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On the Internet by Means of Popular Music: The Cases of Grimes and Childish Gambino

Kristopher R. K. Ohlendorf
The University of Western Ontario

Supervisor
Dr. Keir Keightley
The University of Western Ontario

Graduate Program in Media Studies

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Abstract

What is the internet? It began as a military research experiment, but the internet has since become a sweeping cultural phenomenon. One of the most prevalent areas of the internet’s cultural dominance is in popular music, and this thesis addresses how the internet is being understood and discussed by popular music artists. I study the works of Grimes and Childish Gambino, two popular music artists who grew up alongside the internet’s rise to cultural dominance and explicitly address this experience as an integral component of their lives and works. I look specifically at discourse surrounding Grimes’ “post-internet” music and Childish Gambino’s expansive conceptual work *Because the Internet* (2013). This research concludes by addressing how popular music artists like Grimes and Childish Gambino are helping produce the ways in which we understand and discuss the cultural phenomenon of the internet, and how they provide a foundation for future artists and research to build upon.

Keywords

The internet, post-internet, popular music, music genre, technology, media studies, popular music studies, online music culture, online music discourse, classification, concept album, internet art, vaporwave.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my late grandfather, Dr. Ron Hart. I am forever grateful for inheriting a fragment of your intellect and having spent the time with you that I did.
Acknowledgments

I must first thank my brilliant supervisor Dr. Keir Keightley for believing that my ideas were worth exploring and helping me piece together the thoughts in my head. This thesis would not be the same without your rigor, helpful guidance, and always appreciated “Keir beers.” Other staff members in the FIMS and PMC faculties were also essential in my intellectual development throughout this process; particularly John Reed, Norma Coates, Tim Blackmore, and Warren Steele.

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I must acknowledge the artists who I researched in this thesis for creating the wonderful works that I thoroughly analyze. My hope is that if they ever come across this research, they feel I treated their works and words with respect. Thank you to all artists who push boundaries and encourage me to do the same.

The soundtrack to writing this thesis was heavily provided by Grimes and Childish Gambino’s discographies, as well as Kanye West’s The Life of Palbo, Lil Yachty’s Lil Boat, and Drake’s Views, among others.

I would like to acknowledge my cosmic ancestors comprised of stardust spread throughout the universe over billions of years. We are all in this grand celestial poem together. This thesis and my life would also not be complete without the inspiration I feel every day from Kanye West. Thank you. “We on an Ultralight Beam.”
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David Bowie: I think the potential of what the internet is going to do to society, both good and bad, is unimaginable. I think we’re actually on the cusp of something exhilarating and terrifying.

Jeremy Paxman: It’s just a tool, though, isn’t it?

David Bowie: No, it’s not... it’s an alien life form.

– Excerpt from a 1999 BBC interview with David Bowie

* Image: “David Bowie operating a computer on Jan. 1, 1994, during the dawn of the web as we know it today.” Taken from Mashable, “BowieNet is proof David Bowie was an Internet visionary before Napster,” (Jan 11 2016), http://mashable.com/2016/01/11/david-bowie-bowienet/#bQzIuHuS3Eq7.

1 Introduction: “It’s an Alien Life Form”

This thesis examines two adventurous popular musicians from the twenty-first century whose recent work explores something we call “the internet.” But I want to begin with some prescient words of wisdom on the topic from one of the most adventurous musicians of the twentieth century, David Bowie. Upon his tragic death in 2016, an old 1999 BBC interview resurfaced online of Bowie prophetically discussing the eventual cultural impact of the internet. His ideas grow out of a conversation with interviewer Jeremy Paxman, who asks: “Did I read somewhere that you said if you were 19 you wouldn’t go into the music business?” Bowie agrees, and states, “I wanted to be a musician because it seemed rebellious, it seemed subversive…It felt like one could effect change, to a form.” He continues, “It was very hard to hear music when I was younger…when I was really young, you had to tune into AFN radio to hear the American records. There was no MTV, and it wasn’t sort of wall-to-wall, blanket music. So therefore, it had a call to arms feeling to it. This is the thing that will change things. [That] this is a dead, dodgy occupation to have. It still produced signs of horror from people when you said, ‘I’m in rock and roll,’ they said, ‘my goodness!’ Now, it’s a career opportunity.” Bowie is illuminating what Keir Keightley discusses in “Reconsidering Rock,” when he concludes, “Once rock broke the symbolic link between mass culture and mindless conformity, it became possible to build new distinctions within and upon the terrain of the popular, to express oppositional sensibilities via commercial, mass mediated culture.” While rock may have initially meant “rebellion in musical form,” its subversion eventually became the commercial mainstream. Bowie feels that given the state of music in 1999, being a rock musician was no longer rebellious and had become simply “a career opportunity.” However, Bowie views the internet as the successor to rock culture. He states, “the internet…now carries the flag of being subversive, and possibly rebellious.” He is equating the rebellious feeling that compelled him to become a rock musician with the internet. The interviewer becomes visibly confused by Bowie’s statement.

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Bowie continues, stating that he feels that there are no longer artists “leading the way” in rock music like Presley in the 1950s and the Beatles and Hendrix in the 1960s. He states that instead, “Now, it’s sub groups and genres. It’s hip-hop, it’s girl power, it’s a communal kind of thing. It’s about the community. It’s becoming more and more about the audience, because the point of having somebody who ‘led the forces’ has disappeared. The vocabulary of rock is too well known. It’s a currency, it’s not devoid of meaning any more, but it’s certainly only a conveyer of information now, it is not a conveyer of rebellion. And the internet has taken on that…so I find that a terribly exciting area.” Bowie feels the vocabulary of rock has become too well-known and normalized for any significant subversion to occur and positions the internet as the new “conveyer of rebellion.” With the internet, however, the vocabulary still needs to be created in order to understand and discuss it. This is apparent in Bowie stating, “it’s an alien life form.” This acknowledges the challenge in adequately articulating what “the internet” means. The interviewer later asks for clarification, “It’s simply a different delivery system…but you’re arguing about something more profound?” To which Bowie responds, “Oh yeah, I’m talking about the actual context and the state of content is going to be so different to anything that we can really envisage at the moment…Where the interplay between the user and the provider will be so ‘in simpatico’ it’s going to crash our ideas of what mediums are all about.” Bowie is implying that “the internet” is more than simply a new delivery system. It is an entirely new place for content to exist and interactions to occur. Bowie then draws a comparison with conceptual art, stating, “The breakthroughs at the early part of the century with people like Duchamp were so prescient…The idea that the piece of work is not finished until the audience come to it and add their own interpretation, and what the piece of art is about is the gray space in the middle. That gray space in the middle is what the 21st century is going to be about.”

This “gray space in the middle” is where the majority of the research that follows occurs. Bowie’s prophetic statements are not included here just to validate his brilliance, but to provide a frame for understanding the research that follows. In this Master’s thesis, I seek to better understand how popular music artists are discussing the fragmented cultural context of the internet that Bowie foresaw. Specifically, I provide in-depth analyses of Grimes and Childish Gambino, the respective artistic monikers of Claire
Boucher and Donald Glover. These artists arguably parallel and build upon the rebellion of Bowie and early rock musicians in their use of the internet to rebel and “effect change, to a form.” Their works explicitly engage with the internet and address the experience of living through the internet’s rise to cultural dominance. Boucher and Glover also use the internet to subvert and resist expectations of a woman and a black male in the music industry. In-turn, their rebellious subversion carves new cultural paths for future artists to follow. Studying these artists may help provide some of the vocabulary and ideas with which to better discuss and understand the cultural phenomenon of the internet.

1.1 “I’m From the Internet”: A Framework for Studying the Internet in the Context of Popular Music

The meanings of “the internet” are multifarious and confusing. “The internet” can simultaneously carry multiple meanings ranging from a “series of tubes” to the aforementioned “alien life form.” Due to this confusion, I will provide an initial framework built on sociologist Annette N. Markham’s article “The Internet as Research Context” to provide some clarity. Markham writes, “the concept we label The Internet is, both in practice and theory, a multiplicity of cultural phenomena not limited to either a monolithic entity or a universal set of experiences.” She further states, “users experience [the internet] alternately or simultaneously as tool, place, or way of being.” I will discuss each of these perspectives on the internet and how they relate to the subjects I am studying in order to clarify how the term “the internet” will be used throughout this thesis.

Markham first elaborates of “the internet” as a tool:

The most common frame used to describe the internet is that of tool. As such, the internet is a network of electronic connections, a communication medium, a conduit that allows information to flow from one place to another. Utilized in the framework of a tool, the internet can extend one’s reach, expand the senses, and complicate traditional notions of time and space. Whether we’re saving time by

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shopping online, spending time surfing the latest film reviews, collapsing physical
distance to chat with a group of friends in three different countries, or increasing
psychological distance by using e-mail rather than walking across the hall,
Internet communication is altering the fundamental processes by which we get
things done.

This perspective on the internet views it as a communication technology that facilitates
the sharing of information. In the context of popular music, the internet acts as a tool for
distributing and consuming music as well as a communication tool between artists and
audiences. Both Grimes and Childish Gambino gained initial exposure by using the
internet as a tool to upload, share, and promote their music. Peterson & Ryan elaborate on
this in their article “The Disembodied Muse: Music in the Internet Age.” They write that
“Digital technology has democratized the recording process, allowing many more
musicians to get into the business of recording their own music…unlike previous
physical media… digital content can be distributed via the internet across the country, or
across the globe, in seconds.” Claire Boucher and Donald Glover, the people behind
Grimes and Childish Gambino, did not have to create demo tapes or CDs and send them
to record labels and local radio stations in hope of exposure. They were able to use the
internet as a tool to spread their music and cultivate an audience on their own. This is
significantly different than pre-internet artists who more commonly would have to go
through record label complications to gain exposure. As a result of this more democratic
way of sharing music, it allows artists to widely distribute music very cheaply.

The internet also arguably provides artists like Boucher and Glover with the
power and autonomy to subvert and resist expectations of classification. Instances of
classification resistance that arise throughout this thesis can be better understood in the
context of Pierre Bourdieu’s “classification struggles” from his book *Distinction: A
Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Bourdieu begins by stating that “classification
struggles” are a “forgotten dimension of the class struggle.” He continues, “one only has
to realize that the classificatory schemes which underlie agents’ practical relationship to
their condition and the representation they have of it are themselves the product of that

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University Press, 1984), 466-484.
This suggests that subjects of a classification struggle exist within it because they understand the class relations of certain classificatory schemes they are placed in. Claire Boucher struggles with Grimes being classified as a “pop star” because she recognizes the gendered connotations that come with it. Donald Glover similarly struggles with being classified as a “rapper,” because it implies certain racialized stereotypes that he does not conform to. If neither one of these artists recognized the class relations of being classified as either a “pop star” or “rapper,” they would not feel the struggle to resist such classifications. Bourdieu concludes, “Position in the classification struggle depends on position in the class structure; and social subjects…are perhaps never less likely to transcend ‘the limits of their minds’ than in the representation they have and give of their position, which defines those limits.” Bourdieu is suggesting that subjects within the classification struggle are restricted by the position they already hold. Boucher being “female” and Glover being “black” already positions them in a rigid class structure, which then informs their classification struggles in positioning themselves as artists. Understanding this is important not only because their careers are so closely intertwined with debates about genre labels under which they ought to be classified; it is also relevant because of the role that the internet plays in their resistance to classification. It is not uncommon for avant-garde artists to resist labels, but Grimes and Childish Gambino bring these conversations into the online world.

Returning to Markham, she also notes how the internet may act as a place, stating:

…the internet is not only a conduit that facilitates the swift and planet-wide flow of information, it comprises the cultural spaces in which meaningful human interactions occur. There, in a described, imagined, or perceived place, one can spend time wandering, navigating, and otherwise exploring. One can converse, come to know and love, insult [flame], and otherwise interact with others one meets there. Although computer-mediated social spaces have no literal physical substance, they can be perceived as having dimension, comprising meaningful, structured places where things happen that have genuine consequences. In this frame, the internet is not so much a prosthetic for the senses but a separate environment where the self can travel and exist.

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
Markham is touching on how the internet can act as a cultural environment for people to interact, express themselves and, in some ways, exist. If use of the internet as a tool provides the means to communicate and share information, then the internet as a place becomes the environment where these interactions occur.

To better understand how this relates to popular music, David Byrne discusses the role of environments in the creation of music in his essay “Creation in Reverse.” He finds fault in “conventional wisdom, which maintains that creation emerges out of some interior emotion, from an upwelling of passion or feeling, and that the creative urge will brook no accommodation, that it simply must find an outlet to be heard, read, or seen.”

This romantic narrative of creativity “suggests that a classical composer gets a strange look in his or her eye and begins furiously scribbling a fully realized composition that couldn’t exist in any other form.” Byrne argues that instead, creativity is a sort of reflection of the environment in which it is created. For instance, certain harmonic shifts would not resonate well in larger churches due to echoes, so Western medieval composers used harmonies that functioned better in the space where the music was heard. Similarly, early punk musicians wrote music that sonically resonated in grimy bars, which might have reverberated poorly in large churches. Byrne writes of this adaptive creativity occurring in the natural world as well, with birdcalls that evolve to fit within their respective environments: “Birds that live on the forest floor evolved lower-pitched calls, so they don’t bounce or become distorted by the ground as higher-pitched sounds might. Water birds have calls that...cut through the ambient sounds of water, and birds that live in the plains and grasslands...have buzzing calls that can traverse long distances.”

According to Byrne, the creation of music is deeply rooted in the environment in which it is created. Combined with Markham’s perspective on the internet as a place, the internet can then be understood as a cultural environment that conditions the production of popular music works. This leads artists to view the internet

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9 Ibid.
10 Byrne, 50.
as a cultural place for popular music. For instance, when Detroit-bred rapper Danny Brown states, “I’m not from Detroit, I’m from the internet,” he is suggesting that his cultural rise as an artist is attributed to the internet rather than Detroit. Another artist, Lil Yachty, has been described to “[inhabit] a post-regionalist rap universe, a space defined by digital platforms rather than geography.” The environment of the internet is here prioritized over geographical space.

Grimes’ Visions (2012) was made on a laptop in Boucher’s apartment in Montreal and Childish Gambino’s Because the Internet (2013) was made in a mansion in Los Angeles. However, the more encompassing cultural environment of the internet is what links these two works together. Boucher effectively consumed massive amounts of music online growing up and spit it back out as Grimes, while Childish Gambino’s Because the Internet thematically regurgitates Glover’s relationship to the internet back onto the internet. Unlike in a church or bar, the constraints for music made in the environment of the internet are less immediately apparent. This leads to Grimes’ genre-expanding “post-internet” music and Childish Gambino’s textual-amalgam Because the Internet.

The final way that Markham frames the internet is as way of being. She writes:

Through the design, control, and play of information in online contexts, personalized worlds can be created, organized, and enacted. Though the internet is quite literally a network of computers, the outcome is a fuzzy mapping of imagined geographies, perceived physicalities, and transcendent forms. As a means for reinscribing, reconfiguring, or otherwise shifting identity, body and self’s connection with other, the internet becomes, for some, a way of being.

Markham is suggesting that for people whose lives are deeply embedded on the internet, it becomes a way of life. She continues, “Users who have integrated Internet technologies into their lives to a high degree can be seen to incorporate the internet as a way of being.” Both Claire Boucher and Donald Glover explicitly discuss how growing up alongside the internet’s rise to cultural dominance affected their artistic output, and Glover even claims

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he spends more of his waking hours online than offline. John Dewey writes in *Art as Experience* that “the developing growth of an individual from embryo to maturity is the result of interaction of organism with surroundings, so culture is the product…of prolonged and cumulative interaction with environment.”\(^\text{13}\) The interactions that Boucher and Glover had with the internet throughout their lives influenced their development as individuals and helped shape the cultural expressions they make as artists. Dewey illustrates this when he says, “Experience is the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication.”\(^\text{14}\) By studying the works of Grimes and Childish Gambino as forms of communication, we may better understand how the internet is expressed as a *way of being* through their art. This can also be understood as contributing to what Raymond Williams calls a structure of feeling, which is “concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt.”\(^\text{15}\) The experiences communicated by these artists help to understand a structure of feeling surrounding the internet as a *way of being* that both of these artists express.

The internet is then simultaneously a technological *tool* used by these artists, a cultural *place* where their works are created and exist, and embodies a philosophical *way of being* that is expressed through their art. Markham elaborates on the relationship between these perspectives:

The boundaries between these three frames of tool, place, and way of being are permeable, if not artificial. One can conceptualize and experience the internet as both tool and place, use the internet as a tool while integrating it as a gestalt, or land in various categories depending on the time of day, type of technology, person with whom one is interacting, and any other number of factors. Rather than a taxonomy, model, or theory, this framework is simply one way of making sense of experiences of the internet as well as the complex growing field of Internet research.


\(^{14}\) Dewey, 22.

While she states that these frameworks are perhaps more artificial than real, they are still helpful in understanding the complexity of this thing we call the internet. “The internet” is an adaptable and fluid term that suits a variety of contexts, and the confusion that comes with this term is an aspect of researching it. Looking at the works of artists like Grimes and Childish Gambino, however, help add some clarity to the meanings behind “the internet.”

1.2 Central Ideas and Description of Chapters

Key questions addressed by this thesis concern the relationship between these artists and the internet. What role does the internet play in how these artists resist expectations of classification? How do these artists discuss the role of the internet in relation to their lives and works, and why do they find the internet to be such a central component? These questions envelop my analysis of these two artists.

In Chapter 2, I provide a brief historical overview of the relationship between popular music and technology. I then discuss the historical relationship between popular music and the internet, and bring the discussion up to the present moment. I primarily use the works of Eric Katz and Steve Jones in these discussions. Both Katz and Jones are leading scholars on the relationship between popular music, technology and the internet. Katz’ Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music provides an in-depth understanding of how technology has influenced popular music. Jones’ Rock Formation: Music, Technology, and Mass Communication looks at this relationship in the context of rock music, and his article “Music and the Internet” provides an early overview of popular music and the internet. I also look at some older works of popular music that address technology, dating back to Tin Pan Alley, as well as more recent works of popular music that address the internet. I distinguish between novelty songs about technology and songs that critically address technology. This helps to place Grimes and Childish Gambino within an established tradition of popular music that critically engages with technological change.

In Chapter 3, I provide an in-depth analysis of the term “post-internet” used to classify Grimes’ music. When Grimes’ music first surfaced online, critics and journalists
were at a loss of how best to describe it. There was no clear genre label to encompass what Grimes sounded like, only various amalgams and adjectives. Claire Boucher eventually used the term “post-internet” to describe the sound of her music in an interview. This term was immediately adopted by critics to classify Grimes’ music, but Claire Boucher subsequently dismissed the term altogether. I examine reviews and interviews detailing this narrative, and analyze Boucher’s explanations of “post-internet” to understand how the internet influenced the sound of her music. In discussions of genre, I primarily draw upon the work of Simon Frith, Fabian Holt and Joshua Gunn. These scholars help clarify the progression of “post-internet” as a genre label. I use popular works from Nicholas Carr and Susan Greenfield to elucidate some of Boucher’s ideas about the meanings of “post-internet” and the role of the internet in her life and music. I also place discussions of Grimes within so-called poptimist critical ideology to understand how Boucher’s poptimist-leaning taste informs her “post-internet” music. I then look at how Grimes is perceived as a “pop star” against Boucher’s refusal of the term, and how this relates to questions of gender and parallels her prior resistance to classification with “post-internet”. I conclude with an understanding of how Boucher uses the internet to subvert expectations of classification as Grimes. This chapter provides discussions on how popular music genre formation and dissemination plays out on the internet, as well as how the internet led to Grimes’ “unclassifiable” sound.

In Chapter 4, I provide an extensive analysis of Childish Gambino’s Because the Internet (2013). Part media experiment and part online performance art, Glover takes the idea of a concept album and expands it into a “concept world” that exists on the World Wide Web. I first detail Glover’s unique artistic path and his resistance to traditional hip-hop narratives. I look at his album Camp (2011), which foregrounds Glover’s subversion to racialized expectations of hip-hop artists. I then detail the complicated rollout of Because the Internet and the multitude of ways that Glover used the internet to craft this work. I place discussions of Because the Internet alongside those of Henry Jenkins to understand how it can be understood within frameworks of transmedia and convergence culture. I then use Bolter & Grusin’s concept of remediation to understand the ways that Glover used the internet to make users more aware of its existence, and how he builds upon techniques used by Marshall McLuhan in The Medium is the Massage. Next, I look
at how Glover engaged with his online fanbase with the meme “Roscoe’s wetsuit” and conclude with an understanding of how and why the internet features so prominently in Glover’s subversive artistic career and *Because the Internet*. This chapter attends to questions of classification as they relate to Glover’s race, career and music in the context of the internet.

In Chapter 5, I link together the analyses of these artists to understand what studying them reveals about the relationship between popular music and the internet. I discuss how new artists are continuing on the paths created by Grimes and Childish Gambino and provide ideas for future research. I conclude by suggesting the importance of continuing research in this area.
“Any discussion of the role of technology in popular music should begin with a simple premise: without electronic technology, popular music in the twenty-first century is unthinkable.”

– Paul Théberge


2 The Story Thus Far: A Look at Popular Music and Technology

Simon Frith envisions three stages of musical history based on “the ways in which sounds are produced and reproduced” through technology. He explains that “In the first (or “folk”) stage, music is stored in the body (and in musical instruments)...In the second (or “art”) stage, music is stored through notation...[and in] the final (or “pop” stage), music is stored on phonogram, disc, or tape and retrieved mechanically, digitally, electronically.” Each stage shifts with the changing nature of technology. Nearly two decades after Frith’s initial statements, he notes “the digitalization of music is now complete.” This digital stage involves movement onto the internet, an interconnected computer network that has a noticeable effect on the culture of popular music. Although there is already scholarship written on the relationship between the internet and popular music, none of this analysis looks at how this relationship is now being culturally reproduced by popular music artists. In this thesis, I will focus on the works of Grimes and Childish Gambino to understand how their relationship to the internet informs the way they discuss their works. In this chapter, I will first look at the relationship between popular music and technology, and then between popular music and the internet. Finally, I will introduce examples of popular music about technology and the internet and clarify why Grimes and Childish Gambino in particular are worth studying.

2.1 Popular Music and Technology

In Steve Jones’ Rock Formation: Music, Technology, and Mass Communication, he considers popular music to be a product of its relationship with technology:

Without electronics, and without the accompanying technical supports and technical experimentation, there could not be the mass production of music, and

18 Frith, 226-227.
19 Frith, “Performing Rites, Revisited,” IASPM Keynote Presentation, Gijon, Spain, June 24, 2013.
therefore there would not be mass-mediated popular music, or its consumption. But beyond production and consumption, there would also not be the composition of popular music, for popular music is, at every critical juncture of its history, determined by the technology musicians use to realize their ideas. Of equal importance, without technology there could not be the creation of sounds that are today intimately associated with popular music.\(^\text{20}\)

Mark Katz provides a similar sentiment in *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* when he states “the technology of sound recording, writ large, has profoundly transformed modern musical life.”\(^\text{21}\) His analysis of the relationship between popular music and technology is based around the idea of what he calls a phonograph effect, which is “any change in musical behavior — whether listening, performing, or composing — that has arisen in response to sound-recording technology.”\(^\text{22}\) This effect is not exclusive to the phonograph, and Katz asserts that it is recognized as *any* change in musical behavior. A relatively simple phonograph effect is the 3-4 minute pop single, which was driven by the space allotted on a 7-inch 45 rpm record.\(^\text{23}\) Timothy Warner lists many changes like phonograph effects:

> In the arts, various technologies have emerged which alter the relationship between artists and audience: in music, for instance, the phonograph, electrical recording, radio, the tape recorded stereo, multitrack recording, sound synthesis, the cassette recorder, digital sampling and television have all precipitated change both in the production of the art work and its reception.\(^\text{24}\)

Katz further claims that “The story of any phonograph effect, however complicated, can…be understood as arising from the interaction of three equally important and mutually influencing agents of change: the technology, the users of the technology, and society.”\(^\text{25}\) Both he and Jones emphasize the mutual influence of these elements on


\(^{21}\) Mark Katz, Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music (University of California Press, 2010), 1.

\(^{22}\) Katz, 2.

\(^{23}\) Katz, 3.

\(^{24}\) Timothy Warner, Pop Music - Technology and Creativity (Ashgate Pub Ltd, 2003), 43.

\(^{25}\) Katz, 6.
popular music.

One of Katz’ central phonograph effects is how sound recording and playback dissolve the line between performer and listener, which opens up new ways to experience music. He states that “recorded sound is mediated sound,” and “this mediation has led users to adapt their musical practices and habits in a variety of ways.”26 Edward Kealy writes that recorded music is “an impersonally mediated experience. Instead of being with musicians and hearing them sound an instrument in an aesthetically pleasing way, they (the audience) listen to a speaker system.”27 With the introduction of recorded sound one could listen to music without a musician present. This leap provided a substantial shift in the way listeners experience music. Instead of music being dictated by the musician, it allowed listeners to “ultimately decide what they were to hear, and when, where, and with whom.”28 Or, in the words of Evan Eisenberg, listening to recorded music becomes “a séance where we get to choose our ghosts.”29-12 This control over listening allowed a person to experience musical activity entirely alone, which was initially met with puzzlement. In 1923, Orlo Williams wrote that walking in on someone listening to music alone was as heinous as “if you had discovered your friend sniffing cocaine [or] emptying a bottle of whiskey.”30 Now, it is commonplace to see “people in public places, earphones practically implanted into their brains, nodding or singing along to their own private music.”31 As musical habits of listeners adapted to the mediated nature of recorded sound, what initially seemed odd eventually became commonplace.

The portable nature of recorded sound also provided access to sounds previously unheard by listeners. In 1924, Darius Milhaud wrote “Thanks to the phonograph, I will be able to play the discs of black music — recorded and published by blacks — that I

26 Katz, 2.
27 Cited in Jones, 100.
28 Katz p. 12
30 Katz, 20.
31 Katz, 21.
brought back from the United States. It is truly very precious to be able to study the folklore of all the world thanks to this machine.”

This idea profoundly changed the cultural evolution of popular music and still carries on today. Peterson and Ryan write, “Some adventurous musicians raised in one musical tradition listened to records of another genre and, after repeated listenings, were able to incorporate the other genre into their own style.”

Musicologist Jay Wilkey perceptively writes in 1969, “In the emerging digital age…the divisions of mankind based on differences in style, verbal and musical, are melting away. This electrical retribalization has resulted in the mutual toleration and even mutual influence of many styles – past and present, East and West, pop and classic.”

Recorded sound seemingly transcends time, geographical space and genre. Through the distribution of mediated recorded music, Kurt Cobain could be influenced by The Beatles who were influenced by Elvis Presley. The main link connecting each of these artists is the mediated recorded sounds that were transferred between them by reason of recording technology. Without this link, The Beatles would have never been able to hear the Memphis blues of Elvis, and Cobain would subsequently have never heard the brit-pop of The Beatles. The links binding these artists would be broken.

Technology must then be understood as not only affecting the ways in which people produce and consume music, but also in mediating cultural spaces where popular music culture exists and develops over time. Paul Théberge writes in “‘Plugged In’: Technology and Popular Music,” “Technology is…an environment in which we experience and think about music; it is a set of practices in which we engage in making and listening to musical sounds; and it is an element in the discourses that we use in sharing and evaluating our experiences, defining, in the process, what music is and can be.”

This perspective understands technology as providing an environment for musical experiences to take place.

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32 Katz, 18.


35 Théberge, 3.
Jones focuses on the ways in which these developments cause a “change of mind” in users. Concerning the determinations operating upon the production and reception of music, Jones states:

Such determinations regarding sound and music are affected by the use and design of technology, and by the culture within which technology is produced and consumed. To borrow from [Lewis] Mumford, “behind all the great material inventions of the last century and a half [there] was not merely a long internal development of technics: there was also a change of mind.” A change of mind is currently underway in popular music as new technology both enables and restricts the creation and realization of music. The change of mind includes what Mumford identified as a “reorientation of wishes, habits, ideas, (and) goals,” and an understanding of it is critical to a complete awareness of the evolution of popular music.36

He later concludes, “It is the technology of sound recording, the instruments used for fixing sound, that is the driving force behind this evolution and the concurrent change of mind among musicians, composers, producers, and all involved in the creation (and consumption) of popular music.”37 Music technology thus not only affects the music it encompasses, but also the evolution of popular music as it develops along with the “change of mind” in its creators and consumers over time. What Grimes and Childish Gambino are seen to embody later in this thesis is the “change of mind” that was formed by growing up alongside the internet.

2.2 Popular Music and the Internet

In Peterson & Ryan’s analysis of popular music and technology, they follow Frith’s example and divide the historical development of popular music into technological eras; the invention of music notation, the spread of the parlor piano, the birth of radio, and the LP rock revolution.38 They then take it one step further and add the internet, stating, “Like every major technological change, the internet is having a profound effect on virtually all aspects of our society.” Jones similarly states that “network technologies are driving

36 Jones, 9.
37 Jones, 12.
38 Peterson and Ryan, 223.
further evolution of musical practices and processes at great speed, and they are, at least presently, the site of the most visible shifting.”39 And Katz, quoting musicologist Timothy D. Taylor, considers the internet to provide “the most fundamental change in the history of Western music since the invention of music notation in the ninth century.”40 While these statements carry an air of hyperbole, the undercurrent is that like many previous technological shifts in the past century, the internet is having a noticeable effect on popular music. Like previous technological eras of the phonograph, radio and television, the internet now acts as a cultural dominant for popular music. Peterson & Ryan discuss the consequences of this change:

Digital technology has democratized the recording process, allowing many more musicians to get into the business of recording their own music...[and] makes it possible to manipulate sound in ways that were undreamed of previously...unlike previous physical media such as human performance, records, and cassettes, digital content can be distributed via the internet across the country, or across the globe, in seconds...the digital production and dissemination of culture greatly enlarges the menu of available choices for listening or acquisition, with an unprecedented array of music choices available to internet-savvy consumers.41

According to Peterson & Ryan, the internet affects the production, content, distribution, and consumption of popular music. David Hesmondhalgh claims that this democratization “[has] aesthetic consequences too...the making available of new voices, new experiences and perspectives.”42 It allows more people to produce their own music, creates new sounds to hear, lets amateurs distribute their music around the globe, and in turn opens up others to consume new experiences. While there is some degree of tension with major record label involvement with online streaming services like Spotify, Tidal, and Apple Music, there are still many ways for artists to upload and share their music without going through major label complications. For instance, BandCamp and SoundCloud allow anyone with an internet connection to upload and share their music

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40 Katz, 178.
41 Peterson and Ryan, 231.
42 David Hesmondhalgh, “Post-Punk’s Attempt to Democratize the Music Industry: The Success and Failure of Rough Trade,” Popular Music Vol. 16 No. 3 (Oct., 1997), 256.
instantly. Claire Boucher and Donald Glover both began by uploading and sharing their music through similar services as Grimes and Childish Gambino, and have since reached greater exposure on larger sharing platforms. I will address later in this thesis how this has aesthetic consequences like Hesmondhalgh describes.

Peterson & Ryan conclude that on the internet, “it is the music that moves, and people do not need to move to hear whatever music they please whenever they choose to hear it.”

Jones finds significance in this movement of music online, stating:

The most critical [issues] to which we should turn our attention are those that have consequences for the movement of music within and through different (and sometimes altogether new) spaces, such as changes in sales mechanisms, Internet broadcasting, the use of computers for production, consuming and distributing music, and the personalization of musical tastes and behaviors. And all these issues have important implications for the ways we conceive audiences and individuals.

While the phonograph brought upon the mass mediation of recorded popular music, the internet has provided a space in which these mediated elements can freely move. This increased mobility of popular music on the internet allows it to develop in new ways, just as previous technological advancements brought their own changes.

One of the main results of recorded sound’s movement to the internet is an increased accessibility to music, which began with peer-to-peer file-sharing networks like Napster and Kazaa. In 2000, Jones writes, “The connection of the personal computer to the internet brings potential for connection to a wide variety of music, broadening the scope of listening possibilities.” A decade later in 2010, Katz clarifies that “The clearest change that digital and networking technologies have introduced is the possibility of music’s unprecedented and unparalleled accessibility.” In a pre-internet world, people might overhear a group discussing The Shaggs’ outsider music album Philosophy of the

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43 Peterson and Ryan, 224.
44 Jones, 225.
45 Jones, 218.
46 Katz, 186.
World (1969) and spend the rest of their lives looking for a copy to listen to. Now, one can hear their masterpiece “My Pal Foot Foot” within seconds of finding out about the band. As is the case with The Shaggs, “The internet not only makes it possible to find particular pieces easily, it also allows users to explore unfamiliar territory.” Users of the internet have described this phenomenon as a “world radio” and equate it to “going to a buffet [where] you can get whatever you want whenever you want.” These reactions echo early responses to the phonograph, which introduced the idea of musical choice. However, such decisions were still constrained by the records that were accessible. One was confined to the selection of a local record store or friends’ collections. The internet has almost completely dissolved such restrictions, allowing motivated users to access an unprecedented amount of recorded popular music from around the world.

This mobility also facilitated the development of online communities based around shared musical interests. Katz writes that file-sharing “users may enjoy greater access to music, discover new repertoire, exercise increased flexibility in the way they listen to music, rethink their ideas of musical authenticity, and form virtual communities around shared musical interests.” He further observes, “The sharing of music has fostered the development of distinct online communities…formed around common musical tastes and interests.” These communities were prevalent on file-sharing networks like Napster, which had 80 million registered users at its peak. Katz writes of these users, “Whether convened because of a creative drive, a common religion, or an interest in genre, the members of these communities find meaning in their associations and activities far beyond an interest in free music. They are sharing files, beliefs, ideals,

47 Ibid.
48 Katz, 187.
49 Katz, 189.
50 Katz, 18.
51 Katz, 185.
52 Katz, 193.
and lifestyles.”  

54 Jones adds that “The practice of fandom is mediated by network technologies along with music.”  

55 In a pre-Internet era, “music nerds” might have convened at concerts, record shops, or listening parties, but on the internet, fans of serialism and One Direction alike can find spaces to share and discuss common musical interests. In Chapter 4, I look at Donald Glover’s intimate relationship with his online fanbase and how it informs his work Because the Internet.

As with previous technological shifts, the internet and popular music now have a symbiotic relationship. With increased accessibility, the internet provides a space for popular music to be widely disseminated and offers a new way for users to consume popular music, possibly leading to a more diverse musical landscape. In Peterson & Ryan’s study on the correlation between internet usage and taste diversity, they concluded that “there is a significant relationship between greater internet use and greater [musical] omnivorousness.”  

56 Those who spend more time on the internet tend to seek out more music, expanding their tastes in the process. They also concluded in their study that “Gender proves to be significantly related to omnivorous musical taste, with women on average being significantly more omnivorous than men.”  

57 They state, “Most genres of music are seen as a male domain. Women, particularly young women, are more likely to identify with particular artists and be agreeable with others about music choices.”  

58 In Chapter 3, I address how this may play out in Grimes’ “post-internet” music.

Much of the early scholarly discussions of popular music and the internet focused on file-sharing, and the influence of this phenomenon is still evident today. Katz writes, “It was the novel idea that computer users could obtain content from one another rather than through a corporate entity, and the socialization and community-building that followed from these peer-to-peer interactions, that paved the way for the social-

54 Katz, 194.
55 Jones, 218.
56 Peterson and Ryan, 234.
57 Peterson and Ryan, 233.
58 Peterson and Ryan, 234.
networking phenomenon that has changed the way people use the internet.”

The evolution of the internet is then influenced in part by its relationship to popular music. One of the first major social networks, MySpace, was initially developed with musicians in mind and even had the short-lived label MySpace Records. Of the top 50 most followed accounts on Twitter, over half of them are related to popular music. Out of the top 30 most viewed YouTube videos, 28 of them are popular music videos (the remaining two are educational children’s songs). Spending a significant amount of time online is now crucial for keeping up with popular music culture. Conversations that were once had in record shops now happen on Twitter and discussion boards, and there is always new music to discover online. The act of streaming music through services like Spotify (which has 30 million paid subscribers) requires one to have an internet connection. Katz concludes his book Capturing Sound by saying “Just as the technology shapes the activities of its users, their activities shape the technology.” The MP3 format was not created with music in mind, nor was the phonograph meant initially for music. The development of magnetic tape was pushed by Hitler’s desire to record his speeches, not musical recording. Théberge writes, “Pop artists and consumers have often used technology in ways unintended by those who manufacture it. In this way, pop practices constantly redefine music technologies through unexpected or alternative uses.” This applies directly to the internet, which came about as a military experiment but ended up enabling the sharing and discussion of music. As Lawrence Lessig notes, “The appeal of

59 Katz, 195.
64 Katz, 220.
65 Katz, 179.
66 Katz, 8.
67 Théberge, 3.
file-sharing music was the crack cocaine of the internet’s growth. It drove demand for access to the internet more powerfully than any other single application.”68 This, in turn, influenced the ways people engaged with popular music.

2.3 Popular Music about Technology

Considering the far-reaching influence of technology and the internet on popular music, it can be difficult to pinpoint what exactly should be studied to clearly understand this relationship. Katz emphasizes studying “not the technology, but the relationship between the technology and its users.”69 Jones notes the importance of studying these relationships.

[It] is at the level of consumption and realization that one should begin to analyze the relationship of technology and popular music, for it is at that level that popular music is formed. As the printing press enabled production of mass-circulation newspapers, which consequently affected newspaper content…music technology affects the content of music during its creation as well as its consumption.70

Jones is emphasizing that technology not only affects the creation and consumption of music, but also the content of music. One subset of popular music where this is clearly evident is in music that explicitly addresses technology as a lyrical or thematic subject. For instance, when looking at songs about the telephone, a historical link can be drawn across the 20th century. “Hello! Ma Baby” (Howard and Emerson, 1899) acts as an early Tin Pan Alley example about a man who only knows his lover through the telephone, and “Hello Central, Give Me Heaven” (Harris, 1901) “launched a string of telephone songs over the next few years.”71 This is far from a definitive list, but “Chantilly Lace” (The Big Bopper, 1958), “All Alone” (Frank Sinatra, 1962), “Last Train to Clarksville” (The Monkees, 1966), “Sylvia’s Mother” (T. Rex, 1972), “Hot Line” (The Sylvers, 1976), “867-5309/Jenny” (Tommy Tutone, 1981), “I Just Called to Say I Love You” (Stevie Wonder, 1984), “Kiss Me thru the Phone” (Soulja Boi, 2008), “Telephone” (Lady Gaga

68 Katz, 196.
69 Katz, 3.
70 Jones, 44.
71 Diane Holloway, American History in Song: Lyrics from 1900 to 1945 (iUniverse, 2001), 9.
ft. Beyoncé, 2010), “Call Me Maybe” (Carly Rae Jepsen, 2011), and “Hotline Bling” (Drake, 2015) all, in one way or another, explicitly address the sound medium of the telephone. Such songs about technology may serve as cultural manifestations of how differently users interpreted such technologies during their respective times. The telephone used by the subject of “Hello Ma! Baby” is a much different technological tool than the one used by Drake over a century later, but the songs still carry a similar sentiment.

Television and radio were similarly treated, with “Video Killed the Radio Star” (The Buggles, 1979) acting as a prominent example. The song acts as an example of technological change chronicled by popular music, with its lyrics explicitly addressing changes in music technology. In Warner’s analysis of the track, he notes:

The victim of technological change is, particularly in the popular arts, a recurrent image of the twentieth century — the silent film stars who did not manage the transition to talkies, for example. However, also implicit here is the complex transition from a purely aural performance on radio to a pre-recorded (and highly manipulated) visual illusion of performance on video: perhaps one of the most radical developments in recent music history.72

The illusion of performance on video suggests a mediation of visuals as well as sound, and The Buggles are expressing anxiety about this transitional state. In fact, “The Buggles never performed live, and existed for their fans purely through recorded media: vinyl, magnetic tape and video.”73 Their entire existence was mediated through technology, with their major hit dealing with this very subject. Their music video was even used to launch MTV and ease popular music into a new visual format. Warner concludes that “Considering the subtle complexities and rich paradoxes that an analysis of ‘Video Killed the Radio Star’ reveals, dismissing it as a ‘novelty song’…would seem inappropriate.”74 This suggests a distinction between popular music that simply treats technology as a novelty and popular music that critiques the very nature of such

72 Warner, 45.
73 Warner, 41.
74 Warner, 48.
technologies. When Dire Straights sings “I want my MTV” in “Money for Nothing,” it tells us that the character in the song is addicted to the culture of music television but does not address the implications of this relationship. When The Buggles sing “Video killed the radio star / In my mind and in my car, we can’t rewind we’ve gone too far,” they are making a more explicit critique of the role of technological change in the context of popular music. This places Grimes and Childish Gambino within an established tradition of popular music that critically engages with technological change. The difference is that Boucher and Glover are now interested in changes brought about by the internet.

2.4 Popular Music about the Internet

As with previous communication technologies, there are a plethora of songs that treat the internet as a novelty. Britney Spears asks her lover to “E-Mail my heart and say our love will never die” just as Emerson & Howard’s subject exclaims “Send me a kiss by wire, baby my heart’s on fire!” The heartbroken subject of Prozzak’s biggest hit “www.nevergetoveryou” (2000) weeps at the computer screen just as Sinatra wept by the telephone in “All Alone” (1962). Technologies have changed, but sentiments remain.

One thing that can be learned from looking at novelty songs about the internet is that the majority of them came out after 2005, even though the internet had already been in commercial use for over a decade. This growth is attributed to the shift to Web 2.0, a term coined by Tim O’Reilly in 2004, “to refer to new kinds of media companies which deploy social networks, user-generated content, or user-moderated content.” In Bridgette Wessels cultural history of the internet, she states, “The defining feature of most Web 2.0 services is a cluster of dynamic social networks that form a ‘participant web’ through the active engagement of its users. Web 2.0 encompasses a wide range of applications, such as blogs, wikis, social networking sites, podcasts, social bookmarking

75 Britney Spears, “E-Mail My Heart” (1999), ...Baby One More Time, JIVE.
76 Howard and Emerson, “Hello Ma Baby” (1899).
77 Henry Jenkins, Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide (New York University, 2006), 334.
sites, auction sites, online games, and peer-to-peer services.”

Soulja Boy was arguably one of the first artists to truly capitalize on Web 2.0, with “Crank That (Soulja Boy)” (2007) producing a dance craze out of a YouTube video. Soulja Boy consequently named his album souljaboytellem.com (2007) in order to drive traffic to his website. Many timely Web 2.0 services are clearly referenced in examples of popular music; for instance, “Myspace Freak” (C-Side, 2006), “Twitter Song” (Chris Brown, 2009) and “Instagram that Hoe” (Fat Joe, 2012). Looking at these works shows a growth in music about the internet after the rise of Web 2.0. With Grimes and Childish Gambino, I am interested in how this cultural expansion has been a determining factor in their creative output.

There are also examples of popular music that critically address ideas related to the internet, for instance St. Vincent’s song “Digital Witness” (2014), EMA’s The Future’s Void (2014), Autre Ne Veut’s Age of Transparency (2015), and Holly Herndon’s Platform (2015), among others. British rock band Radiohead discussed ideas related to the internet in their prescient album Kid A (2001) and also used the internet to release their album In Rainbows (2007) as a pay-what-you-want download. While studying every artist who critically addresses the internet would be ideal, it is beyond the scope of this Master’s thesis to do so. Grimes and Childish Gambino in particular are worth studying because their relationships with the internet are remarkably clear. First, both artists’ artistic monikers are closely tied to the affordances of the internet. Both artists’ names are in fact products of internet-based classification systems. Claire Boucher got the name “Grimes” when building her MySpace music profile. She tweets about the origin of the name, “on myspace ur genre could be grime and u could have 4 genres so i was plural grime.” Donald Glover got the name “Childish Gambino” by putting his real name into an online Wu-Tang Clan name generator. This shows that their relationship with the internet appeared at the conception of how they identify themselves as artists, with their artistic monikers coming from online labeling systems. Second, they use the internet to resist and subvert expected forms of classification in relation to their careers.

Boucher is commonly classified as a pop star rather than a successful producer, and Glover is labeled as a rapper even though he does not identify himself as one. These artists assert their autonomy by seeking to subvert external classification with their works. Claire Boucher seeks to resist genre classification altogether with Grimes’ post-internet music, yet she still is a victim to the “pop star” label due to being a female musician. Donald Glover similarly resists being labeled as a rapper, but he is frequently classified as such due to his race. Third, all of these characteristics are manifested in their works, which characteristically tend to resist labels and classification. Grimes “post-internet” music was initially unclassifiable as a result of its supposedly indescribable new sound, and Childish Gambino’s Because the Internet is a textual amalgam meant to be an “experience” rather than an album. Looking at these moments of classification opens up discussion of how these artists use the internet to subvert expectations. Considering the explicitness with which Boucher and Glover engage with and discuss the internet, they serve as productive case studies in better understanding the role of the internet in the experience of popular music. And although both of these artists humbly began by producing music in their bedrooms and uploading it online, they have since become important and successful figures in popular culture. Grimes tours the world as a highly critically acclaimed artist signed under Jay-Z’s Roc Nation entertainment company and has graced the covers of fashion magazines like Teen Vogue, Flare, Elle, and Nylon. Childish Gambino’s Because the Internet was certified gold by the RIAA, selling over 500,000 copies, and Donald Glover is covered in mass celebrity news publications like TIME, People, and Entertainment Weekly for his work as both an actor and musician. While these artists were once obscure, they have since become minor celebrities and have considerable reach online. This exposure makes them productive case studies of the internet’s influence on contemporary culture.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter began with my review of the long-standing historical relationship between popular music and technology through the works of Jones, Katz and others. These scholars discuss how strongly tied popular music is to technology, ranging from the creation and production of works to the development of cultural spaces in which popular
music culture spreads and develops. I then looked at the relationship between popular music and the internet in order to understand how the internet now acts as a cultural dominant for popular music. The internet provides a new space that allows “music to move” as well as a place for fans to congregate; it creates a new technological environment for popular music culture to exist. It is from this technological environment that Grimes and Childish Gambino emerged. I looked at the tradition of popular music works related to technology dating back to Tin Pan Alley and continuing today and used Warner’s discussion of The Buggles’ “Video Killed the Radio Star” to provide a distinction between novelty songs about technology and works that more critically address technology. This places Grime and Childish Gambino within a tradition of popular music that critically engages with technological change. Finally, I looked at a handful of examples of music about the internet, and clarified why Grimes and Childish Gambino were chosen for this study.
“The universe, like the internet, is too much for any of us to wrap our brains around and Claire Boucher, the woman behind Grimes, likes this idea.”

- DUMMY Magazine

* Image: Claire Boucher performing live as Grimes at Seattle’s alternative radio station KEXP. Taken from KEXP’s YouTube Channel, “Grimes – Full Performance (Live on KEXP)” (Mar 27 2012), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJ5UXu4qHZo.

In a series of tweets in December 2014, Claire Boucher explained the true story behind the origin of her artistic moniker, “Grimes.” She tweets, “on myspace ur genre could be grime and u could have 3 genres so i was plural grime.” It was through the affordances of creating this online profile that digitally birthed Grimes into existence. She further states, “I was originally too embarased of this story so i told journalists i was named after frank grimes, who is also very cool.” This is actually incorrect because she previously told Stereogum the name was in reference to the artist Ken Grimes. She soon realized her mistake, and tweets, “or wait, no i said i was named after someone else made grimes, arg – see this is why you shouldnt lie to journalists.” Each of these tweets displays a strong characteristic of Grimes’ career that unfolds throughout this chapter. First, from the very moment of classifying herself as an artist, Grimes holds a complex relationship to music genre labels and the internet. Second, there is an inconsistency between the way Boucher perceives Grimes and the way the media perceives Grimes. Third, Boucher recognizes the power that journalists have in spinning her words. These characteristics frequently appear in the analysis that follows.

In this chapter, I detail a narrative of Boucher’s relationship with classification that is played out in music critics’ discussions of how to classify Grimes’ music. First, a problem arose because Grimes’ style was deemed unclassifiable and critics used a variety of adjectives and metaphors to describe her music. I employ Joshua Gunn’s idea of “the antigeneric moment” along with ideas from Roland Barthes, Fabian Holt and Simon Frith to understand these early discussions. Then, a solution came when Boucher used the enticing term “post-internet” to describe her music as Grimes. Critics then jumped on “post-internet” as a way to label Grimes’ music, much to the dismay of Boucher, who later renounced the term. I discuss why critics so quickly adopted the term and why Boucher resisted its use. I look deeper into the significance of the term “post-internet,”

understanding its relationship to the so-called post-internet visual art movement and looking at the equivocal use of “post-” in this instance. I then unpack Boucher’s supposedly scientific explanations of the term as it relates to others who have discussed the internet’s effects on the brain like Susan Greenfield and Nicholas Carr. I then look at how “post-internet” fits into discussions of poptimism, and how Boucher also resists the “pop star” classification. Using scholarship on popular music genre and the internet, this chapter examines Grimes as a means to discuss a cultural moment in which the internet infiltrated music genre discourse in a remarkable fashion.

3.1 The Problem: Grimes and “the antigeneric moment”

Born in Vancouver then based in Montreal while studying neuroscience at McGill University, Boucher decided to make music after a moment of realization while listening to Panda Bear’s Person Pitch,\(^{81}\) that she suddenly knew how music was constructed.\(^{82}\) With no musical experience whatsoever, a friend showed her how to use the entry-level music production software GarageBand.\(^{83}\) Fascinated by electronic loops, and sometimes layering her voice over fifty times on the same track, Boucher developed avant-garde techniques to production and began creating her own unique sound. This sound perplexed and intrigued critics as she began playing shows in the Montreal scene and posting her music online.

In Joshua Gunn’s “Gothic Music and the Inevitability of Genre,” he affirms that it is impossible for a piece of music to be entirely antigeneric but notes, “It could be argued, however, that when new and unanticipated musical forms are initially experienced, initially heard, there is at least an antigeneric moment.”\(^{84}\) Early discussions of Grimes’ music exemplify an antigeneric moment as it happens. Roland Barthes writes in his essay

\(^{81}\) Boucher has also claimed that this epiphany came while listening to Mariah Carey.


\(^{84}\) Gunn, 44.
“The Grain of the Voice,” “If one looks at the normal practice of music criticism (or, which is often the same thing, of conversations “on” music), it can readily be seen that a work (or its performance) is only ever translated into the poorest of linguistic categories: the adjective… The adjective is inevitable: this music is this, this execution is that.”

In discussions surrounding Grimes’ first two albums *Geidi Primes* (2010) and *Halfaxa* (2010), critics used any adjectival tools at their disposal to try and articulate the sound of these albums. In one of the earliest articles about Grimes, the Montreal-based website *LOOKOUT* writes of the music (I have **bolded** adjectives and descriptors to emphasize their use):

Geidi Primes, her latest album, is **colourful** with an **out-of-this-world** quality that incorporates **space-age** piano riffs, **slurred** lyrics and **delayed** melodies that have you yearning, but unable to sing along. It’s an **intriguing** album with a fusion of **medieval** vibes and **sleepy** sounds, an intermingling that is **truly beyond words**. The vocals are at times **embracing**, **enchanting** and **angelic**, and at other times, **dark**, **spooky** and **otherworldly**.

The “beyond words” nature of Grimes’ music makes it difficult for this reviewer to articulate, and yet the reviewer uses a slew of adjectives ranging from “medieval” to “space-age” in attempt to describe it. The use of adjectives like “angelic,” “enchanting,” and “otherworldly” also arguably carry gendered connotations used to distance Boucher as a female musician. Similar adjectives have been used to describe Icelandic female musician Björk, a precursory artist to Grimes. The interviewer goes onto state, “I’ve really never heard anything comparable to your sound” and notes that “A couple of album reviews say things like, ‘I can’t describe her music, so I won’t. Just listen’.” They proceed to ask Boucher, “When making your music, do you intentionally make it beyond words and distinct from what’s currently out there? Or is that just part of your spirit of making music?” to which she responds “I feel like people compare musicians to other musicians because it’s easier to say that people have similar sound so that readers might be more inclined to listen. It’s the best reference point in order to compare different

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artists.” This parallels Simon Frith’s point in *Performing Rites* when he states, “rock critics rarely describe music in formal language, but almost always through comparison: new sound X is described by reference to already known sound Y…genre labeling is, from this critical perspective, an implied comparison (or set of comparisons) — generic labels are, in fact among the critic’s most essential tools.” Frith is touching on the nature of genre labels as a means for critics to compare artists, and Gunn makes a broader statement about genre categorization in stating “discourse about popular music is fundamentally and inescapably a generic enterprise.” Critics and audiences use genre as a linguistic tool to fix artists and their music in place. This is evident in early reviews of Grimes’ music. Critics used various genre labels to try to fix Grimes within them (I have *bolded* genre labels to emphasize their use):

Boucher uses **drum and bass, hip-hop, electronica, classical, folk, dream pop,** and everything in between to lift, edify, and entrance.

Boucher draws from the palette of **choral music** and **R&B** to create a landscape where fairies flit around pools of water and the distance is a foggy landscape of tree covered mountains.

[Grimes is] abstract, enchanted **outsider pop.**

You can hear trace elements of **pop, techno, industrial,** and especially **R&B** across *Halfaxa*…

…her eccentric, dreamy sound, which draws upon everything from **dubstep** to **disco, Eastern music** to **1990s R&B.**

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The Montreal-based artist’s chameleonic approach sees her switch between **oriental pop**, **chillwave**, and **post-rock** with attentive ease.\(^{95}\)

**Detroit techno** radio rips, **opera**, the swirling loops of **eastern devotional music**, **rave** hooks and an **R&B** sheen are all part of her sound.\(^{96}\)

While there is some agreement among these critics fixing Grimes into a pop or R&B genre, the multitude of labels presented above suggests some confusion among critics. This occurrence brings light to the “antigeneric moment” surrounding Grimes. This is most evident when critics make statements like “There is something so unusual about this record, an artefact that sounds as if it is being transmitted from space, as if it were coming from a more creative place than could be found on earth.”\(^{97}\) Because there were seemingly no clearly-applicable genre labels to sufficiently classify Grimes’ music when it emerged, critics were left in a position where they felt it must be coming from a fantastical world outside traditional genre discourse. They then used their essential tool of genre labels to list as many related subgenres they could think of. This inevitably does place Grimes inside generic discourse, but critics were still divided on how exactly to label her. This “not-a-genre-yet-every-genre” conundrum became a characteristic emphasized in reviews of Grimes’ music. Boucher was described as “genre-bending,”\(^{98}\) “genre-defying,”\(^{99}\) to “[blend] genres like paints on a palette,”\(^{100}\) and “causing genre barriers to melt like…polar ice.”\(^{101}\) *The Guardian* writes, “By sounding a little like

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\(^{100}\) NME, (September 2 2011), http://www.nme.com/reviews/grimes/12288.

everything you’ve ever heard, the whole sounds like nothing you’ve ever heard.”

The difficulty of describing Grimes’ music via traditional genre labels became a way of defining it. In The Quietus’ review of Halfaxa (2010), they conclude, “It’ll also give the arbiters of genre naming with way too much time on their hands a few sleepless nights as they aimlessly argue as to whether this fits into the witch/chill/whatever pigeonhole.”

_Drowned in Sound_ attempts to pin down Grimes as being ‘hypnagogic pop,’ a genre term created by critic David Keenan in the August 2009 issue of _The Wire_. The word “hypnagogic” refers to the transitional state from wakefulness to sleep, and last.fm hazily describes “hypnagogic pop” as follows:

…hypnagogic pop is a broad term covering a constellation of artists that, while having many different “styles”, have a similar music making approach:

(sometimes extremely) low fidelity production (that is intentional in a different way than that of Lo-Fi Indie) filtering, more often than not, reminiscences of pop culture in various degrees (ranging from transparent, blatant pastiches to nearly abstract filtering, reverbing, often also including Plunderphonics technique) and in different forms (from free-form, even cassette-side-long jams to almost complete copies of pop format, like in the case of Ariel Pink's Haunted Graffitti).

In this way, “hypnagogic pop” is linked to a genre term like “indie,” which “refers…to a means of production.” To refer to Grimes as “hypnagogic pop” thus elucidates how Boucher’s lo-fi production methods influence the sound of her music. _Drowned in Sound’s_ review is the only known occurrence of Grimes being tied to this genre label, but it provides an example diverging from other critics in describing how Grimes fits into

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108 Frith, 86.
“the contemporaneous musical zeitgeist.” The reviewer proceeds to explain this zeitgeist:

For, making up in knowledge what they lack in any formal musical training, these twentysomething GarageBand whizz kids are by-products of the internet age, magpies who appropriate vast stores of music to use and abuse for their own personal laptop endeavours. And 22-year-old Canadian Grimes - aka Claire Boucher - is the latest glo-fi crusader to colour the vista with her eerie, otherworldly hues.

This presents an interesting take because the reviewer is concerned with Boucher’s production process, deeming her a “glo-fi crusader” alongside lo-fi pop artists like Ariel Pink. Her lack of formal musical training, combined with being a “product of the internet age,” is given credence as a crucial component of Grimes’ sound. Another reviewer notes that “One of the confusing things about reading interviews with [Boucher] is how quick she is to tell us about her lack of musical training.” In one interview, she explains that “Not knowing how to play music is my greatest asset…I try to imitate things, and then I fail horribly, and then it’s just...something different.” In another interview, she humbly notes that “On the first album I recorded everything on the white piano keys, but [now I’ve] figured out how to write on the black and white keys together, so it’s more diverse.” Lack of formal musical training is nothing new in popular music. Paul McCartney and John Lennon famously could not read music. Outsider artists like Daniel Johnson, and to a lesser extent established artists like Kurt Cobain, used their lack of formal musical training as a large contributor to their sound. Where Boucher diverges is in how she makes up for formal musical training with the internet’s “vast stores of

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music to use and abuse,”¹¹⁴ as noted by the reviewer above. To say that the internet makes up for what Boucher lacks in musical training insinuates that it has a definitive influence on the production of her music. This is described in a review which states “Grimes, whose Claire Boucher openly admits to having no musical training whatsoever and so has ‘no understanding of theory or notation,’ is above all else an avid listener of music, someone whose ability to make a great album seems to stem primarily from Boucher having absorbed so many of them.”¹¹⁵ Boucher did not learn how to write music from any sort of musical training or playing live in the tradition of a rock band, but rather from consuming a breadth of music that was near-unattainable before the internet. 

_DUMMY Magazine_ also brings up the internet in discussion of Grimes’ music:

> The internet is as important to interesting music today as hallucinogens were in the sixties. The internet is the most fun you can have without actually enjoying yourself, and listening to Grimes’s second record ‘Halfaxa’…is as dissociative, as unfocussed and as awesome as the internet itself.¹¹⁶

Bringing the internet into discussions of Grimes marks a shift from reviewers merely trying to describe the music to now explaining why it sounds the way it does. “The internet” is itself a highly fluid term that encompasses a variety of technological and cultural phenomena. To equate Grimes with the internet suggests an intriguing and complex answer to the problem of classifying Boucher’s music. It also provides a temporal explanation, placing Grimes in a zeitgeist with other musicians who also engage with the internet in a similar manner. However, this does not solve the critic’s problem of generic classification.


3.2 The Solution: Grimes and “Post-Internet”

What seemed like one solution to the issue of labeling Grimes’ music came in an interview with Interview Magazine in May 2011, shortly before recording her breakthrough album Visions (2012). Boucher was asked to explain the “non-specific” nature of her sound:

DURGA CHEW-BOSE: Largely, the music writing that’s out there about you is focused on how non-specific your sound is and how your influences are wide-ranging; the word “ethereal” is used a lot. Was that your intention?

CLAIRE BOUCHER: Yeah, I mean, I think people just ask those questions because they’re easy and obvious.

CHEW-BOSE: In your words, how would you describe your music then?

BOUCHER: I mean, I think my sound is post-internet. People my age had the internet when they were kids. So I think I just had a really diverse musical background, but from a really young age. People who are 30 and older don’t have that—they were raised with genres of music. But people my age had everything all at once…genres are sort of disappearing, people just use bands as reference points. And if I were to describe my sound, I’d just say it’s “modern?”

Boucher is clearly stating that the internet had a large effect on her music and is causing genres to “disappear.” For her to use “modern” here also arguably places Grimes’ “post-internet” into a cultural zeitgeist. She would soon be promoting her album Visions in the coming months, and in subsequent interviews, many publications pressed her to elaborate on this “post-internet” phenomenon she described here (For instance, online articles from The New York Times, Dallas Observer, The Creators Project and The
Guardian). By the time *Visions* was released, the term “post-internet” was used in relation to Grimes’ music in reviews by a variety of online publications. I have located uses in online reviews of the album from January to March 2012 by Pitchfork, SPIN, *Consequence of Sound*, *Sputnik Music*, KEXP, *DIY Magazine*, *The Quietus*, *Tastemakers Magazine*, Filter, Dusted, No Rip Cord, *The Yale Herald*, Reviler, *Temporary Rough Venom*, Black Tar Music, Luddite Stereo, and LA

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124 *Consequence of Sound*, “Grimes - Visions” (Feb 17 2012), http://consequenceofsound.net/2012/02/album-review-grimes-visions/.


Music Blog. Later reviews for reissues of Geidi Primes and Halfaxa also used the term, as well as various thinkpieces and end-of-the-year lists that mention Grimes. This does not include print publications, and there are likely more uses out there. This shows a significant adoption of the term “post-internet” in describing Grimes’ music after the interview with Interview Magazine took place.

It does not seem that Boucher’s intention was to be classified as “post-internet” as much as she deployed the term to resist genre classification altogether. She even speaks of the idea of genre as a dated concept. However, whether or not she intended her music to be labeled “post-internet,” it inevitably was. Gunn writes, “despite the predictably resistant rhetoric of popular music artists, music is unavoidably destined for generic containers.” Suddenly, all the confusion and incoherence in labeling Grimes’ music could be contained within a single term. Fabian Holt writes in Genre in Popular Music that “Discourse plays a major role in genre making. A genre category can only be established if the music has a name. Naming a music is a way of recognizing its existence and distinguishing it from other musics.” By stating, “my sound is post-internet,” Boucher inadvertently gave her music a label that made it easily distinguishable from other music. Frith notes, “Whatever decision is made generically…will have a determining influence on everything that happens to the performer or record

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141 DUMMY Mag, “Grimes is leading a generation of online musicians to the material world” (May 22 2012), http://www.dummymag.com/features/be-a-body-grimes-meaning.
144 Gunn, 32.
thereafter.” By deeming her music “post-internet” in this interview, she gave critics exactly what they were looking for — a new, attractive term that would solve their issue of classifying Grimes’ music.

Frith asserts, “Genre is not determined by the form or style of a text itself but by the audience’s perception of its style and meaning.” Whether or not Boucher wanted Grimes to be considered “post-internet,” critics and fans quickly picked up the term to classify her music. As previously discussed, there was something in Grimes’ music that perplexed critics in their attempts to classify it. By calling the music “post-internet,” Boucher played right into their hands. Her music no longer existed outside of genre discourse, because there was suddenly a label to describe it. Holt writes that “Mass mediation plays an enormous role in genre formation, and corporate companies form a major part of the institutional network.” He further notes, “Online discourse can be viewed as an extension of offline discourse, and it is often complementary to the professional mass media.” These interviews, articles and reviews about Grimes were the pervasive forces in adopting the term as a genre classifier for Boucher’s music. Listeners who just discovered Grimes would look to such reviews and find a new genre to obsess over, while old fans could defiantly claim they listened to her “before she was post-internet.” It was not Boucher who held the power of determining whether her music was “post-internet,” but the voices of critics and fans.

Considering that Boucher’s initial use of the term was meant to dispel genre terms rather than create one, she was not pleased with how tied her music became to the label “post-internet”. Shortly after the reviews for Visions flooded in, Boucher took to Twitter to dismiss the term altogether. Although this particular tweet is now irretrievable, a cover story by Self-Titled Mag explains the situation:

146 Frith, 76.
147 Frith, 94.
148 Holt, 21.
149 Holt, 29.
150 Boucher (@Grimezsz) deleted all of her tweets from before Dec 10 2013.
…the term “post-internet,” which Claire once used in an interview to explain, as she says, “the very clear situation that obviously the internet has changed the way people consume music,” how it provides access to music across all genres, encouraging a pastiche of influence. (Claire herself culls influence from across the spectrum, citing Mariah Carey, Aphex Twin, Marilyn Manson and Timbaland as key figures.) “Post-internet,” in an accidental and not entirely inappropriate instance of coining culture, has become a self-perpetuating meme, attributed to her music in a way she didn’t expect. “People are starting to refer to it as if it were a genre, which is not the way it was intended,” she says. “It’s not that I’m a post-internet artist; it’s that the internet exists now, and at one point it didn’t.”

Fittingly, she turned to Twitter to renounce the term entirely, posting, “omg ‘post internet’ whatever i was running my mouth i don’t support the use of that term—not affiliated with it yoooooo.”…The term “post-internet” may have evolved beyond what she intended but perhaps necessarily so. Still, she prefers to keep her distance: “I’m just worried that it gives me an air of faux intellectualism.”

Gunn writes that “Even when fans and artists deny generic labels, often such denial signals a reading of the adjectival code that, when coupled with the denial itself, paradoxically affirms generic inclusion.” By now distancing Grimes from the “post-internet” label, Boucher inadvertently gives the term more power in relation to her music.

It then became a topic among publications to discuss her dismissal of the term; just as they had previously discussed her adoption of it. This is evident in an interview with W Magazine:

Claire Boucher, the 24-year-old singer known as Grimes, rolls her eyes. The cause of her exasperation is the phrase “post-internet” — throwaway words she once used to describe her strange, soulful electro-dance sound — which has been lobbed back at her ad nauseam. “It seems so pretentious,” she says. Public relations aside, though, she still stands behind its meaning. Her self-produced album Visions, released this spring, has the media hailing the arrival of a “new breed of pop star.” The work is unquestionably the result of growing up in a digital world. Like Boucher, who’s a thin wire of nervous energy, the songs are frenetic, with odd musical references ranging from Enya to Björk to Mariah Carey

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152 Gunn, 41.

(for Boucher’s high falsetto). “It’s ADD music,” she explains. “I go through phases a lot.”

This example shows Boucher resisting the term to classify her music, yet still standing behind its existence as a cultural phenomenon. In an interview with *Austin Chronicle*, Boucher states that she never even said her music was “post-internet,” contradicting previous interviews she gave in her career. In another interview, she states:

> It’s just a stupid term that I unfortunately made up... But the concept isn’t stupid, it’s a phenomenon that just totally exists. Because the internet exists. It’s all around us on a daily basis, and it’s totally informed the way people live their lives, the way they consume music, and the way that they interpret it, both as listeners and artists.

Boucher states in an interview early in her career, “I want to make a tome – access every genre of music, and also create new genres with them.” When given the opportunity to found her very own genre, however, Boucher chose to resist it. This presents a paradoxical situation. Boucher is not dismissing the existence of “post-internet,” nor entirely denying that she is a part of it, but is completely against the term being used as a genre label to affix her music. Gunn states that “resistance to genre is not so much a resistance to musical codes as a revolt against the human process of categorizing by which music is mediated by the linguistic sign.” More than anything, this seems to be the issue most pressing for Boucher. It is not the idea of “post-internet” that causes Boucher to resist the label, but the very idea of classification itself. In a video interview, Boucher states, “There is nothing that I really define my music as, because I think that’s

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156 Keep this turn of phrase in mind in the next chapter when we deal with Childish Gambino’s project titled *Because the Internet*.
159 Gunn, 36.
inherently going to limit it.”\textsuperscript{160} This statement encapsulates her resistance to classification, and why Boucher was so resistant to the idea of being attached to the “post-internet” label. Even if she feels that she may be a part of what “post-internet” means, for her music to be classified as “post-internet” would limit one’s understanding of her music.

Frith writes that “to hear music generically…means organizing the sounds according to formal rules.”\textsuperscript{161} This is what Boucher is against, and no matter how hard she tried to resist it, genre classification still binds her. Gunn concludes his work on the inevitability of genre by affirming that “attempts of artists and fans to engage in discussions outside of generic discourse, to avoid categorizing, are ultimately futile.”\textsuperscript{162} The story of Grimes presents a vivid example of this, and in the end, Boucher’s attempts to exist outside of genre only brought her further within it.

In reviews for \textit{Art Angels} (2015), released over three years after Boucher dismissed the term “post-internet,” critics still felt compelled to use it in their analysis (such as \textit{SPIN},\textsuperscript{163} \textit{Vulture},\textsuperscript{164} and \textit{The Local Joke}\textsuperscript{165}). \textit{The Guardian} states that “Boucher has always claimed to be ‘post-internet’” but then calls Grimes “a more traditional pop project.”\textsuperscript{166} Boucher adds:

\begin{quote}
Pop is just another genre. Some of my songs are influenced by pop music. Some of them are not. The whole purpose of Grimes is that it’s genreless. Trying to constantly put a genre label on it makes no sense and then you are always eating your words two months later. So, why bother? People keep trying to be like,
\end{quote}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{160} Konbini, “The Auto-Interview: Grimes” (Jul 17 2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3SVcbft9XOA.
\textsuperscript{161} Frith, 91.
\textsuperscript{162} Gunn, 44.
\textsuperscript{165} The Local Joke, “ALBUM REVIEW: Art Angels - Grimes” (Jan 14 2016), https://thelocaljoke.wordpress.com/2016/01/14/album-review-art-angels-grimes/.
\end{flushleft}
“We’re trying to pin down the Grimes style.” If you haven’t realised by now, you’re never going to be able to.\(^{167}\)

This narrative shows an instance of a characteristically “genreless” artist being inexorably pulled back into generic discourse. No matter how much Boucher and her music may resist genre classification, labels inevitably take over. While Grimes may no longer be as strictly bound to the “post-internet” label as she once was, it continues to appear in music discourse years later. It has become a genre tag on last.fm\(^{168}\) and bandcamp,\(^{169}\) each listing over 100 artists,\(^{170}\) with Grimes listed as the “top artist” on last.fm’s page. The rising UK collective PC Music has been classified as “post-internet,”\(^{171}\) and articles have been written about the elusive term, such as Vice’s “So What is Post-internet Music, Anyway?” in late 2015,\(^{172}\) humanhuman’s “Exploring Post-internet Music”\(^{173}\) in early 2016,\(^{174}\) and MTV’s “The Post-internet Worlds of Atlanta Rappers Lil Yachty and Playboi Carti”\(^{175}\) in early 2016. The term “post-internet” has also been picked up outside of music discourse. The New York Times refers to Jerry Seinfeld’s career fitting into a “post-internet world”\(^{176}\) in one article, and discusses Instagram celebrity Meriam Bennani to be “playing on the idioms of post-internet culture”\(^{177}\) in


\(^{170}\) Other artists classified as “post-internet” by last.fm and bandcamp tend to be low-profile artists influenced by internet subgenres like Seapunk and Vaporwave, and have an aesthetic built on early online imagery.


\(^{172}\) Vice, “So What Is Post-Internet Music, Anyway?”


\(^{174}\) Artists classified as “post-internet” by humanhuman are Holly Herndon, Arca, Amnesia Scanner, Lotic, and Rabit. These artists all make electronic-based music that somehow engages with the internet.

\(^{175}\) MTV, “The Post-Internet Worlds of Atlanta Rappers Lil Yachty and Playboi Carti” (Feb 1 2016).


another. Online fashion publication DIS Magazine claims to be a “post-internet lifestyle magazine.” Nearly five years after Boucher’s seminal interview, “post-internet” lives on. Below are some album covers for albums tagged “post-internet” on bandcamp, which feature re-appropriated imagery of early internet and computer culture.

Images of bandcamp albums tagged as “post-internet”: FREE MUSIC NOW!!!, Heal Zone Demos, and Windows 89.

3.3 The Confusion: Unpacking “Post-Internet”

“Post-internet” bears little resemblance to traditional genre labels. The term had little commercial use in its adoption, which has normally been a key motivation of genre labels in the past. Classifying Grimes’ music as “post-internet” did not initially make it any easier for record shops, online distributors or record labels to organize it for sale (though the term has since been used by places like last.fm and Bandcamp to organize music, as noted above). Nor did the genre emerge from a geographical space or local scene like previous genres. It arises out of that intangible “place” of the internet. There is not even

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179 Frith, 75-76.

180 Holt, 19.
a specific sound of “post-internet,” insofar as it supposedly sounds like everything. Considering “post-internet” bears little resemblance to popular music genre labels that came before it, why was it adopted so widely in relation to Grimes’ music? In order to answer this, we must first address a larger question looming over this analysis – what is meant by “post-internet”?

The term first appeared in discussions of visual art, with “post-internet” describing a movement that succeeded “Internet Art”. It is not unheard of for a popular music genre terms to first exist in other contexts of art. For instance, “Gothic” was initially used to describe literature and architecture before it was brought into popular music. Whether Boucher was familiar with post-internet visual art is not known, but based on her relationship with Montreal’s underground art scene it would not be surprising. Among the first known usages of the term “post-internet” is in an interview in 2008 with Marisa Olson, a well-known figure of post-internet art, when she used it to describe “art after the internet”. Many art critics have debated the nature of post-internet art. In Art in America’s recent “The Perils of Post-internet Art,” the author states “Post-internet’ avoids anything resembling a formal description of the work it refers to, alluding only to a hazy contemporary condition and the idea of art being made in the context of digital technology.” In Art F City’s “Finally, a Semi-Definition of Post-internet Art,” a contributor states “I find the term mostly annoying and don’t believe it will have traction in the long run.” Artspace attempts to define the term in “What is Post-internet Art? Understanding the Revolutionary New Art Movement” and states, “post-internet artists have moved beyond making work dependent on the novelty of the

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182 Gunn, 37.
Web to using its tools to tackle other subjects.” This idea of moving beyond “the novelty of the Web” connects back to the discussion in Chapter 2 of music about the internet. Post-internet visual art does not treat the internet as a novelty and instead critiques the cultural role of the internet, much like the popular music artists I am discussing.

One of the most central points of confusion with the term is its usage of “post.” One critic even confusingly describes Grimes as being “oh so relentlessly post” and ends their critique by stating “Forget it. I’m out of adjectives…Like I said, this thing is oh so post.” In discussing the nature of “post” in “post-internet,” arguments often parallel those about postmodernism. Some postmodern theorists have claimed that “post” carries historical and temporal connotations, sometimes meaning “after” or “past,” while at times meaning “an extension of.” Olson’s definition of “post-internet” relies on “post” meaning “after,” but this creates confusion because the internet is not “over,” just as modernism may not have been “over” when postmodernism emerged. Olson draws this parallel herself when she clarifies “I said that both my online and offline work was after the internet in the sense that ‘after’ can mean both ‘in the style of’ and ‘following.’ For illustration, I referred to the concept of postmodernity coming not at the end of modernity, but after (and with a critical awareness of) modernity.” Other postmodernists argue that “post” implies a reaction to modernism, similar to how some critics find post-internet art to not be after the internet but about the internet, or a critique

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188 John Lukacs, At the End of an Age, (New Haven: Yale UP, 2002).
190 Olson, 60.
of “an internet state of mind.”192 The usage of “post” in “post-internet” is elaborated on in “Exploring Post-internet Music”:

Reading the term post-internet superficially, it would seem to imply that it comes after the internet; an evolution past the internet to a new field. It is quite the contrary in fact. Just as with post-modernism, post-rock or post-everything the use of ‘post’ entails a critical framework around the concept that is being, well… post-ed. ‘Post’ not only means that it comes after, but implies an awareness of its medium, sources, audience and its limits. The movement then takes this self-awareness as its new subject. The result is a metastate of looking and is sometimes criticised for being disconnected, too difficult for the general public to understand, and maybe even be too devoid of actual meaning due to its excessive self-contemplation…In the post-internet era, being online has become so much of our daily life, that it is impossible to think of how we would interact, gather information, work or play without it. Post-internet art is not about the internet as a medium anymore, but more of an examination of this virtual world and its impact and relation to the real world. To put it simply: not merely made on the net, but about the net.193

So “post-internet” may be temporal in taking place after a certain period of the internet’s life cycle, but also reflective in being critical about the world that the internet introduced. Dick Hebdige says of postmodernism, “a single writer can talk at different times about different ‘posts’.”194 This statement rings true with “post-internet” as well, with “post” carrying different, adaptable connotations.

Claire Boucher’s own definitions of “post-internet” offer some of the clearest explanations of this phenomenon. One the one hand she focuses on the biological and evolutionary impact that the internet is having on her brain. On the other, she is critically addressing the vast expanse of art and information that the internet allows her to access. For her, it is the combination of these two sides that encapsulate “post-internet”. She typically leads with a scientific explanation and then elaborates on its consequences for her music. Below are some of her scientific explanations of “post-internet” (I have bolded scientific terminology for emphasis):

194 Hebdige, 183.
The phenomenon I’m referring to is the **neurobiological** difference between people who were born after the internet became a common, household thing and people who had their adolescence without exposure to the internet.\(^{195}\)

I was trying to refer to, specifically, what I think is a **biological** difference between people who were born in the late ‘80s - people who experienced adolescence with the internet - and those who did not.\(^{196}\)

Grimes could be described as ‘post-internet’ because my brain is **biologically** different from the brains of people who were not exposed to the internet as adolescents. I (and 99% of my peers) have therefore carved neural pathways that structure the use of the internet as a priority skill and also allow us fluency and adaptability (that is inherent to our basic understanding of the internet).\(^{197}\)

Definitions like this of “post-internet” reveal Boucher’s neuroscientific background. She never graduated from McGill because her music career took off, but Boucher was enrolled in the “electro-acoustics program, which is like psycho-physics…it’s the physics of neurobiology, specifically related to music.”\(^{198}\) She states, “[I] studied a lot of how the brain interacts with music. So by the time I actually started making music, I kind of had an understanding of frequencies and kind of how the brain responds to things, which I think really helped me as a producer.”\(^{199}\) Considering this background, it is not surprising that she uses terms like “neurobiological” to explain “post-internet,” and it provides a pseudo-scientific explanation of this phenomenon. Acclaimed neuroscientist Dr. Susan Greenfield would agree with Boucher that the internet is having neurobiological effects on our brains. In her book *Mind Change: How Digital Technologies are Leaving Their Mark on Our Brains*, Dr. Greenfield argues, “The human brain will adapt to whatever environment in which it is placed. The cyberworld of the twenty-first century is offering a new type of environment. Therefore, the brain could be changing in parallel, in

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correspondingly new ways.”

Dr. Michael Merzenich, a pioneer in brain plasticity research, also claims that heavy use of the internet has neurological effects. UCLA psychiatry professor Gary Small writes in *iBrain: Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind*, “The current explosion of digital technology not only is changing the way we live and communicate but is rapidly and profoundly altering our brains.”

Although these scientific minds agree with Boucher’s statements, they have nothing to say about popular music. Boucher’s discussion of the science behind “post-internet” effectively introduces these ideas into popular music discourse. In further explaining “post-internet,” Boucher then touches on the cultural consequences of this neurobiological phenomenon:

[“Post-internet”] is leading to what I would consider the beginnings of a musical Renaissance. So for me, post-internet refers to the group of people who are psycho-hybrids with their internet selves (my Twitter, my whatever). [We] turn through the cyber universe, absorb as much as possible. For music, this means that the potential is endless. Sometimes I feel at such a loss simply because I feel so overwhelmed with the beauty and culture of the past that is rising up through the internet, and meeting things from other eras or communities that have never merged before. It’s like… the world’s fair of all art ever (I’m sure a sad and vast proportion will never reemerge for various reasons, but you know what I mean). This can only be great for us—because it is the responsibility of the contemporary musician to continue the legacy of humankind to the best of his or her abilities, especially as we may not have much time yet.

I went through my adolescence having this revelatory experience – I can have any music I want and I can get it immediately. For me and for a lot of people I know, there’s this musical eclecticism that happened.

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The music of my childhood was really diverse because I had access to everything, so the music I make is sort of schizophrenic.\textsuperscript{205}

This bridges the gap in connecting “post-internet” from being a biological phenomenon to a cultural one for Boucher. Her idea of being a “psycho-hybrid” with online identity is alluded to by Greenfield when she states, “a lifetime of early exposure to the influences of Facebook and Twitter is producing a cultural mindset that is different from that of previous generations.”\textsuperscript{206} This different cultural mindset is precisely what Grimes (and later, Childish Gambino) embodies. Pitchfork even once referred to Grimes as “a human Tumblr,”\textsuperscript{207} and Boucher has said “I basically consider myself a cyborg.”\textsuperscript{208} For her, the internet is not a separate aspect of her life but an integral component of her existence as a person and artist.

In Nicholas Carr’s book \textit{The Shallows: What the internet is Doing to Our Brains}, he takes a McLuhan-esque approach and claims “the Net is best understood as the latest in a long series of tools that have helped mold the human mind.”\textsuperscript{209} He then further asserts, “With the exception of alphabets and number systems, the Net may well be the single most powerful mind-altering technology that has ever come into general use.”\textsuperscript{210} One of his main conclusions is that “the Web makes it harder for us to lock information into our biological memory, we’re forced to rely more and more on the Net’s capacious and easily searchable artificial memory, even if it makes us shallow thinkers.”\textsuperscript{211} This is at the heart of what Boucher is describing when she says her music is eclectic,
schizophrenic, and “ADD music.” This is what is meant by the “post-internet’ feel” of the music and why a publication would say “Grimes’ music similar to the audio equivalent of the internet.” Growing up with the internet and a seemingly endless amount of music at her fingertips, Boucher encountered an eclecticism of music that was impossible in a pre-Internet era. Once Boucher started to make her own music, this experience invariably influenced her musical output. As is evident in early reviews, the diverse breadth of genres and styles in her music was apparent, but her depth of formal music theory and practice was shallow. This is why her music was so difficult for critics to grasp, even if it was recorded solely with “the white piano keys.” Critics early on even said that the internet makes up for what she lacks in formal training. This is inevitably why Boucher used “post-internet” to explain the sound of her music. She not only recognizes that she is coming from a period of technological change and media transition, but understands how this experience deeply influences the sound of her music. She is able to grasp the biological effects of growing up with the internet and how it influences her art. This is why she never dismisses the “post-internet” phenomenon entirely because she recognizes it “totally exists.”

3.4 The Aftermath: Poptimism and the Resistance of “Pop”

It is worth mentioning how Boucher’s discussions of “post-internet” coincide with the rise of poptimism. Poptimism has been called “the prevailing ideology for today’s most

influential music critics.”

It involves an argument that pop music deserves the same critical respect as rock. The New York Times’ Saul Austerlitz writes “It is no accident that poptimism is an Internet-era permutation.” Boucher’s diverse “post-internet” taste looks like a poptimist playlist, spanning from pop country to progressive metal. Some artists that Boucher has listed as influences on Grimes are Dolly Parton, Marilyn Manson, Mariah Carey, Tool, Beyoncé, Aphex Twin, Enya, Kanye West, Madonna, Timbaland, Panda Bear, Outkast, andNine Inch Nails. This list not only shows Boucher’s diverse taste spanning various eras and genres, but also displays her appreciation for mainstream pop music. In regards to Tool, Boucher states, “They’re so artsy, but so populist. I try to live by the sonic principles of Tool.”

This art-yet-pop mindset is also shown in a blog post of her favorite songs, where she lists tracks from Prince, Taylor Swift, Skrillex, Elliot Smith, Rihanna and Paramore, among others. In Amoeba’s YouTube segment “What’s In My Bag?” when artists go through Amoeba Record’s store and pick out a few items, among the things Boucher selects are a Blink 182 music video DVD, experimental ambient producer Balam Acab’s album Wander Wonder, Justin Bieber’s Never Say Never concert film, and industrial group Skinny Puppy’s Singles Collection. A non-poptimist (i.e. rockist) mindset would have trouble understanding why Skinny Puppy is placed alongside Justin Bieber, since one is a gritty, authentic, and innovative band and the other is a mass produced product of popular culture. For Claire Boucher, placing these two alongside each other is nothing out of the ordinary.

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220 RIP. Prince passed away towards the end of writing this Master’s thesis.


In regards to the Justin Bieber concert film, Boucher states, “I think Justin Bieber is really under-appreciated…he’s pretty talented. The fact that he wrote all his own singles…he had a hard life (laughs). [The film] makes you appreciate Justin Bieber, ‘cause he’s not just a product of the machine, he’s a real musician.” This statement is to be taken with a grain of salt since Boucher laughed and the fact that Bieber did not actually write all of his own singles, but it displays a model of a poptimist mindset because Boucher is placing the more rockist idea of musical authenticity within the framework of mass produced pop music. She affirms that there is more to Bieber than him being a “product of the machine” because he is also a “real musician.” This poptimist ideology makes sense when applied to many of the artists mentioned by Boucher as influences. She recognizes that while many of them may be mass produced products of popular music, she does not see that as detrimental to their artistic credibility. This then adds another layer to Boucher’s idea of “post-internet” because while it is built around the idea of the vast access to music offered by the internet, it is her poptimist-leaning mindset that caused her to consume so many different styles. A die-hard heavy metal fan with an internet connection has access to the same music that Boucher does, but they may not choose to listen to such a diverse array of artists. Because Boucher views many seemingly opposing styles on the same playing field, she uses the internet as a means to cultivate her eclectic, poptimist taste.

*The Guardian* writes of musicians who embrace poptimism like Robyn and The Knife: “Nurtured by the growing critical mass of indie culture, [these artists] used the structure of pop to create music with a point of view that was not in any way mainstream. It was pop music that wasn’t necessarily popular.” This is again exemplified by Grimes, who emerged out of indie culture and has been deemed “pop for misfits” by *The New Yorker*.223 Fittingly, Boucher also rejects the label of a pop star/artist. This came up prominently around the release of her highly anticipated album *Art Angels* (2015). Since Boucher had dismissed “post-internet” during the cycle promoting her previous album *Visions* (2012), perhaps critics had to think of something new to classify her because they

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took this opportunity to view *Art Angels* (2015) as Boucher’s attempt to break into the pop mainstream. In an interview with *The Globe and Mail* titled “Producer, musician…but don’t call Grimes the p-word,” Boucher states:

I think there’s an aspect of pretty much every interview I’ve gone into over the last year; they’re like, “So are you going to be a pop star?” And I’m like, “No, I’m making this record by myself. I’m on an independent label, this is independent music; most of this record is, like, industrial and, like, screamo. It’s not pop music. … And the headline the next day is, like, ‘Grimes wants to be a pop star.’ And it’s just … like you guys wrote these stories before you ever talked to me. It’s like there’s a media narrative that is really intense and really, really inaccurate, that no matter how many times I say the opposite … just gets more and more powerful. And I’m just really fed up with it. It just really sucks to have the media constantly painting you as something that is so incredibly far away from, like, what you are.

This quote encompasses many of the themes that have run through my analysis so far. Boucher resists the classification of “pop star” and notes that no matter what she says media publications still label her as such. This is not entirely different from the course run by “post-internet,” especially considering that many publications still used the term after she dismissed it. This complicated relationship with how the media perceives Grimes is the subject of the opening song on *Art Angels* (after the intro), entitled “California.” She claims the song is a “hate track for *Pitchfork*… [and] for like the music industry.”

Boucher’s resistance to the “pop star” label is an issue of both gender and classification. She has experienced a lot of sexism in the music industry, and her tumblr post in 2013 entitled, “i don’t want to be infantilized because I refused to be sexualized” (which she has since deleted), addresses instances of sexism she has experienced in the music industry. This blog post caused major media attention and is still mentioned much to her chagrin. She even writes in the post, “i dont want my words to be taken out of context.” Three years after writing the post she tweeted, “most

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annoying thing about my job: being asked about ‘music industry sexism’” and that “media propagates sexism by portraying me as a victim rather than the successful producer that I am.” She once said, “When I first started playing shows, it was awful. People would always be like, ‘You’re not a real musician.’ I’m playing with samplers and MPCs – everyone is also playing with samplers and MPCs. It’s just because I’m a girl that you’re going to shit on me about it.” This perception of Boucher as “not a real musician” causes her to be a largely one-woman project and handle all aspects of production herself. It also relates to previous discussions of her lack of musical training, as detailed in section 3.1 of this chapter. It is not abnormal for an independent musician to have no formal music training, but in discussions of Grimes, critics felt it was necessary to emphasize. This could again be another way of “othering” Boucher, pointing out that she has no formal training when plenty of male independent musicians do not either. Boucher feels that the moment a male producer or engineer gets involved with her music, “then people [would] start being, like, ‘Oh! That guy just did it all.’” When she wanted to add guitar and violin to the album, Art Angels, rather than getting someone else, Boucher taught herself how to play the instruments. She states, “One of the first things I did was Google what chords were in Dolly Parton’s ‘Jolene,’ and I used those on ‘Belly of the Beat.’” Her autonomy and DIY nature contribute not only to her music, but also to the multitude of music videos she has directed for Grimes and to the stage direction of her live shows. She makes it a point to be the sole creative force behind Grimes because she feels the moment a male gets involved the credit would shift to them.

Boucher prefers to be understood as a producer along the lines of Kanye West and Phil Spector because she positions her work as such, even stating early on, “It's kind of


like I’m Phil Spector and I’m forcing a young girl (Grimes) to make pop music and perform exhaustively…Except, instead of it being someone else, that girl is also me.”

Boucher finds the media’s view of her as a “pop star” rather than a producer to be sexist, and tweeted “endless speculation abt whether grimes will be a popstar seems 2 disregard the fact that I’m a paranoid recluse & i can't even walk in heels.” Boucher does not feel that she fits into the classification of a “pop star,” yet media publications still classify her as such. Male independent music producers like Baths, How to Dress Well, and James Blake have arguably added pop sensibilities to their music over the years, but they are not classified as trying to be “pop stars” like Boucher. There is admittedly much more research to be done on how gender factors into these discussions of Grimes, but it is outside the scope of this chapter. What is important to note here is that this displays another example of her struggle against the power of classification.

In an interview with *The Quietus* titled “Eschewing Pop Ideology: An Interview With Grimes,” Boucher states, “It really bothers me that people are so intent on trying to see if they can compare Art Angels to, you know, Taylor Swift or whatever. It’s just not the world I’m operating in” and claims, “What bothered me initially is just the idea that you mention Beyoncé once in the press three years ago and suddenly you can’t seem to get away from it. I’m on an indie label. I couldn’t even get on Top 40 if I wanted to.” Boucher is commenting on the fact that because she may show a poptimist taste by liking the work of Beyoncé, critics now expect her to make music for Top 40. However, Boucher claims that she is not even in a position to reach the mainstream pop world if she tried. The interviewer then notes:

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233 Ibid.
234 Ibid.
As the conversation continues, it’s becoming clearer and clearer to me that any apparent eschewing of the pop genre isn’t necessarily a question of distaste for what that term signifies after all, but rather a frustration with an overarching and pervasive arbitrary classification of music into genres – categories designed to eff the ineffable, to make things easy (and easily marketable). “I think it’s just very hard to speak about music. There’s no kind of inherent qualities to any music, there’s not even a great vocabulary for talking about music,” she continues, “Like, what? Loud, quiet, dark, bright, soft – they’re not actually words to describe music: they’re metaphors. It’s like talking about things that are intangible. It’s hard to describe, and I think it probably bothers any artist.”

This brings us right back to the beginning. Boucher dismisses the label of “pop” just as she did “post-internet,” even using very similar rhetoric. As soon as publications decide some new way to classify Grimes, Boucher dismisses it and it is back to square one. In an earlier interview with Pitchfork around the release of Visions, Boucher did, in fact, say, “I want to be a behind-the-scenes producer. I really hate being in front of people. But I’m also obsessed with being a pop star.” This statement seems to have been taken more literally than Boucher intended, much like when she first used the term “post-internet” to describe Grimes’ music. These examples show Boucher colloquially using terms in interviews that later get picked up by publications as classifications for Grimes. It is at this point that Boucher feels she must outwardly resist the use of such classifications. Just as she does not dismiss the phenomenon of “post-internet,” Boucher may not entirely resist what a pop star represents. However, she has no interest in being classified as such. It is when the classifier is taken from Boucher’s statements and affixed onto Grimes when conflict arises. This again shows Boucher’s strong resistance toward the power that classifications hold.

In the song “California,” she sings “I don’t understand what they say / ‘Cause I get carried away / Commodifying all the pain.” Boucher consistently feels that her words get taken out of context. This relates not only to discussions of classifying her music as laid out in this chapter, but also the ways in which she discusses her issues with sexism and being seen as a “pop star.” The song ends with the last line of the chorus, “California,

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235 Ibid.

I didn’t think you’d end up treating me so bad.” Boucher’s complicated relationship with the media, and music industry as a whole, is a consistent stressor on her as an artist because Grimes is consistently classified and perceived in ways that she sees as inappropriate or constraining.

3.5 Conclusion

Marshall McLuhan writes in *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man*, “The student of media will not only value slang as a guide to changing perception, but he will also study media as bringing about new perceptual habits.” The phrase “post-internet” reveals something more complex than simply an attractive neologism. When applied to the genre-defying nature of Grimes’ music, it may point to something more profound about the internet’s influence on the creation of her music. The explanations of “post-internet” that she gives offer perspectives on how she believes the internet is biologically affecting her brain and consequently altering her creative output. Even though she may resist “post-internet” as a genre label, she never dismisses the existence of “post-internet” as a cultural phenomenon. To her, “post-internet” is not meant to classify her music, but instead to explain the fundamental reasons as to why it exists in the form it does. To say Grimes is “post-internet” is not entirely different than if Madonna had said her music was “post-MTV” or if The Beatles had said their music was “post-Phonograph.” The difference is that unlike Madonna or The Beatles, Grimes created a disruption in traditional genre discourse and “post-internet” appeared to explain why. First, Grimes was considered indescribable and seemingly from another world. Critics used every tool at their disposal to try to pin down her sound, and they continually tripped over themselves. They could sense that there was something about Grimes’ music that was characteristically new, but it was beyond words. Then Boucher deemed her music “post-internet”, and it solved this issue. Grimes could now be fixed to a single term that emphasizes the internet’s influence on her music. While this helped critics and audiences, it caused problems for Boucher because “post-internet” was never intended to be a genre label. If anything, her use of “post-internet” was meant to dispel genre altogether.

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By placing Boucher’s idea of “post-internet” alongside poptimism, it elucidated how Grimes’ post-internet music is informed by an arguably poptimist outlook. This is shown in Boucher’s diverse taste and the way in which she values pop music. However, when classified under “pop” herself, she resisted it just as she did “post-internet.” This sheds more light on Boucher’s consistent resistance to classification and to the complicated relationship between her and media publications. If Boucher was not concerned with classification, her relationship with media publications would arguably be more amicable. Instead, she creates the song “California,” which shows a classification-resistant artist whose issues with the media’s perception of her become a topic of her music. If Grimes’ post-internet music acts as an expression of Boucher’s relationship with the internet, “California” then acts as an expression of the complicated predicament that the term “post-internet,” among other things, placed her in.

One reviewer writes, “Forget ‘post-internet,’ the better description for Grimes is ‘post-genre’.”238 Boucher herself believes genres to be disappearing239 and archaic,240 with “post-internet” pushing towards a genreless future. In order for that to happen, however, critics and audiences would first have to give up much of what they know about discussing music. As seen here with the case of “post-internet,” it does not seem that will happen any time soon. And considering critics started calling Grimes a “pop star” by the time of the next album cycle, it extends this point. Gunn writes, “Within a musical context…genres are not merely a tool of scholarly criticism but one of the basic constructs listeners and artists use to make sense of what they are hearing.”241 It is through the linguistic filter of genre that audiences are able to make sense of the fluidity

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241 Gunn, 35.
of music.\textsuperscript{242} Even if the music exists outside genre discourse as in the case of Grimes, genre labels are inevitably used in order to make sense of it. Where Grimes distinguishes herself from genre-resistant artists of the past is in how the internet fundamentally shaped the genreless nature of her music. Whether or not this will lead to a post-internet “musical Renaissance” is unknown, but if Grimes is any indication of how musical genre is evolving, the internet could continue as a prominent factor influencing and expanding the sonic palette of popular music. However, no matter how new or different one’s music may be, genre labels will inevitably emerge in order to classify and discuss it.

Frith cautions that “The crunch comes when the academic account [of a genre] is written over the mythical one — by the collector — and the history of the genre is rewritten in terms of a new purism.”\textsuperscript{243} The rewritten purism of a genre would then become the way in which it is perceived and understood, whether or not it adheres to the genre’s initial principles. Holt similarly states, “problems arise if scholarly definitions [of a genre] become the rule and not the tool, because that creates barriers for understanding how categories work in culture.”\textsuperscript{244} This scholarly account of “post-internet” is not meant to entirely encompass what is at stake with this term. “Post-internet” is so expansive that to try and pin it down is little different than trying to pin down Grimes’ music, or the internet itself. What this analysis does provide is a glimpse at the underpinnings of a phenomenon in popular music in which the internet infiltrated music genre discourse in a most explicit fashion.

\textsuperscript{242} Gunn, 34.
\textsuperscript{243} Frith, 89.
\textsuperscript{244} Holt, 15.
"Because the internet I’m here, because of the internet we’re all here. It’s the language of earth...Everyone keeps saying by this or that year, Mandarin or Spanish will be the most dominant language, but the internet is already a language we are all connected to... But the thing is, there are no rules, which is also the awesome thing."

— Donald Glover (Childish Gambino)²⁴⁵

4 Speaking “the Language of Earth”: Childish Gambino and *Because the Internet*

One night in 2008, Donald Glover was hanging out with his friends “chilling and drinking” while a sophomore at NYU. They came across a Wu-Tang Clan name generator online and naturally decided to put their names in. While at first it was “all funny and stuff,” as soon as ‘Donald Glover’ came back from the name generator as ‘Childish Gambino,’ Glover felt immediately attached. He said to his friends “you guys, it’s not funny anymore. This is something big.” As with Grimes in the last chapter, Donald Glover’s artistic identity as “Childish Gambino” is a classification taken from the internet. This chapter concerns Childish Gambino’s *Because the Internet* (2013), an expansive work that identifies itself with the internet, exists on the internet, and critiques the influence of the internet. The work exists perfectly in Bowie’s “gray space in the middle” that he discussed in Chapter 1 in reference to Duchamp’s conceptual art. *Because the Internet* exists in “the gray space in the middle” between the art and the audience’s experience of it, which is mediated entirely through the internet. While the previous chapter concerned music critic discourse addressing the role of the internet in Grimes’ music, this chapter will focus on a work explicitly marked, in some way, as “about” the internet.

This chapter addresses how both Donald Glover and *Because the Internet* subvert expectations of classification. Glover states that he is not a rapper and that *Because the Internet* is not an album, but both are often classified thusly. To better understand this, I first provide some background on Donald Glover’s career and how it diverges from

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247 The Wu-Tang Name Generator used by Glover at the website http://www.mess.be/inickgenwuname.php is an online algorithm where the user can “Join Ghostface Killah, Inspectah Deck, Method Man, RZA...” of the Wu-Tang Clan and “Become a real Wu Warrior” by entering their name and clicking the button “Enter the Wu-Tang” to receive a Wu-Tang sounding moniker (e.g., “George Costanza” becomes “Mad Conqueror”).

248 Ibid.

249 Ibid.
traditional hip-hop narratives, which leads to the creation of *Because the Internet*. I then provide an overview of many key elements of *Because the Internet* in order to understand how this text conceptually engages with the internet, and look at the identity crises of *Because the Internet* and how it relates to Glover’s own malleable artistic identity. Next, I place *Because the Internet* within Henry Jenkins’ frameworks of transmedia and convergence culture, along with Bolter & Grusin’s hypermediacy, to better understand this text. I finally explore how Glover used the internet to engage with his online fanbase in experimental and thematic ways with a meme from *Because the Internet* called “Roscoe’s wetsuit”. My goal in this chapter is to better understand how the internet is such an integral component of both Glover’s life and his work, *Because the Internet*.

### 4.1 A Dilettante for the Internet Age

Donald Glover is a multifaceted artist who has reached success primarily as a writer, actor, comedian and musician. He first gained attention starring in YouTube videos with the internet sketch comedy group Derrick Comedy while studying dramatic writing at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts (the videos have since reached over 100 million views). His work caught the eye of producer Tina Fey, who offered him a writing gig on her new series *30 Rock* soon after he graduated in 2006. Glover found success as a writer for the series and earned a Writers Guild of America Award for his work. He left the show after three seasons and moved to LA in 2009. Show-runner Dan Harmon was impressed by Glover after seeing the feature-length Derrick Comedy film *Mystery Team* (2009) and cast him to play Troy Barnes in NBC’s new sitcom *Community*. Shortly after *Community* began, Glover also had a successful stand-up special on *Comedy Central Presents* in 2010 and was awarded the Rising Comedy Award.

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250 YouTube, “Derrick Comedy: About Page,” https://www.youtube.com/user/derrickcomedy/about


at Just For Laughs Festival the same year.\textsuperscript{254}

Meanwhile, ever since his days at NYU, Glover had been creating music. Glover’s earliest known work is the album \textit{The Younger I Get} that he produced between 2004-05 and handed out as CD-Rs to residents in the NYU dorm where he was an RA.\textsuperscript{255} He successively produced ten remix albums under the self-reflexive name mc DJ, and he produced three mixtapes, an EP, and two independent albums as Childish Gambino before his first official release in 2011.\textsuperscript{256} All of these works were released for free online.

While working on \textit{Community}, Glover started collaborating with the show’s music composer, Ludwig Göransson, and began maturing his sound. The two have since worked together on subsequent Childish Gambino releases. Glover released his first official Childish Gambino album \textit{Camp} (2011) with Glassnote Records. \textit{Camp} is a concept album that tells the story of a boy at summer camp and the various trials and tribulations he faces. Glover toured the album extensively and effectively launched his music career as Childish Gambino. Nearing the fifth season of \textit{Community}, Glover made the conscious decision to quit the show in early 2013 in order to spend more time on his own projects.\textsuperscript{257}

This rise to fame sharply diverges from more traditional narratives of hip-hop careers. Murray Forman writes in \textit{The ‘Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop}:

\begin{quote}
Within hip-hop culture, artists and cultural workers have emerged as sophisticated chroniclers of the disparate skirmishes in contemporary American cities, observing and narrating the spatially oriented conditions of existence that influence and shape this decidedly urban music...as hip-hop’s varied artists and aficionados themselves frequently suggest, their narrative descriptions of urban
\end{quote}


conditions involve active attempts to express how individuals or communities in these locales live.\textsuperscript{258}

Forman is concerned with the ways in which rappers discuss a physical and socio-economic social space, “the hood,” in hip-hop. Glover’s class background and entry point into the music business as a TV star, writer and comedian disqualifies him from such a narrative. His debut album \textit{Camp} wrestles thematically with his own racial identity and his feelings as an outsider to hip-hop culture. In the opening track, “Outside,” the lyrics state, “I just wanna fit in but nobody was helping me out / They talking hood shit and I ain’t know what that was about.” Glover mentions his cousin in the song as a sort of antithesis, saying his cousin was “taken over” by the streets and raps to him, “The world sayin’ what you are because you’re young and black / Don’t believe ‘em.” According to one online exegesis, Glover is stating here, “The ‘world’ (current culture) is telling his cousin that because he’s ‘young and black’ he has to be in the streets doing hoodrat stuff.”\textsuperscript{259} Glover actively works against the stereotyped construction of racial identity that he feels influences his cousin.

W. E. B. Du Bois writes in \textit{The Souls of Black Folk} of “double consciousness” as the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.” Double consciousness is meant to embody one’s feeling of “two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”\textsuperscript{260} Glover consistently displays signs of a double consciousness in his lyrics and states in an interview, “White people are a blank slate…we are not…As a black person I constantly have to know what people are assuming about me.”\textsuperscript{261} He deals with this specifically in lyrics that address being perceived as an “Oreo,” a racial slur connoting being black on the outside but white

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{258} Murray Forman, \textit{The ‘Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop} (Wesleyan: 2002), 8.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
on the inside. He raps, “No live shows because I can’t find sponsors/ For the only black guy at a Sufjan concert.”262 This is in reference to indie artist, Sufjan Stevens, whose album, *Illinois,* Glover had previously remixed as mc DJ into *Illin-Noise.* Because of Sufjan Steven’s largely white indie rock fan base, Glover feels like an outsider at his concerts. In another line he says, “I won’t stop until they say ‘James Franco is the white Donald Glover’.”263 This is in reference to Glover’s multifaceted artistic identity being recognized as a “black” version of James Franco, another TV actor who has spread into other artistic worlds. Franco has been recognized to “[enact] hysterical identification or a (con)fusión of the self with a diverse set of multimedia artistic progenitors and contemporaries.”264 For instance, Franco played an artist-turned-murderer named “Franco” on an entire season of *General Hospital,* and his role was conceived as a work of performance art. Glover is working in a similar conceptual performance art world with *Because the Internet,* and recognizes that he is perceived as the “black” James Franco rather than Franco being the “white” Donald Glover.

Glover jokingly refers to himself on the song “Backpackers” as “The only white rapper who’s allowed to say the N-word.”265 He is playing up the idea that he is seen as a “white rapper” due to his career path and the lyrical content of his work. In a *Rolling Stone* interview video titled “Battle: Donald Glover vs. Childish Gambino”266 where he cleverly interviews himself, Glover asks Childish Gambino to quote his favorite verse from another rapper. Gambino responds with a lyric from Eminem, the most successful white rapper in hip-hop history. In some ways, Glover may feel that Childish Gambino follows more in the tradition of a white rapper like Eminem rather than black rappers like Jay Z or Tupac. This further differentiates Glover from the racial connotations of hip-hop’s traditional “the hood,” though at the same time Glover still feels like an outsider to

white culture. He raps how as a child, his mom was “Workin’ two jobs so I can get into that white school, and I hate it there / They all make fun of my clothes and wanna touch my hair.”\(^{267}\) This creates a conundrum wherein Glover is an outsider to white culture due to the color of his skin, but also an outsider to black culture as a result of his taste and education. He finds both sides constricting, rapping “And every black ‘you’re not black enough’ / Is a white ‘you’re all the same’”\(^{267}\) This lyric chides ignorance on both sides, suggesting a refusal of being pigeonholed either too white to be black or too black to be white. In one of his most clever and obscure lines, Glover raps, “So it’s 400 blows to these Truffaut niggas / Yeah, now that’s the line of the century / Niggas missed it, too busy, they lyin’ ‘bout penitentiary.”\(^{268}\) Here, he is effectively using his knowledge of French New Wave cinema, a characteristically white European film movement, as a means to diss rappers he deems “true-faux niggas” that follow more stereotypical hip-hop narratives. Glover himself said, “no one is going to get that line,”\(^{269}\) and one could assume that the rappers he is dissing may not be aware of Francois Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows* since they did not go to film school. It is a clever example of Glover appropriating white culture to further distance himself from black culture and ending up somewhere in-between these two worlds.

Kelly Isley says of The Isley Brothers’ struggle to reach FM rock formats in the 1970s, “I don’t think we would have any problem crossing over if the color of the skin was different. It’s not the color of the music.”\(^{270}\) The “color” of Childish Gambino’s music may similarly appear to contradict the color of his skin. Many of Glover’s early works show a strong affinity for indie pop/rock rather than hip-hop, with Glover remixing albums from Sufjan Stevens and Fiona Apple as mc DJ. Early works of Childish Gambino feature him rapping over songs from established indie rock acts like Animal


\(^{269}\) YouTube user xxbffcutestarxx, “YAYA LOVE!” (Sep 10 2011), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I1X3z_iYa1k.

\(^{270}\) Eric Weisbard, Top 40 Democracy (The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 62.
Collective, Sleigh Bells, and Grizzly Bear.\textsuperscript{271} It is then unsurprising that Glassnote Records, a label known for indie rock acts like Mumford & Sons and Phoenix, signed Childish Gambino. Glover claims that he chose to sign with Glassnote to have an “indie push” for the release of \textit{Camp} and stated that the album was “black rock” due to its use of real instruments.\textsuperscript{272} The term “black rock” relates to the Black Rock Coalition, a New York-based artist’s collective founded in 1985 whose goal is “to assert that a new generation of black musicians could play more than just R&B and hip-hop.”\textsuperscript{273} This is precisely what Glover is trying to do, and in the track “Hold You Down,” a song about the music industry holding rappers down, it ends with the line, “They ask me what I’m doin’, I say I’m stealin’ rock back.”\textsuperscript{274} This places Glover in a position where he is appropriating white music that itself was built on appropriations of black music.

This creates an even further divide between Glover and hip-hop, though that does not stop his music from being classified as such. \textit{Pitchfork} opens their scathing 1.6/10 review of \textit{Camp} with “If you buy only one hip-hop album this year, I’m guessing it’ll be \textit{Camp}”\textsuperscript{275}. This sarcastic statement emphasizes the fact that Childish Gambino’s fans are typically not hip-hop connoisseurs, so if an indie rocker buys one hip-hop album it would be \textit{Camp}. Furthermore, the statement is discrediting Gambino’s hip-hop bona fides. Fittingly, Glover had already rapped “\textit{Pitchfork} only likes rappers who crazy or hood, man” on the album before this review was written. Childish Gambino’s music may seem hip-hop on the surface but arguably bears stronger ties to the indie pop/rock scene. Pierre Bourdieu writes of classification in relation to taste:

Taste is a practical mastery of distributions which makes it possible to sense or

\textsuperscript{271} Childish Gambino, \textit{I Am Just A Rapper} (2010), Self-released.


intuit what is likely (or unlikely) to befall — and therefore to befit — an individual occupying a given position in social space. It functions as a sort of social orientation, a ‘sense of one’s place’, guiding the occupants of a given place in social space towards the social positions adjusted to their properties, and towards the practices or goods which befit the occupants of that position. It implies a practical anticipation of what the social meaning and value of the chosen practice or thing will probably be, given their distribution in social space and the practical knowledge the other agents have of the correspondence between goods and groups.276

Bourdieu is discussing the expectation that comes with anticipating certain values associated with particular tastes, which here can be applied to perceptions of hip-hop and indie rock. When Childish Gambino is viewed through a hip-hop lens, the music is seen as a joke to hip-hop purists because it does not fulfill their expectations. However, when viewed through an indie rock lens, confusion sets in simply because Glover is both black and raps. His background, influences, and record label relationship all point towards the indie rock scene, but Glover still consistently struggles with being classified as hip-hop. On a more fundamental level, these genre labels are built on divisions between black and white music. Sarah Sahim writes in her *Pitchfork* article “The Unbearable Whiteness of Indie”:

In indie rock, white is the norm. While indie rock and the DIY underground, historically, have been proud to disassociate themselves from popular culture, there is no divorcing a predominantly white scene from systemic ideals ingrained in white Western culture. That status quo creates a barrier in terms of both the sanctioned participation of artists of color and the amount of respect afforded them, all of which sets people of color up to forever be seen as interlopers and outsiders.

This touches on views of Glover that classify him as an outsider to indie music as a consequence of not being white. Considering Glover is an outsider to hip-hop as well, this only furthers the classification purgatory in which his music exists. A response to Sahim’s article on *New Republic* states, “There are few artists of color in the indie scene because artists of color who make what could be called ‘indie music’ get classified as

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something else.”

Despite Glover’s attempts at classifying his music as indie rather than hip-hop, he and his music still fall under classifications that he does not agree with or desire. Glover finds technology as a large contributing factor to his success, and in his song “All the Shine,” he explicitly raps, “I got fame, my A&R’s a computer.”

Artists and repertoire (A&R) is the division of a record label that manages, promotes, and generally oversees an artist’s every move, and Glover states here that he simply uses a computer for these purposes. He curates his own online social media profiles, uploads music and videos at whim, and handles various other aspects of his career online.

Glover’s online presence grew along with his television and comedic success, and his highly active social media presence and consistently updated website became strong aspects of his artistic identity. Fans could easily communicate with him on Twitter and Tumblr, and Glover used these platforms in a way that showed they were a part of his life. These online platforms arguably give Glover greater autonomy in curating his artistic image than he would have had in a pre-Internet era. If his A&R were controlled by the music industry, Glover would have fallen more fully into the streamlined and racialized rapper identities that he critiques. However, because of the internet, he is able to take control of his identity and create a complex image of an artist who bridges the gap between white and black cultures without being exclusively on one side or the other. As we will see with Because the Internet, Glover takes his feelings about the power of classification further in creating a text that seeks to resist textual classification altogether.

4.2 Setting the scene for Because the Internet

Childish Gambino’s Because the Internet (2013) begs the question, “How far can a concept album go?” The Beatles’ Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band (1967) was packaged with a cutout sheet of moustaches and badges for the owner to “become” a character on the album cover. Pink Floyd’s Dark Side of the Moon (1969) came with stickers for listeners to place on their speakers, musical instruments or wherever else,

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effectively extending their experience of the album. Pink Floyd later made *The Wall* (1979), supported by an elaborate tour and eventual film that expanded its concept further. A few decades later, progressive rock band Coheed and Cambria, based their entire career on an overarching concept across seven albums, multiple comic books and published novels. This is by no means a definitive history of concept albums, but it elucidates the fact that concept albums often use various elements beyond the audio recording to further the conceptual experience. Donald Glover, with his work *Because the Internet* (2013), embeds and extends his ideas fully within the World Wide Web. Rather than stickers and cutout posters, Glover uses social media posts, YouTube videos, a screenplay, and various other media to develop the conceptual experience of *Because the Internet*.

In *Setting the Record Straight*, Colin Symes adapts Gérard Genette’s idea of the “paratext” to the album format and addresses how features like the cover art and liner notes are indeed essential components of the album as a text. Symes is interested in how aspects that are “off the record” frame the album experience and concludes by pondering how the CD format extends these barriers. He writes:

> CDs, then, adopt new forms of paratext and new ways of interfacing with music. They constitute electronic versions of cover architecture that are screen- rather than page-based and that increase the options available to the “reader” and listener. But the real significance of these textual innovations derives from the fact that they make the disc increasingly autonomous, less dependent on an envelope of textual inferences that to date have “enclosed” discs. They potentially have the capacity to make the compact disc an entirely self-sufficient and independent textual system – a device that offers, via the web, many more channels and vehicles of musical exposition and explanation…this paratext is seemingly without boundaries, temporal or spatial, and it provides portals to a superabundance of sound and music, to an almost infinitely extended *record* of records. Moreover, this superabundance can be accessed almost without effort, instantaneously, and for an infinitesimal cost.

Symes is focusing on how the digital nature of the CD extends the paratext beyond a physical entity. He notes here that the web offers “more channels and vehicles of musical exposition and explanation,” which, as we will see, Glover fully exploits with *Because the Internet*. Existing primarily on the World Wide Web rather than in a sole physical form, *Because the Internet* has been described as a “‘concept world’ rather than a mere
concept album." This world is mediated through the internet and is comprised of conceptually interlinking pieces of media content that Donald Glover released during the rollout of Because the Internet. During this time, any move that Glover made could be interpreted as adding to this “concept world” that was constructed largely during the latter half of 2013 on the internet and still continues today. One critic notes that it plays out like a work of online performance art.

Although it is hard to pinpoint when exactly Because the Internet begins, the first major event that frames this narrative occurs when Glover disappeared from the internet in July 2013, causing TIME to write the article, “Where is Donald Glover?” They write:

Glover’s web presence and constant Twitter banter…played a crucial role [in his meteoric rise to stardom]. His iamdonald.com website was thorough and robust, complete with regularly updated sections… [and] Glover was a Twitter junkie, constantly checking the social networking platform (where he has nearly a million followers) and using it to interact with fans at all hours of the day and night…Donald Glover, Internet darling, had effectively disappeared from the medium that had won him his rabid following.

The internet was an integral component of Glover’s stardom, and so his digital “disappearance” was noticed and notable. Glover effectively committed “virtual identity suicide” by wiping all the old posts from his website and deleting, all of his tweets and photos on Twitter and Instagram with no explanation.

The day after TIME published this article, Glover released a cryptic teaser video. The teaser was named “clapping for the wrong reasons [internet version]” and provided a 49 second condensed version of what would become “Clapping for the Wrong Reasons,”

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282 Susan Greenfield, Mind Change (2015)

an integral component of the *Because the Internet* experience.284 The teaser begins with Glover bouncing a basketball up a staircase and quickly cuts to a collage of scenes ranging from Glover with a bloody nose to someone in a scuba suit, with the sounds of the bouncing basketball and a phone ringing running throughout. A scene appears of the basketball bouncing back down the staircase without Glover and then switches to him answering the phone that was ringing throughout the clip. It then cuts to the title “CLAPPING FOR THE WRONG REASONS” and rolls a complete list of credits. Fans were confused and intrigued, with comments like, “So is this thing going to be released, or what?”285 and “Don’t know what it is, but I’m excited for it!”286 *Paste Magazine* speculated that “The project appears to be for a Childish Gambino project, whether its [sic] tied to a music video or a short film is yet to be known,” and “while nobody is really too sure of what Clapping For The Wrong Reasons will turn out to be, it’s sure to be eccentric to say the least.”287 A little over two weeks later, Glover released the full-length “Clapping for the Wrong Reasons [director’s cut]” which raised even more questions. The 25-minute short film takes place in a mansion and stars Childish Gambino, ex-porn star Abella Anderson, hip-hop artist Chance the Rapper, experimental producer Flying Lotus, and a handful of other seemingly unrelated people like Danielle Fishel, who played Topanga on the 90s TV series *Boy Meets World*.

There is no coherent narrative to the film. IMDb describes it as following “a seemingly mundane day in the life of a young affluent rapper as he wanders through his

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286 Comment from ThatIndianGuy7116, https://www.reddit.com/r/donaldglover/comments/1jdswm/clapping_for_the_wrong_reasons_trailer_new_short/.

The film stylistically pulls from ambiguous European Art Cinema films like Alain Resnais’ *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) and Marco Ferreri’s *Dillinger is Dead* (1969), again displaying Glover’s taste that he showed earlier in the aforementioned “So it’s 400 Blows to these Truffaut niggas” line. *Complex* describes the short film as “a bunch of staggered, seemingly irrelevant (to each other) scenes, which are connected only in that they take place in the same house.” *Entertainment Weekly* calls the film “intriguing and disturbing…But in a good way” and *Vulture* writes “we don’t know why it exists [or] what the context is…yet it’s stunningly watchable…anyone who feels like watching a muted, mysterious 25-minute movie will likely be mesmerized [and] possibly confused.” One fan writes “I have no clue what I just watched” and another asks for clarification:

Could someone please explain this to me? I’ve watched this twice and I just see this as “A Day in the Life of Donald” and the title is what everyone will do when they watch it to the end, clap for the wrong reasons (as in they’ll like and respect this short film, even though they don’t understand it). I’m not hating on it, I actually enjoyed seeing something different like this. I just want to know the deeper meaning behind it/see if there is a deeper meaning.

*Complex* parallels this comment in their thematic questioning of the short film:

What does it all mean? I certainly don’t know, but it’s the type of movie that gives you the probably false sense that there is something grand behind it, tying the whole thing together, and you and I are just not observant enough to catch it. But of course, I won’t ask anyone what it means because I would have to admit that I didn’t already know. Hence, one might find himself, at the end of the

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288 IMDb, “Clapping for the Wrong Reasons (2013),”
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3093732/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1

289 *Complex*, “Watch Donald Glover’s Short Film ‘Clapping For The Wrong Reasons’” (Aug 15 2013),

290 Entertainment Weekly, “Donald Glover short film is weird and thought-provoking” (Aug 16 2013),

291 Vulture, “Donald Glover Made a Haunting, Hypnotic Short Film” (Aug 16 2013),

292 Comment from gatorace15,
https://www.reddit.com/r/donaldglover/comments/1kg5gr/clapping_for_the_wrong_reasons/?sort=top

293 Comment by hightimess,
https://www.reddit.com/r/donaldglover/comments/1kg5gr/clapping_for_the_wrong_reasons/?sort=top
movie, applauding the film’s supposed metaphorical content, or perhaps its ability to convey some deep meaning by playing with the quotidian. But then he’d be clapping for the wrong reasons.

These discussions tap into themes that would eventually inform Because the Internet as a whole. In “Clapping For the Wrong Reasons,” much is shown but little is given away. There is little understanding of the characters, their relationships, and what connects them together in this luxurious mansion. Susan Greenfield writes, “a character in a YouTube clip usually has no complex backstory and no personal relationships, and his or her actions have no long-term consequences; they are frozen in a tiny window of time. What you are watching doesn’t really mean anything.” The short film plays right into this, with viewers having little understanding of what is happening, who these people are, and why they are in a mansion.

A bit more context was provided by Chance the Rapper who mentioned he was working on Childish Gambino’s new album in an interview with the magazine Dazed and Confused. The article describes Chance to be working at a place deemed “The Temple” which is “the rented hilltop mansion [owned by NBA player Chris Bosh]…where Gambino is recording his new album.” This explains the setting of “Clapping for the Wrong Reasons” and the fact that it was filmed alongside recording the album. Dazed and Confused notes, “Engraved on a wooden placard by a vast bronze Buddha at the entranceway, the rules of The Temple are clear: ‘No shoes. No Tweeting or Instagramming. Work starts at 10am.’” This explains Glover’s absence online. He forbid social media use while recording the album and claims, “I just wanted to set up a space where people…really had to deal with themselves” without going online. When Henry David Thoreau removed himself to the woods to write Walden in the mid-1800s, he explained, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the

294 Greenfield, 211.
296 Q on CBC, “Childish Gambino brings ‘Because the Internet’ to Studio Q” (Apr 8 2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xhBntF0q6jY.
essential facts of life.”

While Glover’s forbidding of social media is not quite as extreme as Thoreau, and he was in a luxurious mansion rather than a cabin, he is still playing into a Romantic narrative that says the bustling outside world is somehow distracting to his artistic process. Here the outside world is represented online by endless Twitter feeds and Instagram posts rather than industrial factories. Glover wanted everyone working on the album to be actively present rather than constantly distracted by the internet. He felt that by removing himself from the internet and being completely IRL, he could focus more clearly on his work, just as Thoreau did when he removed himself to the woods. This is rather ironic for an album called Because the Internet, and Nicholas Carr took a similar, more Thoreau-esque approach when writing The Shallows: What the internet is Doing to Our Brains. He removed himself to a cabin with little Internet access in order to write it. Glover explains in an interview that his disconnection from the internet “felt really bad” at first, just as Carr found it “far from painless.” When work was finished, they both fell back into their old patterns once back online, effectively rejoining civilization like Thoreau did after two years of living in the woods.

One scene in the short film shows Gambino clearly working with Ludwig Göransson producing a beat (which would later become “The Party”), though there is little other evidence in the film that points towards any connection to a new album. Around this time, fans were anxiously piecing together whatever they could to try and make sense of what Glover was doing. At one point, fans dug into the code of childishgambino.com and found a way to access seemingly “hidden” pages that Glover had placed there for them. These mostly ended up being extraneous videos, .gif images

298 Online abbreviation for “in real life.”
300 Q on CBC, “Childish Gambino brings ‘Because the Internet’ to Studio Q” (Apr 8 2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xhBntF0q6jY.
301 Carr, 199.
and poetry, but the idea goes along with Glover’s desire for people to learn to code. He once tweeted “learn to code, God codes”\textsuperscript{303} and frequently professed the importance of coding to his fans.\textsuperscript{304}

It was also around this time in September that Glover first tweeted two words, “Roscoe’s wetsuit,” a highly ambiguous phrase that “spread like wildfire”\textsuperscript{305} on social media. Fans theorized that it could be, among other things, the name of Childish Gambino’s next project. I will delve further into “Roscoe’s wetsuit” as a meme later in this chapter. The most explicit message about the new album, though still vague, came from a video uploaded October 8th titled “yaphet kotto.”\textsuperscript{306} The one-minute-twenty-six-second video features Glover submerged in a pool of water staring at the camera with a freestyle rap playing in the background. At the end of the video, it cuts to a black screen with the text “Because the Internet” and then “winter break.”

It was shortly after this video that Glover broke his silence online through a series of confessional messages on Instagram. The series of posts are images of notes handwritten by Glover on Residence Inn Mariott Hotel stationary. The first note begins, “I’m afraid of the future” and continues with messages such as, “I feel like I’m letting everyone down,” “I’m afraid I hate who I really am,” “I feel this will all be pretentious,” “I hate caring what people think,” “I’m afraid this is all an accident,” and “This is the first time I’ve felt helpless.”\textsuperscript{307} One message reads, “I’m afraid people think I hate my race.” This message echoes back to Glover’s complicated racial relationship discussed

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{303} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{304} YouTube, “Childish Gambino Tells His Fans to Learn How to Code” (Nov 9 2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOLk3b3lPm0.
\item \textsuperscript{305} Inifinite Hip Hop, “What in the world is Roscoe’s Wetsuit?” (Oct 3 2013), http://infinitehiphop.com/2013/10/03/what-in-the-world-is-roscoes-wetsuit/.
\item \textsuperscript{306} Why he chose this title is unknown. Yaphet Kotto, the black actor, plays an Italian-American character on Homicide: Life on the Street with the surname “Giardello,” which is similar to Glover’s artistic surname “Gambino.” Glover’s character on Community was also intended to be white, like Kotto’s character on Homicide. These may or may not be some of the reasons why the video is named “yaphet kotto,” as it could simply be homage.
\item \textsuperscript{307} People, “Donald Glover Posts Troubling Notes on Instagram, Opens Up About Leaving Community” (Oct 16 2013), http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,20746092,00.html.
\end{itemize}
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earlier in this chapter and the double consciousness he experiences concerning how people perceive him. Glover confessed these feelings across eight posts with around 50 similar statements covering his anxieties.

An example of one of the images of handwritten notes posted to Instagram.

In relation to these posts, XXL Mag comments, “The range of reactions from fans and onlookers ran the gamut: letters of support, posts appreciating his candidness, people clowning him for being a bitch, others conjecturing that he may be suicidal.”  

TIME writes, “the notes mark a return to part of what made Glover so popular and unique in the first place: unparalleled thoughtfulness, openness and honesty with his fans.”

When People confronted Glover about the “troubling” messages, he responded, “That night, we had a show, and then afterwards, I had this moment of feeling like, ‘What’s the point? Why am I even here?’ I just wanted to write down my feelings. I definitely was just

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expressing myself.” One fan blog wrote an extensive take on the notes as being nihilistic. They analyze 17 of his statements and how each one relates to nihilism, from his fear of an uncertain future to never reaching happiness. Glover continues in interviews that he was simply being honest in these posts, something XXL Mag says is, “rarely seen these days from mainstream artists in any lane, much less in hip-hop.” Susan Greenfield writes in Mind Change: How Digital Technologies are Leaving their Mark on our Brains, “the internet provides individuals with a unique opportunity for self-expression that encourages people to reveal their true self, including the aspects that are not comfortably expressed face-to-face.” According to Glover, he was merely expressing his true feelings. Whereas one might typically call a close friend or family member to discuss such anxieties, Glover turned to the internet. Greenfield further explains, “those who most keenly desire to express their ‘true’ identity are precisely those who rely most heavily on relationships in cyberspace.” This again applies to Glover, whose artistic identity is heavily built on his relationship with fans online. This suggests why he chose the internet (specifically Instagram) to post these messages; he felt it was the most comfortable space for him to do so.

4.3 The Identity Crisis of Because the Internet

The notes also address Glover leaving Community. He confesses, “I didn’t leave Community to rap. I don’t wanna rap. I wanted to be on my own.” Glover extends this idea in interviews when asked about these statements saying, “I just don’t like the term

315 Greenfield, 115.
‘rapper’. It exists but I’m definitely not a rapper.”317 Glover sounds a lot like Claire Boucher from the last chapter here, and this is coming from the same person who released a two-part mixtape titled I am Just A Rapper in 2010. As previously discussed, his relationship to the “rapper” classification is clearly complicated as is his relationship to racial classification. Glover further explains his dismissal of the classification “rapper” in an interview with NME:

Glover says he wants to be able to work on different projects at the same time, instead of being pigeonholed as a comedian, actor or rapper. “I don’t get why I can’t be all these things,” he says. “They’re not ‘a thing’ – I’m alive, I’m just doing something. People expect certain things from you and they don’t even know you. It’s like, how can you know me when I don’t even know me?”318

These expectations go back to Bourdieu’s point and the expectations placed on Glover depending on which art world he is working within. If Glover is on TV, he is an actor, but the moment he steps on stage he becomes a rapper. Glover questions why he has to be labeled as any of these things and why he cannot simply live free of classifications. He uses Kanye West as a relevant example, who in recent interviews for Yeezus (2013) had spoken of a glass ceiling that held him back from getting into the fashion industry due to his “rapper” label.319 Again, racial politics limit black artists’ attempts to break into white-dominated worlds. Glover clearly states, “I just don’t want to be labeled,”320 echoing Claire Boucher’s complaints in the last chapter. Both artists find something inherently restricting about the expectations behind classifications and actively speak out against them in relation to themselves and their works. Glover even began saying that the term ‘album’ was constricting in the context of what he was doing with Because the Internet. In an interview, he first states, “This album is not a rap album,”321 then continues, “I don’t see my album as an album. Like I really don’t. It comes with a bunch of stuff. I want to

318 Ibid.
320 Ibid.
321 Ibid.
make experiences.”

He further explains: “I don’t want to make albums…You gotta build a bigger world. I’m not gonna make an album. I’m going to make an album, I’m going to make the rollout dope, I’m gonna make the movie with it dope, I’m gonna make everything dope, I’m gonna make a world.”

Glover is emphasizing the paratextual elements surrounding Because the Internet as just as important as the audio recording, if not more important. He uses the example of Michael Jackson’s Thriller (1982) to better explain this:

You think about Thriller. The thing that really made that pop off… was the ideas behind it…that video is a short film, he was the first one…the record is amazing, it is, but if it was just the record – and I’m not saying it wouldn’t still be a classic – but if it was just the record it wouldn’t be an experience.

In relation to Because the Internet, Glover is stating here that if he were to simply to release an album it would be “just the record.” However, what he is building with Because the Internet is a conceptual experience.

In early November he continued building on this by releasing the album artwork, which consists of an animated .gif of his sullen face blowing into pixels and re-forming every few seconds. The album art acts as a looped visual representation of Glover’s star brand, his face, being destroyed and restored digitally over and over again.

322 Ibid.
323 Ibid.
Still frames of the animated .gif album cover for *Because the Internet*.

On November 13th Glover then uploaded “one of year’s cleverest lyric videos” for “3005,” the first single from *Because the Internet*. The video is a faux-internet browser window of Childish Gambino watching Abella Anderson (who was previously in “Clapping for the Wrong Reasons”) strip on a webcam as he sends the song’s lyrics to her through instant messages. The aesthetic of this music video was also adapted to a website, Abella.xxx, to promote *The Deep Web Tour* for the album. “The site positions the visitor as ‘The Boy’ character engaged in a private show with Abella (actually a looped video), when the visitor types anything, Abella responds with the tour dates for the show.” This conceptual component factors into themes of love and sex in the screenplay of *Because the Internet*, wherein The Boy has trouble connecting with the women he interacts with (a theme also present on *Camp*). Webcam strippers and forms of “virtual sex,” as conceptually emulated here, offer the pleasure of sex but are void of “real life” human connection. This idea links to broader themes of loneliness and isolation in *Because the Internet* and expands the overall conceptual experience.

In the Instagram posts, Glover also addresses a conflict in releasing the album with his label:

The label doesn’t want me to release in December because it’s not a holiday record and I’m not a big artist. I started the record last Christmas. Christmas always made me feel lonely, but it helped me restart the new year. I want people to [experience] this album when everything’s closed. When everything slows down and quiet. So you can start over.

Fans took to twitter in support of Glover’s desire for the album’s release and used the

325 Complex, “In Case ‘Because the Internet’ Didn’t Make Sense, Childish Gambino Wrote A 75-Page Screenplay To Go With It” (Dec 6 2013), http://ca.complex.com/music/2013/12/childish-gambino-because-the-internet-screenplay.


327 http://www.westernfall.com/
hashtag “#Donald4December” to spread awareness.\textsuperscript{328} Led by the fansite foreverchildish.com, thousands of tweets with the hashtag were posted, and according to Glover this event convinced the label to let him release the album in December as he wanted.\textsuperscript{329} \textit{Because the Internet} leaked on December 3rd, and some fans speculate that Glover was behind it. He tweeted the message “enjoy” earlier that day before the leak surfaced, and in an online Q&A with \textit{Rap Genius} that night he said, “happy leak day.”\textsuperscript{330} He later also tweeted (as part of a scripted conversation) “ARIZONA KID: Maybe he made two versions and leaked one version and gave his record company the other.

SKATEBOARD KID: who. cares.”\textsuperscript{331} Fittingly, there was one specific difference in the two versions. The leaked version cuts off the final track “III. Life the Biggest Troll” right before Gambino says, “Eventually my followers realize they don’t need a leader.” There is no explicit evidence that Glover was behind this, and perhaps he just heard of the leak happening and capitalized on it to conceptually add to the “world” he had been building for months. However, Glover adamantly believes that music should be free. He uses the confounding metaphor that “Trying to make somebody pay for music is like a bakery trying to get people to pay for smelling the bakery as they walk by.”\textsuperscript{332} He claims “music is free. As soon as an album has leaked, anyone can get it. And that’s fine.”\textsuperscript{333} Whether or not Glover leaked the album in protest to his record label like Death Grips did with \textit{No Love Deep Web} (2012)\textsuperscript{334} is hard to say. However, he did use the leak happening as yet

\textsuperscript{328} ForeverChildish.com, “#Donald4December” (Oct 2013), http://foreverchildish.com/post/64133180295/donald4december-childish-gambinos-sophomore.

\textsuperscript{329} The Breakfast Club, “Childish Gambino Addresses Lupe Fiasco Beef, Suicide Rumors, No Wanting To Be Boxed In & More” (Oct 24 2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LEvOcDxI734.


\textsuperscript{332} Complex, “Cover Story Uncut: Childish Gambino Talks About The internet” (Jan 14 2014), http://www.complex.com/music/2014/01/childish-gambino-uncut-interview.

\textsuperscript{333} Ibid.

another conceptual element to the *Because the Internet* experience.

A stream was put on iTunes for fans to listen shortly after the leak, but it was not until December 6th when Glover uploaded the album to becausetheinter.net along with a 72-page screenplay that the various pieces of this world started to connect. The screenplay begins with a cryptic code, and then:

**NOTE TO READER: THE PRELUDE TO THIS SCREENPLAY (“CLAPPING FOR THE WRONG REASONS”) IS AVAILABLE ON THE WEBSITE YOUTUBE FOR FREE CONSUMPTION. IT MAY OR MAY NOT GIVE CONTEXT TO THIS WORK YOU’RE READING.**

This explicitly draws a conceptual link between “Clapping for the Wrong Reasons” and *Because the Internet*. The main character in the screenplay also lives in a mansion described exactly like “The Temple” where the short film was set. The succeeding line is “*You can’t live your life on a bus...*,”

now explicitly linking *Because the Internet* to his previous album *Camp* (2011), which ends with the lyrics, “I wish I could say this was a story about how I got on the bus a boy and got off a man more cynical, hardened, and mature and shit. But that’s not true. The truth is I got on the bus a boy. And I never got off the bus. I still haven’t...” The first page of the script effectively works in contextualizing *Because the Internet* as not only a conceptual continuation of *Camp*, but also that “Clapping for the Wrong Reasons” fits somewhere between these two projects.

The screenplay tells the tragedy of The Boy, a sullen twitter celebrity, who becomes increasingly disillusioned with himself and the world around him. He is constantly around people, yet feels entirely alienated and uses the internet as his only way of feeling any connection. He eventually gets involved with drug dealing and dies in a swimming pool, a scene echoing back to the first promotional video for the album, “yaphet kotto.” Visual clips are embedded throughout the script at specific moments and every song from *Because the Internet* is placed strategically in the script to follow the story as the user experiences it. The story features The Boy interacting heavily with online spaces like

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336 Glover, 1.

Twitter, and the characters and conversations which appear in the script can also be found online. The timing of the posts on Twitter take place just weeks before *Because the Internet* was released. All of this conceptually develops the online world that encompasses *Because the Internet*. Glover then brought this world to life by teaming up with Tumblr IRL, a subset of the social media website Tumblr, which provides “a window to the musician’s creative mind” by partnering musicians with visual artists to “create an audio-visual immersion and present their work in a physical setting.” Glover used this partnership to create a real-life version of The Boy’s room at Rough Trade NYC. *The Creators Project* writes, “On the surface, the exhibit reveals the influences that shape Childish Gambino’s multifaceted creative vision. But on an even deeper level, *Because the Internet* [sic], the third installment of the inspiring Tumblr IRL series, shows what happens when music culture, technology and record stores come together.” This effectively brings the *Because the Internet* experience out of the digital world and into a real-life (IRL) setting. *Because the Internet* could now conceivably be “walked into,” adding more immersion to the project. Glover also did a brief tour of shows which he played exclusively in mansions, much like “The Temple” where “Clapping for the Wrong Reasons” takes place and where the character of The Boy lives.

Whether or not Glover intended *Because the Internet* to be viewed as an esoteric media experience rather than an album, negative reception of the work tended to classify

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338 IRL stands for “in real life.”


341 Glassnote Music, “Here are the cities the mansion performances will be taking place in” (2014), http://glassnotemusic.com/post/67691641010/iamdonald-here-are-the-cities-the-mansion.

342 I was fortunate enough to go to a secret house show at SXSW in 2014 where Glover performed a stripped-down set of songs. I found out about it through Rap Genius on Twitter, who said to tweet them your favorite Childish Gambino lyrics for the chance to go to a show. I tweeted them (it was the 400 Blows/Truffault line) and received a direct message with an address and time. I showed up to a random house in an upscale residential neighborhood and entered through the garage, where I was asked to remove my phone since no pictures were allowed. I proceeded to go to the show of around 30-50 people. I remember there being pop-tarts set up around the house, the same ones that The Boy eats in the screenplay.
it solely as an album of popular music. Pitchfork writes in their 5.8/10 review of *Because the Internet*, “It’s all very ambitious, but experiencing *Because the Internet* as the artist intended requires an hour of fully plugged in attentive reading, embedded YouTube clip viewing, and listening.”\(^{343}\) The Needle Drop’s 5/10 review of *Because the Internet* expresses a similar sentiment when stating “this record is so so so dependent on this screenplay to be completely understood, or I think even enjoyed just on its own.”\(^{344}\) One fan validates this claim when admitting, “Before I read the screenplay it was a 6/10 album definitely but then I watched the short film and read the screenplay [sic] and instantly it was a 9 or 10.”\(^{345}\) These critiques are addressing the nature of *Because the Internet* and Glover’s desire for listeners to go through the effort of fully experiencing it as a conceptual world. Lucy Green argues in *Music on Deaf Ear*, “Both experience of the music and the music’s meanings themselves changes complexity in relation to the style-competence of the [listener], and to the social situations in which they occur…music can never be played or heard outside a situation, and every situation will affect the music’s meaning.”\(^{346}\) Differing consumer practices clearly influence one’s experience of *Because the Internet*. For an active audience member who is embedded within Glover’s online world, they experience *Because the Internet* entirely differently than one who more passively listens to the album outside of this context.

*SPIN* ends their 2/10 review of the album with simply “it’s a bad rap record.”\(^{347}\) In doing so, the reviewer is revealing that they expected the album to be a rap record and thus is disappointed when it did not fulfill this expectation. This again goes back to Bourdieu and reveals two layers of expectation. The reviewer not only classifies *Because

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\(^{343}\) Pitchfork, “Childish Gambino - Because the Internet” (Dec 12 2013), http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/18817-childish-gambino-because-the-internet/.

\(^{344}\) The Needle Drop, “Childish Gambino - Because the Internet ALBUM REVIEW” (Dec 10 2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2uzq3A9YbU.

\(^{345}\) Comment from user “D__” on The Verge, “'Because the Internet': online fame gives Donald Glover the feels” (Dec 10 2013), http://www.theverge.com/2013/12/10/5195582/because-the-internet-online-fame-gives-donald-glover-the-feels.


the Internet as “rap” music, but also deems it an “album.” Both of these classifications create expectations that are unfulfilled when experiencing the text, leading to the reviewer’s dissatisfaction with it. Fans voiced their frustration with the critic’s reading of Because the Internet, with the top-rated comment on the article saying:

Your final line is “it’s a bad rap record,”…Where is the rap on Flight of the Navigator? Or Urn? And you do realize that a minority of the songs on this album purely involve rapping, right? …You walked into this review with the mindset “This is a rap record,” and that is why this review has absolutely no merit. You displayed zero objectivity in reviewing the actual music being presented because you wanted to fit the album into a specific mold.348

This fan sees the text as not fitting into a “specific mold,” much like Glover professes. Another fan makes similar comments, pressing the point, “it’s an experience, not a rap album,” and “it isn’t just a rap album.”349 This shows a very clear division among those who simply listened to the album as an album, and rabid fans who spent hours of time and effort to try and piece together the entire experience. One fan concludes in their glowing 26-page analysis of Because the Internet:

What do I think of this album? I wouldn’t call this an album. I would call this art…If you were to listen to the album alone, you would not realize what the songs are really trying to convey. You would be limiting yourself to a linear way of looking at music…When I listen to this album, I am not going to listen to it just to bump tunes. When I listen to this album, I am going to slip into the little world that Donald Glover created for this project…[This] will be considered one of the first stepping-stones to something much larger for music as a whole. Donald is a visionary.350

This fan parallels Glover himself in highlighting that he or she views Because the Internet as a work of art rather than an album. Because the Internet is not simply music to passively put on in the background, but a work of art that requires active engagement by

348 Comment from user “Craven” on SPIN, “Childish Gambino’s Sloppy, Erratic ‘Because the Internet’ Offers Only Unintentional LOL’s” (Dec 10 2013), http://www.spin.com/2013/12/childish-gambino-because-the-internet-worst-new-music/.

349 Comment from user “Guest” on SPIN, “Childish Gambino’s Sloppy, Erratic ‘Because the Internet’ Offers Only Unintentional LOL’s” (Dec 10 2013), http://www.spin.com/2013/12/childish-gambino-because-the-internet-worst-new-music/.

the audience, not only in intently listening to the music, but in subsuming themselves into Glover’s online world. Fans like this praise *Because the Internet* for the very reasons why critics dismiss it. After all, this project was made more for Glover’s fans than critics. Even though *Because the Internet* reached RIAA Gold-certification, garnered two Grammy nominations, and did receive some positive praise, there is a strong division in readings between those who passively listened to the audio recording and those who more actively experienced this work. On one side it is characterized as a messy and confusing album; on the other it is approached as a profound, visionary work of art.351

The perplexity caused by *Because the Internet* as a media text parallels Glover’s apparent identity crisis as an artist. The identity of The Boy in *Because the Internet* is similar to that of Glover, and whether or not the character is actually Childish Gambino, Donald Glover, or an entirely fictional character is at the crux of discussions on *Because the Internet*; no answers are ever given. One reviewer writes, “It’s easy to conflate them and easier still to lose track of edges where The Boy, Gambino, and Glover meet, and maybe that’s the point…So who do we believe? The boy, the rapper, or the actor? None and all three.”352 For instance, “Clapping for the Wrong Reasons” is credited to Childish Gambino yet is produced by Donald Glover. The Boy is described as wearing the same clothes that Gambino wears in “Clapping for the Wrong Reasons” and is what Glover wore in most interviews and performances after coming back from his online absence.353 Below is a description of The Boy’s closet in the screenplay, and images of Donald Glover wearing the same clothes while performing live, being interviewed, and acting in “Clapping for the Wrong Reasons.”

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352 Ibid.

Little hills of dirty clothes grow up the walls from the floor. Same pile of shoes is there. Wall with same dirty spot. The closet is filled with white shirts and flower shorts. There’s one very old and tattered Shearling coat that hangs to the right.

Images of a description of The Boy’s closet in the Because the Internet screenplay (top) and Donald Glover being interviewed by Arsenio Hall (middle), performing live (bottom left), and acting in “Clapping for the Wrong Reasons” (bottom right).
The Boy also drinks San Pellegrino in the screenplay, which appears in a trashcan in the Tumblr IRL concept room, and Gambino opens an entire fridge-full in “Clapping for the Wrong Reasons.” Glover asks the question “where’s the line between Donnie G and Gambino?” in “Life: The Biggest Troll,” showing that even he is unsure. In response to a lukewarm review from *TIME* about the album, one fan writes, “You are stuck on seeing Donald Glover the writer/actor and not Childish Gambino the musical artist.” Another fan writes in a separate discussion, “Donnie G and Childish Gambino have become one.” These arguments from fans relate to the debates above about approaching *Because the Internet* as an experience or work of art rather than as simply an album. Again, this emphasizes the expectations that come with classification.

To classify Donald Glover as simply an “actor” or “rapper” is arguably no different than approaching *Because the Internet* as an “album.” Is Donald Glover an actor, comedian, rapper, songwriter, producer, or writer? Is *Because the Internet* an album, film, alternate-reality-game, social media experiment, or something else entirely? Glover states that it is not an album and instead draws attention to the paratextual experience surrounding the album. However, the experience itself is difficult to classify because it includes the entire narrative played out thus far. It is thus a circular, confusing, and rather daunting process to fully map out *Because the Internet*. There are additional aspects I have not yet mentioned, including the exclusive app made for the Deep Web tour for the album, multiple conceptual music videos, the listening parties he held for *Because the Internet* in city parks that Glover promoted on social media, the “hackz”

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USB drive that appears in the screenplay and was handed out to 100 fans with exclusive content, secret songs placed online for fans to discover, his mysterious relationship with singer Jhené Aiko, and more. There are also dozens of connections between these disparaging elements linking various elements of Because the Internet together, but they create an endless loop that is too much to cover completely in this chapter. What is important to note is that these dispersed forms of content deepen and complicate the status of Because the Internet as text. The confusing nature of this text parallels the psychological state of Glover in his own confusion over whether he is a rapper, actor, comedian, writer, producer, or whatever else. Similar to how he feels he just exists and should not be categorized; this text embodies an analogous enigma. In order to express this perplexing feeling, Glover turns directly to the internet. Like Claire Boucher in the last chapter, Glover wishes that both he and his art could exist free of labels. Also like Boucher, Glover explicitly engages with the internet to express this feeling. Because the Internet’s ambiguous, dispersed nature is not unlike the internet itself. As noted in Chapter 1, Sociologist Annette Markham explains, “the concept we label The Internet is, both in practice and theory, a multiplicity of cultural phenomena not limited to either a monolithic entity or a universal set of experiences.” Trying to fully define “the internet” is arguably just as circular, perplexing and long-winded an exercise as defining Because the Internet. The Verge writes, “Glover’s signature ‘I’m a mess’ self-awareness extends to this commentary to make clear how overwhelming and all-consuming the internet is.” Because the Internet can be read as an expression of Glover’s own fragmented

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361 Donald Glover and Jhené Aiko were rumored to be dating during the rollout of Because the Internet, and the two feature heavily in each other’s music videos. Aiko appears in the music video for “Telegraph Ave” from Because the Internet, and Glover appears in Aiko’s music videos for “The Pressure,” “Pink Toes,” and “Bed Peace.” Aiko also resembles a love interest in the Because the Internet screenplay, leading fans to further speculate about their mysterious companionship.

362 The Verge, “‘Because the Internet’: online fame gives Donald Glover the feels” (Dec 10 2013), http://www.theverge.com/2013/12/10/5195582/because-the-internet-online-fame-gives-donald-glover-the-feels.
identity that uses the internet to exemplify this state.

### 4.4 Because the Internet and the Exploitation of Fans

Throughout the roll-out and since the release of *Because the Internet*, fans have had countless discussions online about the nature of this text. *Pigeons and Planes* writes:

> For the past four months, Donald has taken his creative ingenuity and built an alternate reality to house the rollout for his sophomore album *Because the Internet*, out now, and with each day we learn something new about this world. Appropriately, we’re learning most of it through the internet. Using two elaborate websites and social media, Donald has created an immersive environment that’s inspiring kids internationally to do things their own teachers struggle to get them to do every day: read, think critically, engage with art, and even learn how to code. But most valuable of all, he’s started an online conversation with entire websites, forums, and threads on Reddit devoted to coming together as a community to decipher all things BTI…This alternate reality is so vast and multi-layered that it can be difficult to understand without spending a LOT of time on the internet.³⁶³

This quote touches on the feverish amount of work fans have put in to experience and discuss *Because the Internet*. Glover’s understanding of the internet and web culture led him to strategically make a rollout that he knew would have this effect. His desire to release it over “winter break” was claimed to be partly a strategic move because he knew high school and university students would have the downtime to sit online and experience it.³⁶⁴ I can personally attest that I did not immediately dive into *Because the Internet* when it was released but waited until I was home for winter break from university, unwittingly playing right into Glover’s hands. He constructed this project to tap directly into the fanbase of so-called digital natives that he knew would follow it. This audience is built on people who have spent enough of their lives online to have a sense of what Glover is talking about in his emoticon-filled screenplay and lyrics stacked with references to Vine, WorldStarHipHop.com, e-vites, and a multitude of Internet slang terms.


³⁶⁴ The Breakfast Club, “Childish Gambino Addresses Lupe Fiasco Beef, Suicide Rumors, No Wanting To Be Boxed In & More” (Oct 24 2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LEvOcDxI734.
Countless thinkpieces and theory-posts surrounding Because the Internet exist online, and a handful of fans even wrote high school or university essays on the project. Many of these discussions proclaim Glover’s genius and offer a variety of takes on Because the Internet. Some fans have argued that Because the Internet is a work of transmedia, which helps in explaining it as a text. In an analysis at westernfall.com, the authors write:

In his article entitled ‘Transmedia Storytelling 101’, Henry Jenkins defines transmedia as “a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story (Jenkins, 2007).” The ‘Because the Internet’ project definitely incorporates a process of delivering important elements of a narrative fiction through multiple, unique delivery channels as discussed above.

This places Because the Internet within Jenkins’ framework of transmedia, which helps in discussing it as a media text. Because the Internet exists across multiple mediums and moves between them with ease, including an audio recording, screenplay, short film, twitter profiles, interviews and various other miscellanea discussed in this chapter. All of these elements are then tied together by the overarching conceptual idea of Because the Internet. These online scholars then note that:

Jenkins goes on to write, ‘The encyclopedic ambitions of transmedia texts often results in what might be seen as gaps or excesses in the unfolding of the story: that is, they introduce potential plots which can not be fully told or extra details which hint at more than can be revealed. Readers, thus, have a strong incentive to continue to elaborate on these story elements, working them over through their speculations, until they take on a life of their own.’ As mentioned previously, alongside the ambiguous nature of the storytelling in the short film, Glover had users look through code to find secrets in his website, including a secret track that


has yet to be found, five months after the release of his album. As a result, the incentive continues for fans to stay invested in the project.\textsuperscript{368}

This analysis links Glover’s and Jenkins’ ideas. Transmedia is a component of what Jenkins deems “convergence culture,” which encompasses “the flow of content across multiple media platforms…and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want.”\textsuperscript{369} For Internet-reared Childish Gambino fans, \textit{Because the Internet} acts as a validation of how they consume content. Jenkins gives an example: “A teenager doing homework may juggle four or five windows, scan the Web, listen to and download MP3 files, chat with friends, word-process a paper, and respond to e-mail, shifting rapidly among tasks.”\textsuperscript{370} Likewise, \textit{Because the Internet} invites the user to be listening to the album while they simultaneously have a screenplay open in their browser along with various other tabs related to the project. After the album is finished, they still might feel compelled to search online for hours, scouring theories and discussions about the project. Jenkins writes that “Convergence involves both a change in the way media is produced and a change in the way media is consumed.”\textsuperscript{371} On the production side, Glover utilized his talents in writing, acting, songwriting, producing, and coding to create the entire experience. His fans consumed it all on the internet. This is different from a pre-Internet world when the musician would make the album and a fan bought its physical release or saw a live show. With the internet, Glover was able to exploit various avenues to craft this project online.

Jenkins writes, “The promises of this new media environment raise expectations of a freer flow of ideas and content.”\textsuperscript{372} Perhaps this is precisely what Glover desires in his need to be free from classification. Nicholas Carr adds to this by stating, “the future of


\textsuperscript{369} Henry Jenkins, Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 2.

\textsuperscript{370} Jenkins, 16.

\textsuperscript{371} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{372} Jenkins, 18.
knowledge and culture no longer lies in books or newspapers or TV shows or radio programs or records or CDs. It lies in digital files shot through our universal medium at the speed of light.”

On the internet, both Donald Glover and Because the Internet are communicated as digital information. Glover feels that this information should be free without fitting into any predetermined molds. In a pre-Internet world it was arguably more necessary for an artist or work to be classified because fans had few, if any, direct links to the artist. With the internet, one can now look at Glover’s social media profiles to see who he projects himself to be. Seemingly, all of the information is there. Concerning the idea of living life online, Glover states, “Life is now a film…life is an expression…my life is online…and so is yours, like everybody’s…it’s like an expression…You can’t live alone anymore.”

With Because the Internet, Glover strives to express this existential feeling through a work of art. Following McLuhan, Jenkins writes “we are in an age of media transition, one marked by tactical decisions and unintended consequences, mixed signals and competing interests, and most of all, unclear directions and unpredictable outcomes.” Both Glover’s artistic identity and Because the Internet are characteristically unpredictable regarding how fans are constantly on edge for what comes “next” in the saga of Glover’s career and the rollout of Because the Internet. One day Glover may release a cryptic short film with no explanation of what it is, and the next he may delete his twitter account. Fans can never anticipate what he will do, and this affected the rollout of Because the Internet. Within the context of convergence culture, Because the Internet can then be understood to reproduce the contingent media environment in which it was created.

It is also important to consider Because the Internet as a hypermediated text. In Bolter and Grusin’s Remediation they discuss remediation, “the ‘anthropotrophic’ process by which new media technologies improve upon or remedy prior technologies.”

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373 Carr, 89.

374 Q on CBC, “Childish Gambino brings “Because the Internet” to Studio Q” (Apr 8 2014), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xhBntF0q6jY.

375 Jenkins, 11.

analysis, they break remediation into two stages. The first stage, hypermediacy, is “A style of visual representation whose goal is to remind the viewer of the medium.”\(^{377}\) The second stage, immediacy, is “A style of visual representation whose goal is to make the viewer forget the presence of the medium.”\(^{378}\) Because the Internet leans toward hypermediacy because it consistently reminds the user of the medium of the content they are consuming. Marshall McLuhan provides a clear example of hypermediacy in *The Medium is the Massage* when midway through the book he presents two largely blank pages side-by-side with the message, “Environments are invisible. Their groundrules, pervasive structure, and overall patterns elude easy perception.”\(^{379}\) Glover makes a similar move a little over halfway through the *Because the Internet* screenplay when the script stops on a page with the instruction to play the 45-second song, “Death By Numbers,” and to “Let the song play for this entire page. When it is done, go to the next page.”\(^{380}\) Both of these examples make the user aware of the medium they are consuming. McLuhan entices the reader to notice the book in his or her hands that may have previously felt invisible. Glover provokes the user to stop reading for 45-seconds and reflect on the experience he or she is having. Like McLuhan, Glover urges the user to recognize the environment that was previously invisible. Rather than a book, *Because the Internet* is meant to be experienced in front of a digital screen. Whether that is a desktop computer, laptop, smart phone, or tablet is irrelevant. It is the environment of the internet that is meant to rise to the surface, and this is the invisible medium that Glover urges the user to notice. I have provided images below of these two instances.

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\(^{380}\) Glover, 48.
Images of hypermediated instances in the *Because the Internet* screenplay (left) and Marshall McLuhan’s *The Medium is the Massage* (right).

Another example of this is the meme “Roscoe’s wetsuit” that Glover spread online throughout the album’s release. It initially started as a cryptic tweet from his account, and he began retweeting any fans that also tweeted the phrase. This caused it to “spread like wildfire”\(^{381}\) early on, and the term kept coming up throughout the project’s rollout and release. It still appears, even coming up in lyrics to the mixtape/EP hybrid *STN MTN/Kauai* (2014) that Glover released after *Because the Internet*. There initially was a website for roscoeswetsuit.org that just showed text of the term and nothing else. Glover even rented out a billboard in LA to display the text. This billboard example is particularly interesting because it takes a piece of new media, a tweet/online meme, and regurgitates it through the old media of a billboard. This is an example of backwards remediation in which old media is used to develop on new media, rather than the other way around. Fans searched for any evidence they could piece together in order to

understand what “roscoe’s wetsuit” could mean. Glover gave them plenty, and “Roscoe’s wetsuit” appeared throughout the screenplay, in the Tumblr IRL room, his music videos, and various other places.382 “Roscoe’s wetsuit” even can be seen on the physical CD release by peeling off the front cover,383 not unlike The Beatles hidden “butcher block cover” on early pressings of *Yesterday and Today* (1966). However, none of this evidence led anywhere. The more the term appeared, the more ambiguous it became. I have provided images below displaying some of the various places where “roscoe’s wetsuit” exists.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>There’s a billboard. It says: ROSCOE’S WETSUIT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Boy stares at it. Just a white billboard with “roscoe’s wetsuit” on it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Images of “Roscoe’s wetsuit” appearing in the *Because the Internet* screenplay (top), and IRL billboard (bottom).

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382 Reddit, “[REQUEST] Roscoe’s Wetsuit Video” (2016),
https://www.reddit.com/r/donaldglover/comments/3xk952/request_roscoes_wetsuit_video/

383 A fan discovered this after the cover was warped from leaving the CD out in the sun. (Reddit - https://www.reddit.com/r/donaldglover/comments/2226c5/so_my_cd_cover_was_warped_today_in_the_sun_behind/)
Images of “Roscoe’s wetsuit” appearing in fan tweets (top), the Tumblr IRL room (middle), and hidden behind the physical CD album cover (bottom).
Fans spent lots of time trying to understand what “Roscoe’s wetsuit” meant and continue to do so long after the album’s release. Some initially believed it was the name of Glover’s forthcoming project that eventually became *Because the Internet,* and others still believe it could be an album in the works. Other “theories” run the gamut from it being a condom for Glover’s penis, an alien living inside of Glover’s body, a reference to Bret Easton Ellis’ *Less Than Zero,* a critique of contemporary hip-hop artists, or a metaphor for life itself. One of the most intricate explanations comes from a fan who thought it could signal a collaborative mixtape between Childish Gambino and Chance the Rapper. The comment explains, “If you put ‘roscoe’s wetsuit’ into the Wu-Tang name generator, you get ‘Sixty Second The Baptist’. If you put ‘Donald Bennett’, (Childish Gambino’s first name and Chance the Rapper’s last name) you also get Sixty Second The Baptist. What are the odds?” At this point, “Roscoe’s wetsuit” had come full circle. The meme that Glover created was effectively processed through the same online algorithm that brought “Childish Gambino” into existence, creating a seemingly unintended conceptual loop found by fans.

Countless other fan theories abound online, but the most provocative and widespread is that “Roscoe’s wetsuit” is actually meaningless. In a YouTube video of Glover at a park in Toronto during a public listening party for *Because the Internet,* fans...

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384 Reddit, “[Discussion] Thoughts on Roscoe’s Wetsuit being the name of Bino’s next album?” (2015), https://www.reddit.com/r/donaldglover/comments/2nu03s/discussion_thoughts_on_roscoes_wetsuit_being_the/?ref=search_posts.


387 Reddit, “This is what Roscoe’s Wetsuit really means.” (Dec 2015), https://www.reddit.com/r/donaldglover/comments/3qkeit/this_is_what_roscoes_wetsuit_really_means/.


389 Reddit, “Is ‘Clapping for The Wrong Reasons’ the Boy’s dream while in the hospital?” (Sept 2015), (https://www.reddit.com/r/donaldglover/comments/3kxkii/is_clapping_for_the_wrong_reasons_the_boys_dream/).

press him for what “Roscoe’s wetsuit” means. He responds, “You guys will see…it’s all part of bigger things too…just remember asking why you want to know, that’s a part of it…do you know why you want to know? …you just want to know? Okay, cool. Remember that.” From the mouth of its creator, “Roscoe’s wetsuit” seems to signify the very act of questioning itself. It creates a conceptual mise-en-abyme wherein the further one looks into “Roscoe’s wetsuit,” the more it reveals itself over and over again. This is exemplified in the screenplay when The Boy first sees “Roscoe’s wetsuit” on Twitter (text styles are taken from the screenplay):

He was looking for something to retweet on his time-line. People say dumb shit all the time...

...someone tweeted “roscoe’s wetsuit”.

“...what’s that?”

The Boy drops “roscoes wetsuit” into Google. A Yahoo answer comes up for it. The answer to “what is roscoe’s wetsuit?” is...“roscoe’s wetsuit”. Hilarious.

The Boy dropping the term into Google parallels what any curious fan would do in this scenario. As expected at this point, there is also a Yahoo Answers page that mirrors the one The Boy finds in the screenplay. Greenfield writes of Google searching:

The advent of the internet, with sophisticated algorithmic search engines, has made accessing information as easy as lifting a finger. No longer do we have to make costly efforts to find the things we want. We can “Google” the old classmate, find articles online, or look up the actor who was on the tip of our tongue…success in a Google search depends not on detailed scrutiny or in-depth reflection but instead on fast evaluations at face value.

It is this reflex of instantly accessing information that “Roscoe’s wetsuit” plays on.

Glover created a term largely void of meaning with the assumption that his fans would


392 Glover, 8.


394 Greenfield, 204-05.
search for meaning online, and in the process imbue it with meaning. In *The Shallows: What the internet is Doing to Our Brains*, Nicholas Carr builds on Plato’s idea that writing causes one to be “filled, not with wisdom, but with the conceit of wisdom” and deems the internet “a technology of forgetfulness” as a result of our reliance on instant information from the Web to find whatever we need. With “Roscoe’s wetsuit,” the fact that there was not a definitive answer online is what led fans to continue searching for meaning. It acts as an anomaly in an online world where so much else can be found with a single click. One fan succinctly explains, “It means nothing. Roscoe’s wetsuit is just proof that anything, no matter how pointless and senseless, can go viral. The people of the internet will repeat it and wonder about it for no reason. Maybe to connect with each other. Maybe to search for meaning where there is none.” *Pigeons and Planes* speculates:

“Roscoe’s wetsuit” is a phrase created to symbolize how anything online can go viral...Because the Internet. While everyone searches for meaning, RTs it, instagmars it, and spreads the word, nobody knows what “the word” really means. If we look at it this way, Roscoe’s wetsuit shows how eager this Internet dependent generation is to latch on to an idea, whether or not we really understand it, and whether or not it really has any meaning at all.

This resembles the short film “Clapping for the Wrong Reasons” because the viewer feels compelled to clap even though they do not know why. Mark Federman at the University of Toronto performed a study addressing “the challenge of multiple media literacies in a tumultuous time.” He concludes that in the internet’s “world of ubiquitous connectivity and pervasive proximity...the greatest skill [involves] discovering emergent meaning

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395 Carr, 54.
396 Carr, 193.
397 Reddit, “Have we received any explanation of the meaning of Roscoe’s Wetsuit” (2014), https://www.reddit.com/r/donaldglover/comments/1w8qj1/have_we_received_any_explanation_of_the_meaning/.
among contexts that are continually in flux. Glover continually shifts “Roscoe’s wetsuit” to suit a variety of contexts, both online and off. No matter where “Roscoe’s wetsuit” appears, the search for its meaning inevitably brings fans to the internet and may thereby reveal its hypermediacy. In this way, “Roscoe’s wetsuit” acts as the conceptual glue that holds *Because the Internet* together and as a microcosm for the project as a whole. From “Clapping for the Wrong Reasons” to Glover’s Instagram notes to the screenplay, Glover created an excess of attractive and enigmatic information and content. The relationship among all of the elements is what comprises the work *Because the Internet*. The further one looks into this content, the more links and connections can be found, but the less apparent any singular meaning becomes. Glover assumed with “Roscoe’s wetsuit” that fans would latch onto it in the way they did, and the same goes for *Because the Internet*. In David Jennings’ *Net, Blogs, and Rock ‘n’ Roll* he equates online viral campaigns to spreading a seed, and states, “the challenge in a fragmented media landscape is to get your seed blown far and wide, so that as people wander that landscape, their chances of coming across it are as high as possible.” While “Roscoe’s wetsuit” had strong conceptual ties to *Because the Internet*, the term’s online circulation also inevitably brought exposure to the project. “Roscoe’s wetsuit” then also fulfills a strong promotional incentive for Glover. In many ways, he exploited his online community of fans to pursue the thematic purpose of this work while increasing its buzz. If he did not already have this fanbase, “Roscoe’s wetsuit” would not have caught on so strongly nor would *Because the Internet* have gained the audience it did. Glover had to first reach online fame before he could look down and reflect on it, and to do so he exploited the very community that got him the fame in the first place. *The Verge* writes:

*Because the Internet* has all the trappings of a work crafted by an artist grappling with success, excess, and the exhaustion that comes with it. But what’s interesting here is how he plays with that trope from a net native’s perspective. His fame is a distinctly online-driven kind of fame, after all. As such, the language of the work is colored by internet life as he’s lived it. What results is a thoughtful if somewhat ungainly commentary on how people relate on- and

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400 Quoted in Carr, 111.

Since the internet is such a large part of his success, Glover was able to use his online presence to spread “roscoe’s wetsuit,” and thus bring exposure to Because the Internet as a whole. If I had tried to do Because the Internet with my measly 200 twitter followers (compared to Glover’s 1.8 million), “roscoe’s wetsuit” would have had much less circulation and its effect would have been lost. However, since Glover has cultivated such a strong online presence throughout his career, there were already nearly 2 million fans ready to latch onto and discuss “roscoe’s wetsuit” the moment it appeared.

Some argue that Because the Internet is a rather elaborate piece of online trolling, which “generally describes someone who adopts an offensive or controversial stance in order to annoy other(s) or to provoke an emotional response.”\textsuperscript{403} \textit{TIME} was unhappy with this behavior and writes in their lukewarm review of the album:

\begin{quote}
When, as has been suggested, Glover is using interviews, social media, and every other public communication to actually create the multimedia concept art, there has to be a reason for it. But, how can we believe anything about someone who considers the world a concept art piece and makes the fans just part of the story, like extras in a movie?…The big reveal at the album’s conclusion is that he was (likely) trolling all the trolls, but what about the fans? What about those of us who don’t need our time wasted merely to make the point that someone was wasting our time? Because the Internet should read as Because I Can, as if the anonymity of the web gives us no culpability for our actions or our art.\textsuperscript{404}
\end{quote}

Like previous critics mentioned in this chapter, the reviewer here is unimpressed with Because the Internet and wishes for it to conform to his expectations of what purpose an “album” should serve. This reviewer is conflicted over the fact that there is “no reason” for Glover to have done what he did. However, there is more to this project than just wasting people’s time. This entire experience of Because the Internet, including

\textsuperscript{402} The Verge, “‘Because the Internet’: online fame gives Donald Glover the feels” (Dec 10 2013), http://www.theverge.com/2013/12/10/5195582/because-the-internet-online-fame-gives-donald-glover-the-feels.

\textsuperscript{403} Greenfield, 147.

“Roscoe’s wetsuit” and everything else, asks its audience to recognize the internet as a part of their lives. It provides no answers but provokes questions about searching for a sense of meaning in the internet-age. These questions, while ultimately circular and perhaps unanswerable, are meant for listeners to not only recognize the internet as a part of their lives but to question what that means.

4.5 Concluding Because the Internet

As a hypermediated text, Because the Internet seeks to reflect the internet to its users. It is nearly impossible to discuss any element of this text without explicitly addressing the internet in some way. Glover uses the internet as a tool to create Because the Internet, as a cultural space for Because the Internet to disseminate and exist, and he expresses the internet’s way of being through Because the Internet. The relationship between Glover and his fans lies at the center of Because the Internet. If his online fans had not followed the experience as it happened and questioned every move, Because the Internet would have been a very different, much less dynamic text. In the last song on the album of Because the Internet, “III. Life: The Biggest Troll,” Glover raps, “High on my own, it took time to realize / Because the Internet, mistakes are forever / But if we fuck up on this journey, at least we’re together.” Themes of loneliness and alienation permeate Because the Internet, but Glover finds solace in the fact that however alone he might feel, the internet and his fans are still there. In her book Alone Together, Sherry Turkle writes:

Our new devices provide space for the emergence of a new state of the self, itself, split between the screen and the physical real, wired into existence through technology…These young people are among the first to grow up with an expectation of continuous connection: always on, and always on them…All of this makes them fluent with technology but brings a set of new insecurities. They nurture friendships on social-networking sites and then wonder if they are among friends. They are connected all day but are not sure if they have communicated. They become confused about companionship. Can they find it in their lives on the screen?…Their digitized friendships—played out with emoticon emotions, so often predicated on rapid response rather than reflection—may prepare them, at times through nothing more than their superficiality, for relationships that could bring superficiality to a higher power, that is, for relationships with the...
inanimate. What Turkle is discussing is how one who has grown up with the internet and digital technology experiences relationships. *Because the Internet* touches on some of the themes Turkle mentions. In “3005” Glover asks, “Got a house full of homies, why I feel so the opposite?” which is also a major theme in the short film “Clapping for the Wrong Reasons” and recurs in the screenplay. Glover is surrounded by friends, but feels entirely alone. It is nothing new for a celebrity to feel isolated and confused by fame. However, Glover turns directly to the internet as a way to explain this feeling. The further he looks in himself to understand why he feels alone, the more the answer is — for lack of a better term — because the internet.

Glover claims that the title “Because the Internet” actually comes from a conversation between him and alternative-rock icon Beck. He states in an interview with *TIME Magazine*:

> I was working with Beck, and he asked me a question about whether rappers talk to each other and I started off the answer by saying, ‘I don’t like starting answers with this, but *Because the Internet*…’ and he said, ‘You should name your album that.’ It started as a joke and the more we talked about it the more it was like, it actually makes sense. It’s weird to me that there’s not a similar title [out there already]. Because the Internet is everything. These words will end up on the internet, somewhere, somehow. Everything we do is put into information online so I thought it was appropriate for the times.

The ellipses following the phrase “Because the Internet…” are essential in understanding how this title begs for completion but never reaches an end, like the work *Because the Internet* itself. Because the internet…what, exactly? The work *Because the Internet* can be understood to continue this never ending statement. Rather than any answers or finite endings, *Because the Internet* only provides more questions and infinitude to ponder.

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406 Claire Boucher also used the term “because the internet” when describing “post-internet.” See footnote 156 for source.

When then asked how much time he spends online, Glover answered, “It’s probably easier to answer how much time I don’t spend on the internet, which would probably be the time when I’m sleeping, so I guess about four hours.” He elaborates:

[I spend that time] Emailing, checking up on information, getting sent Vines, reading a tweet, any sort of information. The album’s sort of about how I only connect through that really. I mean, how often do you sit down and talk to someone for like two hours? It’s not like a bad thing. I don’t want anybody to think this is an indictment. But I thought it was an interesting thing. People used to talk a lot longer and now it’s, like, if I sit down and talk to someone for two hours and not look at my phone, not only is it like a great feat, like it’s hard to do, but I’d be probably in trouble. People would be like, ‘Where were you? Were you sick? Did you get in trouble?’ Something would be wrong.408

Glover is saying that the internet is a main source of human connection for him, and that he literally spends more of his waking day online than off. Greenfield states, “cyberculture does not encourage the development of the attention span necessary for deep thought, and thus is if we rely exclusively on that digital culture, we fail to construct the adequate conceptual framework that gives the world around us meaning.”409 It would be erroneous to say that Glover is incapable of deep thought, but what Greenfield touches on here is the very confusion Glover feels in his unfulfilled desire to find meaning on the internet. The more time he spends online the more disconnected he feels, so he turns right back to the internet to alleviate this. However, it just creates a continual loop like “Roscoe’s wetsuit” with no conceivable ending.

In Joseph Weizenbaum’s Computer Power and Human Reason, he writes, “An intellectual technology becomes an indispensable component of any structure once it is so thoroughly integrated with the structure, so enmeshed in various vital substructures, that it can no longer be factored out without fatally impairing the whole structure.”410 Without the internet, Because the Internet would not exist. Likewise, Donald Glover as we know him would not exist, either. As a black artist, the internet provides avenues for Glover

408 Ibid.
409 Greenfield, 244.
that previously were not available in the music industry. This is why the animated .gif album cover is not of a computer blowing up and being reassembled, but Glover’s own face. Because the internet he initially gained an audience via comedic YouTube videos; because the internet he was able to share music and gain an audience as Childish Gambino; and because the internet he was able to develop a strong fanbase that would continually support him and his work, including the elaborate demands of *Because the Internet* and its need for active engagement. *Because the Internet* is coming from someone whose life has been so deeply influenced and embedded online that to dismiss it would be impossible. Glover clearly states, “I love the internet…I think my whole vision of life has been changed by this tool that humans have made.”

This chapter began by looking at Donald Glover’s career narrative and how he is classified as a perennial outsider to both black (hip-hop) and white (indie) music worlds. This classification struggle, at the core of his identity as an artist, can be seen growing into a superabundance of paratextual media to create *Because the Internet*. In working to understand this text, I looked at discussions about it from critics, fans, and Glover himself. These discussions offered multiple speculations on a highly ambiguous text. By placing *Because the Internet* within frameworks of transmedia, convergence culture, and hypermediacy, I sought to understand some of the logic behind Glover’s creation and dissemination of this text. His use of his online fans in particular is an essential aspect of *Because the Internet* and analyzing the meme “Roscoe’s wetsuit” helped to better understand Glover’s relationship with this fanbase as well as the thematic ideas of this work.

In the previous chapter, Claire Boucher saw the internet as having a neurobiological influence on her brain that consequently affected the sound of her music as Grimes. For Glover, the internet philosophically affects the way that he finds meaning in life. Both artists can be understood as having lived through the internet’s cultural

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411 Q on CBC, “Childish Gambino brings “Because the Internet” to Studio Q” (Apr 8 2014), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xhBntF0q6jY.
growth. Glover explicitly states that he is in a “unique position”\textsuperscript{412} to reflect upon the phenomenon of the internet due to being “part of a generation that’s pretty special because we remember life before the internet.”\textsuperscript{413} For the “post-internet messiah”\textsuperscript{414} Donald Glover, “The internet is a living, breathing thing and we are making it as we go.”\textsuperscript{415} \textit{Because the Internet} is his way of speaking what he calls “the language of Earth,” and in doing so contributes to the development of the “living, breathing thing” that he views the internet to be.

Glover’s internet presence yet again lived in the shadows for most of 2016, and he broke the silence on June 17\textsuperscript{th} when he tweeted a link to an app titled \textit{Pharos}. The app initially was a distant view of the Earth with the perspective slowly getting closer as a number counted down to impact. Fans inevitably went straight to the internet to discuss what this could be, with one fan even deriving a quadratic graph to find what time the app would make impact. Upon impact, the app revealed that Childish Gambino will be performing his new album entirely in full at a special event in Joshua Tree, California on September 2\textsuperscript{nd} 2016. Users who bought tickets to this event were treated with a “guidebook” that features a series of philosophical messages.\textsuperscript{416}

The modern world has the answers readily available for us at a moment’s notice. In a matter of decades, it’s become exponentially harder to reconcile our worldly knowledge with our acceptance of the unknown. Distracted by our day-to-day, questions we’ve all considered are still unanswerable: WHO ARE WE? WHERE ARE WE FROM? WHY ARE WE HERE?

\textsuperscript{412} ANDPOP, “A Deep Interview with Childish Gambino…Because the Internet” (Dec 5, 2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZ6CB6NPvo.

\textsuperscript{413} Time, “A Conversation with Childish Gambino: Nostalgia, Bitcoins and Advice from Tina Fey” (Dec 05 2013), http://entertainment.time.com/2013/12/05/a-conversation-with-childish-gambino-nostalgia-bitcoins-and-advice-from-tina-fey/.


\textsuperscript{415} Time, “A Conversation with Childish Gambino: Nostalgia, Bitcoins and Advice from Tina Fey” (Dec 05 2013), http://entertainment.time.com/2013/12/05/a-conversation-with-childish-gambino-nostalgia-bitcoins-and-advice-from-tina-fey/.

\textsuperscript{416} Pigeons and Planes, “Everything We Know About Childish Gambino’s Mysterious \textit{Pharos} Album Event” (June 24 2016), http://pigeonsandplanes.com/2016/06/childish-gambino-pharos-event-guidebook-info/.
The messages continue, and Glover contextualizes these existential concerns within our internet-saturated world.

A unified human intention is now possible due to accelerants such as the internet. A recognition of “we cannot know everything” by every individual can be made. This large scale agreement cannot only allow for the beauty of our mystery to be celebrated, but for a universal belief system to be born. A rational, progressive, and spiritually fulfilling global pantheism can be reached without disregard for our process of change: evolution.

More messages explain to the user their conceptual role in the live performance with a specific “vibration code” and designated color frequency and wavelength of what colour clothing to wear to the show. There is also a set of rules for the user to follow on how to interact with other fans of similar vibrations and wavelengths. A high-rated comment on Reddit exclaims, “BINO IS CREATING A PHYSICAL REPLICA OF THE INTERNET.” This again raises questions about the distinction between IRL and online life. The performance has yet to happen at the time of this writing, but considering how Because the Internet (2013) developed on the themes of Camp (2011) before it, one could speculate that this new album will build upon many of the ideas presented in this chapter. As Donald Glover’s understanding of the internet evolves and expands to cosmic heights, we will continue to learn more about the inevitable role that it plays in our culture.

Chapter 5

“Rome wasn’t built in a day, and the internet is our new Rome.”

– Kanye West


5 Conclusion: Bricks of a New Rome

This epigraph was delivered by Kanye West as part of a panel on technological change at Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity in 2014. Fittingly, Donald Glover and Claire Boucher both explicitly reference Kanye West as a major influence on their artistic lives and works. It is worth questioning what West is insinuating here. To equate the internet with Rome suggests that it is a living, growing world with the potential to have irreversible political, technological and cultural effects on the history of human civilization. Like the term “the internet,” “Rome” is also multifarious and encompassing. “Rome” once represented a physical space, but it also became something beyond the Mediterranean as a global empire and now represents a historical era and ideal. Similarly, the term “the internet” no longer just represents a “series of tubes” but now describes something more complex. Both of these terms represent something real, a physical space and a technology, but grew beyond “real life” to signify something conceptually intangible. West’s quote may feel hyperbolic, but “Rome wasn’t built in a day” suggests we are in an early stage of the internet’s development and it is in our hands to “build” it. As the internet continues to prominently feature in many aspects our lives, it is important to consider how we discuss the world it encompasses. In concluding this thesis, I want to place my research in relation to broader questions about how we understand the cultural phenomenon of the internet.

Simon Frith writes, “in examining the aesthetics of popular music we need to reverse the usual academic argument: the question is not how a piece of music, a text, ‘reflects’ popular values, but how – in performance – it produces them.” From this perspective, my research is not so much an attempt to describe the internet as it is a consideration of the digital circulation of popular music meanings that create and elucidate our understanding of the internet. Bridgette Wessels writes in Understanding the Internet, “To understand the ways in which the internet interacts with society involves considering the ways in which its characteristics are materializing into social and cultural

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419 Simon Frith, Performing Rites (Harvard University Press, 1996), 270.
forms.”\textsuperscript{420} The works of Grimes and Childish Gambino act as cultural texts that exemplify how they interpret the role of the internet in their lives. To build on this, Marshall McLuhan writes, “The artist is the person who invents the means to bridge biological inheritance and the environments created by technological innovation.”\textsuperscript{421} By placing Grimes and Childish Gambino in McLuhan’s perspective, they can be understood as helping bridge the gap between how we understand our natural biological selves in relation to the technological environment of the internet. McLuhan also states, “The power of the arts to anticipate future social and technological developments, by a generation or more, has long been recognized. In this century Ezra Pound called the artist ‘the antennae of the race.’”\textsuperscript{422} This can be related to Frith’s statement above because he finds that musical works create values for the future by building on the past and present. This could make it seem as if artists are “the antennae of the race” because they tend to produce the values that later become established and popular. In the context of McLuhan, these values are directly related to our understanding of technological development. If we think of Grimes and Childish Gambino’s interpretations of the internet’s growth in this way, it is then important to discuss what potential values and ideas about the internet this research may reveal.

One central question that is worth addressing is why these artists care so much about the internet. Other artists have had many positive benefits in their career from the internet but they are not as compelled to discuss it as a central aspect of their work. For instance, Drake got his big break as a rapper from his mixtape Thank Me Later (2009) blowing up online, but in 2015 proudly raps “Fuck goin’ online, that ain’t part of my day.”\textsuperscript{423} Boucher and Glover’s relationship with the internet is more nuanced and less binary than simply being online or off. They see it as a large, pervasive force in their artistic lives, and these discussions come through in their resistance to classification. In Eric Weisbard’s analysis of artists who resist mainstream radio formats, he concludes,

\textsuperscript{420} Wessels, 2.
\textsuperscript{422} Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media Critical Edition (Gingko Press, 2003), 16.
\textsuperscript{423} Drake, “Energy,” If You’re Reading This, It’s Too Late (2015), Cash Money Records.
“Every attempt to oppose a format mainstream, by renouncing capitalism or compromise, registers entitlement and privilege: middle-class, male, white, heterosexual, northern,hipster, genre, or some other form.”\textsuperscript{424} Weisbard suggests that white males typically held the privilege to resist radio formats, and while a case could be made that Boucher and Glover fit under some of these classifications, they are disqualified because of their gender and race respectively. It is worth questioning how Boucher and Glover were able to occupy “privileged” positions of resistance they formerly would not have held due to their gender and race. A potential reason for this could be that the internet provided these artists with the power and ability to resist the constraining power of classification and build their own unique careers. The internet acts as a liberating force, allowing Claire Boucher and Donald Glover to bypass stereotypical expectations of a woman and a black male in the music industry. The internet offers them the opportunity to openly resist classifications, which was a position previously afforded to white males. In a pre-internet world, it would have been significantly more difficult for either of these artists to reach the cultural positions they now hold. While Boucher and Glover are clearly still heavily subjected to gendered and racial classifications, they are able to actively resist falling into the roles that others enforce upon them. It is worth looking at how the kinds of internet-influenced cultural spaces that Boucher and Glover created for themselves are potentially providing avenues for future artists.

5.1 The Bricks of Grimes

As previously touched on, Boucher has experienced a lot of sexism in the music industry. She begins her blog post entitled “I don’t want to be infantilized because I refuse to be Sexualized”\textsuperscript{425} with “I don’t want to have to compromise my morals in order to make a living.” She later states, “I’m tired of men who aren’t professional or even accomplished musicians continually offering to ‘help me out’ (without being asked), as if i did this by accident and i’m gonna flounder without them. or as if the fact that I’m a

\textsuperscript{424} Eric Weisbard, \textit{Top 40 Democracy} (The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 20.

woman makes me incapable of using technology. I have never seen this kind of thing happen to my male peers.” Boucher was able to bypass this abhorrent environment when she first began producing music with her MacBook laptop with a connection to the internet. She could potentially still have become a successful producer without these technologies, but the number of hurdles Boucher would have had to jump through in a pre-internet music industry may have surpassed the ones she is forced to already confront today. She once said in an interview with *SPIN* in regards to sexism, “The more I’ve had to work in this industry, the more I’ve been shocked at the way people behave.”426 She later divulges in the interview, “With the first incarnations of Grimes I would make stuff and there would be a guy who would be doing the instrumental stuff and after awhile I realized, I’m actually falling into this niche that feels like what I’m *supposed* to do as a female: ‘Just be a singer and have someone do the tech-y stuff.’ The fact that that’s my *default reaction* is absurd.” This illustrates that Boucher initially followed the dominant industry expectations of a female pop musician, but eventually realized the gendered subordination that comes with doing so and chose to actively resist it.

With the ability to produce and distribute music as Grimes in her own DIY studio (as she still does), Boucher bypassed many of the gatekeepers and their presumptive blatant misogyny to gain initial exposure. Boucher states in an interview with *Rolling Stone*, “I've been in numerous situations where male producers would literally be like, ‘We won't finish the song unless you come back to my hotel room.’ If I was younger or in a more financially desperate situation, maybe I would have done that. I don’t think there are few female producers because women aren’t interested. It’s difficult for women to get in. It’s a pretty hostile environment.”427 Producing at home may then be more than just an aesthetic or economic choice. It provides a space where Boucher can work on her music without consistently being subjugated as she might be in recording studios. She


mentions it is the hostility of such environments that contributes to the fact that there are fewer female producers, not because of a lack of interest by female artists. In another interview, she states, “Going into studios, there’s all these engineers there, and they don’t let you touch the equipment…I was like, ‘Well, can I just edit my vocals?’ And they’d be like ‘No, just tell us what to do, and we’ll do it.’ And then a male producer would come in, and he’d be allowed to do it. It was so sexist. I was, like, aghast. It made me really disillusioned with the music industry. It made me realize what I was doing is important.” She still clearly experiences sexism in the music industry, but the importance lies in how Boucher can now speak out against it as a result of the cultural position that she has built for herself. Reaching this position was arguably facilitated by Boucher’s liberating use of the internet to bypass pre-internet music industry ideological barriers. Boucher is able to use her cultural position to resist and reveal the sexism that permeates in the music industry rather than having to compromise her morals in order for her music to be heard. This may cause her to serve as an example for future female artists to follow.

One such example could be Lorde, the project of New Zealand singer-songwriter Ella O’Connor, who cites Grimes as her musical idol. Lorde’s music has been similarly praised for infusing various genres. Her single, “Royals” (2013), sold over 10 million copies worldwide and charted on nine different Billboard charts, including Rock, Dance, R&B/Hip-Hop and Top 40. She has earned two Grammy Awards, was named as one of TIME’s most influential teenagers in the world in 2013 and was included in Forbes’ “30 Under 30” list the following year. Lorde also resists a sexualized image and

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works against mainstream pop star expectations; she turned down an opportunity to tour with mega pop star Katy Perry because it “didn’t feel right.”\footnote{Forbes, “30 Under 30: Bruno Mars And Music’s Brightest Young Stars” (Jan 6 2014), http://www.forbes.com/sites/zackomalleygreenburg/2014/01/06/30-under-30-bruno-mars-and-musics-brightest-young-stars/#6787bce91504.} Clash Music’s review of her album Pure Heroine (2013) states, “[the album] has come at a time when we’re staring at Miley Cyrus and Rihanna, up at the cultural Frankenstein of our world stage and then at each other and thinking, ‘Is this a consequence of the culture and industry we’ve created around us? Is this what it takes to sell?’”\footnote{TIME, “The 16 Most Influential Teens of 2013” (Nov 12 2013), http://time100.time.com/2013/11/12/the-16-most-influential-teens-of-2013/.} Boucher arguably acts as a vanguard for forthcoming subversive female pop musicians like Lorde to follow. Born in 1996 (eight years after Boucher), Lorde has been recognized as a voice for an internet-bred generation. In the song “A World Alone” (2013), she croons “Maybe the internet raised us.”\footnote{Clash Music, “Lorde – Pure Heroine” (Nov 10 2013), http://www.clashmusic.com/reviews/lorde-pure-heroine.} Whereas Boucher recognizes what a world before the internet was like, artists like Lorde are coming from a world where the internet has always existed. It is also a world that is better understood because artists like Boucher have produced ways in which to understand it. As Grimes, Boucher arguably used the internet as a means to help break into a male-dominated sexist industry and provide a path for others like Lorde to follow.

### 5.2 The Bricks of Childish Gambino

For Donald Glover, the internet acts as a similar liberating force in regards to being a black male in the music industry. As I extensively discussed in Chapter 4.1, Childish Gambino’s album, Camp (2011), explicitly deals with Glover’s complicated relationship to racial classification and its ensuing expectations. He resists compromising his integrity in order to fit into stereotypical hip-hop roles. Instead, Glover raps about his

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unique path as an artist and feels he is either seen as too black to be white or too white to be black. His ability to rise to cultural prominence without conforming to stereotypical hip-hop narratives was facilitated by the internet. Starting with his humble beginnings in Derrick Comedy’s YouTube videos, over time Glover built a dedicated online fanbase of individuals who connected with his ideas. So much, in fact, that they spent large amounts of time discussing and experiencing Because the Internet (2013), a text that requires active engagement. Glover’s fans are not just passive consumers of his works, but avid devotees who passionately connect with what Glover stands for as an artist and play a crucial role in the execution of his conceptual ideas.

One of these fans is Kevin Abstract, a rising independent hip-hop artist from The Woodlands, Texas. Born the same year as Lorde, Abstract follows the cultural path laid out by Donald Glover as an unconventional black male artist. He once tweeted, “s/o donald glover for making things easier for kids like me.”437 Pigeons and Planes asked Abstract to elaborate on this tweet, which led to an article he wrote for the website unpacking this statement. Abstract first discusses his experience of attending one of Glover’s impromptu public listening sessions for Because the Internet in Atlanta. His prose recreates the experience of waiting for Glover to appear in person, while acknowledging the complex mixing and meeting of real and virtual spaces this involves: “This is Atlanta. No, this is the internet. No, this is behind the internet…The Deep Web is here. Waiting. These are the kids that had no voice – not before, not on this scale. Waiting. Waiting for it to speak.”438 The “it” here is referring to Glover’s cultural voice. Abstract frames it in such a way that kids who previously felt voiceless now have someone to speak for them. Abstract later elaborates on the experience of listening to Childish Gambino:

437 Kevin the Abstract (@kevinabstract), Twitter, (Sep 14 2014), https://twitter.com/kevinabstract/status/511217650362351616.

When that black kid is walking around his all-black high school, listening to the album, it’s not just an album, it’s something he can connect to. Another soul he can relate to. Someone who talks about the same shit he sees, feels, and hears every day in the streets and hallways. Living on the outskirts of Atlanta. Too black for the whites and too white for the blacks.

Abstract then lists examples of other outsider personalities like, “the boy from Nowhere, Texas who doesn’t have any friends but spends all day on Twitter to pass the lonely time… [who] can’t help but notice this guy (Donald Glover) who acts like him and thinks like him, and talks about the shit he sees on the internet and makes it real.” This statement suggests that Glover makes the experience of the internet “real” for his fans. He is arguably providing a voice that produces the ways in which his fans are able to interpret, understand, and speak of their relationship to the internet. Abstract goes on to discuss the influence Glover had on his self-released free album *MTV1987* (2015).

At 17 years old I wrote an album. I wrote an album about depression, love, memories, and a lot of other dreamy teenage bullshit. I didn’t write an album about the internet. I created something that was a product of it. The thing that was special about the album, however, wasnt [sic] the album. It was the way we released the music that made the album something fresh…with a lot of help from my friends…we used the internet as a medium. Our artwork, our videos were all based on the concept of the audience seeing what I see when I’m most vulnerable, when I turn on my macbook. People can read the textedit diary entries I posted on Instagram and look directly into my life, into my screen, same thing.

Abstract clearly states here that *MTV1987* is not “about” the internet but a “product of” the internet. A reviewer similarly writes, “*MTV1987* is less about technology as it is the result of technology.”[^439] This arguably positions Abstract’s album as succeeding Glover’s *Because the Internet* (2013). Abstract also sees no difference between his “life” and a “screen.” He treats his social media profiles and online ephemera as a window into his life and builds the concept of *MTV1987* by using the internet in a variety of ways. For instance, posting screenshots of confessional messages on Twitter[^440] strikingly similar to Glover’s techniques as laid out in Chapter 4. Abstract also positions the “album” as piece


of a larger conceptual idea that takes place online, just like *Because the Internet*. *MTV1987* was critically well received\(^{441}\) and featured on *SPIN*’s list of best hip-hop albums of 2014.\(^{442}\) Abstract claims that *MTV1987* is “for all of the self-conscious kids who would rather be in their bedroom pretending to be someone else online than going to a high school party and attempting to socialize.”\(^{443}\) He then confesses, “The internet is dark but i feel safe here.” A reviewer notes, “*MTV1987* is an impossibly honest portrait of someone still unsure about whether the internet is bringing him closer to, or further from, ultimate sadness.”\(^{444}\) Another writes, “Kevin Abstract as we know him is an Internet Child, a conflicted, complicated offspring of two worlds—one physical, the other online—competing for importance.”\(^{445}\) Deeming Abstract an “Internet Child” is similar to the aforementioned Lorde lyric, “Maybe the internet raised us.” This then positions Kevin Abstract and Lorde as being bred in a world where the internet is already culturally dominant and they know nothing else. They thus succeed Boucher and Glover, who lived through the internet’s growth as it took place.

Kevin Abstract concludes his article by touching on how Glover helped pave the way for artists like him.

I wouldn’t have been able to release [*MTV1989*] if the black dude who kinda looked like me didn’t share his stories and ideas and take on the world with the world. With the rap world. He’s brave. He’s brave enough to say, “Hey I Like this. I look like this. I talk like this. I made this. Do you like it?” Kanye gave people careers off of a sound he made with an album. He kicked down doors and made it possible for guys like Cudi and Gambino to work. Gambino is doing the same for kids like me—kids who are in their bedroom, spending hours trying to create something that’s bigger than the music. Bigger than uploading a song on

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\(^{441}\) Ibid.


SoundCloud. It’s bigger than themselves. Gambino has created a world and all of his fans have gotten lost in it. They want to know what comes next. Where does the story go? That inspires the fuck out of me. That’s what I’m doing with my art, and that’s how Childish Gambino made things easier for kids like me. He made it clear.

Abstract is explicitly claiming that *MTV1989* was created out of the cultural space that Glover built for artists like him. Abstract recognizes that without Childish Gambino, Kevin Abstract and *MTV1989* would arguably not exist. When Glover made *Because the Internet*, he produced perspectives about the internet that helped others better understand it. This could be the “clarity” that Abstract mentions here. When Abstract is asked by an interviewer, “How much of an understanding do your parents have about what you do?” He responds, “My dad gets the internet a bit more than my mom. They both know what’s up for the most part though.” Abstract is asked if his parents understand what he “does,” addressing the basis of his work as an artist. In response, Abstract does not mention anything about being a rapper, songwriter, or hip-hop artist. Instead, he responds by addressing how his parents understand the internet. This response suggests that Kevin Abstract positions his relationship to the internet as arguably the most integral component of his life as an artist, perhaps more important than his generic affiliation to hip-hop or even popular music. Abstract once tweeted the message, “i miss you a lot this album changed my life omg” along with an image of the album cover for *Because the Internet*. Abstract seems to be continuing on the path that Glover created. He provided a means for Abstract to better understand his relationship to the internet, which is a crucial part of his work. Glover also provided the means for a black, internet-bred artist to find his own voice by listening to him. Kevin Abstract exists in a cultural space as a black male artist that Donald Glover helped create. Considering that Abstract’s relationship with the internet is even further embedded in his life than Glover’s, he may also be producing new ways in which we can better understand this relationship.

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5.3 Further Research

Another new artist that is inciting interesting discussions about the internet is “bubblegum trap” rapper Lil Yachty, who is one year younger than Lorde and Kevin Abstract. Lil Yachty claims that he felt inspired to make music after the success of OG Maco’s “U Guessed It,” a song that reached success as a meme on Vine. He also cites Soulja Boy as a major influence. In Pitchfork’s “The Influencer: A Decade of Soulja Boy,” the article chronicles how Soulja Boy’s early usage of the internet in 2005 influenced future artists. Pitchfork writes, “Soulja’s meteoric rise, from a bored teen in Batesville, Mississippi to the most relevant rapper alive, represented not just the first wholly Internet-bred megastar, but the first time the transition from nobody to hip-hop star was publicly documented every step of the way.” When prodded about Soulja Boy’s influence on him, Lil Yachty states, “The way he came up, it was a whole new wave…the whole way he took over the internet. I follow kind of in his footsteps.”

When Lil Yachty blew up online after his song “1Night” was featured in a YouTube comedy sketch, publications quickly discussed his work as coming from the same internet-bred place as Lorde and Kevin Abstract. Pitchfork opens their review of his mixtape Lil Boat (2016) with, “Atlanta’s Lil Yachty is a pure creation of the internet.”

Another article from Noisey describes him to be “sailing the rap internet’s uncharted waters,” and that he “is making music that feels native to the internet.” Noisey also describes Lil Yachty as “post-regional,” and Pitchfork succinctly states, “[Lil Yachty] inhabits a post-regionalist rap universe, a space defined by digital platforms rather than geography.” This relates back to rapper Danny Brown’s quote in Chapter 1 when he states, “I’m not from Detroit, I’m from the internet.” This also relates to Kevin Abstract’s quote above, “This is Atlanta. No, this is the internet.” These statements show the complexity of intertwined real and virtual spaces where the line between IRL and the

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448 HOT 97 YouTube channel, “Lil Yachty Talks Why He Doesn’t Consider Himself a Rapper & Worst Social Comments He Gets” (Jun 9 2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyqcrHW-CuU.

internet is unclear. The implications of this mindset are now being further embodied by artists like Lil Yachty. An article from MTV discusses what it calls “the post-internet world” of Lil Yachty. This instance shows “post-internet,” a term I covered extensively in Chapter 3, being adopted and normalized to describe and classify Lil Yachty’s cultural place. His music sounds little like Grimes, but it carries a similar approach in that Lil Yachty’s music is inseparable from the internet. Boucher arguably provided the language, “post-internet,” in order to describe a cultural phenomenon that artists like Lil Yachty now fulfill. If Lorde, Kevin Abstract, and Lil Yachty are any indication of the direction new popular music artists are going, the internet will increasingly continue to feature as an integral component.

There are significantly more cultural texts and media ephemera worth studying in order to better understand what popular music can tell us about the phenomenon of internet. In particular, the work of academic and music producer Holly Herndon is worth exploring.\textsuperscript{450} She describes her music to be an attempt at capturing the sounds of the present moment. For instance, in the song “Chorus” (2015), she samples the sounds of Skype conversations and internet browsing to create the song. Her most recent album, \textit{Platform} (2015), is an experimental electronic album in which “she attempts to use electronic music to ask deeper questions about politics, community, and communication.”\textsuperscript{451} Herndon questions the internet from a political angle, and her “[live] performance techniques go beyond a deconstruction of the boundaries between audience and performer, acting as a sometimes uncomfortable lens, laying bare to the audience how personal our engagement with technology has become.” For example, at one show she installed surveillance cameras and when audience members would go on their phones, the camera would zoom in on them and project the image on stage. She also teaches a course on electronic music at Stanford and is currently building a crowdsourced database with musician Jennifer Walshe that catalogs “sound work that explicitly

\textsuperscript{450} I initially proposed to write a chapter on Holly Herndon, but I had to scrap it due to it being outside the scope of this master’s thesis.

engages with the internet.” This database is titled “Post-Internet Sound” and has the objective to create an “archive of sound and music works dealing with the internet since its inception.” This instance again shows “post-internet” being utilized in cultural discourse.

Chapter 3 provided an example of the internet infiltrating music genre discourse with Grimes and “post-internet,” but there is much more to be studied about the relationship between music genre and the internet. Specifically, the online music genre Vaporwave is ripe for further research in this area. Vaporwave emerged on internet communities in the early 2010s and “distinctively has no set location as to where it originated, as it started online, making it the first genre of music to be completely globalized.” Similar to how artists like Lil Yachty are coming from a post-regional space, Vaporwave can be understood as a post-regional genre that emerged from no physical geographical space. Vaporwave works carry a distinct visual and musical aesthetic that nostalgically re-appropriates cultural artifacts from the late 80s and early 90s in the new context of the internet (it sounds like elevator music meant to accompany the act of browsing the internet). The movement also fittingly appropriates Greco-Roman imagery, as seen in the intro image to this chapter of Macintosh Plus’ album *Floral Shoppe* (2011). Below are some examples of user-made Vaporwave art taken from the Facebook group “Vaporwave dreams in your brain.”

452 Holly Herndon’s Twitter Profile (@hollyherndon), Twitter post (Nov 30 2015), https://twitter.com/hollyherndon/status/671287951163265024.


454 The YouTube video “Vapourwave: A Brief History” (next footnote) acts as a perfectly place to start.

455 wos X’s YouTube Channel, “Vapourwave: A Brief History” (Jun 10 2015), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PdpP0mXOiWM.
One of the most popular Vaporwave songs, Macintosh Plus’ “リサフランク420 / 現代のコンピュー,” is a slowed down chopped-and-screwed Diana Ross sample repackaged under foreign lettering. Vaporwave may be understood as “a joke on music itself… [literally] a glorification of stealing other people’s art, and marketing it under something else with foreign languages.” Vaporwave is also frequently produced on cassette tape, and there are a number of Vaporwave-specific cassette labels that distribute and exist entirely online. The movement critiques and satirizes aspects of consumer culture and capitalism, with the origin of its name tied to a passage from Karl Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*. Marx states, “all that is solid melts into air,” referring to the constant change society is subjected to under bourgeois capitalism. “Vaporwave” critiques this idea while simultaneously enacting it. Vaporwave has even been described as “post-music,” a term which is even more confounding than “post-internet.” Mainstream artist Drake has appropriated elements of Vaporwave in the music video for “Hotline Bling” (2015) and in the production of the song “Feel No Ways” from his album *Views* (2016). There is much more to be said about Vaporwave and what it can tell us about music genre, the internet, and cultural movements online.

In Chapter 4, I detailed the extensive rollout of the “conceptual world” that Donald Glover created for Childish Gambino’s *Because the Internet* (2013). This is one instance of the internet being used in an innovative way to release an album, but there are many more worth investigating. Three days after the official release of *Because the Internet*, Beyoncé released her self-titled album *Beyoncé* (2013) online with no prior promotion or announcement. This “surprise drop” strategy has since been emulated by other major acts like Drake, Rihanna, and Kendrick Lamar and is becoming a more common occurrence. Kanye West has also utilized the internet in interesting ways in the release of his albums, specifically *The Life of Pablo* (2016). In the weeks preceding West’s *Yeezy Season 3* fashion show at Madison Square Garden, he tweeted that he

456 Ibid
would be playing his new album at the event and would stream the performance in movie theaters around the world. He catalogued the process of finishing the album through Twitter, posting images of shifting track lists and changing the album’s title multiple times. On the day of the event, West appeared at Madison Square Garden and plugged his MacBook laptop into an aux cord to play the album for millions of onlookers, visually reminding us of the laptop’s status in both the production and consumption of music today. He streamed the album online a few days later, and in the months afterwards continually tweaked and changed songs on the album. Critical reviews of *The Life of Pablo* that were written immediately after its release addressed a different version of the album than was later available. West chose not to make a physical release of *The Life of Pablo* and instead only stream it online. West tweeted “uuuuuum, so there it is... No more CDs from me.” In reference to his previous album *Yeezus* (2013), he tweets, “the Yeezus album packaging was an open casket to CDs r.i.p.” This is fitting, considering the album art for *Yeezus* is that it has none (save for a red sticker) and simply exposes the physical CD format.

*Images of Kanye West’s *Yeezus* (2013) and *The Life of Pablo* (2016).*

*The Life of Pablo* became the first *Billboard* #1 album be available exclusively through streaming with no physical release, which could become a more common trend for major

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artists. Even Because the Internet had a physical (both CD and vinyl) release. There is much more to discuss with The Life of Pablo and what it tells us about the shifting nature of the album format and how artists are experimentally releasing their albums on the internet. In the promotion of Radiohead’s Moon Shaped Pool (2016), they mysteriously deleted all of the content on their social media profiles and pages are left completely blank459 (even profile images are just white). This strategy parallels Donald Glover’s own “virtual identity suicide” that commenced the release of Because the Internet. This is yet another instance of popular music artists using the internet in experimental ways to release their works.

These are but a handful of examples that are worth further examination in order to better understand the relationship between popular music and the internet and how artists are contributing some of the ways in which we discuss and understand the internet. There are many other elements worth looking into as well, for instance record contractual law in the context of the internet as discussed by Grant Hawkins460. There are inevitably many more examples, and the future will continue to provide more.

5.4 Conclusion: A Modest Foundation

This thesis began by questioning the relationship between popular music and the internet, and what this relationship can potentially tell us about how we understand and discuss the phenomenon of the internet. In Chapter 1, I looked at the multifarious term, “the internet,” and built upon Sociologist Anette Markham’s framework of studying the internet as a tool, place, and way of being in the context of popular music. In Chapter 2, I looked at the historically inseparable relationship between popular music and technology and how the internet is simply the newest technology to continue this relationship. I looked at popular music about technology and the internet and placed my subjects Grimes and Childish Gambino within a tradition of popular music that critically engages


with technological change. In Chapter 3, I performed an extensive analysis of the term “post-internet” and how the internet infiltrated music genre discourse in discussions of Grimes. I studied how critics label and classify Grimes, and talked about Claire Boucher’s consistent resistance to classification. I also studied the term “post-internet” more intently in an attempt to get at the root of what the term means. In Chapter 4, I looked at Childish Gambino’s Because the Internet (2013) and Donald Glover’s strong relationship to the internet that informed this work. I discussed how his use of the internet led to a unique career path that resists traditional hip-hop narratives and how this perspective plays into the themes, creation, and execution of Because the Internet. I then concluded in Chapter 5 by addressing the implications of how Grimes and Childish Gambino are helping produce ways in which future artists may be able to understand and navigate their own careers in the context of the internet.

What this research provides is an understanding of some of the ways studying popular music can help us recognize how the phenomenon of the internet is being culturally understood, discussed, and expressed. Because popular music is so intrinsically tied to technology, and consequently the internet, studying popular music acts as an effective way to understand the cultural role of the internet. What studying Grimes and Childish Gambino provides is a glimpse at a particular cultural moment detailing the shift from pre-internet to post-internet popular music culture. Because Boucher and Glover can remember a life before the internet’s cultural dominance, they are able to recognize how this growth influenced their lives as artists. They were able to use the internet in liberating ways, and in turn produce new cultural spaces for others to follow. Such artists include Lorde, Kevin Abstract, and Lil Yachty, who simply know no world before the internet. Boucher and Glover discuss the act of “growing up” alongside the internet, whereas these new artists were “bred” and “raised” by it. As more internet-bred artists like these begin making music, they will have less of an understanding of what it meant to live before the internet. The line between real and virtual may also become further blurred. This has more than just cultural implications in music. For instance, in a recent case of people using Craigslist to solicit sex, a lawyer concluded, “It’s only an offence if
the communication takes place in a public place…Whatever else – the Internet, Facebook or Craigslist – they’re not places.” If the distinction between “real life” and the internet continues to dissolve, new rules and interpretations will continually need to be created in order to keep up.

While the internet can be understood as a technological development alongside radio, telephone, and television, perhaps it is worth understanding from alternate perspectives. One perspective is that the internet can be better metaphorically understood in the same vein of electricity. While the internet is a new delivery system of content like previous media technologies, it also creates an entirely new framework for ideas and innovations to develop and build. As we have seen here, it provides a global cultural environment for people to take part in. Like electricity, the presence of the internet may also soon be “invisible” in the context of modern life due to its integralty. Pew Research Center speculates this will happen by the year 2025. Another perspective is to metaphorically understand the internet as being similar to the development of agriculture. The development of agriculture completely shaped civilization and the modern world, providing the societal means for innovations like electricity and the internet to be created. One could speculate that in the first couple decades of primitive farms, dwellers may have recognized agriculture’s importance but could never fathom the world we live in today. With the internet, we are presently like these early farm dwellers. Given what has been discussed throughout this thesis, the internet is clearly having considerable cultural consequences, and this only seems to be the beginning. The internet’s effects on the way we live have already been insurmountable in its short lifespan, and this thesis engages with how popular music artists understand and interpret the internet in relation to themselves and their works. It may be easy to dismissively say, “They are just musicians, what does it matter?” but considering the intrinsic link between popular music and the

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internet, these artists act as leading examples of how to discuss and understand the world in which we currently live.

Boucher and Glover’s viewpoints are important because they offer crucial looks at what it means to live with the internet while still remembering what it felt like to live without it. As the culture of popular music becomes further embedded online, the perspectives offered by Boucher and Glover provide important viewpoints to help recognize how this cultural shift was interpreted and discussed as it took place. This feeling may soon be lost by future generations, and Boucher and Glover have produced ways to help future generations better understand the role of the internet in their own lives. As the “new Rome” of the internet continues to be built, the perspectives offered by studying the works of Grimes and Childish Gambino act as part of a modest foundation for this new world as it begins to take shape. In order to better understand this world as it unfolds, more research on the cultural role of the internet is necessary. As argued here, studying popular music acts as a preeminent way in which to undertake this.
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# Curriculum Vitae

**Name:** Kristopher R. K. Ohlendorf  

**Post-secondary Education and Degrees:** The University of Texas at Austin  

2010-2014  

- B.S. in Radio-Television-Film  
- B.S. in Communication Studies  

Western University  

2014-2016  

- M.A. in Media Studies  

**Honours and Awards:** James Lawrence Fly Endowed Presidential Scholarship in Communications  

2012-2014  

- Graduate Student Teaching Assistant Award  
- 2016  

**Related Work Experience:** Teaching Assistant  

Western University  

2014-2016