Can't nobody tell me nothin': 'Old Town Road', resisting musical norms, and queer remix reproduction

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Abstract

'Old Town Road', a genre-defying song fuelled by proliferating remixes, is a key site to unravel the position of remixes in contemporary popular music and culture. In this article, I examine mainstream press discourse about 'Old Town Road', finding that Lil Nas X's use of remixes to boost the song's popularity was generally seen as smart, while the racial politics of genre were contested but still powerful. Ultimately, the popular conversation around the song showed a sense that one key possibility of remixes is to resist the ways that genres normatively operate as straight lines of descent from musical forebears, instead engaging in a queer kind of reproduction, a joyful excess of proliferating versions.

Originally released in December 2018, Lil Nas X's 'Old Town Road' is widely seen as a genre-defying song; as one journalist emphasised, 'with the kind of boomy trap beat familiar to hip-hop listeners, it included twangy banjos and lyrics filled with cowboy imagery' (Sisario 2019). Or, as another writer colourfully described it after the track's first remix, which added Billy Ray Cyrus, it is an 'achy-breaky-freaky-deaky-country-rap-banjo-trap-post-industrial-bleep-you-like-a-n-animal song' – referencing not only Cyrus's biggest solo hit, 1992's 'Achy Breaky Heart', but the song's sample from Nine Inch Nails (Richards 2019).[1] 'Old Town Road' went on to huge success. It not only surpassed the previous *Billboard* Hot 100 record for weeks at number one by three weeks (with 19), but was also able 'to rack up an unprecedented 143 million streams in its first full week of tracking, easily beating Drake's previous record of 116 million for "In My Feelings" at its peak the year before' (Unterberger 2019c). I argue that the song's durability and popularity were fuelled by its defiance of conventional wisdom, genre and the normative

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[1] Nine Inch Nails' most famous song, 'Closer' (1994), although not the one sampled in 'Old Town Road', contains the lyric 'I want to fuck you like an animal'.

song life cycle with proliferating remixes – four official ones and many more unoffi-cial. 'Old Town Road' is thus a key text to unravel the position of remixes in contem-porary popular music and culture.

In this article, I examine how mainstream press discourse talks about 'Old Town Road' towards interrogating the underlying systems, structures and beliefs that shaped the song's cultural position. While press coverage is of course not neu-tral, norms of explaining 'both sides' of an issue mean that a cross-section of main-stream thought is available in the press. Moreover, the press helps frame public understanding of cultural events. For both of these reasons, I use press coverage to examine broadly held social beliefs circulating about 'Old Town Road', race in popu-lar music and remixes themselves. For this analysis, I collected a dataset from the Nexis Uni database of news articles in November 2019, using a search of '"old town road" remix'. With the 'group duplicates' feature enabled, there were 483 results. I used the 'sort by relevance' feature and downloaded those from mainstream (non-blog) US news sources until I had reached 100 total stories, which took me to story #260 overall. To analyse this data, I conducted a discourse analysis, a form of close reading that attends to patterns of language use, how the song was framed, and the underlying relations of power that shaped popular discussion of 'Old Town Road'.

I find that, on one hand, Lil Nas X's use of remixes to boost the song's popu-larity was seen as smart. On the other hand, the racial politics of genre were con-tested but still powerful, such that Lil Nas X's success was often attributed to Billy Ray Cyrus in an apparent attempt to manage the song's transgression of racial and genre norms. The cultural phenomenon that developed around the song had some detractors, but largely revelled in its proliferation and total disregard of cat-egories as successive remixes combined widely disparate artists and genres to pro-duce something that defied expectations. Through troubling racial and genre norms, I argue, the song resisted the normative operation of genres as straight lines of descent from musical forebears, instead engaging in a queer kind of repro-duction, a joyful excess of proliferating versions for their own sake. Importantly, the song is productively seen as queer not because Lil Nas X himself is, but because of this norm-breaking. An objection might be raised that a number one hit song seems normative, not queer. After all, if, as Jack Halberstam argues, failure is queer (Halberstam 2011, p. 89), the corollary would be that success is straight. However, queerness is a both/and logic – Lil Nas X did have success, but also left the boundaries shakier than he found them, as his success 'exploit[ed] the unpredict-ability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities' (Halberstam 2011, p. 88). Rather than a notion of queerness standing entirely outside power (which is not possible), this is queer as 'working the weakness in the norm' (Butler 1993, p. 237). 'Old Town Road' does not 'make us better people or liberate us from the culture industry', but I argue that it does 'harbor covert and overt queer worlds' (Halberstam 2011, pp. 20–1).

From remix loopholes to uncleared samples: 'Old Town Road' vs. the industry

From the outset, 'Old Town Road' was both aided by and in conflict with the struc-tures of the music industry. On the helpful side, the song leveraged what one

journalist called 'a remix loophole in the Billboard chart system' – remixes are combined with the initial version in determining chart position (Lil Nas X Eilish, enlist help in race for No. 1 2019). While this collapse of base track and remix(es) into a single metric for the purposes of chart position demonstrates the difficulty remix artists have in being recognised as producing valuable creative works in their own right, it nevertheless benefited Lil Nas X. The role of repeated remixes in boosting 'Old Town Road' was widely discussed. One journalist argued that 'these remixes absolutely helped Lil Nas X as he tried to pull off the seemingly impossible in the chart world' (Lipshutz 2019c). That is, the remixes are understood as extending the song's popularity towards breaking the Hot 100 record. Another journalist contended that, 'Not only do remixes jump-start a new level of excitement for (and consumption of) a song when they're done right, but they also just allow for multiple versions of a song to feed into the same Hot 100 listing, giving the overall entry a natural advantage over songs with just one prominent version to their credit' (Unterberger 2019b). The emphasis here is that a remix can boost numbers not only through the aforementioned 'remix loophole' but also what we might consider organically – by giving audiences something new to enjoy.

Importantly, there was a sense that this was an adroit manoeuvre. One journalist argued that 'deploying multiple remixes of a song is not a new strategy […] but the tactic was most effectively used by Lil Nas X as a means of perking up listeners and folding in fans of the artists hopping on the new versions. And if that blueprint can help keep an established hit at its chart peak for a few more weeks, others will embrace it moving forward' (Lipshutz 2019). That is, while other artists had used multiple remixes before – the above article references the use of this tactic by 2016 Fat Joe and Remy Ma song 'All the Way Up' – journalists identified Lil Nas X's use as in a category of its own because of its greater success, creating what this writer calls a 'blueprint'.

Thus, while there might be a tendency to see repeated remixes as less creative than releasing new songs, some commentators are clear that it is in fact skilled work. As one journalist argues, deploying remixes took strategy, and Lil Nas X 'timed the whole thing beautifully […]. He spaced them out well enough from one another that it always seemed like there was something new to talk about with "Road," and that's why 15 weeks into its run atop the Hot 100, it still doesn't feel like it's all that tired' (Billboard Staff 2019a). Repetition of the same song would be expected to 'feel tired', but Lil Nas X defied the odds by continually providing 'something new'. Another story emphasised that, far from laziness, this was labour: 'Lil Nas X has hardly rested on his laurels with "Old Town Road," releasing new remixes and videos for the track, as well as a parent EP' (Unterberger 2019c). Once the song was widely popular, this writer contends, Lil Nas X could have just coasted, but instead he put in much more work to capitalise on his success. One journalist even went so far as to say: 'As of now there is no American award – not the Grammy, not the Pulitzer, not the Oscar or the Tony – that could adequately reward the miracle that is the never-ending rollout of "Old Town Road"' (Caramanica 2019). Thus, one key way the popular conversation made sense of the song's success is that Lil Nas X made remarkably savvy use of remixes to boost its popularity, taking this existing promotional tactic to a new level.

At the same time, press discourse emphasised that Lil Nas X benefited from contemporary technological conditions in producing these repeated remixes. This ease of contemporary production and distribution methods facilitated the rapid

roll out of his many remixes, but it was also what let him self-release the track outside the music industry system in the first place. However, contemporary distribution technologies also mattered in another way; as one journalist contended, the success of 'Old Town Road' also 'demonstrates that although pop culture is more fragmented than ever, the internet also unites us and makes cultural ubiquity possible for songs like this that defy categorisation but that invite everyone to get on board' (Sampling the sounds of summer 2019). Through its viral internet success, the journalist argues, more traditional chart success became possible. Multiple articles attributed the song's success to its initial popularity on TikTok, such as saying that it 'shattered the record after becoming a viral internet sensation via the TikTok app' (Daniels 2019). The construction that it simply 'became' a viral sensation, or 'went viral', as other articles put it, evacuates the agency of the people making it happen. Although Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green are deeply, and rightly, critical of the idea of virality because it frames people as being passively infected and ignores the role of human agency in sharing culture (Jenkins *et al.* 2013), the obfuscating work 'virality' does as a concept is often, as in this case, exactly the point – it produces a notion of automatic promotion and distribution without human intervention, actively hiding both Lil Nas X's labour and that of his fans. This is in alignment with the common tendency to see technology as causing social phenomena, known as technological determinism.

However, 'Old Town Road' also shows that traditional record company systems continue to have important roles in contemporary popular music. Lil Nas X bought a beat online to serve as the base of the track (another example of new technological possibilities), but only after the song's release did he discover that it contained an uncleared Nine Inch Nails sample; his record label was constructed as coming to the rescue as it 'helped sort out the publishing on "Old Town Road"' (Levy 2019). The end result was that Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross of Nine Inch Nails receive 50% of the song's publishing royalties, which is what passes for a happy ending with an uncleared sample – it is an obscene proportion of the money for a bit of music that makes up a tiny proportion of the song, but at least it was not a lawsuit. As Kembrew McLeod and Peter DiCola note, such an 'arrangement results in a percentage of the proceeds going to the sampled songwriter and publisher. In the case of a royalty, the percentage ranges from 10 to 50 percent; with a co-ownership deal, the range is 25 to 50 percent' (McLeod and DiCola 2011, p. 153).[2] Thus, the 'Old Town Road' agreement was at the high end, demonstrating how novel forms of production like buying beats online cannot easily be reintegrated into the existing systems of the music industry, but a multi-million dollar copyright infringement judgment or an injunction preventing the sale of the song would have been considerably worse. In such ways, 'Old Town Road' shows that managing copyright complexities remains one key role that record labels fill, even as the music industry is otherwise upended by technological and social change.

Nevertheless, the most significant way that music industry structures impeded Lil Nas X was around the issue of genre. When 'Old Town Road' was released, it

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[2] The news story does not mention the terms of the deal (if any) regarding the Nine Inch Nails song's master recording copyright, which is also implicated in a sample, but these, too, come in two versions: 'buyouts typically range from $5000 to $15000 per sample, but in special cases they can cost as much as $50,000 (or even $100,000 in some very special cases). Royalties range from $0.01 per record to as much as $0.15 per record' (McLeod and DiCola 2011, p. 153).

initially appeared on three *Billboard* charts: The Hot 100, Hot Country Songs and Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs. This was short-lived, however, as soon '*Billboard* quietly removed "Old Town Road" from Hot Country Songs'; when journalists asked why, they said:

> upon further review, it was determined that 'Old Town Road' by Lil Nas X does not currently merit inclusion on *Billboard*'s country charts. When determining genres, a few factors are examined, but first and foremost is musical composition. While 'Old Town Road' incorporates references to country and cowboy imagery, it does not embrace enough elements of today's country music to chart in its current version. (Leight 2019)

That is, *Billboard* enacted what Aram Sinnreich calls 'ideological regulation of musical aesthetics', using norms to determine what is, or in this case is not, acceptable (Sinnreich 2010, p. 21). As this begins to suggest, the way that 'Old Town Road' violated musical norms and crossed boundaries – and made people in positions of power uncomfortable by doing so – is one of the key elements that makes it queer.

In response to this de-listing, Billy Ray Cyrus, soon to appear on the first remix of 'Old Town Road', tweeted: 'Been watching everything going on with OTR. When I got thrown off the charts, Waylon Jennings said to me "Take this as a compliment" means you're doing something great! Only Outlaws are outlawed. Welcome to the club!' (Cyrus 2019). Here, Cyrus welcomes Lil Nas X as a latter-day entrant into the 'outlaw country' tradition that began in the mid-1970s and bucked the control of Nashville over the country music industry. Cyrus was joined by other country artists in supporting Lil Nas X; press stories discussed a collaboration with country singer Jake Owen (which has never been released) and support from Brian Kelley of country group Florida Georgia Line (Lockett 2019). Indeed, there was sufficient support in the country music community that 'Old Town Road' received a Country Music Association award nomination for Musical Event of the Year – although a journalist noted that the song was 'snubbed for song and single of the year', suggesting a sense that the unmerited exclusion continued (Reuter 2019b). In such ways, one important feature of the discourse around 'Old Town Road' is that the conditions prevalent in the music industry are seen negatively – at best, they are a system to be gamed such as through the 'remix loophole', and at worst they are a roadblock to musical novelty. This suggests a broader cultural common sense that these older structures lack legitimacy in the face of new kinds of music-making, and one of the key innovations of 'Old Town Road' was the troubling and queering of these categories and boundaries.

'Old Town Road' and the racial politics of genre

One of the fundamental issues in the country chart controversy was the racial politics of genre. Although 'Old Town Road' was deemed not to 'embrace enough elements of today's country music' to remain on the chart, one journalist contended that:

> Billboard's decision did, however, embrace enough elements of yesterday's racism to draw everyone's attention, so in a delightful act of retaliation, Lil Nas X recruited the 57-year-old country star Billy Ray Cyrus to sing on an 'Old Town Road' remix, and now a frivolous ditty about hats and horsies is prompting a broad, meaningful discussion about how racial segregation is baked into the entire idea of genre. (Richards 2019)

While, as I will discuss below, this is not how the collaboration actually came about, what matters here is that *Billboard*'s genre determination was understood as part of a larger system of racism in music. Both the reclassification and what one journalist termed 'the song's conspicuous absence from most major country radio playlists' were 'sharply criticized as unfair and even racist, prompting a debate about genre and race in Nashville' (Sisario 2019). Given mainstream American resistance to discussing racism as a systemic problem rather than an individual prejudice, it is remarkable that such an understanding would surface in a journalistic account at all, let alone enough of them to be a consistent theme in the corpus of press data. The resistance to considering a song with hip-hop elements to be country may have been particularly salient for cultural commentators given the fact that there had been a number of hit songs including elements of both country and hip-hop in recent years, like Jason Aldean's 'Dirt Road Anthem', featuring Ludacris (2011), and Florida Georgia Line's 'Cruise', featuring Nelly (2013) – the latter of which had topped the country singles chart. Perhaps even more remarkable, the popular conversation even at times understood this kind of exclusion to be part of a pattern, putting it into the context of 'country music's history of ignoring artists such as Ray Charles' (Graham 2019).

The genre controversy around 'Old Town Road' demonstrates that crossing racialised genre boundaries typically goes only one way. White people typically have little trouble moving into Black-coded genres. As David Hesmondhalgh argues, when white artists like the Rolling Stones or Eric Clapton copy blues sounds or Moby samples blues recordings, it is seen as something like homage (Hesmondhalgh 2006). As Amanda Nell Edgar notes, musical boundaries work by 'stretching to accommodate movement and exploitative colonization by those in power, while snapping punitively back in place for those framed as interlopers' (Edgar 2014, p. 168). Even without particularly respectful intent, as one journalist pointed out, 2009 song 'I'm on a Boat' by comedy group The Lonely Island was nominated for a Grammy for Best Rap/Sung Collaboration, the contrast of which with 'Old Town Road' 'should remind us that white people are often welcomed into black spaces while black people are more frequently forbidden from entering white spaces' (Richards 2019). The journalist calls attention to the fact that three white men could make their way into the Black-coded genre of rap with a novelty record, but a Black man's 'frivolous ditty about hats and horsies' is not nearly so welcome in white-coded country.

Lil Nas X's removal from the country charts is also reminiscent of the backlash to Black artists sampling white artists' records. In a particularly colourful example, the court decision about Biz Markie's sample of Gilbert O'Sullivan's 'Alone Again (Naturally)' (1972) in his 'Alone again' (1991) 'simply quoted the Old Testament ("thou shalt not steal")' (Brennan Center for Justice 2005, p. 10), taking the position that reusing a piece of someone else's music was only and inevitably theft, not a valid kind of music creation. Accordingly, in the long tradition of treating Black people as inherently criminal, the judge interpreted Markie's sample not as a tort but a crime and 'even went so far as to recommend that the defendants be prosecuted for criminal copyright infringement, a more serious charge that carries its own fines and possibility of prison sentencing in addition to any damages awarded the plaintiff' (Demers 2006, p. 93). Black artists engaging with white people's music are thus treated as suspect, at the same time that moving in the other direction is accepted and even rewarded.

'Old Town Road' thus reflects a wider pattern in which white people have access to all areas of culture, but artists of colour – in this case Black artists – are told to stay in their lane. The problem is 'the nonreciprocal nature of the appropriation' (Greene 2008, p. 374). This is what is often called *cultural appropriation*, in which some culturally Other object or practice that was formerly treated as strange, deviant, primitive, savage, etc., comes to be seen by the dominant group as desirably exotic. This shift, which 'inverts the hierarchy that views nonwhite cultures as "bad" and white cultures as "good," remains dualistic. It is also, of course, the continuance of white racial domination that holds in place the status of whiteness as normative masquerading as "generic" – unadorned, basic, essential' (Frankenberg 1993, p. 205). Thus, as white people come to desire the exotic object or practice, as bell hooks describes in her famous essay 'Eating the Other', they might 'see their willingness to openly name their desire for the Other as affirmation of cultural plurality', but that is not really what is happening (hooks 2006, p. 368). Instead, appropriators engage in a form of 'consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization' (hooks 2006, p. 373). That is, the cultural object or practice is taken out of context and the source artist or culture doesn't benefit, thus not supporting pluralism, diversity, or inclusivity at all. Overall, cultural appropriation wants the culture but never the people it comes from, which is how people of colour's content can be both devalued and lucratively extracted. Thus, white artists borrowing or stealing from non-white artists in blues, hip hop, world music, etc., is usually seen as reasonable, but non-white artists may not legitimately borrow the other direction by sampling or making country songs.

If the racialised-as-white space of country was inhospitable to Lil Nas X on his own, the presence of country singer Billy Ray Cyrus on the song's remixes changed the genre calculation. As we have already begun to see, the way Cyrus came to be involved was narrated in multiple ways in the press coverage. The idea for the collaboration long predated the chart controversy, as Lil Nas X in fact suggested it on Twitter the day after he released the song in December 2018, tweeting 'twitter please help me get billy ray cyrus on this' (@LilNasX 2018). While at first the record label wanted a contemporary country star rather than one most popular in the 1990s, they eventually realised that 'it made more sense to amplify the narrative Lil Nas X had already created online – one that caught fire in March when Billboard took "Old Town Road" off of the Hot Country Songs chart, where it had cracked the top 20'; as one record executive noted, 'it created a sense of him as an underdog, so people were rooting for him' (Levy 2019). The official story, then, is that Cyrus's addition specifically highlighted Lil Nas X's divergence from the norm in a way that using more standard promotional techniques would not have; deviating from what was expected in this deliberate way can be seen as part of the queer nature of 'Old Town Road'.

Although the interest in Cyrus long predated the removal of 'Old Town Road' from the country charts in late March 2019, the remix was actually released very shortly afterward at the beginning of April, making it look like a response. Moreover, given that the song was at number one for only one week in its original version, but 18 more after the remixes began, Cyrus often got the credit for its success. One journalist contended that 'the Billy Ray Cyrus-assisted remix of "Old Town Road" was the version that spent all those weeks at No. 1, the one that will

go down as one of the biggest popular songs in history, and will be played at wed-dings and karaoke nights for years to come' (Lipshutz 2019c). This is of course not true, as the chart combined all versions, but the incorrectness of the claim serves to underscore how much the success is attributed to Cyrus. Sometimes, it's even referred to as *his* remix rather than something masterminded by Lil Nas X. One jour-nalist noted that 'Billy Ray had earned eight [MTV Video Music Award] nominations for his remix of Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road"' (Havens 2019); another said that 'before dropping his remix, Cyrus showed love to the song' (Lockett 2019). Similarly, one writer argued that 'Billy Ray polished an already strong record into a superior gem' (Billboard Staff 2019b), defining the situation as one in which Cyrus made substantial changes rather than just participating in the new version. In such ways, like rock 'n' roll before it, the song takes part in the broader tradition Edgar identifies as 'representing the white male performer as the source of black male sounds' (Edgar 2014, p. 171). Certainly, Cyrus was widely seen as a solution to the track's genre trouble. As one headline put it, 'Lil Nas X Added Billy Ray Cyrus to "Old Town Road." Is It Country Enough for Billboard Now?' (Sisario 2019). Another journalist put a finer point on it, saying that 'Cyrus hopped on a remix to add "authenticity" – whistling and whiteness, basically' (Serpell 2019). In such ways, Cyrus's position as an 'authentic' country artist helped reshape the dis-cursive construction of the song.

The ways this was specifically a white man getting more than his share of the credit for what was ultimately a relatively minor contribution to music made by an artist of colour is a recurring tradition in music. Alan Lomax, who Hesmondhalgh notes 'may with some justification be described as the most famous ethnomusicolo-gist of all time', is often critiqued because he is listed as the cowriter of many of the songs he recorded in his fieldwork (Hesmondhalgh 2006, p. 58). As Toni Lester notes, 'Some of those recordings were of black prisoners forced to perform for Lomax by white prison guards', and indeed 'Lomax later refused to let Leadbelly enjoy income from the copyrights to the music in these recordings, arguing that the music as sim-ply part of a larger American "folk music" tradition' (Lester 2014, p. 235). Focusing on remix in particular, the American DJ Diplo has extracted Brazilian music and made only 'minimal changes to the original songs, which often amount to the add-ition of a sound effect or two on top of the original track'; James McNally argues that, 'by declining even to cite the original artists and labeling the three songs under the anonymous, generic moniker of "Baile Funk," Diplo is able to take credit for the sounds of [Brazilian genre] *funk carioca* and present himself as the originator of the genuine sonic article in the West', and indeed the DJ even bragged in an interview that he could steal samples in Brazil without having to go through a legal or payment process (McNally 2017, pp. 443, 444). In much the same way, when Diplo made the second of the four official 'Old Town Road' remixes, it was called 'the DJ's latest remix', giving him credit much like Cyrus before him (Reuter 2019a). That this pat-tern would repeat even in a case where the Black artist was the driving force towards including white help on his song underscores how pervasive and insidious it is.

This is even more striking given that, as a few people pointed out, Cyrus was far from at the height of his career when Lil Nas X came calling, making him more Cyrus's rescuer than the other way around. Certainly, 'being No. 1 on the Hot 100 for the first time marks an unexpected late-career peak for Cyrus' (Unterberger 2019a), who had not been in the Top 40 since a 2007 duet with his daughter Miley and not by himself since 1992. More directly, one journalist spoke of 'Lil Nas X, who

helped revive the country star's career' (Arnold 2019). It is therefore all the more remarkable that a country singer who did not have a lot of star power at that time often got more credit than a young Black man on his own song. This discussion of the waning status of Cyrus's career combines with critiques of the need for a white saviour to be a counterforce to the group of stories that inflate his role. Cyrus's position, overall, is ambivalent, reflecting both increasingly mainstream awareness and contestation of white supremacy as a system and its persistence. Nevertheless, the genre transgression of a Black artist bringing hip-hop and country elements together of 'Old Town Road' was in large part papered over in popular press discourse by giving a white man far more than his share of the credit; this can be seen as a way to shore up the category boundaries that 'Old Town Road' was queerly showing to be arbitrary and shaky rather than firm and natural.

'That's too many remixes, put some back' meets courting fandom: reception

Although the popularity of 'Old Town Road' was undeniably massive, the response in the press to its many remixes was divergent. This tracks, in popular discourse, the bifurcation David Gunkel describes in expert opinion between utopian views of remix from the copyleft and views of remix as 'cheap and easy' from media corporations and some artists (Gunkel 2015, p. xviii). Some found the remix boosting tactic gimmicky, as when one journalist said: 'Nowadays, the trick to maintaining a hit song's momentum is simple: Add a new star, stir and serve' (Billboard Staff 2019a). This is an idea of the remix as formulaic and uncreative. Another journalist, discussing who might be the next guest on a remix, said, 'I honestly think the Billy Ray Cyrus version is where the whole thing peaked, and wouldn't see myself getting too excited about any additional guests' (Billboard Staff 2019a). Nothing has surpassed the first one, according to this commentator, despite the two more official mixes that had been released by that point. The quantity of remixes became something of a punchline, with another journalist complaining that 'summer 2019's chart legacy will largely be defined by its many forgettable features and a gazillion "Old Town Road" remixes' (McDermott 2019). Even the artist himself acknowledged that the remixes might be seen as excessive, tweeting 'Last one I PROMISSEE' as he released the final, 'Seoul Town Road' remix that featured K-pop star RM of BTS (@LilNasX 2019). He also playfully engaged 'on Twitter with people joking about the number of remixes of his song, retweeting some of them' (France 2019a). As late as May 2020, Lil Nas X was having fun with the number of remixes of 'Old Town Road' he had made. In response to a false claim from a Rihanna fan account that two of her songs were the only remixes ever to reach number one on the Hot 100, he tweeted 'i did not make 27 remixes to the same song to be disrespected like this' (@LilNasX 2020).

More often, however, the song's many remixes were beloved, or at least appreciated as weird-but-good. As one journalist described his own reactions ascribed to a generalised 'you':

The 'Achy Breaky Heart' guy absolutely crushing a guest verse on a cowboy-rap song in 2019? You had to hear it to believe it. Young Thug and Mason Ramsey getting added into the mix […] ? It didn't make much sense, but damn if you weren't intrigued. RM sending 'Old Town Road' into the K-pop universe? It had been months and months, but yup, had to play it at least once. (Lipshutz 2019c)

The emphasis here is on confusion giving way to interest – it is strange, but not so strange that it is off-putting. The remixes were credited with 'possibly making "Old Town Road" not only the biggest hit in Hot 100 history, but also its most unlikely' (Graham 2019). This is a contention that the song used unexpected tactics and combined widely disparate artists and genres to produce something that perhaps should not have worked – but did. Some even more dramatically proclaim their love of the song: 'I was today years old when I became a country-rap-music stan. I'm on my way to Nashville buying cowboy boots, a cowboy hat, looking to take my horse to the old town road and ride till I can't no more'; the journalist went on to declare 'Old Town Road' 'the best country-rap song that ever existed. Forget trap music, I want to stand atop a tractor and belt this remix till the cows come home' (Vulture Editors 2019). In such ways, the song's queering of musical norms was frequently treated as a strength and a source of pleasure.

Such extravagant proclamations of fandom point towards the fact that the success of 'Old Town Road' actively leveraged fandom, especially what I have elsewhere called 'promotional labor' (Stanfill 2019). Here again, Lil Nas X had a high degree of internet savvy, tapping into multiple kinds of participation. Early on, this was primarily on TikTok, where he 'promoted "Old Town Road" with what he calls "ironically hilarious" memes like the "Yeehaw Challenge," which soon went viral on the social-media platform'; participants would 'lip-sync to the song's opening bars in their regular clothes and jump up in the air, then land on their feet as the beat hits, magically decked out in cowboy gear' (Serpell 2019). In contrast to the technological determinist view described above, this description notes both Lil Nas X's labour in promoting the song and meme and the way his success relied on many other people picking it up. Thus, even before the song's insertion into remix proper, its success began in remix *culture* – where the audience of a piece of media will 'retrofit it to better serve their interests. As material spreads, it gets remade: either literally through various forms of sampling and remixing, or figuratively, via its insertion into ongoing conversations and across various platforms' (Jenkins *et al.* 2013, p. 27); the popularity of 'Old Town Road' was significantly driven by different people making their own versions of the meme.

Later, Lil Nas X encouraged his fans to stream the song to help him break the record. However, the action wasn't only top-down in that case, either:

fan groups are more organized and devoted to the cause than ever: Just search the hashtag 'OldTownRoad17' to see the widespread Twitter support for the movement to get the young rapper to unprecedented history on the Hot 100. Twenty years ago, a pop fan might express allegiance to an artist or song by requesting them on the radio (or on [MTV show Total Request Live]), but now, they can directly impact the song's chart performance just by streaming them repeatedly – and rally and instruct all of their fellow fans to do the same. (Unterberger 2019b)

Thus, the (ultimately successful) campaign to get 'Old Town Road' to 17 weeks at number one did not just rely on many people liking the song but also on a more bounded group liking it intensely and taking coordinated action to support it. Such campaigns have a history at least as old as the fan letter campaign that saved TV show *Star Trek* from cancellation in 1967, but being able to directly boost the metrics used to determine industry success is an innovation enabled by technological change.

The remix with BTS singer RM was seen as a particularly shrewd way to piggyback on fandom. One journalist argued that '"Seoul Town Road" works as pure fan service: BTS diehards will love hearing their boy loosely rapping about "the homis in my bag" (a "homi," FYI, is a Korean hand hoe used in traditional agriculture!) surrounded by the most recognisable hook of the year', declaring it 'enjoyable enough to persuade listeners to take one last ride' (Lipshutz 2019a). More specifically, one commentator noted that leveraging RM's existing BTS fan base 'may all but secure Lil Nas X breaking the record' for most weeks at the top of the *Billboard* Hot 100 (France 2019b). The collaboration was also described more than once as likely to 'break the internet'. If industry boundaries were leveraged to contain 'Old Town Road' and keep it from disrupting (particularly racial) genre categories, then the song's reception tended towards not only embracing but revelling in the proliferation and total disregard of categories – what I argue is best understood as the song's queerness.

Moving slantwise in queer time: 'Old Town Road' and queer reproduction

Considering the discursive construction of 'Old Town Road' in its totality – seen as the song that breaks music industry rules, that refused to follow the normal trajectory of gaining popularity and then fading away, that spawned not just one offshoot but a proliferating flock, I argue that it is most productively understood as a queer text, and particularly one that highlights the contours of remix trouble. 'Old Town Road' is queer because it operates on queer time, outside 'temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance' (Halberstam 2005, p. 6). A song is supposed to go through a life cycle, but this one refused to comply with this norm. If, as Kathryn Bond Stockton contends, 'Perverts are "diverts," one could say, who extend themselves or linger', queerly refusing the call to move in lockstep from one stage to the next (Stockton 2009, p. 25), 'Old Town Road' makes much the same move. In particular, if norms have 'the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods' (Halberstam 2011, p. 3), 'Old Town Road' stayed resolutely unruly, disorderly and unpredictable. While, as noted in the introduction, the huge success is in some ways normative, Lil Nas X continued to partially 'stand outside of conventional understandings of success' associated with 'specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation' (Halberstam 2011, p. 2), through the song's queer remix reproduction.

As Sinnreich notes, 'innovative or challenging aesthetics pose a consequent threat to powerful institutions' (Sinnreich 2010, p. 16), and we see this with 'Old Town Road'. The traces of this queer threat are visible from how the song is discussed. One journalist commented that remixes were used 'to help lend the song new momentum every few weeks, seemingly whenever the song was starting to lag. The new bumps in streaming counts, sales and overall exposure ensured that the song was never given the chance to naturally recede either from the top of the charts, or from public attention in general' (Unterberger 2019b). The key word here is 'natural': through this non-normative practice, the naturalised trajectory is rejected. 'Old Town Road' also cultivated a queered form of desire by versioning the same thing, in defiance of consumerism's call to consume, dispose and move on.

Notably, sales are only one measure in the above comment, alongside streaming – which makes very little money for anyone involved – and general exposure; while sales are a normative kind of success, as Patrik Wikström notes, the other two have an increasingly fuzzy if not oblique relation to turning a profit, as 'cloud-based music distribution not only promotes sales of music via other channels, it is also able to satisfy the music demand of a considerable part of the audience. Termed differently, the once strong link between exposure and sales is radically weakened' (Wikström 2013, p. 90). While contemporary capitalism does rely on mass consumption, and often on consuming the same thing multiple times, as in album re-releases with bonus material or in new formats or for anniversaries, streaming counts and memes are fundamentally unlike purchasing and repurchasing. Thus, if, as Sara Ahmed argues, queering is moving slantwise (Ahmed 2006), 'Old Town Road' is queered by its many sidesteps – specifically avoiding the trajectory considered 'natural'. After all, 'Each time it courts death, it pivots', turning slantwise relative to the direction it's normatively supposed to go (Caramanica 2019). This invokes what Sinnreich talks about as recursion – in which the fixity of a linear beginning, middle and end of musical production is disrupted (Sinnreich 2010) – but twisted to think about any given song as only ever becoming.

Moreover, if there are normative parameters of acceptable genres or artists, 'Old Town Road' refused these narrow objects of desire. Much like the fan-made videos splicing together TV footage and expository music that Julie Levin Russo discusses, the many versions of 'Old Town Road' 'represent a queer form of reproduction that mates supposedly incompatible parts ("original" media source and "original" creativity) to spawn hybrid offspring' (Russo 2009, p. 126). Even before any of the remixes, 'Old Town Road' comprised apparently incompatible parts and was refused entry to mainline country music because of it. This shows the aftereffects of the fact that 'these two words, *genre* and *generation*, share the Latin root, generis, of or pertaining to a procreative origin' (Schiffer 2016, pp. 82, original emphasis). Genres are supposed to be (straight) lines of inheritance, within (narrow) acceptable degrees of variation – not promiscuously anything and everything that gives pleasure. The refusal of normative genre was intensified with the stranger and stranger bedfellows of the remixes. From the outset, choosing Cyrus over a contemporary country star who would probably have had a greater boosting effect on the song flouted normative promotional modes. This only intensified in the later remixes, which were described in terms like as 'the odd-couple additions of Young Thug and Mason Ramsey' (Lipshutz 2019c). That is, the song was already an uneasy mix of country and hip-hop, and then subsequent versions leaned in to that disregard for norms – unabashedly, and effectively.

In addition, while lots of songs are remixed to boost sales, this is usually a top-down imposition of the record company, as Sheena Hyndman describes:

the primary purpose of the remix within their business model is to promote the new releases of artists signed to their label. In promotion of these new releases, remixes are treated as disposable and interchangeable commodities that are given away for free in the sometimes vain hope that a listener who hears the remix first will be as, or more, interested in the original version that sounds markedly different. (Hyndman 2014, p. 68)

Instead of this model, Lil Nas X remixed himself, which was part of what let him queer norms of marketability. This also sets him apart from other instances of strange musical bedfellows like the way 'the success of "Walk this Way" put Run-DMC on

the popular culture radar, and it landed Aerosmith – who was more or less washed-up at the time – *back* on that radar' nine years after the song's original release (McLeod and DiCola, 2011, p. 95); or the fact that 'a large portion of the mashups circulating in cyberspace engage in the "genre clash" approach' (Katz 2010, p. 166). While other genre-mixing moments have been successful, they have typically been made by third parties after the fact, not through the kind of self-destruction of boundaries that we see with 'Old Town Road'.

Last but not least, if one or two versions of a song is the music industry standard, the offspring of 'Old Town Road' were functionally infinite. It is an exemplar of joyful excess, of more for its own sake, not a line of inheritance but a rhizomatic proliferation. Limor Shifman distinguishes between virals and memes, noting that 'whereas the viral comprises a single cultural unit (such as a video, photo, or joke) that propagates in many copies, an Internet meme is always a collection of texts' (Shifman 2013, p. 56). In this way, much like the case of Leave Britney Alone that Shifman discusses, 'Old Town Road' did in fact start out as a viral, but once it began to be uncontrollably versioned, both by Lil Nas X himself and the internet at large, it became a meme.[3] Not only did the versions themselves proliferate, but so did the paratextual apparatus around the song like the TikTok videos made by fans. If, as Shifman argues, memes are '(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated and/or transformed via the internet by many users', then the many versions of 'Old Town Road' certainly comprise a meme, even beyond its specific memefication in the Yeehaw Challenge. It therefore matters quite a lot that memes are characterised by quite a non-normative form of reproduction, that they 'reproduce by various means of repackaging or imitation' (Shifman 2013, p. 19).

On one hand, the song's multiremix status was itself a meme, giving rise to an MTV Video Music Awards clip before Lil Nas X's performance purportedly 'from a distant future, in which "Old Town Road" Remix No. 3162 was being teased', which one journalist describes as 'priceless fun, especially when "Old Thug" was teased as one of the guests' – as opposed to Young Thug's involvement in the third remix (Lipshutz 2019b). Similarly, the existence of a Screamo version of the song took an already genre-blurring, jokey song and put it into another jokey genre (Aniftos 2019b). On the other hand, the song was also used as a base for other memes: overlaid on a clip of *Game of Thrones* character Arya Stark finding a horse amidst destruction (Serpell 2019); used by late night host Jimmy Fallon for an impression of presidential candidate Bernie Sanders called 'Old Town Hall' (Aniftos 2019a); producing a couple of different elementary school versions including a third grade class singing about math problems (Kaur 2019); and, perhaps most absurdist, serving as the soundtrack to the trailer for action film *Rambo: Last Blood* (Toone 2019).

This meme proliferation is perhaps unsurprising given that Lil Nas X, named one of 'The 25 Most Influential People on the Internet' by *Time* magazine in 2019, ran a Twitter meme account before his music career took off (Time Staff 2019). One journalist even identified memes as the root of the song, saying that Lil Nas X 'mixed the funny meme culture he loved with hip-hop bounce and country gravel',

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[3] On 'Leave Britney Alone', a 2007 video responding to a spate of negative publicity about pop singer Britney Spears that became a meme, see Know Your Meme (Leave Britney Alone n.d.).

and then 'spent all his waking hours pushing the track online, creating memes or laying search bait on Reddit to jump-start interest' (Levy 2019). The artist himself is steeped in meme culture, and indeed made good use of these skills by riffing on the popular summer 2019 'Area 51 Raid' meme in the video for the Mason Ramsey and Young Thug remix. One journalist described the inclusion of 'yodeling kid' Mason Ramsey as 'meme recognize meme' (Caramanica 2019).[4] Indeed, Lil Nas X's memetic reproduction skills snowballed forward into the memetic reproduction of 'Old Town Road', which snowballed into a whole world of sideways reproducing cultural objects without clear lines of descent.

'Old Town Road' is thus an exemplar of queerness as deliberately and joyously refusing the straight lines of norms. Repeatedly, the song moved slantwise rather than complying with the normative life cycle of gaining popularity and then fading, and it revelled in excess, in more for its own sake; it was not a line of inheritance but a rhizomatic proliferation. This suggests that its queer form and unbounded pleasure had as much to do with why it made industry figures uneasy as they did with why it was so widely enjoyed.

Conclusion

In the end, analysis shows that popular discourse contended that Lil Nas X made smart use of remixes to grow the popularity of 'Old Town Road' and recognised that he came into conflict with the limitations imposed by the racial politics of genre; attributing his success to Billy Ray Cyrus can thus be understood as a way to manage the dissonance. The song had some detractors, but largely its reception reveled in proliferation and total disregard of categories as successive remixes combined widely disparate artists and genres. 'Old Town Road' resisted the ways that genres normatively operate as straight lines of descent from musical forebears, instead engaging in a queer kind of reproduction, a joyful excess of proliferating versions for their own sake. Remixes are often given short shrift in the study of music as a social phenomenon, but 'Old Town Road' demonstrates both the way they can be uniquely suited to reveal cultural fault lines and that they can push popular music in entirely new, hybrid, queer directions.

Competing interests

The author declares none.

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[4] 'Meme recognize meme' is a snowclone of 'game recognize game', a phrase describing one skilled person recognising and respecting the skill of another person. A snowclone is a 'phrase that has a standard pattern in which some of the words can be freely replaced'; other examples include 'X is the new Y' ("Snowclone" n.d.).

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