The Child's Place in Pop Music

—Larissa Wodtke

Rekret, Paul. *Down with Childhood: Pop Music and the Crisis of Innocence*. Repeater, 2017. 115 pp. $15.95 pb. ISBN 9781910924495.

While scholars have studied the fraught figure of the child musical star (O'Connor; Warwick), the perceived child-likeness of adult pop and rock stars (Alberti; Whiteley), actual children's performance of and interaction with music throughout history and geography (Boynton and Kok; Lury), and music written for a child audience (Askerøi; Bickford; Maloy, "Children's"; Maloy "Why"), few have examined the figure of the child in pop music and its ideological implications. In "The Obvious Child: The Symbolic Use of Childhood in Contemporary Popular Music," Roger Neustadter argues that pop music of the 1980s and 1990s, such as Michael Jackson's "Heal the World," Whitney Houston's "The Greatest Love of All," and Paul Simon's "The Obvious Child," sentimentally and nostalgically celebrates the child as representative of innocence and goodness in spite of the contemporary criticism during the 80s and 90s citing the corruption and disappearance of childhood. Björn Sundmark, too, gestures toward the child in popular music by discussing children's roles and representation in popular music videos and how they are "exploited and 'voiced over' by other generations with stronger 'voices'" (328). Framed by this omission in the fields of childhood studies, popular music studies, and cultural studies more generally, Paul Rekret's book *Down with Childhood: Pop Music and the Crisis of Innocence* is a welcome and thought-provoking intervention.

Published by Repeater, a para-academic[1] press in the UK, *Down with Childhood* is not peer-reviewed and is meant to reach a wide audience; accordingly, it is shorter and written in a more colloquial style than typical academic monographs. Repeater specializes in topics that engage intellectually, and sometimes polemically, with current events and cultures; the press

produces books that test new ideas with more agility and immediacy than university publication timelines typically allow. Rekret's volume reflects these aspects of para-academic publications, presenting an interesting interdisciplinary argument through a Marxist lens without a thorough literature review or extensive examples. As a whole, his book serves as a starting point for others who might engage in extensive scholarly examinations of the figure of the child in popular music.[2]

Though Rekret does discuss a few child performers, such as Michael Jackson and Britney Spears, he ultimately focuses on the function of children's voices or themes in music written and performed by adults. In this sense, there are parallels between children's literature criticism and popular music representing children and children's culture. Before entering the analysis of Rekret's book, it is worth reviewing how children's voices have been used within popular music created and performed by adults.

Children's Voices in Popular Music

Children's voices have often appeared in subversive and/or unsettling choruses that mimic playground taunts and chants in popular music since the 1970s: Pink Floyd's "Another Brick in the Wall" and its zombie-like chorus of "we don't need no education/we don't need no thought control"; Suede's "We Are the Pigs" and its chanted coda of "we will watch them burn"; and Hefner's "The Day That Thatcher Dies," with its repurposing of *The Wizard of Oz*'s "ding dong the witch is dead" to accompany Margaret Thatcher's hoped-for demise.[3] In these examples, there is an unease around hearing children sing as a collective, uncontrollable mass about rebellion and violence; it is like the aural equivalent of violent scenes in *Lord of the Flies* and *Village of the Damned*.[4] In the example from Suede, the invocation of riots in British urban streets recalls the unrest and youthful dimension of the Brixton riots in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as those in Toxteth, Handsworth, and Moss Side, with their racial and socio-economic tensions exacerbated by economic recession and police brutality. In Pet Shop Boys's "Suburbia," also based on such riots, the frustration and impotence of being "too old for toys" but too young to have any sense of agency or power are misinterpreted by the authorities as the result of young people's exposure to television media. Hefner's "The Day That Thatcher Dies" describes children as the ones with understanding of the true machinations of neo-liberalism without the taint of adult corruption and compromise:

> I was blind in 1979, by '82 I had clues,
> By 1986 I was mad as hell.
> The teachers at school, they took us for fools,
> Cos they never taught us what to do,
> But Christ we were strong, we knew all along,
> We taught ourselves the right from wrong.

At the same time, the implied reversion of adults to childlike behaviour highlights the fetishization of

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childhood freedom from the norms of responsible adulthood subject to societal governance structures. As Sundmark notes, "Since children are innocent, children want to be free, and . . . tell the truth, they lend themselves well to adult agendas of freedom" (332-33).

Following from this conflation of children and honesty, children's voices in pop music can also be used to evoke morality, innocence, sentimentality, and spirituality, as demonstrated in the Rolling Stones's "You Can't Always Get What You Want," Nick Cave's "Push the Sky Away," and Hercules & Love Affair's "Epilogue."[5] In these examples, children's voices, often in the formation of a choir of conscience, emphasize their innocence in order to make a moral point or provide moral guidance:

> You can't always get what you want,
> But if you try sometime you find
> You get what you need
> (Rolling Stones)
>
> And if your friends think that you should do it different
> And if they think that you should do it the same
> You've gotta just keep on pushing
> Push the sky away
> (Nick Cave)
>
> Please keep us open
> Please keep us free
> So we may offer our hands
> To those in need
> (Hercules & Love Affair)

In some of these cases, children's voices are used to condemn the hypocrisy of organized religion and views recognized as moral by others. For example, XTC's "Dear God," which features one child's voice singing the first verse and the final line of the song, uses the child to criticize Christianity and its inability to explain and rectify actual suffering and injustice. In her comparison of the social history of childhood and the child's singing voice, choral scholar Ardelle Ries observes that in the nineteenth century, "[u]pper adjustment vocal production or *head voice* was considered exclusively as the authentic, safe, and true voice of the child" (259). This head voice connotes "innocence, sweetness, and purity" (265), attributes often associated with the Romantic view of the child. Ries concludes that "as the notions of childhood change over time, so do sound ideals" (264) and recent developments in musical pedagogy have blurred the vocal styles of adult and child. She notes that the "sound of a child imitating adult vocalizations creates a certain level of discomfort for adults. . . . When children sing like adults, a behavioural boundary is crossed" (265). Sundmark also notes this ambiguity in his analysis of Millie's "My Boy Lollipop," where the categories of adult and child are "voiced over" (330-31). He goes on to observe that "the undefined status of the child in music videos . . . make[s] them potentially dangerous. . . . the child balances between difference categories, and becomes scary, taboo" (331). Sometimes the use of children's voices in popular music straddles both freedom and morality, leading to a similar discomfort related to taboo.[6]

Down with Childhood and Children, Popular Music, and Capitalism

Although the above examples of children's voices in pop music reinforce tropes of innocence, freedom, amateurism, and control, Rekret's *Down with Childhood* brings these tropes into conversation with post-industrial economics. Rekret's thesis, which posits that pop music of the last thirty years has used the figure of the child and the child's voice to reflect the global shift to neo-liberal capitalism and its changing labour conditions, explores several questions, including: "what effects does the child's voice, housed in pop songs, produce? What desire does this pop-musical code draw upon when it does its work? And what can it tell us about the changing relationships we form with children?" (11). His argument relies largely on a perceived subversion of childhood innocence in popular music; however, he does not actually define "pop music" or explain its parameters within his argument, and "children's voices" is misleading. In several cases, Rekret conflates children's voices with children's culture, including children's television shows or fairy tales. Rekret locates the onset of the crisis of innocence within pop music in the year 1982: the year that saw the debut of the British television show *Minipops*, which presented children singing current pop songs originally sung by adult artists; the

emergence of young teen dance-hall singers in Jamaica; the publication of Neil Postman's *The Disappearance of Childhood*; and the first full year of broadcasting MTV in the United States (15-17). In Rekret's view, the emergence and proliferation of neo-liberalism and the increase in affective and immaterial labour broke down the barriers between labour and leisure, workplace and home, which resulted in a breakdown between child and adult within the sphere of popular music. He focuses on two particular sub-genres, toytown techno and kiddie rap, but he does not explain why he selected these genres.

To set the context for his interrogation of late twentieth-century pop music and its purported crisis of innocence, Rekret begins with two chapters that present the complexity of actual children's involvement in pop music and a brief summary of how the child has been theorized over time. In the chapter "Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?" Rekret discusses the ways in which child pop stars, including Michael Jackson, Donny Osmond, and Britney Spears, blur the lines between child and adult, pointing to the implications of race and sexuality in the negotiation between adult and child. For example, Rekret points out that Motown Records used Michael Jackson's disruption of the child-adult binary as a way to mitigate "any menace the Black masculinity of [The Jackson 5's] soul music implied for white America" (27), a tactic that was unnecessary for the white Donny Osmond and his brothers. His discussion of adults' fascination with child pop stars, especially when they publicly lose their ostensible innocence, demonstrates the paradox described in Marah Gubar's entry on "innocence" in *Keywords for Children's Literature*—the very idea that innocence is a signifier of emptiness or lack that allows adults to "other" children, rendering them mysterious and exotic. This exoticism makes children erotically attractive, while simultaneously holding them to impossible standards of purity. Rekret ends the chapter by contrasting these child stars with two progressive albums that gave real children more agency: 1968's *Ghetto Reality*, which came out of the Black Panther movement, and 1972's *Free Jazz und Kinder*, which came out of the German avant-garde.

The third chapter, "Everything Degenerates in the Hands of Man," presents what appears to be the apotheosis of child innocence in pop music: the childlike nature of the 1960s musical counterculture, including the genre of toytown pop[7] and psychedelic albums like the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* and the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Rekret rightly points to the pastoral and Edenic themes in these kinds of music, but apparently ignores the "unsettling and macabre" side of toytown pop, such as Thunderclap Newman's "Accidents" and Idle Race's "Skeleton and the Roundabout" (Chapman 512, 517-18), which reveals the ever-present mystery that haunts innocence. He then summarizes the history of changing attitudes to children through various philosophers, including Philippe Ariès,

John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Giorgio Agamben, Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Jean Baudrillard. These views oscillate, seeing the child as either a naturally innocent and moral being or a primitive being needing instruction and guidance if social order is to be maintained. Children are not distinguished from adults at all, or they are lauded as an embodiment of pure potential and freedom. Unfortunately, Rekret does not mention how these theories have been received and complicated over time; for example, medievalists and historians have debated Ariès's theories of medieval childhood and some have outright rejected his perspective (Boynton and Cochelin; Wilson). Rekret ends the chapter with the beginning of the 1970s, which marks a shift in the musical zeitgeist from juvenile playfulness and fantasy to the disillusionment of aging with albums like Joni Mitchell's *Blue* and Neil Young's *Harvest*.

In the next chapter ("Raving, I'm Raving!"), Rekret discusses the hedonism of the rave scene in Britain in the late 1980s and early 1990s, also known as the "Second Summer of Love," which he identifies as a significant period for challenging the relationship between work and play. In his study of popular music produced in the period around 1989, or Francis Fukuyama's "end of history," Joshua Clover describes rave as a relatively brief emergence of unity unmarried to radical politics, which later fragments, as it becomes subsumed by capitalism and government regulations and eroded by the search for ever-diminishing ecstasy and amphetamine highs (see also Reynolds, *Energy*). Rekret proposes that music is an escape from the linear, or the organization of time by work under capitalism, with rave specifically conveying an endless present. He persuasively argues that dance music is more immersive than contemplative genres, but not productive or valuable in a capitalist context, as there is no aim but pleasure (68-69); this relation to capitalist labour is also what politicizes the otherwise apparently hedonistic, apolitical rave in Clover's terms. Clover sees rave as political *because* of its initial refusal to engage with mainstream capitalist temporality and because ravers truly *did* believe in their counterculture of unity, if even for a short time (58). Furthermore, Rekret claims that rave culture "doesn't only reject hetero courtship rituals, it implies a new orientation to sensuality and pleasure, mainly absent from mainstream popular culture since the 1960s" (66); however, Tim Lawrence describes a similar non-heteronormative orientation to pleasure in the 1970s disco scene in his influential study *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Culture, 1970-1979*, and there is arguably a strong genealogy that traces the ritualism of disco to rave. Rekret links this asexual, communal pleasure to the mobilization of childhood within rave. The baby soother accessories, the candy-like appearance of many ecstasy pills, and the birthday party atmosphere that Rekret describes as fundamental to rave culture (63) could find their precedent, along with the non-heteronormative environment, in the children's birthday party balloons and childlike atmosphere at David

Mancuso's The Loft, one of the first key venues in the 1970s New York City dance scene (Lawrence 24-25).

Unlike Neustadter, Rekret sees the music of the early 1990s as subverting the idealism and innocence of childhood, specifically through the emergence of the sub-genre toytown techno in 1992 as a cynical perversion of childhood artifacts, ideals, and memories (78). Toytown techno songs such as "Charly" by The Prodigy, "Sesame's Treet" by Smart E's, "A Trip to Trumpton" by Urban Hype, "Roobarb and Custard" by Shaft, and "Bolt" by Horsepower incorporate samples from children's television shows and public service announcements into their accelerated, hectic hardcore and associate them with the illegal drug culture of the rave scene, thus mocking childhood innocence. Rekret draws an analogy between the ever-accelerating tempos of hardcore and the accelerated mobility of global capital, and between the cynicism of toytown techno and its historical context of "declining social mobility, living standards, and welfare, along with rising youth unemployment" (80). In Rekret's view, the futurity traditionally symbolized by the child was no longer secure, and this insecurity fed into the frenzied disenchantment and infantile rebellion of toytown techno and the destabilization of actual lived childhoods.

Rekret begins the subsequent chapter, "The Sound of Surplus," with Lee Edelman's polemic on reproductive futurism, known for its exhortation to "[f]uck Annie," as a clever lead-in to discussions of what he calls "kiddie raps," including "Hard Knock Life (Ghetto Anthem)" by Jay-Z from 1998, which features children singing the chorus of "Hard Knock Life" from the musical *Annie*. These kiddie raps, which include "We Don't Care" by Kanye West, "I'm a Thug" by Trick Daddy, and "Lemonade" by Gucci Mane,[8] celebrate social mobility achieved through the violent and illegal activity of hustling, using children's voices to reinforce the idea that not all lived childhoods are equal or innocent. Rekret places kiddie raps in the context of increasing criminalization and racialization of youth poverty, and its attendant surveillance, in the US through the late 1980s and early 1990s. As with toytown techno, kiddie raps developed during a time of receding welfare and employment, coinciding with an increase in prisonfare and workfare for what Rekret refers to as "surplus populations."[9] These surplus populations are excluded from capital investment and controlled rather than valued. In this framework, the best available future is capitulation to neo-liberal capitalism. Rekret singles out "I Can" by Nas as a promise of the American Dream via capitalism that lauds entrepreneurial self-affirmation, individualism, and meritocracy, and that "enlists an agency that does not seek to change the world, but merely bargains with it" in the spirit of Lauren Berlant's conception of cruel optimism (94). He contrasts "I Can" with Jay-Z's "Hard Knock Life," in which the figure of Annie and her representation of promissory futurism become a spectre haunting Jay-Z's own ascendance to the bourgeoisie. As Rekret notes, "we have no need to 'fuck Annie' because, in the contemporary capitalist crisis

that dispenses ever greater populations deemed surplus, *Annie's already fucked*" (97).

In the conclusion of his book, Rekret acknowledges that the concept of the child is in flux, but argues that a collapsing political imaginary that ties the child to leisure is linked to a futility of futurity; in his assessment, "the future is either indistinguishable from the present, or else it can't be imagined as arriving at all" (99). Drawing on Mark Fisher's theory of capitalist realism, which maintains that society can no longer imagine a future without capitalism, Rekret argues that it is easier to imagine the end of the childhood than the end of capitalism (100). At the same time, he sees an opportunity in this dissolution to refuse childhood nostalgia and the myth of an accomplished adulthood. These are valid arguments that could be extended further by looking at additional musical genres and their connection to childhood, capitalism, and temporality.

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Twee, Hauntology, and Vaporwave: Potential Extensions and Omissions, and Their Implications

Despite placing the genesis of the crisis of innocence in the 1980s and surveying the childlike psychedelia of the 1960s popular music scene, Rekret omits any discussion of the genre of twee music (also known as jangle pop, indie pop, cutie, and C86), which emerged in the same decade in the United Kingdom and was defined by its cute, childlike aesthetic and shambolic music that often recalled 1960s pop. Bands such as Shop Assistants, The Pastels, Talulah Gosh, Soup Dragons, Darling Buds, and The Field Mice produced guitar-driven songs with childlike themes and often dressed and sounded like children, leading Simon Reynolds to refer to the twee genre as a "revolt into childhood" in his 1986 article for

Melody Maker entitled "Against Health and Efficiency."[10] Reynolds locates the impetus for the indie pop genre as the "grief for a lost spontaneity, impulsiveness and unselfconsciousness; desire to recover the ability to dream, to have a magical, wide-eyed relation to the world; a hope of remaining unsullied" ("Independent Music" 249). The relationship between twee music and the 1960s, or "pop's childhood" (248), is regressive, but unlike toytown techno and kiddie raps, twee is openly nostalgic for childhood. By regressing, twee artists are refusing the progress-based narrative of heteronormative, neo-liberal culture. According to Reynolds, the twee aesthetic uses the idea of the child to

> echo the concerns of the sexual/psychoanalytical politics of the sixties. The flirtation with androgyny and camp, the prevalence of love songs with genderless love objects and free of fixed sexual protocol, the defence of sensitivity and "the wimp," the refusal of performance-oriented sex—all these connect not just with feminism but with radical psychoanalysis's project of a return to the " polymorphous perversity" of the child . . . . Mixed in with these archaic elements are childish things—duffel coats, birthday-boy shirts, outsize sweaters, bows and ribbons and ponytails, beardlessness. (*Bring the Noise* 16)

The apparent freedom offered by this adoption of childlike innocence and refusal to mature is also related to twee artists' adoption of the do-it-yourself, amateur aesthetic espoused in the 1970s by punk, which attempted to operate outside the mainstream capitalist market. During the onset of neo-liberal capitalism under Thatcher and Reagan, twee artists found that "[f]aced with the infinite accommodation of consumer capitalism, the radical response is to abstain . . ." (*Bring the Noise* 18). The genre saw the formation of independent record labels like K Records in 1982, Sarah Records in 1987, and Slumberland Records in 1989, and carried on into the 1990s and beyond with one of the genre's most famous bands, Belle & Sebastian. In the late 1990s, the twee music aesthetic then also emerged in Japan as a feature of the genre shibuya-kei.

Like twee, shibuya-kei formed in response to consumer capitalism, but as an enthusiastic embrace, not abstention (Reynolds, *Retromania* 166-67; Roberts). Though shibuya-kei has origins in the British record import market, it could also be linked to the kawaii culture that developed in Japan throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In her essay "Cuties in Japan," Sharon Kinsella recounts the emergence of kawaii culture in the early 1970s, which eventually led to the coinage of the word *burikko*, meaning "fake-children," to describe a growing trend in cute, childlike culture among young adults (225). In Japanese kawaii culture, unlike its twee counterpart in the Anglo-American context, consumption was a key component of their rebellion because "personal consumption is portrayed as something rather anti-social

and immoral in mainstream Japanese society . . ." (246). Kinsella goes on to explain that "[m]aturity, which in the west has been linked to the authority and rights of the individual, still tends to be thought of according to the Confucian model in modern Japan," a model affiliated with a sense of obligation and deference to the collective society (242). Following from this, the way to rebel against Japanese societal norms is to rebel against adulthood, but from a different angle than Anglo-American twee. In essence, twee music and shibuya-kei are both responses to neo-liberal capitalism, but the former uses the child to maintain freedom from it while the latter uses the child to achieve a freedom enabled by consumer capitalism.

Sianne Ngai theorizes cute as an aesthetic category that is bound to capitalist consumption and "rooted in material commercial culture" (59). Citing Karl Marx, Ngai highlights the implied anthropomorphism by which capitalist commodities are perceived as children in need of protection and supervision by consumer subjects (61), with a latent "disavowal—at once a repression and an acknowledgment—of otherness" (60). This dissonant treatment of otherness mimics the adult's conflicted construction of the innocent child. Shulamith Firestone[11] observes that the "class oppression of women and children is couched in the phraseology of 'cute'" (101). Women and children are linked again in Ngai's analogy of the domestic sphere of the family to posit that the breakdown between adult parent and child is similar to the collapse between consumer and commodity (69). As a commodity aesthetic, Ngai argues, cuteness "indexes the paradoxical complexity of our desire for a *simpler* relation to our commodities, one that tries in a utopian fashion to recover their qualitative dimension as use" (qtd. in Jasper). It is this sense of the utopian that Marc Spitz draws on in his book *Twee*, which argues that twee culture is a "gentle revolution" reacting against an increasingly hostile, capitalist world through a recovery of childness. However, Spitz does not explore the implications of the artisanal, Do-It-Yourself aesthetic of twee culture being prone to an alternative commodity fetishization via the taste politics and curatorial tendencies that overlap with the hipster culture of the last two decades. Like twee, hipster culture is often defined by "tensions . . . [that] revolve around the very old dyad of knowingness and naïveté, adulthood and a child-centered world—but with a radical or vertiginous alternation between the two" (Greif et al. 10-11).[12] This flux in the child-adult binary partially mirrors the contradictions in the maintenance of childlike, empty innocence that is defined and inevitably filled by the very individualist neo-liberal capitalism that it attempts to rebel against. In her review of Spitz's book, Anna Katharina Schaffner identifies twee as

> a symptom of profound cultural exhaustion, a pop-cultural response to the death of grand narratives and radical politics: too weary to fight the corporate capitalist machine, the twee instead create hyper-

stylized alternative worlds in which kittens play, ukuleles sound and childhood is eternal. Their basic disposition is melancholy rather than angry.

The melancholic, exhausted tone of twee music culture can also be found in another genre of popular music omitted from Rekret's study: hauntology.

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Although Rekret works with Mark Fisher's theory of capitalist realism, he does not reference Fisher's work on hauntological music. Along with Simon Reynolds (see *Retromania* 311-61), Fisher used the Derridean term to describe a type of avant-electronic music that has developed over the last decade on labels like Ghost Box Records and Mordant Music and by artists such as The Advisory Circle, Belbury Poly, Burial, The Focus Group, Leyland Kirby, and The Caretaker (97-181). There is a marked similarity between toytown techno's use of childhood media samples and the use of hauntological music's samples of British public service announcements and children's television from the 1960s and 70s, such as *The Owl Service* and *Children of the Stones*. While the use of these samples in toytown techno is satirical and taunting, their employment in hauntological music is esoteric and haunting. Hauntological music and its accompanying visual aesthetic is largely based on memory (especially memories of childhood), curation of obscure sources, alternative heritage often connected to psychogeography, and the uncanniness of reviving dormant memories (Sexton). Rekret's thesis that the rise of neo-liberal capitalism and the dismantling of the welfare state are reflected in the use of the child in toytown

techno and kiddie raps corresponds to critics' conception of hauntological music. These critics conceptualize this music as an embodiment of the mourning of possible futures promised by the post-war era agenda of developments for the public good, and the sense that there was an alternative to neoliberalism in the mid-seventies that was not acted upon (Medhurst).

Other music genres related to and developing alongside hauntology—hypnagogic pop (see Keenan; Reynolds, *Retromania*), bubblegum trap (see Kramer; Setaro), and vaporwave (see Glitsos; Koc; Tanner)—use the child as a cipher for memory, but for memory as a refraction of the half-remembered 1980s and 1990s. The environment of media oversaturation described by Neil Postman as a reason for the "disappearance of childhood" (part of the theoretical frame for Rekret's argument) becomes the impetus for these genres; the internet provides immediate and ubiquitous access to media from the past, which feed into these musical genres and their disjointed temporalities. For example, vaporwave, a music genre that emerged in the 2010s, employs kitschy visual aesthetics and commodity imagery from the 1980s and 1990s and samples muzak to satirize the vacuity of neo-liberal capitalism and to evoke a nostalgia for something that never happened (Glitsos). Like hypnagogic pop and bubblegum trap, vaporwave uses a slow tempo to create a surreal, almost static soundscape that magnifies the seeming lack of progression and growth; these songs tend to go nowhere, cocooned in an uneasy childness. In his exploration of affect and vaporwave, Alican Koc describes the vaporwave affect as one in which the "millennial subject constantly seeks to flee the feelings of isolation and numbness generated by postmodernity's detachment from history, depthlessness, and muted expression, by returning to a warm place in their childhood" within an "eternal present" (69). The connection between an eternal present and the child in popular music is a salient one that appears to reflect the pre-empted future and empty value of consumption in late capitalism.

Leisure and play under capitalism nearly always involve consumption, so by equating the child with leisure, as Rekret does, one can explore connections among the child, consumption, capitalism, and temporality in pop music genres. The very adjective "bubblegum," which often precedes musical genres that assume a childlike audience or use the tropes of childhood, connotes consumption for repetitive, pointless, and disposable pleasure. Nevertheless, the naïveté in these genres is often feigned, and the consumption of food stands in for sex and money, two things an innocent child must lack for adults to believe its innocence. It is then unsurprising that in bubblegum pop, sex is often coded as food (Cooper and Smay 25-27), as with food imagery in children's literature (Alston 110-11; Blackford; Daniel; Katz), and that a child can be queered by money and sex implicitly through an "economy of candy that structures their intense pleasure: where they do have the

agency, choice, access, a measure for barter, and clear permission to overindulge" (Bond Stockton 238-39). If one then adds to this potential indulgence in surplus the fact that candy is "ingested for pleasure and not for nourishment" (Cooper and Smay 24), the issue of use value is raised. Kim Cooper and David Smay contend that bubblegum music "like disco, like porn, serves a utilitarian function—in bubblegum's case, the simple, yet infinitely difficult to create, ecstasy of pop release . . . . Bubblegum is capitalism's gift to puberty" (6). The use value of this childlike music, like that of candy, is connected to capitalist consumption and narratives of maturity, but the genre also challenges neo-liberal temporal logic through its lack of useful (re)production and lack of investment in a future trajectory.

Cooper and Smay's comparison of disco with bubblegum pop is valuable in returning to Rekret's observation that rave music, and by extension other dance music, such as disco, creates an "intense experience of the present, a ceaseless succession of *nows*" (68). This temporality is congruent with the eternal present found in vaporwave and the negation of reproductive futurism found in the "polymorphous perversity" of twee music and the nascent disco scene in New York City in the 1970s, the progenitor of electronic dance music. In cuteness, Ngai also finds an apolitical ineffectiveness that keeps it at a "far remove from the mechanisms of social reproduction" (97). Another way to look at this sense of temporality is Kathryn Bond Stockton's conception of the queer child and "[s]ideways growth," and the "embrace of wasting time, which also sounds like unproductive expenditure" (243). This unproductive expenditure is built into the DNA of many of the music genres associated with the child, including dance music. For example, in his 1978 polemic, "The Infinite Spaces of Disco," Simon Frith argues that disco is essentially an unproductive activity in a capitalist context. At the same time, disco came as close to a utopia as a heterotopia can get, anticipating the alternative utopian thinking opened up by using regression, stasis, and repetition to erode the child-adult binary and the neo-liberal trajectory upon which it is based.

Rekret's volume is disappointingly brief at 115 pages, and as I have outlined, it neglects extensions and extrapolations that might have strengthened and complicated his argument, especially in terms of neo-liberal temporality as it relates to the child-adult binary. As Rekret told Vincent Bevins, "markers of childhood and adulthood are increasingly mixed up," a perspective echoed by other cultural critics, including Heather Snell in her last editorial for *Jeunesse*, in which she dissected this very ambiguity within the child-adult binary and highlighted the ways this permeability can productively disrupt colonial and neo-liberal capitalist temporalities. Despite its limitations, *Down with Childhood* is a useful resource for researchers beginning their interrogation of how the figure of the child functions in popular music, especially in the context of neo-liberal capitalism. Rekret

demonstrates that the lens of neo-liberal capitalism and economics is a fruitful one with which to explore the use of the child and the childlike in popular music, and hopefully, others will continue to build on his work.

Notes

[1] The term “para-academic” has gained currency within the last decade and is often connected to the open access movement, the emergence of theory-based blogs, and the increasing precarity of academic labour. In *The Digital Critic*, Marc Farrant identifies presses such as Zed Books, Zer0 Books, Repeater Books, Open Humanities Press, OR Books, punctum, Pluto Press, and Polity as para-academic publishers that seek “to capitalize and expand on the proliferating and dynamic force of contemporary theoretical discourse, often squeezed into the margins of disciplines and institutions” (146). Along with magazine-format websites like *n+1*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The New Inquiry*, and *The White Review*, these publishers can be “characterized and grouped by their multifarious outputs as responding to contemporary issues and trends—often interdisciplinary—by producing shorter and more accessible books outside the conventional ‘trade’ or ‘academic’ industry distinctions” (146) (see also Ennis et al.; Hall; Joy).

[2] Rekret’s style is mercurial: subheads appear every couple of pages, and it is not always easy to follow the thread of his overall argument through multiple tangents that are raised and quickly abandoned; however, these multiple subsections and tangents could also be indicative of its para-academic milieu, which often borrows its style from the “informal critical experimentation” found in theory blogging (Farrant 141-42).

[3] Other examples of these kinds of song are Alice Cooper’s “School’s Out” and its appropriation of the school song “no more school, no more books”; The Smiths’s “Panic” and its cheerful refrain of “hang the DJ”; and “All I wanna do is / And / And take your money,” chanted in the chorus of M.I.A.’s “Paper Planes” and punctuated by gunshots and cash registers.

[4] In William Golding’s 1954 novel *Lord of the Flies*, a group of British schoolboys are stranded on an island without adults and attempt to govern themselves; however, their social structures break down as the boys become more savage over time, resulting in the murder of Piggy, one of the less dominant boys. The 1960 film *Village of the Damned*, which was adapted from the novel *The Midwich Cuckoos* by John Wyndham, features telepathic, precocious children birthed via parasitic aliens, who move and think as a sociopathic collective and can force adults to act against their will (in two cases, they compel adults to kill themselves).

[5] Additional examples of these types of song include Keith West’s “Excerpt from a Teenage Opera,” Talk Talk’s “Happiness Is Easy,” and M83’s “Splendor.”

[6] One such example of this ambiguity is “Stand on the Word,” a gospel disco track erroneously believed to have been mixed by Larry Levan,

the resident DJ at the Paradise Garage, that features the children's voices of The Joubert Singers (see Gonsher). In the *New Yorker*, Matthew Trammell remarks that "[t]here's something about the song's audacity: the kids sing with defiance about total obedience to an authority. Nothing that sounds this dynamic should advocate for straight living, our instinct says, which makes the song's message all the stickier." Trammell's sense of dissonance between the stridently Christian message of the song, the children's voices, and the dance music context points to the complicated figure of the child within popular music: the defiance that symbolizes the child's freedom and potential to rebel on the one hand and the potentially angelic morality and promise of the future on the other. The "stickier" nature of the song as a dance track played in the clubs speaks to the gospel component of disco that uses call-and-response and breaks (Lawrence 38, 112), and the children's defiance and strength recall Civil Rights–era songs like James Brown's "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud." The gospel attributes, along with this strong defiance and pride, underscore disco's significance as a sanctuary and ecstatic emancipation for black, Latinx, and queer people. French electronic duo Justice's "D.A.N.C.E.," featuring vocals by the London-based Foundation for Young Musicians choir, was based on both "Stand on the Word" and Michael Jackson and the Jackson 5, in effect combining the gospel of disco and the civil rights agenda of Motown. However, Justice were most interested in the "authenticity" of the children's voices, which also meant imperfection:

> one of the things that we loved about 'Stand on the Word' was that the kids were pushed to the point where they sang slightly bluesy and out of tune. That's great, because with kids you want to have their freshness and their naïveté. The kids we used were so good that, to capture their youthfulness, we actually had to write what sounded like slight mistakes into the score. (qtd. in Buskin)

Justice ultimately had to contrive the inexperience of real children to serve their idea of the child, and in doing so, demonstrate that the use of the child in popular music by adults is heavily influenced by existing tropes about childhood.

[7] Rekret defines toytown pop as a genre that is "usually jangly," "slightly off key," and concerned with "children, toys, confections, trains, castles, or animals" (48).

[8] Other kiddie raps include "You Can't Stop Me Now" by RZA, "The Way We Ball" by Lil Flip, "Chain Hang Low" by Jibbs, and "Gangsta" by Fat Joe.

[9] In Rekret's terms, "surplus population" refers to members of the population who cannot or do not contribute perceived value to the neo-liberal capitalist system, including the unemployed and underemployed.

[10] Reynolds later expanded this article into an essay in Angela McRobbie's *Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses: An Anthology of Fashion and Music* and revised it again as "Younger Than Yesterday: Indie-Pop's Cult of Innocence" in his own collection *Bring the Noise*; I cite both of these versions.

[11] Rekret takes his book's title from this chapter of Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*.

[12] Film director Wes Anderson is emblematic of both twee and hipster culture; his aesthetic can also be read in terms of the ambiguity and instability of child and adult categories and cultures (Gilson; Kunze, MacDonald).

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