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The Force of Environmental Lyrics in Pop Songs: The Case of Gorillaz's *Plastic Beach*

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ABSTRACT
This article examines how compositional and performative strategies impact the potency of environmental song lyrics on Gorillaz's album Plastic Beach. The quality of songfulness is implicated as a primary obstacle to lyrical force. The literary function of fictionality is put forth along with the Bakhtinian concept of literary polyphony as key strategies by which lyrics are reinforced. Plastic Beach employs a large cast of contributors, engaging several voices in a fictionalized reflection on plastic pollution. These features support the potential of lyrics to exert political force, while residing in tension with distracting effects of catchy pop grooves.

KEYWORDS
Songfulness; fictionality; polyphony; song lyrics; climate

Introduction

The title of Gorillaz's third studio album announces the permeation of the natural world with synthetic artifacts: *Plastic*, a synthetic, man-made material, and *Beach*, a natural landscape. The conflation is apparent in the juxtaposition of nature sounds (birds, waves) and orchestral instruments on the album's opening track, with assertive beeps and other synth effects on songs like "Plastic Beach" and "Rhinestone Eyes" (another titular juxtaposition of synthetic and natural). The disparity between nature and artifice is also reflected in vocal performances. On the song "Stylo," the muted voice of Mos Def harmonizes with Damon Albarn's falsetto in performing an homage to electricity. Piercing through this soundscape, Bobby Womack's voice exhibits an unmistakably human desperation. The song calls to mind a post-apocalyptic climate, where the natural world has been invaded by synthetic waste. These features place song lyrics into critical engagement with ecology.

Plastic Beach packs the problem of marine pollution into an eclectic yet easily consumable synth-pop format. But how effective is the album as a statement of environmentalist concerns? Many studies have sought out the relationship between popular music and politics (e.g. Grossberg, "Politics"; Pratt; Bennett et al.; Mattern; Peddie; Street, *Music*; Pedelty and Weglarz; Garratt). Several have also noted how pop is inherently suspicious as a platform for politics (Attali; Adorno; Grossberg, "Framing"; Negus, *Popular Music*; Negus, *Music Genres*; Street, "Rock, pop"; Cloonan and Garofalo;

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Pedelty, *Ecomusicology)*. The consensus, it seems, is that politics and popular music cannot be kept entirely distinct. Nevertheless, few environmentally themed songs reach the popular mainstream, and the ones that do are rarely clear ecological statements. There are forces at play in the pop genre that counteract environmental politics. The contents of song lyrics, for example, are easily obscured by pop's emphasis on catchy hits with danceable hooks. Even when words are clearly intelligible, the quality of "songfulness" can absorb lyrical meanings and defeat the political potential of pop lyrics (Kramer; Weinstein). To what extent does the pop music format determine the political force of environmental songs? What strategies does *Plastic Beach* exhibit to overcome the constraining effects of pop?

Method and Limitations

This article intends to answer these questions through song lyric analysis. While musicologists and literary scholars have generally lacked the vocabulary to treat both musical and lyrical aspects of songs at the same time, there has been gradual increase in scholarship seeking to understand song lyrics in their compositional and performative context (R. Pattison; Frith, "Why Do"; Fornäs; Griffiths, "Lyric to Anti-lyric"; Griffiths, "Function"; P. Pattison; Pence; Karlsen; Markussen; BaileyShea; Karlsen and Markussen). My own research reflects a continuance of an emerging body of scholarship which consciously positions itself in between music and literature to answer new questions about the role of song lyrics. While relying in part on concepts from literary theory, my analysis seeks to understand lyrics with reference to compositional and performative elements. Lars Eckstein's *Reading Song Lyrics* has been influential in this regard, as a work which incorporates popular music scholarship (notably Simon Frith's *Performing Rites*) in a distinct approach to song lyric analysis. Inspired by the hermeneutic tradition of popular music scholarship (e.g. Middleton, *Studying*; "Pop"), especially Allan F. Moore's *Song Means*, much of my analysis also concerns how musical textures can highlight lyrical themes, while the juxtaposition of contrasting styles and vocal deliveries enact various emphases and inflections on lyrical meaning.

Gorillaz is a fictional band created by musician Damon Albarn and comic book artist Jamie Hewlett. Each song, music video, and artwork issued by the band develops the lore of its fictional cast of characters (2-D, Murdoc, Noodle, and Russel) and the world they inhabit. My study draws on knowledge from previous studies of Gorillaz's songs by John Richardson and Lars Eckstein ("Torpedoing"), who both emphasize the band's virtuality and ability to operate across several media. Although *Plastic Beach* is a multimedia concept project, and much could be said about its artwork and various interactive media that have engaged its fans, my focus here is on song lyrics and the internal musical and performative elements that affect them. Visual elements are integral to Gorillaz, and I am not claiming that they are irrelevant to the effects of the music. However, there is a case to be made about the effects of listening without awareness of the visual elements that accompanied the album. A narrower scope will allow a closer inspection of the role of song lyrics, bringing forth valuable knowledge to both Gorillaz scholarship and the study of political song in general. I am thus limiting this article to the recorded album, not the world tour or music videos. For a fuller analysis of the multimedia aspect of *Plastic Beach*, see Samutina.[1] Naturally, this narrow focus restricts my ability to comment

on certain ecomusicological aspects of the *Plastic Beach* project. I, therefore, do not aim to understand the album in terms of how it contributes to a general ecological direction in the music business (in the vein of Allan "Ecomusicology"; "Sustainability"; or Pedelty, *Ecomusicology*), but rather how environmental issues are treated thematically in music (in a similar manner to that of Guy; Ingram; or Wodak).

My key concern here is to investigate the political force of song lyrics on *Plastic Beach*. This requires unpacking what I mean by "political" and "force." Any definition of what counts as political (and what does not) necessarily reflects a political standpoint (Garratt 5). For the sake of the questions posed here, I employ a wide view of the political which includes, but is not limited to, the "sphere of life customarily fenced off as politics," i.e. discourse surrounding the public institutions and government of the state (Garratt 10). In this view, any issue of common interest can be of political concern, not only matters of public policy. Environmental discourse, for instance, is concerned with both public policy and with promoting more ecological lifestyles in the private sphere. However, this does not specify what it means for a pop song to be considered political.

To be political is to assert influence over issues of common interest, whether this means reaffirming the established order of things or challenging the reigning paradigm. This definition aligns with the philosophy of Jacques Rancière (*Politics*; *Dissensus*), who describes politics as a field of struggle between the forces that maintain a given order of domination (what he calls "police") and the elements that are antagonistic to that order (which he calls "political"). To Rancière, the world is always perceived in accordance with an established "distribution of the sensible" (*partage du sensible*) that allows some discourse to be heard, while dissenting discourse is suppressed. A work of art is political if it challenges the existing "distribution of the sensible," allowing the perception of discourse that was previously imperceptible. Whereas pop music generally reproduces the dominant consumption patterns of modern society, environmental songs may seek to bring forth an alternative view of the world in which unbridled consumption leads to the destruction of the natural environment. In this sense they are political, although as such they may be more or less potent.

By force, I am referring specifically to a concept of rhetoric inspired by Terry Eagleton, Barry Shank, and related ideas in numerous studies in recent lyric theory (Culler, *Theory*; Culler, "Lyric Words"; Hillebrandt et. al.; Rabaté; Attridge). I do not mean to examine the actual impact of pop songs on the natural environment (by way of having inspired politicians or activists for instance), but rather the effect of different musical features on song lyrics' potential for such impact. As argued by Mark Pedelty, it is not fair to assume that only direct and measurable social effects are important to environmental music research:

> Not only is political impact untestable, it is also unfair to hold musicians to a "social impact standard." Environmental art is probably more catalytic than causal. Music inspires community, creativity, and action, but it is impossible to draw a straight line between musical performance and policy change, let alone ecological outcomes. ("Song" 17)

Pedelty represents an ethnographic approach to musicians working with environmental groups on a local level. His point is nonetheless valid when it comes to music in the global mainstream. The ability of music to engender what Ray Pratt calls "affective transformation," a psychological sense of empowerment that can translate to action, is complex (39).

The real environmental impact of music ultimately comes down to how listeners use it, but it is important to consider how the music itself affords various possible responses. The distributed reception of pop requires, in addition to social and cultural research, a better understanding of the material with which people engage and may be inspired.

In Shank's terms, force lies in music's ability to process the abstract concept of the polis as a concrete bodily experience. The experience of musical beauty enables a new sense of the self and its relation to others (16–17). Focusing on the role of lyrics in particular, the concept of force reminds us that lyric words are not only passive carriers of meaning but are in themselves performative (in the terminology of Austin). In the context of poetry or song, words become verbal events intended to exert some force upon their audience. In the sense that these events challenge hegemonic cultural ideologies (i.e. the "distribution of the sensible"), this force is political. The strength by which song lyric words exert themselves is determined by contextual factors, both the situation into which they are inscribed (i.e. pop music recording and the inclination of the audience to be influenced by politics), and, crucially for this study, the manner in which they are delivered. The intended impact of lyrics may or may not be identical to the meaning of the words outside of this context (Eagleton 90). It is a matter of composition to prioritize factors that contribute to the intended effect. Thus, the elements of *Plastic Beach* which highlight the ecological theme serve to give the songs force as environmental statements. Conversely, elements that obscure this theme weaken the songs' political potential.

In the following, I put forward three elements which have decisive implications on the force of *Plastic Beach*'s environmental lyrics: songfulness, fictionality, and the Bakhtinian concept of polyphony. The first provides a main obstacle to the political force of songs, as music can hardly mobilize listeners to participate politically if it is not recognized as political in the first place. Fictionality and polyphony, on the other hand, are strategies with the potential to empower the lyrical theme. These elements tap into the social dimension of engaging with a theme, while simultaneously contributing to musical complexity. Songfulness will always pose a problem in pop music, but through the successful employment of these other strategies its effect may be harnessed as a means of popular engagement, and finally increase the album's potential to exert political force.

The Problem of Songfulness

The problem facing environmental pop is one of conflicting ideologies projected through music. On the one hand, there is what we may refer to as the ideology of pop, which includes the underlying commercialism of production and marketing, in addition to musical qualities that evoke a sense of lightness and fun, i.e. the elements that make songs viable as hits. This "ideology" is what Rancière would term the conservative forces of "police," upholding the current distribution of the sensible (wherein dancing and shopping are more important than the environment). On the other hand, there are the environmental themes expressed in song lyrics, including the performative elements that add to the force of this theme. These are Rancière's "political" forces, working to bring forth a perception of the world that is generally excluded from the mainstream. However, the disparity of "environmental pop" is not a simple case of content undermined by the form in which it is presented. The pop form may both undercut and

contribute to the force of the topical content. Both are working simultaneously on lyrics that aim to impressionistically inform the listener about ecological problems while evading open confrontation.

The qualities of form that inhibit the eco-political force of *Plastic Beach* can almost entirely be summed up with the concept of "songfulness," a term coined by Lawrence Kramer. This concept denotes how words in song are subsumed by the quality of the voice itself, by the inherent pleasure associated with singing without necessarily paying attention to semantics. This is a quality inherent in nursery rhymes or, in Kramer's example, the imitation of song in a foreign language (51–52). *Plastic Beach* exhibits distinctly nursery rhyme-like lyrics in Snoop Dogg's alliteration on "Welcome to the World of the Plastic Beach." It is enormously gratifying to rap along to the sound of "click-clackin', crack-a-lackin'," and this feeling may draw the listener's attention away from the "pollution from the ocean" also mentioned in the song.

Eckstein has further developed the concept of songfulness both with reference to the music of Gorillaz ("Torpedoing") and as a more general concept (*Reading Song Lyrics*). To Eckstein, verbal meaning is not necessarily only subsumed by the singing voice but may become suspended entirely due to what Ola Stockfelt calls "genre-normative modes of listening" (383). Sustained critical attention to lyrical content is generally not considered necessary to adequately engage with the pop genre. Underlying expectations that pop lyrics are politically benign increase the effects of "songfulness" because listeners are generally not looking for political meaning in the songs. It is thus not only through the words themselves, but also the entirety of the generic soundscape that the effects of songfulness may be triggered. Enthralled by catchy beats and instrumental sections, audiences often consume political music without realizing the implications of what they are listening to. Or rather, the listening act is already influenced by the ideology implicit in the pop music genre, rather than by the presence of an environmental message in its song lyrics. Empirically, this resonates with Deena Weinstein's description of a similar function as it relates to political rock music: even if political song lyrics are heard correctly, audiences still overlook or misinterpret them (11).

Songfulness is not the only way in which lyrical meaning can disappear in song. There are many other potentials for meaning loss. One other example is how words in song may be subjected to "overvocalization," which is when purposeful exaggeration in the vocal performance makes lyrical meaning indiscernible (Kramer 63). However, although there are many distorted or otherwise stylized vocals on *Plastic Beach* these never lead to a total meaning loss, and close listening reveals that these effects often add more than they subtract by reinforcing lyrical contrasts. Songfulness is therefore the most appropriate concept for the purpose of this article. Moreover, I think this concept is applicable in a more literary sense, highlighting the role of the reader (or listener) in realizing the performative potential of words.

According to Dominique Rabaté, it is in recitation (oral or mental) that a person can truly engage with the subject of poetry, physically and emotionally. The reader lends his or her voice to a poem through the gesture of enunciation. Applied to our present discussion, this would mean that it is through "singing along" (there is no good word in English for iterative singing) that song acquires a subjective force. With pop music the listener cannot take the place of the performing voice on a recording, but by singing along they can equally immerse themselves in the song by mentally coming to inhabit the

same aural space as the performer. Most people can sing along to pop music without being trained musicians. In contrast, music which relies on technical skill may alienate many listeners. If the goal is to influence audiences to engage with a position whose ideology is inscribed in the lyrics, songs that are subject to songfulness have the advantage of getting into the heads of the audience. This can only contribute to the intended effect, however, if the compositions can manage to harness the engaging potential of songfulness without succumbing to its inundating effects.

Getting around songfulness in pop music is difficult, but *Plastic Beach* employs several strategies which increase the potential force of its environmental theme. In the following, I will focus on two factors that intertwine in the song lyrics: Gorillaz's fictionalized self-presentation, and the eclecticism of the album resulting from the input of a large cast of collaborators. These elements are essential components in the compositions that make up *Plastic Beach*, and together they imbue songs with added potential for political impact. The fictionality of Gorillaz has previously been explored by Eckstein ("Torpedoing"), in a study of the band's 2005 album *Demon Days* and in particular the song "Feel Good Inc." Building upon his study, I will apply the concept of polyphony, a term which has its origin in music theory, but which has been developed as a metaphor in the literary theory of Mikhail Bakhtin (and now is being re-applied to the context of music, albeit with an emphasis on song lyrics). This concept will elucidate the role of the many different voices appearing on the album, and their role in engaging with the central topic of the album: environmental degradation.

Characters in a Fictional Narrative

Plastic Beach narrates a landscape totally ravaged by plastic pollution. It is both a reflection and a foreshadowing of our planetary development. Scientists estimated between 4.8 and 12.7 million metric tons of plastic waste entering the ocean in 2010 alone (Jambeck et. al.), with over 170 trillion plastic particles afloat in the world's oceans in 2023 (Ericson et al.). While scientists have called for urgent action to mitigate pollution, Gorillaz imagines a world adapting to the situation. Highlighting tensions in an imposed relationship, the band employs acoustic textures to signal the presence of organic and natural things while synthetic sounds signal the inorganic and unnatural. This contrast is latent in the entire album, manifesting when characters encounter plastic pollution. The album features fifteen different musical acts as collaborators, from rappers and rock icons to brass ensembles and the Syrian National Orchestra for Arabic Music. The result is an eclectic album with many different voices, all gravitating with their unique perspectives toward the fictional setting of Plastic Beach.

Listeners are invited to explore the island of Plastic Beach along with the band and their visitors. Together with the characters Bashy and Kano (performed by the rappers of the same names), we first encounter the island with optimism and good vibes on "White Flag." The title signals a departure from the war-inspired theme of *Demon Days*. Lines like "Honey, I'm home, this is where I wanna live" and "I don't know if it's greener, but it's green, though" suggest a naïve, yet almost utopian encounter with the plastic island. The symphonic intro and outro of the track and the upbeat tempo of the synth and drum machine in its rap section supports Bashy and Kano's lyrical vision of a virgin land which will cater to their carefree lifestyle. However, the introduction of synthetic sounds

replacing the acoustics of the orchestra as the rappers enter suggests that they are an unnatural presence on the scene. Their optimistic first impression is subsequently subverted on the following track "Rhinestone Eyes," performed by Albarn in character as Gorillaz's lead singer 2-D.

"Rhinestone Eyes" evokes an ominous atmosphere compared to "White Flag." Foregrounded in the musical texture is a sequence of bleeping sounds, dripping onto the drum machine beat. The first bleep is clunky like a palm striking the end of a pipe tube, and its echo is followed by a high-pitched bleep reminiscent of old computers. The sound of a guitar can only barely be made out in the background layer of the track as 2-D's filtered vocal enters. Introducing himself as a "scary gargoyle," his statically descending voice signals inhospitable unnaturalness. The lyrical sentiment here breaks the utopian illusion anticipated in "White Flag." While Bashy and Kano praise Plastic Beach as a haven far removed from war, 2-D hints that the landscape has already been invaded by the industries of artificiality. The line, "Where the paralytic dreams that we all seem to keep," is a jab to the dream-like naivete of the previous song. Plastic Beach is not a dream but a nightmare. The perception of Plastic Beach as peaceful is a delusion perpetuated in the ideology of artificial culture.

The synthesized sounds that dominate *Plastic Beach*'s musical texture create a sense of alienation from the natural. These sounds are purposely deployed and distinctly related to the potential for environmental redemption and destruction. Starting in the interlude before the second verse of "Rhinestone Eyes," there is harmonic distortion as the melody in the front layer of the sound box is supported by tones descending over ten-second intervals in a background layer (00:51–01:02 and repeated thereafter). The tones that make up each layer have a lot of reverberation. The pitch of the digital sound effects is attention grabbing, and even from the reduced volume of a background layer, the sounds are imposing. Throughout the song, Albarn's voice follows the descending tone of this section, such that 2-D's words become amenable to the power of the synthetic soundscape. High volume major chords take over from 01:12 allowing synthetic sound to completely dominate the song. This is the point on the album when the lyrics are hardest to make out. Semantic meaning is arrested here, but the groove of the music carries the listener on. It is an early climax of songfulness.

What may be compositionally intended to evoke a sense of alienation as part of the musical exploration of the theme can also have an alienating effect on the listener. Through songfulness, the alienated world of *Plastic Beach* becomes an alienating event in the real world. To overcome this, it is necessary that listeners engage with the music not only sensuously, but also that the sensuous experience serves as the beginning of aesthetic engagement, where the work is considered for its artistic qualities. The fictionality of Gorillaz creates an avenue for keeping the music at a distance. While enjoying the music, allowing oneself to be momentarily captured by the rhythms and singing along, one can always return to a different kind of engagement with the characters as alienated others. By engaging with *Plastic Beach* as fiction, audiences can get behind the music's pop façade and retrieve its political message.

It is important to note that fiction does not account for the entire meaning of lyrics. It is an element by which audiences can engage with underlying meanings. Jonathan Culler has argued against considering lyrics in terms of narrative genres of literature. Although lyrics may create fictional worlds, what is essential in lyrics is that they are assertions

about the real world ("Lyric Words" 33). The fact that lyrics strive to be events in the real world is all the clearer in the context of musical performance than in the written poetry Culler is primarily concerned with. The fictional world in *Plastic Beach* should, therefore, be considered on two levels. It lies at a distance from the real world and its environmental issues, but it is also a way to stage ideological concerns that relate back to the outside world (Eckstein, "Torpedoing" 245). What is at stake here, apart from the natural environment, is the political agency of the songwriter to express a specific message with political force. Songfulness captures the attention of the listener and implicates the listener in pop music's ideology of consumerism and by consequence environmental destruction. Whatever politics are inscribed in the lyrics by the songwriter is thereby subsumed by the pop music form. Songfulness is the diffusion of lyrical meaning, but as soon as the listener engages with the world of characters it is songfulness that is momentarily suspended, not lyrical meaning. Fictional narratives, like that of Gorillaz, can create an engagement by which lyrics may retain force.

Polyphonic Play

As stated above, it is by virtue of the listeners' engagement that song lyrics have political force. The album is imbued with the preconditions of such engagement in its narrative, but also through its multi-voiced composition.

Polyphony in music is when several differentiated melodic lines are performed at the same time. In modern music it is both ubiquitous and unremarkable. However, in the Bakhtinian sense, the musical concept serves as a metaphor for a poetic work wherein the voices of characters are set free from the authority of the author's voice. The characters are still part of the author's artistic design, but there is a crucial difference between characters as manifestations of the perspective of the authorial consciousness, and characters that constitute essentially other voices, other consciousnesses with their own worlds. The characters in a polyphonic work operate as distinct personalities within a narrative and can be considered graphically analogous to musical counterpoint (Bakhtin 22). To Bakhtin, polyphony is related specifically to the novel. The space afforded by a novel is necessary to allow for the convincing exploration of distinct personalities. But the central feature of polyphony is not prose or narrative length, but *dialogue*. Richard Middleton has argued that this concept of dialogue need not be restricted to verbal language but could be construed as "dialogues of style-elements and their associations . . . situating meaning not 'in' the text but at the conjecture of intersecting (and often contesting) discourses" ("Pop, Rock" 218). Contrapuntal voices that never converge, although they contribute to a composition as multi-styled, multi-accented, and contradictory in values is the characteristic of a truly polyphonic work (Bakhtin 15).

Applying this concept to *Plastic Beach* we find not a singular statement on the environment, but many voices circling one another. While 2-D expresses a depressing outlook in "Rhinestone Eyes" and hopelessness in "Broken," these are far from the only sentiments present on the album. Other voices include the dispassionate character of Lou Reed on "Some Kind of Nature," whose speak-singing style connects a near disregard for the melody with complacency regarding the negative side of plastics and other artificial materials; the character of Yukimi Nagano (Little Dragon), whose electronically elevated

nasal falsetto suggests complicity with the powers, as someone "caught in the machine" on "Empire Ants" and "caught again" in a struggle with alcohol addiction on "To Binge"; and Bobby Womack's character who, as mentioned in the introduction, is a voice of human suffering and longing with forceful cries that demonstrate hardship on "Stylo" and serene contemplation of the world between "satellites" and "the tide" on "Cloud of Unknowing." The quality Roland Barthes called the "grain of the voice" makes each of these performances resistant to confluence. As an additional style element, the speed at which some lyrics are delivered provide contrasting perspectives by the ways performers fill out the "verbal space" of the musical phrases (Griffiths, "Lyric to Anti-lyric" 43). Every voice is uniquely situated in relationship to the beat, achieving their own flow, sometimes complementary but frequently in disruption of other voices (cf. Diesen et. al. 13f.) The reason why Womack's voice is perceived as distinctly human on "Stylo," is also a feature of the way his lyric phrasing breaks with the robotic flow of Mos Def. Each vocal delivery on the album animates the lyrics in terms of uniquely situated personalities, with multiple reactions to the state of the world.

2-D himself experiments with adopting other perspectives, for example with his call to "sing yourself out of depression" on "Stylo." On this track, 2-D and Womack do not directly interact with each other, but their performances overlap as if they are in dialogue. Each character's unique perspective on the world poses a challenge to the others. 2-D's words suggest a willingness to succumb to the "songfulness" of the electric beat. The fact that this strategy apparently does not work out for 2-D verifies the album as a polyphonic work. To Bakhtin, it is a point of polyphony that characters don't evolve or converge, but are allowed to remain independent, in play with one another. Dialogue takes place between people inhabiting different positions, but does not necessarily lead to character development over time (Bakhtin 28). There is never a unification of the voices in polyphony, only interaction, dialogue, and play. Womack's lines following 2-D's deference to the love of electricity halts the development of characters in the song and refers any inspiration for action back to our world. The words direct our attention to the existence of another world, ours, in which action may be undertaken. Womack's fierce cry and subsequent change of register provides a contrast of delivery which implicates a potential and yet non-specified agenda. Without directly evoking the issue of environmentalism, this is certainly an opening for the listener to break away from complacency and be moved to political action.

The dialogic nature of collaboration endows music with force. The point that pop music is essentially collaborative and that all pop must therefore be regarded as equally dialogic could be argued as a point of contention against the idea that political pop is breaking with the norm. But the institutionalized collaboration between studio musicians, technicians, producers, and executives generally adheres to one monologic authority, usually amenable to the orthodoxy of commercialism. The issue here is that in the dialogic process of creating a polyphonic work, the main artist Albarn relinquishes his authority over the voices in the narrative. Gorillaz and *Plastic Beach* demonstrate that Albarn stretches himself far to incorporate other voices. Even though he does have the final word on production and release of the music, he chooses to engage in dialogue with Hewlett and the other collaborators who appear on his songs, accommodating their distinct voices in the final product. The potential for political impact in this multivoicedness comes from what Jacques Attali calls *noise*.[2] This term refers to a sonic

attribute, but it is a political one which is disruptive to social order. To Attali, music is an attempt to order noise through the exertion of power. In a system where music is subject to exchange for money, money is the power that is exerted in the ordering of noise. In other words, commercial music is music in the service of the political order of money. But just as there is no society without inherent differences at its core, there is no music without noise. Noise always carries with it subversive potential. The existence of music, therefore, entails the possibility for dissent from the hegemonic power that orders it. By being essentially different from the (monologic) authority of the author's voice, the presence of other voices in a polyphonic work has an implicit effect of amplifying noise.

Several sounds may combine into a single voice and establish a basis of harmony and order. This is the case of all non-polyphonic pop songs. It is the incongruity of voices that makes a song truly polyphonic. The song "Sweepstakes" is illustrative. Following an initial verse where Mos Def raps on top of a simple bass and drum 4/4 beat, a Morse code-like series of beeps is introduced at 00:46.[3] This sound accompanies Def's rap through most of the song from this point. Although the Morse signal has a different musical texture and follows a different rhythm than the initial beat, it somehow blends naturally with Def's rap by the second verse. Within this symbiosis of natural and synthetic sounds, and their attendant harmonies and polyrhythms, it is easy to be caught up in songfulness. The "noise" on this track emerges with the introduction of the Hypnotic Brass Ensemble at 02:20. With the Brass Ensemble, the initial beat is replaced with actual drums, replacing a mechanical foundation in the track with a human one. The Ensemble's performance is not in itself dissonant, but it appears disruptive because it never merges with the Morse code-like series of beeps that accompany the song. The brass instruments resist absorption in the preexisting soundscape. Def's flow is never broken, but it is rhythmically adjusted on the introduction of the Brass Ensemble (02:30–03:15). With the fruitless attempt at accommodating both the Brass instruments and the synthetic sounds, Def's vocal is overlayed by noise, making it difficult for the listener to remain under the spell of his songful incantation.

On *Plastic Beach* noise often emerges in transitions. Transitions between songs like the upbeat "Superfast Jellyfish" and sedate "Empire Ants," or between the uplifting "On Melancholy Hill" and gloomy "Broken" are difficult to listen to without a conspicuous change in mood. In the best cases, transitions like these can grab the attention of listeners and help them regain awareness of form. The narrative is formed of and by the many voices, fragmenting the lyrical experience and throwing listeners off. Propulsive grooves on "Empire Ants," "Glitter Freeze," and "On Melancholy Hill" draw the listener in. On "Glitter Freeze" the groove is overlaid with peeling beeps to give the movement an alarming sense of urgency. The groove does not distinguish the urgency to act on behalf of the environment from the urgency to dance. In the transitions between this song and the next, the listener is confronted with contrast. The calm disinterest of "Some Kind of Nature" is a relief after the threatening "Glitter Freeze." Transitions like this one epitomize polyphony not as evolution toward a unifying consensus between characters but as disruptive of any such development.

Plastic Beach is an eclectic musical composition held together by variously overlapping strains of thematic exploration. If the album has a "sound" (a function of Albarn's layering strategies, the constant combination of live instruments, synthetic sounds, and voices modified by various filters), it is difficult to describe it as any one thing. The

listener is invited to approach the spectacle of the island from several different perspectives. These perspectives announce themselves in the musical eclecticism. The polyphonic work invites its audience to partake in dialogue without imposing an authoritative conclusion. However, we have already seen how the album is prone to evoke songfulness, a feature which hides the invitation to dialogue by obscuring the meaningful dialogic work within catchy musical textures. Why would artists with an environmental message play so close to the edge and risk meaning loss at all? What does pop offer that is not better accommodated in a toned down and message-oriented genre like folk, for instance?

Plastic Beach as an Ambiguous Environmental Statement

Before one can be moved to action by political song, the message needs to be heard. But as we have seen, there is no guarantee that audiences will pick up on the environmental theme in pop lyrics. It can also be argued that the theme as I have described it here is simply not as clear as I make it out to be. In an interview following the album's release, Albarn spoke about the environmental theme of the album: "If you meditate on plastic or the sea, I think all the songs kind of fit into that in one way or another" (qtd. in van Buskirk). This quotation suggests that already keeping the idea of the natural environment in mind when listening is key to perceiving the album as political. If this was the case, then the album would work quite poorly as a political statement. Its environmental message would likely elude anyone not already convinced about the topic's importance. The theme would easily be subsumed by the beats.

On the other hand, could not the beats serve as "bait," drawing listeners into the lyrical depths by the way of compositions which emphasize lighthearted fun? Albarn suggests this as well:

> [I]t has environmental thoughts scattered and peppered around every bit of this record. But at the end of the day, it's not just that. It's in a way more colourful than that. . . . Fun! Exactly, it's fun. Especially with kids, you've got to capture their imagination before you say anything. (qtd. in van Buskirk)

Albarn makes the case that songs should capture listeners' attention before political messages can be absorbed. Sometimes this can be seen directly, for example in the progression between "White Flag" and "Rhinestone Eyes." The optimistic lyrics of "White Flag" first capture the listener's imagination, before a more sinister perspective is revealed on "Rhinestone Eyes." Other times the link is less obvious, but the oscillation between playfulness and seriousness is ever present. From this perspective, *Plastic Beach* may be seen as a surface demonstration of fun as a way of approaching a more serious underlying topic. The success of such a strategy in terms of political impact is difficult to ascertain. But it seems to be, at least to some extent, a deliberate strategy in Albarn and Hewlett's artistic design. We see it in one of the most lighthearted songs on the album, which is perhaps also the most stealthily critical.

"Superfast Jellyfish" links an atmosphere of "fun" with subversive references to ocean pollution, connecting the two in the lyrical motif of ready-made and fast foods. The desire for such foods is manufactured through advertising, something Gorillaz demonstrates by starting the song with a sample from a 1986 TV-advertisement for Swanson's

microwave breakfast. The advertisement is comedic and sets the tone for parody. Its punchline is a man's reaction of disbelief and delight to a voiceover message broadcasting the convenience of a ready-made meal. The sample is followed by an interaction between De La Soul rappers Trugoy (David Jolicoeur) and Posdnous (Kelvin Mercer).[4] Trugoy provides the main rap in which he imitates the language of advertisement, while Pos imitates placing a fast-food order. Pos's laughter and Trugoy's ease of lyric delivery signals the pleasure and convenience of microwaved and fast foods. The pleasure, however, is contingent on a disregard for the decidedly un-food-like make-up of processed food products. It may taste like chicken but is synthetically manufactured. On closer inspection, the commercial-mediated simulacrum of food that is presented as home cooked feels just a little bit off.

Acceptance of the desirability of synthetic foods suggest a cultural obedience to the manufactured reality. This extends into the production of pop music as well, making the song a carefully veiled comment on the pressures of the music industry to put out hit music faster and faster, and of the consumer's willingness to prefer ready-made, formulaic pop over more substantial music. In this regard, "Superfast Jellyfish" is a sequel to Gorillaz's 2005 hit "Feel Good Inc.," which also features De La Soul, there in the role of Gorillaz's corporate overlords in the music business (see Eckstein, "Torpedoing"). In "Superfast Jellyfish" the connection is made through the figure of King Neptune and his underlings, whose authority is juxtaposed with a reference to monetary value. The interjection "Don't waste time" is vocalized in a mocking tone reminiscent of a nagging mother telling their child to be good. It is the voice of authority imposing the value of fast-paced consumption, the default ideology of Western consumerist culture.

The chorus performed by 2-D and Gruff Rhys is an ironic celebration of "superfast" food culture. It is suggested here that the comforts of convenience have the negative effect of making our oceans more radioactive with synthetic waste. However, the singer seems undeterred in his reckless consumption. The crushing of aluminum evokes images of teenagers at a party crushing soda and beer cans and throwing the flattened cans away. Musically, the reference is evoked in the final section of the song (starting at 02:24) through the sound of the steel pan (drum), associated with Caribbean beach music. This places the party atmosphere in the vicinity of the ocean. Radioactivity, on the other hand, is evoked in several ways. First by the robotic distortion of the vocals on the line "the sea is radioactive," and secondly by the introduction of a buzzing noise in a descending contour following the first chorus at 01:28. The noise is not immediately disruptive, gradually asserting itself a few seconds past the halfway mark, before eventually becoming more present in the final section of the track. In a sound like the slow deflation of a balloon, all other sounds finally collapse into the noise in preparation for the next track on the album. The final section of the track also includes the premonition of both musical and natural collapse in another sample, this one of David Attenborough's voice on *The Natural World* ("Sperm Whales"), stating that "the sea has gone silent."

The final robotic repetition of the song's title on a comfortable beat beneath the catchy texture of synthesized steel drums promotes singing along. The song can get stuck in your brain for days and, although the earworm can transpire as mere songfulness most of the time, it comes with an opportunity to inspire. With songs like "Superfast Jellyfish," Gorillaz exploits some of the potential for songfulness as part of a subversive package.

With the comedic use of advertising samples and mock-tone delivery of lyrics (and even the presentation of microwaved Jellyfish as a wholesome meal), the song uses parody to offer a satire of human consumption. This message is not stated outright, but playfully explored through a series of impressions and their subversions. More than an insincere gesture, parody is a self-conscious move toward the artificial which combines seriousness and playfulness (Hutcheon 32; Richardson 4). There is no sense of condescension in the revelation of double meaning here, as listeners are invited to participate in the encounters and determine right and wrong for themselves.

The world of *Plastic Beach* may not be a utopia, but with this album, the band is drawing us to the utopian sensibilities of popular music. According to Richard Dyer, entertainment that is created as entertainment (ignoring works created with ulterior motives) generally resonates with the audience because it offers present solutions to overcome the inadequacies of life (222, 228). Entertainment is gratifying because it provides what the real world cannot. In her reading of Plastic Beach as utopia, Natalia Samutina shows how the fictional characters of Gorillaz established a studio on the island to escape the demands of their previous situation with corporate guardianship and persecution by government forces. The island provides an escape from and solution to Gorillaz's problems in their fictional homeland. However, this interpretation does not sufficiently consider the real-world ecological concerns that *Plastic Beach* reflects and that disrupt the idyll of its fictional location.[5] According to Dyer, the utopian solutions provided by the entertainment industry generally limits these solutions to those that can be offered by capitalism (increased consumption), something that cannot be considered utopian in an ecological sense (229). For utopian sensibility to be effective, Dyer states, it must be rooted in the real experiences of the audience. In their engagement with entertainment, audiences must therefore be active in the ideological subversion of the status quo. To the active audience, what entertainment can offer are images of possibility. Those whose sensibilities are taken from of the degraded state of the environment can find in pop music the progressive desire for social change. The audience may recognize in noise in the overall soundscape of the album a parallel to plastic pollution of the natural environment, and on this prompt, they can choose to act.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to determine the force of environmental song lyrics on *Plastic Beach*. Suggesting that performative qualities can indicate a song's potential impact, I put forth songfulness as an obstacle toward force in pop songs. Subsequently, I located two aspects embedded in the compositions on the album, fictionality and literary polyphony, that give the songs the potential to overcome the pacifying effect of songfulness. These strategies are always in battle with the potential for songfulness, and as such the album is always in danger of working against its political message should the strategies fail.

On *Plastic Beach*, Albarn, Hewlett, and their collaborators take part in an environmental narrative. This narrative is presented through multiple perspectives on a fictional world of pollution and cultural indifference. Even though the setting and characters on the album are fictional, their exploration of the environmental theme refer to our world. This happens not as an allegory would use characters to illustrate a single underlying

message, but by imbuing the characters with a strong degree of autonomy, allowing the theme to be explored through multiple perspectives. This may lead to questions regarding the actual message of the album, but I have tried to show that although there is a message, is not singularly determinate, but consists of several iterations on a central theme. One strength of having many different and even opposing voices on an issue that is not yet solved in our own world is that it allows the listener to engage together with the characters and take part in real-world environmental politics.

The perspectives one can encounter on the album are not limited to the interpretation that my analysis has yielded here. One authoritative voice bears final mention. Murdoc Niccals, who in the fictional lore of Gorillaz is the primary songwriter for the entire album, denies that *Plastic Beach* is an environmental record. It is not a moral tale or a warning, but rather a description of the evolution of humankind into plastic beings. Commenting on the album's closing track "Pirate Jet," he says:

> Did you like the show? It was called PLANET EARTH. We're finished and now everyone's evolved into plastic. A new breed of human. But y'know, I want to clear this up. "Plastic Beach." It's not a green record. It's not a judgement on the world. It's just a picture. Plastic Beach: it's another place, another way of looking at the world. And this is its soundtrack. ("Gorillaz, 'Plastic Beach' – Murdoc's")

Murdoc goes to an extreme here, predicting an entirely artificial existence on Earth. This prediction lies at the heart of the album, and it implies a post-humanist challenge to contemporary worldviews that is worthwhile to consider. However, even if we take his statement as something more than a repudiation of a moralizing monologic, Murdoc's is only one voice among several dozen on the record, each responding to the issue in their own way.

In commercial pop it is difficult to separate message from act, and scattered references to nature do not absolve pop songs from their complicity in promoting unsustainable lifestyles. Thirteen years since the release of *Plastic Beach*, plastic pollution has hardly improved, and the global environment is arguably faring worse than ever due to overconsumption. The lack of observable effects on environmental conditions says little about the ways in which the album may have failed to stimulate engagement with environmental politics; however, it is indicative that any potential for large-scale impact has either gone unrealized or been defeated by the forces of commercialism that vie to subdue the political will. Nevertheless, it would be too simple to dismiss pop lyrics entirely as an arena where politics are subservient to commerce. The assumption that pop music is irredeemably subservient to commercial ideology unfairly trivializes the political agency of pop artists. The commercial form is Gorillaz's *modus operandi*. An advantage of catchy music, as is well known, is drawing the masses into a sense of community with one another. By incorporating environmentalism as a topic in their music, they invite fans to come together around this theme. Even if generally subdued by pacifying effects, there is still political potential to be rediscovered by old fans and new.

Notes

1. A visual media presentation may be a more appropriate way to gain a full overview of the multimedia aspect of *Plastic Beach*. A good example is the video "The album that almost

killed Gorillaz" by user Lady Emily on YouTube.com. A video accompaniment to the album including official music videos as well as unofficial concept videos can be accessed via Archive.org (see Gorillaz, "Gorillaz Plastic Beach [Video Accompaniment]"), and a short documentary with behind the scenes footage from the recording sessions can also be accessed (see Gorillaz, "Making"). The visual accompaniments to the album reveal more creative experiments with the theme of artificiality than the ones that are explored in this article. For instance, the visual story shows an evil android doppelganger Noodle, and how Russel became a giant by swimming in a polluted ocean. War and violence provide a complementary aesthetic that connects the plastic theme of *Plastic Beach* to the war theme of *Demon Days*, ensuring a continuation of the Gorillaz fictional narrative across several albums. A point I would have liked to include in an analysis of this material is the link between Rancière's concept of "police" and the Gorillaz characters' adverse relationship to the military-industrial complex.

2. Attali's concept is a plausible inspiration for the metaphor of "noise" later employed by Rancière, but where Rancière uses noise as a metaphor for that which is not yet perceptible, Attali's concept describes a disruptive presence within the current order. For a detailed overview of Rancière's use of sonic metaphors, see Nickleson.
3. There is an actual Morse code on the song "Glitter Freeze," translating into the letters P-L-A-S-T-I-C B-E-A-C-H. The beeps on "Sweepstakes," however, are only similar to Morse signals in their frequency and duration, without any discernible pattern translatable into letters.
4. The collaboration with De La Soul is symbolic. The group has a legacy of pioneering what I have called polyphony in this article, through their revolutionary use of sampling, something Gorillaz also uses here to add even more inflection on an already polyphonous composition.
5. Samutina may still be correct in her assessment that the relocations provides the potential for utopia through creation of an unrestricted collaborative community.

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Notes on Contributor

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