

Trap Irony: Where Aesthetics Become Politics

Justin D Burton

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Abstract

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This beat 'bout to get murdered

Thought this was Future when I heard it

–Uncle Murda (“Panda” remix)

Desiigner sounds kinda like Future. Probably you’ve noticed? Everyone else has. While some reactions are a register of genuine surprise that “Panda” isn’t a Future song (cf Uncle Murda epigraph), many are a combination of [reflexive skepticism](#) about [Desiigner’s authenticity](#) ([He’s never even been to Atlanta!!](#))—or even [the authenticity of New York](#) as a hip hop city—alongside a sort of *schadenfreude* over his ability to [notch a higher rated song than Future has ever managed](#) (“Panda” hit #1 for two weeks in May 2016). This latter observation is certainly true: Southern trap god Future has cracked the Billboard Hot 100 top 10 just once, as a featured artist on Lil Wayne’s “Love Me,” and [his other appearances in the top 30](#) are similarly collaboration. (My discussion of trap focuses here on the hip hop wing of trap. The related but not identical EDM genre also called “trap” lies outside the scope of this particular analysis.) But pointing to the chart “failure” of Future’s singles is also entirely disingenuous, as all four of his official album releases have landed in [the Billboard 200 top 10](#), including a #1 for 2015’s *DS2* and 2016’s *EVOL*. In other words, Future isn’t exactly struggling to be relevant, which is why the nearly reflexive journalistic pairing of “Desiigner sounds like Future” and “Desiigner’s song is more successful than any Future song” gets my critical side-eye popping. The reception of Desiigner as a fake-but-more-successful Future strikes me as a dig at trap music as an easily replicable and therefore unserious genre. Here, I’m listening closely to the ways Desiigner’s vocals sound like Future as an entry point to trap’s political work: a sonic aesthetics of dis-organized polity, of sonic blackness in a post-racial society that I call *trap irony*.

Sounds Like Future

Though I’ve found several instances of writers comparing Desiigner to Future, that comparison usually includes little detailed support about the Future-istic elements of Desiigner’s sound. There are a number of sonic cues in “Panda” that could lead listeners to mistake the singer for Future, but I’m going to focus on the most obvious similarity: Desiigner’s recorded vocals share timbral and affective similarities to some of Future’s recorded vocals. When critics say Desiigner sounds like Future, the vocals are likely their main point of reference, so I’ve identified five points of sonic similarity between Desiigner and Future.



<https://youtu.be/E5ONTXHS2mM>

1. Desiigner's voice on "Panda" is detuned, resonating slightly off pitch with the instrumental, a technique so common in Future songs that I could link to any number of examples. Here are four, all released in the last two years, as a representative sample: "[Stick Talk](#)," "[Where Ya At \(feat. Drake\)](#)," "[March Madness](#)," and "[Codeine Crazy](#)."
2. Second, Desiigner delivers his vocals with a flat affect, conveying little emotion through inflection. Listen to the sections in the video above where he repeats the word "panda" [0:33-39, 1:38-46, 2:44-52, 3:51-58]. These repetitions precede each verse and then punctuate the end of the song. Rhythmically they signal what should be a turn-up— a run of at least a measure's worth of eighth notes just before the full beat drops. But Desiigner's recitation is emotionless, each instance of the word sounding just like the last. Throughout the rest of the song, if a listener didn't understand the words, it would be hard to guess what Desiigner is rapping about based on any emotive signals. Love? Aggression? Loss? The vocal performance is reportorial, dispassionate. Future adopts a similar technique in up-tempo songs. His repetition of the words "jumpman" (1:08-10) and "noble" (1:28-30) in "[Jumpman](#)" and the word "wicked" (0:13-24) in "[Wicked](#)" provide parallels to Desiigner's recitation of "panda." And in "[Ain't No Time](#)," Future delivers lines about his clothes and money as casually as he predicts his enemies ending up outlined in chalk (0:13-26); just as in "Panda," a listener who didn't catch the lyrics to "Ain't No Time" wouldn't be able to attach any particular emotional content to the song.
3. Speaking of not catching lyrics, Desiigner and Future are both notoriously mushmouths: enunciation is optional. A number of [online](#) videos and [fluff posts](#) revolve around the fact that it's hard to make out what Desiigner or Future is saying.
4. Both Desiigner's and Future's performed voices seem to sit low in their registers, produced by opening the backs of their throats and elongating their vocal chords. For context, both artists seem to [speak](#) in the [same register](#) their recorded vocals fall in, and each is also likely to perform their vocals [a little higher](#) in a [live setting](#).
5. The bulk of "Panda"'s verses are in "Migos flow." Named for the ATL trap trio who popularized it in their song, "[Versace](#)," Migos flow is a triplet figure that rises from low to

high, 3-1-2 (where 1 is the downbeat). The first twenty seconds of the “Versace” link above is a constant string of Migos flow. It’s pervasive throughout “Panda,” but 0:49-52 stacks two Migos flow lines back-to-back. Future’s verse on Drake’s “[Digital Dash](#)” (0:18-2:00) is a good example of an extended Migos flow.



<https://youtu.be/m6Q-cwsS-rg>

In other words, Desiigner *does* sound like Future in some significant ways. But that’s not all he sounds like. Detuned vocals isn’t just a Future thing. [Adam Krims](#) theorizes this as part of the “hip hop sublime,” and it’s especially common among Southern rappers (for example, Young Jeezy sounded like Future before Future even did) (73-74). Many trap artists rap in a way that confounds efforts to understand what they’re saying; Young Thug, for instance, employs a vocal style distinct from Future and Desiigner but is [equally difficult to understand](#). And the Migos flow, [as partially demonstrated in this video](#), is not Future’s (or Migos’s) proprietary style. It’s been adopted by several (especially Southern) rappers, most recently in conjunction with trap. The elements I describe in the previous paragraph point to some specific ways Desiigner sounds like Future, which in turn points to ways that Desiigner sounds, more broadly, like trap.

The “Panda” beat, which comes from UK producer Menace, bears this out. Southern trap, as can be heard by surveying the songs linked above, features instrumentals with deep, tuned kick drums, usually dry 808 snares, high and bright synth lines, and punctuation from low brass and strings (0:40-1:33 in “Panda,” for the latter). This low/high frequency spread, with the mid-range mostly open, characterizes a good deal of trap music; the freed mid-range leaves more room for the bass to be amplified to soul-rattling levels without crowding out the rest of the instrumental. Also, one of the most iconic sonic elements of trap is the rattling hihat, cruising through subdivisions of the beat at inhuman rates (for instance, Metro Boomin’s hats at 0:16 in the aforementioned “Digital Dash” rattle but good when the full beat drops). Here’s the thing about “Panda,” though: those hats don’t rattle. Instead, they enter oh-so-quietly at 1:06 and bang out a steady eighth note pattern punctuated with a crash cymbal on every fourth beat until the end of the verse.



Sounds Like Trap

The missing hihats are an important piece of “Panda”’s sonic puzzle, and point to some broader observations about trap aesthetics as politics, what I’m calling *trap irony*. Trap music moves through society in ways it shouldn’t. The image of the trap is a house with only one way in and out, yet trap aesthetics produce a music that seems to constantly find a secret exit, a path not offered, a way around established norms. Materially, the bulk of trap music circulates through and out of Atlanta on mixtapes, beyond the purview of major record labels and, in part because it isn’t controlled by labels, at an astonishing rate—for instance, from January 2015–February 2016, Future released four mixtapes and two official albums. Moreover, trap reverberates as *sonic blackness* in a society whose mainstream has been explicitly peddling a post-racial ideology for nearly a decade. Trap aesthetics become trap politics.



"I made you a mixtape" by Flickr user badjonni, CC BY-SA 2.0

Sonic blackness, as [Nina Sun Eidsheim defines it](#) and as [Regina Bradley has expanded it](#), is the interplay of vocal timbre and current norms about what constitutes blackness; it's a moving target that nonetheless shapes and is shaped by a society's notions of race and racialization (Eidsheim, 663-64). In the case of trap, I argue that its sonic blackness is apparent in the context of post-racial ideology. Post-race politics depends on the notion that racism has ended and that race doesn't matter anymore. In this framework, as Jared Sexton argues in [Amalgamation Schemes](#), multiracialism, the blending of many races together until distinct racial backgrounds are purportedly indecipherable, becomes the ideal. The problem Sexton finds with multiracialism as a discourse is that it doesn't account for the historical racial hierarchies that institutionalize whiteness as ideal; rather, multiracialism "is a tendency to neutralize the political antagonism set loose by the critical affirmation of blackness" (65).

Trap irony describes the way trap picks up recognizable markers of hip hop blackness (urban spaces, violence, drugs, sexual voracity, conspicuous consumption) so that its existence becomes an affirmation of blackness in a post-racial milieu. In fact, ironies abound in trap. [Kemi Adeyemi has written](#) about the use of lean, the codeine-based concoction of choice for many Dirty Southern rappers, as "generat[ing] *productively intoxicated* states that counter the violent realities of a particularly *black* everyday life" (first emphasis mine). [LH Stallings has argued](#) for the hip hop strip club — trap's home away from home — to be understood as an always already queer space despite its surface heteronormativity. [I've elsewhere used Stallings's "black ratchet imagination"](#) to think about party politics in the south, the way a group like Rae Sremmurd use party music as a refusal to produce and re-produce for the benefit of whiteness. The flat affect of rappers like

Desiigner and Future is a similar shirking of emotional labor; where an artist like Kendrick Lamar brings fire and brimstone, Future shows up with dispassionate Autotune warble. Intoxicated but productive, heteronormative but queer, partying but political, affected but flat: in each case, we can hear trap irony navigating the complex assemblages of blackness in a purportedly post-racial society.

The last piece of the “Panda” puzzle is another trap irony, the sonification of a dis-organized polity, a bloc that doesn’t voice its interests as one. Listening to “Panda,” it’s hard to notice that the rattling hihat, integral to so much ATL trap, is missing. That’s because Desiigner vocalizes it himself. Throughout the track, he adds a handful of background vocals that trigger at seemingly random points. Unlike the flat affect of his flow, Desiigner’s vocal ad-libs are full of energy, as if he’s egging himself on. One of these vocals is “brrrrrrrrrrrrrrah,” a tongue roll of varying lengths that replaces the missing hihat rattle. Listen back to the other trap songs I’ve linked in this essay, or check out nearly any track from trap artists like [Young Thug](#), [Rae Sremmurd](#), or [Kevin Gates](#), and you’ll hear the pervasiveness of the hyped trap background vocals.



Screenshot of Desiigner’s performance at the 2016 BET Awards, June 26, 2016

Trap background vocals, like the aesthetics, politics, and economy of trap itself, is a messy business. Desiigner’s background vocals on “Panda” move in meter and sometimes lock into a sequence, but he triggers enough different ones at unexpected moments that a listener can’t know exactly what sound to expect next nor when it will occur. Desiigner sounds like Future, which is to say he sounds like trap, which is to say he sounds like blackness, and his background vocals, which he turns up *loud*, are emblematic of the aesthetics and politics of trap. Trap irony means that a genre that renders blackness audible in 2016 does so not through a multiracial neutralization of the critical affirmation of blackness, but by setting loose a disparate set of recognizably black voices sounding from all directions, rattling across the soundscape, routing themselves through any path that doesn’t lead to the designated entry/exit point of the trap.

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Justin D Burton is Assistant Professor of Music at Rider University, and a regular writer at Sounding Out!. His research revolves around critical race and gender theory in hip hop and pop, and his current book project is called *Posthuman Pop*. He is co-editor with Ali Colleen Neff of the *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 27:4, “Sounding Global Southernness,” and with Jason Lee Oakes of the *Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Music Studies* (2017). You can catch him at justindburton.com and on Twitter [@justindburton](https://twitter.com/justindburton). His favorite rapper is Right Said Fred.



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