Can’t Nobody Tell Me Nothin: Respectability and The Produced Voice in Lil Nas X’s “Old Town Road”

Justin D Burton

Blog post published June 17, 2019 in *Sounding Out!*
https://doi.org/10.59350/4a8sm-7mx75

Abstract

It’s been ten weeks now that we’ve all been kicking back in our Wranglers. allowing Lil Nas X’s infectious twang in “Old Town Road” to shower us in yeehaw goodness from its perch atop the Billboard Hot 100.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Black Studies, Hip Hop, Music



Recommended citation

Burton, J. D. (2019, June 17). Can’t Nobody Tell Me Nothin: Respectability and The Produced Voice in Lil Nas X’s “Old Town Road”. *Sounding Out!*. https://doi.org/10.59350/4a8sm-7mx75

Copyright

Copyright © Justin D Burton 2019. Distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

It's been ten weeks now that we've all been kicking back in our Wranglers. allowing Lil Nas X's infectious twang in "Old Town Road" to shower us in yeehaw goodness from its perch atop the *Billboard* Hot 100. Entrenched as it is on the pop chart, though, "Old Town Road"'s relationship to *Billboard* got off to a shaky start, first landing on the Hot Country Songs list only to be removed when the publication determined the hit "does not embrace enough elements of today's country music to chart in its current version." There's a lot to unpack in a statement like that, and folks have been unpacking it quite consistently, especially in relation to notions of genre and race (in addition to Matthew Morrison's recommended reads, I'd add Karl Hagstrom-Miller's *Segregating Sound*, which traces the roots of segregated music markets). Using the context of that ongoing discussion about genre and race, I'm listening here to a specific moment in "Old Town Road"— the line "can't nobody tell me nothin"—and the way it changes from the original version to the Billy Ray Cyrus remix. Lil Nas X uses the sound of his voice in this moment to savvily leverage his collaboration with a country music icon, and by doing so subtly drawing out the respectability politics underlying *Billboard*'s racialized genre categorization of his song.



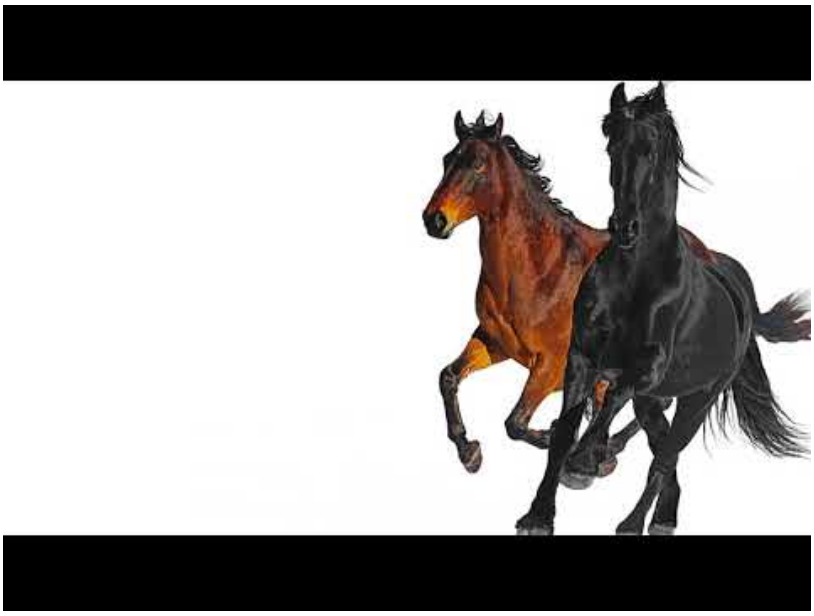
Screenshot, "Lil Nas X – Old Town Road (Official Movie) ft. Billy Ray Cyrus"

After each of Lil Nas X's two verses in the original "Old Town Road," we hear the refrain "can't nobody tell me nothin." The song's texture is fairly sparse throughout, but the refrains feature some added elements. The 808-style kick drum and rattling hihats continue to dominate the soundscape, but they yield just enough room for the banjo sample to come through more clearly than in the verse, and it plucks out a double-time rhythm in the refrain. The vocals change, too, as Lil Nas X performs a call-and-response with himself. The call, "can't nobody tell me nothin," is center channel, just as his voice has been throughout the verse, but the response, "can't tell me nothin," moves into the left and right speaker, a chorus of Lil Nas X answering the call. Listen closely to these vocals, and you'll also hear some pitch correction. Colloquially known as "autotune," this is an effect purposely pushed to extreme limits to produce garbled or robotic vocals and is a technique most often associated with contemporary hip hop and R&B. Here, it's applied to this melodic refrain, most noticeably on "nothin" in the call and "can't" in the response,

https://doi.org/10.59350/4a8sm-7mx75

https://youtu.be/5ho88VXJTBg

After *Billboard* removed the song from the Hot Country chart in late March, country star Billy Ray Cyrus tweeted his support for "Old Town Road," and by early April, Lil Nas X had pulled him onto the remix that would come to dominate the Hot 100. The Cyrus remix is straightforward: Cyrus takes the opening chorus, then Lil Nas X's original version plays through from the first verse to the last chorus, at which point Cyrus tacks on one more verse and then sings the hook in tandem with Lil Nas X to close the song. Well, it's straightforward except that, while Lil Nas X's material sounds otherwise unaltered from the original version, the pitch correction is smoothed out so that the garble from the previous version is gone.



https://youtu.be/7ysFgElQtjI

In order to figure out what happened to the pitch correction from the first to second "Old Town Road," I'm bringing in a conceptual framework I've been tinkering with the last couple of years: the *produced voice*. Within this framework, all recorded voices are produced in two specific ways: 1) everyone performs their bodies in relation to gender, race, ability, sex, and class norms, and 2) everyone who sings on record has their voice altered or affected with various levels of technology. To think about a produced voice is to think about how voices are shaped by recording technologies and social technologies at the same time. Listening to the multiple versions of "Old Town Road" draws my attention specifically to the always collaborative nature of produced voices.

In performativity terms—and here Judith Butler's idea in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" that "one is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body" (521) is crucial—a collaboratively produced voice is a little nebulous, as it's not always clear who I'm collaborating with to produce my voice. Sometimes I can (shamefully, I assure you) recognize myself changing the way my voice sounds to fit into some sort of, say, gendered norm that my surroundings expect. As a white man operating in a white supremacist, cisheteropatriarchal society, the deeper my voice sounds, the more authority adheres to me. (Well, only to a point, but that's another essay). Whether I

consciously or subconsciously make my voice deeper, I am definitely involved in a collaboration, as the frequency of my voice is initiated in my body but dictated outside my body. *Who* I'm collaborating with is harder to establish – maybe it's the people in the room, or maybe my produced voice and your listening ears (read Jennifer Stoever's *The Sonic Color Line* for more on the listening ear) are all working in collaboration with notions of white masculine authority that have long-since been baked into society by teams of chefs whose names we didn't record.



"Tools in a Recording Studio" by Flickr user Carol VanHook (CC BY-SA 2.0)

In studio production terms, a voice's collaborators are often hard to name, too, but for different reasons. For most major label releases, we could ask who applied the effects that shaped the solo artist's voice, and while there's a specific answer to that question, I'm willing to bet that very few people know for sure. Even where we can track down the engineers, producers, and mix and master artists who worked on any given song, the division of labor is such that probably multiple people (some who aren't credited anywhere as having worked on the song) adjusted the settings of those vocal effects at some point in the process, masking the details of the collaboration. In the end, we attribute the voice to a singular recording artist because that's the person who initiated the sound and because the voice circulates in an individualistic, capitalist economy that requires a focal point for our consumption. But my point here is that collaboratively produced voices are messy, with so many actors—social or technological—playing a role in the final outcome that we lose track of all the moving pieces.

Not everyone is comfortable with this mess. For instance, a few years ago long-time David Bowie producer Tony Visconti, while lamenting the role of technology in contemporary studio recordings, mentioned Adele as a singer whose voice may not be as great as it is made to sound on record. Adele responded by requesting that Visconti suck her dick. And though the two seemed at odds with each other, they were being equally disingenuous: Visconti knows that

every voice he's produced has been manipulated in some way, and Adele, too, knows that her voice is run through a variety of effects and algorithms that make her sound as epically *Adele* as possible. Visconti and Adele align in their desire to sidestep the fundamental collaboration at play in recorded voices, keeping invisible the social and political norms that act on the voice, keeping inaudible the many technologies that shape the voice.

Propping up this Adele-Visconti exchange is a broader relationship between those who benefit from social gender/race scripts and those who benefit from masking technological collaboration. That is, Adele and Visconti both benefit, to varying degrees, from their white femininity and white masculinity, respectively; they fit the molds of race and gender respectability. Similarly, they both benefit from discourses surrounding respectable music and voice performance; they are imbued with *singular* talent by those discourses. And on the flipside of that relationship, where we find artists who have cultivated a failure to comport with the standards of a respectable singing voice, we'll also find artists whose bodies don't benefit from social gender/race scripts: especially Black and Brown artists—non-binary, women, and men. Here I'm using "failure" in the same sense Jack Halberstam does in *The Queer Art of Failure*, where failing is purposeful, subversive. To fail queerly isn't to fall short of a standard you're trying to meet; it's to fall short of a standard you think is bullshit to begin with. This kind of failure would be a performance of non-conformity that draws attention to the ways that systemic flaws – whether in social codes or technological music collaborations – privilege ways of being and sounding that conform with white feminine and white masculine aesthetic standards. To fail to meet those standards is to call the standards into question.



So, because respectably collaborating a voice into existence involves masking the collaboration, *failing* to collaborate a voice into existence would involve exposing the process. This would open up the opportunity for us to hear a singer like Ma$e, who *always* sings and never sings well, as highlighting a part of the collaborative vocal process (namely pitch correction, either through training or processing the voice) by leaving it out. To listen to Ma$e in terms of failed collaboration is to notice which collaborators didn't do their work. In Princess Nokia's doubled and tripled and quadrupled voice, spread carefully across the stereo field, we hear a fully exposed collaboration that fails to even attempt to meet any standards of respectable singing voices. In the case of the countless trap artists whose voices come out garbled through the

purposeful misapplication of pitch correction algorithms, we can hear the failure of collaboration in the clumsy or over-eager use of the technology. This performed pitch correction failure is the sound I started with, Lil Nas X on the original lines "can't nobody tell me nothin." It's one of the few times we can hear a trap aesthetic in "Old Town Road," outside of its instrumental.

In each of these instances, the failure to collaborate results in the failure to achieve a respectably produced voice: a voice that can sing on pitch, a voice that can sing on pitch *live*, a voice that is trained, a voice that is controlled, a voice that requires no intervention to be perceived as "good" or "beautiful" or "capable." And when respectable vocal collaboration further empowers white femininity or white masculinity, failure to collaborate right can mean failing in a system that was never going to let you pass in the first place. Or failing in a system that applies nebulous genre standards that happen to keep a song fronted by a Black artist off the country charts but allow a remix of the same song to place a white country artist on the hip hop charts.



The production shift on "can't nobody tell me nothin" is subtle, but it brings the relationship between social race/gender scripts and technological musical collaboration into focus a bit. It isn't hard to read "does not embrace enough elements of today's country music" as "sounds too Black," and enough people called bullshit on *Billboard* that the publication has had to explicitly deny that their decision had anything to do with race. Lil Nas X's remix with Billy Ray Cyrus puts *Billboard* in a really tricky rhetorical position, though. Cyrus's vocals—more pinched and nasally than Lil Nas X's, with more vibrato on the hook (especially on "road" and "ride"), and framed without the hip hop-style drums for the first half of his verse—draw attention to the country elements already at play in the song and remove a good deal of doubt about whether "Old Town Road" broadly comports with the genre. But for *Billboard* to place the song *back* on the Country chart only after white Billy Ray Cyrus joined the show? Doing so would only intensify the belief that *Billboard*'s original decision was racially motivated. In order for *Billboard* to maintain its own colorblind respectability in this matter, in order to keep their name from being at the center of a controversy about race and genre, in order to avoid being the publication believed to still be divvying up genres primarily based on race in 2019, *Billboard*'s best move is to not move. Even when everyone else in the world knows "Old Town Road" is, among other things, a country song, *Billboard*'s country charts will chug along as if in a parallel universe where the song never existed.



As Lil Nas X shifted *Billboard* into a rhetorical checkmate with the release of the Billy Ray Cyrus remix, he also shifted his voice into a more respectable rendition of "can't nobody tell me nothin," removing the extreme application of pitch correction effects. This seems the opposite of what we might expect. The Billy Ray Cyrus remix is defiant, thumbing its nose at *Billboard* for not recognizing the countryness of the tune to begin with. Why, in a defiant moment, would Lil Nas X become *more* respectable in his vocal production? I hear the smoothed-out remix vocals as a palimpsest, a writing-over that, in the traces of its editing, points to the fact that something has been changed, therefore never fully erasing the original's over-affected refrain. These more respectable vocals *seem* to comport with *Billboard*'s expectations for what a country song should be, showing up in more acceptable garb to request admittance to the country chart, even as the new vocals smuggle in the memory of the original's more roboticized lines.

While the original vocals failed to achieve respectability by exposing the recording technologies of collaboration, the remix vocals fail to achieve respectability by exposing the social technologies of collaboration, feigning compliance and daring its arbiter to fail it all the same. The change in "Old Town Road"'s vocals from original to remix, then, stacks collaborative exposures on top of one another as Lil Nas X reminds the industry gatekeepers that can't nobody tell him nothin, indeed.

–

Featured image, and all images in this post: screenshots from "Lil Nas X – Old Town Road (Official Movie) ft. Billy Ray Cyrus" posted by YouTube user Lil Nas X

–

***Justin aDams Burton** is Assistant Professor of Music at Rider University. His research revolves around critical race and gender theory in hip hop and pop, and his book, Posthuman Rap, is available now. He is also co-editing the forthcoming (2018) Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Music Studies. You can catch him at justindburton.com and on Twitter @j_adams_burton. His favorite rapper is one or two of the Fat Boys.*

–

***REWIND! . . .***If you liked this post, you may also dig:

Vocal Anguish, Disinformation, and the Politics of Eurovision 2016-Maria Sonevytsky

Cardi B: Bringing the Cold and Sexy to Hip Hop-Ashley Luthers

"To Unprotect and Subserve": King Britt Samples the Sonic Archive of Police Violence-Alex Werth

https://doi.org/10.59350/4a8sm-7mx75