Elizabeth Navarra Varnado: The sampling aesthetic of Bon Iver's "33 'God'"

Abstract

This paper explores the various types of sampling and digital manipulation used within "33 'God,'" the fourth track on *22, A Million*. Within this track, Vernon utilizes unique modes of musical and vocal expression, featuring samples as symbols of otherness—other times, other places, other emotions—presented through the timbre of others' voices in order to convey his own memories and mental states. Vernon's authorial voice within the track is both complicated and strengthened by this presence of other "characters" in his narrative. The samples will be examined through my term "sonic totem," which is offered to capture the relationship of sound objects and memory within a narrative song. The fact that Justin Vernon's is not the only voice heard on the track will be analyzed as signifyin', as described in the theory of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1988), and related to theories by Simon Frith (1996) and Lori Burns (2010).

Introduction

The impetus for this project stems from an innate fascination with Justin Vernon's 2016 album, *22, A Million.* While the lyrical syntax and formal structure of these songs are not much changed from Bon Iver's earlier output, Justin Vernon's expression and attitude appears significantly changed. Darkness and anger in some tracks (especially "10 Deathbreast") paired with manic joy or elation in others (especially "45") presents a depth of expression yet to be seen from Justin Vernon/Bon Iver. Vernon's voice covers greater range as well—which is additionally enhanced by intense digital manipulation. As the front man, songwriter, producer, and lead singer of Bon Iver, Justin Vernon presents himself as the author of Bon Iver's songs, and his live performances, interviews, and press releases further the notion that his songs are outcroppings of his personal experience.[1]

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[1] Although Vernon is the leader of Bon Iver, his "crew" deeply influences the final musical result: in liner notes he acknowledges many people and producers who shaped *22, A Million*

Like other Bon Iver projects, Vernon's unique voice and melodic phrasing are highlighted within *22, A Million*, and showcase his ability to move from his gritty falsetto through to a baritone range. The emotionality of his voice is typically considered powerful and moving, but to some critics and listeners, the digital manipulations present in *22, A Million* render his natural voice (which is already a bit strange) into uncanny, unnatural, or over-emotional tendencies.

The scope of this inquiry deals with Justin Vernon's use of digital manipulation in "33 'God'", track four of *22, A Million.* Within this track, and throughout *22, A Million*, Vernon utilizes modes of musical and vocal expression in new ways than in earlier projects.

First, although Vernon typically employs cryptic or abstract titles, track names for *22, A Million* are even more abstract as collages of letters, symbols, and numbers.[2] Second, nearly every track radically expands or eschews typical instrumentation and musical texture associated with indie or alternative rock; instead, most tracks employ and prioritize digital samples as the main timbral elements. Vernon began to experiment with this type of digital manipulation on 2009's *Blood Bank EP,* especially with the track "Woods."[3] As a third new expression element, Vernon seems to favor timbres that are unpredictable or glitchy on this album—sounds that cut out randomly or stutter and repeat themselves. The five tracks that do not include digital samples, "715 Creeks," "29 #Stratford Apts," "21 Moon Water," and "8 Circle," feature production techniques that manipulate and mutate "natural" or acoustic instruments and voices.[4]

The fourth and final new expression element of *22, A Million* is Vernon's use of other's voices within his own composition by sampling, as exhibited on "22 (Over Soon),", "10 Deathbreast," "33 'GOD'", "666," and "00000 Million."

To manipulate samples within *22, A Million*, Vernon and his team used an OP-1 synthesizer+sampler device, created by Stockholm-based company Teenage Engineering, to create and manipulate samples. Vernon also devel-

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into what it is. Bon Iver, the band, includes many musicians who have alternate bands or solo project themselves and Vernon acknowledges their input on his musical creation.

[2] To view the track names and their stylization, I suggest looking at the album's liner notes. These notes are available in any publication format (CD, LP, Digital booklet). Here is a recreation of the track names and their stylization. "22 (OVER S∞∞N)"; "10 d E A T h b R E a s T ☒ ☒"; "715 - CR∑∑KS"; "33 'God'"; "29 #Strafford APTS"; "666 ꜛ"; "21 M◊◊N WATER"; "8 (circle)"; "____45____"; "00000 Million".

[3] An excellent discussion of "Woods" and how autotuned/manipulated vocals contribute to expression of alienation and loneliness is discussed by Ragnhild Brøvig-Hanssen and Anne Danielsen within *Digital Signatures, (*Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016) p.117-132.

[4] A variety of techniques were used within the album to achieve glitchy effects. For example, "29 #Stratfford Apts" features straightforward lead vocals (from Vernon and band mate, S. Carey), acoustic guitar, harmonizing vocals, and piano. However in production, Vernon and his team recorded the vocals onto tape, then crumpled up and damaged the tape in order to create warbled vocals that cut in and out on the final track.

oped a system of hardware and software with producer Chris Messina that harmonizes live sounds coming from another player. This device, called the "Messina," was created as an extension of the Prismizer effect (created by Francis Starlight, first made popular by Chance the Rapper's *Coloring Book)*. The Messina is set-up like other harmonizers but can be performed live with low-latency: A microphone inputs into an audio interface, which is hooked up to a laptop running the harmony engine software. A midi controller is mapped to parameters within the software so that Vernon can manipulate the harmonies during live performance. The "harmonized" audio is then converted back to analog. A combination of additional off-the-shelf analog gear and plug-in settings create the special recipe that sets the Messina apart from other iterations of this type of machine.[5]

This live performance playability was the most important feature to Vernon. In an interview, Messina described the tool: "Normally, you record something first and then add harmonies later. But Justin wanted to not only harmonize in real time, but also (to) be able to do it with another person and another instrument. The result is one thing sounding like a lot of things. It creates this huge, choral sound."[6] On *22, A Million*, the Messina is most often used to harmonize and add glitch effects to vocals and saxophones, especially within "715 - CR∑∑KS", "666 ʇ", "21 M◊◊N WATER", "8 (circle)", and "____45_____".

Sonic totems: Defined

Most of the production techniques used on *22, A Million* may be revealed through a focused examination of the fourth track, "33 "God."" This is also the best example of Vernon's use of samples within the expression of a personal narrative. Just as digital effects veil Vernon's "real" vocal timbre, his narrative voice is veiled and projected onto the samples he uses. These samples exhibit a concept I term "sonic totems:" sound objects that represent a connection between timbre and memories of a specific space or place in time (see diagram below).[7]

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[5] Messina has obviously not shared all components used to create the "Messina" sound, but watching live videos of Vernon perform "715- Creeks" will show the multi-faceted capabilities of this harmonizer.

[6] In an interview with Emilia Petrarca,"The Engineer Behind Bon Iver's *22, A Million* Clears Up Any Confusion About Its High-Tech Sound," Messina discusses how the software and hardware of the Messina work together. An electronic music friend helped me decipher what software/hardware Messina refers to.

[7] I created this term to describe specifically the connection between timbre within samples and memory. "Sonic totems" is distilled from the concept "AudioAutobiography." This term was created in a musicology seminar on "music and memory" at the University of Kentucky (Spring 2017). An AudioAutobiography is a group of sounds (musical or not) that represent a memory of the author's, and communicate this experience to the listener. "Sonic totem" further describes the connection between a very specific sound and memories of place and time.

A sonic totem represents temporal "otherness" each time it occurs. This otherness is the most important part of a sample: even if the listener cannot identify the origin of the sample, the imbedded timbre of that sample triggers some attempt at recollection and a sense that the sample is taken from somewhere else. In earlier publications, Erik Askerøi has used his term "sonic markers" to discuss this connection between timbre and time in music (2013, 2016). My term extends this by focusing on the *object-ness* of samples, and how these objects are tied to memories. Sonic totems are objects that are used or displayed in order to retrieve or describe a specific point in space and time, and can be equated to old photos, souvenirs, or other objects used in an artistic collage. Referencing Lori Burns's schema for interpretation of a narrative voice in song, the meaning of a sonic totem can have different shades as it moves from the real author (in this case, Justin Vernon), through the recording's narrator and implied reader/listener, to the real listener (Burns 2010, p.161).[8]

Using the diagram below as a guide (tab.1) each time a sonic totem is put into play, a layer of space or time memory can be added on to its sonic totem. For example, "It's Your Thing" is a track that could represent the early 1970s "golden age" of funk. This early 1970s drum sound is considered a "classic" hip-hop beat, and when this groove is used as a repeating layer within a hip-hop beat, it represents the late 1970s or '80s, a "golden age" of hip-hop. While these first two are examples of cultural or historical memories connected to music, "It's Your Thing" could also be a personal sonic totem, if it represented to the author their own "golden age" (summer as a twenty-year old). Additionally, if a listener holds the sonic totems as representative of something else, say, the death of a loved one, the sonic totem can take on ever-more faceted meaning.

Tabel 1. Sonic Totem in sound, space and time.

Sonic Totem		
Sound	Space	Time
lo-fi, syncopated, drum groove. "Classic" hip-hop sound	"It's Your Thing" by Cold Grits	early 1970s, the "golden age" of funk
	as a repeating layer within a hip-hop beat	late 1980s, a "golden age" of hip-hop
	*played at a party	*summer at 20 years old

This term also references meaningful objects used in filmmaking to denote passage of time or change in a character's mindset, location, age, etc. A good example is the "totem" used in Inception to determine what plane of existence characters find themselves.

[8] In her analysis, "Vocal Authority and Listener Engagement," Burns extends Seymour Chatman's narrative communication model and applies it to narratives in popular music.

By analyzing samples as sonic totems, "33 'God'" becomes a collage of sounds that incorporate memory of the general musical past and memories from Vernon's personal past. With this track, Vernon has moved beyond the perceived authenticity of his own quiet voice, lost in the woods of sincerity and folk music, and explores the ability of the electronic "other" to evoke a powerful, intertextual narrative.[9]

Identifying and tracing purposes of samples

To aid with the analysis of "33 "God,"" I created a spreadsheet that can be read like a score. It denotes what samples are used where, and how they are placed into Vernon's autobiographical narrative. This spreadsheet can be found in Appendix A, along with directions for its use. Within the spreadsheet and throughout this paper, terms defined by Mark Katz and Serge Lacasse will be employed that have become widely used in the discourse on digital sampling. These terms are useful in identifying and tracing the purpose of a sample within the narrative of "33 'God'". *Autosonic quotation* refers to musical borrowings that quote a musical segment by digital (or analog) sampling, but the sample can be manipulated. *Performative quotation*, a term used by Mark Katz, further defines the distinction of autosonic quotation as "quotation that recreates all the details of timbre and timing that evoke and identify a unique sound event" (Katz 2004, p.141). This means that the sample is *not* aggressively modified, so it sounds as if it has been "dropped" from the other recording. Autosonic samples serve a *functional* purpose within a track: either looped as part of a foundational accompaniment beat, or featured within the main "lead vocal" space of the track as commentary on the meaning of the track. Autosonic samples serve to enhance the meaning of a track by giving it credibility to those in-the-know and/or by "dropping in" historical timbres that give historicity to the track. There is a third type of sample present in "33 'God'" that isn't defined by Katz or Lacasse. I term this type "manipulated acoustics": defined as samples of acoustic instruments (for example: guitar, piano, human voice, saxophone) that have been digitally or manually altered through recording techniques or equipment—in this case, the OP-1 or the Messina—and turned into mediated musical units. For the sake of continuity, I will use the term "unmediated" to define recorded sound within the track that sounds "true to

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[9] The scope of this paper does not allow for a full discussion of why Vernon/Bon Iver is considered authentic by listeners. However, Vernon presents himself essentially as a singer-songwriter, and much scholarship has discussed how this type of performer appears authentic to their audience. (Frith 1996, Moore 2002, Negus 2011)

life," although there will still be EQ and tweaking that's done to any "live" sound while in the recording process.

Tabel 2. The samples in "33 'God'" are drawn from the following sources.

Song name	Artist	Album, Year	Samples used	Comments
"Iron Sky"	Paolo Nutini	*Caustic Love,* 2014. Atlantic.	Paulo Nutini singing "I found God, and religion, too"	
"Morning"	Jim Ed Brown	Released as a single, 1970. RCA Victor.	Introductory music with strings, Jim Ed Brown singing: "When we leave this room, it's gone" and "Here in this room, this narrow room, where life began when we were young last night.	
"It's Your Thing"	The Isley Brothers, covered by Cold Grits	Released as a single, 1969. ATCO Records.	Introductory drum beat.	This sample is not credited in the liner notes, but is found on Whosampled.com.
"DsharpG"	Sharon Van Etten	*epic,* 2010. Ba Da Bing.	High female vocals, long syllables.	
"All Rendered Truth"	Lonnie Holley	*Just Before Music,* 2012. Dust-to-Digital.	Lonnie Holley singing "All my goodness to show"	
WCFW Radio	Radio Chippewa	N/A	Percussive vocal syllables, in a female vocal register.	Vernon identified this sample in an interview, Sept. 2016. The station broadcasts near where Vernon lives.
Psalm 22 quote	N/A	N/A	A voice reading Psalm 22, in a low male register.	Credited in liner notes to "A reading by Granger Community Church in Granger, In.

Influence of hip-hop tradition

Vernon's choice of "It's Your Thing" has significance in the story of "33 "God,"" as a classic hip-hop sample. Vernon uses "It's Your Thing" in a traditional hip-hop style, as a repeating layer in an accompaniment beat, for just one portion of "33 "God."" This track has been used in the beat for several recent rap tracks and functions as a classic or "old-school" hip-hop sam-

ple.[10] Table 3 shows another example of its use as a sonic totem in "33 'God'"

Tabel 3. Sonic Totem in sound, space and time, example from "33 'God'" .

Sonic Totem		
Sound	Space	Time
lo-fi, syncopated, drum groove	"It's Your Thing" by Cold Grits	early 1970s, the "golden age" of funk
	as a repeating layer within a rap	2010s to signify the "authenticity" and lineage of the producer
	33 "God" by Bon Iver	2016 • signifies lineage of the producer • signifies influence of Kanye West • signifies "sexiness" in the song

The funky groove of "It's Your Thing" is interpreted as signifying sexiness because of the way it underscores lyrics that hint at a sexual relationship but are kept ambiguous.

> Staying at the Ace Hotel, if the calm would allow
>
> Then I would just be floating to you now
>
> it would make me pass to let it pass on
>
> I'm climbing the dash
>
> That skin[11]

This will be discussed further within the song analysis. For hip-hop producers, the draw of "It's Your Thing" and other classic breaks from funk and soul records is the recognizable timbre of these breaks. Even under digital manipulation, such as pitch or tempo shift, the grit and grain of pre-recorded material holds true and catches the ear of a listener as something "other," something that has come from somewhere – and "somewhen" else. Musicians and producers seek to use sounds that ground their compositions within

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[10] The track has been used in "Power," Kanye West, 2010, "The Blacker the Berry," Kendrick Lamar, 2015, "White Lies," by Danny Brown, 2016. It was also used by Beck in "Discobox" in 1996.
[11] The format of these lyrics is replicated from the liner notes of the album. This preserves the phrasing of the lyrics within the song. This is also replicated in the spreadsheet of the song, located in Appendix A.

the history of music that has come before them, just as scholars quote each other to show how new research ties in with existing and historical scholarship. Hip-hop producers show historicity by *literally* dropping sounds from the past into their works, but producers and musicians in other genres often quote licks, drum beats, and fragments of melodic lines from earlier works to ground them in the past.[12]

For hip-hop producers and fans, "historical timbre" is one important factor that signals "good" or "authentic" hip-hop. Musical quotation is at the center of the genre, and the authenticity of hip-hop tracks is wrapped up in whether the *sound* of a chosen sample is judged to be authentic or not (Schloss 2004*, p. 67)*.[13] Raps often contain verbal references to people from the author's past and the general history of hip-hop, and samples usually back-up these references. Hip-hop scholar Joe Schloss identifies this referential tendency as signifyin(g)[14], a theory first outlined by Henry Louis Gates Jr., as a basis of analysis for African-American literature. In his 1988 text, *The Signifying Monkey,* Gates points out how "black writers read, repeated, imitated, and revised each other's texts to a remarkable extent" (Gates 1988, p. xxii). Gates recognized that "repetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms," including music (Gates: 1988, p. xxiv). He states: "I decided to analyze the nature and function of Signifyin(g) precisely because it is repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference"(Gates 1988, p. xxiv). Gates's "signal difference" identifies the space and time categories on my diagram of the sonic totem. When a new layer of space or time is added into the "otherness" of a sonic totem, this is what Gates calls a signal difference—the signified elements (space and time) have changed, while the signifier (sound object) stays the same.

In his theory, Gates states that signifyin(g) should not be confined only to so-called African-American literature, because "all texts Signify upon other texts, in motivated and unmotivated ways" (Gates 1989, p. xxvi). By considering the lyrics *and* musical elements of rap as text, the displays of repetition, imitation, and revision among producers and artists of hip-hop and rap music are clearly evident, and make these genres prime examples of Gates's theories.

According to popular music scholar Mark Katz, repetition of this text "can be used to boast, insult, praise, or moralize, [and] generally play on the many possible meanings and interpretations of a given statement" (Katz

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[12] Askerøi also offers the theory of 'retronormativity', defined as " the mechanism of repositioning the 'past' in the 'present' and implying, in turn, a nostalgia for vintage technological artefacts and their aesthetic impacts on musical sound" (Askerøi 2016, p. 381). However, although samples from "33 'God'" are from the past, they are not used in a way that preserves historical timbre, except perhaps for the drum groove of "It's Your Thing."

[13] Schloss quotes producer Jake One as evidence of this judgment within the hip-hop community.

[14] Signifyin(g) is written with the parenthetical g to separate it from Peircian signifiers and to denote its origin in African-American vernacular culture.

2004,155). Katz cites Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" as an example of "double-voicedness" as it is so-called in the original theory by Gates (Gates 1988, 51). In the opening minutes of the song, a vocal sample from James Brown's "Funky President" is used: James Brown's voice and rapper Flava-Flav's are heard at the same time singing: "People, people." "Fight the Power" has overtly political lyrics, and the raps of Chuck D and Flava-Flav reference samples used within the accompaniment: "1989, the number another summer (get down)/ Sound of the funky drummer" (Referencing the break from "Funky Drummer" in the accompaniment). Samples within "Fight the Power" express opinions regarding the Vietnam war, white American history overshadowing African American history, and pay homage to African-American musicians important within hip-hop tradition. Within the first minute, samples of James Brown, Afrika Bambaataa, George Clinton, The Jacksons, and others are mixed into the beat of the track (Katz: 2004, 156). In most cases, only a hip-hop aficionado would recognize these samples, but the listener's perspective is only one facet of signifyin(g). Public Enemy prioritized these digital samples as compositional building blocks; they are used as sonic totems that uphold and support the meaning of the lyrics. Further, it's not just the words of previous rappers that are featured in the samples, but the grooves and vocal interpolations (specifically those of Afrika Bambaata) are also used to create a sonic landscape where their passionate raps can reside. Public Enemy used their lyrics to vocalize their philosophy, and used sonic totems to signify the compositions or physical voices of older musicians. To sample the voice of an honored role model is a powerful way to "back up" or bring legitimacy to one's narrative. Rappers and producers consistently use sampling to enhance narrative lyrics and provide an aural history of their own rap lineage.[15]

Because multiple voices are portrayed in a song that is both narrative and historical Katz's analysis of "Fight the Power" provides a model with which to analyze Vernon's "33 'God'" (although the latter lacks political themes). Both songs portray a strong narrative with sung/rapped lyrics that are supported by the musical elements in underlying samples. Gates's theory of signifyin(g) is additionally important to the analysis of "33 'God'" because the samples used by Vernon are repetitions, imitations, and revisions of their original recordings.

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[15] An older example is "The King" by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, released by Elektra in 1998. The track features samples of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Dream" speech. A second good example is Kendrick Lamar's "DUCKWORTH" released in 2017. Lamar's lyrics tell a story of epic-like proportions, citing the background and lineage of his own producer Top Dawg. The samples and other production elements (such as a rap in rewind at the end of the track) reinforce and enhance the thesis of the rap: "Pay attention, that one decision changed both of they lives."

The authorial voice within "33 'God'"

In this and in most of his songs, Vernon's abstract/word associative lyrics outline a first-person narrative, and generally consider the past tense. In "33 'God'", Vernon's lyric "I'd be happy as hell if you stayed for tea" within the opening stanza announces that this is a personal narrative. Vernon's song-writing generally eschews verse-chorus structure, and he tends to write in three-part structures or stanzas, basing his musical material on the trajectory of the narrative lyrics. If an idea or theme in the lyrics returns, a musical phrase or melody will also return. These typical elements are found within "33 'God,'" where Vernon's lyrics reference spirituality, loneliness, love, and perhaps an affair or love unrequited/unconsummated. A reflective or nostalgic tone is presented.

The impression that "33 'God'" is, in fact, autobiographical comes from Vernon's reputation for intimate, "self-expressive and self-revealing" lyrics (Frith 1996: p. 183). Vernon upholds a secretive personal life, avoiding press photos, fan pictures, and interviews, but he does give occasional clues that his songs are related to or descriptive of events in his life.[16] As lyricist, Vernon's is the ultimate authorial voice (Frith 1996: p. 184). Frith's theory about the voice, questions how the singer's voice relates to other voices, or other points of view, present within a song (Frith 1996: p.183). In the case of "33 'God'", Vernon further complicates the meaning of authorial voice by adding other voices into the mix of vocal perspectives within the narrative. What does this implicate for the meaning of these other voices, these sonic totems, presented by Vernon?

These sonic totems presented by Vernon are commentary on his own lyrics, allowing his authorial voice to remain intact. Vernon splices and repeats the samples to create sonic totems that portray a memory of sound-place-time, and "double-voicedness." To pin-point this double-voicedness, focus on the lead vocal space of "33 "God."" The lead vocals of a track are a space where the lyrics reside, a space where the meaning of the song can be analyzed. Justin Vernon's lead vocals are heard as the loudest element of the

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[16] Before releasing *22, A Million*, Vernon gave one press conference to discuss its material. He stated that this was the only interview he would give regarding the album. Within the hour-long press conference, Vernon discussed why he chose several of the samples, how the Messina was created, etc. Specifically referencing "33 'God,'" he said: "This song is about a very messy night in London, and I met this guy Paolo Nutini, and I was like, 'Who is this guy?' A few days later after this very important happening, I was sitting in the hotel room in Spain when Volcano Choir was playing over at Primavera, and I just heard that, 'Find god and religion,' I kind of heard it amongst the lyrics of the song I was already working on for that, and I was like, 'Great! More samples. Yeah!'" A video of this press conference is available on Bon Iver's website.

mix of "33 'God'", but the samples of Jim Ed Brown, Paulo Nutini, and Lonnie Holley are also heard as lead vocals.[17]

Song analysis: Sonic totems as structural elements

The track opens with a familiar idiom regarding a one-night stand or affair, from Jim Ed Brown's tune "Morning": "When we leave this room, it's gone". A sample of a string intro from "Morning" is featured here, with its pitch and tempo modified. This modification produces a romantic, sliding, and somewhat off-tuned timbre in the strings. The WCFW sample provides female murmurings that further suggest "When we leave this room, it's gone," is in reference to some romantic entanglement. Finally, the intro concludes, and Vernon's voice comes in to sing a question: "Is the company stalling? We had what we wanted: your eyes." Jim Ed Brown's: "When we leave this room, it's gone" is repeated three times within the first minute of the song, reinforcing this subject matter in the narrative and serving as a structural boundary for the opening stanza of the song. Here, the accompaniment groove is provided mostly by polyrhythm between the syncopated piano line and the WCFW Radio sample. At 1:08, the final repeat of "When we leave this room, it's gone" leads into Paolo Nutini's voice and words: "I find God, and religion, too.*"* At 1:20, the background accompaniment falls away to a sparse vamp, that hangs for a moment before launching into the backbeat provided by "It's Your Thing", a new fat and funky bass line, and deeply-echoing drums. To begin the second stanza, Vernon sings, "staying at the Ace Hotel, if the calm would allow, I would just be floating to you now." This is the dynamic high point of the song thus far, built upon the foundation of the classic funky backbeat and peppered with Justin Vernon's high-pitched interjections that are echoed by synth samples: "oohs" similar to those sung by James Brown, Michael Jackson, and Prince (around minute 1:33). While the lyrics are fairly ambiguous, these musical features impart a sexy edge to Vernon's performance and match it to the subject matter of the earlier Jim Ed Brown sample. Consider again Paulo Nutini's vocal timbre at "I find God, and religion too." This timbre is not matched or echoed by Justin Vernon except at the emotional climax of the track, beginning at 2:12. At this moment, Vernon's voice enters with the most abstract poetry yet to be sung: "Well we walked up on the bolt in the street After you tied me into the drive -way of the apartment of his bede…"[18] At 2:29, Vernon's perspective

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[17] The song analysis is greatly aided by the spreadsheet! The spreadsheet denotes in bold text when the lead vocal is Justin Vernon's, and in neutral text when the lead vocal space is filled with autosonic samples of Jim Ed Brown, Paolo Nutini, or Lonnie Holley.

[18] *Bede* is not a word that can be found in the Oxford English Dictionary, and a reference to St. Bede seems ill-fitting. One reader suggested it may be a misspelling or mispronunciation of bed, but this has not been discussed by Vernon.

shifts into less enigmatic, first-person statements. His voice drops into a lower register to sing "I didn't need you that night, not gonna need you anytime. Just gonna take it as it goes, I could go forward in the night/well I better fold my clothes." These lyrics do not point to any particular romantic or spiritual crisis if they are taken out of the context of the other samples in the track, however, when they are presented in correspondence with the sampled lyrics, their meaning is projected as some declaration of closure or surrender. These lyrics at 2:29 also contrast with the other abstract and ambiguous lyrics that Justin Vernon sings in the rest of the track.

Following this at 2:38, the groove built by the "It's Your Thing" backbeat and funky bass returns and the listener is left with the sense that whatever may have been building up in this story—never quite happened. Typical conventions used to signify resolution at the climax of a rock song—such as a crescendo to a drum break and a return of a chorus, or a key change, or some "wicked" instrumental solo that ascends higher and higher and higher until a screeching high note is wailed out—are not used. All that Vernon gives is a return to the earlier Cold Grits backbeat groove…then, Lonnie Holley's voice enters into the lead vocal space: "All my goodness to show." Finally, a lonesome quote of Psalm 22 is recited, twice: "Why are you so far from saving me? Why are you so far from saving me?"

Song analysis: Sonic totems as alternate voices

Vernon's samples and manipulated acoustics act as sonic totems that create an association between timbre and memory; the lyrics of "33 'God'" are given interpretive power *only* within the context of the musical imagery and additional lyrics provided by the samples. While Justin Vernon's voice and lyrics present a character that is ambiguous, abstract, and impressionistic (although still intimate and emotional), Jim Ed Brown's voice presents the regretful, nostalgic lover; Paolo Nutini's remembers an emotional and spiritual experience; Lonnie Holley's voice pleads, and finally, the low rumble of Psalm 22 is a spiritual cry of anguish or defeat.

Throughout the track, Jim Ed Brown's lyrics are explicitly about an affair, where as Vernon's lyrics are never this straightforward. Vernon's lyrics need the funky Cold Grits sample and Brown's lyrics to direct the listener's understanding of his abstract words. Brown's "When we leave this room, it's gone" frames the first section of this narrative musically and ideologically, but there is no place where Vernon's lyrics match the straightforward, non-metaphorical lyrics of Jim Ed Brown's country-pop tune. Additionally, the spiritual and emotional elements brought to the track by Paolo Nutini's lyrics ("I find God, and religion, too") are never echoed with any spiritual lyrics sung by Justin Vernon. Only the Psalms 22 sample, which enters at the end of the track (3:10), reiterates this spiritual element. Even then, "Why are you

so far from saving me?" is only an allusion to a spiritual statement, since it is taken from a religious text that is assumed to be addressing God. Vernon presents other voices as sonic totems that represent his experience, rather than singing some of these direct statements himself. However, Vernon includes the sampled text within his own lyrics in liner notes, strongly signifying their place within the narrative. The text of the sonic totems is integral commentary within the narrative, not an afterthought or just a background vocal. To distance his personal voice from the listener, during the most direct first-person narrative statements, Messina harmonies are continually added, and the voice expands into the background of the mix.[19]

Sonic totems of "Morning" and "All Rendered Truth" present the most candid descriptions within the narrative, but Vernon digitally manipulates them and alienates these voices (Brøvig-Hanssen and Danielsen, 2016). The sonic totem of "Iron Sky" is presented by Vernon as a performative quotation, as if Paolo Nutini were singing directly and "humanly" on this track. This type of performative quotation (Gates's "double-voicedness") is described by Vernon to be an artistic necessity. There are some musical lines that he claims he "couldn't have sang (sic)" and that the original artist must be quoted. Vernon elevates these performative samples to insinuate that those melodies and lyrics belong to those artists and have the most meaning coming from their voices. These samples are important sonic totems of Vernon's experience, placed into this musical narrative to be shared with listeners.

Conclusion

To conclude, I present "33 'God'" as an ambitious example of narrative song writing, created through digital sampling processes drawn from hip-hop aesthetics. Vernon weaves his own memories within the memories of others with "sonic totems" or digital samples. Sonic totems become vessels for memory in the moment where Vernon's memory might intersect with the listener's experience, as both author and listener creates meaning from the sonic totems. When a listener recognizes a timbre, and this is possible even if they can't identify the song, an emotional connection is generated that causes introspection and memory-searching for the source of that sound.[20]

Going forward, I believe that the sonic totem concept can be a useful tool to describe the "self expressive and self revealing" power of sampling within

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[19] Research into this area is being completed by Emil Kraugerud, first presented at the 2017 Art of Record Production conference, under the title "The role of stereo center placement in constructions of intimacy."

[20] For more of this theory of the 'uncanny' see Grafton Tanner, *Babbling Corpse: Vaporwave and the Commodification of Ghosts* (2016). Or the concept of "hauntology" as described in Simon Reynolds, *Retromania.*

narrative song composition, an addition of voices that does not detract from the composer's authorial voice (Frith 1996). My term encompasses the historicity sound-place-time memories tied to certain timbres, and how these timbres and musical units can be exploited to create narratives with deeper relationship between text and timbre. Beyond the power of clever or beautiful lyrical content, beyond the power of a well-placed guitar lick or vocal swell, the current development of sampling techniques has the power to elevate the singer-songwriter compositional method that has been around since early folk singers. Sampled voices and timbres are already lauded as adding expressive power and commentary to narratives in rap music, and "33 'God'" shows that they add that strength to indie/alternative/experimental music as well.

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Discography

Bon Iver, *22, A Million.* [LP, CD-Rom, and digital download] Jagjaguar, 2016.

Appendix A:

The following spreadsheet was created as an analysis tool for Bon Iver's "33 "God."" It should be read from left to right, then down. Timestamps in the furthest left column denote the duration of the track. The "Lead Vocal" column shows the lyrics of the song. The format is recreated from the liner notes of 22, A Million, including capitalization, quotations and line breaks. The "Accompaniment" column gives my best guess at samples or instruments used within the accompaniment. "Sample Source" gives the song title of the sample.

Any highlighted cell is a sample, and each color denotes a different kind of sample, as defined in the body of the paper:

- green: autosonic, vocal sample
- orange: autosonic, accompaniment
- purple: performative
- light blue: manipulated acoustic.

Any unmediated sounds, vocal or accompaniment, are not highlighted.
In the introduction and at 2:50 and 3:05, there are samples that are audibly present, but I cannot identify them, denoted by question marks. Whether these are manipulated acoustics created by Vernon or tiny samples from another recording is difficult to tell, but by 3:05 these unidentifiable samples form a climax of wild and diverse timbres that matches the highest emotional point of the lyrics as well.

"33 "God"", Bon Iver. *22, a Million*. Jagjaguar, 2016.

Ω	Lead Vocal	Accompaniment	Sample Source:
00:00		Intro: piano & synth lines, sample fragments	???
00:14		String sample - full version	"Morning"
00:20	"When we leave this room, it's gone"		"Morning"
00:25		WCFW Radio sample looped througout until 1:12	WCFW Radio
00:31	Is the company stalling (Vernon, unmediated voice)		
	We had what we wanted: your eyes		
00:40	"When we leave this room, it's gone"		"Morning"
00:44	With no word from the former		
	I'd be happy as hell, if you stayed for tea.		
00:51	"I know so well, that this is all there is"		"Morning"
00:57		String sample - fragmented, in background	"Morning"
00:56	This is how we grow now, woman		
	A child ignored		
	These will just be places to me now		
	The foreman is down, we're rising the stairs		
01:08	"When we leave this room, it's gone"	Synth lines, drum hits.	"Morning"
01:10		String sample - full version	"Morning"
01:12	"I find God and Religions, too..."		"Iron Sky"
01:27	Staying at the Ace Hotel, if the calm would allow		
01:28		Drumbeat: Cold Grits intro looped throughout	"It's Your Thing"
	Then I would just be floating to you now	Bass & drumset, mandolin	
	it would make me pass to let it pass on		
	I'm climbing the dash		
	That skin	Sampled fragments (oohs)	
		Drumbeat: Cold Grits intro looped throughout until 1:57	
01:44		String sample - fragmented	"Morning"
01:58		String sample - full version (bird shit_)	"Morning"
	"Here in this room, this narrow room,		"Morning"
	Where life began when we were young last night"		
02:06		String sample - short version	"Morning"
		Intro piano returns	
02:12	Well we walked up on the bolt in the street		
	After you tied me into the drive		
	-way of the apartment of his bede		
	Send your sister home in a cab		
02:24	Call & response: unintelligble vocal sample		???
	Said I woulda walked across any thousand lands	Call & response: unintelligble vocal sample	
02:29	no not really if you can't	*Messina harmonies & unmediated background vocals	
	I didn't need you that night,		
	was gonna take it as it goes		
	not gonna need you anytime		
	I could go forward in the night		
	well I better fold my clothes		
02:38		Drumbeat: Cold Grits intro loop throughout to 3:08	"It's Your Thing"
02:39		"DsharpG" high vocals loop throughout to end	"DsharpG"
02:38	Unintelligble vocal sample 2x	Bass & drumset	???
02:50	"All my goodness"		"All Rendered Truth"
02:54	Unintelligble vocal sample 2x		???
03:05	"All my goodness to show"		"All Rendered Truth"
03:10	"Why are you so far from saving me" 2x	Mandolin	Psalm 22 quote