FEARS AND FEVER DREAMS: THE DIGITAL DIASPORAS OF CHARLI XCX

***Kiki Amberber** tracks a techno-diaspora to which we climate-anxious folk could subscribe.*

Art by Ludmilla Nunell

Diaspora, as the scattering or flowing of people beyond and between borders, is a concept both alienating and comforting. I find that it acutely reflects my experiences as a multi-racial person of colour living in a western settler-colonial state. My body as a diasporic one is never quite placed, instead existing in fevered spaces of imagination.

Against the bodily fatigue and tension that comes from moving through white space, Africa hovers as a fantasy scape, a reprieve from disembodiment. In conversations with my sisters, we realise the image we have of the continent is simplistic and romanticised. Yet, never having visited Ethiopia, we cannot shake a utopian vision of finding roots there, or a discovery of self. For me, the same image persists: one of streets filled with Black people, and me walking among them.

Jamaican-British sociologist Stuart Hall criticises this idealistic imaginary pursued by diasporic communities as a static attempt to return to an irrecoverable past, thus reproducing nationalisms and reinforcing borders. He argues that the diasporic imaginary is an attempt to "impose... coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation." Against this, Hall urges that diasporic identities move away from imagined 'pure' homelands, considering potential to be found in the "hybridity" of diasporic identities "constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew".

Globalisation under transnational capitalism means that bodily flows are moving faster than ever, rendering the concept of a space of 'origin' increasingly complex. Here, diaspora spills out beyond race, encompassing a more fluid liminality experienced by all out-of-place bodies. Indian-American anthropologist Arjun Appadurai conceptualises one such site of liminality to be the 'technoscape', a product of globalisation and the blurring of space and time. This holds my attention: in the internet age, moving bodies enter into a complex interaction with virtual space. Does the spatial and temporal uncertainty of digital worlds comprise its own diaspora?

Listening to Charli XCX's third studio album Charli (2019) brings these questions to the fore. Situated concretely within the present, dealing with narratives of intimacy and alienation, the record nonetheless embodies Charli's futuristic sonic style, characterised by shiny silver-sounding, hyper-artificial synth pop. Tracks like 'Gone', 'Click' and 'Shake It' stand out as moments that push the artist into a temporal vacuum that is as futuristic as it is grounded in 2019 internet popular culture. Charli becomes a cyborg in the present, or a human in the distant future: displaced, or non-placed.

'1999' featuring Troye Sivan extends on the album's hybridity, coupling this futuristic/present duality with a third factor of 90s nostalgia. Charli sings, "I just wanna go back... / Never under pressure, oh / Those days it was so much better." The track embodies a yearning for an imagined past of carefree innocence. However, the digital production never allows listeners to forget they are 20 years removed from the narrative, merely inhabiting a heady fantasy. This fraught, self-aware desire is diasporic: it speaks to a longing for a past that is not only irrecoverable but, for many of '1999''s listeners, was never experienced at all.

Far from the simple purity expressed in the track, and wider current cultural discourse, the 90s can be de-mystified as far from perfect. The early internet age was a time of hope regarding the possibilities of digital technologies. However, it was also a period of more explicit hostility against people of colour, women, and queer people around the world - from the queerphobic "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy of the Clinton administration, to Pauline Hanson's blatently anti-immigrant 1996 maiden parliamentary speech.

Of course, a logical problematising of nostalgia culture does little to stymie how our physical bodies are effectively pulled toward the techno-diaspora.. The strength of the cultural imaginary is that it captivates not just the mind but also the body, a noticeable weight that we carry through our interpersonal interactions. When combined with its surpassing of physical borders, located in the online where our physical bodies can disappear, technological diasporic culture appears indestructible. Given this, I wonder whether our collective digital diasporic angst can be externalised productively for change.

In a media environment saturated by coverage on the gravity of the climate emergency, feelings of fear towards environmental decay become tangible and bodily. These are apocalyptic fears. They take one outside their body, or places that body into sharp relief against many other under-threat bodies. It's significant that for many, the climate emergency is the first time they have conceived of their body to be outside of itself and under threat. For many others, particularly First Nations and trans people, their bodies have never been safe or taken for granted.

If technological diasporic yearnings are like apocalyptic climate crisis nerve-ending tingles – bodily, deep below-skin feelings – then can this digital diaspora be a force for change after all?

Here, social and cultural theorist Gayatri Gopinath's notion of queer diaspora is pertinent in suggesting how diasporas can be operationalised to create new worlds and futures. According to Gopinath, "queer diaspora mobilises questions of the past, memory and nostalgia" for re-imaginative and archival purposes. In introducing the notion of a "queer diasporic archive", Gopinath conceptualises the past as able to be re-situated, and thus, used for creative and world-building purposes.

Perhaps Charli XCX, existing in a broader landscape of futuristic pop artists, is 'queering' digital diaspora to repurpose its more reductive manifestations. Diasporic yearnings for the pre-internet age occur in digital space, in a strange and ironic conflation of space. Alongside artists like Kelela, Rina Sawayama and Caroline Polachek, Charli's ultimate message is one of intimacy in the internet age as a possibility, within and despite disillusionment and bodily dissonance.

The album ends on the gritty track '2099', which holds none of the rosy-cheeked optimism of '1999'. Nonetheless, Charli sings, "Ooh, but I'm feeling so good / Better than I ever could." To this diaspora kid's ear, that sounds like a fantasy dream made real.