



Biopolitical Authenticity and Popular Music: The Song Refrains the Same

JOHN MUCKELBAUER AND NATHANIEL STREET

John Muckelbauer and Nathaniel Street, "Biopolitical Authenticity and Popular Music: The Song Refrains the Same," *Provocations* 3 (2019), pp. 10-18.

1. Different, Like Me

I want to be different, like everybody else.
I want to be just like all the different people.
I have no further interest in being the same
Because I have seen difference all around
And now I know that that's what I want.
I don't want to blend in and be indistinguishable
I want to be a part of the different crowd
And assert my individuality along with the others
Who are different, like me.

—"It's Saturday" by King Missile (1992), *my emphasis*¹

2. "Yes, there are two paths you can go by"

"It's a strange business, speaking for yourself, in your own name, because it doesn't at all come with seeing yourself as an ego or a person or a subject. Individuals find a real name for themselves, rather, only through the harshest exercise in depersonalization, by opening themselves up to the multiplicities everywhere within them, to the intensities running through them."²

One of the more pleasurable challenges of writing in response to a book from this series is that the provocations of a book like *I'm Not Like Everybody Else* invites its respondents to produce their own counter-provocations in turn. Of course, the most readily sanctioned and, indeed, scholarly way of doing this is to enter into a dialogue with the content of the book: to explicitly craft a series of positions that place Nealon's arguments and my responses into a specific and recognizable relation with each other so that I might advance some sort of critique, extension, or qualification of his theses. That is, in order to function *as a response*, this writing must actively distinguish itself from Nealon's; there must be more or less clear boundaries that demarcate my subjectivity from his—even, of course, on points where we are in agreement ("[my position is that] Nealon is obviously right when he argues that..."). This implicit "formal" or "stylistic"

commitment to dialogue is doubtless essential for there to be any productive (dialectical) engagement at all with the book.

But the path of scholarly dialogue is not the only one and, in this case, it strikes a particularly sour note. Nealon, after all, argues that the techniques of subjective authenticity have become the engine by which biopolitical capitalism runs and is tantamount to a kind of enslavement. The book then issues a call to harness the “mood provoking powers” of popular musical streams to simultaneously disrupt and alleviate the never-ceasing imperative to establish one’s own subjective authenticity. In other words, dialoguing with Nealon’s book by clearly marking the progression and interplay of “his” and “my” positions may very well miss the most provocative challenge that Nealon extends—a challenge that cannot be taken up simply at the level of content. In such a milieu, it seems important that we become more attentive to the stylistic force of *how* we engage texts and, perhaps, what we are willing to call scholarship, by inviting a different sense of response—perhaps something more like “riffing”—that mobilizes subjectivity, as one of so many masks, in an effort to provoke the emergence of something... depersonalized?

3. Play it Back (A Cover Song)

The recurring bassline of Nealon’s latest book will likely sound familiar to those who have spent any time at all reading around in *Cultural Studies: I’m Not Like Everybody Else* argues that the logic of authenticity that characterizes contemporary popular music no longer offers much resistance to the dictates of contemporary capitalism. But what makes his cover more compelling is that his version is neither a theoretical recognition that we are “always already” trapped within a totalizing discourse nor the story of “the capitalist man” co-opting yet another subculture. Instead, Nealon’s variation offers a historical-economic revision of this refrain. That is, the reason that musical authenticity no longer contests capitalism isn’t simply because music has at long last sold out; instead, it is because the structure and function of capitalism itself have changed. So, if there is any co-opting going on here, it might be more apt to say that a certain will toward authenticity, birthed in the resistive milieu of musical counter-culture, has infected and mutated capitalism’s own operating system. For Nealon, the diagnosis of this mutation combines Jameson’s periodizing historiography with Foucault’s sense of the historical shift from disciplinary to biopolitical societies. The melody goes a little something like this:

When, in the late 60s, American popular music first began to think of itself as an art form (rather than simply as entertainment), the claim to authenticity actually *did* serve a resistant function. Pitched within the Fordist version of disciplinary capital and its mantra of conformity for the sake of the group (the school, the town, the corporation, the country, etc.), the claim to an authentic individuality offered actual possibilities of some kind of resistance. But while that sense of authentic artistry has remained the enabling condition of musical genres as diverse as punk, grunge, country, and hip-hop, the Fordist version of conformity capitalism against which it emerged has actually lost a

lot of its selling power. As mass-markets shaped by mass-subjectivities slowly multiply into niche-markets shaped by niche-subjectivities, the movement and function of capitalism have shifted away from the demand for and reliance on homogenous conformity.

In its place, the newly dominant biopolitical logic of capitalism is one that *celebrates* difference and individuality (from Apple's entreaty that we "Think Different" to Mercedes-Benz's new "Just Like You" campaign to the Army's marketing slogan "An Army of One"). Indeed, it often does so to the point of even demanding a kind of non-conformity to the mainstream (if you're not sure how to obey Corona's instructions to "Find Your Beach," take a lesson from Toyota's reminder to "Carve Your Own Path"). These days, far from serving as an alternative to mass conformity, authenticity increasingly reads like an advanced marketing report—one that could easily be decoded from our personal music libraries. Where the anti-authoritarian punch of the Sex Pistols or the gender-bending soundscapes of David Bowie could throw a wrench into the homogenizing norms of conformity capitalism, they're now more likely to be cross-referenced with other data points to offer you a curated line of products on Amazon.com that will help you blur those pesky authoritarian gender norms in your daily life.

However, the point here is not only that pop musical authenticity has become *de rigueur* (every singer is an "artist" with a distinctive vision) but also that fan culture and critical culture alike have failed to take note of this fact and continue to be stuck in the rut of choosing between the authentic artist and the inauthentic sell-out. Even the "poptimism" movement that tries to take popular music seriously does so by treating that music as if it's really a high art commodity worthy of exegesis—now we can do close readings of Taylor Swift lyrics as well as Tupac. For Nealon, however, these are both poor choices because they fail to attend to the larger dominant economic field of biopolitical capitalism.

4. Again, with Reverb

Of course, the claim that the tactics of capitalism have mutated (from Fordist conformity to bio-political authenticity) is not primarily a claim about popular music—or even pop music criticism. The demand that we relentlessly seek personal growth, self-empowerment, and constant subjective innovation are everywhere today—I'm thinking of the current Microsoft campaign featuring the rapper Common, which nearly shouts at us to get off our butt and get with the program of innovating the future! But for Nealon, popular music is actually a privileged site for exploring the tactics of biopolitics due largely to its prevalence and affective power.

When public spaces from grocery stores to shopping malls to office elevators piped in generic Muzac, and advertising was filled with clever, infantilizing jingles, it made sense to think of popular music offering something non-mainstream. However, these days, those same public spaces and those same ads offer nothing but contemporary and classical popular artists ("my personal" favorite is The Pogues' "If I Should Fall from

Grace with God” as the background for a Subaru commercial). But for Nealon, the most important transformation that has occurred in the musical/capital landscape is the advent of MP3 and streaming technologies that have made popular music a ubiquitous part of nearly every moment of our lives.

These technologies have not only made our personal musical libraries more vast but also produced a kind of phase shift in the way we experience music. Apple, for instance, has gone from putting 1000 songs in your pocket at 99 cents a pop to making their entire musical collection available on any device with an internet connection for \$9.99/month. To say this makes music ubiquitous is somehow an understatement. It is nothing short of overwhelming—and to refer to it as a “stream” (as we all do) is to miss the perpetual turbulence of sheer volume. Think of it this way: there is a strong resemblance between the vinyl collection, the mixtape, the burned CD, and a self-curated MP3 library—even one measuring in the thousands: each is curated in such a way that reflects back onto the curator, shaping their subjective position in relation to the “mainstream.” But the move from the personal library to the subscription-based model is a case of quantity taking on a quality of its own.

Given the sheer volume, it’s no wonder that Nealon describes musical authenticity production as a labor bordering on enslavement. How and where could one even start to mark an authentic personal territory within a space that is both incomprehensibly vast and overdetermined? Of course, we still use many of the old tactics in order to narrow the field: we talk to friends and read reviews on *Pitchfork* and listen to recommended playlists (as we would listen to a friend’s burned CD); but increasingly, we rely on personalized “radio” stations and algorithmically generated playlists. These have become ever more sophisticated (although, often-enough, still bafflingly awkward): they blend machine-learning technologies (that measure everything from genre to vocals to tempo to instrumentation) with human curators and other algorithms that track and analyze our listening habits. Listening to streamed music in this way is much more like tacking with and across complex, shifting currents comprised of human and non-human agencies than it is constructing a musically authentic citadel of one carefully selected “deep cut” at a time.

Consider, for example, Songza, a music streaming company that was absorbed by Google Music a couple of years back. Songza curated playlists based on the day, the time, the activity, the mood, and even the weather. The playlist options read something like this: “It’s a cold and rainy Tuesday evening, play music for ‘warming up on the couch’ or ‘willing the rain away’ or ‘getting ready to go out with friends’.” While Songza no longer exists in its own right, major music providers have taken the hint and now often incorporate more affective and contextualized variables in their curating processes (both Google and Apple music, for example, now provide playlists based on mood and activity). Moves along these lines are nudging the logic of authenticity away from individual subjects and toward moments themselves. And the playlists are often filled with surprises—a Nina Simone station might veer toward Hip-Hop according to some obscure algorithmic logic (it turns out in this case that her music was sampled by some of these artists; as a result, “my” Nina Simone station moves from Simone to Kendrick

Lamar to Kanye West before swinging back around to Muddy Waters as tributaries fork and data points pool within the “stream”). Of course, this version of authenticity is unabashedly ephemeral and any “self” it shapes is connected to a wide array of rapidly evolving human and non-human movements—subjectivity becoming more of a transient flow than a space for inhabitation.

5. But biopolitics feels so... good

Despite the fact that the word “Heidegger” doesn’t once appear in its pages, it’s tough to read Nealon’s book without hearing a handful of Schwarzwaldian notes. In fact, one could easily imagine a version of music’s driving roll in biopolitics within an almost exclusively Heideggerian conceptual framework: popular music, especially in the form of ubiquitously available and highly curated streams, has become the kind of ready-to-hand equipment (*das Zeug*) necessary for disclosing (*erschlossen*) the moods (*Stimmung*) that enable *Dasein*’s authentic being-in-the-world. (Of course, this all results from the ceaseless neoliberal mandate to (re)craft one’s authentic self, so it’s hard to imagine Heidegger “himself” ever pursuing such a *capitalistic* sense of authentic being-toward-death. But if he had a Hölderlin station on his Pandora account...?)

In Nealon’s treatment, however, the tone of contemporary culture sounds much more like the fulfillment of a maniacal Heideggerian nightmare in which authenticity has become the very mechanism of “our contemporary biopolitical enslavement.”³ But again, this is a curious version of enslavement insofar as we are effectively enslaved ... to ourselves. Or more precisely, we are immersed in (and constituted by) the incessant demand to “be different, like everyone else”: to become our best selves, constantly upgrading our subjectivity just as we do our devices.

But as far as enslavement goes, this doesn’t sound all that bad. And indeed, when in the final chapters Nealon gestures to possible forms of “resistance” to our enslavement, it almost feels like he’s mocking cultural study’s orthodox decree that “resistance” is always and everywhere the appropriate response to capitalism. In this case, though, it’s not so much resistance writ large that he’s after but tactics for redirecting the dominant logic of authenticity—to “check out” of the self-production mandate when and where we can. His call is to use the mood-provoking power of ubiquitous musical streaming to affectively slow attention down, speed it up, turn it sideways, or flatten it out entirely—whatever it takes to provoke a disruptive resonance with one’s authentic self as a way of disconnecting from oneself-as-project. And though Nealon never says this directly, it seems that the resistant edge of his project is really directed not so much at biopolitical capitalism and “our” enslavement *per se* but at the relentless demand for selfhood (in any of a million different forms) that characterizes modern subjectivity itself.

Keep in mind that Nealon follows Nietzsche in arguing that authenticity is essentially reactive and that its primary engine is negation: to say “I’m not like everybody else” requires some version of “everybody else” that I’m not like. This authenticity machine, as much as it speaks the language of self-actualization, individuality, and creativity, is

actually a far more insidious force that only produces an “I” as a side-effect of a “not them.” So the biopolitical “enslavement” is an enslavement to an authentic “I” that can only make sense against a backdrop of an inauthentic “them” (the mainstream). The stakes, then, are both ethical (I must have a relation to my “self”) and political (that relation will always be a product of a negation of otherness). Which is why for Nealon, it isn’t simply a question of escape—of a subject finding a space of quiet respite from the boisterous demands of biopolitical subjectivity. After all, we are already seeing a new “counter-industry” emerge with self-help books that instruct us how to check out, “not give a fuck,” and “do nothing.”⁴ Instead, it is a question of experimenting with the affective tools of ubiquitously streamed music to create possibilities for non-subjective living—moods, moments, and otherwise. Tacking along music streams isn’t simply an escapist tool for diverting your (subjective) attention but may very well be a practice that multiplies and intensifies non-subjective ways of living.

6. “Conformity is competitive and divisive”

It’s an important reminder that capitalism does not only have a “one size fits all” strategy at its disposal and that its structure and function change in different times and places. As a result, an engagement with any form of culture must first involve an analysis of the strategies and tactics through which the economic field works. In other words, in order to follow Marx, it’s not enough to just *say what he said* (about economic relations), but it’s also important to *do what he did* (diagnose the current economic relations).

And Nealon’s diagnosis is convincing: much of contemporary capitalism is no longer in the business of encouraging mass conformity; instead, it sells the very idea of difference and individuality (in the political arena, identity politics would be one very visible instance of this phenomenon). But it also seems to me that this is not *all* that it sells, or that at least it doesn’t market this everywhere all the time. Here I am thinking, first, of the possible objection that “self-actualization” and “brand authenticity” are primarily targeted at relatively elite segments of US culture (there is a danger in drawing too many conclusions about capitalism from national marketing campaigns). In other words, it seems to me that “conformity capitalism” is still very much alive and well in the lower ends of the economic ladder.⁵ And this, of course, is perfectly consonant with Nealon’s (Jameson- and Williams-inspired) periodization: those are “residual” structures that serve to offset the “dominant” logic of authenticity.

But I am also thinking of the many popular cultural forces *that are critical of* the prevalent logic of authentic individuality today: in the advertising milieu, consider Bud Light’s ongoing ad campaign whose tagline is “Bud Light: For the Many, Not the Few.” Or, for someone like me who watches hours of ESPN, the constant selling of “male testosterone enhancers”—so that “we don’t suffer a full-on masculinity crisis.” Or more generally, the commonplace “snowflake” critique aimed especially at millennials and centennials as a critique of their incessant and “narcissistic” individualism.

What is interesting about these popular critiques of authentic individuality is not so much that they refute Nealon's analysis but more that they confirm an intensified version of it. That is, one particularly striking aspect of these "anti-individuality" motifs is that they are not premised on a traditional Fordist logic of group conformity so much as they are extensions of the very authenticity that Nealon diagnoses. In other words, these anti-individualist calls to conformity are not offered in the interest of disappearing into some larger demographic social whole but more for a person to *more authentically become who they really are*, through conforming to a larger demographic group. You are not encouraged to take testosterone simply in order to conform but because high testosterone is what a real man really *should* have ("just like your father, and your father's father"). And you are not being encouraged to select a watered-down lager-y beer for the sake of supporting an American brewery but because you don't want to be one of the whiney craft-brew snobs. In an important sense, then, non-conformity-individualism *and its critique* have both become tools for demanding authenticity: become what you are (by rejecting what you are not).⁶

For me, at least, this complication leads to a rather vague historiographical discontent: a dissatisfaction with the conceptual tools we have for thinking historically. Even in Jameson's compelling treatment, the conception of the "dominant/emergent/residual" framework was explicitly premised on the need to locate a cultural norm, without which all of culture would simply be dispersed into heterogeneity.⁷ But this critical framework itself sounds awfully nostalgic in its discomfort with difference. If we are able to stick with this idea of cultural heterogeneity (rather than reducing it through recourse to a "norm"), following the movement of capitalism from conformity, to authenticity, to non-subjective potential might enable the emergence of other historiographic tools whose analogue in the mood-producing stream might offer still other tactics for rewiring the circuitry of self-creation—even if they do so through the mask of subjectivity itself.

7. "Yes, there are two paths you can go by"

I'd like to conclude by re-emphasizing a few points about the relationship between this historiographical discontent and the problem of authenticity and biopolitical capitalism. A dialectical model of history (with its dominant/emergent/residual component parts) relies on the same negative movement that, as Nealon shows us, drives contemporary notions of authentic identity. Authenticity can only function as critique insofar as its very existence is defined by its opposition to the will-to-conformity of Fordist capitalism. The fact that capitalism later began to sell authenticity is a symptom of capital's sublation of this oppositional dynamic. If we were to maintain a dialectical model, then the next obvious stage would be the emergence of a new opposition to biopolitical capitalism—something that resists authenticity-production itself. But this is exactly why it's important not to read Nealon as calling for a musically-induced escape from the self-production mandate. There is absolutely no discord between the effort to "check out" of biopolitics and the "individualizing" of conformity capitalism because both simply serve the "opposition" function of a larger dialectical machinery.

Such a dialectical reading would miss Nealon’s desire to use music as a “soundtrack for becoming,” and he repeatedly shows that “becoming” also flows through mechanisms of authenticity-production as it forks into various branches of the “real” self. As Nietzsche likes to put it, something is only revealed in its truth when it is used as the mask of something else. Fordist capitalism wasn’t opposed by authenticity so much as it was transformed by it—*an appropriation that intensified its logics to the point of transformation* (i.e., of learning to sell individuality rather than conformity). Biopolitical capitalism, then, is every bit as much an intensity of authenticity as it is of capitalism writ large—an “a-parallel evolution,” as Deleuze might say.⁸ The questions to direct at these convergences, then, shift from questions of (“external”) resistance to questions of (“internal”) possibility: What does an authenticity of the moment look like? What non-subjective forms of life might it engender? What economic mutations might it provoke? To hear Nealon’s *more authentic* call, though, we must dislodge it from the dialectical machinery that operates through the negation of identity and re-contextualize it to ask what it would mean for subjectivity to become unrecognizable to itself.

8. Who is that person?

I don’t want to be identical to anyone or anything
 I don’t even want to be identical to myself
 I want to look in the mirror and wonder
 “Who is that person? I’ve never seen that person before
 I’ve never seen anyone like that before.”
 I want to call into question the very idea
 That identity can be attached.

I want a floating, shifting, ever changing persona
 Invisibility and obscurity
 Detachment from the ego and all of its pursuits

Unity is useless
 Conformity is competitive and divisive
 And leads only to stagnation and death

—“It’s Saturday” by King Missile (1992)

¹ *Happy Hour*, Atlantic Records, 1992.

² Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 6.

³ Jeffrey T. Nealon, *I'm Not Like Everybody Else: Biopolitics, Neoliberalism, and American Popular Music* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 117.

⁴ I am particularly thinking of Jenny Odell's recently published book *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (New York: Melville House, 2019).

⁵ Recall, in this regard, Foucault's claim that "the deployment of sexuality" was first directed at aristocratic and bourgeois families: "For their part, the working classes managed for a long time to escape the deployment of sexuality" (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, trans. Robert Hurley [New York: Pantheon Books, 1978], 121).

⁶ At this juncture, I would wish to re-read here the entirety of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* for what it does with "autobiography" and the proliferation of masks (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 11th American ed. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 6.

⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barabara Habberjam (London: The Athlone Press, 1997), 7.