

Malcolm Gladwell's Bad Aesthetics

Justin D Burton

Blog post published October 10, 2016 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/ww2c7-2rc28>

Abstract

Malcolm Gladwell, who recently wrapped the first season of his podcast Revisionist History, has been on a roll lately. Not a particularly endearing one, though. I've been trying to locate his nadir, but it's not easy with so many options to choose from.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Black Studies, Fandom/Fan Studies, Gender



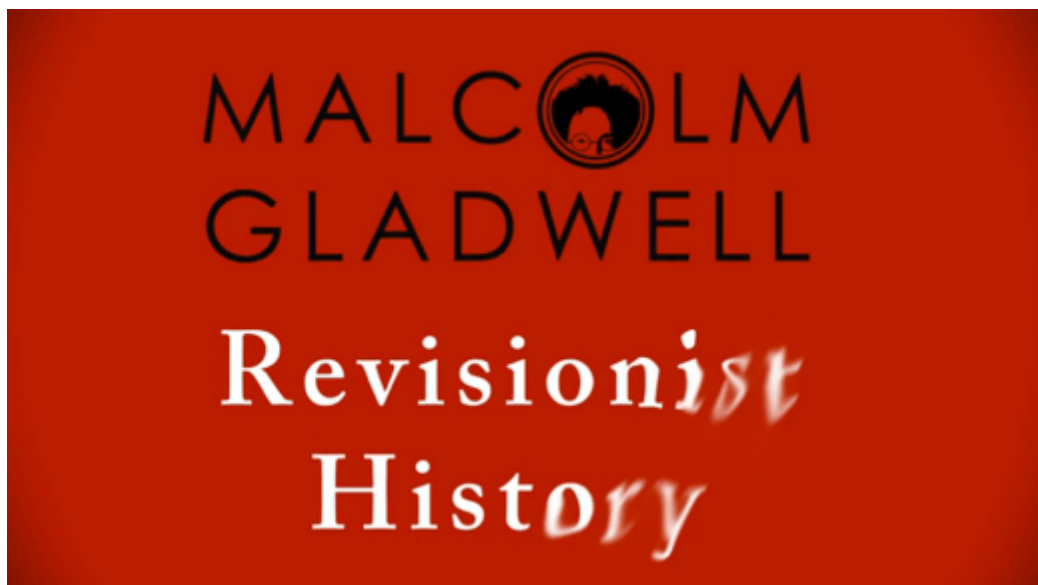
Recommended citation

Burton, J. D. (2016, October 10). Malcolm Gladwell's Bad Aesthetics. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/ww2c7-2rc28>

Copyright

Copyright © Justin D Burton 2016. 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.

Malcolm Gladwell, who recently wrapped the first season of his podcast [Revisionist History](#), has been on a roll lately. Not a particularly endearing one, though. I've been trying to locate his nadir, but it's not easy with so many options to choose from. Is it in the *New Yorker*, when he condescendingly exclaims “Of course not!” in response to whether Caster Semenya should be allowed to compete in the 800-meter at the Olympics? He follows up with the assertion that no track-and-field fan disagrees with him, as if the complexity of gender identification is somehow best left to a majority appeal. Or is it in *Revisionist History*'s Episode 9, “[Generous Orthodoxy](#),” when he chides Princeton students protesting the use of Woodrow Wilson's name around campus? Calling one student “angry”—a loaded word to lob at a black woman—and surmising she would later “regret her choice of words,” Gladwell advises the students to instead threaten to leave the university if their requests aren't honored. Why? Because otherwise “every crotchety old Princeton alum” wouldn't believe they actually care about the university.



For those keeping score, that's Gladwell, who spent [an entire other episode](#) of his podcast lamenting that we don't “capitalize” people's educational potential well enough, counseling black students to separate themselves from an Ivy League education as a way to make a point about a pro-segregationist president. Gladwell's seventh episode, “[Hallelujah](#),” where he discusses musical genius, is not obviously about the kind of systemic inequalities he bumbles in the Semenya and Princeton examples. But the conclusions he draws about genius and the anti-pop aesthetic judgments he claims are informed by the same bad gender and race politics that would put a person's gender identification in other people's hands and place the burden of sacrifice on the aggrieved in matters of racial injustice.

The episode “Hallelujah” revolves around two songs that Gladwell argues reached their peak of genius years after they were initially recorded: “[Deportees Club](#)” (1984) by Elvis Costello and “[Hallelujah](#)” (1984) by Leonard Cohen. In each case, Gladwell asserts that the first recordings were flawed but that they attained a certain beauty in later versions that reveals something about how genius works, though each attained that genius status by different routes. While Costello is

responsible for the version of “Deportees Club” that Gladwell loves—he re-recorded it as “[Deportee](#)” in 1985 (it wouldn’t be released until 1995 on a re-issue of *Goodbye, Cruel World*) —“Hallelujah” would peak for Gladwell in a series of covers, [most famously by Jeff Buckley](#) (1994), performed by artists other than Cohen. Gladwell’s focus on the process by which a song reaches genius status is a riff on David Galenson’s [Old Masters and Young Geniuses](#) theory. Here, Costello and the litany of “Hallelujah” coverers display a process of genius called “experimental innovation,” where the first draft is never the final draft, and genius is only unlocked after years of work. I’ll return to Gladwell’s notion of musical beauty and how it relates to his bad politics momentarily, but I first want to unpack the theory of genius that enthralles him in this episode.



Galenson’s notion of genius is a binary, where some geniuses (“conceptual innovators”) are very young, decisive artists and others, like the “experimental innovators” responsible for “Deportee” and “Hallelujah,” are endless tinkerers who tend to reach their creative potential later in life. Gladwell uses the same paradigmatic examples that Galenson does to categorize geniuses; conceptual innovators are Pablo Picasso, while experimental innovators are Paul Cézanne. Curiously, Gladwell notes that this theory of genius may be best exemplified in music, but he doesn’t seem aware that music scholars have already laid out this same broad theory of genius with easy comps: Mozart the young genius and Beethoven the old master. Moreover, Gladwell doesn’t seem aware that this is a lousy theory of genius.

[I’ve written elsewhere](#) about genius myths, and there’s a rabbit hole of problematic ideas out there about classical music genius that run from benignly self-serving to violently racist. One critique is particularly useful for pushing back against Gladwell, as it highlights the gender and race problems with Gladwell’s approach to genius. Tia DeNora’s [Beethoven and the Construction of Genius](#) (1994) is a painstaking deconstruction of Beethoven’s genius. While DeNora’s argument includes a number of moving parts, it can be summarized as a demonstration of the way “genius” isn’t so much innate talent as it is a combination of several social and political ideals intersecting with a person’s talents or insights.

It was the 90s, when postmodernity crested in musicology, and the aim of DeNora’s analysis is quintessentially postmodern: undo the Great White Man myth to make room for other kinds of histories and notions of genius to be accommodated. If we understand Beethoven’s genius to be firmly rooted in a number of social and political attitudes—including the reflexive belief that only a white man could be a genius—that tipped in his favor, then we can understand that history isn’t telling us that only men or only white people can be geniuses; rather, history is showing its biases. This sort of deconstruction doesn’t really move the academic needle now—most college freshmen can articulate the Great White Man critique—largely due to the work of DeNora and other

deconstructionists who effectively cleared the space for us to build other kinds of scholarship on top of their work.



"Pop!Tech 2008 – Malcolm Gladwell" by Flickr user Pop!Tech, CC BY 2.0

Alas, though, the 90s truly must be all the rage right now, because Gladwell is wading right back into Great White Man territory. To be clear, he isn't doing it on purpose, for whatever that's worth. In Episode 9, the one where he counsels the black Princeton students to threaten to leave the school, he performs a whole Great White Man rant to establish his credibility as A Guy Who Gets It. But beyond understanding that there are too many things named after white men, Gladwell doesn't indicate that he knows what the rub really is, that the name on a building or School is a tiny piece of a much bigger, systemic problem of race and gender. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, his ideas about musical genius betray his own tendency to set up hierarchies where Great White Men are always on top. So excuse me while I pump some air in my Reeboks, hitch up my Guess jeans, and douse myself in CK1; we have some 90s theory to attend to.

Gladwell doesn't—and perhaps can't—articulate what's genius about the versions of "Deportee" and "Hallelujah" he reveres, and his assessment of the originals is similarly vague. About 1984's "Deportees Club," he exclaims, "Oh, god, It's awful!" For Cohen's 1984 "Hallelujah," Gladwell borrows a line from [Michael Barthel](#), who could've just as well been describing Gladwell's podcast: "The entire performance is so hyperserious that it's almost satire." [Historiographic aside: Barthel, who is now a researcher for the [Pew Research Center](#), seems to be the under-cited source for the "Hallelujah" history in both Gladwell's podcast and Alan Light's book on the song]. Gladwell may suffer a poverty of aesthetic language to describe what is or isn't good about these songs, but by considering what he does and doesn't like—what counts as genius or not for him—we can understand where his aesthetic allegiances lie.



Screenshot of Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" video on YouTube

Gladwell finds beauty in music whose emotional content is as stripped down as the acoustic guitar textures on the later recordings of "Deportee" and "Hallelujah." The line he quotes from Barthel misses the point: Barthel *likes* the satirical nature of the original "Hallelujah" and finds the famous Buckley version—which becomes something of an *ürtext* for all the covers that came after it—an unfortunate telescoping of emotional range, a "Hallelujah" that only knows lament instead of the many "holy, broken, profane, transcendent" hallelujahs Cohen first explored. But all those hallelujahs, along with the "angry, loud, and upsetting" original "Deportees Club," don't seem to suit Gladwell, who prefers versions of the songs where both the emotional and musical content are as straightforward as possible.



Screenshot from Jeff Buckley's video for "Hallelujah"

That Gladwell is drawn to the versions of Buckley's "Hallelujah" and Costello's later "Deportee" that feature an acoustic singer-songwriter coffeehouse vibe isn't a coincidence. The villain in his account of genius is pop. Noting that both songs were initially recorded in 1984, he reminds us that year's "biggest album" was Michael Jackson's "Thriller," "pop music glossed to perfection...not

a single stray note or emotion on that record.” “Thriller” was the final single from an album two years old, and it peaked at #4 on the *Billboard* Hot 100, so Gladwell’s definition of “biggest album” is suspect, but he’s looking for “the antithesis of ‘Deportee’ and ‘Hallelujah,’” so I’ll engage on his terms and zero in on his aesthetics by figuring out what he thinks is wrong with pop music like “Thriller.”

Gladwell offers a couple other assessments of pop aesthetics in his description of producers. Clive Langer and Alan Winstanley, who co-produced the *Goodbye, Cruel World* album “Deportees Club” appeared on, are the ill-fitting pop perfectionists who try to harness Costello’s sound but only manage to screw it up. Trevor Horn is the guy spending four weeks—“a month,” Gladwell bemoans—shaping a snare sound for Frankie Goes to Hollywood’s “Two Tribes” (1983). Whether it’s Langer and Winstanley, Horn, or Quincy Jones (who Gladwell doesn’t name but who produced “Thriller”), Gladwell has no space for the behind-the-glass work of sound design and sonic processing in his aesthetics of genius. He argues, citing Costello’s own assessment, that glossy pop perfection couldn’t capture the “dark, emotional, bitter songs, gritty and spare,” pouring out of Costello. For Gladwell, pop music production is the villain because it short circuits the true, raw emotion that he finds beautiful.

The problem with Gladwell’s aesthetics is that he’s mistaking his taste for genius, then reverse-manufacturing an explanation of genius that privileges a specifically white masculine mode of expression. “Glossy pop perfection,” in his estimation, covers up something beautiful, obscuring real emotion. But directly sharing one’s emotions—whether musically or politically—is more acceptable for some than for others. We need look no further than Gladwell for proof. If you’re Elvis Costello or Jeff Buckley singing laments? You’re a genius. If you’re a black woman protesting Woodrow Wilson at Princeton? You’re “angry.”



Joe Mabel [GFDL (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>) or CC BY-SA 3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)]%5D, via Wikimedia Commons

In fact, the danger of directly expressing oneself underlies a wide array of black aesthetics, from Gates’s *Signifying Monkey* to Shana Redmond’s *analysis of Janelle Monae’s “Cold War.”* Redmond cites Darlene Clark Hines’s “*Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West*” to

highlight Monae's engagement with "the acts of dissemblance that have long characterized black women's participation in the public sphere" (398). Hines argues that Black women developed "a cult of secrecy, a culture of dissemblance" to protect themselves in public spaces, "creating the appearance of disclosure...while actually remaining an enigma" (Hines 915). It is Monae's rupture of pop conventions—she breaks down and cries, dropping her lip synch even as the track plays on—that, on the one hand, creates the space for her to step outside of that culture of dissemblance and, on the other hand, marks the cover those pop conventions provide, the strategic, protective secrecy available under so much glossy pop perfection. In his 2002 "[Feenin](#)," Alexander Weheliye homes in on glossy pop voice-processing, the vocoders and filters (and, several years after his article, AutoTune) that render the R&B voice machinic, and contends that these processing techniques yield human desire that "can be represented *only* in the guise of the machinic" (39, emphasis mine). In other words, the gloss isn't a bad thing. It's a strategy that plugs technology into humanity in order to project ways of being beyond the white liberal humanist subject. In both Redmond's and Weheliye's analyses, the sound of pop, the glossy perfection that Gladwell holds up as the antithesis of genius, is employed by Black musicians to enable emotionality in a world that is otherwise hostile to such expression.

Gladwell's bad aesthetics, his refusal to recognize beauty in pop music, is also bad politics. By holding up an aesthetic that prizes stripped-down, straightforward emotionality, a form of expression available to some but not others, Gladwell ends up in the same Great White Man genius bind DeNora and others unraveled in the postmodern 90s. So I'll sum it up with a 90s phrase: genius is always already political. Denora argues—and Gladwell inadvertently demonstrates—that labeling artists as genius relies on politically volatile aesthetic judgments that reinforce existing power hierarchies, in this case along the lines of race and gender. Like his response to Princeton students and his armchair adjudication of Semenya's gender identity, Gladwell's theory of musical genius proves to be less a revision of history and more a revival of history's worst politics.

—

Featured image: "Malcolm Gladwell" by Flickr user Ed Schipul, CC BY-SA 2.0

—

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.

—



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

Pop's Chill Thrills Aren't So Cheap-Robin James

Trap Irony: Where Aesthetics Become Politics-Justin D. Burton

This is What It Sounds Like On Prince (1958-2016) and Interpretive Freedom-Ben Tausig