Poptimism and Popular Feminism

rmjames

Blog post published September 17, 2018 in *Sounding Out!*
https://doi.org/10.59350/rkaed-hba44

Abstract

Almost 20 years ago, 2 Many DJs and Freelance Hellraiser each released too-clever mashups that laid R&B pop diva vocals over indie rock instrumentals, revealing that the paired songs had exactly the same compositional structure.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Feminism, Gender, Listening, Live Music



Recommended citation

rmjames. (2018, September 17). Poptimism and Popular Feminism. *Sounding Out!*. https://doi.org/10.59350/rkaed-hba44

Copyright

Copyright © rmjames 2018. 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.

Almost 20 years ago, 2 Many DJs and Freelance Hellraiser each released too-clever mashups that laid R&B pop diva vocals over indie rock instrumentals, revealing that the paired songs had *exactly* the same compositional structure. The former's "Smells Like Booty" put Destiny's Child together with Nirvana, and the latter's "A Stroke of Genius" combined Christina Aguilera with The Strokes. The mashups were clever because they flouted supposedly commonsense views that these these pairings shouldn't work: how could something as superficial, formulaic, and, frankly, *girly* as Destiny's Child and Aguilera have anything in common with something as serious and aggressive as Nirvana and The Strokes? Writing in 2009, Dorian Lynskey explained that "A Stroke of Genius came out when many indie fans still believed that manufactured pop stank of evil and death, and the idea of Christina Aguilera and the Strokes in perfect harmony was strange." Note Lynskey's use of the past tense: by 2009, the gatekeepers of elite musical taste generally agreed that commercial, chart-oriented music whose fans were at least thought to be mainly teen girls and/or gay men could be just as artistically valuable as rock and hip hop.



"Tricoteuse" by William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), Public Domain

That consensus has a name: poptimism. Poptimism upends the hierarchy between rock (and sometimes hip hop) and pop, which is a contemporary variation on a very old hierarchy that privileged fine art over craft. Back in the 18th century, philosophers like Immanuel Kant invented the idea of "fine art" by distinguishing it from craft: craft is subordinate to utility (you don't want your coffee mug to leak), but art exists for its own sake (think of how unwearable some high fashion is, or of Rosemarie Trockel's art sweaters). As many feminist art historians have argued, this art/craft hierarchy conveniently maps onto patriarchal gender hierarchies: art, like men, is autonomous, whereas craft, like women, are subordinate to daily needs; art is productive, craft is reproductive. For example, art historians Roziska Parker and Griselda Pollock have shown that there is an "intersection in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of the development of an

ideology of femininity…with the emergence of a clearly defined separation of art and craft." The conceptual and institutional structures that confined women to reproductive labor and craft into the service of life's reproductive needs were manifestations of the same underlying gender system.



"Jennifer Lopez | Pop Music Festival | 23.06.2012" by Flickr user Ana Carolina Kley Vita, CC BY 2.0. A Google image search of the word "pop music" listed this image as one of the top images.

This same system informs the traditional rock-over-pop hierarchy. In her 2001 article "Feminist Musicology and the Abject Popular," Susan Cook argues that "'the popular'…has been so thoroughly feminized" and "carries with it a staggering cultural baggage, a trunk full of social codes that have been historically attached to womankind and underprivileged men." In the latter half of the twentieth century, the distinction between rock and pop was largely grounded in the same gender system that organized the art/craft hierarchy: rock embodied all the values and characteristics of ideal masculinity, and that's why it was superior, whereas pop embodied all the values and characteristics of ideal femininity, and that's why it was inferior. In the early 2000s, poptimism revises this gender script, putting "thoroughly feminized" pop on an equal playing field with rock. However, instead of more-or-less uncritically cheerleading for pop and/or pop stars, we should be thinking about the institutions and conventions that dole out artistic status.



"Rock Hard Open Air 2009" by Flickr user Elena, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

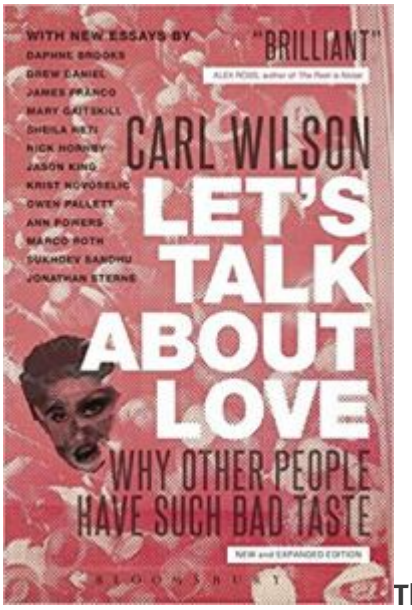
Kelefa Sanneh's 2004 article "The Rap Against Rockism" brought the fact of rock-conceived-as-art to the general public's attention. "Rockism" is the idea that rock music is the only kind of commercial recorded music that has artistic merit. According to Sanneh,

> ***rockism isn't unrelated to older, more familiar prejudices...The pop star, the disco diva, the lip-syncher, the "awesomely bad" hit maker: could it really be a coincidence that rockist complaints often pit straight white men against the rest of the world? Like the anti-disco backlash of 25 years ago, the current rockist consensus seems to reflect not just an idea of how music should be made but also an idea about who should be making it.***

Grounded in the idea that rock is superior because it is both made by and for white dudes and expresses the stereotypical features of elite white masculinity, rockism upgrades the gendered (and raced) logics of the fine art/craft distinction into 20th century terms. Meanwhile, poptimism revalues the aspects of pop music that were traditionally de-valued *because* of their association with stereotypical (often white) femininity: pop is hugely collaborative and rarely written by lone authors; it prioritizes pleasure over deep meaning, beauty and spectacle over substance; its music and its ideas are supposedly simple rather than complex...you get the idea. (Ethnomusicologist Elizabeth Keenan-Penagos explains the gendered implications of poptimism in more depth in this piece about the role of misogyny in critiques of poptimism.)

Sanneh's article kicked off this millennial round of poptimism, but poptimism's basic ideas and values go all the way back to the 19th century (which is much later than Michael Kramer argues here). Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of German composer Richard Wagner uses the same basic framework we now call poptimism: Wagner, he argued, was too concerned with deep philosophical meaning and not enough with the beauty and pleasure of the sounds. Saying things like "music is a woman" and that Italian opera is superior to German opera because it's prettier and more fun (see *The Gay Science* sections 77-80), Nietzsche also recognized the gender and race dynamics of poptimism: by 19th century standards Italians weren't fully white, so his prioritization of Italian over German opera subordinates white highbrow culture to not-really-

white middle-to-lowbrow culture. In *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, he makes his preference for light, unserious art over high culture quite clear. There, he contrasts the "hubbub…with which the 'cultured' man and the man about town allow themselves to be forced through art, literature, music, and with the help of intoxicating liquor, to 'intellectual enjoyments'" with the "nimble, volatile, divinely undisturbed, divinely *artificial* art, which blazes up like pure flame into a cloudless sky" (emphasis mine). This contrast flips fine art/craft hierarchies and argues that things traditionally devalued as feminine, such as superficiality or sensory pleasure, are artistically superior to all the values commonly attributed to fine art, such as intellectual depth. Though he called it "the joyful wisdom" (*die fröliche Wissenschaft*, often translated as *The Gay Science*) instead of "poptimism," the later Nietzsche's music aesthetics articulates the same basic theoretical commitments that inform 21st century poptimism.



The basic idea of poptimism has been around since the late 1880s, but it took more than a century to really take off. In the decade after Sanneh's article, there was a poptimism bubble: it rose to huge popularity, especially with the publication of Carl Wilson's 2007 book on fans of cheesy pop music. That bubble started to burst about 9 or 10 years after that book appeared as critics began to sour on poptimism. Though it was initially understood as a radical upheaval of the powers that be, by 2017 poptimism had been co-opted by those powers. Instead of challenging patriarchal gender systems, poptimism reinforced them. Writing in *The Quietus*, Michael Hann argues that "Poptimism, in practice, has not meant championing those who do not get the acclaim they are due, so much as celebrating the position of artists who don't need their genius proclaimed" such as Beyonce or Taylor Swift. The oft-noted death of the negative album review suggests that [p]optimism is now the orthodox practice among music critics. (This also coincides with recent trends in academic literary theory, which prize "reparative" readings over critical ones.) Such concerns have led Rob Harvilla to pose the rhetorical question "Have we reached the end of poptimism?" because what began as a feminist revolt now feels like an expectation or obligation to stan for the already powerful, such as corporations and megastars. Hann and Harvilla observe a change in poptimism, at least as it is practiced in the music media and industry: poptimism feels less like rooting for undervalued and underrepresented women and more like cheerleading for The Man. Harvilla speculates about

poptimism's end because this corporate poptimism betrays the movement's original ideals and values.

Why did the poptimism bubble happen when it did? There were many contributing factors, such as the rise of what sociologists Richard Peterson and Roger Kern call "omnivorous taste," which is the idea that elites prefer both traditional highbrow culture and a range of lowbrow forms, a.k.a. "I like everything but [usually country or hip hop]." Evolutions in feminist media and activism are another central cause of the poptimist bubble. Because pop is an inherently gendered category defined by its feminization, poptimism's evolution is closely tied to feminism's. The poptimism bubble roughly coincides with the period when feminism broke the mainstream and mutated into popular feminism.

This is more than just a correlation or coincidence. "Pop" is a gendered category, so its evolution is inextricably tied to evolving gender norms and politics. Poptimism emerged at the dawn of a broader "woke" turn in popular media and pop culture. The first decades of the 21st century saw the rise of a proliferation of explicitly feminist web publications (*Autostraddle*, *Broadly*, *Jezebel*, etc.) and the circulation of feminist theory outside the academy on social media sites like tumblr. 2014, the year Beyonce brought the big pink "FEMINIST" sign to the VMAs, was the year that feminism broke the mainstream. As media studies scholar Sarah Banet-Wesier argues, around 2014 a variety of white liberal feminism focused primarily on individual economic (and sexual) empowerment; it "became a sort of product" that circulated both as a corporate and individual brand. "Feminism" sold us Tshirts, Spotify playlists, and a couple of Beyonce albums. Banet-Weiser's term for this feminism as brand or business strategy is "popular feminism." *In 2018, poptimism works more or less like popular feminism: it turns the revaluation of things traditionally devalued because of their femininity into a way to make money*.



Screenshot from Beyoncé's 2014 VMAs performance.

Both popular feminism and corporate poptimism are the result of the same flawed thinking that believes inequality can be fixed just by empowering individuals and not by restructuring the institutions and conventions that structure our relations with one another. This thinking seeks

to put formerly low-status things in high status places without reconfiguring the underlying fact that there is a status differential in the first place.

Banet-Weiser warns that popular feminism is only half of a two-sided coin: "popular misogyny… mimics the operation of popular feminism but flips and distorts the politics." The incel movement is an example of popular misogyny: arguing that women oppress men by refusing to have sex with them, it takes the language of oppression developed by feminism and uses it to justify the idea of patriarchal sex-right. Similarly, the classical music blog "Slipped Disc" has been described as the "Breitbart of classical music" because its championing of the orthodox Western art music canon is "openly sexist, racist, and LGBT-phobic." The 2018 Grammy Awards show presented both sides of this coin in stark clarity: as Maura Johnston noted, though the ceremony prominently featured a #MeToo performance from Kesha and other women artists, almost all the awards went exclusively to men.



Screenshot of Kesha's performance of "Praying" at the 2018 Grammys.

Viewed in Banet-Weiser's terms, the RIAA seems to be leveraging both sides of this coin to maximize its profits, practicing popular feminism in the streets but popular misogyny on the ballot. Like popular feminism, the RIAA's poptimism values superficial markers of feminist progress because they obscure patriarchy's retrenchment. For example, the two most definitive or canonical poptimist texts (the Sanneh article and Wilson book) are authored by cis men, so it may appear that poptimism hasn't changed those institutions and conventions so much as conformed to them.

I agree with Banet-Weiser that though Feminism™ is certainly limited and insufficient, it can be a helpful gateway for beginners. Poptimism™ is similarly limited and insufficient, but we should think about how we can lead fans brimming with that kind of poptimism to a deeper engagement with the institutions and conventions that continue to value the same kinds of people and the music they make and like above others.

—

Featured image: "Pop" by Flickr user Andreas Andrews, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

—

Robin James *is Associate Professor of Philosophy at UNC Charlotte. She is author of two books:* Resilience & Melancholy: pop music, feminism, and neoliberalism, *published by Zer0 books last year, and* The Conjectural Body: gender, race and the philosophy of music *was published by Lexington Books in 2010. Her work on feminism, race, contemporary continental philosophy, pop music, and sound studies has appeared in* The New Inquiry, Hypatia, differences, Contemporary Aesthetics, *and* the Journal of Popular Music Studies. *She is also a digital sound artist and musician. She blogs at* its-her-factory.com *and is a regular contributor to* Cyborgology.

—



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

In Search of Politics Itself, or What We Mean When We Say Music (and Music Writing) is "Too Political"–Elizabeth Newton

Music Meant to Make You Move: Considering the Aural Kinesthetic–Imani Kai Johnson

Pushing Play: What Makes the Portable Cassette Recorder Interesting?–Gus Stadler

https://doi.org/10.59350/rkaed-hba44