

Resistance, Race, and Myth: A Critical Survey of American Popular Music Culture in the 20th Century

Scott Haden Church
Brigham Young University
Provo, UT, USA
scott_church@byu.edu

ABSTRACT

The topic of popular music in the United States has garnered much analysis from scholars, particularly how popular music has created or reflected American myths, collective memory, and racial politics. This essay is a review of select research on the interface between 20th century American popular music, culture, and power. The essay reveals that pop music scholarship is rooted in paradox. Hence, it focuses on three chiasmic or antithetical themes permeating scholarship on the topic: Popular music as either cultural hegemony or resistance to that cultural hegemony; Popular music as fundamental to the American myth, or the American myth as fundamental to popular music; and Popular music as inextricable from American race, or race as inextricable from American music. Further, it sheds light on the interconnectedness of American culture and popular music in the 20th century. This review of critical scholarship on popular music culture in the 20th century is significant for popular culture studies and pedagogy because it provides a frame of reference from which scholars and teachers may formulate research about popular music in the 21st century.

Keywords: popular music, race and ethnicity, American dream, gender, class, postwar

In the latter half of the 20th century, popular music was inextricably entwined with American culture. Although pop music was often viewed as trivial because of its status as everyday entertainment, it still retained a tantalizing appeal for scholars because of its function as a soundtrack to significant historical events (Rodnitzky 105). Not coincidentally, pop music became increasingly legitimized as a field of academic inquiry during the last four decades, as it amassed a mountain of analyses from scholars (Burns 123). The intrigue of popular music as a subject of academic discussion continues into the second decade of the 21st century, as evidenced by the continued assessment of the interstitial space between music and protest—shorthanded as “the spirit of 1968” in one publication (Kutschke 4).¹ With reports of street protests (and their associated songs and music festivals) frequently appearing in American publications during the last several years—music performed at Occupy Wall Street, Women’s March on Washington, and March For Our Lives, to name a few—pop music’s role in social change will likely continue to inject its tendrils into academic discourse in the 21st century.

Accordingly, the present essay focuses on academic discourse about popular music and particularly its relationship to culture and power in the latter half of the 20th century. Through a review of select critical research, my purpose is threefold: (1) to examine the role popular music has played in recent American history, including its myths, collective memory, and racial politics; (2) to demonstrate the paradoxical nature of popular culture scholarship when power enters the analysis, namely between the perception of popular music as *oppressive* by virtue of its power to divert the listener from important social concerns and *resistant*, enabling and empowering disparate social groups to mobilize against social injustice; and (3) to briefly address the gaps in the literature on popular music by providing additional context, commentary, and illustrations for those claims and including examples from relevant songs.

The motivation for delving into the topic was generated from a broader interest in the meanings that people attribute to popular music. This essay employs an interdisciplinary approach to frame its topic of analysis. As myriad critics and historians have contributed their unique analyses to this topic, the synthesis of these contributions provides a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of popular music. The research for this essay, then, was drawn primarily from sources originating in the fields of history, sociology, anthropology, communication, and cultural studies.

After addressing some foundational critical theories on popular music, the remainder of the essay will be situated in the decades following the conclusion of World War II. The selected timeframe coincides with the emergence of popular music genres like Rock ‘n’ Roll, Soul, Funk, and Hip Hop in American culture. The postwar era served as the historical context for impactful cultural events like the pop music-infused counterculture and its associated folk music (Chambers 87). The scope of the essay will not be exhaustive; although it generally addresses post-World War II America, it will be organized thematically rather than chronologically.

In compiling and synthesizing scholarship about American popular music in the 20th century, this essay focuses on three chiasmic or antithetical themes: Popular music as either cultural hegemony or resistance to that cultural hegemony; Popular music as fundamental to the American myth, or the American myth as fundamental to popular music; and Popular music as inextricable from American race, or race as inextricable from American music. The chiasmic nature of these themes is warranted when studying a topic so fraught with contradiction; as pop music scholar Richard Middleton explains it, “What the term ‘popular music’ tries to do is to put a finger on that space, that terrain, of contradiction—between ‘imposed’ and ‘authentic,’ ‘elite’ and ‘common,’ predominate and subordinate, then and now, theirs and ours, and so on” (7). This essay strives to offer additional insight into the paradoxical nature of popular music.

This essay is significant for popular culture studies and pedagogy because it provides a frame of reference upon which scholars may formulate research about popular music in the 21st century. The scholarship

reviewed here is and will remain highly relevant to cultural studies; the theories and issues presented here are not new, nor will they necessarily get old. Popular music, then, is a means through which timeless issues may become articulated. As the warp of culture and the weft of technology increasingly weave into the scholarly thread of pop music, the antithetical themes presented here will provide readers with some context for the role popular music played in postwar American history. The purpose of this essay, then, is to understand 20th century American culture through a critical exploration of its popular music. In short, its objective echoes that of cultural critic Greil Marcus: to briefly examine popular music “not as youth culture, or counter culture, but simply as American culture” (4).

POPULAR MUSIC AS CULTURAL HEGEMONY AND RESISTANCE TO CULTURAL HEGEMONY

Paradoxically, critical scholarship characterizes popular music as either a manifestation of cultural hegemony or a means for resisting that cultural hegemony. The cultural and critical theories outlining these conflicting views are highly influential to the study of popular music. Because popular music scholarship is interested in examining the complex interaction between the music and the listener, the results are often messy. Explaining this dichotomy, cultural critic Tony Bennett writes “the field of popular culture is structured by the attempt of the ruling class to win hegemony and by the forms of opposition to this endeavour” (85). This assertion is based on the political writings of Italian critic Antonio Gramsci, who considered asymmetries of power between the dominant class and the subordinate class to be central to understanding political and social relations (Gramsci 75). To assert control, the elite class creates the conditions most essential to facilitate their oppressive desires. The surrounding culture caters to the needs of these elites, ensuring that the masses will fulfill their interests. Notably, the hegemony is characterized by an ongoing struggle for control between the ruling class and the working class rather than absolute domination. This entails that the elites be able to exert “moral, cultural, intellectual and...political leadership” over these subaltern classes (Bennett 84). This Gramscian approach—popular culture as a site of hegemonic struggle—has become an essential lens for cultural studies scholars to theorize about entertainment (Traube 132).

When power is taken into consideration, popular music can appear to be simultaneously oppressive or resistant, depending on which aspect of the music is being discussed. Successful artists like Madonna, for example, may be characterized as an “agent of patriarchal hegemony” (Fiske 78), while concurrently functioning as “a site of semiotic struggle between the forces of patriarchal control and feminine resistance” (Fiske 79). Critical scholarship enmeshes popular music amidst these contradictory cultural processes; thus, all artists, producers, and consumers of that music are unwittingly participating in this struggle for meaning. Theorizing about cultural hegemony and Madonna can be equally applied to Beyoncé (see Martínez-Jiménez, Gálvez-Muñoz, and Solano-Caballero for an example of such an analysis). The point to be made here is that popular music is so polysemous that its meaning to individual listeners and its function to the larger culture is largely a matter of debate. As explained by sociologist Simon Frith, “To grasp the meaning of a piece of music is to hear something not simply present to the ear. It is to understand a musical culture, to have a ‘scheme of interpretation’” (*Performing Rites* 249). When that scheme of interpretation involves accounting for power, it can be equally correct to characterize popular music as oppressive or resistive.

Many critical scholars celebrate popular music because of its political function: it provides artists and listeners a means of resisting cultural hegemony. The recognition of pop music’s political power certainly did not first take place in 20th century America. Plato, for example, warned against the perils of music in *The Republic*: “any musical innovation is full of danger to the whole State, and ought to be prohibited...when modes of music change, the fundamental laws of the State always change with them” (93). A more recent example of this potential to resist the government is the American counterculture of the sixties. The West

Coast rock of the late 1960s countered the hegemonic war industries by creating an alternative society among its listeners in which identities and communities were created (Storey 90). Even though the counterculture emerged from a largely homogenous class of youth, pop music in the counterculture paradoxically called for a community of all who would sympathize with their ideology. This call for community was reflected in its music (90).

The essential role pop music played in the counterculture may be further elucidated when understood through the concept of the carnivalesque, first mentioned by literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. Carnival is a communal atmosphere where everyone identifies with each other in a shared space, essentially bound together by their opposition to the noncarnival life (Bakhtin 122-123). Carnival penetrates social barriers and hierarchies, in which the carnivalesque behaviors and attitudes embodied in the participant effectively oppose these barriers of convention (124); it is the same with Rock 'n' Roll, where "adult authority is powerless" to combat the genre's "major hierarchical debasement" (Kohl 148). These carnivalesque attributes of the counterculture and its associated music functioned as a type of resistance to hegemonic forces. The carnival element of the counterculture also has been explored in later bands like GWAR, Slipknot, and Insane Clown Posse, through which "heavy metal music and its carnival culture express[ed] a dis-alienating politics of resistance" (Halnon 33). For example, the disturbing lyrical themes of bands like Slipknot (epitomized in album titles like *Mate. Feed. Kill. Repeat.*), coupled with the "devilish, face-painted" imagery associated with the genre, offers a type of "grotesque realism," which culminates in a "liminal utopia of human freedom, creativity, and egalitarianism" (39, 34-35). The idea, rooted in the carnival, that "high and low are no longer distinct from one another" (Kohl 144) seems to exemplify the ethos of popular music.

The potential of popular music to subvert authority makes it compatible with elements of youth culture. In their essay on young listeners, Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel contend that popular music is an agent of resistance in youth, in part, because it uses lyrics that mirror "attitudes and sentiments which are already [within the youth], and at the same time provides an expressive field and a set of symbols through which these attitudes can be projected" (63). Much like the identity building function of the counterculture, the effect of music on youth culture often takes precedence over the teachings of parents and community.

The fashion and style of youth culture may also be subversive. Cultural critic Dick Hebdige outlines his notion of resistance through a discussion of style, much of which is inspired by popular music. According to Hebdige, resistance "begins with a crime against the natural order, though in this case the deviation may seem slight indeed...but it ends in *the construction of a style*, in a gesture or defiance or contempt, in a smile or a sneer. It signals a Refusal" (3). The youth subculture, through argot and style, finds a way to contest the dominant system of values.

The subversive dimension of popular music goes beyond its influence on style. Iain Chambers offers insights on American popular music research through focusing his analysis of popular music in Britain. While acknowledging the African American influence upon pop music, Chambers implies that pop music had a larger potential for resistance than others may realize: "pop has...been involved in attempts to subvert language altogether" (xi). Even the manner through which pop music is made, produced, and distributed has been subject to the banner of resistance; whether the music is lo-fi (Grajeda 357), or the punk embodiment of the DIY mentality (O'Connor 49-50), pop music appeals to audiences because it is resistant to some oppressive alternative.

However, other scholars argue that popular music is oppressive. German composer and cultural critic Theodor W. Adorno sees popular music as being a part of the oppressive culture industry, blinding people to critical class issues. According to Adorno, pop music functions as a distraction to the masses, amusing them into a dangerous pattern of relaxation and lack of discernment (458). Adorno's analysis is built on arguments made originally by Karl Marx, considering the proletariat as the music consuming masses and the

bourgeoisie as the producers and distributors of that music; however, the masses are never mobilized to resist their oppressive foes because they are so entranced by the entertainment the bourgeoisie has provided them. Adorno's condemnation of popular music is controversial, even to scholars. Historian Michael T. Bertrand, for example, calls Adorno's argument "one dimensional" and "rudimentary at best," countering that listeners and distributors are free agents (9). Philosopher Roger Scruton agrees with Adorno's overall assessment of popular music, but disagrees with the political premises Adorno uses to get there: Adorno's "lack of clarity, his jerky and unsequential style of analysis and his attempt to politicize the entire discussion of modernism in music, so as to force it into a neo-Marxist framework that has lost whatever plausibility it might once have had, place great obstacles before the reader" (205). Challenging Adorno's ostensibly misanthropic perspective, Bertrand argues that the pop music consumer should be seen as cognitively complex, possessing the ability to interpret popular music in diverse ways. Despite his detractors, Adorno's provocations about popular music are valuable because of their larger objective to open up new ways of thinking for his readers (Tester 52).

According to the literature cited above, pop music is a force capable of politically mobilizing communities by the promise of resistance to oppression. Paradoxically, however, pop music can be detrimental to social change, diverting the attention of the masses away from critical social issues. In this sense, American popular music functions as both oppressive and resistant.

POPULAR MUSIC IN THE AMERICAN MYTH

Popular music is more than merely oppressive or resistant—it is foundational. Popular music is as fundamental to the American mythos as the American dream is to the narratives in popular music. Indeed, to the consternation of historians and high culture proponents alike, pop music has a powerful potential to alter the course of collective memory (Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark* viii). Searching for accuracy in historical narratives is often treacherous because of the outsized role music plays in shaping, distorting, and determining American public memory. This shaping influence generally applies to all mediated entertainment. Historian Michael Kammen argues that film, for example, has reinforced "stereotypes, romanticizing a world that never was, and distorting realities" (668). Popular music scholars are sympathetic to this viewpoint: In his study of the Blues culture in the American South, rhetorician Stephen A. King states that efforts to reconstruct the past in public memory tend to reinforce certain cultural memories, specifically privileging the dominant white¹ cultural worldview (235). Like Kammen (and recalling Adorno's argument), sociologist George Lipsitz states that popular culture often reiterates dominant values in collective memory, functioning to divert rather than to enlighten or fulfill (*Time Passages* 4).

To be sure, this musical formation of values can be fortuitous, a byproduct of the mass production of entertainment. However, the influencing of public memory vis-à-vis popular music can be intentional, deliberately wielded by those with the power to do so. In the postwar years, for example, the American government promoted popular indigenous music (in the form of jazz) for ideological purposes: to be "music as a universal language that could end international tensions brought on by the Cold War" (246). This curious case exemplifies the American "use of music as a tool in warfare" (Clegg 245) to perhaps "sway those sympathetic to communist aims to the American way of thinking" (247). Power and public memory can also converge in the hands of those who can afford the technologies to record. In the early decades of the 20th century, archivists with the technology to record "cowboy songs" as historical documents also had the ability to use those songs to cultivate an image of what authentic American life on the frontier might sound like

² Generally, I use "African American" in this essay, though I do occasionally use "black" and "white" as adjectives when referring to musical styles and audiences. This convention follows the scholarship on race and pop music cited here (see Baldwin, Neal, Pough, and Stewart, for example).

(Slowik 208).

Because public memory is inherently precarious, the artists and producers of popular music must be responsible in how they represent issues and events in their songs. Historically speaking, however, many artists have evaded this ethical responsibility. Pop music may initiate discriminatory master narratives by underrepresenting gender or perpetuating sexist stereotypes. A historical illustration is appropriate. In the years following World War II, particularly in the decades of the fifties, sixties, and seventies, the “car song” became popular. Songs by Chuck Berry, the Beach Boys, and Bruce Springsteen frequently touched on the mythical topic of automobiles, creating “an American car culture” (164). There are a few representative examples: Chuck Berry’s 1955 song “Maybelline” is considered one of the first car songs (169); The Beach Boys sang about cruising the strip in “I Get Around” (Marcus 120); Springsteen’s songs like “Thunder Road” prominently featured cars, “the most powerful symbol of male identity in America” (Pardini 108). These songs and their associated culture reflected the dominant perceptions of what masculinity was at the time (Lezotte 161-162). Although in “Fun, Fun, Fun” the Beach Boys sing about a girl and her T-Bird, “it was [still] fun contained within boundaries constructed by husbands, boyfriends, and fathers” (168). Through privileging the masculine voice, car songs largely excluded the feminine voice from the musical conversation. Women recording artists would challenge this exclusion in ensuing decades, wresting the connotations of the car song away from masculinity and asserting the musical trope into a place where women’s voices could be heard: “The car song has changed because the two industries that inspired it—automotive and rock ‘n’ roll—are no longer the exclusive provinces of men” (174). Joni Mitchell, for example, recorded the song “Born to Take the Highway” in 1967, initiating a number of car songs in her musical catalog (166). When Mitchell sings *I was born to take the highway, I was born to chase a dream* (166), she not only addresses the American dream of exploring open spaces, she helps to remythologize the car song in the American musical memory.

Public memory about American musical artists in the 20th century amplifies the contributions of artists who are men while often downplaying contributions of artists who are women. The prior example illustrates this issue with gender representation in popular music. Pop music scholars have argued that “Women have been largely excluded from popular music-making and relegated to the role of fan” (Bayton 177) and “women have often been made quite invisible” in popular music (Steward and Garratt 12). The frustrated words of British singer Billie Davis offer a poignant articulation of the same argument:

Audiences don’t expect girls to be musical...There’s the same problem of communication with musicians. They think: “She’s a girl, she doesn’t know what she’s talking about.” It’s very hard to get a band to do what *you* want to do, all the time they want to do their own thing. (qtd. in Frith *The Sociology of Rock* 174)

To be sure, the influence of women in popular music in the first half of the 20th century is stronger than often acknowledged, as women singers were ubiquitous in Tin Pan Alley and jazz recordings in from the twenties to the forties, then jazz, country, and pop in the fifties and the sixties (Kosut 241). Many women emerged as superstars in late 20th and early 21st century American music as well. But the underrepresentation continues: a recent analysis of 600 popular songs from 2012-2017 revealed that women comprised only 22.4% of the artists, 12.3% of the songwriters, and 2% of the producers of those songs (Smith et. al).

Like gender, socioeconomic class is another important aspect of music to consider. Popular music is powerful in the American myth because songs and genres may articulate shared values. As mentioned earlier, for example, the values of working-class culture were mined frequently by artists like Springsteen for inspiration (Lipsitz *Time Passages* 131). In other words, the working-class depicted in popular music lives on in the collective memory of America, where the people use the narratives contained within popular music to “nurture and sustain” them (132).

Socioeconomic status is associated with other styles of pop music as well. The West Coast style permeating American pop music in the sixties, seventies, and eighties could be associated with a “middle-class ideology of riskless hedonism,” as well as “hippie ideology” (Middleton 32). In other words, the activities described in the lyrics of these songs could only be accomplished by people of sufficient socioeconomic status to afford that lifestyle. According to pop music composer Jimmy Webb, this myth was connected with the music of the Beach Boys: “I don’t think that the California Myth, the dream that a few of us touched, would have happened without Brian [Wilson, the architect behind the Beach Boys’ sound], and I don’t think Brian would have happened without the dream. They’re inseparable” (Leaf 6). This music engendered a feeling of liberation, that of “hanging ten” on surfboards and having “fun, fun, fun.” The California Myth that prevailed because of the Beach Boys also coincided with the West Coast music scene. In this atmosphere, folk protest music was being created by artists like Bob Dylan, Woody Guthrie, and Joan Baez. Soon after, with West Coast rock helping to spawn the counterculture, culture and society were merged into a package combining political commentary with the pleasures of entertaining music (Chambers 88).

POPULAR MUSIC AND RACE

Despite the aforementioned concerns by some theorists that popular music only echoes hegemonic master narratives, popular music can also combat those narratives by (c)overly commenting on the social conditions of the times. The resistive power of pop music can be observed through how popular music has reflected the racial identity of its performers and audiences.

Music by African American artists has been essential in creating the sound of contemporary popular music—even while it was being scorned or dismissed by white audiences at the time. A century ago, African Americans were the subjects of white ridicule in music and theatrical productions, despite the sentiment that their music was fundamental to the American myth. In fact, famed composer Antonin Dvořák wrote the following in 1893: “... [the] future music of this country must be founded upon what are called the Negro melodies” (qtd. in Baldwin 160). Indeed, the “Negro melodies” were crucial to the development of pop music in the United States in the early to mid-20th century, even though these melodies were experienced by white audiences through racist “coon songs” or comically acted in the degrading form of “blackface” minstrelsy (Suisman 1296).

As the century progressed, many songs by African Americans dealt with themes of transience and being uprooted. This narrative is exemplified in the songs of enigmatic Blues icon Robert Johnson (Scheurer 203). There is perhaps no more mysterious character in recent American musical history than Johnson; his mythic status has grown to the point that he has become a metaphor for talent, terror, and fear (Marcus 5). Although he only recorded 29 songs in his lifetime, his uncanny talent and mysterious death created a much celebrated and still present American myth of going to the crossroads and selling one’s soul to the devil (Pearson and McCulloch 44). This ominous myth regarding Johnson selling his soul, from the “deep South” of Mississippi, reflects the early 20th century white perception of African Americans as unnaturally mysterious, engaging in incantations and questionable evil practices (Marcus 23). Undoubtedly, this perception was bolstered by some of Johnson’s lyrics, like those for “Me and the Devil Blues”: *Early this morning/When you knocked upon my door/I said, Hello, Satan/I believe it’s time, to go* (Marcus 24). The American fascination with myths like Johnson’s is exploited today via its appropriation as a commodity to sell to “White blues enthusiasts” (King 236, 242). These race-related myths mirror the history of these musical forms as well, within which the black artist’s musical styles are appropriated by the white artist, thus leaving the black artist excluded from the marketplace (Neal 17). As evidence of this white appropriation, artists like Eric Clapton and Mick Jagger based their songwriting heavily on Johnson’s style, eventually becoming massively popular (Marcus 39).

Elvis Presley—himself an American myth—is also a prime example of popularizing black music to a broader (mostly white) audience in the form of rockabilly (Marcus 164-165).

White appropriation of black musical style continues into the 21st century. In the early 2000s, music producers began merging Rock (associated with white listeners) with its competitor, Rap (associated with black listeners). The popularity of artists like Kid Rock, Limp Bizkit, and Linkin Park illustrates this assertion. Middleton and Beebe argue that this generic convergence was a response to the decline of Rock 'n' Roll, largely signifying the associated decline of white, middle class suburbanite privilege (160). This hybridized genre is part of a larger trend of a “neo-eclecticism” in popular music, or the compiling of disparate genres of music together. As this trend for eclecticism becomes realized, so does the potential for white suburbanites to become re-empowered (169). As these examples demonstrate, the intersection of race and popular music offer clear evidence of the claim that pop music is a site of hegemonic struggle.

Because of said conditions, however, some songs need to be covertly socially conscious; these “hidden histories” become the basis of Lipsitz’s book *Footsteps in the Dark*. He explains that the lyrics to the Isley Brothers’ 1977 song “Footsteps in the Dark,” for example, were coded in a way to be “sufficiently personal to secure airplay on mainstream radio, yet adequately figurative, poetic, evocative, and allusive to enable listeners to read shared social concerns and experiences into them” (Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark* x). Hence, the artists opt to employ a tone of uncertainty in the lyrics, making the overall message ambiguous enough that what exactly the song is advocating seems unclear: *Who feels really sure?/Can that feeling guarantee your happiness shall endure?/And do we really care?* This song, fusing “private personal concerns with public and political issues” in the late seventies, illustrates the resistive potential of popular music through its use of subtlety (Lipsitz ix). One of the song’s concluding lyrics seems particularly representative: *Let’s look at what’s been happening and try to be more aware* (Lipsitz ix).

To be sure, other African American artists historically addressed political issues in more overt ways. Marvin Gaye, for example, recorded the much-lauded album *What’s Going On* in 1971 to explore and address the issues of the day. The objective of the title track to promote love and understanding is as clear as its lyrics: *Mother, mother/There’s too many of you crying/Brother, brother, brother/There’s far too many of you dying/You know we’ve got to find a way/To bring some loving here today*. Later, Gaye sings *We don’t need to escalate/You see, war is not the answer/For only love can conquer hate*. He also makes the poignant appeal for shared understanding: *Talk to me/So you can see/What’s going on*. Gaye’s lyrics not only display his conscientious attempts at social critique, but also have elevated Gaye’s album to masterpiece status (Woodstra, Bush, and Erlewine 119).

Relating to that struggle, popular music can be a means of social commentary on issues of race, particularly in genres like Hip Hop, Rap, and R&B. These “explicit or implicit descriptions or assessments of the social, economic, and political conditions” of marginalized groups can function to politically mobilize groups (Stewart 196). Pough contends that Hip Hop, for example, has offered black women the opportunity to create a space to have their voices heard; by employing the same rhetorical strategies used by male Hip Hop artists, artists like Missy Elliott and Lil’ Kim use their music as a means of empowerment (8-9). The nineties Hip Hop group the Fugees (and the subsequent solo careers of Lauryn Hill and Wyclef Jean) also functions particularly well in this capacity for creating a space for voices from the margins to be heard (Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark* 31, 33).

The political nature of Hip Hop is clearly embedded in the lyrics of some of the genre’s representative songs. Stewart’s essay “The Message in the Music” deconstructs various lyrics in order to articulate the political concerns of those who created these songs. He gives much credence to the lyrics in these genres of music and offers an encouraging insight: While some Hip Hop and R&B artists are entirely focused on pursuing profit, others create music to dispense political commentary, mirroring their struggle to raise public awareness (221).

To give a contemporary example, in 2015 and 2016 rap artist Kendrick Lamar has performed several times on television where he and the others on stage are either rapping from prison cells or standing on the top of vandalized police cars (Sisario, *New York Times*). For the 2016 Grammys award ceremony, Lamar performed “The Blacker the Berry” on television in front of a prison backdrop, rapping incendiary lyrics like *You hate me don't you?/You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture*. In this way, Rap provides him an opportunity to express the inequities of racism and police brutality. As Pough explains, “Rap music can be viewed as a dialogue—between rappers and a racist society, between male rappers and female rappers, and between rappers and the consumer” (168).

Other people of color have been marginalized in 20th century American popular music as well, including Asian Americans (Moon, *Yellowface*). Cultural productions like theater and pop music misrepresented Asian Americans by portraying their cultures and unique musical forms only through the Western perspective. This aesthetic “othering” of Chinese Americans functioned to emphasize their difference from the white Westerners, thus frustrating efforts to portray them as equals (85). Similar sentiments were echoed in American pop music regarding Japanese Americans, only at times more sinister. For example, blatantly anti-Japanese sentiment was expressed in American music (with song titles like “You’re a Sap, Mister Jap”), illustrating the tensions between Euro-Americans and Japanese Americans in the years before and during World War II (Moon 335). Discrimination was leveled also against Mexican Americans in music as well, though they did experience some crossover hits of Mexican folk music into the white community like Ritchie Valens’s all Spanish “La Bamba” (Lipsitz, *Time Passages* 143).

Race continues to be an essential part of American popular music. Despite instigating some of these apparent strides in the struggle for racial equality, problems certainly still exist. Yet, American popular music is so widespread that it appears to be one of the most powerful contemporary means of articulating issues about race to its listeners.

READING AND TEACHING POPULAR MUSIC SCHOLARSHIP

This essay has been a synthesis of some of the most relevant issues in pop music scholarship, particularly the relationship of popular music to American culture and power in the 20th century. Through reviewing the literature, this essay has explored the role popular music has played in recent American history, including its myths, collective memory, and racial politics. This essay revealed that pop music scholarship is rooted in paradox. Hence, it focused on three antithetical themes: Popular music as either cultural hegemony or resistance to that cultural hegemony; Popular music as fundamental to the American myth, or the American myth as fundamental to popular music; and Popular music as inextricable from American race, or race as inextricable from American music.

As evidenced by these themes, contradictions abound throughout historical and cultural assessments of popular music in America. One of the objectives of the essay was to demonstrate the paradoxical nature of popular culture scholarship once power enters into the analysis. To demonstrate, one perspective posits that pop music may be interpreted as culturally hegemonic, a form of entertainment that ultimately oppresses its audience by diverting them from social struggles. Another body of scholarship argues that popular music may be interpreted as resistant, an emancipatory tool that uses political commentary to alert listeners to social injustices. Considering each camp, a teacher may draw the contradictory conclusion that American popular music played an active role in inciting social change over the past seven decades—or that it merely reflected prior social changes. Or, a teacher might (correctly) conclude that, historically, popular music has been simultaneously hegemonic and resistive.

It is important for scholars and teachers to address these contradictions in their research and pedagogy.

Pop music, after all, is fraught with contradiction; as music scholar Richard Middleton argues, pop music exists in the “space between ‘imposed’ and ‘authentic,’ ‘elite’ and ‘common,’ predominate and subordinate, then and now, theirs and ours, and so on” (Middleton 7). Scholarship on the messy intersection between pop music and American culture is no exception.

WORKS CITED

- Adorno, Theodor W. “On Popular Music.” *Essays on Music*. Edited by Richard Leppert. U of California P, 2002, 437-469.
- Baldwin, Davarian L. *Chicago’s New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life*. U of North Carolina P, 2007.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. Translated and edited by Caryl Emerson. U of Minnesota P, 1994.
- Bayton, Mavis. “Feminist musical practice: Problems and contradictions.” *Rock and Popular Music: Politics, Policies, Institutions*. Edited by Tony Bennett et al. Routledge, 1993.
- Bennett, Tony. “Popular Culture and the ‘Turn to Gramsci.’” *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. Edited by John Storey. 4th ed., Pearson/Longman, 2009, pp. 81-87.
- Bertrand, Michael T. *Race, Rock, and Elvis*. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2000.
- Burns, Gary. “*Popular Music and Society* and the Evolving Discipline of Popular Music Studies.” *Popular Music and Society* 12.1 (1997): 123-131.
- Chambers, Iain. *Urban Rhythms: Pop Music and Popular Culture*. London: Macmillan, 1985.
- Clegg, Mindy L. “When Jazz was King: Selling Records with the Cold War.” *The Journal of American Culture* vol 38, no 3, 2015, pp. 243-254.
- Fiske, John. *Reading the Popular*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2011.
- Frith, Simon. *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*. Harvard UP, 1996.
- Grajeda, Tony. “The Sound of Disaffection.” *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture*. Edited by Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc. Duke UP, 2002, pp. 357-375.
- Gramsci, Antonio. “Hegemony, Intellectuals and the State.” *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, edited by John Storey, 4th ed., Pearson/Longman, 2009, pp. 75-80.
- Hall, Stuart, and Paddy Whannel. “The Young Audience.” *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, edited by John Storey, 4th ed., Pearson/Longman, 2009, pp. 45-51.
- Halnon, Karen Bettez. “Heavy Metal Carnival and Dis-alienation: The Politics of Grotesque Realism.” *Symbolic Interaction* 29.1 (2006): 33-48.
- Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. Routledge, 2005.
- Kammen, Michael. *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1991.
- King, Stephen A. “Memory, Mythmaking, and Museums: Constructive Authenticity and the Primitive Blues Subject.” *Southern Communication Journal* vol. 71, 2006, pp. 235-250.
- Kohl, Paul R. “Looking Through a Glass Onion: Rock and Roll as a Modern Manifestation of Carnival.” *Journal of Popular Culture* 27.1 (1993): 143-161.
- Kosul, Mary, editor. *Encyclopedia of Gender in Media*. Sage, 2012.
- Kutschke, Beate. “In Lieu of an Introduction.” *Music and Protest in 1968*. Edited by Beate Kutschke and Barley Norton. Cambridge UP, 2013. 1-11.
- Leaf, David. *The Beach Boys and the California Myth*. Grosset & Dunlap, 1978.
- Lezotte, Chris. “Born to Take the Highway: Women, the Automobile, and Rock ‘n’ Roll.” *The Journal of American Culture* vol. 36, no. 3, 2013, pp. 161-176.

- Lipsitz, George. *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*. University of Minnesota P, 2001.
- . *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music*. U of Minnesota P, 2007.
- Marcus, Greil. *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music*. E. P. Dutton, 1975.
- Martinez-Jimenez, Laura, Lina Galvez-Muñoz and Angela Solano-Caballero. “Neoliberalism Goes Pop and Purple: Postfeminist Empowerment from Beyoncé to *Mad Max*.” *Journal of Popular Culture* vol. 51, no. 2, 2018, pp. 399-420. doi: 10.1111/jpcu.12671
- Middleton, Jason, and Roger Beebe. “The Racial Politics of Hybridity and ‘Neo-Eclecticism’ in Contemporary Popular Music.” *Popular Music* vol. 21, no. 2, 2002, pp. 159-172.
- Middleton, Richard. *Studying Popular Music*. Open UP, 1990.
- Moon, Krystyn R. “‘There’s no Yellow in the Red, White, and Blue’: The Creation of Anti-Japanese Music During World War II.” *The Pacific Historical Review* vol. 72, 2003, pp. 333-352.
- . *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s- 1920s*. Rutgers UP, 2005.
- Neal, Mark Anthony. *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*. Routledge, 1999.
- O’Connor, Alan. *Punk Record Labels and the Struggle for Autonomy*. Lexington Books, 2008.
- Pardini, Samuele F. S. “Bruce Zirilli: The Italian Sides of Bruce Springsteen.” *Bruce Springsteen, Cultural Studies, and the Runaway American Dream*, edited by Kenneth
- Womack, Jerry Zolten, and Mark Bernhard, Routledge, 2012, pp. 97-110.
- Pearson, Barry Lee, and Bill McCulloch. *Robert Johnson: Lost and Found*. U of Illinois P, 2003.
- Plato. *The Republic*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. Dover Publications, 2000.
- Pough, Gwendolyn D. *Check it While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*. Northeastern UP, 2004.
- Rodnitzky, Jerome L. “The Sixties between the Microgrooves: Using Folk Music and Protest Music to Understand American History, 1963-1973.” *Popular Music & Society* vol. 23, no. 4, 1999, pp. 105-122.
- Scheurer, Timothy E. *Born in the U.S.A.: The Myths of America in Popular Music from Colonial Times to the Present*. UP of Mississippi, 1991.
- Scruton, Roger. *Understanding Music: Philosophy and Interpretation*. Continuum, 2009.
- Sisario, Ben. “Kendrick Lamar Sweeps Rap Field at Grammys; Taylor Swift Wins Best Album.” *New York Times*, 15 Feb. 2016.
- Smith, Stacy L. et al. “Inclusion in the Recording Studio? Gender and Race/Ethnicity of Artists, Songwriters & Producers across 600 Popular Songs from 2012-2017.” *Annenberg Inclusion Initiative*, 25 Jan. 2018. <http://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/inclusion-in-the-recording-studio.pdf>
- Steward, Sue and Sheryl Garratt. *Signed Sealed and Delivered: True Life Stories of Women in Pop*. South End Press, 1984.
- Stewart, James B. “Message in the Music: Political Commentary in Black Popular Music from Rhythm and Blues to Early Hip Hop.” *The Journal of African American History* vol. 90, no. 3, 2005, pp. 196-225.
- Storey, John. “Rockin’ Hegemony: West Coast Rock and Amerika’s War in Vietnam.” *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, edited by John Storey, 4th ed, Pearson/Longman, 2009, 88-97.
- Suisman, David. “Co-workers in the Kingdom of Culture: Black Swan Records and the Political Economy of African American Music.” *The Journal of American History* vol. 90, 2004, pp. 1295-1324.
- Tester, Keith. *Media, Culture and Morality*. Routledge, 1994.
- Traube, Elizabeth G. “‘The Popular’ in American Culture.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* vol. 25, 1996, pp. 127-151.
- Woodstra, Chris, John Bush, and Stephen Thomas Erlewine, editors. *Old School Rap & Hip-Hop*. Backbeat Books, 2008.

Church

AUTHOR BIO

Scott Haden Church (Ph.D., University of Nebraska-Lincoln) is an Assistant Professor in the School of Communications at Brigham Young University. His research primarily uses critical methods to examine popular culture and social media. His research has been published recently in *Journal of Media and Religion*, *Public Relations Review*, and *Critical Studies in Media Communication*.

REFERENCE CITATION

APA

Church, S. H. (2019). Resistance, race, and myth: A critical survey of American popular music culture in the 20th century. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, 6(3). <http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v6-issue-3/resistance-race-and-myth-a-critical-survey-of-american-popular-music-culture-in-the-20th-century/>

MLA

Church, Scott Haden. "Resistance, Race, and Myth: A Critical Survey of American Popular Music Culture in the 20th Century." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2019. <http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v6-issue-3/resistance-race-and-myth-a-critical-survey-of-american-popular-music-culture-in-the-20th-century/>