Topologies: The Popular Music Survey Course and the Posthumanities

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In response to David K. Blake's call for a popular music pedagogy that, following Henry Giroux, is "capable of contesting dominant forms of symbolic production" and that is at the same time embedded in materiality, I'm prompted to consider how far we as teachers may stretch the contours of a survey class in the interest of achieving a radical pedagogy that engages our students not as passive receptors of information and sound but rather as active agents invested in musical and cultural production.[1] The survey classroom, which facilitates informational breadth and pressing chronology, can prove a particularly tricky locale for employing innovative restructuring. My goal here is to consider topology as one way of critically reconfiguring pedagogical methods in an effort to reengage and reimagine the flows and disruptions of popular music history. In so doing, I am exploring just one of the many possible ways we may approach the popular music survey within the posthumanities, employing Rosi Braidotti's concept of the posthumanities as a response to the "question of what happens to the Humanities . . . when their implicit assumptions about the Human and the process of humanization can no longer be taken for granted."[2]

Blake's own suggestions for shaping a survey syllabus around technological transformations open up a number of productive possibilities for the survey course. The use of technology as a framing device for popular music periodization proves intriguing, and a survey course on the subject could be grounded in work from the past decade-plus by authors like Mark Katz, Timothy Taylor,

1. Henry Giroux, *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3.
2. Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 148.

Jonathan Sterne, and Kiri Miller, each of whom demonstrates a different ana-lytic framework for engaging the intersection of musics and technologies.[3]

Beyond technology, one could imagine a popular music survey course that is similarly periodized but with a hook other than technology. *Faking It*, by Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor, tracks the notion of authenticity as it is con-structed and modified from the 1920s to the 2000s.[4] Barker and Taylor open up productive spaces that challenge preconceived notions about realness and authenticity in popular music while also exposing students to a parade of styles and performers over the course of their short twentieth century. One might also construct a course that explores discourses of spirituality as they flow through popular music, using texts like Sterling Stuckey's and Samuel Floyd Jr.'s theorizations of the ring shout, Maya Deren's divine horsemen, and Loren Kajikawa's analysis of D'Angelo's *Voodoo*.[5] Or perhaps mobility moves a survey course, from the blues and the Great Migration to Schaeffer's train musicking to the automobile as "critical midwife" at the birth of Hip-hop, as Adrienne Brown has put it.[6] In each of these instances—and these are just a few among count-less possibilities—and as with Blake's suggestion of technology, we can hear a pop music survey course that embeds musical creative practices in the broader cultural reformations and transformations to which Stuart Hall calls attention.[7]

A question that occurs to me as I consider these ideas, though, is whether linear periodization is what we're really after. While these organizational possi-bilities—technology, authenticity, spirituality, mobility—perform the necessary work of tying musical practices more closely to cultural processes, I'm interested in pushing a step further in order to lift up and out of the strictures of chrono-logical periodization in survey courses. Instead of moving from the 1880s to the 1920s to the 1950s, from one generation to the next, why not allow a popular music survey course—like the gravitational forces of the universe—to bend

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3. Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Changed Music*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Timothy Taylor, *Strange Sounds: Music, Technology, and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); and Kiri Miller, *Playing Along: Digital Games, YouTube, and Virtual Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

4. Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor, *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007).

5. Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Samuel A. Floyd Jr., "Ring Shout! Literary Studies, Historical Studies, and Black Music Inquiry," *Black Music Research Journal* 22 (2002): 49–70; Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (Kingston, NY: McPherson, 1983); and Loren Kajikawa, "D'Angelo's *Voodoo* Technology: African Cultural Memory and the Ritual of Popular Music Consumption," *Black Music Research Journal* 32, no. 1 (2012): 137–59.

6. Adrienne Brown, "Drive Slow: Rehearing Hip Hop Automotivity," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24, no. 3 (2012): 265–75.

7. Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular," in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 443.

time back on itself in imaginative, creative, and even radical ways? I'll explore here how such a course might work in the context of a particular vision of the posthumanities.

The Posthumanities

In her 2013 book *The Posthuman*, Rosi Braidotti dedicates her final chapter to an exploration of how the university can leave behind some of the problematic assumptions of the humanities—assumptions indebted to liberal humanism that have been critiqued by feminism, queer theory, anti/postcoloniality, critical race theory, disability studies, animal studies, and ecocriticism, among others—in favor of a posthuman critical theory. Braidotti envisages the posthuman as a fuller, more accurate account of life and culture than humanism offers, and I want to briefly consider here the theoretical framework she constructs in the interest of mapping out what the posthuman is in preparation for imagining the ways a pop music survey might overlap with posthuman critical theory to push beyond the established boundaries of the humanities.

What follows is a short summary of the five central ideas of Braidotti's posthuman critical theory, which I will elaborate with pedagogical examples in the final section:

1. *Cartographic accuracy:* The posthuman is meant to map the present by "unveiling . . . power locations" in order to establish "epistemic and ethical accountability."[8] This points to a political dimension of posthuman critical theory, a dimension that allows for the examination of, for instance, patriarchy, heteronormativity, colonialism, and/or racism. It also overlaps with Stuart Hall's account of cultural struggle, which achieves "points of resistance" and "moments of supersession" in the face of the dominant culture that constantly works "to disorganize and reorganize popular culture."[9] Posthuman cartography, then, charts an ever-changing map of power imbalances.

2. *Non-unitary figurations:* For Braidotti, a figuration is a "conceptual persona," the performed identity of the posthuman that revels in complexity and ambiguity, "in-between states [that] defy the established modes of theoretical representation because they are zigzagging."[10] Rather than the emergent, undefined nature of things characteristic of neoliberal deregulation—which, importantly, is most often employed in order to further shift power into the dominant culture—I read Braidotti as describing strategic subversions of fixed identities

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8. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 164.
9. Hall, "Notes," 447.
10. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 164.

or ideas, a restructuring of culture that is meant to redraw the map in favor of the subaltern.[11]

3. *Non-linearity:* Here, knowledge and structures of knowledge are "web-like, scattered, and poly-centred." Pushing away from teleological chronology and binary thought, Braidotti encourages intellectual work in the posthumanities that is "curiosity-driven," spurring "creativity and critique . . . in the quest for affirmative alternatives" to the power locations that are mapped in posthuman cartographies.[12]

4. *Memory within non-linearity:* The flexibility made available by non-linearity extends to memory, which, apart from chronology, becomes imaginative and generative rather than simply reflective. Memory becomes "the active reinvention of a self that is joyously discontinuous," a performance that recognizes the many productive possibilities made available by non-linearity.[13]

5. *Defamiliarization:* Defamiliarization is, perhaps, the most obvious result of the posthumanities. It is "a sobering process by which the knowing subject disengages itself from the dominant normative vision of the self he or she had become accustomed to."[14] Though not all of our students will subscribe to a "dominant normative vision," many will, and amidst cultures plagued by inequality and stasis, within universities increasingly managed more like corporations than institutions dedicated to intellectual work, I want to draw from the posthumanities in the hopes of crafting a pop music survey that can orient students toward a more critically engaged, ethically motivated encounter with music and the cultures that produce it.

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11. This tension between neoliberal emergence and posthuman "non-unitary figurations" extends beyond the scope of this roundtable, but it's one I'm working on developing in other venues. Two broad studies of neoliberalism include David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) and Vijay Prashad, *The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South* (New York: Verso, 2013). Neoliberalism's relationship to hip-hop is one of the central themes of Lester K. Spence's *Stare in the Darkness: The Limits of Hip-hop and Black Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). Robin James' understanding of neoliberalism's social theory as recognizing "out-of-phaseness/dissonance as pervasive," a condition to be calculated and capitalized rather than subjugated, promises some productive analysis of music and neoliberalism and also marks "non-unitary figurations" as potentially less resistant than Braidotti suggests (Robin James, "An attempt at a precise & substantive definition of 'neoliberalism,' plus some thoughts on algorithms," *Cyborgology*, July 19, 2014, http://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2014/07/19/an-attempt-at-a-precise-substantive-definition-of-neoliberalism-plus-some-thoughts-on-algorithms/).

12. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 165.

13. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 167.

14. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 167.

Topology vs. Chronology

In the interest of such a goal, I'm going to consider the ways that topology can be employed as an effective tool of the posthumanities in replacing chronology in a pop music survey. A brief comparison of the two is helpful to start. Chronology is linear, progressing from one point to the next in a teleological push. From start to finish, chronology moves ever forward, structuring material (whether musical practice or cultural transformation) so that one activity/ideology/era follows another without ever overlapping itself. Topology, by contrast, is non-linear, folding and unfolding in a less predictable fashion, twisting time and matter onto themselves in surprising ways. Exemplary topological shapes include the Möbius strip and trefoil knot, each consisting of folds and sutures (no tears) that result in an uncanny object. The trefoil knot is an overhand knot whose ends are joined, creating a closed system that doubles back onto and through itself, while the Möbius strip can be formed, for instance, by twisting a strip of paper before joining its two ends. The resulting loop possesses only a single side and single edge, allowing one to traverse its entire surface without crossing a boundary. To navigate topological contours is to move without a fixed beginning or end point and to sometimes find oneself treading a familiar path even after traveling for some time.

How, then, would a pop music survey course be organized topologically rather than chronologically? One recent example of the kind of study we might present to our students is Jason Stanyek's and Benjamin Piekut's "Deadness," which traces the collaboration of Nat Cole and Natalie Cole on "Unforgettable."[15] By focusing on matching studio practices and employing a notion of collaboration that includes both living and dead, human and nonhuman, Stanyek and Piekut encourage readers—our students—to hear 1961 New York and 1991 Los Angeles as a single musical artifact. Along the way, they fold in a discussion of the 1932 re-recording of Enrico Caruso's 1907 "Vesti la Giubba," looping these four historical moments together by way of similar recording techniques until they begin to vibrate and sound together. In Stanyek and Piekut's account, it is non-linear memory that hears Nat Cole's "Unforgettable" as a pre-echo of Natalie Cole's, one of many "distended pasts that swell up with delays, pre-echoes, calls, and incitements that spill over into multiple presents and futures."[16] Not only does the article open up the discussion of non-linearity and non-unitary figurations (where human performers are understood as collaborating with technologies and studio spaces), but teaching "Deadness" in a survey course also exposes students to shifting ideas of "popular" across

15. Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut, "Deadness: Technologies of the Intermundane," *TDR: The Drama Review* 54, no. 1 (2010): 14–38.
16. Stanyek and Piekut, "Deadness," 18.

the twentieth century, introduces and complicates the presence and availability of recording technologies over time, and, perhaps most importantly, offers a theoretical framework that is not beholden to the musical examples used in the essay. Rather, Stanyek and Piekut advance their theory of deadness as one that "speaks to the distended temporalities and spatialities of *all* performance" and "describes the necessary choreographies of *all* productive encounter" [emphasis mine] (20). In other words, we can craft a survey course to turn its attention to the ways popular musicians collaborate with others who are in different places, live at a different time, are no longer living, or are not human to begin with in the co-creation of music and music cultures.

Other recent publications can be combined in the interest of folding topological spaces inside the survey classroom. David Suisman's understanding of the player piano as a fundamentally digital instrument, which performs by way of a binary code, invites side-by-side studies of music technologies otherwise separated by a century.[17] Suisman's essay could be taught alongside studies about MP3s and late twentieth-century digitality by Mark Katz or Jonathan Sterne. In each case, a topological approach to a pop music survey focuses our students on the materiality of things—the spaces of the recording studio, perhaps, or the shapes of digital media. A study of music technologies could also help students map and "unveil . . . locations of power," perhaps by linking Gustavus Stadler's work on phonograph lynchings at the turn of the twentieth century with Jennifer Stoever-Ackerman's study of the "listening ear" in 1955's *Blackboard Jungle* in order to hear the ways recording technologies have been used in re-inscribing racial segregation and paranoia.[18] Or we can hear the sounds of music moving across regions and cities during the Great Migration alongside the movement-in-place or non-escapist automobility, as Ali Colleen Neff and Anthony Kwame Harrison describe it, of artists like E-40 and legends like John Henry.[19] Similarly, Adrienne Brown's theorization of the Hip-hop car as "harbor[ing] the specter of commonwealth and collective value" can be examined in concert with accounts of construction on the Cross Bronx Expressway and I-95 in areas that years later spawned New York Hip-hop and Miami bass, respectively.[20] Building a pop music survey that slips through time

17. David Suisman, "Sound, Knowledge, and the 'Immanence of Human Failure': Rethinking Musical Mechanization through the Phonograph, the Player-Piano, and the Piano," *Social Text* 28, no. 1 (2010): 13–34.

18. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 164; Gustavus Stadler, "Never Heard Such a Thing: Lynching and Phonographic Modernity," *Social Text* 28, no. 1 (2010): 87–105; Jennifer Stoever-Ackerman, "Reproducing U.S. Citizenship in *Blackboard Jungle*: Race, Cold War Liberalism, and the Tape Recorder," *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2011): 781–806.

19. Ali Colleen Neff and Anthony Kwame Harrison, "Automobility" (lecture presented at the Black Music in America Roundtable, Rider University, Lawrenceville, New Jersey, April 4, 2013).

20. Brown, "Drive Slow," 267.

like this to stitch together musical and cultural moments that resonate decades apart can create a continuity over time and space that also helps us to access the reforms and transformations in popular culture that Blake points to in his essay.

Though a topological survey course works outside of chronological periodization, it is not ahistorical. Indeed, without chronology, our students will be constantly reorienting themselves as they move back and forth to new times and places, and Hall's notion of conjuncture can be a useful tool for keeping the historical clearly in view: "what are the circumstances in which we now find ourselves, how did they arise, what forces are sustaining them, and what forces are available to us to change them?"[21] This series of questions combines attention to history with attention to the present, inviting our students into practices of active analysis of and engagement in the popular culture surrounding them. To tie together Robin James's study of contemporary "Robo-Diva" R&B artists, Jayna Brown's account of a "genealogy of black female performance," especially in the early twentieth century, and Kyra Gaunt's attention to black girls' games in relation to commercial music ranging from the 1950s to the 2000s, is to focus our students' attention on questions of raced and gendered bodies at critical musical moments covering the last one hundred years.[22] What are the race and gender politics of each conjuncture, how did they arise, what forces (have) sustain(ed) them, and what forces were/are available to change them? Returning to these sorts of questions throughout a topological survey course can impress upon our students that they are not passive observers but actors capable of shaping popular culture. Gaunt herself has worked with her students to intervene in the discourses and practices surrounding twerking (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ClT9oJEhQ18), recognizing the dance as "a form of adolescent play . . . and a way to try on identities" while also mapping the power imbalance that results in YouTube capitalizing on videos of young girls twerking while primarily older male viewers watch.

Popular music by its very nature seems particularly well-suited for topological pedagogy. Practices of re-performance and musical borrowing (which, of course, are characteristic of several different artistic media, including classical music) combine with popular music's entanglement with the inherently collaborative "deadness" of recording and playback technologies to reverberate through multiple times and spaces all at once. If instead of adhering

21. Stuart Hall, "Epilogue: Through the Prism of an Intellectual Life," *Culture, Politics, Race, and Diaspora: The Thought of Stuart Hall*, ed. Brian Meeks (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2007), 269.

22. Robin James, "'Robo-Diva R&B': Aesthetics, Poliyics, and Black Female Robots in Contemporary Popular Music," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 20, no. 4 (2008): 402–23; Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 4; and Kyra Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

to chronological accounts of history, we teach our students to listen for what Karen Barad calls the "performance of spacetime (re)configurings that are more akin to how electrons experience the world," reconfigurings that are indeterminate, requiring deep engagement from attentive listeners, we can invite them to experience music and culture in an elemental way, turning their ears to the many possibilities that unfold all around them from their topological vantage points.[23]

The basic idea of topology is a recognition that our movement through space and time is less predictable than we sometimes imagine, placing events closer or further away than we may expect them to be. As a structuring device for a pop music survey course, topology is more than just a quirky idea. Rather, it traverses the posthumanities, operating alongside critical and creative re-imaginings of cultural practices that at once speak to the everyday material experiences of twenty-first century students and also seeks to fashion a more ethical, sustainable future for those students and the ones who follow them. A topological pop music survey, one that weaves imaginatively through time before doubling back to explore a different route, offers our students the chance to disrupt the supposed order of things. Through this offering, we call them into practices that can shape them into the reformers and transformers we hope they can be.

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23. Karen Barad, "Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come," *Derrida Today* 3, no. 2 (2010), 240.