Social Justice and Capitalist Realism in Music Education

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Abstract

In this paper I explore social justice and equity research in music education through the lens of capitalist realism and accompanying concepts. I look at Fisher's ideas on hauntology and its connection to classical liberalism and neoliberalism. Fisher noted how some electronic music and pop music of the early 21st century is structured by nostalgia. This becomes a window into the current capitalist-realist era. I then contend that this nostalgia has continued since his death by looking at contemporary music by Beyoncé and Megan Trainor. Next, I explore at how this hauntology is in music education research. Music educators' interest in post- and anti- frameworks mirror Fisher's concept of hauntology. Then, I look at possible ways forward. This includes moving beyond what Fisher called identitarianism and embracing class consciousness. Finally, I explore how the structures of the academy disincentivize music education researchers from taking on class consciousness.

Keywords

Music education, Mark Fisher, capitalist realism, hauntology, identitarianism

I n the call for papers for this special issue on capitalist realism, Sean Powell proposes a question as a possible focus of submissions: "How does an intentional (re)focus on a critique of capitalist ideology within music education scholarship and praxis—with its centering of the class struggle—inform, augment, intersect, or potentially conflict with scholarly critiques centered on other oppressive social structures (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism)?" In this paper I consider this question with an emphasis on the ways a critical stance to capitalist ideology *conflicts* with how music educators have framed equity over the last decades.[1] Further, I examine the temporal aspects of social justice research. By temporality, I mean that conceptions and assumptions of the past, present, and future play an important role in social justice. Neoliberalism shapes the critique of injustices of the past and present and a hope for a more just future that are central to social justice and equity work in music education.

Mark Fisher's capitalist realism as well as accompanying ideas become a good frame to locate the emphases and assumptions within current social justice work. Fisher was fiercely critical of the mainstream political left of his time, which appears to have changed little since his passing. More so than in *Capitalist Realism*, in other works such as "Exiting the Vampire Castle" (VC) and *Ghosts of my Life*, Fisher took aim at what he called "bourgeois-identitarianism" (VC, n.p.) and the tendency of some on the left to essentialize identities.[2] He was just as fiercely critical of the cancel culture (before the term existed) of the left on social media. I have found Fisher's ideas valuable in identifying the assumptions and blind spots of the political and intellectual left in a constructive way. Like me, he was critical not because he disagreed with the ideal of equity, but because the contemporary left's conception of equity and justice "unthinkingly reflects this historical [neoliberal] moment rather than offering any escape from it" (VC, n.p.).

It is a similar stance towards equity and social justice that I take up as my starting point. The main idea I explore in this paper is that music educators' recent framing of issues of equity is under the sway of capitalist realism. As Fisher noted, one hallmark of capitalist realism is the idea that subversiveness is a key attribute of neoliberalism. One of the themes of critical theory since the Frankfurt School is that capitalism responds to subversive critiques by absorbing those critiques into itself. By incorporating those critiques, capitalism strengthens and derives profit from that incorporation (Adorno 2001, for example). Fisher, however, says that in

the era of neoliberalism, critiques are from their conception already shaped by cap-
italist ideology: "What we are dealing with now is not the incorporation of materi-
als that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead, their *pre-
corporation*: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and
hopes by capitalist culture" (*CR*, 10). As I will explore, from the beginning, con-
temporary conceptions of justice and equity are framed by the ideology of capital-
ism.

A second starting place is Fisher's idea that this precorporation of subversive
potentials is found in the political left's move from structural and economic con-
ceptions of class to identity and culture. Fisher noted that focus on identity is, per-
haps paradoxically, part of capitalist realism and neoliberalism:

> Needless to say, the struggles against racism and (hetero)sexism have not … been
> won, but they have made significant hegemonic advances, even as neoliberalism
> has corroded the social democratic infrastructure which allowed increased work-
> ing class participation in cultural production. The disarticulation of class from
> race, gender and sexuality has in fact been central to the success of the neoliberal
> project—making it seem, grotesquely, as if neoliberalism were in some way a pre-
> condition of the gains made in anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-heterosexist strug-
> gles" (*Ghosts*, 26–27, emphasis added).

In other words, the shift by the political left from class to identity, and their
separation or "disarticulation," is the result of neoliberalism; contemporary iden-
tity politics is precorporated into capitalism. Throughout this paper I explore this
disarticulation within neoliberalism.

Current Music Education Scholarship through the Lens of Capitalist Realism

Like Fisher's observation of the focus on race and sexuality while turning from
class, music education researchers have made a similar move. As Vincent Bates
(2019) has observed, music educators have deemphasized class and focused on is-
sues of identity. While there is some scholarship on class (for example, Bates 2012,
2017; Bull 2019), poverty (Bates 2018; Beveridge 2022), and the influence socio-
economic demographics has on music education (Elpus and Grise 2019; Rickels
2012), music educators have trained more focus on other forms of oppression.
There have been journals dedicated to gender (*Gender, Education, Music, Society*)
and conferences dedicated to sexuality (LGBTQ Studies and Music Education Sym-
posia [QMUE]). Conversely, no journals or conferences have been dedicated to

class. Class is also absent from general collections of equity. There exist collections devoted to social justice and equity (Benedict et al. 2015, Talbot 2018) that have chapters specifically dedicated to race, gender, sexuality, and disability, but not chapters specifically on class and socioeconomics. MayDay's Action Ideals (https://maydaygroup.org/about-us/action-for-change-in-music-education/) explicitly state the goals of challenging "colonial ideologies" and "white supremacy," and embracing "Indigenous, queer, feminist" knowledge, but do not mention class or socioeconomics.

In addition to these conferences and collections, other scholarship has approached inequality and oppression from a host of identities. An incomplete list of scholarship devoted to identity includes: incorporation of repertoire written by people from a diversity of racial and gender identities (Kelly-McHale 2018); an examination of repertoire that portrays different identities in stereotypical and racist ways (Abramo 2007); inclusion of musical and cultural practices associated with various identities (Campbell 2020); inclusion of people of the LGBTQA+ community (Cayari 2019; Goodrich 2020; Nichols 2013; Palkki 2020; Palkki and Caldwell 2018); inclusion of a greater diversity of music teachers of color (Abramo and Bernard 2020; Palmer 2011), sexuality (McBride 2016; Paparo and Sweet 2014), and disabilities (Parker and Draves 2017); and an examination of racial bias and Whiteness in music education (Bradley 2006, 2007; Hess 2017, 2018b; Koza 2008). While these areas within music education focus on different facets of music education, and different constituencies, what binds them together is that they situate and approach oppression through identity.

Similarly, many of the approaches to music education are approached through culture and ideas. I (Abramo 2021) noted that music education research and practice is amidst the cultural and epistemological turn. I argue that music educators' focus on culture as well as ideas or epistemology are in line with the dematerialization of the economy and mirrors the professional class's privileged position within this economy. In other words, music education scholars approach various forms of oppression (which have material consequences) through immaterial frameworks like culture and beliefs rather than primarily through economic or material avenues. This mirrors recent shifts in the economy where commodities become increasingly immaterial. In Fisher's terms, focus on culture and epistemology as avenues towards justice are capitalist realist because they reflect professional class positionality and bias.

The papers presented at the MayDay 2024 Colloquium might serve as a further example of the current focus on identity, culture, and epistemology in music education scholarship as well as the proportions that these thoughts take up in the discourse (https://maydaygroup.org/colloquia/mdg-35-colloquium-sessions-and-provocateurs/). The 24 sessions presented at the conference are the following:

5 in the area of indigeneity (Indigenous, First Nations, aboriginal peoples, and decolonizing);
4 on race (Afro-constructivist, culturally responsive pedagogy and Chinese Americans, Black music educators, and Whiteness);
2 in the areas of disability and madness;
2 on capitalism and suburbanormativity (which is classed in its framework);
1 on sexuality and queering music education;
1 on Eurocentricism and musical diversity;
1 on teacher identity;
1 on futurism (through a feminist and BIPOC framework);
1 on epistemologically informed approaches to music education;
5 on other topics (Popular music and leisure, death, an "everyday approach" to music education, music education ideologies as a religions, and subjectification in violin learning)

These numbers suggest the preponderance of identity—15 of the 24 papers center around *identities* (race, indigenous, sexuality, disability, futurism through a feminist and BIPOC framework) and accompanying epistemologies. Only two papers can be interpreted as being about class and socioeconomics. In addition, common words show up with frequency in the abstracts: indigenous (and variants), 19; epistemology (and variants), 11; culture, 6; race, 3; identity, 4; and class/socioeconomic, 5.

If Fisher is correct that there has been a "disarticulation of class from race, gender and sexuality" (*Ghosts,* 26–27), these trends in identity, culture, and epistemology in music education warrant further investigation to see how, if at all, the scholarship on equity in music education is influenced by capitalist realism. How, if at all, is this disarticulation found in music education scholarship in social justice? Does this disarticulation "reflect this historical [neoliberal] moment rather than offering any escape from it" (VC, n.p.)?

Neo- and Classical Liberalisms

It is important to identify germane characteristics of neoliberalism that are central to Fisher's argument. Some writers have noted that a key characteristic of neoliberalism is the move from expansion to recycling (Harvey 2007; James 2015;

Nealon 2002).[3] As the prefix neo- suggests, neoliberalism is a new form of liberal-
ism, or the economic belief in commerce and free markets and not to be confused
with liberalism as denoting a left political position. In contrast to neoliberalism,
classical liberalism is defined, in part, by its need for expansion. From this telling,
in the search for new profit, capitalism continually expands, finding new lands,
new markets, and new materials to commodify (James 2015).

In contrast, *neoliberalism* captures profit not through expansion, but through
recycling (James 2015). In neoliberalism, value is created "not by conquering or
assimilating new territory, but rather by intensifying new versions of familiar
things" (Nealon 2002, 81). While classic liberal processes of expansion and assim-
ilation continue in current times, neoliberalism is marked by this recycling. Ne-
oliberal recycling is found in what has been described as disaster capitalism (Klein
2007) and creative destruction (Harvey 2007). In these forms of capitalism, profit
is found in the recycling of destruction—such as wars and crises—into opportuni-
ties for profit. Old materials, places, and resources are destroyed to make room for
more economic development.

Hauntology

One way to understand some of Fisher's critique of neoliberalism is that he showed
how recycling is manifest in musical production, and thus subject to capitalist re-
alism. For Fisher, recycling in music takes on a specific temporal aspect in what he
called *hauntology*. Fisher (*Ghosts*) used hauntology to describe an aesthetic of
electronic music that began in the late 1990s. Artists such as Boards of Canada,
The Caretaker, and Burial looked back to older music production technologies to
build an aesthetic around memory and nostalgia.

As the name suggests, this music is haunted by the past—a past that was more
optimistic than the pessimism of today. One aspect of hauntology, in Fisher's use,
was the idea that the modernist enthusiasm of progress is lost in contemporary
postmodernism. Hauntology captures a nostalgia for a past when there was opti-
mism for "possible futures." It is nostalgia for a past when great projects still
seemed possible as was the hope of modernism of the mid-twentieth century.
Whether that hope is in forming a more perfect union, a more socially just world,
or a world improved not degraded by technology, hauntology captures the sense
that this idealism has passed. Crucially, though, this nostalgia is not positive. It is
accompanied by a sense of loss of this better world that never transpired. It is, "a

slow cancelation of the future" (*Ghosts,* 6) as Fisher describes it—a sinking reali-
zation that the utopias pined for in the past will never come, only to be replaced
with the dystopia of the present and impending future. In whole, this nostalgia, as
he frames it, *is not a naive idealization of the past*. Recycling old forms and sounds
is a pessimistic reaction to the hopelessness of the current neoliberal times.

Fisher contended that hauntology in music captures this nostalgia of the past
through the technology of recording and sound production. "The principal sonic
signature of hauntology" he notes, is "crackle, the surface noise made by vinyl.
Crackle makes us aware that we are listening to a time that is out of joint; it won't
allow us to fall into the illusion of presence" (*Ghosts,* 21). As imperfect as vinyl was
with its scratchiness, it holds a particular semiotics; for some contemporary ears,
the old technology harkens back to a time when there was hope in new technolo-
gies. This imperfection yet optimism, however, has been replaced with the phan-
tasmagoria of digital recording—on the surface digital music is pristine, devoid of
blemishes. Digitalization of music is the disappointing arrival of a future utopia
that vinyl promised.[4]

Fisher saw this loss of the past in other forms of popular music besides
hauntological electronic music. In more commercial pop music, artists reference
old forms. He used Amy Winehouse as an example—her music had a distinctive
"60s soul sound" (*Ghosts,* 11). This music written in the early 2000s harkened the
1960s and the modernist past it represents. However, more than retro or merely
copying the past, it displayed a fascination with older forms. Drawing upon Fred-
erick Jameson, Fisher noted that one aspect of nostalgia is "a *formal* attachment
to the techniques and formulas of the past, a consequence of a retreat from the
modernist challenge of innovating cultural forms adequate to contemporary expe-
rience" (*Ghosts*, 11–12). Crucially, this is distinguished from "retro" styles in that
it does not aim to reproduce a past era; instead, artists also try to sound contem-
porary, while simultaneously retreating from creating new cultural forms. As a re-
sult, there is a collapse of time, where the past and the present merge into one.
Nostalgia, then, is a backwards looking process caused by current pessimism.

As Fisher noted in *Ghosts* (see 15), these formal elements of nostalgia are
themselves the result of social and political aspects of neoliberalism. The drying up
of public funds for the arts as part of neoliberalism drove artistic production solely
into the market. The increased role of the arts as commodities pushed innovation
to the side as producers increasingly copied older, popular forms to ensure the

profitability of artistic works. In whole, according to Fisher, popular music of the last thirty years—whether it be hauntological electronic music or more mainstream forms—is characterized by current pessimism and a backward-looking nostalgia of old forms. This aesthetic is a product of a wish for the progressive, hopeful past of modernism before it ended with postmodernism and the increasing marketization of neoliberalism. Further, this music is informed by neoliberalism's compulsion towards recycling.

Hauntology in Contemporary Music

Nostalgia and recycling of old music have continued in popular music since Fisher's death. As musicologist Nate Sloan (2022) has pointed out, *interpolation* is the process in which previously composed music is cited and reused in a song. This differs from the related practice of sampling. In interpolation, recordings are not reused as they are in sampling. Instead, the music is reperformed and perhaps varied slightly. As an example, in the Autumn of 2022, the number 1 song on the Billboard Top 100 was Doja Cat's "Vegas." The track interpolates the song "Hound Dog," made popular by Elvis Presley. It also samples Big Mama Thornton's original recording of the song (Weisbard 2023). "Vegas" is a reference to a song of the past that is in the public consciousness through interpolation and sampling. Further, this postmodern use of interpolation takes on more significance because of its title. Stuart Jeffries (2022) called the city of Las Vegas the "prototypical post-modern city" (111), and others (Jameson 1991, Nealon 2002) have evoked Las Vegas to explicate postmodernism and late-stage capitalism. Las Vegas stands for a celebration of conspicuous consumption through gambling and the motto for its tourism advertising, "what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas." Its citational architecture, such as its reproductions of the Eiffel Tower and the Statue of Liberty, mirrors sampling and interpolation. These citational edifices sit side-by-side with other architecture that references different historical times as a representation of pastiche common to postmodernism. Like the song "Vegas," the city of Las Vegas interpolates old forms and collapses time all within the context of consumerism.

There are technological reasons that both sampling and interpolation have arisen as an aesthetic at this historical moment. The resurgence of the recycling of old musical material for new musical commodities is made possible by contemporary digital technologies. As Fisher noted, "In conditions of digital recall, loss is itself lost" (*Ghosts,* 2). As the internet has made relics of the past available through

archives (such as YouTube) to wide populations, the "past" is more "present" than previously, collapsing time. Nothing is lost to history; everything is ready for immediate recall, providing sources to recycle.

Interpolations, however, are not merely results in digital technology; they are the results of conscious neoliberal recycling of commodities. As Sloan (2022) notes, record companies have purposefully made interpolation part of their market strategies. They regularly pitch interpolation ideas to popular artists. These pitches accompany a recent up-tick in the buying of the catalogs of artists of previous generations, such as Phil Collins, the Ramones, and Neil Young. The pitches to new artists to interpolate old material is an aim of recycling these old catalogs to extract more profit. By asking contemporary artists to record this material, record companies extract profits for writing credits on these new songs. In addition, these new songs serve as advertisements for the original songs, reigniting interests in these hits of previous eras. Record producers are then purposefully pitching the use of these old catalogs to create new songs. Such a process is a clear example of recycling within neoliberalism. Old music as a resource is recycled to create more profit. What distinguishes current interpolations from musical borrowing from previous epochs (from quolibets of the Medieval era, to cantus firmi in Renaissance masses, to standards in jazz) is a purposeful extracting of profit. In other words, it uses the recycling of material for economic gain in the context of neoliberal recycling.

Tracing Hauntology and Recycling in the Music of Beyoncé and Megan Trainor
Contemporary interpolation and sampling perhaps find their most conspicuous and ostentatious form in Beyoncé's 2022 album *Renaissance*. Throughout this album, Beyoncé and her team consciously and overtly interpolate and sample 1990s dance music. Right Said Fred's iconic, yet comical and kitschy, "I'm too Sexy" serves as a clear example. At times, these interpolations take on what might be considered excessive amounts, with numerous artists credited as co-writers of songs. For example, the song "'Cuff It' . . . nods to the funk-and-soul great Teena Marie, with Beyoncé's 'ooo la-la-la-la-la-la' after the first verse (around 0:25) serving as an interpolation of Marie's 'Ooo La La La'" (Curto 2022 n.p.). As a result, the writer of the song "Ooo La La La," Allen McGrier, is listed as a co-writer on "Cuff It." However, a comparison of "Cuff it" and "Ooo La La La" reveals that Beyoncé's use of Ooos and Las bears little resemblance to Marie's singing. She sings neither

the same rhythms, pitches, melody, or even the same number of Ooos and Las (Sloan 2022). It appears that Beyoncé and her team are documenting their sources by giving credit to the songwriter that influenced them as they composed this music.

Beyoncé and her team's practice of giving songwriting credit to sources predates *Renaissance*. As an example, the song "Hold Up" from 2016's *Lemonade* similarly credits inspirations. Ezra Koenig, one of the songwriters of "Hold Up," heard the song "Maps" recorded by the band the Yeah, Yeah, Yeahs and written by its lead singer Karen O. (Gordon 2016). In 2011 Koenig tweeted "hold up...they don't love u like i love u," which replaces "wait" with "hold up" in the lyrics of "Map's" chorus. In 2014 he wrote a melody based on his tweet to a track created by the artist Diplo, based on a loop of an Andy Williams song. This track then became "Hold Up" on Beyoncé's *Lemonade* album. As a result, Koenig, Karen O., Diplo (under his real name Thomas Pentz), Doc Pomus (who wrote the Andy Williams "loop"), and Beyoncé, among others, are given songwriting credit for "Hold Up." The songwriting credits of "Cuff It" and "Hold Up" suggest that Beyoncé and her co-writers are providing songwriting credit to what others might consider "inspiration."

Beyoncé and her team intentionally credited the inspirations of her music, even beyond what might be legally required, to financially compensate songwriters. Some might see this as an act of equity and justice. This argument is not without its merit. Writer Robin James (2019), for example, suggests that Beyoncé's songwriting credit practices purposefully thwart notions of "enclosure" (or a claim to property common to capitalism). However, a capital realist reading might suggest that this putative move towards equity, rather than thwarting a capitalist conception of private property, updates it to the contemporary digital landscape. Žižek (2015) noted that music is an obvious space where notions of commodification and ownership find their limits. Music as sound resists objectification, and people often absorb musical ideas unconsciously. Musical gestures are communal in their conception. Claiming that a person or group of people own a musical idea—which is required of the commodification of music for some to collect the profit—denies these amorphous qualities of music.

In such a view, the concept of inspiration (such as using Ooos and Las or the lyrics of "Maps" as a starting point for generation of original material) is mone-

tized. Such processes are made possible by neoliberal ideology of recycling and excessive privatization. "In conditions of digital recall, [where] loss is itself lost" (*Ghosts,* 2), Koeing's tweet remains an artifact of this process of inspiration. Some might argue in response to this, somewhat as James (2019) does, that crediting inspiration exactly acknowledges and then compensates for the communal aspects that Slavoj Žižek (2015) identifies as the non-commodifiable nature of music. However, this conception of equity is only made possible by a capitalist logic of ownership and enclosure. Ooos and Las are construed as the property of Teena Marie and Allen McGrier, and the words "Hold Up" are those of Karen O., even though none of these artists ever uttered or wrote these in the same way or at all. In addition, such processes are in some ways inequitable because the performers Teena Marie and Andy Williams are excluded in this credit and compensation.

Beyoncé and her team's interpolations and the politics of citation and songwriting credits begin to reveal how the ethos of social justice and equity are under the sway of capitalist realism and "reflects this historical [neoliberal] moment." Their mining of old material, both through sampling and interpolation, mirrors the recycling of neoliberalism as stated above. However, at the same time, Beyoncé's music is often hailed as addressing issues of social justice. Her album *Lemonade* is viewed as a critique of sexism and white supremacy (Abramo 2020a, 2020b). Similarly, Beyonce's *Renaissance* is viewed by some as a celebration and elevation of queer, Black ball culture (Kolli 2023). However, it is Beyoncé and her team's recycling of "diversity" as a form of social justice that makes her musical commodities financially lucrative. Shaun Harper (2022), writing for the pro-capitalist periodical *Forbes,* notes, "Arguably, it is diversity that also makes Beyoncé one of the wealthiest women in the United States" (n.p.). Beyonce's commercial success is not *despite* her focus on diversity and equity; rather, it is *because* of that focus that she is commercially successful. It is this seemingly contradictory juxtaposition of incongruent ingredients that reveals capitalist realism. In both *Renaissance* and *Lemonade,* Beyoncé's team recycles old material in neoliberal fashion, reinforcing private property. This very recycling and privatization are then claimed by some as an act of social justice. The seeming opposites of inequity and justice sit side by side comfortably, or their tensions are obscured by capitalist realism.

This recycling of old forms for statements of equity is not limited to Beyoncé. Meghan Trainor's "Dear Future Husband" recycles the past in the service of femi-

nism. Like hauntological music, the song begins with the crackle of the phonograph. This is coupled by a notch pass filter to recreate the limited frequency range of older phonographs. This beginning, it seems, references the patriarchy of the past. This introduction then gives way to a fuller, modern mix, representing the present, perhaps suggesting escape from this oppressive past. She then sings about a perfect husband, one who buys commodities for her, and she in turn buys for him:

> Take me on a date
> I deserve a break
> And don't forget the flowers every anniversary
> 'Cause if you'll treat me right
> I'll be the perfect wife
> Buying groceries
> Buy-buying what you need

This reappearance of the present collapses the present and past; like Amy Winehouse's recycling and nostalgia for 60s soul, Trainor's song is structured around the doo wop or 50s proregression (I vi IV V I) with the high quarter notes in the piano and horn parts associated with these past forms. Further, "Dear Future Husband" sits comfortably with other songs by Trainor, such as "Made You Look" which celebrates the capitalist gaze by grabbing people's attention through ostentatious displays of status through consumerism of designer name brands:

> I could have my Gucci on
> I could wear my Louis Vuitton
> But even with nothin' on
> Bet I made you look (I made you look)

These lyrics suggest a disarticulation of class from gender. Feminism is celebrated through consumerism and possession of resources of the upper middle class. This shows a similar but also contrasting look backwards to hauntology as Fisher describes it. While he identifies hauntology as a nostalgic look backwards, "Dear Future Husband" recycles old forms to critique the flawed past. Trainor recycles past forms to critique a sexist past.

These contradictions are reconciled by returning to Fisher's concept of precorporation of "subversion." This music "performs our anti-capitalism for us, allowing us to continue to consume with impunity" (*CR*, 12). This is a facet of capitalist realism, where subversiveness is part of the commodity. Subversiveness serves as an escape valve where the consumption feels like an act of resistance. In whole, a

strain in contemporary popular music is the neoliberal citation and recycling of the past in order to make statements of social justice and equity. These statements often disarticulate identity from issues of socioeconomic inequality. As it uses the logic and processes of neoliberalism, it is under the sway of capitalist realism, complicating any claims to equity and social justice. Whether it be Trainor's view of a flawed past or Beyoncé's citations to create "diversity," what these musical practices have in common is a look to the past with an eye on recycling.

Hauntology in Music Education Research

The previous sections described the disarticulation class from identity in music education research and the capital realist aspects of contemporary music production. I outlined hauntology; collapsing of time through citation, interpolation, sampling, and recycling; and how these themes are found in contemporary music. It suggests that capitalist realism is at play in music production, even when the music is framed around issues of equity. In this section, I suggest that these themes similarly appear in the theories often employed in music education research in social justice and equity.

Capitalist Realism in "Post-" "and "Anti-" Theories

Capitalist realism, neoliberalism, and backward-looking, critical inquiry are found the theoretical frameworks which use the suffix "post." Postmodernism (Maidaniyk et al. 2023), poststructuralism (Richerme 2016), posthumanism (Burnard and Köbli 2024), postcolonialism (Kallio 2020, Vaugeois 2007)—in the use of the prefix "-post," these theories are situated after something else.[5] Often this past and its influence on the present is in need of critique. Postmodernism corrects the naive objectivism of modernism; poststructuralism corrects the binaries and rigidity of structuralism; posthumanism corrects Anthropocene views and other frameworks that put humans first without regard for material around them; and postcolonialism addresses the violences and inequalities of imperialism and colonialism. Like Megan Trainor uses the sound of the phonograph in "Dear Future Husband" to critique the sexist past, these theories look backwards to recycle old forms as critique. In this way these theories are similar to pessimistic nostalgia in that it is haunted by the past but differ because they possess a negative gaze upon the past.

This does not mean that those who use these theories do not propose new "positive" ways of being; instead, it suggests that those new ways of being arise from deficits and injustices of the past and future.

Similarly to "post-" theories, "anti-" theories have been in vogue in music education (Hamilton 2021; Hess 2015, 2020, 2021; Kallio 2020; Palmer et al. 2024). These theories demonstrate the pessimism of current times found in hauntology. As one example, this journal has a special issue entitled, "Anti-Racism, Anti-Fascism, and Anti-Discrimination" (Volume 21, issue 2). In the editorial to this issue, Niknafs (2022) refers to "doing the anti- work" and "anti-labour" and "anti-thinking" (8, 9, 11 and 12). Further there is scholarship on antiracism (Hess 2015, 2020; Palmer et al. 2024), anti-black racism (Hamilton 2021), and anticolonialism and decolonialism (Bradley 2012; Hess 2021; Kallio 2020; Rosabal-Coto 2019). Like post- theories, those that use these frameworks aim to forge a better society and music education, but the names and theoretical framing they begin with what they oppose, not what they support. This suggests that they exhibit the pessimistic aspects of hauntology.

The queer theorist Eve Sedgwick (2003) identified these theories as theories of "negative affects." She suggests that academics use these theories to call attention to negative affects in order to "forestall pain" (137). Sedgwick points out that there is a difference between seeking to minimize negative affect and maximizing positive affect, and that "a monopolistic strategy of anticipating negative affect can have. . . the effect of entirely blocking the potentially operative goal of seeking positive affect" (136). From this perspective, "anti" theories—such as antiracism, antifascism, anticoloniality—are theories of negative affect because they aim to minimize the negative, not maximalize the positive. Even anticapitalism, although this term is evoked far less (if at all) in music education, conjures up this negative affect. Thinkers who use these frameworks, of course, aim to create new possibilities; however, critique of the negative of the old is the starting point for creating those new possibilities. By defining and identifying themselves by that which they are against, "anti" theories put forth an agenda of forestalling and minimizing, and hopefully then eliminating, inequitable discourses and negative systems rather than drawing upon positive affect.

I see Fisher agreeing with Sedgwick's observation because it reveals the pessimism of current times.[6] I think he would put particular emphasis on the temporal aspects of Sedgwick's use of the word "forestall." As Fisher noted, "One of the left's

vices is its endless rehearsal of historical debates. . . rather than planning and or-
ganizing for a future that it really believes in" (*CR*, 78). Post- and anti- theories in
vogue are an example of this "endless rehearsal of historical debates." To "forestall"
is an aim to put off in the future that which has happened in the past. It is a negative
agenda that defines itself not in "what it really believes in," but what it aims to
eliminate from the past and present. The sizable presence, if not monopoly, of post-
and anti- theories in music education might suggest that music education is open
to Sedgwick's critique.

This backward-looking, negative affect might be a way to frame a theme within
music education research as well. Some music educators have recently confronted
relics of the past, focusing attention on the historical injustices, making progress
forward look contingent on addressing the past. For example, this is seen through
the recent litigation of repertoire of the past including minstrelsy and other White-
centered repertoire not culturally responsive to other groups (Hess 2018a; Kelly-
McHale 2022). This litigation is warranted because it reveals biases within com-
mon practices and materials that can marginalize constituencies. However, these
investigations similarly begin with what they are against, hence they are of negative
affect. Critical inquiries into past practices fall into the left's vice, to paraphrase
Fisher, of endlessly rehearsing music educators' past failures rather than planning
and organizing for a future music education that we really believe in. Like "Dear
Future Husband," such critique calls upon the past to create critiques of negative
affect.

Capitalist Realism in Culture-Focused Theories

While litigation of the past can be described as "negative," even "positive" ap-
proaches are open to capitalist realist critiques. While not as obvious, another pop-
ular form of music education, culturally responsive and sustaining teaching, has a
similar backward-looking position to enact a socially just future (Bond 2017; Good-
Perkins 2021; Maybin 2019; McKoy and Lind 2022; Palmer et al. 2024). These
theories, in whole, aim to help teachers honor students' cultural assets and herit-
ages and use them to make change for equity in the present and future. An inter-
pretation of these theories from a capitalist realist perspective might suggest that
the stable, historical aspects of culture and identity are emphasized. Culture is con-
ceived of as a body of practices and thinking possessed by students as "culture
bearers" (Bolden and O'Farrell 2020), and this possession is granted to them

though inherence based on their perceived identity, usually a racial identity (Michaels 1992). In such a formation of a socially just pedagogy, students are first locked into their present and an assumed past based on their identity and the culture of which they are bearers. The students' bodies stand in as a collection of the cultural practices of the identities and cultures their identities putatively represent. This framing of culturally responsive and sustaining teaching is similar to those that have critiqued the essentializing tendencies within culturally responsive teaching (Irizarry 2007; Moon 2011), but it particularly emphasizes the temporal aspects of this essentialization. Culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies turn historical notions of culture into qualities possessed, held, or bore by a cultural group in order to recycle it for change in the present and future. Like Beyoncé, this looks backwards to a past that can be recycled for a positive present and future and assigns ownership of ideas to people.

Afrofuturism: New Possibility or Creative Destruction?

In the preceding, I have suggested that recent work in equity in music education can be characterized as backward-looking (as it is in post- theories) and negative (as in anti- frameworks). These are characteristics of capitalist realism because these theories cite and recycle the past. These theories look backwards because of the helplessness and pessimism of neoliberal times. Backward-looking post- and anti- critiques are so pervasive in popular culture and academia that it might be hard to imagine an alternative. While critique of the past and present can be helpful, there are other avenues towards equity in the arts. To repeat Sedgwick (2003), "a monopolistic strategy of anticipating negative affect can have. . . the effect of entirely blocking the potentially operative goal of seeking positive affect" (136). What new possibilities are there that might work with but also shift the current frameworks?

It is possible that Afrofuturism provides an alternative to these critiques of recycling and negative affect that, as I have argued, constitute current music education research in equity (for other music educators who have explored Afrofuturism (see Sánchez-Gatt 2023; Talbot and Taylor 2023). Afrofuturism is described as a form of Black artistic production (Dery 2008; Strait 2023). As the name suggests, it is future looking. Artists such as George Clinton, Sun Ra, and other Afrofuturists used outer space and the future as contrasts to the restricting histories of enslavement and forced migration. "Afrofuturists are creating new possibilities, pointing

to a future where white supremacy holds no power and where new ideas based on the possibilities of liberation, invention, freedom, and joy travel freely" (Strait 2023, 15).

The themes of future, possibility, invention, joy, and space in Afrofuturism contrast the post-, anti-, and negative affect theories of the current social justice movement in music education, while holding a common commitment to equity. Afrofuturism's positive agenda even shows how the current conception of social justice is, as Fisher described it, a "sour-faced identitarian piety foisted upon us by moralisers on the post-structuralist 'left'" (VC, n.p.). In other words, in contrast to Afrofuturism, the current movement in music education equity appears negative, pious, moralist in its continual "calling out" of injustices, "rather than planning and organizing for a future that it really believes in" (*CR*, 78).

Fisher (2013) himself made this distinction, yet connection, between hauntology and Afrofuturism. He noted "that postmodernity and hauntology confront 'white' culture with the kind of temporal disjunction that has been constitutive of the Afrodiasporic experience since Africans were first abducted by slavers and projected from their own lifeworld into the abstract space-time of Capital" (2013, 46). He adds, "Afrofuturism and hauntology can now be heard as two versions of the same condition" (42). They both express the experience of facing inequities of the current times. Hauntology, negatively, looks on the past with a sense of loss of what could have been, and recycles it for the hope of a more equitable present. Afrofuturism, in contrast, positively looks forward to the future to imagine a more just present and future.[7]

As such, as other music educators have suggested (Sánchez-Gatt 2023; Talbot and Taylor 2023) an Afrofuturist aesthetic is a possible positive agenda in music education. The ethos of Afrofuturism which includes imagination, joy, and possibility through the arts align well with music education— perhaps more so than the current negative, backward-looking paradigm of contemporary social justice. Similarly, the recent sizable research on "Black joy" in education in general (see, for example, Adams 2022; Dunn and Love 2020; Williams 2022) is not matched in music education but may be a similar way forward. Rather than being antiracist in negative affect, Afrofuturism and Black Joy can form a positive, creative agenda for working towards a more racially justice world.

Afrofuturism, then, *could* be an alternative to the limits of current conceptions of equity and justice in music education. However, in my experience, this is the

point where most academic pieces in music education on equity and social justice end.[8] There is a program that these writings follow: first, the author levels a critique of negative affect of the status quo. Second, the author proposes an alternative, usually "taken" from "marginalized" perspectives or processes (like Afrofuturism and Black Joy), as an equitable way forward. In this way, it is like Beyoncé's citational practices; ownership of ideas is assigned to people. Culturally responsive and sustaining teaching (Bond 2017; Good-Perkins 2021; Maybin 2019; McKoy and Lind 2022; Palmer et al. 2024) could be seen as conforming to this process; its proponents aim to replace dominant Eurocentric, White music and practices with those of marginalized populations. Cicco (2024) names this process as "erasing-as-dismantling and radical replacing" (58), as opposed to what he suggests is quietly removing or altering offensive content. In this process, teachers and student come to terms with the repertoire and curriculum of negative affect, and as a class community, replace them with marginalized socially just perspectives.

I identity this pattern of negative affect and marginalized alternative not because such practices are unwarranted or ineffective. It seems that any reasonable music educator would conclude that problematic practices, repertoire, and epistemologies should be removed, and perhaps in an overt, "radical" way as Cicco (2024) suggests, and replaced with pedagogies that are student-centered. I name this pattern because it shows the ways that music educators' solutions are influenced by, and precorporated into, capitalist realism. Proposing Afrofuturism, Black Joy, and other alternatives to oppressive structures could be a form of disaster capitalism (Klein 2007) and creative destruction (Harvey 2007). Destruction of the "status quo" creates the blank canvas to incorporate new territories to be expanded into (in classical liberal fashion) and recycled (in neoliberal ways). Afrofuturism, and maybe futurism in general, are the next concepts in this process of creative destruction. Music educators have begun to write about Afrofuturism (Sánchez-Gatt 2023; Talbot and Taylor 2023). To use economic terms, it appears that a speculative bubble is beginning to form around "Afrofuturism." Furthermore, if I am correct, a similar speculative bubble is on the horizon for "Black joy."[9] The proposal of these alternatives finishes the cycle of creative destruction and rebuilding of disaster and neoliberal capitalism and the expansion and claiming of new markets of classical liberalism. Then in the future, these terms will be destroyed through critiques of negative affects, and new ideas will be proposed, repeating this cycle. As a result, current social justice in music education as creative

destruction and disaster capitalism is capitalist realist because it "reflects this historical moment rather than offering any escape from it" (VC, n.p.).

Moving Forward: Postcapitalist Realist Desires

As I am framing it here, even the common, positive, move in social justice in music education of proposing new forms of subversive and subaltern discourses and processes is potentially under the sway of capitalist realism. "Is there no alternative?" as Fisher asks in the subtitle of *Capitalist Realism*. Does such a view amount to an all-encompassing system where people have no agency to make changes for the better? For Fisher, the alternative is to turn away from this form of negative identity politics as recycling marginalized perspective or what he called "identitarianism": "[I]t is imperative to reject identitarianism, and to recognise that there are no identities, only desires, interests and identifications…Instead of freezing people into chains of already-existing equivalences, the point [is] to treat any articulation as provisional and plastic. New articulations can always be created. No-one is essentially anything" (VC, n.p.). Identitarianism, as Fisher frames it, is a characteristic of the left that essentializes identity by freezing equivalences. People of a shared identity are given ascriptive characteristics that they ostensibly share. This identity and characteristic binds them in the assumption that they share a common experience and culture much like, as I suggested above, culturally responsive and sustaining teaching frameworks can do. Rather than freezing people into these equivalences, Fisher suggests that people are seen as more in flux than this essentializing conception of identity allows. People's "desires, interests and identifications" might be seen as continually shifting and sometimes not aligning with "already-existing equivalences" of identities.

For Fisher, the alternative to identitarianism is class consciousness. "The rejection of identitarianism can only be achieved by the re-assertion of class. A left that does not have class at its core can only be a liberal pressure group." (VC, n.p.). Class, in this way, is not an immutable, stable identity; it is not a culture owned by people based on a class identity. Instead, it is a position within the economy and the means of production. For Fisher, conceptualizing class as only another identity and a culture among others, while not addressing its economic position, continues identitarianism and capitalist realism. "Our struggle must be towards the construction of a new and surprising world, not the preservation of identities shaped and distorted by capital" (VC, n.p.). Recycling, backward looking, critiques of negative

affect, providing alternatives from marginalized perspectives—these do not create "a new and surprising world" but continue "the preservation of identities shaped and distorted by capital."

While a class approach prioritizes the economic and position within the economy, it does not mean a complete disavowal of identities and culture. The Combahee River Collective (1977/1983), the group of Black feminists attributed with coining the term "identity politics," noted their stance on the relationship between class as a material position and identity:

> We are socialists because we believe that work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these resources. We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and antiracist revolution will guarantee our liberation. (267)

Identitarianism as opposed to identity politics is the ignoring of the material and economic aspects of the Collective's statement on resources; it is the disarticulation of class from identity as Fisher describes it. Fisher similarly sees class consciousness as having two aspects. "Class consciousness is always double: it involves a simultaneous knowledge of the way in which class frames and shapes all experience, and a knowledge of the particular position that we occupy in the class structure" (VC, n.p.). Identities are an important part of understanding how class frames and shapes experience. However, in identitarianism, the class position is not considered, and class is disarticulated from identity. The shift towards class undoes the disarticulation inherent in identitarianism in support of neoliberalism.

In addition to rejecting identitarianism, the move towards class might avoid recapitulating the theories of negative affect of current identity-focused approaches to justice in music education. "Instead of seeking to overcome capital, we should focus on what capital must always obstruct: the collective capacity to produce, care and enjoy. We on the left have had it wrong for a while: it is not that we are anti-capitalist, it is that capitalism. . . is set up to block the emergence of [abundance for all]" (*Acid Communism*, 9). This provides a positive approach in contrast to a negative one. Perhaps, it is not enough to be antiracist or antifascist, or even anticapitalist—instead, music educators need to be "pro" something. Of course, music educators who work on equity are "pro" justice, but what Fisher's idea is suggesting is that music educators' arguments must be of positive affect, not neg-

ative, and make it a specific part of language, concept-formation, and music making. This requires imagination and hope, which are embodied within Afrofuturism. However, as I am arguing here, this is not to say that music educators reify this joy into Afrofuturism or any other identitarianism because this creates it as the ownership of some and not of others. As Afrofuturism and Black joy exemplify, the arts hold the potential to incorporate this positive agenda through imagination and joy, but not if it is disarticulated from class. However, to associate imagination and joy with an identity is to continue the essentializing qualities of identitarianism that freezes people into chains of already-existing equivalences, continuing the disarticulation of class from identity.

"Subtle Deflections": Impediments to a Positive, Class-Based Agenda

This move towards a new conception proves to be difficult. In writing and structuring this paper, I found it impossible to not follow the negative affect that I have explored and critiqued. I too have found it difficult to escape the neoliberal impulses to recycle the past and present; to engage in the creative destruction of critique; and begin with what I am against rather than what I am for. This is the premise of critical theory, start with the negative, recycle it into something else. This perhaps shows what Fisher meant by precorporation; Critical, possibly subversive approaches, are difficult to imagine outside of *zeitgeist* neoliberal hauntology and pessimism.

In addition to the difficulty of breaking out of old cycles and imagining other possibilities, there appears to be few incentives for researchers to engage in a shift towards class and move away from identitarianism. As Fisher noted, "The petit bourgeoisie which dominates the academy and the culture industry has all kinds of subtle deflections and pre-emptions which prevent the topic [of class] even coming up, and then, if it does come up, they make one think it is a terrible impertinence, a breach of etiquette, to raise it" (VC, n.p.). Fisher argued that identitarianism is part of these subtle deflections, intended or not. As Adolph Reed (2015) notes, "race politics is not an alternative to class politics; it *is* a class politics, the politics of the left-wing of neoliberalism" (n.p., emphasis added).[10] This neoliberal class politics of the elite displaces "the critique of the invidious outcomes produced by capitalist class power onto equally naturalized categories of ascriptive identity

that sort us into groups supposedly defined by what we essentially are rather than what we do" (Reed 2015, n.p.). In other words, identitarian politics is a politics of elites, even if they have "leftist" cultural and identity politics. Beyoncé, Megan Trainor, and other artists are the musical expression of this left elite class politics. Their music is the aesthetic of the disarticulation of class from identity by enacting neoliberal recycling while comfortably sitting next to critiques of racism and sexism. It is a musical expression of "the politics of the left-wing of neoliberalism." These are the "subtle deflections" and disarticulation within the "culture industry" that Fisher describes. To paraphrase Reed, the identitarian and cultural politics that serve as frameworks in music education research in equity *is* the class politics of the left elite. The capture and recycling of identities and culture in the name of equity serves academic, leftist elites (including myself) by helping us accrue academic capital and deflecting attention away from our own class position.

Because of the class politics of identitarianism, the deflection from class is rewarded within the academy and culture. As Fisher noted, among those in the contemporary left, status and capital are accrued by this process of deflection and the precorporation of ever-expanding minoritized identities. "The most lauded figures in the [identitarian left] are those who have spotted a new market in suffering—those who can find a group more oppressed and subjugated than any previously exploited will find themselves promoted through the ranks very quickly" (VC, n.p.). Such an explanation might also describe the politics of music education research. Over the last three decades, the proliferation of "new markets of suffering" in music education is found in how researchers have traversed the varying and increasingly marginalized identity categories of gender (Green 1997; Koza 1993), sexuality (Goodrich 2020; Palkki and Caldwell 2018), disability (Abramo 2012; Churchill and Laes 2020; Dobbs 2017), race (Bradley 2006, 2007; Hess 2017, 2018b; Koza 2008), transgender (Cayari 2019; Nichols 2013; Palkki 2020), mental illness (Hess 2024), and finally, the ultimate abstraction of oppression and suffering, "trauma" (Bauman-Field 2023; Bradley 2020; Bradley and Hess 2021; Griffin and Niknafs 2024). Perhaps like neoliberalism, music education researchers have first recycled the past for critique to clear the way in an act of creative destruction. Then, mirroring classical liberalism, they have searched out new markets in which to expand and capture to eke out more social, cultural, and academic capital for themselves. They perhaps engage in this to "promote themselves through the ranks very quickly." "Class," of course, is in danger of becoming the next step in the process if

it is framed only in identitarian terms of an essentialized cultural identity, rather than a position within the economy, as Fisher and Reed frame it. It can merely become a new market of suffering for personal gain if those who evoke class continue to disarticulate identity and culture from economic position and relation to material resources. If music educators, particularly researchers, are to make this move away from identitarianism and negative affect haunted by the past towards a positive, future-looking agenda we really believe in, we must interrogate the structures that reward us for deflecting class and undermining the socially just change we purport to champion.

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Notes

[1] I use social justice and equity interchangeably in this paper. What I mean by these terms is any writings or ideas by music educators that aim to address inequalities in society, such as sexism, racism, ableism, transphobia, etc. While a history of social justice and equity in music education is yet to be written and is beyond the scope of this paper, it is difficult to pinpoint a precise date to this scholarship. In one sense, social justice can be traced back to the feminist writings of the 1990s (Gould 1992, Green 1997, Lamb 1996, Koza 1993). It also could be marked with the increase in scholarship since the Social Justice and Music Education conference at Teachers College, Columbia University in 2006. It might be pinpointed to a further increase in studies from around 2015 or 2020.

[2] In lieu of traditional citation for Fisher I will refer to the title of the writing in abbreviation. In addition, I would like to state that I count myself as part of these "bourgeois identitarianists" whom Fisher is critical. It is my intent that any critiques of the left, social justice, and music education research and practice that I state here are as much a self-critique as they are of these groups.

3 Some more recent writings on neoliberalism and music education include Goble (2021), Aróstegui (2020), and Karlsen (2019). In my review of neoliberalism and music education, I have not found examples of writings on the recycling aspects of neoliberalism.

4 In addition to the crackle of phonographs, this distinction between analog and digital sound production is found in the different encoding systems. Analog encodes and reproduces sound through electronic currents, known as control voltage, or CV. In contrast, digital reproduces sound through code. Electrical currents are inconsistent; they vary incrementally to create small, subtle changes in pitch on synthesizers and tempo in sequencing such as drum machines. Digital, conversely, is consistent. The "imperfection" of analog is closer to human production (because humans are not perfect in pitch, tempo, and other parameters of music), and as a result, analog sounds more conventionally musical compared to the sterile perfection of digital. Some digital programs in music build this imperfection into digital coding through some form of randomness to mimic this pleasing, musical aspect of analog and human production.

5 Fisher explicitly connected postmodernism to capitalist realism. "What I'm calling capitalist realism can be subsumed under the rubric of postmodernism as theorized by Jameson" (*CR* 7).

6 I did not find any instances of Fisher writing about Sedgwick.

7 Another candidate for the mirror to Afrofuturism is the aesthetic of Steampunk. This largely White aesthetic uses imaginations of the future from the Victorian Era to imagine an alternative future.

8 I hope readers see my intent in first suggesting Afrofuturism as an alternative—I did so to bring up a trope in music education and social justice scholarship— There first is an analysis of a problem that finds its origins in a dominant identity, culture, musical practice, or epistemology. That problem is then replaced with an alternative from a subaltern identity, culture, musical practice, or epistemology. By following this pattern (and in the following undoing it), I hope to bring attention to this common pattern.

9 The guest speaker at the 2024 Music Education Special Interest Group of The American Educational Research Association was Benjamin Blaisdell of East Carolina University who gave a talk on Black Joy.

10 Elsewhere, Reed (2000) makes a similar statement: "Cultural politics and identity politics *are* class politics. They are manifestations within the political economy of academic life and the left-liberal public sphere.… Postmodernist and poststructuralist theorizing lays a radical-sounding patina over this all-too-familiar worldview and practice" (xxii).