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## ROBIN JAMES (2015). RESILIENCE & MELANCHOLY. POP MUSIC, FEMINISM, NEOLIBERALISM.

### Review by Melanie Schiller

You can't bounce back without first falling. According to the American philosopher Robin James in her notable book *Resilience & Melancholy. Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism*, this principle of resilience lies at the very core of the neoliberal agenda, transforming personal suffering into potential surplus value.

To give a contemporary example: In her acceptance speech for winning the 2016 Grammy for *Lemonade* (2016) as »Best Urban Contemporary Album«, Beyoncé highlighted her intention to give musical expression to damage inflicted upon her, symbolically representing black people in the US – and women in particular: »We all experience pain and loss, and often we become inaudible. My intention [with *Lemonade*] was to create a body of work that would give voice to our pain, our struggles, our darkness and our history.«<sup>1</sup> Beyoncé's statement refers to the continuing struggle of representation of blacks in contemporary »America«, the hidden injuries of systematic racism and the traumatic history of slavery in the United States. However, when *Lemonade* was first released in April 2016 (and hence after the publication of James' book), its theme of suffering and pain carried another layer of meaning. As was discussed widely in mainstream media, Beyoncé's husband Jay Z was suspected of having been unfaithful to her, and *Lemonade* was understood to be her reckoning. Confronted with a public outcry, Jay Z remained strategically silent, while his wife's »visual album« was exclusively available on the platform Tidal, which he bought in 2015 (and in which Beyoncé is a partner). This way, the marital problems of Jay Z and Beyoncé generated 306 million global streams in the first weeks, and Tidal gained

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1 <http://time.com/4668482/grammys-2017-beyonce-speech> (accessed April 17, 2017).

1.2 million user sign-ups in the first week after the release of *Lemonade*.<sup>2</sup> As such, *Lemonade* is an example of how a musical narrative of overcoming personal and systematic hardships functions as a highly profitable venture that ultimately stabilizes late capitalist hegemonic structures, rather than challenging them. Framed in this way, Beyoncé's record breaking *Lemonade* is the perfect embodiment of what James calls the neoliberal »resilience discourse«.

In her stimulating account of pop music's intricate relation with neoliberalism, Robin James practices what she calls philosophy of music and philosophy *through* music (21). James combines critical philosophy and (popular) music studies productively, and hence not only offers interesting and challenging analyses of musical phenomena from Calvin Harris, Rihanna and Lady Gaga to David Guetta, Ludacris and Atari Teenage Riot, but also highlights how popular music as a cultural form functions as a mirror of – and active agent in – societal discourses at large, and constructions of identity, race and gender in particular. James looks at musical practices to examine how values and aesthetics of contemporary pop are connected to broader, more fundamental shifts in epistemology, capitalism, and politics. As such, she takes pop music seriously because of its philosophical potential by highlighting the important point that musical works can do more than just reflecting dominant concepts, ideals and structures, but pop can also respond to, critique and rework them. In order to look at what philosophical assumptions and ideas are embedded in musical works, performances, and aesthetics, James analyses a wide range of songs and videos from different popular genres, but with an emphasis on contemporary Electronic Dance Music (EDM). In her interpretative and, as she herself recognizes, subjective approach of offering theories of »how songs work and why they work that way, and what it all means« (22), James explicitly distances herself from historical or ethnomusicological studies of music, and positions herself as a hermeneutic philosopher influenced by Foucault, Attali, Marx and Rancière, as well as critical musicology and film studies. This combination of politics and philosophy, and critical race feminism (notably bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, J. Halberstam, and Sara Ahmed) *in* and *through* pop music indeed seems more urgent than ever in times of Trumpism and the surge of essentialist nationalism, patriarchy and misogyny in politics and mainstream media, and racism and other institutionalized forms of identity-based oppression. As such, James gives a timely account of pop music's form, functioning and potential for societal change.

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2 [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/13/arts/music/beyonce-lemonade-tidal-streams.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/13/arts/music/beyonce-lemonade-tidal-streams.html?_r=0) (accessed April 17, 2017).

In order to discuss the ideological functions of popular music in neoliberal society, James initially differentiates between two forms of »dealing with«: On the one hand, the earlier mentioned dominant paradigm of falling and overcoming – which she calls resilience – and on the other its subversive counterpart: melancholy. In reference to Marx, James calls resilience the new »means of production« (4) in neoliberal society, in which crisis and trauma are necessary – even desirable – phenomena that enable the individual to »bounce back from injury and crisis in a way that capitalizes on deficits so that you end up ahead of where you initially started« (4). Resilience discourse, James argues, is what »ties contemporary pop music aesthetics to neoliberal capitalism and racism/sexism«. In popular music, resilience discourse takes personal damage and transforms it into aesthetic surplus value. Here again, Beyoncé is a case in point: The opening monologue of the video to her iconic single »Sorry« on *Lemonade* highlights personal damage which resulted in her symbolic death. She (presumably) addresses her unfaithful husband and asks:

»So what are you gonna say at my funeral now that you've killed me. »Here lies the body of the love of my life, whose heart I broke without a gun to my head. Here lies the mother of my children, both living and dead. RIP my true love.« (Intro to »Sorry« on *Lemonade*).

Beyoncé – notoriously (one of) the »hardest-working women in show business« – solemnly stages her own »death« in order to subsequently overcome the damage (»Middle fingers up, put them hands high«) and turn it into surplus value.

Musically, James draws analogies between this neoliberal logic of inflicting pain in order to subsequently heroically overcome it and the structure of popular mainstream EDM influenced pop songs: The soars and drops in EDM pop songs rely on modes of intensification that are eventually smoothed out and rendered pleasurable. James even goes as far as claiming that »people find musical gestures like EDM soars pleasurable because *they perform the resilience we seek to embody*« (5; emphasis in the original). Resilience reaffirms the neoliberal logic of overcoming for the production of (aesthetic) surplus value, and follows a very specific pattern: damage is first incited and made manifest, then spectacularly overcome, and the overcoming is broadcast and shared. The reward for this infinite imperative is increased human capital, status and recognition, because resilience does not only function on an individual, but also on a collective level: with reference to Foucault's concept of biopolitics, James argues that individual resilience is understood to boost societies' resilience (7) and leaves social in-

stitutions (capitalism, and what she calls »Multi-Racial White Supremacist Patriarchy«) in place.

So, when resilience is the dominant norm of neoliberalism, and if contemporary pop music often performs acts of resilience, does this imply the impossibility of alternative strategies of »survival« that do not feed into the oppressing structures causing them? With reference to Freud's famous notion, James introduces the second central concept of her book, melancholy. While resilience corresponds with Freud's take on mourning (resolving and overcoming loss), James introduces melancholy as a tactic of inverting resilience: Instead of conquering damage, melancholy refuses to »bounce back *enough* and/or in the right direction« (19) and does not perform the cultural work that is expected in the resilience imperative. One example for melancholy as alternative tactic James offers is Rihanna's refusal to resiliently overcome the violent offence she suffered from, inflicted by her boyfriend Chris Brown in 2009. Rihanna's post-offence album *Unapologetic* sounds melancholic, and her hit single »Diamonds« in particular uses the language and semiotics of tonality to produce harmonic melancholy (147). James describes »Diamonds« as directionless, as it »doesn't go anywhere,« it does not make use of soars, it does not build up a crest – in fact, »it is haunted by an absent soar« (148). »Diamonds« also does not provide a drop, it rather is an »unending loop of soft peaks and valleys« that »lacks the spectacular crises and overcomings we have come to expect from contemporary pop songs« (ibid.). And as such, James concludes, the song demonstrates a lack of resilience: »Rihanna's vocal delivery neither incites damage, by expressing suffering and pain, nor does it express struggle and/or triumphant overcoming« (150). Missing a musical as well as narrative climax or crisis, *Unapologetic* did receive criticism for Rihanna's lack of struggle or fighting back, and Rihanna was accused of failing to sufficiently make use of her emotional pain and trauma (ibid.).

Although James offers compelling analyses and interesting hypotheses, her concept of melancholy remains much less convincing than her arguments about the dominant trope of resilience in neoliberalism and contemporary pop. She describes melancholy as neither refusing to overcome, nor as an ultimately productive strategy of challenging hegemonic culture, since the very core of the concept is to *not* be productive in cultural terms. However, the effectiveness of melancholy as a tactic of resistance (for lack of a better word) remains questionable: does not Rihanna's »melancholic« global super-hit »Diamonds« generate surplus value just like Beyoncé's spectacular overcoming in *Lemonade*? James concludes by arguing that there are »many many ways to deal with damage and trauma, and people frequently re-

cover, survive, cope and flourish in ways that don't adequately support hegemony« (168), but here a lack of convincing alternative evidence (particularly in pop music) most clearly demonstrates the shortcomings of James' otherwise compelling arguments. Finally, by emphasizing the continuing importance of »traditional« subcultural activism and grassroots initiatives (like providing financial aid to underprivileged although – or *because* – these are considered »bad investments«) to challenging the all-encompassing neoliberal ideology of capitalizing on damage, James' notion of melancholy as tactic remains too indefinite. And does melancholy as tactic of subverting the neoliberal logic of resilience not furthermore burden those suffering from systematic violence to also refuse to overcome these traumas – in a particular way?

Aside from unfortunately poor editing and occasionally abstract choice of terminology obscuring James' ideas – »just as resilience discourse is fueled by ›nothing,‹ biopolitics runs on death« (23) –, her hermeneutic readings of contemporary pop offer an inspiring and provocative read. The combination of musical analyses and theoretically informed readings of globally successful songs as well as James' politically motivated philosophical argumentation invites the reader to reconsider the role of pop in contemporary society. However, concluding it can be said that James convincingly diagnoses the disease but fails to offer valid treatment options.

James, Robin (2015). *Resilience & Melancholy. Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism*. Alresford: Zero Books (224 p., Paperback, 15.99€).