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Staging a 'real' masculinity in a 'fake' world: creativity, (in)authenticity, and the gendering of musical labour

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ABSTRACT
A distinction between creativity and commerce as opposing forces is central to discourses surrounding popular music, and this distinction facilitates a gendered hierarchy of valued and devalued forms of musical labour. The practice of singing has typically been coded as feminine and has held a lower status than the masculinized practices of playing an instrument or composing. Accordingly, male pop singers tend to be assessed as inauthentic – and, by extension, insufficiently masculine – by some critics and audiences. In this article, I investigate how entwined notions of creativity and authenticity might shape contemporary pop artists' representations of masculinity. Through a case study of Justin Timberlake's music video *Say Something* (2018), I demonstrate how the showcasing of particular forms of musical labour can function to authenticate constructions of masculinity in accordance with artistic and creative ideals with roots in the Romantic era. My approach to audiovisual analysis merges perspectives from critical musicology and cultural studies, in order to investigate the processes by which 'real' masculinities are articulated on multiple levels.

We can and do despise pop music in general as bland commercial pap while being moved by it in particular as a source of sounds that chime unexpectedly but deeply in our lives.

– Simon Frith

Introduction

Pop music is commonly seen as pure entertainment, as a 'brain-dead waste-land' (Weisbard 2014, p. 2) populated by talentless performers all clamouring

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for attention in the name of commercial profit and fame. Yet, as Simon Frith (2001, p. 96) points out, pop music simultaneously resonates profoundly in our lives. On one level, pop music underscores our daily routines: it spills from speakers in cafés, restaurants, and shops, or it is carefully selected to provide the soundtrack to commutes and exercise routines (see DeNora 2000, Clarke *et al.* 2009). On another level, pop artists' self-fashioning through songs, videos, and social media fuel debates about acceptability and normalcy, eliciting responses that both reflect and shape our attitudes, values, and social norms. Quite evidently, pop music provides an arena wherein ideals of gender, sexuality, and other aspects of identity are continuously negotiated. These negotiations are manifest in the aesthetics of pop texts, whose production and reception are informed by discursive formations with deep historical roots.

In this article, I explore how interconnected discourses surrounding gender, creativity, and authenticity shape pop aesthetics (and how pop aesthetics contribute to shaping these discourses). Adding to the comprehensive scholarship on authenticity in popular music (see, for example, Grossberg 1993, Moore 2002, 2012, Weisethaunet and Lindberg 2010), I am primarily concerned with the factors that afford the authentication of masculinities within a pop domain that is commonly associated with commerce, inauthenticity, and femininity (see Coates 1997, Mayhew 1999, Railton 2001, Coulter 2017). I initially address the Romantic ideals of creativity that persist in the dominant authenticity paradigm of popular music and explicate the gendered coding of different forms of musical labour that underpins this paradigm. Taking an interdisciplinary approach grounded in critical musicology, cultural studies, and gender studies, I proceed to combine discourse analysis, audiovisual analysis, and media ethnography to unpack how the aestheticization and narrativization of musical labour forms part of the co-construction of authenticity and masculinity. To this end, I undertake a reading of Justin Timberlake's music video *Say Something* (2018) vis-à-vis related material in the form of behind-the-scenes video clips, interview statements, and social media posts. Against the backdrop of a discussion of the sociocultural feminization of the male pop singer, I demonstrate how the construction of Timberlake's 'real' masculinity unfolds across multiple channels of expression. The gendered (de)valuation of different forms of musical labour runs as a central thread throughout the article, calling attention to the close relationship between creative credibility and masculinity.

Intersecting creativity and gender: pop music as the inauthentic other and the gendering of musical labour

Creativity in music has long been assessed in relation to the perceived autonomy of composers, producers, and performers. Persistent and intertwined

conceptions of creativity, autonomy, authorship, and authenticity are strongly rooted in Romantic discourse, which, as Jason Toynbee (2012, p. 162) suggests, views music as the direct product of its creator(s). Romanticism thus 'treats creation as a mystical process, and creators as a select band of individual geniuses' (Toynbee 2012, p. 163). In a study that details the gendered history of such ideas, Claire Taylor-Jay (2009, pp. 183–185) notes that, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, prevailing conceptions of both authenticity and creativity were highly gendered as masculine. She explains that 'musicians themselves, as well as other artists, scholars, critics and scientists all sought to explain how a creator could only ever be a man' (Taylor-Jay 2009, p. 183). While such a close association between masculinity and creativity clearly served to disadvantage female artists it simultaneously resulted in a tendency to view 'bad' male composers and musicians as unmanly and impotent (Taylor-Jay 2009, p. 184), which provides an early example of the gendered value judgements that continue to inform the evaluation of musical works, recordings, and performances.

In the early evolution of popular music, creativity (associated with authenticity and masculinity) became defined in opposition to commerce (associated with inauthenticity and femininity).[1] Derek Scott (2008, pp. 3–6) describes how dichotomies between authentic/inauthentic and art/entertainment emerged as part of a popular music revolution in the nineteenth century. Changes in the categorization of music production in this period 'provided critics with a means of condemning music that bore the signs of the popular – which they regarded as fashionable and facile … rather than progressive and serious' (Scott 2008, p. 5). A view of creativity characterized by imperial ideals of the pioneering and groundbreaking was soon established as the standard against which music's value was measured (Scott 2008, p. 92). In the mid-twentieth century, when the emergence of rock and roll saw certain iterations of the popular gain currency as an arena for innovation and progress in its own right, Keir Keightley (2001, p. 109) argues, ideas of quality and authenticity maintained an oppositional relation to deprecated ideas of the mass-distributed, commercial, and safe. The persistence of such dichotomies contributed to producing 'a highly stratified conception of popular music' which views music's credibility and seriousness as dependent on it being more than just entertainment (Keightley 2001, p. 110). In the resulting paradigm, rock is positioned as masculine on account of its association with authenticity and creativity, while pop is positioned as feminine because of its association with artifice and entertainment. Consequently, Norma Coates argues, 'real men aren't pop' (1997, p. 52), which indicates the disadvantages that male pop performers face in measuring up against the entwined ideals of authenticity and masculinity.

Given that prevailing discourse equates pop with commerce and establishes close connections between pop and the (vaguely defined but strongly

devalued) mainstream, pop music routinely serves as the inauthentic Other against which the authenticity and value of other genres are measured. This is argued by Eric Weisbard: 'If music genres cannot be viewed – as their adherents might prefer – to exist outside of commerce and media, they do share a common aversion: to pop shapelessness' (2014, p. 10). Weisbard emphasizes that the categorization of different music genres is closely connected to the pursuit of anti-commercial notions of identity and authenticity (2014, pp. 10–12),[2] and rock's alignment with Romantic values is mirrored by other popular music genre cultures that distance themselves from the ephemerality, commerciality, and femininity associated with mainstream pop music.[3] As I attempt to demonstrate in this article, however, Romantic conceptions of creativity and authenticity frequently operate as guiding ideals also *within* what might reasonably be called the pop mainstream. This is manifest in the performance practices and representational strategies of artists, as well as in audience and media responses to them. Homing in on this particular issue, the gendered implications of various forms of musical labour, and their significance for the negotiation of authenticity and masculinity in pop music contexts, assume significance.

In his book, *Unfree Masters*, Matt Stahl links intersecting ideas of creativity and autonomy to the politics of work. He observes that, even if their realities involve unequal contracts and lack of control and ownership over their own work, popular music artists are generally viewed as 'free':

> Successful artists often appear to us as paragons of autonomous self-actualization […] A primary area of mastery is the artist's control over his or her labor process […] Moreover, the presumed autonomy of the creative cultural-industry worker, exemplified in the figure of the rock star, is a function of mystification by the culture itself. Rather than developing as the result of a capitalist conspiracy, it is a legacy of the proliferation in and appropriation of Romantic myths of the artist as rebel and outsider by our culture. (Stahl 2013, pp. 2–4)

Stahl's description further emphasizes the connection between creativity, autonomy, and particular genres of popular music (most conspicuously rock). Notably, he shows how Romantic sentiments are carried over into popular music ideals of the artist as an autonomous creator. The politics of creative work raised in Stahl's study also provide a starting point for considering the exclusion of pop artists from the Romantic discourse of creativity and autonomy, particularly on the level of a gendered hierarchy of various forms of musical labour.

Certainly, not all forms of creative work are valued equally. Prevailing paradigms of authenticity and value in popular music assign producers, studio engineers, composers/songwriters, instrumentalists, and singers different roles in the gendered social hierarchy of musicmaking (Mayhew 2004, Warwick 2004, 2015, Negus 2011, Hansen 2018). For example, the practice of singing has been culturally coded feminine, and it has held a lower

status than activities perceived to be more masculine, such as songwriting/composing, the mastery of an instrument, or the mastery of technology (for example, record producing). On this issue, Jacqueline Warwick suggests that the dismissal of music centred around (particularly young female) voices adheres to a logic which 'assumes that songwriting and playing instruments constitute more creative and important work than mere singing' (2004, p. 192). The low status of singing as a musical labour should be seen in relation to the close connections between the voice and the body (see Barthes 1977, Frith 1996, Jarman-Ivens 2011) vis-à-vis the centrality of the corporeal to dismissals of pop music as a feminine low culture (see Railton 2001, pp. 322–325). Indeed, it is partly the bodily aspects of singing that prompt a categorization of this activity as an inauthentic form of musicmaking: 'mastery of an instrument becomes a badge of musical truth, while bringing music out from within the body itself is dismissed as facile and "inauthentic"' (Warwick 2004, p. 193).

The inferior and feminized status of the corporeal act of singing is further explored by Allison McCracken, who charts the reception of early crooners in the 1920s and 1930s. Despite their immense popularity among some audiences, McCracken suggests, these male pop singers received much negative attention:

> [The] crooners' high voices, their privileging of emotional vulnerability and their association with female audiences devalued them artistically *and* suggested a lack of manliness that, as acceptable gender behavior narrowed in the early 1930s, increasingly came to be associated with homosexual identity. The conflation of the crooner with the homosexual, especially as represented by the gay 'pansy' characters highly visible in the popular culture of the time, was to prove the most damning and long-lasting accusation against them. (McCracken 2015, p. 6, original emphasis)

This description demonstrates the connections made between particular forms of musical expression (pop singing) and a lack of manliness (often defined in sexual terms), and it provides a historical precedent for the cultural feminization of the male pop singer in the present day. It is partly the high visibility (or desirability) of the pop singer – the way in which he attracts the attention of the audience – that calls his masculinity into question. As frontmen, male singers are at odds with the hegemonic logic that men are supposed to look, not be looked at (see Wald 2002, Bannister 2006, pp. 100–101, Warwick 2015, p. 334). If popular music culture generally encourages the admiration of other musicians, whose musical contributions are seen as more significant, the pop singer's high visibility is precarious exactly because 'the value attached to singing as a form of musicianship is uncertain' (Warwick 2015, p. 334).

It is generally the forms of musical labour that are seen as indicative of authorship – such as songwriting and composition – that are the most highly valued in Romantic, rockist, and masculinist conceptions of

authenticity. Keith Negus suggests that, in the sphere of popular music, it is 'the songwriters that are routinely valued as the authors' and who hold 'a privileged place in the economic and cultural valuing of creativity (rights revenue is allocated to the song "writer" and not the interpreter)' (2011, pp. 609–610). This remains the case even if performers are frequently admired, and performers who write their own material tend to be valued above those who do not (Negus 2011, p. 610). This discursive paradigm poses a particular problem for male pop singers, whose masculinities are already called into question on account of their participation within the feminized, 'fake' world of pop and whose reception tends to prioritize their most apparent creative efforts (singing) to the extent of overshadowing their participation in other, more highly valued forms of musical labour (playing instruments, music production, songwriting).

It is against this backdrop that I now investigate how the masculinity of one male pop artist, Justin Timberlake, is constructed through aesthetic and narrative means. I focus primarily on how particular forms of musical labour are mobilized to form part of a masculinity that qualifies as 'real' in accordance with the prevailing authenticity paradigm outlined in the preceding pages.

Justin Timberlake: saying something 'real'

With an aim to explicate the representational strategies that facilitate the authentication of Timberlake's masculinity across various media channels, the following reading places primacy on addressing the intertextual relations and intertwining discourses that characterize the politics of identity in pop contexts. I follow Stuart Hall in understanding identities as multiply constructed (see Hall 1991, pp. 57–59, 1996, pp. 4–5; see also Hansen 2019). Pop identities are performatively constituted through the creative configuration of sound and visuals in pop texts (songs, music videos, live performances), at the same time as the reception of pop texts is shaped by perceptions of 'who the artist is'. This dialectic is indicative of the ever-changing and never-static character of identities, which is recognized by Hall when he urges us to consider that 'identities do not remain the same, that they are frequently contradictory, that they cross-cut one another, that they tend to locate us differently at different moments' (1991, p. 59). Such a view of identities as fragmented – constructed by numerous, often contradictory elements that are given value and narrativized within discursive frameworks – prompts my methodological approach in this article: merging audiovisual analysis with media ethnography and discourse analysis allows me to outline how different points of contact between artist and audience contribute to the broader negotiation of masculinity across multiple media platforms.[4] My primary ambition in undertaking the following reading,

then, is to shed light on how musical and extramusical elements intersect in ways that afford the authentication of Timberlake's masculinity and creative agency alike.

Justin Randall Timberlake, born 1981, is among the most successful male pop artists of the early twenty-first century. He rose to prominence in the early 2000s as one of two lead vocalists of the boy band NSYNC, and he earned his first two Grammy awards already with his debut solo album, *Justified* (2002). Given the prevalence and persistence of boy band stereotypes and prejudices that intersect notions of pop fakery and lacking masculinities (Wald 2002, Duffett 2012, Hansen 2018), former boy band members are arguably disadvantaged compared to other popular musicians when it comes to the pursuit of credibility. Timberlake's creative work has seen him span the roles of songwriter, producer, actor, dancer, and singer, yet it is for the latter he has received most attention.[5] In the following, I take one of Timberlake's recent music videos, *Say Something* from the album *Man of the Woods* (2018), as a starting point for investigating how the co-construction of his authenticity and masculinity relies on showcasing his participation in the creative work of songwriting, producing, and playing instruments.

Say Something is a particularly pertinent example in this regard, as it contrasts many of Timberlake's other music videos by exchanging dance-fuelled pop excess for a performance-oriented aesthetic that puts his skill as an instrumentalist on display. In the video, Timberlake is shown with a full beard and costumed in a plaid flannel shirt and wool hat. The look might be described as connoting lumbersexuality, which provides 'an opening for men to experiment with the fantasy of being real men' (Hawkins and Størvold 2019, p. 330), and marks a clear shift in his self-presentation. This shift resonates with narratives concerning the significance of *Man of the Woods* as a turning point in Timberlake's career.[6] In promotional material, Timberlake describes the album as inspired by his family and personal life,[7] playing into the Romantic myth of creative works originating from within as a 'direct product of the psyche of the creator' (Toynbee 2012, p. 162). As I will make clear, this myth is evoked also by accounts of how 'Say Something' was written, even if the songwriting credit is shared by Timberlake, Larrance Dopson, Floyd Nathaniel Hills, Timothy Mosley (known professionally as Timbaland), and Chris Stapleton.

The latter is a featuring artist on the song, contributing vocals and guitar, and also appears in the music video. Stapleton is a Grammy Award-winning country artist, which is something that appears to have influenced the style of the song and the aesthetics of the video. The song is characterized musically by a combination of stylistic elements from country, pop, soul, and R&B. Most strikingly, the original sound recording combines prominent acoustic guitars with electronic elements including programmed beats, samples, and sound effects.[8] Vocally, Timberlake and Stapleton straddle the line between

country and R&B, with Stapleton's vocal inflections being especially indicative of country idioms and tropes. The visuals of the music video largely foreground a country aesthetic – established by Western acoustic guitars, Stapleton's cowboy hat, and the Old West atmosphere of the building in which the video was filmed[9] – that accentuates the articulation of a normative masculinity.[10] Because country music culture has long privileged and commodified notions of musical authenticity (see, for example, Peterson 1997), the prominence of country elements in *Say Something* contributes to distancing Timberlake from his boy band past (as well as pop inauthenticity more generally).

The music video was released on January 25, 2018, and it has received in excess of 380 million views on YouTube at the time of writing.[11] The video is directed by Arturo Perez Jr. and produced by La Blogothéque, a web-based production company that has worked with artists including Arcade Fire, Bon Iver, Phoenix, and R.E.M. Specializing in performance videos, La Blogothéque's productions have been described as beautiful, charming, and with 'an authentic sense of intimacy' (Chan 2017). *Say Something* can indeed be described as a cinematic aestheticization of an 'authentic' music performance. The authenticity that is pursued here is significant not least in how it intersects with the articulation of Timberlake's 'real' masculinity, in the sense that the video highlights his participation in forms of musical labour that are simultaneously highly valued (as authentic) and historically linked to masculinity.

The music video consists of a live performance, filmed in one take by a single camera. The live format is, in many ways, the most evident measure of authenticity in popular music. According to Lee Marshall (2005, p. 64), live performance is understood as the most authentic form of musical performance because it is seen to minimize the distance between performer and audience. Live performance conceivably eliminates 'the barriers to authentic expression' found in other formats, because 'there is no safety net' (Marshall 2005, p. 64). Similarly, Frith argues that the dominant paradigm of authenticity in popular music situates the live performance as 'the truest form of musical expression, the setting in which musicians and their listeners alike can judge whether what they do is "real"' (2007, p. 8). Emphasizing the liveness of the performance, *Say Something* uses the audio recorded on set, as opposed to superimposing the pre-recorded album version of the song (which is common practice even when it comes to performance music videos). Combined with the unedited one-take video footage, the use of the live audio further accentuates the authenticity of the performance according to the liveness ideal.

The fact that *Say Something* shows a live performance is highlighted in the promotion of the video through social media. On January 26, 2018, one day after the music video was released, Timberlake uploaded a 40s video clip to his Instagram and Facebook profiles, giving the viewer a glimpse of the

aftermath of the music video shoot. Announcing 'that's a wrap', Timberlake explains that they just finished shooting the video and directs attention to the crew who are disassembling gear and equipment. Timberlake goes on to describe the video as 'one shot, one take, and a live performance', ending with a celebratory 'we did it, we did it' that emphasizes the achievement of pulling this off. In the clip, Timberlake also remarks that he 'officially learned how to walk and play the guitar at the same time', arguably reinforcing the idea that the mastery of an instrument (while walking) requires effort while singing comes naturally (see Warwick 2015, p. 334). The clip has the potential to inform viewers' interpretation of Say Something and Timberlake's persona alike, because it both authenticates the video as a live performance and calls attention to Timberlake's participation in forms of musicmaking that register as masculine within popular music discourse.

There are numerous elements in Say Something that add up to showcase Timberlake's skills as a multi-instrumentalist, positioning him as something 'more' than just a singer. First, the video begins with Timberlake on his own in a dimly lit room, practicing the opening of the song on a drum machine/digital audio workstation (DAW). After Timberlake proclaims 'let's do it', he performs the opening of the song on the DAW. If Romantic views of authenticity are at best ambivalent to the evident use of (particularly electronic or digital) technology (see Marshall 2005, p. 65), the mastery of recording and production technologies is closely associated with masculine and highly valued musical labour roles, such as the producer (Mayhew 2004, Warwick 2004).[12] As Bennett Hogg argues, it is 'not a case of technological mediation being "bad" in any absolute sense, so much as specific technologies being deployed as markers of particular cultural positions' (2012, p. 225).[13] Significantly, Timberlake's use of the DAW in Say Something as an instrument – performing live on it – indicates his role as an instrumentalist, while also showcasing his mastery of production technology. The act of introducing this technology into an otherwise largely retro country/rock aesthetic might be seen as innovative and pioneering, qualities that are deep-seated in the masculinized authenticity ideals long associated with dominant views of creativity (see Scott 2008, pp. 91–92). Accordingly, Timberlake's particular deployment of digital technology in Say Something may well serve to authenticate the performance – and Timberlake's role in it – rather than undermine it.

As the first verse starts, Timberlake moves through the building and picks up the aforementioned acoustic guitar along the way. While calling further attention to Timberlake's participation in other forms of musical labour than singing,[14] the acoustic guitar simultaneously connotes a form of intimacy and first-person authenticity commonly associated with the singer songwriter (see Moore 2001, p. 199, Negus 2011, pp. 623–624). The camera follows Timberlake as he walks while playing the guitar, emphasizing the

liveness of the performance by also focusing on the other musicians dispersed around the building. For example, when Stapleton enters to sing the second verse (at approximately 02:30), the camera pans to the other side of the large room to reveal him standing on a staircase. Again, the authenticity of the performance as a live event is validated by it being filmed by a single camera in one continuous take.

While being filmed in one take, the video can hardly be described as sparse or minimalistic. And the cinematic aestheticization of the performance is key to its projection of authenticity. For one, the retro interior of the building contributes to framing the performance within a country aesthetic that opposes the inauthenticity associated with pop.[15] Moreover, the meticulous management of audiovisual events guides the viewer's attention. This is exemplified during the second chorus (approximately 03:30), when the manipulation of the lights in the building are integral to building up the tension and energy in this part of the video. This scene also demonstrates the audiovisual aestheticization of liveness. When the leftward movement of the camera towards Stapleton coincides with the panning of his voice in the mix, from the left channel towards the centre, this creates a heightened impression of live authenticity. The manipulation of the spatial placement of Stapleton's voice in the mix to match the movement of the image makes the scene appear more natural, more real, as if the viewer is present in the room. Similar moments appear throughout the video. For example, the ambience and presence of Timberlake's voice changes significantly when he moves from an open space into an elevator (approximately 01:38). Such points of synchronization – suggesting a natural, unmediated relationship between what is seen and what is heard – serve as further indicators of the live authenticity of the performance.

On January 29, 2018, another video clip was released on Timberlake's social media accounts. The video is shot in black and white, is professionally edited (in contrast to the unedited home-footage style of other video clips posted to Timberlake's social media accounts), and is accompanied by the caption *Behind: Say Something*.[16] The behind-the-scenes framing of the clip presents it as a candid glimpse into the creative processes resulting in the song and music video, and it further showcases Timberlake's skill as an instrumentalist: he is shown in the studio playing both a guitar and a Fender Rhodes electric piano. The clip is narrated by Timberlake, and his account of the songwriting process and collaboration with Stapleton describes the song as emanating from a spontaneous moment of creativity shared by the two of them (see approximately 01:06–01:18). The scene serves to assert Timberlake's and Stapleton's authorship of the song (bypassing the involvement of the three others who are officially listed as co-writers) and also plays into Romantic myths of creativity as partly involuntary: music

comes from the mind of its authors, resulting from moments of spontaneous inspiration (see Toynbee 2012, p. 163).

As Negus (2011, p. 607) points out, such Romantic ideas of authorship are still widely valued across musical genres. The *Behind: Say Something* video clip firmly positions Timberlake and Stapleton within this discourse. The artistic credibility entailed in this narrative of authorship provides a platform for the naturalization of a masculine ideal that is widespread in popular culture, namely that of the strong, silent type.[17] After Timberlake explains that the idea for the song was sparked by his desire to say something without getting 'caught up in the rhythm of it', the clip ends with the hook of the final chorus: 'sometimes the greatest way to say something is to say nothing'. Effectively, the narrative that describes the song as emanating from Timberlake's own experiences and desires also functions to associate him with the particular trope of masculinity that is idealized by the lyrics. The naturalization of this configuration of masculinity is aided by interview statements that present the lyrics as inspired by Timberlake's personal experiences (see Puckett 2018), thus authenticating the song, lyrics, and articulation of masculinity as representative of his 'real' self.[18]

Timberlake's strong and silent masculinity is ensured not only through the display and aestheticization of musical labour that is coded masculine, however, but also on account of the *absence* of certain other musical practices. Notably, Timberlake is widely recognized as a skilled dancer,[19] and elaborate choreographies are among the trademarks of his music videos and live performances. However, any form of dancing is conspicuously absent from *Say Something*. As is pointed out by gender scholar Maxine Leeds Craig, there is a 'popular assumption that women dance and men do not, and that women will want to dance and that men will not' (2014, p. 4). Such assumptions, she argues,

> form the base of a chain of signifiers that support long-standing racist associations between blackness, femininity, sensuality, the body, emotional expressiveness, and lack of control, on the one hand, and between white masculinity and the opposite characteristics of rationality, intellect, and emotional control, on the other. (Craig 2014, p. 4)[20]

Craig's description of dance's cultural coding as corporeal and feminine resonates with Railton's (2001, pp. 327–328) argument that it is partly the physicality of singing and dancing, and the association of these activities with pop artists, that aligns pop music with a feminized low culture. Rockist ideology extends a paradigm that emerged as part of the bourgeois public sphere,[21] Railton (2001, p. 322) argues, within which what is conceived of as a feminized, corporeal low culture – represented by the carnival and the circus – is deprecated, even as its bodily pleasures are found fascinating. Rock culture developed further as 'a site of political and cultural discussion and debate

that contrasted strongly to the simple, physical enjoyment of "pop"' (Railton 2001, p. 324), of which dance is a prominent marker. The absence of dance in *Say Something*, then, is central to securing an aesthetic that bypasses some of the associations shared by pop music, low culture, and dance alike (femininity, the body), and underscores the naturalization of Timberlake's masculinity in accordance with contrasting ideals of intellect (capacity to write songs, the auteur-role) and emotional control ('say nothing'). As Craig suggests, 'it seems *natural* when women dance, and just as natural when men do not' (2014, p. 4, emphasis added), which is a premise that both underpins and is perpetuated by Timberlake's performance in *Say Something*.

On the whole, the staging of Timberlake's masculinity through *Say Something* and related texts weave together a wide range of signifiers of authenticity, authorship, and masculinity. Coates argues that the performance of masculinity within rockist discourse depends on the ability to 'expel and incorporate any threat to its (however tentative) stability [...] any excess must be contained' (1997, p. 56). This is achieved in *Say Something* by prioritizing and showcasing 'serious' forms of creative work associated with masculinity and authenticity while bypassing or downplaying those forms of musical labour that are associated with corporeality, femininity, and inauthenticity. Most of all, it is the notion of live performance that encourages ascriptions of authenticity, by opposing stereotypes of pop music as 'fake' and 'manufactured'. The live authenticity of the elaborate performance, as well as the accomplishment entailed in filming it in one take, is called attention to yet again at the very end of the music video. After the song has ended, the crew, musicians, and choir all break into loud cheers and applause, prompting Timberlake (off-screen) to say 'holy shit' as the camera pans upwards towards the cheering crowd. He follows up coolly with 'that's one way to get a response', as a final demonstration of the emotional control and professionalism that forms integral parts of his 'real' masculinity.

Concluding thoughts: masculine modes of musicmaking

As I hope to have shown in this article, Romantic and rockist discourse on creativity can represent a significant influence on strategies of representation in pop music, despite common assertions regarding pop's exclusion from this domain. Our everyday encounters with pop texts are imbued with gendered implications, invariably activating numerous narratives of cultural, political, and social significance. In *Say Something*, Timberlake's 'real' masculinity is constituted by the convergence of Romantic notions of creativity and authenticity, on the one hand, and the rhetorical and aesthetic affirmation of normative ideals of male behaviour, on the other. Central to the construction of his masculinity is the display and aestheticization of participation in certain

forms of musical labour, and the conspicuous absence of others. The show-casing of the songwriting process in *Behind: Say Something* and the prominent display of Timberlake's skills as a multi-instrumentalist in *Say Something* and other video clips are central facets of how his masculinity is reshaped in accordance with Romantic ideals of authenticity, authorship, and creativity. Timberlake integrates the traditionally feminized status of the male pop singer into a broader auteur-role that is closely associated with masculine-coded modes of musicmaking. Accordingly, he is not presented as a pop singer so much as he is portrayed as a songwriter, producer, and multi-instrumentalist who also happens to sing.

Of course, singing is not necessarily considered a feminine practice in and of itself.[22] In the case of *Say Something*, the firm grounding of the performance in familiar ideals of authenticity allows for a reshaping of the status of the male pop singer, facilitated partly by the masculinization of the act of singing itself. In *Behind: Say Something* Timberlake proclaims, 'it reminds me of The Allman Brothers or something like The Eagles, or like … it's just nice to hear men singing together again'. Notably, Timberlake does not compare his duet to his previous experience from boy bands (a format that is based around the concept of men singing together), but rather goes back in time another few decades to a period of popular music that was dominated by rock and country groups who foregrounded similar aesthetics and ideals of masculinity and authenticity (based around skill in songwriting, mastery of instruments, live performance) to those pursued in *Say Something*. This demonstrates the point that it is not simply the musical labour itself (for example, singing) that is gendered. Rather, a given form of musical labour can be gendered in different ways according to a wide variety of factors, such as its framing within different genre cultures. In context of pop music, responses to discourses surrounding the voice's connection to the body are frequently informed by pop's own associations with the corporeal (anti-intellectual), inauthentic, and feminine.

Timberlake's move away from modern pop aesthetics in *Say Something* is significant, and the video's staging of a seemingly casual yet elaborate live performance affords ascriptions of authenticity on multiple levels. It is largely the association with this exalted mode of performance that facilitates the construction of Timberlake's 'real' masculinity: temporarily under the cover of ideals and aesthetics associated with rock and country music, Timberlake mobilizes a range of intertwining tropes of masculinity and authenticity, the significance of which are narrated in supporting video clips and other media texts. Interestingly, the aesthetics of *Say Something* contrasts many of the other videos from this period of Timberlake's career (see *Filthy* [2018], *Man of the Woods* [2018], and *Supplies* [2018]), which generally embrace pop spectacle and tease corporeal pleasures by foregrounding Timberlake's skill as a dancer. *Say Something* is thus positioned firmly on the

'right' side of the highly gendered dichotomy identified by Warwick 'of "serious music for listening = good" while "fun music for dancing = bad"' (2015, p. 333). The contrast between *Say Something* and most of Timberlake's other videos exemplifies the matter that different points of contact between artist and audience afford different readings, which is made all the more complicated by the heterogeneity and diversity intrinsic even to dominant mainstream culture. As such, I can only hope that this article sheds light on some of the discursive architectures that underpin the gendering of pop performances and illustrates the matter that our everyday encounters with pop music prompt us to navigate many meaningful frameworks that connect contemporary pop aesthetics with a wide range of historical developments, circumstances, and moments.

Notes

1. For a foundational critique of the gendered nature of the creativity/commerce dichotomy, see Andreas Huyssen's (1986) exploration of the notion of 'mass culture as woman'. Huyssen's discussion of the feminization of mass culture is highly relevant for understanding conceptions of mainstream pop music as an 'inauthentic Other'.

2. As Weisbard (2014, p. 12) points out, the unity of the rock audience around shared anti-commercial beliefs ironically facilitated the genre's commercial success in a variety of arenas (record sales, concerts, magazines, merchandise). See also Keightley (2001, p. 109), who describes the contrast between the commercial success and the anti-commercial ideology of rock music as one of the great ironies of the second half of the twentieth century.

3. The widespread influence of rock ideology on other genre cultures is discussed in detail by Keightley (2001, p. 110) and Railton (2001, p. 322). See also Marshall (2005, p. 65f), who lists key elements of authenticity that occur, to some extent, in discourses surrounding all popular music genres and suggests that these elements are all rooted in Romantic reactions to early capitalism.

4. A more detailed account of my interdisciplinary and interpretive approach to studying the multiple construction of pop masculinities can be found in Hansen (2021).

5. Five out of Timberlake's ten Grammy awards are awarded for 'best vocal performance' or 'best rap/sung collaboration', and his role is commonly reduced to 'singer' in reviews, interviews, and other media material. See, for example, Daniel Kreps' *Rolling Stone* article about Timberlake's book, *Hindsight: And All the Things I Can't See in Front of Me* (Kreps 2018).

6. The album and its promotion as a more personal record received diverse responses. Some critics viewed the album as a product of self-indulgence resulting from Timberlake's white privilege (Grady 2018), while others saw it as an extension of the 'black musical aesthetic' from his previous albums (Jackson 2018). See Graham (2014) for a musicological investigation into the blurred racial boundaries of Timberlake's recordings. Even if a detailed discussion of race and ethnicity falls outside the scope of this article, it should be noted that these issues have been central in the reception of Timberlake and his creative work.

7. See the promotional video clip *Introducing Man of the Woods*. Available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVU-MmJZFFA [Accessed October 10, 2018].
8. Note that the sound recording that is included on *Man of the Woods* differs from the live version of the song that appears in the music video. The difference between the two is most evident in the addition of a choir and an acoustic drum kit in the music video version.
9. *Say Something* is filmed in the Bradbury Building, known most famously as one of the locations in the film *Blade Runner* (1982).
10. Country music has long been associated with an authenticity paradigm that naturalizes heteronormative gender ideals. See, for example, Mandrell, who argues that especially the Nashville country scene, of which Stapleton is a prominent representative, serves as a 'repository for […] what might be termed "authentic" or "real" "American" values, such as patriotism, God and country, "traditional family values", and, not least, traditional social and gender roles' (2014, p. 1016). Note that, as Mandrell (2014, p. 1016) acknowledges and recent scholarship increasingly demonstrates (Hubbs 2014, Mack 2020), there are also counter-normative currents and an increasing visibility of diversity within the genre.
11. According to YouTube's view count on November 30, 2021.
12. For an introduction to discourses surrounding gender and technology more broadly, see, for example, Lohan and Faulkner (2004).
13. The point that it is not necessarily the presence of technology itself that disrupts the perceived authenticity of music, but rather the way in which it is being used, is illustrated by Hogg (2012, p. 225) through the example of Bob Dylan: audiences did not mind Dylan's use of 'non-intrusive' technologies such as the acoustic guitar, microphones, or loudspeakers, but they objected to what they perceived as a fetishization of technology implied by him switching to the electric guitar.
14. Timberlake's skill as a guitar player is also highlighted in another video clip, uploaded to his social media profiles on January 28, 2018, where he is shown playing the acoustic guitar on his own, presumably preparing for the video shoot.
15. See Vernallis (2004, pp. 73–76) on how the 'setting' of music videos communicates genre and attendant sociocultural values.
16. I focus on the video clip uploaded to Facebook, which is 92s long. On account of platform-specific restrictions, the version of the video uploaded to Instagram is only 60s long. The narration and conversations are virtually identical in the two videos, and it is some of the material showing the recording of the track that has been edited down in the shorter version.
17. Sharrett (2009) details the prominence of this ideal in popular culture, as well as how it has been challenged by films such as *Brokeback Mountain* (2005).
18. See Negus (2011, pp. 623–624) on the idea of artists 'confessing' through their music.
19. See Beaumont-Thomas (2018), who describes Timberlake as 'pop's constant dancer'.
20. See Arno Plass' article in this special issue for a study of 'queer tango' that explores how certain bodily practices can subvert such cultural codes and challenge existing social hierarchies.
21. Railton develops her conception of 'the bourgeois public sphere' from Habermas (1995), whose work forms a basis for Railton's assessment of the development of (hegemonic) ideals of 'high' and 'low' culture.

22. See Jarman-Ivens (2011) for a thorough discussion of the performative potential of the voice. See also Garman's (2000) study of the vocal expression of working-class masculinity by performers such as Woody Guthrie and Bruce Springsteen, as well as Solis' (2007) extension of this work in relation to Tom Waits.

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