I Watched the Child Get Introduced to Violence:
Melancholy, Grief, and Self-Making in Earl Sweatshirt's *Feet of Clay*

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On my honor I have never given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment.

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I WATCHED THE CHILD GET INTRODUCED TO VIOLENCE: MELANCHOLY, GRIEF, AND SELF-MAKING IN EARL SWEATSHIRT'S *FEET OF CLAY*:

This project examines the intersections of neoliberalism and popular music aesthetics. By treating music itself *as theory*, this paper examines popular music as a discursive space for the production of alternative politics and subjectivities. Through a qualitative content analysis of Earl Sweatshirt's 2019 album, *Feet of Clay*, it is revealed how melancholy and grief contribute to self-making in the context of the artist's relationship to death under neoliberal capitalism.

Keywords: Earl Sweatshirt, neoliberalism, melancholy, grief

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2021, I began plotting this project in a student faculty research collaboration with my advisor and mentor in the music department. Looking to design a course that examined the intersections of popular music and neoliberal capitalism, we began reading a wide range of texts that covered topics from racial capitalism to the history of country music. This research was especially meaningful to me as I had been drawn to musicological studies that looked at cultural manifestations of power and inequality. But it was not until a moment at my second job as a chef that the weight of this research struck me. One evening after a grueling shift, I complained to a coworker about our inadequate wages and the exhaustive nature of the service industry. When he responded that he believed higher pay would be impossible without additional work, I realized how taken for granted the ideas I had been studying were. After this conversation, false perceptions of meritocracy, the acceptance of economic precarity, and the inability to even imagine a reality in which one could be treated with dignity by their employer were all ideas that I sought to understand from a sociological perspective and as perpetuated by popular culture.

In this project, I examine neoliberalism, its prevailing rationalities, and how it is both affirmed and resisted through popular music. I then perform a qualitative content analysis of Earl Sweatshirt's 2019 album, *Feet of Clay* which examines late stage capitalism through the adolescent experiences of a Black man in America. The aim of my research is to identify how popular music produces alternative politics and subjectivities as a discursive space and what ontological implications those ideas hold for the neoliberal subject.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Neoliberalism

The trouble with understanding neoliberalism is that it holds no singular set of characteristics or practices as a model of governance. At its most fundamental level, it supposedly purports limited government, individual liberty, and the untouchable virtue of economic competition. Though a straightforward premise, the neoliberal project contradicts all three of these ambitions in practice. In reality, greater intervention has been demanded of the state to both facilitate the growth of capital and compensate for its external detriments (Glenn 2009); individual freedoms are limited by the precarity assumed under a faulty welfare state (Brown 2019); and although touted as a hallmark of liberal capitalism, the idea of true consumer freedom appears farcical given the oligopolistic order of many major industries (Pellegrino 2023). So what is neoliberalism?

In my own research, I have observed two key obstacles to making sense of neoliberalism. The first is that it holds a variety of connotations across many disciplines. It can be seen as a "political philosophy, ethos, rationality or local assemblage, …[or] an uneven process of governmental or regulatory development" (Dean 2014:151). How then can we characterize neoliberal thought as a singular conceptual entity that extends to those spheres among others? The second is that neoliberalism, when applied as a descriptor for governance in the last half century or so, encompasses a wide set of policies, institutions, and structures of power that are often inconsistent or even contradictory. What is this ideology if not realized through uniform practices or along clear lines of motivation? These questions have prompted doubts about the usefulness of neoliberalism as a device for understanding social phenomena, especially given its intellectual imprecision (Dunn 2017; Boas and Gans-Morse 2009). In this section I address these

two questions in order to offer as functional and precise a definition of neoliberalism as possible and then justify its utility as a conceptual tool for understanding global politics, finance, and power.

Structure.

Much of the academic discourse pertaining to neoliberalism does a disservice to itself and its audience by failing to define the term with a clear *logos*. The overly-broad application of the term serves to invisibilize the actual institutions and mechanisms that perpetuate neoliberal thought. To outline the structure of neoliberalism in this project, I look to sociologist Mitchell Dean (2014), who understands neoliberalism as a 'thought collective.' The thought collective thesis challenges using the term as a broad misnomer for the qualities of contemporary state governance and instead posits that neoliberalism is an "identifiable but heterogeneous militant movement seeking to influence and appropriate the powers of national and international organizations, including states" (Dean 2014:160). This approach distinguishes the state *itself* and the neoliberal *regimes* of government that are "...*of* and *by* the state" (Dean 2014:155) as well as the external actors who see direct gain from those regimes. When considering this distinction, the scope of analysis ought to shift towards the individuals, institutions, and networks of power that make up the movement that Dean describes, rather than just the state itself. In identifying constituents of this movement such as think tanks, global financial institutions, and public intellectuals, one is able to contextualize neoliberal regimes as thoughtfully constructed apparatuses which benefit limited demographics and subjects within the population as a whole. This context offers a greater sense of perceptibility as well as more complete explanations for disasters attributed to neoliberal policy such as the 2008 global financial crisis.

At this point, I have aimed to characterize neoliberalism as a loose network of individuals, organizations, and institutions that have operated in tandem to affect governance on a global scale. The important distinction between this framing of neoliberalism and others, is that it both separates these groups from the state itself and works to identify them as an organized collective rather than referring to neoliberalism as an isolated self-perpetuating phenomenon. From here, to arrive at a robust definition of neoliberalism using the thought collective model requires an understanding of the historical progression of neoliberal thought and an examination of the writings of its architects. These two tasks are particularly useful in deciphering its contradictions and intended functions. This demands a thorough investigation of less than a century of history beginning with Le Colluque Walter Lippmann in 1938 where the term was first coined and the subsequent meeting of the Mont Pelerin Society in 1947 where its theoretical pillars were refined and eventually proliferated through institutions like the Heritage Foundation and the University of Chicago (Henry 2010). In the following section, I turn to the second question regarding its principles and practices beginning with the historical context that brought about its theoretical inception.

Historical context and conceptual bases.

As noted in this section's introduction, the premises of neoliberalism are contradictory in their own logic and in actualized practice. Considering the extent to which practices of neoliberal governance vary, we might ask what actually characterizes different regimes as a coherent whole. If the means are not universalized in practice, then what are the intended *ends* of neoliberal governance? Using the thought collective model, we can answer this by turning back to the

emergence of neoliberal theory and identify what prompted its origins and shaped its conceptual foundations.

While a comprehensive account of global finance and politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century would best serve this task, I limit this section to what I understand to be the key developments during that period. Sociologist Nicholas Gane (2013) argues that "the neoliberal movement initially developed through two inter-related projects: a political re-evaluation of classical forms of liberalism…and an epistemological critique of many of the rationalist principles of neoclassical economics" (5). Effectively, the former was facing a crisis of legitimacy as its hegemonic foothold was being undone by the failures of the latter.

In the aftermath of the industrial revolution, many western nations saw the rise of robust labor movements and even the realization of other state structures in response to the economic and urban blight stemming from laissez-faire economic practice (WFYI 2019). As economist John F. Henry (2010) notes: "...the (roughly) competitive framework within which liberalism flourished began to dissipate and the capitalist economy increasingly exhibited non-competitive, oligopolistic structures as the prevailing form of organization" (544). The state's orthodox commitment to the doctrine of the 'invisible hand' had reached what appeared to be a point of no return regarding its sustainability and would climax with the onslaught of the Great Depression. These two overwhelming crises of legitimacy and economic failure would, to reiterate Gane's (2013) point, demand a reevaluation of how (and whether) liberal policy ought to govern the market.

In response to the Depression came the Keynesian revolution of embedded liberalism. This was characterized by direct state economic planning through investment in public works, tariffs on trade, and even nationalization of major industries in some nations (Harvey 2005:11).

Marxist historian David Harvey (2005) describes this policy orientation as a "class compromise between capital and labor" and something that "was generally advocated as the key guarantor of domestic peace and tranquillity" (10). Though embedded liberalism succeeded in providing greater social and economic stability, its "collectivist" orientation was detested by defenders of traditional liberalism. While a group of intellectuals had already convened in 1938 to "develop a coherent criticism of planning and Keynesian economic theory" and undertake writer Walter Lippmann's task of "revis[ing] and reenergiz[ing] liberal thought, and restor[ing] liberalism as the only theoretical perspective that conforms to the deep and abiding human interest to be 'free,'" it was not until 1947, that many of the same figures would resemble in an attempt to refine, expand, and disseminate the principles of what they had termed "neoliberalism" nine years earlier (Henry 2010:547).

Organized by economist Friedrich Hayek, the first meeting of the Mont Pelerin Society (MPS) brought together notable scholars including Ludwig von Mises, Milton Friedman, and Michael Polyani among others. This first iteration of the neoliberal project was conceptually bound by "shared principles centered on the primacy of individual liberty and an understanding of the market as the enabler of such liberty, and by their identification of a common enemy [Keynesian economic policy]" (Cahill and Konings 2017:26). The emphasis on individual liberty underlied the group's critique of state economic planning, but also extended to its other main foe, social democracy. This is seen in the Mont Pelerin Society's Statement of Aims, where their supposed allegiance to individual liberty is presented under the guise of anti-authoritarianism and then implies parity between state policy undertaken in the model of embedded liberalism and state policy undertaken by fascist regimes during World War Two:

"The central values of civilization are in danger. Over large stretches of the Earth's surface the essential conditions of human dignity and freedom have already disappeared. In others they are under constant menace from the development of current tendencies of policy. The position of the individual and the voluntary group are progressively undermined by extensions of arbitrary power. Even that most precious possession of Western Man, freedom of thought and expression, is threatened by the spread of creeds which, claiming the privilege of tolerance when in the position of a minority, seek only to establish a position of power in which they can suppress and obliterate all views but their own.
The group holds that these developments have been fostered by the growth of a view of history which denies all absolute moral standards and by the growth of theories which question the desirability of the rule of law. It holds further that they have been fostered by a decline of belief in private property and the competitive market; for without the diffused power and initiative associated with these institutions it is difficult to imagine a society in which freedom may be effectively preserved" (MPS)

Notably absent in this declaration are the specific moral traditions under attack and individuals who benefit most from private property rights and "competitive" market structures. When these texts are assessed with a critical lens, one can elucidate the implicit commitments to religious and racial hierarchies that inform neoliberal theory.

Also notable in this text is the pairing of economics and moral tradition as mutually informative epistemes, a hallmark of neoliberal theory used to justify said commitments without explicit appeals to Christianity or white supremacy. This *economization* of morality is the underlying principle of neoliberal thought and what informed how the members of MPS understood the role of the state. Outlined by Çalışkan and Collon (2009), we can understand the process of economization as the "assembly and qualification of actions, devices and analytical/practical descriptions as 'economic' by social scientists and market actors" (369). While the definition of the economic itself in this process is significant and varied, we can understand its implications for the assessment of moral values as either determined by a principle of maximalism or crude utilitarianism. This too informed how MPS conceived of the neoliberal subject as an economic actor and was eventually extended to the domain of political subjectivity, most notably by James M. Buchanan's concept of *public choice theory* (1962). By drawing a

genealogy of this logic that places early writings from MPS in conjunction with current social phenomena we can further Gane's (2013) task of "develop[ing] a critical sociology of neoliberalism…[which] reconsiders the political positions that neoliberalism initially sought to reject" (1).

Many scholars have argued that an examination of early neoliberal texts can offer explanations for recent anti-democratic political movements. In her 2019 book *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, political theorist Wendy Brown argues that "only through a return to founding neoliberal ideas and to Hayek in particular is it possible to bring into relief the architecture of reason binding traditional morality to neoliberalism and animating right-wing campaigns today" (12). Brown unpacks said architecture of reason beginning with an assessment of Hayek's unwavering commitment to the individual, especially within the permeable realms of the moral and the economic. Brown's (2019) work, which is concerned with the political equality required of a democratic society, sees Hayek's theory of individual liberty as fundamentally at ends with that equality and an ideological tenant that has led to "political power…inevitably be[ing] exercised by and for a part, rather than the whole" (24). Hayekian individualism, oriented around the aforementioned *economization* of non-economic spheres of existence, reconfigures traditional conceptions of the common good along the same lines it does neoclassical economic theory.

In accord with pre-neoliberal notions of the common good, extreme wealth inequalities were a central dilemma that brought into question existing forms of liberalism and neoclassical economics. However, for Hayek, these inequalities are an innate feature of society of which potential solutions are inefficient and futile. Whereas contemporary explanations offered for acute wealth disparities will attribute it to individual failures within a meritocratic system, Hayek

does not appeal to this argument in his own explanation. On the contrary, he argues that "markets reward contributions, nothing more" and that even then "contributions, and…conversely, long and intense labors may come to little (Brown 2019:34). From this perspective, Hayek appears to be in agreement with his Keynesian counterparts. Capitalism solely rewards those already in possession of capital, and even for those individuals there are no guaranteed returns. Whereas embedded liberalism alleviates this issue with social securities, Hayekian neoliberalism acknowledges inequality to be a "morally blind result," (1989:74) but prescribes alternative causations and outlook. To Hayek, "economic planning was impossible because it suppressed market prices which in a free market economy acted as information signals about the dispersed preferences of the many disparate buyers and sellers" (Cahill and Konings 2017:27) As such, governing the market should pertain to facilitating conditions under which market signals can remain unaltered and competition can function as the entropic, but "natural" system of determinacy. Relying on market dynamics then "propagate[s] felicitous conduct in large populations without relying on the overreach of human intention or the fallacies of human reason and without employing the powers of the state" (Brown 2019:33). Notable here are the mutual departures of embedded liberalism and neoliberalism from laissez-faire. Where the former employs an interventionist approach to prevent social instability, non-competition, and oligopoly through economic planning and social securities, neoliberalism instead says that the state still ought to intervene, but in the name of competition as *the* condition for a healthy economy. Here we should recognize two distinctions between classical liberalism and neoliberalism: the shift from exchange to competition and a requirement of the state to now influence market conditions for the sake of said competition.

The significance of these two shifts in liberal political philosophy cannot be overemphasized. Not only did these changes have serious implications for governance, but also for configurations of the individual and the common good. In explaining Hayek's outlook on those two topics, James (2019) underlines Hayek's argument that "complex interdependence in modernity…does not arise from fellow feeling or organized common pursuit, but from individuals following rules of conduct that emanate from markets and moral traditions" (31). Therefore, to Hayek, *there is no common good*, but an amalgamation of individuals at the will of the market. Mitchell Dean (2014) articulates how this ontological stance is a logical extension of the *economization* of the state by noting that "Politically, [neoliberalism] involves dismantling or privatizing the social state, welfare, education, parks, health,and services of all kinds…[and] [c]ulturally, it entails a version of what the ordoliberals termed "demassification," shoring up individuals and families against the forces of capitalism that threaten them" (156). Dean goes on to describe this as *privatized Keynesianism* in which "rather than governments taking on debt to stimulate the economy…individuals and households, particularly poor ones… [take] on the role of incurring debt" (2014:156). Also significant in the phenomenon of demassification is the inability of the population to collectively identify and take action against an exploitative state or undertake what a Marxist scholar would call "proletarianization" (Brown 2019:37). This hyper-individualization and increased assumption of precarity are the costs that neoliberal subjects pay for the state's imperative to maintain a "competitive market" in a twisted iteration of the social contract. From this perspective, the claim that competition is necessary for a healthy economy and society seems contradictory: if we, as individuals, are but isolated "entrepreneurs of self" responding to market signals, and the optimal way to govern is by maintaining the conditions for said signals, then why does this action submit the subject to greater economic

vulnerability? To answer that, we must return to this subsection's original line of inquiry, which asked *what are the ends of neoliberalism*?

To answer this question, and to arrive at a definition of neoliberalism, I will first introduce this quote from David Harvey (2005): "At the heart of the problem lies a burgeoning disparity between the declared public aims of neoliberalism- the well-being of all- and its actual consequences- the restoration of class power" (78-79). In comparing the contradictions between neoliberal philosophy and realities, we can see that the neoliberal project is not one aimed at optimizing collective welfare or governance, but a means to reinvigorate and nurture existing structures of power. With an emphasis on the the structural, functional, and racialized characteristics of neoliberalism, I propose that it can be understood as a *network of individuals and institutions concerned with influencing the state so that a theocratic, white supremacist, class based order of power can govern under the false pretenses of "sustaining market competition."*

Constructing the Individual: Neoliberalism and Biopolitics as Technologies of Subjectivity

In the previous section, I arrived at a working definition of neoliberalism after characterizing its structure, offering a critical genealogy of its origins, and finally connecting its functional means and effective ends. In this section I consider "two complementary and mutually reinforcing forms of rationality" (Mavelli 2017:491): *homo oeconomicus* and *biopolitics*. The former is the ideal neoliberal subject, the individual turned optimized market actor. The latter is a style of governance concerned with governing "life" as assessed through the lens of homo oeconomicus. Through this discussion I aim to characterize these rationalities and then make clear their innate ties to white supremacy.

Homo oeconomicus.

The transformations of the state discussed in the previous section have significant implications beyond its own structures and operations. These implications include an ontological configuration of life that is informed by *economization* in the same way that the state is reconfigured to operate as a firm. Wendy Brown (2015) makes this clear in her conception of neoliberalism as an "order of normative reason that… takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices and metrics to every dimension of human life" (30). Important here is the function of the state as a disseminator of reason. In this argument, Brown posits that it is governance itself that forms the ideologies and behaviors of a state's subjects. When, as described in that quote, market logic ascends as *the* rationality dictating all spheres of life, it is the economic subject who is able to best navigate and profit from neoliberal society. This subject is *homo oeconomicus*.

Homo oeconomicus is a rhetorical and philosophical device informed by both theory and the lived experiences of individuals living under neoliberal regimes. Homo oeconomicus, the optimized economic man, embodies the capitalist tenets specific to his historical context. Analyzing the construction of this figure is then useful in making sense of the economic regime he exists under and vice versa. In returning to the reconstruction of the state under neoliberal regimes, we can observe how these reforms have shaped the economic subject along parallel lines of reasoning. Furthermore, considering the pervasive reaches of *economization*, homo oeconomicus is also a useful framework for understanding the behaviors of the neoliberal subject across all spheres of life. Effectively, homo oeconomicus *is* the neoliberal subject.

Homo oeconomicus is governed, both by the state and themself, as a firm. Wendy Brown (2015) identifies homo oeconomicus as "an intensely constructed and governed bit of human capital tasked with improving and leveraging its competitive positioning and with enhancing its (monetary and nonmonetary) portfolio value across all of its endeavors and venues" (10). In the same spirit of neoliberalism's shift from exchange to competition, homo oeconomicus no longer enters the market to "truck, barter, and exchange" as Adam Smith would say only to then exit it. On the other hand, in a world conceptualized through *economization*, the market instead exists as the sole site of truth where this figure perpetually seeks capital gain for their own sake.

Though not always producing a physical product or laboring for a wage, homo oeconomicus' exploits redefines "work" as the refinement and expansion of one's human capital. As Jason Read (2009) notes, this can include "[a]ny activity that increases the capacity to earn income, to achieve satisfaction, even migration, the crossing of borders from one country to another, is an investment in human capital" (28). Writing this project at the height of influencer and branding culture, Foucault's (2008) claim that homo oeconomicus is an "entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself" (226) is especially resonant today.

While the shift from exchange to competition makes more sense in context of industrial production, many have noted the strange and unsustainable nature of competition for its own sake: "while exchange was considered to be natural, competition is understood by the neo-liberals of the twentieth century to be an artificial relation that must be protected against the tendency for markets to form monopolies and interventions by the state." What stands out here is that the state must intervene for competition to remain viable. Accordingly, governance by the state and self are both imperative to the construction and maintenance of homo oeconomicus. In

the following section, I outline biopolitics, the governing rationality which makes homo oeconomicus a viable form of subjectivity.

Biopolitics: governing 'health.'

As its name suggests, biopolitics is a rationality of governance concerned with the 'health' of the population. The biopolitical notion of health is not related to mental or physical well being, but rather the ability of individuals to facilitate capital growth within the framework of homo oeconomicus. While most scholars view biopolitics as a component of neoliberal logic, political scientist Luca Mavelli (2017) posits that the two are "complementary and mutually reinforcing forms of rationality" (491). Where homo oeconomicus is governed under the belief that "that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey 2005:2), biopolitics is concerned with implementing measures that sustain this practice of life while neglecting those who fail to embody its tenets. As Mavelli (2017) notes the "primary task [of biopolitics] would be to compensate for the risks and failures engendered by neoliberalism through the establishment of a series of institutions and practices….which play a key role in governing the resilience of neoliberalism (499).

The necessity of biopolitics is rooted in the neoliberal dictate that competition must be maintained by the state, so that market signals can persevere as society's baseline site of truth. Biopolitics are then "a way of smoothing and governing the harshest effects of neoliberalism, and thus as a way of governing the resilience of neoliberalism by preserving neoliberal life" (Mavelli 2017:501). This "smoothing and governing" can be seen at its most extreme in bank bailouts following the Global Financial Crisis and in policy like the Affordable Care Act. In each

case, state action benefits economically productive institutions (banks and insurance companies), while neglecting individuals who fail to secure financial stability (those facing extreme financial loss and those unable to afford medical copays). From this we can see that an effective biopolitical practice is one that offers a minimal degree of social security with the ultimate goal of investing in populations that demonstrate economic independence and productivity.

Robin James animates the violent implications of neoliberal biopolitics in her 2015 book, *Resilience and Melancholy*. James (2019) identifies biopolitics as an economized lens of life and death where "life is the object of governance and site of power's investment (or divestment), and killing off internal threats is a common and justifiable way of fostering that life" (8). This quote provides a succinct description of biopolitical death in the same light of Foucault (1997) who famously characterizes biopolitics as the power "to make live and let die" (241). For a demassified populace, death through disinvestment is often articulated as the result of individualized failures to persevere through adversity. However, as these theorists make clear, life is far from guaranteed in biopolitical life. Biopolitics ignore legacies of historical oppression and inequalities and instead governs on the pretense that we are all homo oeconomicus, managing our individual portfolios of capital on a playing field shaped by a rough meritocracy. Biopolitical casualties then are not the fault of the state, but rather failures of the individuals to adhere to an entrepreneurialism of self.

This binary of compliance or death is the basis of Lester Spence's *politics of exception*. Politics of exception are a system of categorization which denote the potential returns on investment that certain populations offer. This assumes that "there are populations, institutions, and places that operate optimally and require minimal intervention [and that]…there are populations, institutions, and places that *can* operate optimally and that require intervention.

They need (market-based) discipline, but the assumption is that they have the capacity at some point to discipline themselves" (2011:24). These are the populations that Foucault would say are made to live through neoliberal biopolitics. On the other hand, politics of exception also assume that "some populations, institutions, and spaces cannot be remade or optimalized. These populations, institutions, and spaces are the exception and are the primary focus of technologies of subjection. Significant resources are deployed to manage, contain, control, and punish these populations, institutions, and spaces" (Spence 2011:26). While biopolitics enact violence through a laissez-faire style of neglect, this quote brings up the important point that they also entail the use of direct violence against what Spence would call exceptional populations.

Politics of exception are neoliberalism's contemporary upgrade of Cedric J. Robinson's (1983) theory of racial capitalism which argues that capitalism itself developed from a European tradition of racialization as a means to domination both economic and otherwise. Politics of exception operate as a component of racial capitalism, but are even more effective in that its marginalization occurs through a deregulated "post-racial" logic. This deregulated reiteration of white supremacy is what Robin James (2015) calls *multiracial white supremacist patriarchy* or *MRWaSP* for short (12). MRWaSP, denotes the neoliberal notion that "it is more cost-effective to include *some* formerly excluded/abjected groups in racial/gender/sexual supremacy because *this inclusion further reinforces both the supremacy of the hyperelites and the precarity of those who pose the greatest threat to* MRWaSP hegemony" (James 2015:15). This inclusion also obscures the innately white supremacist orientation of MRWaSP especially through the valorization of figures like President Obama and Oprah Winfrey, whose success is supposed to be indicative of a free and equal society.

By facilitating the viability of homo oeconomicus as the optimized neoliberal subject, biopolitics effectively govern the population in a way that seeks to maximize the growth of capital to the benefit of *MRWaSP*. The "inclusive" structure of these politics also make it increasingly challenging to identify the ways in which they are exploitative, especially given their mythologization of meritocracy. In the following section, I speak to art, specifically popular music, as a discursive space to imagine realities and subjectivities beyond the hegemonic confines of neoliberal biopolitics.

Sounding Beyond Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism's binary of compliance or death contributes to Mark Fisher's (2022) notion of capitalist realism which he describes as a "widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (2). In this section, I examine popular music as a space for the political imaginary and how both artists and listeners relate to music as a device for world and self-making.

Music is often associated with social movements as a complimentary soundtrack embodying their respective ethos. From the civil rights movement's *We Shall Overcome* to the movement for Black lives' *Alright*, these songs serve as rallying cries as well as signifiers of identity. As Steinberg (2004) notes in his discussion of music in student protest against the Milošević regime in Serbia, rock music offered "a collective identity and a discourse of opposition that demarcated them not only from the regime but from other oppositional forces" (2). This dynamic certainly proved true during the George Floyd Uprising as well as in the larger

movement for Black lives. However, this discourse can also be seen outside of mass social movements in relation to the ingrained subjectivities of neoliberalism.

As Chambers (2019) argues, "any meaningful or robust challenge to neoliberalism will depend upon alternative theories and practices that themselves produce and sustain new forms of subjectivity" (723). While theorists like Wendy Brown have put forth alternative theories which supposedly produce subjectivities that stray from homo oeconomicus, the insular nature of academia makes the dissemination and realization of these ideologies less attainable. On the other hand, there is a growing field of musicologists whose research assesses how "performance, (racial) identity, and (intellectual) property relations have been tethered to the making of popular music and its commercialization since the early nineteenth century" (Morrison 2019:782). This sociological approach to music studies strays from its historic investments in white supremacy while acknowledging music as a "worldmaking practice with inseparable ties to political and social dynamics" (Kajikawa 2019:170).

Robin James' *Resilience & Melancholy* (2015) examines subjectivities that are both consonant and dissonant with neoliberalism through the critical reading of popular music. She first speaks to *resilience discourse* which "ties contemporary pop music aesthetics to neoliberal capitalism and racism/sexism" (2015:6). James argues that resilience discourse in popular music feels affirming to listeners because it mirrors the neoliberal imperative to transform adversity, trauma, and violence into social capital. She does this through a discussion of common motifs in electronic dance music (EDM), specifically pause-drops and soars which she claims are "*metaphors for the listener's transgression of their limitations*, which is experienced as a source of pleasure" (2015:38). In this sense EDM is itself a discursive space which is both affirming and emulative of the rationalities that inform neoliberal capitalism. For James (2015), "these songs

aren't just training exercises for future capital production, they *are* the means of production [and]...work, at the level of form, structure, and logic, just like other instruments of neoliberal capitalism, like financial derivatives and deregulated markets (38).

James contrasts resilient musical tropes with those that are *melancholic* and instead invest in the populations that Spence (2011) would deem *exceptional*. Melancholy entails the appropriation of neoliberal strategies of resilience for the survival of exceptional populations rather than for the production of capital surplus. James (2015) describes this melancholia as "not the failure to *resolve* a lack but *a misfired resilience*, the failure to bounce back *enough* and/or in the *right direction*. If properly executed resilience produces specific populations as exception, melancholy misfires because it does not produce these exceptions" (19). As a practice of alternative politics, melancholy is a micro level act of resistance which refuses the ontological imperatives of neoliberal rationalities.

METHODS

In this project, I perform a qualitative content analysis of Earl Sweatshirt's 2019 album, *Feet of Clay*. This album is rife with explicit references to global capitalism as seen from the perspective of a Black American man retelling his adolescence. It is through this analysis that I explore popular music as a space for the political imaginary and how Earl Sweatshirt conceives of realities beyond the hegemonic constraints of neoliberalism.

As a multidisciplinary endeavor, this project required a novel methodological approach. In structuring my methods, I sought to integrate elements of musicology and sociology while also pushing the traditional practices of both disciplines. In sociology, this meant challenging conventions in ethnographic data collection. In music, this meant using an organized method

outside of the theoretical framework of classical tonal harmony while also centering artists and scholars that music studies have historically excluded.

Feet of Clay

Thebe Kgositsile, better known as Earl Sweatshirt, is a contemporary rapper and producer known for his involvement in the Odd Future collective, his frequent collaborations with producer, The Alchemist, and the dense, abstract lyricism that defines his music. He is also the son of critical race theorist, Dr. Cheryl I. Harris and South African poet laureate, Keorapetse Kgositsile. The project was selected for study given the artist's familial proximity to radical diasporic thinkers as well as its politically charged release statement which describes *Feet of Clay* as "a collection of observations and feelings recorded during the death throes of a crumbling empire" (Minsker 2019).

Feet of Clay is an exceptional album, even within the genre of "alternative hip-hop." What is "alternative" in the larger sphere of rap music is also subject to much debate. As one critic notes, "the internet [has] effectively [collapsed] the mainstream and underground on top of each other…there is this increasingly unignorable truth that some music just doesn't succeed based on its pop appeal or being easy listening" (theneedledrop 2023). This point proves especially relevant in the case of *Feet of Clay* which succeeded not only popularly, but also in putting forth an alternative politics which he discusses with his mother in a 2019 panel. Notable in this panel are the explicit connections made to racial capitalism and late capitalism which inform much of the album (Earl Sweatshirt 2019). While perhaps generalizable to other artists within his creative musical network (i.e. billy woods, MIKE., Zelooperz, MAVI), this case study is most useful as an in depth discussion of how the artist conceives of grief and death given his coming age and reckoning with life under neoliberal capitalism.

Qualitative Analysis

As a discipline, musicology faces a major shortcoming given its lack of standardized methodologies for researching non-classical music. While analysis rooted in tonal harmony is the typical framework which is often applied to non-classical music, this ignores the technologies and cultural genealogies that contribute to the production of contemporary popular music. Musicologist Loren Kajikawa (2019) attributes the persistent dominance of classical music studies in the discipline to what he calls "the possessive investment in classical music." He argues that despite that "panoply of genres either rooted in or deeply influenced by Afro-Diasporic traditions (2019:162), there is an "expectation of power and control…so pervasive that it allows administrators to resist demands for other kinds of music instruction and to continue leveraging classical music's prestige for institutional resources" (2019:165). This has shaped a field of research which disproportionately represents music from the white western canon due to the lack of funding allocated to other spheres of research.

Despite these structural barriers which prevent a wider field of study, there exists a community of scholars in musicology who seek to represent the music of diasporic and otherwise marginalized communities. Musicologist Matthew D. Morrison's 2019 article, *Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse* puts forth a methodology which he calls *Blacksound*. This approach is distinct in its criticism of the historic influence of white supremacy and social darwinism in music studies. Morrison (2019) describes Blacksound as a "means of placing (the performance of) race, ethnicity, and their relationship with other forms of identity at the center of the way we approach and select our subject matter and create musicological epistemologies within the development of music studies" (822-823). Studying non white artists, examining the positional relationship between scholar and subject, and applying a sociological

lens to music studies are all key components of Blacksound which I sought to implement in this project.

In this project, my aim was to identify how and if Thebe Kgositsile made sense of his own subjectivity under neoliberalism given his background, family, and public politics through a qualitative content analysis of *Feet of Clay*. While case studies are common in musicology, this approach strays from ethnographic conventions of data collection in sociology. Whereas most studies assume a sample size of at least 30 to account for a sufficient degree of "randomness," this project would entail an in depth analysis of seven songs from one album. While this appeared to be an impasse in my approach, I found multiple sociological sources which challenge these standards of data collection. Small and Calarco (2022) posit that "the core preconditions of all good qualitative data is not "sample size" or "control groups" or "representativeness," all of which are necessary criteria for other methods, and all of which may be useful for some qualitative studies but not others; the core precondition of good qualitative data is exposure" (20). Furthermore, in Small's (2009) discussion of extended case method, he notes that the "importance of the single case lies in what it tells us about society as a whole rather than about the population of similar cases" (20). These two quotes articulate a few important points. First, sample size is not a necessary indicator of quality qualitative data. On the other hand, it is an appropriate exposure in relation to the frame of the research question. Second, by delving into a singular case, one is able to identify the relationship between micro and macro level social phenomena.

In designing my research process, I attempted to synthesize Morrison's practice of Blacksound and single case study. I began by transcribing all seven songs in NVivo analysis software using the official lyrics from Earl Sweatshirt's youtube channel. I then performed

multiple rounds of coding using a flexible scheme outlined by both my literature and induction (Deterding & Waters 2021). During this process I wrote analytic memos which pertained to the collapsing or even elimination of codes.

FINDINGS

In the following, I describe how Earl Sweatshirt puts forth an alternative politics through the retelling of his adolescence. This discussion speaks to two mutually informative practices of world and self making that are salient across the album. First, I speak to the depiction of what he calls "the death throes of a crumbling empire." This portrayal advances Fisher's (2022) notion of capitalist realism using both lyric and beat production to emphasize both the surrealism and banality of life under neoliberal capitalism. In the second section, I discuss his construction of self in the context of an adolescence juxtaposed by extreme grief and how this builds upon James' (2015) theory of melancholia.

Perish the Hegemony

Feet of Clay is not so much an organized manifesto, but rather a project of argumentative realism which embodies what Kgositsile sees as the end of global capitalism due to its own unviability. As an argumentative realist, Earl Sweatshirt is both a "*critical participant* [and] *journalistic witness*" (Spence 2011:46), who artistically represents this empire through direct and indirect encounters with its practices of death. When asked why he thinks the American empire is crumbling in a 2019 interview, he simply responds"it is" (Earl Sweatshirt 2019). He goes on to discuss the album's conceptual inspiration from conversations with his mother regarding "late stage capitalism, the end of the world, or end of times as we know it" (Earl Sweatshirt 2019).

The critical documentation of these themes in *Feet of Clay* not only sounds the neoliberal capitalism as banally surreal, so ordinarily perverse and illogical, but also as self-evidently staged for its own timely demise.

Throughout the album is a persistent theme of precarity which ranges from emotional isolation to descriptions of the extreme costs of life under biopolitical neoliberalism. This is introduced in the first track *74* where Kgositsile raps: "Sullen kids cultured with death. Circling like carrion. Phone got you living vicarious." Though these three ideas are seemingly disparate, they collectively illustrate a sense of disaffection instilled by a looming sense of death. This is only further reinforced by the monotone delivery of the artist who too sounds this disaffection. Kgositsile's description of cultural environment is consonant with Dean's (2014) description of demassification, especially in its emphasis of social fracture in relation to an omnipresence of systemic violence. Also here is a vicarious situation of life outside of the body. This compares to the account of homo oeconomicus as an "intensely constructed and governed bit of human capital" (Brown 2015:10). In both cases, the construction of self fails to enrich the individual who can be seen as alienated from their distinctively neoliberal labor.

The disembodiment metaphor is extended by feature rapper, MAVI on the track *EL TORO COMBO MEAL* when he says: "The cost is an arm, leg, an arm, leg, and a head in all bread." This line can be read as an observation about economizing the individual, the liquidation of their body into capital, and the ultimate cost of one's humanity under capitalism. The establishment and persistence of this theme of precarity is fundamental to *Feet of Clay*'s central critiques and its sonic worldmaking.

The beat production on this album, of which Kgositsile is involved in on every track, intersects with his meticulous lyricism as a part of his critique of capitalism. This is especially

pronounced on the track *EAST* which chops and loops *Orkes Gambus Al Fata* by Ja Asmar. The manipulations of the sample are fairly simple, with the tempo accelerated and subtle distortion added at the end of a few four bar sequences across the track. The use of syncopation in conjunction with dynamic melodic gestures makes for an eerie, if not facetious sense of whimsy. The oscillating pitch of the loop can then be seen as mirroring neoliberalism's demand for resilience through unforeseen circumstances and adversity akin to James' (2015) discussion of how resilience is sounded in EDM. What distinguishes this track's sonification of resilience though is the disorienting and cyclical structure as opposed to the epic rises and falls of EDM. Where EDM sounds dramatic climaxes and plummets, *EAST* as a soundscape emulates the instability of neoliberal life in that it is hellish, routine, and intentionally fatiguing.

It is at this intersection of monotone delivery and non-lyrical interpretations of neoliberal precarity where Kgositsile is able to upgrade Fisher's capitalist realism (2022). The sense of surrealism and effective dissolution of security and truth is the bad trip that the artist endures while striving to make sense of it all in real time. This leaves Kgositsile in a calculated state of dissociation.

Dissociation is a psychological survival instinct and an emergent theme in the world of popular music. As Greene (2022) notes "In general, whenever human history darkens, this impulse—to obscure meaning, to flatten affect, to don expressive masks—emerges." This flattened affect is a signature element of Earl Sweatshirt's music and what characterizes the removed tone of the album. Given the prominent themes of violence and reconciliation, *Feet of Clay* can be seen as existing within the larger sub-genre of dissociation music. While enveloped in an active sense of trauma, Kgositsile is also unwilling to integrate these realities. He makes clear on *74* that he's "not onboard with the board you tryna lead me on." From this, dissociation

can be seen as a temporal and spatial technology used for the artist's survival. By delaying the assimilation of violence, he is able to produce space and time where he can make sense of multiple traumas and then undertake a life affirming process of self-making. As I discuss in the next section, this is largely characterized by grief as a means to process those violences.

Cognitive Dissonance Shattered and the Necessary Venom Restored

The space where self-making occurs in *Feet of Clay* is at the juncture of Kgositile's adolescence. For him, adolescence entails the mourning of innocence while at the same time imagining a self in the context of and beyond neoliberalism. Despite the precarity which allotts minimal room for imagination, Kgositsile uses dissociation as an expansive device which allows more space for this process to occur. *Feet of Clay* is the ongoing introspection within this space in which he asks *what does it mean to begin in the midst of perpetual death and ending?*

One of the most rich discussions across the album is that of death and grief. This discussion homes in on two interwoven losses: childhood innocence and Earl Sweatshirt's father, Keorapetse Kgositsile. Loss of innocence is not only about the end of childhood, but also the conscious indoctrination into systems of oppression. This idea is most prominent on the track *OD* which includes the lines "I watched the child get introduced to violence" and "Feeling rushed grew up quick. Trip around the sun, this my 25th. Give it up." From this we can see that biopolitical racism both commences the end of childhood for Kgositsile and is the catalyst for his larger reckoning with life and death. This reckoning is only exacerbated by the loss of a parent. On *TISK TISK/COOKIES*, the convergence of these two losses can be seen when he raps "I need the tint just like my daddy skin dark" and "reeling from loss, inner remorse divorce your spirit and corpse." Here we can see what prompted this dissociative adolescent space. However, it is

only through grief that Kgositsile is able to resolve this divorce and metabolize violence in a way that shapes his evolving process of self-making.

Where James' notion of melancholy involves the appropriation of neoliberal strategies of resilience for the survival of marginalized individuals and communities, grief is a parallel, but distinct musicological trope where the artist pursues a therapeutic resolution of trauma in order to dictate *how* they are to survive. The significance of this to Kgositsile is made evident in the same 2019 interview when he states that "any time I've been less attached from the truth… whether it's the sad truth, the unfortunate truth, the fortunate truth, whenever I've not been attached to the truth then I'm really really sad, dejected, and lost…As long as I feel I'm really looking at the facts then that's the closest I can get to like 'feeling good' because I'm informed. I know what's going on" (2019). To internalize these truths then is to move towards a clarity which is both life affirming and rooted in a greater sense of agency.

In *Feet of Clay*, Kgositsile's grieving is a spiritual task of remembering and imagining where memory brings about a stability from which he can envision alternative realities. These memories pertain mostly to family and community. By recollecting past relationships, he finds himself returning to a sense of completeness. In *MTOMB* (an acronym for the 90's R&B group, MTUME), he articulates the healing that occurs when reconnecting to his lineage: "piscean just like my father got bones to pick out, for now let's salt the rims and pour a drink out and sip." This is further emphasized on *OD* when he says "I remember love healing the ruptures." In both of these phrases, the power of the past to reify the present is especially clear and informs how Kgositsile begins to imagine something new.

4N is the final track on the original release of the album and features Haitian emcee, Mach-Hommy. On *4N*, there is a distinct shift in tone which is more definitive and actionable as

opposed to the slow and contemplative mood on earlier tracks. On *4N*, we also see what might be the culmination of Kgositsile's grief. His verse suggests a mature familiarization with death and how that imbues his own ontological grounding. We can see this through vivid imagery in the short lines "Slow breathe, cold flesh made her mouth cry. We know death. Alright let's go left." While not alluding to what "left" entails (again, this is not an explicit manifesto), what is clear is that grief as a means of understanding violence has aligned Kgositsile towards a new ontological directionality at ends with said violence.

The clarity delivered by this grieving process appears to bring an end to Kgositsile's dissociation and allow him to navigate neoliberal empire with a precise wisdom, as suggested in the line "cognitive dissonance shattered and the necessary venom restored." This contrasts the divorce of "spirit and corpse" mentioned on *TISK TISK/COOKIES* and instead sounds a newfound iteration of self. This Earl Sweatshirt appears to have arrived at a wholeness derived from truth and is armed with an apprehension of the empire that must come to an end.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This project holds a number of implications regarding the production of subjectivities in popular culture as well as methodological approaches to the study of popular music. It builds upon Robin James' theory of resilience and melancholy through its discussion of grief and dissociation which may prove to be useful in popular music studies post Covid-19. It also demonstrates the viability of qualitative content analysis as a methodological approach in musicology which future research could use and refine as an approach to the analysis of post tonal music.

While the context for grief and dissociation is very much rooted in the context of this album, the two theories can and should be explored in future research. This discussion builds upon Robin James' theory of resilience and melancholy by suggesting new components which are relevant in the wake of Covid-19, the continual designation of reality as online, and the continuing state of perpetual crisis innate to late stage capitalism. Further research should continue to examine the wealth of ontological discourse that can be found in popular music in lieu of contemporary mass social movements.

Though not without its limitations, this study shows the benefits of an interdisciplinary approach to popular music studies. If more music scholars are to answer Morrison's (2019) call to place "sound, race/identity, performance, and its reception at the center of the analysis of popular music" (790), the use of qualitative content analysis and flexible coding may very well prove to be the foundation for this approach. One of the main benefits of flexible coding is building a coding scheme which is both informed by literature and empiricism. By preparing an initial coding scheme using relevant information from underrepresented scholars, new scholarship can undertake Morrison's task of decentering whiteness in musicology.

In sociology, this study contributes to the field of small ethnography and demonstrates a collection of quality data through high exposure to a small sample. It also presents an alternative approach to sociological studies of music which typically feature large sample sizes and coding using keywords. On the other hand, this extended case study approach offers greater depth on a singular subject which can enable making sense of more abstract language.

While generally successful, what held this project back were mainly constraints of time and logistics. The point of this project was to closely examine one album of music and to make sense of it within the framework of neoliberalism. My methods made for an apt approach to

these goals. However, my findings have limited generalizability given the exceptional background of the artist and the focus of this study on *Feet of Clay*. Furthermore, as a white man studying at an elite liberal arts institution and someone who is not the artist, there is something to be said about the relationship between Black popular art and academia. Despite my best intentions to put forth a study that is honest, empathetic, and grounded in the identity of the artist, I still had to depend on my own informed, but biased discretion given my positionality. Furthermore, it should also be asked to what end this project was undertaken. Given the current field of musicology and its grappling with white supremacy, the point of this project was not to make Black music discernible to an elite white audience, but rather to attempt a critical study of popular music that contributed to the study of music and capitalism while decentering whiteness.

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