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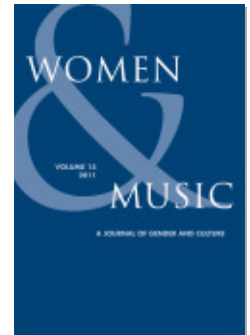
Gender and Sexuality in South African Music (review)

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Gender and Sexuality in South African Music, a book of nine short essays drawn from conference presentations at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, in 2003, begins with an interesting idea: music's uniquely "nonrepresentational" properties, we are told by editors Chris Walton and Stephanus Muller, allow "composers greater freedom to express desire . . . more openly than other arts . . . commonly allow" (i). Situated in a South African context described as negatively "obsessed with sex" (the editors locate the paranoid regulation and denial of sex and sexuality and particularly the prohibition on miscegenation during the years of apartheid as a central departure point for their inquiries), the book suggests thereby that nonrepresentational cultural practice is a privileged site of repressed desire. The book aims to recover this buried record in South Africa and to offer a historical representation hitherto misrepresented or rendered invisible. *Gender and Sexuality in South African Music* thus functions as an exposé, bringing to the "light of day what has too long been hidden in the murky mires of recent history" (i, iii). The inhibited practice of writing the past (and thus history) here uncannily recapitulates the structure of repressed sexual desire.

The editors do not make clear whether it is music itself (figured as the nonrepresentational art par excellence) or the "Afrikaner establishment" of the apartheid era (figured as oppressive and censoring) that renders historical representation repressed ("hidden," "murky," etc.). It is true that the public language of the National Party recoiled with Byzantine embellishment from the "horror of 'mixing the races,'" but of how such anxious representations articulate with music's ineffable character the editors do not speak (ii). Examples of evident "sexual intent" in music offered at the outset of the book—the words "when death approach'd, unlock'd her silent throat" in Orlando Gibbens's *Silver Swan*,

say, or Chuck Berry's "play with my ding-a-ling," and so on—do not inspire much confidence in the nonrepresentational theory of music. Here the evidence tends to hinge on the music's *text* instead of its drastically musical aspect. Music's unique ability to carry a component of sexual desire cannot, it seems, receive as much attention in the book as its launching statements suggest. Put differently, "gender and sexuality" may not, after all, appear "*in South African music*," as the title of the book suggests.

And yet some of the essays in *Gender and Sexuality* do rise to the task of engaging the gendered dimensions of music directly. Most prominently, in "Music Is a Woman" Meki Nzewi unapologetically advances the thesis that *all* music in Africa, qua music, is itself gendered female: "Music is a [metaphysical] Woman" (71, emphasis added). It is not that traditional music in Africa is performed only or even mainly by women but rather that music's philosophical import is intricately associated with the social power of women. "The effect and affect of music on humans operate in a subtle nature similar to the woman's exercise of power in the affairs of traditional African society," Nzewi boldly asserts (73). Nzewi's description of traditional African life is attached to a critique of colonialism: "In Africa," he claims, "gender was not an issue before Western modernism invaded, colonized and deconstructed Africa's worldview and socio-cultural knowledge systems" (72). With examples ranging from the musical practice in the *kiba* musical theater of the Pedi people of South Africa to the musicological parlance amongst the Igbo people of Nigeria, Nzewi effectively demonstrates how conceptions of gender underlie traditional African musical performance, social action, and discourse. The three concentric circles of participants in a *kiba* performance, for instance, "symbolize a trinity of power, or energy domains,"

which are associated with gendered aspects of traditional life. The inner circle of women drummers, symbolizing the womb, is the foundation (“the source and crucible”) of the performance; the middle circle of men *dinaka* (pipe) players, symbolizing the male role in society, is the active, yet “ephemeral,” dimension of the performance; and the outer circle of women members, symbolizing the female guardians of the community, is the critically observant aspect of the performance (74). The inner circle of women represents the procreative life force of the community, while the outer circle, comprised of elderly women, has privileged access to the supernatural spirits and is thus able to mediate between the spiritual and the mundane world. Women thus form both the core and the perimeter of *dinaka* performance, dramatizing their roles as both producers and protectors of society. In Nzewi’s description of traditional Pedi cultural practice, music’s feminized dimension is dignified with respect and pride:

In the *kiba* performance theatre then, as well as in other societal actions, the men initiate a context for societal action, and the women monitor and pronounce a verdict on its appropriateness, thereby serving as the ultimate mediators of group ethos, spiritual sustenance and the overall socio-political order. (75)

Likewise, but with very different ideological consequences, Grant Olwage’s “Black Musicality in Colonial South Africa: A Discourse of Alterities” outlines the contours of a certain Victorian discourse of black musicality in terms of a precariously feminized emotionalism. Not without its paradoxes, black musicality, according to Olwage, was construed by the English nineteenth-century imagination as at once unrestrained and “natural” and at the same time as uncreative and mimicking. For the colonial poet Francis Carey Slater, the natives of the eastern Cape were “born choristers” (1), and for the colonial historian George McCall Theal, blacks “have power in imitating, but very little of inventing” (4). Both these stereotypes contrast vividly with the perceived mas-

culine traits, represented, in the words of the late-nineteenth-century editor of the *Musical Times*, Joseph Bennet, by “qualities of intellect, science, and strength” (2). For all the incoherence of the connection, Olwage deftly demonstrates the way Victorian discourses of scientific racism managed to associate black singing with femininity on two fronts: this was a musicianship of passive monotony (instead of robust creativity) and excessive emotionality (instead of intellectual reason). This dual scheme was thus able to straiten the intellectual puzzles posed by patterns of musical repetition into monotony and the evident virility of dance movements into emotionalism. For the scientific Victorian imaginary, black musicality thus could not but bear womanly traits. Although Olwage does not address it as such, the enthusiasm of such positivist science to isolate and define racial difference must quickly encounter a limit: it is unclear, for example, whether the twin features of musicality that occur in black people is caused by their blackness or whether the features merely mark it. Far from establishing a scientific cause, the Victorian position was thus founded upon an ideological paranoia that by its nature evades stable representation. The dueling aspects of black musicality bear the marks of its inchoate and contradictory articulation.

It is, of course, fascinating to observe the tension between the texts of Olwage and Nzewi. Both posit the notion of a feminized African musicality, the former as an ideological invention of colonial discourse and the latter as a metaphysical conception of precolonial traditional culture. Yet the figure of femininity advanced in each case seems sufficiently different, at least at first glance, to avoid outright contradiction. For all the resonance between them, it does not make sense, for example, to say that the Victorian feminization of African musicality, through its myth of monotonous emotionalism, took over Nzewi’s text as a vehicle through which to utter itself. Nor does it make sense to claim that empirical evidence of African social practice genuinely weighed upon the scientific racism Olwage describes. This is not to say that

Nzewi's text is as uninflected by colonialism as it aspires to be. In fact, it would be quite accurate to situate Nzewi's position as a constitutive dialectical reaction to colonialism itself. That is, by severing organic social ties and filial relationships in Africa, the colonial rupture produces an obsession with a mythical past. Thus, Nzewi celebrates the memory of old African values and proclaims their durability as he denounces the selfish greed of the West and particularly the envious ambition of the disenfranchised "Western woman":

The Western woman in search of high public visibility became constrained to shift her ambition for a power base elsewhere in foreign territories. . . . She started to export and impose the social, cultural and gender problems plaguing the West on Africa's secure mental civilization and cultural practices. (72)

In vivid contrast to the asymmetric gender relations in the West, we see in Nzewi's text an effort to buttress a balanced traditional African order in which men and women coexist in mutual harmony: "The male spirit manifested as visible but ephemeral power; the female spirit emanated as discreet but ultimate power" (73). Thus, in Nzewi's anxiously romantic description of female subjects of prequest Africa, we only find already "fully emancipated African womanhood" (72).

A different kind of anxiety haunts the only other essay in the book that attempts to address the linkage between gender and music within the musical fabric itself. In their essay "The Politics of the Ineffable: A Deconstructive Reading of Hubert du Plessis's 'De Bruid,'" Martina Viljoen and Nicol Viljoen attempt, with incomplete success, to read a song by South African composer Hubert du Plessis in terms of a (feminine) metaphor of *fluidity*. The argument employs the basic mechanism of according a metaphor "subversive" power and then finding that metaphor operating in the music itself. Following a fairly accurate general description of "deconstruction as an ethico-political impulse," Viljoen and Viljoen thus read such an impulse in Du Plessis'

song "De Bruid" (The Bride). This is a noteworthy revision on behalf of a composer whose name has been tarnished by his institutional and political allegiances to the Afrikaner establishment in apartheid South Africa. Thus, far from hearing undercurrents of racism and Calvinism, we find in Du Plessis' song a "liberating artistic symbiosis" between word and tone (53). What kind of liberation is imagined here, and where does it reside? Drawing on Mary Douglas and others, the Viljoens describe "body fluids" as "metaphors of subversion" that can "'dissolve' traditionally accepted social boundaries" (54). The authors go on to describe such "musical metaphors" in the actual flow of notes in "De Bruid." Here is a typical description:

In the introduction to "De Bruid," apart from sonorities rippling outwards (unison, parallel seconds, thirds and tritones), major-minor sonorities with added tritones and semitone melodic fragments with dramatically ascending contours explore extremes of register through contrary movement in right and left hand parts. (54)

How this kind of general description captures a "metaphor" that is a "powerful figurative manifestation of fluidity" is not obvious. Apart from the word "rippling" (which could easily be substituted by "spreading," "fanning," or simply "moving"), there is nothing in the passage that specifically sketches feminine fluidity. In fact, the authors abandon most references to femininity in the actual description of musical events throughout the chapter. It is only at the general level that they recapture the argument with broad statements like this one:

These dramatic musical qualities [in this case an exploration between "contrasting tonal areas and consonance and dissonance"] are suggestive not only of "waves" of elemental sexual euphoria, but also of the subversive qualities of change, transition and metamorphosis. (55)

But contrasts of this sort (between "tonal areas," no less than contrasts between "consonance and

dissonance,” etc.) apply with equal validity to swaths of existing music so vast that, unless carefully differentiated, it may be impossible to draw any specific information out of them. To isolate these general features in “De Bruid” as a specific case of social “subversion” or “transition” is not only implausible but reflective less of a deconstructive than an imagined ethics—an ethics that masks the song’s beleaguered institutional conditions of possibility.

The Viljoens’ essay is not the only attempt to thread a redemptive revision around the Afrikaans composer Hubert du Plessis. In “Queer Alliances” Stephanus Muller engages the subject of Du Plessis’ homosexuality with an eye to writing “part of (music) history as part of a restorative process, a general imperative with regard to the many dead spots of South African history” (36). Perhaps the most carefully crafted of all the essays in the collection, Muller’s essay, in sync with that of the Viljoens, attempts to tease out of Du Plessis’ sexual orientation a dimension of “subcultural criticism” of the dominant narrative about Afrikaans music (36). Muller interrogates the “willingness” of “many” gay composers who were “supported and fostered by the institutional structures of apartheid South Africa with its stultifyingly narrow and often hypocritical moralistic code” to “serve apartheid society regardless of the denial of their rights freely to live their lives as they chose and the palpable resonance of this repression with the racial intolerance of apartheid society” (38). Although Muller fails to mention those gay South African composers *not* willing musically to serve apartheid society (Kevin Volans, Martin Scherzinger, Bongani Ndodana-Breen, among others), his findings do complicate some currently circulating understandings of South African cultural and political history. Muller aptly demonstrates that certain hindsight-advantaged descriptions denouncing Afrikaans composition in the apartheid era (e.g., labeling it as mere “Christian National Realism”) are simplified and distorted. The author also unearths, with some success, surprising ambiguities at the heart of Afrikaner nationalism itself. For exam-

ple, in Du Plessis’ commissioned work *Die Dans van die Reën* (The Dance of the Rain) for choir and large orchestra, op. 22—a work the composer himself ascribes to “a growing consciousness of [his] deeply rooted inseparability from the land of [his] birth and Afrikaner heritage”—Muller finds a strangely hybridized and peripheral historical thread: the musings of an old San man transcribed by a solitary poet addicted to opium (43). He poetically writes:

What would in retrospect be one of the first flowerings of Afrikaans as the vehicle of Afrikaner nationalism in the hands of the mythologized [Eugene] Marais, was then the opiate/dagga-filtered tales of an old Bushman [Ou Hendrik (Old Hendrik)], recorded by an ambiguous loner writing about white ants, evolution and the joys of morphine addiction. (43)

Afrikaner nationalism, in Muller’s lexicon, is thus considerably less pure than its historical representation may permit today. It is foolish, of course, to ask whether Muller is for or against the imagined Afrikaner nationalism he identifies in the ambiguities of Du Plessis’ compositions. And yet, for all the beauty and the subtlety of Muller’s prose, one wonders why so much intellectual energy is expended upon only those aspects of Du Plessis’ life and work routinely overlooked in service of the myth of an Afrikaner nationalism—a virulent brand whose consequences were in fact widespread and devastating.

More overtly political in ambition than Muller’s chapter and yet paradoxically more detached and predictable is Shirli Gilbert’s essay “Popular Song, Gender Equality and the Anti-Apartheid Struggle.” Gilbert attempts to trace the “experiences of black women in the anti-apartheid struggle,” paying particular attention to their “fight for gender equality in the context of their larger quest for national liberation” (11). The author characterizes this struggle in critical terms, arguing that women’s resistance activities were “predicated primarily on their defence of established gender roles and patriarchal institu-

tions" (13). Borrowing the term "motherism" from Julia Wells, Gilbert demonstrates how the strategic use of "traditional female roles," while effective in tackling social injustice, tended to downplay the issue of women's equality (13). Women's songs of resistance, for example, are "conspicuously silent on the issue of women's equality" (15). This diagnosis misses the two-sided nature of the women's struggle during the apartheid era. For instance, in June 1959 in Cato Manor near Durban, African women staged large-scale protests against the National government's Bantu Authorities when they attempted to outlaw illegal liquor stills. The law threatened the economic independence of women directly, for brewing beer had become an important source of income for urban African women. In addition to organizing mass marches, many women entered an officially sanctioned municipal beer hall and destroyed the beer. Although they were targeted primarily at discriminatory apartheid laws, these acts of resistance cannot be construed apart from a struggle for gender equality as well. Gilbert does acknowledge the "two-pronged" nature of women's struggle in South Africa, aimed at once at the overthrow of the apartheid government and against laws that discriminated against them as women, but the absence of historical perspective and ethnographic evidence ultimately deflates this effort. The singular focus on a list of songs found on song-sheets, CDs, and documentaries comes with an unstated demand that (the words of?) the songs themselves engage the topic of gender parity. It is ironic, therefore, that Gilbert's call for a "history from below," an oral history that falls outside of the history "documented in the archives" alone, should produce an analysis that relies so heavily on just that archive.

Less general in scope and more attuned to the complexities of the matter, the chapters by Brett Pyper ("To Hell with Home and Shame!": Jazz, Gender and Sexuality in the *Drum* Journalism of Todd Matshikiza, 1951–1957") and Chris Walton ("Being Rosa") explore the gendered dimensions of the work of specific musical figures in South Africa: Todd Matshikiza's writ-

ings for *Drum* magazine in the 1950s, on the one hand, and the compositional endeavors of Rosa Nepgen, on the other. Pyper's sensitive and historically informed analysis engages the assumptions concerning gender and sexuality in Matshikiza's descriptions of jazz music with a particular focus on the context of its practice in South Africa, namely, the informal drinking house known as the *shebeen*. Although the tangential excursions into the "musical" nature of Matshikiza's prose bear no evident argumentative relevance, Pyper's astute critical eye plausibly identifies in Matshikiza's writing the "reciprocal sexualisation of jazz music and female subjects," which in turn (anxiously) articulate with new modes of African female autonomy in the context of the *shebeen* (23). Walton's "Being Rosa" describes a different male anxiety around female musical production, namely, the negative, parodic reception by elite white male composers of Rosa Nepgen's compositions. Nepgen composed primarily songs, often on texts written by her husband, the prominent Afrikaans poet W. E. G. (Gladstone) Louw. Walton demonstrates how Nepgen's proximity to the "inner circle of cultural Afrikanerdom" often earned her the envious scorn and contempt of her male counterparts, whose "homosexuality," Walton implies, had kept them to some extent outside that circle (69). Walton too often recapitulates the very patronizing tone of his subjects of critique, especially when he addresses Nepgen with the assumed intimacy of "Rosa," while his male protagonists are all addressed by their last names, for example, or he describes her style as one "often hampered by a lack of convincing harmonic direction" without the inclusion of an actual musical example. However, the wit and empathy of his writing brilliantly illuminate the sexism that underlay one of South Africa's minor historical episodes (63).

The book also offers two "autobiographical" essays by Nishlyn Ramana ("Ethnicity, Sex-uality and All That Jazz: The Musical Text as Confessional Space") and Jeanne Zaidel-Rudolph ("Pride, Prejudice and Power: On Being a Woman Composer in South Africa").

The relevance of these chapters seems to hinge on the *identity* of the authors (an Indian gay jazz musician, on the one hand, and a white woman composer, on the other), as if this fact alone constituted grounds for inquiry. To his credit, Ramana attempts to locate the way a “renegotiation” of his ethnic and sexual identities “found its way into” his music, but the examples offered are too paltry (hinging on ideas like collapsing “major/minor binaries”) to resonate beyond wishful speculation (29, 30). Zaidel-Rudolph, in contrast, refuses to define stylistic musical traits in the context of gender identity, preferring to emphasize the structural hindrances faced by a woman composer in the late twentieth century. Unfortunately, this focus is altogether too resolute. For example, without a hint of self-consciousness or irony, Zaidel-Rudolph writes of how, in June 1976, she was invited by CAPAB (Cape Performing Arts Board) to be the “guest composer in the series ‘The Composer Speaks,’” arguing that her “sheer hard work” overcame certain prejudices initially held by performers of her music (84). On the racist nature of CAPAB Zaidel-Rudolph’s account remains silent. Thus, by emphasizing instead what amounts to no more than a “sense” of resistance from performers at CAPAB in the very month the deadly riots broke out in the township of Soweto, Zaidel-Rudolph’s text comes off as a little too disconcertingly disengaged.

As this brief review indicates, *Gender and Sexuality in South African Music* offers neither a

unified voice nor a unified perspective on its field of inquiry. The topics differ dramatically, and the styles of writing range from abstract theoretical discourse to realist anthropological accounting, from intimate personal confession to romantic sermonizing. Since it is clear that this anthology does not take on the task of accurately representing the gendered aspects of musical production in South Africa, it would be unfair to demand that it do so. Yet there is a strangely lopsided presentation sequence in the book upon which I feel compelled to remark. When a moderately talented dead white Afrikaans man receives the attention of two chapters out of nine and no single African composer or musician is discussed in anything like the same detail, we have a crass problem of unequal representation. Moreover, *Gender and Sexuality in South African Music* reads a diversity of meanings out of the complexity of its cultural landscape, but it does not invoke constellations at the local level powerfully enough to alter the theoretical content of studies of gender and sexuality in an international frame. While the chapters by Olwage, Pyper, and Muller in particular bring striking new findings to the historical record, the analytic categories do not impose themselves with any force on the assumptions made by gender and sexuality studies in the North Atlantic. For all its nostalgic romanticism, Nzewi’s text is the exception here, preferring to undercut the entire intellectual apparatus rather than enact another form of African belatedness.

Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams.

By Tammy L. Kernodle. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004. 348 pp.

SHERRIE TUCKER

Women & Music readers who are interested in jazz history have surely noticed the ubiquitous “Mary Lou Williams Paragraph” as it appears in countless documentaries, textbooks, and other sweeping representations of jazz history. With a teensy-weensy bit of exaggeration, it goes something like this:

Although jazz is primarily a man’s world (except for singers who are tragic and don’t know what they’re doing), one woman excelled, thus proving the meritocracy of jazz. The child prodigy known as “The Little Piano Girl of East Liberty” came of age as “The Lady Who Swings the Band” before her remarkable