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Entering the Present Music Meets Race

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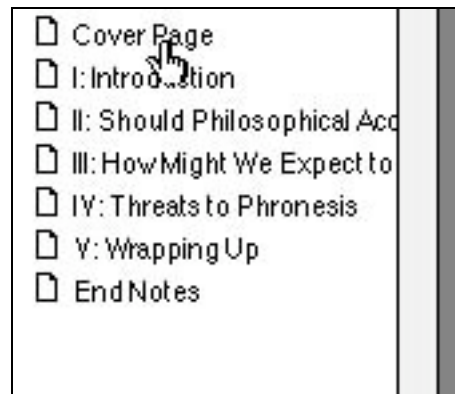



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Entering the Present: Music Meets Race

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The title of this collection, *Music and the Racial Imagination*, is provocative—and I’ll wager that this is intentional. It is a great title because it simultaneously does several things. It brings together “music” and “race,” which have not previously been given equal emphasis in musicology, and then links these two things with imagination.¹ The title creates an imagined space where music and race can begin to co-star in leading roles.

As music specialists who feel connected to the world in which we live and wish that music scholarship had been more cognizant of current issues sooner, we read the book’s title and think “Finally! Someone is taking this on.” The co-editors of this collection, Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman, do not balk and seem to be aware of what they are getting into. Right up front, in the first sentence of the Preface, they state: “*Music and the Racial Imagination* is the product of our commitment to a musicology and ethnomusicology of engagement” (xiii). Mid-way through the second paragraph they follow this up with “an activist stance,” indicating that they see the volume as serving “above all else, a call to an intellectual activism” (xiii). When I first read these words, I almost stopped breathing for a few seconds—I couldn’t believe my eyes. Forget about this not being my “grandmother’s” or “mother’s” musicology; this was not at all recognizable as the musicology of my own graduate school upbringing, only a decade ago! As music scholarship has entered the new millennium, race is becoming visible. With gutsy subtitles in the Introduction such as “The Occlusion of Race in Music Studies,” “Ghostbusting,” and the post- post-Civil War pun alluded to in “Musicology’s Reconstruction,” the editors seem to be up to the task. Not only referring to its

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considerable size (just over 700 pages), this “big book”—to use the nickname the editors give it (*xiv*) when outlining their book’s genesis in their Preface—has a weighty job.

Let’s get back to the title. Thankfully, Radano and Bohlman spend some time explaining what they mean by the “racial imagination” in their Introduction:

In this book we define “racial imagination” as the shifting matrix of ideological constructions of difference associated with body type and color that have emerged as part of the discourse network of modernity. . . . As an ideology, however, the racial imagination remains forever on the loose, subject to reformation within the memories and imaginations of the social as it blurs into other categories constituting difference (5).

While this is not the most clear-cut definition, it seems to move in a helpful direction. The “racial imagination” is a grouping of ideas based on differences that are rooted in physical appearance. They acknowledge that these impressions are not static, but subject to change. In the next paragraph, Radano and Bohlman flesh out the connection to music:

The focus on race’s musical aspect in *Music and the Racial Imagination* will centralize something curiously missing from social- and cultural-studies analyses, despite the common lip service paid to its importance. The imagination of race not only informs perceptions of musical practice but is at once constituted within and projected into the social through sound. Intersecting the musical and discursive, it becomes a “soundtext” that circulates within as well as across national boundaries (5).


Although this passage is awash in the “discourse” of its scholarly tone (why use such ambiguous language? is it necessary to use “the social” as a noun in both of these quotations?), their point is not daunting. By bringing together the racial imagination and

music a “soundtext” is created; this “soundtext” circulates among its original audience and on to others. In other words, concerning music and race, the meaning can change as it is heard and understood by different people.


My point in this previous paragraph is not to be tedious, but to illustrate a very real issue. It is quite easy to become overly reliant on complicated language when writing about subjects whose meanings have been teased out in different disciplinary homes. In fact, it can be tempting—perhaps almost feel appropriate—to use the jargon and styles of writing that are employed in these interdisciplinary fields. Writings in post-colonial studies, literary theory and cultural studies are notoriously complicated; this can be a serious deterrent for those in other disciplines who did not cut their teeth on these theories when still in graduate school. There is a difference between writing eloquently with a careful command of language and writing with a self-conscious ear towards multi-syllabic paradigms. However, in this collection I am pleased to note that most of the essays are *not* weighted down in such a fashion. Additionally, in some cases, even when they engage complex theories regarding race and representation, there are essays that are a pleasure to read (especially those by Wong, Waterman, and Manuel²) and communicate very well to a multi-disciplinary audience. Despite my examples above, the “Introduction” reads rather smoothly with only occasional forays into oblique language.

Before leaving the title, one question I have that was not directly raised in the Introduction but is addressed in several essays, is *Whose racial imagination, specifically, are we talking about?* Throughout the book several suggestions are offered and each one provides an entrée point into this complicated pairing of music and race. While the Introduction works to unpack the phrase the “racial imagination,” the agency and identity of the one doing the imagining is left open. Christopher A. Waterman’s essay traces the trajectory of Armenter “Bo” Chatmon’s 1928 song “Corrine Corrina” from hillbilly to race music to mainstream pop categories, and then its further transformation in the 1994

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movie *Corrina Corrina* with Whoopie Goldberg and Ray Liotta. Waterman seeks the “excluded middle of the American racial imagination, the gap between blackness and whiteness” (198). In this case, it seems as though “America” is doing the imagining: the United States becomes the active interrogator and the changing musical versions project the diverse meanings. In Margaret J. Kartomi’s essay³ it is the Indonesian-Chinese who are objectified in the “racial imagination of the Dutch colonists” during Dutch colonial rule (1602-1945) in the Indonesian archipelago. Through adaptation and resistance, Kartomi reads the music of the Indonesian-Chinese through the lens of the Dutch hegemony. Without trying to minimize the voice of the oppressed, Kartomi’s essay illustrates that today we are left with a musical voice that is filtered through the racial imagination of the colonizer.



Without excavating every instance of the appearance of “racial imagination” in all of the essays, let me turn to one more instance. The last words of the final sentence of the concluding essay in this collection present a new agent’s imagination. While exploring recent relationships between race, ethnicity and nation in late 1990s Central and Eastern Europe (especially in Bosnia, Kosovo, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Yugoslavia), Philip V. Bohlman makes connections between shifting definitions of place and history.⁴ As cartographers continuously redraw maps of this region, Bohlman elegantly contextualizes the role of music as it interacts with place, memory, and forgetting.

However, Bohlman’s essay concludes, “The music of this modern placelessness ensures that race, too, retains its place in the European imagination” (669). While it might not be fair to imply that Bohlman’s essay is meant to be the *last* word on this issue (after all, someone’s essay needed to conclude the compilation), its placement and his position as one of the book’s co-editors seem to imbue his final sentence with added weight. Although he writes about the complicated scene in Eastern Europe after the fall of Communism and the former Soviet Union’s stronghold on its neighbors, the “European

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imagination” seems to be a bit out-dated. Whether we take this sentence to comment on Europe looking inward at itself or as evidence of Europe’s new self image to the rest of the world, concluding this book with the “European imagination” feels a little like there is unfinished business regarding race that still needs to be done, not only in Europe but also in this essay. Earlier, in the book's introduction, Bohlman presented what struck me as a stronger and more vibrant representation of "the racial imagination" in his discussion of Klezmer music and its several audiences. The discussion of Klezmer's increasingly blurred (multi)racial identity(ies) -- in the United States, and in what he calls the "Old World" and the "New Europe" as well -- is a compelling illustration of the multiplicity and fluidity of racial imagination. In fact, as the book's introduction rightly suggests, Klezmer may well be regarded as one of the "metonyms for the ways in which music and race open the historical spaces of the racial imagination throughout this book" (42). The "European imagination," explored at the book's conclusion, seems more limiting, less compelling.

Rather than a criticism about Bohlman’s essay, my aim here is to draw attention to a larger point about the collection: I wish there were a section in the opening material that gave an overview of the essays and the five Parts into which the book is organized. While I do not want to appear overly traditional or old-fashioned, I miss reading the editors’ discussion about how they feel these essays hook together and articulate the mission of the chosen groupings, five Parts, in the book: (1) Body/Dance; (2) Hybridity/Mix; (3) Representing/Disciplining; (4) History/Modernism; and (5) Power/Powerlessness. These five Parts seem to have been carefully chosen and are engaging in their own right. Each two-word pair, separated by a slash, tantalizes the reader to figure out the relationship between the two as dichotomous binary oppositions and/or as complementing views of the same whole.

Another reason I wish there were some sort of overview is that there are questions that inevitably arise when essays are put together into different groupings. For example, Part I (Body/Dance) seems to be the most straightforward because all four of these essays discuss issues concerned with the physical presence from where the music originates and who is affected, and in some cases literally “moved,” by this music. However, even this section brings up a question—couldn’t Zoila Mendoza’s essay “Performing Decency: Ethnicity and Race in Andean “Mestizo” Ritual Dance” (231-70) be put in this opening Body/Dance section rather than in Part II (Hybridity/Mix)? These overlapping topics could encourage the reader to think more about the connections that can be made between and among the book’s five Parts rather than having the reader feel that the dance aspect in Mendoza’s essay needs to be subjugated to the “mestizo” Hybridity/Mix element.

Another question is why are there two essays that, pretty much, treat the same topic? Peter Manuel’s “Ethnic Identity, National Identity, and Music in Indo-Trinidadian Culture” (318-48) and Jocelyne Guilbault’s “Racial Projects and Musical Discourses in Trinidad, West Indies” (435-58) both examine the ethnic and musical confrontations between the African-influenced Creole music of Trinidad and Tobago (e.g., calypso, steel pan, and Carnival) and the country’s East Indian musical characteristics (e.g., the use of the harmonium and sitar and Hindi film music influences). Through their examination of the local Trinidadian press, Guilbault and Manuel each discuss the controversy outlined in the newspapers regarding the recognition that both Indian and Creole influences be seen as important contributors to Trinidad’s national musical identity. Additionally, the two essays explore the syncretic nature of Indo-Trini musical forms, such as chutney-soca, pan-parang, and pan-chutney. Despite the similarities of these essays, they each do different work. Manuel’s reads more like a case study with the emphasis on specific performers, Trinidad’s musical history, and the syncretic sharing of African, Indian, and creole music styles. Guilbault focuses more on how this situation can be read as a “racial



project” (a term she explains and adapts from Michael Omi and Howard Winant⁵) and what Trinidad’s music tells us about race. Congruent with Manuel’s syncretic analysis of Indo-Trini music, she concludes that “race cannot be discussed in the abstract” and “there can be no general theory of race . . . [because] it involves specific circumstances and events, and people with varying interests, agendas, and possibilities” (451). In any case, given the substantial overlap of these two essays (it is not my intent to argue whether or not both should have been included), I would have loved to have seen more of a dialogue encouraged between the two authors in their writing and to have had this highlighted by the editors.

Although these are relatively small quibbles, my motivation behind this request is more practical than anything. In a volume with twenty essays by twenty-one authors on such an extremely diverse range of repertoires and approaches it would have been helpful for the reader to have some type of guide, or map that shows the overall landscape—to cite a central trope in Bohlman’s essay at the end—to navigate our way through. While I feel that the Introduction written by the two co-editors is powerful and appropriate, I wonder if an added Part VI (Epilogue) could have completed the traditional job of the Introduction in an innovative way (which would also require changing the last section of the Introduction [41-44] from “Epilogue” to something else). Though most people might assume that a concluding Epilogue should be read after the other parts in the book, a little hint at the end of the Introduction could let the reader know that this final section weaves together some of the issues brought up in the individual essays and comments on the themes presented in the five Parts. Such a conclusion would be quite helpful before, after, and/or during the reading of the twenty essays. Together the Introduction and, what I am calling, the new Part VI (Epilogue) could act like a border on a crocheted or knitted afghan: both decorative and functional. Permit me to extend this metaphor so as to better illustrate what I mean. This border (the Introduction and Epilogue) is something that

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complements the design and organization of the material in the main body, but it is still flexible enough to be pulled and stretched with use. Such a border adds extra stitching to hold things together. To the outside eye it finishes the project with elegance; to those gathered underneath, it provides a little more room, so that everyone can stay warm. Finally, it strengthens the whole so that all of the individual pieces are tightly held together and less vulnerable to unraveling.

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In terms of its larger place within scholarship, this collection on music and race and what it signals reminds me of a point that arose around fifteen to seventeen years ago during the early stages of feminist directions in musicology. At that time, musicology was most invested in a style of research commonly referred to as “positivism” which translated into recovering “lost” music (particularly music from the Medieval and Renaissance periods) and editing critical editions of music scores based on archival research. Other favored topics included composer biography and studies in the style and genres of classical music (meaning Western European music from the earliest examples through the nineteenth century).

The move to pursue issues relating to women and gender in music came later in musicology than it did in other humanities (e.g., history, art history, and literature) and represented a critical step for the discipline in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In addition to the social and political reasons, which are important in their own right, one of the major motivating factors propelling “feminist” musicology was the desire to ask new types of questions. Instead of why are there no women composers?—a new approach was to seek out the female composers we do know about and recover their “lost” music. But the inquiry did not stop there; in fact, just the opposite happened. Questions of gender extended to all types of music from past into the present, by female as well as male composers. Early publications in this area included *Musicology and Difference; Opera;*

or the *Undoing of Women*; *Feminine Endings*; and *Cecilia Reclaimed* to name only a few of the most influential.⁶

I would like to think that the richness of the path we saw in music and gender studies, and later on in sexuality and Queer theory, will happen with race and ethnicity studies in music. The comparison can be a helpful one for there are certainly analogous issues to explore. As with the question of finding women composers, we need not rely solely on finding composers who are racially and ethnically diverse—though such composers are still important to locate and add to the curriculum. The depiction of women in music as well as what is considered “masculine” when juxtaposed to what is considered “feminine” can become jumping off points for asking similar types of questions regarding the ways racial and ethnic diversity are represented musically and music’s capacity to signify parallel racial identities simultaneously. It is exciting to see that *Music and the Racial Imagination* has already taken several of these steps in its essays.

Just as we began to see a community of scholars emerge around feminist issues in musicology in the late 1980s and early 1990s, we are currently—at the beginning of a new millennium—beginning to see books that are examining the interactions of music, race, ethnicity, and identity. Another collection of essays that came out the same year as Radano and Bohlman’s book is *Western Music and its Others: Difference, Representation and Appropriation in Music*, edited by Georgina Born and David

Hesmondhalgh.⁷ At the risk of being too exclusionary for mentioning only two other books, both Samuel A. Floyd, Jr.’s *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States* and Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr.’s *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* are particularly notable models in foregrounding race, ethnicity

and Black culture in music⁸

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In closing, I would like to make a final observation about the growth and development musicology made in broadening its purview to include topics that focused on women, gender, and sexuality. The interest in these areas also had a very positive effect on the status and role of women, and gay and lesbian communities in the discipline professionally. Study groups were founded and conferences were organized around gender and sexuality issues in music. For the first time women were being elected to top-ranking positions in music professional societies and, in greater numbers, women were considered leaders in the field. The presumed identity of a “Musicologist” had evolved and expanded to include, at last, both men *and* women. I would love to see these things happen in this new realm of music, race, ethnicity and identity. I believe such changes would affect the interdisciplinary collections of paradigms used, and broaden both the diversity of *what* is studied as well as *who* gets to ask the questions.

Radano and Bohlman have put together a collection of essays that pioneers a critical space in music scholarship. The “racial imagination” they have outlined certainly has room to grow, but they have gotten off to a promising start with the interdisciplinary collections of paradigms used, interracial collaboration of their contributors and the multi-ethnic representation in the musics they have included.

Notes

¹ Throughout this review essay I am using the term musicology to include ethnomusicology and music theory. My reason for linking (yet restricting) my discussion to these related disciplines is because they are the ones with which I am most experienced. I do not mean to speak for all areas of music scholarship, such as the writings on music education, music therapy, music cognition and perception, and others.

² Deborah Wong, “The Asian American Body in Performance” (57-94); Christopher A. Waterman, “Race Music: Bo Chatmon, ‘*Corrine Corrina*,’ and the Excluded Middle (167-205); and Peter Manuel, “Ethnic Identity, National Identity, and Music in Indo-Trinidadian Culture” (318-348).

³ “Indonesian-Chinese Oppression and the Musical Outcomes in the Netherlands East Indies” (271-317).

⁴ “The Remembrance of Things Past: Music, Race and the End of History in Modern Europe” (644-76).

⁵ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994).

⁶ *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993); *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, Catherine Clément. Translated by Betsy Wing (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality*, Susan McClary (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music*, eds. Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

⁷ *Western Music and its Others: Difference, Representation and Appropriation in Music*, eds. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000.

⁸ *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States* by Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995); and *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* by Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

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Thomas A. Regelski, Editor.