
Book Review: *Hearing Sexism: Gender in the Sound of Popular Music. A Feminist Approach*

LJ Müller. *Hearing Sexism: Gender in the Sound of Popular Music. A Feminist Approach*. Translated with Manu Reyes. Bielefeld: Transcript Publishing, 2022. 208 pages.

How has sexism become normalized in popular music, and how can listeners be equipped to recognize it? LJ Müller's *Hearing Sexism*, which was awarded the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM) 2019 book prize, argues that sexism manifests in vocal sounds that are both bodily and culturally produced. For Müller, this framing remains understudied by popular music scholars, and yet women-identifying and non-binary voices have long been Othered among white male rock voices. To explore this Othering, Müller presents several tools, chiefly among them psychoanalytic theory, but also semiotics and feminist film theory. Since Müller dedicates the first half of their study to the nuts and bolts of these critical theories, their book is particularly useful for graduate and advanced undergraduate seminars on the topic of sexism and gender in popular music. Müller's interdisciplinary method, grounded in the notion that popular music is not only sonic but "also includes discourses, concerts, images, media (CDs, radio, music stations, YouTube, . . .), etc.," prompts further work on how sonic embodiment shapes judgments about pop singers across several domains (29). Here, Müller approaches this multifaceted archive through psychoanalytic feminist film studies, which allows them to analyze "the body images that arise in sound" through case studies of six recent pop singers (175).

Müller analyzes singers' voices primarily as sounds produced by specific bodies in culturally patterned ways. To attune our ears to sexism, Müller establishes a normative backdrop for judging pop voices: the "real" voice of male acts like Nirvana (specifically, Kurt Cobain) and Robbie Williams. The "real" voice is marked by "spontaneity, full bodily engagement, naturalness and a kind of honest expression of inner feelings" as well as "some sort of identification of the listener with the (male and White?) singer" (37). Building on work by Philp Tagg, Bob Clarida, and others, Müller shows how associations of male rock performances with authenticity not only stem from listeners' expectations but also from each singer's ways of producing sound. Müller's claims echo earlier ones by sound studies scholars such as Jennifer L. Stoeber, Nina Sun Eidsheim, and Dylan Robinson, as Müller contends that "[t]he listening subject is already culturally pre-structured such that it can encounter sound in an appropriate way [. . .] just as sound

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is adapted to the expectations of the listening subject” (41). In this way, a listener encounters a singer’s voice as a sonic object, or what Steven Connor calls the vocalic body,¹ which may or may not reinforce a song’s message. Singers are rewarded with legibility in mainstream culture for matching the sounds they make to the personas and messages they express. Audiences perceive such voices as “authentic” (that vexing keyword in popular music studies) because their sounds—and, I would add, their images—have become culturally ingrained as the norm.

But women singers, like Müller’s case studies of Kate Bush, Kylie Minogue, Björk, and Birdy, are Othered from a so-called “real” sound since their voices often are synchronized not to their bodies, personas, and messages, but to a listener’s particular fantasy image or sound that makes these voices stand out as unnatural. Vocal signifiers such as breathiness, softness, or perceived childishness compel listeners to hear women singers either as objects of sexual voyeurism or as lacking authenticity compared to the male “real” voice. For example, Müller dissects Simon Frith’s and Angela McRobie’s claim that in the song “Feel It,” Kate Bush has the “voice of a little girl,” which collapses the difference between the singer’s voice and her persona.² Müller deconstructs Bush’s voice as distinct from a child’s voice due to differences in vocal physiology, timbre, and training, which debunks the stereotypical view of women as infantile. Müller acknowledges the skill it takes to distance one’s voice from one’s body, which also yields multiple interpretations of the song—readings that are possible once one hears past sexist assumptions. This line of thinking, about the ruptures female pop singers can create within a performance of gender, critiques the binary positions that singers and listeners are forced into by hegemonic producers of popular culture.

Moreover, in a sonic reworking of Laura Mulvey’s “male gaze” concept, Müller shows how production processes sonically airbrush women singers to encourage listeners to fetishize their “unreal” perfection. In Müller’s reading of “Can’t Get You Out of My Head,” Kylie Minogue’s doll-like voice in the “la la la’s” that structure the song’s central hook are processed to sound mechanical, as “a surface phenomenon [that] masks the absence of a subject and lends itself instead to erotic contemplation” (146). Subject to many forms of technological production, women’s voices are cast as subservient to male pleasures—and notably, many of the producers who sculpt women’s voices are male. Of interest here, yet not covered in the book, are the many women who collaborate with producers to shape their voices beyond sexist and gendered norms, including hyperpop hybrid musician-producers such as SOPHIE and 100 gecs.

Among the most pedagogically instructive elements of this book are Müller’s analyses of the bodily impressions that sounds (and lyric delivery) have on listeners, which also feature in recent film studies and voice studies scholarship that digresses from psychoanalytic theory.³ One of the book’s strongest passages explains the anatomy of the mouth

1. Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press).

2. Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, “Rock and Sexuality,” in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, eds. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (London: Routledge, 1990), 329.

3. In film studies, see, for example, Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema*,

and throat as they work to produce sound (86–94). This physiological analysis is richly rewarding when Müller’s close readings describe how the mouth, throat, and lungs produce emotional meaning. Ranging from vocal training, to sonic placement in the body, to the application of delay as a production technique, the close readings are evocative, narrated extensively as they happen, so that readers can listen to the song and follow along. Additionally, at the start of each reading, Müller includes charts that organize song structure (introduction, verses, pre-chorus, refrain, etc.), the lyrics that begin these sections, timestamps, and bars—which assist readers no matter their musical training. While greater emphasis on specific members of the production team would be a crucial reminder that the singer does not solely create the sum of a song’s effects, Müller’s detailed readings of physiology and affect reveal what voices do beyond delivering music or lyrics, supplementing prior branches of popular music scholarship. But there is more work to do beyond updating psychoanalysis and feminist film theory for readings of popular music. Subsequent scholarship in this vein must continue to account for how pop voices are distributed across multiple actors and are shaped by a multitude of forces, including and especially capitalism, so that the commodity form is considered as much as the psychoanalytical fetish.

While Müller limits the book’s case studies to challenge root forms of hearing sexism, they indicate pathways for further research on queer, trans, and disabled singers and artists of color. To connect work on the latter to Müller’s analysis of white singers, we can look to a case study that surfaced the same month *Hearing Sexism* was published. In August 2022, the artist and actor Romy Reiner tweeted a video of her “singing’ or ‘imitating’ how almost every young American singer sings.”⁴ The TikTok video cuts between “Hush Little Baby,” “Frosty the Snowman,” and Amy Winehouse’s “You Know I’m No Good,” which Reiner performs with a breathy voice, rasp and vocal fry, and chewed-out consonants (such that the second song is pronounced “Frosty dee Schnowman”). This style of pop singing has been dubbed the “indie girl voice” or “little girl voice.” In a quote tweet, Ann Powers praised Reiner’s execution of the style but identified the issue that “people reading ‘indie girl voice’ lineages cite white women who borrow Black inflection (Adele, Amy W) but rarely Black women themselves” or men like Frank Ocean who are associated with the “indie R&B voice.”⁵ Reiner’s pastiche draws attention to the scope of this phenomenon but leaves its roots up to speculation. Müller’s framework allows us to read the indie girl voice as a psychoanalytic and material imprint of how female bodies have been trained and heard. But we can extend Müller’s bodily

Embodiment, and the Senses (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); and Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009). In voice studies, see Martha Feldman and Judith T. Zeitlin, eds., *The Voice as Something More: Essays Toward Materiality* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019); and Daphne A. Brooks, “This Voice Which is Not One”: Amy Winehouse Sings the Ballad of Sonic Blue(s)face Culture,” in *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 20, no. 1 (2010): 37–60.

4. Romy, @romyreiner, 7:18 pm, August 13, 2022, <https://twitter.com/romyreiner/status/1558518402930511874?s=20>.

5. Ann K. Powers, @annkpowers, 4:54 pm, August 14, 2022, <https://twitter.com/annkpowers/status/1558844394668703746?s=20>.

specificity to Powers's historical specificity as well as the capitalistic reasons for the indie girl voice's circulation (as I am triangulating in an article I am working on, tentatively titled "The Indie Girl Voice: Whiteness, Ageism, and Remediation"). Broadening out further, we can track these intersecting phenomena and the myth of a "real" sound within and beyond popular music, to study, for instance, soundscapes of discrimination and gentrification.

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