

# REVIEW | Popular Music and the Politics of Hope: Queer and Feminist Interventions

*Susan Fast and Craig Jennex, editors*

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The premise of this collection of essays is that “making and consuming popular music are political activities in the sense that both encourage individuals to imagine and create a better, more just world” (1).

Despite such an exclusively positive understanding of the possible engagements with popular music, the editors claim that in this context “hopeful thinking is difficult” and that hope is a “far more difficult path” (3). Therefore, in their view, the aim of this book was to create work that is “hopeful” (2) and predicated on Kosofsky-Sedgwick’s notion of reparative reading (Kosofsky-Sedgwick 1997), as opposed to “what feels like overwhelmingly negative critique in academic work” (2), “paranoid critique” (14) and a “politics of despair” (4).

According to the authors such a strategy is needed because of the current political circumstances, and in particular the 2016 US election of Donald Trump looms large on this collection. Such references to current political matters (the MeToo and Time’s Up movements also get a mention) ground the discussions in the urgency of contemporaneity and point to the relevance of popular music in the construction and understanding of evolving discourses.

It would have been best however to resist impulsive and uninformed judgements such as Jacqueline Warwick and Susan McClary’s allegation that “Great Britain voted to secede from the European Union because of nostalgia for the glories of nationalism” (231), which is at best simplistic and at worst patronising as it does not take into account the margin of the vote, the diversity of voting across the countries making up the United Kingdom (the political entity which includes Northern Ireland as well as Great Britain) and also the complexities of the issues that coalesced around such voting.

The essays in the collection are grouped in five thematic parts: “Displacing Whiteness”, “Rethinking Difference”, “Decolonizing Sound”, “Refusing Conventions” and “Voicing Resilience”: each of these sections intends to address different social and political identities, which is a welcome strategy in pursuing greater intersectionality in popular music studies.

Reading through the various case studies that form the focus of these texts it is apparent that hopefulness is not that difficult to find after all, indeed very little is needed; for example, according to Daphne A. Brooks, Adele’s acceptance speech at the Grammy Awards ceremony in 2017, in which the singer expressed great appreciation for Beyoncé and her work, “flirted with momentarily bringing the wheels of institutional racism to a dramatic halt” (21).

In general the strategy to achieve reparation seems to be articulated around a desire to read *with* the grain: Mayweather, Janelle Monáe’s fictional/alter ego character, in Marquita R. Smith’s interpretation “embodies the revolutionary power of love as the antidote to violent oppression” (39); Beyoncé’s performance with the Dixie Chicks is to Francesca T. Royster an opportunity to be “flexing her powerful public performance muscles, taking the chance to extend the reach of her BLM [Black Lives Matter] protest to new audiences, as well as the chance to stretch generically and stylistically” (66).

At times these readings become more challenging as the material they seek to “repair” is much more complex: Freya Jarman with Emily Baker argues that the discernible London accents of Adele and Amy Winehouse, artists who were both born in London, “complicate the narrative of straightforward appropriation of African American soundworlds” (113); Maria Murphy contends that in Anohni’s “Watch Me” deriving pleasure from “systems of power” (223) is a way to “subvert the panopticon and auditory surveillance” (224); Jacqueline Warwick understands liking Ariana Grande as being “insubordinate” (234); Tiffany Naiman asserts that “Madonna is not chasing the fountain of youth” unlike other artists such as Cher and Dolly Parton who “utilize extreme methods such as plastic surgery to appear more youthful than they are” (274).

In these instances, the risk for a politics of hope to turn into a politics of wishful thinking, of delusion, or even of denial is noticeable. This is perhaps due to “thin” accounts of feminism and queer theory, which, as it is often the case in popular music studies, pivot around vague notions of “empowerment”, “agency” and “subversion”, thus tending to return rather comfortable readings of the material (see Hawkins 2016, whose capacious notion of queer subversion allowed for the inclusion of works by Justin Timberlake and Robbie Williams among others).

Indeed, on reflection, this collection follows an already established tradition of congratulatory accounts of gender studies in popular music (Iddon and Marshall 2014, Hawkins 2017), and perhaps what is really difficult is to think of any “overwhelmingly negative critiques” of popular music in academic work. The authors don’t seem to offer any examples with this regard: could they just mean Adorno’s 1930s–40s essays (Adorno 1941, Adorno 1981, and Adorno 1990)?

More nuanced and convincing readings arise especially when feminism and queerness are not the primary perspectives—perhaps tellingly so; for example, Laurie Stras’ analysis of the complexities in the negotiation of meaning produced by (gendered) disabled bodies in popular music is lucid and critical: recognising that self-objectification, overcoming narratives, and normative disruptions are not mutually exclusive, but can be inextricably entwined, when not even co-existent.

Similarly, Pamela Fox’s discussion of the importance of autobiography as a necessary consciousness-raising exercise with regards to working class identities is convincing because it acknowledges Bruce Springsteen’s and Chrissie Hynde’s texts

as “unorthodox, often conflicted and compromised, but vital” (125). In particular, Fox deals with Hynde’s problematic stance on sexual assault with deftness as she describes it as “at the very least misguided...it nevertheless represents one notion of agency that makes sense to her” (138).

Also, the “Decolonising Sound” section presents readings that are informed by a more convincing ethics of critical enquiry as well as a more viable illustration of “academic activism” (for instance in the championing of artists who do not already command attention and/or praise from the media and the industry). Here Alexa Woloshyn’s discussions of a “decolonised solidarity” (151) and “complicated allyship” (161) are especially noteworthy.

By and large the emphasis of the analyses in this collection is squarely on the star text rather than the songs. One noticeable exception is Craig Jennex’s essay, whose claim to be wishing to “listen closely” to Saini’s “More Than Aware” is developed as a description of the music (construed as two primary grooves) and the perception of multiple vocalities and languages that Jennex says “subvert normative politics of recognition” and “conventional understandings of identity” (52).

Because of the authors’ prevailing focus on personas and their preoccupation with the advent of Donald Trump (who could be argued to have based his career as a politician on the strength of his mediatic profile), it would have been interesting to employ theoretical frameworks that more specifically dealt with celebrity and the cult of personality. Perhaps Philip Auslander’s notions of “person,” “persona,” and “character” (2009) might have helped in developing a more rigorous examination of the case studies, thus opening up the opportunity to pursue a more accurate and comprehensive inquiry.

Another related perspective that would have been interesting to explore is that of masculinities, which could be argued to be the most fertile terrain for a “politics of hope”: how is popular music responding to and shaping new notions of masculinities that are both resistive and subversive of the kind of hegemonic, strongman politics that contribute to the successes of people like Trump (such as Boris Johnson, Matteo Salvini, Viktor Orbán, Jair Bolsonaro, Benjamin Netanyahu, Vladimir Putin, Narendra Modi — unfortunately this list could go on) who continue to thrive despite all the feminist and queer empowerment, agency, and subversion that popular music is said to engender?

Finally, it is perhaps understandable that the standards of scholarship would be varied across a collection of essays, and perhaps there are arguments in favour of a more inclusive and informal approach in how academic essays are written; nevertheless offering a single tweet as evidence for the “intensified and often volatile bifurcation of racialised public discourse” (61), quoting Wikipedia in a bibliography (256), offering promotional material (49) and personal declarations from the artist (226) as unchallenged statements, the use of adverbs like “vastly” (57, 263), “hugely” (13) and various inflections of the noun “icon” (“iconicity” [23], “iconic” [227]), as well as hypocorisms such as “Bey” (24) and “Yoncé” (25) (both diminutives of Beyoncé’s proper name) significantly lessen both the rigour and the validity of the argument. There is a place for a more playful tone in academic discourse, but this does not need to come at the expense of its standards of excellence.

In conclusion, to paraphrase Fox, *Popular Music and the Politics of Hope* may be an unorthodox, conflicted, and compromised collection, but in its struggle to achieve the notion of a “politics of hope” that makes sense of popular music in the present context it still represents a text with which it is worth engaging.

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