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Elizabeth Gould

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Desparately Seeking Marsha:¹ Music and Lesbian Imagination

Elizabeth Gould
University of Toronto



“All musicians, we must remember, are faggots” (Brett, 1994, 18, emphasis in original)—at least we’re all socially constructed that way. Regardless of race, gender, class, physical- and cognitive-ability, as well as sexual orientation, to be musical in North American and western European societies is to be queer—particularly for men (Fuller and Whitesell, 2002), and maybe specifically for men, since women barely register in discussions of musicians. Well, at least it *plays out* somewhat differently for women than for men. For both women and men, though, “full participation in the constructed role of musician in our society can only be accomplished by recognizing its deviance and acknowledging the norms of society itself” (Brett, 1994, 17), creating insider codes in queer communities for identifying gay men (*Is he musical?*) and lesbians (*Does she sing in the choir?*).² Consequently, homosexual panic, particularly among male musicians, for whom involvement in musical roles causes cultural tension (Gould, 2003) because it conflicts with their (affirmative) gendered positionalities, is well documented (Brett, 1994; Kirkpatrick, 1991), and fairly insidious as it reflects wider societal depictions of musicians as homosexual or powerless (Koskoff, 1991; Stokes, 1994). Women musicians experience this homophobia as it conflates with misogyny (Bredbeck, 1995; Spurlin, 2001) in which the gendering of music as feminine and female (due in part to its so-called non-rational and emotional nature, and in part to its relatively devalued status in contemporary society) emasculates men, resulting in male musicians’ positioning as either homosexual or women.³ It remains an open question which positioning is worse. For women, of course, well, we’re already constructed as women—there’s no escaping that—and our sexuality is pretty much beside the point. Either we are represented on stage as asexual or we’re presumed to be heterosexual with

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the option of dying or going mad in the former instance, and marrying or going mad in the latter. With the limited roles available to us as singers, and . . . and, well harpists (according to the longstanding practice of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra), women musicians fare little better than men.

Ouch. What an unpleasant place to find ourselves—unless, of course, you don't mind being homosexual, female, mad, monastic, or a heterosexually married wife (read "oppressed" in modern patriarchal society). Musicians. Who would have thunk it? I mean—aren't we the heroes, the geniuses, noble and revered, who at the very least make lots of money and get—well, the girl (as opposed to grrrl)?—that is, any white girl, because, after all, we are all white, right?—at least those of us in the tuxedos and long black dresses standing on the brightly lit stage, our audience shrouded in both darkness and silence. You know—us. You and me. All of us, singing and playing music in the most sterile, neutral, dare I suggest—objective?—environment we can devise—because it's about the music—right?—it's not about us. Right? But it is about us, isn't it? I mean—we're the ones up there—and when we look around the stage, we see mostly male, Western faces, the vast majority of whom are white, and all of whom are assumed to be heterosexual—assumed, because,⁴



Sound clip 1

[*well-we-don't-really-think-about-it-much—you-know-because-well-those-stereotypes-about-musicians-those-faggot-oops-musicians-are-so-uncomfortable-that-they-are-best—well—Ignored*]

Okay. Let's talk a bit about the white faces on the stage. Forget the rest for now. Let's talk specifically about our being white—our whiteness. With their concept of the racial imagination, Radano and Bohlman (2000) provide a way for doing that, for talking about music in ways that include race—specifically in terms of identity. The racial imagination reflexively participates in discursive constructions of race in music, opening up, occupying, and filling in

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spaces between and among races. So the racial imagination provides a means both for talking about race in music, and for talking about ourselves as raced in music. It speaks the presence of the racial others in the musical and educational discourses that were silenced, or at best, were addressed “with a vocabulary designed to disguise the subject” (Morrison, 1992, 50), speaking for or of racial others—without ever addressing them directly. Ultimately, of course, it also races the music we perform—our music, which is already framed in terms of whiteness—

Sound clip 2

[in-the-context-of-that-unpleasant-business-about-musicians-heterosexism-homophobia-and-misogyny—]

As a theoretical construct whiteness is a particularly useful—and appropriate—tool for white theorists such as Radano and Bohlman—and me. The point is not to focus attention on white people, but to decenter the power associated with being white; power that constructs being white as the norm, the normal way of being human, and allows white people to ignore our being raced—to leave it unexamined—inasmuch as we have no sense of identity with a racial group. Even as we are unconscious of our being raced, our whiteness also is invisible as we are seen first as individuals, with considerations of our race coming later—if at all (Frankenberg, 1993). Being both unexamined and invisible makes whiteness a category that has been described as unmarked (Chambers 1997)—unmarked in terms of difference. What that means, of course, is when we speak of women, we mean women who are white; when we speak of homosexual people, we mean homosexual people who are white; when we speak of the poor, we mean impoverished people who are white—unless otherwise specified—all of which accrues to white people more political power than that associated with any identity politics.

And this is what is most intriguing to me about whiteness: that it’s possible to be more or less white, as whiteness exists by degrees which result from the mitigating influence of other categories of difference. One can be more white by also exhibiting characteristics of other

unmarked—or at least, less marked—categories: for instance, by being male, heterosexual, middle class; and—regrettably—one also may be marked less white by exhibiting marked categories, such as by being female, homosexual, poor.

Sound clip 3

[Let's-see—Robert-Schumann-is-more-white-than-Clara-Schumann-but-Robert-did-go-mad-of-course-so-Johannes-Brahms-is-probably-more-white-than-Robert-but-Brahms-was-uh—large—so-Peter-Tchaikovsky-is-more-white—no-no-he-was-gay—better-make-that-Ludwig-Beethoven—no-no-he-was-deaf-but-that's-probably-more-white-than-gay-but-is-it-more-white-than-large?—and-what-about-Fannie-Hensel?—I-mean-she-published-under-her-brother's-name—and-and—at-his-insistence—a-paragon-of-the-virtuous-middle-class-but-who-knows-what-really-happened-at-her-soirées?—]

Where/how do we place ourselves along the continuum of whiteness? For feminist women, the ways in which middle class respectability is implicated in whiteness is particularly salient. Our privilege as white women academics, even as white lesbian academics in relationship to nonwhite women academics, is one of mobility along the continuum of whiteness in terms of our embodiment. Non-white feminists have been particularly scathing in their criticism of white feminists on this account (for an eloquent indictment, see Lorde, 1983). Instead of prioritizing race as the primary source of difference, though, Lorde (1983) acknowledges the inter-relatedness of all sources of differences, and calls “Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society’s definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference; those of us who are poor, who are lesbian, who are black, who are older” (p. 99). This is not about ranking oppressions, however. Experiences of the world are more politically and corporeally relevant than any theoretical discussion, and what those experiences mean depends on our situatedness both discursively and materially, making subjectivity an ongoing process that never results in stable or fixed identities, but is rather continuously contested.

It seems to me that what whiteness fails to do is take into account the pervasive marking of lesbian and gay men of all races within and outside their groups. Because members of all

groups are socialized as—and presumed to be—heterosexual, homosexuality is the only category that is marked within and outside of all groups. Consequently, what I find myself wondering in terms of the racial imagination is where am I? Not where am I, white grrrl. But where am I

Sound clip 4

[middle-class-middle-age-mostly-able-bodied-if-persistently-uncoordinated-lesbian-feminist-vegetarian-Buddhist]

white grrrl? How does the racial imagination account for all of that? How does it account for me? As an analytical device, then, I would suggest that whiteness and by extension the racial imagination must be interrogated as they produce and reproduce heteronormativity and fail to take into account the lived experiences of at least some embodied subject(ivity)s. As an alternative, I would suggest another perspective: lesbian imagination (with thanks to Radano and Bohlman, 2000 and Cusick, 1994—oh, and Fink and Grippo, 1977/2003).

Sound clip 5

Recording: *Leaping Lesbians* (Fink and Grippo, 1977/2003)

What I call “lesbian imagination” is explored by Suzanne Cusick (1994) in terms of what she describes as an attempt to avoid thinking straight. Discussing what it might mean to be a lesbian as well as a musician, Cusick notes that all relationships are negotiated in terms of power. She defines sexuality as “a practice which allows movement within a field [of] . . . the power/pleasure/intimacy triad” (p. 71). “Lesbian” is understood by intertwining this triad with “the gender of the beloved” (p. 71), and in a lesbian relationship, both parties are outside the sex/gender system; that is, no one is in the position of being “—worth less, power less—marked ‘woman,’ and no one [is] in the position—power full, worth full—[un]marked ‘man’” (p. 72). This relationship is easier for a woman to construct with another woman than with a man because women are socially constructed in terms of not power. Love for a woman, then, is attraction to not power. Because they have no pervasive or pernicious models in society on

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which to build their relationships, lesbians are more likely to construct power-sharing relationships outside of heterosexual norms, relationships in which power traverses borders and flows freely between partners.⁵ Indeed, Cusick argues that being a lesbian enacts the power/pleasure/intimacy triad in ways that subverts the male/female dualism, mixing and altering both categories in “a notion of *playing* with them in a game in which everyone can play every position, everyone is expected to pay the closest possible attention to how everyone else is playing, and no one (if you play it well) accumulates the power of a social man” (p. 73, emphasis in original).

Sound clip 6

[*Okay-so-this-is-an-idealized-lesbian-relationship-one-we-might-all-desire—eh?—you-know-a-relationship-that-is-decidedly-not-patriarchally-heterosexual—*]

Consequently, her concept of lesbian is not a noun; not an identity, but rather understood as a verb, a way of structuring one’s relations with/in the world.⁶ This avoids essentializing aspects of identity, an issue Radano and Bohlman (2000) acknowledge, as they define racial imagination as “the shifting matrix of ideological constructions of difference associated with body type and color” which is also “a crucial aspect in the constitution of identities and groups” (p. 5).

Thinking of lesbian as a verb—a performativity, a way of interacting with and being in the world—enables Cusick to suggest that it may be detected in the way that she is a musician, in her musicality. How sexuality may be manifested in music, of course, is the most salient question. In order to answer it, Cusick playfully reveals that she has “found it extremely fruitful to ask of *my* various relationships with music one of the two questions men (mostly) always want to ask about lesbians. No, not ‘what do they dooooo,’ but that other perennial...’Who’s on top?’” (p. 74, emphasis in original). She encourages students to think of music as the lover, the one on top who initiates pleasure while they are the beloved, on the bottom, recipient of that pleasure. Her goal is to teach students to increase their skill at being the beloved, to “open themselves to

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the music they hear, to let music ‘do it’ to them, to become more intensely aware (physically, emotionally, intellectually) of what’s being done to them” (p. 74) by the music—in a relationship of mutual sharing of power. Later, she teaches students to “ask of the music . . . how it achieved that effect (and, in more advanced courses, I try to teach them to ask it why)” (p. 74). This immersion of students in something larger than themselves is a listening posture which Cusick argues enriches her students’ lives as well as her own, making it more intrinsically meaningful. She elaborates, “*Like good sex*, it is an experience that re-teaches me how to relate to the world, how to have the nerve to open myself to it” (p. 75, emphasis in original). The operative words here, of course, are “good sex.” One has to wonder how many (undergraduate) students have first-hand knowledge of this.⁷

Clearly, not all music is appropriate for this listening posture, prompting Cusick to select musics that allow her as a listener to be both the beloved and the lover as she chooses. Cusick describes this as a “listening strategy of extreme attentiveness” that makes space for the voices of both music and students, enabling music “*her own wholeness of utterance, before analytical or cultural-historical interrogation*” (p. 76, emphasis in original). Indeed, Cusick prefers attentiveness to analysis as a listening strategy. For her, analysis is “the dismemberment of music’s body into the categories ‘form,’ ‘melody,’ ‘rhythm,’ harmony” (p. 77). She compares this to the violence perpetuated against women in the material world, noting, “because . . . I love music, I cannot bear to do those things to a beloved,” and extends the metaphor to identifying “music as a(nother) women, a(nother) lesbian” (p.77). In terms of musical performance, Cusick, who is an organist, describes her hands as sex organs. Using this terminology, mouth, lips and tongue would similarly be sex organs for wind players (in addition to hands) and singers—which begs the question, why didn’t she include her feet as sex organs?

So after my partner, Carol, read a draft of this discussion about lesbian imagination, I asked her what she thought about it. She immediately replied, “Cusick’s sexy!” Okay, we’re on

the phone here—exactly 2,300 miles apart. I quickly evaluate the situation: Carol’s in Boise, Suzanne’s in Virginia—that’s a good 3,000 miles. It seems safe enough.

Sound clip 7

[Now-I-imagine—what-me-worry?!?—that-Carol-finds-Suzanne-more-inherently-attractive-than-I-do-as-Suzanne’s-appearance-is-rather-less-like-Carol’s-than-mine-which-is—yeah-well-yeah-mmm-pretty-sexy—and-so—]

I reply, “Fine. Cusick’s sexy. But what did you think about her ideas?” She responds again a little too quickly for my comfort, “Cusick, her ideas—doesn’t matter—it’s all sexy!” Finally, I get it—whew! Desire. I find myself thinking about the ways in which desire is implicated in our music, in our musician-ness, in our corporeal understandings and experiences of being lover and beloved, of being musicians—in all of the contexts and ways in which desire is devalued, denied, and denounced—in our music. I find myself thinking—and longing to speak—of all of the ways in which desire is silenced. This invokes not only lesbian imagination, but feminist imagination, as well, in which boundaries are crossed, power is shared, care of each other is given.

Feminist movement to which I refer, however, is understood in terms of interlocking sources of oppression (hooks, 2000). Meanwhile, race, in particular, and class are conspicuously absent from Cusick’s discussion, even as sexuality—and gender, for that matter, are obscured in Radano and Bohlman’s (2000) introduction.⁸ Although they refer to body type and other categories of difference in terms of the racial imagination, both are immediately subsumed by their discussion of race—of color. Class is connected to race briefly in terms of classes of people who are poor and marginalized, while gender is articulated only as part of a group of categories that also includes race, ethnicity, and class. Radano and Bohlman claim that failing to foreground race actually obscures the ways in which the categories “interact and interfere” (p. 10) with each other—but then neglect to address or demonstrate how an admittedly exclusive focus on race can be used to inform ways in which the categories are interconnected. They may not feel the

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necessity to do this, however, as they also assert that race constitutes a foundational source of difference in Western music.

An additive approach to difference is theoretically ineffective, though, as it tends to rank types of oppressions, as well. The point is not to prioritize categories, but to insist on more robust analyses that include them, problematize them, and cut across them. Difference is experienced in a variety of ways, depending on its source, the context in which it is materially present, and the discourses by which it is constituted. Strategies to address it may involve what Sandoval (1990) calls oppositional or differential consciousness, which focuses on a specific source of oppression

in the context of interlocking systems of domination.⁹ Saliency becomes a central consideration, and is decided by those who are directly involved in the research and theorizing. In relationship to Cusick (1994) and Radano and Bohlman (2000), issues involving gender and sexuality for the former and race for the latter are most central, but both are inadequate without consideration of others. Moreover, I am suggesting that to speak of one demands consideration of others, because they interlock and one is always already implicated in others. Further gender and sexuality, as sources of oppression, hold a fairly unique place relative to race. Misogyny, heterosexism, and homophobia are formally built into contemporary Western legal and social codes—and

aggressively practiced in ways that are no longer thinkable in terms of race.¹⁰ Although various types of racism may be practiced within each culture discussed in Radano and Bohlman's book—and they are not to be discounted—it is misogyny, heterosexism, and homophobia that play out overtly and viciously across all cultures. Unlike (other) visible sources of difference, homosexuality is not assumed, never expected, and rarely welcomed—particularly in oppressed

non-white cultures (Hom and Ma, 1993; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1983, Spurlin, 2001).¹¹

Consequently, difference must be interrogated beyond sources of oppression in ways that take into account fluidity of identities and multiplicity of subjectivities. The racial imagination provides a much needed means to begin the discussion; but in the relative safety of race in

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musical and educational discourse, (I have yet to hear of students' refusing to participate because it violated the tenets of their religion), difference as desire is where the discussion inexorably leads.

What lesbian imagination when deployed as feminist may bring to practices of music education, then, is approaches to teaching and learning music that are situated, fluid, collaborative, caring, and giving. As it disrupts power relations, of which heteronormativity would seem to be the most ubiquitous, lesbian imagination is committed to interrogating all discourses of oppression in music education. What would it mean to disrupt teacher/student relationships—in terms of power associated with race, gender, class, sexuality, age, ability? How would we construct our classes, curricula, degree requirements—would we even include such things? What would happen to music in music education—as lover and beloved of teachers and students who not only listen to it, but like Cusick, interact with music directly playing instruments, as well as moving, singing, composing, improvising, and manipulating it in countless ways as we also are manipulated and engaged? (While we may be rejected by the people we love, queer people are never rejected by the music we love.) How would we experience desire in music education?

So—music education as a space in which music teachers and students joyfully engage in music together, claiming multiple subjectivities in nomadic journeys of experimentation and discovery?—now that's queer. And those interlocking sources of oppression? Well, they all seem to turn on and overtly and systematically practice misogyny, homophobia and heterosexism—and not only for musicians. Indeed, homosexuality is the one marked category on which everyone seems to (officially) agree. As a theoretical construct, however, homosexuality has been superseded by both “gay and lesbian” and “queer.” In an effort to destabilize the former, de Lauretis (1991) positions the latter as a term with critical potential. Currently, queer is a strongly contested term that is inhered with political connotations of resistance; an edge, a method of inquiry, of analysis (Jogose, 1996). In terms of lesbian/feminist imagination, queer

functions as an epistemological device that problematizes identity politics in an effort to provide nuanced understandings of interlocking sources of oppression, markers of difference that account for lived experience. Entailing “displacement of colonial, heteronormative, or otherwise hegemonic stratifications, . . . a queer perspective constitutes an interrogation . . . of the way in which all subjects . . . are interpellated as gendered bodies within a given social space” (Dayal, 2001, p. 305), and thus occupies spaces in ways that are inaccessible to notions of whiteness and the racial imagination, pitching and yawing, moving up and down, and sideways. While lesbian/feminist imagination may account for race and other interlocking sources of oppression; queer space in lesbian/feminist imagination destabilizes all identity(ies)—including, most notably, lesbian/feminist and queer. Indeed, queer in lesbian/feminist imagination skews the view, upsets the balance, alters relations of power and desire. It takes us beyond the borders of what we know and can do, of what we can hear. Never one thing or all things, queer disrupts what is most comfortable about our selves. It challenges us to understand and experience our subjectivities in terms of multiplicities. And in doing so, it creates (unlimited) possibilities.

Discourses of music(ology) have certainly silenced the voices to which Radano and Bohlman dedicate their book—but I believe the editors’ concern is with *everyone* who has been silenced by discourses of power. The racial imagination (is there only one?), as a liberatory practice, may leave these voices muted if, in terms of their practice, it amplifies race as an uncontested source of difference, if it does not account for otherness within its sameness, if it constructs identity monotonally within predetermined structures. Lesbian/feminist imagination(s), queer, may turn up the volume, dismantle the conditions of tacet [*sic*] normativity of silence and restraint that mark, disappear, ethnically cleanse. This is for those who are queer because of their queer—pitch and yaw—“and let’s have a song for the ones who aren’t here, and won’t be coming out tonight” (Calvi, 1981/1983).

Sound clip 8

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Recording: *For the Ones Who Aren't Here* (Calvi, 1981/1983)

**** **** **** ****

Is something buried in your old widow's mind that blesses my choice of our own kind?

From "Song to My Mama"
Meg Christian, 1974/2002

**** **** **** ****

Explain why I am an accompanist; explain these soaring episodes I've spent a lifetime fitting into my fingers. Explain the art of listening, of voicing, of blending; of imposing variations on sameness, and sameness on variation. Explain why I am musical. Explain "musical." Leave me out of the picture entirely, if you wish, but explain the hole that's left in music when my kind are missing.

Semi-retired professional (lesbian) accompanist
(quoted by Koestenbaum, 1994, 5)

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Dedicated, with thanks, to
Elizabeth Wood

In Memoriam
Philip Brett

Notes

¹ An actual musician, conductor, and teacher who is black, lesbian, and differently-abled, as well as feminist, funny (no, that's not an oxymoron!), and fearless.

² These codes are only possible because of the recognition of deviance in musical roles....

³ For a rather more detailed discussion, see Gould, 2003.

⁴ Text that is written with hyphens is meant to be read aloud as quickly as possible.

⁵ Clearly, other types of lesbian relationships are possible, but Cusick limits her discussion to lesbian relationships that do not enact traditional sex/gender norms, and it is possible that she may consider other potential configurations as not lesbian relationships.

⁶ This is remarkably similar to my (2004) discussion of feminist as an adjective as opposed to a noun. Although I first read Cusick's article nearly 10 years ago, I was not conscious of her discussion of lesbian when I wrote mine of feminist. Her discussion, however, certainly supports mine, which may (?) have been at least in part drawn unknowingly from hers.

⁷ Thanks to Susan Cook, who noted the relative youth and inexperience of traditional undergraduate students related to the maturity often considered necessary for *good sex*, and raised this question.

⁸ It should be noted that gender and/or sexuality are mentioned in virtually every chapter of the book, although the book's index includes very few references to them. In the index, "women" refers to only Hunter's chapter, "'Sexual Pantomimes,' the Blues Aesthetic, and Black Women in the New South;" "sexual difference" includes one reference to Wong's chapter, "The Asian American Body in Performance;" "feminization of Latin cultures" refers to Aparicio's chapter, "Ethnifying Rhythms, Feminizing Cultures;" "gender, as socio-aesthetic attribute" refers to one sentence in Radano and Bohlman's introduction. No other references to sexuality and/or gender are included in the index although several authors (Wong, Aparicio, Currid, Mendoza, Manuel, Trumpener, Guilbault, Gilman, Longinovi_) include discussions of gender and/or sexuality, and many others (Hunter, Waterman, Pérez-Torres, Kartomi, Masolo, Radano, Scanlon, Turino, Gaines, Holmes and Fisk) refer at least indirectly to gender and/or sexuality. Gender, by its absence, is most conspicuous in Bohlman's chapter. A similar analysis of the index could be made for class and able-bodiedness.

⁹ Again, this is very similar to my argument in Gould 2004.

¹⁰ While the legal status of heterosexism in North America is demonstrated by one, the "homosexual panic" defense used to explain everything from hate speech to murder, two, its

being formally written into many state constitutions, and three, its being a stated goal of the current United States president; “the undeclared war against American women” (Faludi, 1991) is demonstrated in one, the workplace in terms of unequal wages and restricted opportunities for advancement, two, in the home by material and criminal assaults against women, and three, in legislatures and courts by legal assaults against women’s right to control their own bodies.

¹¹ This, of course, does not exempt gay men from participating in misogyny or gays and lesbians from participating in racism (Hom and Ma, 1993).

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Biographical Information

Elizabeth Gould recently joined the music education faculty of the University of Toronto, having previously served on the music education faculties of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Boise State University. The catalyst for her research is gender issues in music education.