



Women's liberation and protest through transnational storytelling

Anita Gonzalez & Innocentia Mhlambi

Introduction

By and large, Black women's song and performance have resisted social oppressions in global contexts. This is true across the contemporary and historical African Diaspora. This theme issue, "Black women's liberation and protests—Transnational musical storytelling" demonstrates how Black women performers intervene in cultural and political landscapes through the active craft of vocal performances. Audra McDonald, who recently performed the role of Mama Rose in the musical *Gypsy* (1959) by Julie Styne and Stephen Sondheim exemplifies the power of vocal performance.

Adam Davenport, and Jaron Legrain, a vocal teacher, analyse McDonald's voice technique in this production, observing how the grit, growl and emotion the singer brings into this performance stirs primal emotions. Davenport writes that her performance "turned 'Rose's Turn' into a protest song—against systemic marginalization, invisibility, and the cost of ambition in a world that doesn't make space for women, particularly women of color." While many actresses have performed this song (Ethel Merman, Angela Lansbury, Bettie Midler, Patti LuPone) each bringing their own interpretation, Audra McDonald's interpretation as observed by Davenport, was decidedly ideological and political.

McDonald's performance evokes a continuum of Black women's music and music making that is relevant to this theme issue. It speaks to the cultural roles Black women play in articulating women experiences through song, and how Black women transmit African traditional culture. The singer's performance, her vocal technique and artistry, aligns with precolonial, pre-slavery vocal techniques African grandmothers and mothers utilized in their storytelling practices, and thus anchors her techniques as continuities within this tradition. Her articulation of moods, tones, emotion and intentionality—moving from a high pitch to low pitch notes, switching timbres during the song's flight, pauses between voice ranges, embodiment of the emotional context of the time, mannerisms and vocal choice reflecting a mental state—are all techniques embedded in voice characterisation used during storytelling that are traceable to pre-colonial, pre-slavery Africa. Davenport's conclusion, that Audra McDonald's performance invokes "acts of cultural transformation in which Black women took their power back by asserting it unapologetically for the entire world to see," bring to bear Black feminist ethos and desire for a boundless and translocal framing of Black women's position in an ever-changing neoliberal world.

The actress makes use of the interplay of body and language (albeit the English vernacular) to display embodied forms of articulating a worldview historically African epistemologically. She simultaneously invokes anti-oppression and Black feminist discourses that have come to characterise liberatory discourse in our modern, western-dominated world. This then makes us consider the greater role she, together with other Black women performers, play in global Black women's cultural and political landscape and how to frame the women singers; concepts central to this issue.

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The work of Marilyn Patricia Johncilla has become indispensable in the following discussions about Black women, Black language and embodied forms of knowledge. Johncilla discusses how indigenous knowledge empowers Black women leaders in Canada. She situates them within that sphere of oral traditions that were brought to the New Land, postulating that even in contemporary times Black women leaders are the nexus to this traditional past through retentions and by establishing continuities with traditional knowledge. She argues that the African indigenous knowledge they transmit is disruptive to western-based socio-political values and cultural economies and in its way contributes to cultural resistance, transformation and empowerment. She concurs with orality studies theorists in that there are certain ways of knowing that are specific to Africans and Diasporans stimulated by stories, proverbs, art, clothing, dreams, oral traditions, language, metaphors spirituality etc., which are part of the bodily experiences and mind-set that Africans, as marginalised people, draw from to comment and inform decisions taken about themselves as beings in the modern world.

Johncilla's perspectives on orally-embodied indigenous wisdom strike resonance with Patience Elabor-Idemudia, and Patricia Yearwood and Beverly-Jean Daniel, who provide even broader brushstrokes on the relationship between embodied knowledge and its finer constitution. These scholars see oral genres as embodied cultural identities which provide modes of thinking, principles, rationalisations and ways of seeing, and form the basis of resistance in ways antithetical to western cultural norms. It is from this perspective that a growing number of scholars view indigenous knowledge as another form of knowledge production. As an alternative way of generating knowledge about the world, indigenous knowledge forms part of the resistance repertoires against mainstream western forms of constructing the world. African cosmologies, cultural traditions and values, their pluralities and diversity present an infinite pool from which to draw grammars and vocabularies of resistance.

Likewise, scholarship on the body and bodily movement in oral societies perceive these as sites where constellations of knowledge, memories, and family or clan genealogies and so forth are located for the moulding and articulation of alternative cultural identities. Further, body movements in performance are also communicative models that send codes to the in-group. Linda Smith and George Dei aver that indigenous knowledge remains in the body and in one's memory. Memory is foundational in the construction of alternative knowledge. Scholars of collective memory posit that memory is opposed to institutional derivatives; it displaces the context of time and space in its pursuit to resist interference. Writing on the politics of history and mnemonic hegemony Berthold Molden notes that in cases where colonialism and slavocratic states were hegemonic powers, they demanded that colonial subjectivities and enslaved persons gave consensus—a social contract—abdicating their agency which allowed the hegemon to frame historical metanarratives to produce a world reality favouring the power elite. Such hegemonies constructed historical metanarratives that produced common sense that “concealed the historicity of the present and the contingency of its historical development” (127). However, the collective memory of the ruled ruptures these teleological and linear historical metanarrations and contradicts dominant narratives. By digging through “layers of time” (Koselleck qtd in Molden), and by drawing from oral histories, everyday histories and quotidian cultures, memory challenges official history by memorialising the past for an alternative understanding of that past by using a variety of cultural forms. As Marcharts points out, “collective memory can be described as a layered field of sedimentations which contingent origin in the dispute of competing definitions of the past that has been forgotten, after a certain version of the past had been imposed and became hegemonic” (qtd in Molden 25). In relation to the body and language, in the age of decolonisation and consciousness awakening, “memory through the body is an act of resistance and reclamation” (Yearwood and Daniel qtd in Johncilla 8–9). The contingent accrued memories of overt and covert resistance to colonial subjugation and enslavement become banks of cultural knowledge that is crucial for the expression of dissent against continued forms of subjectivity in today's globalised world.

Memory comes to life through language and the performing body; while the performing body communicates in-group codes through gesture, ethnic inscriptions, movement or dance, language communicates codes through oral and written forms. In its communicative oral form, the question is, what is the role of language in the articulation of memory and the indigenous forms of knowledge within the context of western-dominated cultures? Again drawing insights from Johncilla, the language of Africans and its Diaspora are sites of resistance and empowerment that allow for freedom of expression in public spaces that are white controlled (79). Historically the languages of the enslaved and colonial subjugated were deliberately destroyed by the enslavers and colonialists. Post-colonialism and the end of the transatlantic slave trade continued forms of African language marginalisation. The forward march of colonial modernity and its continuous encroachment in destructive ways

into the lives of subjugated people have contributed to the near death of African languages in Africa and other former colonised countries.

However, in the case of Africa and the Diaspora, this orality was rarely erased by European languages. African languages demonstrated resilience and a propensity not to forget the epistemologies and the cosmologies embodied in them, an aspect that prompts Johncilla to pronounce that “the indigenous is never lost as the body reclaims, renames and remembers historical, cultural knowledge in the form of storytelling, metaphors, proverbs, art [...] and other indigenous markers” (9). Nonetheless, the momentary displacement of African languages led to interesting developments in the margins of dominant, European languages with regard to indigenous knowledge: enslaved people used the very language of their enslavers as a signifying practice, using codes to pass on secret communication; metrolanguages mixed languages and switched between language varieties, including European languages, within the same speech act; youth languages developed as part of youth subcultures; and as Johncilla (81) points out for Caribbean women, a national language specific to the Caribbean Islands emerged which disregarded linguistic conventions of the English standard version; and lastly women developed womanish linguistic registers which were assertive, brash and offensive. These linguistic developments have gone on to demonstrate that language holds power beyond its immediate and apparent meaning (Laduslaus Semali and Joe Kincheloe 3) and linked to anti-establishment institutions, the language becomes a site of resistance. In women’s linguistic spheres, language becomes even more potent. Their navigation and mediation of the intricacies of the oral forms and their ability to use indigenous wisdoms therein in transgressive ways for expressing women’s experiences unavoidably make their language use counter-hegemonic. In Black women’s language usage, language comes across as embodied having imprinted onto itself indigenous wisdom, African ways of knowing and seeing, consciousness, spirituality, memory, narratives and so forth. In terms of Audra McDonald’s performance, what the commentators were describing is an embodied indigenous language made manifest in contemporary performance. In Johncilla’s words, McDonald was enacting “historical accumulation of knowledge within the body” (83) through song.

Language and the Black transnational feminist discourse

Reflecting on McDonald’s performance as an opening statement is apt for introducing the research articles in this collection, for it dovetails into three significant theoretical developments of Black feminist epistemologies: (1) Increasing advancements in Black women transnational studies, heightening knowledge about multiplicities of women’s experiences both on the African continent and in the African Diaspora; (2) Understanding of Black women’s ways of knowledge production; and (3) Reimagining of Black women’s role in cultural production where their language, especially indigenous languages and emerging metro-languages are key to articulating their evolving identities.

Even though the latter is a challenge for Diasporic Black people socialised in the monolithic cosmology of the English vernacular, taking a cue from F. Abiola Irele, there are oral frames of reference at play in articulating lived experiences by the African descendants of enslaved people similar to those of continental Africans in expressive art (*The African Imagination* 49). Irele calls these “oral references of the African imagination” (*The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora* xv), and it is precisely this structure of mind common to Black people informing a vision of the world, that is at play in Audra McDonald’s voice techniques that are transformed from a mainstream American production into one that carries the historical weight of injustice against othered people in the United States of America. Her work models cultural linkages with storytelling practices of women in Africa, who in contemporary times are equally refused their rightful place in society. Taking a leaf from Toyin Falola and Olajumoke Jacob-Heliso in their collection of studies of women, men and gendered relations in Africa and the African Diaspora, this issue engages Black women’s studies from the vantage point that explores knowledge production as gendered. The focus on indigenous language adds a fresh dimension to the topic of how language and women are at the centre of cultural transformations.

The collection engages with developments in Black women’s studies, and from a comparative perspective demonstrates, as Falola and Jacob-Heliso state, how contributions from different geographical spaces and historical contexts excavate side-lined accounts “centering them within respective knowledge modes in order to bring fresh perspectives that might otherwise have been unknown or overlooked” (1). Even as we share this perspective, we are mindful of the criticism articulated by Akwugo Emejulu and Francesca Sobande regarding Global North-South tensions within the African Diaspora, where Black American culture and politics dominate

and thus affect the way we think about Blackness. The Black Diaspora is vast, and its heterogeneous experiences of resistance are likewise varied across cultures. However, the origination of its struggles from slavery and colonialism, and the continued suppression of Black people globally in the new age empire, presuppose a continual reflection on aspects of Blackness, solidarity and resistance which must go beyond national, pan-national to include transnational politics.

During the second wave of Black feminism, Filomina Steady and Oyèronké Oyěwùmi opined that Black feminism needs continual expansion which would necessitate women on the continent of Africa and those in the African Diaspora to work toward building an equitable transnational ethos. Likewise, Susheila Nasta in *Motherlands* and Emejulu and Sobande, in *To Exist is to Resist* emphasised the same view. The former is important in that she pioneered and brokered transnational connections among women writers from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia, and explored commonalities and differences between them, while the latter went beyond neo-colonial frames and lived experiences of Black people in contemporary Europe and engage how Black women imagined a Black feminism in Europe.

The latest interventions in Black feminist literary criticism by Amber-Louise Cora Luscelles emphasise the interplay between the regional, historical and material particulars of the contexts in which Blackness reaches across the diaspora. With the entrenchment of new age empire and the resuscitation of the old empire as seen in Donald Trump's United States of America, there is a greater need to hasten larger transnational scales of resistance in order to defend the past gains that are threatened by the regeneration of hierarchies of race, gender and privilege, while finding new discourses for navigating the colonial modernities that are muddying and co-opting resistance and liberation discourses.

Closer to home, Danai Mupotsa offers hard hitting realities about the challenges Black feminist transnational ethos have to contend with even as she articulates principles of caring, solidarity and knowledge production. She maps out how global structures of the superpowers are averse to the notion of free, liberated Black people within postcolonial and slavocratic states. Within such states, ideals of Black freedom are undercut by historically contingent global structures of death-dealing anti-Black violence. Mupotsa asks pointed questions regarding domination and resistance, including questions about the vocabularies and vernaculars of anti-Blackness in local and translocal geographies. Her situating of Black feminist transnational discourse contends with an ever-changing architecture of anti-Black violence. She points out that "Black transnational feminist solidarities are an important lens through which to examine this historical trajectory as a structure of domination that is not necessarily transcended by virtue of location in the global north" (14). Perhaps the hardest hitting questions she raises relate to the role of Black feminist academics within the structure of dominance and of anti-Blackness, where their role as co-opted generators of knowledge about blackness might be in a service akin to that of being an *Askari* (traitor).

Dis(empowering) women cultural custodians: Which is which?

Two thought modalities persist regarding African women descendants and their role as cultural custodians. A school of thinking rooted in European feminism of gender inequality posits African culture as deeply unsettling in the manner in which it objectifies and silences women, and relegates them to the margins (Chiweshe and Mutopo). This thinking ironically underscores claims that consider African women as custodians of a patriarchal culture that marginalises and oppresses them.

While the school of thought influenced by *Africana Womanism* takes an opposite view, it also runs the risk of romanticising African tradition and women's roles within it. In a sense, it tones down obvious current challenges African women face in a present-day Africa embroiled in genocidal wars, postcolonial antimonies, and domestic gender-based violence where women and children are the most affected. Instead, it reclaims past social and political organisations not disrupted by colonialism and slavery (Gwerevende and Mthombeni).

Even then, western-derived criticism of African culture hides historical complicity and contingent realities of western cultural dominance and fracture in the gender inequalities experienced by African descendant communities across the world; gaslighting and scapegoating African peoples to believe that African traditions and cultures were inherently *malum in se*. It is therefore apparent that Western feminist discourse, whose epistemologies were taken up by most African feminists too, are rooted in western hegemony and are applied to African societies destroyed by colonialism, at the helm of which sits a fragmented African patriarchy whose masculinities were thoroughly wrecked by the old age colonialism and continue to be conked-out by the current

new age colonial modernity. The feminist focus on the already malfunctioning issues in African gender relations hide persistent cultural practices in the custody of women, which continue to reform, rebuild and transmit indigenous knowledge, and which also are resistant to dominant cultural encroachments.

The feminist-Womanist dichotomy regarding African descendant women and their role in culture framed the latest conference on cultural heritage (the 18th session of intergovernmental International Intangible Cultural Heritage) hosted in Kasane, Botswana that focused on inscriptions for UNESCO's lists. A cursory glance at the programme does not lead to a strong perception of women as empowered by an indigenous knowledge etymologically built-into African culture. Instead, most scholarship emerging from this conference did not engage with earlier or transnational comparative analyses of African culture and the role of women. Instead, it reinforced perspectives derived from European feminism.

Needless to say, there are other ways of engaging with the custodianship of African women in African cultures without diluting it by pitting it against emergent ideological discourses. Etymological constructions of African cultures predate these discourses by centuries. This is brought to light by comparing past and present roles of women to assess (dis)continuities in the spheres of spirituality, historical knowledge, indigenous wisdom, societal and familial (re)organisation, personal and community health, community guidance and so forth. Scholars such as Kenneth Harrow and Tokie Laotan-Brown posit that African women are custodians of culture. Clearly, social transmogrifications due to slavery, colonialism, religion, the written tradition, and currently, technology and globalisation affected African women's role in transmitting cultural knowledge from one generation to another.

Because of colonialism's privileging of African men, women's positioning in modern history remains relegated to the margins of society and so is their role as agents of knowledge, epistemic justice and centres of continuous knowledge production. Nonetheless these changes have not obliterated many cultural activities of which they have authority. African women play visible and invisible roles in certain exclusive bodies of cultural knowledge over which they have been custodians since time immemorial. This view is also shared by Kuumba Bahati who has a *longue durée* perspective of African women descendants' role in cultural transmission and embodied resistance evident in the institutionalised oral systems over which they have dominion. Citing Steady, Bahati mentions that African women descendants engage in individual and collective forms of resistance against patriarchy and other forms of injustice, including deploying transformational expressions that have patriarchal undertones (112). Her argument is apt and instructive; Black women descendants' patterns of resistance serve as transformative praxis that can be drawn upon in present-day anti-patriarchal and counter-hegemonic feminist discourse. Black feminist explorations have yielded satisfactory results by centring Black women's issues globally.

Black women's positionality in traditional and modern societies presupposes that their location in their societies is inherently oppositional. This oppositionality has since shaped their cultural mores and artistic expressions, and so rejoinders to their expressive discourses must highlight not only the complexities of their engagements in artistic expression, but also the multi-layered resistance-basis of their discursive practice. Conceptually, theoretically and methodologically, this oppositionality entails that any explorations of Black women's issues from a Black feminist perspective must acknowledge this intellectual tradition. Historical developments posit African women's cultural custodianship as necessarily decolonial, and therefore preoccupied with not only intergenerational dialogue but also with inscribing a decolonial historiography. Therefore, the next important step of Black feminist discourse is to delink from western feminism because it too, is rooted in the colonial matrix of power and is yet to uproot itself from the whiteness complex, or the white privileging and white beneficiation industrial complex. Most significantly, fourth wave feminism believes that traditional gender roles are oppressive and therefore should be discarded.

This view is precisely why a feminism not delinked from the dominant ideology becomes problematic in engaging with African traditionalism and women's roles within it. The lens through which white feminism refracts experiences of the women of the world is rooted in the original gender struggles of European feminists which are not necessarily the case with Africana Womanism. Scholarship that is beginning to refocus attention on cultural custodianship by African women descendants is in conversation with Clement Tetteh's work comparing cultural custodianship and continuities of Black American women in Black American Baptist and Methodist churches, and Ghanaian Queen mothers and other women from the Yoruba society.

In fact, Tetteh is resurfacing work started two decades ago by indigenous knowledge scholars—work which was overshadowed by new social dynamics that took shape as a response to globalisation and the need for a cosmopolitanism that suppressed the local and national during the teens of the 21st century. These social dynamics

were largely shaped by an emerging discussion in fourth wave feminism around intersectionality, empowerment of women, transgender studies and mastery of technology. These focal points distracted from indigenous feminism. In actual fact, from the early 1990s to the early 2000s, scholarship that researched Black women leaders in the United States, Canada and the Caribbean islands established a nexus between their leadership attributes and indigenous knowledge systems that enslaved people brought to the New World. Tetteh's contribution in this debate, in the context of Black transnational feminism, is a welcome intervention that refocuses attention on this matter and also introduces Artificial Intelligence generation models that are useful for archiving indigenous knowledge systems.

This theme issue reclaims the custodianship of culture. It is women who dictate how we navigate the new challenges of post enslavement and post-colonial world. All of the scholars in this issue excavate the residues of the precolonial culture to investigate new cultural expressions and inscribe new ways of thinking that not only topple the patriarchal hold on culture, but also map out new ways of challenges that limit women's participation in expressive musical production.

Studies on African women as custodians of culture describe how traditionally in pre-colonial Africa, and also in contemporary times, women were and continue to be central to the preservation and transmission of culture. Their centrality in this role was overshadowed by focus on the patriarchal nature of African societies, and the coming of colonialism which privileged African men. Thus, their positioning in modern history relegates them to the margins of society and so also, their role as agents of knowledge, epistemic justice and centres of continuous knowledge production. However, with the influence of Black feminist epistemologies, not only have there been attempts to retrieve, but also to shine a spotlight on how women have continuously, imperceptibly continued in their roles of safeguarding and transmitting culture through various forms in different contexts, space and time using different actors, techniques and discourses. Focus on Black women enhanced not only the voices of modern women, but also brought to light how pre-colonial traditional African women used their voices to articulate women's issues and thereby question practices and customs that alienated them. There are therefore continuities in the politics of women's resistance in traditional and contemporary Africa. Black women's positionality in traditional and modern eras presupposes that their location in their societies is definitely oppositional. This oppositionality has since shaped Black women's contemporary cultural mores and artistic expressions, and so are rejoinders to their expressivity, which highlight not only the complexities of women's discourse in artistic expression, but also the layered resistance-basis of their discursive practice.

What makes Black women's expressive work find resonance in its articulation of resistance is how its vocalisations, technique and discourses are shaped by the quotidian culture resulting from everyday experiences. They translate what would be regarded as banal into something poignant and in that way introduce fresh perspectives into the otherwise familiar. Black women's expressive practices attest to some of the conceptualisations about this form that are underscored in resistance studies; that resistance is a practice, it entangles histories, it is intersectional, and it is contingent; and it responds to the urgency of particular moments. In this way, Emejulu and Sobande (1) view women's resistance expression as a "politics of liberation."

This theme issue engages these debates by foregrounding indigenous languages and indigenous knowledge as part of the broader arsenal available to Black feminists that should be harnessed to explorations of women issues. This very matter has always been a burning concern for Black feminists. Janet Neigh shares this sentiment, arguing that feminist discussions lack linguistic diversity and has not shown significant advancement (70). The default to English as a medium of representing transnational women's issues is exclusionary, following in the footsteps of the hegemony that Black transnational feminism seeks to challenge and overturn. Further, the absence of multilingualism in feminist discussions fails to engage multilingual voices foundational to transforming hegemonic systems of subjugation, when ironically history teaches us that Black intellectual currents, cultural forms and social developments have always been implicated in these global cultural flows which formed a global Black consciousness that was ironically short-changed by insistent articulation of that consciousness only in European languages. First nation feminist scholar Luana Ross warns that "any ideas about transnational feminism must take into account the perseverance of colonialism for indigenous women". A Black transnational feminist discourse that does not develop praxis that acknowledge multilingualism, multiculturalism and indigenous knowledge systems is exclusionary, "disempowering to the various groups and damaging to indigenous people who struggle to maintain their sovereign powers" (47).

Furthermore, this collection of research articles explores how Black women's music-making practices define and reimagine protests, resistance and liberatory discourses across different temporal and spatial frames, both within regional and transnational zones. Collectively, the authors analyse various strategies of resistance. They consider song lyrics, performance styles, using language and tonalities to uniquely craft career trajectories within male-dominated spaces. Several of the writings provide close readings of song lyrics or performances (both staged and on film) where Black creators enact liberatory methodologies for defining their presence. Others explore broad career trajectories of artists who are reshaping the manner in which women articulate their presence within male-dominated commercial realms.

Orientation of the contributions

Contributors to the volume foreground the lived experiences of Black women from the Americas and from across the African continent. They highlight how women in quotidian and professional settings create space for positive expressions of their political and personal ideals. The research uniquely theorizes the use of local indigenous languages to engage communities in a variety of settings. Too often, academic writings about music focus on productions disseminated in colonial languages or through non-African institutions. Because the contributors are deeply embedded in the communities and languages of their subjects, they are able to provide nuanced analyses of political and social threads of inquiry embedded in their execution. At the same time, both this publication and its constituent research articles resonate across a global panorama. They illuminate methodologies used by Black women from across the continent to respond to societal oppression through the moulding and shaping of musical forms. The transnational aspects of the volume articulate how artists use international framings to craft responses to global oppressions. Women create knowledge systems to navigate social, political and economic spheres and use their music to reconstruct local Black histories that intersect with global concerns.

The issue is organized around two broad areas of inquiry: innovation in musical forms and strategic manipulation of career trajectories. Black women artists utilize both mechanisms to assert their presence within a western-oriented and patriarchal global society. Collaborative work is at the heart of how women develop their academic and scholarship. We bring the collaborative spirit and a sense of mutual aid to discuss issues that affect women across the globe. Women's work involves working with others. We need a collaborative type of understanding to approach the modernity we live with at the moment. Alice Walker's concept of Womanism supports the belief that women have unique ways of creating effective collaborative spaces.

The writers amalgamate scholarship from multiple countries within the African continent. Their investigations unfold within international frames from Black America, Europe, and the United Kingdom. Our approach to the publication has been to curate through two critical frames.

The first five essays consider expressive musical styles unique to the African continent and specifically women's contributions through musical innovation and protest traditions. These research articles demonstrate how African women are able to reimagine traditional forms and use them to promulgate unique feminist perspectives about local social issues. Within the board thematic thread of musical innovation, some of our contributors focus on how traditional music can be mobilized to express resistance. The authors demonstrate that resistive messages, public presence and subversive lyrics can mobilize women to transform socially oppressive institutions.

Doreen Rumbidzai Tivenga, in "Breaking the silence: Zimbabwean women's musical narratives of resistance," interrogates the male-dominated music scene of *mbira* music in Zimbabwe. Historically, women's participation in *mbira* music was considered morally deviant; however, in contemporary contexts, the music is an opportunity for women in Zimbabwe to own the creative arts as an extension of the labour of their ancestral mothers and grandmothers.

Hiplife songs as counter-narratives is the subject of Hannah Amissah-Arthur *et al.* Their research article, "Re-defining Ghanaian hiplife songs by women as liberatory narratives" is a close reading of the lyrics of women-authored hiplife songs of the 1990s. They place the lyrics in context, analysing six songs by four different artists. Throughout the research article they argue that sexual innuendoes inherent in the songs are liberatory and resistant discourses. Women who, in male-centered songs are depicted as unreliable, jealous, materialistic sex objects are reimaged in women's hiplife music as depictions of mother supreme or God as woman.

Jordan Ealey, in "Da Art of (Abortion) storytellin': Listening for reproductive justice in Black popular music", writes about abortion stories women artists reveal within their rhythm and blues and hip-hop songs. Ealey

specifically analyses the music of United States artists Digable Planets, Coco Peila, Lauryn Hill, and Noname, noting how the complexity of their music—which incorporates, anthem, testimony and elegy—creates a new kind of protest sound. Her research article, like the work of Amissah-Arthur *et al.* in this same issue, forms part of the emerging discipline of hip-hop feminism.

Omar Mohammad-Ameen Ahmad Hazaymeh in “The impact of women’s singing on political and social mobilization in the Sudanese Revolution” explores how singing is used as a tool for motivating the masses. He describes the overthrow of President Omar al-Bashir’s regime where women’s voices motivated the masses. The use of songs and chants was pivotal in creating social cohesion around national identity. Hazaymeh analyzes themes, structures and text in this insightful research article about women’s roles in the discursive space of protest.

“Patriarchal orientations and womanist protests in precolonial *Urhobo* women’s songs” by Stephen Kekeghe and Moses E. Darah centres precolonial *Urhobo* musicians in Nigeria. The authors analyse five songs through the lens of Womanism as articulated by Alice Walker. Kekeghe and Darah demonstrates how African artists deploy music to express disenchantment. The women’s gendered experiences as articulated in protest music are an integral aspect of their quests for gender equity.

The last three essays consider resistance in production processes. Kealeboga Aiseng, in “The language of Black women’s music: MmaAusi’s role in preserving Setswana heritage” discusses the unswerving commitment of singer Mma Ausi to building a career by singing in the rich musical traditions of the Setswana. He situates her work within a precarious landscape of black women who are cultural stewards of traditions. Aiseng analyses three songs from between 2008 and 2022 for linguistic richness and cultural references; while theorizing that digital platforms erode indigenous musical traditions, Aiseng credits African women with “wielding their music to protect intangible heritage while breathing new life into it for contemporary listeners.”

North American scholar Anita Gonzalez, in “African American women in opera and the dilemma of representation” writes about women singers who demonstrate ingenuity in the use of performance style, character interpretation and strategic image-building as they navigated careers in Europe and the United States. Abby Mitchell, Catarina Yarborough and Audra McDonald each resist stereotypical representations as they craft transnational singing careers.

Finally, Innocentia Mhlambi, in “Glocal memory in the Black Atlantic triad by Black women composers” analyses three operas that speak to revisionary histories of enslavement, war and conflict. Transatlantic experiences of Black women composers cultivate new operatic forms while building Black transatlantic solidarity. Consequently, South African artists such as those working with the Isango Ensemble are able to utilize the Xhosa language to craft musical theater works that speak to cultural memories of crimes committed against Black women. The operas reimagine interconnectedness while reconstructing narratives of enslavement and emancipation.

About the guest editors

Each of the two guest editors, Anita Gonzalez and Innocentia Mhlambi, brings differing perspectives to investigations of transnational musical storytelling. Gonzalez is Professor of Black Studies and Performing Arts at Georgetown University where she writes about transnational Black performance, African American history and Latin American and Caribbean festival performance. As a musical theater and opera librettist she brings a practitioner’s knowledge of storytelling to her academic scholarship.

Mhlambi is associate professor in the Department of African Languages at the University of the Witwatersrand where she teaches and investigates black film studies, popular culture, oral literature and visual culture. Her publications provide critical interventions in these fields as she theorizes about the aesthetics of opera and African expressive culture.

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