In 2012, the popular-alternative musician Beck released an album entitled *Song Reader*. It was a book of sheet music. It was an album in which ‘listeners’ were invited to take an active part and to engage with the music—to hear the songs, they had to be played, and preferably uploaded onto YouTube or the project website, songreader.net (currently unavailable). In 2014 a CD and LP release of all the songs was made by various artists (co-produced by Beck) on the Warby Parker label. The idea behind the project was both aesthetic and nostalgic. It was inspired by a fascination—a fetish?—with a bygone pre-recording era where music was transmitted through sheet music, ‘the original pop music technology’ as Jody Rosen says in the ‘Introduction’ to *Song Reader* (presumably without irony, despite plentiful and varying oral traditions and, indeed, other writing technologies such as parchment).

However, as women’s studies has shown, popular music cultures of nineteenth-century Western societies were shaped, expanded, and advanced by female composers and consumers. Popular sheet music was historically a medium produced for and used predominantly by women, and is thus loaded with experiences and practices that were gendered female (Ehrlich, 1988; Ritchie, 2008; Mittner, 2016). Yet, in reproducing the popular sheet-music aesthetic in *Song Reader*, its inherent femininity is overlooked—Rosen mentions the ‘parlor room’ but fails to mention, or perhaps even notice, the gender of its occupants.¹

*Song Reader* is inherently multimodal, and many of its semiotic meanings were explored in Maxwell (2016). However, using gender as an analytical category opens up new layers of meaning in music (McClary, 1991; Green, 1997; Biddle, 2011), and this is particularly relevant in this album where there are surprisingly few women/non-males represented. *Song Reader* sets the focus on music that is open to all as a hands-on, material affair in an age when listeners are increasingly remote from the physical product. To put that into multimodal-aesthetic terms, it both displays and encourages the cultural practice of performing music (Maxwell, 2015), and this is a performance that is powerful but unequal: it is rooted in the material and social networks in which it was produced, and it is gendered male.
In this chapter, we are particularly occupied with the intersection of multimodality, aesthetics, and gender in *Song Reader*. Gender has long been significant in popular music see for example Whiteley, 1997; Hawkins, 2009, and most recently Hawkins, 2017, and popular music has also been considered from a multimodal perspective (Machin, 2010). The intersection of gender and multimodality is, however, as yet an underexplored area (for notable exceptions see Johansson, 2015 and Machin, 2016), particularly in relation to aesthetics.

The term ‘aesthetics’ is multifaceted, and here we understand it broadly as the appreciation of beauty and artistic taste (*OED*, 2010). From a multimodal point of view, we are concerned not only with the identification and isolation of different modes, but most of all with their interplay—the intermodal relations (cf. Siefkes, this volume). We contend that, while individual modes can be gendered, it is through their interplay that the gendered multimodal aesthetics of *Song Reader* can be discerned, analysed, and set into the broader context of popular music and culture.

*Song Reader* the book-album is designed to resemble a gatefold LP. The cover, with its royal blue background and white and gold notation that morphs into the title, exudes richesse and a classic style. Inside, behind each gatefold are ten songsheets, each with their own individual cover artwork. They are fronted on the left by Rosen’s ‘Introduction’ and on the right by Beck’s ‘Preface’. Rosen’s ‘Introduction’ is black and white text surrounded by a simple border; Beck’s ‘Preface’ features the same artwork as the cover of *Song Reader* but with a contrasting red background. The gatefolds themselves display the album ‘tracks’ (the songs) numbered in order and in hand-written small capitals, right-justified on the left gatefold and left-justified on the right gatefold. These are accompanied by a stylized male figure hunched over a piano on the left, and another playing the guitar on the right. Neither are using sheet music; both, although stylized, present different types of masculinity: the sensible, sublimate male artist playing in a ‘Beethovenian’ pose at the piano, and the solitary pop guitarist (perhaps a singer-songwriter, perhaps a pop dandy), eyes closed dreamingly as if there were only him and the music. Thus, as the reader opens the album, four male figures line up in greeting. Even here at the nexus between music production and reproduction (historically both highly gendered), the sphere of the artist becomes through its representation a predominantly male endeavour. The parlour room has been re-gendered: the opening images together with two male writers serve to portray music-making as a pursuit of men only.

In this chapter we will use three of the songs in *Song Reader* as case studies for analysis: ‘Saint Dude’, ‘America, Here’s My Boy’, and ‘Title of This Song’. These have been chosen because in the book-album it seems to us that the first two are the most explicitly gendered (masculine and feminine respectively), while the last is deliberately neutral. Through our analyses of these three songs in both the 2012 book-album and on the 2014 recording, we take a step towards a more nuanced understanding of gender in
multimodality and aesthetics. Although our case study is popular music, the fact that it is based on a nostalgic book-album, a ‘traditional’ album, and the technology of web 2.0, means that the methods we use here are applicable to a much wider range of cultural artefacts. As did Beck in his ‘Preface’ to Song Reader, we encourage readers to take our method and try it out for themselves.

‘Nothing’s Good Until It’s Gone Away’: ‘Saint Dude’ at the Shrine of Masculinity

The very title ‘Saint Dude’ states that its subject is male, white, and dead. Before opening the songsheet, the cover art sets a scene: on a cream background the word ‘Saint’ is drawn in cotton-wool clouds drawn by an aeroplane (‘there’s a plane sky-writing out your name’, verse 2), whereas ‘DUDE’ is in comparatively hard capitals—as hard as can be achieved against the background of lines representing the rays of the setting sun. Under the horizon dividing the image is the sea, with some half-floating suitcases surrounded by waves (presumably Saint Dude’s ‘baggage floating on the Sea of Galilee’ mentioned in verse three). In the bottom corners of the image two octopuses dance above inset candles whose pale yellow, like that of the small plane, provide the only colour on the image that is not blue. This limited palette of faded blue and yellow, a setting sun, and a devouring sea, gives the impression of a shrine to lost glory. The image is bordered at the bottom but the sun’s rays rise off the top of the page as the aeroplane flies off—presumably to heaven while its vapour trails fade in the encroaching twilight. Before even turning the page to read the music and text of the song, the title and artwork have already set multimodal meanings in motion in the mind of the reader.

Once opened, the songsheet itself is a very pale blue—the colour of fading light—and the title is written in the blue of the deep sea from the title page. The title is at a jaunty angle with the aeroplane once again flying off to the right—although here it is typed rather than written as vapour. The floating suitcases are present on the bottom of page 2, another reminder of the isolation of the cover. The music notation is standard black staves for voice and piano, with guitar chords and tablature above. There is no tempo indication, only the word ‘abiding’—an intertext to the Christian hymn ‘Abide with me fast falls the eventide’, often used in funerals or for commemoration services and most frequently sung to the tune entitled ‘eventide’, thus supporting the idea that the sun on the cover is setting rather than rising.

The music is in the strident key of A major, and in the sheet music the piano part marks all four of the 4/4 beats of the bar throughout the song with some rhythmic decoration at the ends of bars—a relentless yet jaunty funeral march. The lyrics to the first verse tell a story:

Saint Dude
You’ve come a long way from your solitude
Like a sage whose sooth was something crude
Cos you know the truth is ugly Saint Dude

There is no chorus; the song moves relentlessly on to verse two where the people watch the name blown away on Ascension Day ‘Cos nothing’s good
until it’s gone away’. Indeed, the following bridge clears up all doubt: ‘You are ascending/No more pretending leave these earthly days’. Yet not all is good for the saint: ‘Your fable’s tainted pipe dreams are faded your revelations came too late’. But by verse three—which predicts life in 2068—the saint’s vigil will be in place ‘with the gospel of a parking valet on the way’ and ‘apostles from a mall’. The final bridge comes back to the present with ‘Now’, as the saint unloads his baggage into the Sea of Galilee. After a couple of miracles, the song ends by telling how Saint Dude, still addressed as ‘you’, ‘lay down your song at Peter’s gate and you’re a saint’.

As well as the cover artwork, the obvious references to the Christian bible (in which the four gospels are written by men and, despite many women apostles, only men number among the twelve) invite a reading of this song as a hymn. It is a hymn to a white guy, nostalgically canonized and glorified after his death despite the ‘ugly truth’ (verse 1) and ‘tainted fable’ (bridge) of masculinity he represented. If there was any lingering doubt about the performance of masculinity in the song, the back cover (which, like all the songsheets in *Song Reader*, portrays a parody of an advertisement) publicizes ‘Songs for every man to sing’ in collections including ‘The Manly Family Song Album’, ‘Hymns for Him’, and ‘Male Quartette Collection’—the faux-French feminine spelling of ‘quartet(te)’ providing an ironic twist (even if its font is decidedly reminiscent of a western). In *Song Reader* the book-album, then, there is no doubt that ‘Saint Dude’ pokes fun at fragile, fading masculinity, threatened with martyrdom but with promised nostalgic glory ahead.

If it were not for *Song Reader*’s eradication of the feminine from the parlour-room sheet-music setting discussed above, this ‘Saint Dude’ could easily be read as a parody of the book-album itself: men taking over a setting that was gendered female, and being sanctified as a result. For this to be a wholly viable option, however, the historical role of women in the era the book-album harks back to would have had to have been acknowledged, not erased. Even if the advertisement for ‘songs for every man to sing’ is a parody of historical sheet-music advertising that was directed at women, in the context of the book-album’s obliteration of the female role it takes on a more sinister meaning, especially when a knowledge of women’s roles in popular music history is missing. Produced in a societal context where for a man or boy to act ‘like a girl/sissy’ is still a popular insult, we can also read in ‘Saint Dude’ a fear of the end of the patriarchy: after the male has been sacrificed on the altar of feminism, society will collapse, and by 2068 he will be sanctified and worshipped as a martyr. One only has to look at the 2016 general election in the US to see that this fear is real.

On the 2014 recorded album, Bob Forrest performs the song in his gritty baritone with a typical folk-rock backing band (guitars, bass, drums, keyboard). His rendition smooths out many of the syncopations in the vocal part, and the band carries the marching feel of the accompaniment (with occasional keyboard twinkles in the background). Forrest keeps the general
upward motion of the bridge (‘you are ascending’) but does not take the melody as high as does the songsheet. In the second bridge, a higher male voice harmonizes with Forrest’s. Also, this performance brings in a mixed choir to repeat the first verse in unison after the end of the song on the songsheet—a clear reference to a congregational hymn. The song ends with Forrest calling ‘and you’re a saint’ with the choral response ‘Cos you know the truth is ugly Saint Dude’. Forrest’s rendition thus ends with repetition both of the sanctity of Dude and the ugly truth he represents.

‘Saint Dude’ is a parody of a fragile male ego, written and sung by a man, and flanked with adverts of songs for men. However, it is not a compensatory history written in order to open up a field of female-gendered cultural practice for men. Rather, in ‘Saint Dude’ we see a reflection of the deeper gender isolation of Song Reader. Women’s participation in (or inscription into) music-related cultural practices that are dominated by men (for example composing, conducting, researching music) is socially accepted as a form of empowerment; however, it threatens the fragile masculinity of characters such as Saint Dude. Yet when men enter cultural practices encoded with femininity, rather than being seen as a serious opening of new possibilities, identities, and cultural participation, their involvement appears either as a joke or a takeover. ‘Saint Dude’ the song hovers on the border between these two positions: is it, through its parody, a socially acceptable way for Beck (and male performers such as Bob Forrest) to occupy a female space? Or is it in fact something more sinister, a reflection of the deep-rooted and unconscious fear of what could happen should the patriarchy be overcome?

‘With Glory for the Hero Whose Weapon’s Just a Toy/America, Here’s My Boy’

The cover artwork to ‘America, Here’s My Boy’ in Song Reader leaves no doubt about the patriotic and parodic theme. ‘America’ is written in three-dimensional block capitals emblazoned across the top of the page and decorated in stars and stripes. Underneath the title a black-clad grey-haired sorrowful-faced woman is sending off a young soldier, his left forefinger on the trigger of his bayonet. She is looking at him with her left hand palm-up as if giving a gift; he is looking determinedly ahead and off the left of the page as he marches away. There is no subtlety here; indeed, the dark humour of the small print in the bottom left corner (‘WAR EDITION . . . this song is issued in a shorter version than usual, with four verses instead of eight and fewer syllables throughout. Save! Save! Save is the watchword of the day. This is the spirit. . . ’) negates any potential for taking the cover artwork as anything other than pastiche. Opening the songsheet, it becomes clear that it is one of only a few in Song Reader that do not require an inserted page—the song is indeed short enough that it requires no extra paper. The inside is sober black and white, with a black banner all around. It is marked as ‘published by National Ballads Corp.’, thus adding to its air of officialdom.
Both the artwork and title are ironic intertexts to a published propaganda song from 1917 with the exact same title. Its cover art also shows an elderly black-clad mother sending her son to war with his bayonet, this time against the backdrop of the outline of the map of the US. Her facial features are set proud rather than desolate, and her black is tempered by a white shawl. The cover declares above the title ‘The sentiment of every American mother’; indeed, this is echoed in the lyrics which repeatedly declare that ‘There’s a million mothers’ ready to send their sons to the war effort. In comparison to the 1917 propaganda songsheet the Song Reader artwork displays exaggerated colours humped up to brightness and adorned by trashy flag-letters, all subverted by the spoof small text of the ‘war edition’.

Beck’s lyrics are simple, and although the gender of his ‘I’ is not clearly given, the cover art combined with the memories described (‘I held him in my arms as he lay newly born’; ‘I held his tiny hand as we crossed the street’) and the intertext all invite us to hear them as those of a mother. There is one instance of ‘we’ (‘We watched them play soldiers out on the schoolyard’) which could include another parent, or indeed parents (mothers?) of other children. After three verses of memories each ending with ‘America, here’s my boy’, a short bridge in which ‘they’ talk of ‘sacrifices’ and ‘strength beyond blood’ takes the song to the last verse in which a letter arrives. The song ends with the repeated question ‘America, where’s my boy?’.

Musically, the song sits low in the female voice. The only speed indication is ‘Plaintive’, and the song is in A minor. The piano accompaniment lies entirely in the bass clef, with the exception of the bridge and its propaganda talk of sacrifice and blood—here, the music visits the relative major (C) and returns to A minor via the rising chromatic tension of G-G♯-A. The dominant rhythmic motif is the Scotch snap (semiquaver-dotted quaver), with only the line ‘America, (w)here’s my boy’ having a different rhythmic feel, almost stuttering over its semiquavers in a musical lip-wobble of regret. All of this is in stark contrast to the 1917 song, which marches along in a higher register in bright Bb major to staunch quavers and crotchets, while the piano accompaniment regularly rings out clear trumpet motifs.

Whereas the back cover of the 1917 songsheet advertises another song by the same composer, this time about a wedding (a clear contrast of hope for after the war and also appealing to a feminine audience), the Song Reader version advertises a further six war songs with titles and lyrics designed to raise a smile after the melodrama of the song’s tragic ending. ‘The 335 years’ war’ tells of a war where the enemy forgot to turn up; ‘(From the Falklands to the Balkans) I’ve fought in every war’ tells of a seemingly immortal old soldier, apparently immune to all horrors and quite ready to give yet another enemy a suitable bashing. Only the final song, ‘Will the angels guard my daddy over there?’, hints at any wartime suffering, almost forgotten amidst the hurly-burly of patriotism.

If the songsheet itself is clearly a pastiche, Swamp Dogg’s rendition on the 2014 recording of Song Reader is not. Swamp Dogg’s instrumentation
foregrounds the piano and vocals (supplemented by string bass, with bass clarinet and tenor and soprano saxophones appearing in the bridge and final verse), and while he sticks to the chord sequence he takes considerable liberties with melody, rhythm, and accompaniment. His version is melancholy and desperate, reminiscent of a blues lament. In the context of the recording, where the song is presented without the cover art and the intertext, the fact that the singer has changed gender is not noticeable—the lyrics do not have to be altered to allow an elderly father (Swamp Dogg is in his seventies) to lament the loss of his son. Much of the song’s tension is held in Swamp Dogg’s voice, however, as he sings in a high register which seems to rise and rise, especially in the last verse of loss where he even moves into speech, as if he can take no more. The ending is once again sung, but resigned.

Had this been recorded as a female lament, the music would carry different meanings. It would either convey the pride of the 1917 war propaganda intertext (as does Amy Regan in her rendition (Regan, 2013)), or the element of pastiche would come to the fore. Swamp Dogg’s interpretation, however, elevates the song to a very different level. By changing the gender of the singer, the song moves into the realm of tragedy, for a mourning father’s lament carries still more power than that of a wailing mother. In a culture that does not permit men to show emotion, a father’s tears become more serious than those of a mother. Here again, only partly camouflaged and humourized as nostalgic fetish, women and femininity are excluded from a cultural area which is traditionally theirs, while men and masculinity instead take over.

‘The Story Was All in Her Head’: ‘Title of This Song’ and the Absence of Neutrality

As the name suggests and the artwork underscores, our third case study is (seemingly) nameless; where there is a space to enter the title, there is instead written ‘The Title of This Song’ (much in the same vein as ‘Insert Name Here’ or ‘User’). Indeed, the lyrics point out at the end, ‘And the song you sang it didn’t have a name/There was nothing but the song we were singing’. The cover artwork is self-effacing: there is no image, just ‘Title of This Song’ on a red background, above the handwriting-style entries of ‘Beck Hansen’ and ‘Piano’ in spaces left for ‘written by’ and ‘written for’ respectively. The palette is limited to faded red on faded yellow (the colour of old paper), with the faux handwriting in graphite black. There is a border with apparently random dots and colourations—they might represent fingerprints, or the debris blown away after rubbing out pencilled lines. Inside the songsheet the notation is black and white, and the piano part mostly sticks to block chords with the occasional melodic figure. Although there are labels ‘verse’ and ‘chorus’, there appears to be little structural difference between them, since the lyrics to both are through-composed. The labelling of the bridge seems structurally significant, but here the lyrics break down into a repeated
drawn-out ‘Ah’. Likewise, as we have seen, the ‘ending’ (not ‘coda’, as used elsewhere in *Song Reader*) effaces itself in its lyrics.

Or does it? In the context of the artwork, particularly in contrast to the abundant and often exuberant artwork elsewhere in *Song Reader*, the line ‘There was nothing but the song we were singing’ may seem depreciating, but in fact it is the opposite: this song is all there is, therefore it is everything. Likewise, the repeated underlining of the title-that-isn’t-a-title in fact makes it stand out—just as does Beck’s underlined name, and that of the (imaginary) publisher. In the riot of colourful artwork, snazzy lyrics, and singable tunes that adorn the songs in *Song Reader*, ‘Title of This Song’ stands out for its blandness.

In fact, the melodic and harmonic structure of ‘Title of This Song’ is anything but bland. Although it starts solidly in A major, only two bars after the voice enters, the chord changes to F—C—Bb—A. Melodic motifs are repeated with accidentals inserted or cancelled: the melody might not move around much, but it certainly weaves in and around its limited range. This, too, gives an impression of boredom but is in fact extremely interesting—and challenging to sing. The harmony and melody never quite go where ‘the rules’ say they should: while the chorus ends on the perfect cadence D7—A, the final cadence—if it can be called that—is F(add9)—A. This is no ordinary pop song.

The mock advertisement on the back cover actually parodies the song it adorns. ‘From the man who brought you such songs as “Who”—“What”—“When”—“Where” now comes “WHY”’, screams the banner, advertising a(nother) male composer. And the extract given, an ‘inquiry’ and ‘lament’ (as opposed to verse and chorus) are, to put it simply, awful. ‘Why? Why? Why? Why? Why does it take so long? Why? Oh’—why indeed? For, with long held notes, harmonic progressions such as Bb6/9—Ebma7—G,6 and even a 6/4 bar for good measure, the advertised fragment of the (non-existent) song ‘Why’ does take a long time to get nowhere in particular.

Given that ‘Title of This Song’ highlights itself through its apparent self-effacement, it is important to identify the role of gender here. Beck Hansen is a man, and his name is underlined in the gap for a composer. The anonymous composer of ‘Why’ is a man. ‘Title of This Song’ is sung to a ‘you’ by an ‘I’, but the reported speech in verse two comes from a ‘she’ whose love was found dead (or not). Verse three brings us all into the distorted soundscape—‘You’ve taken the notes from your head and played them out loud on a public announcement instead. . . . While ev’ryone just plays along’, and as already noted, the song ends on a ‘we’. This is *Song Reader*, the book-album that we readers are tasked to bring to life in music: in ‘Title of This Song’ we are supposed to forget Beck as composer and stamp our own selves onto the music, more so than any other of the songs. But whose selves are ‘ours’? Who speaks to whom, and who or what is represented? What is their gender? It is the composer who holds the power that he bestows on us to recreate his music. At least since the emergence of the work concept in
Western culture, if not since the writing of the book of Genesis, the default creator is male. Thus, the composer-figure’s self-effacement proves impossible, and to pretend otherwise only serves to highlight the inevitable futility of such an act. Elevating male dominance to a kind of invisible norm makes its omnipresence even more powerful and excludes women in a highly subtle way (Gerschick, 2005).

It is an act that is even more powerful because of Beck’s comparable absence in *Song Reader*. As opposed to the typical pop album, where the star adorns the cover and sings the songs, Beck’s absence as a singer and elevation to the level of (quasi-)classical composer brings him an aura of the unapproachable genius which is—as feminist musicology has shown—a highly gendered concept (Citron, 1993; Battersby, 1989). Phrases in Rosen’s introduction and Beck’s preface such as ‘classical spare beauty’ and ‘completely new and original creations’ are characteristic of nineteenth-century music criticism of male composers’ works (phrases that were used less frequently in writings about female composers, when these were even considered). As such, Beck’s role as composer of *Song Reader* comes loaded with terminology that suggests that he and his works have entered the sphere of the untouchable genius, the ‘imaginary museum’ (Goehr, 2007): ‘they seem to float free of time and place’, as Beck himself puts it in the preface.

Despite its inconspicuous placing towards the end of the 2012 book-album *Song Reader*, ‘Title of This Song’ is the opening track on the 2014 album release. Moses Sumney’s rendition starts with a male voice choir singing a cappella ‘Ah’—reminiscent of that which opens Ben Folds’s 2005 hit ‘Jesusland’, but in this case (although the listener does not yet know it) it is Sumney’s adaptation of the bridge in ‘Title of This Song’. The 2014 *Song Reader* recording thus opens, literally, on a note of all-male harmony. The verse begins with Sumney accompanied only by guitar, but by the chorus his male choir is back for some interjections on backing vocals. The percussion enters in verse two, and in the second chorus the backing vocals take a slightly expanded role. They in fact lead in the bridge, sung three times, with Sumney vocalizing underneath or over the top in a falsetto. The third verse is omitted, replaced instead by a repeat of the first chorus but sung an octave lower (and well out of the female voice range). Thus, ‘ev’ryone’ is not included in Sumney’s rendition of the song—nor is his song ‘ruined’ or nameless. As the song nears its end some effects come in—synth and reverb—with the choir in the background while Sumney sings the final line several times, ending in a solo falsetto. The ‘we’, then, has become the ‘we’ of the performers on the recording; it is no longer the ‘we’ of the performers of the book-album. And this new ‘we’ is most definitely gendered male. ‘Title of This Song’, like *Song Reader* as a whole, does more than present a past culture as masculine hegemony. Rather, by erasing women from the culturally female sphere of the parlour-room songsheet, it re-writes history to ignore the contribution of women, and enmeshes and strengthens a male point of view.
Conclusion: ‘You’ve Ruined The Song/While Ev’ryone Just Plays Along’

*Song Reader* is, after third wave feminism and in spite of its experimental character, surprisingly old-fashioned when it comes to the performance of gender in music. Through our multimodal analyses, we have shown that gendered meaning is always accumulative. It is not just the dominance of the male musicians and male writers providing historical knowledge, it is not just the titles and texts of these songs, it is not just the artwork, it is not just the primacy of musical notation in the layout, it is not just the voices of the artists, it is not just fans’ YouTube videos: it is the whole assembly of small performances of gender that come together to make the gendered meaning of the album so powerful.

This is the underlying male gaze which becomes fully visible only through a multimodal analysis that carves out gendered meanings, and it could be one reason for the album’s seemingly uneven reception—or at least an uneven fan response to Beck’s invitation to record the songs. Given that the gender performance of *Song Reader* is implicitly male, it is unsurprising to find this reflected in the YouTube videos, with significantly more male than female musicians participating in the greater project of an accumulated and unending music performance.

In his preface, Beck wrote of the old songsheets in his collection that:

> Songs could function as an accompaniment to some action; they could speak to specific parts of lives, even as they indulged in fantasy and lyricism. They could be absurd as often as they were sentimental. . . . There are thousands of ‘moon’ songs, exotic-locale songs, place-name songs, songs about new inventions, stuttering songs—but even though much of the music was formulaic, there was originality and eccentricity as well.

Yet the very archive Beck is writing about here looks different from a female gaze. Indeed, there are plenty of songsheets containing marriage songs, nature songs, cooking songs, songs about children, family, care, and friends. Take, for example, ‘Parody Pie’, a song cycle by Liza Lehmann (1914), or ‘Mother’s Cradle Song’ composed by Carrie Jacobs-Bond (1896). These are historical examples of the parlour music on which *Song Reader* is based; they are sheet music with artwork and adverts, designed for amateur enjoyment, running the gauntlet of emotions from the tragic to the humorous, and they were born of the cultural practices of women. This is not to say that essentialist gender divisions should be reinstated; rather, we believe that the overlooking and (in the case of ‘America, Here’s My Boy’) parodizing of women’s historical roles in the cultural and musical practices of the time on which *Song Reader* is based amounts to (unintentional?) sexism in an industry that is already biased in favour of men.
*Song Reader* is styled as a reminder of the cultural practice of music in the parlour room, which was gendered female. Yet women are noticeably in the minority in the *Song Reader* project. Not only have important aspects of feminine aesthetics that have been investigated in the last half century of women’s studies been left out, our analyses have shown that the album itself is gendered male on a number of levels. It is therefore no surprise that *Song Reader*, so lauded and encouraged by Jody Rosen in the introduction as a songbook for ‘everyone’, has in fact proved to be a songbook for ‘everyman’. Gender-neutral language has vanished but has not banished the male dominance of the seemingly neutral author. Rosen writes dreamily about ‘a whole musical universe’, but neglected to say—or realise—that this universe privileges men and male creativity.

But there is some hope. Although the performative freedom proclaimed in *Song Reader* in fact shows itself to be an understanding of freedom according to male premises, there are nevertheless many ways to create a more inclusive call for innovative musical practice that is less pigmented by male standards and supremacy. If we—as Rosen suggests in the introduction—have ‘returned to the parlor room, with the laptop camera taking the place of the upright piano’, then through their participation women will once more, as history has shown several times before, build their own creative rooms ‘in between’. Performances published on YouTube, for example Elise Blatchford performing the ‘Mutilation Rag’ (Blatchford, 2013) or Mjuix performing ‘Do We? We Do’ (Mjuix, 2014), are highly elaborated artistic expressions that go beyond boundaries, and these are waiting to be both analysed and valued.

They are waiting. We are waiting.

**Notes**

1 We use the terms male/female, masculinity/femininity not in an essential way, but as a matter of performance (Butler, 2006), and as a tool for describing different cultural practices that—of course—can be practised by all.

2 At the time of writing, *Song Reader* is available only in hard copy. Nevertheless, in addition to Figure 18.1, the front cover and a selection of the artwork (including ‘America, Here’s My Boy’, part of the sheet music to ‘Saint Dude’, and the advertisement for ‘Why’) can be seen on the publisher’s webpage: https://store.mcsweeneyys.net/products/song-reader (McSweeney’s Publishing LLC, 2017).

3 It should be noted that the production team were not entirely male, and included, for example, Bettie Ross who compiled the guide to sheet music. That this female contribution is literally hidden behind the male only supports our argument; Ross’s role as pedagogue in the project also taps into gendered musical roles of male performers (on the stage) and female teachers (in the background). Here and throughout this chapter it should be noted that our major criticism is of problematic forms of masculinity and masculine hegemony (cf. Connell, 2014).

4 The song ‘Mutilation Rag’—a story of a battle between the left and right hand playing the piano, and danced to by masked figures—is without doubt the queerest song in *Song Reader*. However, the realm of Queer studies is beyond the scope of this chapter.

6 ‘ma7’ is used throughout the short extract in place of ‘maj7’.

7 Thanks are due to Maren Bagge at the Research Centre for Music and Gender in Hanover for bringing ‘Parody pie’ to our attention.

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