

# BOOK REVIEW

**Gavin Steingo. *Kwaito's Promise: Music and the Aesthetics of Freedom in South Africa*.** Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. xx + 307 pp. Maps. Photographs. Music examples. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$90.00. Cloth. \$30.00. Paper. \$10.00 to \$30.00. E-Book. ISBN-13: 978-0-226-36240-3 (cloth); 978-0-226-36254-0 (paper); 978-0-226-36268-7 (e-book).

Gavin Steingo's monograph might be read, according to its author, as "an ethnographic study of the 'politics of aesthetics' that focuses on, and thinks with, kwaito" (10). As such, its double preoccupations are "freedom" and "aesthetics" (14). With regard to the latter, its considerable ambition is to develop "what one might call a modern African aesthetic theory" at a disjunct from Western aesthetics (16) or, in another formulation, "to think the politics of aesthetics from the perspective of Africa, or even from an African perspective" (17). With regard to the former, Steingo wishes to "elucidate forms of *equality* (the fundamental equality of human intelligence, the formal equality of citizens, and the egalitarianism of sonic material) and forms of *inequality* (social and economic) and to bring these contradictory dynamics into relation with one another" (21). Kwaito fits into this schematic "less [as] the name of a musical genre than a particular arrangement of sensory experience," with the primary focus of the book described by its author as:

An examination of kwaito as an arrangement of sensory perception that suspends normative modalities of hearing and knowing, as a distribution of the sensible that ignores actual social conditions (21).

The argument in the book unfolds in seven chapters and an epilogue. "The Struggle of Freedom" (Chapter 1) stakes out concepts and theoretical points of departure. This includes situating the work in the disciplinary field and outlining the research's considerable theoretical debt to the work of Jacques Rancière on aesthetics and politics. It also contains various descriptors of kwaito, including the fact that kwaito expresses the struggle of freedom (2); that it continues to sound an alternative sensory reality (3); that it calls for a fundamental reevaluation of music studies' basic axioms (6); and that it passes over the actual dismal conditions of its listeners and constitutes a distraction from real political issues (thereby being political) (7).

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Furthermore, it frames sensory experience by ignoring actual social conditions (10); it continues to promise (10); it is a robust form of experimentation with the thresholds and limits of the deeply troubled relationship between politics and aesthetics (10); it is unanimously understood as a response to South Africa's democratic dispensation (11); and, fundamentally, kwaito is less the name of a musical genre than a particular arrangement of sensory experience (21).

Chapter 2 ("The Experience of the Outside") constructs an etiology of kwaito geographically (Chicago, Detroit, and New York to Pretoria, Soweto, and Bophuthatswana) and stylistically (House Music—Kwaito—South African House Music). It provides a compelling rumination on the notions of "outside" and "the international" as vital constituents of an abstracted imaginary that could "deregulate the link between aesthetic experience and everyday social conditions" (42). "Platform, or the Miracle of the Ordinary" (Chapter 3) is concerned with "platforms as experimental arrangements of sensory perception" (59), and identifies platforms as record companies, radio stations, and television. It also considers the relationship between gender and performance as a "platform" that contributes to kwaito's ambiguous aesthetic relation that problematizes hierarchical principles in a demonstration of what Steingo calls "aesthetic undecidability" (88).

In terms of the ambition to develop a politics of aesthetics from the perspective of Africa, Chapter 4 ("Immobility, Obduracy, and Experimentalism in Soweto") makes an important argument about the aesthetic and sensorial consequences of technology (especially technological failure) in Soweto. Spatial considerations that induce immobility as well as an "aesthetics of propinquity" (closeness) (103), in addition to the effects of crime (mostly household theft), contribute to Steingo's conclusion that "statements about technology in Europe and North America cannot be easily transferred to the Global South" (114). In South Africa, Steingo writes, "circulation is better apprehended in terms of obduracy than in terms of flow" (121). The author listens for the openness embedded in obduracy in the "deep histories, speeding trains, nocturnal ancestors and canine bodies" of Chapter 5 ("Acoustic Assemblages and Forms of Life"). Here the focus is on a nonanthropocentric approach to musicking, different manifestations of cosmopolitanism, and a further examination of the role played by "outside" (in various guises: temporal, spatial, and/or cosmological) in acoustic assemblages.

One of the "outsides" constitutive of kwaito's *partage du sensible* (Rancière), is the burgeoning black middle class that produces commercial kwaito, the titular "Black Diamonds" of Chapter 6. The best musical description of kwaito in the book occurs in this chapter (175–80), and its appearance at this late stage is a reminder that the book is not about kwaito per se, but about the aesthetics of freedom that is here explored in terms of the intersection between a black middle class and township musicians. In "Times and Spaces of Listening" (Chapter 7), the attention turns to

listening practices in informal taverns, larger outdoor gatherings, and automobiles. Recalling the descriptions of immobility in Chapter 4, Steingo contrasts the “openness with which these subjects engage their acoustic environments” (212).

“The word ‘kwaito,’” writes Steingo in the Epilogue, “can be employed only timidly, awkwardly, and at risk of error” (215). As its bold yellow typeface on the book’s cover confirms, there is nothing timid or awkward about this monograph’s discursive grappling with kwaito, or in its ethnographic and critical engagement with aesthetics and politics. The text is ethnographically rich and theoretically compelling. And if leaning so heavily on theory from the Global North in order “to think the politics of aesthetics from the perspective of Africa” seems contradictory at first, it is possible that in doing so the author may have achieved the ultimate homage to kwaito: an emergent discursive model that mixes freely over the randomly available tracks of circulating (international) theory.

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**For more reading on this subject, see:**

- Prentki, Tim. 2008. “Any Color of the Rainbow—As Long as It’s Gray: Dramatic Learning Spaces in Postapartheid South Africa.” *African Studies Review* 51 (3): 91–106. doi:10.1353/arw.0.0086.
- Rizzo, Lorena. 2014. “Visual Impersonation — Population Registration, Reference Books and Identification in the Eastern Cape, 1950s–1960s.” *History in Africa* 41: 221–48. doi:10.1017/hia.2014.2.