

Introduction

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*You know it never has been easy
Whether you do or you do not resign
Whether you travel the breadth of extremities
Or stick to some straighter line.*

—Joni Mitchell, “Hejira,” 1976.

Joni Mitchell is a great dancer, the kind of smoker you want to be, a ruthless and meticulous emotional surgeon (how many feelings has she pulled from you today?), a bedazzling agent of the surprising note and line, an exultant skater (think of *Hejira*’s gatefold images, the cover of the 2005 compilation *Songs of a Prairie Girl*, or “River’s” dreams of frozen escape), a rightful declaimer of her own brilliance (“about as humble as Mussolini,” David Crosby says—but why should she be?), sometimes a kind of Tiresias, picking her way through various wastelands, shaking her fist at culture’s decline, but sometimes, too, a dreamer in a hotel room, watching Woodstock on the TV and wishing she was there. She’s someone you’d want with you on a long car journey—she would drive—and next to you at the jukebox, jabbing the buttons before doing a slow twist in the Wurlitzer glow. She is, one wagers, a pool shark. She is and isn’t the best authority on her own work: in a 2013 interview, she criticizes and minimizes her extraordinary back-catalog before absorbedly reciting at length a poem she wrote at school, as if its metaphoric flourishes somehow beat “Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire” or its cultural commentary rivals “The Hissing of Summer Lawns.”¹ She has provided the most capacious and sustaining accompaniments to your adolescence, early adulthood, and middle age (and

you're pretty sure she'll be good for your dotage too). Her songs are the best at detailing the traps of womanhood and heterosexuality and, sometimes, too, ways in which you might escape or step around these traps. Yet she refuses to align herself explicitly with a feminist politics and this feels maddening and intriguing and painful. She makes you want to wear a beret. She makes you want to drive out of your life and away from your loves, while wearing a beret. She has read more Nietzsche than you, but says she isn't an intellectual.² Unlike Nietzsche, she makes disappointment into a thing that you want to experience again and again. She makes you want to bake and paint and shout and jive and drink and kiss and wail and think about the Earth and think about yourself and think about yourself thinking about the Earth. She makes ambivalating feel like a fine use of a day. And inexplicably, of late, she has made you want to wear a mustard-yellow crocheted cardigan and paint your kitchen wall coral pink.

This is my Joni, of course—although some elements here may belong to your Joni, too. As this collection evidences, writing about Joni Mitchell often entails writing about oneself. We can see this in Sean Nelson's gorgeous 33 ½ book on *Court and Spark*, which opens with a story of Nelson as a child, in the car with his mom driving through Laurel Canyon, listening in delight as she sings along to "Help Me" (2007, 2). Or Katherine Monk's philosophy-imbued *Joni: The Creative Odyssey of Joni Mitchell*, which sees Monk, aged six, listening to *Song to a Seagull* with her sister, feeling how "it sent a prematurely existential shiver down my six-year-old spine" (2012, ix). Lloyd Whitesell's *The Music of Joni Mitchell* features an account of his attendance at a 1995 performance by Mitchell, listening with excitement to her new "unexpected aggressive electric sound" (2008, 15). In Malka Marom's 2014 collection of interviews with Mitchell, *Both Sides Now*³ she writes of driving to a coffeehouse in 1966 and hearing Joni Mitchell for the first time. "Her song was like a kaleidoscope that splintered my perception [. . .] then refocused to illuminate a reality I had not dared to see" (2014, x). Meanwhile, David Yaffe's recent biography, *Reckless Daughter: A Portrait of Joni Mitchell* opens with Yaffe aged 15, in his girlfriend's room, listening with her to *Blue*, "falling in love with a girl and falling in love with this music" (2017, xi). "The people who get the most out of my music see themselves in it," Mitchell tells Michelle Mercer (2012, 3). *Joni Mitchell: New*

Critical Readings, features several “my Joni, myself” moments. Eric Lott recounts an (enviable!) moment of sneaking backstage and meeting Joni on the *Shadows and Light* tour, while Peter Coviello writes of teaching a stanza of “Cactus Tree” to explain the function of rhyme to his college students. And my chapter maps several scenes of adolescent listening to Joni Mitchell, one of them my own, to think about the complex work of desire that this listening entails, particularly when reflecting on it from adulthood.

What do we talk about when we talk about Joni Mitchell? Recent work, some of which has been just mentioned, has drawn our attention to Mitchell’s brilliance and sometimes orneriness as an interview subject (Marom 2014; Hoskyns 2016); to the twists, turns, and sheer wealth of her creativity (Yaffe 2017); to the stories that make up her *Blue* Period (Mercer 2012); to her snapshot of love and Los Angeles in *Court and Spark* (Nelson 2007); to the multitude of her philosophical and artistic interlocutors (Monk 2012); to the ways in which her work is misunderstood (Daum 2014); and to how her songs are constructed (Whitesell 2008). While it draws on this great, existing work, *Joni Mitchell: New Critical Readings* provides new ways of thinking about Joni Mitchell’s music: as queer, as literary, as embodied, and as complexly temporal, to name just a few of the interventions that the coming essays make. This book represents the first edited collection of essays on Mitchell’s oeuvre. It brings together essays by musicologists, literary scholars and theorists of popular culture and features close reading, detailed listening, musicological analysis, literary comparison, historicization (macro and micro) and personal anecdotes. The pieces that follow talk to each other in many different ways but all share in common a sustained interest in listening, with intense thought and feeling, to Joni Mitchell.

There are lots of ways to listen to Joni Mitchell, of course. Several of the recent critical accounts, discussed earlier, open with the authors listening as a child or adolescent. Yet, for other writers on Mitchell, adolescent listening, particularly female adolescent listening, is a problem. Meghan Daum describes this feeling in her own “Joni and me” story, aptly titled “The Joni Mitchell Problem”:

I realize the clause “Joni and me” has been written upwards of 10 million times, mostly in diaries with flowers drawn in the margins and in sonnets

written in galloping pink cursive. I realize that there is nothing original about being a late twentieth-century-born female who feels that nearly every major life event (first love and heartbreak, leaving home, next love and heartbreak) was accompanied by a Joni that was custom-written for the occasion. (2014, 151)

In order for Daum to lay claim to “her” Joni, she pushes aside the 10 million teenage girls who also love her (their teenage status suggested here by the diary-doodling and poetry-writing which, Daum suggests—wrongly!—are purely the preserve of the teenage girl). There’s a complex defensiveness in Daum’s tone here that abuts her vow of love for Joni, and this love’s particular and cherished coordinates. It’s the tone of a woman feeling that she has to do the work of legitimizing what she loves, as if loving it isn’t legitimacy enough, while also anticipating the ways in which this love will be trashed: as unoriginal, as romantic, as solipsistic, as immature, as too personal, as—let’s just say it—too *feminine*: girl’s stuff. Michelle Mercer does something similar in her book on *Blue*, noting that she is “roughly the eight-nine millionth teenage girl to have an existential transformation through *Blue*” and that Joni Mitchell has “already taken enough blame for being a muse to every flaxen-haired girl who picked up a guitar and mistook emotional turbulence for art” (2012, 3). In this dismissal, Daum and Mercer both presume that female listeners, particularly young female listeners, are a lumpen and knowable object. Doing so, they assume “a singularity of female spectatorship [listenership, in this instance] or subjecthood” as cultural theorist Lauren Berlant puts it (1988, 239). All teenage girls listen in the same way and we all know what that listening sounds like: it’s emotional, it’s personal, it’s romantic and it’s misinterpretive or uncritical—“wrong, wrong, wrong”—according to Meghan Daum (2014, 151). While Daum and Mercer’s texts are otherwise insightful, impassioned, and engaging accounts of fandom and Mitchell’s oeuvre, the fact that both authors similarly feel the need to navigate both the unoriginality and genderedness of an attachment to Joni Mitchell, and that they both target teenage girls as their bad object, is worth pausing upon. To borrow Daum’s phrase, this commonality suggests that the real “Joni Mitchell Problem” might not be about listening to *Blue* rather than *Mingus* but, instead, about gender.⁴

In disparaging teenage girls who listen to Joni Mitchell, Daum and, to a lesser extent, Mercer, join a long roster of critics who denigrate female listening, and especially adolescent female listening. As musicologist Elizabeth Keenan puts it, with regard to the popmusicism versus rockism debates of the last few years, “the tastes of 13-year-old girls are usually the most easily maligned, whether in pop music or in books or in films.”⁵ Keenan is replying here to music critic Saul Austerlitz’s 2014 piece for the *New York Times Magazine* entitled “The Pernicious Rise of Poptimism.”⁶ In it, Austerlitz bemoans the extent to which a critical emphasis on pop music (over other “knottier music”) means that music critics have begun to align their ears with those of teenagers (as Keenan points out, the “girls” part of Austerlitz’s complaint is implied but not directly stated). “Should gainfully employed adults whose job is to listen to music thoughtfully really agree so regularly with the taste of 13-year-old girls?”⁷ Austerlitz asks. This is a clear attempt, as Keenan identifies, to “bring back discourses of authenticity/quality/‘good music’ that privilege white dudes who make mediocre music above [the music of] women and people of color”⁸—an attempt that this collection, in tune with Keenan, is engaged in resisting.

Arguably, Joni Mitchell is no popmusicist.⁹ For example, in a 2015 piece for *New York Magazine*, she claims to never have heard Taylor Swift’s music and, while she can be found expressing her appreciation for certain pop stars—Prince, The Police, even Journey!¹⁰—one imagines that she would not want to be placed alongside them. Nor can we readily class her music as pop. But the popmusicism versus rockism discourses are relevant to thinking about the reception of Mitchell’s music, and its listeners, in so far as they reveal the gendered politics of listening, criticism, and ideas of value that continue to circulate in music writing. My argument here is that female critics’ accounts of listening to Joni Mitchell, particularly those that limn the critical and the personal, often labor through convoluted justifications and distinctions (“I’m not *that* kind of female listener”¹¹) even before coming to discuss the music. This tells us a lot about the anxieties that might attend female-authored music criticism, particularly when it addresses a female artist, and especially when, tonally, it resides on the borders of the critical and the personal. As a salve for

this, as for many things, it is worth turning over to feminist music critic, Ann Powers.

In her reflective piece on National Public Radio's "The 150 Greatest Albums Made by Women," a list which, lest we forget, was topped by Joni Mitchell's *Blue*, Ann Powers writes, "the general history of popular music is told through the great works of men, [. . . and that] without a serious revision of the canon, women will always remain on the margins."¹² She also observes "the shelves weighed down with books about Jimi Hendrix and Nirvana, while only one or two about Aretha Franklin or Patti Smith [or Joni Mitchell, we might add] sit nearby."¹³ (Regarding Joni Mitchell, while there have been plenty of biographies and collections of interviews published, there haven't been many critical treatments of her work and this is the first edited collection.) Powers goes on to specifically discuss Joni Mitchell's occupation of the margins, recounting a story told by screenwriter and Laurel Canyon regular, Carl Gottlieb, to music writer Barney Hoskyns¹⁴ of the days in which David Crosby would bring Mitchell out to play for his friends: "Mitchell would emerge, play a few songs and retreat. 'She goes back upstairs, and we all sit around and look at each other and say, What was *that*? Did we hallucinate it?' Gottlieb said."¹⁵ Commenting on the gender politics of this moment, Powers writes "there's [. . .] something off and sadly typical about this scene. In it, the female musician is a dream, a surprise and a disruptor. She can claim the center of attention, but her rightful point of origin, and the place to which she returns, is a margin."¹⁶ (This collection, it goes without saying, does not put Joni Mitchell in the corner.)

While, inevitably (inevitable because she is female), Mitchell's work has always been gendered in ways that Powers identifies, recent criticism has increasingly interrogated the gender politics that surround and construct Mitchell's work. In particular, Anne Karppinen's recent monograph *The Songs of Joni Mitchell: Gender, Performance and Agency*, thinks in detail about how Mitchell has been marginalized within rock discourses, particularly within critical economies (2016, 1). Karppinen also examines Mitchell's own attitudes to gender, drawing, in part, on French feminist as well as musicological theory, to convincing effect. Sheila Whiteley contextualizes *Blue* as "forging a new world of possibilities for women" (2000, 78) in the early 1970s and

draws comparisons between Mitchell's struggles with the misogynistic music industry and the broader concerns of second-wave feminism (whether Mitchell recognizes herself as a feminist or not) (1). Lloyd Whitesell's introduction also takes up the gender politics of Mitchell's work, acknowledging that "women's intellectual production has been historically undervalued" and that the critical treatment of Mitchell's music has, to some extent, been an example of this undervaluation (2008, 5).

While there is much to be said about Joni Mitchell and gender politics, Mitchell herself has often eschewed framings of her work in these terms. Of feminism, specifically, Mitchell has said that she hadn't heard of it until she went out for dinner with Warren Beatty and Jack Nicholson (I'm guessing in the early 1970s) and they enlightened her.¹⁷ She has said, several times, bluntly "I am not a feminist."¹⁸ We might feel, if we *do* identify as feminist and if Mitchell's music has been a crucial part of our education into this politics, that this disavowal is rather hard to take. But there's a lot to be said for not passing it over—it teaches us to interrogate the kinds of advocacy, as feminists, we might want from our female love objects, and how we might feel when we don't get this advocacy. It's also worthwhile registering the multitudinous ways in which Mitchell's music *does* sustain a feminist viewpoint, as pieces by Pamela Thurschwell, Peter Coviello, Emily Baker, and myself attest in this collection.

Relatedly, *Joni Mitchell: New Critical Readings* also features some of the first readings of Mitchell's work as queer. Performers—Arc Iris, for one, and John Kelly,¹⁹ who performs as a convincing and moving drag Joni Mitchell, for another—have long realized the queerness of Mitchell's music. But, save for David Román's (2005) insightful and detailed discussion of Kelly's performances as Mitchell, and Ann Pellegrini's brief (but no less insightful) gloss on Román's reading (2007, 181), there has been little critical writing that has considered Joni Mitchell's music through a queer theoretical lens. In her work's challenges to heterosexual conventions, in its experiments with timing and experimentation, in its desire to dwell in "the open mesh of possibilities," to borrow the defining words of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993, 8), that come from *not* sticking "to some straighter line,"²⁰ this collection emphatically claims Mitchell's work as queer. Chapters by Matthew J. Jones, Emily Baker, Peter Coviello, and myself explore some of the possibilities of this claim.

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It would not be going too far to say that Joni Mitchell's songs have been, thus far, the most capacious, sustaining, and clarifying cultural objects of my life. It has been a struggle sometimes, throughout the making of this book (and other contributors have expressed similar feelings) to put the contours of this feeling-for-Joni into words in a way that renders it cogent and interesting to others. How do you write about the things you love? Sometimes, for me at least, words have slipped away, and it has seemed much more sensible to play "Harry's House/Centerpiece" on loop while inviting (ok, perhaps not inviting) unsuspecting loved ones to marvel with me at the volta that moves the listener from the snapshot of a man in the corporate 1970s yearningly fantasizing about his wife when she was a teenager, into the upswing surprise of a hopeful 1950s standard. Or to get caught, like Harry, in fantasies of the past—through imagined scenes glimpsed in the songs—Joni sitting with Sam Shepard in a diner in 1975, eating eggs and watching him watch other women; Joni waiting for the lights to change in 1994, furious with politicians, businessmen, record executives, quacks; Joni waiting for the lights to change in 1969, watching a musician play his heart out for nothing; Joni in love and pissed-off with her mum in 1998, pushing the bed against the window to look at the Christmas lights; Joni selfish and sad and wishing Christmas away in 1971; or Joni in 1973, playing *Court and Spark* to Bob Dylan as he pretends to fall asleep.²¹ Such detours into deep listening and imaginings are, of course, the preserve of the ardent fan, not just the procrastinating scholar. But there's no need, really, to separate the two—as Lloyd Whitesell puts it, "the incisive knowledge of the scholar can go hand in hand with the intimate knowledge of the fervent fan" (2008, 10). All of the contributors in this collection are fans, as well as critics, and interested in what might be woven between and across these two modes of listening.

The chapters that follow are often exercises in the joys of deep and detailed listening. As Alexandra T. Vazquez has told us, "listening in detail ignores those accusations of going too far, of giving too much time to a recording" (2013, 4). This kind of listening might take the form of listening on loop, listening alone²² or with others who like to listen as you do, obsessing over a song's particular turn of phrase, intake of breath, or bass line, reading things into track-sequencings, liner notes, or cover art, making arcanelly themed playlists,

or learning the chords so you can play along—to name but a few. The fan listens again and again, as a sign of caring for the song, and also with the desire to burrow deeper and deeper into a track. Listening in detail, too, is proof of your “worthiness” as a fan, evidence that you care *enough* about a song, and an artist, to attend to the labor that went into making a track, and to its minutiae as an object, rather than just consuming it quickly, then discarding it and moving on.

Listening in detail, in other words, is an act of love, of attachment—not something that one would immediately associate with the work of criticism, work that, in its title, this collection seems to foreground. Criticism has long been associated with *detachment*, distance, with holding an object at arm’s length so as to scrutinize, interrogate, and dismantle it into its component parts. Critique is cool, unemotional, and cerebral rather than embodied. It disavows the personal attachment or aversion. Critique is often paranoid in its orientation, as the queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) has identified; it is suspicious, always looking for cover-ups, secrets, what will happen next. Critique does not want to be absorbed by the object because to be absorbed might mean being at the object’s mercy, taken in by it, and, maybe, surprised by it. The critic doesn’t want to appear naive, or enamored, or too implicated by the object he is critiquing.

As is probably clear by now, *Joni Mitchell: New Critical Readings* doesn’t play that way. This book is composed more of reparative readings (perhaps that would have been a better title), readings that, as Rita Felski puts it “[look] to a work of art for solace and replenishment rather than viewing it as something [. . .] to be indicted” (2015, 151). That’s not to say that there *isn’t* critique here—but it aims to redescribe Mitchell’s work rather than dismantle it, leaving room in its reading for, as Felski puts it, “the aleatory and the unexpected, the chancy and the contingent” (152), in a mode that often employs “the language of enchantment, incandescence, and rapture without embarrassment” (175). The readings in this book display vulnerability, hope, epiphany, interest, recognition, surprise as well as, sometimes, disappointment, disenchantment, irritability, ambivalence, and frustration (shadows and light, after all). This book hopes to sit alongside other recent work in musicology that has turned toward ideas of care, nurture, first-person accounts, and reparative listening as vital tools in today’s often eviscerating political, environmental, economic, and cultural scenes.²³

There are numerous Joni Mitchell scenes left out of this book, of course, stones as yet unturned, songs not listened to or skipped over, times missed out. This collection does not listen to or watch everything that has made up Joni Mitchell's musical career so far. There's no "Dancin' Clown" in these pages, for example (although having just watched the video for this song for the first time, which sees Joni dancing around a kitchen with a ginger cat, playing a sweeping brush like a guitar, American Spirit dangling from her lips, this feels like a mistake and reason alone for a second volume).²⁴ There's very little here from her 1980s period and very little about her most recent collection of new material, *Shine* (2008). There's *Mingus* but not much *Taming the Tiger*. These omissions may irritate, please, or pass unnoticed, depending on the reader's predilections, but are not intended as any kind of comment on the works themselves.

This collection, unashamedly, delights in the Joni Mitchell that it delights in. Not because these are the "best" songs, or albums, or moments from her career (who knows what "best" means, anyway, and, frankly, conversations about value are only ever just conversations about personal taste that don't want to 'fess up to their attachments and aversions, in the opinion of this editor), but because these are the songs, albums, moments, that caught these writers' hearts, guts, ears, and imaginations. To put together a collection that *isn't* exhaustive or aiming to be, that, undoubtedly, is made up more of A- than it is of B-sides or rarities undoubtedly risks courting accusations of dilettantism, of being the kind of listener who goes for the greatest hits (such that they are), rather than the misses. Indeed, part of me has sometimes wished that I, or one of the other contributors to this collection, had advanced an arcane theory about "Funeral's" extra-diegetic noise or Alejandro Acuna's ankle bell technique on "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter." But these are thoughts yet to be unfolded and for another collection.

This book is profoundly interested in looking closely at specific moments in Mitchell's oeuvre, some already in full view, some only glimpsed so far, some that have, until now, occupied the vanishing spot, and in reflecting upon the ways in which we have constructed Mitchell: as an intimate, as a seer, as imprinted upon our life stories, and as revealing us to ourselves through her own acts of self-exposure. This book is concerned with mobility—how Mitchell's work moves through time and also moves us over

time—and with the complexities and tricksiness of perspective. It thinks about how Mitchell sometimes runs behind the times, sometimes dwells at the side of the road (a hitcher? a prisoner?) watching the times go by, and sometimes races ahead, too fast for those listeners who want her to stay still for longer or forever.

These essays are also interested in thinking about objects from the past and how they might be much nearer to us than they first appear. Specifically, many of the essays in this book look at past moments in Mitchell's career and life—her appearance in *The Last Waltz*, her polio when aged 9—in ways that make these past moments vividly and instructively *present*. While Mitchell has said frequently that she doesn't like to look back,²⁵ this collection likes running behind the times, dragging things out, and dredging things up, always willing, as Elizabeth Freeman puts it, “to be bathed in the fading light of whatever has been declared useless” (2010, xiii)—whether by critics (personal or professional), or by Mitchell herself.

Although Mitchell has said that she doesn't like to look back, she has spent some time doing so, particularly but not only in recent years. Her most recent work, the 2014 quadruple-disc set *Love Has Many Faces: A Quartet, A Ballet, Waiting to Be Danced*, saw her selecting tracks from her back-catalog to make a new song sequence, intended originally for a ballet (which was made, featuring a smaller selection of songs as *The Fiddle and the Drum* in 2007 by the Alberta Ballet). Her last recording of original material, *Shine* (2007) features a revision of “Big Yellow Taxi.” Prior to that, 2002's *Travelogue* (discussed by Emily Baker in her chapter for this collection) reorchestrated many Mitchell standards; while 2000's *Both Sides Now* reimaged a selection of jazz standards, “A Case of You” and the titular track (Joanne Winning talks about the latter in her chapter on Mitchell and thirdness). Despite her undeniable status as a musical innovator, Mitchell is a persistent (re)interpreter of her own work. She also inspires complicated cover versions, as my piece for this collection touches upon. Furthermore, as Mitchell identifies in the liner notes to *Love Has Many Faces*, her work has long been interested in retrospection. “I create back-flashes in my songs by cutting old songs into them,”²⁶ Mitchell comments, referring to songs like “Harry's House/Centerpiece” (from 1975's *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*) and “Chinese Café/Unchained Melody” (from 1982's *Wild Things Run*

Fast). As Lloyd Whitesell has astutely delineated, Mitchell's songs often cite themselves—something like “Blue,” for example, contains “an almost exact quotation of a passage from [. . .] the introduction to “My Old Man” (2008, 136). And “Amelia” (from *Hejira*, 1976) sees Mitchell return for a one-night stay in the “Cactus Tree motel” (“Cactus Tree” from *Song to a Seagull*, 1968), as Peter Coviello discusses in his essay here.

In its orientation to Mitchell's music, which we know won't please everyone, this collection sometimes swoops, like a magpie or—why not?—a black crow, to pick up the ephemera and minutiae of Mitchell's career, lifting them up for a new look. For example, in his piece about Mitchell's *Don Juan*-era blackface alter ego, Art Nouveau, Eric Lott draws our attention to a long-forgotten curiosity: Mitchell's 1980 short film for Barry Levinson: *The Black Cat in the Black Mouse Socks*.²⁷ Gustavus Stadler zooms in on another moment that's easy to overlook: The Band's Rick Danko staring intently at Mitchell's left hand as she plays “Coyote” in *The Last Waltz*. And Emily Baker thinks about how certain albums, in the case of her chapter *Travelogue*, come to seem ephemeral to critics: lacking substance, easily discardable and of little lasting worth.

Other conversations in this collection may sound, initially, more familiar but come with new twists. In his piece, Howard Wilde interrupts the decades' old Bob vs. Joni back-and-forth, by proposing that the two might not even be traveling in the same vehicle. Anne Hilker sheds new light on figures of melancholy in Mitchell's music, drawing parallels and distinctions with the work of renowned anthropologist, Mary Douglas. Meanwhile, Matthew J. Jones's chapter picks up the much discussed question of Joni's guitar technique and tweaks it, telling us how she made the guitar.

Relatedly, this collection makes a series of new assemblages, putting Mitchell's work with other cultural objects. Some of Mitchell's interlocutors in this book are literary, reflecting both the training of several of our contributors and the literariness of Mitchell's music. For example, in her chapter, Pamela Thurschwell sets up a dialogue between Joni Mitchell and fellow Canadian author Margaret Atwood—both, Thurschwell argues, “irritable feminists.” In his chapter, Peter Coviello draws lines between Mitchell, Henry James, and a

Paula Fox novel from 1970. And my chapter considers a series of set pieces in recent film and TV, where Mitchell appears to warn of trouble ahead.

This book is divided into three sections, although these groupings are not intended to be totalizing. Part One: “‘The Breadth of Extremities’: Voice, Instrument, Feeling,” considers Mitchell’s playing: across time, across borders, across restrictions, across contradictions. It opens with Matthew J. Jones’s provocative and timely discussion of what he calls the “crip virtuosity” of Mitchell’s musical style, honed, in part, because of her childhood polio. Jones draws our attention to the ways in which Mitchell’s “queering of the fretboard” created a new idiom for the guitar. Emily Baker’s chapter turns, with no less insight, to the “problem” (as it has been inaccurately perceived) of Mitchell’s aging voice, particularly in the *Travelogue* era. Baker reframes this voice as one of experience, of defiant sensuality, a voice railing—queerly—against culture diktats that older women should be neither seen nor heard. Joanne Winning is also interested in Mitchell’s later-career voice—this time, as it appears on her 2000 revisioning of “Both Sides, Now.” Winning argues, convincingly, that we should view this as one of Mitchell’s most affecting performances, bridging, as it does, innocence and experience. Finally in this section, Anne Hilker considers the multitudinous ways in which Mitchell’s melodies and words have picked up themes and figures of melancholy. Ever the restless traveler, Mitchell’s melancholic apex comes with “Amelia,” in Hilker’s lyrical reading.

Part Two: “‘The Only [Black] Man in the Room?’ Mitchell’s Milieu,” thinks about Joni’s various roles, disruptions, disguises and swerves away from the music industry’s various boys’ clubs. It opens with Gustavus Stadler’s essay which considers a complex and charged moment in Mitchell’s 1970s: her performance of “Coyote” as part of *The Last Waltz*. Stadler convincingly suggests that Mitchell disrupts the film’s masculinist and mythologizing narrative by “embodying a dramatic unreadability” within the film. Next is Eric Lott’s reading of Mitchell’s “cross-cultural investigations” as Art Nouveau at the end of the 1970s. Appearing in blackface drag, Lott argues, was a way for Mitchell to move differently and more freely through the predominantly white, male LA scene. Closing this section, Howard Wilde picks up that old chestnut—Joni vs. Bob—and gives it new life, arguing that we should think of

Mitchell as the “anti-Dylan,” via a range of close comparisons between the two artists’ work.

The final section of the collection, Part Three: “‘Busy Being Free’: Love, Time, Feminism,” makes contact with Joni across time, through novels, films, and TV, thinking and feeling its way through her complex gender politics and the sometimes contradictory promises of her music. Pamela Thurschwell’s chapter pairs Mitchell with a friend of spirit: Margaret Atwood. Mitchell and Atwood share a sensibility, according to Thurschwell, one which she names “irritable feminism.” Relatedly, Peter Coviello thinks in his piece about what he calls “Mitchell’s fierce and finely calibrated ambivalence,” particularly toward the late 1960s counterculture’s ideals and ideas of freedom. Finally, in conversation with both Coviello and Thurschwell’s work, my own piece picks up *Blue* as an album that one is “supposed” to move on from but, for a range of complicated reasons, might not be able to. What might be at stake in still listening to *Blue*?

Mitchell has sometimes mercilessly speared the work of academics and critics. In her 2013 CBC interview, for example, she talks of “the academic poets [. . .] digging under my lines looking for hidden meaning and slapping themselves on the back going, “I think I’m onto something here!”²⁸ Ideally, the book to come will feel far more pleasurable than being at a gathering of “critics of all expression [. . .]/Saying it’s wrong/Saying it’s right.”²⁹ We hope, ultimately, that these layered snapshots of Mitchell’s work capture some of her shadows, and, especially, some of her light.

Notes

- 1 Joni Mitchell, *The Joni Mitchell Interview* (CBC Music, 2013). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEJuiZN3jI8> (accessed: June 2, 2018).
- 2 David Wild, “Morrissey Meets Joni Mitchell: Melancholy and the Infinite Sadness,” *Rolling Stone* (March 6, 1997). <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/morrissey-melancholy-meets-the-infinite-sadness-19970306> (accessed: June 3, 2018).
- 3 Marom’s book was published under two different titles: *Joni Mitchell: Both Sides Now—Conversations with Malka Marom*, and *Joni Mitchell: In Her Own*

Words—Conversations with Malka Marom. These are listed throughout according to which version the author has used.

- 4 Although, arguably, we can say that the question of whether you prefer *Mingus* or *Blue* is also a question about gender.
- 5 Elizabeth Keenan, “Gender Trouble: ‘Poptimism’ and the Male Critical Voice,” (April 9, 2014). <https://badcoverversion.wordpress.com/2014/04/09/gender-trouble-poptimism-and-the-male-critical-voice/> (accessed: June 1, 2018).
- 6 Saul Austerlitz, “The Pernicious Rise of Poptimism,” *New York Times Magazine* (April 4, 2014). <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/06/magazine/the-pernicious-rise-of-poptimism.html> (accessed: June 1, 2018).
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Keenan, “Gender Trouble.”
- 9 Although, of course, there have been times when Mitchell has, tongue in cheek set out to create a pop record. See her account of “You Turn Me On, I’m A Radio” in Marom, 68.
- 10 See Vic Garbarini, “Joni Mitchell Is a Nervy Broad,” *Musician Magazine* (January, 1983). <http://jonimitchell.com/library/print.cfm?id=199> (accessed: June 2, 2018). Joni Mitchell also really likes The New Radical’s “You Get What You Give.” See David Wild, “Q&A: Joni Mitchell,” *Rolling Stone* (April 13, 2000). <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/joni-mitchell-q-a-20000413> (accessed: June 2, 2018).
- 11 The “vast majority” of female fans “are not fanning properly,” declares Meghan Daum, *The Unspeakable and Other Subjects of Discussion* (New York: Picador, 2014), 151.
- 12 Ann Powers, “A New Canon: In Pop Music, Women Belong at the Center of the Story,” *NPR Music* (July 24, 2017). <https://www.npr.org/2017/07/24/538601651/a-new-canon-in-pop-music-women-belong-at-the-center-of-the-story> (accessed: June 2, 2018).
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 You can read the account in full in Barney Hoskyn, *Hotel California: Singer-Songwriters and Cocaine Cowboys in the LA Canyons, 1967–1976* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), 43.
- 15 Powers, “A New Canon.”
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 David Wild, “Morrissey Meets Joni Mitchell: Melancholy and the Infinite Sadness.”
- 18 In a Q&A with David Wild for *Rolling Stone* (October 15, 1992). <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/joni-mitchell-19921015> (accessed: June 3, 2018);

- in a 1998 conversation with Ani DiFranco for the *Los Angeles Times*: <http://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=150> (accessed: June 3, 2018); and in a 2013 interview with Jian Ghomeshi which you can watch, in its entirety, here: <http://jonimitchell.com/library/video.cfm?id=391> (accessed: June 3, 2018).
- 19 There is much, much more to be said on Kelly's performances as Joni Mitchell than I have space for here, unfortunately. For a great example, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YGI_s7wsZXI (accessed: June 3, 2018).
 - 20 Joni Mitchell, "Hejira," *Hejira* (Hollywood: Asylum Records, 1976).
 - 21 Joni Mitchell, *Love Has Many Faces: A Quartet, A Ballet, Waiting to Be Danced* (Rhino Entertainment Company, 2014), liner notes, 10.
 - 22 In her account of listening to Joni Mitchell, author Zadie Smith has said this is the only way she can listen. See Zadie Smith, "Some Notes on Attunement: A Voyage around Joni Mitchell," *New Yorker* (December 17, 2012). <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/12/17/some-notes-on-attunement> (accessed: June 2, 2018).
 - 23 For example, William Cheng's *Just Vibrations: The Purpose of Sounding Good*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2016.
 - 24 Joni Mitchell, "Dancin' Clown," *Chalk Mark in a Rain Storm* (Hollywood: Geffen Records, 1998). See video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73IvazD2u6c> (accessed: June 2, 2018).
 - 25 Joni Mitchell, *The Joni Mitchell Interview* (CBC Music, 2013). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEJuiZN3jI8> (accessed: June 2, 2018).
 - 26 *Love Has Many Faces*, liner notes, 5.
 - 27 Interested readers can watch this film here: <http://jonimitchell.com/library/video.cfm?id=412>.
 - 28 Joni Mitchell, *The Joni Mitchell Interview* (CBC Music, 2013). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEJuiZN3jI8> (accessed: June 2, 2018).
 - 29 Joni Mitchell, "Shadows and Light," *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* (Hollywood: Asylum Records, 1975).

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