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Nelly Furman, *Georges Bizet's Carmen*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. ix + 134 pp. Illustrations, notes, index, companion website. \$78.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780190059149; \$16.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780190059156; \$10.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780190059156.

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Nelly Furman acknowledges that “given the popularity of *Carmen*, any discourse on it—whether a remake of the story or a critical exercise like the one in this book—partakes of the *déjà vu* (*already seen*), the *déjà entendu* (*already heard*), or *déjà lu* (*already read*), and thereby defies any claim to originality” (p. 105). First published as a novella in 1845 by Prosper Mérimée, set as an opera in 1875 by Georges Bizet, then reimagined through countless stagings, revisions, and new media, it is indeed hard to know where to start with *Carmen*. In this book, Furman acknowledges the magnitude of the task at hand but revels in the story’s richness, enticed by *Carmen’s* perpetual reinvention across time, place, language, and genre. Furman argues *Carmen* is a “modern myth” reflecting “the perceived needs, anxieties, and unacknowledged issues of a society” (p. 4). Moreover, this myth seems to invite oppositional readings. Is *Carmen* about freedom or victimization? Is it misogynist or feminist? Dwelling in this interpretative space, this book attempts “to understand the lasting pertinence of *Carmen*: to account for the success of the story in the industrial age, to discern its attraction in our own cinematic era, to describe the elements of the story that give it its cultural salience and resonance, and to understand these features as markers of both the social realities and the cultural unconscious of our times” (p. 5). Furman’s analytical frameworks draw from Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Clement, Adorno, and Irigaray, among others; her most obvious musicological influence comes from Susan McClary, though she also situates her readings within the Bizetian biographical oeuvre of Paul Landormy, Mina Curtiss, Winton Dean, Michel Cardoze, and Rémy Stricker. While the title of this book claims to treat “Georges Bizet’s *Carmen*,” in reality Furman focuses on a broader swath of *Carmens* including the opera libretto, novella, and selected films. Arguing that myths resist the notion of “original text,” Furman begins with the opera libretto, turns to the novella, then concludes with *Carmen* films. Her reasoning is valid, but I wonder whether the circumnavigations between versions (particularly changes from the Mérimée novella to the Bizet opera) might merit an appendix, online guide, or prefatory material for readers less familiar with these iterations.

Opening with Nietzsche’s contrast of Bizet’s “realistic” love versus Wagner’s idealized depiction, chapter one considers gender, love, language, myth, and politics in the Bizet opera. Furman explores Don José and Carmen as “mirrored” characters: each have been interpreted as both victim and victimizer, bull and matador (p. 21). Reading *Carmen* as liberated rather than libertine, Furman explores the title character through nineteenth-century ideologies of class, gender,

social order, and belonging. She argues that through the newly invented characters of Micaëla and Escamillo, librettists Meilhac and Halévy “affirm conventional notions of sexual difference, while simultaneously blurring gender differentiation in the characters of Carmen and José” (p. 24). Though this chapter largely analyses the libretto’s language and plot, Furman briefly touches on musical details through a capsule discussion of operatic voice typologies, rich cultural contexts that construe mezzo-soprano voices, for example, as sapphonic, old, evil, or *femme fatale*. These vocal ideologies are interwoven with stereotypes about gender, sexuality, race, disability, and other identities—interested readers can seek out copious musicological writing on this subject.[1] In her discussion of voice, Furman also notes how *opéra-comique* conventions frame *Carmen’s* relationships. Carmen’s *mezzo* voice signals her fundamental incompatibility with Don José, whereas Act I’s “Ma mère je le vois” is not at all the right kind of love duet between a tenor (Don José) and soprano (Micaëla). Addressing Don José and Carmen’s radically different visions of love, Furman’s analysis focuses on language, parsing how verb inflections in the “Habañera” and “Flower” arias indicate different views of the subject-object relationship. Borrowing from Lévi-Strauss, Furman describes Carmen as a *bricoleuse*, a virtuosic linguistic performer who deftly handles simile, zeugma, and metaphor. Don José, however, relies on a repetitive repertoire of metonyms. For Furman, the characters’ divergent use of language comprises “one more set of dichotomies in the long inventory of oppositions that structure Bizet’s opera” (p. 35). Furman closes the chapter with Bizet’s campaign to stage *Carmen* at the Opéra-Comique, a theater known for “domestic bourgeois respectability” and profoundly ill at ease with Carmen’s character, behavior, and the opera’s tragic denouement (p. 41). Weighing Bizet’s possible motivations—including tensions in his marriage and a vogue for stage exoticism—Furman explores ties between politics and *Carmen*, namely connections to the Franco-Prussian War and Paris Commune. While politics and trauma are important to consider, it’s not particularly surprising Bizet omitted commentary about the fate of the Communards from his correspondence (both government censorship and individual silence about the Commune lasted throughout the 1870s).[2] Ultimately, Furman concludes, much of the continued relevance of *Carmen* lies in its dichotomies: “placed between Carmen and José, facing the empty space between opposites, the spectator of Bizet’s opera occupies the space of the backslash between dichotomies. Consciously or not, the spectator identifies with one, or the other, or both of the protagonists, and thus partakes in the struggle enacted onstage” (p. 48).

Chapter two deals with Prosper Mérimée’s *Carmen*, a three-chapter novella first published in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* in 1845—Mérimée added a fourth chapter in 1847, ostensibly an ethnological study of Roma customs and language. The novella is framed by a French traveler-narrator who meets José and Carmen and “transcribes” some of their stories; Mérimée muddled matters further by claiming *he* was “only recounting a story” heard years before (p. 67). These multiple framing devices obfuscate whether the narrator, Don José, or Mérimée observe, condone, or participate in the novella’s action. Furman connects this narrative distancing to failures of responsibility and psychologies of disavowal, particularly those connected to misogyny and racism. *Carmen’s* framing devices also blur distinctions between travelogue, novel, documentary, and scientific treatise. In her multifaceted discussion of science and race in this chapter, it is a little surprising Furman neglects to mention the role of travel writing in colonialism (particularly vis-à-vis the work of Edward Said).[3] Furman does position the novella within nineteenth-century academic discourse, noting *Carmen’s* copious footnotes and Mérimée’s own work as France’s Inspector General of Historical Monuments. She calls attention to *Carmen’s* scholarly pose, beginning with the Greek pun in the infamously misogynist epigraph (“every woman is bitter as gall. But she has two good moments: one in the nuptial bed, the other

at her death”) (p. 54). Situating Carmen’s murder as a racist hate crime, Furman explores Mérimée’s incorporation of nineteenth-century racial frameworks from authors such as Arthur de Gobineau (p. 63). While her focus centers on language and race in Mérimée’s purportedly scientific chapter, Furman’s argument evokes other scholarship exploring the kinship between nineteenth-century science and racism.[4] Furman argues that Mérimée deploys knowledge and language in defense of the traveler-narrator and against the Other; he constructs the narrator’s multilingual references as erudite but Roma linguistic virtuosity as dangerous. Mérimée ends *Carmen* by detailing “a few slang words borrowed from the Gypsies by our thieves here in France,” a sentiment Furman evaluates via French bourgeois anxieties about the working class, “Bohemians,” and “foreigners” (p. 69). Furman concludes that “under the cover of having a historical and scientific purpose, Mérimée’s narrator becomes a witness testifying for José, his character, and the truth of his story” (p. 73).

Chapter three surveys the prodigious legacy of *Carmen* on film, divided into sections on “silent” and studio era versions, the Otto Preminger *Carmen Jones* (1954), the 1983 *Carmen* movies, and three *Carmen* retellings from the new millennium.[5] Furman begins with brief contextual analysis of films from the 1910s-30s—Chaplin, DeMille/Farrar, Lubitsch/Negri, Walsh/Bara, Walsh/del Rio, Reiniger, Vidor/Hayworth—borrowing concepts from Laura Mulvey’s well-known theories on looking, pleasure, and the male gaze.[6] Furman suggests American *Carmen* adaptations in the 1910s worked through anxieties about World War I and women’s suffrage, that the alternate ending of Reiniger’s animated film foreshadows later feminist versions, and that “the camera follows José’s gaze” in many *Carmen* films (p. 81). Furman rightly notes the import of Cecil B. DeMille’s 1915 *Carmen* starring the famous opera singer Geraldine Farrar (although she gives a somewhat nebulous description of this film’s screening at Boston Symphony Hall).[7] For these early films, Furman might have commented on *Carmen*’s messy legal issues; due to problems with copyright, some early films chose the Mérimée novella as source text rather than Bizet’s opera.[8] Furman next surveys Otto Preminger’s *Carmen Jones* (1954), a film adaptation of Oscar Hammerstein II’s musical starring Dorothy Dandridge, Harry Belafonte, and Pearl Bailey. Her discussion touches on plot alterations, cultural capital of operas versus musicals, and the racial politics of dubbing Dandridge and Belafonte’s voices. There is such a rich secondary literature on Hammerstein’s musical and Preminger’s film—from James Baldwin’s sharp critique to Furman’s own essay to articles by Annegret Fauser, Melinda Boyd, and others—that it feels a bit unsettling to address this complex and problematic intermedial work in such succinct fashion.[9] Furman situates the three 1983 *Carmen* films (Francesco Rosi, Carlos Saura, and Jean-Luc Godard) in the context of 1980s gender politics, arguing they generally offer anti-feminist stances. Furman pulls at various threads in each film, including the symbolism of Rosi’s bullfights, tensions between exoticism and “real” Spanish music in Saura/Gades, and Godard’s use of Beethoven rather than Bizet. In her final section, Furman covers a trifecta of early twenty-first-century adaptations: Robert Townsend’s *Carmen: A Hip Hopera* (2001), Joseph Gaï Ramaka’s *Karmen Geï* (2001), and *U-Carmen* from the Dimpho Di Kopane theater company (2005). Roaming from an MTV production to a Senegalese film to a South African theater production—and sonically shifting from nineteenth-century French opera to hip-hop, Senegalese music, and the Xhosa language—these examples demonstrate the continued relevance and elasticity of *Carmen*. Furman argues these *Carmens* “transmit a political vision by showing the social issues facing the protagonists, referencing historical events, recording indigenous music, or representing community traditions” (p. 102). They demonstrate how new iterations of the *Carmen* myth not only continue to emerge, but also constantly reshape our understandings of Mérimée and Bizet.

Furman's conclusion surveys *Carmen's* role in continual conflicts about marriage, love, passion, seduction, and flirtation. She notes innovative commentaries on gender, sexuality, voice type, and race emerge in contemporary *Carmens*, such as the score's use in *Dear White People* (2015), the play *Carmen Disruption* (2015), and stagings at Opera MODO (2016), Aix-en-Provence (2017), and Covent Garden (2018). I might add Chicago Opera Theater's 2021 semi-staged production featuring Jamie Barton as Carmen and Blythely Oratonio (tenor alter ego of Stephanie Blythe) as Don José to this catalogue. Furman concludes by emphasizing the perpetual relevance of *Carmen*, noting "the many themes arising in Bizet's opera and Mérimée's novella--misogyny, racism, claims to scientific authority, social needs, economic productivity, cultural identity, personal desire, and the many faces of love--present a multitude of contested sites as sources of inspiration for artists in all media" (p. 114).

This book joins roughly fifteen other volumes on music within the Oxford Keynotes series, a venture inaugurated in 2017 which "reimagines the canons of Western music for the twenty-first century" by focusing on a single composition or album. Oxford Keynotes are concise explorations (generally around 150 pages); this work on *Carmen* joins Keynotes volumes on Sergei Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky*, Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Carousel*, and Laurie Anderson's *Big Science*, among others. The condensed scope of this particular volume is both appealing and provoking. Via a specific lens on *Carmen*, it offers some significant payoff in a relatively short text, one which prompts rich discussions on intermedial mythic adaptations. Brief but wide-ranging, the book speaks to a variety of potential readers. Yet at nearly every turn it introduces subjects that merit deeper investigation--and subjects already discussed elsewhere in depth by other authors or Furman herself. *Carmen* is already a capacious topic, but truly extensive literature exists on other issues raised within the book, such as connections between nineteenth-century science and race, musical exoticism, operatic vocal stereotypes, or gender ideologies in opera. This book is obviously not intended to provide expansive coverage of any of these topics, but there are times when connections seem too pat or underdeveloped in the space allotted.

Overall, Furman offers an invigorating discussion of a fascinating but unwieldy subject. Her analysis focuses primarily on language, plot, and cultural meaning in the libretto, novella, and filmic adaptations--readers looking for discussion of Bizet's music or operatic performance practice will want to seek out other sources to compliment Furman's approach. Neither the companion website nor the "Sources for Further Reading/Listening/and Viewing" provides substantial assistance in seeking out such additional materials. At present, the companion site only includes book and author information and color versions of the book's figures. Copyright provisions may throw up roadblocks, but it's appealing to envision this book accompanied by a more robust menu of recordings, performances, or other audio-visual materials. While the book's "Sources for Further Reading, Listening, and Viewing" does include useful suggestions, both the main text and this appendix might engage more readily with recent work on *Carmen*. Projects such as Hugh Macdonald's Bizet catalogue or the wonderful collaborative venture *Carmen Abroad* provide captivating additional information for readers via open-source Internet materials. Moreover, both of these sources underscore Furman's overall argument about the importance, ubiquity, and global spread of *Carmen*. [10]

NOTES

[1] See, among others, Elizabeth Wood, "Sapponics," in Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, Gary C. Thomas, eds., *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 27-66; Margaret Reynolds, "Ruggiero's Deceptions, Cherubino's Distractions," in Corinne E. Blackmer, Patricia Juliana Smith, eds., *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 132-151; Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

[2] On connections between Bizet, *Carmen*, and the Commune, see Delphine Mordey, "Carmen, Commune Bizet, 'Habanera' (*Carmen*), 'Carmen', Act I," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 28, no. 2 (2016): 215-19. For more on the Commune, sound, trauma, and forgetting, see Erin Brooks, "Sonic Scars in Urban Space: Trauma and the Parisian Soundscape during *l'année terrible*," *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* (2022): 1-32.

[3] See, for example, Claire Lindsay, "Travel Writing and Postcolonial Studies," in Carl Thompson, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing* (London: Routledge, 2015), 25-34. There is also a copious literature on exoticism and *Carmen*; see Ralph P. Locke, *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Ralph P. Locke, "Spanish Local Color in Bizet's *Carmen*: Unexplored Borrowings and Transformations," in Annegret Falser and Mark Everist, eds., *Music, Theater, and Cultural Transfer: Paris, 1830-1914* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009), 316-360; José F. Colmeiro, "Exorcising Exoticism: *Carmen* and the Construction of Oriental Spain," *Comparative Literature* 54, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 127-144.

[4] See, among others, Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016).

[5] Furman cites several influential studies on the *Carmen* film oeuvre, including Phil Powrie, Bruce Babington, Ann Davies, and Chris Perriam, eds., *Carmen on Film: A Cultural History* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2007); Chris Perriam and Ann Davies, eds., *Carmen: From Silent Film to MTV* (New York: Editions Rodopi B.V, 2005).

[6] Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989).

[7] Riesenfeld did not direct Geraldine Farrar in a live performance (there was a live orchestra at Boston's Symphony Hall, but Farrar watched the film from the audience). See Erin M. Brooks, "Movies at the Met? Space and Meaning in Early Film Screenings," *American Music* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 3-45.

[8] See *Carmen, based on Prosper Mérimée's story, illustrated from the Jesse L. Lasky Photo-play, released through the Paramount Picture Corporation under the direction of Cecil B. DeMille, and acted by Geraldine Farrar, by arrangement with Morris Gest* (New York: A.L. Burt, 1915).

[9] James Baldwin, "Carmen Jones: The Dark is Light Enough," in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 46-54; Nelly Furman, "Screen Politics: Otto Preminger's *Carmen Jones*," in Chris Perriam and Ann Davies, eds., *Carmen: From Silent Film to MTV* (New York: Editions Rodopi B.V, 2005), 121-133; Annegret Fauser, "Dixie *Carmen*: War, Race, and Identity in Oscar

Hammerstein's *Carmen Jones* (1943)," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 4, no. 2 (2010): 127-154; Melinda Boyd, "The Politics of Color in Oscar Hammerstein's *Carmen Jones*," in Naomi André, Karen M. Bryan, and Eric Saylor, eds., *Blackness in Opera* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 212-235.

[10] <http://digital.wustl.edu/bizet/>, accessed 15 February 2022 and <https://carmenabroad.org>, accessed 10 February 2022

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