

11-2021

The Music of Neoliberalism: “Only You” in Roger King’s A Girl from Zanzibar

R. Benedito Ferrão

William & Mary, rbferrao@wm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/aspubs>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), [Music Commons](#), and the [South and Southeast Asian Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ferrão, R. Benedito, The Music of Neoliberalism: “Only You” in Roger King’s A Girl from Zanzibar (2021). *Roadsides*, 006, 30-35.
<https://www.doi.org/10.26034/roadsides-202100605>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Arts and Sciences at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Arts & Sciences Articles by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

The Music of Neoliberalism: “Only You” in Roger King’s *A Girl from Zanzibar*

R. Benedito Ferrão

Marcella D’Souza arrives in England from Zanzibar with a vision. The Goan-Arab protagonist of Roger King’s *A Girl from Zanzibar* dreams of herself upstairs in “a fashionable London house. There was a party... My dress... was expensive. I was smiling, chatting... Oddly,... I was also the pensive, shadowy girl standing in the street below, looking up at the woman in the window” (King 2002: 4). Replete with the sensoriality of the city, this written description of a migrant’s encounter with the First World privileges the visual. Yet this account of immigrant aspiration conceals the unheard urban soundscape of modernity and its infrastructures, like traffic and the electric buzz of streetlights. Even the music from the party is inaudible. Consider how Alison Moyet’s opening lyrics in “Only You” aurally echo Marcella’s fantasy: “Looking from a window above / It’s like a story of love / Can you hear me? / Came back only yesterday / I’m moving further away / Want you near me” (Yazoo 1982).



[Yazoo “Only You”](#)

As I ‘hear’ the song by the British band in the novel, it plays like the synthpop soundtrack to the fraught nature of infrastructural changes effected by the Thatcherite government,

the neoliberal regime in power at the time of Marcella's arrival in England. When heard alongside *A Girl from Zanzibar*, "Only You" lyrically and historically signals infrastructural change in the 1980s, while striking a discordant note of resistance.

Although the sonic illustrates the effects of neoliberalism that are the *mise-en-scène* of King's novel, it is also instructive to consider how broadcasting utilities in Britain were (de)regulated by the Conservatives during Margaret Thatcher's tenure. By restructuring the British Broadcasting Corporation, and limiting its coverage, the Prime Minister eroded its "institutional reputation... [and] the right of free expression" (Edgerton 1996: 124). Accordingly, Thatcher's circumscription of acceptable public broadcasting influenced the cultural zeitgeist and the communal sensorium shared by a populace attuned to the same audiovisual programs, nationwide. The endgame, however, was the privatization of radio and television (ibid.: 126).

Examining the relationship between biopolitics and neoliberalism, Michel Foucault identifies the evolution of a form of governmentality that "rationalize[s] the problems posed to government practice by phenomena characteristic of a set of living beings forming a population" (2008: 317), only so that the state can free itself of and transfer these responsibilities to the private sector. For the Thatcher administration, shirking off its biopolitical role in managing affordable housing was a hallmark of its neoliberal governmental strategy, not unlike its divestiture of public broadcasting. Additionally, "by refusing to allow councils to build more stock, [the Conservatives] ultimately forced up [housing] prices as demand rose" (Bragg 2009). Seizing opportunity in the wake of the privatization of government properties, Marcella's real-estate dealings are precisely how she achieves her immigrant dreams. But they do not last. Nor is the song silently playing in King's novel an amenable accompaniment.

Although an undocumented migrant, Marcella's middle-class background, education, business experience and knowledge of English give her the "skills and social capital to facilitate [her] station... [as a] technocrat" (Prashad 2000: 101); she becomes a model minority in the once-metropolitan imperial center. Seed investment from an acquaintance allows Marcella to become a businesswoman. She gets rich "because the Conservatives were selling off poor people's council homes" (King 2002: 245), which Marcella buys and turns into upmarket properties. Even her outsider status affords Marcella an advantage. She muses: "Asians trusted me because I was Asian, Middle-Easterners because I was Middle-Eastern, Africans because I was African... Zanzibar's accumulated history had prepared me perfectly" (ibid.: 209). Suturing a colonial heritage to postcolonial neoliberalism, Marcella's model minority status is inflected by her interraciality which, when parlayed into a purposeful multiculturalism, is pressed into the service of the economy.

And yet, there is a hollowness to these efforts. Evidencing the picaresque nature of the novel, later in life when she resides in the United States, Marcella recalls the dream that simultaneously placed her in a luxurious flat and on the desolate street below, causing her to attest elegiacally: "This was all I had for Europe..." (King 2002: 4). This reflection is mirrored in the moment where the figures in Yazoo's song and King's tale look out ponderously onto the world below from windows. Where Marcella admits that she sees herself as "the pensive, shadowy girl standing in the street" (King 2002:

4), the “[o]nly you” of the song’s lyrics suggests one person viewing another as they are “moving further away” (Yazoo 1982). Nevertheless, as the protagonists report their sightings from the reflective surface of windows, what if both are actually gazing upon themselves in the (looking) glass? This self-perception, akin to the mirror-phase of development, as Jacques Lacan holds, gives rise to the “I... before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other” (1968: 72, italics original).



In turn, Abdul R. JanMohamed classifies what he sees in “the colonialist cognitive framework and colonialist literary representation [as a] manichean allegory – a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between... self and Other, subject and object” (1985: 63). What colonialism rents asunder, the postcolonial subject in *A Girl from Zanzibar* attempts to resolve by internalizing the other who is the distanced image of their own self. “Only You” and the dreamscape in the novel overlap in their portrayal of a Manichean duality, where a subject sees herself as at once successful *and* potentially indigent. The unnamed “you” in the song is like the rich Marcella being watched by her houseless double at street-level, whom she yearns to have near as if to protect this separated twin. For Marcella, her immigrant dream and source of profit – the housing market – is also the font of hypothetical loss (which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy). Leaving behind a former colony to live in the West as an undocumented person of color, she enriches herself from the destitution of others in a country that has pulled back from its biopolitical responsibilities. But if the state

(Not) Only You

Illustration: Vanessa de Sa, 2021.

can do this to its own citizens, what qualms would it have to dispossess someone who has gained entry to the country illicitly? It is this infrastructural capriciousness that Marcella negotiates, even as she lives a privileged life – a duality of plenty and precarity sonically paralleled in “Only You.”

In addition to the dismantling of public broadcasting and housing enterprises, interference in labor and energy industries was also on the neoliberal agenda in Thatcher’s England. The year 1984 saw the closure of Yorkshire’s coalpits, which resulted in union-led strikes by miners; anticipating such actions, Thatcher had stockpiled coal to undermine protests (Jeavans 2004). The Conservatives’ desire was to circumvent “a nationalised coal industry requiring massive subsidies [for this] was anathema to the Thatcher government’s long-term economic goals” (ibid.). Further, as Billy Bragg (2009) uncovers: “Without powerful unions..., the wages of ordinary workers were held in check while the cost of housing... spiral[ed] upwards.” This made workers susceptible to another of Thatcher’s schemes, in which “a newly deregulated banking sector began offering ever more ‘attractive’ loans” that would cause future financial problems (ibid.).

King fictionalizes the aforementioned events. Cocooned in wealthy Bayswater, Marcella admits to not knowing the “news from England” (2002: 228), as if falling into Thatcher’s trap of an enfeebled national broadcasting service that would limit publicly available information (Edgerton 1996: 126–27). Disconnected from national goings on, Marcella is unaware that “[s]triking coal miners were... fighting with police... The police were battling people in the cities too, mostly black people” (King 2002: 229). With no need to be concerned about her livelihood in the way of the miners, it is also true that Marcella benefits from schemes put in place by the same administration that dispossessed those workers. But in a twist, Marcella’s undocumented status is revealed when she gets drawn into a skirmish involving Kamara, a Black friend of hers, and “policemen [who] had just finished a spell in Yorkshire, battling striking miners. Earlier... they had been fighting a mainly black riot... against the police actions in London’s Tottenham and apparently still had it in their heads when they surfaced... in cheerful multi-racial Bayswater” where they levy a trumped-up charge against Kamara, which also embroils Marcella and results in her incarceration (King 2002: 275).

In the face of nationwide unrest in 1984, mobile or “[f]lying pickets became a regular feature at [pit protests],” their aim being to convince miners “to stay away from work” (Jeavans 2004). The Christmas prior, an a cappella version of “Only You” topped the 1983 UK charts and was, reputedly, Thatcher’s favorite holiday song (Webb 2012: 156). It was not Yazoo performing this time, but The Flying Pickets. The name of the band came from its members’ involvement in a socialist theatre production about the British miners’ strikes of the 1970s (The Flying Pickets 2021). The re-release of “Only You” on an album the next year coincided with the 1984 strikes and, through the story behind The Flying Pickets’ name, telescoped the history of the 1970s miner protests into the political milieu of the 1980s – although the outcome was very different.



The Flying Pickets “Only You”

Thatcher may, ironically, have heard the track on the very broadcasting service she was disassembling. What did she make of the genesis of this band that sang her

favorite holiday song? That question may remain unanswered. However, the more persistent query is the one in the song's lyrics: "Can you hear me?" (Yazoo 1982). A call to hear the song's association with protest history, its reverberation in *A Girl from Zanzibar* intones the limits of a neoliberal society. In this echo chamber of immigrant aspirations – of being "Only You" – what is left unheard is the instructive discordance "in the street below."

References

- Bragg, Billy. 2009. "How we all lost when Thatcher won." *The Guardian*, 5 March 2009. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/mar/05/miners-strike-thatcherism-billy-bragg>
- Edgerton, Gary. 1996. "Quelling the 'Oxygen of Publicity': British Broadcasting and 'The Troubles' During the Thatcher Years." *Journal of Popular Culture* 30 (1): 115–31.
- Foucault, Michel. 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978–1979*, translated by Graham Burchell, edited by Michel Senellart et al. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- JanMohamed, Abdul. 1985. "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature." *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1): 59–87. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343462>
- Jeavans, Christine. 2004. "The miners' darkest year." *BBC News*, 4 March 2004. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/3494024.stm
- King, Roger. 2002. *A Girl from Zanzibar*. New York: Helen Marx Books.
- Lacan, Jacques. 1968. "The Mirror-Phase as Formative of the Function of the I." *New Left Review* 1 (51): 71–77.
- Prashad, Vijay. 2000. *The Karma of Brown Folk*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- The Flying Pickets. 2021. "History." <https://www.pickets.co.uk/history-1>
- Webb, Robert. 2012. *The 100 Greatest Cover Versions: The Ultimate Playlist*. Carmarthen: McNidder and Grace.
- Yazoo. 1982. "Only You." Album: *Upstairs at Eric's*. London: Blackwing Studios.

Cite as: Ferrão, R. Benedito. 2021. "The Music of Neoliberalism: "Only You" in Roger King's *A Girl from Zanzibar*." *Roadsides* 6: 30-35. <https://doi.org/10.26034/roadsides-202100605>

Author:



R. Benedito Ferrão has lived and worked in Asia, Europe, North America and Oceania. He is an Assistant Professor of English and Asian & Pacific Islander American Studies at the College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia. He is the recipient of fellowships from the Fulbright, Mellon, Endeavour and Rotary programs, as well as the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies. Curator of the 2017–18 exhibition *Goa, Portugal, Mozambique: The Many Lives of Vamona Navelcar*, he edited a book of the same title (Fundação Oriente 2017) to accompany this retrospective of the artist's work. His scholarly writing appears in various international journals and edited books, including *Research in African Literatures*, *Society and Culture in South Asia*, *Gender, Sexuality, Decolonization: South Asia in the World Perspective* (Routledge 2021) and *Places of Nature in Ecologies of Urbanism* (HKU Press 2017). His fiction and creative non-fiction can be read in *Riksha*, *The Good Men Project*, *Mizna* and *The João Roque Literary Journal*, while his op-eds have appeared in *Scroll* and *The Wire*.

Roadsides is a diamond Open Access journal designated to be a forum devoted to exploring the social, cultural and political life of infrastructure.



🌐 roadsides.net
✉ editor@roadsides.net
🐦 [@road_sides](https://twitter.com/road_sides)
📷 [@roadsides_journal](https://www.instagram.com/roadsides_journal)

Editorial Team:

Julie Chu (University of Chicago)
Tina Harris (University of Amsterdam)
Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi (University of Fribourg)
Madlen Kobi (Academy of Architecture, Mendrisio)
Galen Murton (James Madison University, Harrisonburg)
Nadine Plachta (University of Toronto)
Matthäus Rest (Max-Planck-Institute for the Science of Human History, Jena)
Alessandro Rippa (LMU Munich and Tallinn University)
Martin Saxer (LMU Munich)
Christina Schwenkel (University of California, Riverside)
Max D. Woodworth (The Ohio State University)

Collection no. 006 was edited by: **Christina Schwenkel**
Managing editor: **Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi**
Copyediting: **David Hawkins**
Layout: **Chantal Hinni and Antoni Kwiatkowski**

ISSN 2624-9081

Creative Commons License

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

