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# "You Understand Me Now": Sampling Nina Simone in Hip Hop

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"You Understand Me Now": Sampling Nina Simone in Hip Hop

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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## Table of Contents

List of Figures	ii
Abstract	iii
Intro: Or, Revolutions per Minute: A Decadent Consciousness	1
Chapter One: 50 Cent is the Future: Decadence, Domination and Self-Definition in Commercial Hip Hop	31
"I'll Push up on a Bitch": Internecine Competition and Intersectional Othering in Commercial Hip Hop	36
The Elephant in the Hip Hop Room: Heteronormativity, Heterosexual Relationships, Controlling Images and Self-Definition in Commercial Hip Hop	49
Conclusion, or Toward a Disquieted Revolution	59
Chapter Two: "She All Right 'Cus She Done Seen the Circle of Life": The Social Activism and Self-Definition of Revolutionary Hip Hop	62
"I'm Just a Soul Whose Intentions are Good": Reverence, Revolution, and the Morality of "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood"	64
"Something Akin to Ascension": Elevation and Feminized Revolution in "Freedom" and "Fo(u)r Women"	77
Outro, or: Personal Revolutions	92
Bibliography	97

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1: from "Bad News" by G-Unit.....	45
Figure 2: from "Freedom" by Tony Moon.....	83

## **Abstract**

The overarching goal of this research is to explicate the implications of hip hop artists sampling Nina Simone's music in their work. By regarding Simone as a critical social theorist in her own right, one can hear the ways that hip hop artists are mobilizing her tradition of socially active self-definition from the Civil Rights/Black Power era(s) in the post-2000 United States. By examining both the lyrics and the instrumental compositions of Lil Wayne, Juelz Santana, Common, Tony Moon, Talib Kweli, Mary J. Blige and Will.I.Am, G-Unit and Timbaland, and bearing in mind the intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality, this study concludes that the way that these artists employ Simone's recorded voice in their works oftentimes corresponds to the degree to which they retain her figurative message. While many would assume that these tendencies would correspond with the subgenres of "mainstream" and "conscious" hip hop, in fact the fluidity and complexity of these artists' positions in subgenre refutes this essentialist notion. By engaging in an intersectional analysis of the political and personal implications of hip hop sampling, this essay provides a critical interpretation of the ways the cultural products of the "Civil Rights era" still operate in contemporary U.S. society. These operations are integral to the human rights struggle in which we are all still very much engaged.

## **Intro: Or, Revolutions per Minute: A Decadent Consciousness**

In 2010, William Morris Endeavor's Global Finance and Distribution Group announced plans to produce a biopic of Nina Simone's life, starring the contemporary "queen of hip hop soul" Mary J. Blige.<sup>1</sup> Although production of the film has subsequently been delayed because of scheduling issues with other projects<sup>2</sup> the prospect of the project raises an interesting proposition for cultural commentators and the movie-going and music-listening public alike. How is it that this current media superstar will assume the role of such an historically specific figure? Aside from the perfunctory acting classes, piano lessons and vocal training, what does it mean for a black woman in the post-2000 United States to assume the mantle of a cultural giant from the Civil Rights/Black Power era(s) like Nina Simone? In addition, how will the global corporate interests that fund this project shape its production, tone, promotion and reception? And what meaning will audiences gain from it?

This is not the first time such questions could be posed of a virtual, intergenerational collaboration between Mary J. Blige and the late Nina Simone. On her 2005 release *The Breakthrough* Blige features a deceptively powerful track entitled "About You,"<sup>3</sup> for which producer Will.I.Am samples Simone's classic 1965 recording "Feeling Good."<sup>4</sup> While the way that he samples from the track is fairly distinctive, Will.I.Am is far from the only hip hop producer to draw from this recording, or Simone's catalog in general. Particularly since the singer's death in 2003, the trend of sampling her music in hip hop has become somewhat pervasive.

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Kemp, "Cynthia Mort's Film Focuses on Simone and Her Assistant," *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 14, 2010, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/mary-j-blige-play-nina-23583>.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Arceneaux, "Mary J. Blige Led Nina Simone Biopic Delayed," *BET.com*, July 13, 2011, <http://www.bet.com/news/celebrities/2011/07/13/mary-j-blige-led-nina-simone-biopic-delayed.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Mary J. Blige and Will.I.Am, "About You," *The Breakthrough*. 2005, Geffen.

<sup>4</sup> Nina Simone, "Feeling Good," *I Put a Spell on You*. 1965, Philips.

This trend is significant because Nina Simone articulated an ethic and aesthetic of social activism and self-definition against controlling images throughout her life and work. This overarching framework ran as a consistent thread throughout her personal/professional life, her performance style, and her music. As a black female musician who grew up singing and playing in church in the rural South, Simone's rise to fame would have fit neatly into an "authentic" blueswoman typology. However her extensive classical training and tenure at Julliard exploded this essentialist image for her audiences and the popular press during her career.<sup>5</sup> Further, her virtuosity established her in circles of classical and jazz criticism, traditionally male-dominated "high culture." By establishing a public persona outside of what was then acceptable for or expected of a black female singer, Nina Simone succeeded in defining herself before the eyes and ears of the U.S. and the world. She used her cultural clout to leverage support for the black freedom struggle, performing at various times for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, the Congress for Racial Equality, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Simone created a self-defined public persona as a black woman activist musician who did not conform to the prevailing images of how she "should" behave.

This aesthetic and ethical articulation and practice comprise what I will refer to as Nina Simone's "grammar of cultural production,"<sup>6</sup> or critical social theory. Although those in the traditional academe do not generally view musicians as intellectual theorists, regarding Nina Simone as a critical social theorist in her own

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<sup>5</sup> As Ruth Feldstein notes, "Her 'origins story' countered a racial essentialism that had historically rendered all black artists 'natural' entertainers. The emphasis on Simone's years of classical piano training and hard work challenged the myth, still common in the 1960s, that African Americans were inherently inclined only to entertain." Ruth Feldstein "'I Don't Trust You Anymore': Nina Simone, Culture and Black Activism" *The Journal of American History* 91:4 (Mar., 2005): 1356.

<sup>6</sup> I am drawing on Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison's idea of cultural production in social movements as cognitive praxis, from *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998).



right is essential to preserving the radical subjectivity that she fought so hard to articulate and maintain in her life and work.<sup>7</sup> For a hip hop artist, choosing to sample Nina Simone can be a political or aesthetic decision, or most often a combination of the two. Similarly, hearing a Nina Simone sample can be both a pedagogic and a sensual experience for the listener; as a Signifyin(g) symbol, the hip hop sample carries only the meaning that a listener ascribes to it.<sup>8</sup> However the manner in which these artists sample Simone's work as well as the nature of the lyrics that accompany their beats can affect the extent to which her critical social theory remains intact. The hip hop artists that sample Simone's work are mobilizing her tradition of social protest and self-definition to varying degrees. By retaining Simone's voice in ways more faithful to her original recordings, these artists also retain her figurative articulation of socially active self-definition against the constraining matrix of domination. And when they silence or distort Simone's voice very drastically, they are oftentimes also eschewing her social theory in favor of embodying and propagating the very controlling images that Simone spoke and acted against. The proliferation of these images in hip hop music begs important questions about who has the power to promote them and why. While it would be convenient to type these diverse artists as either "conscious" or "commercial" rappers who work against or for the matrix of domination, the complexities and fluidities of their work and speech preclude this type of neat typology. Individual artists move fluidly between the sub-genres of "conscious"<sup>9</sup> or "mainstream" rap,

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<sup>7</sup> Patricia Hill Collins argues effectively for the practice of regarding black women musicians as critical social theorists in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. (Taylor and Francis Routledge, 2000), 17.

<sup>8</sup> See Samuel Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 238.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Eric Dyson defines "conscious" rap music as "rap that is socially aware and consciously connected to historic patterns of political protest and aligned with progressive forces of social critique." Qtd. In Murray Forman, "General Introduction," in *That's the Joint: The Hip Hop Studies Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2012), 5.

often in the same composition, and by doing so explode essentialist notions of two-dimensional hip hop voices.

The scholarly conversation concerning the issue of sub-genre in hip hop music is complex. While some scholars do not distinguish between sub-genres,<sup>10</sup> others reify the dualism between “conscious” and “commercial” hip hop music.<sup>11</sup> But many scholars have taken up the pursuit of analyzing hip hop sub-genres as competing and complementary impulses in more nuanced and complex ways. In a response to conservative attacks on “gangster” rap, Davarian L. Baldwin reminds us that “nation-conscious rap was created through commodification and market growth.”<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey Ogbar offers a nuanced and intriguing analysis of the lyrical dialogue among rappers themselves concerning hip hop’s commercial and consciousness-raising interests. Ogbar acknowledges that there is a “veritable war” within hip hop, and reveals the

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<sup>10</sup> A few salient examples of the monolithic view of hip hop music include Terri Adams and Douglas Fuller, “The Words Have Changed but the Ideology Remains the Same: Misogynistic Lyrics in Rap Music,” *Journal of Black Studies* 36, no. 6 (July 2006): 938–957, and Yvonne Bynoe, *Stand and Deliver: Political Activism, Leadership and Hip Hop Culture*. (Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press, 2004). These and other writers are often fashioning polemics against hip hop as a whole, and acknowledging the complexities of the culture would presumably weaken their arguments.

<sup>11</sup> S. Craig Watkins structures *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005) as a righteous battle between what he views as two antithetical forces: the capitalist market and political activism. In his prologue, Watkins invokes the story of the genesis of “message rap”: the iconic “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (from *The Message*, 1982, Sugarhill Records.) Although he reveals that Flash and the Five initially “showed no interest in recording what they perceived as a ‘preachy’ rap song,” (p. 21) he still uses this anecdote as the origin story for “message rap” as an anti-market political vehicle. The fact that “The Message” was produced on the same label as Watkins’s celebratory foil “Rapper’s Delight,” seems a fertile ground from which conclusions about the early intimacy of “message” and “commercial” hip hop could sprout. Alan Light also references “The Message” in tracing the emergence of commercial and conscious hip hop’s “irreconcilable” “ever-widening divergence”, asserting that it, “became a pop hit in spite of the fact that it was the hardest-hitting rap that had ever been recorded,” Alan Light, “About a Salary or Reality?” in Forman and Neal, *That’s the Joint*, 144, 143, 139. The fact that the record became a *commercial* success, and that this was at least in part *because* of its socially conscious lyrics explodes the duality that these scholars propose.

<sup>12</sup> Davarian L. Baldwin, “Black Empires, White Desires: The Spatial Politics of Identity in the Age of Hip Hop,” in Forman and Neal, *That’s the Joint*, 144.

“unabashed denunciation” that rappers level at “their hip hop peers who have exploited and bastardized a beloved art form.”<sup>13</sup>

Tricia Rose re-framed the debates about “conscious” and “commercial” rap music with her seminal contribution to the field, *The Hip Hop Wars: What we talk about when We Talk About Hip Hop – And Why It Matters*.<sup>14</sup> As the founder of the field of hip hop studies, Rose fundamentally changed the game with this volume. Rose starts by recognizing that hip hop is “gravely ill”<sup>15</sup> as a result of the “gangsta-pimp-ho trinity”<sup>16</sup> in commercial hip hop, and further reveals that: “Debates about hip hop have become a means for defining poor, young black people and thus for interpreting the context and reasons for their clearly disadvantaged lives. This is what we talk about when we talk about hip hop.”<sup>17</sup> With hip hop defenders often advancing a blind allegiance to all that is beautiful and destructive in the music, and hip hop critics lambasting the culture from a monolithic viewpoint, the result is a polarized infantile beef that benefits no one. As lovers, scholars and fans of hip hop, Rose asserts, we have a responsibility to understand and explain the rampant heterosexism, misogyny and violence that pervade the music, but not to justify it. In furthering Rose’s analysis of the ugly side of commercial hip hop, it is my intention to examine the tense co-existence of “conscious” and commercial impulses in the work of individual artists, and the consequences this co-existence has for the “commercial versus conscious” conversation.

In most of the songs that this essay covers, the producers’ medium includes samples from Nina Simone’s work. While scholars have analyzed digital sampling in

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<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar. *Hip Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap*. (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 2007), 107.

<sup>14</sup> Tricia Rose. *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop and Why It Matters*. (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

regard to the community of individuals who engage in it,<sup>18</sup> the generational gap that it engenders between hip hoppers and the original recording artists,<sup>19</sup> and as a mode of experiencing reality in the postmodern age,<sup>20</sup> only a few scholars have engaged with hip hop sampling's political implications. These scholars' essays often center around the work of James Brown and Public Enemy.<sup>21</sup> While James Brown's "Funky Drummer" break did constitute a Black Nationalist political and pedagogic backbone to years of hip hop production, the trend of sampling Nina Simone's work introduces gender into this equation, just as Simone introduced gender into the music of the Black Arts Movement some forty years ago.<sup>22</sup> The dearth of efforts to negotiate this introduction comprises a lacuna in the existing hip hop sampling scholarship that I am attempting to fill with this work.

This is not to suggest that artists and scholars are not negotiating the gender and sexual politics at play in the hip hop domain; in fact this is a lively and critical discourse. Joan Morgan first coined the term "hip hop feminist" in her seminal work *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost...My Life as a Hip Hop Feminist*,<sup>23</sup> articulating a new ideological standpoint among gender-progressive thinkers in contemporary cultural criticism. In *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood*,

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<sup>18</sup> Joseph Glenn Schloss. *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop*. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Nelson George, "Sample This," in Forman and Neal, *That's the Joint!*, 437-442.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Miller, "In Through the Out Door: Sampling and the Creative Act." in *Sound Unbound: Sampling Digital Music and Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> Mark Dery, "Public Enemy Confrontation," in Forman and Neal, *That's the Joint!*, 407-420, Robert Walser, "Rhythm, Rhyme and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy," *Ethnomusicology* 39:2 (Spring-Summer 1995), 193-217.

<sup>22</sup> Tammy Kernodle "'I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to be Free': Nina Simone and the Re-Defining of the Freedom Song of the 1960's" *Journal for the Society of American Music* 2:3 (2008). Kernodle argues effectively in this piece that "Four Women" was the first song to insert gender into the Black Arts Movement. It is important to note that there is some scholarship on the gendered power implications of sampling the white female voice. See Kay Dickinson, "'Believe'? Vocoder, Digitalised Female Identity and Camp" *Popular Music* 20:3 (2001): 333-347. However white and black women contend with widely divergent oppressions and therefore an analysis of the sampled black female voice carries political imperatives that are distinct from this type of work.

<sup>23</sup> Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost...My Life as a Hip Hop Feminist* (New York: Touchstone, 1999).

*Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*, Gwendolyn Pough recognizes the critical contributions of black women rappers that much of hip hop scholarship ignores, examining how these women “bring wreck”<sup>24</sup> by disrupting male-dominated discourses. Pough theorizes wreck as an extension of the womanist legacy and as a crucial rhetorical tool for black women asserting voices in hip-hop culture. Wreck is a way to combat controlling images, but Pough challenges her readers to get beyond representations and blame to focus on dialogue and concrete plans for social change. Pough went on to edit *Home Girls Make Some Noise: Hip Hop Feminism Anthology*<sup>25</sup> along with Elaine Richardson, Aisha Durham and Rachel Raimist. This volume succeeded in shifting the inquiry of gendered hip hop scholarship from, “What is hip hop doing to women?” to “How are women *using* hip hop?”<sup>26</sup> In her introduction, Pough issues an edict to those courageous hip hoppers of progressive consciousness who are working to reconcile two often contradictory discursive domains: “at the end of the day, none of us can take the easy way out. We must look at and examine the images. We must listen to the lyrics and music. And we must speak out and talk back when we see things that are detrimental to women.”<sup>27</sup> In the essays of this volume a diverse array of scholars do just that, and also speak out about things that are empowering and life-affirming for women in hip hop. Young hip hop feminists also surface in larger feminist discourse, like Shani Jamila’s powerful contribution to *Colonize This!: Young Women of Color on Today’s Feminism*.<sup>28</sup> In this capstone to the volume, Jamila identifies hip hop culture and feminism as “two of the basic

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<sup>24</sup> Gwendolyn Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop culture, and the Public Sphere*. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 12.

<sup>25</sup> Gwendolyn Pough, Elaine Richardson, Aisha Durham and Rachel Raimist, eds. *Home Girls Make Some Noise: Hip Hop Feminism Anthology*. (Mira Loma, CA: Parker Publishing, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Mark Anthony Neal, “Foreword: A Few Words on Hip-Hop Feminism,” in Pough et. al, *Home Girls Make Some Noise*, iv, italics in original.

<sup>27</sup> Gwendolyn Pough, “An Introduction of Sorts for Hip Hop Feminism,” in Pough et. al, *Home Girls Make Some Noise*, ix.

<sup>28</sup> Shani Jamila, “Can I Get a Witness? Testimony from a Hip Hop Feminist,” in *Colonize This: Young Women of Color on Today’s Feminism*. ed. Daisy Hernandez and Bushra Rehman. (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2002).

things that mold us." But she cautions, "we must not confuse having love for either one with blind defense."<sup>29</sup> Joan Morgan's unflinching engagement with the tension that can exist between loving hip hop culture and cultivating a feminist sensibility marks one of the reasons why she is so fundamental to the field. Even beyond her pathbreaking monograph, Morgan continues to expand the field of inquiry by asking real questions like, "How come no one ever admists that part of the reason women love hip-hop – as sexist as it is – is 'cuz all that in-yo-face testosterone makes our nipples hard?"<sup>30</sup> Her call for the contour of a hip hop feminist sensibility deserves to be quoted in full:

We need a voice like our music – one that samples and layers many voices, injects it sensibilities into the old and flips it into something new, provocative, and powerful. And one whose occasional hypocrisy, contradictions, and trifeness guarantee us at least a few trips to the terror-dome, forcing us to finally confront what we'd all rather hide from.

We need a feminism that possesses the same fundamental understanding held by any true student of hip-hop. Truth can't be found in the voice of any one rapper but in the juxtaposition of many.<sup>31</sup>

Tricia Rose, among others, has identified the imperative need for hip hop feminist activists and writers to be at the heart of conversations about gender, sexuality and hip hop music.<sup>32</sup> All too often, that is not the case. As the scope of my study only comprises hip hop songs that sample Nina Simone's recordings or directly draw on her work, the predominance of male artists in the rappers and producers I analyze betrays the intense male dominance of the hip hop recording industry. This is a critical piece of context for the gendered politics of hip hop culture generally, and

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<sup>29</sup> Shani Jamila, "Can I Get a Witness?: Testimony from a Hip Hop Feminist," in Hernandez and Rehman, *Colonize This!* 392.

<sup>30</sup> Joan Morgan, "Hip-Hop Feminist," in Forman and Neal, *That's the Joint!* 417.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 418.

<sup>32</sup> Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 129.

the sampling practice in particular. Sampling is a central tenet of hip hop music production. This fact in itself can serve to naturalize and disguise the masculinist entitlement that often accompanies the appropriation of female artists' work as raw materials for new compositions. As Rose reminds us: "The power of gender inequality and sexual disrespect is its ability to be everywhere at once, to seem normal and inevitable."<sup>33</sup> I acknowledge this not as a way to excuse a male dominated study, but to situate it as an implication of the gender politics at play in hip hop more generally, and as a way to foreground my hope that at some point in the near future more female MCs and producers will be explicitly sampling Simone.

However there are powerful black women hip hop artists that are implicitly carrying on Simone's legacy; two that are very notable are Meshell Ndegeocello and Lauryn Hill. Ndegeocello stands as a powerful figure in gender and sexually progressive hip hop, because of her identification as a queer woman of color, her intergeneric musical style and unapologetically pro-feminist lyrics. As a black woman who identifies as bi-sexual, Ndegeocello also defies convention by braiding together contemporary R&B, hip hop, neo-soul and rock sensibilities in her repertoire. With radically progressive works like *The World Has Made Me the Man of My Dreams*<sup>34</sup> and *Plantation Lullabies*<sup>35</sup> Ndegeocello carries on Simone's legacy of exploding the ways that a black woman performer "should" sound, and what she "should" be saying.

But an even stronger example of Simone's spirit at work in black feminist hip hop lies in the music and career of Lauryn Hill. Hill's iconic statement of hip hop feminism from The Fugee's 1996 landmark album *The Score* is often cited as an indictment of the masculinist gangsta mentality:

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<sup>33</sup> Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 153-4.

<sup>34</sup> Meshell Ndegeocello, *The World Has Made Me the Man of My Dreams*. 2007, EmArcy.

<sup>35</sup> Meshell Ndegeocello, *Plantation Lullabies*. 1993, Maverick.

Rap orgies with Porgy and Bess,  
Capture your bounty like Elliot Ness, yes  
Bless you if you represent the Fu  
But I'll hex you with some witch's brew if you're doo doo  
Voo Doo,  
I can do what you do, easy, believe me  
Frontin' niggas give me hee-bee-gee-bees  
So while you're imitating Al Capone  
I'll be Nina Simone  
And defecatin' on your microphone<sup>36</sup>

Here Hill invokes a black music archaeology ranging from Simone to Miles Davis and back again. She brings ultimate wreck to her gangsta contemporaries, asserting that her feminized black power will reign supreme. And as a triple threat in her superlative acting, singing and MCing ability Hill has the chops to ensure that she will never be the one frontin' on the mic. A New Jersey native, Hill produced her first solo album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, in concert with Ras Baraka's New Ark music group. Her aesthetic and intellectual sensibility is firmly grounded in a neo-Black Arts milieu, and she has practiced the emulation of Simone she articulates in verse throughout her career.

In this cultural context, analyzing Nina Simone's work in hip hop allows important insight into the ways the cultural forms of the 1960s and 70s freedom movements operate in a post-Civil Rights and post-Women's Movement context. Hip hop emerged as a cultural production of black and Puerto Rican youth living in urban poverty and thirty years later is America's number one cultural export, yet this success has not translated into improved economic or social conditions for the

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<sup>36</sup> The Fugees, "Ready or Not," *The Score*. 1996, Ruffhouse.



music's originative communities. In fact, the disparity in income, wealth, employment, education and life expectancy among white and non-white Americans is staggering.<sup>37</sup> Further, hip hop music is often used cited by the neo-conservative contingent as evidence for poor black Americans' culpability in their social conditions.<sup>38</sup> In a cultural climate where Dr. Dre is selling Dr. Pepper and Queen Latifah is a cosmetics "cover girl" but African Americans still only hold 1% of the nation's wealth, one is reminded of George Lipsitz' quote, "Many of the key institutions in our society seem open to black culture, but not black people."<sup>39</sup>

The neo-conservative contingent in America today would cite key people who are not white, male and/or heterosexual who have attained prestigious positions in politics, business or the arts as proof that the matrix of domination is no more; their doctrine of "American Exceptionalism" argues for a color, gender and sexuality-blind society, and rests on the fallacious pillars of the neat, successful "Civil Rights Movement" and "Women's Movement."<sup>40</sup> But it is foolhardy to believe that oppression simply disappeared in the years following the 1960s. It is more accurate to say that it has gone underground and mutated.

In the absence of institutionalized oppression hate, exploitation and inequality have become more diffuse, more insidious, and harder to recognize.<sup>41</sup> And in the

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<sup>37</sup> For more information on economic disparities in black and white American populations, please see 2010 Census Bureau reports, or consult Bakari Kitwana's *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2002), or Nikhil Pal Singh's *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>38</sup> Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 9: "Using hip hop as 'proof' of black people's culpability for their circumstances undermines decades of solid and significant research on the larger structural forces that have plagued black urban communities."

<sup>39</sup> George Lipsitz, "'Swing Low, Sweet Cadillac': White Supremacy, Anti-Black Racism, and the New Historicism" *American Literary History* 7 (1995): 703.

<sup>40</sup> Here I am building upon the ideas of Nikhil Pal Singh from *Black is a Country*. While his brilliant analysis focuses on the Du Boisian "color line," the issues of gender and sexual inequality should be added to this conversation for the sake of my analysis, and the larger freedom struggle.

<sup>41</sup> See Paul Gilroy, *Ain't No Black in the Union, Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 34-35: "The form of the state structures the form of political struggles. Where state institutions impose racial categories, the struggle against racism will be a struggle

dialectic between oppression and activism, as state apparatuses of constraint have been dismantled we no longer have the large scale, formalized social movements of the 1960s and 70s. However if oppression has become stealthier and more treacherous, then perhaps activism might correspondingly metamorphose into a more personal, more diffuse and more radical process. Perhaps the only way to combat the new matrix of domination is with an underground revolution of self. It is in this pursuit that we might regard Nina Simone's grammar of cultural production being mobilized by hip hoppers today. Now as the rappers rap and the breakers break, it is important not to mistake motion for movement. But perhaps if Simone's self-defined social activism finds a resurgence of voice in these works, then it might herald a quieter but more powerful revolution brewing.

Nina Simone introduced herself to her audiences and the American populace as unambiguously against the controlling images of how a black female performer "should" behave. Her performance style was supremely self-defined and crafted in the spirit of social activism. Often characterized as "temperamental," "unstable," or "angry," Simone had no patience for rude or noisy audiences, whether she was playing a concert hall or a club.<sup>42</sup> While the popular and scholarly press regarded oppositional performance as a marker of alienated genius for male bebop artists, a similar stance earned Simone a reputation for hostility and insanity.<sup>43</sup> In her own words, Simone's standards for audience behavior ring with self-definition against an industry that often consigned its black artists to servitude:

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against the state...In organizational terms, many of the new social movements rely on mass mobilization rather than mass membership," George Lipsitz, "'Swing Low, Sweet Cadillac': White Supremacy, Anti-Black Racism, and the New Historicism" *American Literary History* 7 (1995), Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country*, and Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. (New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>42</sup> I am relying on Feldstein's catalogue of denigrating adjectives here, from "I Don't Trust You Any More," p. 1359.

<sup>43</sup> Nina Simone is not alone in this type of attack. As bell hooks notes, "Radical black female subjects are constantly labeled crazy by those who hope to undermine our personal power and our ability to influence others." bell hooks. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 54.

My attitude to performing was that of a classically trained musician: when you play you give all your concentration to the music because it deserves total respect, and an audience should sit still and be quiet...If an audience disrespects me it is insulting the music I play and I will not continue, because if they don't want to listen then I don't want to play. An audience chooses to come and see me perform; I don't choose the audience. I don't need them either, and if they don't like my attitude then they don't have to come and see me. Others will.<sup>44</sup>

Simone reversed the typically understood relationship of an "entertainer" working for the crowd. By withholding her artistic production and tasking her spectators with maintaining appropriate behavior, she leveraged the considerable power that a performer of her stature wields. So while she asserts that she doesn't select her audience, in fact by refusing to play before those whose behavior she deems unacceptable, she in fact does just that. Daphne Brooks aptly describes Simone as:

an artist who cultivated a cultural persona as a virtuosic performer, a challenging and demanding entertainer, and a bold social activist who was unafraid to manipulate the sometimes charged power dynamics and politics of desire that coursed through her relationship with her fans.<sup>45</sup>

It was not only Simone's classical training that shaped her attitudes about a performer's relationship with the audience, but her spiritual background as well. Simone grew up singing and playing piano in church from the age of three under the strict guidance of her mother, who was a Methodist minister. She later recognized the ways that these experiences empowered her performance abilities:

Gospel taught me about improvisation, how to shape music in response to an audience and then how to shape the mood of the audience in response to my

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<sup>44</sup> Stephen Cleary and Nina Simone, *I Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), 52.

<sup>45</sup> Daphne Brooks, "Nina Simone's Triple Play" *Callaloo* 34:1 (2011): 180.

music. When I played I could take a congregation where I wanted – calm them down or lift them up until they became completely lost in the music and atmosphere. At that time I learned valuable lessons in musical technique that had nothing to do with all the classical training that was to come. Over the years those lessons slipped into my blood and became part of me. A time would come when I would start to look for my own musical voice, and the lessons I learned from gospel music would help me find it.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to the pedagogic and spiritual value that the church held for Simone, it was also a painful competitor for her mother’s attention. As she related later: “As I grew older I came to realize something about my mother which was difficult to accept: her first loyalty was to God and her ministry. It came before anything else – before her husband, before her family and before me.”<sup>47</sup> So for Simone, the Black Church was highly formative, a site of inspiration and tension.

This tension was often between the sacred world and the secular. Simone’s mother, Mary Waymon, disapproved of her daughter playing “real” or secular music, but her father, John Waymon, had been a secular musical performer in his youth and taught the young Eunice Waymon (Simone’s given name) worldly songs without his wife’s knowledge. John and Eunice even had a code worked out wherein he would stand outside the front door while Eunice played secular songs, and begin to whistle to warn her if her mother was approaching. Later in life Simone characterized her father as a “refuge: from church, from Momma and from music.”<sup>48</sup> Although Simone is best remembered for her worldly music and her songs with socially conscious lyrics were decidedly secular, her two parents represent the tension that resulted from Simone making a livelihood from something her mother forbade: playing in the world. Although gospel was “in her blood” so too was the devil’s music, and the

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<sup>46</sup> Cleary and Simone, *I Put a Spell on You*, 19.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

tense co-existence of these two impulses, among other issues, resulted in recurring emotional problems for her as an artist and as a person.

Accounts of these emotional problems vary greatly. While her biographer claims that Simone was diagnosed at various times with multiple personality disorder,<sup>49</sup> schizophrenia<sup>50</sup> and depression,<sup>51</sup> Simone mentions none of these specific ailments in her autobiography, although she does acknowledge a problematic relationship with alcohol.<sup>52</sup> Of course, there is a strong likelihood that we as readers are simply not privy to all of her personal business. In addition, there is a long tradition of radical black women being unfairly characterized as mentally ill in the U.S.<sup>53</sup> Simone does document a recurring and persistent exhaustion throughout her adult life, however. As a result of this exhaustion, she reveals some altered mental states:

When I was very tired my subconscious took over and I'd go on auto-pilot until my mind was rested enough to turn itself back on. It was a relief when that happened: sometimes it made me relaxed and talkative, other times I cried for hours, letting the tension drip out of me. I was on the edge of exhaustion the whole time, two minutes away from collapsing...Yet when the nights came around I'd lie awake until sunrise, crying – praying – for rest.<sup>54</sup>

A personal glimpse like this of a woman praying for a reprieve tempers the iconic image of Simone as a larger-than-life activist and performer. While the power that Simone wielded on and off stage was considerable, it is crucial to bear in mind that her pain, like her talent, strength and grace, was very real.

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<sup>49</sup> Nadine Cohodas, *Princess Noire: The Tumultuous Reign of Nina Simone*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), 330.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>52</sup> Cleary and Simone, *I Put a Spell on You*, 83, 114, 144.

<sup>53</sup> See Note 24.

<sup>54</sup> Cleary and Simone, *I Put a Spell on You*, 113-114.

Despite these challenges Simone came to voice through her socially conscious lyrics in a stunning way. With songs like "Mississippi Goddam,"<sup>55</sup> "Why? The King of Love is Dead,"<sup>56</sup> "Four Women,"<sup>57</sup> and "To Be Young, Gifted and Black,"<sup>58</sup> Simone articulated an unambiguous and unapologetic revolutionary spirit. Perhaps her most exemplary socially conscious composition was "Mississippi Goddam," in which she rejects the hypocritical notions of respectability and gradual integration that white America proposed:

Yes you lied to me all these years  
You told me to wash and clean my ears  
And talk real fine just like a lady  
And you'd stop calling me Sister Sadie

Oh but this whole country is full of lies  
You're all gonna die and die like flies  
I don't trust you any more  
You keep on saying "Go slow!"  
"Go slow!"<sup>59</sup>

It was because of lyrics like these and their distinct vocal-centric composition style that scholars would later credit Simone with initiating a seismic shift from left-wing folk "protest" music of the early 1960s to songs that "blended the aesthetic beliefs of the Black Arts Movement with the rhetoric of Malcolm X and the emerging Black

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<sup>55</sup> Nina Simone, "Mississippi Goddam," *Nina Simone in Concert*. 1964, Philips.

<sup>56</sup> Nina Simone, "Why? The King of Love is Dead," *Nuff Said!* 1968, RCA Victor.

<sup>57</sup> Nina Simone, "Four Women," *Wild is the Wind*, 1966, Phillips.

<sup>58</sup> Nina Simone, "To Be Young, Gifted and Black," *Black Gold*, 1970, RCA Victor.

<sup>59</sup> Nina Simone, "Mississippi Goddam."

Nationalist movement.”<sup>60</sup> The origin story of “Mississippi Goddam” is also a chronicle of Simone’s own process of “turning it out”:<sup>61</sup>

...all the truths that I had denied to myself for so long rose up and slapped my face. The bombing of the little girls in Alabama and the murder of Medgar Evers were like the final pieces of a jigsaw that made no sense until you had fitted the whole thing together. I suddenly realized what it was to be black in America in 1963...it came as a rush of fury, hatred and determination. In church language, the Truth entered into me and I ‘came through.’...I sat down at my piano. An hour later I came out of my apartment with the sheet music for ‘Mississippi Goddam’ in my hand. It was my first civil rights song, and it erupted out of me quicker than I could write it down. I knew then that I would dedicate myself to the struggle for black justice, freedom and equality under the law for as long as it took, until all our battles were won.<sup>62</sup>

If it was the incendiary content of Simone’s music that marked her as an artist dedicated to social justice, it was the remarkably heterogeneous form that identified her as a black woman working outside, around and straight through any generic convention of how black women’s music “should” sound. To this day her music is categorized as anything from blues to jazz to classical to soul to gospel, all equally right and wrong in their description. It was not uncommon for Simone to begin a Duke Ellington tune with figures from a Bach cantata, or to sing a tune from a Gershwin opera that bore the ornaments of a cocktail lounge. While sonic pastiche is a feature of many genres of black music,<sup>63</sup> Simone mobilized this tradition within the specific horizon of expectations that audiences brought to listening to a black female

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<sup>60</sup> Tammy Kernodle “‘I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to be Free’,” 301.

<sup>61</sup> Patricia Hill Collins defines “turning it out” as a resistance strategy for black women against controlling images of domination, one in which “silence becomes speech...speech becomes action,” *Black Feminist Thought*, 96.

<sup>62</sup> Cleary and Simone, *I Put a Spell on You*, 89 – 90.

<sup>63</sup> See Sarah Hankins, “So Contagious: Hybridity and Subcultural Exchange in Hip-Hop’s Use of Indian Samples,” *Black Music Research Journal* 31:2 (Fall 2011) 195–197.

performer in the 1960s United States. By refusing to conform to a single genre of music, Simone was also exploding representational types for an African American woman in the U.S. during the 1960s. As Daphne Brooks describes it:

As a response to...narrow definitions of black sound, Simone turned other corners and crossed over and out of constricting musical divides, challenging her audiences to consider and perhaps more importantly to listen for the meaning of liberation in black female performance.<sup>64</sup>

So, Simone's formal liberation from the constraints on a black woman pervaded her music, even in the absence of explicit revolutionary content. She made songs that were not her original compositions into her own highly distinctive original performances. As Brooks explains:

Liberation is thus derived, in part, not only from her more overt protest songs but also from the sheer ideological and generic mobility manifested in her material. Repeatedly, Nina Simone staged a kind of performative sit-in that yielded what we might think of as a kind of socio-politicized musical crossover - one that was less about achieving conventional success on the pop charts and more concerned with barreling into putatively forbidden representational territories.<sup>65</sup>

This formal liberation is important to bear in mind when approaching the hip hop songs that sample Simone's material. No hip hop artists to date have directly sampled her more overtly politicized material like "Mississippi Goddam" or "To Be Young Gifted and Black." The explanation for this, even among artists who are carrying on her revolutionary and self-defined theoretical framework, probably lies in the fact that these songs are simply less aesthetically accessible than many of her

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<sup>64</sup> Brooks, "Nina Simone's Triple Play," 177.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 178.



pop recordings. In a medium that prizes craft as much as sample-based hip hop,<sup>66</sup> this accessibility is key. However even in popular recordings like "Feeling Good" and "Misunderstood," Simone's tendency toward sonic pastiche and inter-generic blending maintains her self-defined framework, even in the absence of explicitly revolutionary content.

Another thread that unites Simone's popular and protest music is the centrality and distinctive quality of her voice. While she began her extensive musical training as a pianist and undoubtedly retained a virtuoso ability throughout much of her career, Simone's voice emerges as a focal point through much of her repertoire.<sup>67</sup> The artist herself regarded her voice as "a third layer, complementing the other two layers, my right and left hands."<sup>68</sup> This idea of balance between instrumental and vocal ability was anomalous at the time, when black women (and women in general) were regarded as natural singers first and foremost; the larger culture identified instrumental music's technological nature as better suited to male performers. In addition to the way she used her voice, the quality of Simone's voice itself defied convention. Simone had a vocal tone that has been characterized variously as "a vibrant and husky contralto,"<sup>69</sup> "a low moaning wail,"<sup>70</sup> and a "sanctified moaning."<sup>71</sup> While all of these descriptions approach Simone's distinctive timbre, there was a sexualized self-assured power to her singing that is nearly impossible to put into words. Rather than attracting an audience, Simone's voice commanded them, and made them like it. This is especially significant in the artistic

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<sup>66</sup> For a compelling overview of hip hop producers' aesthetic conventions, see Joseph Glenn Schloss. *Making Beats*, particularly chapter 3.

<sup>67</sup> Kernodle identifies Simone's vocals as the centerpiece of "Mississippi Goddam": "As with other freedom songs the focus of the performance was Simone's voice," and "Four Women": "The emotional intensity of the performance is Simone's voice." "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free," 302 and 312.

<sup>68</sup> Cleary and Simone, *I Put a Spell on You*, 51.

<sup>69</sup> Qtd. In Cohodas, *Princess Noire*, 81.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>71</sup> Mark Anthony Neal, "Talib Kweli's 'Beautiful Struggle,'" Seeingblack.com, February 7, 2005, <http://www.seeingblack.com/2005/x020705/talibkweli.shtml>

production of a black female musician because of the centrality of “coming to voice” as a pursuit of Black feminist thought.<sup>72</sup> In studying Simone and her music, it is imperative to use theoretical frameworks that incorporate such concepts, and hold them central.

Reading Simone’s body of work through a Black feminist lens necessitates a shift from traditional close reading techniques in cultural studies, in which one would select the most appropriate theoretical framework and then apply it to the text, an object of study that could be Nina Simone’s music, her standing as a cultural figure, or a combination of the two. Instead, identifying the ways that Nina Simone articulated a particular self-defined subjectivity as a social activist against a matrix of racist, sexist and economic domination necessitates regarding Nina Simone as a critical social theorist in her own right. Patricia Hill Collins outlines the tradition of black women musicians as producers of intellectual theory, and the tendency of those in the traditional academe to discount that theory:

Musicians, vocalists, poets, writers and other artists constitute another group from which black woman intellectuals have emerged...Building on African-influenced oral traditions, musicians in particular have enjoyed close association with the larger community of African American women who constitute their audience. Through their words and actions, grassroots political activists also contribute to black women's intellectual traditions. Producing intellectual works is generally not attributed to black women artists and political activists. Especially in elite institutions on higher education such women are typically viewed as objects of study, a classification that creates a false dichotomy between scholarship and activism, between thinking and doing. In contrast, examining the ideas and actions of these excluded groups

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<sup>72</sup> “Much of the best of Black feminist thought reflects this effort to find a collective, self-defined voice and express a fully articulated womanist standpoint,” Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 100.

in a way that views them as subjects reveals a world in which behavior is a statement of philosophy and in which the vibrant, both/and scholar/activist tradition remains intact.<sup>73</sup>

Nina Simone, as *both* a black woman musician *and* a social activist, stands as a powerful synthesis of these two traditions of black women's intellectual output. Working to hear the songs that sample Simone's music through her theoretical framework of socially active, self-defined subjectivity contributes to preserving the subjectivity that she fought so hard to articulate and maintain, instead of simply viewing her as an historical "object of study."

As a white middle class woman scholar, this endeavor necessitates that I shift my own center and work toward a transversal political orientation. Patricia Hill Collins identifies "rooting and shifting" and a "both/and" epistemology/ontology as critical to transversal politics:

Within the assumptions of transversalism, participants bring with them a 'rooting' in their own particular group histories, but at the same time realize that in order to engage in dialogue across multiple markers of difference, they must 'shift' from their own centers...Transversal politics requires rejecting the binary thinking that has been so central to oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality and nation...transversal politics requires both/and thinking. In such frameworks, all individuals and groups possess varying amounts of penalty and privilege in one historically created system.<sup>74</sup>

So while I acknowledge that I cannot transcend my own politics of location as a white middle class female scholar, I also work to avoid perpetuating the objectification of Nina Simone and black women theorists like her in the academy. I acknowledge the historical reality of the "colonizing gaze" of white critics and

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<sup>73</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 17.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 245-6.

simultaneously endeavor to step outside of it, in order to achieve a scholar/activist orientation in my work. By resisting my own tendency toward a colonizing gaze, based on my social position, I can pivot my own center and hopefully, that of the academic discourse.

For instance, when I first sat down to a close reading of Mary J. Blige and William's "About You," I heard the ambiguity of Blige's lyrics as troublesome from a white feminist perspective. How does she expect the man she's addressing to know what she wants if she doesn't seem to know herself? The lines "So glad to have you in my life / It's a new life for me" rang as just one more example of a woman defining her life in terms of a man. I highlighted Will.I.Am's animalistic term "chick" derisively. I decided to put "About You" in the first chapter of this thesis, as an example of a deviation from Nina Simone's critical theory, based on this cursory, dismissive, colonizing reading.

Then I re-visited the song when I was familiar with the idea of transversalism. How else could I hear Blige's words? How could I attempt to imagine where she was coming from, although it was a place I have never been and necessarily can never really go? How could I imagine the terms of this place, try to write from those terms, without co-opting them and their cultural specificity? I listened again. What if ambiguity is not weakness, as it is regarded in white gender politics, but a specific historical survival strategy born of centuries of protecting emotions from abusive and exploitative invaders? In this shift, this recognition of Blige's dissemblance<sup>75</sup> rooted in an expanded historical knowledge, I no longer heard her singing against Nina Simone but in communion with her. I do not pretend or presume to even begin to

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<sup>75</sup> The "culture of dissemblance" is a prominent feature of black women's interactions with other groups in the U.S., based on a historical necessity of hiding their interior lives from hostile and oppressive outsiders. This term was first coined by Darlene Clark Hine in "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of dissemblance," *Signs* 14 (Summer 1989): 912-20.

understand the lived reality of black women in the U.S., but I share this example from my process of working to shift my own aural center in the hopes that it might serve as a model for other white researchers.

I have Nina Simone among other critical black theorists to thank for this effort. As bell hooks asserts:

A fundamental task of black critical thinkers has been the struggle to break with the hegemonic modes of seeing, thinking, and being that block our capacity to see ourselves oppositionally, to imagine, describe, and invent ourselves in ways that are liberatory. Without this, how can we challenge and invite non-black allies and friends to dare to look at us differently, to dare to break their colonizing gaze?<sup>76</sup>

Simone, in her framework of socially active self-definition against a matrix of domination, succeeds triumphantly in “imagining, describing and inventing” herself in a liberatory language. I choose to accept her dare and her invitation, to navigate the politics of pleasure and danger that influence how we as whites listen to black music, and to work toward breaking my own colonizing gaze (or, ear) toward her and the artists who sample her work. Recognizing Nina Simone as a critical social theorist in her own right is essential to preserving the self-defined, socially active subjectivity she worked so hard to achieve and articulate.

In the spirit of a both/and epistemology, I will also employ some Western critical theory in addition to Simone’s framework. Matei Calinescu and Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison’s work will all be useful. Calinescu supplies some of the foundational tenets that I will use to theorize the function of various hip hop musics in contemporary U.S. society. In particular, his etymological and critical treatments of decadence and revolution will be useful. While Calinescu traces the idea of

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<sup>76</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks*, 2.

decadence back to “nearly all ancient peoples,”<sup>77</sup> his outline of the modern notion of decadence rooted in the Judeo-Christian conception of time comprises the bulk of his discussion. The idea of modern, cultural decadence as a style arose in France during the nineteenth century, but didn’t reach its apex until near the turn of the century.<sup>78</sup> Although the vogue of decadentism as a style is largely relegated to the previous *fin-de-siecle*, I will endeavor to show how the intellectual concept operates in the beginning of the third millennium in regard to commercial hip hop, and particularly in the “neo-gangsta”<sup>79</sup> subgenre. Calinescu defines the style of decadence as the loss of the will to live that manifests itself as resentment,<sup>80</sup> a celebration and promotion of decline,<sup>81</sup> and a seductive style meant to scandalize the bourgeoisie.<sup>82</sup> A “poetics of crisis”<sup>83</sup> that guilefully disguises itself as its opposite, the primary danger of decadence is that it is never initially recognizable as such. Decadence implicitly relies on a linear sense of time as an artistic style that embraces an impending catastrophe, an “end of days.” The redemption of decadence lies in the implied paradise that will follow its Armageddon, the “utopia that is silently embodied in the image of its [the West’s] decline.”<sup>84</sup> The potentiality of this Utopia only exists with the accompanying concept of revolution. On revolution, Calinescu writes:

Revolution is distinguished from any form of spontaneous or even conscious rebellion because it implies, besides the essential moment of negation or

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<sup>77</sup> Matei Calinescu. *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 151.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 157-178. Calinescu also goes on to outline decadence in Marxist criticism and as a fashionable style in Italy during the 1920s and 30s.

<sup>79</sup> I am borrowing this term from Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Keepin’ It Unreal,” *The Village Voice*, June 3, 2003, <http://www.villagevoice.com/2003-06-03/news/keepin-it-unreal/>. Coates uses this term specifically in reference to G-Unit, and although she writes for the popular press, I find it especially appropriate because of her central thesis in this piece that the streets that 50 Cent raps about no longer exist, and are a construction of perverted nostalgia. I would only specify G-Unit and Juelz Santana as fitting somewhat into this subgenre.

<sup>80</sup> Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 181

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

rejection, a *specific consciousness* of time and an alliance with it. Here again etymology is revealing. "Revolution," in its original and still primary meaning, is a progressive movement around an orbit, and also the time necessary for the completion of one such movement. Most historical revolutions have conceived of themselves as returns to a purer initial state, and any consistent theory of revolution implies a cyclical view of history - whether successive cycles are seen as alternating (light, darkness) or as forming a symbolic ascending spiral, in accordance with a more systematic doctrine of progress.<sup>85</sup>

This notion of revolution relies on a temporal cosmology that is in sharp contrast to the linearity of the decadent style in the context of Judeo-Christian thought. While Calinescu refers to it as a "specific consciousness," it is more precisely a non-linear cyclical view of time. While it would be convenient in the context of this analysis to characterize a cyclical view as an "African" retention, such an assertion would be reductive and possibly fallacious.<sup>86</sup> However by recognizing the differences between cyclical and linear concepts of time, one can perceive the presence of competing/complementary cosmologies. The tense co-existence of these two conceptions of time allow for the decadent and revolutionary styles in hip hop.

Social activism is implicit in the project of social revolution. In working to analyze the role that inter-generational musics play in activist movements, I'll be employing the theories of Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison. These scholars provide a very useful theoretical model for examining the intergenerational re-contextualization of music in *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century*. Eyerman and Jamison assess music in social movements as a

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 22, italics added.

<sup>86</sup> A complete review of the debates concerning different African groups' conceptions of time lies outside the scope of this study. However there has been substantial debate on this topic among scholars of African thought. For an introduction to this ongoing conversation, see Kwasi Wiredu, ed., *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004) and John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Portsmouth: Heineman, 1990).

form of cognitive praxis, generating new knowledge and bearing particular truths to those involved in a movement. The movement's activities cause these new truths to be disseminated to the wider culture. While previous social movement theory had established tradition as something that progressive movements would fight against, Eyerman and Jamison instead see traditions mobilized, or re-interpreted, in such movements. A tradition provides a "grammar of cultural production" that subsequent generations then amend or revise to produce new cultural forms. With Eyerman and Jameson's framework, I will explicate how hip hop artists employ or eschew the "grammar of cultural production," or critical social theory, that Nina Simone articulated; how hip hop artists are mobilizing the traditions of "civil rights" and black feminist protest, or leaving it stagnant.

Each chapter of this study will focus on four songs generally regarded as belonging to a particular subgenre of hip hop music that sample or otherwise draw from Nina Simone's work. In the first chapter I will analyze G-Unit's "Bad News,"<sup>87</sup> Lil Wayne and Juelz Santana's "Birds Flyin' High,"<sup>88</sup> Mary J. Blige and Will.I.Am's "About You,"<sup>89</sup> and Timbaland's "Oh Timbaland."<sup>90</sup> These songs sample Simone's "Feeling Good"<sup>91</sup> and "Sinnerman,"<sup>92</sup> and could all reasonably be classified as commercial hip hop. These decadent compositions diverge from Nina Simone's critical social theory in varying degrees, and correspondingly disaggregate her recorded voice. In Chapter 2 I will analyze "Freedom"<sup>93</sup> by Tony Moon, "Misunderstood"<sup>94</sup> by Common, "Dontgetit"<sup>95</sup> by Lil Wayne, and the untitled track

<sup>87</sup> G Unit. "Bad News," *50 Cent is the Future*. With Sha Money XI, 2004, Deep Distribution.

<sup>88</sup> Lil' Wayne and Juelz Santana, "Birds Flyin' High," *Lil' Wayne and Juelz Santana - Face Off*. 2006, Independently Released Mixtape.

<sup>89</sup> Mary J. Blige and Will.I.Am, "About You."

<sup>90</sup> Timbaland. "Oh Timbaland," *Timbaland Presents Shock Value*. 2007, Interscope.

<sup>91</sup> Nina Simone, "Feeling Good," *I Put a Spell on You*. 1965, Philips.

<sup>92</sup> Nina Simone, "Sinnerman," *Pastel Blues*. 1965, Philips.

<sup>93</sup> Tony Moon, "Freedom," *Lunar Plexus: The Mix Tape*. 2010, Independently Released Mix Tape.

<sup>94</sup> Common, "Misunderstood," *Finding Forever*. 2007, Geffen.



widely referred to as "For Women"<sup>96</sup> by Talib Kweli. All of these tracks would typically be classified as "conscious" hip hop music. These songs have revolutionary content that refutes the outwardly defined images of the matrix of domination, and revolutionary form that travels an orbit that closely relies on Nina Simone's voice as its center.

I have organized my study into these two relative hemispheres because it seems the most logical choice given the songs' intended listening environments,<sup>97</sup> formal compositions, lyrical content and general shared characteristics. However I by no means wish to reify a rigid dualist typology of "mainstream" rappers and "politically conscious MCs." For instance, Lil Wayne is an artist most often involved in commercially viable, celebratory hip hop, but his offering "Dontgetit" contains decidedly politically conscious subject matter, retains greater portions of Nina Simone's original vocals and critical framework, and would be better suited to listening through headphones than dancing in a club. Indeed, the fact that songs featuring Lil Wayne are found in both chapters of this thesis should attest to the fluidity of notions like sub-genre and the tendency of hip hop artists to test and transcend these perceived boundaries. Wayne himself is critical of the decadent display that can be found in hip hop:

Your grill's glistenin'  
Spent a hundred thousand on mine to feel different  
What's the real sense of it?  
Bling bling, I know  
And did you know I'm the creator of the term

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<sup>95</sup> Lil Wayne, "Dontgetit," *Tha Carter III*. 2008, Cash Money.

<sup>96</sup> Reflection Eternal (Talib Kweli and Hi-Tek), Untitled (For Women), *Train of Thought*. 2000, Rawkus.

<sup>97</sup> Joseph Schloss outlines various intended uses for sample-based hip hop in chapter 7 of *Making Beats*. These intended uses often greatly influence tempo, timbre and lyrical composition.

I just straightened the perm

They let it sit too long, they just makin' it burn<sup>98</sup>

In questioning the rationale of conspicuous consumption somewhat endemic to mainstream hip hop, Wayne simultaneously takes credit as one its first linguistic theorists. In figurative language that centers around synthetic and natural hair styles, Wayne introduces the listener to Mr. Carter and to Young Weezy, proving that both personae can exist concurrently. Rather than dismissing Weezy out of hand as a nihilistic misogynist, the responsible critic must take this type of self-reflective commentary into account.

And just as it is irresponsible to paint commercial rappers in broad strokes as materialistic brutes, we must also take pause before typing our "conscious MCs" as nobles incapable of wrong. Common, who is widely regarded as pre-eminent in the cadre of "conscious" hip hoppers, still spits rhymes like:

A stripper from the South lookin' for a payday  
Said bitch you should do it for the love like Ray Jay  
But they say, "You be on that conscious tip"  
Get your head right and get up on this conscious dick  
I embody everything from the Dali to the party  
It's the way I was raised on the south side safari<sup>99</sup>

Here Common revolts against being typed as a "conscious" MC, and articulates and displays his ability to commodify and mock women. While it is tempting to regard

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<sup>98</sup> Outkast feat. Lil Wayne and Snoop Dogg, "Hollywood Divorce," *Idlewild*. 2006, Sony/Zumba/LaFace.

<sup>99</sup> Kid Cudi feat. Common and Kanye West, "Make Her Say," *Man on the Moon: The End of Day*. 2009, Dream On/GOOD Music/Universal Motown. In the final line of this excerpt Common is referencing his upbringing in south side Chicago, and presumably Signifyin(g) on "The Message:" "It's like a jungle sometimes / It makes me wonder / How I keep from going under." In an intergenerational lineage Common here identifies himself as a descendant and deviant from traditional "message" or "conscious" rap.

our “revolutionary” artists as hip hop saviors, Common reminds us of the fallibility and dimensionality of even the most “conscious” of MCs.

So this notion of most MCs (and producers) as *both* celebratory *and* conscious, decadent *and* revolutionary, privileged *and* constrained is critical to bear in mind. In general, in the songs where the producers sample Nina Simone’s recorded voice in a manner more faithful to the original, they also adhere more faithfully to her critical theory of socially active self-definition against a matrix of domination and its controlling images. And sampling Nina Simone to silence or distort her voice often accompanies a decadence that relegates her social theory to a pedagogic vinyl dust bin. So we must regard sampling as a practice as *both* didactic *and* exploitative, archaeological *and* appropriative.

But for me, as the record keeps spinning, I wonder how many revolutions per minute are possible, as Simone’s clarion critical message is looped end to end for untold millions of young listeners who might otherwise never be introduced to songs like “Four Women” or even “Misunderstood.” I first learned of Simone from Talib Kweli, after a dear friend recommended Kweli and Hi-Tek’s album *Reflection Eternal: Train of Thought* when we were seventeen. This album exploded the two-dimensional way I thought about hip hop, and Kweli and Hi-Tek, through their homage, prompted me to learn more about a woman who has proven to be an inspiration for me in my professional and personal life. The fact that the same dear friend is now an acclaimed hip hop artist in his own right, and one whose work I analyze in this study, is proof of the pedagogic potential of the lineality of hip hop sampling. I am now writing about Tony Moon (or AJ Morton, as I knew him at Virginia’s Governor’s School for the Arts in 2000) and his rhymes on tracks composed of Nina Simone samples, when without AJ’s recommendation and Kweli’s reverence, I never would’ve known about Simone in the first place. This is the path of a revolutionary hip hop orbit, in which the groove is anything but peripheral. And

in working to re-orient my gaze toward the spindle, I am hoping that we can all stay tuned to the revolutionary axis, the work of Nina Simone, around which this potentiality revolves. Peace.

**Chapter 1: 50 Cent is the Future:  
Decadence, Domination and Self-Definition in Commercial Hip Hop**

...in its hatred of life, decadence masquerades as admiration of higher life, and, because of its mastery in the art of seduction, it is able to make weakness look like force, exhaustion like fulfillment, cowardice like courage. Decadence is dangerous because it always disguises itself as its opposite.

- Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 180

I ain't got no feeling  
I'm gonna let these niggas know  
I've been killing 'em with these beats  
Now I'm spitting them killer flows

- Timbaland, "Oh Timbaland"

I made the little man mad  
'Cus I'm flossin' bad  
I ain't a wrestler  
But I'll put your bitch in the Boston crab

- Lloyd Banks, "Bad News"

Many scholars and cultural critics have identified commercial hip hop musics as misogynistic, materialistic and nihilistic. To be sure, in much of this music it is not difficult to identify the commodification of black masculinity as a brutal violence directed toward other men and a hyper heterosexual, objectifying compulsion toward women. But we might gain more insight as scholars, critics and fans if we investigate these musics without simply labeling their producers as hedonistic, misogynist sell-outs. We might interrogate the roots of the fierce competition and woman-hate that pervades these compositions, and the ways that these artists are appropriating, commodifying, and silencing the sampled voices from which they compose their songs. Specifically, all of the songs that this chapter examines sample from Nina Simone's recordings. The ways in which the producers handle her recorded voice, as well as the content that the lyricists and vocalists layer over the beats serve to mobilize Simone's grammar of cultural production to varying degrees, in some instances silencing her critical message and in others channeling it to a new generation.

Mainstream or commercial hip hop is immensely popular in the contemporary United States. With Jay-Z shattering Elvis' former record of Billboard Number 1 albums and artists like Lil Wayne and 50 Cent selling upwards of a million albums in the first week of release, the economic success of these artists and their labels is unquestionable. As such highly commercialized, recreation-oriented and "escapist" fare it is tempting to label this subgenre as kitsch. Personally I am initially compelled to do this, due in large part to an accepted definition of kitsch as widely disseminated bad taste,<sup>100</sup> and the fact that much of this music is in extremely poor taste in its depictions of women. And yet, I can frequently catch myself nodding, singing, dancing or rapping along to messages of hate and exploitation. This paradoxical reaction prompts three secondary lines of inquiry: 1.) What are my own politics of location as a white, female, heterosexual, middle class academic in relation to commercial hip hop music, 2.) Upon close reading, is commercial rap really just escapist, uncritical mass art, like kitsch? and 3.) What thematically and aesthetically in this music excites such simultaneous repulsion and attraction in me?

The answer lies in the pervasive sense of disaster in the content of celebratory, mainstream hip hop and the meticulously crafted beats<sup>101</sup> that make it sound so hot. The thread of "nihilism" that runs throughout these chronicles of violence and hyper-heterosexuality is inherently unsustainable and signals catastrophe and collapse to the listener. And yet the aesthetic composition of sample-based hip hop is often brilliant. Tricia Rose discusses this dangerous seductive quality as "the manipulation of the funk" in *The Hip Hop Wars*, in light of

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<sup>100</sup> For a more thorough working definition of kitsch, see Matei Calinescu. *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 225-264, or Pierre Bourdieu, who describes kitsch as "art that is pretentiously worthless." "From *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*," in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David H. Richter (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007), 1400.

<sup>101</sup> For a compelling overview of hip hop producers' aesthetic conventions, see Joseph Glenn Schloss. *Making Beats*, particularly chapter 3.

the quandary that progressively minded people are faced with when they hear raucously attractive music housing messages of exploitation and destruction:

When the music that gets played over and over at the clubs and on hip hop-oriented commercial radio, BET, and MTV is saturated with hustlers, gangstas, bitches, hoes, tricks, pimps, playas, and stories that glamorize domination, exploitation, violence and hustlers – when this becomes the primary vocabulary for hip hop itself – then the power of the funk has been manipulated. The life force of the funk has been wedded to a death imperative.<sup>102</sup>

As an "Achilles heel for lovers of black music,"<sup>103</sup> the funk can be a truth bearing source of cognitive praxis, or a powerful tool of deception when it carries only dominating images.<sup>104</sup> To understand this deception and seduction, we can use the concept of decadence.

Matei Calinescu outlines several key features of decadence in *Five Faces of Modernity*: 1.) As an art form of decline, decadence relies on a Western or linear conception of time. 2.) The nature of decadence is to be deceptive and seductive. 3.) Decadence is marked by excessive description and imagination at the expense of reason, and 4.) Decadence is meant to scandalize the Bourgeoisie.<sup>105</sup> Decadence, as a loss of the will to live, manifests itself as resentment.<sup>106</sup> Calinescu further defines decadence as "psychological, moral or aesthetic self-deception, as a result of which weakness becomes a task."<sup>107</sup> As an art form birthed in crisis, celebrating decay, and seductive in its formal cohesion, decadence is not simply "decline as such, but

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<sup>102</sup> Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 263.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>104</sup> Joan Morgan refers to these instances as "guilty moments when aesthetic mastery trumps feminist principle" in her "Afterword" to Pough et. al, *Home Girls Make Some Noise*, 477.

<sup>105</sup> Calinescu, *Five Faces*, 151-224.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

acceptance and promotion of decline."<sup>108</sup> While Calinescu outlines these characteristics in reference to a literary movement that reached its apex in late nineteenth century France, there is an insidious, seductive celebration of decline particularly amongst "neo-gangsta" rappers during our more recent *fin-de-siecle*, as well.

Within this theoretical framework, the supposed "nihilism" of market-based, celebratory rap no longer seems quite so arbitrary. The violence and misogyny endemic to this music surely sounds catastrophic. In a linear cosmology, it would seem that the end is near. The deception and seduction of this music lies in the extremely adept craft of its construction, its accessibility and unapologetically celebratory sound. Unreasonable lyrics (to any progressive consciousness) abound throughout celebratory hip hop, and they are certainly scandalous to any middle-class sensibility. And the extremely clever rhyme schemes and lyrical dexterity of the MCs serve to seduce the otherwise progressive listener. But of what crisis is this music birthed? Which decline is being embraced so emphatically? For the answers to these questions, we must turn to the "matrix of domination"<sup>109</sup> in the racist capitalist heteronormative patriarchy in which we all operate.

By identifying intersecting oppressions in society, their dangerous subtleties can begin to be more apparent, and their more obvious manifestations better understood. By reading the songs in this chapter in light of the intersecting racism, sexism, capitalism and heterosexism that pervades our society, one can begin to understand the constraints and privileges of their artists, and how these inequalities of power manifest in their self-presentations and representations of others. For example, black men are barred from participation in the capitalist patriarchy under a racist system, regardless of their economic worth or physical masculine prowess.

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>109</sup> Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought*, 284.



Their privilege is heterosexual and male (and sometimes economic). Timbaland, Will.I.Am, Lil Wayne and Juelz Santana, 50 Cent, Lloyd Banks, and Tony Yayo of G-Unit exert this privilege at the expense of all those it excludes: women, homosexuals, men of lower material means, and in the cultural milieu of celebratory hip hop, those with less proficient musical abilities. Mary J. Blige is exceptional in that she is the only black woman artist whose work I will be analyzing in this chapter; as such the only privilege she exerts is heterosexual, but this too is apparent in her work.

But Blige is not the only black woman who contributed to these songs' production. All of these songs' producers sample Nina Simone's recordings in their beats, and the way that they do so is highly significant. I have referenced in the introduction to this essay the importance of "coming to voice"<sup>110</sup> in the black feminist intellectual tradition, and the process by which Nina Simone succeeded in articulating her own socially critical, self-defined voice despite the racial, gendered and economic position of constraint she occupied under the U.S. system of domination. When producers more aggressively disaggregate, refute, or silence Simone's voice, they often stray far from the theories of self-definition and self-determination that she advanced as a critical theorist. As a result, they succeed in reinforcing some of the most disquieting "controlling images"<sup>111</sup> of black people that circulate in our contemporary culture, images that Nina Simone fought consistently to overcome in her life and in her work.

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<sup>110</sup> See Note 72.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., Chapter 4.

## **“I’ll Push Up on a Bitch”: Internecine Competition and Intersectional Othering in Commercial Hip Hop**

In the lyrics of “Bad News” by G-Unit and “Oh Timbaland” by Timbaland, there is a pervasive mood of violent hyper-masculinist competition. By asserting their dominance over rival rappers, these artists are taking part in one of the central traditions in hip hop, and in black music generally.<sup>112</sup> However the language that Timbaland, 50 Cent, Lloyd Banks, and Tony Yayo use to denigrate their opponents is heavily gendered, classed and sexualized. As black male heterosexual lyricists, these rappers’ linguistic devices betray both their privilege in a racist capitalist heteronormative patriarchy, and their constraints.

The lyricists in both songs are addressing their perceived opponents directly. Boasts of physical violence accompany assertions of the lyrical dexterity that would presumably qualify them as besting their musical opponents. The site of domination is located on the body of the opponent as well as on their body of work. For Timbaland, these physical threats are recurrent in his lyrics: “Don’t take this lightly/If I want you dead it’s done,” “I just might see you somewhere/And break your ass in half,” “You can do you/Or get popped in your dome,” “I’m gonna say this

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<sup>112</sup> In *The Signifyin(g) Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates addresses The Dozens and musical “cutting contests” (ancestors to the rap battle) as “rhetorical training...on-the-streets exercise in the use of troping.” Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifyin(g) Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 70. Amiri Baraka describes Rhythm and Blues “honking contests” in Chapter 11 of *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. (New York: Perennial, 1963). In hip hop culture, Mark Katz has identified the turntablist battle as a primary site of male identity construction: “Saturated with male gendered discourse, behavior, and metaphor, the turntablist battle can therefore be understood as a quintessential vehicle for the exploration of masculine identity.” Mark Katz, “Men, Women, and Turntables: Gender and the DJ Battle,” *The Musical Quarterly* 89.4 (Winter 2006): 580-599. Jeffrey Ogbar recognizes the battle as a central to the art of hip hop: “Hip-hop has always been about one-upmanship. Competition has always driven the art to new levels of creative expression.” Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar. *Hip Hop Revolution*, 44. Joseph Schloss also notes the competitive drive in dee-jay culture, specifically in finding the most obscure records to sample before rival artists in Chapter 1 of *Making Beats*. On his MTV Unplugged album Jay-Z introduced the song, “Takeover,” directed at rival rapper Nas with the words: “We gonna keep it in the truest essence of hip hop, the battle.” Jay-Z. “Takeover,” *Jay-Z: Unplugged*. 2001, Roc-A-Fella.

plain and simple/Nigga take this punishment."<sup>113</sup> But more disturbing is the animalistic epithet that the lyricist uses toward his opponent throughout the track: "Gotta problem you can see me in the streets dog," "I'm listenin' dog/You ain't sayin' shit," and:

I ain't goin' nowhere dog

I'm gonna be right here in your face

Can't do it like me dog<sup>114</sup>

Timbaland deconstructs the vernacular term for a male friend to its original significance: that of an animal. By sarcastically referring to his enemy as an ally, he is in fact rendering him less than human.

Even more disquieting are the ways in which 50 Cent and Banks's violent threats take on heavily gendered and sexualized dimensions. When Banks states, "I don't really like to exercise / But I'll push up on a bitch,"<sup>115</sup> he is implying his opponent's weakness by likening him to a de-humanized woman. Here the female occupies a border territory between human and subhuman identity. And when he boasts, "I ain't a wrestler / But I'll put your bitch in the Boston crab,"<sup>116</sup> he is threatening his male opponent with sexualized violence toward his female partner. Banks simultaneously de-humanizes and objectifies the female, defining her identity in animalistic terms and treating her assault as a threat solely to her male partner's reputation. For Lloyd Banks and 50 Cent, triumphing over a male opponent entitles them to their opponent's partner: "I rap slick enough to slip the ring / Off of Vivica Fox," "My confidence level is high nigga you can't tell / Lickin' my lips at your bitch like I'm L.L."<sup>117</sup> And for Banks, emasculating his opponents is the surest way to prove their fallibility to his violence: "Y'all sweet like ninety-nine bananas / That's

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<sup>113</sup> Timbaland. "Oh Timbaland."

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> G Unit. "Bad News."

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

why I got ninety-nine niggas with ninety-nine hammers.” Banks genders, races and sexualizes his threat of violence by charging his adversaries with effeminacy and implied homosexuality. The use of phallic imagery in reference to the name of the banana-flavored liqueur betrays a homophobia and homosexual hatred rife with latent implications.

Banks is not alone in his use of phallic imagery in fantasies of violence toward his rap rivals. Timbaland states in “Oh Timbaland”:

If I want you dead it’s done  
I can make that happen because  
Nigga my bread is long<sup>118</sup>

Here the lyricist converges racial, sexualized and classed power differentials in just three short lines of verse. His capital is extensive enough to fund a black male opponent’s murder, and he expresses this financial prowess in phallic allusion. Indeed, Timbaland’s fiscal fortitude is a recurring theme throughout the track, in lines such as: “Timbaland ain’t gonna run nowhere baby/Timbaland got private planes.” Even his chosen stage name, a variation of the high-priced work boot turned hip-hop fashion staple, situates this artist squarely in the capitalist system.

However Timbaland relies most heavily on his aesthetic prowess rather than his financial capital or corporeal masculinity in besting his opponents. He opens the track with the lines: “I’ve been killin’ `em with these beats/Now I’m spitting them killer flows,” conflating violence with musical ability. These lines are especially significant, as Timbaland rose to prominence as a producer and then transitioned to the role of a lyricist. His prowess in the former pursuit far outshines his ability in the latter. Although his claims of “killer flows” are dubious, his assertions of dominance as a producer are well founded. Wisely, Timbaland sublimates his wealth to his talents as a musician as the most effective means to overcome his challengers:

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<sup>118</sup> Timbaland. “Oh Timbaland.”

I'm listenin' dog,  
You ain't sayin' shit  
You can keep on wishin'  
You never make a hit

Yeah I got money, take it all from me,  
I'm gonna be the same  
You can get a few whips, you can get a few chips  
You still gonna be a lame<sup>119</sup>

The linguistic challenge becomes pre-eminent. It is ultimately his opponent's lack of verbal dexterity that will prove his undoing, no matter what fiscal advantages he might enjoy.

Conversely, G Unit makes no claims of aesthetic dominance. When not imposing it with brute force, they will purchase their pre-eminence in the rap game with material capital. Banks asserts in the first verse, "I talk money cause it costs to brag," and 50 Cent boasts in the last, "Stones in my cross the size of your earrings."<sup>120</sup> However it is in his recollection of a past shooting that 50 Cent reveals his most telling perspective on the economy of violence:

From day one I came in the game  
They said I was hot  
They got scared, spent that money  
And I got shot<sup>121</sup>

In 2000 50 Cent was shot nine times at close range in the hand, arm, hip, both legs, chest and face. His alleged shooter was found dead three weeks later.<sup>122</sup> This is a

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> G-Unit, "Bad News."

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

man who is not just conjecturing about contract killers, but one who has experienced their attacks on both sides of the gun. Indeed, as an artist in a subgenre that has been referred to as “neo-gangsta” rap, 50 Cent has the street credibility to ensure that his rhymes of violence in pursuit of wealth and power are not entirely fictitious. If 50 Cent the gangster is simply an adopted persona, it would seem that the artist is embodying this image both on and off the mic.

This biographical information makes the childish language that pervades this text all the more noteworthy. The most unusual technique that 50 and his cohorts use to emasculate and denigrate their opponents is to infantilize them. Banks opens the track with the line, “I made the little man mad cause I’m flossin’ bad,” and 50 opens his verse similarly with, “Go ahead against me I’ll hurt your feelings,” and later states, “What little niggas say to 50 Cent don’t matter.” By othering their adversaries as boys, these rappers will presumably confirm themselves as men under patriarchy.

However there is a curious leveling effect in this infantilizing language. The hook itself is a sort of childish taunt, mocking the adversaries as tattletales:

I don’t like you  
You don’t like me  
It’s not likely  
That we’ll ever be friends  
Why pretend?  
“Ma, 50 back at it again.”<sup>123</sup>

The intent here is presumably to depict the opponents as petulant “mama’s boys”, tattling on habitual bullies. However by painting himself as a bully, 50 Cent in effect depicts himself as a child as well. In the final verse he shares:

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<sup>122</sup> Tyrangirl, Josh “Rap’s Newest Target,” *Time*, February 17, 2003, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1004252,00.html>

<sup>123</sup> G Unit, “Bad News.”

You put pressure on me  
When you compare me to 'Pac  
I'm just a new kid  
I can't help it I'm hot<sup>124</sup>

There is a profound insecurity here, possibly rooted in the relatively recent attempt on this man's life. Rather than a dangerous thug, 50 Cent seems here to be a scared boy acting out, trying to out-bully his own tormentors.

But this is not the most revealing instance of vulnerability that 50 shares with his listeners. He closes his verse and the entire song with a disquieting fantasy of killing a record executive:

Record execs  
Know not to play with my check  
I come through put my knife  
Through that vein in your neck (YEAH!)<sup>125</sup>

50 Cent reveals here that his dominance in the record industry, his economic and literal survival, are at the mercy of white media capital. His threat of revolt is just that: an idle posturing. Through his fantasy of rebellion, 50 Cent reveals the extent to which his corporeal and financial masculinity as a black man are utterly constrained to the power of white capitalism. The ejaculation with which 50 closes the piece is profoundly disturbing, in its utterly transparent simulation of confidence. He apes a satisfaction at the thought of penetrating the white capitalist that controls his pocketbook, revealing his vulnerability to the racist capitalist patriarchy, and his Oedipal urges under a paternalistic corporate structure.

This violent masculinist reaction against the white capitalist patriarchy has deep roots in the black freedom struggle. Most significant in relation to Simone's

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

work is the context of the Black Power/Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. While black women activists severely critiqued the misogynist underpinnings of Black Nationalist ideologies from within and without the movement<sup>126</sup> and played critical artistic and political roles during this time period,<sup>127</sup> late 1960s and early 1970s Black Power has largely left a legacy of masculinist race-first ideology. Nina Simone herself was devoted to the Black Power concept: "I talked to Stokely [Carmichael] and read their manifesto. I agreed with every word...Black Power was a lot more than black men with guns – it was a way of returning the black man's pride."<sup>128</sup> So if there is some saving grace to the lyrics of "Bad News" it may lie in the battle for black manhood under a white patriarchy. A critique of black male phallogentrism must take into account the historical reality and cultural memory of lynching, castration and infantilization that black men have endured under the racist patriarchy. The constraints on black men might prompt

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<sup>126</sup> For more on black feminist critique of Black Power masculinism, see Kristin Anderson-Brickner. "'Triple Jeopardy': Black Women and the Growth of Feminist Consciousness in SNCC, 1964-1975." In *Still Lifting, Still Climbing: African American Women's Contemporary Activism*. ed. Kimberly Springer. (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1999), Farah Jasmine Griffin. "'Ironies of the Saint': Malcolm X, Black Women, and the Price of Protection." In *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*. ed. Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2001), Kimberly Springer. "Black Feminists Respond to Black Power Masculinism." In *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*. ed. Peniel E. Joseph. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), and Stephen Ward, "The Third World Women's Alliance: Black Feminist Radicalism and Black Power Politics," in Joseph *The Black Power Movement*, 119-144.

<sup>127</sup> For more on black women's critical contributions to the Black Power project, see Cynthia Griggs Fleming. "Black Women and Black Power: The Case of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee," in Collier-Thomas and Franklin, *Sisters in the Struggle*, 197-213. Sharon Harley. "'Chronicle of a Death Foretold': Gloria Richardson, the Cambridge Movement, and the Radical Black Activist Tradition." In Collier-Thomas and Franklin, *Sisters in the Struggle*, 174-196, Regina Jennings. "Why I Joined the Party: An African Womanist Reflection." In *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*. ed. Charles E. Jones. (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1998), Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest. "'The Most Qualified Person to Handle the Job': Black Panther Party Women, 1966-1982." In Jones, *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, 305-336, Tracye A. Matthews. "'No One Ever Asks What a Man's Role in the Revolution Is': Gender Politics and Leadership in the Black Panther Party, 1966-1971." In Collier-Thomas and Franklin, *Sisters in the Struggle*, 230-256, Rhonda Y. Williams, "Black Women, Urban Politics, and Engendering Black Power." In Joseph, *The Black Power Movement*, 79-104.

<sup>128</sup> Cleary and Simone, *I Put a Spell on You*, 109.



them to exhort privilege wherever they could, if only over black women. This performance of power should not be mistaken for power itself though. In the decadent style the racialized weakness of G-Unit appears as gendered force.

The image of an infantilized, hypersexualized, violent black male whose identity and livelihood are defined by the capitalist racist heteronormative patriarchy is one type of controlling image that Nina Simone sought to destabilize as a critical theorist of black feminist thought. Although the most easily recognizable sample in "Bad News" is from Simone's "Feeling Good," producer Sha Money XI largely silences Simone's physical and metaphorical voices in his composition. In Simone's original recording, her solo unaccompanied voice opens the piece, and a brass vamp enters shortly thereafter, serving as a grave juxtaposition to her bittersweet lyrics of liberation. Sha Money XI opens "Bad News" with a loop of the opening chord to the vamp that sounds hesitant or behind the beat because of its choppy abrupt syncopation. This is the first and last instance of reluctance in the vamp sample, which provides an aggressive domineering force to the remainder of Sha Money XI's beat.

This beat is structured with eight bars of the looped vamp sample followed by two bars of an alternate beat. Sha Money XI accelerates the tempo of the sample, and removes the strings, piano and vocals. The result is a masculinist Sousa-esque brass and percussion procession, stripped of all the instruments coded as feminine or emotional<sup>129</sup> in the Western sonic imagination. The drum back beat does not enter until after the first cycle of the eight-bar section and two-bar section. The

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<sup>129</sup> Although I have not been able to find any musicological sources that explicitly cite this connotation for string music, it is true from my lived experience. The conclusion is also implicit in some musicologists' writing. For instance, Joseph Lanza describes strings as variously "sweet," "sentimental," "romantic," and "pretty" in "Zing Went the Strings!" in Miller, *Sound Unbound*, although he never explicitly interrogates his gendered language. If there in fact is not an analysis of this gendered construction in the Western sonic imagination, there should be.

densely subdivided backbeat creates a double-time feel, and in juxtaposition makes the low-register legato vamp sound even more deliberate, weighty and imposing.

It is not only the rhythmic contrast that lends such gravity to the brass vamp, but the harmonic progression as well. "Feeling Good" features a descending minor tetrachord bass line, a musical structure that has a centuries-long tradition of almost exclusive association with the expressive genre of lament. Beginning in the seventeenth century, opera composers like Cavalli and Monteverdi began using the descending minor tetrachord as foundation for this genre because of its specific affective qualities. As Ellen Rosand states:

The most significant, potentially affective, feature of the pattern is its strong harmonic direction, reinforced by stepwise melody, steady, unarticulated rhythm, and brevity. Harmonically, it suggests one of two possible realizations...Denial of these tonal implications creates a frustration of expectation and results in a heightening of tension.<sup>130</sup>

This tension exists not only within the progression itself, but in its concert with the lament's singer:

The pattern offered the possibility of consistent, yet unpredictable conflict between voice and bass line, creating dissonances of melody, rhythm, and texture; and the effect of this conflict was increased by the nonverbal impact of reiterated descent in the minor mode as a fitting expression of endless suffering.<sup>131</sup>

By retaining a musical pattern laden with tension and coded as backing for an elegy while eschewing the eulogist, Sha Money XI infuses the beat of "Bad News" with griefless death. A wake that silences its mourners, "Bad News" celebrates decline by posturing as triumph. Here is the deception of decadence.

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<sup>130</sup> Ellen Rosand, "The Descending Tetrachord: An Emblem of Lament," *The Musical Quarterly* 65.3 (July 1979): 349.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 356.



**Figure 1:** from “Bad News” by G-Unit

Within this composition, the two-bar sections with an alternate beat pattern serve as aural focus points. In these points, the first bar is composed of a looped chop of the vamp and the second bar is composed of repeated “stabs”<sup>132</sup> of one brass chord in unison with a bass drum and cymbal (see Figure 1). The increased subdivision of the stabs provides momentum to the beat, and serves to call special attention to the lyrics laced over each of these bars.<sup>133</sup> Significantly, Banks’s reference to “ninety-nine bananas,” 50’s expression of insecurity in being a “new kid,” and “compared to Pac,” and his violent fantasy about his corporate boss all occur during these focus points. By foregrounding these violent sexualized fantasies over a beat constructed of instruments coded as “masculine” and devoid of Nina Simone’s vocals and piano, Sha Money XI is trading on the recognizability and marketability of the “Feeling Good” sample, while dispensing with the radical potential of Simone’s original recording and her critical social theory.

Rather than silencing Simone’s voice and vision, Timbaland instead creates a sonic dialogue with the late singer. More dialectic than Sha Money XI’s treatment, the outcome of the discourse is still problematic in that Timbaland ultimately subordinates Simone’s voice to his own masculinist posturing. The way that he constructs his beat is highly evocative. Dale Chapman has argued for the

<sup>132</sup> “The term ‘stabs,’ usually expressed as ‘guitar stabs’ or ‘horn stabs,’ is an evocative one. It suggests quick, knifelike, intense sounds that puncture the surface texture of the music before quickly receding.” Schloss, *Making Beats*, 202.

<sup>133</sup> Joseph Schloss documents the tendency of lyricists to alter their rhymes in response to certain elements within a hip hop beat in chapter 7 of *Making Beats*: “Often, an MC will change the rhythm or tone of their performance to correspond with different samples at various points throughout the song.” 173. While it is difficult to say that G-Unit members intentionally placed more provocative lyrics over these alternate sections of the beat, the lyrics are foregrounded more prominently for the listener in these sections.

postmodern "flatness" of Timbaland's production style, one that sheds any connection to the particular historic time and place of the original sampled material:

Even in those instances in which Mosley does use evocative melodies, timbres, or rhythmic patterns to gesture towards particular cultural references, he presents them in such a way that they rarely evoke the same meanings as similar gestures derived from sampled "live" sound sources.<sup>134</sup>

By building his beats from "scratch" out of extremely short fragments of existing recordings, Timbaland strips them of their original aura and historic specificity. So while the overall effect of his production methods is a meticulous craftsmanship and popularity rarely rivaled by his contemporaries, he eschews the didactic potentiality of his samples in favor of their sensual appeal.

Achieving brilliant musicality through sonic pastiche is perhaps Timbaland's closest link to Simone's artistic legacy. As a consummate craftsman who does not limit himself to one genre of production or limit the genres that he pulls his source material from, Timbaland's mastery of sample-based hip hop is squarely in line with Simone's formal liberation aesthetic. Although in "Oh Timbaland" he ultimately sublimates Simone's sampled and social voices, his artistry does honor and owe a great deal to her legacy.

In "Oh Timbaland" the producer inverts both the overall musical structure of the original recording and the call and response choruses; these two inversions result in a reversed power structure compared to the original composition. Simone's "Sinnerman" consists of a verse, chorus, instrumental section, a second verse, and then a repeated chorus. Timbaland turns this musical structure inside out, beginning and ending the song with samples of the central instrumental section from Simone's

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<sup>134</sup> Dale Chapman, "'That Ill, Tight Sound': Telepresence and Biopolitics in Post-Timbaland Rap Production," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2.2 (2008): 163.

tune. These matching sections bookend "Oh Timbaland," which the producer undergirds with an ostinato that he constructs out of the instrumental backing from Simone's verses.

In his chorus, Timbaland also inverts the call and response chorus from "Sinnerman." In the original song Simone and her band construct their chorus with Simone's calls of "Power" and the male band members' response, "Power to the lord." Timbaland's chorus, repeated three times throughout the song, consists of eight repetitions of Simone's query: "Oh Timbaland, where you gonna run to?" and Timbaland's vocal response, "Nowhere." The first four iterations of this dialogue are between the two solo voices, but in the second four iterations, the producer layers a harmonized chorus behind Simone's vocals, while he still responds unaccompanied. With this technique he inverts the traditional call-and-response, with a communal appeal and an individual, insurgent retort. He privileges his own assertions of bravado not just against a god-like Simone vocal, but against a chorale of potential superiors. Rather than a response, Timbaland's replies function as rebuttals.

In the original recording Simone assumes the subject positions of both the title character and the Lord that (s)he addresses. However in "Oh Timbaland" the producer only samples from the portions of the vocals in which Simone is speaking as the lord. He cleans the samples of any sonic grit and adds echo and reverb, reinforcing the feeling of an all-knowing being addressing the mortal. While at first this sacralization might seem to be empowering to Simone's legacy, the fact is that Timbaland constructs Simone as a straw goddess. By aggrandizing her voice so thoroughly and then forcefully refuting it, he uses her stature only to prove his own worth. Although heavily promoted, Timbaland's victory is pyrrhic and false; in wearing the mask of triumph over his contemporaries and his forebear Simone, the artist in fact signals his own constraint and decline in the decadent style.

So in both their lyrical content and production aesthetics, "Oh Timbaland" and "Bad News" sublimate Nina Simone's critical social theory while trading on the recognizability of her recordings. Either by silencing or contradicting her voice, Timbaland and G Unit also squelch that voice's pedagogic possibility. The social conditions of African American women were central to this pedagogy, and in order to address songs that concern themselves more explicitly with these issues, we turn now to the music of Mary. J. Blige and Will.I.Am and Lil Wayne and Juelz Santana.

## **The Elephant in the Hip Hop Room: Heteronormativity, Heterosexual Relationships, Controlling Images and Self-Definition in Commercial Hip Hop**

Both Mary J. Blige and Will.I.Am's "About You" and Lil Wayne and Juelz Santana's "Birds Flyin' High" make use of samples from Nina Simone's recording of "Feeling Good." However the ways in which the song's respective producers alter and employ the sample could not be more different. These differences correspond to the diametrically opposed images of heterosexual relationships between black men and women in these songs. By retaining more of Nina Simone's recorded voice, Blige and Will.I.Am in turn preserve her figurative message of self-definition in the face of controlling images from the white capitalist patriarchy.

The lyrics of "Birds Flyin' High" center around intoxication, the informal economy of drug dealing, and the commodification and de-humanization of the female figure. Lil Wayne offers the first verse of the song, a tribute to intoxication. There is a certain decadent isolation that pervades Wayne's lyrics; although his subject matter is drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana, one gets the sense that his is a party of one, whose last call is a lament:

And I'm high to the tip top

And I'm twisted with a slip knot

Tangled in a grip lock

And will I ever stop never that

Light it up bring it back

Bring a ounce not a sack<sup>135</sup>

Over sampled drum beats, the listener perceives a man securely ensnared in addiction. The double meaning of "twisted" (highly intoxicated or physically distorted) coupled with the imagery of a black male tied to the upper branches of a

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<sup>135</sup> Lil' Wayne and Juelz Santana, "Birds Flyin' High."

tree turn a seemingly celebratory tune into an unsettling *danse macabre*. Wayne seems to acknowledge the inherent instability and unsustainability of this lifestyle when he raps:

I got it foggy as a sauna in the building  
Lookin' for ya boy I'm probably crawlin' on the ceiling  
Fallin' on the railing catch me I'm gone  
I'm in another zone but trust me I'm home<sup>136</sup>

Wayne seems to revel in this moribund fantasy. The single word "high" from Simone's original recording is the inspiration for this entire meditation on self-destruction. In chronicling his struggle to stay "high" constantly, Wayne actually paints a picture of himself at his personal nadir. Wayne is comfortable and at "home" in this process of decay, moving unquestionably to a final resting place. In this verse Wayne sketches an irreversible decline, and toasts it.

Juelz Santana takes more liberty with Simone's language as a jumping off point for his verse. He is a master of the figure in his verse, cunningly interweaving intoxication, sexuality and commodification with his plays on the multiple meanings of the words "high" and "bird," and the homophonic dexterity of the words "coupe" and "coop." In the hip hop vernacular, "bird" can signify a derogation of the female (along with its corollaries "pigeon" or "chickenhead") or a large measure of cocaine. James plays on the homonymic nature of the word to simultaneously animalize and commodify the women to whom he refers. The rapper extends this confluence of economy and de-humanization to his use of the homophones "coupe" and "coop." While one is a material commodity, a status symbol best accented by beautiful "birds" riding in it, the other is a structure of containment for "chickens." In the lines "But my birds fly higher/Your coupe drive by but my coop drive by ya" Juelz could be boasting about having a larger profit margin "flipping birds" (selling drugs), or

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid.



possessing more beautiful women, who are not interested in his contemporary. His is a figuration of economic and sexual domination.

The animalistic language that Santana uses deserves further attention. The rapper denigrates the female as a “bird,” “chick,” “donkey,” and “bitch”<sup>137</sup> in this track, but still maintains that this de-humanized woman is an object of his sexual desire. It is unclear whether the woman to whom he is referring is white or black, but his linguistic treatment is rooted firmly in black women’s experience as objects of the pornographic male gaze in United States history. As Patricia Hill Collins notes:

The treatment of all women in contemporary pornography has strong ties to the portrayal of black women as animals. In porn women become non-people and are often represented as the sum of their fragmented body parts.<sup>138</sup>

Because of the historical reality of black women as pornographic objects on the auction block, the “license” that slave owners took in sexually assaulting their female bondswomen, and the continued legacy of sexual harassment that black female domestic workers have endured in white households, the objectification of all women in pornography is founded on black women’s oppression under racist and sexist systems. As Santana refers to his woman with animalistic epithets and reduces her description to her “donkey butt,”<sup>139</sup> he represents her as both de-humanized and fragmented. As a heterosexual black man, Santana apes the historic pornographic gaze of the white male in an attempt to gain a seat at his patriarchal table. With this performance of power over a woman, Santana disguise his own subordination in the racist patriarchy.

Santana goes on to preclude any possibility of this woman expressing subjectivity or voice before he engages in sexual activity with her:

She talkin’ too much

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 140.

<sup>139</sup> Lil’ Wayne and Juelz Santana, “Birds Flyin’ High.”

Pass the weed calm yourself

I ain't tryin' to hear that shit

Just smoke, bitch<sup>140</sup>

In a milieu of black male phallocentrism,<sup>141</sup> Santana has no interest in what this woman might have to say, or in her identity other than as a sexualized, dehumanized object. In dealing with an unreasonable, debauched, inhuman object, the logical course of action is to silence her. Santana seems to follow this prescription of how a black male brute would treat a woman, without interrogating his own implied bestiality and debasement in the narrative. This performance of power is due in part to the constraint of the artist; barred from patriarchy under racism, Santana's character acts out in the only display of privilege he has, that of his gender and sexuality.

In the final stanza, the intersecting oppressions of gender, sexuality, class and race all dovetail:

This is what I call Dikeman's finest

Sit back baby relax the tight vagina

Enjoy ya ride enjoy ya high

And show some respect when you see the birds flyin' high<sup>142</sup>

By implying that the object of his sexual desire is bisexual, Santana illustrates the ways that the licentious, low-class, non-heterosexual black female marks the boundaries between deviant and acceptable behavior under a white capitalist heteronormative patriarchy. Santana chooses sexuality as the site where he

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> "Black male phallocentrism constructs a portrait of woman as immoral, simultaneously suggesting that she is irrational and incapable of reason." bell hooks. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 103.

<sup>142</sup> Lil Wayne and Juelz Santana, "Birds Flyin' High."

constructs the ultimate "other," betraying the rampant heterosexism in hip hop culture.<sup>143</sup>

Santana displays his figurative mastery once again in these final lines. Based again on the dual meanings of "ride" and "bird," the listener has two possible meanings to draw from this conclusion. On the one hand Santana is addressing the woman, telling her to take pleasure in the intoxication and sexual act (or occupancy in an expensive vehicle) and commanding her reverence for the profitability of the drug trade. On the other, he could be addressing his fellow males, eliciting their respect for women or "birds" only during sexual activity. In working within a "both/and"<sup>144</sup> cosmology, I choose to read these lyrics as both statements simultaneously. By conflating the woman-as-object and the drugs-as-commodity, Santana achieves a domination of both class and gender rooted in the historic treatment of black women as pornographic non-humans, and he locates these intersecting dominations in the site of black female sexuality.

The both/and epistemology not only accommodates complementary readings of such lyrics, but also accounts for a long tradition of "love and trouble" in heterosexual love songs in the blues aesthetic.<sup>145</sup> By expressing multiple seemingly competing feelings at once, a blues sensibility rejects the binary interpretation of relationships as good/bad, happy/unhappy, etc. This epistemological approach is important to keep in mind when evaluating Mary J. Blige and Will.I.Am's "About You." While upon casual listening, this song seems to be a commercial heterosexual

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<sup>143</sup> As black men have historically been portrayed as weak and/or lazy and black women have been depicted as "unnaturally" strong, black male homosexuals and black lesbians seem to reify these controlling images that justify racism in gendered and sexualized forms. Reactions against homosexuality in black communities are not only derived from the overwhelmingly heteronormative larger culture, but also often adopted as implicit defenses against brutal racism. For more on the disturbing connection between heterosexism and racism, see Patricia Hill Collins *Black Sexual Politics*.

<sup>144</sup> For more information about the non-binary "both/and" epistemology of black feminist thought, see Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, "Groups, Coalitions, and Transversal Politics."

<sup>145</sup> For more information on "love and trouble" in the blues and in black men and women's love relationships, see Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, "Black Women, Black Men, and the Love and Trouble Tradition."

love song, upon closer analysis the seeds of a revolutionary self-definition true to Nina Simone's critical theory are apparent. Blige's lyrics are exemplary of the "love and trouble" tradition and the both/and approach to describing heterosexual relationships between black men and black women:

Boy you got me goin' crazy  
I don't know what to say anymore  
Cuz still I wanna be your lady  
You know that I would never walk out that door  
I'm not giving up on us but  
Things can get a little hard in this life  
But you know, you know I love you

You're everything I ever wanted  
Everything I've never wanted  
In a man can't you see  
What you're doing to me<sup>146</sup>

If Blige's reflections on her relationship seem ambiguous, it is because they are meant to seem that way. She seems deeply in love, but frustrated. Further, it seems that her expression is intentionally confusing not just to the listener, but to the male partner she is addressing:

I'm sayin' yes and sayin' no  
Because I don't want you to know  
How I really feel  
How I really feel  
About you<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Mary J. Blige and Will.I.Am, "About You."

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

Blige is expressing intentionally ambiguous emotions in a soulfully charged vocal style. In dissembling<sup>148</sup> her true feelings from her partner, Blige locates her own voice in the larger “love and trouble” tradition.

But other than as a sounding board for Blige’s intentional ambiguity, Will.I.Am is really peripheral to this woman-centered track. The content of his verse is nearly pure devotion:

Won't trip on ya, I don't bring the drama  
I won't dip out when it's trauma  
I'm holdin' on mama, hold up, wait a minute  
We've been through the downs ups, but stayed in it  
So glad that I've got you, that I got you  
So glad that I got you, I got you<sup>149</sup>

While he references the “downs ups” as an acknowledgment of the love and trouble tradition, his lyrics of unambiguous dedication to the relationship leave little in doubt. Formally, the pace of this verse seems almost deliberately decelerated, and the rhythmic structure is extremely simplistic. In this act of aesthetic deference, Will.I.Am steps aside to foreground Mary J. Blige’s extraordinary vocals.

With production credit on the track, he also foregrounds the black female voice with the way that he constructs his beat. As a black man helping to create a black woman-centered text, he pivots the normative hip hop center in a significant way. Specifically, he helps to set the sonic stage for an intergenerational dialogue between Simone and Blige’s character.

Blige and Simone duet throughout the song, and they do so in a way that progresses toward radical self-definition for Mary’s character. In the first chorus, Mary sings the beginning of each line “About you” solo, and sings “You know how I

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<sup>148</sup> See note 75.

<sup>149</sup> Mary J. Blige and Will.I.Am, “About You.”

feel,<sup>150</sup> layered over the sample of Simone's recording. While in the original recording, Simone was addressing animals and inanimate objects ("sun in the sky," "birds flyin' high"<sup>151</sup>), the structure of this song shifts the addressee to a male partner in a heterosexual relationship. In this first chorus, Blige defines her "new life" in terms of this relationship, alternating lines of verse with Simone. Blige: "So glad to have you in my life"/Simone: "It's a new life for me." The following line features a looped chop from Simone's original recording "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah."<sup>152</sup> In this first iteration, Simone's vocal is central, while Blige's "yeahs" constitute an echoing accompaniment. The reverb-enhanced bass drum in unison with the chopped sample of Simone's voice is a powerful sonic reinforcement to this chorus of affirmation.

Directly following the chorus, the two vocalists share a striking moment of harmony on the word "you," with no instrumental accompaniment. The Simone samples drop out after this syllable, and Blige sings the lines "you're the one for me/I don't wanna be free." If a single life is liberation, she would prefer constraint. Here she is confirming that her "new life" is credited to her male partner. This is in decided contrast to the second iteration of the chorus.

In this instance, the two vocalists again share a duet on the repeated "yeah" portion of the chorus. However rather than simply echoing Simone's vocal, here Blige truly lets her voice ring out. In a virtuosic display of the reason why she is known as "the queen of hip hop soul" Blige hits the highest pitched notes of this song at a thematic point of climax as well. For it is directly following this harmonic dialogue that the two vocalists share their second and final unaccompanied figure of the song. Tellingly, rather than the previous "you," the two vocalists pair on the

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Nina Simone, "Feeling Good."

<sup>152</sup> Mary J. Blige and Will.I.Am, "About You."

deceivingly simple syllable “ooh.” Following this flight of pitches, Blige also alters the succeeding lines:

So glad to have you in my life

So glad to have someone to hold me

So very happy with my life<sup>153</sup>

It is here, through a sonic dialogue between Blige and Simone that Blige’s character in the song comes to self-definition. Through communion with Nina Simone, Blige ascribes primacy to her opinion of her life. This self-definition is at least psychologically freeing for the character, if not actually liberatory. Her vocal performance exists as a sonic example of Simone’s critical social theory come to fruition.

However it is important to acknowledge the heteronormative underpinnings of this piece. As in popular music generally, “About You” is conceived in a worldview that privileges the heterosexual love relationship above other models of romantic union. We find this biased supposition throughout all of the songs examined in this study, as well as in black popular music and African American culture overall.<sup>154</sup> This heteronormativity is not particular to the African American community; it is an outgrowth of the insidious and often invisible homophobia and hate that pervade the

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Gwendolyn Pough acknowledges the heterosexist nature of “many rap love songs” in “Love Feminism but Where’s My Hip Hop?: Shaping a Black Feminist Identity,” in Hernandez and Rehman, *Colonize This!* 86. In regard to black women more generally, Patricia Hill Collins notes, “Black lesbian relationships are not only threatening to intersecting systems of oppression, they can be highly threatening to heterosexual African American women’s already assaulted sense of self,” 167. Collins also proves the striking danger of heterosexism because of its reinforcing relationship to racism: “Too much is at stake for Black antiracist projects to ignore sexuality and its connections to oppressions of race, class, gender and age any longer.” in *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 114. Queer black women rappers constitute a courageous community within hip hop because of this cultural context. Cheryl Keyes highlights one such MC, Queen Pen, in “Empowering Self, Making Choices, Creating Spaces: Black Female Identity via Rap Music Performance,” in Foreman and Neal, *That’s the Joint!* 407-408. For more on this vibrant community of musicians, see Andreana Clay, “I Used to Be Scared of the Dick: Queer Women of Color and Hip Hop Masculinity,” in *That’s the Joint!* 348-357.

larger society. But as a lifestyle choice that the structures of domination deem deviant, homosexuality can add an unwanted additional fetter in the eyes of heterosexual black people striving under positions of constraint in a racist society. Acknowledging heterosexual black privilege is an important step in deconstructing binary thinking that would render all black people in positions of pure constraint under racism. Bearing in mind the limited number of homosexual voices in hip hop music expands the terms of inquiry to include the arena of sexuality as both a site of privilege and constraint.

While the sample of Simone's descending vocal figure in the syllable "ooh" comprises the tipping point of self-definition for Mary J. Blige's character in "About You," the same figure functions very differently in the context of Lil Wayne and Juelz Santana's "Birds Flyin' High." In this composition the producer uses the figure as filigree devoid of Simone's distinctive vocal timbre. By increasing the pitch and tempo of Simone's sampled voice to the point of distortion, the producers render it virtually unrecognizable. One hears a tinny disembodied utterance, more of a machine singing than a woman.<sup>155</sup> And in this context, the added reverb contributes to an overall impression of diminution, as if a tiny voice is echoing in an inhospitable cavern. The listener cannot possibly know how the singer is feeling, because she cannot hear any trace of subjectivity or humanity in her voice. By distorting and diminishing Simone's recorded voice, the producers of this track sonically reinforce the lyrical repudiation of her grammar of social production. As a track that masquerades as a celebration of the "high life" of consuming intoxicants and women, "Birds Flyin' High" eschews Simone's recorded and figurative voices, and celebrates in fact only the inevitable descent of the oppressive ideologies she fought against.

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<sup>155</sup> Kay Dickinson addresses the disempowering effect of male producers "chopping chunks" (343) out of female vocal performances in "'Believe'? Vocoders, Digitalised Female Identity and Camp" *Popular Music* 20:3 (2001): 333-347. Specifically, the "droid-like" effects of vocals that producers highly manipulate blur the line between human and machine and strip the voice, as representation of body, of its "female-ness."



## Conclusion, or Toward a Disquieted Revolution

So in all these seemingly “nihilistic” songs, the critical listener can hear rather a style of decadence. Where “weakness becomes a task,”<sup>156</sup> these lyricists often assume aggrandized postures of strength, while simultaneously embodying and propagating controlling images from the racist capitalist heteronormative patriarchy. While the album that features “Bad News” is titled *50 Cent is the Future*, the self-representations of G Unit’s members betray an inevitable fall. Such is the seduction of decadence, the masquerade of infallibility worn by insecure, constrained individuals. In celebrating their own decline, these outwardly defined voices are actually heralding the instability and unsustainability of the matrix of domination that signs their checks. As bell hooks notes:

Rather than using coercive tactics of domination to colonize, it [white supremacist logic] seduces black folks with the promise of mainstream success if only we are willing to negate the value of blackness...a prime example of this is white consumer support of misogynist rap which reproduces the idea that black males are violent beasts and brutes.<sup>157</sup>

While these artists do have personal volition and should assume personal responsibility for the messages that they are disseminating, placing the blame only on them somewhat misses the point. Rather than simply refuting the stereotypical images of the black male rapper as beast and the black female as a licentious, de-humanized sexual object, it is far more productive to interrogate who has the power to promote these images and why. By not interrogating the racist capitalist heteronormative patriarchy that controls the big media outlets, the casual listener is in fact furthering their programs.

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<sup>156</sup> Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 183.

<sup>157</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks*, 17-18.

However if this decadent style heralds the precarity of its masters' ideology, then it in fact has a role to play in revolution. The thinly veiled self-definition that Blige and Will.I.Am achieve through sonic dialogue with Simone is in fact a primary example that all is not lost, even in a seeming celebration of decline. As a style centered around a coming crisis, the redemption of decadence is the knowledge of that crisis:

The expression of a precise historical moment, decadence no longer appears as a poisonous manifestation of 'bourgeois ideology' but, on the contrary, as a reaction against it and, moreover, as a deep and authentic awareness of a crisis to which no easy (or even difficult) solutions can be prescribed.<sup>158</sup>

This decadent promotion of decline can compel the critical listener to talk back to the wellspring of the decay, and the reasons why it is not fit to survive. As Adorno notes:

Those...whom history is going to thrust aside and annihilate personify negatively... the negativity of this culture...Their protest is our only hope that destiny and force shall not have the last word. That which stands against the decline of the West is not the surviving culture but the Utopia that is silently embodied in the image of the decline.<sup>159</sup>

As a disembodied and often silenced voice of critical social theory, Nina Simone stands as the new potentiality, the spectre of possibility that haunts this music. Just as Simone as an individual came to voice against the matrix of domination, so too can the critical listener come to voice against the matrix that propagates the controlling images that she fought against. It is only through the critical interrogation of seemingly "nihilistic" forms like commercial and neo-gangsta hip hop that their root causes in the racist capitalist heteronormative matrix of domination

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<sup>158</sup> Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 210-211.

<sup>159</sup> T.W. Adorno, qtd. In Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 209.

can become clear. Although these causes are already painfully clear to many individuals who are highly constrained under the matrix, critical listening can elucidate these roots especially for more privileged people. And just as Mary J. Blige turns the corner of self-definition in a seemingly celebratory context, so too can the critically engaged listener come to voice in regard to this music. If we hear disquieting lyrics critically then they might help us as hip hop fans, scholars and critics to turn thought into speech, or speech into action; to turn ourselves out in resistance to the matrix of domination that would prescribe controlling images to those it constrains. Let us be disquieted. Only then can the "new and bold world"<sup>160</sup> of which Nina Simone sang become a reality. Rather than relying only on a linear conception of time and decay, we might begin to see a revolution in the works. For those artists who are reaching toward orbit, we will turn now to the harbingers of Simone's critical theory, the radically self-defined artists of revolutionary hip hop.

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<sup>160</sup> Nina Simone, "Feeling Good."

## Chapter 2: "She All Right 'Cus She Done Seen the Circle of Life": The Social Activism and Self-Definition of Revolutionary Hip Hop

This concept [decadence] is conveyed by a large variety of terms suggesting the decline, decay, and inevitable collapse of ruling classes when they no longer play the progressive role that helped them rise to power. A product of class struggle, history illustrates at every stage the clash between the forces of the new and those of the old...Basically, structural change in history is explained within the framework of a dialectic of content and form, implying the transformation of quantity (the means of production that develop slowly and steadily, illustrating the principle of gradual evolution) into quality (the new social structure that is brought about by revolution). *Evolution* leads to *revolution*, and a declining class opposes both, practically as well as ideologically.

- Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* (italics in original)

Somethin' akin to ascension and its inevitable  
So rebel whatever yo; evil's death is destined so  
Through mastering breath control and meditation methods  
For my internal evolution I'm feelin' real unfettered so

- Tony Moon, "Freedom"

Listen, listen a man always punctual with his, mouth  
Listen to his, revolution of syllables  
Scooping lightning from his pores  
Keeping time, with his hurricane beat  
Asking us to pick ourselves up and become, THUNDER

- Sonia Sanchez on Talib Kweli's "Everything Man"

In a 2004 interview with William Jelani Cobb, Brooklyn rapper Talib Kweli explicitly linked Nina Simone's socially activist music with his own: "I loved that she was injecting activism into her music; she was talking about social topics, doing hip-hop style things with her voice. For her to make a song like 'Mississippi Goddam' or to do a song like 'Four Women' was like hip hop to me."<sup>161</sup> In this brief quotation Kweli succinctly summarizes Nina Simone's critical social theory of socially active self-definition, touches on the way that she embodied this theoretical model in social

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<sup>161</sup> William Jelani Cobb, "The Culture of Civil Rights," *Voices of Civil Rights*, October, 2004, <http://www.voicesofcivilrights.org/civil5.html>

practice and musical form, and links this tradition with the “conscious” hip hop subgenre for which he is a standard-bearer. In the work of Common, Lil Wayne, and Tony Moon, along with Kweli, the listener hears a radical mobilization of Simone’s tradition of socially active self-definition, and a revolutionary cognitive praxis that embraces the activist/artist tradition. All of these artists maintain Simone’s voice in their work, by relying on samples of her recordings or explicitly invoking her as a cultural icon.

I examine the work of Lil Wayne again in this chapter, itself an illustration of the complexity and dexterity of this remarkable artist; his song “Dontgetit” foregrounds controlling images of young black men, in his personal experience and in the U.S. criminal justice system. Sampling the same Simone song, Chicago rapper Common mobilizes Nina Simone’s radical grammar of cultural production to a more traditional Christian strategy in “Misunderstood.” Virginia rapper Tony Moon and producer AirMe construct a transcendent revolution in their aptly named, “Freedom.” And Talib Kweli and Hi-Tek mobilize Simone’s critical theory even beyond the sampling framework in their heuristic untitled track widely referred to as “For Women.” As these records keep spinning, the listener travels a circumference that is never far from Nina Simone’s radical subjectivity at the center.

**“I’m Just a Soul Whose Intentions Are Good”:  
Reverence, Revolution, and the Morality of “Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood”**

In “Misunderstood” and “Dontgetit” Common and Lil Wayne each mobilize Nina Simone’s conception of “misunderstanding” due to the controlling images of the dominant culture. Wayne employs the concept of incomprehension to illustrate the difference between his public persona (Lil Wayne) and his private self (Wayne or Dwayne) and to depict the profiling of young African American males in the criminal justice system, in light of the harsh inequalities of policing, arrests and sentencing practices along class and racial lines. Common engages with controlling images of both young black men and women, constructed and enacted because of social inequalities. In each of these compositions that mobilize Nina Simone’s critical social theory in the twenty first century, their producers foreground her recorded voice with their sampling methods.

In the two rapped verses of Lil Wayne’s “Dontgetit,”<sup>162</sup> the duality of the Lil Wayne or “Weezy” persona and a private Dwayne (Carter’s given name) or Wayne functions as a hinge around which the lyricist builds his monologue. Wayne first addresses those who don’t understand the existence of this dyad: “Misunderstood ain’t gotta be explained / But you don’t understand me so let me explain,” and then those who do: “What’s understood ain’t gotta be explained / So for those who understand, meet Dwayne.”<sup>163</sup> Wayne figuratively illustrates this duality as a dialectical yin and yang, with two interdependent identities:

The wind blow  
My dreads swing  
He had hair like wool  
Like Wayne  
Droppin’ ashes in the bible

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<sup>162</sup> Lil Wayne, “Dontgetit,” *Tha Carter III*, 2008, Cash Money.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

I shake `em out and they fall on the rifle

Scary, hail mary no tale fairy

All real very extraordinary<sup>164</sup>

In the first stanza of this passage, Wayne employs a dissociative technique of referring to himself in the third person to illustrate the resemblance but fundamental difference between Weezy and Wayne.<sup>165</sup> As one lives by the gun the other lives by the Word. The artist even invokes physical similarities to Jesus in constructing the conscientious Wayne identity. This same tension exists as Wayne acknowledges the pervasive consumptive tendencies of commercial hip hop, but asserts that this is neither the time nor the place for them: "Bright pinky rings but that ain't about this..."<sup>166</sup> The despair in Wayne's voice is unmistakable in the end of this line, and his staccato articulation and ritardando seem to add to the sense of apprehension the listener feels as (s)he prepares for the antecedent to which "this" refers. The vehemence with which he spits his next line, "What you `bout bitch?" seems to indicate that the proverbial coin has flipped, and Weezy is now in full control of the mic. The jarring transition from introspection to gendered aggression suggests a knee-jerk reaction that Wayne seems to be observing while he is articulating it. As the lyricist dissociates the two personas they battle one another; as Weezy challenges Wayne with a gendered epithet Wayne does not respond to the attack, instead excusing his alter ego's profanity:

Excuse my French

Emotion in my passion

But I wear my heart on my sleeve

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Here Wayne is also Signifyin(g) on the opening lines of Nina Simone's "Four Women": "My skin is black/My arms are long/My hair is woolly/My back is strong." Nina Simone, "Four Women."

<sup>166</sup> Lil Wayne, "Dontgetit."

Like it's the new fashion<sup>167</sup>

This is a drama of a man outside himself, protesting a controlling image of violence, misogyny and materialism while he simultaneously performs it. It is as if Wayne is paying homage to Simone's legacy in his work against and outside the Weezy voice; however his choice in allowing Weezy to speak betrays a deeply imbedded inner conflict, a violent self-hatred. In the final stanza of this verse, Wayne both affirms his dichotomy of personalities and establishes his conscious, personal self as primary:

But I know you don't understand

'Cus you thought Lil Wayne was Weezy

But Weezy is Wayne<sup>168</sup>

In the second section of the song, Wayne does not rap and instead addresses his listeners in a conversational style. Preceding this portion of the song, the listener hears three clicks of a lighter and a pronounced inhale and exhale. Wayne has presumably lit a blunt (a marijuana cigar); his workday is done and he can shed the Weezy mantle and speak candidly. However it is important for the listener to bear in mind that this candor comes mediated through marijuana. Wayne's framing establishes an informal intimacy between the artist-as-man and the listener, but one that is questionable due to its reliance on the marijuana to make it possible.

In this segment of the song Wayne addresses the inequalities of the criminal justice system along class and racial lines in a powerful way. He expands the notion of misunderstanding from one of personal identity to a societal misconception about the roots of the urban illicit economy:

...young black guys are targeted. Targeted by who? America. You see, one in every 100 Americans are locked up. One in every nine black Americans are

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.



locked up...The money that we spend on sending a motherfucker to jail, a young motherfucker to jail, would be less to send his or her young ass to college...Our jails are populated with drug dealers. You know, crack cocaine, yeah stuff like that. Meanin', due to the laws we have on crack cocaine and regular cocaine, the police are only, I don't want to say only right, but shit. Only logic by riding around in the hood all day, and not in the suburbs, because, crack cocaine is mostly found in the hood. And um, you know the other thing is mostly found...You know where I'm going...You know, level three, level four drug, shit like that. Mmm hmm I guess it's all a misunderstanding and um, I sit back and think well shit us young motherfuckers, you know, that one in every nine? We probably only selling the crack cocaine just because we in the hood, and it's not like your suburbs. *We don't have the things that you have.* Why? I really don't want to know the answer, but uh, I guess we just misunderstood.<sup>169</sup>

The frequent "ums" and "you know's" from this extremely dexterous lyricist reinforce the conversational, ad-libbed feel of his monologue. The way that Wayne delivers his message about the gross injustices of policing, arrest and sentencing laws in the U.S. emphasizes the notion that this is Wayne speaking from the heart, and that the listener should consider this face of the polygonal character the genuine one. He later brings his notion of misunderstanding full circle, connecting both societal controlling images and his personal experience:

You understand me? And, why the fuck would you bring my neighbor to jail just because the reason why he live next door to me ain't the reason why I live next door to him? Meanin' that, he didn't rap his way to my fuckin' neighborhood. He sold crack cocaine to get to my neighborhood.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

Here Wayne proposes class as a leveling force, regardless of the way one gains his economic privilege. The fluidity and complexity of identity in the context of upward economic mobility recurs in his compelling conclusion to the piece: "Fuck if you understand me. I love being misunderstood. Why? 'Cus I live in the suburbs, but I come from the hood. Bring the hook in."<sup>171</sup> Wayne dovetails personal and social misconception based on class and economic injustice in this final statement. Just as Weezy might be one of the "one in every nine" black men "from the hood" of urban poverty who are sorely misunderstood by white America, presumably Wayne is living in the suburbs and speaking to the injustice of Weezy's plight. As he directs his engineer to "bring the hook," Nina Simone's lines "I'm just a soul whose intentions are good/Oh Lord, please don't let me be misunderstood,"<sup>172</sup> reinforce his point. While the connotation of her original recording was a personal expression of a collective inscrutability, Wayne's individual and communal expressions of misunderstanding exist concurrently.

While Wayne constructs himself as an allegorical figure of misconception based on controlling images, Common creates two fictional characters for the same purpose. These two could be stock images of inner city youth, but each has a profound turning point at the cusp of death that complicates the stereotype. Common explicitly frames his song as one with a mission: "We do this for the people that walk that path. Tryina' get to they dream."<sup>173</sup> With this unambiguous introduction Common sets up what he intends to do with this piece very clearly. Inspiration is the mission, and he achieves this goal by illustrating the mortal risk of livelihoods in the drug or sex trades. Common wants his listeners to dream through the drugs and come to self-definition.

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Nina Simone, "Misunderstood."

<sup>173</sup> Common, "Misunderstood."

While Wayne implies a judicial overhaul is necessary to solve the social problems of the urban lower classes, Common instead proposes moral uplift as the route to salvation. His introduction establishes a traditional, Christian-oriented tone that only intensifies throughout the narrative. While this communal, religious orientation diverges from Nina Simone's grammar of radical social activism,<sup>174</sup> his humanization and complication of the typed figures of urban youth succeeds in promoting self-definition in the face of controlling images from the matrix of domination.

The first of these urban youth is a young man disenfranchised from the American Dream who resorts to violence, theft and drug peddling for survival: "Can't find a job so you robbin' and hustlin'/He killed marks and sold dope for cuz n' em."<sup>175</sup> However his heart is not in his trade: "He stood on the corner with the rest of them / Though he knew that this corner wasn't the best of him."<sup>176</sup> His partners in crime ultimately betray him in this anti-criminal morality tale:

Can't believe they would be the ones buckin' him

He on the ground he could feel God touchin' him

He heard the sound of his moms sayin' trust in him

At heaven's gate sayin' "Lord please let me in.

Or send me back to tell my people to be better men."<sup>177</sup>

This young man repents for his life of crime only at the point of death. His *raison d'être* if he survives will be the moral uplift of his brethren. Common presents the Christian God as the unequivocal source of salvation.

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<sup>174</sup> Tammy Kernodle argues effectively that Nina Simone initiated the shift in the protest music of the black freedom struggle of the 1960s from the "revamped spiritual and gospel song performed in call-and-response format to a secular individually performed song that reflected the feelings and aspirations of the larger community." Tammy Kernodle "'I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to be Free,' 296. However Simone retained the gospel influence in much of her performance style and generic blending (see Introduction).

<sup>175</sup> Common, "Misunderstood."

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

Common extends this source of redemption to his female protagonist in the second verse. A failed actress, this young woman has turned to stripping for her economic survival. Like her male counterpart, she also endures a mind-body split based on her inner disgust at trading on her sexuality: "Her body move but her mind was manic and / Thinkin' I don't know where they hands have been."<sup>178</sup> She turns to drugs to numb the pain of her objectification, and the drugs turn out to be her downfall:

Cats put paper where she put powder and  
Life would break her, now she powderin'  
She was high when she feel down and then  
Crowd surrounding and heart was poundin' and  
She fell into a deep sleep the siren sounded and  
Seen bright lights in the midst of clouds and then  
Talked to God feeling like his child again  
Said Lord let me live so I can make you proud again<sup>179</sup>

Common depicts these two characters' inner anguish and turmoil to humanize and complicate what might otherwise be two-dimensional "hustlers and ho's," and continues a strong tradition in the Black Church of regarding God as the source of revolution.

The form of "Misunderstood" reinforces this Christian mobilization of Nina Simone's grammar of cultural production. While Simone was raised singing in church and displayed a gospel influence in some of her repertoire, she is best remembered for her "worldly" popular song and socially conscious material. And her songs that dealt with social injustice were explicitly secular.<sup>180</sup> Producer Devo Springsteen seems to continue this cycle back to its origin with "Misunderstood." He opens the

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> See note 176.

song with an extended sample from Nina Simone's live performance of "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood" in Paris in 1975.<sup>181</sup> He cuts Simone's original introduction to the tune, in which she thanks the audience and improvises vocally, choosing instead to begin "Misunderstood" when Simone begins singing the first chorus of the tune. He does retain the audience's applause following the first line, calling attention to the fact that while he is sampling a recording, it is a recording of a live performance. In the final line of this chorus "Oh lord, please don't let me be misunderstood,"<sup>182</sup> Springsteen adds a descending string tremolo line leading into the beat drop. This accompaniment does not appear in either the live performance or the studio version of "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood," and its addition jars the listener from the feeling of listening to a live performance, preparing her for the ensuing beat as a construction.

Springsteen uses the male chorus that backed Nina Simone on the original live recording and a resounding bass drum to create a weighty ostinato foundation for his beat. Although he cuts her improvised vocals from the introduction to the song, he incorporates them into the beat, along with the accompanying flute and piano ornaments from the original recording. During the two verses, the chopped vocal and instrumental figures backgrounding Common's vocals help to create the feel of a live performance; one can almost see Common at the mic at the front of the stage, with Simone seated at the piano and the band behind him. This simulated live performance further reinforces the powerful currents of communal salvation that run through this composition. However Springsteen constructs his chorus with abrupt changes in pitch, an unexpected voice leading that brings the listener back to the

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<sup>181</sup> Nina Simone, "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood," *The Great Show (Live in Paris)*, 1975, Disques Festival.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

reality of the sample-based construction. Springsteen organizes the words of the chorus in the following way:

Misunderstood/(Common: 'Cus we are)Don't/Don't let me be  
Misunderstood/Don't  
Misunderstood/Don't/Don't let me be  
Misunderstood/Don't  
I'm just human.<sup>183</sup>

The syntax of this passage is choppy and explicitly repetitive, reminding the listener of the fact that it is composed of sampled work. Common's supplemental "'Cus we are" in each iteration of the chorus unambiguously relates the communal mission of his message, a revision of Simone's individual original.

Following the second chorus, there is a stanza from singer Bilal repeated twice:

The life we lead will always lead us  
And we pray that he will never leave us  
It's the price we pay I guess that's the reason  
Why my grandma sang we all need Jesus<sup>184</sup>

Springsteen's beat drops out behind these stanzas and Bilal's only accompaniment is a piano. His throaty tenor is strikingly androgynous to the listener and he delivers his address in the first person plural, de-emphasizing the individuality of a solo voice in this song rooted in community. The Christian lyrics of salvation complete this capstone to a piece that places the responsibility of coming to Christ (and by extension, self-definition) on the song's subjects. The revolution in "Misunderstood" is lineal: as Bilal invokes his grandmother, it seems his moral would please Mary Waymon more than Nina Simone.

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<sup>183</sup> Common, "Misunderstood."

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

This reverence to the history of the Black Church as a beacon of freedom is an essential component in Common's prescription for revolution. Historically, the Black Church has served as a wellspring of the freedom struggle. Common and Springsteen's lineal revolution endeavors to get back to Christianity as a source of salvation. As bell hooks reminds us: "There is no de-colonization process that doesn't involve reclaiming our past."<sup>185</sup>

While Springsteen draws from one of Simone's live recordings, production team Rodnae and Mousa open "Dontgetit" with an extended sample from the studio version of "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood."<sup>186</sup> They augment her vocals with reverberation and utilize the "phonograph effect," or layered static over a digital sample, at the beginning of the piece. This effect serves to reconstruct the specific aura of Simone's original recording, reminding the listener that she is listening to sampled material from a specific historical moment.

On the downbeat of each measure, Rodnae and Mousa place a looped chop of Simone's vocal for the last syllable of the word "misunderstood." In the original recording, Simone increases her vibrato on each iteration of the word culminating in a distinctive mournful timbre on the final statement. It is as if the lump in Simone's throat has finally burst and shaken the word as she sings it to her audience. By isolating this syllable and using to form an ostinato in "Dontgetit," Rodnae and Mousa permeate their composition with the tone of Nina Simone's original record. By relying so heavily on the timbre of Simone's voice, isolated from the meaning of her words, this technique creates not only a cognitive praxis but an emotive one as well. This statement is reinforced with a reverb-enhanced bass drum, underscoring Simone's timbre with its sonic weight.

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<sup>185</sup> *Black is Black Ain't: a Personal Journey through Black Identity*, directed by Marlon Riggs (1995; New York: Docurama Films, 2008), DVD.

<sup>186</sup> Nina Simone, "Misunderstood," *Broadway – Blues – Ballads*, 1964, Phillips.

In the first two verses, the producers structure the beat with ten uniform bars followed by a two bar section that lacks the percussion backbeat. This two bar section precedes the hook (“I’m just a soul whose intentions are good/Oh Lord please don’t let me be misunderstood”<sup>187</sup>), and the lack of percussion foregrounds both Simone’s voice and Wayne’s lyrics in each instance. In the first, he states: “Fucking fantastic, fuck if you agree/I’m bright but I don’t give a fuck if you see me,” and in the second:

But I know you don’t understand

’Cus you thought Lil Wayne was Weezy

But Weezy is Wayne<sup>188</sup>

Both passages operate to denigrate those who would misunderstand the duality between Weezy, the public persona, and Wayne, the private self. These passages serve to reinforce Wayne’s dismissal of those who would “type” him under the controlling image of a violent, consumptive misogynist.

In the section of the song in which Wayne addresses his audience in a conversational style, Rodnae and Mousa also change the structure of the beat. There is a four bar transition period after the third chorus in which the drum beat is absent, the longest of this type of section in the song. It is in this four bar section that we hear Wayne light his blunt and ready himself for the monologue. While he is ad-libbing, there are fourteen bars with the backbeat in between each two-measure section without drums. The relative infrequency of these sections during Wayne’s adlib highlight his words during them even more. Significantly, Wayne makes some of his most condemnatory statements regarding the racial and economic inequalities of the criminal justice system during these passages: “The money that we spend on sending a motherfucker to jail, a young motherfucker to jail, would be less to send

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<sup>187</sup> Lil Wayne, “Dontgetit.”

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.



his or her young ass to college,” “...in the hood all day, and not in the suburbs. Because crack cocaine is mostly found...” and “We probably only selling the crack cocaine just because we in the hood.”<sup>189</sup> Wayne’s words assume the insistence of a beat in the absence of a literal percussion pulse, underscoring his critique of U.S. policing, arrest and sentencing inequalities.

He also provides some of his most powerful moral reflections during the sections stripped of drum beats: “[good humanity] is helpin’ one another, no matter your color or race,” and “[I] may be bad, or just not too good, but I do try.”<sup>190</sup> Wayne proposes an inclusive altruistic humanism in his first statement, and a moral code based on “good intentions” in his second. He precedes this line by stating “But since I am human, I am good and bad as well. But I try my hardest to stay good. And some of the things I do and say may be bad, or just not too good. But I do try.” This vague ethical justification is bolstered by his assertion of positive aims, but ultimately lacking in the absence of any clear articulation of action. His first ethical postulation seems to run counter to what Weezy would assert, and his second attempts to justify the subordination of Weezy’s words to Wayne’s motives. Moral fallibility accounts for the Weezy persona; Wayne’s moral conscience enables this ethical audit. The fact that he is contemplating Weezy’s existence in the first place betrays Wayne as a “soul whose intentions are good,” but his human frailty and capitulation to controlling images renders these intentions blacktop on the road to an outwardly defined self. Wayne’s efforts are important, but they are not sufficient to justify Weezy’s violent, consumptive and misogynistic rhetoric.

So Lil Wayne and Common each mobilize Simone’s critical social theory of socially active self-definition in divergent ways in “Dontgetit” and “Misunderstood.” Each artist employs the incomprehension of subjectivity that stems from controlling

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

images on a societal level, but while Wayne's allegory is highly personal and radical, Common crafts a communal Christian message. Although they rely on the same original song as their raw material, the songs' producers also diverge in their mobilization of Simone's grammar of cultural production. While "Dontgetit" argues for a radical re-understanding of America's culture of incarceration, "Misunderstood" proposes moral uplift as the road to redemption. However both songs' most lasting impact is to complicate and humanize the two-dimensional typed images of the matrix of domination by depicting the pain and injustice that these understandings inflict on the people who endure them. Rappers Tony Moon and Talib Kweli take these ideas around the bend and to the next level in their compositions "Freedom" and the untitled track widely referred to as "For Women." We now turn to their visions of metaphysical transcendence and a supravocal feminized liberation tradition.

## **“Something Akin to Ascension”: Elevation and Feminized Revolution in “Freedom” and “Fo(u)r Women”**

While Lil Wayne levels a critique the U.S. judicial system on a societal level in “Dontgetit,” Tony Moon elevates this critique to one of transcendence in “Freedom.”<sup>191</sup> In this song, Moon constructs a powerful monologue about elevation to revolutionary consciousness. In ten stanzas of uninterrupted flow, Moon builds his rhymes in an arc of ascension, mirroring the content of the lyrics. He begins in worldly concerns of economic exploitation and the U.S. prison system, and climbs to a discussion of transcendence through meditation. Moon’s revolution is metaphysical, and by beginning and ending this track with extended samples from “Feeling Good,”<sup>192</sup> he reinforces Simone’s critical social theory as the origin and destination of liberation. But Moon also builds upon Nina Simone’s grammar of cultural production, inciting his listeners not only to define themselves in spite of controlling images from the matrix of domination, but to define consciousness as oneness with all beings.

Moon opens the song with a morning that reflects Simone’s “new dawn” from the original recording: “As the sun rises above the horizon,”<sup>193</sup> and the next four stanzas, over sixteen bars, remain relatively firmly planted on the ground. Moon first levels a blistering critique against the economic exploitation of workers at the hands of big business:

Like why all the mom and pop shop enterprises dyin’  
Cus Wal-Mart got low prices we buy kid  
Not knowing it’s Chinese slave labor that drives it

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<sup>191</sup> Tony Moon, “Freedom.”

<sup>192</sup> Nina Simone, “Feelin’ Good.”

<sup>193</sup> Tony Moon, “Freedom.”

Thirty million political dissidents livin' in conditions akin to some concentration  
camp victim shit<sup>194</sup>

His anti-capitalist sentiment is directed specifically at raising the consciousness of those sleeping consumers who are unaware of what their savings really costs.

In the following stanza he transitions from the industrial to the prison complex in the U.S., and to direct state control of the people:

Then they got sweat shops but I don't see no difference  
And this shit is just like our prison system is sickenin'  
When the implications are considered and  
Anti-government is terrorist by definition and  
Niggas talk freedom but freedom don't exist in this shit  
And it hasn't since the cultures were indigenous<sup>195</sup>

To Moon, overdeveloped countries are inherently constraining to their citizens; the notion of liberation is antithetical to the capitalist state. His employ of the term "nigga" in describing those who imagine otherwise is indicative of his view of their lack of consciousness.

Moon raps the following two stanzas over what would typically be the hook following the standard sixteen bar verse. This hook instead constitutes a background to Moon's vocals. Producer Airme constructs it out of two non-consecutive samples from "Feeling Good": the lines "Freedom is mine" and "Don't cha know." The fact that Moon continues his vocals over the samples of Nina Simone's voice adds to the non-conventional, escalating structure of the song. If Moon were to drop out during the chorus, his vocals would comprise two verses; instead by continuing through the hook he constructs one continuous ascending line, from the earth to the ether and from morning to night.

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

During the two stanzas that Moon spits over the Nina Simone samples, he touches on the intoxicating effects of marijuana, but in a strikingly different fashion than Lil Wayne (see chapter 1).

La got me flying higher than Icarus

But my wings don't burn they're flame retardant on the little bus

Twist a swisher up or split a dutch

This is what it must sound like when a *dove* just doesn't give a fuck<sup>196</sup>

Moon depicts the high of marijuana in a literal spatial relationship of ascension, and by invoking the myth of Icarus, characterizes himself as invincible to hubris.

Although overall Moon dismisses external stimuli as inhibitive to consciousness, marijuana is singularly immune from this classification. To extend the Icarus metaphor, Moon strays a bit too close to the sun as he makes an exception to his own rule.

In the last line of the verse, the experienced hip hop listener would expect the word "thug" to precede "just doesn't give a fuck" with an almost knee-jerk predictability. However with his extremely deliberate enunciation of the word "dove," Moon inverts the listener's expectations in a fairly common hip hop rhyme scheme. By upsetting our expectations as listeners, he draws special attention to his peaceful tactics.

After Moon takes off during these two stanzas of transition, the last four exist in a space of metaphysical transcendence. The lyricist portrays the pedagogic potential of hip hop as an interdisciplinary mixology:

My curriculum consisted of

Readin' written hieroglyphic scriptures from

Ancient Atlantic and Egyptians, son

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

And I mixed it up with GZA RZA Biggie Buss and literature rotatin' henny  
gently in my sifter cup<sup>197</sup>

Moon has learned his lessons from ancient texts as well as the giants of the rap game; his is an intergenerational blend of cognitive praxis. The contemplative imagery of the final line turns cognac, a common symbol of rap decadence, into a thinking man's metaphorical mixer, able to be re-mixed at his discretion. The artist foregrounds his spiritual practice in the final stanzas:

...so through my daily regimen I realized the external wasn't relevant  
Saw my own aura it was evident  
And ever since feelin' the apparition enrichment I've been different  
Oneness is real; everything else is fiction  
Forgive the contradiction guess freedom exists but beyond description  
Somethin' akin to ascension<sup>198</sup> and its inevitable  
So rebel whatever yo evil's death is destined so  
Through mastering breath control and meditation methods for my internal  
evolution  
I'm feelin' real unfettered so<sup>199</sup>

Building upon the noting of "Feeling Good," Moon depicts feelings that are not constrained by dualist value judgments, but rather liberated fully from a conception of separation between self and other. He comes to his own vision of self-definition by realizing his innate connection, or "oneness," with the rest of the universe. As his ten-stanza verse reaches an emotional and metaphysical climax, his figurative

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Here Moon is presumably referencing Harriet Jacobs: "There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment." *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 55. This reference confirms his earlier claim to be well versed in literature, and also harkens back to the lineage of black feminist thought that he invokes and honors by building on Nina Simone's theories of self-definition. Unfortunately, Moon stops short of actually calling Jacobs's name.

<sup>199</sup> Tony Moon, "Freedom."

spatial location soars into a limitless stratosphere of union. With his last word, Moon parts the curtain for the second iteration of the chorus. His ascending spiral of vocals constructs a sonic and metaphysical pedestal from which Simone's voice rings out. As the "new day" comes to a close, "Freedom" revolves back to its point of origin, Nina Simone's voice. However instead of proposing that we "sleep in peace"<sup>200</sup> Moon advises a supremely wakeful and mindful consciousness, the power of a "dove" not fighting for, but modeling peace.

It's important to note that such an esoteric notion of liberation as one found through meditation will not put bread on the table or free a person who has been wrongly imprisoned. I'm reminded of Ishmael Reed's irreverent allegory of an indigenous woman and an African American man discussing slavery: "She said that slavery was a state of mind, metaphysical. He told her to shut the fuck up."<sup>201</sup> It is all too tempting for those of us who enjoy the relative privilege of leisure time to engage in meditation practice and the means to access spiritual training to prescribe mindfulness as an antidote to all psychological fetters. Although Moon's subjectivity in this regard is relevant, his radical self-definition still rings as a powerful mobilization of Simone's critical theory into a realm of spirituality built around a meditation practice rather than a traditional Christian theology.

The way that AirMe constructs the beat to "Freedom" mirrors the ascendant structure of Moon's composition and his message. AirMe opens the song with Nina Simone's solo voice, remarkably similar to the opening of the original "Feeling Good." However he does not include her first three lines:

Birds flying high you know how I feel

Sun in the sky you know how I feel

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<sup>200</sup> Nina Simone, "Feelin' Good."

<sup>201</sup> Ishmael Reed, *Flight to Canada*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 95.

Breeze driftin' on by you know how I feel<sup>202</sup>

With this deletion AirMe eschews Simone's address to the external world, just as Moon asserts the irrelevance of outside stimuli as illusions. Also, by beginning the piece with the "new dawn" line AirMe foregrounds a sense of enlightenment, an awakening from illusion, a version of turning out where speech might be more effective when converted to inaction. Under the distinctive "ooh" descending vocal figure that precedes the line "And I'm feelin' good," the producer layers staccato piano eighth notes that will continue as an ostinato throughout much of the song. He bookends his beat with Simone's vocals and uses her second "voice," the piano, as its foundation.

Airme drops his beat as Simone hits the word "good," at the same point that the brass vamp enters in the original tune. Moon's vocals also enter at this point, shattering the brief illusion that this is the original recording and unambiguously reminding the listener that hip hop is in the building. The beat itself is a sixteen bar rhythmic pattern (see Figure 2), the most extended and non-repetitious composition that I have examined thus far. Each sixteen bar pattern is followed by an eight bar hook, the first of which Moon raps over. The fact that each sixteen bar section is a cohesive whole, rather than a repetition of eight- or ten-bar sections lends an increased sense of continuity to the ascending structure of the piece. The fact that the sixteen bar section itself is repeated renders the ascension revolutionary; the centerpiece to this remarkably symmetrical composition is of course the unconventional hook where Moon layers his voice over Simone's and signifies on the power of peace in fighting oppression.

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<sup>202</sup> Nina Simone, "Feelin' Good," *I Put a Spell on You*.





**Figure 2:** from "Freedom" by Tony Moon

The second and final iteration of the hook functions as a liberatory climax to the piece. AirMe constructs this section of the song in a strikingly simple way; the sampled lines "Freedom is mine" and "Don'tcha know" alternate back and forth a total of twelve times. The transitions between the two samples are abrupt, calling the listener's attention to the intentionally constructed nature of this passage. Significantly, the two lines are not consecutive in the Simone's original recording. While the clarion "Freedom is mine" line is a similar high point at the end of "Feeling Good," the "Don'tcha know" line is a relative afterthought when Simone is addressing dragonflies and butterflies. By juxtaposing the declarative statement and the interrogative one, AirMe draws the listener into Simone's liberation by questioning the audience's awareness. Don't you know? Ascension is inevitable and freedom can be yours too.

If AirMe invites the listener into communion with Simone with his use of her questioning, Talib Kweli uses inquiry to create his own intimacy with his audience at the beginning of the track widely referred to as "For Women."<sup>203</sup>

Yo so we got this tune called "For Women" right?

Originally, it was by Nina Simone

She said it was inspired by, you know

Down south. In the South they used to call her mother, "Auntie."

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<sup>203</sup> Reflection Eternal (Talib Kweli, and Hi-Tek). "Untitled (For Women)."

You know, she said no "Mrs.," you know  
Just "Auntie." You know what I'm sayin'?  
She said if anybody ever called her "Auntie," she'd burn the whole goddamn  
place down, you know what I'm sayin'?  
But you know, we movin' past that, you know what I'm sayin'?  
Comin' into the new millennium, we can't forget our elders.<sup>204</sup>

In this introduction Kweli frames his powerful reinterpretation of Simone's "Four Women"<sup>205</sup> by outlining Simone's militant stance against the matrix of domination that precluded her forebears' subjectivity, and ensures his audience's comprehension of this framework with his repeated questioning, "You know what I'm sayin'?" He then mobilizes this framework by asserting that times have changed, but like Common, holds that reverence for one's predecessors is essential to the continuing black freedom struggle.

Kweli recasts this legacy of struggle as a herstory in the following four verses. By nuancing and contextualizing each of Simone's four women he is mobilizing Simone's original articulation of a black feminist framework of self-definition in the face of controlling images. The original song features Aunt Sarah, Saphronia, Sweet Thing, and Peaches, four black women with various skin tones, hair textures, and lived realities of constraint and privilege. Nadine Cohodas, a white Simone biographer, reads this song as a chronological accounting of black women of different eras.<sup>206</sup> Black women scholars Tammy Kernodle and Patricia Hill Collins alternatively read this song as the first insertion of gender into the Black Arts Movement<sup>207</sup> and as an account of coming to self-definition in the tradition of black women's blues.<sup>208</sup> The controversy following the song's release in 1966 suggests there were many

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Nina Simone, "Four Women," *Wild is the Wind*, 1966, Phillips.

<sup>206</sup> Cohodas, *Princess Noire*, 180 – 181.

<sup>207</sup> Kernodle, "I Wish I Knew," 310 – 312.

<sup>208</sup> Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 112 – 113.

different readings of the song at that time, as well. While some station managers refused to air the song because they felt it was insulting to black people, others objected to it on the grounds that it was insulting to whites.<sup>209</sup> Simone conceived of the song as promoting self-definition for African American women in their ideas of beauty and self-worth:

The women in the song are black, but their skin tones range from light to dark and their ideas of beauty and their own importance are deeply influenced by that...Black women didn't know what the hell they wanted because they were defined by things they didn't control, and until they had the confidence to define themselves they'd be stuck in the same mess forever – that was the point the song made.<sup>210</sup>

As Kweli crafts his four verses, each is centered on one woman just as in Simone's original. As opposed to the strikingly sparse lyrics of Simone's composition, Kweli constructs sonic portraits of black women that are thoroughly detailed and situated in specific historical circumstances.

Kweli crafts his four verses in a cycle of self-definition and pain for the four women. He re-imagines Aunt Sarah from Simone's original tune ("My skin is black / My arms are long / My hair is woolly / My back is strong"<sup>211</sup>) as a centurion that he meets getting off the subway. He acknowledges her life experience as a gift: "Just her presence was a blessing and her essence was a lesson,"<sup>212</sup> especially her explicit revolutionary consciousness:

She lived from nigger to colored to Negro to black  
To afro then African American and right back to nigger  
You figure she'd be bitter in her twilight

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<sup>209</sup> Cohodas, *Princess Noire*, 188 – 189.

<sup>210</sup> Cleary and Simone, *I Put a Spell on You*, 117.

<sup>211</sup> Nina Simone, "Four Women."

<sup>212</sup> Reflection Eternal (Talib Kweli, and Hi-Tek). "Untitled (For Women)."

But she all right `cus she done seen the circle of life, yo<sup>213</sup>

By channeling the last one hundred years of black history through one black woman's experience, Kweli personalizes and feminizes a legacy of racial struggle. He also emphasizes that Aunt Sarah is not bitter, although she would have justification to be so. And through his word choice he juxtaposes Aunt Sarah against a young Peaches, who will enter in the song's dramatic climax. In Aunt Sarah's golden years, she cultivates a revolutionary consciousness of the cyclical nature of evolution and elevation. By demonstrating Aunt Sarah's inner peace to his audience, he is mobilizing Nina Simone's militant critical theory and explicating how one might "move past that." Significantly, a female vocalist<sup>214</sup> backs Kweli in this verse only on the lines from Simone's original tune.

In Safronia's verse the female vocalist backs Kweli on the lines from the original tune ("My skin is yellow," "My hair is long," "My father was rich and white / He forced my mother late one night," "They call me Safronia"<sup>215</sup>) and two additional ones: "They call it rape" and "I gotta find myself."<sup>216</sup> In the first of these statements, Kweli defines Safronia's origin story more explicitly than Simone did in the original composition. This is presumably due in part to the fact that as a black male artist recording in 2000 Kweli is operating with a different framework of acceptability and respectability than Simone was as a black woman in 1966. The second line that the female vocalist and Kweli share, "I gotta find myself," is repeated three times with a fierce insistence that illustrates the necessity of self-definition for psychological survival. Kweli illustrates Safronia's definition from outside sources in his description of her experiences in higher education:

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> In addition to Talib Kweli, the following vocalists are credited on this track: Darcel, Imani Uzuri, Katushia, Neb Luv, Tiye Phoenix, Tiyi Willingham, and Tracie. It is unclear which singer is performing at various points during the song.

<sup>215</sup> Nina Simone, "Four Women," *Wild is the Wind*, 1966, Phillips.

<sup>216</sup> Reflection Eternal (Talib Kweli, and Hi-Tek). "Untitled (For Women)."

She tried to get in where she fit in  
On that American dream mission paid tuition  
For that receipt to find out her history was missing<sup>217</sup>

Safronia literally and figuratively buys into the American master narrative, only to discover that her own story has been silenced in it.

Kweli also explicates Sweet Thing's back story in a way that contextualizes her outward definition and prostitution in regard to a specific historical and social setting. He begins with her parents, AIDS and crack victims of the Reagan era.<sup>218</sup> He explains the effects of these origins on Sweet Thing as an orphan raised by the streets:

The children of the enslaved they grow a little faster  
They bodies become adult while they keep the thoughts of a child  
Her arrival into womanhood was hemmed up by her survival<sup>219</sup>

Her family and social circumstances compel Sweet Thing into prostitution and outward definition. Tellingly, when she asserts her name at the end of the verse, it is her social environment that defines her:

From Harlem is where I came  
Don't worry about my name  
Up on one-two-five they call me Sweet Thing<sup>220</sup>

This assertion comes at the close of an extended passage where the female vocalist and Kweli speak in tandem. The volume of the two voices is roughly equal, as opposed to the previous two verses in which the female voice only echoes Kweli's. As black men, Kweli and his producer Hi-Tek seem to acknowledge the impossibility of speaking for black women and the necessity of speaking with them, in the pursuit

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> "Daddy dead from crack in '85, mommy dead from AIDS in '89 / At fourteen the baby hit the same streets they became her master," Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

of self-definition.

Peaches achieves this self-definition in Simone's original tune, and Kweli mobilizes this tradition by reconstructing a Peaches that not only comes to voice, but also turns it out as a mother for her children. Kweli depicts the imperative for liberation from controlling images as a matter of psychological survival for Peaches and her children:

She swears the next baby she'll have'll breathe a free breath  
And get milk from a free breast  
And love bein' alive  
Otherwise they'll have to give up bein' themselves to survive  
Being maids, cleaning ladies, maybe teachers or college graduates, nurses or  
housewives, prostitutes and drug addicts  
Some will grow to be old women some will die before they're born  
They'll be mothers and lovers who inspire and make songs<sup>221</sup>

In this concluding verse to his revolutionary composition, Kweli depicts a powerful lineality in black women's struggles for self-definition in the face of controlling images from the matrix of domination. One can imagine the "awfully bitter"<sup>222</sup> Peaches as a younger Aunt Sarah before she has come to an inner peace, or Aunt Sarah as Peaches' daughter, inspiring this song.

The song closes with an extended passage of unison vocals from Kweli and the female vocalist. Peaches comes to self-definition not through her anger and proclaiming her name, like in the original "Four Women," but instead through her role as a mother, her power to change her own conception of existence, and her dissociation from the southern moniker:

I live through my babies and I change my reality

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

Maybe one day I'll ride back to Georgia on the train

Folks 'round there call me Peaches, guess that's my name.<sup>223</sup>

By acknowledging the imperative of self-definition for the next generation, Peaches reinforces the black female lineality so central to Kweli's concept of revolution. It is through her children that Peaches will "change her reality," or come to define herself. But perhaps most significant is the way that Kweli and Hi-Tek mobilize Simone's tradition of Peaches coming to voice by speaking her own name.

Patricia Hill Collins identifies Peaches' arrival at self-definition as a product of her awareness of the specific historical constraints that have determined her circumstances, and her anger that leads to action.<sup>224</sup> Simone reinforces this arrival at self-determination with her emphatic delivery of the final line, "My name is PEACHES" in a timbre informed by righteous rage, and by ending the piece with the only major chord in the composition. This chord functions as a "musical exclamation point"<sup>225</sup> underscoring Peaches turning out in response to the matrix of domination.

While Peaches remains bitter about her social circumstances in Kweli's composition, her declaration of her name at the end of the tune is nearly antithetical to the original "Four Women."<sup>226</sup> Instead of declaring her identity with the force of four hundred years of rage, Peaches here states her name with a verbal shrug. At first her conception of self seems similar to Sweet Thing's because her geographic community determines it, but Hi-Tek and Kweli's production techniques create a sharply contrasting effect in this verse. On the words "guess that's my name," the female vocalist's voice is drastically distorted, lowered in pitch and rendered more mechanical than human. This serves as a sonic dissociation in which the outwardly defined identity separates from the speaker's subjectivity. While the folks in Georgia

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 112 – 113.

<sup>225</sup> Nadine Cohodas, *Princess Noire*, 181.

<sup>226</sup> Nina Simone, "Four Women."

may refer to her as Peaches, it is clear here that the speaker herself is coming to voice with self-definition. The piece ends with the words "my name" repeated in an echo, distorted in pitch and dynamic. Just as controlling images and outwardly defined identity misrepresent and distort black female subjectivity, Kweli and Hi-Tek reveal the idea of Georgia's definition of "Peaches" as distinct from her own sense of self.

This production technique is not the only one that mobilizes or builds upon Nina Simone's critical theory of socially active self-definition against the matrix of domination. Although Kweli and Hi-Tek, who share production credit on this track, do not actually sample the original "Four Women," the way that they construct their reinterpretation of the tune reinforces the complexity of black women's lived realities under the racist capitalist patriarchy and actually creates a supravocal expression of Simone's grammar of cultural production. This untitled track widely referred to as "For Women" does not have a traditional repeating chorus; instead there is a different vocal passage that follows each woman's verse. This construction method reinforces the idea that different women's quotidian realities are as distinct as the women themselves, exploding the essentialist assumptions of the matrix of domination. And the fact that Kweli and Hi-Tek choose not to sample Simone's voice reinforces the need to mobilize her tradition of social activism in a new historical context; Kweli and Hi-Tek's supravocal expression of Simone's critical theory is a way of "moving past" a militant black power rhetoric without leaving it behind. Theirs is an homage free from any risk of appropriation.

So while Moon's revolutionary message ascends into the metaphysical ether, Kweli and Hi-Tek's statement originates in and returns to the "plot of black dirt"<sup>227</sup> of black women's motherhood. This matrilineal revolution harkens simultaneously to

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<sup>227</sup> Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), front matter.



Kweli and Hi-Tek's foremothers and descendants. As Michael Eric Dyson notes in reference to this song:

Kweli thrusts a rhetorical saber in the heart of hip-hop's patriarchal obsessions and narrates the black future in a female voice and vision, without which the race will not survive...By placing the woman front and center on the song that concludes his compact disc, Kweli offers a stirring theological lesson: That our race's future, like the terms that describe it, is best secured when it has feminine endings.<sup>228</sup>

I would add to Dyson's adroit analysis that Kweli and Hi-Tek together forge a musical blade as well as a rhetorical one; their blow to the hip hop patriarchy is not just lyrical, but sonic. By employing three different choruses and a host of female vocalists on the track, as well as using production techniques that signify the disassociation of controlling images from black women's self-definition, Kweli and Hi-Tek succeed stunningly in pivoting the hip hop center to Nina Simone's expression of black feminist self-definition. They transcend the sampling practice while remaining rooted in its tradition of intergenerational sonic pastiche; they honor Simone's legacy with a supravocal expression of her hard-won subjectivity.

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<sup>228</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, "Speech is My Hammer': Black Preaching, Social Justice and Rap Rhetoric," in *Open Mike: Reflections on Philosophy, Race, Sex, Culture and Religion* (New York: Civitas Books, 2003), 300.

## Outro, or: Personal Revolutions

Our babies stay hungry but we got black senators in Congress  
That's the illusion of progress

- Talib Kweli, "Make It All Better"

We knew that just because the rights we demanded were protected by Federal Law, it didn't mean those laws would automatically be applied in every state. But the hopes of those early years looked like coming true, and the question everyone was asking was: 'Where do we go from here?'

- Nina Simone, *I Put a Spell on You*

I realized that what we were really fighting for was the creation of a new society. When I had started out in the movement all I wanted were my rights under the Constitution, but the more I thought about it the more I realized that no matter what the President or the Supreme Court might say, the only way we could get true equality was if America changed completely, top to bottom.

- Nina Simone, *I Put a Spell on You*

Lookin' for the remedy but you can't see what's hurtin' you  
The revolution's here, the revolution is personal

- Talib Kweli, "Beautiful Struggle"

The United States is approaching the fortieth anniversaries of the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As the dismantling of *de jure* segregation and gender discrimination approaches middle age, many would cite the advances of those who are not white, male and/or heterosexual as proof that America is a color- gender- and sexuality-blind society, that anything is possible for those who have the correct constitution to make it.

However behind and underneath the visibility of figures like Hilary Clinton and Barack Obama, the quotidian realities for people who don't fit the heterosexual white male norm are far less prestigious. The median net worth of whites today is a staggering twelve times that of black Americans. Unemployment rates among black

people have not fallen to less than twice that of white Americans since 1976.<sup>229</sup> And women overall earn 77 cents for each dollar a man does. For black women, the figure drops to 68 cents; for Latinas, 58.<sup>230</sup> One in seven black men today is barred from voting because of felony disenfranchisement laws. Black people comprise 12.5 percent of the population, but make up 40% of inmates on death row.<sup>231</sup> Queer people are struggling for equal rights under the law across the nation. Under a doctrine of American Exceptionalism, we are living in a color- gender- and sexuality-blind society with a black male president, a white woman Secretary of State, and lesbians and homosexuals in prominent positions in entertainment and the arts. Many contend that if people have failed to achieve economic and social gains in the absence of institutionalized discrimination, it is because they lack the skills and constitution necessary to do so.

Where do we go from here? In 1970 Nina Simone identified with Stokely Carmichael's answer to the question: Black Power.<sup>232</sup> However she does not acknowledge Carmichael's other infamous answer of the period: to what a woman's role in the Movement was – "prone."<sup>233</sup> Although a giant of the black freedom struggle, clearly Carmichael did not have all the answers. It would be romantic to suggest that Simone herself did. Although she professed and practiced an inspiring ethic and aesthetic of socially active self-definition, she was a woman plagued with depression, loneliness and other personal troubles. Honor is her due, but to enshrine

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<sup>229</sup> Singh, *Black is a Country*, 217.

<sup>230</sup> Laura Fitzpatrick, "Why do Women Still Earn Less Than Men?" *Time*, April 20, 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1983185,00.html>.

<sup>231</sup> Singh, *Black is a Country*, 217.

<sup>232</sup> "Stokely, meantime, had been working out his answer to the 'where do we go from here' question; he and Huey Newton combined all sorts of related ideas about economics, social justice and political resistance under the general heading of 'Black Power.' I talked to Stokely and read their manifesto. I agreed with every word." Nina Simone and Stephen Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 109.

<sup>233</sup> Stokely Carmichael, quoted in Ula Taylor, "Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam: Separatism, Regendering, and a Secular Approach to Black Power." In *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980*. ed. Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard. (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 192.

her on a pristine pedestal of strength and activism would itself be an act of constraint; even when kept on a pedestal a woman is still put in her place.

I would like to suggest that one possible answer to “Where do we go from here?” is, “Inward.” Perhaps just as “post-racism” and “post-sexism” in contemporary U.S. society are more covert, more insidious and more deceptive than the institutionalized oppressions of the past, “post-activism” will be more personal, more revelatory and more powerful. In the relative absence of formal, organized movements, our motion might center around ourselves. Our revolutions will be personal.

This is not to imply that change at the societal level is not necessary, or is not a goal that many courageous activists are pursuing every day. As affirmative action programs endure sustained attack and disproportionate policing and punishment practices erode the citizenship rights that so many have struggled, fought and died for, legislative action is necessary and vital to the project against the matrix of domination in this country. But alone it is not enough. In order to combat racist, sexist, elitist and heterosexist realities that legally do not exist, we as people in varying positions of constraint and privilege must look inward at ourselves and one another to affect change. Creating our lives on our own terms is an act of struggle and resistance.<sup>234</sup> In “movin’ past that,”<sup>235</sup> we are not shunning Nina Simone’s critical social theory, but mobilizing it into the twenty first century with proper historical reverence.

The soundtrack to this mobilization lies in the samples, chops, loops and turns of the hip hop nation. A common criticism of this formation of folks is that we are activist-minded, but not active. I’d like to reframe this conversation by acknowledging the radical potential of coming to voice or turning speech into action

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<sup>234</sup> I am borrowing this sentiment from Bushra Rehman and Daisy Hernández’s introduction to *Colonize This!* page xxv.

<sup>235</sup> Reflection Eternal (Talib Kweli and Hi-Tek), “Untitled (For Women).”

that revolutionary hip hop affords us. The pedagogic potential of hip hop sampling lies in the cognitive and emotive praxis of its compositions and its comrades. As a truth-bearing medium, sample-based hip hop music can speak volumes about and to its community of artists and listeners. The contemporary pre-occupation with Nina Simone's work in the medium reveals the seductive appeal of her music's aesthetics, and the didactic potential of her revolutionary self-defined social activism.

By hearing the hip hop music that samples Nina Simone's work with ears attuned to her critical, self-defined, socially active voice we might be better able to identify the ways in which that voice is silenced, commodified or elevated in twenty first century U.S. society. The potential of this critical way of hearing does not stop there. By regarding Nina Simone as a critical social theorist in her own right and bearing in mind her radical subjectivity in the face of the matrix of domination, we might all be able to hear and see the cultural forms all around us as bearing particular truths about a revolutionary equality, as masquerading pain, fear and silence as power over others, or often as some combination of the two. It is my hope that personal liberations from how we "should" sound and hear are possible, and my contention that these revolutions are particularly well suited to the diffuse, informal organization of hip hop communities.

In order for this project to move toward success, the ears of white critics, fans and scholars must be critical, but not colonizing. The project of socially active self-definition in the face of the matrix of domination cannot be limited to those it most highly constrains. In order for the intersecting web of oppressions that criss-crosses our country to survive, it must have people in positions of privilege that propagate its myths, lies and destruction. The responsibility of white scholars, activists, and citizens is to define ourselves inwardly, and not in the model of domination that so desperately depends on us for its continuation. This responsibility involves abandoning the controlling images that the matrix of

domination propagates; it also involves rejecting the privilege the matrix awards us. In shifting our eyes and ears toward the orientation of another, we must resist the seductive fantasy that this orientation can become our own. Rather than overcoming our own particular politics of location, we must strive to become more conscious of them by endeavoring to view them temporarily from the outside.

It is my sincerest hope that this project comprises an important step in the long road toward this goal. As a girl, I fell in love with hip hop at first because it was cool. It was safely dangerous; it was sexy but only on Saturday nights. I imagined that my passion for it somehow set me apart from the normative white girls listening to Counting Crows who would define themselves in terms of marriage, family, class status and bourgeois respectability. I was not conscious of the complicated politics of pleasure and danger that dictated this attraction, this love for unconformity that I satisfied in my appropriative relationship with hip hop culture. In working toward unpacking the economic, racial and heterosexual privilege that afforded me an imagined ownership of these musics, I have been compelled to endeavor to listen with new ears. I don't delude myself that by re-tuning my own ears I am adopting those of another; rather I am working to shift my aural center and hear what others might. And by tuning in, I can turn it out. Peace.

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