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# The songs of black (women) folk: music, politics, and everyday living

Rasheedah Quiett Jenkins

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

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**THE SONGS OF BLACK (WOMEN) FOLK: MUSIC, POLITICS, AND  
EVERYDAY LIVING**

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
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in

The Department of English

by  
Rasheedah Jenkins  
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## ABSTRACT

The field of folklore in general, but specifically Africana folklore studies can be enriched by greater analyses of Black female contributions. In this study, I position folk music as the primary interest and chosen location to acknowledge Black women's participation from beyond the margins. My inquiry reveals folk music as a lens into the myriad ways in which Black women have translated vernacular traditions into a means to deconstruct the master narrative as well as interrogate racist patriarchy. Specifically, this study examines how Nina Simone, Tracy Chapman, and Lauryn Hill have appropriated the folk aesthetic as a vehicle for social activism and cultural autobiography. I examine: 1) how folk music functions as a strategic discursive space for politically conscious creative expression and 2) how folk music functions communally as cultural autobiography/autoethnography and as a tool for community or nation-building.

Situated at the forefront of my textual analysis are three women performers, Simone, Chapman, and Hill, whom I regard as most emblematic of a "radical Black folk consciousness." I extensively read these women's performative, personal, and lyrical acts using a multi-layered theoretical framework, including but not limited to: Feminism/Womanism, Cultural Autobiography Studies, Black Nationalism, and Marxism. This discussion builds upon and extends the scholarship of autobiography and folklore as tools of subversion as well as recurring themes in African American female rhetorical practices.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*The Songs of Black (Women) Folk* examines the musical genre known as folk, a genre in America most popularly associated with white youth counterculture. However, this study broadens the scope of folk music by discussing the Afro-American oral tradition, cultural experience(s), and political practices. I trace the tradition from its early forms such as hollers and sorrow songs to blues and rap, its latest evolution. In so doing, I delineate the roots of Black folk music as both balm and battle cry during periods of social upheaval, since the music has long provided a living record of African American struggle. In particular, I address how Black female performers have appropriated the folk aesthetic as a means of political expression, ethno-autobiography/documentation, and for community/nation-building projects. I situate my project within current conversations on the American folkloric tradition and oral performance such as jazz, blues, and storytelling. In addition, I integrate previous scholarship on a recurring topic in African American women's quest for subjectivity and liberation: performance (writing, singing, etc.) as activism.

The scholarship on American folk music has marginalized Black folk music and musicians, or discussed it from a masculinist perspective, thus emphasizing only the Black male contribution.<sup>1</sup> This study corrects this imbalance by focusing on the African American female contribution within the Black folk music tradition. I conceive of my project, in part, as a response to research questions raised by Sw. Anand Prahlad<sup>2</sup> who recognizes the problem of the male bias within Africana folklore studies, and highlights the absent feminist or womanist study of black folklore. *The Songs of Black (Women) Folk* studies Black women's musical performance through a lens shaped by the intersection of gender and race.

Although Prahlad's concerns are valid, a few notable feminist examinations of Black women's folk performance have been undertaken. Daphne Duval Harrison's *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* and Angela Y. Davis' *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* are examples of innovative scholarship in this area. While Harrison's study examines the influence of prominent and lesser-known blues women such as Ida Cox and Alberta Hunter, Davis' work focuses on three iconic blues women, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday. Both studies fill in gaps in a folk musical record that privileges the male contribution. In particular, Davis' study is critical to my understanding Black womanist politics, oral traditions, and community uplift. My study, though similar in objective, extends both these works, as I move beyond the more readily accessible folk *blues* aesthetic toward a less specialized idea of folk music that comprises various genres of musical expression, including blues, pop, jazz, and rap.

This study examines the folk revivalist tradition<sup>3</sup> as expressed by three Black female performers, Nina Simone, Tracy Chapman, and Lauryn Hill. Using the criteria proposed by critic bell hooks in "Revolutionary Black Women: Making Ourselves Subject," I identify these performers' radical Black female subjectivity. Their music serves as expressions of political activism that resists various forms of oppression (racism, sexism, and classism). Most importantly, they musically engage in what bell hooks terms "critical pedagogy, the sharing of information and knowledge by black women with black women" (1992, 60). Simone, Chapman, and Hill's social activism builds upon Black women's legacy of racial uplift: Harriet Jacobs, Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, Mary Church Terrell, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday. These three performers raise issues concerning Black women's self-

actualization, the vindication of Black womanhood, and an invested interest in uplifting the Black community.

Sheila Radford-Hill provides a useful definition of community. She states,

for black people, community is a ritual presence that is not necessarily home or 'hood.' It is, however, being 'at home.' In its best sense, the black community embodies history and feeling of connectedness with those who have similar traditions and a specific national, racial, and ethnic identity. Common characteristics of community include similar forms of cultural expression, religious or spiritual traditions, and kinship rituals... When defined in this way, community is a pathway for black personal survival and social transformation (77).

Black women's role in the Black community has been articulated by several writers (e.g., Angela Davis, 1973; Elsie Johnson McDougald; Anna Julia Cooper). In particular, Cooper "identified community building as a source of self-definition" (qtd in Radford-Hill 46). In continuing the legacy of community building as part of Black women's activism and self-empowerment, Radford-Hill states, "Community building is more important to black women now than to any group of women in history. Black women need the collective fulfillment of traditional black communities, whether we actually live in them or not" (77). She further declares, "Acknowledging that black women need their communities is a necessary prelude to action" (77-8). As politically conscious artists whose music serves as part of the cultural front against oppression, Simone, Chapman, and Hill lift their voices in protest, embodying the womanist tradition of serving as culture bearers for the Black community.<sup>4</sup>

Simone, considered the High Priestess of Soul, was an eclectic musical talent who during the 1960s took a political stance with original ballads of protest. Her musical heir, Chapman, is a folk revivalist whose dissenting voice was most prominent during the 1980s. In the late 1990s, Lauryn Hill channeled hip hop-fused folk and R&B as a mode

of female and self-empowerment. These women will serve as loci of the study as their work typifies radical Black female consciousness (the personal) merging into musical performance (the political). Simone, Chapman, and Hill employ folk music as a vehicle for social protest within the context of Black liberation struggle. I read each woman's performative and lyrical acts as consciously political and subversive, affecting both the music recording industry and folkloric traditions. By examining folk music as uniquely performed by Simone, Chapman, and Hill, as well as various others, I problematize and redefine what music of, for, and by the Black (women) folk means.

### **(Re)Definitions of “The Folk” & “Folk Music” in America**

Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* recognizes the importance of reclaiming folklore as a rich source with which to address gaps in the historical record, as well as document *Black* people's collective history. Folklore, then, becomes a critical nexus where radical Black female subjectivity and musical performance exist as a mode of communication that promotes community (collective) uplift. Folklore, notably folksongs, offers a space for female communion and empowerment. Although she specifically focuses on Black women's fiction and visual arts, Alma Billingslea-Brown's work, *Crossing Borders Through Folklore* has wider implications for Black women's folk music. She explains, “folklore functions to define an African American cultural identity, to reclaim a certain femaleness within that identity, and ultimately to affirm the black woman's role in human and cultural continuity” (3). Folklore became a site for Black women to challenge patriarchy, and a repository of production that affirmed our collective and cultural identity. Billingslea-Brown's articulations on aspects of folklore, particularly the idea of

collective and cultural identity, have roots in the eighteenth-century philosophy held by German scholar Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803).

Herder's romantic nationalism centered on the notion that it was essential to build a national culture on native foundations (qtd in Wilson 23).<sup>5</sup> He proclaimed, "the most natural state is *one* people with *one* national character" and decided that it was the "folk poets," the "national poets" who were "the agents through whom the true character of a nation made itself manifest" (qtd in Wilson 24; 28). Of their cultural production, he mused, "What better place, then, could a man go to discover the soul of a nation than to its folk poetry?" (qtd in Wilson 28). Emphasizing that Black Americans constitute a nation within a nation with a history of nationalist politics, W.E.B. DuBois similarly drew upon the connection between Black people's souls and the sorrow songs that emanate from them.

In "Folk Art and the Harlem Renaissance," Bernard Bell further elucidates Herdian folk ideology and group or communal theory present in the works of W.E.B. DuBois (*The Souls of Black Folk*), Alain Locke (*The New Negro*), and James Weldon Johnson (*The Book of American Negro Spirituals*). He suggests, "stirred by the vitality of Afro-American folksong, their own ivy league education, travels abroad and quest for a new phase of group development [these men]...applied the implications of Herder's theories to the spirituals, sermons, blues, and jazz" (156). In particular, DuBois and Locke both attended the University of Berlin, which would have perhaps exposed them to the Herdian folk ideology Bell identifies in their thoughts on Black music. Bell reminds us that at the time of these men's writing, "most nineteenth century scholars and folklorists rejected the notion of Afro-American culture, paradoxically identifying black American music as African and imitative Anglo-American music" (157). As such,

DuBois', Locke's, and Johnson's early validations of Black music, especially the valorization of folk art, emanating from the common folk, was groundbreaking. Locke declared "Negro music [as] the closest approach America has to a folk music, and so Negro music is almost as important for the musical culture of America as it is for the spiritual life of the Negro" (1).<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Johnson also proclaimed the slave's spirituals "America's only folk music," while DuBois famously heralded them as "the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people" (qtd in Bell 157; 162). While the spirituals may form the basis for America's national musical heritage, for Black Americans, they have nationalistic implications.

Our folksongs/poetry, our sorrow songs, bear witness to our collective and cultural identity as descendants of an enslaved people. As we, descendants of slaves, continue to carry this burden, Black women folk poets have documented and interrogated various forms of oppression unique to women's experience through song. While largely excluded from the public sphere of protest and nationalist politics, Black female musicians resisted such confines to express early feminist consciousness that reflected the everyday lives of the folk, specifically, "working-class black communities" (Davis 1998, xv). Davis locates music's centrality to Black folks' socialization, and as part of our movements for social change. As a result, she asserts, "Any attempt, therefore, to understand in depth the evolution of women's consciousness within the Black community requires a serious examination of the music which has influenced them—particularly that which they themselves have created" (qtd in Rose 153).

Delineating folk music's nationalist and subversive aspects, as expressed by Simone, Chapman, and Hill, requires broadening and challenging existing scholarship on African American musical forms. A current academic focus is hip hop culture as

manifest in rap music; critical studies of hip hop have created an expansive discursive space wherein young Black academics are able to articulate and document their (and their people's) own history/histories. Unfortunately, most of the scholarship focuses on male rappers with works by Tricia Rose, Robin Roberts, and Cheryl Keyes being notable exceptions.<sup>7</sup> As well, blues and jazz genres have a history of scholarly inquiry that documents past and current practices and practitioners. However, there is little research on the historical and continual role of African Americans as folk musicians; instead, much of the existing scholarship limits the African American folk music tradition to slave songs, spirituals, and the blues without connecting contemporary African American musical forms such as rap music. *The Songs of Black (Women) Folk* broadens notions of folk music to include contemporary forms like rap. Like Angela Davis, I recognize rap as part of a musical tradition located on a:

continuum of struggle, which is at once aesthetic and political, has extended from Harriet Tubman's and Nat Turner's spirituals through Bessie Smith's "Poor Man's Blues" and Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," through Max Roach's "Freedom Suite," and even to the progressive raps on the popular music scene of the 1980's (1989, 200-201).

In addition, my project progresses discussion of rap into critical examination of female contributions.<sup>8</sup>

This study addresses the central modes of subjectivity, namely race and gender, to craft a more inclusive and representational lens through which to read the folk tradition. When one considers the musical genre, folk revival music, particularly American folk music, the immediate association is usually white and/or male, and rural/agrarian. Artists that are readily associated with the music include: Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, and Joan Baez. The story of the Africanist presence, influence, and continual production of this musical form in America is often marginalized. Even when African

Americans are studied as folk musicians, by the Lomax team, for example, the discussion centers on male performers, such as Huddie “Leadbelly” Ledbetter (the popular 1930s traditional folk singer) and Muddy Waters (a popular blues singer of the 1940s and 50s). The elevation of these male artists overshadows the contributions of musicians like Odetta who, considered the mother of the 1960s folk movement, influenced the likes of both Dylan and Joan Baez, yet she is a virtual unknown throughout wider music circles.<sup>9</sup>

Scholarship that privileges male/white counterculture’s folk music minimizes contributions from artists, such as the dynamic *a cappella* group, Sweet Honey in the Rock. Led by Bernice Johnson Reagon, their performances bridge the gap between traditional folk music and contemporary popular forms, as their repertoire ranges from spirituals and worksongs to rap and rhymes.<sup>10</sup> These are but two examples of female artists whose musical legacies have been marginalized due to the racial and gender hierarchies within American folk music scholarship. Notably, Ronald Cohen’s *Rainbow Quest: Folk Music and American Society, 1940-1970* identifies somewhat inclusive of African American folk music as a major medium of struggle for Civil Rights, and he recognizes artists Odetta and Bernice Johnson Reagon’s contribution to folk music. Though these three performing artists I revisit notions of the folk and their music.

Examining African American female perspectives within the folk tradition relies upon identifying just who are “the folk.” Specifically, who are “the folk” from which Simone, Chapman, and Hill emerged, with whom they identify, and on whose behalf they sing. While the traditional definition of a folk singer limited the artist’s creativity and individuality to the sole interest of the community (Greenway 8), I argue that a more flexible view would allow for the artist to merge the personal and political for the greater good. Ideally, the modern folk singer should produce songs that are a source of

empowerment for the community. This type of homegrown folk representative is tied to a community based on any number of modes of subjectivity, be it race, nationality, economic status, occupation/profession, gender, etc. These modes, however, are fluid, for as I will later discuss folk protest songs often promoted racial and class equality, and when sung in certain union circles, for example, these songs reflected the tensions of interracial alliances who targeted a common foe, company bosses. For purposes of this study, I am especially interested in Black folk. I embrace the terms *Black*—for its diasporic implications—and *folk*—for the sense of communal and shared cultural experiences it invokes. However, I am aware that both terms, especially “folk,” have recently undergone academic scrutiny.<sup>11</sup>

Musicologist Guthrie Ramsey, Jr. buttresses my use of the term folk with his chapter “Reconstructing ‘The Folk’ in Black Vernacular Music,” an overt response to Robin D.G. Kelley’s article, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Folk.’”<sup>12</sup> Ramsey confronts cultural critics such as Kelley who question if the term “folk” can denote African Americans, given the term’s implicit cultural hierarchies. Ramsey also challenges the view that to use terms such as ‘authentic’ when describing the folk invokes a monolithic, essentialist and totalizing effect to describe such a diversified people. “Vernacular”<sup>13</sup> has become the decidedly more acceptable label of choice by such academics, explains Ramsey, for it arguably has a more “elastic quality” to it than “folk” (40). Most importantly, Ramsey reclaims the term “folk,” making clear that “we can use these terms [such as folk] but at the same time convey their porous and flexible qualities in practice” (40). He continues, “Thus, of all our academic enthusiasms to deconstruct monolithic impulses in the name of a diverse blackness, we must recognize that some cultural markers have remained remarkably stable in practice, albeit not in their precise

meanings” (41). The term folk has indeed maintained a degree of stability in its practical usage, despite its long and antagonistic history, due in part to the porous and flexible quality Ramsey highlights. These qualities have arguably allowed for the term’s adaptability and continued relevance in our modern and postmodern eras.

During the height of burgeoning advancements, folk historian John Greenway contested the belief by some writers that we no longer have a traditional agricultural folk. In 1953, he argued, “It is true that the infatuation of the radio, the automobile, television, and other blessing of modern civilization into former cultural pockets is educating the old agricultural folk out of existence, but a new folk, the industrial community, is taking its place” (Greenway 9). He further explains, “The modern folk is most often the unskilled worker, less often the skilled worker in industrial occupations (Greenway 9). In fact, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, African Americans still comprise a disproportionate number of low to unskilled laborers comparable to whites. Also, throughout the south, a sizable percentage of the population is African American, despite mass migration to northern urban centers.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the pastoral landscape most commonly associated with the folk has been re-configured, due to massive Black migration to the city, as an urban concrete jungle where poverty, unemployment, and other plagues of the system unmercifully act upon the folk.<sup>15</sup> These northern city folk imbued with an ethos richly steeped in the south, in turn respond with inventive folk traditions such as rap music (hip hop culture), creating an artistic place of refuge.

My study owes its framing of “Black folk” to DuBois’ seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, which transported the label beyond its colloquial use to the academy. Though accused of being elitist in his earlier days, in writing *The Souls of Black Folk*,

DuBois chronicled a collective history and forecast a direction for Black folk in America. In naming this collective “Black folk,” Donald Gibson asserts that DuBois sought to “establish the relation between black top and bottom, haves and have-nots, educated and uneducated, rich and poor” (Introduction xxxi). In chronicling his return to the south, DuBois reveals the degree to which the history of slavery, “the very root of black experience in the hemisphere,” bound the Black folk collective (Gibson xxxi). Notwithstanding the anachronous separation from slavery, DuBois’ return to the site, the south, invokes a sense of fellowship with those ancestors who endured it. Yet, DuBois was inspired, because from the harrowing experience of the south’s dark shadow arose the soul of Black folk, revealed in the rhythmic cry of the slaves.

As I now attempt to broaden traditionalist interpretations of what constitutes folk music, I do so aware that as with the term ‘folk,’ even the strictest criteria of what is folklore have always been in a state of flux. Author Steven C. Tracy credits Barre Toelken with providing one of the best contemporary definitions of folklore. In *Dynamics of Folklore*, Toelken describes the materials of folklore, which include songs, as “tradition-based communicative units informally exchanged in dynamic variation through space and time” (12). Tracy expounds upon the definition even further by adding, “*Tradition* refers to ‘culture-specific materials and options’ available to the performer; *dynamic* to the performer’s ability to exercise his inventiveness within the tradition” (12).<sup>16</sup> I concur with Tracy’s praise of Toelken’s definition for its flexibility considers folklore’s adaptable nature as it undergoes various transformations impacted by such things as place, socioeconomic conditions, history, and the performer(s).

Pushing boundaries beyond folk purist conceptions, John Greenway’s *American Folksongs of Protest* explored the possibility of re-conceptualizing folk music to include

protest songs, for he acknowledges that “from the earliest periods of American history, the oppressed people forming the broad base of the social and economic pyramid have been singing of their discontent” (vii).<sup>17</sup> In defining protest songs, Greenway explains, “these are the struggle songs of the people. They are outbursts of bitterness, of hatred for the oppressor, of determination to endure hardships together and to fight for a better life” (10).<sup>18</sup> His acknowledgement of protest songs that comprise a large corpus of the folk music tradition is counter to traditional definitions of pure folk music. Yet, such counter definitions should be considered for as he points out, “folklorists do not agree on what constitutes folksong, which itself casts doubt on the validity of traditional definitions” (5).

Nonetheless, Greenway provides a definition indicating the following qualifications: that the song has lost its identity as a consciously composed piece; that it has undergone verbal changes during oral transmission; and that it has been sung for an appreciable period of time, let us say two generations (5-6). Folklorist George List offers a similar traditionalist view of authentic folk music when he states, “folk music is often loosely applied to cover all traditional or aurally transmitted music, music that is passed on by ear and performed by memory rather than by the written or printed musical score” (363). Both Greenway’s and List’s definitions are rather liberal.<sup>19</sup> In an attempt to synthesize the convoluted scholastic definitions of “folk music,” Greenway offers a simple approach to defining the tradition, which would also make it feasible to accept his claim that protest songs are thematically featured within the folksong tradition. He asserts that definitions “must be built on the solid base that folksongs are songs of the folk; its qualifications should be seen as nothing more than tests by which full folk possession can be determined” (9). In light of this definition of folksongs, List

acknowledges in much the same way as Greenway does that there is also a social function for folksongs, their role as “songs of protest that have been utilized in the struggles of unions and radical groups, particularly in the United States during the depression of the 1930s” (377). This moment of American social and economic conflict saw folk music both captivating the nation as well as documenting its turbulence.

In the Foreword to his impressive chronicle, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941*, Robert McElvaine writes, “Throughout our history there have been pendulum swings in public attitudes between self-centered individualism and concern with social problems.” He continues, “the values associated with acquisitive individualism have generally been popular among the more well-to-do, while the values associated with the idea that economics should be based on moral considerations have been more widespread among the working class” (xiv). The Great Depression made glaringly visible the maldistribution of wealth and vast disparities between America’s Carnegies and Fords and the working class populace. In a sobering way, the country still reeling from the frenzied 1920s Jazz Age and increased industrialization became jolted by the 1929 Stock Market Crash and the decade long dry spell that followed. America was due for a pendulum swing to more humanitarian values following an era of greed and conspicuous consumption, thereby “all these ingredients made the 1930s the time in which the values of compassion, sharing, and social justice became the most dominant that they have ever been in American history” (McElvaine 7). The 1930s was most notably also marked by increased radicalism, whereby protests, strikes, and demands were in accordance with such egalitarian values.<sup>20</sup>

The fervent and vast wave of political consciousness taking shape amongst the middle class and within academic circles led to an increased interest in social justice, the

communal, and the folk. Folksongs were essential to the cultural front and were sung in unison to address the day's social ills, from bloody strikes to cause célèbre legal battles. Such a controversial court battle was the 1931 Scottsboro Case, which mobilized interracial and leftist support.<sup>21</sup> Nine young Black men, who pleaded their innocence, had been indicted for raping two white women aboard a freight train passing through Scottsboro, Alabama. The rallying cry for these youth as well as themes of anti-lynching and worker solidarity is reflected in the folk lyrics:

Workers, farmers, Negro and white,  
The lynching bosses we must fight.  
Close your fists and raise them high,  
Labor Defense is our battle cry.  
The Scottsboro boys shall not die,  
Workers led by I.L.D.  
Will set them free, set them free.<sup>22</sup>

These lyrics reveal the level of communality and commonality expressed during the depression for “black and white, it didn't make any difference who you were ‘cause everybody was poor” remembered Louis Banks of the hoboes during a 1960s Studs Terkel interview (207).<sup>23</sup>

Despite the mainstay of racial strife, America was undergoing an awakening of sorts that would bring together an alliance of revolutionary thinkers with folk culture at the forefront. Communist writer Mike Gold, an advocate of the theory of proletarian realism, a belief based upon the often bitter realities of America's poor and working class called for writers to “go left”.<sup>24</sup> Among his contemporaries who heeded the call were Richard Wright, John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell, Tillie Olsen, and Langston Hughes who all consciously produced poems, plays and novels that reflected working class and revolutionary politics.<sup>25</sup> The ensuing interest in “the folk” and the subsequent folk revival during the thirties would eventually resurface and climax again during the

turbulent sixties. The Civil Rights Movement galvanized political protest and became a component of the folk revival that included Simone's participation. Subsequently, Chapman's protest songs against rising 1980s conservatism carries on this folk aesthetic, as does Hill's late 1990s conscious rap. However, it was during the 1930s and 1940s, according to Cohen, Reuss, et al. that leftist politics stimulated great interest in folk music.<sup>26</sup>

While stirring national attention to America's oral history of traditional ballads and songs of hardship, a number of influential performers emerged during this period such as Guthrie, Seeger, Aunt Molly Jackson, the Almanacs, and Leadbelly, most "discovered" by the father-son folk collectors John and Alan Lomax.<sup>27</sup> Later the duo teamed with among others, Zora Neale Hurston and John Work, two notable African American folklorists, to record folk and traditional music for the Library of Congress throughout the southern US, as well as in New England, Haiti, and the Bahamas.<sup>28</sup> Through their collaborative efforts, the academic sense of folklore as static and exclusively European was challenged. The methodology employed by the folk collectors of the 1930s was more inclusive, for it recognized not only a global folklore, but a national folkloric legacy, including America's. Just as America is a nation of immigrants who bring facets of their home countries to it, so too is America's folklore heteroglossic. As Woody Guthrie explained "our songs are singing history" and as American history progressed, the folk were there to record it whether triumphant or trying. For Black folk, the trying times, in particular, are documented in many folksongs documenting America's intense periods of racial strife. These sorrow songs, as DuBois called them, originated from the souls of a people stolen from their land and brought to America as chattel slaves. In describing the importance of folklore to the enslaved and subsequent

generations, Billingslea-Brown, notes, “the African American folk matrix enabled displaced African people to establish differential identity, affirm group solidarity, resist dominance, and “recall home” (2).

### **Historical Overview of Black Folk Music: From Africa to America**

Tracing African American folk music to its present evolution requires a return to West Africa as root and reference. The vitality of West African music heavily influenced American musical forms, especially African American folk music. In addition to DuBois’ landmark work, Leroi Jones’ (Amiri Baraka) seminal work, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, and Eileen Southern’s underappreciated yet monumental, *The Music of Black Americans, A History* document this legacy and inform my discussion. By locating West Africa as foundation, their works build upon scholarship, which dispel notions of the continent as a dark and primitive third world devoid of cultural enlightenment and aesthetic sensibilities. They also challenge the idea that African Americans have not retained certain Africanisms.<sup>29</sup> This latter point is a significant one in that it reveals the agency of disinherited peoples who acted upon and influenced the dominant culture through their own recollections of home.

African music is heterogeneous, and does not readily lend itself to broad generalizations; however, there are certain details that are common to the Western slaving regions from which most African Americans came. Significant to an analysis of West Africa as a musical reference is acknowledging that music functions in the religious, political, social, and economic structure of these societies. Francis Bebey’s *African Music, A People’s Art* perhaps best illustrate the primacy of music in the lives of these African peoples. Bebey, a Camerounian musician, identifies two basic facts of music’s importance. First, it is an integral part of African life from the moment of one’s

birth to one's death. Second, it covers a range of expression, including spoken language and nearly all means of natural sounds (17). This range of expression is particularly compelling as it manifests in the contemporary African American musical form of rap music, wherein deftness with the spoken word is a central tenet.

Whereas Bebey provides a native's account of modern West Africa, former slave, Olaudah Equiano provides a literary-historical one that emphasizes the primacy of music in the African way of life. In recalling his homeland of Guinea, he writes, "we are almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets. Every great event such as a triumphant return from battle, or other cause of public rejoicing, is celebrated in public dances which are accompanied with songs and music" (Equiano 143). Musicologist Eileen Southern further explains, "For every 'custom' (the term used in Africa with reference to public ceremonies, rites, festivals, and similar events) and for almost every activity among the Africans, there was an appropriate music" (5). From these similar accounts, it can be concluded that African music is profoundly communal, an art that involves the active participation of the whole wherein music acts as celebration, consolation, or as accompaniment to the daily travails of life.

This communalism augments my argument that folk music is a form of political activism: the music is performed by, for, and in the service of the people. Poignant demonstrations include the protest folksongs sang by freedom fighters marching hand and hand during the civil rights marches of the 1950s and 1960s. As Bebey notes, "African music is fundamentally a collective art. It is a communal property whose spiritual qualities are shared and experienced by all" (vi). To be certain, though, the African tradition does allow for musical exceptionality by skilled master drummers or the village bard [griot]. As Southern notes, "it was as a member of a performing group rather

than as individuals that professionals made their greatest contribution to the performance” (12). Southern further states:

The most common form of musical performance involved an ensemble (as distinguished from solo performers) including instrumentalists, singers, and dancers... Onlookers participated in the activity by clapping the hands, as we have seen, or by tapping the feet. Essentially, then, there was no audience; all persons were actively involved in the music-dance performance in one way or another (12).

African rooted folk music in the New World has thrived on this idea of the communal, which is best exemplified in the survival of the ring shout, a collective dance and music ritual performance.

According to Sterling Stuckey, “the ring shout was the main context in which Africans recognized values common to them” (qtd in Floyd 1995, 266). Moreover, he regards “the Negro spiritual as central to the ring and foundational to all subsequent Afro-American music-making” (qtd in Floyd 1995, 267). In further extending Stuckey’s analysis, Samuel Floyd, Jr. offers a critical foundation in which to view the nexus between the ring shout and black music. He posits, “since all of the defining elements of black music, are present in the ring, Stuckey’s formulation can be seen as a frame in which all black music analysis and interpretation can take place” (268). Throughout the hardships of slavery and beyond, it has been the rich tradition of the ring shout, wailing calls and soothing responses, jubilant hollers, blue notes, and defiant lyrics sang empathetically on behalf of the people that have been most sustaining. These Black cultural expressions have also provided critical spaces in which to theorize Black experience(s).

The gradual acculturation of West African slaves to Western ways while retaining vestiges of their own culture is the cornerstone of Amiri Baraka’s “Blues People” theory.

Like Floyd analysis of the “ring shout,” and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s correlating the “signifying monkey” to Esu Legba, Baraka returns to West Africa in his citation of the blues as the key signifier with which to theorize African American experience.<sup>30</sup> Though he is certainly not the sole theorist to consider western Africa as foundation, African American retention of Africanisms, or the symbiotic relationship between West Africa and the West, his work solidly anticipates theorizing the history of a people through a history of their music. Further, his theory grounds my own examination of African American folk music as I trace social activism and folksongs as performed by Simone, Hill, and Chapman correlating the climatic historical events relevant to Black folk. In effect, Baraka examines the production of the American Negro, (a new race) alongside the development and transmutation of African music to American Negro music (a new music), insofar as the latter is a seeming microcosm of the first (8). Thus, with his “Blues People” theory, the music and the people are bound synthetically by a shared history and foundation in Africa (retention and origin, respectively), but are made anew through the acculturative process of Americanization.<sup>31</sup>

In 1845’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass wrote nearly a half-century earlier than W.E.B. DuBois of the expressive sorrows of the slave spirituals and the revelation of their souls that the spirituals, “The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as the aching heart is relieved by its tears (47). In advancing Douglass’ sentiments, DuBois echoes them in *The Souls* by offering, “I know that these songs are the articulate message of the slave to the world...They are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways” (207).

Interestingly, Zora Neale Hurston counters, “the idea that the whole body of the spirituals are ‘sorrow songs’ is ridiculous. They cover a wide range of subjects from a peeve at gossipers to Death and Judgement” (qtd in Griffin 123). Hurston’s interpretation widens the possibilities and meaning of black music. This expansion, however implicit, considers the politicized and subversive qualities of sorrow songs that empower Blacks and elevates us beyond our continual role as objectified victims. As Angela Davis demonstrates in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, sorrowful blues tunes sang by Rainey, Smith, and Holiday were informed by a feminist consciousness. As well, my study reveals the folk aesthetic in Simone, Chapman, and Hill’s music, which serves to counter various forms of oppression.

### **Contemporary Black Folk Music: From Rebel Music to Referendum then Rebirth**

The following chapters analyze Nina Simone, Tracy Chapman, and Lauryn Hill, providing close readings of their bodies of work. Each chapter is organized chronologically and follows key historical moments of progressive social change for African Americans and the accompanying musical expressions by these artists. Beginning with the civil unrest during the 1960s, I anchor my analysis in Nina Simone’s protest music, inspired by events during the 1960s and 1970s. Her folk performance and mode of folk revival begins the line into which Tracy Chapman and Lauryn Hill follow.

In Chapter 2: “Mississippi Goddam: Nina Simone, The Badass High Priestess of Souled Folk,” I examine Simone as both high priestess of the folksong as well as life narrator. As a seminal folk revival artist during the turbulent Civil Rights era, Simone was highly regarded as a jazz and blues artist (both part of the larger black folk tradition) as well as a classical pianist. I focus on Simone’s song as political act and her revealing autobiography, *I Put A Spell On You*. It reveals a portrait of a “young, gifted, and black”

artist's progress from being individually to communally centered as the personal becomes political. Simone captures her evolution as a radical black female subject in the same way that other activists do, including Assata Shakur (*Assata: An Autobiography*), Angela Y. Davis (*Angela Davis: An Autobiography*), Elaine Brown (*A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story*). As Simone's growing political consciousness arises in the wake of the social chaos surrounding her, she surrenders her love for classical music and performances. Songs such as the highly subversive "Mississippi Goddam" align her with the 1960s Black Liberation Movement, while "Four Women" reveals her equal concerns for Black women's issues. I provide a textual analysis of these songs, alongside her activist work, and autobiography to frame Nina Simone as a dynamic musical figure and a crusader for justice.

In Chapter 3: "Talkin' Bout a Revolution(ary): Tracy Chapman Takes on Reganomics," I read Tracy Chapman's music as a direct response to the Reagan-Bush reign, during which times, uncompassionate social policies were enacted as a "big pay back" for the modest gains achieved during the Civil Rights Era as well as during the 1970s feminist movement. Tracy Chapman confronts the rise of conservatism through song amidst a vacuous climate of general apathy and pop star juggernauts who placated the masses with popular tunes. Conversely, Chapman's eponymous 1988 debut album sought to ignite the masses with explosive songs like "Talkin' Bout a Revolution," revealing her commitment to economic injustice and "Behind the Wall," reflecting her concern with violence against women. I analyze the thematics of flight and mobility in two songs, "Mountains O' Things" and "She's Got Her Ticket," which offer different alternatives for survival in postindustrial America. These songs and the album as a whole

demonstrate Chapman's merger of political convictions and artistic performance to give voice to those silenced by classist and sexist policies.

Chapter 4: "Ms. Educated Lauryn Hill: Lessons in Love" focuses on Simone and Chapman's musical descendant, Lauryn Hill, whose music is a pastiche of soul, gospel, hip hop, blues, and folk. Despite her musical fusion, Hill is quintessentially "hip hop" and most representative of her generation's female rap activist. Hill performs rap as pedagogy, by drawing upon experiential knowledge and formal/self-directed training to impart lessons to the masses. Two songs from her highly acclaimed 1998 solo debut, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, most illustrate Hill's themes of love and education, and distinguish her as radical black female subject. "Doo Wop (That Thing)," and the stirring album track "The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill" demonstrate Hill's dedication to an activism that seeks both a personal (sacred) and political (secular) revolution. Chapter 5: "Neo-Soul & Nouveau Folk, The Tradition" looks beyond Simone, Chapman, and Hill to their musical daughters and sisters, Erykah Badu, Jill Scott, and India.Arie who have carried on the tradition of activist performances through folksongs of protest.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For example, Benjamin Filene's *Romancing the Folk* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), conflates the blues and folk traditions. Within the whole of the American folk tradition, he discusses only two African Americans in detail, Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter (the popular 1930s traditional folk singer) and Muddy Waters (a popular blues singer of the 1940s and 50s) as representative of the African American folk music contribution. Also, famed father and son folk collectors, John and Alan Lomax brought national acclaim to Ledbetter, Waters, and other Black *male* folk musicians. As relative gatekeepers of folk music, their privileging black male performers to the public forefront as idealized folk performers is telling from a historical standpoint. In light of such an absence of black female contributions, the following works are critical in expanding the scholarship: Daphne Duval Harrison's *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (1988) and Angela Davis' *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism, Gertude 'Ma' Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (1998).

<sup>2</sup> In "Africana Folklore: History and Challenges," Professor Sw. Anand Prahlad raises the issue that there remains "an overwhelming emphasis on male elements" even within the expansion of folklore studies, particularly Africana folklore studies. He also points out that "folklorists in Africana studies have not engaged the ideas of feminism or womanism that have enjoyed such a commanding presence in other fields such as literary analysis." "In fact, Prahlad continues, "one is hard pressed to think of contemporary, full-length, feminist *or* womanist studies of black folklore (262). The gender-related questions he raises which

I intend to address are: What are some of the unexamined influences on gendered performative practices, and what are some of the meanings operating in women's speech events and oral texts? I will approach these questions as well as my other previously stated objectives within the frameworks of black cultural nationalism, black feminism, and oral performance theory.

<sup>3</sup> In "The Fabrication of Folklore." *Folklore Matters* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee Press, 1989), folklorist Alan Dundes makes a distinction between the concepts of survival, revival, as well as fakelore, a neologism coined in a 1950 issue of a semi-popular periodical, *American Mercury* by folklorist Richard M. Dorson. Dundes states, "Survival implies a continuity of tradition, no matter how diminished or altered in form an item of folklore might be. Revival suggests discontinuity, a break in the tradition. It refers to a conscious decision to resuscitate an item of folklore that flourished in the past. Fakelore, in contrast, never existed at all—at least in the form presented" (41).

<sup>4</sup> I use the terms black feminist and womanist throughout this study. I particularly prefer the latter term, "womanist," coined by Alice Walker (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, 1983) and more cogently defined by Geneva Smitherman. Smitherman states that a womanist is a "Black woman who is rooted in the Black community and committed to the survival and development of Black women as well as the community" (2006, 47).

<sup>5</sup> For a stimulating discussion on Herder and the American Folk Tradition, particularly its significance to the Civil Rights Movement, see Gene Bluestein's *Poplore: Folk and Pop in American Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> See Alain Locke's history of Black music in *The Negro and His Music*, which was first published in 1936 for further reading.

<sup>7</sup> See Tricia Rose's *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994); Robin Roberts, "'Ladies First': Queen Latifah's Afrocentric Feminist Music Video," *African American Review* 28 (1994); and Cheryl Keyes' *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (2002). Also notable is Gwendolyn D. Pough's *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (2004).

<sup>8</sup> Sw. Anand Prahlad's highly ambitious *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of African American Folklore* (2006) glaringly omits the rich folklore revivalist tradition of Nina Simone, Tracy Chapman, as well as Lauryn Hill, though he includes several male MCs. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay's *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. as advertised features nine new authors as well as a "strengthened vernacular tradition." That expanded tradition includes Nina Simone's "Four Women," Holiday's "Strange Fruit," and Martha and the Vandellas "Dancin' in the Street," which accompany original contributions such as Bessie Smith's "Backwater Blues," Leadbelly's "Goodmorning Blues," and Bernice Johnson Reagon's "Steal Away to Jesus." The addition of these three artists reflects a genuinely progressive approach to canonizing women's folkloric contributions, made all the more revealing by the selection of songs, which are political in nature as Simone's deals with remnants of slavery, "Strange Fruit" is subtly an anti-lynching song and "Dancin' in the Street" is also a veiled reference to the rioting that rocked urban streets during the tumultuous 1960s. See also Trudier Harris' *Call and Response: An Anthology of African American Literature*.

<sup>9</sup> Odetta is an influential folk revival singer born Odetta Holmes on December 31, 1930 in Birmingham, Alabama. She was classically trained in piano and operatic singing but soon turned her interests to folk music, though her repertoire also includes the blues and spirituals. Her distinctive ability as a folksinger is due in part to her power and clarity of voice as well as the richness and intensity of her delivery. Yet, she is also noted as an archivist of the music, as her research, recording, and touring attests to keeping alive the legacy of early folk and blues singers such as Bessie Smith and Leadbelly (<http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Park/8672/odetta1.html>)

<sup>10</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagon began as a SNCC Freedom Singer along with Cordell Reagon, Charles Neblett, Rutha Mae Harris, and, occasionally, Bertha Gober. The group performed traditional folk music/freedom songs that coincided with advancing the politics of Movement goals (Ward 294). For more on Reagon's

contributions to the folk music tradition, see Brian Ward's brief profile of her in *Just My Soul Responding* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998) and Pete Seeger and Bob Reiser, *Everybody Says Freedom* (New York: Norton, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> The label "folk music" has fallen into disfavor, as Robert Santelli explains in the Introduction to *American Roots Music* (based on the PBS television series). According to him, music writers re-Christened the badly worn term "folk music," American roots music "as a catchall phrase to describe any American music form that had influenced pop music and was a 'root' of rock and roll, or as a simple substitute for folk" (Intro). Santelli contests the term "folk music" as it has been over-analyzed by scholars and over-simplified by the media who eagerly labeled anyone with a guitar or banjo a folksinger" (Intro). Nonetheless, he and other contributors to the collection such as John Cohen and Alan Jabbour believe that the terms "folk music" and "roots music" are so relative that the slight difference in their meaning is insignificant; therefore, this recent preference for the term "roots music" seems to be an aesthetic one. For purposes of this present study, I will continue to use and identify with the term "folk music" as it connotes being communally rooted in the folk, who as the terms suggests are the core. This is a central concept in my aims to reveal how the folk and their music are integral. Therefore, as it is in the label, so too shall be the treatment of the folk in this study, at the forefront. My preference for the term is more political than aesthetic.

<sup>12</sup> In his "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Folk,'" cultural studies critics, Robin D. G. Kelley expands upon fellow scholar Stuart Hall's, "Notes on Deconstructing the 'Popular,'" to provide a critique of Lawrence Levine's essay entitled "The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences" (1992). Kelley's main point of contention with the essay is that Levine fails to problematize the concept of an authentic "folk culture." "A cultural studies approach," Kelley insists "would insist that terms like "folk," "authentic," and "traditional" are socially constructed categories that have something to do with the reproduction of race, class, and gender hierarchies and the policing of boundaries of modernism" (1402). He further seems to warn that "unless we deconstruct the terms 'folk' and 'authentic' and see 'modern' and 'traditional' as mutually constitutive and constituting, we will miss the dynamic process by which culture is created as well as its relationship to constantly shifting experiences, changes in technologies, and commodification" (1402). In the original essay that led to Kelley's critique, Levine asks historians to "explore the degree to which popular culture functions in ways similar to folk culture and acts as a form of folklore for people living in urban industrial societies, and can thus be used to reconstruct people's attitudes, values, and reactions" (Levine qtd in Kelley 1400). See also Levine's response to Kelley's critique "Levine Responds." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 97, no 5 (Dec 1992), pp. 1427-1430.

<sup>13</sup> Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr. *Race Music: Black Cultures From Bebop to Hip Hop* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 2003). Ramsey elucidates the meaning of vernacular and differentiates it from folk by advancing that 'the' vernacular has a more elastic quality to it than 'folk.' It can convey the sensibilities of a subculture or even those of an entire nation. Vernacular music can comprise folk, popular, or mass culture, as these terms are understood. Despite this elasticity, however, it still retains a sense of cultural hierarchy, and its implicit value is unquestionably implied. American vernacular music, for example, carries a sense of connection to the 'common man,' one born to a particular class, region, or racial group. Vernacular means 'homegrown.' It indexes a provincial outlook and not a cosmopolitan one. It can denote 'American and not the European 'norm.' It means 'uncultivated' and approached 'unselfconsciously.' White ruling classes, it should be noted, are generally perceived to be devoid of a 'vernacular' expression (40).

<sup>14</sup> For actual statistical *Household Data Annual Averages*, which provide the most current (2005) data which substantiates my claims, see Characteristics of the Employed, tables 9-23 at <http://www.bls.gov/cps/home.htm>. For data on Black US population, see <http://factfinder.census.gov> Chart R0202 United States Percent of the Total Population Who Are Black or African American Alone. 2006 Universe: Total Population. While Washington D.C. ranks first with a Black population of 55.4%, Mississippi (37.4%), Louisiana (31.6%), and Georgia (29.8%) all southern states filled out the top four.

<sup>15</sup> For an insightful discussion of Black migration and urbanization, see Farah Jasmine Griffin, "*Who Set You Flowin'?*": *The African- American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> According to Tracy, there is also a “devolutionary premise in folklore theory that folklore ‘decays through time’ or runs down by moving from ‘higher’ to ‘lower’ strata of society” (13). Such a belief is based on a romantic and primitivist nineteenth-century European worldview that views folkloric materials as “survivals” or “popular antiquities.” This worldview encourages academic scholars within various disciplines to look and work backwards “toward a presumed perfect past” (13). Folklorists belonging to this school of thought clearly view folkloric material as cultural artifacts, anthropological discoveries, and relics of the “perfect” past to be preserved. This view does not allow an acceptance of folklore as living material, which evolves along with the folk, their environment, and in accordance with a natural progression of history.

<sup>17</sup> See also Philip Foner, *American Labor Songs of the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: U of Illinois Press, 1975), and David K. Dunaway, “Music and Politics in the United States,” *Folk Music Journal* 5, no. 3 (1987): 268-94.

<sup>18</sup> Folklorist Alan Dundes seemingly responds to Greenway’s analysis. In “Who Are the Folk? *Essays In Folkloristics* (1978), he states, “With respect to the folklore produced or inspired by industrialization, Marxist folklorists have made a useful contribution. They saw that the concept of folk had to include both peasant and proletariat, that is folk of the country and folk in the city. However, Marxist theory erred in limiting folk to the lower classes, to the oppressed. According to strict Marxist theory, folklore is the weapon of class protest. It cannot be denied that some folklore does express protest. Numerous folksongs, for example, articulate discontent with social ills, racism, and other issues. But there is also rightwing folklore expressing the ideology of groups of a conservative political philosophy. If one carried Marxist theory to its logical extreme, then one day when the perfect society was achieved, there would be no oppressed group, hence there would be no folk, no folklore. The point then is that while there is factory folklore and the folklore of labor unions, there is also folklore of big business and big businessmen. The traveling salesman joke cycle, for example, is clearly a reflection of capitalistic free enterprise as well as a vehicle for a city slicker trickster’s attempt to seduce a country farmer’s daughter” (8). Dundes’ point is well-taken, however, I believe that Greenway was simply highlighting folksongs of protest that have prevailed throughout history through the industrial age as opposed to “limiting folk to the lower classes” as Dundes suggests. In kind, I perceive my study as one that demonstrates the use of folksong as activism.

<sup>19</sup> For a concise history of (purist and otherwise) theoretical perspectives in the study of folklore, including Devolutionary Theory, see Thomas Burns’ “Folkloristics: A Conception of Theory.” Ed. Elliot Oring, *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres, A Reader* (Logan: Utah State UP, 1989) 1-20.

<sup>20</sup> On May 5, 1920, two Italians, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, two foreign-born radicals fell into a police trap that had been set for a suspect in the Braintree crime. The arrest of Sacco and Vanzetti had coincided with the period of the most intense political repression in American history, the “Red Scare” 1919-20. While neither Sacco nor Vanzetti had any previous criminal record, they were long recognized by the authorities and their communities as anarchist militants who had been extensively involved in labor strikes, political agitation, and antiwar propaganda and who had had several serious confrontations with the law. Sacco and Vanzetti were executed on August 23, 1927, a date that became a watershed in twentieth-century American history. Robert D’Attilio and Jane Manthorn, et alia. *Sacco Vanzetti: Developments and Reconsiderations*, 1979. Boston: Boston Public Library, 1979. The Red Summer refers to the summer and fall of 1919, in which race riots exploded in a number of cities in both the North and South. The three most violent episodes occurred in Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Elaine, Arkansas. For a more in-depth reading of the events as they unfolded in Chicago, see William M. Tuttle’s *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919*. Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1997. According to John Greenway (*Americans: Folksongs of Protest*) “the 1929 strike at the Loray mills in Gastonia, North Carolina, began like hundreds of others in the southern textile industry, but ended as the South’s greatest labor trial...The story of the strike itself is so usual that it does not need retelling: a mill community, exploited, oppressed, discouraged, and sullen in its discouragement, is aroused to action by Northern organizers—in this case, Communists.” After several judicial mishaps, charges were eventually dropped or reduced for several of the accused strikers. Nonetheless, Greenway notes that the strike led to an “especially rich production of song” (135).

<sup>21</sup> Although Lead Belly did not openly proclaim the leftist cause and was not as overtly political in his songwriting as either Seeger or Guthrie, several of his songs do reflect the harsh living of southern Blacks who were accustomed to hard work, cotton fields, poverty, and racism. In his more socially conscious moments, Lead Belly wrote endearing songs of social protest such as “The Bourgeois Blues;” “He Is the Man,” a campaign song; and his own version of “The Scottsboro Boys Shall Not Die.” In this latter song’s spoken interludes or cante-fables, the often spoken introduction to a song a characteristic of folk music, which Lead Belly was famous for employing, he reasons, “If a white woman says something, it must be so, and she can say something about a colored person, if it’s a thousand colored men, they kill all of ‘em just for that one woman. If she ain’t telling the truth, it don’t make any difference. Why? ‘Cause it’s Jim Crow, and I know it’s so ‘cause the Scottsboro boys can tell you about it” (Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell. *The Life & Legend of Leadbelly*. New York: Harper Collins, 1992). This open form of social protest, demonstrated by Lead Belly was a courageous step, in a political climate, though radical, still hostile toward African Americans, especially those who stepped “out of their places.” In retrospect, it is convenient to dismiss Leadbelly’s politics and songs of protests as lax, mild, or even non apparent, however, such misgivings should be reconsidered in light of Leadbelly’s association and performances with Seeger and even Alan Loxmax, men noted for having more radical ideologies. Such highly politicized interracial alliances definitely mark a bold step for such times.

<sup>22</sup> From *Workers Song Book No.1* (New York: Workers Music League, 1934) 5.

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion on the relationship between the middle class status of Blacks and the lynching factor, see the life’s work of Ida B Wells Barnett (*On lynchings: Southern horrors, A red record, Mob rule in New Orleans*. New York, Arno Press, 1969. See also her autobiography, *Crusade for Justice*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1970. The centuries-old tensions between the races was especially demonstrated in the deep south where there was an increase in the number of reported lynching. Unemployed whites began to fervently express their grievances that Blacks were economically advantaged. As Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s life work attests, exceptional cases of Black economic privilege or even the perceived threat of it led to increased racial tension. Such tensions oftentimes escalated to mob violence, lynching of Blacks and the destruction of their property. Yet, despite the mainstay of racial strife, America was undergoing an awakening of sorts that would bring together an alliance of revolutionary thinkers with folk culture at the forefront.

<sup>24</sup> While Gold and others attempted to outline appropriate modes for performing art within academic circles, the folk were largely uninfluenced by the popular radical ideologies of the day, as their bleak realities were only exacerbated and their songs of sorrow only heightened during the Great Depression. Aunt Molly Jackson, the celebrated Kentucky folksinger explains the origins of her songs, “I’ve been framed up and accused of being a Red when I did not understand what they meant. I never heard tell of a communist until after I left Kentucky—then I had passed fifty—but they called me a Red. I got all of my progressive ideas from my hard tough struggles, and nowhere else” (qtd in Greenway 261). Nevertheless, there was a growing swell of poor and working class Americans who growing disdainful of the once revered monied barons of the 1920s were now attracted to or at the very least sympathetic to the leftist movement, such as one Pennsylvanian who in 1932 wrote to President Hoover that “the capitalists were ‘responsible for this unemployed situation,’ and so they should be made to pay the cost of remedying it.” Similar sentiments were expressed by a poorly educated New Yorker in late 1930 when he remarked, “I am neither an anarchist, socialist, or communist—but, by God, at times I feel as if I should affiliate myself with the radicals”<sup>1</sup>). Such were the sentiment brewing amongst America’s jobless, working poor, and even middle classes as they too were not spared the harsh blows dealt by the depression.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Wright (1908-1960) *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938), *Native Son* (1940), *How’ Bigger’ Was Born; The Story of Native Son* (1940), *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (1940).; John Rodrigo Dos Passos (1896-1970) author of the epic trilogy *U.S.A.*, which comprises the novels, *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel* (1930), *1919* (1932), and *The Big Money* (1936) first collected in one novel in 1938; Jaes T. Farrell (1904-1979), *Young Lonigan: A Boyhood in Chicago Streets* (1932), *Gas House McGinty* (1933), *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan* (1934); Tillie Olsen (1912-) *Yonnonidio: From the Thirties* (1974), *Tell Me a Riddle* (1961), which contains the much-anthologized stories “Tell Me a Riddle” and “I Stand Here Ironing”; and Langston Hughes (1902-1967) a most prolific writer whose work includes

an autobiographical prose piece, *Not Without Laughter* (1930) as well as collected poetry, his first, *The Weary Blues* (1926), *The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Relations* (1931), *The Dream Keeper* (1932), *The Ways of White Folk* (1934). Hughes had his early works published in the NAACP publication, *Crisis Magazine* and in *Opportunity Magazine*. Leftist magazines, *The Nation*, *New Masses*, *Daily Worker* and *Partisan Review* were also venues where these young writers and their comrades published works deemed radical. See also, Daniel Aaron's *Writers on the Left* Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1977 and David Madden's *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968.

<sup>26</sup> See Ronald D. Cohen's *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival & American Society, 1940-1970* (2002); Richard Reuss' *American Folk Music & Left-Wing Politics* (2000); Denisoff, R. Serge. *Great Day Coming: Folk Music and the American Left*. (1971); and Ron Eyerman and Scott Barretta's "From the 30s to the 60s: The Folk Music Revival in the United States." *Theory and Society*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Aug., 1996), pp. 501-543.

<sup>27</sup> John Avery Lomax (1867-1948) and his youngest son Alan (1915-2002) are credited with singularly redefining the meaning of folk music as they pursued 'pure folk' from rural southerners, white and black. According to Ronald Cohen, the elder Lomax "though searching for the democratic threads that linked Americans, rich and poor, northern and southern, black and white, city and country, [he] approached his collecting from a conservative, even romantic, position. Idealizing the 'folk,' he failed to question the status quo, particularly southern race relations" (12-13). Nonetheless, as a result of their many folk expeditions, a series of influential song books were produced: *Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp* (1919), *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1934, with Alan), *Our Singing Country* (1941, with Alan), and *Folk Song: U.S.A.* (1947, with Alan). For a critical view of Alan Lomax, see music critic Dave Marsh's *Counterpunch* magazine article entitled, "Mr. Big Stuff, Alan Lomax: Great White Hunter or Thief, Plagiarist and Bigot?" (21 July 2002), [www.counterpunch.org/marsh0721.html](http://www.counterpunch.org/marsh0721.html)

<sup>28</sup> Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) famed author (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 1937 ) and folk collector compiled several collections of folk survivals that she gathered during her many travels throughout the American south as well as abroad, Jamaica and Haiti. Such collections include: *Mules and Men* (Philadelphia, London: J.B. Lippincott Co, 1935); *Tell My Horse* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1938), and a posthumous collection *Go Gator and Muddy the Water* (New York: Norton, 1999). This latter work is a collection of stories on the manners and mores of African-Americans in 1930s Florida. They were written when Hurston was employed by the federal government to transcribe the oral history and to collect data on the customs of black people. At the time, few of her stories made it into print. John Wesley Work (1901-1967) African American Fisk University scholar and folklore collector. Among his contributions: *American Negro Songs and Spirituals; A Comprehensive Collection of 230 Folk Songs, Religious and Secular* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1940); *Lost Delta Found: Rediscovering the Fisk University-Library of Congress Coahoma County Study, 1941-1942* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005); and *Collections of spirituals* (with Frederick J. Work) (Nashville: Southern Baptist Convention. Historical Commission, 1962).

<sup>29</sup> See also the edited work of Joseph Holloway *Africanisms in America*. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2005 c1990), and Lorenzo Dow Turner's *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (Ann Arbor: Univ of Michigan Press, 1974 c1949). For an enlightening and convincing study on the development of antebellum African American music and the syncretic blend of African and American folk and popular music, see Dena J. Epstein's *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977).

<sup>30</sup> Baraka's analysis, in particular, parallels both Houston A. Baker, Jr.'s *Blues Ideology and African American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) and Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) insofar as both scholars look toward Africa as reference for their theoretical developments on music and literature, respectively.

<sup>31</sup> See also Jahn Janheinz *Muntu: An Outline of the New African Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961). Baraka's ideas on African retention are informed by previous scholarship on black music advanced by scholars such as H. E. Krehbiel (*Afro-American Folksongs: A Study in Racial and National Music*, 1914) who concluded that the folksongs he studied "contained 'essential elements' from Africa that were not the result of the 'negro's innate faculty for imitation' but rather reflected 'peculiarities of scale and structure' that must have come from Africa" (qtd in Caponi, 17), Maud Cuney-Hare (*Negro Musicians and Their Music*, 1936) who observed in her study that "'the feelings of the Negroes in America were expressed in the manner of the primitive music of Africa,' who voice their 'homesickness in a medium familiar to them'" (qtd in Caponi 18), and anthropologist Melville Herskovits (*The Myth of the Negro Past*, 1941) who documented the existence of New World African survivals in social organizations, religions, language, and the arts, in particular, music (Caponi 18).

## **CHAPTER 2: NINA SIMONE, THE HIGH PRIESTESS OF SOUL-(ED FOLK)**

Knowledge of Nina Simone's appeal eludes many of my generation; however, she is affectionately known by adoring fans worldwide as "High Priestess of Soul" and "Queen of African Rooted Classic Music."<sup>1</sup> There is a disconnect between my generation and the previous generation of men and women who actively participated in struggles for black liberation, set to music by Simone. She began her musical career during the late 1950s, and thus she belongs to my grandparents' or my parents' generation, yet her music spoke to me. In my mid teens, I often rummaged through my parents' old 45s and 8 tracks. On one occasion, as I prepared to store the O'Jays, Teddy Pendergrass, and Minnie Ripperton records, I came across one I had not yet heard. I dusted off and played the record, and heard Nina Simone's voice belting out "You know darn well-ll/That he went to hell-ll-ll-ll!" I was hooked and overwhelmed and lured by the brashness, boldness, and bravado of her voice; I played the record again and again that day. Such was my first encounter with an artist whose musical ability awed me. As I delved into the life of the woman at the core of the music, it was Simone's commitment to liberation movements that made her vision compelling to me.

Nina Simone not only sang in protest, she also acted on her words. As both foot soldier and muse for the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, Simone sang out against racial oppression, and gave melodic voice to the victims of American apartheid.<sup>2</sup> Further, she also marched alongside Dr. King, and served as musical performer during numerous other marches, and fundraising events, such as the 1964 Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) "Freedom Concert" and the 1965 March from Selma to Montgomery (Ward 301-2). Aside from befriending numerous Black leaders, Simone expresses pride in her acceptance as the Movement muse. She announced, "My friends

in SNCC told me that when they got started and had their meetings to discuss strategy—meetings which often turned into parties later—there would always be Nina Simone records in whoever’s house the meeting was held in” (95). SNCC chairman, H. Rap Brown, in 1967 “hailed her as ‘the singer of the black revolution because there is no other singer who sings real protest songs about the race situation’” (qtd in Ward 301-2). “To Be Young, Gifted and Black” was declared by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) to be the Black national anthem, and “Mississippi Goddam” captured the anger and horror of state-sanctioned crimes against Blacks.<sup>3</sup>

Nina Simone’s vast and eclectic songbook, her mastery as a classically trained pianist, and her contributions to the Black liberation struggle make her an inspirational model for current and future female activists/performers. In the early 1960s, Simone’s political consciousness grew and she developed from singing jazz standards and traditional love and folk ballads to protest music. In reviewing her discography, Simone’s RCA years (1967-1974) represent her most political period. Arguably, her most overtly political song, “Mississippi Goddam,” reflects Simone’s raising her voice “to the Heavens” exposing the “evildoers” who terrorized southern Blacks (Giovanni, *Nina Simone, Forever*).

A quintessential protest song, “Mississippi Goddam!” became an anthem for many activists. SNCC member, Stanley Wise who recalls how “everybody in the Movement just sort of took that as a tribute to the [1964 Freedom Summer] Mississippi Summer Project” (Ward 301).<sup>4</sup> “Mississippi Goddam” was written in response to the assassination of Medgar Evers, Mississippi’s first NAACP field secretary, and the church bombing that resulted in the deaths of four little black girls in Birmingham. The song fits John Greenway’s description of folksong as protest, since it is clearly one of those

“outburst of bitterness, of hatred for the oppressor, of determination to endure hardships together and to fight for a better life” (10). Simone would dedicate the next phase of her musical career to such “bitter outbursts” as she aligned herself with the Black liberation movement.

Simone’s participation in the fight against racial injustice did not preclude her consciousness raising efforts on behalf of black women. Her black womanist sensibilities are emblematic in the stirring song “Four Women”(1965). While 1963’s “Mississippi Goddam” is a bold and direct statement against the repression of black people’s freedom, “Four Women” depicts the prevailing effects of slavery, especially on black women. Simone confronts issues of black women’s (mis)representation, self-worth, and standards of black beauty misinformed by color caste. Simone’s narrative strategy of black women “telling their stories” in four distinct stanzas demonstrates her grounding in the African oral tradition and Black folk expressive culture in which storytelling is a predominant feature. Similarly, her narrative technique reflects women’s folkways of cooperative storytelling, whereby women can engage in empowering rhetorical practices. This notion is delineated by authors Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson in “Spinstorying: An Analysis of Women Storytelling,” where they highlight women storytelling and the “strategic dimensions of this storytelling, [termed] “spinstorying” (157). In general, “Four Women” explores recurring themes that have been central to Black women’s narratives, including the quest for subjectivity and liberation from both racist and sexist oppression.

As a Black liberation activist and champion, Simone, belongs to the continuum of Black women dedicated to community uplift and Black empowerment. Foremothers Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, and Mary Church Terrell first

articulated the plight of Black women. Latter-day freedom fighters Fannie Lou Hamer, Angela Davis, and Assata Shakur carried on the tradition of joining collective Black and women's liberation struggle, while Nina Simone and her folk-blues predecessors Bessie Smith, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, and Billie Holiday, sang out for social equality.<sup>5</sup> To claim her lineage as part of the blues tradition, Simone paid homage to those before her with renditions of "Gimme A Pigfoot" and "Need A Little Sugar in My Bowl," both recorded by Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit." Simone and her blues foremothers engage in the tradition of folk music as an alternative mode of expression, and created a communal space for disenfranchised Black folk, especially Black women. This space provided a place for Simone to protest and voice grievances against various systems of oppression, a discursive space where "the lives of working-class black communities" were expressed (Davis 1998, xv). Simone's art identifies her as a "radical black female subject," which according to hooks describes a woman whose collective struggle against racism and sexism informs her own struggle for self-actualization (56).

The assertion of agency, resisting prevailing norms, and inscribing oneself as a self-defining subject are prominently featured in Simone's repertoire of songs. In an attempt to uplift Black people, Simone bore witness to our pain and offered up high praise as a source for empowerment. In the spoken dialogue to her 1968 live version of "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black," she says of the song, "Now it is not addressed primarily to White people, though it does not put you down in any way, it simply ignores you. For my people need all the inspiration and love that they can get." Such candid remarks, made by Simone during her musical performances, and her self-admitted tempestuous nature led critics to adversely label her: "legend with an attitude," "dangerous diva," "difficult" and "daunting" (e.g., Bardin, Gayford & Bracewell).

However, as Brian Ward notes, “There was a self-possessed assurance—critics would call it arrogance and bloody-mindedness—about Simone; an independence of mind, spirit and action which seemed both refreshing and inspirational.” He continues, “It was this combination of message, music and manner which made her such a potent figure for the Movement” (302).

Against the paradigmatic shifts that occurred during the 1960s and within the context of both the Civil Rights Movement and Black Nationalism, Simone’s role as a radical black female subject emerges. “Mississippi Goddam” and “Four Women” and her autobiography, *I Put a Spell on You*, co-penned with Stephen Cleary, provide a chronological and evolutionary glimpse into her artistic and political development. Simone’s music reflects the autobiographical or testimonial nature of folk music that often blends the personal and the political, for the folk performer usually belongs to the community on whose behalf he/she performs (Greenway 8), which is also the case for the cultural (or collective) autobiographer. The media of folksong and cultural autobiography provide a rather natural confluence. Folksinger and author, Bernice Johnson Reagon identifies black women’s autobiographical writing as “cultural autobiography” because the black woman’s selfhood is integral to her sense of community (qtd in Smith and Watson 78).<sup>6</sup> Analyzing Simone’s autobiography and the representative protest songs offers didactic tools for achieving race and gender consciousness, critical awareness of and active participation in Black liberation struggle.

### **Nina Simone’s *Kunsterroman*, A Portrait of an Artist: “Young, Gifted, and Black”**

Nina Simone’s life narrative as recounted in *I Put a Spell on You* is a *kunsterroman*, which shows the portrait of a young classically trained pianist turned protest singer who was “Young, Gifted, and Black.”<sup>7</sup> Christened Eunice Kathleen

Waymon, Nina Simone was born in Tryon, North Carolina on Feb 21, 1933. Tryon was an atypical southern town: although far from a utopian ideal of racial harmony, based on her autobiography, it certainly was no “Mississippi Goddam!” With a degree of humor, Simone recalls her birthplace as a resort town where “white folks came from as far away as Florida to escape the heat and try out Tryon’s main attractions—horses and moonshine whisky” (4). Though “there was no policy of racial justice in Tryon,” for like many other southern towns, it was segregated, Simone explains that there was a certain cordiality in black and white relations. Since the place thrived on its tourist industry, blacks and whites peacefully co-existed “to ensure nothing happened to spoil the peaceful life the white folk led” (5). Although blacks were still considered racially inferior, the presentation of racial accord was maintained to serve Tryon’s local economy. The small town was promoted as an ideal destination, and thrived on its tourist based service economy where both Blacks and whites financially benefited, the Waymon family being no exception (4-5).

Before the Great Depression struck and before his family fell on hard times, Simone’s father took full advantage of Tryon’s tourist industry by maintaining a successful barbershop, a dry cleaning operation, and even a small trucking business. Simone’s mother, Mary Kate, reared six children, and eventually became a housekeeper, a job she held after her husband became incapacitated from a near-fatal illness; however, by Simone’s third year, her deeply devout mother became an ordained Methodist minister. As a child, Simone revealed an early proclivity for music, and there is little wonder why, since her family was musically inclined. Her father played harmonica and guitar, while both her parents and all her siblings played piano and sang in the church choir and various local singing groups. As music constantly pervaded the Waymon

household, there were no early formal piano lessons for young Simone or her siblings; she recalls quite simply “we learned to play the same way we learned to walk, it was that natural” (14). Simone recalls her mother being “so surprised she almost died on the spot” to witness her two-and-a-half-year old child sitting at the keyboard playing one of her favorite hymns, “God Be With You ‘Til We Meet Again” in the key of F (15). Her mother’s analysis was that her child had received a gift from God, and she would return the favor by having her open the church services.

Those early church performances, steeped in Black vernacular culture of improvisation and call-and-response, prepared a young Simone for a life’s work of commanding audiences as a protest artist. In later life, Simone’s live performances demonstrate her improvisational skills, which were dictated by her mood, the audience, and most importantly, the current political climate. She would often implore the audience for a response to her musical call, which, in turn, became collective/participatory choral protest. Her musical intent as she stated was “to move the audience. To make them conscious of what has been done to my people around the world” (Sebastian “Soundbite”).<sup>8</sup> Grounded in the deeply wrenched sorrow songs and jubilees of her people, Simone’s gospel roots were not subdued by her formal classical training; instead, the two are harmonized into a genre she pioneered, referred to as African rooted classical music.

Young Simone’s prodigious piano playing garnered her praise outside the black church circles with the white locals, including her mother’s employer, Miss Miller, who offered to pay a year’s piano tuition. Lessons were arranged for 6-year-old Simone with a local Englishwoman, Mrs. Muriel Massinovitch. Disciplined, very strict, but polite in her instruction, ‘Miz Mazzy’ as Simone affectionately called her, only allowed her pupil

to play Bach. However, as time progressed Simone came to appreciate Bach, for, as she describes, “he is technically perfect.” She explains, “once I understood Bach’s music I never wanted to be anything other than a concert pianist; Bach made me dedicate my life to music, and it was Mrs. Massinovitch who introduced me to his world. I had set out on a journey which became more wonderful and thrilling each week” (23). Nevertheless, Simone began to experience a sense of isolation and loneliness that is common to talented artists. Being a gifted, classically-trained pianist distinguished Simone from her peer group, but her talent also began to alienate her from her family: “the faster I progressed with Miz Mazzy the further away I seemed to get from my parents” (25). More importantly her maturation and identity formation were crystallized by the harsh realities of being black in America.

Young Simone’s rude racial awakening came as she matured. She began to critically examine the racial politics in her local community, and gradually she began to question familiar things that were becoming problematic, such as why she could not sit down at Owen’s Pharmacy or use the bathrooms at gas stations (26). Slowly, she began to understand her life within the context of the Jim Crow South. Her growing awareness of racial difference and her grappling to understand the workings of and white privilege mark a narrative shift in the autobiography. As she describes her evolving racial consciousness, her story becomes less “I-centered” and shifts to a “we-centered” cultural autobiography.

This transition is most profound when she recalls her resistance to the code of white supremacy during a singular moment.<sup>9</sup> Simone recounts,

When I was eleven years old I was asked to give a recital in the town hall. I sat at the piano with my trained elegance while a white man introduced me, and when I looked up my parents, who were dressed in their best, were being thrown out of their front row

seats in favour of a white family I had never seen before. And Daddy and Momma were allowing themselves to be moved. Nobody else said anything, but I wasn't going to see them treated like that and stood up in my starched dress and said if anyone expected to hear me play then they'd better make sure that my family was sitting right there in the front row where I could see them, and to hell with poise and elegance. So they moved them back. But my parents were embarrassed and I saw some of the white folks laughing at me (26).

Young Simone countered this moment of racial subjugation with defiant and direct action. Indignantly, she foregoes the prim and proper decorum of her classical piano training to chastise those who dared to uproot her parents. Implicitly, she implicates her parents for passively allowing themselves to be moved, revealing the generational difference in approaches to combating racial injustice. Simone's resistance to racism at such an early age forecasts the bold proclamation she would make when she released "Mississippi Goddam."

Notably, this experience of segregation, mockery from whites, and the shame of her parents was a moment of DuBoisian double consciousness. She confronted her "twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls; two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" (2). Further, this moment of enlightenment for Simone marked a pivotal moment in her sheltered life. She recalls the rupture, the lifting of the veil of racism this incident provoked in her young life, "All of a sudden it seemed a different world, and nothing was easy any more. I really had thought that all white people were like Miz Mazzy and Mrs Miller, all kind and elegant, all polite. But now prejudice had been made real for me and it was like switching on a light" (26). Simone continues, "The day after the recital I walked around feeling as if I had been flayed and every slight, real or imagined, cut me raw. But the skin grew back again a little tougher, a little less innocent, and a little more black" (26-7). This vivid reference to the flaying of black skin demonstrates Simone's

situating herself within a historical legacy of countless slaves who endured the brutal lash of the master's whip. The piano recital incident decisively marked the end of Simone's racial naiveté and prepared her for a life's work dedicated to conscious music making and active participation in liberation struggle.

Eunice Waymon did not set out to become Nina Simone, "High Priestess of Soul," protest singer, and political activist. She along with her mother envisioned that she would become the first black concert pianist (32; 45). However, this ambition was based on a faulty assumption and lack of awareness of her predecessors who had long before realized such a dream, such as Phillipa Duke Schuyler, Natalie Hinderas, and Ernestine Dent.<sup>10</sup> Her lack of such knowledge as a southern girl in rural North Carolina is perhaps understandable, but even as an adult, Simone proclaimed that this was her desire without acknowledging her pioneering predecessors. This is especially perplexing considering her belief in legacy and paying homage to predecessors, like Holiday, for example. Her persistent claims "to be the first" reveals Simone's sense of herself as a ground-breaking musician. Such claims also help to portray her as sympathetic figure who was denied "her coveted pioneering status," since her dream was, indeed, deferred. Her intense training was in preparation for acceptance into Philadelphia's prestigious Curtis Institute of Music; however, Simone failed the entrance examination. The specter of racism loomed as Simone wondered if her race had played a part in her failure to gain acceptance. She surmised, "I knew prejudice existed, but I never thought it could have such a direct affect [sic] on my future. Nobody told me that no matter what I did in life the colour of my skin would always make a difference. I learned that bitter lesson from Curtis" (44). Still determined to gain entry into the Institute, Simone began giving private lessons to earn an income, until one of her pupils introduced her to his agent; she

was immediately booked with a well-paying gig at Atlantic City's Midtown Bar and Grill. The move marked the first fateful step in Eunice Waymon being introduced to the world not as the Curtis-trained "first black concert pianist" she had wanted to be, but as Nina Simone, High Priestess of Soul another, more radical, first.

The transformation from naïve and still rustic North Carolina preacher's daughter Eunice Waymon to world-renowned Nina Simone came gradually; the first step was a name change. She decided on Nina Simone and explained the derivation; Niña, Spanish for "little one," was a beloved pet name given her by a Spanish boyfriend, and Simone was borrowed from French actress Simone Signoret. With her name settled, Simone gave a compelling first night's performance, however, Harry Steward, the club owner, required that she add singing to accompany her piano playing or she'd be out of a job. Simone began to further improvise her sets to include singing the lyrics to the popular tunes she fused with classical music. She recalls of her club performances, "Playing at the Midtown made me looser and more relaxed about music. I was creating something new, something that came out of me" (51). Simone's penchant for creating an eclectic fusion of classical, jazz, blues, folk, gospel, and children's songs into her performances began to garner widespread attention from industry insiders and critics who could not easily "find a neat slot to file [her sound] in" (68).<sup>11</sup> Simone says, "If I had to be called something it should have been a folk singer because there was more folk and blues than jazz in my playing" (69). The significance of Simone's self-identified folk aesthetic foregrounds her eventual devotion to protest and activism, which became central to her life's work and artistic pursuit. Looking back on the those protest years, Simone explains, "I felt more alive then that I feel now because I was needed, and I could sing something to help my people. And, that became the mainstay of my life. That became

most important to me not classical piano, not classical music, not even popular music, but Civil Rights movement music.”<sup>12</sup>

Following a successful run at the Midtown Bar where Simone honed her eclectic sound and vast songbook, she signed with Bethlehem Records, which released her first album *Little Girl Blue* in 1958. She released several more albums and quickly became associated with the “intellectual crowd” of New York’s Greenwich the Village where she befriended Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), and Lorraine Hansberry. Hansberry became a “special friend” whom Simone credits with “starting off” her “political education,” which was subsequently extended by her friendship with Stokely Carmichael (87). The Village was also home to the jazz crowd, and a burgeoning folk scene that included the likes of Joan Baez, Tim Hardin, Peter, Paul and Mary, Odetta, and a young Bob Dylan (Simone 68). Simone immersed herself in this subculture where she further developed her folksy sound and progressive politics. Her musical repertoire and discography give credence to her folk-identified reference, since throughout her career, even before her self-proclaimed protest years, she recorded several spirituals and traditional ballads—including “House of the Rising Sun,” “Children Go Where I Send You,” Chain Gang (Work Song),” Black Is the Color of My True Love’s Hair,” and an album of traditional songs called *Folksy Nina* (Colpix, 1964). Aside from writing her own folk protest songs, Simone covered the songs of established folk artists, such as Bob Dylan’s “I Shall Be Released” and Peter Seeger’s “Turn! Turn! Turn!”

Simone’s experience in the Village, and the friendships she developed helped to spur on her political consciousness. However, her growing awareness was initially stirred when she entered the role of mother, which allowed her introspection. Ironically, motherhood demands freed Simone from an encompassing role of public performer, and

gave her brief respite from the constant grind of performing. Simone's newfound private persona began when she married Andrew Stroud, a New York Police Department detective and Sergeant (and her eventual manager) on December 4, 1961. Comfortably settled into a life of domesticity, and having acquired success in the entertainment industry, Simone explains, "The responsibility of being a parent forces you to look at things differently anyway...I started to take a more direct interest in the world around me, this world I had brought a child into" (85). The world that she looked upon was one in which there was a struggle for the liberation of oppressed people, particularly Black people.

The American south became a battleground in the Civil Rights Movement. By peaceful means of sit-ins, protests, and marches to more aggressive forms of resistance, rioting, and raising arms in community and self-defense, Blacks began to take a stand against U.S. racial terrorism and social inequality. A new politic of black power arose; emboldening, transgressive, and affirmative in scope, this politics of both thought and action played an integral role in not only igniting Black agency, but also in the promotion of positive identity, national and cultural formation.<sup>13</sup> During this historical moment of Black liberation struggle, music played an integral role in the determination for social justice and Black pride. As an accompaniment to both the Civil Rights and subsequent Black Power movements, songs such as James Brown's defiantly affirmative "Say It Loud, I'm Black and Proud" and Nina Simone's uplifting "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black" became movement anthems. The call-and-response structure of the former and the lush chorality of the latter reflect the prominent role that folk idioms played in the cultural front. Such artists constitute what Herder would call folk poets, who were

“organically one with their culture—those most in tune with the national soul” (Wilson 28).

Nina Simone’s role as folk poet was especially significant considering that much of the retrospective discourse on Black liberation movements document the patriarchal, sexist, and even misogynist tendencies of the male leadership (see Elaine Brown’s *A Taste of Power*). The glorification of male leadership: preachers, politicians, and self-proclaimed leaders (e.g., Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Huey Newton) overshadowed the countless, fame-less women (e.g., Septima P. Clark, Claudette Colvin) who were at the forefront of underground and grassroots organizing. Lynne Olson’s *Freedom’s Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement From 1830 to 1970* is a comprehensive study that fills this gap in the historical record. Olson highlights over sixty unknown or lesser-known Black female activists who paved the way for Black liberation. As a powerful force in grassroots and organizing for progressive change, Black women also made significant contributions on the cultural front. Likewise, Alma Billingslea-Brown contends that

Although they were located on the periphery of nationalist discourse, black women writers, artists, and intellectuals traversed the boundaries erected around the domains of history, identity, image, and art and produced works that interrogated and subjected nationalist discourse to critique, especially with regard to gender” (11).

Radical Black women subjects, such as Lorraine Hansberry, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, and Nina Simone resisted patriarchal norms both within and without the Black liberation struggle that would have confined them to private, non-confrontational spaces. In their assertion of agency through Black expressive culture via theatre, poetry, song, Black women have been an integral part of movements for revolutionary change.

Simone's folksongs of protest, which span the 1960s and 1970s, is part of this rich cultural legacy.

Billingslea-Brown offers useful analysis on the cultural production of the 1960s, especially Black women's folklore. Although her work specifically addresses visual arts and fiction, her argument is applicable to folk music.<sup>14</sup> She explains, "For African Americans, the conditions for the formation of a functional identity assumed urgent and collective overtones during the 1960s and were linked, not only to history and socioeconomic and political power, but also to the spheres of art and aesthetics" (10). Simone's song lyrics and cultural autobiography reflect this collective identity, as she addressed issues of racial subjugation and the crisis of black womanhood in both genres. Simone belongs to the collectivity of women who "interrogated, restructured, and supplemented the 1960s ideological program of black cultural nationalism and generated 'a unique vision of identity, community, and historical change.'"<sup>15</sup> In so doing, these women "promoted and translated the emancipatory energies of a folk consciousness to the realm of art and aesthetics. Equally important, they implemented strategies to transform the material and expressive forms of folklore from sites of oppression to spaces of intervention and resistance" (Billingslea-Brown 12).<sup>16</sup> Folklore became a cultural realm that offered Black and white women a space for both artistic freedom and uplift for a greater cause. Attuned to the folk revival and the Black liberation and impending women's movement, Nina Simone, used her art to document the collective voices and plight of these communities during the revolutionary tides of 1960s America.

Just as the 1930s marked a watershed moment in American history wherein a popular front was accompanied by an equally revolutionary cultural front, the 1960s too underwent such a shift. For Black people, it was a renaissance of Black Nationalism, and

artistic production, most notably the Black Arts Movement, flourished and responded to the times—the battle for social equality.<sup>17</sup> As the 1960s liberation movement shifted from Christian-based non-violence to secular angry calls for retaliation and armed protection, so too did the music, which progressed from balm to battle cry. Religious-themed songs have long been a part of Black folk tradition, and during the 1960s such songs offered solace to weary freedom fighters during their marches toward liberation. Ronald Cohen articulates the historical continuity and impact of the traditionally-based folk music to the movement. He explains, “From the abolitionist movement of the mid-nineteenth century, topical songs had long been connected with civil rights organizing, and a direct line continued into the mid-1960s. Cohen continues, “Indeed, ‘We Shall Overcome’ resonated nationally and internationally, with worldwide liberation movements for five decades” (204). However, the Black Nationalist perspective eschewed such idealistic Christian based songs.

In the 1964 sermon “The Ballot or the Bullet,” Malcolm X, a definitive voice of Black Nationalist thought, derided the effectiveness of singing songs such as “We Shall Overcome.” Rather he saw the chorus as indicative of regress and evidence of a national crisis, stating, “Anytime you’re living in the twentieth century, and you’re walking around here singing ‘We Shall Overcome,’ the government has failed us” (qtd in Gates, Jr. & McKay 92). Influenced by Malcolm X’s black nationalism, and amidst the turmoil of increased violence against Blacks, songs arose that coincided with the departure from the “turn the other cheek” Christian philosophy of non-violent protest. Blacks desired an alternative to the increasing violence waged against them. In turn, the radical contingent of the black liberation movement and its cultural front heeded Amiri Baraka’s literary

call to arms expressed in his 1969 poem, “Black Art.” He called for “poems that kill./ Assassin poems, poems that shoot guns” (qtd in Gates, Jr. & McKay 1883)

### **“Mississippi Goddam”: A Song that Kills**

Simone responds to this call and to the surge of terrorism waged against Blacks. The murders of Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Addie Mae Collins in Alabama and Medgar Evers in Mississippi were the “final pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that made the enigma of race whole,” as Simone explained. She further explains, “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’” (89). After hearing the news that four young black girls were murdered, Simone was enraged, and she recalls gathering materials in an attempt to make a home-made pistol determined to “kill someone” she could “identify as being in the way of [her] people getting some justice for the first time in three hundred years.” Her husband cautioned, “Nina, you don’t know anything about killing. The only thing you’ve got is music.” Nina Simone did not act out violently; instead, she channeled her outrage into protest music, which became her weapon of choice to both document the everyday lives of Blacks under siege and retaliate against the systemic forces that sanctioned it.<sup>18</sup> In light of the recent violent attacks, she began to question the non-violent approach, and she sat down at her piano and an hour later came out of her apartment with the sheet music for “Mississippi Goddam.” Simone explains her first conscious steps toward becoming a political artist, “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” (90). The celerity with which the words came to Simone

demonstrate what Laura Jarmon's identifies as the emergent quality of Black folk narratives, their "taking on identity relative to the contexts in which they occur. The immediacy of circumstances, in this case the church bombing, and the four children's deaths, represent the "situational feature" that gives Simone's subsequent narrative an emergent quality (226). Spurred on by intense anger at the loss of innocent life to Jim Crow racism, Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddam" had entrenched her within Black liberation struggle and folk protest music.<sup>19</sup>

With its provocative title irreverently declared throughout, Simone's song certainly disrupted the status quo throughout the recording industry and beyond. "Mississippi Goddam" was a bold indictment against American apartheid provided an alternative to the more pacifist "We Shall Overcome." "Mississippi Goddam" expressed the feeling of many Black Americans, who in Fannie Lou Hamer's famous words were "sick and tired of being sick and tired."<sup>20</sup> Simone captures this sentiment when she sings the chorus, "Alabama's gotten me so upset / Tennessee made me lose my rest / And everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam." Simone speaks to the anger, weariness, and restlessness experienced by those freedom fighters both on and behind the front lines. She speaks to the battle fatigue of those who heard news broadcasts of the brutal murders of the young girls and Evers. The battle ground was the South, namely, Alabama, the site of church bombing and the "home base" for the Martin Luther King-led Civil Rights Movement, Mississippi, in remembrance of Medger Evers and Emmet Till, and Tennessee, the home of the Ku Klux Klan and the eventual site of King's assassination.<sup>21</sup> "Mississippi Goddam" is an indictment against the insidious history of terrorism against Blacks widely perpetuated throughout the South since slavery. As critic Mark Anthony

Neal proclaims, “the recording remains one of the most trenchant and timely critiques of the segregationist South” (48).

Simone’s rebellion relies on her efficacious use of the black rhetorical act of signifying/signification, a “style of verbal play in which a speaker puts down, needles, talks about a person, event, situation, or even a *government*. Depends on double meaning and irony, exploits the unexpected and uses quick verbal surprises and humor [emphasis added]” (Smitherman 2006, 43). In addition to employing many of these features of signifying to critique the American south, Simone adopts an oratorical style common to Black preachers, and “Mississippi Goddam” itself has a definitive sermonic-prophetic tone. Gates, Jr. and McKay submit that “the black sermon typically is a vehicle not only for conversion and worship but for sociopolitical exposition and analysis” (70). As a signifying sermon, then, “Mississippi Goddam” casts Nina Simone as a black prophetess. Interviewer Martin Gayford noted that including her mother, “she [Simone] comes from a line of preachers, 15 of whom were numbered in her mother’s immediate family.” Considering her lineage and its effect on her art, he suggested that “she wanted to work on the audience like a preacher on a congregation?” Simone affirmatively responded, “EX-ACT-LY. You got that right. Give them courage” (qtd in Gayford par. 2; 8).<sup>22</sup>

“Mississippi Goddam” (1963) teeters between the holy and the profane. On the one hand, Simone is “testifyin,” defined by Smitherman as a “Black church term for verbally acknowledging and affirming the power of God” (45). On the other, Simone’s use of the oratorical style of the black preacher is ironic, considering that she freely hails what can be interpreted as a blasphemous oath. However, such ambivalence toward Judeo-Christian belief reflected the times and increased militancy in the Movement.<sup>23</sup> Simone’s religious ambivalence perhaps captured this secular progression of the

Movement and those who were beginning to wonder if, like a dying Christ on the cross, God had forsaken Black people during the darkest hours of Civil Rights struggle, particularly the bombing of innocents in a place of worship. Realizing the depth of venomous hatred that was so readily and innately spewed against the Black community along with an overwhelming sense of despair and hopelessness led to Simone's response, a proverbial exclamatory "Goddam."

In "Mississippi Goddam," Simone calls upon prayer as a panacea for the violent racist subjugation of Blacks. She sings both directly and indirectly to God in two separate verses; in the first she sings, "I can't stand the pressure much longer / Somebody say a prayer." In a subsequent verse she sings, "Lord have mercy on this land of mine / We all gonna get it in due time...I've even stopped believing in prayer." This latter verse signals ambivalence toward Christian belief's power of prayer and shaken faith, even as Simone seems to hold strong to Old Testament and apocalyptic ideals of vengeance, retribution, and destruction by an angry God. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers "the utterance of [Goddamn] as a profane oath," with the attributive properties of accursed and damnable. As a double entendre, Simone plays with the ambiguity of the expletive from a simple use of profanity to the subtext of its deeper, more sinister meaning, Mississippi and the Jim Crow South are damnable places that God should indeed damn.

The significance of this latter reading is made clear during a 1997 magazine interview in which Simone explains a disclosure she made to the audience mid-way through the song, "This is a show tune / But the show hasn't been written for it yet." As a self-fashioned prophetic seer and Black preacher, she responds, "Mississippi Goddam," to me, is a prophetic tune. I believe that America is going to die, die like flies, just like the song says. That's what I believe lady." Interviewer Alison Powell prompts Simone

further and asks, “Will we be killed or commit suicide?” to which she responded in French, “C’est la même chose!” (“It’s the same thing!”) (qtd in Powell par. 58-59). The song’s upbeat and playful melody and Simone’s lively cabaret-style piano playing belie the foreboding lyrics. The playfulness of the piano reinforces Simone’s signification of America’s future, for again, as Smitherman reveals, signifying as social critique can also be “couched as play” (43). Against the backdrop of the song’s frivolity, Simone urges that there looms the threat of revolution, metaphorically called “the show.” She sings “Can’t you see it / Can’t you feel it / It’s all in the air.” The aftermath, as Simone suggests, is that Blacks *and* whites will “die like flies.” While “Mississippi Goddam” hints at the instability to come, Simone is even more candid in her songs “Revolutions Part 1 & 2” (1969) where she declares, “Right now, we got a revolution / ‘Cause I see the face of things to come / Yeah, the Constitution, well my friend it’s gonna have to bend / I’m here to tell you about the destruction of all the evil that will have to end.” Again, here, Simone assumes a prophetic tone and foretells what will befall America, if the country does not legally redress and *enforce* the defense of Blacks’ civil rights.

Simone urges America to be expedient and true in delivering social justice to Blacks, which has been long overdue and slow coming. She sings from experiential knowledge, “Don’t tell me / I tell you / Me and my people just about due / I’ve been there so I know / They keep on saying ‘go slow!’” In a call-and-response exchange between Simone and her bandmates (and in live versions [1967], her audience), Simone calls from the pulpit to the Amen corner:

Washing the windows...

Picking the cotton...

You’re just plain rotten...

You're too damn lazy...

...

Desegregation...

Mass participation

Reunification...

Do things gradually...

But bring more tragedy...

The response to each of her announcements is a shouted “too slow.” In the 1968 live recording of the song (featured on *Nina Simone, Forever Young, Gifted & Black: Songs of Freedom and Spirit*, 2006), Simone’s call is a direct *call* to action. Performing just three days after Martin Luther King, Jr.’s April 4 assassination, an indignant Simone implores the audience to join her in a choral expression of protest. Her inviting command is urgent, “If you have been moved at all and you know my songs at all for godssake join me, don’t sit back there. The time is too late now. Good God, you know, the King is dead, the King of Love is dead! I ain’t about to be non-violent honey (indignant laughter) Oooh no!”

The call-and response session is an aspect of Black music, and for Stuckey the foundation for the exchange is the “Amen corner, featured prominently in Black church practices known as testifyin. Part two of Smitherman’s definition of testifying is applicable here, “By extension, to speak to or affirm the significance or power of an experience outside the Black church” (45). The first set of exchanges is a signification of the Black experience in America, as Simone provides historical context to Blacks’ racial subjugation beginning with chattel slavery and extending to exploitative domestic positions and menial labor. Simone’s invoking these roles demonstrates how little

economic progress Blacks have made. The stereotypes of “just plain rotten” (criminal) and “too damn lazy” are leveled against Blacks as an excuse to maintain the status quo of race and economic superiority favoring whites. Blacks are then regarded as the culprit for the lack of or slow pace of progress as opposed to systemic forces.

The most infamous of these kinds of rationales is found in Moynihan’s 1965 *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, which blamed social deviance in the Black communities on matriarchal households. Accordingly, Radford-Hill claims, “social policy transformed African Americans from a striving but oppressed people to a disadvantaged powerless minority” based on social research and public policy that concluded, “social deviance among blacks was more responsible than race discrimination for black inequality” (45). As inequitable government mandates, and repressive social policies, such as those during the Reagan-Bush era, continually thwart pressing issues like those Simone raises (desegregation, mass participation and reunification), Simone rightly asserts that “more tragedy” and suffering will occur.

Simone bears witness to the current suffering and atrocities of American apartheid, which mainstream Americans also began to witness on televised daily news accounts. She sings of the “hound dogs on my trail / School children sitting in jail,” and in another verse “Picket lines / School boycotts / They try to say it’s a Communist plot / All I want is equality / For my sister my brother my people and me.” These references evoke images of the Civil Rights Movement that have become a part of the nation’s collective memory. Simone’s testimony brings auditory awareness to Blacks’ vulnerability, policemen allowing their canine to viciously attack protesters, or the hordes of young marchers being herded to jail, and Blacks’ strength, picketing and boycotting to reveal our economic and collective power. The goal for these freedom fighters and Nina

Simone was equality, which was not contingent upon integration. In her signature offhand manner, Simone asserts, “You don’t have to live next to me/ Just give me my equality.” Her ambivalence toward integration echoes those concerns of Malcolm X and other Black Nationalist who advocated on behalf of building self-sufficient, self-determining, strong Black communities.<sup>24</sup>

These Black Nationalist goals were being taken seriously by Blacks who were doubtful the nation would ever adequately handle its “race problem.” Beginning with Marcus Garvey’s “Back to Africa” Movement, leaders have proposed philosophies of Black empowerment and agency, and nation-building as opposed to suffering from white oppression.<sup>25</sup> Simone is aware of the futility in demanding equality from the oppressor, for as she sings, “Oh but this whole country is full of lies.” And, in the previous verse she sang,

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

These lines demonstrate that Black assimilation into superficial and supposed white ideals of behavior and proper English had failed to warrant full equality and citizenship. Further, the derogatory monikers such as “Sister,” “auntie,” “uncle,” and “boy” are key references from slavery and Jim Crow that were used to “keep Blacks in their place” of objectification and subservience. Simone’s weariness and anger due to the lies and slow progress of US amends on Blacks’ behalf contribute to her bold declaration that Mississippi and implicitly, America be damned.

Nina Simone expressed her most fiery condemnation against American racism in “Mississippi Goddam.” However, 1965’s “Four Women” is a protest song written expressly for Black women who are, in Zora Neale Hurston’s words, the “mule[s] of de

world.”<sup>26</sup> The song reflects Simone’s growing awareness of the intersecting oppressions based on race and gender. By the mid-1960s, Nina Simone was at the height of her professional and political career; however, her role as performer-activist began to affect her well-being. In 1966, while on a big-city tour with comedian Bill Cosby, Simone began to display signs of delirium from twelve years of exhaustion due to an intense performance schedule, a schedule planned by her husband and manager Andy Stroud. Simone said of their professional relationship, “He aimed too low, settled for too little and worked me like a carhorse, one-night show after one-night show” (114). She acknowledges that their lack of communication and endless arguments eventually led to the dissolution of the marriage.

These feelings regarding her husband/manager extended to those executives who she believed mishandled her career and exploited her talents. Throughout her life, Simone condemned the record industry’s unscrupulous practices and gross exploitation of black artists, including her, and others like Memphis Slim and Muddy Waters (105). During an interview, she bitterly described her repressive relationship with the industry stating, “I like being onstage, but when it comes to show business itself and the pirates that run it, no, I don’t like it at all.” She further states that she was “completely ripped off,” and had “never been paid all royalties for the five hundred songs [she] composed” (qtd in Bardin par. 16). Aside from monetary concerns, Simone expresses the lack of autonomy in her career, “I was rich and famous but I wasn’t free. Most of the decisions I made were taken in consultation with my manager/husband, accountant, lawyer and record company. Like it or not, I couldn’t do what I wanted and think about the consequences later” (113). As a recording industry commodity and by extension,

commodified by her husband/manager, Simone realized that she was forced to move at the whim of market forces and managers.

The lack of autonomy in her life and her career led Simone to examine anew her position as a Black woman in America and her kinship with other such women, despite her privileged status. A privileged life, as she was beginning to realize, did not necessarily spare her from the “everyday life” and struggles of black (women) folk in America. This realization catalyzed Simone’s black feminist or womanist consciousness, which bell hooks claims is “a crucial part of the process by which one asserts radical black female subjectivity” (1992, 61). hooks continues, “Whether she has called herself a feminist or not, there is no radical black woman subject who has not been forced to confront and challenge sexism” (1992, 61). While Simone initially prioritized Black liberation struggle above women’s liberation, a movement she felt excluded from, she recognized that Black women needed to expose racist and sexist oppression simultaneously (117).<sup>27</sup>

In one of the autobiography’s most deeply confessional and revealing moments, readers get a glimpse of a fragile and vulnerable Simone. She laments her state, “My whole life had been full of doubt and insecurity, and I was never confident about what I was doing.” She continues, “All I really needed was someone to pull on my hand and say, ‘You’re okay, Nina. Leave yourself alone.’ Andy wasn’t the sort of man to do that, never had been” (117). In an attempt to understand her dependence on Andy for a liberating “sense of peace,” Simone responds by looking internally for the source of her dis-ease. She literally looks in the mirror to “see two faces.” Although she admitted that she loved being both black and a woman, she reasoned, it was her “colour and sex which had fucked [her] up in the first place” (118). Simone’s recent marital discord brought to

the forefront her insecurities, and struggles with self-acceptance. Nevertheless, in her music, she looks beyond her situation and casts a wider net to address the complications that arise in black male and female relationships, particularly when there is a lack of self-love.

### **“Four Women”: An Ode to Mammies, Tragic Mulattas, Whores, & Angry Bitches**

In the wake of those recent events, she was inspired to compose what she describes as a “love song” entitled “Four Women” meant “to take the scab off the terrible sore to do with the relationship between black men and women” (117). The song is a brilliant example of the African oral tradition of storytelling and folk protest song. In this case, Simone conjures a communion exclusively for black women whose uplift had largely been ignored by the Black liberation struggle movement. She invokes well-worn stereotypes concerning Black women and attempts to historicize and subvert them. Despite her noble intentions, upon its 1966 release some black radio stations banned “Four Women” saying that it ‘insulted’ black women to which Simone responded “the song told a truth that many people in the USA—especially black men simply weren’t ready to acknowledge at that time” (117). She continues, “Many of the women I knew were thinking the same way, that along with everything else there had to be changes in the way we saw ourselves and in how men saw us” (117). As a radical black female subject, Simone is breaking silences to share her struggles with self-image and self-love with a community of Black women who have continually dealt with the double bind of being born black and *female*. While James Brown’s popular mantra, “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” was an inspiration to the black masses, Simone’s “Four Women” was an assertion of agency “in a world that has no interest in radical black female subjectivity” but would rather seek to “repress, contain, and annihilate it (hooks 1992,

56). In building a community of empowered, self-actualized Black women through the call of song, Simone is promulgating radical black female subjectivity.

Simone's four part narratives, on the one hand, reveal the actual plight of countless America's homegrown native daughters of slavery; yet on the other hand, she is also deconstructing these one-dimensional images of how the world at large interprets Black women. Such deconstruction is critical to our liberation and self-actualization, for as Hill Collins reminds us, "that memory of the suffering that Black women experience from skin color stereotypes has run, and still runs, deep" (qtd in Bratcher 121). The predominant stereotypes categorize Black women as being one or more of the following, Aunties, Mammies, Tragic Mulattas, Lascivious/Prostitutes, and Angry Bitches with the politics of color, hair, and class as determining factors. Nina Simone offers a general analysis of "Four Women" that reveals her chief objectives in penning the song. She says,

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. All the song did was to tell what entered the minds of most black women in America when they thought about themselves: their complexions, their hair – straight, kinky, natural, which? – and what other women thought of them. 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.

As Simone suggests, Black women had to become self-defining and embrace self-love to be freed from the mental enslavement of white standards of beauty. Since slavery, black women have faced distorted images and untruths about ourselves. In "Four Women" Simone is "establishing a politics of representation that would both critique and integrate ideals of personal beauty and desirability informed by racist standards," and puts into place "a system of valuation that would embrace a diversity of black looks" (hooks 119).

The narrative structure of “Four Women” allows each of the four women, who represent the myriad shades of black diversity, a chance to share her story.

Simone begins each woman’s verse with a characterization based on the politics of black looks, color caste and hair texture,

My skin is black...  
My hair is wooly...  
...  
My skin is yellow...  
My hair is long...  
...  
My skin is tan...  
My hair's alright, it's fine...  
...  
My skin is brown

According to critic, Melanie Bratcher, “Simone’s use of Nommo conjures up varied skin colors to reflect an extended family motif that describes a totality within the African American community.”<sup>28</sup> The message within the motif is one of connectedness; therefore, skin colors become ideograms that denote the proverbial ‘I am because we are’ (121). While skin color certainly links these women to one another, the shared legacy of slavery is the predominant linkage and source of their color variation. They belong to the painful narrative of the Black Diaspora and the Black Experience, the shared legacy of enslavement, dispersal, and dispossession.

“Four Women” is a narrative that demonstrates themes that have been central to Black women’s discursive practices, the quest for subjectivity and liberation. These themes are featured prominently in slave narratives, so it is appropriate that Simone would begin by embodying the voice of the enslaved Aunt Sarah. However, in revealing the prevailing effects of slavery on subsequent generations of Black women, Simone’s “Four Women” becomes a recurring narrative that moves beyond the slave to reveal the continued plight of her children. The stories unfold as follows:

My back is strong enough to take all the pain  
It's been inflicted again and again...  
My name is Aunt Sarah  
...  
My father was rich and white  
He forced my mother late one night  
My name is Saffronia  
...  
Whose little girl am I?  
Well yours if you have some money to buy  
My name is sweet thing  
...  
I'm awfully bitter these days  
Because my parents were slaves  
My Name is Peaches!

Each woman's narrative features the horrors of slavery, pain (Aunt Sarah's whippings on the back), rape (which produced an isolated Saffronia), both the commodification of the black female body and the myth of black female sexual licentiousness (Sweet Thing's prostitution), and violence (Peaches' vengeance and righteous anger).

The song's structure as multi-voiced ballad is striking as it both confessional and communal characteristic of women's folkways and female penned slave narratives. I make a distinction here between female-authored and male-authored slave narratives. Frederick Douglass' narrative, for example, is highly Westernized, and features predominantly masculine ideals such as rugged individualism and the notion of the "self-made" man. As Valerie Smith notes, Douglass' narrative "may thus be seen not only as a journey from slavery to freedom but also the journey from slavehood to manhood" (34).

<sup>29</sup> Conversely, Folksinger and author Bernice Johnson Reagon identifies black women's autobiographical writing as "cultural autobiography" and notes black woman's selfhood as integral to her sense of community. She asserts, "We are, at the base of our identities, nationalists. We are people builders, carriers of cultural traditions, key to the formation and continuance of culture" (81). Moreover, in *Black Autobiography*, critic Stephen

Butterfield further explains, “the ‘self’ of black autobiography is conceived as a member of an oppressed social group, with ties and responsibilities to other members. It is a conscious political identity, drawing sustenance from the past experience of the group” (2-3). As a result, the autobiographical “I” is displaced for the collective “we.”

Hill Collins further explains this notion of racial solidarity through collective identity. She states, “a value system influenced by African origins fostered a collective ‘I,’ a sense of racial solidarity needed to both preserve traditions and offer a united front to white supremacist treatment (Hord and Lee 1995)” (25). Simone’s communal act, then, evokes a spiritual continuum in which she declares her historical, gendered, and self-reflexive relationship to these four women. In situating herself as part of a binding cultural identity narrative, Simone’s act is one of signification. “Four Women” reveals Simone’s “testifyin,” as she both confesses her own experiences as a Black female, and bears witness to the other women’s stories, which figuratively, she *bears*, for she is the source from which they flow.

In “Four Women,” Nina Simone also evokes the self-referential act of naming and personal storytelling through her role as folk narrator, African griot, and “shared floor” speaker (Langellier and Peterson 168). Simone’s methodology reflects the collaborative strategies that women participate in to share stories and theorize. With slavery as a reference, Simone develops a “kernel story” that developed “according to group participation in adding details and exposition, in analyzing story aspects, in responding with reference to other experiences, in asking questions, and in stringing together additional stories” (Langellier and Peterson 162). Aunt Sarah’s story begins as the “kernel,” the offshoot from which the other women’s stories are produced. Simone embodies the four women and gives voice to each woman’s tragic narrative, which all

belong to the grand narrative of slavery and its prevailing aftermath. As active-participant, Simone is implicated in the stories as she both bears witness to and is a living testament to the legacy of slavery. She speaks, then, for those women like Aunt Sarah whom she resurrects, to those women during the 1960s, and to we current generation of women—a testament to the song’s historical relevance and continuing significance.

Nina Simone’s 1977 live recording of “Four Women” displays her improvisational skills in re-fashioning her lyrics anew for greater, more subversive effect. In the spoken monologue, which introduces Aunt Sarah, Simone links Black women’s current economically subordinate positions to slavery. She says,

Four women. We’ve done this song many times for you, so we don’t have to explain Aunt Sarah too much to you, except to tell you she’s still going to work every morning about 7:30, walking the streets of Harlem. She’s 107 and she’s still scrubbing floors; but it’s okay, okay, she don’t have too long now...Aunt Sarah has lived long enough to see the full circle come round.

And to conclude Peaches’ verse, she improvises the line to include the effects of being a child of slaves,

I’m awfully bitter these days  
Because my parents, God gave ‘em to me, were slaves—  
And it’s crippled me.

In these added lyrics, Simone is emphasizing the prevalence of slavery to our current conditions that extend beyond the vanity of physical appearance. She is highlighting far more pressing issues such as our lack of economic power, and our crippling mental enslavement. The circularity of the song’s structure from the enslaved Aunt Sarah to the child of slaves, Peaches, reveals the perpetual cycle of slavery and its residual effects that will effect generations to come. The song’s cyclical pattern is also characteristic of an African worldview, as well as means of paying homage to the ancestors on whose shoulders we stand. As Floyd (1995) explains, “In the cultural memory of African

Americans, *life* is cyclic, as is time, as is their music—and all these elements symbolize the ring and contradict linear progression” (231).<sup>30</sup> In effect, Nina Simone is embracing the idea of cultural memory, the remembrance of slavery, and the impact it continues to have. Only in remembrance of our past can we break the final shackles of mental slavery toward liberating our beleaguered communities and ourselves.

Nina Simone’s own personal conflicts with internalized oppression moves her from a sense of her alienation to a collective solidarity with Black women, an act of empowering communion. Theorist Sheila Rowbotham echoes DuBois’ view on collective identity formation based on shared historical experience as empowering. She posits, “in order to create an alternative [identity] an opposed group must at once shatter the self-reflecting world which encircles it and, at the same time, project its own image onto history” (76). Rowbotham continues, “In order to discover its own identity as distinct from that of the oppressor it has to become visible to itself. All revolutionary movements create their own ways of seeing” (qtd in Stanford Friedman 76).

While Nina Simone’s “Four Women” is invariably a folksong of protest, and an act of resistance against America’s historical representation of Black women, it is ultimately an appeal to black women. Simone urges Black women to reclaim ourselves anew on our own terms as we both carry the cultural memory of slavery and its many narratives; the song also urges black women to move beyond these remnants of slavery, particularly negative stereotypes. Her message is steeped in the tradition of Black Nationalism, a movement predominantly associated with Malcolm X. Simone’s aforementioned statement that “there had to be changes in the way we saw ourselves and in how men saw us” parallels the thoughts of Malcolm X who similarly declared, “We have to change our own mind...We’ve got to change our own minds about each other.

We have to see each other with new eyes. We have to come together with warmth”(qtd in hooks 1995, 146). bell hooks especially credits the leaders of the Black Nationalist movement, such as Malcom X, with advancing issues of color caste, black self-love and love for one another. In the essay “Loving Blackness as Political Resistance” in *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, she posits,

No social movement to end white supremacy addressed the issue of internalized racism in relation to beauty as intensely as did the black power revolution of the sixties. For at least this movement challenged black folks to examine the psychic impact of white supremacy...Exposing the myriad ways white supremacy had assaulted our self-concept and our self-esteem, militant leaders of black liberation struggle demanded that black folks see ourselves differently—see self-love as a radical political agenda (119).

In retrospect, Nina Simone’s “Four Women” interrogated the difficulty but necessity of achieving Black self-love and, particularly, romantic love within, and in spite of the hostile environment and confines of White supremacy. This idea is also captured in 1967’s “Blues for Mama” when she wails, “When you love a man enough / You’re bound to disagree / ‘Cause ain’t nobody perfect / “Cause ain’t nobody free.” It is only when Blacks mentally emancipate ourselves from colonized thinking can we build indomitable loving communities in spite of systemic efforts to conquer us.

Simone describes the bleak political landscape of Black America post-liberation movement, as thoroughly devastated by the US government. After having declared her withdrawal from political performance, she surmises, “The protest years were over not just for me but for a whole generation and in music, just like in politics [CORE, SCLC, SNCC], many of the greatest talents were dead or in exile and their place was filled by third-rate imitators” (118). Dismayed that disco replaced the black revolution, Simone acknowledges that as a “veteran of the movement,” “the establishment was biting back. It was no accident that the most active black musicians couldn’t get recording deals with

the major labels, no accident at all” (135- 36). The music industry could no longer accommodate her brand of musical activism, and instead, favored the burgeoning mainstream appeal of popular Black music, such as disco. Disco offered a transcendental and superficial place where interracial harmony and subculture acceptance flourished; individuals escaped societal realities, and simply danced to the beat. It offered very little in the way of protest and communal uplift. Nina Simone, the great political activist and folk protest singer was beginning to feel the backlash of American corporate interest, and as with many of her comrades, she, too, went into retreat.

As countless others had done before her, namely authors and entertainers, such as Josephine Baker, Richard Wright, W.E.B. DuBois, Simone renounced her homeland in 1969.<sup>31</sup> She had protested against her native country through song and with much political tenacity. However, perhaps as with others, such as Randall Robinson in his latest work, *Quitting America*, she too realized that America would not become the democracy that she professes to be, despite valiant efforts made by idealists and protesters alike. She became a U.S. expatriate and sojourned the world and called countries such as Liberia, Barbados, Switzerland, France, Trinidad, the Netherlands, Belgium, and England home at various times. She ultimately settled in France in 1993 where she died April 21, 2003 in Carry-le-Rouet, Bouches-du-Rhône. As citizen of the world, Simone’s travels beyond the US border widened her perspective, for as she sings in “Backlash Blues,”

But the world is big  
Big and bright and round  
And it’s full of folks like me  
Who are black, yellow, beige and brown  
Mr. Backlash, I’m gonna leave you  
With the backlash blues

Declared the “High Priestess of Soul” and revered worldwide for her contributions to music and the liberation movement, Simone left her native land but her music and message comprise a legacy that is embraced internationally.

Adamant against returning to America, Simone believed that if she were here, the tradition of protest music would have been more prominent; however, she explains her global perspective. She proudly states, “I address my songs now the third world. I don’t think you [the interviewer] know it, but my song “To Be Young, Gifted and Black’ is in Chinese. I am popular all over Asia and Africa and the Middle East, not to speak of South Africa” (qtd in Powell par. 23). While Simone remained staunch in her dedication to Black liberation struggle, she began to recognize broader forms of oppression, namely global class oppression, in which colonial powers dominated those so-called third world nations. Folk protest singer and activist Tracy Chapman, who seemingly responds to Simone’s musical calls, also shares this worldview. In “Revolution (Parts 1 & 2), for example, Simone beckoned, “Singing ‘bout a revolution / Because I’m talkin’ bout a change to which Chapman reverberates in her 1988 debut single, “Don’t you know / they’re talkin’ bout a revolution / It sounds like a whisper... / Poor people gonna rise up / And get their share / Poor people gonna rise up / And take what’s theirs.” With her eyes on oppression that affect the human condition worldwide, Tracy Chapman carries on the tradition chartered by Nina Simone, to be an artist on the vanguard of music-making that addresses the plight of the folk beyond borders.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Nina Simone has been a mainstay in mainstream pop culture and gross commercialism; as such, her love songs, in particular have been used in televised campaign ads. Just recently, in mid-May 2007, singer John Legend is featured in a BMW commercial, proclaiming his admiration for Simone, as her music plays in the background. Also, at the time of this writing, there appears to be a surge of newfound interest in Nina Simone. There’s a rap mix tape, *Nina Simone, Remixed and Reimagined*. (Sony Legacy, 2006). Also,

according to *VIBE* magazine (2007), R&B singer, Mary J. Blige is reportedly scheduled to play Simone in an upcoming film on Simone's life.

<sup>2</sup> In *What the Music Said* (Routledge: New York and London, 1999) critic, Mark Anthony Neal, suggests that Simone's music is "an aural counterpart to the sit-ins, non-violent demonstrations, and prayer meetings that dominated the movement" (48).

<sup>3</sup> In a January 1997 *Detail* magazine interview, Brantley Bardin offers, "In the late '60s, your song "To Be Young, Gifted and Black" was declared by the Congress of Racial Equality [CORE] to be the black national anthem." Simone responds, "Yes, and then black America promptly refused it." Perhaps, the song didn't catch on because of the longstanding tradition of the Johnson Brothers' "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (1900) being considered the "official" Black national anthem (qtd in Bardin par. 45-46). See Julian Bond's and Sandra Kathryn Wilson's *Lift Every Voice and Sing: A Celebration of the Negro National Anthem* (New York: Random House, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> According to critic Mark Anthony Neal, "The Mississippi Summer Project, in which both black and white students from the urban North traveled to the Mississippi Delta to organize leadership and register votes, was one of the initial activities to counter the mainstream tactics of SCLC and the NAACP. Though three of these youths—Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney—would lose their lives in a brutal exhibition of southern violence, the summer project served to significantly politicize American youths, by integrating the specific issues of both northern and southern locales" (47).

<sup>5</sup> Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery* (New York: The Free Press, 2001) draws a musical lineage with Billie Holiday and Simone. She says, "In 'Strange Fruit,' Holiday left us a powerful and enduring song of protest against racial violence—protest that has been cited by each succeeding generation of black singers to follow her from Nina Simone to Abbey Lincoln to Cassandra Wilson and Dee Dee Bridgewater" (131).

<sup>6</sup> See Bernice Johnson Reagon. "My Black Mothers and Sisters or On Beginning a Cultural Autobiography." *Feminist Studies* 8 (Spring 1982): 81-95. Also, cultural autobiography considers the sense of collective identity of marginalized communities, such as Blacks and women. As a result feminist/cultural studies theorists, such as Reagon, Stephen Butterfield, Sidonie Smith, Caren Kaplan, Susan Stanford Friedman, et al. have challenged the emphasis on individualism and autobiographies advanced by theorists such as Georges Gusdorf and Olney.

<sup>7</sup> Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is a famous example of the *kunsterroman*.

<sup>8</sup> One need only listen to live versions of Simone's "Mississippi Goddam" or "(Why) The King of Love Is Dead?" to hear her improvising lyrics and adding ad-libs/political commentary, and asking the audience to join her in singing out in protest. The quoted statement is taken from BBC World News Soundbite Central: Nina Simone on HardTalk. The interview was conducted by Tim Sebastian in 1999. Nina Simone is a pioneer of her unique and distinct sound known as African rooted classical music.

<sup>9</sup> This thematic of black female political awakening is centered in fictionalized accounts such as Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (1983) where young Black female protagonists confront imperialism/racial superiority.

<sup>10</sup> For biographical information on these performers (Natalie Hinderas, Hazel Harrison, Phillipa Duke Schuyler, Ernestine Dent, Margaret Bonds, and a few others) see Eileen Southern's *Biographical Dictionary of Afro-American and African Musicians* (1982); Leonarda Records' "Kaleidoscope: Music by African-American Women;" and Anne Lundy's "Communication with Ernestine Jessie Covington Dent: Pioneer Concert Pianist." *The Black Perspective in Music*. Vol 12, no 2 (Autumn 1984): 244-265. Thanks to Dr. Robin Roberts for having me delve deeper into Simone's claims.

<sup>11</sup> Nina Simone took great issue with being simply classified as a jazz singer. She argues, "Calling me a jazz singer was a way of ignoring my musical background because I didn't fit into white ideas of what a

black performer should be. It was a racist thing; 'If she's black she must be a jazz singer.' It diminished me, exactly like Langston Hughes was diminished when people called him a 'great black poet'. Langston was a great poet period, and it was up to him and him alone to say what part the colour of his skin had to do with that" (69).

<sup>12</sup> As stated in the 1992 French Documentary entitled Nina Simone: *La Légende (Nina Simone: The Legend)* written and directed by Frank Lords. Retrieved from YouTube at <http://youtube.com/watch?v=SEX19zLQezU>

<sup>13</sup> For further readings on the social and political reformations undertaken by Black Americans during the 1960s see Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995), Manning Marable. *Race Reform and Rebellion: The Second reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1992* (Jackson: Univ Press of Mississippi, 1993), and Ralph James, *Northern Protest: Martin Luther King, Chicago and the Civil Rights Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> Billingslea-Brown allows for musical analysis within the framework she establishes. She cites critic, Dan Ben-Amos, "The improvisational and hybrid forms of the blues, work songs, tales, jokes, and legends have since come to represent not only a category of knowledge and a mode of thought, but a kind of art. As an artistic process, African American folklore may be found in a number of communicative media. For that reason, black folkloric texts frequently cross into the domain of literature, the visual, and musical arts" (Dan Ben-Amos, "Toward A Definition of Folklore in Context," 5, 14).

<sup>15</sup> Here Billingslea-Brown cites Madhu Dubey who applied this characteristic to the work of black women novelists and the nationalist aesthetic. I am extending this observation beyond the realm of the literary to the performing arts.

<sup>16</sup> Billingslea-Brown explains the contested nature of folklore during the 1960s for at once, "the civil rights movement was closely linked to a southern-based folk heritage, the African American folk tradition was associated with that movement and considered by many to be a source for derogatory images and stereotypes." Conversely, Billingslea-Brown continues, "folklore was recognized as the site of cultural memory and a vast repository for creative expression" (11).

<sup>17</sup> *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*. James Edward Smethurst. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. "After Mecca": *Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement*. Cheryl Clarke. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Nina Simone elaborates on her non-violent politics. She says, "If I had my way, I'd've been a killer. Okay? That's true. I would've had guns and I would have gone to the South and given them violence for violence, shotgun for shotgun...I would have used guns during those years. I was never a non-violent person." (Nina Simone: *La Légende*, 1992) Retrieved from YouTube at <http://youtube.com/watch?v=SEX19zLQezU>

<sup>19</sup> The album created a firestorm of controversy Simone explains, for after "bringing down the place" in New York's Village Gate and receiving similar accolades wherever she performed it, the song was released as a single (90). According to Simone, the album sold well "except in the south, where [there was] trouble with distribution. The excuse was profanity – Goddam! – but the real reason was obvious enough" (90). Simone recalls that a dealer in South Carolina sent a whole crate of copies back to the office with each one snapped in half; Simone laughed in response because "it meant we were getting through" (90).

<sup>20</sup> For biographical material on Fannie Lou Hamer, see Cha Kai Lee's *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999) and Kay Mill's *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: Dutton, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> The 1968 live recording of "Mississippi Goddam" reflects Nina Simone's usual improvisation to reflect the current state of affairs or her current state of being. In a somber mood, due to Dr. Martin Luther King's recent death, she re-interprets the songs in his memorial. In a spoken interlude to the audience, she asks

for their participation, their protest, “If you have been moved at all and you know my songs at all for god’s sake, join me. Don’t sit back there. The time is too late now, good God you know, the King is dead. The King of love is dead. I ain’t bout to be non-violent honey.”

<sup>22</sup> In the famous August 1969 Special Issue of *Ebony* magazine, which featured the title, “The Black Revolution,” Nina Simone is featured. She is interviewed by Phyl Garland who also compares Simone to a preacher. He says, “You know, it seems to me that what you do you do in music is like preaching. You’re telling the truth and spreading the word, the way Baldwin has done in writing, but you’re using music to do it.” Simone affirmatively responded, “That’s right. Um hummmmm.” Retrieved from <http://www.high-priestess.com/ebony0869text.html>

<sup>23</sup> See the extended works of James H. Cone, including: *Black Theology and Black Power* (Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1969), *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), and *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968-1998* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> See Malcolm X’s speech “The Ballot or the Bullet” for an analysis of the Black Nationalist philosophy. Also, on the issue of integration, Malcolm X states, “It’s just like when you’ve got some coffee that’s too black, which means it’s too strong. What do you do? You integrate it with cream, you make it weak. But if you pour too much cream in it, you won’t even know you ever had coffee. It used to be hot, it becomes cool. It used to be strong, it becomes weak. It used to wake you up, now it puts you to sleep.” (“Message to the Grass Roots,” speech, November 1963). Malcolm’s views speak to the concern that White involvement in Black liberation struggle weakened the movement. His foresight is also revealed, for the statement also conveys the aftermath of an integrated society, in which Black power (the Black community) is weakened by assimilation into White ideals.

<sup>25</sup> See Garvey’s “Africa for the Africans” for the basic tenets of his Black Nationalist philosophy.

<sup>26</sup> The history of racial oppression and sexual inequality has made black women “de mule uh de world,” as Nanny teaches Janie in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).

<sup>27</sup> In her autobiography, Simone says of the women’s movement, “I never thought of myself as part of women’s liberation because I felt my needs were the same as any woman’s, and the questions that female radicals were asking had no relevance to me” (117).

<sup>28</sup> Bratcher cites Jahn (1990) definition of Nommo, which is “a speech/sound that puts forth creation and sharing. It indicates the magic power of the uttered word” (246).

<sup>29</sup> See also Nellie Y. McKay’s “The Narrative Self: Race, Politics, and Culture in Black American Women’s Autobiography” in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds., *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998. 96-107).

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion on various African worldviews, see ed. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, ed. *African Philosophy: An Anthology*. (Malen, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1998) and Lee Brown’s *African Philosophy: New and Traditional Perspectives* (New York: Oxford UP, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> See Michel Fabre’s *From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France, 1840-1980* (Urbana and Chicago; University of Illinois Press, 1991). It is a rich collection of African American artists and intellectuals (W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Jessie Fauset, Gwendolyn Bennett, et. al) who traveled abroad and became expatriates to various European nations.

### **CHAPTER 3: TRACY CHAPMAN', TALKIN' BOUT A REVOLUTION(ARY)**

Tracy Chapman first made me take notice in 1992, four years after her self-titled debut was released. I had certainly heard her before then, but had never really *listened* to her lyrics. During that time, I do not recall her music being played in heavy rotation on mainstream black radio, nor were her videos widely featured on Black Entertainment Television (BET) or Music Television (MTV). I'm sure her lyrics, more radical than rap's most politically conscious songs, and her bold anti-video and pop star looks made her less attractive to mass media outlets. When Chapman's album premiered, I was only ten years old, and so, I could not appreciate Chapman's message. However, in 1992 on my 14<sup>th</sup> birthday, a little older, wiser, and growing more politically aware, I was more receptive. During my birthday celebration, an older cousin of mine played Chapman's album and expressed how much he liked her, while "Talkin' Bout a Revolution" blasted in the background. After my mother briefly listened to Chapman, she gave her approval. I, in turn, listened more closely, since I've always respected my mother's taste in music. I have since associated many of Chapman's lyrics as pertinent to my mom's situation, and many women like her who work hard for low wages, lining the pockets of wealthy management who profit from their labor. Perhaps, my mother took an immediate liking to Chapman because she saw her self reflected in those lyrics. Chapman's trenchant and compelling ones demand attention.

Through its powerful storytelling and biting social commentary, Chapman's debut album offers unabashed critique of the economic system's virulence during the Reagan-Bush administration and its global influence. Speaking on behalf of Blacks, women, so-called third world citizens, and other marginalized groups, Chapman's message is global. When studying abroad in Ghana, West Africa in the summer of 2000, I found that while

the youth I encountered favored American R&B and rap, the older generation mostly played the local hi-life, Bob Marley, and Tracy Chapman, two icons of political music. In songs such as “Fast Car” Chapman documents universal stories of struggle, deprivation, and striving for a better life. This is a true gift of the artist, the folk singer, the poet, the griot: to tell the multi-faceted stories of life for the downtrodden with respect, dignity, and truth.

### **Born to Fight the Good Fight, The Makings of a Revolutionary**

William Julius Wilson’s *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass and Public Policy* argues that poor Blacks are being left out of the labor market, which leads to their further marginalization and isolation in deteriorating inner cities. Chapman’s “Subcity” captures the plight of this truly disadvantaged underclass by aptly invoking their geographic location and socioeconomic position outside the parameters of even poverty’s norm—inner city and working poor. She sings, “Here in subcity life is hard/ We can’t receive any government relief/ I’d like to please give Mr. President my honest regards/ For disregarding me.” As the song suggests, the most desperate of the poor, the jobless and homeless were at the bottom rung of society; they were the least visible, and the least likely to receive government relief, which during the Reagan-Bush era was scant. According to Radford Hill, poverty theories such as Charles Murray’s *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980* cited social disorganization (inner-city crime, drug abuse, unemployment, and housing decay) as evidence that the social programs of the 1960s had failed. Such analyses, which informed Reagan’s social policy agenda “turned the liberal poverty argument on its head by claiming that social dysfunction causes poverty rather than the other way around” (65). As a result, the Black community was faced with even more debilitating setbacks.

Although Chapman feigns appeal to an uncompassionate conservative “Mr. President” in “Subcity,” “Talkin’ ‘Bout a Revolution” was a call to collective action that disavowed “standing in unemployment lines” (government relief), a disempowered position Chapman knew all too well as a child of disadvantage. Like the underclass in Chapman’s Subcity (Anytown, USA), life for Chapman was difficult, but she was able to overcome what in America are disadvantages, being born Black, female, urban, with working poor roots. Tracy Chapman was born March 30, 1964. Her parents divorced early on, leaving Chapman and her older sister, Aneta, to be raised by their mother in Cleveland, Ohio’s inner-city. She shared with them a love of music, and recalled that her mother always listened to the radio: Marvin Gaye, Gladys Knight, Mahalia Jackson, mostly rhythm and blues. When asked if she knew she wanted to be a musician, Chapman responded, “I think I was a musician, it wasn’t about deciding I would be. I was singing as soon as I could talk.” She admits, however, that she did not foresee that music would become her career or that she’d have success in it (Rose “Interview”).

At an early age, Chapman began writing songs and taught herself how to play the guitar, on a small inexpensive one purchased by her mother. She explained her fascination with the guitar, “One of the things that made me want to learn how to play guitar was watching Buck Owens and Roy Clark and Minnie Pearl on Hee Haw when I was 8 years old...The guitars they played were beautiful” (qtd in Farley, par. 7). Though a talented child, Chapman could not escape the harsh realities of growing up in single-headed (income) household in an urban center. Chapman recalled poverty’s effects on her youth. She stated, “Sometimes there was no electricity, or the gas would be shut off.” She further recalled, “I remember standing with my mother in the line to get food stamps” (qtd in Farley, par. 6).

A bright student, Chapman won a scholarship through President Kennedy's A Better Chance (ABC) fund, which enabled her to attend Wooster School, a private boarding school in Danbury, Connecticut. Chapman describes her acceptance into the school as a "saving grace," for the Cleveland public school system was "in shambles" and marred by overcrowding; racial tensions surrounding busing; and underpaid, striking teachers. She recalls a turning point in her young life, when at fourteen years old she was swept up in a race riot; someone pointed a gun at her and told her to run or he'd shoot (Rose "Interview"). Having recently been accepted to Wooster, this defining moment convinced Chapman's mother to send her away to the prestigious boarding school, whereas, she before had assumed that her daughter was too young to leave home. Ironically, Chapman did "run" and escape the urban chaos for better educational opportunity; however, the culture shock (hers and her privileged colleagues') proved at times unsettling.

She was only one of twenty students of color (most of whom were also scholarship students) amongst a student population of 200 (Rose "Interview"). According to Stengel, "it was her first glimpse of white, upper-middle-class life, and she found aspects of it dismaying." Chapman recalls, "it was difficult because a lot of students there just said very stupid things." She continues, "They had never met a poor person before. In some ways, they were curious, but in ways that were just insulting. How many times as a black person are you asked to explain to a white person what racism is or what it means to black?" (qtd in Stengel, par. 15). Chapman's early encounters with white privilege, and the divisiveness that race and wealth invoke would become material for her folksongs of protest. Friends remember her singing "Talkin' Bout a Revolution" during her junior year of high school, the song that would eventually

open her debut album. Music provided young Chapman solace from the cruelty she experienced because of her outsider-insider status as gifted, poor Black child in a sea of white privilege. Although athletically inclined—she was star basketball player and played on the varsity soccer team, music was a constant and more dominating force in Chapman’s life (Stengel, par. 16).

After graduating from Wooster in 1982, she attended Tufts University in Boston, where she majored in anthropology and African studies. According to Sheila Whiteley, “Chapman’s personal experience of poverty, racial discrimination and humiliation, together with the insights gained on the Boston-Cambridge folk circuit provided a strong grounding for a politicised [sic] black woman” (172). College-educated, Chapman brought her message beyond the university to coffee shops, churches, Harvard Square, and developed a staunch following (Stengel, par. 17). She soon attracted the attention of fellow Tufts student, Brian Koppelman, whose father Charles was co-founder of SBK, a major music publishing company. Koppelman signed her to SBK, and was able to secure Chapman a deal with Elektra Records in 1986.<sup>1</sup> Her eponymous debut album was released in 1988 led by the release of the single, “Fast Car,” a narrative tale that details deprivation and longing for a better life.

Chapman’s socially relevant lyrics, commitment to revolutionary change, and her paving the way for a “women’s movement” in music make her and suitable and illuminating figure to study. In addition to her musical recordings, she has participated in numerous charitable and conscious-raising events, such as Amnesty International tours, 1992’s Farm Aid V, and celebrations honoring South Africa’s Nelson Mandela.<sup>2</sup> Her lending her voice to these events and several other worthy causes complement her political stance and musical message. Chapman’s activism and fearless fight against

various forms of oppression stand out within the context of feminist, Black, and music studies. *Time* writer, Stengel captures Chapman's appeal and exceptionality,

Chapman quickly became a cultural icon. Her short, spiky dreadlocks signaled a move away from pop glitter. Her music, pared down, almost willful naïve, was an antidote to the synthesized sound of the 1980s. In an age when pop singers seemed more like musical M.B.A. than recording artists, she seemed genuine. Her politics were mushy headed and self-righteous, yet she was an urban folk singer without the fragility of the genre (par. 7).

Although he derides Chapman's utopic idealism, Stengel's assessment reveals the emergence of a Black radical subject onto the 1980s music scene and public sphere.

Chapman resists normative standards of looks within the recording industry and without, for the Black (and white) community has narrow standards of Black beauty.<sup>3</sup> As a decolonized subject mentally liberated from normative demands, Chapman resists notions of beauty informed by white imperialism. Such was the case with Simone, who as her political awareness grew, abandoned her usual performance garb of formal attire and straightened hair for an: afro, exquisite braided coifs, headwraps, and caftans. Chapman's dreadlocked hair, jeans and tee-shirt, and simplicity mark her politicized stance and place outside the norm of 1980s glam and excess. As Whitely notes, "in the early 1980s, the emphasis was on presentation—"designer boys, material girls" (1997, 94), yet Chapman went above the surface appearance and placed the emphasis on the substance, the message in her music.

Beyond looks, Chapman's political art, her folksongs of protest identify her as a radical Black female subject, for her politics of collective struggle against racism and sexism informs her own struggle for self-actualization (hooks 1992, 56). Moreover, Chapman "links her struggle to be self-defining with the collective plight of Black women" (hooks 1992, 56) and other marginalized groups. Being from an economically

disadvantaged background, Black and female enabled Chapman to identify her personal struggles for a greater collective identity. Songs such as ‘She’s Got Her Ticket’ and “Behind the Wall” reveal Chapman’s Black feminist/womanist consciousness.

Just as Chapman exposed the blight of the invisible poor, the blight of the urban and minority, she also addressed the silences surrounding women’s oppression such as domestic violence. Ray Pratt locates “Behind the Wall” as “the first song on any popular album, let alone a number one album, that deals with violence against women” (146). Chapman breaks from the “silencing [that] occurs when Black women are restrained from confronting racism, sexism, and elitism in public [discourse] (Hill Collins 1998, 50). Breaking silence, once again, is integral to Chapman’s own radical Black female subjectivity, as it “enables [her] to reclaim humanity in a system that gains part of its strength by objectifying Black women” (Hill Collins 1998, 47). Further, Hill Collins locates the 1980s and 1990s as pivotal decades when Black women were collectively no longer silenced, as the period ushered in a wave of works “by and about Black women, designed to reclaim and highlight Black women’s humanity.”<sup>4</sup> As a musician, Tracy Chapman’s debut album was in the vanguard of works that revealed in a radical Black female subjectivity, in contrast to the dominance of de-politicized pop.

Perhaps more so than any other decade of music, the 1980s pop music scene exemplifies what Marxist theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer describe as the “culture industry.”<sup>5</sup> Though published in the mid-1940s, the attack on art during a burgeoning market-driven economy seems especially fitting for a critique of the 1980s music scene as well. Chapman’s folk music stands defiantly against the intensified proliferation and mass marketing of pop music during the 1980s in which the vision of artistic music production was lost to the greater aims of the capitalist market. The gross

commercialism of music that was not particularly politically conscious was particularly disturbing, considering the looming societal ills of the period. These included: the growing economic chasm between rich and poor; Reagan's arms proliferation program; urban decay, white (and Black) flight and other effects of the postindustrial nation; the onset of the AIDS crisis; a looming drug epidemic, and increased crime. Yet, in the wake of these unsettling events, a passive populace danced to the beat of pop tunes and was left immobilized and blinded by the music's anesthetic effect.<sup>6</sup>

Tracy Chapman's 1988 emergence onto the musical scene was ground-breaking. Her folk music contrasts strikingly with rap produced during the period. The year marked an apex for conscious rap with the release of two highly charged rap albums, Public Enemy's *It Takes A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (Def Jam/Columbia) and Boogie Down Productions' *By All Means Necessary* (Jive/RCA). Both politicized Black male dominated rap groups espoused Black nationalist rhetoric via the idolized Malcolm X. Ironically, 1988 was also a seminal year for gangsta rap, as NWA's *Straight Outta Compton* (Ruthless/Priority) was released.<sup>7</sup> In sharp contrast, Chapman's emergence also marked a time, according to Ray Pratt "when magazines such as *Musician* could speak of the 'year of the women'" (160). In June 1988, the magazine featured articles on Chapman along with fellow women artists Michelle Shocked and Sinead O'Connor. On the magazine's cover it read, "Why the best new artists of 1988 are women: the major labels change their tune." The statement, according to Whiteley, reveals what the music critics saw as a "significant development—women as part of a new musical movement...serious women who played guitars and who had a social conscience (171). Chapman's innovation and fearlessness in exposing "silences" surrounding issues such as domestic abuse ("Behind the Wall") and her unabashed "far-left" politics ("Talkin' Bout

a Revolution”) situate her within the burgeoning culture of a 1980s female led folk-revival.

In spite of the new technological sound, increasingly commercialized music, the rise of pop superstardom, and politically conscious rappers, a wave of politicized and radical female artists created their own discursive spaces of resistance. Like Simone before her, Chapman’s identities and politics uniquely positioned her to expose the intersection of various forms of oppression, racism, sexism, and classism/imperialism. Her staunchly political album is multifaceted and far-reaching; there are rallying cries for systemic change, feminist anthems, and stirring love songs. “Talkin’ Bout a Revolution,” “Why?,” “Across the Lines,” and “Mountains O’ Things” are strident condemnations of racism and class exploitation. Chapman offered a more candid call to arms than Public Enemy (e.g. 1990 “Fight the Power”), for she astutely evokes class warfare rather than a racialized battle drawn between Blacks and Whites. “She’s Got Her Ticket” and “Behind the Wall” reflect Chapman’s Black feminist or womanist concerns and the plight of women as an oppressed group within capitalist patriarchy.

Ray Pratt locates in Chapman’s songs a “prophetic menace and power [that] recalls Bob Dylan’s *The Times They Are A-Changin’* album of 1964” (161). He further submits that there is also a “hopeful perspective” from which this menace and power sprang. He cites Chapman, who defends herself against those who would label her an “angry, young, black protest singer.” She reasons, “For me, all is not gloom and doom. The stories in my songs may appear negative on the surface, but the message I’m trying to convey is positive and hopeful” (161). In songs such as “Behind the Wall” and “Talkin’ Bout a Revolution, Chapman promotes assertive action. She is critical of the inaction of the police and the neighbor to protect an abused wife in the former song, and

the latter is a rallying cry to those countless poor in relief lines. The album underscores the necessity for revolutionary change that must redress their exploitation oppression. Chapman's debut album with its employment of folk idioms, such as music as social documentary and as a tool for change and empowerment forged a revolution within the music industry but also on mainstream America.

Despite controversial subject matter and abrasive political statements, the album was well received by critics and the buying audience. She won three Grammy awards at the 1989 ceremony, including Best New Artist and Best Contemporary Folk Album. More importantly, at the height of American conservatism, commercialism, and consumerism, Chapman's message of social activism and anti-capitalist rhetoric apparently resonated with buyers and critics alike who generally praised the album. In 1989, *Rolling Stone* magazine placed it number 10 on its "100 Greatest Albums of the 80s" list reflecting its seminal role in shaping the decade's sound and themes. She was dubbed the "Anti-Material Girl" who "spoke for the disenfranchised, told tales of escape, expressed hope for change" by *Yankee* magazine's Ian Aldrich. Hip hop critic Nelson George hailed her as "Today's Black woman...shamefully under-represented in record bin...college-educated, upwardly mobile, politicized Black women." *Time* magazine writer, Richard Stengel praised her distinctive sound by saying, "And there is that voice, a rich contralto that seemed to come from a hundred miles away. A sweet, sad, wise voice that haunted almost all who heard it. A voice that seemed to know things they didn't" (par. 6).

Chapman speaks from a place that knows and sees, and in turn, she speaks on behalf of those growing number of disenfranchised and dispossessed Americans, the rising tide of the homeless, the invisible poor. Her observations are documentation of the

repressive Reagan years and the global effects of capitalism. Chapman tapped into the ethos of the period, and inspired a generation of Americans, particularly other female artists to speak out with a conscious voice on prevalent issues concerning America's conservative backlash against Blacks. She was on the front lines in galvanizing a resurgence of feminist and politicized women performers, beginning in the late 1980s and lasting well into the late 1990s with artists such as Sarah McLachlan, Tori Amos, Lauryn Hill, and Erykah Badu. During the 1997 Lilith Fair tour, organized by Canadian singer-songwriter McLachlan, Chapman shared the stage with many of the female artists for whom she helped pave the way, including Fiona Apple, Paula Cole, and Jewel.<sup>8</sup>

Along with her contemporaries, Chapman's singer-songwriter status meshed with a commitment to radical politics ushered in this renewed wave of political awareness in music. As with other such folk-identified women artists, such as Suzanne Vega ("Luka" 1987), Michelle Shocked, and Sinead O'Connor, Chapman looks back to the 1960s when music and politics were not mutually exclusive. While Chapman certainly belongs to the wave of 1980s singer-songwriter women artists who drew upon the folk idiom, she also is part of a continuum of Black musical resistance and an activist tradition of progressive Black women. Chapman's radical politics invoke the works and activism undertaken by fellow radicals, such as Angela Davis and Assata Shakur. Her music reflects a modern "feminist consciousness" that reflects "the lives of working-class black [and other marginalized] communities" (Davis 1998, xv), and ties her to the blues women tradition, expressed by Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday. She also builds upon the folk-protest tradition of Odetta and Nina Simone whose songs of protests were aural sites of resistance during the 1960s Black liberation struggle.<sup>9</sup>

In terms of instrumentation, the guitar, Chapman and Odetta both play the instrument as an accompaniment to their rich altos. However, Chapman's biting social commentary is most comparable to those in Nina Simone's musical repertoire, including "Mississippi Goddam," "Four Women," and "Revolutions (Parts 1 & 2)." Chapman's original ballads of protest "Behind the Wall," and "Talkin' Bout a Revolution" seemingly respond to Simone's call and carries on the tradition of employing folksong as protest to address sexist oppression and race and class subordination. Such ballads reflect John Greenway's description of the folk protest song, as they are "outburst of bitterness, of hatred for the oppressor, of determination to endure hardships together and to fight for a better life" (10). This fighting spirit and optimism for a "better life" through the struggle of resistance is clearly identified in Chapman's debut album.

Two themes that are common on *Tracy Chapman* are fight and flight. The idea of inaction is disavowed, as Chapman urges the downtrodden to resist. As expressed in Chapman's song, another action to be considered is the idea of flight, non-violent resistance. Two songs, in particular, "Mountains O' Things" and "She's Got Her Ticket" address the flight thematic from differing angles. In "Mountains O' Things," flight comes through embracing the idea of upward mobility and the narrative of the American Dream. The narrative voice in this song is unapologetically complicit in her greed, consumption, and the accumulation of "mountains of things," symbols of status and privilege in America. To the other extreme, in "She's Got Her Ticket" flight is invoked in a traditional sense as a means of liberation for Blacks, women, and oppressed groups. In these instances, to seek flight is an assertion of agency, a self-defining liberatory act, and an act of resistance against repression. Chapman's songs provide a context in which

to explore each, during a particularly hostile environment for Blacks, 1980s postindustrial America.

### **“Mountains O’ Things”: An American Dream Deferred**

“Mountains O’ Things” is a parody of the American Dream, reconfigured for the 1980s. It serves to both critique and protest against the period’s conspicuous consumption, hyper materialism, and the flourish of Big Business as the growing chasm between the “haves” and “have nots” widened. Many of the “have nots” were already poor and mostly Black. Tricia Rose explains the new economic shift and its impact,

Postindustrial conditions had a profound effect on black and Hispanic communities. Shrinking federal funds and affordable housing, shifts in the occupational structure away from blue-collar manufacturing and toward corporate and information services, along with frayed local communication patterns, meant that new immigrant populations and the city’s poorest residents paid the highest price for deindustrialization and economic restructuring (30).

While Blacks were hit hardest by Reagan’s backlash against small gains achieved during the Civil Rights movements, there was segment of upwardly mobile Blacks who fled the fledgling urban centers en masse. They abandoned communal and familial ties that were strong before integration to pursue individual aims. Seeing black flight as “symptomatic” of “larger structural and economic transformations,” Mark Anthony Neal explains that during the late 1960s and 1970s, “labor shifts [many of which Rose mentions above] offered opportunities for college-educated segments of an expanding black middle class [However,] they would prove to be a definitive threat to a traditional African-American working class in the urban North and Midwest” (104). The irony, as Neal continues, was that this class comprised those “whose migration from the South was initially driven by the growing labor demands of the industrial city generations earlier” (104). As they fled the South toward the greener pastures of Northern promise, eventually their communities

faltered and they invariably suffered the most. In this regard, while Chapman's "Mountains O' Things" attacks the American Dream narrative that ideally most all Americans should aspire to attain, it has far deeper implications for Black Americans. As Whiteley notes, Chapman's song criticizes the symbols of wealth "which resonate with the lure of embourgeoisement inherent in black capitalism" (2000, 180).

"Mountains O' Things" is narrated by an American dreamer, an everywoman, such as Miller's Willy Loman (*Death of a Salesman*, 1949) or Hansberry's Walter Lee Younger (*A Raisin in the Sun*, 1959) who aspires to partake in America's economic empire. As with most working class/poor Americans, the achievement of such pursuits are highly unlikely, as most find themselves in a perpetual cycle of labor, which only serves to enrich the pockets of the well-established and wealthy. Chapman establishes this context in the first few stanzas,

The life I've always wanted  
I guess I'll never have  
I'll be working for somebody else  
Until I'm in my grave  
I'll be dreaming of a life of ease  
And mountains Oh mountains o' things

She ironically notes the futility of setting one's sights on such a fantasy life. In the meantime, the dreamer will relish in the fantasy, the dream of casual living and a massive material accumulation.

For Whiteley, Chapman's spirited musicality ironically paired with the song's dire opening lines is effective. She states, "Hi-life is aurally engaging, it sounds 'happy' in its association with carnival and celebration. The mood, however, is as deceptive as the lure of 'the American dream' is to those who are living in poverty" (2000, 181). In one of those dire lines ("I'll be working for someone else until I'm in my grave"), according to Whiteley, are "sentiments that are not so far removed from the rural blues of

slavery.” She continues, “It would seem, then, that this is Chapman talking as a perceptive black woman, drawing attention to inequality through an idiomatically black musical style that gradually fades with a recognition that survival depends upon imaginative escape” (2000, 181). These forms of imaginative escape are manifest in Black folk culture, such as the folk tales that revere the memory of flying Africans, and the folk blues song’s traveling motif, which offered tangible means of Black mobility (I will discuss these two thematics in my song analysis for “She’s Got Her Ticket”). In “Mountains O’ Things,” however, Black mobility is read against 1980s consumer culture, and the accumulation of material objects.

Considering the socioeconomic context for this culture of greed, there was certainly an increasing amount of disposable income for the well-established “old money” and the rising “new-money” b/yuppie set to frivolously spend on “things.” According to Robert S. McElvaine, during the Reagan Revolution’s economic redistribution (and near dismantling of the New Deal), “the rich family’s annual income increased by 177 times more than did the average family’s annual income.” Comparatively, according to McElvaine, “Families in the poorest 40 percent (which, obviously, includes a good portion of the middle class) saw their real income decline over the same time span (see also Kevin Phillips’ study *The Politics of Rich and Poor* [1990] for more on Reagan-Bush economic policies). Chapman reveals the extravagant displays of wealth, the luxury items commonly purchased by the wealthy, as the narrator’s dream includes: “To have a big expensive car / Drag my furs on the ground / And have a maid that I can tell / To bring me anything.” To promote America’s protestant work ethic and the belief that hard work warrants entitlements such as these symbols of wealth, American dreamers were bombarded with popular culture representations of wealthy

living. These images presented goals to aspire toward, rewards, or more appropriately false hope, for those who worked hard. In music, Madonna's "Material Girl" (for example, in the video, she dons a Marilyn Monroe-esque style to display her love for diamonds and furs), and on the airwaves (Dynasty, Falcon Crest), these lifestyles proffer paradoxically presented as fantasy and attainable. In these fictionalized narratives of wealth, there were the props of glitz and glamour, Bentleys, full-length mink coats, and complete access and accommodation.

Aside from these fictionalized accounts of wealthy living, the American mainstream was also introduced to "real life" accounts as experienced by their favorite celebrities. As a precursor to the hip hop and rock influence of MTV's *Cribs*, "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" hosted by Robin Leach became a 1980s TV phenomenon. The show allowed viewers a voyeuristic glimpse into the lives of Hollywood A-listers and like celebrities. Leach's British accent and patrician manner set the appropriate mood for a tour of how the other half lives: the yachts, fine antique furnished manors, and the parade of European luxury cars. His signature closing salutation to America's dreamers was a toast, "Champagne kisses and caviar dreams." Chapman seems to mock these very lines when she affects a boastful tone and sings,

Sweet lazy life  
Champagne and caviar  
...  
Those who deserve the best in life  
And know what money's worth  
And those whose sole misfortune  
Was having mountains o' nothing at birth

Implicit in the latter lines is a critique of social Darwinism and the consequent notion of the deserving rich and the rightfully unfortunate poor. Further, Chapman criticizes the belief that the wealthy understand the value of money, which justifies their great

accumulation of it, while the disparate poor are born into an economic caste system that marked and, will likely, bond their destitution. Evoking Marxist socioeconomic theory, Chapman denounces exploitative capitalist practices and debunks analyses that seek to justify corporate greed and the excesses of the wealthy. The song's narrator says that there are those who tell her to "Renounce all those material things you gained by / Exploiting other human beings." Class exploitation, capitalist patriarchy rather than a natural order are the root of unequal wealth distribution, and the imbalance of power, labor and its fruits.

Chapman attacks the American dream even further when she lays out the chief objective as greed-driven consumerism, which during the 1980s was rampant. Laying bare this capitalist credo, Chapman sings, "Consume more than you need / This is the dream / Make you pauper Or make you queen." The narrator is aware of her complicity in the shallowness of the consumer culture; however, rather than critique it, she still wants to be one of the "haves," a "queen." She seeks to follow the great American narrative of upward mobility, the "rags to riches" story. Again, Whiteley reminds us that Chapman's themes are rooted in the rural [folk] blues tradition. In effect, Chapman's "calling out" the royal-like entitlements of the wealthy in the face of such poverty is similar to Bessie Smith's "Poor Man's Blues." Smith wails "Mister rich man, rich man, open up your heart and mind / Give the poor man a chance, help stop these hard, hard times / While you're livin' in your mansion, you don't know what hard times means / Poor working man's wife is starvin', your wife's livin' like a *queen*" (emphasis added) (qtd in Davis 1998, 327). Smith chose to reason with "Mister rich man," in hopes of appealing to his humanitarian side; however, Chapman, speaking decades later as a post Civil Rights baby, is mocking and denouncing the "rich man's" economic system. While

implicating the inequity of America's class system, Chapman's invoking the title queen and pauper,<sup>10</sup> serves to also globalize the issue. She speaks in resistance against all forms of Western imperialism (former and current monarchies) largely built upon the exploitative slave trade and subsequent colonialism.<sup>11</sup>

Chapman's use of "queen" is equally revealing when one considers it within the context of the Reagan dubbed "welfare queen," a racially coded signifier of Black woman. These women were "identified with and blamed for the deterioration of the American public sphere, poor Black women simultaneously become symbols of what's wrong with America, and targets of social policies designed to shrink the government sector (Lubiano qtd in Hill Collins 1998, 37). With its damaging portrayal of Black women, the myth is similar to the 1965 Moynihan report that linked Black matriarchal family structures to social deviance within the Black community, a target of Simone's critique. Targeting Black women, then, became an effective measure to justify the subsequent backlash against minimal Civil Rights gains. The Reagan-Bush myth of "lazy" and "dependent" Black women led many in the middle class (including the Black middle class) to connect their financial woes with government response to the poor. However, this displacement was deceiving, for "as Americans better understand the realities of the global economy, they may realize that government economic policy and protected business classes, not welfare queens, are robbing them of their old-age pensions (Mishel and Bernstein qtd in Hill Collins 1998, 64). In spite of this revelation, the prevailing image of the "welfare queen" and implicit repudiation of the poor's "fleecing of America(ns)" remains. In "Mountain O' Things" the narrator seeks association with the regal connotation of the title queen and all its inherent entitlements versus the

subverted meaning of the “welfare queen,” which is essentially the modern-day pauper Chapman references.

Although the fairy tale life of queendom seems appealing, toward the song’s last stanzas, the narrative voice appears to concede that material things don’t bring happiness. Chapman’s satire is in full effect when the narrative voice declares,

I won’t die lonely  
I’ll have it all prearranged  
A grave that’s deep and wide enough  
For me and all my mountains o’ things

The nonsensical and vivid picture that Chapman captures affirms the saying “You can’t take it [material/mountain o’ things] with you”; however, the narrator believes that her things will offer solace even in death. Chapman’s exaggeration here reveals the depths of what Marx termed commodity fetishism, “the mistaking of an object for a social relation, or vice versa” (Krimm 67) in 1980s America. In the last stanza, Chapman interrogates this idea that inanimate “things” provide comfort rather than association with human beings.

The narrator admits,

Mostly I feel lonely  
...  
Good people are only  
My stepping stones  
It gonna take all my mountains o’ things  
To surround me  
Keep all my enemies away  
Keep my sadness and loneliness at bay

In exposing the pathology of consumer culture, which privileges the love of things over people, Chapman’s message attacks to the “uncompassionate conservatism” sweeping America.

As upwardly mobile Americans, Black and White, fled to the suburbs, they filled their homes with all the trappings of success, “mountain o’ things.” In the aftermath, the

urban centers were filled with poor, disenfranchised, minorities (enemies) who were left to deal with the reeling effects of flight. However, back in the suburbs, the grass was not always greener, for as the narrator reveals, there is still sadness and loneliness. Whiteley explains the rise of suburban enclaves and the subsequent blight left behind, “consumption produces both wealth and poverty and that the tensions inherent in a ‘growth’ society governed by insatiable needs will lead to psychological poverty, anomie and alienation” as described in the lines “mostly I feel lonely...” (181). Indeed, suburban malaise set in as the American Dream proved far from Edenic for those Blacks and Whites who fled the urban centers en masse. Nevertheless, in spite of this awareness of the old proverb Chapman is signifying, “Money doesn’t bring happiness,” the song ends with her singing in a faraway tone, “I’ll be dreaming, dreaming...dreaming...” as the narrator continues to pine for the elusive American Dream she’s envisioned.

Chapman’s mockery of the American Dream criticizes individualist pursuits that are core to America’s values. She offers a counternarrative to the grand narrative of the American Dream “success story” in “She’s Got Her Ticket.” Significantly, the song immediately follows “Mountains O’ Things” in the album’s track as Chapman prompts astute listeners to compare the two. While the preceding track concerns flight as upward mobility within the context of the American Dream, “She’s Got Her Ticket” is a liberating message for those who chose flight as an act of resistance. The assertion of agency, resisting prevailing norms, and inscribing oneself as a self-defining subject characterize the African American and women’s rhetorical traditions. The theme of flight, and more specifically, traveling is also characteristic to these traditions and that of marginalized groups as a whole.

## “She’s Got Her Ticket” and Her Passage to Freedom

The theme of flight is part of a Black folk belief that takes on great significance for Black Americans who endured the bondage of slavery. From this condition arose the belief in “Flying Africans,” which have been thematically used throughout, particularly the Black literary tradition. Virginia Hamilton further explains the motif and its prevalence in the Black folk belief,

there are numerous accounts of flying Africans and flying slaves in the black folktale literature. Such accounts are often combined with tales of slaves disappearing. A plausible explanation might be the slaves running away from slavery. In code language murmured from one slave to another, ‘Come fly away!’ might have been the words used. Another explanation is the wish-fulfillment motif, a detailed fantasy tale of suffering, of magic power exerted against the so-called Master, it was first told and retold by those who had only their imaginations to set them free” (172-73).

Hamilton offers two connotations to demystify the myth of the flying Africans, one of mobility and agency, the other imaginative but still resistive. Toni Morrison explains her use of the folkloric myth in her work *Song of Solomon* in which the protagonist Milkman Dead is inspired by his family’s folklore and history. He is particularly intrigued with his great-grandfather, Solomon, who flew like a Black eagle back to Africa to escape slavery. Morrison explains,

It is about black people who could fly. That was always a part of the folklore of my life; flying was one of our gifts. I don’t care how silly it may seem. It is everywhere—people used to talk about it, it’s in the spirituals and gospels. Perhaps it was wishful thinking—escape, death, and all that. But suppose it wasn’t. What might it mean? (qtd in Higgins 5).

As Morrison suggests, the myth permeated the everyday lives of Black folk; it became so entrenched in Black folk culture that the veracity of the tale became indiscernible. To

escape the oppressive conditions of life in America, particularly slavery, flight became an important symbol.

The spirituals and gospels, the songs of Black folk, as Morrison points out, also contained this belief in flight. Similarly, Angela Davis situates travel as “one of the central organizing themes of the spirituals.” She locates various ways the theme was used, such as “traveling liberators (as in “Go down, Moses / Way down in Egypt land / Tell old Pharaoh / To let my people go” and traveling vehicles (as in “Swing low, sweet chariot / Coming for to carry me home”) (1998, 70). Further, in her analysis of the significance of traveling to her blues women subjects, and the theme’s continuing importance for Black music, in general, she cites Lawrence Levine. He observed,

It was a particularly crucial symbol for Afro-Americans to whom it had been denied throughout the long years of slavery. Freedom of movement, as Howard Thurman has argued, was for Negroes the “most psychologically dramatic of all manifestations of freedom.” The need to move, the existence of places to go, and the ability to get there, constituted central motifs in black song after emancipation (qtd in Davis 1998, 68).

Although Davis is predominantly concerned with the nexus between newfound mobility and women’s control over their sexual lives, her analysis is relevant to broader forms of freedom, namely access to the public domain. According to Davis, “blues representations of women engaged in self-initiated and independent travel constitute a significant moment of ideological opposition to prevailing assumptions about women’s place in society” (1998, 67). She continues, “Notions of independent, traveling women enter into black cultural consciousness in ways that reflect women’s evolving role in the quest for liberation” (1998, 67). Chapman, then, employs the traveling theme, in the same way the 1920s and 1930s blues matriarchs did, for even after slavery the motif continued to have relevance to Blacks during Jim Crow and 1980s postindustrialism.

Black women, in particular, were urged by Chapman to resist norms that sought to confine us based upon our race, place, and gender.

“She’s Got Her Ticket” opens with the image of a self-defining, self-determined young woman:

She’s got her ticket  
I think she’s gonna use it  
I think she’s going to fly away  
No one should try and stop her  
Persuade her with their power  
She says that her mind is made  
Up

This woman’s story is quite different from the one listeners witness in “Fast Car.” While both songs explore the themes of flight and traveling, “Fast Car” offers a more problematic view of flight. It invokes the traveling vehicle as a source of freedom (as in the lines “You got a fast car / But is it fast enough so you can fly away”). However, unlike the young woman in “She’s Got Her Ticket,” in “Fast Car” the narrator’s liberation is linked to a partner who does not share her vision nor urgency for escape from deprivation. Chapman sings,

You got a fast car  
And I got a job that pays all our bills  
You stay out drinking late at the bar  
See more of your friends than you do of your kids  
I’d always hoped for better  
Thought maybe together you and me would find it  
I got no plans, I ain’t going nowhere  
So take your fast car and keep on driving

Dismayed by her partner’s inaction and lethargic response to better their condition with the use of his fast car, the woman begins to forego her desires to escape (“I got no plans, I ain’t going nowhere”).

Conversely, the young woman in “She’s Got Her Ticket” seems resolute in her decision to flee, for “her mind is made / up.” Rather than “move out of the shelter / Buy

a big house and live in the suburbs” as the woman in “Fast Car” suggests, the other woman’s desired destination is left unknown. However, the implication is that she is malcontent with life in what can be defined as typical 1980s America, corporate greed.

Chapman sings,

Why not leave why not  
Go away  
Too much hatred  
Corruption and greed  
Give your life  
And invariably they leave you with  
Nothing

The last lines reveal a sentiment Chapman captures in “Mountains O’ Things,” that one’s life is spent working for someone else until death, enriching others while amassing nothing (but desiring/dreaming about an accumulation of things). The young woman, then, rejects the ideas of exploitation, and other forms of oppression (hatred), such as racism, sexism, and racism.

Chapman suggests that young women have no alternative but to resist against such challenges to their humanity, which she captures in the last few stanzas

Young girl ain’t got no chances  
No roots to keep her strong  
She’s shed all pretenses  
That someday she’ll belong  
Some folks call her a runaway  
A failure in the race  
But she knows where her ticket takes her  
She will find her place in the sun

When read in terms of Black upward mobility, these lines are significant, particularly in light of my discussion on Black flight to suburban communities. As the young woman has disavowed capitalist exploitative culture, which Chapman reveals in the previous verses, she also rejects the culture of the Black bourgeoisie. Their flight to the suburbs has left a void, leaving once strong communal ties and collective identity broken; as a

result, the young woman “has no roots to keep her strong.” Her running away (flight) mark her as a “failure to the race,” for she goes against the prevailing norm of respectability and Black exceptionality (succeeding against the odd and rising above one’s race), and the script of assimilation.

The presentation of flight in “She’s Got Her Ticket” is a liberatory one in which a young woman, perhaps Chapman, is figuratively spreading her wings. When asked about the personal, autobiographical, and observational quality of her songs, Chapman responded that her music was a combination of those elements, and cautioned, “it’s not as personal as one might think. Some of the songs are written in the first person, but it doesn’t necessarily mean it’s my experience.”<sup>12</sup> Although Chapman’s use of the folk idiom, storytelling, allows her to capture multiple stories that don’t reflect her own personal experience, the autobiographical possibilities of this song, in particular, are compelling, when one considers Chapman’s interview with Stengel. She describes her schools (prior to Wooster) and her neighborhood as rough, and said “At times, it was a terrifying place to be.” She also confessed that she had “no desire to stay and no desire to go back.” While critical of bourgeois sensibilities, Chapman does not romanticize the urban ghetto, which stifles the growth and potential of all young, gifted, and Black children. Given access to her ticket, the song’s subject/Chapman seeks escape to find “her place in the sun,” a place that will provide nourishment and growth. In an allusion to Langston Hughes’ “A Raisin in the Sun,” her dream will not be deferred, left to dry up like a raisin in the sun.”

In honoring those women who assert agency to seek out their place in the sun, Chapman sings a celebratory song to an upbeat reggae groove. Whiteley, notes Chapman’s musical choice as “significant in that reggae—and its association with the

Rastafarian movement [a Black nationalist and spiritual movement]—is a music that is centered on ‘roots,’ on belonging, on ‘finding a place in the sun’” (2000, 182). This mood and image is in stark contrast to the caged bird in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem 1899 “Sympathy,” which include the following lines:

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,  
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore—  
When he beats his bars and would be free;  
It is not a carol of joy or glee,  
But a prayer that he sends from his heart’s deep core,  
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—  
I know why the caged bird sings! (qtd in Griffin 158)

Birds, expressly caged birds (an animal associated with flight and traveling) have long been a recurring motif in Black literary and oral traditions. Farah Jasmine Griffin explains the significance in “Sympathy” and its wider implications for Black people. She states, “Here [in the case of “Sympathy”], the caged bird –black Americans, brought enslaved to a foreign land—seeks freedom. He mourns the loss of it; beats his wings in an unsuccessful bid to acquire it and then, bloodied and still enslaved, he sings” (158). “He sings, she continues “not out of joy but out of a desire for freedom” (158). Such sorrow songs, which emanated from a people in bondage has marked the legacy of Black music, however, we are also a people of jubilant song, which expressed our desire for freedom both hoped for and actualized.

Griffin’s *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery* reclaims Billie Holiday from the morose “caged bird” figure (as described in the poem “Sympathy”) that so often informs popular culture representations of her. The reclamation of Holiday looks to her musical descendants, such as vocalist Abbey Lincoln who in “Bird Alone” sang “Bird alone, flying low / Over where the grasses grow / Swinging low, then out of sight / You’ll be singing in the night.” Likewise, Angela Davis claims Chapman as one of Holiday’s

descendants and states, “It is in Billie Holiday that we can identify links, for example, between the classic blues of Bessie Smith and the contemporary rhythm and blues of artists such as Tracy Chapman and Erykah Badu” (1998, 197). Chapman’s “She’s Got Her Ticket” as well as Lincoln’s “Bird Alone” rewrite the script of the sympathetic bird who sings a sorrowful song out of desolation and bondage into one of the phoenix whose monumental liberating rise warrant high jubilant praise.

In “She’s Got Her Ticket,” listeners are left with the same image that opens the song, a self-defining, determined young woman who knows where she is headed. Instead of inactively dreaming, dreaming...dreaming (the closing expression on “Mountains O’ Things”), this young woman is mobile and soaring. Chapman sings, “And she’ll fly, fly, fly...”. Angela Davis notes the significance of such a theme, “for women especially, the ability to travel implied a measure of autonomy, an ability to shun passivity and acquiescence in the face of mistreatment and injustice and to exercise some control over the circumstances of their lives...” (74). Whether one takes the meaning of flight literally or figuratively, Chapman, as one of those self-defining, decolonized, liberated, Black radical female subjects has found “her place in the sun.” Through her folksongs of protest, she is promulgating this liberating message for others to follow. Her message is particularly pertinent to those of us coming of age during the post Civil Rights Era, the “Post Soul Nation” so dubbed by critic Nelson George. We, the hip hop generation and subsequent ones continue to struggle in finding our way. However, there is the concern if the hip hop generations, or Blacks, in general are hearing Chapman’s message.

Stengel explains that urban contemporary radio stations don’t play her music because it does not fit into [their] dance-and-funk formula” (par. 22). Conversely, in making the case that Chapman’s perceived lack of acceptance by Blacks has “less to do

with genre than with soul” Public enemy rapper, Chuck D argues, “Black people cannot feel Tracy Chapman, even if they got beat over the head with it 35,000 times” (qtd in Stengel, par. 22). Chuck D’s implication is that Chapman’s music is “too precious, too bland, too white” (Stengel, par. 22). *Rolling Stone* (1988) advanced a similar view, suggesting that she appeals to white liberal guilt. As such, Chapman’s music was referred to as an “after-dinner conscience-comforter” (qtd in Whiteley 2000, 187). As Whiteley points out, Chapman’s primary audience were indeed white university students and festival-goers accustomed to the folk music scene (190). However, there is no denying Chapman’s folk blues aesthetic and the intended audience on whose behalf she sings; she speaks as one with experiential knowledge on being Black, female, and working class. As such, “Chapman can be situated alongside contemporary artists [such as Chuck D] from the field of funk and rap whose lyric themes also highlight frustration, disillusionment and distress” (Whiteley 2000, 190).

Currently, with seven studio albums spanning 1988’s eponymous *Tracy Chapman* to 2005’s *Where You Live*, Chapman is still singing songs of protest on behalf of all oppressed. However, she admits that she is less idealistic (Rose “Interview”). In 2000, at 35-years old said that she has “mellowed” since her “Talkin’ Bout a Revolution days, and reasons, “You can do more than be angry; you can do something about what’s making you angry” (qtd in Farley, par. 5). Her unwavering commitment to activism and staunch social commentary evokes Simone’s legacy, for she continues to sing out against oppression, and actively engage in activist and humanitarian causes. Following the huge success of her debut album, Chapman has maintained a steadfast following, but her subsequent album sales (1989’s *Crossroads* and 1992’s *Matters of the Heart*) paled in comparison to the debut. As with Simone and Hill, Chapman admits to having

ambivalent feelings toward the recording industry, which according to her “doesn’t value the artistic side of music” (Rose “Interview”). She also cites that the instant success of her debut became “stressful for a person who likes to be pretty private” (Rose “Interview”). As a result of such feelings, she contemplated leaving the industry; instead, in 1995, she released the album *New Beginning*.

The album brought her newfound interest, driven by the release of the first single, a bluesy courting song “Give Me One Reason,” which earned her a fourth Grammy. Although the single predominantly carried the album’s acclaim and commercial success, Chapman’s radical politics, though nuanced, were still evident. She tackles classic Chapman issues such as the plight of the working class (“Cold Feet”) and new ones such as our need to be eco-friendly (“The Rape of the World,” “Heaven’s Here on Earth,” and the title track “New Beginning”). Chapman’s “green” politics mesh with her broader message of social justice, for as she reveals, we have the ability to “recreate our lives and to recreate this world, hopefully in a better shape and form” (Rose “Interview”). Chapman’s latest effort, 2005’s *Where You Live* features the song, “America,” the most political track. Seemingly inspired by the current political situation of war and nation-building in the Middle East, Chapman is inspired to “call out” the historical record of Western imperialism. Beginning with the conquest and appropriation of Christopher Columbus (whose ghost “haunts this world”), Chapman takes to task America’s conquering spirit, the land and the people. She sings, “Made us soldiers and junkies / Prisoners and slaves / While you were conquering America.” The album marks nearly two decades in the recording industry for Chapman where she remains one of the singular voices of protest, uncompromising and unabashed to reveal stories that are at once deeply intimate but also speak to the collective plight of the downtrodden.

Similarly, Chapman's storytelling echoes the political rap agenda, which was gaining momentum as she debuted her own radical politics. Though rap music did gain prominence during the late 1970s to early 1980s, it is by no means a novel artistic form as Rose and many hip hop scholars have delineated. It is a direct extension of the African American oral, poetic, and protest tradition rooted in a contiguous Afro-diasporic musical and cultural expression, which gave rise to vernacular practices like toastin', boastin', signifying and the dozens. These are forms of Black expression that reverberate in modern day rap.

As such, before its commercialization, rap once demonstrated the true essence of folklore as Herder expressed it, as a means toward fostering a sense of community/nationalism. Indeed, rapping folk poets were needed to implement a rebuilding effort of both our physical environment but also our communal spirit. While the urban centers were rapidly disintegrating due to globalization and Reagan's uncompassionate conservatism, the black nation, the people, the community needed to rebuild and stand in armor against the backlash of assaults on our very humanity. Music has always served as a balm and battle cry during such warring times, with the advent of rap music being no exception. Many scholars have articulated the rise of rap music, though perhaps not as lucidly as Rose in her seminal *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. The urban terrain in the wake of globalization is centrally figured in Rose's location of hip-hop's emergence. Without coincidence, the city is also prominent in that first of political raps, "The Message" where the urban environs is described as a "jungle" physically/mentally acting upon its inhabitants as in the line "it makes me wonder/ How I keep from going under." Delivered with a passionate anger, the narrator sermonically describes in vivid detail the psychic effect of

urban decay. In the opening verse, listeners are led on a sensory stroll through the “jungle” as Grandmaster Flash raps of the deplorable urban conditions, the disillusionment, bitter hopelessness, and the limited to no (upward) mobility,

Broken glass everywhere  
People pissing on the stairs  
You know they just don't care  
I can't take the smell, can't take the noise  
Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice  
Rats in the front room, roaches in the back  
Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat  
I tried to get away but I couldn't get far  
'Cause the man with the tow truck repossessed my car

The song best reflects rap's documentary and ethno-autobiographical scope into the everyday living and struggles of a people. Like Tracy Chapman's storytelling, politically conscious rap such as “The Message” offers reportage of an aspect of black life that was once muted. As a cultural movement, hip-hop reflects the agency of a youth who would not be “taken under” by their urban jungles, and Chapman bridges this progression.

Hip-hop culture and its Black noise emerged to disrupt, unnerve, and ultimately demand visibility and reclamation of the masses who were left abandoned by Civil Rights era's gains and further repressed by 1980s economic policies. In this way, while Simone and Chapman's songs literally no longer sufficed to voice grievances or soothe weary warring souls, rap music became a new protest mode. At once, in its most “real” form and void of its current hyperrealistic and fanciful incarnations, rap music, the modern day sorrow songs, documented and narrated the everyday lives of black folk. In the tradition of her musical antecedents, Simone and Chapman, Lauryn Hill uses rap music to carry on the tradition of singing out in protest on behalf of the folk, while empowering them to seek revolutionary change both within and beyond.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Chapman's biographical material was gathered from the following sources: Stengel, Richard. "Singing For Herself." *Time*. 12, March 1990; Farley, Christopher John. "Telling Her Stories." *Time*. 28, February 2000; Whiteley, Sheila. "Talkin' 'Bout a Revolution: Tracy Chapman, Political Uprisings, Domestic Violence and Love" (New York and London: Routledge) 171-195 and <<http://www.about-tracy-chapman.net/index.htm>>.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed outline of Chapman's benefit concerts and tributes, see <<http://www.about-tracy-chapman.net/biography.htm>>.

<sup>3</sup> Similarly, bell hooks notes, "A world that can recognize the darker-skinned Michael Jordan as a symbol of black beauty scorns and devalues the beauty of Tracy Chapman" (128). *Killing Rage, Ending Racism*. "Black Beauty and Black Power (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Hill Collins cites a few noteworthy examples of important works from the 1980s, including Angela Davis's *Women, Race, and Class* (1981); the groundbreaking essay by the Combahee Rive Collective "A Black Feminist Statement," published in 1982; Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983); and Barbara Smith's anthology of Black women's writings *Home Girls: A Feminist Anthology* (1983).

<sup>5</sup> See Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972, 1988, 1999), J.M. Bernstein, ed., *The Culture Industry, Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. Theodor W. Adorno (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), and Nigel Gibson and Andrew Rubin, ed. *Adorno, A Critical Reader*. (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Notable exceptions to collective efforts of musicians to engage in consciousness-raising events include Live Aid, a multi-venue rock music concert held on July 13, 1985; Farm Aid, a benefit concert held on September 22, 1985 initiated to raise money for family farmers in the United States; the 1985 recording of "We Are the World" written by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie as part of famine-relief efforts to support Ethiopia, which suffered drought in 1984 and 1985.

<sup>7</sup> Although hyper-violent and misogynistic, the most controversial song on the album, "Fuck the Police" spoke out against police brutality in urban communities. The song gained significance during the 1991 police beating of Rodney King and the subsequent tense-filled LA Riots in 1992.

<sup>8</sup> See Christopher John Farley's *Time* "Galapalooza!" 21 Jul 1997. <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,986728,00.html>>.

<sup>9</sup> In *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity, and Subjectivity* (2000), Sheila Whiteley also notes Chapman's relation to the former artist, Odetta, a 1950s and 1960s folk/gospel singer and activist who performed during such events as the historic Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Whiteley states, "Chapman's use of a folk idiom, then, can be interpreted as the assimilation of a powerful musical critique traditionally associated with the expression of marginality" (189).

<sup>10</sup> The two references are a play on the Mark Twain's classic tale, *The Prince and the Pauper* (1882).

<sup>11</sup> See for example Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Tracy Chapman on Music Planet 2nite, November 2nd 2003.

#### CHAPTER 4: MS. EDUCATED LAURYN HILL'S LESSONS IN LOVE

Admittedly, I was probably one of the few who actually missed Lauryn Hill's stellar *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998) when it first appeared. I bobbed my head to the gems that received airplay and sang my heart out with her on "Ex-Factor." However, I did not rush out to purchase the CD, nor did I sing her praise as many of my peers did. Initially Hill came across to me as self-righteous, preachy, and too sanctified. I shook my head in disbelief when she accepted an MTV Music Award with Bible in hand, and then again, when she quoted a passage from the Bible during the Grammy Award ceremony. On the advice of one of my cousins, I finally listened to Hill's album. I discovered Hill anew through this musical journey as she schooled me about her life's pains and pleasures, her fragility, her humanity. Despite her status as both a hip hop queen and divine one, Hill raps that she is "only human" in one of *Miseducation's* most notable pedagogical tracks, "Doo Wop (That Thing)." In spite of myself, I began to see hints of myself as Hill revealed pieces of *her* self beyond the fame and role of good shepherd as first and foremost a flawed but self-actualizing Black woman. Yes, she can be pedantic and preachy, however, her bold and unabashed style reflects the urgency of her call for listeners to forge the path to personal and political liberation, re-education, and community responsibility.

In mapping a trajectory from folk protest music to rap, I look to Lauryn Hill's music exemplifies rap as an agency for political activism. Rap music first emerged in the late 1970s, but during the early to late 1980s, in particular, it offered a once voiceless youth a place of sustainment, as well as a space to critique the economically depressed urban spaces that contained them. Several scholars, Gladney, 1995; Henderson, 1996; and Pough, 2001, have discussed the Black nationalist implications in rap music, and rap's

endearing legacy as a continuation of 1960s Black liberation movements and the protest tradition. Both movements demonstrate the ways in which Black expressive culture—folksongs; rhetorical practices such as boasting, toasting, and signifying—have been used as means to critique oppression, theorize Black experience, and bolster Black empowerment. My discussion is atypical of current mainstream and scholarly discourses on rap music that demonize the whole. While recent denouncements of rap as misogynistic, grossly violent, and highly superficial are justifiable and necessary critiques, my analysis seeks to uplift a movement that once uplifted me. I'd like to emphasize the hip-hop of old (school), which served a pedagogical purpose, that “kick[ed] the truth to the young black youth.”<sup>1</sup> This chapter highlights Hill's musical message, its social relevance, its example of rap music that serves community and nation building efforts, and by implication is also pedagogical and counterhegemonic impulses.<sup>2</sup>

Although most scholarship on rap music's formation is male-centered, Rose, 1994, Cheryl Keyes 2000, and Gaunt, 2006 remind us that Black women contributed to and shaped rap music since its infancy. These women “challeng[ed] male rappers' predominance...[and] prove[d] that they have lyrical skill; in their struggle to survive and thrive within this tradition, they have created spaces from which to deliver powerful messages from Black female and Black feminist perspectives” (Keyes 2000, 255). While Black female rappers are able to create discursive spaces that address both racism and sexism within patriarchal norms. As Robin Roberts notes, “Rap, like all other forms of popular music, is not inherently feminist or political,” yet its “female performers manage in this genre, as in other popular genres, to use specific generic qualities to promote a feminist message” (1996, 141).<sup>3</sup> Specifically, I am interested in

how Lauryn Hill uses rap performance and lyrics as part of community and nation-building projects.

While I locate Hill's *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* as most exemplary of a folk aesthetic and politics, I must acknowledge those female emcees who represented for Black women before Hill's meteoric ascendance to rap royalty: Roxanne Shanté; Sha Rock (of Funky 4 + 1 More), J.J. Fad, Sequence, Sweet Tee, Salt-N-Pepa, MC Lyte, and Queen Latifah to name a few. Tricia Rose's assessment of the latter three Black women rappers is particularly useful for an analysis of the community building potential that such rappers promote. She posits, "through their lyrics and video images, black women rappers form a dialogue with working-class black women and men, offering young black women a small but potent culturally-reflexive public space" (294). I submit that of these three, Queen Latifah most effectively executed the rap game to uplift, educate, and foster collective unity through her lyricism. With womanist awareness and Black nationalistic goals, Queen Latifah claimed a public space to critique the devaluation of Black women both within the hip-hop movement and beyond (e.g., Forman; Roberts).<sup>4</sup>

For her womanist efforts, Nelson George half-heartedly names Queen Latifah one of hip hop's great ones. However his presumptuous statement when read in full is a typical masculinist reading of hip-hop that devalues and discredits female contributions to the culture. He states,

Hip-hop has produced no Bessie Smith, no Billie Holiday, no Aretha Franklin. You could make an argument that Queen Latifah has, as a symbol of female empowerment, filled Aretha's shoes for rap, though for artistic impact Latifah doesn't compare to the Queen of Soul. Similarly, you can make a case that Salt-N-Pepa's four platinum albums and clean cut sexuality mirror the Supremes' pop appeal, though neither of the two MCs or their beautiful DJ Spinderella is ever gonna be Diana Ross. In the

twenty plus years of hip-hop history on record, a period that has produced black vocalists Chaka Khan, Whitney Houston, Anita Baker, Tracy Chapman, Mary J. Blige, and Erykah Badu, there are no women who have contributed profoundly to rap's artistic growth (qtd in Pough 2004, 8).<sup>5</sup>

Supplanting one's predecessor has traditionally been a prominent characteristic of the male-dominated rap tradition; whereas, the female rap tradition values the idea of a co-existence. George's male-centered assessment reflects these different objectives, for his glaring omission of Hill fails to recognize her connection to the very artists he mentions. Hill's work clearly integrates with theirs, whether she responded to, advanced, complemented, or rebirthed their technique, style and/or message, she is their daughter or sister across the divide. Her defiant wail "Loving you is like battle / And we both end up with scars...No one loves you more than me / And no one ever will" makes her akin to the blues women, Bessie and Billie who often sang themes of love, loss, and pain. Further down the line, her musical foremothers include, Nina Simone, Aretha Franklin's less mainstream, lesser-acclaimed and more rebellious 60s soul sister. Aside from her direct lineage to these "blues women," Hill contributed to rap's artistic growth both musically and politically. She shares with her contemporaries, Mary J. Blige and Erykah Badu hip hop fused R&B, all of whom helped pave the way for a litany of current "conscious daughters." On her debut album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, she smoothly blends gospel, blues, R&B, folk, rap, and reggae elements into a cohesive and commercially appealing sound. While her inviting sound brings in listeners, Hill's message is central, as she offers life lessons that may lead to personal and collective empowerment. My discussion on Lauryn Hill seeks to counter such exclusionary interpretations of hip-hop culture.

Hill's socially conscious activism and her iconic status as hip hop's "it girl" make her an appropriate figure to study.<sup>6</sup> Numerous accolades have been bestowed upon her in praise of her gift of song and poetry. "The most versatile vocalist of her generation," wrote Kevin Powell in *Horizon* magazine. A *Harper's Bazaar* article declared her "beautiful, multitalented, whipsmart." "Catalyst...shining star...a divine singing voice and an up-front rhyme flow that ranks her among hip hop's dopest MC," assessed *Vibe* magazine reviewers. Public Enemy's Chuck D even went so far as to compare her to reggae legend Bob Marley. Finally, *Essence* declared that she had "created "a new image of womanhood in the world of hip hop."<sup>7</sup> *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, a benchmark album, would garner Lauryn Hill an unprecedented ten Grammy nominations and five awards at the 1999 ceremony, including album of the year, a first for a hip hop artist. She reclaimed the often misogynistic sphere of rap as a shared one wherein women/female MCs could foster a communal space to promote dialogue, education, and social uplift. Such practices were increasingly lost during this post-consciousness rap era. She did so unbossed and unmanned, not as novelty or sex spectacle of an all-star male crew but independently, self-aware and protective of the image that she portrayed before a vying public.

Hill claimed her public space as a female MC without the early 90s stylized Afrocentricity (the accouterments or the royal title) as did her most closely aligned predecessor, Queen Latifah. Conversely, she did not go the way of her contemporaries, the self-appointed "baddest bitches," who preferred to be scantily clad or adorned in expensive designer labels, "because such appellations merely mar the images of young African American females (Keyes 2000, 262).<sup>8</sup> She had a natural regality without announcing it and an undeniable sex appeal without screaming it. Her bohemian, rasta-

flavored look, replete with dreadlocks, head wraps, and avant-garde couture fashionably and consciously redefined the late 1980-mid 1990s “fly girl” look and Black women’s erotic subjectivity. Beyond the hip hop image, Hill explains that she “was a young woman with an evolved mind who was not afraid of her beauty or sexuality. For some people that’s uncomfortable. They didn’t understand how *female* and *strong* work together. Or young and wise. Or *Black* and *divine*” (qtd in Morgan 2006, 157). All these attributes are witnessed and promoted on her revealing album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*.

The confessional aspects of *The Miseducation* is part of a narrative tradition that is highly valued in African American literary history, narratives that act as sites of resistance and didactic tools (hooks 1992, 61). These narratives counter oppressive hegemonic forces that seek to silence marginalized voices or thwart community and nation building. Moreover, Hill’s debut album critiques the educational system and ways of knowing and criticizes patriarchal norms in both rap music and the African American community. While Nina Simone’s story songs attacked white capitalist patriarchy, and Chapman employs her folk consciousness against global oppressive forces, Lauryn Hill addresses the need for an inner revolution, an inward glance into one’s own soul before implementing positive social change for the whole.<sup>9</sup> As such, her lyrics discuss issues such as decolonization, self-education, self-determination, love, and spiritual salvation.

This message reflects Hill’s call for a post-soul nation that is more fragmented, thus in dire need of recovery from “psychic trauma inflicted upon [us] by racist aggression and assault (hooks 1995, 137-8). Simone’s urgent message of social justice was in keeping with the fighting years of the 1960s and Chapman’s folk resurrection meshed with early politically conscious rap documenting the Reagan years and the global

effects of capitalism. In Hill's time, the late 1990s, the Black community was threatened by continued downward spiral in Black cultural life even during the presidency of a supposed friend to Black people, Bill Clinton. In the 1990s, it was time for some soul-searching, mental re-conditioning, and re-building, as Blacks were still reeling from the effects of postindustrialism and the Reagan-Bush years. Sheila Radford-Hill notes that during the 1990s, little progress was made to combat these devastating effects under the Clinton administration. She states, "In the mid- to late 1990s, President Bill Clinton and the Republican factions that dominated both houses of Congress...had a limited amount of political capital, and they were not about to spend it on issues of economic justice" (62-3). As a result, Radford-Hill reveals the ways in which such injustice impacted the Black community, the underclass and the middle class, for there was: persistent poverty, income disparity, job growth and unemployment that adversely affected Blacks. Further, Blacks fared no better in areas such as access to health care; quality education; and falling prey to violent crimes (see pp. 59-61 for actual statistics & analysis). Such times called for a gathering of a million Black men, and subsequently, a million Black women, to address such pressing issues facing the Black community.

Hill, seemingly, heeded the call for collective action, demonstrating that she did not intend to compromise her message of personal and community responsibility, which reverberate throughout her album. Two songs from *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* most illustrate Hill's themes of love and education and identify her as radical Black female subject in the line of Simone and Chapman. "Doo Wop (That Thing)," and the title track "The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill" demonstrate rap pedagogy. Hill uses rap to school and uplift the masses. *New York Times* writer, Ann Powers notes Hill's prophetic voice, and reasons, "Her religious fervor is not what makes *Miseducation* exceptional; it is the way

that her faith, based more in experience and feeling than in doctrine, leads her to connect the sacred to the secular in music that touches the essence of soul” (par. 3). Dispelling the contradiction that the sacred and secular cannot coexist, Hill delivers an inspiring message to youth in keeping with her firm Judeo-Christian beliefs of redemptive love and the fellowship of love.

### **Going Back to New Jerusalem, Hill’s Early Years on the Block**

While Gwendolyn Pough acknowledges that “Lauryn Hill now claims that *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* was not about her, many listeners felt that they were glimpsing her autobiography as they listened to the album. When she rapped and sang about her child, her loves, and her losses, it was easy for young women in urban America to identify and connect” (2004, 107). The title track, “The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill” provides sketches of her formative coming-of-age years in South Orange, New Jersey, reverently called “New Jerusalem.” During one of the album’s most playful upbeat moments, listeners are taken down memory lane to visit the “streets that nurtured Lauryn Hill” on the track “Every Ghetto, Every City.” As one of these “young, gifted, and Black” children that her foremother Nina Simone praised, exalted, and spiritually birthed, Hill’s message is that she was an everygirl to whom most any little Black girl could relate— particularly in terms of the arduous ordeal of getting one’s hair pressed and curled.

Set to the catchy tune of the 70s TV classic, “Welcome Back, Kotter,” Hill interpolates John Sebastian’s lines “Welcome back” to the chorus “You know it’s hot, don’t forget what you’ve got / Looking back / Thinking back, thinking back, thinking back.”<sup>10</sup> Hill’s rap follows the theme of the original song, which speaks of a homecoming, a return to the place where “your dreams were your ticket out” but would

eventually “lead you back where we need you.” These lyrics reveal that despite the meteoric rise to fame, the Grammy wins, and worldwide acclaim, Hill could remain grounded in home and reality. Hill’s grounding in home and remembrance of New Jersey reflects a “homegrown” organic intellectual sensibility for Abrams notes, “Rappers are also firmly rooted in their communities. There are constant references to specific cities (Philadelphia, New York, Los Angeles) and specific neighborhoods (Harlem, Compton, Brooklyn, Long Island). Significantly, Hill’s “Every Ghetto, Every City” offers an alternative vision to trends that either report or hyperbolize urban life from a singularly Black male perspective. Conversely, her “tale of ordinary site” celebrates loving Black communities such as the one that nurtured her.<sup>11</sup> Hill’s community differs from those of her male counterparts and she offers a striking and necessary balance to portray diverse Black communities and experiences. She preserves her ordinary site as a narrative wherein she can perform herself and inscribe the story of other “little [Black] girls” like her within rap and popular culture. Hill’s urban tale is not a purely romantic vision, for she does acknowledge on “Every Ghetto, Every City” that “car thieves got away through Irvington / Hillside brings beef with the cops.” Nevertheless, she nostalgically depicts growing up in the late 1970s to early 1980s pre-epidemic crises (crack, violence, AIDS), and describes the current thriving Black communities that have prevailed against such backlashing to produce young, gifted, and Black children both within and beyond the ghetto.

Lauryn Noel Hill was born on May 25, 1975 to Mal Hill, a management consultant and Valerie Hill, a grade-school English teacher. They moved to South Orange, New Jersey from East Orange when Hill was in fifth grade (Jacobs par. 19). Their middle class status made them “social buffers” between Black poverty and the

white middle class.<sup>12</sup> Although she grew up in the more affluent South Orange, young Hill could not escape the harsh realities of poverty and racism. Clearly visible and closely situated near her home was Newark's Ivy Hill housing project represented in rhyme on "Every Ghetto, Every City." Hill raps "Story starts at Hootaville grew up next to Ivy Hill /When kids were stealing quartervilles for fun." "Cognizant of [her] mediating perch," (McCoy 205) her location on the threshold of two worlds, urban dis-ease and relative suburban ease, she candidly explained her liminality to Rolling Stone reporter Alec Foege, "You'll see that my house is right on the borderline of the ghetto. I have always have went [sic] to school with a lot of white kids—it was really like a suburban environment—but I lived with black kids" (40).<sup>13</sup>

Since Hill's childhood breaks from the traditional (and often stereotypical) script of the perceived ghetto culture, her authenticity has been called into question. Adam Krims argues that "realness has always been closely associated with the ghetto in hip-hop presentations, just as authenticity in the blues has long been associated with black rural (usually southeastern) life" (66). He further demonstrates this intense focus on poverty and the "ghetto as a locus of authenticity" that permeates the culture. He states, "The videos signal their urbaneness in widely recognized ways—quick shots of cityscapes, lyrics focusing on urban geography, inner-city streets, subways, buses, housing projects, abandoned buildings, and so on" (66).<sup>14</sup> Hill's relatively privileged upbringing and her divergence from hip hop's ghetto credo explicitly make her a target for critic Hilton Als.

In a piece entitled, "No Respect," Als ironically privileges Nina Simone's "blackness" over Aretha Franklin's "manufactured, impersonal form of blackness." He then goes on to level the same criticism of Franklin [also a child of the middle class]

against Hill with claims that “she speaks from a blacker-than-thou stance that feels contrived.” He believes that the “version of blackness, at least the version [Hill] promotes on *Miseducation*, feels distinctly middle class. It is as if she’d learned the rhetoric of persecution without actually knowing what it is to live it” (209). And, in an affront to those who claim that Hill “represents the future of soul music,” Als quickly dismisses the idea, instead suggesting that white British singer PJ Harvey is the real contender (209). He even likens Harvey to Simone, for her “powerful songs” rivals Simone’s “in the force of their anger and wit” (210). For Als, as with most hip hop gatekeepers, socioeconomic status matters in determining one’s authenticity, and determines which artist has “real soul” or who is “real” (in terms of hip hop credibility). Harvey, raised by “liberal-minded” parents on Black American blues, is more soulful, according to Als for it is her “desperate contortions of despair [that] identify her as a member of an underclass of one” (210). Al’s claims are based on the faulty assumption that authenticity and soul are located solely amongst those of lower socioeconomic class status, and by default emerges from those “liberal” whites who’ve admired and affected Black musicality from a distance. Though more advantaged than her peers in the neighboring Ivy Hill housing projects, Hill’s liminal class status would seem to provide her a sharper critical lens with which to promote ideas on strengthening Black communities.

Hill’s “Every Ghetto, Every City” as well as her biographical accounts offer rich narrative and social analysis on the experience of the Black middle class. As scholar Mary Patillo-McCoy suggests, this class and their “residential enclaves are nearly invisible to the nonblack public because of the intense (and mostly negative) attention given to poor urban ghettos” (1). In her study, *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril Among the Black Middle Class*, Patillo-McCoy investigates how racial segregation,

changing economic structures, and disproportionate Black poverty affect the residential experience of Black middle class families, and especially youth (1). Patillo-McCoy notes that “the black middle class overall remains as segregated from whites as the black poor (Farley 1991 qtd in Patillo-McCoy 25). This means that the search for better neighborhoods has taken place *within* a segregated housing market” (25). “As a result,” Patillo-McCoy continues, “black middle-class neighborhoods are often located next to predominantly black areas with much higher poverty rates” (25). Blacks of all socioeconomic statuses, including the middle class have been effectively “strapped-in” and confined to limited geographic spaces due to discriminatory institutions: banks, insurance companies, and urban planners (25). Such a realization exposes the tenuous state of the Black middle class who find themselves entwined with less fortunate members of the Black community. Though Patillo-McCoy’s study is exclusive to Groveland, a black middle-class neighborhood on Chicago’s South Side, it applies to similar residential areas in other states, such as the one where the Hills resided. It also serves to clarify the effect privilege and proximity to “urban” peril had on Hill’s commitment to community uplift through song.

In addition to being a radical Black female subject, I submit that Hill is also what Nathan Abrams refers to as an organic intellectual, which seemingly parallels Herder’s “folk poet.” Citing Gramsci and Lipsitz, Abrams argues in “Antonio’s B-Boys: Rap, Rappers, and Gramsci’s Intellectuals” that rappers meet certain identifiable characteristics of an organic intellectual as follows: they are members of an aggrieved community; they reflect the needs of that community; they attempt to construct a counter-hegemony through the dissemination of subversive ideas; and they strive to construct a historical bloc—a coalition of oppositional groups united around these subversive or

counter-hegemonic images (3). While Abrams' argument is convincing and provocative, as with the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement, discussion on leadership is male-centered and open with the possibility for Black feminist re-writing and re-visioning. As his *b-boy* title suggests, Abrams' intended focus is on hardcore rap and his chosen subjects are Nelson George coined "homegrown heroes" and are all male (Public Enemy, Paris, and KRS-1). However, Hill's homegrown folk *heroine* and folk poet status are relevant to such a discussion, as she voices the grievances of her community while attempting to uplift it. Hill raps her position as a voice of the aggrieved on the song, "Forgive them Father,"

And when I let go, my voice echoes through the ghetto  
Sick of men trying to pull strings like Geppetto  
Why Black people always be the ones to settle  
March through these streets like Soweto

As the lines reveal, Hill's privileged upbringing does not preclude her recognition that she belongs to the broader community of oppressed Black people. In evoking the South African Apartheid struggle, Hill globalizes the plight of the Black diaspora, as she calls for a unified front where women share leadership. As part of her once preeminent leadership role in the male-dominated terrain of rap music, Hill overcomes rap's code of "ghetto-authenticity" to deliver politically conscious rap with Black feminist sensibilities for the enlightenment of all.

Although Hill and her older brother, Malaney, enjoyed a relatively privileged upbringing, she cautions, "I wasn't raised rich. But I never really wanted the things that we didn't have. I think my parents instilled in us that we didn't need lavish things. As long as we had love and protection, we were always taken care of." (qtd in Ewey par. 8). An essential part of such stability was that the Hill home had a tradition of music in which the whole family participated. Before he became a family man, Hill's father

performed on the nightclub singing circuit and at weddings. Valerie Hill played piano, and Malaney played the saxophone, guitar, and drums. Like her brother, young Hill was encouraged to take lessons and pursue her many musical and theatrical interests such that today she doesn't "remember [her] life without music" (qtd in Ewey par. 7).

While music was at the forefront, Hill was also a model student, as her resume attests; she was also: head cheerleader, star athlete in track and basketball, class president, founding gospel choir member, and founder of a breakfast program for needy students. During the buzz of Hill's Grammy sweep, back at Columbia High, Ms. Peniston, reflects on her former student, "Lauryn was a gifted student, but more than a student, she was a teacher, someone who influenced a lot of other kids. She really had a vision for bringing people together" (qtd in Jacobs par. 21). This is the role that Hill assumes on *The Miseducation*, for as lyrical educator she imparts life lessons to her listeners with the assignment that they effect personal and subsequent social change. Although more economically privileged than both Simone and Chapman, by the admission and remembrances of those who knew her before her musical success, it is clear that early on, Hill had was politically conscious and had a zest for transformative action. But before such message could be manifest on her breakthrough debut album, she gave us hints of her light as one-third part of innovative rap group The Fugees.

Hill teamed up with high school classmate Pras Michel who later introduced his cousin Wyclef Jean to the group. During an interview with Edwidge Danticat Jean proclaimed, "When I heard Lauryn sing, I was like 'Wow!' It clicked. I knew it was meant to be" (85). The trio's first album, *Blunted on Reality*, Ruffhouse/Columbia (1993), flopped; however, the group's second album, *The Score*, topped the charts. Then enrolled at Columbia University, Hill left to pursue a musical career. *Vibe* contributor

Selwyn Seyfu Hinds notes the novelty of a rap assemblage where the lone female holds “equal opportunity mike status within a group.” He recalls the archetype Funky 4 + 1 More and the Digable Planets trio which featured female MC Ladybug as precedents, but seems to marvel at Hill’s ability to outshine her male band mates. Hinds proclaims, “You were the middling anchor between Wyclef’s frenzy and Pras’s slow burn. Perhaps it was a foregone conclusion, albeit an unfair and premature one, that the critical public would laud you as the group’s saving grace” (95). Although every effort was made to maintain the group, it eventually dissolved.<sup>15</sup> Hill eventually stepped from beyond the circle of three to display her mic skills. The Fugees had just “lost one,” as the opening song, *Lost Ones*” on her debut album proclaims.

In the “Intro,” preceding the “*Lost Ones*,” listeners are immediately conditioned for a schooling as the opening bell rings, a familiar sound to students that denotes the beginning of the day’s lessons. The instructor then commences the roll call to which several students respond in the affirmative, all except Lauryn Hill. After being called upon three times to no avail, the steady pulse of a throbbing hip hop beat commences the first track “*Lost Ones*” followed by someone announcing, “It’s L-Boogie ya’ll” to which Lauryn Hill finally responds and blazes ears with the message that she has indeed arrived. Her exclamatory and defiant statement “My emancipation don’t fit your equation” reveals her classroom absence. Hill has elevated her status from student, an empty vessel to be filled. She, instead, assumes the role of waterbearer, educator cum prophetess, quenching the unenlightened and miseducated masses’ thirst for knowledge.

While deeply personal, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* is simultaneously a political manifesto in the spirit of the great educator Carter G. Woodson. The historicity and intertextuality of the title is not lost on critic Pough, for she begins her analysis of the

album's title with the source, Woodson. She claims that Hill's "signifying on Woodson's *The Miseducation of the Negro* (1933) brings forth a history and a legacy of critique. Invoking her own name personalizes the political message" (107). Through this process of naming and self-actualizing Hill situates herself along a continuum of progressive thinkers, namely the Father of Black History. By invoking Woodson, Hill (re)introduces his message of empowerment to the hip hop generation.

Throughout his work, Woodson outlines a systemic effects of Negro miseducation that function to subordinate Blacks in inferior positions. This system of miseducation is an advanced form of enslavement that negates Blacks' physical freedom from the shackles of slavery, for this enslavement involves total control of the mind and information/knowledge received. With free, though limited, access to literacy and education, freed slaves and their descendants were able to gain access to education; however, as Woodson demonstrates, the liberating power of these newly acquired benefits did little to serve the people. Woodson proclaims, "The education of the Negroes, then, the most important thing in the uplift of the Negroes, is almost entirely in the hands of those who have enslaved them and now segregate them" (22). Implicit in Woodson's analysis is the idea that the oppressor will not impart to the oppressed the necessary skills and means by which to become fully emancipated.

The systemic effects of Black miseducation stifled the kind of mental liberation that Hill advances on her album. The oft-quoted line, "When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions" is critical to understanding Hill's message. While Simone and Chapman predominantly sang out against white capitalist patriarchy, Hill reserves her strongest criticism for the educational system. Her efforts were in keeping with the goals of Black liberation struggle and the move toward

Afrocentricity in the 1960s, where among other institutions, Black people and radical groups took control of their children's education.<sup>16</sup> Hill's reference to Woodson's work demonstrates her efforts to counteract the potentially damaging effects failing schools can have on Black youth. Molefi Kete Asante regards Woodson's work as central to the development of Afrocentric approaches to education in which "teachers provide students the opportunity to study the world and its people, concepts, and history from an African world view" (171). De-centering the prevalence of white world views in curriculums can redress problems that arise when educating African American children, for as Asante suggests, Black children, teachers, Black history, and Africa have been maligned by this system (179). Afrocentricity, he claims, may be the "'escape hatch' African Americans so desperately need to facilitate academic success and 'steal away' from the cycle of miseducation and dislocation" (179). Similarly, Hill's invoking Woodson's work constitutes a "calling out" of the educational system; simultaneously, it is a call for youth to become active agents in pursuit of a liberating education, to free themselves from oppression.<sup>17</sup> Like rapper KRS-One's declarative mantra "You Must Learn," to rap duo Dead Prez's unabashed critique of the educational system in "They Schools," Hill advances an education that promotes mental liberation through decolonization that will free both the oppressed and the oppressor.<sup>18</sup>

### **"The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill": Lessons in Self-Love and Self-Education**

After having spent the greater part of the album wrestling with the trials and tribulations of a love affair and sowing seeds of loving wisdom to the rap community and others in need of uplift, Hill tends to the affirmative needs of the self. Hill's personal (miseducation and ongoing re-education) informs her political (promulgating the need for re-education and self-love of the collective). Simone seems well aware that the personal

is political, for as Bratcher explains, “The meaning of “Revolution (Parts 1&2) is that the real revolution begins on the personal level:

Singing ‘bout a revolution  
Because I’m talkin’ ‘bout a *change*  
More than just air pollution  
*Well* you know you’ve gotta clean your brain (125)

Though she demonstrates a profound self-determination and growing self-awareness throughout the album, Hill’s mental liberation, as Simone calls for, and her self-love blossom on the title track, “The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill.” It is here specifically where she declares her process of self-actualizing/affirming education as personal salvation. She explains,

And every time I try to be  
What someone has thought of me  
So caught up, I wasn’t able to achieve  
But deep in my heart the answer it was in me  
And I made up my mind to define my own destiny

Hill’s message of self-education, “the answer it was in me,” speaks to her radical Black female subjectivity, as she links her struggle to be self-defining with the collective plight of Black people, namely women. This message of self-actualization is a lesson that Hill has had to learn and one that she intends to teach others. bell hooks notes the importance of independent pedagogy when she declares, “Radical black female subjects have had to educate ourselves for critical consciousness, reading, studying, engaging in critical pedagogy, transgressing boundaries to acquire the knowledge we need” (1992, 60). As part of a stirring finale and one of the album’s last tracks, Hill reclaims her life as her own and rejoices in an unfettered destiny to be defined and fulfilled on her own terms.

Beyond her own journey to self-love and self-determination, Hill sees her community in despair. Hill’s disillusionment echoes that of Marvin Gaye’s passionate

and near desperate rhetorical wail “What’s Going On” when she laments, “I look at my environment / And wonder where the fire went.” She continues,

What happened to everything we used to be  
I hear so many cry for help  
Searching outside of themselves  
Now I know His strength is within me  
And deep in my heart the answer it was in me  
And I made up my mind to find my own destiny

While Gaye’s outward glance led to his plaintive cry, Hill’s gaze is reflexive and she cries out to the God *within* her to armor herself with self-love and self-direction. Emboldened, she faces her environment and assumes the role of folk-conscious performer and community bearer, spreading messages of liberation through LOVE.

bell hooks explains that processes of decolonization and re-education are crucial to the practice of loving. Love, according to her, is essential to freedom, as Hill’s “The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill” attests. Initiating this practice of loving, hooks believes, is “where education for critical consciousness has to enter” (1994, 295). hooks goes on to describe the lack of public discourse and popular culture representations on the subject of love. As hooks calls for, Lauryn Hill knows love and means to share it and spread its redemptive qualities through her gift of song. She is heeding the call by Woodson who urged the “highly educated” Negro to “fall in love with his own people and begin to sacrifice for their uplift—if [they] would do these things, he could solve some of the problems now confronting the race” (44). Such sentiment is also echoed by hooks who argues that love is foundational in any movement for social justice; she asserts, “Indeed, all the great movements for social justice in our society have strongly emphasized a love ethic. Yet young listeners remain reluctant to embrace the idea of love as a transformative force” (hooks 1994, 295). Hill’s message of love and her strategies for pedagogical enlightenment delve into the realm of self-analysis, self-worth, and *self-love*.

Hill seems well aware that before one can build nations/communities, sow seeds of wisdom, and advocate for the liberation of a people, one must commit to his or her own self-healing, re-education, and mental liberation. For Black women, especially, “who want to end the crisis of malaise affecting the growth and development of their political culture, they must first promote their own health and healing,” suggests Hill Collins (1998, 51). She further contends that “the pathway to such health and healing lies in strengthening our connections to each other and rebuilding black communities as places of nurture and transcendence” (51). As a pedagogical tool, Hill’s album advances this idea of strengthening Black women’s relations to one another and the Black community as a whole. As Angela Davis notes, “progressive art can assist people to learn not only about the objective forces at work in the society in which they live, but also about the intensely social character of their interior lives. Ultimately, it can propel people toward social emancipation” (1989, 200). Hill’s lesson plans for her listeners require such self-inquiry into their “interior lives” for according to her truth, it is the only way toward liberation, self- and collective.

In balancing her role as both a voice for the folk and a radical Black female subject, Hill shows that she is fully aware of the nexus. Her passion for music is integral to her humanitarian efforts on behalf of communities in need. Throughout *The Miseducation* she highlights her role as musician-slash-social activist, and she is unafraid to call out those in the rap community for their uninspired and uninspiring contributions. Hill drills this point when on the album track “Superstar,” she repeats “Come on baby, light my fire / Everything you drop is so tired / Music is supposed to inspire / How come we ain’t getting no higher?” To enhance and provoke the desired musical effect, Hill’s usual spitfire rap style is slowed down as she takes on a tired and uninspired flow. In a

clever sampling of The Doors' "Light My Fire," Hill remixes and de-sexualizes the title's meaning, and transforms it into a call for inspiration. Her message is reserved for those rap super-stars who do not light a path for their community, as did several of those from the old school. To draw a distinction between the two eras of rap, pre and post mainstream, Hill begins "Superstar" by twice shouting out, "Hip hop started out in the heart now everybody trying to chart." The goals of chart-topping and achieving rap superstardom, along with subsequent wealth potential, has thwarted the messages delivered by these modern poets.<sup>19</sup> Hill exposes the shallowness and superficiality of some of rap's most successful superstars and calls us back to the old school.

Hill brings hip hop back to the heart with the inspirational "Doo Wop (That Thing)," which reflects a love and concern for the well-being of her community that is itself lacking self-love and abiding romantic love. A radical Black female subject, Hill asserts her agency to simmer the rap bass and beat and disrupt the flow and general narrative of rap discourse that is usually void of love as a thematic. In keeping with her political aims of community uplift, Hill's love narratives are progressive. As Davis reasons, "While not all progressive art need be concerned with explicitly political problems—indeed, a love song can be progressive if it incorporates a sensitivity toward the lives of working-class women and men" (1989, 200). In revealing that love is not misplaced on a hip hop album, Hill's love narratives resist the notion that African Americans lack the capacity for loving relationships, however dysfunctional they appear within the context of the white capitalist patriarchal structure.

### **"Doo Wop (That Thing)": Lessons in Old School Lovin'**

On the album, Hill has four love ballads that detail love gone awry ("Ex Factor", "I Used to Love Him", "When It Hurts So Bad") and transcendent true romantic love

(“Nothing Even Matters”). This latter is a rousing duet with her 1996 Smokin’ Grooves tour mate, Neo-soul newcomer D’Angelo. Hill explains the song’s intent in *Ebony*, “I wanted to make a love song à la Roberta Flack and Donny Hathaway, and give people a humanistic approach to love again without all the physicality and overt sexuality.” She continues, “I wanted it to be about what it’s like when your back starts to tingle and your stomach feels funny.” To inspire such a love that reflects the sanctity of Black love beyond stereotypical representations of gratuitous sex—as prevalently displayed by her rap counterparts—Hill offers “Doo Wop (That Thing).” The song serves as metanarrative, a pedagogical tool to school youth in the ways of loving. Her title is significant in that it is paradoxical, for on the one hand, Hill is signifying on the Doo Wop Era where teenage love (exemplified by Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers’ 1956 hit “Why Do Fools Fall in Love?”) was perceived as pure and innocent, romantic. This is in stark contrast to the current generation signified as “That Thing,” in which teenage love, as depicted by popular culture and otherwise is viewed as hypersexual and in pursuit of “that thing” (sex).

Through skillful use of indirection, Hill’s preacher-teacher signifying unfolds. She uses the extended metaphor “that thing” to signify on a gamut of folk, including “loose women” and “wanna-be thugs.” “That thing” takes on ambiguous and multiple meanings throughout the song, but the implicit meaning is sex. In continuing the dialogue of responsible, safe sex promoted by Salt-N-Pepa’s “Let’s Talk About Sex” (1990) and TLC’s early condom fashion and “Waterfalls” message (Keyes 2000, 261), Hill’s sex talk is more didactic in tone and pushes the discussion even further. Given the adverse effects of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases on urban communities, “Doo Wop (That Thing)” moves beyond the safe sex promotion, and is a

seeming call to abstinence; she is urging both young men and women to hold on to “that thing,” while developing self-love and self-worth.

In his provocative discussion on creating a new paradigm for analyzing the sacred and secular aspects of Black music, Jon Michael Spencer looks to the blues for a sexual ethic, considering that when it comes to the subject of sex “we either speak too harshly or remain violently silent” (108). Spencer locates the blues as a pedagogical and theological springboard for such a discussion for it rejects both extremes of harshness and silence.

He contends,

Beneath all of the lyric about a man’s “snake” and a woman’s “jelly-Roll” and about lovers doing the “bedspring pop,” there is a seedling of a sexual ethic to be extracted if musicologists would be willing to engage in the requisite spiritual archaeology. That ethic, when articulated, includes the kind of preaching that Bessie Smith did in her “Preachin’ the Blues” of 1927. Smith confessed to the ‘girls’ that her intention in singing her song was not to save their souls but rather to advise them practically as to how to preserve their “jellyrolls.” She continued with her blues biblicism, “Read on down to chapter 10, taking other women’s men you are doin’ a sin.” Big Bill Broonzy, in his “Preaching the Blues,” similarly called out those women who go to church just to show their skirts and those men who go just to hide their dirt (108-9).

He explains the significance of the blues singers who merged the sacred and the profane by proclaiming, “[they] spoke so openly because their prophetic ‘calling’ was...to sing the truth” (109). In truth telling and calling out, the blues singers seamlessly bridge the contentious relationship between the sacred and the profane, the blues and the spiritual as a source of empowerment in helping one “get ovah.” As Blues-Preacher for the hip hop generation, Hill’s “Doo Wop (That Thing)” takes on a similar effect, as she imparts gospel truths (“rap biblicism”) to respond to the secular issues facing youth.

In keeping with her blues lineage (such as Smith and Broonzy) of truth-telling, Hill begins her two-part sermon lesson on love as a direct address to young women,

reserving her first verse for those who wrongly associate romantic love with sexual exchange. She gently chastises them with real talk in the lines,

It's been three weeks since you've been looking for  
your friend / The one you let hit it and never called  
again / 'Member when he told you he was 'bout the  
Benjamins / You act like you ain't hear him then gave  
him a little trim.../ Plus when you give it up so easy  
you ain't even fooling him / If you did it then, then you  
probably fuck again.  
Talking out your neck sayin' you're a Christian  
A Muslim sleeping with the gin  
Now that was the sin that did Jezebel in

Hill cautions young girls to practice the art of self-respect and to be both protective and selective of their male partners. Her message is an empowering tool for Black youth who “with broader support from black communities [such as Hill’s pedagogical rap]...can reverse patterns that adversely influence their peer relationships, their choice of sexual partners, and/or their relationships with their own children” (Radford Hill 51).

In a clever act of signification and “linguistic social corrective” aimed at her congregation (Smitherman 1977, 120), Hill’s latter three lines call into question young women’s spiritual stamina. She conflates sexual promiscuity and alcohol consumption with the maligned biblical figure of Jezebel, who led her husband to a false God.<sup>20</sup> In popular culture representations, however, Jezebel has also come to denote a “loose woman.” Hill plays with both images for “sleeping with the gin” demonstrates reverence for another “god” and the skillful use of the phrase “sleeping with” in light of the previous verses reveals Hill’s effectively “siggin” on promiscuous young women.<sup>21</sup>

In continuing the dialogue she sets forth in this opening verse to women, Hill’s second lesson in love is “dedicated to the men / more concerned with his rims and his Timbs than his women.” Such men parallel those she previously warned the ladies about, as they are “bout the Benjamins” and displays of nominal wealth; thus they are typical of

the American dreamer parodied in Chapman's "Mountains O' Things." As Chapman reveals, the privileging of material objects over people exposes the pathology of consumer culture; similarly, for Hill such circumstances demonstrate dysfunctional love for self and others.

Hill reveals the underlying root of this dysfunction as a lack of self-love, self respect, and self-awareness, all emblematic of a post-Civil Rights Movement Black community. A community in need of healing before we can truly embrace ourselves and one another in ways that are affirmative. In terms of romantic relationships, bell hooks submits, "True love does have the power to redeem but only if we are ready for redemption. Love saves us only if we want to be saved" (2001, 169). However, she notes, "so many seekers after love are taught in childhood to feel unworthy, that nobody could love them as they really are, and they construct a false self" (2001, 169). Hill counters this lack of self-worth when she admonishes young girls for:

Showing off your ass 'cause you're thinking it's a trend /  
Girlfriend, let me break it down for you again / You know  
I only say it 'cause I'm truly genuine / Don't be a hardrock  
when you're really a gem / Babygirl, respect is just a minimum  
...

It's silly when girls sell their soul because it's in / Look at where  
you be in hair weaves like Europeans / Fake nails done by  
Koreans / Come again / Come again.

Similarly, her verse to the men, who run the gamut from the materialistic and absentee fathers to those who commit domestic violence, calls out the hardcore masculine performance that Black men feel obligated to uphold as their true self is devalued and repressed. She raps,

Him and his men come in the club like hooligans / Don't care  
who they offend popping yang like you got yen / Let's not pretend,  
they wanna pack Cristal by the case men, still in they mother's  
basement / The pretty face, men claiming that they did a bid men /

Need to take care of their three and four kids men...The sneaky silent  
men the punk domestic violence men / The quick to shoot the semen  
stop acting like boys and be men.

Hill's calling out rises above the fray of male-bashing, as her message seeks to counter the prevalent depictions of Black males promoted by her male rap counterparts. While many rap artists are complicit in negative representations, the *incessant* scenes of Black men clubbing, sipping expensive liquor, glorifying violence, and sexually exploiting women is part of America's historic racial past in caricaturing Blacks, particularly Black men. bell hooks explains that, "Seen as animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers, black men have had no real dramatic say when it comes to the way they are represented. They have made few interventions on the stereotype" (2004, xii). Instead, she notes, "Negative stereotypes about the nature of black masculinity continue to overdetermine the identities black males are allowed to fashion for themselves" (xii). In modeling flawed and stereotypical behavior espoused by gangsta rap artist, Black boys fall victim to acting out in ways that are detrimental to themselves and their communities. Hill offers her harsh critique as a "schoolin" to Black boys, for as hooks states, "Progressive schooling of black males can become a norm only as we begin to take their education seriously, restoring the link between learning and liberation" (45).

Hill directs Black youth to look inward, for after "calling out" both women and men, Hill's repeats the refrain, "How you gon' win when you ain't right within / How you gon' win when you ain't right within / Come again." This statement gets to the root of Hill's pedagogy, as she summons youth to become self-defining and self-actualizing on the path to decolonization. Further, "Doo Wop (That Thing)" instructs youth to embrace a love of self before attempting to engage in romantic love, a lesson that Hill herself has come to learn. While she assumes the role of virginal Mary in the previous

song, “To Zion” an allegorical ode that celebrates the birth of her “man child,” on “Doo Wop” she forsakes this sanctimony to reveal her flawed humanity. In the third person she declares,

Now Lauryn is only human / Don't think I haven't been  
through the same predicament / Let it sit inside your head  
like a million women in Philly, Penn.

In an attempt to open the lines of communication with her listening audience, particularly young women, Hill demonstrates her experiential knowledge in the ways of loving and the failures and struggles that come along with it. Love ballads included on the album, such as “Ex-Factor” and “I Used to Love Him” attest to her experiential knowledge. After situating herself as wise to the ways of love and as her sister’s keeper, Hill invokes a politically motivated community of Black women (the Million Woman March) whose strength in numbers and concern for community uplift serve to protect the sanctity of Black womanhood and ultimately the Black community.<sup>22</sup>

In keeping with the pedagogical implications of her album, Hill’s reference to the 1997 Million Woman March also acts as a history lesson; she is citing an important historical moment in our nation’s history, one that deserves preserving in our collective memory. In recalling the momentous occasion, Hill offers young Black girls an alternative to objectification and a lack of self-love. Her intent is for these girls to recognize themselves as self-defining daughter with a lineage of Black women culture bearers and activists. More importantly, the reference is a call to action for these young girls to mobilize and carry on the tradition of activism through increased sisterhood and community uplift. Hill’s efforts are both consciousness-raising and catalysts for effective change, two components that undergird the hip hop movement, activism and community building.<sup>23</sup>

Hill's appeal to young Black girls reinforces Hill Collins' call for Black women to uplift their community. She contends, "black women will need to pay more attention to the process of teaching black girls to pursue their individual aspirations as well as their collective self-interest" (1998, 51). Essentially, these girls should be active participants in creating visions to improve their communities and devising plans of action to effect change. It is through this process, according to Hill Collins that "they will learn that they are responsible for their own lives and for the preservation of their culture" (1998, 51). Through her conscious-raising "preach-teach" raps, Hill is empowering youth to first engage in self-love, and then as Woodson instructed, "fall in love with his [or her] own people and begin to sacrifice for their uplift" (44) and rebuild our besieged communities.

As her song title "Doo Wop (That Thing)" suggests, Hill harkens back to the doo-wop and old soul of yesteryear that celebrated love and loving Black communities; she locates herself within that tradition and its purveyors, such as her musical foremother Nina Simone.<sup>24</sup> On "Ready or Not" (*The Score*, 1996), Hill raps "I be Nina Simone and defecating on your microphone."<sup>25</sup> Hill's evoking Nina Simone is particularly significant in terms of Black rhetorical practices and hip hop's naming practices. Rose explains "hip hop's prolific self-naming" as part of the "African and Afrodiasporic cultural forms" of "reinvention and self-definition" (36). She further states, "Rappers...take on hip hop names and identities that speak to their role, personal characteristics, expertise, or 'claim to fame'" (36). Hill's naming is a signifying act in which she makes Nina Simone a Black rhetorical trope, essentially an act of deference and respect for her predecessor.<sup>26</sup>

Simultaneously, Hill's (naming) paying homage to Simone is also a bold statement that announced her own arrival. Hill is paralleling herself to an artist who moved inspiring shuffling feet to inspiring minds for revolutionary social change. While,

Nina Simone engaged in nonviolent protest marches, her protest music helped to set in motion mental awakening and more aggressive liberatory actions. Bridging the intergenerational gap, Hill reaches back to honor the legacy of Simone, and invokes her name as an inspirational figure for hip hop youth to honor.

In a show of reverence for Simone, Hill reveals the abiding affinity she has for the “High Priestess of Soul” by associating her with Jesus Christ. She explains her veneration for both figures in *Details* magazine,

Both taught me that your thanks is not necessarily on earth, that it's a rough path to tread. I mean, Nina Simone was a revolutionary who spoke on behalf of people who probably didn't even appreciate her, and it made for a very hard, almost bitter life. And Jesus Christ? Thankless job, too—you save the world but must be crucified.”

Though her sentiments were expressed before her rise to fame and acceptance, Hill can certainly relate to these words now that her fans and detractors alike have dismissed her. Her subsequent “comeback” efforts have been taken as instances of her “falling off her rocker” and her coveted throne as queen of hip hop. Echoing Simone, Hill has expressed her disillusionment and discontent with the recording industry, proclaiming “All they could see was the commodity Lauryn Hill, the person was dying” (qtd in Pareles par. 2). She has since grown more guarded, limiting her appearances and interviews, especially following the release of her second album, *MTV Unplugged No. 2.0* (Columbia, 2000) where she embraced a more decidedly folk aesthetic than can be traced on her previous album. On the album, Hill's penchant for merging song and politics remain intact, as she accompanies her acoustic “sermons” with her guitar playing on subjects ranging from self-determination (“I Get Out”) to liberation (Bob Marley's “Redemption Song”).

While Hill once expressed ultimate high praise for Simone's sacrifice by naming her along with Christ, such valorization has not stifled Hill's agency and efforts to effect

change on her own. Speaking on the complacency of the current generation and our incessant valorization of worthy antecedents, feminist critic, Joan Morgan reminds us that we should have “mad love and respect [for] black foremothers (like Angela Davis, bell hooks, Pearl Cleage, Ntozake Shange, and Audre Lorde, to name a few)” for their contributions to black female empowerment but we must ultimately save ourselves. Thus, she suggests that although we should “consider our foremothers’ contributions a bad-ass bolt of cloth. We’ve got to fashion the gear to our own liking” (23). In honoring Simone, Hill weaves her cloth anew to spin messages for today’s generation of hip hop youth. She raps the aforementioned verse in full,

I could do what you do, easy  
Believe me, frontin' niggaz  
gives me heebe-geebes  
so while you imitatin' Al Capone  
I be Nina Simone and defecating on your microphone

Hill’s verse is a critique of rap music that is increasingly and perpetually recycling a thwarted American ethos—the pursuit of the American Dream or as rapper 50 Cent best espoused, the quest to “Get Rich or Die Tryin.” The American Dream as expressed and touted by many of today’s current rappers is reflected in their problematic videos and rhymes about an excess of women, fine cribs, pimped out rides, icy jewelry, and exorbitant amounts of disposable cash. Just as Chapman’s songs (“Mountains O’ Things,” “Fast Car”) mocked and denounced the pursuit of the American Dream, Hill’s rap rejects it as well, and reveals that her vision is an alternative to the commercialism of other rappers. Taking the lyrics in full context, Hill’s boastful toast is aimed at that segment of hip hop culture, both the youth and rappers, so fixated on materialism that they fail to see the legacy of freedom fighters such as Simone.<sup>27</sup> The legacy of a woman who “defecated” on microphones, read as a woman who (colloquially speaking) “dropped

that real shit.” On *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Hill talks that talk, engaging youth with her verbal rap prowess, her preachin’, testifyin’ and schoolin’, all the while carrying on the tradition of empowerment through music like Simone and Chapman did before.

Citing George Lipsitz’s use of Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of “dialogic” as it relates to popular music, Tricia Rose argues that such a theory is especially useful for examining African-American music. Similarly, Laura Jarmon explains, “The dialogic quality of many black folk expressive forms can symbolize communal harmony” (227). For purposes of this study, both concepts are useful to further explain the dialogue that Hill invokes when she “names” Nina Simone and her constitution as a female MC. Rose explains, “Negotiating multiple boundaries, black women rappers are in dialogue with each other, male rappers, other popular musicians (through sampling and other revisionary practices [such as Hill’s naming], and with hip hop fans. Rose continues her analysis of the dialogic process, which I quote at length for its insightful articulation of the female rapper’s role in the perceived masculine sphere of hip hop,

Black women rappers are integral and resistant voices in Hip hop and in popular music generally. They sustain an ongoing dialogue with their audiences and male rappers about sexual promiscuity, emotional commitment, infidelity, the drug trade, racial politics and black cultural history. Rappers interpret and articulate the fears, pleasures and promises of young black women and men whose voices have been relegated to the silent margins of public discourse. By paying close attention to rap music, we can gain some insight into how young African-Americans provide for themselves a relatively safe free-play zone where they creatively address questions of sexual power, the reality of truncated economic opportunity, the pain of racism and sexism and, through physical expressions of freedom, relieve the anxieties of day-to-day oppression (qtd in Forman & Neal 294).

Rose’s explication of the female rapper’s position is at once also characteristic of the folk artist as I have delineated throughout my analysis. Female rappers implement rhetorical strategies to counter narrate those master narratives that both degrade and/or marginalize

African Americans, particularly women. As well, these rappers serve to bear witness to their own personal experiences but testify on behalf of the collective, which is part of a greater community or nation building effort.

As Lauryn Hill builds upon the legacy of Nina Simone and Tracy Chapman, she too has passed on a sustaining legacy of her own. Writer Christopher John Farley of *Time* magazine cites newcomer artists such as Maxwell and Erykah Badu as contributors to a wave of “emotionally relevant” music part of the emerging “neo-soul” movement. He credits Hill as one of the movement’s forerunners, and claims *The Miseducation* to be “the kind of galvanizing work neo-soul needs: unabashedly personal, unrelentingly confrontational, uncommonly inventive.” In the absence of a sustainable and vibrant socially conscious rap music, neo-soul (with its eclectic blend of hip hop, R&B Soul, gospel, rock, jazz, etc influences) has arisen as an alternative space for critical dialogue on pressing issues relevant to the hip hop community. The struggle to decolonize and liberate the hearts and minds of the community continues, and so too does the work of Black radical female subjects such as Hill.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> A sample from Wu-Tang Clan’s “C.R.E.A.M.,” *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*, RCA, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Along with Tricia Rose’s resourceful fieldwork, the theories of Jacques Attali facilitate my discussions on rap music as a tool of empowerment, and community/nation building, which were instrumental in the territorial battle for Black public spaces undertaken by urban youth during the late 1970s to early 1980s. Such notions of space and empowerment (assertions of agency) are centralized in Attali’s theories as well as hip-hop’s emergence. Attali is a French professional economist who argues that “the tools commonly used for economic and social theorizing (language and mathematics) no longer suffice;” therefore, he proposes a radically new theoretical form in music, the organization of noise.<sup>2</sup> He introduces and develops this theory in his influential 1987 book, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. His intention, he claims, is not only to theorize about music, but *through* music.

<sup>3</sup> Robin Roberts also notes, “female rappers are reluctant about or refuse altogether the label ‘feminist’” (1996, 139). Tricia Rose, Joan Morgan and others have also discussed this issue. For example, Rose explains that for both rappers and many other black women, “feminism is the label for members of a white woman’s social movement, which has no concrete link to black women or the black community” (in Forman 304). She, Morgan, and bell hooks have argued for a feminism that is more practical (less theoretical) and relevant to the lives of women of color.

<sup>4</sup> For more detailed discussion, see M. Forman, “ ‘Movin’ Closer to an Independent Funk’: Black Feminist Theory, Standpoint, and Women in Rap,” *Women’s Studies* 23 (1994); R. Roberts, “ ‘Ladies First’: Queen Latifah’s Afrocentric Feminist Music Video,” *African American Review* 28 (1994).

<sup>5</sup> As part of her project, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture and the Public Sphere*, Gwendolyn Pough’s black feminist analysis of hip-hop attempts to corrects such sexist statements from “self-proclaimed Hip-hop historians” such as George. Her analysis then serves as a both a corrective to counter narrate the masculinist history of hip-hop as well as to illuminate those black female MCs whose contributions of bringing wreck to the rap game was erased and certainly devalued by Nelson’s *his-tory*.

<sup>6</sup> I must acknowledge that other equally talented socially conscious artists who are among Hill’s contemporaries and comparables may be likely and deserving candidates for future such case studies: Ms. Melodie, Sister Souljah, Bahamadia, Mystic, Conscious Daughters as well as many more lesser known, and acclaimed underground artists.

<sup>7</sup> *Contemporary Black Biography*. Vol. 53. Thomson Gale, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Cheryl Keyes comments on Queen Latifah’s feminized Afrocentricity that subsequent to her success, “a few female rappers, including Harmony and Isis, also adopted traditional African women’s attire and dealt with black political issue in their raps” (88). However, Queen Latifah’s immediate predecessor is noted by Keyes as well, for Queen Kenya, a member of hip hop’s Zulu Nation, was the first female MC to use “Queen” as a stage name (190). And, of course, the anti-thesis to this anointed image is the self-described “baddest bitches”. Here, I’m referring to Lil Kim and Foxy Brown who later influenced the likes of Trina, and a slate of other such plentiful though less successful female MCs of this type.

<sup>9</sup> For purposes of this study, which seeks to examine the politics and artistic performance of a “radical black womanist” consciousness (my immediate choice), Sister Souljah is perhaps a more radical complimentary to the likes of Nina Simone and Tracy Chapman. This is especially the case as Simone has the reputation as an angry performer, an angry songwriter, a point she addressed in a 1997 *Interview* magazine article with Alison Powell. As demonstrated with the debut of her one and only solo album, “360 Degrees of Power” (1992, Epic/SME), Sister Souljah’s unapologetic black nationalist agenda is clearly evident on the song entitled, “The Hate that Hate Produced.” She boldly proclaims, Souljah was not born to make white people feel comfortable. / I am African first, I am Black first. / I want what’s good for me and my people first. / And if my survival means your total destruction, then so be it. / You built this wicked system. While Sister Souljah was just as intelligent, articulate, and bold as Lauryn Hill, her militancy, association with the equally controversial Public Enemy, and her perceived “angry black woman” rants deemed her a dangerous threat. Her rhetoric and flow, particularly those that made her a target of President Bill Clinton placed her outside the pale of mainstream America who viewed her as nothing more than a hatemonger and a racist.

<sup>10</sup> The theme song “Welcome Back” was written and recorded by John Sebastian (Lovin’ Spoonful frontman), Reprise Records, 1976.

<sup>11</sup> For further reading on hood representation in rap music, see Murray Forman’s . He expounds upon the themes of space and place within hip hop as “important factors that influence identity formation as they relate to localized practices of the self” (155). Theoretically comparable to cultural autobiographical studies, he further contends that these hip hop “tales of orignary sites of significance that describe local places and place-based activities emerge as crucial indicators for the shaping of attitudes and identities” among hip hop artists (155).

<sup>12</sup> As sociologist Mary Patillo-McCoy suggests, the middle class and their “residential enclaves are nearly invisible to the nonblack public because of the intense (and mostly negative) attention given to poor urban ghettos” (1). In her study, *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril Among the Black Middle Class*, McCoy investigates how racial segregation, changing economic structures, and disproportionate black poverty affect the residential experience of black middle class families, and especially youth (1). Though

her study is exclusive to Groveland, a black middle-class neighborhood on Chicago's South Side, it has far reaching implications for similar residential areas, such as the one where the Hills resided. McCoy's study highlights the effect such unique experiences of middle class privilege and peril had on Hill's commitment to community uplift.

<sup>13</sup> Further in a *Harper's Bazaar* interview she remarks on the ghetto just beyond her, "I remember looking out this window and there was a certain time of day when the sun used to shine on those buildings, and they used to look like gold. Beautiful. And I'd bug, 'cause I knew they were full of wild people, kids stickin' up each other." She goes on to surmise, "But when something is at its worst, there's always something beautiful there too" (204-208).

<sup>14</sup> The greater implication for Krims' Marxist analysis is that he locates what he terms the "hip hop sublime" (reality rap or ghetto life) as commodity. *Music and Marx: Ideas, Practice, Politics* (2002).

<sup>15</sup> Former Rolling Stones contributor Toure' suggests that Lauryn's solo turn was motivated by competitiveness with Wyclef who released his 1997 solo debut, *The Carnival*. See the article "The Mystery of Lauryn Hill" at [http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/5940100/the\\_mystery\\_of\\_lauryn\\_hill](http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/5940100/the_mystery_of_lauryn_hill) for further discussion. As well, Karen Renee Good provides further details. She explains that Lauryn on a brief hiatus due to pregnancy, watched in disbelief Wyclef take center stage to be heralded as the designated "genius" of the crew. Wyclef's album was critically acclaimed and garnered him newfound honors and recognition from beyond Lauryn's golden girl status. Lauryn explains how the publicity waned in her favor to champion Wyclef when the buzz became "You thought the girl was all that? Here's the guy who really sings." Lauryn further details her response, "I was just like, *Whaaaat?* I said, okay, have I been stagnant for the sake of promoting this 'group collective effort'? I was so busy trying to convince the world of how strong we were as a unit" (100).

<sup>16</sup> See for example, Assata Shakur (1987) discussion of education and grassroots efforts for community control of schools in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville section of Brooklyn, New York in pp. 181-83.

<sup>17</sup> For further reading on the liberatory education, see Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). New York and London: Continuum, 1993.

<sup>18</sup> As vividly demonstrated in the infamous Willie Lynch letter, the goal of the oppressor has been to miseducate, manipulate, and colonize not only the body of the oppressed but most importantly the mind. Then and only then could enslaved Africans and succeeding generations become willing participants in the destruction of our own humanity, and the most prized human capacity, the ability to think of one's own free will. The recurring theme of literary/education as essential to Black liberation has been established since slavery, wherein Frederick Douglass' narratives serve as the traditional standard. Early pioneers for education such as Mary McCleod Bethune to freedom fighters Malcolm X also emphasized this importance. In this "post-colonial" world, the arduous process of de-colonization has been the subject of most noticeably third world revolutionary music performers from Jamaican Bob Marley calling "Emancipate yourself from mental slavery/none but us can free ourself" to Nigerian Fela Kuti's similar call on "Colonial Mentality." <sup>18</sup> During the 1960s brief era of radical music, several artists expressed the need for mental liberation such as James Brown's message of race/color pride on "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud" to Nina Simone's praisesong of Black achievement on "To Be Young Gifted and Black."

<sup>19</sup> Black poetry spoken to music—spoken word—emerged during the late sixties to early seventies with performers/poets/activists such as the Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, and the Watts Prophets. Selected discography/published works by these rap elders include: The Last Poets self-title debut album (1970) which features songs such as "Niggers are Scared of Revolution" and "Wake up Niggers" and the 1971 release *This is Madness*. The infamous, inflammatory call to action, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" is featured on Gil Scott-Heron's 1970 debut album *Small Talk at 125<sup>th</sup> & Lenox*, Flying Dutchman Records, which was followed by the 1971 release *Pieces of a Man*. The Watts Prophets released *The Black Voices: On the Streets in Watts in 1969* followed by *Rappin' Black in a White World* in 1971. Nikki Giovanni was but one of several notable literary activists (others include Sonia Sanchez, Gwendolyn Brooks and Amiri Baraka) whose rhymes reflected the turbulent realities of Black life

during the Civil Rights Era and its immediate aftermath. Noted works by Giovanni include *Black Feeling*, *Black Talk* (1967), *Black Judgement* (1968), and *Re: Creation* (1970). Sanchez' notable works of collected poetry include, *Homecoming* (1968) and *We a Baddddd People* (1970) As part of the burgeoning Black Arts Movement (1965-1976), these artists developed oral narrative poems employing the African American vernacular language, the formularized poetic technique, the call and response device, and other folk customs in an attempt to advocate radical political reform at the behest of a Black Nationalist agenda. As such, these poet-activists are revered as the founding elders of rap music, with Gil Scott-Heron in particular, bearing the title "godfather of rap" for his demonstrated prowess on perhaps the most famous of these toasts or spoken word "rap-poems", the oft-cited "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" (*Small Talk at 125<sup>th</sup> & Lenox*, Flying Dutchman Records, 1970). The rap-poem a response to The Last Poets' "When the Revolutions Comes (1970) is a satiric call to action against repressive forces that would rather quell radical uprising with distractions via television with its barrage of soap operas and advertisements. He raps for example: "Green Acres, The Beverly Hillbillies, and Hooterville Junction will no longer be so damned relevant" and in another verse, "The revolution will not go better with Coke. / The revolution will not fight the germs that may cause bad breath." Also, Scott-Heron has seemingly embraced his role as "godfather of rap", for in his poem "Message to the Messengers" (*Spirits*, TVT Records, 1993), he offers words of wisdom to his wayward children who have sold out and compromised the revolutionary and pedagogical potential of their modern day poems. As rappers who speak for a whole generation, he advises that they speak truth and offer elevated messages to impressionable youth who heed their words. He says, "Young rappers, one more suggestion, before I get outta your way/ I appreciate the respect you give to me and what you've got to say/ I'm sayin' protect your community and spread that respect around / Tell brothas and sistas they gotta calm that bullshit down / Cause we're terrorizin' our old folks and brought fear into our homes." This intertextual, intergenerational dialogue or 'message' to these new messengers is a constructive and respectful approach unlike that of other elders (Rev. Calvin Butts and C. Delores Tucker for example) who have wholly demonized the hip-hop generation, which only further deepens the chasm of communication, mutual respect and understanding. Angela Davis and Min. Louis Farrakhan are other examples of elders who have respectfully dialogued with the hip-hop generation.

<sup>20</sup> See 1 Kings and 2 Kings.

<sup>21</sup> See Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1977) 120 for examples of effective subtle and circumlocutory signifying in the Black church.

<sup>22</sup> Hill is referencing the October 25, 1997 Million Woman March held in Philadelphia, "the city of brotherly love" where Black women's grass roots organizing banded together to address solutions to community problems. For a firsthand account and sound analysis of the event, see Sheila Radford-Hill *Further to Fly: Black Women and the Politics of Empowerment*. Minneapolis and London: U of Minn Press, 2000. 99-102. See also, "Million Woman March Seen As Step Toward Unity at <http://www2.cnn.com/US/9710/25/million.woman.march/> and the web site for the Million Woman March Organization 10 year anniversary at <http://www.officialwmw10yearanniversary.com/>

<sup>23</sup> In *Stand & Deliver: Political Activism, Leadership, and Hip Hop Culture* (2004) Yvonne Bynoe questions the prevailing belief that hip hop is a viable political movement capable of effecting social change (as did the Civil Rights movement generations before). She rightly suggests that Black Americans should "construct a more sophisticated dialogue about what constitutes leadership, politics, and political action" (vii). However, her argument falters when she continues, "This understanding should be premised on the principle that political power comes from influence and influence comes from the ability to deliver (or deny) money, votes, or both to a political candidate, legislator, or political party; in the words of MC Lyte, all the rest is 'chitter chatter'" (vii). Bynoe's view of leadership is narrow and admittedly works within the White power structure. In effect, though she acknowledges the many grassroots efforts and conscious rap artists' contributions, she is essentially dismissing them as ineffectual in mounting social policy change. I disagree with Bynoe's argument because I don't believe that rappers have to venture into roles as elected officials to assume or command leadership positions (as she suggest on p xiii). Further, although I don't discourage Blacks' participation in the voting process, such involvement has historically yielded no substantial and effective redress for the masses of Black people. Conversely, politically conscious rappers, such as Hill use their medium (rap music) as a means of consciousness-raising and for

counterhegemonic purposes. Many more, even the gangsta rappers and the commercially-driven ones are involved in philanthropic causes. See Bakari Kitwana's "The Challenge of Rap Music" in *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2002) for a listing of such causes to which rappers have contributed. Kitwana also gives a more fair portrayal and more balanced view of the ways in which rappers have and can counter hegemonic forces.

<sup>24</sup> For further reading on the doo-wop music tradition, see Cousin Bruce Morrow's *Doo Wop: The Music, The Time, The Era*. New York: Sterling Pub., 2007. Also see, Anthony J. Gribin's *The Complete Book of Doo-Wop*. Iola, Kansas: Gazelle, 2000.

<sup>25</sup> It is important to note here that even as I attempt to draw an intergenerational bridge between Simone and Hill's music and activism, Simone declared in 1997's *Interview* magazine that she did not like rap music. In fact, she told interviewer Alison Powell, "I don't think it's music. It's just a beat and rapping, and even though they are protesting against what we have all protested against—racism in this country—[rappers] have ruined music as far as I'm concerned" (qtd in par. 8-9). Simone's commentary on rap music is emblematic of musicians of yesteryear and a large segment of mainstream America thoughts on rap. Such interpretations reflect the typical generational difference between the preceding one and the next.

<sup>26</sup> In "Ring Shout! Literary Studies, Historical Studies, and Black Music Inquiry" [1991] Samuel Floyd elucidates this notion of musical signifying as "troping."

<sup>27</sup> Hill's namin' of and aligning herself with Nina Simone is similar in many respects to socialist rap group Dead Prez's representation of Black Panther Party for Self Defense Party co-founder and leader Huey P. Newton. On "Police State" from their debut album, *Let's Get Free* (Loud Records, 2000), they rap the lyrics, "I'll take a slug for the cause like Huey P./while all you fake niggas try to copy Master P/I want to be free to live."

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION: NEO-SOUL & NOUVEAU FOLK, THE TRADITION

Pass it down to the children/ Pass it down/ Carry it on.  
Carry it on now/ Carry it on/ TO FREEDOM!

Assata Shakur, "The Tradition"<sup>1</sup>

In further tracing musical connections between artists, I use the roll call to summon the current artists who are carrying on the tradition of Black female activism through various modes of expressive culture. The roll call is "a convention of the oral tradition that recalls the names of other freedom fighters who have gone before and celebrates their place in a continuum of struggle" (Perkins 11). Perkins also proclaims that "one of the most exciting aspects of reading several narratives of the [same] period against each other is the way the texts begin to 'hold conversation' with one another" (xvii). As I have revealed in my study, reading texts across temporal and generational differences exposes a dialogic process. Simone recognized the importance of carrying on the tradition of protest singing, "passing it down to the children," and honoring musical antecedents through dialogue.

During an interview, Simone was asked if she'd heard any of the women who had "made it O.K. to be angry in pop music" to which she responded, "No, I heard one girl singing, "You Al Capone, I'm Nina Simone." When asked if she liked that Lauryn Hill evoked her name, Simone answers, "Yes, I just wish she had sung one of my songs." In a seeming attempt to placate Simone, the interviewer says that the songs "belong to you." Simone asserts, "But who cares? There's no excuse for the young people not knowing who the heroes and heroines are or were" (qtd in Powell par. 62-69). Simone's indignant statements concerning paying proper due reveals that she is, then, urging her musical daughters to move beyond simply acknowledging her as an influence, and name droppin.'

Instead, she asks that they preserve her songs of protest for the ages by having them “talk” and “testify” again to current generations. One can only imagine the dynamism that Chapman would bring to “Mississippi Goddam” or the raw emotionalism Hill would deliver on “Four Women.”

Situated at the forefront of my analysis were Nina Simone, Tracy Chapman, and Lauryn Hill whom I regard as most emblematic of a “radical Black female subjectivity.” In choosing my subjects, I looked across generation and temporal differences to identify the women performers who made significant impacts within the music industry and beyond to the public sphere where their music and messages served as balm and battle cry. While Marvin Gaye’s *What’s Going On?* is arguably the quintessential protest album, Nina Simone’s “Mississippi Goddam” is undoubtedly the quintessential protest song that represented the tenor of the Civil Rights Movement. As such, Simone and her musical antecedents, Chapman and Hill, as well as Badu, Soctt, and Arie are suitable figures to study within this context of continuous Black liberation struggle. In hearing the calls that their musical antecedents, mother, Simone, and sisters Hill and Chapman issued, Erykah Badu, India.Arie, and Jill Scott responded in the affirmative.

The eclectic Erykah Badu debuted her introspective and philosophical smooth grooves with 1997’s *Baduizm*. Her current release, 2008’s *New Amerykah Part One (4<sup>th</sup> World War)*, features a less esoteric, more politicized Badu as demonstrated on the uplifting tracks “Soldier” and “My People,” where throughout the song she repeatedly sings these words of encouragement: “hold on my people.” Badu assertively announces: “I go on and on and on and on/ My cipher keeps movin’ like a rollin’ stone/ On and on and on and on/ Goddamit I’m a sing my song.” Her use of the cipher is significant, for it

serves as a self-defining symbol, one that also reifies her sense of herself as a performing artist/activist.

Likewise, India Arie revisits the dialogue surrounding the skin color complex poignantly dramatized in Simone's "Four Women." Arie lovingly sings "Brown skin, you know I love your brown skin/ I can't tell where yours begins/ I can't tell where mine ends." When read intertextually, Simone's angry Peaches is now engaged in a loving relationship where brown skin and Black romantic love are serenaded like in Hill's "Doo Wop" songs of yesteryear. Chapman's travelin' woman has found her place in the sun, and she is now "singing praises and basking in her "Golden" livin', a practice exalted by Jill Scott. In "Golden," self-empowerment and liberation are championed by Scott as she sings out: "I'm taking my own freedom/ Puttin' it in my song/ Singing loud and strong/ Groovin' all day long.../ I'm livin' my life like it's golden/ Livin' my life like it's golden."

Jill Scott displays her range in vocal ability and subject matter as her poetic jazzy sound covers celebrations of love "He Loves Me (Lyzel in E Flat)" to critiques of our increasingly Orwellian government "Watching Me." With hints of Simone, in the latter song, she foregoes encouraging words to emboldened, direct attacks against systemic powers and calls out "Damn can I get that democracy and equality and privacy/ You busy watchin' me that you're blind baby / You neglect to see the drugs coming into my community." Equally relevant politics of Blackness (hair and looks) are given considerable attention to in songs such as "I Am Not My Hair" and "Video." These signature celebratory songs about self-affirmation and acceptance place India Arie's name amongst the roll call of current politically conscious Black female artists, like Badu

and Scott, whose musical messages and compassionate politics carry on the liberatory goals of Simone, Chapman, and Hill.

Despite their commercial success and celebrity status, these artists have maintained a sense of personal and artistic integrity in telling the stories of everyday folk, their common social and cultural oppressions. As such, these women are iconic radical Black female subjects and folk poets committed to breaking silences and transforming their community and the world. Reading these women's performative, personal, and lyrical acts using a multi-layered theoretical framework, elucidates the scholarship of folklore as protest, as a tool for fostering community building and as a site for engaging in subversive Black rhetorical practices. Future lines of inquiry could locate traditional folk singers, such as Odetta and Sweet Honey in the Rock as musical antecedents of this tradition. Still further, looking toward the current musical era and anticipating the next, one could explore the musical descendants of my subjects, those I named in the roll call, Badu, Arie, and Scott, as well as others whose songs of freedom are enabling the Black community to "make it ovah."

While Simone serves as the foundation and musical matriarch for her subsequent daughters, Chapman continues her legacy of meshing music with staunch social commentary and reportage. As Simone's lyrical daughter, Chapman creates music that serves as political activism. As she explains, "I don't think about creating hits...As an artist, you must remain true to your artistic development and not consider any commercial potential" (qtd in Paoletta par. 3). Chapman's artistic vision remains constant, and her unwavering commitment to music as activism is a testament to Simone's influence.

While Hill may be regarded as the least complementary figure, I studied her alongside Simone and Chapman because she responds to her antecedents in ways other than calling for collective organization against oppressive forces.<sup>2</sup> Instead, her message speaks to the ongoing concerns about (mis)education and Black people's psychic well-being. Hill heeds the call made by Simone and Chapman for collective action through revolution; however, her response is based upon the need for re-education and inner revolution. Despite their militant calls to action, her antecedents realized this need as well, hence they offered "Four Women" (Simone) and "She's Got Her Ticket" (Chapman) to which Hill responded with songs such as "The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill" and "Doo Wop (That Thing)." Further, Hill's message and medium bridge Simone and the hip hop influenced conscious daughters, Badu, Scott, and Arie.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> "Tradition," *Assata, An Autobiography* (London: Zed Books, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> For purposes of this study, which seeks to examine the politics and artistic performance of a "radical black womanist" consciousness (my immediate choice), Sister Souljah is perhaps a more radical complimentary to the likes of Nina Simone and Tracy Chapman. This is especially the case as Simone has the reputation as an angry performer, an angry songwriter, a point she addressed in a 1997 *Interview* magazine article with Alison Powell. As demonstrated with the debut of her one and only solo album, "360 Degrees of Power" (1992, Epic/SME), Sister Souljah's unapologetic black nationalist agenda is clearly evident on the song entitled, "The Hate that Hate Produced." She boldly proclaims, Souljah was not born to make white people feel comfortable. / I am African first, I am Black first. / I want what's good for me and my people first. / And if my survival means your total destruction, then so be it. / You built this wicked system. While Sister Souljah was just as intelligent, articulate, and bold as Lauryn Hill, her militancy, association with the equally controversial Public Enemy, and her perceived "angry black woman" rants deemed her a dangerous threat. Her rhetoric and flow, particularly those that made her a target of President Bill Clinton placed her outside the pale of mainstream America who viewed her as nothing more than a hatemonger and a racist.

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## **VITA**

Rasheedah Adilah Quiett-Jenkins was born and raised in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She attended McKinley High School and went on to pursue an undergraduate degree at Louisiana State University. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English with minors in both History and African and African American Studies in December 1999. As a Huel Perkins fellow, Quiett-Jenkins continued her matriculation at LSU to pursue a doctorate degree in English, which she will receive in August 2008.