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# “I Don’t Trust You Anymore”: Nina Simone, Culture, and Black Activism in the 1960s

Ruth Feldstein

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On September 15, 1963, Nina Simone learned that four young African American girls had been killed in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Prior to that point, Simone, an African American singer, pianist, and songwriter, had an eclectic repertoire that blended jazz with blues, gospel, and classical music. Immediately after hearing about the events in Birmingham, however, Simone wrote the song “Mississippi Goddam.” It came to her in a “rush of fury, hatred and determination” as she “suddenly realized what it was to be black in America in 1963.” It was, she said, “my first civil rights song.”<sup>1</sup>

Unlike Simone’s earlier work (one critic had dubbed her a “supper club songstress for the elite”), “Mississippi Goddam” was a political anthem.<sup>2</sup> The lyrics were filled with anger and despair and stood in stark contrast to the fast-paced and rollicking rhythm. Over the course of several verses Simone vehemently rejected the notions that race relations could change gradually, that the South was unique in terms of discrimination, and that African Americans could or would patiently seek political rights. “Me and my people are just about due,” she declared. Simone also challenged principles that are still strongly associated with liberal civil rights activism in that period, especially the viability of a beloved community of whites and blacks. As she sang toward the end of “Mississippi Goddam”:

All I want is equality  
For my sister, my brother, my people, and me.  
Yes, you lied to me all these years

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<sup>1</sup> Nina Simone, “Mississippi Goddam,” performed by Nina Simone, [1964], *In Concert—I Put a Spell on You* (compact disk; Polygram Records 846543; 1990); Simone referred to Alabama in the first line but emphasized with the song’s title the state known for the most violence against African Americans. Nina Simone with Stephen Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone* (New York, 1992), 89–90.

<sup>2</sup> Phyl Garland, *The Sound of Soul* (Chicago, 1969), 176.

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.  
 But this whole country is full of lies  
 You're all gonna die and die like flies  
 I don't trust you anymore  
 You keep on saying "Go Slow."

"Mississippi Goddam" expressed on a cultural terrain pain and rage. It also offered one of the many political perspectives that people in and out of movements were developing in the early 1960s, well beyond the emphasis on interracial activism that predominated among liberal supporters of civil rights. It suggests themes this essay engages at greater length: the political work a song could do and the multiple ways in which cultural production mattered to black activism—far more than as merely the background sound track to the movement, and not simply as a reflection of the pre-existing aspirations of political activists.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the swirling range of ways African Americans envisioned freedom in the early 1960s, activism that had little to do with integration or federal legislation has, until recently, been marginal to civil rights scholarship. Instead, historical accounts have largely focused on, and reproduced, a narrative that characterizes black nationalism, and in fact all demands other than integration, as something problematic that emerged in the late 1960s. What the historian Robin D. G. Kelley refers to as a "neat typology" chronologically and analytically separates liberal interracial activism—associated with a unified national success story—from more radical black activism—associated with the end of a beloved community and failure.<sup>4</sup>

This particular historiographical trend has led to significant, and symptomatic, absences in accounts of the 1960s. Simone's political activism and fiery denunciations of the well-mannered politics of "going slow" were well noted at the time. Indeed, "Mississippi Goddam" was the first of many songs that Nina Simone performed in which she dramatically commented on and participated in—and thereby helped to recast—black activism in the 1960s. In the decade that followed, she was known to have supported the struggle for black freedom in the United States earlier, more directly, and in a more outspoken manner around the world than had many

<sup>3</sup> A rich body of scholarship that takes up these various political perspectives includes Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003); Bill V. Mullen and James Smethurst, eds., *Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism, and Twentieth-Century Literature of the United States* (Chapel Hill, 2003); Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004); and Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert W. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill, 1999). In addition to work cited, scholarship attending to the cultural dimensions of African American activism that has shaped my thinking includes Hazel Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); Vincent Harding, *Hope and History: Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement* (New York, 1990); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York, 1996); and Barbara Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1938–1948* (Chapel Hill, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston, 2002), 62. See also Brian Ward, "Introduction: Forgotten Wails and Master Narratives: Media, Culture, and Memories of the Modern African American Freedom Struggle," in *Media, Culture, and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle*, ed. Brian Ward (Gainesville, 2001), 3. For efforts to complicate this dominant narrative, see, for example, Charles Payne, moderator, "Teaching the Civil Rights Movement" online forum, *History Matters* <<http://historymatters.gmu.edu>>, search: Payne, Charles (Nov. 1, 2003).

other African American entertainers. She recorded nearly twenty albums and received critical and commercial acclaim within and outside the United States; by the late 1960s, Simone had a global audience for wide-ranging recordings that included Beatles songs and those that considered segregation's effects on children, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., gender discrimination and color consciousness among African Americans, and black pride. Many critics from around the world concluded that she was "the best singer of jazz of these last years," who had a particularly "extraordinary presence" in live performances and a magical ability to connect to her audiences.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, beyond brief references to "Mississippi Goddam," she has largely fallen through the cracks of scholarship—on music, on civil rights, and on women's activism. Jazz scholars, for instance, have produced a trajectory from swing to bebop to free jazz within which Simone does not neatly fit. Scholars of the civil rights movement who are interested in untraditional leaders, including women, have tended to focus on rural or rank-and-file women.<sup>6</sup> The relative silence about Nina Simone is not simply a problem of categorization (a song is not the same as a speech) or of recovery (women's historians and others have not appreciated Simone as an activist). Rather, her absence emerges from the ways that certain kinds of cultural productions and particular expressions of female sexuality have often been placed beyond the parameters of African American political history.

Building on the work of scholars who complicate this "neat typology," this essay explores the nature and implications of Nina Simone's activism in the 1960s and the sources for the subsequent invisibility of that activism. It argues that gender and sex-

<sup>5</sup> "Best singer": "la meilleure chanteuse de jazz de ces dernières années" in Maurice Cullaz, "Une Divine Nina," *Jazz Hot* (May 1969), 7; "extraordinaire présence" in F. Hofstein, "Nina: Back to Black," *Jazz Magazine* (May 1969), 13; quotations from French sources were translated into English by Eren Murat Tasar. For her powerful effects on crowds, see, for example, John S. Wilson, "Recital Victory for Nina Simone," *New York Times*, Dec. 30, 1968, clipping, Nina Simone file, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Clipping File, 1925–1974 (Widener Library, Cambridge, Mass.). For a more critical assessment, see Alan Walsh and Jack Hutton, "Antibes Jazz Festival Report: Miles, Peterson, and Nina on Form," *Melody Maker*, Aug. 2, 1969, p. 6. In addition to the songs discussed in this essay, see Jackie Alper, Ron Vander Groef, and Nina Simone, "Old Jim Crow," performed by Nina Simone, [1964], *In Concert—I Put a Spell on You*; Nina Simone, "Four Women," performed by Nina Simone, [1966], *Wild Is the Wind—High Priestess of Soul* (compact disk; Polygram Records 846892-2; 1990); Abbey Lincoln and Nina Simone, "Blues for Mama," performed by Nina Simone, [1967], *Nina Simone Sings the Blues* (compact disk; BMG International B0001ZXMB8; 2004); Langston Hughes and Nina Simone, "Backlash Blues," performed by Nina Simone, *ibid.*; and Gene Taylor, "Why (the King of Love Is Dead)," performed by Nina Simone, [1968], *The Very Best of Nina Simone, 1967–1972: Sugar in My Bowl* (compact disk; RCA 67635; 1998). See accounts that Nat Cole, in contrast to Simone, was initially a "nonparticipant" in black activism and his subsequent financial pledge: "Singers Pledge Money for Civil-Rights Struggle," *Down Beat*, Aug. 15, 1963, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Scholarly references to Simone include Reebee Garofalo, "The Impact of the Civil Rights Movement on Popular Music," *Radical America*, 21 (1987), 14–22; Arnold Shaw, *Black Popular Music* (New York, 1986); and especially the valuable discussion in Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley, 1998), 289–93. For jazz studies, see, for example, Krin Gabbard, ed., *Jazz among the Discourses* (Durham, 1995). Ken Burns's PBS documentary *Jazz* (2000) is a particularly influential example of how a dominant jazz narrative mostly excludes women. For the gendered dimensions of jazz, see Ingrid Monson, "The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse," *Journal of American Musicological Society*, 48 (Fall 1995), 396–422. Increased attention to Fannie Lou Hamer speaks to a more general interest in the grass-roots dimensions of women's activism; see, for example, Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana, 1999).

uality were central to Simone's reception from the outset of her career in the late 1950s onward and to her racial politics in the early 1960s. (This was well before she recorded "Four Women" in 1966, a controversial song about color consciousness that addressed gender and racial discrimination in relation to each other.<sup>7</sup>) More specifically, I argue that with her music and her self-presentation Simone offered a vision of black cultural nationalism within and outside the United States that insisted on female power—well before the apparent ascendancy of black power or second-wave feminism in the late 1960s and 1970s. Drawing on reactions to Simone, to the lyrics from songs on her first overtly political album, and to her self-representations in the United States and abroad, this essay demonstrates that events and issues from the 1960s that are often treated as separate were in fact deeply intertwined: These are the development of black cultural nationalism, the role of women in black activism more generally, and the emergence of second-wave feminism. These were connected and widespread well before the "official" rise of black power or second-wave feminism.

Moreover, Simone was not alone—in her assessments of liberal activism or in her gendered racial politics. She was connected to many cultural producers and activists, men and women. Musically, socially, and politically, she came of age in the late 1950s and early 1960s as part of an interracial avant-garde in Greenwich Village and Harlem that included Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, Leroi Jones (later Amiri Baraka), Abbey Lincoln, Miriam Makeba, and James Baldwin, among others.<sup>8</sup> Her political education began as a result of her friendship with the playwright Lorraine Hansberry; she chose to write explicitly political songs shortly after influential jazz critics censured the vocalist Abbey Lincoln for making a similar move. Certainly, Nina Simone's music and politics stood out in 1963 when she wrote "Mississippi Goddam"; coming just one month after the record-setting March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and Martin Luther King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech, she provocatively departed from conventional wisdom in a moment often remembered as the heyday of liberal interracial activism. Yet she was emphatically not a solitary figure or a voice out of nowhere. Simone is a window into a world beyond dominant liberal civil rights organizations and leaders and into networks of activist cultural producers in particular. She matters not necessarily because she definitively caused a specific number of fans to change their behavior, but because the perspectives on black freedom and gender that she among others articulated circulated as widely as they did in the early 1960s.

The historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has referred to an "emergent revisionism" in civil rights scholarship that has focused attention on the *coexistence* of nonviolence and armed self-defense, of activism in the North and in the South, of local

<sup>7</sup> For the response to "Four Women," see, for example, Earl Calwell, "Nina Simone's Lyrics Stir Storm of Protest," *New York Post*, Sept. 2, 1966, p. 10, clipping, Simone file, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Clipping File, 1925–1974. Simone, "Four Women," performed by Simone, [1966].

<sup>8</sup> For this subculture, see especially Robin D. G. Kelley, "Nap Time: Historicizing the Afro," *Fashion Theory*, 1 (Dec. 1997), 330–51; Simone with Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 66–72; and Judith Smith, *Visions of Belonging: Ordinary Families, Popular Culture, and Postwar Democracy, 1940–1960* (New York, 2004). For civil rights activism in New York City, see Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*.



On July 6, 1963, Nina Simone (center) met with other activist-performers (left to right, Chuck McDew, Lorraine Hansberry, Theodore Bikel, and James Forman) at Bikel's Greenwich Village home; they joined in what the *New York Amsterdam News* referred to as an "impromptu song session." Courtesy New York Amsterdam News.

organizing and an internationalist perspective. Invaluable work on women and gender and civil rights, culture and civil rights, and the transnational dimensions to civil rights activism has increased in recent years.<sup>9</sup> With Nina Simone, these fields of knowledge come together, and we see that cultural commodities, activist women entertainers, and changing meanings of femininity and masculinity were part of what enabled ideas about African American political activism to circulate around the world.

<sup>9</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "Foreword," in *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles outside the South, 1940–1980*, ed. Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York, 2003), xiii. In addition to work cited, for gender and civil rights, see Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, 2003); for culture and civil rights, see Adolph Reed Jr., ed., *Race, Politics, and Culture: Critical Essays on the Radicalism of the 1960s* (New York, 1986); for domestic civil rights in an international perspective, see Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War, Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, 2000). For discussions of gender, culture, and the transnational dimensions of civil rights in relation to each other, see Mary L. Dudziak, "Josephine Baker, Racial Protest, and the Cold War," *Journal of American History*, 81 (Sept. 1994), 543–70; Kevin Gaines, "From Center to Margin: Internationalism and the Origins of Black Feminism," in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham, 2002), 294–313; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993); Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Jazz, Civil Rights, and Africa, 1950–1967* (New York, forthcoming); and Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004).

### “Not Exactly a Jazz Performer . . . a Lot More than Just a Jazz Performer”: Producing a Biography of Defiance

Nina Simone, whose birth name was Eunice Waymon, was born in 1933 in the small town of Tryon, North Carolina. Her mother was a housekeeper by day and a Methodist minister at night; her father worked mostly as a handyman. Simone started tapping piano keys when she was three years old and was soon playing hymns and gospel music at her mother's church. By the time she was five, and as a result of local fund-raising efforts on the part of whites and blacks in her town, she was studying classical music with a white teacher. After high school, Simone continued her studies at the Juilliard School in New York City. She planned to go from Juilliard to the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia and hoped to be the first African American classical pianist. She was dismayed when the Curtis Institute rejected her in 1951.<sup>10</sup>

Several years later, tired of giving piano lessons and in need of money (in part so that she could continue her own classical training), Simone started to play popular music at an Atlantic City nightclub. Under pressure from her boss, she also started to sing and then to write her own music and lyrics. Simone's first popular hit came in 1958 with a ballad-like recording of the George Gershwin song “I Loves You, Porgy.” The song received considerable airtime on the radio; it reached number 2 on the rhythm and blues (R&B) charts and the top 20 in the summer of 1959. Simone moved to Manhattan, performing and recording regularly. In 1959, one critic suggested that she might be “the greatest singer to evolve in the last decade and perhaps the greatest singer today. . . . the greatest compliments could only be understatements of her talent.” Within the world of jazz vocals, a critically acclaimed star was born. Or, as Simone later put it, “I was a sensation. An overnight success, like in the movies. . . . Suddenly I was the hot new thing.”<sup>11</sup>

At that point, press coverage of the “hot new thing” increased. Simone was the subject of discussion in publications that crossed racial, political, and cultural divides; she received reviews in the premier jazz journal of the day, *Down Beat*, and in the entertainment industry's bible, *Variety*; critics discussed her in black newspapers

<sup>10</sup> According to Simone she was rejected because she was black, but she noted that “the wonderful thing about this type of discrimination is that you can never know for sure if it is true”: Simone with Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 42. Simone did not apparently feel connected to a long history of classically trained black women. See, for example, Kathryn Talalay, *Composition in Black and White: The Life of Philippa Schuyler* (New York, 1995); and Allan Keiler, *Marian Anderson: A Singer's Journey* (Champaign, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Ira Gershwin, DuBose Heyward, and George Gershwin, “I Loves You, Porgy,” [1935], performed by Nina Simone, [1957], *Little Girl Blue* (compact disk; Neon B000055Y5G; 1994). See Joel Whitburn, *Top R&B Singles, 1942–1995* (Menomonee Falls, Wisc., 1996), 402; and David Nathan, liner notes, *Very Best of Nina Simone, 1967–1972*. The critic Sidney Lazard, *Chicago Sun-Times*, quoted in Garland, *Sound of Soul*, 175. Simone with Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 66–67. Biographical information is based on consistent accounts in memoirs, secondary sources, and sources from the 1960s, including, for example, Simone with Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*; David Nathan, *The Soulful Divas: Personal Portraits of over a Dozen Divas from Nina Simone, Aretha Franklin, and Diana Ross to Patti LaBelle, Whitney Houston, and Janet Jackson* (New York, 1999), 42–65; Philippe Carles, “Antibes 65: Entretien avec Nina Simone,” *Jazz Magazine* (Sept. 1965), 46–48; and Jennifer Gilmore, “Nina Simone,” *Salon.com*, June 20, 2000 <<http://www.salon.com/people/bc/2000/06/20/simone/index.html>> (Nov. 8, 2001). “I Loves You, Porgy” was one of several songs associated with Billie Holiday that Simone recorded. For Holiday's complex legacy, see especially Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (New York, 2001).

and magazines such as the *New York Amsterdam News* and *Ebony* as well as in the *New York Times* and *Time*. Even before her first performances in Europe in 1965, jazz magazines abroad had praised her extensively. In discussions of Simone from around the world, fans and critics gave up on efforts to define the type of music she played. “She is, of course, not exactly a jazz performer—or possibly one should say that she is a lot more than just a jazz performer,” wrote a reviewer for *Down Beat*.<sup>12</sup>

If critics could not define her music, they agreed that Simone’s upbringing mattered to the kind of performer she had become. In a proliferating discourse, Simone’s “origins story” was told and consistently retold. A profile in *Metronome* was typical:

Born Eunice Waymon in Tryon, North Carolina (population 1,985), the sixth of eight children, her father was a handyman, her mother a housekeeper who was an ordained Methodist minister. At four Eunice was able to play piano; at seven she was playing piano and organ. . . . The story itself is exciting, revealing, an American one.<sup>13</sup>

In the repetition of this story about a poor black girl who had received training in classical music and became a popular vocalist whose style defied musical categories, more was going on than the recycling of promotional materials. In key aspects of her life and in numerous *accounts of* that life—that is, in her own self-representations and as the object of representation—Simone departed from then-dominant depictions of African American entertainers, and of African American women entertainers specifically. As she later described this period, “Unlike most artists, I didn’t care that much about a career as a popular singer. I was different—I was going to be a classical musician.” The story of Simone’s origins in the rural South and the classical musical training she had received inserted African American women into debates about jazz and high culture, venues that had historically excluded them and had favored a certain model of masculinity.<sup>14</sup>

When Simone first caught the attention of jazz critics and fans and this biographical narrative became more common, the jazz world was undergoing dramatic changes. This was a period of musical innovation when musicians, producers, consumers, and critics of jazz engaged in sometimes acrimonious debates: about the “appropriate” role of politics in jazz, about discrimination in the industry, and about the relationship between jazz and high culture, on the one hand, and a seemingly ever-encroaching mass culture, on the other. Scholars of jazz studies have noted that since the early twentieth century, but especially in the post–World War II decades, jazz had stood at a crossroads between perceptions of it as an organic art form rooted in black communities—and therefore “authentic”; as a commodified mode of mass entertainment;

<sup>12</sup> John S. Wilson, “Newport, the Music,” *Down Beat*, Aug. 18, 1960, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> “The Rareness of Nina Simone,” *Metronome* (June 1960), 30.

<sup>14</sup> Simone with Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 65. For gender, women, and jazz, see especially Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: “All-Girl” Bands of the 1940s* (Durham, 2000); Sherrie Tucker, “Improvising Womanhood, or a Conundrum Is a Woman: Race, Gender, and Representation in Black Women’s Jazz,” in *Black Culture, Industry, and Everyday Life*, ed. S. Craig Watkins (New York, forthcoming); and Monson, “Problem with White Hipness.”



and as an elite aesthetic expression. Simone was by no means the only jazz musician whose music and performance styles fans and critics discussed in contradictory ways or who blended jazz, classical, and other music genres.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, it was relatively rare for African American women musicians, many of whom were singers, to be part of a critical discourse about jazz as art. Consequently, the biographical narrative that accompanied Simone's early years as a performer was doubly subversive. Her "origins story" countered a racial essentialism that had historically rendered all black artists "natural" entertainers. The emphasis on Simone's years of classical piano training and hard work challenged the myth, still common in the 1960s, that African Americans were inherently inclined only to entertain. At the same time, stories about Simone undermined a gender exclusivity that assumed that African American virtuosity was gendered male. In the 1920s, for instance, women blues singers had been extremely successful, but many people had regarded them simply as popular entertainers and had associated them with sexuality and working-class urban vices more than with technical skill or acquired artistry. Twenty years later, as the scholar Farah Jasmine Griffin has noted, "even" when a white-dominated musical establishment conceded that African American musicians might be "geniuses," there was still an assumption that this genius in someone such as Charlie Parker had come "naturally" or, in the case of a woman such as Billie Holiday especially, was "undisciplined."<sup>16</sup>

African American musicians had long sought to counter this racial essentialism. They did so most effectively, perhaps, in the 1940s, when Parker, Dizzie Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, and others associated with the development of bebop positioned themselves as highly skilled modernist artists who scorned popular entertainment. But they forged a gendered ethos of African American musical virtuosity that implicitly equated cultural creativity with masculinity. The ethnomusicologist Ingrid Monson has explained how, despite the actual presence of women jazz musicians, the "subcultural" image of bebop was nourished by a conflation of the music with a style of black masculinity.<sup>17</sup> White audiences especially regarded this as a countercultural or oppositional masculinity. Gendered meanings of jazz infused the music with an avant-garde radicalism *and* with associations to a modernist universal high culture in ways that seemed to preclude women.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> For an influential articulation of blues as the authentic black culture, see Leroi Jones, *Blues People* (New York, 1963); for debates about jazz and race, see Ira Gitler et al., "Racial Prejudice in Jazz, Part I," *Down Beat*, March 20, 1962, pp. 20–26; and Ira Gitler et al., "Racial Prejudice in Jazz, Part II," *ibid.*, March 29, 1962, pp. 22–25. For a rich intellectual and cultural history of African American jazz musicians, see Eric Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley, 2002); see also Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr., *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley, 2003); Nichole Rustin, "Mingus Fingers: Charles Mingus, Black Masculinity, and Postwar Jazz Culture" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1999); and Scott Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003). Other African American musicians who blended jazz and classical music included Charlie Parker, Charles Mingus, and Mary Lou Williams.

<sup>16</sup> For women singers having their "jazz credentials called into question," see Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?*, 155; for women blues singers, see Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York, 1998); and Hazel Carby, "'It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime': The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," in *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, ed. Vicki Ruiz and Ellen Dubois (1986; New York, 1994), 330–42. Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery*, 15.

<sup>17</sup> Monson, "Problem with White Hipness," 402.

The Simone who emerged in this critical discourse, however, straddled the worlds of high art and mass culture, of so-called authentic blackness and a universal genius that transcended race and gender. She was a “at least a triple threat artist,” according to the *Nashville Tennessean*, because she had studied classical piano at Juilliard and combined “musical range with her dramatic way . . . and composes, sometimes on the spot.” Pre-concert publicity suggested that a Simone performance at Carnegie Hall would feature an “artistic rarity”: a woman who combined “flawless technical skill as a pianist” and “a superb sense of showmanship besides.” It was no coincidence that, when a seventeen-year-old in England formed a club devoted to Simone’s career in 1965, he intentionally named it the “Nina Simone Appreciation Society” rather than the more common “Fan Club” that peers had formed for African American R&B musicians who had “cult followings” in England. “Because of the kind of music she was doing . . . because of her history in music . . . I felt it was just appropriate to call it an Appreciation Society and not a fan club. It just didn’t sound right to me to say Nina Simone Fan Club.”<sup>18</sup> With her biographical trajectory in place, Simone emerged as distinct from other popular entertainers and especially from entrenched associations between African American women entertainers and commercial culture.

And yet, because this biographical narrative emphasized region and class, the classically trained Simone retained her status as an authentic African American singer who represented her race. Fans and critics repeatedly noted that she was a child prodigy who had grown up in the rural South and had played church music even before classical music. “Undoubtedly, her early training in the church and her years of singing in her father’s choir, contributed strongly to the gospel patterns” in Simone’s music, according to one portrait.<sup>19</sup> Simone, with her rural southern background, was regarded as “authentic”; paradoxically, this was the case whether or not she played music associated with racial specificity or blackness, which frequently she did not.

While critics commonly depicted Simone in terms of both musical virtuosity and racial authenticity, few did so as vividly or evocatively as did Langston Hughes. Hughes was expansive in his praise of Simone’s technical skill: “She plays piano FLU- IDLY well, SIMPLY well, COMPLICATEDLY well, THEATRICALY well, DRAMATICALLY well, INDIVIDUALLY well, and MADLY well. Not just WELL.” Yet, he noted reassuringly, “She is far-out, and at the same time common. . . . She has a flair, but no air.” Her skill, he added, did not distance her from black people or blackness. “She is a club member, a colored girl, an Afro-American, a homey from Down Home.” Nina Simone, he concluded, was as different as “beer is from champagne, crackers from crepes suzettes . . . Houston from Paris—each real in their way, but Oh! How different—and how fake it is if it is not Houston you want but the ‘city of

<sup>18</sup> Joan Crosby, “As the Lyrics Go, So Go the Songs,” *Nashville Tennessean*, Feb. 15, 1965, clipping, Simone file, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Clipping File, 1925–1974; “Annual Nina Simone Concert Due at Carnegie Hall,” News Release from Anne Fulchino, *ibid.* 17-year-old quoted in David Nathan interview by Ruth Feldstein, Nov. 2001, audiotape (in Feldstein’s possession).

<sup>19</sup> “Nina Simone: Angry Woman of Jazz,” *Sepia*, 16 (March 1967), 64. See also Maurice Cullaz, “Nina Simone,” *Jazz Hot* (Sept. 1965), 27–31; and Maurice Cullaz, “Antibes,” *ibid.* (Sept. 1969), 41. For the rural South and the church as repositories for African American music, see Marybeth Hamilton, “Sexuality, Authenticity, and the Making of the Blues Tradition,” *Past and Present* (no. 169, Nov. 2000), 132–60.

light.”<sup>20</sup> For Hughes as for others, Simone simultaneously embodied racial authenticity and yet could not be pigeonholed.

Europeans echoed Hughes when they tended to regard Simone as quintessentially African American—emblematic of racial and national specificity—at the same time that they positioned her as a cosmopolitan figure whose affiliations were not tethered to any one nation. Her performances of songs in French (three songs on her 1965 album *I Put a Spell on You*) and her French-derived professional name reinforced this impression and strengthened associations between Simone and the “city of light.” In fact, some initially assumed that she was a “French chanteuse.” Yet European fans also raved about her unique ability to evoke “the shame” of American segregation and racial violence with her “burning political discourse.” According to one enthusiastic British reviewer, Simone could “take a predominantly white and initially indifferent audience and by sheer artistry, strength of character and magical judgement, drive them into a mood of ecstatic acclamation.”<sup>21</sup> Simone’s background as a classically trained musician who bridged cultural hierarchies enabled her to bridge other seemingly contradictory positions: Critics and fans represented her as nationally and racially specific, on the one hand, and as international and cosmopolitan, on the other.

Ultimately, the status that Simone’s biography conferred countered but could not dislodge the gendered meanings of jazz that were becoming increasingly dominant. From the outset of her career, professional music critics and fans, advocates and detractors, referred frequently to the fact that she was “difficult to work with” and hostile to audiences, across lines of race, if they were not “sufficiently respectful.” At the Apollo, in Harlem, Simone “found out how rude the place could be when I started to introduce a song and people laughed at me.” She declared that she would never play the Apollo again. Early on, critics associated this behavior too with her origins. They linked Simone’s “high standards” to her training in classical music and disregard for mass consumer culture. She might yell at noisy audiences or even walk off a stage mid-show if fans were too “boisterous,” but observers explained that because the “stormy petrel of the piano” had a “deep-felt desire to be heard with the respect due an artist,” she emphasized the “social graces”; Simone insisted that music should not be interrupted and that whether she was in a club or a concert hall “one must be neatly dressed and observe the proper decorum.”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Langston Hughes, “Nina Simone,” *New York Post*, June 29, 1962, clipping, Simone file, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Clipping File, 1925–1974, emphasis in original. For this description by Hughes as a way to promote Simone, see *Chicago Defender*, March 21, 1964, clipping, *ibid.*; and the compilation of reviews that the International Talent Associates, Inc., assembled to represent Simone, *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> “French chanteuse” in Nathan interview. “The shame”; “qui évoque la honte” in Jean-Pierre Binchet, “Antibes 65: Soirées des 24 et 25 juillet (Nina Simone),” *Jazz Magazine* (Sept. 1965), 22; “burning political discourse”: “brûlant discours politique” in Hofstein, “Nina,” 13. Michael Smith, “The Other (More Serious) Side of Nina,” *Melody Maker*, Dec. 7, 1968, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> “Nina Simone Pregnant: Settles Suit Secretly,” *New York Amsterdam News*, March 17, 1962, p. 1; Smith, “Other (More Serious) Side of Nina,” 7. Simone with Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 74. “Nina Simone Pregnant,” 1. Robert Lucas, “Nina Simone: A Girl with Guts,” *Negro Digest* (Feb. 1962), 23–24; “Nina Simone Pregnant”; final three quotations in Lucas, “Nina Simone,” 23–24. For a similar emphasis on Simone’s hostility to fans and to mass culture in accounts of her opposition to bootlegging, see “Trend May Be Set by Nina’s Suit,” *New York Amsterdam News*, Feb. 20, 1965, p. 13.

Simone's hostility, like her hybrid melding of classical and popular music, was not unique. She was one of many jazz musicians in the postwar decades who defined themselves in opposition to mass culture and to fans. Descriptions of Simone might mesh with the jazz scholar Scott DeVeaux's discussion of bebop: "The artistic novelty of bop was such that its defender felt obligated to educate audiences to shoulder their responsibilities as consumers of modern art. To the disgruntled or skeptical, they did not hesitate to point out that a studied disregard for audience sensibilities is the modern artist's prerogative." When male musicians such as Gillespie, Monk, or Parker distanced themselves from Louis Armstrong, when they experimented musically during "after-hours jam sessions" far away from fans, when they incorporated into their performances stances, clothing, and attitudes that conveyed hostility, alienation, or outright rudeness, they were depicted in the jazz press as unorthodox geniuses. As Ralph Ellison noted, white jazz audiences expected "rudeness as part of the entertainment. If it fails to appear the audience is disappointed."<sup>23</sup>

But if rudeness in male jazz musicians confirmed their genius, similar behavior confirmed something else about Simone. The point is not to debate Simone's behavior—which by all accounts was unpredictable and difficult—but to consider the gender-specific meanings it assumed. Over time, she was far more likely to be depicted as "a witch" than as an artist with high standards. "'Temperamental' is one word that is applied to her frequently; 'insulting' and 'arrogant' are also favorites." Critics and fans characterized her as notoriously "mean," "angry," and "unstable" or as eccentric and beset by "inner fires."<sup>24</sup> This refrain was almost as common as references to her classical training. On the one hand, these references placed Simone more in a long line of unstable women celebrities than as a member of an exclusive club of innovative black male artists. As a black woman, however, her status as a demanding diva evoked racially specific kinds of fear.

The repetition of Simone's biography highlighted gender's significance to the racial and cultural politics of jazz in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Her origins story distanced her from the so-called sleazy blues woman and countered essentialist assumptions about race and musical skill by insisting on the presence of women and hard work. It included African American women in the black modernist critique of mass culture that was part of jazz in this period—a world in which "musical achievement had also become a symbol of racial achievement," as Ingrid Monson has explained.<sup>25</sup> Even as an ever-recycled biographical narrative cast Simone as difficult or

<sup>23</sup> Scott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History* (Berkeley, 1997), 8. Bernard Gendron, "A Short Stay in the Sun: The Reception of Bebop (1944–1950)," *Library Chronicle*, 24 (1994), 136–39. Ralph Ellison, "On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz" (1962), in *Shadow and Act*, ed. Ralph Ellison (1964; New York, 1995), 225.

<sup>24</sup> Nat Shapiro, liner notes, *In Concert—I Put a Spell on You*. "Simmering Down," Sept. 30, 1963, p. 82, clipping, Simone file, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Clipping File, 1925–1974. "Mean" in "Simmering Down"; "angry" in "Nina Simone: Angry Woman of Jazz"; "unstable" in Raymond Robinson, "Nina Simone Thrills, Oscar Brown Chills," *New York Amsterdam News*, Dec. 3, 1966, p. 10; "inner fires" in John S. Wilson, "Nina Simone Sings Stirring Program," *New York Times*, April 17, 1965, clipping, Simone file, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Clipping File, 1925–1974. See also "Snarl at Apollo Audience," *New York Citizen-Call*, Feb. 18, 1961, p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> Monson, "Problem with White Hipness," 410.

unstable, it rendered her a defiant figure in two important respects: Her music defied categorization, and she was defiant toward her fans. These qualities were not incidental to Simone's racial politics but were integral to her participation in black activism. In part because of the ways in which this biography of defiance took shape in the early years of her career and the role that gender played in that narrative, Simone was poised, by the early 1960s, to expand the parameters of her activism.

### "Her Music Comes from a Particular Point of View": Performing Black Activism

By 1963, Simone was maintaining a relentless schedule of recording and performing, but she was also accelerating her involvement in black freedom struggles. Well before she wrote "Mississippi Goddam," she supported national civil rights organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and such local organizations as the Harlem Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) by offering her name as a sponsor and performing at numerous benefit concerts. At that point, she did not think of herself as "involved," because she was only "spurring them [activists] on as best I could from where I sat—on stage, an artist, separate somehow." That feeling of detachment did not last, however, as Simone became "driven by civil rights and the hope of black revolution."<sup>26</sup> In 1964, she headlined for SNCC several times in just a few months, including an event at Carnegie Hall that added to her reputation as a musician worthy of that location and as committed to the movement. The following year, Simone's husband and manager, Andrew Stroud, volunteered her "services" to CORE, agreeing to a deal in which Simone would perform at CORE-sponsored fund raisers around the country at a minimal cost. These benefit concerts were very important to the treasuries of civil rights organizations. According to one estimate, CORE planned to raise close to two thousand dollars per Simone concert, considerably more than many other musicians and entertainers raised in benefit performances.<sup>27</sup>

Simone also traveled south to the site of many civil rights battles. The "ever-arresting Simone," as a journalist for the *New York Amsterdam News* described her, was on

<sup>26</sup> For the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), see "SNCC Backers," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 6, 1963, p. 5; and "Sponsors of Carnegie Hall, February 1st [1963] Benefit for SNCC," n.d., microfilm reel 45: B-I-13, #1094, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Papers, 1959–1972 (Widener Library). For the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), see Jesse H. Walker, "Theatricals," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 20, 1963, p. 15. For the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), see "Mammoth Benefit to Fight Segregation and Brutality: New York State Conference of NAACP Presents the Amazing Nina Simone," advertisement, *New York Amsterdam News*, May 25, 1963, p. 14. For the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), see "Nina Sings for YMCA on Sunday," *ibid.*, Feb. 27, 1965, p. 16. Simone with Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 90–91.

<sup>27</sup> For Carnegie Hall, see Julia Prettyman to Nina Simone, May 5, 1964, microfilm reel 45: B-I-12, #1053, SNCC Papers, 1959–1972; Prettyman to Andrew Stroud, June 17, 1964, microfilm reel 45: B-I-12, #1058, *ibid.* For CORE, see Stroud to Jim McDonald, April 26, 1965, microfilm reel 12: E-II-44, #0892, Papers of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE)—Addendum, 1944–1968 (Widener Library); Alan Gartner to Stroud, Aug. 20, 1965, microfilm reel 12: E-II-44, #0892, *ibid.*; Jesse Smallwood to Allen Gardner [*sic*], telegram, Aug. 23, 1965, microfilm reel 12: E-II-44, #0895, *ibid.*; and Simone with Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 108. For \$2,000, see "Fund Raising Department Report," Oct. 1965, microfilm reel 8: B-I-13, #0735, CORE Papers—Addendum, 1944–1968. Other concerts at which jazz musicians played in 1963 and 1964 to support the civil rights movement raised

the roster of stars scheduled to perform at an “unprecedented show” in Birmingham, Alabama, in the summer of 1963. In Birmingham, the American Guild of Variety Artists together with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), SNCC, CORE, the NAACP, the National Urban League, and the Negro American Labor Council cosponsored a “Salute to Freedom ’63” concert. Designed in part to raise money for the upcoming March on Washington, the concert was originally planned for an integrated audience at Birmingham’s city auditorium. When organizers faced opposition from local whites, they moved the show to a local all-black college. According to one estimate, the controversial concert raised nine thousand dollars. Simone also performed in Atlanta and for marchers during the Selma-to-Montgomery march in 1965.<sup>28</sup>

The historian Brian Ward has argued that this kind of visible political engagement on the part of African American popular musicians—those with mass appeal among African American and white audiences—was relatively rare in the early to mid-1960s and that going to the South as Simone did was especially noteworthy. Entertainers risked alienating white fans as well as the deejays who chose what music got airtime. Not surprisingly, when SNCC organizers compiled lists of musicians and entertainers who were potential sponsors in these years, they often targeted a cultural avant-garde oriented around Greenwich Village and the political Left, and they focused on jazz musicians more than on those with more popular mass appeal. Simone was then recording with the Philips label, one associated with sophisticated, elite, and educated consumers of jazz across lines of race. She was performing and socializing at the Village Gate, a place where, as she put it, “politics was mixed in with so much of what went on at the Gate that I remember it now as two sides of the same coin, politics and jazz.”<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to conclude that, because of Simone’s presumed respectable audience and her associations to elite high culture, it was “safe” for her to make the political choices that she did. All performers took significant risks when they supported African American activism. To cite just one example, the album *Straight Ahead* featured Abbey Lincoln as vocalist, with music by the drummer Max Roach and the saxophonist Coleman Hawkins, among others; Lincoln wrote lyrics about race relations for several of the songs, including the title track, in which she warned against change happening too slowly. In November 1961, *Down Beat* published a scathing review. The critic Ira Gitler accused Lincoln of being a “professional

\$984.10 and \$1,354.65: see “Caught in the Act,” *Down Beat*, Aug. 1, 1963, p. 37; and “Hollywood Benefit Raises \$1,354 for Civil-Rights Campaign,” *ibid.*, Nov. 5, 1964, p. 9. For the relationship between jazz and benefit concerts for civil rights organizations, see Ingrid Monson, “Monk Meets SNCC,” *Black Music Research Journal*, 19 (Autumn 1999), 187–200.

<sup>28</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, Aug. 10, 1963, p. 42; “Fund Raisers for Freedom: Celebrities Rally to Civil Rights Call by Helping to Raise Thousands in Cash,” *Ebony* (Oct. 1963), 120–26. \$9,000 estimate in Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 302. See also Simone with Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 101–3; and Bob Hunter, “Singer Gloria Lynne in Her Glory,” *Chicago Defender*, Feb. 16–22, 1963, p. 22.

<sup>29</sup> Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 289–93. For the willingness of deejays to boycott controversial songs, see *Variety*, Oct. 3, 1965, p. 63. For efforts SNCC organizers made, see, for example, “Sponsors of Carnegie Hall, February 1st [1963] Benefit for SNCC”; Charles McDew to Mr. Max Roach and Miss Abby [sic] Lincoln, Dec. 22, 1962, microfilm reel 27: #40-0816, SNCC Papers, 1959–1972; see also Monson, “Monk Meets SNCC.” Simone with Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 67.

Negro.” As a singer she was “wearing” and “banal,” and as an activist she was “sincere” but “misguided and naïve” with her “African nationalism.” This criticism effectively, if temporarily, helped to silence Lincoln as a singer. Although she continued to perform, Lincoln did not release another album under her own name until 1973.<sup>30</sup>

Organization activists knew that they could not necessarily count on performers such as Lincoln and many others who faced threats of critical censure or even censors. SNCC personnel courted stars to get them engaged with the movement, flattered them after the fact, and hoped that African American entertainers would attract even more popular white entertainers to their cause. “I would like to express our deep appreciation to you for your assistance,” wrote Julia Prettyman, a SNCC staff assistant, to Simone after a benefit performance. “It is not often that we are incapable of expressing the beauty of a performance or the extent of our gratitude, but such was the case this time.”<sup>31</sup>

While showing up was clearly a risky political choice that Simone made, she did more than perform her standard “supper club” music at political events. The lyrics to the songs she wrote also changed and became more explicitly political. As one reviewer would later note, approvingly, “Her music comes from a particular point of view.” The album that marked this transition was *In Concert* (1964). Because it was relatively rare for musicians outside of the world of folk music to bring culture and politics together so directly in this period in their lyrics, it is worth considering how Simone made this move.<sup>32</sup> *In Concert* offers a framework for understanding the intersections of gender and music, art and activism in Simone’s career both before and after the album’s release.

### *Gender and Racial Politics on In Concert*

*In Concert*, like other albums by Simone, blended moods, styles, and genres. Over the course of seven songs, recorded from a live performance in New York, Simone moved from tender love songs to more classic blues to folk songs. Simone’s skillful transi-

<sup>30</sup> Abbey Lincoln, *Straight Ahead*, performed by Abbey Lincoln, [1961] (compact disk; Candid CCD 79015; 1989). Ira Gitler, “Review: Abbey Lincoln, *Straight Ahead*,” *Down Beat*, Nov. 9, 1961, pp. 35–36; see also Gitler et al., “Racial Prejudice in Jazz, Part I”; and Gitler et al., “Racial Prejudice in Jazz, Part II.” For Lincoln as for Simone, gendered racial politics that emphasized female power developed alongside sometimes repressive personal relationships in which men dominated; for more on Max Roach and Lincoln, and the controversy over *Down Beat* in particular, see Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?*, 149–90; Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery*, 163–91; and Ingrid Monson, “Abbey Lincoln’s *Straight Ahead*: Jazz in the Era of the Civil Rights Movement,” in *Between Resistance and Revolution: Cultural Politics and Social Protest*, ed. Richard G. Fox and Orin Starn (New Brunswick, 1997), 171–94. For Simone’s stormy relationship with her husband and manager Andrew Stroud, see esp. Simone with Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*.

<sup>31</sup> For examples of such courtship and flattery, see McDew to Roach and Lincoln, Dec. 22, 1962, microfilm reel 27: #40-0816, SNCC Papers, 1949–1972; and Jimmy [Forman] to Betty Garman, Dec. 10, 1964, microfilm reel 27: 40, #0823, *ibid.* Prettyman to Simone, May 5, 1964, microfilm reel 45: B-I-12, #1053, *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Bill McLaren, “Caught in the Act,” *Down Beat*, Jan. 23, 1969, p. 34. For the reluctance of other musicians, see Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*. Lincoln’s *Straight Ahead* is one exception in its mix of culture and politics, as is Max Roach and Oscar Brown, *We Insist! The Freedom Now Suite*, performed by Max Roach, Oscar Brown, et al., [1960] (compact disk; Candid CCD 9002; 1987). Both of those albums are solidly entrenched in a postwar jazz canon in ways that Simone’s music is not. See Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain’t*; and Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?* For more coded references to racial politics in popular music, see Suzanne Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999).

tions between styles and her engagement with the live audience all added to the album's power and confirmed the challenge she posed to conventional cultural categories. Three songs on the album indicate with particular clarity how gendered strategies of protest were consistent parts of Simone's repertoire. Indeed, rejecting any singular definition of African American womanhood was part of the album's racial politics and remained central to Simone's participation in black activism beyond *In Concert*.<sup>33</sup>

In the song "Pirate Jenny," Simone transformed a song about class relations in London from Kurt Weill and Bertholt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* into a song about race, class, and gender relations in the American South. By maintaining ties to the original version, Simone associated her own antiracism with Brecht's antifascism and evoked a historical alliance between African American musicians and an interwar political Left—one that, according to the scholar Michael Denning, "permanently altered the shape of American music."<sup>34</sup> But there were unique aspects to Simone's version of a song about a poor and abused woman's fantasies of revenge. After the ominous beating drum in the opening bars, the lyrics introduced a black woman scrubbing a floor:

You people can watch while I'm scrubbing these floors  
And I'm scrubbing the floors while you're gawking.  
Maybe once you'll tip me and it makes you feel swell  
In this crummy southern town in this crummy old hotel.  
But you'll never guess to who you're talking.

In the verses that followed, the woman envisioned violence and her own empowerment. She witnessed a "ship, the black freighter" come into the town "shooting guns from her bow" and leaving every building in the town but the hotel "flattened." The woman then determined the fate of the abusive town members, deciding whether they should be killed "now or later." In a powerful whisper, devoid of any musical accompaniment, Simone offered her protagonist's answer: "right now."

From the opening bars until the final drum, the song conveyed a woman's rage with the rhythm, instrumentals, and Simone's rich contralto voice—together with the lyrics. African American women and their labor were Simone's point of entry in "Pirate Jenny." They were the means through which she exposed the socioeconomic and gendered dimensions of racism and expressed a fantasy about vengeance. In singing about this fictional woman in a Brecht-Weill song that had classical undertones and links to the Left in an era known for "We Shall Overcome," Simone also rejected

<sup>33</sup> Due to constraints of space, I focus on three songs in which the relevance of gender to racial politics is particularly apparent, but, as noted, Simone made related moves in other songs and on other albums. The focus is lyrics more than music because it was Simone's style of lyrics that changed on this album.

<sup>34</sup> Kurt Weill and Bertholt Brecht, "Pirate Jenny," performed by Nina Simone, [1964], *In Concert—I Put a Spell on You*; Kurt Weill and Bertholt Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera*, [1928], English adaptation by Marc Blitzstein, [1954] (compact disk; Decca B00004X09T; 2000). Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1996), 324. For the relationship between German left-wing modernism and American protest music, see Russell Berman, "Sounds Familiar? Nina Simone's Performances of Brecht/Weill Songs," in *Sound Matters: Essays on the Acoustics of German Culture*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Lutz Koepnick (New York, 2004).



expectations of what protest music might be. "Perhaps it is a masterpiece; certainly it is a warning," suggested the liner notes.<sup>35</sup>

Like "Pirate Jenny," the song "Go Limp" featured a woman protagonist, but here the similarities ended. In terms of genre, "Go Limp" was a parody of folk songs—this as folk music was enjoying a celebrated revival.<sup>36</sup> During the live recorded performance, Simone repeatedly invited the audience to sing along during "hootenanny time," only to mock the participatory ethos of the genre. ("And if I have a great concert, maybe I won't have to sing those folk songs again," she sang in one verse.)

Quite aside from genre, the lyrics of "Go Limp" foregrounded Simone's alternately amusing and ironic interweaving of sexual and racial politics. The song focused on a young woman civil rights activist defending to her mother the choice she has made to join marchers. In response to her mother's warnings, the daughter promised self-restraint: she would remain nonviolent, she assured her worried mother, *and* she would remain a virgin. Simone used humor to suggest that it would not be easy for the young woman to meet these dual goals. As Simone sang in the voice of the young woman,

Oh mother, dear mother, no I'm not afraid  
For I'll go on that march and return a virgin maid  
With a brick in my handbag and a smile on my face  
And barbed wire in my underwear to shed off disgrace.<sup>37</sup>

The high point of this song—the moment when the live audience was most involved—occurred when Simone teased the crowd with the fate of this young woman. Sang Simone, as the narrator:

One day they were marching, a young man came by  
With a beard on his chin and a gleam in his eye.  
And before she had time to remember her brick . . .

At this point, Simone stopped singing. Over the course of the long indefinite pause that followed, the laughter and applause from the audience increased, crescendoing as the audience came to its own conclusions about the implied rhyme with "brick." It was only after this long pause—only after a laughing Simone encouraged her audience to draw these conclusions—that she repeated the verse and concluded:

And before she had time to remember her brick  
They were holding a sit down on a neighboring hay rick.

With these performance strategies and lyrics, Simone played with gender roles and invited the audience in—making them complicit in this bawdy acceptance of premarital sex and the spoof of folk music. Yet she did not cast off her extratextual repu-

<sup>35</sup> Shapiro, liner notes, *In Concert—I Put a Spell on You*. Simone did hold one long high note for her final reference to the "ship, the black freighter"; see Berman, "Sounds Familiar?"

<sup>36</sup> Alex Comfort and Nina Simone, "Go Limp," performed by Nina Simone, [1964], *In Concert—I Put a Spell on You*. On folk songs, see Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996); and Kerran L. Sanger, *"When the Spirit Says Sing!" The Role of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1995).

<sup>37</sup> Simone does not name the race of the woman or of the man with whom she becomes involved. As will become clear, this ambiguity is productive.

tation either. Simone evoked a tradition of black female musicians who sang about sex, but she did so in a masterly performance of bawdiness.

In subsequent verses, Simone explained what had happened to the woman and why the brick and barbed wire had not been more useful. This young woman, sang Simone, agreed to have sex not in spite of her desire for respectability and self-restraint (the brick in the bag and the barbed wire). Rather, the sex took place precisely because of the nonviolent civil rights training that the young woman had received. Activists had taught the young woman two things: to “go perfectly limp” *and* to be “carried away” if anyone approached her. Consequently, sang Simone slyly, again amid considerable laughter from her audience,

When this young man suggested it was time she was kissed  
She remembered her briefing and did not resist.

The song thus invoked the *unanticipated* consequences of nonresistance and of being carried away. In the song’s final verse, Simone sang that the young woman had a baby and the bearded young man vanished—hardly a desirable outcome. Nevertheless, the young woman was upbeat, declaring in the final line that because of the choices she and the man had made, the child would not have to march like his parents did. In “Go Limp,” Simone mocked, but did not quite reject, the value of passive nonresistance as a means to improve race relations. By contrast, in the album’s most famous song, “Mississippi Goddam,” Simone aggressively questioned nonviolence as a strategy. Like “Pirate Jenny,” the song was lyrically and politically ferocious. Here as in “Pirate Jenny,” Simone’s public rage was intentionally incendiary and emphatically unladylike, as far from the respectability of a classically trained female performer as one could imagine.

### *Beyond In Concert: Gender, Liberalism, and Black Cultural Nationalism*

Overall, *In Concert* questioned patient nonviolence, Christianity, the interracial folk revival and the related celebration of freedom songs, and white-defined images of blacks; it celebrated a more racially politicized culture. But Simone’s focus on sexuality and gender allowed her to put women at the center of multiple struggles for civil rights. In “Go Limp,” by inserting a playful sexual narrative into a song about marching, she turned an ironic gaze on self-restraint and nonviolence, hallmarks of liberal civil rights activism. So too, in “Mississippi Goddam,” when Simone rejected the impulse to “talk like a lady,” she effectively claimed that doing so would not halt such discriminatory practices as calling black women “Sister Sadie.” Simone undermined a historically potent gendered politics of respectability that persisted in African American activism of the late 1950s and early 1960s. In a critique of both whites and blacks, she challenged the notion that certain kinds of gender roles were a route toward improved race relations. Her lyrics unleashed a liberation of another sort—the liberation from doing the right thing in the hopes of being recognized as deserving. In both songs, elements that potentially repressed black activism (nonviolence) and elements that potentially repressed female sexuality were linked in ways that



This promotional photograph of Nina Simone, with her hair short and “natural,” circulated widely, if inconsistently, after 1961. *Photograph by Maurice Seymour. Courtesy Ronald Seymour, Inc. Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.*

challenged liberalism itself. In her performance of rage—and “Mississippi Goddam” and “Pirate Jenny” were just two early examples—Simone further defied expectations of respectable black womanhood. In addition to the specific if brief reference to “Sister Sadie,” Simone’s delivery and performance of “Mississippi Goddam” was nothing short of a declaration of independence for “Sadies” everywhere—including in the civil rights movement.<sup>38</sup>

The challenges to liberalism that Simone posed in her songs about race relations led many fans to associate her with black power and black cultural nationalism. Associations between Simone and a racial militancy that was more highly publicized in the late 1960s heightened her notoriety in those years but obscured the fact that

<sup>38</sup> For gender and the politics of respectability, see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Woman’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993). For respectability and the civil rights movement, see William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York, 1980); and Marisa Chappell, Jenny Hutchinson, and Brian Ward, “‘Dress modestly, neatly . . . as if you were going to church’: Respectability, Class, and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” in *Gender in the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Peter J. Ling (New York, 1999), 69–100. For Abbey Lincoln’s musical expressions of rage, see Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?*; and Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery*.

Simone's perspective predated the end of the decade. It differed significantly, moreover, from that of many African American men with whom this militancy was equated.

Black power and black cultural nationalism were fluid and broad phenomena with long histories and multiple manifestations. Both found expression in diverse arenas—ranging from Maulana Karenga's US Organization, which stressed the importance of African traditions among African Americans, to the Deacons for Defense and Justice, a Louisiana-based armed organization for self-defense formed in 1964, and to the black arts movement, with its belief that politicized black cultural producers and cultural products were essential preconditions to black liberation. James Brown popularized (and commodified) these very different impulses when he sang "Say It Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud" in 1968.<sup>39</sup> Political histories of the civil rights movement tend to associate the phrase black power with Stokely Carmichael, a SNCC activist who issued a formal call for black power in 1966, months after organizing a third party in Alabama (the Lowndes County Freedom Organization) with a black panther as its symbol.<sup>40</sup> Despite this diversity, black power and black cultural nationalism were often conflated—with each other and with the Black Panther party, formed in Oakland, California, under the leadership of Bobby Seale and Huey Newton in 1966—and associated with the late 1960s.

African American women participated significantly in movements and expressions of black cultural nationalism and black power. A growing body of scholarship and memoirs suggests that women were leaders, grass-roots activists, and cultural producers. Yet many organizations remained, for the most part, male-dominated; further, in the late 1960s, assertions of black *male* pride remained at the center of calls for black power that were implicitly and explicitly gendered male.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> For diverse arenas in which black power and black cultural nationalism took shape, see, for example, Manning Marable, *Black American Politics: From the Washington Marches to Jesse Jackson* (New York, 1985); Nikhil Pal Singh, "The Black Panthers and the 'Undeveloped Country' of the Left," in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles Jones (Baltimore, 1998), 63; William Van Deburg, ed., *Modern Black Nationalism: From Marcus Garvey to Louis Farrakhan* (New York, 1997); Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*; James Smethurst, "Poetry and Sympathy: New York, the Left, and the Rise of Black Arts," in *Left of the Color Line*, ed. Mullen and Smethurst, 259–78; and Leroi Jones and Larry Neal, eds., *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (1965; New York, 1968), 303. James Brown, "Say It Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud," performed by James Brown, [1968], *Say It Live and Loud: Live in Dallas 08.26.68* (compact disk; Polydor 31455-7668-2; 1998).

<sup>40</sup> See Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (New York, 1990), 276, 291; and Robert Weisbrodt, *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1990), 195.

<sup>41</sup> For memoirs, poetry, and scholarship documenting women's participation in black power and black cultural nationalism, see, for example, Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (New York, 1992); Nikki Giovanni, *The Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni* (New York, 1995); Sharon Harley, "'Chronicle of a Death Foretold': Gloria Richardson, the Cambridge Movement, and the Radical Black Activist Tradition," in *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights–Black Power Movement*, ed. Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin (New York, 2001), 174–96; Regina Jennings, "Why I Joined the Party: An African Womanist Reflection," in *Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Jones, 257–65; Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest, "'The Most Qualified Person to Handle the Job': Black Panther Party Women, 1966–1982," *ibid.*, 305–34; and Sonia Sanchez, *We a BaddddDD People* (Detroit, 1970). For how masculinity constituted expressions of black power and black cultural nationalism, see, for example, Phillip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (New York, 1996); Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*; Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 388–415; and Jerry Gafio Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (New York, 2001), 325–47.

Not surprisingly, then, few Americans, white or black, were likely to associate African American women with the perceived shift from nonviolent civil rights activism to black power. In 1967, one critic suggested that part of what made such songs as "Mississippi Goddam" so powerful was that they sounded as if they *should* have been written by "some black power disciple of the caliber of Leroi Jones or Stokely Carmichael," while in fact they were the words of a "woman who has become one of the show world's most popular and controversial entertainers." A journalist at the *New York Post* cemented the link between Simone and a male racial militancy publicized in the late 1960s; alluding to the Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver's prison memoir, *Soul on Ice*, which in 1967 had shocked readers with its visions of violence by blacks, the *Post* headlined its profile of the singer "Nina Simone: Soul on Voice." From the time of its initial release, rumors had circulated that "Mississippi Goddam," known for its "bold lyrics and profane title," was banned from radio stations in the South and from national television; at least one observer suggested, however, that it "was banned by radio stations because a woman dared put her feelings into song. . . . the principal objection raised by most critics to the Mississippi song was apparently not so much its militant lyrics, but the fact that an entertainer, and a woman entertainer at that, had dared to put them to music."<sup>42</sup>

But Simone had dared to do so well before this observation was made in 1967. She wrote "Mississippi Goddam" and "Go Limp" at a time when black male activists were just beginning to articulate meanings of African American sexuality and civil rights under the rubric of black cultural nationalism. Simone regarded Carmichael and other black male leaders as friends and teachers. Still, her vision exposed sexual aggression on the part of many male activists as potentially problematic. "Go Limp" was a frank satire of masculinist impulses in black activism, in which authentic blackness and black power could only be signified through male toughness and sexual potency.<sup>43</sup> With its ambiguity and tongue-in-cheek nature and with its consistent lack of clarity, Simone spoofed the sexual politics of civil rights activists. It was unclear whether the woman "did not resist" or was "carried away" by her own sexual desires; it was unclear as to the circumstances under which the brick should stay in her handbag (and against whom it should or should not be used); and, not the least, it was unclear who, or what, was going to "go limp." What was clear was that in her *performance* of this song and others, Simone claimed the power of sexuality from a

<sup>42</sup> "Nina Simone: Angry Woman of Jazz," 60. Lee Dembart, "Nina Simone: Soul on Voice," *New York Post*, March 15, 1969, sec. 3, p. 1, clipping, Simone file, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Clipping File, 1925–1974; Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York, 1968). "Nina Simone: Angry Woman of Jazz," 61–62; for Simone and censorship, see also, for example, Cordell Thompson, "Young, Gifted, and Black Tune May Have Nixed Nina's TV Showing," *Jet*, May 14, 1970, pp. 60–61. For more on the impact of "Mississippi Goddam," see Wilson, "Recital Victory for Nina Simone."

<sup>43</sup> See Simone with Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 87, 98. For an early example of black male sexual aggression as related to liberatory black politics, see Leroi Jones, "Durchman" (1964), in *The Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. William J. Harris (New York, 1991), 76–99; for later examples, see Amiri Baraka, "T. T. Jackson Sings" (1969), *ibid.*, 216; and Larry Neal, "The Baroness and the Black Musician," in *Black Fire*, ed. Jones and Neal, 309. For black male sexuality in early R&B music, see Mark Anthony Neal, "Another Man Is Beating My Time": Gender and Sexuality in Rhythm and Blues," in *American Popular Music: New Approaches to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Rachel Rubin and Jeffrey Melnick (Amherst, 2001), 127–39.

black woman's point of view and that this power was central to her vision of black political liberation.<sup>44</sup>

"Mississippi Goddam" and the genealogy of that song also suggest that Simone was among those who helped to create a version of black cultural nationalism as early as 1963 in ways that did not devalue women. According to Simone, "Mississippi Goddam" "erupted out of me" right after she had heard about the church bombing. As she explained it, she had first used materials that her husband, an ex-police officer, had around the house to try to build a gun. Then she realized, "I knew nothing about killing, and I did know about music. I sat down at my piano. An hour later I came out of my apartment with the sheet music for 'Mississippi Goddam' in my hand." The song thus anticipated the arguments that Amiri Baraka would make about the political purposes of culture when he organized the black arts movement in 1965. Baraka and others, however, forged links between black culture and revolutionary politics with associations among militant poems, militant men, violence, and sex: "Poems that shoot guns," for example, were those "that come at you, love what you are, breathe like wrestlers, or shudder strangely after pissing."<sup>45</sup> Simone's creative contributions to black cultural nationalism are important because they indicate that this type of masculinism, and even misogyny in some instances, was not a given, nor was it inherent to black cultural nationalism and black power.

Simone was not alone in this regard. As scholars have shown, black women writers such as Alice Childress, Claudia Jones, and Lorraine Hansberry were among those who "developed a model of feminism" in the late 1950s, in the words of Mary Helen Washington. Beyond the realm of cultural production, in the mid-1960s women in SNCC addressed the intersections of racism and sexism within and beyond the civil rights movement. By 1968, members of the Third World Women's Alliance were just some of the women who criticized black men for defining "the role of black women in the movement. They stated that our role was a supportive one; others stated that we must become breeders and provide an army; still others stated that we had kotex power or pussy power." The publication of *The Black Woman: An Anthology* in 1970 was a landmark, not because the ideas were brand new, but because the editor and activist Toni Cade Bambara captured in this single-volume collective manifesto competing strands of black feminism that had been developing for years.<sup>46</sup> Simone contributed to this discourse early in the decade and on the cultural front where she was literally center stage.

<sup>44</sup> Clearly, "Go Limp" could be interpreted in various ways, at the time and subsequently. I am not suggesting that there is or was one singular meaning or message in the song; rather, the multiplicity of meanings is itself significant.

<sup>45</sup> Simone with Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 89–90. Amiri Baraka, "Black Art" (1969), in *Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. Harris, 219.

<sup>46</sup> Mary Helen Washington, "Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Claudia Jones: Black Women Write the Popular Front," in *Left of the Color Line*, ed. Mullen and Smethurst, 185. For women in SNCC, see Frances Beale, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," in *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade Bambara (New York, 1970), 95–98. Third World Women's Alliance, "Statement" (1968), in *Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women's Liberation Movement*, ed. Rosalyn Fraad Baxandall and Linda Gordon (New York, 2000), 65. For black women and feminism, see also Rosalyn Baxandall, "Re-Visioning the Women's Liberation Movement's Narrative: Early Second Wave African American Feminists," *Feminist Studies*, 27 (Spring 2001), 225–45.



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This advertisement appeared in the *New York Amsterdam News* in 1963. Nina Simone first traveled to Lagos, Nigeria, in 1961; in that same period she increasingly linked her support for American civil rights activism to music and styles associated with Africa. *Courtesy New York Amsterdam News.*

### *"I'd Arrived Somewhere Important": Africa and Black Cultural Nationalism*

While Simone had many influences, Africa was one important resource for her articulation of a black cultural nationalism that emphasized female power and that found clear expression on the album *In Concert*. In December 1961, just days after her second marriage (to Stroud), Simone joined a group of thirty-three black artists, musicians, and intellectuals for her first trip to Africa; the group was going to Lagos, Nigeria, on behalf of the American Society of African Culture (AMSAC). AMSAC, an organization founded in the late 1950s by the activist John A. Davis, was committed to promoting African culture as "high" culture in the United States and to encouraging collaboration between African and African American artists and intellectuals in particular. The trip to Lagos in 1961 marked the opening of an AMSAC West African Cultural Center in Lagos and the beginning of an exchange program between African and African American performers. Simone was part of a group notable for its diversity, in terms of performance styles and gender; participants included Langston Hughes, the opera singer Martha Flowers, the dancers Al Minns and Leon James, the jazz musician Lionel Hampton, and a range of educators and academics. What they shared—with each other and with other African American entertainers who traveled to Africa in this period—was some commitment to an international vision of racial politics and culture as these informed each other. Simone later described her arrival this way:

All around us were black faces, and I felt for the first time the spiritual relaxation any Afro-American feels on reaching Africa. I didn't feel like I'd come home when I

arrived in Lagos, but I knew I'd arrived somewhere important and that Africa mattered to me, and would always matter. . . . it wasn't Nigeria I arrived in—it was *Africa*.

This perspective, romanticized as it was, emphatically rejected then-dominant conceptions of Africa as backward or undeveloped.<sup>47</sup>

Simone continued thereafter to emphasize the importance of Africa to African Americans. She embraced physical markers of black cultural nationalism in ways that joined the struggle of African Americans to a more transnational vision of African freedom, making both visible through her female body. She dressed more frequently in what critics called African garb and performed African music at the Dinizulu African Festival. In promotional photos that circulated in 1961 and onward, Simone appeared with her hair “natural”—an Afro. These styles persisted, if inconsistently, and elicited strong reactions throughout the decade. In a performance at New York's Philharmonic Hall in 1966, Simone “stirred up excitement in her audience,” according to one critic, “by walking on stage in a stunning African motif hat and gown ensemble.”<sup>48</sup>

Simone's appearance and the ways in which she drew on Africa both to perform black womanhood and to comment on racial politics were particularly significant in Europe. “Why am I so roused by different music, different folklore of Africa?” she rhetorically asked a French reporter before performing in Algiers. “Now the ‘gut bucket blues’ . . . and the religious music of our people are obviously attached to our African tradition.” As she elaborated, “that which we are (but that we never ceased to be in reality despite appearances), more and more is something that is very close to Africa.” In England and France especially, such statements, together with her music and overall presentation, offered Europeans an unfamiliar perspective on African American women entertainers. Scholars have shown that entertainers such as Josephine Baker and Billie Holiday had appeal and success in Europe and worked to control their careers but that Baker especially was subject to a primitivist discourse. By contrast, even though European fans and critics, white and black, may have regarded Simone as exotic, her well-known reputation for political activism coupled with the ways in which she aggressively claimed certain styles for herself made it harder for her to be the object of a primitivist discourse. Critics described Simone as “looking almost tribal with her cone-shaped hairdo and an African-type habit,” and they acknowledged both her power and the “vociferous” reception the crowd gave her.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> See “33 Americans Going to Negro Art Fete,” *New York Times*, Dec. 3, 1961, clipping, American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) file, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Clipping File, 1925–1974; and Morris Kaplan, “U.S. Negro Artists Go to Africa to Join in Cultural Exchange,” *New York Times*, Dec. 14, 1961, clipping, *ibid.* For more on AMSAC, see “AMSAC Annual Report, 1960–61,” pp. 1–7, *ibid.*; and James Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935–1961* (Chapel Hill, 2002), 171–72. Simone with Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 80–81, emphasis in original. For a tradition of African American internationalism, see especially Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, 1997).

<sup>48</sup> See “Mammoth Benefit to Fight Segregation and Brutality,” 14; and “Rareness of Nina Simone,” 30. Robinson, “Nina Simone Thrills, Oscar Brown Chills,” 10. See also Philharmonic Hall Concert Program, Nov. 22, 1966, Simone file, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Clipping File, 1925–1974.

<sup>49</sup> “Why am I”: “Pourquoi je suis si bouleversée par les différentes musiques, les différents folklores d'Afrique? . . . Or les ‘gut bucket blues’ . . . et la musique religieuse de notre peuple se rattachent évidemment à



Simone's proactive self-fashioning added to her stature as a critic of American race relations. With her appearance and her performances—especially of “Mississippi Goddam” and her version of the song Billie Holiday made famous, “Strange Fruit”—Simone spotlighted American race relations for European audiences. In doing so, she often reached a receptive audience. “‘Mississippi’ is one of the most emotional pieces that it has ever befallen me to hear,” wrote one French reviewer; others appreciated how she “attacks ‘Strange Fruit’” or raised the hope for “a perfect world, in which a White is worth the same as a Black.” When she performed these and other civil rights songs in Paris, she generated enthusiasm among both jazz lovers and the “general public.” She was, according to one fan, the “darling” of France. A British teenager completed a school assignment on American race relations by playing Simone's version of “Strange Fruit” to his high school class because “she was my introduction to civil rights.” While he had “read newspapers like everyone else,” Simone's songs “totally opened my eyes to a reality that I didn't know.”<sup>50</sup>

Simone was direct about her desire both to educate and to entertain in Europe. As she put it to the French journalists Michel Dellorme and Maurice Cullaz toward the end of her first European tour, she considered herself an ambassador of sorts for her race: “because of the lack of respect that has lasted for hundreds of years, each time I go to a new country, I feel obliged to include in my repertoire songs that proudly affirm my race.” In this context, as a female entertainer who produced and performed certain kinds of music—and who was an object of consumption herself—Simone helped to export American civil rights activism, and black nationalism in particular. Her politics and her performances were deeply and self-consciously intertwined.<sup>51</sup>

Yet Simone was not simply one in a long line of African American entertainers who achieved greater success among audiences in Europe than in the United States; nor did she merely compare non-American race relations favorably to those in the United States and position Europe as an oasis. Instead, she conceived of racism as an international problem. As she observed to European journalists, she had “found prejudice in Britain, in Holland, and even Morocco. . . . Now I love being in London—it has its own personality and character and I love the way the people talk; but I don't really feel any more welcome in London than I do at home.”<sup>52</sup> Simone was able to

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une tradition africaine. . . . Ce que nous sommes de plus en plus (mais que nous n'avons jamais cessé d'être, en réalité . . . malgré les apparences) c'est quelque chose de très près de l'Afrique” in Cullaz, “Antibes,” 41. For Josephine Baker, see, for example, Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (New York, 1998), 103; for Holiday, see Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery*, 99–103. Walsh and Hutton, “Antibes Jazz Festival Report,” p. 6.

<sup>50</sup> “‘Mississippi’ is”: “‘Mississippi’ est une des choses les plus émouvantes qu'il m'ait été donné d'écouter” in Cullaz, “Nina Simone,” 28; “attaque ‘Strange fruit’” in Jacques Creuzevault, “Antibes,” *Jazz Hot* (Sept. 1965), 16–27, esp. 18; “a perfect world”: “l'appel vers un monde parfait, celui où un Blanc vaut un Noir” in Binchet, “Antibes 65,” 22; “du grand public” in Cullaz, “Divine Nina,” 7. British teenager quoted in Nathan interview; see also Nathan, *Soulful Divas*, 53.

<sup>51</sup> “Because of”: “A cause de ce manque de respect qui dure depuis des centaines d'années, chaque fois que je vais dans un nouveau pays, je me sens obligée d'inclure dans mon répertoire des chants qui affirment orgueilleusement ma race” in Michel Delorme and Maurice Cullaz, “Nina Simone: Affirmer orgueilleusement ma race,” *Jazz Hot* (Sept. 1965), 7. In this regard, she was quite different from Josephine Baker and others whose offstage critiques of American race relations were not as central to onstage performances; see Dudziak, “Josephine Baker, Racial Protest, and the Cold War.”

<sup>52</sup> Smith, “Other (More Serious) Side of Nina,” 7. On the “ever-increasing number of jazzmen making their

infuse her eclectic repertoire—including African chants—with meanings that were not solely national. Farah Jasmine Griffin has argued that, when Billie Holiday sang “Strange Fruit” in Europe, audiences could indict racial violence in the United States such as lynching without having to consider histories of colonialism and race relations in their own countries. By contrast, Simone was popular and performing at a time of rising student and anticolonialist activism in Europe; that temporal overlap combined with her own outspokenness and appearance made such distancing more difficult. For example, at one concert in England, she declared that the performance was “for all the black people in the audience.” Whites were shocked, including ardent fans, and were well aware that at this British club Simone was talking to, naming as black—and identifying with—her many black fans of West Indian and African descent and not African Americans. Or, as she told one British reporter, “The Negro revolution is only one aspect of increasing violence and unrest in the world.” In 1969, she questioned assumptions that the civil rights movement had improved the lives of African Americans, but she also suggested that her recording of the song “Revolution” was significant because it was about far more than “the racial problem.”<sup>53</sup>

Here too—when she located American race relations in an international context in ways that drew attention to gender as well as race—Simone was part of a larger cohort of black women who evoked international as well as American issues in discussions of race. The exiled South African singer Miriam Makeba’s years of anti-apartheid activism were joined to American calls for black power when she married Stokely Carmichael in 1968, for example. Based in New York, members of the Third World Women’s Alliance offered a global and economic perspective on interlocking gender and racial inequities. African American expatriate women in Ghana articulated political agendas in which gender equity was central.<sup>54</sup> It was in this context that Simone used her body, her music, and her words to forge links between Africa and African Americans and disseminated ideas about black freedom that were not specifically about the United States.

### *Black Activism and Feminism, or Movements in Motion*

It is worth emphasizing that Nina Simone was making these interventions and claiming these styles early in the 1960s. She was part of a larger group that Robin Kelley

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homes in Europe,” see “Americans in Europe, a Discussion,” *Down Beat*, July 2, 1964, pp. 64–73, esp. 64; Joachim Berendt, “Americans in Europe, a Dissident View,” *ibid.*, Sept. 10, 1965, p. 19; and Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (Boston, 1996).

<sup>53</sup> See Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery*, 106. Nathan interview. Smith, “Other (More Serious) Side of Nina,” 7. Royston Eldridge, “Nina’s the Medium for the Message,” *Melody Maker*, April 19, 1969, p. 5; to Eldridge, Simone offered more positive assessments of race relations in Europe. Nina Simone, “Revolution,” performed by Nina Simone, [1969], *To Love Somebody—Here Comes the Sun* (compact disk; BMG Entertainment 74321 924792; 2002).

<sup>54</sup> See Miriam Makeba with James Hall, *Miriam Makeba: My Story* (New York, 1987), 111–16; Helen A. Neville and Jennifer Hamer, “‘We Make Freedom’: An Exploration of Revolutionary Black Feminism,” *Journal of Black Studies*, 31 (March 2001), 451–52; Becky Thompson, “Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism,” *Feminist Studies*, 28 (Summer 2002), 337–55; and Gaines, “From Center to Margin,” 305.



Nina Simone performs at Lorraine Hansberry's funeral at the Presbyterian Church of the Master in Harlem on January 16, 1965. As a result of her friendship with Hansberry, Simone later explained, "I started to think about myself as a black person in a country run by white people and a woman in a world run by men." *Courtesy Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.*

has identified in the late 1950s and early 1960s as "black poets, writers, musicians . . . for whom the emancipation of their own artistic form coincided with the African freedom movement." As has become clear, women cultural producers played a significant part in this turn-of-the-decade subculture; the jazz singer Abbey Lincoln, the folk singer Odetta, the actress Cicely Tyson, and the fictional Beneatha, heroine of Lorraine Hansberry's landmark play *A Raisin in the Sun*, were just some of the other women who wore their hair in Afros in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Simone's shift from a glamorous performer to a singer with a militant physical presentation associated with black power and Africa became more consistent after 1965, but it was not new to that period. What was relatively new was that the Afro and other styles became widespread among black male militants—sufficiently so to make it seem that anyone who had done so prior to that point was "early." Individually, each woman might seem to have been ahead of the times. Taken together, we can begin to see how

much our sense of the times and the ways in which we narrate black activism and black cultural nationalism have tended not to include women.<sup>55</sup>

This point has historical and historiographical implications. Scholars have become more aware that black cultural nationalism was ascendant well before the late 1960s—that the liberal political activism and the beloved community of the early 1960s did not simply give way to the more radical cultural nationalism of the late 1960s. Simone highlights the centrality of African American women to this reperiodization and the relevance of black feminism to black activism more generally.<sup>56</sup> Songs from *In Concert* and Simone's subsequent performance strategies suggest how women forged black cultural nationalism through the prism of gender and did not just critique the assumptions about masculinity in black power and black cultural nationalism after the fact, important as those later critiques were.<sup>57</sup>

The ways in which Simone played with gender roles and cultural categories—how she could be said to have been “improvising womanhood,” as the historian Sherrie Tucker has formulated that idea—indicate, too, that a concern with gender politics did not necessarily develop out of or after concerns with civil rights and racial politics. In other words, black women's role in black activism has implications for analyses of second-wave feminism. In her autobiography, Simone located “sisterhood” as the central catalyst to her politicization around race. It was her friend Lorraine Hansberry, she wrote, who launched her “political education” in 1961 and “first took me out of myself and allowed me to see the bigger picture.” As a result of Hansberry's influence, “I started to think about myself as a black person in a country run by white people and a woman in a world run by men.” In the 1960s and subsequently, Simone emphasized how constitutive gender solidarity was to her “political education.” When she introduced “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black,” a song that became an anthem of black pride and reached the top 10 on the R&B charts in 1969, Simone repeatedly paid tribute to Hansberry, who had died in 1965. At a concert in Berkeley, she exhorted her audience to sing the chorus of the upcoming song with her and then explained, “this song is dedicated to the memory of my dear, dear friend whom I miss very much, and if I don't control myself, I could talk about all night. Lorraine Hansberry, who wrote ‘Raisin in the Sun’ and died before her time.” Here and elsewhere, Simone made relationships between women central to the very idea of

<sup>55</sup> Kelley, “Nap Time,” 344; for other women and for the role of the fashion industry in this process, see *ibid.*, 330–51; see also Smith, *Visions of Belonging*. Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959; New York, 1961); For an emphasis on the late 1960s, see, for example, William Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965–1975* (Chicago, 1992), esp. 192–204. For the dominance of white male new leftists in scholarship on the 1960s, see Alice Echols, “‘We Gotta Get Out of This Place’: Notes toward a Remapping of the Sixties,” *Socialist Review*, 92 (no. 2, 1992), 9–33.

<sup>56</sup> In addition to works cited, for reperiodizing the sixties, see also, for example, James C. Hall, *Mercy, Mercy Me: African American Culture and the American Sixties* (New York, 2001); for the centrality of African American women to such a reperiodization, see Gaines, “From Center to Margin”; and E. Frances White, “Africa on My Mind: Gender, Counterdiscourse, and African American Nationalism,” in *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability*, ed. E. Frances White (1990; Philadelphia, 2001), 117–50.

<sup>57</sup> For examples of black feminist critiques, see Bambara, ed., *Black Woman*; and “Combahee River Collective, a Black Feminist Statement” (1977), in *The Black Feminist Reader*, ed. Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (Malden, 2000), 261–70. While many of the ideas in the anthology *Black Woman* took shape earlier in the 1960s, other selections were reactions to events in the mid- to late 1960s—to the (in)famous Moynihan report (Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” 1965), among others.

black pride. She later noted that in the early 1960s she and her more politically informed friend had “never talked about men or clothes or other such inconsequential things when we got together. It was always Marx, Lenin, and revolution—real girls’ talk.”<sup>58</sup> As in her songs, Simone reversed the usual model in which women first joined civil rights organizations only to have issues of gender inequities dawn on them.

It would be anachronistic to impose second-wave feminism onto Nina Simone in 1963 and 1964. As suggested, in the titillating “Go Limp,” for example, Simone played with an older tradition of African American female singers who had sung about sex as much as she anticipated a tradition of second-wave feminists who would write about sex. Nevertheless, in considering how protest and politics converged in Simone’s music, it is important to see that gender and sexuality informed her denunciation of racial discrimination. Elements of what we now call feminism were prefigured in this music and were integrally linked to her black activism generally. Finally, it is important to recall the relevance of Simone’s experiences in and attitudes toward places beyond the United States. The historian Kevin Gaines has shown that there was, in the early 1960s, an “affinity” between an “articulation of black feminism and the rhetoric of internationalism.” This “affinity” was evident in Simone’s career even though she was not a political leader, a traditional intellectual, or a diplomat. Instead, through her position as an African American female entertainer she absorbed and disseminated a gendered vision of black freedom and culture, one that was not based only on national specificity, in ways that were eminently consumable by her many fans.<sup>59</sup>

### “Not Luxury, Not Leisure, Not Entertainment, but the Lifeblood of a Community”: Culture and Civil Rights Scholarship

Over the course of the 1960s, Nina Simone stood out in several respects. Her music defied categorization, blurring the lines between jazz, classical, folk, blues, and soul music; representations of her as a performer with classical training who blended many styles made it impossible to fit her into any one musical genre. With her explicitly political lyrics as early as 1963, Simone defied a liberal civil rights ethos. Finally, by making gender central to her radical racial politics, she unlinked what

<sup>58</sup> Tucker, “Improvising Womanhood, or a Conundrum Is a Woman.” Simone with Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 86–87. Nina Simone and Weldon Irvine Jr., “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black,” performed by Nina Simone, [1969], *Nina Simone, Platinum Series*; Nathan, liner notes, *Very Best of Nina Simone, 1967–1972*. Simone with Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 86–87. For a now-classic analysis of feminism developing out of and after a commitment to civil rights, see Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York, 1979).

<sup>59</sup> For sexuality and women blues singers, see Carby, “‘It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime’”; for sexuality and second-wave feminism, see Jane Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought* (New York, 2001). Gaines, “From Center to Margin,” 20. The AMSAC trip to Nigeria in 1961 received widespread coverage in the black and white press and across a political spectrum of liberal and radical publications; see, for example, “African-American Cultural Exchange: Nigerian and U.S. Negro Artists Blend Talents at AMSAC Festival in Lagos,” *Ebony* (March 1962), 87–94; for critical accounts from Africa, see Francesca Pereira, “AMSAC Festival Was a Pleasure,” *Lagos Daily Times*, Dec. 30, 1961, clipping, AMSAC file, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Clipping File, 1925–1974.

some radical men had linked: racial progress, racial power, and masculine sexual power. Because she was a performer whose fans cut across lines of race, class, gender, and nation, these multiple levels of defiance set Simone apart, reinforcing both her celebrity and her notoriety in the 1960s.

Those same qualities have made it hard to incorporate Simone into historical analyses of the 1960s, whether the subject is music, gender, racial politics, or the areas of considerable overlap between them. Assumptions about what kind of culture and what types of heroes mattered at different points in the 1960s have contributed to Simone's relative invisibility. Simone was not particularly easy to look up to or glorify, and she was by no means a movement leader. Of equal if not greater significance, she was never a traditional jazz singer, and she dramatically departed from the freedom songs we associate with the early to mid-1960s—the ubiquitous “We Shall Overcome,” “This Little Light of Mine,” and “Go Tell It on the Mountain,” to name only a few.

While these songs did (and do) have power and appeal, it took work and time to produce this freedom song canon. It took shape in 1963–1964 in songbooks and albums that SNCC used for fund raising, for instance, and in tours that the Freedom Singers and others gave. According to editors of the anthology *Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement through its Songs*, whose first part was originally published in 1963, freedom songs were “sung to bolster spirits, to gain new courage and to increase the sense of unity.” This canon-in-the-making tended to include songs that were easy for large numbers of people to sing (with relatively few lyrics, in other words); songs that were adapted from church music (“spiritual after spiritual after spiritual began to appear with new words and changes,” according to the activist C. T. Vivian); and songs that were “unrehearsed” or “improvisational.” Many songs came out of the Highlander Folk School where black and white activists had spent time, evoking associations with interracialism and with an ethos of folk music as pure, authentic, and noncommercial.<sup>60</sup>

The process of canon formation that took place in the mid-1960s reinforced a myth that still persists: that authentic civil rights music in the period before 1965 meant rural, noncommercial, grass-roots, church-inspired freedom songs that were the sound track to the nonviolent movement. The iconic power of freedom songs has made it difficult to incorporate into analyses of culture and black activism other cultural expressions from this same period that had opposing qualities—more urban-based, commercial, or complicated compositions with themes of sex or violence, for instance. Songs with overt sexual content such as “Go Limp,” songs that considered

<sup>60</sup> For SNCC fund-raising efforts and the Freedom Singers, see, for example, the brochure *Freedom Gifts: Posters, Books, Holiday Seals, Calendar*, n.d., microfilm reel 27, #39: 0748-50, SNCC Papers, 1959–1972; and Dinky Romilly to Irwin Silver, Feb. 25, 1964, microfilm reel 27, #34: 0122, *ibid.* Guy Carawan and Candie Carawan, eds., *Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement through Its Songs* (1963, 1968; Bethlehem, Penn., 1990); “Mississippi Goddam” was included in the second volume of this anthology. Guy Carawan and Candie Carawan, “Introduction,” *ibid.*, 12. C. T. Vivian quoted *ibid.*, 4; *Black Music Research Journal* (1987) quoted *ibid.*, 5. For the Highlander Folk School and folk music, see Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill, 2000), 3; and Miles Horton with Judith Kohl and Herbert Kohl, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography* (New York, 1990).

the whole country implicated in racism, and songs that did not necessarily embrace nonviolence such as “Mississippi Goddam” became something other than authentic freedom songs. Those are not the melodies worthy of recuperation in public schools eager to commemorate Martin Luther King Day every January.<sup>61</sup>

In other words, the political, commercial, and ideological choices activists made in the 1960s as they produced the canon of freedom songs continue to reverberate and in some instances have been reinscribed. In a stirring introduction to the multi-disk collection *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs, 1960–1966*, the scholar, musician, and activist Bernice Johnson Reagon wrote that the “struggle for freedom” revealed “culture to be not luxury, not leisure, not entertainment, but the lifeblood of a community.” It was, she added, “the first time that I know the power of song to be an instrument for the articulation of our community concerns.” Given those assessments, the absence of Simone from this forty-three-song compilation in which a major goal was to document a “series of musical images, seen both distantly and at close range, of a people in conversation about their determination to be free” is telling.<sup>62</sup> One result of this absence is that the politics of sex and gender have been segregated from the politics of race—far more so, in fact, than they were at the time.

In the 1970s, Nina Simone suffered a series of setbacks. Her second marriage ended, she had numerous financial difficulties and legal conflicts with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), and, with the decline in African American activism and the repression of black radicalism by the U.S. government, she grew increasingly pessimistic, if not despairing. In the face of considerable personal, legal, and political difficulties, she performed and recorded infrequently. Simone led a peripatetic if not nomadic life, living in Barbados, Liberia, France, and Switzerland over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, returning to the United States only briefly.<sup>63</sup>

When Simone died in April 2003, obituary writers from around the world affirmed her relationships to civil rights activism, and some referred to her internationalism. At the funeral service in France, Miriam Makeba offered the “condolences

<sup>61</sup> For freedom songs in contrast to “entertainment,” see R. Serge Denisoff, “Protest Songs: Those on the Top Forty and Those of the Streets,” *American Quarterly*, 22 (Winter 1970), 807–23; for blues collectors and scholars in the 1930s who “expurgated” the sexual songs of blues, see Hamilton, “Sexuality, Authenticity, and the Making of the Blues Tradition,” 146.

<sup>62</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagon, “The Song Culture of the Civil Rights Movement,” liner notes, *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs, 1960–1966* [1980] (compact disk; Smithsonian Folkways Recordings 40084; 1997). Reagon’s contributions to the movement and to scholarship on black activism have been invaluable. See, for example, Bernice Johnson Reagon, ed., *Black American Culture and Scholarship: Contemporary Issues* (Washington, 1985); *The Songs Are Free*, Bernice Johnson Reagon with Bill Moyers, dir. Gail Pellett (Public Affairs Television, 1991) (one videotape; Mystic Fire Video, 2001); and Bernice Johnson Reagon, *If You Don’t Go, Don’t Hinder Me: The African American Sacred Song Tradition* (Lincoln, 2001). Copyright issues may have been one among many variables that played a part in assembling the wonderful *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement* collection; I raise this example simply as a way to consider what is absent as well as what is present and to see how narratives about culture and civil rights assume authority and get perpetuated.

<sup>63</sup> See Nathan, *Soulful Divas*, 60–63; and “Nina Simone Ends Voluntary Exile from U.S.,” *Jet*, April 22, 1985, pp. 54–55.

of the whole South Africa,” and according to some accounts Simone’s cremated body was to be scattered across several African countries. Many reports, however, depicted Simone as a historical relic from a bygone era or as an entertainer who had supplied background music for the civil rights movement more than as an activist in her own right. Even in acknowledging her contributions, then, this coverage implicitly reinforced a dichotomy between culture and politics.<sup>64</sup>

Today, it is all too easy to document the ways in which politics is shaped, if not supplanted, by entertainment and popular culture. One might forget that creative and productive meshings of progressive political movements and cultural commodities seemed possible in the 1960s; further, many people concluded that to do so would invigorate and transform both arenas. As Simone explained to a *Time* reporter in 1969, “‘When I’m on that stage . . . I don’t think I’m just out there to entertain.’” The journalist then elaborated, “Nina is a Negro and proud of it: she is out there to share with audience what Soul Singer Ray Charles calls her ‘message things.’”<sup>65</sup>

It is worthwhile for historians of politics as well as historians of culture to take these assertions seriously. Simone, on and off stage and in and out of the United States, was a political subject. She points to the importance of getting past cultural and political hierarchies that took shape in the 1960s and subdisciplinary divides that have persisted subsequently. Nina Simone’s stardom over the course of the 1960s—her music, her activism, her reception and self-presentation, and the intersection of all of these in her highly visible public persona—helps us to render black activism in all of its richness.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Richard Harrington, “Nina Simone, a Voice to Be Reckoned With,” *Washington Post*, April 22, 2003, sec. C, p. 1; and John Fordham, “Nina Simone: Soul-Jazz Diva Whose Music Spoke of Love, Respect, and Their Opposites—Particularly in Relation to Race,” *Guardian Review*, April 22, 2003, p. 23. Miriam Makeba quoted in Susan Bell, “Friends and Family Pay Their Tributes to Jazz Legend’s Political Courage at Packed Funeral,” *Scotsman*, April 26, 2003, p. 17. Exceptions include Craig Seymour, “An Appreciation: Nina Simone’s Voice Fused Art, Politics,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, April 23, 2003, p. 1E.

<sup>65</sup> “More than an Entertainer,” *Time*, Feb. 21, 1969, clipping, Simone file, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Clipping File, 1925–1974.