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NINA SIMONE'S TRIPLE PLAY

by Daphne A. Brooks

Listen to the opening notes of Nina Simone's remarkable 1957 debut album *Little Girl Blue* and one hears a performer asserting her intentions, throwing down the glove: the exuberant "motor running-running" (Dobie 232) trademark vocals, the playfully virtuosic dance of a pianist's velocity that turns the tempo of a Duke Ellington classic inside out and breaks open the melody to mine the ironically pulsating energy, the propulsive beat of non-stop "indigo" heartbreak. As jazz critic Scott Yanow states in the liner notes to the album, Simone's take on Ellington was one of many "unexpected" and "memorable" twists that introduced the artist to the world. "[R]ather than begin the [recording] with one of her more accessible vocals," says Yanow, "Simone starts out with a surprisingly up tempo and abstract piano exploration of 'Mood Indigo' before her vocal makes the song a bit more recognizable" (Yanow). It remains the first (public) record(ing) of Nina Simone's counterintuitive brilliance as an artist who defied the center, ran circles in the margins, and wove together "highbrow" and "lowbrow" forms to create an off-beat repertoire that was, some might argue, "emo" before "emo," Afropunk, folk eclectic, jazz torch song magic.¹

No one critical apparatus can sustain a sufficient reading of Nina Simone, an artist celebrated in part for having stylized a heterogeneous musical repertoire of songs for nearly four decades. A classically-trained pianist who shifted into jazz, pop, cabaret, and folk performing in the mid 1950s as a way to support her education and subsequently to shore up her income, Simone gained notoriety for having moved fluidly from playing the music hall chanteuse by covering Gershwin's "I Loves You Porgy" (inspired by Billie Holiday's interpretation) and the Norwegian folk lilt of "Black is the Color of My True Lover's Hair" to "Duke Ellington compositions, Israeli folk songs, and songs by the Bee Gees" (Bernstein B6). She was the ultimate queen of popular music "crossover" in the most exhilarating and unconventional sense of the word, and she deftly and consistently called upon this ability to mix and match musical forms as a way to break free of the racial and gender circumscriptions placed upon her in popular music culture. Simone frequently commented on the significance of her generic moves, boldly proclaiming that "'It's always been my aim to stay outside any category'. 'That's my freedom,'" she insisted to one reporter. But it was a "freedom" that, according to biographer David Nathan, "drove industry pundits and the music press crazy as they tried to categorize her" (Nathan 232).

**“There Must Be Some Kind of a Way
Out of This Place”: Nina Simone’s Musical Maroonage**

In many ways, Nina Simone would shape the bulk of her career in response to an aesthetic conundrum: what should a black female artist sound like? Some of Simone’s most famous song titles summed up this query. Through her music she sought to make her listeners grasp how “it would feel to be free” and to be “young, gifted, and black,” as well as female. Her songs thus served as sonic struggles in and of themselves, as embattled efforts to elude generic categorizations as a black female performer. These points would likewise resonate throughout much of Simone’s intense and absorbing memoir, *I Put a Spell On You*, a text in which the artist assails the cultural myopia of critics too obtuse to read the aesthetic range and complexities of her material. “[S]aying what sort of music I played,” Simone observes, “gave the critics problems because there was something from everything in there” (Simone and Cleary 68–69). For Simone, the constant (and, in her mind, completely erroneous) comparisons to Billie Holiday were signs of the music press’s inability to read the depth of diversity in black female musical expression. People, she argues, “couldn’t get past the fact we were both black. . . . Calling me a jazz singer was a way of ignoring my musical background because I didn’t fit into white ideas of what a black performer should be” (Simone and Cleary 68–69). As a response to these narrow definitions of black sound, Simone turned other corners and crossed over and out of constricting musical divides, challenging her audiences to consider and perhaps more importantly to listen for the meaning of liberation in black female performance. In this way, to rock critic Dave Marsh, she was the consummate “Freedom Singer,” someone who “lived and sang like a person who not only counted on the promise but lived in the actuality of the American Dream” (Marsh v).²

No doubt, she lived that “Dream” of aesthetic entitlement with tenacity in the Jim Crow south while being raised as a child prodigy whose virtuosic capabilities would realize the perfectionist strivings of middle-class parents. Born Eunice Waymon in 1933 to a family headed by a father who was a business entrepreneur and a mother who was an ordained Methodist minister in Tryon, North Carolina, Simone began playing piano when she was three years old and went on to perform hymns and gospel music at her mother’s church. By the age of five and with the help of local community fundraising, she was studying classical music. But according to Simone (who adopted her stage name, in part, from her favorite French film actress Simone Signoret), it was her musical genius that also set her apart from her family as well as her peers. “I knew,” she observes, “I wasn’t like everybody else, I wasn’t like them anymore” (Simone and Cleary 25). “No one in the family,” she continues, “knew how isolated my music made me” (Simone and Cleary 30).

The *I Put A Spell On You* memoir in fact frames this social and cultural isolation as a factor that fostered and nurtured in Simone her experimental wanderlust as a musician, as well as a kind of fearless, non-conformist streak. Simone recalls how, from the earliest age forward, she “had no preference for any individual style. In fact, I liked to play as many different styles as possible” (Simone and Cleary 17). Obsessed with aesthetic excellence and performative virtuosity instilled in her in part by her beloved English piano instructor “Miss Mazzy,” Simone argues that she was less interested in defining the terms of “what” she played as she was invested in playing whatever she tackled very well. Although her

initial intent was to pursue a career as a classical pianist, financial woes forced her to take work as a nightclub performer. As if to underscore her fundamental resistance to fitting neatly into the conventional role of the black female chanteuse, Simone, for economic reasons, ultimately embraced her role as a vocalist and committed herself to performing “a diversity of material” that, in turn, became her trademark and signature appeal to such an extent that, as music critic Adam Bernstein sees it, she cultivated and perfected a “love for contrasting sounds and defying predictability. Her version of the pop staple ‘Love Me or Leave Me,’” for instance, “plays a dazzling classical run with a throaty jazz vocal” (Bernstein).³ As historian Ruth Feldstein has noted in her work on the artist’s socio-political activism, on albums such as the 1964 landmark *In Concert* album, Nina Simone “rejected any singular definition of African American womanhood” and this effort “remained central to Simone’s participation in black activism” beyond the album itself (Feldstein 1353,1358). What I would add here is that we also consider how Simone’s social activism was not only overtly incorporated into the content of her material, but, just as well, that it permeated the form of her musical heterogeneity that worked to free African Americans from cultural and representational stasis.

Simone was as equally invested in social activism as she was in musical experimentation and pushing herself artistically. As she demonstrates in her effortless (generic) movements between mid-1960s agitprop folk and cabaret spectacle and as she maintains in her autobiography, her “music was dedicated to a purpose more important than classical music’s pursuit of excellence; it was dedicated to the fight for freedom and [what she referred to as] the historical destiny” of African Americans (Simone and Cleary 91). Liberation is thus derived, in part, not only from her more overt protest songs but also from the sheer ideological and generic mobility manifested in her material. Repeatedly, Nina Simone staged a kind of performative sit-in that yielded what we might think of as a kind of socio-politicized musical crossover—one that was less about achieving conventional success on the pop charts and more concerned with barreling into putatively forbidden representational territories. In turn she worked to generate a kind of aesthetic “protest music” of a different order from that traditionally associated with black (female) musicians of the 1960s.⁴

Below I consider Nina Simone’s work as a critical template for examining the politics and poetics of counter-hegemonic, black feminist popular music “crossover.” I explore Simone’s varying modes of socio-cultural transgressiveness *in* song, and I read several of her specific musical recordings and performances that challenge facile perceptions of the socio-political utility of black female musicianship in American culture. Like her blues era forebears who, as Hazel Carby reveals, had “ramblin on their minds’ and who intended to ‘ease on down the line’” since “the power of movement was theirs” (Carby, 243), Nina Simone translated blues women’s mobility into broadly-realized aesthetic and socio-political intent. Her fluid musical movements amounted to formal disturbances that upset the order and cultural logic of “protest.” By engaging in a rigorous, internal, socio-political dialogue with her own audiences, she repeatedly questioned, examined, and tested the limits of agitprop popular music as well as the complex range of power dynamics between black performers and predominantly white audiences.⁵ Nina Simone’s singular forms of “freedom songs” would lead her into some of the most provocative musical spaces, and it was her experimentation with the compositions of German avant-garde

theater pioneers Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill that, I argue, are perhaps the most crucial examples of the way that she manipulated and re-calibrated notions of both conventional protest music and pop music “crossover” into strategies of what we might think of as black feminist distanciation. Undoubtedly the most prominent African American interpreter of Brecht and Weill’s dense and disruptive songbook, Simone drew inspiration from the duo’s Weimar Republic epic theater aesthetics and redeployed them in the context of Civil Rights era turmoil. Along the way she forged her own form of musical integration and performative agitation, crossing the lines of musical genres as well as, on certain occasions, performative propriety, and defamiliarizing cultural expectations of where black women can and should articulate their voices and musicianship aesthetically and politically.⁶ In this essay, I argue for ways to listen for Simone’s spectacular acts of distanciation as they manifest themselves in her interpretations of Brecht and Weill compositions “Pirate Jenny” and “The Alabama Song,” as well as in her own song “Mississippi Goddamn,” a work inspired by the duo’s “Alabama.” As we shall see, in each of these visceral and yet slyly ironic performances, Simone manipulates excess and dissonance—generic, vocal, musical—as interventionist aesthetic weapons in song that re-write the category of 1960s “protest music.” From leveling an insurgent pirate’s revenge aria in “Pirate Jenny” to her nimble performance of multiple voices in both “Mississippi Goddamn” and “The Alabama Song,” Simone swerves off the beaten path of stalwart and stirring Civil Rights musical performances by the likes of Fanny Lou Hamer and Odetta. In these particular cases, rather than singing clear-eyed folk anthems as did Hamer or historically resonant work songs and spirituals as did Odetta, Simone, in these performances, draws from the ideological crux of Brecht and Weill’s repertoire to craft a poetics of sonic alienation as coruscating socio-political commentary.⁷

Perhaps, then, we might liken her phonic, lyrical, and generic modes of disturbance to something loosely akin to the “triple play” that Houston Baker famously outlined some twenty years ago in relation to Caliban’s subaltern moves. To Baker, it is Caliban’s “supraliteracy” which amounts to “a maroon or guerilla action carried out within linguistic territories of the erstwhile masters, bringing forth sounds that have been taken for crude hooting, but which are, in reality, racial poetry” (Baker 195). Like Caliban, Nina Simone staged her own form of (musical) maroonage by living inside of the purposefully offbeat, experimental theater song structures of Brecht and Weill, performatively re-inhabiting this material with her own eccentric narrative voice. Baker’s landmark study of the insurgency of “indigenous language” is of most interest to me in the way that it might enable us to think about Nina Simone’s musical acts of social impropriety and linguistic insurgency, what Nathaniel Mackey might in fact call her “Calibanization” of Brecht and Weill’s compositions.⁸ Hearing the poetics of Simone’s “maroon or guerilla action,” her “profane” acts in song, and her alienating gestures in musical performance allow for ways to interpret uniquely articulated forms of sonic black womanhood.

Think, then, of the tripling in this study as a series of counterintuitive cultural practices that Simone negotiates across three different versions of her most famous protest song, “Mississippi Godamn.” I explore these multiple versions of the track as different iterations of black feminist distanciation, but I travel to Simone’s “Mississippi” first by way of “Pirate Jenny,” the artist’s most famous traditional Brecht and Weill cover in order to illustrate her daring aesthetic engagement with the kinds of dramatic alienation effects

that she would ultimately redeploy in her legendary cursing anthem. I argue that only by shifting our socio-cultural expectations of black female vocalists and only by dislodging from what Hortense Spillers has rightly identified as the tendentious “emphasis on the female vocalist’s . . . biographies” (Spillers 166) rather than her art, only by reading against the grain of narrow constructions of the black female subject in song as Farah Griffin does in her landmark work on Billie Holiday, only then are we able to consider the “ontological edge” (Spillers 166), the luxuriant excess, and the masterfully strategic dissonance of Nina Simone’s triple play in popular music culture.⁹

Epic Nina: Long Distance Running on *In Concert*

Stories of Nina Simone’s notoriously “hostile” and “difficult” relationship with her audiences are well known. The tales of a “temperamental” and “angry” artist have circulated and received their fair due critique from feminist scholars and journalists who have exposed the gender biases in, for instance, the pathologizing representations of Simone versus the laudatory fetishization of Miles Davis’s back-turning solos. Still, Simone was a boldly aggressive figure at different stages of her career in concert, at varying times calling for her black audience members to stand and directing her songs only to them. Other times she was known for admonishing her fans when to applaud, give standing ovations, and be silent (as she did when I saw her on one of her last US concert tours in 2001).¹⁰ Certainly these and other anecdotes lend themselves to a portrait of an artist who cultivated a cultural persona as a virtuosic performer, a challenging and demanding entertainer, and a bold social activist who was unafraid to manipulate the sometimes charged power dynamics and politics of desire that coursed through her relationship with her fans. In landmark ways as well, Simone’s fraught relationship with her audience played out in her performances of the songs themselves, and this uniquely tense push and pull with her audiences would prefigure the kinds of (un)ironic modes of haughty aggression and direct critique that we more often associate with the postmodern glam of a David Bowie, the punk aesthetics of the Sex Pistols, or the hip hop spectacle of a Kanye West. In the decades before such artists would create headlines as a result of their cool or adversarial relationship with fans, Simone was cultivating a kind of performative distancing embedded in her eccentric covers of German “epic” theater songs composed by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill that she would exploit to great and different effect at very different moments in her career. Considering the ways that Simone interpolates Brecht into her work and the ways that she interpolates herself into Brecht and Weill’s work thus enables us to read Simone’s own forms of musical and lyrical alienation as epistemic insurgency, and radical, sounded, black female agency in the age of Civil Rights agitation.

“Pirate Jenny,” the better-known Nina Simone cover of a Brecht and Weill song, appears on the *In Concert* album, recorded on March 21, 1964, at Carnegie Hall. In her smoldering rendition of Brecht and Weill’s classic *Three Penny Opera* revenge aria, the singer executes a spectacular performance of subterfuge, one that finds her inhabiting the voice of insurrectionist “Jenny” who “scrubs” away at the hotel floors while the master class (mis)reads her prostrate alias. Simone observes with biting and snide satisfaction that, “once ya tip me

... it makes ya feel swell . . . But you'll never guess to who you're talking.'" "Slipping on" (Hartman 17–48) the parodic voices of the ruling class, the singer mocks the "gentleman" who "can say, 'Hey gal, finish them floors!'" all the while failing to read the bloody revolution brewing in his midst. Like Melville's 1855 slave revolt novella *Benito Cereno*, with its sharp critique of hegemonic myopia, Simone's "Pirate Jenny" taunts the obtuse, master (class) dupe who watches her performance like that of Babo's slave "put-on." Simone here covers a song that allows her to oscillate between a servant with a gleam in her eye and "a smile" on her face and the gentlemen who frantically scramble to re-instantiate their power by desperately demanding that she continue to "earn her keep." Akin as well to the parodic strategies of white characterization invoked by black abolitionist William Wells Brown in his antebellum drama *The Escape* (1858), Simone's rendition of "Jenny" affords her the room to experiment with multiple subject positions: master and servant, gentry class and rebel (female) outlaw, narrator and actor. The singer's articulation of simmering rage ties all of these parts together in a performance that cycles dialectically back and forth and through the booming chorus where Simone sings victoriously of "the ship/ the Black Freighter" that "runs a flag up its masthead," finally in the last stanza "disappear[ing] out to see/ And/ On/ It/ Is/ Me" ("Pirate Jenny"). Without ever mentioning race explicitly, Simone's cover of "Pirate Jenny" would, in the midst of evolving black enfranchisement struggles, generate all sorts of rich historical allusions to the trajectory of African American forced migration, with a "Black Freighter" coming and going, making a passage in the middle of the song toward our heroine who prophesies her own reversed stowage of escape on board the ship.

We might hear in Simone's performance the kind of "massive itinerancy" that Fred Moten traces, the kind of "fugitivity" that announces itself in shifting subject positions, and which, in turn, creates a productive excess that obfuscates the putative transparency of the black female singer. We might ask, what can't Simone's predominantly white, liberal, Carnegie Hall audience who lives "outside the veil" of historical subjection hear or see? "Pirate Jenny" wears the phanaric mask of black feminist musical resistance and signifies on the ideological opacity of white spectators—figurative and literal—who fail to grasp the existence, let alone the utility of that mask. With "Pirate Jenny" alone, then, Simone emerges on *In Concert* as a brilliant cultural and political satirist of American race relations who, like her contemporary Moms Mabley, confronted and lampooned white patriarchal power head on in her work. Her performance joined in with the comedy of her contemporary Dick Gregory to deliver a sardonic indictment of Jim Crow white supremacy and likewise anticipated the work of a seasoned Richard Pryor (who, in the early years of his career, would open for her) by staging a charged socio-political encounter in song and signifying on "the socioeconomic and gendered dimensions of racism" (Feldstein 34).¹¹

Yet it is precisely this kind of "racial, regional, and class specificity" that has led German studies scholar Russell Berman to argue that Simone's epic theater covers are anything but Brechtian. If Brecht and Weill's far-reaching and influential dramaturgical project was, in part, to innovate theater aesthetics that would in turn serve as cold and "alienating" forms of socio-political commentary, then, as Berman sees it, Simone's "Jenny" could not diverge any further from these tenets. Rather, Simone's "dramatic emotionality and rich texturing" stand at odds with Brecht-Weill songstress Lotte Lenya's standard-bearing "crisp, mechanical" style that manifests the exemplary "gest" that Brecht and Weill imagined as

the fulcrum of their sound. To Berman, Simone's performances of Brecht songs are ones not of "distance and abstraction" that cleave to the putative orthodoxy of epic theater, but are instead enactments of "proximity and precision." Her combination of "strident politics" and "greater emotionality" ultimately "imputes a more emphatic engagement and specificity of reference." For this reason, Berman concludes, Simone's performances are at a "distance from distanciation" (Berman 177–179).¹²

Any strict interpretation of Brecht and Weill's classic anti-operas would no doubt underscore how Weill opposed "any exaggeration in the direction of emotion" and likewise how Brecht held contempt for those who appealed to "emotion, terror, and pity" through their art as well (Hirsch 94; Buck-Morss 40). However, Simone's invocation of their work, I argue, is a project less invested in remaining faithful to the literal tenets of Brechtian ideology and more focused on producing interpretative deformations of Brechtian text that paradoxically generate an alienation effect; her work dares audiences to see and hear "America" differently and on a different frequency. Rather than mounting a dichotomy wherein Brecht "stages . . . collectivity" while Simone "dwells on a private, subjective response to political events" (Berman 180), my aim here is to demonstrate the ways that Nina Simone innovates and enacts her own distinct critique of tyranny and apathy in western contemporary culture, and in the process, stops the audience from losing themselves in the romance of the black female singing voice (Griffin, "When Malindy Sings"). Read in this way, Simone's Brecht-Weill performances emerge as re-imagined executions of black feminist distanciation and as bids that ultimately make "strange" and new the socio-political activism of black female vocalists—extending the work of Billie Holiday, marching lockstep with a newly politicized 1960s Abbey Lincoln, and paving the way for the 1970s Afrofuturist feminism of the group Labelle.¹³

Damning & Distanciation in "Mississippi Goddam"

No song would manifest the far-reaching dimensions of Nina Simone's political aesthetic and the aesthetics of her politics on *In Concert* perhaps more masterfully than her own original protest composition "Mississippi Goddam." A song that was written by the artist immediately in the wake of the 1963 church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, in which four school age African American girls were murdered while attending Sunday school, "Mississippi Goddam" remains one of the most powerful pop music protest songs of the Civil Rights era, and it uses irony as a central tool to critique the persistent Southern white supremacist terror endured by African Americans in the midst of the burgeoning Civil Rights movement. Much later in Nina Simone's career, the artist discussed how she had composed "Mississippi Goddam" with Brecht and Weill's work in mind, specifically "The Alabama Song"—the most famous number from their anti-opera *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*. As we shall see, "Alabama" is the latent text in Simone's damned "Mississippi," but it is only one of the many devices that Simone made use of as a songwriter and performer to generate varying modes of political distanciation and musical dissonance that she would articulate throughout her performance of the song on *In Concert*. One need think only of the abrasiveness of the curse in the title alone, a subject to which

I'll return later, in order to imagine the ways that Simone positioned herself at odds with Civil Rights nonviolent coalition building and laid what Feldstein pointedly argues were the early seeds of black nationalist militancy, prefiguring Amiri Baraka's aim to write "poems that kill" by some two years (1365).¹⁴ Across her long and dynamic career, Nina Simone's performances of "Mississippi Goddam" would highlight the ways that the artist utilized different kinds of surplus representational and metanarrative tactics to deploy biting socio-political as well as cultural critiques and to complicate the utility of the black female singing voice in American culture.

First captured on vinyl on *In Concert*, Simone's early performance of "Mississippi Goddam" audibly highlights her at times tense relationship with her Carnegie Hall audience, surely a predominantly white, liberal, cosmopolitan crowd if ever there was one. *In Concert's* version of "Mississippi Goddam" encapsulates the interactive drama unfolding as the artist introduced it to many listeners who were presumably hearing the song for the first time. In what has become something of a trademark in this recording of the song, Simone declares in the opening seconds of her performance that "the name of this tune is 'Mississippi Goddam'" to audible laughter and applause from the audience. The euphoria of the song's tempo—with Simone on piano, Rudy Stevenson on guitar, Lisle Atkinson on bass, and Bobby Hamilton on drums—and Simone's near ebullient introduction sets a sly trap for the audience who, with their robust laughter, is seduced into a suspended state of disbelief as to the dire seriousness of the song's subject matter. Several beats later the singer ominously adds: "and I mean every word of it." Her sobering refrain here reinforces the J. L. Austin(ian) dimensions of the title's malediction (Brown and Kushner 544), how her utterance does not merely "describe or report but performs an action" (Austin). In one fell swoop, Simone interpolates her own audience into the doomed collective of the song itself, the blind men and women who, like the "gentlemen" of Pirate Jenny's hotel, are unable to recognize the rebellion as it unfolds before their very ears. By the time Simone would turn mid-song back to her audience in this performance, asking of them "bet you thought I was kidding ya'?" Pirate Jenny's venomous parting whisper to her obtuse oppressors, "that'll learn ya!" hovers dangerously close by in the air. Simone wields audience patter on "Mississippi Goddam" as a disciplinary, metanarrative threat much like her Jenny's searing retort delivered in the wake of revolution's carnage, as the bodies pile up.

The crowd's laughter that punctuates the opening seconds of "Mississippi Goddam" remains a remarkable sonic documentation of the kinds of tense (dis)connections with her audience that Simone maintained throughout her career. Here in her Carnegie Hall performance, the shifting (dis)identifications between the performer and her fans open up a series of questions as to the ways in which the *In Concert* crowd was actively and audibly working through its own repertoire of desires and anxieties in relation to Simone's performance. What to make of this confident, full-bodied first round of audience laughter? Do we hear the sounds of a crowd delighting (with delusion) in the putative distance between worldly New York and God damn(ed) rural Mississippi? Is this decidedly uneasy second round of laughter, markedly less hearty and far more tentative, an anxious reaction to the social and cultural impropriety sounded by one black female vocalist *In Concert*? In either instance, the distance in social and political hierarchy as well as the affective bonds between that of Simone and her audience would noisily fluctuate as the performance unfolds.

What is especially important to recognize in this pattern of sounded relations between the singer and her audience is how it demonstrates the extent to which Nina Simone's live performances were exercises in what we might call black feminist Brechtian musical events. If Brecht's theater envisions the actor as a figure who measures and modulates the audience's affective distance from the drama itself in order to encourage critical commentary, Simone's musical performances aggravate that affective distance in musical terms. Although in many ways her self-referential outrage distances the song "Mississippi Goddam" itself from orthodox modes of alienation in epic theater, below I suggest that we might hear how, at its core, Brecht is ideologically present in Simone's song of the South. By way of her propulsive *In Concert* performance, Simone brings her listeners close(r) to the voices of trauma and obstinacy coursing through her song; she delivers the sonic equivalent of African Americans' utter discontent living under quotidian Jim Crow subjugation—dodging and countenancing hound dogs, imprisonment, and police brutality. At the same time, it is precisely this musical testimony of a visceral open wound that Simone seeks to expose, to articulate, to sing in contestation of here. The agitated musical discontent of "Mississippi Goddam" that she masters exacerbates her audience's "sentimental gaze" and their emotional appropriation of the narrative (Blau 6). In her remarkable original composition, the black female (singing) subject splits, moves, and inhabits multiple positions in order to generate a productive distance between her audience, herself, and "Mississippi," a synecdoche for the American (un)scene/seen.

The first "political anthem" in Nina Simone's evolving career as an activist and agitator, "Mississippi Goddam" showcases the artist's then newly articulated fearlessness as a songwriter willing to yoke combative political ideology line by line into her composition (Feldstein 1–2; Simone and Cleary 88; Kernodle 301). With energetic force, Simone sings in her Carnegie Hall appearance of how

Alabama's gotten me so upset
 Tennessee made me lose my rest
 And everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam

Alabama's gotten me so upset
 Tennessee made me lose my rest
 And everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam

Can't you see it
 Can't you feel it
 It's all in the air
 I can't stand the pressure much longer
 Somebody say a prayer

Alabama's gotten me so upset
 Tennessee made me lose my rest
 And everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam

CALLALOO

This is a show tune
But the show hasn't been written for it, yet

Hound dogs on my trail
School children sitting in jail
Black cat cross my path
I think every day's gonna be my last

Lord have mercy on this land of mine
We all gonna get it in due time
I don't belong here
I don't belong there
I've even stopped believing in prayer

Don't tell me
I tell you
Me and my people just about due
I've been there so I know
They keep on saying "Go slow!"

But that's just the trouble
"do it slow"
Washing the windows
"do it slow"
Picking the cotton
"do it slow"
You're just plain rotten
"do it slow"
You're too damn lazy
"do it slow"
The thinking's crazy
"do it slow"
Where am I going
What am I doing
I don't know
I don't know

Just try to do your very best
Stand up be counted with all the rest
For everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam

I bet you thought I was kiddin'—didn't you?

Picket lines
School boycotts

CALLALOO

They try to say it's a communist plot
All I want is equality
for my sister my brother my people and me

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

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

But that's just the trouble
"do it slow"
Desegregation
"do it slow"
Mass participation
"do it slow"
Reunification
"do it slow"
Do things gradually
"do it slow"
But bring more tragedy
"do it slow"
Why don't you see it
Why don't you feel it
I don't know
I don't know

You don't have to live next to me
Just give me my equality
Everybody knows about Mississippi
Everybody knows about Alabama
Everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam

Simone's *In Concert* rendition of the song finds a singer who is strategic with her narrative gestures that disrupt, disturb, and intervene in the fallacies of a Civil Rights era cultural imaginary that is full of potholes, elisions, and silences with regards to America's racial crisis. One hears her belting out the third stanza lines, "can't you see it/ can't you feel it" with full, show tune vigor and bravado, but it is a line that owes much to dramatist Brecht and composer Weill's aim in their epic theater endeavors to "awaken" their audiences to history. "Can't you feel it?" The song is addressed precisely to those who

are numb and sleeping through the tyranny of history, the assassination of NAACP field secretaries, and church bombings that murder little girls; they are deaf, dumb, and blind, Simone's song asserts, to the American catastrophe at hand. At its core, "Mississippi Goddam" aims to expose the myth of American collectivity that the insult of Jim Crow culture repeats and plays out in the everyday lives of black folks. Simone here "plays out," in her jaunty piano riffs, in her darkly candid lyrics, in the shifting fever of her vocals, the triple rift between what "everybody knows," what no one but her will say, and what she prophetically reads in her jeremiad moments as the fire, brimstone, and locust future at which the nation is hurling.¹⁵ Can't you see it? Can't you feel it? We ain't in *Oklahoma* (1943) anymore, Simone's song proclaims. Her infamous interjection—"This is a show tune but the show hasn't been written for it yet"—signifies on the politically expressive limitations of that very genre.

To be sure, "Mississippi Goddam" is a song that owes much to the American Broadway musical art form and the classic structure of Tin Pan Alley show tune euphoria. Simone evokes the sound of traditional musical theater songs from *Showboat* to *South Pacific* in her ballad of Southern social chaos, even as she simultaneously empties out the traditional Broadway show tune of its putative social frivolity, replacing its content with a narrative that sounds nothing like "Ol' Man River." Her performance both theatricalizes the historical narrative she unveils and (re)historicizes musical theater by using the form to make a political intervention in Civil Rights culture. Situating herself at the temporal crossroads—sitting in, as it were, at the piano—she both alludes to the negation of "the (racial) show" in the hegemonic imaginary and writes a musical of black revolt directed equally against Southern terror and (Northern) American socio-political apathy.

Like "Pirate Jenny," but even more pronounced here, Simone enunciates multiple social positions in her anti-love song of the South. Piling on an accretion of pronouns—I, me, you, everybody—her point of address shifts repeatedly throughout the song. In the remarkable eighth stanza alone, Simone (as singer-songwriter) interfaces arduous black labor—"washing the windows, picking the cotton"—with the ironic voices of white supremacist hypocrisy ("you're just plain rotten!" "you're too damn lazy!") with the "do it slow" chant yelled in the background by her band. The ambiguity of this call and response, one in which we might read the responding chant as a call for civil (servant) disobedience, amplifies and inverts itself five stanzas later when the art of nonviolent protest ("desegregation," "mass participation," "reunification," "do[ing] things gradually"), as Simone observes, "brings more tragedy." "Do[ing] it slow" is both a mark of resistance and a failure on the part of movement leaders to face the time bomb that keeps ticking (off) in the race against Civil Rights era white supremacist terror. Simone and her band effectively check the tempo of the nation, calling attention to the historically glacial pace of this country's racial reform even as the galloping, staccato rhythm section marches forward and forecasts the nation's impending damnation.¹⁶ Simone as singer here holds the compositional narrative together, bobbing and weaving across a variety of ideological positions pitted against one another. In a devastating confluence of characters, she emerges in song as the Bull Connor "they," the "me" that's reeling from Southern terrorism, part of the "everybody" who knows about Mississippi and quite centrally the brave and singular "I" bold enough to utter the malediction that propels the incendiary chorus of the song.

The Curse of the Black Pearl

No other song in contemporary popular music culture history has made such radically subversive political use of profanity other than “Mississippi Goddam.” Simone’s cursing chorus, what Derek Miller reads as a linguistic “ejaculation” that sets off the irregular rhythmic patterns of the song, opens up the field of alienation that the singer cultivates from beginning to end in her performance, drawing the ire of Southern segregationists, religious leaders, and some civil rights progressives alike which resulted in the song being banned in Mississippi and other Southern states. Well beyond merely causing a commotion in social manners though, Simone’s profanity would serve as the insurgent fulcrum of her song. For it is by way of cursing that Nina Simone articulates her own affective disidentification with the South and likewise challenges her listeners to reconsider their own connections to her. The malediction, then, sits at the center of a fraught set of relations in Simone’s performance of “Mississippi Goddam” and functions as the operative iteration that generates multiple social and political interventions in Simone’s self-construction as a black female musician as well as the critical dimensions of her protest ideology (Miller).¹⁷

Within the realm of the politics of black female respectability, as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has made so clear, the salty language and the religious disavowals of the pianist chanteuse would no doubt transgress multiple realms of social propriety.¹⁸ On *In Concert’s* version of the song, the profanity that serves as the central theme of “Mississippi Goddam” distances Simone and her composition from conventional, faith-based protest music performed by activist peers—from the SNCC Freedom Singers to Fannie Lou Hamer—as well as her initially incredulous and increasingly anxious Carnegie Hall audience. With regards to that latter context, the curse is the most powerful mode of distancing that Simone generates. Simone’s reiteration of the “Mississippi Goddam” malediction, along with her infamous mid-song declaration—“I’ve even stopped believing in prayer”—marks the inflammatory pinnacle of the song and typifies her performative distancing in the song.

On the surface, it is the most alienating utterance in a song that sings a ballad of social alienation. For cursing is clearly, as Kate E. Brown and Howard I. Kushner have pointed out in their cogent work on the subject, “the linguistic mode of alienation from language and culture” (544).¹⁹ Yet even this act of verbal dissonance remains, in certain ways, deeply rooted in ultimately affirming rather than disavowing one’s relationship to God. Linguist Ruth Wanjyrb illuminates, for instance, the ways in which cursing has historically been grounded in “strong faith” and that the word “damn” in particular exposes a speaker’s complex relationship to her faith. As she points out, “the English DAMN dates back to 1280. Derived from the Latin *damnum* (‘damage,’ ‘loss,’ and ‘hurt’), it means to inflict harm or damage or loss upon [an other]; to condemn or doom to punishment” (Wanjyrb 128). This, then, is the double work of Simone’s curse: to engage in a fraught relationship with a God that she now rejects and yet simultaneously needs in order to fulfill her condemnation of the South. Just as well, this is “the fantasy of malediction”; it conjoins revenge and alienation, transforming them into an utterance so “that the body . . . can generate a voice so powerful as to translate outrage into vengeance, disrupting the narrative of its own exclusion” (Brown and Kushner 546). But to Brown and Kushner, it is the historical subject

who suffers as a result of swearing since “cursing ahistoricizes the body as it gives rise to the eruptive rather than the expressive.” Cursing is something, they argue, that “*happens to a subject*” (539). It encourages the disavowal of self-possession, in turn, re-affirming “the success of cultural discipline” (539). But where then does this leave Nina Simone in concert? In the negated “non-presence” (546) that Brown and Kushner assert that cursing creates, caught in the vortex of the “agrammatical and ahistorical” (549) profane utterance? What of the black female vocalist who sings her curses?

Only by hearing a “profane” Simone through the prism of musicality can we recognize the ways in which her spectacular acts of swearing ultimately reconstitute the steadfast socio-historical “value” of the black female performer in song. As Lindon Barrett demonstrates in his groundbreaking work on the subject, the black singing voice “provides the allowance for African Americans to enter or subvert symbolic, legal, material, and imaginative economies to which we are most usually denied access” (57). Here in the context of “Mississippi Goddam,” singing fills the historical void that the curse burns open. It keeps Simone *in* (her own) time. Her musical curse conversely reminds us of Barrett’s powerful contention that “the singing voice sounds of the most enduring of African American testimonies to the exigencies of our presence in the Americas” (57).

Cursing and singing. Their social utility is perhaps more entwined than one might think. Consider the “catharsis, aggression, and” as Ruth Wanjyrb convincingly notes, the “social connection” engendered by foul language. Simone’s singing curse grants her access to aggression with a score; it allows her to be “symbolically violent” and to “achieve [her] purpose without breaking the prohibition on actual bodily harm” (Wanjyrb 120). Instead, through cursing, Simone’s performative violence “breaks” the conventional musicological structure of the song itself, thus creating what Miller reads as a kind of “rhythmic” alienation effect. As he brilliantly observes, Simone delivers the chorus “in an irregular 5/8 bar,” thus “the State of Mississippi is fundamentally out of sync with the rest of the world, just as ‘Mississippi’ is out of sync with the rhythmic world of the song” (Miller). To make our world anew, Nina Simone, ideologically in sync with her song and musically out of sync with her own accompaniment and her band, profanely vocalizes her state(s) of (dis)affected rage.

Surrogation of the King

Throughout Nina Simone’s career, the malediction’s utility would transfigure in song, most stirring in a version recorded on April 7, 1968, just four days after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in a performance at the Westbury Music Fair in Westbury, NY. In the raw, corrosive aftermath of King’s murder, Nina’s curse emerges as the sonic site of cathartic exorcism, a wished-for choral effort to simultaneously “damn” to hell another ugly chapter of American race relations and at the same time open the door to post-Civil Rights possibility. A substantially subdued Simone opens the song, speaking over the familiar rhythmic piano pulse of “Mississippi” and replacing 1964’s feigned ebullience with a eulogy:

of course a couple of years ago, four little girls were killed in Alabama and at that time we got the inspiration to do this song. But Dr. King's murder has left me so numb, I don't know where I'm at really. And of course you heard this song that was composed by Gene Taylor especially for today. But I hope that between now and the end of the year, it'll all be together enough that we will have songs that go down in history for these wonderful, brave people who are no longer with us (Simone, "Mississippi Goddam" 1968).

Simone "goes numb" in this version of the song, singing behind the beat, manifesting in the shifted tempo of her performance the (historical) weight and feel of how "slow" it really goes in the early aftermath of King's murder. If, on the one hand, the malediction is "uttered . . . from a position in which no social consensus is possible" (Brown and Kushner 561), this version of Simone's "Mississippi," predicated yet again on the curse itself, operates conversely as the site of viscerally palpable social bonding and politically re-energized coalition building. A surrogation of the previous performances of the song, this radically altered version of "Mississippi" finds Simone playing the role of historical mediator and performative figurehead whose passionate aim, this time around, is to forge emotional affiliations with her audience and to make King's movement a regenerative force in the present tense. Midway through her performance, Simone addresses listeners in order to make King's voice audible once more, to interpolate him into the crowd and, in turn, to interpolate them into her resurrected musical movement (Brown and Kushner 539). "Now you heard him," Simone declares. "He's one of you. If you have been moved at all and you know my songs at all. FOR GOD'S SAKES JOIN ME. Don't sit back there. The time is too late now. Good God! You know . . . The King is dead. The King of Love is Dead. I ain't 'BOUT to be nonviolent, honey!" (Simone, "Mississippi Goddam" 1968). Still, like she was in 1964, "not kidding" around, Simone nonetheless punctuates her remarks this time with her own deeply knowing, spontaneous laugh that bubbles over the refrain of her chorus here, creating a kind of ironic counter response to the Carnegie Hall audience's obtuse joviality.

This 1968 version of "Mississippi Goddam" pronounces more overtly the dimensions of dislocation and grief embedded in the song ("Where am I going / What am I doing? / I don't know") and performs the inevitable Civil Rights effigy, "to evoke an absence, to body . . . forth" the King of the immediate past and the synecdoche for a much larger social revolution (Roach 2–3). Simone rallies her audience, urging them not to "just stand back there" but to step up and move forward, in the process performing a surrogated 1955 King in Montgomery, Alabama, walking—not riding—alongside Coretta Scott, Rosa Parks, Bayard Rustin, and a legion of other young, upstart activists who refused to sit in the zone of the underclass. She, effectively, re-values the militant roots of King's activism and recuperates the insurgency of Rosa's front seat strike. Like Clark Johnson's stunning 2001 film *Boycott*, Simone here resuscitates the radical social protest tactics of early civil rights activism, and she translates King's vision into insurgent musical language.²⁰

Alabama Meets Mississippi

King is therefore central in this distinct version of “Mississippi Goddam,” but the connections between his iconography and the song would return yet again in an even later version of the song captured on film live at the London jazz pub Ronnie Scott’s on November 17, 1984. In an interview taken at the time of the gig, the artist reflects on her reasons for continuing to sing her most famous “protest anthem,” arguing that “it’s important in 1984, because no one ever really commemorated or remembered . . . enough Martin Luther King. And ‘Mississippi Goddam’ brings him back” (Simone, *Live at Ronnie Scott’s*).²¹ Some years into the Reagan-Thatcher era, then, Simone used her west end platform to revive the political work of her “Mississippi” composition and, likewise, to explain her aesthetic inspiration. On stage, she describes “this song” which is, “as you know . . . written by Nina Simone. It’s very much like 1932 . . . at that time Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill wrote another song called ‘Moon Over Alabama’—in fact they wrote several songs from *Mahagonny*. But there isn’t time to do them all. What we’re going to do is combine ‘Mississippi Goddam’ with ‘Moon Over Alabama’” (*Live at Ronnie Scott’s*). Here for the first and perhaps only time one sees and hears Simone publicly aligning her song of the South with Brecht and Weill’s most famous tune from their anti-opera *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, “the Alabama song” (or, as she refers to it here, “Moon Over Alabama”). The alliances that she forges between her own composition and the *Mahagonny* musical are subsequently made all the more potent by Simone’s dynamic reinterpretation of both songs.

First performed on July 17, 1927, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* is, in part, the tale of “a great city obsessed with pleasure” and teetering on the brink of ruin. No doubt Simone would allusively draw an analogy between America and Mahagonny, the American masses and the Brechtian pilgrims on their unstoppable march in search of material and sexual pleasure. *Mahagonny* is a moral tale, as is Simone’s. Weill scholar Foster Hirsch argues that in their imagining of the *Mahagonny* narrative, Brecht and Weill envisioned “a cheeky assault on propriety” (Hirsch 11). *Mahagonny*, Hirsch contends, “trespass[es] acceptable boundaries of literary, musical and theatrical decency” and “refuses categorization” (11, 12). In this regard, one can see how Brecht and Weill’s material would have appealed broadly to Simone in her own “assault” on decorum and social propriety.

Moreover, Simone’s specific reference to *Mahagonny* the musical brings her use of the song’s malediction full circle and poses yet another provocative link to the Brechtian narrative. Simone’s damning vocals, for instance, reference the convicted rebel Jimmy’s lines in scene 17 of *Mahagonny* when he sings of how “It begins to grow light/ It must not lighten/ There must be no sunrise/ That means a new goddam day begins” (Brecht 56). In Jimmy’s song, the curse here emerges as an erstwhile attempt on the part of the outcast to stop the sun from rising on this godforsaken land. Just the same, we hear Simone imparting the curse so as to ensure that day will not break on the hell that is Mississippi/America. Perhaps, then, there is something to be made of a musical link between Simone and Jimmy, a character who is convicted for (among many other things) “singing forbidden songs” in the midst of the threat of a “big typhoon” (Brecht, *Rise and Fall* 56). Most powerfully, however, it is Simone’s interpolation of the “Alabama Song” into this later version of “Mississippi Goddam” that would do multiple kinds of work to reinforce the incisive epistemological critiques embedded in her composition.

In the musical *Mahagonny*, a “contingent of female pilgrims” perform their ode “on their way to the new city” (Hirsch 9). Weill’s wife, the legendary actress (turned singer) Lotte Lenya, would perform her signature version of the song with vigor and precision while belting out the chorus: “Oh show us the way to the next whiskey bar! Oh don’t ask why! Oh don’t ask why! . . . Oh moon of Alabama . . . we’ve lost our dear old mama . . .” (Hirsch 9; Lenya). At odds with Lenya’s cold and regimented gestures in the song, Simone’s trademark deep, ominous vocals would seemingly transform the economy of the “Alabama Song.” Interfacing classical precision with improvisational play, Nina Simone drew on her much-lauded chops as a musician combined with her own political sophistication to sing themes from *Mahagonny* and “Mississippi” once more with feeling.²² And it is for this reason that Russell Berman reads her Ronnie Scott’s performance as straying so radically from Brechtian intention.

Yet I would argue that we might instead read the ways that Simone re-signifies and critically re-deploys “Alabama” in order to evoke her own methods of distancing in “Mississippi.” In tempo alone the two songs resemble each other—the polka style march of “Alabama” and Simone’s fidgety pedal tone embedded in the riff.²³ Both songs are about certain kinds of escapism and denial. Brecht and Weill’s women assert that “we just want liquor” while Nina Simone’s America lives in the fantasy that it can hold back time, that it can freeze its beloved “Sister Sadie” in a cotton-picking stoop. The key figures of course that Simone exploits and transforms in her performance are the “us” and the “mama” whom she swiftly translates into “mammy” for the final verse of the song. Simone’s Ronnie Scott’s performance ultimately exposes the connection between the “us” who’s lost their good old “mammy” and “the everybody” who knows but refuses to accept her passing. In effect, the singer reminds her audience that she ain’t their mammy, that mammy is dead. The genius move that Simone makes in this performance is to utilize the “Alabama Song” as a way in which to extend and signify on the narrative of hegemonic resistance to black empowerment that “everybody” knows but that some still can’t bear to face.

Boldly and yet obliquely, she hints as well in the song’s closing lines about how “everybody knows about” presumably the dangers in everyone from a Ronald Reagan to a Jesse Jackson godhead figure in the ominous year of 1984. Here again one witnesses Simone staging a “sit-in” at the piano—as she had in 1964—“sitting in” via the pedal tone to critique the collective “everybody” that’s got her so upset—not just Southern states this time. Indeed, the “everybody” of Simone’s “Mississippi” versus the “us” of “Alabama” perhaps poses the most intriguing intersections between the two songs. Berman reads these two collective pronouns as at odds with one another. Somehow for him, Simone’s “everybody” is a mythically congruous unit, one that is fundamentally at odds with the “us” in search of whiskey and sex. For him, the racial and gender specificities inherent in “Mississippi Goddam” are ultimately indicative of Simone’s effort to “stage individuality,” an “American cultural politics of anti-Communism, which” he argues, “she would have hardly endorsed, even while participating in it” (Berman 180).

But this kind of a reading both fails to consider the political value of Simone’s inscription of racial and gender specificity into the American imaginary, and it neglects to consider Simone’s articulation of disenfranchisement at the heart of the song. For if nothing else, “Mississippi Goddam” is about the inability to join in the collective in the first place. Reading Simone’s performance in this way threatens to overlook one of its crucial epistemic

critiques, that is, the ways that Simone conjoins oppressive forms of “knowing” to awaken audiences to their own abjection. In her rendition of “The Alabama Song,” Nina Simone repeatedly juxtaposes the second verse, “don’t ask why” and the later verse, a robust “you know why.” The duality of these two verses taken together back-to-back provokes its own commentary: “Show us the way to the next whiskey bar. Don’t ask why. YOU KNOW WHY.” Complacency and collective suppression are pushed side by side in this reinterpretation of the *Mahagonny* song. Simone’s performance makes clear that it’s the subject of “knowing” that fundamentally links these two songs together. It is a lyrical juxtaposition that generates its own alluring, epistemological question.

Coda: Sweet Home Alabama

By the time of her Ronnie Scott’s gig in 1984, Nina Simone had long since left the States, first moving to Barbados and later to Africa, throughout Europe, finally settling in France for the remainder of her life. Late into her career, she would maintain the status of a much-heralded musical outsider, a fiercely enigmatic artist who voiced strong opinions about everything she saw wrong with “black” and “white” America—from Reaganomics to Michael Jackson’s phantasmagoric skin color. An expatriate vocalist musician, she was literally on the “outside” of her “Mississippi” America, but even from abroad she negotiated ways of entering back into America’s primal pop musical scene, the “rock and roll” that Greil Marcus so affectionately celebrates for “dramatizing a sense of what it is to be an American, what it means, what it’s worth, what the stakes of life in America might be” (4).

What was “The Alabama Song” by the time of her 1984 performance but a song best known in popular culture for having been a hit single for the Doors in 1967 and a curious 1980 David Bowie b-side? No surprise that Jim Morrison, the Lizard King himself, would cathect onto a song that epitomizes what Simon Reynolds and Joy Press see as the “nomadism, estrangement and flight” at the heart of the Doors’ “psychedelic experience” (44). Morrison’s fatal “headlong hurtle towards ruinous self-expenditure” would serve as the crux of the Doors’ “Alabama,” a Bacchanalian march in search of booze and women (Reynolds and Press 118). Bowie, the Brit, a self-described “Brecht fan,” a sometime Berlin resident, and a friend of Simone’s would cleave closer to the critical spirit of *Mahagonny*, releasing his version of the song on the heels of 1979’s “Boys Keep Swinging,” an overt mockery of male bonding and “phallic delirium” not unlike the pilgrims in Brecht and Weill’s musical.²⁴ But it is Nina Simone, herself, who stages a final trespass by (re)engaging the song. Her intervention in rock masculinist narratives interrupts the hedonistic boys-are-back-in-town versions of the song and instead choreographs a guerilla action that re-sounds, re-centers, that surrogates black female voices buried at the bottom of the rock and roll archive.

For Simone, then, her performances would serve throughout her career as spectacularly ruminative occasions to dramatize and sonically bring to life the most potent affective dimensions of her public persona. In the 1970s, she built on her reputation for staging live concerts that were at once viscerally torrential and emotionally captivating in ways

that extended and reanimated the jarring spirit of her 1960s alienated protest material. Think for instance of Simone's appearance at the Montreaux jazz festival in 1976, when the artist unleashed a ten-minute tour-de-force litany of feelings and a re-ordering of "Feelings"—the then-current radio hit. In her performance of Morris Albert's maudlin pop song, Simone the expatriate tensely and yet magnetically moves from the position of introspective "reflection" (about "feelings, nothing more than feelings/ trying to forget these feelings of love") to that of sheer willed improvisational invention, immersing herself in extended and dazzlingly intricate runs across the piano ivories. Pushing the scene of performance to "the edge of the event" (to borrow a line from Fred Moten), openly castigating the song itself for its melancholic origins ("I do not believe the conditions that produced a situation that demanded a song like that!"), Simone repeatedly takes her audience in this reading of the song to a place where she mediates affective dissonance, musical virtuosity, and generic hybridity (between classical and pop), just as she had done in 1964 at Carnegie Hall.²⁵

NOTES

1. Feminist rock music critic Kathy Dobie likens Simone's voice to "a motor running, running." Dobie observes that Simone's "voice seems to trigger grief, in the same way that certain sounds do—a fog horn, light rain on an empty lake, trucks rolling down the highway in the middle of the night" (232).
2. *I Put A Spell On You* illustrates this journey in great detail, and in this regard it remains a stunning discursive record of black female popular music eclecticism and virtuosity. A first person account of the artist's life as a musical prodigy-turned-popular music sensation and 1960s Civil Rights activist, the book follows Simone's life-long pursuit of "freedom" as an aesthetic as well as a political endeavor. Ruth Feldstein calls the book "a biography of defiance," and she offers a rigorous reading of Simone and Cleary's savvy and yet ideologically complicated text (25).
3. From high school in North Carolina, Nina Simone moved on to The Juilliard School in New York City before taking a detour into the world of Atlantic City nightclub performing as a way to pay the bills in the 1950s. She has often stated it was this need to support herself that led her to begin singing in addition to playing the piano. See Simone and Cleary 44–53.
4. *I Put a Spell On You* demands more analytical attention than I am able to give it here. Nonetheless, following the lead of both Shane Vogel and Thomas Postlewait, I am reading Simone's autobiography as a "document" not of performance history but of "performance theory" in which we can hear and see her making sense of a complex web of racially, gendered, class, and sexually charged politics that shaped her career. See Vogel 167–93, Postlewait. Tammy Kernodle explores Simone's centrality as an innovator of the contemporary freedom song, and she focuses in part on interrogating the musicological complexities of Simone's composition "Mississippi Goddam." While Kernodle and I diverge in our methodological approaches to examining this song, we nonetheless share an interest in demonstrating the virtuosic aesthetic strategies of Nina Simone's protest music. See Kernodle 295–317. Simone's activist efforts in many ways resemble that of Abbey Lincoln, an artist who fully embraced her role as a jazz musician and protest performer. For more on Lincoln's remarkable career, see Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free* 161–192. See also Porter 149–190.
5. On the politics of black women's eccentric movements, see Peterson xi–xii.
6. Shane Vogel examines an equally provocative aesthetics of what he calls performative "impersona" in the career of Lena Horne (167–193).
7. For more on Hamer's Civil Rights song activism, see Reagon. For more on Odetta, see Jacobson.
8. In his essay "Other: From Noun to Verb," Mackey illustrates the ways that poet and critic Edward Kamau Brathwaite transforms the noun Caliban into a "fugitive" linguistic verb, a discursive tool of maroonage. "Calibanization' insists," he argues,

that in West Indian folk speech English is not so much broken as broken into,
that a struggle for turf is taking place in language. . . . As in the anagrammatic

'derangement' Shakespeare had recourse to in fashioning *Caliban* from *cannibal*, the puns, malapropisms, odd spellings, neologisms, and straining means Brathwaite resorts to speak of the disturbances outside as well as inside the language, social disruptions the word is thus made to register. (272)

9. Hortense Spillers argues that "if we can draw out the emphasis on the female vocalist's art, rather than her biographies, then we gather from the singer that power and control [to] maintain an ontological edge" (166). See also Wald.
10. Pop critic Jennifer Gilmour maintains that Simone's relationship with her audience "endured" throughout her career and that she sustained a lack of tolerance for "talk during a performance" in which case she would "stop playing. She might even leave the stage. Claiming that it broke her concentration, at the bar she'd wait until the loud drunks were thrown into the street to resume her playing."
11. For an example of Moms Mabley's incisive Civil Rights protest humor, see *Moms Mabley, Comedy Ain't Pretty*. See also Gregory. In 1960, Colpix recorded Nina Simone's landmark sets at the Village Gate in New York City, and a young Richard Pryor served as her opening act. Simone recounts meeting the comedian in her autobiography. See Simone and Cleary 70–71.
12. For more on alienation effects, see Brecht.
13. On Billie Holiday's social protest work in song, see Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free*. On Abbey Lincoln's Civil Rights and black cultural nationalist politics as a performer, see Porter 149–190. On Labelle see Echols 71–120.
14. See also Baraka 219.
15. Kernodle describes how the "song begins in C major in an up-tempo 4/4 that is established by the drummer playing each beat, the bassist playing double octave stops, and Simone's piano vamping on the main harmonies" (303).
16. In short, "Mississippi Goddam" is a song that invokes temporal shifts in historical, musical, and performative time as forms of narrative critique. As performance studies scholar Derek Miller has brilliantly pointed out to me, Simone's *In Concert* rendition of the song "resists rhythm." "Particularly when she sings 'they try to say it's a Communist plot,'" Miller argues, "it is as though the absurdity of the FBI's charges against [Martin Luther King Jr.] throw her out of time and she has to find her way back by the end of the verse." Thanks also to Katia Washington for her helpful comments regarding tempo in "Mississippi Goddam."
17. See also Munoz; Simone and Cleary 91.
18. As Feldstein makes clear, Simone rejected "the impulse to talk like a lady," and she defied "expectations of respectable womanhood" altogether in her musical repertoire (1365–1366).
19. Cursing, Brown and Kushner argue, is a "breach of communicative propriety" (537).
20. See also Smith.
21. In her interview, Simone also reflects on the contemporary success of Irish modern rock group U2, and their 1984 hit "Pride (In the Name of Love)," observing that their song as well "about the story of Martin Luther King" proves that the movement is "not dead in their minds. The youth need to know the history of America . . . They need to know what we did there. And so I'm happy that I'm still singing it because obviously that group [was] still thinking about it too. And in 1984 they were able to put together a sound that became a hit which means that he is still now alive in the eyes and the ears and the brains of many young people. I think that's important and that's my contribution . . ."
22. Simone balanced her classical training with her gospel church culture's emphasis on deep improvisational experimentation and adventure (Simone and Cleary 19). She outlines her politics at length in *I Put A Spell on You* as well, and particularly underscores the intellectual dimensions of her shared politics with playwright and friend Lorraine Hansberry (Simone and Cleary 86–87).
23. Thanks to Reginald Jackson for his helpful feedback regarding Simone's piano performance.
24. My thanks to Maureen Mahon for her helpful feedback regarding Bowie's version of Brecht and Weill.
25. See Simone's 1976 Montreaux jazz festival performance at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mH5ZE3N8cxU>>.

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