

“AND I WANT YOU TO WALK DOWN FREEDOM’S ROAD”:
RETHINKING RESISTANCE IN THE MUSIC OF NINA SIMONE, 1958-1963

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ABSTRACT

Sarah Tomlinson: “And I Want You To Walk Down Freedom’s Road”: Rethinking Resistance in the Music of Nina Simone, 1958-1963
(Under the direction of Michael Figueroa)

This thesis argues that before pianist and singer-songwriter Nina Simone wrote her first explicitly political protest song, “Mississippi Goddam,” in 1963, she was performing resistance through musical activism and the multiplicities of her musicianship. It is grounded in black feminist theory, intersectionality, jazz feminist scholarship, popular music studies, and cultural studies. Chapter 1 looks to Simone’s personal connections, artistic networks, and musical activities around New York City to show that she was resisting racism and engaging with black consciousness, civil rights, and Pan-Africanism during her early career. Chapter 2 analyzes Simone’s musical multiplicity to demonstrate how she was not contained within the category of the jazz singer. It discusses the history of her first commercial hit, “I Loves You, Porgy,” and explains how she resisted audiences’ expectations through performance. By interpreting Simone’s early career activities and multiplicities of musicianship as resistance, this thesis shifts her narrative as an activist musician.

In memory of my father, who taught me to listen to Bach and activists.

To the musicians and revolutionaries of the Black Lives Matter movement carrying Simone's
legacy down freedom's road.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1963, after the Birmingham church bombing, that's when Nina first identifies herself becoming involved with the movement. That's when she sat down and in 20 minutes wrote one of the most important songs of the Civil Rights Movement, "Mississippi Goddam," where she let her anger and rage and sadness pour out of her. As her career progressed, she wrote some of the greatest anthems of the Civil Rights Movement: "To Be Young, Gifted and Black," "Backlash Blues." She surrounded herself with a community of intellectuals and radicals like Lorraine Hansberry, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes and Miriam Makeba. She was radicalized.

—Liz Garbus, Director of *What Happened, Miss Simone?*¹

In an interview with NPR, director of the 2015 documentary *What Happened, Miss Simone?* Liz Garbus points to Nina Simone's composition of "Mississippi Goddam" in 1963 as the moment of her radicalization. The documentary traces Simone's Civil Rights anthems and friendships with prominent members of the black intelligentsia neatly back to the genesis of "Mississippi Goddam." Garbus's statement seems to be referencing a passage from Simone's autobiography, co-written with writer Stephen Cleary, in which Simone reflects on her response to the Ku Klux Klan's bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama and Byron De La Beckwith's murder of NAACP leader Medgar Evers: "I suddenly realized what it was to be black in America in 1963...it came as a rush of fury, hatred and determination. In church language, the Truth entered into me and I 'came through'."² Simone asserts "Mississippi Goddam" as her first civil rights song, and she states that its composition caused her to "dedicate [herself] to the struggle for black justice, freedom and equality under the law for as long as it

¹ Liz Garbus, "New Documentary Finds Nina Simone 'In Between The Black And White Keys,'" interview with Liz Garbus by Michele Norris, *NPR*, June 24, 2015, accessed May 29, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/2015/06/24/416805770/new-documentary-finds-nina-simone-in-between-the-black-and-white-keys>.

² Nina Simone and Stephen Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2003), 89.

took, until all our battles were won.”³ Such is the powerful narrative that has been constructed around the composition and outcome of “Mississippi Goddam.” Yet as tempting as it is to identify Simone’s radicalization with a single moment, the story does not necessary reflect Simone’s actions as a whole. This thesis examines Simone’s actions before she penned “Mississippi Goddam,” her first explicitly political protest song, as early manifestations of her musical and political resistance. I argue that early in her career, Simone performed resistance through musical activism and the multiplicities of her musicianship.

A pianist, vocalist, activist, singer-songwriter, and composer, Nina Simone was born on February 21, 1933 in Tryon, North Carolina, with the given name of Eunice Kathleen Waymon. She began learning to play the piano when she was three years old, and by age four she was performing in front of the congregation at St. Luke’s Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, where her mother was a minister. Community members quickly recognized her talent and collectively funded her classical piano lessons with Muriel Massinovitch for five years, beginning in 1941. After graduating as valedictorian from an all-girls integrated boarding school in Asheville, North Carolina, Simone left for New York to study at the Juilliard School of Music. She studied at Juilliard for one year and used her time to prepare for an audition at the Curtis Institute of Music. In her autobiography, she discusses how she could only afford to pay for one year of university tuition.⁴ She had high hopes of attending the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, which was both prestigious and free for all accepted students, but the school rejected her application. Simone was deeply affected by the rejection. She claimed to have first taken it personally, but in later years reconceived of the rejection as an act of racial discrimination. To make money and continue playing, she taught piano lessons and began

³ Ibid., 90.

⁴ Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 35.

performing at nightclubs in Philadelphia. When performing, she adopted the stage name “Nina Simone” to keep her evening performances secret from her parents. One nightclub owner told her that he would not pay her if she did not sing, thus began her foray into vocal performance. Simone played a regular gig at the Midtown Bar and Grill in Atlantic City, where she started developing her early commercial repertory. After her agent, Jerry Fields, introduced her to the owner of Bethlehem Records, Sid Nathan, Simone signed with Bethlehem to produce her first album, *Little Girl Blue*. This album set the stage for the singer-songwriter style of her recording career by featuring her piano playing and vocals.⁵ As she wrote in her autobiography, “I went into the studio and recorded my songs exactly as I always played them, so when you listen to that Bethlehem album you’re hearing the songs played as they were at the Midtown Bar.”⁶ Bethlehem released *Little Girl Blue* in 1958, which included Simone’s first big commercial hit, “I Loves You, Porgy.” The success of “I Loves You, Porgy” launched her professional recording career and prompted her to move to New York City once again. Throughout her career, Simone’s musical style brought jazz and classical idioms together with Broadway hits and folk ballads. Her distinct vocal timbre could shift from grit to silk within a moment.

As her success grew, so too did American racial tensions. By the mid 1960s, Simone became celebrated for her freedom songs, musical advocacy, and explicit criticism of racial inequality in the United States. Her music of the mid to late 1960s continues to resonate and carry resistant meaning in the twenty-first century through songs such as the feminist ballad “Four Women,” the black pride anthem “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black,” and “Strange Fruit,” which condemned the lynching of black Americans in the Jim Crow South. Yet by the early

⁵ Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*; Heather Buffington Anderson, “Simone, Nina,” in *American National Biography Online*, Oxford University Press, 2014-, accessed June 10, 2016, <http://www.anb.org.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/articles/18/18-03891.html>.

⁶ Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 60.

1970s, Simone was disappointed and disillusioned by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Coupled with her failed marriage to manager Andy Stroud and burnout from a demanding performance schedule, Simone took a break from music and moved abroad. She lived in Barbados, Liberia, and Switzerland before she began performing in the U.S. again in 1978.⁷ She never again maintained long term residence in the U.S., choosing instead to move around Europe from London and Geneva to Paris. She recorded a few albums such as *Fodder on My Wings* (1982) and *A Single Woman* (1993), spending her final years living in Paris where she died of breast cancer in 2003.⁸

It is important to recognize “Mississippi Goddam” of 1963 as one of the most powerful and influential musical manifestations of activism with respect to Simone’s career and in American popular music writ large. While there is relatively little scholarship on Nina Simone, three of the most prominent academic publications on Simone include analyses of “Mississippi Goddam” in their central arguments. Historian Ruth Feldstein discusses how Simone’s development of black cultural nationalism during the mid to late 1960s insisted on female power with “Mississippi Goddam” as a prime example.⁹ Feldstein acknowledges Simone’s involvement in activist activities before 1963 as background information, but her work is most concerned with Simone’s career during and after the song’s composition. Feldstein also makes historiography a focus in her work, explaining how Simone “has largely fallen through the cracks of

⁷ John S. Wilson, “Pop: Nina Simone Back,” *New York Times*, December 12, 1978, C8.

⁸ Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*; Heather Buffington Anderson, “Simone, Nina,” in *American National Biography Online*, Oxford University Press, 2014-, accessed June 10, 2016, <http://www.anb.org.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/articles/18/18-03891.html>.

⁹ Ruth Feldstein, “I Don’t Trust You Anymore”: Nina Simone, Culture, and Black Activism in the 1960s,” *The Journal of American History* 91 (2005): 1349-79; Ruth Feldstein, *How It Feels To Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

scholarship—on music, on civil rights, and on women’s activism.”¹⁰ As such, her article makes invaluable assertions about the politics and influence of Simone’s music including “Mississippi Goddam.”

Musicologist Tammy Kernodle also listens deeply to “Mississippi Goddam.” Kernodle, like Feldstein, has written about “Mississippi Goddam” with respect to historiographic bias and Simone’s mid to late 1960s activism. In her 2008 article, Kernodle argues that much of Simone’s protest music was part of a second generation of freedom songs, one that aligned more closely with militant black power nationalism than the first generation freedom songs’ affinity with the hopeful optimism and interracial collaboration of the Civil Rights Movement. “Mississippi Goddam” signified an important shift in that Simone began to express explicit anger, growing secularism, a turn away from the rhetoric of nonviolence, and disillusionment with the black middle class’s adherence to assimilation and the politics of respectability. Kernodle also includes a detailed song analysis of “Mississippi Goddam”—a useful and rare tool, since most academic publications on Simone’s career are not by music scholars. Furthermore, Kernodle discusses the historical bias in favor of the Civil Rights Movement over the Black Power Movement. The Civil Rights Movement’s agenda of nonviolence and interracial collaboration has been more palatable to white Americans than the black solidarity and “by any means necessary” strategies of the Black Power Movement. As such, the achievements and legacies of the Black Power Movement are ignored and underemphasized in hegemonic, white-controlled representations of United

¹⁰ Feldstein, “I Don’t Trust You Anymore,” 1351.

States history. In accordance with this bias, Kernodle credits Simone's allegiance with Black Power as one of the reasons for her historiographic erasure.¹¹

In her 2011 article, African American studies and theater studies scholar Daphne A. Brooks discusses theater culture in relation to "Mississippi Goddam." Brooks argues that theater pioneers Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill influenced Simone's performance of distancing, exemplified in her versions of cover songs by the Brecht and Weill and in the theatrical gestures of "Mississippi Goddam." Like Feldstein and Kernodle, Brooks points out important aspects of Simone's early career that contributed to her later output, such as the multiplicity of musical styles present in Simone's 1958 *Little Girl Blue* album. Even still, Brooks spends most of her attention on the 1964 *In Concert* album on which "Mississippi Goddam" was released.¹²

English and Africana studies scholar Salamishah Tillet, musicologist and African American studies scholar Shana L. Redmond, and popular music scholar Richard Elliot have also made notable contributions to scholarship on Simone. Tillet's 2014 article stays with songs from Simone's mid to late 1960s, including "Four Women" and "Strange Fruit," and she listens to Simone's music's sampling in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century realm of hip-hop. In contrast to Simone's low volume in academia, Tillet shows how the hip-hop community has long been honoring and educating listeners about Simone's influence and legacy; she hears the "Simonizing of hip-hop" as a way of tracing black radicalism.¹³ Redmond dedicates a chapter of her 2014 monograph, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora*, to Simone and her 1969 anthem, "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black." Redmond

¹¹ Tammy Kernodle, "'I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free': Nina Simone and the Redefining of the Freedom Song of the 1960s," *Journal for the Society of American Music* 2 (2008): 295-317.

¹² Daphne A. Brooks, "Nina Simone's Triple Play," *Callaloo* 34 (2011): 176-97.

¹³ Salamishah Tillet, "Strange Sampling: Nina Simone and Her Hip-Hop Children," *American Quarterly* 66 (2014): 121-22.

positions “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black” as a canonic song of the long Civil Rights Movement that served as a dedication both to activist and playwright Lorraine Hansberry and to the young people who continued to fight for civil rights even after several of the most important leaders of movement were gone. In her discussion of Simone’s political involvement before recording “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black,” Redmond traces back to “Mississippi Goddam” but does not mention much about Simone’s music or activities before that. In Elliot’s monograph *Nina Simone*, the only current academic book centered on Simone, he captures the swath of Simone’s career with adept song interpretations and explorations of various musical styles. In terms of breadth, Elliot covers Simone’s entire career and he is particularly interested in her late career, making his study an exception from the mid to late 1960s (generally understood as the middle of Simone’s career) focus of other publications. Yet even Elliot begins his chapter titled “Politics” with an exposé on Simone’s *In Concert* album and “Mississippi Goddam” in particular.¹⁴

The narrative around “Mississippi Goddam” is also the exposé of this thesis, and I do not seek to argue with the current scholarship on Simone. Rather, I move in a different direction with respect to 1963 by listening to the manifestations of resistance in Simone’s career before her composition of the song, rather than those that came after. Specifically, I focus on Nina Simone’s career from the release of her *Little Girl Blue* album in 1958 until just before her composition of “Mississippi Goddam” in the autumn of 1963. I agree that Simone’s music, politics, and activism from the mid to late 1960s and beyond deserve in-depth study, but looking more closely at her earlier work can offer new ways of understanding her music throughout her career. Previous scholars have acknowledged some of Simone’s activities during this time period, so I build upon their work as I focus on her career before 1963.

¹⁴ Richard Elliot, *Nina Simone* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2013).

In this thesis, I argue that before she wrote her first explicitly political protest song in 1963, Nina Simone performed resistance through musical activism and the multiplicities of her musicianship. Chapter 1, “Resistance and Musical Activism,” discusses Simone’s activist activities in and connected with New York City’s local music scene during the late 1950s and early 1960s. I analyze Simone’s personal connections, artistic networks, and musical activities to argue that she was resisting racism and engaging with black consciousness, the Civil Rights Movement, and Pan-Africanism during this time period. While Nina Simone’s lyrics were not yet explicitly political, Chapter 1 demonstrates how several of her actions and activities were. The chapter is grounded in scholarship on local music scenes and black feminist theories of mobility to examine how place and movement relate to ideas of agency. Just as Chapter 1’s study of Simone in relation to New York City does not imply that she is fixed or contained within one place, Chapter 2 analyzes Simone’s musical multiplicity to show how she was not contained within one musical category. Chapter 2, “Resistance and Musicianship,” discusses the history and associations of Simone’s first big hit, “I Loves You, Porgy,” to explain how Simone’s performance of multiple musical styles in multiple modes of music-making was a way of resisting audiences’ expectations. As Simone writes in her autobiography, “Because of ‘Porgy’ people often compared me to Billie Holiday...It was a racist thing; ‘If she’s black she must be a jazz singer.’”¹⁵ I discuss how gendered and racialized expectations of black women’s musicianship contributed to “Porgy” being pushed as a hit over others songs on *Little Girl Blue*. I argue that while she could have capitalized on such expectations by adhering to the jazz singer label, Simone’s eventual refusal to comply with narrow categories based on culturally constructed connotations between identity markers and musicianship was a form of political and personal resistance. Hearing Simone’s resistance through her multiplicity of musical styles shifts

¹⁵ Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 69.

her narrative as an activist musician. Both chapters discuss the boundaries of location (New York City) and categorization (jazz singer) to show how Simone made music with respect to those boundaries and beyond them.

Constructions and representations of Simone's narrative are especially relevant today, as three films on Simone have been released since 2015. In addition to *What Happened, Miss Simone?*, directed by Liz Garbus and produced with The Estate of Nina Simone, Jeff Lieberman and Re-Emerging Films also released a documentary, titled *The Amazing Nina Simone*, in 2015. Lieberman spent two years interviewing over fifty individuals connected to Simone's life, music, and legacy including Simone scholars Salamishah Tillet and Ruth Feldstein. More recently, the 2016 release of the biopic *Nina*, directed by Cynthia Mort and produced by Ealing Studio, became the topic of public outrage as actor Zoe Saldana darkened her skin and wore a prosthetic nose to play the part of Simone in the film. Te-Nehisi Coates wrote in response to the film's trailer, "...there is something deeply shameful—and hurtful—in the fact that even today a young Nina Simone would have a hard time being cast in her own biopic."¹⁶ In addition to the film's offensive physical representation of Simone, it depicts her personality as impulsive, enraged, and irresponsible. Considering the many fascinating periods and events in Simone's life, it is disappointing that a widely distributed and high budget film would choose to focus on and dramatically exaggerate a period of Simone's life when she faced various struggles. While the documentaries have been met with positive critical reception, the biopic, as *Times* reviewer Stephanie Zacharek wrote, "is all wrong."¹⁷

¹⁶ Te-Nehisi Coates, "Nina Simone's Face," *The Atlantic*, March 15, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/03/nina-simone-face/472107/>.

¹⁷ Stephanie Zacharek, "Review: Simone Biopic *Nina* Is All Wrong, But Who's to Blame?" *Time*, April 22, 2016, <http://time.com/4303134/nina-movie-review-biopic-zoe-saldana/>.

Another important representation of Simone comes in the form of her autobiography, *I Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone*, co-written with Stephen Cleary. Its usefulness calls for consideration of the autobiography as a genre in itself. Cultural studies scholar Pamela Fox has written about autobiographies of women country musicians, arguing that autobiographies can be understood as self-representational performances. Autobiographies work to construct a coherent narrative of a musician's life and career, sometimes smoothing over incongruities or complications for the sake of linear storytelling.¹⁸ Indeed, I reference and critically engage with Simone's autobiography throughout this thesis, particularly the narrative that Simone constructs around "Mississippi Goddam." As mentioned, Simone asserts "Mississippi Goddam" as her first civil rights song in her autobiography. During this passage, she goes on to say,

Once I got inside the civil rights movement I found out that many people already thought of me as a political artist, a 'protest singer', because I used to talk about civil rights on stage sometimes, praising the freedom riders...But I didn't consider myself involved; I was just spurring them on as best I could from where I sat – on stage, an artist, separate somehow.¹⁹

She acknowledges that her pre-1963 actions were sometimes interpreted as political, but she chooses not to self-identify with such interpretations. Instead, she creates a conception story that conflates the genesis of a song, "Mississippi Goddam," with the genesis of her politicization. By interpreting Simone's actions as political before 1963 in this thesis, I do not seek to disprove or undermine her self-representation. Rather, I critically engage with the conception story and I study her autobiography as a performance. I relate to the "many people who already thought of [Simone] as a political artist" and assert that their understanding of her actions mattered along

¹⁸ Pamela Fox, "Recycled 'Trash': Gender and Authenticity in Country Music Autobiography," *American Quarterly* 50 (1998): 237, 241-1.

¹⁹ Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 90.

with—but not instead of—her self-understanding. Moreover, that the timeline of my study references the song demonstrates the success of the “Mississippi Goddam”-politicization conception story. It is a powerful narrative that continues to influence the reception and legacy of Simone’s music.

Through controversies and differences, it becomes clear that there are many stories on the life and music of Nina Simone. As such, this thesis does not attempt to right any wrongs or tell the definitive story of Simone’s early career. However, it does contest that stories of her early career are worth telling, analyzing, and politicizing. It works to expand the understanding of Simone as a virtuosic performer, political figure, and activist musician. It encourages listeners, fans, and scholars to ask critical questions about Simone’s career and representations. As more and more ears turn towards Simone and her legacy, it is important to acknowledge that her actions and the context of those actions tell multiple stories of musicianship, style, activism, and resistance.

CHAPTER ONE: RESISTANCE AND MUSICAL ACTIVISM

Like a leaf clings to a tree
Oh my darling cling to me
For we're creatures of the wind
—Nina Simone, “Wild is the Wind,” *At Town Hall*

When Colpix Records released her *At Town Hall* album in December of 1959, Nina Simone certainly seemed like a creature of the wind.²⁰ During the previous year, she had toured to performance venues in Chicago, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Hollywood between playing gigs in New York City. Her career was taking off, causing shifts in her movements, influences, and networks. Amidst these movements, the cultural scene in New York City became an important locus for the musical and political ideas that would soon become mainstays of Simone's career and legacy. It was here that she became friends with Langston Hughes, shared ice cream cones with Odetta, and performed alongside Miriam Makeba.²¹ By focusing on New York City, we can understand how the winds blowing Simone in and out of the city were not actually wild, but were connected to a distinct musical and intellectual scene. Furthermore, while Simone was not yet performing explicitly political song lyrics during this early period in her career, many of her connections with artists and intellectuals implicated her involvement in political networks and activities. Such connections were often formed in New York City and then extended outward. In this chapter, I argue that Simone's networks, activities, and movements in and extended from the New York City cultural scene between 1958 and 1963

²⁰ Nina Simone, *At Town Hall*, with Jimmy Bond and Al Heath, produced by Bob Blake and Jack Gold, Colpix CP/SCP 409, 1959, vinyl.

²¹ Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 67-70; Robert Shelton, “Two Folk Singers Present Concert: Miriam Makeba and Nina Simone at Carnegie Hall,” *New York Times*, May 22, 1961, 37.

demonstrate her early engagements with black consciousness, activism, and political music making.

The chapter is divided into four sections. The first section, Scene and Movements, discusses the theoretical frameworks of the chapter as whole. It explains (1) the methodological background of studying music scenes and (2) how to interpret historical and contemporary discourse on space, place, and movement through theories of black feminism.

The remaining sections—Black Consciousness, Civil Rights, and Pan-Africanism—explain how different ideologies of musical activism manifested in Simone’s early career. Black Consciousness paints the auditory and intellectual landscape of New York City, and particularly of Greenwich Village, to show how Simone came into contact with black consciousness through informal networks. After discussing her connections with Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, and Lorraine Hansberry, I show how ideas of black consciousness manifested in musical ways for Simone. The discussion focuses on Simone’s versions of cover songs by Oscar Brown, Jr., listening closely to “Brown Baby.” The next section, Civil Rights, looks to Simone’s participation in civil rights benefit concerts and her growing networks with activist musicians. That section owes a debt to Ingrid Monson’s *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* for its extensive research on civil rights activism within jazz musicians’ networks. Though not specifically bounded within New York City, Monson’s documentation of many activist activities in New York shows how the city was an important location for civil rights. Not only was Simone herself involved in these activities, but many of the musicians with whom she collaborated were also performing as activists. The fourth and final section, Pan-Africanism, interprets Simone’s performances with African-born musicians Michael Olatunji and Miriam Makeba as well as her tour to Nigeria with the America Society of African Culture (AMSAC) as

musical manifestations of Pan-Africanist ideology. Both Olatunji and Makeba were recognized as activist musicians during their engagements with Simone. Furthermore, the AMSAC tour had clear political and ethical motivations that Simone echoed in her own rhetoric. This chapter provides evidence of Simone's political music making during her early career and it demonstrates the diversity and breadth of such activities.

Scene and Movements

Theoretical and methodological understandings of “scene” and “movement” frame my study of Simone's activities in and out of New York City. Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson discuss the history and theory of “scene” in *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual*, writing, “The term ‘scene’ was first widely used by journalists in 1940s to characterize the marginal and bohemian ways of life of those associated with the demiworld of jazz.”²² Scene entered scholarly discourse in the early 1990s with the work of popular music scholar Will Straw. Related to its journalist and scholarly origins, “scene” remains an important concept in both jazz and popular music studies. In his theorization, Straw compares the musical scene to the older notion of musical community. According to Straw, a musical community is concerned with “a population group whose composition is relatively stable...and whose involvement in music takes the form of an ongoing exploration of one or more musical idioms said to be rooted within a geographically specific historical heritage.”²³ In other words, musical communities offer individuals a sense of belonging within a group, are place-based, and are concerned with connecting to a clearly conceived musical history. Musical scene, however, “is that cultural space in which a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety

²² Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson, “Introducing Music Scenes,” in *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual*, ed. Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), 2.

²³ Will Straw, “Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music,” *Cultural Studies* 5 (1991): 373.

of processes of differentiation, and according to widely carrying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization.”²⁴ Musical scene is an appealing concept because it allows scholars to study multiple musical activities through one theoretical framework. The boundaries of a scene are more permeable than that of a community. Individuals, from fans to performers, and musical practices can move in and out of a scene easily. Whereas community is concerned with understanding continuity, scene is concerned with understanding change. Moreover, as Bennett and Peterson explain in the *Music Scenes* edited collection, not all scenes are defined by a geographically bounded physical place. They describe three types of scenes: local, translocal, and virtual, where translocal and virtual are not bounded by a single place.²⁵

With respect to Nina Simone’s activities in New York City, the idea of local scene is most useful. Bennett and Peterson describe local scene as “a scene clustered around a specific geographic focus.”²⁶ While similar to musical community in its focus on a specific geographical place, local scene maintains the permeable movements of individuals and styles as well as the embrace of coexisting musical practices and ideas. There is notable scholarship that studies New York City as a local music scene, such as Travis Jackson’s 2012 monograph *Blowin’ the Blues Away: Performance and Meaning on the New York Jazz Scene*. As an ethnomusicologist, Jackson studies jazz as a cultural practice by looking to its many manifestations of musical activity from the informal educational networks of performers to fans’ means of listening. His choice to study scene over community is especially effective in his analysis of jazz’s relationship

²⁴ Straw, “Systems of Articulation,” 373.

²⁵ A translocal scene is made up of “widely scattered local scenes drawn into regular communication around a distinctive form of music and lifestyle.” Approaching a translocal scene is often helpful for studying a specific musical genre in multiple locations. Virtual scenes often form through Internet communication, but also through fanzines and similar subscription services. As such, musical scene is a flexible concept with uses beyond what will be explored in this chapter. Bennett and Peterson, “Introducing Music Scenes,” 6.

²⁶ Bennett and Peterson, “Introducing Music Scenes,” 6.

with African American history and culture. Where a concept of community might attempt to stabilize jazz as an essentially African American art form, scene allows for connections and associations without essentialisms. Studying the New York City jazz scene in the 1990s, Jackson's use of "scene" is genre, place, and time period specific. He maintains flexibility by asserting, "The activities of musicians and other participants in [local scenes] are not only affected by the given elements of geography; they also have the potential to substantially alter that geography through their movements as well as their responses to and attempts to control it."²⁷

Like Jackson's study, this chapter is concerned with musicians' movements—particularly Nina Simone's movements—within and often beyond the New York City scene. While scene scholars such as Jackson often conceive of movements within the concept of scene, it is also worth contemplating "movement" as a theoretical framework in its own right. In particular, black feminist theory provides a useful lens for understanding Simone's movements and the history of black women's relationships to space. Because this chapter is concerned with the spatial conception of "scene," it is important to acknowledge how geographic theories of space and place have historically represented black women's narratives. Such representations are often closely connected to slavery's history. In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, cultural geographer Katherine McKittrick explains, "Enforcing black placelessness/captivity was central to processes of enslavement and the physical geographies of the slave system."²⁸ Identifying the simultaneity of placelessness and captivity exposes the contradiction between black populations being confined to specific spaces due to slavery and

²⁷ Travis Jackson, *Blowin' the Blues Away: Performance and Meaning on the New York Jazz Scene* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 68.

²⁸ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 9.

their discursive erasure from presence in space. McKittrick is concerned with recognizing black spaces and geographies both historically and discursively. She specifically centers on black women. As she writes, “Ownership of black women during transatlantic slavery was a spatialized, gendered, often public, violence; the black female body was viewed as a naturally submissive, sexually available, public, reproductive technology.”²⁹ Considering the body’s presence in physical space, territorialization of the black female body through objectification and ownership made the body the site of spatial domination. Not only were black women confined to and erased from space, white colonialist patriarchy also objectified black women’s bodies as spaces available for exploitation. To counter black women’s erasures from and connotations with space, McKittrick calls for geographic focus on the black women’s spaces to render black and black feminist narratives present, legitimate, and experiential.³⁰ As such, this thesis focuses on the movements of Nina Simone and discusses how Simone chose to move through the spaces within and outside of New York. It aims to affirm Simone’s presence and agency.

Centering on black women’s spaces requires an acknowledgement of movement and mobility. In *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*, literary scholar Carole Boyce Davies describes the history and cultural meaning of black women’s migrations, journeys, and movements. Davies discusses how, in fiction, the physical journey functions as a signifier for personal development and masculinity, where men escaping from slavery through movement are understood as moving from slavehood to manhood. The journey, if any, for women tends to be internal and without physical movement.³¹ Despite these fictional

²⁹ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 44.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

³¹ Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (London: Routledge, 1994), 130-31.

representations, “Documentation of migration suggests, however, that escape and travel were not necessarily gendered, as in only men having access to the road. Clearly, if the meaning of Harriet Tubman’s life is at all iconic, then the notion of a woman making multiple journeys back and forth in difficult situations has to stand for some form of agency and resistance.”³² Considering the privileging of movement as masculinized, we must not think of Simone as contained within the New York City music scene. Rather, the movements that she made before, during, and after living in New York City, from her travels out of North Carolina to Philadelphia and Atlantic City to her travels out of New York City to Barbados, Liberia, and France, should be understood as central to her career development and personal agency. As Davies writes, “If we continue to read Black women only as doubly contained because of the implications of race and gender oppression and therefore further distanced from the possibilities of flight, then whatever agency is implied in physical movement is too easily erased.”³³ Discussing the representations of black women’s movements against the realities of their mobility is useful in understanding Simone’s movements in and around New York.

As such, this chapter interprets Simone’s musical activities and activism through the framework of a local music scene and a black feminist understanding of movement. To begin, we will turn to New York City during the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Black Consciousness

When Simone moved from Philadelphia to New York City in 1959, many of her activities and networks, both artistic and political, revolved around Greenwich Village. The Village’s vibrant folk music, innovative jazz artists, and radical beat poets reverberated with the movements of post-McCarthy era communists, recent black migrants from the South, and

³² Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, 133.

³³ *Ibid.*, 134.

burgeoning civil rights radicals. New York City had been transforming into a Black Bohemia since the end of World War II, after which many black families and individuals moved to northern states. In 1940, the black population in New York City was 458,000, and then rose to 700,000 by 1948.³⁴ The close of World War II brought a sense of optimism and the promise of economic opportunity.

Likewise, Simone moved to New York to seize economic opportunity as her first album *Little Girl Blue*'s big hit "I Loves You, Porgy" swept her up in success.³⁵ She played all over town at famous music venues such as Village Gate, Village Vanguard, Town Hall, and the Apollo Theater, and she resumed lessons at the Juilliard School, where she had previously studied during her late teens.³⁶ Simone contributed to and was influenced by the Village scene's world of artists and intellectuals in the late 1950s and early 1960s, which was buzzing with modern music and radical ideologies. Poet Langston Hughes watched playwright Lorraine Hansberry transform his poetry into theatrical productions, trumpeter Miles Davis recorded his modal jazz album *Kind of Blue* with John Coltrane and Cannonball Adderly, and folk singer Odetta performed ballads at the Village Gate.³⁷ This was also the setting where LeRoi Jones, later known as Amiri Baraka, was founding the Black Arts Movement along with other artistic intellectuals such as Nikki Giovanni and Larry Neal. The Black Arts Movement celebrated Afrocentric "black art" as created by black American artists, from musicians and poets to

³⁴ Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 3.

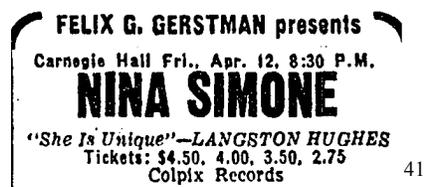
³⁵ *Little Girl Blue* was Simone's first legally released album, but there are bootlegged recordings from 1955-56 of Simone performing in Atlantic City. Premier Records released the recordings on the album *Starring Nina Simone* in 1964. Simone filed a lawsuit against Premier Records, claiming that its release was unauthorized. In February of 1965, Premier Records made an out-of-court settlement with Simone. See "Nina Simone Sues Premier, R.H. Macy," *Billboard*, January 9, 1965; "Nina and Premier in Settlement," *Billboard*, February 13, 1965.

³⁶ Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 70.

³⁷ Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 330; Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 70.

filmmakers and photographers, who politically aligned with black solidarity, black liberation, and the Black Power Movement.³⁸

Simone became friends with many of these influential artists when she moved to New York, leading to collaborations throughout her career. Langston Hughes was an early supporter of her music. He heard her perform at the Village Gate in 1961, shortly after traveling with her to in Lagos, Nigeria. This connection manifested in Hughes's public promotions of Simone's music making. In 1962, he published an article praising Simone in the *New York Post*, and a couple of years later he wrote the liner notes for her 1964 *Broadway-Blues-Ballads* album.³⁹ Encouraging music shoppers to give Simone's album a listen, he wrote, "She is strange...She is far-out...She has a flair, but no air...She is unique. You either like her or you don't. If you don't, you won't. If you do—wheee-ouuu-eu! You do!"⁴⁰ The *New York Times* published an advertisement on April 8, 1963 for Simone's debut solo concert at Carnegie Hall, which also featured Hughes's praise:



Hughes's encouragement and support during Simone's early career led to collaboration during the height of her prominence as a protest songstress. Responding to systematic racism and white supremacist backlash against the Civil Rights movement's achievements, Hughes wrote a poem

³⁸ Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1997), 179-241; Tammy L. Kernodle, "Black Arts Movement," *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2283957>.

³⁹ Langston Hughes, "Nina Simone," *New York Post*, June 29, 1962; Nina Simone, *Broadway-Blues-Ballads*, produced by Hal Mooney, Phillips PHS 600/PHM 200, 1964, vinyl, liner notes by Langston Hughes.

⁴⁰ Simone, *Broadway-Blues-Ballads*, liner notes by Hughes.

⁴¹ "Display Ad 45—No Title," *New York Times*, April 8, 1963.

titled “The Backlash Blues” in 1965.⁴² Hughes shared the poem with Simone before its publication in June of 1967, a month after Hughes’s death in May, as Simone set his text to music and premiered the song during a live concert in November of 1966.⁴³ In the wake of Hughes’s death, Simone began performing the song to memorialize him and to promote his anti-racist ideologies. “Backlash Blues” quickly became part of her standard concert repertoire of the late 1960s, and it is evidence of the important friendship that began during her early days in the Village.

While Hughes, born in 1902, was a generation older than Simone, her activities in the New York scene also put her in contact with artists closer to her age. In fact, Langston Hughes was a common connection among these artists. In his autobiography, Amiri Baraka recalls seeing Hughes at a jazz club with musician Charles Mingus around 1958. As he reflected on the friendships he made while living in the Village, Baraka mentioned how “he [Langston Hughes] sent me an autographed poem, ‘Backlash Blues,’ which I have on my wall framed today.”⁴⁴ Simone lists Baraka among her Village acquaintances in her own autobiography, and Baraka briefly harks back to these early days in his 1986 essay “Nina Returns.”⁴⁵ As Simone called him up to sit on the stage with her at a performance in 1984, Baraka remembered “the time I heard Jimmy Baldwin went up on the Village Gate stage and sat on the bench with Nina.”⁴⁶ The overlapping friendships—Hughes and Simone, Baraka and Hughes, Simone and Baraka, Simone

⁴² Kimberley L. Phillips, *War! What Is It Good For? Black Freedom Struggles and the U.S. Military from War World II to Iraq* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 228-30

⁴³ Langston Hughes, “The Backlash Blues,” *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 74, 1967: 251-52; Nadine Cohodas, *Princess Noire: The Tumultuous Reign of Nina Simone* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), 192-93.

⁴⁴ Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 219.

⁴⁵ Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 67; Amiri Baraka, *Digging: The Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 57.

⁴⁶ Baraka, *Digging*, 57.

and Baldwin—reveal the close-knit networks traceable to the Village. Baraka’s essay documents their friendship and he even discusses how Simone “persistently” asked him to assist her in writing her own autobiography.⁴⁷

Hughes and Baraka are both well-known figures of the Black Arts and Civil Rights movements and likely influenced Simone’s ideology, but she cites Lorraine Hansberry as the most important teacher in her “political education.”⁴⁸ Hansberry is best known for her play *A Raisin in the Sun*, which she based off of Hughes’s poem “Harlem.” Hansberry and Simone met in the Village and they became close friends when Simone moved to Mount Vernon, a suburb of Manhattan, in 1962. As Simone wrote in her autobiography, “Lorraine started off my political education, and through her I started thinking about myself as a black person in a country run by white people and a woman in a world run by men. I realized I was ignorant and had much to learn, but my teachers from Lorraine onwards were the cream of the movement: Stokely Carmichael, Godfrey Cambridge and many, many others, most of whom I would never meet face to face but in their writings, speeches or just in their actions.”⁴⁹ Simone paid homage to Hansberry throughout her life— both in her autobiography and in song. Hansberry died of cancer in 1965 at the young age of thirty-four. Her ex-husband and literary executor compiled her texts into a posthumously released play, *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, in 1968.⁵⁰ Taking cue in 1969, Simone collaborated with Weldon J. Irvine Jr. to compose a song with the same title that honored Hansberry, promoted her activist sentiments, and became an anthem of black pride.

⁴⁷ Baraka, *Digging*, 63.

⁴⁸ Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 87.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵⁰ Shana L. Redmond, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 199.

Yet while Hansberry is imperative to any discussion of early ideological influences on Simone, Simone's self-representation of "ignorance" about racial and gender discrimination and feeling of being "separated from what was going on" in the Civil Rights Movement at the beginning of her friendship with Hansberry seems incongruous with her musical activities at the time. For example, on October 21, 1960, Simone performed a concert at Hunter College, hosted by Village Gate owner Art D'Lugoff. Following the performance, Laureen Gunther published a concert review in the *New York Amsterdam Times*. Gunther noted, "At the end of the last group of songs, the audience rose to its feet and would not be satisfied until Miss Simone returned and performed once more for them. She chose for an encore 'Brown Baby,' a song which has the feeling and pathos of the Negro's long struggle for a better life."⁵¹

Simone's performance of "Brown Baby" demonstrates her early engagement with black consciousness through song. The song was composed by jazz musician, entertainer, and social activist Oscar Brown, Jr., and was the first of his songs to be recorded. Gospel singer Mahalia Jackson performed the premiere recording of "Brown Baby" on her 1960 album *Come On Children, Let's Sing*. Later in 1960, Brown released his own performance of the song on his debut album, *Sin & Soul*. With his album's dark humored criticisms of racial inequality and exploitation in the U.S., Brown became an early example of the political/protest singer-songwriter.⁵² Indeed, the album paved the way for Brown's creation of many more activist artworks. Peter Keepnews wrote in his 2005 *New York Times* obituary that Brown "preferred to call himself an entertainer, although even that broad term did not go far enough: he saw his art as

⁵¹ Laureen Gunther, "Nina Simone Heard at Hunter College," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 29, 1960, 15.

⁵² "Brown Oscar, Jr.," in *Encyclopedia of Popular Music (4 ed.)*. Oxford University Press, 2006-, <http://www.oxfordreference.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195313734.001.0001/acref-9780195313734-e-3440?rskey=TKbSZA&result=1>.

a way to celebrate African-American life and attack racism, and it was not always easy to tell where the entertainer ended and the activist began.”⁵³

Brown and his *Sin & Soul* album clearly had an impressive influence on Simone. She recorded four songs from the album—“Brown Baby,” “Work Song,” “Rags and Old Iron,” and “Forbidden Fruit”—with *Forbidden Fruit* also becoming the title of her 1961 album. She kept these four songs in her main repertory throughout her career, recording each song several times. It is also likely that *Sin & Soul* inspired the title of Simone’s 1967 album *Silk & Soul*. Simone as well as her mentor Hansberry and others publicly approved of Brown and even provided endorsements on the *Sin & Soul* album cover. Hansberry’s quotation reads, “. . .a startling genius for rendering sense and nonsense into acutely succinct and brilliant summaries of life as we live it.” Simone’s endorsement read, “I think Oscar Brown is one of the most creative young men in the musical world today.”⁵⁴ Her 1960 performance of “Brown Baby” at Hunter College and her quotation on his 1960 album demonstrate an earlier relationship with Brown and his music.

“Brown Baby” is an early example of black pride as the speaker urges the “little brown baby” to “go with your head up high.” Yet rather than the celebratory songs of black pride that would come later in the 1960s, from James Brown’s “Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud” to Simone’s “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black,” the minor key and heavyhearted lyrics of “Brown Baby” filter racial pride through a more melancholy mood.⁵⁵

⁵³ Peter Keepnews, “Oscar Brown Jr., Entertainer and Social Activist, Dies at 78,” *New York Times*, May 31, 2005, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/31/arts/music/oscar-brown-jr-entertainer-and-social-activist-dies-at-78.html?_r=0.

⁵⁴ Oscar Brown Jr., *Sin & Soul*, Columbia Records CK 64994, 1960, vinyl, Lorraine Hansberry’s and Nina Simone’s quotations on album cover.

⁵⁵ There is no known recording of Simone’s Hunter College performance so the following lyrical and musical analysis of Simone’s cover of Brown’s “Brown Baby” is based upon her first commercial recording of the song, which was released on her *Nina at the Village Gate* album in 1962.

Verse 1

Brown baby, brown baby
As you grow up
I want you to drink from the plenty cup
I want you to stand up tall and proud
And I want you to speak up clear and loud
Brown baby

Verse 2

Brown baby, brown baby
As years go by
I want you to go with your head up high
I want you to live by the justice code
And I want you to walk down freedom's road
You little brown baby

Bridge

So lie away, lie away sleeping
Lie away sleeping, lie away sleeping
Lie away safe in my arms
Till your daddy and your mama protect you
And keep you safe from harm
Brown Baby

Verse 3

It makes me glad
You gonna have things that I never had
When out of men's heart all hate is hurled
Sweetie you gonna live in a better world
Brown baby
Brown baby
Brown baby

Simone performs solo on voice and piano in her rendition of the somber lullaby, which expresses both the pain of the speaker's past and the speaker's hopeful yet uncertain optimism for the baby's future. Before singing the song's first words, "brown baby," Simone's piano playing establishes a sense of uncertainty and sorrow coupled with a desire to move forward to better times. The song is in A minor and begins with a tonic chord. Yet rather than a stable root position chord, Simone introduces the idea of instability to the song by playing this introductory

chord in first inversion. Furthermore, Simone plays this opening section with expressive rubato, and throughout the song she never establishes a steady pulse. Such harmonic and temporal uncertainties create suspense for the listener, who must cling to Simone's every move rather than being able to predict the succession of musical ideas. After playing the opening chords, Simone plays a single accented pitch, B, in the right hand several times with increasing tempo and dynamic level to create a sense of urgency and drive forward. The musical expressions of urgency and uncertainty foreshadow and color the song's textual meaning. While most of the song's lyrics focus on the brown baby's life, the speaker suggests her own hardship in the final verse. She says to the brown baby, "You gonna have things that I never had," implying that she hopes the baby's life will not be as difficult as her own. The urgent, repetitive B in the piano introduction drives the song's musical structure forward in a way that mirrors the song's textual focus on the future. Furthermore, the musical figures of uncertainty mirror the instability and strife of the speaker's past, and they also undercut the assertion that the brown baby's life will be better. While the text on its own is definitive, its pairing with the music makes the speaker's words seem more like an optimistic hope than a guaranteed promise. She is hopeful yet uncertain that the brown baby's life will indeed be better than her own.

The intermingling between optimism for the future and the harsh reality of the past is also expressed in the musical apex of "Brown Baby." Relatively early in the song, the end of the second verse marks the song's apex when Simone sings "freedom's road." After singing the first three lines in a similar style to the opening lines of the first verse, Simone signals an emotive shift by playing a dramatically embellished chord following the words "justice code." She then sings "And I want you to walk down" a capella and rather straightforwardly, but then plays four successive chords of increasing dynamics before erupting on "free" with a high C. She sings

each syllable in “freedom’s road” with a single sustained pitch, descending C-B-A. Towards the end of her long hold on “road,” she adds melismatic notes to descend down an octave. She sings the final words of the second verse, “You little brown baby,” in the same vocal range with which she began the song. Her emphasis on the phrase “freedom’s road” suggests that freedom’s road is one of the things that the speaker never had. Rather, the speaker wishes freedom’s road for the brown baby. Furthermore, while the speaker directs her words to the brown baby, her message is also a call for black parents and caregivers to protect their children, to keep them safe from the harm, and to acknowledge that the past generations’ strength in the face of racial oppression will benefit future generations. The older generation had to withstand all the hate in men’s/white supremacists’ hearts (“When out of men’s heart all hate is hurled”) so that they could give “a better world” to the brown baby and thus future generations of black and brown people.

The key relationships of Simone’s “Brown Baby” also express the speaker’s suffering alongside her hopeful desires. Simone plays in A minor to create a melancholy musical setting, representative of hardship. That is, until the final moment of the song when she shifts from A minor to an A major root position chord through the arrival of a Picardy third. In this small, simple moment, the listener finally believes that the speaker’s aspirational promise, “Sweetie you gonna live in a better world,” may actually be fulfilled.

Simone’s musical setting and performance of Oscar Brown Jr.’s black pride lullaby, “Brown Baby,” demonstrate her early connections to musical activism and black consciousness. Yet Simone and Brown not only crossed socially conscious paths through songs such as “Brown Baby” and other covers such as “Rags and Old Iron,” but also through live performance.

Civil Rights

TV GUIDE

RECOMMENDED THIS WEEK

Lena Horne, Theodore Bikel, Horace Silver, Nina Simone, Oscar Brown Jr., Billy Taylor, Joey Bishop and others on Freedom Riders Telethon on WNTA-TV (Channel 13), beginning at 10:30 p.m., with Louis Lomax and Betty Frank as emcees. ⁵⁶

.....

On July 7, 1961, Nina Simone, Oscar Brown Jr., Lena Horne, Theodore Bikel, Horace Silver, Billy Taylor, and Joey Bishop performed for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) Freedom Riders telethon.⁵⁷ The telethon raised funds for the Freedom Rides, a series of public transportation protests that were initially organized by CORE. While there were many more that followed, the first group of Freedom Riders consisted of seven black men, three white men, and three white women. The purpose of the Freedom Rides was to expose and condemn southern states' noncompliance with the Supreme Court's ruling in *Boynton v. Virginia* (1960), which prohibited segregation in the waiting rooms and other terminal services for interstate transportation. The first group planned to travel from Washington, D.C. to New Orleans on two buses, one serviced by Greyhound and the other by Trailways. After leaving Washington on May 4, 1961, neither group made it all the way to New Orleans by bus. The Freedom Riders on the Greyhound made it to Anniston, Alabama, but then decided to fly to New Orleans after a white mob burned their bus and beat them with knives, iron pipes, clubs, and bricks upon exiting the flaming vehicle. The Trailways Freedom Riders traveled as far as Jackson, Mississippi, where they were arrested and jailed. Along the way, they sustained violent encounters with white segregationists in Montgomery, Alabama. Although the first Freedom Riders endured horrible

⁵⁶ "TV GUIDE," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 8, 1961, 17.

⁵⁷ "Big Telethon Set to Aid Freedom Riders," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 24, 1961, 17.

violence, they inspired hundreds of more Riders through the summer and fall of 1961. The Freedom Rides largely succeeded in two ways. First, they eliminated interstate segregation by inciting the Kennedy administration to press for an expedited Interstate Commerce Commission ruling, which went into effect on November 1, 1961. Second, they inspired many people to work full time for civil rights organizations such as CORE, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Southern Christian Leadership Congress (SCLC), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).⁵⁸

As Ingrid Monson documents in *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa*, the telethon that Simone and Brown performed in was not the only musical event that financially and morally aided the Freedom Riders. The July 1961 telethon aired on WNTA-TV Channel 13, which was and continues to be the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) channel for the New York metropolitan area.⁵⁹ The event successfully earned \$36,000 in pledges and almost \$30,000 in revenues for CORE.⁶⁰ It was preceded by a CORE-organized fundraising concert that featured jazz musicians Louis Armstrong, Cannonball Adderly, and Gerry Mulligan on June 28, 1961.⁶¹ Art Blakey also chimed into the Freedom Riders support when he recorded a seven-and-a-half minute drum solo titled “The Freedom Rider” in May 1961. Blakey released the recording in 1961 on an album, also titled *The Freedom Rider*, with his band The Jazz Messengers.⁶²

Several musicians supporting the Freedom Riders through concerts and tributes shared musical connections with Simone. Simone had been performing with Art Blakey since her early

⁵⁸ Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 190.

⁵⁹ “About THIRTEEN,” Thirteen: Media with Impact, accessed June 1, 2016, <http://www.thirteen.org/about/>.

⁶⁰ Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 190-94.

⁶¹ “Jazz Supports the Freedom Riders,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 24, 1961, 17.

⁶² Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 194.

days in New York, such as when they played at the Apollo Theater together for a weeklong gig in April 1959.⁶³ Simone played alongside Horace Silver earlier in 1961, as an advertisement in the *New York Amsterdam News* on February 11, 1961 promoted, “He’s with Nina—Horace Silver, who named Harlem ‘Soulville’ and composed a tune by the same name, is on the jazz bill which comes into the Apollo Theater Friday, featuring Nina Simone.”⁶⁴ It is also likely that Simone strengthened relationships with musicians through the Freedom Riders benefit concerts. A couple of years later in 1963, Simone played with Cannonball Adderly at the City Auditorium in Atlanta as well as at the Newport Jazz Festival in Newport, Rhode Island.⁶⁵ She also participated in another civil rights benefit concert with Oscar Brown, Jr. when they performed for the Negro American Labor Council at the Apollo Theater on January 26, 1962.⁶⁶ Considering the connections to these artists both before and after the Freedom Riders concerts, Simone’s participation in the telethon was no coincidence. Her participation was a direct engagement with civil rights activism, and her connections among other Freedom Rides performers demonstrate her informal engagements with activist networks. In other words, Simone was regularly performing with musicians involved in activism. Considering Simone’s later prominence as an activist musician in the mid to late 1960s, it is likely that these early engagements had important influence.

The composition and premiere of the *Freedom Now Suite* was an important activist project that Simone was not directly a part of but involved several musicians in her New York

⁶³ “Display Ad 57 -- No Title,” *New York Amsterdam News*, April 18, 1959, 16.

⁶⁴ “Photo Standalone 24 – No Title,” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 11, 1961, 15.

⁶⁵ “Gloria, Nina, Cannonball On Jazz Show, Feb. 11th,” *Atlanta Daily World*, February 7, 1963, 3; John S. Wilson, “10th Jazz Series Opens in Newport: Adderly Group, Lateef and Nina Simone Perform,” *New York Times*, July 5, 1963, 14.

⁶⁶ Jesse H. Walker, “Modern Jazz Show Held for Labor,” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 3, 1961, 16.

network of connections. Oscar Brown, Jr. and jazz drummer Max Roach composed the piece, which premiered at the Village Gate on January 15, 1961 in a benefit concert sponsored by CORE.⁶⁷ The other musicians involved were vocalist Abbey Lincoln, Nigerian drummer Michael Olatunji, and vocalist Sarah Vaughan. In a 2001 article on the piece, Ingrid Monson claimed that the suite “is perhaps the best-known jazz work with explicitly political content.”⁶⁸ The piece’s symbolic meaning draws from civil rights, African independence, and modernism “as Roach and his musicians strive not only to make use of the African and African-American legacy, but to do so in a modern way.”⁶⁹ Roach and Simone headlined a concert at Town Hall on March 26, 1960 and they stayed friends for decades onward.⁷⁰ It is possible that the Pan-Africanist leanings of Brown and Roach’s *Freedom Now Suite* had an important influence on Simone, as she became directly involved with Pan-Africanist music and activities starting around 1961. Her friendship and collaborations with Michael Olatunji, however, seemed to be an especially important factor, and the Village Gate was a frequent host.

Pan-Africanism

Leading up to her tour with the American Society on African Culture to Lagos, Nigeria in December, Simone participated in a number of Pan-Africanist collaborations and activities in 1961. Several activities involved performances and connections with South African singer Miriam Makeba and, as mentioned, Nigerian drummer Michael Olatunji. This section discusses Simone’s musical activities celebrating Pan-Africanism in 1961, beginning with her collaboration with Olatunji in April and ending with the tour to Lagos in December.

⁶⁷ Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 152.

⁶⁸ Ingrid Monson, “Revisited! The Freedom Now Suite,” *JazzTimes*, September 2001, accessed June 4, 2016, <http://jazztimes.com/articles/20130-revisited-the-freedom-now-suite>.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ “Display Ad 53 – No Title,” *New York Amsterdam News*, March 26, 1960, 15.

Furthermore, it demonstrates Simone's holistic view of Africa, which impacted her understanding of self and heritage as well as encouraged her participation in Pan-Africanist politics.

Michael Babatunde Olatunji was born in Ajido, Nigeria in 1927, moved to Atlanta, Georgia in 1950 and then arrived in New York City a few years later. His first prominent performance in New York was his collaboration with the Radio City Music Hall Orchestra on the piece *African Drum Fantasy*, which premiered in 1958. In 1959, the same year that Simone moved to New York, Olatunji signed a record contract with Columbia Records. As such, Simone and Olatunji were rising to musical fame in New York during the same time period. Olatunji established his hold on the New York cultural scene in 1965, when he opened the Olatunji Center for African Culture in Harlem with financial support from John Coltrane. The Olatunji Center offered classes in African dance, music, language, folklore, and history.⁷¹ *The Guardian's* obituary for Olatunji affirmed that he "played a key role in furthering the appreciation of African- and specifically Nigerian—music, polyrhythms and spirituality in jazz and world music."⁷²

Simone's first known collaboration with Olatunji came shortly after his performance in *The Freedom Now Suite*. In April 1961, Simone recorded "Zungo," a song composed by Olatunji, for the *Nina at the Village Gate* album.⁷³ The song comes from Olatunji's 1961 album

⁷¹ "Olatunji, Babatunde," in *Encyclopedia of Popular Music* (4 ed.), Oxford University Press, 2006-, <http://www.oxfordreference.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195313734.001.0001/acref-9780195313734-e-63326?rskey=cvYcNL&result=1>.

⁷² Ken Hunt, "Obituary: Babatunde Olatunji: Vibrant Nigerian Drummer Who Put the Old Sounds of Africa into New Jazz," *Guardian*, April 11, 2003, 1.29.

⁷³ Nina Simone, *Nina at the Village Gate*, with Al Schackman, Robert Hamilton, and Chris White, produced by Cal Lampley, Colpix CP/SCP 421, 1962, vinyl.

Afro-Percussion, Zungo!, the second album that Olatunji released with Columbia Records. The liner notes of Olatunji's album offer a brief translation of the Yoruba lyrics:

Baba' sings of his grandfather's hamlet:
Who would take me back to Zungo,
Who would take me back to Zungo,
Zungo is my home.
The world is incomplete without Zungo,
Zungo is my home.⁷⁴

Olatunji begins the piece by wordlessly humming the tune's main melody. The piece builds in momentum with the staggered entrances of the percussion instruments, the dramatic addition of a vocal choir singing the lyrics, and gradual increases in tempo. When Simone performs "Zungo," she similarly begins by playing the main melody without words. Her version also builds momentum through the gradual increase in accompanying instruments and tempo, though it is less elaborate than Olatunji's original. She maintains the Yoruba lyrics, affirming a relationship with ancestral land and heritage. The lyrics also signify that the speaker is not currently in her home, but that "Zungo is my home." Zungo is a mythical place that allowed both Olatunji and Simone to claim connections to ancestry in Africa. While Olatunji's connection is more specific considering his birth and upbringing in Nigeria, Simone's singing of Zungo as home is broader in that it connotes an African American claim to African ancestry and belonging. In Simone's version, both African Americans and Africans can claim "Zungo" as their homeland, aligning them in Pan-Africanist spirit. As Simon would later write in her autobiography, "Africa, half a world away from New York...Maybe it would be like going home."⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Michael Babatunde Olatunji, *Afro-Percussion, Zungo!*, Columbia Records CS 8434, 1961, vinyl, liner notes by Robert Farris Thompson.

⁷⁵ Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 137.

Simone and Olatunji's activities are connected beyond this song. One of Simone's most loyal and longstanding band members, guitarist Al Schackman, played on both *Nina at the Village Gate* and *Afro-Percussion, Zungo!*. Furthermore, each album's liner notes discusses the importance of the Village Gate as a performance venue. Indeed, Simone and Olatunji performed together in recurring gigs at the Village Gate during 1961. A *New York Amsterdam News* advertisement from September 9, 1961 promoted a collaborative concert.



They also performed together in December 1961, dovetailing their booking at the Village Gate with that of Miriam Makeba. Simone and Olatunji's gig ended on December 10, while Makeba played at the Village Gate from December 12 through New Year's Eve.⁷⁷ Again, the Village Gate was an important point of connection between Simone and musician activists like Makeba.

Miriam Makeba, well known as “Mama Africa” and “Mother Africa,” also found her rise to fame around the same time as Olatunji and Simone in the late 1950s. Born outside of Johannesburg, South Africa in 1932, Makeba's big break came in August 1959 when the antiapartheid film *Come Back, Africa* premiered at the 21st Venice Film Festival. Although Makeba only made a short appearance at the beginning of the film, she was heralded as its star. The film gained international acclaim, including fans from Europe and the U.S. After the South African government withdrew her passport for her involvement in antiapartheid politics, Makeba moved to New York and began playing gigs around the city. She quickly became known for

⁷⁶ “Display Ad 40 – No Title,” *New York Amsterdam News*, September 9, 1961, 15.

⁷⁷ “Display Ad 59 – No Title,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 9, 1961, 17.

infusing her music making with African independence activism. Her first marriage was to fellow South African émigré Hugh Masekela, but she eventually divorced him to marry Black Panther activist Stokely Carmichael in 1968. Although her marriage to Carmichael also ended in divorce, their relationship is one of many ways in which Makeba became closely involved with black consciousness and civil rights activism in the U.S. In addition to “Mother Africa,” a critic from the *New York Times* even noted her as “Africa’s musical ambassador to the U.S.”⁷⁸ Makeba sang at a birthday celebration for President Kennedy, testified before the United Nations Committee on apartheid, won a Grammy award for a collaboration album with Harry Belafonte, and combined her chart topping hits like “Pata Pata” with outspoken denunciations of apartheid.⁷⁹ Later in life, she welcomed Simone to Liberia. As Simone wrote in her autobiography, “she was ‘Mother Africa’, famous and loved throughout the continent and a friend of kings and princes, prime ministers and presidents.”⁸⁰

According to Simone, she and Makeba met when Simone approached her after one of Makeba’s performances at a New York nightclub. As Simone recalled, “within a few minutes we felt we’d known each other all our lives. Miriam told me she’d heard my records on the radio in South Africa at the end of the fifties—which astonished me—and had wanted to meet me ever since.”⁸¹ By the spring of 1961, Simone and Makeba were performing together. The two artists performed at the annual benefit concert for Harlem’s Church of the Master, the largest Presbyterian congregation in New York.⁸² The concert was held at Carnegie Hall on May 21,

⁷⁸ Robert Shelton, “2,800 Hear Concert by Miriam Makeba,” *New York Times*, April 22, 1963, 23.

⁷⁹ Ruth Feldstein, “Screening Antiapartheid: Miriam Makeba, ‘Come Back, Africa,’ and the Transnational Circulation of Black Culture and Politics,” *Feminist Studies* 39 (2013): 12-14.

⁸⁰ Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 138.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

1961, marking Simone's first performance at the prestigious venue. Robert Shelton, music critic for the *New York Times*, wrote in his review of the concert, "Miss Simone is a singer and pianist with a style as eclectic as a stew. But in the folk, pop, jazz and classical mélange she offered, there was a compelling mixture of wit, dramatic fervor and bubbling imagination."⁸³ Shelton was less generous, however, in his assessment of Makeba's shifting musical styles. He noted that she had incorporated Western musical styles with her "tribal chants," and assessed, "It is a familiar, but not inevitable, course for the folk artist to dilute his material when transplanted to a new milieu. In an artist of Miss Makeba's heritage communicativeness and voice, even the subtlest dilution is a loss."⁸⁴ Shelton's narrow view of Makeba's music exoticizes her South African upbringing as "tribal" and criticizes her for any moves beyond his tightly constrained expectations of African music. Moreover, his description of Makeba's performance situates African idioms as old while Western idioms are new and modern. Such rhetoric is closely tied to colonialist and imperialist agendas that represent Western society as modernized and developed while mythical Africa must stay rooted in the ancient, underdeveloped past.⁸⁵ Shelton provides one example of the common and harmful misconceptions that the activities of the American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) hoped to counter. Rather than presenting African and American artistry in opposition with one another, the AMSAC artists' tour to Lagos, Nigeria planned for American participants to "share the stage with their African counterparts to demonstrate the development of Negro artistry both in Africa and in the Americas."⁸⁶

⁸² "Church of the Master Celebrating 20th Year," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 17, 1958, 21.

⁸³ Shelton, "Two Folk Singers Present Concert," 37.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁸⁵ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1981), 14.

⁸⁶ "Americans Going to Nigeria for Big Cultural Festival," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 2, 1961, 27.

Simone traveled with AMSAC to Lagos, Nigeria in December of 1961 to participate in the Pan-Africanist activities of the society. In June of 1961, AMSAC hosted a dinner event in Washington, D.C. to raise funds and support for a cultural exchange program between African and African American artists. Simone attended and was even selected to perform at the event, along with Hazel Scott, Michael Olatunji, Diahann Carroll, and Irving Burgie. Ossie Davis spoke at the dinner on behalf of the members of the AMSAC Performing Arts Committee, saying, “No greater task is before us than to bring to our own those gifts which we have husbanded and trained—to present them man to man, brother to brother, and culture to culture.”⁸⁷ A few weeks after the dinner, AMSAC hosted its fourth annual meeting. The meeting resulted in the society’s agreement to pursue the following goals:

1. closer identification of American Negroes and Africans, on the basis of common ethnic background, should be fostered and that AMSAC should ‘swim with the broad stream of cultural Pan-Africanism.’
2. An untapped reservoir of American Negro skill, entrepreneurial experience and capital existed, and that it should be marshaled to play a larger role in African development
3. That great concern among certain influential white American groups over increasing African-Afro-American solidarity was leading them to action inimical to the interests of Africans and Negroes and that counter action was necessary.⁸⁸

AMSAC was responding to recent attempts by white-owned magazines such as the Reporter and the New Yorker to claim that Africans and African Americans did not like each other. The artist tour to Lagos, thus, was a way of building solidarity and a “closer identification of American Negroes and African.” When AMSAC associate director Calvin H. Raullerson announced in

⁸⁷ “Cultural Exchange Program Discussed at D.C. Dinner,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 3, 1961, 12.

⁸⁸ Simon Anekewe, “Cobfab Hits Mags Which Would Split Africans, Negro Americans,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 1, 1961, 5.

August that he would be moving from New York to Lagos to set up a cultural center, he was furthering the goals articulated at the annual meeting.⁸⁹

The tour that brought Simone to Lagos celebrated the opening of the new center with “a two-day festival and conference on the art, music, dance and drama of Africans, and of Americans of African decent.”⁹⁰ Simone credits her involvement with AMSAC to her friendships with Langston Hughes and James Baldwin as “they took [her] to a couple of meetings, and Langston helped to get [her] on the party.” It is likely that Michael Olatunji also played a role through his performances and collaborations with Simone earlier in 1961 and because he traveled with Simone and Hughes on the tour. Other participants included folk singer-songwriter Odetta, jazz pianist Randy Weston, jazz specialist and music professor Willis James, art critic and anthropologist Cedric Dover, art professor Hale Woodruff, poet Rosey E. Pool, jazz musician Lionel Hampton, folk musician Brock Peters, dancer and choreographer Geoffrey Holder, writer and actor John Akar, concert pianist Natalie Hinderas, and concert singer Martha Flowers.⁹¹ Reflecting upon her arrival in Lagos, Simone wrote:

We flew to Europe on 20 December and connected with a flight to Lagos. I looked out over miles and miles of jungle as we flew until we dripped down to land and the blunt heat of Africa hit us. Outside on the tarmac I could hear the drums going and the songs of welcome starting up. When I got to the door I saw crowds stretched out all round, musicians and dancers, local politicians in their traditional African clothes in a small group at the bottom of the steps, schoolchildren waving and running through the crowd. We stood, all of us, blinking in the sun at the celebrations our arrival had triggered. 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. The people of Lagos never made me feel anything other than welcome but it wasn't Nigeria I arrived in—it was *Africa* [emphasis in original].⁹²

⁸⁹ “Lagos Office Opens Aids Negro Artists,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 26, 1961, 14.

⁹⁰ “AMSAC Center in Nigeria,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 30, 1961, 15.

⁹¹ “Americans Going to Nigeria for Big Cultural Festival.”

⁹² Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 80-81.

Later in her autobiography, Simone explains what she meant by *Africa*: “My Africa had no countries, just hundreds of different peoples mixed through history into a rough cocktail and forced to seed an exiled nation in a far-off country: my great-grandfather, Grandma, Daddy, Momma, me.”⁹³ Simone was aware that her holistic view of Africa was based upon misperception, as she goes on to explain how “modern Africa” would have been a shock to her system. Yet her view of Africa is still significant because it explains her understanding of self and heritage. Indeed, the festival encouraged broad views of both African and African American art. AMSAC was concerned with finding points of connection across boundaries rather than displaying the distinctions between them. The first day of the festival focused on “Negro Culture in Africa and in the Americas” and the second day focused on “common themes, derivations and sources of African and American Negro plastic and spatial arts, spirituals and popular music, drama, literature and the dance.”⁹⁴ The festival wanted to demonstrate and understand how hundreds of different people had been mixed through history, looking at both changes and continuities. Although homogenizing views of Africa can be damaging in the hands of white imperialism and neocolonialism, Simone’s Pan-Africanism came from different motives and manifested in ways that encouraged African-descended people’s solidarity.

Based upon her connections, activities, and music making in the years before her 1963 composition of “Mississippi Goddam,” it is clear that Simone was politically engaged. Her close friendships with activists led to sensitive performances of black consciousness songs such as “Brown Baby” and later compositions of black pride anthems. Onstage performances supported civil rights activities and musical collaborations aligned with Pan-Africanist agendas. Moreover,

⁹³ Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 138.

⁹⁴ “Americans Going to Nigeria for Big Cultural Festival.”

she was moving in and out of the local music scene in New York City on her own terms. Her musical activities demonstrate mobility and flexibility both in her movements and her ideas. Indeed, this flexibility extends from that of her physical movements to her multiplicity of her musical styles.

CHAPTER TWO: RESISTANCE AND MUSICIANSHIP

In 1959, Bethlehem Records released Nina Simone's first commercial recording, *Little Girl Blue*.⁹⁵ The album begins with bass player, Jimmy Bond, swinging alongside drummer, Al Heath, before Simone enters by alternating between rhythmically accented chords and virtuosic flourishes on the piano. Simone improvises a solo that crosses from bebop to baroque and back again before a tutti grand pause creates the dramatic entrance to her vocal proclamation, "You ain't never been blue." The swinging beat of the opening track, "Mood Indigo," makes way for the nineteenth-century Romantic-inspired art song, "Don't Smoke in Bed." Simone plays dense chords that dissolve into yearning melodic ascensions, while singing with controlled vibrato in this work for solo voice and piano. The album's biggest commercial hit, "I Loves You, Porgy," is Simone's version of Bess's half of a love duet from George Gershwin's 1935 Broadway opera *Porgy and Bess*. Simone begins the song with a grandiose piano introduction that leads her first sung words "I love you." She builds suspense with by drawing out "you," and then lands on "Porgy" as Bond and Heath join in. After the singing the chorus for a second time, Simone breaks into a rhapsodic vocal and piano solo. Her lyrics express distress about being reunited with Porgy as her piano harmonizations move further and further away from the home key of E major. Her cadence suggests a key change into A major, but then she returns to the main melody in E major. Like this misleading cadence, the listener never knows where to turn her ears next

⁹⁵ There are bootlegged recordings from 1955-56 of Simone performing in Atlantic City. Premier Records released the recordings on the album *Starring Nina Simone* in 1964. Simone filed a lawsuit against Premier Records, claiming that its release was unauthorized. In February of 1965, Premier Records made an out-of-court settlement with Simone. See "Nina Simone Sues Premier, R.H. Macy," *Billboard*, January 9, 1965; "Nina and Premier in Settlement," *Billboard*, February 13, 1965.

when listening to *Little Girl Blue*. The mood, style, technique, and key can change at a moment's notice. Throughout the album, Simone and her combo move among diverse musical genres, styles, traditions, and sources.

In this chapter, I interpret Simone's performance of multiple musical styles in *Little Girl Blue* and beyond, as well as Simone's refusal to adhere to audience expectations of her musicianship as forms of resistance. The mainstream U.S. music industry had racialized and gendered expectations of Simone's musical style and practice according to her identity as a black woman. Simone performed in a variety of musical styles but advertisements and promotions for her concerts often promoted her as a jazz singer and emphasized aspects of her music making that most closely fit such expectations. It was no coincidence that Simone's biggest hit from *Little Girl Blue*, "I Loves You, Porgy," was best known for its previous performances by black women musicians. The success of "I Loves You, Porgy" propelled frequent representations of Simone as a jazz singer, representations that she explicitly rejects in her autobiography. I argue that Simone resisted culturally constructed confluences between identity markers and musical style by refusing to adhere to a single style, genre, or categorization of her music making.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section, Music Industry and Categorization, explains how the capitalist interests of the U.S. music industry fueled cultural confluences between identity markers and musical style. The white patriarchal norms governing the music industry have long attempted to control the boundaries of black female musicianship. I discuss how and why the music industry profits from essentialized rather than flexible categories. In the second section, Popularizing "Porgy," I interpret "I Loves You, Porgy" as a window into the complicated entanglements between Simone's interests and those of music industry advertisers and producers. I argue that their emphasis on this song, rather than other songs

include on *Little Girl Blue*, essentialized Simone's music and modes of music making to squeeze her into the jazz singer category. In this context, it is important to recognize Simone's agency in performing the song. To this end, in the third section, Agency and Multiplicity, I discuss how Simone exercised her agency and resistance against controlling expectations of the music industry through her performances of "I Loves You, Porgy" and other music from her early career. Advertisements and reviews reveal the differences between what audiences expected Simone to perform and what she actually performed. Such documents also reveal how audiences arrived at performances expecting Nina Simone the jazz singer, but found that her music was, as one reviewer wrote in 1959, "jazz only peripherally."⁹⁶ Simone grew in popularity by refusing to give people what they (thought) they wanted. This chapter therefore aims to demonstrate the ways in which her multiplicity of musical styles was acknowledged, acclaimed, and met with surprise.

Music Industry and Categorization

Simone was well aware of how the mainstream U.S. music industry categorized her music making according to her race. Reflecting upon the success of "I Loves You, Porgy" during her early career, she wrote in her autobiography,

Because of 'Porgy' people often compared me to Billie Holiday, which I hated... What made me mad was that it meant people couldn't get past the fact we were both black: if I had happened to be white nobody would have made the connection. And I didn't like to be put in a box with other jazz singers because my musicianship was totally different, and in its own way superior. Calling me a jazz singer was a way of ignoring my musical background because I didn't fit into white ideas of what a black performer should be. It was a racist thing; 'If she's black she must be a jazz singer.'⁹⁷

⁹⁶ John S. Wilson, "Jazz: The New and Old: Nina Simone heard at Town Hall With Veterans Horace Silver, J.J. Johnson," *New York Times*, September 4, 1959, 32.

⁹⁷ Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 69.

Her reflection on the ways in which the music industry defined her music focuses on how she was categorized in terms of genre. She calls out the conflation of black identity with jazz music, identifying this conflation as racist. She further suggests that, “If I had to be called something it should have been a folk singer, because there was more folk and blues than jazz in my playing.”⁹⁸ It is notable that Simone determines her category of singing style based on her piano playing. Here, Simone is reacting to genre categorization, but she does not express discontent with the “singer” label and perhaps understands her singing and her piano playing as one in the same. Simone may have thought of herself as a singer-songwriter, a label that interweaves vocality with instrumentality. However, although Simone does not explicitly state so, her categorization as a jazz singer is also sexist for minimizing her capacity as an instrumentalist. The frequent comparison to Billie Holiday demonstrates that black women musicians were not only expected to perform in the jazz genre because of their race, but they were also expected to primarily or solely perform as singers by virtue of their gender. When Simone writes about the music industry “ignoring [her] musical background,” she is referring to her training as a pianist, specifically as a classical pianist. Because of the ways that the music industry controlled expectations of music making based on identity markers, Simone’s reminder of her training as a classical pianist is a reminder that she does not fit discriminatory expectations of black female musicianship.

Simone’s frustrations with the association between jazz and blackness can be better understood in light of literature on the confluences between race, culture, and musical style. Travis Jackson has written about “the African Americanness of Jazz” as a conflation between race and culture. Jackson affirms that culture is a learned practice, rather than a natural practice based upon phenotype. He urges music scholars to look to jazz musicians’ various forms of

⁹⁸ Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 69.

music education within and outside institutions. He does not reject the associations between jazz music and African Americanness, but rather pairs jazz with other styles of music created and celebrated in largely African American communities. In discussing the associations between jazz music and racial identity, he argues, “jazz as a form is inseparable from other African American musics.”⁹⁹ Here, he is drawing on writings by Olly Wilson and Amiri Baraka that theorize canonizations of black music and black musical practice.¹⁰⁰ Baraka’s pivotal publication, *Blues People*, was published in 1963 while Simone was well established in the Village. The book’s appearance aligned with the rise of a radical black consciousness that claimed jazz as part of the black musical canon. Simone rejected her categorization as a jazz musician, however, because she felt that it was based solely on the fact that she was black. She felt as if reviewers and venue promoters were not listening to her, but rather looking at her. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, she participated in and contributed to black consciousness, but her words in her autobiography show how she did not want to be limited by a strict vision of black music making. It is complicated because Simone begins her professional career labeled as a jazz musician—which she later rejects—around the same time that she becomes involved with Pan-Africanism. Simone rejects the jazz label because it essentialized her based on race, yet she still advocated for black solidarity. It would be a different story if Simone had chosen to categorize herself as a jazz singer, rather than the musical industry categorizing her as such. The frustration she expresses in her autobiography demonstrates her resistance to being defined by a single label and sheds light on why she performed in so many musical styles throughout her career.

⁹⁹ Jackson, *Blowin’ the Blues Away*, 47.

¹⁰⁰ Olly Wilson, “The Significance of the Relationship between Afro-American Music and West African Music,” *Black Perspective in Music 2* (1974): 3-22; Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Morrow, 1963).

Moreover, as Simone noted in her rejection of the jazz singer label, jazz music was not central to her musical upbringing. Even at a young age, Simone “liked to play as many different styles as possible,” and her most prominent musical influences were classical and gospel music.¹⁰¹ By age six, her piano playing was so proficient that she was leading the gospel choir at her mother’s Baptist church.¹⁰² In addition, Simone took classical piano lessons from Muriel Massinovitch, an Englishwoman who had moved to Simone’s hometown, for several years during her youth.¹⁰³ When she began playing at the Midtown Bar and Grill in Atlantic City in the early 1950s, her first professional performance gig, she played and improvised on classical pieces, hymns, gospel songs, popular tunes.¹⁰⁴ While Simone would soon become influenced by and involved in jazz musical circles, as discussed in Chapter 1, there is not much connection to jazz during the early stages of her musical education. Reminding her audiences of her early musical education remained important to Simone throughout her career, as she demonstrated that her musicianship and her personal music history defied their expectations.

Entangled with expectations related to race and genre, the music industry’s emphasis on Simone as a singer relates to gendered expectations of women musicians’ modes of music making. Whether or not Simone considered herself to be a jazz musician or a jazz singer, she was often referred to and represented as such. Looking to the work of feminist jazz scholars helps explain the gendered implications of Simone being labeled and heard as a singer. In her

¹⁰¹ Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 17.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

book on all-women jazz swing bands, Sherrie Tucker discusses “the widely accepted version of the jazz woman as a girl singer, who stands in front of the band rather than among its ranks.”¹⁰⁵

By expecting women to be singers rather than instrumentalists, many histories of women instrumentalists in jazz and other U.S. genres have been overshadowed and erased. Tucker discusses how many people did not believe her when she told them that there were hundred of all-women swing bands, and thus, hundreds of women instrumentalists playing jazz, during the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁰⁶

The expectation that women musicians would be singers rather than instrumentalists has had several historical effects. It meant that women who both sang and played an instrument would be better remembered for their singing, it erased women instrumentalists from historical narratives, and it encouraged women musicians to become singers because it was more commercially viable.¹⁰⁷ When Simone began performing at the Midtown Bar and Grill in Atlantic City during the early 1950s, the owner of the bar, Harry Stewart, gave her an ultimatum. In her autobiography, Simone recounts the first night that she performed at the bar,

Harry was waiting for me at the bar when I finished and I asked him if it had gone all right. He was very nice about my playing, said he liked it, but there was just one thing, why hadn't I sung?

I looked at him. “I'm only a pianist,” I said.

He took his cigar out of his mouth: “Well tomorrow night you're either a singer or you're out of a job.”

So the next night I sang as well.¹⁰⁸

While it is possible that Stewart asked all of his evening musicians, male or female, to sing, he nonetheless pushed Simone into a mode of music making that adhered to gendered expectations

¹⁰⁵ Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: “All-Girl” Bands of the 1940s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 57.

¹⁰⁶ Tucker, *Swing Shift*, 1 and 21.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

¹⁰⁸ Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 51.

of her musicianship. Her nightly gigs at the Midtown bar were her first paid performances. Singing was the means by which she was able to become a commercially viable musician. Her musical upbringing playing gospel music at her mother's church and taking classical music lessons was defined by her piano playing, but making a living as a professional musician became possible for Simone when she began singing.

The forces that pushed Simone away from being solely a pianist—her rejection from the Curtis Institute of Music and Stewart's demand that she begin singing—pushed her away from a privileged and masculinized form of music making: virtuosic instrumental performance. As Lara Pellegrinelli has shown in the context of jazz, historians have tended to devalue the contributions of singers. Male jazz aficionados working to legitimize jazz as high art privileged individuality and instrumental virtuosity. Pellegrinelli argues, “the instrumental emphasis in jazz historiography responds to the prestige value of instrumental music in the western art tradition.”¹⁰⁹ While jazz scholars have noted women blues vocalists as important to jazz music's beginnings, “Historiography (i.e. instrumental historiography) either confines singers to an inferior social space or simply erased singing from cultural memory from that point forward in its chronology: singing is contained by and at the origins of jazz.”¹¹⁰ Thus, pushing women towards singing careers and devaluing the musical importance of singers have been linked manifestations of sexism; even women's successes as singers are undermined. By encouraging Simone to sing and representing her primarily as a singer, the music industry pushed her towards an underappreciated and historically underemphasized mode of music making shaped by gender

¹⁰⁹ Lara Pellegrinelli, “Separated at ‘Birth’: Singing and the History of Jazz,” in *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, ed. Nicole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 41.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

bias. To further understand how Simone navigated gender and racial bias in her early career, we turn to an in-depth study of “I Loves You, Porgy.”

Popularizing “Porgy”

By the time Simone had moved to New York City in 1959, “I Loves You, Porgy” was rising steadily on pop and R&B charts around the U.S. It stayed on the Billboard Hot 100 list for fifteen weeks between August and November, hitting its peak position at number eighteen.¹¹¹ As Simone and her version of “Porgy” grew in popularity, music venues in New York City, along the east coast, and across the country began booking Simone for live performances. *Porgy and Bess* would have been well known for many of Simone’s listeners, as she began performing “I Loves You, Porgy” shortly after a U.S. State Department-funded production of the opera finished its world tour in 1956 and concurrently with its first film adaptation in 1959.¹¹² The opera centers on a poor African American community in the fictionalized Catfish Row, a town that the opera’s white creators, composer George Gershwin, and librettists DuBose Heyward and Ira Gershwin, claimed to have based off of Folly Island, South Carolina near Charleston. Gershwin was specifically interested in basing his musical score on the “authentic Low Country African American folk music” of Folly Island.¹¹³ The prima donna, Bess, is a drug addict and her suitors are Porgy, a crippled beggar, Sportin’ Life, a well-dressed drug dealer, and Crown, a sinewy brute.

Artists and intellectuals have chastised *Porgy and Bess* for its exoticist misrepresentations of black culture that draw upon stock characters from blackface minstrelsy

¹¹¹ “I Loves You, Porgy Nina Simone (11021|Bethlehem) (US),” *Music Industry Data*, Academic Rights Press, 2016-, [http://musicid.academicrightspress.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/search/result?singles\[\]=239620](http://musicid.academicrightspress.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/search/result?singles[]=239620).

¹¹² Ellen Noonan, *The Strange Career of Porgy and Bess: Race, Culture, and America’s Most Famous Opera* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 185 and 261.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 143.

and reinforce negative stereotypes of African Americans to white audience members, yet others have praised *Porgy* for creating prominent roles for black artists in opera and film and for integrating previously segregated performance venues. In reference to the State Department tour that made the rounds during the early years of the civil rights movement, historian Ellen Noonan writes, “The State Department presented the *Porgy and Bess* cast...as exemplars of colorblind opportunity to counter international press coverage of white supremacy in the United States.”¹¹⁴ Simone’s soon-to-be mentor Lorraine Hansberry ardently disapproved, noting in 1959 how because of *Porgy*, African Americans have “had great wounds from great intentions.”¹¹⁵ To Hansberry, Gershwin and Heywards’ good intentions, rather than championing black life and culture, created violence and pain. Other black intellectuals understood *Porgy* in a different light, such as Lester Granger of the *New York Amsterdam News*. He wrote in 1957,

So far as these United States are concerned, there is little that a filmed presentation of *Porgy and Bess* could do to intensify the racial stereotype that has operated so seriously to the Negro’s disadvantage over the years... we can’t expect, in all reasonableness, that all plays including Negroes in their casting are going to present the race in a noble outline...if Negro actors sat on their hands and refused to accept parts that did not ‘win friends and influence people’ toward improved racial relationships—if they did this, there would not be enough parts for them to keep in practice and qualify for the big roles when these should come around.¹¹⁶

Granger claims that having black performers on the stage is more important than the roles they performed. While he does not support disparaging representations of black characters and communities, he argues that the idea that black performers should only “present the race in a noble outline” is idealist and could ultimately do more harm than good. Another *Amsterdam News* columnist Jesse H. Walker summed up the 1959 film’s reception, observing, “Many

¹¹⁴ Noonan, *The Strange Career of Porgy and Bess*, 189.

¹¹⁵ Jack Pittman, “Lorraine Hansberry Deplores *Porgy*,” *Variety*, May 27, 1959.

¹¹⁶ Lester Granger, “Manhattan and Beyond,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 14, 1957, 8.

Negroes in the North condemned it while many in the South fought to see it—unsegregated.”¹¹⁷ Walker’s statements demonstrate both that there were differences in opinion among African Americans, but also that these differences sometimes fell along regional lines. Taken together, these responses demonstrate the tensions between representation and participation of black performers in *Porgy and Bess*.

The conversations about representation and participation were contemporaneous to Simone’s release of “I Loves You, Porgy,” and they are implicated in the song’s popularity. While “I Loves You, Porgy” was one of eleven tracks on her album, it was the only song that had previously been popularized by black women musicians. The song that launched Simone into the public eye was one that fit audience expectations of black women musicianship. First, it was associated with the character of Bess, previously performed by opera singers Anne Brown, Etta Barnett, and Leotyne Price, and second, Simone discovered it on a recording by Billie Holiday.¹¹⁸ Listeners may not have been accustomed to hearing a black woman pianist transition from bebop improvisations into Bach inventions, as Simone performs on other *Little Girl Blue* tracks such as “Mood Indigo” and “Central Park Blues,” but Bess’s love duet had already carved out a space for black women musicians through its performances in Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* and its recording by Holiday.

If the character of Bess is understood as a trailblazing role for black women on the musical stage, the trail she blazed then became a constraint. Whatever space the trailblazer has carved out becomes a new category, boundary, restriction and stereotype. Furthermore, this space was already prepared by minstrelsy characters, for which Bess—the beautiful, drug addicted damsel-in-distress—was the Jezebel. As Naomi André summarizes, “The stereotypes in

¹¹⁷ Jesse H. Walker, “Theatricals,” *New York Amsterdam News*, April 8, 1961, 17.

¹¹⁸ Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 53.

Porgy and Bess are usually leveled at the black characters in minstrel garb, and these are certainly present in the opera with Jezebel Bess, Sambo Porgy, Crown the Buck, and others.”¹¹⁹ Scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins have theorized how such characterizations relate to slavery history, theatrical representations, and contemporary perceptions. In *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), she discusses four controlling images of black womanhood: the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, and the Jezebel.¹²⁰ According to Collins, “the Jezebel, whore, or sexually aggressive woman—is central in this nexus of elite white male images of Black womanhood because efforts to control Black women’s sexuality lie at the heart of Black women’s oppression.”¹²¹ The Jezebel stereotype represents black women as loose and immoral with insatiable sexual desires; it is often associated with prostitution. By objectifying and exaggerating black women’s sexuality, white society exploited the Jezebel stereotype to justify white male slave owner’s acts of sexual violence against black women. The stereotype fed the idea that black women could not be raped because they always desired sex. In addition to defending white male rape, the Jezebel stereotype also elevated the cultural position of white women. According to the ideals of Victorian femininity, which white middle to upper class American women strived to achieve during the nineteenth century, a True Woman was sexually pure until marriage. Even in marriage, the True Woman’s sexuality was only in service of her husband, thus shaming any kind of female sexual desire. The sexually aggressive Jezebel was the antithesis to the True Woman, denigrating black women to bolster white women’s notions of cultural superiority and elitism. However, in this stereotype, the Jezebel’s sexual appetite was

¹¹⁹ Naomi André, “Immigration and the Great Migration: *Porgy and Bess* in the Harlem Renaissance,” *American Music Review* 45 (2015): 2.

¹²⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 67-90.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

severed from the likely outcome of increased fertility. Like the Mammy, the Jezebel should not give birth to or nurture her own children for fear that such a role would strengthen the African American family. Collins continues, “by forcing Black women to work in the field or ‘wet nurse’ white children, slaveowners effectively tied the controlling images of Jezebel and Mammy to the economic exploitation inherent in the institution of slavery.”¹²² The Jezebel persisted after slavery through blackface minstrelsy and stage productions like *Porgy and Bess*, continuing to perform its oppressive purpose through representation. *Porgy and Bess* puts the Jezebel on the operatic stage and it reinforces expectations about black women’s performance. Thus, the popularity of Simone’s “I Loves You, Porgy” is tied to the Jezebel’s negative stereotyping of black womanhood. However, as will be examined in the following section, Simone finds ways to complicate, contradict, and subvert the stereotype.

Like the controversy over *Porgy and Bess*’s racial politics, the success of Simone’s “I Loves You, Porgy” lies at the crux of her agency as a performer and white capitalist expectations. “Porgy” was released on her *Little Girl Blue* album, but according to her autobiography Simone had been singing the song since her piano bar days in Atlantic City. Ted Axelrod, a white college student who was one of Simone’s earliest fans, suggested that she sing the song after he heard it on one of Billie Holiday’s albums. As she recalls, “I learned the song—as a favor to Ted more than anything else—and played it a couple of nights later. Everybody loved my version, especially Ted, so it became a regular number in my set.”¹²³ After *Little Girl Blue*’s release a couple of years later, Simone remembers in her autobiography how Sid Marx, a white R&B radio station DJ, expressed particular interest in “I Loves You, Porgy” after listening to the full album. Discussing Marx’s role in the song’s early success, she writes,

¹²² Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 77.

¹²³ Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 53.

Maybe he decided to make the track a hit, because he played it over and over, day and night. He'd play it three or four times in a row sometimes. After a while he didn't have to keep pushing it because people started calling the station asking for it by name, so the other DJs had to play it too. As soon as that happened Sid Marx said to me, "Nina, you've got to get Bethlehem to release 'Porgy' [as a single], it'll hit!"¹²⁴

Typically, Simone was not shy about her musical skills and talents. In the case of "Porgy," however, she consistently points to others who were involved in the song's success: Axelrod asked for it, the audience loved it, Marx pushed it, and radio listeners requested it. In her autobiography, she represents the song's success with an air of deference and detachment. Taken together, white capitalist consumers and producers, from the audience members at the Atlantic City bar to Sid Marx as a radio DJ, played an important role in the demand for Simone's version of "I Loves You, Porgy."

Simone's "I Loves You, Porgy" resonates in the space carved out by the character of Bess and sung again by Holiday. In certain ways, this space fit white audiences' expectations and conflations between identity politics and musicianship. Simone's comparison to Billie Holiday made sense to audiences not only listening to cover songs, but also looking at stereotypes. In her essay, "Black Women, Jazz, and Feminism," Linda F. Williams discusses her interviews with black women musicians, where Williams asked them about their stances on feminism and their experiences with discrimination as performers. In her interview with singer Raye Jones, Jones discusses how certain songs carry the baggage of racialized, gendered, and classed oppressions. As Jones said, "A song such as 'Georgia on my Mind' is stereotypical for me because it invokes a mammy-type-gutsy-style on stage. And I do not feel that way." Yet when Williams asked if Jones would stop performing the song, Jones replied, "By no means. I just remember that years ago when I sang in predominantly white environments there was a body of songs audiences

¹²⁴ Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 61-62.

associated with black people and that's what they wanted to hear versus the music I had prepared to perform for them. They did not call for 'Afro Blue' or Nina Simone's 'Four Women'."¹²⁵ Like "I Loves You, Porgy," "Georgia on My Mind" also evokes one of the controlling images of black womanhood, the mammy in this case. It is fitting, furthermore, that Jones would note Simone's 1966 song "Four Women" as a song associated with black womanhood for which she might welcome an audience request. Both "Four Women" and Collins' theorization of the four controlling images of black womanhood connect to histories of slavery and exploitation of black women. But rather than depicting the stereotypes of the four controlling images of black womanhood, "Four Women" depicts the subjectivities of four individual African American women who have been impacted by harmful stereotypes yet continue to exhibit resilience against them. It is also important that Jones continued singing "Georgia on my Mind." While some audience members may collapse certain songs with black womanhood, neither the performers nor the songs themselves should be analyzed so narrowly. Similarly to Jones, Simone did not remove "I Loves You, Porgy" from her performance repertoire due to its associations with the Jezebel stereotype. Just as there were many differing perspectives on the racial ethics of performing *Porgy and Bess*, Simone's performance of "I Loves You, Porgy" should not be dismissed as shameful or essentialized as only successful for satisfying white audience's desires for black exoticism and minstrelsy nostalgia. The success of "Porgy" coincided with Simone's encounters with the black intelligentsia and black radical thought in New York City, and she continued to perform the song throughout her career. While it is important to contextualize the history of Bess's Jezebel characterization, Simone's performance, discussed below, does not make her complicit with this characterization.

¹²⁵ Raye Jones as quoted in Linda F. Williams, "Black Women, Jazz, and Feminism," in *Black Women and Music: More than the Blues*, ed. Eileen M. Hayes and Linda F. Williams (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 129.

Agency and Multiplicity

In fact, Simone sang “I Loves You, Porgy” alongside “Four Women” in New York at the Harlem Cultural Festival on August 17, 1969. The Harlem Cultural Festival, also known as “Harlem Woodstock” or “Black Woodstock,” was a series of six concerts that took place in Central Park on Sunday afternoons during the summer of 1969.¹²⁶ The festival coincided with the ignition of the Black Power Movement in the late 1960s, and Simone’s performance fanned the flames. In her recitation of David Nelson’s poem “Are You Ready?” she advocated for the confrontational methods, black pride, and revolutionary spirit exemplary of the Black Power Movement, asking her audience,

Are you ready to kill if necessary...Are you ready to do what you have to do to create life? Are you ready to smash white things? To build buildings? Are you ready? Are you ready to build black things? Are you ready to give yourself your love, your soul, your heart, to create life? Are you ready to create out of nothing? Are you ready, black people?¹²⁷

Raymond Robinson, writer for the *New York Amsterdam News*, titled his review of Simone’s August 17 “Blues Festival” performance, “Truly A Black Show At Harlem Cultural Festival.” Robinson wrote that, compared to the previous four concerts in the series, the August 17 concert “was by far the best. My reason for saying this is that the Blues show reflected more of the cultural and entertainment heritage of the Black man than any of the others.” As he concluded, “This was truly a memorable show produced by Black men specifically for Black people.”¹²⁸

Simone’s performance of “I Loves You, Porgy” in the same setting where she made one of her most powerful and explicit assertions of musical activism demonstrates her ownership

¹²⁶ Alan Light, *What Happened, Miss Simone?: A Biography* (New York: Crown Archetype, 2016), 1.

¹²⁷ “Nina Simone: Are You Ready?” YouTube video, 7:00, from a performance at the Harlem Cultural Festival on August 17, 1969, posted by “Nina Simone,” February 7, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ATogtRm9k8>.

¹²⁸ Raymond Robinson, “Truly A Black Show At Harlem Cultural Festival,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 23, 1969, 18.

over the song's meaning and her agency in its performance. Indeed, the Harlem Cultural Festival performance is evidence that none of her performances of the song were defined by white audiences' expectations, even if those expectations were often present. Rather, when Simone performs "I Loves You, Porgy," she reclaims the tenderness of Bess's love for Porgy. She reorganizes the racial ethics of the song to express joy, pain and humanity. She takes the controlling image of black womanhood carried in the song and she weaves it into something new, subjective, complex, and restored. Her version of "Porgy" was her way of being ready to give herself and her audiences love, soul, heart. It was her way of building a black thing.

From her earliest performances, Simone's performative choices made "I Loves You, Porgy" her own. In the libretto to *Porgy and Bess*, Bess's lyrics read,

I loves you, Porgy,
Don' let him take me,
Do' let him handle me
an' drive me mad.
If you kin keep me
I wants to stay here
Wid you forever
an' I'd be glad.

Librettists DuBose Heyward and Ira Gershwin's attempted to represent black dialect with abbreviated pronunciations and alternative verb conjugations. Simone, however, does not pronounce the lyrics according to this script. Instead, she resists assumptions and associations of dialect by singing the following lyrics in her performances of "Porgy":

I love you, Porgy,
Don't let him take me,
Don't let him handle me
And drive me mad.

If you can keep me,
I want to stay here,
With you forever
And I'll be glad.

In a similar vein, Shana L. Redmond has written about Paul Robeson's performances of "Ol' Man River" from *Showboat*, another Broadway show depicting stereotyped black characters written by white creators, with respect to dialect and pronunciation. Redmond writes, the "dialect not only distinguishes Black from white in the musical but also serves to contain the Black characters in their *natural* state as uneducated and simple laborers and confidants" [emphasis in original].¹²⁹ Simone rejects this distinction through her pronunciation choices in performing "Porgy."

Furthermore, Simone's virtuosity on piano and her frequent variances in live performances make her renditions of "Porgy" distinctive. She almost always begins with an intricate and lush piano introduction, as in her *Little Girl Blue* recording. During a 1961 performance, she added introductory lyrical material beginning in a different key before shifting into the song's home key of E major. When she arrives at the rubato piano solo, she may improvise new material and head towards the final chorus through exciting and unpredictable musical devices.¹³⁰ Her constantly changing arrangements of the song could be one of the reasons why audience members frequently requested "Porgy"—they not only wanted to hear a familiar and loved song, but also to discover Simone's on-the-spot embellishments and innovations. She created something new with each performance.

Simone's performances of "Porgy" also demonstrate that she was selective about which audience expectations she would fulfill or defy. Her performance at the Harlem Cultural Festival, for example, might not have been planned in advance. On a video recording of the performance,

¹²⁹ Shana L. Redmond, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 105.

¹³⁰ "Nina Simone – I Loves You Porgy Live 9/11/1960," YouTube video, 3:52, posted by "badlydrawnroy," September 13, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewNw78TpRPk>.

it is clear that an audience member requested “Porgy” shortly before Simone and her band performed the song. Just as she was about to play “Ain’t Got No—I Got Life,” a rearrangement of two songs from the Broadway show *Hair*, the crowd interrupted her. A man’s voice is clearly heard yelling out “We love you, Porgy!” indicating his request for Simone to perform her famous first hit. After finishing “Ain’t Got No—I Got Life,” she begins playing the chorus of “The Dove,” a French chanson by Jacques Brel popularized in English by Joan Baez. Before repeating the chorus of “The Dove” for a second time, Simone turns her head away from the microphone and to tell her band that “Porgy” is the next tune. Within a few bars, she obliges the man’s request with her performance of “I Loves You, Porgy.”¹³¹ However, she did not always fulfill such requests. Simone only performed certain songs such as “Porgy” on her own terms. In a *Philadelphia Tribune* concert review from 1961, Art Peters reported,

[W]hen members of the audience called out to her to sing ‘Porgy,’ the number which skyrocketed her to stardom a few years ago, she bluntly refused... She announced she would not sing the tune and was going to sing another selection instead. When a groan of disappointment went up from the customers, she said: ‘Look, I know half of you hate me anyhow. That’s why you’re here. You’re going to hate me when you leave here and go home. So, I might as well sing what I like.’¹³²

Yet even though Simone did not honor her audience’s requests, Peters reported, “The overflow crowds wildly applauded every number at every show” and they encouraged Simone’s performance of multiple, well-received encores.”¹³³ As such, Simone performed “Porgy” only on her terms and did not structure her performances solely based upon audience expectations.

Furthermore, advertisements and reviews also reveal the differences between what audiences expected Simone to perform and what she actually performed. Similar to the 1961 concert where

¹³¹ “Nina Simone – Harlem Festival – part 3,” YouTube video, 9:12, from a performance at the Harlem Cultural Festival on August 17, 1969, posted by “Sérgio Vasco,” August 19, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xc49cprX5nc#t=04m56s>.

¹³² Art Peters, “Nina Simone: Jazz’s Angry Young Woman Or Just Misunderstood by Fans?” *Philadelphia Tribune*, September 26, 1961, 1.

¹³³ Peters, “Nina Simone.”

she refused to perform “Porgy,” advertisements and concert reviews demonstrate how she was acclaimed by listeners even when she was not giving them what they had wanted.

Advertisements for Simone’s performances during her early career tended to market her as a jazz singer whereas concert reviewers often acknowledged Simone’s musicality on the piano alongside her singing and her multiplicity of musical styles. For example, a *New York Amsterdam News* advertisement on July 18, 1959 promotes “Nina Simone, amazing young jazz singer and pianist.”¹³⁴ On March 17, 1959, the *Philadelphia Tribune* encouraged concertgoers to check out “Nina Simone, the sensational new singing discovery.”¹³⁵ The *New York Times* advertised for “Nina Simone, singer” in 1961 and “Nina Simone, vocalist” in 1963.¹³⁶ However, the labels that bring listeners into Simone’s concert tend to shift upon reflection of her performances. On September 14, 1959, *New York Times* writer John S. Wilson published a review of Simone’s performance at Town Hall. After acknowledging her as a singer and pianist, he states, “Miss Simone used jazz only peripherally in her performance...she proved an extremely winning performer.”¹³⁷ In fact, Wilson followed Simone’s early career, publishing multiple reviews of her concerts. In 1963 he noted how Simone “used devices and ideas drawn from folk music and from pop music, as well as from jazz, to build her songs into unusually well-rounded performances.”¹³⁸ Exemplified by Wilson’s reviews, other concert reviewers acknowledged Simone’s diversity of musical styles. Another *New York Amsterdam News* review

¹³⁴ “Photo Standalone 23 – No Title,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 18, 1959, 17.

¹³⁵ “Off the Main Stem,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, March 17, 1959, 5.

¹³⁶ “Cabaret Tonight,” *New York Times*, November 17, 1961, 40; “Music Notes,” *New York Times*, April 12, 1963, 27.

¹³⁷ John S. Wilson, “Jazz: The New and Old: Nina Simone heard at Town Hall With Veterans Horace Silver, J.J. Johnson,” *New York Times*, September 4, 1959, 32.

¹³⁸ John S. Wilson, “10th Jazz Series Opens in Newport: Adderly Group, Lateef and Nina Simone Perform,” *The New York Times*, July 5, 1963, 14.

reporting on a November 1961 performance at the Apollo reads, “Nina Simone is one of the most versatile performers to enter the music world in the past decade. As a singer she is at home in Jazz, pop, spiritual, blues, and folk music. Her keyboard ability ranges from the discipline of a concert pianist to the broad and imaginative scope of a jazz musician.”¹³⁹ As such, these reviews recognized that Simone’s musicianship was both vocal and instrumental, and they pointed out her wide use of contrasting musical styles. When listening deeply, audiences could hear that Simone’s musicianship was not bounded to the racialized and gendered category of the jazz singer.

A *New York Post* review published a few months earlier in April 1961 for a concert also hosted at the Apollo captures the intertwined relationships between Simone’s performance agency, her musical multiplicity, and even her early activism. Keeping in mind that Simone was already known for her confrontational encounters with audiences, reviewer Edward Kosner reported,

A recent incident at the Apollo Theater in Harlem tells the story... Finishing a ballad before a boisterous week-end crowd, Miss Simone swung into the introduction to ‘Work Song,’ a composition inspired by a chain gang refrain, written by trumpeter Nat Adderly and lyricist Oscar Brown, Jr. ‘My brother,’ she remarked impassively, ‘was once on a chain gang.’

A small tide of gigglers washed across the footlights.

Miss Simone’s hands dropped from the keyboard. Bristling, she proceeded to deliver a short lecture on manners to the gigglers.¹⁴⁰

Simone’s offense at the gigglers was likely two-fold. First, Simone often lectured audiences about proper concert etiquette. In her autobiography, she wrote,

My attitude to performing was that of a classically trained musician: when you play you give all your concentration to the music because it deserves total respect,

¹³⁹ “Nina Simone Tops Apollo Jazz Show,” *New York Amsterdam News*, November 11, 1961, 19.

¹⁴⁰ Edward Kosner, “To Nina Simone, Respect Means More Than Flattery,” *New York Post*, April 11, 1961.

and an audience should sit still and be quiet...If a drunk started shouting or fighting while I was playing, it broke my concentration so I stopped playing until they were quiet, and if they weren't quiet I wouldn't play.¹⁴¹

Simone's actions at the April 1961 Apollo concert exemplified this attitude. Furthermore, Simone was not concerned with adhering to audience expectations, but she was concerned that they adhere to hers. The foundations of her expectations based on her classical training defied the confines of the jazz singer identity that audiences expected to witness. The second aspect of her offense connects to the personal and cultural politics of "Work Song." Chain gangs were groups of prisoners chained together as they performed manual labor, often working to build roads or clear land. Chain gangs exploited the labor and lives of black Americans living in the South, continuing the oppressions of slavery from the end of the Civil War into the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁴² Prisoners in chain gangs used the steady pulse of song to synchronize their movements, giving rise to a folk repertory of black American work songs. The audience's laughter at Simone's comment was not only inappropriate concert hall etiquette, but it also trivialized the racialized oppression and exploitation carried in her brother's story and in her rendition of "Work Song." Simone's verbal interactions with the audience and her performance of the song displayed an early manifestation of her confrontational and steadfast attitude that became more prominent when she shifted into explicit activism

Simone demonstrated resistance against biased expectations through her performances and through the musical styles of her songs and background. Edward Kosner, reviewer for the April 11, 1961 Apollo concert, even linked Simone's deference to her musical multiplicity, stating "her manner is decidedly regal and it's clear—whether she's doing an up-tempo number

¹⁴¹ Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 52.

¹⁴² Mark Colvin, *Penitentiaries, Reformatories, and Chain Gangs: Social Theory and the History of Punishment in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 220 and 253.

with a rollicking gospel backing or a ballad embroidered with Bach-like figures—that she’s not going to give an inch.”¹⁴³ From the early days of her career, Simone resisted expectations by performing in multiple musical styles and never giving an inch on her ideological beliefs. From performing songs like “Porgy” and “Work Song” to proclaiming the politics of Black Power, Simone advocated for her beliefs whether or not her audience was on board.

¹⁴³ Kosner, “To Nina Simone, Respect Means More Than Flattery.”

CONCLUSION

This thesis has pointed to several examples of Nina Simone's resistance, activism and political music making during her early career. Such a study challenges the idea that Simone only became political after composing "Mississippi Goddam" in 1963. It is also important to consider the implications of politicizing Simone's music making throughout her career and lifetime, both in the early stage of 1958-1963 and beyond. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Simone's performance at the Harlem Cultural Festival in the summer of 1969 was one of the most politically charged and memorable concerts of her career. She performed several of her famous protest songs, including "Four Women," "Backlash Blues," and "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black." Yet she also performed a portion of a song that she never recorded before or since, and she performed a love song. After finishing her rendition of "Ain't Got No—I Got Life," Simone almost immediately began performing the chorus of "The Dove," a chanson originally written in French by Jacques Brel. Simone sang the following lyrics in English.

The dove has torn her wing
So no more songs of love
We are not here to sing
We're here to kill the dove.

Brel wrote the song, titled "La Colombe," in 1959 to mourn the death and destruction resulting from the Algerian War (1954–62). Joan Baez popularized the song in English with her 1967 recording of "The Dove," released on her album *Joan*. Baez's version protested against U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Simone never recorded "The Dove" but her performance at the Harlem Cultural Festival further transformed the song's antiwar sentiment. Like "Backlash

Blues,” Simone’s rendition of “The Dove” could be interpreted as protest against the exploitation of young black men’s lives in service of the Vietnam War as well as against the broad racism and destruction of white supremacy.

“The Dove” ironically expresses how there is no time for music or love, and especially not music about love, in times of war and destruction. The lyrics of “The Dove” sever the political subjects of war and destruction from the personal subjects of music and love. However, because these lyrics are sung, the song as a whole exposes this severance as a false binary, contending that the political cannot be separated from the personal. War, destruction, music, and love all exist within the same song, the same world, and the same sphere of interpretation. Indeed, after repeating the chorus for a second time, Simone sings the following to transition into “I Loves You, Porgy.”

But before we do,
Before we do,
We must sing one love song,
For you

I love you, Porgy...¹⁴⁴

Her contention that, “We must sing one love song” brings her explicit protest songs like “Backlash Blues” and “Four Women” into the same space and setting as her famous love song. Her performance of “The Dove” and “I Loves You, Porgy” within the Black Power setting of the Harlem Cultural Festival demonstrated how the personal cannot be so easily separated from the political.

As such, I do not intend to dissociate the personal from the political in this thesis’s focus on politicizations of Simone’s early career. Rather, I have aimed to demonstrate that political consciousness is fostered through personal friendships, that identity politics are implicated in

¹⁴⁴ “Nina Simone – Harlem Festival – part 3.”

songs with intimate lyrical content, and that the political and the personal are intertwined. While I studied political meaning during a portion of Simone's career that is generally discussed as apolitical, I also hope that this thesis encourages scholars to find the personal in Simone's mid to late 1960s period of explicit activism. Simone has been unrepresented in scholarship relative to her musical influence and legacy because of the genre-focused canons of music scholarship. Much of her current revival is due to the burgeoning interest in protest music and 1960s politics present in both music scholarship and popular discourse. However, the emphasis on protest and activism could lead to another bias in the study of Simone's music and popular music writ large: a valuation of the political at the expense of the personal. For example, in her article rightly condemning the shameful colorism of the 2016 film *Nina*, in which Zoe Saldana darkens her skin to portray Simone, Tequia Burt praises Simone's activism by chastising love songs. She quotes "Mississippi Goddam" when she writes, "While the Supreme's Diana Ross was asking 'Where Did Our Love Go' in 1964, Simone was boldly telling white audiences 'Oh but this country is full of lies/You're all gonna die and die like flies/I don't trust you anymore.'"¹⁴⁵

Yet Simone was performing love songs similar to "Where Did Our Love Go," such as "Love Me or Leave Me" during the same years as her protest music. In fact, at a performance in Sweden in 1965, she played "Love Me or Leave Me" followed by "Mississippi Goddam."¹⁴⁶ Scholars studying and praising Simone's politicizations must understand that we may be paving the road for another historiographic bias, one that only looks to the political. A comprehensive understanding of Simone's music, career, and legacy requires an appreciation for the protest songs without undermining or erasing the love songs. We may even recognize the songs that

¹⁴⁵ Tequia Burt, "The Music of Nina Simone and Her Powerful, Beautiful Blackness," *Reverb*, April 18, 2016, <https://reverb.com/news/the-music-of-nina-simone-and-her-powerful-beautiful-blackness>.

¹⁴⁶ "Nina Simone. Sweden 1965," *Jazz Icons: Bonus Disc, Series 3*, produced by David Peck, Phillip Galloway, and Tom Gulotta (San Diego: Reelin' in the Years Productions, 2008), DVD.

exemplify both love and protest, such as when Simone performs “Brown Baby” as an expression of love for children, family, future, and black pride or when she sings “I Loves You, Porgy” at a festival bolstering Black Power.

In this thesis, I have drawn attention to manifestations of resistance, politics, and activism during Nina Simone’s career in the years between 1958 and 1963. I hope that the coming wave of new scholarship on Simone will engage with and complicate my own work. As the High Priestess of Soul herself sings, “Been working/And working/But I still got so terribly far to go.”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ Nina Simone, performance of “Work Song,” composed by Nat Adderly and Oscar Brown, Jr., *Forbidden Fruit*, with Chris White, Al Schackman, and Robert Hamilton, produced by Cal Lampley, Colpix CP/SCP 419, 1961, vinyl.

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