"In Pieces"

Nina Simone's Critical Geographies and Listening as Incommensurable Practice

Jenny Henderson



I will sing for you [...] after which I will graduate to a higher class. I hope you will come with me.

—Nina Simone (in Garbus 2015)

I thought they needed teaching. If they couldn't listen, fuck it!

—Nina Simone, What Happened Miss Simone? *(in Garbus 2015)*

Nina Simone demands absolute rigor from her listener. Even now, looping her music on my small Bluetooth speaker, I sit still, often pausing and restarting her songs, hearing a new detail each time. When Simone settled in front of the piano, preparing to cast her spell, her goal was no less than total transformation for audiences. "I want to shake people up so bad that when they leave a nightclub where I've performed, I just want them to be to pieces," Simone once remarked to an interviewer (in Garbus 2015).

Simone's aim—to transform her audience to "pieces" through performance—foregrounds her critical geographic work on racial-sexual violence. What does it mean "to be to pieces"? Fragmentation

TDR 69:2 (T266) 2025 https://doi.org/10.1017/S105420432500005X
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https://doi.org/10.1017/S105420432500005X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Student Essay Contest Honorable Mention

Jenny Henderson (Tufts University) is a PhD candidate whose research explores the intersections of place-making, performance, sound, and sexual violence. Her dissertation project foregrounds artists as critical geographers, analyzing the works of Nina Simone and Tanya Tagaq, among others, to illustrate how these performers connect the survival of sexual violence with interrogations of place in the US and Canada. She has taught and assisted courses on popular culture, performance, public speaking, and decolonial and literary theory at Tufts and Harvard University, and is an AY 2024/25 American Fellow with the American Association of University Women (AAUW). She is also a practicing creative nonfiction writer and critical essayist. jenny.henderson@tufts.edu

The graduate program in Theatre and Performance Studies at Tufts University trains scholar-artists to develop projects in theatre history, performance studies, critical theory, and cultural analysis in various performance traditions and global contexts. Our faculty specialize in illuminating how social and cultural formations—particularly gender, race, indigeneity, ethnicity, sexuality, colonization, and class—inform performances both on and off stage. In turn, we support and celebrate interdisciplinary scholarship from our graduate students, which centers shared concerns of performance, while at the same time taking up concerns in outside fields of inquiry. We approach performance through diverse methods, such as historiography, ethnography, and critical analysis of performance texts. The program offers support and mentorship from our distinguished core faculty—Heather Nathans, Barbara Wallace Grossman, Kareem Khubchandani, Lilian Mengesha, Paige McGinley, Pannill Camp, and Tasha Oren—as well as the flexibility to work with scholars across the university and the greater Boston area. https://tdps.tufts.edu/academics/graduate-programs/phd-theatre-and-performance-studies

is central to surviving trauma; it is often its effect. In the case of sexual violence, survivors are tasked with integrating discrete selves—the violated victim, the "reliable" reporter, the capable survivor—in their narrativization of the event (Herman [1992] 1997; Miller 2019). As a survivor of rape, Simone wrestled with this bind most explicitly in her memoir, in which she attempts to bridge her past and present selves through language (Simone [1991] 1993:37, 77). Simone's desire to turn her audience "to pieces"—and the howling, overlapping subjectivities she deploys vocally to do so—reveals a totalizing preoccupation with disruption in her work that resounds, but does not replicate, the fragmentary experience of surviving sexual trauma. Furthermore, her disruptive style emphasizes spectatorship's limitations, while defamiliarizing the "spectacle" of her Black feminized body onstage.

I read Simone's work in a lineage of what Daphne Brooks terms "Afro-alienation acts," which "call attention to the hypervisibility and cultural constructions of blackness in transatlantic culture [...] to render racial and gender categories 'strange' and to thus 'disturb' cultural perceptions of identity formation" (2006:5). Afro-alienation acts "erupt [...] out of the stillness" of "stagnant signification" inflicted on the Black female body by the dominant order, thus they are "encoded with the traumas of self-fragmentation" (5).[1] Simone's performances prompted audience members' fracture and reflection, even while she constantly drew attention to their differences, claiming the specificities of her experiences as hers alone. Listeners may be left in "pieces," but those pieces are not Simone's.

Through her music, Simone compiled a sonic archive. She also authored an *atlas*. In her goal to transform her audiences to "pieces," Simone guided them towards a reckoning that was as

Figure 1. (previous page) Nina Simone performs at the Newport Jazz Festival, 1967. (Photo © John Rudoff)

1. Afro-alienation acts "invoke anti-realist forms," following Brechtian and Black feminist models (Brooks 2006:5). Simone returned again and again to Bertolt Brecht's dramatic repertoire. Scholars debate whether Simone's work can be rightfully classified as "Brechtian," as I briefly explore later (see Brooks 2011:180–82). Simone's annihilation of "putative stillness" (Brooks 2006:5) however, certainly mines Brecht's songbook for her own "manipulation of excess and dissonance" (Brooks 2011:181).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S105420432500005X Published online by Cambridge University Press

spatial as it was narrative and cultural. By appointing herself as a sort of sonic cartographer and navigator, Simone revealed the constitutive relationship between performance and place. Simone foisted upon audiences a method I term "listening as incommensurable practice," working from José Esteban Muñoz and Joshua Chambers-Letson, a pathway for understanding how sexual violence is interwoven in the system of racial capitalism (Muñoz 2013:103–15; Chambers-Letson 2018:xx–xxii). Simone opens up a place for audiences to examine, in all their incommensurability, how individual crises of rape, including her own, function within broader contexts. Specifically, Simone investigates rape from her personal experience and alongside the "afterlives" of African enslavement in the 20th-century United States, alongside the "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment," as Saidiya Hartman articulates these afterlives (Hartman 2007:6). But most relevant to Simone is the afterlife Kimberly Juanita Brown adds: the "residue of sexual exploitation" that is mapped onto her body and that she contends with again and again across her musical performances (Brown 2015:18–19).[2]

Exemplary of Simone's invocations of incommensurable listening are her 1964 performance in Carnegie Hall and later performances of "Four Women." At Carnegie, I read Simone as disrupting the concert hall's spatial scripts through "Pirate Jenny," "Go Limp," and "Mississippi Goddam." Through "Four Women," Simone interrogates conceptions of time and place as linear and contained. She explores how those in power deploy "controlling images" of Black women throughout US history to rationalize consumption and conquest (see Collins [1990] 2002). For Simone, it's clear that in her "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free," liberation and abolition are a place, even if that site lives in the subjunctive mode—in the imaginative yet real realms that performance creates.

Listening as Incommensurable Practice

What does it mean to truly listen? What sensations arise when hearing another's story or tuning into the intricate sounds of our shared surroundings? What do you hear, reading this, now? In *Listening in Detail*, Alexandra Vazquez considers a listening that "opens up," rather than pins down; her subject matter, Cuban music, is "impossible to pinpoint, but it is nonetheless locatable" (Vazquez 2013:9). Listening, like mapping, leads with history and particularity, while also making room for detail, difficulty, and transformation—and for something, also, like tenderness.

"Listening as incommensurable practice," as exemplified by Simone, functions as cultural critique and *spatial intervention*. Simone's work foregrounds her perspective as a Black woman raised in North Carolina, a survivor of domestic and sexual violence, and an ardent Black radical organizer during the civil rights movement. She rebukes the notion that space is "transparent," or readily knowable and systematically measurable (McKittrick 2006). "Listening as incommensurable practice" insists that each person—through their own set of readable identities and private memories—navigates space differently, or incommensurably. My personal maps are not the same as yours, by virtue of my own lived and inherited histories.

"Listening" to others' maps of spaces, both familiar and unfamiliar, is not a simple practice of "putting yourself in someone else's shoes." Instead, it instructs audiences to sit with the nuances and contexts that make place dynamically unfixed and densely sedimented. At any given moment, multiple maps of any given place exist. Simone's maps illuminate both this multiplicity and her own perspective, thus modeling a way of crafting narrative that both honors and deprioritizes individual experience.

2. My definition of rape aligns with lawyer and scholar Sarah Deer's (Creek), for whom "rape" "encompass[es] a constellation of crimes that involves the abuse of sexual power, including child sexual abuse and adult rape, one-time incidents and ongoing abuse, even when not overtly physically violent" (2015:xix). Like Deer, I refuse to hierarchize rape according to "proof of physical violence," believing *all* rape to be an "intimate violation of the highest order" (xix).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S105420432500005X Published online by Cambridge University Press

This is a vital intervention in dominant narratives about rape, which collect around empathy for the individual in lieu of challenging structural patterns of violence.[3]

Simone—through theatrical and place-oriented strategies such as disruption, citation, site-conscious staging, and crowd participation—troubles "empathy" as an ideal for audiences witnessing performances about sexual violence, instead advocating for an "ethics of incommensurability" (Chambers-Letson 2018:xx–xxii). Chambers-Letson turns to Muñoz on communism (2018:xx) to describe the political import of incommensurability in *After the Party*, locating it as a "redistributive" mode of communism:

> In order to foster a world of boundless exchangeability, capitalism flattens difference into equivalence, making singularity into commensurability. In the place of capital's commons of equivalence, communism calls for a commons of incommensurability: "a sphere of relation structured less by the flat social fictions of possession, equality, and equivalence, than by a mode of sharing out, just redistribution, and being together in racial and sexual particularity. (2018:xx)

Chambers-Letson's "commons of incommensurability" requires "a form of 'being-with, in difference and discord' where racial and sexual difference are not extinguished but shared out with each other" (xx–xxi). In the context of sexual violence, this "being-with-in-difference" works against capitalist systems of profit, which consider the feminized body as only a site of production; gender as only an identity to be policed; justice as only possible through punishment; and healing from harm as only legible through neat recovery.[4]

In contrast to Muñoz and Chambers-Letson's "commons," empathy elicits comparison, in that it is fundamentally "a projection of oneself into another to better understand [them]" (Hartman [1997] 2022:24). Comparison colludes capitalism in its hunger for "having." I champion the empathy Jill Carter (Anishinaabe) separates from "sympathy" and defines as "feeling with," instead of "for" (2015:414), however, I also agree with Saidiya Hartman's troubling of empathy's slipperiness. "In making the others' suffering one's own," Hartman considers, "this suffering is occluded by the other's obliteration" ([1997] 2022:25). Holding onto Carter's "with," Muñoz's and Chambers-Letson's "being-with-in-difference" might be thought of as a radical mode of relation, beyond empathy, which does not "obliterate the other," as Hartman fears, but realizes their particularity as central to the project of "feeling with" them (Chambers-Letson 2018:xx–xxi).

Simone prefigures this radical mode of relation through performance. In lieu of projecting common ground onto her performances, Simone asks spectators to recognize difference and interrogate systems of power. She links her individual survival of abuse with broader patterns of Black women's violation across US American history through lyrically and performatively (re)claiming her body onstage while also engaging in a practice of doubling, or even "triple-play," to borrow Brooks's wording (see Brooks 2011). Simone draws a line between how her Black female body has been historically "marked" for violation, while also creating a space for redress within the context of her own lived experiences and audience interactions (Spillers 1987). For example, in "Blues for Mama" (1966a) Simone affirms and consoles a woman she calls "mama" who is in an abusive relationship; at the Newport Jazz Festival, Simone introduced the song as for "a certain type of woman who has had this kind of experience" (in Tillet 2023). "Blues for Mama," which follows a traditional 12-bar blues form, mirrors Black blueswomen's practice of writing and performing songs about domestic

3. Relatedly, Simone's mapping and performance practice may also be read as a critique of the overemphasis on the (white, upwardly mobile) individual in urban planning and white feminist movements of her 1960s contemporaries.

4. Black trans people in the US reported up to 1.5 times more instances of sexual harassment and assault compared to their white peers, and 50% of Black trans women experience sexual assault in their lifetime according to the 2015 US Transgender Survey (James et al. 2017:3, 18). Though the majority of the instances of sexual violence I discuss here involve ciswomen, the vulnerability and targeting of Black trans women must be part of any conversation on rape in the US.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S105420432500005X Published online by Cambridge University Press

abuse in order to chronicle and intervene in racial and sexual violence on personal and national scales (see Harrison 1988; Davis 1998; McGinley 2014). I read Simone as singing back to these foremothers, who become the titular "mama," while also addressing other survivors in the audience and ultimately reassuring herself. Simone was deep in her own abusive marriage at the time, and her memoir reiterates the circumstances of assault described in "Blues for Mama" (Simone [1991] 1993:76–78). The grammar in the lyrics differs from the blues genre's more frequent use of first-person; through Simone's use of direct address, she shifts the audiences' focus away from their individual experiences, and even her own, and towards an ethics of mutual support (Simone 1966a).

Simone required her audience's total presence: she often walked offstage when audience members were distracted; she'd chastise "bad" listeners, scolding them to sit down, be quiet, and pay attention.[5] In her autobiography, she characterizes her approach thusly:

> If an audience disrespects me it is insulting the music I play and I will not continue, because if they don't want to listen then I don't want to play. I don't need them either, and if they don't like my attitude then they don't have to come and see me. Others will. ([1991] 1993:52)

Simone's ethos actively challenges set societal scripts, which cast Black female artists as virtuosic and perpetually primed to entertain. Through her frequent refusals, Simone demands reciprocal spectator-performer relations, premised on mutual respect and recognition. Returning to my formulation of listening as incommensurable practice: Simone clarifies that audiences may only enter a space of transformation with her, of "being with in-difference," if they are present, thoughtful coperformative witnesses—that is, "radically engaged and committed, body-to-body."[6] Moreover, her refusal to perform without their respect—and her declaration of not "needing them"—insists that audiences recognize *her* as conducting their shared space. Already, often before her performance was fully underway, Simone had flipped the stage's script: where typically white men with capital controlled place, implicitly and explicitly, Simone claimed spatial command and withheld entertainment if audiences did not recognize her artistry, authority, and agency.

In addition to demanding the audience's full attention, Simone unequivocally located being-with-in-difference as a participatory strategy by referencing her own body and pointing to herself. Throughout her career, Simone marked her own Blackness and sex in front of white audiences, proudly and unmistakably claiming her own identity. Her performances of "Ain't Got No/I Got Life" are one powerful instance of this. The song is from the 1967 musical *Hair* by Gerome Ragni and James Rado, originally sung by white protagonist Claude after he decides to defy the Vietnam War draft.[7] In her classic citational fashion, Simone appropriates the song, changing lyrics like "I got my ass" to "I got my sex," and incorporates earlier lines from the musical in which *Hair*'s Black characters reflect on their disillusionment living in America ("I'm Black/Ain't Got No"). Through her altered medley of the songs, Simone catalogs her body parts—her hair, brains, ears, "boobies," neck, fingers, lips, feet, toes, liver, back, and blood, adding on her "heart" and "soul"—declaring them her own through her repetition of "I got my..." Her performance linguistically reverses the historic parceling of Black female flesh on the auction block where "it was common practice for bidders to feel between women's legs, examine their hips, and fondle their breasts" (Hartman [1997] 2022:64). Simone seizes herself back—or, in Amber Musser's words, "reterritorializes

5. Simone's collaborators described her music to be as disciplined as the most challenging classical arrangements (in Garbus 2015). Though Simone frequently praised audiences at classical venues, cherishing their austere attention, she credited her time at Midtown Bar in Atlantic City as honing her crowd maintenance skills (Simone [1991] 1993:49–53). This is not to say the intensive listening Simone beckoned was solely the domain of concert halls; activists from the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) would play Simone's songs at their parties, places for political preparation and pleasure that also required a high level of concentration and care (SNCC Digital Gateway n.d.).
6. See D. Soyini Madison on Dwight Conquergood in "Co-Performative Witnessing" (2007:827).
7. It is important to note the musical's appropriation of Native terms and relatively one-dimensional Black characters, for instance, while also recognizing that it provided Black actors with the most roles in a musical since *Show Boat* (1927).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S105420432500005X Published online by Cambridge University Press

her flesh" (2014:183)[8]—therefore rejecting and critiquing the "charged nexus of possession and sexuality" projected onto Black women by white spectators. Refusing the segmentation of her body into pieces of property, Simone instead claims each part herself, including her "heart," "sex," and "soul," as constituting her livelihood; her whole embodied self, profoundly her own, is her "source of power" (see Lorde 1978:53).

Simone's performances of "Ain't Got No/I Got Life" also provide a model for how she figured her own intimate experiences with sexual violation into her specific historical context as a Black American woman—all while requiring rigorous listening from her audience. Simone started performing "Ain't Got No/I Got Life" during the late 1960s, a grief-ridden time for her politically, professionally, and personally. Her dear friend Lorraine Hansberry had died. James Earl Ray assassinated Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.[9] By 1970, she had left her husband and manager, Andy Stroud, who was "wrapped around [her] like a snake," influencing all of her finances and business arrangements (Simone [1991] 1993:116). He still controlled her money after their divorce, severely limiting Simone's freedom as a single mother *and* musician. Simone and Stroud's relationship was tumultuous; he physically abused her often. Early in their relationship, as Simone recounts in her memoir, Stroud held a gun to her head and raped her: "I sat tied up like his prisoner, bleeding and shaking, scared out of my skin. After five hours he stood me up, kicked over the chair and took me into my bedroom. He tied me to the bed and forced himself on me," she writes ([1991] 1993:77).

Within this devastating context, Simone's triumphant ode to her body and self resonates on individual, historic, and national scales. At her 1969 performance of "Ain't Got No/I Got Life" in Germany, Simone concluded the song with a thrilling flourish, as she typically did. However, this time, she added two components: First, she stood up to dance, repeating "I got my life." She rocked to the beat with her gaze downward, seemingly entering a private release of her own. Then, she returned to the piano, concluding the song with the following new lyrics:

I got my arms
I got my hands
Got my music
Got my ears to hear music by and I'm so grateful
So grateful
And my eyes to see colors by
And I'm so grateful
For that way I know beauty
I got life. (in ReelinIntheYears66 2021)

Simone references the parts of her that she uses to make her music: her hands, ears, and eyes. She marries her artistry to her reclamation of her body, boldly loving both as her own. Through her music, Simone maps a way back to herself, stitching together those parts fragmented by violation. Her song is the thread that sutures. By including her eyes, which allowed her to "see colors," Simone not only links sound and sight, suggesting that listening is more than an auditory practice, but also informs her audiences that "see[ing] color" is central to her artistic ethos. Later on in the concert, Simone shouts out the "ten soul brothers" among her mostly white European audience. This moment, along with her celebration that she can "see color" and "know beauty," became a regular part of Simone's performance. Across concerts and venues, Simone would frequently hail Black listeners, crafting a sonic space for them, *especially* in rooms filled largely with white people.

8. In her book's conclusion Musser discusses Simone's "Ain't Got No/I Got Life."

9. Simone ascertained that King's murder was "no freak tragedy, it was the traditional white American tactic for getting rid of the Black leaders it couldn't suppress in any other way," placing his assassination alongside Malcolm X and Medgar Evers's (Simone [1991] 1993:113). Further, as Coretta Scott herself has stated, several pieces of evidence point towards King's assassination being a multilevel conspiracy, involving local, state, and federal government agencies (see Jackman 2018).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S105420432500005X Published online by Cambridge University Press

For example, at a concert at University of Massachusetts, Amherst, before singing "Young, Gifted, and Black," Simone said: "I know there are only 300 Black students, so this song is dedicated only to you" (in Garbus 2015:52:57).

Simone did not foreclose the active participation of non-Black audience members—in fact, as I've argued, she required their disciplined engagement. However, she marked how even in the transformative space of her performances, where she sought to enter a self-described "mass hypnosis" with listeners, being-with-in-difference was a necessary prerequisite for joining her radical commons. This style of performance sets the stage for perhaps Simone's most famous concert, widely known for her rendition of "Mississippi Goddam," at Carnegie Hall in 1964. It was an event historians would note as a "turning point" in Simone's career, and civil rights protests more broadly, for decades to come.



Figure 2. Poster for Nina Simone's first solo concert at Carnegie Hall, 12 April 1963. (Courtesy of Carnegie Hall Rose Archives)

Carnegie Hall, 1964

On a March evening in 1964, Nina Simone transformed Carnegie Hall's cosmopolitan stage into a site of maroonage. She performed a revision of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's theatrical standard "Pirate Jenny," and debuted her now-famous protest song "Mississippi Goddam" for the varnished hall's predominantly white, liberal audience. Since Simone's first solo performance at Carnegie Hall in April 1963, she had sharpened her set list's political candor, shifting from plaintive ballads and instrumental covers to songs that explicitly testified to her experiences within the civil rights movement.

Simone's 1964 Carnegie Hall performance and accompanying live album denotes just one example of her critical geographical work. There Simone performed a map for navigating the times, providing practical strategies for insurgence and survival amongst Black women. Through her lyrics and mode of performance, Simone theorized that geographies of carcerality and Black resistance extend far beyond the cataclysmic "moment" of the 1960s.

I situate Simone within a lineage of Black women artists who set the record straight both on their genre-defining creativity and their mobility as agential artists and travelers through fraught US American landscapes. I imagine these artists and theorists as cowriting a genealogy of sonic truth telling. Like Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Ma Rainey, along with contemporary artists like Beyoncé, SZA, and Solange, Simone problematized America's white supremacist geography while

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Figure 3. Nina Simone, second from right, singing in small group with Lorraine Hansberry (to her left). (New York Public Library Digital Collections, Music Division; https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/5d9a7e60-2cf4-0135-0613-0fc77b59adf9)

empowering her movement across it. Brooks importantly points out how Simone's "formal disturbances," particularly acute in a setting as grandiose and lily-white as Carnegie Hall, also agitate the power dynamics between white audiences and Black performers. Simone, through her fugitive "crossover" style and "spectacular acts of distanciation, [...] defamiliar-ize[ed] cultural expectations of where black women can and should articulate their voices and musicianship aesthetically and politically" (Brooks 2011:179).

Simone grounds her songs in her experiences as a Black Southerner and her own *not nonviolent* revolutionary practice, recruiting theatrical tactics to critique the spaces she navigates from concert halls such as Carnegie to the US American South to the national political stage.[10] Simone and blueswomen demonstrate how songs are guides for negotiating space. Maps, by definition, are navigational tools and projections of their authors' perspectives. Colonial cartographers rehearse scenarios of ownership and conquest through mapmaking. In his landmark 1988 essay, J.B. Harley destabilized colonial maps' objectivity, dissecting them as political devices. He declared that "maps, unlike [...] literature, art, or music appear to have few genuinely popular, alternative, or subversive modes of expression" (1988:79). I trouble Harley's binary divide between *maps* and *literature*, *art*, *and music*.[11] By situating maps as scored in "power, not protest," Harley suggests that only society's most powerful create authoritative maps. Defining maps through power alone obscures how they are also instruments of liberation. Furthermore, indexing maps as archetypally the imperial classes' domain occludes other kinds of political sovereignty, including Indigenous sovereignty.

Enslaved Africans' fugitive songs provide a cogent example of maps scored by performance and protest. In a collection of her late plays, Lorraine Hansberry cites two songs sung by enslaved Africans traveling the "midnight trains" of the Underground Railroad.[12] Folk songs such as "Follow the Drinking Gourd" and "Steal Away" are hallowed maps, containing in their subterfuge practical instructions for Black fugitives following rivers, trees, and stars towards their freedom dreams.[13]

10. Simone is quoted as describing herself as "not nonviolent" upon meeting Martin Luther King Jr. (see Schackman and Garbus 2015).
11. This is not an original argument; I am following the important work of Native studies scholar Mishuana Goeman (Tonawanda Band of Seneca) (see Goeman 2013:24).
12. Simone credits her political awakening to Hansberry, writing: "I was always aware of what the vanguard black artists and thinkers were concerned with, but I wasn't an activist in any sense. [...] It would take a special kind of friend really to pull me into the ideas of the Black Movement and force me to accept that I had to take politics seriously. That special friend was Lorraine Hansberry, the first black writer to have a hit Broadway play—*Raisin in the Sun*, 1958—and the person who first took me out of myself and allowed me to see the bigger picture" ([1991] 1993:86–87).
13. Black liberation is a not yet fully realized project. My phrasing of "freedom dreams" comes from Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (2002).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S105420432500005X Published online by Cambridge University Press

The former's lyrics gradually move through each of the important riverways on a fugitive's journey; the "Drinking Gourd" refers to the Northern Big Dipper constellation and lyrics like "dead trees will show you the way" provide alternative compasses in the absence of evening stars—moss creeps on the northern side of trees, its fertile growth like handrails in the dark night (Silber 1994:218–20). Like quilt codes, another example of enslaved Africans' inventive mapping, these fugitive songs were "hidden in plain sight"; they evidence an intimate understanding of place, one that contrasts white settlers' obsession with ownership of it (see Scott 1990:27; and Mojica 2012).

"Steal Away" further unsettles the connection between property and place. Enslaved Africans used the phrase "stealing the meeting" to refer to clandestine gatherings, "as if to highlight the appropriation of space and expropriation of the object of property necessary to make these meetings possible," Saidiya Hartman argues ([1997] 2022:65). "'Flights' from captivity were referred to as 'stealing away,'" she continues, and the phrase "designated a wide range of activities from praise meetings, quilting parties, and dances to illicit visits with lovers and family on neighboring plantations" (66).[14] Deployed by Nat Turner, and likely written by him, "Steal Away" and its Black singers tender a map that exposes, counters, and ultimately moves beyond white territorializations of space and apprehensions of Black mobility. Thus, "stealing away," as an insurgent refrain, links the enslaved persons' strategic traversals of physical geographies—the plantation, the gathering space, and the road—to their contestations of their "condition as a legal form of unlawful or amoral seizure," or what Spillers terms the "violent severing of the captive body from its motive will" (Spillers 1987:67). Through their performances and transmissions of "Steal Away," Black singers flourished their own form of cartography, one that rejected geographies defined through white possession (see Moreton-Robinson 2015; Seed 1995). They respatialized their own "stolen away" bodies and the places they communed in as "site[s] of sensual activity, sociality, and possibility" (Hartman [1997] 2022:66). This reappropriation of the "stolen" body is particularly radical in the context of acts of rape and violation committed against Black people during enslavement. To reclaim flesh as one's own is to object to being made into "unrapeable" property. "Stealing away" from the plantation and "stealing away" one's own body was also a direct attack on white slaveowners' systems of profit, which relied on their productive and unpunishable rapes of Black women.

Simone's insurgent work carries on the navigational songs of enslaved Africans. Brooks locates Simone's "poetics of sonic alienation," composed of her disruptive and "experimental" interpretations of popular songs, as "musical maroonage," or, citing Houston Baker, "guerilla action [...] carried out within linguistic territories" (Brooks 2011:179; Baker 1984:196). In my close readings below, again following Brooks, I consider how Simone rewrites the spatial through her linguistic fugitivity; Simone, too, respatializes her "stolen away" body in order to issue and imagine a map of the 1960s US that is not defined through the ethics of property and production at the core of its racial caste system. Simone's maps, conveyed through performance, foreground information critical to navigating, surviving, and hopefully ending sexual violence from her particular vantage point as a Black woman in 20th-century America. Close readings of Simone's songs reveal how, through incommensurable practice, she charted for audiences the co-constitutive relationship between the white supremacist capitalist management of space and of Black feminized bodies, while disrupting these cycles with her own vocal screams and overlapping subjectivities. The result "invents" another type of order, one premised on "frictive" relation instead of dominance.[15]

"Pirate Jenny"

Similar to the appropriative move of the singers of "Steal Away," who rejected the cartographies of white possession, Simone folds a lineage of African insurrection within a European "show tune." Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill scripted "Pirate Jenny" for their satire of the Weimar Republic,

14. Hartman is directly working from Hortense Spillers (1987:65–81).

15. My use of the word "frictive" builds from its usage in queer studies; in particular, I am drawing from Ramón Rivera-Servera (2012); Martin Manalansan (2014); and Kareem Khubchandani (2020).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S105420432500005X Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Threepenny Opera.[16] Brecht and Weill's classic "anti-opera" typifies Brecht's theory of distanciation (in Brecht 1957:91–99; see also Tian 1997). The pair valued abstraction and a certain coldness in delivery, and they disparaged artists who relied on pathos and pity to impact their audiences (see Brecht 1957; Buck-Morss 1977:40; and Brooks 2011:182). German studies scholar Russell Berman argues that Simone's covers are "anything but Brechtian," instead pronouncing "distance from distanciation" through their "proximity and precision" and "racial, regional, and class specificity" (2003:177–79). Brooks suggests that Simone is "less invested" in Brechtian ideology, refocusing our attention on Simone's generative distortions of Brecht and Weill's work (2011:181):

> Simone's invocation of their work [...] is a project less invested in remaining faithful to the literal tenets of Brechtian ideology and more focused on producing interpretative deformations of Brechtian text that paradoxically generate an alienation effect; *her work dares audiences to see and hear "America" on a different frequency*. [...] Nina Simone innovates and enacts her own distinct critique of tyranny and apathy in western contemporary culture, and in the process, stops the audience from losing themselves in the romance of the black female singing voice. (2011:182; emphasis added)[17]

Simone's directive to "see and hear America on a different frequency" extends spatially: a frequency literally describes the number of times an event occurs in a set unit; Simone's "frequency" demonstrates the unrelenting quality of racial and sexual violence in the US and how that incessance shapes her and other Black women's navigations of public space.[18] Seeing and hearing America on a different frequency also means challenging "America" as a knowable place. As Simone halts white spectators' "romanticization of the black female singer," she also troubles their transparent idealizations of America and its apparent geographies.

Simone sang "Pirate Jenny" third in her set, preceded by two covers: George and Ira Gershwin's 1935 showtune "I Loves You Porgy," her first major hit; and George Stone's "Plain Gold Ring."[19] "Porgy" may have lulled her audience into a false sense of security for what was to come, while "Plain Gold Ring" established a creeping, rueful ambience narrated by the "other woman." Officially under her "hypnosis" now, Simone further disquiets her audience through "Pirate Jenny," setting the stage for the different "frequency" of what constitutes "American," which she would cement in her damning, closing number, "Mississippi Goddam."

Brecht and Weill's "Pirate Jenny" is sung by Polly Peachum, taking on Jenny the maid's revenge fantasy on the townspeople who mistreat her. Simone transfers the setting to a "crummy Southern town," where she is "forced to scrub floors," while "gentlemen" watch. As in the original, Simone's "Pirate Jenny" character sees a "black freighter" ship in the distance and imagines, or perhaps enacts, a plot to shackle and kill her subjugators. Recounting his personal connection to the song, poet-critic Hanif Abdurraqib notes that Simone's version is "so jarring" because she understands that "black people have a different relationship with boats, with chains, with the South, with freedom and the haunting that comes with not having it" (Abdurraqib 2017:194–95). Simone also

16. Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* is based on the 1728 ballad opera *The Beggar's Opera* written by John Gay with music arranged by Johann Christoph Pepusch. Brecht's *Threepenny* is adapted from Elisabeth Hauptmann's translation of *Beggar's Opera*; all of *Threepenny*'s music is original by Kurt Weill with the exception of the opening melody, which is retained from Pepusch's arrangement (see McNeff [1994] 2006:61–62).

17. Brooks is citing Berman (2003:180) and Griffin (2004:102–25).

18. Brooks also places Simone in conversation with her contemporary Moms Mabley, asserting both as brilliant "satirists" of US American race relations (2011:181). For further discussion on Mabley as cultural critic, see Katelyn Hale Wood, *Cracking Up: Black Feminist Comedy in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Century United States* (2021).

19. Music journalist Sarah Tomlinson rightfully critiques that "I Loves You Porgy"'s success, as the only one on Simone's debut album "previously popularized by black women musicians," reveals the limitations of the general consumer public as it fit "audience expectations of Black women musicianship" (2016:55). Kitty White originally sang "Plain Gold Ring" in 1956; Stone, the song's author, also worked under the songwriting aliases Earl Burrows, Jack Hammer, and T.T. Taylor.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S105420432500005X Published online by Cambridge University Press

knows well that Black *women* have a different relationship to "forced" domestic labor and being "watched" by the "gentlemen" who coerce them (Simone 1964). Through her invocation of the "freighter" and forced labor, Simone summons the geographies of the slave ship and the plantation, interposing them into the concert hall. As her Jenny spites those who "gawk" at her, Simone frustrates her Carnegie audience's easy spectatorship of her performance, reminding non-Black (and male) concertgoers of their fundamentally different, or incommensurable, relationships to the terrains she summons and the politics of display.

Simone's "Pirate Jenny" contrasts the original not just contextually, but sonically. Where actress Lotte Lenya performed the *Threepenny* number with technical freneticism at a noticeably faster pace, Simone is unapologetic and measured, savoring each beat of her harrowing lilt and thundering piano. Simone's "Pirate Jenny" maintains the original's repetitive rhythm, but introduces interpretive freedom and variance; as she shifts tempo and accents and sustains dissonant chords, Simone withholds fulfillment from the audience, increases musical tension, and reaffirms that she is in command of the melody. Through asserting her control over space and time and intentionally making her voice more challenging for audiences to track, Simone acts out what Brooks calls "a spectacular performance of *subterfuge*" (2011:180). Simone's "subterfuge" conjures insurrection and white elites' misrecognition of it, embodying the Black geographic method of "stealing away."[20]

Furthermore, Simone's performance replicates the spatial movements of maroonage: Simone's Jenny escapes after the ship's rebels "flat[ten]" the town, perhaps alluding to fire's central role in many emancipation plots, including enslaved people's organized burning of New York in 1712 (see Lepore 2005); the song culminates with her flight from the gentlemen's captive gaze, as Simone/Jenny "disappears out to sea," joining the pirates' community. *Threepenny*'s Polly/Jenny prefaces the song by saying she "has no family," only a "dream"; in her performance, Lenya adopts aloof gestures of regality, often turning a distant smile upwards and grandiosely waving her arms overhead (see Mr. Egerman 2013). In contrast, Simone's Polly/Jenny is not playacting a fantasy, but recounting a revolutionary plot: when Simone sings "you'll never guess to who you're talking," she elongates the phrase with a sneer, mocking the men who, as Brooks surmises, "fail to read the bloody revolution brewing in [their] midst" (2011:181). As she oscillates between extended utterances and sharply spoken retorts, cackles, and whispers, Simone's voice itself becomes fugitive and evades capture. Simone raids the song and stage, supplanting African traditions of maroonage into a German theatrical standard in a grandiose classical music hall.

While her Northern crowd could have distanced themselves from the racism she sang about later on in "Mississippi Goddam," the disconcerting "Pirate Jenny" may have been much harder to deflect. This may be why Simone presented "Pirate Jenny" first, intentionally unnerving her audience in preparation for the remainder of her set. Simone's piano hunts the listener with its pounding, as she turns Carnegie Hall into a scene of a shipboard insurrection. Through performance, Simone ruptures the slave ship's psychic grounds and Carnegie Hall's spatial script. She jolts her audience out of the passive consumption the hall's architecture of fine, front-facing red velvet chairs encourages. Reveling in vocal excess, Simone's screeches bring to a halt the cycle of repetition that would render her body a commodity defined by its capacity for multiplication. She *refuses* to be the virtuosic Black songstress that her audience may desire and that the ostentatious stage's "scenario" anticipates.

At her conclusion, Simone whispers into stillness that her victims be killed "right now." Her decisive command counters white supremacist violence and the demand that the Black pursuit of justice "go slow," which she would critique later in "Mississippi Goddam." Finishing "Pirate Jenny" with a spectral shout—"That'll learn ya!"—Simone instructs her audience how to read her body and the spaces she remaps, while refusing legibility.

20. Much like "Steal Away" reclaims "theft" and projects it back onto the slaveowner, "Pirate Jenny" might invoke "looting" as a discourse—often used against Black rebellion, including against Black Lives Matter protestors—to illustrate the colonizer-capitalist as the real plunderer (see Osterweil 2020).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S105420432500005X Published online by Cambridge University Press

"Go Limp"

If Simone's haunting and opaque "Pirate Jenny" embodied a practice of fugitive alienation, "Go Limp," covered two tracks later, brought the audience close as she corralled them into a call-and-response refrain not unlike a nursery rhyme in tone and content. *Too roo la*, *too roo la*, *too rool li ay*, Simone cued, making her Carnegie crowd mimic the tune back.

In "Go Limp," Nina Simone revises a protest song written for the 1958 Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament by Alex Comfort, famous for his antimilitarist politics and 1972 nonfiction manual *The Joy of Sex* (see Rayner 2000; see also Place and Cohen 2000). In both Comfort's and Simone's versions, the song depicts a young woman attempting to remain sexually innocent amidst the hostile advances of fellow male protestors. At the beginning of the song, the woman pacifies her mother's worries, assuring her that she'll return from the march a "virgin maid," enumerating how she'll safeguard her virtue: "with a brick in my handbag / and a smile on my face / and barbed wire in my underwear / to shed off disgrace." By the song's end, its protagonist has endured sexual advances from "a young man [...] with a gleam in his eye," slept three nights on a "hard classroom floor," and, following her organizing briefing's implicit guidance, "gone perfectly limp" for the young man. The song concludes optimistically—the narrator's assailant has left his name and address and even though the protagonist is now pregnant, her child "won't have to march" if she and the movement "win." Lyrically and narratively, "Go Limp" seems to satirize the passivity and nonviolent approach of some activist groups—the speaker's attempts to protect herself from "disgrace" are thwarted when, as the lyrics tell us, she follows the "N-A-A-C-P" ethos to "go limp" in the face of attack. Even if she puts a positive spin on it at the end of the song, the woman's "brick" and "barbed-wire underwear" remain ineffective. "Go limp" also refers to the protest tactic of total muscular relaxation that makes it more difficult for police to carry away protestors. Protest leaders would have trained their cohorts to "go limp" when an officer tried to drag them off to be arrested, guidance that is both practical and bespeaks the state cruelty rampant at many of these incidents—only once a body is "dead weight," or becomes heavy, does the officer register the level of force they are using. In the song, Simone's amused tone is confusing; nonviolence is mocked, tongue-in-cheek, "go limp" is offered as a half-ironic, half-serious instructive, and meanwhile her lyrics attest to the real horrors and stakes of political organizing. Simone depicts protesting as arduous and dangerous for young women, even if worthwhile, and seems to say, by transporting the song to the NAACP setting, that nonviolent organizing circles are not the reprieve from harm they may consider themselves to be. In the lyrics, the speaker is assaulted by another marcher, insinuating gendered violence is still a reality in activist communities. This critique foreshadows Simone's "Four Women" (1966b), which testifies to the unique oppression Black women face as a result of their Blackness and gender presentations.

Simone's Carnegie Hall performance of "Go Limp" amplifies the song's disorienting qualities. At the Carnegie Hall concert and on at least one other occasion, Simone feigns her own befuddlement, acting as if she forgot the song's plot and her place in it ("Have I told you about Mama yet?" she intonates to the crowd). Simone's almost verbatim repetitions of her "confusion" reveal her "forgetting" as part of her script. Simone prompts the audience to help her "remember," as she encourages and praises their recitation of the song's simplistic "too roo la, too roo la, too rool li ay" refrain ("You've got it! You've got it!" she exclaims). At one point, between the first chorus and second verse, Simone instructs the audience: "You get the gist of the song now? When we get to the chorus again, I expect you to sing with lust." Recordings of "Go Limp" reveal that Simone desired, even advocated, for audiences' vocal participation: she musically "holds for laughs," often slowing down and quieting her accompaniment for them; interestingly, towards the end of the song, Simone creates a secondary voice of her own as she leaps an octave, creating a sonic space and echo that she alone can reach.

When I first heard "Go Limp," I felt uneasy—Simone describes a woman, devoted to the civil rights movement, who chooses not to resist her own rape. She makes her audience complicit in the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S105420432500005X Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 4. Nina Simone, Netherlands, 1966?. (Courtesy of Netherlands Institute for Sound & Vision, Netherlands CC-BY-NC-ND)

man's advances, coaching them to "sing with lust," joining in on their laughter, and, of course, leading them in a whimsical call-and-response. That Simone makes her spectators perform their amusement is key—"Go Limp" is right before "Mississippi Goddam," which Simone does not formally introduce. Subtly, as she critiques nonviolence in both songs, she suggests that, as a political strategy, it is insufficient to effect material change (Simone [1991] 1993:94–95). Simone's wariness of nonviolence is indicative of the era in which she performed; that spring, Congress had not yet passed the Civil Rights Act, in spite of major political demonstrations, including the 1963 March on Washington, and just that fall, John F. Kennedy was assassinated and white supremacists bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, causing the death of four young Black girls. Along with the strategy of nonviolence, Simone seems to critique, too, the expectations white audiences historically have placed on Black performers to instruct them on race and stand in for Blues authenticity when she half-sings, half-says in an aside: "And if I have a great concert / Maybe I won't have to sing those folk songs again." Lamp-shading her "great concert" hall setting and expressing a fatigue at the "folk songs" stereotypically associated with her, Simone draws attention to the labor of her performance. Simone's irreverent tone in "Go Limp" also points to the futility of performance that fails to provoke its audience. Moreover, the "Go Limp" lyrics and Simone's theatrical "forgetfulness" suggest a practice of opacity. Though the song's narrator goes limp and does not resist the young man's forcefulness, she does not provide consent. Simone's befuddling use of humor constructs a wall between the audience and herself, obstructing them from transparently "reading" her. I am reminded of Zora Neale Hurston's "theory of tactics":

> The theory behind our tactics: The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song. (Hurston [1935] 1990:3)

With "too roo la, too roo la, too rool li ay," and to some extent "Go Limp" as a whole, Simone gives her audience "something to play with" before she "sings her song"—in this case, "Mississippi Goddam." Simultaneously, Simone cues her listeners to understand things are not always as they appear; "Go Limp" slips on the appearance of witty, yet flighty and fun commentary, when really the subject matter is much more dire and damning. Returning to McKittrick's "transparent space," this troubling sets up Simone's geographic pièce de résistance, a sustained indictment and unsettling of the US American landscape.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S105420432500005X Published online by Cambridge University Press

"Mississippi Goddam"

Simone's "showtune for a show that has not been written yet" is in many ways her signature song, embodying both her musical expertise and strident Black radical politics. She wrote and composed "Mississippi Goddam" in the wake of the murders of both Medgar Evers and the four Black girls in Birmingham. Simone debuted "Mississippi Goddam" shortly before her Carnegie show, however, the New York concert would mark its premiere to a wider audience.

Carrying the navigational pulse of enslaved Africans' songs, Simone's "Mississippi Goddam" maneuvers and scores the US American landscape's anti-Blackness. In the lyrics she tracks white supremacist violence across the South; however, she ultimately locates white terrorists' threats across her many "paths" and daily routines: violence is chronic, seeping into and merging past, present, and future tenses. Simone's catalog of the landscape testified to her terror and exhaustion and indicted the supposed transparency of Mississippi's land regulation. Following the Supreme Court's landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, white Mississippians formed two organizations to counter desegregation. The first was the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, a state agency proposed by the Mississippi House of Representatives and approved in 1956, which notably investigated and retaliated, via physical violence and economic recompense, against Black Mississippians even cursorily involved in the civil rights struggle. A white planter and plantation owner, Robert Patterson, initiated the second state-sanctioned white supremacist organization in 1960s Mississippi: motivated in part by his own claims to land in the delta, as well as fear that Black citizens would "outnumber" him, Patterson created the Citizens' Council, which collaborated with "elected officials, members of law enforcement, and White [sic] business leaders [...] to detect and discourage local civil rights activity through the collective economic power that its members held" (Rolph 2019). Though the Citizens' Council started with Patterson in Indianola, Mississippi, its influence quickly spread beyond the state, and members created chapters in surrounding Southern states, as well as in Northern cities including Cleveland, Chicago, St. Louis, and Los Angeles (McMillen 1971:138). The Mississippi Sovereignty Commission funded the Citizens' Council, donating a total of $193,500 from 1960–64, and Medgar Evers's murderer Byron De La Beckwith was an active member of both the Council and the Ku Klux Klan (MDAH n.d.). I provide this context not to rehearse how acute racial injustice was in 1960s Mississippi, although it is important to remember the depth of state-incentivized persecution of Black Southerners during a US American era often heralded for its progress, but to underscore even more the geographical incision of Simone's protest song. In explicitly naming anti-Blackness as persistently everywhere, mundane in its extremity, Simone more accurately maps 1960s Mississippi than state-manufactured maps of the region. Or, put differently, her song gets at a truth about place that aerial, paper maps elide. Consider these lyrics from the first verse of "Mississippi Goddam":

> Can't you see it, can't
> you feel it
> It's all in the air
> I can't stand the pressure much longer
> Somebody say a prayer (Simone 1964)

Bringing to mind Christina Sharpe's notion of "the weather," or the everyday "climate of anti-Blackness" (2016:106), Simone implores her predominantly white Northern audience to witness what, for her, is all around. Anti-Blackness constitutes Simone's very "air," altering its pressure like an eardrum ready to burst from the sheer force of altitude. Simone's characterization of the "weather" she endures as a Black woman aptly renders the "air" of white supremacy, which permeates each level of the "goddam" Mississippian climate. Simone further explored the pervasiveness of racial and gendered violence in subsequent performances of "Mississippi Goddam," in which she updated lyrics to cite current events, including protests and riots in St. Augustine, Selma, and Watts, Los Angeles, as well as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. Through these alterations, Simone reveals her unrest is not limited to Mississippi, while also, to repeat an earlier phrase, adding details to a "sonic archive" of Black history.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S105420432500005X Published online by Cambridge University Press

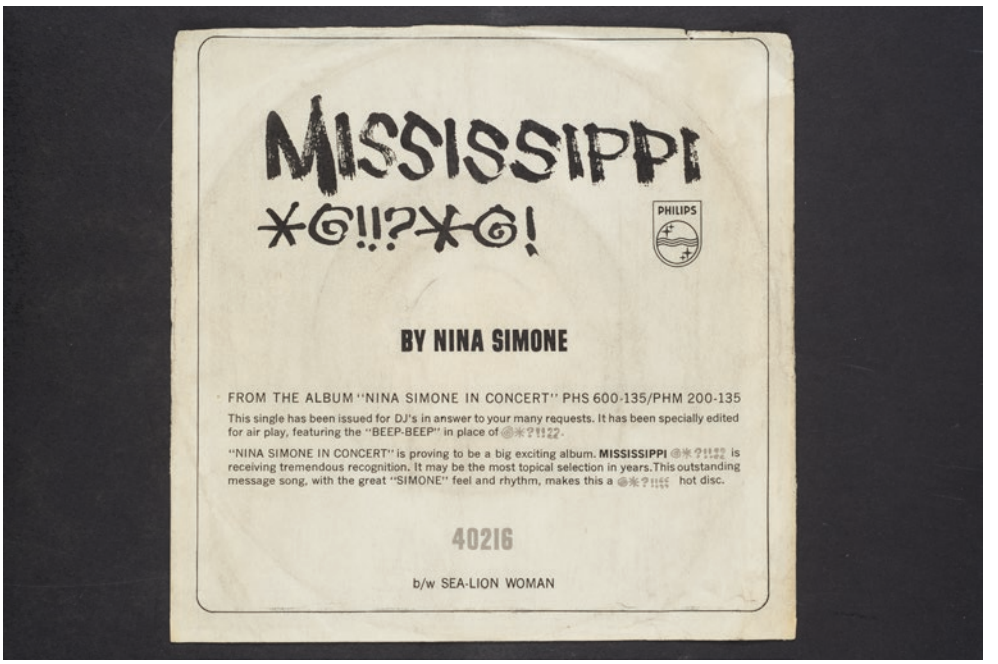


Figure 5. Record sleeve for the single release of "Mississippi Goddam" by Nina Simone, from the album Nina Simone in Concert. *(Courtesy of Carnegie Hall Rose Archives)*

Even though Simone concentrates her ire on Mississippi, she destabilizes the presumption that anti-Black geographies are solely the terrain of the "goddam" Deep South by disrupting Carnegie Hall's typically decorous environment and appealing to her audience directly: "Can't you see it / Can't you feel it?" She demands listeners pay disciplined attention to what for her is the weather of US American existence. Furthermore, Simone disturbs linear time and place with her script-flipping repetitions of "too slow": calling out the racist rhetoric that positions Black people as "too slow," she argues that *justice* is "too slow." "Slowness" functions on multiple levels as yet another intervention in white, upper-class culture's investment in propriety. Politely pursuing "slow" change is an inadequate means of material social transformation. This argument manifests most clearly in Simone's third verse:

> Picket lines, school boycotts
> They try to say it's a communist plot
> All I want is equality
> For my sister, my brother, my people and me
>
> Yes, you lied to me all these years
> You told me to wash and clean my ears
> And talk real fine just like a lady
> And you'd stop calling me Sister Sadie[21]

21. "Sister Sadie" may reference the jazz standard "Sister Sadie" popularized by James Moody at the time; however, Simone is more likely citing the minor character "Sadie" in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Sadie is fugitive Jim's wife and is enslaved by Widow Douglas and Miss Watson, white women who represent the hypocrisy of genteel Christian society. With "Sister Sadie," Simone seems to be calling out white Christian etiquette, particularly amongst white women, in which Black women are only seen in relationship to (and in service of) whites—as "Sister Sadies." In her essay on "Mississippi Goddam," Nadine Cohodas writes that Simone's "Sadie" might stand in "for all the demeaning moments when condescending whites refused to address blacks with courtesy titles no matter their age or position" (Cohodas 2018).

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Note the change of address in this verse: Simone goes from calling out those who persecute civil rights activists as communists, a strategy deployed constantly by the Citizens' Council and Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, to saying that "*you* lied to me all these years." While the "they" who accuse protestors of "a communist plot" more likely refers to those with political authority and influence, such as Citizens' Council members, the "you" Simone confronts is the Carnegie Hall audience. She turns to them, as she has throughout the set and as was customary of her performance style, to reproach the very "lady-like" behavior expected of Carnegie Hall performers. Her critique is unmistakably one concerning *performance*; taking on the idiom to "wash and clean [her] ears" and the directive to "talk real fine just like a lady," Simone contests (white) audiences' attempts to "civilize" and control her manners of listening and speaking, while rebuking racist discourse that depicts Black people as dirty and impure (in need of washing), inarticulate ("talk real fine"), and, for Black women in particular, overly masculine ("like a lady"). Here, Simone also condemns Black respectability politics as counterproductive reactions to stereotype. By transitioning from "they" to "you," Simone confronts her Northern crowd and the white hegemonic space of Carnegie Hall.

Simone's vexation at her surroundings is consistent throughout "Mississippi Goddam." She declares early in the song "I don't belong here / I don't belong there," immediately after pleading to the "lord" to "have mercy on this land of mine." In this stanza, she explores her uneasy relationship to the US American land. Simone resolutely does not "belong here" nor "there"; she feels out of place throughout the country, perhaps due to the daily danger for Blacks in the US, which she testifies to in the song, and her very presence in America being a product of her ancestors' enslavement. And yet she prays, singing: "this land of *mine*." Even though Simone feels alienated from the land where she resides, she claims it as her own. Simone's map underscores both the relentless, reiterative danger she faces in her daily navigation of space and her profoundly ambivalent relationship to place itself. America's grounds are haunted by the ever-present specter of violence and unanswered prayers for Simone.

Simone emphasizes language's limitations in "Mississippi Goddam." And yet she uses language to *damn* Mississippi: "The double work of Simone's curse," Brooks argues, is "to engage in a fraught relationship with a God that she now rejects and yet simultaneously needs in order to fulfill her condemnation of the South" (2011:188). Her "damn" is an Austinian utterance and act. By "damning" the US American South, Simone *does something* to the land. She acts upon it. Simone may be "damning" her listeners as well; however, she may also be opening up space for them to issue their own "damning" of America, in all their incommensurable entrances into their cursing. Her "goddam" also reveals the futility of language. Simone is so disturbed by "Mississippi" that the structure of her sentence falls apart: instead of naming Mississippi's emotional or physical impact on her as she does for the other states, she just says "goddam." The failure of language to testify to the effects of violence would be explored through her screams and howls just a few years later with "Four Women."

"Four Women"

Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. "Peaches," and "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire" and "Earth Mother," "Aunty," "Granny," God's "Holy Fool," a "Miss Ebony First," or "Black Woman at the Podium": I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.

—Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987:65)

The lyrics of "Four Women," organized in four stanzas, follow four Black women, each representing an anti-Black female stereotype. Each stanza concludes with the refrain, "What do they call me? My name is..." (Simone 1965; see Mr. Wolf 2022). The women—Aunt Sarah, Saffronia, Sweet Thing, and Peaches, in order—all correlate to what Patricia Hill Collins theorizes as "controlling images" ([1990] 2002:69–96). Simone invokes the "mammy," "tragic mulatto," "Jezebel," and "Sapphire," respectively. Hortense Spillers initiates her landmark essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," quoted above, with the same structure as Simone's

https://doi.org/10.1017/S105420432500005X Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 6. Nina Simone performs "Four Women" in the Netherlands, 25 December 1965. (Mr. Wolf 2022; screenshot by TDR*)*

"Four Women." Both treatises deconstruct how white dominant culture marks the Black female body through a history of sexual violation, which is evidenced through the creation of the very tropes both Spillers and Simone investigate.[22]

Simone draws a historic continuum between these stereotypical figures in relationship to sexual violence and what Kimberly Juanita Brown terms the "afterimages" of enslavement (2015:1–6). Through Simone's insurgent final and prolonged note—her wailing hold on "My name is *Peaches*"—she takes the song's peak of suspension and rupture and uses it to embody a sonics of dissent (Simone 1966b; see also Spillers 1987:81). Simone's fleshy rebellion counters catastrophe's singular grammar, as Simone gathers meaning from Black feminist collectivity and through her interruption of her own body as "marked" text (Spillers 1987:65).

In filmed performances of "Four Women," including one in Holland from 1965, Simone settles into the piano. Gesturing to her own natural hair, she says, "one of these women has hair like mine," setting up her own positionality and prompting audiences to perhaps reflect on theirs (see Mr. Wolf 2022). Her song starts with Aunt Sarah as she sings: "My skin is black / My arms long / My hair is wooly / My back is strong / Strong enough to take the pain / Inflicted again and again /

22. Joshua Chambers-Letson importantly observes: "Spillers invents a certain strand of performance studies (which is to invent Joseph Roach and then Diana Taylor) when she queries, 'We might well ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually "transfers" from one generation to another, finding its various *symbolic substitutions* in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments?' Isn't this how Roach and Taylor describe performance insofar as performance affects a 'symbolic substitution' that transmits and transfers the 'initiating moment' from spectator to witness, generation to generation, performer to performer, body to body?" (Chambers-Letson 2018:14; see also Spillers 1987).

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What do they call me? / My name is Aunt Sarah." Simone's straightforward instrumental composition directs the audience's focus to her lyrics, which follow the above pattern for each woman. With the character of Aunt Sarah—the enslaved laborer, made to be simultaneously asexual and always available for sexual violation—Simone enunciates a beginning "which precedes [her]" (see Broom 2019).[23] By initiating her song with Aunt Sarah, Simone instructs her listeners—many of whom would have been well-meaning white civil rights activists—that an accounting for the crimes against these "four women" *must* commence with what Spillers calls the inaugural "materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh 'ungendered'" (1987:68). Spillers argues two decades after Simone that assigning gender and particularly white womanhood's "matriarchist value" to Black women represents "a fatal misunderstanding" (80). Thus, Spillers articulates that violation against the gendered female must be read differently in the context of Blackness and Black flesh's "ungendering" at the "suspended" site of the Middle Passage (80). Simone's scene with Aunt Sarah harkens back to Frederick Douglass's Aunt Hester, whose infamous scream was Douglass's "blood-stained gate, [his] entrance to the hell of slavery" ([1845] 2011:6). Just as Simone's beginning precedes her, Douglass's initiation into slavery's rupturing "hell" precedes him—enunciated through sound, or what Fred Moten theorizes as "proof that objects resist" (2003:1). Simone and Douglass's recollections of their "aunts" point towards a catastrophic grammar that does not conclude, but repeats through marking another "captive body" (Spillers 1987:67).

After Aunt Sarah, Simone adopts the roles of Saffronia and Sweet Thing, whose stories both illustrate racial capitalism's dependence on the sexual exploitation of Black women. Saffronia, who has "yellow" skin and lives "between two worlds," recounts: "my father was rich and white / he forced my mother late one night." Simone's Saffronia indirectly references *partus sequiter ventrum*, the 1662 Virginia law that decreed a child's enslaved status followed their mother's; this absolved white enslavers who raped Black women and in fact further incentivized them because any children resulting from the rape would increase the enslaver's capital by generating more human property (see Morgan 2018; and Getman 1984). Saffronia uses her own body as the text that betrays this sordid history; her mother's rape is proven by Saffronia's skin. Simone's next character, Sweet Thing, represents a sex worker, with lines like: "Whose little girl am I? / Anyone who has money to buy." Though sex work is work, when placed alongside the rest of the women in this song, it seems as though Simone is making a point about the limited options afforded Black women in a culture that devalues them and reduces them to a body, or sweet "thing." Both Sweet Thing's and Saffronia's names allude to the dynamics in which the hypersexualized Black woman's body is turned into a commodity, a process bell hooks terms "eating the other" (1992:21–22). Sweet Thing invokes the circulation and consumption of sugar, which was central to the slave trade and became synonymous with Black female flesh. Kara Walker explores this conflation in her 2014 art piece, *A Subtlety: Or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, a larger-than-life-size installation of a "mammy" sphinx figure made entirely of sugar in an old Domino warehouse. Saffron is a spice used to add flavor in dishes, thus Saffronia speaks to the operation "within commodity culture, [in which] ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture," as bell hooks argues (hooks 1992:21). Both Sweet Thing and Saffronia make plain how the commodification and sexual violation of Black women are rooted in histories of and present iterations of African enslavement.

Finally, and most crucially, Simone brings her audience back to Aunt Sarah at the song's conclusion: her voice now closer to a militant howl, she cries out, "I'm awfully bitter these days / Because my parents were slaves." "Four Women" has a seemingly chronological structure, with each "controlling image" occupying a sequential moment in US American history. Simone places them in relationship to each other and brings them into the present tense ("My skin *is*..." "What *do* they call me?" "My name *is*...") to show that these racist tropes and their effects endure and, though sang chronologically, are not linear. Simone locates her "parents" as enslaved, condensing her genealogy to show that Aunt Sarah and the afterlives of slavery remain in the present. With her final verse,

23. My phrasing here is a reference to Sarah Broom's *The Yellow House* (2019), her deeply geographic memoir of her family's history in New Orleans, which inspires my work on trauma, place, and memory.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S105420432500005X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Simone halts the rhyme scheme with "I'll kill the first mother I see!" and challenges the song's repetitive structure by only stating her name once—this time with an elongated, defiant scream. In extending "Peaches" to the point of excess, Simone talks back to the white supremacist systems that would see her body as solely a site of production (see Tuck and Yang 2012). "Excess" is taken up on Simone's own terms, her belt both sustained and controlled as she seizes *back* the name that would identify her only through her sex.[24] While "Four Women" up until this point follows a relatively static rhythm and smaller range, engendering a hypnotic quality, Simone breaks her song's spell, suspending "My name is..." and hovering at her voice's crackle, until she finally gives her voice over to screaming resolve. Simone's scream folds into Aunt Hester's within what Fred Moten calls "scene[s] of objection" (2003:1). Simone transgresses across registers, perspectives, and generations, forming what Brooks calls a fugitivity that "announce[s] itself in shifting and subjective positions, and which, in turn, creates a productive excess that obfuscates the putative transparency of the black female singer" (2011:181). At her performance's apex, Simone "stands *in the flesh*" and sounds against the dominant order, which would read her scream's "provocative intensity" as "nothing but the call of a wild animal," as Edourd Glissant critiques ([1989] 1997:123–24; see also Spillers 1987:81; and Moten 2003:8). Simone's recalcitrant scream instead extends the insurgent language of her ancestors to name the reiterations of violence that mark their bodies, while breaking these cycles open wide.

Coda: "How Sweet It Would Be If I Found I Could Fly"

Nina Simone demands absolute rigor from her listener. For me there is always more to hear and to learn, and Simone gifts her listener transformation, again and again, as she requires discipline.

Chambers-Letson inaugurates one of his sustained meditations on Simone with her track "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free," where for a second, Simone soars. As Chambers-Letson notes, her voice "climbs the octave up the word 'wish' into the upper register" (2018:36). She sings:

> How sweet it would be if I found I could fly.
> I'd soar to the sun and look down at the sea.
> Then I'd sing cause I'd know how it feels to be free. (Simone 1967)

Alongside these lyrics, Chambers-Letson includes Hiroshige Utagawa's 1857 *ukiyo-e* (woodblock print), *Fukagawa Susaki and Jumantsubo*, which dramatizes an eagle's sweeping view of the earth's snow-covered hills, its landslides and cresting waves. "Hiroshige's print mobilized the aesthetic encounter to give his audiences (mostly middle and working-class Edo [Tokyo] spectators) the sense of flying," Chambers-Letson writes (2018:36). Viewing the print one imagines that, for an instant, you are glimpsing at the passage of time—not as some masterful god, but as a bird, who will fly and fall, but will know what it means to be free, to feel it in your wings. Simone's final stanza of "I Wish I Knew How It Feels to Be Free," where she takes flight, and now this Hiroshige print, will always remind me of the Greek myth of Philomela. In the story Philomela, after being raped and mutilated by her sister's husband, transforms into a nightingale. Many times, I have glanced out my window or stared into trees seeking solace in birds, imagining I could shift shapes like Philomela. What would it mean to sense flight that feels forever out of reach? Simone teaches her listeners that empathy is impossible, but education—and with that, transformation—is not. Being rendered to pieces is a devastation, yet through the shards, you might create something radical, each fragment imbued with lessons learned. The bird above the sea writes an alternate lineage of the aerial, one not premised on the colonial cartographer's conquest or empire's surveilling eye, but on songs passed and shared, an embodied map felt flying high.

24. Peaches is both the literal fruit that bears more fruit, but also slang for vagina.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S105420432500005X Published online by Cambridge University Press

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