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And I Heard ‘Em Say: Listening to the Black Prophetic

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Acknowledgments

“In those days it was either live with music or die with noise, and we chose rather desperately to live.”

Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act

There are too many people I’d like to thank and acknowledge in this section. I suppose I’ll jump right in.

Thank you, Professor Darryl Smith, for being my Religious Studies guide and mentor during my time at Pomona. Your influence in my life is failed by words. Thank you, Professor John Seery, for never rebuking my theories, weird as they may be. I’ve never had a teacher that’s made me feel more confident. Thank you, Professor Susan McWilliams, fellow Kanye fan, for allowing me to immerse myself in Baldwin and sharpen my scholarly teeth. Thank you, Professor Erin Runions, for your tireless leadership and constant encouragement. Deadlines have never seemed less scary. And finally, thank you Professor Joti Rockwell for taking me on, essentially, as a full-time student, and helping me hear the world like never before.

Thank you to my parents, whose support knows no bounds. Thank you to W.E.B. Du Bois, for making me cry. Thank you to James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed, Langston Hughes. Thank you to Nina and Kanye.

Chapter One

Introduction: Can Your Hear It?

In the 1968 New York Times obituary for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., King's final protesting efforts were described by the paper as "his greatest plans to dramatize the plight of the poor and stir Congress to help Negroes."¹ The article later goes on to quote King as saying "We need an alternative to riots and to timid supplication. Nonviolence is our most potent weapon". To King, violence was the breakdown of politics, and alternative methods of addressing systemic racism were necessary in the name of progress. This sentiment was echoed in the recent film *Selma*, directed by Ava DuVernay. In a scene where King, played by David Oyelowo, confronts a young John Lewis, he emphasizes the importance of having the struggle televised. The conflict between white and black Americans needs to be *dramatized*, in order for white Americans to care.

King's emphasis on the dramatic goes beyond a need to simply elevate, or heighten aspects of conflict. Rather, it seems that King valued dramatic appeal in its ability to galvanize and mobilize. To dramatize the subjugation of African Americans is to bring back into the debate black humanity, and the tragedy that was, and is, white supremacy and domination. King's comments are certainly shaped by the specificity of his context, operating post-Emancipation but pre-Civil Rights victories. But his methodologies of non-violence and dramatic staging do beg the question: Just how does one respond to manifestations of evil?

¹ Schumach, Murray. "Martin Luther King Jr.: Leader of Millions in Nonviolent Drive for Racial Justice." *The New York Times*. April 5, 1968.

Another interesting case study in response to white supremacy may be found in W.E.B. Du Bois' perennial work, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Perhaps the most referenced sentence that motivates his project is captured in the question: What, exactly, does it mean to be a problem? This unasked yet consistently present question, in all its permutations, resonates throughout the text, as Du Bois attempts to navigate both his and the Other world of whiteness, speaking from, across and within the color-line that so captures the problem of the Negro in the 20th century.

In fact, when Du Bois is faced with this question of being a problem, his answer is that he “answer[s] seldom a word”². And how could Du Bois *not* struggle with silence in the face of such a question, involving the complexities and totality of white supremacy? Surely, *Souls* is an attempted mode of redress, but it also begets the larger question: if the color-line delineates national consciousness in such a way that the African-American presence is viewed as a problem, how can and do black Americans respond from a place of marginality? Or, rather, if Du Bois' work is, at its *most* simplistic core, an attempt to re-enact the conversation that introduces his work, what would/can/should this conversation look like?

Du Bois' writing is one of many attempts to speak out across the color divide in American consciousness. As the 20th century unfolded (*Souls* being written in 1903), numerous other African-American writers and political activists joined Du Bois in a chorus against white supremacy; Malcolm X, MLK, Ella Baker, Ida B. Wells, Huey Newton, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison make up only a fraction. And that's not to say black writers weren't working before Du Bois as well. The poetry of Phyllis Wheatley, for example, preceded Du Bois by over

² Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford [England] ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007

a century. Though ideologically, politically and creatively nuanced, the writings of these figures provided methods for responding to white supremacy; how to survive, how to resist, and how to heal.

Recently, many of the above writers were canonized in Cornel West's book with Christa Buschendorf, *Black Prophetic Fire*³. West, perhaps the most prominent scholar on the black prophetic tradition, wrote about the importance of prophetic blackness as a response to white supremacy in his 1982 work *Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*. Now, however, his recent work opens with the following question:

“Are we witnessing the death of black prophetic fire in our time? Are we experiencing the demise of the Black prophetic tradition in present-day America? Do the great prophetic figures and social movements no longer resonate in the depth of our souls? Have we forgotten how beautiful it is to be on fire for justice?”⁴

West subsequently claims that “something” has died in Black America since the death of Martin Luther King Jr., and that black collective action has ceded prominence to individualistic pursuits of wealth, greed and the undergirding of capitalism. West's opening comments paint a conservative picture in which black leadership thrived during the Civil Rights movement but died along with its most prominent leaders; thus, to appreciate the black prophetic, one must turn backwards.

West's claim is hardly unique; it echoes not only other scholarship that claims certain forms of black activism are historically and contextually specific⁵ but also generational conflicts surrounding the role, purpose and manifestation of black activism amongst the community. Most

³ Specifically, Douglass, Du Bois, King, Baker, Malcolm X and Ida B. Wells.

⁴ West, Cornel, and Christa Buschendorf. *Black Prophetic Fire*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2014.

⁵ “What Was African American Literature? — Kenneth W. Warren | Harvard University Press.

recently, protests in Ferguson, Missouri have become a site of political upheaval as younger activists reject the presumed authority of an older generation of activists, like Reverend Jesse Jackson and other religious and political organizers. One protestor summed up his views on black leadership by pronouncing that the only leader they needed was Mike Brown, the young black man killed by Darren Wilson in August 2014⁶.

Though West himself later admitted that the eruption of Ferguson denies the absolute death of black prophetic fire⁷, the original moratorium begets more questions. For example, in an interview with *Democracy Now!*, West argued that President Obama is not the culmination of the black prophetic tradition, but in fact the opposite. West rather believes that President Obama is a complicit head of an oppressive system that fails to continue the legacy of previous leaders in the black prophetic canon⁸. Obama's failure to channel the black prophetic despite attaining the highest political office juxtaposes black political progress with the continued existence of systemic racism. Black politics and cultural life are at an impasse: If the fire of Ferguson is assumed to be contiguous with the Civil Rights movement of the 20th century, it seems that the communitarian struggle that West viewed as deceased has been resurrected. Conversely, the mantle of the black prophet, assumed by many to be worn by Obama, falsely confuses political achievement with racial equality. Thus, in our understanding of the black struggle against white supremacy, how do we come to understand the varied responses to domination? Are there other avenues for the black prophetic?

⁶ Bosman, Julie. "Lack of Leadership and a Generational Split Hinder Protests in Ferguson." *The New York Times*, August 16, 2014.

⁷ Staff, N. P. R. "Reviving A Grand Tradition Of 'Black Prophetic Fire.'" *NPR.org*. Accessed November 28, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/2014/11/01/360452483/reviving-a-grand-tradition-of-black-prophetic-fire>.

⁸ *Black Prophetic Fire* Page 3

West himself, at one point, would have said yes. A longstanding fan of music, West has often remarked on the importance of jazz and other musical forms in African American political and religious life in both his role as scholar and public intellectual. In fact, West's exhortation of the importance of black music stretches back to his premiere work, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*. In it, West argues that in order to fight white supremacy, a fusion of black Marxist thought and black liberation theology must emerge. He details multiple traditions of response to modern racism, ultimately landing on the "African American humanist" response to domination as the best possible route. On this, West says the following:

"The best example of the Afro American humanist tradition is its music. The rich pathos of sorrow and joy which are simultaneously present in spirituals, the exuberant exhortations and divine praises of the gospels, the soaring lament and lyrical tragicomedy of the blues, and the improvisational character of jazz affirm Afro American humanity. These distinct art forms, which stem from the deeply entrenched oral and musical traditions of African culture and evolve out of the Afro American experience, express what it is like to **be human under black skin in America**. Afro American musicians are Afro American humanists *par excellence*. They relish their musical heritage and search for ways to develop it. This search proceeds without their having to prove to others that this heritage is worth considering, or that it is superior to any other. Rather, the Afro American musical heritage develops and flourishes by using both its fertile roots and its elements from other musical traditions—from the first religious hymns and work songs through Scott Joplin, Bessie Smith, Louie Armstrong, Mahalia Jackson, Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Ulysses Kay, Miles Davis, Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, and contemporary black music. The heritage remains vibrant, with innovation and originality ensuring continual growth. Indeed, it has become one of the definitive elements in American culture."⁹

To West, the affective capability of music (that is, the ability of music to convey sorrow and joy, amongst other feelings) acts akin to a phenomenological declaration of blackness. The aesthetics

⁹ West, Cornel. *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*. 1st ed. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982. Page 85

of music, the connotations of genre, and the concept of art itself best reclaim the sense of humanity that institutional racism so thoroughly atomizes. Furthermore, West references a genealogy of music ranging from African work songs to contemporary black musicians that addresses the co-evolving Genealogy of Modern Racism that he details earlier in the book. Thus, West's own belief that musical traditions can be a site of African American humanist response to domination begs the question that if, in our contemporary political moment, the black prophetic seems to be waning in some circles, might it be thriving in others?

Returning to Du Bois once more, it is clear that the importance of black music has long been intertwined with anti-racist writings and work. For *Souls* is a book in which music is a core element, opening every chapter and closing the work itself. Du Bois says the following of the music that he includes:

Before each chapter, as now printed, stands a bar of the Sorrow Songs,—some echo of haunting melody from the only American music which welled up from black souls in the dark past. And, finally, need I add that I who speak here am bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil?¹⁰

Du Bois' inclusion of music functions as evidence of West's comments some 80 years later; that the ability of art and music to humanize African-Americans is paramount in the struggle for liberation. Du Bois also believes that not only are African Americans capable of creating great art, it is in fact black art that is indigenous to America; that, "there is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave"¹¹

¹⁰ Du Bois, *Souls* "Forethought"

¹¹ Du Bois, *Souls* "Of our spiritual strivings"

Thus, for the rest of this paper, I argue the following: to better understand how black prophetic theology and political thought function currently and historically, one must thoroughly examine black music as a site of religious and political resistance to white supremacist domination. Not only has African American music been integral in both black religious and political life (frequently blurring the two), but it is able to act as an affective discursive practice that humanizes and dramatizes resistance to domination in a way other rhetorical strategies like speeches, writings and textual materials are unable to do.

My hope with this project is to add to the scholarship on the black prophetic that is often, but not always, textually centered. That is to say, several scholars mention the importance of musicality throughout their works; I am nowhere near the first. However, engagement with the black prophetic frequently employs a methodology of a figure-centric approach, focusing on individual actors and their particular manifestations of black prophetic fire. Thus, however inadvertently, a canon of sorts tends to develop that includes critical and important writers and politicians, but no musicians. Thus, implicitly, musicians are excluded from the black prophetic tradition insofar as the scholarship has failed to cement their standing as equal to writers, activists, speakers and politicians. I hope to show that musicians, based on their musical and performative work, are capable of channeling black prophetic political theology in order to resist domination and demonstrate new ways of conceiving liberation.

Engaging the Black Prophetic

Cornel West's *Prophesy Deliverance!*, first published in 1982, set forth an argument that the true path toward liberation for African Americans was to be found in a combination of progressive Marxism and a revolutionary Christianity undergirded by black theology. West

believes that both Marxism and Christianity are limited in their ability to address modern racism, but that by fusing the two into a revolutionary and prophetic mode of discourse, white supremacy might more easily be rejected.

According to West, Christian theology needs the class-consciousness that progressive Marxism provides. As a nation born into modernity instead of transitioning into it, America lacks the Marxist framework to properly understanding class struggle. One theory of Marxism that West hopes Christian theology will embrace states that the history of civilizations occurs in their transitions, and that capitalism is a transitory period motivated by class struggle. Marxist theories toward the primacy of materiality and history, as well as its critique of capitalism, lend themselves to the African American resistance movement insofar as they grant black theologians better tools to address class concerns often overlooked by dominant theology.

Conversely, West believes Marxist thought benefits from black theology in that it recasts God to be on the side of the oppressed, thus framing religion and faith as a means of resistance rather than an opiate of the masses. Black theology also posits white supremacy as the motivating core behind American imperial capitalism that progressive Marxism seeks to dismantle. To put in as a maxim: the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

It is this intellectual and religious fusion that West seeks in order to brand black prophetic Christianity; a revolution-oriented theology that seeks to dismantle white supremacy through Marxist responses to American (and global) capitalism. As West says:

Revolutionary Christian perspective as praxis must remain anchored in the prophetic Christian tradition in the Afro American experience which provides the norms of individuality and democracy; guided by the cultural outlook of the Afro American humanist tradition which promotes the vitality and vigor of black life; and informed by the social theory and political praxis of progressive Marxism which proposes to

approximate as close as is humanly possible the precious values of individuality and democracy as soon as God's will be done.¹²

Writing in 2008, political theorist and American studies scholar George Shulman expands notions of the black prophetic in his book *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture*. Shulman's work takes West's theoretical focus on prophetic leaders yet recasts the act of prophesy to be a genre of political speech axiomatic to American political speech. Ranging from biblical jeremiads that praise prophets like Moses to the contemporary writings of Toni Morrison, Shulman believes that prophetic language has entered American political culture at the level of the rhetorical, becoming a genre both sacred and secular that is best employed by African Americans in the face of oppression.

Shulman's intervention into the black prophetic interests me in its ability weave together both the sacred and profane elements of political prophecy. Part of Shulman's project is to show how prophetic rhetoric has become normalized, to an extent, in American political culture to the point where its religious derivation almost becomes secondary to its political galvanization. Shulman himself references Ranciere's idea of "speech acts" that transform democratic subjects¹³. In comparison, what I'm attempting to do in this project is to highlight how "singing" or other oral acts function in American political life.

The other component of this theoretical equations concerns discourse surrounding the emergence of black music as a site of politics and religion. The scholarship in this arena is abundant and varied according to genre, time period, method, etc., but I'm perhaps most

¹² *Prophesy Deliverance!* 146

¹³ Shulman, George M. *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture*. Minneapolis: Univ of Minn Pr, 2008. Page 166

interested in theologian James Cone's work *The Spirituals and the Blues*. Originally written in 1972, Cone concerns himself with drawing out a theological interpretation of negro spirituals and blues music. Cone believes that spirituals, through their Christian rhetoric surrounding Christ and Heaven, are sites of theological striving and appeals to the divine that double as expressions of humanist struggle in the moment. The spirituals addressed both the sacred and the profane; in one example, Cone discusses how spirituals concerned with getting into Heaven were often codes for escaping slavery to the North¹⁴. In this case, divine and earthly liberation were pursued as one, and the music was the tool that enabled the collapsing of the two.

If spirituals were capable of bringing appeals to the divine down to the level of the profane, then the blues became the secular counterpart through which the experiential qualities of African American life were celebrated and praised. Operating largely after the spirituals, though not entirely removed, the blues concerned themselves often with issues of embodiment, sexuality, desire, and the immediacy and primacy of the material world. Dismissed by some as vulgar or lowly, Cone believes the blues to be humanist manifestations celebrating black life in the constant face of death. Despite, in lyrical content, not making reference to God or the Holy, the blues in function were capable of acting as gospel of the Earthly, capable of praising along secular lines the tragedy and joy of black life in America. Cone's work, both in method and content, inform my own insofar as it charts a scholarly path in which music and artistic expression can be read as sites of politics and religion. I hope to approximate Cone's close reading of lyrics, combined with proper contextualization, in order to show how different musical genres can be read as embers of the black prophetic fire that refuses to be extinguished.

¹⁴ Cone, James H. *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*. Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1991.

Chapter Two

“Can’t you see it? Can’t you feel it?” Nina Simone and the Prophetic Blues

The Prophetic Blues Aesthetic

George Shulman describes James Baldwin as employing a blues aesthetic¹⁵ in his work; an aesthetic of tragic creativity with comic undertones that prevent full-blown cataclysm. But absent in Shulman’s analysis of Baldwin is a clear discussion of what constitutes a blues aesthetic. His glossing over of the term “blues” speaks to a larger question: just what, exactly, are the blues? This question is more than a question of genre; rather, understanding the blues is critical in understanding the transformation undergone by black prophecy in the mid-century.

Shulman’s positing of a blues aesthetic is meant to indicate a move by Baldwin to place the prophetic in the realm of secular political rhetoric. Departing from the likes of Martin Luther King Jr., Baldwin avoids theistic language in his prophecy, instead focusing on saying things unsaid and bearing witness to lived experience. The core of Shulman’s treatment of Baldwin can be summed up with the following passage:

I call him nontheistic because he does not announce God’s words or point of view as a messenger, but prophetic because, on the avowed basis of experience, social position, and artistic vision, he announces what is disavowed and unsayable and testifies to what he sees and stands against it. I call him nontheistic but prophetic because he announces the vicissitudes of human finitude not by way of God’s righteousness in a providentially ordered universe by way of the exemplary meaning or ‘truth’ of his experience as a human being and as a ‘sexually dubious’ black man. By translating theist prophecy into such secular terms, what does Baldwin achieve?¹⁶

¹⁵ Shulman, George M. *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture*. Minneapolis: Univ of Minn Pr, 2008. Page 132

¹⁶ Shulman, Page 132.

Shulman's move, through Baldwin, is to illustrate how the office of prophecy continues in secular discourse and is not inherently dependent upon biblical reference; rather, the prophetic becomes a narrative structure of bearing witness, of speaking humanistic truth(s). This translation, however, isn't an answer unto itself. To boil Shulman's main inquiry to its simplest form, one might ask, "What does secularizing prophecy do?"

My argument in this chapter is to examine the ways in which the secularization of prophecy as exhibited by Baldwin can be viewed in parallel with the secular black musical tradition of the blues. This parallel, I argue, is essential in understanding how black music maintained its prophetic office despite moving away from explicitly biblical rhetoric and content. Through a close reading of Nina Simone's music and performances, as well as her own blues aesthetic, I aim to expand the office of the black prophetic to include political protest alongside appeals to the divine.

What does it mean to be Black and Blue? Theorizing the Blues

Before diving into analysis of Simone as a blues prophet, or Baldwin for that matter, one must theorize just exactly what the blues are. Of course, scores of literature and analysis have been written on this topic over the years, ranging in discipline from detailed musicology to theoretical and cultural studies. Though the blues certainly do have particular musical structures and features that structure the genre apart from others, my theorizing of the blues, for the purpose of this chapter, will focus more on the racial, cultural and political uses, contexts, and characteristics of blues music. In fact, I argue that to consider blues as strictly a musical genre is to ignore the plurality of blues manifestation through affective turns.

Turning to literature on the blues invariably leads to Leroi Jones' *Blues People*, which Questlove referred to in a New York Times piece as an attempt to "make sense of the musical aspects of the African-American experience... at the level of prose."¹⁷ Jones, later known as Amiri Baraka, sought to analyze African American music, particularly the blues, through the lens of sociological inquiry. Jones/Baraka posited that "There are definite stages in the Negro's transmutation from African to American" and that "are most graphic in his music"¹⁸ Jones's scholarship was some of the earliest writing to seriously consider the blues as a site of political and cultural richness; through his work, he re-centered the importance of context in shaping musical discourse, posited a timeline for the evolution of black music, and argued that musical traditions were instrumental in African American identity formation. Jones describes the core of his argument as follows:

In other words, I am saying that if the music of the Negro in America, in all its permutations, is subjected to a socio-anthropological as well as musical scrutiny, something about the essential nature of the Negro's existence in this country ought to be revealed, as well as something about the essential nature of this country, i.e., society as a whole.¹⁹

Jones' analysis, while a critical contribution at the time of its writing, also speaks to the difficulty of disciplining an approach to the blues. Jones had no qualms in asserting that an objective sociological approach is best suited to study the blues. Through this interrogation of the blues, Jones seeks to uncover larger fault lines of oppression, identity politics and the false promise of democracy.

¹⁷ Questlove. "Questlove Reflects on Amiri Baraka." *The New York Times*, January 12, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/13/arts/music/questlove-reflects-on-amiri-baraka.html>.

¹⁸ Baraka, Amiri. *Blues People; Negro Music in White America*. New York: W. Morrow, 1967.

¹⁹ Baraka, Page x

Much of his analysis focuses on the politics of the production of the blues, and in turn what the blues produce. Though far from a Marxist analysis, Jones does expend much of his energy on the growth of a black middle class that coincided with increased urbanization after Emancipation. Jones traces this shifting class status through the evolution of rural blues into urban blues; he characterizes blues of the “new city” as “harder, crueler, and perhaps even more stoical and hopeless than earlier forms...it took its life from the rawness and poverty of the grim adventure of ‘big city livin.’”²⁰ Jones treatment of the diverging blues leads to a privileging of the country blues that served as folklore and could be thus viewed as more “pure”. That is to say, the sociological argument formulated by Jones, in which he claims to find essential characteristics of black life, is not without its biases.

Though crucial to the development of analytic blues literature, Jones’ analysis was not without critique, particularly his methodology. Writing in 1964, shortly after *Blues People* was first published, fellow writer and student of music Ralph Ellison reviewed Jones’ work in an essay of the same name. Ellison, no stranger to music, staged an intervention into Jones’ conceptualizing of the blues as a site of pseudo-empirical analysis; Ellison believed music was not a process or tool through which identity is formed, but rather an irreducible ingredient of identity to begin with. Ellison frequently wrote about “living with music”--humans live with sound; they do not generate it. Modeling his argument after Jones’ treatment of various “stages” of black identity, Ellison addressed slave spirituals by saying, “A slave was, to the extent that he was a *musician*, one who expressed himself in music, a man who realized himself in the world of

²⁰ Baraka, Page 105.

sound....”²¹ The immutability of the desire to express oneself in sound more accurately captured the relationship between American blackness and music than the sociological approach that left Ellison so cold. Ellison treats the music as a transcendental force whose appreciation necessitated “no literary explanation, no cultural analyses, no political slogans—indeed, not even a high degree of social or political freedom.” To him, music was “what we had in place of freedom”²².

If Jones’s work represents an archeological investigation into previously uncovered pasts, Ellison places himself on the other end of the spectrum, presenting a vivified and transcendent blues that gives voice to suffering but is not constrained by it. Ellison believes the blues to be “the heritage of a people who for hundreds of years could not celebrate birth or dignify death and whose need to live despite the dehumanizing pressures of slavery developed an endless capacity for laughing at their painful experiences”²³. Rather than sociology, Ellison would see that “any effective study of the blues would treat them first as poetry and as ritual”.

But Ellison’s transcendental blues is an ultimately ill-fitting solution to Jones’s essentialized historicization. For if Ellison seeks to correct Jones’s constraining linking of the blues to historical records of identity formation by positioning them as art and lyric, he does so in a way that completely erases the potential for art to be both aesthetically concerned and political. Commenting on the work of the blues, Ellison concludes that “the blues are not primarily concerned with civil rights or obvious political protest; they are an art form and thus a **transcendence** of those conditions created within the Negro community by the denial of social

²¹ Ellison, Ralph. *Shadow and Act*. New York: Random House, 1964. Page 254.

²² Ellison, page 254

²³ Ellison, page 255

justice.”²⁴ Whether or not the blues are *primarily* concerned with civil rights, it seems odd that Ellison would argue they transcend the unjust conditions from which they sprouted given his previous assertions of the blues as speaking to us about human tragedy. Art and affect are privileged over history in Ellison’s conception of the blues, creating just as incomplete, though opposite, portrayal as Jones’ historical approach.

How, then, to treat the blues? How to capture both their value as modes of artistic expression as well as historical sites of protest, mourning, hope and revolution? Perhaps this need to pin down and distinctly delineate the blues is exactly to blame. Perhaps a conception of the blues that is mobile yet rooted, pluralistic yet distinct, and entertaining but political would prove more useful.

There are two theorists in particular whose work contributes greatly toward theorizing this kind of blues definition. The first work I turn to is Guthrie Ramsey’s *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-hop*, which helps to fill the critical gaps in the dialogic between Jones and Ellison. Ramsey’s work on black musical cultures employs a mix of methodological approaches, ranging from musicology to cultural studies. His shifting lens provides a flexible view on the blues, and this malleability is perhaps better equipped to move the blues out of the constraints of “genre”.

In the third chapter of his book, “It’s Just the Blues”, Ramsey introduces a concept he names the “Migrating Blues Muse”; said muse is created to address the geopolitical formation and interplay between musical codes and rhetoric, influenced by midcentury black migration primarily from South to North. Speaking on different signifying gestures and practices used in

²⁴ Ellison, page 256 (emphasis mine)

the North versus the South, Ramsey argues “These two rhetorical fields do not stand in direct opposition to each other...the relationship I am describing exists rather as a powerfully rich and complicated dialectic”.²⁵ Characterizing the blues as a series of gestures, practices and performances more effectively links music and racial identity; in this way, the inherited enacting of certain coded acts in the present collapses the false dichotomy that divides Ellison and Jones’ respective views. Here the blues are allowed to be fluid.

Ramsey goes on to theorize what he calls the “blues modality” as a framework with which to view blues music. The blues modality allowed artists “to build personal styles and new musical idioms that spoke powerfully to various constituencies. Indeed, the blues were everywhere. It became a musical system through which women such as Dinah Washington could articulate a subjective presence into a male centered musical discourse like jazz. It was molded and ‘jumped’ by Louis Jordan into a personalized style that influenced subsequent innovators such as Chuck Berry.”²⁶ By characterizing the blues as what W.T. Lhamon might call a “lore cycle”²⁷, Ramsay shifts away from constraints of genre and constitutes a more nuanced, performative blues that works to balance both the tension of the historical and present moment as well as that of the individual and larger societal patterns. The blues is contextual, yet constant; specific, yet flexible. His reference to Dinah Washington should not be discounted, either; as we

²⁵ Ramsey, Guthrie P., and American Council of Learned Societies. “Race Music: Black Cultures from Behop to Hip-Hop.” edited by Samuel A. Floyd, Jr, 2004. Page 47.

²⁶ Ramsey, page 74

²⁷ Lhamon, W. T. *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to HipHop*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998.

will see later with Simone's music, the blues emphasis on immanence and embodiment held strong potential not just for anti-racist expression but gender equality as well.

But perhaps the theorist who best incorporates Jones's valuing of history, Ellison's emphasis on aesthetic significance, and Ramsay's intentional flexibility is James Cone's exploration of the blues in 1976's *The Spirituals and the Blues*. In it, Cone details the history of both slave songs and Negro Spirituals and what he views to be their secular counterpart, the blues. Cone defines the blues in the following way:

The blues are true because they combine art and life, poetry and experience, the symbolic and the real. They are an artistic response to the chaos of life. And to sing the blues truthfully, it is necessary to experience the historical realities that created them²⁸.

Cone properly understands the blues to be an expressive and affective discourse that translate lived experience into an aesthetic form. His definition of the blues aims to collapse those false dichotomies that often arise in blues scholarship. In fact, the navigation of dichotomies is central to formulating the blues, for as Cone says, "The blues express a black perspective on the incongruity of life and the attempt to achieve meaning in a situation fraught with contradictions"²⁹. Derived from the experience of being black in America, the blues force a confrontation between the illusionary promises of equality and democracy and the immanent reality of black oppression. Cone asserts "the blues are not abstract; they are concrete. They are intended and direct responses to the reality of black experience"³⁰.

²⁸ Cone, James H. *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*. Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1991. Page 103

²⁹ Cone 103

³⁰ Cone 107

Cone's theorizing, as we shall come to see, complements and bolsters the immanence and grounding in the present that Baldwin also values. But critically, Cone's contribution to the scholarship makes important room for plurality; because he argues that the blues are derivative of lived experience, the manifestation of the blues is left open to match the wide range of lived experiences. Thus, Cone presents a blues that are personal yet public, honest and creative, tragic and beautiful, and above all, black.

Baldwin's Blues

Now that a theory of the blues has been laid out, it becomes necessary to trace this blues aesthetic in black literature. Shulman, as indicated earlier, acknowledges this aesthetic in Baldwin, but takes no time to tease out where he finds it in Baldwin's work. Thus, this section aims to combine the previous theorizing of the blues with an exploration of black literary expression.

Ralph Ellison, in his essay "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity", discusses the conflict in identity African Americans face when confronted with canonical American literature. Ellison describes how, when white authors claim an American reality, "the Negro tends to answer... 'Perhaps, but you've left out this, and this, and this. And most of all, what you'd have the world accept as *me* isn't even human'"³¹. To Ellison, American fiction does not merely exclude African Americans but distorts them, creating false images that perpetuate myths of inhumanity, inferiority and inability. It seems no coincidence, then, that a writer like Ellison would spend so much time writing on music, an expressive medium outside of American literature that poses less risk of sabotaged images. To understand the importance of

³¹ Ellison, Ralph. *Shadow and Act*. New York: Random House, 1964.

African American music and writing, one first has to acknowledge the *failure* of literature; a failure not of African American writing, but of American literature as a body of work to properly give voice to black Americans.

Toni Morrison understands this as well, as demonstrated in her monograph *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. In it, Morrison argues that “the contemplation of this black presence [in American history and literature:] is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination”³². Morrison believes that an unnamed “Africanist” presence shaped ideas of masculinity, freedom and Americanness through its very absence. That is to say, even in works where black populations were not explicitly made visible, their *invisibility* aided in constructing notions of democracy and national identity. If Ellison indicates that African American presences in American literature are fraught with myths of racist stereotypes; further, Morrison leads us to believe even in their absence black literary populations reaffirm white dominance. In both cases, whether through presence or absence, the failures of American literature to African Americans become hard to ignore.

Perhaps it is because of this failure that James Baldwin so often valued music, the blues in particular. Baldwin opens his essay, “Many Thousands Gone”; by stating “It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story. It is a story which otherwise has yet to be told and which no American is prepared to hear”³³. This line, bold on its

³² Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. 1st Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1993. Page 5.

³³ Baldwin, James. *Notes of a Native Son*. New York: Dial Press, 1963.

own, is also a curious choice as an opener: for “Many Thousands Gone” is ostensibly a critical review of Richard Wright’s lauded novel *Native Son*. Baldwin’s issue with Wright is that his character Bigger Thomas reinforces rather than deconstructs the belief that “black is a terrible color with which to be born into the world”. Baldwin thus positions himself as a critic of both white and black fiction, and his assertion of music as authentic narratives calls into question the discipline of literature itself.

Baldwin not only understands the limitations, if not failure, of literature, but also cements music as a form of political narrative. Worth noting is that Baldwin’s belief of music as narrative form goes deeper than simple storytelling, for storytelling is dependent on an audience. Because [white] Americans have a “protective sentimentality” that “limits their understanding of the music, black musical expression is both heard yet left alone, less prone to white interventions into black self-representation.

To Baldwin, the void left by things unsaid provides the greatest source of danger. He writes “we find ourselves until today oppressed with a dangerous and reverberating silence”. Baldwin’s characterizes silence not to be the absence of sound but rather the haunting presence of dangerous assumptions. He believes that “Wherever the Negro face appears a tension is created, the tension of a silence filled with things unutterable”. Baldwin’s deafening silence speaks to Morrison’s later point that sometimes the absence of voices speaks just as loud. Much of Baldwin’s writing, then, might be best read as a shout.

However, Baldwin’s critique of literature was not a dismissal, but rather a re-evaluation of the promises of the medium. After all, Baldwin was first and foremost a writer himself. But

his critical view of writing and storytelling is evident; perhaps most so in his short story “Sonny’s Blues”. Though typically regarded best as an essayist, Baldwin’s short story about a man and his drug-addicted brother proves just as potent as any of Baldwin’s fiery monologues.

The story opens with the unnamed narrator recounting “I read about it in the paper, on the subway, on the way to work. I read about it, and I couldn’t believe it, and I read it again”³⁴. Present from the first two sentences is a distrust of the written word; text alone fails to convince the narrator of what he’s reading. What he’s reading, as the reader comes to find out, is a newspaper article about his brother Sonny’s arrest on heroin charges. Thus, the first meaning of the title: blues as Sonny’s fall, his addiction, and his corruption.

The story continues as the narrator searches for Sonny, encountering street youths and family members along the way. As Keith Byerman acutely points out, many of the narrator’s interactions are marked with misreading’s and/or willful ignorance³⁵. As Byerman puts it, the narrator “chooses to interpret the messenger rather than the message”³⁶. Whether it’s reminiscing about his brother when talking to an addict or projecting his own fraternal tensions onto a story about his father and uncle, the narrator consistently misreads these interactions as a method of evading emotional confrontation with Sonny’s criminal reality.

³⁴ Charters, Ann, ed. *The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*. “Sonny’s Blues”. 8th ed. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2011.

³⁵ Byerman, Keith A. “Words and Music: Narrative Ambiguity in ‘Sonny’s Blues’.” *Studies in Short Fiction* 19, no. 4 (Fall 1982): 367.

³⁶ Byerman, Keith A. “Words and Music: Narrative Ambiguity in ‘Sonny’s Blues’.” *Studies in Short Fiction* 19, no. 4 (Fall 1982): 368.

But when the narrator finally encounters Sonny and listens to his band play the blues, he is confronted with Sonny's reality through the inescapable power of music. The following passage marks the point in the story when Sonny and his band mates start to play:

All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it. And even then, on the rare occasions when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations. *But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air.* What is evoked in him, then, is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant, too, for that same reason. And his triumph, when he triumphs, is ours."³⁷ (Italics added)

Baldwin's forceful and evocative description of music through the narrator creates tangible moments of realization. Perhaps this is Baldwin's way of illustrating his famous declaration that "the interior life is a real life, and the intangible dreams of people have a tangible effect on the world".³⁸ The intangible sonic force of music rises from the void in order to affect those in the present moment; central to this relationship is the musician, who acts as interlocutor between the sound and the people, imposing an order to make the intangible tangible. The music evokes in him something terrible and triumphant--perhaps Ellison's tragicomic--and the audience enters into a relationship with the artist. This act of translation undergone by the musician indeed places him in a prophetic office, translating the guttural affect of the blues into a message for the audience. Baldwin's blues theory is dependent on affect and its ability to more effectively galvanize audiences over the at times cold written word.

But, again, just what is the message? What is, or are, the blues? Baldwin anticipates this question with the following passage:

³⁷ "Sonny's Blues", page 146

³⁸ Baldwin, James. *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985*. Macmillan, 1985. Page 176.

Then Creole stepped forward to remind them that what they were playing was the blues. He hit something in all of them, he hit something in me, myself, and the music tightened and deepened, apprehension began to bear the air. Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about. *They were not about anything very new.* He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, *in order to find new ways to make us listen.* For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, *it always must be heard.* There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness". (Emphasis added)

Again, Baldwin's blues become evocative, bringing out something in the narrator and the rest of the crowd. But the key turn of phrase is that the blues are "not about anything very new". Rather, the power comes from finding new ways to *listen*, for the tale of suffering must always be heard. This passage rounds out Baldwin's blues: they are a musical force, translated by the musician for the audience, that evokes and narrates tales of struggle and suffering through a non—textual medium in the present. The blues, then, are painted less as a musical genre and more as an affective discourse. Baldwin's choice of language also deserves inquiry; he consistently refers to the blues in the plural, as seen in Creole's description of what the blues *were* all about. Thus, Baldwin's blues aesthetic leaves room for plurality. In fact, in describing Sonny's performance, Baldwin's language avoids any positive identification of the music's features. Rather, the performance is described in affect: Sonny looking like "someone in torment", Creole's "beautiful and calm and old" voice, the narrator sensing that "freedom lurked around us"³⁹. Baldwin's language delivers an affective theory of blues feeling that connotes freedom, torment, and struggle through music. It is this theory, this blues aesthetic, this immanent new way of making people listen that better allows us to understand Simone and the prophetic blues.

³⁹ "Sonny's Blues" Page 148

Blues Affect and Nina Simone

This understanding of blues as affective discourse better helps us reinterpret Nina Simone not as the High Priestess of Soul but as the Blues Prophet. Conventional literature on Simone quickly classifies her as a jazz artist; this is logical, given her extensive training in classical piano and her performance of jazz standards. However, her positioning, as jazz singer should not preclude the possibility of Simone channeling the blues muse. Certainly, she has explicit twelve bar blues performances in her repertoire (“Backlash Blues” is one of her bigger hits), but even those songs typically viewed as jazz may be double conscious⁴⁰ in their own way, working within the Baldwin blues aesthetic of testifying to politicize spaces deemed safe from contamination. A close reading of a few Simone selections will reveal the ways in which Simone’s employ of a blues aesthetic complimented her political goals, blending together secular musical form with Baldwinian secular prophecy.

Nina Simone, born Eunice Waymon in North Carolina of 1933, studied music from an early age. She committed herself to five hours of piano practice a day and spent a summer honing her skills at Julliard⁴¹. Though versed in classical music, Simone’s fiery spirit ever persisted; when Simone’s parents were moved to the back of the audience during one of her early recitals, Simone stopped the show and ordered they be brought back to their proper seats. She recalls that after the event “[her] skin grew back a little tougher, a little less innocent, and a little more black.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Oxford World’s Classics. Oxford [England] ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

⁴¹ Pierpont, Claudia Roth. “The Many Battles of Nina Simone.” *The New Yorker*, August 4, 2014. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/08/11/raised-voice>.

⁴² Pierpont

After being rejected from the prestigious Curtis Institute, Simone started playing the clubs in New York. To many, she arrived to fill the void left by prominent jazz singer Billie Holliday. However, Simone's trajectory was far more complex. As Claudia Pierpont describes it, "Her repertoire of jazz and folk and show tunes, often played with a classical touch, made her impossible to classify."⁴³ Stylistically, her music often transcended genre and became simply Simone. But there were unifying strands in her music; as the Civil Rights movement became more violent and the push for equality more urgent, so did Simone and her performances. In the midst of the restless 60's, Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry and James Baldwin all attached themselves to Simone, urging her to embrace the political within her music. Finally, in what may be called a watershed moment for Simone's emergence as prophetic, she penned the song "Mississippi Goddam" in response to the murder of Medgar Evers and the bombing of the Birmingham church. According to Pierpont's profile, "It took her an hour to write 'Mississippi Goddam.' A freewheeling *cri de Coeur* based on the place names of oppression, the song has a jaunty tune that makes an ironic contrast with words—'Alabama's got me so upset, Tennessee made me lose my rest'—that arose from injustices so familiar they hardly needed to be stated".

But given its quite direct title, Nina Simone's (in) famous song, "Mississippi Goddam", is a deceptively complex affair. Indisputable, however, is how Simone's piece, and performance thereof, encapsulates prevailing tensions of the civil rights movement; namely, those between assimilation and separatism, rage and love, black and white. Structurally and lyrically, Simone's performance is a demonstration in and of itself; how to infiltrate white consciousness while disguising explicit racial aggression. By employing a Baldwin-esque confrontation with

⁴³ Pierpont

blackness and manipulating expectations of performance, Simone's blues seek to complicate the black/white dichotomy by collapsing the distance between politics and art.

Discussion of "Mississippi" necessitates choosing a version; often, Simone would switch the lyrics depending on the make up of the audience. For this close reading, a 1964 performance at Carnegie hall will be consulted due to the date's proximity to the Freedom Summer of Mississippi, where the song was taken up as a protest anthem.

Simone's song begins relatively upbeat, her voice complimented by instrumentals from her modest yet crucial band members. The tempo is quick, the tone light; as Simone announces the song, it feels like the start of a Broadway show number. The drums that punctuate her first spoken line craft a theatrical atmosphere, as she addresses a laughing and jovial audience.

Simone's voice, in the beginning, remains light with an upward melodic contour. The direction of her voice climbs and connotes optimism, and the discord between her show tune voice and damning lyrics produces a haunting affect. In fact, it's in the first somewhat innocuous segment that the seeds of irony plant their roots, later to be harvested in the more explicit turns of the song. Simone is playing, musically, a song that would please a largely white audience expecting to listen to a black jazz musician. But the contrast with the lyrics destabilizes expectations; it's not hard to imagine the audience beginning to hold their breath at this point in the number.

Around the 1:20s mark, the song begins to change. The register lowers, Simone's voice following, as she redefines the song as "a show tune" for which "the show hasn't been written yet". Again, Simone's affinity for dualism appears. This song is simultaneously of and removed from time; it's prophetic, but existing in the now. This transition, particularly just before she

launches into bold social critique, sets the audience up for a potent collapsing of time, clashing history with the present moment.

The following verse details either Simone or the narrator's (it's unclear if they're one in the same) encounters with racism in America, and draws from strong and recognizable Civil Rights movement imagery ("school children sittin' in jail"). With these lines, Simone's voice sounds to be descending in contrast to her previous ascent, which compliments the newer, darker dimension of the performance. In fact, the song seems to occupy two planes; a higher plane of perhaps "high" entertainment (jazz, blues) and a "lower" plane of guttural emotion. Each time she returns to the chorus, the song soars upward to the higher plane, but quickly dives back down to the lower.

Simone starts the third verse of this section by saying, "Don't tell me, I'll tell you", which seems to sum up her motivations behind this performance in one line. Using this space of entertainment, Simone is reversing the audience/performer relationship (one that is also coded, at this historical moment, as white/black) to address her audience of oppressors. Though music is listened to, it's also a means of communication. Simone is using this opportunity, clearly, to deliver a message, uninterrupted.

What happens next is perhaps the most interesting and engaging part of the piece. Simone sings, "I've been there, so I know/They keep on sayin', 'Go Slow'". Simone is referencing the prevailing white attitude believing the Civil Rights movement and black politics writ large are attempting too much change too fast. Patience was often a rhetorical tool used to quell black anger, and Simone is having none of it. Following this, she begins a call and response structure with her band mates, detailing how the words "too slow" have been used against African

Americans; in cleaning windows, picking cotton, and generally being subservient to white patrons/masters/dominators. Again, we see Simone's particular sense of irony. She takes one meaning of the "go slow" argument and turns it back on itself, forcing a confrontation with the hypocrisy of white Americans.

After another chorus, Simone's next verse sharpens, becoming more direct and aggressive. She addresses the audience without pretense, saying, "You lied to me, all these years", and informs them "you're all gonna die, and die like flies". Her vocals become increasingly gruff, and her range loosens up as she begins to border on shouting. Then, she launches into the second iteration of her "go slow" signifying, though this time discussing how Civil Rights progress is indeed going to slow. This commentary is layered, at once ironically playing on the base premise that African Americans need to go slower, as well as reversing the previous call and response section. It's notable, again, in a song pervasive with dualism, that there are two call and response sections; the first detailing black subjugation and labor, the second expressing anger at the pace of change.

And perhaps here lies Simone's most damning critique; that the march of progress toward equality is still littered with injustice and subjugation. The black church and black political movements, for example, were highly patriarchal institutions. Simone also struggled with her blackness, and how she often appeared more traditionally African than other African Americans, which could at times be marginalizing⁴⁴. She structurally draws a parallel between these two political struggles, undoubtedly to highlight their differences, but also to tease out their similarities. The proposed solutions in Simone's song, desegregation and mass participation, still

⁴⁴ Pierpont

avoid addressing systemic issues of white domination. They don't work against subjugation, but rather seem to remove themselves from it. Though subtle, it seems Simone is simultaneously critiquing black politics as well as white supremacy.

Simone ends her verse by asking the audience, "Why don't you see it? Why don't you feel it? I don't know, I don't know!" which contrasts the beginning of the song in which she asks, "can you feel it?" etc. She's answering her own question here; she knows the white audience can't see it, or won't. Simone's tragicomic sense of humor is again on display; she knows in fact that not everyone *knows* about Mississippi, Alabama, etc. The very supposition that white Americans know about racist violence in the same way black Americans do is a joke. Sure, they may have heard of these instances, but Simone is forcing an acknowledgment. She's infiltrating whiteness with blackness, ignorance with truth, and entertainment with politics. Simone creates here what Gaye Theresa Johnson might call a geographic site of democracy⁴⁵; she reconfigures a space loaded with expectations and power dynamics to suit her political agenda. She returns the gaze of the white audience with damnation in her eyes. It's impossible not to believe her at the end, when she yells, "That's it!" One really does get the sense she's said it all.

Simone's performance of "Mississippi Goddam" is soaked in immanence; her confrontation with the audience is not concerned with past injustices, like perhaps "Pirate Jenny", but rather the current political struggles faced by African Americans in the moment of the civil rights movement. Simone exhibits what I refer to as a politics of immanence; the now is

⁴⁵ Johnson, Gaye Theresa. *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013.

precisely what matters most to her. The very premise of “Mississippi Goddam” is in some ways to translate current injustices across the veil, urging white audiences to recognize the plight of her people. Though not quite an appeal, which connotes a certain level of subservience, Simone’s shouting is seeking sympathetic ears.

Her politics of immanence is precisely what links her to Baldwinian prophecy. Shulman correctly reads Baldwin’s work as “model[ing] a black subject that affirms its impurity and provokes whites to accept what they disavow by shifting prophecy from transcendence to immanence.”⁴⁶ Simone seeks not the goals of prior instantiations of prophecy like deliverance or rising above injustice. Rather, she aims to educate and anger white audiences through performance as a means of reconstituting national consciousness. Though referring to Baldwin, the following quote by Shulman easily maps onto Simone’s performances: “By bearing witness to what is disremembered and who is uncounted by a liberal nationalist regime, he reveals its racial construction, disrupts its innocence, and seeks its reconstitution.”⁴⁷ Given that Simone’s performances were described as being “brought into abrasive contact with the black heart and to feel the power and beauty which for centuries have beat there”⁴⁸, the parallels between Baldwin and Simone’s focus on confrontation with the reality of blackness are evident.

Simone’s honesty demonstrated in “Mississippi Goddam” is not anomaly; her transparency and boldness come through in her other works as well, creating a career clearly concerned with addressing the immanent threats of the every day. A close reading of Simone’s

⁴⁶ Shulman, page 154

⁴⁷ Shulman, page 141

⁴⁸ Pierpont

cover of “Strange Fruit” aids our understanding of Simone’s unique ability to employ affect in narrative.

Nina Simone’s rendition of the poem and song “Strange Fruit” perhaps best matches the dual themes of haunting terror and irrepressible beauty found in African American history. Indeed, the collapse of the beautiful and tragic (as discussed by Cone, Ellison and Baldwin in their own ways) sonically permeates her performance. Both the slow, creeping pace of the song and the ample use of silence create a foreboding atmosphere at once mournful and eulogistic.

The opening of the song with a single piano note sets a simple. The rest of the song is punctuated largely by single chords, played in a descending order. The downward progression of the notes combined with the linear narrative structure of the lyrics creates a sinking feeling, delving deeper and deeper as the song’s increasingly grotesque details pile up.

Simone’s voice, though, seems at odds with the piano’s pattern on occasion. She often seems to follow the piano’s pattern, but at times dramatically soars upward. This discordance with the instrumentation places special emphasis on key lyrics, like “trees”, “breeze”, which are then followed by slightly longer silences. The apparent friction between the piano and Simone’s voice is no mistake; rather, classically trained Simone is manipulating the instrument in order to affectively draw attention to certain disconcerting moments. Pairing these discordant moments with long silences creates a somber, almost reflective atmosphere after each verse, for the listener to dwell in their feeling.

Simone’s notes also grow longer toward the end of the song, where her vocals become less restrained and more emotionally raw. This is especially apparent at the 2:24 mark, where she sings the word “leaves” in an extended wail, ranging again from a high to a low note, reinforcing

the “dropping” of the song, both in form and its content. Simone heightens the drama, then guides the viewer back down. Her voice raises you to the heights of possibility, but reminds you of the eventual fall back down.

The piano flares up a bit around two thirds into the song, but the end is comprised almost entirely of Simone’s voice. This abandonment of instrumentation leaves the song to linger on a solitary note that builds upon the mournful environment, leaving the listener then alone in the silence absent of voices.

Simone’s choice to perform “Strange Fruit” is both entirely logical and boldly transgressive. The song, made popular by Billie Holiday, was familiar to her artist. As mentioned earlier, when Simone first debuted, she was seen by some to continue the legacy Holliday left behind. But comparing the versions, it’s clear Simone was not content in paying homage to Holliday, or even “updating” the song for a new audience. Rather, Simone’s version sounds at times like a completely different song. Holiday’s recordings, for example, often features horns alongside the piano, filling out the silence with a more traditional jazz sound. The piano arrangements as well are more complex, relying less on the echoing of individual chords and more on sophisticated melodies. The cadence of Holiday’s voice as well sounds a tad quicker, or at least the silences between her lines are less pronounced than Simone’s. Simone took Holiday’s classic and stripped it down, made it more raw, both musically and emotionally. Simone’s version holds no pretenses of polish or formality; rather, it is dependent on a negative affect insofar as the silence and minimalism present in the song interpolates and invites the audience into Simone’s mourning, again forcing a confrontation between artist and audience, black and white.

My argument thus far has been an attempt to get at the larger question of what work the blues do. Though Simone is only one iteration of the larger blues genre, her work, when used as a case study, seems to suggest a degree of functionality to the blues that adds a more complex dimension. I'm reminded of the earlier African American spirituals and slave songs being described as "work songs", referencing also their African heritage. These songs were about process; labor, marking time and more. They weren't simply art extracted from life; they were functional components of politics, identity, religion and labor. Perhaps the blues is the work of these songs continued, albeit in a different context. Simone, as has been documented, was close with many prominent civil rights activists. But grassroots organizing and nonviolent protests could only get so far. That's not to say they were ineffective, but rather that Simone seemed to take and manipulate a space of high art thought to be removed from politics and bring it into the movement. Perhaps this is the work the blues is doing: naming explicitly those struggles that are so often (and deliberately) overlooked in broader American culture. A laborious undertaking, indeed.

Chapter Three

Post-Racial Prophecy: Kanye West and the Signs of Liberation

The contemporary political moment in America reflects an odd paradox in which the supposed racial progress symbolized by Barack Obama's two-term Presidency is contrasted against the high profile and frequent killings of African-American men and women, boys and girls, murdered by cops and/or vigilantes. Obama's apparent ascendancy offers itself as a solution to racial inequality; that a black man sits in the White House represents an achievement of American politics heretofore unmatched, albeit in terms of formal political office. Obama's first 2008 election ushered in, for some, the Post-Racial Age in which American racism had been defeated by political mobilization. However, others believed that the individual accomplishment of Obama, or his campaign rather, signified an increased acceptance of diversity in politics but still viewed Obama's policies and political moderation to be far from liberation. Still others exist outside or between these categories, with prominent figures like Cornel West fluctuating between approval and harsh critique. Regardless, however, of one's opinion on Obama's liberatory potential, the contrasting images of a black President and slain black bodies creates a cognitive dissonance in which understanding of contemporary racism becomes obfuscated, both existing at the root of and outside of political consciousness.

This divide between liberatory potentiality and the pessimism of continued violence creates what might be referred to as political theodicy. In a moment of great political achievement, how do we come to understand the racially motivated killings of American citizens? The death of Mike Brown occurred after President Obama's "My Brother's Keeper" initiative, after all.

These questions are not to imply that the consistent racist violence in America are correlative or derivative of the Obama presidency. Rather, I aim to return to Cornel West's comments that Obama signals the end of black prophetic fire. For while I agree with West that President Obama may not carry the same torch as supposed predecessors Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, the question remains: who does? Or has the potential to?

Again, perhaps what's needed is not looking for familiar manifestations of the black prophetic fire but manifestations that have existed outside formal scholarship and discourse, akin to Nina Simone's piano pulpit. And in this case, in supposedly post-racial America, perhaps no figure serves as a better case study than Kanye West.

West's career stretches back years, but it's telling that one of his earliest public appearances was girded in controversy. Through his September 2005 televised outburst during a Hurricane Katrina telethon, West's profile was catapulted to the top of the American news cycle. West now (in)famous assertion, on live television, that "George Bush doesn't care about black people" created a focal point for racial outrage following the media coverage and institutional failure of Hurricane Katrina.

What is lost in recollection of West's outburst, and telling in its absence, is a lead up to the sound bite detailing the injustices in the handling of the Katrina disaster, presented in full below:

I hate the way they portray us in the media. You see a black family, it says, "They're looting." You see a white family, it says, "They're looking for food." And, you know, it's been five days [waiting for federal help] because most of the people are black. And even for me to complain about it, I would be a hypocrite because I've tried to turn away from the TV because it's too hard to watch. I've even been shopping before even giving a donation, so now I'm calling my business manager right now to see what is the biggest amount I can give, and just to imagine if I was down there, and those are my people down there. So anybody out there that wants to do anything that we can help -- with the way

*America is set up to help the poor, the black people, the less well-off, as slow as possible. I mean, the Red Cross is doing everything they can. We already realize a lot of people that could help are at war right now, fighting another way -- and they've given them permission to go down and shoot us!*⁴⁹

What is remembered as a declaration of Bush's racism is much more nuanced, and in fact does not explicitly address the President at all until the final sound bite. West's larger issues rather center on skewed and racist media coverage, his own failure to help, and a call to send more aid to the area. Only after Mike Myers reads another bit of scripted text does Kanye then interject the oft remembered but misquoted indictment. Of course, Kanye West is not the sole victim of media caricature by sound bite. But what is interesting is the way in which West's rather insightful plea for humanitarian aid (remember, this is happening in the proverbial eye of the storm without benefit of hindsight) became regarded as an anti-patriotic, racially motivated crusade.

Speaking in 2014, Mike Myers retroactively supported West's claim, saying that he was "honored" to be standing next to him at the time⁵⁰. Myers recent comments reveal the shift in attitude toward West's loose cannon comments some nine years later; West was right. Not necessarily in Bush's own prejudices, but that the response to Katrina was slow, economically and racially unjust, and a disaster in its own right⁵¹.

The questions raised by West's outburst go beyond whether or not he was right. What's at stake in narrating his anti-Bush tirade is the question of speech; which modes of speech are valued, legitimized, denigrated, ignored, remembered or forgotten? Many modes of speech are

⁴⁹ Moraes, Lisa de. "Kanye West's Torrent of Criticism, Live on NBC." *The Washington Post*, September 3, 2005, sec. Arts & Living.

⁵⁰ Heath, Chris. "Mike Myers's Comeback - GQ June 2014." *GQ*, May 21, 2014

⁵¹ Thompson, A. C. "Katrina's Hidden Race War." *The Nation*, December 17, 2008.

constitutive of American political rhetoric. Almost all political parties throughout American history have used some form of the Jeremiad narrative structure; David Walker famously issued an “appeal”, and even our Founding document is characterized as a Declaration. Based off of the modes of political and religious rhetoric employed by various actors throughout our formative years, my question then becomes this: *How* does what we say affect the way we’re heard?

In this chapter, I argue that Kanye West, through both his music and aesthetic practices, uses a form of prophecy that signifies upon signs of domination, remixing meaning and revealing entrenched forms of racism to combat the supposition of post-racialism. Through a complicated dialectic on spectacle, violence, wealth and blackness, West speaks to the contemporary moment in which phenomena like lynching and slavery have seemingly transmogrified into police brutality and mass incarceration.

Theorizing Kanye West

Much like Simone and the blues, a brief theoretical inventory is helpful in establishing the relationship between the genre of hip hop and the black prophetic before moving forward into West’s music. Though scores of scholarship on rap and hip-hop exist, I aim to focus on a particular strain that considers hip-hop in relation to other African American discursive practices alongside the prophetic and the literary.

One critical starting point is Henry Louis Gates’ seminal work, “The Signifying Monkey”. Complex and wide in its implications, Gates’ work enters into the discourse on signification, in which the nature and employ of language is analyzed in an effort to understand how language creates meaning. Gates draws largely from African American folktales (like the signifying monkey) and writings by African American authors in order to establish an Afro-

American literary tradition that is referential, autonomous and powerful in its ability to reshape the language of the oppressor to empower the subjugated.

Gates identifies two main modes of signification in his work, the oppositional and the cooperative. Though both strains of signification are primarily concerned with reworking the subject's relationship to the sign and signifier, they approach textuality in two different ways. The cooperative form of signifying often uses repetition of tropes and texts and alters them slightly, often creating a more reverent positionality toward the source material. To a certain extent, this is what we have witnessed in Nina Simone's work; rather than rejecting classical jazz and symbols of elite white society, Simone mimics the economically and racially encoded aesthetic traits while adding a flair of black activism. If Simone provides us with a tentative model for understanding the cooperative form of signification, then its counterpart, the "oppositional," might be more apt to theorize Kanye West and his oeuvre.

Gates positions the oppositional tradition of signification to exist in the gap between the sign and the signified; signs, often of the dominant, are appropriated and re-employed by the subjugated to thus signify a different connotation. Rather than the cooperative strain, which might be loosely summarized as an act of referencing, the oppositional rhetorical strategy often humorously perverts and manipulates various signs in order to craft new meaning. In the newly formed erosion of the chasm between sign and signifier, critical commentary and discourse occurs.

Though Gates' work is primarily concerned with African American literary culture, his belief that signification is a means of reworking meaning carries over to other mediums as well. His literary approach is particularly well-suited to the lyrically dense genre of rap and hip-hop.

Plenty of hip-hop scholarship has remarked on the ability of the musical genre to signify⁵²; from sampling to lyrical referentiality, scholarship on this has already been done, a stellar example being “Signifying Rappers” by Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace. In a collection of essays, Costello and Wallace seek to understand, as a pair of former college roommates living in 80’s and 90’s Boston, how hip-hop’s emergence as a black cultural expression functions as a tool of political resistance for the black community while consumed by white audiences. Part of their argument is hip-hop’s ability to signify, thus disguising encoded messages meant for black audiences while making the music palatable to broader white culture. Indeed, even at the level of composition, through the practice of sampling, Costello and Wallace argue that riffing on previously established tropes enables a sort of political and cultural discourse not found, to the same degree at least, in other more formal mediums. Hip-hop, as an emergent medium in the latter half of the 20th century, became a youthful sonic output for anger and resistance that drew upon earlier forms of black music, like jazz and funk, but carved out paths for a newer generation.

One final piece of theoretical framework to be placed in conversation with Gates’ and Costello/Wallace is James Cone’s black liberation theology. Just as Gates intervenes into Afro-American literature and Costello/Wallace into hip-hop, Cone aims to intervene into theological language surrounding God, arguing that signifying discourse is a critical component of the move toward liberation. Cone believes that destroying white theological language isn’t useful given that Christian faith is essential to much of African American culture. Rather, Cone suggests that theological language, particularly the word God, is flexible and can be retooled linguistically to

⁵² Tillet, Salamishah. “Strange Sampling: Nina Simone and Her Hip-Hop Children.” *American Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2014): 119–37. doi:10.1353/aq.2014.0006

better orient blacks toward freedom and self-actualization. Cone says, “Black theology affirms that there is nothing special about the English word ‘God in itself. What is important is the dimension of reality to which it points’”⁵³. In other words, Cone believes that theological language is only useful *insofar* as its connotative power aligns with theological impulses toward liberation. Thus, signifying on hegemonic Christian language becomes an imperative aspect of the project of black liberation.

Theory surrounding signification thus grounds us in an intellectual crossroads between literature, music and theology. Because of signification's emphasis on the connotative, it seems complementary to emerging schools of theory surrounding affect and performance studies, in which this analysis may find an adoptive home. Therefore, as we move forward, the framework of signifying language and rhetoric helps us better understand the ways in which Kanye West signifies himself as a prophetic voice.

Invisible Man: Disenfranchisement and Being Seen

West's comments during Katrina certainly elevated his profile; he went from an obscure rap artist to a site of national discourse. But West's career, deceptively, stretches back further than the 2004 release of his first album. For years, he had been working as a producer on other rap artists' albums, most notably his future mentor Jay-Z's *The Blueprint*. For a man now typically associated with the spotlight, it's a bit ironic that what first garnered him fame was playing the Invisible Man behind some of hip-hop's boldest sounds.

My invocation of Ralph Ellison's singular and paramount novel, *Invisible Man*, is more than just a clever turn of phrase. Kanye West's debut album, *The College Dropout*, draws strong

⁵³ Cone, James H. *A Black Theology of Liberation*. 20th anniversary ed. Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1990. Page 60

parallels to Ellison's novel. Whether or not this was intentional by West is unclear, yet also moot, for a comparative reading of these two texts helps illuminate West's ability to testify against domination.

The College Dropout opens not with a song, but a skit. Skits will become a trademark of West's throughout his career, though he's certainly not the first to incorporate them into an album. The skit, titled "Intro", opens with a brief monologue by an unnamed "faculty member" of a fictional College. He asks Kanye to put together a song for kids to sing at Graduation, something "beautiful" that will make the kids start "jumpin' up and down and sharin' candy and stuff". Immediately, the album segues to the first song, "We Don't Care", where Kanye agrees to comply with the faculty member's request. "Oh yeah", answers West, "I got the perfect songs for the kids to sing".

As the song moves into the chorus, the listener experiences their first dose of Trickster Kanye. The lyrics are a send-up of drug dealers, gangsters, and criminals engaged in illicit behaviors in order to survive⁵⁴. The verse that follows the chorus continues as an extension of this thought. West praises drug dealers for making a way out of no way, so to speak, in the face of economic disenfranchisement and limited educational opportunity. People in the hood are "forced to sell crack, rap and get a job" in order to survive. The money accumulated from these illegal activities aren't luxurious profit, but rather presented as funds for the advancement and betterment of children. Dope money, West admits, is dirty, but also serves as a scholarship. West clearly holds a sense of reverence for drug dealers ("But as a shorty I looked up to the dope

⁵⁴ *We wasn't supposed to make it past Twenty Five
Jokes on you, we still alive*

man”), a theme returned to throughout his career. Coupled with this reverence, though, is a deeper valuing of the individualism and autonomy that drug dealing allows. West is praising less the ability to accumulate wealth and more those methods through which systemically disenfranchised African-Americans can reclaim a sense of self. Here we begin to see West signifying on stereotypes of African-Americans; he’ll make a song praising selling drugs, but in the process highlight informal monetary, political and cultural economies that serve as a method of breaching borders between white and black, rich and poor.

In the third and final verse, West exposes the socioeconomic conditions that give rise to drugs, gangs and the hood. Cancelling after school programs and neglecting the importance of education is the problem, not the lack of intelligence. Kanye argues that selling drugs to make money does not preclude intelligence but rather requires it. He provides a narrative of the discounted, those individuals who were failed by the educational system. While this song may masquerade as “gangsta rap” superficially, it also operates as an indictment of the educational and economic infrastructures that perpetuate disenfranchisement among African-American communities. This point is driven home with the final iteration of the chorus that features the voices of children singing about trying to “get by”. The inclusion of a children’s choir is a haunting touch that affectively complicates notions of innocence and the individual; these children are almost used as a warning by West, a projection into the future of black youth should these economic and educational circumstances persist.

Once “We Don’t Care” concludes, the skit resumes with “Graduation Day”, which sees Kanye being reprimanded by our Unnamed Faculty Member.irate at Kanye’s inappropriate choice of song for a school sanctioned ceremony, Kanye is denied his Graduation and chooses to

drop out of college. Crucial, however, is what the Unnamed Faculty Member says to West, presented below:

What in the fuck was that Kanye?! I told you to do some shit for the kids! You can give me your muthafuckin' graduation ticket right now! You will not walk across that stage, you won't slide across that stage! A muthafucka can't pull you across that stage Kanye! *Who told you see, I told you to do somethin' uplifting! I'm tryin' to get you out here with these white people and this is how you're gonna do me! You know what, you's a nigga! And I don't mean that in no nice way.* Had little kids sing about the shit, the jokes on you, you throw your mutha hands in the air, and wave good-bye to everybody, cause you getting' the fuck out of this campus, what the fuck you gone do now! (Italics added)

The profanity-laden tirade is certainly comical in its exaggerated delivery but belies a serious rift between the UFM and Kanye. The faculty member calls Kanye a combination of names, but never a liar. Rather, his umbrage is with Kanye's exaltation of the illicit in front of *white people*. The faculty member is concerned with maintain respectability rather than speaking the truth about the educational system. Though this skit is primarily used in the album as a narrative set-up for Kanye "dropping out", it's here that the parallels to Invisible Man become most explicit.

In the sixth chapter of Ellison's novel, the unnamed protagonist confronted by Dr. Bledsoe, the President of the College. The exchange that parallels the opening to West's album occurs after the narrator takes Mr. Norton, a wealthy white trustee, to the outskirts of campus, meeting Jim Trueblood and visiting the Golden Day tavern. Dr. Bledsoe is furious that the narrator would expose a white trustee to what he sees as the unsavory elements of the college's campus, to which the narrator responds that Mr. Norton asked to be shown these areas.

Dr. Bledsoe retorts, "You're black and living in the South—did you forget how to lie?"⁵⁵ Parallel to Kanye's opening skit, the source of conflict revolves around how to represent the

⁵⁵ Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. 2nd edition. New York: Vintage International, 1995. Page 139

black community to white Americans. Namely, in each instance, an older, conservative black man is presented as lying to preserve a sense of dignity rather than expose the truth(s) of living black in America. The exchange continues, as Dr. Bledsoe explains his opinion on lying:

Why, the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie! What kind of education are you getting around here? Who really told you to take him out there?

To be a complicit slave is preferable to being honest and offending the white man, according to Bledsoe. Education equates docility, not a critical engagement with race but rather learning to appease wealthy whites in order to preserve order. Bledsoe is what Ishmael Reed may have had in mind in creating his “Talking Android”; a member of the African American community who espouses white culture and power over blacks⁵⁶. Ellison is critiquing the conservative strains of African-American thought that places individual pursuits of power (read: appeasement) over fighting for communal liberation.

When the narrator again insists that Mr. Norton had asked to be taken to these places, Bledsoe yells, “*Nigger, this isn’t the time to lie. I’m no white man. Tell me the truth!*” Bledsoe’s act of naming stuns the narrator; he sits thinking “He called me *that*. He called me *that*.”⁵⁷ The use of “nigger” continues, as Bledsoe, concluding his diatribe, defends himself. He explains that his job is “telling white folk how to think about the things I know about”⁵⁸ Bledsoe finds authority in what he views to be a somewhat subversive act, governing blacks under white supremacy rather than confronting the supremacy itself. He goes so far as to say he’d rather see

⁵⁶ Reed, Ishmael. *Mumbo Jumbo*. 1st Scribner Paperback Fiction Ed edition. New York, NY: Scribner, 1996.

⁵⁷ *Invisible Man* page 139

⁵⁸ *Invisible Man* page 143

“every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where [he is]”. He acknowledges that he betrayed himself and others to obtain the position he now holds, that he at times feigned, at other times embraced, docility to further his career. Bledsoe puts it best himself when he proclaims, “Yes, I had to act the nigger!”

Ellison’s dialectic between the young narrator and the established Bledsoe posits an aesthetic of black performativity. Indeed, throughout the rest of the novel, the narrator in essence performs blackness in different ways. Bledsoe’s chosen performance was to act the nigger. And while disagreeable, the ability to “act” according to a racist ontological construct hints at the malleability of black identity. Conversely, the very “role” one can be said to embody might be invoked as a means of determinism. Should one call another a nigger, the projected expectations of acting as such may follow suit. That is to say, in both Ellison and West’s works, a character is called a nigger by another black man as punishment, as reprimand for not performing their role assuaging white people. Both “niggers”, as presented, deviate from assumed modes of conduct aimed at bolstering hidden infrastructures aimed at placating potential white saviors. To be educated in both of these worlds is to learn to survive through servility, rather than strive for any resemblance of defiance. Thus, returning to West’s narrative, when he decides to “dropout” of College, he isn’t simply artistically rendering his own autobiography (West did drop out of college) but rather standing in opposition to the expectation that he and his music need to please anyone, especially whites. West commits himself to testifying to the truth of his experience in its totality. So, when West sets out on the rest of the album to critique both white supremacy and American capitalism, he understands he might simply be dismissed as a nigger. But, as he’s now made clear, he doesn’t care.

I wish to return to the concept of the unincorporated that I posited as a motivation for Kanye's work earlier. By saying Kanye speaks to and for the unincorporated I mean to say that his music troubles harsh delineations of the center and the margins. He frequently aims to deconstruct borders that separate the formal from the informal, legal from the illegal, and deviant from the normal in ways that reveal racism's tendency to consider poor black populations negligible. An unincorporated area is one with common social identity but lacking in any distinct form of political governance or organization like a city or town. Perhaps in a similar vein as Gloria Anzaldúa's characterization of the border as a place rather than divisive construct, West is seeking not the act of incorporation but recognition of the instances in which black populations are forced *outside* of their own country. Should Nina Simone be loosely categorized as a Prophet of Immanence, then West might be said to be the Prophet of the Invisible. Thus, when West rap's "Cut our lights out like we don't live here", it's easy to imagine Ellison's Invisible Man in his light leeching room, smiling and bobbing along⁵⁹.

Dark Fantasy, Flashing Lights: Spectacle, Violence and Hypervisuality

In the later, contemporary era of his work, Kanye's emphasis on intricate production and theatricality continue to narrate his supposed fall from the top⁶⁰. The return of instrumentation, noticeably lacking on *808*'s clinical auto tuned minimalism, is not only reminiscent of West's earlier work, but dramatizes the almost operatic fall from grace West experienced in the years following the twin punches of his mother's death and his infamous VMA scandal. Strings, horns and voices are all dialed up to new heights throughout the album, and often distorted and

⁵⁹ *Invisible Man*, "Prologue".

⁶⁰ 2008-2010 West's popularity was waning after the death of his mother and some unsavory public behavior

synthetized in unsettling ways. The sonic aesthetic of West's "masterpiece" album captures the dual themes of romanticism and trauma that the title references; simultaneously attempting to capture feelings of high drama with intimate turmoil.

Perhaps this can be best heard in "All of the Light's" and its preceding interlude. Arriving after the aggressive and politically charged, "Power", the interlude for "All of the Lights" is arresting in its classicism, trading galvanizing chants and sinister percussion for a slow violin and piano accompaniment. The interlude, purely instrumental, belies the tragic content, lyrically, of the song to follow. What's contrasted with this depressive lyrical turn is the track's opening with booming horns, and an opening chorus in which singer Rihanna urges the eponymous lights to be turned up high enough for the audience to "see everything"⁶¹.

Kanye's first verse opens with a line symptomatic of the entire album: "Somethin' wrong, I hold my head/MJ gone, our nigga dead". The depressed Kanye who, pre-interlude, was considering suicide⁶² returns here, lamenting the loss of Michael Jackson, long seen as a champion of and/or for black musicians. The album's prevalent theme of loss is introduced by the one-off reference to Jackson, linking fame and mortality in a way that suggests a correlative relationship. The song's lyrical content continues to detail an abusive and deteriorating relationship troubled by violence and family discordance. References to custody battles and divorce populate the rest of West's lyrics, all the while contrasted with opulent features by a veritable parade of music industry titans (Rihanna, Fergie, Alicia Keys and Elton John all make appearances before the song's conclusion). The song becomes a curious combination of

⁶¹ Turn up the lights in here baby/Extra bright I want y'all to see this/Turn up the lights in here baby/You know what I need, want you to see everything/ Want you to see all of the lights

⁶² "Now this would be a beautiful death/Jumping out the window" *Power*

luxuriating in the celebrity status West has attained over the years while simultaneously airing candid experiences, though potentially fabricated, of struggles with intimacy, love and depression. Again, the “beautiful” and “dark” become a dualism rather than a dichotomy, both being defining characteristics of Kanye’s fifth album.

Though the title is “All of the Lights”, it’s important to note which lights West takes time to name. Supplementing Rihanna’s initial chorus, which held the first reference to lights, West raps “Cop lights, flashlights/spot lights, strobe lights/ street lights, All of the lights”.. The street lights that end the sequence is ostensibly a reference to a track named “Street Lights” off of his previous album, detailing a lonely trip at night in which West ponders his own mortality in light of his mother’s passing. The dialectic between surveillance and celebrity that West undergoes draws parallel between the seemingly dissonant notions of surveillance and celebrity. To West, the cop lights and spotlights both wreak havoc on intimacy, relationships, and humanity.

If “Power” and “All of the Lights” work to underscore West’s views on fame and public perception, perhaps the third track in the mini-sequence, “Monster”, is West’s response to continued public scrutiny. Notorious for its banned music video and career-making verse for guest feature Nicki Minaj, “Monster” is perhaps the most legendary yet controversial song on the already explosive album. And though the song appears to be a counter-depressive expression of braggadocio as a mid-album tonal switch, its continuity within the album’s narrative is apparent in the opening lyrics alone.

The song opens with a haunting synthesized vocal by West, his voice distorted to the edge of belief. He growls, “I shoot the lights out/Hide till it’s bright out/Whoa, just another

lonely night/Are you willing to sacrifice your life?” After a disconcerting scream, the chorus pronounces:

Gossip, gossip, nigga just stop it
 Everybody knows I’m a motherfucking monster
 I’mma need to see your fucking hands at the concert (x2)
 Profit, profit, nigga I got it
 Everybody knows I’m a motherfucking monster
 I’mma need to see your fucking hands at the concert
 I’mma need to see your fucking hands

Keeping in mind the album’s context, in which West’s portrayal in the public is that of a depressed, egotistical fame-monster undergoing public shaming for his interruption of nubile country singer Taylor Swift, the chorus is certainly West’s “owning up” to his reputation. He admits to being a monster in the consciousness of the masses; however, his monstrous reputation still begets him an audience. Suggested in the parallelism between “gossip” and “profit”, West correctly understands the fabled American idiom that “there’s no such thing as bad press”.

But this song in particular goes further than a simple mea culpa on West’s behalf. While a close reading of the song’s lyrics certainly provides insight into the nuance of his project, the whole pictures necessitates discussion of the music video, which was almost immediately banned by YouTube upon its release. West has long drawn comparisons between him and Michael Jackson, and its far from a leap to assume the “Monster” video was intended to be his “Thriller”; high profile, big budget, supernatural.

The video, released in July of 2011, opens with a shot of white female model hanging from the ceiling, a chain wrapped around her neck. Weaving together a series of scenes depicting Rick Ross, Kanye and Jay-Z all engaged in various stylized acts of violence in which women are the victims, the video comes across part-horror film, part-MTV. As the men rap about monsters,

murderers and hyper masculine posturing that is so often associated with violence, models in various states of death and decay are decoratively displayed in body bags, stuffed in couches, and covered in bloody make-up.

The video is completely, undeniably, and grotesquely misogynistic. This aspect of the work is indisputable. Rather than try and reclaim this video to be anything other than violently anti-women, I seek rather to expose how this representation of the monstrous masculine works in conjunction with Kanye's larger oeuvre.

To do so, we'll jump ahead in a non-linear move, to first consider Nicki Minaj, and her presence in the video. Minaj has been hailed as the best aspect of the song, to the point where West himself was hesitant to include the final cut on the album for fear she would overshadow the whole project⁶³. Both aurally and visually, Minaj's performance is a schizophrenic, aggressive, and incisive performance. Her relentless flow, much quicker than her male counterparts, is theatrical, as Minaj weaves back and forth between two vocal characters; the first being a brash, unrelenting snarl that is deep and rumbling in its delivery. Its counterpart is a hyper feminine "Barbie" persona, bubbly, high-pitched and playful. Visually, these two voices are represented side by side in the video, as the former persona, clad in all black lingerie, ties up and tortures the latter persona, which features Minaj in a neon pink wig and white dress. The two voices converse with each other throughout the verse, with the darker Minaj covering lines about wealth, conquest and beating men at their own game, and the pink-haired Minaj serving as a mockery of her critics' childish complaints.

⁶³ *Sway in the Morning* 11.26.13, 2013.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SdwUEt8IHF0&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

Minaj's schizophrenic femininity disrupts the conversation surrounding gender in this video. Certainly, Minaj's sexuality is a key component of her performance; but the two characters at play suggest a sort of polyphonic discourse on sex, perhaps approximating the discursive concept of the virgin/whore archetype(s), as theorized by authors such as Gloria Anzaldua⁶⁴. This archetype of either virginal or deviant female sexuality precludes women's agency in their own gender and sexual identity, and men often employ the virgin/whore false dichotomy as a tool of domination. Minaj's invocation, then, of this archetype could be read as the feminine counterpart to the hyper masculine violence preceding her contribution. Indeed, Minaj is quite aware of gender, remarking to her male counterparts that, "You could be the King but watch the Queen conquer". She follows up by proclaiming her intention to "eat your brain", a layered double entendre that not only references the songs thematic of monstrosity and cannibalism but also signifies on the popular rap sign, "brain", which is commonly used as a stand in by male rappers for oral sex. Thus, the line both holds meaning with respect to both the male sex fantasy and a threat to the male domination.

Minaj's lyrics become more self-aware as the verse continues, culminating in the verses climax in which she practically yells:

Pink wig thick ass give 'em whiplash
 I think big get cash make 'em blink fast
 Now look at what you just saw
 This is what you live for
 (Scream)
 I'm a motherfucking monster

⁶⁴ Anzaldúa, Gloria, Norma Cantú, and Aída Hurtado. *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Fourth Edition edition. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012.

Minaj's lyrical maneuvering between sexuality, success and the grotesque crafts a narrative in which she simultaneously plays into the male fantasy (with the Barbie wig and exaggerated anatomy) while also using the opportunity to showcase her lyrical ability. When she declares herself a monster, saying "this is what you live for", (the same "you" that's been coded as male throughout), Minaj acknowledges that she's been playing along the whole time; her schizophrenic monstrosity employed to delight the listener critiques the false dichotomy of the virgin/whore that Minaj resists. The "Monster" present, here, is not of her own creation, but rather a projection of the listener's anxieties regarding autonomy and female sexuality.

If Minaj's performance can be read, then, as both embodying the male fantasy and the male horror, then perhaps, reflexively, Kanye's performance and the video at large can be reinterpreted to be hyperbolically displaying the misogynistic in order to push back against popular tropes leveled at African American men. That is to say, through this lens of subversion, West is playing the "monstrous" Frankenstein of the black man that so haunts canonical entertainment such as *Birth of a Nation*. Throughout the video, West murders and assaults white women, boasts about wealth and indulgence, and recounts acts of savagery. If, as Rosemarie Garland Thomson theorizes in *Extraordinary Bodies*, freak shows and the grotesque historically serve as sites for normative audiences to project and re-inscribe hegemonic anxieties surrounding race, class, gender and sexuality, then West's video can be read as the dark and twisted fantasy of the white audience. It is the violent, misogynistic black man *to the extreme*, to the point where the trope collapses in on itself through West's self-aware performance. In this way, "Monster" becomes not an exercise in the hyper misogynistic, but rather a critique of white sexual and

gender anxiety that motivates phenomenon like lynching, castration etc. It is in this way that we are able to see how West, in his music and visuals, manipulates stereotypes, tropes and signs projected onto black bodies in order to confront the encoding of racism onto the skin.

The track closes with a somewhat disguised admission of guilt. As the final shots of the video air, including a black woman with make-up made to resemble a primate, West's again distorted voice can be heard in the background saying, "I crossed the line/I'll let God decide". West understands the images egregiously racist connotation, and perhaps this final shot is our way of knowing that the trickster is in on the joke.

"I Just Talked to Jesus, He said 'Whaddup Yeezus'"

Three years after *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, and after two collaborative projects (2011's *Watch the Throne* with mentor Jay-Z and 2012's *Cruel Summer* highlighting West's protégés), West released his follow-up solo project: *Yeezus*. A bold statement of a title, *Yeezus* certainly references West's now famous egoism, but characterizing the album and its resultant aesthetic era as merely the epitome of self-indulgence portrays the deep critiques and racial politics present in the album. Certainly, songs like "New Slaves" and "Black Skinhead" hold no pretense regarding their aggressive rhetoric, matched by a new turn in West's production that replaces that theatrical orchestration of MBDTF with discordant electronic tirades ruptured by choirs and abstracted samples. But to understand *Yeezus* as a cultural artifact, one must also consider the performance of the album; namely, West's publicity leading up to its release and the aesthetics of the *Yeezus* Tour, which saw West on the road for the first time in years. In a holistic approach to the album, *Yeezus* becomes not only one of West's more interesting sonic

experiments, but also a prophetic model of radical self-possession in the face of white supremacy.

Indeed, *Yeezus* might be crudely summarized as West facing white supremacy. That's not to say his previous work isn't explicitly anti-racist, but that the emphasis on the corporeal, particularly the literal face, is employed throughout the execution of *Yeezus* and is crucial in understanding how West mobilizes performance, signification and music to highlight what he might call the true "abominations of Obama's nation"⁶⁵. The portmanteau of Kanye's abbreviated pseudonym, Yeezy, and Jesus Christ encourages a consideration of the parallels between embodiment and incarnation. It also reflects the critical backbone of not just West's music but hip-hop in general: signification. In crafting a hybrid name, West playfully riffs on his own self-importance in comparison with the divine; he is so important, so large, and so influential that he has transcended the human. In many ways, *Yeezus* operates on one of the core assumptions in black liberation theology, as defined by James Cone and contemporaries. If West is God made flesh, then God, or at least her/his corporeal manifestation, is black. How, then, does West's self-ordained claim to the Divine intervene in current discourse surrounding white supremacy? Let us turn to the music.

The first public unveiling of *Yeezus*' material was Kanye's debuting of the lead single, "New Slaves". The song opens with the following lines:

My Mama was raised in the era when
Clean water was only served to the fairer skin
Doing clothes you would of thought I had help
But they wasn't satisfied unless I picked the cotton myself

⁶⁵ West famously calls out his critics in "Power" (2010) in the lines "They say I was the abomination of Obama's Nation/Well that's a pretty bad way to start a conversation".

The first two lines are a clear reference to United States segregation, in which public utilities like drinking fountains were often legally separated along the color line. West's second pair of lines makes reference to the present, claiming that even in the world of fashion (in which he has made a name for himself as a designer), he's fighting against racism. Indeed, the last two lines, in their invocation of cotton-picking, make explicit the notion of "new slavery" that the title asserts. Further, the parallel between his mother's segregated reality and his own collapses the distance created by history that often erases the contiguous threads tying instances of oppression together. If his previous album was West bemoaning the death of the self as a result of public spectacle, than *Yeezus* is, fittingly, a rise to action. Shifting from the personal and internal to the structural and societal, "New Slaves" continues to expound instances of what Michelle Alexander calls "The New Jim Crow"⁶⁶; the rest of the song includes lines referencing mass incarceration, labor exploitation, and corporate corruption alongside references to lynching and slavery⁶⁷.

The song then descends into a revenge fantasy in which Kanye graphically details sex with the spouse of an anonymous corporate man. Similar to "Monster", the lyrics are aggressively misogynistic and vulgar, but placed in a dialectic between archetypes that plague African Americans (slaves and prisoners etc.), it could be argued that again West is engaging with the threat of hyper-masculine black sexuality which is consistently narrated as the black

⁶⁶ Alexander, Michelle, and Cornel West. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2012.

⁶⁷ "Meanwhile the DEA/teamed up with the CCA/they tryna lock niggas up/they tryna make new slaves/See that's that privately owned prison/Get your piece today/They probably all in the Hamptons/Braggin' bout what they made"

rapist⁶⁸. In this way, there's a degree of sovereignty in West being able to self-narrate those projected fears he knows accompany his skin color, but that autonomy is certainly limited.

When West released "New Slaves", however, he didn't simply upload the song for fans to purchase. Rather, he debuted the song by projecting his face onto 66 different buildings across 6 countries at the same time. The projection showed only West's face in an uninterrupted performance of "New Slaves", and was projected onto the surfaces of buildings, sans screen. The result was Kanye's now signature paradox of intimacy and grandeur, pride and terror. The choice of buildings as sites of sermon is fitting; by making his face part of the building, West reminds the audience of the role of slave and exploited labor in literal and figurative construction. West's digital face is making visible the hidden labor behind various erected structures, including a Prada store. Thus, "New Slaves", as a kickoff to *Yeezus*, employed a pseudo-messianic rhetorical strategy accompanying damning critiques of racism and economic disenfranchisement.

⁶⁸ A constant narrative trope in Jim Crow south, black men were always feared as rapists who sought out white women (birth of a nation, for example).



Figure 1 Kanye West debuting "New Slaves" on the side of an apartment building

The emphasis on provocative visuals continued with West's second single, "Black Skinhead". The song, a stomping battle-cry anthem complete with West himself shrieking, relies heavily on cacophonous percussion and deep synthetic chords. Again, the dark and electric sonic affect displayed in "New Slaves" promulgates the arrival of dogmatic Kanye, churning rage and proclamation into condemnation.

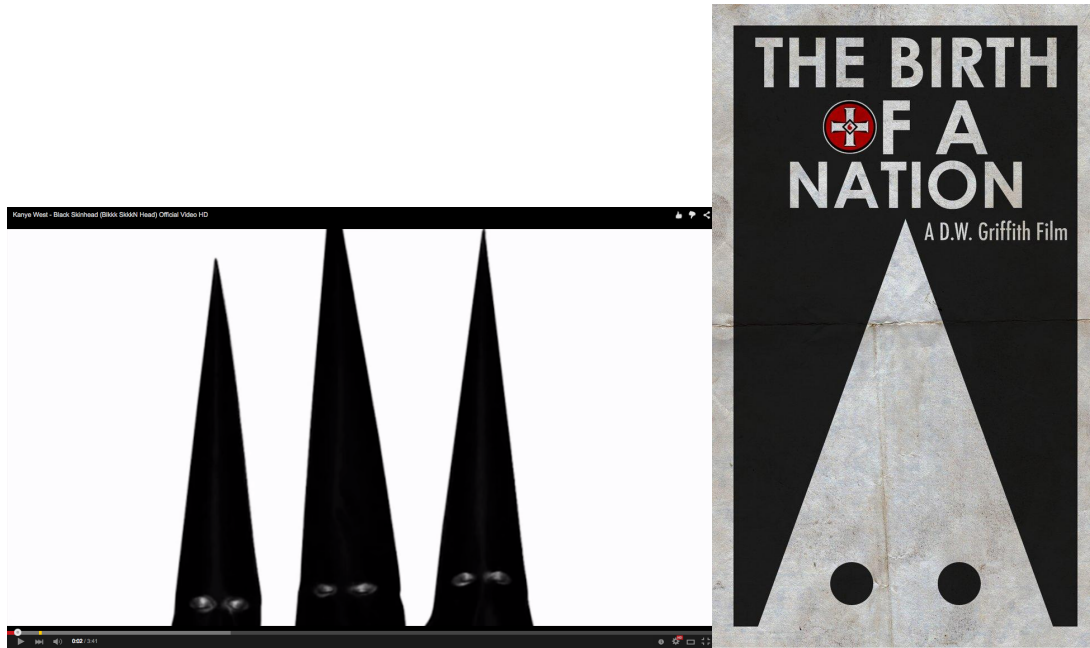
Lyrically, this song is presumably the backbone of *Yeezus*'s supposed argument; it's West's black militant anthem, his take-no-prisoners anthem of black power. The lyrics are

replete with references to Malcolm X⁶⁹, anxieties surrounding miscegenation, and racist cartoons. Perhaps the most interesting reference is Kanye's reflexive call out to King Kong and the display of black bodies for entertainment⁷⁰. Kanye waxes autobiographical by shouting "Middle America packed in/Came to see me in my black skin", signifying on the racialized subtext to King Kong's spectacle. Kanye understands himself to be mass consumed in white culture, but that does not preclude him from making militant claims to black power.

Kanye's intertextual literacy is not only concerned with symbols representing black power. The most controversial aspect of *Yeezus*'s aesthetics is Kanye's appropriation of white power symbols. There are multiple instances of this, but the first arises in the opening of the "Black Skinhead" music video. The video opens on three anonymous black individuals clad in triangular black hoods reminiscent of the infamous pointed hoods worn by members of the Ku Klux Klan.

⁶⁹ West is a long time fan of Malcolm, and when he raps "my by-any-means on" he's referencing Malcolm's espousal of using "by any means necessary".

⁷⁰ "They see a black man with a white woman at the top floor they gon' come to kill King Kong" Kanye West, "Black Skinhead"



If Kanye’s Yeezus persona becomes one instantiation of black power in the form of radical self-possession, then an alternative characterization of militant black supremacy manifests itself in the appropriation of white supremacist symbols and archetypes, like the “black skinhead” or “black Klansman”. West draws upon these symbols not to glorify but rather engage in a project of signification that seeks to destabilized canonical understandings of power, violence and oppression.

Kanye’s aesthetic signification reached its zenith when he revealed that his *Yeezus Tour* merchandise prominently featured the Confederate Flag. West was seen frequently wearing garments emblazoned with the flag in public, and sold various types of apparel at his shows.

Public opinion ranged from utter disgust to hails of artistic genius, but perhaps West explained himself best during a radio interview in Los Angeles:

The Confederate flag represented slavery in a way. That's my abstract take on what I know about it, right? So I wrote the song, 'New Slaves.' So I took the Confederate flag and made it my flag. It's my flag now. Now what you gonna do?

West's appropriation of the Confederate Flag seeks to neuter the flag's radiating hatred. By wearing a flag flown by the oppressors, West subverts the directionality of power through a reflection at the level of the symbolic. If symbols of white power can be worn, consumed and used by those it's meant to subjugate, then wherein lies the power? Certainly, critics of West angry at the drudging up of a symbol with a long violent history are justified. But West's signification here echoes the transformation within hip-hop of the word "nigger". By reworking nigg(er) to the now ubiquitous nigg(a), the argument can be made that the meaning of the former is diminished by the banality of the latter. Indeed, subverting a symbol of hatred to be an innocuous decoration can in its own way prove to be a source of resistance. I don't aim to suggest that the solution to racism is appropriating white supremacy, but rather than West's aestheticism provides new opportunities for learning how to navigate racist and oppressive symbols and their signified meanings. For, as the merchandise bearing the flag decries, "I ain't comin' down". These racist symbols, so ingrained in our national mythology, may not be capable of destruction except from within.



Figure 2 West sporting a bomber jacket with the confederate flag

Can I live? Light and Death in Kanye's Work

It is here that we find West at a crossroads with black liberation theologian James Cone. For Cone, God *must always* be on the side of the oppressed, and any Christianity that denies said reality is not Christianity at all. Cone argues that a reconceiving of a black god is essential in the struggle for liberation, and that this reconception necessitates “destroying white signs” (like the word God) in order to attack the hegemony. TO lay claim to the divine requires a new vocabulary.

The final piece of Kanye's *Yeezus* aesthetic I aim to cover is his self-presentation. Throughout the entirety of his tour, West wore a series of custom made Maison Martin Margiela Masks, each intricately decorated with diamonds, jewels, gold and various other materials. The mask covers West's face completely, from just below the chin to the crown. No eyes, mouth or

other facial features can be seen. And, when the stage lights reach the mask, the light is refracted and reflected outward in an effect many saw reminiscent of a disco ball.



Though ostensibly making his face the most prominent feature of his body, by adorning it in crystals and diamonds, West also obfuscates his face by luxuriating in anonymity. The dialectic established by this mask thus renders West invisible through hyper exposure rather than a lack of sight. West again resembles an Invisible Man, akin to his earlier days, but reveals how the spectacle made out of black bodies can also render invisible a sense of humanity. In this way, West seeks to represent how both ends of the visibility spectrum result in the death of black life, either through ignorance or violent spectacle. Kanye's use of the incarnation, then, argues for a radical self-possession that reclaims a sense of humanity over the black body that has been so often subjected to the whims of the oppressor.

Perhaps what we can glean from West is this: should hip hop be viewed as a discursive practice in which meaning is reworked, reinterpreted and remixed, then West's conversation at the level of the symbolic, between black power and white supremacy, argues for a radical self-possession that reclaims the black body. Indeed, his Christological focus on the Incarnation pushes against the dispossession often experienced by African Americans, and places emphasis on the whole body in an age in which black men in particular are dissected, both physically and figuratively. I believe West to be operating under the doctrine of James Cone's black liberation theology in which entrenched symbols of domination are atomized from the inside out in order to reveal the deep-seated roots of white supremacy in our supposedly post-racial society. West's manipulation of his body and representation, ranging from abstracted, intangible images on the sides of buildings to masks that obscure his identity, West's form of prophesy is one in which he allows his body to be the site of expectation and stereotype in order to reveal how the black body functions in the white imaginary. His manipulation of the visual, ranging from invisibility to hyper-exposure, challenges the ability of the white gaze to properly and accurately understand black life. In an age where images of black death are more present than ever, West's work is thus a violent, blinding spectacle of black life.

Chapter Four

Are You Listening?

When 2013's *Yeezus* was released, perhaps more controversial than Kanye's assertion to the title of the divine was his sampling of Nina Simone's rendition of "Strange Fruit" on the album's seventh track, "Blood on the Leaves". Already a politically charged album, the inclusion of one of the most famous anti-racist song of the 20th century, recounting the lynching of black people under segregation, was viewed as either a culmination of the album's aggressive black militancy or a blatant attention grab that disrespected the legacy of the song and poem. Though West's sampling of "Fruit" can, and is, read in a myriad of ways, its use in conversation with the rest of the song, in which West bemoans how wealth and celebrate destroy his relationships, again returns to his theme of the violent spectacle. In fact, when West performed this song live for the first time, projected in the background was an image reminiscent of the lynching trees in the American South.



Figure 3 Kanye West performing "Blood on the Leaves" at the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards

Certainly, Kanye is making explicit, through a weaving of visual and narrative tropes, that the spectacle his life has become is akin to the spectacle of lynching. In the rest of the songs, West argues that money, drugs and fame are just as destructive, in a white supremacist culture that consistently denies West of humanity, than abject poverty. Again, Kanye believes that narrating the black body from property (slavery) to spectacle (celebrity) does nothing to address racism, but rather maintains a system in which African Americans are unable to lay claim to their own bodies. When West repeats the lyrics "Came out of your body", in reference to his unnamed girlfriend taking drugs for the first time, it feels as if West is pining for transcendence, to be valued for something beyond his physical form. Perhaps this is why West chose to signify upon the Trinitarian Incarnation, pronouncing himself both as a god ("I am a God") and as Christ. West aims to disentangle the notion that working against white supremacy means either sacrificing or limiting oneself to purely the profane body. West's vision is one in which his body,

the black body, is elevated to the level of the sacred. In this way, his narrative of class ascendancy echoes a resurrection of sorts in which black life is no longer subjugated to the dregs of the American social order. Indeed, though I set out to avoid a (bio/hagio)graphy, my proposed argument of West's resurrection does find life imitating art, or vice versa. West was severely injured in a car crash in 2003, and even recorded some of his music ("Through the Wire") with a wire-shut jaw in recovery.

Though attempting to echo Henry Louis Gates' argument, that what's at stake regarding signification and the black vernacular is meaning itself, would be a bold yet futile folly, I do believe what's at stake in extending the black prophetic tradition explicitly to musical expression is how we understand empathy. In a liberal democracy born out of, and often sustained by, white supremacy, the ways in which pluralism and coexistence are maintained, bolstered or threatened must be under constant scrutiny. As current racist/racial traumas such as the killing of Trayvon Martin and Ferguson tap into our nostalgia for the Civil Rights era in which we claim historical progress to mean the ends of racism, it's important to note which modes of expression are remembered and valued, and which are forgotten.

Returning to *Selma* as a case study for understanding anti-racist expression in the contemporary moment reveals that often our nostalgia for moments of historical progress is also predicated on notions of authenticity, rationality and historical accuracy. One of the larger sources of controversy surrounding the film and its release was the accusation that the film's depiction of President Lyndon Johnson was historically inaccurate and failed to properly represent the President's involvement with King and the Civil Rights movement. The accusations that the film failed to accurately portray history because of factual inaccuracy (which in itself is

disputed) positions our understandings of history to be predicated on rationality over sentimentality. And while the rational and factual components of history are certainly of merit, discounting the sentimental recreation of history, particularly trauma, neuters certain aspects of historical moments and prevents us from reaching a true understanding. Certainly, we can intellectually understand the Civil Rights movement, decades later, but what does it mean if that understanding is sans feeling? How can we reclaim the sights, sounds, smells and feelings of anti-racist struggle? What happens if we don't?

These are the questions that primarily motivated this thesis. Because, often, in confronting the absurdity that is racism, and subjugation more generally, approaches that are purely rational in method breakdown under the absence of logic. Despite having several educational lessons, both formal informal, on black history, it was hearing Kanye West's "Heard 'Em Say" that I always return to as a moment when I realized being black and an American carried the weight of being a problem. The delicate piano notes swept me away in a reverie; the low register of West's voice that sounded confessional in nature. There was an element of the affective channeled through music that aided my understanding in a way reading and writing had failed to do. Listening to Kanye became a way of understanding myself better, both privately and publicly. I could hear West, through my headphones, speak of experiences I had struggled to articulate, but when asked what I was doing, I had the guise of "listening to music". Hip-hop and other forms of black music became the tools for my guerrilla warfare, disguised yet ever-present, in a way *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* couldn't. Of course, this anecdote is acutely personal, but I share it with you at this moment as a way of understanding why I became interested in looking at the role of music in political and religious life.

Throughout this paper, I've argued that African American musical traditions, particularly the blues and hip-hop, can and should be considered sites of black prophetic fire in their ability to both signify upon dominant Christian symbols and theology and also serve as sites of political resistance in both rhetoric and performance. I argued that Nina Simone's Civil Rights blues, so-to-speak, worked in a time of segregation to infiltrate black political prophecy across the color-line in order to raise white consciousness' understanding of the then present effects of racism and white supremacy. Operating in a climate in which the color-line has been blurred by both Barack Obama's Presidency and the growing ascendancy of a bi/multiracial American population, Kanye West's music and aesthetic performance has similarly manipulated performance space, akin to Simone's pulpit-piano, but signifies upon the concept of the black body-as-spectacle in order to reclaim a sense of humanity through a radical embodiment, represented through the Incarnation. What I've hoped to show is that in their ability to work both within and outside spaces traditionally thought of as "political", African-American musicians have been able to perform anti-racist work at the level of culture in order to occupy, penetrate or refocus white consciousness. Their work does not supersede the more traditional political work of abolitionists, Civil rights leaders, community organizers or protestors, but nor should it be considered ancillary or derivative. Rather, these musicians and their respective art should be seen as equally productive yet radically different ways of engaging with systems of white supremacy. Christianity often serves as a middle ground or intermediary in this struggle in its ability to both be legible to white American culture yet also speak to the liberation of African Americans. Music's unique signification upon Christianity and its theologies lends itself as an avenue of resistance in which the literary, political, religious and musical intertwine, diverge, and mingle

yet again. Because music can be thought of as being both outside of and also fundamental to politics and religion, it's potential as an interdisciplinary mode of affective discourse proves essential in combatting the totalizing forces of domination that know no disciplinary boundaries.

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