

A Conscious Citizen: Sam Cooke, Racial Performativity,
and the Crisis of Crossover Music

by

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The people who must believe they are white can never be your measuring stick. I would not have you descend into your own dream. I would have you be a conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world.

—Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Letter to My Son”

*You know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation
Always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper*

—Beyoncé, “Formation”

Introduction: Two Medleys and a Death

Sam Cooke is dead.

He's on the floor of The Hacienda Motel outside Santa Monica, on Ninety-first and Figueroa. Just shoes and a jacket on, a few drinks in him, and a bullet, too. December 11, 1964, three in the morning and his wife Barbara is miles away, at home with their kids.

He's in the manager's apartment, which he'd broken into, looking for one Elisa Boyer, the young woman he'd brought to the motel. She's the one who stole his clothes, and possibly his license and credit card as well. She isn't there, but the manager is, with a gun.

He was 33 years old, already one of the all-time great singers, The King of Soul. The manager had no idea who he was. He was just a black man in her apartment at three in the morning. There was no room for questions.

"Is everybody in favor of getting romantic?"

Miami at night, January 12, 1963.¹ This, right here, is effortless for Cooke. He's scatting sweetly in his red dinner jacket, his falsetto feather-light as the band plays the chord changes. He tells the fellas what he wants them to do: go home and say to their ladies, honey, believe me, it's alright.

¹ Sam Cooke. "Medley: It's All Right / (I Love You) For Sentimental Reasons." *One Night Stand! Sam Cooke Live at the Harlem Square Club, 1963*, 1985.
<https://open.spotify.com/track/5YODDTcnCGOBm1SvzIVuPs>.

His voice growls, the saxophone blares, the drum swings behind him. It's alright, it's alright, it's alright, alright—he's almost shouting—long as I know, honey, long as I know that you love me, honey, it's all right.

He's crooning something new now—“(I Love You) For Sentimental Reasons”—as if the tunes had always connected like that, had always fit together. He took the song from Nat Cole who took it from The Brown Dots, but right now, Cooke owns it. The crowd knows it, and Cooke knows they know it.

“Everybody, come sing along with me,” he pleads, leading them through the verse, one line at a time. “I think of you every morning,” he shouts, and they return the next half: “dream of you every night.” Women scream out. Over the din of the crowd, he belts the last note alone.

Now it's July 8, 1964, New York City.² Cooke has something else to tell his audience. The gentlemen of the house, Cooke says, have a tendency to neglect their ladies. He gets a chuckle from the crowd—“Observation, baby,” Cooke laughs, genial. If she gets weary, his advice goes, try a little tenderness. That one he'd heard from Aretha Franklin, still a few years before Otis Redding got his hands on it.

The guitars almost shine. “(I Love You) For Sentimental Reasons” finds its way in again, woodwinds a-flutter, just a bridge until the next tune. The seated crowd is quiet tonight—no noise in the back, no screaming, this is a supper club, after all — so the winds are not hard to hear.

² Sam Cooke. “Medley: Try a Little Tenderness / (I Love You) For Sentimental Reasons / You Send Me.” *Sam Cooke at the Copa*, 1964.
<https://open.spotify.com/track/3SSME22KikEJx7H5t2zvAI>.

There are the horns, finally, at beginning of “You Send Me.” They appear in unison, dabbing softly at the edges of Sam’s best moans. The audience applauds, enthusiastic but polite.

I. The Perfect American Boy

Sam Cooke died, and nobody quite knew what to think.³ Even today, the circumstances behind his death—where did Boyer go? why did Cooke break into the manager’s apartment?—are relegated to debates and reconstructions.⁴ What happened, in the end, to the man often called “the perfect American boy”?⁵

It feels like there are pieces missing. In his two recorded live performances—the first, taped at the mostly-black Harlem Square Club in Miami, and the second, 18 months later, at the mostly-white Copacabana in New York City—Cooke seems to appear as two different artists. One, raucous and loud, a preacher of soulfulness. The other, deferential and smooth, a lounge singer almost to the point of parody.

The first of those two recordings was kept sealed in the RCA Records vault, never intended to be heard. The second was released later in 1964, topping the *Billboard* R&B album chart and reaching #29 on the pop album chart.⁶ “It was

³ Peter Guralnick. *Dream Boogie: The Triumph of Sam Cooke*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2005. 609-642.

⁴ Elisa Boyer was of Chinese-English descent, and had met Cooke at an Italian restaurant that night. Ben Child. “Sam Cooke biopic to probe murder theory.” *The Guardian*, March 18, 2015. <http://gu.com/p/46mzy/stw>.

⁵ Mark Burford. “Sam Cooke as Pop Album Artist—A Reinvention in Three Songs.” *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 65, No. 1. University of California Press, 2012. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jams.2012.65.1.113>. 126.

⁶ Peter Guralnick. *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom*. New York: Harper & Row, 1986. 45.

“Sam Cooke discography.” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sam_Cooke_discography.

supper-club soul in the best sense of the word,” writes scholar and biographer Peter Guralnick, “achieving a level of *savoir-faire* and uptown class that other soul singers like Joe Tex, Solomon Burke, and Otis Redding could only aspire to.”⁷ *Sam Cooke at the Copa* showed that black artists, and soul musicians in particular, could reach the summit of sophistication.

Only until a record executive discovered the Harlem Square Club tracks in a storage bin would the concert finally be released to the public, over two decades after Sam Cooke’s death. *One Night Stand!*, the resulting album, is now recognized over the Copa as his greatest performance and one of the most important live records of all time.⁸ “Here is the harsher, grittier Sam Cooke of the SAR sound,” Guralnick writes, referencing the SAR record label that Sam opened with his manager J.W. Alexander. “In the words of a number of people I know who saw him playing the clubs or R&B revues, this is ‘the real Sam Cooke.’”⁹ To some listeners, that’s the reason behind its concealment. The record company didn’t want people to hear the real Sam Cooke.

Perhaps this is W.E.B. DuBois’s “double consciousness” in practice: one soul that is the “perfect American boy,” and one soul that is black, never to be accepted or even acknowledged by white America. In *Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois has this to say: “The double-aimed struggle of the black artisan—on the one hand to escape white contempt for a nation of mere hewers of wood and drawers of water, and on the other

⁷ *Sweet Soul Music*, 44.

⁸ Scott Simon and Gregg Geller. “A Night Out With Sam Cooke: *Harlem Square* Turns 50.” Weekend Edition Saturday, NPR. Jan. 12, 2013. <http://n.pr/VXDKCl>.
Jon Dolan. “Sam Cooke, *Live At the Harlem Square Club, 1963* (1985)” in “50 Greatest Live Albums of All Time.” *Rolling Stone*, April 29, 2015. <http://rol.st/1DBOIM6>.

⁹ *Sweet Soul Music*, 45.

hand to plough and nail and dig for a poverty-stricken horde—could only result in making him a poor craftsman, for he had but half a heart in either cause.”¹⁰

II. Soul Searching

“The most expressive Negro music of any given period will be an exact reflection of what the Negro himself is,” writes Amiri Baraka in his book *Blues People*. “It will be a portrait of the Negro in America at that particular time.”¹¹

Born in 1931 in Clarksdale, Missouri, and raised on the South Side of Chicago, Cooke became a standout singer in traveling children’s gospel groups before taking the reins of The Soul Stirrers, the preeminent gospel vocal group of the day.¹² His decision to move up from the insular world of religious music to the expansive, commercial world of pop was a full-blown scandal in the black community—until he won them over, too.¹³

Over his brief career, Cooke saw his influence manifest not only on the *Billboard* charts—his resume includes a #1 pop smash, a handful of Top 40 hits, and a catalog of successful studio albums, as well as his two live albums—but on the music industry writ large. Cooke was the first true soul singer to cross over, the artist after whom the “crossover artist” was fashioned.

It began with “You Send Me” in 1957, his chart-topping pop debut, and lasted through “A Change is Gonna Come” in 1964, released not two weeks after his death,

¹⁰ W.E.B. DuBois. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1903. 4.

¹¹ LeRoi Jones. *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1963. 137.

¹² *Dream Boogie*, 14.

¹³ *Ibid*, 64.

his most lasting contribution to popular culture and to the Civil Rights Movement for which it was written.¹⁴ Cooke's was the model of economic and musical success that so many would follow, from his immediate apprentice, Bobby Womack, to contemporaries and immediate successors like Smokey Robinson and Otis Redding, to modern-day acts like Leon Bridges, Raphael Saadiq, and even Beyoncé and Jay-Z.

The question, then, of whether the Sam Cooke heard on the records, in the clubs, on television, by white and black kids across the country, was at all the "real Sam Cooke" is a potent one. In asking, one considers what alterations an artist must make in order to achieve success, what parts of the self must be managed or contained,¹⁵ and what might be lost in the process. One considers if there is a future of blackness that need not require sacrifice.

The question, though powerful, is a misleading one. It relies on the premise that an artist like Sam Cooke cannot put his whole self in more than one cause, that he is a poorer craftsman for his aspiration to and success in the music mainstream. It implies that the industry could only change Cooke, and that Cooke could never change the industry. The reality is that both happened, in not insignificant ways. The search for "the real Sam Cooke" is a diversion from the understanding that he and his music are always signifying and resignifying to different people in seemingly contradictory ways.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Sweet Soul Music*, 13.

¹⁵ E. Patrick Johnson. *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*. London: Duke University Press, 2003. 9.

¹⁶ "Signifyin(g)" is borrowed here from Henry Louis Gates and Samuel Floyd: the intertextual relationship of black art shown through reference and revision, as interpreted through specific historical moments and social settings. Defined in Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr. *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003. 20.

III. A Plan for Criticism

The aim of this thesis is to understand Sam Cooke in particular, and black musicians in general, as actors not separate from or controlled by but interacting with the socio-economic forces around them. To take a note from Guthrie Ramsey, “a criticism of black music explains the cultural work that music performs in the social world.”¹⁷ Further, a productive criticism of black music will seek to understand a text’s construction from the materials of that social world, and will consider the capitalist realities of the music industry not as an unfortunate byproduct but a central element of cultural work.¹⁸

To that end, Sam Cooke’s crossover is best viewed through the lens of racial performativity. Through this lens, the music of Sam Cooke and his contemporaries can be heard and observed as performances of blackness, in which political, economic, and aesthetic markers work as proactive as well as reactive navigations within and around a white-dominated industry. Through particular, situational performances of blackness, soul musicians refused to merely give in to “mainstream” expectations and demands. On the contrary, as this thesis argues, the “crossover” of soul music reveals the very instability of racial and musical boundaries and the transgressive potential of black sounds.

The first chapter, “Racial Performativity and the Crisis of Blackness,” will expand upon the idea of racial performativity as an extension of queer and race

¹⁷ Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr. “The Pot Liquor Principle: Developing a Black Music Criticism in American Music Studies.” *American Music*, Vol. 22, No. 2. University of Illinois Press, 2004. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3593007>. 288.

¹⁸ Jason Toynbee. *Making Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity, and Institutions*. London: Arnold, 2000. xiv-xvi.

theory. By examining the oppositional construction of “black” as a racial category in historical context, this section delineates a process of racialization and stereotyping that must occur to maintain the supremacy of whiteness in society. Also considered here is how black thinkers from the late-19th to mid-20th centuries have worked to push against that hierarchy and put forward alternative versions of the black “soul,” which factor into the development of popular culture at the time. This chapter’s study of performativity seeks to understand the dynamics of racial “crisis,” and, finally, establish a performative description of “blackness” with which to analyze artists and musical texts.

In Chapter Two, “From Race Music to Pop Music,” the process of racial construction and crisis will be compared to the evolution of race music and the formation of the music mainstream. Examining the performative aspects of genre, this chapter looks at what it means to “sound black” and the demands of the music industry with regards to racial performance. This chapter’s goal is to consider musical crossover as a disruptive force, and to argue that for soul musicians to aspire to the music mainstream is not antithetical to creativity and has the power to be a rebellious, autonomous act.

Sam Cooke’s own narrative, then, will find further consideration in Chapter Three, “Sam Cooke, in Practice.” His interactions with religion, Civil Rights politics, and identity issues all play roles in his varied racial and gender performances. Using the description of blackness from Chapter One and the model of crossover-as-crisis from Chapter Two, this section argues that Cooke’s musical and career choices are considered, purposeful parts of his ongoing relationship with the music industry and

his fans. Along the way, throughout this and other chapters, the thesis draws connections between Cooke and other “soul” artists, from the blues of Mamie Smith to the rock ‘n’ roll of Louis Jordan, from Nina Simone’s pointed protest to James Brown’s upbeat uplift—incredibly varied music creating different, often conflicting visions of blackness.

The central argument of this thesis, that black crossover music works performatively to destabilize the racial boundaries of the industry and society, can provide greater insight into music beyond even the mid-20th century. Indeed, considering the impact of people like Cooke and Simone on contemporary R&B and hip-hop, this thesis concludes by thinking forward to present-day artists who continue the societal and musical legacy of soul. With a number of prominent recent releases—from Beyoncé and Kendrick Lamar, Nicki Minaj and D’Angelo—engaging questions of the political implications of blackness, the subject of possibilities for performing blackness in popular music is more than ripe for further exploration.

A few notes on how this thesis was researched and composed: Sam Cooke has only in the past two decades become a subject of analysis for scholars of music and race. Thus, this thesis relies on the two major studies of his life for most of its biographical information: Peter Guralnick’s *Dream Boogie: The Triumph of Sam Cooke* and Daniel Wolff’s slightly older volume *You Send Me: The Life and Times of Sam Cooke*. As a matter of stylistic consistency, quotation marks will denote song titles, articles, essays, and individual web pages; italics will be used for albums, books, films, television shows, journals, and printed publications; and website names will use neither. Artists and authors will be referred to by their stage or pen names, if

they have them. Full names will be employed on first reference and last names on most subsequent references, except when doing so impedes clarity.

Finally, the songs mentioned here have all been accessed digitally, and are legally available on a number of streaming services. The bibliography below includes a list of all the music discussed as well as a public playlist, linked to at the bottom of this page, that contains a selection of relevant songs.¹⁹ I strongly encourage readers to listen along.

¹⁹ “Thesis: Selected Recordings.” Spotify.
<https://open.spotify.com/user/1226188316/playlist/61nE5vwZ1KVJEWectjqLH>.

Chapter 1. Racial Performativity and the Crisis of Blackness

In *Between the World and Me*, an address to his young black son, the writer Ta-Nehisi Coates insistently refers to “white people” as “the people who believe they are white.” The rhetorical device works as a reminder. The reader is never allowed to forget that people call themselves white because they *believe* that they are. Society and its institutions have been built around the ultimate goal—The Dream, he calls it—of becoming and staying white.²⁰ Coates wants readers to understand the myth of it all: “Race” does not exist. It is a lie we tell ourselves and each other, albeit a convincing and longstanding one.²¹

Discussing the idea of “blackness,” then, is fraught: To what, exactly, is that word referring? How can one discuss race at all, if it is an imagined thing?

This chapter discusses the social construction of “race” and theories of racial performativity—how the notion of race is systematically created and reinforced, and how the boundaries of race are constantly blurred and challenged. It will explore historical shifts in ways of thinking about the “race question,” push against “authenticity” and the values placed upon it, and analyze the strategies of “soul.”

It is too easy to dismiss black and white thinkers for buying into this myth, and to reject their work for reinforcing racial hierarchies or otherwise being counterproductive toward the objective of dismantling race. Race may be imagined, but that does not prevent it from shaping the lives and experiences of people; race

²⁰ Ta-Nehisi Coates. “Letter to My Son.” *The Atlantic*, July 4, 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/tanehisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me/397619/>.

²¹ Ta-Nehisi Coates. *Between the World and Me*. New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015. 12.

impacts people, in numerous intersectional ways, regardless of their understanding about how it works. Blackness is lived, even as it is scrutinized.

“In those somber forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself—darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission,” writes W.E.B. DuBois in the introduction to *The Souls of Black Folk*. “He began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another.”²² This “veil” of race shapes how people interact with the world and each other, and DuBois insists that only after realizing the veil exists can we see past it. But even then, there’s work left to be done. The dilemma of this thesis is to consider the impact of race—and of blackness specifically—on music without essentializing.

When this thesis at times, for the sake of convenience, refers to individuals or groups with racial descriptors like “black” or “white,” Coates’s motif should still come to mind. Rather than defining blackness itself, this chapter develops a working, performative description for the *idea* of “blackness,” which plays a dynamic role in the production and exchange of music and culture.

I. Making Race

If race is a myth, then it must have been established through a process of myth-making—of *race*-making. The racial body is not a biological fact, argues Jonathan Xavier Inda.²³ A person’s so-called race is not a “natural” trait; race refers to nothing

²² DuBois, 5.

²³ Jonathan Xavier Inda. “Performativity, Materiality, and the Racial Body.” *Latino Studies Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 3, Fall 2000.
http://www.academia.edu/532929/Performativity_Materiality_and_the_Racial_Body. 75.

original or irremovable about the body, but rather to a signification. That is, race does not exist except for people saying it exists, and the very process of saying *creates* it.

“How did they get that way?” Baldwin asks. “By deciding that they were white.”²⁴

The particular racialized bodies examined in this chapter are creations of colonialism, stemming from the 15th century Age of Exploration. Europeans traveling to Africa and the New World encountered peoples who appeared distinct from themselves. Because these groups differed in body, they were believed to differ in mind. Exploiting other peoples—physically through slavery and genocide, culturally through re-education and representation, and economically through mercantilism and redlining—was made easier by a system that explained why one group should inherently dominate another group. “Race is the child of racism, not the father,” writes Coates. “And the process of naming ‘the people’ has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy.”²⁵

Race is oppositional. In the European construction, the classifications of white and black were positioned on opposite sides of a racial spectrum, but they also could not exist without each other.²⁶ “We have been the thing against which normality, whiteness, and functionality have been defined,” Robin Kelley writes of being

²⁴ James Baldwin. “On Being ‘White’ ... And Other Lies.” *Essence*, 1984. In *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to be White*. Ed. David Roediger. New York: Schocken Books, 1998. 179.

²⁵ *Between the World and Me*, 7.

²⁶ Nadine Ehlers. “‘Black Is’ and ‘Black Ain’t’: Performative Revisions of Racial ‘Crisis.’” *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 2006, Vol. 47, No. 2. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14735780600961619>. 150.

black.²⁷ “Whiteness” is not outlined by what it *is* so much as what it is *not*. (And there are inconsistencies in what is considered *not* white, as this chapter will discuss later.)

Inda describes race as an “embodied spectacle.” Racial designations emerged from observations of the seemingly “incontrovertible” evidence of the body, such as skin color, that appeared to prove some essential nature.²⁸ “Those with an ostensible European countenance have generally been constructed as ‘white’ and accorded the privileges that go with that designation, while those with a dark complexion have, for the most part, been viewed as ‘non-white’ and bestowed the subordinate status of such racialized populations,” Inda writes.²⁹ This difference was necessarily hierarchical, establishing the dominance of some Europeans, who identified themselves as members of a white race, over Africans and Asians and Native Americans, who were determined to belong to their own “Negro” or “Oriental” or “Indian” races.³⁰

If to be black meant to be part of a black race, then what is “blackness”? If whiteness is the absence, then what is the presence?

Blackness has traditionally been the measure of how much a person *is* their race, how close they fit to a perfect archetype of “authentically black.” The idea of blackness has been imposed, adapted, and co-opted numerous times in numerous

²⁷ Robin D.G. Kelley. *Yo Mama's Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997. 3.

²⁸ Local diversity and phenotypic variance tend to be ignored for the construction of larger oppositional identities. Inda, 81.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 77.

³⁰ Racial designations change over time, and vary depending on origin, as a quick look at the Racial Slur Database will show. These three are just some of the most prominent and outdated. <http://www.rsd.org>.

contexts, but referring to “blackness” as a given ignores its construction. More importantly, it obscures just how blackness works, from its origin to today, as a multi-purpose tool. Kimberly Benston frames the issue with this question: “Is the self of blackness an empirical presence, a goal, or a necessary fiction to be ultimately discarded in the higher interests of communality?”³¹

II. To Be a Problem

In the European racial system, a “white” classification was highly valued, considered clean and beautiful; any “black” or non-white classification was lesser, ugly, dirty. Racialized bodies were ascribed non-physical racialized characteristics: white was civilized, intelligent, while black was savage, animalistic. This dichotomy associated black people with the physical world and white people with the mental. For example, black people were thought to have inherent musical and dancing abilities, while white people were rational and inventive.³² “Our history was inferior because we were inferior, which is to say our bodies were inferior,” Coates writes. “And our inferior bodies could not possibly be accorded the same respect as those that built the West.”³³

This racialized system constitutes the “veil” that DuBois describes. Through the veil, racialized bodies are seen only as their naturalized associations. “White supremacy is a system of order and a way of perceiving reality,” write Frank Chin

³¹ Kimberly W. Benston. *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism*. New York: Routledge, 2000. 4.

³² Paul Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993. 96.

³³ “Letter to My Son.”

and Jeffrey Paul Chan in their essay “Racist Love.”³⁴ “Colored minorities in white reality are stereotypes.” Chin and Chan divide stereotypes into “acceptable” and “unacceptable” models, as determined by white society. The former is safe and controllable, like the Sambo or Mammy. The latter is dangerous and uncontrollable, like the Brute or the Jezebel. Stereotypes that bestow degrees of acceptability, regardless of who espouses them, promote whiteness as the highest model of acceptability.

The very naming of a thing creates it. In asserting what black people *are*, white supremacy necessarily controls what black people *can do*. A stereotype, Chin and Chan write, “operates as a model of behavior. It conditions the mass society’s perceptions and expectations. Society is conditioned to accept the given minority only within the bounds of the stereotype.”³⁵ As an example, consider what channels of upward mobility are generally seen as open to African-Americans, and men in particular. “In popular culture, black men are recognized in three areas: sports, crime, and entertainment,” Orville Lloyd Douglas writes in *The Guardian*.³⁶ Any other area is out-of-bounds.

The veil is not limited to people who believe they are white. Chin and Chan dub “racist love” as the process by which racial models of behavior become accepted by the people to whom they refer. “The subject minority is conditioned to reciprocate

³⁴ Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan. “Racist Love.” *Seeing Through Shuck*. Ed. Richard Kostelanetz. New York: Ballantine Books, 1972.
<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~hist32/Hist33/chin%20Racist%20Love.pdf>. 65.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 66-67.

³⁶ Orville Lloyd Douglas. “Why I Hate Being a Black Man.” *The Guardian*, Nov. 9, 2013.
<http://gu.com/p/3k84h/stw>.

by becoming the stereotype, live it, talk it, embrace it, measure group and individual worth in its terms, and believe it.”³⁷ Through education, legal dictates, cultural assimilation, and physical enforcement, minorities are taught to accept white supremacy, the acceptable conditions of white society, and their assigned place in it. This teaching also requires that they accept their given race and take it as fact.

Race is dictated, then accepted, then assumed.

In accepting race as a natural phenomenon, is one necessarily accepting the stereotypes it brings along? Is blackness necessarily negative? African-American writers and thinkers have gone back and forth on these questions. In the introduction to *Appropriating Blackness*, E. Patrick Johnson notes that “‘blackness’ does not belong to any one individual or group. Rather, individuals or groups *appropriate* this complex and nuanced racial signifier in order to circumscribe its boundaries or to exclude other individuals or groups.”³⁸ If blackness could be used strategically against black people, the logic goes, then it might be reclaimed and used strategically against racism. If certain images of blackness could hurt and constrain black people, counter-images might heal and free them.

Thinking back to DuBois’s *Souls of Black Folk*, note when he references the perennial question, “How does it feel to be a problem?” He seeks to move the conversation away from its assumption that “black people are a problem.”³⁹ DuBois urges “race consciousness” (as it is later named by scholars), education about and awareness of the world one lives in, that he believes will allow a black person to

³⁷ Chin and Chan, 66-67.

³⁸ Johnson, 2-3.

³⁹ DuBois, 2.

escape white contempt. Booker T. Washington, though disagreeing with DuBois on the specifics of that education, agrees that racial pride provides the means for racial progress. But that racial pride was tied to restrictions of its own; to have pride in oneself and one's race, one had to adhere to a principle of hard work and uphold particular standards of behavior.⁴⁰ “Despite the obvious tensions among black spokespersons in the late-19th century, though, they all agreed that the values of respectability, thrift, strict sexual morality, and adherence to the work ethic were necessary for the uplift and advancement of the race,” argues Charles Banner-Haley.⁴¹

This thread of black people urging fellow black people to be “twice as good,” explicitly or implicitly, has been restated often: by Marcus Garvey, by Malcolm X, by President Barack Obama.⁴² However, this strategy—and it is a strategy, with sociopolitical motives of racial uplift—does not succeed in eradicating stereotypes. Rather, to use the terms of Chin and Chan, it merely attempts to push back against the “unacceptable” stereotype by embracing the “acceptable,” which reinforces the hierarchical positioning of whiteness above all. Coates argues this succinctly: “If you accept that being twice as good is the price of the ticket, then you accept a double standard, and thus necessarily accept the precepts of racism.”⁴³ However, the

⁴⁰ Charles Banner-Haley. *The Fruits of Integration: Black Middle Class Ideology And Culture, 1960-1990*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1994. 14.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Ta-Nehisi Coates. “The Champion Barack Obama.” *The Atlantic*, Jan. 31, 2014. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/01/the-champion-barack-obama/283458/>.

⁴³ Ta-Nehisi Coates. “On the Death of Dreams.” *The Atlantic*, Aug. 29, 2013. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/08/on-the-death-of-dreams/279157/>.

development of this strategy also shows a critical dynamic: the assertion by black people of previously denied autonomy.

The Afro-Modernist and Black Arts Movements (to which Baraka belonged) that developed in the 1960s, taking up the mantle from the Harlem Renaissance some four decades earlier, sought a cultural and political intervention. “In the same way the ‘New Negroes’ of the Twenties began, though quite defensively, to canonize the attributes of their ‘Negro-ness,’ so the ‘soul brother’ means to recast the social order in his own image,” writes Amiri Baraka in his 1963 book *Blues People*, which does its own recasting of the history of black people and their culture in America.⁴⁴ Baraka, Larry Neil, and others sought to mine history and heritage for a new Black Aesthetic, which would reject white standards of beauty and flip the script on racial hierarchy.

“The mere general designation, cultural nationalism, distinguishes a position within black self-determination discourses that valorizes black culture,” writes Michael Hanson, “at the extreme, employing the Hegelian dialectics of recognition and inversion that devalue European culture and history while mythologizing Africa as the primordial site of a positive transfiguration and social uplift in the recuperative gestures of self-making.”⁴⁵ For Baraka, the worth and humanity of black people was evident in their music and art, from blues and gospel to the bebop of the day, and it united them as a nation. White culture, he argues, lacks the power and inventiveness

⁴⁴ Jones, 219.

⁴⁵ Michael Hanson. “Suppose James Brown Read Fanon: The Black Arts Movement, Cultural Nationalism and the Failure of Popular Musical Praxis.” *Popular Music*, Vol. 27, No. 3. Cambridge University Press, 2008. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40212397>. 344.

of black culture. “White is then not ‘right,’ as the old blues had it, but a liability, since the culture of white precludes the possession of the Negro ‘soul.’”⁴⁶ Here, too, the familiar racial dichotomy, of Africa on one side and white America on the other, is maintained. Only the values attributed to each side are challenged.

“To be black is to be anti-white,” writes David Smith, commenting on Baraka’s work. “Baraka’s sole innovation is to assert that blackness, rather than whiteness, is more desirable.”⁴⁷ This declaration was still radical when James Brown brought it into his music in the late 1960s, with his Top 10 hit “Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud.”⁴⁸ From the political lyrics to the syncopation-heavy rhythms, funk was the music of cultural nationalism, breaking from most of what white society had deemed “proper” music.⁴⁹ Similar to Washington, Brown advocated for what President Richard Nixon called “black capitalism,” a campaign that came bundled with values of drug prohibition, self-reliance, and self-pride.⁵⁰ Black people didn’t need white people to succeed, only their own commitment to success. “Integration was one of the biggest mistakes we’ve made,” Brown said in a 1972 issue of *Soul Magazine*. “It allowed the white man to think he could be equal to us.”⁵¹

⁴⁶ Jones, 219.

⁴⁷ David L. Smith. “Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts of Black Art.” *boundary 2*, Vol. 15, No. 1. Duke University Press, 1986-1987. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/303432>. 243.

⁴⁸ James Brown. “Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud (Parts 1 and 2),” 1968. <https://open.spotify.com/track/2rOyqEU3frual4yxJymr0Z>.

⁴⁹ James B. Stewart. “Message in the Music: Political Commentary in Black Popular Music from Rhythm and Blues to Early Hip Hop.” *The Journal of African-American History*, Vol. 90, No. 3, “The History of Hip Hop.” Association for the Study of African-American Life and History, 2005. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20063998>. 214-215.

⁵⁰ Nelson George. *The Death of Rhythm & Blues*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1988. 103-104.

⁵¹ Quoted in Hanson, 357-358.

III. Who Can Sing the Blues?

The black “soul” that Baraka, and DuBois before him, mentioned sits at the heart of the black nationalist project. In the essay collection *Soul*, Lee Rainwater describes soul as an expressive lifestyle adopted in the 1960s by some city-dwelling black populations.⁵² But the term is rooted further back in culture. It’s an obviously religious word—soul as in spirit, as in the Holy Ghost, as in “soul-stirring”—stemming from the black church, that Ulf Hannerz says looks to “the essential human.”⁵³ Within racial pride movements, soul would specifically refer to “the essential Negro,” a fundamental blackness.

But simply being a “member” of the black race does not guarantee soulfulness, however. There are degrees. One can/must also *act* black. “Soul” can be substituted in some circumstances for “hipness.” Someone can be a “soul brother” or “soul sister.” Sam & Dave are “Soul Men.”⁵⁴ Soul is also a characteristic of (a certain, Southern) black culture: both music and food can be “soulful.” James Brown has “Soul Power.”⁵⁵ Soul is the *it* factor, begging the question: Who has it? Baraka, for his part, valorizes poor and working class African-Americans as exemplars of the most “authentic blackness.” They are the “blues people” (a term borrowed from Ralph Ellison) who supposedly live close to the “folk experience.”⁵⁶

⁵² Lee Rainwater. “Introduction.” *Soul*. Ed. Lee Rainwater. Ann Arbor, MI: Aldine Publishing Company, 1966. 8.

⁵³ Ulf Hannerz. “The Significance of Soul.” *Soul*. Ed. Lee Rainwater. Ann Arbor, MI: Aldine Publishing Company, 1966. 17.

⁵⁴ Sam & Dave. “Soul Man,” 1967.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/4eGHlplaq1ME8oetnTuFFf>.

⁵⁵ James Brown. “Soul Power,” 1971.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/6vkavDGYE4mqAAhFkktpnL>.

⁵⁶ Jones, 176.

As Johnson argues, “black authenticity” is a politically charged concept. It implies the existence of an “inauthentic” or fake blackness, a *wrong* way of being black.⁵⁷ The employment of such authenticity requires an essentialist definition of what “black” is, and a position of self-given authority to determine that definition. Baraka directs disappointment at black people who fall into the trap of accepting white superiority and, in the hope of attaining favor, supposedly attempt to imitate white people. This “slave mentality,” as Baraka calls it, is especially prevalent in middle class and upwardly mobile black people, for whom “the emulation of white society prove[s] to be not only a pattern for the new leaders, but an end in itself.”⁵⁸ That is, they *become* white, forfeiting their soul.

Baraka would agree with Chin and Chan in the dangers of such assimilation: “The successful operation of the stereotype results in the neutralization of the subject race as a social, creative, and cultural force. The race poses no threat to white supremacy. It is now a guardian of white supremacy, dependent on it and grateful to it.”⁵⁹ Baraka (himself a product of the black middle class) might have worried that embracing white stereotypes endangers the ability of poorer black people to fight those expectations and the consequences that might come with failing to meet them. After all, the reasoning goes, if some black people can find success under the status

⁵⁷ Johnson, 3.

⁵⁸ Jones, 58.

⁵⁹ Chin and Chan, 67.

quo then so should they all. Any failure is solely their own personal responsibility, not institutional racism.⁶⁰

Regardless of who invokes it, Johnson writes, “authenticity, then, is yet another trope manipulated for cultural capital,” and should be considered in terms of what work it is employed to do.⁶¹ The invocation of “authenticity” by black thinkers can be seen as part of an ongoing struggle for self-determination and self-representation. “If soul is Negro, the non-Negro is non-soul, and, in a unique turnabout, somewhat less human,” Hannerz writes.⁶² Valuing soul, it becomes clear, is a strategy for interacting with, surviving through, and succeeding in a white world. “In the case of soul, the method is that of idealizing one’s own achievements, proclaiming one’s own way of life to be superior,” Hannerz continues. “Yet the same soul brother may argue at other times that he is what he is because he is not allowed to become anything else.”⁶³

Take the question, “Can white people sing the blues?” In his 1994 essay “Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity,” Joel Rudinow considers how arguments over authenticity in the blues fall into three central questions: who “owns” the blues, who can claim to understand the blues, and who is actually able to play the blues.⁶⁴

The last question is a matter of training and technique, which certainly is not racially

⁶⁰ Manning Marable and Leith Mullings. “The ‘Personal Responsibility vs. Institutional Racism Debate’ — Bill Cosby vs. Michael Eric Dyson.” *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal. An African-American Anthology*. Ed. Manning Marable and Leith Mullings. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009. 617.

⁶¹ Johnson, 2-3.

⁶² Hannerz, 17.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 27.

⁶⁴ Joel Rudinow. “Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues?” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 52, No. 1, “The Philosophy of Music.” American Society for Aesthetics, 1994. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/431591>. 129.

determined (despite the stereotype of black musicality mentioned above). The first two questions, on the other hand, are ones of experience and credibility. Not everyone agrees on those requirements. Rainwater recounts: “Speaking of the credentials for becoming a soul singer [bluesman Al] Hibbler listed in order of importance: having been hurt by a woman, being ‘brought up in that old time religion,’ and knowing ‘what that slavery shit is all about.’”⁶⁵ But what of the black women like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, who made the “classic blues” famous in the first place? Angela Davis writes that the blues served a slightly different purpose for them: “Women's blues provided a cultural space for community-building among working-class black women...in which the coercions of bourgeois notions of sexual purity and ‘true womanhood’ were absent.”⁶⁶ The benchmarks for blues credibility obviously differ even among black musicians. Can a white person playing the blues truly connect to the black cultural heritage and history from which the blues spring? Can they tap into that vast well of religion and slavery, art and violence, solidarity and discrimination, sex and sexism? Must they encompass all of it at once? And should they?

“Can white people sing the blues?” cannot be disconnected from the fact that white people already have sung the blues, and have largely benefited economically and socially in a way that most black people haven’t been able to. The same holds true if one replaces blues with soul. A new genre of music, “blue-eyed soul,” was invented to categorize and market when white people, such as The Righteous

⁶⁵ Rainwater, 9.

⁶⁶ Angela Davis. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. New York: Pantheon Press, 1998. 44.

Brothers or Van Morrison,⁶⁷ sang what was traditionally the music of black people.⁶⁸

But does it still count as soul? This is the strategy of authenticity politics:

essentializing soul or the blues calls into question the legitimacy of that co-option.

“The Great Music Robbery,” as Baraka calls it, is the process by which black creativity is rejected as inferior by white critics, plundered by the white-dominated industry once it becomes popular enough, and then considered legitimate only when white artists appropriate it.⁶⁹ This process will be analyzed in-depth in the next chapter.

And yet, these essentialist reclamation projects constrain even as they liberate. If true blackness is poor, then is it a betrayal to strive for better circumstances? If blues and soul can only be sung by black people, then are black musicians able to sing *only* blues and soul? Is there only one right way to be black? If so, who gets to decide?

The answer, at least in contemporary race studies scholarship, is not to outline the boundaries but to open up the possibilities. “There are 40 million black people in this country, and there are 40 million ways to be black,” writes the African-American scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr.⁷⁰ Even that generalization can be expanded and refined, however. It is not simply that each person has their own “way” of being black, but

⁶⁷ The Righteous Brothers. “Unchained Melody,” 1965.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/1jFhnVoJkcB4lf9tT0rSZS>.

Van Morrison. “Moondance,” 1970.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/6KHNMPZTSif1zFbFKErpNU>.

⁶⁸ Reebee Garofalo. “Culture Versus Commerce: The Marketing of Black Popular Music.” *Public Culture*. Chicago: Duke University Press, 1994.

<http://publicculture.dukejournals.org/content/7/1/275.citation>. 277.

⁶⁹ Rudinow, 130.

⁷⁰ Henry Louis Gates Jr. “Foreword.” *Black Cool: One Thousand Streams of Blackness*. Ed. Rebecca Walker. Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2012.

multiple ways in multiple contexts, all of which interact with and borrow from and react against and push toward everyone else and their own dynamic identities.

Blackness is both shaped by the world and actively shaping it.

IV. Call-and-Response

Destroy the essentiality of race, and what's left is a practice and a process: racial performativity.

In his article "Performativity, Materiality, and the Racial Body," Inda considers Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and how it relates to race.⁷¹ Butler's 1993 work *Bodies That Matter* rejects the historical assumption of a naturally gendered (i.e., male or female) body. Rather, it is "discursively constructed" by language, actions, and institutions. The name "woman," then, does not reflect an existing category but rather creates the category and places a person in it. Gender in this sense is "performative." "In speech act theory, the performative refers to those acts of speech that bring into being that which they name," Inda writes. "It is that aspect of discourse that, in the act of uttering, also performs the action to which it refers."⁷²

Race works through the same process. As previously discussed, there is no naturally racial body, no "fact" of race. Rather, bodies are *racialized* through language, actions, and institutions that act as if race exists, and as if bodies can have racial designations. In doing so, these systems retroactively reinforce their underlying

⁷¹ Inda, 75.

⁷² It should be mentioned that the speech act theory of linguistics was first developed by J.L. Austin and expanded by Jacques Derrida. Ibid, 75.

assumption that race is a “natural phenomenon whose meaning is prior to and beyond the reach of human intervention.”⁷³ This does not simply happen once. The “natural phenomenon” of gender or race must be repetitively referenced to be assumed as truth, performed so often that it can reference itself. Nadine Ehlers calls this a “naming ritual,” an assignment.⁷⁴ A person with certain physical or genetic attributes is gendered as a “girl” at birth, but more importantly, that person is then continuously “girded” at every stage of their life—most obviously by the sheer act of people referring to them as a girl. So, too, is a person racialized as “black” by skin or heritage at birth, and in many moments from then on.

“The racing of a body,” Inda writes, “is a never-ending process, one that must be reiterated by various authorities and in various times and places in order to sustain the naturalized effect of ‘race.’”⁷⁵ Those authorities can range from parents and teachers to bosses, law enforcement, and the government, and their reiterations can take the form of lessons about history and heritage, census surveys, law enforcement interactions, media representations, and rules both formal and informal. Whether these reiterations refer to positive (black musicality) or negative (black criminality) stereotypes, they establish the veil of race as a primary way for people to engage with the world. This veil, as DuBois mentions, also shapes how people see themselves. “The subject is formed and forms itself through a process of mediation with and within the terms and norms that call it into being and that structure how it is recognized in the world,” writes Nadine Ehlers.⁷⁶ Whiteness is reiterated through the

⁷³ Ibid, 82.

⁷⁴ Ehlers, 153.

⁷⁵ Inda, 87.

⁷⁶ Ehlers, 154.

same process. Because white supremacy is the default, though, whiteness is almost always treated as “acceptable,” and thus allowed to go unquestioned, unmarked, uninterrogated.⁷⁷

Because the racing of a body is never complete, it can also be interrupted. “The racial body is always open to the possibility of resignification,” Inda writes, “to the prospect of being materialized otherwise.”⁷⁸ This is the project of movements like the Black Arts and cultural nationalism, to encourage a dialectical shift in identity production, to reverse the previous negative notions in favor of their own, more positive ones.⁷⁹ Other resignifications then come forward, from other individuals or groups that seek to critique, problematize, and redefine previous significations. In fact, Johnson asserts that this “mutual constructing/deconstructing, avowing/disavowing, and expanding/delimiting dynamic that occurs in the production of blackness is the very thing that constitutes ‘black culture.’”⁸⁰ Such reclamations—by black and other minority groups—have been attempted in the past, as in the resignifying of identifiers like “Chicano” and “Negro” as well as “queer.”

Just because a subjugated minority insists on receiving dignity does not mean it is acknowledged, however. “To assert one’s blackness does not automatically free one from society’s structures of domination,” writes Smith.⁸¹ Bebop musicians like Ornette Coleman encountered this paradox in the 1950s and ’60s, breaking away

⁷⁷ When performances of whiteness are criticized, it’s often because they include aspects of “low” culture or unacceptable behavior usually associated with blackness. This will be explored in Chapter Two.

⁷⁸ Inda, 93.

⁷⁹ Johnson, 19.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸¹ Smith, 248.

from the dominant jazz style of swing to invent a new, more difficult genre marked by “harmonic obstacles,” rhythmic syncopation, and improvisation.⁸² The result was a “willfully harsh, anti-assimilationist sound,” as Baraka describes it, that touted an attitude of black elitism but turned off most black and white audiences.⁸³ Even though critics reviewed Coleman’s music positively, his unapologetically “black” aesthetic did not win over enough listeners to support him financially.⁸⁴

Performance offers a way to navigate these challenges. A “performance” conjures up the image of an actor, a stage, a captive audience, but none of these roles are static. “Performance flourishes within a zone of contest and struggle,” writes the anthropologist Dwight Conquergood.⁸⁵ When someone asserts or falls into a particular construction of race—whether identifiable as one phenotype or not, playing into or attempting to subvert/reject a stereotype, positive or negative, or any combination of the above—they are performing race. When a person, a group, or an institution assumes or asserts a particular construction of race *upon* another person, a group, or an institution, they are performing race. And when those forces meet, the resulting dynamic is a performance as well. Performance, Conquergood writes,

⁸² More on the markers of “sonic blackness” in Chapter Two. Scott DeVeaux. *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997. 298.

Ornette Coleman. “Lonely Woman.” *The Shape of Jazz to Come*, 1959.
<https://open.spotify.com/track/23aDP04QX8MAHA99FLaPtN>.

⁸³ Baraka, 182.

⁸⁴ Coleman also made his own attempt at black capitalism, hiking his prices for concerts and working to open his own jazz club and music publishing company, but both those initiatives failed and his live engagements merely broke even. John Litweiler. *Ornette Coleman: A Harmolodic Life*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1992. 109.

⁸⁵ Dwight Conquergood. “Of Caravans and Carnivals: Performance Studies in Motion.” *The Drama Review*, Vol. 39, No. 4. MIT Press, 1995. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1146488>. 137.

crosses thresholds, shifts shapes, and violates boundaries. Rather than static objects receiving assignments, people are active agents, changing actions, attitudes, and appearances—consciously and unconsciously—depending on the time, the environment, and the situation.⁸⁶

Performances in the theatrical and musical sense, however, are particularly rich for examination of racial performativity, in part because of the presumed static roles of the performer, the audience, and the repertoire. An example can be viewed in the blackface performances of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Patricia Schroeder recalls how popular “coon songs” portrayed black people as foolish, lazy, and thieving, and were performed originally in minstrel shows by white men in burnt cork makeup. Minstrel shows were popular because of their transgressive behavior, as white men “demeaned” themselves by acting out the “low” culture of black men and women. The theater of the “unrespectable” morphed into vaudeville revues and tent shows, with both black and white casts performing to black and white audiences. Their portrayals kept in line with general media representations of black people across the country.

Coon songs, rather than merely being demeaning, offered an opportunity for black artists to perform race in a way that challenged norms and expectations. “All Coons Look Alike to Me,” the first published coon song, was written by a black composer, Ernest Hogan, and set to ragtime music, a form that combined the primarily black genre of jazz with the lyrics and delivery of the primarily white Tin

⁸⁶ Ibid, 138.

Pan Alley repertoire.⁸⁷ The black press decried Hogan's composition, but it became a hit regardless in great part because of its adherence to previously determined images.⁸⁸ Taking advantage of those stereotypes offered a road to employment. Minstrel and vaudeville shows provided job opportunities, good pay, artist community status, and training to black artists who were willing to "blacken it up."

Of course, the "blackening" (both in terms of acting and appearance, as black artists often applied burn cork makeup to their own faces) was a racial performance in the sense that it seemingly adhered to *white* definitions of blackness. Black audience members, meanwhile, could tell that black actors were, so to speak, putting on a show; the black actors didn't merely "play it straight" but altered their comedy and inserted irony where the white actors hadn't intended. "All these art forms speak simultaneously in two registers, one designed for a mainstream audience and another lying beneath the surface, coded, audible only to those who already know it is there: an in-joke," Schroeder writes.⁸⁹ In that way, these performances proved the falseness of those stereotypes by showing how black artists were not acting "naturally" but in fact doing an impression. Coon songs worked for black artists as a reverse-appropriation. "If blackness was a form of masquerade for white minstrels,"

⁸⁷ "Tin Pan Alley" refers to the collective of New York City songwriting and music publishing businesses, which operated from the late 1800s to the mid-1900s. They were heavily concentrated around 28th Street and 5th Avenue in Manhattan. Patricia R. Schroeder. "Passing for Black: Coon Songs and the Performance of Race." *The Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 33 No. 2. Blackwell Publishing, 2010. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-734X.2010.00740.x>. 141.

⁸⁸ George J. Gaskin. "All Coons Look Alike to Me," 1896. <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.100010769/>.

⁸⁹ Schroeder, 144.

Schroeder asks, “could not the inherited stage version of blackness provide a mask for African-American performers?”⁹⁰

This very crossing of boundaries fuels both the excitement of these art forms and the danger of them. Nadine Ehlers, building off the idea of racial performativity as an incomplete process, writes that “race is at once policed through and predicated upon the very concept of crisis.”⁹¹ “Race” as a concept is constantly in—and defined by—a state of insecurity, perpetually under threat of being proven false. Anything that may transcend race, bypass race, combine race, obscure race—in short, anything that does not adhere strictly to a strict white-Other binary—throws the whole system of racial categorization into question. (Any negative connotations of the word “crisis” come from the point of view of the dominant power, because it’s a threat to the status quo.) To prevent those crises, Ehlers writes, rules and rhetoric have historically policed racial boundaries. Anti-miscegenation laws (whether by actual ordinance or simply social agreement) prohibited interracial sexual or romantic contact, which might lead to “unnatural” racial mixing in future generations. Mobs often enforced such laws with intimidation or deadly force.⁹² For example, the black singer Billy Eckstine, an idol of Sam Cooke’s, saw his career free-fall after a notorious 1950 article in *Life Magazine* brought too much attention to the devotion of his many white female fans.⁹³ Scientific and genetic racism reinforced these boundaries as well,

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ehlers, 149.

⁹² Of course, these laws applied mostly to black men, for having sex with white women—white men who raped black women went without reprimand. Chapter Two expands upon this double standard.

⁹³ Burford, 146.

essentializing blackness as the result of “black blood,” which also acted as a pollutant threatening the purity of “white blood” (i.e., the “one-drop rule”).⁹⁴ Sex wasn’t all, though. “Passing” also threatened racial boundaries, as could certain actions and behaviors—a black person “acting” white, perhaps by showing upward mobility, was something that needed forceful “correcting,” frequently by lynching or economic coercion.

In any moment of racial performance, Ehlers says, a crisis underlies: Will someone successfully reproduce the societal norms around their race, or will they fail to do so?⁹⁵ A third option exists as well: Might the norms themselves change? Racial navigations in this way are not merely reactive, but proactive. “The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist,” writes Fred Moten in his book *In the Break*. Moten argues that this “freedom drive” against objectification is in fact the core of blackness and black performance.⁹⁶ This conception of blackness is, understandably, contrary to previous thought. “Earlier studies of Negro social life and personality had emphasized the extent to which Negro behavior could be seen as a direct effect of the caste system maintained by whites,” writes Rainwater. “The Negro was presented as a passive product of white-dominated racist institutions.”⁹⁷ This assumption, which itself is dehumanizing, is also wrong. Yes, performances of blackness must take into consideration the rules and boundaries placed upon them, but they are not solely defined or limited by such constraints.

⁹⁴ Ehlers, 150.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 155-156.

⁹⁶ Fred Moten. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003. 1.

⁹⁷ Rainwater, 3-4.

Reflecting on the popular game of “the dozens”—trading clever barbs and “yo mama” jokes—in black urban centers, Robin Kelley urges a consideration of blackness beyond a simple top-down assignment: “We have to acknowledge the artistry, the fun, the gamesmanship that continues to exist, if not thrive, in a world marked by survival and struggle.”⁹⁸ Performances of blackness think about the past, about the present, and about the future, and bring those together into multiple visions of the world. The basis of black racial performance and black musical performance are much the same: a call-and-response.

V. Working with Blackness

In the past, when writers mentioned blackness, that word referenced a conception of how black something is. An individual could quantify blackness, say, on a sliding scale from 1-100: 1 being the least authentically black, and 100 being the Platonic ideal of black. Through a performative lens, however, there is no ideal; blackness is always dependent on time, place, and audience. There is no “right” way or “wrong” way, no perfect score and no possibility for failure.

The question must change: “In what way is someone performing ‘black identity?’” rather than, “How black are they being?” The answer, then, should be a description, not a grade. It is not an absolute, nor even a spectrum. It must be able to include strategies as well as constraints, visions as well as stereotypes, social construction as well as lived experience.

Racial performances are influenced—sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously—by three connected factors: How one perceives oneself, how one is

⁹⁸ Kelley, 4.

seen from outside, and how one acts taking those things into consideration. That is to say, the perception and enactment of one's own racial identity converses with—conforms to and resists against—those societal tropes, rules, and expectations that work to define racial boundaries. When the factors change—whether the situation, the actors, the societal context, or some combination of all of these—so too does the performance. Racial performances always play off one another, shifting together. (These racial performances affect “whiteness” as well as “blackness” and non-binary racial identifiers such as “brownness.”⁹⁹)

Chapter Two will use these concepts of blackness and racial crisis to examine the history of the music industry and its relationship with race, including the concepts of “black sounds” and the dynamics of crossover. In order to ask why musicians enact particular performances of blackness, however, the first questions must be these: Under what constraints, rules, and boundaries are black musicians working? And what are the rewards and consequences for violating them?

⁹⁹ “Most of the world’s people are some shade of brown. We do not fit well with the binary of black/white.” Toni Nealie. “Meditations on Brownness.” *The Offing Mag*, June 30, 2015. <http://theoffingmag.com/essay/meditations-on-brownness/>.

Chapter 2. From Race Music to Pop Music

Though some 40 years had passed since the music first rose from the plantations of the Mississippi Delta, in 1920 the blues became an overnight sensation. Mamie Smith, with her “Crazy Blues,” was its first superstar, but she sang it nice and slow: “I can't sleep at night, I can't eat a bite, 'cause the man I love, he don't treat me right.”¹⁰⁰

Soul music—parent of R&B, grandchild of the blues, born of the “Southern dream of freedom,” as Peter Guralnick writes¹⁰¹—can trace its arrival into American popular culture to that moment when the record industry realized that black music could sell. After “Crazy Blues,” the public demanded more. From there emerged race music, rhythm and blues, rock ‘n’ roll, and the forms of black cultural expression that would become dominant art forms and parts of public discourse.

With Sam Cooke in mind, this chapter will discuss how music genres were racially constructed over the 20th century, and how the industry formed and reformed around the expansive, intertextual, and often challenging sounds of blackness. The narrative presented in this chapter, however, is necessarily an abridgment, a fragment of the much larger history of black music in America; its themes and dynamics, however, will ring familiar for any genre or time period. Understanding how blackness has historically been heard will be central to an examination of the development and mainstreaming of black music. Finally, this chapter will consider

¹⁰⁰ Mamie Smith. “Crazy Blues,” 1920.
<https://open.spotify.com/track/5j6tQBJnNG4wLLdVISJ5g2>.

¹⁰¹ *Sweet Soul Music*, 6.

the politics of respectable music, the performative process of crossing over, and how “mainstream” success simultaneously reinforces and challenges the structures of the industry.

I. Blues Notes

Despite its origin as an improvised, oral tradition, the blues had to be written down before anyone could start selling it. W.C. Handy made that his task.

A black musician and minstrel orchestra leader, Handy was raised in the Western musical canon and in 1912 began taking what he heard from local Mississippi bands and publishing it as sheet music.¹⁰² Translating the characteristic vocal dips into “blues notes” and the familiar AAB structure into a standardized 12-bar form, Handy introduced the music of ex-slaves and sharecroppers to the general, white public.¹⁰³ But record company executives just couldn’t sell it. Labels like Columbia, Brunswick, and Okeh Records put out recordings of white, female vaudeville singers like Sophie Tucker and Marion Harris performing these “commercial blues” numbers, but neither white nor black audiences bought them.¹⁰⁴

So when Perry Bradford, a black vaudeville star from New York, came to Fred Hager, the white executive of Okeh, proposing that the label invest in “authentically black” recordings aimed at black audiences, Hager thought it might be

¹⁰² Popular music, from the 1890s until the early 1920s when radio and records fully took over, was primarily commercialized through sheet music sales.

¹⁰³ Cheryl L. Keyes. “The Aesthetic Significance of African-American Sound Culture and Its Impact on American Popular Music Style and Industry.” *The World of Music*, Vol. 45, No. 3, “Cross-Cultural Aesthetics.” Verlag für Wissenschaft und Building, 2003.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41699526>. 111.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 112.

worth a shot. Okeh had previously attempted to compete in the more popular, traditionally white-created and -purchased genres such as ballads, sacred music, marching band music, and classical; black audiences were seen as smaller and more niche.¹⁰⁵ Pushed by Bradford, Hager invited Mamie Smith to the studios to perform two of Bradford's songs, "You Can't Keep a Good Man Down" and "That Thing Called Love." Smith was a black vaudeville singer from Cincinnati who sang in Harlem's cabarets, but had never before sung in the folk form.¹⁰⁶ Recorded with a white studio band, sung in a vibrato-filled timbre with a New Orleans jazz feel, the record was somewhat of a flop.¹⁰⁷ It did sell well among African-Americans, though, and that was encouragement enough for Hager.¹⁰⁸

For her follow-up session, Bradford convinced Hager to back Smith with an all-black jazz orchestra, but most everything else remained the same. The composition was Bradford's own, "Crazy Blues," and the horns were classic big-band. Like her previous cuts, "Crazy Blues" did not even sound like the blues, per se, ascribing to neither the standard 12-bar, AAB structure nor any bluesy delivery on Smith's part. It's all vaudeville.¹⁰⁹ But Smith had a hit, and a smash hit at that, such as the burgeoning industry had seen few times before. According to Cheryl Keyes,

¹⁰⁵ William Roy. "'Race Records' and 'Hillbilly Music': Institutional Origins of Racial Categories in the American Commercial Recording Industry." *Poetics*, Vol. 32. Elsevier, 2004. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/222421290_Race_Records. 271-272.

¹⁰⁶ Adam Gussow. "'Shoot Myself a Cop': Mamie Smith's 'Crazy Blues' as Social Text." *Callaloo*, Vol. 25, No. 1, "Jazz Poetics: A Special Issue." The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3300383>. 10.

¹⁰⁷ Mamie Smith. "You Can't Keep a Good Man Down," 1920. <https://open.spotify.com/track/1oBCQz76QQfNpAAxB2JMjD>.

¹⁰⁸ Jones, 99.

Keyes, 113.

¹⁰⁹ "Crazy Blues."

“Crazy Blues” sold 10,000 copies its first week on the shelves, before becoming one of the country’s first million-selling records. By year’s end, it hit 2 million—astronomical sales, mostly coming from poor and working-class African-Americans. Angela Davis writes that black listeners came out in droves to purchase the record for a dollar each, a “small fortune” for most in 1920.¹¹⁰

“There was a market there that had not been served,” said Michael Taft, head of the Archive of Folk Culture at the Library of Congress’s American Folklife Center, in an interview with NPR. “Mamie Smith and her recording was like the opening shot. I think the black public was ready to start buying records, there was enough of a working class with money that were ready, willing and able to buy recordings that were coming out of their own culture.”¹¹¹ Bradford was correct. There was a demand for black singers and the blues, and record companies ran to meet it. Okeh began recording several other women blues singers, and Tin Pan Alley composers started writing mainstream blues songs of their own, all under the umbrella of “classic blues.”¹¹² Artists like Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, Alberta Hunter, Clara Smith, and Trixie Smith were brought into contracts with major labels like Columbia and Paramount and toured widely; unrelated singers who shared the same last name as Mamie Smith were often billed as “one of those Smith sisters,” Keyes writes, though some, like Bessie Smith, became million-selling stars in their own right.¹¹³ Mamie Smith herself

¹¹⁰ The African-American population in 1920 was around 10.5 million. Davis, xii.

¹¹¹ “Mamie Smith and the Birth of the Blues Market.” NPR. Aug. 1, 2006.

<http://www.npr.org/2006/11/11/6473116/mamie-smith-and-the-birth-of-the-blues-market>.

¹¹² Roy, 272.

¹¹³ Keyes, 114.

Bessie Smith. “Downhearted Blues,” 1922.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/5JUhjSyjxtO4uEguZfyf26>.

went on to score a handful of other hits, as well as a healthy film career, while an entire industry for black artists and “race records” built itself around the genres she launched and made room for.

II. Hearing Blackness

“Crazy Blues” succeeded where others had failed, and launched an entirely new genre, in large part because Smith was a black singer singing to black listeners. To those audiences—and to the black press that delighted at her success—Smith’s blues looked and sounded “black” in a way others hadn’t. “What it takes to put a ‘Blues’ number over, Mamie sure has got,” *The Chicago Defender* announced.¹¹⁴

Of course, there are no natural “black sounds,” just as there is no natural black race. But there are aural markers and musical patterns associated—and that have been naturalized and stereotyped—with Africans and African-Americans, which are often evaluated in opposition to whiteness. “African-American music has been often defined in terms of selective features that are, by varying degrees, present or absent in European classical music,” writes Keyes.¹¹⁵ Michael Hanson writes that these features delineate social and racial difference.¹¹⁶ Central among them are call-and-response structures, blues notes and the pentatonic scale patterns they come from, and syncopation. Baraka emphasizes one other feature: “The most apparent survivals of African music in Afro-American music are its rhythms: not only the seeming emphasis in African music on rhythmic, rather than melodic or harmonic, qualities,

¹¹⁴ Gussow, 9.

¹¹⁵ Keyes, 107.

¹¹⁶ Hanson, 343.

but also the use of polyphonic, or contrapuntal, rhythmic effects.”¹¹⁷ Such markers have their origins in West African work songs and religious spirituals, developed and adapted in America’s slavery system, in churches and fields.¹¹⁸ These features continue to appear in today’s hip-hop and R&B.

The white, Western musicologists who have historically evaluated black music draw upon this contrast as the reason for marking “black-sounding” music as inferior to that which descended from European art music.¹¹⁹ The blues note, rather than a natural part of a scale system, was a “rebellious” tone; blues singing was “hoarse” and “uncultivated”; black music was purely functional, rather than “serious art.”¹²⁰ Music critics keep these comparisons alive today. As the *Los Angeles Times* argued in a review of a Public Enemy-headlined concert, “Rap is not a critics’ music; it is a disciples’ music.”¹²¹ Black culture as a whole is relegated solely to one side of the mind-body dichotomy, reinforcing the values of white supremacy.¹²² “Because of this seeming neglect of harmony and melody, Westerners thought the music ‘primitive,’” Baraka writes. “It did not occur to them that Africans might have looked askance at a music as vapid rhythmically as the West’s.”¹²³

¹¹⁷ Jones, 25.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 17.

¹¹⁹ Similar contrasts were drawn in regards to “Eastern” musical styles as well, such as Chinese, Indonesian, and Indian music, both classical and folk.

¹²⁰ “Functional” here refers to music that serves a specific function in the carrying out of daily activities, such as work, religious practice, or education. Baraka, 28-30.

¹²¹ John D’Agostino. “Rap Concert Fails to Sizzle in San Diego.” *The Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 28, 1990. http://articles.latimes.com/1990-08-28/entertainment/ca-286_1_san-diego-sports-arena.

¹²² Gilroy, 97.

¹²³ Baraka, 25.

Though the two traditions arise from different value systems, the dominance of the white, European system has carried through into contemporary discourse and business, determining in part what is and is not eligible for inclusion in the American mainstream. Meanwhile, that drive, and resistance against it, has sustained the energy and innovation of black music. Just as E. Patrick Johnson wrote that black culture is the result of a “mutual constructing/deconstructing, avowing/disavowing, and expanding/delimiting dynamic,” so too is black music defined by instability, a place of conflict over the “production of blackness.”¹²⁴

III. Genre Games

In his article “Questions of Genre in Black Popular Music,” David Brackett recalls visiting a record megastore in the early 2000s hoping to find an album by The Drifters, the iconic doo-wop group formed in 1953 that backed both Clyde McPhatter and Ben E. King. Rather than being sorted into an “oldies” section, alongside records of the same era, The Drifters instead appeared in “R&B,” the contemporary version of “rhythm & blues.”¹²⁵ It was an odd placement, certainly, but not uncommon in the music marketplace. “Consumers interested in the inconsistencies of this system need only look under ‘J’ in the R&B section,” Brackett muses, “where they will find the Jackson 5, the Jacksons, and Jermaine and Janet Jackson, but not Michael—he’s in

¹²⁴ Johnson, 2.

¹²⁵ The Drifters. “There Goes My Baby,” 1959.
<https://open.spotify.com/track/2s4B4fUIVikE4ELgoupjXL>.

the Pop/Rock section in the middle of the floor along with his confreres Prince and Jimi Hendrix.”¹²⁶

What’s in a genre name? As Brackett’s story highlights, black music and its labels have been fluid throughout American history, going through numerous iterations, reiterations, and interpretations. Emerging from various locations—including marketing departments, subcultural groups, and outside critics—genres are neither temporally or sonically consistent. Indeed, the rules and flexibility of genre naming often parallel the rules and flexibility of identity. Genres remain useful nevertheless in understanding the capitalist and creative relationships central to the continuing functions of the music industry.

After the success of Mamie Smith, Okeh Records rushed to capitalize on the sudden popularity of black singers and the blues. In 1921, Okeh launched the first ever black music catalog, the 8000 “Race” series, featuring a number of singles by Mamie Smith & Her Jazz Hounds, such as “Cubanita” and “Rambling Blues.”¹²⁷ Also included in the catalog were records by groups like Daisy Martin and Her Five Jazz Bellhops, the Norfolk Jazz Quartet, and Tim Brymm’s Black Devil Orchestra.¹²⁸

The “race records” designation reflected less the styles of the music (which ranged from jazz to classic blues to the soon-to-be-popular acoustic Delta blues) than who made it: black artists, producing “working class African-American music.”¹²⁹

¹²⁶ David Brackett. “Questions of Genre in Black Popular Music.” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 1. Columbia College Chicago and University of Illinois Press, Center for Black Music Research, 2005. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30039286>. 74.

¹²⁷ Roy, 273.

¹²⁸ “Okeh 8000 series numerical listing.” 78 Discography. <http://www.78discography.com/OK8000.html>.

¹²⁹ Garofalo, 275.

This was a marketing decision more than anything else. At the same time that “race” worked as a segregating identifier, it also stood as a point of pride—Reebee Garofalo writes that prominent African-Americans were called “race leaders” in the same black newspapers, like the *Chicago Defender*, where the records were advertised. Separate racial identifiers (“hillbilly” or “old time”) signaled music for rural white people. Those records, the genre of which morphed into “country & western,” served a similarly niche audience and developed parallel to the race music industry in the 1920s in much the same way.¹³⁰

When Okeh’s catalog came out, other record companies followed suit. Paramount launched its own race series in 1922, Columbia in 1923, Vocalion in 1926, and Victor in 1927. According to Cheryl Keyes, “the number of blues and gospel titles released each year grew from about 50 in 1921 to 250 in 1925 and 500 in 1927.”¹³¹ The organization of catalogs reflected the way the industry marketed music in the 1920s. William Roy writes that records were sold mostly to stimulate phonograph and sheet music sales, so they were most common in places like furniture stores, which were segregated by location and clientele.¹³² Labels, such as the short-lived but influential Paramount Records, would have those store owners act as talent scouts, to search out both new artists and new styles of music.¹³³ Catalogs, like Okeh’s 8000 series or Paramount’s 12000 series, were designed for easy selection by

¹³⁰ Hillbilly records were created to market to farmers. Okeh Records pursued this market as well, recording the fiddler John Carson and finding him, and other “Old Time Tunes” like his, commercially viable for a new catalog series. Roy, 266.

¹³¹ Keyes, 113.

¹³² Roy, 272.

¹³³ Sarah Filzen. “The Rise and Fall of Paramount Records.” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Vol. 82, No. 2. Wisconsin Historical Society, 1998-1999. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4636792>. 113.

retailers and scouts, who would want to better target their shoppers and place their new recruits.

It wasn't until 1942, however, that *Billboard*—the trade publication of the music industry and overseer of record popularity metrics—recognized the industry growing up around African-American popular music and published its first chart specifically to track those songs. But “race music” as a designation was no longer in vogue.¹³⁴ Instead of a more obvious racial term such as “ebony” or “sepia,” *Billboard* went with “Harlem Hit Parade.”¹³⁵ By the end of the 1940s, however, the industry had more or less settled on a more appropriate—if still rather un-descriptive—catch-all to sell to America: “rhythm and blues,” as dubbed by the white *Billboard* reporter (and later music exec) Jerry Wexler in 1949.¹³⁶

IV. Participation and Identification

Genres, Toynebee argues, are important for tracking the musical habits and social alignments of artists, from an individual text to a body of work.¹³⁷ Their vagueness is part of their usefulness. “For critics as much as for musicians, then, genre poses a conundrum,” he writes. “At one and the same time it seems to be constituted as an essence, as a collection of traits, and in structured opposition to other genres.”¹³⁸

The first two notions of genre imply a set of sonic attributes at the dead center of a repertoire—such as instruments, lyrics, and song structure—to which all musical

¹³⁴ Garofalo, 276.

¹³⁵ Keyes, 116.

¹³⁶ *Sweet Soul Music*, 22.

¹³⁷ *Making Popular Music*, 102.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 106.

texts are related. While it is true that music can be grouped along those lines, to pursue that “ideal” sound is futile.¹³⁹ As easy as it may be to “identify” a text as part of a genre, no text can conform perfectly to every single corresponding trait; otherwise, all rock or hip-hop would sound exactly the same.¹⁴⁰ Nor can a genre be boiled down to a racial essence: no-one who has listened to The Righteous Brothers or The Bee Gees would argue R&B, though a historically African-American-invented and -driven genre, is only played by black artists or consumed by black audiences.¹⁴¹ The previous chapter’s dilemma of white musicians playing the blues underlines this issue. The third notion of genre addresses genre as social process, wherein communities of listeners name and then claim particular genres. Subcultural groups exemplify this process, yielding new and hybrid genre categories like trap and skater-punk.¹⁴²

The reality of genres is that they are simultaneously real and imagined. “Musical genres participate in the circulation of social connotations that pass between musicians, fans, critics, music-industry magnates and employees,” writes Brackett.¹⁴³ Genre labels function as a critical part of sharing and disseminating music, among small groups as well as in the larger economy, and an important part of the creation of new music. “Thus R&B, the music-industry category, might consist of R&B, hip-hop, neo-soul, and quiet storm as proposed in radio formats, nightclubs, certain record

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 103.

¹⁴¹ Garofalo, 279.

¹⁴² *Making Popular Music*, 111.

¹⁴³ “Questions of Genre in Black Popular Music,” 76.

stores, or in the everyday discourse of fans,” Brackett continues.¹⁴⁴ Genres are constantly undergoing transformations, and their elements are not mutually exclusive. Brackett makes the critical argument that, due to artistic synthesis or a shifting historical understanding, a musical text may belong to more than one genre at a one time. That isn’t to say that genre is meaningless or infinite, however. “Simply because the boundaries of genre are permeable and fluctuating does not mean that they are not patrolled,” Brackett writes. “Simply because a musical text may not ‘belong’ to a genre with any stability does not mean that it does not ‘participate’ in one.”¹⁴⁵

“Participation” is an apt word choice. To borrow Brackett’s example, writing that a song like OutKast’s 2003 hit “Hey Ya”¹⁴⁶ definitively belongs to hip-hop might be a half-truth at best. Brackett explains that a more accurate statement would be that “Hey Ya” primarily *participates in* hip-hop, while also participating in funk, R&B, alternative rock, and even “pop.”¹⁴⁷ Of course, there are certain genres it absolutely does not participate in, such as country. “Participation” also accounts for how categorization of music changes over time: a light Motown song like “Please Mr. Postman” by The Marvelettes¹⁴⁸ may have been considered straight pop when it hit

¹⁴⁴ Neo-soul is a contemporary subgenre of R&B that merges elements of funk and hip-hop. D’Angelo and Frank Ocean are a particularly prominent examples. Quiet storm is another subgenre distinguished by slow, soulful, sexy jams, as in “Let’s Get It On” by Marvin Gaye or most of Barry White’s discography.

¹⁴⁵ “Questions of Genre in Black Popular Music,” 76.

¹⁴⁶ OutKast. “Hey Ya,” 2003. <https://open.spotify.com/track/5WQ1hIc5d2EVbRQ8qsj8Uh>.

¹⁴⁷ A certain clear studio quality and sound balance in the recording can be heard as “pop production,” a term that itself has been influenced over the years by the mainstreaming of certain popular genres—hip-hop being the most recent. For more, read Derek Thompson, “1991: The Most Important Year in Pop-Music History.” *The Atlantic*, May 8, 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/05/1991-the-most-important-year-in-music/392642/>.

¹⁴⁸ The Marvelettes. “Please Mr. Postman,” 1961. <https://open.spotify.com/track/6jX5mso4x00c1EiNMrTU9U>.

the top of the *Billboard* charts in 1961, but now it would certainly be placed in R&B, “doo-wop,” and “girl group.”¹⁴⁹

In this way, genres can be seen as performative like identity, with boundaries constantly policed by participants, musicians, and authorities such as critics and industry heads. Sometimes that policing comes in the form of top-down relabeling; sometimes it is the result of small musical changes, such as disco’s development from funk music. And, occasionally, it is racial. What, actually, is the difference between “soul” and “blue-eyed soul,” other than that the latter is performed by white artists?¹⁵⁰ Such a decision is a judgment of whiteness (as previously discussed, soul is defaulted black), but a tenuous one. Corinne Bailey Rae, a contemporary British singer-songwriter who has scored two Top 10 albums, was born to a white-English mother and a black-Caribbean father but identifies alternately as “black” and “mixed-race.”¹⁵¹ Her music is classified as soul, among other genres (pop, indie, R&B), but never blue-eyed soul, despite her half-white heritage.¹⁵²

Genres are unstable economic indicators, but their usage does have consequences. “Rhythm and Blues” stood as the dominant term for black-derived music until November 1963, when *Billboard* suddenly discontinued the separate

¹⁴⁹ “Girl group,” along with “boy band,” is a fascinatingly imprecise genre name of its own because it describes the band makeup (and usually a younger audience) rather than the sound, although both imply multi-part vocal harmonies heavily based in R&B styling.

¹⁵⁰ Garofalo, 277.

¹⁵¹ Nadra Kareem Nittle. “Race Card: Corinne Bailey Rae and Zadie Smith Navigate Race And Art.” Bitch Media, Jan. 21, 2010. <https://bitchmedia.org/post/race-card-corinne-bailey-rae-and-zadie-smith-navigate-race-and-art-1>.

¹⁵² Corinne Bailey Rae. “Put Your Records On,” 2006. <https://open.spotify.com/track/2dEJE18eoskLm4bjSW6kmY>.

R&B singles chart.¹⁵³ The magazine cited the popularity of Motown Records and the large number of R&B singles appearing on the pop chart as the reason for the change, and from 1963 until 1965 maintained that a separate chart was unnecessary. Without it, though, black artists no longer had a clear genre in which they could participate, and retailers and radio stations had no obvious way to track new black music or bring up-and-coming acts to the attention of the mainstream. The result was a three-year span where black musicians seemingly disappeared from the industry altogether.¹⁵⁴ Only three of the top 50 albums in 1964-65 were by black artists, and the number of black artists in the top 10 slots of the Hot 100 singles chart dropped from 37 in 1963 to 21 in 1964, a decrease of over 40 percent.¹⁵⁵ As Chris Molanphy shows in his article “I Know You Got Soul: The Trouble With Billboard’s R&B/Hip-Hop Chart,” any changes to *Billboard*’s rules have an outsized impact on the state of black music in the country.¹⁵⁶

The industry must have noticed the lack of black artists, or a drop in profits from black markets, and in January 1965 reinstated the R&B chart. As the genre was inundated with new, Southern styles, especially the rootsy, harder “Stax sound” out of Memphis and the rhythmic, gospel-heavy “Muscle Shoals sound” of Alabama, the term “soul” came to represent a new surge of emotion in black music.¹⁵⁷ “It was a

¹⁵³ David Brackett. “The Politics and Practice of ‘Crossover’ in American Popular Music, 1963-1965.” *The Music Quarterly*, Vol. 78, No. 4. Oxford University Press, 1994. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/742509>. 778

¹⁵⁴ Garofalo, 277.

¹⁵⁵ “The Politics and Practice of ‘Crossover’ in American Popular Music, 1963-1965,” 779.

¹⁵⁶ Chris Molanphy. “I Know You Got Soul: The Trouble With Billboard’s R&B/Hip-Hop Chart.” Pitchfork, April 14, 2014. <http://pitchfork.com/features/article/9378-i-know-you-got-soul-the-trouble-with-billboards-rbhip-hop-chart/>.

¹⁵⁷ *Sweet Soul Music*, 8.

musical mode in which the band might be out of tune, the drummer out of time, the singer off-key, and yet the message could still come across—since underlying feeling was all,” Guralnick writes. In 1969, *Billboard* changed the R&B chart name to “Soul” until 1982, when they abandoned what they saw as a limiting label in favor of the more straightforward “Top Black Albums” and “Hot Black Singles” charts.¹⁵⁸ Of course, those caused their own confusion, as white participation in black genres never declined—as in when the 1989 American Music Award for Best Black Male Vocal went to the white pop artist George Michael.¹⁵⁹

Billboard, though seen by many in the industry as authoritative, tends to lag behind the cultural zeitgeist. When hip-hop emerged as a genre and began to gain popularity—after the Sugar Hill Gang’s breakout 1979 hit “Rapper’s Delight”¹⁶⁰—it was lumped into the R&B and Black music rankings. Not until 1989 did hip-hop gain a chart of its own, “Hot Rap Singles.” *Billboard* switched back from “Black” charts to R&B from 1990-1999, when it issued the combined “Hot R&B/Hip-Hop” chart, which exists to this day (in addition to a slew of rankings too numerous and complicated to explore fully here).¹⁶¹

Rock ‘n’ roll, on the other hand, didn’t become associated primarily with white artists until the 1960s. That was after Elvis Presley and Bill Haley had covered,

¹⁵⁸ Garofalo, 278.

Molanphy.

¹⁵⁹ Garofalo, 278.

¹⁶⁰ Sugar Hill Gang. “Rapper’s Delight,” 1979.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/0FWhGmPVxLI6jOVF0wjALa>.

¹⁶¹ Molanphy.

“Charts.” *Billboard*. <http://www.billboard.com/charts>.

and the white Cleveland DJ Alan Freed had named, the style.¹⁶² But rock was inarguably created by black artists like Louis Jordan and Ray Charles, and was through the 1950s heard as a distinctly “black” style, with all the stereotypes and racialized baggage that came with.¹⁶³ Now, Jordan and Charles are usually lumped under the label of R&B; rock in the 21st century (and especially the subgenre of “indie rock”¹⁶⁴) is assumed to refer to white men with guitars.¹⁶⁵

“Afro-American music did not become a completely American expression until the white man could play it,” Baraka muses.¹⁶⁶ But when, if ever, did it become a mainstream expression?

V. Mainstreaming

The “mainstream,” writes Jason Toynbee, is imagined as the junk food of the music industry.¹⁶⁷ It’s said to be bland and mass-produced, full of empty calories and little nutritional value.

¹⁶² Both Presley and Haley might also be considered “rockabilly” artists, for taking the saxophones of jump blues and replacing them with guitars, a merging of black and “hillbilly” styles. Keyes, 120.

Elvis Presley. “Blue Suede Shoes,” 1956.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/47gmoUrZV3w20JAnQOZMcO>.

¹⁶³ Roshanak Kheshti. “Musical Miscegenation and the Logic of Rock and Roll: Homosocial Desire and Racial Productivity in ‘A Paler Shade of White.’” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 60, No. 4. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40068560>. 1039.

¹⁶⁴ Sarah Sahim. “The Unbearable Whiteness of Indie.” Pitchfork, March 25, 2015.

<http://pitchfork.com/thepitch/710-the-unbearable-whiteness-of-indie/>.

¹⁶⁵ Lawrence N. Redd. “Rock! It’s Still Rhythm and Blues.” *The Black Perspective in Music*, Vol. 13, No. 1. Foundation for Research in the Afro-American Creative Arts, 1985. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1214792>. 32.

Kheshti, 1038.

¹⁶⁶ Jones, 155.

¹⁶⁷ Jason Toynbee. “Mainstreaming, From Hegemonic Centre to Global Networks.” *Popular Music Studies*. Ed. David Hesmondhalgh and Keith Negus. New York: Arnold, 2002. 149.

Scholars tend to agree. Baraka degrades the mainstream as “oblivion.”¹⁶⁸ To Nelson George, writing in the provocatively-titled *The Death of Rhythm & Blues*, the mainstream is merchandising.¹⁶⁹ Their positions stem from the Afro-Modernist project to re-signify black culture, but both scholars also understand the mainstream’s historical demographic alignments. Since the birth of the modern music recording industry, “the assumed mainstream pop audience was northern, urban, middle or upper class, and also white,” writes David Brackett.¹⁷⁰ That assumption may be false, but it is influential.

While what is in the mainstream is necessarily popular, not all that is popular is considered mainstream. That’s the main issue with those terms—they are all purposefully vague. “In practice, there is no evidence that the mainstream exists as a substantive category,” Toynbee writes.¹⁷¹ Even the pop singles chart—the *Billboard* Top 40, the ranking of music conventionally referred to as the mainstream—is, in fact, a pretty heterogeneous group, and not by accident. Rather, Toynbee argues, “a mainstream is a formation that brings together large numbers of people from diverse social groups and across large geographical areas in common affiliation to a musical style.”¹⁷² A more useful way to think about the mainstream is as the result of an ongoing, continuous process: “mainstreaming.”

Toynbee, in his essay on mainstreaming, identifies three currents that make and maintain the music mainstream: hegemony, an economic current, and the search

¹⁶⁸ Jones, 131.

¹⁶⁹ George, 9.

¹⁷⁰ “The Politics and Practice of ‘Crossover’ in American Popular Music, 1963-1965,” 777.

¹⁷¹ “Mainstreaming, From Hegemonic Centre to Global Networks,” 149.

¹⁷² *Ibid*, 150.

for an aesthetic of the center.¹⁷³ In postcolonial terminology, the “mainstream” is the “core” of any cultural industry—the center of enterprise, dominant and valued above all else.¹⁷⁴ Subgenres, subcultures, and alternative or minority groups lie on the periphery—they are the Other, as described by Gayatri Spivak.¹⁷⁵

The hegemonic quality of the mainstream explains how mass taste, rather than being “the inevitable cultural outcome of modern capitalist societies and mass media,” must be assembled.¹⁷⁶ For example, Toynbee writes, in the Tin Pan Alley-Hollywood period of the music industry, approximately from the 1920s through the 1950s, the 32-bar, AABA song structure dominated, with lyrics focusing around common themes like love and loss. This style was ubiquitous, disseminated through cinemas and radios and aimed at current citizens and recent immigrants alike, attempting to bring Americans of all classes into a common fold—or, as Jared Ball would argue, to negate alternative cultural expressions in favor of the dominant one.¹⁷⁷ The economic reasoning of such a mainstream should be obvious: to sell to the broadest possible market. “For here is a formation whose identity must be (precisely) nebulous and all-encompassing if it is to include difference,” Toynbee writes. “To put it another way, we might say that hegemony depends on ambiguity

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Mary Pratt. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. New York: Routledge, 1992. 7.

¹⁷⁵ Gayatri Spivak. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988. 280.

¹⁷⁶ “Mainstreaming, From Hegemonic Centre to Global Networks,” 151.

¹⁷⁷ Jared Ball. *I Mix What I Like!: A Mixtape Manifesto*. Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2011. 52.

rather than precise naming.”¹⁷⁸ Mainstream culture means whatever a person needs or wants it to mean.

Such ambiguity is achieved through an aesthetic of the center, or at least the search for it. Toynbee writes that all styles have a “centripetal tendency,” in which the key, pleasurable features of a certain music tend to be repeated.¹⁷⁹ After a while, however, that tendency lessens, as artists exhaust the possibilities of the template or otherwise tire of the same old sound. When that happens, new voices and features—*difference*—are required to reinvigorate the style. Even in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, when the music industry supports a number of different style mainstreams (hip-hop, country, rock, etc.), the cycle continues. “The mainstream has always depended on the importation of musical authenticity, a primordial source of energy from without,” Toynbee says. Richard Middleton calls this energy the “low-Other.”¹⁸⁰ In the process of mainstreaming, the center takes from the “low” culture of the periphery (the Other) what it sees as new and exciting, incorporating that into the “high” culture of the mainstream.

Black culture has been America’s most consistent renewable source of low-Other energy.¹⁸¹ In both audience and sound, black music can be a conduit for racialized stereotypes of blackness, and is described as such by hegemonic

¹⁷⁸ “Mainstreaming, From Hegemonic Centre to Global Networks,” 155.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 153.

¹⁸⁰ Richard Middleton. “Musical Belongings: Western Music and Its Low-Other.” *Western Music and Its Others*. Ed. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. 63.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 67.

authorities: savage, animalistic, noisy, improper.¹⁸² Rock ‘n’ roll in its early iterations was produced and listened to by “delinquent bodies,” as Jennifer Stoever-Ackerman writes; rock was “jungle music” that was not just different from but threatened white middle-class values and the fabric of civil society.¹⁸³ Hip-hop, Tricia Rose writes, received (and continues to receive) a similar treatment. This perceived threat centers on two traits naturalized as part of blackness: criminality and sexuality.

The association of blackness with criminality is well-documented and influential in both politics and music, and connected to longstanding stereotypes of African-Americans as poor and violent.¹⁸⁴ “If you listen to the lyrics of hip hop, they actually revere crime,” said a police officer in reference to Public Enemy, when the popular rap group visited England in 1988.¹⁸⁵ The threat of blackness also hinges on fears of black sexuality, which has long been an object of anxiety and fascination and a target of control for white people.¹⁸⁶ The imagined “Black Brute” (reimagined in the

¹⁸² Tricia Rose. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994. 138.

¹⁸³ Jennifer Stoever-Ackerman. “Reproducing U.S. Citizenship in *Blackboard Jungle*: Race, Cold War Liberalism, and the Tape Recorder.” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 3. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011. <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/aq/summary/v063/63.3.stoever-ackerman.html>. 792.

¹⁸⁴ Kelly Welch. “Black Criminal Stereotypes and Racial Profiling.” *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, Vol. 23, No. 3. Sage Publications, 2007. <http://ccj.sagepub.com/content/23/3/276.short>. 276.

¹⁸⁵ Quoted in William Maxwell. “Sampling Authenticity: Rap Music, Postmodernism, and the Ideology of Black Crime.” *Studies in Popular Culture*, Vol. 14, No. 1. Popular Culture Association in the South, 1991. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23413913>. 2.

¹⁸⁶ Black women are additionally policed by black men. While this chapter focuses mostly on black male heterosexuality and masculinity, the careers of black female musicians are certainly impacted more by the low-Other designation of black female sexuality, hetero and queer alike. After all, the music industry is, like most economic spaces, dominated by and aimed at heterosexual men. Later chapters consider intersectional performances of blackness.

1990s in the “superpredator” trope) was seen by white men as dangerous and criminal for not only for his animal strength but also his lust after and desire to rape white women.¹⁸⁷ And, as Chapter One mentioned, fear of miscegenation fueled anti-abolitionist and anti-Civil Rights backlash.¹⁸⁸ From the Ku Klux Klan’s glorification in the 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*,¹⁸⁹ to the lynching of Emmett Till by a white mob in 1955 and the murder of Michael Brown by a white police officer in 2014,¹⁹⁰ white men have read danger—imminent or eventual—into the sexualized and/or criminalized black body, and acted (*performed*) violently against it to keep it within acceptable boundaries.

The taboo of the low-Other *is* its appeal, though, especially to white youth. Eric Lott, in *Love & Theft*, traces how white audiences’ obsession with exaggerated black male sexuality anchored the appeal of raunchy blackface minstrel shows.¹⁹¹ Ragtime, a syncopated dance music that came from jazz, was similarly popular because it seemed to “permit the socially forbidden participation in the lascivious,

Daphne A. Brooks. “‘All That You Can’t Leave Behind’: Black Female Soul Singing and the Politics of Surrogation in the Age of Catastrophe.” *Meridians*, Vol. 8, No. 1, “Representin’: Women, Hip-Hop, and Popular Music.” Indiana University Press, 2008. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40338916>. 181.

¹⁸⁷ Clyde Haberman. “When Youth Violence Spurred ‘Superpredator’ Fear.” *The New York Times*, April 6, 2014. <http://nyti.ms/1kgDX5d>.

¹⁸⁸ Kheshti, 1043.

¹⁸⁹ *Ethnic Notions*. DVD. Directed by Marlon Riggs. Signifyin’ Works. San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1986.

¹⁹⁰ Frederica Boswell. “In Darren Wilson’s Testimony, Familiar Themes About Black Men.” *Code Switch*, NPR, Nov. 26, 2014. <http://n.pr/1uHiq4b>.

¹⁹¹ Eric Lott. *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

expressive, and illicit ways associated with black life,” writes Susan Curtis.¹⁹² Davis argues in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* that female blues singers were identified with a particular working-class sexuality.¹⁹³ Rock ‘n’ roll became the sound of rebellion for exactly the “lowness” heard in its blues influences and seen in its subversive attitude.¹⁹⁴ Since the 1980s, some scholars and activists have argued that hip-hop’s presentation of masculinity appeals to young white men in much the same way.¹⁹⁵ “It is no accident that the source of Hip is the Negro for he has been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries,” wrote Norman Mailer in a 1957 essay titled “The White Negro.”¹⁹⁶ Because these stereotypes are reiterated throughout the cultural imaginary, they remain potent over time and transferable over media.

“African-American music in this sense authorized white desire,” Curtis writes.¹⁹⁷ Indeed, the relationship of the low-other to the mainstream might seem familiar. It’s the same process mentioned in the previous chapter that Baraka described as “The Great Music Robbery.”¹⁹⁸ Black traditional and subcultural activities have long been a source of new authenticity for music, fashion, art, and

¹⁹² Susan Curtis. “Black Creativity and Black Stereotype: Rethinking Twentieth-Century Popular Music in America.” *Beyond Blackface: African-Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930*. Ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. 133.

¹⁹³ Davis, xiii.

¹⁹⁴ Steve Valocchi. “The Emergence of the Integrationist Ideology in the Civil Rights Movement.” *Social Problems*, Vol. 43, No. 1. University of California Press, Society for the Study of Social Problems, 1996. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3096897>. 134.

¹⁹⁵ “Sex Stereotypes of African-Americans Have Long History.” NPR, May 7, 2007. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10057104>.

¹⁹⁶ Norman Mailer. “The White Negro (Fall 1957).” *Dissent Magazine*, June 20, 2007. https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/the-white-negro-fall-1957.

¹⁹⁷ Curtis, 133.

¹⁹⁸ Rudinow, 130.

other creative industries. Consider the scandal of the white pop star Miley Cyrus “twerking” at the 2013 Video Music Awards, and the ongoing debate about “cultural appropriation.”¹⁹⁹ Consider, as mentioned above, how the Tin Pan Alley songwriters (most of whom were Jewish New Yorkers) began to write “blues” songs after the success of Mamie Smith. The music industry requires the energy of blackness to maintain the hegemony of white artists and producers.

VI. Crossing Over

In crossover music, this power imbalance shifts, though not entirely. “Some see the idea of crossover as utopian, a metaphor for integration, upward mobility, and ever-greater acceptance of marginalized groups by the larger society,” writes Brackett.²⁰⁰ As with the actual politics of integration, however, crossover at once finds itself critiqued as both too radical and not radical enough, dependent on the standing structures of power but threatening to their existence.

“After I got into the public,” Louis Jordan once recalled, “they said I should straddle the fence—that I shouldn’t play just for Negroes, but for the world.”²⁰¹ It was prescient advice for Jordan, King of the Jukebox. In “Caledonia,” Jordan’s 1945 hit record with His Tympany Five, the brass swings with the boogie-woogie piano, hallmarks of early rock n’ roll.²⁰² Jordan talk-sings his way through a declaration of

¹⁹⁹ Tressie McMillan Cottom. “Brown Body, White Wonderland.” *Slate*, Aug. 29, 2013. http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2013/08/miley_cyrus_vma_performance_why_appropriation_of_black_bodies.html.

²⁰⁰ “The Politics and Practice of ‘Crossover’ in American Popular Music, 1963-1965,” 777.

²⁰¹ Quoted in *Race Music*, 62.

²⁰² Louis Jordan. “Caledonia,” 1945.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/3JNXLHYtjU8DmcdtOIM6V2>.

his love, always tongue-in-cheek: “Caledonia! Caledonia! What makes your big head so hard?” His voice cracks, and the last syllable of her name just screeches out.

“Caledonia,” boosted by the popularity of a video shown in movie theaters that year, not only topped the Harlem Hit Parade but also ascended the pop singles chart, reaching the #6 spot.²⁰³ He did, in a way, play for the world. For some critics at the time, however, that was the same thing as playing for white folks. His polished-yet-cartoonish performances (complete with coordinated outfits) did indeed appeal widely to white audiences, a self-consciously “harmless,” even laughable, image seen by black critics as evidence of his selling out black pride for popularity.²⁰⁴

According to Toynbee, the term “crossover” conventionally describes black music intended originally for a niche black market that then “crosses over” to the mainstream or pop market, which, as previously mentioned, is assumed to be working or middle class and white.²⁰⁵ Crossover is not a solely black phenomenon, however. Other niche genres like electronic dance music or country have found success on the pop charts (e.g., Taylor Swift and Carrie Underwood), as have foreign artists in genres like Latin pop (e.g., Ricky Martin and Gloria Estefan). So too has music intended for American markets, either niche or pop, sometimes found success in a parallel niche or foreign market. But no genres have had quite the crossover power of black music.

The worry for critics about crossover music is that, in appealing to the mainstream, artists might dilute the sounds that made them stand out in the first

²⁰³ “Louis Jordan discography,” Wikipedia.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Jordan_discography.

²⁰⁴ *Race Music*, 67.

²⁰⁵ *Making Popular Music*, 120.

place—that cultural innovation, in the face of economic incentives to become “respectable,” will fade away into oblivion. Baraka catastrophizes “the hopelessly interwoven fabric of American life where blacks and whites pass so quickly as to become only grays!”²⁰⁶ And in fact, common aesthetic factors do tend to emerge in crossover recordings, as multiple studies have documented. “The biggest crossovers tend to be songs that make the most obvious concessions to values that date back to the conventions of Tin Pan Alley pop,” Brackett writes.²⁰⁷ Looking at a handful of R&B songs from 1965, Brackett found that formal arrangements, vocal harmonies, and Western orchestral instrumentation (all sonic markers of whiteness), with limited improvisation (a sonic marker of blackness), tended to do better on the pop charts than those songs that sounded more “black.”²⁰⁸

Here’s another way to spin that: Those black crossover songs participated in a pop genre as well as R&B. In this way, black artists exhibited a central tenet of black musical culture, intertextuality, by referencing or appropriating white sounds. Motown Records, the Detroit-based label founded by Berry Gordy in 1959, specifically courted white audiences by merging black vocal groups like The Supremes²⁰⁹ and The Miracles,²¹⁰ who featured call-and-response patterns between the front and backup singers, with white-coded pop production, heard especially in the horn and string arrangements. The combination became so prominent in the music

²⁰⁶ Jones, 111.

²⁰⁷ “The Politics and Practice of ‘Crossover’ in American Popular Music, 1963-1965,” 792.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 786.

²⁰⁹ The Supremes. “Where Did Our Love Go,” 1964.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/69RH84na5iUNwrwxpgjC5j>.

²¹⁰ The Miracles. “Shop Around,” 1960.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/47IRIQxGDe2Sc6F4pe2FMf>.

mainstream that it earned its own moniker: the “Motown Sound.”²¹¹ Jimi Hendrix and Sly and the Family Stone, later in the decade, both borrowed heavily from the mostly-white San Francisco psychedelic rock scene in their own versions of rock and funk. Black artists also appropriate other “low-Other” cultures, such as when Sam Cooke, like numerous jazz musicians before him, started playing with a “Latin sound.”²¹² Hip-hop artists particularly pride themselves on their lyrical and musical references: “For rap’s language wizards, all images, sounds, ideas, and icons are ripe for recontextualization, pun, mockery, and celebration,” Tricia Rose writes.²¹³

Whether they were better received because of their hybrid composition or they were hybridized in order to find greater success, crossover songs inherently challenge the notion of musical authenticity. “Black music in this context is revealed as hybrid at the root,” writes Brackett.²¹⁴ Crossover songs escape some of the boundaries of genre and racialized marketing; they bring the margins to the center, make the “low” high (or at least middle-brow). Certainly, though, black artists face higher barriers of entry to mainstream popularity than do white artists, and a greater degree of scrutiny even when they succeed. “‘Crossover’ recordings illuminate the instability of musical categories even as they reinforce and rely on them,” Brackett argues.²¹⁵ So too do crossover recordings reinforce and destabilize the industry’s capitalistic practices.

²¹¹ The label would later feature artists who broke from those strict requirements, such as Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, and Michael Jackson, who all got their starts at Motown. Valocchi, 134.

²¹² *Dream Boogie*, 237.

Sam Cooke. “Cupid,” 1961. <https://open.spotify.com/track/6VqVieqjDEwS3mByMq4OzB>.

²¹³ Rose, 3.

²¹⁴ Brackett, 88.

²¹⁵ “Questions of Genre in Black Popular Music,” 80.

To crossover is also to ascend to a higher level of economic performance. That cannot be discounted. Musical success, as previously discussed, was and to a degree still is one of the few prominent paths to black upward mobility. Critics like Baraka deride that path as an attempt at imitating whiteness, at rejecting blackness for personal gain.²¹⁶ The reality, however, is that the economic security and prestige provided by mainstream success are desirable in more ways than one. A move from the “Chitlin Circuit”²¹⁷ to, say, the Copacabana comes with a sizeable improvement in not only the artist’s material comfort but also treatment; in general, the physical safety of black musicians, especially while touring, was rarely guaranteed.²¹⁸ Greater impact on the music industry means greater liberty and support inside it, including artistic freedom. The hope, fulfilled or not, is not that crossover success would make blackness disappear but rather that it would allow blackness to go unrestricted.

In the crossing-over of black music, there is racial crisis. Crossover exposes the construction of the music industry and threatens to destabilize its boundaries. An industry built to support white, urban consumers and artists can include segments for black people and other groups, but it requires the preservation of difference to maintain its hierarchical relationship to the low-Other. The necessity of this defense increases when black music becomes outwardly political or contradicts societal

²¹⁶ Jones, 58.

²¹⁷ “The ‘Chitlin’ Circuit’ ... was a group of performance venues located mostly in the South that were safe and acceptable places for African-American musicians and entertainers to perform during Jim Crow.” Tanya Ballard-Brown. “The Origin (And Hot Stank) Of The ‘Chitlin’ Circuit.” Code Switch, NPR, Feb. 16 2014. <http://n.pr/1nsb55U>.

²¹⁸ The “Green Book,” a cheap traveling guide for African-American motorists during Jim Crow, was especially helpful to touring jazz musicians. “‘Green Book’ Helped African-Americans Travel Safely.” Talk of the Nation, NPR, Sept. 16, 2010. <http://n.pr/9N0V02>.

norms. “It is the ability to resist, the potential (with continued demonstrations of the fact) to salvage culture and use it as a means of anti-colonial struggle, which demands such a powerful response from the colonizer’s media,” writes Ball.²¹⁹ One song’s crossover, after all, has the potential to spur much more.

The music industry has developed several practices that reinforce its boundaries. “When black rhythm ’n’ blues performers began to attract the attention of record consumers, the industry began the practice of ‘covering,’” writes Lawrence Redd.²²⁰ “Covering” here does not merely refer to the practice of musicians performing their own versions of other artists’ songs, a longstanding feature of the jazz and folk genres, but rather the strategic, predatory move by a record company to have one of its white artists cover a lesser-known and often just-released song by a black artist.²²¹ From solo acts like Pat Boone covering songs such as “Long Tall Sally” and “Tutti Frutti” by Little Richard (another Blackwell-produced hit from Specialty Records), to barbershop groups like The Crew Cuts covering The Chords’ classic “Sh-Boom,”²²² covering became infamous for the obvious way in which companies attempted to capitalize on black creativity and in the process created less-exciting but better-selling music. Boone, an ardent Christian, particularly frustrated

²¹⁹ Ball, 56.

²²⁰ Redd, 41.

²²¹ Performing a cover song could often be a cheaper bet for a record company than attempting to craft a pop hit of its own. It required only paying songwriter fees for the use of the composition. For more on royalties, see footnote #272.

²²² The Crew Cuts, “Sh-Boom,” 1954.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/3EcdioSeXbtELIdpFGDg5W>.

The Chords. “Sh-Boom,” 1954.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/5TiUTAPurormiQX9gE0CAQ>.

black musicians by making the sexual content of lyrics by Little Richard and others more “palatable” for middlebrow audiences.²²³

Covering and other such forms of industry-promoted appropriation, in addition to contributing to the Great Music Robbery, can be read as defensive acts. “The objective,” Redd says, “was to prevent black artists, who recorded on small labels, from entering the large white consumer market by supplying consumers with recordings of white artists singing the rhythm ’n’ blues music of the blacks.”²²⁴ To this end, Boone’s “Tutti Frutti” hit #12 on the pop chart while Little Richard’s only reached #17. By covering black music and instilling it with white sonic markers, artists and record companies reiterate the dominance of whiteness in the mainstream.

Any intrusion of unacceptable blackness into that arena is just that, an infiltration—or perhaps a dirtying, to draw a comparison to the genetic purity argument in Chapter One²²⁵—on not only white sonic hegemony but also white capitalistic monopoly. It’s the same fear of miscegenation in another form —“musical miscegenation,” the threat might be called.²²⁶ The aversion to interracial mixing, however, did not apply to the rape of black women, especially enslaved black women, because that remained consistent with the established racialized power structure. In the same way, the plunder, to use Ta-Nehisi Coates’s term,²²⁷ of black musical

²²³ Little Richard. “Tutti Frutti,” 1955.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/4ZnqFqoT9TFKWR6fUmrmo>.

Pat Boone. “Tutti Frutti,” 1956.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/5GWHzvmJrGQ5F4m7MUtfN>.

²²⁴ Redd, 41.

²²⁵ Ehlers, 150.

²²⁶ Kheshti, 1039.

²²⁷ *Between the World and Me*, 21.

creativity by the white music industry is encouraged and rewarded, because it maintains the place of black culture as low-Other and white culture as center. These relationships are naturalized through repetition, cementing “brown and black peoples of the world” as the prescribed bottom of the “commodity chain,” as Roshanak Kheshti writes in “Musical Miscegenation and the Logic of Rock and Roll.”²²⁸

In this light, Jordan’s blackness—as performed on- and off-stage—reads as a strategic navigation and subversion of the industry norms. The showmanship that factored so well into his reception, especially on-screen, he learned from years on the road working minstrel shows.²²⁹ Rather than selling out black culture, Jordan brought it with him, resignifying the traditions of performance in new ways. Jordan became known in the black musical community as a strict bandleader and a serious businessman. His comic mask, another trick borrowed from minstrel shows, provided a front for white audiences while making money off them, always staying in on the joke: “speaking *back and black*,” as Houston A. Baker Jr. put it (emphasis his).²³⁰

Sam Cooke’s performative strategies differ in execution from Jordan’s but pursue similar goals. He paves out new visions of blackness for a new era, building on the work done by Smith, Jordan, and the “race leaders” in between. Chapter Three picks up where the introduction left off, returning to Cooke, whose performances of blackness so directly—and successfully—courted the mainstream. Understanding all the mainstream promised and required, and the struggle of soul to find a place within, Cooke’s story becomes not one of assimilation but of something more radical.

²²⁸ Kheshti, 1051.

²²⁹ *Race Music*, 62.

²³⁰ Houston A. Baker Jr. *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987. 24.

Chapter 3. Sam Cooke, in Practice

“I thought it was the most ridiculous song I ever heard in my life,” said session guitarist Cliff White, on listening to Sam Cooke sing “You Send Me” for the first time.²³¹ White, speaking years later to biographer Peter Guralnick, said he was impressed with neither Cooke nor the simple pop tune. “I thought he was out of his fucking mind.”²³² White wasn’t alone in thinking so; crossing over was the riskiest thing Cooke could ever do.

Since 1950, the Chicago kid had led The Soul Stirrers further into the national spotlight, headlining shows in venues such as Harlem’s Apollo Theater and releasing popular religious songs like “Jesus Gave Me Water” and “Wonderful.”²³³ But by the mid-’50s, as Guralnick writes, Cooke had hit a wall in his career. Gospel record sales were in decline, as were show bookings.

In 1956, Cooke decided to make a pop record. He wanted bigger audiences, bigger sales, and a bigger car, too. He ditched the rest of the Stirrers for a few days and went into a New Orleans recording studio with the producer and bandleader Robert “Bumps” Blackwell.²³⁴ The single they cut, “Lovable,” came out in ’57 under the name “Dale Cook,” a move suggested by Art Rupe, head of Specialty Records. The idea was to test the waters of the pop market without alienating Cooke’s

²³¹ Sam Cooke. “You Send Me,” 1957.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/0BFeyqJ9DJXS7gKg0Kj46R>.

²³² *Dream Boogie*, 173.

²³³ *Ibid*, 153.

The Soul Stirrers. “Wonderful,” 1956.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/1Kg0T6wpMXehfYFkLWKiee>.

²³⁴ *Dream Boogie*, 159.

gospel fans, who were adamant that religious singers not dabble in secular material.²³⁵ “Everybody was afraid,” said Bobby Womack, a student of Cooke’s. “That’s just the way we were taught. If you betray God, stop serving Him and start singing the devil’s music, then something terrible’s going to happen to you.”²³⁶

The record flopped, after all that, and nobody mistook Cooke’s voice for anyone else’s. Backlash from within the community came immediately. “There was a whispering campaign going on,” said James Woody “J.W.” Alexander, a mentor and partner of Cooke’s who led the Pilgrim Travelers group. “He was ostracized, and he was hurt.”²³⁷ But Cooke could see the gospel industry still held no future for him; there was no going back now.

From 1957 until his death in 1964, Cooke carved a path for himself into and around the music mainstream, navigating multiple and often conflicting identities as a black crossover artist. Through his multifaceted performances of blackness, as a soul musician and celebrity, Cooke pursued fame, acclaim, and autonomy, troubling the boundaries of musical genres and the economic structures of the industry. By analyzing his contributions to pop, soul, and protest music, this chapter will emphasize the political implications of Cooke’s crossover while considering its intersections with alternative strategies and sounds of soul.

²³⁵ “Lovable” was so safe, it borrowed its melody from “Wonderful,” which Cooke had just recorded with the Soul Stirrers. *Sweet Soul Music*, 36.

Sam Cooke (as Dale Cook). “Lovable,” 1957.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/4wsc7iglNffghS5xKDJxqu>.

²³⁶ *Dream Boogie*, 197.

²³⁷ *Ibid*, 165.

I. Don't Try to Holler

Cooke began his musical career like so many other young black singers, as part of a group at his church. His father, the Reverend Charles Cook (Sam would later add the “e” onto the end), led the Christ Temple Church in Chicago Heights and started The Singing Children to tour with him at revivals around Indiana and Illinois.²³⁸ Cooke, as always, sang tenor.

According to Guralnick, the Cook family believed in self-pride as much as they did respectability, upward mobility not at the cost of dignity. Rev. Cook himself became known for his entrepreneurial spirit, and he put an emphasis on not merely providing for his family but leading them to a life of material comfort. “There was no prohibition in the Bible against worldly success,” Guralnick writes of Rev. Cook’s worldview; “in fact, there were many verses that endorsed it.”²³⁹

Discovered singing around the neighborhood, Cooke was recruited by to the Highway Q.C.’s, a group for older boys coached by R.B. Robinson.²⁴⁰ Robinson sang baritone in the famous gospel group The Soul Stirrers, which formed in Texas in 1926 and since 1937 had been fronted by the tenor Rebert “R.H.” Harris, an idol of Cooke’s. “He had clearly studied Harris,” Guralnick writes of Cooke. “His diction, his phrasing, his gift for storytelling, the way in which he would make extemporaneous ‘runs’ and then end up right on the beat with an emphatic

²³⁸ Ibid, 14.

²³⁹ “...And as proud as he was of his ability to put enough food on the table to feed a family of ten—and to have recently acquired two late-model limousines, a radio, a telephone, and a brand-new windup phonograph—he was equally determined that his children should learn to make their own way in the world.” Ibid, 20.

²⁴⁰ *Sweet Soul Music*, 28.

enunciation of the word or phrase that would bring the whole verse into focus—these stylistic traits all echoed the older man’s.”²⁴¹ Indeed, when Harris quit the Stirrers in 1950, Cooke—two years out of high school and already familiar with the group’s repertoire—came onboard to take his place.

In two critical ways Cooke broke from Harris, though. Along with most of the prominent gospel singers of the time, Harris was a “hard” singer known for almost screeching his falsetto notes.²⁴² That model of the “shouter” was the dominant form in R&B, too, among artists like Louis Jordan and Ray Charles.²⁴³ But in the tradition of white singers like Bing Crosby and Gene Autry, Cooke crooned, his tone relaxed and sweet.²⁴⁴ Of course, he *could* sing hard, as *Live at the Harlem Square Club* shows, but J.W. Alexander, whom Cooke met while touring with the QCs, encouraged Cooke to learn his own vocal qualities. “Don’t you try to holler with these guys,” Alexander told him. “You don’t have to. You just be sure you’re singing loud enough for people to understand what you’re saying... And if you do that, you can come up behind the screamers and always get the house.”²⁴⁵ This would stick as his signature. His first recording, “Jesus Gave Me Water” in 1951, features Cooke singing lead on the upbeat tune, enunciating perfectly even as he glides into melismas.²⁴⁶

²⁴¹ *Dream Boogie*, 33.

²⁴² *Sam Cooke: Legend*. Online. ABKCO Music & Records, Inc., 2003.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANvGnRQDzM4>.

²⁴³ The prominence of “shouting” can be attributed in part to the state of technology, where microphones weren’t yet powerful enough and singers needed pure volume to be heard. Keyes, 116.

²⁴⁴ Bing Crosby. “White Christmas,” 1942.
<https://open.spotify.com/track/01h424WG38dgY34vkI3Yd0>.

²⁴⁵ *Sweet Soul Music*, 32.

²⁴⁶ Melismas, as described by Guralnick: “the stretching of a single syllable over the course of several notes or measures.” These are particularly clear markers of sonic blackness. *Ibid*, 33.

Cooke, as it turned out, was also less conservative than Harris, who reportedly left the Stirrers out of religious conviction. “The moral aspects of the thing just fell into the water,” Harris said about their spiritual singing.²⁴⁷ But Cooke wasn’t so concerned with a thing like that, nor really was his father, despite being a preacher. “There was only one way to save souls, and spiritual singing was not it,” Guralnick writes of Rev. Cook’s philosophy. “Spiritual singing, like every other earthly pursuit, was only a means to an end.”²⁴⁸

As had been the case with the Q.C.’s, Cooke’s performances with The Soul Stirrers brought in a much younger crowd, both male and female, though his fans certainly trended toward the latter. “According to every account from this period, his voice, along with his smooth honey-brown skin and innocent yet masculine features, made Cooke gospel’s first teen idol,” writes Nelson George.²⁴⁹ This was not a coincidence. Just as he trained his voice through music lessons, Cooke learned to present himself like a professional. He didn’t dance or move excessively on stage, but simply sang (everyone around him knew he had two left feet); he took acting lessons to improve his “speech, enunciation, and poise” (something that Motown would later require for all its performers).²⁵⁰

Though his core audience was young, Cooke wanted nothing less than to cultivate a “sophisticated appeal,” as Mark Buford writes, which he believed would

The Soul Stirrers. “Jesus Gave Me Water,” 1951.
<https://open.spotify.com/track/25Eecv9kJomHdLYAf01ve9>.

²⁴⁷ *Dream Boogie*, 61.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 64.

²⁴⁹ George, 79.

²⁵⁰ *Dream Boogie*, 188.

bring him into an upper echelon of elite performers and celebrities. To achieve that, however, he had to leave gospel.

II. You Send Me

When Cooke, Art Rupe, and Bumps Blackwell went into the studio in 1957 to record the follow-up to “Lovable,” they brought differing views on what a “pop Sam Cooke” should sound like. Specialty Records was, first and foremost, a gospel label, and both Blackwell and Rupe felt that Cooke’s gospel roots had been too obscured on “Lovable.”²⁵¹ Rupe, a white man, insisted on backing Cooke with an all-male, all-black quartet, recreating the sound of The Soul Stirrers. Under that tacit understanding, Cooke signed a solo contract with Specialty, guaranteeing him \$500 in advances and—most importantly—some songwriting royalties. They weren’t much, but they were something.

The day they planned to record the song arrangements, however, Rupe walked into the room to find Blackwell and Cooke rehearsing an R&B rhythm section and four white backup singers, two of whom were female. “It was all wrong—it was against everything he and Bumps had agreed upon—and to Art’s ears the sound of those female voices clashed with Sam’s rich tenor in a way that was both personally offensive and distinctly unmusical,” Guralnick writes.²⁵² To Blackwell and Cooke’s ears, it sounded refined. The record bears them out: “You Send Me” is a light number, with Cooke’s voice just overtopping the saccharine-sweet singers, who take

²⁵¹ Ibid, 172.

²⁵² Ibid, 175.

the place where a string section might have been. Rupe erupted. Cooke, confident in the product, demanded a larger royalty.

Rupe ended his contract with both Blackwell and Cooke, giving Blackwell the rights to four tracks they had just laid down—including “You Send Me”—and Specialty the right to the other eight. Rupe thought Cooke had no chance at selling a pop song, and wanted nothing to do with it. But their conflict took on racial connotations, as well. Rupe insisted on maintaining a tight grip on what he would accept as authentic black music, even from two black men. “I didn’t think the sound was the sound that our market demanded: heavy emphasis on the black experience, the so-called black sound,” Rupe said.²⁵³ Further, Rupe interpreted Cooke’s demand for control over the sound of the recordings, and over the economic conditions of their release, as “egotistical, self-serving.”²⁵⁴ He seemed to see the duo as children who didn’t understand the industry they all worked in as well as he did. Cooke understood that, as an artist under contract, he was supposed to “go along to get along, just yes them to death”—he just didn’t want to. Blackwell, alongside John and Alex Siamas, formed Keen Records, which signed Cooke immediately (with even higher royalties than Specialty) and released “You Send Me” as the B-side to a cover of the jazz standard “Summertime.” Rupe was wrong, as it turned out: “You Send Me” sold 2 million copies in all and topped both the R&B and pop charts.²⁵⁵

Cooke’s vision for himself came from many influences but provided no easy box in which to place him. As he told friends often, he aspired to become a black

²⁵³ Burford, 142.

²⁵⁴ *Dream Boogie*, 178.

²⁵⁵ Burford, 121.

balladeer as had rarely been seen in the black community. He admired Nat “King” Cole but saw him as limited.²⁵⁶ Cole was famous, just not Frank Sinatra famous. Sinatra had the lifestyle and image Cooke sought; he had, along with Crosby, “since the 1920s voiced a disembodied surrogate for the absent, idealized, or wholly fantasized male lover.”²⁵⁷

The only black singer with the outsize influence Cooke desired was Harry Belafonte, whose 1956 album *Calypso* not only began America’s calypso music²⁵⁸ craze but also became the first ever million-selling album by a solo artist, black or white.²⁵⁹ Belafonte’s \$750,000 annual salary made him the highest paid black entertainer in history, no doubt bolstered by his developing film career. Cooke watched Belafonte succeed as a black man while embracing his specific West Indian roots, bringing a folk form to the mainstream, “all with a sexy and sophisticated style and deliberately soft-spoken presentation that went directly against every stereotype that white men like Art Rupe seemed bound and determined to perpetuate.”²⁶⁰ The dignified model of balladeer broke away from the limiting roles regularly projected

²⁵⁶ The King Cole Trio. “Straighten Up and Fly Right,” 1943.
<https://open.spotify.com/track/6pQddvc4XifQHsQtkSYYxp>.

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 143.

Frank Sinatra. “All of Me,” 1948.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/1GLA53wyoybkJIQPLJR1Ml>.

²⁵⁸ Harry Belafonte. “Banana Boat Song (Day-O),” 1957.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/4fHDIIntTsRGSyTg5UYZYC>.

²⁵⁹ Burford, 124.

Cary Ginelli. “*Calypso* by Harry Belafonte.” All Music.

<http://www.allmusic.com/album/calypso-mw0000313800>.

²⁶⁰ *Dream Boogie*, 188.

onto black musicians and actors: “the down-and-out bluesman, the streetwise stud, the affable farceur, or the outright buffoon.”²⁶¹

Cooke did not want to be a “black Frank Sinatra” but rather, like Belafonte, compete in that high arena with his own performance of blackness. Mark Burford argues that Cooke’s own crossover strategy featured his negotiation of “the salience and transparency of cultural identity, between mainstreaming the vernacular and vernacularizing the mainstream.”²⁶² That is to say, Cooke succeeded because he made pop music sound like soul as well as making his soul music sound pop. His move from sacred to secular music entered a tradition of this very practice. A primary reference point is Sister Rosetta Tharpe, a singer and guitar player who became the first gospel performer to sign a record deal—this at a time when gospel itself was seen as too upbeat for the church.²⁶³ In her 1941 recording of “Rock Me,” a version of a Thomas Dorsey composition,²⁶⁴ Tharpe secularizes the sacred; backed by a jazz band, she resignifies the chorus of “rock me” not as a call to a protective God but to a pleasurable lover.²⁶⁵ Ray Charles, Cooke’s immediate predecessor and a co-creator of soul music, did the same; his first R&B chart-topper, the love tune “I Got a Woman,” directly ripped off the melody of a spiritual, “It Must Be Jesus.”²⁶⁶ Like Cooke,

²⁶¹ Burford, 154.

²⁶² Ibid, 139-140.

²⁶³ Gayle Wald. “From Spirituals to Swing: Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Gospel Crossover.” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 3. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30041982>. 389.

²⁶⁴ Dorsey is often called the Father of Gospel Music, and notably persuaded a black church in Chicago to allow the blues note into services.

²⁶⁵ Sister Rosetta Tharpe. “Rock Me,” 1941.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/6JPFR7rHz9a8LtLAX87hyG>

²⁶⁶ Ray Charles and David Ritz. *Brother Ray: Ray Charles’ Own Story*. New York: The Dial Press, 1978. 150.

Charles heard criticism from the church-going black community for “bastardizing God’s work,” but he cared little about those complaints. “Besides,” Charles later wrote in his biography, “the church was something which couldn’t be taken out of my voice even if I had wanted to take it out.”²⁶⁷

Neither did Cooke want to nor try to backpeddle on his own background. Even an unremarkable pop tune like “Lovable” showcases some of the gospel inflections that he inserted into all of his material, from pop originals to covers (even songs where it seemingly didn’t belong, like the Irish classic “Galway Bay” or the popular Italian song “Arrivederci Roma”²⁶⁸). That recognizability, Burford writes, explains why many of Cooke’s gospel fans eventually moved along with him throughout his pop career; it also makes apparent his appeal to a growing white audience as something new and exciting, while also still safe for consumption. In addition to his string of hits—29 in the *Billboard* Top 40 and more in the top registers of the R&B chart²⁶⁹—Cooke specifically produced albums of “middle of the road” fare such as jazz standards and show tunes. Those records, such as 1959’s *Tribute to the Lady* (a Billie Holiday covers album), 1960’s *Cooke’s Tour* (where the foreign songs mentioned above appeared), and *Hits of the ’50s* from the same year, featured a

Ray Charles. “I Got a Woman,” 1954.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/2xar08Fq5xra2KKZs5Bw9j>.

The Southern Tones. “It Must Be Jesus,” 1954.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/7M99tD8uA2EyeArWWGvoP8>.

²⁶⁷ Ibid, 151.

²⁶⁸ Sam Cooke. “Galway Bay.” *Cooke’s Tour*, 1960.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/4T6tT3MrcOuXuZ3eXXxyuL>.

Sam Cooke, “Arrivederci Roma.” *Cooke’s Tour*, 1960.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/4ukwY2KYtp6m4qHFad5N0J>.

²⁶⁹ “Sam Cooke discography.”

familiar repertoire and big-band or string accompaniments, and as such “aligned less with teenage purchasers than with their parents.”²⁷⁰

Burford argues that though Cooke’s adult-aimed LPs have long been considered pandering to established values of whiteness—and indeed, they do contain sonic markers traditionally aligned with the pop mainstream, as described in the previous chapter—they also worked to build Cooke the prestige of an “album artist.” Belafonte was the model here, too. Not only did the designation bestow “public recognition of one’s sophistication as a performer, mature taste and self-restraint, long-term marketing potential, and claims to populist sensibilities and national selfhood,” as Burford writes, but also established a financial foundation based on more stable engagements and sales than one-night gigs and hit singles provided.²⁷¹

III. Career Moves

Making a *career* of crossover music, in this way, required more out of Cooke than sounding good. He carried out his most strategic choices not in the art of music, but the business of it. As the “You Send Me” sessions show, Cooke paid close attention to the details of his contracts, and maintained strong partnerships with both Alexander and Blackwell. It was Alexander who convinced Cooke to take control over his songwriting rights. “Letting someone else publish your songs was giving away half the proceeds,” writes Daniel Wolff in his biography of Cooke.²⁷² Indeed, Cooke had

²⁷⁰ Burford, 116.

²⁷¹ Ibid, 123-125.

²⁷² Daniel Wolff. *You Send Me: The Life and Times of Sam Cooke*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1995. 190.

to file suit in 1959 against the owners of Keen Records for a purported \$30,000 owed in back royalties—a suit he won two years later, collecting \$11,000 and buying back his masters from the Keen sessions.²⁷³

The situation is all too familiar in the industry, especially for black musicians working under white record company owners. Sylvester Stone, leader of the legendary psychedelic funk band Sly and the Family Stone, filed suit in 2010 against his manager and his attorney, alleging that in the '80s the pair had used an employment agreement to divert millions of dollars of royalties for their own benefit. A jury in Los Angeles ruled in his favor in 2015, awarding him \$5 million in damages.²⁷⁴ But very few artists have the time or resources to bring such accusations to court. The plunder of black music profits dates from the race music era (if not further back), when talent scouts and record companies duped new musicians into taking lower flat fees than white musicians in addition to signing low- or no-royalty contracts.²⁷⁵ And most song rights only become more valuable over time. When the jazz trumpeter-turned-pop-producer Quincy Jones had to bail out his failed “Free and Easy!” tour of Europe in 1960, he was compelled to sell his catalogue; years later, he

A note on royalties: BMI (Broadcast Music, Inc.) and ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers) are the two major publishing rights organizations in America. They work in similar ways, licensing music and collecting fees from songs that play on the radio, television, or the Internet on behalf of musicians, composers, and songwriters. Royalties for music are split 50/50 between the songwriter(s) and the publisher/copyright holder, which is responsible for promoting the music of the songwriter. If songwriters act as their own publishers and own their songs' copyrights, they collect both parts of those royalties. Exactly how large a cut the royalty will be depends on an individual's contract.

²⁷³ Ibid, 206, 243.

²⁷⁴ Ted Johnson. “Sly Stone Wins \$5 Million Verdict in Lawsuit Against Former Manager and Attorney.” *Variety*, Jan. 27, 2015. <http://variety.com/2015/biz/news/sly-stone-wins-5-million-verdict-in-lawsuit-against-former-manager-and-attorney-1201416654/>.

²⁷⁵ Filzen, 114.

bought it back for seven times more than his original price.²⁷⁶ “The key thing to remember today is don’t sell your catalogue,” warned Marshall Gelfand, business manager for Michael Jackson, who purchased the entire Beatles songbook in 1985.²⁷⁷

So in 1958, Alexander and Cooke became partners in a publishing company called Kags Music, which Alexander registered with BMI.²⁷⁸ Both Cooke and Alexander wrote songs for the company, which were then sung by Cooke and others, like the young soul artist Jackie Wilson. While Cooke still recorded for Keen, through Kags he owned the publishing on both sides of his 1959 hit record “Everybody Loves to Cha Cha Cha.”²⁷⁹ Like many pop hits of the day, “Everybody Loves to Cha Cha Cha” capitalized on the nascent cha-cha dance trend, but Cooke told his own story of realizing his date knew the dance better than he did. The tune hit #2 on the R&B chart and reached into the pop Top 40—his highest chart placement since “You Send Me.”²⁸⁰ Cooke, in fact, made sure to write or have a hand in writing most of his hit singles, from 1960’s “Wonderful World” (#2 R&B, #12 pop) and “Chain Gang” (#2 R&B, #2 pop) to 1962’s “Twistin’ the Night Away” (#1 R&B, #9 pop) and 1963’s “Another Saturday Night” (#1 R&B, #10 pop). Over his lifetime, Cooke wrote over

²⁷⁶ The failure wasn’t all Jones’s fault. His big-band tour included 30 people in all, and the Algerian crisis in Paris caused their show to lose money, even before a promoter skipped town with advances for more than 15 dates. Quincy Jones. *Q: The Autobiography of Quincy Jones*. New York: Doubleday, 2001. 302.

²⁷⁷ Robert Hilburn. “The Long and Winding Road.” *The Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 22, 1985. <http://www.latimes.com/la-et-hilburn-michael-jackson-sep22-story.html>.

²⁷⁸ BMI, when it formed in 1939, focused more on publishing rights for race music and other niche genres that ASCAP didn’t or refused to represent. *Dream Boogie*, 249.

²⁷⁹ Sam Cooke. “Everybody Loves to Cha Cha Cha,” 1959.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/3SnGhXZqjymbEZuPbHfjW>.

²⁸⁰ “Sam Cooke discography.”

120 pieces in all. “If in the future, I can’t find anyone who will pay me to sing,” Cooke reasoned, “I’ll still be in a position to get paid when others sing.”²⁸¹

Cooke’s small-scale operation and near-monopoly over his songwriting differed radically from most other pop arrangements at the time, especially in New York’s Brill Building and at Motown. The Brill Building, a modernized Tin Pan Alley, housed a number of famous songwriting teams—including Leiber and Stoller, King and Goffin, and Phil Spector—who could write, publish, record, and cut records all in the same building.²⁸² Motown differed in its black ownership and mostly-black roster, but it too was a hit factory, accumulating 60 top-15 pop songs and 14 chart-toppers between 1964-1967.²⁸³ The majority of Motown’s songs were written by the all-black team of Holland-Dozier-Holland, performed by the company’s variety of solo and group acts, and backed by the in-house session band.²⁸⁴

By 1959, however, Cooke’s relationship with Keen Records, which Blackwell had already left, began to wane. Wolff argues that the company, after Cooke’s first single went #1, never really learned to do promotion or proper distribution. Cooke found himself courted by major labels. Atlantic, Capitol, and RCA-Victor all wanted

²⁸¹ Wolff, 224.

²⁸² Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller were responsible for Ben E. King’s “Spanish Harlem” and “Stand By Me,” Carole King and Gerry Goffin wrote hits like “You Make Me Feel (Like a Natural Woman)” and “Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow,” and Phil Spector pioneered the “Wall of Sound” production style.

Jon Fitzgerald. “Black Pop Songwriting 1963-1966: An Analysis of U.S. Top Forty Hits by Cooke, Mayfield, Stevenson, Robinson, and Holland-Dozier-Holland.” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 2. Columbia College and University of Illinois Press, Center for Black Music Research, 2007. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25433786>. 98.

²⁸³ *Ibid*, 98.

²⁸⁴ Brian Holland, Lamont Dozier, and Eddie Holland Jr. penned songs for everyone from Martha and the Vandellas and The Supremes to The Four Tops and Marvin Gaye. Jon Fitzgerald. “Motown Crossover Hits 1963-1966 and the Creative Process.” *Popular Music*, Vol. 14, No. 1. Cambridge University Press, 1995. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/853340>. 1.

him, but only RCA-Victor offered him the right combination of money (a \$100,000 guarantee), exposure (a major label meant more publicity and better gigs), and freedom (Cooke demanded to keep Kags and his publishing rights).²⁸⁵ But Cooke's business-side initiatives expanded beyond his own solo career. With Alexander and S.R. Crain, his road manager, Cooke in 1961 established his own label, SAR Records, recording some of the songs he wrote for Kags with Womack's group The Valentinos and his old friends in The Soul Stirrers.²⁸⁶ Though SAR didn't make profits the way Kags did, Cooke would go on to form another label, Derby, and an ASCAP publishing company called Malloy.²⁸⁷

Not only could Cooke explore his continued love of gospel music by having his signees perform songs that might be too "funky" to do himself, he also claimed full artistic control over the process, laying out his own arrangements and cutting his own demos.²⁸⁸ "The label would prove to be his training ground for new talent and his test tube for new sounds," Wolff writes. Moreover, being both another stream of income and a way for experienced black musicians to support younger black musicians, "SAR was Sam's idea of the Civil Rights Movement put into practice and a big step toward controlling his own product."²⁸⁹

²⁸⁵ Wolff, 204.

²⁸⁶ Ibid, 218.

The Valentinos. "Tired of Living in the Country," 1964.
<https://open.spotify.com/track/5aDu2vuOdzfXVaML280Aki>.

²⁸⁷ *Sweet Soul Music*, 40

²⁸⁸ Johnnie Morisette. "Black Night," 1963.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/6CF8aEvdLAza7zlPSrc9Rf>.

²⁸⁹ Wolff, 225, 218.

Cooke had been keeping on top of the Movement, especially as it developed around him in Los Angeles, finding himself somewhat radicalized; he'd befriended Cassius Clay even before the boxer became Muhammad Ali,²⁹⁰ met Malcolm X, and read W.E.B. DuBois, James Baldwin, and Booker T. Washington. "Sam was deep, deep into that business," said Cliff White.²⁹¹ Like every other black musician at the time, Cooke came face-to-face with segregation and racism on tour as well as in his dealings with the industry. One incident sticks out as particularly ironic: at a Howard Johnson's restaurant in New Jersey, a waitress refused to serve Cooke and his band even while "You Send Me" played on the jukebox inside.²⁹²

Slowly, he used his growing status as a recording star to make some changes, at least in his immediate vicinity. The model, once again, was Belafonte, who advised Martin Luther King Jr. throughout the Movement, enlisted other Hollywood stars like Paul Newman and Marlon Brando in the cause, and famously advised John F. Kennedy in his bid for black voters in the 1960 presidential election. "To reach someone's soul, you have to have a social relationship," Belafonte said in a 2007 interview.²⁹³ Wolff tells another story of Cooke when his tour with Jackie Wilson

²⁹⁰ "It was the same old story, Sam thought. Everyone wanted Cassius Clay to remain the 'All-American Boy'—and if he didn't, the same black bourgeoisie that had opposed Martin and the Movement didn't want the white world to find out about it. Fuck the white world. This was a young man who couldn't be contained, who had embraced a despised doctrine of black separatism and self-determination out of religious conviction but who still retained an irrepressible gift for showmanship and abundant intellectual curiosity." *Dream Boogie*, 555. Clay and Cooke even recorded a song together in 1964, something of a fight song for Clay: "Hey Hey, The Gang's All Here." <https://youtu.be/PZdIMH2tIIE>.

²⁹¹ Wolff, 290.

²⁹² *Ibid*, 177.

²⁹³ Steve Howell. "I chose to be a civil rights warrior." *The Guardian*, March 13, 2007. <http://gu.com/p/fy97/stw>.

came to the Norfolk Arena, a segregated venue where white attendees sat on the center and right and black attendees sat on the left. Cooke demanded that his performance be integrated, or he'd refuse to play. "It wasn't the way the good old boys were used to being addressed by colored entertainers, but Sam was adamant—polite but adamant—and, as the headliner for a show that cost the promoters thousands of dollars, he knew he had the power."²⁹⁴ Cooke won that battle with ease.

IV. Closer to the Mainstream

With Cooke's career trajectory in mind, both in terms of sound and business, it's useful to return to his evenings at the Copacabana and Harlem Square Club. Both performances connect with Cooke's complex and changing relationships to blackness and the industry, and with his strategy to find and keep as large an audience as he could. The Copa in particular meant a great deal to his career, especially considering his history with the nightclub: the first time he played there, Cooke truly and utterly bombed.

His Copacabana debut in 1958 crowned the wave of success Cooke had enjoyed since "You Send Me" came out. He had just made a triumphant return on *The Ed Sullivan Show* to a huge TV audience, perhaps his biggest exposure to the mainstream yet—no doubt recompense for a disastrous first appearance on the program the previous year, when CBS accidentally cut off a nervous Cooke mid-

²⁹⁴ Wolff, 202.

verse.²⁹⁵ On December 1, 1957, however, Cooke was all confidence, performing both “You Send Me” and his newer single, “(I Love You) For Sentimental Reasons.”²⁹⁶ “He had his routine down pat,” writes Wolff of the performance. “His long fingers clasped together as if in prayer, and a quick little kiss at the camera to accompany the lyrics, before strolling off like a man in complete control.”²⁹⁷ The next day, “You Send Me” hit #1.

A three-week-long residency at the Copacabana should have been Cooke’s coronation as the high-class nightclub performer he always wanted to be. The Copa, a prestigious New York City nightclub run by Jules Podell (who supposedly had mob ties), was known for its sequined chorus line of Copa Girls and headlining shows of singers and stand-up comics such as Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, and Bobby Darin.²⁹⁸ For many, it stood as the pinnacle of the city’s “Great White Way,” both in terms of glamour and skin color—its audience often included celebrities, but it famously denied entry to African-Americans like Belafonte and Sammy Davis Jr. and refused to allow black performers on its main stage until 1952.²⁹⁹ Even when Cooke did play

²⁹⁵ The accident might have even been good for Cooke, even in the short run, as the public outcry around Cooke’s stolen moment led to his rebooking on the program and a surge of popularity for his single. Not even the alternative versions of the song by white artists could compete. “We had killed [all the] covers, we were way over a million, and there was a chance to build up and cash in on the snafu,” Blackwell said. For his second appearance on the show, Cooke doubled his fee. *Dream Boogie*, 204.

²⁹⁶ Sam Cooke. “You Send Me.” *The Ed Sullivan Show*, Dec. 1, 1957.

<https://youtu.be/REjmIdpAHsw>.

Sam Cooke. “(I Love You) For Sentimental Reasons.” *The Ed Sullivan Show*, Dec. 1, 1957.

<https://youtu.be/SS66UzXfnNM>.

²⁹⁷ Wolff, 167.

²⁹⁸ “Jules Podell, Showman, Dead.” *The New York Times*, Sept. 28, 1973.

<http://nyti.ms/1XaIkxd>.

²⁹⁹ Nicole Winger. “‘Making It’ In New York City – The Supremes At The Copacabana, 1965.” MA Thesis. University of Western Ontario, 2013. Cited with permission of the author. <http://cas.uwo.ca/documents/mrps/N%20Winger%20MRP%20final.pdf>. 38.

there, the stage never truly felt like it belonged to him. But he took glee and pride in occupying that white space: “A little nigger in the Copa!” he bragged to friends after his 1964 show. “A little nigger was in the Copa!”³⁰⁰

Scheduled to open for Jewish comedian Myron Cohen, Cooke in 1958 found himself in front of an audience more suited for the Borscht Belt than the Chitlin Circuit. As Guralnick and Wolff tell it, Blackwell prepared him poorly, putting together a show for what he thought white middle-aged, middle-class nightclub-goers wanted to see.³⁰¹ He made the setlist ballad-heavy and hit-sparse, but failed to write out the full arrangements for the Copa’s 16-piece orchestra.³⁰² He hired a choreographer to teach soft shoe to Sam, notoriously a poor dancer. *Variety* and every other publication panned the shows. “He doesn’t seem to be ready for the more savvy Copa clientele,” *Variety* wrote of the residency. “His stint seemed overly long and there was a feeling that he had overstayed his welcome.”³⁰³ Cooke, after all that, came off looking like just another teenybopper fad, a black boy playing at white success.

What changed between then and his 1964 return? Part of it was marketing—in the six years between, Cooke had made his way out of one-hit-wonderdom and into a sustained career of hit songs and decent-selling albums. He had a new top-level contract with RCA-Victor, higher royalties, and a business of his own.³⁰⁴ A huge

³⁰⁰ *Dream Boogie*, 608.

³⁰¹ Wolff, 171.

³⁰² *Dream Boogie*, 222.

³⁰³ Wolff, 174.

³⁰⁴ *Sweet Soul Music*, 42.

Times Square billboard purchased by his RCA-Victor manager announced “Sam’s the biggest Cooke in town,” and he knew it.

But the critical element was sheer practice. According to Alexander, Cooke came back from his 1962 tour of Europe energized. It was in England, opening for Little Richard, that he figured out how to loosen up. His polished act won applause, but Little Richard—all energy and power—won the night.³⁰⁵ If before Cooke sang with some gospel technique, now he brought the “gospel *fever*.”³⁰⁶ His performances incorporated more markers of sonic blackness, and he started writing harder material, too, because audience’s tastes were changing. In the face of Stax and Muscle Shoals, his pop-soul no longer flew with young audiences anymore; teens could tell he was drifting towards the complacency of nightclub pop. Cooke felt the need to innovate, find a new energy of his own. Compared to the rootsy power of Stax stars like Otis Redding—whose yearning hit “These Arms of Mine” crossed over in 1963³⁰⁷—songs like “With You” and “Cupid” felt cute but limp.³⁰⁸

Europe provided a necessary place for Cooke to experiment with his live act. Outside of the States, in venues where they weren’t as well known or burdened with cultural expectations, soul musicians found greater freedom of movement (sometimes literally). Though not totally unburdened, black artists found that Europe—without Jim Crow segregation or much of America’s racial baggage—allowed for more

³⁰⁵ *Dream Boogie*, 425.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 431.

³⁰⁷ *Sweet Soul Music*, 142.

Otis Redding. “These Arms of Mine,” 1962.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/4skknrc3sJqaPTtUr2cwFq>.

³⁰⁸ Wolff, 241.

flexible performances of blackness. Vaudeville performers such as Josephine Baker and Adelaide Hall in the 1920s garnered better receptions, with greater artistic seriousness, for their primitivism-influenced performances in Europe than in America, according to Zakiya Adair.³⁰⁹

The pianist and singer Nina Simone similarly found Europe more amenable to her politically charged music and activism, performing concerts there in the late '60s dressed in "African garb" and with her hair in an Afro. "She embraced physical markers of black cultural nationalism in ways that joined the struggle of African-Americans to a more transnational vision of African freedom, making both visible through her female body," writes Ruth Feldstein.³¹⁰ Simone rejected the exoticization of the vaudeville acts. Her sets included such confrontational protest music as "Mississippi Goddam" (which had been banned from television across the country and radio in the South³¹¹) and Billie Holliday's "Strange Fruit," and Simone made a point of announcing that her performances were "for all the black people in the audience."³¹² Sometimes, she mocked her white audience outright, demanding the respect not automatically given to her as a black woman, and was unsympathetic to

³⁰⁹ Zakiya R. Adair. "Transgressive (Re)presentations: Black Women, Vaudeville, and the Politics of Performance in Early Transatlantic Theater." *Understanding Blackness Through Performance: Contemporary Arts and the Representation of Identity*. Ed. Anne Cremieux, Xavier Lemoine, and Jean-Paul Rocchi. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 78.

³¹⁰ Ruth Feldstein. "'I Don't Trust You Anymore': Nina Simone, Culture, and Black Activism in the 1960s." *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 91, No. 4. Organization of American Historians, 2005. [http://jah.oxfordjournals.org/content/91/4/1349.extract#](http://jah.oxfordjournals.org/content/91/4/1349.extract#.). 1371.

³¹¹ *Ibid*, 1368.

³¹² *Ibid*, 1373.

any rudeness or interruptions.³¹³ Finding the artistic atmosphere in Europe more favorable than back home, Simone left the States almost entirely from the 1970s on, living in alternately in France, Switzerland, Liberia, and Barbados.³¹⁴

V. Addressing the Copa

Cooke's best performance on the *Sam Cooke at the Copa* album betrays his newfound sense of swagger. "Twistin' The Night Away," one of his newer RCA-Victor singles, has Cooke almost shouting, ad-libbing little comments here and there: "You gotta feel it, feel that feeling." He even sounds like James Brown at times. The horns squeal in response to his call of "they're twisting!" in the chorus. Saxophones trade bars taking solos, and Cooke laughs, inviting the audience to clap along with him.³¹⁵

If his first run at the Copacabana relied heavily on stolid and safe ballads, his reappearance brought the soul power, in delivery and in the arrangements—the Copa orchestra was there, but Cooke came with a tighter and better rehearsed rhythm section. His latest album (and final studio release before his death), *Ain't That Good News*, was his most swingin' and the first since his debut to reach the album Top 40.³¹⁶ It also included "A Change is Gonna Come," his original Civil Rights anthem based on Bob Dylan's ubiquitous "Blowin' in the Wind," but the former didn't show

³¹³ Daphne A. Brooks. "Nina Simone's Triple Play." *Callaloo*, Vol. 34, No. 1. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011. <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/callaloo/v034/34.1.brooks.html>. 184.

³¹⁴ Feldstein, 1378.

³¹⁵ Sam Cooke. "Twistin' the Night Away," 1964.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/2MjjhZpqzIOoDCb0wbIFsU>.

³¹⁶ "Sam Cooke discography."

up at the Copa.³¹⁷ “It was, as Sam had explained to Bobby, a distinctly white-folks version of his standard show,” Guralnick writes.³¹⁸

Compare that to the *Live at the Harlem Square Club* setlist, from the year before. With no covers besides his version of “(I Love You) For Sentimental Reasons,” Cooke’s Miami performance is more oriented towards his dancier material for longtime fans, like the groovy, repetitive “Feel It (Don’t Fight It).”³¹⁹ “Twistin’ the Night Away” appears again, but his performance is louder, more raucous, punctuated by screams from women in the audience.³²⁰ Whoever played sax that night took two hot solos, adventuring out of the tune’s main melody more than at the Copa. Cooke yells in “Somebody Have Mercy,” cracking a joke about a rumor going around that he had leukemia (it wasn’t true); he riffs on the chorus of “You Send Me” in the middle of “Bring It On Home to Me” (R&B #2, pop #13), one of the most decisively Southern-style soul songs he’d ever written.³²¹

Cooke indeed sounds harder than he did at the Copa, more guttural. “There was nothing soft, measured, or polite about the Sam Cooke you saw at the Harlem Square Club,” Guralnick writes.³²² That was a reflection of the venue, and the audience, too. The Miami club was a regular stop on the tour of almost every R&B

³¹⁷ Bob Dylan. “Blowin’ in the Wind,” 1963.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/18GiV1BaXzPVYpp9rmOg0E>.

³¹⁸ *Dream Boogie*, 581.

³¹⁹ Sam Cooke. “Feel It (Don’t Fight It).” *One Night Stand! Sam Cooke Live at the Harlem Square Club*, 1963. <https://open.spotify.com/track/2j5AMkbTet4BvTWhKrPOta>.

³²⁰ Sam Cooke. “Twistin’ the Night Away.” *One Night Stand! Sam Cooke Live at the Harlem Square Club*, 1963. <https://open.spotify.com/track/3Z3uByZYPcuVYxOTg7T6j6>.

³²¹ Wolff, 249.

Sam Cooke. “Bring It On Home To Me.” *One Night Stand! Sam Cooke Live at the Harlem Square Club*, 1963. <https://open.spotify.com/track/3IYM0ZNXLG2276Wcoj0pyz>.

³²² *Dream Boogie*, 454.

star, according to Guralnick, and they guaranteed Cooke a \$1,500 salary plus a percentage of the ticket sales. The audience was mostly filled with black people, meaning he could tap further into the gospel theatrics he'd honed.³²³ Cooke had committed himself to playing these sort of dive venues—the Harlem Square Club, though popular and well-managed, was a “big barn of a building”³²⁴—even as he pursued prestige billing. It was part strategic marketing for Cooke, and part commitment to black cultural citizenship. “When the whites are through with Sammy Davis Jr., he won’t have anywhere to play,” Cooke remarked to producer Lou Adler. “I’ll always be able to go back to my people ‘cause I’m never gonna stop singing to them.”³²⁵

As he grew in popularity among white audiences, Cooke knew his base, always coming back to the black folks who had followed him loyally since his gospel days and through his switch to pop. His performance in Miami is not his natural self set free—“the real Sam Cooke” as Guralnick argues³²⁶—but a show for an audience, a performance of blackness for a black crowd. His more traditionally black sonic markers worked in part to prove he hadn’t been subsumed by his crossover desires, or fallen victim to the “slave mentality” of upward mobility.³²⁷ Playing up that side also, in turn, revitalized Cooke’s “low-Other” appeal to the white mainstream. Keeping black audiences satisfied filled business needs as well as personal ones.

³²³ Burford, 141.

³²⁴ *Dream Boogie*, 453.

³²⁵ Wolff, 185-186.

³²⁶ *Dream Boogie*, 45.

³²⁷ Burford, 155.

Jones, 58.

Cooke did tap into the protest repertoire at the Copa, but he did so in a way his white audience might better relate to. He actually played “Blowin’ in the Wind” itself—an upbeat, funky version—along with the Movement’s favorite folk anthems “This Little Light of Mine” and “If I Had a Hammer,” which the activist-musician Pete Seeger wrote in 1952 and the trio Peter, Paul and Mary made a Top 10 hit in ’62.³²⁸ Cooke really worked the crowd, though; if he thought the material was below him, like Guralnick argues, he sure didn’t show it. “When he finally played there, man, those chicks were popping,” Alexander said of the Copa show. “It was almost like a sex act, man, like he was beating up on them to get an orgasm.”³²⁹ Couched in the formal atmosphere of the Copa and surrounded by lighter pop fare, however, Cooke’s sexual performativity came off as more acceptable. Perhaps, as Guralnick suggests, the strategic decision not to release the Harlem Square Club recordings at the time was mutual—if his Copa show pushed to the edge of mainstream respectability, the Harlem Square Club may have tipped him over.³³⁰

His sheer sex appeal might have been one of his most dangerous aspects, in fact. Everyone knew whom Cooke attracted, and he was in danger of developing a reputation for sexual promiscuity. He got a girl pregnant in New Orleans, filed for divorce from his first wife, and was arrested in the middle of a Philadelphia performance for lack of child-care payments (in that order).³³¹ Luckily, his manager

³²⁸ Ibid, 58.

Peter, Paul & Mary. “If I Had a Hammer,” 1962.
<https://open.spotify.com/track/6f4TUUHjfRjYkyrM5KSoJ4>.

³²⁹ *Sweet Soul Music*, 44.

³³⁰ Simon and Geller.

Dream Boogie, 585.

³³¹ Cooke married again but had at least two children out of wedlock. *Dream Boogie*, 217.

prevented a press incident, but Cooke knew he had to take steps to protect his image. When Nat “King” Cole played Birmingham in 1956, the North Alabama Citizen’s Council had publicized a photo of Cole with his white female fans (“COLE AND YOUR DAUGHTER,” it threatened) and then assaulted him on stage.³³²

According to Burford and Cooke’s brother, L.C., Cooke stopped straightening his hair and wearing leather jackets, “lest he appear too ‘slick’ and potentially threatening to the white fathers whose teenaged daughters were buying his records hand over fist.”³³³ He wore his hair natural but close-cropped, aiming for a “collegiate look” with V-neck sweaters and pleated pants.³³⁴ That said, Cooke hated that he was bound by double standards—after all, Sinatra and others could have all the sexual escapades they wanted—and engaged privately in stunts that defied those restrictions.³³⁵ With this attitude (and his sexual performativity) in mind, Cooke’s alleged aggressiveness and assertion of dominance in The Hacienda Motel, before his murder, don’t appear so incongruous. He knew his sexuality, both on and off the stage, posed a crisis for white supremacy; he knew to choose his moments and act strategically, for fear of retaliation. He just didn’t always succeed.

³³² White supremacist “Citizen’s Councils” emerged around the country in response to Civil Rights advancements and court rulings on desegregation. They worked similarly to the Klu Klux Klan, focusing on economic intimidation and political disenfranchisement of black people. *Ibid*, 145.

³³³ Burford, 126.

“If you had all that slick stuff in your hair, he told his brother (who continued to cling to his upswept process), the white man was going to think you were slick, he wouldn’t trust you around his daughter.” *Dream Boogie*, 220.

³³⁴ *Ibid*, 210.

³³⁵ In the early 1960s, Cooke had sex with the wife of a white program director in a motel bathroom, while the director was passed out in the bedroom. Bobby Womack recalled that Cooke said it was a subversive act on his part. Burford, 149.

VI. Resisting

Cooke's live sets flaunt his handling of addressivity, an intersubjective awareness of his audience, as David Brackett writes,³³⁶ and code-switching, moving through different linguistic and cultural identities, both performative displays of blackness.³³⁷ To pursue a mainstream audience, Cooke adopted such strategies as a matter of survival in some cases and as a matter of artistic choice in others.

His song "Chain Gang," from 1960, exhibits this balance. Cooke recorded the tune, another RCA-Victor single, in a Manhattan studio but worked tirelessly to get the percussive sound—a clink on the downbeat—to properly evoke a line of black prisoners "shuffling across a red-dirt field somewhere in Georgia," as Wolff writes.³³⁸ The lyrics are dark but hopeful, and the arrangement—a mix of high strings and rhythmic grunts, as well as a gospel-deep voice on the pickup—is somehow danceable.³³⁹ Wolff writes that Cooke was confident the song would play in different ways on Chicago's South Side and in the suburbs—to black listeners and white listeners—masking the social commentary in a way that recalls vaudeville performances.³⁴⁰ It worked: "Chain Gang" hit #2 on both the pop and R&B charts, his highest crossover since "You Send Me."³⁴¹

³³⁶ "Questions of Genre in Black Popular Music," 86.

³³⁷ Gene Demby. "How Code-Switching Explains the World." Code Switch, NPR, April 8, 2013. <http://n.pr/XoC6A7>.

³³⁸ Wolff, 211.

³³⁹ Sam Cooke. "Chain Gang," 1960.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/7v1858htfU0srTDwhxeka8>.

³⁴⁰ Schroeder, 141.

³⁴¹ "Sam Cooke discography."

“A Change is Gonna Come,” Cooke’s seminal contribution to the Civil Rights Movement, displays a similar awareness of audience in its pitch to the crossover crowd.³⁴² That, in part, explains its longevity; President Barack Obama alluded to the tune in his 2008 victory speech.³⁴³ Writing at the end of 1963—a particularly tumultuous year that witnessed, among other events, the SCLC’s Birmingham Campaign and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy³⁴⁴—Cooke modeled “A Change is Gonna Come” after Dylan, whose *Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* he’d listened to incessantly. He wondered how a “white boy” had written a song with such a powerful message, and set out to craft his own.³⁴⁵ As Christopher Trigg describes it, the result is more ambiguous than the Civil Rights tunes that Dylan and others in the folk movement had contributed. In the early 1960s, freedom songs were usually either original, topical songs commenting on particular events from an outsider perspective—such as Dylan’s “Oxford Town” and “Only a Pawn in Their Game”³⁴⁶—or participatory, group-sung tunes adapted from spirituals or traditional songs—such as “We Shall Overcome.”³⁴⁷ Those songs worked “to bridge real or

³⁴² Sam Cooke. “A Change is Gonna Come,” 1963.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/0KOE1hat4SIer491XKk4Pa>.

³⁴³ Christopher Trigg. “A Change Ain’t Gonna Come: Sam Cooke and the Protest Song.” *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 79, No. 3. University of Toronto Press, 2010. <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/utq/summary/v079/79.3.trigg.html>. 992.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

³⁴⁵ *Dream Boogie*, 512.

³⁴⁶ Bob Dylan. “Oxford Town.” *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*, 1961.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/7Ay1IHxhuM33NoXKsS0iom>.

Bob Dylan. “Only a Pawn in Their Game.” *The Times They Are A-Changin’*, 1964.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/6lib77q4koq52srysevRfT>.

³⁴⁷ Tammy L. Kernodle. “‘I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free’: Nina Simone and the Redefining of the Freedom Song of the 1960s.” *Journal of the Society for American Music*, Vol. 2, No. 3. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1752196308080097>. 297.

perceived cultural gaps between southern blacks and middle class activists” by attempting to translate the goals and struggles of the black freedom movement for white northern audiences.³⁴⁸

These were not the only viable strategies, of course. Simone had different aims for “Mississippi Goddam,” written the same year in direct response to the death of four black girls at Birmingham’s 16th Street Baptist Church.³⁴⁹ As the story goes, when Simone heard the news she grabbed a gun and went to go kill the first white person she saw; her husband stopped her and suggested she channel her anger into music. “Mississippi Goddam,” an off-putting upbeat song in the style of a show tune, was her first attempt at musical protest, an expression of Simone’s dissatisfaction with conservative political activists and her mastery of traditionally white musical forms.³⁵⁰ Simone, who crossed over from a career in classical music into the jazz and folk scenes of Greenwich Village by combining the forms into a sound all her own, became highly involved with the Black Nationalist and black feminist movements. In her music and concerts, she denied any supposed need to convince white audiences of racial or gender equality; instead, through tunes like “Go Limp” and “Four Women,” she confronted them with the reality of it.³⁵¹ She demanded respect, rather than

Joan Baez. “We Shall Overcome.” *In Concert*, 1963.

<https://open.spotify.com/album/66EuOM4JX57MTYRtSzQp4q>.

³⁴⁸ Kernodle, 296.

³⁴⁹ Nina Simone. “Mississippi Goddam.” *In Concert*, 1964.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/1XaSgwyBiiOXTuWfruk0XW>.

³⁵⁰ A. Loudermilk. “Nina Simone & the Civil Rights Movement: Protest at Her Piano, Audience at Her Feet.” *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3. Bridgewater State College, 2013. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1442368437/>. 124.

³⁵¹ Nadine Cohodas. *Princess Noire: The Tumultuous Reign of Nina Simone*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/wesleyan/docDetail.action?docID=10532094>. 137.

aspiring to respectability. “If America said no, it wasn’t going to open the door to us,” Simone writes in her autobiography, “we had to be strong enough to kick it down.”³⁵²

As a performative exercise of crossover, “A Change is Gonna Come,” synthesizes the three approaches. Showcasing Cooke’s ability to tell stories in simple phrasing and orchestrated to connote dignity—slow and filled with stirring strings and horns—“A Change is Gonna Come” speaks to both black and white audiences but in different ways.³⁵³ On the surface, it feels confident: “I know a change *gonna* come, oh yes it will.” But Cooke inserts a note of personal anxiety that had rarely appeared in his music before, save for “Chain Gang”: “It’s been too hard living, but I’m afraid to die.” Neither straight social commentary nor an encouraging sing-along, it is one mournful blues, filled with doubt.³⁵⁴ The song’s passivity, Christopher Trigg argues, was evidence of Cooke’s ambivalence about the possibility of change rather than his hope for it. “It feels like death,” Bobby Womack famously told Cooke.³⁵⁵

Perhaps that’s its significance, too, communicating Cooke’s anxiety about living in America as a black man to the rest of the country. Indeed, the song entered

Nina Simone. “Go Limp.” *In Concert*, 1964.
<https://open.spotify.com/track/15U1FRPRTqcYxjyxJSidQ3>.

Nina Simone. “Four Women.” *Wild is the Wind*, 1965.
<https://open.spotify.com/track/3djK3AhkRb0wRIVwWHaZdc>.

³⁵² Simone’s high standards operate as part of an intersectional performance of her own blackness. As a black woman, she was doubly denied access to the realm of “genius” or high art—and the deference it bestowed—allowed even to black male musicians. She rejected the patriarchal attitudes not only of the white musical establishment but also of critics like Baraka and movements like the Black Panthers, who maintained stereotypical views of women even as they promoted black liberation. Feldstein, 1360.

Nina Simone. *I Put A Spell On You: The Autobiography Of Nina Simone*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2003. 112.

³⁵³ *Dream Boogie*, 547.

³⁵⁴ Trigg, 992.

³⁵⁵ *Dream Boogie*, 549.

the Top 40 right after Cooke's murder, as a B-side to the dance-trend-riding "Shake" (R&B #7, pop #4).³⁵⁶ Though Cooke originally planned to never play "that fucker" in public, he did debut it very publicly on Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* in February 1964.³⁵⁷ Guralnick writes that Cooke appeared relaxed and neatly dressed, heading off any critique that he might be stepping out of bounds, that this wasn't the time or place to make a protest. As Cooke apparently told his drummer after the performance, "it almost scared the shit out of me."³⁵⁸

VII. Cooke as Crisis

When Cooke died in that California motel room, in December of the same year he conquered the Copacabana and the *Tonight Show*, people wondered if it was revenge, if it had been orchestrated from above, as payback, a forceful correction. "In a time of assassinations and assassination conspiracy theories," Guralnick writes, "[there was] considerable speculation that Sam Cooke had been cut down for his very pride and overweening ambition, that the Man was not going to let a nigger, any nigger, get too uppity."³⁵⁹

Cooke—and Simone, Brown, and others—were always swimming upstream in the music industry. Their music broadcast their blackness, and it could not be

³⁵⁶ "Black Pop Songwriting 1963-1966," 107.

"Sam Cooke discography."

³⁵⁷ *Dream Boogie*, 549.

Trigg, 992.

³⁵⁸ Unfortunately, the tapes from this number were apparently lost, so Guralnick and others are mostly working off the memories of band members. His swagger and thunderous reception can be observed on an earlier number from that session, "Basin Street Blues," of which recordings do exist. *Dream Boogie*, 552.

Sam Cooke. "Basin Street Blues." *The Tonight Show*, Feb. 7, 1964.

<https://youtu.be/DWNEBLhF6w>.

³⁵⁹ *Sweet Soul Music*, 48.

ignored. But Cooke inserted himself into the American mainstream, played its game to the extent that he could enjoy its benefits, and found agency within it. He struggled to stay respectable while rebelling against the expectation; doing so may have killed him. He toyed with the edges of acceptable sounds and stretched them, ever so slightly; he contested the plunder of black creativity but fueled the need for it. Cooke himself became a racial crisis as he turned crossover from a byproduct of the music industry to a feature, rejecting both black and white expectations for black musicians in the pursuit of an autonomous soul.

“The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist,” Fred Moten writes.³⁶⁰ The history of soul music testifies to the same. In Sam Cooke, listeners found a musician resistant to objectification by his industry, a conscious citizen of his terrible and beautiful world.³⁶¹

³⁶⁰ Moten, 1.

³⁶¹ “Letter to My Son.”

Conclusion

Super Bowl 50, at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, California, paused its Carolina Panthers-Denver Broncos matchup for a much-promoted halftime show.³⁶² As planned, headliner Coldplay kicked off with a medley of its repertoire before the band was joined by halftime show alumni Bruno Mars (Super Bowl XLVIII, 2014) and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter (Super Bowl XLVII, 2013). As *The Atlantic's* Spencer Kornhaber noted, however, when Beyoncé took the field to perform her song "Formation," she overshadowed the other acts.³⁶³ Entering with a drum line and a squadron of women dressed in black leather, berets, and '70s-style Afros, Beyoncé channeled both the Black Panthers and Michael Jackson, her outfit modeled after Jackson's in his own 1993 halftime performance.³⁶⁴ To some onlookers, her appearance felt like an occupation.

The pressures and strivings that shaped black musical practice in the 20th century can be heard in popular music today; even as genres shifted and tastes and technology changed, the central dynamics of the industry never went away. Examining just a few of the most prominent black crossover artists working in 2016, this thesis will conclude by considering the ways in which politics, identity, and

³⁶² Coldplay, Beyoncé, and Bruno Mars. "Coldplay's Full Super Bowl 50 Halftime Show feat. Beyoncé & Bruno Mars!" NFL, Feb. 7, 2016. <https://youtu.be/c9cUytejflk>.

³⁶³ Spencer Kornhaber. "Beyoncé's Radical Halftime Statement." *The Atlantic*, Feb. 8, 2016. <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/02/halftime-coldplay-beyonce-bruno-mars-formation/460404/>.

³⁶⁴ Michael Jackson. "Michael Jackson – Super Bowl (complete performance)." Jan. 31, 1993. <https://youtu.be/idg8TNknvDU>.

industry issues continue to shape the sounds and business of black music and what paths today's performances may carve for the future.

I. This Plot is Bigger Than Me

Beyoncé's outfit wasn't the only notable element of "Formation."³⁶⁵ As *The New York Times* critics brought up in a roundtable discussion, the song and its accompanying video, which the singer had released just a day before the Super Bowl, registered as significant moments in Beyoncé's career.

"My daddy Alabama, momma Louisiana / You mix that Negro with that Creole, make a Texas bama / I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros / I like my Negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils," Beyoncé sings. The music video is filled with imagery that evokes at once Hurricane Katrina, antebellum and modern-day New Orleans, and the Black Lives Matter movement. Beyoncé juxtaposes celebrations of African-American physical attributes and cultural heritage with visions of surviving through oppression; in other words, as Morris writes, "this video is really, really black."³⁶⁶ The live performance hit similar notes, as Beyoncé and her dancers raised fists in a "black power" salute, which called back to the 1968 Olympics, and spelled out "X" on the field, widely interpreted as a reference to Malcolm X.³⁶⁷

On the Super Bowl stage—a mainstream space that is as white-controlled, male-dominated, and capitalist as any—Beyoncé's "really, really black" performance stood out in stark contrast to expectations of a depoliticized NFL. "This is football,

³⁶⁵ Beyoncé. "Formation," 2016. <https://youtu.be/LrCHz1gwzTo>.

³⁶⁶ Jon Caramanica, Wesley Morris, and Jenna Wortham. "Beyoncé in 'Formation': Entertainer, Activist, Both?" *The New York Times*, Feb. 6, 2016. <http://nyti.ms/20hmtF6>.

³⁶⁷ Kornhaber.

not Hollywood, and I thought it was really outrageous that she used it as a platform to attack police officers who are the people who protect her and protect us, and keep us alive,” said former NYC mayor Rudy Giuliani after the game, voicing common conservative concerns that the Super Bowl should be “wholesome, family entertainment” for “middle America.”³⁶⁸ Police unions threatened to boycott her world tour. The expectation that Beyoncé—a black woman from Texas, with both Louisiana and Alabama heritage—would not insert a “black agenda” into the proceedings stems from the view of her as representing a unified and “color-blind, post-racial America.”³⁶⁹ After all, Beyoncé is relatively light-skinned, conventionally attractive, rich, and popular across all demographics—to such an extent that some critics might argue that she “became white,” as Baraka might say, or at least represents an “acceptable” blackness within white society.

On the contrary, Beyoncé is grappling with what Salamishah Tillet identifies as the racial paradox for African-Americans of being “simultaneously citizens and ‘noncitizens.’”³⁷⁰ She is far from alone in tapping into those debates around blackness, however, and far from a definitive voice. Within the context of the

³⁶⁸ Both phrases are euphemistic: the former for middlebrow, non-controversial, and socially conservative entertainment, and the latter for working- and middle-class, conservative people who tend to live in America’s “Heartland” rather than more liberal, coastal cities. Jacqueline Cutler. “Beyoncé’s ‘black power’ salute during Super Bowl 50 halftime show slammed by Rudy Giuliani as ‘attack’ on police.” *New York Daily News*, Feb. 9, 2015. <http://nydn.us/1QQDvav>.

³⁶⁹ Farah Jasmine Griffin. “At Last...? Michelle Obama, Beyoncé, Race & History,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 140, No. 1. American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2011. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/848998668?accountid=14963>. 132.

³⁷⁰ Salamishah Tillet. “Strange Sampling: Nina Simone and Her Hip-Hop Children.” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 11. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/aq/summary/v066/66.1.tillet.html>. 120.

ongoing Black Lives Matter protests, numerous examples of racially politicized hip-hop and R&B have come into the cultural discourse from, among others, J. Cole (“Be Free”³⁷¹), Janelle Monáe (“Hell You Talmbout”³⁷²), D’Angelo (*Black Messiah*³⁷³), and Kendrick Lamar (*To Pimp a Butterfly*³⁷⁴). All those texts reference directly or indirectly the names of black people killed by police.

Listening to these records, one might say they, too, “feel like death.”³⁷⁵ The latter two albums sample sonic palettes that can be heard as particularly “black,” mostly for their similarities to ’60s and ’70s soul music, but also for their simmering rage. Clover Hope at Jezebel writes that *Black Messiah* channels “the slow-cooked process of being angered and compelled into action.”³⁷⁶ It’s been a long time coming, after all—Simone sang “I can’t stand the pressure much longer / Somebody say a prayer” back in 1963.³⁷⁷ *Black Messiah*, which was quickly released after a grand jury declined to indict the Ferguson, Missouri officers involved in killing 18-year-old Michael Brown, is full of dark, chaotic funk, recalling Sly and the Family Stone’s cynical turn on their 1971 album *There’s a Riot Goin’ On*.³⁷⁸ “All we wanted was a

³⁷¹ J. Cole. “Be Free,” 2014. <https://soundcloud.com/dreamvillerecords/j-cole-be-free>.

³⁷² Wondaland Records. “Hell You Talmbout,” 2015. <https://soundcloud.com/wondalandarts/hell-you-talmbout>.

³⁷³ D’Angelo. *Black Messiah*, 2014. <https://open.spotify.com/album/5Hfbag0SsHxafx1SySFSX6>.

³⁷⁴ Kendrick Lamar. *To Pimp a Butterfly*, 2015. <https://open.spotify.com/album/5Hfbag0SsHxafx1SySFSX6>.

³⁷⁵ Bobby Womack, in *Dream Boogie*, 549.

³⁷⁶ Clover Hope. “Black Messiah, Top Five and the Power of Perfect Timing.” Jezebel, Dec. 17, 2014. <http://jezebel.com/black-messiah-top-five-and-the-power-of-perfect-timing-1671384408>.

³⁷⁷ “Mississippi Goddam.”

³⁷⁸ Sly and the Family Stone. “Luv N’ Haight.” *There’s a Riot Goin’ On*, 1971. <https://open.spotify.com/track/4Phj7Zce9seBEAaqiyK12r>. Hanson, 356.

chance to talk,” D’Angelo sings on “The Charade,” “stead we only got outlined in chalk.”³⁷⁹

Lamar shares that skepticism of change, inserting himself into the continuum of black activism as an actor in conflict. Over horns and percussion that draw heavily from funk—George Clinton of the seminal group Parliament Funkadelic collaborated on numerous tracks—*To Pimp a Butterfly* reflects Lamar’s emerging race and class consciousness after the success of his 2012 major label debut, *good kid, m.A.A.d. city*.³⁸⁰ “I’m the biggest hypocrite of 2015 / When I finish this if you listenin’ then sure you will agree,” Lamar raps on “The Blacker the Berry,” the album’s first single. “This plot is bigger than me, it’s generational hatred / It’s genocism, it’s grimy, little justification.”³⁸¹ The scale of the conflict can be overwhelming; at times on the record, his voice goes hoarse.

He knows that white people will also be listening (*good kid, m.A.A.d. city* hit #2 on the *Billboard* 200 chart; *To Pimp a Butterfly* would reach #1), but according to Carvell Wallace, he simply doesn’t care; he’s not really talking to them.³⁸² Lamar goes on to elaborate on his “survivor’s guilt” from being able to leave his hometown of Compton, California, and needing to give back to his community as a means of his

Jon Pareles and Jon Caramanica. “Review: D’Angelo’s *Black Messiah*.” *The New York Times*, Dec. 15, 2014. <http://nyti.ms/1zZRaEC>.

³⁷⁹ D’Angelo. “The Charade.” *Black Messiah*, 2014.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/7gQzzsppcAezKh0HFjrG3q>.

³⁸⁰ Joe Coscarelli. “Kendrick Lamar on His New Album and the Weight of Clarity.” *The New York Times*, March 16, 2015. <http://nyti.ms/18TitX8>.

³⁸¹ Kendrick Lamar. “The Blacker the Berry.” *To Pimp a Butterfly*, 2015.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/5Mtt6tZSZA9cXTHGSGpyh0>.

³⁸² Carvell Wallace. “On Kendrick Lamar and Black Humanity.” Pitchfork, March 19, 2015. <http://pitchfork.com/thepitch/704-on-kendrick-lamar-and-black-humanity/>.

own survival. He's speaking to other black people looking for ways to survive.³⁸³ In the process, he finds it necessary to tackle the specters of respectability politics and personal responsibility, and not always with clarity.

The writer Marlon James, analyzing "The Blacker the Berry" and Lamar's press appearances surrounding the album, sees Lamar conflicted between asserting his dominance over stereotypes ("My hair is nappy, my nose is round and wide") and questioning his complicity in black death ("So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street / when gangbangin' make me kill a nigga blacker than me? Hypocrite!").³⁸⁴ Lamar may temporarily reiterate the impositions of white supremacy in the process of examining his own blackness, Marlon argues, but it's important to remember that "racism makes no sense" either. David Smith, from Chapter One, comes to mind again: "To assert one's blackness does not automatically free one from society's structures of domination."³⁸⁵ James argues, though, that it should be acceptable for black musical storytelling to be confused, to take artistic liberties. "Each song lets us try on a new way of being in the world," writes Nitsuh Abebe of the act of listening. The same can be said for the act of performing, as well.³⁸⁶

³⁸³ "Even if master's listenin' I got the world's attention." Kendrick Lamar. "Complexion (A Zulu Love)." *To Pimp a Butterfly*, 2015.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/72hFOhhhnOJZnnp6uVOgPn>.

³⁸⁴ Marlon James. "Kendrick Lamar, *The Blacker the Berry*" from "25 Songs That Tell Us Where Music is Going." *The New York Times Magazine*, March 10, 2016.

<http://nyti.ms/1UgqaLg>.

³⁸⁵ Smith, 248.

³⁸⁶ Nitsuh Abebe. "Introduction" from "25 Songs That Tell Us Where Music is Going." *The New York Times Magazine*, March 10, 2016. <http://nyti.ms/1UgqaLg>.

II. A Black Bill Gates in the Making

In the essay “Shit White People Say About Beyoncé,” Joshua Dubler writes that the singer is treated by critics—even favorable ones—as both a “perfect object and auteur.”³⁸⁷ Those expectations seemingly give her little room to navigate, but there are opportunities in the exposure.

As Jenna Wortham notes, every song that Beyoncé drops and every move she makes become a point of analysis and critique.³⁸⁸ This comes in large part because of the artist’s sheer omnipresence; she exists in an upper echelon of celebrity and economic success such that Sam Cooke could scarcely have imagined.³⁸⁹ Like Nina Simone, Beyoncé’s art envisions strategies for her intersectional reality. Her 2013 surprise “visual album,” the self-titled *Beyoncé*, explores themes of sexuality and female pleasure, pride in both economic domination and domestic life, black pride and radicalism. The album counters critiques of Beyoncé by particular strands of white feminists for talking about loving her husband, Jay-Z (né Shawn Carter), as in “Drunk in Love,”³⁹⁰ and for exhibiting her body, as in “Partition.”³⁹¹

Simone’s anthem “Four Women,” taking issue with the limited societal roles that black women are allowed to fill, is revived here for the 21st century.³⁹² “I took

³⁸⁷ Joshua Dubler. “Shit White People Say About Beyoncé.” *Soundings*, Vol. 97, No. 3. Penn State University Press, 2014.

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/sij/summary/v097/97.3.dubler.html>. 388.

³⁸⁸ Caramanica, Morris, and Wortham.

³⁸⁹ “All That You Can’t Leave Behind,” 184.

³⁹⁰ Beyoncé feat. Jay-Z. “Drunk in Love.” *Beyoncé*, 2013.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/6jG2YzhxptolDzLHTGLt7S>.

³⁹¹ Beyoncé. “Partition.” *Beyoncé*, 2013.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/5hgnY0mVcVetszbb85qeDg>.

³⁹² It’s worth noting that “Peaches,” the “rough” and “bitter” character inhabited by Simone in “Four Women,” is also whom Beyoncé calls upon for her more risqué feelings: “He like to call me ‘Peaches’ when we get this nasty.” *Ibid*.

some time to live my life, but don't think I'm just his little wife," Beyoncé sings in "****Flawless," a song that samples a TED Talk on feminism by author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. "Don't get it twisted, get it twisted. This my shit, bow down bitches."³⁹³ Nicki Minaj, both in her song "Anaconda"³⁹⁴ and the controversy surrounding it, similarly confronts music industry power structures and beauty standards that deny black female artists the same respect and acclaim allowed to even black men and white women. Even "conscientious" hip-hop and R&B, as practiced by male artists like Lamar and Kanye West, still indulges in casual misogyny even as it asserts race consciousness.³⁹⁵ "Black women influence pop culture so much but are rarely rewarded for it," Minaj said on Twitter.³⁹⁶ *Beyoncé* the album announces its own significance; it stands as a self-portrait of Beyoncé the person, containing multitudes, not contradictory but complementary.³⁹⁷

That album's release showcased Beyoncé's undeniable economic power within the industry. Dropped without warning on iTunes just before midnight on a Friday, its very existence served as its ad campaign; *Beyoncé* debuted at #1 on the

³⁹³ Beyoncé. "****Flawless." *Beyoncé*, 2013.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/7tefUew2RUuSAqHyegMoY1>.

³⁹⁴ Nicki Minaj. "Anaconda," 2014.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/794F99D5BQHS5ZGRXAs7I5>.

³⁹⁵ "That Kanye and Kendrick (Kanye more obliquely and less intelligently than Kendrick) are responding to the publicized suffering of black people in this country, and the various movements that have risen in response to it, only makes their misogyny more deplorable." Tomi Obaro. "What Do Kendrick And Kanye Owe Women Listeners?" BuzzFeed, April 5, 2016. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/tomiobaro/kendrick-and-kanye-sexism#.beqJpXLd0>.

³⁹⁶ Quoted in Nosheen Iqbal. "The Nicki Minaj debate is bigger than Taylor Swift's ego." *The Guardian*, July 22, 2015. <http://gu.com/p/4aqh9/stw>.

³⁹⁷ Rookie Magazine Staff. "The Great Big Beyoncé Roundtable." *Rookie Mag*, Dec. 19, 2013. <http://www.rookiemag.com/?p=65684>.

Billboard 200.³⁹⁸ The “Formation” release mirrored that surprise. Both moves demand immediate attention as well as respect for Beyoncé’s clout: “You might just be a black Bill Gates in the making, ’cause I slay,” she sings, before turning it around: “I just might be a black Bill Gates in the making.”³⁹⁹

Beyoncé, both in partnership with and separate from Jay-Z, exhibits the latest iteration of black capitalism and Cooke’s dreams of self-sustainability and financial independence. Jay-Z, who formed Roc-a-Fella Records in 1996 when major labels declined to sign him as a rapper, now runs the company Roc Nation. According to a 2010 *Wall Street Journal* article, that business combines recording with music publishing and artist management, invests in live shows through a partnership with the company Live Nation, and now runs the streaming service Tidal (of which Nicki Minaj and Beyoncé are part-owners).⁴⁰⁰ Beyoncé runs her own management company and makes money from more than one women’s fashion line and numerous sponsorships. Their combined net worth is \$1 billion.⁴⁰¹

The two artists, through their management companies and individual collaborations, work to mentor and gain exposure for up-and-coming black artists in

³⁹⁸ Andrew Hampp and Jason Lipshutz. “Beyoncé Unexpectedly Releases New Self-Titled ‘Visual Album’ on iTunes.” *Billboard*, Dec. 13, 2013. <http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/the-juice/5827398/beyonce-unexpectedly-releases-new-self-titled-visual-album-on>.

³⁹⁹ “Formation.”

⁴⁰⁰ John Jurgensen. “The State of Jay-Z’s Empire.” *The Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 29, 2010. <http://on.wsj.com/1w6tgWS>.

Andrew Flanagan and Andrew Hampp. “It’s Official: Jay-Z’s Historic Tidal Launches with 16 Artist Stakeholders.” *Billboard*, March 30, 2015. <http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/6509498/jay-z-tidal-launch-artist-stakeholders>.

⁴⁰¹ Claire Lampen. “What Are Beyoncé and Jay Z’s Net Worth? Hip-Hop’s Royal Couple Pulls in Serious Cash.” *Mic*, Feb. 11, 2016. <http://mic.com/articles/134954/what-are-beyonce-and-jay-z-s-net-worth-hip-hop-s-royal-couple-pulls-in-serious-cash#.qh1N5uzdP>.

their genres—mostly notably pop superstar Rihanna and rapper-producer Kanye West, arguably the most innovative artist in hip-hop and a big player in the fashion industry.⁴⁰² The comparison to Cooke’s SAR Records and Kags Publishing should be apparent; with their crossover popularity and business pursuits, Beyoncé and Jay-Z not only succeeded in establishing careers with diversified income streams⁴⁰³ but also found new ways to incorporate their and others’ blackness into the mainstream.

III. The Changing Same?

“Our ambition was never to just fit into the corporate mold,” Jay-Z writes in his book *Decoded*. “It was to take it over and remake that world in our image.”⁴⁰⁴

What image could that be, though? Contemporary performances of blackness remain fractured and in conflict, with each other and the world around. That, after all, is black culture: mutually constructing and deconstructing, avowing and disavowing, expanding and delimiting.⁴⁰⁵ Despite the success of artists like Jay-Z, Beyoncé, and Lamar, the music mainstream in 2016 remains dominated by white musicians, businesses, and tastes. The security of black lives remains unstable; so does black art. Can crossover ever provide an existence beyond the act of making do?⁴⁰⁶

“As I lead this army make room for mistakes and depression,” Lamar raps on the final track of *To Pimp a Butterfly*.⁴⁰⁷ That album ends with Lamar in a fictional

⁴⁰² Grantland Staff. “Who Is Hip-Hop’s Alpha Dog? A Grantland Staff Survey to Determine the Most Important Rapper Right Now.” Grantland, Feb. 25, 2015. <http://gran.tl/1FTUF3M>.

⁴⁰³ As Cooke said, even if people stop paying them to perform (indeed, Jay-Z rarely releases his own songs anymore, although he still tours), they will still be paid when others perform. Wolff, 224.

⁴⁰⁴ Quoted in Jurgensen.

⁴⁰⁵ Johnson, 2.

⁴⁰⁶ Conquergood, 137.

⁴⁰⁷ Kendrick Lamar. “Mortal Man.” *To Pimp a Butterfly*, 2015. <https://open.spotify.com/track/1WT11QmhZutciEv1NsHt1R>.

conversation with his hero, the rapper Tupac Shakur, who died in 1996. He wants Tupac's thoughts on how to survive and thrive in the world as it is, not as he wishes it to be, and the responsibilities of his art to himself and others. Lamar's last question, asking how his community might rewrite its self-destructive narratives and break the cycle of exploitation—how, paraphrasing Coates, black people can live without descending into *The Dream*⁴⁰⁸—goes unanswered.

“The greatest reward of this constant interrogation, of confrontation with the brutality of my country, is that it has freed me from ghosts and girded me against the sheer terror of disembodiment,” Coates writes.⁴⁰⁹ The “race question,” that is to say, has no answer beyond the act of questioning itself. “What becomes evident,” argues Nadine Ehlers, “is that crisis is actually the ever-present condition of racial identity formation.”⁴¹⁰ Questioning opens the possibilities for resignification, for interruption, for further questioning—for continued crisis.

Soon after Beyoncé's Super Bowl appearance, a group of pro-police protestors organized a rally at the NFL's New York City headquarters.⁴¹¹ The organizers decried the “hate” they saw promoted by Beyoncé's black performance, seeking to force the NFL to keep such “racism” off the stage and off the television.⁴¹²

Only three people showed up.

A counter-protest to support Beyoncé, on the other hand, brought dozens.

⁴⁰⁸ “Letters to My Son.”

⁴⁰⁹ *Between the World and Me*, 12.

⁴¹⁰ Ehlers, 150.

⁴¹¹ Jessica Roy and Hilary Weaver. “All Two of Beyoncé's Haters Showed Up to the Anti-Beyoncé Protest.” *New York Magazine*, Feb. 16, 2016. <http://nymag.com/thecut/2016/02/anti-beyonc-protest-becomes-pro-beyonc-protest.html>.

⁴¹² Proud of the Blues. “Anti-Beyoncé Protest Rally—New York.” Eventbrite, Feb. 16, 2016. <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/anti-beyonce-protest-rally-new-york-tickets-21446744791>.

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⁴¹³ Included here are the notable albums, singles, and live performances referenced in this thesis. Not all artists referenced are reflected here, nor are songs not individually released as singles. Artists are listed by stage or band names, and songwriters are listed as they appear in their composer credits. A playlist of the music in this thesis, dependent on streaming availability, is published on Spotify. A free account is required to access. <https://open.spotify.com/user/1226188316/playlist/61nE5vwZ1KVJEWectjqLH>.

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