

THE DISCOURSE OF THE DIVINE: RADICAL TRADITIONS OF BLACK
FEMINISM, MUSICKING, AND MYTH WITHIN THE BLACK PUBLIC SPHERE
(CIVIL RIGHTS TO THE PRESENT)

by

Issac Martel Carter

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of
The Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Florida Atlantic University

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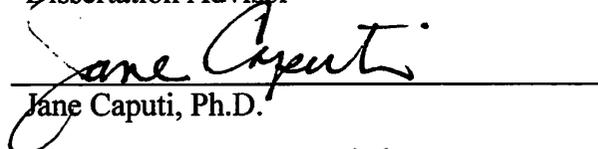
Issac Martel Carter

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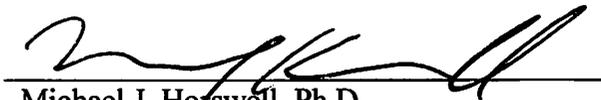
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I wish to express sincere gratitude to my family and friends, my committee, and the Orisha, griots, and ancestors who have guided me throughout this life. I am blessed and highly favored.

ABSTRACT

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The Discourse of the Divine: Radical Traditions of Black Feminism, Musicking, and Myth within the Black Public Sphere (Civil Rights to the Present) is an exploration of the historical precursors and the contemporary developments of Black feminism in America, via Black female musical production and West and Central African cosmology. Historical continuity and consciousness of African spirituality within the development of Black feminism are analyzed alongside the musical practices of two Black female musicians, Nina Simone and Me'shell Ndegéocello. Simone and Ndegéocello, The High Priestess of Soul and the Mother of Neo-Soul, respectively, distend the commodified confines of Black music and identity by challenging the established norms of music and knowledge production. These artists' lyrics, politics, and representations substantiate the "Signifyin(g)" elements of West and Central African feminist mythologies and music-making traditions.

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CHAPTER ONE—INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

It is thus necessary to imagine radically new theoretical forms, in order to speak to new realities. Music, the organization of noise, is one such form. It reflects the manufacture of society; it reflects the audible waveband of the vibrations and signs that make up society. An instrument of understanding, it prompts us to decipher a sound form of knowledge.

My intention here is thus not only to theorize about music, but to theorize through music. (Attali 4)

Activist, intellectual, revolutionary, and Black feminist Angela Davis said her work *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* “will not popularize feminism in Black communities” (xix). However, she did hope it would demonstrate multiple African-American feminist traditions. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* examines the origins of Black feminist consciousness through the artistic work of Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday, all of whom were critical in shaping the history of popular music and American culture (Davis xx). Davis articulates:

What can we learn from women like Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday that we may not be able to learn from Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, and Mary Church Terrell? If we were beginning to appreciate the blasphemies of fictionalized blues women—especially their outrageous politics of sexuality—and the knowledge that might be gleaned from their lives about the possibilities of transforming gender relations

within black communities, perhaps we also could benefit from a look at the artistic contributions of the original blues women. (xiv)

The exploration of Black feminist traditions through Blues provides two imperative premises crucial to the goals of this study. First, Davis demonstrates that feminist traditions should include the oral narratives of African-American women's music, which contains elements of African cultural heritage and history. The inclusion of oral narratives is pivotal, for it allows working class voices and others without access or the means to publish texts to diversify the construction of the Black feminist historical tradition. Second, Davis establishes that within the oralities of Black American music there is an African spiritual presence and process, *nommo*. Davis states "The blues preserve and transform the West African philosophical centrality of the naming process. In the Dogon, Yoruban, and other West African cultural traditions, the process of *nommo*—naming of things, forces, and modes—is a means of establishing magical control ... over the object of the naming process" (33). These two premises are imperative to understanding contemporary Black feminism and expanding the concept to include Black musical and spiritual traditions within the developments and articulations of feminist consciousness and actions.

The goals of this study are to (1) expand Angela Davis' research of oral narratives and Black Feminism to other genres of music, during different time periods by exploring the music, lyrics, biographical data, and discourse of Nina Simone during the Civil Rights Era and of Me'shell Ndegéocello during the postmodern present; (2) magnify the identification of Black cosmological philosophies, symbols, and figures beyond *nommo*, present within Black women's musical production; (3) apply the Black vernacular

tradition of signification to the music of Nina Simone and Me'shell Ndegéocello. *The Discourse of the Divine: Radical Traditions of Black Feminism, Musicking, and Myth within the Black Public Sphere (Civil Rights to the Present)* contributes to the ever broadening sphere of decolonized readings of Black women's musicking in relationship to Black feminist traditions, Black cosmology, and the Black vernacular tradition.

Nina Simone, High Priestess of Soul, and Me'shell Ndegéocello, Mother of Neo-Soul distend the commodified confines of Black music. Their musicking, lyrics, politics, and biographies substantiate the Signifyin(g)¹ elements of West and Central African feminist mythologies, the Black vernacular tradition, and West African music-making customs. Analysis of the work of Nina Simone during the Civil Rights Era and moving through to the postmodern present to examine Me'shell Ndegéocello's work, reflects that these artists embody the coterminous relationship between Black female subjectivity, cosmological agency, and communal autonomy. Simone and Ndegéocello demonstrate how Black women's musical production pushes the boundaries of identity and culture and challenge dominant ideologies and constructs while engaging West African traditions of Black feminism, Black musicking, and Black myth.

Key Terms

There are three key terms that extend the boundaries of theory and action this study advances: myth, musicking, and praxis. First, the term myth, as it applies to the texts of the Black female musicians in this study, is intended to extend the binary boundaries of the sacred and profane stories and expound on the folklore, vernacular, and

¹ Signifyin(g)—Gates capitalizes the “S” in Signifyin(g) to distinguish the Black vernacular tradition form of the word from the “common” or “standard” English use. The “(g)” appears in brackets to underscore the fact that within the Black vernacular tradition the “g” is not typically pronounced (Gates 43–46).

the oral and musical tradition of Black experience. Myths are cosmic tales, written and spoken in vernacular traditions that possess the power to alter consciousness and actions. (Caputi 291). Myths chronicle our current lives, our origins, our cultures, our conditions, and our worlds, with an enigmatic specificity that requires us to wake from the slumber of rational senses and embrace the metaphysical past, present, and future concurrently. Karla Holloway notes in *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature*:

The recovery of myth is linked to the emergence of textual complexity ...
By assuming this perspective, my intention is to stress the use of myth in black women writers' texts as a vehicle for aligning real and imaginative events in both the present and the past and for dissolving the temporal and spatial bridges between them. With this framework, myth complicates language and imagery. (Holloway 25)

Holloway's focus on the recovery of myth in the texts of Black women writers provides the theoretical space to explore the musical texts of Black women, illustrating how these women have contributed to the continuity of Black feminist traditions. Holloway's concept of myth stresses the recovery of silenced and lost voices, including oral narratives, which Davis states are overlooked due to privileging of the written word. Thus, Black women's musicking and myth are linked to Black feminist traditions. Lene Brøndum's "The Persistence of Traditions Myths" appearing in the edited work, *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage* describes African-American women's myths as stories "that seeks to explain or give meaning to aspects of human life or a culture's origins and identity" (qtd. in Diedrich 156). It is vital to understand that Black myths,

which encompass the life and times of the Black Diaspora, cannot be fully understood from a Eurocentric perspective. This is because West African lives do not easily fit into homogeneous constructs of Western society. Toni Morrison, in a 1983 interview, addresses the problematic nature of Eurocentric criticism of her fiction, claiming that her novels are written in a structure that emanates from Black culture and Black cosmology, which is distinct from Eurocentric criticism (Taylor-Guthrie 151). Similarly, the mythical structures and symbols examined in this study operate outside Western constructs of music, identity, culture, and spirituality.

Second, in this study, the term music is engaged through the concept of musicking. Musicologist, Christopher Small's *Music of the Common Tongue: Survival and Celebration in African American Music* suggests that musicking is a collective process, a way of playing and responding to music by which musician, listener, and all those involved in the production and distribution of music occupy shared spaces, with no essential separation between them, reacting to and interpreting the conditions of our world. Christopher Small describes Black music making as such:

What we call Afro-American music, then, is not a collection of sound-objects, or a repertory of pieces, or even a group of musical styles narrowly considered, but an approach to the act of music making, a way of playing and of responding to music ... (Small 13–14)

Small's intent is to provide a conceptual and historical framework for Black music in America that demonstrates how, through the process of music making, listeners and performers engage in the exploration of social conditions and development of identity of the times. From the work songs of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Blues of the

nineteenth century, and the Hip-Hop of today, Black music in America has functioned in a manner that has addressed most, if not all, formations and developments of Black life in the New World. The musicking framework further accentuates Attali's assertion of the capacity to theorize through music. The term musicking asks and answers how and why African-Americans engage in the human activity of musicking. Therefore, Black musicking is not solely a cultural expression or symbolic representation, but a means of dialectical and dialogical analysis and action, to understand and respond to social conditions and political phenomena. The concept of musicking addresses the analytical limitation of musical forms as Davis suggests in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* by expanding understanding of Black music beyond the scope of the individual artist or audience member. Musicking is a shared experience and response to the world. Applying the term musicking to Black female artists resituates the analysis of their works within the social conditions demarked by the intersection of race, class, and gender.

The third term, praxis, combines the constructs of myth and musicking. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* characterizes praxis as a cyclical, critical self-reflection that evolves through knowledge, theory, action, and reflection, to produce new theory and knowledge (Freire 60–75). Praxis, as a transformational paradigm, suggests that social conditions are changed when oppressed groups deepen their understanding of their own experience through indigenous forms of knowledge and collective analysis and action. Black women's musicking in this study is situated as praxis, possessing social and spiritual powers to effect change. A feminist mythical praxis of musicking warrants the weaving of consciousness, individual and collective memories, and myth with musical

performance and audience participation through a nuanced, call and response² system of meaning, known as musicking. The dialectical nature of the Black feminist mythical praxis of musicking distorts the dominant patriarchal and racist discourse by empowering Black women and men through a West African spiritual and historical consciousness, providing a discursive agency and subjectivity when recounting or reauthoring the past or the prospects of the future.

Musical and Mythical Theorizing

Several scholars³ have engaged Black music in theorizing Black feminism. Each of these scholars argues for resituating the musical production of Black women in the context of burgeoning feminist consciousness, discursive statements, and as a cultural form of dissent. Hazel Carby's *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America* suggests "what a consideration of women's blues allows us to see is an alternative form of representation, an oral and musical women's culture that explicitly addresses the contradictions of feminism, sexuality, and power" (10). Guthrie Ramsey's *Race Music* observes the growing practice of musical scholarship situating music as political texts, cultural practices, and gendered discursive statements. By insisting Black feminist theory and traditions are not only written, and include the music and performance of Black female musicians, the landscape of multiple African-American feminist traditions is

² Call and response is a mode of discourse highly prevalent within African American culture that prioritizes dialogue. Consisting of both verbal and nonverbal interactions between performer and audience, these interactions between musicians and audiences (musicking) is expressed through the complex exchanges taking place beyond the performance sites, and are observed in a variety of forms within the Black commons (Collins, 2006, 261).

³ The following authors explored Black feminism and music: Patricia Hill Collins (2000) and (2006); Hazel Carby (1986), (1991), and (1999); Kyra Gaunt (2007); Eileen Hayes and Linda Williams (2007).

expanded. According to Davis “Music was central to the meaning of a culture of resistance during slavery. Likewise, the blues, the most important post-slavery musical genre, encouraged forms of social consciousness that challenge the dominant ideology of racism” (*Blues Legacies* 120). Davis further states that Black women’s Blues also confronted patriarchy, ideas of high versus low culture that demeaned the popular music of the working class, and the moral authority of the Black church. Black feminist thought and action, as expressed through music, represents subjugated knowledge excluded, opposed, or disregarded by Westernized culture.

The exclusion of non-Westernized forms of thought and culture has significantly shaped the relationships between Black women’s music, feminist scholarship, and social movements. Black musicking’s form and function, as part of the Black vernacular tradition, is a site of resistance to Western paradigms. Philosopher Michel Foucault’s *Society Must Be Defended* provides insight into the relationship between language and power, which supports the importance of music as a form of discourse producing knowledge. Blocks of historical knowledge represent what Black people know at the local level and the power of these perspectives derives from the critiques offered to “functional arrangements or systematic organizations” obscuring these bodies of knowledge (Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended* 7). Collins distinguishes her use of the term subjugated knowledge by first stating that these knowledges are not naive, as suggested by Foucault, but are rendered as such by those controlling knowledge validation and, second, that Foucault’s use of the term subjugated knowledges does not account for historical influence of West African culture on Black feminist thought and action (*Black Feminist Thought* 291). Dominant groups attempt to replace or erase these

knowledges in an effort to dominate dimensions of oppressed groups' lives, including the labor and bodies of women. The phallogentric, white supremacist suppression of Black women's ideas, within dominant social institutions, prompted "African-American women to use music, literature, daily conversations, and everyday behavior as important locations and tools for constructing a Black feminist consciousness" (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 251–252). Through musicking, Black women's distinctive standpoint produces and validates knowledge claims that empower Black women and their communities.

Black music's historical knowledge challenges the dominant hegemony, cultivates cultural identities, and encourages critical consciousness and discourse. Hegemony, as articulated by Antonio Gramsci, consists of manufactured consent by the elite class of leadership in society to achieve dominance through coercive force and civil consent. The civil, economic, political, and social systems from the intellectual and moral leadership legitimize the existing power relationships so they appear to be just and natural (*Prison Notebooks* 55–60). The production of Black women's music provides real life, day-to-day analysis, and a counter-narrative to the conventional wisdom and false consciousness of the status quo, necessary and accessible within Black popular culture. Caribbean critic, Sylvia Wynter's "Ethno or Socio Poetics" discusses the importance of Black musical production to Black cultural identity in the New World:

The black experience in the New World has been paradigmatic of the non-Western experience of the native peoples; and that the black experience constituted an existence which daily criticized the abstract consciousness of humanism; that the popular oral culture which the black created in

response to an initial negation of this humanness, constitutes as culture, the *heresy of humanism*; and that is why black popular culture—spirituals, blues, jazz, Reggae, Afro-Cuban—and its manifold variants have constituted the underground cultural experience as subversive of the status quo Western culture as was Christianity in the catacombs of the Roman Empire. For it was in this culture that the blacks reinvented themselves as a WE that needed no OTHER to constitute their Being; that laid down the cultural parameters of a concretely universal *ethnos*. (85)

The heresy of Black music, as Wynter articulates, confronts the inhumane Western hegemony and dualistic Western notions of culture and identity. The Black Diaspora's polyrhythmic musicking fosters a radical subjectivity negating the Otherness created by Western colonial systems of thinking. Through the oral cultural production of enslaved Africans, the diversity of humanity, denied by the West, is cultivated and maintained. As discussed in L. H. Stallings' *Mutha' is half a word* "Black female cultural producers, in order to create and sustain radical Black female sexual subjectivity, must embrace difference as a foundation without simply reversing the established order that fosters readings of difference as deviance" (6). Black women's musicking emphasizes an "equilateral order" to difference without deficit (Stallings 10). As such, Black women's musicking embraces difference and compels new considerations for collective modes of knowledge and being. Black women's music, symbols, and metaphors push and extend the boundaries of Blackness and manifestations of Black cosmology.

Theorizing Black feminism through music also requires examination of West and Central African systems of values, beliefs, and spirituality. Black cosmology in this study

represents a metaphysical bridge, connecting Black feminist consciousness and traditional West African philosophical and spiritual traditions. Angela Davis accounts for the overarching West African cosmological presence in the music of Black women through nommo. Davis' articulation of nommo provides a further foundation for understanding the interdependent systems of the spiritual and physical realms of Black women expressed and cultivated by Black female musicians. The West African spiritual process of nommo, or the naming of things, endows Black women and men musicians with the transformative power of the word, distinguishing it from Judeo-Christian religious prayers, which limit this authority to God (and men as His representatives) alone. The process of conjuring through naming problems, nommo, establishes control over the object of naming and even possesses the power to invoke and create goddesses. This transformative word magic establishes mastery over one's life, endowing Black women musicians with the ability to transform individual experiences into problems that are shared and solved collectively by the Black community (*Blues Legacies* 128–129). Davis' depiction of nommo, as an ancestral spirit energy and power present in Blues connects Black American culture with our West African antecedents. This study builds on the tradition of nommo and demonstrates that Black women's music possesses West African mythical representations. The musical and mythical signification of Black cosmology within Black women's musicking expands our understanding of Black feminist traditions.

Black women's musicking metaphysical properties, or as Caputi's *Gossips, Gorgons and Crones* describes as a "psychic activism" (re)acquires and reacquaints women to a world of mythical and spiritual powers able to shift consciousness and, when

collectively employed, lead to radical change (149–150). The praxis of myth is a necessary disruption, a culturally inherited comeback to the matrix of domination that would have dominion over Black people, mentally, physically, and spiritually. Feminist interpretation and analysis of myths within the musical production of Black women reveal and reclaim the transformative powers of Black folklore and West African cosmology embedded in the dialectical and dialogical call and response discourse of Black music. “The energetic elements of this mythic vocabulary can be found, read, and communicated with in both ancient and contemporary forms, from the worlds of religion, as well as art and popular culture” (Caputi, *Goddesses and Monsters* 293). The Discourse of the Divine conjures its energy and potency from ancestral beginnings, fulfilling the traditions of West African living and being, music and myth, making clear the connections among the lived experiences of Black women, musicking, and the praxis of myth. This study reconnoiters the recordings and performances of Black women and their relationship to physical and metaphysical spheres of power. The dynamic relationship of African-American women’s musicking, the social, political, and cultural context of their musical production, along with expressions of spiritual agency and signification, engage a non-Western form of cultural criticism and Black feminist praxis.

Black Feminism, Both And

Because any political agenda that addresses the realities of most African-American women's lives must deal with the four major systems of oppression and exploitation—race, class, gender, and sexuality—black feminist politics radically breaks down the notion of mutually exclusive, competing identities and interests, and instead understands identities and political process as organic, fluid, interdependent, dynamic, and historical. The openness of our political processes and the permeability of our multiple identities help create the potential for collaborations that transcend social boundaries and reject elitist criteria for leadership. Instead of policing boundaries, racial or otherwise, black feminists have more often than not penetrated these barriers, expanding the meaning of “we” and “community” in the process. (Ransby 1219)

Black feminism's origins are a heterogeneous, historical, and dialectical response to the inhumanity of colonialism, slavery, and Western imperialism. Black feminism recognizes the multiplicity of an individual's identity and the simultaneity of oppression. Sylvia Wynter's *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom* argues that European imperialism and forces of modernization would see Black women denied any form of equality or humane existence. Surviving the genocidal and global capitalist strategies dispensed throughout the Caribbean and Americas led to a wide range of social movements during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including the historical traditions of what has become known as Black feminism in the United States during the 1970s. Black feminism reveals the fundamental gaps between the Black women's

constructs of identity and community and the deficit-based dualistic identities perpetrated by the Westernized social hegemony (Wynter 311–312). From the historically inscribed colonial image of the Venus Hottentot to the antebellum Jezebel and Mammy, the misrepresentation of Black women and women of color corrupted social relations, economic systems, communication structures, and systems of knowledge production. The oppression of Black women is composed of multiple interdependent social constructs, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, which attempt to assign Black women to a permanent subordinate status.

The works of many generations of mothers, sisters, daughters, and ancestors have made immeasurable contributions to the Black feminist traditions resisting the dominant hegemony. Black women, throughout the history of the United States have engaged in womanish forms of struggle, both antiracist and antiheterosexist, as demonstrated by their activism addressing Abolition, Women’s Suffrage, Women’s Liberation, and Black Liberation movements. The Combahee River Collective’s “Black Feminist Statement” underscores the history and legacy of Black women’s activism:

There have always been Black women activists—some known, like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Marcy Church Terrell, and thousands upon thousands unknown—who have had a shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity to make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggle unique. Contemporary Black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters. (Guy-Sheftall 233)

The history of Black women activists is a history of organizing and knowledge production that supports and sustains multiple identities and fosters humanity and wholeness. Barbara Smith's anthology *Home Girls* asserts Black feminism is theory, analysis, and action accomplished through everyday organizing (Smith xxxvii). The legacy of Black feminism and its historical antecedents lie in the deeds of the first Black women to resist colonialism and slavery, as well as their methods and practices of knowledge production (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 253).

Over time, many labels, both positive and negative, have characterized Black women's tradition of consciousness and actions. Black feminism, womanism, and third world feminism are all labels, created and/or assigned, to articulate the history of Black women's activism. Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* authored the term womanist to outline the psyche of Black women who consciously resist and live the legacy of Black women's effort to move beyond the socially constructed, stratifying station ushered forth by the systems and structures of colonialism:

Womanist 1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of 'girlish,' i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with an other black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*. (xi)

Walker's definition of womanist also includes the term Black feminist. Collins refers to the struggle of naming this Black women's radical tradition with "no name" as a "linguistic treadmill" (*Black Feminist Thought* 21). The use of the term "Black feminism" in this work intends first to recognize the ancestral history and provide a unifying language for men and women from the African diaspora, as well as those ascribed the status of being socially or politically "colored" and thus denied the power and privilege associated with the racial and social construct of whiteness. Second, the term Black feminism engages gender, sexuality, race, and class analysis and action from the unique perspective of Black women's diasporic, historical, and contemporary intersectional identities and activism. Lastly, the use of the term Black feminist/feminism, embodies this author's identity and intersectional activism as a Black male feminist, advocating for a reflexive profeminist and prowomanist theory and practice. Gary Lemons' *Black Male Outsider: Teaching as a Pro-feminist Man* provides an assessment of the need for Black men to adopt a feminist paradigm:

Black men embracing womanism/feminism, however, is not simply a matter of gender and racial solidarity enjoined at the discursive level alone. Whether we refer to ourselves as *pro-womanist* or *pro-feminist*, black male feminism must continually define itself in relation to the activist history of black women and men against (hetero) sexism and racism. (Lemons 14)

Use of the term Black male feminism throughout this study indicates a decolonized, nonhierarchal praxis aimed at ending all forms of oppression, informed by feminist and womanist thought and actions. For men accepting the challenge to enact

feminist/womanist theory and practice, it is imperative the dialectical or dialogical aspects of Black women's thought and activism do not deter or distract us from searching for and tending to "our mothers' gardens." Black women's activist and theoretical activities are a garden of roses, with many names, including Black feminism, womanism, African womanism, and so on, which all men need to tend, alongside female activists, artists, and scholars.

The Black feminist movement in the United States during the late 1960s and the early 1970s was a necessary insurrection for Black women's activism, which was constantly compromised by the Black Liberation Movement, dominated by Black men, and the Women's movement, dominated by White women. The dualistic constructs of race and gender within Western logic systems naively attempt to position diametrically Black women's activism via either race or gender. Collins's *From Black Power to Hip Hop* articulates that the binary framework that is used to explore Black women's radical subjectivity is limiting. "The content of Black women's political activism is also important—especially how Black women remain positioned between often competing politics of nationalism and feminism" (Collins, *From Black Power* 23–24). The dualistic dynamic of race and gender or interpretations of Nationalism or Feminism are inadequate to trace the historical development of Black feminist thought and actions. The suggestion that Black feminism arose out of first wave and second wave feminism or the Black Liberation movements of the 50s and 60s is inaccurate. Black women's response to oppression acknowledges and respects the multiplicity of identities and strategies. The one-dimensional aspects of Nationalism and Feminism placed limitations on Black women's activism. In *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde expresses that the inability to

recognize multiple areas of human existence as legitimate is a “tool of social control” (122). Lorde’s claim prompts the examination of difference, without assigning deviance, and the need to break away from the master’s tools of social control. The power of Black feminism is in its value of difference and willingness to engage multiple forms of oppression.

With no single agenda or strategy appropriate to address the multiple domains of power, Black women’s resistance exercises a collective heterogeneity of struggle to contest systems of power. French philosopher, Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality Vol. 1, An Introduction* expands insight into the multidimensional nature of power and resistance that is helpful in creating a context for the intersectional activism of Black women:

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Should it be said that one is always “inside” power, there is no “escaping” it, there is no absolute outside where it is concerned, because one is subject to the law in any case? This would be to misunderstand the strictly relational character of power relationships. Their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence, there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others

that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. But this does not mean that they are only a reaction or a rebound, forming with respect to the basic domination an underside that is in the end always passive, doomed to perpetual defeat. Resistances do not derive from a few heterogeneous principles, but neither are they a lure or a promise that is of necessity betrayed. They are the odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite. (93-94)

Foucault's analysis of power and resistance moves from the meta to the micro, emphasizing the identification of local mechanisms of power and the power of the individual to take action at various sites of subjugation. Collins' essay "On West and Fenstermaker's 'Doing Difference'" draws from Foucault, but further explains power in relation to the simultaneity of oppression through her concept of interlocking systems of oppression. Collins proposes:

First, the notion of interlocking oppressions refers to the macro level connections linking systems of oppression such as race, class, and gender. This is the model describing the social structures that create social positions. Second, the notion of intersectionality describes micro-level processes — namely, how each individual and group occupies a social position within interlocking structures of oppression described by the metaphor of intersectionality. Together they shape oppression. (Collins 492)

Collins' analysis addresses the hegemonic domain of power that manipulates the ideas, images, and ideologies that maintain dominant groups' right to rule. Collins' analysis also addresses the interpersonal domain of power where resistance can take many shapes and forms expressing the diversity of Black feminism. The traditions of Black feminism include activism, bodies of knowledge, and institutional practices all aimed to address "social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions" (*Black Feminist Thought* 22). It is the persistent and pervasive instances to survive, resist, and transform that reveal the essence of Black feminist traditions, a multiplicity of traditions that are dialectical and dialogical in nature and communal in spirit. Key perspectives including Black Feminist Thought, Womanism, and Black male feminism further express the heterogeneity of Black women's thought and action.

Black Feminist Thought

Within the critical elements of Black feminist thought, "its thematic content, its interpretative frameworks, its epistemological approaches, and its significance for empowerment" there are two concepts, intersectionality and epistemology, that are indispensable to Black feminism (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 17). Feminist scholar Barbara Smith emphasizes intersectionality as one of the most crucial elements of Black feminist thought (*Home Girls*, xxxiv). Intersectionality is an "analysis claiming that systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organization, which shape Black women's experiences and, in turn, are shaped by Black women" (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 299). The concept of intersectionality reveals the connections between different forms of oppression and power. Collins utilizes the term matrix of domination, to summarize the connections

between “the overall organization of hierarchical power relations in any society. Any specific matrix of domination has (1) a particular arrangement of intersecting systems of oppression; and (2) a particular organization of its domains of power; e.g., structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal” (299). For Collins *thought* is essential because it empowers women and serves as multi-axis knowledge center of Black women’s social justice projects connecting and contesting power relationships (xi). Thought informs action and action further informs thought through a reflexive praxis. Black feminist thought intersectionality is essential to the analysis of, and actions intervening against, the systematic oppression of Black women and other oppressed groups.

The intersectionality Collins asserts within Black feminist epistemology is an essential element of Black feminist knowledge production. Because of the marginalization of Black women and their knowledge, Black feminist epistemology is serves as an alternative to Western system of knowledge production (*Black Feminist Thought* 252). Collins departs from positivist, theoretical interventions that rely on a dominant Eurocentric, procolonialist perspective in attempting to explain the Black women’s experience in America. Her strategy addresses epistemology and the ways in which power shapes our research questions and answers. Collins claims that the “significance of a Black feminist epistemology may lie in its ability to enrich our understanding of how subordinate groups create knowledge that fosters both their empowerment and social justice” (*Black Feminist Thought* 269). The alternative form of knowledge production Collins describes as Black feminist epistemology emphasizes lived experiences as meaning, the use of dialogue and ethics of caring, and personal

accountability (*Black Feminist Thought* 257). Black women's conversations about their lived experiences are another aspect of their everyday knowledge production. "For Black women new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community" (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 260). A Black feminist epistemology methodologically validates and substantiates the experiences of Black women in a manner that honors the unique perspective of Black women's heterogeneity and intersectionality. Thus, even though individual Black women may respond differently to oppressive forces based on different crosscutting interests and identities, there are themes, or core issues, that all Black women can acknowledge and integrate into their thought and action.

Womanist Ideas

Womanism is a social change theory and methodology that has a relationship with Black feminism, as well as other women-ed social justice projects. Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* describes Womanist's relationship with feminism as such: "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (xii). Walker's portrayal of womanism expresses the idea that as a theory and practice, womanism is a much deeper and broader concept that includes feminism and Black feminism while remaining distinct. Since the introduction of the term womanist by Alice Walker in 1983, there has been much debate regarding the term Black feminist, those who identify as feminist or Black feminist, those who reject feminism and those who more readily identify with a womanist moniker. Layli Phillips' *The Womanist Reader* observes that unlike Black feminism, womanism is linked directly to the intersections of Black womanhood (xxi). Phillips maintains "Womanism manifests five overarching

characteristics: (1) it is antioppressionist, (2) it is a vernacular, (3) it is nonideological, (4) it is communitarian, and (5) it is spiritualized” (xxiv). Phillips argues that these characteristics shape the contour of analysis and action that is womanist and differentiates it from other ideological perspectives such as Black feminism, Black Nationalism, and Marxism.

Womanism is not focused externally on confronting power structures; its chief concerns lie within physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being. The womanist attention to values, beliefs, and behaviors recognize that the oppressed (infirm) mind and body can only continue to support the hegemonic manifestations in society’s institutions and structures and indoctrinate new prisoners within the current hegemony. “Thus, from a womanist perspective, the most basic forms of health and healing are related to rebalancing the world socially, environmentally, and spiritually” (Phillips xxx). Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, one of the triumvirate of progenitors of womanism including Alice Walker and Cleonora Hudson-Weems, in her pivotal work “Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English,” offers that “Black womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom. It concerns itself as much with the black sexual power tussle as with the world power structure that subjugates Blacks” (72). The teachings and tenets of womanism, toward a collective harmony, focuses on the humanity of all people and their day-to-day interactions of consciousness raising, local actions, and dialogue producing a collective wisdom that begins with the identification of an individual’s standpoint and works toward the “harmonization and coordination of everyone’s standpoints” (Phillips xxxvii).

Though Black Feminism and Womanism are often interchanged as analogous terms, womanist scholars argue womanism represents a form of Black women's activism distinct and separate from Black Feminism. Clenora Hudson-Weems' essay, "Africana Womanism," asserts:

The modified terminology 'Black Feminism' is some Africana women's futile attempt to fit into the construct of an established White paradigm. At best, Black feminism may relate to sexual discrimination outside of the Africana community, but cannot claim to resolve the critical problems within it, which are influenced by racism and classism. (qtd. in Phillips 40)

Feminism and Black feminism from a womanist perspective is rooted in an experience that is incompatible with that of Black women from the African diaspora. "Feminism is a term conceptualized and adopted by White women, involves an agenda that was designed to meet the needs and demands of that particular group" (*The Womanist Reader* 47). Katie Cannon's *Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* adds "Black feminist consciousness may be more accurately identified as Black womanist consciousness, to use Alice Walker's concept and definition" (56). Hudson-Weems articulates that womanism is a more appropriate term to describe the activities of Black women engaging in self-definition and issue identification from the unique perspective of women from the African diaspora. Delores S. Williams' *Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices* avows "Womanist consciousness directs black women away from the negative division prohibiting community building among women. The womanist loves other women sexually and nonsexually" (qtd. in Phillips 120). The distinction of Hudson-Weems and

Williams speaks directly to those who believe Black feminism has not appropriately integrated all members of the Black community, including men and the queer community. Cheryl J. Sanders' "Roundtable Discussion: Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective" summarizes womanism by stating "the womanist is a black feminist who is audacious, willful, and serious; loves and prefers women, but also may love men; is committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people; and is universalist, capable of all loving, and deep" (86). The dialectical and dialogical nature of Womanism and Black feminism also includes articulation of African feminism and Africana womanism. It is within the dialogical, the internal knowledge production, and validation process of the Black public sphere, Black women's thoughts and actions remain dynamic and responsive to ever changing social conditions and consciousness.

Black feminists Patricia Hill Collins⁴ and bell hooks⁵ are full participants in the dialogue and address some of the concerns articulated by womanist. bell hook's *Ain't I a Woman* shares that in spite of the White racism inherit in the term "feminism," she chooses to re-appropriate the term to include all who are oppressed (95). Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* more directly asserts "Black Feminism is not white feminism in blackface. Black women have particular and legitimate issues which affect our lives as Black women, and addressing those issues does not make us any less Black" (60). It is precisely this exchange and interaction that remains most relevant to a Black women's standpoint. The dialogical nature of the Black women's standpoint creates flexibility and acuity, informing and authenticating the various perspectives and practices of Black

⁴ *What's in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism and Beyond*, 1996

⁵ *Roundtable Discussion: Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanism Perspective*, 1989

women's activism. Collins discusses this characteristic of Black feminism's internal dialogue by stating that:

In contrast to the dialectical relationship linking oppression and activism, a *dialogical* relationship characterizes Black women's collective experience and group knowledge. On both the individual and the group level, a dialogical relationship suggests that changes in thinking may be accompanied by changed actions and that altered experiences may in turn stimulate a changed consciousness. (*Black Feminist Thought* 30)

The dialogical denotes how African-American women share with each other their lived experiences on a daily basis to create knowledge. The dialogical validates knowledge claims deemed vital and necessary to the intersectional experience of Black women.

Despite the diversity of dialogue delineating Black feminism from Womanism, commonalities permeate. Barbara Omolade's *The Rising Song of African American Women* points out "Black feminism is sometimes referred to as womanism because both are concerned with struggles against sexism and racism by Black women who are themselves part of the black community's efforts to achieve equity and liberty" (xx). Alice Walker's *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens* offers four definitions of a womanist, one of which describes a womanist as "a black feminist or feminist of color" (xi). There is a parallel emphasis on dialogue, the lived experience, and everyday resistance, which emphasize the significance of heterogeneity in the responses by Black women to multiple forms of oppression. There is also a common ancestral history shared within these dialogical perspectives regarding historical figures such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, and Ella Baker, as antecedents to both feminist and womanist,

Black women's standpoint. In addition, Layli Maparyan acknowledges that despite the womanist distinction made by womanist pillars such as Ogunyemi, Black feminism and womanism both share an emphasis on intersectionality (Maparyan 23). Citing these commonalities is not attempting to reconcile the differences presented thus far, as well as the other differences Black feminists or womanists may identify, but rather to illustrate how the dialogical discourse of Black women presents opportunities for convergence and heterogeneity. The convergences and heterogeneity within Black women's activism offer a model for members of oppressed groups to participate fully in social justice projects aimed at liberation for all.

Black Male Feminism

On the margins of the dialogical dialogue of Black women's activism is the presence of Black men who, through their activism and scholarship, have supported Black feminist and womanist practice and paradigms. Black men, as a collective, have unwittingly shaped Black feminist and womanist ideals because of an allegiance to patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism. Manning Marable's *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* includes an essay "Grounding With Sisters" that emphasizes the importance of Black men understanding and appreciating the irreplaceable perspectives of Black women:

This triple oppression escaped Black males entirely. To understand the history of all Blacks within the Black majority, the "domestic Black periphery," special emphasis is required in documenting the particular struggles, ideals, and attitudes of Black women. To do less would be to reinforce capitalist patriarchy's ideological hegemony over the future

struggles of all Black working people. Black male liberationists must relearn their own history by grounding themselves in the wisdom of their sisters. (70)

The underdevelopment of Black America, to which Marable speaks, will end only when Black men take on the task of uprooting the patriarchal assumptions and institutions that dominate the Black public sphere. This means Black men need to engage in Black feminism, and its intersectional orientation, if we are to reach the potential of our humanity. David Ikard's *Breaking Silence* states "Before black men can productively engage black feminist on the issue of black masculinity, however, they must accept that their victimization in America as black men does not exempt them from participation in patriarchy" (47). To accept and understand Black men's victimhood from a nonpatriarchal standpoint is essential for the Black community as a collective. Gary Lemons' *Black Male Outsider* Black feminism is at the heart of the Black liberation struggle (xx). The liberation Lemons articulates is one where masculinity practiced outside of the heteronormative ideologies and acculturation processes moves against all forms of oppression. Haki Madhubuti's *Claiming Earth* challenges Black men to rethink the patriarchal male acculturation prescribed by the dominant society that impedes progress toward a more just and fair society of women and men (112, 123–124). Profeminist/womanist theories and practices by Black men are growing in number. Marable, Lemons, Ikard are but a few of the recent examples of Black men engaged in Black feminist work. Unfortunately, in the history of the Black radical tradition there have always been those, both men and women, who oppose equality among the sexes in favor of more patriarchal and hierarchal relationships.

Throughout Black women's radical history, there have always been those in the Black community whose stances on Black women's activism were negative and limited. Man-haters, matriarchs, and lesbians are the familiar categories prescribed to Black women who cannot fall in line behind their men. Rudolph Byrd, co-editor of *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality*, recounts how Black leaders, activists, and scholars such as Amiri Baraka, Eldridge Cleaver, and Molefi Asante's modus operandi was one of sexism and homophobia that insisted "heterosexuality is the sine qua non of Blackness" (Byrd and Guy-Sheftall 19). These attitudes of Black men create complex issues for Black women seeking progressive camaraderie, community, or companionship. Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* reminds us of the backseat messages Black women receive from Black men:

All too often the message comes loud and clear to Black women from Black men: "I am the only prize worth having and there are not too many of me, and remember, I can always go elsewhere. So if you want me, you'd better stay in your place, which is always away from one another, or I will call you 'lesbian' and wipe you out." Black women are programmed to define ourselves within this male attention and to compete with each other for it rather than to recognize and move upon our common interests. (48)

These types of messages are the source of great pain and strain within the Black community for relationships and advancing social justice projects. Again and again, women are asked to sacrifice or put aside the womanish elements of their identity for the sake and needs of men's patriarchal self-image. Black women know all too well the

phallogocentric induced pain of having to choose the prescriptions of men over their own needs, as well as the needs of the community, at the risk of being ostracized by Black men and the Black community. Black men need to recognize this dynamic and eliminate the painful pathology of male PMS⁶ from our radical repertoire and begin to establish new patterns of behavior fully to integrate all of Black womanhood into our social relations and movements. Michael Eric Dyson discusses the need to change the Black men and women gender dynamic in his essay, “Between Apocalypse and Redemption: John Singleton’s *Boyz n The Hood*,” stating:

This pain follows a weary pattern of gender relations that has privileged concerns defined by black men over feminist womanist issues. Thus during the civil rights movement, feminist and womanist questions were perennially deferred, so that precious attention would not be diverted from racial oppression and the achievement of liberation. But this deference to issues of racial freedom is a permanent pattern in black male–female relations; womanist and feminist movements continue to exist on the fringe of black communities ...

Equally as unfortunate, many contemporary approaches to the black male crisis have established a rank hierarchy that suggests that the plight of black men is infinitely more lethal, and hence more important, than the condition of women. (346)

⁶ Male PMS (Patriarchy, Misogyny, and Sexism) is a term used to describe mental, physical, and metaphysical adherence to Westernized systems of gender constructs. The term is intended to acknowledge men’s role in oppressing women, by using a term often negatively applied to women in order to alienate or dismiss women’s perspectives and leadership as irrational or overly emotive.

Dyson's identification of the dilemma has not removed the practice from the community of Black men. This is still evident today and was certainly so during the civil rights period that Dyson discusses. Collins notes how Elaine Brown and Angela Davis experienced sexism in the Black Panther Party and the cultural nationalist movement led by Maulana Ndabezitha (born Ronald) Karenga (*From Black Power* 107). The overdetermination of race within the Black Panther Party and Nationalist movements are emblematic of the patriarchy Black women have endured for centuries working toward Black liberation.

It is important to understand that patriarchy predates the experience of Black women in America. Although patriarchy has been a precarious component of the Black experience in America and abroad, bell hooks' *Black Looks: Race and Representation* suggests Western patriarchal ideas and ideologies of gender were imposed on enslaved African men (89-90). The hegemonic meaning of gender shaped during the period of colonization and the enslavement of Africans subjugated both women and men of color. María Lugones' *The Coloniality of Gender* explains the importance of comparing and contrasting modern/colonial gender systems with those before contact with the West to comprehend fully the model of new global power brought forth by colonialism:

Understanding the place of gender in pre-colonial societies is pivotal to understanding the nature and scope of change in the social structure that the processes constructing colonial/modern Eurocentered capitalism imposed. Those changes were introduced through slow, discontinuous, and heterogeneous processes that violently inferiorized colonized women.

This gender system introduced was one thoroughly informed through the coloniality of power. (12)

Colonial powers rearranged Africans' gender, as well as social and sexual arrangements into the heterosexual and patriarchal paradigms present in today's society. Gerda Lerner's *The Creation of Patriarchy* maintains "The oppression of women antedates slavery and makes it possible ... We have seen how the confluence of a number of factors leads to sexual asymmetry and to the division of labor which fell with unequal weight upon men and women" (77). The Western hierarchal ideas and economic organization imposed on the Black Diaspora were socially constructed for the specific purpose of ensuring the eminent power of White men.

The imposed patriarchal arrangements provoked by colonialism and slavery were foreign to West and Central Africans. Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí's *The Invention of Women* questions the rationality of patriarchy for the African diaspora and expounds how "gender was not an organizing principle in Yoruba society prior to colonization by the West" (31). "The usual gloss of the Yoruba categories *obinrin* and *okunrin* as "female/woman" and male/man," respectively, is a mistranslation. The categories are neither binarily opposed or hierarchical" (32–33). Ifi Amadiume's *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religions and Culture* also addresses the danger of mistranslation of non-Eurocentric cultures and experiences into Western terms and expressions. "The history of European imperialism and racism means that the language which aided that project is loaded with generalized terms which do not necessarily have a general meaning but serve a particularistic interest" (1). That interest is one of male power and White power created by a colonial power. Oyěwùmí further explains that "women as an identifiable category,

defined by their anatomy and subordinated to men in all situations, resulted in part, from the imposition of a patriarchal colonial state ... The creation of 'women' as a category was one the very first accomplishments of the colonial state" (124). The bio-logic of Western society transformed state power into gender power controlled by men. With the power directly determined by the phallogocentric monologism of masculinity, and the construction and categorization of race, African women were the targets of both constructs.

Acknowledging the historical prevalence of a socialized patriarchy is not suggesting an overall indictment of Black men. Rudolph Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall's *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality*, creates space for Black men's profeminist actions and dialogue by documenting a wide variety of African American men who engaged in an analysis of the overlapping categories of race, gender, and sexuality. Gary Lemons' *Black Male Outsider* insists that Black men must abandon allegiances to heterosexism and homophobia in order to develop a model of masculinity that supports Black feminism (35). These works represent the dialogical efforts of men to raise Black male consciousness to the harmful effects of male PMS. bell hooks' *Feminism is for Everybody* shares that Black liberation from oppression is just as dependent upon raising the feminist consciousness of Black men as well as Black women (11). Those who have demonstrated a firm opposition to the most blatant forms of violence and oppression directed toward Black women provide examples of how Black men can move beyond the hegemonic ideologies of masculinity. Such men, including Alexander Crummell, Bayard Rustin, Huey P. Newton, James Baldwin, and Essex Hemphill reclaimed the prowomen tradition beginning with the writings and actions of

Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois (Byrd and Guy-Sheftall 21). However, depicting Douglass and Du Bois as historical antecedents for Black male feminism or as Gary Lemons describes them “our womanist forefathers,” does not intend to imply that these men or any others were perfect and never benefited from male privilege (*Womanist Forefathers*). Angela Davis’ *Women, Race, & Class* addresses the fact that Black men benefit from privilege, but this does not mean their privilege prevents Black men from advocating for women’s rights. “Even Frederick Douglass was sometimes uncritical of the prevalent stereotypes and clichés associated with women. But his occasionally sexist remarks, were never so oppressive as to depreciate the value of his contributions to the battle for women’s rights in general” (85). Later in her text, Davis praises Du Bois for his relative “lack of male supremacist undertones,” regarding him as “peerless among Black and white men alike” and notes how many of his contemporaries viewed him “as the most outstanding male defender of women’s political equality of his time” (146). Nonetheless, despite the discursive statements of Douglass and Du Bois, along with those who continued to blaze a path for non-Westernized Black manhood, there is still a deep need to build a progressive profeminist masculinity movement.

The building of such a movement is a possibility requiring a day-to-day theory of Black male feminism, accessible beyond the discursive statements of Black men in books and those few who are integrating the daily practice of feminism in their lives. This practice would become a collective priority, currently absent from our communities, beginning with raising our children, both men, and women, to be feminist. Mark Anthony Neal’s *New Black Man* points out “There is no blueprint that exists to help produce young black men in America who are even remotely sensitive to the differing realities of

women, particularly black women, and especially if those young black men are asked to venture beyond the most simplistic and obvious markers of gender difference” (31). Moving young men beyond the conventional wisdom of Black masculinity asks men to see past their patriarchal gaze and learn from the wisdom of Black men. Linda Strong-Leek’s “Reading As A Woman: Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart And Feminist Criticism” shares that men can learn to see the world through a feminist lens only if the social constructs of gender favoring men are deconstructed and men must reposition themselves in nonhierarchical relationships with women (33). This type of self-reflection demands that Black men’s practice of masculinity is grounded in the intersectional dimensions of Black feminism. David Ikard’s *Breaking the Silence: Toward a Black Male Feminist Criticism* suggests “To root out this hostility and other negative responses to black women’s issues, black male feminists will need to be rigorous and uncompromising in their critique of black patriarchal thinking. This means that all aspects of black gender and cultural issues are subject to critique . . . ” (174). This critique necessitates that Black men be challenged to acknowledge, adopt, and nurture profeminist thoughts and behaviors. Michael Awkward’s *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality* posits “Perhaps the most difficult task for a black male feminist is striking a working balance between male self-inquiry/interest and an adequately feminist critique of patriarchy” (49). Such a balance is difficult due to the proliferating patriarchy present in society’s political, economic, cultural, and domestic social systems. In these systems, Black male feminist role models are noticeably absent. Kimberly Crenshaw, contributor to *Words that Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech and the First Amendment* insists that the challenge ahead for the development and

integration of Black feminism is that it must lead toward social justice in all aspects of the lives of women and men (qtd. in Matsuda 132). An everyday theory of Black male feminism recognizes that oppression in any segment of society facilitates oppression in all areas of society. The Black feminist mythical praxis of musicking offers Black men an alternative entry point to examine and reconstruct Black manhood outside of Westernized binary, gender constructs.

The goal of this study is to deepen the understanding of Black feminism and the multiplicity of its traditions. Unfortunately, there are several prevalent, Westernized societal ideologies obstructing men and women from Black feminism, including: 1) The idea that the Black woman is already liberated; 2) Racism is the primary (or only) oppression Black women have to confront; (3) Feminism is nothing but man-hating; 4) Women's issues are too narrow; and 5) Feminists are nothing but lesbians (B. Smith xxviii–xxxiii). Despite these limiting perspectives, Black feminism continues to challenge the societal constructs marginalizing individuals and communities. The Black feminist mythical praxis of musicking creates and sustains an African-American way aimed at the destruction of oppressive social constructs and institutions. The Black feminist mythical praxis of musicking informs consciousness, analyzes social forces, and strategizes social transformation through musical and mythical signification. Each of the remaining chapters of this study connects Black feminism, musicking, and myth to the social realities of the Black public sphere. Chapter two explores Africanisms in the context of the historical antecedents of Black Feminism, Musicking, and African cosmology. Chapters three and four offer an analysis of the musicking of Nina Simone and Me'shell Ndegéocello within the context of Black feminist musical and mythical

signification practices. Chapter five explores the Black feminist mythical praxis as knowledge production and social action, elucidating the possibilities of moving Blackness from the margins to the center of social theory. In total, *The Discourse of the Divine* identifies a radical, historical continuity within Black women's musicking, and positions the Black feminist mythical praxis of musicking as a form of social theory.

CHAPTER TWO—FEMINIST AFRICANISMS

Reclaiming the past does not only rehabilitate or justify the promise of a national culture. It triggers a change of fundamental importance in the colonized's psycho-affective equilibrium. Perhaps it has not been sufficiently demonstrated that colonialism is not content merely to impose its law on the colonized country's present and future. Colonialism is not satisfied with snaring the people in its net or draining the colonized brain of any form or substance. With a kind of perverted logic, it turns its attention to the past of the colonized people and distorts it, disfigures it, and destroys it. This effort to demean history prior to colonization today takes on a dialectical significance.

When we consider the resources deployed to achieve this cultural alienation so typical of the colonial period, we realize that nothing was left to chance and that the final aim of colonization was to convince the indigenous population it would save them from darkness. The result was to hammer into the heads of the indigenous population that if the colonist were to leave they would regress into barbarism, degradation, and bestiality. (Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 148–149)

The importance of acknowledging the Africanisms within African-American culture is essential to understanding the connections between Black spirituality, feminism, and musical production. Negating the African presence within Blacks of the

New World is a distortion of Black identity and culture, as well as an act of dominion over Black minds, bodies, and spirits. Melville Herskovits' epic work, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, firmly supports the presence of Africanisms within African American culture:

The millions of Africans who were dragged to the New World were not blank slates upon which European civilizations would write at will. They were people with complex social, political, and religious systems of their own. By forced transportation and incessant violence, slavery was able to interdict the transfer of those systems as systems; none could be carried intact across the sea. But it could not crush the intellect, habits of mind, and spirits of its victims. They survived in spite of everything, their children survived and in them survived Africa. (Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* xviii)

Survival required resistance in all forms, and the preservation of key cultural traditions, memories, and practices. As revealed in this study, Black women's musical production engages the survived elements of African spirituality, consciousness, music-making practices, and vernacular traditions.

Henry Louis Gates' *The Signifying Monkey* makes a strong case for the importance and presence of musical and mythical forms of Africanisms brought by Africans to the New World.

Inadvertently, African slavery in the New World satisfied the preconditions for the emergence of a new African culture, a truly Pan-African culture fashioned as a colorful weave of linguistic, institutional,

metaphysical, and formal threads. What survived this fascinating process was the most useful and the most compelling of the fragments at hand.

(Gates 4)

The enslaved West and Central Africans transported to the New World did not abandon their ancestor's culture; to the contrary, they used their heritage as the foundation of Black culture in America. The Black feminist mythical praxis of musicking reinstitutes an Africanized system of meaning and action that interprets and instigates the reimagination and reconfiguration of social conditions and the social order beyond the binary logic of Western race, class, and gender constructs. Black music in America is much more than a leisure activity or entertainment; it continues Black cultural traditions and practices of knowledge production and social change. Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* observes that Black women rely on "music, literature, daily conversations, and everyday behavior" to cultivate sites of collective resistance because of the fact that racialized and patriarchal institutions and systems of knowledge production provide few arenas for Black women's collective resistance (Collins 251). The functions of Black musicking extend beyond Westernized perception of music; Black musicking expresses forms of collective thought and action designed to address the inhumanity of modern, Western civilizations.

This study maintains that Black musicking in America is the oldest site of collective knowledge and cultural production for African-Americans. Ethan Goffman's essay, "From the Blues to Hip Hop: How African American Music Changed U.S. Culture and Moved the World," argues that music was the primary cultural retention tool for enslaved Africans. "Separated from their languages and history, African Americans

somehow managed to preserve something of their culture through the only medium available to them: music, originally limited to voice and rhythm ... and closely associated with dance” (Goffman 1). The significance of a Black feminist mythical praxis of musicking, as an African-based practice, is that it reclaims spaces for thinking and doing that “constitutes an important dimension of Black women’s empowerment” (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 285). The presence and performance of Africanisms within a Black feminist mythical praxis of musicking is a revolutionary reprise of a collective Black cultural memory, maintained through the middle passage melded materially and metaphysically throughout the New World. Recovering and reclaiming the African antecedents to Black feminism is important to the history of Blacks in America: the social change Black feminism articulates, as well as the feminist methodologies including musicking, are employed to transform society.

Survivals of the Other

Africanisms represent dialectical resistance to the oppressive nature of Western colonialism and slavery, as well as the preservation of indigenous West African forms of consciousness and action. Colonialism attempted to suppress significantly or sever Africans and indigenous populations from their cultural roots. Ambitiously, colonialism also sought to construct a society where White men subjugated all, including women and people of color. To maintain the global design of imperial colonization, the history and relationships of women and nonwhites were reimagined to configure a social order reliant on hierarchal gender, race, and class classifications. Linda Smith’s *Decolonizing Methodologies* notes that the systems of the West and non-Western cultures differ substantially in that they reside on different sides of imperial and colonial ideology

concerning the *Other*⁷ (Smith 31). Westernized categorical descriptions exclude, discriminate, and dehumanize Africans, indigenous groups, women, and other peoples of color created systematic patterns of discrimination and dehumanization to distance Western civilization from the *Other*. Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*, articulates that:

Man is neither the oldest nor the most constant problem that has been posed for human knowledge. Taking a relatively short chronological sample within the restricted geographical area—European culture since the sixteenth century—one can be certain that man is a recent invention within it. (386)

This invention of man by the Western bourgeois brought what Walter Mignolo, observed as the “colonial difference” and Anibal Quijano described as the “coloniality of power.” Under colonial power, non-European people “were dispossessed of their own and singular historical identities” and “their place in the history of the cultural production of humanity” demeaned as only capable of “producing inferior cultures” (Quijano 552). Mignolo's “Geopolitics of Knowledge” points out how “colonial differences throughout the history of the modern/colonial world-system” shape social relations and “foreground the planetary dimension of human history silenced by discourses centering on modernity, postmodernity, and Western civilization” (61–62). Eurocentric cognitive models and

⁷ The social, political, military, and cultural impact of imperialism and colonialism deliberately devalued the humanity of the peoples who were colonized. “The collective memory of imperialism has been perpetrated through the ways in which knowledge about indigenous peoples was collected, classified and then represented in various ways back to the West, and then, through the eyes of the West, back to those who have been colonized ... the Other has been constituted with a name, a face, a particular identity, namely indigenous people (L. Smith 1–2).

perspectives concerning knowledge and being, situate all oppressed groups within the hegemonic history of Europe. The result of the all-consuming, universal paradigms alters the Western world's understanding of the subaltern Black Diaspora's culture and traditions, including Black women's leadership, cosmological representation, and musical production. Western civilization wields the power of self-serving constructed knowledge and social categories to maintain control over the material and metaphysical manifestation of Africanisms in America and the configuration of the *Other*. The tools that Western society employs to orchestrate this hegemonic strategy include overrepresentation, silencing, and de-demystification.

The overrepresentation of Western man tethers the *Other* to fixed posts of internal and external polarizations, narrowly determining value, purpose, and possibilities. Eurocentric models of knowing and the prioritization of Western systems of classification, knowledge construction, and power benefit the oppressive, Western conception of man. Sylvia Wynter's *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom* challenges Eurocentric models of social and cultural construction, regarding the overrepresentation of "Man" as the struggle of our time. Wynter argued that the "vigorous discursive and institutional re-elaboration of the central overrepresentation, which enables the interest, reality, and well-being of the empirical human world to continue to be imperatively subordinated to those of the now globally hegemonic ethnoclass world of "Man" (262). This overrepresentation of "Man," as Wynter argues, demarks the dialectical elements of history with the rise of the West on one side and the enslavement of Africans, colonization of Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America, and the subjugation of Asia on the other (263). Frantz Fanon's *Black*

Skin, White Masks underscores the effect of the Western construction of race and the overrepresentation of “Man” when he states:

I am over-determined from without. I am the slave not of the ‘idea’ that others have of me but of my own appearance.

I move slowly in the world, accustomed now to seek no longer for upheaval. I progress by crawling. And already I am being dissected under white eyes. I am fixed. Having adjusted their microtomes, they objectively cut away slices of pieces of my reality. I am laid bare. I feel, I see in those white faces that it is not a new man who has come in, but a new kind of man, a new genus. Why, it’s a Negro! (116)

Overdetermination as detailed by Fanon and overrepresentation as discussed by Wynter assert that the colonial construction of the Negro or the Black Other restricts the humanity of enslaved Africans. Overdetermination and overrepresentation also devalue and destroy all cultural traditions that do not fit “Man’s” global design. The colonizer/colonized, human/subhuman, male/female dichotomies stridently enforced throughout history did not only enslave and colonize; these systems and institutions also reduced non-Western knowledge, identities, and traditions to the status of uncivilized, inferior, or fetish items. African musical practices, gender arrangements, and spiritual beliefs are grossly subsumed and distorted by the overrepresentation of Western man.

The overrepresentation of “Man” symbiotically supports the silencing of *Other* cultures and non-Western knowledge and traditions. The dialectics of what is mentioned and what is omitted in a particular historical narrative are crucial to the context of the

past. Michel-Rolph Trouillot provides the following sequence to specify the presence of silences in history:

Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: The moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance). (26)

From Trouillot's perspective, the history of Africa and the lack of knowledge regarding Africanisms in America is a combination of any number of silences. Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* stresses the importance and power of being able to write one's own history outside of Western silence. Smith states, "Any consideration of the ways our origins have been examined, our histories recounted, our arts analysed, our cultures dissected, measured, torn apart, and distorted back to us will suggest that theories have not looked sympathetically or ethically at us" (L. Smith 39). Recognizing the flaws of Western history and the processes that preserve Africanisms in America form a break in the silenced history of the Black Diaspora. Barbara Omolade's *The Rising Song of African American Women* posits that Black women's history can only emerge by an "African American woman's social science with a unique methodology, sensibility, and language" unapologetically rooted in the everyday speech and actions of Black women. This study builds on Omolade's insight by suggesting that Black women's music and spirituality are sites of Black feminist representations of Africanisms that shout the truth to contest the silences induced by the West. The Black vernacular traditions, West African cosmology, and feminist standpoints contained within the lyrics and lives of

Simone and Ndegéocello's musicking express a dialectical resistance to the silencing of the Black Other.

Beyond the theories of silencing and overrepresentation, the concept demystification, as observed by Dipesh Chakrabarty, further demonstrates how Western systems of knowledge conceal Africanisms in America. Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* proposes that the violent colonial transition to capitalism mistranslated third world or non-Western societies' historical narratives as problematic propaganda to support the inhumanity of the modern world (31). Chakrabarty asserts that in the case of India between 1783 and 1900, the incompleteness of Western translations necessarily fills the open spaces of non-Western narratives with inferiority and inadequacy. Similarly, the narratives of the enslaved Africans in America regarding the persistence of Africanisms in Black America have also fallen victim to Western translation. For example, Chakrabarty's argument establishes that European social and political categories are insufficient in attempting to conceptualize, analyze, or categorize non-European life-worlds because of language, customs, as well as due to the problems that secular history has in handling "practices in which gods, spirits, or the supernatural have agency in the world" (Chakrabarty 72). The Black feminist practice of musicking's vernacular strategy extends beyond Western language systems and provides a methodology to allow for mythical and musical signification of Africanisms to exist alongside historical, Western grand narratives.

European social and political categories homogenize historical narratives. They do not account for the sacred *Other* or spirituality outside Western systems of beliefs. Chakrabarty describes Western history as godless and disenchanting, where the spiritual

and the mythical have no authority or agency within historical narratives (Chakrabarty 73). “The fault line central to modern European social thought is the divide between analytics and hermeneutic traditions in the social sciences” (Chakrabarty 18). Western analytics demystifies cultural ideologies, absolving the spiritual from cultural histories and denying the diversity of humanity’s pluriverse. Chakrabarty argues that the hermeneutic tradition, which produces “affective histories,” moves beyond Western limitation and is in tune with the diversity and cultural life-worlds of the *Other*. Chakrabarty re-enchants this history of the *Other* to include non-Western spiritual symbols and relationships of power. Chela Sandoval’s *Methodology of the Oppressed* also discusses the tradition of the hermeneutics of love⁸, as a category of social analysis and action in a post-modern world (Sandoval 10). Sandoval articulates that the hermeneutics of love, as an affirmative practice and interpretative strategy, is a political technology consisting of “bodies of knowledges, arts, practices, and procedures for re-forming the self and the world” (Sandoval 4). Sandoval’s hermeneutics is a mode of social action and identity construction that inspires understanding of individuality and questions the very nature of being devised by the global expansion of the West. Sandoval’s technology allows women of color to reconcile the fragmentations and ruptures of culture and identity induced by the West. Without hermeneutic analysis, understanding of the life-worlds, bodies of knowledge, and cultural practices of the Black Diaspora evade Western conceptions, thereby preventing changes in these societies’ power structures and relationships.

⁸ Sandoval describes love as an apparatus that combines the theory and methods of oppositional consciousness, methodology of the oppressed, and the methodology of emancipation, into a technology for social transformation (2).

Despite the epistemic and ontological barriers presented by those employing Westernized theories and methodologies, the debate over Africanisms spurred considerable research validating the presence of African antecedents in African American culture. John E. Philips, in his essay, “The African Heritage of White America,” discusses the influences (music, speech, agricultural, live stock, religion, and cuisine) African culture has had on Western society, particularly in the United States. Philips states “It should be remembered that one of the first feminist demands in the United States was for the right to own property and engage in trade—a right unquestioned in West Africa, where the power of the market women is considerable” (qtd. in Holloway, J. 384). Philips highlights how Black women heavily influenced the earliest developments of feminism in the United States through the abolitionist movement and women’s fights for property rights. Vivian Gordon’s *Black Women: Feminism and Black Liberation* asserts “African slave women were the initiators of feminism in America. It was their struggle for humanity of womanhood that first made White women aware of White male paternalism which limited their development, but idolized their status” (25). The research of Philips and Gordon avows that enslaved African women brought with them a standpoint opposed to inhumane, European exploitation. Contemporary Black feminism is a powerful manifestation of Africanism in American that has been mutated and muted but persists in Black culture. The Black feminist mythical praxis of musicking exemplifies and amplifies the Black woman’s standpoint and cultural traditions imported from Africa.

Black Musicking and The Spirit

The music is rooted in the constant revitalization and critical interrogation of the tradition; figures, forms, rhythms, and ideas are constantly recycled, reexamined, and reconstructed (rootwork).⁹ This continuous musical dialogue plays at the interstices, at the margins, where ideological debates, historical vectors, demographic shifts, material conditions, and theories of identity, difference, and diaspora overlap, intersect, coalesce, and come into conflict and temporary resolution. The music, then, offers us a crucial site of investigation into histories of black struggle placed against the backdrop of American society institutions, in a developing global context. (Njoroge Njoroge, *Dedicated to the Struggle* 91)

Black Feminism, musicking, and spirituality in the United States all share common West African ancestry. In this study, the relationship between African-American music, West African cosmology, and Black feminism are explained through the principles and practices of Black musicking. Africanisms, unlike Western constructs, do not require the compartmentalization of spirituality, gender, or music. These traditions are shared and expressed through a multiplicity of activities employed by Black women. An example of the connections between music, myth, and feminism is captured by Paula Giddings' account of an enslaved African woman, which shares that if a woman was not acting as she should, her neighbors would adopt an African custom and "play the banjo"

⁹ Njoroge uses the concept of rootwork to re-present both theory and practice, subaltern strategy, and cultural action. Refracted through the lens of the African diaspora, this notion alludes to conjurational practices (Hoodoo, Vodun, Obeah, Palo, Mayombe, Candomble, etc.) as well as the material operations, philosophical transformations, historical mediation, aesthetic medications, and spiritual invocations that shape and embody the Black musical tradition.

on her: make her the subject of a public song that warned her that she “betta change” (Giddings 45). Samuel Floyd’s *The Power of Black Music* supports the spirit of Giddings’ findings and maintains that African mythical traditions and customs survived the Middle Passage and are evident in contemporary Black music. Floyd’s research reveals the many connections between African and African-America music in both forms and function. These connections are both physical and spiritual and tie together the practices of musicking and the exercising of myths in the passing down of cultural knowledge and social values (Floyd 22-23).

The foundation for Floyd’s research is featured in Sterling Stuckey’s *Slave Culture*, which stresses the importance of the ring shout as the originator of all forms of Black music and culture in the U.S. Stuckey states “The ring shout was the main context in which Africans recognized values common to them. Those values were remarkable because, while of ancient African provenance, they were fertile seeds for the blossom of new forms” (16). The new forms of values expressed by the Black Diaspora in America through musicking include ancestor worship, storytelling, trickster expression, and various other spiritually based symbolic devices. The history and practices of the ring shout, characterized by its call and response components serve as a functional source of inquiry, knowledge production, and spiritual agency in Black music. The ring shout fused music, dance, and spirituality, from a diversity of traditions within the Black Diaspora, into the characteristics and processes still present in contemporary Black musicking.

Black women’s musicking is distinct in this study of Black music because of the multifaceted role that gender has played in Black American’s lives. Kyra Gaunt’s *The Games Black Girls Play* reflects on many years of participant observation and

experiences as a child playing musical games to theorize the intersections between gender, race, and music. Gaunt's work foregrounds gender distinction in her exploration of the Black musicking tradition. "The study of black music is more than appreciation of black musical traits, styles, and genres devoid of attention to the lived and embodied experience of being male and female" (12). Gaunt's intervention challenges ideas of a universal Black music making experience. Gaunt articulates how gender, identity, social interactions, and politics of power all shape the musicking experiences of Black men and women differently. "All musical practices and discourse exist inside the structures of gender and sexuality that shape our interpretations of African American musical behavior, our language about black music and identity, and our notions of power in and out of musical contexts" (114). Colored by the power politics of sexuality and race, Black women occupy an exclusive position within Black music making traditions.

The edited volume by Eileen Hayes and Linda Williams *Black Women and Music* also accentuates how race and gender complicate the study of Black music. "*Black Women and Music* is a corrective to discursive practices that inadvertently make visible as much as illuminate the heterogeneity of black women's musical experience" (6-7). Gaunt, Hayes, and Williams emphasize that representations of Black music often rest upon the pillar of patriarchy (a critique Gaunt offers for Floyd's work) excluding women, and not accurately portraying the sexual differences in power and performance of Black music. "Musical performance among African Americans remains gendered, or intersex phenomenon, from juba-patting and corn shucking, to field hollering and gospel shouting, from griots and griottes, from (male) master drummers to (female) blues queens" (Gaunt 114). The observations and interventions provided by Black feminist scholarship

illustrate the nonmonolithic nature of Black culture and music. By highlighting how women and men have different experiences based on socialized gender roles, the intersectional and internal dynamics of race, gender, and class within the Black community and in the production of Black music are made apparent. The experiences of Black women within the Black music-making tradition facilitate a unique and distinctive gendered interpretation of the social order.

The games Black girls play represents one of the first activities in Black musical production. Gaunt asserts “Black girl’s sphere of musical activity represents one of the earliest formations of a black popular music culture. Girls are its primary agents: they are the leaders in composing the beats, rhymes, and multi-limbed choreographies of handclapping games, cheers, and double-dutch” (183). She describes this process as kinetic orality. Kinetic orality plays a crucial role in shaping Black identity, culture, and musicking. “Musical blackness is a culturally transmitted set of practices, communications, and traditions, where embodied language or orality (kinetic orality) play a significant role in the social construction and knowledge of being African American” (38). African American youth’s introduction to Black musicking through kinetic orality is noteworthy given the prominent position Black music holds within African American culture. “Moreover, what is true of black African culture is true of any culture rich in artistic spiritual content: initiation into its youth guarantees its presence in consciousness, and to a considerable extent in behavior for a lifetime” (Stuckey 24). Simone and Ndegéocello serve as examples of the possibilities when music is introduced to youth. Gaunt’s work not only disaggregates the discourse and discursive practices of Black

musicking, it expands the understanding of everyday sites of Black women's resistance and musical production.

Despite scholarly and artistic efforts, the centrality of Black music to the African-American experience has often positioned Black men at the center of authentic Blackness. Doing so obscures the centrality of the role of Black women in African-American musicking. W. E. B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction in America* vividly resists the patriarchal temptation and characterizes Black music in America as follows:

There was joy in the south. It rose like perfume—like a prayer. Men stood quivering. Slim, dark girls, wild and beautiful with wrinkled hair, wept silently; young women, black, tawny, white and golden, lifted shivering hands, and old broken mothers, black and grey, raised great voices and shouted to God across the fields, and up to the rocks and the mountains.

A great song arose, the loveliest thing born this side of the seas. It was a new song. It did not come from Africa, though the dark throb and beat of that Ancient of Days was in it and through it. It did not come from white America—never from so pale and hard and thin a thing, however deep these vulgar and surrounding tones had driven. Not the Indies nor the hot South, the cold East or the heavy West made that music. It was a new song and its deep and plaintive beauty, its great cadences and wild appeal wailed, throbbed and thundered on the world's ears with a message seldom voiced by man. It swelled and blossomed like incense, improvised

and born anew out of an age long past, and weaving into its texture the old and new melodies in word and in thought.

They sneered at it—those white Southerners who heard it and never understood. They raped and defiled it—those white Northerners who listened without ears. Yet it lived and grew; always it grew and swelled and lived, and its sits today at the right hand of God, as America's once gift to beauty; as slavery's one redemption, distilled from the dross of its dung. (124-125)

Du Bois' portrait of African American music, as a Black woman, moves counter to the patriarchal and chauvinistic characterization of Black power, freedom, creativity, and the authentic Black experience. Du Bois' account of African-American music, through the Black female form, embodies Black feminist and womanish tenets of strength, harmony, and mutuality. His account also foregrounds the role of Black women in the collective struggle for freedom.

As the centrality of Black music in the lives of African-Americans cannot be understated, neither can the importance of Black women's role in musical production be ignored. Barbara Omolade states Black musicking affords Black women an everyday language to work for intersectional justice through the listening and retelling of the Black women's collective experience (Omolade 110–113). For Omolade, Black women have the ability through song, voice, rhythm and tone, lyric and language to transcend the social barriers placed on all our lives, fighting alongside Black men and ancestors to create a better world. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn's and Andrea Rushing's *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora* affirms the centrality of Black women and their musicking and

asserts that Black women have not only been culture bearers, their music has been critical for Black survival, as the song in Black culture has always been used to promote community, communicate cultural values, and articulate resistance to oppression (191). Terborg-Penn's and Rushing's view of Black musicking provides women a public voice of critique and a means to preserve the foundational characteristics of Black culture. The Black feminist mythical praxis of musicking upholds Black women as both cultural artists and change agents whose music is vital to Black values, solidarity, and liberation.

Endarkened Feminist Theory and Hermeneutics

In defining an endarkened feminist epistemology, I have deliberately sought language that attempts to unmask traditionally held political and cultural constructions/constrictions, language that more accurately organizes, resists, and transforms oppressive descriptions of sociocultural phenomena and relationships... Thus, in order to transform that reality, the very language we use to define and describe phenomena must possess instrumentality: It must be able to *do* something towards transforming particular ways of knowing and producing knowledge. (Dillard 2-3)

To investigate Black musicking in the manner I have suggested, it is necessary to address the theoretical and methodological challenges presented by Western structures of knowledge production and interpretation. Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* confronts the epistemological aspects of knowledge production asserting Black women's method of knowledge production connects the shared lived experience, power relationships, and action. From Collins' perspective, a Black Feminist Epistemology "encompasses standards for assessing truth" and a "set of principles for assessing knowledge claims"

which are broadly acknowledged and accepted by Black women (Collins 256). Layli Maparyan's *The Womanist Idea* also addresses the idea of epistemology and what constitutes "good knowledge" from a womanist perspective. Maparyan's outlook on epistemology emphasizes a "triad of concern" including human–human relationships, human–spiritual relationships, and human–nature relationships (36). "For womanists, good knowledge is knowledge that helps people and other living beings, promoting balance and well-being with Creation. Therefore, good knowledge is practical and beneficial—back to basics" (Maparyan 37)! Maparyan stresses that knowledge is spiritual; that the spiritual permeates all aspects of life; and that knowledge emanates from a variety of sources, encompassing the rational and the intuitive, the physical and the metaphysical. Cynthia Dillard's *On Spiritual Strivings* combines aspects of Collins' and Maparyan's ideas through her frame of endarkened feminist epistemology. Dillard shares:

I use the term "endarkened" feminist epistemology to articulate how reality is known when based in the historical roots of Black feminist thought, embodying a distinguishable difference in cultural standpoint, located in the intersectional/overlap of the culturally constructed socializations of race, gender and other identities, and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance for African American women. (3)

Dillard further expounds on the concept of endarkened feminist epistemology in her most recent work, *Learning to (Re)member*, where she shares that in Black women's knowledge-production practices, the sacred or spiritual is fundamental to any inquiry.

The sacred, as Dillard explains, gives reverence for the ways in which Black women's "work is honored and embraced as it is carried out" (*Learning to (Re)member* 60). "Reverence as a womanist value relates to both the environmental and spiritual domains. Reverence combines awe, respect, love, and veneration" (Maparyan 45). Foregrounding the spiritual and sacred, as bodies of knowledge and forms of practice essential to describing and participating in the struggles against all forms of oppression, is critical to understanding the Black experience. Moreover, foregrounding of spirituality and sacredness within the framework of Black women's epistemology is instrumental to understanding Black women as producers of knowledge and participants in Black radical traditions, including Black musicking.

Applying a Black or endarkened feminist epistemology offers a substantially different viewpoint and organization for understanding the intersectional constructs of gender, race, and class, as well as other identities and life forms. Karla Holloway's *Moorings and Metaphors* describes this intersectional and interdimensional space of inquiry as a mooring. "Its center is where behavior, art, philosophy, and language unite as cultural expression within an African-American literary tradition" (Holloway 1). This study draws from African-American literary tradition insights to engage Black feminism, musicking, and spirituality. However, establishing music's link to Black literature is not to suggest sameness in the production of written and oral texts of Black women. Hazel Carby (1986) reminds us "Different cultural forms negotiate and resolve very different sets of social contradictions" (9). For example, Zora Neal-Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* foregrounding of African spirituality may not be the same as that of Me'shell Ndegéocello on her album *Peace Beyond Passion*. While Black women's

literature and music share a place of “mooring” production and consumption, they differ in distribution and the spaces of dialogue and actions created. Black women’s musicking predates Black women’s literature in America, and because of levels of access, distribution, and cultural practice, Black women’s music is embedded broadly in Black working class communities, far beyond the limits of Black literature. Although acculturated, the music of Black women arises from the same rhythms and folklore of the original ring shout, the epicenter of collective Black knowledge production and social justice action in America. Jürgen Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* observes that just as the discourse within coffee houses, saloons, and newspapers generates opinions for the purpose of guiding and goading the affairs of the public sphere, so does the ring shout, in its various manifestations, and is central to the cultivation of collective knowledge within the Black community. Black musicking in America has always maintained a dynamic space to share and contest critical ideas and concrete experiences that influence the day-to-day Black experience.

Beyond the methods of knowledge production provided by an endarkened feminist epistemology, Black women’s musical moorings require a non-Western interpretative strategy cognizant and sensitive to the pluriverse of Black language and life-worlds. Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s work, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, elucidates the communal archive of Africanisms present in African American literature, applied herein to the music of Black women. Gates argues that Black vernacular is a precious resource within the writings of African Americans, as it allows for a more authentic and articulate expression of Black thought and meaning. Essential to Gates’ line of thinking is the concept of Signifyin(g), which advocates Black vernacular’s

uniqueness as a rhetorical strategy of interpretation and transformation and is an indigenous strategy for knowledge production. Gates' theoretical framework distances it from common strategies that attempt to read, analyze, or interpret the Black literary traditions. Gates maintains that his theory allows for the Black tradition to speak for itself. "That the black myths of black slaves and ex-slaves embody theories of their own status within a tradition is only one of the more striking instances of what Ralph Ellison calls the 'complexity' of the Negro's existence in Western culture" (Gates xxv). Gates' intention is to "enrich the reader's experience of reference and representation, of connotations and denotation, of truth and understanding, as these configure in the black formal literary traditions" (xxi). The Black vernacular tradition contains the hermeneutic basis for how the Black vernacular tradition is to be read. "The black tradition's fundamental idea of itself, buried or encoded in its primal myths—ambiguous, enigmatic, profoundly figurative, complex rhetorical structures" provides the basis for its own critical theory (23). Signifyin(g) is Gates' self-reflexive concept to represent this as double voiced, allowing for analysis of Black texts. Signifyin(g) represents a passing down of tradition, an extension of existence, external to everyday notions of life and death, living and being.

Building on the foundation supplied by Gates there are two scholars, Samuel Floyd and Alexis De Vita, whose research provides the primary pillars for this inquiry, both referencing Gates' theory of African American literary criticism as essential to their investigations. Samuel Floyd's *The Power of Black Music* supports the claims made by Gates and asserts that "Similarly, African-American music can be examined through the same vernacular tradition, with the rhetorical tropes of verbal provenance replaced with

those of its own genesis. In this way ... tropes in musical performances and compositions—can serve as Signifyin(g) figures” (Floyd 7). Tropes are metaphoric and theoretical uses of language in Black vernacular based on West African mythology, which repeats or revises existing texts in a manner altering and extending their meaning and interpretation. Stallings asserts that the trickster model of inquiry in the Black vernacular tradition breaks the taboos of society and equilaterally engages the intersections of difference (9–10). Musical Signifyin(g) and Trickster-Troping in Black musicking are not simply the naming of artists, borrowing, remixing, or performing prior material, it is an understanding of how Black musicking functions as “perceptive and evaluative acts of approval or disapproval, validation or invalidation through respectful, ironic, satirizing imitation, manipulation, extension, and elaboration of previously created tropes and new ideas” (Floyd, “Ring Shout!” 59). Cultural memory and musicking power the signifyin(g), musical troping traditions of Blacks in America. For Floyd, cultural memory in the Black music-making tradition is reflexive, moving through the past, present, and future, drawing on past mythologies; interpreting current realities, and telling our future legacies. Floyd asserts that within the Black public sphere, music culture and art are linked, and these links are signifiers meaningful to the Black experience (*The Power of Black Music* 97). Signifyin(g) and troping modes of communication and dialogue, both within and outside of the ring shout, advance everyday theory criticism of musical narratives and scores, and validate or invalidate the experiences of the Black Diaspora.

Musical signifyin(g) and trickster troping allow the complexity and significance of Black women’s musicking to reveal the continuity of African mythical properties and

Black feminist traditions of music making. Musical signification and troping draw from musical forms, literature, history, and current events, to bring attention to social conditions and spiritual phenomena within the Black public sphere. Terborg-Penn and Rushing (1996) offer an observation of Black women musicians, which further connects myth, music, and feminist knowledge production:

Perhaps the poetic tributes to African-American women singers demonstrate that they often act as “loas” and “orishas” in African-American culture by possessing enormous emotional power, healing their hearer’s grief, and mediating between the human and the transcendent. My argument is not that the enormous power ascribed to African-American women singers is on a direct continuum with the role of women singers in traditional or contemporary Africa, but rather African-American women singers often seem to take on roles ascribed to female deities in Africa. (194–195)

Taking on the roles of West African deities is consistent with the mythatypical processes Alexis De Vita describes in her work *Mythatypes*. Black women’s musicking is connected to Central and West African spiritual practices, cultivating the continuance of a spiritual belief system, informing ideas pertaining to indigenous female knowledge, mythical agency, erotic power, and diverse, universally united Black identities. Floyd shares that African cultures do not compartmentalize or separate the spiritual (sacred or profane) or the physical and spiritual worlds, as they are all important and interconnected aspects of African life worlds (*The Power of Black Music* 15). Utilizing musical Signifyin(g) and trickster troping allows for the discovery, distinguishing, and explaining

of social conditions and spiritual phenomena encountered in the daily lives of Black women, as demonstrated in the call-and-response counterpoints of perception and reactions used in Black women's musicking. The material manifestations and physical realizations of musical Signifyin(g) are keys to understanding Black music and its evaluation (*The Power of Black Music* 96–97). Black women's music is not just an object, but also an ongoing series of cultural transactions between human beings, organized through sound and the spiritual world (Floyd, *Ring Shout!* 61–62). Black women's musicking captures and conveys both the dialectical and dialogical characteristics of Black feminism and the ring shout.

This study also brings attention to the work of womanist scholar Alexis De Vita's *Mythatypes*, which analyzes the creative literature of women from the African Diaspora in search of persistent patterns and recurrent female symbols from African cosmological systems of belief. De Vita states that her work intends to identify and explain mythical patterns within Black women's literature (De Vita 2). De Vita articulates that in the literary worlds of African and African-American women there is a "third dimensional perception" that cuts through the oppositional polarities between non-Western and Western culture, where mind, body, and spirit are interconnected and intraconnected (20). The term mythatype is intended to be an interpretative paradigm bearing witness to the shifting and fluid identities and processes of Black women as they interact with and among living communities, both spiritual and physical. De Vita's goal is to allow readers of Pan-African literature to witness the celebration of Black life and how Black women's literature is rooted in West and Central African spirituality (10). In *Eroticism, Spirituality, and Resistance in Black Women's Writings*, Donna Aza Weir-Soley supports

De Vita's claims that African-derived spirituality informs current works of literature. She examines the political, cultural, spiritual, and historical gender characteristics present in Black women's literature. Weir-Soley argues Black women's literary texts, notwithstanding the silencing and mistranslation of West African spiritual traditions are inscribed with creolized African religions that connect Black cosmology and Black women's radical subjectivity (6). In defining mythatypes De Vita states:

For ease of reference, rather than repeatedly attempting to differentiate or identify ancestresses-becoming-historical-figures-becoming-legends-becoming-deities, I have termed these shifting female identity models "mythatypes." This term is meant to clarify an ancestress's or goddess's fluid passage from life to death to spiritual interaction with living communities, which is often present in womanist literatures and philosophies. (1-2)

The various mutations and reinterpretations of the Black Diaspora's religious and spiritual systems encompass the term mythatype. In this study, the mythatype frame is expanded to include cultural building patterns, identities, and processes of trickster troping, goddesses, griots, witnessing, conjuring, spiritual activism, Black folk creation, signifyin(g), biomythography, and naming practices. The application of the mythatype frame to Black female musicking allows music to be understood as dialectical and dialogical sources of spiritually based feminist knowledge production, as in the case of African mythology. The mythatypes present in Black women's musicking further elucidate the Africanized amalgamation of feminism, music, and spirituality. The conceptual frame of mythatypes offers a reflexive flexibility to explore and identify

feminist West and Central African cosmology concepts within the music of Black women.

There is a West African folkloric tale that contextualizes the historical and contemporary progressions of spiritual, musical, and feminist fusion by the Black Diaspora in America. The myth emanates from West African mythical traditions and the regions connected by the Niger River. This myth centralizes Black women's presence and importance in the human life cycle and underscores the power of Black women's music and spiritual endowments in cultivating humanity. It is within this mythical narrative that this study's claims regarding Black feminism, music, and myth derive. A version of this Black folklore appears in Alan Cohen's book, *Wisdom of the Heart* (2002). Cohen, in retelling this West African "Sing Your Song" myth writes:

When a woman in a certain African tribe knows she's pregnant, she goes out into the wilderness with a few friends. Together they pray and meditate until they hear the baby's unique song. As they attune to it, the women sing it aloud. Then they return to the tribe and teach it to everyone else.

When the child is born, the community gathers and sings the child's song to them. When the child enters school, the villagers gather and sing the song. When the child passes through the initiation to adulthood, the people again come together and sing. At the altar of marriage, the person hears their song. Finally, when it's time for the soul to pass from this world, the family and friends gather at the person's bed, just as they did at their birth, and they sing the person to the next life. (2)

This tale centers Black women, their music, and spirituality and demonstrates how music and myth were woven together in the daily lives of West African tribes. Margaret Creel's *A Peculiar People* study of Gullah culture located on the southern coast of the United States supports the validity and centrality of the "Sing Your Song" myth. Creel maintains "The relationship between the pivotal positions of humanity and religion in African ontology is seen in general concepts regarding life in an African village on the individual as well as the communal level" (62). Her study further reveals how all life activities from birth to death are entwined through communal ceremonies and rituals. "A newborn's survival past three to seven days was a sign that it had been blessed by the spirits and a sacred naming ceremony was held where the infant was set apart for a certain occupation and a life of good habits and industry" (Creel 62). The "Sing Your Song" tale demonstrates the significant role Black women played in the functional rituals, ceremonies, and musical traditions of West African tribal life. This mythical narrative embodies the role of Black women's music described by Terborg-Penn and Rushing:

Black women's music has proven critical to black survival, for they have at all times used their song to uphold and preserve traditional or communal values and to promote group solidarity Black women create, encourage, and sustain musical traditions, and in doing so, provide significant links between the ceremonial, ritual, artistic, and social foundations of Black culture. (91)

The "Sing Your Song" myth foregrounds Black women and the unifying principles of interconnectedness, interrelatedness, and interdependency through musicking.

Transmuted or transformed, the “Sing Your Song” myth identifies a mooring that links Black women’s musical, spiritual, and feminist practices. The hegemonic forces of overrepresentation, silencing, and mistranslation obscure the understanding of the “Sing Your Song” myth, as well as the persistence and prevalence of music in Black America. When African systems of knowledge are translated via Eurocentric thought, the African belief system is destabilized because of the West’s ideas regarding the citizen subject, “imagination” as a category of analysis, ideas regarding civil society, patriarchal fraternities, public/private distinctions, secular reason, and historical time (Chakrabarty 19). The “Sing Your Song” myth sets the tone for the method of exploring Black feminism through the forms and functions of African music-making traditions and the spiritual agency of women from the African diaspora.

Africa’s influence on Blacks in America is evident in the Black literary tradition’s myths and rhetorical strategies and the culturally specific musicking concept of ring shout, discussed by Floyd and Stuckey. *The Discourse of the Divine: Radical Traditions of Black Feminism, Musicking, and Myth within the Black Public Sphere (Civil Rights to the Present)* expounds upon the lineages of Black feminism, mythatypes, and musicking. Applying the theories of musical signifyin(g) and mythatypes to Black feminist analysis of women’s music production reveals this music-making tradition as an apparatus of creation, contesting the alienation and rupture of Black people from their African mind, body, and spirit. The Black feminist practice of musicking produced and performed by Nina Simone and Me’shell Ndegéocello are examples of the necessary dialectical and dialogical disruption, a culturally inherited rebuking to the forces of cultural imperialism and oppression.

CHAPTER THREE – GODDESS NOIRE

Did you know that the human voice is the only pure instrument? She wrote one of her brothers. That it has notes no other instrument has? It's like being between the keys of a piano. The notes are there, you can sing them, but they can't be found on any instrument. That's like me. I live in between this. I live in both worlds, the black and white world. I am Nina Simone, the star, and I am not here. I'm a woman. My secret self is between these worlds. (Cohodas, 4)

Nina Simone would not become the classical pianist she originally aspired to become, she became something greater, “the true singer of the civil rights movement” a title bestowed upon her by Black power leader Stokeley Carmichael (Simone, *I Put a Spell on You* 98). Brian Ward's *Just My Soul Responding* discusses how Simone, as compared with the other artists during the early-to-mid 1960s was uniquely radical. Simone's musicking directly challenged racism in America, especially in the Jim Crow South (Ward 299–300). Though other artists like Curtis Mayfield provided pride and inspiration to Black culture in the second half of the twentieth century, Simone was peerless in her tireless attacks against oppression (Ward 300). Nina Simone was ahead of the musical curve contesting racial and gender barriers. Classically trained, Simone did not initially gravitate to popular music. However, Simone's view of popular music changed as she received praise for her politically charged music during the 1960s and 1970s. Simone shares “My music was dedicated to a purpose more important than

classical music's pursuit of excellence; it was dedicated to the fight for freedom and the historical destiny of my people...So if the movement gave me nothing else, it gave me self respect" (Simone, *I Put a Spell on You* 91). The label of Black feminist or womanist cannot be strictly applied to Simone; however, it is clear her identity advocated feminism, as bell hooks describes in *Talking Back* by "creating political paradigms and radical models of change that emphasize collective as well as individual change" (182). Simone's music, lyrics, and performance intertwine the spirit of Cultural Nationalism, the centrality of Black women's radical subjectivity, the prominence of Black cosmology, and the ever-emerging Black feminist consciousness.

Nina Simone was born Eunice Kathleen Waymon in Tryon City, North Carolina on February 21, 1933, during the Depression. She was the sixth of eight children born to Mary Kate and John D. Waymon. The Waymon family was well known and well regarded in the community. "Daddy had become a pillar of the black community" (Simone 15). Simone's mother was also very well respected and was an ordained Methodist minister who preached in area churches. "My mother was equally regarded ... bringing up six children, working to support her family and nursing her husband through a long and nearly fatal illness" (Simone 15). In addition to being well regarded in the community, the entire Waymon household possessed musical talents, although Simone's abilities were unrivaled. Simone, at the age of three, played her first song on the organ "God be with You 'Til we Meet Again," her mother's favorite hymn (Cohodas 16). No one in her family had ever heard Simone play the organ before the age of three and by the age of six she was the regular pianist at the Waymon's home church. Simone's talents also caught the ear of a local woman, Mrs. Katherine Miller, for whom Simone's mother

worked as a housekeeper. Mrs. Miller, impressed with Simone's talent, felt that she would greatly benefit from classical training. The Waymons couldn't afford such training, but Mrs. Miller made a deal with the family and agreed to pay for Simone's lessons for one year and if she showed promise she would make sure that they continued (Cohodas 31).

Simone began her formal piano training with Mrs. Muriel Massinovitch, or Miz Mazzy, as Simone called her, at the age of six (Simone 25). Simone excelled in the first year and Mrs. Miller, true to her word, began to raise funds for Simone to continue her training and prepare Simone for her musical future. Miz Mazzy admired Bach and the technical aspect of his music and only allowed Simone to practice Bach. Over time, Simone would come to love Bach as much as did Miz Mazzy. "Once I understood Bach's music I never wanted to be anything else other than a concert pianist; Bach made me dedicate my life to music, and it was Mrs. Massinovitch who introduced me to this world" (Simone 3). Simone continued her training with Miz Mazzy until she left for high school. During the five and a half years Simone spent under Miz Mazzy's musical care, Simone's relationship with Miz Mazzy grew, and Simone thought of her as a mom. "She had no children of her own, and I was sharing my Momma with the rest of the family and the Methodist church In time, she became another mother to me, one I had all to myself. That was how I came to think of her, as my white momma" (Simone 24). Simone progressed, and the goal became clear and simple, to support Simone in becoming the first Black American classical pianist. Mrs. Miller, with the help of Mrs. Massinovitch, her mother Kate and the townspeople of Tryon, created the Eunice Waymon Fund. "Not only was she being groomed as the first black woman to excel at classical piano, but she

was to carry the weight of the town's expectations on her small shoulders" (Hampton and Nathan 14). There were already other Black women who played classical music, including Hazel Harrison, Natalie Hinderas, and Philippa Schuyler, but Simone and others in her community were not aware of these artists and her dream was to be the first (Cohodas 41).

While Simone came to know, and indeed love, classical music she did like to play 'real' music, the name her mother Kate gave to all music that was not religious. Her mother did not allow Simone to play 'real' music, but her father would encourage and indulge his daughter by teaching her blues, ragtime, and jazz tunes he enjoyed. Simone observed that her father always used the black keys on the piano when he played (Simone 17). The black keys on the piano form the five-note pentatonic scale, which differs from the seven-note heptatonic scale. The pentatonic scale is present throughout the world of music and is very prevalent and prominent in the music of West Africans and African Americans, especially Spirituals and the Blues. The continuity of Black music in America and the music of West African ancestors is evident by the use of the pentatonic scale in both secular and sacred music (Floyd, *The Power of Black Music* 51). Simone's upbringing musically, with gospel, blues, and classical is analogous to the world she occupied, in between the white and black keys and the White and Black worlds. The pentatonic scale is the bridge that connects her Black musicking to her West African past, both physically and metaphysically. The black keys are the recursive temporal bridge foundational to Simone's Africanized, Blues-inspired music, which she effortlessly mixed with her Western-inspired classical training.

Simone's talents continued to blossom, and she performed recitals in the local community, as well as in her mother's church. Simone also thrived academically; she was the head of her class at Tryon Colored School and skipped the ninth grade. Simone continued her education at the Allen High School for Girls where she also received additional musical coaching (Hampton and Nathan 15). The Allen School, 50 miles away from Tryon, was one of only three private accredited secondary schools for Black girls in North Carolina (Cohodas 41–42). Simone's academic success did not come without great personal sacrifice. She and her childhood sweetheart, Edney, broke up because of the long distance nature of their relationship. Devastated by the break-up, Simone used her musical training to distract herself from the pain of losing her love. She was entering her senior year and wanted to graduate Valedictorian. "I practised all hours I could because it was the only way I could stop thinking about Edney" (Simone 35). In Edney, Simone lost her connection to the outside world, the world beyond music (Simone 35).

Simone graduated Valedictorian from the Allen School in 1950 and earned a scholarship to attend the Juilliard School of Music in New York. The plan was to use one year at Juilliard to prepare for entrance into the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia (Hampton and Nathan 15). Unfortunately, Simone's plans were derailed when the Curtis Institute of Music denied Simone entry after her audition. Her family and community members believed racism was at the root of her denial. The Curtis Institute's rejection scarred Simone, and she felt she let everyone down by not becoming the first African American to attend the prestigious Curtis Institute.¹⁰ The experience of rejection from

¹⁰ Blanche Burton Lyles, in 1954, was the first African American to graduate from the Curtis Institute of Music. Blanche was mentored in classical music by Marian Anderson; at age 11, she received an unlimited scholarship to study piano at the

Curtis taught Simone a valuable lesson about racism. Simone learned that talent did not trump race, destroying her assumptions of color-blind meritocracy (Simone 43–44). Still determined, Simone hired Vladimir Sokhaloff, a professor at Curtis, to be her tutor. Professor Sokhaloff worked with Simone and encouraged her to apply again next year (Simone 45). Struggling to make ends meet, Simone worked as an accompanist and piano teacher until one of her students shared that Atlantic City’s clubs and bars offered more lucrative jobs than teaching piano. Simone’s mother would not approve of her working in Atlantic City, and to keep her from finding out Simone created the stage name, Nina Simone. “I’d had a Hispanic boyfriend one time, Chico, who had christened me Niña, pronounced neen-ya... And I liked the name Simone too, ever since I’d seen Simone Signoret in those French movies” (Simone 49). The rejection from the Curtis Institute crushed Simone, but from that pain she was reborn, resulting in the “reincarnation that was Miss Nina Simone” (Hampton and Nathan 16).

Nina Simone possessed a divinely powered instrument whose gifts and insights inspired generations. “I didn’t get interested in music; it was a gift from God” (Cohodas 4). Hidden and distorted by social, cultural, and musical polarization, the world of Nina Simone was one of music, often misunderstood, amidst the turmoil of love, loss, greed, suffering, and an undying commitment to Black people. The musical prowess of Nina Simone is undeniable and her status in the Black community during the civil rights movement and beyond is unassailable. There has never been a musical icon whose stature musically and culturally has been so successful, provocative, and enduring. Nina Simone

prestigious Curtis Institute of Music. She was also the first African American female pianist to play at Carnegie Hall with the NY Philharmonic Orchestra.

is an icon and an iconoclast who for over 40 years served as a beacon of inspiration for civil rights and the worldwide struggle for humanity. She led a life full of great joy and great pain, and in the spirit of her stirring reprise of Frank Sinatra's "My Way," she did it her way.

Simone's prolific career includes 47 studio and live albums and 15 Grammy nominations. Her musical works, varied and vanguard, ranged from gospel to classical, to jazz and blues, but ultimately Simone's music was something all her own. "If I had to be called something it should have been a folk singer, because there was more folk and blues than jazz in my playing" (Simone 69). Simone added that the critical need to categorize her and her music was fueled by racist ideas of what a Black performer in her day should be, not by what and who she was. Paul Robinson, long time drummer of Nina's from the mid eighties until her death shares "Obviously being a successful black woman—and an outspoken one—at a time when black people still had to sit at the back of the bus had a tremendous effect on her" (Hampton and Nathan 116). Simone's musicking was emblematic of her radical subjectivity. Simone sold over one million CDs in the last decade of her life, making her a global catalog best seller. In 2000, Simone was awarded a Grammy Hall of Fame Award for her rendition of "I Love You Porgy."

Simone's friendship with Lorraine Hansberry, the first Black woman writer to have a play on Broadway, *Raisin in the Sun* (1958), beginning in the early 60s indoctrinated and nurtured Simone into the world of revolutionary thought and action. Hansberry and Simone spent countless hours engaged in social justice discussions. "It was always Marx, Lenin, and revolution—real girls' talk" (Simone 87). Over time, Nina Simone was schooled by many of the Black civil rights and Black power luminaries,

including Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Stokeley Carmichael, Miriam Makeba, and Godfrey Cambridge. In a rare interview appearing on her compilation album, *Protest Anthology*, featuring previously unreleased live performances and interviews during the 1960s, Simone discusses her art and how she wants her art to live on long after she dies. In her words, Nina Simone defined the artist as such:

An artist's duty as far as I'm concerned is to reflect the times I choose to reflect the times and the situations in which I find myself that to me is my duty . . . and at this crucial time in our lives, when everything is so desperate when every day is a matter of survival, I don't think you can help but to be involved. Young people, Black and White know this that's why they are so involved in politics. We will shape and mold this country or it will not be molded and shaped at all. I don't think you have a choice, how can you be an artist and not reflect the times? That to me is the definition of an artist. ("Definition of an Artist" 2008)

In her practical and prophetic manner, Simone lived and died as she intended. Simone's performances, interviews, and life's work share common traits and characteristics of West African mythatypes that Terborg-Penn and Rushing assert Black women's musicking demonstrates (194–195). Simone's musicking embodies the mythatypes of activist witnessing, musical conjuring, and the goddess properties expressed through biomythography and folk hero creation.

Signifyin(g) Witness Spiritual Activist

On September 15, 1963, Nina Simone learned of the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Four young girls were killed; one young

woman lost her eye, and several others were injured. The bodies of Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Denise McNair were discovered in the debris (Simone 89). A fifth girl who had been with them, Sarah Collins (the younger sister of Addie Mae Collins), lost her right eye in the explosion, and 22 other people were injured. Claude Sitton, of the *New York Times*, also reported that two young Negro boys were shot during the aftermath of the bombing. Johnny Robinson, age 16, was shot by a White police officer and Virgil Wade, age 13, was shot by a 16 year old anti-integrationist, Larry Sims (“New York Times” 1963). Simone recalls her mental, physical, and spiritual state after hearing the news of the bombing and subsequent violence, as well as the lessons she received from her friend and playwright, Lorraine Hansberry:

The bombing of the little girls in Alabama and the murder of Medgar Evers were like the final pieces of a jigsaw that made no sense until you had fitted the whole thinking together. I suddenly realized what it was to be black in America in 1963, but it wasn't an intellectual connection of the type Lorraine had been repeating to me over and over—it came as a rush of fury, hatred, and determination. In church language, the Truth entered into me and I ‘came through.’ (Simone 89)

The ‘Truth’ or spirit that came over Simone was transformational and through her song writing Nina Simone became an activist witness of the ‘Truth.’

Simone scored “Mississippi Goddamn,” in the wake of the overwhelming emotions stirring in her mind, body, and spirit. Being moved by the spirit is common in the Black church experience. “Forms of worship from the black church such as shouting, getting in the spirit...are all adaptations of African religious practices creolized to

conform to Christianity's norms, values, and sacred teachings, while still retaining the flavor of their African origins" (Weir-Soley 88). Simone was not unfamiliar with being moved by the Spirit, having being raised in her mother's church. Emilie Townes' *In A Blaze of Glory* states "It is in the head and heart where spirituality as a social witness is born" (11). Simone's pain and heartache, along with years of intellectual engagement with her friend, activist and playwright Lorraine Hansberry, as well as her musical talents were woven together in the wake of the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church. Simone's first impulse was to make a zip-gun (homemade pistol) but the cajoling of her husband, Andrew Stroud, a New York police detective led Nina to the piano, and in an hour "Mississippi Goddamn" came into being. "It was my first civil rights song, and it erupted out of me quicker than I could write it down" (Simone 90). Wade-Gayles' *My Soul is a Witness* asserts that Black women have a distinct relationship with the Spirit and that this relationship is accentuated by gender and racial identities. Wade-Gayles further asserts that Spirit speaks in songs and the spiritual energy created is distinctive to Black women (6-7). Simone's musicking invokes the legacy of Black women's spiritual witnessing and demonstrates how prayers, songs, and actions are linked. "Mississippi Goddamn" spoke truth into action with Simone serving as the spiritual witness, wielding the power of change, for an ever growing movement.

Many activists loved Simone's brazen live recording of "Mississippi Goddamn," and regarded it as an anthem of the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer Project. Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) member and Mississippi Freedom Summer organizer Stanley Wise shares "I mean everybody in the Movement just took that as a tribute to the Mississippi [Freedom] Summer Project" (Ward 301). The anger and sense

of purpose Simone expressed in her performance of “Mississippi Goddamn” mirrored the frustrations that fueled the Black Power Movement. The Freedom Summer project was a campaign to empower, educate, and register Black citizens in Mississippi. Simone would continue her support of the movement by performing benefit concerts and lending her celebrity to the project. The fusion and coherence of the sentiments and feelings during this time illustrate how artists and their music are in tune with the Black public sphere. Simone supported civil rights organizations such as the SNCC, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) through benefit concerts. The murders of 1963, the assassination of Medgar Evers, and the bombing at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham deepened Simone’s relationship with Black social movements. Simone’s music, lyrics, and performance strategies on-and-off stage embodied the Black women’s standpoint and demonstrated Black women’s leadership and relevance within Black social movements. Simone’s “Mississippi Goddamn” bridged the nonviolent tenets of the Civil Rights Movement to the demands of the emerging Black Power Movement. “Mississippi Goddamn” marks the shift that was taking place in the Black community, which was growing weary of the slow and pacifist approach of the Civil Rights Movement.

Reading Simone’s experience writing “Mississippi Goddamn” in the context of African cosmology demonstrates the mythatypical representation of Simone as a spiritual activist through her musicking. The spiritual role of Simone, as a protector and healer of her people exhibits what Layli Maparyan’s *The Womanist Idea* frames as spiritual activism, a set of practices designed to change hearts and minds (117). Simone’s musicking is grounded in womanist spirituality, deeply rooted in the belief that

spirituality as a witness moves in the face of hardship to reaffirm humanity and dignity (Townes 114). “Mississippi Goddamn” is a proclamation of the dignity of Black life. Ruth Feldstein’s *How It Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement* attests to the significance of Simone’s music and her song “Mississippi Goddamn” during the early part of the 1960s stating it “was a political anthem, one that expressed unqualified outrage at the violence inflicted on African Americans. The lyrics, filled with anger and despair, stood in stark contrast to the fast-paced rollicking rhythm” (84). By the later part of the sixties, Simone would become known as the ‘High Priestess of Soul,’ which was the title of her album released in 1967. Simone’s praise-name was earned and manifested through her civil rights songs and work in the civil rights movement. This naming is an important acknowledgement of the spiritual relationship between Simone and the Black community. “It was at this time, in the mid-sixties, that I first began to feel the power and spirituality I could connect with when I played in front of an audience. I’d been performing for ten years, but it was only at this time that I felt a kind of state of grace come upon me...” (Simone 92). The process and practices of witnessing, and spiritual activism are essential elements of claiming community and acknowledging mythatypical representation.

“Mississippi Goddamn” was the first of many civil rights songs Simone wrote or performed between the 1960s and early 1970s that inspired and cultivated self-respect within the consciousness of the Black community. Other civil rights songs by Simone include “Old Jim Crow” (1964) and “Revolution” (1969). In addition, she co-wrote two other civil rights classics, “Backlash Blues” (1967) with the lyrics written by her mentor and friend Langston Hughes and “To Be Young, Gifted and Black” (1970) in honor of

her friend Lorraine Hansberry, who died of cancer, with lyrics written by her bandleader Weldon Irvine. Simone also engaged in spiritual and musical signifyin(g) of racially conscious scores, “Strange Fruit” (1965), the anti-lynching protest song originally recorded by Billie Holiday in 1939 (Davis 181); and she also popularized the song, “Why? The King of Love is Dead” (1968), written by Simone’s bassist Gene Taylor on the Emmy nominated album ‘*Nuff Said!*’ after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King. (Simone 115).

In addition to mythatypical characteristics of Simone’s protest songs, these songs also contained several elements of musical signification. Simone states “After the murder of Medgar Evers, the Alabama bombing, and “Mississippi Goddam” the entire direction of my life shifted and for the next seven years I was driven by civil rights and the hope of Black revolution” (Simone 91). The lyrics of “Mississippi Goddamn” on Simone’s 1964 album *Nina Simone in Concert* include the following:

The name of this tune is Mississippi Goddam
And I mean every word of it
Alabama’s gotten me so upset
Tennessee made me lose my rest
And everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam
Alabama’s gotten me so upset
Tennessee made me lose my rest
And everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam
Hound dogs on my trail
School children sitting in jail

Black cat cross my path
I think every day's gonna be my last
Lord have mercy on this land of mine
We all gonna get it in due time
I don't belong here
I don't belong there
I've even stopped believing in prayer
Don't tell me
I tell you
Me and my people just about due
I've been there so I know
They keep on saying "Go slow!"
But that's just the trouble
"do it slow"
Washing the windows
"do it slow"
Picking the cotton
"do it slow"
You're just plain rotten
"do it slow"
You're too damn lazy
"do it slow"
The thinking's crazy

“do it slow”

Betch you thought I was kidding

Picket lines, school boycotts

They try to say it’s a communist plot

All I want is equality

For my sister, my brother, my people and me

You don’t have to live next to me

Just give me my equality

Everybody knows about Mississippi

Everybody knows about Alabama

Everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam

The lyrics of Simone’s “Mississippi Goddamn” identify the issues threatening Black people in America and the first word of the title, Mississippi, names the state in which Medgar Evers was killed and serves as metaphor for all southern states. The song was banned from radio in the South, supposedly for the word goddamn and Simone received threats from the Ku Klux Klan (Cohodas 157–158). Simone’s intersectional lyrics questioned the pace of equal rights, the religious-based acquiescence to suffering in this world and gaining freedom in the afterlife, and the slow, gradual, and savage pace of desegregation. “Mississippi Goddamn” was a Black musicking remix, a musical sign of Dr. King’s 1963 “Letter from the Birmingham Jail,” which questioned the pace of Civil Rights (Ward 301). “Mississippi Goddam” was a provocative statement against White supremacy and fueled racial discourse throughout the nation. The power of Simone’s

musicking is evident in that her music was significant to her community, as well as to the social movements of her time.

When Simone released the live recording of “Mississippi Goddamn,” on her 1964 album *Nina Simone in Concert*, the album also included another of her musical signifying works “Old Jim Crow.” The lyrics of “Old Jim Crow” include:

Old Jim Crow
Where you been baby
Down Mississippi and back again
Old Jim Crow don't you know
It's all over now
Old Jim Crow
You've been around too long
Gotta work the devil
'Til your dead and gone
Old Jim Crow
You know it's true
When you hurt my brother
You hurt me too
Old Jim Crow don't you know
It's all over now
Old Jim Crow
I thought I had you beat
Now I see you walkin'

And talkin' up and down my street
Old Jim Crow don't you know
It's all over now
Old Jim Crow don't you know
It's all over
All over
Oh Lord, it's all over
All over
It's all over
It's all over
It's all over now.

Simone humanizes Jim Crow into signifying a simulacrum that needs to be destroyed because of harm caused to the Black community in the South. Raised in the rural South, Simone was familiar with Jim Crow's racial tactics. "All my life, every sense I can remember, even when I first started to take piano lessons I felt it then, I knew what I was thought of ... I had to cross the tracks to the white side of town, we would take my music lessons and every Saturday that I did it I felt it ... I felt it all my life ... ("Old Jim Crow Interview," 2008). The lyrics of "Old Jim Crow" and its blues styling further express a musical signification pointing to the continuity of Blues and feminism, established by Davis' *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*. As Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, Michele Gibbs, and Hazel Carby reveal, the performance of Blues demonstrates Black women's engagement with Black feminism. "Black women blues is a metonym for black women's critical engagement with African American feminist thought" (Hayes and

Williams 3). Simone's "Old Jim Crow," illustrates musical signifyin(g) and her recalling the lessons from her father on the black keys of the piano. "Old Jim Crow" is 'real' music addressing the inequities of the Jim Crow, being retold by a daughter of the South.

"Old Jim Crow"'s familiar Blues format is rich with meaning and displays the power of "cultural memory in black music-making" by translating "memory into sound and the sound into memory" (Floyd, *The Power of Black Music* 9). Simone's lyrics reference both the devil and the Lord displaying awareness of the sacred and profane and invokes ritual and myth into the consciousness and actions of Black culture. For Simone, the line between Blues and Gospel, secular and sacred was unnecessary. "Mama and them were so religious that they wouldn't allow you to play boogie-woogie in the house, but would allow you to use the same boogie-woogie *beat* to play a gospel tune. I don't agree with this attitude because our music crosses all those lines" (Levine 200). Simone's view of Black music is supported by West African cosmology where there the sacred and profane, the physical and spiritual all exist contemporaneously (Floyd, *The Power of Black Music* 15). "Old Jim Crow" expresses the spiritualized feminist politics that interrupts the institutional racism of the South, as well as the musical signification that is distinctive to Black musicking.

"Backlash Blues" continued Simone's signifyin(g) of the Blues and mythatypical representation. Backlash, as a mythic metaphor, is a recursive structure stressing the intimacy and dialectical relationship between White backlash and the Black experience in America (Holloway 14). Simone defines backlash in an interview:

The word Backlash is like every time we try to get our rights and we do something that displease them they take it out on us in different ways ...

deliberately to punish us for trying, for whatever step we made to try and get some freedom every time we do something and they disapprove they hit us ... and it get worse the more aggression we have ... that is what White backlash is ... you see since it is a White power structure they control our economics, everything we do, they control so if we try to do anything to help ourselves they slap us ... they hit you back in various ways, and that what that is, every time we try do something they punish us and that is what White backlash is ... (Simone “Backlash Blues Interview” 2008).

The lyrics of the “Backlash Blues” create another musical simulacrum representing a universal racist White male construct actively denying Black communities social, economic, and political development.

Mr. Backlash, Mr. Backlash

Who do you think I am?

You raise my taxes, freeze my wages

And send my only son to Vietnam

You give me second class houses

And second class schools

Do you think that everybody colored

Is second class fools?

Mr. Backlash

I'm gonna leave you

With the backlash blues

When I try to find a job
To earn a little cash
All you got to offer
Is your mean old white backlash
But the world is big
Big and bright and round
And it's full of other folks like me
Who are black, yellow, beige and brown
When Langston Hughes died
Oh ... He told me many years before
He said Nina Keep on working till they open the door
One of these days when they open it
Doors are open wide make sure you sock it to them where they live
Where they will have no place to hide

The “Backlash Blues” lyrics invert the dominant, hierarchal relationship of the Jim Crow South and form a reflexive bond imagined as a reciprocal realignment of the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor. Simone’s revisioning of backlash empowers Black resistance to racism. Humanizing the oppressive forces of White domination (as she did similarly with Old Jim Crow) destabilizes the traditional Western historiography of racial injustice and connects the voice and actions of the Black community during the Civil Rights Movement through the mythical metaphor of “Backlash Blues.” The lyric Mr. Backlash also creates a common language directly linking the racial oppression of the South to those in the nation who oppose Black liberty and freedom. The lyrics

addressing racial segregation in housing, schools, employment, and war are consistent with the collective standpoint of Black feminism (Collins 24).

Simone's musical signifyin(g) on the lyrics of Langston Hughes draws on the Blues, as a canonical musical structure within the Black experience. According to the music historian Floyd "The blues recognized and represented independence, autonomy, a certain amount of liberation, and release from the oppression of slavery" (Floyd 77). Simone's "Backlash Blues," utilizes the call-and-response elements of the ring shout and provided "cathartic, affirming, and restorative powers" to the listener (Floyd 74). Moreover, the live version of "Backlash Blues" appearing on Simone's *Protest Anthology* also displays her reverence for her ancestors with an ad-libbed verse musically and mythically signifyin(g) reverence for, and lessons learned from, her mentor, friend, and now ancestor Langston Hughes. Feminist historian, Omolade observes that Simone's music draws upon "powerful Black women of the past" and the "strength from their sisters in collectives, friendships, love affairs, and organizations" (Omolade 113). Langston Hughes was not a sister, but as feminist scholar Joyce Joyce states in her book chapter, "Hughes and Twentieth-Century Genderracial Issues" appearing the anthology *A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes*, he was one of "the first black male feminist writers of African American letters" (qtd. in Tracy 120). Simone's musicking exemplifies both the witnessing and activism signifyin(g) recognition and validates the experience of the Black public sphere (Floyd, *The Power of Black Music* 232).

Together, Simone's protest songs, "Backlash Blues", "Old Jim Crow", and "Mississippi Goddamn" are examples of how the principles of African cosmology establish power over systematic racist threats within the Black community and galvanize

the communal nature of these issues and the collective context necessary to address the problems. Simone's musicking, entrenched in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, personifies the mythotype of her cultural title of Priestess, and it also expresses the power of musical and mythical signifyin(g). Her protest songs continue the historical continuity and demonstrate the centrality of Black women's activism in social movements from the time of slavery to civil rights. Cheryl Gilkes' *If It Wasn't for the Women* states, "African-American women and women of color generally have a dramatic impact within and beyond their communities. The translation of this historical role into real power and social justice is the ultimate goal of community work" (27). This power challenging hegemony emanates from a Black tradition that holds one accountable for community and roots identity within the collective Black experience (Townes 115). Simone's lyrics and electric performances were modes of musicking that empowered Black consciousness, informed Black activism, and supported the spiritual nature of the struggle for Black liberation.

Magical Musicking

Simone's musicking is also an expression of the Black conjuring tradition. In the conjuring tradition, conjurers are individuals spiritually incarnated with the ability to heal or harm, by casting magical spells, enchanting objects, and creating potions and tinctures through knowledge of plants and herbs. Yvonne Chireau's *Black Magic* emphasizes the role of West African supernatural practices in African American culture, specifically the concepts of Conjure and Conjurers, as spiritual and political methods of divine mediation exercised by Black Americans since arriving in the New World (Chireau 33). "Conjure is a magical tradition in which spiritual power is invoked for various purposes, such as

healing, protection, and self-defense” (12). For example, abolitionist Frederick Douglass discusses his encounter with an enslaved conjurer, Sandy Jenkins, who gave Douglass a special root to carry on the right side of his body to prevent being abused by his slave master (Douglass 41–42). While Douglass would later refer to Sandy’s notions as superstitious, according to his autobiography, he was never whipped again. Skeptics of the conjuring tradition such as Douglass were commonplace, but African-American’s belief in the supernatural endured with some regarding conjuring as black magic or evil, yet others members of the Black community viewed conjuring as a spiritual agency.

Conjuring themes and practices exist in the earliest forms of Black music in America, such as Negro Spirituals and Blues. “While the Blues captured the black experience in song, they also served as a primary conduit for African American supernatural beliefs. Chireau notes “Conceived in the blues as Hoodoo or Voodoo, Conjure was a constant inspiration of blues composers” (145). As Black music evolved in the New World, African-Americans did not abandon the Conjure system of beliefs. Theophus H. Smith’s *Conjuring Culture* observes that because of the ritualistic structures of Black culture and Black music, the songs produced continue to contain spiritual, transformative powers (123). Nina Simone’s musicking displays the symbolic and ritualistic powers of conjure. “Pirate Jenny” (1964) and “Four Women” (1966) are two examples of Simone’s connection with conjuring mythatype. Simone’s musicking expresses the Conjurer desire to gain power over the dominant systems of oppression to address the particular circumstances of African Americans and bring about change (Chireau 146). “Pirate Jenny” and “Four Women” illuminate the connection between music, myths, and rituals in Black cosmology (Floyd 1995; Omolade 1994).

“Pirate Jenny” appears on the same album as “Mississippi Goddamn” and “Old Jim Crow” and, similar to her more popular protest songs, advocated Black freedom. “Pirate Jenny” is a cover, or musical signifyin(g) of the song appearing in Kurt Weill and Bertholt Brecht’s *The Threepenny Opera*. Simone singing and performing the lyrics of “Pirate Jenny” significantly alters the form and the song’s meaning because of her unique perspective as a Black woman. Simone’s lived experience as a participant in Black social movements transforms the piece from a song about class inequality in Britain into a song representing the Black Power Movement in America (Feldstein 2005). The lyrics of “Pirate Jenny” are as follows:

You people can watch while I’m scrubbing these floors
And I’m scrubbin’ the floors while you’re gawking
Maybe once you tip me and it makes you feel swell
In this crummy southern town in this crummy old hotel
But you’ll never guess to who you’re talkin’.
No, you couldn’t ever guess to who you’re talkin’
Then one night there’s a scream in the night
And you wonder who could that have been?
And you see me kinda grinnin’ while I’m scrubbin’
And you say, “What’s she got to grin?” I’ll tell you
There’s a ship, The Black Freighter
With a skull on its masthead will be coming in
You gentlemen can say, “Hey gal, finish them floors!
Get upstairs! What’s wrong with you? Earn your keep here!”

You toss me your tips and look out to the ships
But I'm counting your heads as I'm making the beds
'Cuz there's nobody gonna sleep here, tonight
Nobody is going to sleep here honey
Nobody, nobody!
By noontime the dock
Is a-swarmin' with men
Comin' out from the ghostly freighter
They move in the shadows
Where no one can see
And they're chainin' up people
And they're bringin' em to me
Askin' me,
"Kill them NOW, or LATER?"
Askin' ME!
"Kill them now, or later?"

Simone's performance of "Pirate Jenny" created a mythical representation of the growing tensions within the Black community regarding the pace of Black liberation. In 1966, Dr. King was stabbed during a march in Chicago and Simone states, "I was tired of our leaders having to risk their lives each time they went out on the street ... I, for one, was through with turning the other cheek, through with loving my enemies. It was time for some Old Testament justice" (Simone 110). The "ghostly Black Freighter" lyric symbolizes the coming Black revolutionary storm of activism advocating Black liberation

by any means necessary. Simone as the protagonist is empowered by her pivotal and ritualistic role in preparing the impending doom of those who look down on her. While the song “Pirate Jenny” metaphorically addresses the racial inequities of society, like the Conjure tradition, it offers an immediate and practical means of transformation, similar to the self-defense strategies suggested by the Black Power Movement.

Simone’s live performance of “Pirate Jenny” calls upon the Black Diaspora’s memory, feminist mythatypes, and practice of the spiritual arts in defense of Black women and her people. “While Conjure possessed multiple uses, its most salient functional value for blacks had to do with practices of racial opposition. Conjuring arbitrated the day-to-day conflicts in which slaves were confronted with white slaveholder domination” (Chireau 15–16). “Pirate Jenny” addresses the daily conflicts in a separate and unequal society of the 1960s and advocates violence as a means of change. In her essay, “Slave Codes and Liner Notes,” Michele Russell discusses how Nina Simone was able to fuse Africanized ideology with art and history into revolutionary praxis. Simone’s musicking reflected the growing strength and courage of the revolutionary movements taking place throughout the United States, Caribbean, and South Africa, which were challenging Western constructions of colonialism, slavery, and apartheid. (Russell 5). “Pirate Jenny” displays what Smith’s *Conjuring Culture* describes as the “incantatory intent in black music as an analogue to the covert quality of conjuring” (116). Simone’s conjuring power as “Pirate Jenny” is synonymous with the power of Black women’s subjectivity in Black liberation movements. When asked about her performance of “Pirate Jenny,” Simone suggests “Perhaps it is a masterpiece;

certainly it is a warning” (Feldstein, “I Don’t Trust You” 1364). The warning expresses Simone’s desire to protect the Black community by any means necessary.

Simone’s expression of the conjuring tradition also addressed the internalized effects of racism in the Black community. Simone’s song “Four Women” graphically depicts four constructs of Black women and engages the listener to consider the four women as both physical and metaphysical metaphors of the Black women’s experience in America. “The women in the song are black, but their skin tones range from light to dark and their ideas of beauty and their importance are deeply influenced by that” (Simone 117). Simone goes on to say “It wasn’t something I sang about a lot because the black struggle was my priority, but I knew if I tried I could compose a love song to take the scab off the terrible sore to do with the relationship between black men and women” (Simone 117). Upon the release of “Four Women” some members of the Black community felt the song was insulting to Black women and only portrayed them as stereotypes of themselves. Simone did not agree “All the song did was to tell what entered the minds of most black women in America when they thought about themselves: their complexions, their hair—straight, kinky, natural, which ... Black women didn’t know what the hell they wanted because they were defined by things they didn’t control” (Simone 117). Simone on her *Protest Anthology* states “Four Women” got all kinds of strange reactions ... I am quite pleased at least they hear the song, they hear it and it touches them some place and it is not a problem where it touches them but I am pleased it touches them” (“Four Women Interview” 2008). The lyrics for “Four Women” in their entirety are as follows:

My skin is black

My arms are long
My hair is woolly
My back is strong
Strong enough to take the pain
inflicted again and again
What do they call me
My name is AUNT SARAH
My name is Aunt Sarah
My skin is yellow
My hair is long
Between two worlds
I do belong
My father was rich and white
He forced my mother late one night
What do they call me
My name is SAFFRONIA
My name is Saffronia
My skin is tan
My hair is fine
My hips invite you
my mouth like wine
Whose little girl am I?
Anyone who has money to buy

What do they call me
My name is SWEET THING
My name is Sweet Thing
My skin is brown
my manner is tough
I'll kill the first mother I see
my life has been too rough
I'm awfully bitter these days
because my parents were slaves
What do they call me
My name is PEACHES

“Four Women” is Simone’s historical account and contemporary catharsis concerning the treatment of Black women in society. Simone asserts in her autobiography that the song stems from her insecurities of being a woman and a musician in search of security. Chireau articulates that the conjuring practices of “bluesmen and women depicted the intimate realities and afflictions of black American life, using modes of delivery that resonated with the prayer, testimonial, and preaching traditions in many African American churches” (148). “Four Women” is a blues, blues for Black women confronting the taboo elements of Black women’s lives through the magic of the conjuring tradition. The musical signification of the Blues structure underscores the historical and spiritual continuity of Black musical practices, and spiritual beliefs retained from West African roots (Chireau 145). Simone believed that most Black women in America could identify with the sentiments of the song and that most Black women would not respond favorably

because they were not ready to acknowledge the truth and emotion behind her portrayal (Simone 117).

Simone's "Four Women" portrays a multilayered protagonist in the form of four Black women with Simone's singular authoritative voice. Simone's blues, "Four Women," combats Black women's experiences of racism, sexism, classism, and overall oppression through exploitation and misrepresentation. Through her Blues, Simone's lyrics give life and power to the voiceless suffering of Black women who have been mentally, physically, and spiritually abused by systems of colonialism and slavery (Chireau 146). The mythatype of the conjurer infuses Simone's "Four Women" and "Pirate Jenny" with a spiritual agency confronting and rebuilding the consciousness, identities, and images of Black women through musicking.

Misunderstood Orisha and Hero

First of all my music is the essence of my being, I have been playing and singing since I was three ... there is a reason why I am alive and on this particular planet, though I would not tell you I came from here, I don't think I came from here at all, I really don't and I hope to live long enough to substantiate that, I really mean it. (Simone, "Nobody Interview" 2008)

The musicking of Nina Simone, *The High Priestess of Soul*, reveals connections between feminist musicking and feminist mythatypes of West African orisha. Terborg-Penn and Rushing (1996) remind us that Black women artists today share a continuity and connection to the historical roles of African female singers, including the adoption of spiritual roles often associated with West African female deities (194–195).

Biomythography is an essential methodology to explore the connection and continuity

between Simone's musicking and West African orisha. Audre Lorde identifies biomythography in her 1982 autobiography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. In an interview with Karla Jay, Lorde states "Zami is not only an autobiography, but mythology, psychology, all the ways in which we can see our environment ... I define it as biomythography because I found no other word to coin what I was trying to do" (qtd. in J. Hall 110). Sharon Patricia Holland in her 1988 article, "Which Me Will Survive," asserts Lorde creates a new form of biography that incorporates culture, identity, history, and myth. Holland also shares that Lorde's writing possesses the power to connect the Black vernacular tradition with Black women's radical subjectivity and musicking (1988). Biomythography entwines narrative by simultaneously foregrounding of historical facts alongside mythologies in portraying individual or collective life events. It incorporates multiple forms of knowing and weaves together history, cultural memory, music, and the lived experience. Biomythography allows reading of Nina Simone's life and musicking through the lenses of the Black cosmology.

Nina Simone, by her insistence, is not of this world; she occupies the infinite metaphysical space between the white and black keys, where notes are notions of identity and culture is yet to be defined. The life, lyrics, and performances of Nina Simone bear witness to the challenges and triumphs in cultivating and sustaining a radical black female subjectivity. Feminist, bell hooks' *Black Looks* describes radical black female subjectivity as a willingness to challenge the "status quo" and "go against the grain" to acquire the knowledge and develop a "feminist consciousness" vital to radical black female subjectivity (57). Radical Black women such as Nina Simone must operate in the marginalized spaces, outside the social conventions confining the image and

representations of Black womanhood and Black people. Bernice Reagon, former member of the 'Freedom Singers,' a musical group organized by SNCC and the founder of a cappella ensemble 'Sweet Honey in the Rock' shares her thoughts on the significance of Simone's musicking:

The very sound of her music and the way in which she comported herself on stage and in her private and business life also helped to define her political and racial significance. "Simone helped people to survive," Reagon recalled. "When you heard her voice on a record it could get you up in the morning ... Nina Simone's sound captured the warrior energy that was present in people. The fighting people." (Ward 302)

The warrior Nina Simone functioned outside the norm, and her lyrics and performances personified the relationships and interventions of the Spirits. Simone's womanish lyrics brazenly depart from the apprehensiveness that many Black celebrities demonstrated during the civil rights movement (Ward 302). Michele Russell's assessment asserts Simone's representation of Black feminist mythatypes involved "All the weapons we had used in the past to protect ourselves when organizations failed: incantation, congregation, conjures, slave religion But she put them to use in a situation and at a time when organizations were developing, and we were contending for power" (Russell 4-5). The weapons that Simone utilized manifested from the power of the orisa, Oshun and participated in the processes of Black folk hero creation.

Simone's feminist mythical musicking signifies against the West's mythical trope of the Black Diaspora, depicting Black people empty, soulless savages and embodies the mythatype of an African goddess, Oshun. According to Women's Studies scholar Shani

Settles' "The Sweet Fire Honey," "Through mystical identification with the Orisa, Black women are able to discern and challenge the construction and manipulation of controlling/devaluing "public images" that hold up distorted mirrors ... of white hegemonic mores and values" (qtd. in Floyd-Thomas 201). Simone's brand of Black feminist musicking provided a distinctive re-visioning of society, community, and self by poking and prodding at the minds, bodies, and souls of Black people. Simone was adamant in her attempt to reach Black people on a deeper level:

I think what you are trying to ask is ... why am I so insistent upon giving out to them that Blackness, that Black Power, that Black pushing them to identify with Black culture, I think that's what you're asking My job is to somehow make them curious enough or persuade them by hook or crook to get more aware of themselves and where they came from This is what compels me to compel them, and I will do it by whatever means necessary. (Simone, "By Any Means Necessary" 2008)

Simone's multidimensional and intersectional Black womanhood, dedicated to the protection and preservation of her people, especially children, reveals the mystic mediations of the goddess Oshun, the erotic power of the orisha, and the mythatypic of the Black folk hero.

One essential characteristic of the orisa Oshun is her care and compassion for children and Simone's "To Be Young, Gifted and Black," dedicated to the memory of friend Lorraine Hansberry, is a prime example of Simone's and Oshun's mythatypical alignment. The lyrics of the song appear below:

To be young, gifted and black,

Oh what a lovely precious dream
To be young, gifted and black,
Open your heart to what I mean
In the whole world you know
There are billion boys and girls
Who are young, gifted and black,
And that's a fact!
Young, gifted and black
We must begin to tell our young
There's a world waiting for you
This is a quest that's just begun
When you feel really low
Yeah, there's a great truth you should know
When you're young, gifted and black
Your soul's intact
Young, gifted and black
How I long to know the truth
There are times when I look back
And I am haunted by my youth
Oh but my joy of today
Is that we can all be proud to say
To be young, gifted and black
Is where it's at!

In a live version of “To Be Young, Gifted and Black” appearing on her *Protest Anthology*, Simone dedicates the song only to the Black students in the audience and goes on to state that the other eighteen thousand white students do not need it. “When I go I am going to know that I left something for them to build on, that is my reward . . . just take this one home with you” (Simone 2008). Simone’s performance of “To Be Young, Gifted and Black” is a spiritual representation of Black feminist action and activism of Oshun.

Oshun is the Orisha (also spelled Osun and Orisa) of love, beauty, and female power. Shani Settles believes West African cosmology is reciprocal, “You are your Orisa and your ancestors and they are you” (qtd. in Floyd-Thomas 194). Settles continues to suggest that relationships with Orisa are political and predicated on the power of Black cosmology to transform consciousness, interpretation and actions (Floyd-Thomas 194). Locating Simone as a mythatype of Oshun requires an understanding of the fluidity of the Black Diaspora’s West and Central African cosmology, where deities’ names and powers may change as the terrain of challenges shift (De Vita 5). Simone’s alignment with Oshun manifests in her performances and actions of protection for Black people. Robert Thompson’s *Flash of the Spirit* shares that West African river goddesses such as Oshun are “famed for their witchcraft” and “the arts of mystic retribution and protection against all evil” (74). Images of Oshun indicate a witch-like capacity and power, “brandishing a lethal sword, ready to burn and destroy immoral persons who incur her wrath, qualities vividly contrasting with her sweetness, love, and calm” (Thompson 79). Oshun’s complexity mirrors many of the characteristics and traits of Simone, who was known to be equally rebellious and loving.

The mythical and mercurial personality and musical performances by Simone exhibit the dialectics of Oshun's love. Oshun is known for healing and showing favor to children, but her love also has a darker side, which is "ultimately protective of her people (Thompson 80). The lyrics and performance of Simone's classic, "Please Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood," appearing on her 1964 *Broadway-Blues-Ballads* album, written for Simone by Bennie Benjamin, Gloria Caldwell, and Sol Marcus, disclose the warring spectrum of dualities inhabited by Nina as she lived and sang:

Baby you understand me now
If sometimes you see that I'm mad
Doncha know no one alive can always be an angel?
When everything goes wrong, you see some bad
But I'm just a soul whose intentions are good
Oh Lord, please don't let me be misunderstood
Ya know sometimes baby I'm so carefree
With a joy that's hard to hide
And then sometimes it seems again that all I have is worry
And then you're bound to see my other side
But I'm just a soul whose intentions are good
Oh Lord, please don't let me be misunderstood

Misunderstood and mesmerizing, Nina Simone's persona expressed the full multiplicity of life and the range of Oshun. Simone empowers her people and her audiences to see themselves through West African systems of values and meaning, reconnecting them to humanity outside the demystified dogma of dominant society.

Simone, the *Oshun of Blues* as described in Olutunde Olufemi's poem, "Ode to Nina," became aware of her spiritually based power during the Civil Rights Era. Nina Simone had been performing for over 10 years before she felt the power of the spirit in her performances in the mid 1960s. "It's like being transported in church; something descends upon you, and you are gone, taken away by a spirit that is outside of you" (Simone 92). Once possessed, Simone's performances had a new purpose. African feminist scholars Terborg-Penn and Rushing share the connection between the spiritual and song, "In precolonial Africa, song was viewed as functional in everyday life and as critical in the sacred life that interpenetrated the secular life...the Spirit does not descend without a song" (Terborg-Penn and Rushing 194). The spiritual powers Simone provoked were transformative and allowed her to reassemble her dichotomous reality as performer and person, into a whole being with a purpose. "With civil rights I played on stage for a reason, and when I walked off stage those reasons still existed—they didn't fade away with the applause; and there were always new ideas to discuss, articles to read, speakers to listen to and songs to write" (Simone 94). During her performances, Simone believed that she had the power to bring audiences under her influence. "I began to feel it happening and it seemed to me like mass hypnosis—like I was hypnotizing an entire audience to feel a certain way" (Simone 92). Simone's conjuring control over her audience emanated from her powers to enchant her songs with perceptive altering potions of prose, as represented by Oshun.

Two songs from her 1967 *High Priestess of Soul* album, "Take Me to the Water" and "Come Ye" further illustrate Simone's spiritual connection to Oshun. In the Black spiritual "Take Me to the Water," the lyrics call those seeking salvation to enter the

redemptive waters of Oshun, “to be baptized” and find the home of salvation (Simone 1967). “Come Ye”, arranged with Africa-based rhythms, and sang with a haunting beckoning, summoning all who want to transcend the pain of the current social conditions to come together and and find peace. These works depict mythical stories of perseverance and transcendence. Singing praise songs like “Take Me to the Water” and “Come Ye” “resurrect the lives and experiences of orisha, the warrior and the ‘drylongso’ Black woman” (Omolade 106). Oshun as a “symbol of female power and sensuality” is a pivotal goddess in the quest for knowledge and truth (Omolade 105). Through a mythatypical relationship, Simone and Oshun’s narratives of liberation, self-determination, and collective freedom help to heal the wounds inflicted by dominant modes of colonized consciousness and inspire future warriors to continue the struggle for Black liberation.

Nina Simone’s musicking and her life operated in the oppositional space against dominant hegemony, as does Oshun. There are three events highlighting the link between the *High Priestess of Soul* and the erotic powers of Oshun, whose revolutionary love calls for Black women to be fiercely conscious and unapologetically authentic in all actions (Floyd-Thomas 198). The spirit of Oshun possesses a dialectic some may characterize as impatient, ill tempered, or volatile, which is “ultimately protective of her people” (Thompson 80). Protecting Black people and healing herself from within were priorities of Simone throughout her life, both musically and personally. “It is not as simple as talking jive, the daily struggle to stay alive” as Nina’s lyrics state in her song “Revolution” (Simone 1969). Simone did not sing jive; her life represented the daily struggle to survive and strive for human dignity. When Nina Simone was 11 years old

and was preparing to give a recital in her hometown of Tryon, NC, Eunice Waymon would come to know the realities of racism and be moved by the spirit Oshun. “I looked up at my parents, who were dressed in their best, were being thrown out of their front row seats in favor of a white family ... I stood up in my starched dress and said if anyone expected to hear me play then they’d better make sure my family was sitting in the front row” (Simone 26). The second event occurred in the mid-sixties when Simone was attending an off-Broadway play featuring Bill Duke and Brock Peters. “I thought the roles they played were insulting to black people, and I got up there on stage in the middle of the show and told them so. I stopped the play in its tracks ... They apologized, and took me home in a cab (Simone 97). In 1995, Nina Simone shot at a record executive who stole money from her. In an interview with Tim Sebastian on March 25, 1999 for “BBC Hard Talk: Putting Music First,” Nina recalls the event, “Yes I did, that was a record company that stole my album and didn’t pay me, they said we are not going to give you any money, and I said yes you are ... I got a gun, followed them to a restaurant and tried to kill them” (Sebastian 1999). Each of these incidents reinforces the courageous and brash nature of Oshun, as well as begins to develop the historical narratives associated with Black folk hero creation.

Simone’s unpredictable temperament is well documented, but her imperfections cannot be universally depicted as reckless, violent, or evil if they are to be understood. Musical scholar Ramsey asserts the interpretation of music and musicking requires an account of the historical moment, the setting, geographic location as well as race, gender, and class. (Ramsey 21). Simone’s musicking deserves similar treatment. With Ramsey’s interpretative strategy applied to Simone’s actions of rebellion and perceived

recklessness, they can be re-situated in the spirit of self-preservation and protection against degradation and exploitation by the dominant culture. Simone's actions place her firmly in the lineage of Black heroes whose deeds and actions expressed retributive agency against social, political, and economic systems of oppression. Lawrence Levine's discussion of Black "bad men" emphasizes the omnipresent importance of individuals beginning with the period of enslavement through the civil rights era who resisted White society's standards and norms of the "good nigger." John Roberts' *From Trickster to Badman* asserts that when Black people challenged White society's "authority or right to define black behavior and social roles" they were labeled as "bad niggers" (177). The crimes of the "bad nigger" or "bad men" were crimes of self-defining, physical, social, political, economic, and spiritual resistance, creating a pantheon of Black heroes within Black folklore, whose actions signified the ever-present, growing insistence on freedom and human dignity (Levine, *Black Culture* 440). Black women in America have consistently demonstrated their courage and commitment to defying hegemonic law and authority for Black liberation, and their actions have influenced "black folk heroic creation" (Roberts 181). Informed and inspired by her spiritual agency from Oshun, Simone's acts against oppression became motivated and empowered. Through her musicking and social action, Nina Simone ascended to the status of Black folk hero. Simone reflecting on her career in an interview with Tim Sebastian of BBC asserts:

Music as a political weapon, as a political weapon it has helped me for 30 years to defend rights of American blacks and third world people all over the world ... it helps to change the world. I sing to move the audience to make them conscious of what has been done to my people around the

world ... I sing from intelligence, I sing from letting them know that I know who they are ... anger has its place, but I sing from intelligence because I don't want them to think that I don't know who they are darling!
(Sebastian 1999)

The intelligence and deep way of knowing Simone embraced recognized the power of the erotic, the power of Oshun and provided the divine muse and spiritual energy enacting change in our society. Simone was a Black woman who was cheated out of royalties, routinely scrutinized by the IRS because of bad management and consistently confronted by issues of race, gender, and class (Cohodas 341-342; Hampton and Nathan 77).

Simone's attempts to address these issues over the course of her life included various strategies and tactics, some of which involved confronting the system of oppression with words and deeds deemed inappropriate by society's stratified social standards. "The 'evilness' of a given black woman may merely be the façade she presents to a sexist-racist world that she realizes would only exploit her if she were to appear vulnerable" (hooks, *Ain't I* 86). An attempt to characterize wrongly or misname Simone neglects the conditions of musicking and thus her life, and the life of a Black folk hero (Roberts 184). Such a negation obscures the connection between the spiritual, the erotic, and the political in the life and musicking of Nina Simone.

Nina Simone was much more than a musician, civil rights activist, or a symbolic expression of Black power. Simone participated in the pantheon of mythatypical representations of West African feminist ancestry and music-making practices. Her life and music reveal divine inspiration and intervention. Spiritual witness, conjuring blueswoman, an embodiment of West African orisha and Black folk hero are but some of

the terms that could be used to describe Simone's musicking. The Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis Simone embraced, captured the spirit of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, honored the erotic feminist Blues traditions and continued the legacies of spiritual agency by West African orisha.

CHAPTER FOUR–NEO ÂME SOUVERAINE

I live to create and to play, but also to do so in connection with the world, in connection with humanity. I have no real interest in living in my own musical fantasyland. The world is real, things people are living through are real ... I don't set out trying to redefine the black, female, urban perspective. I've been called a revolutionary soul singer, although I've never called myself that. Revolution is a process of transforming oneself, of healing, of growing, of freeing one's mind and then being brave enough to encourage that growth in the society around you ... I try to record the spirit of the times as I see it, be a voice that opens dialogue that reflects my listening more than my own opinions. I just try to express myself and be funky, and if folks are feeling that, they'll come out to the show or pick up the record and have an experience. That's what it's all about—having your own experience, not something that's been dictated to you by some marketing strategy or demographic determination. Breaking free of the idea that we are all just here to accumulate products has everything to do with revolutionizing oneself, honoring your soul and singing the truth as you know it to the world. (Chideya)

Revolutionary Soul Singer, Me'shell Ndegéocello evades aggregation into any categorical analysis, as her musicking embodies multiple categories and identities. Even her stage name, Ndegéocello, which in Swahili means “free like a bird” (Brady), also has

a double meaning Nde-GAY-ocello (Clay). Her musical versatility is evident, and she employs numerous musical stylings, contents, and forms ranging from jazz, soul, hip-hop, rock, dance, to blues, funk, and R&B. Her music embodies the essences of Black music beyond notions of genre and classification. Ndegéocello says, “I don’t know what to call my music ... No one has been able to define it, or put a tag on it” (D. Smith). When pressed to delineate her style, she has stated “I play improvisational hip-hop, R&B, jazz, funk music. That’s the bottom line” (D. McNeil). Virtuosos such as Sting, Jaco Pastorius, Family Man Barrett, and Stevie Wonder profoundly influence Ndegéocello’s bass playing; and she draws musical inspiration from artists like Prince, Sweet Honey in The Rock, Miles Davis, and Nina Simone. Me’shell Ndegéocello is an enigma of cultural and political identities including mother, musician, Black, woman, bisexual, friend, lover, human being, sister, daughter, fan, and muse. Canonized by her contemporaries, marginalized by mainstream and scrutinized by the sanctimonious, Me’shell Ndegéocello’s musicking is authentic curiosity and creativity, an imperfect struggle to be and belong beyond the barriers of race, gender, or class. Me’shell Ndegéocello’s musicking, consisting of her musical performance, lyrics, and life occupy the margins of Black female radical subjectivity, yet vividly demonstrates the continuity of divinely inspired, transformative black women’s music. She queers all boundaries as a hybrid, hip-hop improvisational, bandleader, songwriter, and vocalist, and multi-instrumentalist in today’s musical landscape (Goldin-Perschbacher 474). Me’shell’s mark on humanity is one blurring distinctions of race, gender, class, sexuality, and religion and making visible the possibilities of moving the ontological *Othered*, those outside the mainstream identities, toward the center of consciousness, humanity, and spirituality.

While many female musicians feel forced to acquiesce themselves to the phallogocentric standards of sex appeal, Ndegéocello remains avant-garde, with her shaved head or braids, playing bass, writing the music and leading the band, tackling taboo themes of race, religion, love, betrayal, and sexuality. Ndegéocello is a multi-instrumentalist, with bass, keys, and guitar being among the instruments with which she is predominantly associated (Womack). Her lyrics, musical performances, and videos are a tapestry of untenable simulacrum, poking and prodding notions of consciousness and representation. Her career sprawls over two decades and Ndegéocello has received 10 Grammy nominations and was the first woman to be featured on the cover of *Bass Player* magazine. Her career includes Billboard Top 100 hits: “If That Was Your Boyfriend, Wild Nights,” duet with John Mellencamp and a cover of Bill Withers, “Who Is He and What is He to You.” She’s participated in the Red Hot Riot Organizations, Red Hot series, *Red Hot + Riot, a tribute to Fela Kuti* and *Red Hot + Cool*, Time Magazine’s 1994 album of the year to help raise funds and awareness for HIV/AIDS (Redhot.org). She also contributed to the *Raise Hope For Congo* compilation record to help raise money to empower and support Congolese women experiencing widespread sexual violence (Plaid). In 2010, Ndegéocello contributed the essay “Gwendolyn Gone,” to the anthology *It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life Worth Living*. In her essay, Ndegéocello reflects on a childhood experience where she and a friend of hers were teased and labeled “tomboys.” The other woman being ridiculed, Gwendolyn, turned on Me’shell, hit her and said she no longer wanted to be friends. When asked about her contribution in an interview, Ndegéocello stated “Having gone through similar things myself, sometimes just giving five minutes of your time to tell a

story about how you got through it is super important” (Cheers). Ndegéocello’s experience as a child influences her outlook on her friendships today. (Savage and Miller 113). Ndegéocello’s musical signification on the concept of friends is evident on her 2014 release, *Comet, Come to Me*, where she covers the hip-hop classic, “Friends,” by Whodini. In an interview with *The Boombox*, Ndegéocello shares her observations on the word friend, “Language is morphing, and friends is just such a malleable word, I don’t know what it means anymore” (Timmhotep). Her cover of Whodini’s 1984 hit is an autobiographical and anthropological autopsy of friendship and its meaning(s). It is no coincidence that Ndegéocello, who has repeatedly shared she has felt out of place because of the combination of her identities, would engage this classic from her childhood, relating also to formidable childhood experiences. Ndegéocello’s music is metaphysically holistic, and in her words she believes “Music should move your soul and your heart, not just your body and your mind” (Ferguson). The *questions* are the most salient aspects of the songs and embodiments of Me’shell Ndegéocello; the possibilities of her subject matter and her subjectivity are subversive. Her musicking probes the limitations and promises of identity, culture, spirituality, and humanity.

Me’shell Ndegéocello was born Michelle Lynn Johnson, in Berlin, Germany on August 29, 1968. Me’shell adopted the stage name Ndegéocello during her youth as an act of rebellion against her government name (Harrington). Her mother is a health care worker, and her father, Jacques Johnson, is a former military man and jazzman, also known as *Saxman*. “He was the first African-American to earn the rank of sergeant major—the highest non-commissioned officer status—in the premier United States Army Band. And he served as lead tenor saxophone and director of the U.S. Army Blues Jazz

Ensemble” (Kabran). After spending the first few years of her life in Germany, Ndegéocello relocated to Virginia with her family in the early ‘70s. She developed her interest in music from her father and her older brother who played the guitar in a band. “My brother had all these instruments around the house, so I got into music pretty naturally,” she said. “I wanted to play the drums but my mother, of course, didn’t think that was an appropriate instrument for a woman. So I tried the bass” (Kim). When Ndegéocello was fifteen, a friend of her brother left a bass guitar in the basement of her house, and she was hooked. “I was fifteen when I started playing bass guitar—a friend of my brother’s left it over at the house. I started fiddling with it, and it was love at first sight. Music was like “I walk, I talk, I breathe, I play music.” And I don’t talk very much. I just would hang in the house and play music” (Udovitch). From that point on Ndegéocello would spend much of her days learning bass lines from all genres of music, including Prince, who remains one of her most inspirational artists. Ndegéocello is reluctant to accept being described as a prodigy, but her father says “She took to it like a duck to water. She’s the best musician in the house, and I’m a pro and make a living at it” (Harrington)!

Despite her musical gifts, Ndegéocello struggled when asked to conform to the artistic standards. She briefly attended D.C.’s Duke Ellington School of the Arts but flunked out. Her father says, “Her bass teacher wanted her to play the acoustic upright bass, and she got all Fs when she would not attend class because she couldn’t play loud” (Harrington). An alternate account of her dismissal from the Duke Ellington School found in Shana Goldin-Perschbacher’s essay, “The World Has Made Me the Man of My Dreams: Meshell Ndegeocello and the ‘problem’ of Black female masculinity,” claims

she was dismissed because of a romantic relationship with another female student (473). She went on to attend Oxon Hill High, where she excelled, played in the school band, graduated early at the age of sixteen and soon began gigging in the D.C. area (G. Smith). Ndegéocello's first professional gig was accidental. Her father's bass player did not show up, and Ndegéocello sat in with her father's jazz group. Ndegéocello remembers her father saying "You're going to learn to read charts now He told me the more basic I was, the better I'd be. I remember going off on some tangent on one of the standards, and he just looked at me like, "Oh, you've lost your mind" (Crisafulli)! Ndegéocello credits her father for that early training and disciplining in jazz, working on standards like "My Funny Valentine," learning how to keep a groove and be a minimalist simultaneously. Her father also taught his daughter how to feel the music. Ndegéocello explains "On his horn, he showed me how you could play the same note harsh and ragged or smooth and beautiful, so I became a stickler for tone from the beginning" (Crisafulli). Me'shell Ndegéocello's father helped her move beyond the conventions of artistic standards and supported the development of a musical identity all her own.

During Me'shell Ndegéocello's adolescence and young adulthood, she searched for identity and purpose. "I'm the ultimate misfit," says Me'shell Ndegéocello, "I'm black. I'm a woman. I'm a bisexual" (Hunt). Ndegéocello has struggled to find her place both musically and personally. "I'm dying to be loved for who I am," she says. Her demons include feeling she was too dark to be attractive, being the bisexual daughter of a Christian mother, and coping with drug addiction (Solomon). Similar to her musical training, Ndegéocello's upbringing influenced her identity struggles and the subject matter of her musicking.

The relationship between her mother and father had a profound effect on Ndegéocello. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, she recalls her parent's relationship:

“It was horrible watching the way my father treated my mother and not feeling I could help her,” she says, setting down the chopsticks and growing tense. “I’ve seen my father cheat on my mother several times in front of my face, and I wasn’t strong enough to tell my mother that. Even though I knew she knew, I felt like I betrayed her by not telling her.

(Hilburn)

Musically, Ndegéocello has broken her silence. She has translated the pain and confusion of her childhood into powerful works of musicking. The imperfections of love and fidelity have been consistent themes in her music. Ndegéocello describes herself as much the “tormented artist” (York). The feelings and misgivings because of her father’s betrayals, accompanied by questions of race, gender, and sexuality, are very prominent in her musicking. Her mother is biracial and grew up in the South. Awareness to race has always been at the forefront of Ndegéocello’s life, especially her childhood. “All my life, I’d be called a nigger—by kids, adults while trying to get a job. White boys would say I’d better be different if they were going to sleep with me, like I have to be exotic for them” (Seigal).

The internal and external experiences of race and racism would not be the only social constructs to cause Ndegéocello emotional strife. Her Southern Baptist upbringing loomed large in her formative years, as she explored and questioned her sexuality. “For a long time I swore I was going to hell or something like that because I was living in sin”

(York). However, her family was very supportive of her sexuality and her coming out.

“Once my parents found out ... I became comfortable with it, and they treated me like any other child, and they didn’t look at it as anything different” (York 1993).

Ndegéocello continued to explore her identity in high school through literature. “I began reading a lot of books by black authors like James Baldwin and Langston Hughes, so I became very aware of what was going on ... I became so angry ... Now, it’s not so much anger I feel, it’s a customary sadness I live with. I look, and I don’t see our future. I don’t see my place” (Seigal). Me’shell Ndegéocello continued her search for identity and through music came into her own.

Musically, Ndegéocello’s personal experiences and raw talent fuelled her nonconformity. She has always resisted conventionality to explore her authentic musical voice and identity. Ndegéocello did a brief stint at Howard University but continued to struggle with the chauvinistic conventions of jazz purists who marginalized the mainstream music she enjoyed. Ndegéocello describes the experience, stating “It was awful—they wouldn’t let me play. I had one teacher tell me that playing mainstream music was a waste of time. All the jazz cats only wanted to play jazz, and I failed a jazz improvisation class because I changed the arrangement of “Billie’s Bounce” (Harrington). While Ndegéocello was out of place at Howard, she found a place in Washington D.C.’s Go-Go scene.

Ndegéocello spent much of the 80s in the Washington, D.C. area, male-dominated, funk bases go-go scene. Go-go emerged in the late 60s and 70s in the D.C. area. Go-go music fuses funk, dance tracks, multiple layers of syncopated percussion, and audience call-and-response. Chuck Brown, who many consider the Godfather of Go-Go,

and his band the Soul Searches were the driving force of this musical eruption in Washington D.C. aka Chocolate City (Pinchback). Other than her father, Ndegéocello credits go-go as being most instrumental in her music playing:

It was hard to gain respect being a woman playing go-go. And it got really ugly at those shows. There were a lot of people being killed. I got shot at too many times. The person being shot at would run onstage to get away. But it's helped my music, particularly my live performance. Go-go is very impromptu. You don't know what's gonna happen. (Walters)

Ndegéocello, reflecting on her experiences in the go-go scene states “That was very difficult ... I picked up some misogynistic habits myself” (Darling). Difficulties aside, Ndegéocello excelled and set herself apart from other players. She started out with the go-go band *Prophecy* after their bass player was shot, and went on to play with more prominent bands like *Rare Essence* and *Little Benny and the Masters*. Reminiscing on Ndegéocello's skills, Mike Neal of the go-go band *Rare Essence* said, “Her bass playing set that group apart from anything else that was happening around the city The girl could play” (Harrington). In 1990, the “Washington Area Music Awards” would recognize Ndegéocello as the top female rapper and top female go-go vocalist, though for Ndegéocello, fame and popularity eventually became stifling. “I was dying slowly in D.C., musically It was awful. A lot of my friends were dying, literally, and I was heading down a really bad road” (Harrington). It was during this time that Ndegéocello visited New York and decided to make it her home (Harrington).

Ndegéocello's move to New York City in the early 90s reinvigorated her passion for music and began her distinctive contribution to Black music. She joined the *Black*

*Rock Coalition*¹¹ created by Vernon Reid, guitarist of the rock funk band *Living Colour*, writer Greg Tate and producer Konda Mason. During this time, Ndegéocello completed her demo, and was the first female artist to sign with Madonna's label *Maverick*. Over two decades later Me'shell Ndegéocello's mercurial and mesmerizing music has earned her accolades from fans and critics alike, including the title of Mother of Neo-soul (Womack). Neo-soul represents a soul music renaissance heavily influenced by contemporary rhythm and blues (R&B). By the late 1990s neo-soul artists such as Erykah Badu, Jill Scott, D'Angelo, and India.Arie dominated the R&B charts. Hip-Hop artist, Talib Kweli speaking of his admiration of Ndegéocello and her neo-soul label says "I wouldn't place her at all. She is music" (Solomon)! Now a veteran of neo-soul, Jill Scott describes Ndegéocello by stating "Me'shell is in a realm of her own" (Solomon). Ndegéocello finds the high praise flattering, but loathes the neo-soul classification and title. Ndegéocello herself often scoffs at the idea of Neo-Soul. "Neo-soul ... What is that? I was inspired by Al Green, Gil Scott-Heron, Curtis Mayfield. To me what I was doing then was nothing 'new'—the only thing new was the time I was playing it in To me, it's all one big thing" (Aaron). Ndegéocello, in further characterizing her music, states "It's all black music, truth be told. Hip-hop, soul, jazz, funk, rock 'n' roll, even spoken-word poetry—white corporations make the most money off all of it, but it's all native and co-opted black culture" (Conner).

Ndegéocello's music reverberates the pulse of the people despite hegemonic heteropatriarchy and popular culture's continual marginalization of her musicking and

¹¹ The Black Rock Coalition is a "collective of artists, writers, producers, publicists, activists, and music fans assembled to maximize exposure and provide resources for Black artists who defy convention" (BlackRockCoalition.org).

identity within the constructs of Westernized Black society. Ndegéocello's work underscores the necessity of music and the requirement of rhythms to reorganize our world's ideas and ideologies. Her work echoes John Shepherd's "Music and the Last Intellectuals" description of the role of music in shaping individual and collective identity.

Music is an inalienable presence within human societies for reasons that dominant Western cultures seldom admit to academic discourse: it is central to those processes within any society whereby individuals are collectively moved to think and organize themselves. (Shepherd 113)

Ndegéocello challenges the established norms of Blackness, womanhood, and sexuality. Her identities embody Black feminism and engage musical signifying, while simultaneously participating in a longer tradition of West African cosmological mythatypes. Ndegéocello's musicking exemplifies the griot tradition, the trickster mythatype, and Black folk creation process.

Neo-Griot Signifyin(g)

Ndegéocello's uncompromising approach to musicking expresses the willingness to be free, improvisational by nature, and erotic in practice, positioning her prominently in an ambiguous pluriverse of Black being. Mark Anthony Neal suggests Me'shell Ndegéocello's *Cookie: The Anthropological Mixtape* album, the fourth of her career, was the first pop record speaking to the era of Newblackness. Neal's reference to Newblackness builds on the insights of Maasani Alexis De Veaux a.k.a. Mama Soul, defining "newblackness" as:

Defined by a radical fluidity [allowing] “conversation” within “blackness” across genders, sexualities, ethnicities, generations, socio-economic positions, and socially constructed performances of black identity ... it is the “language” of a blackness that many black folks had been afraid to embrace for a fear that somehow it was a reduction or erosion of blackness. (qtd. in Neal, 2003, 13)

Ndegéocello’s musicking embraces “newblackness” through both musical and mythical signification. *Plantation Lullabies*, Ndegéocello’s debut album received three Grammy nominations, Best R&B Album, Best Female R&B Vocal Performance, and Best R&B Song for “If That’s Your Boyfriend” (Mester). Ndegéocello’s *Plantation Lullabies* immerses listeners in an intimate, intersectional discursive dialogue of Afrocentric ideas of consciousness, beauty, love, and revolution. It announces the presence of a revolutionary soul singer, whose identity politics surpasses the contradictions of Black essentialism and blurs the lines between Black Nationalism, feminism, and queerness. Patricia Hill Collins remarks “Black women and other women of color in the hip-hop generation do seem to be striking out in a different direction ... These are women who push and pull at the ‘inner and outermost definition of femininity, feminism, and womanhood’ and who rebel ... ” (2006, 195). Ndegéocello’s music and lyrics exemplify how a woman of the hip-hop generation embraces radical subjectivity, as well as continues to explore the Black vernacular tradition, Black Feminism, and West African cosmology.

Ndegéocello’s musicking personifies the mythatype of the griot-historian, the “symbolic conveyer of African oral and spiritual traditions to the entire community”

(Omolade 105). Omolade maintains that a Black woman griot-historian is distinct from the West African tradition. The griot is usually male and attached to particular courts or lineages. Omolade's use of the term griot-historian is symbolic, Black women who connect, synthesize, and communicate Western and West African histories, customs, and dialectical world-views to support humanity's liberation (105). Omolade's reconceptualization allows Ndegéocello to be situated as griot-historian and continues the continuity of Black women artists who use their ancestral voices to share deep wisdom concerning the Black experience and the struggle for liberation (Omolade 110). The honesty Ndegéocello expresses celebrates Blackness through a Nationalistic nostalgia, while simultaneously challenging the internalized oppression induced by Western society's colonial paradigms of race, gender, and class. Ultimately, Ndegéocello's musicking is not only averse to the dominant culture, but all proscriptive paradigms of identity. Her music resists conformity to notions of Black Nationalism, heterosexuality, and sexism.

Ndegéocello's ability to articulate Black nationalistic militancy and represent queerness challenges the Black heteropatriarchal paradigm strictly separating the queer Black identity from the nonheteronormative. Me'shell Ndegéocello is a product of the hip-hop generation and like other Black women of this generation she came of age during a period Patricia Hill Collins delineates as an age when the Black women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s were in abeyance and the Black Arts and Cultural Nationalism movements spawned a generation willing to prioritize urban epidemics of gang-violence, drug dealing, police brutality, and the politics of Reaganomics and Affirmative Action, without a black feminist critique or strategy (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*).

Ndegéocello shares, “I’m an old fashioned person with hip-hop-values” (Young). Her musicking demonstrates consciousness to the patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism of her generation and creates space within African-American nationalistic discourse beyond Westernized bio-logic and the boundaries of Black internalized oppression. According to Omolade, Ndegéocello continues the griot-historian tradition calling into question allegiance to oppressive ideologies of identity and culture.

Ndegéocello’s multiplicity of identities contests heteronormative ideas of Black liberation and love regulating women and queerness to the margins. In recounting her debut album, *Plantation Lullabies*, she states “I like to think of my songs as love songs amidst revolution. Love songs that celebrate blackness. Some love songs submerged in pain and loss” (D. Smith). In celebrating Blackness, the warrior spirit of Me’shell Ndegéocello does not capitulate to the fault lines of historical homophobia and sexism within the Black social movements of the later 20th century. “The griot-historian is and must be a warrior breaking down the intellectual boundaries while destroying the political limitation to her people’s—and, indeed, all humanity’s liberation” (Omolade 105). Ndegéocello angrily asserts “Just because I’m gay doesn’t mean that I don’t have a love of black people. Anything I can do to uplift the race; I would do. How does who I love affect my commitment to the black cause” (Villarosa). The love of Black people and the pain and frustration of being marginalized on all fronts summons Ndegéocello into the fold of griot-historians who are “submerged in the waters of Black women’s pain, power, and potential” (Omolade 105–106). Arthur Flannigan-Saint-Aubin’s, “Black Male Gay Discourse,” poses the question “What does it mean to be blackgaymale Does there exist an essential blackgaymale? Even if one rejects the notion of an essential “gayness”

or an essential “blackness,” one can still claim the complex of sexuality and ethnicity as a locus of difference from which to think, to act, and to create” (489). Ndegéocello’s musicking broadens the essentialist identity questions of “gayness,” “blackness,” and “womanhood” by fluidly cutting through these monolithic, constructed identities. *Plantation Lullabies* (1993) vividly displays Ndegéocello’s plurality as she seamlessly weaves together spiritual and historical stories of queer and heterosexual love within Black Nationalism’s ideas and identities.

On *Plantation Lullabies* (1993), both “I’m Diggin’ You (Like an Old Soul Record)” and “Picture Show” position Ndegéocello as the first person protagonist where her paramour is not linked to patriarchal heterosexual relationship paradigms. While on the tracks “Shoot’n Up and Gett’n High” and “Step into the Projects,” Ndegéocello’s heteronormative relationships are performed. In the lyrics from “Shoot’n Up and Gett’n High” Ndegéocello states:

He lived two train stops away
I was a train ride away from heaven
We signify about politics, low income housing, Birth control, and abortion
The capitalistic hand around my throat
Shootin’ up dope to cope in this dehumanizing society
We both found God when he O.D.’d
He found beauty in my black skin
Amidst the cover girls and Clairol ads
Makin’ no mistake what’s white is right
Livin’ in a world where the TV shouts

“Forget where you come from!”

And damn I thought I was shootin’ up Africa in my veins

White man voodoo slow my brain the while man fights wars and enslaves

All in God’s name

The lyrics from “Shoot’n Up and Gett’n High” directly confront oppression, both from the perspective of divinely inspired global capitalism, as well as the internalized effects of racism on Black cultural values and identity. In “Step into the Projects,” Ndegéocello’s lyrics include:

She’s darker than a child’s deepest sleep

And into his mind she creeps

In this world of lies and confusion

She’s the only thing not clouded by illusions

The pain of everyday life is hidden by the blackness of our skin

He searches to find peace within

He finds love in the blackness of her skin

Back to the ghetto

Serenaded by the violence outside the window

Project aristocrats gather they realize

That our hearts and minds are shackled by the lies

But he finds peace when he looks into her eyes

And see her blackness is fine

The blackness of her skin the blackness of her mind

“Shoot’n Up and Gett’n High” and “Step into the Projects” express Ndegéocello’s revolutionary hopeless romanticism while embracing heterosexual relationships. However, on the records “I’m Diggin’ You (Like an Old Soul Record)” and “Picture Show,” Ndegéocello’s first person position leaves the gender or sexuality of her partner ambiguous. Ndegéocello creates space for a gender critique on this album along with militant, nationalistic narratives and expressions.

The track “I’m Diggin’ You (Like an Old Soul Record)” presents Ndegéocello in a narrative, asking her partner to reflect on the recent Black history and the Black aesthetic of the 60s and 70s in her lyrics:

Remember back in the day
When everyone was black and conscious.
And down for the struggle.
Love brought us all together.
Just sittin’ back and talkin’.
Cultivating a positive vibe.
Blue lights in the basement.
Freedom was at hand and you could just taste it.
Everything was cool. Diggin’ on me diggin’ on you.
Everything was cool and brothers were singing
“Ain’t no woman like the one I got”

Ndegéocello utilizes the Black rhetorical strategy of signifyin(g) by drawing from Eldridge Cleaver’s memoir, *Souls on Ice*. Ndegéocello’s uses as the title and chorus of a song exploring the colonized identity politics of interracial dating to cultivate “historical

voices, spiritual consciousness and liberation politics within creative mediums and works designed to empower and enlighten” (Omolade 111). On “Soul on Ice,” Ndegéocello directs her attention to white standards of beauty and Black men succumbing to Westernized standards of beauty. “Are you suffering from a social infection misdirection, excuse me does the white woman go better with the Brooks Brothers suit?” (Ndegéocello 1993) The question that Ndegéocello poses not only addresses racism in the West, but also the internalized effects within Black culture. “I’m Diggin’ You (Like an Old Soul Record)” and “Soul on Ice” are examples of Ndegéocello’s ability as a griot-historian to signify and connect African-American ancestral past, Black feminism along with spirituality through musicking.

Plantation Lullabies’ merging of Blackness, queerness, and womanhood into amorous protest songs creates a critique of monolithic notions of the Black Diaspora distending the demarcations of authentic Black identity within the context of social movements and Black women’s activism. Ndegéocello’s musicking reiterates Marlon B. Ross’ “Camping the Dirty Dozens: The Queer Resources of Black Nationalist Invective,” questions concerning “the formal and material practices that mark sexual identity as a resource for racial identification and racial identity as a resource for sexual identification within and across historical moments within and across cultural traditions” (291).

Plantation Lullabies moves the markers of cultural and social constructs to create spaces for the construction of conscious and unconscious, heterogeneous identities (Ross 291).

Despite her poignant critiques, Ndegéocello’s intersectional merging of marginalized identities through her musicking is not without perceived inconsistencies and contradictions. Stefanie Dunning’s essay, “Ironic Soil: Recuperative Rhythms and

Negotiated Nationalisms” asserts, “Ndegéocello’s emphasis on nationalism also signals a discomfort with articulating lesbian desire by masking it in ambiguity... her queer politics and eroticism seem to be submerged beneath the album’s nationalist agenda” (236). Dunning’s assessment illustrates the problematic nature of labels when applied to the musical texts of Ndegéocello. Dunning’s assessment, positioned within the polarizing dialectics of Western thinking, limit the ability to maneuver outside binary categorical analysis. However, Lakesia Johnson’s *Iconic* discusses how “Ndegéocello’s revolutionary performance of black queerness forces her audience to move outside comfortable categories of gay and straight, male and female, black and white” (105–106). Ndegéocello is an affirmative representation of the intersectional nature of Black feminism. Ndegéocello shares “If you met me, I’m like–whatdya call it? I’m, like, wussy butch. I’m the most fragile person you could ever imagine. Yeah, that’s very important ... I’m far from butch, believe it or not. And not feminine, I guess. A femme in a butch body” (Phoenix). Ndegéocello’s self-reflection expresses the difficulty with any single label to describe her or her musicking. For example, Ndegéocello rejects the label of being feminist. “I’m not a feminist, not at all,” Ndegéocello said. “Feminism is a white concept for white, middle-class women who want to have the same opportunities as their white, male counterparts I’m not going to fight my brothers; I’m going to try to stand beside them” (Seigal). Many who advocate for a womanist paradigm, distinctive and distant from feminism, share Ndegéocello’s critique of feminism. However, Collins (2006) argues that Black women and men of the hip-hop generation may reject the label of Black feminism, but not the ideas. Ndegéocello’s perceived contradictions to the frame of feminism is the result of the binary, single agenda social movement constructs that led

to the development of the intersectional Black feminism. Employing a pluralistic, intersectional framework to her musicking, as the griot-historian, engages the negotiations associated with Black liberation, through a radical Black female subjectivity, while deemphasizing the importance of Western patriarchal constructs of race and gender.

For her brutal honesty, Ndegéocello's often catches heat from individual communities, like the Queer community for using the word faggot in her song "Leviticus: Faggot" (Ndegéocello 1996). The White community has attacked her for songs like "Soul on Ice," inspired by Eldridge Cleaver's work of the same title, which in her lyric she states "We've been indoctrinated and convinced by the white racist standard of beauty Visions of her virginal white beauty dancing in your head, you let the sisters go by" (Ndegéocello 1993). Monica Coleman's *Ain't I a Womanist, Too?* discusses how Ndegéocello's willingness to delve into oppositional, seemingly unresolvable contradictions, makes her a convenient target to those employing standard narratives governing Black identity, Christianity, and sexuality (144). Ndegéocello questions the noble notions of Christianity in her song, "The Way," which explores the use of the Bible as a tool for colonization, "Your followers condemn me your words used to enslave me" (Ndegéocello 1996). Ndegéocello addresses the apathy of the Black in her work "Dead Nigga Blvd," where she confronts the capitalistic values consuming Nationalist ideologies. The chorus of "Dead Nigga Blvd" avows "Cuz everybody just trying to make that dollar/Remember what Jesse used to say? I am somebody!/No longer do I blame others for the way that we be because niggas need to redefine what it means to be free" (Ndegéocello 2002). On "Berryfarms" Ndegéocello interrogates the Black community's

homophobia in a bisexual context, “Can you Love me without shame?/I need you when I feel pain/but naw you like to fuck around” (Ndegéocello 2002). Ndegéocello is cognizant of the various reactions to her music. “Sometimes, I feel like I am under attack from every direction ... People see me as a heretic. Homophobia is rampant in the black community, so I am a traitor to my race, and gay people don’t like me because I’m not gay enough” (Hilburn). The role of the griot-historian is not necessarily to make people feel comfortable. Francis Bebey’s *African Music: A People’s Art* conveys that the griot, male and female, were both admired and scorned for their abilities to retell the history of the people, “the wisdom of its philosophers,” “ancestors proverbs,” and “events no longer within living memory” (24). The body of Ndegéocello’s work validates her intersectional identity and ability to use the music as the griot-historian to chronicle the Black experience, so that it is no longer silenced or sequestered to the margins of historical narrative.

Ndegéocello’s *Cookie: The Anthropological Mixtape* (2002) embodies the mystical, musicking of the griot-historian. Omolade points out that the griot-historian is eminently improvisational in blending the words of her ancestors. “Each one becomes a griot, a storyteller of the past and future. They all learn to create a song loud enough to end the silence” (Omolade 115). Omolade characterizes the griot-historian as a multilingual figure that speaks to and with her ancestors, mixing the voice of Dr. King, Nina Simone, and Angela Davis (Omolade 114). Mark Anthony Neal provides a detailed account of the mythical and historical voices layered on Ndegéocello’s *Cookie* album. “Hot Night” features a commentary from Angela Davis’ 1999 *The Prison Industrial Complex* album. “Akel Dama (Field of Blood)” includes Gill Scott-Heron, “Comment #1

Talk at 125th Street Lenox,” Countee Cullen, “Heritage,” and Etheridge Knight’s poem “The Idea of Ancestry.” “Dead Nigga Blvd. (part 1)” ends with Dick Gregory’s speech, “Human Rights and Property Rights at Kent State.” “6 Legged Griot (Weariness)” features Claude McKay, “If we Must Die,” June Jordan, “In Memoriam: Martin Luther King Jr.,” and Etheridge Knight’s “Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminally Insane” (Neal, *Songs in the Key of Black Life* 16–17). Ndegéocello’s layering of these texts is a recursive strategy; Karla Holloway’s *Moorings and Metaphors* argues that it creates a mythical linguistic metaphor altering the meaning and interpretation of the text (26). Neal points out the homophobia of Knight and Scott-Heron and other Black leaders during the 1960s and 1970s, as well as those of the current hip-hop generation which has been well documented (Neal, *Songs in the Key of Black Life* 16).

Ndegéocello’s queering signifyin(g), layering the voices of homophobes with her voice, along with gay authors June Jordan, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen, and Dick Gregory radically alters these oral texts and breathes new meaning into Black identity and culture. Ndegéocello’s reflexive discourse combines dominant hegemony and discursive statements into a critique of the status quo, as well as the identity politics of resistance. Me’shell Ndegéocello combines philosophy, methodology, and musicking technique in a tapestry of sound leaving no doubt of her importance within Black society and popular culture (Bebey 26). Ndegéocello’s musicking leaves a griot-historian crumb trail of food for thought for future generations to contemplate the efficacy of the historical marginalization embedded in Black identities and social movements.

Erotic Funkstress Eshu-Elegba

Me'shell Ndegéocello's openness, introspection, and cultural curiosity create dissonance within commonplace cultural constructs. Me'shell Ndegéocello's plurality is problematic for typical readings of her music from Nationalist, feminist, or queer perspectives. The dilemma is historical, as is evident by the queer identity politics plaguing Civil Rights, Black power, and Black feminist movements. The intersections of gender, race, class, sexuality, and religion are marginalized, as often is the musicking messenger, Ndegéocello. Me'shell Ndegéocello acknowledges the tensions of these themes, "Making a song is the only time I feel gender-less and race-less, you know I just feel at ease ... you just have this one thing to concentrate on" (Timmhotep). Metaphysically and hermeneutically, Ndegéocello's musicking engages the mythatype of trickster troping. Gender studies scholar Stallings asserts Ndegéocello is incomparable in her ability to queer Blackness utilizing the Black vernacular and musical traditions (224). Her multiplicity mimics the West African trickster figure, Legba. In Fon mythology, Legba is the seventh son of the Janus face, supreme god Mawu-Lisa. In Yoruba mythology, Esu the mediator moves between the realms of goddesses, gods, and the physical world of humanity. Legba walks with a limp, which is a mediating function, keeping one foot amongst the heavens and the other on the earth (Gates 6). The Fon regard Legba as the divine linguist who can speak and interpret all languages; her discourse is "metaphorically double voiced" (Gates 7). It is worth noting that Gates acknowledges each time he uses the masculine pronoun for Esu, the feminine pronoun is an appropriate substitute (Gates 29). The multiplicity of meaning and interpretation, and many names of the mythatype Elegba, Legba, Eshu, Eshu-Elegba, Elegbara¹² are

¹² Eshu-Elegba has many names, which will be utilized throughout this chapter. It

embodied in the musicking of Me'shell Ndegéocello, a.k.a. Bashir Shakur, a.k.a. Michelle Johnson, a.k.a. Mom.

Ndegéocello's intersectional plurality embodies the mythatype of the West African orisha Legba. Historian Robert Thompson remarks "Eshu-Elegba is the very embodiment of the crossroads ... the messenger of the gods ... bearing the crossroads to us in verbal form, in messages that test our wisdom and compassion (19). Eshu-Elegba is unique in that he/she combines both male and female constructs of identity, as does Ndegéocello. According to Henry Louis Gates' reading of the Yoruban and Fon myths, Esu is genderless, dual gender, bisexual, Esu's existence is that of the third principle—neither male nor female, neither this nor that, but both and, as such can move betwixt and between gender groups (29). Ndegéocello's intersectional musicking represents ideas and identities of the reflexive fluidity of the West African messenger Eshu-Elegba.

Ndegéocello's embodiment of masculinity and femininity, while providing an antiracist critique fuses philosophical and practical social arrangements stratified by gender, race, and sexuality insecurities. *The World Has Made Me the Man of My Dreams* (2007) is Ndegéocello's seventh studio album, inspired by a conversation with her mother. Ndegéocello reflects on the title, "It was born from my mother telling me my man, my prince, would come. And he didn't come, so I became what I needed. Had to" (Rodriguez). Ndegéocello's becoming moves beyond what Western society defines as masculine and feminine, gay and straight, Black and white, to cultivate a whole self outside of constructed distinctions. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* posits that queering of

is not intended to confuse, but to reinforce the multiplicity of Esu.

phallogentric, patriarchal constructs of heteronormative sexuality and gender roles holds particular significance in male/female discursive statements:

The idea that butch and femme are in some sense “replicas” or “copies” of heterosexual exchange underestimates the erotic significance of these identities as internally dissonant and complex resignification of the hegemonic categories by which they are enabled. Lesbian femmes may recall the heterosexual scene, as it were, but also displace it at the same time. In both butch and femme identities, the very notion of an original or natural identity is put into question; indeed, it is precisely that question as it is embodied in these identities that becomes one source of their erotic significance. (168)

Ndegéocello’s fluid sexuality disrupts normative heterosexual gaze and ruptures patriarchal paradigms purported as natural. Also, her queering of Black identity and Christian religious themes interrupts dominant constructs of race and religion.

Ndegéocello’s musicking operates beyond biocentric classification. Ndegéocello pulls at the polarizations of dominant heterosexual phallogentric sexuality and the idealistic space of “postness” creating space outside the hegemonic discourse of identity constructs. Her space, like Eleba’s, is one producing pluralities of meaning while at the same time connecting the parts to the physical and spiritual whole (Gates 37). Shana Goldin-Perschbacher asserts that Ndegéocello’s refusal of gender or musical classification creates a space embracing so called contradictions:

Western culture assumes that masculine and feminine are opposites on a linear plane, but while these descriptions sway markedly in one direction

or the other, Ndegéocello's music and artistic personae have developed over the past 20 years to present far more nuanced, critical, and queer perspectives on gender. In her music, aspects of masculinity and femininity can, at the same time, 'belong to' anyone, quite productively so, and those who unthinkingly embody the (often harmful) extremes of these stereotypes are criticized. (476)

Ndegéocello plays a trick on gender constructs and moves beyond the "butch/femme" queer dichotomy, as does Elegba. Ndegéocello is the "third gender"¹³ a black hole, a gravitational force pulling against the polarizing constructs of gender and escaping the "phallogocentric trap of Western discourse" (Gates 30). She discloses "a hidden cultural wholeness; rather than closing off unity through the opposition, of which Legba is the sign" (Gates 30). Ndegéocello's metaphysical musicking stands at the thresholds of ambiguity and wholeness, poised for a transformation, she is the representation of a liminal space for humanity.

The liminal space shared and cultivated by Ndegéocello represents the crossroads of identity and culture. Victor Turner's "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage" offers the idea of liminality, as a place of progression through three states of existence: separation, ambiguous liminal period, and the third phase when passage is consummated (Turner 4–20). Turner broadens the use of the term liminal, describing this state as one that is structurally if not physically invisible. Monica Coleman's *Ain't I Womanist Too?* resituates the liminal existence and experience in a

¹³ Western binary and biological constructs of gender do not accurately portray non-Western life worlds. Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí's *The Invention of Women* discusses the presence of third gender categories in African, Native American, and South Asian cultures.

queer context. Focusing on queer marginalization by Black religious beliefs, Sneed moves the liminal experience outside the context of ritual to theology. Furthermore, Kevin Quashie asserts that Black women's identities are not static but are in a perpetual state of motion, individually and communally; a fluid state of (un)becoming. "My representation of the term as an/other is intended to imply unity and disruption, subject and object, self and (not)self, and what lies between. Both and all and sometimes none. To be an/other is to be, quintessentially, a subject (un)becoming" (Quashie 32–33).

Me'shell Ndegéocello's musicking expresses cultural and ritualistic liminality. She personifies the *Other* within *Others*, embodying the queer, genderless, untenable racial identity of the ubiquitous messenger Elegba. "The experience of betwixt and between racial, sexual, gendered, and religious identities fosters creative responses that attempt to make sense of this liminality" (qtd. in Coleman 145). Ndegéocello's response from her multiplicity of identities to her fluid sexuality represents an expansion of the intersectional aspects of Black women's lives and activism outside societal standards and entrenches her in relationship with a space of Esu's rule, a space of "understanding of truth, a relationship that yields an individual's meaning" (Gates 39). Me'shell Ndegéocello's musicking marks the crossroads of liminal space, beckoning society to progress and move beyond polarized consciousness, only allowing meanings of gender and sexuality to be oppositional and hierarchal. Ndegéocello's musicking is a reconciliation of constructed dichotomies. The mythatype of Esu calls from the crossroads to move humanity from its restrictive constructs to join Ndegéocello in the multidimensional and metaphysical center, where the intersectional axis links the linear polarizations of race, gender, class, sexuality, and spirituality.

Ndegéocello's liminality addresses both the sacred and profane aspects of society and the conflicts created by religion and the heteronormative narratives espoused by religious zealots. Me'shell's musicking offers an introspective critique of spirituality that both marginalizes and empowers her multiple identities. Her musicking, like "Esu is the ultimate copula, connecting truth with understanding, the sacred and profane, text with interpretation He connects the grammar of divination with its rhetorical structures" (Gates 6). Lori Burns and Melisse Lafrance's *Disruptive Divas* explores the religious representation contained on Ndegéocello's *Plantation Lullabies* album. In the track "Mary Magdalene," Ndegéocello transforms the biblical narrative of Mary Magdalene, by inverting the gender of Jesus and inserting herself into the role of erotic savior. Lyrics of "Mary Magdalene" include:

In a harlot's dress you wear the smile of a child with the faith of

Mary Magdalene

Yet you wash the feet of unworthy men

Come and I'll set you free into an endless valley of fruits both sweet and sour

And whatever displeases your palate my kisses will wash away

Stay. If you must dance, dance for me

Blessed are the pure at heart for they shall see god, so close your eyes and dream

For the world will blind you and I'll judge not so that I may not be judged

Burns and Lafrance's reading of Ndegéocello's religious themes transforms these religious narratives into introspective myths of empowerment for women, people of color, queer populations, and spiritually grounded individuals who struggled against the dogmatic and divisive perspectives personifying dominant fundamentalist positions and

politics (Burns and Lafrance 135). Signifying(s) on the Bible, which for some is the home of salvation and for others is a text legitimizing patriarchy, misogyny, sexism, and homophobia, reinforces Ndegéocello's role as ultimate translator and mediator between the gods and humanity. "Writing oneself into the Bible is a disruptive, some might even say sacrilegious, act" (Burns and Lafrance 141). Eshu-Elegba-Ndegéocello deconstructs modern notions of spirituality, identity, and sexuality; as well as subverts the dominant, racist, and heterosexual Christian modes of human relationships with the world and with supreme divinity. Ndegéocello does not shy away from sharing the intimate nature of her relationship with divinity. Ndegéocello remarks, Women are probably closer to God We make life And women constantly have the ability to create, even if you don't have children" (Powers). In addition to "Mary Magdalene," songs on this album such as, "The Way," "Leviticus: Faggot," and "Deuteronomy: Nigger Man," are all examples of Ndegéocello's interpretative powers of the mythatype of Legba. The use of familiar Christian tropes, "sweet chariot" on "Leviticus: Faggot" and "Mother father god said let us make man in our own image god" on "Deuteronomy: Nigger Man," as well as calling out religious figures on "The Way," "Brother John Paul convinced himself of his wisdom to judge to forgive to condemn" signify and deconstruct the religious authority established by Western, patriarchal, and spiritual beliefs. Ndegéocello's musicking, empowered by Legba, foregrounds marginalized terrain of Black identities.

The mythatype of Esu shares Ndegéocello's willingness to engage the sacred and profane, without hierarchy or judgement. In an essay by Me'shell Ndegéocello, *Confessions, Obsessions, Revelations, and Proclamations*, she discusses the spiritual role

of funk in her music, revealing her willingness to operate with the mythatypical aspects of Elegba:

One day in an interview I was telling (New York writer) Greg Tate that playing music to me is like conjuring up spirits, you know? Funk is an evil spirit to me. I like to venture into that realm. It feels good when I play with my musicians to bring out those spirits, and it would be cool to share those experiences with as many people as possible. I mean, that's what music is about. (Ndegéocello 1994)

Ndegéocello's summoning of spirits, good and evil, is common in the African American religious belief systems where there are a host of supernatural forces directly mediating the physical human life and actions, "including spirits, ghosts, and angelic personalities that were periodically summoned to assist human beings in their endeavors" (Chireau 29).

Ndegéocello embraces the power and strategies of Eshu, which Western religion mistranslates Legba as the devil. Patricia R. Schroeder's *Robert Johnson, Mythmaking, and Contemporary American Culture* discusses how the devil became mis-associated with the Elegbara because of Western society's strict good and bad constructs (Schroeder 34). Ndegéocello, undaunted by the religious frame of the devil, enthusiastically states "I love the myth of the devil: the fallen angel who became jealous. So the symbolism of the *Devil's Halo* for me is that there are gray areas in music and life" (Holley 2009).

Ndegéocello's *Devil's Halo* (2009) operates in the spaces mediating the highs and lows in life, as does Elegbara. Schroeder maintains that Elegbara is closely associated with "interpretative arts, both musical and verbal," which partly explains how Robert Johnson made his infamous pact with the devil down in the Mississippi Delta (Schroeder 34–35).

In an interview discussing *Devil's Halo*, Ndegéocello asserts that there is “Good and bad in all things, especially love. I don’t think it’s a conscious part of my writing process, I just think it’s how it is and I honor that” (Rodriquez).

The lyrics from Ndegéocello’s song “Slaughter” on *Devil's Halo* plays on the good and bad themes of love that Ndegéocello contemplatively investigates. The lyrics of “Slaughter” include:

She said she loved me
I ran away
Don’t say you love me
I’ll run away
My love will lead you to slaughter
If you see it comin’ I’d run the other way
I’m the spawn of a sick mother, tricks and lovers
Left to drown in a cold dark sea
Be my love
Hold close to your heart
Fear eats my soul
Be my lover
I’ll make you suffer
Be my love
Hold close to your heart
Fear eats my soul
My love will lead you to slaughter

When I see it comin', I'd run the other way
I'm the spawn of a sick father, tricks and lovers
Left to drown in a cold dark sea
My love
(be my lover)
(be my love)
(be my lover)

These lyrics play and tease with concepts of lust and love, fear and hope, right and wrong. Esu's principal function is the indeterminacy of interpretation, the bearer of uncertainty and chance and because of her divine linguistics and interpretations; Esu is the muse of the critic (Gates 32–34). Again, we find Ndegéocello working the center of the certainty of painful and joyful experiences governing our realities, without closure, only providing plurality, an open-ended signification of humanity's possibilities.

Another example of Ndegéocello's interplay with the irresolvable is evident in her song "Lola," also appearing on her *Devil's Halo* album. The first verse of "Lola" states:

She drinks until she passes out on the floor
She has never been in love, No thanks for nothing
A wife's just a whore with a diamond ring
A wife's just a whore with a diamond ring
The boy she loved left her for another girl
The girl she loved left her for another boy
So everyone thinks that they're something better
Yeah everyone thinks that they are so fucking special

“Lola” is a cryptic critique of the institution of marriage, queering the uncertainty of relationships and asserts a reflexive imperative toward the self-actualization of imperfection. Ndegéocello’s lyrics dwell at the crossroads of spoken and unspoken truths. The story of Lola is an unsolvable puzzle where pieces are continually added, altering and eluding a final outcome. Martha Mockus suggests Ndegéocello’s musicking tackles the taboo, and blurs binary constructs by removing them from the secrecy of the private sphere and exposing them in public spheres (qtd. in Acampora 94–95). The attention Ndegéocello offers moves through the hypocrisy of love and loss, gay and straight, placing at the center the double or multiple reflections of individual’s varying relationships with the amorous institutions and ideologies. Ndegéocello’s trickster troping tests the boundaries of Black identities and ideologies.

Improvised Folk Creation

In homage to the life and music of Nina Simone, Me’shell Ndegéocello released her 10th studio album, *Pour une âme souveraine: A dedication to Nina Simone*. Writer K. C. Whiteley observes “Ndegéocello has been referred to as Nina Simone’s ‘artistic daughter’ because—much like Simone—she cannot be categorized or pigeonholed to a particular musical or personal classification.” *Pour Une Âme Souveraine* with the French title, which means ‘for a sovereign soul,’ is a signifyin(g) shout out to the fact that Simone spent much of her later years in France, and that her soul or spirit is still alive. When asked about this comparison to Simone, Ndegéocello responds:

People say that about me as if I’m doing it intentionally, avoiding a niche or label. It’s involuntary, it’s the way my consciousness works. I don’t think of music as compartmentalized; I’m not having emotional whims.

It's something you get better at. At first I needed to be seen and acknowledged. Now it's more about the craft and growing the interior life; trying to age gracefully and do something that is good. In terms of Simone's gift, she stands alone. (Whiteley)

Like Eshu, Nina Simone's and Me'shell Ndegéocello's musicking has defied categorization, exhibiting an idiosyncratic network of representation and possible meaning. Cosmically, the beginnings of this project precede the material manifestation. Ndegéocello participated in the annual Women's Jazz Festival at Harlem's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, curated by Toshi Reagon (the daughter of Bernice Reagon, Founding Member of the a cappella group Sweet Honey in the Rock and member of the SNCC Freedom Singers). Me'shell's performances were well received and planted the seed for doing an album covering or signifyin(g) iconic songs from Nina Simone's catalog. The process of deciding which songs would comprise this project Ndegéocello shares:

I tried to find songs I knew I could do justice to, Ndegéocello says. I wanted to focus on things that show a greater sensitivity and wider range of genre. I feel like often she's just seen as this soul jazz artist, but her upbringing in North Carolina and her classical background is definitely present in a lot of her songwriting. (Brady).

The liner notes for *Pour Une Âme Souveraine*, contributed by Hilton Als, a cultural critic for *The New Yorker*, contextualizes Ndegéocello's tribute to Simone as "a conversation between two women." Als writes:

Me'shell [is] helping to keep you alive in her own way, ... no matter how

painful ... she lets you speak, Nina, by encouraging all those complications, complications one hears in her own voice, which is underscored by her famous bass, and her desire for communion, which is her wish, Nina, as much as it was yours. (Ndegéocello 2012)

Ndegéocello further contextualizes her relationship with Nina Simone on this project describing it as “an idea of something ethereal that exists. It’s different at different times, it’s fellowship, kinship” (Whiteley). The kinship and fellowship Ndegéocello posits, positions *Pour Une Âme Souveraine* as both musical signification and engages the mythatype processes of Black folk creation in which, “ancestresses-becoming-historical-figures-becoming-legends-becoming-dieties” (De Vita 1–2). De Vita’s conception of the term mythatype “is meant to clarify an ancestress’ or goddess’ fluid passage from life to death to spiritual interactions with living communities” (De Vita 2). Folklore and mythologies recover historical voices as a necessity of living and moving forward. The West African principle of “Sankofa” (reach back and get it) is foundational to mythatypes. Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s *A Sankofa Moment* shares that the symbol of Sankofa is depicted as a bird heading in one direction, with its head looking backward, and in looking backward, we can move forward and progress (17). He further avows that any people who do not know their past will perish. “Psychologists call it a social death, Theologians call it a spiritual death” (Wright 18). Me’shell Ndegéocello, free as a bird with her head on a swivel, looks back and locates Nina Simone, and with her effort retains the historical and spiritual processes of Black folk creation.

Culture building is an on-going activity within the Black Diaspora with the aim of both protection and progress. Black folk scholar, John Roberts’ *From Trickster to*

Badman explores the relationship between culture building and heroic creation in Black culture. Roberts characterizes the continuous process of Black folk heroes as:

A continuous process—one intimately related historically to black culture building. The process began in Africa and continues in America as a dynamic creative activity aimed at facilitating and enhancing the adaptability of certain behavioral patterns traditionally accepted by African people as advantageous for maintaining and protecting their identity and values in certain types of situations. (13)

Ndegéocello holds Simone in high regard, “Nina Simone was unusual, unruly, unparalleled. She has an unmistakable voice and an unavoidable spirit ... she was a loud, proud black, female voice during a time when black female voices were not encouraged to make themselves heard” (Rosebuds). Ndegéocello’s recognition of Simone’s spirit and historical presence indicates an awareness of the social conditions in the past as well as the necessity for the spirit of Simone today. Ndegéocello tells NPR’s Melissa Block, “she was like royalty” (NPR Staff). Ndegéocello encountered the High Priestess in her early twenties. “I spent months researching and listening to as much of her music as I could. It was great to find such an amazing voice that didn’t sound like everyone else’s. She’s a huge inspiration” (Brady). The inspiration of Simone endured, leading to the release of *Pour Une Âme Souveraine*, Ndegéocello’s musical and mythical signification of Nina Simone. Roberts suggests that “Folk heroic creation, as an emergent process is one of the ways by which cultural groups attempt to facilitate adherence to group values during periods of intense change” (Roberts 12). Ndegéocello’s reverent recognition of the transcendent nature of Simone and the importance of reintroducing her to the world that

may not be familiar or was forgetting her work employs Black folk tradition. “Any people who forgets their story, any people who does not remember their history, any people who ignores their past, are people on their way to death” (Wright 18). Her remix of Simone’s art in the current climate of music and state in society critiques the popular and contemporary, summoning the values of the past as a musicking mirror to examine the present conditions. Ndegéocello’s reintroduction of the ‘High Priestess of Soul,’ engages the musical signifyin(g) process of honoring Nina Simone while simultaneously invoking the spiritual processes of Black folk hero creation.

The processes of Black folk hero creation, through musicking, represents a mythical signification process. Ndegéocello’s tribute to the sovereign soul of Simone serves as an example of how the practices of enslaved Africans endured through Black heroic folk creation. An example of the transformative, musical, and mythical signification quality of Ndegéocello’s musicking is witnessed through her cover of Simone’s classic work, “To Be Young, Gifted and Black.” “To Be Young, Gifted and Black” challenged Ndegéocello and she felt her singing did not fit the times, as it did when Simone recorded and performed the song during the Civil Rights Era. In an interview with *The Thread*, Ndegéocello talks about her process of recording Simone’s work with sincere intention and not merely copying her songs:

It just didn’t have the feeling it needed for these times. It’s beyond skin-color now, I think ... I wanted to have that trans-cultural feeling

When we were recording it, it was during that Trayvon Martin incident, so I’m have a man singing it, because it’s hard to imagine being a young man of color in society today. (Howe)

Ndegéocello's comment validates an awareness of the recent profiling and killing of young Black men, as well as the historic nature of the song. Ndegéocello is a mother of two; she gave birth to her son Askia in 1989 and her wife Alison gave birth to their other son in 2009. Ndegéocello's sensibilities as a mother and her recognition of the continuing disparities in law enforcement claiming the lives of young Black men foreground her musical rearrangement of "To Be Young, Gifted and Black." The lyrics of the song appear in their entirety below and still carry with them a musical mantra of hope:

To be young, gifted and black,
Oh what a lovely precious dream
To be young, gifted and black,
Open your heart to what I mean
In the whole world you know
There are billion boys and girls
Who are young, gifted and black,
And that's a fact!
Young, gifted and black
We must begin to tell our young
There's a world waiting for you
This is a quest that's just begun
When you feel really low
Yeah, there's a great truth you should know
When you're young, gifted and black
Your soul's intact

Young, gifted and black
How I long to know the truth
There are times when I look back
And I am haunted by my youth
Oh but my joy of today
Is that we can all be proud to say
To be young, gifted and black
Is where it's at

The musical and mythical meeting between Nina Simone and Me'shell Ndegéocello symbolizes an encounter with a Black folk hero, whose life and music exemplified the ideal values of the radical imagination, still rooted in the Black cultural heritage.

Simone's place within the pantheon of mythatypes, along with those who came before her like Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Billie Holiday, Lorraine Hansberry, Zora Neal Hurston, and Zami is secure, but continues in fluid passage along with the musicking of Me'shell Ndegéocello, the signifying-griot-messenger-folk-creator.

CHAPTER FIVE–SOULCIAL THEORY

I am black; I am the incarnation of a complete fusion with the world, an intuitive understanding of the earth, an abandonment of my ego in the heart of the cosmos, and no white man, no matter how intelligent he may be, can ever understand Louis Armstrong and the music of the Congo. If I am black, it is not the result of a curse, but it is because, having offered my skin, I have been able to absorb all the cosmic *effluvia*. I am truly a ray of sunlight under the earth. (Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* 45).

This study began at the invitation of Angela Davis’ inspirational work, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*: “I hope that this study will inspire readers to listen to the recordings of Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday both for pleasure and purposes of research, and that it will occasion further interdisciplinary studies of the artistic and social contributions of blues and jazz women” (xx). This study continues the examination of the historical antecedents of Black feminism through the music of Nina Simone and Me’shell Ndegéocello. Building on the spiritual concept of nommo, this study engages spiritual agency and African cosmology through the fluid and expansive frame of the mythatype. The musicking of Nina Simone and Me’shell Ndegéocello, fueled by cultural memory tropes and call-and-response performance elements, draws upon myth, interprets realities, and moves Black consciousness and actions toward a collective future. The historical and mythical theories of Black women and their musically infused actions are woven together into the Black-feminist-mythical-

musicking-praxis. This praxis, exhibited by the musicking of Nina Simone and Me'shell Ndegéocello, critiques society's customs of oppression and the internalized, binary constructs of being enforced by slavery and colonialism; further, this praxis creates new forms of cultural knowledge and action. The Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis engages what Cynthia Dillard's *Learning to (Re)member* describes as a process beginning with "a shift or transformation in one's inner self that simultaneously influences one's outer or public acts" (113). A Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis is interconnected and interdependent with the realms of Black womanhood, musicking, and myth. The Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis is a form of social theory, an African-based cosmological mode of thinking and being that aligns the individual with the communal and the spiritual.

The musical and mythical Africanisms within Black women's musicking support the establishment of a more comprehensive system of knowing and being. Understanding the theoretical roots pertaining to the traits and elements of West Africa, particularly persistent in the music-making practices in Black American culture is a paramount goal of this study. A Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis engages and applies enchanted cultural traditions, through musicking, to a system of meaning that interprets and instigates the social conditions both endured and imagined. This practice of musicking rejects conventional language, scientific method, and worldviews of rationalism or any relations that relegate Black feminist musicking and mythatypes to savagery, irrationality, and religious blasphemy (Chakrabarty 72–73). The musicking of Nina Simone and Me'shell Ndegéocello are conduits connecting individual and collective consciousness, identity and action, physical and metaphysical. As Terborg-Penn and

Rushing observe, African American women musical artists “take on the roles ascribed to female deities in Africa” mediating the space between Africa and America by calling upon powers “human and transcendent” (Terborg-Penn and Rushing 195). Black women’s musicking evokes and invokes West African goddesses and the cosmology of Black mythatypes. Nina Simone and Me’shell Ndegéocello’s musicking is a testament to this cultural practice, a revolutionary reprise of Black traditions, maintained and nurtured in the atrocities of the New World.

A Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis deepens the link between thought and action by identifying the “mystically objective” in Black music where reality is both spiritual and material (Fabre and O’Meally 241). The mythatypes within African-American music and musical practices are an essential organizing element in the everyday experiences of the Black Diaspora. Black musicking is a life activity, not different from other life activities and includes observation and interpretation of competing narratives, social phenomena, and spiritual agency. Properly situated, the musicking of Simone and Ndegéocello emerges as a form of social theory and praxis. A Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis investigates sites of struggle and arenas of power, and informs consciousness, social formation, and social movements. Alex Callinicos’ *Social Theory: A Historical Introduction* assists in expanding viewpoints and visions of what constitutes social theory. He states “It should be clear enough by now that social theory is an irredeemably political form of thought ... social theories at least implicitly evaluate as well as analyse, and offer political solutions to what they describe” (5). Callinicos offers three identifying characteristics of social theory:

(1) It is concerned with society, which is conceived as being distinct from political institutions; (2) It distinguishes between and seeks to make generalizations about different kinds of societies; and (3) It is concerned in particular to analyse modernity—the form of society which emerged in the modern West over the past few centuries and has come to dominate the world as a whole. (10)

Black musicking shares the characteristics that Callinicos outlines. The musicking presence of Simone and Ndegéocello meets the criteria of social theory Callinicos suggests. The Black feminist epistemology, womanist ideas, and overall radical Black woman's standpoint exercised by Simone and Ndegéocello's musicking establish a musical and mythical form of social theory, a Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis. A Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis is a *soulcial*¹⁴ theory where thought and action maintain the enchanted elements of Africanisms outside of Western constructs. Historian Robin Kelley's *Freedom Dreams* supports the power of Simone and Ndegéocello's feminist Afrocentric expression through musicking by citing how "The radical black feminist movement, not unlike other feminists, also redefined the source of theory. It expanded the definition of who constitutes a theorist, the voice of authority speaking for black women to include poets, blues singers, storytellers, painters, mothers, preachers, and teachers" (Kelley 154). Simone and Ndegéocello's music poses an immanent challenge to modernity and by employing postmodern concepts of knowledge

¹⁴ *Soulcial* Theory is a term originating in this study to describe the historical and cultural interconnectedness between Black music, myth, and feminism. 'Soulcial' Theory in this study is applied to the musicking of Nina Simone and Me'shell Ndegéocello; however, it can be applied more broadly to link Black musicking and social justice thought and actions.

production, social relations, cultural identities, and political practices counter to dominant ideologies.

Situating Black women's music as a feminist, social praxis garners debate regarding identity politics, knowledge production, popular culture, identity, and spirituality within the context of "authentic" and "essentialist" dichotomies of cultural and political constructs. The Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis disrupts historical phallogocentric practices of categorizing and separation, serving as an axis point to integrate a multiplicity of identities and spiritual beliefs and practices. Feminist Patricia Collins remarks "Within the interpretative framework, fighting on behalf of freedom and social justice for the entire Black community and for a more inclusive society based on social justice was in effect fighting for one's own personal freedom." (2006, 130). Historically, as well as today, the conditions of Black women's placement within the matrix of domination creates a tension that simultaneously extends and expands binary frames of thought and action to address the color line, the gender gaps, and class warfare in America and abroad. A Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis provides a form of knowledge production, an avenue for action, and a model of social transformation that realigns race, gender, and class constructs.

Black Women's Knowledges

The epistemic aspects of Black women's musicking embody Black traditions of knowledge production, Black identity development, and social action intimately connected to the Black community. Within Black intellectual traditions and Black vernacular practices "street talk and new music, radio shows and church voices, entrepreneurship and circulation" are honored and privileged forms of discourse (*The*

Black Public Sphere 3). Mark Anthony Neal's *What the Music Said* broadens understanding of the development of Black knowledge beginning with Reconstruction, by also citing the Black church, jook-joints, Black radio, and Black women's organizations such as the National Association of Colored Women. Gwendolyn Pough's *Check It While I Wreck It* observes that the Black musicking during the Black Power era of the late 60s and early 70s and the Hip-Hop generation in the late 80s are sites of powerful Black counter narratives. The musicking of Nina Simone and Me'shell Ndegéocello represent essential elements of discourse and knowledge production from the mid-sixties to the present. Mark Anthony Neal specifically describes the role of Nina Simone's Civil Rights and Black Power anthems in the Black public sphere during the 60s and 70s, avowing "her music as an aural counterpart to the sit-ins, non-violent demonstrations, and prayer meetings that dominated the movement" (Neal 48). Andrea Clay's *Like an Old Soul Record: Black Feminism, Queer Sexuality, and the Hip-Hop Generation*, observes that Me'shell Ndegéocello's musicking is also important to public debate as "her message is both (homo)sexually explicit and marked by social protest" (64). These observations further demonstrate the connections between Black women's musicking, knowledge production, and Black social movements. Collins describes the links between Black feminism and social justice movements as naturally occurring. "I have always seen organic links between Black feminism as a social justice project and Black feminist thought as its intellectual center" (*Black Feminist Thought* xi). A Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis aligns and embraces African ascendant people's ways of knowing and being, repairing the disconnection from mind, body, and spirit ushered by Westernized modernity.

The debates confronting the polarized identity politics and binary Western construct serve as opportunities to expand knowledge and social justice discourse. Cultural studies scholar, Stuart Hall, argues that as the twentieth century came to a close, we entered a new age marking new thinking around the cultural politics of difference. “Within culture, marginality, though it remains peripheral to the broader mainstream, has never been such a productive space as it is now. And that is not simply the opening within the dominant spaces that those outside it can occupy” (Hall 106). African American religious scholar, Cornel West also engages the latter portion of the twentieth century and the artistic, cultural critiques of monolithic and homogeneous representations and self-identification. The new cultural politics of difference West depicts contests the mainstream, or as West signifies the “malestream,” by artists or cultural workers, making transparent the cultural contradictions in society, as well as those present in the production of their art (West 94). The musicking of Nina Simone and Me’shell Ndegéocello serves as examples of this new type of postmodern, differential identity politic. Nina Simone embodied the beginnings of Black postmodern sensibilities. Simone’s songs, such as “Four Women” and “Pirate Jenny,” offered an alternative to the patriarchal Black militancy. Me’shell Ndegéocello continues the musical continuity of Black musicking through her signifyin(g) cover of Simone’s classic, “Four Women.” Ndegéocello also contributes her original works, as evidenced by the tracks “Jabril” on her *Cookie* album and “Sloganeer” on her album entitled, *The World Has Made Me the Man of My Dreams*. Ndegéocello’s musicking represents a celestial arrangement of West African cultural practices where Black womanhood is identified independently from the competing, binary narratives of Nationalist authenticity and Western essentialism.

The Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis embraces the new politics of difference in a divine, grassroots, deprofessionalized¹⁵ manner. The innate, indigenous impulses, where the deepest forms of indigenous knowledge align within the *commons*¹⁶, or the working class spaces, where social majorities commune to learn, share, and honor cultural traditions. Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash assert that the *commons* are places, both physical and metaphysical, where individual and collective identities are shaped and transformed (*Grassroots Post-Modernism* 69). The Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis cultivates new and existing commons through musical moorings, dialectical, and dialogical discourse. The knowledge produced and validated within the *commons* deconstructs “the individualization of the possessive, envious, and covetous individual, the *Homo oeconomicus*, created in the West” and supports the collective return to the indigenous and ancestral *we* (Esteva and Prakash, *Grassroots Post-Modernism* 130). The *we* is created in communities when individuals decide to work collectively to solve common problems and relinquish the burdens of modern designations of individuality. In *Escaping Education*, Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash further discuss the divine, grassroots, deprofessionalized knowledge production

¹⁵ Deprofessionalization is a process of sharing professional knowledge and reaffirming indigenous knowledge and traditions to reveal the biased epistemic and ontological paradigms embedded in Western forms of knowledge. Deprofessionalization puts the profession and academy aside for the good of commons and community; and requires questioning of Western myths, use of accessible language, avoiding the pitfalls of Westernized scientific knowledge and active living in and amongst the commons, and engaging in social movements. (Esteva and Prakash, *Escaping Education* 119–121)

¹⁶ The commons, are the nonmonetized, public space in both rural and urban areas where the masses, working class, and everyday folk, gather to share culture, vernacular, analysis, and action. The commons include communal gardens, free art spaces, and intentional social media outlets. (Esteva and Prakash, *Escaping Education* and *Grassroots Post-Modernism*)

in the *commons* through the term contemporary prophet. The term contemporary prophet describes those individuals within a community who “profess the possible or probable outcome evidenced and emerging in the present. They unveil what is hidden and rendered opaque by economic, technological, and other systems” (Esteva and Prakash, *Escaping Education* 122). The contemporary prophet is rooted in communal cultural traditions poised to transform society. Nina Simone and Me’shell Ndegéocello function as contemporary prophets, engaged in the traditional practices of Black music production, knowledge production, and spirituality. Their musicking facilitates the processes of convening in the *commons* and engages the social movements of the times, through a Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis.

The Vernacular of Love from the Margins

How wondrous and fearful it must be to step out into that space of possibility where you define yourself on your own terms, to craft a new multi-ethnic, gender-bending, biracial, sexually dynamic, fluid person identity that is seen and respected by all sorts of people who seem so different from oneself. The responsibility and potential freedom that this promises are boundless. Yet it is obvious that these new personal identities can never occur without fundamental structural changes that make such identities possible for everyone. (Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop* 196)

The musical production of African ascendant women reconceptualizes the boundaries of the social minorities of the world by using vernacular-based language and metaphors to open new opportunities (commons) for thinking, acting, and being. In her

essay, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," hooks maintains the margins as both "sites of repression and sites of resistance" (hooks 21). hooks' reflection on her childhood experiences of being regulated to one side of the tracks in her small town of Hopkinsville, Kentucky, shares how this experience offers a distinctive perspective and the promise of change. "To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body" (hooks, "Choosing the Margin" 20). From hooks' observations and personal experience, Black Americans have developed an ability to see from within and from without. "We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the centre as well as on the margin... This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and centre" (hooks "Choosing the Margins" 20). Nina Simone understood this form of sight, constantly reminded of this inside-out paradigm every time she crossed the tracks to go to the white side of town for her piano lessons at Miz Mazzy's house. Her musicking is a reflection of this mode of sight as is evident in the lyrics of songs such as "Backlash Blues," "Old Jim Crow," and "Mississippi Goddam." Me'shell Ndegéocello also demonstrates the internal and external sight through songs like "Dead Nigga Blvd" and "The Way." The margins and center are constantly in negotiation with hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces and hooks identifies language as a key arena of this struggle. hooks asserts:

Dare I speak to you in a language that will move beyond the boundaries of domination—a language that will not bind you, fence you in, or hold you. Language is also a place of struggle. The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves, to reconcile, to reunite, to renew. Our words are not

with meaning, they are an action, a resistance. Language is a place of struggle. (hooks, “Choosing the Margin” 16)

The importance of language cannot be understated. Language is instrumental in shaping consciousness, and the constructs of identity and language, as well as combating these constructs. The margin is not an easy place to be situated, it requires a community to affirm and sustain this location. “Theorising this experience aesthetically, critically is an agenda for radical cultural practice. For me this space of radical openness is a margin—a profound edge ... It is not a ‘safe’ place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance” (hooks “Choosing the Margin” 19). The Black vernacular within musicking functions as speakerly text, articulating the margin, as it voices what modernity has silenced or regulated to the shadows of the dominant culture. The vernacular is essential in resistance for as hooks hypothesizes “It is not just important what we speak about but how and why we speak” (hooks, “Choosing the Margin” 22). How and why we speak through Black musicking emanates from the Black Diaspora’s cultural, historical, and mythical forms of struggle and survival. Black musicking is a specific way of producing knowledge and voicing the experience of the Black Diaspora, which hails from acculturated African traditions (Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*). “Speaking from margins. Speaking in resistance” are key characteristics of Black vernacular and musicking (hooks, “Choosing the Margin” 22). The margin of Black musicking redefines the Black experience in relationship to dominant forms of social relations and identity, through a spiritual and communal language of love.

The margins are a creative space for change that transforms individual and collective subjectivity. “Spaces can be real and imaged. Spaces can tell stories and unfold

histories. Spaces can be interrupted, appropriated, and transformed through artistic and literary practice” (hooks, “Choosing the Margins” 23). Nina Simone and Me’shell Ndegéocello’s musicking cultivates the margin and provides a critical, alternative, and oppositional voice within publics, counter-publics, and *commons*. From the margins, an oppositional consciousness of differentiation is developed and acted upon. Chela Sandoval’s *Methodology of the Oppressed*¹⁷ explores the development of oppositional consciousness by examining feminist involvement in social movements during the late 1960s through the 1980s. “This form of oppositional consciousness was enacted during the 1968–90 period by a particular and eccentric cohort of U.S. feminists of color This cohort enacted the differential mode of social movement, which was subsequently developed under the aegis of ‘U.S. third world feminism’” (Sandoval 44). hooks and West’s *Breaking Bread* substantiates Sandoval’s claims by characterizing the 60s, 70s, and 80s as a time of “weakening of political solidarity between black men and women” (9). The weakened relationships supported the creation of spaces for Black feminists and other marginalized feminists of color to work together. These relationships spurred the development of the oppositional third world feminist consciousness. The form of oppositional consciousness that Sandoval identifies consists of five categories:

This study identifies five principal categories around which oppositional consciousness is organized, and which are politically effective means for

¹⁷ This theory and method was enacted as praxis during the 1970s women’s movement, when feminist activists of color identified the integrationist, revolutionary, supremacist, separatist, and differential modes of resistance as fundamentally linked to one another, in the form of a rhetorical structure when viewed through the differential form. This structure comprises a social-movement theory: U.S. third world feminism. But it also functions as a method for the analysis of aesthetic and political texts. (Sandoval 71)

transforming dominant power relations. I characterize these as the “equal rights,” “revolutionary,” “supremacist,” “separatist,” and “*differential*” forms of oppositional consciousness. These ideological positions are kaleidoscoped into an original, eccentric, and queer sight when the fifth, differential mode is utilized as a theoretical and methodological device for retroactively clarifying and giving new meaning to any other.

Consciousness. (Sandoval 43)

The differential, as observed by Third World Feminism activity and other oppositional movements during this historical global period, helps align Black feminist movements with other decolonizing efforts throughout the world (Sandoval 41). In this study, the musicking of Nina Simone and Me’shell Ndegéocello has been positioned as oppositional to the dominant constructs and differential by encompassing the unjustified juxtapositions of Western modernity. Differential consciousness pushes against and through hegemonic constructs of consciousness and identity to form radical new ways of thinking and being betwixt and between, or what Anzaldúa calls weaving “between and among” ideological constructs (Sandoval 57). “Differential consciousness requires grace, flexibility, and strength ... Within the realm of differential social movement, ideological differences and their oppositional forms of consciousness ... are understood as strategies” (Sandoval 59). The differential is foundational to the Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis as it facilitates the connections between individuals and movements, by promoting a perspective from the margins that recognizes alignments and dissemblance without the hierarchies of dominant ideologies.

Post-modern love fuels the grace, flexibility, and strength of Black-feminist-

mythical-musicking-praxis. Me'shell Ndegéocello avows in her song *Pocketbook* on the album *Cookie: The Anthropological Mixtape* that “Love is the root politic” (Ndegéocello 2002). In this study, love is a root organizing principle allowing for movement between ideological and cultural constructs. Chela Sandoval describes love as a semiotic technology, “a hermeneutic, as a set of practices and procedures that can transit all citizen-subjects, regardless of social class, toward a differential mode of consciousness” (139). Sandoval’s concept of love is adapted from Alice Walker’s concept of mestizos found in her work, *In the Closet of the Soul: A Letter to an African-American Friend* and in Gloria Anzaldúa’s theory of *la conciencia de la mestiza*, or the consciousness of the ‘Borderlands’, contained in her work *Borderlands/La Frontera* (Sandoval 169). “As a complex kind of love in the postmodern world, where love is understood as affinity—alliance and affection across lines of difference that intersect both in and out of the body” (Sandoval 169). It is essential to understand love as erotic, linking political and spiritual polarizations of modernity. “For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic—the sensual—those physical, emotionally and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings” (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 56). Through love, the Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis is made possible. bell hooks’ *All About Love* emphasizes that love as a spiritual praxis “is first and foremost about commitment to a way of thinking and behaving that honors principles of inter-being and interconnectedness” (hooks 77). Maparyan further asserts “The most basic social–ecological tool for transformation is LOVE. Love is a particular energy vibration that resonates at the level of our highest and best selves and society” (323). A Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis is an

expression of deep, divine love that shifts the centers of the margins, operates in the intersections, and is transformative in connecting all forms of life, physical and spiritual.

Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis shifts the center and integrates the heterogeneity of the *Other* into a space where difference is not deficit. Margaret Andersen in her article, “Race, Gender, and Class Stereotypes” states “Shifting the center of thinking requires beginning one’s study from the experiences and viewpoints of those who have been defined as marginal in society” (Andersen 72). Shifting the center is more than a play on words or a semantic gesture of inclusion, it is fundamentally a theoretical and methodological turn in perception and analysis allowing for one’s complete subjectivity to be observed. “We can see then that the power relations that create subordination and domination are reflected in the systems of knowledge that are used to describe and understand society. Shifting the center means that we can *know* through a different lens, that of the experience of the dominated” (Andersen 73). By shifting the center, the questions regarding *Others* or those excluded, are asked and answered. The Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis is an apparatus shifting the center and creating a new postmodern midpoint. In this enchanted space of margins, the *la mestiza*¹⁸ Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*, maneuvers: “At the confluence of two or more genetic streams, with chromosomes constantly “crossing over” this mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool” (Anzaldúa 99). The Black neo-being from the

¹⁸ “*La mestiza* is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another.” Mestiza is a pluralistic consciousness that display a tolerance for contradictions and ambiguity, as well as an ability to move individuality and duality toward collective divergent thinking that is inclusive without requiring rejection or abandonment of culture. (Anzaldúa 99–102)

margin embodies plurality and honors the pluriverse of life forms. “Nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad, and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned ... The focal point or fulcrum where *la mestiza* stands is where phenomena tend to collide. It is where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs” (Anzaldúa 101). Shifting the center, as a social praxis, mends the margins and facilitates the emergence of a whole self, without the need of universal, singular constructs. Decentering modernity and (re)centering the margins situates modernity as a liminal experience, not a permanent or immanent reality. The Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis repairs the ruptures of identity and culture, guiding society through the middle passage of modernity to cultivate the postmodern world.

Centering the Black Goddess

One of the often stated objectives of the WomanSpirit movement is to overcome the “ism” brothers; racism, sexism (including heterosexism), and classism, the sons of patriarchal conditioning. Patriarchal education has led us to believe that Africa is “the Dark Continent,” void of any noteworthy contributions to civilization. This is an outrageous lie! Africa is, in fact, the place where humanity began. (Teish, *Jambalaya*, ix)

This study of Black feminism insists that there is a need for new social, musical and spiritual arrangements, centering Black women. The new center is intersectional and heterogeneous. bell hooks’ *Talking Back* expresses her belief that the voices and experiences of Black and Third World women are crucial to establishing and maintaining a new center. The new center questions the assumed dialectics brought into being by the oppressed and oppressor and reveals alternative constructs. “My placement of black

women at the center was not an action to exclude others but rather an invitation, a challenge to those who would hear us speak, to shift paradigms rather than appropriate ... an expression of my longing to know more and think deeply about our experience” (hooks, *Talking Back* 16). Black women’s experience has always included marginalization because of modern social, cultural, and political constructs privileging whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality; however, this was and is not Black women’s rightful place. María Lugones’ “Toward a Decolonial Feminism” critiques the disappearing acts performed by modernity:

Modernity organizes the world ontologically in terms of atomic, homogeneous, separable categories. Contemporary women of color and third-world women’s critique of feminist universalism center the claim that the intersections of race, class, sexuality, and gender exceed the categories of modernity. If a *woman* and *black* are terms homogeneous, atomic, separable categories, then their intersections show us the absence of black women rather than their presence. (742)

Black women’s presence, though marginalized and often rendered invisible, is omnipresent and moves beyond modernity. Ralph Ellison’s words in the prologue of his work *Invisible Man*, captures the essence of Black women’s invisibility. “I am an invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me ... I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they only see my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me” (Ellison 3). Ellison’s title and first sentence, “I am an invisible man,” effectively mark both the invisibility of Blackness and the hidden presence of

Black women within constructs of modernity (3). The Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis cultivates and sustains spaces beyond modernity, foregrounding the experience of Black women in a language all their own. Black women's musical practice, in this study, recalls West African beginnings to reveal the historical sources of thoughts and actions as opposed to Western epistemology, ontology, ontogeny, and phylogeny. The sources of power encompass cultural memories and cosmological agency. What we now designate as Black Feminism, Womanism, Africana Feminism, or Third World Feminism is a return to wholeness, a (re)membering of our humanity. It is a return to the goddess mythatypes and a signification on the contemporary possibilities based on precolonial social relationships in West Africa.

There is a myth from the Yoruban religious tradition that serves as a metaphor for the Black social (*soulcial*) praxis claims of this study. This myth has many forms and this is a collective account. Olodumare, the genderless Supreme Being and ruler of the heavens, sent down orishas to begin the task of fashioning the earth and humanity. All of the orishas were men, except Oshun, the goddess of love and giving, the bringer of harmony (R. Thompson xv). During the beginning of creation, there was jealousy and wickedness among the humanity and the orisha. Olodumare, witnessing the wickedness of the orisha, stopped the rains and scorched the earth. The male orisha attempted to plead for forgiveness, but their messengers were not able to ascend high enough into the heavens for their prayers to reach Olodumare. Oshun, the youngest of the orisha, offered her assistance, but the other orisha considered her too young, naïve, and frail, not possessing the power to reach Olodumare. Oshun, unwavering in her love for humankind and risking her existence, ascended to the heavens to reach Olodumare. Olodumare,

astonished by Oshun's sacrifice and love of humanity, rewarded Oshun and she became the messenger of Olodumare. Olodumare declared to the orisha that through Oshun and her beautiful, harmonious, female energy would the world thrive. Then came the rains, the sun submitted to the clouds, the earth yielded its bounty and humanity was saved. Oshun then took her place amongst the other orisha as Queen. Oshun is the orisha of "sweetness, love, and calm" and "she unifies the world," who is known to love music and dance (R. Thompson 82). Black feminism is material and mystical African acculturated retentions of theory, method, and practice. The Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis returns humanity to the divine harmony of the Black woman and the Black Goddess.

It is through the Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis, along with other differential and oppositional actions, that our world is transformed. Beyond the margins, at the new center, the oppositional and differential are explicit, and multiplicity is never reduced. Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor's *The Great Cosmic Mother* declares "We return to the Goddess by *remembering, redefining, respelling*—by turning, as in a dance, away from one gesture toward another We must become beings who do not wish to control life, but only listen to its music, and dance it" (430). The West and Central African cosmological cultural memories are the master trope of this return to a space of dignity and respect for all living creatures and spiritual beings. "It means to redefine us and therefore change us by returning us to our original consciousness of magical-evolutionary processes" (Sjöö and Mor 425). In this study, it has been demonstrated that throughout the Black Diaspora, Black women's thoughts and actions within and outside of social movements has been a recounter with African cultural memories and practices,

musical and spiritual. Black women's musical *soulcial* theory praxis is the conjuncture, or conyuntural¹⁹ space, beyond modernity. Conjuncture analysis names the moment, and words are wielded as powerful spiritual acts of consciousness and action. Luisah Teish, in *Jambalaya*, states:

Immanent spirituality is also rooted in human community. There is no concept of individual salvation (there is nothing to be saved *from*) nor of an enlightenment that leaves others behind. “The dynamic interaction of energy through the use of work celebration (music, song, dance, myth), and placation (sacrifice, offering) was the standard mode of worship for early African peoples...”

Community also extends to the gods, the *orishas*, those powers beyond the human world that nevertheless guide us, direct us, sometimes trick us, and—in ritual—can possess us, transporting us beyond the limitations of our separate beings into connection with the underlying community of all being. (Teish xvii)

Black women's musical *soulcial* theory praxis guides our return to the spiritual space characterized by Teish. By centering modernity's marginalized, we reorient ourselves and chart new constellations of being. The Black-feminist-mythical-musicking-praxis is a score for the pluriverse, a collective biomythography, and transformational love energy, embracing the differential dimensions of our being, seeking not only our collective survival, but also holistic social transformation.

¹⁹ Coyuntura links research, analysis, reflection, action, and community empowerment by encouraging participants to name, define, and narrate their struggles as well as act on the problems that impact them in the current conjuncture, or what Gustavo Castro calls the “amplified present.” (<http://cril.mitotedigital.org/coyuntura>)

Betwixted and between the things that you have not yet discovered

Let it carry you and me over the river then wash us down

Lift us out of this trashing life I want out of rat on top of rat

I'll race you down to the water ... (Ndegéocello, "Modern Time" 2014)

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