Changing Blues:

The Continued Life and Appropriation of Black Women's Blues in Twenty-First Century Popular Culture

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"Changing Blues: The Continued Life and Appropriation of Black Women's Blues in Twenty-First Century Popular Culture" argues that contemporary creators reimagine or repurpose the politics and methods of 1920s-1930s Black women's blues music in order to amplify particular political investments and to attain social value within the twenty-first century popular culture arena. While specific historical events gave rise to blues women's tactics, the issues they explored remain relevant today, such as class, sexual expression, and romantic relationships which together make up the sexual-economic. The sexual-economic is a dual concept. It refers to existing systems that oppress Black women through conjoined sexual and economic means *and* a way of performing resistance that understands the sexual and economic as intertwined concerns for building and imagining radically liberated futures. Focusing on the sexual-economic theme across early twentieth century blues and twenty-first century popular culture, this dissertation explores contemporary work from pop stars, blues singers, and filmmakers. While these projects riff on older blues politics, they also reflect their own moment's concerns. The blues' sonic slipperiness, I argue, is a double-edged sword: giving it the ability to adapt but also putting it at risk for commodification and codification that waters down or erases its radical provocations. In adopting a moving or unmoored orientation towards blues politics, we can readjust in parallel to the blues' movements across time and space, simultaneously holding on to blues women's often-silenced

contributions while letting go of how and where the blues must sound. This approach will allow us to understand not only the blues' functioning today but how Black women's artistic and critical contributions are put to work within popular culture.

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Preface

> when i woke up this morning i woke up thinking billie lives! so after i got through talking on the phone to this sister who called me up right in the middle of when i was thinking billie lives! i got up and put on a tape of an old record by billie and listened to it again for the first time in a long time while i made a pitcher of orange & lemonade and drank some. then i took the tape and went outside to sit in the sun and listen to the tape some more and write this poem down in a hurry.
>
> -"billie lives! billie lives" by Hattie Gossett

If someone told me that they wanted to read my dissertation, but they only had a few minutes to spare, I would tell them to read Hattie Gossett's "billie lives! billie lives." Not because my dissertation does not offer anything new or because I see Gossett's poem as a condensed or even simplified version of my own arguments but because "billie lives! billie lives" is at the heart of my impetus in taking on this project. Gossett's poem reanimates long gone music legends, like Billie Holiday, gives them breath and reminds us how much their lives and work remain relevant to us in the present. Gossett reminds us that there is more to learn, that there is more we "hadnt heard about" (120).

"billie lives! billie lives" envisions a synchronous community of Black women icons past, present, and fictional, like Fannie Lou Hamer, Sojourner Truth, Tammi Terrell, and Peaches from Nina Simone's "Four Women." Rather than nostalgically favoring past icons over contemporary ones, Gossett honors the temporally specific methods of different eras, such as the tactics that arise from changes to technology or virtual communication. In tune with Gossett, I do not argue that contemporary sources or performers that do not clearly align with or imitate the tactics of earlier blues women "fail" the test for radical politics. Instead, I argue that envisioning a larger conversation, community, or lineage in which these twentieth- and twenty-first-century sources

and figures exist alongside one another can give rise to new ways of listening to the way Black feminist politics are presented, transformed, and codified through popular culture.

If there is anything I hope someone does *not* take away from this dissertation it is that contemporary artists or blues-inspired media are uncomplicated or unpolitical when held up against what we would consider the classic blues of the, primarily, 1920s and 1930s. Just as the speaker of "billie lives! billie lives" lives alongside Holiday's music, many of us live alongside the music, images, and stories of popular twenty-first-century performers and media that draw on the politics, sounds, and figures of Black women's classic blues. As we wake up, drink our lemonade, make and take phone calls, the echoes of older blues music and the political practices of the women who popularized it continue to exist and evolve in our contemporary moment. This dailyness of the popular is reflected in its Latin etymological roots, *populus* and *popularis*, with "popular" meaning "prevalent among the general public." The prevalence of the blues in our contemporary life and popular performance is partly, though not entirely, why these contemporary uses of the blues are worthy of our attention. We live with blues women's political and musical contributions in a way that is ubiquitous whether we are active listeners of blues music or not.

1.0 Introduction

As I write and rewrite, I am often at my dining room table, above which hangs the first music I remember hearing as a child: Nancy Wilson's 1966 record *A Touch of Today*. My earliest music memory is spinning in tight circles to Wilson's "Call Me," my favorite track from the album, thinking that mimicking the record's own circular movements was how you learned to dance. While Wilson is a jazz singer, her musician-like approach to her voice as instrument and her bluesy representation of romantic relationships reminds me of the blues' long legacy, its ability to create a kind of kinship across time and even space, a kinship that I have felt myself gathered up in since those early moments listening to *A Touch of Today*. I am perpetually interested in the way that these sounds live alongside us as well as how they continue to inform and develop our everyday political practice, the way we think about historical echoes in the present, and what we owe to each other as we collaborate towards more radical futures. As the chapters of this dissertation show, the means to those radical futures seems increasingly complicated as we continue to grapple with the intersections of class and race, the limits *and* access popular performers have to voice political stances, and the attempt to balance an interest in the blues' evolution while maintaining an awareness of its origins and popularization by Black working-class women. The sort of curious hope of Gossett's poem is not always easy to hold on to in the face of these complexities and the reality of the blues' commodification. However, when all else fails, I would argue that the curiosity piece of such an approach is generative for understanding the blues' evolution and role in contemporary popular culture as well as what the blues' continued life says about the performance of Black feminist politics in contemporary popular culture.

"Changing Blues," the title of this dissertation, reflects the mixed, emotional landscape of this project. In one sense, the title, "Changing Blues," simply describes the blues as a changing thing. This quality of the blues is not new. Its different eras—country, classic, and urban—speak to the blues' long history of adapting to new political, social, economic, and regional contexts. Today, the blues continues to adapt to meet political exigencies particular to the twenty-first century and contemporary popular culture. In "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music," which he published under the name LeRoi Jones, Amiri Baraka conceptualizes "the changing same" to speak to the changing nature of Black music across time, genre, and regional environment in concert with a sense of unity among Black music/s through these changes. He refers to the duality of this simultaneous change and unity, the changing same, as "the same family looking at different things. Or looking at things differently." Baraka prophesizes the crescendo of Black music/s as "growth to include all the resources, all the rhythms, all the yells and cries, all that information about the world" (211). Many of the contemporary iterations and representations of the blues I discuss in this dissertation are part of those resources and rhythms, that information, that speak to and about Black women's blues politics and performance within today's popular culture. The title, "Changing Blues," also borrows from the common structure of many blues titles, like Bessie Smith's "Pinch Back Blues" or Mamie Smith's "Lonesome Mama Blues." In this capacity, "changing blues" is a kind of condition, a state of having the blues *about* or *in reaction to* change. This meaning reflects this project's—and other recent blues scholarship's—grappling with a sense of nostalgia brought on by the blues' newest evolutions in projects with economic and political investments that might seem at odds with those of classic blues women. And, in yet another interpretation, "Changing Blues" signals an action, a person or entity who is actively *changing* the blues. From filmmakers to pop stars, this dissertation considers contemporary

participants in the blues' evolving meanings, methods, and representations. The multiple meanings of this dissertation's title and their simultaneity are at the heart of "Changing Blues: The Continued Life and Appropriation of Black Women's Blues in Twenty-First-Century Popular Culture" and its interest in the blues' changing as well as my investment in listening to that change as evolutionary *and* inherent to the genre given that the blues has always spoken to temporal, political, geographical, and technological shifts.

"Changing Blues" argues that contemporary creators reimagine or repurpose the politics and methods of 1920s-1930s Black women's blues music to amplify particular political investments and to attain social value within the twenty-first-century popular culture arena. While specific historical events gave rise to blues women's tactics, the issues they explored remain relevant today, such as class, sexual expression, and romantic relationships which together make up the sexual-economic. The sexual-economic is a dual concept. It refers to existing systems that oppress Black women through conjoined sexual and economic means *and* a way of performing resistance that understands the sexual and economic as intertwined concerns for building and imagining radically liberated futures. Focusing on the sexual-economic theme across early twentieth-century blues and twenty-first-century popular culture, this dissertation explores contemporary work from pop stars, blues singers, and filmmakers. While these projects riff on older blues politics, they also reflect their own moment's concerns. The blues' sonic slipperiness gives it the ability to adapt but also puts it at risk for commodification and codification. In adopting a moving or unmoored orientation towards blues politics, we can readjust in parallel to the blues' movements across time and space, simultaneously holding on to blues women's often-silenced contributions while letting go of how and where the blues must sound. This approach will allow

us to understand not only the blues' functioning today but how Black women's artistic and critical contributions are put to work within popular culture.

Several central questions guide my work. Among them are what are the early twentieth-century events that impacted blues women's understanding of the sexual-economic and what do contemporary Black women performers have to contend with now when it comes to the sexual-economic? How might looking at contemporary echoes of the blues in popular culture through the lens of the sexual-economic defy our expectations about the blues' evolution or contemporary complexity? How do we hold some of what is beautiful about the blues—its expansiveness, its ability to stretch and move, to incite mobile intimacies across time and audience—while also remaining attuned to the ways in which it can be translated for projects whose investments are less aligned with a Black feminist blues politics than they would like to appear? What larger conclusions might we draw about the ways in which Black feminism is commodified in the popular culture arena to garner social capital for contemporary projects? And, finally, if we do turn our ears to a Black feminist blues politics before it was named as such, what sorts of sounds will we hear? What lessons about subversive resistance might reward a renewed listening? To answer these questions, I draw on multiple archives. These archives include the classic blues period of the, primarily, 1920s and 1930s, twenty-first-century popular culture performance that riffs on classic blues music and politics, and the historical context of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the United States with reference to events and systems, such as slavery, emancipation, and the Great Migration.

An understanding of Black women's sexual-economic oppression and resistance is not complete without an understanding of the historical context through which such political resistance arises. The reproductive value of Black women's bodies under slavery was tied to the legal

processes of the institution. Because the womb reproduced "slavery property," what the mother passed on to her child was "a death sentence" (Hartman, "The Belly of the World" 169). Black women's modes of resistance were responsive, in part, to the fact that enslaved Black women carried the reproductive value of slavery as a profitable institution. Given this history, blues women's bold performances of their sexuality and sexual desire were representative of a public claim to ownership over their own bodies. Hortense Spillers elaborates on the position of enslaved Black women and its reverberations in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." Spillers' account of Black womanhood is, crucially, a claim about a historical subject position. This approach resists the ahistorical essentialism of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 book *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,* commonly known as the Moynihan Report. Spillers begins "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" with a critique of the Moynihan Report and its claim that a matriarchal structure is inherent to the Black family structure in the United States and a problem for Black communities.

Spillers also critiques the white feminist movement's reliance on Eurocentric narratives that posit the female body as ahistorical and the white female body, in particular, as universal. In resisting these essentialist frameworks and the way in which they decontextualize and, in many cases, outright ignore Black women's struggles, Spillers provides a historical framework for looking at the forms of oppression and subjecthood that would, I argue, lead to blues women's sexual-economic protest and performance. Unraveling essentialist conceptions of gender, Spillers makes a distinction between the body and the flesh, arguing that enslaved Black women were "ungendered." For Spillers, the body is the liberated subject position that has the mark of discourse on it while the flesh is the quantifiable, physical matter that is exchanged within a market system—as, of course, enslaved peoples were. Ideas of the feminine then, that undergird many feminist

movements if only as the representation of what these movements are working against, loses its meaning in the context of flesh and its ungendering. Spillers writes, "In effect, under conditions of captivity, the offspring of the female does not belong to the mother, nor is she or he related to the owner though the owner possesses it" (217). Because the concept of the feminine was tied up in the domestic space and motherhood, two things that Black women were denied as discussed by both Hartman and Spillers, this ungendering was a necessity for slavery's continuation since, if the enslaved Black woman was gendered, she would have to be incorporated into the domestic sphere and motherhood in a way that would unravel her forced role in the perpetuation of slavery.

It is important to note that blues women's provocative sexual expression was not the mainstream resistant posture to this history of enslaved Black women as "slave breeders" (Lee IX). Instead, it was the respectability politics that encouraged Black women to pursue an "upstanding" social status through institutions like marriage that became the more appropriate, by mainstream definitions, posture to take. The Black women's club movement initially organized locally in the late nineteenth century but sought more national recognition in 1895. Their methods of self-help and social reform eventually lost popularity in the 1930s, but their ideas about the importance of Black women achieving respectability were already ingrained and normalized in many ways. While respectability politics can appear derisively elitist through the lens of today's activism, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, who coined the term in *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, describes it as an activist method that demanded respect and dignified treatment. Respectability politics provided a framework for Black women who were increasingly gaining access to public spaces in new ways and prioritized notions of uplift to achieve social reform. As a political tactic, respectability politics valued

"temperance, cleanliness of person and property, thrift, polite manners, and sexual purity" (Harris 213).

Many blues singers openly flouted the tenants of respectability politics, particularly through their sexually evocative lyrics. Black women's blues politics were doubly resistant, radically reclaiming their sexuality and the very bodies that had been at the mercy of enslavers *and* challenging notions of "good behavior" eschewed by respectability politics' advocates. While contemporary popular culture would appear to be a distant cry from the respectability politics of the Progressive Era, we do still see ideas about "appropriate" ways of performing Black womanhood for the good of racial reputation in today's popular culture through, for instance, Black women's policing of each other's behavior on reality shows like *The Real Housewives of Potomac*. Such policing is often at the service of avoiding being seen as "ghetto," a term often weaponized as modern shorthand for behavior that does not adhere to the tenants of respectability politics despite Higginbotham's more complex understanding of the term.

A historical overview of the blues and its material context is critical for understanding the way in which these varying political frameworks, such as respectability politics and blues politics, arose. Many blues scholars and historians agree that there are three general blues eras. These eras have been broken down into subcategories, usually depending on the thematic content of the songs they describe. The eras are country (or rural) blues, classic (or city) blues, and urban blues. In *The Music of Black Americans*, Eileen Southern elaborates on these three eras, saying that country blues was the earliest discernable form of the blues and often featured an individual man with his simple guitar accompaniment (335). The city or classic blues—sung, primarily, by Black women in the 1920s and 1930s—was characterized, in part, by its more "sophisticated" sound in relation to earlier country blues. The classic blues singer was usually accompanied by a piano or orchestra.

The classic blues represented a significant shift toward more wide-spread dissemination of the blues. With the advent of recording, blues performances were no longer confined to localized spaces. Now listeners in Tennessee could more easily hear a blues performer in New York City. This influenced younger generations of blues performers who were now exposed to a wider variety of the music, giving rise to more imitations of and riffs on the blues genre (*Blues People*, Baraka 102).

This earlier intense rise in the expansion and improvisation of the genre is reflected today through the blues' adaptive travel and transformation within contemporary popular culture. Long before we get twenty-first-century iterations of the blues, early blues recordings changed the music's consumption and representation. The new context of phonographic recording represented a major shift since the blues would have previously only been heard live. Not only were physical gatherings of audiences a significant part of the music and even its interpretations—particularly when it comes to identifying methods like call and response in the blues—but the physical presence of the blues performer was also deeply connected to the music's performance. This connection between the body and the music did not dissolve once recording technology became more popular. Instead, the body continued to inform interpretations of blues music even if it was not materially present. Ashon Crawley writes, "The blues body, the black woman body, is a disruption to notions of civility and decorum; the more this body performs its wildness—the more one accepts one's condition of fleshliness—the more disruptive and in need of coercive control" (12-13). The politics of the Black blues woman's body, the disruptions it provokes, reverberate in blues sound. The disruptive potential and the associations attached to the Black blues woman's body is part of what gives the blues its political tenor when evoked in other contexts—even without the presence of the actual Black blues woman's body.

The first blues recordings were marketed as race records, records targeted expressly to Black audiences. In *Blues People*, which he published under the name LeRoi Jones, Baraka argues that the classic blues ushered in a new arena of professionalism that a blues singer could aspire to. The classic blues was dominated by women, in part, because of their previously limited job opportunities. While some blues women did travel on the performance circuit, it was still more common and accepted for men to travel in order to find better job opportunities. However, the professional blues singer represented a new job opportunity for Black women who had previously been confined to more limited job opportunities, such as domestic work, sex work, and work related to the church (Baraka 93). While the blues' professionalization and commercialization represented new economic opportunities for Black women blues singers, it also led to critiques of mass-marketed or commercial blues music by those that thought the music was less authentic than its earlier, folk counterpart. Part of this critique was provoked by the fact that the classic blues had a more universal appeal than folk blues. Baraka attributes this increasing universality of the blues to post-emancipation changes to Black life in the United States. While Black people were, of course, still violently oppressed following slavery's abolition in a myriad of ways, the very fact of emancipation did mean that they were part of conversations and issues that they had not been part of before. Baraka writes, "The lyrics of classic blues became concerned with situations and ideas that are recognizable as having issued from one area of a much larger human concern. Classic blues is less obscure to white America for these reasons, less involuted, and certainly less *precise*. Classic blues attempts a universality that earlier blues forms could not even envision" (87).

Critiques of the blues' commercialization also tended to be gendered given the fact that most classic blues singers were women, a reality both Baraka and Hazel Carby emphasize. In "In Body and Spirit: Representing Black Women Musicians," Carby writes, "The field of blues history is

dominated by an assumption that 'authentic' blues forms are entirely rural in origin and are produced by the figure of the wandering, lone male. The blues women of the twenties, who recorded primarily in urban centers, are regarded as commercialized aberrations who compromised and adulterated 'pure' blues" (180). This narrative raises the stakes when it comes to revising the dominant understanding of blues women's relationship to the economic or the idea that they were cultural sell-outs. Carby offers a framing of classic, popular blues music that does not dichotomize the authentic and the commercial. Its resistance to definition and codification is what allows the blues to inhabit commercial spaces whose structures may appear to limit its more radical nature. The blues' fugitive tactics when it comes to subversive meaning and coded messages can be traced from its roots in slavery to its use in popular culture, even within other genres. Not a static genre, the blues' musical transformations occur concurrently with recording innovations in the music industry and changing conditions of Black life in the United States. Its presence in later genres, like R&B, rock and roll, and hip hop, further proves its adaptability and fluidity. Adam Gussow, for instance, refers to the blues as "an overlooked precursor of the socially resistive gangsta rappers of the late 1980s" (*Seems Like Murder Here* 13) and Reiland Rabaka makes a similar argument, saying that classic Black blues women, in particular, paved ground for members of the Hip Hop Women's Movement (*Hip Hop's Amnesia* 8-9). Within both rap and hip hop, subversive meaning-making tactics are used to signify on the very capital-driven entertainment structures these genres find themselves participating and performing in.

The events of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the United States had a massive impact on the lives and music of blues women. In particular, the context of slavery economics, emancipation, the Great Migration, and the commercialization and professionalization of the blues were archived and processed via classic blues music for both performers and

audiences. The abolition of slavery, although it occurred prior to the classic blues period of the 1920s and 1930s, provides an important historical context for the music and, in part, prompted the political strategies of organizations, like the Black women's club movement, whose methods contrasted with blues women's. While the thirteenth amendment was said to abolish slavery in 1865, this amendment did not entirely or immediately eradicate slavery in the United States. Not only were all slaves not immediately freed but many institutions and laws arose that mirrored slavery's oppressions albeit in more disguised ways. Hartman is among the contemporary scholars who have laid out how this transition occurred, detangling the written abolition of slavery from actual freedom.

As an ever-changing archive of post-abolition struggles, the blues recorded, navigated, and even negotiated with this new landscape, enacting the kind of political consciousness that led to organized protest. In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, Angela Davis critiques the idea that Black women's blues was not actually political for this very reason, arguing that the blues raised its audience's consciousness and contributed to the political landscape that made more traditionally recognizable forms of protest possible. Davis also marks the way that abolition was represented in the transition from slave music to blues music via the theme of the individual. She writes, "As slave music suggests, the conditions for physical and spiritual survival during slavery…defined the value of the individual as subordinate to the community. The abolition of slavery, while it did not bring economic and political freedom, created a backdrop for new kinds of relationships between black individuals and thus for a different valuation of the individual in general" (45).

Blues women's political consciousness-raising efforts became particularly important during the Great Migration, one of the largest migratory movements in the history of the United

States which saw about six million Black people move from Southern states to Northern, Midwestern, and Western states from the 1910s to the 1970s[1] (National Archives). According to Davis, well-known blues singers, like Bessie Smith, “helped to forge for northern African-Americans a collective consciousness rooted in memories of the South but rearticulated with the northern black working-class experience. The forging of this consciousness was critically important as a buffer against the often traumatizing effects of the migration northward” (83). Not only did the Great Migration impact those who stayed in the South, it also brought about new economic possibilities as well as struggles for those who left it. These major transitions were archived in Black women’s blues music. Carby speaks to this archival capability of the blues in “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues” when she writes, “The music and song of the women blues singers embodied the social relations and contradictions of black displacement: of rural migration and the urban flux. In this sense, as singers these women were organic intellectuals; not only were they a part of the community that was the subject of their song but they were also a product of the rural-to-urban movement” (476). This movement illuminated the economic struggles of life in the city. This is not to say that more Southern or rural regions of the United States did not come with their own economic hardships, but the Great Migration coincided with the city’s—and its economic landscape’s—more popular exploration in Black music.

During the height of its popularity in the United States from the 1920s to the 1950s, the blues was still marginalized in critical conversations about racial oppression and political movements. The blues’ association with working-class Black women, sexual freedom, and even

[1] https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/migrations/great-migration

lyrics about seeking violent revenge were seen as harmful for racial uplift projects that were concerned with how Black artists represented the Black community to white audiences. Despite these criticisms of the blues, it remained popular for decades, in its original musical form and through its literary forms. Beginning in the 1980s, the blues was reclaimed for its political and cultural influence within scholarship. This scholarship laid the groundwork for understandings of prevalent blues themes and framed blues women's work as political. Today's scholarship approaches the blues as a complex tradition that remains influential today and often explores popular culture as the site through which we see that influence. These two central routes of scholarly conversation—one on the historical context of Black women's blues and the other on contemporary Black feminist performance in popular culture—are particularly central to my work and inform my readings of primary sources, both historical and contemporary, across the chapters of this dissertation. Along with these two categories of scholarship, I also draw on contemporary scholarship that challenges conventional modes of listening and thinking through the blues' relationship to race.

Early canonical blues scholarship continues to contribute to mainstream understandings and interpretations of Black women's blues music today. Beginning in the 1910s, scholars began looking at the blues but through the lens of European musical standards. Later, writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Sterling Brown took up the blues as literary inspiration, honoring its formal artistry, cultural impact, and, often, the women who popularized it. During and after the Great Depression in the 1930s, blues criticism began to emerge from writers like Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Albert Murray. Writers involved in the Black Arts Movement, like Amiri Baraka, also began giving the blues critical weight for its intertwined theoretical and aesthetic value.

While the blues' framing as political may be taken for granted today, the first wave of blues scholarship functioned as counternarrative, pushing back against the historical marginalization of the music and the Black women who popularized it. This scholarship established blues singers and musicians as contributors to Black political projects and freedom movements. Understandably, some of the blues' more controversial aspects, such as their seeming tolerance of domestic abuse, are elided in this wave of scholarship. Davis, for instance, devotes brief attention to this pattern but subsumes its complexity under the heading of irony. Although this scholarship represented renewed interest in the blues, particularly in its critical and political capacity, writers still had to contend with a mostly white, academic audience's expectations of what counted as "worthy" of critical attention. Not unlike the pressure that white audience interpretations exerted on Black thinkers in the 1930s through 1950s, causing them to marginalize the blues for its more risqué themes, the academy's racialized conceptions of knowledge, knowledge processes, and knowledge use-value presented challenges for scholars who wanted to legitimate the blues and its impact.

Scholarship on the historical contexts from which Black women's blues music of the 1920s and 1930s arises is essential to understanding how the music's politics spoke to issues affecting Black women. In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Davis speaks to the historical context of Black women's blues music, emphasizing the particular mode through which Black women's blues music addressed and provoked political agendas in ways that were both similar and different to slave music. While still complicated and constrained by laws, such as anti-miscegenation law, Black people did enjoy more freedom to choose their sexual and romantic partners following emancipation. Given this context, Davis makes a case for why the themes of love and sex in Black women's blues music is tied to the political despite debate over art's ability to achieve political ends and enact activism. Davis explains that the blues both borrowed and departed from the tactics

of slave music. While the blues differed from slave songs given their different historical and social context, they also borrowed from slave music's subversive methods. Davis writes, "Given its place within the African-American music tradition, the blues absorbed techniques from the music of slavery, in which protest was secretly expressed and understood only by those who held the key to the code" (111). Davis points to the tactic of intentional secrecy in order to push back against scholars who fail to see social protest in blues music. She argues that while "art may encourage a critical attitude and urge its audience to challenge social conditions…it cannot establish the terrain of protest by itself" (113). However, as "public articulation of complaint," Black women's blues music can and should still be seen as "constituting powerful social and political acts" (101).

Like Davis, Hartman discusses the shifts that Black women blues singers were responding to and navigating post-emancipation. Through its grappling with the bind of both economic hardship and more freedom in choosing sexual and romantic partners, for instance, Black women's blues music links sex and finances, sometimes connecting the two through a shared metaphor or equating sexual partnership with financial stability. This pairing in Black women's blues music speaks to both the affordances and limitations of life post-emancipation. Hartman ultimately, challenges the dominant, positive narrative of emancipation's impact. She writes, "…the advent of freedom marked the transition from the pained and minimally sensate existence of the slave to the burdened individuality of the responsible and encumbered freedperson" (*Scenes of Subjection* 116-117). Hartman argues that "burdened individuality" is dual in nature, defining it as "being freed from slavery and free of resources, emancipated and subordinated, self-possessed and indebted, equal and inferior, liberated and encumbered, sovereign and dominated, citizen and subject" (117).

Because both new and similar oppressions to those that existed under slavery were at work post-emancipation, "freedom and equality" became a symbolic narrative bolstered by the rhetoric of progress rather than a material reality. Hartman asks "If slave status was the primary determinant of racial identity in the antebellum period, with 'free' being equivalent to 'white' and slave status defining blackness, how does the production and valuation of race change in the context of freedom and equality?" (118). Taking seriously Hartman's careful attention to historical context and race's evolving meanings based on that context, I ask what contemporary capitalist valuations and uses of blues music in popular culture today mean for the celebration as well as the appropriation of Black women's music and politics.

In *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory,* Baker argues that, like for all Afro-American expressive culture, slavery economics serves as a defining condition for the blues. While art may be falsely understood as a category divorced from the capitalist world of commodities, art objects are not exempt from a capitalist system of value and do function as commodities. In other words, there is no magical "before" in which the blues exists with zero relation to economic conditions fueled by capitalism in the United States. Baker allows for the possibility of the blues existing as both subversive *and* commodity. Given this historical context, Baker advances the concept of the blues "investigator" or "detective," a boundary-crossing figure who playfully improvises *atop* these existing conditions to turn things on their head, revealing new worlds and paradigms for existence.

Not unlike Baker, Fred Moten's approach to thinking through Black performance in relation to its context of production and consumption in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* is inspired by an improvisatory sonic methodology. Drawing on Marxism as well as the context of slavery economics in which Black people "arrive" as already commodity,

Moten argues that radical or subversive Black performance is "always already embedded in the structure they would escape" (2), the structure being one in which, under the logics of capitalism and slavery, the performer already contains the commodity. Moten and Baker draw our attention to a seemingly "unlikely interplay": the entangled relationship between resistive Black art, such as blues music, and the economics of survival. Blues music cannot be divorced from its role as entertainment and the impact it had for Black women in search of job opportunities post-emancipation. The capitalist system that the blues critiqued was the same one that popularized, disseminated, and profited from it—even while actual Black blues singers and musicians saw a much smaller percentage of those profits than recording studio executives.

Contemporary scholarship on the blues' relationship to popular culture often argues for its continued relevance to performances of Black feminism on the public stage. Shayne Lee looks to blues women as a precedent for many of today's Black women performers in *Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women, Sexuality, and Popular Culture*. Lee's study argues that popular culture is a rich site through which to think about gendered formations and their potential to empower. She writes, "erotic revolutionaries stir up gender trouble, generate gender maneuvering, and bring wreck into the public square by providing a variety of images and narratives as themes accessible to confronting, redrafting, and recoding gender expectations on sexuality" (19). Erotic revolutionaries, for Lee, play an important role in performing sexuality in ways which challenge its expected heteronormative routes and respectability politics.

Imani Kai Johnson also draws our attention to popular culture performance in "From blues women to b-girls: performing badass femininity." Drawing a link between contemporary women breakdancers and blues women of the 1920s, Johnson defines "badass femininity" as a "performance that eschews notions of appropriateness, respectability, and passivity demanded by

ladylike behavior in favor of confrontational, aggressive, and even outright offensive, crass, or explicit expressions of a woman's strength" (20). Johnson sees blues women as the earliest example of this concept. Johnson acknowledges the fact that many see popular culture performances as promoting the harmful objectification of women regardless of whether the lyrical or performative choices are ultimately being made by men or women. Hip hop feminists, therefore, offer both love and critique for hip hop and mainstream hip hop culture. Johnson argues that popular culture prompts generative conversations about gender, sex, performance, and feminism. Johnson's work highlights the way in which contradictions between radical political performance and popular culture performance do not need to be—and are perhaps more productive if not—assimilated into coherent or comfortable meaning.

Like Johnson, Reiland Rabaka is also invested in thinking about the blues in relation to hip hop, but Rabaka's *Hip Hop's Amnesia: From Blues and the Black Women's Club Movement to Rap and the Hip Hop Movement* critiques Hip Hop Studies for what Rabaka calls its amnesia around hip hop's older musical and political origins, like the blues. Likening blues women's marginalization and exclusion from the Black women's club movement to hip hop women's own marginalization and challenging of respectability politics, Rabaka asks "What did the Hip Hop Women's Movement 'inherit' from the Black Women's Club Movement? Which parts of its 'inheritance' has it outright rejected or ingeniously 'remixed' in its ongoing efforts to speak to the special needs of young African American and other (especially non-white) women at the turn of the century?" (8-9). Rabaka makes a direct case for the continued relevance and legacy of the blues today in the intersection between current feminist movements and popular culture.

Thinking sound and race together has a long history within both sound studies and Black studies. Many blues scholars draw on work by scholars that may not explicitly mention the blues

by name but are invested in exploring the relationship between race and sound. Scholarship at the intersection of sound studies and Black studies critiques the larger structures that racialize sound and affect listening practices. In *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music*, Nina Sun Eidsheim argues that listening is an enculturated process. Eidsheim calls attention to listening as enculturated to critique the micropolitics at work in a listener's perception of voice. Pushing back against the idea that voice—and, in particular, our listening to it—is objective, Eidsheim claims that "voice is not innate; it is cultural. Voice's source is not the singer; it is the listener" (9), making an argument for listening *to* listening. Attending to the predetermined listening frameworks that Eidsheim refers to rather than positing an authentic reading of the blues allows us to see how the blues is put to work in order to garner contemporary projects particular types of cultural or political value.

Eidsheim also offers evidence for why the blues' presence is able to signal the Black women who popularized the music without *their* material presence. Eidsheim writes that her concept, "acousmatic blackness," "capture[s] the perceived presence of the black body in a vocal timbre, whether or not that body is determined to be black by other metrics….any identification of black vocal timbre is, by definition, blackness formed in response to the acousmatic question" (7). Along with vocal attributes ascribed to blackness, the blues carries the weight of the genre's history and political associations, making its ability to conjure blackness, even without its explicit presence, stronger. Using Eidsheim's theory of acousmatic blackness, we can go one step further to ask not just whether blackness is conjured when the blues, in sonic form alone, is used in contemporary popular culture projects but what *form* of blackness? What else adheres to the blues' blackness when we hear it? What political associations? What epistemologies? And, of course, what figures?

Like Eidsheim, Jennifer Lynn Stoever also argues that listening is cultural in *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*. Stoever illuminates the way in which sound is racialized with particular sounds being mapped onto "whiteness" and others mapped onto "blackness" (7). Her concept of the listening ear functions as both a symbol of dominant listening practice's accrual over time and an illustration of how dominant culture forces individual listening practices to assimilate to the norms of the sonic color line. Challenging the way in which the sonic color line is upheld by Music Studies' disciplinary norms, Stoever's resistive method draws attention to the way in which the sonic color line has constrained the way we listen and "read" sound. She states that sounds come to us "'already listened to,' whether we encounter them in print, on recordings, or in our own ears" (23). This has significance when it comes to how we listen to Black women's blues music today, particularly in the context of blues scholarship that has contributing to defining the parameters through which we hear the blues. Like Eidsheim, Stoever's work speaks to how the blues is able to proceed without the material figure of its Black women producers while still signifying their critical and political labor. Stoever writes, "Aural and visual signifiers of race are thoroughly enmeshed; sounds never really lose their referent to different types of bodies despite being able to operate independently of them" (12). Both Eidsheim and Stoever's work pushes back against dominant narratives about how sound works, highlighting the way in which it is actually *put* to work.

Adam Gussow's recent work on contemporary conversations around blues ownership is particularly relevant for considerations of the commodification of Black women's blues and its use in twenty-first-century popular culture. In *Whose Blues? Facing up to Race and the Future of the Music*, Gussow argues that "the blues is a mutable but durable music with a distinctive sound that takes a range of forms as it undergoes a modernizing process, a music that continually

renegotiates its relationship with its own traditions" (49). The blues' mutability allows its echo to speak to multiple, sometimes even contradictory, values or investments. This renegotiation capacity that is embedded in the blues plays a large role in why cultural producers return to the music and its central figures again and again. Gussow lays out Black bluesism: the idea that the blues is so distinctly and inherently Black music that it is not authentic unless practiced by Black people. In contrast, blues universalism is the idea that blues music, if anything, eradicates racial barriers and can be practiced and appreciated authentically by anyone. While he argues that Black bluesism has more of a claim than its "universalist" counterpart, he claims that, considered individually, both ideologies do not fully account for the blues' complexity and story. In staging a conversation between the two ideologies, Gussow practices what he names a "trickster ethos, [which] is itself grounded deeply in the blues tradition" (39). This method enables him to juggle and jump between multiple disciplines, paying particular attention to the blues' multiple uses and the ways in which it is made to labor for a variety of investments.

Blues scholarship has gone a long way in elucidating the blues' material origins and historical development. Both older and more contemporary blues scholarship has also argued for Black women blues singers as political, cultural, artistic, and intellectual participants in larger conversations on class, race, gender, oppression, and the complexity of Black life in the United States. Today, contemporary scholarship on the blues also addresses how many popular performers and genres have been impacted by early twentieth-century blues women. Because the blues' foundational impact has been well-trodden by both older and more current blues scholarship, we can begin to explore what the blues' continued presence says not just about the blues' capability to move and adapt beyond its historical context but about us—about our continued return to its political imperatives and to the music itself, its sounds and performances. What has been neglected

and I argue warrants some attention in our current moment is the multiple kinds of value attached to Black women's blues and conferred by it. By focusing attention on the exploitation, consumption, and cooptation of the blues, on the one hand, and maintaining the ability to hear the blues as still critical and challenging, on the other, we can arrive at a more complex understanding of the blues' functioning today as Black women's artistic and critical contributions are put to work within popular culture.

Contemporary blues scholars have argued that Black women blues singers are antecedents for many popular Black women performers today. However, less attention has been paid to how Black women's blues is being used in multiple, complex, and sometimes ambiguous ways that go beyond surface resonances and challenge mainstream interpretations of the original music and its practitioners. Rather than confining the blues to the past, I argue that the blues' continued life and use in popular culture allows us to imagine the blues as ongoing. Hearing the blues today in the context of its ongoingness opens the original music back up to innovative interpretation and, simultaneously, pushes us past merely identifying its appearances in the present. If we do not attend to Black women's blues as ongoing in these deeper ways, we risk marginalizing some of the central demands that arose from the intersectional positionalities of its singers and that remain urgent today. It is the lineage of the blues that gives the contemporary performances discussed in this dissertation some of their political tenor—particularly the politicizing of the personal, intentionally provocative sexual performance, and the centering of intersectional positionalities and experiences.

In our contemporary moment, as forms of media, artistic expression, and dissemination multiply, it becomes even more important that we attend to the continuing life of Black women's blues today. The blues' presence in popular culture is sometimes explicit through, for instance,

samples in popular music or biopics on famous blues women, like Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday. Other times, its presence is more subtle, almost appearing as aesthetic or conceptual background. While these contemporary projects riff on and remix Black women's early twentieth-century blues politics, they also reflect their own contemporary moment and concerns. Therefore, undertaking an exploration of current popular culture renditions of Black women's blues politics alongside the older, classic context of the music necessitates an attention to both periods in order to avoid simply mapping one archive of performances over another. Being aware of the connections between Black popular culture performance today and the work of earlier blues women not only places contemporary projects in a continuum with blues singers but also importantly adds complexity and context to current conversations around the Black feminist politics as expressed through popular culture. While particular historical events and realities gave rise to the tactics that Black women blues singers used, many of the blues themes they explored remain relevant today, such as the economic, romantic relationships, and sex. These themes frame and pull together the multiple archives—both classic and contemporary—that make up the core of this dissertation.

Many twenty-first-century events and trends inform my understanding of the contemporary, popular culture landscape in which the blues is, I argue, still alive and evolving. Many of those events have to do with an increase in mainstream attention to Black oppression and social justice efforts in the United States, like Black Lives Matter (BLM), whose global protests against police brutality gained more media coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic. BLM and BLM's organized protests threw into relief the reality of Black oppression in the United States, a reality that had been more marginalized on mainstream outlets during Barack Obama's presidency from 2009 to 2017 which ushered in an era of seeming racial progress. The optimistic—and, in many ways, superficial—allure of this era would quickly be dashed by the presidential election of

Donald Trump in 2017. These political events are among those that contribute to the contemporary landscape in which Black women's blues politics occupy a central role in popular culture navigations and negotiations of the sexual-economic.

Popular hashtags, like #BlackGirlMagic, and tropes, like "The Bad Bitch," exemplify increased attention across social media and popular culture to financially successful, powerful Black women, like Beyoncé whose fervent fandom, "The Beyhive," is representative of the sort of following and platform the most famous popular performers have today. While #BlackGirlMagic and "The Bad Bitch," as examples, do not have to and certainly do not only live in the realm of mainstream popular culture or the lives of the rich and famous, these concepts are often disseminated in connection to popular culture figures. Along with these concepts, the increased popularity of the body positivity movement and its prominent advocates, like Lizzo, as well as many Black women performers' attempts to eschew respectability politics are an important part of this project. These trends highlight contemporary developments around Black women's ability to perform and express their sexuality without contradicting their ability to serve as radical, feminist figures.

Finally, ideas tied to economic growth or wealth, like hustle culture or "the grind," are also relevant for my exploration of the sexual-economic in contemporary popular culture. These ideas are expressed lyrically, but they are also visually represented in the twenty-first century through visual albums and media that offers images of Black royalty, such as "Queen Bey" or Janelle Monáe sitting on a throne in *Dirty Computer* (2018). The push and pull between these images as empowering or liberatory on the one hand and their valuation of financial wealth or socioeconomic hierarchy on the other is critical for thinking about how we see the sexual-economic being negotiated in contemporary popular culture. As I explore twenty-first-century popular culture

projects that riff on blues music and politics in the United States, I draw on Baker's call to anyone attempting an "ideological analysis of expressiveness as a commodity." He writes that any such analysis "should take adequate account of the defining variables in the culture where this commercialization occurs. In Afro-American culture, exchanging words for safety and profit is scarcely an alienating act. It is, instead, a defining act of in expressive culture" (*Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* 196). In the case of this project and the contemporary evolution and presence of Black women's blues music and politics in popular culture, I ask if classic blues performers were "exchanging words for safety and profit," what are contemporary iterations of the blues—across musical performance and film—exchanging their creative expression for now? How do we continue to see "safety and profit" as concerns? For whom are they concerns? And what other additional concerns might we have to contend with today?

This introduction has laid out the historical and contemporary contexts that inform this work, the archives I draw from, and relevant scholarly conversations from, primarily, Music Studies, Black Studies, and Popular Culture Studies. The remaining chapters of this dissertation build on the argument that, in twenty-first-century popular culture in the United States, Black women's blues politics and expressions of the sexual-economic are remixed in order to amplify particular contemporary political investments and to gain cultural capital. The first chapter focuses on Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues* (2008) as a case study for the cooptation of Black women's blues within the context of twenty-first-century popular culture as well as the historical erasure of Black women's performance through figures like Betty Boop. The second chapter focuses on three blues-centric films released in the past fifteen years, *The United States vs. Billie Holiday* (2021), *Bessie* (2015), and *Cadillac Records* (2008), which frame real-life blues figures in ways that open up the relevance of their political, musical, and performative tactics even as they limit them. The

third chapter considers the work of Beyoncé, Janelle Monáe, and Lizzo, arguing that their use of blues tactics places them on a continuum with earlier blues women while still allowing them to speak to contemporary exigencies. The fourth chapter turns to the work of three contemporary Black blues artists, Amythyst Kiah, Adia Victoria, and Shemekia Copeland, arguing that while these blues singers are less widely known than the figures of the previous chapter, they offer unique interpretations of and innovations on classic Black women's blues politics and methods. Finally, the coda explicitly invites the reader's participation and reflection via call and response while synthesizing the dissertation's arguments and the stakes of adopting a critical but unmoored approach to considering Black women's political and artistic labor in contemporary popular culture.

2.0 Chapter One: Nina Borrows the Blues

I came across animator Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues* (2008) when I was going through my own identity crisis of sorts in high school. The film's hybridity in both form and content resonated with what I felt at the time was my less harmonious background—Black and Egyptian—based on the external feedback I received from classmates, friends, and even near-strangers. In many ways, *Sita Sings the Blues* begins this project. Long before it fully took shape, I was writing about the film and, long before that, I was watching it in high school, seeing something seductive in its rebellious traversing of boundaries and collaged animation styles. But just as I thought Paley's methods contained multitudes, an exciting onslaught of visual, literary, and sonic references, it took me years—and a lot of both personal and academic digging—to hear what *wasn't* in the film: the Black women who lived and sang the blues Paley takes for her title. It is no wonder to me now that the film seemed so seductive. Its vision, and Paley's own, of a seemingly boundaryless world in which everything belongs to everyone felt like a rejoinder to those—the classmates, the friends, the strangers—who were intent on policing boundaries. However, rather than being a revolutionary act of freedom, that "boundaryless" fantasy was predicated on the political and artistic contributions as well as erasure of Black blues women who are uncited, not freed, by Paley's film. It is these Black blues women who imagined a radical future and continue to inspire our contemporary visions of freedom, and it is to those Black blues women I dedicate my project.

While it would be difficult to argue that the film's hybrid quality is not dynamic with its musical numbers, collaged animation styles, and overlapping storylines adapted from Paley's own experiences and the ancient Sanskrit epic, the *Ramayana*, Paley's film simultaneously hinges on

and erases the politics of Black blues women of the classic era. Paley, an American cartoonist, animator, director, and self-professed free culture activist, released *Sita Sings the Blues* in 2008. The film translates not just its original source material but the blues itself, mining the sexual politics of Black women's blues to gain a kind of cultural capital within the context of twenty-first-century popular culture. Taking a radically creative approach to adaptation, *Sita Sings the Blues* makes use of the cultural and political associations of Black women's blues music in order to forward its investments and to attain value within the popular culture arena. It relies on the invisible figures of blues women to shore up some of the film's most central investments, such as sexually evocative performance and radical feminism, which it uses to adapt and politically recontextualize the *Ramayana*.

Much has been written about the blues' historical origins, but its formal travel into literature, visual art, and film is also well documented and a central part of the genre's evolution. Even before we reach the twenty-first century which makes up the focus of this project, the blues was adaptive and, much like *Sita Sings the Blues*, used the methods of adaptation to respond to the particularities of its context. For instance, the blues of the 1920s and 1930s, what came to be known as the classic era, borrowed from the subversive tactics of slave music. At the same time, the classic blues discussed topics, like Black people's increased sexual freedom, that were specific to a post-emancipation United States, and even invented new tactics that took into account the growing representation of the individual in Black music as opposed to the primarily communal focus of Black music during slavery. Given this core ability of the blues to adapt and respond to context, it is counterproductive to argue against contemporary adaptations of Black women's blues by positing a stable, original version of the blues frozen in time. That being said, it is worth asking what the diffusion of Black women's blues across time gives rise to as well as erases. The fact that

many of the political challenges of Black women's blues are yet to be realized further raises the stakes of these conversations since those early political imperatives originated in and continue to affect the lives of real people.

An animated film and multimedia mashup, *Sita Sings the Blues* collages together the *Ramayana,* blues music recorded by jazz age singer Annette Hanshaw, and Paley's own semiautobiographical account of the end of her marriage. Written around 500 BCE to 100 BCE, the *Ramayana* tells the story of Prince Rama and his wife, Sita. Rama and Sita are banished from Ayodhya to the forest following the success of Rama's stepmother's plot to be rid of him. Sita is kidnapped by Ravana, forcing Rama to rescue her. Rama is able to rescue Sita and kill Ravana, but Rama forces Sita to prove her chastity by walking through fire. Because the gods are on her side and aware of her fidelity to Rama, Sita survives the walk through fire and she returns with Rama to Ayodhya. At its core, Paley's film follows the same narrative, tying together multiple threads through a set of shared themes: heartbreak, feminist consciousness, and liberatory independence. While the narratives of the film overlap and consistently interrupt each other, there are three discernable "locations" or narrative spaces in the film: Sita and Rama's plot from the *Ramayana,* the modern telling of a struggling marriage, and the meta-narration of Sita's story by a trio of Indian shadow puppets.

Figure 1 Sita and Rama's plot from *Sita Sings the Blues*[2]

Figure 2 Nina Paley's autobiographical plot from *Sita Sings the Blues*[3]

[2] "Rama Hanuman Sita Rain Reflection" by Fred Miller under License CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic.

[3] "Nina and Dave at Airport" by Fred Miller under License CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic.

Figure 3 The *Ramayana*'s meta-narration from *Sita Sings the Blues*[4]

In Paley's rendition of the story, after the couple returns to the palace in Ayodhya, Rama has continued doubts about Sita's fidelity when he finds out that she is pregnant. He orders his brother to abandon Sita in the forest where she eventually gives birth to twin sons and raises them on her own. Many years later, Rama locates his sons when he hears their songs of love for their absent father emanating from the forest. Even after this reunion with his sons and Sita, Rama doubts his wife's purity, leading Sita to beg the earth to swallow her whole as final proof of her devotion. In the modern, semiautobiographical narrative that accompanies this retelling, Nina begins the film living in San Francisco with her husband. After accepting an offer for a six-month job in Trivandrum, India, her husband moves alone. A month later, he contacts Nina to inform her that his work contract has been extended for another year. Nina sublets the apartment and joins her

[4] "Bhavana Sita Contaminated" by Fred Miller under License CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic.

husband in India, but her husband is unenthused by her arrival. When Nina is temporarily in New York, her husband sends her a short e-mail to say that their marriage is over. It is at this point that Nina, heartbroken and alone, begins reading the *Ramayana.*

Despite the flurry of negative and positive reception, less attention has been paid to the blues' presence in Paley's film. Some laud the film for its creative re-envisioning of the *Ramayana,* arguing that its irreverent and satirical handling of its source material promotes radical reinvention and challenges strict understandings of the ancient epic.[5] Others focus on the film's controversial representation of Sita as sexy and curvaceous. Some find Paley's animation of Sita to be offensive while others see Paley's film as a positive, feminist modernization of the Hindu narrative. These conversations, understandably, center on *Sita Sings the Blues*' approach to Hinduism and Indian culture, but the position of the blues in the film and its origins in Black women's politics receives no attention. Paley uses Black women's blues music and politics as the sort of modernizing glue to bridge the *Ramayana* and the contemporary semiautobiographical events of the film.

Sita Sings the Blues is certainly not the first to liberally "borrow" from the political and artistic work of Black blues women. In fact, the film itself points us to another example. Annette Hanshaw, a white American jazz age singer and popular radio star in the 1920s and early 1930s, is the voice that sings the blues in Paley's film. Hanshaw was one of the most prolific recording artists of her time, recording over 200 records between 1926 and 1934. "Black Bottom" was one of her first recordings in 1926 for Pathé, an international record company based in France. The song's title refers to the Black Bottom dance which originated in New Orleans between 1900 and 1910 among Black people who had migrated from the rural South. The dance eventually became

[5] See Asmita Ghosh's "A Feminist Reading of Sita Sings the Blues," https://feminisminindia.com/2016/11/23/sita-sings-the-blues-film-review/

popular all over the country in the 1920s. The dance is also referenced in Ma Rainey's 1920s recording of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" and August Wilson's 1982 play by the same name. In Paley's film, Hanshaw's signature sign-off "That's all!" follows the animated musical numbers. This trademark which ended Hanshaw's recordings led to her voice often being confused with animated cartoon character Betty Boop.[6]

In 1932, Helen Kane sued Max Fleischer, Fleischer Studios, Inc., and the Paramount Publix Corporation, arguing that Betty Boop was an obvious parody of her own baby-voiced singing, seductive dance style, and iconic "boop-boop-a-doop,"—an allusion to sex in Kane's song "That's My Weakness Now"—but the story of the Betty Boop lawsuit and its long, charged history does not stop there. Esther Lee Jones, otherwise known by her stage name, "Baby Esther," was a Black singer and entertainer in the 1920s known for her "baby" singing style. She was referenced in the 1932 lawsuit when her manager accused Kane and *her* manager of copying Jones' style which they saw during one of Jones' performances in 1928, before Betty Boop's debut on August 9, 1930. Kane's manager did corroborate what Jones' said: Kane saw Jones perform in Harlem's Cotton Club in 1928 and heard her iconic "boop-boop-a-doop" which was a reinvention of scatting, a technique popularized by Black singers, like Louis Armstrong, and connected to West African percussive composition. Jones had been training as an entertainer since only four years old in her birthplace of Chicago and, at seven, Jones was already one of the most popular child performers of the time, well known for her scat-inspired singing style. Ultimately, Kane lost the case and Jones' mention in the courtroom proceedings was remembered more as proof that Kane's style was not original to her rather than evidence of the way in which mainstream popular culture was

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[6] Betty Boop was most famously voiced by Mae Questel who began her career as an impersonator in the vaudeville circuit, but Margie Hines first voiced Betty Boop and several other voice actors did so as well before Questel took over as Betty Boop's voice in 1931.

mining—and would continue to mine—Black performers' artistry for the benefit of white studio owners, executives, and performers, like Kane and actress Clara Bow who was also said to have taken her vocal stylings from Jones (Bellot). Ironically, while Kane's lawsuit unintentionally exposed the true origins of Betty Boop's character, this exposure had the effect of giving other studios license to promote and profit off the animated figure without reference to Kane *or* Jones.

Folks, meet Betty Boop (right). You'll be seeing a lot of her because she is the new animated cartoon character who is trying to cut in on Mickey Mouse's popularity. Does she look familiar to you? Now look at little boop-a-dooper Helen Kane. Helen was the cartoonist's inspiration for Betty, the first time a real life character has been used for the popular jumping comics

Figure 4 A 1932 article claiming Helen Kane (left) as the inspiration for Betty Boop[7]

[7] "Helen Kane and Betty Boop – Photoplay, April 1932" by Wikimedia Commons, 01/04/1932. Public Domain.

My use of Betty Boop as an example alongside *Sita Sings the Blues* is not simply a product of Hanshaw's presence in the film via recordings. Both *Sita Sings the Blues* and Betty Boop illustrate a long history of the commodification of Black women's performance through visual and sonic tropes that borrow the cultural value of Black women's work without attention to their creators and the material histories which are foundational to their artistry. Paley's animated version of Sita is strikingly similar to Betty Boop, perhaps not similar enough to be the impetus for a lawsuit, but certainly similar enough to make the argument that Paley's Sita does not exist without Betty Boop who does not exist without Kane who does not exist without Esther Jones. While Paley uses a variety of animation styles, Sita's animation during her musical performances has received the most public attention in terms of Paley's innovative visual style. In these scenes, unlike her representation in the puppet trio's storytelling, which is more akin to traditional artistic renderings, Sita is curvaceous and "'buxom'" (Tripathi). As she sings and dances, her body oscillates in relation to the central pole of her spine and tiny waist from which her hips and breasts extend. The machinations of Sita's animated figure are also tied up in the film's particular feminism that is invested in a kind of radical sensuality and sexual liberation tied to the Black blues woman.

While the animated Sita's form features more exaggerated proportions, her physicality and dance style are reminiscent of Betty Boop's. For instance, in the musical number where Sita performs "Mean to Me," recorded by Hanshaw in 1929, her hips and breasts sway in conjoined movement, her arms periodically aloft, as she vies for Rama's attention and bemoans his harsh treatment. In one moment, she sings while laying atop a piano in a fashion audiences have come to associate with the figure of the seductive jazz age songstress. Across her many popular cartoons, Betty Boop's animated dance style consistently emphasizes the sway of her hips and the curvature of her frame, breasts and hips extended in a way that reflects Sita's animation in Paley's film.

The similarities do not stop there. One of Betty's dance moves involves holding her arms aloft and swaying both her torso and arms in a fluid, wave-like pattern. This move is almost always accompanied by the common melody known as the "Arabian riff," "The Streets of Cairo," "the snake charmer song," or "The Poor Little Country Maid." The melody has come to represent everything from belly dancing to vaguely Middle Eastern or Arab settings across television shows and film. We hear it in Betty Boop's animated cartoon "Is My Palm Read" (1933) as she does the aforementioned dance on her way to see a fortune teller and in "A Language All My Own" (1935) where she performs the same dance on stage in Japan. Just in case we were not sure what culture was being insulted in "A Language All My Own," the cartoon also begins with fortune tellers kneeling and praying on a rug to the silhouetted image of a witch on a broomstick. The specific prayer postures and rug serve as references to Islamic prayer practices with the addition of the witch suggesting that there is something akin to "witchcraft" in these religious traditions. While the "Arabian riff" does not make its way into Paley's film, we do see Sita doing the same dance in "Mean to Me," her arms aloft and swaying as she endures trial by fire at Rama's request to prove her fidelity. The consistent dance style among these examples from Betty Boop and *Sita Sings the Blues* in concert with the variety of geographical locations—a fortune teller's office in, presumably, the United States, a stage in Japan, and a forest in India—collapses these spaces into a repetitive Western-centric aesthetic of exotic otherness.

Along with the dance movements and bodily shapes of Sita and Betty, the coloring of Paley's animation style in "Mean to Me" connects to that of Betty Boop. In "Red Hot Mamma" (1934), Betty falls asleep in front of her lit fireplace and dreams that her fireplace becomes a portal to Hell. Upon entering, Betty discovers some demons. The entirety of "Red Hot Mamma" is in black and white, but the demons Betty encounters are drawn completely black with horns and

pitchforked tails. They operate a chute marked “Freshmen.” As human beings come down the chute, the demons zip them into a white suit adorned with the same horns and tails that the demons sport. We then see the “freshmen” directed to enter a structure marked “Freshmen Hall” where a firetruck, operated by demons, sets the structure ablaze, the once “freshmen” demons now exiting as black as the veteran demons running the show. In the scene where Sita endures trial by fire and performs the dance associated with the “Arabian riff,” sans the melody, she appears almost like a silhouette, but her blackness is meant to signal the effects of the flames that surround her, as in the case of the demons in “Red Hot Mamma.”

Figure 5 Sita's trial by fire from *Sita Sings the Blues*[8]

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[8] “Sita Agni Poster” by Fred Miller under License CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic.

While this visual connection between the animation style of Betty Boop and Paley's Sita may seem superficial, it is these connections that show that Paley's use of the blues is not just for the convenient relevance of blues lyrics to her film's plot. Instead, through the music, animated movements, and visual design, she references an icon of the 1930s who owes her popular performance to the work and artistry of Esther Jones. The artistic legacy that Paley keeps alive in *Sita Sings the Blues* is one where white creators directly benefit from the work of Black women performers without acknowledgement of the origins of these musical or artistic stylings and political practices let alone an offer of credit. The history behind the creation of Betty Boop then inspires not only Paley's aesthetics but her very approach to her inspirational material, an approach that exemplifies the commodification of Black women's music and performance.

Rather than radical homage, Paley's use of Black women's blues politics via the sound of the blues as a cultural and temporal bridge draws on the aesthetic retro "cool" of Black women's blues without engaging its substantial political contributions. In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa explicitly talk about the way in which women of color are used to build alliances between white feminists and women of color feminists in a way that makes their bodies into an inanimate political architecture. The anthology's title comes from Kate Rushin's "The Bridge Poem," which opens "I've had enough / I'm sick of seeing and touching / Both sides of things / Sick of being the damn bridge for everybody" (lines 1-4). The poem's speaker lists multiple ways in which making women of color act as bridges benefits those who do so, citing "connection to the rest of the world," legitimacy, and appearing to be "political and hip." Rushin, Moraga, and Anzaldúa argue for engaging with difference as a critical act of labor that can and perhaps should be, at times, painful or uncomfortable rather than superficial or beneficial only for those in power. Paley's film, in

contrast, sets up women of color—Sita as well as the invisible Black blues woman—as a sustaining resource for white feminists as represented by Paley's semiautobiographical counterpart in the film. While the blues' ability to travel—both geographically and temporally—and transform in order to address a variety of contexts is not new, failing to acknowledge its origins risks erasing the positionalities of the Black women who made the blues famous.

The absent figure of the Black blues woman labors for the film's ideological impulse, but the absent figure is also valuable in terms of the concepts that stick to the Black blues woman's body within the white imaginary. In other words, the political associations that attend the figure of the Black blues woman are what allow the Black blues woman to do work and contribute conceptual labor to a film in which she does not actually exist. Blues sound and its attendant politics are, in other words, able to proceed without the actual presence of any blues women. Critiquing the micropolitics at work in a listener's perception of voice, Nina Sun Eidsheim argues that listening is enculturated. I use Eidsheim's concept of enculturated listening to show how Paley is able to benefit from the sound of the blues without the presence of a blues woman. The sound of the blues in Paley's film allows particular themes and investments into the world of the film, such as the film's sexual politics, because in our enculturated listening to the blues, we hear not just the raw "fact" of the music but the voice of *Black women* blues singers. Enculturated listening strengthens the attachment between the sound of the blues and its associated politics without the presence of its originators in *Sita Sings the Blues*.

Sita Sings the Blues relies on the invisible figures of Black women blues singers to shore up some of the film's most central investments, such as sexually evocative performance as radical feminist practice. The blues is what does the work of building thematic bridges across Paley's collaged narratives and time periods. The sexual politics of the film and their visualization are

central to Paley's reliance on a Black feminist blues politics. Imani Kai Johnson's term "badass femininity"—a "performance that eschews notions of appropriateness, respectability, and passivity demanded by ladylike behavior in favor of confrontational, aggressive, and even outright offensive, crass, or explicit expressions of a woman's strength" (20)—comes from the performances of 1920s blues women. Paley's sexualized animation of Sita in *Sita Sings the Blues* evokes the sexual politics of Black women's blues performance that Johnson discusses in order to draw on its ideological import. Given the work that has been done on Black blues women's politics by scholars of color, it is clear that these ideas have an attachment to a particular artistic tradition, a tradition that, of course, Paley is well aware of given her direct reference to the blues in the film's title.

Paley evokes a sense of mechanical uncanniness through her animation choices and sound design which signals her efforts to modernization the story of the *Ramayana.* During the film's musical numbers, Sita's animated body appears almost marionette-like or as interlocking mechanical parts. This aligns with the dubbing style Paley chooses to use. Hanshaw's recordings retain their gritty, mechanically textured sound, evoking a vintage aesthetic as well as an uncanniness when voiced from a body, although animated, rather than a record. Louis Chude-Sokei links Euro-American modernism to an obsession with the mechanical. He writes, "[the] machine aesthetic [is] produced by and through the West's difficult and ambivalent responses to industrialization, and…would ultimately find its political and social fulfillment in an America that announces its global presence via the language of inevitability, the language of the *new*" (110). Paley enacts this same language of the new in her film, both through her retelling of the *Ramayana* and her uncanny animation style. It is her Americanized telling of Sita's story through her own semiautobiographical plot and the blues as bridge for these narratives that is meant to awaken the

story's radical potential, thus securing a particularly *national* capability for innovation and newness.

Blues women defiantly expressed their sexuality and sexual desire in their music, and this sexual expression is one of the aspects of Black women's blues music and performance that Paley visualizes most clearly in her film. Rather than being only for the purpose of entertainment, this sexual expression in the hands of classic blues women was inherently political. Blues women's sexual politics challenged the respectability politics of the Black women's club movement (Rabaka 8) who saw blues singers' sexual performances, lyrics, and even lifestyles as counterproductive to Black uplift and social reform efforts. Looking to blues women as a precedent for today's Black feminist performers, Shayne Lee traces the roots of respectability politics as it appears in nineteenth-century Black feminist thought to slavery and Black women's forced position as "slave breeders and objects for sexual gratification" (IX). She argues that Black women went on to "de-emphasize their sexuality" (IX) in response to these horrific conditions. Therefore, the common themes of love and sex in Black women's blues music are deeply political even though some listeners may see these themes as insignificant or even "merely" personal. Angela Davis writes, "The historical context within which the blues developed a tradition of openly addressing both female and male sexuality reveals an ideological framework that was specifically African-American. Emerging during the decades following the abolition of slavery, the blues gave musical expression to the new social and sexual realities encountered by African Americans as free women and men" (4).

Among these "new social and sexual realities" was increased freedom to pick ones sexual and/or romantic partners. The historical context through which blues women's post-emancipation vocalizations of sexual desire and satisfaction emerged framed such expressions as distinctly

political. For instance, in Bessie Smith's "Do Your Duty," the singer demands sexual satisfaction, singing "If I call three times a day, baby, come and drive my blues away. When you come, be ready to play. Do your duty." On its face, the word "duty" alone gives the lyric its bold, insistent tone. However, considering the context of slavery in which Black women were forced "slave breeders and objects for sexual gratification" (Lee IX) as well as the continuation of a culture in which women were and are expected to fulfill men's sexual desires while silencing their own, the song's twist on who is expecting and demanding sexual gratification takes a critical stance towards Black women's sexual exploitation and the historical context of that exploitation. Like many other blues songs of the classic era, "Do Your Duty" uses sexual innuendo. For instance, Smith sings "If my radiator gets too hot, cool it off in lots of spots. Give me all the service you've got. Do your duty." Even while innuendo was a common method to disguise references to sexual organs or sexual acts, the sexual theme in the blues music of the classic era still came through loud and clear.

Rather than being a passive tactic, innuendo in fact marks the way in which the blues was borrowing from the musical tactics of enslaved peoples that necessarily used subversive methods to hide messages that promoted freedom, often disguising practical instruction to aid enslaved peoples' escape. While the blues was able to be more explicit than slave music, Black music continued to be policed. Censorship efforts that targeted Black music cited themes like sex and violence to justify their actions, but ultimately, Black music's ability to incite protest and to raise political consciousness was a threat to maintaining an unjust status quo, evidenced by the banning of Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" and later "Gloomy Sunday" whose banning Hattie Gossett references in "billie lives! billie lives." Therefore, the use of innuendo in the blues was two-fold: subversion remained a necessary tactic to hide particular meanings or interpretations from white audiences, but it also connected the blues to the context of slavery, illuminating changes, like

increased sexual freedom, as well as the continuation of racial oppression through issues like economic poverty and the judicial system. While the blues adapted to its context and promoted radical futures, it did not push its audience to forget the "past." In fact, by borrowing from the tactics of slave music, the blues unbounded slavery from the temporally constrained location of the past in a way that allowed listeners to gain a critical, political consciousness around their current circumstances and the violent systems that perpetuated them.

In some instances, the sexual theme in the blues was accompanied by mentions of jealousy and even threats of violent revenge against a cheating partner or "the other woman." For instance, in "Aggravatin' Papa," Bessie Smith sings "Aggravatin' papa, don't you try to two-time me…If you stay out with a high-brown baby, I'll smack you down, and I don't mean maybe…I got a darn forty-four that don't repeat." Jealousy is a common theme in blues music and, while the jealousy theme may appear to perpetuate riffs between Black women, in the case of "Aggravatin' Papa," it highlights colorism and the post-emancipation context of the classic blues. Following emancipation in the United States, questions of Black subjecthood and how to navigate individual needs versus those of the community took on new meaning under changed and changing circumstances. Therefore, lyrics that appear to sacrifice the communal for the jealous needs of the individual actually speak to the complex social circumstances of Black life and community-building in the United States after emancipation.

The voicing of individual needs—even and especially when in conflict with other individuals in the community—challenges the expectation that a community might think and move as a mass or unit. In this way, Black women blues singers asserted their individualism as they navigated forms of both community solidarity and individual freedom in a post-emancipation United States. In other words, the forwarding of the individual, in the case of Black women's blues, as distinct

subject rather than part of an entity categorized by race and gender *is* political. This is not to say that the blues binarized the individual and the community. Blues singer's particular form of audience address often connected the singer's individual struggles to those of the larger community and did not entirely dismiss collectivity or collective concerns, but Black blues women's willingness to voice their individuality—even "violently"—was an assertion of their complex subjecthood.

The blues' approach to subjects like colorism, sexual desire, and jealousy was informed by the material lives of Black women and the reality of intersectionality. While the blues may resonate widely, Paley borrows it without context, erasing its center in the lives, contexts, and histories of Black women. The blues, even in its capacity as entertainment, arises from the particular struggles of its most famous women practitioners and a politics that challenged externally-imposed limitations on their freedoms and artistic, as well as sexual, expression. While Black blues women might be made invisible within Paley's film, the blues' association with blackness is still doing work for the film by evoking a sort of cultural alterity. Rather than provoking a critical contextualization of the lived lives that Paley's borrowed blues comes from, its presence in the film acts more as a sign of cultural "cool" that gives Paley "racial capital" as a white feminist. Within the world of *Sita Sings the Blues*, it is Paley's stand-in that benefits from the cultural production of people of color through blues music and Sita's story in the *Ramayana.*

Applying Nancy Leong's concept of "identity capitalism" sheds light on how Paley is able to benefit from her capitalist exploitation and erasure of Black women blues singers. Paley is part of the ingroup whose members, for Leong, already benefit from their identity and further benefit from their association or proximity to members of the outgroup. The exploitative relationship between the ingroup and the outgroup is what Leong ultimately calls "identity capitalism" with "identity

capitalists" being "ingroup members who profit from outgroup identity" (*Identity Capitalists* 3). While Leong is coming from a legal studies perspective and calls for explicit policies to decrease identity capitalism, her case studies are wide ranging and relevant to Paley's own role as an identity capitalist. For instance, Leong argues that Nike's use of Colin Kaepernick, activist and former football quarterback, in their advertisements following Kaepernick's public advocacy for Black rights and his association with the Black Lives Matter movement is an instance of identity capitalism (32).

Many of Leong's examples hinge on the racial identity of the outgroup member alone, but in the case of Kaepernick, part of what Nike is profiting from is not just Kaepernick's identity as a Black man but his political associations. In other words, while it could still be identity capitalism, if Nike used Kaepernick in their advertisements *before* the controversy of his public activism, they would gain a related but different form of cultural capital since his image would not explicitly carry the particular political associations it would following his activism. Similarly, Paley is profiting off the political associations that attend the blues as a result of their origins in the work of Black women singers. Rather than featuring an individual Black woman in the film, as would be the case for many of Leong's examples, *Sita Sings the Blues* exploits the sound of the blues and the appearance of its performative gestures, like sexually evocative movement, for its political associations. While Leong's argument hinges on the presence of an outgroup member, I argue that it is the *erasure* of Black blues women in *Sita Sings the Blues* that constitutes the film's relationship to identity capitalism. Expanding Leong's argument to include instances in which visual, sonic, or even physical gestures associated with or invented by outgroup members or communities work under the theoretical rubric of identity capitalism broadens conversations about capitalist cooptation of cultural signifiers in the twenty-first century.

Thinking through these stakes regarding capital in connection to the film becomes increasingly complex when we turn to the copyright controversy that has surrounded Paley since the film's release. The homepage of the film's website immediately displays a letter on the film's copyright policy signed by Paley. Paley knew when she started making the film that using old music would present a problem for her. Disregarding the advice of legal experts, Paley chose to use the Hanshaw recordings and make the film as she wanted to. Ultimately, she released the film for free after becoming fed up with the bureaucratic maze of copyright law. Paley speaks at length on her website about her justification for making the film completely free. Her letter on the film's website reads, "I hereby give *Sita Sings the Blues* to you. Like all culture, it belongs to you already, but I am making it explicit with a…CC-0 license…Please distribute, copy, share, archive, and show *Sita Sings the Blues*. From the shared culture it came, and back into the shared culture it goes."

It is true that the legal system is itself already built off denying marginalized people rights. However, Paley's definitions of art, ownership, and "shared culture," ultimately erase the contexts that the art she uses as her inspiration is coming from. As we have learned from the example of Betty Boop, she is neither the only one nor the first. This becomes particularly problematic in relation to the "you" of Paley's letter: "Like all culture, it belongs to *you* already" [emphasis added]. Who is the "you" in this case? When Paley uses the word "art" and "culture," she is referring to *her* film, but this fails to consider the other pieces of art or culture that are clearly being used as source material within it. The hierarchy that Paley sets up between the legal system and "the people" elides the context of historical and systemic oppression that affects people—creators especially—of color. While dreams of a society less dominated by the capitalist structures of ownership and possession are not without their merit, when these ideals come into play on a larger

level and are voiced by white creators, it is not unusual for the work of Black creators to become the artistic fodder that is now freely available to all. Paley's narration of her copyright battle successfully and conveniently positions her as marginal, thereby foreclosing questions about her own privilege.

Even though the film's title immediately signals its literal use of the blues, uncovering the way in which the figure of the Black blues woman is doing labor for the film requires an understanding of the blues in relation to Black feminist praxis. While Paley chooses to use Hanshaw as the musical voice of Sita, the blues cannot be disentangled from the Black women performers and recording artists that capitalized on the music, transformed its political register, and dominated the radio and recording industry in the 1920s before being marginalized in the 1930s when male country blues overtook the market (Davis xix). While men as well as white women have certainly sung the blues, the iteration of the blues that Paley borrows and makes Sita the mouthpiece of is one directly tied to Black women. In the hands of Black women performers, the blues took on a different cadence. It is through Black women blues singers that the blues becomes, among other things, an expression of the complex and often contradictory emotional terrain of romantic relationships, an archive of Black women's suffering and abuse, and an exploratory site of sexual play and desire.

While I am not invested in arguing for an originary or authentic version of Black women's blues music, part of what is at stake is forgetting. Jennifer Nash argues that intersectionality has been put to work for women's studies' program-building within the academy and that this disciplinary use is what shapes intersectionality's institutional life most (2). For Nash, the burden placed on intersectionality has also resulted in Black feminists' drive to defend, protect, and, ultimately, claim ownership of the concept. Nash sees Black feminist defensiveness as the primary

affective posture towards intersectionality, stating that this defensive attachment to intersectionality ends up "leaving black feminists mired in policing intersectionality's usages, demanding that intersectionality remain located within black feminism, and reasserting intersectionality's 'true' origins in black feminist texts" (3). Nash urges Black feminist academics to release this "holding on" to intersectionality and to instead "let go" in order to allow Black feminism to unleash its "visionary world-making capacities" (3). This sort of letting go is complex when it comes to Paley's film because it seems to allow her to forget the blues' origins in Black women's creative and intellectual labor just enough to permit her to make the arguments she does about ownership. However, she also conveniently remembers the politics that get attached to the blues *via* their origins and context which she uses to impart value on *Sita Sings the Blues*.

Nash's arguments are focused on an academic landscape in which terms like intersectionality are repurposed for institutional aims, but my argument requires that we are attuned to the way in which the political associations of particular sounds, in this case the blues, are vulnerable to being lifted as well. This kind of sonic slipperiness of the blues, I argue, is a double-edged sword: giving it the ability to adapt and transform as it enters new geographical, temporal, political, and even technological contexts but also putting it at risk for commodification that waters down, or at worst erases, its radical roots and provocations. Perhaps what is required when it comes to the blues is an approach that is not quite letting go nor holding on since rigid arguments about the blues' meaning only dampen the dynamism of its evolving and subversive techniques. To listen with a critical but open ear allows us to hear what is already there, even if buried, like the boop-boop-a-doop that was always Esther Jones, but to also let sound in, to hear anew as we turn our attention to the blues' continued relevance in popular culture and to our own associations with a genre so foundational for art and politics. In this flow of sound that invites a

more moving or unmoored orientation towards blues politics, that requires that we readjust in parallel to the blues' own movements across time and space, we can simultaneously hold on to the still too often silenced contributions of blues women while letting go of how and where the blues must sound.

3.0 Chapter Two: The Blues as Biopic

I barely made it through *Nina* (2016), Cynthia Mort's biopic on Nina Simone. I shared my play-by-play experience of watching the film on social media, expressing my outrage, and even ran to my record player seconds after the film ended to play Simone's 1967 album *Silk & Soul* as if to cleanse my palette. The controversy of casting Zoe Saldana as Simone is well-known and that plus the darkening of Saldana's skin and the application of her prosthetic nose certainly disturbed me, but I was also upset by the film's failure to capture Simone's radical political legacy as a Black woman singer who carried on and evolved the political urgencies of Black women's classic blues music. Some of the issues I perceived with the film felt *so* "Hollywood"—the inclusion of a fictional central male character, the use of Martin Luther King Jr.'s image to seemingly represent all Black activist efforts and movements in the United States—but amongst these more systemic concerns was the personal, the fear that the most intimate, preserved version of Nina I held in my mind would be tainted in such a way that I could not return to it again.

Running to my record player was my own attempt to stage such a return and seek refuge there. However, I argue that return is not the most generative route to take towards the blues given the blues' inherent capacity for evolution. Without that evolution, we do not have different blues eras to talk about. We certainly do not have the classic blues era of the 1920s and 1930s, which this project focuses on alongside twenty-first-century popular culture, since the classic blues was evidence of the blues' evolutionary ability. The classic blues responded to changing conditions for Black people in the United States, particularly following emancipation and the Great Migration. These changing conditions are archived through classic blues' depiction of working-class life, the urban environment of the city, the train as a symbol of both mobility and abandonment, and

increased freedom around choosing one's sexual partners. One could even make the argument that without evolution we do not get the blues at all since it evolved, in part, from slave music. More recently, the blues has evolved to inspire other musical genres such as R&B, rock, and rap. This problem of return is at the core of the question of how we openly observe the blues' contemporary evolutions in popular culture while maintaining not only an awareness but a living relationship with its origins and originators—many of whom issued political calls that I argue we have yet to realize and still demand our attention today.

In *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality,* Jennifer Nash advocates that Black feminist scholars let go of a sense of ownership over an authentic version of the concept of intersectionality in the context of its perceived translation and utilization across the university, from academic departments to administrative offices. Nash argues that Black feminists' primary affective relationship to the subsumption of intersectionality in the academy, and Women's Studies in particular, is one of defensiveness or of "holding on." Defensiveness is a common affective position when it comes to current conversations in the blues community as well. The debate between Black bluesism and blues universalism which Adam Gussow discusses in *Whose Blues? Facing Up to Race and the Future of Music* is evidence of this defensiveness since advocates for blues universalism, primarily white blues musicians, are offended when race is brought up in relation to the genre. Gussow argues that their more pastoral conception of the blues as an avenue for escape contrasts with those that back Black bluesism, arguing that the blues' ties to Black oppression and struggle in the United States cannot be overstated and that that history informs who can and cannot play the music authentically today. The defensiveness Nash identifies is tied up in a sort of melancholy as well. She writes,

> If black feminist theory enabled the field [of Women's Studies] to "progress," and if black feminist theory's main contribution was a demand for inclusion, then the labor of the field is complete and black feminist theory is no longer relevant or required in the way it once was. As [Claire] Hemmings suggests, the underside of progress is also loss, a melancholic sense that the imagined demands of black feminism, and of black women, have produced the loss of the simplistic and coherent category of gender as the centerpiece of our work (15).

I argue that a similar melancholic attitude is common when considering the blues' evolution, or what some might see as its dissolution, in contemporary popular culture. The title of this dissertation references that melancholy in working doubly to signal the blues' changing as well as a type of blues feeling that arises from that changing, i.e. having or being afflicted with the changing blues. It should not be surprising that a similar melancholy is at work when we consider the fact that the blues and its attendant politics are, like intersectionality, foundational in Black feminist thought. While Nash's context is academic and mine is rooted in popular culture, Black feminist contributions, whether scholarly or artistic, are vulnerable to assimilation and erasure, making a defensive reaction on the part of Black feminists understandable.

It is my hope that this dissertation and its various archives—classic and contemporary—provide evidence for the generative capacity of adopting a more unmoored approach to the blues as opposed to a melancholic posture. Such an unmoored approach is inspired by Nash's own arguments, but I depart from Nash in my approach to origin stories. Nash critiques origin stories for the way in which they posit a "correct" reading of foundational Black feminist theories, such

as intersectionality. She writes, "Origin stories work by presuming that intersectionality emerged not through debate or collaboration but through a *singular* voice, historical moment, or foundational text. In this way, origin stories are distinct from intellectual genealogies that trace how concepts emerge from multiple traditions or that analyze how different theoretical traditions treat the same concept differently" (39). While Nash is discussing the origin stories told about intersectionality within an academic context, origin stories are also relevant when it comes to discussing blues music and its twenty-first-century iterations. For the blues, origin stories can frame earlier eras of the music as more authentic. In the face of seeming contradictions, like today's wealthy popular singers riffing on a genre of music made famous by working-class women, we might lean on origin stories to avoid navigating the complexity of such contradictions.

Despite these pitfalls, I argue that blues origin stories do not have to be left behind for the future of Black feminist theory. Rather, origin stories can be opened up rather than abandoned to re-enliven political exigencies, to make contemporarily urgent past methods and lessons. Inspired by Nash's discussion of the risks of trapping oneself in a defensive position but also with an awareness of the blues' very real vulnerability to being codified, commodified, or erased in ways which are dangerous for its still relevant and not fully realized political projects, I advocate for a double-handed approach to thinking about the blues in popular culture and our contemporary moment. As we use one hand to remember the blues' origins and the struggles of its creators who were, primarily, Black working-class women, I invite us to, simultaneously, use the other to remain fluid and moving in our relationship to the blues in contemporary culture, celebrating its adaptive ability and inherent capacity for evolution.

Along with *Nina* in 2016, Hollywood's screens have notably featured a multitude of Black blues women in the past fifteen years with *Cadillac Records* (2008), featuring Beyoncé Knowles

as Etta James, Queen Latifah portraying Bessie Smith in *Bessie* (2015), the 2020 film adaptation of August Wilson's play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* with Viola Davis as Ma Rainey, and finally Andra Day playing Billie Holiday in *The United States vs. Billie Holiday* (2021). It is worth asking what these films tell us about the public representation and consumption of famous—often framed as famously tragic—Black women in popular culture and our renewed interest in the blues woman in the twenty-first century. This trend of blues biopics or films centering blues women has proliferated alongside recently released television shows that feature non-law-abiding women characters. These characters are intentionally represented as relatable, even unremarkable, making their criminal adventures all the more unexpected. Shows like *Good Girls* (2018) and *Dead to Me* (2019)—a kind of modern-day *Thelma & Louise* (1991)—frame their main ensembles or duos as resistant feminists that challenge societal expectations about well-behaved women. Both shows mentioned above feature a majority white cast. Of the three leading women in *Good Girls*, one is Black, played by Ruby Hill, and in *Dead to Me*, the two white leads are occasionally aided off-the-record by a police officer, played by Dominican American actress Diana-Maria Riva.

Both these recent television shows and recent films featuring radically unruly blues women appear to be part of the same pattern and public interest in entertainment centered on resistant women. However, these television shows frame their white leads as universal stand-ins for women who find themselves—whether intentionally or unintentionally—at odds with the legal system. They offer an acontextual, colorblind fantasy which flattens racial difference as it relates to differences in legal consequences and treatment. Blues-centric films that frame blues women's politics as relevant only to past oppression preserve the fantasy represented by television shows like *Good Girls* and *Dead to Me* since they draw a distinction between past and present, allowing the present to represent fully realized progress while the past appears passed. Ultimately, the

preservation of such fantasies is unsuccessful if we read against them with an awareness of the historical context through which Black women's political resistance and survival methods arose in the United States and the relevance of blues women's politics in our contemporary moment. Respectability politics is one such Black survival method that arose as part of an effort to gain legitimacy and opportunities for upward mobility post-emancipation. Much of what counted as respectable behavior was, importantly, defined in opposition to racist stereotypes like sexual obsession and promiscuity. For Black women, in particular, such stereotypes were connected to conditions under slavery in which their bodies were violently conscripted into the perpetuation of slavery's system. Downplaying or eschewing any form of sexual expression was, therefore, a political method responsive to such a history.

Blues women took a different route, resistively celebrating and performing their sexuality in ways which challenged respectability politics and the lack of sexual freedom under slavery. Scholars like L. Michael Gipson have observed a gradual dismissal of respectability politics in popular music and performance today, citing the difference between Beyoncé's earlier work and her 2013 Super Bowl performance as evidence. Since blues women, famously, challenged respectability politics, they make productive models for a contemporary interest and trend—at least one being played out in popular performance as noted by Gipson—towards eschewing respectability politics' conservative parameters. That being said, biopics are, of course, creative accounts of historical narratives. Biopic filmmakers make intentional choices in regard to the framing of their subjects and stories in the same way filmmakers in any genre do. Therefore, the biopics I explore in this chapter are not and cannot be read as simple or straightforward representations of the lives of blues women. Instead, they are crafted, negotiated images of these blues women, pushed and pulled to highlight this and diminish that. The mere fact of their being

crafted images is not an issue. Instead, I argue that their craftedness makes these biopics particularly generative for exploring contemporary understandings and uses of blues women's politics and their relevance to our present moment.

I argue that *The United States vs. Billie Holiday*, *Bessie*, and *Cadillac Records* frame historical blues women in ways that open up their relevancy and usefulness even as they also restrict them. Some of these films reify problematic myths about Black blues women's place in the genre's history while others highlight lesser known and explored aspects of the lives and music of Black blues women. While none of these films offer an identical representation of blues women, they all speak to how Black women's artistic and political contributions are framed, codified, opened, and restricted in contemporary popular film. As we attempt to hear the blues in a different way—a way that remembers its origins while also celebrating its evolution—these filmic framings offer us interpretations of past blues women's political and artistic impact to read through and even against in order to illuminate not only the radical lessons of musical icons like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Etta James, and Billie Holiday but also the contemporary methods that marginalize or erase the political relevancy of these figures. *Cadillac Records* takes an ensemble-based approach towards its representation of historical blues figures, like Etta James, Muddy Waters, Willie Dixon, Chuck Berry, and Little Walter, but the film's narration of the blues is heavily male-dominated with women often being framed as the sexual rewards of impressive musical skill on the part of male blues musicians. Alternatively, *Bessie* does emphasize how multiple aspects of Bessie Smith's and Ma Rainey's identities, such as their sexuality, impacted the oppressions the two iconic blues stars faced. The film also examines how both women incorporated the politics of these identities into their respective blues performances. *The United States vs. Billie Holiday* evokes the real world outside of the film by casting singer Andra Day as Billie Holiday. Day's casting as

Holiday explicitly places her on a continuum with earlier blues women. Therefore, rather than relegating its depiction of Black women performers to the past, the film's casting evokes a sense of living legacy.

Hattie Gossett's poem "billie lives! billie lives," published in Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga's 1981 anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, exemplifies how past blues women can still offer us political lessons even after the height of their popularity. In Gossett's poem, the past is not past/passed. The speaker imagines a house where Billie Holiday lives across or beyond time with other Black women figures , such as Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Dinah Washington, and Fannie Lou Hamer. Referring to Holiday's 1941 recording of "Gloomy Sunday" with OKeh Records, Gossett writes, "the record was taken off the radio the last time but we have developed some other methods." In placing the poem's speaker in a temporal continuum with Holiday, Gossett frames Holiday and her legacy as still relevant while also acknowledging the continued and developing work of Black feminists fighting for radical change. This continuum allows for the sharing of knowledge: "when i go see [billie] i am gonna ask her if she could give some of us weekly lessons cuz i know some other sisters that want to learn how to use their voices the same way billie did on this record." Rather than being a static homage to Billie Holiday, "billie lives! billie lives" highlights how Holiday's sound can still serve as a provocation for political action.

In contrast, many films about legendary, real-life blues singers frame their work as past, as important but not necessarily presently productive history. One of the central ways in which these films flatten the political contributions of past blues women is through superficializing their politics as non-intersectional. In fact, some of the films I discuss in this chapter, such as *Cadillac Records*, appear to find difficulty in representing more than one positionality at once. Others, like

Bessie, highlight intersectional aspects of blues women's lives and work in ways which are not often depicted on a Hollywood screen. The sexual-economic as intersectional blues legacy and framework for radical political consciousness pushes back on non-intersectional representations of past blues women. While biopics as a genre may convey or set up an expectation for a sense of truth, they, of course, involve creative license from the outset, but the directions in which this creative license is taken can be impacted by a variety of pressures from wanting to pay respect to the biopic's central figure/s to wanting to uphold national narratives. My intent is not to argue that a biopic can be or even should be objectively "truthful." "billie lives! billie lives" intentionally frames Billie Holiday in a particular way as much as any of the biopics I discuss in this chapter frame their central character/s in particular ways. Instead, I argue that by being conscious of the way in which these biopics frame blues women and their lives in relation to the sexual-economic, we can become more conscious of how Black women's blues politics are represented even as they are restricted within popular culture.

3.1 Bessie

The blues is not about people knowing you. It's about you knowing people.[9]

Directed by Dee Rees, *Bessie* tells the story of Tennessee-born blues legend Bessie Smith. Nicknamed the "Empress of the Blues," Smith was born in 1894 or 1895 and died in 1937. She was born into poverty along with six other siblings, but after her parents died when she was young, Smith and her brother, Andrew, worked as street performers to make money. Ma Rainey first heard Smith singing in a musical troupe with her brother, Clarence, and invited her to join her traveling show. While *Bessie* tells the story of Bessie Smith, the film also highlights the simultaneously nurturing and competitive relationship between Smith and Rainey. As a traveling performer during the 1920s, Smith was part of the vaudeville circuit, so her performances involved the kind of multi-entertainment indicative of vaudeville shows that include humor, dancing, and singing. The advent of recording and the invention of "race records," which were made by Black artists and marketed to an audience of primarily Black listeners, impacted these traveling shows since now audiences could listen to the blues in the comfort of their own homes. Although Smith's first contract with Columbia Records paid her less than white performers, she was the highest-paid Black performing artist in the United States during the 1920s. Unfortunately, many Black women blues singers, like Smith, lost popularity with the start of the Great Depression which marked an interest in Black male blues singers and record companies beginning to cater to white audiences who were listening to jazz more than the blues. While Smith was able to adapt her repertoire to include more jazz

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[9] Bessie. Directed by Dee Rees, performances by Queen Latifah, Kamryn Johnson, and Rikki McKinney, HBO Films, 2015.

songs, she retained her Southern style which was no longer attractive to listeners and, therefore, record companies and other performance venues. Smith performed more in New York City during the 1930s at famous locations, like the Apollo and the Cotton Club. Rees' film follows Smith's mentorship and friendship with Ma Rainey, her trajectory from amateur performer to icon, her romantic and sexual relationships with both women and men, her experience of colorism in the entertainment industry, her first recordings, her interactions with key players in the Harlem Renaissance, and the later rejection of her music due to its "folksy" sound.

Figure 6 "Empress of the Blues" Bessie Smith (1894-1937)[10]

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[10] "[Portrait of Bessie Smith] – Public domain portrait print" by Library of Congress, 01/01/1936. For publication information see "Carl Van Vechten Photographs (Lots 12735 and 12736)" http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/res/079_vanv.html.

Figure 7 "Mother of the Blues" Ma Rainey (1886-1939)[11]

Like *Cadillac Records*, *Bessie* gives us an extended history of the music industry's innovations and shifts over time. Early scenes in the film show the era of the blues' exclusively live performance: Bessie, bathed in blue light and in front of a cheering crowd on stage; Ma Rainey on stage as a younger, admiring Bessie watches; Bessie navigating the exploitation of theater owners and the demands of live performance which she summarizes by telling an amateur performer that she has "got to be able to sing, dance, and tell a damn joke or two" to be in her

[11] "Ma Rainey" by Wikimedia Commons, 1920. Public Domain.

show; and Ma and Bessie traveling their tour route via train, a foundational symbol of the era's performance landscape. Later, we see Bessie contending with changes to the music industry and performance methods. For instance, we see the increasing professionalization of the blues as represented by the Black-owned record companies like Black Swan Records and the advent of race record divisions from companies like Columbia Records. Despite her initial criticism that these recording companies represent "store-bought blues," Bessie changes her tune when Black Swan Records expresses interest in having her audition for them. The record label ultimately rejects her due to her "downhome sound," implying that her folk blues emphasizes an outdated or "backwards" rurality that will not contribute to the project of racial uplift. Later, Mr. Walker, a representative from Columbia Records, offers Bessie a deal to record for their new race record division: $50 a side and "no royalties of course." Eventually, he increases the deal to $125 a side, prompting Bessie to sign on, but the film still makes a point to illustrate how record companies and producers cheated Black artists out of profit by withholding royalties, knowing that these artists would be successful enough to incur a significant amount of money via royalties if they accrued them. While race records did create space and opportunity for Black music and its eventual decline and integration had consequences for Black artists, *Bessie* shows the nuances of race records' promises—some fulfilled and some withheld.

Through its depiction of sexuality and colorism, the film allows us to see how blues women's personal experiences, navigations, and understandings of the sexual-economic—both liberating and restrictive—impacted their more public politics and daily political practices. Patricia Hill Collins argues that this connection between experience and political consciousness is a key facet of Black feminism. She writes that Black feminist thought is not "knowledge for knowledge's sake…Black feminist thought must be tied to Black women's lived experiences and aim to better

those experiences in some fashion" (31). While it was not named as such during the 1920s and 1930s, the classic blues was Black feminist in its method of developing political theory from the everyday experiences of Black women. While blues women did craft their music with artistic intention, the blues cannot be untethered from the material circumstances it arose from and spoke to. Not only did blues women discuss issues clearly relevant to Black feminism, the very way in which they vocalized those issues, raising their audience's political consciousness through centering lived—often painful—experiences, resonates with Black feminism's emphasis on developing theory and political practice from the personal. As a key aspect of both our contemporary understanding of Black feminism and the political and musical practices of classic blues women, the politicizing of the personal has radical potential in our present moment. By highlighting this aspect of the classic blues, Rees' *Bessie* frames the genre and the practices of its earlier singers as still relevant for political organizing today. In doing so, blues women's lives become more than spectacle for modern audiences. They offer the kind of lessons we can use today just as the speaker of "billie lives! billie lives" suggests. In the film, these lessons arise from the sexual-economic and are represented through sexuality and colorism in particular.

Smith was a staunch critic of colorism, particularly in the entertainment industry, and the 2015 film shows how theater owners during the early stages of Bessie's career rejected her and many other performers in favor of lighter-skinned ones. The depiction of colorism in *Bessie* directly speaks to blues women's understanding of the sexual-economic since problematic ideas around who was considered desirable or attractive to audiences influenced—and still influences—who received work as a performer and, therefore, benefited economically. In the beginning of the film, Bessie is administered the "paper bag test" by a theater director who, after holding up a paper bag to Bessie's face, tells her that she must be "lighter than [it]." It is the first mention of colorism

in the film and the only direct mention of colorism in the three films discussed in this chapter. Later, once Bessie has gained more success as a performer and is now in the position to hold auditions herself for her own show, we see her appear to administer the same test to a would-be member of her show. This time though the paper bag test requires that the test-taker be darker, not lighter, than the bag. Bessie tells the auditioner that there will be "No yellow bitches!" in her show.

Following this scene, Lucy, Bessie's lover, asks Bessie how she would feel if Lucy did not pass Bessie's version of the paper bag test. In other words, how would Bessie feel if her lover was light-skinned? Bessie says, "It wouldn't matter about your color." In what is a brief amount of time relative to the film's entire runtime of 115 minutes, *Bessie* provides an example of how sexual and economic concerns are tied as well as how blues women, like Smith, integrated their firsthand experiences of the sexual-economic into their political practice. The paper bag test's particular form of discrimination ties one's skin color to their perceived attractiveness or lack of attractiveness to potential audiences and, thereby, ties that to the performer's access to economic opportunities. The paper bag test then can be seen as a manifestation of sexual-economic oppression. Bessie, of course, critically reverses the colorist framework of the paper bag test to instead prioritize darker skinned performers in her own show, using her platform to speak back to discrimination in the entertainment industry and give performers an opportunity who may not have as many otherwise. By bringing the issue of colorism into Bessie's bedroom when Lucy questions Bessie about her position in relation to Lucy's own skin color and their relationship, the film represents colorism as not just a public issue but a private, intimate one. In this case, the issue is tied up in access to financial opportunities for Black women performers, but it is also tied up in Bessie's sexual life as represented by the film.

Bessie immediately frames blues women's expressions of sexual desire as relevant to contemporary political practice. Historically, blues women did not adhere to the rigid, conservative sexual politics of most middle-class to upper-class Black women in the United States. As staunch critics of the Black women's club movement, which promoted more conservative sexual politics in the name of racial uplift and respectability, blues women radically and boldly practiced their own sexual politics in both their daily lives and in their music. Following the film's title card, we follow the camera's movement in a single shot that takes us from the stage to backstage to the alley immediately outside of the theater. This fluid movement, as exemplified by the use of a single shot, connects Bessie's professional career to her life "backstage." This proximity between the stage and the alley where we first see Bessie maps a route between blues women's performance and their personal experiences. In the alley, we see Bessie making out with a man. Bessie is enjoying herself until the man says "Just let me put it in." Bessie responds, "No, I think it's fine just where it is," but the man insists, becoming aggressive with Bessie and grabbing her more forcefully until he, ultimately, slaps her. Bessie picks up a shard of glass from a broken bottle and stabs the man with it, saying "Don't mean I don't want to mess around a little bit. I just didn't want to do all of that."

By allowing for the simultaneity of Bessie's sexual desire *and* her right to say no, the film does not frame her assault as a product of her sexual desire. The respectability politics of the Black women's club movement, while, in part, reactive to white-authored prejudices about Black people and their sexual practices, was predicated on the implication that to publicly or "inappropriately" express sexual desire was to *allow* yourself to be vulnerable to such attacks like the one Bessie receives at the beginning of the film. In the face of these more conservative ideas, blues women's performance of their sexual desire as well as their refusal to give up their right to fight back, even

when that meant engaging in so-called violent behavior, was political. This historical context is crucial for understanding not just why this early scene in *Bessie* encompasses so much of what makes Black women's blues politics radical but also why what bell hooks refers to as "violence" in Beyoncé's 2016 visual album *Lemonade* has a more critical potential given the blues history it draws on. In other words, the film's representation of blues politics does much more than just show modern audiences what the past politics were of these historical figures. It allows those modern audiences to see what those politics were and how they *remain* relevant to us today for our own political practice just as the speaker of "billie lives! billie lives" seeks out the passed/past Billie Holiday to learn lessons that will benefit the speaker's contemporary moment.

In contrast to other blues biopics, *Bessie* integrates Smith's sexuality into the film, showing not only her sexual and romantic relationships with both men and women but also how her sexual identity aligned her with other blues women, like Ma Rainey, and fostered a community of mutual support and resistance to heteronormative imperatives. In doing so, *Bessie* forwards blue women's politics, representing sexuality and its expression as political instead of depicting sexuality purely as entertainment for modern audiences. Importantly, Bessie and Ma's queerness is represented as a shared knowledge between the two women. We see this several times in the film. In the first instance, Bessie, still an amateur performer in the film, has just seen Ma perform and, following the performance, goes to her train car, determined to join Ma's traveling show. As the two talk, a topless woman walks in. Before leaving, Ma asks her, "Where you going without my sugar though?" The woman kisses Ma first on the cheek and then on the lips. Ma asks Bessie, who has been watching the interaction, "What you know about it?" Bessie responds with a smile and says "Same thing you know about it." This moment emphasizes not just a shared sexuality but a shared

knowledge that arises from the two women's romantic and sexual relationships with women. The repeated use of the word "know" frames these relationships as a kind of knowledge.

In her introduction to *Critical Inquiry*'s special issue on intimacy, Lauren Berlant argues that intimacy's movement has been constricted by hegemonic stories about how it moves. She writes,

> What if we saw [intimacy] emerge from much more mobile processes of attachment? While the fantasies associated with intimacy usually end up occupying the space of convention, in practice the drive toward it is a kind of wild thing that is not necessarily organized that way, or any way. It can be portable, unattached to a concrete space: a drive that creates space around it through practices (284).

In *Bessie*, intimacy is a constellation. Ma and Bessie's sexual and romantic relationships with women connects them in intimacy not just to those women but to each other. As Berlant says, their intimacy "creates space," a space in which Ma and Bessie share a form of knowledge that resists hegemonic, heteronormative stories about intimacy's expected routes. Rather than relegating Ma and Bessie's queerness to the spectacular or framing it as simply a "scandalous" secret, we see how this initial conversation between Ma and Bessie gives rise to the women's sharing of other forms of knowledge. For instance, Ma begins bringing Bessie to her meetings with theater owners to teach Bessie the ropes and to warn her about how music industry figures will attempt to exploit her. While Ma and Bessie's relationship, ultimately, goes through ups and downs in the film, the two continue to share a sense of intimacy and, importantly, that intimacy is achieved through sharing knowledge paramount to their sexual-economic survival.

The film's representation and centering of the relationship between Smith and Rainey contrasts other filmic depictions of blues women. For instance, Cynthia Mort's 2016 biopic on Nina Simone, *Nina*, fictionalizes a romantic relationship between singer Nina Simone and Clifton Henderson, the man who was Simone's nurse, then assistant, and eventual manager. Lisa Simone Kelly, Nina Simone's daughter, has publicly criticized the film and this storyline, saying that Henderson was gay and, while he was a close confidant of Simone's, was never involved in a romantic or sexual relationship with her. In fictionalizing a relationship between Simone and Henderson, *Nina* erases Henderson's sexuality while also creating a heteronormative romantic storyline for the film to fulfill the demands of a classic Hollywood story.

While we do see Bessie engaged in sexual and romantic relationships with men in Rees' film, her relationships—both sexual and non-sexual—with other women are a critical part of the narrative. Tammy Kernodle argues, in popular culture, Black women are consistently depicted as being in competitive, antagonistic relationships with one another. Kernodle says that this depiction has resulted in the erasure of Black women jazz musicians within music history and writing. She identifies the "exceptional woman narrative" as part of this exclusion since it centers one incredibly talented woman musician at the expense of others as if there can only be one. In Bessie, we do see Ma and Bessie's relationship weaken as the two become more competitive with one another. As Bessie's fame grows, so does Ma's jealousy. In one scene, Bessie and Ma are performing together on stage when Bessie moves in front of Ma, taking the spotlight to the sound of the crowd's wild applause. The seeds of jealousy are obvious on Ma's face as she stands behind Bessie. The two later get into an argument on the train following this performance and, eventually, part ways. Despite this conflict, the two reconcile at the end of the movie, sharing an intimacy again brought on by their similar experiences of facing criticism in the press. Kernodle writes,

> …close examination of the social and familial relationships between [black] women exposes a complex culture of engagement and socialization. These relationships are at times defined by layered and multifarious praxes through which collectives of black women have engaged in self-definition; created systems of knowledge that provided the skills to navigate political, social, and economic spheres; and formed "safe spaces" that have supported their process of brokering power (27-28).

The systems of knowledge Kernodle refers to are the same systems we see Bessie and Ma co-creating in the film. These systems arise from both sexual and economic knowledge as shown through the scenes discussed above. *Bessie* shows how Black blues women navigated the sexual-economic as a means of oppression, how they developed political practices that publicly critiqued this oppression, and how contemporary audiences might find their experiences and practices still relevant today.

3.2 Cadillac Records

I lost two daughters to bluesmen. Dangerous business you in.[12]

Darnell Martin's *Cadillac Records* is an ensemble film featuring portrayals of music legends like Muddy Waters, Chuck Berry, and Little Walter. While the film centers most prominently on its male musicians and represents blues history in a heteronormative way that, ultimately, marginalizes Black women's contributions to the genre, Beyoncé also stars in the film as Etta James. James herself was born in 1938 in Los Angeles and began singing in her church choir where she was known as a gospel prodigy. By the age of twelve, James had already moved to San Francisco and begun working for bandleader Johnny Otis. She would go on to start her solo career in 1955 before signing with Chess Records in Chicago, the recording label depicted in *Cadillac Records*, five years later. Her most well-known songs like "Something's Got a Hold on Me," "I'd Rather Go Blind," and "All I Could Do Was Cry" showcase the merging of gospel, blues, jazz, and rock. James continued to record well into the 90s, earning a place in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1993. James' role as a witness to the blues' continued relevance in the twenty-first century is illustrated in her most recent Grammy wins: *Let's Roll* won a Grammy Award for best contemporary blues album in 2003 and *Blues to the Bone*, which was released the following year, won a Grammy Award for best traditional blues album.

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[12] *Cadillac Records.* Directed by Darnell Martin, performances by Adrien Brody, Jeffrey Wright, and Beyoncé, LightWave Entertainment, 2008.

Figure 8 "Miss Peaches" Etta James (1938-2012)[13]

Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday, the blues icons depicted in the other two films I focus on in this chapter, *Bessie* and *The United States vs. Billie Holiday*, were no longer around to see their interpretations on the big screen. Smith died in 1937 and Holiday died in 1959. Etta James died in 2012, four years after the release of *Cadillac Records*, and was still making music when the film premiered. Her last album, *The Dreamer*, was released in 2011. While James was said to have responded positively to Beyoncé's casting and performance as the famous singer, attendees of

[13]"ETTA JAMES R.I.P. (January 25, 1938 – January 20, 2012)" by Black History Album under License CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 DEED Attribution-Noncommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 Generic.

James' 2009 concert at Seattle's Paramount Theater claimed that James was decidedly not happy about Beyoncé's performance of "At Last," one of James' most well-known hits, for former-president Barack Obama's inaugural ball. According to concert attendees, James voiced her feelings onstage, saying, "That woman he had singing for him, singing my song—she's going to get her ass whupped….I can't stand Beyoncé. She has no business up there on a big ol' president day, gonna be singing my song that I've been singing forever." While concert attendees, various news outlets, and James' family did not reach a consensus on James' feelings about Beyoncé's performance at the inaugural ball, the story does point to the tension that comes from biopic depictions of those who can still comment on their filmic portrayal. James' claims of ownership over her song draw a line between Beyoncé as actor and Beyoncé as performer. James' comment implies that Beyoncé singing the song in the film as Etta James is fine, but to sing the song outside of the film *as* Beyoncé is encroaching on James' right to the song. James claimed that she had not been invited to sing at the inaugural ball, making Beyoncé's performance all the more insulting since it appears to suggest that Beyoncé's version is capable of supplanting James' iconic original.

While much of this dissertation is devoted to arguing for the generative and radical potential of the blues' life in popular culture today, despite hesitancies around its consumption and the watering down of its politics on mainstream stages, this conflict between James and Beyoncé emphasizes a tension in the blues' present life. Contemporary uses or translations of artistic genres or movements we see as historical can quickly give rise to arguments about authenticity. In the case of Beyoncé's performance as Etta James, these arguments took on a very material and living presence since James was able to speak back to what she perceived as her own erasure and marginalization in favor of a "newer," more contemporary icon. Casting that creates a kind of lineage between stars of the past and those of present—like Beyoncé's casting as Etta James in

Cadillac Records and Andra Day's casting as Billie Holiday in *The United States vs. Billie Holiday*—has the potential to draw attention to the continued relevancy of past, in this case blues, artists and their connection to Black women artists today. However, biopics like the ones discussed in this chapter can also render their central characters politically obsolete. As argued above, *Bessie*, ultimately frames blues women's politics as still relevant, but other blues biopics can make blues women appear politically obsolete by narrativizing their stories in ways which are superficially spectacular or salacious as opposed to complexly critical and political. An ensemble-led film as opposed to a traditional biopic which centers on one, often titular figure, *Cadillac Records* paints a picture of the blues' long history and its transition across genres from the folk blues to rock and roll. While the film's overwhelming focus on its male characters pushes blues women to the periphery of the story, it is specifically looking at the sexual-economic in the film that highlights the erasure of blues women's political and artistic contributions to the genre.

Rather than being framed as contributors to the blues, *Cadillac Records* frames women as the rewards of the blues. In other words, they are part of the gains for blues-playing male musicians. This framing begins the film and is perpetuated throughout it. The voice-over that we hear throughout the film initially begins as an audio recording by historical blues musician Willie Dixon, played by Cedric the Entertainer. As the camera leads us into Chess Records' recording studio, Willie begins his recording:

> I'm Willie Dixon. I'm making this here audio recording so that when you visit Chess Recording Studio you know the history. Now, the first time a gal took off her underwear and threw them on stage, it was on account of a fella singing the blues. Now, when the white girls started doing it, they called that rock and roll. Took a whole lot

> of people to make the music that would change the world. Yessir. This story ain't just about me. It all started with two men: one a white man from Chicago [Leonard Chess], the other a sharecropper from Mississippi [Muddy Waters]. The year was 1941.

In this opening narrative, which Willie explicitly calls a history, women are the sexual profit of male blues musicians. As Willie says, "Takes a whole lot of people to make the music that would change the world," we see him flipping through a photo album and landing on a photo of Etta James, played by Beyoncé. This seeming acknowledgment of the role that blues women like Etta James played in creating and developing the blues is discounted by the fact that Willie is making an audio recording so, in the oral form that his blues history takes, the critical contribution of blues women is still erased. What we would hear in the audio recording is a male-dominated version of blues history.

The connection between blues men's performance and sex continues throughout the film. At one point, a man on the street says to Leonard, "I lost two daughters to bluesmen. Dangerous business you in." Later in the film, three Black women enter Muddy's hotel room, saying "We heard you on the radio." The next day, Chess says to Muddy, "You got a power with that guitar. It's amazing. It put three women in your bed last night." And in his voice-over, Willie says, "[Muddy Waters] was the man every man wanted to be and every woman wanted to love," this time emphasizing the heteronormative aspect of his blues history and erasing not just blues women but their protests against such heteronormativity through bold vocalizations of their sexual desire and relationships with women. The film's simultaneous sexualization and erasure of women is representative of Black women's, and blues women's in particular, sexual-economic exploitation and oppression.

Even the year, 1941, that begins Dixon's story further erases blues women. While the film centers around real-life figures, such as Muddy Waters, Leonard Chess, Etta James, Chuck Berry, and Little Walter, that make beginning the story in 1941 a logical choice, it also blatantly skips over the classic blues period. Baraka states that it was women who were the great classic blues singers while country blues singers tended to be men. He writes, "The first recordings of blues were classic blues; it was the classic singers who first brought blues into general notice in the United States" (*Blues People* 91). Given the importance of not only the classic blues period but the contributions of classic blues women to the genre, *Cadillac Record*'s timeline as well as its framing of women as blues men's sexual rewards as opposed to critical political and artistic contributors is an act of erasure.

Etta James is not immune from this same treatment in *Cadillac Records*. Her first appearance in the film is accompanied by an underlying joke that briefly introduces the possibility of her being a sex worker. Referencing Chuck Berry's sex life, Willie as narrator says, "Now Chuck wasn't the only one looking for female talent. Len was on a girl-hunt too." Following this line, we see Leonard letting Etta into his hotel room. Willie's narration and the hotel setting sets up viewer expectations to see this meeting as a sexual one. This expectation is emphasized when Etta lays down on the hotel bed, saying, "You want me to do it right here? Right now? …It's just hard to do it when you ain't in the mood, and I ain't in the mood." These lines are intentionally suggestive, but we come to realize that Etta is, in fact, there to audition for Leonard as a singer and the lines above are in reference to her singing. While this momentary joke or playful shifting of the viewer's expectations does not have to be indicative of the film's approach to the representation of women in the narrative overall, it is echoed so heavily throughout the film that Etta's introduction is part of, not an exception to, the film's larger pattern.

Ultimately, Leonard and Etta will go on to have a sexual and romantic relationship, but Etta's character never evolves much past our introduction to her. Even her artistic ability seems to be fueled by Leonard's direction in a way that, rather than reading as collaboration, reads as if Etta has little to no control over her craft and is, instead, a raw source of talent for Leonard to prompt and shape. During the scene in which Etta is recording "All I Could Do Was Cry" in the studio, Leonard tries to rile her up in order to get more emotional authenticity out of her performance. Echoing the narrative of the song's lyrics, Leonard asks her if she knows what it feels like to have her man take "another broad down the aisle." Etta proceeds to give an emotional performance to which Leonard responds, "If I brought up bad memories, I'm sorry. But it was good for the song." Because this scene is not accompanied by others which point to Etta's expertise as an *artist*, not just someone with a sort of innate or organic vocal talent, the film suggests that blues women, like Etta, draw from personal experience.

While the personal is a crucial part of blues women's artistic practice as well as their political practice, to identify it as the sole source of their music does a disservice to them as performers very aware of their craft and tactics to engage audiences. I do not intend to suggest here that the personal and the crafted are in a binary relationship to one another or can even be distinctly separated when it comes to looking at popular culture performance, particularly Black women's blues. Instead, I argue that it is important to recognize when depictions of Black women artists *do* lean into this binary or overwhelmingly suggest that Black women artists merely vocalize personal experience in a way that is somehow less artistic or crafted, reserving the label of "musical genius" for their male counterparts. While I argue that blues women's love songs or songs about romantic relationships should not be dismissed as apolitical, Hazel Carby draws attention to the

way in which the idea that these songs make up all of blues women's work is not only incorrect but perpetuates patriarchal and heteronormative music histories. She writes,

> The mythology that blues women sang obsessively about the passive female victims of male indifference or violence has been sustained by patriarchal histories and the lack of availability of alternative recordings….This music and lyrics confronted conventional expectations of male/female sexual relationships and challenged the narrow boundaries and limits of compulsory heterosexuality ("In Body and Spirit" 181).

Ironically, *Cadillac Records*, whose narrative is structured by a diegetic recording, does not take advantage of an opportunity to fictionalize a recording that might function as an alternative to the patriarchal histories Carby refers to.

The film's framing of women as the sexual rewards for blues men gestures towards the music industry's sexual economy. In other moments, the film does much more than gesture, making a connection between the sexual and economic explicit. When Leonard and Muddy find Etta at risk of drug overdose in the middle of her empty apartment, Etta tells them, "My mama sold what didn't get repossessed. They gonna take my house." Leonard responds by telling her to put the house in his name: "It's not a loan. It's a gift." Etta says, "I must be real special. I must make you a lot of money" to which Leonard protests," I'm not your fucking pimp." This moment problematizes Leonard's financial support of Etta, entangling their sexual and professional relationship. Although Leonard's comments seek to disentangle these relationships, another moment in the film emphasizes the reality of this entanglement. After Muddy finds out about Leonard and Etta's relationship, Leonard tries to tell him that it is just business. Muddy jokes to

Leonard, “You never hold me like that.” Leonard responds, “Crossover and I’ll jump into bed with you.” Crossover refers to when an artist either appears simultaneously on more than one genre’s chart or goes from more marginal popularity to mainstream popularity. Crossing over was particularly difficult for Black artists since genres were largely distinguished along racial lines. Reebee Garofalo breaks down these genres into three categories that dictated commercial marketing strategies: pop was for mainstream audiences, country and western was for regional audiences, and rhythm and blues was for Black audiences. This meant that to successfully crossover, Black artists had to be doubly popular, succeeding with Black audiences first and then “mainstream,” i.e. white, audiences as well. As Garofalo argues, “It is a process which holds black artists to a higher standard of performance than white and it is only recently that it has been successfully circumvented in any systematic way” (277). Leonard’s comment to Muddy, while playful, refutes his own protestations to Etta that their sexual and romantic relationship exists apart from their financial one.

Cadillac Records does depict sexual-economic exploitation, primarily emphasizing its effect on the male figures of the film. While we do see Etta contending with sexual-economic exploitation as well, the film’s consistent framing of women as the sexual rewards of blues men’s musical performance and its inability to make space for Black women’s critical, political, and artistic contributions erases rather than highlights Black women’s protestations against sexual-economic oppression. The film does make regular reference to the way in which Black male performers, regardless of their popularity and success, were exploited in the music industry by producers and studio heads. However, it takes care to connect Leonard and Muddy to one another via joint oppression—Muddy for his Blackness and Leonard for his Jewishness—making Leonard’s exploitation of Muddy and other Black musicians appear colorblind. In his voice-over,

Willie says, "Now Leonard Chess didn't worry none about skin color. It was the color of them bills that mattered. Just get you enough green to cover yourself and you ain't no Jew boy no more and you ain't no colored boy either. Just a man with a Cadillac." Willie's narration frames Leonard's profit-driven exploitation as a colorblind, gathering the Black musicians he works with as well as himself up into the American dream's fantasy of not just wealth but "racelessness." The music industry was already very much in the business of exploiting Black musicians and finding ways to limit or place boundaries on their success through structures like crossover. Leonard's exploitation then, regardless of what we might pretend to discern about intention or ideological motivation, is systemically upheld and validated through the common practices of the music industry.

Cadillac Records shows Leonard engaging in other exploitative practices that take advantage of the economic vulnerability of the film's Black musicians. For instance, Leonard gives Muddy a Cadillac at one point in seeming congratulations of his success which Leonard has, of course, also benefited from. Later, Muddy is facing financial hardship and asks for the royalties for one of his songs. Leonard tells him, "The Cadillac ain't free," suggesting that Muddy's royalties have already been "given" to him in the form of the car, a transaction that was not made clear when he received it. When Leonard asks Muddy if he needs money, Muddy tells him that his wife, Geneva, wants a house. Leonard tells Muddy that he will take care of it, again extending an economic relationship in which Muddy is financially dependent on Leonard, lacks control over what form his earnings take, and does not independently own his material possessions. The relationship is one of patronizing parentage, echoed elsewhere in the film when Little Walter, another Black musician working with Leonard, calls Leonard his "white daddy." While Muddy's life might appear to be full of the material trappings of wealth, his financial relationship with

Leonard closes off the possibility of ever saving money or building generational wealth. Other musicians in the film are well-aware of Leonard's tactics and their consequences. When Howlin' Wolf signs on to the label, instead of accepting a nicer car, he says, in reference to his dilapidated truck, "This truck, I own it. It don't own me."

Given the history of not just Black people's legal condition as fungible property themselves under chattel slavery but the ongoing reality of systemic oppression, an oppression that is in many cases "lawful" and limits Black people's access to not just gaining but passing down the means for financial security, these scenes make clear that race and class cannot be disentangled despite Leonard's protests. Stuart Hall identifies two central tendencies in the study of racially-structured social formations: the economic and the sociological. These lenses are responsive to the over-determination of one another and representative of larger debates within Social Science. Arguing that the economic and sociological speak to one another's gaps, Hall states that race is "the modality in which class is 'lived,' the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and "fought through" (341). In framing Leonard's exploitation as colorblind, *Cadillac Records* fails to represent the way in which race cannot be untethered from the performers' exploitation. Moments in the film do hint towards these connections, the most explicit being when Muddy teasingly tells Leonard "We just working here, Sir," after Leonard tells him to lay a track for him. Muddy's comment is meant to reference the slave-master relationship, mockingly suggesting that Leonard's demands are akin to a master's demands of a slave. Leonard angrily responds, "Stop talking to me like I'm some damn plantation owner." This scene, as well as those mentioned above, puts Leonard's exploitation of Muddy and the music industry's exploitative practices on a continuum with slavery's economic structure.

This sort of continuum is one that blues women have, historically, emphasized and protested in their music. By largely silencing this aspect of Black women's blues, *Cadillac Records* dilutes the relevance of Black women's blues politics to our contemporary moment. The film does show how blues music transitioned into and influenced other musical genres, like R&B and rock and roll, representing its continued but transformed presence today. In many ways, the film is not precious about narrowly defining the blues or engaging in debates about what iteration is the most authentic. Instead, it represents the genre as inherently adaptable, celebrating its blurred contours rather than distinctly defining it. While we see the blues' generative evolution across genre, the film also, importantly, shows how the blues was consequently at risk of theft. Elvis, The Beach Boys, and The Rolling Stones are among the real-life figures and musical groups depicted in the film who profited off the blues and, in many cases, explicitly stole songs written by Black artists. While watching Elvis perform on television, Chuck Berry, played by Mos Def, says "Well, there you have it, ladies and gentlemen. Your new king." Garofalo speaks to the blues' shifting across time and the way in which musical genre categories were influenced by marketing incentives and trends. Race records was the common term for Black music, particularly Black working-class music, until 1949 when it was swapped out for R&B which was the industry term through the 1960s. R&B was considered the more palatable term, reflecting the integrationist phase of the early Civil Rights Movement.

The term race records had the effect of isolating Black music from mainstream audiences, but it also gave Black artists a space to achieve success, albeit limited, without having to give up their stage, even if it was a small one, for white artists. The "blue-eyed soul" category, which was popular from 1963 to 1965, was devastating for Black artists as many Black musicians were displaced by white soul singers, a displacement that was also reflected in the "British invasion"

when British artists dominated the top of the charts. Willie references this in *Cadillac Records* when he says, "[Our music] was made in America, but I guess nobody thought we were Americans." The term soul replaced R&B in 1969 but was eventually swapped out for the term Black music in 1982 because soul was considered too limited to contain the diversity of Black music and musical styles. In tracing these musical shifts, the film draws a connective thread between older forms of the blues and more contemporary, popular genres. Scholars like Tricia Rose, Imani Johnson, and Shayne Lee have also made critical arguments to this end, amplifying the blues', and specifically blues women's, connection to contemporary performance. Without including the political and artistic contributions of blues women in this musical timeline though, the film fails to make blues politics relevant in our contemporary moment. In reducing women's role in blues history and erasing the political contributions of blues women, *Cadillac Records*, ultimately, forecloses the relevance that this history could have on our understanding of today's popular music as well as on contemporary political practice.

3.3 The United States vs. Billie Holiday

My song, "Strange Fruit." It reminds them that they're killing us, reminds them. It reminds you too...[14]

The most recently released blues biopic of the three discussed in this chapter, *The United States vs. Billie Holiday* tells the story of Billie Holiday with particular attention to her long-running battle with the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN) for her public protesting of lynching, most famously remembered through her haunting song "Strange Fruit" which was recorded in 1939. While Holiday is most often labeled a jazz vocalist, she is also commonly associated with the blues. Like Nina Simone whose musical stylings covered a wide range of genres, such as classical, blues, jazz, and folk, Holiday's music is representative of a variety of musical influences and carries on the blues' tradition of personal storytelling and political protest. Holiday spent a large part of her childhood in Baltimore but was, according to most sources, born in Philadelphia. She and her mother, Sadie, oscillated between stable and unstable conditions at home with Holiday often being left in others' care. Holiday's mother moved to New York in the late 1920s and Holiday eventually followed her there, beginning her singing career in nightclubs around 1930. She was eighteen when John Hammond first heard her in a Harlem jazz club. Hammond helped Holiday land crucial recording opportunities with musicians like Benny Goodman and Teddy Wilson. After touring with the Count Basie Orchestra in 1937, Holiday toured with Artie Shaw's orchestra in 1938, becoming the first Black woman vocalist to tour with a white orchestra. Holiday's monumental talent as an artist did not stop her from facing discrimination and, after leaving Artie

[14] *The United States vs. Billie Holiday.* Directed by Lee Daniels, performances by Andra Day, Trevante Rhodes, and Garrett Hedlund, Lee Daniels Entertainment, 2021.

Shaw's orchestra due to such discrimination, she began performing independently back in New York.

Figure 9 "Lady Day" Billie Holiday (1915-1959)[15]

It was during this period that Holiday recorded "God Bless the Child" and "Strange Fruit," two of her most well-known songs. She recorded "Strange Fruit" with Commodore Records since Columbia, her recording company at the time, was not interested in the song due to its powerful

[15] "[Portrait of Billie Holiday, Downbeat, New York, N.Y., ca. Feb. 1947]" by Library of Congress, 01/01/1947. Public Domain.

protest against the practice of lynching in the Southern regions of the United States. Banned by a number of radio stations, the song was controversial to say the least. Even now, regardless of how many times, over how many years, it has been played, its first notes and lyrical utterances—"Southern trees bear strange fruit, blood on the leaves and blood at the root"—are horrifically arresting. It is a song, sung as only Holiday uniquely could, that hangs in the air long after its final note, after Holiday's "Here is a strange and bitter crop," delivered in a kind of agonized, stretched vocal. After releasing the song, Holiday got a warning from the FBN to stop singing it. Holiday's refusal angered Harry Anslinger, the FBN Commissioner and a documented racist who devoted his career to taking Holiday down. He pursued her until her death in 1959. In focusing on Holiday's battle with Anslinger and the United States government's attempts to jail her for her drug and alcohol addiction as well as—or, primarily—for her refusal to stop performing "Strange Fruit," *The United States vs. Billie Holiday* does take up the more well-trodden, scandalous parts of Holiday's life. While this framework makes it more difficult to recognize how other parts of Holiday's oeuvre can also be seen as political, in taking up such an explicitly protest-oriented phase of Holiday's life, the film does emphasize Holiday's role as an activist. However, the film's focus on "Strange Fruit" also exemplifies mainstream media and music history's difficultly in seeing the seemingly superficial parts of blues women's music, like songs about love or romantic relationships, as political.

While *The United States vs. Billie Holiday* gestures towards Black women's sexual-economic oppression, in dismissing the political context of blues women's love songs, the film misses the larger complexity and subtlety of Black women's sexual-economic protest. The proliferation of blues women's songs about love or romantic partnerships was, far from being a "frivolous" pursuit, evidence of the impact abolition had on Black people's ability to choose their

sexual partners. In reference to the history of Black women's forced position as "slave breeders" (Lee IX), Saidiya Hartman writes, "The sexuality and reproductive capacities of enslaved women were central to understanding the expanding legal conception of slavery and its inheritability. Slavery conscripted the womb, deciding the fate of the unborn and reproducing slave property by making the mark of the mother a death sentence for her child" ("The Belly of the World" 169). Given this context, blues women's songs about romantic relationships and sex take on a political resonance, speaking to slavery's violent and oppressive conditions. Blues women's bold vocalizations of sexual desire also stood in opposition to respectability politics that required that Black women adopt a more conservative and modest approach to sexuality in order to *earn* their right to be seen and respected as human beings.

Understanding the specific contexts of Black women's oppression does much more than just rewrite common historical narratives. Without understanding these contexts and not only including but centering Black women's oppression in continued fights for social justice, we create and lean on frameworks that are built on Black women's exclusion, frameworks that require destruction, not reform. In her now famous article, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," Kimberle Crenshaw coins the term intersectionality. Her argument and definition of the term highlight the stakes of using systems that rely on a single axis understanding of oppression as *either* race discrimination or sex discrimination. She writes, "Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (140). Crenshaw takes the legal system and anti-discrimination doctrine

as her focus, but her arguments highlight the necessity of using an intersectional framework in multiple areas or contexts.

Looking at blues women's love songs in light of the historical context outlined above rather than a white feminist framework allows us to see how these songs are not necessarily apolitical. In framing these love songs as largely apolitical, *The United States vs. Billie Holiday* takes up the more explicitly political instances of Black women's music, such as "Strange Fruit" which, while deserving of attention, is emphasized at the same time that other instances of Black women's political commentary through their music is silenced. Several moments in the film contribute to this silencing. When Billie is asked about "Strange Fruit" in the film, her responses dismiss her love songs. In one instance, she emphasizes that the song is about human rights, saying "The government forgets that sometimes. They just want me to shut up and sing 'All of Me.'" Later, during a fictionalized interview in the film, Billie says, "['Strange Fruit'] is an important song you know [about] things that are going on in the country. I don't think people know I care about those things. Most of my other songs just about love." While these moments in the film importantly highlight the government's attempts to censor Holiday's explicitly political music, they also simplify blues women's political methods and erase the historical background through which their political methods arose.

Despite the film's marginalization of the political capacity of blues women's songs about romantic relationships, the film does include several scenes that show blues women's complex political tactics. For instance, we see Billie practicing "I Cried for You," a song about romantic heartbreak. In the scene, she says that she wants to make her performance of the song more conversational in order to engage the audience. She says, "You know, Carnegie Hall and Broadway. The whole thing is meant to keep negroes out. Let's change it up a little bit." This

moment illustrates how Holiday intentionally crafted her performances of even romantic songs to protest racial discrimination. Angela Davis has previously discussed the way in which Black women singers, like Holiday, used all of the sonic and performative techniques available to them—intonation, timbre, and so on—to riff on the largely commercial numbers they sang. Other moments in the film also gesture towards Holiday's complex understanding of and utilization of the political tactics available to her despite her involvement in an entertainment industry that sought to limit her capacity for radical protest. Natasha Lyonne portrays Tallulah Bankhead in the film, an actress who was known to have had a sexual relationship with Holiday—a relationship the film erases although it portrays the two as close. When Tallulah warns Billie that the entertainment industry executives are using her, Billie responds, "What makes you think I ain't using them? You'll never understand my life, white girl." This scene illustrates how Black women's oppression cannot be subsumed into white-centric, feminist frameworks. Billie's last remark to Tallulah—"You'll never understand my life"—and her direct address to Tallulah, "white girl," implies a difference in context and, therefore, political tactics available to the two women. Her rhetorical question—"What makes you think I ain't using them?"—shows that Billie is navigating the limited access she has to modes of radical protest by turning the mainstream entertainment industry's tools back on them.

It would be a mistake to assume that the blues biopics discussed in this chapter are interested only in representations of the past. The blues biopic, like Houston Baker's term critical memory, is tied to the radical potentiality of the present and future, a fact Billie recognizes in the film when she tells Anslinger that his grandchildren will be singing "Strange Fruit." For Baker, nostalgia functions as a tool to manage future unrest in ways which predictively contain it rather than radically allow that unrest to emerge, disruptively, in the present. In contrast to nostalgia,

Baker defines critical memory as "the very faculty of revolution" ("Critical Memory" 3). Baker's understanding of nostalgia is tied to a "Black conservative…middle-class beautification of history" (4). While the lives of blues women and their refusal to adhere to respectability politics rarely aligns with the kind of historical beautification Baker talks about, these narratives can still be "cleaned up," and often are, whether it is by adding a fictional heterosexual romance or simplifying and therefore erasing the most complex means of blues women's political protest. On the other hand, these biopics also have the ability to make us critically remember and, in critically remembering, to understand how the lives and work of blues women can still be relevant today.

Baker's words provide a generative approach to commercialized narratives of such radical blues women: "Reading through the commercial is a form of rational and emotional resistance by marginal groups" (11). Rather than covering our ears or shutting our eyes in response to the Hollywood-ified stories of our well-loved heroes, reading *through* these filmic representations can be critically generative, allowing us to see both what is marginalized and what finds a way to break through more rigid storytelling frameworks. To read through these commercial narratives does not always require that we put a positive spin on what we find there. Instead, it means remembering—remembering the historical contexts of Black women's oppression, their inventive strategies to musically speak back to oppressive systems, and, perhaps most of all, to remember how these narratives can be used as tools to limit or open up their capacity for contemporary revolution.

4.0 Chapter Three: Pop Stars and the Blues

When I tell people about my work for the first time, I am sometimes met with expressions of interest but also uncertainty about what the blues, a genre of music many would consider classic but outdated, has to do with popular culture in the twenty-first century. When I mention that my work involves looking at figures like Lizzo, Beyoncé, and Janelle Monáe, looks of uncertainty quickly become ones of recognition. While these stars certainly do not represent the entirety of Black feminist-informed contemporary music, their widespread popularity is worth noting. In the spirit of Black feminist thought that roots theory in everyday practice, Matthew Salzano writes, "What one engages with in everyday life provides the tools needed to build feminist theory" (57). While we might not all listen to or engage with Beyoncé, Monáe, and Lizzo every day, their popularity has made their image, music, and messages the stuff of the everyday.

Because of the value and increased attention placed on cultural representation within today's popular media, what Aria Halliday refers to as the "image economy," the visual album and music video have amplified possibilities for commodification. All of this chapter's central figures construct the widely-disseminated images that make up their work and their public persona in intentional ways whether it is through a wardrobe that challenges gender norms and pays tribute to the uniform's working-class origins, the visual tropes of Black reclamations of royalty, or a communal wedding party that dances in the face of the heteronormative expectations that undergird the institution of marriage. My exploration of Beyoncé, Lizzo, and Monáe here is not prompted only by their respective popularity or superficial associations with Black feminism. All three musical icons engage with contemporary iterations of Black women's blues politics, albeit in different ways: some through their lyrical tactics which, for instance, argue for the political

radicality of open expressions of sexuality and desire/desirability and others through reference to concepts that while contemporary are also in lineage with Black women's blues politics, such as "the bad bitch"—or the "Bad Bitch Barbie" as Crystal LaVoulle and Tisha Ellison refer to it—and the body positivity movement.

What kind of feminist theory might emerge from looking at the work of Beyoncé, Lizzo, and Monáe and how do they each draw on historical musical and political frameworks for navigating the experiences of Black women in the United States in the twenty-first century? With their mass popularity and the platform that their respective presence in twenty-first-century popular culture grants them, Beyoncé, Lizzo, and Monáe are influenced by a wide range of musical genres, such as R&B, soul, rap, pop, hip hop, and funk. Their sounds and even visual markers—particularly in the case of Monáe's wardrobe in *Dirty Computer* (2018)—reference both the current and older genres of music they draw from. These genres of music themselves draw on the artistic and political tactics of Black women's blues music. Reiland Rabaka, for instance, argues that hip hop is indebted to the legacy of blues women, drawing a link between hip hop feminism today and the political context of the Black women who performed the blues during the first half of the twentieth century. The music of iconic pop performer, Beyoncé, has been likened to the blues, with scholars like Kinitra Brooks and Kameelah Martin arguing that *Lemonade* (2016) functions as a neo-blues narrative. Clyde Woods argues that, like the blues, jazz, gospel, rock and roll, R&B, and funk respond to and archive the material circumstances and oppressions of their historical and sociopolitical moment.

While blues music during the classical era of the 1920s and 1930s was popular music, the idea of popular music or popular performance has become more unwieldy as production and dissemination technologies change and grow. As stars like Beyoncé, Monáe, and Lizzo gain even

more popularity, an ever-increasing audience, and a global platform, questions of Black feminism in relation to the commercial come more and more to the forefront within both scholarship and daily, informal conversation. These conversations take as their primary sources not just the music being released by these artists but a whole network of material, including interviews and, of course, the visuals that accompany albums and individual releases. All three artists—Beyoncé, Lizzo, and Monáe—use visual affordances and tactics to bolster their messaging, market their music, and associate themselves and their work with larger events, both historical and current. Classic blues women's exploration of the sexual-economic arose from particular events of the early twentieth century, like the Great Migration, the Great Depression, and the introduction of race records, but it also arose from earlier contexts and events, like slavery and its abolition. While artists, like Beyoncé, Lizzo, and Monáe build on and are impacted by these late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century contexts, they also respond to their own context within the twenty-first century, both riffing on and inventing new ways of navigating the sexual-economic in popular culture.

Sexual performance might be taken for granted as a feature of contemporary popular culture—music videos in particular—but one of the main ways that Black blues women politicized the personal was through freedom of sexual expression. In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, Angela Davis argues that Black women's blues music represented and archived one of the biggest changes from slavery to post-slavery in the United States: Black people's freedom to choose their own sexual and romantic partners. Davis discusses the way in which the newfound reality of having more choice over sexual partners post-emancipation gave rise to a particular set of politics surrounding Black women's sexual lives and desires—one which was at odds with the respectability politics practiced by the Black women's club movement (Rabaka 8). This theme of sexuality was famously explored and

performed by Black women blues singers much to the disapproval of "respectable," church-going folks who saw these blues singers as harmful to the project of achieving legitimacy and equal rights as Black citizens in the United States. Because of the post-emancipation context in which public representations of Black womanhood were being constantly negotiated, the blues' often humorous, playful, and even risqué representations of sex take on a political and critical tone.

Looking at the economic theme across both classic blues women's performances and contemporary performances by popular culture icons reveals a major change from the context of the 1920s and 1930s when blues women were largely working-class. The contemporary figures I turn to are not just well-off but inordinately wealthy given their widespread global popularity and celebrity status. Many fans do see these figures as revolutionary symbols of the American dream. Lyrics like Beyoncé's "I dream it, I work hard, I grind till I own it" ("Formation") summarize the motto of "hustle culture"—a concept that perpetuates the logic of the American dream by suggesting that hard work equals financial success and impoverished individuals or populations are responsible for their economic circumstances. In the case of Beyoncé, Monáe, and Lizzo, their respective rises play a role in politicizing their economic rhetoric and representations of wealth. While many historical blues figures enjoyed fame, the nature of celebrity status has changed—partly due to fast-increasing commercial possibilities and partnerships and faster methods of disseminating music and media.

Despite the gap between the socioeconomic class of earlier blues singers and today's popular performers, both groups have had to—and continue to—contend with the limited possibilities for disruptive, radical performance within mainstream channels. Fred Moten and Houston Baker respectively point to the history of Afro-American expressive culture's subversion of these limitations. Arguing against any theory that would posit the existence of a "pure" or

originary Black performance in the United States that occurs outside of commodification and capitalist reproduction, both Baker and Moten claim that slavery economics serves as a defining condition for all Afro-American expressive culture. Rather than seeing this as a problem per se, Baker celebrates the way that Afro-American art plays within, atop, and alongside these conditions in complex ways. While the relationship between slavery economics and Black performance that Baker and Moten point to is critical for exploring the blues' continued relevance in popular culture performance, it is equally important to consider the different climate in which figures like Beyoncé, Monáe, and Lizzo are performing.

I use Reebee Garofalo's concept of crossover to illustrate how the three figures I focus on in this chapter have had unique trajectories that are, in part, a product of reinvigorated value of cultural representation in today's "image economy" (Halliday) and not easily assimilable into linear theories of commercialization that begin with authenticity and move to "selling out." Garofalo argues that to successfully crossover, Black artists had to first achieve success among Black audiences before gaining access to and hopefully success with "mainstream"—otherwise white—audiences. In line with the common Black adage "You have to work twice as hard as everyone else," the crossover system holds Black artists to a higher standard than white artists since they must be doubly approved. Because she has enjoyed mainstream popularity for the longest out of this chapter's three figures, Beyoncé serves as a helpful example of how today's popular culture arena differs from one where crossover is the central, and often only, way for Black artists to gain success. L. Michael Gipson tracks Beyoncé's career from its early beginning with Destiny's Child to her current reign as "Queen Bey," arguing that while Beyoncé previously adhered to respectability politics, she has since eschewed them in favor of embracing "an unapologetic blackness" (147). Part of the evidence for this "unapologetic blackness" comes from

Beyoncé's references to Black life and politics. Going from intentionally garnered mainstream appeal to expressing concerns through her music that tie her more explicitly to Black musical and political traditions, all while maintaining her popularity, Beyoncé's trajectory may be more analogous to a filmmaker who agrees to direct a big studio feature in order to gain enough financial success and legitimacy within the industry to later produce their indie passion project.

While there has been no political climate where the political expressions of a Black public figure, however "watered down," are not at risk for criticism and even violent threats, Beyoncé, Monáe, and Lizzo are all equally savvy brand-managers as they are performers. This is not to make an argument about whether these figures believe the political messages they put out. Instead, it is to comment on their knowledge of how to edge up to, and even relatively safely cross, the line that distinguishes appropriately commodifiable politics from dangerously disruptive politics while maintaining their popularity and, therefore, financial stability. While some may bemoan these tactics for their "calculatedness," it would be unrealistic to argue that many classic blues singers did not practice subversive methods themselves which also played alongside and against the limiting parameters of the entertainment industry.

I argue that Monáe, Beyoncé, and Lizzo use and creatively riff on blues tactics that place them on a continuum with earlier blues women while still allowing them to speak to contemporary exigencies. These popular culture performances can also stand in opposition to some of the investments of classic Black women blues singers, such as class struggle and oppression. As bridge—but an ever-evolving bridge—the sexual-economic was fundamental for earlier blues women and continues to be relevant to contemporary performers. In both cases, the sexual-economic is a dual concept in that it refers to both existing problematic systems or conditions that oppress Black women via the sexual and economic as intermeshed *and* a complex way of

performing resistance that understands the sexual and economic as being of equal, again intermeshed, concern when it comes to building and imagining a radically liberated future for Black women.

Integrating a consideration of the blues legacy created by Black women into the conversation—not just through reference but through deeper exploration of the blues' own nuances and contradictions—is central to thinking about cultural productions associated with Black feminism today and the tensions that arise from Black feminism's inevitable contending with the realities of capitalism. The blues has musical origins in, among many things, work songs sung by railroad workers in the nineteenth century. Scholars like Hazel Carby look at this from the lens of "communal expression" ("It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime" 8), but it is also an early example of musical expression and creation under the limiting circumstances of the labor-intensive work necessary for survival—for some more than others—under capitalism. While the particulars of the context would and continues still to evolve, blues singers in the 1920s and 1930s as well as popular performers today, like Lizzo, Monáe, and Beyoncé, also navigate the limitations placed on the possibilities for radical expression under capitalist frameworks that foreground profitability and mass appeal. Though the blues—as sonic, as poetics, as aesthetics, as affect—would not be what it is without its power to travel, to create routes of intimacy across potentially disparate bodies, it is still crucial to attend to its originators given the way that the *particular* positionalities of Black women shaped the blues itself.

Black feminism is not monolithic, but the blues' popularity and influence on so many Black feminist frameworks make classic blues women key players in earlier understandings and discussions of what it meant to be a "free" Black woman post-emancipation. Their impact on the music and entertainment industry, evidenced by how many musical genres share the blues as a

jumping off point, cannot be overstated. While the politics expressed in the work of popular Black women performers, like Beyoncé, Lizzo, and Monáe, are also not monolithic, classic blues women's conception and navigation of the sexual-economic does set the stage for contemporary popular culture navigations of the sexual-economic today. The different socioeconomic status of these contemporary figures relative to earlier blues women points to the blues' evolution and its adaptation to address different albeit related sets of concerns we can also call the sexual-economic. It is a sexual-economic that does not look exactly the same as that of classic blues women, but both iterations of the sexual-economic—classic and contemporary—share the understanding of the sexual and economic as tied when it comes to both oppression and modes of resistance for Black women.

I argue that seeing these current figures alongside their blues women predecessors and looking at the sexual-economic in Black women's performances today as a blues legacy can throw into relief how the politics of these intertwined themes are explored in popular culture. The blues has, in some way, always spoken to the *changing* contexts of Black life in the United States and, as an adaptive form, using it as a kind of stable test upon which to pass or fail current artists does a discredit to both those current artists and the fluidity and creative criticality of past blues women. The question becomes then how the sexual-economic manifested in classic blues women's material lives and their artistic practice as well as how the sexual-economic manifests today for Black women in popular culture. What do the resonances and dissonances between the circumstances and artistic methods of both periods reveal about the sexual-economic in the ongoing life of Black women's blues?

4.1 Beyoncé

Best revenge is your paper.[16]

Figure 10 "Queen Bey" Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter (born 1981)[17]

Born 1981 in Houston, Texas, Beyoncé Knowles competed in local talent shows at a young age before joining R&B group Destiny's Child with Kelly Rowland and two of her classmates, LaTavia Roberson and LeToya Luckett, who were later replaced by Michelle Williams and Farrah

[16] Knowles-Carter, Beyoncé. "Formation." *Lemonade*, Quad Recording Studios, 2016.

[17] "Beyoncé Black Is King Still" by Mason Poole under License CC BY 4.0 DEED Attribution 4.0 International.

Franklin. Beyoncé began a solo career in 2003 and Destiny's Child officially broke up in 2005. More overt discussions of Beyoncé's music and performances as political kicked off following her 2016 Super Bowl performance of her single "Formation." Just two months after the Super Bowl performance, Beyoncé released the visual album *Lemonade* in April 2016 to, again, record-breaking success. In 2018, Beyoncé and Jay-Z released their joint album, *Everything Is Love* to the surprise of many fans still reeling from the scandal of Jay-Z's infidelity as presented in *Lemonade*.

I argue that the blues' legacy of the sexual-economic sets the stage for Beyoncé's performances of sexuality and her discussion of the economic. The historical context of blues performances of the sexual-economic also help give Beyoncé the appearance of radicality since she is using tactics that hearken back to these earlier blues singer but to convey a less radical message. The failures of the album's economic rhetoric contrast blues women's nuanced, critical understanding of the sexual-economic and, even more importantly, are crucial since in not addressing *Lemonade*'s economic rhetoric, we risk becoming enamored with Beyoncé's performances of the sexual, which are limited in their revolutionary potential—which is not to say they have none—when we add in how the album discusses economic wealth and capital gain. *Lemonade* does not resolve or totally demolish the systems that oppress her and other Black women of a variety of backgrounds. If we set that expectation aside, what is left is grappling with the pleasure we might get from seeing a rich, successful Black woman so loved and celebrated on a global, public stage and critically questioning how Beyoncé does perpetuate problematic systems while often getting read as revolutionary.

While the blues in its most generic definition does not appear explicitly in Beyoncé's 2016 album *Lemonade*, the lineage of the blues reverberates through the album's central themes and

political methods. The subject of countless scholarship, Beyoncé has gone from famous pop star to icon, particularly as her association with Black feminism has become more commonplace. *Lemonade*, Beyoncé's sixth studio album, marked a watershed moment in her career for its confessional style and integration of the personal and political. Figured as a public response to rumors surrounding the infidelity of Jay-Z, rapper, record executive, and Beyoncé's long-time husband, fans voraciously celebrated the album, not only for its layered references, celebrity cameos, charged visuals, and memorable songs but for the peek it seemed to offer into Beyoncé's private life.

Lemonade includes twelve songs—"Formation" is listed in the album's credits but was released as a single in February 2016—and is divided into eleven chapters in a structure reminiscent of the seven stages of grief. These chapters chart and structure the album's emotional trajectory: Intuition, Denial, Anger, Apathy, Emptiness, Accountability, Reformation, Forgiveness, Resurrection, Hope, and Redemption. This overarching structure, the repeated use of poetry by Warsan Shire across tracks, and the recurring visuals in the album's accompanying video, which runs about an hour, are part of what makes *Lemonade* a visual album rather than a random collection of music videos. To even imagine *Lemonade* without its visuals is a difficult exercise. We would lose Beyoncé atop a slowly sinking New Orleans police car in "Formation," Serena Williams dancing in "Sorry" as Beyoncé casually sits on a throne nearby, and Beyoncé's baptismal emergence onto a city street where she gleefully swings a bat at parked cars, fire hydrants, windows, and surveillance cameras in "Hold Up." Gone would be the solemn line of Black women, hands clasped and arms raised towards the water, in "Love Drought" that references the enslaved Igbos who took control of their slave ship in 1803, choosing to march into the sea rather than submit to slavery. We would also lose the familial appearances which are so central to

the album and include Beyoncé's mother, Tina Knowles, her grandmother, Hattie White, and her daughter, Blue Ivy Carter. These moments, and so many others, do more than entertain the viewer. Within the visual, representational grammar of the "image economy" (Halliday), they speak to the United States government's continued and intentional neglect and destruction of Black life, the public policing of Black women's bodies, and the passing down of ancestral knowledge and survival tactics among Black women.

Being aware of the connections between *Lemonade* and the work of earlier blues women not only places Beyoncé in a continuum with blues singers but also importantly adds nuance to current conversations around the album's politics. *Lemonade* itself contains many self-aware references to the overtly political, so in some ways, a discussion of *Lemonade*'s politics comes very much from the content of the album itself. That being said, Black women's blues paved the way for considerations of the sexual politics of Black women's musical performance and what investments arise from a musical form so dominated and popularized by Black working-class women. Beyoncé's overt performances of sexuality in *Lemonade* have been both celebrated for being empowering and criticized for displaying Black women's bodies in ways which mirror patriarchal and exploitative practices.

The political and social context of Black blues women's sexual performances offers complexity to understandings of the way in which Beyoncé performs sexuality. The commonality of the sexual theme in Black women's blues music was highly intentional and political since it marked increased freedom for Black people in the United States to choose their sexual partners following emancipation and critiqued the more conservative logic of respectability politics (Davis). Scholars like Gipson point to Beyoncé's 2016 Superbowl performance of "Formation" and her referencing of Hurricane Katrina and the United States' violent law enforcement system

in the song's accompanying video as evidence of her challenging of respectability politics in the tradition of earlier blues women. Clad in black leather costumes reminiscent of militaristic uniforms, Beyoncé and her dancers took to the football field during the 2016 Superbowl with synchronized movements, visually performing "Formation" as an anthem for Black women's political organizing. The costuming for the performance incorporated some traditional aspects of military dress, referencing the costuming in Janet Jackson's "Rhythm Nation" (1989) which also features performers dancing in synchronized formation with Jackson at the lead and serves as a musical call for revolutionary organizing. The image of choregraphed lines of Black women dancers at an event like the Superbowl—which, for many, is associated with a heteronormative, male-centric vision of the country—also calls to mind the Black nationalist iconography of the Black Panthers whose all-black, militaristic, sometimes gun-toting uniforms represented a powerful critique of the nation and its dominant myths of freedom and equality. The fishnet tights and fitted leotards of Beyoncé's Superbowl performance of "Formation" departs from Jackson's "Rhythm Nation" in being more overtly sexual. The performance's costumes are not dissimilar to those worn in Beyoncé's "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)" (2008) which, while also about independence in some ways, is from, for Gipson, a pre-feminist consciousness Beyoncé, making the song's militaristic twist in costuming and choreography along with the more explicitly political lyrics what seems to set it apart as being part of Beyoncé's "feminist" era.

In many ways, blues women set the stage for current understandings of Black women's public sexual performance as politically charged. One of the central contributions of Black women's blues of the classic era was the politicizing of sexual performance and innuendo within the context of Black women's increased sexual freedom following emancipation. Ma Rainey's "Down in the Basement," for example, uses sex to critique class structures and class-based

hierarchies around art. Navigating the increasing professionalization of blues performers, Rainey was particularly adept at performing hidden critique within her music. Prior to its professionalization, Baraka argues, it was widely believed that anyone could sing the blues since it was related to life experiences rather than something that could be taught or "mastered" in a professional sense (82). Professionalization defined the music in ways which were more tied to audience demand and the economic desires of the recording labels than before. "Down in the Basement" critiques the way in which the music industry dictates norms and values around music that are based in class. Rainey sings "I've got a man, piano hound. Plays anything that's goin' around. When he plays that highbrow stuff, I shout 'Brother, that's enough!'…So take me to the basement, that's as low as I can go. I want something low-down, Daddy, want it nice and slow." The basement here works as sexual innuendo, but its architectural metaphor also maps onto the critique of class with Rainey dismissing the trappings of "highbrow" music in favor of the "low-down." With the blues' basis in the lives of working-class Black women, its roots in what Rainey calls the "low-down" are not coincidental. Black blues women did not just sing the "low-down" as an accident of their lives but claimed it in a way that openly pushed back against the criticism they faced from mostly middle-class advocates of respectability politics. They used the "low-down," much as Rainey does in this song, to loudly voice their right to pleasure, their right to desire, and even their right to demand the satisfaction usually confined to men.

Like the blues women before her, Beyoncé also politicizes the sexual theme and expression of desire with lyrics that allow for the coexistence of power and sexuality, sending the message that a woman's ability to maintain a powerful position and actively participate in the economic arena is not mitigated by her sexual involvement. In "Hold Up," Beyoncé sings "Let's imagine for a moment that you never made a name for yourself or master wealth. They had you labeled as a

king, never made it out the cage, still out there moving in them streets, never had the baddest woman in the game up in your sheets." A moment from "Sorry" also appears to allow for this coexistence of power and sexuality. Serena Williams' sexual dancing in "Sorry" revises her own public image given that her body has been held under a microscope with people praising her athleticism one minute and insulting her body the next for its perceived masculinity. Draped across a throne near Serena's dancing, a nonchalant Beyoncé sings to the camera, occupying her seat of power confidently and relaxedly. The simultaneity of these images—Williams dancing and Beyoncé on the throne—does not binarize sexual performance and women's empowerment.

Despite this scene's seeming ability to challenge the false binary between sexuality and women's empowerment, it also highlights the way in which other Black women's bodies are commodified and exploited in *Lemonade*, or even how some Black women's bodies are excluded altogether. Critiques of the album's commodification of some Black women's bodies to gain representational value without engaging substantive, intersectional politics exemplify the integration of the sexual and economic in contemporary popular culture. Ashleigh Shackelford marks Williams' publicly represented health and able-bodied-ness as limiting to how radical *Lemonade*'s Black feminist politics could be. She writes, "If bigger-bodied, or perceived bigger-bodied, Black women and femmes cannot be sloppy, sedentary, unhealthy, disabled, and fail expectation of performance, then it is not truly inclusive, radical, or humanizing" (12). Sarah Olutola focuses more on colorism within the album, arguing that the message of Black women's resistance is subsumed by a Eurocentric framework in *Lemonade* which ends up elevating Beyoncé's body as exceptional above other Black women. Olutola writes, "Although the two black women enjoying themselves in the white master's house signifies as a co-conspiratorial reclaiming of this site of white biopolitical power, the video never quite allows Serena to stand on equal

footing to Beyoncé, who consumes her dancing dark-skinned body as entertainment" (111). The symbolism of Beyoncé sitting on the throne as Williams dances for her is echoed, Olutola reminds us, in the name of Beyoncé's fandom. "The Beyhive" mirrors this same monarchical hierarchy with Beyoncé's fans acting as consumers "a caste below that of the protected 'queen bee'" (104).

Lemonade's messaging is in tension with the class politics represented by earlier blues women. With roots in slave music, the blues' ties to the economic are part of its critique of oppression, and it navigates both that critique of and inevitable participation in capitalism in complex, often seemingly contradictory ways. Early blues performers did not and could not afford to live in a fantasy where survival did not necessitate money and, therefore, money-making activities. As Baker argues, many blues performances referenced both "lack and commercial possibility," expressing an age-old, tempestuous relationship—that between "creativity and commerce" (*Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* 9). Necessity and survival are key factors here, making the blues' playful juggling of the commercial and creative—what Baker calls a "black survival [motion]" (196)—subversive in its fostering of Black life. As Baker argues, this role of the Black performer is deeply ingrained within exploitative economic structures in the United States, but blues performers mischievously played from within these problematic parameters to critique their very structures.

"Formation," a song well-known for its activist-oriented visuals and message, contains several references to economic structures and Beyoncé's own economic wealth. In lyrics that directly iterate the rhetoric of the American dream, Beyoncé sings "I dream it, I work hard, I grind till I own it." On the other hand, lyrics like "When he fuck me good, I take his ass to Red Lobster. If he hit it right, I might take him on a flight on my chopper. Drop him off at the mall, let him buy some J's, let him shop up" and "I just might be a Black Bill Gates in the making" turn conventions

of who typically owns economic wealth and the means of gaining it in the United States on their head. Beyoncé treats her man to the spoils of her wealth following her sexual satisfaction—a dynamic that would traditionally be the other way around—and the "Black" that precedes "Bill Gates" is meant to transform "Bill Gates" in a way that shifts the problematic politics of inordinate wealth, making "Formation" a sort of counternarrative but one that appears to lean more towards inversion rather than radical destruction of problematic systems. That being said, Bill Gates' predetermined access to money-making opportunities and resources via his wealthy family and his identification with the world of computer science, a world gatekept by and for white men, makes Beyoncé's commentary critical of not just racialized but gendered and classed privileges. Therefore, "Formation" is commenting on a particular generational mode of financial freedom which complicates *Lemonade*'s representation of Black wealth.

Analyzing the album's seemingly superficial glorification of Black wealth necessitates an understanding of Black women's historical sexual-economic oppression and resistance. Enslaved Black women carried the reproductive value of slavery as a profitable institution. Therefore, Black women's modes of resistance stemmed, in part, from this historical condition. This history is also part of what gives meaning to blues women's explicit claiming of *ownership* over their bodies as sexual, desiring, and desirable. The same history provides additional context for contemporary reclamations of the body by Black women performers like Beyoncé as discussed by LaVoulle and Ellison who argue that Beyoncé is a "Bad Bitch Barbie" for the way she navigates the objectification of her body and turns it to her benefit. LaVoulle and Ellison define a "Bad Bitch Barbie" as a figure who "develops ways to move from survival to success, embracing the body while using it as a means for self-empowerment" (73). Despite its more contemporary terminology, the "Bad Bitch Barbie" shares its subversive tactics with earlier blues women who also found ways

to regain power over their bodies within systems that saw them as profitable commodities. Just like in the case of blues women's radical reclaiming of sexual ownership over their own bodies, this historical background is foundational to understanding Black resistance tactics like building generational wealth.

Black people have historically been and continue to be economically disadvantaged through intentional tactics such as red lining, gentrification, and the school to prison pipeline and, while these factors are among the incentives to build generation wealth, the fact is that, under slavery, the condition of enslavement was a forced inheritance. Therefore, like blues women's radical claiming of their sexuality, the concept of building generational wealth gathers additional meaning from slavery's historical context since it centers on what you pass down and the legacy you leave behind for future generations, not just building and enjoying wealth in one's own lifetime. This background sheds light on how the economic rhetoric of figures like Beyoncé can feel empowering despite their concession to capitalist valuations of material wealth and socioeconomic class. While their economic rhetoric can feel more assimilatory than destructive, the historical context in which not just wealth but generational wealth becomes particularly meaningful for Black families nuances lyrical and visual representations of wealth in Black popular culture performance. Beyoncé's incorporation of daughter Blue Ivy into her music videos and live performances, for example, highlights this vision of an economically powerful Black future generation. Beyoncé's class status is not representative of earlier blues women and the blues' rigorous critique of economic oppression highlights what is problematic about *Lemonade*'s political rhetoric and departure from the blues' centering of working-class politics. However, *Lemonade* does end up speaking to the navigation of oppressive economic systems that disadvantage Black women in particular and blues women's ability to critique without always

providing resolution allows us to see what is empowering about representation without resolution in *Lemonade*, releasing Beyoncé from the pressure to fix violent systems.

The burden to act as the personification of Black feminist liberation that we, as fans or just passive consumers of Beyoncé, place on her stems from more than whether her politics are good or bad, liberating or limiting. This is not to say that we should avoid being critical of less-than-radical aspects of Beyoncé's performances, but I do argue that expectations when it comes to the radical potential of Beyoncé are indicative of a pattern that arises earlier than *Lemonade*'s release in 2016. Hartman reckons with the material specificity of Black women's historical oppression, challenging representations of Black women as symbolic figureheads of vague freedom and resistance. Hartman focuses on the Black domestic worker as a victim of this superficial symbolism. Beyoncé, importantly, does not share a socioeconomic class with the figure of the Black domestic worker. However, the symbolic expectations placed on Black women as elaborated in Hartman's article are relevant to Beyoncé as well. Hartman refers to forms of "care, intimacy, and sustenance" provided by the Black domestic worker as "coerced and freely given" ("The Belly of the World" 171) and I borrow her phrase to argue that this trap or tension expressed by "coerced and freely given" is where Beyoncé, not unlike the other contemporary figures of this chapter, sits. While not a false equivalency between Beyoncé and a working-class Black domestic worker, this framework of care that is "coerced and freely given" reflects the impossible tangle of the potential radical capacity of Beyoncé's music. How do we begin to distinguish which of Beyoncé's messages are "freely given" without regard for their profitability and which are "coerced," prompted by her own or the music industry's imperative to make money by capitalizing on the popular messages or political themes of the moment? The impossibility of distinguishing the

“freely given” from the “coerced” reveals the complex space Beyoncé, her blues predecessors, and contemporaries perform within.

4.2 Janelle Monáe

Hit the mute button. Let the vagina have a monologue.[18]

Figure 11 Janelle Monáe (born 1985)[19]

Unlike Beyoncé's, Janelle Monáe's work is more often spoken about through the lens of the fictional given the science-fiction-inspired and speculative worlds she creates in albums like *Metropolis: The Chase Suite* (2007), *The ArchAndroid* (2010), and *Dirty Computer* (2018). Like Beyoncé though, Monáe began singing at a young age, performing in her Baptist church in Kansas

[18] Monáe, Janelle. "Django Jane." *Dirty Computer*, Wondaland Arts Society, Bad Boy Records, and Atlantic Records, 2018.

[19] "Janelle Monáe – Øyafestivalen 2014." by NRK P3 under License CC BY-NC-SA 2.0 DEED Attribution-NonCommerical-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic.

City, Kansas, as a child and appearing in local theater productions. Monáe was born to a working-class family—her mother worked as a janitor and her father worked as a truck driver—a fact she references proudly in her music. In 2018, Monáe released two singles, "Make Me Feel" and "Django Jane." A few months later, she released the single "PYNK," following it up only a few weeks later with the release of her visual album, or "emotion picture," *Dirty Computer*.

Like *Lemonade*, the sexual-economic as blues legacy informs Monáe's revolutionary navigation and representation of the conjoined themes as well as our ability to recognize them as themes in the album, but unlike Beyoncé, I argue that Monáe pushes and riffs on these tactics practiced by earlier blues women in ways that forward and adapt them. *Dirty Computer* frames pleasure and sexuality as radical in ways that are broader in scope and more communal than Beyoncé's *Lemonade* which leans more into the personal, particularly because of its autobiographical elements as opposed to the more explicitly fictional genre of *Dirty Computer*. That being said, *Dirty Computer* is also autobiographical in some ways in its plot, not just its lyrics. For example, Monáe was rumored to be dating Tessa Thompson at the time of the album's release and, in the album, her character, Jane, is in a relationship with Mary Apple 53, played by Thompson. Monáe uses both her sexuality and class background in the album as a sort of framework for *Dirty Computer*'s vision of politically radical practice.

Given its inspiration from the worlds of science-fiction and dystopian cinema, making a case for why Monáe's work is in kinship with Black women's blues might appear to be more of a challenge. However, Monáe's politicization of sexual desire and expression, her discussion of class politics in conjunction with her critique of capitalism in the United States, and the intersectional integration of her material life connects her work to that of earlier blues women. Monáe's performance of her queerness, which Monáe has discussed in several interviews both personally

and in relation to her work, also connects her to blues women. While it is documented and does show up in some modern biopic representations of blues women, like *Bessie* (2015) and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (2020), the way in which many blues women integrated their queer identity into their politics and music has been, generally, less archived in contemporary narratives—both fictional and scholarly—of blues women.

While Monáe's Afrofuturist approach to drawing links between the past, present, and future might seem divorced from the work of earlier blues women, the act of creating radical visions of a not-yet future via music is something both share. For Monáe, this attention to and travel across time is not merely a matter of content or surface-level representation. Instead, the very genre of memory structures and even politicizes Monáe's visual album, *Dirty Computer*. Throughout the album's narrative, memory is made powerful as resistive method and threat to the institutions that seek to erase it. The album is made up largely of "memories" which are the main music videos in *Dirty Computer* that are then surrounded by the larger science-fiction narrative.

In this larger narrative, Jane, played by Monáe, is taken against her will and put into a large facility where she is strapped to a table that resembles a surgical table in a medical institution. As the rest of the narrative unfolds, two men look on in a nearby room where they are watching and erasing Jane's memories. As mentioned previously, these memories make up the central music videos for the album and, while they are of course associated with the past as memories, they also serve as visions of a more radical future achieved through revolution. The multiple roles of these memories as both past and future are further emphasized when the two men have trouble categorizing them. When more content from Jane's mind comes up on the computer, one man tells the other, "I don't know what this is. This doesn't even look like a memory. What is that? Is that a dream?" The other urges him to just delete it and "keep moving." This uncertainty around genre

allows the colorful, joyful, and powerful visions of the music videos to function as past and future, as call to action and warning about what we will lose or fail to gain if we do not act now. Remembering is one of the primary revolutionary actions of *Dirty Computer*. We learn that this violent facility uses a sort of forgetting gas, referred to as “NEVERMIND,” whenever any of its victims begin to remember and “see the past clearly.” Mary Apple 53, played by Tessa Thompson, has already forgotten the past and been brainwashed by the time the album starts and, to curb Jane’s resistance, tells Jane “Thinking will only make it harder. It’s best if you just enjoy the process. Accept it. People used to work so hard to be free. We’re lucky here. All we have to do is forget.”

Remembering then is shown to be, while revolutionary, also potentially painful, making the temptation to assimilate into the dystopian present of *Dirty Computer* by forgetting even more dangerous. And forgetting is a large part of what Monáe’s 2018 album advises us against, offering us advice in a way that the blues was also famous for through songs like Bessie Smith’s “Pinch Back Blues” which warns against men who financially exploit their romantic partners. In having the music videos of *Dirty Computer* also serve as future visions, earlier blues women and Monáe also share the tactic of envisioning not-yet-existent radical futures. While classic blues women did enjoy more sexual freedom than Black women did prior to emancipation, their sexuality and sexual expression were still policed. And yet, these blues women sang boldly about sex in ways that practiced a freedom not yet afforded them, therefore imagining a future that did not—and arguably still does not—exist yet. Similarly to classic blues women, Monáe celebrates and represents sexual expression as not only empowering but threatening to the powers that be. She does this, in part, through integrating her queer identity into *Dirty Computer*’s narrative with a romance between Jane and Mary Apple 53, played by Thompson who was rumored to be sharing a romantic

relationship with Monáe, giving the album a foot in reality via its central romantic relationship much like Beyoncé's *Lemonade*. While queerness is celebrated and ingrained into *Dirty Computer*'s politics perhaps more explicitly than it was in the music of classic blues women, even the blues of the 1920s contained fairly clear references to the sexuality of its singers which would have been seen as "deviant." Ma Rainey's "Prove It on Me Blues" is one of the most well-known examples of this theme. Rainey sings "Folks say I'm crooked" and "Went out last night with a crowd of my friends. They must've been women 'cause I don't like no men." In the same song, Rainey sings "It's true I wear a collar and tie." Personifying this lyric, blues singer of the 1920s-1950s, Gladys Bentley was famous for performing in a tuxedo and top hat. Her cross-dressing attire challenged boundaries around "normative" gendered behavior and appearance.

Figure 12 Gladys Bentley (1907-1960)[20]

[20] "Gladys Bentley c. 1930 (extracted)" by Wikimedia Commons, 1907. Public Domain.

Monáe, also famous for her iconic attire, sporting everything from an architectural pompadour to bejeweled space buns, is also well-known for donning a tuxedo as uniform which pays homage to her working-class family. Monica Miller argues that "When we see [Monáe] in the tuxedo…we know that she is working" (64). The tuxedo then, in Monáe's performances and public appearances, serves as both uniform for her radical, artistic labor and as challenge to gendered binaries. While some blues scholars like Clyde Woods emphasize the almost documentarian nature of the personal in Black women's blues music, blues practitioners were also very intentionally integrating and performing the personal in ways which made the blues a craft rather than a kind of natural, divine instinct. Much like classic blues women, Monáe uses her own intersectional identities as well as class background to inform her artistic politics while also crafting these themes in ways which dually entertain and subvert.

Just as Monáe uses her own experiences to develop the political landscape of *Dirty Computer*, her body also acts as political voice within the album. This is reflected in the album itself during, for instance, "Django Jane" when Monáe, as Jane, sings "Hit the mute button. Let the vagina have a monologue." Giving voice to the body that is, while not inherently or biologically gendered, hegemonically associated with women makes space for a voice that is often marginalized and erased. Monáe's album, in fact, challenges constructed notions of gender as biologically determined. In "Pynk," for instance, Monáe dances along with other figures in pink velvet leotards, some of which come with pant-like attachments that resemble a vagina. The combination of the leotards with the vaginal pants and those without signal that the song's feminist message is not exclusively directed to those with a vagina, decoupling gender and the body.

As Monáe remixes mainstream notions of who can be centered in a feminist anthem like "Pynk," so too does she remix notions of queenliness. In the song "Q.U.E.E.N." which appears on

The Electric Lady (2013) and features singer-songwriter Erykah Badu, Monáe's "Q.U.E.E.N." stands for queer, untouchables, excommunicated, emigrant, and Negroid. Badu and Monáe redefine the term queen by remixing with freakiness as Lia Bascomb elucidates. Referencing the song's refrain, "Am I freak for getting down?" Bascomb writes, "The idea of being a 'freak' and its associations with sexuality, abnormality, and deviance has a long history within the African diaspora that centers on the intersection of different forms of spectacle and performances of (un)respectability" (1). This radical claiming of freakiness coincides with Monáe's vision of the sexual-economic since Monáe's empowering representations of sexual expression and freedom critique the history of exploiting Black women's bodies, like Sara Baartman's, in "freak shows" for financial gain, connecting the sexual and the economic via the body.

The site of the museum plays a key role in Monáe's critique. Remixing the site of the museum where the song begins into a living museum challenges the space as an institution representing Western colonization and theft. These representations of the Black woman's body as both exploited sexual object and commodity build the landscape of Monáe's sexual-economic politics and critique in her music. The throne, an object directly tied to notions of queenliness and royalty, also appears in both Monáe's *Dirty Computer* and Beyoncé's *Lemonade*. "Django Jane" shows Monáe sitting on a throne, wearing white patent leather boots and a red suit that matches the red hats and tights of the Black women who surround her. She sings "Yeah, this is my palace, champagne in my chalice." Immediately surrounding the throne, we see the architectural features of an industrial basement: exposed pipes on the ceiling, damp floors, and tiled, cement walls. There is a sense of self-making, of a creative take-over of existing space, of opulence among disrepair. Both Shackelford and Olutola critique Beyoncé's use of monarchical imagery and terminology—"Queen Bey," "the Beyhive"—and while both Beyoncé and Monáe's use of Black royalty rhetoric

can be criticized for its use of hierarchical social formations that are more limited in their ability to deconstruct concepts of power and wealth, it is worth asking if Black royalty rhetoric is another instance of innovative subversion within an existing problematic system or if it is too limited in its political potential to be truly radical given its socioeconomic structure.

Just like the blues women before her, Monáe is certainly well-aware of how sex and power are deeply connected, giving rise to both problematic patterns of oppression and control but also lighting a path for how sexual expression and empowerment can serve as political action. *Dirty Computer*'s departure from the blues via its sci-fi genre strengthens the radical, visionary capacities of the album and does end up aligning with the classic blues' own visionary tactics. Monáe's remixing of Black women's blues tactics extends beyond a superficial adoption or reference and, instead, develops an innovative understanding of the sexual-economic in the twenty-first century that uses memory as a medium to remind us of the past's entanglement with not only the present but the future.

4.3 Lizzo

The juice ain't worth the squeeze if the juice don't look like this.[21]

Figure 13 Lizzo (born 1988)[22]

Like Monáe, Lizzo also politicizes sexuality and sexual expression but particularly through her critique of what bodies are "allowed" to be sexual, to experience sexual desire and be sexually desired in return. Melissa Viviane Jefferson, known now by her stage name Lizzo, was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan where her family was involved in the Pentecostal church. The gospel music that Lizzo grew up hearing due to this religious affiliation influenced her later career, but

[21] Lizzo. "Juice." *Cuz I Love You*, Atlantic Records, 2019.

[22] "Lizzo, Oslo Spektrum 2023" by NRK P3 under License CC BY-NC-SA 2.0 DEED Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic.

moving to Houston, Texas at the age of nine with her family would continue to widen her circle of musical influences. In fifth grade, Lizzo took up the flute, going on to play in her high school marching band and eventually earn a scholarship to the University of Houston. In some ways, Lizzo's trajectory is reminiscent of Nina Simone's who also grew up in a religious household with her mother, a Methodist minister, and her father, a preacher, and who began as a classical pianist. Also, like Simone whose immense talent on the piano was on display during many of her performances, Lizzo integrates her flute skills into her music. After moving to Los Angeles in 2016, Lizzo released the EP *Coconut Oil* and then later released *Cuz I Love You* in 2019 to great success.

In the summer of 2023, three former dancers for Lizzo's "Special" tour—Crystal Williams, Arianna Davis, and Noelle Rodriguez—accused Lizzo, Shirlene Quigley, and Big Grrrl Big Touring Inc. of sexual harassment, religious harassment, and perpetuating and contributing to a hostile work environment. Perhaps one of the most highly publicized allegations to come out of the lawsuit is the allegation that Lizzo made "thinly veiled" comments, expressing concern, to Davis about her weight gain. While all of the allegations are serious, this one received some of the most public outcry due to Lizzo's vocal advocacy of the body positivity movement and criticism of anti-fat rhetoric and beauty standards. Many fans felt betrayed, seeing the allegations as an exposure of Lizzo's hypocrisy and disingenuous crafting of her public persona, and still others argued that the performer had always been disingenuous, referencing Lizzo's ownership of a shapewear brand, Yitty, as evidence of her preexisting hypocrisy. Like Nina Paley, it is possible that Lizzo plays at walking the walk and talking the talk so to speak of radical feminist politics but, ultimately, fails to put them into daily practice, a key part of Black feminist consciousness as elaborated in Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the*

Politics of Empowerment. As with Paley, looking at the radical provocations of the classic blues alongside contemporary performance, while often a more nuanced endeavor, can be revealing of hypocrisy. Paley relies on the political associations of classic Black women singers but erases their actual presence. Lizzo, according to the allegations, benefits from the representational politics of hiring fat Black women dancers but treats those same dancers poorly behind the scenes, at times perpetuating the same anti-fat rhetoric she claims to challenge.

The allegations against Lizzo carry particular importance because of her own professed body positive politics and the increasing popularization of the body positivity movement in the last few years. This tension between the personal and the performative goes back to the classic blues era of the 1920s and 1930s when blues singers drew on their personal experiences to speak their audience's own struggles, infusing their lyrics with references to everything from abusive romantic and sexual partners to the 1927 flooding of the Mississippi River as seen in Bessie Smith's "Backwater Blues." Though some scholars and blues fans have seen this integration of the personal as a sign of the organic or autobiographical within blues singers' work, blues singers were—and continue to be—artists, deliberately crafting their product and its performance. This is not to say that the personal nature of the blues and the reality of it as a craft are at odds. What I want to emphasize is the critical intention and inventive tactics behind blues singers' performance of the personal. The contemporary figures I explore here share this with past Black women blues singers. For instance, Beyoncé's crafting and marketing of *Lemonade* as potentially autobiographical is what, in part, gives rise to critiques of Beyoncé's politics as represented in the album. Monáe imbues *Dirty Computer* with the personal—her sexuality, her subversive donning of traditional menswear—but creates a science fiction universe full of fictional characters and scenarios. As Baker and Moten argue, there is no golden era of "authentic," pre-capitalist Black

performance in the United States to return to, and conjointly, there is no moment where we can say Black women blues singers were not crafting their art to some degree whether it was for an audience of waiting locals, standing expectant before a rural, outdoor stage or a constellation of global listeners, needles poised above their spinning vinyl records. The album as autobiographical document is still, in itself, a genre and way of approaching an object as opposed to a stable equivalency between life and art. While I am concerned with the material lives of blues women, past and present, my objects of study are—and, to some degree, must be—the products they produce and their own constructed public persona. Therefore, the iterations of self-love and radical politics I discuss in relation to Lizzo are her performances and representations of such.

I argue that Lizzo uses classic blues women's tactics that represented their investment in the communal to frame her own navigation of the sexual-economic in communal ways and ways that prioritize communal action. Lizzo takes up, primarily, the popular theme of love and romantic relationships we see in the work of earlier blues women and, just like the blues women before her, politicizes it in order to disrupt the patterns of violence—psychological as well as physical—that Black women are subject to. Lizzo's representation of sexual empowerment and body-positive celebration is communal and she achieves this by using a classic blues tactic in which the singer's "I" represents the "we" or, in other words, the larger audience. While her lyrics on economic wealth and expensive designer brands as a status symbol would not be out of place in Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, she also continues her investment in the communal through lyrics which do point more towards a community-centric practice of building economic wealth.

Lizzo's connection to the music of classic blues women, in some instances, occurs formally. For instance, in "Phone" from Lizzo's 2016 album, *Coconut Oil*, the repetition of the song's central lyric—"Where the hell my, where the hell my phone, huh?"—and the fact that there

is a final, humorous punchline in the song where Lizzo realizes she is holding the phone reflect classic, formal blues structures from both blues music and blues poetry. More often than not though, Lizzo's music reflects that of earlier blues women through its sexually bold performance and representation of a sort of blues orientation towards romantic love and relationships. Songs like "Tempo," "Worship," "Scuse Me," "Juice," and "Soulmate" exemplify Lizzo's message of self-love. Myles Mason argues that Lizzo's use of call and response in her 2019 Tiny Desk Concert builds a sense of unity and harmony, provoking the audience to love themselves the way that Lizzo does herself.

Importantly, Lizzo's self-love is unlike contemporary capitalist versions of self-love which merely advocate for spending. Instead, Lizzo's version of self-love, as it appears in her performance, centers Black women and exists outside of mainstream beauty and body standards that position thin, light-skinned women as deserving of "self-love" or most justified in loving themselves. Lizzo is well-aware of this context in which her preaching of self-love is disruptive, and her knowledge of that context is exemplified through her lyrics. For instance, in "Tempo," she sings "Slow songs, they for skinny hoes. Can't move all of this here to one of those. I'm a thick bitch. I need a tempo" and in "Scuse Me," "Feeling like a stripper when I'm lookin' in the mirror. I'll be slappin' on that ass, getting thicker and thicker." The lyrics of "Juice" show how Lizzo further politicizes these public performances and acts of self-love by framing her brand of self-love as transformative for everyone. In "Juice," she sings "If I'm shining, everybody gonna shine," highlighting the intersectional identities that position her as multiply marginalized and would, therefore, make her freedom multiply disruptive and radical.

"Soulmate" perhaps most explicitly illustrates Lizzo's self-love since it is itself a love song. Referring to herself, Lizzo sings "And she never tells me to exercise. We always get extra fries,

and you know the sex is fire…'Cause I'm my own soulmate. I know how to love me. I know that I'm always gonna hold me down." Lizzo's preaching of self-love combined with her advocacy for the body positivity movement takes advantage of contemporary technological affordances and platforms, such as social media, but it also draws on the body positive politics of earlier blues women. In "'Jelly Jelly Jellyroll': lesbian sexuality and identity in women's blues," Maria Johnson argues that blues women, like Ma Rainey, transformed the stereotypes popular in the minstrel tradition, like the mammy, into "self-defined" sexual subjects "as can be seen in the name of Ma Rainey, where 'Ma' stood for both mother and lover" (3). Shackelford references another famous "Ma," writing "I think about the Big Mama Thorntons singing their pain, creating innovative magic through fat, queer resilience but getting their legacy and craft appropriated and snatched…Black fat women and femmes are always expected to play support systems to everyone in the world (even to other Black women and femmes) while being politically denied healthy access to sexuality/sexualization, gender conformity, and humanity" (10-11). Like her blues predecessors, Lizzo explicitly claims her sexual desirability, challenging the systemic mammification and desexualization of fat Black women.

Lizzo's celebration of her body as sexual, desiring, and desirable connects her to earlier blues women as does her interest in the theme of love and romantic relationships within music. Black women's blues music has been the subject of scholarship that aims to make meaning of the music's lyrical, sonic, and performative aspects. Davis' reading of many instances of the blues as ironic, particularly when the singer is expressing tolerance towards abuse, elides what might be a more challenging aspect of Black women's blues music. I argue that while there are many examples of the blues that explicitly resist abuse, the ones that express tolerance towards it or love despite it, while not passive, might be taking a different route of resistance than can be

encompassed in the lens of irony. These instances resist the codification of the ironic reading. Ma Rainey's "Oh Papa Blues" is about dealing with a man's mistreatment and exploitation—"All my money, I give you" she sings—and ends with a threat: "You'll 'gret the day that you ever quit me." While the song's lyrics speak to the singer's feelings of abandonment, the final threat does not render those prior expressions inauthentic or ironic. Instead, the threat seems to be made despite those still romantic feelings expressed through lines like "I'm forever tryin' to call his name."

The reality was that Black women's abandonment and exploitation by romantic or sexual partners was not a fiction made up to construct a stage on which blues singers could express threats or sing lyrics that are easier to read as resistant. Instead, blues singers actively spoke on these realities that Black women faced in ways which were relatable to their audiences. Their expressions of tolerance for abuse, while not un-crafted for performance, lose their affective aspect when read only through irony. This is not to make a claim about what blues singers and their audiences were feeling, but it is to say that the lens of irony elides the complexity and empowering possibility that arises from the act of resistance or threat *in spite of* something we might call love or, at least, attachment. In other words, it is "I'm forever tryin' to call his name" right next to and up against "You'll 'gret the day that you ever quit me" that speaks to how the blues slips past falsely binarized categorizations like passive and active, tolerance and resistance, or authenticity and performance. Even the present tense of lyrics like "I'm forever tryin' to call his name" suggest that the singer is speaking from that affective register, making the future tense of the threat—"You'll 'gret the day that you ever quit me"—a future-oriented promise or trajectory, perhaps one that while literally addressed to the male figure is made between herself and an audience of those who might hear themselves through the song.

Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" does something similar to Rainey's "Oh Papa Blues" in terms of tense, with much of the song being sung in a present where the singer is bemoaning the loss of a man. For instance, Smith sings "I can't sleep at night. I can't eat a bite 'cause the man I love, he don't treat me right. He makes me feel so blue, I don't know what to do. Sometimes I sit and sigh and then begin to cry." Later, lyrics like "But what you're gonna need is an undertaker man" point to the future, much like the threat of Rainey's "Oh Papa Blues." Unlike Rainey's threat though, this line in "Crazy Blues" does not specify whether it should be heard as a threat to the male figure with the undertaker being presumably for his dead body or if it is an expression of the singer's suicidal ideation. The lack of clarity surrounding this line allows it to function in multiple ways at once, simultaneously expressing the singer's heartbreak *and* violent resistance to mistreatment. Another line in the song, "Now I see my poor love was blind," can also be read in multiple ways. On the one hand, the singer might be speaking of *her* love for the partner, meaning that she could not apprehend or see the tragic reality of the romance, but "love" could also refer to the partner himself, meaning that he is the one who is blind to, perhaps, the singer's love for him or value to his life. These meanings toggle between what might seem like the singer's more victimized blindness and the calling out of the mistreating partner's blindness.

Figure 14 "Queen of the Blues" Mamie Smith (1891-1946)[23]

Taking up the theme of mistreatment in romantic relationships, many of Lizzo's songs encourage her audience to take an empowered stance towards heartbreak even while she acknowledges the reality and pain of lost love. For instance, in "Good as Hell," Lizzo sings "Come now, come dry your eyes, you know you a star. You can touch the sky. I know that it's hard, but you have to try. If you need advice, let me simplify. If he don't love you anymore, just walk your fine ass out the door" and "Time to focus on you, all the big fights, long nights that you been through. I got a bottle of tequila I been saving for you. Boss up and change your life. You can have

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23 Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library. "Mamie Smith" The New York Public Library Digital Collections. 1921 - 1939. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/bbebeb9f-9c94-2277-e040-e00a18063600

it all, no sacrifice. I know he did you wrong. We can make it right, so go and let it all hang out tonight." In "Jerome," a song addressed to the mistreating romantic partner, she sings "Jerome, Jerome, take your ass home, and come back when you're grown" and "Poor little baby, who told you that you stood a chance with this royalty?" refusing to tolerate mistreatment and mixing her message of self-love into the song by representing the romantic partner, Jerome, as undeserving of her attention and love. Perhaps most reflective of a blues orientation towards love, which is both un-naive and sometimes seemingly accepting of mistreatment, is Lizzo's "Crybaby." In the song, she sings "He said: Why you cryin', baby? Why you cryin', baby? What did I do? Oh, I said, shut up and kiss me. Oh, 'cause I don't wanna be here for long…Let my guard down for you and you gon' make me put it back up…You know it hurts sometimes. My love is your love. Why can't your love be mine?" By balancing these dual and connected responses of both refusal and acceptance, Lizzo's music exists in kinship with the music of classic blues women that also represents the terrain of romantic relationships as central to daily life and even community-gathering through the giving and receiving of advice.

This duality is also represented in the kind of affective slippage of *Cuz I Love You*'s title track. In the music video accompanying "Cuz I Love You," we get both wedding and funeral imagery when Lizzo stands in a white, wedding-like dress at a podium in a set-up that evokes a eulogy more than it does a marriage ceremony. This wedding-funeral mise en scène is reflected in the lyrics as well when Lizzo sings "I'm crying 'cause I love you." "Truth Hurts" also visualizes a wedding in ways which are, similarly to "Cuz I Love You," unexpected. In the music video for "Truth Hurts," the wedding scene appears slightly chaotic with the second would-be married person missing and Lizzo flirting with the officiant. As the men in the larger wedding party begin flirting with one another and the possibility of a two-person romantic plot dissipates, the potential

marriage of the song becomes a communal one, the video becoming increasingly focused on the ensemble of characters rather than on a singular couple or just Lizzo herself. The allusions to being left at the altar or, at least, left—"You coulda had a bad bitch, non-committal, help you with your career just a little. You're supposed to be hold me down, but you're holding me back and that's the sound of me not calling you back…You tried to break my heart. Oh, that breaks my heart that you ever though you had it. No, you ain't from the start"—end with group celebration rather than isolated dejection, transforming the very shape of what a wedding ceremony traditionally is.

Memphis Minnie's "Nothing in Rambling" is an interesting case next to Smith's "Crazy Blues" and Rainey's "Oh Papa Blues" both of which refer to romantic partnerships in ways that are more expectedly emotional, but it is also interesting next to Lizzo's "Cuz I Love You" and "Truth Hurts" for the way it also takes up the traditional institution in a perhaps unexpected way. In "Nothing in Rambling," Memphis Minnie refers to romantic partnerships in a purely practical tone, seeing marriage as a way to potentially escape a difficult, rambling lifestyle. She paints a picture of the poverty in rambling, singing "The peoples on the highway is walking and crying. Some is starving, some is dying," and also speaks to violence at the hands of the police when she sings "I was walking through the alley with my hand in my coat. The police start to shoot me, thought it was something I stole." In the song, Memphis Minnie repeats the lines "'Cause ain't nothing in rambling, either running around. Well, I believe I'll marry, oooh, oooh, Lord, and settle down," identifying marriage as a potential escape from the pitfalls of rambling. Rather than narrating marriage as idealistic or romantically charged, it becomes viewable as a system deeply tied to the economic through the song. Therefore, while "Nothing in Rambling" appears to adhere to what is demanded by heteronormative models of romantic life's expected trajectory in saying that the singer will get married, it also explicitly resists those models by deromanticizing marriage

and framing it as economic institution. In this way, "Nothing in Rambling" playfully appears to give in just as it escapes from institutional narratives.

Figure 15 Memphis Minnie (1897-1973)[24]

Many of Lizzo's lyrics when it comes to the economic resemble the economic logics found in Beyoncé's lyrics. For instance, both Lizzo and Beyoncé often mark the economic through referencing particular brands or financial gain. In "Worship," Lizzo refers to "beefin' up [her] purse" and in "Scuse Me," she sings "So much Prada on me, I'm a prodigy." Much like Beyoncé,

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[24] "Memphis Minnie promotional photo" by Meili Powell under License 17 U.S. Code & 107 – Limitations on exclusive rights: Fair use.

some of Lizzo's mentions of the economic are meant to turn the rules of wealth on their head, reversing the representation of who is or deserves to be wealthy in the United States. In "Cuz I Love You," Lizzo sings "Wanna put you on a plane, fly you out to wherever I am," a lyric that is not dissimilar from the previously discussed lyric in Beyoncé's "Formation": "If he hit it right, I might take him on a flight on my chopper." Both lyrics put the power of not only economic wealth but mobility in the hands of Black women, putting them in the position of economically supporting a partner rather than the reverse. Other lyrics, like "Buy my whip by myself, pay my rent by myself" in "Like a Girl," also put the means of economic independence in the hands of Black women which, while challenging, in some ways, to the normative flow of wealth in the United States does not necessarily radically disrupt capitalist definitions of class and value.

Although Lizzo's approach to the economic is not drastically different to Beyoncé's on its surface, she does perform a more communal vision of work and support. For instance, in "Coconut Oil," Lizzo sings "When I look at you, I see me. I do unto you as I would do someone livin' in my two story. We got different stories. We under one roof, so when it spring a leak, we both got work to do." Like Ma Rainey's "Down in the Basement," Lizzo uses the house as metaphor, signaling economic struggle through the roof's leak. Seeing radical work as communal and necessitating a structure that emphasizes solidarity and co-responsibility for one another, Lizzo's music does move towards disrupting an individual-centric narrative of class mobility that can, problematically, feed into the "bootstrap" myth. While many of Lizzo's lyrics still glamourize the material trappings of an upper socioeconomic class status, they also represent an investment in the communal, taking steps towards dismantling individualistic frameworks of achieving social change.

In simultaneously holding an attention to the exploitation, consumption, and cooptation of Black women's blues as well as maintaining the ability to hear the blues as still critical and

challenging in its very expansiveness and changing, I argue that we can arrive at a more complex understanding of not only the blues' functioning today but how Black women are using and being inspired by the music within contemporary popular culture as well. Both older and more contemporary blues scholarship has discussed the genre's material origins and historical development, establishing past blues women as political and intellectual contributors. While it is important to contextualize the blues—both as music and ideology—I am less invested in an argument over authenticity or musical origins. Beyoncé, Monáe, and Lizzo share a kinship with earlier blues women through their riffing on classic blues tactics and navigation of the sexual-economic, but they do so in the context of the twenty-first century. Rather than being a framework on which to "test" the radicality of the work I discuss in this chapter, classic Black women's blues music and politics both complicate and are complicated by reading the work of popular culture figures like Beyoncé, Monáe, and Lizzo alongside the work of past blues women. The sexual-economic as temporally and culturally specific changing backdrop illuminates the way in which contemporary performers represent Black feminist concerns as well as how intersectional those concerns are, particularly when we consider the working-class origins of the blues tactics they adapt.

5.0 Chapter Four: Today's Blues Women

In the long history of blues scholarship, contemporary blues artists tend to be positioned as the middle child—between the older blues singers of the 1920s and 1930s and the pop, rap, and hip hop performers of the twenty-first century whom many see as carrying on the legacy of earlier Black blues women. The artists performing under the official genre heading of the blues tend to claim less space in scholarship and popular music discourse. In part, their platforms are often smaller or more niche than popular stars like Beyoncé, Lizzo, and Janelle Monáe who are the focus of the previous chapter. However, the presence, innovations, and diverse artistry of contemporary blues singers attest, perhaps most clearly, to the blues' continued life and relevance today. More than archivists, artists like Shemekia Copeland, Adia Victoria, and Amythyst Kiah breathe new air into the blues, gathering blues fans into a community that is alive and well.

While Copeland, Victoria, and Kiah do not represent all of the Black women blues singers working today, each artist's repertoire showcases a unique blend of classic blues themes and sound along with contemporary twists on the genre. Far from merely replicating the music of the blues women before them, Copeland, Victoria, and Kiah draw on the blues' musical and political legacy while taking advantage of contemporary allowances, often being even more explicit in their political critique than their predecessors. While classic blues women were, as argued across previous chapters, engaged in consistent political critique, the contemporary artists that I explore in this chapter take advantage of their increased freedoms via lyrical vocabulary. For instance, Adia Victoria's "Deep Water Blues" takes the traditional bluesy "break-up" song and uses it to critique the trope of the "strong, Black woman." She sings "They say a Black woman got steel for a spine. She'll carry your weight. She'll carry it fine. She'll think of you 'fore she'll think of

herself. She don't mind not being on the mind of nobody else, but I don't want to rescue you." She goes on to tie the problematic expectations of lopsided emotional labor put on Black women in intimate relationships to the larger and longer history of Black women's labor in the United States through the role of mammies and domestic workers. She sings "Now it's been too many times I've been put in a place to have to wipe up a mess a white man made, like my grandma did and her mama did too, so I'll be awful glad to get me clean of you." Scholars like Angela Davis have argued, at length, that classic blues singers were launching protest via their music. While their music was often the impetus for what we, as contemporary listeners and audiences, might see as more recognizable or legible protest, their music was still staunchly political and critical. The artists of this chapter take that legacy of the blues women before them and run with it, exploding the genre with explicit political protest while still maintaining the blues' tradition of expressing the personal and connecting with audiences through intimate themes, such as loss and heartbreak.

Despite their ability to be more explicitly critical than twentieth-century blues women, contemporary blues artists also find themselves in the eye of the storm when it comes to debates about the blues' origins. In *Whose Blues? Facing Up to Race and the Future of Music*, Adam Gussow calls this two-pronged debate blues universalism versus Black bluesism. Black bluesism argues that the blues' origins among not just Black people but *violences* against Black people in the United States is foundational to the contemporary performance and understanding of the genre. Blues universalism argues the opposite: that the blues is not tied to race and is rather universal, "just American" music. Gussow traces the concept of blues universalism to the 1960s blues revival in which, primarily, white artists and fans championed the music that younger, Black people had lost interest in. Many adherents to blues universalism argue that the blues owes its revival and, therefore, contemporary presence to the white people who kept it alive. Though Gussow argues

that Black bluesism has more of a claim than blues universalism, his methodology "highlight[s] paradox" and "takes pleasure in the two-sidedness of apparently clear-cut issues" (39). Like Gussow, Houston Baker also uses a trickster-like critical approach in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Such approaches are rooted in the blues' playfulness and own methods of critique. I join this tradition of adopting a blues-inspired trickster ethos when it comes to looking at contemporary popular culture performance that riffs on the blues. While I maintain that the blues' origins are still not only relevant but have things to teach us, I also celebrate the blues' evolutions and transformations. These evolutions are, I argue, not entirely new but rather a feature of the blues since its inception. The blues is and has always been responsive. It does not, and cannot, archive, navigate, critique, or sound in an ahistorical or acontextual vacuum. Therefore, to bemoan the fact of its transformations is to misunderstand something at the root of the blues.

My attempts to hold both the blues' origins and its inventive contemporary iterations simultaneously occur across the chapters of this dissertation but are perhaps in the best company in this final chapter since the contemporary artists I discuss here contend with a similar push and pull. Unlike the artists of the previous chapter, Copeland, Victoria, and Kiah are actual blues artists performing and releasing music today and are, therefore, more directly in the middle of the debate Gussow identifies. Because of this context, I argue that we see all three artists explicitly navigating national narratives and histories via the blues. The sexual-economic continues to be a thread in contemporary blues music and each artist represents and critiques the sexual-economic in different ways. The way these artists also speak to national narratives or histories in their music enters them into a high-stakes contemporary conversation about how we understand music and claims to ownership or authentic rendition. Rather than being a separate issue from the sexual-economic,

Copeland, Victoria, and Kiah's respective navigations of national and historical narratives color their dealing with the sexual-economic.

These contemporary artists use a variety of tactics, such as critical ambiguity and geographical specificity to speak on the blues' origins and ability to comment on larger issues, such as racial oppression and socioeconomic class struggle. The specific iteration of critical ambiguity we see across Copeland, Victoria, and Kiah's work is, while reminiscent of previous versions, one that has evolved over time. With roots in slave music, critical ambiguity developed from the necessity of disguising lyrics that aided successful escape and liberation efforts, all while evading capture. Blues artists intentionally used the tactic of critical ambiguity to critique the structures they found themselves working within and financially reliant on. Many women blues artists also used the tactic of critical ambiguity to speak in nuanced and complex ways about abuse in romantic and sexual relationships.

As we witness artists gain larger platforms upon which to develop and market the political persona that accompanies their music, we also see critical ambiguity evolving. Though artists, particularly Black women artists, still contend with the demands of record companies, audiences, and of course, capitalist imperatives to make as much profit as possible, many contemporary artists enjoy more freedom than their musical predecessors when it comes to imbuing their music and public persona with a political message. That being said, we still see contemporary artists using critical ambiguity to contend with the previously stated demands of multiple parties and even their own financial interests. In Beyoncé's case, for example, *Lemonade* teeters between fulfilling audience expectations for insights into her personal life and a playful withholding of that fulfillment. It does so via critical ambiguity, never fully revealing what the audience can trust as "authentic." The contemporary blues artists of this chapter often use critical ambiguity across an entire album as

opposed to within a single track, charging that ambiguity with the contradicting myths and violent realities that undergird this country and the stories it tells about itself. Copeland's 2018 album *America's Child*, for instance, sets up the expectation that we, as listeners, might get some kind of argument about the United States via the album as a whole. Yet, the variety of songs, some seemingly only disparately connected to one another, foils attempts to make neat meaning from this gathering of songs. Where some songs, like "Americans" appear to perpetuate the myth of America as a "melting pot" paradise, others, like "In the Blood of the Blues," explicitly lay out the United States' long history of racial violence, situating the blues as decidedly Black in response to blues universalist stances.

Along with utilizing critical ambiguity to intervene in hegemonic national stories or representations, Copeland, Victoria, and Kiah highlight the regional, particularly the South in the case of Victoria and Kiah, as a way to frame not just sexual-economic issues but challenge blues universalist arguments that uproot the blues from the racialized violences and regional origins that are so crucial to the genre's history as well as present. The popular artists I discuss in the previous chapter do end up speaking to the national which many scholars have pointed out—especially in Beyoncé's case—but with their global platforms, where they gain reach, they lose the resonance that geographically specific lyrics might have with a more localized audience. While, of course, each has fans from specific places and talks about specific places or regions in their music, the topics that rise to the surface in their respective careers tend to be ones that are more easily framed in a larger, more global scope, such as racial discrimination, the body positivity movement, and queerness. This is not to say that these topics have nothing to do with regional specificity or are not generatively nuanced by considering them alongside critical frameworks that take region or geography into account. It is to say that these singers with a global platform, quite smartly, do not

rely too heavily on lyrics or visual tropes that might not translate across geographical boundaries. Janelle Monáe, for instance, builds a science fiction world in *Dirty Computer* (2018) that allows her to expand her critical reach. Even her newest album and its title, *The Age of Pleasure* (2023), marks a temporality, an era, as opposed to a material location as such. Rather than being a mere biographical detail of the singer's life when it comes to the contemporary blues music I explore in this chapter, regional specificity offers a rejoinder to universalist approaches to and understandings of blues music. While the blues' ability to travel and adapt is not only inherent to the blues itself but generative, locating their respective work regionally allows Copeland, Victoria, and Kiah to radically re-narrate the histories and stories that the blues has and continues to speak to.

5.1 Shemekia Copeland

I'm between the lines of every song, I'm the reason the blues is keeping on.[25]

Figure 16 Shemekia Copeland (born 1979)[26]

Born in Harlem, New York in 1979, Shemekia Copeland began seriously devoting her life to singing at the age of fifteen. Her father, blues guitarist legend Johnny Copeland, encouraged her to sing from a young age, even bringing her on stage at Harlem's Cotton Club when Copeland was only eight years old. As her father's health declined, Copeland began throwing herself more

[25] Copeland, Shemekia. "In the Blood of the Blues." *America's Child*, Alligator Records, 2018.

[26] "The Main Stage in Welles Park" by TheeErin under License CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic.

seriously into singing, releasing her debut album *Turn the Heat Up* in 1997 at the age of eighteen. She has cemented herself as a powerful blues artist, earning eight Blues Music Awards, numerous Living Blues Awards, and several Grammy nominations. Through her performances and her own daily blues radio show at SiriusXM's *Bluesville*, Copeland plays a large part in keeping the blues.

Many of Copeland's songs highlight the sexual-economic in a fashion reminiscent of the classic blues. In particular, she uses the blues' traditional penchant for giving advice or offering warnings with songs like "Crossbone Beach" in which the singer shares the story of their sexual assault. The song, ultimately, ends in the singer killing the assaulter and leaving them in a ditch, achieving revenge in a way typical of many historical blues songs. "The Wrong Idea" highlights a similar theme but takes a more playful approach. Copeland achieves this approach through the song's upbeat rhythm as well as her live performances of it in which she claps, smiles, and directly invites the audience's participation, making the song a kind of collaborative feminist anthem. "The Wrong Idea" speaks to the assumption that a group of women out at a bar together, drinking, are looking to get picked up or hit on. In it, Copeland sings "Out with the girls to have a good time, a lot of laughs, a lot of glasses of wine. Some clown at the end of the bar stared at us a little too hard. He slides on over, offers you a drink. Well, let me tell you, mister, just what I think. You got the wrong idea. You not the reason that I came here. You got the wrong idea. Good boy, go back to your beer."

Across her performances of "The Wrong Idea," Copeland invites her audience to participate. Taking her performance at Portsmouth, New Hampshire's Music Hall in December 2021 as an example, we see Copeland pause in the middle of the song to speak to her audience: "So, this is the part where I ask the ladies to sing with me. Ladies, are you gonna help me out? I'm counting on you. And all you gotta do is sing, 'You got the wrong idea.' Can you do that for me?

Alright, I'm counting on you. Come on, ladies. Loud and proud." After Copeland and the women in the audience perform a few rounds of a call and response of the song's titular phrase—"You've got the wrong idea"—Copeland again stops to address the audience, saying "But here's my problem. We go all over the world, right? And everywhere I got, I got men coming up to me telling me 'Shemekia, you are wrong. It's not us that have the wrong idea. It's you guys.' And they go, 'We want to sing too.' So, because I'm fair, I'm like 'Alright, you all want to sing, you can sing.' So, fellows, are you ready?" While this moment might appear to take back the song and performance's promise of centering the women in the audience, after performing a few rounds of the same call and response with the men in the audience, Copeland jokes that the women performed better. She says, "Come on, ladies. Let's show 'em how it's done. We gonna tear the roof off this sucker." This performative tactic adds to the playfulness of the song and mirrors the *de*centering of men within its story, but only a few musical phrases after Copeland stages this decentering, she offers an aside—this one much quieter than her earlier invitations to the audience: "I haven't been in a bar in so long, I don't know what happens in there. There's no telling. All speculation." This moment seems to take back yet another promise, the one that "The Wrong Idea" at least reflects some part of the singer's personal experience. Copeland's aside almost jarringly speaks to the craftedness of the personal, a skill that past blues women were also adept at despite narratives that attribute their talent for engaging audiences to uncrafted expressions of personal experience. Copeland's speculative craft highlights the intentionality behind her attention to the sexual-economic theme even as it oscillates between playful, intimate engagement and a withholding of the personal.

Like the blues, Copeland's catalogue contains extensive examples of bold reclamations of sexual desire and sexual freedom. For instance, "Isn't That So" plays on the problematic "boys

will be boys" adage which preemptively justifies and forgives behavior like the ones we see in "Crossbone Beach" and "The Wrong Idea." In the song, referring to God, Copeland sings "Didn't He know what He was doing putting eyes into my head. If He didn't want me watching men, He'd have left my eyeballs then, isn't that so?" By appearing to use a similar but reversed logic to "boys will be boys," Copeland normalizes women's sexual desire, but lines like "Line of least resistance, lead me on" also allude to the singer's own capacity for resistance or self-control whether that capacity is taken advantage of or not. In another instance of reversal, "Too Close" takes up the blues trope of a rambling man trying to avoid getting "tied down" by a romantic partner and puts those same concepts in the hands of Copeland who, after bemoaning the suffocating nearness of her romantic partner, ends by defiantly claiming her space: "Gonna powder my face, put on leather and lace….I need my space, gonna leave this place."

Copeland's dealing with the sexual-economic, like her blues predecessors, is nuanced and more complex than a simple matter of addressing the sexual-economic as if it is representative of two distinct issues. Her music takes into account the histories of sexual-economic subjugation and oppression that Black women faced and continue to face. These are the same histories and realities that make blues women's reclamation of their sexuality and sexual desire so radical, given the historical context of slavery in which the "sexuality and reproductive capacities of enslaved women were central to understanding the expanding legal conception of slavery and its inheritability" (Hartman, "The Belly of the World" 169). This history is what makes no accident blues women's integrated understanding of the sexual and economic as inherently tied modes of oppression as well as opportunities for liberation. Far from being an accident, this integration is a statement in and of itself, and contemporary blues singers, like Copeland, continue the tradition,

at times evolving their representation of the sexual-economic by taking advantage of increased—although not complete—expressive freedom.

"Drivin' Out of Nashville" directly calls out the exploitation and abuse that takes place in the music industry with the blues' signature tongue-in-cheek playfulness. Mirroring the narrative of "Crossbone Beach," "Drivin' Out of Nashville" tells the story of the singer exacting revenge on a music industry man who attempts to entice and take advantage of the singer with promises of stardom. Despite the song's subject matter, the blues' playful tone shows up several times. For instance, Copeland sings "I guess I had enough. My bouffant lost its puff. These music men got one thing on their mind. They claim that you have a big chance somewhere in their pants, but disappointment's all you're gonna find." The lyrical double-entendre of "disappointment" both highlights the failure of these music men's promises of music industry success and cheekily alludes to their suggested physical shortcomings. Here, the sexual and economic are represented as co-constitutive oppressions, with the promise of economic success making the singer particularly vulnerable to the music man's sexually exploitative advances.

The sexual and economic are explicitly tied in Copeland's "Outskirts of Love;" she sings "Woman at the bus stop in a wedding gown, there's a ticket in her hand. She's heading out of town, carrying a suitcase bound up with string. It was all that she had left since she pawned her wedding ring." In this case, the dissolution of a marriage or potential marriage is directly accompanied by the song's central figure's economic struggle, highlighting the institutional legality and potential economic security of marriage as opposed to its more seemingly romantic ideals. Despite the commonality of references to romantic love across the classic blues, the blues women of the 1920s and 1930s often emphasized the institutional nature of marriage. For instance, as discussed in the third chapter, Memphis Minnie's "Nothing in Rambling" frames marriage as a

way out of a life characterized by economic struggle and rambling. In highlighting marriage as a legal institution and associating it with economic stability, blues women disrupted marriage's romantic narrative and instead emphasized the history of Black people being denied the legal rights of marriage in the United States. This denial went hand-in-hand with enslaved women's forced passing down of the condition of slavery to their children and the withholding of legal recognition of Black families under slavery, allowing family members to be separated.

While Copeland's representations of the sexual-economic carry on the political legacy of the blues women before her through highlighting marriage as an institution and the exploitation of Black women via co-constituted sexual and economic means, she also uses the blues to reference contemporary events. In "She Don't Wear Pink," Copeland tells the story of a queer woman who gets married to "a real good man" at "just eighteen" but finds herself confined by the limitations placed on her. The song challenges heteronormative, gendered expectations and recounts the woman's "failure" to adhere to those expectations by leaving dishes piled in the sink, not wearing pink, and not liking Barbie and Ken. These "failures" are mapped onto the woman's queer identity which is subtly present throughout the song but most explicit at the end when Copeland sings "She got a job teaching at the high school. Kids finally had a teacher who was cool, but the parents got her fired. They made a big stink when they found out she don't wear pink." This lyric references the very real firing of queer educators. While this discrimination is certainly not a new problem, it has been given more media attention in recent years with the firings of Amanda Ruud McVety in 2014, Jocelyn Morffi in 2018, Jay Bowman in 2022, and Maggie Barton in 2023 being prime examples. In the case of these, and many more related wrongful firings, sexuality and economic stability are connected, with teachers who refuse to disguise their sexuality being made vulnerable to firing and, therefore, the revocation of economic stability. Interestingly, if we look at the entirety

of Copeland's oeuvre, this reference to discrimination based on sexuality exists in some tension with her representations of the United States as a country where diverse individuals enjoy equal freedom.

Copeland's representations of the United States, particularly in her 2018 album *America's Child* and her 2020 album *Uncivil War*, draw on critical ambiguity to complicate national narratives of progressiveness and equality. This critical ambiguity takes place, most notably, across single albums or even across multiple albums as opposed to in individual songs which, while certainly complex on their own, are in generative tension with some of Copeland's other songs. Copeland's juggling of multiple narratives about diversity in the United States—those that claim it as a nationally celebrated value and those that highlight the violent oppression that the country's institutions are not only built on but continue to perpetuate—can be seen across her work. The ambiguity surrounding the representation of the United States in Copeland's work is critical, much like blues women's critical ambiguity, because of its refusal to comfortably settle in a single place. Instead, the juggling of multiple stories across the album and albums leaves the listener to struggle with those same stories, their contradictions and their investment in mythologies.

"Americans" from *America's Child* paints a picture of diversity across several categories from religion to politics: "There's an Elvis impersonator riding in an elevator, a Hindu from Yucatan asking to shake his hand, a slick-haired deplorable thinking he's adorable…a left-wing liberal geek married to a red neck freak…a pole dancer leaving jail chewing on her fingernails, a transgender sugar daddy riding in a purple caddy." The fact that the song lists what the lyrics refer to as "walking, talking contradictions" does not necessarily make a statement about the United States' freedom or lack thereof. Rather, it is the repeated line "Still free to be you and me" which appears to suggest that the diverse characters represented in the song are all free—and not just free

but, specifically, free to be themselves. Despite the potential for this song to be read as an anthem for the United States' "progressive" values and generous freedoms, other songs on the same album directly challenge that reading by not only calling out discrimination but framing such discrimination as the national norm. "Ain't Got Time for Hate" also represents human diversity in its lyrics, but rather than being a diversity that is cosigned by the nation as a kind of foundational, national principle, the non-discriminatory stance is framed as the singer's own via the use of first-person pronouns: "*I* don't care if you're rich, never had a dime. This whole life is an uphill climb…And *I* ain't got time, ain't got time, ain't got time for hate" [emphasis added]. To further emphasize the fact that this non-discriminatory stance is the singer's and not the country's, Copeland sings "People lost and lonely, looking for a home, call us names that still hurt us, a lot more than stones. It's the law of the jungle. It's the law of the land. We hold each other's hearts in the palm of our hands." The use and repetition of the word "law" in this lyric refers to the perpetuation of discrimination and oppression through the United States' legal system which appears to contradict the implication in "Americans" that freedom and equality are tied to Americanness.

Despite this implication, there are ways in which "Americans" does push back against colorblind approaches which would suggest that the United States unequivocally accepts all diversity. The dense, image-heavy quality of the lyrics do not shy away from seeing differences that would be ignored if one subscribed to colorblindness. James Baldwin weighs in on the blues' relationship to Americanness when he argues that the triumph we hear in the blues is "a very un-American" one. He elaborates: "…the triumph here is that the person to whom these things happened watched with eyes wide open, saw it happen (82). Baldwin summarizes the more American stance by arguing that white America is foundationally deluded in its thinking and

vision, refusing to see with "eyes wide open" in the way that the blues does. While Baldwin is speaking about triumph here, I use his sight-based analogy to highlight Copeland's emphasis on seeing clearly or with "eyes wide open." In challenging the rhetoric of colorblindness through image-heavy lyrics that illustrate difference through explicitly direct language, Copeland's "Americans" exhibits what Baldwin identifies as the blues' investment in seeing clearly.

While "Americans" has a more critically ambiguous approach to how it represents the United States, particularly when heard alongside "Ain't Got Time for Hate," many of Copeland's other songs are explicit protest anthems. Her album *Uncivil War* was released in 2020 against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and increased media attention to the #BlackLivesMatter movement, an organization created in 2013 by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, and protests against ongoing police brutality. When the year 2020 gets brought up, even when not in relation the COVID-19 pandemic or #BlackLivesMatter protests, many people still respond with a heavy sigh. For some, the increased mainstream attention around #BlackLivesMatter and incidents of police brutality mirrored their own sudden education in these issues. For others who had been aware of, fighting against, and surviving despite such state-sanctioned systemic violence for a long time, the events of 2020 turned up the volume on a soundtrack that had already been running for decades. All of this occurred alongside the pandemic which further highlighted questions of community responsibility when it came to health and initiated conversations about individual freedom, as some resented and actively challenged mask and vaccine mandates. During this period of seemingly widening cultural fissures, Copeland's album put into song the ongoing issues that 2020 brought to the forefront as if to provide a name for the time and its central conflicts: The Uncivil War.

Despite the album's more protest-oriented anthems, such as "Walk Until I Ride" and "Money Makes You Ugly" which calls attention to climate change and the environment destruction that takes place due to greedy profit margins, the album's title song, "Uncivil War," appears to equalize opposing, political stances. The American Civil War haunts the song with lyrics like "How long must we fight this uncivil war, the same old wound we opened up before?" and "The spirits are back in rags blue and gray, thought they were gone, but they won't go away" directly referencing the American Civil War of 1861-1865 and its ghosts. These lyrics are accompanied by others which advocate for a peaceful surrender on both sides. For instance, Copeland sings "It's time to chill, agree to disagree, cut out all the hostility. Call off the fighting and bring it to an end. We can shake hands and be friends again." While these lyrics equalize both sides in a way that downplays the stakes of the issues being addressed, other lyrics, if listened to closely, do add in some ambiguity. Copeland sings "He says left, and she says right. One says peace, the other says fight. One hand's a palm, the other's a fist, another chance for love just got missed." While the binary oppositions of "He says left and she says right" are echoed elsewhere in the song, pairings like "peace" and "fight" or "a palm" and "a fist" do suggest that one side is advocating for peace where another side offers violence. This is not to say which side Copeland attributes which approach. In the case of #BlackLivesMatter protests against police brutality, for instance, the "fist" in "Uncivil War" could be both a symbol of the police's violence or, alternatively, a symbol of the unwavering fight for social justice.

Other songs on the album are far less ambiguous. "Walk Until I Ride" explicitly calls out the way in which racial injustice can be seen through socioeconomically determined geographical boundaries. Referencing the fact that taxi cabs are known to stop less, if at all, for Black customers, Copeland sings "Clouds opened up, rain pouring from the sky, arm in the air trying to flag a ride,

but the cabs don't go to my part of town. They just passed me by, not even slowing down." Again highlighting the way in which primarily Black and working-class neighborhoods are underserved when it comes to resources and access to everything from food to emergency services, she goes on to sing "Four in the morning, my baby child crying, fever he had kept burning higher. Grabbed the phone, dialed 9-1-1. When I told them where I lived, I knew they wouldn't come." In the present tense of the song, the singer is walking in a collective, signaled by the use of the first-person plural pronoun "we," as if marching in an actual protest. Copeland sings "We're walking for the poor and unemployed, the hopeless and the hungry and those who have no joy. We're walking for the refugees and those who have no home, for every single soul who feels so all alone." "Walk Until I Ride" clearly sets up the issues of a song like "Uncivil War" as high-stakes and worth fighting, thereby creating tension between the more "Why can't we all just get along?" rhetoric of "Uncivil War" and the protest-oriented scenes of "Walk Until I Ride."

"Apple Pie and a .45" also more clearly critiques the patterns of violence endemic to the United States. The song's title, as do the lyrics of the song, implies that guns are as American as apple pie—as the saying goes. The song, initially, exaggerates the normality of gun use in an almost humorous way with Copeland painting a picture of an American family's pastimes: "Mama's reading 'Guns and Ammo,' sipping lemonade, baby's in the backyard tossing hand grenades, grandpa's shooting dinner, some possum and some squirrel." Then, a sudden shift in tone immediately following the previous line: "Last night, they ended up shooting our neighbor's baby girl." The song goes on to depict other examples of gun violence, including a school shooting and a shooting in a church. Copeland explicitly references the oft-repeated phrase in response to incidents of mass shootings in the United States when she sings "Can't seem to stop the funerals

though we say we care. All we got for those families is our *thoughts and prayers*" [emphasis added].

Interestingly, Copeland's album *Uncivil War* moves between multiple points of view. "Apple Pie and a .45," for instance, is from the point of view of a person or persons from the gun-wielding family in the song. The lyrics frame the mother reading "Guns and Ammo" and the grandpa shooting dinner as the singer's own and Copeland's use of the first-person plural pronoun "we" in "All we got for those families…" connects the singer to those the song frames as complacent towards the issue of gun violence as if in direct contrast to the protesting "we" of "Walk Until I Ride." Meanwhile, songs like "Uncivil War" seem to take a more omniscient, almost apolitical point of view. While the political issues of *Uncivil War* are stated more directly than in Copeland's earlier album *America's Child*, the 2018 album also appears to contain a variety of points of view as discussed earlier in relation to "Americans" and "Ain't Got Time for Hate."

Copeland successfully creates tension in and across her albums by moving between social justice-oriented, political clarity and a kind of ambiguity that refuses easy interpretation. Given the national framing and topics of these albums, that tension and ambiguity speak to Copeland's complex depiction of the United States itself. The lack of harmony in the political rhetoric we hear across some of Copeland's songs leaves the listener without clear resolution and, importantly, a cohesive depiction of the United States. This critical ambiguity is a foundational tool of the blues where it has been discussed, primarily but not only, in relation to blues women's depictions of abusive romantic or sexual partnerships. In adopting a critically ambiguous approach to national themes and issues, Copeland generatively forces the listener to wade through a complex density of perspectives, all the while playfully using shifts in tone and language to thwart the listener's sense that they are done listening.

5.2 Adia Victoria

There ain't nothing so sweet as a Southern sky when the sun goes down beneath the pine, but when the night comes through, they keep their eye on you.[27]

Figure 17 Adia Victoria (born 1986)[28]

[27] Victoria, Adia. "Far From Dixie." *A Southern Gothic*, CanvasBack Records, 2021.

[28] "Adia Victoria ACL Music Festival 2015" by Ralph Arvesen under License CC BY 2.0 DEED Attribution 2.0 Generic.

Known for her unique collaging of musical genres, sometimes referred to as "gothic country music" and sometimes "gothic blues," Adia Victoria is a singer and songwriter currently living in Nashville, Tennessee. Born in 1986 to a Trinidadian father who was often away serving in the military and a Seventh-day Adventist mother, Victoria grew up in South Carolina where her mother's roots were. The release of her first single "Stuck in the South" in 2016 immediately established her as a complex Southern musician whose geographically creative lyrics critically map the regional landscape of her childhood. Victoria went on to release her debut full-length album *Beyond the Bloodhounds* the same year, later releasing *Silences* in 2019 and *A Southern Gothic* in 2021 the latter of which particularly explores regionally framed themes of migration, departure, and return.

Victoria's dealing with the sexual economic in her music is often characterized by a sense of abandonment or loneliness. The impoverished figures and speakers of her songs are isolated—whether due to recent abandonment or an ongoing lack of communal care and responsibility. In songs like "Magnolia Blues" and "South for the Winter," the more Northern or urban landscape is associated with isolation and both songs state an intention to return South. Importantly, Victoria's music shies away from superficial, regional binaries that might depict the North as cold and the South as warm, the North as isolating and the South as friendly, or even the North as free and the South as oppressive. Instead, Victoria's music grapples with her experiences growing up in the South, of calling the South home, while still being critical of not only Southern histories of racial violence but their continued presence today.

In "Magnolia Blues," the abandonment and false promises of a romantic partner, common to many classic blues songs of the 1920s and 1930s, is set against the backdrop of two regions—the North and the South—with the addition of a liminal, migratory space through which the singer

travels from the South to the North and, potentially, back South as the song suggests. The sexual-economic is layered on top of these regional concerns and navigations. "Magnolia Blues," for instance, is directly addressed to someone, presumably a romantic partner, who uproots the singer from the South: "I followed you into the blue and North into the cold. You led me off my land. You led me far from home. I tried to be the kind of gal who never needed shit. I gave you all my light and I got nothing to show for it. I'm going back South, down to Carolina. I'm going to plant myself under a magnolia. I'm going to let that dirt do its work." In this lyric, the singer's plan to plant herself under a magnolia tree is a solution that directly corrects being led off her land earlier. There is, of course, a suggestion of suicide here—a suggestion or even explicit reference common to both blues music and blues poetry—but there is also rootedness, not necessarily instead of suicide perhaps but in addition to. The possibility of rootedness becomes, ironically, further and further away when the singer is unable to leave the North via train because she has no money.

The sexual-economic in "Magnolia Blues" is one of lack; the lack of a sexual and/or romantic partner is paired with a lack of economic means in the song. The symbolic romantic poverty that leaves the singer with "nothing to show" for the relationship is mirrored in the song when the singer does not have money to take a train "back home," i.e. to the South. Victoria sings "I asked the conductor, 'Sir, won't you let me ride?' He said, 'Baby girl, this ain't my world. Train ain't nothing of mine." As opposed to being an example of a hierarchical structure in which the conductor, drawing on his authority, denies the singer her wish to ride the train, I hear this moment as one of almost pessimistic comradery in which the singer and conductor are bonded through a shared condition signaled by a lack of material ownership or possession. Here, the conductor is merely operator rather than owner and the lyric implies that those that own the train may very well own the world as well. In "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues,"

Hazel Carby discusses the commonality of train imagery and sonics in blues music, arguing that, while a consistent motif across the genre, the train's symbolic register differed between women and men blues singers. For men, the train was generally used as a more individualist symbol of mobility. Blues women certainly riffed on and took up this symbolism as their own in an effort to challenge the expectation that men, and not women, were the ones who desired—and even required—freedom and mobility, often lyrically referred to as "wandering." However, as Carby points out, the train tended to signal presence and absence in blues women's music, an image of loneliness and desire for those who were gone as opposed to a symbol of the singer's own drive for individual, untethered freedom.

While Victoria does use the symbolism of the train in a way similar to that of the blues women before her through connecting it with the absence or departure of a loved one—often a romantic partner as is the case in "Magnolia Blues"—the train is particularly symbolically dense and complex in Victoria's song. Rather than signaling a one-way movement in which the lover leaves the other, the train in "Magnolia Blues" signals multiple movements: doubled departures and failed returns. The singer departs the South for the North but then plans to depart the North in order to return to the South. This latter departure is, of course, unrealized due to the singer's economic circumstances. Amidst all of these movements is the future hope of rootedness, of planting oneself beneath the magnolia tree and "let[ting] that dirt do its work." Though it is not a universal aspect of the migration narrative, Farah Jasmine Griffin includes a return South in her consideration of migration narrative tropes in "*Who Set You Flowin'?": The African-American Migration Narrative.* She writes, "Through migration narratives—musical, visual, and literary—African-American artists and intellectuals attempt to come to terms with the massive dislocation of black peoples following migration…The migration narrative shares with the slave narrative

notions of ascent from the South into a 'freer' North (3-4). The singer's sense of stasis in the North and their desire to return South maps onto Griffin's discussion of migration narratives and challenges notions of ascent. The multiple migrations and locations of "Magnolia Blues" render the classic blues symbol of the train and migratory narratives of ascent even more complex in Victoria's music. She picks up the symbol of the train in kinship with the blues women before her but, much like those blues women themselves when they borrowed the train motif from blues men, the train takes on new meaning in her hands.

"Magnolia Blues" and "South for the Winter" bookend *A Southern Gothic* with "Magnolia Blues" introducing the album and "South for the Winter" having the last note. The songs resonate so closely with each other, "South for the Winter" could be the sequel to "Magnolia Blues." In this installment, the singer is still in the North—now named New York—and has fallen more deeply into the loneliness and anonymity of the city. Again, they are trying to get back to the South "where [they] belong" and, this time, the train is not material, instead appearing to them in a dream "through the fog." The song begins "Waltzing down 5th with a fifth of gin hid in the pocket of the jacket I'm in, slipping on ice as I drift downtown 'cause that is the place all the lost girls are found. In the cold, cutting my bones. It's the cold that makes me wonder why I left home. I think it's time I head South for the winter." These opening lines immediately underscore the passive aimlessness the singer is stuck in. Rather than wearing the jacket, they are merely in it and rather than walking downtown, they are slipping and drifting as if moved by the invisible current of the city. Place, specifically the city, becomes an active figure and participant, an aspect of the song that connects Victoria to earlier blues women who both documented and navigated the upheaval that came with the Great Migration and adapting to more urban, Northern environments.

Both Daphne Harrison and Amiri Baraka respectively push back against the idea that classic or "city" blues imitated more rural, country blues which some considered the most authentic era of blues music. Harrison argues that singers of city blues or classic blues women were just as involved in the blues' evolution as country blues singers. Classic blues singers spoke to the challenges of living in what Baraka calls the "harder, crueler" nature of the city (105). Rather than merely imitating country blues, classic blues women took up the blues' foundational techniques and histories while also exploding its boundaries in order to cement the genre as one uniquely capable of adaptation. This is not to say that the country blues was not on its own complex and critical, but I emphasize that the classic blues, the era which sets my own project into motion, is the era that most evidences the blues' ability to weather monumental changes. It is the classic blues then that should make it come as no surprise that we still hear the blues today in the twenty-first century since history has shown that the blues is not just alive but *persistently* so.

While some may hear Victoria's representations of the South in "Magnolia Blues" and "South for the Winter" as nostalgic, I argue that she is performing a much more complex attitude towards the South, in these two songs as well as across her others, which takes the melancholic aspect of nostalgia but retains a critical posture. The present of both "Magnolia Blues" and "South for the Winter" do not actually take place in the South and the singer's return South remains an unfulfilled wish in each song. This dream of returning South that never materializes lends the South a nostalgic air; in always staying at a geographical distance, it is seemingly able to remain idyllic. When we consider Victoria's exploration and representation of the South across her work though, the South appears to be not actually idyllic but rather an idyllic illusion. Katherine McKittrick discusses the re-envisioning capacity of Black women's geography, arguing that Black women's geography challenges "rational spatial colonialization and domination" as seen through

"white masculine European mappings, explorations, conquests" and "the profitable erasure and objectification of subaltern subjectivities, stories, and lands" (x). In "thinking about the production of space as unfinished" (xxiii), Black women's geography pushes back against the assumption that space is fixed as an idyllic representation of a place might have us believe. McKittrick shows that just as space is socially produced, it is also capable of being re-negotiated or even re-imagined in radical ways that challenge racism and sexism which she establishes are also "spatial acts" (xvii). Like McKittrick, Robert Stepto considers space's ability to express "oppressing social structures which are always configurations and manifestations of the color line," arguing that "symbolic geography is, above all, a remarkable expression of how Afro-Americans have persistently constructed real and imagined dominions" (91). Victoria's music exemplifies the place-based critique McKittrick refers to and Stepto's discussion of critical Black (re)visions of space by continuously questioning and pulling at the seams of place, and region in particular, as static or one dimensional.

"Stuck in the South" functions as a counternarrative to idyllic, pastoral depictions of the South, narratives populated by Southern belles which the singer of "Stuck in the South" declares they "don't know nothin' 'bout." Instead, Victoria's Southern landscape is haunted by images that speak to both present and historical racial violence, such as lynching, an image that opens the song when Victoria sings "I been dreaming of swinging from that old palmetto tree." The song ends with a declaration—"I can't get stuck in the South"—that is immediately refused by the song's final lines: "I'm stuck in the South. Oh, I'm stuck in the South." "Far From Dixie" also challenges idyllic representations of the South even as it claims the region as home. At first glance, the song is addressed to and about the singer's mother with whom she shares a toxic relationship. This relationship is what prompts the singer's departure from the South. If read through the lens of this

relationship, the verse that alludes to racial violence in the South appears vaguely connected through the singer's journey away from the region but slightly peripheral to the central thrust of the song. The verse in question is: "There ain't nothing so sweet as the Southern sky when the sun goes down beneath the pine, but when the night comes through, they keep their eye on you."

While the song is about the singer's relationship with their mother—evidenced, in part, through the singer's consistent, direct address to "Mom"—I argue that, far from being peripheral, the above verse is critical to the other central relationship of the song: the one between the singer and the South. This relationship is not necessarily separate from the one between the singer and their mother. Instead, these relationships—regional and familial—are collapsed through the space of home. Each verse can be read doubly through the frame of these relationships. References to sharing blood, for instance, like "Your blood is yours, yours is mine" and "I got you in my bones no matter where I roam," biologically address the mother, but they also represent Victoria's complex navigation of her own relationship to the South which we see across her music.

Other lyrics in the song suggest that the mother is abusive: "The love we share is a rope that bind, make me lose my way and lose my mind. Leave me black and blue. You know it do." Earlier, Victoria sings "You tell, you tell, and you tell, it sweet to every John and Jane that you meet, but I can see right through. You know I do," which suggests that the mother keeps up an appearance of outward perfection when it comes to the relationship between her and her daughter. If we read this song as evidence of Victoria's place-based critique, this lyric also references the larger regional as well as national narrative that the South is idyllic, the same narrative that "Stuck in the South" directly undermines. In other words, it becomes the South, not just the mother, that falsifies a narrative to an external audience. The singer's sight—"I can see right through"—functions as radical vision, capable of seeing the truth and perhaps even re-envisioning regional

possibility. This possibility of re-envisioning is crucial to Victoria's dealing with place and national narratives. Victoria reinvigorates the blues' existing capacity for geographical navigation as well as transformation, reminding us of the evolving and negotiable nature of not just place but the blues itself.

5.3 Amythyst Kiah

Today they say that we are free, only to be chained in poverty.[29]

Figure 18 Amythyst Kiah (born 1986)[30]

Born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Amythyst Kiah is a singer-songwriter whose music, much like Adia Victoria's, traverses multiple genre boundaries. Inspired by folk blues, country, and alternative-rock, Kiah released her first album *Dig* in 2013. *Wary + Strange* has been Kiah's most popular album to date. Released in 2021 with Rounder Records, the album is as personal as

[29] Kiah, Amythyst. "Slave Driver." *Songs of Our Native Daughters*, Smithsonian Folkways, 2019.

[30] "Amythyst Kiah – Purbeck Valley Folk Festival 2022" by Stephen and Helen Jones under License CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic.

it is communal, framing the political as personal and vice versa in a move reminiscent of past blues women. Kiah's music career itself is an example of communality. She is a member of Our Native Daughters, a group of Black women banjo players and singer-songwriters which includes, along with Kiah, Leyla McCalla, Allison Russell, and Rhiannon Giddens. Their song "Black Myself," which appears on their 2019 album *Songs of Our Native Daughters* and was written by Kiah, received a Grammy nomination for Best American Roots Song and won Song of the Year at the Folk Alliance International Awards. Kiah's most recent album, *Pensive Pop*, was released in 2022 under Rounder Records.

While queer country musicians are not, by any means, a new phenomenon, Kiah joins a contemporary cohort of increasingly popular openly queer artists working in country or folk music, such as Lil Nas X, T.J. Osborne of Brothers Osborne, Joy Oladokun, and Allison Russell who is a fellow member of Our Native Daughters. Even Trixie Mattel, winner of RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars, season three, incorporates original music inspired by iconic country musicians like Loretta Lynn into her popular performances. Black musicians and openly queer musicians have historically been actively kept out of the genre's core community and continue to struggle with that discrimination and exclusion today despite the popularity of Black country artists, like Darius Rucker and Tracy Chapman, and popular Black artists with chart-topping country singles, like Beyoncé and Lil Nas X.

All of these artists and more are challenging assumptions about who can and cannot write and perform country music, a genre often associated with a very particular Southern nostalgia shaped by white, politically conservative, Christian values. The Black roots of country music challenge such an exclusionary representation of the genre. For instance, the banjo is a key instrument within country music. Derived from West African lutes made of gourds, it was brought

to the United States by enslaved people. The instrument would go on to become a common part of minstrel and blackface shows. Eventually, its appropriation by white musicians led to the instrument falling out of favor among Black musicians. Early white country artists were also adapting songs from Black musical forms, like field songs, Black hymns, and the blues. Country music would not be what it is without the work of blues women who were, in many cases, radically open about their queer identity, performing it through, for instance, cross-dressing in the case of Gladys Bentley and Ma Rainey. Despite country music's best effort to appear rigidly heterosexual, white, and male, many have noted the queer undertones of the genre's most common performance features. For instance, in "Meet the queer vanguard of country music," Scottie Andrew writes, "In its mid-century heyday, country performers were some of the most flamboyant artists. Though the days of rhinestone nudie suits and pompadours have largely dissipated, country music itself has always shown shades of queerness."

As an openly queer artist working in the intersecting genres of blues, folk, and country, Kiah leans into country and blues' penchant for story-telling through her covers of classic folk songs, such as "Dark Holler," written by Bill Browning and first recorded in 1958, and "Over Yonder in the Graveyard," written by Ola Belle Reed, a prolific songwriter and singer who was born in 1916 but gained increasing fame in the 1960s. Kiah's covers play with and thwart gendered expectations about not only the relationship described in the song but the relationship between the singer and the song itself. This gendered expectation would demand that the actual singer, Amythyst Kiah, and the song's singer—in the way a poem has a speaker that, while potentially connected, should not be collapsed with the poem's author—should share pronouns. In other words, a seeming "mismatch" between the gender presentation of the singer we watch *performing* the song and the pronouns of the singer/speaker *living* the song can challenge audience

expectations. Where some performers swap the pronouns in the lyrics of a song they are covering with their own pronouns, Kiah keeps the lyrics of the songs she covers as is, practicing the sort of "intentional ambiguity" (27) Angela Davis sees as a central tactic of classic blues singers. Maria Johnson also speaks to this blues practice of ambiguity. Identifying the practice both in historical blues and the work of contemporary Black women performers, Johnson writes,

> Although vaudeville blues lyrics tended to be more thematic than early country blues lyrics, blues lyrics in general are non-narrative in character, creating much ambiguity and allowing for multiple interpretations. Rather than arguing for a definitive interpretation for any given stanza or song, then, it is important to consider alternative interpretations and to celebrate the provocative possibilities blues performance provided for affirming a range of gender and sexual identities (13).

Kiah's intentional ambiguity and the alternative interpretations invited by it are what challenge the gendered norms at work in audience expectations, particularly audiences of country and folk music.

"Dark Holler" tells a story in which the singer falls in love with a woman to the disapproval of their parents. In the song's chorus, the singer expresses misery over the thought of the woman being with another man, singing "I'd rather be in some dark holler where the sun never shines than for you to be another man's darling when you ain't no longer mine." While, on their face, the song's lyrics could be read as being about a heterosexual relationship, Kiah's rendition lends a generative sense of ambiguity to the folk song. The song implies that the woman is a younger, even inappropriate age, for the singer's affections: "Well, I was born in Old Virginia. South

Carolina, I did go, and there I caught a pretty woman, but her age I did not know." The singer's parents' disapproval—"Papa says I must not marry. Mama says it'll never do"—could be due to this age difference, but given Kiah's interest in expressing her queer identity in her music, this disapproval can also be read, in Kiah's performance of the song, as a response to a queer relationship.

Kiah's cover of "Over Yonder in the Graveyard" similarly plays with and thwarts gendered expectations. While Kiah keeps the lyrics of "Over Yonder in the Graveyard" the same as well, the writer of the song is Ola Belle Reed, a woman Appalachian singer-songwriter and banjo player. Like "Dark Holler," "Over Yonder in the Graveyard" is about a romantic relationship, but in this one, the singer's lover has passed away. The song opens, "Over yonder in the graveyard, where the wild wildflowers grow, oh, there she lay, my own true lover. She's gone from me forever more." Also like "Dark Holler," the song's lyrics—"I'll not end a man with riches, undone in sorrow I will remain"—suggest that the singer identifies as a man. In this case though, the song was originally written by a woman, a fact that speaks to the queer undertones that often get silenced but are part of the genre of folk and country as Andrew argues. Rather than bringing a new ambiguity to the song then, Kiah's performance of "Over Yonder in the Graveyard" reinvigorates that history, establishing her place in a longer legacy.

Perhaps more subtle but still critical is Kiah's fondness for rambling songs—songs in which the singer lives a rambling lifestyle or expresses a desire to do so. As was discussed in relation to the common blues' symbol of the train, men tended to be the ones doing the rambling in blues music, often leaving women behind to uphold the household, take care of children, and find their own ways to earn money. Singers like Memphis Minnie subverted those expectations as heard in "Ramblin' Blues," and Kiah takes up the same challenge now, depicting herself as

rambling in several of her songs. In "Doomed to Roam," for instance, she sings "I left behind a place that I called home. Am I doomed to forever roam?" and, in "Myth," "Oh, can you tell me where we going? And what it will be like where we've been? Well, I won't see you again, so I guess I'll go ramblin'." The additional expression of lack in "Myth"—"Mother of the far and few, and there's not much left to eat. Yeah, hey, and if we die in this dry ocean, baby, will time keep rollin', rollin' on"—resonates with Kiah's exploration of socioeconomic class and poverty, a theme that often goes hand in hand with rambling since it implies a life of less security whether it be symbolic or financial.

Kiah's songs that deal most explicitly with economic concerns use imagery that points to not only working-class struggle but the industries, such as mining and the railroad, that have been historically most tied up in working-class concerns and life. In "Brand New Shoes," she addresses a presumably wealthier figure: "Where'd you get your brand-new shoes and the clothes you wear so fine? Well, I got my shoes from a railroad man and clothes from a man in the mines." In "Aragon Mill," Kiah continues her use of this imagery but widens the song's scope from the more individual orientation of "Brand New Shoes" to one that is wider and more communal. "Aragon Mill" depicts a town, now wracked with an economic depression due to an unemployment crisis brought on by the shutting down of the town's mill. Kiah sings "There's a chimney so tall that says 'Aragon Mill.' There's no smoke at all coming out the stack for the mill has shut down and it ain't coming back…The mill has shut down. It's the only job I know. Tell me, what will I do? Oh, where will I go? I'm too old to work, too young to die. Tell me, where will I go, my family and I?" The song's illustrations of the town are desolate with "no children at all on the narrow empty street." The singer's own unemployment is connected to the whole town's economic decay, connecting the

private and the public and framing the personal as indicative of larger, social problems in a way reminiscent of classic blues women.

"Polly Ann's Hammer," cowritten with Allison Russell, perhaps best exemplifies Kiah's particular way of addressing the sexual-economic. A counternarrative to the legend of John Henry, the song focuses on Polly Ann, John Henry's wife, making her the central character of the famous folklore. The centering of Polly Ann challenges her usual marginalization in popular iterations of the story and the song, of course, also connects to the railroad industry and its history of exploiting working-class labor as well as the labor of imprisoned people. Depicted as a hero of giant proportions, John Henry was said to have died in a race against a steam-powered drill in order to blast through the mountainous terrain and build the Big Bend tunnel in West Virginia for the Chesapeake & Ohio (C. & O.) Railway. Originally, songs about John Henry were sung primarily by railroad laborers to keep time as they worked and to caution against overworking themselves lest they end up dead like John Henry. When the songs were taken up by popular musicians, the rhythm became more upbeat, therefore, rendering the song a celebration of heroism.

Kiah and Russell's song counters popular renditions of the John Henry story by not only centering Polly Ann but by enacting a shift on the lyrical level that suggests a refusal of labor is what will bring about freedom. References to slavery in the retellings of the John Henry legend rely on emancipation as a fantastically imagined liberatory moment in which John Henry is now "free" to go work for the railroad. Slavery appears in popular retellings of the story only to signal its end and the victory of a so-called national morality. While the Polly Ann of "Polly Ann's Hammer" takes up her husband's hammer when he is sick, announcing to naysayers her ability to swing it "harder than any man can," the final words of the song, sung from Polly Ann to her child, suggest that this labor, the swinging of the hammer, is not where freedom lies: "This little hammer

killed John Henry, won't kill me, won't kill me. This little hammer killed your daddy. *Throw it down*, and we'll be free" [emphasis added]. Here, "throw it down" implies a refusal on Polly Ann's part to continue laboring and, as the last lyrics suggest, this refusal is what will actually bring about the freedom formerly attributed to the *taking up* of the hammer.

Where part of the challenge of "Polly Ann's Hammer" relies on a lyrical close-reading, songs like "Black Myself" are more explicit in their protest. Davis, arguing against blues scholars and critics who see the blues' tendency to vocalize a personal or intimate perspective as antithetical to political protest, writes,

> "Protest," when expressed through aesthetic forms, is rarely a direct call to action. Nevertheless, critical aesthetic representation of a social problem must be understood as constituting powerful social and political acts….public articulation of complaint—of which there are many instances in the blues—must be seen as a form of contestation of oppressive conditions, even when it lacks a dimension of organized political protest (101).

Davis sees the blues' inability to function as a "direct call to action" as expected given that there were no "formal political channels" at the time that would allow blues women to vocalize their dissent in a way which aligned with traditional definitions of protest. Albeit still censored and exclusionary, Kiah's bold protest anthems suggest that the music industry, particularly in its more independent pockets, has evolved to some degree. "Black Myself," one of Kiah's most referenced and popular songs, is explicitly about anti-Black racism. Lyric after lyric calls out distinct but connected forms of oppression from colorism—"I don't pass the test of the paper bag 'cause I'm Black myself"—to the stereotype of Black people as dangerous or criminal—"You better lock

your doors when I walk by ‘cause I’m Black myself.” The repetition of “’cause I’m Black myself” speaks to the idea that Black people in the United States cannot do anything without repercussion and, as is usually the case, violent repercussion.

Kiah’s “’cause I’m Black myself” is a version of the phrase “doing X while Black.” This phrase intentionally has endless variations, ultimately signaling the inability of Black people to do even the most mundane things without repercussion as mentioned above. Well-known iterations of the phrase include “Driving while Black,” referencing the murders of Black people at the hands of police officers while being pulled over, and “Running while Black,” which spread across social media platforms following the murder of Ahmaud Arbery in 2020 by three white men who chased and killed Arbery when he was out for a run. The repetition of “’cause I’m Black myself” eventually transforms in the song, going from an indication of enforced, oppressive limitations to a mark of pride and strength as heard in lyrics like “I stand proud and free ‘cause I’m Black myself” and “And I’ll stand my ground and smile in your face ‘cause I’m Black myself.” Finally, the song ends with a reminder that the work is not done: “There’s no more work horses but still some work to do.” The term “work horse” here references the legal treatment of enslaved peoples as chattel—tangible, moveable property, such as livestock and furniture—under chattel slavery. Earlier in the song, Kiah sings “When they stopped shipping work horses, they bred their own anyway” in reference to enslaved women’s violently enforced role in perpetuating chattel slavery through their children. The song’s final lyric echoes this earlier moment but refuses such a system while it directly calls the listener to action in a way that, as Davis states, was less available to past blues women.

The blues’ particular iteration of the sexual-economic, which I explore throughout these chapters in both historical and contemporary contexts, is not just a tactic to activate political

consciousness in the individual lives of listeners. The blues' sexual-economic also challenges larger narratives just as contemporary blues artists like Copeland, Victoria, and Kiah challenge national narratives. Blues women's past and present understandings of the sexual-economic challenge narratives that see the sexual and economic as separate concerns. Blues women's understanding of the sexual-economic also challenges white-centric feminist movements that attempt to universalize feminist struggle through the figure of the Western white woman, ignoring the particularities of Black women's history, oppression, and own feminist movements.

While Copeland, Victoria, and Kiah's challenging of national narratives may appear to differ from the way in which past blues women, and even the performers of the previous chapter, address the sexual-economic, the three blues women of this chapter do continue the legacy of classic blues women through their radical counternarratives and counter-geographies. Far from merely echoing the work of earlier blues women, Copeland, Victoria, and Kiah are as much a part of the blues' contemporary and future evolution as any other artists. Their gathering under the label of "blues women" and identification as blues singers working in the genre is not an indication of any lack of radical remixing and creative riffing on the foundational music. Instead, their ability to both identify explicitly as blues singers *and* innovate the genre and, most centrally, its political urgencies is perhaps the best indication of the blues' ability to transform and adapt, to be sung and heard in new ways, across time.

6.0 Coda

And I was born with you, wasn't I, Blues?
Wombed with you, wounded, reared and forwarded
from address to address, stamped, stomped
and returned to sender by nobody else but you.

-"The Blues Don't Change" by Al Young

In lieu of a traditional conclusion, this is a coda—a concluding passage for a musical piece or movement. I offer this coda not only for its connection to the musical content of this dissertation but because a coda also brings with it an opportunity for formal differentiation from the preceding sections of the musical piece or movement in question. The formal structure of this coda incorporates call and response, a musical tactic in which one musician's phrase is met with a response by a second musician. The musicians continue to collaboratively build on each other's phrases, conversing back and forth. It is my hope that this coda and its call and response-inspired structure similarly pushes at the boundaries of single-authored scholarship.

Throughout the course of this dissertation, I have often referred to the contemporary creators and creations I discuss as being in kinship or a kind of lineage with earlier blues women. It is my hope that my work exists in the same lineage. I am indebted to earlier blues women who protested the boundaries set for them and who raised their voices so loudly that we are still hearing their reverberations today. They are certainly part of this work and as more than just content. This is not to mention my family whose radical transgressions and belief in music as a place that can facilitate those transgressions has contributed to my own work. And I could go on further still; there are ancestors, chosen family, friends, mentors, and more who have all, in some way, worked towards "Changing Blues: The Continued Life and Appropriation of Black Women's Blues in

Twenty-First-Century Popular Culture." While I do not intend to discount my own labor in completing this project, I want to emphasize the ways in which this concluding opportunity for call and response is reflected throughout the project given its pulling at the boundaries of single-authored scholarship.

In this dissertation, I have shown how widely Black women's blues music, tactics, and politics have been taken up across twenty-first-century popular culture. I have also explored how we might adopt an unmoored orientation towards the blues that celebrates its expansive and adaptive capabilities while remaining attuned to its origins and originators. Far from merely identifying where we see the blues' echoes today, it is my hope that the chapters of this dissertation have supported my argument that the political challenges of Black women's classic blues music are still deserving of our attention, not as stagnant artifacts but as urgent, complex imperatives relevant to our contemporary moment. In "'This voice which is not one': Amy Winehouse sings the ballad of sonic blue(s)face culture," Daphne Brooks argues that blackness can be and is often used as a "site of affective nostalgia" (50). This affective nostalgia allows performers of what Brooks calls "sonic blue(s)face" to tap into—and take advantage of—the political and artistic contributions of Black artists, like blues women. Houston Baker's conception of nostalgia in "Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere" also highlights how nostalgia can be used as a tool to confine the would-be radical disruption of the past's still relevant and unrealized political demands.

Despite these uses of nostalgia, I argue that we can employ what Baker terms "critical memory" in our approach to the blues' continued presence and evolution in today's popular culture. The blues tends to inspire distinctly personal feelings, such as defensiveness, attachment, care, and so on. While I would argue that personal approaches to the blues do not appear only in

blues poetry, blues poetry certainly provides ample evidence for these affective postures towards the blues. For instance, in Al Young's "The Blues Don't Change," the speaker lives intimately alongside the blues and, while the speaker of Langston Hughes' "Note on Commercial Theatre" is talking about more than personal property, they do express a sense of ownership over the blues: "You've taken *my* blues and gone—" (line 1; emphasis added). Roland Freeman's "Don't Forget the Blues" similarly personalizes the blues' theft and cooptation from "*our* communities" (line 2; emphasis added), directly addressing the poem's audience with his call: "Listen to me" (line 10). The speaker of Gayl Jones' "Deep Song" hears the blues calling their name. Meanwhile, the speaker of Sonia Sanchez's *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women* causally links their birth with blues song —"*because* i was born / musician to two / black braids, i / cut a blue / song for america" (21; emphasis added). Importantly, all five of these poems map the personal onto larger issues surrounding the blues, such as commercial cooptation, the genre's origins, or the blues' recurring political themes. In doing so, these writers—along with many contemporary performers—take a cue from blues women themselves who also politicized the personal.

Maintaining criticality towards not only the way in which the blues gets used in popular culture but our own investments when it comes to the blues and even our assumptions about how it should or should not be used is important. That being said, I do not argue that we should somehow extract the personal from our approach to the blues, and I hope in formulating your responses to the calls of this coda, you see the personal as absolutely relevant. Instead, I would argue that personal investments in the blues have always been a key part of not only the lives of blues performers but of many blues scholars and, of course, blues novelists and poets as well. The blues incites personal reflection whether it is being discussed in scholarship, sung in a nightclub, played in our living rooms, or echoed in alternative forms. It calls for our response. Gathering the

blues' myriad meanings and resonances—personal, scholarly, literary, musical, filmic, political, cultural, historical, classic, contemporary, and so on—allows for an approach that, in its potentially impossible messiness, resists building boundaries around the blues' twenty-first-century life. Crucially, resisting those boundaries does not require that we forget or let go of the blues' origins or the political imperatives and unmet challenges of the Black women who popularized it.

Classic blues women of the early twentieth century were contending with the impact of emancipation and, later, the Great Migration. In the face of limited job opportunities, music provided Black women blues singers with greater, albeit still limited, mobility through traveling performance routes. As Angela Davis argues, Black people also gained more freedom in choosing their romantic and sexual partners post-emancipation which is evidenced in the prevalence of blues songs about love and sexual desire. Despite these changes, emancipation also brought on new sets of challenges. For instance, Black-led efforts to advance socioeconomic mobility and access to dominantly white-led institutions necessarily led to more conservative expectations around how Black people should behave in a newly emancipated country.

These expectations policed sexual expression, particularly for Black women. Given enslaved Black women's forced position as "slave breeders and objects for sexual gratification" (Lee IX), Black women post-emancipation were tasked with upholding more conservative values around sexuality and sexual expression in order to offset this history and perception. Despite the greater freedoms that came from emancipation, the violences of slavery would—and still—continue to reverberate in multiple ways, particularly through the carceral system which echoed and only thinly disguised many of slavery's practices and structures. As blues women spoke to their particular context and its attendant injustices, they raised their audience's political consciousness, politicizing the personal and vice versa. Along with giving voice to these issues,

blues women also imagined differently and radically through their music, lyrically prophesizing a future of greater freedoms and liberatory sexual expression from their present.

Today, popular performers like Beyoncé, Lizzo, and Janelle Monáe as well as contemporary blues singers like Amythyst Kiah, Adia Victoria, and Shemekia Copeland continue to navigate the sexual-economic through their music. However, shifts in the music industry, social media's immediate and global dissemination methods, and increasing public efforts to eschew the parameters of respectability politics have impacted the twenty-first-century sexual-economic landscape that today's performers live and work in. The profitable celebrity of figures like Beyoncé, Lizzo, and Monáe complicate and call into question how well any figure within popular culture can serve as a truly radical icon if their celebrity status and socioeconomic class hinges on and benefits from capitalism's structures. Rather than seeing these shifts as a justification for testing how well contemporary iterations of the blues adhere to the genre's earlier lives, I argue that this complexity is useful in exploring the sexual-economic in our contemporary context as well as the classic blues' own complexities and political imperatives.

Where do you observe the sexual-economic in your life or the lives of those around you?

Scholars like Nina Sun Eidsheim and Jennifer Lynn Stoever have pointed to how our perceptions of sound can be racialized. These arguments in concert with Brooks' that blackness can function as a "site of affective nostalgia" ("'This voice which is not one'" 50) mean that the blues can carry with it the politics of the women who popularized it even without their presence, a fact that we see in Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues* (2008). The kind of seductive cool of the blues can, therefore, become a seemingly reproduceable aesthetic. Betty Boop is among the many

examples of this in terms of the character's visualization as well as the material history of her inspiration and creation. Creations like Betty Boop and Paley's film can have the effect of simplifying the blues' political context or even erasing it altogether. While biopics like *Cadillac Records* (2008), *The United States vs. Billie Holiday* (2021), and *Bessie* (2015) include and even center blues women rather than erasing them, they can also open up blues politics even as they relegate them to the past as evidence of our country's apparent racial progress.

Nancy Leong's concept of racial capitalism can be applied to our understanding of the way in which Black women's blues can be commodified and used to garner capital for contemporary projects. Leong calls racial capitalism a "longstanding, common, and deeply problematic practice," defining it as "the process of deriving social and economic value from the racial identity of another person" ("Racial Capitalism" 2152). Leong primarily focuses on case studies in which the racial identity of individuals is used to garner racial capital, but her arguments are useful for looking at how Black blues women can be used in such a manner as well. Importantly, Leong argues that while "Claiming social affiliation with nonwhite individuals also allows whites to signal characteristics of tolerance, cosmopolitanism, and cultural literacy" (2182), any individual, regardless of race, can engage in and benefit from racial capitalism. This invites a more complex exploration of how contemporary creators of all racial identities might make use of and remix the blues.

Where do you see the impact of Black feminism in the popular culture you consume?

Just as the speaker of Hattie Gossett's "billie lives! billie lives" reminds us, the blues and the voices of its most well-known performers remain relevant today. While specific historical

events gave rise to blues women's tactics, the issues they explored, such as class, sexual expression, and romantic relationships—all represented in the sexual-economic—have not disappeared. I have argued for the relevancy and complexity of the classic blues and explored how contemporary projects riff on and represent the blues' navigation of the sexual-economic, but it is also my hope that this work does not serve as a definitive statement on what the classic blues much less its contemporary echoes in popular culture mean. Instead, I hope that this project has and will continue to prompt questions and explorations of not only the blues' evolution but of our assumptions and preemptive interpretations of historical blues meaning. Like the speaker of "billie lives! billie lives," I eagerly believe that a renewed listening to the blues will be met with new lessons about practicing subversive resistance and imagining radical futures.

Attending to the blues in contemporary popular culture is more than a mission of identifying the past in the present. Instead, such a project has stakes for the ways in which Black feminist artistic, political, and critical contributions are commodified and disseminated in the twenty-first century through a variety of media. These contributions, of course, also continue to evolve through popular culture in complex ways that point us towards the generative possibilities of adopting a simultaneously critical and unmoored approach to the fluidity and continued life of Black women's blues. In the spirit of continuation, I hope you will not only respond to the calls of this coda but listen beyond this page.

Listen to the blues. What do you hear?

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