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"Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood": Nina Simone's Theater of Invisibility

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Journal

Callaloo, 35(4)

ISSN

0161-2492

Author

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Publication Date

2012

DOI

10.1353/cal.2013.0011

Peer reviewed



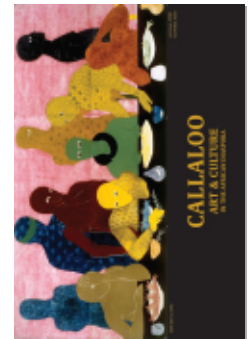
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Callaloo, Volume 35, Number 4, Fall 2012, pp. 1056-1084 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/cal.2013.0011](https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2013.0011)



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“DON’T LET ME BE MISUNDERSTOOD”
Nina Simone’s Theater of Invisibility

by Danielle C. Heard

To find another and truer sexual self-image the black woman must turn to the domain of music and America’s black female vocalists, who suggest a composite figure of ironical grace. The singer is likely closer to the poetry of black female sexual experience than we might think, not so much, interestingly enough, in the words of her music but in the sense of *dramatic confrontation between ego and the world that the vocalist herself embodies*... The Burkean pentad of fiction—agent, agency, act, scene, and purpose as the principal elements involved in the human drama—is compressed in the singer into a living body, insinuating itself through a material scene, and in the dance of motives, in which the motor behavior, the changes of countenance, the vocal dynamics, the calibration of gesture and nuance in relationship to a formal object—the song itself—is a precise demonstration of the subject turning in fully conscious knowledge of her own resources toward her object. In this instance of being-for-self, it does not matter that the vocalist is ‘entertaining’ under American skies because the woman, in her particular and vivid thereness, is an unalterable and discrete moment of self-knowledge. The singer is a good example of ‘*double consciousness*’ in action. We lay hold of a metaphor of commanding female sexuality with the singer who celebrates, chides, embraces, inquires into, controls her womanhood through the eloquence of form that she both makes use of and brings into being (emphasis added).

—Hortense Spillers, “*Interstices: A Small Drama of Words*”

Masking is a play upon possibility and ours is a society in which possibilities are many. When American life is most American it is apt to be most theatrical.

—Ralph Ellison, “*Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke*”

I laughs too, but I moans too.

—*Old Ex-slave Woman*, *Invisible Man*

Let’s face it, Nina Simone is a marked woman. But of those “confounded identities” by which she is marked as she stands before her audience, of the “bizarre axiological ground” which would inhume her, she loosened the clay and fashioned masks to make herself a

work of art, a “composite figure of ironical grace,” playing upon possibility in the drama that is American life—at home and abroad—and in so doing unburied herself as a tricky agent.¹ On the wall of her dressing room you will find hanging several costumes—that of “Peaches,” “Pirate Jenny,” “Little Girl Blue,” “Sephronia,” “Sweet Thing,” “See Line Woman,” “The Other Woman,” “Sister Sadie,” and “Aunt Sarah.” You will notice a sequined evening gown, a black turtleneck and slacks, a batik-print bou bou, a crocheted fishnet tube top, a kente cloth wrap, and a black cocktail dress. On the dresser will rest a row of mannequin heads with mod bob wigs—graduated, cropped, and flipped—and in the drawer a pile of head wraps from Senegal and Barbados, a beret from Paris, a wide-brimmed straw hat, a bottle of *Sta So Fro*, and a pick. In the other drawer hides several pairs of false eyelashes, a bottle of kohl, a tube of *Maybelline* in fire engine red, and a bottle of French perfume. A carved teak box from Liberia overflows with brass, gold, copper, silver, cloth, and beaded necklaces, bangles and earrings, new and antique, from four or five continents. With these props, she plays out “productive ambivalence” in phantasmagorically intoxicating and unpredictable spectacles, dramas that shine a spotlight on the interstitial black hole of black female subjectivity, indeed, enactments of double consciousness that Ralph Ellison might describe as “illuminating the blackness of . . . invisibility” and “[making] poetry out of being invisible.”²

Called by Stokely Carmichael the “true singer of the civil rights movement,” Dr. Nina Simone is well known as a global icon of “protest music” whose anger and pathos carry hard-hitting critiques of injustice (Simone and Cleary 98).³ Without arguing against this characterization, I do want to pose an unconventional view that Simone’s performances are, in fact, significantly comic in nature, and that much of the political iconicity and force for which she is so widely recognized is largely mobilized by such comic modalities. Interpreting her iconic anger and pathos in relation to the comic, in large part as an extension of Ellison’s thinking on “invisibility” as a mode of social action that plays, centrally, on the tragically hilarious “joke” of racial difference, I argue that an economy of laughter—as Freud once schematized it—is no doubt at play in her entire oeuvre, and especially in her live performances for culturally mixed audiences.⁴ Such an interpretation depends, as well, on a shift in emphasis that regards Simone holistically as a performance artist and that requires us to consider her theatricality in addition to her musicianship and celebrity. Examining them in their polyphonic entirety, Simone’s performances reveal themselves to be deeply comic when the structure and function of comedy is considered. While tragedy tends to deal in the affective register, comedy is a primarily cerebral, critical genre that deals in cognition and knowledge. A study of her work from this vantage point unveils her heavy use of comic irony to address absurd logics of inequality and difference. In other words, she puts into action a poetics of invisibility, which in terms of its politics aims not simply to render experiences of everyday life more vivid for her audiences (which poetry does) but also to bring her audiences to a better understanding of what they see in the world. Such a poetics of invisibility, moreover, emerges from and enacts the inherent incongruity, or “interstice,” to use Hortense Spillers’s term, of double consciousness—a “funny” feeling of betweenness, of neither / nor. Simone blends the tragic and the comic in her work in order to bring her audiences to better knowledge regarding issues of social justice and, as a consequence, enable them to see her “face to face.”⁵ She manages to carve this space for ethical recognition with performances that are structur-

ally based on the incongruity of the joke form and utilize comic irony to break apart the racial, cultural, and sexual expectations that prevent Simone's full humanity from being seen. To be misunderstood was one of Simone's unvarying fears and sources of personal struggle, yet she constantly extended this private concern to the political terrain of cultural misunderstanding more broadly.⁶ The comic mode, it turns out, allowed Simone to approach and, oftentimes, transgress the limits of cross-cultural knowing in the name of the ethical project that performed invisibility mobilizes.

Using an interdisciplinary approach that combines what Ingrid Monson would call a "more musical approach to cultural theory" with performance studies and theories of humor, the following essay explores the politicized musical career of the eccentric performer and diva par excellence, Nina Simone, a cultural figure who is colloquially appreciated by many yet curiously understudied (Monson, *Saying Something* 3). In so doing I locate Simone in a discussion of theater and as a contributor to performance theory by interpreting some of her recorded and filmed live concerts as examples of musical theater that revise, through parody, popular theorizations of political theater. I do this while pressing forth my more radical aim to recast Simone as a comic performer, a trickster and a conjurer, whose live work, in its confluence of multiple performative elements, I call her "theater of invisibility." I trace the improvisational and strategic comic maneuvers of parody, ironic reversal, understatement, and the absurd, all versions of Kenneth Burke's "perspective by incongruity" central to Ellison's optic concept-metaphor of invisibility, the premise that drives the dramatic farce of "civilized" society. I focus on live audio and film recordings of Simone's concerts in order to consider the full range of performative elements contained within her theater of invisibility, a "lyrical surplus" that spills over the musical performance into extemporaneous and dramatic corporealized gestures, dances, and interactions with her audience (Moten 39). With a prolific career from which to draw, I choose to look at recordings from what Simone would characterize as the most political period of her life, 1964 to 1970, as well as a performance given in the wake of the long "sixties," just after Simone announced her first retirement. With an appreciative spirit for a beloved artist, I investigate precisely how the popular performer managed to hold in her spell global, racially mixed audiences in processes of political awakening based on ethical recognition, despite culturally ingrained discourses of difference, through eccentric musical and dramatic expressions which demanded and coaxed refined understandings of freedom, of peace and justice, and of the full humanity of her and others like her. Simone, I argue, actively tapped into the comic register to transform the fury and dismay of an "angry black woman," an interstitial figure threatening both to the white liberalism and black masculinism associated with radical race and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, into a political critique, social vision, and call to action that reached across barriers of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and language.

Simone and the Avant-Garde

Simone's political coming into being was occasioned by a cultural scene defined by the counter-cultural interplay of music, comedy, and politics. Greenwich Village in the

early 1960s, and in particular Art D'Lugoff's Village Gate nightclub at the corner of Thompson and Bleecker Streets, formed a matrix of different cultural forms unified by a leftist undercurrent. The Village formed the locus of interracial avant-garde cultural exploration, as well as a nascent black avant-garde defined by bebop in the late 1940s and 1950s, free jazz in the 1960s, and also theatrical and poetic experimentation throughout this time. The Village witnessed the birth of the avant-garde modernist phenomenon of "happenings," or interactive, improvisational performance events, formalized by artists such as Allan Kaprow and Robert Whitman and eventually popularized within "hippie" counter-culture.⁷ At the same time, it sustained an intelligentsia working at the vanguard of intersecting radical movements.

Simone socialized intimately with Village artists Lorraine Hansberry, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Miriam Makeba, and others who slowly delivered Simone into political consciousness. This group of intelligentsia would often meet and mingle at the Gate. Simone paints the scene, however romanticized, in her autobiography: "The Village Gate was the jazz centre. Politics was mixed in with so much of what went on at the Gate that I remember it now as two sides of the same coin, politics and jazz. Comedians like Dick Gregory, Bill Cosby and Woody Allen opened for the players and it was all part of the same thing—the music and the comedy, the jazz and the politics, it all went together" (Simone and Cleary 67).⁸ In fact, during the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Gate hosted regular variety show concerts featuring these local musicians, poets, comedians, dancers, and other performers to benefit civil rights organizations such as CORE, SNCC, the SCLC, and the NAACP. Simone was a regular performer at these benefit concerts; however, before 1964, she saw herself as a supporter of, and not a participant in, the movements for civil rights embodied by these organizations (Monson, *Freedom Sounds* 165). Simone confesses in her memoir that she was motivated by the political movements happening around her, yet she remained uninvolved politically and even became disillusioned by the movements over time. Outside of the Village, too, Simone took part in major progressive events without claiming involvement. For example, she recalls that performing at Donald Sutherland and Jane Fonda's FTA or "Free the Army" tour, "an anti-Vietnam review which mixed music, comedy, and protest," "I just sang, keeping away from the politics" (Simone and Cleary 125). However, the fact that she became understood as a protest singer, dubbed the voice of the civil rights movement, and made conscious decisions to use her status to respond to instances of injustice suggests that she was politically engaged, and significantly so, albeit in a way which may not have been interpreted as such within conventional paradigms of social action and rebellion. Simone's creative mode of political engagement and her ability to move as a radical figure beyond the limits of the various movements of the 1960s and 1970s speaks to the sweeping alterity of her (at times off-the-cuff) political project.

The idea of the avant-garde brings together the notion of the political vanguard with artistic experimentation insofar as its action upon society occurs through cultural expression. As mentioned above, during the historical moment in question, the notion of the black musical avant-garde was confined to experimental jazz responding to the discourse of aesthetic modernism, namely bebop followed by free jazz. As Ingrid Monson explains,

Bebop musicians extended the embrace of modernism by adding their disdain of the popular, as well as their interest in the same hallmarks

of avant-garde modernism that interested 'high art' experimental composers: formal experimentation and theoretical exploration; a politically vanguardist stance and rhetoric of progress; and an alternation between the celebration of intuition and rationalism as the basis of art. (Monson, *Freedom Sounds* 18)

While bebop was framed by the structural conditions of the mainstream civil rights movement, free jazz was framed by black cultural nationalism. As Monson notes, "Free jazz has been championed as the embodiment of revolutionary black nationalism, as well as a path toward deeper spiritual truth, universality, and internationalism" (*Freedom Sounds* 5). While it is not quite accurate to equate Simone's art with free jazz, we can say that its aesthetic ambitions, spiritual and political vision, and experimentalism align it in significant ways with the latter.

Simone is a performer who found herself at home in a variety of musical aesthetics, genres, and traditions, black and white—she created not only folk or pop music, but art music (and theater) too.⁹ Like free jazz musicians, who tended to resist the label "jazz"—or any label—on their music, Simone also refused to categorize her music by any particular generic description. She describes this refusal to be pigeonholed early in her career:

After [the Town Hall concert in 1959] critics started to talk about what sort of music I was playing and tried to find a neat slot to file it away in. It was difficult for them because I was playing popular songs in a classical style with a classical piano technique influenced by cocktail jazz. On top of that I included spirituals and children's songs in my performances, and those sorts of songs were automatically identified with the folk movement. So saying what sort of music I played gave the critics problems because there was something from everything in there, but it also meant I was appreciated across the board—by jazz, folk, pop and blues fans as well as admirers of classical music They finally ended up describing me as a "jazz-and-something-else singer." To me "jazz" meant a way of thinking, a way of being, and the black man in America was jazz in everything he did—in the way he walked, talked, thought and acted. Jazz music was another aspect of the whole thing, so in that sense because I was black I was a jazz singer, but in every other way I most definitely wasn't. (Simone and Cleary 68-69)

Both Simone and the free jazz artists recoiled at the way that the label "jazz" stifles, or "noun-izes," to borrow from Nathaniel Mackey, the possibility inherent in the form, yet understood it as a convenient term for black art.¹⁰ By making this comparison, I aim to stress my interpretation of Simone as a black avant-garde musician and performer. Although she was known primarily as a popular musician, a closer consideration of her music and how she describes her approach to music suggests an experimental sensibility expressed around issues of race, culture, and identity, yet with a universal reach. While this approach compares to that of the male-dominated avant-garde jazz scene extant in Simone's Village neighborhood, her unique theater of invisibility distinguishes itself from any one artistic movement, perhaps placing her even more "far out" than the free jazz cats. The content of Simone's art, which must be understood in terms of its musicality, lyrics, improvisations,

dramatic stagings, and antiphonies with the audience also compares to the predominantly white avant-garde concept of the “happening.” In an interview, Simone in fact uses this term to refer to her most successful performances.¹¹ It is helpful, I argue, to see Simone in this light—as an avant-garde artist working not only in music, but also, more broadly, in performance spectacle—in order to comprehend the full political statement her work tends to make. Her performances of “protest” music would have as much to do with the immediate topical concerns of the civil rights struggle as they would the ongoing drama of identity experienced through double-consciousness that predated and postdated the political epoch with which she is associated.

An Economy of Laughter

On the morning of September 15, 1963, four members of the Ku Klux Klan set the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, ablaze with nineteen sticks of dynamite planted near the church basement. Four little black girls, Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, and Denise McNair were murdered in the blast. This tragic act of racial terrorism sent off waves of mourning and sparked violent tensions across the country. For Nina Simone, a performer who up until that moment felt herself a mere observer of civil rights struggles, the murder of the four girls signaled the event which initiated her activist career. With the recent murder of civil rights activist Medgar Evers weighing freshly on her mind, Simone moved from utter despair and disbelief to the desire for violent retribution. In her memoir, she describes the rapid, epiphanic grief cycle this way:

I went down to the garage and got a load of tools and junk together and took them up to my apartment. Andy [Stroud, Simone’s husband at the time] came in an hour later, saw the mess and asked me what I was doing. My explanation didn’t make sense because the words tumbled out in a rush—I couldn’t speak quickly enough to release the torrents inside my head. He understood, though, and was still enough of a cop to see I was trying to make a zip gun, a home-made pistol. I had it in mind to kill someone, I didn’t know who, but someone I could identify as being in the way of my people getting some justice for the first time in three hundred years. (Simone and Cleary 89)¹²

Stroud’s emergency intervention to remind his wife, “Nina, you don’t know anything about killing. The only thing you’ve got is music,” forced Simone to stop, think, and reconsider strategies. She then turned to the medium with which she was most familiar to stage her public reaction. After an hour at the piano, she emerged from her apartment with sheet music for “Mississippi Goddam,” what Simone called her “first Civil Rights song” (Simone and Cleary 90). In an interview that took place years after the publication of *I Put a Spell on You*, Simone’s memory of her creative response to the traumatic event of the church bombing tragedy does not waiver:

That song . . . did more for me to get me out of myself than any song that I've ever done. I was so outraged when the four colored girls were killed in . . . that Baptist church. I tell you I was so outraged that I didn't—I only walked the floor for hours at a time and that's how it came out. It just came out as a complete outraged protest against the injustices of this country against my people . . . It just completely covers, I think, the whole terrible outrage that I feel about the Negro . . . being regarded as a human being, and most of all it touched me off about those four children, and how little attention was given to them. It was so abominable! And the fact that they were colored, it didn't make the papers too long. It's—you know? Huh. (Interview by Andy Stround)

"Mississippi Goddam" is teeming with a penetrating rage and sadness, an affect so deep that Simone cannot articulate it in mere words neither in 1963 nor years after the fact in her interview with Stround. In the wake of the church bombing, with most of black America in mourning, the political anthem can be seen on the one hand as what Daphne Brooks (borrowing from Joseph Roach) calls "black female surrogation," or the inadequate effigieic response to communal loss commissioned to black songstresses by the nation at times of national crisis.¹³ Notwithstanding this emotional impulse, however, the actual poetics of the tune reveals deeply comic structures which play with understatement, parody, and the sharp incongruities of quotidian experiences of American life. In considering Simone's response to the bombing as a comic one, Glenda Carpio's observations about the role of comedy in African American cultural expressions of grief are useful. She says that grief appears in "the most piercing tragicomedy, one in which laughter is disassociated from gaiety and is, instead, a form of mourning" (7). Additionally she explains, "In African American expressive culture, grief often assumes a tragicomic mode, best known through the blues. But this tragicomic mode also finds stunning expression in black humor" (Carpio 11). In his poem titled "Nina Simone" composed about a decade after the occasion of "Mississippi Goddam," Black Arts poet Lance Jeffers captures this alternative, comic expression of grief in Simone's voice:

this brown woman's voice
 this blackwheat voice
 this blackthigh voice
 this blackbreast voice:
 far far in the dim of me I hear her in the dark field
 of the slavery South:
 gowned in burlap, barefoot,
 head down, a musing smile on her lips:
 out into the fields before the dawn she goes alone:
 she gazes into the trees swaying into the slowly-draining night:
 sudden grief pierces her torso and she laughs scornfully:

Now she stands before a microphone and
 feels the echoes of her slavery past:
 an ache across her torso and a desolating laugh:

she throws back her head to sing and her teeth whiten
the bloodsea of her mouth.

(Jeffers 24)

Jeffers's poem draws out the uncannily comic nature of the singer which I aim to convey. The voice of this poem is corporeally rendered as a voice tied to "brownwoman," "black-thigh," "blackbreast," to "torso," "lips," and to the "bloodsea of a mouth"—a corporeality overdetermined by slavery and by the blue spotlight of a stage. At the same time, the voice is a disembodied voice, a voice that boomerangs through history—to use an Ellisonian image—takes possession of and visits the dim of different bodies. Accordingly, this voice is hers and not hers. It is a voice that eventually finds its way out of Simone's mouth, but it is a voice forged during slavery. Disembodied in this way, it sings a sorrow song passing through the souls of generations of black folk, who, like Jeffers, hold "far far in the dim of [them] . . . the dark field" of the past in the present.

What haunts this poem most of all is the musing smile and bitter laugh amidst the imagery of pain and tragedy. The repetition of laughter emerging from a pained torso stages the strange tension of the tragic and the comic found in Simone's work. It brings to light a question at the heart of this piece, essentially: What happens when we respond to injury not with raw anger or with moans of suffering but with wise laughter? The gaping, chortling grin of the slave, of the darky entertainer and its desolating potential discovered in Jeffers's poem anticipates the "spokesman for invisibility" and his "blues-toned laughter" that Ellison writes about in the 1981 introduction to *Invisible Man*. For Ellison, there is a "subtle triumph hidden in such laughter" that is "more affirmative than raw anger" (*Invisible Man* xvi). Jeffers's and Carpio's observations about the relationship between grief, mourning, and humor in African American culture in concert with Ellison's reflections on the effectivity of taking on invisibility's comic apparatus become especially helpful for this discussion of Simone, whose grief and anger weave drastically in and out of the comic both as a form of redress, but also as a "more affirmative" method of converting emotion into cultural critique. Such is the case, I argue, with her composition and live performances of "Mississippi Goddam."

Simone's political anthem reveals a seething irony in the contrast between the upbeat show tune quality of the accompaniment and tongue-in-cheek understatement of African American experiences of Jim Crow and civil rights struggles found in the lyrics of the AABA chorus.¹⁴ What Monson argues about music, and especially African American music's ability to communicate meaning and "speak" to different musical and sonic elements of the performance is important in discerning how the comic irony and incongruity rife in this tune are generated not solely by the textuality of the lyric, but largely through the relation between text and sound. The comedic effect of the choruses generates principally from the ironic contrast between the manic joviality of the band and the gravity of the song's themes of social injustice, racial terror, and militant response. Humor also arises in the text of the lyric, independently of the tune's sonic dimensions, through Simone's use of understatement. For example, Simone's introduction of the title itself provokes laughter from her Carnegie Hall audience, a predominantly white, liberal crowd, by the joke contained within the understated "Mississippi Goddam!"—the latter term a curse word generally reserved for a stubbed toe or a broken glass.¹⁵ The lyrics of the first A section in

the song exemplify how Simone employs meiosis to describe Jim Crow and racial terror as a mere nuisance: “Alabama’s gotten me so upset/ Tennessee made me lose my rest/ And everybody knows about Mississippi, goddam!”

Understatement (or meiosis), irony (“verbal” not situational), and overstatement (or hyperbole, which is not predominant in this tune) are comic figures of speech, all of which express the surprise of the speaker, represented by the contrast or inconsistency between the actual situation and the utterance. In other words, the speaker (who may be speaking in words or in music/sound) does not aim to accurately describe the situation in a literal way, but rather to communicate her reaction of surprise to the situation.¹⁶ Simone uses comic irony not so much to express her own surprise, but more so to generate a reaction of surprise in her audience. This technique of using irony to surprise can also be understood as generating a shock of recognition in her audience, recognition of the absurd situation of stereotype and the caricature of difference which obscures the full humanity of the racialized other.¹⁷ Moreover, with comic figures of speech, the degree to which something is “funny” depends upon the contrast presented between statement and experience. What is funny by no means need be a positive realization, nor does laughter necessarily equate to pleasure. If disturbing incongruities, such as those between the pervasiveness of racial stereotype and the reality of common humanity, can be understood as positive and pleasurable, perhaps they might be so in relation to the satisfaction which comes with gaining more accurate knowledge about a given situation. They might also produce pleasure through the sense of superiority gained in the overturning of dominant discourses of racial difference. Moreover, with these verbal figures of the comic, the degree to which they are funny corresponds with the degree to which they are critical.

A subcategory of irony which comes into play here is that of parody. “Mississippi Goddam” overtly parodies the show tune genre, and not in a merely nostalgic or de-contextualized way. “Mississippi Goddam” exemplifies postmodernist parody in the sense described by Linda Hutcheon, where “through a double process of installing and ironizing,” “postmodernist parody is a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations” (93-94). In this light, Simone’s decision to reply to the church bombings with a parody of the show tune results in an ingenious critical move for the way it addresses the multiple incongruities of black experience in America. Mississippi is a synecdoche not just for the South, but as Malcolm X noted, for everything south of the Canadian border (454). First and foremost, Simone’s parody foregrounds the ambivalent relationship blacks have had with “going before massa,” show business, and especially comic performance—the way in which blackness has been a constant source of humor and perpetual performance, on the one hand, and deeply realized experience of a political and epistemological locus often discussed in comic terms within black cultural circles. However, perhaps the most remarkable effect of the rhetorical structure of “Mississippi Goddam” is the way in which its comic opening carves a space for ethical listening and an unobstructed encounter with the raw emotion of the singer.

Conjuring Liberals

On different occasions, Simone described her intended audience in varied terms. In one moment she emphasized that her music was intended for “her people.” However, at other times, it was clear that she intended to speak across cultures. For example, Simone’s fan, friend, and biographer Sylvia Hampton recalls Simone’s explanation to the young white girl, “you know these white folk don’t want to hear the truth! You must know the struggles we go through. I’m gonna keep on telling them. They can’t hide from me!” (Hampton and Nathan 39). It is evident how “Mississippi Goddam” was composed with both audiences in mind, but the comic strategy of the song works particularly well to bring strangers into the mind and experiences of an angry black woman.

William Sonnega makes a compelling argument about how progressive black theater faces a predicament of liberal white spectatorship insofar as the attendance of white liberals at black theater does not necessarily equate to a progressive understanding of black culture or an interest in becoming involved in the politics of the performance. Instead, liberal “colorblindness,” or a buck-passing cultural relativism, combined with the “rigged paternalism” of liberal policies that pretend to address issues of racial and socio-economic injustice both ignore or excuse one’s participation and implication in institutional and cultural structures of racism and allow the liberal viewer to enjoy black performance guilt-free. Moreover, white guilt is alleviated by the patronage of black theater, as if one’s attendance is a show of one’s progressive stance on race matters. For the black playwright who is interested in successful cross-cultural sharing of knowledge through performance, coming up with an effective aesthetic strategy is tricky, slippery, and risky.

In crossover contexts such as her 1964 Carnegie Hall concert, Simone faced the very same predicament observed by Sonnega and negotiated this predicament by seducing her white, liberal audiences with outrageous and eccentric displays of campy, diva style and intoxicating humor. Once she got them, she forced them to confront what they had not necessarily paid to see. In her memoir, Simone recognizes this newfound strategy as a gift:

It was this time, in the mid-sixties, that I first began to feel the power and spirituality I could connect with when I played in front of an audience . . . something deep, something very deep. That’s what I learned about performing—that it was real, and I had the ability to make people feel on a deep level. It’s difficult to describe because it’s not something you can analyze; to get near what it’s about you have to play it . . . And when you’ve caught it, when you’ve got the audience hooked, you always know because it’s like an electricity hanging in the air. I began to feel it happening and it seemed to me like a mass hypnosis—like I was hypnotizing an entire audience to feel a certain way . . . I had a technique, and I used it. To cast a spell over an audience I would start with a song to create a certain mood which I carried into the next song and on through the third, until I created a certain climax of feeling and by then they would be hypnotized. (Simone and Cleary 93)¹⁸

Simone’s hypnotizing effect can be compared to the African American practice of conjure, also called “hoodoo,” or a form of folk magic which derives from Haitian Vodun spiritual

rituals that summon the dead souls, or *loa*, and also Native American spiritual practices. In Vodun, the *loa* take possession of the parties involved in the ritual. Conjure, which morphed and traveled from Africa to the Caribbean and the United States through Louisiana and spread throughout the South, however, is seen more as a form of magic which transforms people into other objects. Unlike Vodun, which is a widespread religion, conjure is not widely practiced; yet knowledge of “hoodoo” persists in the form of cultural folklore and myth among African Americans. Simone, who grew up in rural North Carolina and lived in the Caribbean and Africa for extended periods of time, describes her hypnosis in terms similar to these varied diasporic versions of spiritual possession and transformation. In fact, Simone’s cover of Screamin’ Jay Hawkins’s 1956 recording of the hit tune “I Put a Spell on You” became not only a hit for Simone, maintaining a spot at the top of the billboard charts in the United States and the UK between 1965 and 1968, but also an anthem for Simone’s hypnotic performances. Hawkins became well known for playing up a stereotypical portrayal of a Haitian *ougan*, or vodun priest. Using props identifiable by US audiences as belonging to “voodoo” practices—a smoking skull, a pair of tusks through his nasal septum, snakes, and fire displays—he spoke wildly in tongues, bugged his eyes, and generally performed as a charlatan *ougan*. Simone’s cover of the song, the title of which she used for her autobiography, suggests a revision of Hawkins’s original references to African-derived versions of spirit possession rituals and conjure, as demeaning as they were, in the context of her relations with her audience during a performance. In fact, during live performances of the song, she often stares down the audience as if they are the lover in the song upon whom she puts a spell, and occasionally improvises licks and riffs reminiscent of African music, and extemporaneously adds lyrics which reference “hoodoo.” A good example of this would be during Simone’s 1968 televised concert in Britain where during her performance of this song she adds the lyrics, “I went to Alabama and got some mojo dust and I put a spell on you!”—“mojo” being an element of conjure.¹⁹ (Simone also had the ability to hypnotize herself, and catch the spirit, like in church, in the middle of a performance, a tendency which will be discussed in more detail later). Hypnosis, or Simone’s version of conjuring, moreover, bears a relation to comedy. Again, we might cite Carpio’s argument that black comedy which critically and subversively transforms stereotypes into critiques of slavery and racial injustice can be compared to the transformative function of conjuring.²⁰

“To check” and make sure the audience was “hypnotized,” Simone continues in her description of her performative powers, “I’d stop and do nothing for a moment and I’d hear absolute silence: I’d got them. It was always an uncanny moment” (Simone and Cleary 93). You can hear this happening on the Carnegie Hall recording: Simone introduces the tune to her audience, “This next tune is called ‘Mississippi Goddam.’” The audience laughs and applauds. And in a slightly ominous tone she adds, “And I mean every word of it.” The audience laughs again, but with a tinge of uneasy anticipation. With debonair energy Simone jumps into the swinging first A section: “Alabama got me so upset/ Tennessee made me lose my rest/ and everybody knows about Mississippi, Goddam!” While the lyric calls upon the audience’s knowledge of racial injustice and violence in the US South to fill in the logical gaps left in the wake of these understatement, a knowledge presumably shared by her liberal audience, the tone of the song maintains an almost saccharine mirth sustained by Simone’s lilting contralto. After one AABA chorus, the band’s vamping

changes to a minor key as they enter a short interlude during which Simone explains to her audience, "This is a show tune, but the show hasn't been written for it yet," inspiring another round of blithe laughter.

A prepped, or "hypnotized" audience is then caught off guard when brought to the first verse. The dip into the minor key for the two verses (divided by one chorus) in the middle of the tune creates a spatial dimension that resembles the gap that resides between appearance and reality, or the space of a joke; the gap that Simone traverses with her audience contains within it the tragic recesses of racial injustice and terror. The space of this song is also not unlike the layered tragicomic nodes spelunked by invisible man in the prologue of Ellison's novel, the "lower frequencies." The change to a minor key signifies not only the appearance of a new unit within the composition but a switch into the tragic, the blues. While the general structure of the song remains the same—the tempo, rhythm, and chord structure do not change—the modal change to the dominant minor transforms the tone of the song from manic and jocular to tragic, anxious, and menacing. The accompanying lyrics, while similar in meaning to those in the first section of the song, are no longer understated, but rather terrifyingly literal descriptions of what's to be damned about "Mississippi." On the sonic level, Simone's change of vocal timbre and intonation during the verse signify trepidation and horror augmenting the textual meaning of the lyrics: "Hound dogs on my trail/ School children sittin' in jail/ Black cat cross my path/ I think everyday's gonna be my last." The lyrics, along with Simone's voice, escalate to a tone of desperation, foreboding, and ominous doom in the second A section of the first verse: "Lord have mercy on this land of mine!/ We're all gonna get it in due time./ I don't belong here, I don't belong there/ I've even stopped believing in prayer." The next line turns toward a direct confrontation between Simone speaking on behalf of her people and her white listeners, particularly those satisfied with blacks' non-violent approach to freedom struggles: "Don't tell me, I'll tell you!/ Me and my people just about through/ I've been there so I know/ keep on sayin' go slow." This verse leads into an interlude, the lyrics of which turn towards a critique of non-violence: "But that's just the trouble ([Chorus:] too slow!)/ Washin' the windows (too slow!)/ Pickin' the cotton (too slow!)/ You're just plain rotten (too slow!)/ Too damn lazy (too slow!)/ You're thinkin's crazy." The turnaround brings the song back out of the verse and into the dominant major for one verse and a chorus, and then changes back into the dominant minor. Before taking her listeners down into what I like to think of as the tragic bottom of the song, the second verse, she confronts her consternated audience with a question: "I bet you thought I was kidding, didn't you?" provoking a low mumbling—no more laughter. Simone is not kidding, yet she does perform a joke; she generates a shock of recognition, slipping the yoke, through the joke form.²¹

In the next section, the singer's anger and frustration build and the angry black woman emerges in full fury. Like a dragon shooting fire, Simone sings her fury with ventricular and pressed phonations. "Yes, you lied to me all these years,/ you told me to wash and clean my ears./ Talk real fine, just like a lady/ if you'd stop callin' me Sister Sadie! / Oh but this whole country is full of lies,/ you're all gonna die and die like flies, / I don't trust you anymore,/ ya keep on sayin' go slow."

"Mississippi Goddam" surrogates the pain of black Americans terrorized by racial violence and injustice, critiques the civil rights movement's strategy of non-violent protest

for moving tragically slow, and advocates for racial separatism and violent revolt. On top of all that, it indicts white America for its history of deceit and terror and foretells white listeners with the personal interpellation (“you”) of their imminent demise. It expresses all this with the socially unacceptable anger of a black woman, one who refuses the name “Sister Sadie,” a name which, like “Auntie,” works to reduce Simone and those like her to inhuman caricature. All this, yet her comic affront is received with roaring applause, an indication that she got through to her listeners. In “Mississippi Goddam” and elsewhere, Simone anticipates the project of black arts articulated by Amiri Baraka and others involved in the black avant-garde of the 1960s whereby the urge for physical violence as a revolutionary tactic was transferred into cultural productions determined by an aesthetics of violence. We might recall, for example, the lines from Baraka’s tone-setting poem “Black Dada Nihilismus”:

. . . come up, black dada
 nihilismus. Rape the white girls. Rape
 their fathers. Cut the mothers’ throats.
 Black dada nihilismus, choke my friends
 in their bedrooms with their drinks spilling
 and restless for tilting hips or dark liver
 lips sucking splinters from the master’s thigh . . .

However, unlike the Dadaist impulse in these lines to demolish white culture to carve a tabula rasa for black culture, Simone’s violent urges are transferred into comic expressions which do not aim to destroy but rather to call on the power-holding class to take responsibility for their actions. While, as Phillip Brian Harper argues, black arts poets probably intended for poems such as “Black Dada Nihilismus” to be overheard by white listeners, Simone, as her conversation with Sylvia Hampton suggests, directly confronted white listeners, some of whom became her adoring fans in the process.²² Her performances made it extremely difficult for her white liberal audiences to ignore or excuse Simone’s ostensible pain and rage with claims to colorblindness or a cultural relativism.

“Mississippi Goddam” was originally performed at the Village Gate to a standing ovation. Notably, every published recording of “Mississippi Goddam” is a live recording and features audience reaction. Without question, the life of this song, composed initially as an expression of political activism, traces an ongoing intervention with the social in order to perform some kind of decolonial work. At the historical moment of its writing, Simone’s political anthem described an increasing urge for violent retribution and racial separatism arising on the street and within radical factions of the civil rights movement. It did this while engaging at the same time in a radical pedagogy aimed at white liberals. Of course, the ability of Simone’s humor to carve that space for ethical understanding ran up against its limits, particularly in the South where the recording was boycotted. Simone recalls, “The excuse was profanity—Goddam!—but the real reason was obvious enough. A dealer in South Carolina sent a whole crate of copies back to our office with each one snapped in half.” The “real reason,” we can assume, is the affront to the racist status quo in the South. However, for Simone, the snapped albums did not indicate comic failure. Rather, her memoir reads, “I laughed, because it meant we were getting through” (Simone and Cleary 90).

Theater of Invisibility

Her first musical idols being the Germans and Austrians “Mozart and Beethoven, Czerny and Liszt, and my beloved Bach,” Simone’s exposure to German culture began early and continued into her adult life as she listened to Brecht and Weill compositions and even incorporated a few interpretations into her oeuvre (Simone and Cleary 34). At Simone’s 1964 Carnegie Hall concert, Simone performed “Pirate Jenny,” an English version of the popular number from Act I of *The Threepenny Opera*, and as those who have written about Simone’s first “protest song” have observed, “Mississippi Goddam” is a likely reference to the “Alabama Song” from Act I of Brecht and Weill’s *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahoganny*.²³ Two decades after *In Concert*, Simone debuted her rendition of the “Alabama Song” at Ronnie Scott’s jazz club in London in a medley with “Mississippi Goddam.” While Simone clearly seems to be referencing Brecht and Weill’s “Alabama,” I find “Mississippi” to possess even more sonic and lyrical similarity to another Brecht/Weill composition: the “Mandalay Song,” which opens Act III of the duo’s musical comedy *Happy End: A Melodrama with Songs* (1929), an anti-capitalist satire which provoked controversy amongst its bourgeois audience. Simone’s 1964 recording features a similar manic, jaunty, polka-like beat, held down by Lisle Atkinson’s fast, driving 1-5 bass line, Bobby Hamilton’s bright, steady high-hat, and Rudy Stevenson’s and Simone’s harmonic vamping on the two and four. The title phrase apparently references the exclamation “Mother Goddam!” shouted by Sam, who plays brothel owner “Mother Goddam” in drag, before entering into the salty number, as well as at other moments in *Happy End*. “Mother Goddam” is also repeated at the beginning of each A chorus.

These references to Brecht/Weill songs on *In Concert* become significant as we consider Simone’s own theories of political theater, which are articulated through the performances themselves. Simone’s appreciative but critical interpretations of these numbers appear to trouble Brecht’s notion of *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect) as a strategy for turning the audience into objective critics of the performance. Simone interpellates her audience into a critical role which, unlike the ideal audience in Brecht’s epic theater, depends upon their affective investment in the performance. Distinct from Aristotelian poetics, which allows the audience to be relieved of their ethical obligations to the political through the process of catharsis, the critique of which inspired Brecht’s political theater, Simone engages her audience both at the intellectual and the affective levels in order to foster an ethical relationship that forms the basis of political allegiance.

Simone’s specific references to context and her direct address to the white “you” constantly interpellated in the song (in contrast to the race—and gender—specific “me” and “my people”) in relation to the affective confrontation with tragedy rendered as much by lyrics as by the emotive qualities of her voice forces a recognition of the audience’s own role in the ongoing drama of what Ralph Ellison called the “American racial theater.” Remarkably, however, despite emphasis on racial distinction, the song unites an “everybody” commonly incensed by the problem of “Mississippi.” From the beginning of the song to the end, what “everybody knows about Mississippi” has changed to include the perspective of an increasingly radicalized civil rights movement on the cusp of black power and 1960s counterculture. The poetics of invisibility which structures this coming into better knowledge facilitated by the song is a tragicomic poetics and occasions a blues-toned laughter.²⁴

This approach is quite different from epic theater and the method of defamiliarizing the actor from the spectator by exaggerating the split between performer and performance, singer and song, called for by Brecht. While Simone's theater of invisibility, like epic theater, "arouses [the spectator's] capacity for action," "forces him to take decisions," and makes him "face something" whereby he is "brought to the point of recognition," it does not turn "the spectator into an observer" where he "stands outside [and] studies" the spectacle with a critical distance. Nor does it oppose "reason" to "feeling" as antithetical and counterproductive to political incitation (Brecht, *Brecht on Theater* 37). Russell Berman and Daphne Brooks both have drawn the connections between Simone's performance of Brecht/Weill compositions and her performative revision of epic theater. For Brooks, this revision is more of an extension of Brecht's theory, taking into account the interstitial terrain of race and gender in a cultural practice Brooks dubs "black feminist distancing." "Black feminist distancing" is a version of what Brooks, drawing on Brecht, earlier theorized as "Afro-alienation," or the performative mobilization of double-consciousness, the sense of alienation that comes from the transatlantic black experience of seeing oneself through the eyes of others, into a "critical form of dissonantly enlightened performance" which cleverly translates the racialized alienation of social experience into "literal and figurative acts of self-affirmation" (Brooks, "Nina Simone's Triple Play" 179; *Bodies in Dissent* 3-6).²⁵ What Brooks describes comes closer than mere epic theater to what I am attributing to Simone, insofar as in both cases we are talking about the shocking performance of double-consciousness in front of white audiences for political and historical awakening. As useful as this theorization is, especially for the subversive black performances that she attributes to other "Afro-alienation" acts, I am more inclined to follow Berman's emphasis that "it is not distance and abstraction but proximity and precision that Simone targets" (Berman 177). Berman goes so far as to say that Simone engages in an "anti-Brechtian process of refamiliarization," particularly with the geographic and cultural specificity of the US South.

All this, the mechanism of the theater of invisibility, compares better with Antonin Artaud's theater of cruelty. Quite unlike Brecht, Artaud calls for a theater that "can fascinate and ensnare the organs," that "flows into the sensibility." Unlike Brecht's interest in a singer's intentional splitting of himself from the song by bringing attention to the artifice of singing text for an audience, "speaking-against-the-music" and thereby awakening a "stubborn, incorruptible sobriety which is independent of music and rhythm," Artaud's theater, turns words into incantations. It extends the voice. It utilizes the vibrations and qualities of the voice. It wildly tramples rhythms underfoot. It pile-drives sounds. It seeks to exalt, to benumb, to charm, to arrest the sensibility. It liberates a new lyricism of gesture which, by its precipitation or its amplitude in the air, ends by surpassing the lyricism of words. It ultimately breaks away from the intellectual subjugation of the language, by conveying the sense of a new and deeper intellectuality which hides itself beneath the gestures and signs, raised to the dignity of particular exorcisms (Brecht, *Brecht on Theater* 44-5; Artaud 90-91). This theater, Artaud says, should be "spellbinding," as are Simone's hypnotic performances.

In a sense, Simone's ability to "put a spell" on her audience is not entirely new. Farah Jasmine Griffin summates the black woman's singing voice, as it has been observed by the West, as "a voice capable of casting spells. It is certainly a voice concerned with its connection to the world of the spirit, its ability to invoke the presence of the divine. So the

sound heard as ‘other,’ as in ‘foreign,’ is also a sound that is ‘other’ like the mystery that is God.” As well, the black woman’s singing voice serves to “nurture” and heal the nation in times of crisis, as would a mammy who “is like one of the family” yet not losing out on the privileges and protections that the family for which she cares provides (Griffin 107). At the same time, the black female singer’s impassioned incantations of injustice have also been responsible for the incitement of dissent and political action. Drawing upon Griffin’s portrait of the spellbinding black songstress, Brooks hears in “Mississippi Goddam” a “sonic distancing” which “stops the audience from losing themselves in the romance of the black female singing voice.” I hear a similar disruption of audience expectations in the tune, however I view the mechanism by which Simone achieves this as hypnotization, not alienation. The feeling experienced by the audience is thus compassionate, not cathartic. Moreover, hypnotization is far more complex than what Berman describes. Working on the comic register, it requires not “refamiliarization” but rather recognition (Brooks, “Nina Simone’s Triple Play” 182). If Simone makes things seem unfamiliar to her audience, she does so only in order to catch them off guard and ring them closer where they can recognize her in “her particular and vivid thereness,” as Spillers would put it (“Interstices” 165), illuminated “the blackness of [her] invisibility,” as Ellison would put it (*Invisible Man* 13). Simone’s voice hypnotizes, intoxicates, through its flaws, its rough edges, its inconsistencies and incongruities, a comic absurdity vocalized.

“My Name is PEACHES!”

Together the lips, jaw, tongue, and larynx constrict and control the vocal organ. Lungs, mouth, the sinuses, pharynx, vocal folds, and epiglottis open and close, contract, expand, and vibrate in combinations to create seemingly infinite phonic possibilities. One of the most complex and intricate of instruments, the voice arguably possesses the greatest range of emotive expression and as such is frequently imitated by musicians on other instruments. However, the so-called trained singer, at least by Western standards, aims to achieve the control of manmade instruments and is valued by the degree to which she can maintain a smooth and steady tone, volume, and timbre, entering appropriately in and out of vibrato and staying perfectly on pitch, disembodied her voice from that which produces it.

Not Simone. Our experimental vocalist regularly makes full use of her vocal organ, consciously distorting her singing voice and partaking in what Houston Baker, Jr. calls the “deformation of mastery” in order to invoke social memory and communicate semantic meaning, as Frederick Douglass describes of the song sung by slaves on the way to the Great House Farm, “if not in the word, in the sound.”²⁶ Markedly, Simone creates a phonic vocabulary through the “grain of the voice,” as Barthes would put it, in order to communicate repeating sentiments from song to song and lyric to lyric. Here, I fixate for a moment on what I am calling the “voice of Peaches,” the voice of the character in Simone’s song “Four Women” that phonically, as much as lyrically, announces a militant black feminist stance absent from racialist and masculinist variations of 1960s radicalism, a stance that would not materialize in the form of a movement until the early 1970s.²⁷ As discussed above, while Simone’s affiliations with organized movements were loose at best, her music

often expressed the tenor of political activity at a given moment so emblematically that organized movements sometimes claimed her as a representative. Likewise, without naming it as such, "Four Women" became a black feminist anthem and was, in fact, prescient in its militant sentiments. Moreover, the phonation of the "Peaches" character as it irrupts in Simone's performances signals the voice of the "angry black woman" divorced from stereotype and made three dimensional, a character whom Simone continues to phonically cite throughout her oeuvre.

The voice of Peaches is identifiable by its ventricular phonations and hoarse contralto, also known, appropriately, as "the growl" in music, as well as its shouting nasal quality. This voice can be interpreted both in terms of its frequent and characteristic use by women blues singers, and also in terms of avant-garde jazz's experimentations with "ugly" sounds, or instrumental distortion, which could be misinterpreted as the mistakes of an untrained musician. The former invokes the black feminist impulse of the blues to publicly state one's pain and anger, while the latter resonates with the shock factor of free jazz's sonic experimentation and its sounding of black nationalist rage.

With poetic brevity, the lyrics of "Four Women" tell the distinct stories of "Aunt Sarah," "Sephronia," "Sweet Thing," and "Peaches," whose lives are shaped by skin shade, hair texture, generational relation to slavery, sexuality, and differing responses to adversity and oppression. Simone, perhaps, transmigrates the spirit of the four little girls murdered in Birmingham into these four fictional characters, invoking the specter of silenced black girls and women. Showing the diversity of black women's lives, "Four Women" breaks apart assumptions of monolithic black womanhood and complicates racist and masculinist understandings of black femininity with its reinterpretation of the worn slave, tragic mulatta, jezebel, and angry black woman stereotypes. The latter, "Peaches," describes herself thusly:

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

A generation removed from slavery, "Peaches" might be the contemporary of classic blues legends Gertrude "Ma" Rainey or Bessie Smith. However, with a looser interpretation of "parents," the character's blackness applies across several generations, and her militancy aligns her with the growing nationalist sentiment concurrent with the period—the year 1966, to be precise—during which this piece was composed.

During a televised concert in Holland in 1968, as in all of Simone's performances of this song, the last two lines of the lyrics are sung over a crescendoing cadenza, and the name "Peaches" is shouted at the top of the singer's lungs and held over the last measure and a half of the piece, elongated with a fermata and marked by five resolving chords punctuated triumphantly by piano, bass, drums, and flute in unison. There is so much

strain behind the sung note “Peaches” that it forces a vein to protrude from Simone’s neck. For this performance, Simone is seen donning a short- to mid-length natural, or “afro,” a hairstyle that just started gaining popularity in urban communities in the United States as a statement of black nationalist pride. She seems to be highly conscious of the politicized choice of hairstyle, as she points out her “wooly” coif, as she calls it, to her predominantly white audience.

Peaches’ self-assertion is angry and threatening, but it also possesses a tinge of comic irony. The “ugly” sound of the last section contrasts surprisingly with the relatively subdued groove of the prior three, and seems absurdly out of place. The character’s namesake, a sweet and tender fruit, contrasts humorously with her caustic and uncouth delivery. And the untrained sound of a woman shouting at the top of her lungs contrasts ironically with the sound of the accompanying piano’s elaborate flourish. However, this comic irony does not interfere with the seriousness with which we take “Peaches,” but rather produces the climactic moment of hypnosis which allows Simone to connect with her audience the most viscerally. The voice of “Peaches,” in its ugliness, forces one’s hairs to stand on end and goose bumps to raise from the skin. It parodies the stereotypical voice of the angry black woman and recasts the anger in the context of the complex texture of black woman’s lives. Cathartic escape: Peaches won’t have it.

Hypnotizing the masses

By the mid-1970s, the United States and most of the world found itself in a post-apocalyptic state, a position from which to observe the successes and failures of the many revolutionary, decolonial, and countercultural movements which defined the long 1960s.²⁸ With the end of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal in 1975, much of the hope of “the sixties” matured into a nihilistic cynicism. The cynicism and hopelessness of this post-traumatic moment comes across in Simone’s 1976 concert at the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland. Eight years earlier during her first performance there in tumultuous 1968 she writes, “I sang only protest songs. I did that to make a point, to show the most prestigious music festival in Europe where I came from, what I was about, and what was happening in my country” (Simone and Cleary 105). But this time around in 1976, Simone felt free to tell her audience that she did not want to be there, to chide them for being poor listeners, and did not fail to express her low expectations of them. It was around this time that Simone announced the production of her last album *It’s Finished* (1974). Along with it, Simone had planned for Montreux to be her last public performance.²⁹ Despite these public declarations of throwing in the towel, the 1976 Montreux appearance, which was filmed and released recently on DVD, presents Simone’s “theater of invisibility” and her mass “hypnosis” in full effect. Here she shows deep investment in creating a compassionate and ethical relation with her audience in order to get them to see and feel things in a certain way in hopes of effecting the radical change on a global scale that Simone was constantly working toward. While in many ways a self-indulgent catharsis over being without her lover, Imojah, whom she left behind in Liberia, the performance is nonetheless marked with political critiques about the United States and Europe, constant references to “Africa,” and Liberia more specifically, and structured by songs with explicitly political content.

One of the most overtly political is “Backlash Blues,” which adds music to the poem written by Simone’s good friend from the Village, Langston Hughes, and published post-humously in *Crisis* magazine in 1967. Like “Mississippi Goddam,” Hughes’s poem directly confronts “Mr. Backlash” or the power-holding white “you” with the socio-economic, racial, and political problems facing “folks like me/ who are Black, Yellow, Beige, and Brown.” The first stanza reads:

Mister Backlash, Mister Backlash,
 Just who do you think I am?
 You raise my taxes, freeze my wages,
 Send my son to Vietnam
 You give me second class houses,
 Second class schools.
 Do you think that colored folks
 Are just second class fools?

The final stanza (“You’re the one/ Will have the blues./ Not me—/ Wait and see!”) also poses the threat of violent retribution (Hughes 251). Before entering into her incredibly funky rendition of the poem, Simone seems to decide on the spot that, “Yeah, I’m ‘onna tell you the truth tonight!” This promise to “testify” in the classic African American sense is augmented by Langston Hughes’s deathbed order which she recounts for the audience: “Nina, keep working till they open up the door.” Hughes, along with many black artists, intellectuals, and activists, saw what Simone was doing as important political work. No mere pop artist, and up to something much bigger, Simone rejected being labeled as an “entertainer.”

Simone explains as much during one of the many memorably odd moments of the show. After being encored back onto the stage, Simone postpones playing another tune in order to chat with her audience about her daughter who had just started attending a boarding school in Switzerland, about black artists who come to Europe for “ten or fifteen years and don’t speak one word” of the native language, and other tangential sentiments. She then interrupts herself to ask whether her friend, David Bowie, is in the audience. Getting up to look around she calls out “Is David Bowie here?” Most of the audience finds it amusing, perhaps understanding that it was part of the whole theater of her performance, but a lone heckler demands Simone to “sing a song already!” Simone takes her time making her way back to the piano and comments about her “dear” friend’s absence before finally answering the heckler: “What you’re talking about ain’t got nothin’ to do about nothin’ but show business and I’m not about show business.”

Indeed, Simone constantly disrupts her audience’s expectation of what a show should be in order to resist being identified as and reduced to a mere “darky entertainer.” Playing with this mask, her initial entrance onto Casino Stage dramatizes the ambivalence of the “funny Negro,” that complex, double-edged relationship between African Americans and comedy generated by the blurred line between black humor and black people as a source of humor for white audiences.³⁰ Upon being introduced, Simone enters the stage and curtsies deeply for her applauding audience. She holds the curtsy, eyes cast downward, for a good quarter-minute before she slowly looks up, as if waking from a dream and real-

izing suddenly where she is. Taking a step backward, she begins to size-up her audience with an unamused, deadpan expression, by now her posture upright. Subtle changes in Simone's expression suggest that her innocuous observance turns to a look of judgment, perturbation, even disdain. The increasingly baffled audience eventually falls silent. She turns her head to the side, rests one hand upon the Yamaha, which fills the stage next to her, and holds the elegant pose without cracking a smile, again for a long pause. A few enthusiastic audience members try to drum up another round of applause, but fail, and soon again Casino Stage falls quiet enough to hear a pin drop. As if suddenly remembering an urgent matter that she needs attend, Simone shakes herself out of the pose and abruptly takes a seat at the grand piano.

This dramatic introduction presents a fascinating look at the way in which Simone enacts a poetics of invisibility in order to "hypnotize" her audience. Another way to think of this bodily joke is the way that she challenges any subjugating "enframements" and any objectifying gazes that might reduce her to archetype or spectacle.³¹ Simone wants control of what happens that evening. She does not intend to be mere entertainment bought and paid for by casual festival goers. She accomplishes this with the two poses. The first humble, supplicating gesture resembles the posture of the faithful slave bowing before her master (going before massa). The second pose presents a stately woman, dressed elegantly in a short black gown, stunning antique necklace, and wearing her hair in a short "natural"—the image of the respected concert pianist and revered black queen she wanted to project. In her presentation of the vast incongruity between the two identities that her one body can connote, she plays with invisibility in her enactment of the joke of race (and gender). This performed invisibility provokes not laughter, but silence, which Simone takes to be a sign of her successful "hypnosis."

Hypnosis for Simone can be understood in terms of getting her audience to see, hear, and feel in a certain way, a manner in which they are made aware of incongruities and absurdities and coaxed into a form of ethical seeing. Unlike the conventional definition of hypnosis, which suggests that the hypnotized turn into uncritical automatons lacking control of their own consciousness, Simone does intend to "put a spell" on her audience, but only as an antidote to the ways in which colonialist and sexist cultural narratives may have already brainwashed them. Simone does not want to force a point of view through manipulation. Rather she wants to create engaged political agents sensitive enough to see through obfuscating lenses to the actual common, albeit diverse, humanity which should lead people to struggle together.

In fact Simone's hypnosis can be understood in terms of a poetics of invisibility, and for this reason her disruptions are part of the act and contribute toward the overall comic effect of her performance. The poetics of invisibility, which depends on the structure of the joke and which effects a critical response from the audience, Simone stages with extreme contrasts. Everything from the contrasts of her speech, mixing black vernacular idiom with an ambiguously European accent and bourgeois colloquialisms, to the range of conflicting emotions through which she abruptly takes her audience, all contribute to this hypnotic effect.

Psychological studies of the cognitive process of irony, meiosis, and hyperbole claim that the rhetorical use of contrast inherent in all three comic figures of speech is more effective than literal speech at critique and persuasion. Psychologists Colston and O'Brien



Nina Simone curtsies for her audience at Casino Stage.



Nina Simone strikes a contrasting pose.

argue that speakers who employ comedic rhetoric “invoke a powerful mechanism to achieve many pragmatic goals.” The audience may experience and recognize a contrast between her expectations and the actual situation, but she may not be fully aware of the expectation that creates this contrast. They argue, “the speakers create a contrast with the encountered event by referring to some different event, and thus change the perception or judgment of the encountered event by the interpreter of the remark.” Moreover, “The speaker is somehow making the expected or desired state of affairs more salient when things have not turned out as expected” and as a result make the inherent contrast more apparent (Colston and O’Brien 1559-60). The pragmatic efficiency of comedy thus comes from the way in which comic contrast challenges a given reality and grants agency to the interpreter to arrive at the better knowledge on her own terms. Of course, in this way, the outcomes of comic figures of speech cannot be predicted, but the psychologists’ argument is that critique and persuasion are unleashed more efficiently and effectively in a comic rather than a literal mode.

The sequence of events after “Backlash Blues” provides a snapshot of Simone’s improvised contrasts during the Montreux performance. In response to her audience’s applause which morphs into a steady clapping beat Simone launches into “Be My Husband,” which she performs at the microphone without the piano. Just the clapping and the beat from the drummer accompany the flirtatious lyrics and the singer’s sultry dancing.³² About a minute into the song, Simone interrupts herself to talk to the audience, a common occurrence. She complains about how bootlegging has robbed her of her albums’ profits, a major source of consternation to the recently divorced songstress avoiding the IRS with her international travel. She continues to muse upon having seen the festival’s screening of a documentary on the life of recently deceased blues heroine Janice Joplin. Suddenly displaying her low opinion of the audience, she tells them, “I started to write a song about it, but I decided that you aren’t worthy.” In Simone’s opinion what killed the blues heroine was not the drugs, but that “she played to corpses.” This she tells them with a wicked smile, clicks her tongue to shame them, and winks, “You know what I mean?” She starts to giggle and then goes into a spell of mad laughter. She exclaims, “For true!” and returns to where she left off with her solo and dance. Strangely enough, her audience does not seem to mind the shaming and even applauds in response to Simone’s “you know what I mean” and

laughs with her, acknowledging the importance of being a sensitive listener—indeed, they’ve been conjured.

The set is then marked by an abrupt transition from Simone’s extremely sultry grooving out on “Be My Husband.” After replacing the mic to the stand, with the passion now drained from her face she makes a B-line for the keyboard and starts her upbeat stride piano into to Billy Taylor’s “I Wish I Knew How It Feels to Be Free.” Not only does the audience experience the extreme contrast of mood from voluptuous and funky to playful and lighthearted, but they also experience, like in “Mississippi Goddam,” the incongruous juxtaposition between the lyrics of the song and the accompaniment. The original recording of “I Wish I Knew How” on Simone’s 1967 *Silk and Soul* album sounds true to Taylor’s instrumental original, which appeared as the theme song to BBC’s *The Film Programme* first aired in 1971. It features a prominent gospel feel mixed with a bit of R&B and pop, the funky horn section on the track granting it a dash of the trademark Motown Sound. The gospel or soul feel of the original recording suits the lyrics of the tune which express longings for freedom in a classic African American idiom:

I wish I knew how it would feel to be free
 I wish I could break all the chains holding me
 I wish I could say all the things that I should say
 Say ‘em loud, say ‘em clear for the whole round world to hear.

Simone’s choice to perform the tune at Montreux, with the ragtime feel of her stride piano and the drummer’s swing beat accompaniment, dramatically alters the original tune by augmenting the contrast between the feel of the accompaniment and the lyrics of the song. While the spirituality of the composition remains intact, this alteration moves the genre of the tune from the tragic to the comic register, evading a cathartic response in favor of a more critically engaged one. In this live performance, Simone’s vocal interpretation of and improvisation upon the lyrics redirects the subjective focus of the song on her and not some abstract speaker with whom it is more difficult to empathize. Toward the end of the second verse Simone takes on the voice of “Peaches,” her playing takes on a severe *agitato*, and looking the audience in the eye she sings, “I wish you would KNOW what it means to be ME! / Then you’d see, you’d agree / everybody should be free,” and adds the aside “cause if we ain’t we’re murderers.” Showing incredible vocal dynamic changes within and among verses, Simone sings the next verse in a soft falsetto as if rising “like a bird in the sky,” as the lyrics announce, to find that space of freedom. Incredibly, it seems that for a moment Simone discovers that freedom and exclaims, “the spirit’s movin now”—at this moment she has hypnotized herself. In this spiritual, emotional place—indeed this tragic place—where words break down, she hums an improvised melody in the falsetto range through her joyous countenance, singing the ineffable feeling of freedom. Simone seems to catch the spirit without warning and this highly personal moment becomes accessible to the audience.

This improvised expression of freedom is comparable to the attempts of free jazz of the 1950s and 1960s to escalate to new horizons while simultaneously returning to a more “primitive” spiritual place. With the free jazz movement being predominantly occupied by men—some of the notable innovators include Cecil Taylor, John Coltrane, Ornette Cole-

man, Charles Mingus, Archie Shepp, and Sun Ra—we see again how Simone’s musical and performative experimental improvisations toward freedom might earn her a place with the boys in the official black avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s. On the other hand, following the cues of Fred Moten, we might expand what we identify as avant-garde expression within black culture. One consequence of such an interpretation leads us to view how the unpredictable, eccentric, and uncontainable improvisational nature of Simone’s art can be understood as an “alternative” form of the avant-garde. Reveling in this moment of freedom, Simone enters back into a completely improvised verse of “I Wish I Knew How” singing in a conversational tone, “I got news for ya, I already know.” Simone takes the audience out of the tune with elated expressions of her own personal freedom. She ends the staggering spectacle of “I Wish I Knew” with an improvised coda, a dramatic classical flourish on the piano, an extended dominant chord which moves up and down the keyboard, accompanied by the new refrain, “I already know what it feels to be free!”³³

In Simone’s 1976 Montreux performance of “I Wish I Knew How” she engages the strategy of ironic reversal, transforming the original groove of Billy Taylor’s composition, and her own original recording of it, from a prominent gospel feel to the more playful groove of stride piano. Ironic reversal is both a basic element of humor and a common strategy within black music, and especially jazz. In this case, Simone participates in what Monson calls “intermusical” irony, or an irony which references prior moments in sound and music. “Quotations” in jazz often provoke laughter and amusement among listeners who pick up on the intermusical reference. Simone’s intermusical references are comic in nature. She participates in “intracultural” irony because the tune which she parodies is not one adopted cross-culturally, but intraculturally. Simone’s reference is even more intimate than “intracultural,” however, since not only does she parody Taylor’s version, but also her own recorded version. The studio produced LP *Silk & Soul* (1968) on the RCA Victor label, featuring Eric Gale on guitar, Bernard Purdie on drums, Clyde Taylor on bass, Ernest Hayes on organ, and a horn section, appears constricted by the standards of the commercial music industry, especially in comparison to this live version at Montreux. Simone’s self-parody of her *Silk & Soul* version of 1968 relates a commentary about recorded music versus live performance, the latter which the artist preferred. By poking fun, through parody, at her unalterable studio performance with an unpredictably live one, she jokes about the problems of trying to capture the dynamics of artistic performance, ossifying them into a commodifiable form, changing them from verb to noun. The repetition of the 1968 recording with a signal difference contained in this parody, a difference that critically mocks the popular music industry of which Simone is a major player, enacts a transformation of genre, which Monson describes as a hallmark of African American “creativity and ingenuity” (Monson, *Saying Something* 104).³⁴

In addition to ironic reversal, the change in groove enacts another layer of comedy in its evocation of absurd contrasts. Associated with the revelry and freedom of the Prohibition Era speakeasy, “stride” is a style of piano which evolved from ragtime and developed in New York City, and especially at Harlem “rent parties,” between 1910 and 1930. It was popularized by jazz pianists such as Fats Waller, James P. Johnson, and Willie “The Lion” Smith. One of the most distinctive qualities of stride piano is the left-hand pattern of the baseline which jumps from the bass note on the first and third notes up a tenth, or even greater interval, to the chord on the second and fourth. The name “stride” comes from

the way in which the left hand strides up and down the keyboard, while the right hand produces virtuosic contrapuntal melodies together creating “spontaneous and inventive cross-rhythms, poly metres and surprising harmonic effects” (Robinson). The upbeat feelings produced by Simone’s stride piano contrast greatly with the tragic meaning embedded in the lyrics, a longing for freedom and a better world. The doubled contrasts—of genre, style, mood, and mode of performance—found in this live version invoke the absurdity of race and other constructs that obstruct this “freedom” in a way that makes mere enjoyment of the tune difficult. In this case, the revision of “I Wish I Knew How” allows for a form of comic improvisation that better communicates the urgency of the original message. It also enlivens the instrumentality of the song so that what originally had a more tertiary function of accompaniment now participates in an antiphonal conversation with the lyrics. Unlike Western music, which does not understand itself to have semantic meaning, black music, and especially forms like gospel and jazz, always has a syntactical element. In this way, we can see how comedy can arise from the sound of music.

Simone experienced a sense of freedom first during her stay on the island of Barbados and then more intensely during her time living in Liberia. Appropriately, then, upon being called back for a second encore, Simone ends her concert with a nod to Africa. By confession physically tired and “half high” Simone asks the audience, “Hey! How many a ya been to Africa? Come on, come on. How many a ya stayed for more than five days? Did you like it? Did it blow your mind?” Calling a Senegalese conga player on stage, Simone and the two drummers proceed on command to “give them some rhythm of what it feels like to be in the bush.” After establishing the feel with her rhythmic vamping over two chords on the piano, a sound similar to that found on her composition “See Line Woman,” she leaves it to the drummers so she can show the audience the traditional dance moves she learned in Liberia.³⁵ Calling upon her audience to “move to Africa,” Simone makes it clear in her final gesture that her European, vastly white audience, as “peaceful” as Simone keeps saying they are, still must acknowledge their colonial history and their relationship to the Third World. As well, she wants them to fall in love with Africa in the way that she has and to become more free through cross-cultural experience. In this way, Simone’s cultural interventions claim an international, intercultural reach.

Simone’s Montreux appearance is strung through with the deeply and overtly personal, starting with the opening tune “Little Girl Blue” and moving later in the first encore to Janis Ian’s “Stars” and Morris Albert’s “Feelings.” As the line in “Stars” goes, Simone has a “soul [she’s] not afraid to bare.” The laying bare of her “soul” for the audience to see throughout this concert provides less an entertaining spectacle than an example of the diversity of human personality. By playing with the discontinuity between the realm of appearances and reality, Simone makes it impossible for others to reduce her to an archetype. How can she be “the angry black woman” when she also sings the vulnerability of a little girl? How can she be the entreating servant when she stands tall as a queen to be revered? How can she be a gun-toting black nationalist when she also preaches love? And is “Sister Sadie” capable of the deep passion and longing Simone feels for Imojah? The weaving of the political with the deeply personal makes possible an ethical recognition, a face to face encounter with the other, a requisite component of buggie jiving as a political strategy. The project for Nina, then, is not a need to be understood, to be fully known in the name of some narcissistic hunger for fame. Rather it is a project to not be misunderstood.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am indebted to the many people who have provided sage commentary on this essay. I am especially thankful for conversations with the Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship of Scholars in the Humanities at Stanford University, particularly Lanier Anderson, J. P. Daughton, Karen Zumhagen-Yekple, Kate Elswit, Shana Goldin-Perschbacher, and Bradley Naranch. I would also like to especially thank Mark Jerng, Tsitsi Jaji, Natalie Léger, Hortense Spillers, Nicole Waligora-Davis, Satya Mohanty, and Michele Elam.

NOTES

1. Cf. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book":

Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. "Peaches" and "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire" and "Earth Mother," "Aunty," "Granny," God's "Holy Fool," a "Miss Ebony First," or "Black Woman at the Podium": I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented. (203)

Here, I signify upon the opening paragraphs of "Mama's Baby" in addition to her sentiments expressed in the epigraph from "Interstices" above in order to foreground the excessive attenuated meanings that accrue to the spectacle of the black woman in the public spotlight and the problem of how to "speak a truer word concerning [oneself]" despite the heavy layers of coding, a problem which nourishes Nina Simone's artistry; I am also drawing upon Ralph Ellison's musings on "the mask" and his concept of invisibility, that taking on the mask of invisibility and putting it to work in a performative context is a trickster strategy of liberation; the last epigraph represents the sentiments of the mourning mother whom Invisible Man encounters during his reefer-induced "trip" into the "the lower frequencies" of Louis Armstrong's music, a surreal and haunting articulation of the concept of "tragicomedy" that is central to invisibility and to Simone's theater.

2. Cf. Harry Elam, Jr., "The Black Performer"; Elam's term "productive ambivalence," or the performative shape-shifting akin to Ellison's (via Yeats's) ideas on "masking," provides another useful conceptual framework for thinking about the aesthetics and politics of Simone's "performance art" (as I am calling it). Ellison, *Invisible Man* 8-13.
3. Nina Simone received honorary doctorates in music and the humanities from the University of Massachusetts and Malcolm X College at a tribute to the artist at the Washington, DC Human Kindness Day Celebration in 1974.
4. Freud's principle of economy states that humor is driven by aggression condensed into the verbal shorthand entailed in joking. He explains, "tendentious jokes are especially favoured in order to make aggressiveness or criticism possible against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority. The joke then represents a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure" (125).
5. Much of my thinking on coming to a better view of the world is linked to the concept of "epistemic privilege" theorized by Satya Mohanty, Paula Moya, Linda Alcoff, Michael Hames-Garcia, and others in *Reclaiming Identity*; they argue that better knowledge is attainable via social locations, or identities, that may provide a more accurate view of the world. For example, minorities who experience oppression might have better understanding of concepts such as "justice," and "freedom" due to the experiences their identities provide. This "post-positivist realist" take on epistemology allows for the possibility of accurate knowing and common understanding. The "face-to-face" encounter embedded in Simone's performances I link to Levinas's theorizations of the ethical encounter, and also to the way it had been theorized before Levinas, with references to 1 Corinthians 13 by W. E. B. Du Bois (especially in the penultimate chapter of *Darkwater*) and Ellison in his concept of invisibility.
6. Her song "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood" which titles this article is one of Simone's personal anthems. She remained bitter over the fact that the cover recorded by the British band The Animals went on to become a billboard hit.
7. Cf. Banes 27-29.
8. In this essay I draw frequently from Simone's autobiography. While this text is an occasionally embellished, incomplete, or even inaccurate account of Simone's life story, I draw upon it to give

a sense of Simone's subjective response to the historical and cultural details I provide here. Since I am interested in how Simone uses her art to negotiate the ways in which her audiences and a general public understand her, it is also valuable to consider how she represents herself through her autobiography. In the idiom of the classic blues tradition, Simone tells her story—in print and on stage—in order to “make the telling useful.” Cf. Baker, *The Blues Aesthetic* 64. Baker discusses how Zora Neale Hurston understands embellishment in her autobiography *Dustracks on a Road*.

9. For a detailed history of the evolving way in which music in the Western world has been categorized alternately as “bourgeois,” “folk,” and “pop,” see Frith 21-46. My own distinction between “art” and “pop” here is a loose one, translating mainly to the idea that “art” music/theater is not principally concerned with commercial logic in the way that “pop” is. However, it is not difficult to find examples of how many artists easily slip in and out of these categories.
10. See Mackey.
11. Cf. *Nina: A Historical Perspective* directed by Joe Gold.
12. Simone, *I Put a Spell on You*, 89.
13. Cf. Brooks, “‘All That You Can’t Leave Behind.’”
14. On “Mississippi Goddam” as a political anthem and signature protest song, see Ruth Feldstein; Kernodle; Brooks, “Nina Simone’s Triple Play”; and Berman. Out of those who have published on Simone, Daphne Brooks is the only scholar to have focused closely on Simone’s use of irony in “Mississippi Goddam.” She thus begins the work of what I aim to stress more centrally in my extended analysis of Simone’s use of comic irony in her entire oeuvre.
15. Brooks argues that “the curse is the most powerful mode of distancing [alienation, in the Brechtian sense] that Simone generates,” particularly in regard to Simone’s disregard of the black female politics of respectability and her breaking from the tradition of the faith-based protest music that had provided the soundtrack to civil rights desegregation and enfranchisement struggles (“Triple Play” 188-89). While I find this argument about the blasphemous force of “Goddam” to be convincing, compelling, and generally true of the word’s effect in “Mississippi Goddam,” in regard to the jocular way Simone utters it to her audience in the beginning of the *In Concert* recording, I interpret its usage as cavalier and incongruent with the gravitas of what “Mississippi” connotes.
16. Cf. Colston, “‘I’ve Never Seen Anything Like It’” 43-58.
17. In *Poetics* Aristotle wrote of peripeteia, the unexpected “reversal” of situation in a dramatic plot, and of anagnorisis, or “recognition,” which peripeteia often effects. “Recognition,” Aristotle wrote,

as the name itself signifies, is a change from ignorance to knowledge resulting in either friendship or enmity towards those who are marked for good fortune or misfortune; and the finest recognition is the one which occurs at the same time as the reversal, like the one in *Oedipus [Rex]* . . . Now since this recognition occurs between men, in some cases only one of them is recognized by the other, and this occurs whenever the identity of the latter is already known; in other cases each must recognize the other, e.g. Iphigenia was recognized by Orestes from the letter that was sent, but a second recognition, in which Orestes is made known to Iphigenia, was needed. (20-22)

This peripeteia, or flipping the script if you will, followed by anagnorisis, is the revelatory moment of the punch line in comedy. It is precisely what occurs in the anecdote from Ellison’s essay of 1958 “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke” in which he writes: “Said a very dark Southern friend of mine in laughing reply to a white businessman who complained of his recalcitrance in a bargaining situation, ‘I know, you thought I was colored, didn’t you.’” Here, Ellison’s friend’s joke slips off what Ellison refers to elsewhere as “the yokelike anti-Negro stereotypes” through the “shock of recognition” which the joke of race accomplishes. This comic anagnorisis is a public “pants-ing,” a kind of undressing, which finds its humor in revelation of the naked truth.

18. Simone and Cleary, *I Put A Spell on You*, 93.
19. Cf. *Nina Simone Live in ‘65 & ‘68*.
20. This is a major current of Carpio’s path-breaking book on black humor. I’m indebted to Natalie Léger for helping me to compare African American versions of Afro-diasporic religion with Vodun of Haiti.
21. Cf. Ellison, “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke.”
22. Cf. Harper.
23. Cf. Berman, “Sounds Familiar” and Brooks, “Nina Simone’s Triple Play.” This song is also translated as “Moon of Alabama” and “Moon over Alabama.”

24. In the introduction to the 1980 edition of *Invisible Man*, Ellison explains that his spokesmen for invisibility "had been forged in the underground of American experience and yet managed to emerge less angry than ironic. That [they] would be a blues-toned laughter-at-wounds who included [themselves] in [their] indictment of the human condition" (xviii).
25. Daphne Brooks, "Nina Simone's Triple Play"; *Bodies in Dissent*, 3-6.
26. In his 1845 narrative Douglass writes,

The slaves selected to go to the Great House Farm, for the monthly allowance for themselves and their fellow-slaves, were particularly enthusiastic. While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wildsongs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out—if not in the word, in the sound;—and as frequently in the one as in the other. (349)

27. The National Black Feminist Organization and Black Women Organized for Action were founded in 1973, and the Combahee River Collective was founded in Boston in 1974.
28. Cf. Berger, esp. Part III, "American Post-Apocalypses" 133-216.
29. In fact, both of these plans changed with the prodding and convincing of loyal fans and admiring producers.
30. From the beginning, the very presence of a black body as a spectacle produced for the white gazer an occasion for laughter. On the slave plantation, the sight of the happy-go-lucky grinning and laughing slave became the source of endless enjoyment for the planter class, an enjoyment which metamorphosed into the blackface minstrel show, America's first form of popular entertainment, in the 1830s and through the Civil War. With the help of the obfuscating lenses of photography and film, the ontological hilarity of the "funny Negro," the "darky entertainer," or the "Sambo" became indelibly marked in the American popular consciousness.
31. Drawing on the Derridean notion of the parergon, the various connotations of the German word *gestalt*, and the specific term Heidegger draws from it, *Ge-stell*, Maurice Wallace discusses the role of photographic and representational "enframement" in the "chronic foreclosure of realist representation in black male visual contexts" (28). The way in which enframement "fixes" its subject compares to the invisibility of hypervisible blackness discussed by Ellison.
32. The drummer who accompanies Simone on this album is uncredited.
33. My readings of the music in this section are indebted to conversations I had with Tsitsi Jaji about this performance.
34. Monson usefully puts Henry Louis Gates's concept of "signifyin'" together with Linda Hutcheon's explanation of postmodern parody, both of which rely on repetition with a difference to create irony, an irony which has the potential to be critical in nature.
35. This is what she tells her audience. However, these dance "moves" appear to be the same as those Simone spontaneously performed at a number of her live shows, even before she lived in Liberia.

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