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**Black women performers of women-identified music:  
“They cut off my voice; I grew two voices”**

Eileen M. Hayes

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

1999

Program Authorized to Offer Degree: Music

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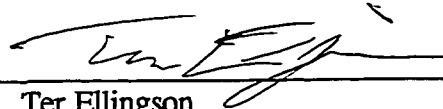
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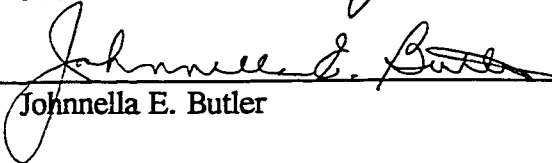
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Abstract

**Black Women Performers of Women-Identified Music**

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Black women have played a critical role in women-identified music (“wim”), which is, demographically speaking, an intense but small world. The music industry term, “woman-identified music” (or “women’s music”), refers to a performance, recording, and distribution network spawned by U.S. lesbian-feminist musician/activists in the early to mid-1970s. The genre, comprised of a myriad of musical styles, is generally defined as music that is “for, by and about women.” Performances take place at women’s music festivals—venues open to women only.

This study examines the overlapping subjectivities of black performers and wim listeners/audience members as they collectively and individually negotiate their identities in a predominantly white, lesbian-feminist social field. Traditional ethnomusicological concerns are complemented by some of the more suggestive features of cultural studies.

Most significant is an examination of blackness from the perspectives of wim musicians.

Black women musicians critique notions that blackness is more authentically correlated with male, heterosexual identities than with black lesbian identities. At the core of this study is that the identities of the performers matter to audience members, black and white—often in contrasting ways. One musician’s sense of parody or irony may be lost

on an audience member who brings a contrasting framework of interpretation to the performance. Sometimes these interpretations collide.

Musicians address notions that instruments, including the voice, are markers of sexual and/or racial identity. White consumers particularly reference certain criteria in appraising the performances of black musicians including the body, (e.g., skin color, size, vocal timbre) and musical style. Amongst wim fans, the circulation of myths about certain vaudeville blues singers of the 1920s influences their reception of performances by black musicians.

While women-identified music consumers affirm the significance of black women musicians to this sphere, discussions with audience members reveal racialized definitions of women's music that often exclude the music of black artists. This study examines a complex of contradictions that emerge as consumers and performers consider the dimensions of race, gender, sexuality and musical style in the process of coalescing around a musical genre.

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In memory of my father,  
William A. Hayes (1928-1993),  
for making this journey possible.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*We've made the world safe for androgyny in the charts, but a few women musicians in the forefront is not what we wanted.*

Deidre McCalla, black performer, women-identified music<sup>1</sup>

*Women of color who have been fortunate enough to attend women's music festivals... are certainly aware that women's music is not just white girls with guitars.*  
letter to the editor, *HOTWIRE: Journal of Women's Music and Culture*<sup>2</sup>

*"gender is the modality in which race is lived"*

Paul Gilroy<sup>3</sup>

It is summer 1997. The inaugural Lilith Fair is launched as a seven-week music festival billed as a celebration of women in music.<sup>4</sup> The organizing efforts of singer/songwriter Sarah McLachlan, Lilith's founder, receive critical acclaim from the mainstream press, music and entertainment magazines such as *Billboard*, *Entertainment Weekly* and *Rolling Stone*. Conceived as a traveling, all-women tour, the Lilith Fair debuts at a natural amphitheater in George, Washington.<sup>5</sup>

The tour does not escape some of the criticism levied at its "older sister" festivals held in fixed locations throughout the U.S., e.g., the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. Despite appearances by black artists Tracy Chapman and Cassandra Wilson, Lilith '97, like its older sister counterparts, is criticized for its lack of diversity. *Ms. Magazine* upbraids McLachlan for her reluctance to use the word "feminist" in describing the festival.<sup>6</sup> McLachlan, reasserting her feminist identity, replies that if she took every opportunity to "spout feminism," men as attendees would be repelled from the tour.<sup>7</sup>

Some observers make gratuitous references to festivals such as the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival founded in 1973. The Michigan festival is held annually and is regarded by many feminist activists as alternative culture's precursor to the mainstream women's pop music tour. More recently, many regard women's music festivals, with their genesis in lesbian-separatism and open exclusively to women, as anachronistic. Many long-time festival attendees admit "things have changed" for women in the entertainment industry. Initially, women's music festival proponents described themselves as "women-identified."<sup>8</sup> My interest in this study is the role of black women in women-identified music—the social and cultural space carved out for women of diverse sexual identities—long before the much heralded Lilith tours began.

This is an ethnomusicological study of black musicians' participation in the feminist cultural (music-centered) network referred to as "women's music" or "women-identified" music (wim). "Women's music" is a marketing term used by the popular music industry. Musicians and consumers use this term interchangeably with the term "women-identified music." This study uses "women-identified music" in describing this cultural network. Most of the women interviewed describe themselves as feminists; many have long histories of political activism advocating for blacks, women, and other minorities. I describe the artists I interviewed by the cumbersome term, "black performers of women-identified music." In so doing, I do not imply the widespread notion that women are

performers rather than musicians. The alternative term “black musicians of women-identified music” seemed redundant.

Women-identified music (“wim”), founded in the white lesbian community, emerged in the early 1970s as part of the cultural arm of radical feminism. Though it is tempting to think of wim as a musical genre parallel to calypso, flamenco, or tarab, it is more appropriately understood as a network of musical activity. Proponents defined wim as “music by women, for women and about women.” The wim recording and distribution industry, controlled financially by women, was a focal point. “Culturally a white, middle-class coalition” (Reagon 1993:33), wim includes the participation of many performers and consumers, of all sexual orientations. In spite of their marginal numbers, black women are highly visible and play a vital role. However, with few exceptions, their participation is elided in scholarship about black, women-identified or feminist music. Widespread access to this music is limited. Wim receives little airplay; when it is broadcast it is generally by alternative radio programs devoted to feminist issues and music.<sup>9</sup> Generally, the music of black performers included in this study is not played on urban music or black radio programs.

My aim in this work is to illuminate how the experiences of black audience members and musicians in wim reflect the complex interactions of gender, sexuality, race, and conceptualizations of the voice. This study is neither a compilation of oral herstories by black musicians and audience members, nor a chronicle of women’s music festivals as critical sites of music performance.<sup>10</sup> Neither is it a history of

black performers' experiences in the cluster of independent record companies making up the women's music recording industry. I have not tried to write a full history of black women's participation in this sphere, nor have I attempted a comprehensive study of the more prolific black artists. Despite the influence of prominent black performers associated with wim, (e.g., Sweet Honey in the Rock, Tracy Chapman), this study focuses on lesser known performers and music festival attendees.<sup>11</sup> The ethnographic method that I used in this study was at times similar to that of an oral historian—some consultants with whom I worked referred to me as a journalist. Overall, this study is organized as a series of essays, inspired by the musicians I interviewed, about the politics of their identities within wim. I asked black musicians to address a range of issues, many of them topics of long-time debate in the wim community. The theme of this study is that the identities of musicians in wim spheres *matter* to consumers and performers. My study extends the work of other scholars (Bradby 1993; Lont 1992) in that I examine ways that ideas about race, gender and sexuality are recruited by consumers and performers in affirming or contesting the parameters of the genre.

In practice, the definition of wim is provisional, relational and ambiguous. Encompassing a myriad of musical styles (e.g., blues, country, gospel, folksong revival, spirituals, Afro-Celtic) this study contrasts with monographs in ethnomusicology that examine a relatively stylistically homogeneous genre such as juju (Waterman 1990) or zouk (Guilbault 1993).<sup>12</sup> A set of symbolically significant features helps in describing wim. Interestingly, few of these features have to do

with the sound of the music (e.g., harmony, rhythmic patterns). Rather, extra-musical factors lend coherence to the myriad styles of wim, e.g., feminism's concern with women's agency, the significance of women loving women, and the primacy of females in women's lives.<sup>13</sup> Performers and consumers, when pressed, find it difficult to describe the genre in purely musical terms even though consumers hold tacit assumptions about the genre from a music and performance perspective (e.g., choice of instrument, stage dress, voice quality.)

White musician Sue Fink is credited with the statement, later paraphrased, that "there is no women's music - only women's music audiences."<sup>14</sup> Fink's dictum foreshadows my suggestion that overlapping discourses about racial and gender authenticity pervade the self-conscious social field of wim. As I will illustrate in later chapters, different questions and issues about black performers emerge as important to members of contrasting audience groups. For many of the white women I interviewed, the sexual identity of performers emerged as a critical issue. Many black women audience members I interviewed voiced their concern with the ways black musicians exhibit blackness—through musical style or attitude. Consumer/performer appraisals about authenticity in terms of race and ethnicity frequently contrast sharply or collide with preconceptions musicians and audience members alike bring in terms of gender and sexuality, to interpretive contexts.

Authenticity has an interesting history in the social sciences. This study focuses in part, on a problem best described as the slippage between race as embodied in people or in people's bodies and race as embodied in culture (as in the

term “black music”).<sup>15</sup> This issue has been articulated by a long line of scholars from Boas (1928), Herskovits (1945) and Du Bois (1903), to the current generation of cultural theorists including Gilroy and Hall. In delineating these issues, I do not posit an authentic prototype of wim in terms of gender or race. Rather, this study explores “new spaces of contestation” (Hall 1997:124) that open when the focus is musical style and black musicians’ individual and collective identities.

This study contributes to the field of popular music studies with its secondary emphasis on audience research.<sup>16</sup> As such, my research challenges long-held disciplinary assumptions about direct correspondences between individual and collective identities, musical style and genre, though it is not the first to do so (Lange 1997; Erlmann 1996). In earlier trends in ethnomusicological writing it was often assumed that a particular social group has “culture A” and another social group has “culture B.” Working on a network such as this makes it clear that people involved in a single social scene may bring radically different presumptions and interpretive schemas to the group experience. Thus, this study reminds us to be careful about presuming a homology or a direct mapping of culture onto a particular social group.

Periodically I illuminate divergent readings by black and white audience members of performances by black musicians. My experiences with white consumers in this sphere inspires me to discuss some effects of code misreadings and appropriations and, as alluded to in the ethnographic sketch that follows, the

tenacity of the racialized imagination in reception. At the same time, I examine ways black musicians both contest representations of black female sexuality in popular culture and/or incorporate aspects of more dominant discourses into their acts. This suggestion anticipates a discussion I carry out in chapter four.

Throughout this study, I have considered the reception of performances by black women in the wim community where the audiences are predominantly white. Occasionally, performances have reminded me of hooks' observation about how often the "desire to reach a specific audience shapes the nature of standpoint and perspective" (1995:219). Oftentimes, I have thought about hooks' observation that "at times the performance work of individuals ... appears to be specifically designed to disrupt mainstream white sensibilities" (hooks 1995:219). Parallel issues arise as I contemplate the readership of this study.

Many of the performances discussed illustrate the anthropological commonplace about tradition as a site of or reaction to fluidity and change. This study retains its emphasis on local knowledge and on local music, topics of frequent discussion in ethnomusicology in the early 1990s (Guilbault 1993; Slobin 1992). Throughout, I comment on how the working out of identity politics in this realm—a small world in demographic terms—can shed light on larger patterns of North American social life. To illuminate themes addressed in this study, I offer a brief ethnographic sketch of my "road trip" to a women's music festival.

On the road to a women's music festival

And they're throwing all these festivals and this music and these concerts happen... But as soon as some other folk check the definition of "women" that's in the dictionary...they decide that they can come because they are women, but when they do, they don't see or hear nothing that is like them. Then they charge, "This ain't no women's thing!" Then if you try to address that and bring them in, they start to play music that ain't even women's music!

- Bernice Johnson Reagon, 1983, West Coast Women's Music and Comedy Festival<sup>17</sup>

In August 1995 my friend Cindy Spillane and I drove from Maryland to the 20th Anniversary of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. I was to conduct research for my dissertation on black women's participation in women-identified music. In previous years I had attended the festival alone; now I was glad to have Spillane's company. Toward evening we stopped at a truck stop diner in Hart, Michigan, the nearest town to the festival site in Walhalla, a plat of 650 acres of privately owned land in the woods of northern Michigan. We were in a rural area and admittedly had been a bit spooked by a small flurry of anti-lesbian sentiment of passersby along the road. This was the last leg of the trip and we had exhausted our supply of the best and worst scenarios that might befall us at the festival. We hoped our Michigan job assignments would not be too taxing and that Spillane's tent, which she was borrowing from a friend, would not flood.

Spillane and I had met as members of the D.C. Area Feminist Chorus. Both of us dropped out eventually; I grew weary of being the only black participant in a white field, the "flygirl in the buttermilk."<sup>18</sup> Spillane felt strongly that the chorus' engagement with feminist praxis and music had, in her words, "petrified at about

1975.” Additionally, we shared experience as feminist activists in the Washington, D.C. area. Spillane, a white lesbian, frequently led workshops in the women’s community on anti-racism; she was also a fat women’s activist. My feminist organizing had been predominantly with other black women and women of color in the area of reproductive rights.

A source of our amusement during the road trip had been speculating about how festigoers might assume we were girlfriends in the romantic rather than platonic sense.<sup>19</sup> There would be many couples at this festival because for many lesbian and bisexual women this particular festival was a favorite place to vacation. We had heard through the grapevine that over 9,000 women (predominantly white lesbians) were expected for this outdoor, 5-7 day event, billed as the largest women’s music festival in the world.

### *Racing the imagination*

I related to Spillane how, at my first women’s music festival, a white participant warned me that a “cute little gal such as yourself” should be careful “what with all the black studs around.” I am not sure this person attended the event for the music—apparently a number of women do not. This interaction, however, foreshadowed a complex web of issues that my study would address including the enactment of racialized sexual politics. As an actor in this mini drama, I was struck by the depth of the racialized imagination packaged in a well meaning wrap. I do not mean to conjure the white festival participant as a working-class

“fall guy” for her silenced middle-class counterparts. I encountered similar sentiments when I spoke with other white festival attendees. Admittedly however, I found the comment disturbing. Throughout my research I noted the presuppositions music festival attendees bring to discussions about black performers of wim. Consumer perceptions of performers are informed by notions about the body (skin color, size, vocal quality) and musical style. Women consider both in the process of attributing sexual identities to black musicians and festival attendees.

*Gender, play, and transgression*

We were going to have a long ride. To pass the time in the car, Spillane and I constructed butch and femme personas for ourselves.<sup>20</sup> Thwarting expectations about what some in women-identified circles consider markers of butch and femme identities, Spillane and I adopted the aliases of Bunnie and Lambert respectively. Spillane performed “Bunnie” as overtly femme; I enacted “Lambert” as decisively butch.<sup>21</sup> We took delight in these personas and extended their use privately throughout the festival for our own amusement.

We listened to the radio and to cds we had brought along. Since we knew that Michigan, like some other women’s music festivals, strongly encouraged women not to play men’s voices over sound systems, we wanted to get in all the Mick Jagger, Elton John, Michael Jackson, The Artist, and Luther Vandross we could. We also listened to Tracy Chapman and k.d. lang during our trip.<sup>22</sup>

Spillane looked forward to her first women's music festival; I had attended several others including the Michigan festival. Naturally, Spillane wanted to be prepared so before the trip she talked with several of her friends about what she could expect. I mentioned that part of the pleasure participants derive from a large festival such as Michigan, is that attendees have opportunities to be both actors and audience members in the larger social drama that is the festival.<sup>23</sup> In the festival arena, where lesbians predominate, participants enact numerous social performances that contest, combine, and turn identity categories—particularly those of gender and sexuality—on their head. These acts take place on stage but even more so off stage, as festigoers, virgin (first-time attendees) and otherwise, conduct everyday life at the festival. I looked forward to highlighting in my study what was happening at ground level in the lives of black women performers and festival attendees.

Spillane then connected what she had learned from her friends to our workshift assignments at the festival. She knew that festival participants were required to complete two 4-hour shifts as part of their Michigan stay. Various posts were available but at least one kitchen stint was strongly encouraged. The kitchen, if one could call it that, was a wide expanse of outdoor grounds, divided into areas for food preparation, cooking, serving, and clean up. Food preparation and serving occurred under large tarps.

At the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, the predominantly volunteer kitchen staff serves meals for 5,000 or more. By kitchen staff, I refer not to the

small coterie of individuals who “woman”<sup>24</sup> the large kettles of food (paid professionals on staff), but rather, to the supervisory personnel who provide instruction during the kitchen orientation sessions (i.e., proper cutting of broccoli, efficient corn-husking, pan scrubbing procedures). Competence in the kitchen, traditionally the domain of women, is highly regarded—especially by festi-virgins - many of whom are participants in and/or spectators to outdoor mass meal production for the first time. One hot Michigan summer, the orientation team of which I was a member, received corn-husking instruction from a tall, lithe, “butch”-like level-headed blonde. She had an attractive and appealing, yet distant and unattainable look, similar to that of the lesbian-appropriated heroine of the television adventure series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (Lucy Lawless as Xena, Renee O’Conner as her sidekick, Gabrielle. Lawless persistently issues denials of lesbian identity when interviewed). Uncompensated physical labor of my African American ancestors notwithstanding, I remember thinking I could husk corn for the rest of my life.

### *Inside/outside*

Spillane planned to do one shift in the kitchen; one that could employ her skills and experience as an anti-racism trainer and activist; and one security shift. Security detail fulfilled various functions; some pragmatic such as parking, traffic flow management, and tending to emergencies; and others that were more symbolic. Overall, I found that the enactment of the preoccupation with security at

the festival was a powerful reminder of how precarious the safety of lesbian/bisexual women is in the outside world. I imagined that security team personnel participated in regulating the flow of gendered bodies onto the festival grounds, referred to by participants as “the land.”<sup>25</sup> Here I reference the festival’s policy of admitting “women born womyn” only, the effect of which, festival attendees explained, meant that not only were men (and boys over age 11<sup>26</sup>) barred from the festival, but those who identified as transgenderists, male to female as well. Earlier in the spring, while attending the National Women’s Music Festival in Bloomington, Indiana, a black festival attendee shared with me her plan to boycott Michigan ‘95 precisely over this issue. This is but one example of the micropolitics of identity that gets worked out at women’s music festivals.<sup>27</sup>

Following our exchange about the Michigan admittance policy, Spillane asked me whether from the perspective of women of color a similar inclusionary/exclusionary phenomenon takes place around race issues at women’s music festivals. In fact, many women had shared such stories with me and I immediately thought of the Women of Color Tent (WOC) at Michigan. Founded by Amoja Three Rivers, the WOC was one of the large networking tents sponsored by the festival.<sup>28</sup> For many years, Three Rivers, Blanche Jackson and others advocated for a greater voice for black/African American, Latina, Asian-American and Native American women at the music event. Participants describe being drawn to the tent because of the opportunities it provides to meet with other women of color. Moreover, it provides women of color with physical and discursive space separate

from the madding crowds of white women.<sup>29</sup> According to the black women I interviewed, although festivals are generally thought to be lesbian-friendly places of recreation, women of color often experience what one black woman described as “white overload.” Black women, therefore, may seek refuge from whites for a while. “After all,” one festigoer related, “we make up less than two percent of the festival population.” One wonders if the white overload that women of color experience at women’s music festivals is any different from the kind of overload they experience on their job sites, or in their neighborhoods and homes. I did not ask anyone about this.

After the festival, I told Spillane that what emerged in almost every conversation I had with black women (ostensibly about wim), were stories of negotiating racism at women’s music festivals. These narratives provide a glimpse into an area neglected in the scholarship about women-identified music, cultural feminism and lesbian politics. Black musician Sandra Washington once remarked to me: “It didn’t take me long to realize that my naive expectations about the women’s community being nirvana were wrong. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen overt racism in the women’s music scene...although I have seen a lot of covert racism.”<sup>30</sup>

Black women from diverse backgrounds attend women’s music festivals. As numerous writers have discussed, group members experience intra-group tensions as well as inter-group difficulties. I described to Spillane that black women at Michigan ‘91 discussed incidents in which the politics of skin color were played out in the women of color tent as the ethnic/political allegiance of “light-

skinned” women was questioned by women of “darker” hues. I told Spillane how I had observed an evidently white mother standing outside the open-sided tent, providing visual supervision for her mixed (race) heritage daughter participating in a drumming workshop for women of color.<sup>31</sup>

### *Appropriating Africa*

After the festival, I remembered an incident I had observed involving music, space, white privilege and appropriation. At Michigan '95, while sitting near the area reserved for stacks and stacks of watermelons, I observed a trio of black participants begin to play a shekere, cow bell and calabash—instruments often considered to be African—in interlocking patterns.<sup>32</sup> Clearly the black attendees were enjoying the interaction. Soon afterwards, two white women playing “African” instruments joined them and before long, many more white women joined the informal jam session. Some time passed and eventually, the three black women left the group. Later in the Women of Color tent, I overheard one of them talking about how the white women always take over. Martina Jackson, a black firefighter from Virginia, voiced a version of this sentiment in expressing her regret about missing a drumming workshop with Ubaka Hill, ostensibly she suggested, because of its enormous popularity with white, festival participants. Her question, “How come the white women get Ubaka and we don't?,” remained in my consciousness throughout the festival. Later I learned that such a sense of exclusion prompted festigoers to request a drumming workshop for “women of color only.”

*White looks*

Little did Spillane and I know that she would have an opportunity to employ her experience as an anti-racism trainer at the Michigan festival. She told me later that, over the years, many white women have yearned for their own space at the festival, similar to that occupied by the Women of Color tent. “But the whole festival is white!” I said. Though the moniker recalls a popular suburban residential design, the “white women’s patio” was a programmed event at the festival. The patio itself consisted of several chairs in a designated area of grass/dirt several hundred feet from the Women of Color tent. Summer ‘95 the white women’s patio sponsored anti-racism workshops which worked with women on feelings of entitlement that inspired them ironically, given the ratio of whites to non-whites at the festival, to yearn for a comparable white space.<sup>33</sup> The white women’s patio personnel also worked as patrollers, encouraging traffic flow around the women of color tent, as visual surveillance by white curiosity seekers is frequently reported by women of color. Having experienced this type of visual surveillance at the festival as well as in public venues off-land, I remarked to Spillane that things were “better this year in part, because of the patio’s efforts.”<sup>34</sup> We laughed over the patio’s appellation and were smug in our recognition that patio participants would be credited for their efforts in diverting the hard and steady gazes of white festival attendees from the women of color tent.

*Black and lavender*

About halfway into our trip, Spillane, who was driving, glanced in my direction. “How is our flag coming?,” she asked. Before the trip I had described how women personalize their tents, recreational vehicles, and grounds in the immediate vicinity of their camp. I mentioned that festigoers tack clotheslines in the woods so that they might hang beautiful/outrageous quilts, banners, posters, many of which pay homage to women’s history, lesbian/bisexual/transgender identities and other politics. I had heard that the Michigan Festival was giving an award for the best home exterior design. I thought we should compete. Spillane wondered what we could do since neither of us had domestic talent. I suggested we take a flag and post it outside the tent. Spillane said, “You mean a rainbow flag?”<sup>35</sup> I shrugged. “Child, we need something black and lesbian.” “Where will you get that [type of flag]?” Spillane asked. Suddenly she reversed herself and exclaimed, “You’re a het (heterosexual); you can sew!” Our hand-sewn nylon flag, the design of which was an inverted black triangle against a background of deep lavender became an object of admiration in our campsite neighborhood. Spillane said one needed a “course in semiotics” to understand the flag.

She had a point; by semiotics my companion referred to a philosophical study of signs and symbols as they function in language and in everyday life. According to some black women I had met at previous music festivals, a triangle that was half-black, indicating race and half lavender, indicating lesbian identity was symbolic of their identities as black lesbians.<sup>36</sup>

*Sister (Mammy) Act*

Unlike Spillane, I did not yearn to work in the “kitchen” no matter how “cute” the “girls” were. I especially did not want to volunteer in the dining area apportioning food to “a bunch of white women.” (Is it reasonable to characterize 9,000 women as “a bunch?”) The possibility made me think not only of the numbers of black women who both historically and currently earn their living in the food service industry but also of the career trajectories of two superb black film actresses of the 1930s, Hattie McDaniel and Butterfly McQueen.<sup>37</sup> Both were cast in David Selznick’s *Gone with the Wind* as servants in the O’Hara household. I was not sure I could carry off my role as well as either of those brilliant performers. First was McDaniel who successfully parlayed a portrayal of an insubordinate mammy into a lucrative career. Less recognized today was McQueen who, closer to my body type perhaps, left black audiences laughing and shaking their heads at her incisive portrayals of black house servants. The opportunity to staff one of the long conjoined tables in the dining area struck me as a little too historical. And to think I paid to get in to the festival! If I could pull off the kitchen stint with style and the right combination of performative moves, that would be one thing. There was however, always the chance that my act would pass unnoticed and that my role-playing would appear naturalized. From talking with numerous black women at women’s music festivals, I knew that over the years many had brought a similar memory of place and race to the kitchen workshift experience. “You don’t look

anything like Butterfly McQueen, Lambert,” Spillane said. “It’s not about McQueen,” I retorted. “Oh,” Spillane replied. “I thought it was.”

### *Language matters*

Speaking of paying to get in, a working-class black festigoer who Spillane and I met at the festival put it, “Michigan is expensive. Every year you spend a couple hundred bucks on the ticket ... then about \$800 to get here and be comfortable.” Later, another black festigoer, a naval officer from Virginia, asked me if I were a “porcelain girl.” Could this have been an obtuse comment on my enactment of class identity or a reference to my physical stature? She continued. “I just mean,” she said, “Do you like to camp? You either like to camp or you don’t. You either are the type who brings your TV and porcelain dishes to Michigan or you rough it like the rest of us.” My immediate response to the officer’s comment was an urge to find the porta-Jane (known in general parlance as a porta-john). Such attention to language reflects a legacy of the early 1970s lesbian-feminist movement, when language was used as a tool to raise consciousness.<sup>38</sup> For example, for feminist and lesbian participants in the wim network, the respelling of “women” as “womyn” or “wimmin” (omitting the root “man”) becomes a significant marker of sexuality as well as a marker of gender. According to women I spoke with, for “20 somethings” and younger, girl respelled as “grrl” or “grrlz” signals the arrival of a new generation in feminist politics and music.

*What's home got to do with it?*

Over fifteen years ago Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon addressed a workshop audience at the West Coast Women's Music Festival.<sup>39</sup> She observed a tendency of festival attendees to bring the accouterments of home to the festival site.<sup>40</sup> She wanted to dissuade the crowd of its preoccupation with comfort—not of the material kind referenced by the naval officer—but of the salient differences between home and women's music festivals, the latter of which she characterized as sites of coalition for women of various constituencies. Further, she acknowledged the predicament the women's movement faced after advocating early on, that women unify on the basis of a shared experience of oppression. In the epigraph, Reagon satirizes and anticipates debates which continue to pre-occupy audience members when musical issues are addressed. Throughout this study I return to issues referenced by Reagon in her address to the WCWMF; that is, the role of race, gender, and sexuality in shaping and reflecting the definition of women-identified music

*Dyke spotting*

As we walked into the diner Spillane joked nervously that the diner guests could “spot us as dykes,” —a reply based on the belief that people engage in shared assumptions about visible markers of lesbian identity. Spillane and I were temporarily relieved, however, by the proximity of three, large, “dark-skinned” - “butch looking black women in black leather jackets” seated at a table near the door. “We are not alone,” I thought to myself. Spillane urged me to approach the

women for an interview because, in her words, they were dykes going to Michigan. Spillane's comment was audible confirmation that even my long-time feminist associate had lapsed into an essentialized image of black lesbians. I responded that based on skin color and body type alone we could not be sure of the women's sexual identity or of their destination.

Later that night as we stuffed ourselves into our sleeping bags, Spillane opined, "You gotta admit they [the women in the restaurant] looked a lot like Bessie Smith."<sup>41</sup> My companion referenced a narrative, frequently circulated in wim spheres about the popular black, vaudeville blues singer and reports of her lesbian (but significantly, not bisexual) identity. Too exhausted to explore any longer racialized elements of thought and feeling, identity politics and music, I squeezed my friend's hand, promised that we would "process" the issue in the morning and rolled over. "Good night, Spillane," I said, unable to fully appreciate the issues the next day would bring.

#### Song of the Exiled

They cut off my voice: I grew two voices.  
 Into two different languages, my song I pour.  
 They took away my suns; two brand-new suns  
 like two resplendent drums today I'm playing.  
 Isolated I was from all my people,  
 today my twin songs are returning like in an echo  
 and despite the darkness of this exile,  
 my poem sets fire against a mirror.  
 They cut off my voice: I grew two voices.

Alice Partnoy

*Sisterfire* 1985, Washington, D.C.<sup>42</sup>

Yearning, black women and women-identified music

My perspectives on black women's participation in wim have developed through twenty years of concert attendance, conversations, reading, listening to recordings, and personal engagement with the women who care the most about this music. As a graduate student in ethnomusicology, I spent hours listening to "Song of the Exiled" by Alice Partnoy, a Latina poet who at one time was disappeared for months within her native country of Argentina. Partnoy read the poem cited in the epigraph at an early *Sisterfire* (1985)—the much hailed multicultural music festival showcasing women performers. I was fortunate to buy the recording.<sup>43</sup> Innumerable times that year I fast-forwarded *Sisterfire*, a compilation of diverse performances, to Partnoy's recitation as it segued to Sweet Honey in the Rock's "Chile/Biko/Venceremos."<sup>44</sup> "Venceremos," (to borrow a phrase that circulates in some of the "new musicology") became the "object of my listening desire."<sup>45</sup>

Over and over I played *Sisterfire* (1985), as I had Sweet Honey's *Good News* (1981) and *We All...Everyone of Us* (1983) in previous years. With an avid interest in African American culture studies and experience in feminist organizing, black women and women-identified music seemed an obvious choice for a dissertation topic. I welcomed the opportunity to investigate an unexamined aspect of African American music-making, and to scrutinize the familiar mantra of race, gender, and sexuality.<sup>46</sup> Later, what I found even more compelling was, to follow Kobena Mercer, the "complexity of what actually happens 'between' the contingent spaces where each 'variable' intersects with the others" (1991:193).

In this study, I extend Partnoy's notion of the voice as a way to focus attention on black performers' participation in wim. Whereas Partnoy conjures "two voices" as a metaphor for the doubling of social resistance, in this study, I bring together two other discourses on the voice. The first is a phenomenological concern with "voice" as the embodiment of sung performance (a concern which, in this case, includes attention to instrumental music and analysis of musical speech surrogates). The other is "a more metaphorical employment of voice as a key representational trope for social position and power."<sup>47</sup> The latter use of "voice" reverberates throughout feminist, African American, lesbian/gay, and cultural studies literature as well as feminist-inspired anthropological research.<sup>48</sup> Though I use the term "discourse" to indicate musicians' use of verbal resources, I also use the term in ways inspired by recent interpreters following Foucault: "discourse as a mode of language use articulated with forms of power, institutional and otherwise."<sup>49</sup> My interest in discourse is part of an evolution in ethnomusicological thought on music as a social process.

This is the first full-length study of the participation of black women as performers and consumers of women-identified music. Whereas the central role played by black women in popular music has increasingly come to the fore, critics are right to question the paucity of black lesbian representation in popular culture. This lack has been partially addressed over the last decade through the token inclusion of black lesbians in films, television and literature; stereotyped depiction of black lesbians as "mannish," "man-haters," and as over-sexed predators are still

prevalent. Disappointed that a study of this scope had not been undertaken previously, several black music festival participants I interviewed pointed to the plethora of ground-breaking work by black lesbian writers (e.g., Christian 1977; Clarke 1981; Shockley 1984) in the areas of literature and literary criticism.<sup>50</sup> This body of work does not address the topic of black women in wim.

One would think that a natural home for a full-length study such as this would be feminist and/or black ethnomusicology or anthropology. Several years ago, for example, the newsletter of the gay and lesbian section of the American Musicological Society devoted several articles to the study of wim, and published syllabi for proposed courses on feminism, sexual identity, and music. It was striking that “all the musicians were white and the gays were women” leaving some of us to wonder if the “multicultural wars,” as Hazel Carby calls them, had made a difference.<sup>51</sup> This study’s value, I suggest, is in its redress of a broader issue underlying these critiques; that is, the prevalent correlation of black racial authenticity with maleness and, by association, with heterosexuality rather than with femaleness and the full range of human sexual identities and music.

In recent years there has been a dramatic flourish in gay/lesbian culture, particularly in the U.S. and Canada. Within academia, gay and lesbian studies are taking hold. The emerging “queer theory” flourishes in this environment. In this study I have taken care to present my analysis with sensitivity and have sought to eschew sensationalism in regard to performers’ negotiation of their identities in terms of race and/or sexuality. The potential personal and professional risks of

sexual identity disclosure are such that several scholars may have already been discouraged from developing new scholarship in this area. A number of researchers have addressed these concerns (Jacobs 1996; Lewin and Leap 1996). I follow George Chauncey (and others) in suggesting that those writing about homosexuality—just one of the sexual identities highlighted in this study—can not help being cognizant of the potential professional consequences of working on a subject that continues to be marginalized within the discipline (1994:10). Performers of this study face similar risks, a phenomenon upon which I elaborate elsewhere in this chapter.

When I began this study in 1991, there were few studies that integrated a concern with race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality and music. Readily available however, were studies in ethnomusicology postulating relationships between musical style and social identity. Some attempts unwittingly incorporated essentialist tendencies. I drew inspiration from a number of works however, including Pena's work on ethnic and class identity, Texas-Mexican conjunto and orquesta music (1985) and Christopher Waterman's *Juju* (1990), a study of a Nigerian popular music and the role of style in helping to shape community. Likewise, I found leads for my study in Turino's work on ethnic identity and Peruvian panpipe musicians (1989).

For theoretical inspiration I am indebted to members of the Birmingham school, Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall in particular, as well as to other critics of black culture including bell hooks, Cornel West, Kobena Mercer and Barbara Smith.<sup>52</sup> A

contribution of this work to cultural studies, an area in which the above-referenced scholars are eminent, is its reliance on ethnographic investigation; that is, research conducted with real people.<sup>53</sup>

This study enters the critical space forged by anthropologists (see Limon 1991; Harrison 1991; D'Amico Samuels 1991; Altorki & El-Solh 1988; Gwaltney 1980; Hymes 1974) who have challenged the discipline's ethnocentric conceptualizations of working in one's own culture or what Gwaltney referred to earlier as "native anthropology." Much of this literature critiques the categories of "native" and "outsider" suggesting that the identities of all people, including ethnomusicologists, are shifting and multiplex in specific historical contexts.

Equally as important, I offer this study as a hopeful corrective to some modes of feminist theorizing across the disciplines which, while addressing issues pertaining to women of color, reinscribe racist theorizing by omission or neglect. I do not wish to perpetuate this practice through my reading of and reference to the literature. To illustrate, it has become commonplace for post-structuralist theorists to ritually credit ground-breaking work of feminists and lesbians of color during the early 1980s for providing the impetus to contemporary studies of postmodern identity. The tendency on the part of writers to single out one or possibly two publications from the corpus of work by women of color during this period, misrepresents and subjugates the contribution of these writers to the foundations of what is now the postmodern identity project. I suggest that this literature represents a school of thought, so to speak, and urge that scholars reassess this

literature (e.g. Moraga et al 1981; Combahee River Collective 1979; hooks 1981; Hull et al 1982; Smith 1983; Lorde 1984) systematically and in its entirety.<sup>54</sup>

At the time of its emergence proponents looked to wim as a utopia for women both in terms of music industry participation and identity politics. Some of the potential which early adherents envisioned for wim, has been realized.<sup>55</sup> It must be argued however, that as Cynthia Lont (1992) points out, the “music’s foundation in a predominantly white lesbian community,” with its incorporation of cultural feminism combined with the continuing exclusionary politics of the mainstream recording industry, have served to contain the genre as well.

My intention is neither to exaggerate the influence of wim nor to rescue it wholesale from its detractors. It might be argued that black musicians whose participation has been central to the herstory of this musical sphere, bring their musical homes to recording studios and to stages of women’s music festivals. A small number might think of women’s music festivals as sites of utopian possibility in music sound, community, and performance, but in general, musicians and interviewees of this study do not. Some might argue that a festival such as that held in Michigan offers a unique opportunity to see glimpses of a utopian vision still in progress. One woman I met, illustrating what bell hooks characterizes as “yearning” for the promise of the future remarked, “perhaps that’s what the constructing and de-constructing of the Michigan festival each year is about; it’s about hoping that we get it right next time.”<sup>56</sup>

Throughout the text, I have struggled to encourage previously central but subordinated voices, including my own, to emerge. As numerous writers have asserted (Abu-Lughod 1991:143; Savgiano 1995; hooks 1992a; Turino 1993; hooks 1992b) however, even attempts to “decolonize the text” do not “displace the basic configuration of global power on which anthropology [and ethnomusicology], as linked to other institutions of the world is based.”<sup>57</sup>

Throughout this study I attempt to reconcile traditional concerns of ethnomusicology with a focus on some of the more suggestive features of cultural studies. Areas addressed in the dissertation are not technically musicological, that is, my focus is not on sound structures, harmonies, rhythmic patterns and so on. Rather, my interest lingers on black musicians as critical interlocutors who engage the cultural space of women-identified music as serious business and as serious ritual play. Indeed, the music itself might be the backdrop for a performance equally as intriguing. This study is as much about the nuances of collisions (cultural or situational) in this sphere as it is about affiliations. I point to the slippage between subversion of codes and near collusion with other ones. An issue recurring throughout and one familiar to critics of black culture is, “real compared to what?” At the same time, this study casts doubt on presumed mappings of musical style onto genre onto identity. These issues combine to make this musical sphere an intriguing area of study for scholars of African American culture, music and feminism. My hope is that this work contributes to a black feminist musical anthropology where all three identifiers are thoroughly interrogated and, to extend

the suggestion of Hazel Carby, each is regarded as a problematic of intellectual and passionate interest.<sup>58</sup> Rather than to suggest that black women's identity enactment through musicking<sup>59</sup> converges on a singular position or falls squarely into the binaries of essentialism or anti-essentialism, it is my hope that some nuanced answers might emerge from the chromaticized issues discussed herein. Essentialist and anti-essentialist tendencies in analyses need not continue to dominate discussions of black, women's, lesbian, or - of black lesbian, cultural politics. Though occasionally I am guilty of attempting to mediate discourses surrounding these issues, I have not wittingly augmented the polemics myself.

#### Black women and women-identified music: stylistic and political influences

Two streams of musical and political influence must be traced to account for the participation of black musicians as *women* and as *blacks* in women-identified music. In addressing such a task, I risk suggesting first, that black musicians' concern with the elimination of racial prejudice stems from blacks' historical struggle for racial equality and that second, black women's parallel concern with gender equity, speaks to the influence of second wave women's movement. These movements are often configured as separate and distinct. In actuality, the streams of influence leading to black women's participation in wim are multi-faceted and overlapping.

The role of black women in the women's movement must be seen not as an anomaly but as part of a tradition in which, in the words of the nineteenth century educator, Anna Julia Cooper, black women were "confronted by both a woman

question and a race problem.”<sup>60</sup> By the same token, scholars have elucidated black women’s advocacy for gender equality in successive black liberatory struggles. Some scholars attribute an assertion of female gendered consciousness as expressed through performances of black performers of wim directly to songs performed by black singers of vaudeville blues. Although I discuss the significance of this suggestion in chapter five, here, I set out a different proposition. I suggest that an understanding of the interaction of politics and music of the 1960s and early ‘70s is essential for accounting for black women’s participation as musicians and as political actors in women-identified music.

A related task scholars face is to critique ways that the history of wim has been raced white, sublimating its stylistic debt to African American musical traditions. To illustrate, in spite of the wide range of musical styles exhibited by musicians, the image that is resisted—as well as incorporated, (see Keil 1985; Hall 1997:128) because of its currency as a stereotype of women’s music performance—is that of the white female solo singer with acoustic guitar. According to cultural insiders, the currency of this image is expressed in the widely circulated and yet routinely refuted axiom “wggw” (that is, “white girl with guitar”). Women’s music activists I interviewed suggest that performers on the women’s music circuit were always more diverse in race and musical style.<sup>61</sup>

Ironically, the wggw folk style, derived from post World War 2 folk revival groups such as The Weavers, incorporated influences of black performers such as the American blues singer, Leadbelly (aka Huddie Ledbetter). In the cultural

politics of wim, the “white” folk style from which so many consumers I interviewed sought to distance themselves, draws on black traditions.

It is commonplace to assert the indebtedness of the second wave women’s movement first, to the black civil rights movement and secondarily, to the anti-Vietnam war movement. Less widely recognized is that this historical succession parallels the influence of the abolitionist movement on the women’s suffrage movement of the nineteenth century.<sup>62</sup> In both time periods, movements for black liberatory struggle and anti-war activism were predecessors, catalysts, and prototypes for women’s collective action (King 1988:295; Giddings 1984). The black historian Paula Giddings encapsulates the influence of black freedom movements on successive movements for women’s liberation (1984):<sup>63</sup>

The fundamental goals of white feminists have been historically defined through the Black movement. This was evident in the abolitionist movement, the southern antilynching and interracial movements, the struggle of black women to perform dual roles in the forties and fifties, and the civil rights movement (1984: 348).

Black women encountered exclusionary practices on the part of men toward women in both the civil rights (see Giddings 1984) and black power movements (see Brown 1992).<sup>64</sup> Similarly, the predominantly white women’s movement subordinated black women’s concerns (hooks 1981; Giddings 1984). Details of black women’s sense of exclusion from both movements have been discussed in depth elsewhere in the literature and will not be repeated here.

The genesis of second wave women’s movement can be traced to the 1961 establishment of the Kennedy Administration’s Commission on the Status of

Women, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt. This event, combined with Betty Friedan's, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), charted a new course for contemporary feminist thought. In describing the focus of her book as "the problem that has no name," Friedan discusses details of her college alumni survey, fifteen years after their graduation.<sup>65</sup> Friedan addressed concerns of middle class white alumni, many of whom were housewives. Women Friedan interviewed reported feeling listless and dissatisfied with their personal lives. Their educational status or family income, the author suggested, did not mediate the emptiness they experienced. The one-dimensional perspective on women's reality presented in Friedan's book became a marked feature of the contemporary feminist movement (hooks 1984).

Second wave women's movement followed on the heels of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam war movements.<sup>66</sup> Two developments spurred the women's movement toward a new level of intensity.<sup>67</sup> The first was the Civil Rights Act which provided "the legal foundation for women's rights" (Giddings 1984:299). Second was the development of feminist consciousness amongst white women who worked with SNCC (the "Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee") and other black civil rights organizations (e.g., CORE, NAACP). Participating in grass roots, student-led civil rights organizations such as SNCC provided white women an opportunity to employ their leadership skills. They also had an opportunity to work with black women in positions of authority within these organizations.

The contemporary women's movement, of which radical feminism comprised one faction, "never had a clearly defined leadership or single agenda"

(Kahn 1995:3). More accurately described as a loose organization of different movements, two major factions emerged. In 1966, a liberal wing coalesced around the founding of the National Organization for Women (NOW), with its platform for “equal rights.” NOW’s membership was more mainstream and was comprised primarily of business and professional women, trade union representatives, and government employees. As scholars have suggested, what has become mainstream feminism had at its foundation traditional liberal economic aspirations of equal employment opportunities for women.<sup>68</sup> NOW’s early black participants or founders included: Aileen Hernandez, former ILGWU union organizer;<sup>69</sup> theologian, Pauli Murray; civil rights activist, Fannie Lou Hamer; and Representative Shirley Chisolm. Writes Giddings, “the stated purpose of NOW was to act like an ‘NAACP for women,’ to ensure the enforcement of the Civil Rights Act” (1984:304).<sup>70</sup> “Sisterhood” though powerful, “soon dissolved into a plethora of differences” as the white, heterosexual, middle-class women who dominated the women’s movement named sexism as the primary source of women’s oppression (Kahn 1995:4). NOW experienced regional and ideological conflicts; the more radical faction withdrew because of the organization’s hierarchical structure and unwillingness to accommodate lesbian voices. The more conservative faction withdrew because of the organization’s endorsement of a woman’s right to have an abortion.

Women who had been active in the civil rights and anti-war movements were angered by the sexism of male leadership.<sup>71</sup> In response, a number of them

formed the more radical and amorphous “women’s liberation movement.” (Kahn 1995:3). These radical feminists “hoped for more than equality—the liberation of women, they argued, would require a social revolution, in which gender itself would become irrelevant” (Kahn 1995:3). Buoyed by the women’s movement as a whole, proponents of the radical faction placed greater emphasis on “lifestyles,” creating community, and building permanent institutions that would bring the revolutionary future into the present” (Kahn 1995:5).<sup>72</sup> The historian Lillian Faderman suggests that many lesbian-feminists discovered lesbianism through the radical feminist movement (1991:216). In their idealism, Faderman writes, lesbian feminists resembled the cultural feminists of the beginning of the century, such as Jane Addams. Instead of hoping to transform patriarchal institutions as the earlier women often did, they wanted to create entirely new institutions and to shape a women’s culture that would embody all the best values that were not male (Faderman 1991:216).

Women’s cultural/political activists of the early 1970s spawned a network of businesses and service organizations designed to meet the needs of lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual women.<sup>73</sup> This period saw the emergence of feminist presses, publications, and bookstores.<sup>74</sup> Though lesbian feminists dominated these cultural institutions, any woman who considered herself woman-identified was welcome. The new institutions were seen as developing out of the consciousness of female/lesbian identity (Kahn 1995:5).

As is the case with many social and cultural movements, the radical arm of the women's movement experienced numerous disjunctions; first between lesbians and heterosexual women and later between white middle class lesbian feminists and working class butch/femme lesbians. Faderman characterizes the division between the constituencies as discord about whether butch/femme roles were an imitation of heterosexuality and hence heterosexist. In turn, working class lesbians scoffed at what they characterized as the bourgeois lifestyles of middle class lesbian-feminists.

"Women's music" had its genesis as a music industry category in the early 1970s, when cadres of predominantly white lesbian/feminist musicians banded together to found independent women's music recording and distribution companies.<sup>75</sup> At the same time, it was a marketing term that implicitly described the audience for this music. Proponents of women's music wished to celebrate women's culture, which for many became synonymous with lesbian and feminist concerns, through song and performance. Women musicians cited the sexism of the male-dominated rock and folk music scenes as evidence that new opportunities were needed for women at all levels in the popular music industry. Cultural feminism encompassed more than values and behaviors; it came to involve goods, services, artistic and intellectual work, and other cultural elements. Performances, exhibits, book-readings etc. were often held in places designated as "women-only."<sup>76</sup>

A manifestation of cultural feminism was the formation of women-only recording and distribution companies (e.g., Olivia, Women's Revolutions Per

Minute, Ladyslipper, Wise Women's Enterprises Inc.). Musicians associated with Olivia Records (e.g., Olivia released its first record, a 45-rpm single in 1973<sup>77</sup>) included singer/guitarists Cris Williamson and Meg Christian.<sup>78</sup> Other prominent musicians included Alix Dobkin (*Lavendar Jane Loves Women*) and pianist Margie Adam. With the exception of the short-lived Women's Music Network in New York City (1973-76), Olivia was the first collective attempt at an organization committed to the production, distribution, and promotion of women's music (Lont 1992:245). Philippina-Americans Jean and June Millington worked with Williamson on early recordings. Peace activist and singer/songwriter Holly Near founded Redwood Records in 1972. By the mid-1970s women's music companies were scattered through the U.S. Women's music distributors entreated "establishment" stores to set up women's music sections and encouraged FM stations to play women's music (Faderman 1991:222).<sup>79</sup>

During this period, women-only music festivals, which proliferated, became the primary sites for wim performance. "The festivals" Faderman writes, "were modeled on the hippie be-ins of the 1960s, in which counter-culture crowds, in various stages of undress, would dance, get high on LSD or pot, and listen to music. The women's festivals, however, always had political overtones" (1991:221-222). Workshops were held that attempted to address issues of concern to lesbian-feminists. In attempts to be sensitive to a host of needs, organizers provided vegetarian meals, access for disabled women, sign interpreters for the deaf, and sliding scale entrance fees.<sup>80</sup>

Writes Faderman, “Nothing was allowed at the festivals that was not ‘politically correct,’ a label that was to become a benchmark of all judgments in the community, even judgments passed on lesbian-feminist entertainers” (1991:222). Newspapers such as the feminist paper “Sojourner” celebrated the new “women’s culture.” “Reviews of women’s music festivals, books, plays, and art shows were at least as significant as articles that covered political issues such as the ERA,<sup>81</sup> reproductive rights, women’s health and violence against women” (Kahn 1995:5). Eventually “women’s music” came to refer not only to “the music itself”<sup>82</sup> but, in the words of one prominent black musician within this sphere, a “feminist cultural network.”<sup>83</sup> The wim network showcases lesbian and feminist creations in music, dance, comedy, theater, and the visual arts that are often in women-only venues.<sup>84</sup>

The utopian vision of coalition amongst various feminist constituencies was cut short by inter and intra-group conflict. In working out the details of day-to-day living as lesbian-feminists, women “discovered” that lesbian-feminists were as diverse a group as one might find in the heterosexual world (Faderman 1991:220). Those who were brought together by their general radical views were not immune to the factionalism that has beset most minority groups after the initial euphoria of discovering commonalities (Faderman 1991:220). “Women’s culture,” emanating to be sure, from a utopian vision, was in fact a set up for success and disappointment.

Race and the problematic universalization of white, middle-class women’s experiences was powerfully critiqued by Jewish feminists and women of color.<sup>85</sup>

Women of color, working class, Jewish, and poor women, equally committed to feminism, maintained that issues of class and race were as salient as and inseparable from those of gender. They too were concerned with what scholars would refer to later as the interrogation of “women and the subject of feminism” (Butler 1990; Riley 1988)

The critique of the universalization of white women’s experience was manifest in the emergence of black feminist organizations. Concurrent with the developments outlined, black women who had been active in the New Left incorporated class analysis into their perspective on race and gender inequity. The National Black Feminist Organization (“NBFO”) founded in 1973, articulated the need for “political, social and economic equality especially for black women” (1984:344). Within a year of its founding, the NBFO had a membership of two thousand women in ten chapters. Similar groups followed in its wake.<sup>86</sup> In 1974 members of the Boston chapter of the NBFO decided to form an independent collective. Calling themselves the Combahee River Collective, in 1977 the collective published for inclusion in Zillah Eisenstein’s anthology, *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Social Feminism*, a statement articulating its philosophy.<sup>87</sup> Widely cited in writings by feminist scholars, “A Black Feminist Statement” outlined a black feminist politic which emphasized the simultaneity of black women’s oppression as blacks and as women.<sup>88</sup> At the same time, the statement included a call for the eradication of homophobia, rejecting a stance of lesbian separatism because such a philosophy, the writers stated, “leaves out far too

many people, particularly black men, women, and children.”<sup>89</sup> Individuals within the group pursued multi-issue activist involvement in lesbian politics, sterilization abuse, and abortion rights.<sup>90</sup> On a national scale, the early commitment of Black lesbian feminists such as Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Margaret Sloan, and Barbara Smith was crucial to building the movement in the 1970s, when many heterosexual Black women were reluctant to identify themselves as feminists (Smith 1998:203).<sup>91</sup>

Within wim spheres, musicians of color, through performance, gave voice to the need to deconstruct notions of womanhood, resisting its conflation with the experiences of white lesbians. Black musicians associated with the women’s music recording industry in its nascence for example, included members of Sweet Honey in the Rock (“SHIR”), singer/composer, bassist, Linda Tillery, pianist/composer Mary Watkins, singer Gwen Avery, and percussionist/guitarist/singer Vickie Randall.

Founded by Bernice Johnson Reagon in 1973, the emergence of the internationally acclaimed SHIR on the women’s music circuit was a critical event in the history of wim. SHIR has been described by some scholars as a sonic bridge between the contemporary movements for women’s equality and black emancipation.<sup>92</sup> A major contribution of *We Who Believe in Freedom: Sweet Honey in the Rock...Still on the Journey* (Reagon & SHIR 1993) is that its contributors reckon black women into the genealogy of women-identified music.

Detailing SHIR’s initial experience with the wim community, Reagon reports experiencing culture shock during an April 1977 concert tour to the west

coast. She comments that SHIR had gone “from Washington, D.C. where we sang for Black people, churches, schools, theaters, folk festivals, and political rallies, to the radical, separatist, white-women-dominated, lesbian cultural network in California.”<sup>93</sup> Conflicts arose between SHIR and the west coast wim community. According to Reagon, these conflicts highlighted race and cultural differences. Reagon states that initially SHIR seemed “peripheral” to the U.S. women’s movement “because so much of the work reaching the national media was identified with white middle-class women” (1993:28). Reagon experienced disjunctures both with modes of early white feminist theorizing and with practices within black communities of not taking societal abuses against women seriously. Illustrating the former, Reagon relates SHIR’s insistence that concerts at which they were featured be open to the entire community, meaning that men were to be included as audience members:

I was keenly aware of the trauma that some of our early sponsors went through in organizing a platform we would accept. It was coalition work of the riskiest kind. The 1970s women’s cultural network was doing some of the most radical work in changing the face of American culture by providing new forums for women to be heard; and Sweet Honey was a group of Black women singers who had something to say about the world we lived in. Being women did not prepare us for being a voice within and beyond the women’s cultural network. It was culturally a White, middle-class coalition. Sweet Honey was tested by fire... (Reagon 1993:33).

In response to questions Sweet Honey received early on in the course of their involvement with the women’s music network about their feminist identities, Reagon writes:

I explained that our radicalness was rooted in our history and models, and that the words and phrases we used were used by our

mothers and our mothers' mothers, and we wanted to always name that connection. I also explained that in a struggle for justice in this society we should be on the same side, but we were not the same and Sweet Honey in the Rock had to name herself (Reagon 1993:33).<sup>94</sup>

Involvement in wim spheres notwithstanding, SHIR continued to perform from its expansive repertoire. Reagon writes, "When Sweet Honey in the Rock began, I had been singing a cappella for several years and had no intention of ever going to the stage with less than the full range of African American music forms" (Reagon 1993:37).

Illustrating the anxiety she experienced about the reception of an explicitly woman-identified song, "Every Woman Who Ever Loved a Woman," before her east coast based, black community audiences,<sup>95</sup> Reagon recalls asking, "Would Sweet Honey survive in our base if we sang this song? Would Black people leave us before we got started? Would people think everybody in Sweet Honey was sleeping with women, or each other?" (1993:33).<sup>96</sup>

Reagon vividly depicts how, especially in the early years, some black audience members dismissed the significance of SHIR's repertoire emphasizing black women's issues.<sup>97</sup> Describing a rally in support of Joan Little at which SHIR performed, Reagon writes, "We listened as her lawyer related the story of how the judge in her case said that he did not believe you could rape a Black woman, because of our nature" (1993:31).<sup>98</sup> The Joan Little case became a cause celebre amongst black feminist activists.<sup>99</sup>

In October 1978, the Combahee River Collective decided to illuminate the “specificity of the feminine” and to connect it to the constitution of “class, race and ethnicity,” through sponsoring cultural [read: art, music, dance, film] events. This resulted in *Varied Voices of Black Women*, a concert tour by West Coast musicians Mary Watkins, Gwen Avery, and Linda Tillery and [the late] poet, Pat Parker. The tour demonstrated that white lesbians were not the only ones creating a new women’s culture (Kahn 1995:7). Writes Kahn (1995:7) “though the concert was first and foremost a celebration of Black lesbian feminist identity and culture, it was also an attempt to broaden the white feminist community’s understanding of feminist and lesbian identity.” The *Varied Voices of Black Women*, a traveling tour of women performers, and in that regard not unlike *Lilith*, toured eight cities in the fall of 1978.<sup>100</sup> This study draws in part on interviews with musicians who took part in the “*Varied Voices*” concert.

As a result of her work with the *wim* network, and *Sweet Honey in the Rock*, activist, folklorist, and concert promoter Amy Horowitz founded Roadwork, Inc., a nonprofit organization in Washington, D.C. in 1978 (Horowitz 1993:190). “Roadwork,” Horowitz writes, was conceived as both a “booking home for *Sweet Honey* and a vehicle to initiate other cross-cultural projects.” Amongst its many cultural projects, Roadwork produced *Sisterfire*, a multicultural music festival produced annually and open to women and men, held in Takoma Park, Maryland.<sup>101</sup> Reflecting on the demise of *Sisterfire*, Horowitz writes:

In 1987 a series of cultural/racial/sexual clashes on the grounds proved too heavy a load for the delicate suspension of the *Sisterfire*

experiment. A national boycott, fueled by some of the women's music press, kept attendance down the following year and we stumbled, we did not survive the resultant withdrawal of support (1993:193).

Former promoters of other women's music festivals now defunct shared parallel narratives with me when describing the imploding of their organizations.

The self-conscious employment of black musical idioms took on a particular resonance in wim spheres, partly because of the ways these forms had been deployed during the civil rights movement. I turn now to examine the types of music that influenced and were contemporaneous with the women's music movement. An outline of the black music that was heard in the secular sphere during the 1960s and 1970s is integral to understanding the range of musical forms black musicians bring to wim performance contexts.

Three complex musical histories converge with women-identified music. The first, is a broad category of music generally identified as African American including the entire range of black musical genres from spirituals to funk. The second category, related to the first, includes African and Afro-Latin influences and the third category is comprised of stylistic influences stemming from the urban folk music revival of the 1940s and 1950s. The third category is less clearly defined stylistically than the others and includes pop music styles of the 1960s and singer/songwriter styles of the 1970s.

These traditions are conglomerations of various musical innovations that have drawn heavily from each other. Each reveals internal cross-cutting of influence from one genre to another. They have at their foundation a contradiction

inherent in an American popular culture as it emerged in the antebellum period and continued in the aftermath of slavery. Historians of American popular music frequently refer to an explicit “borrowing” of black cultural materials by whites for mainstream white dissemination. By this calculation, even without the visible and aural presence of black musicians, wim would owe a debt to the creators of black popular and religious music.<sup>102</sup>

African American spirituals were used as vehicles for creating greater and safer social space for blacks during the difficult times of the civil rights movement. Paul Gilroy in “Diaspora, Utopia and the Critique of Capitalism” (1987) suggests that the emphasis on the strategic uses of mass mobilization by the civil rights struggle often obscures the importance of music to this movement.<sup>103</sup> The black social protest movement included boycotts, mass “jail-ins,” mass non-violent actions, sit-ins, and the Freedom Rides.<sup>104</sup> The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), an interracial organization leading nonviolent demonstrations since the forties, the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) and the subsequently formed SNCC, became the leading organizations in the civil rights struggle.<sup>105</sup> These organizations synthesized black culture and politics into a single dynamic force that drew whites as well as blacks into mass action.<sup>106</sup> African American spirituals and worksongs were well suited for the militant lyrics that the largely student-led protesters created at their lunch-counter sit-ins, public facility picket lines, courts, jails, and churches. One commentator observed:

The spiritual “Oh Freedom,” which was certainly sung in 1860, could be sung again in 1960 without the need to change any of the

words. And when new words were added to the songs, they often blended in so easily with what had gone before as to be virtually indistinguishable from the original material (Silverman 1992:4).

Spirituals were not the only genre black protesters redeployed during the civil rights movement. Protesters seized upon traditional black church songs, retooling them with updated text. “We Shall Overcome,” for example, a song that became the anthem of the civil rights movement and a sonic emblem of political struggle throughout the world, was hammered out from an old black church song, “I’ll Overcome Some Day.”<sup>107</sup> “Woke Up This Morning with My Mind on Freedom” and “We Shall Not Be Moved” were gospel songs retexted for civil rights protests.

By the time of the Albany Movement for desegregation,<sup>108</sup> schisms had emerged between the various civil rights organizations.<sup>109</sup> The historian Paula Giddings writes:

It would take a special effort to keep the disparate elements of the Albany Movement together and SNCC discovered a vital key to that unity...Albany became known as a “singing movement” and it was the rich, darkly timbered voice of Bernice Reagon, an Albany State College student who joined SNCC, that evoked the resonance of centuries-old memories and strength” (1984:283).

Reagon was involved with the Freedom Singers, organized by Cordell Reagon and James Forman, during the fall of 1962 (Reagon 1993:159). Manning Marable observes: “It is very difficult, in retrospect, to comprehend the sheer courage of these black teenagers and young adults” (1991:66). The Freedom Singers translated the organization’s belief in the efficacy of civil disobedience into music and song.<sup>110</sup>

The growing clamor of black Americans for civil rights coincided with the anti-Vietnam war movement and the associated burgeoning folk music scene (Szatmary 1991:89). The foundation for protest song of the 1960s came from the turn of the century labor movement. The Wobblies, members of the IWW (International Workers of the World), spread their message of equality by setting new texts to familiar tunes. Folk singer Woody Guthrie continued the legacy of the protest song after federal and state authorities raided and closed IWW offices during the Red Scare following World War 1 (Szatmary 1992:85). Pete Seeger joined Guthrie in singing songs extolling the value of American workers. Guthrie, moving to New York after World War 2 where he penned "This Land is Your Land," founded the Almanac Singers in 1940 and the Weavers in 1948. The Weavers' membership included Ronnie Gilbert and Lee Hays. Thus began the protest song movement that continues through 1958-1964 when singer-songwriters as we think of them now, came into existence (Echard 1997:424).

The Guthrie style of protest song received less airplay during the McCarthy period of the 1950s, but a rebirth occurred in the early 1960s as the numbers of white college students increased and pressure from conservatives diminished. Projecting a "safe, corporate image" *The Kingston Trio*, formed in 1957, is credited with starting the U.S. folk revival.<sup>111</sup> The New Christy Minstrels followed the Kingston Trio one-year later.

Ironically, the commercial folk boom led to the rediscovery of "traditional" folk artists such as Pete Seeger, the reformed Weavers, the African American

folksinger Odetta, and Jean Ritchie. Young consumers became interested in the bluegrass style of guitar pickers such as Bill Monroe, Doc Watson, and Earl Taylor. They discovered the electric blues of black bluesman such as Muddy Waters (aka McKinley Morganfield), John Lee Hooker and Howlin' Wolf.<sup>112</sup> Women-identified music receives its stylistic language also through the music of Mike Seeger and Peggy Seeger, pivotal figures in the America folk music revival, who were involved in leftist politics. Performing in coffeehouses in Greenwich Village, Native American Buffy Sainte-Marie incorporated a number of musical influences into her style, including African American elements. Later, Sainte-Marie reports, she discovered her "native" voice and began penning tunes drawing on traditional Native American musical materials.

The convergence of the civil rights movement and folk music on college campuses led to the mercurial rise of Bob Dylan (aka Robert Allen Zimmerman) and his brand of protest folk music.<sup>113</sup> Dylan's influences included country musician Hank Williams, Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, Jimmy Reed, and Howlin' Wolf (aka Chester Burnett)—all of whom were popular during the 1950s. A fan of both country and rhythm and blues, Dylan also embraced folk music, including music of the Kingston Trio and Odetta. Woodie Guthrie figured prominently amongst Dylan's stylistic and "spiritual" influences. As Dylan recalled:

And when I heard Woodie Guthrie, that was it, it was all over...He really struck me as an independent character. But no one ever talked about him. So I went through all his records I could find and picked all that up by any means I could.<sup>114</sup>

Dylan began singing protest songs at Greenwich Village clubs, songs stressing civil rights themes. Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" became an anthem for the social protest movements of the early 1960s and the singer publicized his politics by taking part in public demonstrations.

Singer Joan Baez, Dylan's female counterpart in the protest song movement, performed in Cambridge coffeehouses during the late 1950s, making her debut at the Newport Folk Festival in 1959. Like Dylan, Baez' music took a decidedly political stance leading up to the 1963 March on Washington. A Chicana of mixed heritage, Baez' encounters with discrimination as a young person paved the way for her singing of protest songs.

The political and musical influences of the civil rights and anti-war movements converged at the March on Washington in 1963.<sup>115</sup> The rally following the march included addresses by various leaders including Martin Luther King, Jr. and his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. Performers on the roster included black gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Bob Dylan, and others. Baez marched with Dylan, Odetta, and Harry Belafonte, the Jamaican-American entertainer and activist. No women were scheduled to address the crowd initially but at the last minute, three black women activists were invited to share the podium with King, other male speakers and the wives of civil rights leaders. The appearance of gospel music in the seemingly secular context of the struggle for racial justice compounded the steady secularization of the music that had been a feature of its transformation into soul (Gilroy 1987:174).<sup>116</sup>

Protesters also redeployed black popular music in service of the civil rights movement. Later in the same year the Impressions recorded “People Get Ready,” and in 1964 the group’s “Keep on Pushing” exhorted listeners that “it don’t make no sense not to keep on pushin.” Gilroy observes that this song and Nina Simone’s “Mississippi Goddam” are two of the best known illustrations of the broad and general politicization of soul which preceded the displacement of the Civil Rights movement by demands for Black Power from the mid 1960s onwards (Gilroy 1987: 174).<sup>117</sup>

Both the civil rights and anti-war movements underwent changes throughout the mid-sixties. The folk protest movement began to fragment after Kennedy’s assassination in November 1963. Dylan reportedly became disillusioned with political activism. Thematically, his songs became more inward oriented and by the time he released *Bringing It All Back Home* it was clear that he had abandoned protest music for electric rock.<sup>118</sup> At the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, a different Dylan was evident.

The Black Power movement grew out of the work of civil rights organizations in the rural South, but spread rapidly to a new constituency in black urban areas where ‘soul’ reigned amidst a burgeoning cultural nationalism.<sup>119</sup> According to Maulana Ron Karenga (1968) tenets of black cultural nationalism were to “Think Black, Act Black, Create Black, Buy Black, Vote Black and Live Black.” Gilroy points out that the expressive culture of black America was to play an important role in establishing exactly what these injunctions were to mean.<sup>120</sup>

Whereas the musical culture of the civil rights movement “pointed to the patience, dignity, and determination of blacks in the furtherance of racial justice,” (Gilroy 1987: 178) the soundtrack of soul would have a different sound. In other words, the tone and tactics of the black power movement differed from that of the civil rights movement. James Brown and Aretha Franklin became “identified as the spiritual and moral guardians of the inner meanings not merely of black music but of black American culture as a whole” (Gilroy 1987:177). Aretha Franklin’s cover of Otis Redding’s “Respect” was issued in 1967.<sup>121</sup> Many feminist critics heard “Respect” as a feminist anthem. At the time of its release, blacks heard it as a song directed toward whites. The effects of state violence and repressive measures of the U.S. government were expressed in black musical culture. Gilroy observes:

Clear open statements were replaced, in musical culture at least, by more oblique forms of signification often more stylized and satirical in their stance. The iconography of soul shifted away from the pseudo-military macho imagery of clenched fists in black leather towards the dress and cultural emblems of ancient Africa (1987: 178).

The celestial and interplanetary themes in the soul and funk of this period provided a means to satirize American imperialism and to advance utopian visions of a reconstructed society in which the black nation, united under a groove, would thrive in peace.<sup>122</sup> This is exemplified in performances of one of the most popular black dance-oriented bands of the 1970s, the Funkadelics. Earth, Wind and Fire, the other top black band of this period, began in the early 1970s with mystical, veiled statements of Pan-African themes.<sup>123</sup>

Contemporary black performers of women-identified music draw on a wide range of musical styles (e.g., Afro-Celtic, Afro-Cuban drumming, singer/songwriter/acoustic guitar). Musicians I interviewed stressed their commitment to and participation in struggles for both gender and racial equality.

## CHAPTER II

### **Rethinking genre, identity and musical style**

This study challenges narrow notions of black subjectivity in terms of gender, sexual identity, race, and music and integrates concerns of contemporary ethnomusicology with features of cultural studies. A rich literature supports examination into what I have called ethnomusicological investigation into the identity politics of women-identified music (wim). The central theoretical foci of this work are first, the presumed mapping by ethnomusicologists between genre, musical style and identity; second, the interplay of gender and sexuality; third, the complex relations between race and ethnicity and fourth the interaction of these.

Both the erasure of women-identified musicians from studies of African American music and the omission of blacks from critiques of women-identified music are troubling, but not inexplicable. The logic of inclusion and exclusion in regard to race, gender and sexual orientation are calculated systematically and arbitrarily. An over integration of concepts of black particularity result in the eliding of investigations of musical realms which attenuate hybrid or recombinant musical and political discourses. A reasonable guesstimate is that the music of this study disappoints the desire for cultural and therefore racial purity. According to some of the black musicians I interviewed, conflicting appraisals of their music include observations that their performances are “too black” or “not black enough.” A complementary rhetorical gesture asserts that the music of black performers in this realm is so broadly political and draws so much on traditional African American

musical materials that it transcends the boundaries of “womyn’s music.” Others assert that this realm of musiking is too closely associated with lesbianism to warrant further attention.

*What is women's music? If that's all they're looking for is women's music, then I guess it [my body of work] doesn't have anything to do with women's music. I'm telling you, "a triad is a triad."*<sup>1</sup>

Mary Watkins, composer and pianist

A review of the literature indicates scholars occasionally conflate genre and musical style. Increasingly, ethnomusicologists (Lange 1997; Hernandez 1995; Keil 1994; Sakata 1983) are differentiating the two and examining their relationship. Deborah Hernandez’ discussion about genre and musical style in *Bachata: A Social History of a Dominican Popular Music* (1995) provides a valuable lead for this study.<sup>2</sup> Like bachata, wim incorporates a number of styles and stylistic features. In recalling the work of Robert Baron who suggests that the musical categories of salsa and soul are “generic” terms that capture a culture’s “essence,” but yet can contain several musical styles, Hernandez offers us still another useful way to think about wim. I do not think Baron’s is the last word on this issue, but his is an interesting suggestion.

Keil’s observations about urban blues and polkas that began to emerge as distinct styles from a complex of earlier twentieth century musical forms, also inform our discussion of genre and musical style. Keil suggests, for example, that “the very naming of music as ‘blues’ or ‘polka’ is a declaration of consolidation” (1985:126). Keil’s work resonates with this study in that several times during my

fieldwork, participants remarked that women-only music festivals enable participants to come together “under the banner” of music, from which it may be inferred that they may not have reached consensus about the music itself. There are precedents in ethnomusicology for adding a certain amount of uncertainty in textual theme and musical style—to the definition of wim. In her study of the Hungarian *nota*, for example, Rose Lange observes that “Gypsy *nota* is one of several contemporary musical constellations which do not issue from a clear subject position” (Lange 1997). Moreover, Lange suggests that Gypsy *nota* is characterized by “vagueness and irregularity in its access to experiences of a non-dominant character” (1997:517).<sup>3</sup>

Scholars from a wide range of disciplines admit that identity is fluid, and caution against essentialist tendencies in analyses. Essentialism is commonly understood as “a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the ‘whatness’ of a given entity” (Fuss 1989:xi). It assumes that certain characteristics are inherently part of the core being of a group (Lubiano 1997:109). An example of racial essentialism is that blacks have rhythm; an example of biological essentialism is that women are inherently nurturing. My study draws on the work of contemporary theorists who discuss the continuum of essentialist and anti-essentialist conceptions of race and ethnicity (Hall 1997; Gilroy 1993b), gender and sex (Butler 1990), sexuality (Fuss 1991), and “the third world woman” (Savigliano 1995; Spivak 1993). These scholars have, to various extents,

referenced the interconnectedness of these antagonisms (positions of race, sex, gender, sexuality) “and all other intervening variables” (Mercer 1991:193).

Following Stuart Hall,

these antagonisms refuse to be neatly aligned; they are simply not reducible to one another...We are always in negotiation, not with a single set of oppositions that place us always in the same relation to others, but with a series of different positionalities. Each has for us its point of profound subjective identification. And that is the most difficult thing about this proliferation of the field of identities and antagonisms: they are often dislocating in relation to one another (Hall 1997:131).

Continuing his discussion of identities which refuse to be neatly aligned, Hall observes, “the carnivalesque is not simply an upturning of two things which remain locked within their oppositional frameworks; it is also crosscut by what Bakhtin calls the dialogic” (1997:133).

“Opponents” of poststructural logic “in which the contingent and hybrid aspects of cultural identities are stressed” (Monson 1997a:27) frequently counter that postmodern theorists, in their focus on the contingent nature of identity, tend to deny the consequences of the interactions of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia at the systemic level. None of the writers who have inspired my thinking in this area have argued this position. For example, in “Black Popular Music: Crossing Over or Going Under?” Rebee Garafolo reminds us of Hall’s comment that “racial and ethnic categories continue today to be the forms in which the structures of domination and exploitation are lived.”<sup>4</sup> Sagri Dhairyam,

highlighting her position as a lesbian of South Asian-American heritage, extends this idea:

Though academic analyses locate identity as a contingent filiation of discourses and help to destabilize a regime of heterosexual sameness, in the process, these analyses run the danger of erasing the experiential and affective realities of alternative sexualities and/or raced communities, which must constantly struggle not only to affirm their pleasures but to describe their terrors (1994:34).<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, I examine the very self-conscious ways that black performers within this realm negotiate their race identities through aesthetic elaboration. In chapters three through five, I provide examples of what Gayatri Spivak calls “strategic essentialism.” By strategic essentialism Spivak follows others (Hall 1997:130; Gilroy 1993b) in allowing for the weaknesses of essentialist critique. At the same time, she admits that such strategies may still be used in creative, social or political realms.

### Blackness and representation reconsidered

The focus of research into black music has changed considerably over the past two and a half decades. Earlier approaches in diaspora music research emphasized the persistence of Africanisms and continuity with an African past (Maultsby 1990; Jackson 1981; Nketia 1974; Wilson 1974; Waterman 1963). An overriding concern with the role of musical elements (e.g., call/response, overlapping voices, use of polyrhythms, syncopation) in the cementing of African American identity can be understood in terms of the inherently political context in which the concept of African American ethnomusicology was introduced. Scholars

of African American music faced a dilemma: on the one hand, a racist social context propelled them to adopt a defensive posture, that of proving that African Americans had a viable culture and had retained some kind of tangible connection to an African past. On the other hand, scholars found themselves defensively refuting arguments for black mastery of music (including rhythm) and dance, buttressed by biological essentialism. In addressing the narrowness of an essentialized notion of “blackness” which sometimes attenuated analyses of black music, Hall comments that:

the essentializing moment is weak because it naturalizes and dehistoricizes differences, mistaking what is historical and cultural for what is natural, biological and genetic. The moment the signifier “black” is torn from its historical, cultural and political embedding and lodged in a biologically constituted racial category, we valorize, by inversion, the very ground of the racism we are trying to deconstruct (Hall 1997:130).

Here, Hall alludes to the slippage between race as embodied in people or in people’s bodies, and race as embodied in culture as problematized in the term, “black music.” As I mentioned earlier, a long line of scholars have problematized this issue including Boas (1928), Herskovits (1945), and Du Bois (1903).<sup>6</sup>

Although African retentions are still the focus of some contemporary studies of black popular music (Keyes 1996), scholars from many fields have brought contrasting analytical tools to the project of problematizing blackness. The “new black musicology,” a term I have coined to describe the recent flurry of interdisciplinary research problematizing blackness and music, provides an interpretive framework which can accommodate studies of black performers of

women-identified music. The eclectic array of black performers' musical styles in this sphere, to follow Paul Gilroy, "confounds any simplistic (essentialist or anti-essentialist) understanding of the relationship between racial identity and racial non-identity, between folk cultural authenticity and pop cultural betrayal" (1993b:99). It is not enough to contrast the music of "black" musicians within this sphere with the music of "white" musicians. It is even less satisfying to follow the lines of an anti-essentialist (and admittedly vague) critique. In other words, no further clarity would be achieved if I were to suggest that each black musician performs in her own style and "that's that."

In this study, rather than suggest that there is a coherent black women-identified music, I ask, "how is blackness performed in this realm by black musicians and how is identity constructed by black and white audience members?" Through performance and reception, notions of musical blackness and/or whiteness come together with U.S. social categories of being a black or white person. While race and ethnicity, as these terms are commonly used in scholarship, have much in common, they are not coterminous. Occasionally music consumers and performers interviewed for this study also distinguish the categories. Though participants varied in ethnic background and national origin attend women's music festivals and concerts in inclusive venues, in general, participant discussion of race and ethnicity is framed in terms of a categorical distinction between "black" and "white" peoples and cultures. This is historically an American way of dealing with racial difference, given the centrality of slavery to U.S. experience.

By and large, ethnomusicologists have yet to publish full-length empirical research in regard to female gendered identities in black music-making. For the most part, studies about African American expressive culture are thought to be inclusive of men's and women's experiences. Kyra Gaunt, in her unpublished doctoral dissertation, *The Games Black Girls Play: Music, Body, and "Soul"* (1997) demonstrates the difference gendered experience makes in the life cycle of black women. Gaunt illuminates the role of hand-clapping, "cheers" and double-dutch (jump-roping) in the lives of African American girls in urban areas.<sup>7</sup> Many more studies focus on black women and music through the genres of biography and autobiography. Although anthropological studies about black women throughout the diaspora are more numerous, these studies do not, for the most part, concern black women's music making in North America.

This study contributes to literature critiquing the incorporation of black popular music performers in feminist analyses of contemporary music and culture (Rose 1994; Keil and Feld 1994; hooks 1992:61-77). Two trends are discernible in feminist analyses of black women's participation in popular music in the U.S. The first is a tendency for critics to apply feminist modes of theorizing to performances of rap or hip hop by black women. The second trend is a tendency for writers to illuminate issues of sexual politics in black cultural life through studies of vaudeville women's blues performers (e.g., Carby 1990; Davis 1990; Harrison 1988). Some studies (i.e., Davis 1998) are illuminating in that they demonstrate the development and trajectory of gender consciousness among black women in the early decades of

the twentieth century. However, feminist critiques incorporating black performers as case studies have been criticized, rightfully, for their unidimensionality and for failing to present the contradictory aspects of black culture and of black women's historically ambivalent relationship with predominantly white women's movements.

A number of scholars have addressed a widespread practice of feminist critics and journalists to construct black women rappers, as feminists (see Rose 1994). Tricia Rose, in *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994), suggests that one of the reasons black women rappers are the focus of such case studies is that they "affirm black female working-class cultural signs and experiences that are rarely depicted in American popular culture" (1994:170). To Rose's credit, she describes black women rappers' negotiation of gender identity and the "contradictory nature" (1994:147) of rap's sexual politics. Rose's account of her interactions with individual performers on the subject of feminism should be required reading for feminist theorists and journalists striving to bring complexity to their work on black women, resistant strategies and popular culture. Particularly illuminating is her acknowledgment of the dimensions which artists and researchers take into account in adopting feminist identities. Rose regards black performers' ambivalence about feminism as a problematic to be studied. She does not attempt feminist "make-overs" of the women rappers (e.g., "Queen" Latifah, Salt 'N' Pepa, MC Lyte) she interviews. Though valuable leads are found in feminist critiques of popular culture, the omission of black performers of wim in studies of gender and music performance is

striking.<sup>8</sup> The literature on black women vaudeville blues singers presents an interesting problematic for this study, especially in terms of myths which circulate in women-identified spheres about acclaimed performers such as Bessie Smith and Gertrude “Ma” Rainey. I discuss these myths and their circulation in chapter five.

With few exceptions, the black music literature reflects an omission also of discussions about the music-making of blacks outside the heterosexual mainstream. Studies have yet to be done in the alternative dance scene or with black gay and lesbian gospel choruses in urban centers. Many reasons might be cited for the sustained omission of research into this aspect of black cultural practice, some of which I discussed in the introductory chapter.

In addressing sexual identity, gender and performance through empirical investigation with black women musicians, this study challenges a masculine heterosexual idea of black cultural authenticity (1997:28). In “Some Thoughts on the Challenges Facing Black Gay Intellectuals,” Ron Simmons describes how many blacks maintain that homosexuality is not a part of core black culture, but rather, emanates from contact with whites (1991:211). Simmons illuminates strains of such thinking in the works of writers such as Molefi Asante and Fanon. Black public intellectuals have worked diligently to dissuade the general public of these ideas. The gist of their argument is that successful black liberatory struggle includes the eradication of homophobia in black communities; the elimination of racism and sexism; and the dismantling of a class-based society (Marable 1997:42; Dyson 1996: xi; West 1994:131; hooks 1989:120; see also Simmons 1991:211).

Gay/lesbian identity is often excluded from traditional definitions of “blackness” in spite of a strong gay presence in black communities—especially in regard to music involvement. Philip Harper juxtaposes the ambivalence of the traditional black church toward homosexuality with the influence of black gay musicians in the realm of secular entertainment:

...the church choir context ...has stereotypically served as a locus in which young black men both discover and sublimate their homosexuality, and also as a conduit to a world of professional entertainment generally conceived as “tolerant,” if not downright encouraging, of diverse sexualities...Thus, the black-church context, though ostensibly hostile to homosexuality and gay identity, nevertheless has traditionally provided a means by which black men can achieve a sense of themselves as homosexual and even, in cases such as Sylvester’s, expand that sense into a gay-affirmative public persona.

Ingrid Monson expands upon the ambivalence in black communities, stating:

While there is considerable tolerance for alternative gender and sexual practices within African American culture, [sic] there remains a taboo against public discussion of sexual orientation or the outing of performers in many African American musical communities--including jazz and gospel (1997:28).

The theme of a black person’s gay or lesbian identity reflecting negatively on his or her blackness receives filmic treatment in *Black Is...Black Ain’t*, (1995) a project begun by filmmaker Marlon Riggs and completed by his production staff after his death. The film’s theme is the limitations which identity categories place on black gays and lesbians. Addressing the social intolerance he experiences from some heterosexual black men in particular, Riggs observes that because of his sexuality, he “cannot be black” (1991:253). Riggs’ comment illustrates Monson’s observation that:

“homosexuality and cross-dressing in Africa, Latin America, and African America are often negatively correlated with ethnic legitimacy. Engaging in homosexual practices or transgendered display (especially for men) is commonly perceived as making the practitioner less black or Latino” (1997:28).

Women-identified musicians Linda Tillery and Ubaka Hill, interviewed for this study, provide commentary in Riggs’ film.

At the same time, it may be argued that some performances of gayness are ethnically marked. Issac Julien, one of Britain’s leading black independent filmmakers and a prominent cultural activist, explores the construction of gay male sexualities around race, in *Looking for Langston* (see Gilroy 1993:166-173). Charles Nero (1991:243) offers a number of such examples, including that of the urban tough, loud, back-talking, effeminate gay black man, articulated by Antonio Fargas’ character, Lindy, in the film *Car Wash*.<sup>9</sup> Speaking to ethnically (and perhaps class) inflected modes of gay performance as well as to Hall’s comment about the “difference that doesn’t make a difference of any kind,” Marlon Riggs comments:

The sum total of primetime fag pantomimes, camp queens as culture critics, and the proliferating bit-part swish-and-dish divas who like ubiquitous black maids and butlers in fifties Hollywood films move along the edges of the frame, seldom at the center, manifests the persistent psychosocial impulse toward control, displacement, and marginalization of the black gay Other. This impulse, in many respects, is no different than the phobic, distorted projections which motivated blackface minstrelsy (1991:256).

#### The women-identified music literature and black performers

With few exceptions (Reagon 1993; Penelope & Wolfe 1993) the music of black women-identified performers, its production, circulation, and consumption,

has been elided not only from scholarly representations of black music histories, but from lesbian and gay social histories (Miller 1995; Faderman 1991) and accounts of women-identified music (Bradby 1993; Gaar 1992; Lont 1992; Robertson 1987; Petersen 1987; Tilchen 1984).<sup>10</sup> In the third edition of *The Music of Black Americans*, Eileen Southern devotes a paragraph to Sweet Honey in the Rock under the heading, "community based music groups." Bernice Johnson Reagon and members of Sweet Honey in the Rock contribute to the literature on black women and wim through their edited volume, *We Who Believe in Freedom: Still on the Journey...Still on the Journey* (1993). As such, theirs is an invaluable collection of essays written by members, former members, and others closely associated with the ensemble throughout its twenty-year history. Reagon's history of black congregational singing and her explication of the transformation of African American spirituals into protest song is an important contribution to the literature.

Dissertations on wim (Nogle 1984; Lont 1984) have had disciplinary homes in the fields of speech communication and theater; none have been written from ethnomusicological or anthropological perspectives.<sup>11</sup> Two articles on wim appear in Koskoff's edited volume (1987). Carol Robertson's "Power and Gender in the Musical Experiences of Women," a case study on women's music making in segregated spheres is, in part, based on her participant observation with a feminist (predominantly lesbian) choir in Washington, D.C. Karen Petersen's "Women-Identified Music in the United States" (1987), is an overview of the genre beginning with the pop music milieu in which it emerged. Petersen outlines the formation of

early women-identified record and distribution companies, and encapsulates debates amongst listeners about the genre's commercial success. She also devotes attention to the issue of musical, as opposed to textual, innovation in women's music. Petersen suggests that women-identified music can be characterized textually as follows: a) those songs with obvious lesbian-feminist content, and b) those songs which address concerns of women and the effects of sexism on women's lives. Textual analysis is not the only way one can gauge the parameters of women-identified music. The working out of these issues through social interaction is another way ethnomusicologists can survey listeners for their values and perspectives. As suggested to me by journalist and women's music and culture activist Toni Armstrong, Jr., the topic might also be approached by examining which performers pass through the wim field.<sup>12</sup> Illustrating the rationale behind the programming for the nightstage performances at the Michigan festival for example, Armstrong suggests that the program is structured around three "slots": 1) an obviously lesbian-feminist act, 2) an "ethnic" act, and 3) a comedy act.<sup>13</sup>

Armstrong describes herself as a "midwife" to the [women's music] movement and suggests that in addition to the categories of musicians described by Petersen, women's music festivals incorporate musicians who are not typically feminist or lesbian feminist. Nevertheless, through performance such musicians transverse or transgress traditional gender boundaries in their home cultures (e.g., ethnic or national). Armstrong's formulation, in addition to Slobin's discussion of transregional music and "validation through visibility" (1992:10) provides a

framework for understanding the phenomenon of women's music festivals extending invitations to artists as diverse as the Bulgarian State Radio Women's Chorus and black lesbian singer, Pam Hall.<sup>14</sup>

I am also interested in the incorporation of transnational ensembles in women-identified music spheres.<sup>15</sup> In what ways does a community, formed out of an "otherness" based on sexuality, itself generate "otherness" based on race or national origin? Let us take the Bulgarian State Radio Women's Chorus marketed as *Les Mystiere de Vox Bulgares* as a case in point. *Les Mystiere de Vox Bulgares*, which won a Grammy Award in 1990, is a women's choral ensemble specializing in "post-peasant" styles of singing (with traditional text).<sup>16</sup> Slobin writes that the ensemble's embrace by the rock-pop community and Hollywood coincided with a move by Bulgarian "nationals" away from the idea of state control of their national heritage. The following excerpt from an interview Bradby conducted with an Irish feminist consumer, "Cliona," demonstrates a certain type of awareness about lesbian identity and appropriation:

...funny things get adopted, d'you know that *Le Mystere des Voix Bulgaires*, did you hear those women, they were taken on (and) big by a certain kind of lesbian, by sort of, could be more, political sort of, and there was somebody else, somebody very unusual like that, that we had discovered ourselves, and then discovered that a lot of other women that we knew were listening to them as well, but I suppose simply that they - it was an all-women group maybe and the music was wonderful.<sup>17</sup>

Slobin addresses the difference in local and transregional consumption—"It is unlikely that the Grammy has caused Bulgarians to accept the old Women's Radio Chorus as the proud emblem of upward musical mobility." This is just one example

of “transregional musics” being accepted by and incorporated into the wim community. There are many others.

By the same token, to what extent do transnational groups “internalize” dominant representations and discourses for financial gain or other opportunity? I have observed the phenomenon of “African,” and by all markers (according to my own reading and those of audience members I have interviewed) heterosexual performers attempt to invigorate their performances with gratuitous references to lesbian sexuality. Perhaps some performers do not attempt to “black up” but to “dyke up.” One wonders, for example, to what extent the othering of non-western artists in terms of musical style inspires the Mahotella Queens to perform in lesbian drag. American pop music history provides precedents for such an inquiry.

Attempts to fashion a definition revealing internal consistency and coherence may actually obscure rather than to clarify, intriguing aspects of this musical sphere. Based on my research with black performers of wim, I suggest a modification of Petersen’s “definition” of the genre, an idea upon which I elaborate in chapters three through five.

In addition to the publications I have mentioned, “The National Women’s Music Festival: Collective Identity and Diversity in a Lesbian-Feminist Community” (Eder et al 1995), published in the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* is informative. The writers, sociologists, are interested in the creation of alternative communities within social movements. Drawing on a body of literature outside the purview of this study, Eder et al discuss women’s music festivals as an example of

“prefigurative politics.” Breines uses this term to describe the attempt of the New Left to “embody personal and anti-hierarchical values in politics” and “to create and sustain within the lived practice of the movement, relationships and political forms that “prefigured” and embodied the desired society” (Eder et al 1995:487). Eder attributes discord within women-identified women ranks to the prevalence of “prefigurative politics” and “identity politics”. Interestingly, Eder’s focus on interview data with heterosexual women is out of proportion to the ratio of lesbians to straight women at NWMF each year (about 90% are lesbian). The writers conclude their study by suggesting that NWMF is an example of a “partially successful alternative community” (Eder 1995:506). A contribution of Eder is the recognition that information about women’s music festivals reaches only a portion of lesbians and bisexuals. Many women, especially those falling outside of lesbian feminist networks (including many women of color and working class women) are less likely to be drawn to the festival and its organization. Eder et al focus on social organization rather than on music or on the social organization of music. <sup>18</sup>

#### “Colorful ethnicity” and queer theory: does it make a difference?

In this study I follow Butler in defining gender as “the cultural meaning that the sexed body assumes” (1990:6). Though studies of gender and sexuality have much in common, they are not synonymous (Jacobs & Cromwell 1992; Sedgwick 1991; Butler 1990). “Sex” is used to refer to biological phenotypes (Jacobs et al 1997:2). Jacobs suggests the use of “sexualities” for the “range of behaviors called

“homosexuality,” “heterosexuality,” “bisexuality,” “trisexuality,” and the like (Jacobs 1997:2).<sup>19</sup> Clarification of these terms is critical for this study. Many music festival attendees, for example those at Michigan ’95, signify on all or any of these definitions at any given time. Butler writes that the complexity of gender requires an interdisciplinary and postdisciplinary set of discourses in order to resist the domestication of gender studies or women’s studies within the academy and to radicalize the notion of feminist critique (1990:xi).

Ethnomusicological interest in the construction of gendered identities, particularly female identities and music, has expanded since Koskoff’s edited volume (1987). A survey of earlier literature on gender and music reveals “like much of the rest of the literature dealing with questions of performance and identity, a certain essentialist view of gender as a given biological condition that is simply reflected in performance roles and musical symbolism” (Erlmann 1991:26). Receiving impetus from initiatives in anthropology, continued calls for the study of gender and music have led to the formation of new organizations in ethnomusicology (e.g., the Committee on the Status of Women, the Les/Bi/Gay, Transgendered and Sexualities Concerns Committee).

In addition to feminist theories this study draws on queer theory—an interdisciplinary approach to the study of sexuality which took shape toward the end of the 1980s. Coined in 1990 by Teresa de Lauretis, queer theory builds on and departs from the feminist, lesbian and gay scholarship preceding it.<sup>20</sup> This body of literature is in part, “stimulated by the politics of location that lesbian, gay,

bisexual, transgender, and other scholars have brought to their search for scientific understanding of sexual and gender diversity” (Jacobs et al 1997:1).

According to David Halperin the express purpose of queer theory was to “introduce into a monolithic, homogenizing discourse of (homo) sexual difference a problematic of multiple differences, and to highlight everything that is perverse about the project of theorizing sexual pleasure and desire” (1995:113). In addressing the liabilities of the term “queer,” Halperin notes a general tendency amongst its users to domesticate the term, suggesting that such practices have the effect of draining “queer” of its political efficacy (1995:64). He suggests further:

the lack of specifically homosexual content built into the meaning of ‘queer’ has made that term all too handy - not for generating a de-essentialized identity or defining a marginal positionality, so much as for multiplying the opportunities for disidentification, denial, and disavowal... Queer therefore invites the kind of hostile political manipulation that already is too familiar to lesbians and gay men from the deployment of the label ‘bisexual’: it provides a means of de-gaying gayness (1995:65).

Halperin admits he is close to making an argument for strategic essentialism here. His concern about the “de-gaying” of gayness resonates with concerns many scholars have about the actual difference that difference makes in lived experience.

Paralleling Halperin’s concern, Stuart Hall remarks about “postmodernism’s deep and ambivalent fascination with difference—sexual difference, cultural difference, racial difference, and above all, ethnic difference” (1997:125). Inspired by an essay by Michele Wallace, Hall states she was quite right to ask whether:

this reappearance of a proliferation of difference, of a certain kind of ascent of the global postmodern, isn’t a repeat of that “now you see it, now you don’t” game that modernism once played with

primitivism, to ask whether it is not once again achieved at the expense of the vast silencing about the West's fascination with the bodies of black men and women of other ethnicities. And we must ask about that continuing silence within postmodernism's shifting terrain, about whether the forms of licensing of the gaze that this proliferation of difference invites and allows, at the same time as it disavows, is not really, along with Bennetton<sup>21</sup> and the mixed male models of *The Face*, a kind of difference that doesn't make a difference of any kind (1997:135).<sup>22</sup>

A further example of "a kind of difference" that does not subvert hegemonic paradigms is provided by Sue-Ellen Jacobs, feminist anthropologist and Tewa scholar (1997:21, 37-38). Jacobs illustrates the extent to which some have gone to exoticize others with the example of the movement for "remasculinization of certain American and European men (white heterosexual males with classic education) through ethnotourism and ecotourism worlds of Brazil."<sup>23</sup>

Barbara Smith voiced a similar concern in regard to the burgeoning field of black women's literary criticism. Anticipating Halperin's work in questioning the politics of location she writes:

Far too many non-lesbian Black women who are actively involved in defining the African American women's literary renaissance as critics, teachers, readers, and writers completely ignore Black lesbian existence or are actively hostile to it... Ironically excluding or attacking black lesbians often marginalizes the very women who have built the political and cultural foundations that have made this renaissance possible.<sup>24</sup>

In a compelling review of Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning*, a film about "yearning," black and Latino gay working-class men and drag balls in New York, bell hooks observes similarly that:

this current trend in producing colorful ethnicity for the white consumer appetite that makes it possible for blackness to be

commodified in unprecedented ways, and for whites to appropriate black culture without interrogating whiteness or showing concern for the displeasure of blacks (1992b:154).

Halperin is not alone in suggesting that the use of the term “queer” to refer to a conglomerate of constituencies (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered) “sometimes gives a false impression of inclusiveness” (Halperin 1995:64; Butler 1993b). Some (Jay 1994) argue that though pinned together in the public imagination, gay and lesbian communities are often quite separate.

As many scholars have argued, the term “queer” can be misleading in perpetuating the impression that “race and gender no longer pose political problems for queer unity” (Halperin 1995:64; Butler 1993:228). Many suggest that much queer theory continues to be, at best, “thin” on gender and race (Ingrahm 1997:7). Nonwhite women and men (and many non-Westerners) often equate “queer” with the experiences of white, middle-class [and urban] gay men (Halperin 1995:64; Harper 1993:173). Phillip Brian Harper addresses this concern in explaining his practice of using the more clinically derived term “homosexuality” when discussing sexual identifications within African American contexts. He writes, “Indeed, ‘gay’ especially, conjures up in the minds of many who hear it images of a population that is characteristically white, male, and financially well-off; thus it can actually efface, rather than affirm, the experiences of women and men of color” (1993:173). Sagri Dhairyam (1994) submits that “women” also disappear under the rubric of queer. (Aware of this issue throughout my research with black performers, I used the terms lesbian, gay and bisexual when speaking of sexual identity).

An additional reason for my use of “lesbian” over “queer” is related to what some scholars have described as the generational division prevalent in lesbian communities (Patton 1994). Musicians I interviewed for this study ranged in age from thirty-five to sixty. Many were active in lesbian feminism, feminism and black liberatory struggle<sup>25</sup> before the emergence of “queer nation.”<sup>26</sup> I do not argue that black lesbians do not identify as “queer.” I suggest, however, that music consumers and musicians whose experiences inform this research preferred the term “lesbian”.

Judith Butler warns against opposing the theatrical against the political within contemporary queer politics (1993b: 232). I would add women’s music festival “performances” to those Butler describes as an “important set of histories ...in which the increasing politicization of theatricality for queers is at stake.”(1993b:233). Such a history, Butler suggests:

might include traditions of cross-dressing, drag balls, street walking, butch-femme spectacles, the sliding between the “march” (New York City) and the parade (San Francisco); die-ins by ACT UP;<sup>27</sup> the convergence of theatrical work with theatrical activism; performing excessive lesbian sexuality and iconography that effectively counters the desexualization of the lesbian;<sup>28</sup> and tactical interruptions of public forums by lesbian and gay activists in favor of drawing public attention and outrage to the failure of government funding of AIDS research and outreach.

As suggested by noted “queer geographers,” (e.g., Inghram et al 1997) I would not exclude from the list, gender performances such as those I describe in vignettes throughout this study. They are no less significant when performed at gender segregated venues (publicized private space in the case of Michigan).

Writers such as Inghram discuss the differences between public and private spaces for gay men and lesbians. Even though Butler claims that the undermining [of gender norms] is not enough to establish and direct political struggle (1993b:240) I would still add women's music festival social drama to Butler's list.

I am interested in queer theory's applicability not only to gender and sexuality, but to racial politics and music. The concept of inside/outside is particularly intriguing. In addition to meanings that are obvious from the term, inside/outside refers to a theoretical construct scholars (Fuss 1991) have used to describe how groups generally thought to be socially peripheral are frequently "symbolically central" and vice versa.<sup>29</sup> Urging critics to interrogate the "other" of Blackness/Whiteness, Cornel West expresses this concept when he suggests that social theory is needed to examine and explain the historically specific ways in which "Whiteness" is a politically constructed category that is parasitic on "Blackness" (West 1992:213). Gilroy points to this kind of symbiotic relationship when he writes "black political countercultures grew inside modernity in a distinctive relationship of antagonistic indebtedness" (1993: 191).

The more formal interpretations of the inside/outside concept are similar to the work of Feld in "Notes on World Beat" (1988). In this essay Feld explores the "nature of revitalization through appropriation" as evidenced by Paul Simon's collaboration with South African artists on *Graceland*. More specifically, the metaphor inside/outside speaks to what Feld describes as the Africanization of American music and the Afro-Americanization of African music. The consequence

of this loop of influence is that the “despised outside” (that which is African related) is incorporated to an extent by the accepted inside (that which is American [raced white]). Yet, as Feld describes, appropriation has a dual character. In another example in “Dialogue Three” Feld and Charlie Keil (1994:323) address the contradictions involved in music appropriation. Writing about what he believes is central to understanding struggles for musical diversity now, Feld addresses “the extent to which the diversity we believe in is dependent on the forces that we more typically imagine as countering diversity.”

I have devoted brief attention to the potential of queer theory to nuance and expand areas of investigation currently being addressed by ethnomusicologists and critics of black culture. This sharing of influence is not unidirectional. By the same token, some of the theory propounded by postcolonial and black culture theorists is helpful for salvaging gender and sexuality studies from racist theorizing and for illuminating what is at stake for members of various subaltern groups when their interests collide. For example, several black lesbian consumers I interviewed suggested that gay and lesbian events such as local marches and the Gay Games, tend to hire black heterosexual performers (e.g., Patti LaBelle) more often than black lesbian musicians in an effort to appeal to gay white men. Anna Lee adds class to the mix and describes a similar phenomenon when “a sister perceived a black woman performing from a heterosexual position as more professional than an openly black lesbian who performed in a woman-identified context” (Lee 1989:153). A cross-cutting of ideas from race theory and queer theory provide a

framework for interpreting the comments of music consumers who attribute lesbian identity to black women singers boasting certain voice types and repertoires. This is discussed further in chapter five.

As a way of broadening queer theory's scope of inquiry, I suggest that the music of black wim performers is the sonic response to a question posed to me by a black woman attending the 1995 Michigan women's music festival. This particular festigoer, a firefighter from Virginia, asked in passing, "Why don't they put some black in the gay flag?" Use of the flag began in the 1970s, primarily on the west coast. While the flag's six colors are generally held to represent the diversity of the gay/lesbian community, some black women with whom I spoke related their inability to identify with this particular symbol of lesbian/gay "nationhood." The similarity in focus between the interlocutor's question and the title of Gilroy's interrogation of race, nationalism and empire, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, (1987) is too pressing to ignore. Throughout my study, audience members and musicians pointed repeatedly, not to the Du Boisian framing of the "twoness" of their identities, but to the "threeness" of their sex (meaning sexuality), race and gender subjectivities.<sup>30</sup>

My conversation with the firefighter was not the only time the color symbolism of the gay/lesbian movement was broached by music consumers. The founder of a black lesbian retreat center in California, in speaking about black 'sisters who don't pass' but who have not yet assimilated into "lesbian culture" remarked, "I have to teach them to like black and lavender."<sup>31</sup> The interlocutor

referenced black as the symbolic color of the black diaspora and lavender as the symbolic color for lesbian collectivity. As contrasted with the more widely available pink triangles, (a popular symbol for gay and by association, lesbian collectivity), triangles which are half black and half lavender are valuable commodities amongst black lesbians and allies on the festival circuit. Scholars, writing about the recruitment of Nazi history in the affirmation of contemporary gay and lesbian identities, have noted as well that black triangles reference gender specific experiences of women during the holocaust. This recalls Saalfield and Navarro's article, "Shocking Pink Praxis: Race and Gender on the ACT-UP Frontlines" (1991). The authors suggest that a black triangle, not pink, was used to designate lesbians, [also prostitutes, my addition], as vagrants or anti-socials in Nazi Germany. Saalfield and Navarro state that "the pink triangle misrepresents not only people of color but also women."

Although whites may not immediately make this association, the identity of a lesbian or gay person of color comes into crisis when the symbol earmarked for the queer liberation struggle is an oppressively iconic "flesh tone" (Saalfield and Navarro 1993: 347).

See Figure 1.1 for a sketch of the black and lavender flag.

### Research design and methods

The primary data from this study comes from my interviews (1994-95) with twenty black musicians who perform regularly or have performed in wim venues. Of the musicians I interviewed, I observed sixteen in live performance and have watched videotaped performances of four. In addition to musicians and consumers,

I spoke informally with record company executives, music festival producers, writers for trade publications, and artist managers.<sup>32</sup>

This study, ethnographically informed, investigates the community that is created when participants meet together at women's music festivals. As anthropologists would use these terms, the focus of my study is something between a community and a network.<sup>33</sup> An ethnography in the traditional sense—a study of a spatially contiguous community—was not possible since this work deals more with musicians' lives (and livelihoods) as they intersect nodes of an informal network. Festivals held in various locations throughout the country, provide safe communal spaces for women to enact many identities including the erotic and political. Festivals are held in diverse settings such as not-for-profit educational centers, national parks, and college campuses. They reflect efforts to privatize public space and to publicize private space as described by noted “queer geographers” (Ingram et al 1997:4).<sup>34</sup>

Women's music festivals are held throughout the U.S., in a few countries in Europe, various provinces in Canada and in Australia. Many are still held today while others have ceased operations.<sup>35</sup> In an attempt to achieve regional diversity I attended the following women's music festivals: the 1995 Northampton Lesbian Festival, Northampton, Massachusetts; 7th Annual Gulf Coast Womyn's Festival (1995), sponsored by Camp Sister Spirit, Ovett, Mississippi; National Women's Music Festival (1992, '95), Bloomington, Indiana; Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (mid-1980s, 1992, 1995), Oceana County, Michigan; and the '95 West

Coast Women's Music and Comedy Festival, Yosemite National Park, California. The latter four festivals were organized around music while the Northampton Festival did not have music performance as its focal point.<sup>36</sup> Throughout the dissertation, I refer to the festivals either by acronym, for example WCWMCF for the West Coast festival, or by geographic location, e.g., "Michigan" for the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. Regular festigoers tend to prefer the latter method of identification. The current women's music industry is comprised of several independent record labels that produce recordings of women-identified artists as well as others. Independent record companies and business establishments, not necessarily "women-only" continue to market and distribute sound recordings and related promotional products.

Participant observation at women's music festivals enabled me to meet performers and music consumers in women-only venues and acquaint them with my research interests. My initial plan was to interview performers on-site (backstage, so to speak) at festivals but this approach revealed naivete about how things worked. Festival musicians are busy as they perform a variety of roles (e.g., workshop leaders, show emcees, festival ensemble directors). By trial and error I found that the best approach was to meet performers at festivals and request a later in-person or telephone interview. While interviews with consumers were conducted on-site at festivals, those with performers were held in restaurants, cafes or their homes. In attempts to establish rapport with audience members, I stressed my experience in feminist-lesbian organizing. With conservatory trained performers, I

emphasized my conservatory training and interest in black studies. Frequently, musicians asked me if I were a performer. It took me some time to master this aspect of symbolic navigation. At first I said “yes”. I quickly learned however, that while I am an amateur singer and pianist, a more appropriate response to this question was “no.” This response seemed to put musician interviewees at ease and allowed the conversation to remain focused on them.

In addition to interviews, I made surveys available for written completion by participants at two festivals.<sup>37</sup> These written surveys enabled me to gather the names of women for future follow-up and to reach more women than was possible through personal outreach. I also placed an advertisement in *Lesbian Connection*, a newsletter of the lesbian community with a national readership, requesting women who were interested in completing a survey to contact me.<sup>38</sup> In addition, I attended concerts held in gender and sex inclusive venues (e.g., in churches, nightclubs, and concert halls).

Throughout this study, I emphasize the contacts I made with women at festivals, but I also refer to the variety of places women’s music is made including lesbian bars, folk and ethnic cultural festivals, lesbian cruises, and feminist political events. Quite coincidentally, during the early stages of my research, I became a member of the (Washington) D.C. Area Feminist Chorus, an organization that is the focus of Robertson’s comparative view of performance in light of power and gender (1987).

Black women, the politics of naming and the term, “woman-identified”

Hayes: Is music of the Cultural Heritage Choir women-identified?

Tillery: No more than Clara Ward and the Ward Singers. No more than the Caravans. It’s women-identified in that what we are doing is bringing the kitchen table experience to the stage. That type of women-identification has existed in the black community since there was a table...<sup>39</sup>

Musician Linda Tillery’s comment, cited above, highlights the issue of black women as the “subject of women-identified music,” and the incorporation of repertoire with textual themes emphasizing racialized concerns set to and drawing on traditional African American music materials.<sup>40</sup> This fragment of my interview with Tillery reveals a “collision of discourse” (Fox 1994:61) in regard to whether music of the Cultural Heritage Choir is women-identified. The nature of this “collision” is important. Tillery, is one of the most esteemed arrangers, producers, singer/songwriters in the wim network. Her comments shed light on two seemingly mutually exclusive definitions of “women-identifiedness.” Tillery’s comment situates black female a cappella ensembles such as the CHC within a performance realm emanating from a longer (and more broadly defined) tradition of women-identification in African American culture. Tillery suggests a connection, conceptual if not specifically musical, in Afro-American culture between Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir, and black female groups such as the Clara Ward Singers, a popular gospel group of the 1940s.<sup>41</sup>

Tillery's mention of the Clara Ward Singers is intriguing. Clara Ward (1924-1973) initially sang with a trio including her mother and sister. Later the group expanded and their name changed to the Famous Ward Singers. The Wards toured extensively, taking the initiative among gospel groups in making some rather controversial moves.<sup>42</sup> The Ward Singers were the first gospel group to perform at the Newport Jazz Festival—Sweet Honey in the Rock performed at that festival in 1986.<sup>43</sup> In 1961, the Ward Singers were the first gospel group to do nightclub acts; in 1963, they were the first gospel group to sing at Radio City Music Hall in New York. The Ward Singers' style has been described as pop-gospel and they were among its earliest representatives.<sup>44</sup> The Wards were innovative in discarding traditional choir gowns and appearing with elaborate dress and hairstyles.

Tillery's opinion that women-identification in the black community has existed "since there was a table" is confirmed by many black women writers including the black lesbian-feminist critic Lorraine Bethel. Writing in an article about Zora Neale Hurston, Bethel, incorporating familiar, romanticized tropes emblematic of the writing of the time, (1982) writes:

Black women have a long tradition of bonding together...in a Black/women's community that has been a source of vital survival information, psychic and emotional support for us. We have a distinct Black woman-identified folk culture based on our experiences as Black women in this society; symbols, language and modes of expression that are specific to the realities of our lives...Because Black women were rarely among those Blacks and females who gained access to literary and other acknowledged forms of artistic expression, this Black female bonding and Black woman-identification has often been hidden and unrecorded except in the individual lives of Black women through our own memories of our particular Black female tradition.<sup>45</sup>

As mentioned earlier, during the course of my conversations with musicians and audience members, I evoked the term “women-identified music” as it is used by cultural insiders to refer to the women’s music network, a conglomeration of record producers, music distributors, artists, festival producers, visual artists, etc. Bethel’s definition of women-identified more closely approximates the meaning implicit in Tillery’s comment. However, I also suggest that Tillery’s reference to women-identifiedness is more than a historical reference to black women’s bonding. By employing the metaphor of the kitchen table, Tillery implicitly referenced Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, co-founded in the 1980s by black lesbian writer, Barbara Smith, for the purpose of publishing works by black women writers—lesbians in particular.<sup>46</sup>

In the latter interpretation, admittedly my own, the domestic realm, which the kitchen represents, is taken to include black lesbians. Tillery’s ambiguous evocation of “kitchen table experience” in this respect illuminates the fact that the performance of an a cappella ensemble such as the CHC reflects black cultural aesthetics and ethos while speaking to a women’s culture differentiated by sexual orientation. Even while making this argument I am aware of the permeable boundaries of public and private in African American culture. Perhaps Aida Hurtado expresses it best:

The public/private distinction is relevant only for the white middle and upper classes since historically the American state has intervened constantly in the private lives and domestic arrangements of the working class. Women of Color have not had the benefit of the economic conditions that underlie the public/private distinction... (1989).<sup>47</sup>

Though Bethel's comment should be interrogated from black women's many positions, an examination of its sentiment provides partial understanding of the occasional "collisions" I experienced during informal conversations with festigoers (and musicians) about their favorite black women-identified performers. An example is the following interaction between myself and a festigoer when I asked her to name her "favorite" black women-identified artists:

Wilson: Janet Jackson, Oh, I'm sorry. That's not considered women's music. Ubaka Hill, the drumming.<sup>48</sup>

In this exchange, the festigoer adjusted her response to meet what she thought was my expectation as the researcher. Given the sentiment expressed by Bethel, a response of "Janet Jackson" or "Anita Baker," two black popular music singers who have had frequent pop/r&b chart hits, is not surprising.<sup>49</sup> My encounter with Wilson was one which led me to monitor my own assumptions that the women with whom I spoke would speak as cultural "insiders" when it comes to women-identified music. Perhaps it is the failure of researchers to recognize the dual readings of "women-identified" that has perpetuated misunderstandings between black and white musicians and music consumers as well as scholars of wim.

The emergence of a strong lesbian/queer studies literature in the 1990s with its interrogation of sexual identity and a burgeoning liberation movement has supplanted a concern with issues falling under the rubric of "women-identified" (See Darty and Potter 1984; Rich 1980; reprinted 1983).<sup>50</sup> The term is rarely used

in contemporary scholarship to refer to lesbians; it is prevalent however in the literature on women-identified music.

Biddy Martin in “Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference[s]” contextualizes the deployment of the term “women-identified,” suggesting it displaced the term “sexual minority.” Martin describes “woman-identified,” with its legacy in the history of (romantic) friendships between women, as a “figure that proved disabling and reductionist in its own way” in that sexuality became linked with a certain type of feminist politics (1993:279). Writes Martin:

In the context of the ‘sexuality debates,’ renewed interest in butch/fem relationships, in role playing, and in sadomasochism has restored attention to the discontinuities of sex, gender, sexual desire, sexual object choice by introducing the elements of fantasy and play. This work not only has fractured the unity achieved in the woman-identified woman between lesbianism and feminism but has exposed the absence of any consensus about the definition of lesbian identity and its relation to politics (1993:281).

Throughout this study I attempt to strategically employ the terms lesbian and women-identified. Admittedly, “women-identifiedness” is an awkward formulation. During my exchanges with audience members, it became clear that “woman-identifiedness” assumed different meanings for consumers when used in conjunction with discussions about music. For some, the term connotes adherence to feminist philosophies and their advocacy of “women’s issues.” Most often, however, music festival attendees correlated “woman-identifiedness” with lesbian identity.

During my fieldwork, I observed women using the terms “lesbian” and “women-identified” tactically in diverse settings to a) position themselves, b)

negotiate their relationships with me as the researcher and c) anticipate the consequences of an implied readership of this study. Indeed the practice of wim songwriters to pen texts with pronouns referencing gender-ambiguous protagonists, comes from performers not wanting to identify themselves overtly as lesbian. Many do not want to render themselves or their listening public vulnerable to physical attack and/or social ostracism.

Tony Armstrong Jr., former editor and co-founder of *HOTWIRE: Journal of Women's Music and Culture* writes:

Being women-identified may or may not have anything to do with being lesbian, but it's always focused on the female sensibility, and on relationships between females. The specific topic could be mothers and daughters and grandmothers, friends, sisters, the women's movement, lesbian love relationships, the love between women musicians, the relationship a woman has to the world at large, 'the woman in your life is you,' whatever. Being woman-identified means by, for, and about women.

In "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," black lesbian feminist socialist writer Audre Lorde extends her discussion of "naming" to include the use of the term "women-identified":

despite the fact that woman-bonding has a long and honorable history in the African and African American communities, and despite the knowledge and accomplishments of many strong and creative women-identified black women in the political, social and cultural fields, heterosexual black women often tend to ignore or discount the existence and work of black lesbians...Part of this need to misname and ignore black lesbians comes from a very real fear that openly women-identified black women who are no longer dependent upon men for their self-definition may well reorder our whole concept of social relationships (Lorde 1984).

Writing in "New Notes on Lesbianism" (1983) Cheryl Clarke opines:

I name myself "lesbian" because this culture oppresses, silences, and destroys lesbians, I name myself "lesbian" because I want to be visible to other Black lesbians...I name myself "lesbian" because being woman-identified has kept me sane. I call myself "Black" too, because Black is my perspective, my aesthetic, my politics, my vision, my sanity.

Contestation over the terms "lesbian" and "women-identified" strongly affects self-conceptualizations of the genre by some black women-identified musicians and audience members.

My interview with Michelle Lancaster and Pamela Rogers, co-directors of the black women's a cappella ensemble, *In Process...*, helped clarify the ambivalence many black women experience in regard to the term women's music. This ambivalence is similar to the widely cited tension black women experience with terms such as "feminism." Lancaster's comments, for example, belie a determination to keep the signifier of "women's music" open and to defend against its association with lesbianism exclusively or with a definition of feminism that is raced white, thereby curtailing feminism's relevance to women of color. After contemplating my question, Lancaster, (an attorney), responded:

Well - what do you mean by "women's music" - is that music that women sing? Is it music that deals with women's issues, women's lives? Is it music that deals with feminist issues, lesbianism...?<sup>51</sup>

My response was that since *In Process...* had sung at women's music festivals [e.g., Sisterfire, NWMF<sup>52</sup>] and planned to continue doing so, they [group members] would have a good idea [as to the definition of "women's music."] In the following

excerpt Rogers gives voice to an ambiguity that emerged in conversations I had with some black women in the early stages of my fieldwork.

I think we sing at events based on whether or not what the event is about something that we can relate to - and it's not necessarily - I don't know if I think that qualifies us as a feminist group - we still sing the same music that we sing everywhere else. The music that we sing is more about women's lives. It's about political struggles. It's about our tradition, so it's about us trying to be who we are.

The gist of Rogers' comment is that feminism has a narrow compass. According to Rogers, feminism is not about women's lives writ large or about larger political struggles. Rogers opined:

I think it [our music] could apply to almost any situation so I don't think it's kind of aimed at any [constituency? cause?] in particular -- so I don't know if I'd call it women's music except that we are women and we are singing it - and we're singing about our lives in that way.

As we were talking, I thought of *In Process*'... repertoire and how it reflects women's concerns, including AIDS, homelessness, and features textual references to prominent black women historically (e.g., educator Mary McLeod Bethune, civil rights activists Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker, journalist and anti-lynching crusader Ida Wells). Rogers said that it is important for the ensemble "to let other people know that these are black women who made a difference, and that they've influenced our lives. And we are trying to pattern our lives after those women."<sup>53</sup>

During the course of my fieldwork, especially at times when I assumed I was "off duty" as a researcher, I occasionally described the focus of my study, as "black feminist music." For some this moniker referred to black musicians of wim

while others, particularly those unfamiliar with this sphere of music making, thought I was describing a broader range of black female recording artists. The inexactitude with which I informally described the parameters of my study led casual acquaintances (e.g., at bus or subway stops) to conclude that my research encompassed an area that was “too broad.” Contestation over the subject of “feminism”—especially as it applies to music, continues to produce debate among scholars and listeners/audience members. Black lesbian writer, Tonia Bryan, addresses use of the term “feminist” to describe the music of black women artists from a different vantage point from that discussed by Rogers and Lancaster:

They are four black dykes up late on community radio. finally allowed to take over the air waves they're spinnin' tunes and talkin' about livin' in the life. afterwards one of them remarks that she would really like to see the show concentrate on more feminist oriented music. like joan armatrading. does HER feminism have room for patra's feminist thighs? India's feminist house? Chaka's feminist come-back? mary j's feminist booty? Patti's feminist bi-curiosity? ru paul's feminist falsies? Adeva's feminist attitude? tlc's feminist condoms? mc lyte's feminist make-over? swv's feminist nails? anita's feminist rapture? donna's feminist hot love? diana's feminist weave? WHOSE feminism is she talkin' 'bout anyhow? all i know is sometimes when i get tired of deconstructing, decolonizing, theorizing, strategizing and empowering, my girls bring me back from the edge. renew me with their words. stroke me with their soul. give me the strength to go on.<sup>54</sup>

Maintaining a distinction in conversation between women's music and women-identified music emerged as an important aspect of my research methods. In grant applications and in my dissertation proposal I made frequent reference to “women's music.” However, upon embarking on the research I found that this term had negative connotations for many black interviewees. In retrospect, I had allowed my own comfort with the term to dictate its use in my interactions with

some black performers and audience members. In innumerable ways, black women and some women's music record company officials related their preference for the term "women-identified" which they characterized as being less exclusively associated with white, middle class lesbians. After discussing musical style, Rogers returned to the issue of women's music as though it had been turning over in her mind for some time:

So, I don't know how it's really women's music, except that we're women doing it. I don't know. Although it definitely is about us, although I don't think it's exclusive to women because we - our struggle is not just as women. It's for our whole race...<sup>55</sup>

The interactions described above partially illustrate what is at stake for music consumers and performers as they contemplate difference, black women's histories and politics in the cultural terrain of women-identified music.

#### Professional/personal risks in (sexual) identity disclosure

My decision to focus on lesser known black musicians within this sphere has led me to a heightened awareness of ethical issues regarding identity disclosure, confidentiality agreements and the rights of study participants. These issues cast a long memory in social science research, most notably in the history of research "on" and with African Americans. Scholars have illuminated case studies of ethical issues in anthropological fieldwork (e.g., AAA's Handbook on Ethical Issues in Anthropology 1987, Cassell and Jacobs eds.) and have traced sources of

anthropology's encounter with ethics since its emergence as a discipline (Wax 1987).

Within the Society for Ethnomusicology there is a sub-committee whose purpose is to examine issues related to ethics. In 1994, the Board of the American Musicological Society (AMS) appointed a committee to draft a statement of guidelines for ethical conduct. Encouragingly, several ethnomusicologists have written about ethical issues and intellectual property rights (Seeger 1996; Slobin 1992; Keil 1994). Seeger (1996) writes: "many ethnomusicologists find it difficult to write about popular music because they cannot cite song lyrics or include recordings with their books without a great deal of difficulty." Discussing the ethics of intellectual property, Seeger suggests researchers obtain either tape-recorded or written permission of participants, when making any recording in the field, at a concert or in a studio (1996:101).

The issue of "informed consent" is salient to this discussion as is whether benefit (or harm) might result from this study if community members/consultants are identified by name. Invigorated by the recent emergence of queer theory and sobered by an awareness of these issues as they resound in African American social science research, I suggest that ethnomusicological investigation into gender and sexual subjectivities draws attention once again to ethical issues in ethnographic fieldwork and writing.<sup>56</sup> Because of the social and political contexts in which wim festivals are situated, this study includes no photographs, videos, or field recordings of performers or of festival attendees. Commercial recordings by the artists

discussed herein can be purchased at many large music conglomerants, through mail order or at gay/lesbian, feminist or alternative book stores.

The musicians and audience members I interviewed gave me verbal permission to make use of their interview data in this study. To the best of my knowledge, at the time of the interview, each respondent understood that the dissertation is, for all intents and purposes, a published manuscript that eventually becomes available to the general public. After the interviews were conducted, I learned of requirements that the Human Subjects Research office on our campus has for scholars conducting research projects such as mine. At the behest of personnel from this office, I attempted to obtain written permission to reproduce excerpts from each musician's interview and to divulge her name in the dissertation. I did my best to comply with the request of the HSR office. The HSR office did not collect or require copies of the signed release forms; nor did they request copies of the signed consent forms. The fact that there are no clear and consistent guidelines in this area made for a frustrating venture. However, I again stress that I had already secured verbal permission from interviewees to use their names and excerpts of our discussions in the dissertation. With anticipation, I looked forward to reading the American Anthropological Association's new Code of Ethics which the organization approved in June of 1998. Of the Code's eight sections, section IIIA, point 4 addresses most directly the ethics of the researcher's negotiation of informed consent with study participants. The last sentence of this paragraph reads: "Informed consent, for the purposes of this code, does not necessarily imply

or require a particular written or signed form. It is the quality of the consent, not the format, that is relevant.”<sup>57</sup>

Since the Society for Ethnomusicology had not set forth disciplinary guidelines for conducting such research, I wondered how my experience as a researcher compared with that of my colleagues and with that of established professors. To illustrate the range of ways ethnomusicologists have approached this issue, I offer the results of an informal survey I conducted of ethnomusicologists in academia. In Kingsburyesque style, I have used pseudonyms in referring to individuals and to the institutions with which they are affiliated.<sup>58</sup> The scholars I surveyed are graduates of various universities, all of them in the U.S. They approach ethnomusicology from a variety of perspectives, some anthropologically and others musicologically.

Ben Peng, teaching at a southwestern university, reported he had obtained verbal consent to publish the input of research “subjects.” He stated that as a graduate student, he had not been made aware of an office at his alma mater similar to the Human Subjects Research Office at the University of Washington. Peng stated however, that as a faculty member, he has “been made aware” of a similar office on his campus. Sam Johnson, a (Ph.D.) graduate of a northeastern university and currently working outside academia, conducted dissertation research with young people. Johnson reported he did not want “to freak them out” by asking them to sign something. He did, however, obtain written permission from some primary consultants after his dissertation was completed. Jane Garfield, teaching in

the California area, responded that “if consent forms are needed for ethnographic fieldwork, then we don’t have a discipline.” Timothy Rancher, a professor at a northwestern university replied, “thank goodness you are getting your signatures now.” An assistant professor and graduate of a midwestern university, Dale Jones, stated he had obtained verbal consent from his consultants, all of whom were involved in the popular music industry. He added, “If a book comes out, I’ll get written consent.” Finally, Alice Duvall, also teaching at a southwestern university, reported that she designed a consent form and had it reviewed by an attorney who said that her signed form was not legally binding.

My efforts to obtain documented consent to use the real names of musicians in this study were met with varying degrees of success. In instances where I was unable to obtain written consent from musicians to divulge their identities in the study, I refer to them by pseudonym. As a research endeavor concerned with culture analysis and as a project inextricably intertwined with musicians’ lives, I have tried not to privilege divulged identities. As I mentioned earlier, some of the conversations I had with musicians about their music and sexual identities were characterized by ambiguity when I introduced the terms, “lesbian” and “women-identified.” I interpreted musicians’ slippery use of the term “lesbian” and/or adroit avoidance of the term “women-identified” as a strategy for identity management vis a vis homophobia and repercussions that could ensue were a musician’s comments regarding sexual identity found “on record.” During my interactions with musicians, it became apparent that indeed the semantic implications of terms that I

used were significant. It is one thing to welcome inclusion in a study about ones musical contribution to a particular sphere and its relationship to ones social identities but it is another matter entirely to fear reification and exploitation of aspects of one's identity. In most cases, I have used musicians' professional names when discussing their performances and recordings. In contrast, where the discussion concerns an aspect of a performer's identity such as the body, I use a pseudonym. This study draws on interviews afforded me by musicians, some of whom identify as straight and others as lesbian or bisexual.

The disclosure process has shown me that consent, rather than operating statically and unilaterally, is negotiated in a discursive field comprised of the regulatory efforts of musicians, researchers/faculty, and institutional review boards supported by federal agencies. In considering the ethnomusicologist's imperative to "sign on the dotted line" I am not the first to suggest that overlapping discourses of gender, race and sexuality are immersed in the field of "multiple-and mobile - power relations" (Foucault 1978).

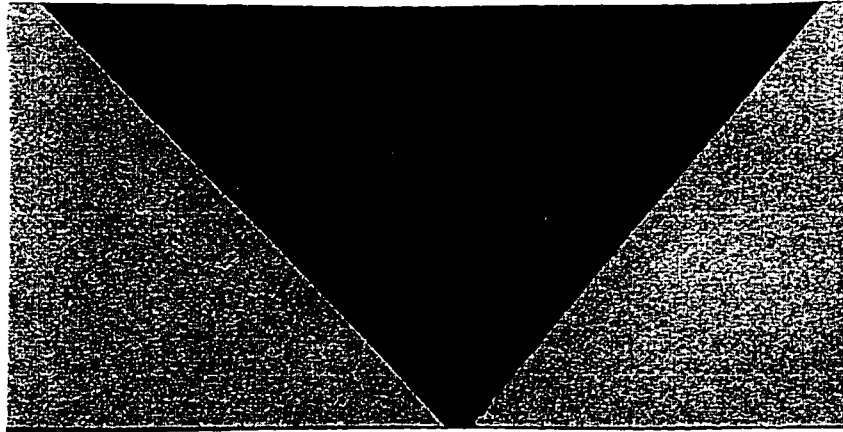


Figure 1. Black and Lavender Flag

### CHAPTER III

#### **Black performers of women-identified music and uses of black tradition**

*The music people are drawn to, isn't always connected to their ethnicity.*

singer/songwriter, Deidre McCalla<sup>1</sup>

*All our music comes back to justice, the need for equity, that we have a tradition.*

Pam Rogers, co-director, In Process...<sup>2</sup>

*And how has she solved the ever present nappy hair situation? is her only choice dreadlocked radicality? has she opted for a slick zhane sensibility? are wigs more her thang? or is a sharp razor her styling tool of choice?*

black lesbian writer, Tonia Bryan<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, I examine notions of black identity as they emerged from my conversations with black performers of women-identified music. Throughout, I incorporate lines of argument outlined by scholars from a variety of fields including cultural, black, feminist, and gender studies. Many of these arguments address ways that blackness is performed or exhibited.

Music, especially ideas about what constitutes “black music,” has played an integral role in debates about black identity. Many have described black identity reclamation through music-making, as exhilarating and liberating. Recent discussions of black identity have acknowledged the paradox that arises however, as notions about blackness, authenticity and music coincide with and/or fuel essentialized assumptions about black people. Ronald Rodano puts it this way:

While the discourses of authenticity have obviously provided an important defense against a racist and oppressive culture and served in shaping African American collective memory, they have also continued to validate notions of difference that limit the extent of black self-definition (1995:84).

As though to anticipate Rodano's comments, Gilroy writes:

Where music is thought to be emblematic and constitutive of racial difference rather than just associated with it, how is music used to specify general issues pertaining to the problem of racial authenticity and the consequent self-identity of the ethnic group? (Gilroy 1993b:76).

As numerous scholars have observed, it is not possible to completely separate racial and sexual axes of social regulation and power; racializing and gendered norms are articulated, one through the other. During the course of my fieldwork, several musicians intimated, sometimes "off the record," that because of their musical style and textual emphasis, many black men and women audience members have regarded them as "not black enough" and yet "too lesbian." Concomitantly, black performers shared that many white lesbians regard them as "not lesbian enough" and "too black." These tendencies in critique revolve around the notion of an essential black and/or lesbian subject. Here, I explore what happens when differences, as is typically the case, "refuse to coalesce around a single axis of differentiation" (Hall 1997:131), such as for example, an essential black (or lesbian) subject.

Essentialism assumes that certain characteristics are inherently part of the core being of a group (Lubiano 1997:109). At the core of essentialist critiques are notions of what constitutes an authentic member of "xx" culture or society. Identities constructed around these beliefs frequently provide the basis for oppression and resistance on the part of a group or an individual. Critical in this venture is Diana Fuss' argument that essentialism is not in and of itself progressive or reactionary.<sup>4</sup> In this light, an appropriate question for ethnomusicological

investigation is: if aspects of a performance reflect essentialism or, for that matter, anti-essentialism, what motivates its deployment?

My interviews indicate that for many black women, the experience of being a musician in the predominantly white lesbian field of women-identified music is one in which audience members may decide that a black performer embodies no essences felt to be constitutive of either black or lesbian identity. Interviews with black artists illuminate their experiences as they bridge two different interpretive communities, each of which is comprised of many factions.

### Notions of blackness

Throughout my fieldwork, I had frequent exchanges with black musicians about how their musical acts either thwarted and/or affirmed notions of blackness generally held by music consumers. In separate interviews I spoke with twin sisters, Sharon and Sandra Washington, singers/songwriters/guitarists, who, before a relatively recent hiatus from the women's music concert circuit, enjoyed a lengthy career as *The Washington Sisters*. While discussing consumer expectations in regard to blackness and musical style, Sharon Washington, (a tenured professor in education at a midwestern university), described the Washington Sisters' musical style as eclectic. She said that in the beginning she was unaware that because of the duo's musical style, some audience members would question their blackness.

"Later," she said,

I found out that black women had questions. There were times when I was just really angry. I feel like I can be a black woman and sing

folk music. It doesn't mean that I'm less black. I was naive in the beginning but since then, I've gained awareness. Now I have an understanding about people's reactions to me. It's about where they're at, not me...<sup>5</sup>

In some ways my conversations with Sandra Washington and her sister Sharon, typified discussions I had with other black women musicians who grew up in middle class families. Sandra Washington spoke about her middle-class suburban upbringing and its effect on the ways she enacts black identity. She also spoke to the perceptions of music consumers:

Eileen: Have you ever felt that people expected you to express your black identity in a particular way?

Sandra: I'm sad to say this but mostly that's from other African American women. They never get what they think of as "black," if that's their expectation. But if they are coming to be entertained, that works.

Eileen: Do you have an idea of what they are looking for or what they think "black" will be?

Sandra: Yes, a lot of times it is not what my sister and I are. We were raised in a completely white community...There were no more than ten black kids out of 500 in our elementary school...We don't speak black english. We don't have an urban patois. We aren't urban.<sup>6</sup>

My discussions with the Washington sisters allowed us to explore themes often commented upon by contemporary critics of black culture who problematize racism as encountered by—and this is Gilroy and many others—the black petit bourgeoisie (Wallace 1990; Dyson 1996; hooks 1993; Cose 1993; Gilroy 1993a). These writers have written persuasively about the association of certain markers (e.g., education, recreational pursuits, musical style, geographical location) with

“whiteness” rather than with “blackness.” Preoccupation with the latter is prevalent in popular music criticism and black culture criticism including dance and film studies.<sup>7</sup> Sandra Washington brings to the fore a frequently stated idea that “the urban has become virtually synonymous with notions of blackness and blight in public discourse” (Smith 1997:2).<sup>8</sup> Reflecting on remarks Washington made earlier, I am led to ask whether she deliberately counterposes the performance of black identity with entertainment. In other words, does the performance of black identity involve a seriousness, a moral or political content that “entertainment” per se, does not necessarily entail? In a similar vein, a comment by respected black composer/pianist Mary Watkins, much acclaimed in wim circles, intimated at the association of black identity performance with “a message.” Watkins opined that some women audience members “can’t tell you are black unless you are angry.”<sup>9</sup>

I spoke with Sharon Washington about how performances of *The Washington Sisters* were received at various music festivals in Canada. There the duo has performed before general, gender-inclusive audiences. Describing *The Washington Sisters* in terms of musical style, (Sharon) Washington opined, “I have a hard time [describing our musical style]. I usually just say that we’re eclectic and we do a variety of styles. I guess we say that the music that we do is called “heartfelt sound.” It runs the gamut. But I wouldn’t necessarily call it worldbeat. I think of worldbeat as music with no European influence.”<sup>10</sup>

My interaction with Sharon Washington underscores that when it comes to categorization of musical genres, performers and audience members may have

rather different notions. Assigning descriptive labels to particular musical styles is a task carried out not only by the performer and record industry officials but the audience as well. As this study demonstrates, audience perceptions may contrast significantly with those of the performer.

Notions of essentialized black identities as alluded to by *The Washington Sisters* are illustrated by Reginald McKnight in his essay, “Confessions of a Wannabe Negro” (1993). Addressing his early schooldays encounters with fellow black and white students who questioned his black identity, McKnight writes, “I think these people have been trying to suggest to me that though I exhibit blackness I perform it rather poorly” (1993:103). McKnight describes numerous instances in which authenticity of his enactment of blackness was questioned. He relates for example, that as a young person his speech pattern was frequently described by his black and white peers, as “white.” This observation, he notes, was not necessarily a compliment. In the eyes of some of his black friends, McKnight’s usage of standard English rendered him less black and his white associates considered him, at best, a masquerader. There are similarities between the experiences McKnight outlines and Sandra Washington’s comment that she and her sister did not grow up speaking black English—as though the latter were a requisite component of black identity.

According to this line of thinking, performers whose musical styles fall outside those considered traditionally black (e.g., gospel, blues, jazz, rap), are excluded from the canon of black artists. To illustrate, McKnight mentions black

musicians Tracy Chapman, Richie Havens, and Jimi Hendrix. Chapman and Havens, both of whose style is reminiscent of those popularized during the folk music revival, (e.g., solo singer with acoustic guitar) and Jimi Hendrix (e.g., psychedelic rock guitar virtuoso), are not generally credited for their mastery of the idioms with which they are associated. McNight elaborates, "I know of no one who lauds such artists for their mastery of art forms that could be referred to as decidedly "white," except a handful of rock bands who argue, and quite rightly, that rock is a product of black culture as much as it is of white culture..." (1993).

Artists may be excluded from the canon of black music for varying reasons. In Hendrix' case it may have to do with his appropriation of a rock style, which ironically, is a white appropriation of black electric guitar techniques and a legacy of urban blues performance of the 1950s. A related notion is that an association with technology, for example electric guitar, moves a black musician outside the parameters of blackness. The latter is an erroneous idea perpetuated in black and white discourses, as interpreters decide who is "in" and who is "out" of the canon of black music traditions. Paradoxically, it may be the association with "folkness" (e.g., acoustic guitar/solo singer) that excludes artists such as Chapman and Havens from the canon of blackness. Ironically, Havens' earlier recordings and Chapman's most recent live performances exhibit greater incorporation of stylistic features that might be described as traditionally "black."<sup>11</sup>

With a musical style that some critics describe as country, musician Deidre McCalla suggests that the music she performs, in a "singer/songwriter folk vein,"

does not typically access a black audience.<sup>12</sup> McCalla observes, “stylistically, it’s not a music that black kids grow up listening to.” Describing her experience attending an all girls Catholic boarding school, McCalla, a graduate of Wisconsin Conservatory, said that her early music influences were Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan, and James Taylor. She added that “a whole lot of black people don’t have that experience.”<sup>13</sup> I asked McCalla, who has been with Olivia since 1985, how she felt about being described as a performer of country music:

...Country music has changed so much in the last ten years...what is defined as country music is now so broad. Ten years ago, you were talking about 101 strings, pedal steel guitars, lush, boring, sappy arrangements...Ten years ago, Mary Chapin Carpenter wouldn’t have been considered country. Now, it has more to do with marketing and how Nashville has changed. The country music I like is more contemporary country music.<sup>14</sup>

I interviewed a white lesbian couple at the West Coast Women’s Music and Comedy Festival who reacted negatively toward white singer/songwriters in the folksong revival vein (solo singer accompanied by acoustic guitar). Interestingly, they were more receptive to black women-identified musicians such as Deidre McCalla, performing in ostensibly similar idioms. My fieldwork suggests that the performance style of the standard-bearers of wim, that of solo voice with guitar, is read by many consumers within this sphere as “old-fashioned.” I discuss consumer notions of technology and “the difference a generation makes” in chapter six.

Providing a contrasting example, at least one black composer I interviewed expressed her perception that occasionally the boundaries of performers and musical genre are “policed” by music consumers. The composer elaborated that “a lot of white women would not accept jazz from black women but would accept it

from white composers and players,” a phenomenon she found frustrating. Though an isolated instance in my research experience, the composer’s experience represents perhaps “side b” of the consumer appraisal and incorporation of McCalla that I mentioned earlier. By extension, according to this same composer who also writes in classical idioms, it might be argued that the performer presumed to be extending boundaries for her “race” through genre selection accrues more symbolic capital in women-identified spheres.

Reflecting on the fact that white artists are frequently credited with having mastered traditionally black idioms, and underscoring a sentiment expressed by several musicians of this study, McKnight writes:

...it appears to me that black-influenced whites are very often thought to be deepened and ennobled by such processes, while white-influenced blacks are regarded as weakened, diluted, less black (1993:104).

With this observation, McKnight juxtaposes two related but different processes of interpretation. In support of his former point, McKnight recalls that “blue-eyed soul” is a term frequently used in describing white performers who take up traditionally black idioms.<sup>15</sup> McKnight offers a number of examples of the latter including Eric Clapton, and Madonna. The rapper Vanilla Ice, who emerged in 1990, might also be included as might the Young Rascals, a group from the 1960s which began appearing on the playlists of black radio outlets. Early country music stars such as Jimmie Rodgers and Bill Monroe “blackened up” routinely, as did vaudevillian Sophie Tucker (Lott 1995:5). Reebee Garafolo offers a relatively

recent and controversial example of “blackening up” involving the case of white, British-born George Michael who won the 1989 American Music Award for Best Black Male Vocal (1993:234). Conjuring a haunting parallel to an earlier discourse of racial politics and popular music, Eric Lott writes, “Every time you hear an expansive white man drop into his version of black English, you are in the presence of blackface’s unconscious return” (1995:5).

McKnight’s second point is that there is no term comparable to “blue-eyed soul” that references the competencies blacks display in mastering idioms associated preponderantly with whites. In an attempt to account for this discrepancy McKnight asks:

Are we to conclude that this difference lies in the notion that blackness-as-performance is more neatly extricable from blackness-as-being than whiteness-as-performance is from whiteness-as-being? Is blackness-as-performance somehow regarded as a free-floating entity, belonging to no one in particular, while whiteness-as-performance can, and should, only belong to whites? (1993:104).

McKnight’s intervention about how some critics seem to regard whiteness-as-performance as belonging to whites only, recalls Butler’s suggestion that:

Drag is not the putting on of a gender that belongs properly to some other group, i.e., an act of expropriation or appropriation that assumes that gender is the rightful property of sex, that ‘masculine’ belongs to ‘male’ and ‘feminine’ belongs to ‘female’...Where that notion of the ‘proper’ operates, it is always and only improperly installed as the effect of a compulsory system (Butler 1991:312).

In contemplating the issues McKnight raises, I recall a line of inquiry pursued by Sagri Dhairyam in “Racing the Lesbian, Dodging the White Critic” (1994) in which she addresses the writings of some noted queer theorists. Dhairyam underscores

McKnight's concern about the apparent fixed nature of "race," discussions of the latter as a social construct to the contrary:

The oft-evoked contrast between the visibility of race and the invisibility of queer sexuality, then, hierarchizes queer sexuality over race by ignoring the cultural terrorism that maintains race as a stable category to contain its manifestations (1994:32).

Dhairyam argues further that some theorists write as though, "unlike sexuality, other identities of race or class have more at stake in foundationalist identity politics and are therefore less able to mobilize subversive drag" (1994:30). Dhairyam's comment anticipates a discussion I carry out in chapter four concerning concrete, rather than abstract encounters with racism experienced by black performers in wim spheres.<sup>16</sup>

At the most, I would argue, black competencies in performance are phrased in terms of their white counterparts (e.g., statements such as "she is a black Ava Gardner"). Earlier precedents for appraisals of this type are exemplified by the experiences of some black concert sopranos of the late nineteenth century. The African American music historian Eileen Southern (1997:246) documents the career of the much celebrated soprano Matilda Sisieretta Jones (1869-1933).<sup>17</sup> Jones was referred to as the "Black Patti," a comparison to the reigning prima donna of the period, white concert soprano, Adelina Patti. By the mid-1890s, the black prima donna had almost disappeared from the nation's concert halls because of a lack of public interest. Southern describes how after successful concert tours in Europe, Asia and Africa, Jones' managers, in 1896 abruptly launched her into a

new career as the featured artist in a touring vaudeville company called Black Patti's Troubadours.<sup>18</sup>

This section was inspired by my conversations with black musicians who intimated that some audience members have suggested that their music is “not black enough.” In the section that follows, I discuss a related but different phenomenon—the evocation of black tradition by performers of women-identified music.

#### Black women's a cappella ensembles and the use of black tradition

*A lot of people think of spirituals as being that old slave, Uncle Tom music. What they don't realize is that this is teaching music; that in the sounds, in the voices and the melodies - that people would sing as they were being beaten, tortured and chased - that this was the music, these were the voices that helped us to survive. And a lot of kids - they don't have a clue about that. That's what is so important about the work and research that Linda does...trying to reenergize this incredible culture of ours.*

Melanie DeMore, member, *Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir*

An investigation of black women's a cappella ensembles requires familiarity with black women's cultural and political history, audience research and interviews with musicians. Together, they provide a framework for understanding the favorable appraisals of *In Process...* and *Linda Tillery and the CHC* by attendees of women's music festivals. My interviews with members of *In Process...* and *Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir*, provide an interesting pathway through which to further consider, the deployment of blackness in wim spheres. In the introductory chapter, I discussed the role of African American music in the civil

rights movement of the early 1960s. Several musical legacies of that period have a bearing on the emergence of black women's a cappella ensembles discussed in this study. One was the work of the SNCC Freedom Singers, an a cappella ensemble co-founded by the late Cordell Reagon in the early 1960s, that participated in voter registration drives in Albany, Georgia. Buoyed by cadres of cultural activists, the Freedom Singers translated SNCC's belief in the efficacy of civil disobedience into music and song.<sup>19</sup> An early member of the Freedom Singers was Bernice Johnson Reagon who founded *Sweet Honey in the Rock* in 1973.<sup>20</sup> *Sweet Honey* figured prominently as a cultural "bridge" in musical style and in thematic content, between the aftermath of the civil rights movement and the women's movement (Lont 1992). For black musicians and consumers, the performance of traditional African American music a cappella in various spheres is a powerful enactment of black identity in a gendered frame.<sup>21</sup>

*In Process...* is a seven member a cappella ensemble in Washington, D.C. founded by Bernice Reagon and Sweet Honey in the Rock. The ensemble emerged from a vocal workshop Reagon and SHIR conducted in the District of Columbia. The workshop was designed to train another "generation" of singers in the African American choral singing tradition. Bernice Johnson Reagon and Sweet Honey in the Rock founded the vocal workshop out of a need to be "grounded in their home community." As part of their quest for continual growth and development, in June 1981, workshop participants began performing under the name, *In Process....*<sup>22</sup> I attended *In Process...* concerts in Washington, D.C. from 1992-94. I also

observed the ensemble's performance at the 1995 National Women's Music Festival in Bloomington and interviewed co-directors, Michelle Lancaster and Pam Rogers.

After years of a solo career in wim, Linda Tillery founded *Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir* (CHC) in 1991. The ensemble is based in California's Bay Area. At the time of this writing CHC is a sextet singing a cappella accompanied by occasional harmonica and hand-held percussion instruments, including shekere, tambourine, calabash and pounding stick. (At first, I was perplexed by the continued use of the moniker "a cappella" to describe these ensembles since all three ensembles, Sweet Honey in the Rock included, make proficient use of hand-held percussion instruments in performance. Recently, however, the meaning of the term has shifted to refer to the privileging of the voice and lyrics in musical arrangements.) The CHC's arrangements reflect a broad African American tradition in which the voice is used to imitate instruments and incorporates vocables. Perhaps the most renowned proponent of this practice is singer/composer Bobby McFerrin with whom several CHC members have collaborated. Women's music festivals audiences have been delighted by their vocal approximations of instruments, (e.g., trombone, trap set, bass, trumpet), reminiscent of the style of Sweet Honey in the Rock.<sup>23</sup>

*In Process...* and *Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir* have different performance agendas reflected in their quite distinct repertoires. In addition to a traditional repertoire, *In Process...* performs songs by contemporary

composers, some of whom are black women (e.g., Michelle Lancaster, Ysaye Maria Barnwell).<sup>24</sup> Remarked Pam Rogers:

I'm glad that the [our] music appeals to women because I think that a lot of the music that women have listened to is very abusive of women and it's been music that has put women down, so I feel like I want our music to make women feel better - proud of the fact that they are the women who did things...<sup>25</sup>

The CHC, on the other hand, performs only traditional African American music (e.g., “Fix Me,” “Hammer Ring”) or songs so standard in the repertoire that they function as traditional.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, though members of *In Process...* and the *CHC* are quick to differentiate their ensembles from each other—and from Sweet Honey in the Rock—there are several obvious similarities. Firstly, members of each ensemble bring varied musical backgrounds to the group. For example, each member of the CHC, pursues a solo or duo career in addition to ensemble involvement. Secondly, according to the consumers I interviewed, the stage presentation of all three ensembles conveys self-respect and dignity. Thirdly, membership of all three ensembles is comprised of black women who either in writing (Reagon 1993) or in private conversation refer to themselves as “middle-aged,” some identify as middle-class while others have working-class backgrounds.

Of greater significance is that both the *CHC* and *In Process...* devote attention to the reclamation of black history through music. Audience education is prominent in this process. In her role as director of the CHC, Linda Tillery often adopts a “professorial stance” as she shares information, antiphonally, with predominantly white audience members about the significance of African American

worksongs and spirituals. In a discussion with *In Process...* members in which the artists emphasized the sense of mission that informs their choice of repertoire, Lancaster remarked:

But do they [black music groups such as Take 6] make the connection that their style of singing goes back to a particular era, a particular genre of music? I would tend to argue “No.” That would just be a wild guess on my part. But that’s what we try to do. We’re not just singers – we don’t just get out there and sing and say “okay, this sounds good.” We attempt to recreate an original sound...<sup>27</sup>

Members of both ensembles credit Bernice Johnson Reagon as a “keeper of the flame,”<sup>28</sup> (presumably the flame of African American a cappella music performance as a purveyor of cultural continuity.) Throughout fieldwork conducted for this study, I interviewed black women artists about the African American spiritual as a site of authentic black expression. Lancaster alludes to notions of authenticity in the excerpt cited earlier when she refers to “an original sound” that ensembles such as *In Process...* attempt to recreate. The employment of music for social critique is an important aspect of African American musical heritage, as is the reworking of older pre-existent materials (e.g., spirituals, gospel songs) that are recontextualized as secular protest vehicles, and congregational singing (including accompanying stylistic devices such as lining out). Lining out is a process of music transmission whereby the song leader iterates a line of song text for audience members, immediately prior to their singing the phrase. All of these elements can be found in the performances of *In Process...*<sup>29</sup> and *Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir*.<sup>30</sup>

A cappella ensemble members I interviewed described their practice of drawing upon traditional African American repertoires as “following in the footsteps” of folk singers such as Odetta and gospel music singers such as Mahalia Jackson (1912-1972). Odetta, considered by many to be a foremother in the broadest sense, of the women-identified music scene, performed at the National Women’s Music Festival in 1991 (Eder et al 1995:499). She had also performed there many years earlier. *In Process...* for example has sung songs by Odetta, amongst them, “If You Can’t Walk, Fly.”

The self-consciousness I have described in terms of black women’s a cappella ensembles and the performance of spirituals is not limited to wim contexts. Spiritual performance in secular spheres has been imbued with a certain type of self-consciousness since their inception as concert art. In bringing spirituals (some “reworked” with updated text, others with original text) to the secular and public stage, ensembles such as *In Process...*, the *CHC* and Sweet Honey in the Rock are heirs to a legacy of music, black identity and self-consciousness that extends back to the late nineteenth century. This was aptly demonstrated at a concert I attended in Oakland, California.

Women-only concerts are not the only venues in which *In Process...* and *Linda Tillery and the CHC* perform. Both ensembles have performed at numerous gender inclusive folk festivals and have participated in benefit concerts for non-profit organizations. The concert, entitled “*Hold On: The New Spirituals Project*”

sponsored by Redwood Cultural Work, a non-profit branch of Redwood Records, provided me an opportunity to see *Linda Tillery and the CHC* in an open admission performance. The *New Spirituals Project* is an annual program whereby a contemporary composer is commissioned to pen a suite of spirituals based on traditional African American musical elements. The year I conducted research for this study, Bernice Johnson Reagon had been awarded the commission. Performed by the Redwood House Choir, the first half of the concert consisted of Reagon's, *Anybody Here?*, a suite which the composer characterized as a set of "new spirituals for modern times." Linda Tillery and the CHC's performance of a set of traditional African American spirituals and other songs popularized by the Hampton College (Institute) Choir in the last quarter of the nineteenth century made up the second half of the concert.<sup>31</sup>

More familiar to contemporary audiences (and perhaps even to some scholars) than the "Hampton" spirituals are those sung by the Fisk Singers during the post (Civil)-war years. Initially, these singers were students at Fisk, an historically black college established in 1866 as part of an effort to provide education for emancipated blacks.<sup>32</sup>

I suggest that contemporary ensembles such as *Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir* as well as *In Process...* follow in a tradition established by the small ensembles preceding them by over a century. The repertoire of these small ensembles consisted of traditional African American songs set for concert performance by classically trained composers. The Fisk repertoire, for example,

marked “the height of vernacular authenticity in the white imagination” (Radano 1995:74). My primary aim here is to focus on musicians’ self-conceptualizations about the spirituals and the meaning this body of repertoire has for them as they perform in predominantly white wim spheres. Performances of African American spirituals play a critical role in black women’s affirmation of their identities in wim realms.

DeMore, in the opening epigraph, gives voice to a long memory of pain and suffering in black history. She speaks as well, to the power of the music, specifically of African American spirituals, that helped blacks to survive. Ronald Rodano, in “Soul Texts and the Blackness of Folk” (1995) examines how blacks turn to the African American spiritual in the process of constructing African American history and identity. As Gilroy suggests, *The Souls [of Black Folk]* is the place where slave music is signaled in its special position of privileged signifier of black authenticity” (1993b:91). Until recently in popular culture, the signifier of black authenticity was gangsta rap; it’s counterpart in cinema were films that depict turf struggles in black communities.<sup>33</sup> In numerous conversations, performers as well as audience members gave voice to concerns similar to those expressed by DeMore. Several maintained that African American spirituals were the quintessential music of authentic black culture.

Illustrating how the idea of an authentic racial culture has been contested historically, Gilroy examines the transatlantic experiences of the Fisk Jubilee

Singers. Addressing the significance of the Fisk Jubilee Singers' foray into popular culture, he writes:

Black people singing slave songs as mass entertainment set new public standards of authenticity for black cultural expression. The legitimacy of these new cultural forms were established precisely through their distance from the racial codes of minstrelsy. The Jubilee Singers' journey out of America was a critical stage in making this possible (1993b: 90).

The prominence and popularity of minstrelsy complicated the reception of the Jubilee Singers. As Gilroy outlines, it took enormous effort to establish the singers' credibility and to "market" their particular brand of black cultural expression, some fifty years after blackface entertainment had suffused the public sphere. By way of example, he notes that, ironically, the group was at one time refused lodging because the innkeeper assumed the Jubilee Singers were a company of "nigger minstrels" (that is to say, white performers). Predictably, the choir's progress was dogged by controversies over the relative value of their work when compared to the output of the white minstrel performers. In explicit opposition to minstrelsy, which was becoming an established element in popular culture, Gilroy suggests the Fisk Singers projected the memory of slavery outwards as the means to make their musical performances intelligible and pleasurable.

In discussing the transatlantic travel of the Jubilee Singers and their reception in England, Ireland, Wales and Scotland, Gilroy illuminates a path Erlmann blazes in his study of black south African performance (1991). Erlmann illustrates the way spirituals were seized upon by local South Africans as a kind of cosmopolitan symbol of blackness. Again, the point is that spirituals have

circulated widely, and that they have received various interpretations by different interpretive communities. This line of thinking is similar to arguments put forth by Louise Meintjes in her discussion of Paul Simon's *Graceland* and its reception by black, white, and mixed-race South African music consumers. In each case, those engaged in the process of interpretation maintain a notion of some core of black essence.

Gilroy's illumination of the transatlantic reception of the Fisk Singers is not only a matter of fascinating historical interest. I mention the Fisk ensembles to underscore how some members of a cappella ensembles view their music, themselves as performers and their "musical mission" in contrast to competing discourses of black popular music. My discussions with *In Process...* co-directors, Rogers and Lancaster included reference to the black popular music industry. I approached this issue by asking Rogers and Lancaster why their concerts do not attract a greater black audience—especially since they claim their music concerns "the entire race." Lancaster emphasized the role of the commercial music industry and how it has influenced consumer notions about the type of music considered "entertainment." She also spoke to the role of *In Process...* in preserving black culture through song:

Yeah, I think that's interesting...In many cases, black people are the innovators of the current trends. Most of the music that we sing does not reflect the current trend. In other words, we're not singing go-go music; we're not singing rap exclusively; we're not singing the L.A. Babyface sound or whoever else is out there—the guy sound. We sing without all the instrumentation and electronic amplification of things. When you have us, what you have is our voices. And you have the messages that we're bringing and you

also have our attempt to preserve the culture. And right now, we don't have to worry about the contemporary sound because it's out there.<sup>34</sup>

Members of a cappella ensembles suggest that they have a special responsibility to keep the [black] heritage alive through the performance of traditional African American music. Indeed, it might be argued that what emerged in many of my interviews was a conservative notion of black women as keepers of the culture. Performers might argue however, that the "shepherding" of their black cultural heritage through music performance is, to the contrary, a radical strategy.

Rhonda Benin of the *CHC* also addressed the issue of low turnout amongst black audiences:

I feel like blacks don't have the opportunity to know that we exist. I don't know whose fault that is. I'm not sure if African Americans do enough reading, if they have the same access to knowing about their own culture as much as whites. I think a lot of it has to do with not reading...I think that if we'd work hard at getting the audience, we'd get them in a minute...<sup>35</sup>

The ensembles share a commitment to the reclamation and propagation of black cultural history through musical performances as well as through often-neglected modes of signifying practices of costume and gesture. Black women's a cappella ensembles mark gender concerns in a number of ways, including stage dress, performance presentation, thematic content, and attitude. It might be argued that in contrast to the type of sexual autonomy and allure exhibited by some performers of popular music, ensembles such as *In Process...* do not enact sexuality in the same way. Rather, their performances convey strong notions about

respectability and dignity which, in the words of one ensemble member, “befits women of African heritage.”<sup>36</sup> Some of this respectability is enacted through the costuming of the ensemble. I asked Lancaster and Rogers to talk about the ensemble’s stage dress. Rogers, who has designed some of their outfits, cited Reagon’s influence:

In one of our vocal workshops, Bernice said that every African woman ought to be able to dress another woman. You ought to have something that’s big enough for any woman to wear. I want people to see our African heritage even though we may be stylized. I want people to see that we claim our heritage. I also think about each woman in the group, about what color or style she needs...[Hayes: Not only outfits, but headdresses too.] Rogers: Oh yeah.<sup>37</sup>

Delving further into the issue of stage dress and performer identity, however tentatively, I continued, posing the obvious:

- Hayes: Now, I’ve never seen any of your legs. Is that on purpose?
- Rogers: The stage is elevated—the audience is elevated. We need to be comfortable. It’s not an attempt to keep the performers from looking attractive—it’s about comfort.
- Hayes: One singer told me she never shows her legs on stage and if she does, she can’t sing.
- Lancaster: Yeah, we’re not displaying our bodies...groups like *In Process*...send a whole different message. We don’t have nothing tight across our hips. We convey that we can be beautiful without exploiting our bodies. I always feel comfortable on stage, don’t feel like anyone is looking at my breasts or waistline. It creates a different feeling with the audience. We aren’t selling sex. That’s what a lot of groups are forced to do. We want people talking about our outfits but not about our body parts. There’s a famous women’s group, and I won’t call any names—and it’s not that they have great voices...

Rogers: It's been a hard concept for some of the women [of our ensemble] to understand because women are used to the idea of the body being who they are. Some women have felt that "if we're all covered up, how can anyone tell that my body may be more attractive than another's?" Our outfits are really about the messages that we get out...

This conversation highlights a quest for respectability and dignity, a perennial theme in black women's history. An ethnomusicologist investigating the realm of women-identified music without recognition of this phenomenon, would be severely hindered in his/her analysis of fieldwork conducted with audience members about performances of black women's a cappella ensembles.<sup>38</sup> Many times during the course of my fieldwork, black women audience members shared positive appraisals of *In Process...*, the *CHC*, and *Sweet Honey in the Rock* (e.g., "they look like African queens—so regal").

According to ensemble members, notions of respect are integral to the negotiations of their performance personae. Deborah Gray White suggests that black women's "perennial preoccupation with image" is a "justifiable concern born of centuries of vilification."<sup>39</sup> Given their focus on cultural reclamation combined with a stage presentation that emphasizes self-respect, I suggest black women's a cappella ensembles express sonically what Darlene Clark Hine calls "a self-conscious black women's culture of resistance" (1995:386). The culture of resistance to which Hine alludes is grounded in black women's historical circumstances with regard to a complex U.S. sexual history. In public and private spheres, black women experienced egregious public humiliation, violence and

disrespect. Many women kept their reactions hidden on an affective level. Hine (1995) illuminates this adaptive strategy through her discussion of black women's "dissemblance." She suggests that in an effort to maintain the integrity of their sexuality, black women created an appearance of openness and disclosure which "actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors."<sup>40</sup> For black middle class women, Hine argues, the culture of dissemblance assumed its most institutionalized form in the founding, in the late nineteenth century, of the National Association of Colored Women's clubs (NACW).<sup>41</sup> The NACW organized against derogatory images and negative stereotypes of black women's sexuality. Hine notes that by 1914, the organization's membership had surpassed that of both the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Urban League. Hine writes:

As the institutional infrastructure of black women's clubs, sororities, church-based women's groups, and charity organizations sunk roots into black communities, it encouraged its members to embrace those values, behaviors, and attitudes traditionally associated with the middle classes...The more educated they [single, educated, professional black women] were, the greater the sense of being responsible, somehow, for the advance of the race and for the elevation of black womanhood. They held these expectations of themselves and found a sense of racial obligation reinforced by the demands of the black community and its institutions. In return for their sacrifice of sexual expression [publicly], the community gave them respect and recognition.<sup>42</sup>

Hazel Carby examines how tensions expressed in nineteenth and early twentieth-century black women's fiction symbolized ways in which black female sexuality was frequently displaced onto the terrain of the political responsibility of

black women. I suggest that performances by black women's a cappella ensembles in wim contexts reflect the heritage that Carby describes.

The "politics of respectability" in music performance is not unrelated to genre, since the performance of different genres requires specific stage presentations by musicians. Ingrid Monson (1995) takes up the matter of dignity and respectability in her discussion of black jazz musicians, race, gender, and white hipness. She points out that the emphasis on dignity and respectability stressed by many musicians with whom she interacted "is not a marker of assimilation, but the assertion of a professional, urban, cosmopolitan African American identity" (1995: 421). Monson concludes that "discipline, dignity and social consciousness are as important to defining hipness as transgression or social marginality."<sup>43</sup>

It is ironic that in a sphere which, according to many, is considered "radical," a turn to a type of cultural—or more to the point—sexual conservatism as projected by members of black women's a cappella ensembles is apparent. This observation seems paradoxical on first hearing, given the carnivalesque atmosphere of some women's music festivals and the atmosphere they engender with regard to freedom of expression including nudity. In the case of Michigan '95, for example, an experimental brothel was established for the amusement of the professional workers, prior to the festival's opening for general admission.<sup>44</sup> With the notable exception of the brothel, many features of women's music festivals are reminiscent of music festivals of the 1960s (e.g., Newport, Woodstock).<sup>45</sup> One wonders if an experimental brothel would be encouraged at a gender inclusive rock or jazz

festival today. It might be argued that leftist political movements have frequently embraced conservative notions about sex and sexuality. Indeed, dominant conceptions of respectability that accompany a kind of public desexualization are typically a part of radical political movements.

In the feminist cultural network of women-identified music—a network considered by many to be politically radical—how can the apparent muted sexuality in performances by black women’s a cappella ensembles be explained? I suggest that we are witness to a divergent strategy for dealing with the “woman question” as articulated by the prominent black educator/activist of the late nineteenth century, Anna Julia Cooper. On the one hand, white women festival attendees celebrate their sexuality as an indicator of their symbolic freedom from patriarchy and gender oppression. Black women, on the other hand, often have public and private experience involving sexual violence and charges of lasciviousness. The interconnectedness of race, gender, and sexuality politics in U.S. history can help explain what might be described as the mutedness of sexuality in the performances of black women’s a cappella ensembles. Music performance and stage presentation are implicated in this long history of black women and their quest for respect and autonomy in private and public spheres.

Gospel music with a lesbian sensibility

Drawing on traditional gospel and blues styles, and incorporating elements of boogie-woogie, stride piano, lining out, stylized moaning, and use of double entendre, a concert by Cap Montgomery resembles a religious revival, or alternatively, a speakeasy sing along.<sup>46</sup> Montgomery captivates her predominantly lesbian audience. Engaging her audience in call and response, Montgomery captivates her listeners with what might be called a black lesbian sensibility.<sup>47</sup> Part of Montgomery's craft is the irony of her delivery, as she deploys songs originally intended for heterosexual black church attendees before women-only audiences. Juxtaposing gospel and blues traditions, contralto/pianist Montgomery, speaks during a concert (recorded live), to the irreducibility of her identities as a black lesbian. Through her redeployment of "I'm Gonna Live the Life I Sing About," a song by the "father of gospel music," Thomas Dorsey (1899-1993), Montgomery gives voice to the psychic toll that the experiences of racism, sexism and homophobia have had on her and other black lesbians. Engaging audience members in call and response, Montgomery's lyrics point to the need for consistency in her life. I illustrate the singer's focus on the contradictions and ironies she experiences as a black woman and lesbian with excerpts of her stage patter and redeployed songtext. I have used [ ] to indicate the phrases during which Montgomery received a response to her call, from the audience:

Excerpt, "I'm Gonna Live the Life I Sing About in My Song:"

I'm gonna live the life I sing about yeah in my song. I'm gonna stand up for what I believe in all day long. You can talk about me much as you please

but the more you talk, I'm gonna bend my knees—just live the life that I sing about in my song.

By day, by night, people watching in the light, Some may scorn me, talk about me—call me queer, I don't care. I don't go to church and sit all day on Sunday, get bombed or raise hell all day Monday. No, I got to live, the life that I sing about in my song...

I'm gonna live the life I sing about in my song. I'm gonna stand up with my sisters [this coming summer]. You can't go to church on Sunday and sit all day on Sunday, get bombed and raise hell all day Monday. No, you've got to live, the life that you sing about in your song.

[By day], [by night], [people watching] [in the light], [Some may scorn me], [talk about me] - [call me crazy], [I don't care.] I can't live one life, then sing another, or live by day with bullshit under my covers, I'm gonna live, the life that I sing about in my song.

I'm gonna live the life I sing about yeah, in my song.

Fading into the next segment, Montgomery asks the audience if there is anything they would like to know about “these blues.” Purposeful audio editing heightens the sense of orality of Montgomery's presentation. Appealing to the audience's sensibilities through a somewhat romantic, exoticizing trope, Montgomery opines:

These blues are ancient...I just started to learn them about ten years ago although I've been familiar with these blues forever. These blues are in my bones. I sing these blues any kind of way I want to...These blues are very sensitive blues. They know something about me and I know something about them and together we know something about you. And these blues have taken me through things I could not talk about, I wasn't even allowed to talk about... [Montgomery demonstrates vocally, through moans and groans, what “the blues is.”]

Her stage patter continues:

...this music has led me to God, it's led me to salvation, freedom. I didn't know it...that's my gift. Lately, I've been adoring my music the best that I know how. And being a black woman and being a

lesbian-this is ridiculous....let's really get these mixed up and then be crazy - and then you want somebody to understand you - why won't they understand you? (Montgomery laughs). You're not asking much...(more laughter from Montgomery and audience) I'm a crazy woman with normal cravings...(laughter from Montgomery and the audience) All the time I wanted just a little drop of love...So, if it hadn't been for music, Aretha Franklin, Mahalia Jackson, The Coasters, The Drifters, Four Tops, or The Spinners, Roberta Flack, the Wiz, or the Wizard of Oz - if it hadn't been for someone making these wonderful melodies that I could listen to and heal by little by little - just enough so I could get through each day, there is no way that I could have survived - I was completely lost, confused and afraid, and feeling very very alone and not like anyone else, anywhere. I say that because I know that I'm among a bunch of very unusual women who are giving me that nod of approval saying 'yes, we have felt like that.' Even though we seem very much alike we all have felt like we don't belong and we are going to stop that shit, ain't we?<sup>48</sup>

Through these excerpts Montgomery elucidates that it is the oppression rather than the condition of blackness or lesbianness that is the cause of the stress upon her psyche. Pointing to the psychological dimensions of oppression based on race, gender and sexual identity, Montgomery's comment illustrates the theme of race (black), sexuality and its association with "madness" explored by Sander L. Gilman (1985), hooks (1990) and others. Paralleling what other writers have suggested about the relationship of inside/outside, Gilman suggests "The Other is always 'mad.' Insanity is not merely a label (any more than is geography or skin color). It exists in reality. But the Other's 'madness' is what defines the sanity of the defining group" (1985:129).

Montgomery's eccentricities call attention to her identities as a historical subject, as a woman forced to disguise her "pain and anger within the outward

appearances of a sideshow.”<sup>49</sup> It might be argued that beneath Montgomery’s novel performance was a “sedimented layer of historical knowledge and historical critique” (Lipsitz 1990:4).

### Musical constructions of gender

*“Oh Jah, let the sisters walk with thee.”*  
 “Sister’s Chant” by Judy Mowatt

The focus of this section is how the music of black performers of wim affirms, expands upon, or contests apriori definitions of the genre in terms of gender identity. In investigating a social realm in which women come together, in the words of one black festigoer at Michigan, “under the banner of music,” a logical focus for this inquiry is an investigation of what this banner is about—from the perspectives of black musicians.

In the second chapter I recalled Petersen’s definition of women-identified music. The inclusion of the collective recorded repertoire of black performers whose voices resonate throughout this study, necessitates a modification of Petersen’s typology. A survey of the latter reveals the following areas of textual emphasis: a) songs with obvious lesbian-feminist content, b) songs about oppression-resistance of all types and c) songs reflecting black women’s cultural/political heritage. Certain songtexts in the collective repertoire express affiliation with lesbian/gay movements. Textually, others reflect how black women’s engagement with some issues, such as AIDS, transcends one-issue politics. For example, while some songs about AIDS reflect concern with the

relationship between the latter and “Africa” others emphasize the theme of AIDS and the rising number of “boarder babies” in U.S. urban centers.<sup>50</sup>

My inquiry here is organized around various issues that emerged from my conversations with musicians about their respective repertoires. Performers suggest many of these compositions (songs) relate to what is typically understood by the phrase, “black women’s issues.” Some of these make reference explicitly to black women as contemporary and historical figures; others reference familiar tropes in black political and cultural history, such as freedom and justice. Still others address the pleasures and vulnerabilities of being black and female.

*Craftswomyn’s Bazaar. Afternoon. Hot. Resplendent, Rashida, straddling a high stool, was leaning into the lap of a sistah in Market Wimmin, a tent for vendors of color sponsored by Amoja Three Rivers and Blanche Jackson. I thought I recognized her resonant voice and confident, comedic tone but how to be sure; I had seen her neither bald nor naked before...[Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival ‘95 ‘headnotes’]*

Meeting Rashida Oji fortuitously at Market Wimmin while perusing the hand-made crafts by vendors of color reminded me why mention of Oji’s name evoked impassioned responses from the festigoers I spoke to about their favorite black performers of wim. Several years earlier I expressed interest in interviewing Oji for this study. She reminded me that she was an “interesting case” as far as women-identified musicians are concerned. Oji, looking forward to her Day Stage performance, talked excitedly about “She’s a Good Girl Now,” a song through which she “came out” to her family about incest perpetuated by her father. As she would relate during her stage patter, Oji sang this song at a family picnic held after her brother’s wedding. After the performance her half sister informed her that their

father had perpetuated a long-term incestuous relationship with her as well. In her Michigan performance of “She’s A Good Girl Now” Oji, accompanied by the percussion of Suki, conga and Robin Nziagah, saxophone, both of the Afro/Cuban ensemble, Azucar Y Crema, evoked features of an African American musical heritage. Noteworthy is the internal call and response embodied in the composition itself and the way Oji delineates this structure through changes in voice timbre with the call most often accompanied by melody, and the “response” most often being something between speech and song, at times resembling a chant.

The collective repertoire of musicians discussed in this study reflects concern with issues of national and international violence. A smaller number of songs address domestic violence and sexual abuse, the latter a phenomenon which, according to Oji, “has been in everyone’s life on some level.” Oji noted that domestic violence seems to “go across the board” of gender, race and class...<sup>51</sup>

Hine states that “one of the most remarked upon but least analyzed themes in Black women’s history deals with Black women’s sexual vulnerability and powerlessness as victims of rape and domestic violence.”<sup>52</sup> Putting rape in context, Hine writes:

The institutionalized rape of black women has never been as powerful a symbol of black oppression as the spectacle of lynching. Rape has always involved patriarchal notions of women being, at best, not entirely unwilling accomplices, if not outwardly inviting a sexual attack. The links between black women and illicit sexuality consolidated during the antebellum years had powerful ideological consequences for the next hundred and fifty years.<sup>53</sup>

Oji's "No Way" is a song inspired by a scene she witnessed as a child when her father beat her mother. Oji's song, one of the few by black performers of wim to focus on this manifestation of domestic violence, reminded me of a rally I had participated in several years earlier.

NOW's 1992 "March for Women's Lives," focusing on reproductive rights was memorable because of a performance of "Colours," [of my womb]"<sup>54</sup> by former Sweet Honey in the Rock member, Yasmeen. "Colours" etches "silhouettes" of three women's lives. One woman experiences rape, another, abandonment, and the third, incest. Preceding Oji's performance by three years, Yasmeen's engagement at the '92 March was one of her early forays into musical/political activism after her departure from Sweet Honey. Relating "Colours" to her own personal narrative, Yasmeen says

Some years later I learned that the practice of physical and mental abuse toward women is rampant in almost every country. I have personally been a victim too. I have been pregnant and abandoned; I have been physically abused by a husband—from broken bones to nearly a broken spirit.<sup>55</sup>

Several other composers treat the issue of community violence in their songs.<sup>56</sup> Afro-Canadian Lillian Allen's "Nellie Bellie Swellie" from her Juno award-winning *Revolutionary Tea Party* depicts the rape of a young girl and the subsequent ostracization she experiences within her community. Allen, a dub-poetry artist, has received the Juno Award twice, the highest honor of the Canadian recording industry. She received this recognition for both *Revolutionary Tea Party* and for *Conditions Critical*. Dub poetry is spoken poetry over a musical track

strongly influenced by reggae and other Caribbean musics. June Millington, guitarist/rocker and founder of the Institute for the Musical Arts, referred to Allen as the “Audre Lorde (the late black lesbian poet and writer) of reggae.”<sup>57</sup>

Love songs are also featured in the collective repertoire of black musicians of this study. Some of these are inventive, character songs, which signify on heterosexual norms such as Cap Montgomery’s “Sugar Mama.” Written when the artist was most widely known as a bassist and solo performer, Linda Tillery’s early full-length recording *Secrets* (Redwood Records, 1985) boasts a number of cuts which listeners consider lesbian-identified. Straight and lesbian audiences alike may interpret songs with ambiguous pronouns, such as SHIR’s “Seven Day Kiss,” as directed toward them. Falling under the latter rubric are songs such as Tillery’s deployment of “Fever,” popularized by Peggy Lee and recast by Tillery with a lesbian-identified text:

Pochohantas loved Sacejewaya; they had a very mad affair.  
 When her daddy tried to kill her, she said “Daddy, oh don’t you  
 dare.  
 She’s givin’ me fever, with those kisses  
 Fever with that flamin’ hue  
 She’s givin’ me fever in the morning, and fever yes, I burn forsooth.

I asked Sandra Washington if she considered any of her love songs to be political. Paying homage to lesbian songwriters who have preceded her, she stated:

Not particularly political. They may have made political statements earlier. If I had written those songs in the early 1970s - then yes, writing a love song about a woman could have been a political statement. But by the time we [The Washington Sisters] recorded the music - I’m not so sure it’s a political statement. But for me,

making positive statements about being a lesbian was not political - just matter of fact...Our family wasn't freaking out, folks around me weren't freaking out. In some instances, even today, standing up and saying that you love a woman is making a political statement. I try not to write songs that say 'oh my god - I'll never breathe again without this person.'

A black lesbian's search for Karen Carpenter

*"My mother raised me a lesbian."*  
- Rashida Oji, singer/guitarist/composer

Rashida Oji's round robin performance at Michigan Womyn's Music Festival 1995 illustrates a way that music which is generally understood as emanating from and directed to the heterosexual mainstream can be enjoyed and reinterpreted in a predominantly lesbian context (e.g., women's music festivals, women's bars). In this Day Stage performance, Oji, formerly of Oakland, California, led an ensemble of prominent musicians in a rousing performance of the Carpenter's 1970s pop chart hit, "Close To You."<sup>58</sup> Oji's pleading, gravelly-voiced interpretation of the text ["That is why all the girls in town, follow you all around/just like me, they long to be close to you"], fused into the performance an affect of longing which the Carpenters' original version did not suggest.<sup>59</sup> The latter, combined with Oji's gospel preaching-like vocal inflections, infuse her rendition with an element of "blackness." Incorporating key characteristics of new world black musics, the Day Stage round robin ensemble was an example of musical play at its best as audience members spontaneously performed their roles as foils to the main actor, illustrated by their stylized swooning in response to the singer's lines:

On the day that you were born the angels got together and decided  
to create a dream come true/So they sprinkled moondust in your  
hair and golden starlight in your eyes of blue.

A musician skilled in her craft, Oji “camped up” the moment for what it offered, intensifying the soul of her delivery as the audience’s participation increased. The audience was thrilled by the ensemble’s rendition of this 1970s pop chart hit. This event requires a multi-layered semiotic reading that leads us to consider Oji’s performance as well as issues of a) the significance of music of one’s youth to an identification, as an adult, with music of that period and b) the coincidence of one’s initial “coming out” and music. That prior to and especially after her death, rumors circulated in women’s communities that Karen Carpenter was a lesbian, is not tangential to this discussion but part of the indeterminate mix. This symbolic cluster may be read as an aural tribute to Karen Carpenter and as a signification on the white pop musical styles (and the clean-cut, wholesome images of the “stars”)—generally associated with the music of the early ‘70s. In this transformation, conventions of soul, secularized in decades past from their antecedent of gospel, lent sonic affirmation to the expression of lesbian desire. I had several playful/serious exchanges with and overheard conversations amongst festival attendees departing the concert field after Oji’s performance. The juxtaposition of the Carpenter’s text and the liaison (inter- and intra-racial) suggested by Oji’s performance, had resonance for several women as they joked that they wished their brown eyes could be blue, if only to win Oji’s affections. Audience affiliation for and participation in the performance was integral to this

event. Oji and company's "Close to You" functioned like an anthem of lesbian identity ala 1970s. "Close To You" was an example of a fascinating phenomenon, noteworthy not only for the nostalgia and fun it generated for middle-age participants. The performance was memorable also for the non-fixity of symbolic meanings wrought where performance by a black singer of an over-produced '70s pop tune initially marketed to the heterosexual mainstream, meets soul at the corner of lesbian identity.

Oji's performance incorporated aspects of "signifyin," a multi-faceted black cultural practice that extends throughout the black diaspora. Gender play and inversion for example may be read as acts of signification on traditional gender roles. In the much cited work on this process as it occurs in African American culture, Henry Louis Gates in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Criticism* (1988), discusses the relationship between African and African American vernacular traditions through the art of signification. Drawing on the work of Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, Gates writes:

Complimentary remarks may be delivered in a left-handed fashion. A particular utterance may be an insult in one context and not another. What pretends to be informative may intend to be persuasive. The hearer is thus constrained to attend to all potential meaning carrying symbolic systems in speech events - the total universe (1988:81-82).

Linguist Geneva Smitherman suggests additional characteristics of "signifyin." These include: indirection, circumlocution, metaphorical-imagistic (but [with] images rooted in the everyday, real world), humorous, ironic rhythmic fluency and sound; teachy but not preachy, directed at person or persons usually

present in the situational context, punning, play on word, and introduction of the semantically or logically unexpected (1986:121). Scholars of African American culture (Levine 1977; Smitherman 1977) particularly in the fields of literature and music (in rap and hip hop, see Keyes 1996:223; Baker 1993; Potter 1995) have written extensively about signifyin' (a black English spelling). In some cases, writers, in discussing signifyin' employ a discursive style which itself signifies on the subject about which they are writing.

Oji's round robin performance illustrates the significance of visual and aural signifiers and context in the process of reception. In the case of Oji et al, an aural analysis alone would have obscured the audience's role in the performance. Oji's blackness, a visible signifier of difference, mattered to audience members, as did her cover of the pop hit in a soul musical style. The effect was a performance very different from the original marketed by Karen Carpenter and her producers to the white heterosexual mainstream.

### Performing Africanness

Living with my mother's people I absorbed their culture patterns and these were not African so much as Dutch and New England...My African racial feeling was then purely a matter of my own later learning and reaction...But it was none the less real and a large determinant of my life character.

- W.E.B. Du Bois, 1940<sup>60</sup>

In this section I explore the representation of Africa in music performed by black musicians of this study. Numerous scholars (Hountondji 1983; Appiah 1992) and ethnomusicologists (Agawu 1995) have critically engaged unanimist

constructions of Africa in the hope that the continent as an area of intellectual inquiry will “become more than a colorful but marginal spot on a multidisciplinary map.”<sup>61</sup> Agawu (1995) traces elegantly the racialized problematics of writing the music cultures of “a continent with a population of upward of 400 million distributed into over forty-two countries and speaking some thousand languages.”

Scholars suggest that over the past two decades, the identification of African Americans with “Africa,” politically and culturally, has been tripartite in nature (e.g., West Africa, East Africa and South Africa). The music of black performers of *wim* reveals various strategies for evoking Africa sonically as well as visually. My interest in exploring such representations of Africa in the performances of black women emerged from an ethnographic context. Musicians and consumers I interviewed often referred to “African” tropes in formal or informal conversations, and often in relation to music performance.

Ethnomusicologists and musicologists have explored the representation of the other—in particular the African other—in pop music collaborations and other musical ventures. Issues raised in such studies include: authenticity; hybridity; music symbolism; and international commodification. Omibiyi-Obidike (1992) illustrates some of the problems incurred in defining an African identity in the sphere of art music, through an examination of the music of three Nigerian composers.<sup>62</sup> Meintjes (1990:37-73) discusses *Graceland* as an example of collaboration between an American artist, Paul Simon, and South African musicians, (Ladysmith Black Mambazo being the most well-known to American

audiences). Meintjes points to featured instruments, the pennywhistle and bass guitar, for example, as referencing black South African genres, the kwela and mbube respectively.

Numerous composers in the western art music tradition, from Stravinsky to William Grant Still to Steve Reich have represented Africa in various sonic dimensions. Ethnomusicologists (Keyes 1996) and other critics of African American culture have addressed representations of Africa as strains of Afrocentric discourse in popular music, calling specific attention to rap and hip hop recordings and videos (videos by Public Enemy and Queen Latifah figure prominently in these discussions).

My intention here is not to argue about the rightness or wrongness of the ways in which musicians express allegiance to and identification with Africa. The dilemmas and opportunities posed by various performative options are intriguing. In the following pages, I am most interested in the style in which black performers of women-identified music imagine Africa.

In "A Dialog with bell hooks," (1993) for example, Gilroy and hooks discuss the limitations of some earlier strains of Afrocentrism.<sup>63</sup> Early proponents of some strains of Afrocentrism emphasized the "purity" of Africa, that it was culturally uncontaminated and, receiving secondary emphasis, that its people were heterosexual.<sup>64</sup> More recently, theorists have re-examined the utility of the diaspora idea, re-evaluating rhetorics that posit a naturalized connection of blacks in the diaspora to an African homeland, writ large, unmediated by processes of

mutation and adaptation (Gilroy 1993b; hooks and Gilroy in Gilroy:1993a). Gilroy explores these ideas in *Black Atlantic*, a term he uses “to supplement the diaspora idea with a concept that emphasizes the in-between and intercultural” (1993:208).<sup>65</sup> In “Dialog” hooks and Gilroy discuss how some Afrocentric strains mirror certain “white Western modes of thinking” (hooks:210). Typically, western modes of investigation tend to focus on the history and interests of elites, rather than on popular culture. Western modes of thinking are also implicated in the narratives of progress and development that mark certain Afrocentric discourses. Neither hooks nor Gilroy deny the value of certain Afrocentric conceptualizations. What they warn against however, is the practice of taking refuge in a black history that is rendered unproblematic, uncomplicated, and suffused with romantic nostalgia.

#### Yoruba representation in music style and songtext

As an indicator of West African influence, I turn now to a discussion of the representation of Yoruba identity in performances by musicians from this study. I preface my findings and excerpts of interviews with musicians by acknowledging that even in Nigeria, Yoruba identity is a relatively recent phenomenon. The tendency for adherents to simplify or select a list of traits which stand for Yorubanness—to distill the cream of Yorubanness, so to speak,—is especially common amongst those engaged in New World practices, whether they be Yoruba, Catonese or Peruvian.

This tendency however, is not restricted to New World practitioners. The more significant ethnomusicological insight is that New World identity claims are part of a process of interpretation that occurs as people lay claim to an “xx” identity. In this case, some black performers of wim lay claim to an “African” past and construct it at the same time. Negotiation of identity, to be sure, is not about “rightness” or “wrongness;” as Christopher Waterman points out in “Our Tradition is a Very Modern Tradition” (1990), pan-Yoruba identity is a relatively recent phenomenon.

During the course of my research, I did not have the opportunity to interview black attendees at women’s music festivals about their relationship outside the festival environment to New World Yoruba practices, such as those discussed by Robert Ferris Thompson in *Flash of the Spirit* (1983). As a Michigan festigoer however, I participated in various observances sponsored by the Women of Color Tent, several of which incorporated aspects of Yoruba ritual. These rituals, attended predominantly by black women from the U.S., involved participants sitting or standing in place with a fire as the focal point of group members’ attention. In one ceremony, women were invited to honor their ancestors by calling out their names as libations were poured. Future researchers might explore the origin of the interest in Yoruba religious practices by black women from the U.S. To what extent do festival participants “relate” to such rituals? Concomitantly, to what extent does Yoruba representation in music, figure as construction of the other by the “other”?

According to performers I interviewed, musicians have incorporated the Yoruba religion into their lives on different levels. Some, such as a member of Judith Casselberry's JUCA, are religious practitioners. One musician facilitated JUCA's learning of Yoruba for the chant to Ogun, god of war, which comes at the end of "Songs of War" (*Hot Corn in the Fire*). Yoruba representation is found in Ubaka Hill's "Oya's Song,"<sup>66</sup> (*Shape Shifters*) named for the Yoruba goddess. Ubaka Hill is an educator, leader and director of the DrumSong Institute, an organization which she founded and through which she teaches women to drum.<sup>67</sup> She is frequently referred to as a "goddess" by festival attendees. Even while speaking in a non-pedagogical setting, Hill takes advantage of the opportunity to instruct through metaphor:

One of Oya's attributes is change. Oya oversees the cycles and crossroads of change and she is also connected with the wind...I composed the work to give a feeling of how the winds of change come into our lives. Sometimes it arranges the furniture and puts it right back in place, or comes in, changes it and moves on, but the change is a healing and cleansing change.<sup>68</sup>

A performer who many festival participants describe as deeply "spiritual," I asked Hill if she were a practitioner of the Yoruba religion. She responded:

No, not in its totality. I don't embrace it all - like I don't embrace Christianity in its totality. There are aspects of Yoruba spiritual understandings and principles that I embrace as I do Christianity, as I do Buddhism, as I do shamanic healing, as I do Wiccan. As a young person, I looked at all of these - Suffism, mysticism - so as a spiritual person, I consider myself a mystic - I should say a metaphysician. So metaphysics from a scientific point of view but more so on the psychi/spiritual point of view - moving more toward shamanism as a practice.<sup>69</sup>

Casselberry-DuPree's arrangement of traditional chants, "Opening Elegba," "Obatala" (the creator) and "Closing Elegba" (*City Down*) provide further glimpses into Yoruba representation in music by black performers of wim. Casselberry related that Elegba, a Yoruba diety, guards the crossroads and that in order to speak with any of the gods or goddesses one has to first speak to Elegba. According to Casselberry, when one has communicated with the deities, one must close with an elegba.

Percussionist Nuraudafina Pili Abena, describes her practice of Yoruba as part of her spiritual and cultural growth as a New Age African American woman.<sup>70</sup> A native of Cambridge, Massachusetts, Nuru performs Afro-Cuban folkloric, traditional Senegalese, West African spiritual and festive music, West Indian calypso, jazz and pop music (Trowbridge 1989). She has studied Yoruba religion extensively and has incorporated many of its beliefs into her music. Writer Jennifer Trowbridge relates that when Abena teaches drumming, she teaches the accompanying religious beliefs and practices, because for her, they are inseparable.

The influence of Swahili as a symbol of Africa writ large is evident in the personal philosophies of some black performers of wim. Swahili, the African language spoken most widely amongst blacks outside of Africa, came into prominence in the United States during the 1960s, amidst the black cultural nationalism movement. During this period, Ron Karenga introduced the seven-day harvest and community building observance of Kwanzaa based on an array of tenets of African religions and customs. Rashida Oji, formerly "Regina Wells," related

that a black woman acquaintance well versed in Yoruba, astrology, and numerology gave her a Swahili name after listening to her life story. Prior to meeting this woman, Oji recalled, her self-discovery process was manifested in her search for another name. This odyssey occurred in stages: first she adopted “Regina” (meaning “queen” in Latin), next “Red” then “Reggie” and finally “Gina.” Oji added however, that she “never felt like the (latter) name fit.” At the time of this writing, Oji “wore the name” of Rashida Jokha Oji: Rashida meaning “righteous,” Jokha, “robe of adornment” and “Oji”, drum. All are Swahili words. A member of *Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir*, Oji has one solo album, *Big Big Woman*, cuts of which I discussed earlier.<sup>71</sup>

Clearly, my foray into the representation of West and East Africa in the music of black performers of wim is impressionistic. Further research with performers and consumers alike is warranted. Among the women I interviewed, there is a strong identification with the spiritual legacy of Africa in contrast to, but not always mutually exclusive of, identification with Africa in its contemporary manifestations. hooks writes that often, “Isis and Osiris are reconstructed as black superheroes but this has no relation to our actual political needs or to the needs of Africa” (1993:214). Adding nuance however, to hooks’ critique, I am reminded, following Holland (1996), of Audre Lorde’s open letter to Mary Daly (1984) in which she questions the feminist theologian about the “place of West African goddesses in her paradigm of [Greek goddess-centered] female empowerment.” Lorde explains that within some modes of cultural feminism, coded white, the

significance of Africa—as opposed to Greece—as a geographical symbol of the “birthplace” of black women’s strength and refuge can not be overlooked. My research demonstrates that indeed, black performers of wim address contemporary manifestations of Africa through performance. Generalizing impulses, the dangers of idealism and pastoralization, though obvious, must be examined for their strategic application in a social and musical field in which one essentialist strategy is often offered to counter another.

“Race” over ethnicity and national boundaries: alliances with the South African freedom struggle

Black voices from within the overdeveloped countries may be able to go on resonating in harmony with those produced from inside Africa or they may, with varying degrees of reluctance, turn away from the global project of black advancement once the symbolic and political, if not the material and economic, liberation of Southern Africa is completed.

Paul Gilroy<sup>72</sup>

*What are we doing in South Africa killing our brothers and our sisters?*  
Casselberry-DuPree’s, “South Africa,” from *City Down*

What is striking about the collective repertoire of black performers of wim is the extent to which performers use music to voice protest and social conflict. In performances of social criticism, pan-Africanity is evident in both musical style and thematic content; anti-apartheid songs are the most prevalent amongst those referencing Africa or the diaspora.<sup>73</sup> I was especially interested in how the cry for freedom in South Africa is imagined by musicians of this study.

A concentration of songs by U.S. black performers of wim referencing South Africa is understandable given the international attention focused upon the

apartheid regime and the political pressure exerted by U.S. blacks in that movement. Blacks in South Africa and in the U.S. find accord in the legacies of comparable socio-historical experiences of subjugation; that is to say, “colonialism” in South Africa and “Jim Crow” laws in the U.S. I am also interested in sonic evidence of the ambivalent or even antagonistic feelings, glossed in some music scholarship, that Africans and African Americans experience toward each other.

The following songs were composed and recorded prior to the release of Nelson Mandela from prison on February 11, 1990 and the abolishment, in 1991 of the primary pieces of legislation which defined apartheid (e.g., the Population Registration Act, the Group Areas Act, the Natives Land Act).<sup>74</sup> Inspired by Gilroy’s penetrating arguments in “Jewels from Bondage: Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity,” (1993b) I am interested in what happens between “invocations of an African motherland” and powerful critical commentaries on musician-composer’s immediate, local conditions. In response to Gilroy’s suggestion that critical accounts of the dynamics of black subordination and resistance are monocultural, ethnocentric, and national, it might be argued that a portion of the songs analyzed within this study, are notable exceptions to Gilroy’s observation, both stylistically and thematically.

Sung by *In Process...*, “Senzennia” (“What Have We Done?”) is a South African freedom song based on a traditional South African hymn. It is one of the few songs of this repertoire that is sung in an African (Zulu) language.<sup>75</sup> In “Senzennia” the freedom call is imagined not only through language but through

harmonic treatment reminiscent of isicathamiya, the Zulu male choral style popularized by the internationally acclaimed Ladysmith Black Mambazo. Several writers discuss the roots of this choral style including Erlmann (1990; 1991) and to a lesser degree, David Coplan (1985; 1988) in his historical survey of black South African popular performance. “Senzennia” is strophic in form and reveals overlapping call and response. “War Children” (lyrics and music by Michelle Lancaster) commemorates the freedom fighting efforts of young people in South Africa revolving around two events. The first is the 1976 Soweto massacre (elsewhere known as the Soweto “uprisings”) of students protesting the teaching of the Afrikaans language to blacks. The second is the 1985 state of emergency declared by then Prime Minister P.K. Botha, during which time more than 22,000 people were detained.<sup>76</sup> Lancaster’s arrangement of “War Children” in call/response form, is reminiscent of some Sweet Honey in the Rock arrangements by Ysaye Maria Barnwell in its layers of musical sound, vocables, and the use of hand-held percussion instruments. At selected intervals, Lancaster, as lead singer, relates information about the massacre and state of emergency over the layers of sound. Toward the end of the song, she intensifies her delivery, increasing the coarseness of her voice as it takes on a preaching-like quality. The song’s refrain [we will free South Africa] does not implicate U.S.ers in the apartheid system.

Several songtexts in the collective repertoire of musicians of this study draw connections between oppressive forces around the world and the South African freedom struggle. Occasionally, these songtexts implicate U.S. blacks for their de

facto role in perpetuating apartheid (as Americans or as consumers in a capitalist society.) In wim, this practice has precedence in Sweet Honey's "Chile-Soweto/Biko/Venceremos," cited in this study's introduction. The Washington Sisters' "Say No" with text and music by Sandra Washington, is another example. Accompanied paradoxically, by a West African hand-drumming pattern, "Say No," in verse/refrain form, features Linda Tillery and black guitarist/singer Vickie Randallas back-up vocalists.<sup>77</sup> The last stanza of "Say No" consists of a definition of apartheid [the sanctioned, institutionalized discrimination of a people on the basis of race]. This stanza is then double-tracked with the refrain [Say No] resulting in an unexpected polyphonic effect. An "Africa" feel is achieved through the use of hand-drumming, and the time line played by a bell. Fast-paced, the song's deceptive ending is a resounding "Say No" by all the vocalists. The percussion patterns continue, with delayed entrances for the instruments, fading out at the end.

Canadian Lillian Allen's "Freedom is Azania" (South Africa Must Be Free)<sup>78</sup> is a cut from her Juno award-winning recording, *Conditions Critical*. Allen's 1991 recording for children, *Nothing but a Hero*, features "Mandela," a song in which the singer assumes the perspective of a child asking her mother why she was crying on the day Nelson Mandela was released from prison. Absent from this recording for young people is the instrumentation featured on many of Allen's cuts. The delivery however, retains its impact as the singer evokes the names of well known black figures (all U.S.ers) such as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Sojourner Truth, and Zora Neale Hurston. "No Good News" from the same

recording, also features reference to South Africa [the news on South Africa ain't that great 'cept the people there still have faith that one day their nation shall be free of this brutal racist government].

Casselberry-DuPree's "South Africa" (*City Down* 1987) implicates blacks of the diaspora as well as non-black listeners in the perpetuation of apartheid as exemplified in the refrain [what are you doing in South Africa—robbing from the motherland?]. Set to a fusion of rock and reggae, racial (family) links across national boundaries are referenced explicitly [what you doing to your brothers and sisters?]. The songtext tugs at the listener's consciousness [How can we sit when we know this is going on—when we know that it is wrong?]. After numerous repetitions, the singers' text evolves to include the performers themselves in the indictment [what are we doing in South Africa killing our brothers and our sisters]. Judith Casselberry's "South Africa must be free," a recurring spoken chant, functions as the bridge to the song's last section. The chant runs obligato-like beneath layers of spoken text and song, and continues to do so as the tunes fades to its conclusion. Casselberry is supported in the chant by back-up vocals. Jacque DuPree offers spoken word recitation including Psalm 23 (later taken up by Casselberry), various other text fragments, and high pitched cries. Casselberry-DuPree's performance effectively illustrates a way the music reflects performers' conceptualizations of an idea of the diaspora which is "composed of communities that are both similar and different" (Gilroy 1993:87).

South African musicians such as (formerly exiled) Miriam Makeba,<sup>79</sup> and The Mahotella Queens<sup>80</sup> have also performed before wim audiences. Madeleine Yodele Nelson, leader of the New York City-based Women of the Calabash and her ensemble performed with Paul Simon in South Africa for the Graceland project.

My discussions with black musicians about their performances of Africanness, illustrate Du Bois' sentiment that his "African racial feeling was ...purely a matter of [his] own later learning and reaction...[yet] it was none the less real and a large determinant of [his] life character." During the course of my research, several singers, Oji and DeMore included, shared aspects of their biographies with me pointing to their identification with various parts of Africa through "learning and reaction."

Reflecting on the repertoire which inspired investigations carried out in this chapter, I asked Rogers and Lancaster to comment on similarities they perceived between *In Process...* and other black women artists on the wim circuit:

- Hayes:           What other [women-identified] groups do you think you are similar to?
- Lancaster:       Other than Sweet Honey? Sweet Honey started *In Process* – you have to talk about where we come from.
- Rogers:           I don't know of any others. [Dr.] Ysaye [Barnwell] was telling me of some groups in London. There's a group in Baltimore that sings a cappella.
- Hayes:           In your minds, is there anything that you, Odetta, Sweet Honey, Toshi [Reagon], Casselberry & DuPree have in common?

- Lancaster: We all sing such different styles of music. Other than commonalities in content—trying to get across different social messages, singing about contemporary issues including South Africa, humanity, women’s rights.
- Hayes: And all do benefits for different causes.
- Rogers: Toshi [Reagon] recently opened for “Archie” from Australia. He was talking about similarities in our struggles. She played some urban blues – then her own compositions. His music was more of a country sound. You see, the country sound is not really a white sound – it’s a black sound...We want justice, our traditions restored – all in different styles. Same thing with Toshi, Odetta, Casselberry & DuPree...Odetta sings a lot of Leadbelly. All of our music comes back to justice, the need for equity, that we do have a tradition.<sup>87</sup>

In summary, the collective repertoire of black performers of wim is remarkable for the various ways that musicians imagine Africa through songtext and musical style. Songs referencing W. Africa writ large contrast with the ways black wim performers lay claim to a global alliance with black political struggle, especially in South Africa. The South African material comes highly charged with political content and with references to black racial solidarity throughout the diaspora. In contrast, the claim to Yorubanness emanates from a different movement, with more parochial concerns about New World identity. In various ways, this chapter speaks to the efforts of black performers of women-identified music—and this is an idea put forth by Radano—to contradict easy assumptions about the character of African American culture, even as [they] publicly certify the constructs of authenticity attributed to black music.

## CHAPTER IV

**Style and conflict in women-identified music: “slightly different roots”**

“Every time I hear the crack of the whip  
 My blood runs cold.  
 I remember on the slave ship  
 How they brutalise my very soul.”

Bob Marley and the Wailers, *Catch a Fire*

*There are some issues that I don't even have to worry about... it's like the whole SM controversy...I went to the 1991 Miss Leather contest there, right? Something about the crack of that whip - took me places I didn't want to go. So you do what the fuck you want to, but I have slightly different roots...*

Karen Williams *OUTrageous*, North East Women's Musical Retreat<sup>1</sup>

In the above epigraph, comedienne Karen Williams quips that, as a woman of African heritage, the politics of sado-masochism remind her of “slightly different roots.” Williams, the most widely recognized black comedienne on the wim circuit, is a favorite of the women's music participants I interviewed.<sup>2</sup>

This scenario is a reminder that black women bring different cultural and social histories to wim performances. Consequently they have modes of interpreting performances which may be at odds with more dominant discourses. This chapter focuses around four vignettes that illustrate collisions of socially situated points of view regarding sexuality, race, and gender. They come from either my interviews with performers and music festival attendees or from my participant observation at women's music festivals.

Black women's bodies, essentialism and the limits of subversive drag

Cap Montgomery, (discussed in Chapter 3) is at home in both blues and gospel music traditions. Montgomery worked with a women-identified music

record company during the early years of the industry. By the time I interviewed her, she was no longer performing regularly, however I was invited to examine archival videotapes of some of her past performances.<sup>3</sup> During a telephone interview from her home in California, Montgomery outlined the circumstances of the event in which, by her own account, she was charged with “dancing.”

Eileen: Did Magnolia [a pseudonym for a women’s music record company] ask you to leave or did they just not call you again?<sup>4</sup>

Cap: It feels like Catholic torture. They said that I was doing sexual gyrations on stage. [Eileen: Oh my.]

Cap: It really wiped me out...a slap in the face and a kick in the gut...[Montgomery continues]...I’d shake my ass a little and wiggle my legs...it was part of my personality...they asked me to sign a contract saying that I wouldn’t do that...when I didn’t sign it they canned me.

Eileen: Did this seem racist to you?

Cap: So oppressive - I can’t even - [it was] like being in a Catholic church and being called out.<sup>5</sup> In first grade, I went to Catholic school and they used to call kids out for burping...but with Magnolia it was worse because the criticism was “you danced.” I couldn’t believe it. Since I was three years old I had been shaking my hips...it was weird...I should have never stopped.

Eileen: Well yeah, we would have been better off.

Cap: Now my knees are bad and I can’t shake the way I would like (laughs). It’s so healthy to shake your ass.

Eileen: I saw some of your videotape...you were doing good!

Cap: But I used to really shake!<sup>6</sup>

Montgomery describes a complex situation. Against the backdrop of black sexual iconography and popular culture, this incident raises significant issues, some

of which point to consumer conceptualizations about markers of black—and lesbian feminist—identity. Firstly, to what extent did various discourses about black women's sexuality collide or coincide with the aesthetic "requirements" of the genre (blues) in which Montgomery was performing? Did the record company staff allow their own reading of sexuality, music, race and performance to influence their reception of Montgomery's act? Was the sense of satire and transgression that Montgomery brought to the performance lost on the record company personnel? By the same token, perhaps the record company staff were striving to act judiciously by not going along with what they felt was a performance that incorporated a sexual stereotype of black women. Presumably the Magnolia people did not think their treatment of Montgomery was racist.

The crisis point Montgomery illuminates illustrates a central problematic of this study; that is, that black performers of wim reported frequently finding themselves "betwixt and between" as multiple communities and interpretations come to bear in different contexts, performance and otherwise. In casual terms, Montgomery and I talked about how the incident seemed to illustrate the record company staff's participation in an essentialized notion of black female sexuality - one which was wanton and lascivious. I suggest that in this incident a black musician's attempts to mobilize her act as "subversive drag" in terms of race went unread by white staff members of the women's music record company.<sup>7</sup>

As bell hooks writes, "Since we [black women] are coded always as "fallen" women in the racist cultural iconography we can never, [as can Madonna,] publicly

“work” the image of ourselves as an innocent female daring to be bad (hooks 1992b:160). hooks cites Tina Turner as an example of a black popular singer who builds commercial success and finds critical acclaim in her appropriation of the “wild woman” image. I would argue that one of the marks of a successful blues singer is the ability to incorporate the stereotype of sexual availability while fiercely asserting sexual autonomy. As I discuss in chapter five, the appearance of sexual availability is not all that is necessary. As Keil observes, “for a working-class style to grow and prosper, the dominant culture’s stereotypes must be accepted and transcended” (1994:206). Montgomery’s experience illustrates this point.

Interestingly, this incident, still painful for Montgomery to recall, revolves around the movements of the musician’s hips and buttocks. These are sites of fascination in sexual iconography in contemporary popular culture (hooks 1992b:63; Rose 1994). Tricia Rose confronts this issue as it applies to black women rappers and an aesthetic hierarchy “that renders black women’s bodies inadequate and sexually unattractive” (Rose 1994). Drawing on her analysis of music videos by black women rappers, Rose expresses a perspective echoed by many scholars of black women and popular culture:

Because female bodies are especially scrutinized in this way, such explicit focus on the protruding behind in black popular culture counters mainstream white definitions of what constitutes a sexually attractive female body. It also serves as a rejection of the aesthetic hierarchy in American culture that marginalizes black women (Rose 1994:168).

It may not be too much of a stretch to suggest that the reception of Montgomery’s act by record company officials is mirrored in what Rose characterizes as “cautious

responses” of some white, feminists critics to performances by black women rappers. Such critics express ambivalence about the women rappers’ use of sexually overt gestures and lyrics.

At the same time, we might ask, to what extent music critics, academics, music historians and performers participate in gendered/racialized constructions of black musicians.<sup>8</sup> Monson (1995) writes, “The image of “unabashed badness” and sexual transgression has sold extremely well in the twentieth century, thanks in part to white fascination with it.” Sherrie Tucker’s research of 1940’s all-women jazz and swing bands asks:

Who is served by the figure of the jazz/blues singer as the embodiment of stereotypes about black femininity, oversexed and underloved, the musician who is assumed to have no musical knowledge but is thought to express, naturally, through her pain, an extra-earthly feminine wisdom which may do the singer no good but which nurtures and entertains listeners? (Tucker 1997:14).

In a collection of essays on spectatorship and black representation in popular culture, (*Black Looks: Race and Representation*), hooks (1992b:61-77) discusses examples of white European fascination with the bodies of blacks—black women in particular. Drawing on the work of Sander Gilman, hooks illustrates this “lure and loathing” with the often cited example of Sarah Bartmann, a black woman who was forced into service as a human exhibit subject and displayed in Paris in the early 1800s. Much of the racialized fascination with Bartmann’s body concentrated attention on her buttocks (hooks 1992b: 63). The display of Bartmann’s naked body is not an isolated or unique incident. As a regular practice of slavery, the

bodies of blacks were routinely inspected as they (women and men) stood on auction blocks awaiting transactions in human capital to be completed.

hooks also cites the example of black cabaret performer Josephine Baker, who, for many years, successfully parlayed white eroticization of black bodies into a lucrative stage career. hooks cites Phyllis Rose's observations about Baker's "concentration on her ass":

She handled it as though it were an instrument, a rattle, something apart from herself that she could shake. One can hardly overemphasize the importance of the rear end. Baker herself declared that people had been hiding their asses too long. "The rear end exists. I seem no reason to be ashamed of it. It's true there are rear ends so stupid, so pretentious, so insignificant that they're good only for sitting on." With Baker's triumph, the erotic gaze of a nation moved downward: she had uncovered a new region for desire.<sup>9</sup>

The Josephine Baker example illustrates Hall's suggestion that cultures of the black diaspora have used the body—"as if it was, and it often was, the only cultural capital we had" (1997:129). Writing about the significance of style in the construction of black identity, Hall says, "We have worked on ourselves as the canvases of representation" (1997:129). On first reading, Hall's evocative comment is striking in that generally one thinks of racialized critiques of the body, especially in regard to blacks, as emanating from non-group members. It might be argued that here, Hall introduces the idea of agency and irony in black performance. The Josephine Baker example illustrates Hall's observation, as does Montgomery's encounter with the women's music record company.

I compare Montgomery's thwarted attempt to mobilize her act as subversive drag—and the failure of a local music critic to read it as such—with a song recital I attended at the Seattle Opera House by the black American soprano Kathleen Battle.<sup>10</sup> Battle, formerly of the Metropolitan Opera, performed a set of songs or aires by English composer John Dowland (1562-1626). From the perspective of the concert reviewer, Melinda Bargreen, ["Finale Saves Uneven Concert," *Seattle Times*] there were two "false starts" in the program as the soprano instructed and reinstructed her accompanist to begin. The critic attributed these false starts to Battle's "trouble finding her pitch from the pianist's introduction." Another critic interpreted the aborted beginnings to Battle's reputation as a temperamental artiste. As an amateur singer I too have studied the Dowland song cycle. Had the critic been more familiar with the text, she would have realized that Battle had engaged in a bit of theatrics as the text describes a woman with a "changing mind." Unfortunately, the collision between the narratives surrounding Battle as the epitome of the temperamental artiste and the critic's unfamiliarity with the music itself, rendered her and possibly others in the audience unable to appreciate the humor of Battle's presentation. Instead of Battle's performance being read, in Butler's terms, as a miming of herself, the soprano's stage behavior was read as naturalized, unable as she was, to convey a separation of her "I" from the role she was playing. The music critic, so taken by Battle's stage persona as "original," was unable to conceive of Battle's performance as "necessary drag," "reproduction," or as imitation. In neither Battle's nor Montgomery's

experience, to borrow from Butler (1993a), was the “fabrication” of the musician’s performance “exposed.”<sup>11</sup> Carole-Anne Tyler writes, “Sometimes, one is ironic without having intended it, and sometimes, despite one’s best intentions, no one gets the joke” (1991:54).

A black woman’s stand with transgendered people: civil rights revisited?

A tremor on the fault line of gender<sup>12</sup> and identity was exemplified by the admittance policy of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival subsequent to 1995. The festival’s official policy was to allow admission to “women-born women” only. This policy promoted a sexual politics that denied admission to transgendered people, male to female, and positioned them on the outside of this, the largest womyn’s music festival in the U.S. According to some festival attendees, in years past Michigan gatekeepers had conducted some bodily checks at the main entrance. Most of these checks, it was reported to me, were of pre- and post-operative attendees who wished to make a publicized statement about their right to enter the festival based on their gender identity rather than on the sexualized (female) features of their bodies. (A white woman scholar remembered other reasons for body checks including the disruption caused by a small group of white young men when they crashed a festival over two decades ago.)

For some black women I interviewed, the policing of gender in this context is ironic, given the variegated impact of homophobia on the lives of festigoers. A black festigoer I met at NWMF ’95, had boycotted “Michigan 95” in light of what she called “the civil rights issue” stating something to the effect that “yesterday it

was us on the outside—we've got to stick together.” The black festigoer's comment is a short step from Lorde's observation in *Zami*, where this “biomythographer” writes of her white friend:

Muriel seemed to believe that as lesbians, we were all outsiders and all equal in our outsiderhood. “We're all niggers,” she used to say, and I hated to hear her say it. It was wishful thinking based on little fact; the ways in which it was true languished in the shadow of the many ways in which it would always be false.<sup>13</sup>

The position this interviewee took of positioning the gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender nation's emancipatory claims parallel to the black civil rights struggle received mixed reviews from other black women with whom I spoke. Some cultural critics claim that regardless of color, the gay people of San Francisco, for example, share an “ethnic identity.” Most black women music consumers with whom I conversed were sympathetic toward and indeed active in the gay/lesbian rights movement. Many expressed resentment, however, at white, middle class pre-operative men who, from their perspective, had most likely benefited from class, gender and skin color privilege prior to taking steps to becoming women. Thomas Yingling in “Acting Up: AIDS, Allegory, Activism” (1991) states it plainly:

gay men [sic] are marked different in a way that does not preclude their “passing” or their negotiation of many of the privileges of masculinity even if known to be gay...gay people of color and lesbians, for instance, may well find themselves alienated from white gay male culture but they may also recognize that their own political future and visibility are bound in complex and equivocal ways to the struggle of gay white men. The dialectic of that recognition does not often work the other way: gay white men are less likely to see their own political fortunes at stake in what happens for people of color or women (1991:294).

When discussing homophobia in black communities (1989) bell hooks describes how the trope of visibility works in places where discourses of race and sexuality converge. She gives voice to a concern expressed by several black women I interviewed about the Michigan policy. Anticipating Yingling's discussion, hooks suggests the attempt to "make gay experience and black experience of oppression synonymous" runs the risk of "minimizing or diminishing the particular problems of people of color in the face of a white-supremacist society" (1989:125). In a well-drawn argument hooks writes:

there is a significant difference that arises between [the experiences of gays and people of color] because of the visibility of dark skin. Often, homophobic attacks on gay people occur in situations where knowledge of sexual preference is indicated or established—outside of gay bars, for example. While it in no way lessens the severity of such suffering for gay people, or the fear that it causes, it does mean that in a given situation the apparatus of protection and survival may be simply not identifying as gay. In contrast most people of color have no choice (1989:878).

On the other hand, Lisa M. Walker, in "How to Recognize a Lesbian" (1993) maintains hooks' argument fails to address the situation for people of color who are light-skinned and pass for white. I suggest that Walker's suggestion is a non sequitur to the broader argument hooks is making. Walker's well-taken comments notwithstanding, the relative numbers of light-skinned lesbians passing as white is small in comparison to the numbers of white gays and lesbians with economic advantage over blacks and Chicanos/Chicanas. Walker's more considered suggestion is that hooks' argument "overlooks the discrimination that some members of the lesbian and gay community (and the heterosexual one, for

that matter) suffer for their nonconformity to the normative visible codes for gender identity no matter how they choose to identify.”<sup>14</sup> As scholars have suggested, the rhetoric of choice masks an underlying reality for many gays and lesbians; that is, that for many, sexual identity is an inherited attribute, not a choice.

Some white women with whom I spoke at the Gulf Coast Women’s Festival were adamant about the sanctity of “women-born womyn” space for reasons already cited. Moreover, these women maintained, at any time they [pre-operative males to females] could pass as men if and when they needed.

In the case of Michigan, the micropolitics of the admittance policy was conjured as a stand-off between difference as an inherited attribute and difference as a politic of articulation.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it seems to me, the explicit policy predicament at Michigan was one of the essential or naturalized “woman” as the “subject of feminism,” (to refer to Butler’s discussion of the latter). In other words, the Michigan admittance policy pre-’95 was an example of the “conflation of the category of women with the ostensibly sexualized features of their bodies [at birth, my emphasis]” (Butler 1990:19). Illustrative of Butler’s densely packed discussion of the “radical splitting of the gendered subject,” the Michigan admittance policy is an example of both “sex” and “gender” trouble in the field. In response to protests and an alternative encampment established by transgender activists and allies beyond festival grounds, Michigan ‘95 admitted transgendered males to females, though, to the consternation of some, without publicity or official welcome. As described to me by a white lesbian from the midwest, Michigan’s

decision to admit transgendered attendees to “come out” in this manner, unannounced and without public acknowledgment, had the effect of reinscribing them “into the closet.” This phenomenon is keenly elucidated by Eve K. Sedgwick in “Epistemology of the Closet” (1993). As Stuart Hall says, “It is only too tempting to fall into the trap of assuming that, because essentialism has been deconstructed theoretically, therefore it has been displaced politically” (1996:249).

#### Liminality in race and gender at a women’s music festival

I offer still another example of gender differentiation (or is it gender non-differentiation?) in the context of women’s music festivals. Traditionally, festival producers have encouraged women not to play the voices of men over stereo systems, loudspeakers, or radios while in attendance. For example, the 20th anniversary Michigan program guide reads, “Please play music with all womyn’s vocals—that means no men’s voices on the tape...It’s not a judgment of music or men, but a strong desire to be surrounded by the sounds of womyn.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, I was surprised when, summer 1995 at the WCWMCF, I heard the voice of pop mega-star Michael Jackson emanating from the kitchen where the staff was awash in a string of Motown hits while cleaning up after the afternoon meal.<sup>17</sup>

At one time, Motown [Record Company] was the largest black-owned corporation in the United States (Garafolo 1993:241). Black music journalist, Nelson George, describes Motown as “totally committed to reaching the white

audience” (1988:86). Its founder, Berry Gordy, Jr., came up with a pop formula that was the perfect metaphor for the integrationist phase of the early civil rights movement: upbeat, gospel-tinged, black pop, produced with a white audience in mind, that was threatening to no one in tone or content, and was irresistibly danceable (Garafolo 1993:241).

I asked several women about Jackson’s “presence” in the dining hall. I wanted to verify my hearing of the same recording. The women with whom I spoke expressed befuddlement at my interest. An anticipated few indicated that they did not think of Jackson as male, in the “regular sense,” others laughed light-heartedly that “Michael is our token male.” “Token maleness” was also evident at the Northampton Lesbian Festival ’95 when it was announced in the program booklet that one act would include men as performers. Festival promoters described this gesture as akin to a “broad, bold experiment.” Given the history of men in rock music performance, several women attendees with whom I spoke informally, wondered how the festival’s producers, WOW Productions, could in good conscience, use that particular rationale in justifying the inclusion of male musicians on the performance roster of a women-only festival.

My interaction with kitchen staff about Michael Jackson finds resonance with aspects of Jonathan Sterne’s article on programmed music and commercial spaces (1997). Maintaining a focus on programmed music, or “Muzak,” (a popular brand name) Sterne records his attempt to conduct an “ethnography of listening” in

the Mall of America, the largest mall in the United States, located in Bloomington, Minnesota. He writes that:

...actual hearing and listening practices are not necessarily at the forefront of participants' consciousness—sounds can be quite ephemeral, and therefore my calling attention to the music would not necessarily elicit responses from people that reflected what would happen in my absence (1997:22-50).

My experience with Michael Jackson and the women's music festival dining hall recalls two observations of black culture critics. Firstly, because of its pervasiveness in American popular culture, black music is often deployed in situations that are bereft of black people. Hazel Carby elaborates on the ironies of racial politics in the post-civil rights era in "The Multicultural Wars" (1992). Here, she draws attention to a disparity between the appearance of blacks as "subjects" in texts and how these texts are becoming "a way of gaining knowledge of the 'other,' a knowledge that appears to satisfy and replace the desire to challenge existing frameworks of segregation" (Carby 1992:197). In "Commodified Groves" (1994:307) Keil alludes to the phenomenon of whites reinforcing their identity vis a vis black music.

We give that [our own sexuality] over to Michael Jackson, or to Aretha [Franklin], or to other black stars, and it keeps us from getting in touch with our own emotions, warmth, and sexual power. It's as if we have given that up as part of a trade-off: We are going to oppress you folks racially and class wise, keeping you a permanent underclass, but we will revere you as stars of power, celebrities of sensuality. There is something really twisted about that...

Secondly, the music in the kitchen “collision” recalls controversies over the problematics of racial and sexual difference in regard to Jackson, debates which are well known and need not be reviewed here. Michele Wallace points out that E. Ann Kaplan includes Jackson in what she calls the “second, softer androgynous group” of rock performers (that includes Annie Lennox, David Bowie, and Boy George).<sup>18</sup> Ambiguity and the blurring of gender boundaries, subjects rarely discussed in mainstream ethnomusicological literature, have received long overdue attention in studies of popular music (Sarkissian 1992:345). The surprised reaction of women I asked about Jackson recalls Wallace’s comment about the singer’s search for an individual solution to a global problem

as he attempts to generate somewhat primitive or naive historical readings from a position (that of black male pop star/black male in the street/black male of ambiguous sexuality) in cultural discourse ordinarily experienced by mainstream (white) culture as profoundly silent, nonexistent, and unspoken for (1990:89).

This incident brings up interesting questions about the role of race and whether the kitchen crew (all of whom were white) would have broken with festival convention and played the voices of white artists as readily. Had the kitchen workers played a Boy George recording before I walked in? Is the kitchen not governed by the suggested codes of behavior as the rest of the festival? Alternatively, I am also interested in how this practice—innocent on its surface—relates to the “othering by the other,” a phenomenon I discussed in the second chapter.

A parody on a parody at a women's music festival

My biggest issue—and I know if I'm a real live lesbian  
I've got to have an issue—is education.

-Lynn Thomas, cabaret performer/composer<sup>19</sup>

Lynn Thomas' "Straight People," which she performed at the '95 Gulf Coast Women's Festival in Overt, Mississippi illustrates humor evoked at women's music festivals as lesbian/bisexual performers, whether musicians or comedienne, signify on gay/lesbian and straight societal norms through performance (e.g., verbally, through costume, stage behavior). Historically, in the "raised-consciousness" charged environment of the women's music festival, where performances both on and off-stage, are discussed and "processed" in terms of gender, political correctness, race, relationships, the patriarchy, etc., misunderstandings have arisen as participants analyze discrete events, musical and otherwise, from their particular social locations. Thomas' cabaret-like rendition of "Straight People," a take-off on Randy Newman's 1977 hit, "Short People," was a case in point.

Immediately preceding the song's performance, Thomas, a white performer who enjoys incorporating comedy into her act, asked for a show of hands of straight women in the audience. As a seasoned attendee of women's music concerts I recognized this question as one frequently posed by performers as a segue to jokes about straightness, gender roles and stereotypes. In response to the call for a show of hands, a young white heterosexual woman attending the Mississippi festival with a small group from AmeriCorps, raised her own. The

resulting controversy concerned how ostracized the young woman felt by the song as she found herself in the “minority.” Thomas stated in an interview the next day, that “for some of them [the young women] this is their first experience with women’s culture at this level.” She shared that this type of “crisis” occurs every time she performs the parody of Newman’s hit. Thomas said:

When I do my song “Straight People” which is based on Randy Newman’s “Short People,” sometimes people don’t get it completely. Oftentimes straight people get it and the gay and lesbian people are so worried that their straight friends will be offended that they don’t really listen to what it is really about. It’s a parody on a parody really. And the concept is how silly, prejudice and stereotypes are.<sup>20</sup>

Attributing a generation-gap as a contributing factor to the misunderstanding, Thomas said, “sometimes if people are younger and they’ve never heard the Randy Newman song, they don’t get the whole thing.” Though Wanda Henson, festival co-producer, intervened as mediator, Thomas, who has played piano bars/cabarets in the New York-New Jersey-Pennsylvania area for the last eighteen years, in both gay and straight venues, was upset by the incident:

I hate to turn people away mad. I want people to get it about the problem of being in the minority—the problem of being oppressed, ridiculed for things that are stereotypical—that really don’t reflect the individual. That’s an important part of all solidarity with an oppressed group. It’s wonderful that straight women are here...On the other hand, it’s important to understand how it feels if you’ve never been in that situation...

Sometimes I think that people have certain expectations when they go into a situation like this, that because they’ve done so, they should be acknowledged for being tolerant—that they’re thinking that they’ve put their necks on the line and have risked being identified as lesbian, and then for me to sing the “Straight People”

song makes them feel like what they were doing here is not even appreciated.<sup>21</sup>

Afterwards, Thomas and I spoke at length about the role of heterosexual women in efforts to eliminate homophobia in feminist and black communities and the need for greater feminist education generally.

“If only you were just one:” fieldnotes on identity and allegiances

*“If only you were just one: black or lesbian.”*

A white male trade publisher reacts to Audre Lorde’s petition to have her manuscript considered for publication.<sup>22</sup>

In this section I discuss examples of black women performers and women’s music festival participants being asked to “choose one identity over another.” Throughout my field research, interviewees framed their predicament as one of being asked to choose between their black and lesbian identities. For the black lesbian performers and consumers I interviewed, lesbianism “clearly does not figure as the exclusive ground of either identity or politics; however, it is neither divisible from nor subordinate to other identities” (Martin 1993). Marlon Riggs captures this sentiment in his black gay documentary, *Tongues Untied*, the intent of which he describes as an effort to “invalidate” the argument of one identity taking precedence over another.<sup>23</sup> Black women-identified singer/guitarist Judith Casselberry addresses this issue as well: “Being black lesbian women you can’t say what’s more important: ‘is it more important that I’m black, is it more important that I’m a woman, is it more important that I’m a lesbian?’ Hey—it’s a package deal. I can’t sit down and segregate the parts. I am me and that’s all part of it. So it’s

important to address all of it.”<sup>24</sup> In speaking eloquently to the complex interaction of race/ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation, Casselberry’s comments are reminiscent of the elaboration of this concept over a decade and a half earlier by feminists and lesbians of color. In refuting the idea that lesbian identity detracts from black authenticity, Casselberry underscores comments of many commentators (Smith 1993; Riggs 1991; Lorde 1984; Anzualda 1981). For example, Audre Lorde (1984:121) writes, “Black women who once insisted that lesbianism was a white women’s problem now insist that black lesbians are a threat to black nationhood, are consorting with the enemy, [and] are basically unblack.” The belief that racial authenticity is exclusively correlated with heterosexual identity is prevalent in many cultures; it is not confined to the black American cultural experience. Casselberry’s self-conceptualization allows for difference outside an assumed or imposed hierarchy of subjectivities.

Casselberry’s insistence that her multiple identities as a black lesbian are significant, resonates with Sharon Holland’s analysis of the erasure of a black presence in lesbian studies. In “(White) Lesbian Studies” (1996), Holland argues against the reduction of the “category of lesbian to the confines of a white discourse on identity politics.” In concluding that blackness is the fodder for a discontented lesbian studies, Holland treads territory previously pursued by Hazel Carby and others. Holland contends that many lesbian critics, or critics in lesbian studies, have drawn on the “impending threat of blackness” as a corrective to narrow thinking, “while never conceding the ground for examination of ‘literatures’

to the voices of women of color.” Years earlier, hooks (1990:125) warned of the tendency for discussions highlighting “difference” and “otherness” to make of this potentially radical discipline... “a field of study where old practices are simultaneously critiqued, re-enacted and sustained.” Holland problematizes a manifestation of lesbian studies wherein the “colored girls” do the “soul work” of the discipline, and “the white women shell out the theories that decide how this soul work is going to be read, disseminated, and taught in juxtaposition to already canonized white lesbian authors” (1996:250).<sup>25</sup> Holland cites Ann Ducille’s response to Houston Baker’s observation that black women’s presence in literary discourse is the site for “the convergence of matters of race, class and gender today.” She notes Ducille’s caution that “one of the dangers of standing at an intersection—particularly at such a suddenly busy, three-way intersection—is the likelihood of being run over by oncoming traffic.” (Inventively, Holland subtitles this section of her essay, “Hit the Road, Jackie” coyly punning on “Hit the Road, Jack,” the song popularized by Ray Charles in the early 1960s.) With its focus on the discrepancies between the inclusion of women of color into curricula, but not their influence, Holland’s work expands upon valuable leads found in the work of Aida Hurtado (1989; 1996). Comments of Casselberry and others indicate the extent to which black lesbians, to follow Biddy Martin, reject the concept of separate, even if multiple, identities by refusing to isolate the “self” and then divide it into neat and hierarchical categories (Martin 1993).

Holland's redeployment of the term "colored girls" can be read on several levels. One interpretation is that with "colored girls" Holland makes an oblique reference to Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*, (1975) the acclaimed Broadway play depicting the personal and interpersonal lives of seven black women. In recent years, the term "women of color," of which "colored women" is an inventive inversion, has itself come under fire by feminist critics for its totalizing effects and erasure of the specificities by which racisms are articulated. Hazel Carby (1992:194), for instance, in interrogating ways that the black female subject has been addressed, questions the marginalization of "race" in the ways that "women of color" has been deployed. Carby suggests the term implies that white women and men do not have color and therefore are not implicated in a society structured by race dominance. Asking "are only the so-called colored to be the subjects of a specialized discourse of difference?," Carby's question reminds me of a cartoon shared with me by a black lesbian festigoer at the 1995 National Women's Music Festival in which the feminist cartoonist points out that three decades after the civil rights movement, black women are once again being referred to, in some circles, as "colored women."<sup>26</sup>

The redeployment of terms such as "queer" or "nigger," deployed at one time to injure and/or to exclude is discussed by Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter* (1993:223). Butler discusses how the "reterritorialization of a term that has been used to abject a population" can become the site of resistance, "the possibility of an

enabling social and political resignification” (231). Butler’s discussion follows formal and informal discussions amongst critics of African American culture in regard to the use of “nigga” in rap music. Butler notes that to a certain extent this recontextualization has occurred with the term “queer.” We have yet to see if “colored women” will be redeployed by black women, many of whom have long memories of the term’s specificity of use in U.S. history. For many blacks, it was not the word “colored” that was injurious, rather, it was the symbolic violence levied by the word it preceded: “gal” or “girl” for woman, “boy” for man, a semantic indicator of the juvenilizing of adults. My years as a colored girl—in the concrete and not abstract sense, were spent growing up in two locales, from birth to age eight in Buffalo, New York, and later, from age eight to thirteen, in Kansas City, Missouri. Like many of my African American peers, I remember the period during which our family adopted a “black,” as opposed to “colored” identity. As the height of the civil rights movement came to fruition my black friends and I would tease each other mercilessly about whether we were “black” or “*still* colored.” “Colored” had a ring of stigma about it and the modifier of “still” added an extra layer of out-datedness to the term. Everyone had made the transition to the widely heralded black identity except, it seemed, my grandparents. Residents of a small town in central Pennsylvania, another ten years passed before my grandparents, longtime Lincoln Republicans, accepted the new “black” identity and opted for voting affiliation with the Democratic party.<sup>27</sup>

Henry Louis Gates, in his memoir *Colored People* (an elegant account of his upbringing in Piedmont, West Virginia) captures the sense of place and pride that accompanied “colored” identity.<sup>28</sup> Gates describes the tension between longing and repudiation that many blacks experience today regarding this same identity. Like Gates’ mother and father, elder members of my own family reminisce that being colored was in some ways superior to our enactment and understanding of contemporary black identities. During these discussions, an example frequently made by one of my aunts is the quality of public school instruction for blacks. “When we were colored,” she usually begins, “we had black schools with black teachers. When was the last time you had a black teacher, Eileen?” Linking my own experience as a colored girl with that of Gates (1994), hooks (1996) and others is the paradox of a desire to assert a connection with the past while, given some of segregation’s demeaning effects, maintaining a certain social distance. It might be argued that the underside of being colored is often forgotten by armchair theorists, feminist or otherwise.

In bridging the gap between a theoretical discussion of colored girls and lived experience, I recall making the return drive from the “field” of Overt, Mississippi to the airport in Birmingham, Alabama so that I might catch a flight to my home in Maryland. Deciding I wanted to make an early evening of it, I pulled into the parking lot of a Days Inn. Pleased with the work I had done, I looked forward to dissertation completion and landing a job as an assistant professor! Having just attended the Gulf Coast Women’s Music Festival, I was dressed in the

festival wear of jeans and a tee shirt. I stepped to the counter to ask the staff person for a room for one. Without personal greeting, the woman behind the counter advised me that the line for applications for the “maid position forms to the right.” Admittedly surprised, I paused. What would be communicated if I protested too much? Numerous stories circulate about the black anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston making her living as a maid and it is certainly an honorable profession. Yet, I thought, what if I did not issue a disclaimer loudly enough? Did my colleagues in the department, members of the “white boys network” especially, which, as Rabinow points out is a “cultural rather than a biological category,” experience encounters such as this?<sup>29</sup> There was little recourse, it seemed. I had returned from the field and it was business as usual. My encounter with the white desk clerk, preoccupations in cultural studies with the contingent nature of identity notwithstanding, points to the concrete role that racism plays in society and its ramifications for fieldworkers.

Besides its focus on what Cornel West might suggest is a “black bourgeois” concern, this event implores us to examine in what ways theories mask material practices. Perhaps the utility of the term “colored women” is as fodder for late night conversations amongst feminist activists and academics; its suggestion may not signify a trend of greater anthropological significance. I am reminded of a passage in which Gilroy observes ironically that more than a century after the official end of slavery, his young son returned home from school singing “slave songs” that he had learned in music class that day. Up until that incident, Gilroy

recounts sardonically, he [Gilroy] had been under the impression that slavery was over.

I bring forward another illustration of the fractured consequences of identity allegiance that emerged at women's music festivals over the course of my research. At the 1995 West Coast Women's Music and Comedy Festival, founder Robin Tyler chaired a panel discussion of lesbian-feminist activists regarding the formation of a lesbian state, non-imagined, to be founded within the limits of the contiguous United States. The most vocal audience members, predominantly white, age 50 and over, ostensibly embraced the idea though the question of which territory lesbians, accompanied by gays "and friends," should "take over," was posed repeatedly by audience members and not without a tone of alarm. Here, as was noted by the one panelist under age 35, a generation gap was evidenced. As the discussion ensued, it became apparent that an underlying concern of many was not the elimination of homophobia per se but retirement planning and the future of the lesbian nation as it ages. Lost in the discussion were issues of "diversity," in regard to ethnicity or economic class. The emergence of a lesbian gerontocracy became evident as one white festival participant assured those assembled that younger people would be needed in the new lesbian state as service providers (e.g., massage therapists, cooks, physicians, chauffeurs). The discussion, and the anxiety it elicited from women regarding economic security set in relief media obsession with "lesbian chic" and as one writer put it, the "continuing contradiction posed to it by an older lesbian feminism." Few black women audience members were present at this

session (a dance party hosted by a prominent black deejay was held concurrently). Long-time black lesbian feminist activist and writer, Margaret Sloan, was the only black panel member.

White women were not the only ones pursuing utopian land projects at women's music festivals that year. Activists and women's music festival veterans Blanche Jackson and Amoja Three Rivers sponsored a workshop at Michigan '95 to speak with women about their efforts to found a retreat center for women of color. At a scheduled festival workshop, Jackson and Three Rivers shared their visions for a space that is psychologically and physically safe for women of color and their white allies. The "women of color land," they explained, would serve as a retreat center for artists and writers initially and hopefully include musicians at a later date. At last report, Jackson and Three Rivers were considering land possibilities in West Virginia. Overall, the "lesbian state" workshop and the workshop offered by the veterans of the Michigan festival recalled not only utopian land projects initiated by leftists and feminist separatists during the 1960s but successive back to Africa movements propounded by American blacks since the early decades of the nineteenth century.

Though it is clear that music festival participants experience affinity on one or more levels, my research mitigates against arguments that a lesbian culture shared equally by participants is at the core of women-only music festivals and concerts. Illustrating this point is an exchange I had with a first-time ("festi-virgin") black festigoer, Sunshine McKenzie, age 19.<sup>30</sup> My encounter with McKenzie

illustrates how much I had taken for granted in terms of a shared knowledge of festival participants. Encounters with women such as McKenzie, new to women's music festivals, jarred me into "reality" in a way that was critical for my research.

"Michigan '95" was the second time I had incorporated a written survey into my research methods, placing the surveys (four pages each) copied onto lavender paper on the brochure table for participants to complete at their leisure. I wanted to explore qualitatively and on a larger scale, the role that feminism played in black women's lives, and the extent it influenced their musical preferences. Though it was clear that the questionnaire's focus was consumer preferences regarding black performers of wim, I welcomed survey completion from any one willing to do so. In an effort to ascertain to what extent black festigoers participated in a shared language of festival attendees, I included the following question:

How do you spell the name of adult female human beings?

- a. women    b. wimmin    c. womyn

Although I tried not to hover around participants as they completed surveys, I found that festival attendees were more apt to complete the questionnaires when I stayed in the vicinity. Often festigoers engaged in conversation with each other about the questions. In a way, the survey provided a small group of relative strangers with something to talk about. Whereas I was rather pleased that some of the questions were particularly well-phrased, some women opined that the survey reminded them of a high-school or college exam.

McKenzie completed the survey. I noticed that she indicated that she spelled the name for “adult female human beings,” “w-o-m-e-n.” She was the only festigoer to make this response without a caveat that in the festival environment she uses either possibility “b” or “c.” Since her response was an anomaly, I decided to pursue the issue with her. Without hesitation, McKenzie informed me that the reasoning behind her response was that she was “educated.” Had I been wearing a hat other than that of researcher, I would have pondered whether she believed I had any education at all. At the same time, my interaction with McKenzie was a strong reminder that women’s music festivals attract women from not only various backgrounds but that they are attended by women holding various agendas and rationales for festival participation. McKenzie, for example, had simply accompanied a friend to the festival and neither feminist music nor politics was on her agenda. During the course of my research, I met festigoers who seldom or never attend concerts or workshops, preferring the comradie of women. Still others attend primarily for the crafts and the artisans’ marketplace.

Interestingly, I was not the only one who had assumed shared knowledge amongst black festigoers in regard to what it meant to be women-identified. Sitting with a group of women in the Women of Color Tent waiting for them to complete the written survey, Charlane Jordan, age 34, was dismayed to find I had included a question about whether the respondent identified as a “feminist,” “womanist,” or as “both”. Jordan exclaimed that “every black woman” she knew identified as a womanist.<sup>31</sup> I told myself that I should think twice before responding given that I

did not wish to compromise ethnomusicological research with feminist education. The feminist educator side won out however, and I asked if by any chance she had a masters degree in liberal arts. My assessment was off by a margin; she was still pursuing her masters degree. I affirmed her commitment to womanist politics (a term which she had deployed uncritically), but submitted that the vast majority of black women are unfamiliar with the term “womanist” and are unaware of its derivation. I mentioned to my interlocutor that the term “womanist” received literary currency through Alice Walker’s essay, “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens” in her book of the same name (1983). Relatively few readers, I suggested, were familiar with Walker’s nonfiction. The festigoer expressed appreciation for this information and added that in women’s studies courses she had taken as an undergraduate, she had never been encouraged to critically examine the terms “womanist” and “feminist.” In retrospect, I am struck by the uncritical stance Jordan took to both terms and how in her formulation, she set up “feminist” as an identity to avoid, regardless of feminist theory and activism advocated by black women writers in particular.

It is interesting to consider my sharing of my definition of feminism with Jordan as a breach of fieldwork methodology. Although as a researcher I cannot defend such an action, I am also not willing to suggest that ethnomusicologists distance themselves from those whose musical practices they study. On the other hand, “When is sharing ‘information’ with someone an imposition because a scholar enters the field with the credibility of a researcher?” This is important to consider

even if the researcher appears to be a member of the same class, racial group, or gender as the interlocutor. As researchers, we are not immune from these strictures just because on one or two levels, we are working with members of “our own society,” an all too encompassing catch phrase that masks a complex set of relationships. Who knows—perhaps Jordan was “putting me on.” Perhaps she was more familiar with the polemics of the arguments about womanist/feminist politics than she was willing to admit. Such situations have been described by numerous ethnographers in the social sciences and music, usually accompanied with a self-deprecating comment from the researcher about his or her own gullibility.

My exchange with Jordan raises a number of issues, theoretical and methodological. Firstly, much of the literature assumes that black women have adopted a womanist identity in opposition to a feminist identity. I concur with hooks who, in her early writings, suggested womanist was never a widespread popular social movement such that the feminist movement was and continues to be. It might be argued that Jordan’s response illustrates “an uncritical acceptance of distorted definitions of feminism rather than a demand for redefinition” (hooks 1984:22). At the same time, Jordan articulated what a womanist was by enunciating what it was not. More often than not, “womanist” is defined by its difference from what “feminist” is imagined to be in its most radical form. According to Jordan, a womanist is not a feminist. She implies that a feminist is white when she says that all the black women she knows are womanists. In introducing the term “womanist” to the lexicon of feminist theory, Walker suggests

a counter-term to one that for many, has untenable associations. In the context of women's music festivals, which at one time were considered sites of radical political subjectivity, issues such as these really matter. Jordan's statement recalls Carby's suggestion that "black feminist criticism is to be regarded critically as a problem, not a solution, as a sign that should be interrogated, a locus of contradictions" (1987:14).

Many feminist anthropologists and other researchers have discussed how their identities as feminists have informed their research methods and project design (Harrison 1995; Abu Lughod 1991; Steady 1981). Several have discussed the import of their feminist identities in the practice of their everyday lives. Tricia Rose's account of her interactions with black women rappers is exemplary in this regard (1994). As part of an exchange with rapper MC Lyte who remarked she was often labeled a feminist by critics even though she did not think of herself as one (Rose 1994:176) Rose, demonstrating feminist pedagogy at work, shares her definition of feminism with the performer. MC Lyte then concurred that according to that definition she was indeed a feminist.

Rose explains the phenomenon of young women rappers distancing themselves from feminism by suggesting they are "acutely aware of the dominant discursive context within which their responses" will be reproduced (Rose 1994:149). Rose's work with performing artists exemplifies the point that feminist theorists have made repeatedly, that "for black women, feminism often reads white feminism and consequently represents a movement that has contributed to

sustaining their oppression while claiming to speak on their behalf' (Rose 1991:181). Underscoring leads blazed by contemporary critics of feminism, Rose argues that:

feminist theorists must not be satisfied with simply "letting the other speak" but should begin a systematic reevaluation of how feminism is conceptualized and how ethnicity, class, and race seriously fracture gender as a single-axis category. Until this kind of analysis takes place...many black women will be unable to rely on feminist analysis, and what white feminists say to MC Lyte will remain paper thin (1994:181).

Rose cites frustration with white feminist theorists who clumsily attempt to incorporate popular rap and other black performers into feminist analyses. I read her critique as having points of similarity to those of Feld (1994:304-311) who finds puzzling the extent to which some feminist theorists have gone to incorporate rock artists such as Tina Turner, or soul singer Aretha Franklin, however unsuccessfully, into unidimensional analyses of feminism and popular music.

Ambivalence, such as that expressed by MC Lyte, is reflected not only by some (black) women music consumers and performers, but in the writings of some black (feminist) scholars. Writers from various disciplines make frequent gratuitous references to "womanist" without supporting use of this term through critical discussion and engagement. This contrasts sharply with a body of literature by black women critics who, while interrogating theories of feminism (hooks 1989; Carby 1987), through writings or lectures, describe themselves as feminists (Davis 1990; Smith 1984; hooks 1981).

The music of black women-identified musicians included in this study, most of who identify as feminists and have been long-time feminist activists, could be the focus of critical feminist studies. Rose's account of her interviews with performers demonstrates sensitivity and finesse. I can not help but wonder however, how MC Lyte's response might have been modified had Rose incorporated into their interaction brief acknowledgment of black women's long history as feminist activists and theorists. Unfortunately, the exchange Rose depicts seems to undermine her goal in that feminism is reinscribed as a mode of theorizing framed by the experiences of white women. As the work on black women, music and feminist subjectivities develops, it will be interesting to see whether the practice of scholars sharing their definitions of feminism and other terms with interlocutors becomes a matter of standard practice. My hope is that lessons gleaned from these vignettes of fieldwork encounters, identities and allegiances will be a contribution to the scholarship on black women, music and feminism.

Black middle-aged women are not the only ones who report ambivalence in regard to the term "feminism" however. In chapter five I examine the attitude of a new generation of young musicians toward the term feminism and women-identified music.

## CHAPTER V

**Signifiers of Difference in the Process of Reception**

*She looked like Bessie Smith and sounded like her too.  
I knew right away she was a lesbian.  
white festigoer to researcher,  
West Coast Women's Music and Comedy Festival, 1995.*

*White women often mistake size for sexual orientation.  
black lesbian festigoer to researcher,  
West Coast Women's Music and Comedy Festival, 1995.*

*There is no women's music—only women's music audiences.  
musician, Sue Fink*

In an environment designed to challenge gender and sexuality norms through music performance, the politics of butch, femme, lesbian, bisexual, and straight identities *matter*. Here I examine the notion, held by many consumers, that clues to a performer's sexual identity (particularly as a lesbian) can be found through her performance, specifically in the way she plays her instrument or in her manner of singing. Throughout this chapter, I examine listener/audience member perceptions about black performers of wim based on consumer (and performer) conceptualizations about visual and audible signifiers of difference. "Difference," in this case, refers not only to racial differences (e.g., black, white, bi-racial) and sexual identity (e.g., lesbian, straight, bisexual) but to a difference in "sexual style."<sup>1</sup> Under the rubric of visual differences, I refer to skin color, body size, stage dress, etc. By audible difference I mean timbre, range, pronunciation, vocal quality, etc. By sexual style, a category falling under the rubric of sexual identity, I mean whether listeners/audience members perceive a singer as "butch" or "femme."

In lesbian parlance, “butch” is a shorthand way of referring to essentialized notions of masculinity that have been appropriated and reworked by women of various sexualities. “Femme” is a parallel way of referring to notions of femininity that have been appropriated in a similar manner. According to the women I interviewed as well as theorists of lesbian culture (Case 1989; Nestle 1987; Morgan 1993; Roof 1991; Grahn 1984), the terms “butch” and “femme” are not adequate for describing women’s lives as lesbians. I concur with Butler who, in her ongoing philosophical efforts to disentangle gender and sexuality, suggests:

The vocabulary for describing the difficult play, crossing, and destabilization of masculine and feminine identifications within homosexuality has only begun to emerge within theoretical language; the non-academic language historically embedded in gay communities is here much more instructive. The thought of sexual difference within homosexuality has yet to be theorized in its complexity (1991:240).

Increasingly, researchers have posited that a group of people, in this case predominantly lesbians and bisexuals, interpret performances according to more than one set of principles, values, or aesthetics. The central idea emerging from this chapter is that the same behavior, tone of voice, or manner of standing on a stage can symbolize different essences to members of contrasting groups. This phenomenon is illustrated in some of the more recent ethnographic work on performance (Meintjes 1990).

To illustrate, during the course of my research I found that a particular voice quality may symbolize for some, the essence of “butchness.” For other audience members, the very same voice quality might be imputed to symbolize the

essence of a black expressiveness. To illustrate further, let us take the notion, circulated in some lesbian discourses, that Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton (1926-1984), an early rock & roll pioneer, was a lesbian. Again, the underlying assumption is that there is a connection between vocal style and sexual identity. Thornton boasted a coarse, gravelly voice, and a repertoire, assertively delivered, about relationships between men and women. She is most widely known for her only substantial hit: “Hound Dog,” recorded in 1952.<sup>2</sup> “Hound Dog” is the quintessential example of Thornton’s bluesy style. Presley covered the tune four years later. In “Hound Dog,” the protagonist informs her errant male suitor that she sees through his smooth talking jive. Thornton’s rendition of “Hound Dog” inspired a number of “answer” records from male artists including Rufus Thomas’ “Beat Cat” and John Brim’s “Rattlesnake” (Garr 1992:3).

“Hound Dog” was penned by the white songwriters Mike Stoller and Jerry Leiber. According to Stoller, Thornton’s physical appearance provided as much inspiration for their penning the tune as did her vocal style.<sup>3</sup> It might be argued that the presumptions observers make about Thornton’s sexual identity based on her appearance have as much to do with her skin color as her physical stature. With her dark skin and heavy-set form, Willie Mae Thornton was not beautiful according to “American” standards based on white norms. Kyra Gaunt writes:

The meaning of lightness and darkness among the skin color variations within the black population continues to influence perceptions of black beauty as well. Comments to dark-skinned black women such as “She’s black, but pretty,” or “You sure are pretty for a dark-skinned sister,” imply a kind of dichotomous relationship between the darkness of black skin and beauty.<sup>4</sup>

Based on my research in wim contexts, Thornton's mastery of black expressiveness might be seized upon by white lesbian music consumers in particular, as a marker of butch identity. On the other hand, the black music consumers I interviewed expressed respect for singers such as Thornton--especially for their mastery of blues idioms, but generally did not impute to them lesbian, and by implicit association, butch identities. During the course of my fieldwork, I found that essentialized notions of voice quality (including timbre, range, pronunciation), repertoire selection, somatics and race get mapped onto each other by audience members/listeners in wim spheres as they conceptualize what a lesbian "looks like" or "sounds like."

While privileging visibility can be politically and rhetorically effective, such a strategy is not without problems.<sup>5</sup> I follow other scholars (L. Walker 1993) in suggesting that the tropes of visibility and of audibility (my suggestion) are problematic. Lisa Walker addresses visibility/invisibility in "How to Recognize a Lesbian: The Cultural Politics of Looking Like What You Are" (1993). Walker suggests that one of the problems with the formulation of visibility/invisibility is its "lack of sensitivity to shifting power relations, its related lack of clarity about whether visibility is a matter of self-representation or of attribution."<sup>6</sup>

Walker draws on the work of black lesbian critics (Omosupe 1991; Gomez 1988) and others, suggesting that the relationship between a visible signifier of difference and its signified identity is complex. Throughout my fieldwork, audience members shared with me factors they consider in the process of attributing sexual

identity (e.g., lesbian, bisexual) and sexual style (e.g., butch, femme) to black performers of wim. Some of these attributes were visual (e.g., athletic stature = lesbian); others were audible (e.g., soprano range = a heterosexual woman). My study suggests that the relationships between visible and audible signifiers of difference are also complex.

The incident recounted in the introductory chapter about my friend Spillane's perception of the black women diner customers, serves as a point of entry for a discussion about the construction of identities through visibility and the role that race, music, and essentialism play in that process.<sup>7</sup> What sets of interpretive moves inspired Spillane to assume the "three, large, black women" seated in the diner were "dykes going to Michigan?" What did she mean by her late-night observation, "You gotta admit, they looked like Bessie Smith."? Had the women sung spontaneously for diner guests while I visited the restroom? Taking responsibility for my part in this intrigue, what else had we assumed about these three women based on visual performance—sexual style, radical political subjectivity, fighting skills? Admittedly, my companion and I felt "saved" by the trio's presence; my interest throughout this chapter lingers on the question of "why"?

This vignette, of which I was a primary participant, integrates assumptions about black women, identity politics and the body. Spillane's comment that "they looked like Bessie Smith" evokes the 1920s when black female singers carried the race records industry, the success of which was indelibly linked to vaudeville blues

performance. At the time, innuendo frequently implicated Smith and Gertrude “Ma” Rainey in affairs with other women and sometimes with each other. This, combined with an assertive stage presence and lyrics defiant of gender norms, helped foster the transgressive image enjoyed by these performers. A festigoer’s attribution of lesbian identity to a black performer of wim because she “sounded like Bessie Smith” (cited in the epigraph) typified reactions from white audience members to my queries about performances by black musicians. By “sounding like Bessie Smith” I suggest that consumers reference not only aspects of the singer’s body (e.g., voice quality, skin color, physical mass) but the assertiveness, dramatic flair, and defiance of gender norms that Smith and some of her counterparts exhibited on and off stage. While most wim consumers with whom I spoke expressed appreciation for the black women singers of vaudeville blues, a smaller number expressed disappointment that they (e.g., singers such as Bessie Smith and “Ma” Rainey) had not “come out” (as lesbians).

The term “coming out,” “like much campy gay terminology,” was a play on the language of women’s culture, in this case referring to the practice of a debutante “coming out” to her cultural peers of high society. According to Chauncey, in the years leading up to the 1939-45 war, gay people spoke of “coming out” to the “gay world” or what they called “homosexual society,” “a world neither so small, nor so isolated, nor, often, so hidden as ‘closet’ implies” (1994:7).

Chauncey writes that given the ubiquity of terms such as “coming out” and “the closet,” it is instructive to bear in mind that gays and lesbians did not use these terms before the 1960s:

The fact that gay people in the past did not speak of or conceive of themselves as living in a closet does not preclude us from using the term retrospectively as an analytic category, but it does suggest that we need to use it more cautiously and precisely, and to pay attention to the very different terms people used to describe themselves and their social worlds (Chauncey 1994:6).

By the 1970s, the critical audience for “coming out” had changed from the gay world, to the straight friends and family of the gay, lesbian or bisexual person. While clarifying the social milieu for the (non)emergence of contemporary gay and lesbian identities (as we know them in the U.S.) Chauncey is sympathetic toward the consumer tendency to read the present into the past or, in the words of a prominent ethnomusicologist, to assume that the “ancestors of oysters are oysters.”<sup>8</sup>

Narratives about the black vaudeville singers, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith, two of the most popular singers showcased by the Theatre Owners’ Booking Association (“TOBA”) in the 1920s, are of particular interest to me here as is the social milieu for black gays and lesbians during that period. Rainey and Smith belong to a long list of important 1920s blues-women, many of whom performed in Harlem during the period referred to as the “New Negro Movement” or the “Harlem Renaissance.” This list also includes Ethel Waters, Alberta Hunter, and cabaret singer Gladys Bentley.<sup>9</sup> As mentioned in chapter two, scholarship on black women blues singers provides valuable leads into the expression of black

working-class cultural and sexual politics via music during the 1920s. While narratives of the vaudeville blues singers play an important role in the affirmation of lesbian identity by consumers of women-identified music, this complex phenomenon has been underexamined. My intent here is to illuminate the leap between an audience member's appraisal of "She [a black performer of wim] looked like Bessie Smith and sounded like her too" to an identification of that same performer as a lesbian.

"I kept waiting for her to come out:" notes of an ethnographic encounter

I hate to be a sourpuss, but all this lesbian hero-worship of k.d. lang really irks me. Lesbian celebrities who stay firmly wedged in the closet are bad enough, but lesbian celebrities who tease and prance and flirt just barely on the wrong side of coming out make my blood boil!...They're willing to soak up our love and money, but won't take the risk of coming out.<sup>10</sup>

- letter to the editor, *On Our Backs*

Exchanges I had with women at the West Coast Women's Music and Comedy Festival 1995 regarding a Nightstage performance of Nell Carter, an African American singer of Broadway musical fame, illuminate some of the issues involved in the process of audience members "claiming a performer as one of our own." At issue here was Carter's sexual identity and the appropriateness of her performance in a women-identified music context. In the following excerpts about whether Carter's show was a "women's music type performance," Carly Rivers, a white lesbian in her fifties, was disappointed that Carter is not a lesbian. It was clear that for Rivers the definition of "women's music" includes lesbian self-identification by the performer:

...I think Nell is a very powerful performer and I enjoy relating to her power and strength and feeling that as a woman maybe I could have a bit of that too, but I was disappointed because it's one of the biggest nights here and she's not a lesbian and I would really would have loved to have seen a lesbian performer up there—maybe not quite as good as Nell, but somebody who speaks more from where I am.<sup>11</sup>

I asked Rivers to speak specifically about how she knows categorically, that Carter is not a lesbian:

Hayes: Do you know that for a fact?

Rivers: ...No, she talked about her three husbands. She said she has a new love, lover or love interest—she's in love.

Hayes: I didn't catch that.

Rivers: She did not identify whether it was a man or a woman. I kept waiting for her to come out. I thought this was going to be her big opening night...<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, Toni Langfield, a white lesbian in her early sixties and Rivers' partner, privileged the music and performance itself over the performer's social identity in regard to sexual orientation. In response to my query about whether Nell Carter's was a "dyke performance," Langfield asserted:

I thought it was. And I didn't think about it [Nell's sexual orientation] at all. She sensed the audience energy was low and she stopped the show and did something about it...I didn't have a thought in my head about whether she was a lesbian or not. [Eileen: Great]. That's where I was coming from. The music and the energy from the music was the most important thing.<sup>13</sup>

Performer "energy" figured prominently also, in the assessment of Nancy Yamamoto, a Japanese American lesbian.<sup>14</sup> For Yamamoto, the fact that Carter's

performance exuded energy and that she was “giving her all to the women” made it women-identified.

Concurring with Langfield and me that the Broadway headliner gave a strong performance, Rivers brought the conversation back to the issue of meaning and significance to lesbian audience members:

Yeah, she gave a strong performance, but what do we want to walk away with when the performance is over? “Nell Carter’s terrific” or maybe someone who tells us a bit of her life story, who has been through some of the same things we have, maybe someone who has found an answer or two...<sup>15</sup>

Musician Linda Tillery, one of the most prominent black musicians, producers and arrangers on the wim circuit underscores the significance of the artist’s identity to audience members this way:

Saying “I love a woman” as a woman, isn’t the most popular thing to do in life, but it had to be spoken because there were people who needed to hear it and who needed to be affirmed—people who needed to see themselves reflected in that larger than life way—you know the way artists have of doing that from the stage... People who go to concerts—they choose the people they choose because they see certain parts of themselves in those performers. So it is really a part of themselves that is standing on stage and becomes as big as the room and becomes awesome and powerful... You know, when I have gone to hear Aretha Franklin for example, I feel magnified ten times. I’m looking for that part of myself because I know it’s there. I know that if I go to hear this woman I will find some parts of myself there.<sup>16</sup>

Tillery’s comment recalls Robert Walser’s observation in his study of heavy metal as a discursive practice. Walser writes: “Popular culture is important not only because that is where most people get their ‘entertainment’ and information; it’s where they find dominant definitions of themselves as well as alternatives, options to try on for size” (1993:xiv).

During the course of my fieldwork at women's music festivals, I asked musicians and consumers to comment on the phenomenon of "gaydar," (a linguistic take-off on "radar"), a term that emerged periodically in my exchanges with audience members. According to consumers I interviewed, gaydar refers to a non-fixed set of indicators that enable one to "determine" the sexual identity of others. Any number of factors may be taken into account (e.g., body language, costume, voice quality, instrument selection, color choices, rumors). The day after Carter's performance, Candice Morgan, founder of a west coast organization for lesbians of African Heritage, spoke with me about a consumer tendency to recruit notions about race and body size in the process of attributing sexual identities to black performers in women-identified music spheres.<sup>17</sup>

For Morgan, it was clear that Carter was heterosexual though she understood the confusion that arises on the part of "white women" because of their tendency to "mistake size (read: heaviness or physical mass) for sexual orientation." Morgan's comment recalls commentary of black cultural critics about the social construction of white identity. bell hooks addressed the ethnographic gaze of blacks in this process as did others (e.g., Gwaltney 1980) long before white identity studies emerged as a sub-field of cultural studies. hooks writes:

Black folks have, from slavery on, shared in conversation with one another "special" knowledge of whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny of white people. Deemed special because it was not a way of knowing that has been recorded fully in written material, its purpose was to help black folks cope and survive in a white supremacist society.<sup>18</sup>

Referencing the performer's stage-talk that evening, Morgan recalled Carter stating she had programmed selections intentionally because, through them, she could "say what she wanted to say." Opining that the artist was under no obligation to reveal her sexual orientation to the audience, Morgan informed me that the singer's sexual orientation would be clear from the texts of songs she performed that evening. With reference to Carter's program, including several songs popularized by the vaudeville blues singers, Morgan suggested that Carter's experience "with a woman" was obvious. Here, Morgan participated in the widespread consumer practice of believing that "if the singer (female) is singing about loving women then she must be a lesbian." Morgan's assumption recalls Barbara Bradby's (1993) elaboration on the role of the author in popular music performance:

In its materialist practices, rock endeavored to combine the multiple functions of the modern song-recording process into one "authorial, and inevitably male" figure (Dylan, Jagger, Prince)... Nevertheless, there is still a sense in which in everyday listening we hear the singer (often, actually, singers) as a sort of authorial presence in the song, a practice which feeds into, but which is not determined by, the creation of "stars" in the multiple textual practices which surround popular music (1993:183).

One notes that the interpretive move Morgan makes is, to some extent, genre-determined since in western art music, song cycles are frequently arranged for both low (contralto and baritone) and high (soprano and tenor) voices. For example, that a soprano performs a Schubert song cycle set for high voice and by so doing sings of her love for "das Madchen," is not in general held to be an

admission of lesbian identity. Bradby continues her call for further investigation into the social nature of lesbian myth-making, an endeavor to which this study contributes.

Morgan recalled hearing about Carter's performance on a gay cruise liner and the singer's reference to her lover as "she." Morgan also mentioned that perhaps Carter was invited to WCWMCF as a "reward" or gesture of appreciation for her activism in the gay rights movement. My interactions with Rivers, Langfield, Yamamoto, and Morgan illustrate, as Bradby so aptly states, that "in the specific situation of the lesbian culture, the need to categorize people's identities as a means to cementing a common identity, is a generalized function, even if categories themselves are in a continual state of flux" (1993:170). Indeed, the processes of rumor exchange, fantasizing, and elaborating on sexual identities, "emerge...as themselves part of the everyday practices which go into negotiating lesbian 'identity' with other lesbians" (Bradby 1993:169). Fantasy elaboration, Bradby suggests, "serves as the social basis for the circulation of certain discourses in popular music as lesbian discourses" (1993:170). One expects such correlations to be mediated by collective fantasizing, mass mediated images, and rumors, some of which artists themselves perpetuate as part of their marketing and promotional efforts.

My purpose in exploring conceptualizations of gaydar with festival participants and musicians was not to determine categorically the sexual orientation of performers discussed. Rather, I wanted to understand the process by which

women imagine the sexual orientation of others (and consider the imaginings of “others” toward them) and the role of music in such formulations. I suggest that elements of the Nell Carter debates form a significant and unmarked subtext against which assessments about the sexual orientation of black performers are made. Included amongst these elements are somatics and musical style. Morgan’s suggestion that for verification of Carter’s sexual identity I examine her repertoire with particular attention to her performance of vaudeville blues, is my point of entry for the following section.

“Prove It On Me”: narratives of vaudeville blues singers in the reception process

Angela Davis, in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1998:40), characterizes vaudeville blues era songs such as “Prove It On Me Blues” as “cultural precursors to the lesbian cultural movement of the 1970s, which began to crystallize around the performance and recording of lesbian-affirming songs.” Many lesbian culture observers have made the same point. The historian Lillian Faderman writes that a few blues songs about lesbianism

can be read as a subversive statement of lesbian pride in its listing of lesbian competencies, and a prefiguration of the radical feminism of a much later era in its warning that women can find other women much nicer than cruel and selfish men (1991:78).

Composed by Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, the protagonist in “Prove It On Me Blues,” sings of wearing “a collar and a tie,” says she “talk to the gals just like any old man,” and that she “went out last night with a crowd of my friends, They must’ve been women, ‘cause I don’t like no men.” Hazel Carby in “It Just Be’s Dat Way

Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues" suggests that this song

vacillates between the subversive hidden activity of women loving women [and] a public declaration of lesbianism. The words express a contempt for a society that rejected lesbians...But at the same time the song is a reclamation of lesbianism as long as the woman publicly names her sexual preference for herself...(1986:18).

The complex attitudes with regard to female homosexual relations that were prevalent among sophisticated Harlemites in the 1920s are sometimes reflected in the lyrics (Faderman 1991:76) and advertisements of the blues. One such example is offered by the initial advertisement for "Prove It On Me Blues." The advertisement for the recording depicts a large black woman in a man's hat, tie and jacket, talking to two "entranced feminine flappers. In the distance, observing them, there is a policeman."<sup>19</sup> Faderman writes:

The copy that accompanies the picture tries to pique the potential buyer's salacious interest by hinting at the possible autobiographical nature of the song: "What's all this? Scandal? Maybe so, but you wouldn't have thought it of 'Ma' Rainey. But look at that cop watching her! What does it all mean?"<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, not only has "Prove It On Me Blues" been incorporated into the collective repertoire of women-identified musicians, but the historical figures of Gertrude Rainey and Bessie Smith in particular, have achieved icon-like status amongst many wim consumers. Ainley and Cooper observe that the one common thread in lesbians' use of popular music is the "lusting after images of independent women performers."<sup>21</sup> What does it mean that the vaudeville blues singers, more than other singers in American pop music history, have been adopted and incorporated into the wim community as symbols of transgression, independence,

gender role defiance and female sexual agency?<sup>22</sup> I suggest that race and class play a role in this transference and that much in this regard has been taken for granted by feminist theorists and lesbian culture critics.

My research extends the work of scholars (Davis 1998; Harrison 1988; Carby 1986) on song text interpretation (by critics themselves) and classic vaudeville blues history (Lieb 1981; Albertson 1972). Davis outlines in new terms how black vaudeville blues singers, through their performances, articulated a black working-class women's gender consciousness. The work of Davis and others relies upon "textual methods of investigation to determine whether a song has lesbian meaning or not."<sup>23</sup> The value of textual analysis notwithstanding, what is elided in the process is what contemporary audience members glean from this body of music as well as the role myths about the blues singers play in the process of identity affirmation by lesbian listeners. Carby foreshadows the moment of my contribution to this subfield when she writes, "A variety of narratives, both fictional and biographical, have mythologized the woman blues singer and these mythologies have become texts about sexuality" (1986). My interest here is how audience members use "information" about "xx" [Bessie Smith, for example] to inform assumptions they make about the sexual identities of contemporary black performers.

In this section I discuss narratives about Bessie Smith and Gertrude Rainey in tandem with the social milieu for black gays and lesbians during the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>24</sup> Maria Johnson points out that all too often, histories of

vaudeville blues follow a “birth to death,” “rise and fall” model which leads viewers to the conclusion that women’s blues music is dead--having gone out with “St. Louis Blues...” (Johnson 1997:85).

The careers and personal lives of Bessie Smith and Gertrude “Ma” Rainey have been chronicled extensively and I will not repeat them here. It is more relevant here to demonstrate that vaudeville blues singers were more diverse than my interactions with consumers at women’s music festivals suggest.

The early 1920s is known as the golden era of the black female blues singer. Songwriters of blues included black male songwriters Perry Bradford, Clarence Williams, and Thomas “Fats” Waller.<sup>25</sup> Some, but not all of the blueswomen wrote and/or participated in the writing of their own material. Even though audience members I interviewed made frequent reference to the voices of blues singers as “gruff,” “gravelly,” and “low,” the vaudeville blues singers boasted a range of voice qualities and types, from that of “lilting soprano to deep contralto, from expressive, soulful wails to abrasive, gut-bucket groans and moans.”<sup>26</sup>

Mamie Smith’s (1883-1946) 1920 recording for General Phonograph Corporation, which issued the Okeh label, foreshadowed the success of what would become known as the race record market. After Smith’s recordings of “Crazy Blues” and “It’s Right Here for You” demand for recordings by black artists increased enormously. In 1921, Okeh established its race record company; specializing in jazz and blues, the race record industry featured, amongst others, black women singers of vaudeville blues. The names vaudeville blues entertainers

were accorded reflect the esteem with which their public held them. Honorific titles also represented an adroit marketing tool by record companies targeting black consumers. For example, Gertrude Rainey was dubbed “Ma” Rainey as in “Mother of the Blues” and Bessie Smith (1894–1937) became known as the “Empress of the Blues.”<sup>27</sup>

This chapter is enriched through reference to works such as George Chauncey’s (1994) which chronicle the extensive gay and lesbian social world developed in Harlem’s complex cultural milieu.<sup>28</sup> New York was a major venue for vaudeville blues performance. Harlem consolidated its status as New York’s leading black neighborhood just as World War 1 led tens of thousands of Southern blacks to migrate to New York and other Northern cities (Chauncey 1994:245). Many blacks viewed moving North as an act of political self-determination tied to the elevation of the race as well as to individual empowerment.<sup>29</sup> Others saw the North as a land of freedom and opportunity having fled “the violence and oppression of the post-Reconstruction South, its lynchings, [rapes], a new form of peonage called sharecropping, labor farms and chain gangs, and poll taxes” (Harrison 1988:18).<sup>30</sup> In the 1920s, Harlem became to black America what Greenwich Village became to bohemian white America—the symbolic and, in many respects, practice-center of a vast cultural experiment (Chauncey 1994:246). Chauncey admits that more work needs be done on the social organization and acceptability of homosexuality in black and white rural communities. At the same time, he suggests that moving to the city enabled black gay men at least, to

participate in a gay world such as they might not have imagined in smaller southern venues. Describing his study as mapping the “boundaries of the gay world under a sexual regime in which many homosexually active men did not identify themselves as a part of it,” Chauncey reminds us that many homosexual men found no reason to identify themselves as queer (1994:24) according to contemporary standards.

A black lesbian subculture could be established fairly early in Harlem for several reasons (Faderman 1991:72). Harlem exhibited a greater tolerance than predominantly white America for same-sex relationships. Even though heterosexuals often ostracized them, there were many bars and dance spaces in Harlem where black lesbians could meet others like themselves.

Faderman makes the important observation that “while a lesbian identity was impossible for many women to assume during the 1920s, sex with other women was the great adventure” (1991:67). Areas such as Greenwich Village and Harlem “seemed to provide an arena in which like-minded cohorts could pretend, at least, that the 1920s was a decade of true sexual rebellion and freedom” (Faderman 1991:67).

White fascination with Harlem “seems to have smacked of a ‘sexual colonialism,’ which many used as a commodity, a stimulant to sexuality” (68). Whites often refused to see Harlem’s ambivalence toward homosexuality.<sup>31</sup> There were clubs in Harlem that welcomed homosexuality, if only as one more exotic drawing card to lure tourists (Faderman 1991:69). Whites were able to explore in Harlem what was forbidden to them in the white world. “Urban blacks in the

1920s,” we are reminded, “did not simply accept homosexuality as a ‘fact of life,’ as gay whites liked to think they did, but Harlem’s reliance on tourism created at least the illusion of welcome” (69). Faderman observes that white business owners and tourists “encouraged some Harlem entertainers even to flaunt lesbianism, to make it a spectacle and an attraction to those who expected the outré from Harlem” (1991:72).

“Bisexuality” had a special appeal for Harlem’s sophisticated socialites. Faderman suggests that bisexuality “seems to have suggested that a woman was super-sexy.”<sup>32</sup> Moreover, there may be something to Faderman’s point that to Harlem sophisticates, bisexuality may have seemed like adventure, while homosexuality “seemed like disease.”<sup>33</sup> Some sophisticated 1920’s Harlem heterosexuals did not take the lesbian side of bisexuality seriously. Faderman suggests that soirees of black millionaire heiress A’Lelia Walker, daughter of “Madame” C.J. Walker, helped contribute to an atmosphere of acceptance, or at least of tolerance, for bisexuality.

Critics suggest that vaudeville blues songs do not deal with bisexuality readily, “perhaps because that affectional preference lent itself less readily to humorous caricature than did blatant lesbianism” (Faderman 1991:77). Faderman writes that instead:

they sometimes present extreme lesbian stereotypes (especially the mannish lesbian image that the term ‘bulldiker’ connoted), which allowed the listener to recognize the situation without introducing subtle complications and to laugh at the in-joke. With the usual goal of titillation, the songs also satirically probed masculine uneasiness about the suspicion that women know how to “do it” better to each

other than men do. And they frequently admitted to an ambivalent fascination.

Numerous entertainers, celebrities and “high-livers,” both white and black, played at and visited Harlem hot spots where they had many opportunities to “act gay.” Gladys Bentley, for example, became the most visible black lesbian entertainer of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Described as a 300-pound male impersonator, (Faderman 1991:72) Bentley sometimes performed under the name of Bobby Minton. “Huge, voluptuous [and] chocolate colored,” according to one fan, she was as famous for her tuxedo, top hat, and girlfriends as for her singing (Chauncey 1994:252). Bentley sang the blues but she was best known for ad-libbing popular ballads and show tunes, giving them a salacious edge and encouraging her audience to join in singing the now “filthy lyrics.”<sup>34</sup>

Although many gay entertainers included songs with sophisticated double-entendre in their repertoire, few were open to outsiders about their homosexuality (Chauncey 1994:253). Like Bessie Smith and several others, Bentley tended to keep from public view, her relationships with men. “In her exceptional case, it was more profitable to hide that aspect of her life from the public, which was fascinated by her outrageous image.”<sup>35</sup> Daphne Harrison reminds us that “some audiences expected raunchy lyrics and [vaudeville] singers gave them what they wanted” (1988:100). Bentley made her “lesbianism” and “bulldagger” looks part of her show business persona at the two clubs she worked at after a series of one-night stands at rent parties, buffet flats, and cellar clubs. “When she finally moved on to the Ubangi Club, she toned down her lyrics to the merely risqué, wore ‘flashy

men's attire,' and headed a revue that included a pansy chorus line composed entirely of female impersonators" (Chauncey 1994:253). Bentley's appearances "drew celebrities like flies."<sup>36</sup>

White singers, such as Libby Holman, Sophie Tucker or Blossom Seeley, "capitalized on the popular appeal of the blues by copying the songs and performance styles of black women."<sup>37</sup> References to the latter singers however, did not emerge in the conversations I had with white women audience members during my fieldwork.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps part of the appeal of the black blueswomen is not unlike the appeal of black rhythm & blues singers to white youth of the late 1950s. In other words, though the "music itself" is important, contemporary consumers of wim reference several factors vis a vis the vaudeville blues singers in the affirmation of their lesbian identities.

Throughout my fieldwork, music consumers emphasized Rainey and Smith's lesbian identities in spite of their much heralded associations with men.<sup>39</sup> Faderman writes that Rainey "was also sure to let the public know about her interest in young men and even to cultivate that heterosexual image of herself so that it largely undermined the other" (Faderman 1991:75). While some black lesbians in 1920s Harlem lived with other women in butch/femme couples, others who had affairs with women were married to men, either because they were bisexual, needed to marry for economic reasons, or maintained "front marriages." The latter "permitted them to continue functioning with less stigma in the very

sexually aware and ambivalent black community” (Faderman 1991: 74). None of these topics emerged in my conversations with music consumers.

Additional contradictions emerge from my participant observation in wim contexts concerning the role of the vaudeville blues singers in the affirmation of lesbian identity by consumers. I find it interesting that vaudeville singers such as Ethel Waters and Alberta Hunter are not as often claimed as “one of our own” by contemporary consumers of wim, even though both are reported as having had intimate relationships with women.<sup>40</sup> Audience members I spoke with referred to Hunter as a lesbian only when talking about her much-publicized “comeback” of the 1980s. Our conversations did not include reference to Hunter’s career during the 1920s.

Limited referencing of Waters and Hunter may be related to the class background of their audiences, the artists’ voice qualities and somatic characteristics.<sup>41</sup> In contrast to Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, as Daphne Duval Harrison (1988) writes in *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*, entertainers such as Hunter represented a new type of blues singer, “more cosmopolitan, less emotional.”<sup>42</sup> Harrison writes:

The Chicago and New York cabarets where they worked employed bands such as King Oliver’s and Fletcher Henderson’s to provide dance music for the so-called sophisticated gamblers and businessmen and their women. Their styles utilized wider vocal ranges, a greater variety of music, and often an upbeat rhythmic rendition more akin to vaudeville singing (1988:12).

I suggest that voice quality and attitude play a role here as well. Scholars have noted that while Waters’ repertoire was similar to that of her contemporary

Bessie Smith, the image the former projected was quite different. Davis writes that according to the wealthy patron of black artists and intellectuals, Carl Van Vechten,

In her singing she [Waters] exercises...subtle skill. Some of her songs she croons; she never shouts. Her methods are precisely opposed to those of the crude coon shouter, to those of the authentic Blues singer, and yet, not for once, does she lose the veridical Negro atmosphere. Her voice and her gestures are essentially Negro, but they have been thought out and restrained, not prettified, but stylized.<sup>43</sup>

Waters was considered the most sophisticated of the classic blues singers. It might be argued that the vocal styles of Waters and Hunter contrasted significantly with the vocal style of Bessie Smith. Harrison nuances this conclusion however, drawing attention to Smith's versatility as an artist. She claims that her manner of singing developed from a country style to a more sophisticated flexible blues style "that could handle the tough or slick sounds that city listeners were accustomed to" (Harrison 1988:11).

With frequent references to singers' physiques, historical narratives about the vaudeville blues singers reflect a value in African American culture for "full-figured" female bodies. The American beauty and fashion industry offers contrasting messages about the size of women's bodies. On the one hand, while mainstream fashion glorifies thin women, in recent years fashion designers have targeted large women as a new niche in the market. The value still exists, however, that to be a large woman is to be outside of mainstream society's notions of attractiveness. In the minds of many consumers, a large physique is associated

with images of the “other.” My fieldwork indicates that when a woman is large, has “dark” skin, and sings the blues, consumers often assume she is a lesbian.

In retrospect, it is significant that in my role as ethnographer, the only times I asked women to speculate whether or not certain performers were lesbian was when I was not convinced of their lesbian identity myself. This points to a shortcoming in my research methods. In many ethnographic contexts during the course of my fieldwork, I observed that if audience members found the artist’s performance of lesbian identity convincing, the conversation often flowed to the issue of her availability for romantic encounters (fantasy elaboration). If on the other hand, doubt about the performer’s sexual orientation persisted, conversations with audience members did not get past the topic of the initial ambiguity. Apparently an ambiguity about sexual orientation is more significant to audience members than whether a performer is “lesbian” or “straight. I found that perceived ambiguity, in contrast to “coming out” is interpreted as an arbiter of an ambivalent political commitment to lesbian self-determination.

My fieldwork suggests that there is a tendency for (white) audience members to attribute “butch” identities to black women based on a complex set of factors including notions of the body and class markers. This discussion adds the dimension of voice quality to the multi-woven tapestry that emerges in the affirmation of lesbian identity amongst many wim consumers. My interactions with white music consumers reveal a fetishized acceptance of some aspects of black vaudeville musicians’ personae in the affirmation of contemporary lesbian identities.

Narratives about selected performers of vaudeville blues are called forth by consumers for their commentary on gender relations, without the acknowledgment of the construction of these relationships in black communities.

My ethnographic inquiry suggests that amongst contemporary white consumers of wim, the heterosexual affiliations of the vaudeville blues singers are not taken seriously. Many white lesbian listeners seem to overlook Davis' observation that "what gives the blues such fascinating possibilities of sustaining emergent feminist consciousness is the way they often construct seemingly antagonistic relationships as non-contradictory oppositions" (1998:xv). Examining how heterosexual music consumers of the 1920s and 1930s heard the blues could add a new dimension to the discussion.

A number of interesting questions emerge from my investigations in this area. Firstly, how often do black performers and consumers refer to the blueswomen in informal discussions, stage patter, etc? My research suggests that when black musicians recite their musical genealogies they may (or may not) include the blueswomen as part of a broader genealogy of musicians who have influenced their performance trajectories. Secondly, what type of identity affirmation do black heterosexual consumers of mainstream popular music derive from the music and narratives of the vaudeville blueswomen? What role do notions about the body play in the consumer appeal of black Broadway revues such as the Fats Wallers-inspired, *Ain't Misbehavin'*? Moreover, why are the lead roles in such

musicals typically portrayed by “large” (or as writers have noted about Bessie Smith, “big-boned”) actresses/singers?

Stage performance is not the only arena in which consumers make assumptions about women’s sexual identities. The “diner incident” already described recalls southern white lesbian writer Minnie Bruce Pratt’s discussion at NWMF ‘95 of butch and femme as descriptors that can be used in conjunction with various sexual identities *and* genders.<sup>43</sup> Conceivably, the black women in the Michigan diner could have self-identified as butch or as femme lesbians, bisexuals, or heterosexuals. During the course of my fieldwork, I found that black, working class women who are competent in working-class jobs, and/or fall outside behavioral and phenotypical norms for white middle-class women, are assumed by many festigoers, to be lesbian and, by implication, butch.

*“It’s kind of ironic - she’s white and a butch.”*  
black lesbian comic, Karen Williams<sup>44</sup>

In her performance at the North East Women’s Musical Retreat, recorded live, comedienne Karen Williams signifies explicitly on the stereotype of black lesbians exclusively as butch, hence the irony that XXX, a well-known performer of women’s music, is white and butch-identified.<sup>45</sup> It might be argued that Williams’ routine provides counter-evidence to hooks’ observation that “black women have no public, paying audience for our funny imitations of white girls. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any setting other than an all black space where black women

could use comedy to critique and ridicule white womanhood..." (1992:38). Though far from an "all black space," a festival such as NEWMR provides such a venue.

Many black women writers refer to the confluence of working-classness, "dark" skin color and lesbian identity. Black lesbian critic, Cheryl Clarke, addresses this issue in her poem "Of Althea and Flaxie:"

In 1943 Althea was a welder  
 very dark  
 very butch  
 and very proud  
 loved to cook, sew, and drive a car  
 and did not care who knew she kept company with a woman.<sup>47</sup>

White women are not the only ones however, who engage in this mode of thinking.<sup>48</sup> Admittedly there have been times when my own gaydar has been overactive, such as when I have assumed that some of the competent black women city transit operators (Washington, D.C.), UPS or Federal Express workers were lesbians.<sup>49</sup> Riding home from the '96 Gay/Lesbian Pride March in Washington, D.C., for example, I extended honorary lesbian status to the driver, who in very the next block mentioned purchasing a gift for her husband. Up until that point, I had been sure she was "in the life." Evidently I was wrong, but to borrow from the women who sang the blues, you sure would have had to "prove it on me."

#### Black musicians address the performance of lesbian identity and sexual style

A conversation I had with Judith Casselberry, producer/ leader of the band, J.U.C.A., illuminated not only critical issues in the process of reception, but the performance of lesbian identity and sexual style. The band's performance of "Hazel

Turned Me Out” served as a point of entry for our discussion.<sup>49</sup> “Hazel” is a light-hearted, erotically charged song that the band performed before enthusiastic audiences at the Northampton and Michigan Festivals (1995). After securing Casselberry’s assent that “Hazel” was a “lesbian song,” I asked her how audience members are able to recognize this as a lesbian performance. Casselberry replied that because aspects of women-identifiedness have permeated popular music performance more broadly, we can no longer tell unless “somebody tells us:”

When I go out to see performers, I don’t make any assumptions [about sexual orientation] unless someone says flat out that that’s what is going on. I know of all-women groups that are not lesbians and you wouldn’t know it to look at them. And I work with women who are not lesbians.

My talk with Casselberry included brief reference to the text in conjunction with the audience’s identification of Casselberry herself as a lesbian (or as “one of our own”) and how both factors contributed to the reception of “Hazel.”<sup>50</sup> After Casselberry ventured that analysis of textual content would be the only way to determine whether a performer/band identified as lesbian or not, I asked her whether a performer’s body language could function as a marker of lesbian identity. Casselberry, in maintaining that such a strategy would be flawed, responded with comments about Jill Sobule’s music video, “I Kissed a Girl” which she described as “alternative rock by a white girl.”

...The visuals are the suburbs. The husband is pictured. And the white girl goes over to the neighbor’s house [female] and they kiss. To just hear the chorus of this song, you might assume that she’s a lesbian, but even with that, whether or not that woman is a lesbian-identified woman or not, I don’t think she is.<sup>51</sup>

A joyous, playful song, the recording depicts a kiss between two women. The non-married protagonist recounts talking with her friend Jennie about their respective relationships with men. Jennie describes her male interest, Fred, as a “hairy boheemoth” but adds “he’s such a handsome guy.” The protagonist remarks that her boyfriend, Larry, has just asked her to marry him. She opines however, “I can do better.” The bridge follows: “So we laughed, and compared notes// We had a drink, we had a smoke //She took off her overcoat// I kissed a girl.” The textual refrain expresses the joy and abandonment of their encounter: And we laughed at the world// They can have their diamonds and we’ll have our pearls// I kissed a girl (for the first time).<sup>52</sup>

Casselberry suggested that increasingly in popular culture, boundaries between lesbians and heterosexual women are crossed. According to the women I interviewed, the stigma that is still attached to openly identifying as a lesbian means that notions of fixed sexual identities are deliberately confounded in performance. For example, Casselberry pointed to a music video of white lesbian mainstream singer/songwriter, Melissa Etheridge, championed by many I met at women only music festivals as “one of our own”:

On VH1 Melissa Etheridge did a show with other female vocalists. One of them I know is a lesbian and her body language with Melissa was not anything where you would be able to look at them performing and say “okay, here are two lesbians.” But then with the next performer, she was all over Melissa and I personally think that she was a straight woman. You just can’t necessarily tell, especially since the new lesbian “chic” has hit.<sup>53</sup>

Casselberry's comments do not reflect the need for sexual minority viewers, particularly young people, to see some aspects of their experience acknowledged in mainstream popular culture through vehicles such as music videos, films, and plays. Given the disproportionately high suicide rate amongst young lesbian/gay people, music videos such as the one Casselberry discusses could be helpful in affirming that "gay" is "okay." With oblique references perhaps to k.d. lang and Melissa Etheridge, Lily Braindrop writes:

While no artists are obligated to wear their sexuality on their sleeve, it's disheartening how few major-label queers buck the stigma and address their sexuality at all. We're all tired of songs with suspiciously gender-vague lyrics and pussyfooting interview quotes like "My focus is on my art, not on my sexuality," "I keep my personal life separate," and "Oh, I would never categorize my sexuality. Who cares about that stuff anyway?" You want to know who cares about "that stuff"? Millions of queers in this country who are aching to see a mainstream performer stand up and say "Yes, I am!"<sup>55</sup>

During the course of my research, I spoke with straight music consumers about issues of sexual identity, music and performance. I asked singer Emma Jean Foster-Fiege (EJFF) of Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir if audience members ever assume she is a lesbian given the ensemble's performances in women-identified venues:

...I think they [lesbians] just intuitively know [that I'm straight], for the most part. I don't know how but just from the response I've gotten, I think they know. Just like from the parties, I think, they know. There's something about the eye contact that lets a gay woman know that you aren't going that way--that you aren't open to be hit on.<sup>56</sup>

In talking with me about her sexual orientation, EJFF's comments recall Barbara Smith's earlier critique of heterosexual privilege and black women:

Heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that Black women have. None of us have racial or sexual privilege, almost none of us have class privilege, maintaining "straightness" is our last resort.<sup>56</sup>

EJFF's observation as a straight musician in venues predominated by lesbians contrasts with my own experience as an activist and researcher in these same environments. Still, her comments resonate with what some have characterized as "lesbian unawareness," a phenomenon exemplified in my interaction with hand-percussionist and singer, Madeleine Yayodele Nelson, leader of Women of the Calabash, an African American women's a cappella ensemble based in New York City. I spoke with Nelson about the reception of her ensemble at a Washington, D.C. concert in 1992, where her group shared billing with Odetta. I asked her about Calabash's predominantly white lesbian audience.<sup>57</sup> She said that she was unaware that her group had especially, a lesbian following.

My conversations with both EJFF and Nelson exemplified a tendency on the part of the heterosexual performers I interviewed to minimize differences in the sexual identities of performers and women's music listeners/consumers. Reluctance, however well-meaning, to deal forthrightly with issues of sexual difference might be construed, by some, as heterosexist. (Phaar 1988).

I asked singer/songwriter Cap Montgomery, whose rendition of "Sugar Mama," is a hit with women's music audiences, to talk about her performances and her enactment of sexual style. Montgomery, whose performances recall those of

purported accounts of Gladys Bentley, spoke of coming of age in the '50s, '60s, and of role-playing/performance:<sup>58</sup>

I love it. Let's get dressed up. A person shouldn't try to perform unless they are into some kind of thing. The worst thing you can do is to try to perform and be a neutral. I grew up in the '50s, '60s. Playing around is fun. Role-playing our asses off. Cross dressing—all kinds of stuff.

In discussing cross-dressing, Montgomery opines:

...If you're a woman—you'd be crossing where? Well, it should be common knowledge that cross-dressing means that you like to wear your zipper in the front, maybe go out with a collar and tie once in a while—taking a woman out to a straight club and show her off—get her up on the table and dance.<sup>59</sup>

Montgomery's clarification of cross-dressing points to the association of butch with traditional masculine stereotypes including that of dress. As I mentioned earlier, femme is associated with stereotypically feminine roles. Montgomery's comment that "it should be common knowledge" reflects back to the time and circumstances of her coming of age and what was expected of women:

In a separate interview, I discussed the politics of butch/femme in performance with singer/songwriter Sandra Washington.

Eileen: As a performer do you think about butch or femme identity for yourself [on stage?]

Sandra: Not at all. Well wait - now that I hear that you've been talking to our "fans" or whatever... At Michigan - it's sort of like summer camp - all women, 99% lesbian. So yes, do I camp out as a femme at Michigan? "Camping" meaning drag 'n camp. Yes. I have worn a wedding dress on stage.

Eileen: Great.

Sandra: But I would never put on a wedding dress at any other concert anywhere. And yes, I've actually performed in a dress at Michigan. My sister [Sharon Washington] was probably wearing pants or leggings at the time. People say then, "oh, one is butch; one is femme." I say, "yes, but we're camping" - high camp.<sup>60</sup>

Washington's remarks illustrate Sue-Ellen Case's observation that "the butch-femme couple inhabit the subject position together"—"you can't have one without the other" (Case 1989). Certainly, butch/femme is as diverse as the larger category lesbian. Case's essay, "Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic" (1989) was part of a flurry of analyses responding to suggestions made by many lesbian-feminists that butch and femme styles were anachronistic. As a cultural practice, butch/femme relies upon the carnival space of lesbian subcultures and, like the carnivalesque, such practices are enabled by a particular suspension of rules within a specific community (Roof 1991). Case also discusses the aesthetics and practice of camp concluding that irony, wit and artifice of camp work to reveal the constructedness of the conventions of straight sex and gender systems (Mockus 1994:265). Washington's comment that she would "never put on a wedding dress at any other concert" underscores the observation that the "femme is invisible as a lesbian unless she is playing to a butch." Both observations have been critiqued by theorists and noted writers addressing femme identities (Newman 1995).

Numerous questions arise from my interview with Sandra Washington. Firstly, what were the Washington Sisters signifying with Sandra's wearing of a wedding dress? Were they portraying a lesbian couple getting married? Were they signifying on a straight wedding? How did the performers' relationship as siblings

affect the reception of their act? Would some audience members have read the performance as a signification on incestual relationships? Sandra's initial response to my question about butch and femme roles was that she does not think of herself as either, pointing to the performative aspect of their act. In the following excerpt, Sandra Washington observes that her participation in butch and femme identity enactment is influenced by the perceptions of others ("we do it because it puts other people at ease"):

My partner and I sometimes make jokes about femme/butch. But we do it because it puts other people at ease...Our friends sometimes call me "the little woman." But what's the difference? Both of us do the execu-drag every day with hose, heels etc. and go to work. I just don't like to play basketball. And [my partner] doesn't like to do physical landscape work.

Here Washington suggests that a butch identity involves competencies in sports or manual labor. She adds complexity to an identification of herself as "the little woman," by mentioning that her partner, considered by their friends to be more butch, does not enjoy doing landscape work. Apparently, in Washington's estimation, physical landscape work is an area of activity which would fall under the rubric of butch.

The topic of butch/femme in performance also came up in a conversation I had with singer/songwriter Sharon Washington. Sharon concurred that people often assume that because a black woman is large, she must not only be lesbian but also butch. Her comment recalled the observation by a black lesbian festigoer that "white women" have a tendency to "mistake size for sexual orientation." She observed:

Guess I never thought about them [black performers of women-identified music] in terms of their femininity and seen them as butch. A lot [of black women performers] just seem to be in the middle. Some might call them butch because of their size. Size however, is not an indicator...People decide that "Clarrise"<sup>62</sup> is butch. But she has a great soft side. Her girlfriend is more butch...For some women in their mid-40s, depending on when you came out, if you were going to bars, everyone wanted to be butch. [It was] survival.<sup>63</sup>

Washington's comment, "depending on when you came out...everyone wanted to be butch" is instructive. Lesbian historians have chronicled the social dimensions of butch/femme roles from the 1920s through the present. Several of these studies address the social lives of black lesbians (Kennedy & Davis 1993; Faderman 1991; Chauncey 1994). Scholars (Faderman 1991) suggest that until the 1940s there was not a model of what a lesbian society could look like. The late 1940s and 1950s saw the development of relatively safe spaces for women who identified as lesbians to meet others who identified similarly. Bars became a popular meeting place for white working-class lesbians, in particular. Middle class lesbians had alternative strategies for meeting each other.

During this period, it became necessary for lesbians to adopt either the butch or femme role because violence (e.g., police raids) often ensued when they appeared in public. Because of racism, black lesbians were often thought to be butch even if they were not. Kennedy and Davis in *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (1993) point out that because of racial barriers, black women often socialized in their own communities, rather than meeting in white spaces, such as bars. This practice changed in Buffalo, for example, as the city became home to blacks in greater numbers and in less segregated ways. By the 1970s, U.S. lesbian identity

politics required that lesbians abandon butch and femme roles but there was a resurgence of these roles in the 1980s.

### The redeployment of symbolic codes of identity

The confounding of gender norms is a regular occurrence at some women's music festivals. In fact, at women's music festivals, participants regularly redeploy symbolic codes of sexual identity and of sexual style. During the course of my fieldwork, I observed a tendency amongst festival attendees, including myself, to essentialize a complex of factors relating to a woman's lesbian identity.

An example of the latter is tractor-driving by women workers at a festival such as Michigan or Gulf Coast. Here, the "transgression" is not limited to a disruption of gender norms. A bit of "class-bending" may be enacted as well, especially on the part of middle-class women. In evoking the tractor example my purpose is to highlight where a gender-bending practice of one group (white middle-class women) is achieved by drawing on notions of what is traditionally (male) "working-class" rather than male middle-or owning class associated work. Commenting on the connection between an oppositional gender consciousness and the appropriation of working-class male associated culture for example, an anonymous lesbian feminist scholar suggests "that's why we swear so much" (personal communication).<sup>64</sup> Many writers discuss how lesbian identity enactment by middle-class women may include the appropriation of working-class, super femme or butch codes (e.g., Pratt 1995; Nestle 1987; Newton 1993; Newman

1995). It may also involve an appropriation of male forms and behaviors. I am not the first to observe identity affirmation on the part of one constituency via symbolic codes of behavior associated with another group. In the tractor-driving example, location, (notions about rural as opposed to urban), are implicated as well.

In the complex environment of the women's music festival, minute and mundane activities become performances signifying on sex, sexuality, and desire. Projections about the competence with which women perform male-associated tasks (e.g., construction work or heavy equipment operation) as well as those traditionally associated with women, create an impetus for the expression of erotic attraction. During my research I found that lesbian-by-competence identity, (my coinage of the phrase), is frequently ascribed to women based on skills associated with women's traditional domestic roles (e.g., cooking, hostessing, cleaning, food preparation). "Off land," such attributes would receive little or no commentary unless perhaps, performed by men.<sup>66</sup> In this manner, the complex of "coolness" and the performance of tasks traditionally associated with women is essentialized by festigoers as a marker of lesbian identity and sometimes, as a locus of desire. As theorists have written persuasively, lesbian and gay identities are not monolithic; sexual desire can not be mapped wholecloth onto sexual identity, let alone, gender. The Michigan corn-husking incident I recounted in the introductory chapter (see the passage entitled "Gender, play, and transgression") recalls Butler's discussion of the relation between gender and sexuality in which she states that "the heterosexual logic that requires that identification and desire be mutually exclusive

is one of the most reductive of heterosexism's psychological instruments" (1993:239b). I found that women's music festival participants frequently signify on the facile expectation that there is a one-to-one correlation between desire, gender, and sexuality.

Jenny Livingston's film, *Paris Is Burning*, offers a number of examples parallel to but different from the illustration of symbolic code deployment I offer from the Michigan festival. As documented in Livingston's film, black and Latino drag queens enact gay identity via feminization through an upwardly mobile (and white) class maneuver. Rather than evoke images of black working-class women in their runway routines, "house" of Paris devotees idolize white, upper middle-class women and superstar black pop music divas. Providing one of the few reviews which takes class and race into account (hooks 1992; Butler 1993b) hooks describes the ball competitions as an example of thinly disguised black working-class self-loathing. She observes that the film's politics of race, gender and class are "played out in ways that are both progressive and reactionary."

Carole-Anne Tyler, in "Boys Will Be Girls: The Politics of Gay Drag," makes critical observations about mimicry that complement hooks' analysis of black male drag performance in *Paris*. Referencing her previous work on theories of mimicry which reinscribe white, middle-class femininity as the real thing, the (quint) essence of femininity, Tyler writes:

this is implicit in the feminist critiques of drag...which contrast its style as sign of a hostile burlesque with that of a "natural" femininity, whose understated good taste is a sign of the genuine article. If boys will be girls they had better be ladies. A real woman is a real lady; otherwise, she is a

female impersonator, a camp or mimic whose “unnaturally” bad taste—like that of the working-class, ethnic, or racially “other” woman—marks the impersonation as such. Miming the feminine means impersonating a white, middle-class impersonation of an “other” ideal of femininity. The mimic flaunts or camps up lack by fetishistically projecting it on to the class, ethnic, or racial other, from whom she distances herself through a dis-identification that takes the form of an apparent identification, as with the impersonator (1991:57).

Black and Latino drag ball queens depicted in *Paris is Burning* contrast with historical examples offered by Chauncey (1994:261) of interracial encounters in Harlem during the 1930s, where white drag queens participated in black balls. Many observers found the participation of white gay men in these circles intriguing. “For a moment,” Chauncey writes, “the racial differences between black and white spectators...were overshadowed by their common positioning as ‘normal’ bystanders who were different from the queer folk on the ballroom floor” (1994:261). Significantly, however, white drag queens did not adopt a black racial identity for their performances. Many accounts refer to African-American queens appearing as white celebrities, but none refer to whites appearing as well-known black women. Chauncey cites one observer quoted in a 1936 *Amsterdam News* column as recounting that “the vogue was to develop a ‘personality’ like some outstanding woman,” but the only women he [the interviewee] listed were white—Jean Harlow, Gloria Swanson, Mae West, and Greta Garbo.<sup>65</sup>

The examples of women’s tractor-driving at festivals such as Michigan and the example I cite from *Paris*, underscore how gender-bending practices are often tied to the mobility of other types of identity, including those of class and race (Faderman 1991; Nestle 1992; Davis and Kennedy 1986; Penelope 1994). Carole-

Anne Tyler argues that “differences other than that of gender have a phallic significance” (1991:61), noting that class and racial differences figure regularly in the fantasies of audience members (spectators). Such “othering by the other” is not a new concept to cultural studies critics. Tyler observes that “the fantasy of the ‘other’ as phallic Other is not necessarily radical, since s/he may be phallic in exactly those terms a sexist, racist, and classist symbolic legitimates.”

Addressing several of the themes of this section, Tyler revisits the definition of camp, asking “what counts as camp and why?” (Tyler 1991:33). She concludes that camp is not “a unitary phenomenon, meaning the same thing to everybody.” Exploring psychoanalytic theories about drag and camp, Tyler reveals a thinly disguised misogyny in some analyses about masochism, sexism and the media, camp, etc. Moreover she teases out the essential and anti-essential in theories of gender and sexuality construction. Contributing to a discussion in which a number of queer theory scholars engage (Butler 1993b; Butler 1993a; Fuss 1991), Tyler writes that, “What passes for passing for or impersonating a gender when gender is always already impersonation, is symptomatic and must be analyzed” (1993:54). For the purpose of this study, the most interesting aspect of Tyler’s discussion are the sections in which she deals with class and race and the observation that, for some women in our culture, the “phallic” resounds in race or class privilege.

Our discussion of festigoers’ recruitment of symbolic codes of identity in the formation of other identities provides us with a point of entry to examine wim consumer notions of voice quality. During the course of my fieldwork, I found that

consumers often make assumptions about a performer's sexuality based on her "vocal codes," some of which the musician might appropriate or transfer from other genres or musical styles.

"With a voice like that, she's got to be a lesbian": notions of the voice as a marker of lesbian identity

In this section I examine consumer notions about the voice as a marker of sexual identity. Linking the ethnographic examples cited in this chapter thus far is the recurring question on the part of audience members/listeners, "Is she or isn't she a lesbian?" Again, the underlying notion is that sexual identity, like racial identity, can be performed. As a researcher I often asked festival participants, "how can we tell she's a dyke?" At a women's music festival, an anticipated response might be: "Because of the way she husks corn, drives a tractor, or pitches her tent." Of greater significance for this study is that informal discussions with audience members about musicians elicited the familiar assessment that "with a voice like that, she's got to be a lesbian."

The question of "Is she/isn't she a dyke?" Bradby maintains, underlies not only talk about pop music, but also any display of competence as a member of the lesbian culture (1993:151). Bradby's work with Irish lesbian feminist consumers of U.S. women-identified music (1993) provides some valuable leads for my examination of notions about voice quality and sexual identity in wim. Interviews Bradby conducted with Dublin consumers illustrate that some women perceive that

that there is something in the voice itself that communicates lesbian identity.

“Cliona,” a bisexual woman, said of black singer/guitarist Tracy Chapman:

..there’s something about herself and her voice and the way she sings them (songs) and I just feel, h-heh heh, only a woman who loves women could sing like that, there’s something in it, it’s very hard to define it, but there’s something that, listen, listen to it and you might hear...

After Bradby rejoins appreciatively that Cliona has a special insider’s knowledge to be able to discern this, Cliona disavows her comment stating:

...and not just me but a lot of other women, and I suppose most of our friends would be politically, aware as well, would have, and the first time I heard her, I had—she had that sort of effect on me, aw, in the gut, and Kate sort of the same, and what’s that other woman(.)

Bradby: k.d. lang?

Cliona: about two years ago, I had gone to bed and Kate came upstairs and, said, “you’ve got to hear this woman singing, she said. I can be you any money she’s a lesbian, she said, it said nothing about her, she just sang one song...” (Bradby 1993:164).

These excerpts illustrate Bradby’s (1995:34) suggestion that part of the shared sign system of the lesbian world is a knowledge of who is a lesbian, whether as “out” or “closeted,” in the world of pop performers. This knowledge, Bradby suggests, should not be thought of as fixed for all time—meanings are negotiated in conversation and other “performances” and in the relationship between conversation and texts, both written and musical.

Androgyny is the focus of other commentaries on the performances of some wim artists. Many audience members, black and white, described the voice qualities of Tracy Chapman and Joan Armatrading, two of the most well-known

black musicians associated at one time with the wim circuit, as androgynous. What does this descriptor mean in regard to singers and other performers in this sphere? Women with whom I spoke about Joan Armatrading, for example, framed their discussion of the artist's voice quality in lesbian-identified terms even in the face of the artist's insistence that she is straight. What the black women I spoke with never mentioned was Armatrading's British rock/funk musical style and that her stage band is comprised of white men. In this case, race wasn't a salient element of interviewees' appraisals of Armatrading; rather a more important feature was her lesbian (non)identity.

Based on my conversations with music consumers, it might be argued that a definition of androgyny to which many subscribe is "embodying features that are considered both male and female." To an extent, androgyny of women performers is about the appropriation of male codes prevalent in the dominant culture—audible and/or visual. Early performances of kathy lang (before her incarnation as k.d. lang) for example, illustrate a possible outcome when traditional female roles are "obscured" or "reversed." In video clips of performances (Harvest of Seven Years) from the early 1980s, lang, in a rendition of "Bobalena" adopts a stage presentation similar to rockabilly icons such as Jerry Lee Lewis and Elvis Presley.<sup>68</sup> Her performative (and vocal) stance is as the aggressor even while she sings of having been wronged by another. Dressed in a knee-length dress, cowgirl boots to the calf, and donning a shag hairstyle, lang seems to epitomize consumer notions of "androgyny" even though she is visibly recognizable as a woman. lang's vocal

renditions, delivered in vocal codes associated with male rockabilly stars, disrupt the effect of femininity that her appearance has ostensibly generated. In the words of Martha Mockus, lang is “audibly lesbian”.

Fueling notions about the androgyny of particular women performers is the idea of the “sound of the voice itself,” a notion underscored by women in Bradby’s study. Holly Near, white women-identified singer and a founder of the women’s music industry, alludes to this notion as she reflects on her own experience:

...people felt there wasn’t really enough element of submission in my voice to be a star. I think back then women chose to be the red-hot mama or the helpless waif—there were two images, which is not unlike what it was in literature. You could be the whore or the nun or the virgin. You were the one Mary or the other.<sup>69</sup>

I would argue that lesbian performers of women-identified music want it known that they are women. The salient point here however, is that some performers deliberately challenge gender, class and cultural boundaries through music sound. Interestingly, in my research, consumers referred to musicians such as Tracy Chapman and k.d. lang as androgynous far more often than they referred to musicians currently affiliated with the wim circuit by that descriptor.

One wonders about labels chosen by the mainstream music industry and whether “androgynous” is a safe[r] middle-ground descriptor for lesbian musicians who have crossed over to mainstream pop music. Mockus is right to note, for example, that for some, there is a need for positive, clear-cut lesbian representation in mainstream popular music (1994: 267), hence assessments by critics of the “new breed of androgynous pop women” (Stein 1993) such as Tracy Chapman, Indigo

Girls, and k.d. lang. One wonders to what extent assessments of a musician as “androgynous” include tacit reference to her repertoire selection and textual themes, the timbre and range of her voice and visual performance. What is the role of class in identifications of this type? To what extent do “androgynous” women stars in pop music performance have in common the reclamation of working-class associated musical genres such as country/rockabilly (k.d. lang), acoustic folk (e.g., Tracy Chapman) or vaudeville blues (e.g., Bessie Smith)?

Consumer conceptualizations about vocal athleticism, regardless of genre, might also play a role in the tendency for lesbian music consumers to claim certain singers as “one of our own.” In the case of operatic soprano Cecilia Bartoli, for example, the appeal does not necessarily revolve around her vocal range. Perhaps notions about the exclusivity of a “high art” such as opera, Bartoli’s voice type and consumer notions about the athleticism of the voice fuel opportunities for fantasy elaboration that opera, by its very nature, seems to invite.

In *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940*, Chauncey offers a historical reference which helps us to understand the practice of many gay men to claim female opera stars as one of their own. He notes that according to one observer, the Metropolitan Opera was a “standard meeting place” for gay men. The historian describes how gay men covertly appropriated public spaces for their own purposes, “even in the context of the post-Prohibition clampdown” against them (1994:351). An observer recalled that “since there were no known instances of police raids on [such distinguished]

cultural events, all stops were pulled out as far as costume and grooming.” Gay men regularly gathered for the performances of entertainers “who assumed special significance in gay culture,” such as Beatrice Lillie and Judy Garland (351). In linking class, gay “community” and the social consumption of art, Chauncey points to ideas outlined by Bourdieu:

The cultural significance of such events had always been determined as much by the audience as by the performers on stage. But as their role in gay life suggests, such events were the site of multiple audiences and productive of multiple cultural meanings, many of them obscure to the class that nominally dominated them.<sup>69</sup>

Bartoli’s actual sexual identity notwithstanding—and fantasy elaboration is carried out regardless of a performer’s actual sexual identity—could it be that concerts featuring Bartoli play a role for lesbian communities similar to the one described by Chauncey? Voice type notwithstanding, what did a black women-identified singer mean when she jested to me that she envisioned holding a large gathering of black performers of women-identified music with the caveat, “no sopranos allowed.”<sup>70</sup> To pose another example, consider musical acts that are infused with humor such as the women-identified musical/comedy team, BETTY, comprised of three artists, one of whom is black guitarist Alyson Palmer.<sup>71</sup> It might be argued that with its adolescent bubble-gum like sound, BETTY signifies implicitly on women-identified consumer notions of the voice and the performance of femme identity. Again, we are reminded of Bradby’s suggestion that it matters who is singing but not in a straight-forward way. Our discussion of voice quality recedes somewhat in the next

section, so we might discuss notions of instruments, race, gender and sexuality in women-identified music spheres.

Performers discuss instruments as signifiers of race, gender, and sexual identities

*It is not really so unusual for someone in an audience to watch a woman play the trumpet for over an hour and still think she is a singer. After all, women in music are singers, right?*

Ellen Seeling, white trumpet player<sup>73</sup>

*I want to play what I feel. I don't want to play Bach right now. I don't want to play Andrew Lloyd Weber but I've got to do that to pay the mortgage. So what's happening now is that I'm prostituting my music - that's what I have to do.*

Xavier Ray, black violinist<sup>74</sup>

The early years of the women's music network saw the rise of many issues related to gender, music, and identity politics. The function of instrumental music in the collective repertoire of women-identified musicians figured prominently in these debates. According to the fans and musicians I interviewed, a frequently discussed topic was whether woman-identifiedness could be communicated through forms of musicking that were purely instrumental. In this section, I address this issue from the perspectives of black performers.

Trumpet player, Ellen Seeling (1988), outlines the issues emerging from debates about instruments and instrumental music in the women-identified music trade publication, *HOTWIRE: A Journal of Women's Music and Culture*. As outlined by Seeling, the first concern is whether instrumental music can “convey feelings of pride, solidarity, urgency and purpose” to an audience. The writer's second observation is that within the women's community, [purely] instrumental

music is frequently seen as male-identified. Advocating for greater appreciation of instrumentalists, Seeling writes that “to the mainstream audience, the image of an instrumentalist is so male that many myths about women can be shattered by the performances of women virtuosi. Their care and feeding are essential to the struggle of women artists, and therefore to the women’s movement in general.”

Few in the women’s music network will deny that in this musical sphere, vocal music is privileged over instrumental music. Seeling offers several explanations for why instrumental groups have “suffered a steady decline as women’s music matures.” She observes that there seems to be only “minor interest in instrumental music, and little concern that what was once a very diverse artistic community has become a singer/songwriter ghetto.” The result, she writes, is that opportunities for instrumentalists are limited. Moreover, she cites the financial cost of recording studio production for large instrumental groups. In discussing the “politics of instrumental music” in women-identified spheres, Seeling presents an impassioned plea for a more prominent place for instrumental music on women-only concert rosters.

Flexible and varied interpretations of performances, a theme I broached in an earlier section, shows up similarly when the subject is women-identified musicians and their choice of instruments. In my research, I found that a performance by a black woman musician evoked different responses from women’s music festival concert attendees, based on whether the audience member appraised the performance in terms of its black racial authenticity or its authenticity in regard

to “woman-identifiedness.” These often divergent appraisals frequently fell along “racial” lines. I observed a tendency for white women to appraise performances in terms of “woman-identifiedness” while black audience members critiqued musical acts in terms of the degree of blackness enacted through performance.

Again, appraisals of race and gender identity align themselves in often contradictory and ambivalent ways. To illustrate, I spoke with several audience members during and after a performance by Toshi Reagon, a prominent black singer/electric guitarist in women-identified music who performed at the Michigan and Northampton festivals in 1995.<sup>75</sup> Many audience members appreciated Reagon’s socially concerned songtexts emphasizing amongst other themes, justice, and compassion for the homeless and for people with AIDS. Other consumers reported being “put off” by what they described as Reagon’s driving, hard rock musical style, the latter of which they associated with maleness. As for whether Reagon’s performance was woman-identified, some black audience members with whom I spoke maintained that Reagon’s performance did indeed fall under the rubric of women’s music. Others reported that Reagon’s musical style disappointed their expectation for “black” performance. My attempt to mention other black rock guitarists (e.g., Jimi Hendrix) who perform in similar idioms did little to assuage a white lesbian couple I interviewed of their perception that Reagon’s musical style fell outside the constellation of musical styles considered “black.” This example illustrates audience member perceptions about performer

identity, racialized definitions of women's music, gender ideals, musical proscriptions of blackness and instrument selection.

Several writers (e.g., Shepherd 1987; Walser 1993) have addressed the association, on the part of audience members, of male qualities, with volume, driving rhythm, and technological advances. Mavis Bayton, in an article ambitiously entitled "Feminist Musical Practice" (1993:184) writes about English musicians as "feminist guitarists". She describes the efforts they undergo to avoid a "male guitar-hero stance" which she calls "guitar-as-phallus"<sup>74</sup> or "guitar-as-woman." A middle-aged punk feminist Bayton interviewed reflected on the irony of her own guitar performances:

I know when I go for some big chords that this is what men do. And my feeling when I do it is irony, because I know that you don't have to strut around to make a good sound. I know that you can do it anyway. For boys to see a woman doing it is feeding them an image they haven't had before (Bayton 1993:184).

This punk guitarist's comments capture the sense of irony or parody that runs throughout many of the performances I discuss in this study. At the same time, one notes the musician's insistence that by playing "big chords," she is providing [boys] with an image they haven't had before. This comment recalls a remark by an *In Process...* member that the ensemble's deployment of traditional African American musical materials serves an educational function.

Clearly, essentialism plays a role in the assessments of band members Bayton interviewed. Prescribed gender roles have played a determining role in women's musical experiences cross-culturally. For as long as I have observed

Reagon in performance, I have read her playing as a signification on guitar hero movements of both mainstream rock and male punk bands. I spoke with many listeners, black and white, who called themselves Reagon fans. Reagon characterizes herself as a “blues-folk-based rock-’n’-roller” (Reagon 1993:5).

Bayton, in “Feminist Musical Practices” (1993), illuminates some of the major concerns that have been debated by consumers of women-identified music. Interestingly she devotes little attention to women-only venues as sites of women’s rock/pop music performance. Bayton found that “gender constraints operate most strongly in the early stages of women’s musical careers, and it is then that feminism has its major impact” (1993:191).<sup>75</sup> With the exception of hand-drumming and percussion ensembles, most of the audience members I interviewed found it difficult to consider that (with the exception of piano) instrumental-only music could be women-identified. Throughout the remainder of this section, I examine a montage of observations by musicians about the significance of gender, race and sexuality in their choices in performance medium.

Hand-drummer and percussionist Ubaka Hill for example, related that as a child she was “not discouraged” from playing the drums but that neither was she encouraged:

Again, it’s the same sexist oppression. In my own family, everyone could see that I had a feeling for, an interest in drumming and rhythm but nobody ever bought me a drum. One of my brothers for Christmas got a toy trap set. I played it—he never played it! So he was being encouraged but I was not. I think that’s a real common social thing that girls, and I’ve heard these stories from women, [they] were never encouraged to play the drums. They had opportunities to play in school bands, but they were never

encouraged to play drums. Often times we were less discouraged, but we were never encouraged, you know?<sup>78</sup>

Hand-drummer Jacque Jones related that even though she did not pursue music in “an aggressive way until early adulthood” she attributes her “knowing” that some instruments were associated with “masculinity” and others with “femininity” to her socialization as a young person:

...to personalize it, since that (drums) is an instrument that I am attracted to—by the way...I was also attracted to bass, slide guitar and traps—but instruments definitely identified as so-called male instruments, at least for a large part of my growing up.<sup>79</sup>

My exploration into the representation of Africa in the music of black musicians was complemented by my interest in the legacy of early debates in wim regarding the proscription of certain instruments as authentically women-identified. As a participant observer at women’s music festivals, I was struck by the phenomenon of hand drumming and percussion circles/jamborees that take place. (There are also hand-drumming camps, such as Moon Sisters Camp in California, where participants can receive instruction from some of the foremost hand-drummers in the country. Beyond the realm of festivals, black percussionists such as Jacque Jones, Ubaka Hill and Nurudafina Pili and white percussionists such as Carolyn Brandy hold drumming workshops and retreats for womyn-only, exposing participants to African, Neo-African, and Native American traditions of drumming and percussion while “celebrating womyn’s community.”)

My participation in drumming classes for women of color (Summers 1992, 1995) prompted me to investigate the hand-drumming experiences of black

musicians regarding gender and ethnicity. What were the origins of hand-drumming and percussion circles at women's music festivals? How were such circles related to men's hand-drumming jamborees that take place in public parks in New York City, Los Angeles or Toronto, for example?<sup>80</sup> Why, I wondered, was drumming so popular at festivals as opposed to jamborees with other "portable" instruments? With my emphasis on "portability," what important factors were I leaving out of the equation? Again, with this preliminary marker I raise more questions than I am prepared to answer.

I queried Jones, an Afro-Cuban style drummer formerly with the avant-garde ensemble, *Dancing on the Crevasse* about the prevalence of drumming amongst that part of the lesbian community represented at women's music festivals. I asked Jones what she understood about the phenomenon of women taking up hand-drumming in festival contexts. Jones suggested a connection between gender expectations and instrument selection by women:

...In my own particular case, the connection between taking on an instrument that has been traditionally viewed as a masculine instrument (at least here in the United States) has to do in part with the willingness or "a lack of concern" about how one is perceived and whether or not one's so-called femininity would be at stake. If one doesn't have that concern, then one does what feels good.<sup>81</sup>

To be sure, there are limits to a "gay as transgressor" mentality as implied by Jones' comment and as discussed by various scholars (see Gilroy and Julien 1993). Jones' comment elides experiences of black lesbian femmes, for example,

such as depicted by the character of Cleopatra Simms' "blonde" girlfriend in Gary Gray's film, *Set It Off*.<sup>82</sup> Jones continues, building on the idea that lesbians who play drums have been more willing than straight women, to transgress gender boundaries:

The connection between choice of instrument and how you self-identify can be fairly strong, so there was a willingness for a lot of women who identify as lesbian to go ahead and play those instruments they were attracted to because they weren't afraid of being seen as non-feminine. It wasn't as much of a controlling device for us as it might be for women who are more identified as heterosexual or straight. But I definitely see a social shift in that.

I encouraged Jones to say more about that "shift":

I've seen a lot more so-called straight women taking on instruments like guitar and drums, fronting bands and playing those instruments and not tripping about whether they are viewed as masculine or feminine.<sup>83</sup>

I asked Jones to comment further on my observation that at women's music festivals, festigoers—particularly white festigoers—play hand-drums, more often than not, as opposed to trumpet, trombones or other "male-identified" instruments. In Jones' conceptualization, drumming is forced into the past; it is related to "ancientness," and, as in Hill's formulation, it is connected to the earth.<sup>84</sup> At this juncture, Jones did not address issues of race. A recurring complex in her response however, was that of the close alignment of the earth/human/spiritual/and music, critical components of cultural feminism.

...We have the voice, we have the body and we have drums and those are our earliest instruments. The drum reaches back into something very, very old and a lot of the rhythms that we learn are much older than any of us [will] ever know. They are passed on and passed on. They evoke and invoke certain things.

Still another motivation for women to play drums, as Jones suggests, is access in regard to both money and skill:

For a lot of us, the appeal of the drum is you can participate with other drummers in an ongoing way and not necessarily be well trained or a virtuoso - you don't necessarily have to have studied for a long time to at least play for a little while with a group of people...And you can buy a cheap drum and get a halfway decent sound from it much more easily than for example, you can buy a cheap horn. There is a certain level of access with the drum that doesn't happen with other kinds of instruments, so my guess is that that's part of it.

Hill's response to my inquiry about possible links between sexual identity and a woman's decision to drum was suffused with a similar type of romantic essentializing. For Hill, women's drumming is equated with spirituality, the natural world, solidarity with the earth, balance, community and timelessness. She spoke of seeing more of a balance being created between heterosexual women and lesbians:

...This is my limited observation about this but I see a balance being created...because not only lesbians are drumming but straight women and feminists are drumming and straight women who are drumming are also old hippies, who are also becoming much more aware, in tune and wanting to be connected with the earth, earth vibrations, with the healing arts and with the whole sense of building community. So I would say that in the earlier days, there were more lesbians drumming but in the present, I see a balance happening.<sup>84</sup>

I asked Ubaka Hill about the racial politics of hand-drumming circles at women's music festivals. Expressing disappointment that the numbers of drumming workshop attendees or of drumming circle participants are not increasing, Hill opined:

In that area, I don't see much of a balance. The imbalance is that there are less women of color drumming when I look at the big picture. And I'm not limiting that to African Americans—all women of color. My experience is limited—I'm not teaching all around the U.S. but I have been to Alaska, Hawaii, Japan. I still am seeing more white women.<sup>86</sup>

As for reasons more black lesbians don't play hand-drums as much, even in contexts predominated by lesbians, Hill responded that the answer could be found in black women's tendency to internalize stereotypes about themselves as blacks, a much discussed subject by African American feminist critics (hooks 1993; Scott 1991):

Of course, we understand the concept of racism and when it's internalized, it leads to self-hate, self-dislike of one's African ancestry, or of ones Asian or Latin ancestry and so on...Of course drums have always been connected with African people but we know what Hollywood did with that and all the images we received from the external sources about our images of Africa—to play the drum was like 'ooga moga' in the jungle kind of savagery—you know? ... Not deep, spiritual, empowering and I think that if you have conversations with other African American sisters you may not get to that point very quickly because it's so old, embedded and deep.<sup>87</sup>

Some black festigoers with whom I spoke informally, pointed to another aspect of the historical legacy of primitivism and its concomitant exoticism of the "Other." Many expressed frustrations with what they described as the appropriation of African or African-derived musical forms by white women at festivals. "Appropriation" could be manifest in any one of a number of ways: encroaching on black participants' physical space, giving the impression of not wanting to "share" the instruments with black attendees etc. Some black women also expressed their perceptions that many white festigoers had adopted a kind of liberal "hipness" for the duration of the festival, a modality some found difficult to trust. Still other

black interviewees maintained that white women tended to take over during such percussion jamborees. As a black lesbian firefighter put it to me: “How come the white women get Ubaka and we [e.g., black women] don’t?”

My research in this area would have gained a valuable dimension had I interviewed white attendees specifically about race, gender construction and their experiences playing percussion instruments during festival workshops or at improvisational jam sessions. A reading that includes greater attention to class would also augment the findings of this study. However, the empirical data I have presented provides a placeholder from which to explore the observation, frequently made, that white participants consider themselves “hip” or “liberal.” Monson, in providing a finely nuanced discussion of race, gender, and white hipness in jazz historical discourse, cites Lott’s locating within blackface minstrelsy, the origins of the American concept of the bohemian nonconformist:

With antebellum blackface performers a set of racial attitudes and cultural styles that in America go by the name of bohemianism first emerged, and there was a utopian or emancipatory moment in their often clumsy courtship of black men. I am not interested in romanticizing these performers. While I believe they were to some extent drawn to “blackness,” this fact should also interrogate the racial logic usually hidden in our romantic notions of the bohemian, the Beat, the hipster. We ought to recognize, in other words, the degree to which blackface stars inaugurated an American tradition of class abdication through gendered cross-racial immersion which persists, in historically differentiated ways, to our own day.<sup>88</sup>

Monson’s critical exegesis, though concerned primarily with these issues as they relate to the social construction of male identity, provides us with a valuable

pathway through which to pursue future investigations of race, white “hipness,” class, gendered constructions of women - and music.

My interview with acclaimed composer/pianist Mary Watkins of Oakland, California began with an overview of one of her published works for orchestra, influenced by jazz, *Five Movements in Color*. Watkins, trained in western classical music, composes in a number of idioms. She spoke candidly about her identity as a musician, which included reference to stylistic resources she employs in her compositions:

I’m an American composer, an African-American composer. Any time I have the opportunity to express the soul of the African American people, I’m going to do that. I love classical music, [I] also love the music of my people, [and] understand where it comes from.<sup>89</sup>

Watkin’s album, *Something Moving*, produced by Olivia Records in 1978, was the first album by that record company that received consistent radio play. According to Watkins, *Something Moving* was played on jazz stations and “actually charted top 20, maybe top 10.” Referring to the early years, when some adherents of wim stipulated musicians’ choice of instrumentation, Watkins stated:

I’m not bound by a combination of instruments...if you want to use strings—use them. I’m saying this because there is a history of “this is what you should use” in women’s music. I don’t have much patience with it - with women’s music or whatever that is. I’m not invalidating the need for an identity, but I don’t take well to being dictated to. You don’t win popularity contests that way...

In speaking about essentialized proscriptions of women’s music, Watkins, who left Olivia in 1979 opined:

I could never do music for just lesbians. They reminded me of kittens huddled together, clinging to each other and anybody who didn't fit their idea of what lesbian feminist was - they were out. This turned me off. Someone decides what femininity is - soft, nurturing and what's female - usually white, by the way. I saw that they were not particularly supportive.

I asked Watkins to address the fact that some women don't consider instrumentalists performers of women's music. She responded:

What is women's music? If that's all they're looking for is women's music, then I guess it [my music] doesn't have anything to do with women's music. I'm telling you, "a triad is a triad."<sup>89</sup>

Later, Watkins added:

I express myself musically better than I do verbally. About race, class, gender—[it] all exists, but not really. I go for what I understand to be the truth. This transcends race, class, sexuality—[it] transcends all of that—whether you're a feminist or not, African American or not.

Curiously, when discussing Watkins throughout this study I refer to her as a composer. To be sure, she is not the only black composer of women-identified music I interviewed during the course of my fieldwork. Many of the other singer/songwriters did not identify themselves by that term. As Philip Brett so rightly points out in "Musicality, Essentialism and the Closet," the term "composer"

...no longer has much usefulness as a contemporary label outside the institutions of classical music because of the new variety of modes of musical production and the dying force of an ideology constructed around a single (male) originating force and a concept of "art" as an elite and segregated human activity (Brett 1994:22).

Violinist Xavier Ray's initial contact with wim was through her work with *Dancing at the Crevasse*, an avant-garde/jazz band which at the time of our

interview Ray described as being on “unlimited hiatus.”<sup>91</sup> Describing avant-garde music as a “man’s world,” Ray related her initial enthusiasm upon learning about the women’s music community. Because of early conflicts and disappointments however, she no longer identifies herself with the wim network. Providing running commentary over several video clips of *Dancing at the Crevasse*, Ray discussed the unpopular nature of the musical style she loves:

People get scared when you do the kind of music that I just showed you. I don’t even think it’s that “out there.” My music now is far more “out” than this. I don’t even like to refer to theory...I’m more into the avant garde end of improvisational work...I still appreciate structure...I open myself as a channel and the music comes through. Quite honestly, I hate listening to that kind of music. Like poetry, it’s so subjective. But I love playing it...<sup>92</sup>

Sympathizing with Ray’s experience at a midwest women’s music festival held in the early 1990s, I queried whether the festival producers had encountered difficulties relating to an all-instrumental ensemble. Ray replied:

It’s the strength of the womanness that would make it women-identifiable because to me, instrumental music doesn’t have a gender. I think of women-identified music as a singer speaking of women’s issues. It’s hard to do that [with an instrumental piece] without speaking of what it is you’re doing. Maybe when women listen to this music it has more meaning than when men listen to it. I don’t know.

According to Ray, when *Dancing at the Crevasse* first started, the ensemble received “amazing” support by the women’s community. What she did not like, however, was a marketing decision that DAC bill themselves as “the newest and largest all women’s jazz improvisational band:”

I didn't like the fact that we had to defend why we were together. I didn't want to use that as a hook. It had separatist overtones...We are musicians and that's first and foremost.

Sharing that she never felt an identity with the instrument, Ray related that as a black woman she has "battled" her violin for years. Pointing to some hand-made instruments on the hearth of her fireplace, Ray remarked: "Here's a black woman playing a European-identified instrument. I have to remind myself that this [Africa] is where the instrument came from. But that's not what I saw [growing up]."

Ray, who makes a living as a professional violinist for both symphonies and musical theater could, if she were inclined, trace her black violinist "ancestry" to a number of musicians. Violinist, John Thomas Douglass (1847-1886) concertized extensively, earning the reputation as "the master violinist" and "one of the greatest musicians of the race." Douglass, like Black Patti, found that he could not earn a living solely with his violin and turned to the vaudeville circuit.<sup>93</sup> During the 1870s, he toured with the Georgia Minstrels and with the Hyers Sisters. In the nineteenth century when it was difficult even for a white American to earn a livelihood as a concert artist, black instrumentalists in the U.S. were inspired by the example of George Polgreen Bridgetower (1779-1860), son of an "African" father and a Polish mother. Bridgetower is well known for his relatively short but highly successful concert career in Europe and for his association with Beethoven.<sup>94</sup>

After recounting a number of racist incidents that occurred within and without wim spheres, Ray spoke of her discouragement in general and the tensions

she experiences as a professional avant-grade jazz musician who is forced to play in classical drag for financial viability:

I want to play what I feel. I don't want to play Bach right now. I don't want to play Andrew Lloyd Weber but I've got to do that to pay the mortgage. So what's happening now is that I'm prostituting my music - that's what I have to do. These things are so difficult to do day after day after day. I want to play my own music—but who is going to pay money like they pay Diana Ross, to hear 'blop blip bloo Bloop Bloo?..I'm bringing some serious messages here!...being a black women—all of that is just difficult. There is a social stigma attached to it...

My conversation with Ray also included discussion of her class background (which she described as middle-class) and of her southern origins. Her father, a doctor, and her mother, a university professor, urged her to extend her graduate study and pursue a doctorate in music but Ray said that after the masters degree (M.M.) she “had had it.”

Historically in wim, the issue of what instruments women played was just as significant as who played them. In this case, “instruments” refers to vocal and instrumental music. Interesting questions emerge in wim where consumers and musicians deploy strategic essentialism in efforts to displace homophobic and sexist impulses of outsiders. These issues apply to song authorship as well. For example, we might ask whether authenticity is compromised if women sing songs penned by men. Moreover, can men sing wim, that is to say, does a song retain its “women-identifiedness” if sung by a man?<sup>93</sup> Sandra Washington reflected on the latter:

Sandra: Men can certainly write songs about women; I don't think men can necessarily write women's music. If a person writes a Tibetan chant and they are not Tibetan, then they didn't write a Tibetan

chant. What they wrote was a song in the style of a Tibetan chant. It's still not women's music—even if a man writes a song that stylistically use the same elements that a women's music composer uses. What he has done is to write in the style of women's music. Women's music is written by women. That's the whole point.<sup>94</sup>

Eileen: Does the same follow—that women's music is performed by women?

Sandra: Yes. It's not just about gender; it's about a lifetime of experiences. Women's music is feminist music. For me, there is no separation between women's music and a feminist perspective because plenty of women write music which is not women's music. [There is an] expectation that the music will be affirming to women; that there's compassion there and a lot of respect. You can write a women's music song about a man, but it's feminist at its base - not necessarily political, but it's feminist...

Later, I asked the musician whether, according to her definition of women's music, men can be in the band. Washington responded that as long as they are not in the lead, they are welcomed and that their presence does not impinge on the meaning of women-identified:

Sandra: No problem...men can certainly sing on women's music songs, but they aren't in the lead—they aren't in control. I care about who spawns the music, who births the music and who is the focus in performance. I've played with men, both white and men of color, straight guys, straight women, gay guys—

Eileen: Straight colored guys?

Sandra: Yeah. They can sing my stuff as back-up artists...<sup>95</sup>

Composer/musician Rachel Bagby related audience member reactions to her decision to hire a male drummer for her band, when they performed at a women's

music festival at a west coast university several years ago. Here, she stresses that her overriding concern in asking a man to participate in the gig was musical competence, not gender:

... it's not like I had my pick of musicians. I think someone stuck camera in my face and asked me about it and I said "look, I am the one in front and they are behind me. And that particular drummer happens to be the baddest drummer on the peninsula. And I didn't know a woman drummer and I didn't have that much time to put this together." That's no excuse and if I had understood that only women can participate, that would have been different. As I moved more in women's circles, I got over it...<sup>96</sup>

The composer's comment that the musician she chose for the university performance was "the baddest drummer on the peninsula" contrasts with the perception that women instrumentalists must compensate for their gender "liability" through technical expertise. Here, she emphasizes the drummer's musical prowess as compensation perhaps for the symbolic liability of his gender identification. Many musicians who participated in this study remarked similarly, that musical competence was critical, no matter who they played with.<sup>97</sup> The interviewee's response also echoes the views of female rock musicians Bayton (1988:239) interviewed who commented on the small pool of female musicians who are available for professional gigs.

## CHAPTER VI

***Yearning: the future for black women and women-identified music***

*Sometimes I get annoyed at the new women coming along in women's music who don't know what it was like working in the trenches keeping things going.*  
 musician, June Millington

*I'd like to think that black women and women's music will become more prominent as years go by... Ten years from now, we could have a whole slew of artists in the mainstream.*  
 Kay Wilson, festigoer, Michigan, 1995.<sup>1</sup>

This study takes seriously musician Sue Fink's observation that there is no women's music, only women's music audiences. My interactions with veteran wim performer, June Millington, and black festival attendee, Kay Wilson, cited in the epigraph, illustrate contrasting views members of this community hold about the past and future of wim. In some ways, the comments of Millington and Wilson characterized my interactions with performers and audience members in this sphere. Veteran performers and other long-time lesbian feminist activists tended to view the last two decades as a kind of golden era. Black festival attendees, on the other hand, many of whom had fewer years experience with the women's music network, tended to make projections about the crossover possibilities that await black wim performers.

While a number of black audience members with whom I spoke described themselves as optimistic about the genre's future, many white consumers and lesbian culture observers point to the "decline" of wim and culture, particularly as it was envisioned in the early 1970s. Rationales for the latter point of view are numerous. The passing of time figures prominently amongst explanations women

offered in postulating the genre's decline. Many point to the "graying" of feminism and the current generational divide between younger and older lesbians. As is the case of many social and cultural movements, including black liberatory struggles, an older generation decries what it perceives as a younger generation unappreciative of its efforts, decades earlier, to address a wide range of social issues on behalf of its constituency.

Many cite the mainstreaming of feminism and the increasing focus on issues of interest to middle-class women at music festivals. These tendencies, some maintain, are manifested in workshop topics, a number of which have to do with economic security and financial success. In support of this view, a number of women with whom I spoke mentioned the de-emphasis of political issues at music festivals. Some argue that these differences occur in the context of feminist backlash as cited by numerous writers (Faludi 1991). Still other consumers note that *HOTWIRE*, the only journal devoted to the coverage of women's music and culture, ceased publication in 1994.

Generational rifts in wim surface not only about the direction of feminist politics but about music as well. This arena is rife with contradiction. Several white audience members I spoke with shared their preference for the golden-oldies of women's music, that is to say, songs by women's music founders: Cris Williamson, Holly Near or Meg Christian. Still others grimaced when the names of these artists were brought up in conversation. As Bradby (1993) illuminates in her study, the latter reaction is less an indication of dislike for the music as much as a mark of

recognition for and a distancing from these performers and the socio-political climate with which they are associated.

Throughout my research, consumers and performers acknowledged that feminism—or something approximating it—has suffused popular culture. At the same time, many observed that it remains to be seen whether and/or how women's influence will be manifest at the highest levels of the pop music industry.

Performers and consumers acknowledge changes in wim, not all of which were anticipated. Women, age 40 and older at the time of my research, welcomed and at the same time, lamented changes that have taken place in society in regard to women and popular music. As related to me by some of the women I interviewed, Tribe 8, through its employ of “crude” language, “blasting” electric guitar accompaniments and sexual toys/props evokes ironically, reminisces of the pornography wars of second wave women's movement. At the same time, many younger musician/songwriters signify on the acoustic guitar-centric folk/pop musical styles of the founding mothers of women's music and attempt to disassociate themselves from images evoked by mention of the genre. Vanguard of wim are frequently referred to as “old-school” by a younger generation of women's music consumers who are “here, queer, and ready to steer”—presumably the women's movement—yet in which direction, it might be argued, is anyone's guess. Similar impulses have occurred in black popular music as the 1990s have been dubbed the decade of '70s remakes. To the general consumer of black

popular music, artists such as MC Lyte, Donna Ferris, and now Lauryn Hill are the first and last words in black womanness and music sound.

In contrast however, consider the most recent emergence of *Midwest Women's Autumnfest*, a women's music festival founded in 1995 and held annually in DeKalb County, Illinois. Don't tell the producers of this newer festival that women-identified music is "dead."<sup>2</sup> Further, reminding us that middle-agedness has in some circles, become an implicit marker of lesbian-feminist identity, a young woman writes to an e-mail discussion group for scholars of women's music: "According to my age, I shouldn't like women-identified music, but I do!"<sup>3</sup> Something brings thousands of participants to women's music festivals each year, whether it's a chance to engage in cooperative living, gain new skills, or find romance. Others are drawn by the opportunity to vacation in a lesbian-safe environment. As one observer put it about the yearning of black diaspora peoples, maybe it's about the chance to witness a diasporic community "reversing itself," and coming together again. Enacting this yearning, each year women coalesce under the banners of new festivals while others have ceased operations.

It might be argued that feminism wrought real advances for women in the music industry. These advances are symbolized by the emergence each year of new women recording artists. Ironically, one reason for the tendency on the part of the mainstream press to overlook wim artists, is the current preoccupation with lesbian chic in popular music. By "lesbian chic," consumers reference the crossover careers of performers such as Tracy Chapman, Melissa Etheridge, and Sheryl

Crowe. Black lesbian music consumers often tacitly claim black artists such as Grace Jones and Phylis Hyman as “one of our own,” but the latter have not been associated with wim, per se. Some women’s music consumers rationalize the success of the current crop of androgynous women artists by suggesting that wim performers and audience members carried out the “trench work” leading to their emergence. Black musician Lillian Allen suggests an alternative interpretation of this phenomenon observing that singer/songwriters such as Chapman and Etheridge paid their dues in women’s music for many years before being “discovered” by the mainstream pop music industry. Performer Judith Casselberry, whose insights resonate throughout this study, observes that the fact an alternative music reaches the mainstream, is itself a sign it has been drained of its radicalizing potential. As Charles Keil writes, “to use an organic analogy, you can’t really know a lot about the growth or maturity of a style until it begins to decay” (1994:203). In this case, that style is the conglomeration of musical styles that constitute women-identified music.

Another major critique of wim, and arguably, one of the most prevalent, is that the music lacks innovation. To be fair, “lack of innovation” has been a constant in critiques about the genre (Petersen 1989). Here, we’re on shifting and contradictory ground. My research with audience members about black wim performers suggests that where musical performances are considered innovative, they are also held to be non woman-identified. Most striking about wim is that the participation of black women as performers is encouraged, desired, and supported.

Indeed, according to black and white consumers, it is the black performers who reinvigorate the soundscape and social field of wim. The contributions of black women musicians however, do not necessarily precipitate an expansion in the definition of the genre by the majority of music consumers. The following excerpt from an interview with a lesbian festigoer typified exchanges I had with white consumers in which I attempted to unpack racialized definitions of women-identified music.

Festigoer: I was sitting here thinking “how do I define women’s music?” I don’t know if I know how to define it. I guess I think of women’s music negatively. I think of it as very white and very sort of isolated. I think of it as white women singing to white audiences and so I don’t know if I would call Sweet Honey in the Rock “women’s music.” I guess I sort of have this negative connotation about women’s music now.

Hayes: Do you think that the idea of whiteness is inscribed in the word woman? I mean, do you think that once people hear that word, they can’t get anything else in their head?

Festigoer: I don’t think that necessarily about “woman” but “woman’s music” or “woman’s movement”—those words together, definitely. Well I think, you know, there’s that whole thing... The name of that book, *‘All of the women are white, all the men are black and the rest of us are brave’*—that yeah, that may be just in the term woman there is. Yeah.

Hayes: When you think about women’s music – does this great wash of whiteness come over you? This idea that the white women are doing women’s music and the black women are doing something else. Describe it again to me... Why is it something else? What makes it “something else”?

Festigoer: (long pause) The music partially I guess, makes it something else.

Hayes: —Meaning?

Festigoer: Well you know—what I said before about the music being about the feelings rather than just the melody that the words go on top of. It's part of the whole point. It's just deeper. The music is deeper and it's connected to the words and the feelings.

Black musicians I interviewed suggest “woman-identified” has yet to transcend its original association with whiteness. As Judith Casselberry relates:

One problem in the women's music scene is that because it was started by white women, what women-identified music is to a lot of people, is not a global perspective of what wim is. It's more like a North American Caucasian perspective.<sup>4</sup>

Though black performers are thought to provide the vitality and moral authority (however imagined) to wim, consumers continue to characterize the collective repertoire of black musicians as falling outside the parameters of the genre. It would be difficult to imagine the social and cultural field of women-identified music without the many contributions of the artists interviewed for this study.

I suggest that for black performers and wim, a reversal of Aida Hurtado's observation about women of color and their location in women's studies applies. Hurtado characterized the latter association as one of “inclusion without influence.” This sphere of musicking reflects black women's influence but not their inclusion in consumer definitions of the genre. Ethnomusicologists have already recognized the phenomenon described as the Afro-Americanization of American popular music. At the same time, there is widespread recognition that ironically, blacks have not routinely been credited for their contributions to American popular culture. Perhaps blackness plays the role of further “queering” the already queer,

white social field of women-identified music. The reticence of music consumers to modify the definition of women's music to reflect the participation of black performers they so admire is an area worthy of further investigation.

It might be argued that the categorization of black performers of wim by distributors reflects (and promotes?) consumer and industry ambivalence about the scope of the genre. Based in Durham, North Carolina, Ladyslipper, the largest distributor of women's music, publishes a seasonal catalog of its inventory. My interest here lingers on a cursory analysis of Ladyslipper's "bin headings" especially in regard to the categorization of the music of black women.

Ladyslipper, founded in 1976, distributes a remarkable array of recordings, including some by black musicians mentioned in this study (e.g., Casselberry-DuPree, Sweet Honey in the Rock, Ubaka Hill, Melanie DeMore, Deidre McCalla, Toshi Reagon). Ladyslipper's bin headings include but are not limited to: African, African Heritage, Women's Music/Feminist/Lesbian (elided as one bin), Mehn's Music (with accompanying explanation), and Global. Amongst Ladyslipper's 1997-98 "Music by Women" listings for example, is an entry for a recording by blackgirls, an ensemble comprised of three white women from North Carolina. It may be argued that the incongruity between the ensemble's name and the race of its members, highlights the irony of the social constructedness of race. At the same time however, this promotional strategy recalls Feld's illumination of levels of Ba-Benzele appropriation and representation in world beat (1996). Feld illustrates the practice of cultural property becoming intellectual property by recalling a track by

avant-garde jazz musician, Jon Hassell, found on his 1979 recording, *Fourth World Volume 1, Possible Musics*. Feld comments on how in titling a particular track “Ba-Benzele,” “a people so named are now a song title owned by another” (1996:18).

Additional entries are included for white lesbian crossover sensation, Melissa Etheridge, *Sweet Honey in the Rock*, and Zap Mama, a five-member ensemble marketed as being from “Africa” by way of “Europe.” Dinah Washington, Betty Carter, and Billie Holiday are found under jazz, while Aretha Franklin and Queen Latifah boast one recording each in the R&B/Rap bin (elided). Neither female nor lesbian identity is a prerequisite for inclusion in the catalog. Entries of recordings by black drag queens Ru Paul and the late Sylvester under “Mehn’s Music” demonstrate that catalog editors do not legislate based on sex.<sup>5</sup> Barbara Streisand sneaks in under New Listings while k.d. lang is included under Women’s Music/Feminist/Lesbian. Country music’s Dolly Parton and r&b’s Patti LaBelle boast token representation in the catalog with one recording each.

A number of questions issue from my cursory and partial survey. Firstly, is the inclusion of recordings by artists such as Parton and LaBelle a nod to lesbian consumer demand or, do their respective listings speak to their status as icons in some gay men’s communities? Secondly, is their inclusion in *Ladyslipper’s* inventory a sign of recognition for their activism in the struggle for gay & lesbian rights? After all, recordings of Parton, who for decades has packaged herself as the ultimate femme in drag, and the formerly outrageous but-toned-down now LaBelle,

can certainly be found in any major record store. What Dyer writes about lesbian/gay culture and Minelli's mother also applies to Parton and LaBelle: "Neither the Amazons nor Judy Garland were 'meant' to be figures in lesbian or gay culture, but they are and it is proper to analyze them as such." (Dyer 1991:188).<sup>6</sup> Lest my observations sound like, to follow Manning Marable, drive-by criticisms, let me state that the latter is not my intention. Carole-Anne Tyler for example, reminds us that middle class academics regularly point to Parton as an example of female, female impersonation, but that "from a working-class point of view she could be the epitome of genuine womanliness" (Tyler 1991:57).

Likewise I am intrigued by the fact that the "women's music/feminist/lesbian" bin includes a small number of artists who, according to women I interviewed, might otherwise fall under another category. Black singer/songwriter Deidre McCalla, for example, is found in the feminist, and not African Heritage bin. Is the women's music cultural insider to infer, therefore, that McCalla's country-pop style has no ties to "African Heritage." Who decides? The *Ladyslipper* catalog incorporates artists as diverse as sister and brother Katia and Salvador Cardenal described as part of the Nicaraguan New Song movement, Pacific Islander Henriette Winkler, and the First Nations trio Ulali. It is likely that now, after years of consciousness-raising, the catalog editors can not be charged with racism—or with sexism or homophobia—but what is happening? The politics of inclusion and exclusion affects not only black wim performers, but a wide range

of musicians. There is a politic at work here, but its apparatus is not readily apparent.

This study has ramifications for future ethnomusicological research, feminist theory and black cultural studies. The primary finding is that the identities of musicians and other performers matter deeply to audience members/listeners in this sphere. My research illustrates the complex interaction of race, gender, and sexuality in performance as well as reception. It might be argued that wim refers not only to a feminist cultural network but to a process of reception whereby audience members critique performances in terms of how convincingly identities of sexuality and blackness are performed. My ethnographic research on audible and visual signifiers of difference as markers of sexual identity and sexual style is a placeholder in this area. Likewise, appraisals of white audience members that the musicking of black performers of wim seems “natural” or “more spiritual” than white women’s music making is an area for future investigation.

In this study, I have shed light on the subjectivities of black performers in a predominantly white lesbian social field. While consumers affirm the significance of black women musicians to this sphere, discussions with audience members reveal racialized definitions of wim which often preclude the music of artists interviewed for this study. Black performers however, continue to engage the field of women-identified music as serious business and as serious ritual play. I have attempted to relay how a genre is imagined and the contradictions that emerge as consumers and performers think black, lesbian, and feminist through music.<sup>7</sup>

## Notes

## CHAPTER I

- <sup>1</sup> Cynthia Lont (1992:252).
- <sup>2</sup> Letter to the editor, *HOTWIRE: Journal of Women's Music and Culture*, 1989.
- <sup>3</sup> Gilroy, *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, p. 85.
- <sup>4</sup> Childerhose, Buffy 1998: 1.
- <sup>5</sup> The concerts were held at The Gorge, in George, Washington.
- <sup>6</sup> The '98 Lilith Fair Tour included performances by Queen Latifah, Erykah Badu and Me'shell Ndegeocello.
- <sup>7</sup> Childerhose, p. 71.
- <sup>8</sup> This term is used infrequently by members of a younger generation which, according to some interviewees of this study, has come of age in a period of lesbian chic in popular music.
- <sup>9</sup> An example of such a radio show would be "Sophie's Parlor" in Washington, D.C.
- <sup>10</sup> Readers hoping to find descriptions of festivals no longer in existence (e.g., East Coast Lesbian Festival, Sisterfire, New England Music Festival, West Coast Lesbian Festival) or of conferences no longer held (e.g., Midwest Lesbian Conference, West Coast Lesbian Conference) will be disappointed as will those expecting a running commentary about the 'life' of any festival in particular.
- <sup>11</sup> Tracy Chapman had one of her many 'starts' at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival when Maxine Howard invited her to sing "*Stormy Monday*" on her set.
- <sup>12</sup> *Juju* is a Nigerian popular music; *zouk* is a local popular music of Guadelope which became widely popularized and attracted a large listenership of throughout the Caribbean, Europe and Africa.
- <sup>13</sup> Here I use this rather vague and oblique notion of "women loving women" deliberately. Petersen (1987) writes of "the struggles and glories of women in sexual relationships." Few of the performers I observed in live performance sang openly and directly about sexual relationships with women although performers alluded to it.
- <sup>14</sup> In an interview with Toni Armstrong (1993:397) Fink said, "I don't think we have 'women's music'—I think we have a women's music audience. We have a group of people who want to hear music by and about women." See *Lesbian Culture*, edited by Julia Penelope & Susan Wolfe (1994).

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- <sup>15</sup> Franz Boas, *Anthropology and Modern Life*, 1928. In "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture" Hall's (1997) focus is black culture, not necessarily black music.
- <sup>16</sup> Audience research studies in popular music and sexuality include Bradby's (1993) "Does it Matter Who is Singing?"
- <sup>17</sup> Reagon 1983:360.
- <sup>18</sup> I deploy "flygirl," originally of r&b derivation, with a nod to Greg Tate's *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992. Tate, in his discussion of the corpus of black visual artist, Jean Michel Basquiat, uses "flyboy" as a way of describing the phenomenon of being the only black in a white social field. Tate describes Basquiat as the most financially successful black visual artist of all time.
- <sup>19</sup> Being with Spillane at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival over a five day period sensitized me to the deployment of the word "girlfriend" in lesbian contexts. Prior to Michigan, I referred to my close female friends as my "girlfriends." Repeatedly festigoers asked me to clarify what I meant by this term when I used it in reference to Spillane.
- <sup>20</sup> Though definitions of "butch" and "femme" are widely debated, by "butch" I refer to a general understanding amongst lesbians that involves drawing on male codes, forms of behavior, dress etc. "Femme," identity, on the other hand, is generally understood as drawing on feminine forms of behavior, dress, codings, etc. Spillane and I enacted these identities primarily through tone of voice, facial expression, physical movements, dress, and attitude.
- <sup>21</sup> Selection of these names was arbitrary on our part.
- <sup>22</sup> Rumors circulate about the sexual identity of all these artists.
- <sup>23</sup> Long-term festigoers generally refer to women's music festivals by geographic location such as Michigan or Northampton or by acronym, such as "NWMF" (National Women's Music Festival).
- <sup>24</sup> Again, attention to the ramifications of language usage in terms of gender is significant in this realm.
- <sup>25</sup> "The land" refers to the land on which the festival is held. In my exchanges with festival attendees the term often was accompanied by a sense of romantic reverence.
- <sup>26</sup> At Michigan for example, there is a special "Brother Sun Boys' Camp" for boys ages 4-10. As described in the festival booklet, Brother Sun is a "self-contained, overnight camp for boys with camping, activities and special field trips to explore rural Michigan while mom's at her camp." Male children over the age of three are not allowed in any other part of the festival grounds. See the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival brochure, 1995:9.
- <sup>27</sup> Frequently, festigoers shared with me stories of black women "boycotting" certain festivals over racial conflicts.

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<sup>28</sup> “Women of color” is a popular political designation, to refer to Native American women, U.S. black women, Asian-American women, and Latinos. After many years of advocacy by women of color with festival “bureaucracies,” many have instituted organizational means by which women of color can gather together at the respective festivals. Women of color at the Northampton Lesbian Festival 1995, were sponsors of a women of color information table. The National Women’s Music Festival sponsors a Women of Color Workshop series and also hosts an evening meal for women of color. One black lesbian scholar and women’s music festival devotee related that the “women of color dinner night” at NWMF became a reality after a great deal of advocacy on the part of women of color festival attendees. (personal communication 1997).

<sup>29</sup> The latter is a shorthand term used to refer to an historically situated and diverse group.

<sup>30</sup> Sandra Washington interview, December 3, 1995.

<sup>31</sup> The workshop was led by black hand-percussionist Ubaka Hill, a popular performer on the women-identified music circuit.

<sup>32</sup> The “watermelon patch” may be my own term for the large stacks of watermelons under a big tree near the dining area. Festigoers were instructed regularly, to please ‘do not sit on the watermelons.’

<sup>33</sup> Festival officials estimated that of the 8,000+ in attendance at Michigan ’95, 200 were women of color, fewer than that were black women.

<sup>34</sup> Numerous culture critics have described, for example, the visual surveillance of black customers by white clerks in department stores.

<sup>35</sup> “Rainbow flag” is a reference to what is otherwise known as the “gay flag”: the colors of which are (from top to bottom) red, orange, yellow, green, blue and purple.

<sup>36</sup> I discuss this color symbolism in chapter two.

<sup>37</sup> In 1939, McDaniel was recognized for her performance in *Gone with the Wind* and thusly became the first black to receive an Academy Award.

<sup>38</sup> Black English too, reflects usage changes to circumvent the association of “black” with negativity, (e.g., replacing “brown-out” for black-out; “dark” comedy for “black” comedy.)

<sup>39</sup> Founder and director of Sweet Honey in the Rock, an internationally renowned professional black women’s a cappella ensemble affiliated with the women-identified music circuit.

<sup>40</sup> The 1981 West Coast Women’s Music Festival was held in Yosemite National Forest, California. In addition to her role as Sweet Honey’s director, black cultural historian and MacArthur Fellow Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon is Emeritus Curator of African American History at the Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C.

<sup>41</sup> Here I reference stories that circulate in the women-identified community about Bessie Smith's lesbian identity. As scholars have pointed out, though her sexual identity is more accurately described as bisexual what interests me in this study is the claiming of Smith, by white consumers in particular, as "one of our own" based on her lesbian identity. When black consumers I spoke with claimed Bessie Smith, it was more along the lines of her being a great black singer—"just like Billie Holiday."

<sup>42</sup> Translated from the Spanish by A. Partnoy and Sandra Wheaton. Barnwell, Ysaye Maria. "Becoming a Singer" in Reagon ed., *We Who Believe in Freedom: Sweet Honey in the Rock... Still on the Journey*, p. 266. *Sisterfire*, produced by Roadwork, Inc. Washington, D.C. is discussed by Bernice Johnson Reagon and others in Reagon, 1993.

<sup>43</sup> According to Roadwork, Inc. founder, Amy Horowitz, *Sisterfire* was criticized by some for its gender inclusivity; on the other hand, some white women complained that there was not enough (white) women's music while some black women felt there were too many white women. Horowitz suggests that a lot of straight people wondered why there were so many gays and lesbians while "political people" thought the festival should address more substantive issues (p. 193).

<sup>44</sup> "Venceremos" means "We Will Win." *We Who Believes in Freedom... Still on the Journey*.

<sup>45</sup> The "new musicology" refers to musicological studies by predominantly gay and lesbian scholars, that interrogate issues of sexual identity in western art music. See *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, edited by Philip Brett et al (New York: Routledge. 1994. "Object of my listening desire" is an expression employed by several contributors to this edited volume.

<sup>46</sup> I refer to "race, gender, and sexuality" as a "mantra" because it is an area frequently researched by scholars.

<sup>47</sup> Feld and Fox 1994.

<sup>48</sup> For an overview of this research see Susan Gal's "Between Speech and Silence: The Problematics of Research on Language and Gender" in *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era*. Oxford: University of Ca Press (1991).

<sup>49</sup> Turino 1993 following Foucault.

<sup>50</sup> Black lesbian writer Cheryl Wall characterizes 1970 as a "watershed" year for emerging black women's voices in literature. A much noted contribution to this literature was *The Black Woman*, an anthology by the late Toni Cade Bambara, (New York: New American Library, 1970). Writes Cheryl Wall, "Rejecting the definitions imposed by experts ("all male") and resisting encouragement to locate themselves in the emergent definitions of women by white feminists, the

anthology heralded an effort by black women to define themselves." Additional major contributions by black women in literature during this time included Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and Maya Angelou's "*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*," the first volume of Angelou's popular series of memoirs.

<sup>51</sup> With this phrase I reference the title of the frequently cited, "*All the Women are White, the Blacks are Men and Some of Us are Brave*." Hull, 1982.

<sup>52</sup> "Birmingham School" is shorthand for the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies.

<sup>53</sup> Here also, I do not use "real people" as a gloss for working class people only; this study is based on interviews with working class and middle-class musicians and consumers.

<sup>54</sup> *Movement in Black*, a collection of poetry by the late black lesbian poet Pat Parker could also be added to this list.

<sup>55</sup> Many music consumers credit wim performers for the crossover appeal of the new lesbian singers (e.g. k.d lang, Tracy Chapman, Melissa Etheridge) etc. I take up this issue in chapter five.

<sup>56</sup> This person wished to remain anonymous.

<sup>57</sup> Abu-Lughod, Lila. "Writing Against Culture" in *Recapturing Anthropology*. 1991:143.

<sup>58</sup> See Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*.

<sup>59</sup> Christopher Small uses this term in *Music of the Common Tongue: Survival and Celebration in Afro-American Music* (1987). New York: River Run Press.

<sup>60</sup> In evoking a black women's tradition of advocacy on race and sex issues, following Hazel Carby, I do not advocate that this tradition is without breaks and disruption. It is neither seamless nor continuous. (See King 1995: 294 for the quote of Anna Julia Cooper, Ph.D, born into slavery and who later became a prominent educator.)

<sup>61</sup> Personal communication, Toni Armstrong, Jr.

<sup>62</sup> See Giddings, 1984.

<sup>63</sup> Likewise, Giddings discusses conflicts within "first wave" women's movement as black women advocated for equal rights for their sex and race. Giddings presents an illuminating account of the work of Black women's suffrage clubs organized in the years prior to World War I.

<sup>64</sup> Black panther member and at one-time chair of the party, Elaine Brown, expresses the sentiment of many black female activists when she writes, "A woman in the Black Power movement was considered at best, irrelevant. A woman asserting herself was a pariah. A woman attempting the role of leadership was, to my proud black Brothers, making an alliance with the 'counter-revolutionary, man-hating, lesbian, feminist white bitches'" (1992:357). Further, she writes, "Oddly, I had never thought of myself as a feminist. I had even been denounced by certain

radical feminist collectives as a 'lackey' for men. That charge was based on my having written and sung two albums of songs that my female accusers claimed elevated and praised men" (1992:367). In her memoir (1992) Brown describes her transformation from a Black power activist, but non-feminist, to a woman who would no longer support certain modalities of Afrocentric philosophy that contributed to the suppression of black women. Nor would she advocate the equation of black Power with the self-determination of black men only. She writes, "I would claim my womanhood and my place. If that gave rise to my being labeled a "man-hating lesbian, feminist bitch," I would be the most radical of them (1992:368).

<sup>65</sup> Smith College alumni.

<sup>66</sup> In recognition of the suffragists movements of the 19th century, 20th century feminists refer to the women's liberation movement of the late 1960/early 1970s as the "second wave," thereby making the 19th century movement for women's rights, the "first wave." Though it is agreed that "second wave" feminism has run its course, scholars and activists have not reached consensus about which wave, "third" or "fourth" we are currently experiencing in regard to feminism. Kahn is the editor of *Sojourner*, a feminist newspaper that has been published for over twenty years. I draw heavily from Kahn's book, *Frontline Feminism 1975-1995: Essays from Sojourner's First 20 Years* in this section. Kahn suggests that second wave feminism had its genesis in the period between 1967-1970.

<sup>67</sup> Giddings, p. 299.

<sup>68</sup> King, 1995:306.

<sup>69</sup> ILGWU is the acronym for the International Ladies Garment Worker's Union.

<sup>70</sup> This is one of the few times I can recall an activity of the white majority being described as an activity of the minority.

<sup>71</sup> The SNCC of 1964-65 underwent what Giddings refers to as an identity crisis which left the organization disoriented. Some of the confusion, she writes, could be traced to tensions "of interracial liaisons between white women and black men which reached a pitch during the Freedom Summer" (1984:301). Giddings cites one white activist as saying that though some relationships were constructive and that the sexual tension created by the presence of white women in SNCC "was key to their incipient feminism" it also "became a divisive and explosive force within the civil rights movement itself."

Many Black activists agreed that whites were creating more problems in SNCC than solutions (Giddings 1984:301). Consequently, Giddings writes, many whites within SNCC were "demoted," a move which white women now budding feminists, resisted, in part through an unsigned paper on the treatment of women within SNCC presented at the organization's

Waveland Conference in 1964. The points of this paper were for the most part ignored; Giddings characterizes Stokely Carmichael's widely known rebuttal, "The only position for women in SNCC is prone," as the most infamous reaction to the paper. Giddings suggests two reasons that black women in SNCC did not protest this and other incidents of sexism in great numbers. First, she maintains, is that many black women found race concerns so pressing that they had little time to address issues of gender. Second, is that though Carmichael's statement angered many black women, the charge that women were less than key players in SNCC was unfounded. Giddings argues that the influence of black women was actually increasing; "it was white women who were being relegated to minor responsibilities, in part because of indiscriminate sexual behavior." Writes Giddings, "If black women had complaints of their treatment in SNCC, those complaints often centered around the 'brothers' role in their white 'sisters' sexual liberation" (1984:302). Clearly, sex discrimination existed in SNCC; but it was not perceived as more detrimental than other issues within the organization. Tensions surrounding these relationships emanate from the history of race, sex, and class oppression in the U.S.

The writers of the SNCC position paper on the treatment of women eventually joined the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), an organization with a predominantly white membership, founded in 1962. Giddings' accounts of interviews with white women who were members of both organizations reveals a virulent strain of sexism in SDS, noting that when the concept of "women's liberation" was presented to an SDS meeting, it was "laughed off the floor." By 1967, Giddings writes, radical feminists succeeded in passing a resolution calling for their full participation in the organization (Giddings 1984:303). From the mid-1960s onwards, the demands for Black Power began to displace the call of the decomposing Civil Rights movement.

<sup>72</sup> This alignment reflected sharp divisions between lesbians and heterosexual women along the lines of feminist theory and practice.

<sup>73</sup> Examples of women's institutions included: women's garages, cafes, land-based women's communes, women's healthcare centers.

<sup>74</sup> Feminist activist and writer, Gloria Steinam, co-founded *Ms. Magazine* in 1972.

<sup>75</sup> Here, I allude to the formation of Olivia Records. As Lont writes, "with the exception of the short-lived Women's Music Network in New York City (1973-1976), this was the first collective attempt at an organization committed to the production, distribution, and promotion of women's music" (Lont 1992: 245). Earlier events in women's music included Maxine Feldman's "Angry Athis" (1969), a 45-rpm single with explicitly lesbian lyrics. Feldman is considered the first "out" lesbian artist. In 1973, Alix Dobkin, a lesbian separatist singer/guitarist formed a musical group,

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Lavender Jane, with flutist Kay Gardner and bass player Patches Attom. The album, *Lavender Jane Loves Women* followed (Lont 1992: 244).

<sup>76</sup> Udis-Kessler 1995:21.

<sup>77</sup> This single was by white performers of women-identified music, Cris Williamson and Meg Christian. The next album Olivia distributed was Meg Christian's *I Know You Know*, in 1974. Holly Near started redwood Records in 1972.

<sup>78</sup> Olivia Records was founded by a group of "political lesbians." According to Roadwork founder Amy Horowitz a "political lesbian" was a woman who was probably involved with women sexually, but more importantly, chose women on the basis on which they did everything - performers, producers and women committed to supporting women in every way, politically, socially and financially" (recounted in Reagon 1993). Reagon writes: "Having been nurtured and reborn through the rich sands of Black Nationalism, I understood this as a radical movement..." (Reagon 1993:32).

<sup>79</sup> Many record stores no longer have a "women's music" section.

<sup>80</sup> The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, for example, started in 1976 (Lont 1992:246).

<sup>81</sup> The text of the Equal Rights Amendment is as follows:

Section 1 Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

Section 2 The Congress shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article.

Section 3 This amendment shall take effect two years after the date of ratification. Source: *ERA* by Janet K. Boles. New York: Longman. 1979.

<sup>82</sup> See Christopher Waterman's *Juju: A Social History and Ethnography of an African Popular Music* where he refers to "the music itself" as "a classic example of scholarly animism" 1990:6.

<sup>83</sup> Interview, Deidre McCalla, November 1, 1995. "Women's music is a misnomer. There is no such thing as women's music when you can talk in terms of blues, classical, rock etc. What the term refers to is a network of people involved in promoting women and believing that women should have access to all aspects of the entertainment industry. The important thing is that it is a feminist cultural network."

<sup>84</sup> In addition, to women-only events, many women-identified musicians including those who participated in this study, also perform in gender-inclusive venues.

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<sup>85</sup> See Combahee River Collective Statement 1981; *This Bridge Called My Back, Nice Jewish Girls, All the Women are White, the Men are Black but some of us are Brave*; Pat Parker's *Movement in Black, Sister Outsider* by Audre Lorde.

<sup>86</sup> Giddings, citing Foner 1979.

<sup>87</sup> As Guy-Sheftall notes, writers of the statement were: Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith and Demita Frazier.

<sup>88</sup> Combahee River Collective: 1981.

<sup>89</sup> The collective's name "came from the guerrilla action conceptualized and led by Harriet Tubman on June 2, 1863, in the Port Royal region of South Carolina. This action freed more than 750 slaves and is the only military campaign in American history planned and led by a woman" (1995). Source: *Words of Fire*, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, editor. New York: The New Press (1995).

<sup>90</sup> Whereas mainstream feminist movement was concerned with securing a women's right to an abortion, women of color faced the contrasting situation of sterilization abuse. The mainstream women's movement was curiously silent about this form of abuse in the area of reproductive rights. The Collective became a study group after experiencing some internal discord. The division was characterized initially as a lesbian-straight split. It was later determined to be the result of a conflict of interest between those who wanted the group to retain its focus on political work and those who were hoping for more of a support group to provide personal support.

<sup>91</sup> In the Introduction to *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983), editor Barbara Smith details examples of some of the more overtly feminist organizing that was being carried out by women of color at the time. Black feminist "cultural work" began to flourish during the late 1970s (Smith 1983:xxxix).

<sup>92</sup> Lont 1992 makes this suggestion.

<sup>93</sup> Reagon credits folklorist, Dr. Amy Horowitz, with being the "bridge" between Sweet Honey and west coast women's music producers; members of SHIR at that time included: Reagon, Evelyn Maria Harris, Laura Sharp, and Yasmeen Williams (1993:32).

<sup>94</sup> Throughout the compilation of essays, SHIR is referred to as "her" or "she."

<sup>95</sup> Sweet Honey debuted this song, spring of 1977.

<sup>96</sup> Sweet Honey produced their first recording in autumn of 1976. Title: *Sweet Honey in the Rock*, Flying Fish Records. They performed at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival in 1977.

<sup>97</sup> Reagon illustrates these points with a story about how she came to compose "Joan Little" and with a recounting of a conversation with a white woman that underscored feminism's concerns with the preoccupation of middle class white women. Joan Little was arrested on a burglary

conspiracy charge in 1975. "During a forced rape by her jailer, she managed to take his knife, kill him and escape." Writes Reagon, "North Carolina put out a dead-or-alive warrant on her head" (Reagon 1993:29).

<sup>98</sup> Reagon writes that "Joan Little" was the first song of SHIR to be played on the radio. She observes "it was on a news broadcast. That should have given me some clues about how we would fare on Top 40 Black radio" (1993).

<sup>99</sup> SHIR would go on to adopt a practice of honoring heroines of black history through song. This practice would be emulated by other black women's a cappella ensembles including In Process..., discussed elsewhere in this study. Reagon, for example, composed "We Who Believe in Freedom" as a tribute to civil rights activist Ella Baker, while the life and work of civil rights leader, Fannie Lou Hamer, inspired the penning of a song named after this important activist.

<sup>100</sup> Smith 1983:xxxviii.

<sup>101</sup> Just some of the artists who performed at *Sisterfire* included: Elizabeth Cotton, Alice Portnoy, poet, June Jordan, Toshi Reagon, Tracy Chapman, The Moving Star Hall Singers, Lillian Allen, lesbian comedienne Kate Clinton, Asian American Dance Theater (Horowitz 1993:193).

<sup>102</sup> I do not suggest that if blacks are represented textually, then they need not actually participate and thus leave the status quo unchallenged.

<sup>103</sup> Gilroy, p. 173 *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987).

<sup>104</sup> James Farmer, head and founder of CORE, conceived the Freedom Rides. These rides were designed to challenge the continued segregation of interstate transportation facilities throughout the South (Giddings 1984:279). On Sept. 22, 1961 the Interstate Commerce Commission banned racial discrimination in interstate buses and facilities. Giddings discusses the critical role that black women, SNCC members Diane Nash and Ruby Doris Smith, played in the Freedom Rides. Along with SNCC students Charles Sherrod and Charles Jones, they served thirty days in jail and came to be known as the Rock Hill Four. SNCC developed a new strategy in Rock Hill, South Carolina called "jail, no bail." (1984:278). Though the students sustained considerable hardship, "their tenacity showed the potential effectiveness of the 'jail, no bail' strategy." (279).

<sup>105</sup> Giddings points out that civil rights leader Ella Baker is responsible for recognizing that the student sit-in movement which spread throughout the South and touched northern cities as well, needed to be coordinated. Baker suggested that the students found their own organization (1984:275).

<sup>106</sup> Gilroy (1993b:173) citing Evans 1980.

<sup>107</sup> The latter had been adopted by members of the Food and Tobacco Workers Union in the 1940s and was first sung in Charleston, South Carolina.

<sup>108</sup> The Albany action was a protest in response to a bus station's failure to comply with the September 1961 anti-discrimination interstate transportation ruling,

<sup>109</sup> Giddings, 1984 p. 282.

<sup>110</sup> Gilroy (1993b: 173) citing Piven and Cloward, 1977. The Freedom Singers included Cordell H. Reagon, Rutha Mae Harris, Charles Neblett, Chico Neblett and Bernice Reagon (Reagon 1993).

<sup>111</sup> The Kingston Trio was comprised of three college students, Bob Shane, Nick Reynolds, and Dave Guard (Szarmary 1991:87).

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 93.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>115</sup> 1963 was the year of the Birmingham March and the televised police misconduct; it was also the year that civil rights activist, Medgar Evers was assassinated. The March on Washington was held on August 28, 1963.

<sup>116</sup> The March on Washington, an arbiter of hope for so many, was followed less than a month later by the Birmingham church bombing which killed four black girls attending Sunday school.

<sup>117</sup> Several black women with whom I spoke regarded Nina Simone as a significant figure in the genealogy of black women's participation in women-identified music. Recommended listening: Simone's "*Black Woman*."

<sup>118</sup> Szarmary 1991:100.

<sup>119</sup> This sentence only is Gilroy, p. 176.

<sup>120</sup> Gilroy 1987: 177.

<sup>121</sup> "Respect" was on the *I Never Loved a Man the Way I Loved You* album.

<sup>122</sup> Gilroy 1987: 180.

<sup>123</sup> Gilroy 1987:181.

## CHAPTER II

<sup>1</sup> Watkins interview, 11/29/95 in which she credits Linda Tillery with this response.

<sup>2</sup>*Bachata* refers to a complex of music that emerged from and belongs to a long-standing pan-Latin American tradition of guitar music, *musica de guitarra* (Hernandez 1995:5). There has been considerable debate about whether bachata is an event (a dance, for example) or a musical "genre." In the 1970s, as the music became consolidated as a musical style, it was named "bachata" not by the music industry and not by musicians, but by the middle and upper classes, whose purpose, Hernandez suggests, was to trivialize the music (1995:13).

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<sup>3</sup> Varied in origin, Gypsy *notak* are Hungarian language songs performed by Romungro. Definitions of *notak* are often casual and circular.

<sup>4</sup> See Garofalo's "Black Popular Music Crossing Over or Going Under?" in *Rock and Popular Music: Politics, Policies, Institutions* edited by Bennett, Frith, Grossberg, Shepherd and Turner. Here, Garofalo cites Hall 1985:110.

<sup>5</sup> By "raced body" Dhairyam refers to the bodies of people of color. In doing so, she does not deny that "whiteness" is also socially constructed.

<sup>6</sup> Franz Boas, *Anthropology and Modern Life*, 1928.

<sup>7</sup> Gaunt's data also includes interviews with black women who grew up in the suburbs. Most of the interviewees of Gaunt's study are college educated—at the time of the interviews, many were pursuing doctoral degrees—and identify as middle class. Double-dutch: two twirlers, 1 or more jumpers in the middle, two ropes twirled in opposite directions.

<sup>8</sup> Many of the performers discussed in this study are long-time feminist activists.

<sup>9</sup> According to Nero, "When the black militant Abdullah accused Lindy of being another example of how the white man has corrupted the black man and robbed him of his masculinity, Lindy responded, "Honey, I'm more man than you'll ever be and more woman than you'll ever get." In this case, a gay, black and admittedly queen identity is marked by use of dialect and attitude. To his credit, Nero states that the character of Lindy does not necessarily undermine and challenge the status quo.

<sup>10</sup> The trade publication, *HotWire: Journal of Women's Music and Culture*, Chicago, Illinois is a notable exception. It might also be noted that Southern (1997) includes brief mention of Sweet Honey in the Rock; Post (1997) includes interviews with a two black women-identified musicians. Bonnie Morris' *Eden Built by Eves: The Culture of Women's Music Festivals* (1999) is an invaluable compilation on women's music festivals.

<sup>11</sup> Victoria Nogle's study (1984) is a rhetorical criticism of women's music and the "lesbianfeminist" movement. University of Nebraska, Speech Communication.

<sup>12</sup>(personal communication). See also "Midwife to the Culture: How Wire" in Kate Brandt, ed., *Happy Endings: Lesbian Writers Talk About Their Lives and Work*.

<sup>13</sup> According to music consumers with whom I talked, Nightstage performance is considered the most prestigious. Many festigoers related that they would forego day concerts but definitely attend nightstage to get their "money's worth."

<sup>14</sup> Hall, Pam. "I Am Pam Hall, Fifth Generation Dyke" in *Lesbian Culture, An Anthology*, edited by Penelope & Wolfe. (1993).

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<sup>15</sup> One wonders about the limits of the term “transnationalist.” Are black Americans living temporarily in Britain transnationals? What happens to Native Americans in this formulation? What relationships are illuminated or obscured by use of this term?

<sup>16</sup> One is led to query why the French appellation for this ensemble, as opposed to let’s say, Italian, Arabic, - or Croation, for that matter.

<sup>17</sup> I have edited Bradby’s unedited transcript since I am illustrating a different point than she.

<sup>18</sup> Writes Eder: “The NWMF is the oldest of a number of women’s music festivals held across the United States. It was first held in 1974 on the campus of the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. The festival was the successor of a women’s Folk Festival, which was organized in 1973 by singer Kristin Lems and other students in response to the exclusion of women from another campus folk festival. Because of the success of the folk festival, its organizers decided to arrange a National Women’s Music Festival the following year for the purpose of overcoming the underrepresentation of women in the music industry and creating an alternative women’s culture. The festival was then held annually in Champaign until 1981, when obstacles created by the University of Illinois prevented the festival from being held. In 1982, the festival was revived by a group of women in Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana, and moved to Bloomington.” (from “NWMF History” in 1989 NWMF program). Eder:513. The NWMF was held in Bloomington until 1997 when it moved to Muncie, Indiana.

<sup>19</sup> “Tri-sexuality” refers to cultural practices which conceive of three genders.

<sup>20</sup> See David Halperin’s *Saint Foucault* 1995:113.

<sup>21</sup> Benetton is a clothing store based in England that markets its clothing line to (thin) young adults. Advertisements are characterized by a melange of models of various ethnicities and often, of indeterminate sex.

<sup>22</sup> Michelle Wallace: “Modernism, Postmodernism and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture.” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Sneja Gunew engage in a parallel discussion in terms of “third world woman” identity in “Questions of Muliculturalism” in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During. London: Routledge. 1993.

<sup>23</sup> Jacobs found a picture of white American real estate salesmen “playing Indian” in Jere Van Dyk’s “Amazon: South America’s River Road.” *National Geographic* 187(2):3-39 1995. In support of studies of such ethnotourism she cites Sharon W. Tiffany and Kathleen J. Adams, “Anthropology’s Fierce Yanomami: Narratives of Sexual Politics in the Amazon.” *NWSA Journal* 6(2):169-95 (1994).

<sup>24</sup> Barbara Smith, p. 127 in “The Truth That Never Hurts” in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Chandra Mohanty, editor.

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<sup>25</sup> I use the term “black liberatory struggle” in the sense that bell hooks and others use the term. It refers not only to the civil rights and black power movements, but to successive struggles for black self-determination since the mid 1970s. It refers as well to black freedom struggles that took place around the world prior to the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

<sup>26</sup> “Queer” is “the shortest term for indicating the collectivity of marginalized consensual sexualities: lesbian, gay male, bisexual, transgendered, transvestite, and specific erotic networks such as those involving sadomasochism (1997:459).

<sup>27</sup> ACT-UP has chapters in various cities in the U.S.

<sup>28</sup> I argue that the enactment of sexuality of black lesbians is performed against a backdrop of heavy sexualization, so that this aspect of Butler’s statement does not ring true for black women.

<sup>29</sup> This suggestion is one I have borrowed from Stuart Hall’s citing Stallybrass and White’s *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* 1986:3. Cornell University Press.

<sup>30</sup> See Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

<sup>31</sup> I met Rochelle Larsen, (pseudonym) at the West Coast Women’s Music and Comedy Festival, Summer 1995.

<sup>32</sup> Some women have overlapping roles.

<sup>33</sup> Something approaching a geographically based ethnography might have been possible; for instance, a study of participation in women-identified music by black women of the Bay area—over perhaps a year’s time.

<sup>34</sup> For this quote, Ingram credits, M.C. Boyer (1994:3) *City of Collective Memory: Its historical imagery and architectural entertainments*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

<sup>35</sup> The Lilith Fair is an example of a mainstream women’s festival that has been influenced by the realm of women’s music festivals discussed in this study.

<sup>36</sup> The Northampton Lesbian Festival had its last “run” summer, 1995.

<sup>37</sup> I have intentionally phrased this sentence in the passive voice as the number of times I approached women with the survey, balances with the number of times I left brochures on a table for festigoers to fill out at their convenience.

<sup>38</sup> This “advertisement” ran for two issues and yielded less than five responses. *Lesbian Connection* was founded in 1974. Though initially circulated for free, eventually the publishers were forced to request a small payment “from those who can.” Now the publishers state that the newsletter is “free to lesbians.” All others are asked to make a \$27 donation.

<sup>39</sup> Linda Tillery interview, November 27, 1995. The Ward Singers consisted of Clara Ward (1924-73), her mother, Gertrude and her sister, Willa. Later, the group expanded to include Marion Williams and Henrietta Waddy, at which time they performed under the name of the

Famous Ward Singers. The Caravans of Chicago, referenced by Tillery in the epigraph, was a mixed gender group.

<sup>40</sup> I make the suggestion of “blacks as the subject of women-identified music” with a nod to Teresa de Lauretis’ discussion of “women as the subject of feminism.” Judith Butler and many others, follow up on this discussion. de Lauretis articulates her argument in *Technologies of Gender*.

<sup>41</sup> I am indebted to Joan M. Braxton and Andree N. McLaughlin, editors, *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afra-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance* for the term “Afra-American,” a nod to the feminization of an ending derived from the romance languages.

<sup>42</sup> Southern 1997:481.

<sup>43</sup> Here, I am not suggesting SHIR is a “gospel group” though they were awarded “Best Gospel Album recognition in 1985 for *Feel Something Drawing Me On* (Flying Fish Records). They also received “Best Gospel” recognition at the First Wammies Awards in 1987.

<sup>44</sup> Southern 1997:482.

<sup>45</sup> From “This Infinity of Conscious Pain” in *All the Blacks are Men, the Women are White, but Some of Us are Brave*.

<sup>46</sup> I did not ask Tillery about this reference though undoubtedly, given her status in the black lesbian community nationally and her involvement with Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press writers over the years, she is quite familiar with several “kitchen table” institutions. Whether Tillery meant to evoke both traditional black and black feminist histories at once, is another matter.

<sup>47</sup> Hurtado 1989.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Kay Wilson, Michigan 1995.

<sup>49</sup> Indeed most people, black and white, men and women, when told the subject of my research was black performers of wim heard black women performers instead.

<sup>50</sup> The queer liberation movement follows on the heels of the earlier gay/lesbian liberation movement of the 1970s.

<sup>51</sup> Michelle Lancaster interview.

<sup>52</sup> National Women’s Music Festival, Bloomington, Indiana.

<sup>53</sup> Rogers, interview, fall 1992.

<sup>54</sup> Singers referenced include: Joan Armatrading, Chaka Khan, Mary J. Blige, Patti LaBelle, Ru Paul (female impersonator), tlc – a vocal group, the rapper, MC Lyte, swv (Sisters with Voices), Anita Baker, Donna Ferris (or Donna Summers?), and Diana Ross.

<sup>55</sup> Pamela Rogers interview, fall, 1992.

<sup>56</sup> To illustrate, one of the announced themes of the 1998 SEM conference was Ethnomusicologists and the Field.

<sup>57</sup> AAA Newsletter, September 1998, p. 19-20; Rebecca Joseph, Contributing Editor.

<sup>58</sup> I reference to Henry Kingsbury and his work with a community of classical musicians, *Music, Talent, and Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press (1988).

### CHAPTER III

<sup>1</sup> Black singer/songwriter, Deidre McCalla, Olivia recording artist.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Pam Rogers.

<sup>3</sup> Tonia Bryan, "In Tha Life In Tha Closet," *Da Juice! A black lesbian thang*. Toronto 1995:69.

<sup>4</sup> Fuss 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Sharon Washington, interview December 4, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Sandra Washington interview.

<sup>7</sup> An example of a commercial film that privileges one set of markers of blackness over other possible combinations can be found in a comparison of the subtexts of John Singleton's *Boyz in the Hood*, (1991) and *Waiting to Exhale*, (1995) (adapted from the book of the same name by Terry MacMillan) and directed by Forest Whitaker. The former features what was, up until a few years ago, a popular cinematic (and rap video) narrative: three young, heterosexual black men with contrasting strategies for negotiating survival in a black community, where cards of hopelessness and violence are dealt more frequently than cards of hope and possibility. *Waiting to Exhale* concerns the friendships of four, upwardly-mobile, heterosexual black women living in the southwest and their search for happiness through romantic love. In numerous commentaries following the release of these films, Black male "hood" symbolism and representation as projected in "Boyz" became globalized as "black." *Waiting*, in contrast, was glossed and marginalized as a "chick" film and ignored as a metacommentary on black culture. In contrast, the contested terrain for black authenticity, the use of the signifier "chick" and its association as a dismissive reference for white women, moved *Waiting* one step farther from "blackness." Rightfully, critics charged that by the same token, *Waiting* was hailed by others as a black women's film, when in fact the range of its characters' backgrounds in terms of class and sexual orientation is limited. What I found more disturbing about the discourse that accompanied critiques of both films, was the failure of critics to address the complex interaction of class, construction of heterosexuality, location, despair, despair resistance, and race as represented in the films. *Boyz in the Hood* is an

example of a specific musical style (rap), location, and gendered experience being read as a sign of black racial authenticity.

<sup>8</sup> This makes sense given the migrations of blacks from the South to the North between 1910 and 1970. During this time, six and a half million blacks moved. Writes Nicholas Lemann, "In 1970, when the migration ended, black America was only half Southern, and less than a quarter rural." (*The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991:6).

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Mary Watkins.

<sup>10</sup> Interview, Sharon Washington.

<sup>11</sup> Recent live performances by Chapman have incorporated more r&b elements into her musical style.

<sup>12</sup> McCalla's *Don't Doubt It* received a New York Music Award nomination for Best Independent Album and Best Song on an Independent Album ("This Part of the World" by Ilene Weiss). In 1988, *With a Little Luck* was also nominated for Best Independent Album and Best Vocalist on an Independent Label. McCalla recorded both albums with Olivia Records. Though *With a Little Luck* did not win in New York, in an interview with Toni Armstrong, Jr., McCalla noted that it received the San Francisco Cable Car Award, "which is a recognition for contributions to the lesbian and gay community" (McCalla interview by Armstrong 1988:5).

<sup>13</sup> McCalla interview, November 1, 1995.

<sup>14</sup> McCalla interview.

<sup>15</sup> As Michael Dyson points out, arguments in regard to authenticity do not necessarily divide along "racial" lines. The university professor, ordained minister and public intellectual provides by way of example, Vanilla Ice who was roundly criticized within hip-hop circles because of his attempts to "sound black." In contrast, Dyson notes, white hip hop groups such as Third Base and House of Pain "have been enthusiastically embraced because of their 'legitimate' sounds and themes."

<sup>16</sup> I am not the first to point out the compulsory nature of white privilege; Butler takes up the compulsory nature of white identity (1993b); others (Roedigger 1998; hooks 1992b; Frankenberg 1997) investigate it as well.

<sup>17</sup> Jones performed first under the name of Matilda S. Joyner and then later as Madame M. Sissieretta Jones.

<sup>18</sup> Another example of this phenomenon was soprano Annie Pindell (ca. 1834-1901) who was called the "Black Nightingale," a reference to white soprano Jenny Lind, the "Swedish Nightingale" (Southern 1997:252).

- <sup>19</sup> Gilroy in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987: 173) cites Piven and Cloward, 1977.
- <sup>20</sup> Original members of Sweet Honey in the Rock: Bernice Johnson Reagon, Carol Maillard, Louise Robinson, and Mie, who left the group near the end of summer, 1974. That same year, Evelyn Maria Harris joined the group. Dianaruthe Whaton, Ayodele Harrington and Rosie Lee Hooks joined as substitutes when Maillard left to pursue a theater job. (see: Reagon 1993:18)
- <sup>21</sup> *In Process...* and *Linda Tillery and the CHC* were founded well after SHIR was established, as were other a cappella black women's vocal groups cited in this study. An a cappella quintet not discussed in this dissertation is Sisterfriends, formed in 1991. All are current or former members of the MUSE, Cincinnati Women's Choir. Sisterfriends has worked with Linda Tillery, Ysaye Maria Barnwell, and Rachel Bagby (program booklet, National Women's Music Festival 1995).
- <sup>22</sup> Source: the ensemble's promotional materials.
- <sup>23</sup> The CHC has also worked with Dr. Ysaye Maria Barnwell of Sweet Honey in the Rock; Tillery credits Bernice Johnson Reagon with providing her with encouragement to pursue the founding of the group.
- <sup>24</sup> Lancaster is a member of *In-Process...*; Barnwell is a member of *Sweet Honey in the Rock*.
- <sup>25</sup> Lancaster has penned several tunes that are especially popular with black women audience members; one concerns the "joys" of black hair. Rogers interview, fall 1992.
- <sup>26</sup> This is true as of the time of this research, 1995-1996.
- <sup>27</sup> Lancaster interview. The black men's a cappella jazz group Take 6 include a track on one of their albums in which they signify on gospel quartet harmony and the style of African American spirituals.
- <sup>28</sup> Interview with Melanie DeMore, October 17, 1995.
- <sup>29</sup> *In Process...* (1990) membership included Pam Rogers, Michelle Lancaster, Carolyn Shuttlesworth, Paula Pree, Sharon Green, Lateefah Crosson, and Nketia Agyeman. Producer: Bernice Johnson Reagon.
- <sup>30</sup> Membership, Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir at the time of this research: Linda Tillery, vocals, percussion; Emma Jean Foster-Fiege, vocals; Rhonda Benin, vocals; Eloise Burrell, vocals; Rashida Oji, vocals, Melanie DeMore, vocals.
- <sup>31</sup> The spirituals were arranged by composer, Dr. Jacqueline Hairston of Oakland, California.
- <sup>32</sup> Only later, did the ensemble, consisting of eleven students acquire the name Fisk "Jubilee" Singers.
- <sup>33</sup> Both tendencies seem to be turning a corner now.
- <sup>34</sup> Lancaster interview.
- <sup>35</sup> Rhonda Benin, fall 1995.

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<sup>36</sup> Pamela Rogers interview.

<sup>37</sup> ML/PR interview.

<sup>38</sup> By positioning black women and the “politics of respectability” within a broader cultural discourse, I hope to bring insight to analyses of performances of “old African-American songs” by members of black women’s a cappella ensembles.

<sup>39</sup> Cited by Darlene Clark Hine, (1995:383). See: “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance.”

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Hine, 1995: 384.

<sup>42</sup> Hine, 1995: 385.

<sup>43</sup> Monson, 1995: 422.

<sup>44</sup> Readers have asked me to provide further details about the brothel and “how it worked.”

Unfortunately, I was privy only to informal discussions with festival attendees that ensued in its aftermath. I have no additional information.

<sup>45</sup> One wonders if a heterosexual dominated festival such as Woodstock or Newport would have a brothel.

<sup>46</sup> Montgomery is a pseudonym.

<sup>47</sup> Montgomery was one of the few performers of this study who I did not have an opportunity to observe in live performance. At the time of my fieldwork she was no longer performing. Montgomery and I conducted our interview over the phone.

<sup>48</sup> Stage talk.

<sup>49</sup> Lipsitz 1990.

<sup>50</sup> For example, “Boarder Babies,” a cut from the *In Process...* album.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Rashida Oji.

<sup>52</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, 1989.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 1.

<sup>54</sup> “Colours” is a cut from Yasmeen’s self-titled album.

<sup>55</sup> See Yasmeen essay in Reagon 1993.

<sup>56</sup> In 1996 Sweet Honey performed a song in Seattle entitled, “Run” which encourages women living with the threat of domestic violence to run to a shelter or to a friend.

<sup>57</sup> Interview, June Millington, Bodega, California, October 19, 1995; personal communication.

<sup>58</sup> Members of the ensemble: Barbara Higbie, Suki, Azinga.

<sup>59</sup> Well known examples of black artists covering tunes by white composers include: Aretha Franklin’s “Bridge over Troubled Waters” (Simon & Garfunkel); Coltrane, “My Favorite Things”

(Rogers & Hammerstein), Jimi Hendrix - The Star Spangled Banner, Whitney Houston "I'll Always Love you" (Dolly Parton).

<sup>60</sup> Radano observes that in *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940); reprint New York: Schocken Books, 1968). Du Bois acknowledges that his affinity with Africa is constructed.

<sup>61</sup> Agawu, 1984: 387. Agawu's work led me to the work of the philosopher, Hountondji.

<sup>62</sup> See *African Musicology: Current Trends, Volume 11. A Festschrift Presented to J.H. Kwabena Nketia*. Los Angeles: International Studies and Overseas Program 1992.

<sup>63</sup> The dialog on which this essay is based, preceded the publication of Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*.

<sup>64</sup> For sustained discussion in this regard see Ali 1989; Karenga 1993; Asante 1987.

<sup>65</sup> Gilroy is not the first to use the term "black Atlantic." Robert Ferris Thompson uses it in *Flash of the Spirit*, 1983.

<sup>66</sup> Hill related that "Oya's Song" is an instrumental version of Linda Thomas Jones' "Oya de," a song with text also. According to Hill, Jones is an African American drummer "very much involved in the Yoruba spiritual tradition."

<sup>67</sup> The DrumSong Institute is based in Brooklyn, New York.

<sup>68</sup> Hill interview, January 24, 1996.

<sup>69</sup> Ubaka Hill interview.

<sup>70</sup> "Four Percussionists" by Jennifer Trowbridge in *HotWire: Journal of Women's Music and Culture*, May 1989: 18. Nuraudafina Pili Abena took her name in 1980.

<sup>71</sup> Oji has since left the ensemble and resides in Hawaii. *Big, Big Woman*: Fabulous Records.

<sup>72</sup> Gilroy 1993:35.

<sup>73</sup> I make no attempt to discuss all songs by black performers of women-identified music with regard to the trope of South Africa or Africa in general.

<sup>74</sup> Denis-Constant Martin 1992:200.

<sup>75</sup> *In Process...* 1990. I wish to thank Judith Teicher for the information about "Senzennia."

<sup>76</sup> Liner notes – *In Process...* 1990.

<sup>77</sup> Vickie Randle is hailed by many wim fans as "having made it" since she performs nightly on the Jay Leno Show. The other musicians providing supporting vocals are: Annie Stocking, Claytoven Richardson, Larry Batiste, Teresa Trull. Drumming and other percussion: Paul van Wageningen, Ray Obiedo, Frankie Holder. *Understated*, 1987. Iceberg Records.

<sup>78</sup> Lillian Allen. *Conditions Critical*, Verse to Vinyl Records, 1987. Musicians: Billy Bryans/drums; Lauri Conger/keyboards, Dave Gray/guitar, Terry Lewis/bass; Nydia Liberty Mata/timbales, congas & percussion.

<sup>79</sup> Born in South Africa, Miriam Makeba became a professional dance-band singer in 1954. The South African government revoked her citizenship after she testified before the United Nations about apartheid in 1963. After her marriage to Black Panther leader, Stokeley Carmichael in 1968, she was exiled from the United States and went to Guinea.

<sup>80</sup> Formerly, The Mahotella Queens performed as essentially “back-up” singers in a four person configuration, Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens. Simon “Mahlathini” Nakbinde was the kingpin of the ghettos and uncontested master of mbaqanga, or more precisely of mqashiyo (Denis-Constant Martin 1992:1960).

<sup>81</sup> Pamela Rogers interview.

#### CHAPTER IV

<sup>1</sup> Transcript from a recording made at the North East Women’s Musical Retreat; Karen Williams, *OUTrageous*. 1993. Distributor: Ladyslipper. Karen Williams is a past president of AWMAC, the Association of Women’s Music and Culture.

<sup>2</sup> Recorded live at the North East Women’s Musical Retreat, attended predominantly by white women, the audience laughter seems tentative and nervous.

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to June Millington for allowing me to watch videotapes from her collection.

<sup>4</sup> Magnolia is a pseudonym for a women’s music record company.

<sup>5</sup> The complete phrase in Black English is to be “called out of one’s name.” To “call someone out” is to belittle or deride them in public.

<sup>6</sup> Interview, Cap Montgomery, 12/4/95.

<sup>7</sup> I did not seek independent confirmation of Montgomery’s report.

<sup>8</sup> See Tucker 1997 and hooks 1992b. The observation that music critics, academics, performers and other observers participate in gendered/racialized constructions of musicians is a general one. The phenomenon is not confined to black musicians.

<sup>9</sup> Rose, Phyllis, *Jazz Cleopatra: Josephine Baker in Her Time*. New York: Doubleday. (hooks p. 63).

<sup>10</sup> This concert was held, November 20, 1997, at the Seattle Opera House, Seattle, Washington. The pianist was JJ Penna.

<sup>11</sup> These last two sentences involve a play on leads presented in Butler’s essay.

<sup>12</sup> This phrase is adapted from MacKenzie’s discussion and overview, “Transexualism in America: A Tremor on the Fault Line of Gender.”

<sup>13</sup> Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. New York: The Crossing Press.

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- <sup>14</sup> The rhetoric of choice assumes an experience that is not shared by all lesbians, gays, and bisexuals.
- <sup>15</sup> This statement transposes Trinh T. Minh-Ha's (1996) "A new hearing may then be produced on our own terms that makes difference not an inherited attribute but a politics of articulation (or disarticulation)."
- <sup>16</sup> Michigan orientation program.
- <sup>17</sup> West Coast Women's Music and Comedy Festival, Yosemite.
- <sup>18</sup> See E. Ann Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock*, 1988: 102.
- <sup>19</sup> Lynn Thomas, "Pride and Education: Everyone's Job" in *HotWire: Journal of Women's Music and Culture*, January 1992:18. Thomas composed the anthem of the 1993 March on Washington for Gay & Lesbian Rights.
- <sup>20</sup> Interview with Lynn Thomas, April 1995.
- <sup>21</sup> Interview with Lynn Thomas.
- <sup>22</sup> See Barbara Smith (Mohanty 1991:123).
- <sup>23</sup> *Tongues Untied* has received numerous awards including "Outstanding Merit" and "Best Experimental Video" by the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame; "Best Performance" by the Atlanta Film Festival; and "Best Documentary" by the Berlin Film Festival.
- <sup>24</sup> Interview, Judith Casselberry.
- <sup>25</sup> In "Anzaldúa's Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza," Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano (1994) addresses this theme as well, through summarizing some of the major critiques by scholars of color (Mohanty 1991; Julien and Mercer 1988; Carby 1990) of the theorizing of "difference."
- <sup>26</sup> In the writing of some theorists, particularly those influenced by the British school, "colored" is spelled "coloured" which has been criticized too as removing the specifically American experience of race and racism from the term. See Dhairyam, and Holland for employment of the term "colored."
- <sup>27</sup> Today, my grandmother, age 92, uses "black" predominantly with infrequent references to "colored." I have never heard her use the Rev. Jesse Jackson's suggested, "African-American."
- <sup>28</sup> Highly recommended is director, Tim Reid's film, *When We Were Colored*. hooks discusses colored identity in *Bone Black* (1996).
- <sup>29</sup> See Rabinow in *Recapturing Anthropology* 1991:65. "For Hire: Resolutely Late Modern."
- <sup>30</sup> This is a pseudonym.
- <sup>31</sup> Charlane Jordan is a pseudonym.

## CHAPTER V

<sup>1</sup> I borrow the notion of “sexual style” from Lisa Walker.

<sup>2</sup> “Hound Dog” was penned by the songwriting team of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller in 1952.

<sup>3</sup> Garr (Garr 1992:3) states that Stoller recounted this observation for the Rolling Stone.

<sup>4</sup> Kyra Gaunt, unpublished dissertation, “*The Games Black Girls Play: Music, Body, and “Soul.”*” 1998, UMI. The University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.

<sup>5</sup> Walker makes this observation in terms of visibility; I add audibility to the equation. (see Walker 1993:868).

<sup>6</sup> Walker 1993: 867.

<sup>7</sup> See the introductory chapter’s “On the road to a women’s music festival.”

<sup>8</sup> I borrow this phrase from Christopher Waterman’s (1990) discussion of Yoruba identity formation and the tendency of many to read the present into the past.

<sup>9</sup> See Harrison’s *Black Pearls* for detailed discussions of vaudeville blues singers of the 1920s. The claiming of Alberta Hunter as a lesbian by lesbian music consumers after her long hiatus from performing speaks to an interesting phenomenon as well. It might be argued that older women are often claimed “as one of our own” by lesbian consumers once they no longer conform with traditional notions of femininity because of their age.

<sup>10</sup> Christina Winter, Letters, *On Our Backs*, March/April 1990:5 as cited by Martha Mockus 1994.

<sup>11</sup> Carly Rivers interview.

<sup>12</sup> Carly Rivers interview.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Toni Langfield.

<sup>14</sup> Nancy Yamamoto is a pseudonym.

<sup>15</sup> Carly Rivers interview.

<sup>16</sup> Interview, Linda Tillery.

<sup>17</sup> Morgan is a pseudonym. “African heritage” is an inclusive term referring to blacks of the diaspora.

<sup>18</sup> hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1996).

<sup>19</sup> Faderman 1991: 75. This advertisement is described similarly by numerous writers.

<sup>20</sup> Faderman cites the *Chicago Defender* as a source for this advertisement.

<sup>21</sup> “Who’s Conning Who?,” *Trouble and Strife: the Radical Feminist Magazine* (1992), No. 23; cited in Bradby (1993).

<sup>22</sup> Theresa Trull’s recording of “Prove it on me”; Saffire: The Uppity Blues Women is trio popular on the women-identified music scene. Members of Saffire: Gaye Adegbalola, Andrea Faye and

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Ann Rabson. Faderman makes a similar admission, p. 78 about the vaudeville blues singers as precursors for lesbian identity today affirmation today.

<sup>23</sup> Bradby 1993: 151.

<sup>24</sup> I do not mean to imply that a gay identity had emerged at this point. Perhaps this is an instance where "same-sex attraction" or even "homosexual" would be more accurate.

<sup>25</sup> Southern 1991: 374.

<sup>26</sup> Southern 1991: 373.

<sup>27</sup> Ida Cox (1896-1967) was referred to as the "Uncrowned Queen of the Blues" while Alberta Hunter's (1895-1984) was known as the "Prima Donna of Blues Singers" (Southern 1997:373). Ethel Waters (1896-1977) after having come to New York in 1919, established herself as one of Harlem's leading entertainers and was billed as "Sweet Mama Stringbean."

<sup>28</sup> Chauncey 1994:434. In part, Chauncey draws on the work of Eric Garber.

<sup>29</sup> Chauncey 1994:245.

<sup>30</sup> I have added rape to this list to reflect the sexual violence perpetuated systematically upon black women during this period. See Hine 1989.

<sup>31</sup> Faderman 1991:68.

<sup>32</sup> Faderman, p. 75.

<sup>33</sup> Faderman, p. 74.

<sup>34</sup> One wonders about Chauncey's reference to "ad-libbing" since a lot of what appears to be "ad-libbed" in performance is actually rehearsed, such as "rehearsed improvisation."

<sup>35</sup> Faderman (1991:322) cites numerous sources for this information.

<sup>36</sup> Faderman (1991:72) writes that Bentley was reportedly "dressed in a tuxedo, [and that she] announced her homosexuality by marrying a woman in a New Jersey civil ceremony." She does not offer the citation for this reference.

<sup>37</sup> Harrison 1988:23 cites Ronald Foreman, *Jazz and Race Records, 1920-1932: Their Origins and Their Significance for the Record Industry and Society* (Ph.d. diss., University of Illinois, 1968), 24.

<sup>38</sup> Smith boasted a coterie of male lovers, including her husband, Jack Gee.

<sup>39</sup> The references to Hunter and Waters are from Southern 1997:373 and 371 respectively.

<sup>40</sup> Hunter, for example, rose to prominence in the more glamorous setting of the cabarets, which enjoyed a different constituency than that of the "black masses" of the South. Harrison. 1988:11.

<sup>41</sup> Harrison 1988: 12.

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- <sup>42</sup> Cited by Davis 1998: 153. This passage comes from Van Vechten, p. 165-166. In: *"Keep A-Inchin' Along": Selected Writings of Carl Van Vechten About Black Art and Letters*. Edited by Bruce Kellner. Westport, Conn: Greenwood, 1979.
- <sup>43</sup> National Women's Music Festival held in Bloomington, Indiana.
- <sup>44</sup> From *OUTrageous*, an album by Karen Williams.
- <sup>45</sup> Williams refers to a well known white musician on the wim circuit. For discussion of butch identity by white women who identify as butch, see Kennedy & Davis' *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (1993).
- <sup>46</sup> Cheryl Clarke 1982. *Narratives: Poems in the Tradition of Black Women*. New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press. Barbara Smith cites Clarke's poem in "The Truth That Never Hurts" (Mohanty 1991:107).
- <sup>47</sup> For example, reportedly black actress Jada Pickett Smith was denied the lesbian (butch) role of Cleo in *Set It Off*, because she was "too pretty" and "too little."
- <sup>48</sup> Many women-identified women participate in this widely circulated "truth" in lesbian-feminist communities.
- <sup>49</sup> J.U.C.A. is the acronym for Joy, Creativity, Understanding, Abundance.
- <sup>50</sup> "Hazel" was written by Debro Kenya McGee, another black performer/composer and member of Casselberry's band.
- <sup>51</sup> Interview with Judith Casselberry.
- <sup>52</sup> "For the first time" is echoed by the back-up singers.
- <sup>53</sup> Interview with Judith Casselberry.
- <sup>54</sup> Cited in Mockus 1994:268. "Pop Goes Queer" *The Advocate* 587 (8 October 1991:37). "Yes I am" is the title of a Melissa Etheridge recording. Singer, k.d. lang received heavy criticism for adopting a stance, early in her career, of wanting to keep her personal life separate from her public career as a performer.
- <sup>55</sup> Interview with Emma Jean Foster-Fiege.
- <sup>56</sup> Smith 1986.
- <sup>57</sup> This concert was held in Lisner Auditorium, The George Washington University in 1992.
- <sup>58</sup> Interview with Cap Montgomery
- <sup>59</sup> Interview with Cap Montgomery.
- <sup>60</sup> Interview, Sandra Washington.
- <sup>61</sup> "Clarisse" is a pseudonym.
- <sup>62</sup> Interview with Sharon Washington.

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- <sup>63</sup> See Julia Penelope's "Class and Consciousness" in *Out of the Class Closet: Lesbians Speak* (1994) for a discussion of lesbian identity, race (including skin color privilege), social and economic class.
- <sup>64</sup> An obvious anecdotal example is that though women most often do the cooking in the home, the top professional chefs in the U.S. are predominantly male.
- <sup>65</sup> Chauncey 1994:263.
- <sup>66</sup> *Harvest of Seven Years*, made in 1991, includes videoclips of performances from 1983-1990.
- <sup>67</sup> Garr 1992: 152.
- <sup>68</sup> Chauncey 1994:351.
- <sup>69</sup> Here, I spoke with a performer interviewed for this study.
- <sup>70</sup> The other members of BETTY are Amy Ziff (vocals, cello, keyboard) and Elizabeth Ziff (vocals, keyboard, programming).
- <sup>71</sup> White trumpet player, Ellen Seeling, *HotWire: Journal of Women's Music and Culture*, July 1988:18.
- <sup>72</sup> Pseudonym of the black performer of wim.
- <sup>73</sup> Reagon played a solo set at Michigan 1995; at Northampton 1995, she was a sideman in Casselberry's J.U.C.A.
- <sup>74</sup> A more polite (?) term than "cock-rock." Cock rock is mentioned by John Sheperd in "Music and Male Hegemony" in Leppert & McClary (eds.) *Music and Society*. Cambridge: C.U.P., 1987.
- <sup>75</sup> One study (Zervoudakes and Tanur 1994) on instrument selection and gender stereotyping notes the prevalence of young women playing historically "male" instruments (e.g., bassoon, saxophone, French horn, trumpet, trombone, euphonium, tuba, contrabass, percussion) as compared to historically "female" instruments (e.g., flute, oboe, clarinet, violin, viola).
- <sup>76</sup> Interview with Ubaka Hill. Hill is also a visual artist.
- <sup>77</sup> Interview with Jacque Jones (a pseudonym), ethnomusicology student and formerly a member of *Dancing on the Crevasse*, Oakland, California, November 1995.
- <sup>78</sup> Lee Cronbach (UCLA) explores African American drumming circles with particular attention to the symbolic meaning of the conga drum, in "Drum Circles and Love-Ins: African-American Hand Drumming in North American Popular Culture," delivered at the Society for Ethnomusicology Northwest Chapter meeting, March 2, 1996, University of Oregon. Cronbach suggests that the fact that the conga signified the essence of African culture made it an important part of the Black nationalist side of bebop as well as a symbol of Third world "Edenic" living for

the beat generation. He concludes that drum circles in the U.S. today are associated either with black cultural nationalism and/or with the "love-in" ideology of the 1960s.

<sup>79</sup> Here, Jones globalizes lesbians' experiences of masculine and feminine identification. Certainly a lesbian who identifies as 'femme' may worry about not being "feminine" enough as might a butch-identified woman who seeks to pass as femme if necessary. See Tracy Morgan's discussion, "Butch-Femme and the Politics of Identity" in *Sister, Sexperts, Queers: Beyond the Lesbian Nation* 1989. New York: Penguin Books.

<sup>80</sup> "Cleo" is played by Queen Latifah. It might be argued that *Set It Off* more successfully than other black character films incorporates sexual difference into its narrative. The film's gratuitously violent ending - where Cleo, driven to despair is murdered by police as she has attempted to murder, further reinscribes essentialism regarding black lesbians. I was heartened to see that Cleo's girlfriend however, was depicted as shedding a few tears upon learning of her lover's death. Unfortunately, Cleo's lover was depicted in isolation and was not shown supported by family and friends.

<sup>81</sup> Groups such as Fanny, founded by June Millington, paved the way for contemporary women in rock who front bands, play guitar etc. Rock music however, remains remarkably closed to women as instrumentalists. Whether straight women are viewed as more masculine or feminine, they are protected somewhat by heterosexual privilege.

<sup>82</sup> At this point my questioning was with regard to white lesbians since they are by far, the majority of women at women's music festivals and also in the majority at informal drumming "jams" which are open to all women. This is to the consternation of some festival participants of color who I interviewed for this study.

<sup>83</sup> This balance depends on the context; in a music festival that is 92% lesbian/bi-sexual, the "balance" that heterosexual women can provide numbers wise, is limited.

<sup>84</sup> Ubaka Hill interview.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Lott, p. 50-51.

<sup>87</sup> Mary Watkins interview.

<sup>88</sup> Mary Watkins interview.

<sup>89</sup> Xavier Ray is a pseudonym as is the name of the band. Interview with Xavier Ray, 11/26/95 in Oakland, California.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with Xavier Ray.

<sup>91</sup> Southern 1997:251.

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<sup>92</sup> Another violin master was Jose (Joseph) White (1833-1920), a native of Cuba. Though he established a reputation in Europe, White eventually appeared with the Philharmonic in New York playing the Mendelssohn Concerto in E minor.

<sup>93</sup> Sandra Washington suggests that men can be in the back up band but that they can't be in the main act.

<sup>94</sup> Sandra Washington interview.

<sup>95</sup> Sandra Washington interview.

<sup>96</sup> Interview, Rachel Bagby.

## CHAPTER VI

<sup>1</sup> Wilson responded to a question about the future of black performers of women-identified music.

<sup>2</sup> Founders of this festival are Anne Smith and Joan Lawrence.

<sup>3</sup> The address for the e-mail discussion group for the academic study of women-identified music: wom-mus@listserv.no-fi.com.

<sup>4</sup> Interview, Judith Casselberry.

<sup>5</sup> Black vocalist and drag queen Sylvester, died of AIDS in 1988.

<sup>6</sup> Nor however, am I suggesting that they are figures in lesbian/gay culture "the same way."

<sup>7</sup> Here, I allude to bell hooks' *Talking Back: thinking black, thinking feminist* (1989).

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**APPENDIX A: Discography**

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- Allen, Lillian. Nothing But A Hero. Verse to Vinyl/Redwood Records, 1991, RR9202.
- Allen, Lillian. Conditions Critical. Redwood Records, 1987. RR8802.
- Allen, Lillian. Revolutionary Tea Party. Verse to Vinyl. 1985, VV 101C.
- Avery, Gwen. Live at the IMA. Fabulous Records.
- Bagby, Rachel. Full.Outta the Box, 1993. OTB-S107.
- Bagby, Rachel. Reach Across the Lines. Outta the Box, 1989. C-101.
- Casselberry-DuPree. City Down. Iceberg Records, 1987. Stereo Ice 125.
- Casselberry-DuPree. Hot Corn in the Fire. Ladyslipper, Inc., 1994, LR204CS.
- Casselberry-DuPree. Casselberry-DuPree. Shelion Productions.
- DeMore, Melanie. Share My Song. Redwood Records, 1992, RR9203.
- DeMore, Melanie. Come Follow Me. 1986.
- Hill, Ubaka. Shape Shifters. Ladyslipper, 1995, LR116CS.
- In Process...1990.
- McCalla, Deidre. Don't Doubt It. Olivia Records, 1985, LC 939.
- McCalla, Deidre. With a Little Luck. Olivia Records, 1987, OL953.
- McCalla, Deidre. Everyday Heroes & Heroines. Olivia Records, 1992, OL 965.
- Millington, June. One World, One Heart. Fabulous Records, 1988, FR202.
- Oji, Rashida. Big Big Woman. Fabulous Records, 1992, FAB404.
- Tillery, Linda. Secrets. 1985 Redwood Records, BLF 736.
- Tillery, Linda. Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir. Tuizer Music, BLH746, 1995.
- Tillery, Linda and the CHC. Front Porch Music. 1997.
- The Washington Sisters, Understated. Iceberg Records, 1987, ICE 221.
- The Washington Sisters, Take Two. SHSAWA Music, 1991, SHSA 222CS.
- Watkins, Mary. Something Moving On.
- Watkins, Mary. Spiritsong: Solo piano compositions. Redwood Records, 1985, RR-8506.
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**Compilations**

- Sisterfire. Redwood Records, 1985. RRC 8507.

**Appendix B: Women's Music Festivals cited**

Gulf Coast Womyn's Festival (GCWF)  
Camp Sister Spirit  
Ovett, MS  
Box 12-LC  
Ovett, MS 39464  
(601) 344-1411  
sisterspir@aol.com

National Women's Music Festival (NWMF)  
(held in Muncie, Indiana)  
P.O. Box 1427  
Dept. LC  
Indianapolis, IN 46206  
(317) 927-9355  
wia@indynet.com

Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MWMF)  
WWTMC  
P.O. Box 22  
Walhalla, MI 49458  
Phone: (616) 757-4766

Midwest Womyn's Autumnfest  
Athena Productions  
217 S. 2<sup>nd</sup> Street, #193  
DeKalb, IL 60115  
Phone (815) 748-5359

Northeast Women's Musical Retreat  
NEWMR, P.O. Box 597  
Branford, CT 06405  
Phone (860) 293-8026  
Email [NEWMR99@aol.com](mailto:NEWMR99@aol.com)

Northampton Lesbian Festival (last year of operation, 1995)

West Coast Women's Music and Comedy Festival (last year of operations, 1995)

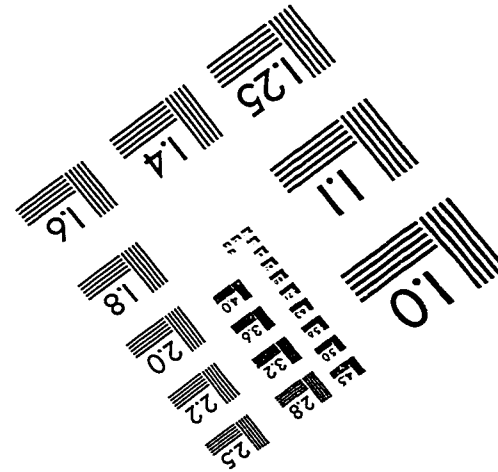
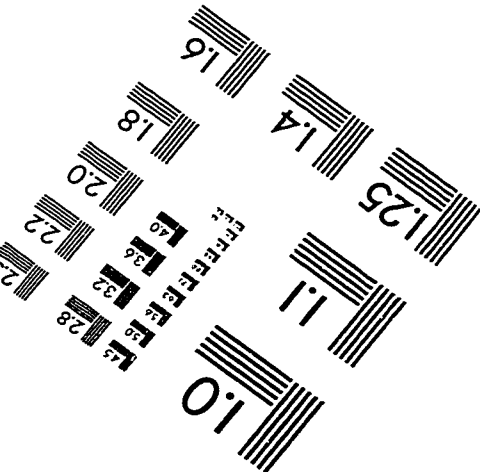
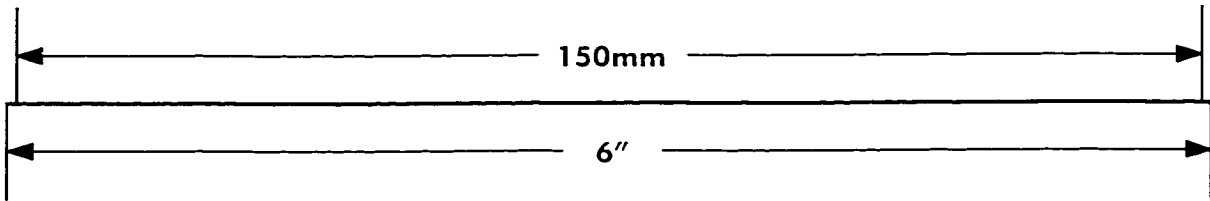
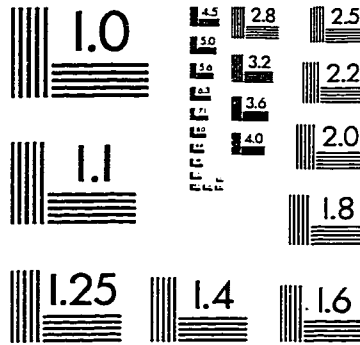
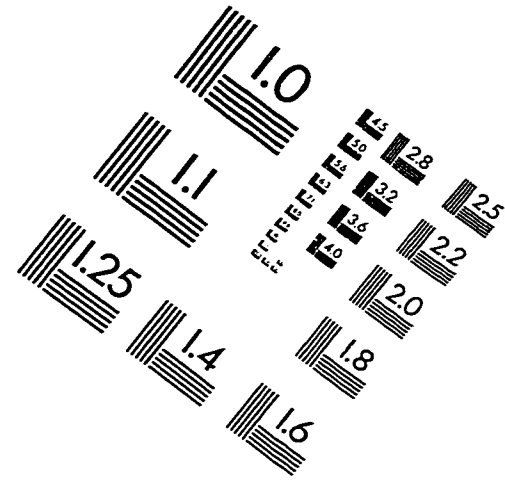
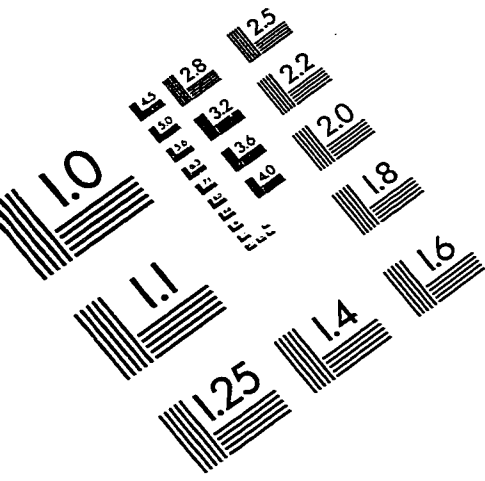
**APPENDIX C: INTERVIEWS**

- Allen, Lillian. Toronto, Ontario. December 12, 1995.  
Avery, Gwen. Oakland, California. December 4, 1995.  
Bagby, Rachel. Hanover, New Hampshire. January 6, 1996.  
Benin, Rhonda. Oakland, California. December 5, 1995.  
Brown, Renaye. Berkeley, California. December 4, 1995.  
Burrell, Eloise. Oakland, California. November 26, 1995.  
Casselberry, Judith. Peekskill, New York.  
Cooke, India. Oakland, California. November 26, 1995.  
DeMore, Melanie. Oakland, California, October 17, 1995.  
Foster-Fiege, Emma Jean. Berkeley, California. December 1, 1995.  
Freundlich, Susan. October 17, 1995.  
Hill, Ubaka. Brooklyn, New York. January 24, 1996.  
Lancaster, Michelle. Washington, D.C.  
McCalla, Deidre. Charleston, North Carolina. November 1, 1995.  
Millington, June. Bodega, California. October 19, 1995.  
Newcomer, Cynthia. Takoma Park, Maryland. September 10, 1992.  
Odetta. Washington, D.C. January 17, 1992.  
Oji, Rashida. Kaeau, Hawaii. November 11, 1995.  
Real, Ginny. Takoma Park, Maryland. Spring 1992.  
Rogers, Pamela, Washington, D.C.  
Stato, Joanne. Silver Spring, Maryland. Fall 1992.  
Thomas, Lynn. Overt, Mississippi. April 1994.  
Tillery, Linda. Oakland, California. November 27, 1995.  
Washington, Sandra. Lincoln, Nebraska. December 3, 1995.  
Washington, Sharon. Northampton, Massachusetts. December 4, 1995.  
Watkins, Mary. Oakland, California. November 29, 1995.

**VITA**

Eileen M. Hayes was born in Buffalo, New York. She attended the Peabody Conservatory of Music where she majored in piano. She graduated with honors from Temple University with a B.M. in piano and music history. Ms. Hayes obtained the M.A. in Folklore (Ethnomusicology) from Indiana University where her area of emphasis was African American music cultures. Her completion of doctoral studies at the University of Washington was facilitated by a Danforth-Compton Fellowship. Ms. Hayes expects to receive the Ph.D. in Music with an emphasis in ethnomusicology in the spring of 1999.

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