Hearing Together? A Listening Across the Lines of Tracy Chapman's *Crossroads*

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Abstract

In this cowritten piece, we draw on the first song of Tracy Chapman's *Crossroads*, her eponymous album released in 1989, to situate our reading of Tracy Chapman's life œuvre as a critical engagement with the concept-as-form that is the crossroads. We demonstrate that her work is imbued by an Africana-informed understanding of the crossroads. In its form and content, our piece wades through various significations of crossroads. Similarly, our authorial voices, both in the singular and in the plural, are met by the reader through the piece as they diverge and intersect, harmonize and solo, coax and interpellate. The notions of crossroads that we mobilize are directly informed by a Legba-Èṣù intellectualism, alongside LGBTQI and Black feminist thought. Both our realm and method of study is one that deliberately perceives "in the space between" Tracy Chapman's lyrics, music, and presence, a path into our respective lives. In the act of writing, we uncover this untold text, composed of these lifelines, and account for how Chapman's work has affected our life choices, research, and relationship to each other as scholars-in-care.

Maybe together we can get somewhere
Any place is better
—Tracy Chapman, "Fast Car"

This article-essay is inspired by *FRAME*'s invitation to reflect on how literature may challenge, question, or transcend the erasure of marginalized voices and perspectives.[1] What can be gained in naming a reflection on the challenges literature poses to these systemic deletions as an act of "reading between the lines?" If any literary criticism amounts to reading between the lines, then what would make our kind of literary criticism different? How do we repurpose literary criticism? How does one turn away from critique for critique's sake and choose to focus instead on identifying literary antidotes to the blotting out of the marginalized? To answer these questions, we turn to the art of singer-songwriter Tracy Chapman, and more specifically, to the evocative magic of Chapman's lyrics. In this article-essay, we attempt to read Chapman's rebuttal of the silencing of marginalized voices that is lodged within the depths of her work, but also in the interstices that serve her listeners, in her lyrics, her performances, and her life as it has been told. In particular, we are inspired by the beginning of Chapman's song "Telling Stories":

> There is fiction in the space between
> The lines on your page of memories
> Write it down but it doesn't mean
> You're not just telling stories. ("Telling Stories")

The mark of a great song-lyricist lies in their ability to evoke an entire world within the impossibly terse word limit that constitutes a song's lyrics. The world evoked by the lyricist with a short assemblage of words as

1 This article is dedicated to Cécile Accilien, Kaiama L. Glover, Régine Michelle Jean-Charles, Valerie Orlando, Gloria Wekker, Daphne Brooks, and Derne Darelle Moutoula Niengou. We thank Isolde Kors at Universiteit Utrecht and April Mann at University of Miami in Florida, as well as the Critical Writers Group (Sarah Budasz, Quinsy Gario, Nosa Imaghodo, Niall Martin, Alana Osbourne, and Michael Thomas), and peer reviewers for their excellent feedback.

simple as these "There is fiction in the space between/The lines on your page of memories," isn't fully fleshed out. Instead, this imagined unspoken text, that bursts from Chapman's sung lyric into the listener's ear-and-mind, constitutes a world that lives in the imagination of the listener. Unlike the lyric that evoked it, this world is not fully defined while it is perceivable, is not fully readable-and-audible. It sits somewhere in this space-between the lyric itself and the world it gestures to. Because every listener is both different and similar, as is any given individual listener from one day to the next, the inaudible "text" of the space-between varies indefinitely while maintaining its consistent echoing qualities.

Apart from showing the magic of Chapman's craft, the beginning of "Telling Stories" also displays her decades-long engagement with the imaginary of *the crossroads*. We situate this imaginary both in her music—*Crossroads* (1998) is the title of Chapman's second album and the title of the album's opening track—but also in her career trajectory, and in our relationship to her work as listeners. Specifically, in this article-essay, we turn to the meaning Chapman's engagement with the imaginary of the crossroads has held for each of us as Haitianists, as Chapman fans, as feminists and intellectuals, and as people whose world-making commitments have both resonated with and been challenged by Chapman's oeuvre. As we wade through the untold story of the meaning behind her music and through the magic of her presence in our lives, varied definitions of the word crossroads guide our reflection upon Chapman's ethical work. While it is usually iterated as a plural in English, 'crossroads' can function syntactically both as a singular or collective noun. A crossroads can designate "a road that crosses a main road or runs cross country between main roads" and a "place of intersection of two or more roads," but it can also designate "a central meeting place." Metaphorically speaking, the crossroads refers to "a crucial point especially where a decision must be made" ("crossroads").

Tracy Chapman's trajectory from the moment she landed on the popular music scene in the late 1980s, defies all the logics of the record industry of her time and challenges the unstated but very much

enforced rulebook of women's modes of access to popular success in the music industry. This challenge to the standard success narrative that premissed most women musicians' careers is especially striking when considering that she never wavered from a presentation that defied the rigid gendered/sexuality/body standards that regimented women's access to fame in the late eighties and sold 44 million copies despite it. But the most astounding way in which her trajectory dramatically differs from her peers is that from 1989 on—that is to say, one year into her career as a recording artist and starting with the release of her second album *Crossroads*—Chapman durably exited any form of promotional labor such as giving interviews or, later on, content creation (Chapman does not participate in social media of any kind). Similarly, Chapman has strictly avoided engaging in any fame-related activities, only finding her extra-musical life discussed in the press through other people's indiscretions (See Alice Walker's repeated public comments on their decades-old romantic relationship, as recently as in 2023).

In this piece, we refer to Chapman's approach to the music industry as a practice and ethics of 'reluctance.' This praxis that effectively circumvents the vast majority of the promotional labor expected from popular music artists, aside from the production of her albums and the corresponding music videos and photoshoots, is almost unparalleled for an artist of her stature, with the exception of UK artist Sade Adu who imposed her refusal to participate in extra-musical efforts of any kind from her very first album. Chapman developed this praxis of reluctance in her formative years at Tufts University, growing confidence as a musician and scholar as she engaged in the radical politics of Black liberation and lesbian feminist worldmaking of the time, honing her craft within the alternative music industry created by the Women's Music Movement. This is corroborated by a recent article and podcast, in which Ann-Derrick Gaillot re-narrates Chapman's career and significance by situating her oeuvre in LGBTQI and Black feminist culture in particular.

However, Chapman's early career and her status as a seasoned musician with a strong local and national following before she signed

her record deal in 1988 is largely excised from most mainstream narratives on the artist. Instead, the overwhelming majority of these accounts describe a somewhat stereotypical 'rags to riches journey-to-stardom' myth, in which Chapman was 'plucked out' of the stage of a small Massachusetts college town café and rescued from abject anonymity by her manager/discoverer to be catapulted into international stardom (Pond 7). Whether it is music journalist Steve Pond's 1988 feature story about Chapman in *Rolling Stones*, his 2024 hour-long conversation about Chapman's music with *New York Times* pop music critic Jon Caramanica, or the very fact that Luke Combs, "a giant of country music" (Freeman), re-recorded Chapman's 1988 "Fast Car" to win four Grammys in 2024, few pundits of the music industry are interested in readings that honor Chapman "on her own terms" (Pond).

With the aforementioned in mind, our article deeply engages with the question: Why were each of us [Cae and Alessandra], from quite radically different backgrounds, drawn to her works, through what we, going forward, will define as an *ethics of the crossroads*? To reclaim Chapman as both a folk and a blues singer or to understand Chapman's own re-operation of the stereotype around the folk singer, a stereotype which inaccurately tends to whitewash this genre and understands it as diametrically opposed to blues, means rereading her work through the ethical exigencies that undergird especially Africana feminist and queer thought. In line with these exigencies, our article contributes to an emerging scholarship notably by Ann-Derrick Gaillot, Rasheedah Quiett Jenkins, and Francesca Royster, which re-inscribes Chapman's lifework into a tradition of Black lesbian feminist intellectualism and praxis. More specifically, our present article-essay focuses on a crucial conduit of Africana thought—*the crossroads*—to activate readings of Chapman's life œuvre, as one which is critically engaged in questions of justice-making.

Movement I. On Methodologies
The Blues, a Legba-Èṣù Informed Crossroads

What emerges from the dominant narratives of Chapman's work is the genre to which managers and journalists have consistently ascribed her work and performance: folk music. By the 1980s, folk had come to signify a certain "fragility" (Chapman qtd. in Pond).

Chapman explains:

> female folk singers […] had more control than other women in the music scene. […] They wrote their own songs, they played them, they performed them themselves—there you have a picture of a very independent person, and trying to make them seem emotional and fragile and all puts a softer edge on it. As if there was something wrong with being independent. (Chapman qtd. in Pond)

For its part, blues generally has been understood as generated from an African-American experience. Of course, as multiple scholars have noted, blues and folk are related to each other. Chapman's work heeds this more organic history, which refuses the appropriation of either by a Euro-white-only genealogy. Throughout her career, she remained thematically and aesthetically at the crossroads of both genres, refusing neat categorization into either. In doing so, Chapman reclaimed both genres within the African-American music tradition to which they belong. This particular aesthetic praxis of the crossroads helps identify her as a precursor to the movement that has been gaining ground for the past twenty years through the work of artist-scholars such as Rihannon Giddens of the band Carolina Chocolate Drops. In their music and advocacy, these artists have sought to bring attention to the lost Black tradition of banjo music and the Black roots of music genres such as folk, Americana, or country music.

Crucial to our analysis is the role that the crossroads or junction plays in Africana thought and aesthetic practice that is intellectually

informed by Fon and Yorùbà intellectualisms. While in Haitian Vodou, Legba serves as the spirit or lwa of the crossroads, Legba-Èṣù also comes to function as a phenomenological manifestation of what it means to access the deep wisdom of the ancestors and of those knowledge systems that harken 'back' to Africa and have also been regenerated and reinvented in the Americas. The justice-based work that takes place at the crossroads refers to the 'concrete' histories of the Underground Railroad and the spiritual, kinesthetic (Tines 241-247), mental, and embodied practices that make escape from white supremacy possible. Following the crucial work conducted by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988), in our present article, we refer to the crossroads or juncture that intellects itself as one informed by a Legba-Èṣù informed cosmology. Furthermore, its primary teleology is a restoration of balance (Castor 146).

Drawing on our own expertise, we put forward the blues as one grounded in an ethical exigency that is directly related to a specific history of the trade of enslaved persons. Moreover, as Houston A. Baker, Jr. has noted (1984), the ethical urgency of the blues is located in a specific formal element—that of the crossroads—which manifests itself as much in sound and composition as in lyrics and performance (Baker 6-8). For our part, from our respective pedigrees in Haitian Studies, we complement Baker's North American theorizations of the blues through related ethical and formal practices from Vodou thought. That is, we consider Baker's considerations of the blues as in direct relationship to Legba-Èṣù informed intellectualisms that resonate intimately with the primacy that Vodou thought places on Legba as an integral agent to knowledge.

An Essay, Or On Attempting

At some level, the present piece is an article in that it cites peer-reviewed research to build its arguments, but it is also an essay in that it engages self-reflexive interrogations into why each of us has been drawn to Chapman's oeuvre. As an essay, whose etymology refers to the notion of 'attempting' and 'trying,' it deliberates in ways traditionally academic

but also draws on our own reflections from our positionalities as we listen together, but not in the same way, to Chapman's work. In what follows, we therefore try to hear together the meanings of Chapman's œuvre, across and through our different perspectives. Much like Chapman, who moves both inside and outside the music industry's economies and the genres of blues and folk, we move both inside and outside of the more traditional trajectories of academic conversation. Having begun our narrative together in the we, we now break out into our own singular crossroads.

Movement II. Tracy Chapman's Praxis of Reluctance, and My Knowing in Circles: Cae's Listening (in the mode of the I)

Like many, I learned about Tracy Chapman's recent surprise Grammy Award ceremony appearance through a video posted on social media. Chapman performed with Luke Combs, whose cover of one of her most iconic songs "Fast Car" became the first song authored by a Black woman to top the country music charts earlier that year, and, perhaps even more significantly, to ever win the Country Music Awards title of "Song of the Year." Hilarious and compelling was poet Hannah L. Drake's video reaction to the performance. In it, the spoken word artist waxes poetic on the glow of Tracy Chapman's skin, who, as she reminds the viewer, turned sixty this year. As she does so, she artfully riffs on and helpfully challenges the negative aspects of sayings such as 'black don't crack' as she leans on Tracy Chapman's conspicuous glow to highlight her ethics and praxis of self-care and self-preservation. Drake's diatribe artfully runs counter to the detrimental aspects of a certain kind of 'strong black woman' ideology which insists that our chronic overwork and societal undervaluation should not worry us because our skin looks better than other women our age, even though Black women in our age group are more at risk to develop chronic diseases than most women of other ethnicities.

Drake counters this ideology by attributing the glow of Chapman's skin, her "black don't crackness," to the artist's ethics of self-care and self-preservation, stating for instance:

> This is the skin of a woman that is unbothered. This is the skin of a woman who understands that she needs to rest. [...] This is the skin of a woman who 'ain't got nothing to prove.' (Drake)

Drake's intervention is especially meaningful because, as the last sentence of her video, in which she quotes a line from Chapman's "Fast Car" (1988), demonstrates, Drake, a middle-aged Black woman herself, relies on a deep knowledge of Chapman's repertoire as well as on a familiarity with Chapman's ethos known only to her fans who witnessed her emergence in the popular music landscape some thirty years ago and have been following her career ever since.

In Drake's lyrical speech, as she basks in the emotional re-discovery of the meaning of Tracy Chapman's music and modes of worldmaking, she echoes the emotion of fans overjoyed to finally see Chapman receive her flowers, and highlights how, throughout her career, Chapman's music, demeanor, consistent masculine-of-center lesbian/dyke presentation and circumspect approach to media and fame have modeled an ethos of self-care and self-preservation that constitute a vital expansion to the restrictive modes of expression afforded to Black women in the public eye and beyond.

But mixed with the intense *joy* of watching Tracy Chapman receive her accolades during the Grammys, there was also a hint of guilt for some of her fans. A guilt akin to what it would feel like to randomly run into your first all-consuming love, decades after the story ended, only to realize that despite what you had imagined, not only did you survive, but, in order to do so, you also reached a kind of forgetting, a kind of amnesia around the meaning of this love and the ways it changed the trajectory of your life. Or the ways it allowed you to be who you are today. In her poignant 2018 essay on Tracy Chapman, Royster notes that Tracy Chapman's music reminds her of the times of her life where

as a young scholar in a predominately white institution, and as a young Black woman exploring her sexuality, she lived in the spaces "in between" (Chapman, "Telling Stories"), "under the pressure of already knowing what you hadn't been taught" (Royster).

I resonate with Royster's description of the meaning of Tracy Chapman in her life. When Royster reminisces on Chapman's presence in as intimate a realm as her dreams, I am reminded of how thinking of Tracy Chapman's meaning in my life connects me to a self-reflexive dimension, one that I associate with the convoluted trajectories of knowledge. Royster explains that Chapman connects her to a state of in-betweenness she experienced when she felt pressured to know something she hadn't been taught. My connection is different. Chapman reconnects me with the knowledge of what I have been taught but have felt pressured to unknow. She connects me with the circularity of all forms of knowledge. Both in her music, lyrics, presentation, and in the very arc of her appearances on the public stage, Chapman seems to point to my knowing in circles. In other words, Chapman points to the sudden compelling resurgence of my submerged knowledge, either drawn from other layers of the self, ancestral voices, divine entities, or the ebb and flow of knowing and unknowing within the flux of consciousness. This is what I hear in Chapman's music.

I have often received Chapman's songs as a gentle yet compelling invitation to peel off unnecessary protective layers of myself. In thinking of the meanings of Tracy Chapman in my life, I therefore turn to another signification of 'crossroads,' one that indicates that a person has reached a crucial point of life, a juncture in which a decision must be made. I think of moments at the crossroads as moments of undeniable interpellation in which a glimpse is allowed, consciousness looking at itself to take in its own circularity. Moments when our often repeated attempts at unknowing something we know about ourselves suddenly become impossible. Moments when the circular routes, our multiple forms of knowing suddenly become apparent. Moments within which our unacknowledged personal trajectories suddenly converge at a common crossroads. Faced with the inevitability to choose a path.

As someone who grew up as a biracial kid in suburban Paris in the late eighties, when Tracy Chapman released her first self-titled album, discovering her music and her presence on my TV screen and her voice blasting on the radio was akin to witnessing impossibility made possible. It would be fair to say that even as a teenager, I, like many, developed an instant crush on her, one that confused and puzzled me. I was several years away from coming to an acceptance of my sexuality, and this was one of the moments of recognition that I would work hard to forget about. Coming out in 2003 allowed me to revisit my infatuation and to get in on the secret held close in the lesbian community thanks to a documentary on the Michigan Womyn's Festival: lesbian and bi women across the country had been loving on Tracy Chapman's music long before Elliot Roberts ever laid eyes on her. While I couldn't fully name why at the time, I sensed that this encounter with her music and unapologetic presentation in the landscape of popular music held life-defining meaning to me. I felt a kinship, understood my journey as tied to hers, and our journeys as roads, circles that were somehow, somewhere crossing.

Today, I am a nearly fifty-year-old, French Haitian lesbian Black feminist jazz vocalist turned scholar living in Miami, Florida. The journey that led me there is the result of many cycles of knowing and unknowing the same truths, until denying them wasn't possible anymore. A bit more than thirty years ago, when I discovered Tracy Chapman's existence and was attempting to parse my many emotions as I was listening to her voice and soaking in every detail of the artwork, it feels like it was one of those moments in which I knew before knowing. But are not our fantasies part of our knowing?

In converging the meaning of the crossroads as "the crucial juncture where a decision must be made" with the crossroads as "a meeting place," I remember conversations with other Black singer-songwriters who were part of the artistic collective I co-founded in Paris in the early 2000s. We often marveled at Chapman's improbable existence in the popular music landscape. I played one of my favorite songs of hers, "Nothing Yet" (2000), at a tribute event that we organized. While I stayed true to keeping my relationship with her music alive, covering her songs regularly, as I left the musical scene and transitioned

to academia in 2013, I joined a form of Tracy Chapman amnesia that had been obfuscating her legacy—until last February. When thinking of Chapman's career, I am reminded of the way in which it punctuates crucial moments of collective reckoning in terms of social justice and anti-racism.

There is an unmistakable form of interpellation in a lot of Chapman's music, but it is especially striking in "Fast Car," undoubtedly one of her most iconic songs. The interpellation mode starts when her trembling contralto asserts conversationally "you have a fast car." This assertion instantly places a set of keys in the audience/listener's hand, and has us pressing the imaginary gas pedal for an evasion with Chapman's character halfway through the first verse. But the assertion also plunges the listener into the confidence of her character's existential crisis and invites us to join a fugitive mode of contemplating driving away. She immerses the listener in the urgency of fugitivity. In that song, Chapman draws a portrait of lower-class, small-town youngsters saddled with intergenerational trauma and trying to escape state violence. Apart from its chorus, the entire song is built on four notes played over a two-measure haunting hand-picked guitar motif. Chapman's song manages to function as the ultimate US-American small town fresque, while also suggesting queer fugitivity by her delaying of the gendered pronouns to the very end of the song, something Chapman is notorious for. But the interpellation Chapman performs is also manifest in the very arch of her performance of this song at Nelson Mandela's 70th Birthday Tribute in 1988 at London's Wembley Stadium some thirty-six years ago, and during the 2024 Grammy Awards, both of which constitute two iconic moments that frame her career thus far, as told by the mainstream media (Caramanica and Pond; Pond).

The lore of these performances that bracket Chapman's career both frame her presence onstage as somewhat miraculous because it is completely unexpected. In 1988, Chapman, who had already played a few songs earlier in the event, suddenly had the opportunity to play a couple more in a prime time slot when Stevie Wonder's equipment suddenly malfunctioned. Chapman's rendition of "Fast Car" immediately captured the attention of the unexpectant crowd both at the venue and

throughout the world, bringing attention to the ultimate goal of the event which was to raise awareness of the deadly apartheid regime of South Africa. Similarly, in 2024, the secret of Tracy Chapman's appearance was kept under wraps and stunned the audience since Chapman had not appeared in a widely broadcast event in decades. Her duet with Luke Combs was all the more impactful because it took place at the time of the impending presidential election and the racist and divisive rhetoric it enhanced. Chapman's unexpected presence on stage in echoing performances of "Fast Car" at critical moments of US and global history recall Daphne Brooks' description of the "sphinxlike presence" of classical pianist Hazel Harrison in Ralph Ellison's work, one that is much less commented on in the field of Black studies than that of the little man who "sits at the crossroads" in Ellison's narrative. For Brooks, Harrison's guidance of Ellison as she encourages him always to play his best in case the little man at the crossroads might be listening enacts an afro-sonic feminist praxis that highlights the import of "cultural polyvalence in America" and of the "sonic meaning of Black womanhood" (Brooks 205).

I consider both performances as echoing moments at the crossroads. Thirty-six years ago, the words of "Fast Car" invited us to recognize the crossroads in our lives by considering the paths we chose and the truths we have tried to unknow about the state-sanctioned racialized violence of apartheid. Thirty years later, Chapman's words, performed in an improbable surprise duet with Luke Combs, resonate differently. As US-American society is plagued again by the looping deathly desire of unknowing what it knows about itself within a toxic MAGA rhetoric, which is only, as Chapman tells us, "[a] new page in the same book" ("Nothing Yet"), fans of Tracy Chapman have perhaps never wanted a fast car out of this reality so vividly.[2] Her words dare us to stop telling ourselves stories about the roads we have taken and continue to take as individuals, but also those paths we take collectively.

2 We finalize this essay right after the results of the 2024 US-American presidential election have been determined, confirming that once again, America is persisting in unknowing its history of violence and oppression only to repeat it.

Movement III. On Happy Hybridity, White Womanhood, and the 1990s: Alessandra's Listening (In the Mode of the I)

I first encountered Tracy Chapman's work as a young white woman in graduate school. I received her work as powerful but did not have the critical tools to engage with it through the exigency of justice-related issues that undergird Africana thought. I heard Chapman in concert on 9 Sep. 2000, on State Street in Madison, when I was a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. I was already listening to her music, but seeing her in Madison and reflecting upon this moment in hindsight reminds me that Madison was known as the Berkeley of the West, a university that was proud of its progressive, activist open-mindedness. I was pursuing a doctorate in French and Francophone Studies at the tail end of the heyday of French Studies in the United States when French departments were buttressed by the crucial role French theory had played in shaping critical theory. Moreover, the French department at UW-Madison was renowned for its explicit commitment to a feminist agenda that understood feminism as an approach to oppression and in which those oppressed must find a means to translate their experiences to each other to build a critical coalitional mass that might claim rights in society. I completed my Ph.D. under Professor Aliko Songolo, who was one of the first scholars to write a book-length study dedicated to the work of Aimé Césaire. I studied in the presence of a camaraderie of professors, including Songolo, the late Elaine Marks (1930-2001), Judith Graves Miller, and Gilles Bousquet. The intellectual crossroads abounded: a feminist department's commitment to anticolonial struggles and a thesis advisor whose work in anticolonial literary practices was dedicated to feminist struggles. That is, if scholars such as Gloria Wekker and Françoise Vergès have theorized in book-length work how feminism (read as white feminism) has failed those less privileged, then Madison's department in the 1990s was actively working towards crossing justice-based agendas. Moreover, his practice of reading across literary canons continues to allow Songolo to bring the work of writers such as Aimé Césaire, Assia

Djebar, Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, and Mohamed Mbougar Sarr into conversation.

In early 2024, in watching Chapman and Combs on the Grammy stage together, I expected to be irritated at how Combs performed alongside her, but, in fact, I was moved, even mesmerized, by how he paid her respect and seemed genuinely thrilled just to be in her presence. I was also troubled by my own reaction to him: why was I so focused on how he treated her? Moreover, I was befuddled by how her song might affectively be received by audiences who likely are quite politically conservative. Questions arose: Are we to understand Combs's re-performance of Chapman's work as a sort of late capitalistic rendition of Fred Hampton's daring and ultimately life-compromising attempt at a "rainbow coalition," whereby across racial lines, we come together to acknowledge the effects of brutal capitalism on 'us all'? How to take critical stock of the dissonant gendered and "racial politics of the scene" (Nash 26)? In considering the so-called 'intersectionality wars,' Nash refers to how a given group of persons are (or are not aware) of Africana feminist intellectualisms and their histories. What of the gross injustices of slavery and its afterlives that continue to bear their monumental injustices upon Black women? Was Combs' reverence on stage one that showed a deep respect for Chapman? How can we read this moment: as a re-adaptation, appropriation, or a deep honoring of the troubled histories of Turtle Island/ North America?

These arising questions that occupied me while watching Chapman's and Combs' performance during the Grammys made me further aware of how important the Vodou philosophical system has become in my life. In terms of my own positionality, I acknowledge that the happy hybridity that informed my graduate school years also contributed to my "white innocence" (Wekker). It contributed to a belief that anything coalitional could take place under the guise of an ethics that accepted neoliberal agendas. As I worked through Gloria Wekker's analysis of the breakdown in the potentialities of coalitional spaces and as I wrote an article on my own positionality to Haitian and Vodou Studies (Benedicty-Kokken), I began to give more credibility to recent theory's notion that we are indeed "conscripted" (Scott) into specific roles in

society, through our identities and positionalities. Yet, if there is a way out, then perhaps our only option is to take account of how we are conscripted and to listen to each other's theoretical approaches.

What has struck me most in working with Cae on this essay is how the approaches and critical archives with which she became and continues to be enamored of Chapman's work are so different from mine. Were it not for our shared commitment to Vodou ethics, would we have ever found each other in what this essay has become? It is only in this collaborative work, perhaps, that we may anticipate how our scripts play out, and perhaps interrupt them, or at least slightly adapt them to be able to do "lesser violence" (Soudien), especially from positionalities of whiteness.

Movement IV. Chapman's Crossroads

Crossroads figure as a prominent element of Chapman's discursivity. Chapman's song "Crossroads" (1989) draws directly on the intellectual history of the blues outlined by Baker. The genealogy we draw to a Legba-Èṣù epistemology is hardly surprising since Chapman, who graduated from Tufts in 1987 with a major in anthropology, had minored in African studies and was planning to enroll in a graduate program in ethnomusicology before becoming a recording artist. Chapman announces not just that the first-person narrator of the song will take her own path but that she will do so "standing at the crossroads" ("Crossroads"), meaning that a conscious grounding within the crossroads can open oneself up to the possibility of being changed by those perspectives that flow through them at any given moment.

Chapman's work may at once be read as referring to Christianity and to a Vodou-Africana informed tradition. Indeed, as scholars have noted for decades, the two religious thought systems are not mutually exclusive (Desmangles; Bellegarde-Smith and Michel). Chapman's lyrics read:

Mmh, mmh
Mmh, mmh
Some say the devil be a mystical thing
I say the devil he a walking man
He a fool he a liar conjurer and a thief
He try to tell you what you want
Try to tell you what you need (Stanza 3)
Mmh, mmh
Mmh, mmh
Standing at the point
The road it cross you down
What is at your back
Which way do you turn
Who will come to find you first
Your devils or your gods (Stanza 4)
All you folks think you run my life
Say I should be willing to compromise
I say all you demons go back to hell
I'll save my soul, save myself (Stanza 5)
Mmh, mmh
Mmh, mmh
Save my soul, save myself
Save my soul, save myself
Save my soul, save myself
Save my soul, save myself (Stanza 6)

In the above, Chapman interpellates, and perhaps misinterpellates, her listeners into a complex matrix whereby the second-person "you," uttered towards the middle of the song, becomes the crossroads par excellence, with at least four possibilities of interpretation. First, it can refer to a rhetorical 'you' through which she addresses herself, deciding how and if she will go on with the music industry (stanza 3); second, it can refer to the 'you' of her addressee (and here, whether it matters that her audiences might be indeed "yuppies") (Caramanica and Pond 28:55); third, the 'you' may refer to the "mystical" devil who

serves as a quiet magnet at the crossroads, questioning, without dictating (stanza 3);[3] or, finally, the 'you' might indeed also represent the Christianly-informed devil, as the commercial interests that compromise her "soul" and "[her]self" (stanza 5 and 6).

While Chapman's song clearly references Christian nomenclatures, she operates a subtle trickster-playfulness of the god/devil binary in ways that shift her positionality into a more agential one. First, as she deploys a language of the Christianly-informed binary between God and the devil, in pluralizing it, she paganizes the Christian invocation. Second, she invokes another type of devil, one depersonalized, depicted as "a mystical thing," one who corresponds more clearly to a "codifying force" (Baker 9), by which we mean the conceptual capacity of the blues singer. As argued by Baker, the blues singer is informed by a deep history of Africana thought to dissolve the binary at the "matrix" that is a Legba-Èṣù-informed crossroads (Baker 6, 8). Similarly, Chapman's œuvre, her songwriting, her compositions, her performances, how she calls in her listeners, and how she also protects herself from them belong to a deep understanding of the crossroads. It becomes abundantly clear then that Chapman's song deliberately performs this opening and "dissolves" the binary, in the aspirational sense, that allows "people to hope or to dream or even to consider what's thought to be impossible" (Chapman qtd. in Pond).

As noted by the scholars we cited above, the notion of the crossroads—whether in Vodou, blues music, or the intellectual and justice-oriented practice of intersectionality—resides in a deep form of knowledge. In Haitian Kreyòl, the term is *konesans*: it is akin to what Édouard Glissant refers to as *donner-avec* (Glissant 45), a generosity in knowledge-making that defies the "almost rapacious-with" (Wing xiv). Kyrah Malika

3 The "mystical devil" might be read as any member of the Gede lwa or spirits on Vodou, who harness evil energies and transform them towards the collective good. Scholars have written extensively on the phenomenon of vilifying Africana derived religious practices rather than perceiving their potential for a justice-based ethics. For a full consideration of this phenomenon see: "Dessalines' nalatenschap, vodoufilosofie en intimiteit (als curatie) / Dessalines' Legacies, Vodou Philosophy, and Intimacy (as Curation)." *Onze Koloniale Erfenis: Slavernij en kolonialisme door hedendaagse ogen*, edited by Wayne Modest and Wendeline Flores, Lanoo, 2024, pp. 176-193, which centers the work of Kesner Castor, Leslie G. Desmangles, and Katherine McKittrick.

Daniels theorizes this deep knowledge, which in Haitian Vodou is named konesans as "sacred wisdom" (Daniels 93). Chapman's second-person address, invoking its multiple addressees, represents the unsolvable but "dissolvable" matrix to which Baker refers. As Baker notes, part of blues performers' practice is to maneuver the tricky space between what is expected from them by the culture industry and the deep philosophical work they are translating for their audiences. A blues singer, then, is highly aware and critical of how they perform in a given space. No performance is the same because each performance must consider all the people, energies, and elements that enter onto the 'stage.' That is, the stage is never a proscenium, referencing Aimé Césaire famous adage from *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (1939); rather, it is a crossroads, a conduit of the varying consciousnesses that enter the space. The blues performer draws on these energies to communicate a justice-oriented message to those present and listening to the performance.

The crossroads is then a place, but most importantly, a praxis, whereby radically different subjectivities come into contact but do not merge or hybridize—at least not at the level of real-time solidarity—but inform each other, passing on knowledge. What Chapman stages alongside Combs on 5 Feb. 2024 on stage at the Grammys is a refusal to be fetishized or to let Combs' racial identity slip into the degrading condescension that characterizes white saviorism. Combs was born in North Carolina and attended Appalachian State University, a fact that brings with it a classed and racial complexity, and which especially references what Darlene Love refers to as: "Music is not going to separate you. It's going to bring you together" (Love qtd. in Hehir 9:10); or what Robbie Robertson theorizes as "what happens when you put together music coming down from the mountains and music coming up the Mississippi River" (Robertson qtd. in Hehir 8:19), a hybridity which informs the roots of blues, country, folk, and gospel music. She prompts him to be held accountable to hold her in reciprocity, even if just for the duration of the song, for yes, the words of "Fast Car" may indeed apply to the lives of many on the down-and-out, but they were written and emerged from

her personal crossroads—intersections that pay forward intergenerational trauma and knowledges cultivated over centuries.

Within the crossroads, even on a stage broadcasted internationally in 2024, Chapman negotiated "full creative control of the performance" (Shonk). She transformed the stage, powerfully and calmly, into the prominent formal assertion of the "'X' of crossing roadbeds" (Baker 9), with a triangular formation among the camera, the in-person audience, herself, and Combs, a formation that allows her to avoid eye-contact until she chooses it. This triangle is the physical potential that follows through less tangibly into the matrix, the various vectors emanating into the room or our screens as we watch from our personal spaces. Combs respectfully seeks out eye contact throughout the entire song; and towards the end, she offers it to him, a gesture of a Glissantian *donner-avec*, a reciprocity that is possible just for a moment, but veritable. It is this aspirational capacity to imagine a dissolving of the racial divide that especially a Haitian Vodou-informed practice makes possible, but one that also refuses this dissolution until justice has been done.

Since we are a long way from justice, this work of aspiring towards the justice-oriented can only take place, in Chapman's words, in the fiction, but a fictional whose contours are laid out by the pragmatic: "There is fiction in the space between" ("Telling Stories"). This agility between the aspirational and the pragmatic is what Chapman makes possible and is, for us, related to a legacy of Legba-Èṣù-Afrikana philosophical expressions which the descendants of the enslaved have carried, adapted, and "translate[d]" from their centuries-long practices of fugitivity in the material circumstances of slavery and its aftermaths. It is this working of the juncture that insists on reciprocity, which Chapman choreographs in February 2024 at the Grammys, quietly claiming the authorship of "Fast Car" but sharing it, on her terms, with Combs.

Conclusion

Across the lines
Who would dare to go
Under the bridge
Over the tracks
That separates whites from blacks
—Tracy Chapman, "Across The Lines"

In this piece we have attempted to hear across the lines. Animated by the signification of the crossroads both as a place of intersection and a meeting place, we have drawn on Chapman's own oeuvre and praxis of the crossroads whose goal it is to honor and dignify solidarity, not as a goal or a given, but as an act of collective world-making, a process that must always aspire to serve one another ever more reciprocally.

Whether it moves through folk, blues, or the myriad other genres it embraces, Chapman's music centers a deep commitment to the justice-oriented ethics afforded by Africana thought. Within this conviction, Chapman as a blues/folk singer, emergers as a critic par excellence because she is able to discern the multiple and often confusing narratives that inundate contemporary audiences. The art of this critical discernment is one that distills and manages the crossroads as a matrix, always in movement and rearrangement, adapting to the given urgencies of the moment, constantly transformed by the varying perspectives that flow through it. Chapman allows this in her song by inviting varying interpretations of the addressee and bringing differing ethical worlds into conversation, one with the other.

Taking our cue from Chapman's work, we end this piece with the recognition that considering the impossibilities of feminist solidarity is crucial to laying the necessary terrain for "looking for other worlds" (Jean-Charles). As we do so, attuning ourselves to the epistemologies afforded by a Legba-Èṣù-informed knowledge (or in Haitian Vodou, konesans) (Daniel 93), we might, in fact, access ways of reading, engaging, and receiving the very notion of the coalitional, as we hope to have

achieved here, at least partially. As we take the risk of this attempt to hear together, across the many lines of its very impossibility, we echo Chapman's proposition to keep affirming as she does that "Maybe together we can get somewhere," and that however uncertain the journey is of moving along the crossroads, as we do so, we may hold closer the knowledge that "any place is better," when together keeps being attempted as much as it is questioned.

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