"My Name is Peaches": Literature, Lyrical Activism and Black Music

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Abstract

This article explores how one might conceptualise music as a form of literary activism. It close reads naming, witnessing, metaphor, allusion, and calls-to-action in the three songs "Four Women" by Nina Simone, "Strange Fruit" by Billie Holiday, and "Glory" by John Legend and Common. These close readings demonstrate how we might consider lyrical activism in music as a form of literary activism. It argues that song forms can be literature and contribute to an aesthetic treasure trove of literature that works upon readers, and upon the world, in an active intentional way, to achieve social change. The essay also provokes the question of the bounds of the literary and the musical.

"Say their names" has been a catchphrase of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. George Floyd. Breonna Taylor. Adama Traoré. These men and women lost their lives. These men and women were murdered. Such distinctions matter. These men and women did not lose their lives in a moment of abstraction or carelessness—they did not leave them in a yellow basket, a-tisket-a tasket, to be forgotten or claimed by others (Fitzgerald & Chick Webb Orchestra; Some One Ella Fitzgerald 2018). Their lives were jeopardized, then ended due to racialisation, institutional inertia, and police complicity in systems that prejudicially identify, locate, target, and erase the lives of black and brown individuals (Gendrot 2020; Hinton 2017; Hinton 2021; Suddler 2020). Individuals and systems, through such actions—human actions—terrorize communities. The #BlackLivesMatter movement is notable for its insistence on naming and humanising Black people as one response to systemic violence. Naming resists erasure. Naming resists the erasure that is instantiated by the passive case. Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam killed Emmet Till. Saying the names of those whose lives were taken ensures transmission and remembrance. Visibility. When protestors chanted the names of victims of police violence, they bore witness and testified to the humanity of George Floyd. They centered the names of individuals and their lives as a form of resistance to the system that had erased them, insisting that we—those who shouted and those who heard—recognise Breonna Taylor, Adama Traoré and the lineage and genealogy they stood and died in. That genealogy stretches back through centuries, through Medgar Evers, Emmet Till, the Scottsboro Boys. Martin Luther King. Peaches.

Peaches. That last name brings us from historical reflection to the work of human creativity. She is an imaginative realisation of historical truths. Peaches is one of four iconic figures that composer, singer, poet and performer Nina Simone conjures in her song "Four Women," recorded in 1965 and released in 1966 on the album *Wild is the Wind*. Her searing portrayal of four archetypes—or stereotypes—of black women is literary and historically grounded. The song bears witness to the violence black women experience and have experienced in America. "Four Women" also serves as the hinge and pivot of this reflection on

literature, activism and Black music. The work of Nina Simone, Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" (Gerard Tondu 2011; Holiday 2006) and of Common and John Legend (thinkcommon 2015) illustrate (perhaps a little too clearly) the chain of associations that inspired this essay.

That chain goes as follows. Literature can be activist and music can be literature. Literature can be musical and activist. Music can be activist and literary. Music, literature and activism all engage in witnessing and each demands participation from readers, listeners, and participants. Black music demonstrates these associations and qualities. It is its own entity and does not need to be categorised as literature. At the same time it has a genealogy of being literary and activist that stretches back and forward, through lines, roots and branches, ancestry and tradition, creation and evolution. At this point I must acknowledge my experiential limitations in writing this piece; I am a pakeha (white) scholar of New Zealand descent. I have come to this music, to this literature, and to anti-racist activism, through a long biographical and scholarly process. I have a sustained affective and intellectual connection with the music I discuss below. This does not make it my own. It does, however, position me to see how Black music is discussed and "produced" academically in Western disciplinary traditions and to write with, into, and back at those processes.

Academic and disciplinary assessments of literature have sometimes regarded explicitly political and activist literature with suspicion, although some are granted exemption—Yeats' "Easter 1916" for example. Amiri Baraka, thinker, musical scholar, activist, identified this process in an essay for a glorious aesthetic-activist text, *Of Poetry and Protest.* He reminded readers that centuries of work in the Anglo-American and continental European scholarly traditions have established disciplinary regimes and canons (22-3). In the past these have worked to define literature as a consciously crafted written form, with demarcated genres, and a scepticism to forms such as the manifesto, or the folk tale. In Baraka's blunt summation one result has been that "the main thrust of the term 'protest poetry' is to stigmatize the literature that questions the given, the status quo" (23). He hints that works that are both explicitly political/interventionist and also canonic are produced by white

creators. Giti Chandra offers a nuanced riff on this, when she asks how renowned non-white or minority "literary" women (e.g. Toni Morrison, Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston) produce work that is successful because it fails to disrupt oppressive systems (6-7). If we put these two assertions together this suggests that works produced by non-white authors that have an activist intervention are frequently stigmatized as "protest poetry" or, alternatively, that when they are lauded as literary, it is because the creators write and represent themselves and their work in certain ways that conform to genre expectations and societal ideas about race and ethnicity.

Leaving this as a provocation, one deliberately left hanging, the next disciplinary boundary in the chain of association between literature as activism, literature as music, and some music as literary activism, requires bridging the divide between literature and music. The most obvious bridge is through the lyric—a written, spoken, or sung line of text in a song or piece of music. Lyric also (not coincidentally) means a line in a poem and it can serve as an adjective conveying beauty. However, focusing exclusively on the lyric, in absence of the music to which it is set, is a mistake and one that reinforces some scholarly and philosophic conventions about the primacy of text over sound for delivering meaning. This is just one aspect of a way of thinking that has often separated music from rational thought. Pim Higginson unpacks that process in the sweeping *longue durée* overview that begins his book *Scoring Race* (2017). He then shows how this relates to racialisation in music. He concludes that Western philosophy and aesthetics have divorced word and thought from music and sound in a process of racialisation whereby Black music has been consciously set aside from rigorous thought and evolved thinking. There is a long Western tradition of dismissing music and musical lyrics as less-than-literary with some notable exceptions such as the German *Lieder* where the fusion of literature and music, and the frequent use of canonic poets such as Rilke or Goethe, served to legitimate the lyric.

This article acknowledges but does not engage in such debates or caveats about canonic versus folk art. It thinks beyond them and skips over the *whether* great literature can be activist (a question that is, anyway, outdated) to show *how* Black music exists as literature and activism.

It models how we might analyse Black music to enrich our understanding of literature—and of activism. Bram Ieven, Eliza Steinbock and Marijke de Valck have asked how the arts are and have been activist. They show how aesthetic strategies engage in politics, how art produces resilience, and how resilience is one component of activist engagement. They suggest part of the activist power of the arts lies in three qualities: *durational persistence*, or how artworks influence society and culture and circulate for long periods of time, *elasticity*, as in how the arts are flexible, adapt and use new sites and spaces to convey meaning, and *imaginative possibilities*, as in how art can imagine better futures, show alternate pasts, and forge possibilities where politics and everyday life make all seem grim and dim. To this I respond, in the following case studies, with a classic improvisatory: "YES AND." Black music does all this. It also mobilizes, preserves and transmits history. It does this through naming and bearing witness, through allusion and sampling (intertextuality), transmedia and narrative. These are strategies that work both aesthetically and politically to refuse erasure, to name and resist systemic violence, and build resilience through solidarity and through the sharing of collective narratives. They do memory work (Assmann).

Four Women: Naming

The power of apprehending the universal through humanizing and bearing witness to it is a power typically attributed to canonic literature in the Western tradition. King Lear is archetypal: when he screams into the storm, audiences, readers, grasp the experience of disempowerment, old age, irrelevance, decay, despair, and madness. Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennett, now hailed as canonic (once relegated to frivolous chick-lit), has universal appeal because she eschews such drama for a supposed clear-eyed pragmatism that delivers devastating darts of incisive gender analysis.

This universalising of experience has an activist component. It names and exposes limiting and violent conditions that constrain life. Historians and theorists have argued incessantly over agency and the relationship between choice, coercion and subjection especially in the

context of the racialisation that licensed and endorsed plantation slavery. Philomena Essed has argued that ultimately the best anti-racist and humanist response she could locate lay in acknowledging the dignity of every human (2019). Gloria Wekker, equally luminescent and as-oft-quoted Dutch theorist of racialisation in the Netherlands, has testified to the power of willed blindness (white innocence) vis-à-vis race-thinking and racialisation in Europe, specifically the Netherlands (2016). Literature undoes or challenges such 'innocence.' It acts, in the form of narratives or poems, to expose brutal conditions, affirm humanity, and testify to both subjection and resistance. Vocal music, with the added dimension of sensory appeal and literal voice, shows forth these theoretical understandings in performance. In this sense, then, music and literature have an activist orientation. They give voice.

The voice is central in the aesthetic activism assessed below so please, pause as you read, and play the performances I close read. The versions I consulted are listed in the bibliography. We start with Nina Simone's "Four Women," then move back in time to Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," and finally jump forward to Common and John Legend's "Glory." Simone's oeuvre exemplifies the poesy, the universalism, the naming, and the witnessing, that is one of literature's activist interventions. Simone's song "Four Women" traces the experience of four women, archetypes of the American black female experience—Aunt Sarah, Saffronia, Sweet Thing, and Peaches. [1] Each merits a verse.

Aunt Sarah is the first to appear in Simone's lyrics. The music almost drones yet simultaneously drives forward. Piano chords and subdued drumbeats carry us through. It is an incessant but monotonous backdrop which foregrounds Simone's voice. Her immaculate vocal placement leaps out from this musical backing.

[1] It is worth mentioning that at one point Simone was criticized for stereotyping Black American women in these portrayals but that critique has not been sustained. Simone's intent, and the acknowledged and received meaning of her song, is to illustrate conditions and to subvert these stereotypes while also showing the truth of the experiences that attach to a variety of age and social and skin-colour factors in Black American lives.

My skin is black
My arms are long
My hair is woolly
My back is strong
Strong enough to take the pain
Inflicted again and again
What do they call me?
My name is Aunt Sarah

Simone's voice slides into pain and hovers on the name of Aunt Sarah. To the literary eye and the textual orientation of the Western canon this may not seem literature (Higginson 15-24). Yet lyrics blur the bounds between poetry and music. Here is variation in line length, there is a rhyme, repetition, enjambment (pain / inflicted), there is powerful imagery. Aunt Sarah's hair is woolly, just as Shakespeare's mistress's hairs were unruly wires growing upon her head. This is not to say Simone is Shakespeare. That would do a disservice to both. Yet Simone's lyrics capture a character and disrupt expectations of the feminine in this line, as Shakespeare did in his. Simone's Aunt Sarah reminds us of the backbreaking labour that erased and enforced gender in the lives of so many Black women.[2] Her back bore the pain, inflicted again, and again. Sojourner Truth, abolitionist speaker and former slave, famously stated that despite the back-breaking labour she performed when enslaved, she was "a woman too."[3] She asked why her labour was naturalised and her sexual functions exploited but her gender erased while that of white women was everywhere affirmed. Just as Deborah Gray White did ground-breaking work naming and stating the importance of gender in slavery, and as Sojourner Truth proclaimed that slavery and gen-

[2] I have not even touched on the relational burden and duty of black womanhood subsumed in that simple term, Aunt, in this usage. This term transcends the use of it in the biological and legal term, but symbolizes a role of caring, and status of an elder in a society and community, endowed with wisdom, often admixed with a life of domestic service and provisioning for a community.

[3] This is the utterance that has come down in various accounts. For a detailed examination of what Sojourner actually said, what she wrote that she said, and what others subsequently wrote about her statement, see the Nell Painter and Deborah Gray White texts cited here.

der must be considered together, so Simone presents us with that truth in this verse (White; Painter).

Jennifer Morgan wrote of how, in early travel narratives, European observers described Black women as both monstrous and desirable, reproductive and field laborers, destined to bear pain uncomplainingly (Morgan 184-5). Nina Simone gives voice to black women's self-naming within this representational system. She names that pain and exposes how American society has erased the pain and amplified convenient stereotypes. There is chilling evidence that this continues to happen.[4] And on top of the bleak description of pain and labour she adds the detail that Aunt Sarah's skin is black.

Here, Simone also lays the foundation for a devastating exposé of colourism. In the rest of the song, she moves through a set of images and contrasts that use colour as a symbol of a host of other experiences and differentiations within the overarching designation of black. In the next verse the character's skin is yellow. The hair is long. The singer belongs between two worlds: "My father was rich and white he forced my mother late one night. What do they call me? My name is Saffronia." Centuries worth of rape recorded in a single phrase.

Then a third verse. Again, a devastating indictment of the gendered abuses suffered by women, and in this case a light-skinned Black woman caught in an economy of desire and sexual labour. This, to me, the writer-mother and female, with daughters who look up at their father with trusting eyes, is a devastating line:

[4] Recent scientific work, made visible by tennis player Serena Williams's prominent account of her birth experience, has identified how the pain of Black women is chronically under-acknowledged and ignored in medical diagnoses and scientific research. Moreover, due to a complicated set of intersecting systems, Black women's birth mortality is disproportionately high. See: Martin, Nina and Renee Montagne. "Nothing Protects Black Women From Dying in Pregnancy and Childbirth."; Haskell, Rob. "Serena Williams on Motherhood, Marriage and Making Her Comeback."

My skin is tan
My hair is fine
My hips invite you
My mouth like wine
Whose little girl am I?
Anyone who has money to buy
What do they call me?
My name is Sweet Thing

Simone draws out the "sss" on hips. One can almost feel her lips shaping it as she sings. And the lips are implied in the sound, amplifying the presence of the body in the lines and the verse. She infantilises herself vocally as she reveals the process of infantilisation that has created desirability and lack of threat in Sweet Thing's persona. The pan flute enters with a beguiling flourish after the word "wine." Sweet Thing is accessible (pun intended) and the musical timbre is inviting. The layers of internalisation and longing in this verse testify to survival and pain. The tone almost fades away. Sweet Thing drifts into the distance. She may be lost.

And suddenly, the tone changes. It is harsh. The grain of Simone's voice makes her listener hear the bitter taste in her mouth as she spits the words. "My skin is brown," Simone intones. "My manner is tough. I'll kill the first mother I see," she promises, "My life has been rough." The verse continues: "I'm awfully bitter these days, cos my parents were slaves. What do they call me? [rising vocal, piano crescendo, crashing rolling chords] MY NAME IS PEACHES," Simone roars.

As these reflections suggest, the juxtaposition of the four vignettes and the seeming simplicity work together to universalize the particular. The song realizes and transmits knowledge that is searing and galvanising. What cannot be conveyed in text, however, is the grain of the voice, to borrow from Barthes (Barthes and Heath 182-3).[5] Each verse is

[5] I do not entirely agree with Barthes' typology of pheno-song and geno-song—or rather—it may be prone to the same types of discursive limitations that Higginson argues have racialised music criticism, but Barthes' grasp of—and insistence on—the signifying power of the sound, timbre, power in what he calls the "grain" of the voice is astute and helpful, especially for scholars who do not work with music.

intoned differently; phrased with tender care or harsh invective metallic power. There is a driving, inevitable, increasingly rough tone in the ultimate verse, the Peaches verse. The softness and delectable juiciness of peaches are ironically subverted by Simone's bitter tonal texture and uncompromising lyrics.

Is this literature? It is naming. And naming is power. Note here the grammatical charge of the "they call me" versus the self-claiming of "my name is." The very act of naming (and the power it implies) is invoked and queried here. These women are named by others and named in racializing ways. They are identified and named by Simone, but they also, as personae in these lyrics, claim their names. Naming and universalising the particular is one way into an analysis that engages Black music as literary activism. Simone's four women were painfully real and yet archetypal. Peaches, Saffronia, Aunt Sarah, Sweet Thing. Through naming them, and the life conditions they represented, Nina Simone created poetry with political import. She was not the first. Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" (written by Abel Meeropol in 1937) also witnessed to injustice with searing intensity and lyrical beauty.

Witnessing

Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant South
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolia, sweet and fresh
And the sudden smell of burning flesh!

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

The testimony in "Four Women" is archetypal. So is the testimony in "Strange Fruit" and yet it works in a different way, with a brutally graphic yet metaphoric exposé of the historic injustice of racialised lynching. It is more overtly grounded in historical events unfolding around the singer. Rates of lynching had risen alarmingly in the economic depression following a period during which Black American land and business ownership had increased, voting rights had technically been granted and slavery officially abolished. Ida B. Wells's fearless journalism, which reached hundreds of thousands, laid out the figures and the fictions that showed how racism undergirded the brutal and widespread murder of Black men in the name of protecting white women (Wells-Barnett and Royster). Billie Holiday, Black American female star and singer of poignant beauty, and Abel Meeropol, Jewish communist activist, songwriter and High School teacher, made haunting music of it that has reached millions.

I listen and am broken. This essay has halted time and again because this song is so difficult to witness. Last night I listened to the trial testimony of former police officer Derek Chauvin, and heard a CNN journalist describing black exhaustion—feeling the pain, again and again. In the 1959 live television recording of "Strange Fruit"—the one I am using to produce this close reading—Billie Holiday channels that pain in her voice, in her body, in the line of her shoulders and under her eyes (ReelinInTheYears66 2018). Her life story and its personal pain is an important backdrop here. She opens by claiming the song as hers: "And now a little tune written espressly for me," she starts, in a slightly slurred voice, with a defiant chin lift … "Strange Fruit." Holiday made this number her own in performance, through iteration and assertion, and with her authorship of definitive interpretations such as the one I close read here.

The central metaphor is stark and obvious. The "strange fruit" of the title is the body of a Black American, murdered in the tactical, terrorist, white supremacist violence of lynching. The piano opens. Billie's voice, by this stage in her life, has dropped, and as she commences with the lyric "Southern trees" she swoops down and up. She breathes, pauses, and frowns—her mouth wrenched slightly to one side—then continues,

"bear a strange fruit." At this point the lyric might be innocently celebrating nature. Yet Holiday's delivery has already indicated a blues swoop, a pained texture and a slow tempo, that alert us. These fruits are not what they seem; "blood." The next line takes us straight into the macabre, with vivid gothic images. Fruit and leaves, alike, are stained by blood and that blood has gone into the soil and is in the root. This is also a metaphor about history and the origins of this violence. It takes us beyond the immediate horror into the past of racialisation and structured capitalist and colonial violence of the plantations that has founded the wealth of the South and made its soil productive.

Fast forward. The last verse takes us beyond horror into legacy and devastation. The body is left hanging for the work of nature, rot, and history to take its course. This verse moves into the top—a low top—of Holiday's range at this stage in her career. The vocal toll her personal ups and downs have taken is evident. She digs into the harshness of the poem. Pluck. Suck. Sharp. Holiday's voice moans and hovers with the wind. When she sings that the tree will drop its heavy load, the word "drop" is an agonized cry. The bitter crop is made bitter indeed. The reference to crop brings us back to plantation slavery, and the metaphor of the song thus comes full circle. That single word—"crop"—is itself worth an essay. Holiday starts impossibly low and then drags up, sliding painfully through her register until she arrives, bends the note, crescendos, and abruptly cuts off. Holiday's performance is an unbearable history, testimony, and act of witness.

The song's creation narrative shows an urgency to bear witness and to testify against injustice. Abel Meeropol, the poet who wrote the lyrics, was a moderately successful popular music lyricist. Billie Holiday is legendary, in the fullest sense of that word, subject of and to countless narratives of her life and work. Together they created a testimony—one that shares with the *testimonio* the quality of a narrative that is an urgent voicing of something to which one bears witness, a voicing that is self-conscious, reflective and intentionally political and aimed at resisting

systems of injustice and oppression.[6] As Angela Davis argues: "I think that Strange Fruit is perhaps the most influential and most profound example and a continuing site of the intersection of music and radical social consciousness" (SFJAZZ 04:17-04:35). Meeropol was horrified by a postcard of a double lynching and wrote the poem and song in response (Baker; Margolick). Holiday, when asked to sing it, was unconvinced at first but once she agreed, sung it in almost every performance, confronting audiences, night after night, with the bitter fruits of the self-proclaimed gallant Southern States where racialisation, deprivation, land pressure, economic hardship, hatred and ugly, uncontrolled, communally sanctioned violence held sway.

The song lays out a powerful metaphor. So powerful that it is taught all over the world to illustrate metaphor, and bitter history. Students, deeply moved, write shocked essays about it (of varying quality). Moreover, the grain of Holiday's voice, in her iconic and canonic performance, is distinctive and is widely recognised as African American. She is, herself, a member of the group whose racialised trauma is narrated in the song. The song is both a comment on the terrible suffering of the victims of lynching and their families and communities, but also the toll that witnessing that trauma takes on members of the group who are subject to the same structures of oppression. They have an intimate and wearying relationship to the violence and the witnessing encapsulated in "Strange Fruit." There is a further moral and aesthetic point here, which is that those of us who are not racialized in the same way are asked to empathize and see beyond our own experience. Whatever our position, if we then consider the metaphor and the violence of the gallant south and the capitalist modernity of which it is part and parcel, the song demands that we interrogate our society and its systems that are and have been complicit in the violence it depicts. This society and set of systems produced the Atlantic slave system, plantation slavery, and the differential valuing of the lives and votes of racialised, colonised and enslaved peoples (Jenkins and Leroy; Gilroy). In demanding we

[6] I have been quite careful with the vagueness of 'shares with' here as the testimonio speaks of a particular set of histories, and emerges in the Latin American context, and expansions of the term have been contested (Blackmer, K. and J. Rodríguez 2012).

examine our own relationship with the depicted scene, the song asks of us an ethical engagement which is itself a form of activism.[7]

Literary Allusion and Intellectual History

Intellectual historians, musicologists, and literary scholars often trace allusions and references to illustrate how systems of knowledge, meaning and social structures and beliefs are constructed. Popular music offers similar networks of allusions and references, in a process dating back centuries. "Strange Fruit" is at the heart of one of these processes: Nina Simone has covered it, as have John Legend, Dee Dee Bridgewater, and Dianna Ross. This process of allusion, referencing, and building on a concept invites us to read Black music as intellectual history. Popular music, like elite textual forms, develops concepts over time and shows how they shape and reflect mentalities and cultures. And it leads to my final exploratory close reading which demonstrates lyrical and literary activism in popular music.

John Legend and Common invoked Martin Luther King's name in a song replete with allusions, metaphors, and potent imagery. In late Spring 2020, I realised the complexity of the web of references their song weaves in a very immediate way. I was attempting a yoga stretch, at the Griftpark in Utrecht, Netherlands, in an outdoor exercise class (in compliance with COVID rules). A piano chord rang out and the words "one day," seemed to hang in the air for seconds, before opening into the rest of the song "Glory" by John Legend and Common. As I clumsily transitioned from bending double to standing one-legged, I felt my spine tingle and my core stiffen to the lines "when it go down, we woman and man up."

The class over, I raced home and played the track incessantly, tracing the allusions that had leapt out at me. They are densely woven,

[7] I do not have space, here, to explore the resonance of bitter fruit and the bitter herbs of the Passover table. It suggests a connection between the Jewish and Black diaspora and their treatments at the hands of hostile societies. This gets us into a rich and complex genealogy of thought that expands notions of intellectual history and brings them into connection with the global, through the mechanisms of diaspora, as both concept, process, and collective, not to mention a system of knowledge dissemination and movement.

thickly detailed, and historically rich. The song alternates between spoken rap lines and a deliberately, crafted, soaring elegiac chorus. Here I will use just one allusion, one image, and one metaphor to represent the whole:

> When it go down / we woman and man up
> They say, "Stay down" / and we stand up
> Shots, we on the ground / the camera panned up
> King pointed to the mountain top / and we ran up

This reference to the "mountain top" has an illustrious genealogy and it rests on many allusions. In Exodus chapters 19-20, Moses responds to God's call and ascends Mount Sinai to receive God's commandments for his people, during their great journey from enslavement in Egypt, to life in their promised land (International Bible Society 65–6). Christ preaches one of his most apocalyptic sermons opposite a temple, at the base of the Mount of Olives, warning that in the quest for justice, turmoil and terror will be unleashed. Martin Luther King Jr., a Christian pastor, knew these references. The audience at his "I've been to the Mountaintop" address, delivered at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple, on April 3, 1968, knew these references. Gospel singers and Christmas revellers at the Boston Pops concerts (to name but one example) belt out the lyrics to the spiritual "Go Tell it on the Mountain." Mohammed's first revelation took place on a mountain, and has resonance for the black Muslim community in the States.[8]

> [*Applause continues]* Like anybody, I would like to live a long life—longetivity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. (*Yeah*) And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. (*Go ahead*) And I've looked over (*Yes sir*), and I've seen the Promised Land. (*Go ahead*) I may not get there with you. (*Go ahead*) But I want

[8] Harry Belafonte's "Jamaica Farewell" is stretching this reading too far, although Belafonte's well-known activism invites further reflection and analysis. Eminem's "M___F___g Mountaintop," in "Shake that Ass" also invites questions.

> you to know tonight *(Yes)*, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. [*Applause*] (*Go ahead, Go ahead*) And so I'm happy tonight; I'm not worried about anything; I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. [*Applause*]
> ("I've Been to the Mountaintop")

King's speech was delivered in response to the deaths of Echol Cole and Robert Walker, male sanitation workers in Memphis who, denied shelter due to segregation laws, had taken shelter in their truck and were crushed to death when it malfunctioned (Estes). King gave it the day before his death with an almost prescient resignation, evident in the excerpt above. We can see the crowd responding in a call-and-response pattern. It is a famous speech. The call to the Mountaintop, then, is echoed back and forth, into song and literature, and back out again in a process of cultural change and transformation. The term "the Mountaintop" connotes Martin Luther King. Common's reference is not subtle. Other Hip Hop lines are, in fact, far more intricate (e.g. Kendrick Lamarr's dazzling "To Pimp a Butterfly"). However, this example offers a clear way into the approach to song as literary. We learn about history and the communities it speaks to and from when we apply the tools of literary analysis.

Two further examples will bring this reflection to an end. In the middle of "Glory" we hear the lyric: "Saw the face of Jim Crow under a bald eagle." Jim Crow is the epithet given to the formal and informal processes commonly practiced in the American South to disenfranchise Black voters. This very week, eighty or so years after activists first mobilised *en masse* to challenge Jim Crow, *The Guardian* published an article describing new voting regulations in Georgia as "Dr James Crow" and citing President Joe Biden who described them as "Jim Crow on Steroids" (Jackson). The bald eagle is, of course, American's national bird, a potent symbol, one that invokes the Roman Republic (associated with democracy and citizenship but also power and empire) and adjusted to the fauna of the Americas. It is featured on the national seal and heralded as an American icon. The contrast between this symbol

and the process of disenfranchisement captured in the term "Jim Crow" alerts us to the false promise of American democracy and equality and to the need for action to fulfil that promise. To realise King's mountaintop vision.

The music captures the impulse to egalitarian action and also the history of campaigns for social justice. In a metaphor which sums up some of the argument of the essay, Common proclaims "We sing, our music is the cuts that we bleed through." The metaphor that music is embodied, and carries both life and death and the stuff that makes life possible—blood—also registers the cuts. The slings, the arrows, the pain that strikes again and again, and the blood at the root.

However, before getting carried into an interpretive web of my weaving, I will stop with a caution. We need to use tools of literary analysis with care, acknowledging that we must not divorce the mechanics from the soul, the context, the driving force and the possibility for transformative change embedded in that chain of allusions. We ourselves, do literary activism when we do this analysis correctly, thereby transcending disciplinary boundaries.

In the galvanising moment of apprehension when I first registered this web of meanings, I turned my head to exchange a glance of acknowledgement with fellow stretchers in the Griftpark. Surely, they could feel it too, in this spring of George Floyd's murder? But not one of the fellow stretchers and balancers responded. The web of allusions, so obvious to me, was seemingly lost to them, although it inspired its own wave of Hip Hop creation here in the Netherlands (Van Gaalen).

The yoga playlist was supplied by global fitness corporation Les Mills, as part of their "Body Balance" franchise. At one level this completely undermines my analysis. "Glory" is an epic, transmedia, anthemic tribute to the Civil Rights movement. It is the culmination of a living process generated and sustained very clearly in Black American culture, in which song, understood as literature, reveals the function of literature as activism. It is also commercial and functions as background music to entitled white individuals stretching in a bourgeois yoga class in Utrecht. That ambiguity is OK. It reminds us that art is commercial. While popular music fans and idealistic literary-minded readers alike

may scorn the commercial, and that scorn has at times been evident in ideas about the canon, we should not be bound by it because, often, creators are not. Mozart's *Magic Flute*, after all, was considered vulgar, financially motivated, and populist when it was first performed.

Conclusion

Literature can be activist without compromising "literary quality." Moreover, song forms can be literature and contribute to an aesthetic treasure trove of literature that works upon readers, and upon the world, in an intentional way, to achieve social change. To that end, raising these very questions, and critically interrogating the boundaries and values underlying canon-formation is—still—a radical and subversive act. So, for that matter, is scrutinising canonic works from a marginalised or critically alienated perspective (*viz.* Giti Chandra's approach.) The songs analysed serve as vital historical records for communities who were deliberately alienated from the tools of literary production during and beyond the onset of plantation slavery in the Americas. It is even more important, then, that we, scholars and historians operating in elite academic contexts with the power to determine and institutionally incorporate works of literature and historic records worthy of study, examine Black music and its testimony with respect and close attention. Therefore, in the spirit of radically breaking down boundaries in this issue of *FRAME*, I would like to highlight the obvious breakthrough offered by the Pulitzer Prize committee's award to Kendrick Lamar, of a literary prize, for "To Pimp a Butterfly." This continues in the vein of the recognition of song lyrics as poetry accorded to Bob Dylan. An instructive case, too, because of Dylan's overt activist engagement in social movements and anti-war protest.

To that end, the challenging of disciplinary boundaries, taking songs as literature, literature as a form of activism, and witnessing and poesy as the "stuff," the matter that undergirds these linkages, has the advantage of reminding us to think about sound. It asks that we remember the situatedness of literature when we experience it. A song, as a poem, or novel, does not exist in a void. Whatever our views on the death of

the author, taking song seriously as literature forces us to deal with the grain of the voice that tells the story, as Barthes put it. Or, to put it more simply, how can we fully understand "Strange Fruit" as poetic genius without hearing the grain of Billie Holiday's voice in its most iconic renderings? And renderings they are. They rend. She rends. And what, now, do we do about it?

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Biography

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