"WE'D RATHER DIE ON OUR FEET THAN BE LIVIN' ON OUR KNEES"

THE ROLE OF RADICALISM IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN PROTEST MUSIC, 1960 – 1990: A CASE STUDY AND LYRICAL ANALYSIS

Master's Thesis

in North American Studies

Leiden University

By

Roos Fransen

1747045

10 June 2018

Supervisor: Dr. S.A. Polak

Second reader: Dr. M.L. de Vries

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Introduction

The social importance of African-American music originates in the arrival of African slaves on the North American continent. The captured Africans transported to the British colonial area that would later become the United States came from a variety of ethnic groups with a long history of distinct and cultivated musical traditions. New musical forms came into existence, influenced by Christianity, yet strongly maintaining African cultural traditions. One of the most widespread early musical forms among enslaved Africans was the spiritual. Combining Christian hymns and African rhythms, spirituals became a distinctly African-American response to conditions on the plantations slaves were forced to work[1]. They expressed the slaves' longing for spiritual and physical freedom, for safety from harm and evil, and for relief from the hardships of slavery. Many enslaved people were touched by the metaphorical language of the Bible, identifying for example with the oppressed Israelites of the Old Testament, as this spiritual *Go Down Moses* illustrates:

> Go down, Moses
> Way down in Egypt's land
> Tell old Pharaoh
> Let my people go[2]

The spiritual is inspired by Exodus 8:1, a verse in the Old Testament. This passage describes Moses' assignment by God to free his people, the Israelites, from slavery in Egypt. "Go down" refers to Moses going down the river Nile from Jerusalem to Egypt. For African-American slaves, going down meant going down the Mississippi river into the Deep South, representing the southern British colonies and later, the slave states. The Israelites represent the slaves and Pharaoh is equivalent to the white slave owner. The African Americans identified with the Israelites and by singing this spiritual, expressed their desire to be freed from slavery. The song provided comfort; the slaves put their faith in being released in God; indeed, through Moses, he had freed his people from bondage before.

However, *Go Down Moses* can also be perceived as containing a covert protest message. Since the slaves could not openly protest their bondage, they made music that expressed their opposition to being kept in slavery, but in a hidden, religious message. Some

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[1] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 33 – 36.
[2] Jubilee Singers, *Go Down Moses*, 1872.

of the spirituals would actually contain secret messages about how and when to flee to the northern, free states —where slavery was unlawful—, about rising up against the oppression of the white slave owner; about practical ways to obtain the freedom the slaves longed for.

After slavery was abolished, African Americans still fought for freedom and equality and still used music to get their message across. In the former slave states, they were still disenfranchised. After the Reconstruction era in the South, which gave freed blacks better social and political opportunities, white supremacists enforced limiting laws for blacks, so-called "Jim Crow" laws. The South remained segregated; blacks and whites lived separately and blacks were structurally disadvantaged[3]. Musical genres like blues and jazz originated form this environment. Blues artists expressed their hardships mostly instrumentally; blues songs expressed feelings of sadness; of 'being blue'. Later, in the 1930s, artists like jazz singer Billie Holiday used their voice to criticize the way blacks were mistreated:

> Southern trees bear strange fruit
> Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
> Black bodies swinging in southern breeze
> Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees[4]

In *Strange Fruit,* Holiday addresses the lynching of blacks that occurred in the South after the Civil War in the South. Because southern white racists lost their lawful dominance over African Americans, they used methods of intimidation like extrajudicial public lynchings to establish social dominance and discourage blacks from participating in society, like working, getting an education and voting. In a lynching, a group of people, the so-called lynch mob, came to watch the public hanging of individuals who were punished for alleged crimes without due process. In the case of the American South, these individuals were African Americans. Holiday compares their hanged bodies to strange fruit growing on trees, suggesting these bodies are the 'harvest' of a sick culture. Because in a lynching, the victims were usually hung from trees, so, to listeners, it was clear what Holiday was singing about. However, *Strange Fruit* is a metaphorical description of what happened in the South and Holiday does not express her opinion on the matter. Yet, because of the reference of the

[3] Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (London: Harper Collins, 1988), 230 – 243; 512 – 521.
[4] Abel Meeropol, "Strange Fruit", performed by Billie Holiday, 1937.

bodies being ‘strange fruit’, it was still clear this was a protest song, criticizing the illegal killing of African Americans in the South.

Less than thirty years after *Strange Fruit*, blacks continued to be disadvantaged. The Civil Rights Movement wanted to end racial segregation and discrimination against blacks, particularly in the South. Again, music played a culturally significant role. Contemporary adaptations of spirituals like *We Shall Overcome* were sung during countless sit-ins, but also secular, more popular genres like folk and soul music proved highly suitable in the context of protest. Artists like Harry Belafonte and Sam Cooke utilized their popularity to spread messages of protest and the need for change. Through benefit concerts, these artists were able to provide funding for civil rights organizations. Reciprocally, the movement also gave these artists a podium to gain fame among the public.

Among these activist artists were also musicians that were considered to be more radical by their contemporaries. This study will focus on the African-American tradition of protest music from the 1960s on and will close read and historically contextualize the works of three of such musicians. I will analyze in what ways African-American protest music can be considered to be radical and how this music has developed. In this study, I will close read song lyrics of popular works by Nina Simone, James Brown and Public Enemy. I have selected these artists, because they were all perceived as radical by their contemporaries and still bear this reputation. Also, because each of these artists represents a certain phase in the black freedom struggle and I want to ascertain how African-American protest music has developed from the period between 1960 and 1990. This selection of artists allows me to make a diachronic analysis of the development of black protest music. How do the themes of the songs represent the historical context in which they were first performed? What rhetorical strategies did the artists employ to communicate their radicalism to their audiences? How were they different in their radicalism? In order to answer these questions, I will analyze the work of these artists by close reading and historically contextualizing a selection of the lyrics of their songs, determining the extent of their radicalism. I will argue that the studied works of Nina Simone, James Brown and Public Enemy show a diachronic trend of increasingly outspoken outrage toward racial injustice in the United States. Also, my study will show black protest music moved away from the white mainstream, focusing more on the development and establishment of a black cultural tradition.

This thesis thus researches the social history of certain American musical genre. Like this study, the extensive body of literature on the social history of American popular music mainly consists of case studies, studying certain music genres, artists, subcultures or organizations like music labels. A seminal work for this study is Amiri Baraka's *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, which he published as LeRoi Jones in 1963. Baraka argues the history of African Americans in the United States is strongly linked to the evolution of its music; blues and jazz in particular. *Blues People* also argues American white culture was influenced by African-American music and examines how this can be seen in American society. The book is a chronological overview of black music from the time of slavery up to the 1960s. Baraka provides his readers with not only a musical, but also social and cultural history of African Americans. For example, the chapter "The City" focuses on the period following the 1910 – 1930s Great Migration of millions of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North, creating a creatively fertile environment for the development of new music styles, like jazz and classical blues. In *Blues People,* the history of music is continuously contextualized in the social and cultural history of African Americans and their role in American society, and Baraka concludes not only African-American, but also American culture itself was influenced by black music.[5]

Greil Marcus' 1975 *Mystery Train: Images of American Rock 'n' Roll Music* is an early attempt to place rock and roll music in the broader context of American culture. Marcus argues, similar to Baraka, that rock and roll music has its origins in African-American musical traditions. Marcus also argues rock and roll is not merely a subculture within American society: it expresses a version of America and thus is an illustration of the peculiarity of American culture. Marcus also stresses the significance of music in American identity formation. According to him, cultural products like songs of Elvis Presley were just as relevant as the literature of great American writers like Melville. Like literature, pop songs "…dramatize a sense of what it is to be an American; what it means, what it's worth, what the stakes of life in America might be. This book is rooted in the idea that these artists can illuminate those American questions and that the questions can add resonance to their work."[6] Finally, Marcus claims American artists are so-called "symbolic Americans", because they express "Americanism", features that make Americans American, to the public. Marcus' work has an interdisciplinary approach to a musical study. He does not merely analyze the music of

[5] LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991).
[6] Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of American Rock 'n' Roll Music* (New York: Penguin Group, 1975), 4.

the artists he included in his research, but also uses the music to explain the exceptionalism of American culture and thus, *Mystery Train* is both a social historical and literary study.

*Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations (*1998), written by historian Brian Ward, is a political historical study of the entertainment industry and the efforts of African-American artists and producers to profit of that industry. Focusing on popular music genres as R&B, black rock and roll, soul and funk, rather than the classical genre of jazz, Ward studies the period between 1950 and 1970. He draws parallels between the commercialization of black artists, reaching white audiences in segregated areas and political victories being achieved at the time for the equal rights of blacks. Ward uses the Brown V. Board of Education case as an example, which declared Southern state laws about the separation of black and white public schools to be unconstitutional. So, on the one hand, black creative expression like popular music was culturally breaking barriers between black and white, while, on the other, political changes were occurring that would, eventually, lawfully end segregation. By making this comparison, Ward attributes black art a significant role in the development of American social history. Because black artists were gaining popularity, singers and producers sought economic gain from the white dominated entertainment industry, leading to economic independence and black empowerment in the African-American community. Unlike Baraka's *Blues People*, Ward also pays attention to the cross-cultural influence of white American culture on black American culture and vice versa. He tries to avoid a simplified view about two separate cultures, black and white, which makes this study innovative.[7]

Finally, a highly inspirational work for this study is Jeff Chang's 2005 *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. This is an urban social history of the environment in which hip-hop music was born and evolved. *Can't Stop Won't Stop* describes the New York borough The Bronx and how the "benign neglect" of the area of created hip hop culture, consisting not only of rap music, but also street art (graffiti), DJ'ing and breakdancing. Like Marcus, Baraka, Southern and Ward, Chang uses an interdisciplinary approach; using historical context to explain why certain artists gained popularity and why they chose the topics they rapped about. Chang places the violent lyrics of certain songs in the context of the gang wars that were occurring in The Bronx in the 1970s, for example, thus trying to contextualize the music. Furthermore, he compares these 1970s songs to the music

[7] Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 1998).

of the 1990s, when the Crips and Bloods were in a more violent gang war than the gang war of the 1970s, resulting in more violent rap songs. Again, a study of music is proven to be more powerful when combined with a research into its historical context.[8]

Aside from establishing a relevant historiography for this research, it is necessary to provide definitions for terms I will use. Since there are many definitions of the term "radicalism" that often contradict one another, I have decided to formulate a new one to determine to what extent the studied music can be typified as radical. The origin of the word "radical" comes from the Latin noun *radix,* meaning "root". In the literal sense of the word, radicalism means "going to the root or origin". Or, as revolutionary activist Angela Davis stated, "After all, *radical* simply means 'grasping things at the root'"[9]. In this sense, being a radical means pressing for change fundamentally. In the Merriam-Webster dictionary, "radical" is defined as follows:

> a : very different from the usual or traditional : extreme
> b : favoring extreme changes in existing views, habits, conditions, or institutions
> c : associated with political views, practices, and policies of extreme change
> d : advocating extreme measures to retain or restore a political state of affairs[10]

Radicalism is generally associated with religious fundamentalism, extremism and terrorism. Also, since fundamentalism and radicalism are semantically similar; both terms refer to a fundamental origin, it is relevant to explain the difference between the concepts. Whereas fundamentalism involves a nostalgic belief in traditional values, radicalism is about principally wanting change in a certain way, and not being susceptible to reaching a consensus.

Cross and Snow define a radical as "a social movement activist who embraces direct action and high-risk options, often including violence against others, to achieve a stated goal[11]", and Pieslak typifies radicals as people "who tend to adopt and express dogmatic and often idealistic racist, superior, intolerant, absolute, hateful, or illegal views and actions in

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[8] Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (London: Picador, 2005).
[9] Angela Davis, *Women, Culture & Politics* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 14.
[10] "radical", *MerriamWebster.com,* accessed 23 January, 2018, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/.
[11] Remy Cross and David A. Snow, "Radicalism within the Context of Social Movements: Processes and Types", *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2012), 118.

violent or nonviolent forms."[12]. In the introduction to their edited collection *The Radical Reader: A Documentary History of the American Radical Tradition*, McCarthy and McMillan describe radical movements as follows:

> Occasionally, radicals have resorted to violence, but most radical movements have reflected the democratic ethos of American life - they have been open rather than secretive and have relied on education, example, or "moral suasion", rather than coercion, to achieve their goals.[13]

Inspired by the definitions mentioned above, being a radical then, for the purposes of this thesis, means wanting to change part or parts of society fundamentally using non-confirmatory methods and not being prepared to compromise in achieving the wanted change. So, a radical in my view has three identifying qualities. The first is that a radical is convinced of a certain belief; usually about wanting societal change. The second is that a radical is not willing to compromise in bringing about the change he or she is advocating and the third is the radical uses non-confirmatory methods to achieve the wanted change.

In order to define what makes cultural expression such as music political, I will make use of Antonio Gramsci's theory on cultural hegemony and T.J. Jackson Lears' elaboration of that theory. Gramsci was the leader of the Italian Communist Party in the 1920s and was imprisoned under Mussolini's regime for over a decade. During his incarceration, he wrote a series of essays, titled *Prison Notebooks* (1929-1935). Considered a highly relevant contribution to political theory, Gramsci's thinking covered topics from nationalism to history and, most importantly for this study, his own vision on Marxist theory. An important concept Gramsci discusses is that of hegemony. He explains why by his time; the socialist revolution traditional Marxists had foreseen had not taken place yet. According to Gramsci, the power of capitalism was not only restricted to economic and political influence; through hegemony, societies were also subconsciously ideologically forced into accepting the capitalist system. The bourgeoisie was not only able to stay in power because it had the financial means and political upper hand; it also had a cultural hegemonic dominance. According to Gramsci, in

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[12] Jonathan Pieslak, *Radicalism and music: an introduction to the music cultures of Al-Qa'ida, racist skinheads, Christian-affiliated radicalism, and eco-animal rights militants* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2015), 5.

[13] Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John McMillan (eds.), *The Radical Reader: A Documentary History of the American Radical Tradition* (New York: The New Press, 2004), 6.

order to achieve a successful socialist revolution, the proletariat first needed to attain its own cultural hegemony; based on its own values.[14]

For this study of African-American protest music, Gramsci's ideas on coercion, consent and accommodation are especially interesting. He believed hegemonic power relied on a combination of coercion and consent. Most mainstream cultural products invite the general public to consent to the cultural hegemony. However, once the subordinated working class becomes conscious of being coerced into living certain a way, it will no longer consent to doing so. However, T.J. Jackson Lears warns against a too simple view on Gramsci's theory. In "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities", he describes how subordinate groups that oppose the dominant group do not always act on their opposition. According to Lears, they might not have discovered the language, or "discourse", of resistance to successfully oppose the cultural hegemony of those in power in practice. This is because the language of those who consent and those who oppose, of accommodation and resistance, "are not reducible to any binary scheme"[15]. For example, subordinate groups can be fearful of actively opposing the dominant group. But, more importantly, these groups can be so effectively influenced by the dominant mindset, they unconsciously act in favor of the cultural hegemony and against their own interests. Or, lastly, they have to work along with the dominant system in order to be able to voice their own opposition. In this case, we speak of resistance within accommodation. Or, in other words: according to Lears, there exists a gray area in the relations between those in power and those who are not.

Since I will analyze songs of African-American artists to determine to what extent these songs are expressions of radicalism, I will use Gramscian theory to determine what makes a cultural expression like a song part of consensus culture or anti-hegemonic. To Gramsci, each cultural expression is a political one. However, for this study, I will distinguish between cultural products that are supportive of the cultural hegemonic power and those that consciously and purposely oppose that power and are, therefore, anti-hegemonic expressions. In this sense, the songs analyzed in this thesis differ from products like *Go Down Moses* and *Strange Fruit*. The artists performing the songs consciously and purposely express anti-

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[14] Antonio Gramsci, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1972).
[15] Jackson T.J. Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities": in *The American Historical Review* 90 (1985), 593.

hegemonic messages in their art. Because of their radicalism—they openly opposed hegemonic dominance and were unwilling to reach a consensus—their protest music is different, because it does not contribute to coercion by nor consent to the hegemonic system. So, based on Gramscian theory, the music studied in this thesis are political, as are all other cultural expressions. However, the songs are also anti-hegemonic expressions, rather than expressions of resistance within accommodation.

As stated above, this thesis will evaluate three case studies. The first chapter close reads and historically contextualizes several protest songs by Nina Simone and analyzes the extent of radicalism in her work. The second and third chapter will do the same with the work of James Brown and Public Enemy. Each chapter will open with a short summary of the historical background of the decade the studied artists represents.

Chapter 1

Nina Simone and calling out racism

After the American Civil War was won by the Union in 1865, slavery was abolished in the country's southern States. However, through so-called Black Codes, African Americans were still disenfranchised in the South. Federal government interfered, and a period of reconstruction commenced enfranchising blacks and giving them the opportunity to become politically active. In 1868, the 14th Amendment to the Constitution gave African Americans equal protection under the law. In 1870, the 15th Amendment granted black males the right to vote. However, white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) retaliated, and within a decade, the new-found rights of blacks were limited again through "Jim Crow" laws on state level. For example, federally, blacks were allowed to vote. Jim Crow laws, however, prevented them from being able to vote because blacks were unable to pass voter literacy tests that were intentionally made extra difficult or confusing. Southern blacks stayed disenfranchised and the South remained segregated.[16] "Jim Crow" was enabled even more after the Plessy versus Ferguson ruling by the United States Supreme Court in 1896. It ruled states were allowed to make "merely a legal distinction"[17] between races, which practically segregated all public facilities in the South, making southern whites and blacks to live supposedly "separate but equal", essentially disadvantaging African Americans even further.[18]

This legal basis for segregation was not overturned until the Supreme Court's Brown versus Board of Education decision of 1954, ruling racial segregation of children in public schools as unconstitutional.[19] One year later, Rosa Parks was arrested because she refused to move to the back of a segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama, leading to a bus boycott in that city. According to Klarman and Cook, the Brown versus Board ruling and Montgomery boycott fueled the the Civil Rights Movement.[20][21] In 1957, president Eisenhower signed the

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[16] Eric Foner, *Reconstruction*, 230 – 243; 512 – 521.
[17] Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).
[18] Robert Cook, *Sweet Land of Liberty? The African-American Struggle for Civil Rights in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1998), 12-20.
[19] Michael J. Klarman, *Brown v. Board of Education and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 56 – 60.
[20] Klarman, *Brown v. Board*, 110 – 121.
[21] Cook, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 82 – 92.

Civil Rights Acts, allowing anyone who tried to prevent someone from voting to be prosecuted. After these first years, activists protested southern segregation by organizing sit-ins, boycotts and peaceful demonstrations. Older, traditional and more hierarchical organizations like the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) were joined by the grassroots student organization Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1960 in the fight for civil rights. NAACP was, for example, the driving force behind the Brown versus Board of Education case. Martin Luther King's SCLC organized the marches on Washington and Selma. SNCC favored direct-action protest and initiated sit-ins, most famously in segregated lunch counters in the South, joined the Freedom Rides with CORE (Congress of Racial Equality); riding interstate buses in mixed racial groups, and, most notably, focusing on black voter registration.[22]

During the Freedom Summer of 1964, volunteers of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) went to Mississippi to participate in door-to-door activism in order to get African Americans to register to vote. The COFO existed of activists from SCLC, NAACP, SNCC and CORE. SNCC, however, provided the project with most of the funding and, most importantly, with volunteers. The campaign was controversial and dangerous, and the volunteers, the so-called "freedom riders", were routinely harassed, arrested, and sometimes even beaten or killed. Three volunteers, two of whom white, were kidnapped and later found killed, drawing substantial national attention for the freedom struggle in the South. In that same year, president Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, guaranteeing equal employment, voting opportunities and desegregation initiatives of Southern public facilities. In 1965, another victory was won when the Voting Rights Act was signed, banning voter literacy tests. A few months before, peaceful protestors had been violently harassed by Alabaman police during the Selma to Montgomery march. The encounter was aired on national TV, leading, again, to national outrage.[23] By this time, activists like Stokely Carmichael, future chairman of SNCC, started losing faith in tactics of non-violence.[24]

During the summer of 1964, COFO also founded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), to protest the "regular" Mississippi Democratic Party, which excluded blacks from participating in its organization. The MFDP was successful and even

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[22] Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), 58 – 72.
[23] Cook, Sweet Land of Liberty, 150 – 165.
[24] Kwame Ture, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), p. 441–446.

attended the Democratic National Convention of 1964. However, because of compromises made by civil right leaders like King and CORE's Bayard Rustin during negotiations with the Johnson administration, participation of the MFDP's black candidates in the DNC was obstructed.[25] After this, many young freedom fighters felt disillusioned by the traditional ranks of the movement. With the MFDP, many thought their struggle could finally have an institutional impact, but when this project failed, they lost faith in the old forms of protest.[26] In the years to follow, SNCC-members moved away from its philosophy of non-violence, and "Black Power" became the vision of the movement. This was also the strategy that appealed most to Nina Simone.

By the time Nina Simone wrote her first protest song *Mississippi Goddam* in 1963, she had become a nationally popular folk, jazz and soul artist with a large fan base consisting of black and white people alike. In her 1991 autobiography she remembers how, before 1963, she was not involved in the black freedom struggle,

> […] because of how I was raised: the Waymon way was to turn away from prejudice and to live your life as best you could, as if acknowledging the existence of racism was in itself a kind of defeat. […] Of course, I knew discrimination existed, but I didn't allow myself to admit it had any effect on me.[27]

Born Eunice Kathleen Waymon in Tryon, North Carolina in 1933, Simone did not consciously encounter racism until she was eleven, when her parents were asked to move to the back of the room during one of her piano recitals. Before that, the white people she had known were "all kind and elegant, all polite."[28] Tryon was a popular holiday destination for tourists. According to Simone, it was a somewhat atypical town in the segregated South. Unlike other southern cities, blacks and whites lived among each other, instead of separately in different neighborhoods. She remembers how relations between the town's black and white inhabitants were "always very cordial"[29]. Simone was born into a musical Methodist family; both her parents took up important positions within the church community. On Sundays during church services, Young Eunice showed potential as a pianist, and was given the

[25] Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 60-69.
[26] Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: a Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 300 – 389.
[27] Nina Simone, *I Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1991), 86.
[28] Simone, *I Put a Spell on You,* 26.
[29] Ibid, 5.

opportunity to get private lessons from a wealthy Englishwoman living in Tryon. So, when she saw her parents being embarrassed when they were forced to watch their daughter's recital from the back of Tryon's town hall because of their skin color, Simone realized she "lived in a different world, and nothing was easy anymore."[30]

It took thirty years, however, before she became actively dedicated to the African-American struggle for freedom and equality. By then, living in Harlem, she had made the acquaintance of notable intellectuals of the Civil Rights Movement, like Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Stokely Carmichael and, most importantly, Lorraine Hansberry. When Simone moved to Mount Vernon, she and the black, feminist and leftist playwright became close friends. Hansberry provided Simone with political education, and the two artists had deep conversations: "It was always Marx, Lenin and revolution – real girls' talk."[31] They talked about the socialist revolution leftists like Hansberry believed would occur in capitalist countries like the United States. There exists a socialist tradition in African-American political history. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, was a democratic socialist. Many of the most effective organizers and grassroots theorists, Ella Baker, A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, for instance, related to leftist ideology. Socialism appealed to revolutionary individuals like Hansberry, who advocated social equality for the black community.[32] The playwright convinced Simone of the important role she could play in the revolution to come; not only for blacks, but for women as well.

Simone became actively involved with the black freedom struggle in September 1963, when she learned of the infamous 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing in Birmingham, Alabama. This, together with the assassination of NAACP secretary Medgar Evers that same year in June, was the last straw for the singer, and the trigger for her involvement in the black freedom movement. In her autobiography, she mentions how the radio broadcast about Birmingham made her so furious, she got "a load of tools and junk" together in order to make a so-called zip gun. "I had it in my mind to go out and kill someone, I didn't know who, but someone I could identify as being in the way of my people getting some justice for the first time in three hundred years."[33] Her husband convinced her she should channel her feelings of frustration, anger and outrage into her music. An hour later, she had written *Mississippi Goddam*.

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[30] Ibid, 6.
[31] Ibid, 87.
[32] Mary Helen Washington, *The Other Blacklist: The African American Literary and Cultural Left of the 1950s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 243.
[33] Ibid, 89.

"This is a show tune": *Mississippi Goddam* (1964)

When one watches a video of Nina Simone performing *Mississippi Goddam* of 1965 in The Netherlands, Simone can be seen nodding to her own piano melody and happily smiling at her audience before she starts singing. You would not expect Simone is about to perform a confronting and unapologetic protest song, calling out racism in the American South.[34]

The most famous recording of *Mississippi Goddam* is from a live show in New York in 1964. Simone's band starts to play in a jaunty, upbeat rhythm and she sings:

> The name of this tune is Mississippi goddam
> And I mean every word of it
>
> Alabama's got me so upset
> Tennessee made me lose my rest
> And everybody knows about Mississippi, goddam![35]

The predominantly white audience of Carnegie Hall laughs and applauds. Because of the jazzy and cheerful melody, they are still unaware of the graveness of the singer's musical message. Simone repeats the chorus again, and then informs the audience: "This is a show tune, but the show hasn't been written for it yet".[36] Again, the audience responds with laughter. However, it will soon become clear the song's topic is not as humorous as the band presents it to be.

So, what does Simone mean when she says the show tune still needs to be written? The show stands for the prospect of a social revolution because Simone predicts African Americans are no longer going to endure racism without retaliating. Thus, Simone's ironic "show tune" is meant as a predicting and menacing anthem of the revolution to come. She pretends it to be a show tune because she wants to outmaneuver her audience, making them believe she is an African-American artist there to play them an enjoyable song. When it becomes clear the song is, however, about how blacks are no longer going to stand being discriminated, the effect of the threatening nature of the song is even greater.

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[34] 'Nina Simone - Mississippi Goddam (Live in Netherlands)', YouTube, accessed May 10th, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghhaREDM3X8, 0:11 – 0:39.
[35] Nina Simone, 'Mississippi Goddam', performed by Nina Simone, *In Concert* (1964), track 7.
[36] Simone, 'Mississippi Goddam'.

By repeatedly emphasizing "Everybody knows about Mississippi, goddam!"[37], Simone refers to the notorious reputation of Mississippi as the most dangerous state for blacks to live in and where Medgar Evers had just been assassinated. "Alabama's got me so upset" is a reference to the church bombing by the Ku Klux Klan in Birmingham. "Tennessee made me lose my rest" ascribes the 1960 retaliatory violence black protesters of segregation in Nashville were confronted with, resulting in arrests and the bombing of civil rights lawyer Z. Alexander Looby's house. Southern segregationists could claim blacks were treated the same way as whites in the South, but Simone reminds her audience the evidence proves differently, and African Americans know about it and will not ignore it any longer. The song is a warning; a statement that things are going to change. In Gramscian terms, the lyrics show a conscious and open move away from consent culture: whereas blacks first accommodated the hegemonic system as a compromise to gain equality, they are now, as Simone tells the audience, no longer willing to consent and thus, becoming anti-hegemonic.

So, referring to the racism and violence the African-American community of the segregated Southern states had to live with, it immediately becomes clear *Mississippi Goddam* was not just any show tune. Simone means business: she openly calls out racism and becomes more explicit when she continues the song:

> Hound dogs on my trail
> School children sitting in jail
> Black cat 'cross my path
> I think every day's gonna be my last

Unlike the Biblical yearning for freedom expressed in *Go Down Moses* and the metaphorical rhetoric of *Strange Fruit,* Simone explicitly names the practical social injustices African Americans dealt with. There already existed a long tradition of African-American protest music, however, that tradition did not yet contain the blatant, urgent description of the troubles of racism blacks faced. The hound dogs chasing Simone refer to African Americans being threatened with violence in the South and how the unsafety they experienced. The school children in jail are a reference to the unjust and disproportionate incarceration of young blacks and, more practically, the mass arrests of black protesters in Nashville in 1960. The black cat represents the misfortune in the lives African Americans led in the South,

[37] Ibid.

merely because of their race. And finally, Simone again voices the unsafety she and other African Americans experience. She confronts her audience by saying that this unsafety results in blacks fearing for their lives daily.

Lord have mercy on this land of mine
We all gonna get it in due time
I don't belong here
I don't belong there
I've even stopped believing in prayer

Don't tell me
I tell you
Me and my people just about due
I've been there so I know
They keep on saying 'Go slow!'[38]

By saying she has stopped believing in prayer, Simone shows a turn away from the extensive Christian tradition of southern blacks, which provided comfort for the African-American community ever since the days of slavery, promising redemption from the harsh conditions in the racist South and finding support in faith. Simone, coming from this tradition, expresses a feeling of despair by singing she does not find solace in religion anymore. After all, backs were still being persecuted and discriminated. Religion has not done enough to secure the safety, equality and freedom of America's black population: action is required. Simone expresses she, and others with her, are tired of "going slow"; referring to the gradual desegregation politics of the South and the racist Jim Crow laws. Coming from the South, she says "I've been there", showing she is well-acquainted the "separate but equal" way of life in America's former slave states. The deaths of Medgar Evers and the four young girls in Alabama proved life still was not safe for African Americans and they were still not treated equally. Simone continues her criticism on gradual desegregation politics in the South:

But that's just the trouble
'Do it slow'
Washing the windows
'Do it slow'
Picking the cotton
'Do it slow'
You're just plain rotten
'Do it slow'
You're too damn lazy

[38] Ibid.

'Do it slow'
The thinking's crazy
'Do it slow'

The "Do it slow" parts are Simone's band responding to her singing. This way of singing, call-and-response, is a popular black gospel singing technique originating from the time when slaves sang work songs to increase morale and verbally affirm the sense of community among the enslaved Africans. The technique influenced other African-American musical genres, and, in the case of a protest song, adds more vigor to the message of the artist. In the case of *Mississippi Goddam*, the response ("Do it slow") is supposedly given by white segregationists because of the prejudice they felt toward blacks. This is the enumeration of characteristics Simone lists ironically: blacks wash windows, pick cotton, are rotten, lazy and think crazily; and this is why southern segregationists are in favor of "going slow". Again, Simone calls out the racism African Americans experienced in their daily lives. In the video recording of her performance in Amsterdam, when enumerating their stereotypes, she confrontationally stares into the eyes of her white audience, with a stern, frustrated expression on her face.[39] However, "do it slow" is also a reference to the slow pace slaves used to work at as a means of resistance and a way to make life on a plantation as bearable as possible. This early type of protest recurs here in *Mississippi Goddam* and is part of the stereotypes of southern African Americans. Simone here acknowledges African-American protest history, but also emphasizes going slow is no longer a way of achieving equality.

In the Carnegie Hall recording, Simone addresses her audience seemingly kindly, and asks: "Bet you thought I was kidding, huh?" Her audience laughs, uncomfortably. By now, there is no doubt *Mississippi Goddam* is no jaunty show tune, but an unapologetic, frustrated and menacing protest song. Again, by asking said question to the audience, Simone shows she has outsmarted them. It is a display of power; Simone proves she has the upper hand. This is metaphorical for her message: blacks are fed up with their poor quality of life, they will soon retaliate and gain power and white America is completely unaware of it.
The singer continues:

Picket lines
School boy cots
They try to say it's a communist plot

[39] 'Nina Simone - Mississippi Goddam (Live in Netherlands)', YouTube, accessed May 10th, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghhaREDM3X8, 2:45 – 2:56.

All I want is equality
For my sister my brother my people and me

Yes, you lied to me all these years
You told me to wash and clean my ears
And talk real fine just like a lady
And you'd stop calling me Sister Sadie

Simone names two ways of peaceful protest civil rights demonstrators used to protest segregation in the South. She then refers to the COINTELPRO program of the FBI, that tried to undermine civil rights efforts by persecuting civil rights leaders as communists.[40] Here, she again calls out unequal treatment; this time by a government agency and openly criticizes it. Washing and cleaning her ears and talking fine like a lady indicate African Americans behaving obediently in exchange for the promise of them eventually being treated equally. Sister Sadie is a fictional character in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and represents the suppression black women experienced when their slave masters renamed using standard slave names. Simone calls out racists on not keeping their promises; black women were still treated unequally and she expresses she is no longer willing to wait for the approval of whites and thus, claims her independence herself.

After this, the phrase "Go slow!" and "Do it slow" is repeated several times. By now, the song has almost come to an end, and Simone emotionally exclaims her lyrics, almost yelling. In the meanwhile, the up-beat show tune keeps playing and it feels as if the band is working up to a climax. Simone has conveyed an urgent message, and she unapologetically wants her listeners to know "doing it slow" does not suffice anymore. A revolution is coming, and Simone means for her audience to feel the threat. At the end of the song, she yells: "You don't have to live next to me, just give me my equality. That's it!"[41]

"I'm gonna leave you with the blues – *Backlash Blues* (1967)

In *Backlash Blues*, Simone again openly confronts the system of racism and segregation African Americans suffered in the United States. She addresses "Mr. Backlash", the personification of white racist retaliation as a response to desegregation after the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965. As a response to these

[40] Robert Cook, *Sweet Land of Liberty,* 251 – 252.
[41] Ibid.

civil rights victories, white segregationists undertook legal and social measures to restrict the newly gained rights of blacks. Constitutional racism was banned; however, institutionalized racism remained. By 1966, this process of a white male's outrage at the loss of his privilege was called white backlash. Discrimination was forbidden theoretically, but socially and culturally, it persisted. Blacks still dealt with social and economic inequality, not only in the South, but in the more urban North as well.

In *Backlash Blues*, Simone sings the blues for Mr. Backlash, criticizing white backlash against blacks. The genre of the song, blues music, originated in African-American communities of the South in the 19th century. The musical style usually contains blue, or "worried", notes and the lyrics address hardships and provided African Americans with an outlet to express the sadness and frustrations of being a discriminated minority. A typical element of blues music is also the call-and-response arrangement that typify spirituals and we have already come across in *Mississippi Goddam*.

In *Backlash Blues,* Simone again does not shy away from enumerating the social inequalities African Americans experienced in the Unites States:

> Mr. Backlash, Mr. Backlash
> Just who do think I am
> You raise my taxes, freeze my wages
> And send my son to Vietnam
> You give me second class houses
> And second-class schools
> Do you think that all the colored folks
> Are just second-class fools?[42]

Like in *Mississippi Goddam,* Simone explicitly confronts racism in the United States' South. At the time the song came out, in 1967, civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King had spoken out against the Vietnam War. For many blacks, it felt contradictory to go fight for a country that still treated them as less than white Americans. This is what Simone addresses in these lyrics; blacks were expected to send their sons off to a war to risk their lives while, at home, they were treated as seconds class citizens, receiving a lesser quality housing, education and being paid less than whites. By asking "do you think that all the colored folks are second-class fools?" she again lets white segregationists, personified by Mr. Backlash, know African Americans are fully aware of the tactics of white backlash and, again, she explicitly names the ways blacks are disadvantaged because of racism.

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[42] Langston Hughes, "Backlash Blues", performed by Nina Simone, *Nina Simone Sings the Blues* (1967), track 6.

Simone continues, and now does not only respond to those hardships, but also has a threatening message for Mr. Backlash:

> When I try to find a job
> To earn a little cash
> All you got to offer
> Is your mean old white backlash
> But the world is big
> Big and bright and round
> And it's full of folks like me
> Who are black, yellow, beige and brown
> Mr. Backlash, I'm gonna leave you
> With the backlash blues[43]

At a time merely three years before, three civil rights workers were murdered in the South because they went door-to-door to get African Americans to register to vote, one can imagine message like this could be quite controversial. The lyrics are threatening, because by saying the world is full of people like Simone, she is suggesting whites might one day be subdued by people of color. She does not explicitly express what she means by singing this, but the passage certainly has a confronting, blunt and slightly menacing tone to it. Simone recurrently keeps showing her attendees she is consciously conveying a message of defiance. In a live recording of *Backlash Blues,* she sings to her audience:

> When Langston Hughes died, when he died he told me many months before: "Nina, keep on working 'till they open up the door. One of these days, when you made it, and the door is open wide. Make sure they know exactly where it's at so they have no place to hide."[44]

She mentions Langston Hughes here, because he is the author of the song. Here, Simone shows how Hughes had encouraged her to keep fighting for civil rights until whites had 'opened up the door', meaning until blacks were completely admitted to society as equals to whites. "Make sure they know exactly where it's at" again shows the confrontational and unapologetic nature of Simone's activism.

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[43] Hughes, "Backlash Blues".
[44] Nine Simone, "Backlash Blues (live version)", *Forever Young, Gifted and Black: Songs of Freedom and Spirit* (2006), track 2.

Another interesting aspect of the song is her continuous reminding of Mr. Backlash that he is going to be the one with the blues. Also, at the end of the song she sings: "You're the one that will have the blues/Not me, just wait and see". As described above, "the blues" represent feelings of sadness and despair, and by saying Simone will leave Mr. Backlash with the blues, she metaphorically gives her song to him, leaving the blue feelings of the discriminated black community with him. By singing this, she is telling her listeners she is convinced in the end, African Americans will get the rights they are fighting for. Mr. Backlash—white racists—will lose that battle and thus, end up feeling unhappy and "blue". This, again, was a threatening message for the hegemonic powers; white supremacists.

"There's a world waiting for you": *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* (1969)

In 1969, four years after Lorraine Hansberry had died of cancer, Simone co-wrote *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* in honor of her friend and revolutionary teacher. In these years, a shift had occurred in the Civil Rights Movement. As will be discussed in the following chapter, the second half of the 1960s marked a shift from activists working within the white hegemonic structures to focusing on black empowerment. Instead of trying to compromise with the white establishment, blacks now started to emphasize the need for an African-American, anti-hegemonic shared identity. *Mississippi Goddam* and *Backlash Blues* were addressed to white liberals and segregationists. Unlike these protest songs, *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* is, however, focusing less on whites than it is on blacks. It is meant as a motivational song for blacks, especially young African Americans. On the 2006 compilation album *Forever Young, Gifted & Black: Songs of Freedom and Spirit*, a live recording of the freedom song is included. In the recording, Simone starts by telling a story of how she misses Hansberry and about the origin of the song. She tells the audience about *To Be Young, Gifted and Black:*

> Now, it is not addressed primarily to white people.
> Though, it does not put you down in any way; it simply ignores you.
> [laughter and applause]
> For my people need all the inspiration and love that they can get, so...[45]

[45] Irvine Weldon, 'To be Young, Gifted and Black', performed by Nina Simone, *Forever Young, Gifted & Black: Songs of Freedom and Spirit* (2006), track 1.

There is contradiction in saying she will ignore white people with her song while addressing her white audience directly by saying it. By saying the song will not put white people down, she provocatively calls attention to how blacks have been treated by whites. For years, African Americans have been left out of the mainstream white culture, and now Simone announces she is going to sing a song that is focused merely on black culture instead of white culture.

Simone introduces her song as a motivational anthem for African Americans, letting them know, like many of the more radical activists would exclaim, black is beautiful, and being black was something to be proud of. Simone wants to let the black youth know they are not alone, and their journey towards equality and freedom has just begun, now constitutionally, blacks and whites are equal:

> Young, gifted and black
> We must begin to tell our young
> There's a world waiting for you
> This is a quest that's just begun

Simone also emphasizes the need for collectivism. She urges her people to empower younger generations, to tell them they have opportunities in a desegregating world. In the live version of *To Be Young, Gifted and Black,* she continuously sings "Unify us, and don't divide us", and continues, while a choir accompanies her: "Let us not fight over trivials. Let us learn how to love ourselves first."[46]

To Be Young, Gifted and Black is a song of empowerment and pride and it marks the end of the civil rights era and Simone's involvement in the movement. Black pride was the loudest chant now and, by this time, Simone herself had traded her relaxed, straight haircut for an afro. Simone here represents the shift to the focus on black pride that occurred in the late 1960.The anthem provides an interesting change of perspective, and it hints towards the philosophy of black artists independently creating art for black people in the coming decade; the 1970s.

And so, to what extent are the analyzed protest songs *Mississippi Goddam, Backlash Blues* and *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* expressions of radical thought? According to the working definition of radicalism created for this study, *Mississippi Goddam* and *Backlash Blues* are products of a non-confirmatory method to express protest. As discussed above,

[46] Ibid.

Simone broke with a tradition of African-American religious and metaphorical protest music by explicitly addressing the hardships and social injustices the African-American community experienced in the segregated South. Also, Simone was clear about wanting societal change: she did not believe in the institutional system of Jim Crow laws, favored desegregation and believed African Americans deserved the same economic and social opportunities whites had. The singer's lyrics express an unwillingness to compromise in achieving the change she desired for blacks. Lyrics like "Don't tell me/I tell you", "I don't trust you anymore" and "[…] just give me my equality!" in *Mississippi Goddam* show Simone was only interested in desegregation and the equal treatment of blacks as a solution in the civil rights struggle. Lastly, the singer is radical in the sense that the songs are verbally threatening the white hegemonic order; Simone's messages in both *Mississippi Goddam* and *Backlash Blues* are confronting and menacing. Because of the threatening way Simone tells Mr. Backlash the world is full of people looking like her and telling him he is going to be the one with the blues, *Backlash Blues* might even be identified as even more radical than *Mississippi Goddam*. Where *Mississippi Goddam* merely bluntly lists the social injustices, African Americans were confronted with, *Backlash Blues* contains a more provocative message. Simone does not only respond to racist action; she herself has a message for white segregationists as well. That is, that she is not alone in her pursuit of freedom and equality; that there many other colored peoples in the world, maybe suggesting on a global scale, the white man is the minority. However, the way Simone outmaneuvered her audience by playing a seemingly innocent "show tune" before she starts hinting at a revolution to come, one could also say *Mississippi Goddam* is more radical. Of course, the use of a profanity ("goddam!") as a black woman in the 1960 is in itself already an expression of radicalism. In this perspective, *Mississippi Goddam* is unprecedented in multiple ways.

To Be Young, Gifted and Black is a different kind of protest song and is also radical in a different way. Whereas earlier African-American protest music was focused on the hardships blacks faced because of white supremacy; much attention was given to the role of whites in that music. However, *Young, Gifted and Black* represents a shift in focus within the Civil Rights Movement. Disillusioned with the collaboration with the white establishment in order to achieve change, black activists started focusing on black community building and black emancipation. *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* is a product of this shift. It's a song of empowerment, addressing African Americans and leaving white Americans out of the picture.

The civil rights anthem thus had a radical side to it; unlike other popular music, *To Be Young Gifted and Black* was not meant for a wider, interracial audience. It's a product of

black pride, a movement occurring more and more after the second half of the 1960s. Unlike themes of suffering and survival in *Strange Fruit*, *To Be Young Gifted and Black* is about being victorious after enduring so much hardship. It is about forming a collective, and collectively being proud of culture and heritage. Like the blunt, threatening, confrontational nature of *Mississippi Goddam* and *Backlash Blues*, this was unconventional compared to the African-American musical activist tradition. In this sense, *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* certainly also is an expression of radicalism.

Chapter 2

James Brown, black emancipation and self-pride

The second half of the 1960s marks the end of the gradualist, pacifist Civil Rights Movement leaders like Martin Luther King came to represent. Black activists came to believe the traditional methods of protest and pursuing legal equality were not effective enough in order to change the race relations in the United States. After the violence civil rights activists had endured in the South in the first half of the decade, more and more blacks turned away from a nonviolent philosophy, favoring self-protection.[47] Already in 1957, Robert F. Williams, president of a North Carolinian NAACP city chapter, promoted armed black self-defense. He had founded the Black Armed Guard: a local rifle club made up of mainly black veterans. The guard was a response to the threats civil rights activists faced, and Williams aimed to defend the black community from white racist attacks.[48]

By this time, Malcolm X had become a well-known figure in the black freedom struggle as well. X was the most influential spokesperson of the black supremacist and separatist religious organization the Nation of Islam. The Nation was a controversial group for whites and blacks alike. Unlike other civil rights groups, the Nation did not favor desegregation and integration for blacks, but separatism. The organization forbade its members from voting, unlike the traditional Civil Rights Movement, which emphasized black enfranchisement. X was critical of leaders like King, calling him a puppet of the white establishment.[49] He distrusted the government and believed the only people that could protect blacks from being prosecuted and physically attacked by whites were blacks themselves, thus, like Williams, favoring armed self-defense. Because of X's involvement in the organization, the Nation of Islam's membership increased from an estimated 1,200 to 50,000 or 75,000 persons within a decade. A charismatic personality and convincing speaker, X gained popularity among young, urban blacks. Coming from a harsh environment and no stranger to crime, many related to X. He was an advocate of self-defense, black nationalism and African-

[47] Robert Cook, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 176 - 201.
[48] Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 86 – 99.
[49] Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (London: Penguin, 2011), 255 – 261.

American self-determination.[50] In 1964, X broke with the Nation of Islam and tried to connect more with milder civil rights efforts.

Another notion X promoted was that of black nationalism and "Black Power", meaning the self-determination of African Americans. The term was popularized by SNCC chairman Stokely Carmichael in 1966. The term called for blacks cooperating to achieve the advancement of African Americans, independent from white support. Under Carmichael, Black Power became SNCC's central ideology, even expelling whites from its membership. SNCC radicalized, moving it further away from moderate organizations like the NAACP. Young African Americans, frustrated with the slow progress of the civil rights efforts, accepted the call as a more effective way to approach the advancement of African-American rights[51].

Like SNCC, another organization based on the ideology of Black Power was the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. The Panthers were founded in 1966 by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, who were inspired by individuals as Malcolm X, Robert F. Williams and pan-Africanist writer Frantz Fanon. It was a leftist group that initially focused on armed self-defense. Newton and Seale wanted to act on the police brutality against blacks they had come across in the urban Californian Bay Area. Tensions in the urban black areas, the ghettos, of the big northern cities were growing, culminating, among others, in the 1965 Watts riots in Los Angeles. Because of restrictive housing laws in LA, blacks and other minorities lived separately from white neighborhoods in densely populated ghettos. Due to social discrimination, blacks were unable to attain high-paying jobs. Blacks faced police brutality as well because of a racist police force in the city. Newton and Seale recognized in the frustration of the black community in the ghettoes a weapon to use against police brutality. They organized armed patrols, watching the LA police in order to protect the black community. The Black Panther Party thus became a militant group, and they started dressing the part. Panthers wore uniforms, leather jackets and distinctive black berets, emphasizing their militant nature. They let their hair grow in a natural afro, promoting "black is beautiful", meaning they were not complying to white beauty standards anymore.[52] In 1967, the Panthers expanded their activities to social, communal work and formulated a defining document; list of demands named the "Ten-point Program". In the program, Newton and Seale advocated for

[50] Marable, *Malcolm X,* 190 – 193.
[51] Kwame Ture, *Ready for Revolution*, 192.
[52] Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

black self-reliance and equal opportunities, stating blacks would not be free until they were allowed to determine their own destinies.[53]

What Robert F. Williams, Malcolm X and the Black Panthers had in common, was their advocacy for black self-reliance and self-defense, but also black masculinity and traditional gender roles. They all believed it was the black man's task to protect and defend the black community. In fact, for its first two years of existence, the Black Panther Party consisted exclusively of men. The use of guns and glorification of violence and their militant appearance proved their manhood, affirming the Party was a patriarchal organization by the time the first black woman joined them. In a 1970 article on the Panthers, Tom Wolfe described them as follows: "These are no civil-rights Negroes wearing gray suits three sizes too big— […] —these are real men!"[54]

The Panthers denounced traditional feminism as a product of white power and replaced it with a "womanist" ideology. Womanism claimed black men and women were equal but held different positions within the African-American community, Also, race issues were always more important than gender issues. Because of this division of roles, the revolutionary Black Panther Party remained traditionally patriarchal.[55] The same can be said about soul and funk artist James Brown.

James Brown and Nina Simone made protest music in different ways. Whereas Simone called out racism in her music, confrontationally naming the ways blacks were disadvantaged by racist white culture, Brown hardly paid attention to these social injustices in his music at all. Instead, he addressed mainly blacks in his protest songs, singing about black pride and self-reliance. In 1966, he met Donald Warden, a scholar from Berkeley University, who hosted a black news program and was well-acquainted with people like Bobby Seale and Huey Newton. Brown liked Warden's promotion of the necessity of education for the African American youth, and the two met at Berkeley. Warden only wanted Brown to say a few motivational words on his radio program, but Brown was committed to the cause. In 1966, Brown released his self-explanatory, first socially conscious song *Don't Be a Dropout,* urging

[53] Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, "The Black Panther Ten-Point Program", *The North American Review* 253, no.4 (August 1968), 16–17.
[54] Tom Wolfe, "Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny's", *New York Magazine* (June 1970).
[55] Antwanisha Alameen-Shavers, "The Woman Question: Gender Dynamics within the Black Panther Party", *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men* 5, no. 1 (Fall 2016), 33-62.

young blacks to do well in school.[56] "Without an education, you might as well be dead",[57] he sang, emphasizing the importance of proper schooling to achieve black empowerment. *Don't Be a Dropout* is seemingly an expression of consent to hegemonic power. However, it could also be interpreted as a form of resistance and radicalism against the hegemonic system, which was rigged against black students. Because blacks were already disadvantaged due to racism, Brown here tells young African Americans to work with that system in order to outsmart it; to finish their education so they can take care of themselves and be successful. If they do not, they behave the way the hegemonic powers expect and want them to behave; to remain uneducated, disenfranchised and with little agency. So here, Brown follows the movement of advocacy for black self-reliance that occurred from the late 1960s on, as mentioned above.

In order to achieve equality, Brown believed African Americans had to become self-sufficient. This was not a new proposition; already in 1895, Booker T. Washington advocated financial self-reliance for blacks as a means to be treated equally.[58] Brown was innovative and radical in his philosophy however, because he used his own capital to invest in businesses in order to create employment opportunities for other blacks. He owned radio stations, a night club and a hotel. Furthermore, he was the owner of multiple record labels, coproduced *Blaxploitation* movies and founded his own trading stamp corporation, "Black and Brown". In an interview with *Jet* in 1971, he expressed his opinion on racial matters, something he rarely did:

> I'm a racist when it comes to freedom. I can't rest until the Black man in America is let out of jail, until his dollar is as good as the next man's. This country is going to blow up in two years unless the white man wakes up. The Black man's got to be free. He's got to be treated like a man. This country is like a crap game. I'll lose my money to any man as long as the game is fair. But if I find the dice are crooked, I'll turn over the table.[59]

As this quotation exemplifies, for Brown, freedom and independence were strongly connected to financial wealth. This mainly applied to men, however, for Brown directed his

[56] RJ Smith, *The One. The Life of Music of James Brown* (New York: Gotham, 2012), 179-180.
[57] Burt Jones, 'Don't be a Dropout', performed by James Brown, *Don't be a Drop-out,* 7" single (1966), track 1.
[58] Booker T. Washington, "The Atlanta Exposition Address", *A Nineteenth Century American Reader*, ed. M. Thomas Inge (Washington, D.C.: United States Information Agency), 411-413.
[59] M. Cordell Thompson, "James Brown Goes Through Some New Changes", *Jet*, December 30, 1971, 61.

messages of black pride predominantly at young black men. He believed it was a man's responsibility to provide for their families, like he so famously sung: "This is a man's, man's man's world / But it would mean nothing, without a woman or a girl"[60]. Like Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party, advocates of Black Power, Brown envisaged African-American gender roles to be traditional. Black men were required to financially look after and physically defend their families; women took on a supportive role in the home. To Brown, masculinity was strongly linked to freedom, and freedom was linked to financial independence: being able to take care of oneself and one's family. According to Brown, the (man's) world "would mean nothing without a woman or a girl", because it was a man's goal in life to be able to raise a family and be able to take of it. In order to raise such a family, naturally, men needed women. By saying he was a racist when it came to freedom, Brown meant he was only focused on the civil liberties of his people; African Americans. He favored their freedom over that of white Americans, because he simply disregarded their interests. His priorities lay with the advancement of the lives of black Americans.

Whereas artists like Simone expressed their activism mainly through their music and contributed to the civil rights struggle actively by performing at fund raisers and protest rallies, James Brown actually became politically active. Already right after "Don't be a Drop-out", he got involved with politics. The song was noticed and supported by vice-president Hubert Humphrey, who himself was in charge of a "Stay in School" program. In 1968 Brown endorsed Humphrey when he ran for office. In the same year, he purchased two mainstream local radio stations (one in his hometown of Augusta, Georgia) and transformed them to African American-orientated R&B stations, broadcasting programs like "Profiles in Black", which discussed and promoted black empowerment and pride.[61] That same year, Dr. Martin Luther Jr. was killed, and Brown was booked for a big show in Boston. Organizers wanted to cancel the show, afraid of managing thousands of outraged, grieving young blacks in one place. The crowds were already in downtown Boston, however, and it was decided by local officials the show could not be canceled. The show was broadcast on local television as well, in order to motivate fans to stay at home. Still, 2,000 fans attended and the atmosphere was frustrated. Brown knew he had to choose his words wisely. Earlier that day, on the radio, he had urged black citizens to honor King's message of non-violence and not to go out to protest, and many young, militant blacks had criticized him for it. He started the show by paying his

[60] James Brown, Betty Jean Newsome, 'It's a Man's Man's Man's World', performed by James Brown, *It's a Man's Man's Man's World* (1966), track 2.
[61] Smith, *The One*, 182.

respects to the late Dr. King and played some songs. However, when some fans tried to jump the stage and white policemen pulled them off, for a moment it seemed a black versus white aggressive confrontation would be broadcast on live TV. For the country, already in social unrest, this would mean more rioting; more racial violence. Brown deescalated the situation by yelling through his microphone: "Let me finish the show. We're all black. Let's respect ourselves. Are we together or are we ain't?" After this, his audience finished watching the show and went home. There was no violence in Boston in the days after the murder of King. Many news stations gave Brown credit for stopping a riot on the streets of the capital of Massachusetts.[62]

"We don't want no sympathy, we just want to be a man": *I Don't Want Nobody to Give Me Nothing (Open Up the Door, I'll Get It Myself)* (1969)

As mentioned before, Brown believed in hard work and self-determination. He did not need anyone else to get what he wanted, and this was the message he wanted to share with his audience. In his 1969 hit *I Don't Want Nobody to Give Me Nothing (Open Up the Door, I'll Get It Myself)*, he emphasizes his conviction that hard work and free enterprise will help the African-American community to get what it wants. The white, ruling class just has to give it the opportunity to do so:

> I don't want nobody
> To give me nothing
> Open up the door:
> I'll get it myself
> Do you hear me?[63]

With these lyrics, Brown wants to get a message through to the people causing the social inequality for African Americans. Furthermore, he addresses African Americans, encouraging them to become economically and culturally independent, because, like Brown, they can achieve it without help.

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[62] Ibid, 191-193.
[63] James Brown, 'I Don't Want Nobody to Give Me Nothing (Open Up the Door, I'll Get It Myself)', performed by James Brown, *I Don't Want Nobody to Give Me Nothing (Open Up the Door, I'll Get It Myself),* 7" single (1969), track 1.

In 1972, he endorsed the reelection of Republican president Richard Nixon, something he would be criticized for thoroughly by the black community. He never regretted the endorsement, though, and regardless of all accusations of bribery by the administration, Brown always denied getting money for his support for Nixon. In a 1972 article in *Jet* magazine, he explained he believed Nixon's program was beneficial for blacks, as it was for black entrepreneurs like himself.[64] *I Don't Want Nobody to Give Me Nothing* corresponds with these beliefs. He implores the American government to give African Americans the right tools and opportunities in order to achieve their own autonomy.

> Don't give me integration, give me true communication
> I don't give me sorrow, I want equal opportunity
> To live tomorrow
> Give me schools and give me better books
> So I can read about myself and gain my true looks[65]
>
> We got talents we can use on our side of town
> Let's get our heads together and build it up from the ground[66]

What Nixon and Brown liked about each other, was that neither felt the urge to stress the need for integration for blacks. Brown wanted self-sufficiency for his people; so, for Nixon, a Republican with a large Southern, white constituency opposing integration, Brown was the perfect black supporter. The artist here says integration, as civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King had advocated, is not something he longs for; he just wants equal opportunity to build his own life. This is what he also means when he refers to "our side of town"; the areas and communities African Americans live in. However, these lyrics also illustrate Brown's advocacy of black pride through education about African-American heritage, something Nixon's constituency would not approve. And thus, on the one hand, Brown held traditional Republican beliefs about self-determination, but also favored black cultural empowerment. Thus, the artist advocated a strong, common and most importantly, independent black identity for the African-American community, living alongside other American cultures. Like Simone's *Young Gifted and Black*, the song shows a move away from resistance within accommodation: willingness to adapt to white cultural hegemonic standards. Instead, it shows

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[64] "Brown endorses Nixon: "Brown Urges Nixon to Help Blacks and Endorses President", *Jet*, October 26, 1972, 61.
[65] Brown, "I Don't Want Nobody to Give Me Nothing".
[66] Ibid.

the growing need African Americans felt to build their own, new standard without the influence of whites, and thus an anti-hegemonic sentiment.

"Brother, we can't quit until we get our share": Say it loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud (1968)

Brown is perhaps most known for his activism because of the song *Say it Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud*. The title is self-explanatory. In a time when phrases like "black pride" and "Black Power" were controversial because of their connection with militant groups like the Black Panthers, Brown decided to release a track calling up people to express their cultural pride loudly. Like Nina Simone's *Mississippi Goddam* and *Backlash Blues* the song makes a blunt, clear statement. Unlike Simone's protest songs, however, *Say it Loud* did not function to criticize white racists, but, like *To Be Young, Gifted and Black,* served to empower African Americans.

Also, like Simone's *Mississippi Goddam, Say it Loud* was unpopular with black and white radio stations alike. When KGFJ, a big African-American Californian radio station, refused to play the song, Brown responded by placing an advertisement in a local newspaper, titled "A message from James Brown to the people of America":

> The hierarchy of KGFJ has taken it upon themselves to deny James Brown the right to identify himself to his people and to deny the right of his people to hear the message contained in this recording. […] If the Black People that are going to stand by and let KGFJ do this then all this fighting James Brown does for the Black People is wasted.[67]

Brown was not a humble man and did not shy away from some public melodrama to get his record broadcasted. It worked: KGFJ played the song and other, black stations followed swiftly.

Brown starts the song by yelling "Say it loud!" and a group of children call back: "I'm black and I'm proud!"[68] This is again an example of the traditional call-and-response type of singing in African-American culture. At Brown's funeral in 2006, his manager Charles Bobbit told an anecdote on Brown's choice for children to sing the chorus with him. He wanted young voices on the record because he wanted to inspire young black generations and meant

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[67] James Brown, "A message from James Brown to the people of America", *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 29, 1968, ProQuest.

[68] James Brown and Alfred Ellis, 'Say it Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud', performed by James Brown, *Say it Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud,* 7" single (1968), track 1.

for the song to sound hopeful. However, the choice was also a strategic one. He knew adding children to the arrangement might help take the radical edge off the already quite outspoken content of the song.[69] This is an interesting detail, because Brown was well aware of the controversial nature of the title. However, he did find it important for the song to reach the mainstream listener. Drawing on Gramscian theory, one could argue this was a version of resistance within accommodation of the dominant order: Brown had to take into account the framework of hegemonial structures in order to get his message across. However, this message was anti-hegemonic, because it directly challenged the white supremacist dominant order.

After he and the choir of children repeat the chorus line several times, Brown raps the first verse:

> Some people say we've got a lot of malice
> Some say it's a lot of nerve
> But I say we won't quit moving until we get what we deserve
> We have been 'buked and we have been scorned
> We've been treated bad, talked about as sure as you're born
> But just as sure as it takes two eyes to make a pair, ha!
> Brother, we can't quit until we get our share[70]

Whereas Brown also strongly advocated for individual freedom and self-empowerment, "Say it Loud" illustrates his support of collective action as well. Bobbit also remembers how Brown wrote the song on hotel napkins after watching a news story about black-on-black violence, wondering why his people were fighting amongst themselves.[71] In the manner he confronted his Bostonian fans with their lack of self-respect and inability to act as a group, this verse is about "we" and "us" as well, referencing all African Americans, motivating them not to stop working together in order to achieve racial, social and economic equality. The lines also boldly tell white, racist listeners that Brown represents a dauntless community of proud people who will not be defeated in their struggle for civil rights. The black pride era was also accompanied by its own vernacular. To emphasize a feeling of community and a mutual cultural background, blacks, the Black Panthers in particular, started to refer to one another as "brother" and "sister" more often. In James Brown's music, he used the terms frequently as well. He also referred to himself as "Soul Brother Number 1", emphasizing his blackness in his nickname.

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[69] Don Rhodes, *Say it Loud! My Memoires of James Brown: Soul Brother No.1* (Guilford: The Lyons Press, 2009), 50-52.
[70] James Brown, "Say it Loud".
[71] Smith, *The One*, 210.

The most radical line of the song comes in the fourth verse of the song: "We'd rather die on our feet, than be livin' on our knees."[72] The line is a perfect summary of Brown's personal convictions. As a proud man, he strongly believed a man without freedom was not a man at all. And so, black men, should continuously fight for their freedom, even if it meant putting themselves in danger. According to Brown, the black community should rather want to perish in the struggle for equality, than not to fight for it at all. In his 1986 autobiography, Brown describes his own experience creating and performing the anthem:

> The song is obsolete now. Really, it was obsolete when I cut it, but it was needed. You shouldn't have to teach people they should be proud. They should feel it just form living where they do. But it was necessary to teach pride then, and I think the song did a lot of good for a lot of people. […] People called "Black and Proud" militant and angry – maybe because of the line about dying on your feet instead of living on your knees. But really, if you listen to it, it sounds like a children's song. That's why I had children in it, so children who heard it could grow up feeling pride. It's a rap song too. The song cost me a lot of my crossover audience. The racial makeup at my concerts was mostly black after that. I don't regret it, though, even if it was misunderstood. It was badly needed at the time. It helped Afro-Americans in general and the dark-skinned man in particular. I'm proud of that.[73]

Indeed, the artist explains how he himself had already attained his sense of self-pride and used Say it Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud to inspire blacks to follow his example. Unlike his militant contemporaries, for Brown, black pride did not entail exclusion from American society or taking up arms to gaining the wanted equality. He wanted to help his people empower themselves to they could claim their own, position in that society. In order to do so, they first needed to start feeling proud about themselves and their heritage. Say it Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud was meant to stimulate this.

"Like a dull knife, you just ain't cutting": Talkin' Loud and Sayin' Nothing (1972)

So, what was Brown's relation to militant individuals like Stokely Carmichael, Huey P. Newton and groups like the Black Panthers? Brown could not identify with the ideology of militant black nationalists. He was an advocate of black emancipation because he wanted African Americans to be proud of their heritage in order to become self-sufficient.

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[72] James Brown, "Say it Loud".
[73] James Brown and Bruce Tucker, *James Brown: The Godfather of Soul* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1986), 199-200.

Nonetheless, the rhetoric of groups like the Black Panthers did not resonate with Brown's ideas. As discussed above, according to Brown, blacks had to become financially independent in order to achieve the same social status as whites. Once this was accomplished, racism would, in the end, disappear, and blacks and whites could continue living alongside each other in American society. The ideas of the Black Panther Party, however, were less pragmatic. As discussed above, in his 1966 "Ten-Point Program", Huey P. Newton, a Marxist, listed the beliefs of the Party, demanding, among other things, political, economic and social self-determination and independence.[74] Not surprisingly, Brown and the Panthers, both extremely proud and convinced of their beliefs, did not get along. After Brown released "America is My Home", in the Summer of 1968, the Panthers even left a fake bomb on the doorstep of his hotel room with a note Brown never disclosed the contents of.[75]

In 1972, Brown retaliated. Black militancy flourished and the Black Panther Party expanded from 31 members in May 1967 to more than 10,000 by December 1969.[76] Brown felt that despite their numbers, the Party was not accomplishing much for the black community: black militancy was not the way to go. "What we need are programs that are so out of sight, they'll leave the militants with their mouths open. […] A militant is just a cat that's never been allowed to be a man."[77] Brown felt he knew better how to fix the system: in order to do so, you had to be part of the system. Again, this fits Lears' theory about resistance within accommodation. For Brown, black militant radicals like Newton did not participate and thus, could never bring about change.

To make this message clear, Brown wrote "Talkin' Loud and Sayin' Nothing" in 1970, criticizing the radical black activists for their revolutionary, yet empty rhetoric.

> Like a dull knife
> You just ain't cutting
> You're just talkin' loud
> And sayin' nothing[78]

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[74] Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, "The Black Panther Ten-Point Program", *The North American Review* 253, no.4 (August 1968), 16–17.
[75] Smith, *The One*, 208.
[76] Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 199.
[77] Smith, *The One*, 265.
[78] James Brown and Bobby Byrd, 'Talkin' Loud and Sayin' Nothing', performed by James Brown, *Talkin' Loud and Sayin' Nothing*, 7" single (1972), track 1.

The dull knife represents the lack of practical influence the Panthers had through their revolutionary beliefs. The Panthers are represented as a knife, a weapon, however, the knife was not sharp and thus, would not do any harm. Brown wanted to mock the militants by letting them know he was not to be influenced by their ideals, because he did not take them seriously at all:

> Don't tell me
> How to do my thing
> When you can't, can't
> Can't do your own
> Don't tell me how to be a boy
> When, when you know I'm grown[79]

According to Brown, if you wanted change, you had to act, and, at times, make compromises for the greater good. Therefore, the rigid, idealistic principles of the Panthers did not appeal to him at all. To him, their unrealistic beliefs were proof the Party consisted of immature men, whereas he himself was mature. Brown advocated Soul Power as an alternative for Black Power.

Brown believed in the American system. He did not want to break that system; he merely wanted to change it for the betterment of blacks. In his biography on Brown, *The* One, RJ Smith notably writes: "Home was home, and for all its flaws America was worth fixing. For Brown, black education would lead to black empowerment, empowerment to financial independence, and independence would lead to social equality; that was his touchstone."[80] In this perspective of self-determination and looking out for your own, James Brown, in the light of American liberal tradition, was not radical at all. In Gramscian terms, here, he was exercising resistance within accommodation; he was not part of anti-hegemonic culture.

However, his protest songs *I Don't Want Nobody to Give Me Nothing, Say It Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud* and *Talkin' Loud and Sayin' Nothing* were all products of and advocating black pride and, so, broke with confirmatory methods of expressing activism within the African-American protest music tradition. Like Simone, Brown was also explicit about the change he wanted: he wanted blacks to feel proud and empowered so they would gain the same opportunities as whites. In exchange, whites only had to "open up the door"; not restrict blacks from grasping those opportunities. This belief in self-reliance is also a non-

[79] James Brown, "Talkin' Loud and Sayin' Nothing".
[80] Smith, *The One*, 178-179.

confirmatory, republican-oriented method to acquire the desired change in civil rights tradition of democratic and leftist sympathies. Lastly, Brown's productions can be identified as radical because he expressed an explicit unwillingness to compromise ("We'd rather die on our feet, than be livin' on our knees"). For Brown, it was black pride and self-determination, or nothing.

James Brown was radical in his unapologetic blackness and his advocacy for black emancipation and indifference to black integration. Thus, he advocated societal change. He was unwilling to compromise in achieving this change because he was not interested in black integration in white dominated culture. He invested in the black community by owning his own businesses, creating job opportunities and trying to motivate other blacks to do the same; all examples of the non-confirmatory methods he used to gain equality. And, finally, he was radical because he advocated a different form of black pride than many of his counterparts did. Unlike the Black Panthers and other radical black nationalist organizations, Brown was not militant. He was a loyal American working within the system. He believed blacks could fit within that system when they were given the chance to look out for themselves.

Chapter 3

Public Enemy, black militancy and distrust of government

The late 1970s and 1980s marked a period of increasingly harsh conditions for urban blacks living in America's major cities. Cocaine by this time had become a popular drug, and when a big influx of the drug occurred and prices decreased, drug dealers started selling a solid, smokable version; crack cocaine. The newly developed narcotic on the market led to the crack cocaine epidemic in big American cities, which, in turn, led to an increase in drug-related crime. Already, in 1971, Nixon had declared a "War on Drugs", and in 1973 his government had established the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), which actively focused on the control of illegal drugs. Nixon also increased punishments for drug-related crimes, in some cases making incarceration a minimum sentence.[81] Because of the vicious circle of poverty and discrimination blacks were faced with in urban inner cities and ghettoes, the African-American community was an easy target for War on Drugs initiatives. Young blacks had fewer work and education opportunities and more easily resorted to crime, compared to whites who did not face discrimination and institutional racism. In fact, John Ehrlichman, aide of Nixon in declared in 1994:

> You want to know what this was really all about? The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I'm saying? We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.[82]

Ehrlichman here suggests the War on Drugs was a tool of the American government to take discriminatory, suppressing measures against the black community. In her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander argues a similar case. Her study, however, focuses on Reagan's continuation of the War on Drugs. Reagan's

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[81] Johann Hari, *Chasing the Scream: The First and Last Day of the War on Drugs* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 35 – 43.
[82] Dan Baum, "Legalize It All: How to Win the War on Drugs", *Harper's Magazine* (April 2016), https://harpers.org/archive/2016/04/legalize-it-all/ (accessed May 13, 2018).

administration targeted crack cocaine in particular, and by implication, young black men. Because of increasingly harsh punishments, a disproportionate number of black males were incarcerated because of drug-related crime. Alexander argues these mass arrests also increased police brutality against blacks, thus making Reagan's War on Drugs a cover for a racist criminal justice system, aimed at incarcerating and disenfranchising as many blacks as possible. Because in many states, once one was convicted for drug-related crime, one lost the right to vote. Also, a criminal record drastically decreased opportunities for blacks, contributing to the already existing downward spiral of poverty in the black urban communities, which, in turn again led to more drug abuse and drug-related crime.[83] It is interesting to compare this information to why James Brown advocated for young blacks to stay in school; to prevent them from becoming a part of the vicious circle that structurally disadvantages African Americans. Subsequently, the distrust of government among African Americans grew. Civil rights groups like the Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam, now under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan, found many followers in urban environments. It was in such an area where the members of Public Enemy grew up.

The hip hop group Public Enemy was founded in 1986 on Long Island by the group's best-known rap artists, Carlton Ridenhour and William Drayton; hereafter referred to as Chuck D and Flavor Flav, respectively. The duo had gained popularity among urban black youths from Long Island and New York because of their unapologetic and confrontational lyrics and were noticed by Def Jam Records. They were signed to the label, together with production team The Bomb Squad, DJ Terminator X, and 'Minister of Information' Professor Griff. Griff acted as the spokesperson of Public Enemy, but also as the leader of performance group Security of the First World, S1W. In this research, however, the works of rappers Chuck D and Flavor Flav will be emphasized most, since they produced the lyrics that form the topic of this chapter. The Security of the First World will be addressed as well, because the group's appearance formed a crucial element of the message Public Enemy wanted to deliver.

Unlike Nina Simone and James Brown, Public Enemy started out consciously making music that defied the dominant order. Before the group gained national fame, popular hip-hop

[83] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 70 – 95.

artists like Run DMC confined themselves to making party music, contributing to the consent culture of hegemonic powers. The DJ was the main act at dance parties and rappers, or 'Masters of Ceremony'; emcees, supported DJ's by rapping and rhyming on the microphone. In the present day, hip hop and rap music is characterized by the popularity of rappers instead of the production team and DJ's behind the beats they perform to. Public Enemy was one of the rap groups to instigate this shift. For Chuck D, rapping was not just supposed to be about witty word play; his lyrics needed to mean something as well. In Public Enemy's first major 1988 hit "Don't Believe the Hype", Chuck summarizes his intentions by rapping "Caught in the middle and not surrendering. I don't rhyme for the sake of riddlin'".[84]

Apart from the group's controversial lyrics, which I will discuss later in this chapter, Public Enemy also utilized its image to express its beliefs. Firstly, its logo consists of a silhouette of a man in a hat standing, arms folded, with a crosshair positioned over the top. "The crosshairs logo symbolized the black man in America, A lot of people thought it was a state trooper because of the hat, but the hat is one of the ones that Run-DMC wore. The B-Boy stance and the silhouette was more like the black man on the target."[85] Another example of Public Enemy symbolism can be seen on the album cover of *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back,* where Chuck D wore a LA Raiders cap as a tribute to the Black Panthers who were, just like the football team, founded in Oakland. On the same cover, we see Flavor Flav wearing his iconic clock necklace, meant to remind Public Enemy's listeners to "know what time it is": time for Public Enemy to talk serious business.[86] The band was also one of the first rap groups to accompany their singles with music videos. These videos were often received with outrage, because of their confrontational nature, for example, showing drug abuse in African-American ghettoes. Lastly, the band put great consideration into its live performance. As mentioned above, Terminator X, Chuck D and Flavor Flav were accompanied on stage by a performance group called The Security of the First World; S1W. Originally meant as security for Chuck D and the Bomb Squad when they were still playing at house parties in the ghettos of the East coast, the S1Ws were disciplined, militant men with strong ties to the Nation of Islam and the Black Panthers. During life performances of Public

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[84] Public Enemy, "Don't Believe the Hype', performed by Public Enemy, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (1988), track 3.
[85] "Public Enemy Reveal Origins of Name, Crosshairs Logo", Rolling Stone, last modified August 18, 2014, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/public-enemy-reveal-origins-of-name-crosshairs-logo-20140818.
[86] Russell Myrie, *Don't Rhyme for the Sake of Riddlin': The Authorized Story of Public Enemy* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 104-105.

Enemy, they functioned as background performers, marching around in uniforms and carrying fake heavy arms. The imagery of S1W added more emphasis to the severity of Public Enemy's message.

Public Enemy's logo[87]


Two members of S1W, Professor Griff (bottom right), Flavor Flav (bottom left), Chuck D (bottom middle) and Terminator X (top middle)[88]

[87] https://tonymuhammad.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/publicenemy_logo.jpg.
[88] https://www.stereogum.com/1715533/public-enemy-announce-deluxe-it-takes-a-nation-of-millions-to-hold-us-back-fear-of-a-black-planet-reissues/news/.

"Too black, too strong": Bring the Noise (1987)

Bring the Noise was Public Enemy's second single of their 1988 first hit album *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. The song actually summarizes some of the topics the group got such a controversial reputation for. It starts with a sample of a Malcom X "Message to the Grassroots" speech, with X repeating the sentence "Too black, too strong". The fast, chaotic beat starts playing and Flavor Flav calls out to his fellow group member to "show them how we do this". Chuck D's low but loud, serious voice responds and he raps:

> Bass! How low can you go?
> Death row, what a brother knows
> Once again, back is the incredible
> The rhyme animal
> The uncannable D, Public Enemy Number One
> Five-O said, "Freeze!" and I got numb
> Can I tell 'em that I never really had a gun?
> But it's the wax that the Terminator X spun[89]

The line "Bass! How low can you go?" is ambiguous. On the one hand, D is referring to the depth of his own voice. On the other, however, he is asking how low people can go, in terms of hardships. He answers that for African-American men, the lowest they can go is capital punishment by federal law, referring to the fact black men were and have been overrepresented in American federal prisons and on death rows.[90] This was especially relevant in 1987, when the War on Drugs was being waged by federal government, disproportionally affecting African Americans, black males especially. For urban black men like Chuck D, the death sentence was an actual threat to their lives and thus something they were familiar with. Tricia Rose defines this development as follows: "Hip hop artists articulate a range of counter-reactions to the range of institutional policing faced by many young African Americans"[91]. After this line, D boasts about himself as rap artists are known to do, referring to himself as "uncannable", meaning he could not be contained, and "Public Enemy Number One", admittedly aware of his group's controversial status. The lines that come next,

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[89] Public Enemy, "Bring the Noise", performed by Public Enemy, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (1988), track 2.
[90] Michael Tonry, "Race, Ethnicity and punishment" in: *The Oxford Handbook of Sentencing and Corrections*, ed. Joan Petersilia and Kevin R. Reitz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 63.
[91] Tricia Rose, "Fear of a Black Planet: Rap Music and Black Cultural Politics in the 1990s", *Journal of Negro Education* 60, no. 3 (Summer 1991), 279.

exemplify this as well. By "Five-O", Chuck D means the police, so he raps about the situation when the police stop him and he gets numb, afraid of what happens next. Would it even matter that he did not carry a gun, he questions, since, because of racial prejudice, the police would suspect him of carrying a weapon either way? However, it turns out he is not a threat because of alleged gun possession, but because of the music he makes (the "wax" of a record represents this).

Bring the Noise criticizes the prejudice rap groups and rap fans had to deal with. Hip hop was a relatively new genre, and conscious rap even more so. Born in the black ghettos of the urban North, the music was associated with crime and violence. Or, as The Bomb Squad sampled, rap groups like Public Enemy were, for main stream media and for governmental bodies like the police, "too black and too strong". Another factor that was threatening about Public Enemy, was the ideological thinking of some of its members. D raps:

> Now they got me in a cell 'cause my records, they sell
> Cause a brother like me said "Well
> Farrakhan's a prophet and I think you ought to listen to
> What he can say to you, what you wanna do is follow for now[92]

In this verse, Chuck D advocates for Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, known for his black separatist but also homophobic and anti-Semitic views. Later on, in his career, Chuck continued to refer to himself as a follower of Farrakhan, as did S1W leader Professor Griff.

Finally. "Bring the Noise" is a politically charged, controversial song because of Flavor Flav's reference to the use of violence in the bridge:

> Ayo Chuck, they're saying we're too black, man
> Yo, I don't understand what they're saying
> But little do they know they can get a smack for that, man[93]

Coming from rough neighborhoods in the Long Island and New York projects, the group members of Public Enemy had known violence up close. Flavor Flav does not explicitly mean he or Public Enemy will resort to violence when they are called "too black", but he does warn listeners that others might. Again, like Chuck's lines about death row, this refers to the fact that Public Enemy, like many of the young blacks identifying with their music, came from a

[92] Public Enemy, "Bring the Noise".
[93] Ibid.

harsh, masculine environment. In the biography of the group, *Don't Rhyme for the Sake of Riddlin',* Keith Shocklee, member of the Bomb Squad, comments: "The way we looked at it you had a bunch of ultra-soft black men representing the black race. It was like, "We're not like that, you ain't in the hood!""[94] Shocklee talks about how R&B artists of the time did not appeal to him and thus explains how the need for less "soft" genres like hip hop originated in the disadvantaged neighborhood he himself came from. So, even though they themselves were not advocates of violence and criminality, Chuck and Flavor did confront its existence in their music. For the young inhabitants of the same impoverished areas, this was music they could relate to, because the musicians did not shy away from truths they knew intimately.

"Check the Chromosomes": Prophets of Rage (1988)

Like many of Public Enemy's hit songs, *Prophets of Rage* starts with a sample quoting an important black figure. Comedian Richard Pryor is heard to respond to the accusation "You're quite hostile", by saying: "I got a right to be hostile, man, my people are being persecuted!"[95] Similar to Chuck's death row reference in *Bring the Noise,* Pryor expresses distrust toward the American government, accusing it of unfairly persecuting African Americans based on their skin color. Apart from this expression of anti-governmental sentiments, *Prophets of Rage is* also about black empowerment and militancy. The title refers to lost black leaders, as Chuck explained in a 1988 interview: "We were talking about Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, the prophets of rage, the black leaders of America that was wiped out. And we're talking about how that anger is in every black American".[96] Public Enemy recognized the need for new prophets of rage, and so, arose to channel the anger of young African Americans. For example, Chuck raps:

> Just peace at least 'cause I want it
> I want it so bad that I'm starving
> I'm like Garvey, so you can see B?
> It's like that, I'm like Nat, leave me the hell alone
> If you don't think I'm a brother then check the chromosomes
> Then check the stage, I declare it a new age
> Get down for the prophets of rage[97]

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[94] Myrie, *Don't Rhyme for the Sake of Riddlin',* 67-68.
[95] Public Enemy, "Prophets of Rage", performed by Public Enemy, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (1988), track 15.
[96] "Public Enemy", in: *Melody Maker* (London: July 1988), 23.
[97] Public Enemy, "Prophets of Rage".

This excerpt of the song references Marcus Garvey, advocate of pan-Africanism and founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, and Nat Turner, leader of a slave rebellion in 19th century Virginia. Both men, in this context, symbolize black resistance and empowerment. Chuck D provocatively compares himself to them, identifying himself as an individual with the same revolutionary potential and intentions. Furthermore, by saying "check the chromosomes", he confronts the racist Americans idea that blacks and whites have the same number of chromosomes in their DNA, thus making them of the same race, debunking the idea that the black and white men are not of the same kind, or "brothers". D continues on to "declare a new age", urging listeners to look toward the stage, metaphorical for the growth in popularity of hip hop music. Further on, in the fourth verse of the song, he raps: "I'm like Vesey or Prosser, we have a reason why. To debate the hate that's why we're born to die"[98]. Again, D compares his cause to that of leaders of (planned) slave rebellions (Denmark Vesey and Gabriel Prosser): he's fighting for racial equality and against hate and racism. According to this thesis' working definition of radicalism, Public Enemy's *Prophets of Rage* is certainly an expression of radicalism. The group wanted social change; better opportunities and more equality for urban African Americans and used non-confirmatory methods; making controversial rap music with provocative lyrics expressing black militancy, black pride and anti-governmental sentiments.

Further on in the song, Chuck, similar to James Brown, advocates the importance education for blacks, especially self-education on their African-American heritage, because what they are taught in school, is, according to him, false: "They tell lies in the books that you're readin'. It's knowledge of yourself that you're needin.'"[99] Again, these lines show Public Enemy's distrust towards the American establishment and its encouragement of black pride and black empowerment.

"This is what it takes for peace, so I just took a piece:"Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos (1988)

Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos is Public Enemy's most provocative, resistive and radical song for multiple reasons. The song tells a story about how Chuck D is incarcerated

[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid.

because he refuses to be conscripted to the US Army. He tries to break out of prison using force, with the help of the militant S1W group. To illustrate the narrative, the rap group produced a music video. In the video, Chuck D is rapping from a prison cell and is seen walking past multiple prison cells exclusively containing other black men. In the video, Flavor Flav is calling Chuck in the prison, supporting him and telling him about the plan to help him break out. Subsequently, Chuck is seen starting a prison riot, and prisoners use violence on the prison guards and warden. After this, we see multiple frontal shots of Chuck and the other prisoners threateningly walking towards the viewer, and their freedom. In the chaos of the riot, Chuck is recaptured and taken to be hung by a noose in a dark room. The S1W's arrive, climbing over the prison walls in Black Panther uniforms, heavily armed. The last shot is of the rope tightening and the white warden smugly smiling, suggesting the S1W's came too late to save Chuck D. Besides the provocative, violent images, viewers were confronted with a realistic image of the American justice system and mass incarceration, combined with historical practices that continue to live in the cultural imagination. The grim, dangerous atmosphere of the prison makes it uncomfortable to watch the video, as Public Enemy intended.

Chuck opens his first verse with his most iconic, often copied line "I got a letter from the government the other day. I opened it and it said they were suckers".[100] He gives a clear, insulting statement: the government wrote him a letter – to draft him in the army – and it is a fool to have done so. Chuck continues:

> They wanted me for their army or whatever
> Picture me giving a damn, I said never
> Here is a land that never gave a damn
> About a brother like me and myself because they never did
> I wasn't with it but just that very minute it occurred to me
> The suckers had authority[101]

So, for the army to write to him was a waste of time, because, as these lyrics make clear, Chuck refuses to fight for the country that has disadvantaged him for being a black man. This is an explicit expression of resistance. The notion of refusing to join the army was not a new one among blacks. Black men had fought in the US army, always to return to the same

[100] Public Enemy, "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos performed by Public Enemy, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (1988), track 12.
[101] Public Enemy, "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos".

unequal status in their homeland. During the Vietnam War, blacks opposed the war, among whom Martin Luther King. To some blacks, helping their country oppress foreigners while they themselves were oppressed by segregation and racism in the US, was unacceptable. The most notable African American to refuse his draft was Muhammad Ali, who was arrested and convicted for his refusal, but his conviction was overturned later on.

Public Enemy draws on this story, however, to address other issues. Chuck says he does not agree with his arrest and incarceration, because for him, it is insensible to fight for a country he is not loyal to, because of the way he is treated. However, he also acknowledges the "suckers" or the government, are the ones that have authority over him and he has no choice but to be imprisoned. The song also criticizes the racist American correctional system, as Chuck did in *Bring the Noise,* by referring to it as an "anti-nigga machine"; a system designed to disadvantage African Americans. He elaborates on his opinion of the system, however, by controversially rapping:

> They got me rotting in the time that I'm serving
> Telling you what happened the same time they're throwing
> Four of us packed in a cell like slaves, oh well
> The same motherfucker got us living in his hell
> You have to realize, what it's a form of slavery
> Organized under a swarm of devils[102]

Because of the War on Drugs in the late 1980s, American prisons were overcrowded, as Chuck exemplifies by comparing his crowded cell to African chattel slavery. He also makes a comparison between the white federal government that incarcerated him and white slavers and slave owners and finally, referring to them as devils.

To Chuck, his prison escape is completely justified. For one, he is incarcerated on false grounds and furthermore, the living conditions in the prison can be compared to that of a slave. He decides to escape, and even kills a female prison guard during the process. He justifies this as well, saying "a cell is hell, I'm a rebel so I rebel. Between bars, got me feelin' like an animal".[103] So because Chuck is in a hellish place, being treated inhumane, he claims, it is the system that makes him commit the violence and crimes he is committing. This message, together with the provocative, militant images of the music video, makes "Black Steel in the

[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid.

Hour of Chaos" a highly controversial song. Because it inclines to a call for anarchy and the justification of the use of violence, the song is highly radical.

Chuck D. being "executed" in the video of *Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos*[104]

As mentioned above, all music of Public Enemy is anti-establishment; anti-hegemonic. On the 1990 album *Fear of a Black Planet,* Flavor Flav dedicated an entire song, *911 is a Joke,* to the lack of response to emergency calls in black neighborhoods. Another hit single on *Fear of a Black Planet* is the provocatively, self-explanatory titled *Fight the Power,* labelling iconic American artists like Elvis Presley as racists. However, Public Enemy produced self-conscious music as well. Singles like *Night of the Living Baseheads* criticized drug abuse among the black community, and the single *Self-Destruction,* in collaboration with many other notable rap artists, denounces black-on-black crime and other self-destructive behavior.

Above all, Public Enemy´s music is provocative and unapologetic. Songs like *Bring the Noise and Prophets of Rage and Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos* blatantly express the anger and frustrations many young blacks dealt with in the late 1980s. As the close readings of these songs have shown, Public Enemy advocated black pride and empowerment, but also militancy and civil disobedience. It is unquestionable that the studied works are strongly anti-hegemonic and products of protest culture. Public Enemy is expressive in its message of black militancy. Because of this, the group's work is radical. Using methods that were non-

[104] https://backinthedaybuffet.com/old-school/public-enemy-black-steel-hour-chaos/.

confirmatory at the time—making conscious rap music with harsh, confronting lyrics and using confronting imagery— Public Enemy expressed its advocacy for equal treatment of blacks on topics such as mass incarceration and the American correctional system, defying "the powers that be"; the American established government.

However, Public Enemy's radicalism can also be traced to the group's immense popularity with the mainstream, regardless of their militant, controversial rhetoric and appearance. Again, like Simone and Brown, by means of resistance within accommodation, the group gained popularity among black and white audiences alike by cooperating with record labels that contributed to the cultural hegemonic order. By doing so, however, they got a platform to spread their consciously anti-hegemonic, radical message.

Conclusion

This thesis has focused on the African-American tradition of protest music from the 1960s to the 1990s and analyzed and historically contextualized the works of three radical African-American artists: Nina Simone, James Brown and Public Enemy. Each of these artists represents a specific historical context: Nina Simone that of desegregation in the South in the 1960s, James Brown of black emancipation and Black Power in the 1970s and Public Enemy of hardening conditions in black urban areas and black militancy in the 1980s. I have analyzed in what ways African-American protest music can be considered radical and how this music has developed over time by close reading a selection of popular songs performed by these musicians. I have defined being a radical as follows: being a radical means wanting to change part or parts of society fundamentally using non-confirmatory methods and not being prepared to compromise in achieving the wanted change. I have used Gramscian theory on hegemony, coercion and consent to define what makes a cultural product like a song political. The songs analyzed in this study are anti-hegemonic expressions because they consciously oppose the hegemonic order.

I have concluded that the studied works of Nina Simone, James Brown and Public Enemy show a diachronic trend of increasingly outspoken, blunt outrage toward racial injustice in the United States. Also, my study shows how black radical protest music moved away from the white hegemonic mainstream culture, focusing more on the development and establishment of a black cultural tradition. In the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement fought for desegregation and legal equality in the former southern slave states. Conditions for blacks in the South were harsh because of the threat of white backlash as a response to civil rights' victories. Nina Simone used her music to express her frustration on the matter. In *Mississippi Goddam* and *Backlash Blues*, she breaks away from the African-American tradition of religious or metaphorical protest music and calls out racism by enumerating the injustices blacks faced in the South. She also unprecedentedly swears multiple times in *Mississippi Goddam*, and in both that song and *Backlash Blues*, she threatens white listeners with the African-American freedom revolution is to come. The third and final song I have analyzed, *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, shows a different kind of radicalism. In this song, Simone shows an anti-hegemonic movement by focusing her music on a black audience. Whereas before, black protest songs addressed racial inequality and advocated for change; they were products of Gramscian resistance within accommodation. They appealed to the white

supremacist hegemonic system and thus, upheld that same system. *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* turns away from this hegemony and addresses blacks primarily, telling them to be proud of their blackness. This is a radical message because it directly challenges the white ruling order: Simone tells African Americans to move away from collaborating with the hegemonic establishment and to start focusing on their own community.

James Brown continued this trend and also mainly addressed an African-American audience in his songs of activism. Brown's message was about black emancipation: he advocated for blacks, especially black men, to be proud of their heritage and to work hard in order to become financially self-sufficient. Brown did not believe integration with white culture would help African Americans to gain a better quality of life. Instead, he stimulated black-owned business so the African-American community become self-sufficient and live alongside whites, but with equal opportunities. Brown's unapologetic call for black pride and his unwillingness to compromise ("rather die on our feet, than be livin' on our knees) made him radical.

Like Brown, Public Enemy's radicalism can be identified through its advocacy for black pride. However, the group also conveyed messages civil disobedience and black militancy. Public Enemy's performance group Security of the First World, a heavily armed unit dressed in military attire, showed the group's support of armed self-defense. Songs like *Prophets of Rage*, *Bring the Noise, Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos* and *911 is a Joke* express a confronting and blatant critique on the white dominant order and hegemonic institutions like the American justice system and authorities like the police force. Public Enemy's music is radical because of its openly confrontational and aggressive expression of the anger and frustration many young blacks in urban areas experienced.

It is impossible to answer which of these artists was most radical because they all expressed radicalism in different ways and within a different historical context. One could say Public Enemy was most confrontational in the use of its lyrics and threatening imagery of black masculinity and militancy. However, we need keep in mind the environment Public Enemy came from. Growing up in harsh urban areas where they were young black men confronted with criminality and poverty, one can understand and contextualize the rap group's rhetorical strategy better. In Simone's time, it perhaps was just as confronting that an African-American woman would use profanity on the radio and during live concerts, implicitly threatening her white audience. Again, it is important to bear in mind the historical context: in southern states, blacks still feared for their lives due to the threat of white supremacists, Simone went on stage and criticized the hegemonic system enabling that threat.

Thus, it is not possible to determine who was most radical. However, it can be concluded throughout the studied decades, a diachronic movement occurred of a more consciously open and blatantly angry protest movement, in which the studied artists actively called their audience to action. Also, the development of the music shows how more and more, radical artists and activists moved away from the mainstream and wanting to be a part of the white hegemonic cultural system. They concentrated, instead, on establishing and celebrating a consciously black cultural tradition.

Presently, the discussion of radicalism in African-American music is still highly relevant. Since 2013, the Black Lives Matter movement has been actively fighting racial profiling, police brutality and the in unequal treatment of blacks in the United States justice system. African-American artists have joined forces extensively with the movement. In 2016, R&B singer Beyoncé released a song called *Formation*, which embraced blackness and femininity. The song was also, however, a call-to-arms, addressing blacks, black women especially, to "slay" and "get in formation"[105]. The song became more controversial when Beyoncé performed it during the Super Bowl halftime show. Her back-up dancers wore black berets that reminded of the Black Panther Party. Also, when she sings "You just might be a black Bill Gates in the making" the singer and her formation of dancers raise their fists, also reminiscent of the Panthers. They continue to dance in the formation of an 'X', a tribute to Malcom X.[106] Afterwards, Beyoncé was accused of being radical and even a racist.

More recently, hip-hop and funk artist Childish Gambino released the much-discussed video to his protest song *This is America*. The video is filled with symbolic references to contemporary racial injustices. For example, in the opening frames of the video, Gambino is seen dancing to a gospel-like, upbeat song, singing "We just want to party, party just for you". He moves like the caricature of Jim Crow from the 1828 song *Jump Jim Crow*, a song and dance mocking and stereotyping of African-American slaves. The music suddenly changes, and Gambino is swiftly handed a gun and he shoots a hooded black man, who was just before still playing his guitar to the gospel song, in the back of the head. Gambino then hands the gun carefully to a young boy who treats the gun with great caution and care. The African-American man Gambino just shot, however, is disrespectfully dragged away.[107] The song criticizes America's glorification of gun possession. However, it is also a reminder for

[105] Khalif Brown, "Formation", performed by Beyoncé, *Lemonade* (2016), track 12.
[106] "Beyoncé - Formation Live At The Super Bowl 50 Halftime Show 2016", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lIX2ENPZo-8.
[107] "Childish Gambino - This Is America (Official Video)", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYOjWnS4cMY.

African Americans not to become distracted by mainstream media, symbolized by the elaborate dancing of the artist. Gambino tells his audience repeatedly: "Get your money, black man",[108] corresponding with James Brown's conviction of self-reliance, telling them to look after themselves.

Formation and *This is America* prove there still exists a diachronic movement of radical African-American protest music, and this movement is still relevant. Hip hop artists like Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar often use samples of songs by Nina Simone, James Brown and Public Enemy to show their historical consciousness and to link their music to a greater tradition of black protest music. Despite, or maybe even because of their outspoken radicalism, the music of these artists remains popular to this day.

[108] Donald Glover, "This is America", performed by Childish Gambino (2018).

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