

Chapter 13

The “Daughters of Soul” Tour and the Politics and Possibilities of Black Music

MAUREEN MAHON

In the spring of 2004, I received an e-mail announcing a concert called “Daughters of Soul.” As a fan, I found the tour description enticing. As a cultural anthropologist who studies contemporary African American musicians, I was curious about what the Daughters of Soul might mean in academic terms. Examining the ways and reasons cultural producers use artistic forms for expressive purposes—be they aesthetic, political, or both—is a central research concern for me. The arts and media are moneymaking businesses and sites of consumer entertainment, but they are also arenas in which definitions of identity and relations of power are articulated and contested, reproduced and reconfigured. For the artists and their audiences, music, film, literature, and the visual arts are important because they give aesthetic pleasure, provide inspiration, stir aggravation, and sustain life in both economic and entertainment terms. For anthropologists, these forms are significant because they are tangible products of human activity through which individuals tell themselves and others who they are and what they value. In short, the arts and media provide a map of what matters to cultural producers and the communities that support or criticize their work. Furthermore, these cultural productions are in many cases the sites and subjects of sociopolitical struggle and activism; in other words, they are a significant form of cultural politics. This chapter, a discussion of the conceptualization and execution of the Daughters of Soul tour, explores the cultural politics of black women’s musical production and the politics and possibilities of contemporary black music production in the age of neoliberalism.

The e-mail announcement described a tour that would play European jazz festivals and feature vocalists who had either a biological or stylistic link to African American soul music. Daughters of Soul is a two-hour concert featuring six lead vocalists, three backup singers, and a four-piece band. On its initial run in 2004, it played four dates at three European jazz festivals: the Nice Jazz Festival, Nice, France; the Pori Jazz Festival, Pori, Finland; and the

Jazzaldia Festival, San Sebastián, Spain. I was intrigued by a lineup that included the daughters of Donny Hathaway, Chaka Khan, and Nina Simone—Lalah Hathaway, Indira Khan, and Lisa Simone. Alongside them would be women who were pioneering artists in the field of black rock: Nona Hendryx, a founding member of the all-female, black rock group Labelle; Joyce Kennedy, a vocalist in the black funk metal band Mother's Finest; and Sandra St. Victor of the Family Stand, a black rock band that won critical praise with its innovative, genre-spanning 1991 album *Moon in Scorpio*. The latter three artists had developed long and varied careers; for example, St. Victor and her bandmates achieved chart success with their writing and production of several songs on Paula Abdul's 1991 multiplatinum pop album *Spellbound*. Partly because of their choice of musical genre, however, these black women were not in the mainstream of contemporary black music, a field dominated by rap, dance, and R&B during the last twenty-five years. For black women rockers in rock's white-male-dominated scene, the challenges were numerous. Their gender and race mark them as doubly outside the white male arena of rock 'n' roll. Like white women they are intruding in male space and like black men they are treading on white territory. As black women, they have to fight for recognition and respect as legitimate rock performers. St. Victor, a singer and songwriter, conceptualized the concert tour package to provide a performance opportunity for herself and musicians with whom she wanted to work in musical styles of their choosing. Using a broad definition of soul that embraced rock and funk, the Daughters of Soul tour advanced an expansive version of contemporary black American musical performance into the public sphere.

In drawing attention to the strategies St. Victor and her colleagues used in the design and execution of their tour, I want to highlight some of the complexities and contradictions that are part of the production and analysis of popular culture forms. Anthropologist Dorinne Kondo has observed that fashion, theater, and the arts are "contradictory sites of pleasure and contestation" (Kondo 1997: 4). Furthermore, she notes, the professional artists who are producing work in these arenas are often engaged in "complicitous critique" (Kondo 1997: 144). Kondo is sensitive to the need to find a way to analyze and characterize efforts to challenge a field while still working within that field. She calls on scholars to seek ways to "engage the complex politics of pleasure and of 'resistance' when nothing is beyond commodification or beyond the dominant" (Kondo 1997: 5; cf. Savigliano 1995). She stresses that it is especially important to address these issues when dealing with minoritized producers who typically work both within and against dominant paradigms of race, gender, and class. The Daughters of Soul exemplify this condition. They exploited and invested in dominant images and expectations in order to get a platform for a production that both contested and reproduced prevailing images of black women.

Ethnographers—who are similarly operating within and against the dominant frames of their field—can exploit the strengths of ethnography to uncover and analyze the strategic, sometimes contradictory, ways cultural producers position themselves and their work. In addition to participating, observing, and interviewing, ethnographers must attend to the “strategic shifts” people make as they negotiate between the rubrics of complicit and resistant behavior in order to achieve their goals. I see this focus as being aligned with the efforts of scholars who are trying to balance between “too much construction (textual, discursive, etc.) on the one hand, [and] too much making (decontextualized ‘resistance’) on the other” and who use practice theory, a “framework that theorizes a necessary dialectic between the two extremes” (Ortner 1994: 4) to explain social processes. Bringing this kind of ethnographic awareness to bear on popular culture producers working in the context of neoliberalism enables the revelation of links between political engagement, market forces, and identity. For black cultural producers in the post–civil rights era, for example, popular culture—especially music—is a form of capital. Black music and musical performance have a market value that provides access and mobility that older civil rights discourses of rights and practices of organization, it seems, no longer do. Indeed, artists can use musical performance to critique dominant ideologies when other avenues of contestation are closed off. Significantly, the musical mobilization I discuss here is shaped by the politics of race, gender, and location. The shift in venue from the United States to Europe offered performance opportunities not readily available to black American women in the United States, but it also introduced concerns related to reception in the European context, particularly in terms of local understandings of race, gender, and sexuality. In this chapter, I use ethnography to reveal the interaction of personal and structural factors that shaped the choices the Daughters of Soul artists made as they mounted their transnational, transcultural tour.

Like other essays in this collection, my study shows the ways in which people assert themselves and their interests in the face of exclusion, acting according to their needs and their desires rather than operating solely within the limited confines of officially accepted or expected behavior. Consequently, an ethnographic analysis of the tour allows me to draw attention to the relationship between strategies and dreams, aspects of thought and action that are always a part of cultural production. Watching two performances of the concert—in San Sebastián and Nice—talking to the Daughters of Soul performers, listening in on their late-night strategy sessions, and witnessing the fruits of their creative labor underscored for me the importance of practices of dreaming, imagining, and envisioning. The starting point of creativity and activism, they are at the heart of human agency and play out within and against social and institutional structures. In his study of black political organizing (2002), historian Robin D. G. Kelley uses the evocative title *Freedom Dreams* to put the role of the imagination at the center of an analysis of social

change. His emphasis on dreams is unusual in studies of social movements, he says, but crucial, because “any serious motion toward freedom must begin in the mind” (Kelley 2002: 5). The struggle for social and political freedom that are the focus of the activists Kelley is writing about are distinct from but connected to the quest for aesthetic and creative freedom that concerns artists. In both cases, the acts of dreaming and doing in spite of what seems logically possible are imperative. The women who participated in the Daughters of Soul tour are hardheaded dreamers who are also professional musicians with backgrounds and experience in bringing musical ideas to fruition and earning a living in the process. Their actions represent a dialectic of dreaming and doing that is encapsulated in Antonio Gramsci’s aphorism: “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.”

My impulse to think about the work of these performing artists in light of Gramsci (1971) follows from the fact that for St. Victor and many cultural producers the processes of dreaming extend beyond thinking about professional and aesthetic possibilities into the realm of cultural politics, that is, “the processes through which relations of power are asserted, accepted, contested, or subverted by means of ideas, values, symbols and daily practices” (Glick Schiller 1997: 2). This is because in order to implement the creative projects they imagine, artists who do not fit into the public spaces and creative landscape in which they hope to perform have to alter them so they can participate in them. Artists in this position are by necessity challenging the dominant ideologies in which potential gatekeepers and audiences are invested. Elsewhere, I have noted that increasingly anthropologists are paying attention to these processes, viewing the media and popular culture forms that these cultural producers create as “anthropologically significant sites of the production and transformation of culture” (Mahon 2000: 469). This shift emerges out of a slowly growing willingness to see media and popular culture as worthy of serious scholarly attention throughout the academy. It may also stem from recognition that the viability of achieving change through more traditional modes of political activity like electoral politics and social policy initiatives has been severely restricted in a period of neoliberal reform and that some social struggles and political expressions occur in part through the production of media and popular culture.

Challenging dominant ideologies and practices has been imperative for contemporary black American rock musicians who operate in a context dominated by limited notions of appropriate black cultural expression. Although some exceptional black rockers like Jimi Hendrix, Tina Turner, Prince, Lenny Kravitz, and Living Colour have enjoyed mainstream success, most have found that the racialized political economy of the recording industry makes it difficult, if not impossible, to produce and disseminate their music. In particular, the commonly held idea that black artists and audiences have no interest in or attachment to rock has shaped their professional prospects.

During the 1990s, I researched the black rock scene in New York and Los Angeles, working with musicians who were members of the Black Rock Coalition (BRC), an organization formed in 1985 to support African American rockers and draw attention to the racism of the recording industry (Mahon 2004). They were also concerned with challenging the pervasive thinking that saw their investment in rock as a rejection of blackness. This was the case because over time rock, a form originated by black Americans in the 1940s and 1950s, had become associated with white Americans and, in terms of performers, with white men.

The black rockers who participated in the BRC had come of age in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period of desegregation and important advances for African Americans in terms of increased acquisition of college education, white-collar employment, and homeownership—the usual markers of middle-class status in the United States. By the mid-1980s, the heart of the Reagan era, they were watching the erosion of and attack on civil rights era gains. Mainstream political discourse and media representation ceased to approach race and racism as structural issues that public policy should address. At the same time, BRC members were trying to break into a recording industry that operated with rigid ideas about appropriate and marketable black musical productions. Furthermore, these private companies were not subject to civil rights legislation ensuring equal employment opportunities (NAACP 1987). With few formal ways to press for inclusion in the industry, BRC members sought to raise consciousness about the racism of the music industry and the historic contribution of black artists to rock ‘n’ roll. The new organization also worked to create a visible community of listeners and performers—by sponsoring concerts in New York and later in Los Angeles—in order to demonstrate the vitality and viability of black rock. Along with founding BRC band Living Colour, Sandra St. Victor’s band the Family Stand was one of the handful of black rock groups that secured a major label recording contract during this period. As a veteran professional musician and as someone who participated in the BRC’s cultural activism, St. Victor was, by the turn of the millennium, well versed in the vicissitudes of the music industry. She knew, for example, that it would make sense to create her own opportunity to perform rather than wait for something to happen. In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss the strategies St. Victor used to mount the show and consider some of the consequences of her efforts.

Strategies of Naming: Selling Soul

Using the connections I had developed with black rock musicians in New York, I was able to get in contact with Sandra St. Victor whom I did not know before starting this project. We communicated by e-mail and phone before the start of the tour. We talked about the conceptualization of the show, an

idea she had been toying with since moving to Amsterdam in 2002. She had long thought it would be an ideal musical and performing experience to bring together a grouping of black women vocalists whose work she admired—some whom she knew and wanted to work with, others whom she had not met but hoped to work with. In organizing the tour, she was responding to two fears that often motivate action: she worried that if she didn't put the show together, no one else would and it would never happen. And, she worried that if she didn't do it, someone else would—and would get the credit.

St. Victor was conscious of stepping outside her usual role as an artist to be a tour organizer and promoter. All professional musicians must, at some level, think of their careers as a business they are running, but business became the centerpiece for St. Victor since she was the person selling the Daughters of Soul tour to European jazz festivals. Working with a Dutch colleague, Cees Gog, who had experience with the business side of festivals, she focused on logistics like budgets, schedules, marketing, promotion, hiring musicians, payroll, and road management that she did not engage with when she focused on being a singer on stage. She also had to find a way to package her idea so that it would appeal to festival programmers. From a marketing perspective, simply assembling six artists would not be as effective or interesting as creating a story that connected the performers.

The women of the Daughters of Soul tour represent a range of musical styles—R&B, rock, disco, funk, even a little jazz, but St. Victor found that she could forge a viable link by using the term “soul” and recasting it to fit her aesthetic vision. “Soul” allowed her to work within a genre that was recognizable as black and into which it was easy to fit black women. Soul music came into its own in the 1960s on labels like Atlantic and Stax and is associated with artists like Aretha Franklin (“The Queen of Soul”) and Otis Redding. With its uncompromising assertion of an aesthetic rooted in black American religious and secular traditions, fans and critics have tended to view soul music as a particularly authentic form of black musical expression. By the late 1960s, the term “soul” bled outside of the realm of music and became a way to invoke blackness in a positive, self-determining way. The terms “soul brother” and “soul sister” came into use and “having soul” described the possession of valued attributes of blackness. Putting the tour together in late 2003, St. Victor was also exploiting the fact that soul had returned to prominence with the neo-soul movement of black musicians in their twenties reaching back to traditions of the early 1970s and infusing them with some millennial energy. Although she might have called the tour “Soul Sisters,” using the term “daughters” and including the children of well-known soul singers was a way to concretize the performers’ connection to the genre of soul and to each other. The tour would present the spiritual and biological “daughters of soul.”

When we spoke, St. Victor observed, “there’s the question of what makes something soul music. For me it’s a true and pure expression. It doesn’t have

to have the blues chords, the R&B sound. Soul is about expressing from the soul. And Nona and Joyce, when they sing, they express *so raw*. That’s the soul. Everything they do. So even when they rock, the soul is there. . . . Soul is the spirit of the performance, the depth of the performance, the artist’s connection with the music and the message.” The artists on the tour were connected, St. Victor stressed to me, by a commitment to a certain type of embodiment and performativity that she labeled “soul.” At the beginning of each of the performances in Europe, St. Victor prefaced her introduction of the artists with a commentary on what soul meant to her in the context of the tour. Soul was a commitment to deeply felt expression. It was something you could find in art that ranged from rock to Rembrandt, she would announce. Significantly, St. Victor was reclaiming and reframing soul to encompass hard-rocking artists like Nona Hendryx and Joyce Kennedy who would probably not fit a standard musicological definition of soul. These two artists had been working in rock and heavy metal contexts that rigid U.S. genre and marketing construct as white and male. For St. Victor, however, the power, persuasiveness, and excitement of their performance styles were crucial to her musical vision for the tour. She was less concerned with the strictures of musical genre than with the expressive capabilities of the women she had recruited to the tour. She respected their artistry and believed Kennedy and Hendryx would be assets to the show. Dividing and defining the artists by genre was not a preoccupation of hers, but she reasoned that for the purposes of selling the tour to European festival booking agents and marketing the festival to audiences, she would have to be strategic in the way she represented her vision. Thus, she chose to both use and rearticulate “soul” for the purposes of selling and explaining the musical production she was creating.

Strategies of Location: Choosing Europe

I am not sure that it was necessary for St. Victor to do the work of redefining soul to promote the tour to European jazz festival organizers. Many African American musicians view Europe as an ideal working environment because the people booking its music venues and festivals tend to have a more open-minded approach to African American music than their equivalents in the United States. Indeed, there is a long history of black American musicians and other artists going to Europe for either brief or extended stays. There, especially in France, they found greater artistic freedom and far less restrictive racism than was typical in the United States (Stovall 1996). While long-term moves to Europe have become rare since the 1960s, many post-civil rights era black musicians maintain an interest in Europe and Japan because these are regions where they find appreciative audiences and dependable, well-paying opportunities to perform for them with more consistency than in the United States. This is especially true for musicians whose work is more experimental

or otherwise less tied to the conventional black music genres that dominate in the United States.

The programming philosophy that apparently informs the decision making at the European jazz festivals may seem unusual to people accustomed to the rigid genre-based approach common in the United States where hard and fast lines between rock, R&B, blues, and jazz and divisions between black and white performers determine programming of concerts and radio stations. The European jazz festivals follow the rules of a local market where “black music” is synonymous with a high quality of musicianship and performance. Whether it is rock, fusion, straight ahead jazz, R&B, or blues is less significant than the racial identity and musical abilities of the performer. Based on my reading of the event programs, I started to think that the European jazz festivals might be more accurately defined as “festivals of music played by black people.” The Nice Jazz Festival hosted jazz vocalist Dee Dee Bridgewater, opera singer Jessye Norman, disco band Chic, jazz and R&B trumpeter Roy Hargrove, Nigerian Afro-beat artist Femi Kuti, and the Daughters of Soul. There were also artists of European descent who were closely identified with black music genres: “blue-eyed soul” artist Steve Winwood and singer-songwriter Rickie Lee Jones played the festival in Spain. Here, the connective tissue was not a strict musical genre, but musical blackness—rather broadly defined—and the willingness to embrace a range of styles.

Still, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that European jazz festivals are also operating from racialized perspectives and that Europe is far from being free from racism. Western European populations have been exhibiting anxiety about the presence of immigrants of non-European descent since they began arriving in large numbers following World War II. The nationwide riots in France in late 2005 are a recent and high-profile manifestation of racial and ethnic divides on the continent. For black American musicians, however, racially essentialist ideas about black people and music have worked to their professional advantage in ways that U.S. stereotypes usually do not. In Europe, they are lauded as musical geniuses uniquely able to deliver aesthetically and emotionally pleasing musical sounds. In the United States, they are confined to a limited range of musical genres. Overall, Europe offers a more hospitable economic and artistic climate for black American musicians and many black musicians depend on Europe for performance opportunities that guarantee decent pay. Black artists might criticize the beneficent racism that tends to treat black people as exotic bearers of compelling creativity, but to eradicate these views could undercut a significant revenue stream.

For St. Victor (and I suspect for many black American musicians) the European option, however financially rewarding, is still a compromise. Indeed, in a certain sense it is a response to a rejection. The United States, after all, is the economic center of the popular music industry and working outside of it is a step down, a second choice. When planning the Daughters of Soul, St. Victor

was unable to convince the U.S. venues she contacted of the viability of her tour and was unable to get economic support for it. Starting in Europe where she was able to develop interest—even to the point of convincing a Dutch television station to film a documentary of the tour—her goal was to lay the groundwork for future performances in the United States, the home country of all of the Daughters of Soul. To this end St. Victor launched a Web page (www.daughtersofsoul.com) that provides background about the tour and contact information for booking the show.

Strategies of Performance: Negotiating Race, Gender, and Sexuality

Although they had different stylistic approaches to the material and different vocal qualities and ranges, each of the six Daughters of Soul had formidable vocal chops. The concert was structured to showcase each singer as a soloist and also in duet, a choice that gave each participant room to shine on her own while also allowing exchange between singers. The songs were a mix of tunes associated with the artists on the tour, songs associated with the “parents of soul” being honored on the tour, and soul hits from the past and present that St. Victor thought would work well for the singers and the show. Lalah Hathaway, for example, opened her set with “Brown Skin,” a recent hit by neo-soul artist India.Arie, then followed up with the older mid-'70s hit “Street Life” and then her father’s popular “Little Ghetto Boy.” St. Victor also arranged duets that paired the biological and spiritual daughters; these were especially strong moments as the women played off of one another’s energies. The show also featured two production numbers, “Four Women” and “Lady Marmalade,” moments when there were more than two vocalists on stage. I discuss these two set pieces because in their image, sound, content, and execution, they crystallize some of the race, gender, and sexuality negotiations the Daughters of Soul performers made as they sought to express and enact their desires as performers while also entertaining an audience.

In Nice, halfway through the set, Lisa Simone prepared the audience for the next song, speaking over a quiet bass and drum beat that started playing as the applause for her previous number dwindled. “I’m going to take you back. This is a song by my mother Nina Simone.” A swell of applause greeted the familiar name. Lisa hummed along with the brooding bass then continued. “In the 1960s, the United States was going through a rough time. Maybe you recognize this bass line,” she said. “She wrote this song a long time ago, during a time of struggle between white and black people in America. Most of us who are brown or yellow or light brown are a mix of different things. This song represents women from four different walks of life.” She paused and started to sing the first verse of her mother’s “Four Women,” a song of four deft, first-person portraits of everyday black women. On the 1965 recording, Nina Simone sang all four verses, each of which concludes with the statement

of the woman's name. On the tour, St. Victor assigned a verse to each of four singers—Simone, Kennedy, Hendryx, and herself—and staged the number so each woman made an entrance and sang her story. Each verse describes the woman's physical appearance, indicates her personality, and announces her name. A woman named Aunt Sarah speaks of her black skin and the strength that allows her to tolerate the pain that has been inflicted on her. A light-skinned, long-haired woman named Siffronia talks about living between two worlds because of her features and the fact that her father was a rich white man who raped her mother. The third woman says that she is known as Sweet Thing; she describes her inviting figure and asks, "Whose little girl am I? Anyone who has money to buy." The last woman introduced in the song describes herself as a tough and bitter person who has lived a rough life and is now out of patience "because my parents were slaves."

For Simone aficionados, the song's last line, "My name is Peaches," spoken by the fourth woman and sung by all four Daughters of Soul in harmony, is well known as a black woman's defiant assertion of her refusal to be trampled on. Talented, original, iconoclastic, Nina Simone, known as the High Priestess of Soul, gave voice to the experiences of contemporary black people in the 1960s and 1970s. Throughout her career, she occupied an iconic status for black American audiences, women in particular. Inspired by the civil rights movement, Simone intertwined personal and political preoccupations in songs like "Mississippi Goddam" and "To Be Young, Gifted and Black." She could just as easily sing a love song like "Wild Is the Wind" as a protofeminist declaration like "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood."¹ "Four Women" gives voice to black women who might otherwise be invisible, unheard, or misrecognized. The portraits do not depict superwomen, positive role models, or simplistic stereotypes; instead, they peel back a layer as each woman speaks for herself about her personality and position. In rendering these portraits, Nina Simone confronted some of the most sensitive issues in black American communities: the politics of gender and skin color. Commenting on the song in her autobiography, Simone explained, "The women in the song are black, but their skin tones range from light to dark and their ideas of beauty and their own importance are deeply influenced by that. All the song did was to tell what entered the minds of most black women in America when they thought about themselves: Their complexions, their hair—straight, kinky, natural, which?—and what other women thought of them. Black women didn't know what the hell they wanted because they were defined by things they didn't control, and until they had the confidence to define themselves they'd be stuck in the same mess forever—that was the point the song made" (Simone 1991: 117). Part of the power of "Four Women" comes from the direct way Simone documented a condition. There is no glossing over of black difference or overstatement of black unity or positive black consciousness. She drew from her experiences and those of other black women to express and expose some of what it means

to be a black woman. It was, of course, a deeply political move for Nina Simone to perform a song like this in the thick of a black political movement that, as many black feminists have observed, submerged the concerns of black women and discussions of sexism in order to focus on what were constructed as the more immediate needs of the community (Combahee River Collective 1995; A. Y. Davis 1983; hooks 1981). Reflecting on her choices, Nina Simone said, “along with everything else there had to be changes in the way we [black women] saw ourselves and in how men saw us” (Simone 1991: 117). Forty years after its release, “Four Women” remains a moving piece precisely because it addresses issues that black women continue to struggle with. As Nina Simone put it, “I didn’t wake up one morning feeling dissatisfied. These feelings just became more and more intense, until by the time the sixties ended I’d look in the mirror and see two faces, knowing that on the one hand I loved being black and being a woman, and that on the other it was my colour and sex which had fucked me up in the first place” (Simone 1991: 118). The inclusion of “Four Women” in the set allowed the tour to pay homage to a black woman artist whose work was significant to the performers on stage while also articulating something about black women and black femininity that went beyond the usual images available in mainstream popular culture.

“Four Women” stood out as a serious song in the midst of the soulful, rocking fun and playfulness that led a reviewer from the French newspaper *Le Figaro* to describe the show as “sexy, vulgar but fun” (*un concert sexy, vulgaire mais rigolo*) (Koechlin 2004). The question of how to present oneself on stage is always an issue for performing artists. For black women, discussing and representing one’s sexuality is particularly vexed. Black feminist scholars have observed that over time, black women developed a culture of silence about their sexuality in response to a long history of being characterized as sexually aberrant: overly sexual, improperly feminine, or completely asexual (A. Y. Davis 1983; Hine 1995; Morton 1991).² This has made black women wary of speaking about sexuality, sexual pleasure, and sexual desire for fear of reinscribing dominant stereotypes. As a result, “black women’s complex sexual lives are caught between a racial/sexual mainstream cultural rock and a counternarrative hard place” (T. Rose 2003: 395; cf. Hammonds 1994). Significantly, some black, predominantly working-class women broke these silences by producing widely circulated public discourses about sexuality and other women’s concerns through their participation in blues music (Carby 1999; A. Y. Davis 1998; D. D. Harrison 1990) in the 1920s and, more recently, in contemporary rap (T. Rose 1994). “Lady Marmalade,” the only song in the set in which all six Daughters of Soul sang together, is about the sexual power of a black woman. Performed on the Daughters of Soul tour, it reveals some of the challenges associated with staging black women’s sexuality.

In some ways, it would have been impossible *not* to include “Lady Marmalade.” It was the biggest hit of funky black rock divas Labelle, of which tour

Daughter Nona Hendryx was a founding member. Furthermore, the song had been reintroduced to mainstream radio and video through director Baz Luhrmann's 2001 film *Moulin Rouge*, a musical whose soundtrack included a remake featuring young, popular, and sexy female vocalists—Lil' Kim, Christina Aguilera, Pink, and Mya. In the summer of 2001 it was number one on *Billboard's* Hot 100. For Labelle, it had been a Hot 100 number one in 1975. A familiar song, it also provided an opportunity for vocal pyrotechnics. "Lady Marmalade" then, was an opportunity for all six daughters to strut their stuff vocally and, as it turned out, otherwise. In contrast to the sobriety of "Four Women," "Lady Marmalade" is an upbeat, infectious romp in which, in a time-honored American tradition, something "dirty" is rendered in French: the song's famous chorus is the proposition "Voulez-vous couchez avec moi ce soir?" (Do you want to sleep with me tonight?) The song tells the story of a *café au lait* colored streetwalker whose beauty and sexual prowess are so great that at least one of the men who pays her for sex, Joe, cannot get her out of his mind. Written by Bob Crewe and Kenny Nolan, "Lady Marmalade" is a brilliant pop song that also contains a familiar, potentially reductive depiction of a black woman. (Ironically, it presents an image that is also part of Simone's "Four Women," via the character Sweet Thing.)

St. Victor opened the number by chanting, "Soul Sisters! Soul Sisters! Where's all my Soul Sisters?" calling the Daughters of Soul to the stage. Together, the six launched into the "Hey, Sister! Go, Sister!" refrain that starts the song. The performance was focused on playful teasing; indeed, a whole lot of "shaking it" was going on as the Daughters of Soul strolled and strutted their way through a crowd-pleasing rendition of the hit. Hendryx, Kennedy, and Khan traded off verses. Khan slid onto her knees like an old-style soul man, clasped the microphone, and leaned forward to sing about Creole Lady Marmalade. Hathaway grabbed a cowbell to provide percussive accents and then, coordinating with Simone and Hendryx, executed some backup singer moves. The performance was a raucous and funky way to conclude the show.

As a fan I enjoyed the spectacle of the "Lady Marmalade" performance, but as a critic, I found myself struggling to interpret this pleasurable unruly performance. At one level, I see the display of sexiness as a fallback to what audiences expect from women on stage, especially black women. In fact, I should note that in Nice, the crowd was so delighted that by the end of the song, many audience members were standing on their chairs shouting "Encore!" At another level, I see "Lady Marmalade" as a celebration that neither erases nor apologizes for a black woman's sexuality, a confrontational move in the contemporary context. As performed by Labelle, the *Moulin Rouge* soundtrack artists, and the Daughters of Soul, it is also a statement and enactment of (soul) sisterhood as women exuberantly sing together, praising another woman.³ Inevitably, "Lady Marmalade" and some of the Daughters' song choices and onstage practices raise fraught questions about how to interpret

black women’s use of sexuality in performance. Are they objectifying themselves or exercising agency through self-definition? Are they asserting control over their image? Or are they capitulating to expectations of how women on stage should display their bodies? If they are doing all of these things at once, does one action take precedence?

Some of the songs performed on the Daughters of Soul tour allowed black women to speak in forthright terms about sex. Given the probable language gap—the performers sang in English to French- and Spanish-speaking audiences at the performances I saw—the lyrical content was arguably less important than costume, bodily movement, and the sound of the voice in conveying images of black women. Here, a range of styles was at play and the variety was notable. St. Victor and Lalah Hathaway kept their bodies well covered in loose-fitting dresses and were reserved in their dancing. Lisa Simone wore a close fitting jumpsuit and paced the stage confidently, dancing with tasteful hip shakes during instrumental segments of her numbers. Blonde-haired Joyce Kennedy dressed like a rocker in black leather and white lace. Kennedy’s vocals and those of Nona Hendryx, like most rock vocals, were rooted in R&B, but the guitar-centered instrumentation, the volume, and the kinetic energy of their performances put them into the rock camp where black women are not expected to be. There was also the subversive sexual energy brought by Hendryx, who wore a tight leather miniskirt and bustier and commanded everyone in the audience to “sweat with me” at one point in her set. Indira Khan took a page from her mother’s book and dressed to accentuate her considerable cleavage and, balancing in her high-heeled, thigh-high boots, leaned forward—a lot. There was pleasure and pleasure-in-impropriety (in contrast to black middle-class respectability) at work in these sexually playful performances and their refusal to follow middle-class mores. Still, cultural critic Tricia Rose’s comment about sexuality in women’s rap is meaningful here: “For some, their sexual freedom could be considered dangerously close to self-inflicted exploitation” (1994: 168). As I developed my analysis, I noted my own strategic shifts from sympathetic readings that embraced the liberating agency of the show to more critical readings that wearied at the tour’s recapitulation of stereotypes. Where I stood depended on the point I wanted to make. I found that to document and interpret the actions of the Daughters of Soul, I was contending with many of the same negotiations around gender, race, sexuality, and location that the artists must have confronted, as well as my own hopes and expectations for the show. My discussion of the ambiguous nature of sexuality in black women’s performance and the extent to which a European location opened up possibilities for these performers is, like the performance itself, a product of neoliberalism’s peculiar openings for expression and the limits that are inevitable in neoliberal states where structural inequalities persist.

The Daughters of Soul performers both played with and played against ex-

pectations, seeking to express their creative vision, but often operating within familiar paradigms in order to secure a platform and garner an audience. St. Victor and her business partner Cees Gog felt the tour had succeeded in part because they received positive feedback from festival staff members and good critical notices in Nice, Pori, and San Sebastián. At the root of the strategies I have been discussing—and some are perhaps more conscious than others—was the Daughters of Soul performers' interest in accomplishing professional, artistic, personal, and ideological goals. They made strategic shifts to incorporate the familiar images of black female performers even while promoting the less-familiar ones by centering a song like "Four Women" and by including the hard-rocking performances of Kennedy and Hendryx. Indeed, the performers' interest in expanding the possibilities of black women's performance was coupled with a desire for visibility and acceptance in mainstream arenas. This is a familiar position for artists: they are invested in their difference and also interested in achieving some level of inclusion, albeit inclusion on more amenable terms. St. Victor designed the tour to address the particular limits faced by black women vocalists and to carve a space for the kind of musical performance that mattered to her and her sister performers. She manipulated discourses, drew on a historical legacy, mixed music genres, and identified a performance context that she correctly anticipated would be open to her work and—and this is important—willing to pay for it. St. Victor's efforts to produce the Daughters of Soul responded to the economic, career, aesthetic, and ideological imperatives of black women artists. In using the Daughters of Soul show as an opportunity to perform and gain visibility, the artists were exercising their agency within a restrictive set of structures—those of the U.S. recording industry as well as the more general race, gender, and class constraints of mainstream U.S. culture.

This situation reveals, as Kondo suggests, that anthropologists need to reconsider "conventional categories such as resistance or accommodation, opposition or sell-out" (Kondo 1997: 150). In order to survive in their chosen field, cultural producers operate well beyond these clear-cut binaries. As an ethnographer, I have found it productive to also move beyond binaries and focus instead on the belief these cultural producers have in "what might be" and the practices they enact to achieve their goals. At the same time, of course, it is necessary to attend to the internal and external forces that shape their choices. Finally, this project reminded me of the importance of acknowledging that, as an ethnographer, I was operating within and implicated in the very systems of representation, consumption, resistance, and accommodation that I was analyzing and, consequently, needed to be aware of the ways that my own investments shaped the ways I approached and interpreted the material at hand.