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## Must Be Love On The Brain?

*Feminist responses to the “can we separate artwork from artist” question in the era of #MeToo popular feminisms<sup>1</sup>*

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**ABSTRACT** As #MeToo activism has revealed cascades of famous and influential men to be serial sexual harassers and rapists, the question of what to do about aesthetically pleasing art made by morally and politically disgusting men has received renewed interest and urgency. I identify two different types of feminist responses to this question. The first kind of response modifies post-feminist and post-race approaches to diversity as a kind of beauty: replacing beauty with disgust, these approaches treat sexism and misogyny as individual-level flaws that can be eliminated through appropriate aesthetic judgments. The second kind of response begins from the premise that centuries of white supremacist capitalist cisheteropatriarchy have shaped our aesthetic principles and conventions such that sexism and misogyny are systemic problems baked into all works of art. I examine how Angela Davis’s revision of Marcuse’s concept of the aesthetic dimension, Katherine McKittrick’s and Alexander Weheliye’s concept of “emulation,” and Rihanna’s vocal performance choices on her 2016 single “Love On The Brain” are all instances of this latter type of response.

**KEYWORDS** #MeToo, feminism, ethics, Rihanna

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“Artistic success in the contemporary Euroethnic art world is perceived by all as the payoff of a zero-sum game, in which one player’s win is another player’s loss” (Adrian Piper, “The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists”)<sup>2</sup>

Is it morally permissible—or even possible at all—to enjoy artworks by artists whose beliefs and actions are racist, sexist, or otherwise oppressive? This is not a new question. For example, echoing concerns raised by Ellen Willis in the late 1970s,<sup>3</sup> Norma Coates wrote in 1997 that “The Rolling Stones trouble me. As much as I love their music, it

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1. As per *JPMS* policy, because the author of this paper is currently co-editor of the journal, this paper’s peer review was supervised by the past co-editors currently serving as associate editors. Neither of the current co-editors was involved in nor had knowledge of its peer review, nor was the paper entered in Scholar One, the submission management system to which current co-editors have access.

2. Adrian Piper, “The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists,” in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2010), 242.

3. Ellen Willis, “The Big Ones” in *Out of the Vinyl Deeps*, ed. Nona Willis Aronowitz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2011).

periodically grates against my sensibilities and produces spasms of feminist guilt.”<sup>4</sup> As #MeToo activism has revealed cascades of famous and influential men to be serial sexual harassers and rapists, “what to do with the abusers whose art we like?”<sup>5</sup> has received renewed interest and urgency. For example, by mid-2018, the *New York Times* has published at least three pieces on exactly this question in 10 months, and after the 2019 release of both *Surviving R Kelly* and *Leaving Neverland* there were flurries of pieces about what to do with the oeuvres of R Kelly and Michael Jackson.<sup>6</sup>

This paper analyzes contemporary discussions of this question both within and outside academia. Using Cristina Beltrán’s observation that post-racial discourse substitutes aesthetic judgments about beautiful diversity for moral and political analyses of racial justice, I show how contemporary popular feminist responses to this question substitute individual judgments of disgust for analyses of gender and race politics. Popular feminism is Sara Banet-Weiser’s name for the early twenty-first-century co-optation of white, liberal feminism by patriarchal racial capitalism.<sup>7</sup> It describes how the spectacular performance of (liberal, white, bourgeois) feminist ideas and values no longer resists but contributes to patriarchy, white supremacy, and other forms of systemic domination. Treating individual feelings of disgust as evidence of one’s own commitments to gender justice while obscuring the ways that patriarchy and white supremacy function as structuring logics of artworks,<sup>8</sup> this approach evinces neoliberal feminism’s definitive logic, which uses superficial reform on the individual level to obscure intensified patriarchal and white supremacist domination at the systematic and institutional level.<sup>9</sup> To be clear: I am not arguing that we shouldn’t be disgusted by sexual assault and harassment. My point is that *disgust isn’t enough*, but popular feminisms act like it is, and they do so because it’s part of a broader neoliberal logic for managing white supremacist capitalist cisheteropatriarchal domination. This logic, I argue, is a version of the “zero-sum” calculus Adrian Piper

4. Norma Coates, “(R)evolution Now? Rock and the Political Potential of Gender,” in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (New York: Routledge, 1997) 50–64. See also Rihan Jones and Eli Davies, *Under My Thumb* (London: Repeater Books, 2017).

5. Jeet Heer and Josephine Livingston, “Woody Allen, #MeToo, and the Separation of Art and Artist,” *The New Republic*, 2 February 2018, <https://newrepublic.com/article/146876/woody-allen-metoo-separation-art-artist>.

6. Amanda Hess, “How the Myth of the Artistic Genius Excuses the Abuse of Women,” *New York Times*, 10 November 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/10/arts/sexual-harassment-art-hollywood.html>;

Natalie Proulx, “Can You Separate Art From the Artist?,” *New York Times*, 28 November 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/28/learning/can-you-separate-art-from-the-artist.html>;

Robin Pogrebin and Jennifer Schuessler, “Chuck Close is Accused of Harassment. Should His Artwork Carry an Asterisk?,” *New York Times*, 28 January 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/28/arts/design/chuck-close-exhibit-harassment-accusations.html>. See also “Michael Jackson: The Reckoning” in Slate.

7. Sara Banet-Weiser, *Empowered* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

8. A.O. Scott comes close in his piece on Woody Allen: “There is a powerful and understandable urge, as a consequence of the long-overdue recognition of the pervasiveness of sexual abuse, to expunge the perpetrators, to turn away from their work and scrub it from the canon. It’s never quite so simple. Mr. Allen’s films and writings are a part of the common artistic record, which is another way of saying that they inform the memories and experiences of a great many people. I don’t mean this as a defense, but an acknowledgment of betrayal and shame.”

A.O. Scott, “My Woody Allen Problem,” 31 January 2018, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/31/movies/woody-allen.html>

9. Robin James, *Resilience & Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism* (London: Zero Books 2015) and Shannon Winnubst, *Way Too Cool: Selling Out Race and Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press 2015).

identifies in the epigraph because it assumes that feelings of pleasure and disgust are exclusive of one another and that righteous disgust at flawed individuals is sufficient to fix systemic sexism that persists in norms about aesthetic pleasure themselves.<sup>10</sup>

There are better responses to this question, and analyzing them can help us understand what kinds of things a response to the question must do in order to adequately address both of those forms of structural domination and individual feelings of dis/pleasure. Drawing on the work of Angela Davis, Katherine McKittrick, and Alexander Weheliye, I argue that Black women's vocal performance traditions offer a different and more complicated model for dealing with white supremacist patriarchal harms from both artists and aesthetic conventions. These aesthetic practices—variously called “heartbreak” or “emulation”<sup>11</sup>—create new forms of relation that make different sorts of pleasures possible. And whereas both the “yes” and “no” responses to “should we separate the artist from the art?” assume pleasure and displeasure are mutually exclusive, heartbreak and emulation understand them as necessarily intertwined; they are only separable on the (incorrect) assumption that artistic and aesthetic conventions regarding pleasure and beauty aren't themselves structured by white supremacist capitalist cisheteropatriarchy. Instead of using complexity as a “shelter”<sup>12</sup> or a dodge, heartbreak and emulation appeal to a non-zero sum practice of accounting and accountability that allow us to work through the complexities that vex this question. Rihanna's vocal performance on her single “Love On The Brain,” which is about domestic abuse, illustrates such a working-through. Her performance choices both highlight the fact that pop music conventions make women's suffering aesthetically pleasurable and rework the gender politics of such conventions so that the aesthetic pleasure is no longer exclusively tied to patriarchal violence.

### #MeToo Aesthetics

According to feminist media studies scholars Shelley Cobb and Tanya Horeck, after *The New York Times* published an account of film producer Harvey Weinstein's history of sexual assault and harassment in October 2017, “powerful men from a range of sectors, including the film, music, literary, media, sports, fashion, and food industries, have been toppled one by one, as accounts of their predatory, abusive behaviour have emerged.”<sup>13</sup> They call this phenomenon the “Weinstein effect.”<sup>14</sup> They observe that “though this feels like a watershed moment, it is important to proceed with caution and determination, and

10. As Rebecca Lentjes argues, “The ‘hashtag me too’ movement put its emphasis on individual abusers rather than systemic structures that perpetuate misogyny and sexism” (Lentjes, *Sonic Patriarchy and the Neoliberal University*).

11. “Heartbreak captures, at least a little, those injuriously loving emulations of what it means to be Black and human within the context of white supremacy.”

Katherine McKittrick and Alexander G. Weheliye, “808s & Heartbreak,” *Propter Nos* 2, no.1 (Fall 2017): 14, <https://trueleapress.files.wordpress.com/2017/10/pn2-print.pdf>.

12. Ann Powers, “Before and After” in NPR Music, 11 May 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/05/11/722198385/before-and-after-listening-to-michael-jackson-and-accusers>

13. Shelley Cobb and Tanya Horeck, “Post Weinstein: gendered power and harassment in the media industries,” *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no.3 (April 2018): 489, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.145615>

14. *Ibid.*

to not assume that the new visibility of feminist arguments about gendered inequality in the workplace will necessarily lead to the long-term structural changes so desperately needed.”<sup>15</sup> Such caution is equally necessary in evaluating the effect of the “Weinstein effect” on the “should we separate the artist from the artwork?” questions.

In articles published since the Weinstein story broke, responses range from yes to no to both yes and no. I’m interested in popular feminist iterations of the latter two kinds of response. The “no” responses argue that one’s feelings of disgust ruin artworks that one used to like, and the “yes and no” responses argue that even though one still likes the artwork, the creator’s behavior was so morally and politically disgusting that it is inappropriate to enjoy and support their work. Roxanne Gay comes down firmly on the “no” side. She argues that although Bill Cosby’s TV show (which was groundbreaking in its featuring of a Black middle-class family as the main characters in a sitcom) was deeply important to her and many other Black children who watched it growing up, the fact that he is a serial rapist makes her unable to enjoy his work any longer. According to Gay, “Cosby’s artistic legacy is rendered meaningless in the face of the pain he caused. It has to be. He once created great art, and then he destroyed his great art. The responsibility for that destruction is his and his alone. We are free to lament it, but not at the expense of his victims.”<sup>16</sup> This is a simple zero-sum equation: pain cancels out pleasure. In Gay’s system of accounting, proper respect for the victims and their pain takes the place of our enjoyment of Cosby’s work. This zero-sum math is behind most “no” answers. For example, high school journalist Sofia Heller says that she “decided that I would not be able to watch [House of Cards]. I couldn’t separate the art from the artist because Frank Underwood [the main character] and Kevin Spacey [actor accused of sexual assault] were one and the same. His depravity transcended a fictional script.”<sup>17</sup> Similarly film critic David Erlich says, “I do have trouble enjoying products made by monstrous men.”<sup>18</sup> In the “no” responses, the monstrosity of the actor eclipses the greatness of his (it’s usually a his) work. Claire Dederer explains this in a way that clarifies its difference from the “yes and no” answer. In “no” cases,

the awful thing disrupts the great work; we can’t watch or listen to or read the great work without remembering the awful thing. Flooded with knowledge of the maker’s monstrosity, we turn away, overcome by disgust. Or . . . we don’t. We continue watching, separating or trying to separate the artist from the art. Either way: disruption. They are monster geniuses.<sup>19</sup>

15. Ibid, 490.

16. Roxanne Gay, “Can I Enjoy the Art but Denounce the Artist?,” *Marie Claire*, 6 February 2018, <https://www.marieclaire.com/culture/a16105931/roxanne-gay-on-predator-legacies/>.

17. Sofia Heller, “Art over Artist?: The moral implications of separating art from artist,” *The Harvard-Westlake Chronicle*, 27 February 2018, <http://hwchronicle.com/art-over-artist-the-moral-implications-of-separating-art-from-artist/>.

18. David Ehrlich, “In the Aftermath of Harvey Weinstein, Can We Separate the Art from the Artist? – IndieWire Critics Survey,” *IndieWire*, 16 October 2017, <https://www.indiewire.com/2017/10/harvey-weinstein-separate-art-from-artist-film-critics-1201887805/>.

19. Claire Dederer, “What Do We Do with the Art of Monstrous Men?,” *The Paris Review*, 20 November 2017, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/11/20/art-monstrous-men/>.

When moral and political disgust at the artist translates into aesthetic disgust at their work without remainder (there's that zero-sum math again), then the answer is "no." But as Dederer points out, moral and political disgust at the artist outweighs without necessarily voiding the aesthetic pleasure one gets from their work. Even though we perceive such artists as monsters and geniuses, we are morally and politically obliged to weed out monsters from our cultural consumption.<sup>20</sup> Ruby Phillips's op-ed in *The Daily Northwestern* guides readers through this process:

When I am about to rewatch Eminem's "8 Mile" or Spacey in "American Beauty" for the 60th time, I have to stop myself and reflect. I think about how many women's careers have been ruined and how many women have had to give up their bodies, their dreams and their self-respect just to indulge some man. I think about how many men have gotten away with it and continue to get away with it. Then if that doesn't work, I think about the silence—the decades and decades of silence—and the fear that people continue to feel about coming forward and dismantling this complex system. And I remember that the small inconvenience of me not watching a good movie pales in comparison to that.<sup>21</sup>

In order to dissuade herself from experiencing an artwork that she enjoys, Phillips practices a kind of aversion therapy: when faced with a film she has liked in the past, she runs through a list of all the harm caused by its abusive star in an attempt to change her positive association with the film to a negative one. A.O. Scott's *New York Times* piece on Woody Allen concludes with a similar suggestion: "I will not blame you if you want to stop watching Woody Allen's movies. But I also think that some of us have to start all over again."<sup>22</sup> The reason he needs to re-watch Allen's films is to re-train his perception of Allen's performances in them from pleasurable to monstrous. Guided by the imperative "I . . . have to choose between watching movies I enjoy or condemning predators,"<sup>23</sup> these "yes and no" takes rely on the same zero-sum math as the "no" responses—here, it is the moral and political ideal that one ought to achieve through aversion therapy. The non-zero-sum state of ambivalence is a flaw one must correct: disgust at sexual assailants must replace the pleasure one finds in their artworks. It's a difficult if necessary "trade-off."<sup>24</sup>

This zero-sum accounting of pleasure and disgust uses aesthetic judgment as a metric of gender justice. Feeling disgusted by sexual assault and harassment serves as evidence that you aren't misogynist and that you aren't complicit in the patriarchal harming of women. If "many of these works make the consumer complicit in the perspective of the

20. It's important to note that genius is a gendered term. As Christine Battersby explains, European concepts of "genius" originated in Roman notions of the male reproductive force/semen. That's why "seminal" means something close to "genius." See Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990).

21. Ruby Phillips, "Phillips: In the #MeToo era, go beyond separating the art from the artist," *The Daily Northwestern*, 29 April 2018, <https://dailynorthwestern.com/2018/04/29/opinion/phillips-in-the-metoo-era-go-beyond-separating-the-art-from-the-artist/>.

22. Scott, "My Woody Allen Problem."

23. Heller, "Art over Artist?"

24. Pahull Bains, "Can We Still Separate Art From Artists in a Post-Time's Up Era?," *Fashion Magazine*, 12 February 2018, <https://fashionmagazine.com/culture/who-made-my-art/>.

abuser,”<sup>25</sup> then feelings and expressions of disgust at these works indicates one’s refusal of such complicity. If, however, this disgust sufficiently removes one from complicity, then patriarchal abuse must be something abusers bring with them to taint their otherwise acceptable work and not also something built into the structuring logics of artworks and aesthetic conventions. Such accounting begins from the assumption that “there are plenty of other good movies, ones that weren’t made by abusive men.”<sup>26</sup> But as scholars such as Laura Mulvey, Susan McClary, and Christina Sharpe have demonstrated, cinematic, musical, literary, photographic, and other Western artistic traditions are built on the premise that depictions of women’s (especially Black women’s) abuse are aesthetically pleasing. For example, in 2016 the TV trope where queer characters are killed off in order to advance the story arc of cishetero protagonists (called “bury your gays”), received renewed popular attention after four US TV shows aired within the same few weeks each killed off a queer woman character.<sup>27</sup> This is so sedimented into our artistic languages that even when the patriarchal abuse of women isn’t the explicit content of an artwork, such abuse lingers in the languages’ formal dimensions as “feminized” elements are subordinated to masculinized ones. McClary has argued that tonal harmony—the structural language of much Western art and popular music—creates aesthetic pleasure by eliminating (or resolving away) *feminized* musical elements, such as dissonance.<sup>28</sup> It’s no wonder A.O. Scott found Woody Allen’s performances the apex of comedy: the languages of comedy and cinema are themselves patriarchal. Or, as Carl Wilson writes in his reflection on the Michael Jackson documentary *Leaving Neverland*, “It’s a stubborn, inconvenient fact that Jackson was to modern popular music and dance what Dickens was to the Victorian novel. . . . Nearly a decade after his death, there are weeks when half the acts on the Billboard chart sound like they’re doing MJ imitations.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, Jackson’s music has had such a significant influence on pop songwriting and aesthetics that even if we stop consuming his work, it would be nearly impossible to avoid hearing music influenced by it. Even artworks that weren’t made by abusive men normalize the subordination and abuse of women and other non-cis-straight-white-adult men. Because patriarchy and misogyny are built into our aesthetic conventions, being disgusted by

25. Hess, “How the Myth of the Artistic Genius Excuses the Abuse of Women.”

26. Phillips, “Phillips: In the #MeToo Era.”

27. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/bury-your-gays-why-100-87717628> Rebecca Traister almost gets to this point but doesn’t go so far as to hold the structuring logics of artworks responsible. She argues that “the accused are men who help to determine what art gets seen and appreciated—and, crucially, paid for. They decide whose stories get brought to screens: There is currently a campaign pointing out that Amazon under Price canceled the proto-feminist show *Good Girls Revolt*, in addition to passing on *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Big Little Lies*. These decisions matter; they shape what kinds of messages audiences receive and what kinds of characters they are exposed to.” Misogynist, abusive men determine the content of artworks. This is true, but it misses the point I am trying to make on two counts: first, it’s about content not formal structure; second, it still treats it as a matter of individual bad actors and not gendered norms and practices.

Rebecca Traister, “Our National Narratives Are Still Being Shaped By Lecherous, Powerful Men,” *The Cut*, 27 October 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ellenoconnellwhittet/ballet-me-too-nycb-women-gender-injuries-sexism>.

29. Carl Wilson, “It’s Too Late to Cancel Michael Jackson” in *Slate*, 27 February 2019. <https://slate.com/culture/2019/02/michael-jackson-leaving-neverland-cancel-culture-metoo.html>

despicably behaved artists isn't enough: the very terms through which we feel aesthetic pleasure are unjust. There is no un-complicit position on this issue. This is why Mulvey argued that feminists had an obligation to reject the aesthetic pleasures Hollywood cinema had to offer.<sup>30</sup> Though I don't agree with Mulvey's solution, she does correctly diagnose the problem.

These "no" and "yes and no" responses follow neoliberalism's imperative to make individuals responsible for reforming injustices that exist at the structural level (and thus intensifying those injustices rather than eliminating them). But they use a specific tool to do that. Cristina Beltrán has shown how neoliberal diversity or post-identity rhetorics use aesthetic judgment to replace and/or ground moral and political judgments.<sup>31</sup> As Lester Spence, Shannon Winnubst, and other scholars who study the way neoliberalism changes white supremacy and patriarchy have observed, neoliberalism takes traditional logics of purity and exclusion and remakes them into practices of conditional and instrumental inclusion of otherwise elite members of historically underrepresented groups that accompany intensified exclusion of less elite members of these groups: "today's public rhetoric affirms a universal commitment to equality by emphasizing our increasingly diverse body of elected and appointed representatives."<sup>32</sup> Perceptible diversity serves as evidence that traditional forms of exclusion have ended and that society is in fact equal and meritocratic. Beltrán argues that we perceive diversity in a specific way, and that this (mis)perception is key to its ability to obscure ongoing and intensified oppression. "Racial diversity," she explains, is "often experienced as a kind of beauty and a form of aesthetic pleasure. For many race-conscious citizens, descriptive representation has a kind of beauty that feels and looks like a form of justice."<sup>33</sup> Perceived racial diversity—on, say, a conference panel or a syllabus—functions as palpable evidence of the fact of social justice. To judge that panel or syllabus as beautifully diverse, its composition must exhibit what I understand to be an appropriate level of diversity, much in the same way a beautiful artwork must be composed in a way that meets or exceeds my basic aesthetic criteria for it. Here, diversity is an aesthetic criterion, not a moral or political one because taste is the criterion, not justice. We know that it's taste because our tastes are often wrong. What I think is appropriate representation may be something besides proportional or equal representation. Because patriarchy shapes our tastes, we often misperceive women's lessened underrepresentation as overrepresentation. For example, listeners of the "Stuff You Missed In History Class" podcast complained in 2016 that the show featured too many episodes about women; however, when the podcast producers tracked the number of episodes about women, they found that only 21% of them were about women.<sup>34</sup> Though

30. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *Screen* 16.3, (Autumn 1975), 6–18

31. Cristina Beltrán, "RACIAL PRESENCE VERSUS RACIAL JUSTICE: The Affective Power of an Aesthetic Condition," *Du Bois Review* 11, no.1 (July 2014), 153, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X14000034>

32. Shannon Winnubst, *Way Too Cool: Selling Out Race and Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press 2015), 138.

33. Beltrán, "RACIAL PRESENCE," 153.

34. Trace V. Wilson, "Our Final Answer on 'Too Many Women'," *Stuff You Missed in History Class*, 2 June 2016, <https://www.missedinhistory.com/blogs/our-final-answer-on-too-many-women.htm>.

women are at least half the population, people felt 21% tipped the scales distastefully far in women's direction. They felt women's continued but lessened political underrepresentation was actually an aesthetic overrepresentation. This is bad not only because it substitutes aesthetic judgment for political judgment, but also because aesthetic beauty serves to hide a moral and political lie: although some non-whites have been granted access to elite positions and spaces, white supremacy itself has not gone away.<sup>35</sup>

The feminist responses to "should we separate artist from artwork?" question I discussed above also substitutes aesthetic judgment for political judgment, except the judgment is of disgust instead of beauty. As with beautiful diversity, disgusted feminism uses individuals' perceptions of disgust to hide the fact that patriarchy is getting worse. As the Kesha-led all-women #MeToo performance at the 2018 Grammys shows, there's an appetite for women pop stars to make a spectacle of their reclaimed sexual subjectivity—audiences find it aesthetically pleasing. But as Maura Johnston noted, this spectacle accompanied an awards ceremony that awarded almost exclusively men, creating a "disconnect between the message of female empowerment and the reality of male dominance."<sup>36</sup> In the cases I studied above, disgust functions as evidence of women's or feminist empowerment, and the disconnect between aesthetic judgment and political judgment pries open a disconnect between a message of feminist empowerment and the reality of male dominance. Their zero-sum calculus cannot account for the fact that practitioners' ongoing enjoyment of art makes them complicit in the misogyny baked into artistic conventions—i.e., that they continue to find misogynist aesthetic norms and practices pleasurable and non-disgusting.

So what we need is a non-zero sum approach to this question, one that can account for the fact that an artwork can be both aesthetically pleasurable and politically disgusting, and that because of historical and ongoing/worsening patriarchy in our aesthetic norms and artistic practices, this is the only way for us to engage with and consume art and remain accountable for white supremacy, patriarchy, and other ongoing forms of systemic domination.

Drawing on the work of Angela Davis and Katherine McKittrick, I argue that Black women's vocal performance traditions offer such a model for dealing with white supremacist patriarchal harms from both artists and aesthetic conventions. These aesthetic practices—variously called "heartbreak" or "emulation"<sup>37</sup>—create new forms of relation that make different sorts of pleasures possible. I pay special attention to Rihanna's vocal performance on her single "Love On The Brain," which is about domestic abuse. Her performance choices both highlight that pop music conventions make women's suffering

35. For example, in 2019 the FBI reported that the number of hate crimes that year was the highest since the period immediately after 9/11, when hate crimes against purportedly Muslim people surged. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/12/us/hate-crimes-fbi-report.html>

36. Maura Johnston, "What Do the Grammys Have Against Women?," *Rolling Stone*, 29 January 2018, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/what-do-the-grammys-have-against-women-201683/>.

37. "Heartbreak captures, at least a little, those injuriously loving emulations of what it means to be Black and human within the context of white supremacy." McKittrick and Weheliye, "808s & Heartbreak," 14.

aesthetically pleasurable and rework the gender politics of such conventions, so that the aesthetic pleasure is no longer exclusively tied to patriarchal violence.

### Working With And Against

In her study of classic women blues singers, Angela Davis weaves Frankfurt School aesthetic theory with Black feminism to explain how artists like Billie Holiday and Bessie Smith could perform songs that “simultaneous[ly . . .] confirm and subvert racist and sexist representations of women in love”<sup>38</sup> by “work[ing] with and against the . . . ideological content”<sup>39</sup> of their lyrics and the conditions of their production. Their with-and-against technique relies on a non-zero sum math that accounts for both the repetition of the white supremacist misogyny in those lyrics and conditions of production *and* their reworking into something more critical and less oppressive. Davis grounds this math in a non-zero sum Marcusean metaphysics. According to Marcuse, artworks create an aesthetic dimension alongside but in opposition to the everyday reality in which that work and its artist(s) exist. Davis cites the following passage from Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization*:

The radical qualities of art are grounded precisely in the dimensions where art transcends its social determination and emancipates itself from the given universe of discourse and behavior while preserving its overwhelming presence. Thereby art creates the realm in which the subversion of existence proper to art is recognized as a reality which is suppressed and distorted in the given reality.<sup>40</sup>

Artworks can depict, express, represent, sketch, and otherwise imagine counterfactual realities. They can manipulate our senses to perceive and feel things that are otherwise unavailable to us in the real world. This is what the aesthetic dimension is: the reality produced by the aesthetic—i.e., sensory—properties of artworks. This reality coexists with lived reality; they are not mutually exclusive.

The singers Davis studies use vocal techniques that produce an aesthetic dimension wherein the meaning and function of a song’s otherwise oppressive practices and structures are changed. Holiday, for example, “utilized . . . her jazz style to reconfigure the songs she performed and recorded.”<sup>41</sup> The vocal performance choices she made transformed “formulaic”<sup>42</sup> Tin Pan Alley sexual politics and “sentimentality”<sup>43</sup> into a critique of those very formulas. One way Holiday did this was by transforming speech patterns that indicate sarcasm—such as alternating high and low pitch from syllable to syllable—into vocal melodies. This way, she could sing the printed lyrics in a way that undermined their literal meaning. She was thus able to “challenge through musical form—the aesthetic dimension—the social conditions implied by the lyrics of the songs she sang.”<sup>44</sup> The songs

38. Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 164.

39. *Ibid.*, 163.

40. *Ibid.*, 164.

41. *Ibid.*, 165.

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*

44. *Ibid.*, 170.

didn't change those conditions in social reality, but in the aesthetic reality shared by artists and audience. Holiday's performances thus used music aesthetics to create dimensions of reality that were more livable and pleasurable for Black women than the historical, material, economic, and political reality of her (and our) white supremacist patriarchal world. These performances don't replace or erase the realities of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, but they do create pocket universes nestled in and providing relief from those realities.

Davis's analysis of Holiday relies on the same non-zero sum calculus that Keguro Macharia locates in the work of Audre Lorde. Western political imaginaries tend to be governed by a zero-sum logic that "insist[s] that the entire world must be remade and, in the process, void[s] the quotidian practices that we want to multiply and intensify."<sup>45</sup> From this perspective, fixing political problems works a lot like Descartes's attempt to fix the epistemological problems of seventeenth-century European philosophy: tear everything down to the foundations and start rebuilding from the ground up. As Macharia emphasizes, this fetishization of revolution devalues and ignores the existing practices of care that oppressed people have performed—often for centuries—to survive and thrive within unjust institutions. Such practices "loo[k] for available resources" to "build and inhabit the worlds" one crafts in one's quotidian relations with other people. Thinking with Audre Lorde, Macharia argues that "sharing joy builds and sustains worlds."<sup>46</sup> Creating everyday pleasures, especially the joy of pleasures shared with others, is a way oppressed peoples carve out smaller, habitable worlds in a universe whose current structure requires their physical, social, and/or civil death. These everyday pleasures are a lot easier to accomplish than, say, fixing sexism. We can do them *now* while we work on that bigger, longer-term fix. Through the sharing of these everyday pleasures—like the pleasure of listening to a favorite song—we build and sustain an aesthetic dimension that is less oppressive and more fulfilling than the real world.

### Heartbreak

Davis uses the idea of the aesthetic dimension to explain a non-zero-sum approach to racism and sexism in art. Katherine McKittrick and Alexander Weheliye theorize a similar approach both quantitatively, as a "wicked mathematics," and qualitatively, as "emulation" or "heartbreak." They also perform it poetically in their writing.

According to McKittrick and Weheliye, the sounds of the Roland TR-808 drum machine sounds evoke both pleasure and pain. It is both central to African American musical traditions from hip hop to techno, and materially and historically tied to white supremacist patriarchy and its exposure of Black people to "extreme susceptibility to many different forms of sexual violence and violation."<sup>47</sup> For example, the 1999 single "808" by R&B trio Blaque is about how enjoyable the sound of that drum machine is, and it records or expresses that enjoyment in extra-propositional, poetic terms. It thus

45. Keguro Macharia, "Not this. More that!," *The New Inquiry*, 23 July 2018, <https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/not-this-more-that/>.

46. Ibid.

47. McKittrick and Weheliye, "808s & Heartbreak," 15.

“encodes the flesh-memory of the innumerable hours I’ve spent listening to music made with the TR-808 in clubs, in living rooms, on headphones while walking, hearing/feeling the 808s boom from passing cars, etc. and the sheer enjoyment derived from it in a way that is difficult to cordon off into words on the page.”<sup>48</sup> While it—both the song and the 808—is deeply pleasurable, the song also happened to be written by one of the most infamous sexual predators in pop music today: R. Kelly. Similarly, the 808 was introduced to hip hop by Afrika Bambaataa, who also has a record of sexual assault. Given the histories of Black musics in the US, the sound of the Roland TR-808 carries with it both intense, “this gives me life” pleasure and psychological and physical pain.

Rather than try to zero-out either end of the equation, McKittrick and Weheliye ask, “Can the 808s and the mechanics of the deep boom, signal something else without losing the messed-up, vicious stagnancy of the predation (or the sinister twin practice of forgetting and/or excusing the violence either in the name of art/musical genius or racial solidarity)?”<sup>49</sup> It’s important to preserve both the pleasure and the pain. First, erasing the pain is effectively erasing the ongoing impacts of slavery and white supremacy as racializing, gendering, and capitalist projects. To erase the pain we’d have to pretend racism, sexism, and capitalism are over and all their damage has been healed. But they aren’t and it isn’t. Second, voiding the pleasure this music brings denies Black people access to one of the technologies, in the music-as-technology sense, they have for “not overcoming but surviving, living with, breathing in, subsisting through”<sup>50</sup> a world otherwise designed to equate Blackness and social death. “The act of loving music deeply, the act of feeling and loving music intensely—is one way Black communities physiologically and neurobiologically navigate racist worlds.”<sup>51</sup> These deeply loved musics are structured by the white supremacist capitalist patriarchal violences that are responsible for the pain. Much in the same way that the structuring logics of, say, narrative cinema and tonal harmony code misogynist violence into their aesthetic norms, “the narrative of these [sexual assault] survivors becomes part of the computing that structures the boom of the TR-808s.”<sup>52</sup> It’s impossible to cleanse hip hop and R&B by boycotting and de-platforming predators because the racialized sexual violence is hard-wired into the genres’ aesthetics. Thus, “the throb of feeling good . . . has a painful musicological history. . . . The thump, the boom, create shivering circuits of pleasure laced with damage, loss, sorrow.”<sup>53</sup> Neither the pleasure nor the pain cancel the other out; they exist together. McKittrick and Weheliye call this doubled condition “heartbreak.”

Holding pleasure and pain, love and loss together, heartbreak is the result of a non-zero-sum math that, according to McKittrick, “calculate[s] the incalculable, that which cannot be captured by or in the sociogenic code of Man, but discloses and creates human

48. *Ibid.*, 14.

49. *Ibid.*, 16.

50. *Ibid.*, 15.

51. *Ibid.*, 21.

52. *Ibid.*, 17.

53. *Ibid.*, 15.

life as Black life.”<sup>54</sup> Following Sylvia Wynter, McKittrick argues that our concept of the human has been overdetermined by a white supremacist, cisheteropatriachal, capitalist concept of Man. This concept of Man calibrates the math behind the “plantocratic and colonial accounting systems”<sup>55</sup> we have inherited from Modernity—i.e., what most people think of as “math,” the kinds of math taught in schools and used in business and government. This is the same math behind the zero-sum feminist accounting I discussed earlier. It’s a zero-sum math because it is designed such that human=Man with no remainder; Man and dehumanized object are its only variables. In this math the pain of dehumanization and personhood are mutually exclusive. But if we stop tethering life exclusively to Man, we have access to non-zero sum maths that can calculate alternative ways of living. These alternative maths can account for both the pain of dehumanizing objectification and the pleasures of living, like those that come from loving music intensely or playing games.<sup>56</sup> As McKittrick explains, “here are mathematics—measured and unmeasured bam, drop, eightt—that reveal a new or different register of black life (I hope!): That, perhaps, is wicked mathematics.”<sup>57</sup> The sounds of 808s and the songs that use them, emulated by the poetics of McKittrick’s prose, perform mathematical operations that work out both dehumanizing pain and alternatively human pleasure.

This happens through these operations’ “intonation,”<sup>58</sup> which is a combination of timbre, pitch, accent, and other aspects of vocal delivery. “Not exactly affect . . . but [it] can be studied as such,”<sup>59</sup> intonation refers to the same thing as what I call the implicit knowledges coded into Black women’s music traditions. As I argued elsewhere, “aesthetic practices develop and emerge as types of implicit (i.e., non-propositional or non-verbal) knowledge, knowledge created in response to lived experiences in a particular social location,” such that when Black women music critics “talk about how [Beyoncé’s album] *Lemonade* makes them feel, what affects and knowledges and emotions it communicates, they are talking about the music—they just . . . don’t think music is abstracted away from . . . structures of feeling common to Black women with shared histories and phenomenological life-worlds.”<sup>60</sup> Musical and non-musical sounds communicate implicit knowledges through poetics. The aesthetic and technical choices songwriters and performers make, like the choice to use the sound of an 808 kick or snare, can shift the register at which a song communicates, from, for example, the human knowledges built into the production and distribution of the TR-808 machine, to the extra-human knowledges recorded in African American women’s vocal performance traditions.

54. Ibid., 33.

55. Ibid.

56. “Outside biocentric ledgers and coloniality, there is also the long tradition playing the numbers in Afro-diasporic and other communities.” McKittrick and Weheliye, “808s & Heartbreak,” 33.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid., 30.

59. Ibid.

60. Robin James, “How not to listen to *Lemonade*: music criticism and epistemic violence,” *Sounding Out!*, 16 May 2016, <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2016/05/16/how-not-to-listen-to-lemonade-music-criticism-and-epistemic-violence/>.

Emulation is a poetic technique that reconsiders artworks and practices that have painful histories of racial/sexual violence through a “wicked mathematics” that can derive extra-human registers from them, registers that are outside the spectrum of (Man-as-)human perception. A method of versioning that makes palpable music’s extra-human pleasures alongside its dehumanizing pain, “emulation . . . work[s] as a series of inaccurate repetitions that disclose the awful, the hurtful, and the intrusive. Emulations, like 808s, are injuriously loving.”<sup>61</sup> As inaccurate repetitions, emulations articulate two registers at once: one calibrated to Man-as-human’s listening ear, which feels injurious (and also pleasurable in conventional ways), and “extra-human”<sup>62</sup> ones that feel pleasurable in unconventional ways. “These extra-human devices and narratives . . . expose what kind of mechanisms and schemas and sounds and instruments (musical and not) help make this world navigable for those who are, in most instances, disciplined and surveyed and always imagined as static-in-place (look!).”<sup>63</sup> Emulating Frantz Fanon’s “Look! A negro,” McKittrick and Weheliye’s text demonstrates how this works. In Fanon’s original telling, “Look!” is a command uttered by one white person to another; according to Fanon, he hears “Look!” as objectifying and dehumanizing—he is the mere thing to be looked at, not an addressee of the command. But when McKittrick and Weheliye repeat and refer to Fanon’s word(s), it carries a different tone. First, it functions not as a command, but a parenthetical referent; were Fanon’s and McKittrick and Weheliye’s lines read aloud, they would sound different, the former more accented and staccato, the latter lower in pitch and in emphasis. Second, they interpellate the reader or hearer differently: whereas Fanon’s “Look!” objectifies, McKittrick and Weheliye’s “(look!)” addresses readers as part of an epistemic community that knows the original reference, and as a not necessarily overlapping community who knows the experience of being addressed as Fanon was by this original “Look!” McKittrick brings both of these points together in her claim that “intonation is not just the enunciation and performance of “look!”; intonation (“look!”) is reflexly felt (heartbreak) (which is not exactly affect, is it, but can be studied as such?).”<sup>64</sup> Emulating “Look!”, the intonation of “(look!)” conveys both “Look!”’s dehumanizing injury and the extra-human pleasure of being together in epistemic community. These extra-human poetics multiply registers of existence without subjecting those registers to a zero-sum accounting that requires all registers to be reconciled to an Absolute (in Beauvoir’s sense) or a human subject and its ethics.

Similarly, Weheliye argues that in R&B singer Brandy’s emulations of the 808, “the tone of Brandy’s voice and her intonation . . . like Blaque’s, undertakes the care work of humanizing the technology.”<sup>65</sup> Here, “humanizing” doesn’t mean giving it access to personhood by making it legible as (Man-as-)human; rather, it means translating machine protocols into techniques that she can repeat and perform herself. This is care work because it concerns reproductive labor, which, as Davis and Beauvoir emphasize, is

61. McKittrick and Weheliye, “808s & Heartbreak,” 13.

62. *Ibid.*, 31.

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Ibid.*, 30.

65. *Ibid.*, 27.

inherently repetitive<sup>66</sup>—for example, you have to feed yourself and those in your care multiple times a day. Emulation is the labor of inaccurate repetition, the labor of caring for and reproducing forms of sociality that help Black women navigate white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. “Something you do and can never possess,” this work is also not productive in the capitalist sense: emulations “cannot be possessed” because they don’t follow neoliberal capitalism’s zero-sum logic that demands one own past injury by spectacularly overcoming and profiting from it.<sup>67</sup> Much in the same way that reproductive labor is interminable (there’s always a next meal to prepare), past injury “lingers” as a “sonorous echo”<sup>68</sup> in emulations even as they create extra-human registers of experience. The work of emulation can’t be accounted for on zero-sum ledgers that only recognize the labor of ownership. And in the examples McKittrick and Weheliye cite, that work happens in the poetics of tone and intonation with which one inaccurately repeats the tone and intonation of Fanon’s “Look!” or the TR-808.

As McKittrick emphasizes, these wicked mathematics recalibrate our bodies; years of listening to music and loving it deeply shape our psychosomatic comportments. “The practice of loving, desperately, the unspeakability of music, is found, in part, in our neurobiological and physiological and intellectual response to that music and music makers.”<sup>69</sup> Listening can be a type of emulation: as we hear music, its aesthetic dimension rewires and recodes our neural, metabolic, and other psycho/physiological systems. Emphasizing these physiological and psychological effects, McKittrick and Weheliye thus refine Davis’s account of the aesthetic dimension: it’s not just a metaphysical byproduct of artworks, but a deeply physical experience that happens in and to listeners and spectators. “The sounds and beats and grooves they make—are not outside us or of us, but praxis.”<sup>70</sup> Like any artistic or athletic practice, emulation’s wicked mathematics reshapes your muscles, comportment, capacities, and so on: “heartbreak is an aesthetic-physiological practice.”<sup>71</sup> The physio-psychological states we experience when joyfully listening are literally a different configuration of existence, aesthetic dimensions that are still attached to but “more, [a]lways more”<sup>72</sup> than the white supremacist capitalist patriarchal configurations coded into the digital technologies, musical conventions, and musicians that make the songs we deeply love and emulate.

The emulations of the 808 McKittrick and Weheliye discuss in their article create a configuration of existence that “exceed[s] and unsettle[s] the accumulative logic of

66. Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Vintage Books 1983). Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (Knopf 2010).

67. James, *Resilience & Melancholy*, 2015.

According to McKittrick and Weheliye, emulation and heartbreak “does not follow the logic of redemption” (16). The resilience discourse James identifies in her book is one type of redemption, a type of redemption that calculates profits and losses on a zero-sum ledger.

McKittrick and Weheliye, “808s & Heartbreak,” 16.

68. *Ibid.*

69. *Ibid.*, 20.

70. *Ibid.*, 18.

71. *Ibid.*, 21.

72. *Ibid.*, 18.

cisheteropatriarchal racial capitalism”<sup>73</sup> by refusing zero-sum ledgers, such as a resilience discourse that requires us to either expunge or overcome pain and trauma, or concepts of personhood predicated on self-ownership and private property. Heartbreak is an experience specific to Black people under white supremacy; it is, as McKittrick and Weheliye emphasize, a praxis of Black life. Non-Black oppressed people can experience parallel phenomena.<sup>74</sup> To do so, we have to figure out our own non-zero-sum maths, equations appropriate to the ways we are injured by a white supremacist cishetero capitalist patriarchy (and we all are, it harms us all, even animals and the planet). The pleasures and sociality we get from making and appreciating art help us live through such damage, but at the same time the artworks and art institutions are themselves perpetuating it. We need non-zero-sum maths that account for both.

Because injurious practices are sedimented into every facet of our world, down to and including the environment, zero-sum accounts that treat these harms as something that can be avoided or overcome merely naturalize them behind the veneer of ethics. An aesthetic-physiological practice like emulation rearticulates these harms not for our scopophilic pleasure, but in a way that makes them more survivable, almost like a cognitive behavioral therapy that reorients a negative association to a positive one. It doesn’t resolve the harm by revolutionizing the world—that’s another kind of zero-sum thinking; rather, this non-zero sum practice helps people survive this one while they engage in the longer-term project of social justice.

### Love On The Brain

The uses of emulation in Rihanna’s vocal performance on her 2016 single “Love On The Brain” clarify how its “wicked mathematics” create racialized sexual and gender relations that are irreducible to something legible as human gender or human ethics. Emulating white cisheteropatriarchal capitalist gender and sexual norms and the aesthetic conventions built upon those norms, Rihanna’s performance of “Love On The Brain” opens up extra-human registers of experience. Her singing is an aesthetic-physiological practice that creates an aesthetic dimension calibrated to emulation’s wicked, non-zero-sum mathematics.

A doo-wop ballad, “Love On The Brain” descends from the genre of Black women’s blues songs Davis identifies, where performance choices complicate otherwise straightforwardly misogynist lyrics about heterosexual relationships. On the surface, the lyrics are about a woman who won’t leave an abusive masculine partner because the sex is so good. Many reviewers took this to be a song about Rihanna’s own abusive ex-boyfriend, Chris Brown.<sup>75</sup> But Rihanna performs the lyrics in ways that undermine that superficial reading.

73. Ibid., 22.

74. My use of parallel here draws on political scientist Lester K. Spence’s concept of Black parallel publics. Black parallel publics reproduce logics present in the dominant white culture (such as neoliberalism) within Black communities and Black cultures. See Lester K. Spence’s *Stare in the Darkness: The Limits of Hip-hop and Black Politics*, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

75. For example: ““Love On The Brain,” a retro slow jam, borrows stylistically from Amy Winehouse’s “Wake Up Alone,” to offer a tough sound as the song seems to reminisce over Rihanna’s abusive relationship with Chris

First, small performance choices in elements like attack and pronunciation suggest that these lyrics aren't delivered straight, but sarcastically. In the build-up to the climax in the chorus, the lyrics rehearse the "he beats me but the sex is great so I can't leave" trope. In this way, the song appeals to racist and sexist aesthetic languages wherein black women's suffering is something the structuring logics of artworks have taught us to find compelling and pleasurable. Rihanna, however, sings these lyrics in ways that alter their meaning. She growls some of the vowels, such as the "I"s, or the "u" in "he fucks me so good." At one level, her growl mimics sounds made during good sex; it is a representation of traditional heteropatriarchal sexual pleasure. At another level, her growl echoes vocal idioms that convey frustration and anger. In the first chorus, the growl on the "u" of "fucks" is muted, but the extremely staccato delivery almost mimics the social media convention of putting a period after every word in a sentence to emphasize the gravity and force of one's claim, thus clarifying that this is also an expression of anger and frustration. Rihanna's singing doesn't express the literal meaning of these lyrics, but rather that the picture these lyrics draw and the norms they reinforce are outrageous and enraging.

Her live performance of the song at the 2016 Global Citizen Festival<sup>76</sup> amplifies these elements, both sonically and visually with body language. In the first verse, she bobbles her head, sneers, and rolls her eyes. She frequently gives dead stares that say "you've got to be kidding me." At 1:06-7 she sings in a high-pitched "nayh-nayh" teasing manner. Together, these convey sarcasm on Rihanna's part. Like a philosopher who is summarizing a view they oppose only to critique it, Rihanna's "Love On The Brain" rehearses an argument that she disagrees with. The lyrics are what her addressee(s) expect her to think, feel, and do, and she performs the song to let her addressee(s) know that this is an outrageous expectation. This is one way the tone of her delivery and body language produce an emulation of both cisheteropatriarchal gender scripts and the aesthetic conventions that are intertwined with them.

The recorded version of the song contains a use of emulation that is both more fundamental to the song's structure and more significant with respect to its impact on cisheteropatriarchal gender scripts and their humanizing effects. Intonation is also the medium in which Rihanna executes the emulation. Though the choruses are sung in Rihanna's normal register, the verses are sung in what Julianne Escobedo-Shepherd describes as a "Prince-adjacent falsetto." You can see the breakdown in this diagram:

Taking the song in 6/8, X = 4 measure phrase  
 X intro - instrumental  
 X intro - instrumental

Brown." Christian Kennedy, "Rihanna's 'ANTI' a personal, experimental opus," *Michigan Daily*, 28 January 2016, <https://www.michigandaily.com/section/arts/rihannas-anti-personal-experimental-opus>.

In *New Musical Express*: "The rolling organ and romantic string arrangements are offset by the dark-as-fuck lyrics, which seem to be Rihanna's ode to a violent lover (which of course make you think of her being assaulted by Chris Brown in 2009)." Jordan Bassett, "Rihanna's Anti is Here – Read Our Track-By-Track Review," *NME*, 28 January 2016, <https://www.nme.com/blogs/nme-blogs/anti-track-by-track-first-listen-review-11602#mxTDxT3zSacSQs2> V.99.

76. Rihanna, "Rihanna Love On the Brain: Live at Global Citizen Festival 2016," filmed September 2016, YouTube video, 3:49, posted September 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXvyJDqqQec>.

X vi a - falsetto; staccato and low intensity suggest seething anger/over it  
 X vi a - falsetto  
 X vi b - falsetto  
 X vi b - falsetto  
 X - prechorus a - voice drops to regular range  
 X - prechorus a  
 X - prechorus b  
 X - prechorus b  
 X - chorus  
 X - chorus  
 X - chorus  
 X - chorus  
 X - not a pause—stays in meter throughout  
 X - v 2 a  
 X - v2 a  
 X - v 2 b, in falsetto  
 X - v2 b, in falsetto  
 X - prechours a - falsetto  
 X - prechorus a - falsetto  
 X - prechorus b  
 X - prechorus b  
 X - chorus  
 X - chorus  
 X - chorus prime  
 X - chorus prime

Though the first verse is in a voice that approximates Prince's falsetto, it is more prominent in verse two because it comes directly after a period of Rihanna singing in a lower, fuller voice. Falsetto is traditionally a technique used by cis men singers to extend the upper limit of their range. That's why Escobedo Shepherd identifies Prince as a referent. Prince, however, was also known for his gender queering and bending. Rihanna's falsetto picks up on this and takes it to a new level. She emulates men's falsetto to produce sounds and a voice that are extra-human because they can't be attributed to a clearly gendered voice. Her Prince-like falsetto is an aesthetic-physiological practice that creates an extra-human aesthetic dimension that isn't calibrated by or to human gender scripts. "Love On The Brain" thus follows a non-zero sum math: it is thoroughly saturated with aesthetic conventions that will always be tainted by humanity's ongoing histories of domination, and it also generates an extra-human dimension wherein both those aesthetic conventions and human gender/race scripts function as more than just that. Working with aesthetic conventions saturated with sexism and racism to produce sounds and sensations that help us perceive less oppressive realities, Rihanna both holds us accountable for our current injustices and figures a possible path away from them.

Davis, Macharia, McKittrick and Weheliye, and Rihanna's approaches to the problem of racist and sexist aesthetic conventions all adopt a non-zero sum math that both

centers the ongoing reality of human oppression and inequality and accounts for extra-human practices that allow us to relate to each other, ourselves, and our senses in ways that aren't overdetermined by those systems of oppression. This concept of non-zero sum accounting is like a mathematical formula that sets out the constants (ongoing oppression) and variables (artistic practice) together in a way that we can scribble through and work out their complex relations. It is a way to acknowledge the complexity of the "can we separate the (good) art from the (bad) artist?" question without using that complexity as an evasive excuse. Unlike the popular feminist approaches I analyzed earlier, these non-zero sum approaches acknowledge the ongoing reality of white supremacist patriarchy while also providing us the means of carving out less oppressive aesthetic realities to tide us through the long, hard work of making our political realities more just. Each of these accounts demonstrates that poetics and aesthetics are central to non-zero sum accounting. Whereas the popular feminist approaches I studied take the *self* as the thing that must be worked on and fixed so that it exhibits the proper attitude toward the works of offenders, these non-zero sum approaches focus instead on experimenting with artistic media and aesthetic practices so that they do more than just reproduce the white supremacist capitalist patriarchal logics that have been coded into them. This experimentation helps us figure out how it feels when we relate to one another in less oppressive ways, and these feelings can guide us as we work together to build more just empirical and political realities.

When it comes to making and appreciating art, because sexism and racism are coded into aesthetic norms and conventions, such non-zero sum maths are the only feminist and anti-racist way forward. As a white woman, my non-zero sum math will be different than the Black feminist approaches I outlined in this paper. I will need aesthetic-physiological practices attuned to the way my body and my senses have been shaped by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. But the music I love deeply can help me figure those out.

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