
Said the Hooker to the Thief

"Some Way Out" of Rockism

In the 1980s, performers and champions of art rock in Britain coined the word *rockism*, a term of disapproval for their North American counterparts' austere and deadly earnest performance style (see Christgau "Decade: Rockism"). Since Kelefa Sanneh revived and popularized the term in the United States in 2004, rockism has become the name for the jurisdiction straight white men exercise over matters of taste in popular music. Today, rockism encompasses—and sometimes conflates—aesthetic preferences and social prejudices, leading to objections that the term has been stretched beyond coherence (see J. Rosen; Woods; Wolk). Of course, one could defuse allegations of rockism by noting rock's many internal divisions and the subsequent difficulty of locating their unified, hostile relationship to other genres and their fans. Yet, something keeps most rock fans, artists, and critics in conversation with each other and not with, say, church musicians. Despite their sometimes sharp disagreements, the champions of classic, hard, punk, mod, metal, and subsequent rock styles have shared "a field of argument over the origins, directions, and posterity of the music" (Saul xii).¹ It may be helpful, then, to think of rockism as the conduct of debates that produce the distinction "between the 'mass' and the 'art' in mass art [which] has been the distinguishing ideological project of rock culture since [the late 1960s]" (Keightley 109).² Across most of its genres, the following practices have become signs of rock's transcendence of its roots in the Hit Parade: writing one's own material, providing one's own instrumental accompaniment, producing dense concept albums rather than catchy dance singles, and following one's muse resolutely, in spite of pressure from fans and record labels.³ As debates ensue over whether certain artists, fans, and genres adhere to these values, rockism assigns autonomy, authenticity, and authorship (see Keightley 134)—virtues that reflect an ideal hero more than any actual artist. Rockist proceedings conclude by disclaiming these hagiographic activities,

1. Considering that rock critics have sought to follow the path of jazz by elevating their music from a market product to an art object, it is not surprising that I should be able to apply Scott Saul's description of hard bop's factionalism to that of rock.

2. For eyewitness testimony to the birth of what later became known as rockism, see Willis; also Christgau ("A Man as Good").

3. See Echols, "Shaky Ground"; Sanneh; E. Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll* 230-53.

declaring that the aforementioned qualities were already present in the sources. Complex figures appear in rock's moral fables as types such as rambling bluesmen, innocent country girls, savvy pimps, and dissolute sellouts. Once dressed in these characters, they are prepared to teach about the corrupting effects of an urban, money economy on individuality.

Before the rockism debate is retired as what some would deem another fruitless exercise in identity politics, it is worth considering the race and gender contours of rock's archetypal cult artist and prostitute. Such a review shows that rock's archetypes have been race- and gender-specific and that these raced and sexualized characters have incited visceral desires to purify, protect, and strengthen rock in relation to competing genres. In this essay, I trace rock's identity-coded market moralities not to resistance to mass culture in the Cold War era but to a longer line of anticommercial ideologies designed to preserve (or create) white male freedom.⁴ Adopting this historical frame allows confrontation with the deep dreams of the rockist imaginary and opens the possibility of redistributing rock's cultural and economic capital beyond revaluing black roots musicians and derided pop divas. To achieve this fundamental change that both sets of anti-rockists want would entail engaging a theory of volition that can account for agency's inseparable components of self-assertion and submission to external power.⁵ In imagining that transformation, I have often returned to a resonant line from classic rock's founding year of 1967, the insistent opening of Bob Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower": "There must be some way out of here." However, instead of assigning that declaration to "the joker," I assign it to the hooker, in the hopes that centering and embracing the compromised figure of the prostitute offers some way out of rockism's constraining notion of freedom as a state of permanent rebellion

AESTHETIC AND IDENTITARIAN APPROACHES TO ROCK IDEOLOGY

My approach combines two traditions in the critique of rock that have usually been pursued separately. On one side, scholars and journalists interested in rock ideology have rightly noted that Romanticism and Modernism provided rock an aesthetic morality deeply opposed to commercialism (see Frith "The Magic;" Gracyk 176-202; Keightley III). While they brilliantly demonstrate rock's slippery capacity to be *in* mass culture while expressing disdain for it, their writing on aesthetics often separates rock and its parent cultures from their connections to broader labor struggles—despite the fact that professional artists have long understood themselves to be we now call culture workers. More attention to the dream of free labor inspiring cultural workers suggests that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century aesthetics bequeathed rock ideology not only an

4. Unpropertied white males were the first Western population to find themselves declared equal shareholders in citizenship without sharing in the privileges of their aristocratic fellows. In seeking civic equality, subsequent populations have engaged in a prototypical search inherited from those first recipients of formal and not substantive equality.

5. Madison Moore finds this duality in *fierceness*, which entails "both ownership and the loss of control" (73).

anticommercial ethic but also emblematic “blacks and women” to symbolize the corrupting power of market culture—and the imagined benefits of exile from it.⁶

As the classic rock consensus emerged, critics were treating the study of aesthetics and identity politics separately, separately with Ellen Willis lamenting rock’s co-optation by high-minded bohemians in 1968 (420) and Patricia Kennealy-Morrison flatly calling the same cohort male chauvinists in 1970 (358). Norma Coates recently reconciled these approaches, linking rock critics’ opposition to mass culture to their depiction of it as feminine—even female (66).⁷ Rock culture, Coates argues, shaped and deployed the figures of teenyboppers and groupies as tasteless consumers of mass culture or disposable commodities, respectively. Her study of the gendering of mass culture calls for a companionate approach to that culture’s racialization, a project I begin by attending to figures such as the country virgin and the rambling bluesman. Complementing Coates with an examination of race and masculinity in rock ideology, Christophe den Tandt argues that, in enforcing to rock’s austere aesthetic, male rockers simulate the operation of a self-regulating guild of musical craftsmen, free from corporate control. His depiction of rock’s attempt to uphold a “nineteenth-century artisan ideal” in the twentieth century (and the twenty-first) through white males’ technical mastery of African-American skills mirrors the arc I trace (Tandt 384). As Tandt finds the artisan ideal preserved in the classic rock band, I find dynamics of nineteenth-century blackface resounding in rock nostalgia’s capacity to locate working whites’ lost liberties in the lives of economically marginal blacks. I would add that, in addition to claiming street smarts through identification with black men, they also maintain a place for pastoral innocence by celebrating “cool-eyed country girl[s]” with “vanilla-fresh” voices (“Into the Pain of the Heart”).⁸

Unlike students of rock aesthetics, those who focus on racism and sexism in rock often characterize its definition of artistry as a transparent cover for identity-based exclusion. For example, journalist Kelefa Sanneh asks: “The pop star, the disco diva, the lip-syncher, the ‘awesomely bad’ hit maker: could it really be a coincidence that rockist complaints often pit straight white men against the rest of the world?” (Sanneh). Unless one imputes secret political conservatism to all white men in the early rock community, it is not a foregone conclusion that people who staked out “an oppositional relationship to mainstream culture” should have created a conservative’s dream canon of self-made white men (Coates 67). My concern here is not how, say, Bruce Springsteen’s skeptical representation of the American Dream in “Born in the USA” was rebranded as a patriotic anthem. Rather, I am interested in how the energies put into erecting and safeguarding

6. I use “blacks and women” advisedly, knowing that the formulation has a tendency to make its women white and its blacks male. The imagined hypermasculinity of blackness and the feared effeminacy of whiteness are pertinent in explaining rockism, as will become apparent in the following sections.

7. Frith and McRobbie complicate Coates’s claim by arguing that the “consolidation] . . . of mass youth music in its cock rock form” masculinized the genre using the same commercial realm that had been said to feminize it (52).

8. This approach contrasts with that of Frith (“The Magic”) and Keightley, whose foundational discussions of rock ideology are more concerned with conditions of musical production and consumption within age-segmented markets, respectively.

rock's *aesthetic* integrity produced a canon that, by and large, aligns with the pursuit of white male freedom, even when the subjects are *not* white men.

Highlighting the small number of people among the canon-makers and the canonized that are not straight white Anglo-American men risks simplifying complex operations to a simple exclusionary reflex.⁹ Rock's canon-makers have not always reacted involuntarily to identity's apparent physical features. Rather, they have seized upon sonic and visual evidence to cast artists as exemplary *characters* in cautionary tales about the market. Perhaps sheer racism, sexism, and homophobia informed rockism's oversight of popular music criticism in the disco era (see Echols, "Shaky Ground" 162-65). Yet, today, even avowedly right-wing institutions have adopted a "rhetorical register of disaffiliation" from explicit advocacy of social inequality (Wiegman 119). While now offering belated plaudits to overlooked "blacks and women," rock ideologues have continued to distribute the dividends of critical attention and long-term profits according to moral distinctions between ascetic artists and debased whores. In so doing, the ideology's ever-present capacity to *make* characters distinct from artists' visible social identities has only become more apparent. Consequently, before critics tabulate the number of women and minorities on a "best of" list or in a personal music collection as proof of rock's sheer power to exclude, they should be sure that rockism has not worked its alchemy; because rockism is perfectly capable of remarkable reinventions, transforming Mick Jagger into "Madonna the Panderer" and Joni Mitchell into "Miles Davis: Streetwise Pimp and Restless Artist"—as in the cases below.

THE PROSTITUTE RULE AND THE JONI EXCEPTION

Fulfilling *Rolling Stone's* invitation to close its twentieth anniversary issue with sage words about the essence of rock, Bob Dylan renewed critiques of show business expressed at the magazine's founding in 1967. Dylan championed a *motionless* stage persona he thought black men epitomized: "Howlin' Wolf, to me, was the greatest live act, because he did not have to move a finger when he performed—if that's what you'd call it, 'performing'" (Loder 303). Ideological mystification is clearly at work here, for, if the musician did not move a *finger*, he could not have played his *guitar*. The real curb on exhibitionism here is not the bluesman's refusal to perform for audiences but Dylan's refusal to recognize that show business requires one to, well, *show*.

Opposing two ideals from the US market—black restraint and white pandering—Dylan also situated performing as a close neighbor to prostitution.¹⁰ He aligned the strutting Rolling Stones' frontman Mick Jagger with a *chick performer*, whom he imagined as a whore: "Showbiz—well, I don't dig it. I don't go to see someone jump around. I hate to see chicks perform. *Hate* it ____ [T]hey whore themselves. Especially the ones that don't wear anything. They fuckin' whore themselves" (Loder 303). By suggesting that

9. See Brooks; Sanneh; G. Wald, "Sister Rosetta Tharpe."

10. As Dylan praises Frenchman Charles Aznavour alongside Howlin' Wolf and Ray Charles, it would appear that *United States* whiteness, more so than its continental counterpart, was at risk of complete submersion in commerciality.

Jagger's titillating movements identified him with the striptease of a Madonna, Dylan sought to remind his longtime friend of a truism from the days when they were listening to folk-blues records on opposite sides of the Atlantic: "it's still hipper and cooler to be Ray Charles, sittin' at the piano, not movin' shit. And still getting across, you know? Pushing rhythm and soul across" (Loder 303).¹¹ Once again, Dylan inaccurately perceived a black male performer to be immobile. In truth, the Right Reverend Ray moved so much—using his entire body to conduct the band—that it often appeared he would fall off his piano bench! That journalist Kurt Loder did not note Dylan's failures of reportage is an index of an ideology's capacity to produce theories, ways of seeing that determine not only the way objects are ranked but also the way they are identified at the outset.

Unlike the misrepresentation of Ray Charles, Dylan's generalization about women performers did strike interviewer Kurt Loder as false. He quickly asked if Dylan would dare class "even someone like Joni Mitchell" with chicks who give their virtue away instead of men who horde it. The legend laughingly corrected himself: "Well, no. But, then, Joni Mitchell is almost like a man" (Loder 303). This gender reassignment shows the terms by which rockism has to create that which it later interprets. The degraded whore is such an essentially feminine figure that the ideology must resignify a female person as a masculine proxy in order to praise her. Similarly, a white male performer who is judged sufficiently liberated from commercial demands can be detached from his fellow white cover artist Pat Boone. While Boone became a laughing stock for producing diluted "white" versions of black artists' hits, Jagger was racially repositioned as heir to the original mojo of Howlin' Wolf or Muddy Waters.¹²

Enlivening dead metaphors about prostitution that might otherwise prove unremarkable, Dylan provided the *dramatis personae* for a morality tale in which musicians progress, like pilgrims, through a world fallen into commerce. He tapped into dichotomous imagery in rock that has saddled singing (white) chicks with the burden of representing the pandering sellout while using soulful (black) instrumentalists to epitomize underground artists who dramatize withholding. As should be clear, neither Dylan's women nor his blacks corresponded to actual living persons. Seen through the tint of rockist lenses, complex and contradictory performers appear either as praiseworthy masters of cool or as suspect purveyors of heat. Once juxtaposed, they serve as moral reference points for artists—and critics—attempting to grasp those elusive liberties that the Age of Revolutions was to have guaranteed white male citizens two centuries prior.

While one could supplement Dylan's vivid allegory with numerous additional examples, a recurrent trope from the critical archive about Joni Mitchell will illustrate the utility of the raced and sexualized characters in rock's enduring market allegories. Mitchell's admittance into the canon has been accompanied by repeated references to cosmetics as impediments to rock's requisite truth-telling. One voice during the opening of PBS's

11. According to one observer, the criticism of Madonna's sexual provocations began the same year of Dylan's denunciation of "chick" performers (Paglia 10).

12. If rockism were purely a mechanism for compiling a white boys' club, then Pat Boone would be readily admitted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Clearly, rockism's racial and gendered grid of authenticity produces different identities than are encountered in other arenas of social life.

2003 biography of Joni Mitchell (perhaps that of MTV's Bill Flanagan) praises her as "unique because of the fact that she's not going to put lipstick and makeup on the truth" (Lacy and Bennett 1:16). The same year, another critic took up the theme, commenting that those who hear Mitchell sing her 60s classic "Both Sides Now" with an aged and cracked voice get "the simple truth without lipstick or makeup" (Knelman). Continuing the theme, Mitchell biographer Karen O'Brien opposes "the natural vigour" of her subject, Bonnie Raitt, Marianne Faithfull, and Joan Baez to "the ersatz, painstakingly tended youthfulness of Cher and Tina Turner" (9). In O'Brien's judgment, the women in her quartet never abandoned their connection to rock's roots in unadorned folk style. Unlike Cher and Tina Turner, whose allegedly excessive stylization made them fodder for imitative drag queens, rock's innocent country girls grew into still-unvarnished women.¹³

It is not, of course, identity-based discrimination *alone* that can uproot as entrenched a rocker as Tina Turner from the genre. Rockers would like to think their genre thrives on the naked power of its raw sound while vacuous pop survives only because its empty sounds are paired with expensive visual supplements (i.e., manicured stars and music videos). (see Frith, "Pop Music" 96). The result is that consumers of these faddish products—whether hit singles or cosmetics—are thought to absorb those objects' qualities, becoming trivial, indistinguishable, and decadent themselves (see Walter Hughes, qtd. in Echols, "Shaky Ground" 162). If framed not as the dynamo of the Ike and Tina Turner Revue but as another vapid idol of a set of tasteless gay consumers, Turner can lose her claim in rock as surely as Mick Jagger can become a chick performer.

Ironically, this critically acclaimed Joni Mitchell who eschews lipstick and makeup bears as little relationship to the historical performer as Dylan's unmoving Ray Charles to the one available in concert footage. Equally false is the refrain that Mitchell "never showed her tits" (Christiansen; Echols, "Soul of a Martian" 219). In fact, she rotated exposure and artifice, appearing on album art from 1972 to 1977 naked (from behind), bikini-clad while floating in a pool, and in blackface drag. Mitchell actually *did* employ lipstick, makeup, and other enhancements to assume her alter ego of Art Nouveau, a black male pimp and jazz musician who appeared on the cover of *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* (1977) and in two films. Art's unveiling announced the release of Mitchell's first double-LP (a loose concept album), studio experiments with multi-tracking her guitar, and departures from the soaring melodies and autobiographical lyrics that had established her popularity. Aligning herself with street blackness, jazz music, and Miles Davis in particular, Mitchell proclaimed herself a restlessly creative artist who followed her muse more than the market. Forgetting that the commercially unsuccessful music of this period was accompanied by a thoroughly cosmeticized persona, critics invariably cite this period in awarding Mitchell a place in rock's canon.¹⁴

13. For more on the cultural power of cosmetics in Anglo-America from the eighteenth century to the present, see Peiss's excellent *Hope in a Jar*.

14. For a fuller discussion of the genesis and utility of Mitchell's black male persona, see my "The Only Black Man at the Party: Joni Mitchell Enters the Rock

Journalist Stephen Holden once contended that canonizing Joni Mitchell would rid rock of its “most serious bias: its disdain for folk-oriented soft-rock, especially when made by women” (Holden). He could not have anticipated that the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame would honor her as a black male jazz musician. Oddly enough, misrepresenting her race and gender worked to make her authentic because, from a rockist standpoint, a black male street figure could not be inauthentic. Thus, at the confounding conclusion of the lipstick debates, Mitchell enters the canon in full-body blackface drag while Tina Turner—whose primary misrepresentation has been her cavalcade of wigs—must stay at the gay club with her iconic wigs and drag impersonators.¹⁵ One would think that the example of David Bowie would have prepared rockists to see enhancements such as lipstick and makeup as potential routes *to* liberated expression. Such a viewpoint is not dominant, however, because rockism proceeds from centuries of antitheatrical jeremiads that envision performance halls filled with unscrupulous prostitutes who use cosmetics, costumes, and pretense to sell what should never have even been *seen*.

A BRIEF, TANGLED HISTORY OF PROSTITUTION AND SLAVERY IN LIBERAL THOUGHT

When considering the enduring bias against *performers* in anti-commercial invective, it is instructive to return to the etymology of prostitution. This return reveals that railing against the commercial involves suspecting not only misrepresentation but also mediation *in toto*. Literary critic Catherine Gallagher observes that prostitute comes “from the Latin, *pro* meaning ‘before’ and *statuere*, meaning ‘to setup or place.’ Toprostitute is thus to set something, oneself perhaps, before someone else to offer it for sale” (22n35). The fall into the marketplace results from a fall into representation; being seen is a precursor to being sold. Considering the traditional desire to protect art from the contamination of commercial exchange, it is ironic that the prostitute is linguistically conjoined with the statue, an art object *designed* to be shown.

Robert Christgau alludes to this puritan dread of the visual in his sharp depiction of rockism and its effects. There is a bit of good-natured ribbing in Christgau’s portrayal of US-American rockers “so uncomfortable with the performer’s role that they strive to minimize it,” yet end up projecting not sincerity and immediacy but, instead, “conscious, and rather joyless, fakery” (“Decade: Rockism”). His logic points to a crucial link between exposure and solicitation: that the objection to selling out has contained within it a presumption that “stand[ing] out” is always the first indication of prostitution (Gallagher 22). The only reason to exhibit, in this paranoid logic, is to sell (out) to leering lechers located either in management or in the audience. Consequently, aesthetic ideologies opposed to commercial exchange and popular access reinvent artists as people whose only duty is to please themselves, redeeming the prostituted performer as onanist.¹⁶

15. Turner is, of course, in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame with ex-husband Ike Turner. My point is that each mode of assessment in rock reinvents the artist and can produce a different outcome.

16. That rock discourse directs opprobrium against masturbatory or homosexual acts does not negate the operation of male narcissism or homosociality in rock.

To engage the etymology linking prostitute, statue, and exhibitionist performer in this way is to do more than play a mere word game. Though these characters operate at the level of figurative comparison, they played a role in historical attempts to make distinctions among overlapping populations of industrial laborers, theatrical entertainers, slaves, and prostitutes—a process that parallels the attempt to distinguish rock from pop, despite their shared mass cultural origins. Just as rock was a new object in twentieth-century culture, so the unpropertied white male citizen was a new object in Anglo-American *society*. Establishing whether he was more *like* an aristocratic gentleman, a slave, or a prostitute would determine what kind of respect and wage he would merit. In seeking both money and honor for their new art form, white male rock critics had a rhetorical model in the ongoing struggle to establish their political status. As I proceed into a radically condensed history of Anglo-American discourse around prostitutes, slaves, and vagabond rambler, I want to emphasize that the racially and sexually specific nature of these characters *predates* mass culture, though the progress of antidiscrimination affected their utility.

Embedded in rockist disdain for the prostitute is a fear of sexual slavery with roots in the types of thinking engendered in early Anglo-American capitalism and its spheres of uneven development. In slave societies, a system of forced labor included sexual exploitation as one of its economic tools (see Morgan 1); in imperial centers, self-declared wage slaves and prostitutes worked in near proximity to earn liquid capital in industrializing cities (see Wallerstein 279). It has often been said that the explosion of industrial capitalism enhanced social mobility and thus fueled movements to level hereditary social distinctions. In this era, white men without property or title were promised promotions from involuntary serfdom to labor mobility, ancient obligation to negotiated wage, subjection to citizenship, and social deference to “horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 7). Though the subject of the monarch was recast in the form of the self-determining citizen, the archive houses countless comparisons of the wage earner’s life to that of a prostitute or a slave. The irony is that the free man’s sense of proximity to these unfree figures was especially acute *after* he was awarded “liberty” in the form of the franchise and the wage contract.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that bonds among white men of different stations were forged by an insistence that, though they alternately craved and dreaded participation in a money economy, they should never be confused with slaves and prostitutes, who were imagined as forms of currency lacking self-determining capacity. It was not that ambitious white men did not want to put a price on themselves; it was that they needed to be able to disavow ever having done so. The notion of liberty they took up was one distributed downward from a landed aristocracy suspicious that the need for money necessarily made one susceptible to bribery and coercion (see Isaac 113, 130; Rozbicki). The gentry’s liberties included condescension, leisure, and command—privileges that those who had to work to eat could hardly exercise. For white wage laborers to feel they enjoyed an equal share in this newly redistributed liberty, they would have to cultivate a willed obliviousness to their own vulnerability to the caprice that characterizes all transactions in a money economy. Ambivalently positioned, they invented opposing

figures: one a vagabond or confidence-man who touched down in the commercial realm only when his money ran out, the other an amalgam of slave and prostitute whose will and dignity were entirely overridden by monetary transactions. While supposedly free white men rubbed shoulders in the muck with the latter, they identified in their imaginations with the former.

Considering this situation from that cradle of industrial capitalism, nineteenth-century London, sociologist Roderick Ferguson notes that the prostitute became a galvanizing figure for a wide array of philosophies and social movements opposed to the wage labor system (9). Assessing Karl Marx's canonical remarks on the prostitution of the worker, Ferguson observes: "The prostitute symbolizes the dehumanization or [,] more specifically, *man's* feminization under capitalist social relations" (8). This disempowering outcome rendered the revolutionary promise of liberation hollow and made it clear that the proletariat owned *only* his own body—and perhaps that of his wife or child—while the landed capitalist's assets simply began there. For all his disputes with the theorists of capitalist economics, Marx concurred that, in a free society, a man would own himself at the least. Unlike Adam Smith and John Locke, he saw man's alienation from that first property in the rise of the wage contract under capitalism (see Pateman and Mills 17). Thus, he viewed the prostitute as the perfect representation of this condition, in which industrial workers, like sex workers, "ha[ve] only that labor that resides in [their] bod[ies] to sell" (Ferguson 7-8). As Jean-Christophe Agnew demonstrates in a brilliant discussion of the co-evolution of commercial theatre and capitalism's mediated economy, Marx may as well have said "actor" in the place of prostitute. For prostitutes, vagrants, actors, and wage workers were typically drawn from the same regions and social classes and, in fact, often engaged in exchanges that blurred the distinction between economies—formal and informal, licit and illicit (see Agnew; Burnett; Davis; Pullen).¹⁷

The rhetorical power of the metaphor of prostitution has been so great that the term often seems capable of denotative description without reference to actual prostitutes. However, it is worth wondering at campaigns for liberty that managed to equate sex work and industrial labor and, for that matter, how the exchange of a man's power to work for liquid capital came to be seen as effecting a *gender* reassignment. If anything, Marx's male worker becomes a form of *currency*, not a female.¹⁸ Yet, a masculinist conception of proletarian liberation promulgated the idea that capitalism's great evil was the reduction of *men* to the status of currency and generated outrage by substituting for that a reduction of status from male to female. Dylan's portrayal of whores is clearly indebted to this history of working-class consciousness.

As a slave to sin or to consumer demand, the nineteenth-century prostitute often shared a conceptual bed with the chattel. In the Jacksonian United States, the white male

17. Though one could profitably return to seventeenth-century sermons decrying theatre, cosmetics, and fashion—and working-class riots that targeted bawdy houses—I restrict my attention to the Age of Revolutions for the sake of space (see Agnew; Romack).

18. Although anthropologist Gayle Rubin famously demonstrated the ways in which women have been used as currency to broker negotiations between men, it should be remembered that there is nothing *intrinsic* to female bodies that makes them the best medium for these transactions (93-95).

workers at the fore of the labor movement feared a *racial* reassignment as well as the gender reassignment discussed above, as made evident in their vociferous objections to wage labor as “white slavery.” In the first decades of the nineteenth century, slavery itself was considered a violation if the subject was white. By the latter part of the century, abstract liberty had been so thoroughly connected to birth as a white male that the only people deemed white *slaves* were white female prostitutes (see Roediger 72).¹⁹ Abolitionists also contributed to the crossing of the prostitute and the slave. Iconic texts and images defined slavery as primarily about the sexual violation of enslaved women.²⁰ As Michael Newbury details, literary celebrities of the antebellum United States joined this chorus by comparing the crowd’s desire for their public appearances to the graphic torture and sexual abuse of the slave (160).

Building on George Rawick, historian David Roediger contends that white workers in the antebellum North played the plantation dandy as a way of revisiting the easeful life they nostalgically associated with their lost agrarian pasts (95-96). Of course, easy living was, historically, the prerogative of the landed aristocracy. Consequently, working whites were better able to live out their fantasies of black leisure and license. Indeed, to inhabit those fantasies, they needed only to take from the folk’s bottomless well of *cultural* property, rather than to engage in potentially fatal conflict with economic elites over *economic* property.²¹ If blackface performance constituted an implicit critique of life under the tyranny of capitalism’s workday, it also marked a limit of cross-racial identification. Far from aligning politically with black workers, white actors and audiences used their leisure time to enjoy unstructured black life vicariously or through performance.²²

While there was no unanimous white response to blacks’ transition from slaves to vagrants and sharecroppers—nor even consistency in any one artist’s engagement with the racial imaginary—the twentieth century witnessed successive social and artistic movements that ventriloquized blackness as a way to criticize market culture. Along with folk survivals the world over, stylistically undomesticated African-American speech was thought to ward off the disintegrating and alienating effects of market culture (North, Preface). Modernists, beatniks, folkies, and hippies were twentieth-century heirs to a nineteenth-century tradition of inhabiting imaginary black lifestyles full of pleasures denied to those whites who behaved according to regulation (see Saul, Part I; G. Wald, “Mezz Mezzrow”).

During the industrial period, from the 1820s to the 1970s, the dissolute prostitute and the black man who had not sold (or could not sell) his soul served as important figures, screens onto which enfranchised and ambitious people projected their fears and desires.²³

19. In the dominant social imaginary, black women’s fitness for both slavery and prostitution was an unquestioned part of a racialized sexual market (see H. Rosen).

20. For a full-length survey of the iconography of slavery’s sexual violence, see Wood.

21. I would argue that this cycle repeats when well-off men impersonate rappers to escape from the decorum of the university and the boardroom and enjoy a time before sexual harassment laws.

22. On the cultivation of poor whites’ identification with white elites rather than with nonwhites of their own class, see Allen.

23. While Leslie Fiedler and Eric Lott focus on the flickering homoeroticism in white men’s bonding across the color line, I pursue a slightly different tack, analyzing an economic and not a Freudian/Oedipal allegory.

To the extent that white laborers of the Jim Crow era thought of themselves as enslaved to wages, they could fantasize that impediments to joining the formal labor market did not constrain but rather liberated black sharecroppers and vagrants.

The rise of folk and rock posed some challenges to this narration of race, gender, and market morality. White women like Janis Joplin took a page from the blues queens' handbook, wielding authority as bandleaders and unleashing rough and intense vocal performances that defied expectations of demure femininity (see Echols, *Scars of Sweet Paradise*). In addition, Motown's stable of black performers crossed over from the "race market" to become the "Sound of Young America." As a result, records by black performers circulated in much larger quantities and the performers themselves were increasingly invited to perform at venues with primarily white clientele. While black musicians who played rougher styles still earned praise, the white staff at *Rolling Stone* exhorted Motown acts to drop their elaborate choreography and costumes for a less premeditated and contrived performance style. Alice Echols notes that the well-coiffed and -choreographed Supremes, in particular, were considered to have lost their "soul"—their racial birthright—and become assimilationist "Tom travesties" ("Shaky Ground" 168). Nevertheless, as the fates of Joni Mitchell, Tina Turner, and Mick Jagger show, the feminine associations of prostitution and the expectation of raw blackness persisted even after the *reality* of the music industry changed.

For those "bohemians" who flocked from "folk, blues, and jazz" subcultures to rock around 1967, there had been *white male* figures to serve as icons of manhood at liberty (Kennealy-Morrison 358; Willis 420). As long as Bob Dylan was resuscitating and recirculating the spirit of Woody Guthrie, there was a white male icon of unbound freedom. However, as rock urbanized and severed its ties with folk as unoriginal, restrictively traditional, and socially naive, the white rambler faded from rock and took up primary residence in country. This absence, coupled with corporate interest in the music as a lucrative commodity, made the white male position in rock a potentially compromised one. With the white folk musician all but disappeared, white rockers seized upon black blues—and, less often, jazz—musicians as reliable icons of agency beyond the norms of work, family, and staid musical convention.²⁴ Meanwhile, the white slave, in the form of the prostituted girl singer, bore the burden of all that the ambitious rocker wished to disavow. Though abstract and idealized, the bluesman and the prostitute formed standards by which the degradation or triumph of an individual in capitalist society was judged.

With racial slavery and Jim Crow in the twenty-first century's rearview mirror, it might seem reasonable to assume that rockism will eventually run its course or yield the stage to some new masculinist discourse of authenticity. Times do change, and it is possible that the dominant ideology in popular music discourse could become hip hopology, in line with the dominant *market* category in contemporary pop music.²⁵ However,

24. Even the distaste for Motown and disco confirmed blacks' presumed essence, as rockist anger stemmed from the absence of the soulfulness expected of blacks.

25. Of course, rock criticism has retained its authority by relishing its lower market position as indication of good taste. Consequently, I would predict that hip hop critics will gain this perch the more they can convince a broad

beyond restoring black men to the throne of authenticity after Michael Jackson's simultaneous "fall" into neutered pop and vitiligo, it is hard to say what difference installing hip hopology would make. With the premium hip hop places on keeping it real (black) by asserting impenetrability, its grid of authenticity is actually quite compatible with Bob Dylan's—in which whiteness and femininity both increase as one descends into commercialism (McLeod 139-42). Besides, the historical invocation of the prostitute and the slave sketched above suggests that rockism is not the origin of racially and sexually tinged allegories of music in the marketplace. Therefore, it would be a mistake to think that time and the succession of styles will, by themselves, upend it.

RECOVERING ROCKISTS

Responding to Kelefa Sanneh's rallying cry, a number of confessed rockists have proposed reforms of rock's critical habits. A review of the most influential essays reveals implicit appeals to inclusion and diversity. Unfortunately, seeking inclusion on the terms of the rockist canon and erecting plural canons with different rules are equally ineffective in challenging the tenets of rock's canonizing process. Wedded to inclusion and diversity, the writings of what might be termed "recovering rockists" also remain in the grip of addiction to rock's most seductive high: the desire for unfettered agency, liberation from the constraints of mortality and of dependency. As they aim to satisfy this desire through the manufacture of and identification with heroically autonomous artists, they tend to reproduce the guitar hero, even when he inhabits an unfamiliar skin.

Among feminist critics, the desire to recognize women as agents has proceeded from locating them "in rock" to Gayle Wald's influential call to focus on "women *who* rock" ("Sister Rosetta Tharpe," 66). While Wald's ingenious shift succeeds in bringing figures such as the otherwise invisible gospel great Rosetta Tharpe into rock's view, it does so by reproducing rock's definition of agency. Yes, Tharpe *rocked* the church, but did the Spirit and the congregation not rock Tharpe as well, urging her to bend her guitar and voice in her signature style? Without displacing the musician as the sole active agent, formulations for the "new story" that Wald and followers want to "invent" remain tantalizingly out of reach (*Shout, Sister, Shout!* 219).²⁶ The reason would appear to be not motive but methods. Wald is concerned that her recovery project might "safely position its subject in the past" (217). To avert this outcome she takes great care in presenting Tharpe as the precedent for Ray Charles, Eric Clapton, Chuck Berry, and Li'l Kim, among others. Establishing precedent, however, confirms rock's old stories by creating ancestors for a tradition *known in the present*. Consequently, as with the case of Joni Mitchell's canonization, it has the tendency to maintain the characters and moral of rock's market allegory while periodically declaring that some artists will no longer be classified according to their socially ascribed race and gender.

public that their aesthetics will help them choose hip hop that makes them seem culturally astute. Still, it is unlikely that hip hop will be able to exert an imperial claim over popular music criticism in the way that rock has.

26. I address the impact of Wald's "women who rock" on Daphne Brooks below. See as well Sonnet Retman, who is torn between portraying Nona Hendryx as a collaborator and a restless, avant-garde experimentalist (110).

In an address given before the Experience Music Project's 2006 gathering of musicians, critics, and scholars, Daphne Brooks invoked Gayle Wald while exhorting the audience to "disturb [rockism's] critical paradigms," to take a new survey of rock history's "thicket of guitar god clichés" while wearing the eyes of eccentric female pioneers whose impact on rock has been forgotten (58). Yet, in some moments, the speech exchanged this focus on radically re-interpreting the guitar gods for an appeal to acknowledge overlooked (black) women who—she added in homage to Wald—"do indeed rock" (Brooks 62). In the published text, Brooks is torn between, on the one hand, a wish to explore quiet storm R&B and 90s pop diva genealogies and, on the other hand, an imperative to participate in "aggressive, swaggering . . . language" that she identifies as "the discursive form of rock and roll insurgency itself" (60). The confessed rockist and aspiring black feminist rock critic seem as far apart as two performers she invokes, The Clash and Maxwell. Faced with such a chasm, the solution of inclusion is insufficient to bridge the differences. For, without a critic to manufacture aggressive swagger for quiet storm master Maxwell, he can never be made to speak in what she deems rock's most prized language. Yet, if he were transposed into the register of aggressive self-assertion, Maxwell would also cease to disturb "rock's critical paradigms," as Brooks wants his inclusion to do. Then again, if recognized as the master of the "urban hang suite" (rather than as a rocker), he could not be encompassed *within* the prized genre of rock as anything more than a minor figure. Such a conundrum suggests that attempts to unseat rockism in popular music criticism will stall as long as rock—as a noun or a verb, a genre or its rebellious practice—remains critics' central preoccupation.

A final recovering rockist, Douglas Wolk, offers a perceptive analysis but attempts a partial apologia that is markedly similar to some white-authored ideas about the permanence of racism. In the process, Wolk *exemplifies* rockism's imperial purview in an article that intends to overturn it. Although he pinpoints rock critics' habit of treating their aesthetic criteria as "normative," he later generalizes that "rockism is programmed into the way *people* write about music." In the same vein, he writes that "rockism [is] a bad thing . . . and *nobody's* free of it; I'm sure not" (Wolk).²⁷ The *mea culpa* elicits sympathy: if the very writer who wishes to challenge rockism is guilty of it, then it must not be *so* bad. Furthermore, if *everyone* is a little bit rockist, then we should all stop being so hard on ourselves.

Yet, Wolk's conception of *we* reproduces the "imperial" (even imperious) rockist presumptions he is at pains to interrupt. He is mistaken in saying that *every* popular music critic's "DNA" comes from *Rolling Stone* and *Creem*. In writers such as Nelson George, Greg Tate, Daphne Brooks, and Farah Griffin, one can trace an intellectual genealogy that stems from jazz's *Downbeat* and from the writings of Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Ralph Ellison, and Albert Murray—most of whom were committed opponents of early rhythm and blues, let alone the bombast of stadium rock. Ideas from this critical tradition inform Tricia Rose's *Black Noise* which has, in turn irrevocably impacted hip hop studies and black feminist approaches to popular music. Therefore, though Wolk is

27. My emphases.

right to seek a way to understand other types of music “on [their] own terms,” it would help to know (or remember) that these musics already have a critical archive and a language of approbation other than the one he deems universal: “[that] rocks.”

Having mistakenly assumed that all popular music criticism is rock-based Wolk looks to “escape the choking staleness” of the rock canon by “[staging] raids on other kinds of culture criticism: great writing about movies, about literature, about food.” Unfortunately, these avenues offer no escape. Outside of poststructuralist academia, the prevailing assumption is that an inventive genius with enduring integrity—the hero of all rockist tales—stands behind every successful creative act.²⁸ The worship of the Warholian sellout occurs only in certain avant-garde circles. Moreover, even this vanguard holds onto the notion of a rebellious core self, deploying experimental techniques and trickster personae to slough off imposed identities. As Keightley argues, modernist critics of folk romanticism are still invested in the authentic. They just locate it in masquerade, irony, and other distancing mechanisms (Keightley 138). Across the fields of literature, dance, cinema, music—and, I would imagine, cuisine—the devotion to authenticity is widely demonstrated in staged struggles against a tangle of presumed constraints: restrictive tradition, contaminating modernization, consumers’ demands, and greedy managers and corporations. Stretching rock to include forgotten women, dismissed genres, or even non-musical fields of culture is no guarantee of a way out of rockism because the desire for the completely and permanently inviolable individual merely passes through rock’s jurisdiction. As I have argued, it did not begin there and will not end there.

As a brief attempt to “say something new” about rock’s canon (Wolk), I would like to experiment by restoring Aretha Franklin to the throne of the undisputed Queen of Soul, after rockists removed her to a less powerful post in a broader field: the best singer in the history of “rock & roll” (Lethem).²⁹ While I do not doubt Franklin’s appeal beyond the precincts of soul and gospel, I want to draw attention to the ways that importations of musicians from other genres into rock’s canon tend to misrepresent the musical priorities of communities in which the performer’s playing (as if) only for *himself* is not the aim. For example, when rock critics praise Aretha Franklin for refusing to let a lyricist “tell her what a song is about,” they substitute their belief that agency resides in the rebellious individual for an alternate conception of power (Gersten).³⁰ Based on her roots in the church, Franklin might think of an agent not only as one who operates independently for her own benefit but also as one who gives herself over to be used by a higher power (see Gordon 23). To countenance this possibility does more than simply establish that a black female gospel musician may have different priorities than an avowedly hedonistic white male rocker. This mode of analyzing Aretha Franklin reveals that the performance of

28. Pushing against this cult of the artistic genius, Jack Halberstam has argued that Lady Gaga’s genius is not individual but indicative of a collective undoing of gender and a search for spiritual payoffs beyond capitalism.

29. I say “less powerful” because, as Frith and McRobbie argue, “soul and country musics offer women more autonomous power than achieved by ‘women in rock’” (53).

30. See Lethem, as well, for an argument that the rock vocalist, like the jazz soloist, breaks the confines of the composer’s will.

hypnotizing musical *mastery* so prized in rock (e.g., the immobile Howlin' Wolf) may be produced by its seeming opposite: *submission* to a higher authority, musical or divine. Insisting that agency is not a sign of sovereignty would shake up rock criticism (and cultural criticism more broadly) much more than proving that Ree rocks as hard as the Stones—or that black women do things entirely differently . . . *and that's OK!*

Exceeding these aspirations toward inclusion or diversity, a new conception of agency might provide the “new story” that Gayle Wald sought. In introducing Rosetta Tharpe, Wald insists that regardless of the effects of the “Holy Spirit”—or the appearance that she is “lost in her music”—the guitarist “remains utterly in control of its effects on her audience” (viii). The notable use of possessive pronouns emphasizes a commitment to a vision in which the great artist consciously masters and effectively conquers self, sound, and audience at once. As a counter, think of the ways that a phrase like “slave to the rhythm”—evoked by Grace Jones and Michael Jackson—relinquishes the possibility of self-imposition. Musicians and dancers appear as subjects of a rhythmic master in an economy decidedly unlike—yet eerily reminiscent of—that of New World slavery. The ineradicable presence of an external master suggests that freedom and authority can—and perhaps must—be present together, not only for black people in the New World but for all of us descended from the disfranchised. Thus, the tremendous work involved in redeeming a dismissed or forgotten artist should be supplemented by a commensurate divestment from the search for an uncompromised rebel. For, it would appear that rockism’s fundamental power lies not in its capacity to canonize based on social identity but in its echoing the conventional wisdom that only in pursuing absolute independence can one enjoy a taste of freedom.

CONCLUSION: EMBRACING PROSTITUTES, CLOTHED AND UNCLOTHED

For those seeking some way out of rockism, the important question Daphne Brooks posed still remains open: “Is it possible to write about rock like a black feminist critic?” (61). Consulting with the unofficial dean of black feminist critics seems an apt way to respond. Reminiscing about the establishment of African American literary studies, Hortense Spillers offers a lucid portrait of “the problem” with canons and a program for engaging it. She writes:

It seemed to me that it was woefully insufficient to a clarification of the “problem” to simply attach “black” to a line-up of emergent epistemologies—“structuralism,” “post-structuralism,” “feminism,” “postmodernism,” to name a few—but that we had rather go into the formation itself to determine what it had missed in drawing its borders, which inevitably excluded “black” from its accounting procedures. (Spillers 11)

Following Spillers, one might conclude that placing “black feminist” in front of “rock criticism” is not sufficient. Indeed, a criticism that could effect the goals of black feminism *might have to forgo calling itself by that name* if, at a given moment, such a designation would restrict its project to rescuing black women who “do indeed rock” (Brooks 61). It could not rest with the patronizing inclusion of denigrated artists, fans, and genres as

rockers, after all. For rock's aesthetic tenets, like the political promises of the Age of Revolutions, have located the cause of subordination in the moral makeup of the individual rather than in social interactions. Consequently, even if rockism can be modified to recognize anticommercial authenticity in persons of unexpected races and sexes, that achievement will be incomplete if it serves to reconfirm that the pure rebels, slaves, and hookers of the rockist imagination do exist. A transformative rock criticism would certainly propel overdue redistribution of prestige and long-term profits through canon expansion, but it would also have to flesh out the cardboard characters on both sides of rockism's market allegory.

It has certainly been a worthwhile victory to demonstrate that women, rappers, and dance-pop artists can be possessed of a driven *auteur's* vision, despite the fact that many reject the mode of the hermit or wallflower. Still, I cannot help but think that it would be more effective—not to mention plain, delicious fun—to consider that rockists may have been in love with whoring performers all along. It was just that, because of shared ambivalence, *auteurs* and critics agreed that, in the rock business, prostitutes should be *paid* to keep their clothes *on*. ■

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