
Response to Kate Grover

It was gratifying to read Kate Grover's gripping "Rock Trolls and Recovery." I will confess that, like many academics, I was sad when the little article I hoped would reset the agenda of the resistance to rockism was greeted with what seemed a resounding silence. ("Said the Hooker to the Thief" was one of my first publications, and now I know better than to hope for immediate engagement). I remember being afraid when I was writing it—first, because I was taking slight issue with critics and scholars whose work I admire. But I had greater trepidation about taking on the project of canon expansion, an additive model that offers concrete, measurable solutions and a great moral satisfaction: Add Tammi Terrell, the Raelettes, Menudo, Cesaria Evora, or Adam Lambert to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and *presto!* problem solved. Music is re-released; careers are potentially revitalized. Neglected fans feel recognized. What could be wrong with challenging the Dylan-Stones-Beatles triumvirate and the versions of authenticity that they have come to exemplify? There are real affective and economic benefits of canon expansion.

Still, I thought the risk of subjecting that project to critique was worth taking. It seemed to me that canon exclusion has always been a symptom rather than the disease itself. I wanted to grasp the criteria for canonization and whose interests have been served by them, because that's the origin of the power that I think opponents of rockism want to dethrone. After all, to borrow a quote from Dr. King, who should want to be integrated into a burning house—or, indeed, a burning Hall of Fame?

Grover catches those nuances in a thorough and generous reading of my 2013 article. I hesitate to say much in response, as my primary feeling was one of elation that *someone read it!* Nearly every citation of my essay poaches a definition of rockism from the first paragraph and moves on. Perhaps these readers put the subsequent theory, history, and case studies in the category of *tl;dr* . . . Nevertheless, at the risk of extending a long conversation further, I'll venture some responses to Kate Grover.

In addition to a fair and ample review of the rockism debate and my place within it, Grover charts new territory for future work in the field, especially increased attention to rockism as "a quotidian and constantly changing" fan discourse. I take her point that a debate among critics may be stale or rigid in ways that fan discourse may not be. A deeper investigation of fan practices might well reveal non-canonical aesthetics and critical frameworks. It would be interesting to know if people who don't have to churn out musical judgments on contracted deadline are any more heterodox than professional critics are. Should we be looking for the origins of *poptimism* in fan circles

before it became an official critical position? Are there now fan discourses that do not take the corrective project of popitism as their starting point? If so, what new aesthetic criteria and political possibilities are they articulating? Grover intuits that the fans are more progressive than the critics. Mining these archives may indeed bolster her hypothesis.

Then again, I wonder if the critics and fans can be so easily separated. Every critic was first a fan, and a fan with a byline becomes a critic, right? While fans certainly can set themselves against critical dogma, fan discourse is perhaps best understood as critical debate without citations. And fandom is shaped by critics' writing even when opposed to it. Looking at the footnotes, I note that Grover pays more attention than I did to social media comments as an archive. There is certainly much to gain in analyzing that archive, although my intuition tells me that we will find familiar tendencies there. I suspect as much because I think of rockism as a local flare-up from frictions that are constitutive of white identification as it emerged under the twin conditions of liberal democracy and capitalism—conditions that shape our lived reality beyond the field of criticism. In that sense, I guess I wasn't particularly interested in music as such but in the fabrication of social identities to facilitate the maldistribution of material and symbolic goods. That the imperatives of maldistribution could attach themselves to something as non-representational as musical sound suggests the poverty of the formulation "because of the color of their skin" to get at the ways that the necessity of whiteness as an imagined community structures a whole way of life, from the way we hear to how we imagine just compensation and the right to bodily integrity.¹

The matter of bodily integrity takes me to my title. Grover questions the "carceral term[s]" occupying my title and the body of the essay. I can't deny that loaded epithets for sex workers are repeated throughout the essay. I can only say that I chose the terms advisedly. The term *sex worker* emerged as a way of granting those who labor in that field the dignity that workers have struggled to obtain for the entire class. I am entirely in line with that project. In this essay, however, I wasn't interested in people but in imaginary figures. And what I found over and over again in rockist discourse was a most undignified *figure* also highlighted in Roderick Ferguson's influential *Aberrations in Black*.² The question, in my mind, was what might be gained from having to embrace—or perhaps I should have said to inhabit—that figure, unsanitized and unreformed.

My effort may not have been successful with every reader, but that was the intent of maintaining the charged terms. After all, in the interview I discuss in the original essay, Dylan wasn't comparing Mick Jagger and "chick performer[s]" to a specific sex worker but to a degraded figment of a masculinist imagination. So, rather than redeeming "the prostitute," I wanted to suggest that the dignified worker is already, irrevocably, in the muck, too. And, if there's no coming clean, then perhaps a radical and transformative solidarity might be achieved by having to inhabit the stigmatized word and what it signifies.³

1. Barbara J. Fields and Karen E. Fields, "Did the Color of His Skin Kill Philando Castile?," accessed January 27, 2019, <http://jacobinmag.com/2016/07/racecraft-barbara-karen-fields-philando-castile/>.

2. Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 7–9.

3. In his influential book, *Stigma*, Goffman theorizes as a member of a community absent stigma but perceiving it in others. In his text, "we" always see stigma in "them." I suspect that formulation can't undo the work that stigma

I wanted to make quick note of a recent article that engages my work, Kathryn Lofton's "Dylan Goes Electric: Religion and Race in Rock's Secularizing Event."⁴ Lofton brings a remarkable perspective I hadn't considered: the role of metaphysics and faith in supporting aesthetic ideologies.⁵ Religion always begins with a creed, first principles that must be assumed and, in fact, cannot be proven. Lofton helped me realize that, although I am not trained in religious studies, I wanted to unearth and name those principles, to describe rock's sacred texts and accompanying hermeneutics. I suspect we share a tendency to want to seize statements of faith and show that they make reality rather than describing it. I also suspect that, just as secularism did not obliterate religion, rockism (like racism) will migrate and morph and cross-pollinate as a means of surviving to do its malignant work. For that reason, I hope that it remains an object of critical study and analysis, even if (as Grover's essay suggests) the word itself is no longer the term of the day.⁶ Rather than being surprised by the conservative turns of artists such as Morrissey and Kanye West (and the hip hop adjacent Dave Chappelle), it seems we have much more work to do in investigating the first principles of these genres and their role in facilitating maldistribution. After all, the "pimps and hos" discourse that Tricia Rose says took over hip hop arguably plays out rock's founding distinctions from the standpoint of Black artists in an upstart genre, entering the jaws of the recording industry.⁷ If rock is no longer the dominant genre, rockist impulses endure, disguised (as always) as acts of righteous self-assertion and liberation. Figuring out who pays the cost of that self-assertion and how to get out of the cycle: those remain our tasks.

I've been drawn away from my work on music by a book project on the first 250 years of *Othello* in performance (It isn't so far from Richard Burbage in blackface in 1604 to Joni Mitchell slathered up in 1976, is it?). But when I return, I cannot wait to get caught up on the work of Ann Powers and Daphne Brooks, Elliott Powell and Kimberly Mack, Christa Bentley and Maureen Mahon, Ashon Crawley and Alisha Lola Jones, among many others. I know the conversation on the relationship of music to social hierarchies and liberatory projects has deepened and grown while I've been away, and I look forward to rejoining it. I want to thank JPMS and Kate Grover for drawing continued attention to rockism and its quasi-religious tenets, so that we might continue to recognize them in new guises and to fight against their pernicious effects. ■

does, even if it accurately describes its mechanisms. Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963).

4. Kathryn Lofton, "Dylan Goes Electric: Religion and Race in Rock's Secularizing Event," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 33, no. 2 (2021): 31–50, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jpms.2021.33.2.31>.

5. I was a little sad that Lofton did not discuss the *one* part of the essay in which I talk about the way that gospel performers have historically prized humility over mastery, as in the audience injunction: "let him use you." I hope to have that conversation one day.

6. On the persistence of state racism after the South African government stopped using the word apartheid, see: Jacques Derrida, "But, beyond . . . (Open Letter to Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon)," trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry* 13, no. 1 (Autumn 1986): 155–70.

7. Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk about When We Talk about Hip Hop—and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).