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Testifying through Time: Black Womanhood and Legacies of Testimony in the African American Literary Canon and Hip-Hop Culture

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of South Alabama
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

by
Candice M. Fairchild
B.A., University of South Alabama, 2020
May 2022

To Trevon Hicks—rest in peace, grasshopper. I hope there are periwinkle cars in heaven.

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ABSTRACT

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In this thesis I argue in favor of a new subgenre of rap music entitled *testimonial rap*. I reject subgenre categorizations of confessional poetry and conscious rap for the testimonial music of MCs Sa-Roc and Rapsody. This thesis identifies how both MCs inherit and contribute to a literary lineage of testimony among Black women in Hip-Hop and the African American literary canon through deeply vulnerable and intertextual lyrics. I primarily focus on two albums: Sa-Roc's *The Sharecropper's Daughter* (Extended Edition) (2021) and Rapsody's *Eve* (2019). This thesis is broken into five parts: an introduction, an interlude, two chapters, and an outro. Each section analyzes music alongside literature to establish connections between seemingly disparate genres of artistic expression to better our understanding of how Black women challenge and redefine literature through testimony.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In her 1987 masterpiece *Beloved*, Toni Morrison brings us to the Clearing, "a wide-open place cut deep in the woods" at the "end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place" to witness a sermon that heals and shakes (102). As she beckons her congregation forward from the trees edging the Clearing, she calls for them to testify, asking the children to laugh, the men to dance, and the women to cry (Morrison 102). Baby Suggs's sermon calls for her congregation to testify and bear witness, not in words, but in sound, motion, and liberating reckless abandon. She asks her people to feel, deeply and unapologetically, until the laughing, dancing, and crying begins to heal, until it all becomes "mixed up," until an exchange of feeling occurs through testimony between each man, woman, and child (103). Morrison contributes to and builds tradition in the fictional space of the Clearing through what foundational Hip-Hop scholar Tricia Rose refers to as "the love ethic" ("Hip Hop Lecture Series" 19:48). Through Baby Suggs, Morrison demonstrates the necessity of vulnerability in testimony and the nuances of vulnerability; vulnerability is not just tears and rage. It is equally, if not more so, joy, laughter, and love. The stunning clamor of testimony, in all of its movement and sound, echoes a tradition of community-building among Black women in the African American literary canon.

In her breathtaking ability to write for a generation, Morrison, like Baby Suggs, sends out a call for testimony. In a song dedicated to Morrison entitled "Toni Morrison" (2015), MC Akua Naru responds to her call by reflecting on Morrison's oeuvre, asking "How can one hand hold the pen / One pen hold the people?" followed by the answer "Toni Morrison" (1:04-1:23). In an interview with Rose, Naru explains the potential that rests within rap music to contribute to traditions built by artists like Toni Morrison. She explains that some artists such as Tariq Trotter (Black Thought) have "taken emceeing and propelled it to the level of high art" and that she hopes her audience will recognize the potential for "high art" in rap music. Naru goes on to emphasize this potential by stating:

> There are ways in which people have told stories, in which people like, not like Toni Morrison, because I don't know if that's ever possible, but *in the tradition of Toni Morrison*, that they were able to sum up an entire generation, an entire movement, an ideology, a way of understanding ourselves as Black and brown people in the world. (55:16-56:19; emphasis added)

Naru's emphasis on "the tradition of Toni Morrison," begins to gesture toward the focus of this thesis—a broader tradition, the literary lineage of testimony among Black women in Hip-Hop and the African American literary canon. Naru also highlights the connection between literature and rap music, two genres often considered disparate due to their aesthetic differences. In this thesis, I am focusing on women in Hip-Hop, specifically MCs Rapsody and Sa-Roc, and how they contribute to literary lineages of testimony.

For scholars to further recognize the incredible artistry of women in Hip-Hop and the work that they are accomplishing under frequently astonishingly limited means, it is useful to consider the reciprocal relationship, as Emily Lordi puts it in her monograph *Black Resonance: Iconic Women Singers and African American Literature* (2013), between writers and MCs. While Lordi's book is primarily concerned with exploring the reciprocal relationship between writers and singers, she does gesture towards the potential for examining the reciprocal relationships between MCs and writers in the epilogue. In doing so, she makes it clear that she does not support "efforts [by scholars] to bolster hip hop's academic credibility by conflating" it with poetry (221). Instead, she offers a different means for reading MCs in relation to literature by advocating for engaging the writers, MCs, and singers "on their own terms" in an effort to understand and appreciate "their dynamic alliances" (225). Like Lordi suggests, this thesis offers a reading of MCs in relationship to Black women writers on their own terms. While I examine the two as sharing a literary lineage of testimony, I also understand that they do so in very different artistic capacities. I utilize the term literary not to "bolster hip hop's academic credibility," but to emphasize how MCs and other Black women artists challenge traditional conventions of literature and art. Each artist brings her own contributions to a tradition of archival community-building through unique mediums of expression that merits further analysis. Thus, scholars should examine Hip-Hop in an effort to understand what it can do for literature and poetry rather than what poetry and literature can do for Hip-Hop.

Rapsody and Sa-Roc create music that contributes to literary lineages of testimony through testimonial and densely intertextual lyrics. Their testimony occurs

both in the autobiographical sense and through fictional narratives that testify and bear witness to Black female subjectivity. Autobiography is, in some ways, an isolating genre. Yolanda M. Manora discusses the dangers of analyzing the autobiographical work of Black women without taking the history of the genre into account. In her article "'What you looking at me for? I didn't come to stay': Displacement, Disruption and Black Female Subjectivity in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*" (2005), she explains that the intricacies of Black female subjectivity are often lost in scholarship on autobiography by scholars who base their arguments in "compliance with the norms of the genre as they have been established by white, male autobiographers" (Manora 361). Thus, she highlights how "traditional" readings of autobiography negate the "communal and relational emphasis" in Angelou's autobiography (Manora 365). As Black women in Hip-Hop, Rapsody and Sa-Roc, like Angelou, navigate the intersections of race and gender through "communal and relational" testimonies.

MCs like Rapsody and Sa-Roc offer their testimonies in an industry that does not favor their narratives. Opportunities for women MCs are limited. When asked if a "range has opened up in terms of the expressive for women MCs" during her interview with Rose, Naru responds, "No" without any hesitation ("Hip Hop Lecture Series" 35:57-36:09). When Rose asks her to explain her answer, Naru points out that there are corporate executives who have created a marketplace that relies on a specific narrative and image for the music of women MCs to sell. She explains that if artists are looking for financial profit, then the mainstream industry is a good place to start (36:16-38:04). Thus, the opportunities for a female MC to be financially successful are limited to this mainstream avenue.

Naru highlights the formulaic, and sometimes damaging, track for success prescribed to female artists who operate within the mainstream. She goes on to explain further that, "sex sells," and that placing Black women in the spotlight as "objects" is a part of the formula that cannot be challenged, but that there is an alternative industry provided by the internet (38:31-38:46). She notes that while these women can support themselves and reach wider audiences through the "alternative industry" created by the internet, they create with far fewer resources than what is available to women in the mainstream. Naru asks of her audience, "Can you imagine how much amazing art, the kind of music we might hear if these artists were able to get money? [...] I feel like sometimes it's easier to present brilliant work when you have the resources to do it" (42:21-43:26). Thus, women MCs who do not conform to the formula are forced to "hustle" in order to support themselves and create their art with limited financial means, making their artistry even more impressive.

Rapsody and Sa-Roc deal with similar circumstances as women in Hip-Hop who do not conform to the mainstream hyper-sexualized formula. Sa-Roc gestures to the reality of being an underground rapper in her song "Lyrical Manifesto": "I'm one of a million voices / In danger by radio station playing it just for paper" (0:30-0:34)[1]. While Sa-Roc is considered an underground/indie rapper, Rapsody has gained more popularity through her involvement with BET and artists such as Kendrick Lamar and J Cole. Rapsody is still not as widely known as, say, Nicki Minaj or Megan Thee Stallion[2]. Much

[1] All transcribed lyrics come from Genius.com.

[2] Rapsody has 589k Instagram followers compared to Nicki Minaj's 162M and Megan Thee Stallion's 264M followers. These numbers are similarly reflected in Spotify Streams as well. Rapsody currently has 449,043 monthly listeners while Nicki Minaj has 38,289,051 monthly listeners and Megan

of this lack of popularity is often attributed to artists like Sa-Roc and Rapsody's participation in what is referred to as "conscious rap." [3]

Conscious rap is a politically and socially focused subgenre of rap music. As La Marr Jurelle Bruce defines it, "The conscious genre frequently features politically charged content, condemnation of social ills, protest provocations, and visions of social transformation, often delivered with didactic lyrics" (141). Sa-Roc and Rapsody are both frequently identified as conscious rappers by commentators and fans. Rapsody specifically, has gone on record about her distaste for the label. She claims it is an arbitrary title that values the so-called "consciousness" of one MC over another. When asked about her thoughts on being considered a conscious rapper during an interview with Breakfast Club Power 105.1 FM, Rapsody responds: "No, I can't stand it […] I don't like that because everybody's conscious" ("Rapsody Embraces Queens" 15:48-15:53). As she aptly explains in the interview, to label someone as "conscious" is to consider others somehow *less* conscious. Rapsody points out that all MCs are conscious, and all MCs rap from a place of consciousness; the realities each MC is conscious of may differ depending on individual experience, but one MC cannot inherently be more conscious than the other (15:48-16:31).

Thee Stallion similarly has 36,468,834 monthly listeners. In comparison, Sa-Roc has a total of 150k followers on Instagram and 49,260 monthly listeners on Spotify (Data collected 11/18/2021).

[3] In a YouTube video entitled "Will Conscious Hip Hop Ever Become Popular?" members of Dead End Hip Hop (DEHH), a popular YouTube channel and podcast, debate the potential for conscious rap to become popular. While they go back and forth on the issue, their conversation makes it clear that most who participate in conscious rap who lack adequate funding are unlikely to rise in popularity, and that even with proper funding, artists like Kendrick Lamar are an "anomaly" in the industry.

Consciousness is derived from a place of implicit self-awareness, so one person cannot be more conscious than another. Conscious rap as a label is limiting in that it ignores the nuances of protest; it fails to recognize that protest is born from a deeply personal place and instead works as a blanketing term boiling the music down to politics. This hyper-politicization of the music detracts from the subtle vulnerabilities of individual artistic expression, lumping conscious rappers into a categorization that ultimately constrains their mobility as artists. Once identified as a conscious rapper, every song they create automatically, before even being listened to, is assumed to fall in line with perceived characteristics of the genre. Thus, already ignored explorations of Black female subjectivity are even further silenced—cast into a difficult-to-break mold.

Therefore I argue for a new subgenre of rap music: *testimonial rap*. Testimony, by definition, is a communal and deeply personal act. Testimonial rap is carried out through the first-person "I" by MCs testifying, whether it be spiritual or secular in context, and bearing witness to both personal and collective experiences through performances that create intense spaces of vulnerability while simultaneously engaging in social commentary. Testimony lends itself to several genres. It can be carried out through autobiography, memoir, spoken word, etc. MCs like Sa-Roc and Rapsody create albums that engage different characteristics of different genres. Unlike conscious rap, which introduces the dangers of hyper-politicizing the work of MCs, testimonial rap gestures instead towards a deeply personal and simultaneously communal experience of telling and listening. While most of what we say as human beings is already inherently political, testimonial rap's more capacious definition leaves breathing room by reflecting a

generalized consciousness of personal experience rather than the politically pegged consciousness implied by "conscious rap."

In her rejection of conscious rap, Rapsody seems to, perhaps inadvertently, link rap music to personal testimony. She gives examples of how individual artists are "conscious" because they are aware of their surroundings, and they are influenced by personal experiences. Thus, Rapsody highlights how rap music and the consciousness necessary to the craft is by default testimonial in nature. This is not to say that all rap music is representative of an authentic personal experience, an individual's "truth." There are certainly plenty of MCs who write fictional narratives; storytelling is a vital part of the genre. It would be incredibly reductive to suggest that one MC's fictional narrative, or even autobiographical narrative, is somehow representative of an "authentic" Black experience. Assessments such as this produce dangerous generalizations about Hip-Hop culture, rap music, and Black experience generally speaking. When a listener (particularly a white listener) has limited interactions with rap music, it often results in an assumption that whatever narrative being portrayed in the song is somehow an "authentic" and comprehensive assessment of Black experience. Thus, it is dangerous for every song to be read as autobiographical because it can foster an underdeveloped and bias-fueled interpretation of not only the song, but Black experience as a whole.

That being said, some music is indeed testimonial in the autobiographical sense. Many MCs utilize the testimonial first-person "I" to discuss and reflect on their own personal experiences. In her latest album *The Sharecropper's Daughter: Extended Edition* (2021) Sa-Roc on the track "Forever" explicitly identifies how her craft functions therapeutically:

> And I still don't know everything
>
> But I guess *confessions* from 8 x 11s in
>
> studio sessions seem like it's only right
>
> And trust me, this my therapy, fuck your
>
> couch (1:27-1:35; emphasis added)

Sa-Roc's assessment that her time spent on the page, "8 x 11s," is therapeutic for her in the sense that she is able to access a level of vulnerability innate to the self-reflexive mode of her process for this particular song and album generally. By utilizing the first-person "I," Sa-Roc bears witness to her own personal experiences and reflects on the growth she has undergone as a human being—she is "conscious." Thus, it is easy to see why Rapsody's assessment of conscious rap is appropriate. While Sa-Roc does discuss themes consistent with conscious rap on this album, and much of her other work as well, being conscious of the circumstances she explores is not the defining quality of her music, testimony is. She is testifying. Her ability to "confess" contributes to the structural form of her craft, not her consciousness. In its use of the first-person "I," testimonial rap could easily be likened to confessional poetry by scholars.

However, in defining the genre, I have specifically chosen not to apply the context of confession in order to avoid burdening the work of artists unnecessarily with connotations of guilt. Charles Molesworth explains that "[i]n a sense confessional poetry can be seen as one degraded branch of Romanticism, placing the sensitivity of the poet at the center of concern" and ultimately creating a sense of "morbid self-voyeurism" (163,164). This is a rather extreme definition of confessional poetry, but it is an important one to engage with. A more sensible definition provided in *Poems: A Concise Anthology*

explains that the subgenre was "initially created to describe the work of Robert Lowell," and that the "first-person speakers … explore intensely personal subjects that often transgress social taboos about self-exposure" (Renker 744). I note the variations in definitions to highlight the nuances of confession. As Brian M. Reed notes, confessional poetry is an especially "confusing term" to define. Typically, confessional poetry does not necessarily equate guilt; confession is not used in the traditional sense. However, for those who are not familiar with the poetic subgenre, "confession" is still a loaded term. Rather than risk any misconceptions about the particular kind of rap music I am attempting to classify, I have chosen the term testimonial rap as the best reflection of the process by which these songs are constructed.

By engaging in testimonial rap, Rapsody and Sa-Roc resist scholarly erasure by reflecting on and contributing to literary and sonic legacies of testimony through intertextual and multi-genre performances of both fictionalized and autobiographical testimony. The following interlude and subsequent chapters consider the positioning of Black women in Hip-Hop to Black women in the African American literary canon through the lens of testimonial rap, focusing specifically on the work of Rapsody and Sa-Roc as inheritors of a literary lineage of testimony. Emphasis will primarily be placed on, but not limited to, Rapsody's *Eve* (2019) and Sa-Roc's *The Sharecropper's Daughter (Extended Edition)* (2021).

CHAPTER II

INTERLUDE: VERSES OF VULNERABILITY (FEAT. MS. LAURYN HILL AND JEAN GRAE)

"Oh free! Free, free, free your mind." —Ms. Lauryn Hill "I Gotta Find Peace of Mind" (2002)
"I've hit depression hard and started to pick at the scabs / From the scar, I'm a mess addressing pain in a bar, I confess." —Jean Grae "Take Me" (2003)

Rapsody and Sa-Roc, while the focal point of this thesis, are not alone in Hip-Hop as women contributing to the testimonial traditions of writers like Morrison and Angelou. Their literary foremothers are not solely Black women writers whose primary medium is the page. They also inherit a lineage of testimony from their sonic foremothers, other women singers and MCs like Ms. Lauryn Hill and Jean Grae—two women who produce testimony speaking to both personal and communal experiences. Hill and Grae utilize music as a sonic medium for conveying deeply personal and vulnerable instances of testimony. Like Baby Suggs, they create music-oriented narratives that demonstrate the nuances of vulnerability by highlighting the range of emotions—rage, joy, sorrow, etc.—accompanying the stories they share, stories that (whether autobiographical or fictional) evoke emotional responses from their audiences. Thus, Rapsody and Sa-Roc glean from the traditions instilled not only by Black women writers, but from women in Hip-Hop as well, creating community through sampling and literary allusions.

Hill presents an autobiographical testimony rooted in traditional Judeo-Christian conventions, testimonies conveyed to deepen and put on display one's relationship with God. Laden with gratitude and sorrow, Hill's performance weaves a narrative that foregrounds her spirituality and love of God. She offers a testimony told in the context of her faith. Bruce explains the intricacies of determining the autobiographical nature of rap lyrics: "In general, I do not presume that song lyrics are direct references to the biographies of their creators; nor do I blithely conflate the *character* in a song with the *artist* who sings it" (145; emphasis original). In other words, scholars, critics, and members of the general audience should not automatically assume that the use of the first-person "I" indicates that the given song or album is autobiographical. That being said, Bruce does go on to explain that Hill's *Unplugged* is an exception: "However, because Hill insists that *Unplugged* is a personal testimony about her actual life, I regard the song's protagonist as an iteration of Hill herself" (145). Thus, because Hill identifies *Unplugged* (2002) as testimonial it is best to analyze the album as autobiographical.

Hill's song "I Gotta Find Piece of Mind" is deeply vulnerable. She takes her audience through a range of emotions that demonstrate the nuances of vulnerability as she "positions herself within [a] cohort of black women in pain" (Bruce 146). The pain Hill references in the song produces meaning as she desperately seeks out peace from the trauma that cracks her voice and sends tremors through her melodies. The acoustic performance with the subtle sound of guitar strings accompanying her voice serves to amplify her testimony. The seeming "imperfections" of her performance, the cracking of her voice and the sobbing that wracks her lyrics, bring a sense of rawness to her testimony, increasing its power. Near the final lines of the song, Hill offers a moment of

worship as her struggle to find peace culminates into a final embrace of her faith: "Oh what a merciful, merciful, merciful God / Oh what a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful God" (7:56-8:05). As she sings the final lines, they become a chant peppered with tears as she "comes undone before her audience, exposes spectacular vulnerability, and demands that we witness the sound of her grief and gratitude" (Bruce 147). Bruce explains that, at the end of the song, "[h]er sobs seem to slosh away any trace of that 'forbiddingly perfect' veneer, opening up to radical revelation" (147). This is the power of testimony; as a public form, testimony demands engagement in the most human sense possible through an exchange of vulnerability in both the act of sharing and witnessing. Hill's testimony offers a confirmation of God's existence and an opportunity to witness His power through her own narrative, a performance that is "traumatic, tragic, ecclesiastic, and ecstatic" (Bruce 148).

Differing from Hill, Grae presents an inverted testimony (by Judeo-Christian spiritual standards). Like "I Gotta Find Peace of Mind," Grae presents testimony that grapples with intense instances of vulnerability centered on religion and mental health in songs such as "Take Me" (2003). While these songs are not overtly autobiographical, she utilizes the first-person "I" to create a sense of immediacy and intimacy in her music that brings her audience closer to the speaker's testimony. In "Take Me," Grae presents a speaker who sits on the precipice of suicide as she questions her faith. In this way, she presents an inversion of religious testimony. Rather than presenting a story that testifies to the existence of God and His works in her life, the speaker testifies to her own spiritual confusion and desire to end her life. The speaker explains that "[i]n layman's terms" her "faith's been blurred" even from an early age: "I scratched crayon in between the holy

word I pray on, but still…" (1:06-1:11). The speaker's "blurred" faith contributes to her confusion and desire to end her own life. She testifies to her experience with religion and suicidal thoughts with a disregard for the very religion she simultaneously clings to and rejects, unveiling an instance of vulnerability in a brass challenge of the faith she now questions: "I know it's written suicide is giving hell and devil's privilege / Only wicked heathens commit it, sin of ages, well fuck it, bring it!" (1:53-1:59). The speaker's testimony is a medium for her to contemplate her options: life or death, faith or unbelief.

In telling this story, Grae, through the persona of the speaker, creates a profound sense of vulnerability and intimacy by creating a testimony centering themes that often go unheard because of their sensitive and/or blasphemous nature. Through graphic and shocking details, Grae paints the image of a woman whose testimony conveys the urgency of her story and her existence:

> Lately I've been waking early mornings screaming
> "Save me," dreams of seven horsemen chasing Jean[4], hastening speed
> So I'm raising the barrel envisioning marrow
> Splashed on the wall and polka dotting all my apparel. (2:00-2:10)

By sparing no details in the description of the speaker's suicidal fantasies, Grae presents a testimony that demands her audience feel uncomfortable, if not because of her

---

[4] These lines present the possibility that this song may indeed be autobiographical in the reference to her stage name (Jean), but because it is the only instance that could indicate the autobiographical nature of the song, it should be treated as a fictionalized instance of testimony.

"blasphemous" (as she describes it) rhymes, but because of her refusal to spare her audience from the brutality of suicide. Because she leaves nothing to the imagination, she tells the story of a woman that most refuse or would rather not hear, giving voice to women who have not been heard and creating a collective through narrative intimacy.

MCs like Hill and Grae are a part of the foundation, the history of testimony in Hip-Hop, that Rapsody and Sa-Roc draw from. As they craft their own testimonies, you can hear the echo of Hill's sorrow and gratitude and of Grae's struggle with faith and life as a collective of women demanding to be heard by any means necessary.

"I am Nina and Roberta, the one you love but ain't heard of." —Rapsody "Nina" (2019)
"I am her" —Sa-Roc "I Am Her" (2017)

CHAPTER III

"THE SONIC MEMOIRS OF A REAL G": REPOSITIONING AUTOBIOGRAPHY THROUGH TESTIMONIAL RAP IN THE WORK OF SA-ROC

James Baldwin writes of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), "This testimony from a black sister marks the beginning of a new era in the minds and hearts and lives of all black men and women…" His assessment of Angelou's literary contribution as testimony alludes to a literary lineage of Black women in the African American literary canon testifying to the varied experiences of Black womanhood. This lineage highlights how Black women have challenged and redefined what constitutes literature. In *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (1985) Marjorie Pryse explains that Alice Walker "associates authorship with magic" and that she considers herself a "medium" through writing (1). Pryse goes on to explicate the implications of Walker's position as medium:

> If there is magic involved in Walker's perception of herself as a "medium," it *is women's magic*, the origins of which are as old as women themselves—and which, in the black community, has often taken other forms but has also long included literary expression [...] By making her statement, then, *Walker purposely gathers together all the creative force of her black and female forerunners*. By acting as "medium" for Celie, she gives them voice as well. (2; emphasis added)

By exploring Walker's position as medium, Pryse highlights the capacity of "women's magic" to bend and blend genres, and to deconstruct monolithic conceptions of Black womanhood by giving voice to women across a spectrum of experience and time through "literary expression."

In referring to herself as a medium, Walker emphasizes the most important element of testimony and lineage: connection. Pryse goes on to explain further that literary expression takes many forms outside of written text. She notes that contemporary (1970s and 1980s) Black women novelists, like Walker, act as "mediums" who "make it possible for their readers and for each other to recognize their common literary ancestors" (Pryse 5). By acknowledging "gardeners, quilt makers, grandmothers, rootworkers, and women who wrote autobiographies" as "literary ancestors," these Black women novelists challenge Westernized constraints placed on literature by "enlarg[ing] our conventional assumptions about the nature and function of literary tradition" while simultaneously establishing connections to those "literary ancestors" who came before them (Pryse 5). Thus, they lend textuality to quilts and gardens making them literary spaces where their "literary ancestors" cultivated and shared stories, where they testified through fabric and soil for the benefit of themselves and posterity. Women MCs, like Sa-Roc, contribute to this tradition, carving a path for future generations through emceeing.

3.1 Challenging Genre: Sa-Roc, Conscious Rap, and Confessional Poetry

Sa-Roc, like her literary ancestors, also challenges "conventional assumptions" about "literary tradition." Rather than conforming to text-based expectations of literature, she instead performs sonic explorations of various genres, making categorizations

difficult. She does this largely through her capacity as an MC to sonically merge genres, blurring the lines between poetry, autobiography, confession, and memoir. By interacting with these genres through a sonic medium, she challenges the very meaning of text and operates outside of many of the traditional constraints placed on purely text-based genres. As an MC, she can manipulate both form and genre.

Because she navigates a sonic literary space, she is not bound by the rules of the page; she is free to slip between what is heard and what is read. An MC is not required to create a textual representation for every sound. It is a common trope in rap songs to have the literal sound of gunfire present in a song. The sound of gunfire exemplifies the freedom of an MC. An MC may also choose to utilize onomatopoeia in their lyrics, but it is not necessary. While the onomatopoeia can be transcribed, the sound of gunfire cannot without disrupting the rhyme scheme. Thus, MCs are not restricted to the constraints of on-the-page poetry and traditional literary devices. They have the freedom to maneuver between sonic and written elements of poetry as they operate in liminal spaces of form.

Just as they have the freedom to manipulate literary devices, they also have the freedom to manipulate genre. Sa-Roc's ability to meld genres is a unique quality of her craft. Rap music is an innately multi-genre medium of expression, thus making it densely literary while simultaneously musical. Sa-Roc's oeuvre spans from sci-fi to historiography as she paints portraits of socio-political and fantastic narratives, similar to the work of writers like Toni Morrison and Octavia Butler. Morrison's *Beloved* and Butler's *Kindred* (1979) are prime examples of the literary lineage Sa-Roc is inheriting of Black women writers challenging definition through testimony and multi-genre work. Is *Beloved* a ghost story or a historical novel? Is *Kindred* science fiction or neo slave

narrative? Both novels prioritize the voices of Black women, although through fictional instances of testimony rather than autobiographical, by merging genres to fit the needs of the characters whose stories they tell and uplift. Like Morrison and Butler, Sa-Roc's work (and the work of many other MCs) is difficult to categorize. This is, in part, because it resists categorization through its multi-genre qualities.

This, however, does not mean that their work is left uncategorized; it simply means that the task is difficult. Commentators, in both literary and cultural capacities, often force categorizations that are potentially damaging in their constraints. There are subgenres within rap music that artists such as Sa-Roc are frequently placed within. Sa-Roc is generally considered a "conscious rapper," and while she does not seem to necessarily disapprove of this label, she does appear to be indifferent to it (much like Morrison who grew indifferent to the label "magical realist").[5] In an interview with Dead End Hip Hop (DEHH), she states, "I guess I would be classified as like a conscious MC because the lyrics that I spit have meaning, and they're very intentional about not perpetuating the common stereotypes of being like rap. You know, sex, drugs, and violence" (2:20-2:36). Unlike Rapsody, she does not push against the label of "conscious MC," but her own definition of what that means highlights the difficulties of the genre. Because her music has meaning outside of the bounds of commodified mainstream rap, it is conscious. Thus, conscious rap is associated with an intentional and often political approach to music and narrative. If commentators, whether in literary or cultural capacities, categorize Sa-Roc's work as "conscious," they risk hyper-politicizing her

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[5] Morrison, Toni."An Interview with Toni Morrison." *Conversations*, By Chrisitna Davis 1986.

music. By hyper-politicizing her work, commentators produce limited interpretations of Sa-Roc's artistry and place constraints on her career through their narrow interpretations.

For this reason, literary scholars should analyze Sa-Roc's work, and the work of other MCs, because it presents the opportunity to question the "'conscious' banner," as Bruce puts it, and problematic categorizations in literary criticism such as confessional poetry. The polarizing nature of conscious rap, while it can be useful for creating distinctions in moral and artistic values, presents the hazards of hyper-politicization, introducing artistic constraints that further silence the voices of Black women. Because Sa-Roc's music exists in the space of conscious rap, she removes her work from potentially harmful stereotypes of hypersexualized images of womanhood and femininity often produced by mainstream media by creating lyrical content that critiques mainstream constructions of femininity and womanhood. However, the conscious label also simultaneously projects a new and equally harmful hyper-politicized context onto her music. Just as the hyper-sexualization of women MCs can be detrimental and silencing, so too can the hyper-politicization of women MCs—pitting the two against one another and detracting from their art by introducing a harmful binary. Thus, literary and cultural critiques should avoid conscious rap as a label; the politically pegged consciousness it implies is counterproductive.

When conducting a literary analysis of Sa-Roc's lyrics, scholars may also be tempted to find a "fit" for her in existing "traditional" poetic genres, conflating her music with traditional conventions of poetry. Confessional poetry is perhaps the most alluring potential categorization. Much of Sa-Roc's work, and the work of many other MCs, exhibit some of the common tropes of confessional poetry, primarily the use of the lyric

"I" to divulge personal information. Her oeuvre is riddled with instances of "confession" by poetic standards, but, similar to conscious rap, labeling her work confessional runs a dangerous risk. Confession, in the sense of confessional poetry, does not carry the weight of traditional definitions of confession. However, to anyone unfamiliar with the genre, the term "confession" is still laden with assumptions of guilt. Instead, Sa-Roc's work, for the purposes of literary analysis and common use, is far better suited to testimonial rap as a genre categorization.

While Sa-Roc's work resists categorization through its multi-genre elements, it shares a common identifying thread with both conscious rap and confessional poetry—autobiography. The personal nature of intentionally presenting an image of oneself by divulging personal information connects both genres to autobiography, a larger umbrella of categorization. Testimony exists within the scope of autobiography as well. The primary difference between autobiography and testimony is its communal nature. Autobiography can be an isolating genre, whereas testimony is inherently communal, *inter*spective rather than *intra*spective. The tradition of testimony Sa-Roc operates within is necessarily communal, and as such testimony is the most fitting subgenre since it lends itself to multi-genre usage.

While this chapter primarily focuses on her album *The Sharecropper's Daughter (Extended Edition)* (2021), especially her songs "Rockwell's America," "Forever," "Options," and "Wild Seeds," there are earlier examples of her desire to testify and build connection to her literary ancestors found in her oeuvre. Her single "I Am Her" (2017), while not necessarily autobiographical, offers an anthem for women and a demand for change and accountability. The opening verse of the single states the purpose of the song,

“This so lil girls dream bigger than they supposed to / And we get a fair share of pie on the plate” (0:16-0:21). Immediately, the audience is informed that this song is being created for future generations of women. As such, it functions to disrupt common discourse that leaves no space for women at the table: “Pardon this interruption of your daily status quo / We’re here to disrupt the arrangement of your daddy’s show” (0:28-0:33). Sa-Roc not only acknowledges that this song will create a forced rupture of misogynistic values, but she also acknowledges her literary ancestors who have also called the “daily status quo” into question through their own testimonies. She cites her literary foremothers: “This double extraordinary enigmatic flow is brought to you by Audre, and bell, and Maya Angelou” (0:33-0:38). By citing these women as influential figures rallying for the same cause, Sa-Roc situates herself in a lineage of testimony born from a desire for change. The chant of “I am her” throughout the song reinforces her connection to other women, including the literary ancestors she directly names. In this way, she creates a song that unites them with a shared demand for change and equality.

3.2 Sa-Roc: Emceeing Autobiography, Testimony, and Black Female Subjectivity

Like other quiltmakers, gardeners, grandmothers, rootworkers, and autobiographers, Sa-Roc contributes to a literary tradition by telling her own story, by testifying. Sa-Roc's magic is cast in rhyme and verse. As an MC, she contributes to a literary lineage of testimony while simultaneously, like her literary ancestors, challenging traditional conceptions of literature. Her album *The Sharecropper's Daughter*, a self-proclaimed autobiographical piece[6], challenges traditional characteristics of autobiography through its densely communal and intertextual nature. The opening verse of the first track on the album, "Options," begins with Sa-Roc explaining that her "literary expression just preliminary extensions of the real me" and that by listening to this album we, her audience, are "listening to the sonic memoirs of a real G" (0:20-0:29). Immediately, Sa-Roc challenges traditional characteristics of autobiography.

Autobiography, as a genre, frequently exists in an unchallenged and unacknowledged white space. The characteristics and constraints of autobiography have largely and historically been established by "white, male autobiographers" (Manora 361). Autobiography, in an American context, is typically considered an effort to create the self as the "quintessential American Individual," one who conforms to distinctly American ideals of "community, family, and the individual" (Manora 361). As such, critics often

[6] In an interview with Carolyn Langer from WICB 97.1FM, Sa-Roc is asked if *The Sharecropper's Daughter* (2020) is her first "anecdotal let go," or autobiographical, project, to which Sa-Roc replies that she has had several songs that speak to her past and the "more intimate details of [her] life," but as a cohesive project this album is the first to focus solely on her story of how she "came to be" (10:49-11:31).

bleach autobiographies by reading them in ignorance of context in an attempt to envelop everyone into a very specific (and very white) American identity.

In light of these often implicit and unquestioned readings, Manora highlights how the history of autobiography is problematic when applied to the autobiographical work of Black writers, especially Black women writers. Manora asserts that in her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, "Angelou the writer thwarts the performative space of genre, upsetting the individualist and intrasubjective yet allegorical imperatives of autobiography to craft a relational, *intersubjective memoir*" (360; emphasis added). Sa-Roc similarly, through her own personal testimony, creates an "intersubjective memoir" by citing the work written by other women and integrating it into her own story. Her intersubjectivity is built in the context of community, a mingling and melding of stories to highlight her position as an individual while also emphasizing how others inform and influence her perception of self.

The Sharecropper's Daughter, her "sonic memoir," is testimonial and necessarily communal. She weaves the narratives of other influential Black women into her own, testifying to a broad range of experience while simultaneously re-contextualizing audience engagement. She delivers her testimony not in written text, but through sonic performance. Because she is verbally delivering her autobiography, her audience is called to listen rather than read, thus shifting the rules of engagement. Rather than visually bearing witness, she calls on her audience to aurally witness her testimony. Thus, this album is an excellent example of the utility of testimonial rap as a subgenre; it accounts for sonic expression.

Testimony, whether in the courtroom or in the pulpit, is sonic at its roots. Testimony is also inherently communal; it demands an audience and participation through the act of listening and bearing witness. To testify, is to provide proof of something's existence or occurrence. Sa-Roc testifies to the experiences that shaped her artistry and to the realities faced by Black women through the lens of her own unique experiences. This pushes the boundaries of traditional notions and expectations of autobiography.

She pushes back on traditional expectations of autobiography through her creation of intersubjectivity, which she accomplishes through intertextual lyrics. Sa-Roc's work, on *The Sharecropper's Daughter* and much of her other projects, is densely intertextual featuring an abundance of allusions and direct references to the work of artists such as Toni Morrison. One such instance occurs in her song "Rockwell's America": "And who was I? / Young Assata from the Zulu tribe / Trying to breed love from hate like *The Bluest Eye*" (0:40-0:45). The allusions in this reference are potentially two-fold. In addition to a clear reference to Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), there is also a more ambiguous reference to Assata Shakur, Godmother of Tupac Shakur. This reference is ambiguous because Sa-Roc's actual name is Assata Perkins.

In an interview with Talib Kweli, Sa-Roc explains the origins of her name. Kweli asks Sa-Roc to discuss the "juxtaposition" of her namesake, "Assata Shakur" and her "MC name Sa-Roc," which is a "tribute to Sha-Rock" the "female MC pioneer" and how the two names form her "as an artist" ("Talib Kweli & Sa-Roc Talk Rhymesayers" 9:32-9:56). She answers by explaining that her MC name, Sa-Roc, was not originally intended as a tribute to Sha-Rock and that once she learned of the MC, who personally reached out

to her to discuss her work, she decided to envelop that into the meaning of her stage name. She notes that both women are important to her because both navigated difficult circumstances and devoted their time and talents to advancing Black culture (9:58-11:28). Sa-Roc is keenly aware of how her own names, two innate markers of her identity, are closely connected to the stories of other women.

Thus, by referencing her own first name and/or the name of Assata Shakur, Sa-Roc collapses her narrative with another woman's story, highlighting their connectedness through her own individual experiences. In this way, Sa-Roc further challenges traditional conceptions of autobiography by melding her own story with that of another woman's—emphasizing community. In other words, Sa-Roc is an individual, but by crafting an "intersubjective memoir" she demonstrates that her own individual experience is by no means disconnected from other Black women. By doing so, as Pryse suggests of Black women writers in the 1970s and 1980s, Sa-Roc emphasizes her connection to her "literary ancestors."

Evie Shockley highlights a similar connection in her monograph *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (2011). While Shockley is specifically referencing the blues, her assessments are applicable to the work of MCs. Shockley explains that the blues were a "versatile" and "transportable art" because the, "*I* speaking in a stanza of blues lyrics would often articulate 'intensely personal' (and typically private) woes, but because those woes were widespread among African Americans and were figured in broad, metaphorical terms in the lyrics, nearly *anyone* in the community could speak that *I*" (88; emphasis original). Sa-Roc utilizes the first-person "I" similarly to the blues "*I*" in that her experiences, while unique to her,

reflect a larger reality faced by all Black women, thus making her music both "versatile" and "transportable" like the blues. Part of this versatility is her ability to combine her testimony with those of other Black women.

In "Rockwell's America," she channels her literary ancestors further by integrating Morrison's debut novel *The Bluest Eye*, through a play on words by referencing Pecola Breedlove, into her own story. Pecola Breedlove grapples with the desire to be seen and loved in a country that has deemed her outside of traditional (white) conceptions of beauty. She is a character whose story is told primarily through other perspectives, an effort on Morrison's part to shield her while simultaneously "centering" her as the focal point of the novel (211). By calling on this character in particular, Sa-Roc highlights the complexity of Black female adolescence. She utilizes Pecola's story to explicate the hostile national environment and climate that Black girls must navigate as they attempt to "breed love from hate" as she did in her own childhood experiences. By referencing Morrison's novel, one that is specifically about a young Black girl, Sa-Roc connects her own personal experience to other explorations of Black female adolescence.

Like Walker with Celie, Morrison gave voice to other Black women through Pecola. Morrison explains that "[o]ne problem" she encountered was "centering" and that "the weight of the novel's inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing" (211). Although Morrison references a work of fiction here, she hits on one the many dangers of autobiography: voyeurism. An autobiographical piece, and by the same token testimony, is left at the mercy of those who read or listen to

it. An artist has little control over how their work is perceived or, in more disturbing cases, consumed.

While Sa-Roc's own style of delivery is powerful and fierce, she is not exempt from the anxieties associated with producing deeply personal work. The process of creating an autobiographical piece is daunting for several reasons. In an interview with Carolyn Langer of WICB 97.1FM, Sa-Roc divulges her own feelings about her autobiographical creative process. She explains that "[t]here was a lot" that she had to "unpack and uncover" while bringing *The Sharecropper's Daughter* to life. The album is her personal testimony, through which she explores her father's history as a sharecropper and the implications of that past on her own life. She explains that during her creative process she was forced to ask herself many anxiety-inducing questions that ultimately reaffirmed her belief that "true art takes [...] real courage":

> You're right, I hadn't really explored that fully before… And there's a sense of vulnerability that comes along with doing that. There's trepidation that comes along with it … "Is this too much? Am I too exposed?" You know, "Who listening to this is this going to affect positively or negatively?" Meaning negatively in terms of like, maybe family members who I'm talking about, that you know the story is a little bit…the pieces of what I'm sharing are too personal, and just making those choices is frightening sometimes. So yeah, it was just the timing of processing all of that and putting it, presenting it in a way that best characterizes who I am as a person and as an artist. (15:20-17:41)

Sa-Roc's fear of being "too personal" in stitching together her narrative from the fabric of her family's story reflects the risks of autobiography. By writing a story as personal as her own, she engages in a project of vulnerability.

She demonstrates this vulnerability throughout the album while also putting forth effort to deconstruct monolithic configurations of Black womanhood. She creates her own subjectivity as a Black woman and MC by highlighting her nuanced and diverse experiences as both an American citizen and a woman in a male dominated field. While *The Sharecropper's Daughter* is centered on Sa-Roc herself as an individual, it is also deeply and necessarily communal. She largely establishes this community through sharing vulnerable lyrics. By establishing vulnerability, both through the pain and pride she has experienced, she creates layers of connection through her testimony.

There are several songs on the album that demonstrate her vulnerability as an artist and her desire to emphasize the spectrum of Black womanhood, but perhaps the most vulnerable and powerful track on *The Sharecropper's Daughter* is "Forever." While each song on the album is deeply personal, this song, through both her lyrics and visual representation of those lyrics in the music video, best demonstrates her ability to testify and bring together other women. The song opens with a bar that immediately establishes vulnerability, both physically and emotionally: "When I wake up, no make up, half naked, I feel like I'm the shit" (0:12 -0:14). The opening line of the song strips her to a natural state, absent of make-up and only partially clothed. Physically, this is a vulnerable state for a woman. The need to get up and immediately make yourself "presentable" is a part of most women's daily routine. Sa-Roc flips this idea on its head by instead presenting her vulnerability through the joy and pride of that moment. She opens herself

to criticism, and yet still chooses to proudly state “I feel like I’m the shit” (0:14). In this opening line to her anthem for women, she exudes pride.

She goes on to juxtapose this moment of pride in her body with memories of when she had acted against it through self-harm. She explains in the opening verse that she is “not flawless,” but rather she is “scarred up” and “fine with it”—her “body art a laundry list of all of life’s unkindnesses” (0:19-0:23). According to Sa-Roc in an annotation on Genius.com, this is “referring to the scars from when [she] would self-harm as an adolescent/teen.” She goes on to explain that she “felt helpless in the face of all of life’s hardships and injustices,” and had “unfortunately used self-mutilation as a way to act out [her] anger and frustration on [herself].” She emphasizes the importance of this line of the song by sharing the lessons she learned from her experiences with self-harm:

> I believed I had no value and no power against the many blows life dealt me. Each cut was made after extremely traumatic events in my life. I have now grown to see how valuable I am, and how my pain has made me stronger and aware of just how powerful I can be. I now regard my scars, that I once hid or made up stories about, as beauty marks that tell a story about [how] I overcame what seemed to me as the worst of experiences, to become the empowered woman I am today. (Genius.com)

By sharing her history with self-harm and what she learned from it, she builds connection with her audience through her testimony. She asks her audience to witness the joyous and painful parts of her story, both sonically and visually.

In the second verse of the song she digs deeper into her history of mental health struggles. Harkening back to the opening lines of the song and the vulnerably proud moment of self-love, “I feel like I’m the shit,” she explains how she came to that state of pride: “I ain’t always have it in me / No tolerance for pretending / I was 14 years old forcing pills down my throat so my baby fat diminished” (1:45-1:50). In the music video this line is paired with a visual of a scar on her throat, presumably from a tracheotomy. This bar is followed by another that states, “Still got the scars from cutting my wrists when I thought that life was finished” (1:51-1:56). Similar to the showing of her tracheotomy scar, this line is also paired with a close-up image of the scars on her wrists. She does not leave the lines without reflection for contextualization. She follows these intensely personal and vulnerable visual images and spoken words with an affirmation stating, “Now they remind me what my lows look now that I know the sky’s the limit” (1:56-1:58). She gives this pain a place in her narrative through the vulnerability of self-love as she testifies to the experience and offers it alongside the visual stories of other women.

Other Black women are included in the music video, seated on a shared throne. This imagery serves to further deconstruct monolithic conceptions of Black womanhood. The video alternates between outdoor and indoor settings. A stunning golden throne is featured in the indoor setting against a black backdrop, making it a focal point in the video. With each transition back to the throne, a different woman is seated on it, drawing attention to how each woman is different from the last. Frequently, Sa-Roc is seated on the throne delivering her testimony. Like Sa-Roc, each Black woman occupying the same throne when she is not seated on it highlights her own differences by

gesturing to her arms or holding a different posture. Ultimately, because they all share the same seat, the throne links them all together, while simultaneously highlighting their differences. In this way, each woman testifies to her own unique experience. In one sweeping visual motion, this song and music video create community among Black women, deconstructing monolithic conceptions of Black womanhood through Sa-Roc's testimony.

Outside of the bounds of the music video, Sa-Roc further establishes community lyrically by calling on her literary ancestors, specifically her mother. She reflects on her childhood and her struggles with mental health. In doing so, she channels memories of her mother and Earth, Wind, & Fire in the hook:

> You better shine on 'em baby, you a star. You betta
>
> Be exactly who you are-Forever
>
> Cause they gon' try and change your heart. Don't let 'em
>
> Cause you so damn fine, just the way you are (2:09-2:20)

The comforting affirmation resounding from these lines comes from Sa-Roc's childhood memories of her mother. In an annotation on Genius.com, Sa-Roc explains that the hook of "Forever" is inspired by her mother. As a child, she "stood out" because, unlike the other girls in her elementary school, she wore her hair "cut in a short Afro." Her mother "understood this" and "in the mornings before school, as [they] got ready in the mirror, she [her mother] would sing the chorus of 'Shining Star' by Earth, Wind, and Fire to [her]." By imbedding this memory of her mother into the song, she, again, reifies her connection to her literary ancestors and testifies to the loving relationship she had with her mother.

By referencing her mother in "Forever," Sa-Roc illustrates how her relationship to her mother is key to establishing her own subjectivity. Her mother informs her understanding of her life, just as Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Audre Lorde, and other women she references in her songs influence the creation of her identity as an artist and as an individual. Thus, the interwoven and intertextual nature of Sa-Roc's lyrics illustrates an approach to autobiography strikingly similar to Angelou's. Manora explains that Angelou crafted her autobiography (or as Baldwin refers to it, her testimony) through a "culturally specific communal ethos" (365). Like Angelou, Sa-Roc creates her story in a way that defies the constraints of allegory by leaning into a communal narrative. Manora explains that "Angelou's [autobiography] is a distinctly African-American autobiography" and that "the relational dynamics" work to "draw her unmistakably into the company of Hurston and other African-American women writers who locate their relationships with other women as the spaces in which they are nurtured and allowed to grow" (365). By identifying the similarities of her own narrative to those of other women, Sa-Roc creates and nurtures a subjectivity that is not isolated.

Sa-Roc prioritizes this sense of community in many of her songs. She creates her music, like other Black women writers, in the spaces where their relationships meet and nourish one another. In her song "Deliverance," for example, Sa-Roc states, "I am not an island / Hold up the diaspora with my limbs" (1:39-1:42). Sa-Roc highlights here a vast connectedness to other Black women, making her testimony one that gives voice to and aligns herself with women from her past, paying homage to her African roots. By emphasizing connection to other women in her music, Sa-Roc testifies to an array of

experiences of other Black women and highlights the spaces where her own connections overlap with and are informed by the experiences of others.

She does this in part in an effort to deconstruct monolithic conceptions of Black womanhood, but also in an effort to benefit future generations of Black women who will need the nurturing and affirmative spaces Sa-Roc's testimony creates through intertextuality. Sa-Roc has a number of songs that demonstrate this desire. In the release of the extended edition of *The Sharecropper's Daughter*, Sa-Roc introduces a new opening track, thus re-contextualizing her testimony. This new opening song, "Options," illustrates her frustration with the music industry and her desire to impart her testimony. She opens the song by stating, "This joint should have been done / A year late, dollar short, and then some" (0:11-0:14). Immediately, her frustration is apparent. By expressing that this song is long overdue, she sets the tone for the rest of the album. Tired of feeling unheard, Sa-Roc's testimony is both community building and a story on behalf of others who feel silenced. She prefaces the rest of the song with a warning in the first verse:

> Got the silent treatment for so many years with no retort,
> Now I'm so in mode to just emote until my throat is hoarse
> 'Cause they wouldn't recognize a trailblazer until the road is torched
> So if you follow me, beware, my accounts are probably jaded.
> Maybe a characteristic of the underappreciated, Sa-Roc (0:43-0:57)

By offering this warning to her audience, she frames her testimony as retaliation to being silenced. This is likely referring to her status as an "underground" rapper,

something that can largely be attributed to her being labeled a “conscious MC.” Because her music exists outside of the bounds of commodified mainstream rap, she has struggled to be heard by a large audience.

This struggle is most evident in “Options” where she recognizes that, despite her best efforts, her testimony may be told in futility. The hook of the song demonstrates that she has come to terms with this, but in spite of the constraints placed on her music, she still creates for posterity: “I know, I know, I know I’m just talking / They probably won’t listen ‘til I make it to the coffin” (0:59-1:02) She explains that, like so many other artists, it is unlikely that she will be heard until she is deceased. It is unclear who this “they” is that she references. The ambiguous nature of “them” calls her audience into question. Is she referring solely to future generations of women who will inherit her story just as she has inherited the stories of her literary ancestors? Is she referring to other MCs? Is she referring to rap fans generally? Or is she speaking to all of the above? Because her message is applicable to a broad range of listeners, it is difficult to decipher who Sa-Roc sees herself as testifying to in this instance. No matter who she is speaking to, it is clear that she speaks to the benefit of future generations. She goes on in the hook to say that she can “[l]ead ‘em to the water,” but they “might not drink until you offer” and that she is just trying to “leave ‘em with some options” (1:02-1:06). Her desire to leave her ambiguous audience with “options” suggests that she is issuing a call to action. The ambiguous nature of her audience makes her testimony all the more public. In order to leave this public audience with options, she has to give them her testimony--a trigger for change.

Her testimony is the greatest gift for posterity she has to offer. She goes on in the song to begin the delivery of her testimony. She describes her desire to testify as an "urge": "This urge run through me like electric pulses, my tongue convulses / And spits out pieces of my shattered past, unfiltered and rather impulsive" (1:18-1:26). By stating this, she contextualizes her testimony as involuntary, a story that naturally emanates through her, making her the vessel for something bigger than herself. Because her testimony takes on such a life of its own, it is rejected by mainstream audiences: "But they don't want the army of me / They want an R&B radio freak that they can digest and swallow in small doses" (1:26-1:31). She understands that her story, and the story of others like her, the "army of me," is not desired by the mainstream, and as such is pushed into silence. In Audre Lorde's essay "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" (Year of Pub.), she explains the hazards of silence:

> I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. And it is with concern and caring of all those women which gave me strength and enabled me to scrutinize the essentials of my living. (147)

Like Lorde, Sa-Roc recognizes that her silence will not protect her, or other women. Her work reflects this recognition.

Sa-Roc's work writ large shares Lorde's concern for creating connection with other women. As Gwendolyn D. Pough puts it, women in Hip-Hop, "encourage self-definition not only for themselves, but also for contemporary young Black women" (10). Sa-Roc is no exception. In her song "Wild Seeds," a track added to the album in the extended edition, she suggests that her audience is less ambiguous than it may have seemed in "Options." She explains that her album is an effort to uplift the voices of other Black women, both in the past and present, and so her music is both for Black women and directed at those who refuse to listen to them:

> Spit a universe out the mouthpiece and its seeds out my uterus
> Never had a table seat, so I'm chasing bread like it's sacred, call it the Eucharist
> Every spoken word invoke women battered but never broken
> This that sharecropping, hatchet-toting, poetry in motion
> This is TransAtlantic echoes out the floors of salted oceans
> Make me a living portrait of my sisters' voices for the culture (2:15-2:31)

These bars encapsulate both the history Sa-Roc speaks for and through, and the goal of her testimony, to uplift the voices of other Black women by representing the culture through their stories and her own.

Sa-Roc is not alone in her commitment to sharing her story and the stories of other women. Women in Hip-Hop like Akua Naru, Janelle Monae, Jamilia Woods, Rapsody, and many others all share in this effort as they build connections through their shared literary lineage of testimony. As Sa-Roc testifies, so too do other women—joining

together in literary expression to seek out and build spaces where they can flourish and effect change.

CHAPTER IV

"IN THE SPIRIT OF L. HILL": VULNERABILITY, TRIBUTE, AND TESTIMONIAL EXCHANGE IN *EVE*

"Reading The Color Purple *was the first time I had seen Southern, black women's literature as world literature. In writing us into the world—bravely, unapologetically, and honestly—Alice Walker has given us a gift we will never be able to repay" –Tayari Jones*

Jones's analysis of *The Color Purple* (1982) illustrates the incredible capacity of testimony to forge connection and community. Told primarily from the perspective of Celie, Walker's novel utilizes Celie's story, her testimony, written as letters to God and her sister, Nettie, to explore connections between women, nature, and God. Celie's letters testify to the beauty, magic, and spirituality witnessed when women congregate to explore their kaleidoscopic connections and imagine a God who desires, first and foremost, the pleasure of His people.

Walker's emphasis on connection fortified through testimony is a tradition carried on by artists like Rapsody. L. Lamar Wilson explains that "[w]ith verses rooted in Alice Walker's womanist tradition of self-reflexive ode, cautionary tales, and homage to elders and ancestors," budding MC Rapsody "foregrounds the work of her mind in an industry that's thrived on selling black women's blues, capitalizing so much on their music about being treated badly…" Wilson is apt to point out the roots of Rapsody's "family tree" as he refers to it in this interview with Rapsody for the *Oxford American*. Rapsody honors these roots while simultaneously creating a community through verse that combats monolithic and hyper-sexualized productions of Black women's bodies and pain.

Featured in Nottz's "Black Woman" (2021), Rapsody and MCs Ke Turner, Rah Digga, and Nikki Greer gather inspiration from *The Color Purple* and Walker's womanist tradition to create a sonic collective paying tribute to and growing through the narratives of Walker's Celie, Shug Avery, Nettie, and Sofia. In the opening verses, Rapsody raps, "I talk like Celie to my sisters" (0:48). This bar is indicative of Rapsody's oeuvre; she prioritizes honesty and uplifting the voices of Black women and MCs, creating community for future generations of Black women, a reservoir of strength and representation.

Rapsody's album *Eve* (2019) carries this torch of testimony by conjuring other women's stories and testifying to their contributions to her life and the lives of others. Thus, she builds community for posterity while simultaneously paying homage to other Black women who collectively influence her art, whether through personal connection or through artistic mediums such as music, literature, and film. Rapsody's *Eve* is densely intertextual both in literary, filmic, and musical references. The album title itself refers to the first woman, Eve according to Judeo-Christian tradition. Her allusions and wordplay are made more meaningful through the community the album necessitates, a community that testifies through a range of emotions—exuberant, outraged, and mournful. Each track is named after a different Black woman whose story, whether fiction or non-fiction, testifies to the multiplicity of Black womanhood. Songs like "Nina," "Cleo," "Oprah," "Maya," "Myrlie," "Reyna's Interlude," and "Afeni" are examples of Rapsody's continuation of a literary lineage of testimony.

Rapsody does not carry out this project alone. She includes the voices of other women, whether through samples or through features. Spoken-word poet Reyna Biddy is

consistently featured throughout the course of the album alongside other women MCs and singers like Queen Latifah, Leikeli47, Mereba, and others. She also features several male artists on the album like PJ Morton, J. Cole, D'Angelo, and others. By doing so, she incorporates men's voices into the narratives of women, granting them the opportunity to pay homage to women who have influenced them while simultaneously exploring male-female relationship dynamics. She explains in an interview with Genius's Rob Markman, that when she created *Eve*, she wanted to create an album that the "village could gravitate towards," the "village" being made up of "women and men" (2:50-2:53). She states that women "could connect to it because naturally we speak the same language, but men are raised by strong women too" and as such should contribute to the narratives conveyed through the album, thus further highlighting her desire to establish community (2:53-2:58).

Rapsody explains the importance of building community through her album *Eve*. Markman offers an insightful summation of Rapsody's priorities as an artist explaining that even in her earlier work, such as her albums *Thank H.E.R Now* (2011) and *Laila's Wisdom* (2017), Rapsody has found ways to pay homage to her inspirations. He explains that her album *Eve* feels like a culmination of her efforts to pay tribute to those who have inspired her and helped her get to where she is now (0:54-1:30). He asks her what the impetus for the album was. In response, she explains that the idea came to her during an interview with Wilson who, while playing Nina Simone and Roberta Flack on the car radio, told her "Rap, you gotta understand you come from this lineage. You're an extension of these two women. They're part of your family tree" (1:58-2:03). After hearing this, she was inspired to think differently about her identity as an artist. She tells

Markman, that as an MC she had "never really thought about it like that," and that while she was inspired by women like Simone and Flack, she had never considered her musical connection to them. Her interview with Wilson inspired a new line of thought: "Yo, you are. You're soulful, you're truthful in your music. Your music has message, it has purpose" (2:18-2:22). By realizing this about herself, she understood that she was not disconnected from her fellow women artists and North Carolina natives. She explains that her conversation with Wilson "got [her] gears to thinking" until she concluded that she is "an extension" who is "made up of a bunch of different women" (2:22-2:30). She goes on to explain to Markman that she has since revised her answer when asked who her inspirations are.

In the past she would reference other women MCs like Queen Latifah and Lauryn Hill, but now she also acknowledges that her inspiration comes from women like Nikki Giovanni and Phylicia Rashad as well. In citing not only her musical influences, but the other women who have inspired her, she acknowledges that her connections to other Black women "goes further than music" (2:46). By explaining that her inspirations extend beyond the bounds of her sonic foremothers, Rapsody gestures toward the literary lineage of testimony she inherits, a lineage of women whose stories are interwoven into her own personal testimony through communally shared artistic and lived experiences. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Rapsody reflects on what she hopes to gain from the women who inspire her by connecting her story to theirs. She recalls how she felt watching the movies of Cicely Tyson and Phylicia Rashad:

> "I would sit and watch their movies, the power that they possess, and how they carry themselves. That's how I want to model myself as an artist. I

> want to be classy like that. I want to be intelligent. I want to be regal. But at the same time, hip and raw… So it was just like, I should give more to myself, and I can do that in a creative way. And this [*Eve*] was my way of doing it: connecting all these different sides of me to other women." (Bernstein)

Thus, while Rapsody testifies to the experiences of other women throughout the course of the album, she also testifies to her own, defying monolithic conceptions of Black womanhood while crafting Black female subjectivity through shared discourse.

4.1 Creating a Collective: Troubling Gender, Curating Vulnerability, and Testimonial Exchange

In Aja Monet's *My Mother was a Freedom Fighter* (2017), she writes, "my mother was a freedom fighter and so were her mother and her mother's mother. i witness their movements in this world and it informs my own, their labor to love and live freely, their joy and their pain, their magic and madness" (10). In these opening lines from her author's note, Monet eloquently establishes the importance of lineage and connective experience. Laura Vrana explains that Monet's *Freedom Fighter* "is, as evidenced by its title, a collection of tales about maternal ancestors and their descendants, depicting the black female struggle as heroic even when quotidian or ugly" (11). Vrana goes on to explain that "the humanizing portraits of black women grappling with complex concerns like whether to abort a child enable Monet to critique those institutional parameters that produce such impossible choices" (11). Monet's collection identifies and creates through a repository of experience, thus highlighting the "multifaceted elements of black female

experience" (Vrana 9). In this way, Monet shares a similar sentiment to Rapsody's *Eve*. Like Rapsody, Monet also explores the depth of inherited emotions passed down through generations of women who have fought to "love and live freely." She does this not by putting herself at risk through the kind of vulnerability born from autobiography, but through vicarious explorations of other women's stories, sharing and identifying herself through their testimonies.

Similarly, Rapsody's *Eve* also pays tribute to her foremothers who have lived their lives as a testament to "their joy and their pain, their magic and madness" as she locates herself within their stories, identifying the parts of herself that share kinship through deeply felt and deeply woven connection. Monet explains that "women of the diaspora" have taught her the necessity of maintaining and exploring connection through verse: "they taught me that these poems are a way one posits the importance of feeling deeply in order for substantial social change to take place" (10). Rapsody's *Eve* is a product of this sentiment as well. In a brilliant display of testimony, Rapsody creates community by centering vulnerability in explorations of the stories of other Black women who have inspired her in personal and artistic capacities. In other words, Rapsody both puts on display the vulnerability of others while simultaneously demonstrating her own capacity to be vulnerable by identifying herself within their stories. By doing so, she creates art that ultimately advocates for change, creating a space, a repository, where artists can congregate to configure a deeply appreciative reality for Black women, challenging misogyny, dismantling monolithic conceptions of Black womanhood, and creating new horizons for posterity.

While Sa-Roc participates in vulnerability in the traditional sense by sharing her own story, as explored in the previous chapter, Rapsody puts vulnerability on display by curating the testimonies of others—creating a collective repository that functions through testimonial exchange. Rapsody curates from a communal space and through "the love ethic" rather than from an institutional and largely emotionally sanitized practice. In this way, Rapsody does not engage in vulnerability in the traditional capacity of the term. Instead, she participates in a sub-form of vulnerability which I have labeled, *vicarious vulnerability*, meaning that Rapsody participates in vulnerability by collapsing her story with the testimonies of others rather than by placing herself in an overtly autobiographical position of risk—thus complicating the potential effort of scholars to dub her work "confessional" while still maintaining deeply personal investments through artistic expression. While she often utilizes the first-person "I" in her songs and does divulge in an interview with *Rolling Stone* that she wants her audience to understand who she is through her music, she does so in a way that cannot fully be identified as autobiographical. Instead, Rapsody's "I" reads (and sounds) as more closely related to the communal blues "I" Shockley identifies in *Renegade Poetics*, an "I" that can testify to collectively shared experience rather than being solely grafted onto a single individual—a persona of Rapsody at the most (88). This is in-part because of the community Rapsody necessitates in the creation of the album.

In her efforts to create an album that "the village [can] gravitate towards," Rapsody metaphorically brings her audience to the Clearing, the sacred space of worship featured in Morrison's *Beloved*. Like Baby Suggs in the Clearing, Rapsody creates a space of testimonial exchange, one that challenges and questions expressions of gender in

Hip-Hop while simultaneously cultivating change. In the Clearing, Suggs calls to her congregation of men, women, and children to engage in a testimonial exchange with the goal of communal healing:

> It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart. (Morrison 103)

In this moment, Suggs asks her congregation to engage in testimonial exchange as they participate in necessary and sustaining communally exercised vulnerability. Suggs's sermon anchors her congregation together through an assessment of their reality as Black people in America while simultaneously giving them the tools to combat the hate thrown at them by white Americans. Suggs explains to her flock the significance of the Clearing as a site of testimony and love: "'Here,' she said, 'in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard'" (Morrison 103). Thus, the Clearing is a repository of testimony with Suggs acting as the curator of her ministry, collecting the testimonies of others and bringing them together to cultivate healing through reciprocity for her people; a place to undo the damage wrought by systems built to destroy and dehumanize.

Like Suggs, Rapsody also seeks to undo this damage through her abilities as an MC, although her efforts are complicated by titles such as "conscious rapper." Had Suggs been an MC, her sermon carried out in verse, she would have ultimately been labeled

"conscious," a term that fails to recognize the intimate space of protest she creates by instead loading it down with hyper-politicized connotations that ultimately detract from the important work she executes, much like the work of Rapsody, who is often dubbed "conscious" despite her disdain for the label. Rapsody's *Eve* operates in a similar tradition to that demonstrated in the fictional space of the Clearing; she works to create her own sonic Clearing within the confines of an album. Rapsody's album is laden with features, both male and female artists. By including so many voices and naming each track after a different Black woman, Rapsody becomes a curator of testimony as she finds herself through vicarious vulnerability and provides her audience with instruction for social change through deeply intertextual performances.

In the opening track of the album "Nina," Rapsody presents an image of herself that is closely connected to her understanding of who Nina Simone was as an artist. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, she explains that she got the audio for the song from Mark Byrd who sent her "the record and it already sampled Nina [Simone], so that was [an] easy" way for her to immediately begin exploring her connection to fellow North Carolina native Simone. She explains that when she "thought about Nina, [she] thought, 'What does she represent for me?'" She recalls a quote that has "st[uck] out" to her: "It's an artist's duty to tell the truth and speak the times." This responsibility is one she takes seriously and feels she shares with her sonic foremother Simone:

> "…so for that song I just wanted to talk about myself, because I felt like at the core of who I was represented who Nina Simone was at her core: Talking about the times. Speaking up and giving voice. Being a griot for whatever is going on at the time." (Bernstein)

In this way, "Nina" and indeed each song on the album is an effort on Rapsody's part to answer the question she once feared "Who the fuck am I?" (Bernstein). Her shared role with Simone as a griot and advocate for the voices of the marginalized leads her in the direction of answers to this question as she, through vicarious vulnerability, situates her identity alongside the voices of others testifying to the experiences and stories of Black women and their relationships to them.

"Nina" is the first step on Rapsody's journey of self-discovery and self-expression. The song begins with a sample of Simone's cover of "Strange Fruit." While written by a white man, Simone (and Billie Holiday before her) brings a level of vulnerability to the song as a Black woman singing about the brutality and horrors of lynching in America. Emily Lordi explains that when "Billie Holliday insists on 'pouncing' on the lyrics of 'Strange Fruit' (1939), she disrupts common constellations of life, song, and voice" (10). Simone performs a similar action to Holiday by answering her call to "disrupt," and, in the act of participation, issues her own call for the disruption of "common constellations of life, song, and voice." Rapsody, hearing the call of both, issues her own answer in verse. Following the introductory sample, Rapsody delivers the first line of the song—powerful and jarring, following in suit with the tone set by Simone: "Emit light, rap, or Emmett Till" (0:24-0:27). Rapsody explains her decision to reference Emmett Till in the opening line of "Nina," the first bar of the album: "It's just sharing these two ideas, where 'emit light…' It's up to you to give people light, to inspire you, to educate" (Bernstein). The idea of emitting light quickly sparked her passion for wordplay and brought about the idea of following it with Emmett Till. She goes on to explain that because of her desire to educate and inspire, "Nina" "had to be first" because

it encapsulates her values as an artist: “I want you to know the core of who I am from the first line” (Bernstein). Thus, Rapsody testifies to who she is through the stories of others, through her shared values with Simone, the love ethic (as Tricia Rose puts it) and a desire to create positive change through sharing and elevating the voices of others.

Rapsody pushes the opening line even further by following with “I drew a line without showing my body, that’s a skill” (0:27-0:30). In the space of a single breath, Rapsody conjures a history of violence wrought on Black women while simultaneously citing her own victories over the systems that would rather her voice be silenced, her body put on display instead. By immediately bringing attention to Emmett Till, she draws attention to his mother, Mamie Till who lost her son to the racial brutality of angry, racist white men in Money, Mississippi. By following this reference with her own victory over misogynoir in the music industry, explaining that she carved out a space for herself without selling hyper-sexualized images of her body, she emphasizes intersectionality, drawing attention to the fact that Black women must fight against racism and sexism. Thus, as the song progresses, the “we” Rapsody mentions along with the first-person “I” comes to represent a collective of women—joining them in shared experience as she gathers the voices of others to explore these experiences in a carefully curated repository of testimony.

Rapsody goes on in the song to explain that she does this “in the spirit of L. Hill,” signaling that while the song is named in honor of Simone, she still testifies to a literary lineage that extends beyond Simone and encompasses other women as well (0:36). When Jonathan Bernstein observes that the “album’s concept feels extremely fleshed out” because she “raps about so many different historic black women who don’t

even have songs named after them" Rapsody responds by stating that she wanted the album to include women beyond the few she selected for the track titles: "That was another way of creating, of making sure I included more women. But I didn't want to force it" (Bernstein). By stating that she did not want to "force" the inclusion of other women, she emphasizes how the stories melded together organically, highlighting the connections she, and so many others, works to testify to in the album. She illustrates this further by rapping,

> I am Nina and Roberta, the one you love but ain't heard of
> Got my middle finger up like Pac after attempted murder
> Failed to kill me, it's still me, woke up singing Shirley Murdock
> As we lay these edges down, brown women, we so perfect
> Went from field nigga to still nigga, being cropped out the picture
> But we all know who got the juice, my sisters (1:34-1:51)

This passage highlights how Rapsody seamlessly shifts from utilizing the first-person "I" to the collective "we" as she identifies herself within a group of women who share an experience deeply influenced by a literary lineage of testimony. Rapsody envelops the stories of Nina Simone, Roberta Flack, Shirley Murdock, and Tupac Shakur (whose voice she includes in the final track of the album paying tribute to his mother, Afeni Shakur). This rapid-fire intertextuality puts on display her ability to testify to the experiences of many through the act of curating.

Alongside her use of Simone's sample in the song, she also includes Biddy's voice in the outro. Biddy brings a surprising new sound to the sonic tapestry of the song. Because she is not listed as a feature, her spoken word performance comes as a

shock in the outro, slowing the song and coming in after a brief pause following Rapsody's "Survival" (2:22). A steady beat mixed with the sound of Simone's sample accompanies her opening lines, surging her message forward and giving it sonic power: "Here's to the honey in you / To the bittersweet in me / I will shed this blood so romantically, so viscously quiet" (2:29-2:37). Her voice joins Simone's in a quiet but threateningly defiant tone. Biddy's lines testify to the resilience of Black women by juxtaposing images of beauty and pain, further emphasizing the fact that vulnerability looks like joy and suffering, both "romantically" and "viscously quiet." The speaker's words serve as a warning to any who may oppose her or attempt to destroy what she has built:

> In this war, likely to succeed
>
> Unlike me to surrender
>
> ….
>
> Praying for a breather
>
> Do you see my pain?
>
> Do I seem like prey?
>
> Empathy be the reason you're still standing
>
> We are not the same (2:49-3:10)

The speaker makes it clear that she is not to be taken lightly, complementing Rapsody's bars confirming their shared ability to "draw a line" without complying with the formula misogynoir requires for women to succeed in Hip-Hop. Thus, "Nina" begins the album as a song fueled solely by the vulnerability of multiple generations of Black women, testifying to their power through the diversity of their experiences—triumph and

loss. Rapsody continues this trend throughout the rest of the album by curating the voices of others and building a community founded in testimony.

In each song, whether expressing feelings of joy, rage, or sorrow, there is a definitive undercurrent of gratitude, further emphasizing the role of tribute in the album. Like in "Nina," Rapsody's efforts are fortified by Biddy's haunting spoken word performances. Biddy's voice appears again as the most emotionally and sonically concentrated moment on the album, "Reyna's Interlude." Continuing in Walker's womanist tradition of "self-reflexive ode," as Wilson puts it, Biddy presents a speaker whose "ode to the black woman's body" carries her voice across piano keys, slowly ushered into an enveloping beat that emphasizes and strengthens her gratitude and resolve. Her "ode to the black woman's body" falls in line with Walker's "self-reflexive ode" by ultimately circling back to Biddy herself as a Black woman. The speaker of the poem speaks to an audience of Black women and to Biddy herself. In her tribute, the speaker foregrounds the strength of Black women which shines through experiences of adversity:

> She's been through a lot
>
> Years and years on end, she chose to keep on
>
> …
>
> To bear baby after baby
>
> Praying this time maybe they'll be birthed into safety
>
> Ideally a place where someone can love them (0:06-0:28)

The space the speaker references is the one Rapsody creates—the sonic Clearing. Thus, *Eve* functions as the instructional guide for creating a reality where Black women

and children can be deeply and safely loved by men and women alike—where they can cast off centuries of hate on the floor, pooling fabric that should have never been woven.

Biddy contributes to the instructional nature of the album: “Nobody tells you how to survive as a black woman / So let me learn you a lesson” (1:42-1:48). The speaker teaches this lesson by listing the strengths of Black women and ultimately circling back to gratitude:

> Black women, you are a threat on every point of the map
>
> You are love, in its purest form, all unapologetic, all unconditional
>
> Always too compassionate, sometimes too forgiving
>
> But, never too afraid to show up
>
> …
>
> Thank you for your mercy
>
> You are the strongest form of human
>
> Black women (1:52-3:06)

By concluding her lesson in gratitude for her pupils, the speaker ultimately points back to Biddy herself: a Black woman participating in art that heals, art that demands vulnerability in its creation, art that composes a future in a vein of love. Thus, “Reyna’s Interlude” is another effort of curation on Rapsody’s part as she mines the repository of vulnerability to accumulate the natural resource necessary for change, testimony.

Rapsody’s efforts to create community founded in a desire to induce social change is most evident in the track “Afeni,” named after Tupac Shakur’s mother Afeni Shakur. This song, more than any other, is concerned with troubling gender through testimony. While the entire album deconstructs reductive and harmful misogynistic

values, “Afeni,” the closing song on the album, does so most overtly and powerfully. The track features the voices of PJ Morton, Reyna Biddy, and Tupac Shakur (through a sample of his famous “Keep Ya Head Up” from *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z…* (1993)). The song opens with a sample of Tupac’s first verse from “Keep Ya Head Up,” which ultimately serves as a part of the chorus alongside PJ Morton, where he questions:

> Now since we all came from a woman
> Got our names from a woman and our
> game from a woman
> I wonder why we take from our women
> Why we rape our women
> Do we hate our women? (0:27-0:36)

Rapsody, while sampling the work of a massively popular male fixture in Hip-Hop, creates an intertextual connection to the work done by Afeni Shakur. As the mother of Tupac, Afeni’s influence ultimately finds its way into the questions posed by Tupac making her a literary ancestor for Rapsody. Thus Rapsody’s “Afeni” foregrounds one facet of Black womanhood, motherhood, highlighting the importance of women in the lives of men and demanding accountability for how Black women are treated.

Shortly after the opening sample, Rapsody states, “My brothers (My brothers), I love you (I love you) / I hate to know some of you treat us like Glover” (0:39-0:42). Here again, Rapsody calls on her literary foremother Alice Walker by referencing Danny Glover’s role in the filmic adaptation of *The Color Purple* as Mister, further imbedding her work in Walker’s womanist tradition, seeking the “survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female” (xi; emphasis original). The song emphasizes the love given by

women to men. By having both men and women center and explore this love through vulnerable artistic expression, Rapsody curates a collection of voices (including her own), who testify to Afeni's profound love for her son, a love that would make him question the misogynistic and harmful treatment of women. As such Rapsody troubles gender roles, placing men in a position of vulnerability manifested as unfettered gratitude. Morton exemplifies this in the chorus following Tupac's vitally important series of questions regarding male behavior towards women:

> I don't know where I would be
> If you weren't here with me
> If you don't hear anybody else sayin'
> Please know you're appreciated ('Ated)
> The way you walk, way you talk so fine (Fine)
> And ooh, you got a brilliant mind (Brilliant mind)
> There ain't nobody better (Better)
> Each and every one of you matter to me (1:55-2:17).

Morton's chorus falls in line with the masculine tradition of respect that Rapsody advocates for in this song. She cites Tupac Shakur gesturing towards the sample from "Keep Ya Head Up," "And I pray you feel the same way as that 2pac song" (1:19), and Common, "We should have some things in common / Just like common, he respect us" (2:33-2:35), as examples of how women should be treated and discussed by men, with respect and reverence to their connection as human beings. She goes on to remind the men in her audience not to forget or easily discard that connection: "We ain't your hoes or your bitches, / trophies, or meant for pimpin'/ … / Rib of my rib, do you still feel us in

ya" (1:21-1:33). Here, again, she provides a biblical allusion to Eve, the namesake of her album, in order to reify the connection between man and woman—casting separation and divisiveness to the side.

In addition to instances of masculine vulnerability on the track, "Afeni" closes with a powerful performance by Biddy, whose vulnerable honesty sonically centers a sense of caring and exhaustion that testifies to the difficulty and beauty of Black womanhood. As Morton's voice fades along with the lively music that accompanies the chorus, Biddy's voice falls in seamlessly, ushered in by the caress of piano keys—shifting the tone of testimony. The transition creates a beckoning and welcoming call to Black men:

> Come here, let me untwist your hair and
> massage your head.
> Let me pick your brain.
> I wanna let you into this safe space I hold
> and keep sacred for you (4:19-4:31)

The speaker's invitation discards the confrontational tone seen in "Nina" to soothe, creating a deeply intimate space that invites vulnerability and suggests the possibility of healing. She asks, first and foremost, that her male audience listen meaningfully to what she has to say, thus the absence of all other voices in this closing portion of the song. The speaker goes on to explain that she understands the struggles faced by Black men: "I know you are a kind of hurt. / I kinda wish I could take the pain away from you. / I seen how the Devil likes to have his way with you" (4:34-4:40). In a profound moment of empathy, she goes on to explain further that she has "felt their hate

for [him]" and has witnessed their "innate ways to fake and play with [him] in this life [he] was given, over this nightmare [he is] livin'" and that although she recognizes his struggles she needs him to recognize that they are "in this together" (4:41-4:54). Her love, devotion, and exhaustion are evident when she asks, "so can't you love me deeper than that? Like God intended you to? / Can't you remember where you came from, / like you ain't came from my seed of love?" (4:55-5:09). Her questions serve to reprimand and remind him that she is essential to his living:

> Thought I taught you the gravity of respect and paying dues, thought you knew.
>
> My God don't like ugly.
>
> My God said she need an apology.
>
> Needs to know you see all the beauty she created.
>
> Needs you to know wouldn't be no you if it wasn't for us.
>
> My God said, "How much harder we gotta love you?" (5:12-5:42)

The song closes with this final question, the precipice before shatter that comes from giving too much of oneself without receiving the same in return. The question that prods the social change Rapsody's album advocates for, a recognition of the multifaceted experiences of Black women and the respect that they deserve but are so often denied, a call for someone to listen and bear witness to an album that testifies to the necessity of change.

CHAPTER V

OUTRO

We cannot simply highlight black women's contributions to male-dominated expressive traditions without developing new modes of reading those traditions—by considering, for instance, that the very notion of female 'influence' may limit women more than it empowers them. –Emily J. Lordi

As Lordi posits in her monograph *Black Resonance: Iconic Women Singers and African American Literature* (2013), scholars need new analytical modes when considering the work of Black women artists. As this thesis has highlighted through examinations of the work of artists such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Ms. Lauryn Hill, Jean Grae, Rapsody, and Sa-Roc there is a demand for flexibility in our work as scholars, for interdisciplinarity. If we are to meet these women on "their own terms," as Lordi suggests, we need to reinvent, reimagine, and redefine the terms by which we discuss their work. This thesis has been an effort to continue the work of scholars such as Lordi by participating in this reinventing, reimagining, and redefining. The current scope and capacity of literary studies can only go so far in analyzing and productively understanding the sonic and lyrical artistry produced by Black women.

By discussing the reciprocal relationship between sonic and literary participations in testimony, this thesis aims to provide a new set of terms for discussing the work of

women in Hip-Hop, MCs who battle racism and misogynoir with lyrics that both stupefy and educate. The goal of this thesis is to invite further discussion of the ways Black women resist academic binaries that constrain and reduce their work to a manageable size. Their work is not meant to be managed; their work is meant to challenge—to expand our perceptions of what we deem literary and to understand the beauty in the breaking of that definition so that we may begin to imagine how the shattered pieces can be rearranged.

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