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*WHOSE MUSIC IS IT, ANYWAY?*  
BLACK VOCAL ENSEMBLE TRADITIONS AND THE FEMINIST CHORAL MOVEMENT:  
PERFORMANCE PRACTICE AS POLITICS

BY

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B.S., University of Illinois, 1989  
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THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts  
in the Graduate College of the  
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Urbana, Illinois

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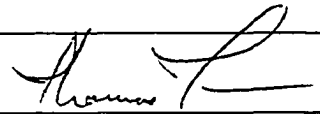
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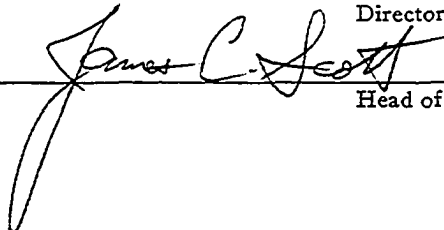
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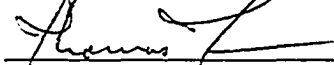


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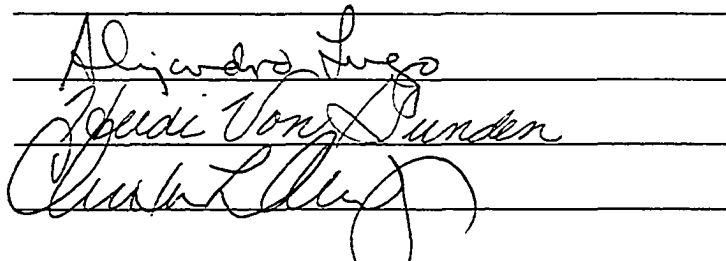


Head of Department

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Chairperson



† Required for doctor's degree but not for master's.

This effort is dedicated to my heroes,  
Karsten and Nancy Boerger,  
who have worked harder for it than anyone else.

and to Karin Boerger,  
my most loyal fan.

and in loving memory of *mein Opa*, Gerhard Börger (1914-2000),  
a most joyous and beautiful *Chorsinger*,  
who completed his life's work on the same day that I finished this book:

*Der Gerechten Seelen sind in Gottes Hand,  
und keine Qual rühret sie an.*

*Chorus angelorum te deducant in paradisum.*

“Buppa: *Sing!*”

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**CHAPTER I**  
**INTRODUCTION**

*“Though it’s flagrant to expect to earn a degree in my desires,  
I wish to enforce no separation between my musical and my sexual passions.”<sup>1</sup>*

*– Anonymous Lesbian/Classical musician*

*“Some people can write a dissertation on whistling Dixie.  
I can whistle Dixie!”<sup>2</sup>*

*– Linda Tillery*

*July, 1993; Cincinnati, Ohio; The Seventh National Women’s Choral Festival*

*The sixteen singers in my choir and I have just left the stage to wild applause from a theater full of women from all over the country. We are surprised and overwhelmed by such a reception at this, our first appearance outside of our own community. As we celebrate in the wings, a charismatic, African-American woman demands my attention. I recognize her as Melanie DeMore, one of the honored guest artists at this festival, and one of a few Women of Color in a sea of choirs most of which, like mine, are directed and peopled by White women. She has hurried backstage to congratulate me on our performance. She first applauds our musicianship and then gets to her real point: “I felt that you performed our music with respect. I felt like you honored our music. You got it.” I smile and thank her humbly, though I am bewildered. I have spent a season generating and rehearsing our repertoire, which includes three songs from Black American traditions. The list of responsibilities I have understood as part of my job for these months comes out of my training: teach the women to sing in tune; train them to blend their timbres; strive for variation in dynamics, articulation, and tone; insist on expressive phrasing. Nowhere on my list does it say: “Make sure that when you sing Black music, you communicate honor rather than disrespect.” If such a requirement had appeared on my list, I would not have known what fulfilling it entailed. Whatever it is I have unwittingly done to reach this particular artist’s benchmark, I am extremely relieved. I hadn’t known my performance would be measured for this; I suddenly realize that the last criticism of my work I could bear hearing is that it was racist.*

**Overview of the Topic**

This study will examine the relationship of racial and gendered identity to music-making in the performance of African-derived vocal musics by contemporary women’s ensembles in the United States. In particular, I have been intrigued by the historical ubiquity of these styles in the repertoires of the

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Wayne Koestenbaum, 1994 (1), in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (Brett et al. 1994)

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Post, 1995 (24).

virtually-White, amateur ensembles of the twenty-five-year-old *Womyn's* choral movement.<sup>3</sup> Because musicians in these ensembles tend to regard themselves as cultural workers of a sort, their choices of repertoire and the conditions of its use and reproduction are at least in part consciously political. In general, it is only much more recently – when at all – that these musics have begun to appear in other, more mainstream, virtually-White choirs (e.g., church groups, academic ensembles, civic choirs), and when they do, it cannot be assumed that their use communicates the same meanings to the singers and their audiences as when they are sung by Feminist- and Lesbian-oriented groups. I have been interested in the messages that White, Feminist choristers ascribe to the singing of songs in Black styles as well as in the means of transmission by which these songs enter their repertoires.

My relationship to the subject of this study is a very personal one. I spent the 1990s as the director of a *Womyn's* chorus I had created in my own community of Champaign-Urbana, Illinois. As I was interrogating my own practice toward the end of my tenure, I began to consider specific ways in which many of my performance choices had been influenced by the practices of *Womyn's* choirs in other parts of the country. One of these practices was to follow closely the creative output of several professional Black women singers and ensembles, whose work often turned up on concerts given by choirs like my own. I identified three such ensembles as having been important repertoire sources for my chorus: Urban Bush Women, Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir, and Sweet Honey In The Rock. The women in all three of these groups, whether acting jointly or realizing individual projects, have fulfilled a primary role in this country as carriers of Black song traditions. Furthermore, by virtue of their performance histories, they are commonly – though not exclusively – identified with the *Womyn's* music movement. I began to wonder why I couldn't name any Black men's or Black men and women's ensembles doing the same kind of work. Was this simply because my attention had been so preferentially focused on women's endeavors, or was there something about carrying their Black ancestors' songs that was especially the province of women? During the course of my research, I discovered a web of collaborative relationships connecting the three groups, as well as histories of cooperation between some of these individuals and the directors of particular *Womyn's* choirs.

One of the concerns of this study arises out of a series of disturbing challenges to my own practice: How could I account for a lack of concordance between messages I had thought I was sending in performing certain Black musics and messages actually received by some audience members, particularly African Americans? What did I need to learn in order to avoid offending listeners when my intent is always to inspire? Was it possible for me as a White musician to make performance choices about Black music that would be appreciated by every Black audience member? If not, what kind of information did I need to have before I could feel I was making informed choices that I was prepared to defend?

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<sup>3</sup> This spelling emerged in the '70s, being used often as code or euphemism for *Lesbian*, but more broadly identifying the emerging public culture of Feminist Lesbians and other Lesbian-supportive Feminists. It is still useful today in issuing a specific invitation/warning: a "*Womyn's*" event is assumed to embrace open celebration of Lesbian identity in a Feminist context and is distinguished from a "women's" event, which could be geared toward the Promise Keeper's Auxiliary. I will use *Womyn* as an efficient way to denote a group comprising mostly Feminist Lesbians and other Lesbian-supportive Feminist women.



Casual conversations about all of these questions with African-American friends and colleagues revealed to me that the crucial issue I had not considered was the problem of cultural appropriation. This concept had not been a part of my framework as a musician, but I found that whether my friends – and subsequently the participants in the study – had a name for it or not, all of them identified its manifestations and proved highly sensitized to its history in the music industry of the United States.<sup>4</sup> As a result, a significant portion of this study is concerned with arriving at Feminist singers' definitions of cultural appropriation. The biggest lesson that this project has held for me has been learning that specific issues of power and privilege are always present whenever White musicians perform Black music in racist America.

It was clear to me from the beginning that the sources of the information I needed were the singing women themselves: the members of the three professional groups I have named, whose national audiences are large and diverse, and participants in the Feminist choral movement. I decided I would counterpose interviews of women in the three Black ensembles against interviews of women in three White, Feminist choral groups, including my own. My process for selecting the other two choirs is described later in this chapter. In addition, I felt it would be critical to include in the study one exceptional Feminist choir, a group whose membership is as racially integrated as its repertoire. Though musicians in typical Feminist choirs are often heard to say that we wish we could “attract more Women of Color” to our organizations, there is one group in particular – MUSE: Cincinnati's Women's Choir – that has both said this and achieved it. I was interested to learn how the women of MUSE have accomplished this and what role their performance of Black styles has played in their success.

There were other compelling reasons for including the voice of MUSE's director, Catherine Roma, in the study. Dr. Roma is one of the founding mothers of the Womyn's choral movement. The depth of her perspective on its history and of her involvement in its present shape are unsurpassed. In particular, she has had social and working relationships with women from every other ensemble included in this study. Roma's leadership, creativity, and tireless networking have made MUSE one of the most vital organizations in the movement. Because of the high profile she and MUSE enjoy, the concerts, recordings, and events they produce have a strong influence on the repertoires and philosophies of choirs nationwide.

Locating myself in the national Womyn's music movement – as both the author of this study and the director of one of the ensembles examined – requires a summary of my family and educational backgrounds.

### **Author's Background**

I began studying music at age five when my parents bought me a piano and commenced paying for lessons, which I would continue for fifteen years. I picked up the trumpet in grade school, and in middle school I began guitar and drums, as well as choral singing. These other things I did “for fun,” while the focus of my serious study was always the piano and its literature. At age twelve I began attending a fine arts camp every summer, where I took not only piano lessons but also classes in aural skills, music

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<sup>4</sup> Some other, more colorful terms I have heard are *cultural tourism* and *cultural vampirism*.

theory, music history, piano literature, and the works of specific composers, all in the European art – or “classical” – tradition. This was my world, the only social environment apart from my family where I felt I belonged. When I was fourteen I began lessons with Annie Sherter, a world-class pianist from France who happened to have moved to our Midwestern town. I studied with her until leaving for college, and though I underwent nine more years of applied music study at university, I credit her alone for awakening my comprehension of musical language and for the extent of my passionate involvement with it.

I began college at the University of Illinois with a major in Piano Performance. By the middle of my junior year, I had come to terms with the unsuitability of my nature to the enforced solitude of the career pianist. I transferred into the Music Education curriculum with choral music as my emphasis. Since that decision, I have completed three degrees in choral conducting. My history of regular employment as a choral director to date has included two years of service in public schools, two years as an adjunct faculty member at one college and one university, and nine years as the founding director of a community chorus of women’s voices.

My musical practice has extended into styles untouched by my formal education, which eclecticism I ascribe to my family history. My mother was born into an English-speaking home of third- and fourth-generation Irish and German Americans. However, the overriding cultural influence on my childhood came from my paternal relatives. My father was born in Germany on the North Sea. After World War II, he immigrated with his family to Venezuela. By the time the family had immigrated for a second time, to the Midwestern United States, both my father’s sisters had lived in Spain for extended periods. My early linguistic environment was characterized by a constant switching among German, Spanish, and English. Banter in German often included the opposition of High and Low German; Spanish might be either Castilian or Venezuelan. While I was still a child, the older of my aunts moved to El Salvador, Venezuela, Guatemala, and back to the United States again, and my grandparents spent three years in Haiti. Whether I was visiting these family members in other countries or whether we were gathered in the United States, I was always surrounded by the artwork, cuisine, customs, speech, and music of the many places the Boergers had lived. It is a family trait – born of adaptive survival behaviors – to apprehend quickly the characteristic speech sounds, tastes, and other behaviors of the people with whom we come in contact.

For me to attend to expressive nuance in these several languages as a small child was to practice, in part, a kind of musical listening. And in the background of this polyglot conversation, I was as likely to hear *merengue* as I was Bach fugues, *cante jondo*, jazz trios, polkas, or the drums that communicated all night across the mountains above Port-au-Prince. I grew up with a need to hear and play music of many historical and geographical styles. More significantly, I grew up taking it for granted that it was possible and normal to learn to make someone else’s sounds.

As a music professional, I have worked in the following capacities: as a classical pianist, chorister, soprano soloist, composer, and conductor; as a folk guitarist and vocalist; as a hand percussionist in traditional African and Diaspora styles; and as a teacher and coach of vocal ensemble styles from various

folkloric traditions. Within the general context of my musical education and experience, a few salient events compelled me toward an artistic practice that eventually demanded answers to the questions asked in this study.

### **Chronology of Events Inspiring the Study**

#### August, 1985: from rural Minnesota through Minneapolis to Urbana, Illinois

*I am twenty years old and on summer break from university. I have worked since June for a small college in a language- and cultural-immersion program serving youth from all over the country. I have been teaching conversational Spanish and the singing of songs from various Spanish-speaking countries. Four days before my contract is up, I am suddenly and secretly removed from the campus and put on a Greyhound bus for having refused to closet myself in a conversation two days earlier. I realize that a friend I had loved and trusted has turned me in. Two days later I learn in a phone conversation with another colleague that, in an intentional lie calculated to justify my expulsion to the rest of the staff, the dean has deliberately insinuated that I have molested a female student. I think that nothing worse will ever happen to me until a week later, when representatives of the college take it upon themselves to inform my parents that their daughter is a Lesbian. So begins our years-long family struggle toward loving acceptance and mutual enjoyment of one another in light of this new idea of who I am. It is horrendous for all of us.*

#### Spring semester, 1986: Junior High Music Methods Class, University of Illinois School of Music

*This is the year that I have become a high-profile Lesbian activist. I have been fighting to change the university's policies so that what I suffered the previous summer cannot legally be inflicted on anyone here. My professor has just hollered profanity at me at the top of her lungs to stop me from finishing a response she had called on me to give. I challenge her behavior. Her excuse is that she was protecting the rest of the class from what she could tell was about to be one of my "Women's Libber" attitudes. Her assumption about what I had been about to say is dead wrong, but that is beside the point, so I don't stoop to defend the content of my intended response. I run out of the classroom crying in rage and humiliation. My classmates, with one or two exceptions, have never been friendly to me; surely no one will stand by me in this.*

#### Fall semester, 1988: University of Illinois School of Music

*For the third time in my life as a choral musician, I am being asked to perform "The Neighbor's Chorus," an English translation of a number from Jacques Offenbach's operetta La Jolie Parfumeuse. The graduate student preparing this recital has chosen this piece of comic bravura as her big finale. In it, a woman has flummoxed a man's plans for sexual access to her on a date. The man's neighbors are grilling and taunting him on the morning after, and they want to know: "Did you beat her, shake her, choke her till you made her pout? Did you beat her and choke her and knock her all about?" Since the last time I have*

*been asked to sing this, I have worked in a domestic-violence shelter. I can no longer get the words past my lips. No one else seems to have any problem with it. I tell the conductor respectfully why I must decline to sing the piece and that she will have to excuse me from it or lose me for the whole recital. An agreement is worked out whereby I may leave the stage before the finale. This solves my immediate problem with the repertoire, but it only exacerbates my greater problem of feeling alienated in every place where I endeavor to practice my art.*

*Any day in the 1989-1990 school year: Kenosha, Wisconsin*

*I am fresh out of college, directing four choirs in a junior high school. I have deliberately taken a job in one of the two states in the country where it is illegal – at least on paper – to fire me for being a Dyke. Still, every day I practice my art through the terror that today they will put me on a Greyhound bus and send me somewhere.*

*October, 1989: a choir rehearsal somewhere in Milwaukee County, Wisconsin*

*There seems to be no visible Feminist or Queer community in Kenosha.<sup>5</sup> It has felt like a blessed accident to find Kate, a Radical Dyke<sup>6</sup> Feminist, living just a few miles away. Tonight she has invited me to come to Milwaukee with her to sit in on her rehearsal with the Mukwonago Feminist Singers and Eaters, a chorus of women with a penchant for potlucking together at least as avidly as they rehearse. I am astonished at the idea of a chorus that calls itself Feminist and is full of open Lesbians. The repertoire is another revelation: a ballad about two women growing old together, a miners' union song from Appalachia, and Sweet Honey In The Rock's "Cryin' for Freedom" about Steven Biko and the struggle against South African Apartheid. Despite the fact that the director has no clue about how to make this bunch sound like a chorus, something thrilling is going on here.*

*September, 1990: Urbana, Illinois*

*I have quit my job in Wisconsin to be back in Urbana full-time with my partner and our kids. We have just returned from the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. I am hungry for more Womyn's culture in my town, and I figure that if the director from Mukwonago could do it, I certainly can. I create the ensemble that is to become AMASONG: Champaign-Urbana's Premier Lesbian/Feminist Chorus. Among the music I prepare for us to sing is a secular piece from the German Renaissance re-scored for treble voices, a round from Appalachia, and a medley of songs about freedom by three African-American Lesbians who are popular on the Womyn's music circuit.*

<sup>5</sup> I avoid using the male-gendered *Gay* as a catch-all in the same way that I refuse to use *man* as representative of humanity. *Queer* is my catch-all term of choice because it is open to constant expansion in its definition, is less cumbersome than the now-standard but ever-lengthening list *Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgendered*, and connotes the threat we present to the established order as long as we resist assimilationist politics and insist on the wisdom afforded us by our outsider status.

<sup>6</sup> When Lesbians use the word "Dyke," we are proudly claiming a strong word, one with etymological connections to the name of a Greek goddess of justice (Grahn 1984) as well as to the name of a structure that withstands tremendous pressure. It is a way that we signify being absolutely unapologetic about loving women. Heterosexuals, however, have typically wielded the word as an obscenity, and those who do not wish to give offense are therefore cautioned against using it outside of trusted bonds with Lesbians who refer to ourselves this way.

July, 1993: Cincinnati, Ohio: the Seventh National Women's Choral Festival

*I am sitting in the audience as a small ensemble of White Lesbians from a city in Wisconsin takes the stage. They open their set with a melody I recognize, though they have re-texted it in a way that alters the content and the affect entirely. What was once "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" has become "Sing Low, Sweet Second Altos" in an uptempo and frivolous ditty about the foibles of their chorus. I feel my face reddening with embarrassment: I am ashamed to be associated with choristers who would trade the original song's deep, feelingful singing in exchange for something so trivial and unmusical. Our set is next on the program, and I look forward to showing the house that "amateur" doesn't have to mean "empty."*

*Later that day it is brought to everyone's attention that this group's performance – as well as the previous night's rendering by another White chorus of "Ezekiel Saw de Wheel" delivered with Las-Vegas-revue-style "choralography" – has seriously offended the Black women in attendance. Now I understand at least why Melanie DeMore had found it so important to come backstage after our performance to communicate to me her approval.*

September, 1996: Champaign, Illinois

*Tonight is the opening in the Krannert Art Museum of an exhibit of works by African-American artists. AMASONG has been invited to present our collaboration with Zimbabwean dancer Patience Mudeka, specialist in Zimbabwean music Tom Turino, and an intergenerational/interracial group of community dancers from the White Street Arts Center. Patience, newly immigrated to Urbana from Harare, Zimbabwe, has spent the summer teaching all of us the rural songs and dances of her native land. The project has been thrilling for everyone involved, and we have already given several performances around town in the last month. On this night we do an especially good job, and we are feeling proud and happy.*

*After the show, one of the Board members of AMASONG reports that at least one African-American woman in the audience was outraged at seeing "all these White women singing African music."*

October, 1996: Portland, Oregon

*The Portland Lesbian Chorus has agreed to host the Eighth National Women's Choral Festival and has scheduled a weekend planning meeting, to which several choirs have sent delegates. Conductors have been asked to submit scores and tapes of selections to be considered for the festival's final event, a massed performance involving all attendees. AMASONG's delegate has brought my repertoire submission, an arrangement I have made for AMASONG of "Keep Your Lamps," a Negro Spiritual.*

*The planning committee sits down for Round One of the mass-chorus repertoire-selection process. When my piece comes up, everyone listens admiringly to the recording and agrees that the music is simply wonderful. Then one (White) woman firmly pronounces the piece unacceptable because it is a Negro*

*Spiritual that has been arranged by a White woman. Several other vociferous (White) women endorse this position aloud, and all the other (White) women silently concur.*

*Of the winning selections, the ones that are Black-sounding have been created by Black women, and the ones that are White-sounding have been created by White women. However, not all of the music is good.*

November, 1997; Presque Isle, Michigan

*I'm on holiday, relaxing on my parents' sofa. For some reason, I become conscious for the first time of the fact that of the twenty selections on AMASONG's newly released CD, six of them – almost a third – originated in the voices of Black people, whether from Africa, the Caribbean, or the United States. I realize that we have never given a concert without including music in Black styles. It occurs to me simultaneously that these things could typically be said of many Feminist choirs but seldom of any other kind of White choir that I can think of. I ask myself why I program this way, what this means, and how the music gets to me in the first place. As I trace my favorite Black songs backward to where I first heard them, my memory's eye regards the faces of the members of MUSE, Mukwonago Feminist Singers and Eaters, Sweet Honey In The Rock, Hersong, Urban Bush Women, Anna Crusis, Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir, Calliope... all groups of women, singing.*

### **Research Design and Methods**

My original research for this project consists of taped interviews with twenty-eight women in seven cities conducted over the course of fifteen months. The processes by which I was eventually able to interest musicians in speaking to me differed from ensemble to ensemble. Before I could feel confident that I had devised a study that was worth other women's time, I made a trip to Cincinnati to seek Catherine Roma's impressions and advice. I knew that I could trust her endorsement, and I also knew that without it, I would be unable to complete the study in a meaningful way. Her judgment that the study was not merely valid but even "necessary" secured her and MUSE's participation in it, as well as her willingness to speak on my behalf to some of her friends and collaborators in Sweet Honey In The Rock and Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir. At the time, I felt heavily dependent on this kind of endorsement in approaching the members of these two professional groups.

### Involving the Professional Ensembles

#### *Urban Bush Women*

With the exception of my own ensemble, the group whose participation was the most natural for me to secure was Urban Bush Women (UBW). My lover of the last three years is a long-time performer with the company and now serves concurrently as its rehearsal director. Because much of the time that we can have together is spent when I join her on tour, I have had a social relationship with the company since she and I began seeing each other in 1997. Even more significantly, I have been in the professional employ

of Urban Bush Women over the last two summers. With the group's artistic director having seen my dissertation proposal and given me permission to include UBW in the study, I was able to interest company members in being interviewed without first revealing the purpose of my study.

Urban Bush Women, a seven-member performing ensemble based in New York City, was founded by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, a native of Kansas City, Missouri. After earning degrees in dance from the University of Missouri and Florida State University, Zollar went to Harlem in 1980 to study with Dianne McIntyre, artistic director of Sounds in Motion (Aduonum 1999, 64, 68, 70). Four years later, she created Urban Bush Women as a primarily dance-based performance company. As her artistic vision expanded to involve more vocal and dramatic work than is typically featured in dance performance, she began auditioning potential company members for their singing and acting abilities in addition to their movement skills. With the company's eventual stability and growth, Zollar was able to develop a variety of community-engagement programs designed to extend the impact of her artistic work further beyond the concert stage. One of these programs, the Community Sing, is the focus of my interviews with the company members.

Urban Bush Women's current mission statement reads as follows:

Urban Bush Women is an ensemble of artists, educators, organizers, and administrators dedicated to exploring culture as an expression of social complexities and a catalyst for social change. Founded in 1984 to realize the vision of Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Urban Bush Women creates powerful artistic works that celebrate the struggle, transformation and survival of the human spirit. The company's aesthetic is formed through a creative process synthesizing the history, culture and spiritual traditions of African Americans and the African Diaspora with contemporary dance and music. Dedicated to encouraging cultural activity as an inherent part of community life, UBW also engages in extensive community based programming, collaborating with community members to identify cultural influences and to shape communal self-expression through expertise in contemporary artistic practice. (UBW 1999)

This statement articulates an unapologetic definition of artmaking as connected to cultural identity and history and defines the company's politics as one of active engagement with – rather than withdrawal from – the daily lives of people in the communities from which its members come and which it serves.

The most explicit and holistic enactment of UBW's philosophy occurs during its month-long summer institute, *A New Dancer for A New Society*, held on the Florida State University Campus in Tallahassee. As described by UBW, "The Urban Bush Women/Florida State University Summer Dance Institute is an intensive training program in dance and community engagement for artists with leadership potential interested in developing a community focus in their art-making." It is at "the Institute" where, two years running, I have spent five weeks in UBW's employ as a guest faculty artist.

The work of the Institute is carried out within two main spheres of activity. The first sphere involves guiding students who come from all over the United States and some foreign countries – usually African and Diaspora nations – to attend the Institute. These attendees are referred to as "Participants" of the Institute. Participants take morning and midday classes in modern dance and African or Diaspora

dance, theater techniques, and ensemble singing. The afternoon curriculum involves lectures, workshops, and seminars on philosophies of and techniques for community engagement and organizing. One weekend is occupied by a visit from The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, a New-Orleans-based organization that provides training in the analysis of institutional racism. Evenings are devoted to attending guest lectures, performances, or optional Community Classes.

The evening Community Class series is only one of several components designed for the Institute's second sphere of activity: engagement with the residents of Tallahassee. These classes – for example, Afro-Cuban dance, West-African drumming, or *capoeira*<sup>7</sup> – are taught by UBW members or guest faculty of the Institute and are free and open to the public. Many Participants attend these events to experience the success of UBW's engagement in the local community, since the bulk of the Institute's other community work is carried out during the day while most Participants are in class. Throughout each day, current and former UBW members, Participant alumni, and guest artists are deployed to various sites to work with groups in schools, public housing developments, drug rehabilitation programs, nursing homes, amateur performing academies, churches, youth support organizations, and the like. Encounters between the Institute and local groups can consist of one meeting, or they can recur throughout the course of a long-term project.

The Participants' course of study and the panoply of Community Workshops coalesce toward the end of the Institute in the Community Arts Festival. The Participants are instrumental in the planning and execution of the Festival, which serves as the practical application of the principles and skills they have been studying. The Festival begins with a ceremony at dawn on a Saturday and occupies the better part of twenty-four hours, taking place in a variety of local venues. Festival performances and activities feature a range of artistic media and levels of expertise, involving people of many races, generations, and other backgrounds. The art that is made and the manner in which it is presented draws attention to contemporary challenges facing the community and points the way toward increased community health through collective work and expression.

My work at the Institute has involved me in both the Participant and Community spheres. This past summer, my partner and I co-taught a daily class for Participants called "Community-Building Through Voice." In this class we led Participants through a variety of exercises to enhance their breathing, listening, and vocalizing skills. Then we coached the Participants in applying those skills to various ensemble experiences ranging from the purely unstructured and improvisational to the rehearsed and controlled. Whenever class activities required the use of pre-existing song material, we used music in traditional Black styles. We selected the various experiences for the unique sonic and psychic rewards that each could yield. We helped the group to see that each experience would be most successful when all singers paid attention to the different kinds of involvement and cooperation with one another that any moment demanded. The larger lesson we were called to teach was that success in the ensemble singing

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<sup>7</sup> An Afro-Brazilian martial art developed by slaves, *capoeira* is "played" to musical accompaniment by *birembau* (musical bow), drum, tambourine, singing, and hand-clapping. By softening their parries into more dancelike movements at a signal from the *birembau*, *capoeiristas* disguised from approaching slave-owners the fact that they were practicing for self-liberation.



experience tangibly enhances singers' personal concern for and enjoyment of one another, making their cooperation in non-singing endeavors more fruitful.

During the past two summers, my partner and I co-directed evening rehearsals of the Institute Community Choir, a group open to anyone in the greater Tallahassee area. Our job was to prepare a small repertoire of songs in Black oral traditions that would be featured at different events of the Community Arts Festival, being used as ceremonial music, accompaniment to dance pieces, or a showcase of the choir's performance for its own sake.

When I was not teaching class or directing rehearsal, I was actively attending most other Institute events, whether sitting in to drum for dance classes, participating in workshop discussions, or taking notes at guest lectures. The Institute is most commonly experienced as a round-the-clock cultural, political, and artistic immersion experience with people from many walks of life. The Participant application process is inclusive with regard to characteristics such as race, sex, class, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, and (adult) age, and the Institute is remarkable in forging cooperation and understanding among people who in any other context would never expect to get along. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the Institute is uniquely the conception and creation of African-American women, and the majority of its faculty and Participants are women of African ancestry. Furthermore, the Tallahassee community presence at the open events is predominantly Black, and most of the workshops targeting specific community organizations serve groups that are predominantly or exclusively Black.

Certainly, the nature and extent of my contact with UBW sets them apart from all other groups in this study but my own. In particular, having participated with UBW in this experiment we call "the Institute," I have been uniquely situated to observe company members' approaches to working in Black art forms in a context that involves sharing them with White people. It was during our residency for the 1998 Institute that I interviewed one former and six current company members for this study. Most of the interviews were squeezed in between classes at a time when all of us were immersed in the practical application of the ideas that lay behind my questions. This experience in a sort of laboratory of my own hypotheses and confusions has been invaluable in helping me to arrive at my own analysis in the face of competing opinions.

#### *Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir*

Linda Tillery and The Cultural Heritage Choir (CHC), based in Oakland, California, is a five-woman, *a cappella* ensemble primarily dedicated to the performance of African-American oral-tradition music. Formed in the early 1990s, CHC represents only the latest successful project in Tillery's long career as a performing and recording artist who has always had, in her words, "one foot in mainstream music and one foot in women's music (Morris 1999, 109)." In the former realm, Tillery has led her own bands, as well as singing with musicians as widely known as Bobby McFerrin, Kenny Loggins, and Carlos Santana (Patino 1998). Tillery has nearly fifty recordings to her credit as a singer, instrumentalist, and producer (Post 1995).

My direct connection to Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir was through Melanie DeMore, the artist who had come backstage to congratulate my work at the National Women's Choral Festival in 1993. Before joining CHC, DeMore was – among other things – a solo performer on the Womyn's circuit and the director of VOICES, a Womyn's chorus in San Francisco. Because she and I had done some similar work, and because she was present at the events in 1993 that ultimately catalyzed this study, I was reasonably confident that she would be willing to help me. I sent letters describing the project to both her and Tillery. As added support, Catherine Roma and another mutual friend both spoke to Tillery about me and the project. Ultimately, the only word I heard from Tillery, via the second friend, was that the project looked fine, but that she had no time to spend on it. I felt satisfied that she had at least been informed of my intentions by the time I heard back from Melanie DeMore, who was indeed interested in the study and willing to participate.

The remaining challenge was identifying a date and a location when DeMore and I could meet. It happened that CHC was in the middle of a year of heavy international touring with a schedule so rigorous that one member's health had actually been seriously compromised. Our eventual meeting, in August of 1998, was finally enabled by circumstances of remarkable coincidence. It was DeMore who – knowing of my relationship to one of the dancers in Urban Bush Women – noticed that CHC and UBW had been scheduled for overlapping residencies at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in Lee, Massachusetts. I had made plans to join UBW at Jacob's Pillow for purely personal reasons, and when DeMore asked me whether I would be there, I was astounded. She explained that CHC was involved in a collaboration with Zaccho Dance, whose artistic director was creating a site-specific work about the Underground Railroad for Jacob's Pillow.

I went to Jacob's Pillow with hopes of speaking to other CHC members in addition to DeMore. My girlfriend and I had arranged to extend our stay beyond UBW's departure so that I could spend several days collecting data. As it happened, the collaboration between CHC and Zaccho Dance demanded the Choir's involvement in unexpectedly long and grueling workdays right up until the opening of the piece. With the Choir members – especially Tillery – so chronically overtaxed, it was obvious that in meeting with me, DeMore was extending herself as a personal favor. Both of us sensed that the others – lacking her connection to me and to the particular history that inspired this project – would find nothing to motivate them to talk with me under the strenuous circumstances and that it would be an imposition even to ask.

Having just come from the Institute, where my exceptional situation had enabled me to interview so many members of UBW, I was disappointed that the five-member CHC would be represented in the study by only one voice. It is the case, however, that most groups in the study are represented by one voice for every five, ten, or fifteen members. Because the women of CHC are relative peers in age and professional background, I felt that DeMore was a perfectly suitable spokeswoman for the ensemble. It should be pointed out that Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir is the only group in the study that goes unrepresented by the voice of its director. To supplement my interview with DeMore, I was able to attend a lecture-demonstration at the Festival: *"Singing the Gospel: A Conversation with Linda Tillery."*

The careful notes I took, along with my collection of interviews of Tillery by other scholars, include many of her insights and opinions that are relevant to this study.

### *Sweet Honey In The Rock*

The professional vocal ensemble with the highest profile among singers in the Feminist choral movement is Sweet Honey In The Rock. Almost every interviewee from the amateur groups mentioned them unprompted. Most choristers had seen Sweet Honey perform at least once, and most had sung music from Sweet Honey's repertoire. I encountered a near-universal love of the group's music, reverence for their virtuosity, and appreciation for the messages attributed to their existence and performance. Sweet Honey In The Rock is a six-member *a cappella* ensemble of African-American women formed in 1973 and based in Washington, D.C. Their repertoire is a mixture of traditional songs from Africa and the Diaspora and original compositions rooted in traditional Black styles. With an extensive discography and over two decades of performing at churches, colleges, political rallies, and Womyn's, folk, and jazz festivals all over the nation and abroad, Sweet Honey has reached the most vast and diverse audience of all the groups included in this study.

Given Sweet Honey's eminence, I was uncertain of my ability to interest members in being interviewed. When I was still designing the project, I had hopes of speaking to all members of the group and even observing a rehearsal. It later became clear that neither of these hopes would be realized, but I knew it was critical that I manage to interview at least two particular Sweet Honey women: Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon and Dr. Ysaye Maria Barnwell.

Ysaye Barnwell is one of Sweet Honey's most prolific composers. She holds degrees in speech pathology and public health, but her musical study and experience have been life-long, beginning with seventeen years of violin study under her father.<sup>8</sup> Among her musical projects independent of Sweet Honey is a set of instructional recordings with a companion booklet entitled *Singing in the African American Tradition: Choral and Congregational Vocal Music*. This set teaches several voice parts to a collection of traditional songs in styles ranging from Yoruba chant<sup>9</sup> to gospel quartet. The booklet provides song texts, elaborates on each style's historical context, and lists additional resources. Regarded together with singing workshops Barnwell gives nationwide, this project bespeaks her personal commitment to the maintenance and dissemination of Black oral-music traditions.

Barnwell had been a guest artist at the National Women's Choral Festival in 1993, and she was quite public in her distress over the manner in which she had seen some White groups use Black music. Therefore, as was the case when I wrote to Melanie DeMore, I felt hopeful that she would have some personal interest in supporting a project aimed at addressing these particular issues. Furthermore, by the time I sent Barnwell my letter, Catherine Roma had already endorsed my project to her. I was also

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<sup>8</sup> Ysaye Barnwell, interview by the author, tape recording, Washington, D.C., 26 April 1999.

<sup>9</sup> An animistic religion indigenous to West Africa, particularly the region now known as Nigeria. Yoruba came to the Americas in the bodies of slaves and thrives today in many Diaspora communities under different names, including Candomblé and Macumba (Brazil), Santería (Cuba and Puerto Rico), and Voudun/Voodoo (Haiti/New Orleans).

emboldened by the sense that I was not a total stranger to her, as we had interacted – albeit briefly – on two occasions that I knew she would remember when I referred to them in my letter. When after several months I had not received a reply from her, I sent a second letter, explaining apologetically that I was running out of time and that if she had already decided against participating in the study, I hoped she would let me know so that I could adjust my plans. Three days later, Barnwell phoned, graciously indicating her agreement to be interviewed.

The musician whose participation I was the most nervous about securing was also the single most important woman in the sample. The more research I carried out, the more I found that Bernice Johnson Reagon's work had laid the foundation upon which all the other significant endeavors and ideas represented in this study stand. Reagon is the founder of Sweet Honey In The Rock and the composer of much of their most-loved repertoire. She is also a prominent historian, in which capacity she serves both the Smithsonian Institute and American University. Reagon was an activist in the Civil Rights Movement, during which time she – as a member of the Freedom Singers – experienced and promulgated the power of African-American song to enact solidarity and engender courage in the face of danger. All of her song performance, teaching, collection, and composition in Sweet Honey and several other notable projects can be seen as her continued response to the lessons of those experiences. Reagon is in high demand as a scholar and musician. One gets the sense from her that she has a need to place unequivocal limits on the time and energy she will spare. I was dubious that approaching her as a total stranger would avail me at all, but none of our many mutual friends was willing to intercede for me.

To my surprise and gratitude, my letter to Dr. Reagon elicited a prompt answer via e-mail in which she agreed to be interviewed. Through a series of e-mails, we put our schedules in agreement for a one-hour visit in her office at American University on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 1999. She also used our e-mail connection to specify the topics she would and would not be willing to discuss. I was extremely fortunate in that Dr. Barnwell was able to see me on that same day, enabling me to carry out both interviews during the same trip. My concern that this project would be incomplete without them proved to have been well founded. My fifty minutes with Dr. Reagon and my two-and-a-half hours with Dr. Barnwell yielded some of the most valuable, original, and incisive responses in this study.

#### Selecting and Involving the Amateur Choirs

##### *AMASONG*

The first amateur, Feminist choral ensemble I examined was my own, which is AMASONG: Champaign-Urbana's Premier Lesbian/Feminist Chorus. I founded AMASONG in the fall of 1990 by putting handwritten, photocopied fliers up around the University of Illinois campus and various public spaces in the downtown areas of Urbana and Champaign. The posters announced: "Creative Womyn Take Note!" and invited any interested woman who could carry a tune in a bucket to help form this new ensemble. Reinforcing the implicit message of the word *Womyn*, I had drawn various configurations of women's symbols all over the paper in a way that would be inviting to Lesbians and repugnant to any other

kind of woman who could not enjoy open Lesbian company. The poster announced a date and time for the first rehearsal; for the group's protection, I released the location only to interested women who called my home number as posted.

From the first night, it was clear that there was enough local interest a chorus of this kind to make it happen. Though we started small, with about sixteen members and an intimate audience, we were to grow steadily throughout the decade. By the end of our ninth year, I had capped membership at sixty, we had become a cherished local institution with a large and diverse audience, we had performed at several regional and national venues, our first compact disc recording had won the 1998 Gay and Lesbian American Music Award for Best Choral Group, and our second recording (which went on to win two GLAMAs, including Best Choral Group) was in the works. In June of 1999 I met my last challenge as AMASONG's director by taking the group on a performing tour of the Czech Republic. Later that month we auditioned and hired my replacement, and I turned the bulk of my attention to writing this dissertation. It was in September of 1999 that I interviewed four AMASONG members for the study.

I selected the members so as to include differences in sexual orientation, length of time in the chorus, musical background, and race. The only way for me to include a non-White perspective in the study was to interview the sole Woman of Color currently in the group. Fortunately, she was good-natured about her inevitable and impossible position as token spokeswoman for her race, and she was generous in letting me make an example of her. Another of my choices was motivated by that particular singer's long history of involvement in Womyn's music festival culture, an experience whose perspective I deemed particularly relevant. Selection of the other two members was fairly random; there were many women I could have chosen while still representing the other differences previously enumerated. I was careful not to approach women to whom I had already revealed the topic of my study in previous conversations. Finally, their selection was based as much on practicality as on anything else: they had extremely flexible schedules and lived in locations convenient to me. The youngest was in her late thirties, the oldest close to fifty. Finally, my study of AMASONG includes my own responses to the questions I asked the directors of the other choirs.

#### *Surveying the Womyn's Choral Network*

The process of choosing two other virtually-White and White-directed, Feminist choruses for the study was long and sporadic. I developed a survey instrument for distribution among Womyn's choral networks (Appendix A). I expected responses to confirm my impressions that most Womyn's choruses sang music in Black traditional styles and that most Womyn's choruses had few or no Black singers in them. I also expected that from among those choruses of whom the survey showed these things to be true, I would be able to choose two that were convenient for me to visit, whether in terms of their geographical proximity to me or each other, their directors' willingness to arrange visits and interviews, or both.

I determined that the most efficient way to distribute the survey instrument, and the one whose convenience guaranteed the highest rate of response, was to send it out on the Choruswomen listserv.

Choruswomen is the latest networking tool of the Feminist choral movement. The majority of its subscribers belong to ensembles in the Sister Singers network or to women's or mixed ensembles of the GALA (Gay and Lesbian Association of) Choruses, which organizations I discuss in Chapter Four. Also on the Choruswomen list are singers and conductors from a variety of other types of choruses who wish to be included in dialogue about choral music from a Feminist perspective. Choral composers, publishers, and more popularly-oriented songwriters who would like to see their works performed by women's choruses have subscribed to the list to aid in dissemination of their works and to facilitate other kinds of musical collaborations. The list is for women only.

I was surprised by how few responses came back after the first solicitation. At two intervals of six to eight weeks I reissued my plea, which efforts elicited a few more responses. At the same time, I was engaged in the frustration of a year-long, vain attempt to get Catherine Roma to commit to a date when I could visit MUSE. By August of 1999 I was clearly running out of time. I knew I could no longer wait for other directors to arrange time in their busy lives to contribute to my research or actively coordinate visits from me. I set aside three weeks in September for the collection of the rest of my data. I called Roma and announced that I would be getting into my car and simply arriving; she could tell me which particular days worked best for her. This strategy was immediately effective, and I set out to apply it to two groups in the survey sample whose geographical locations would allow me to include them in the same trip with the MUSE visit.

### *Sistrum*

I planned to begin this final research trip with Sistrum: Lansing's Women's Chorus. Sistrum was founded in 1986 by Rachel Alexander. I had met Alexander in 1993 at the National Women's Choral Festival, and we had had several visits since then at regional Feminist choral gatherings, at regional and national conventions of the American Choral Directors Association, and at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, where she is the piano technician and head carpenter. Though I did not reveal the goals of my study to Alexander, she was very willing to help by being interviewed, setting up other interviews, and inviting me to stay in her apartment. I did tell her as vaguely as possible that variety among the respondents was important, most especially with regard to sexuality and race. Of the three interviews she was able to set up for me, one was with a young, White Lesbian, one was with a middle-aged, White, Heterosexual woman, and one – as was the case with AMASONG – was with Sistrum's only Woman of Color, an African-American Lesbian. Sistrum was the first stop on my research trip, so it was only later that I was able to appreciate the uniqueness of this collection of individuals, who presented the three most widely differing perceptions of their chorus's work that I was to encounter within any single ensemble.

### *MUSE*

From Lansing I drove to Cincinnati for the long-awaited MUSE visit, which began at the group's weekly rehearsal. During the first half of the rehearsal, I interviewed Lois Shegog, who is MUSE's

Associate Director and an African American. During the break in the rehearsal, Roma introduced me to several other women who represented a sample appropriate to what she knew were my goals. Though no one else knew the subject of the dissertation, all of these women were most willing to help, and we arranged interviews to take place throughout the next three days of my stay. The sample included an African-American couple, a White Lesbian, and a White Heterosexual woman. All of these women, including Roma and Shegog, were around the age of fifty. All of them exhibited a profound sense of pride in and loyalty to MUSE, and the extent of agreement among them about what MUSE does was evidence of the kind of group discussion and "process" to which Roma has been committed since the choir's inception in 1983. Because of the uniqueness and prominence of this group's musical and political successes, I devote a separate chapter to a case study of MUSE.

### *Anna Crusis*

My plan had been to drive farther east after my stay in Cincinnati. I had decided to place Philadelphia's Anna Crusis<sup>10</sup> alongside AMASONG and Sistrum in my sample of virtually-White, amateur, Womyn's choruses. Setting up a research visit with "Anna" proved more complicated than I could have anticipated, and the process, which I had begun at home and continued from Lansing, was still not completed by the time I arrived in Cincinnati.

To initiate the process, I e-mailed Anna's contact person on the Choruswomen list, who had completed my survey months earlier. I told her that based on the results of the survey, I had identified Anna Crusis as one of the groups I wished to study. I asked her to put me in contact with Jane Hulting, the group's director, so that I might ask Hulting's permission to include the group in the project. The chorus member responded emphatically that it was inappropriate to place that decision in Hulting's hands and asked me to pursue it with the Board of Directors, putting me in contact with one of them.<sup>11</sup> This Board member was very willing to help, but she felt it was her responsibility to share copies of my proposal with the rest of the Board and put the decision up to a vote. Two undercurrents in the organizational life of Anna Crusis were made very clear through my exchanges with both these women. The first one was that the nature and distribution of power appropriate to a Feminist group were under contestation. The second one – which the Board member cited as the source of her caution – was that recent, heavy demands on the singers' time, coupled with a fresh history of political conflicts that had been only barely managed, had left the group vulnerable to fracture at the introduction of one more demand or controversy. When she volunteered that race had been at the center of some of these conflicts, I felt all the more determined to get Anna into my study at any cost.

The Board's process of coming to agreement and then setting up interviews with individual chorus members was finally completed on the very day that I left Cincinnati for Philadelphia. In the end, I was

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<sup>10</sup> *Anna Crusis* is a play on the musical term *anacrusis*, which refers to a preparatory beat that propels the music to a sense of arrival or emphasis on the following beat.

<sup>11</sup> According to the singer, Hulting operated too often as though Anna were "her chorus," forgetting that she was there "to serve the community and not the other way around."

able to speak with Hulting and three singers, none of whom had been told what the project entailed. All three singers were White Lesbians; two of them were what I would call Liberal, while the third was a self-described Radical Dyke Feminist. Hulting is Heterosexually married. The women ranged in age from their mid-thirties to about fifty. I was surprised to learn that the two older members had been in Anna many years before, when the group was still under the direction of its founder, the pioneering Catherine Roma. Roma had created Anna Crusis in 1975 and directed it until relocating to Cincinnati in 1983. Since her departure, Anna has undergone a series of changes, as is to be expected of any group over time and across a shift in leadership. There is a smaller continuous core of singers in Anna than in the other amateur groups in the study, which is probably both the result and the cause of what long-term members point to as Anna's gradual shift in identity. In many ways, this shifting is a microcosmic reflection of larger trends in the mainstream Feminist and Lesbian cultural movements.

### Interview Structure

The twenty-eight taped and transcribed interviews represent some forty-five hours of conversation. The typical interview lasted around ninety minutes, though some respondents who had little to say and others who were under serious time constraints spoke for less than an hour. Several conversations – most notably the Roma and Barnwell interviews – lasted longer than two hours. Most respondents had not been told the purpose of the study beforehand, but in every case I allowed the respondent to read my proposal after the interview and to tape any additional comments she had in light of that information. Because several respondents in various groups requested anonymity, I have chosen to use pseudonyms for all of the ensemble members of Urban Bush Women, AMASONG, Sistrum, MUSE, and Anna Crusis. All founders and directors, as well as prominent performers Melanie DeMore and Ysaye Barnwell, are identified by their real names.<sup>12</sup>

I had three sets of objectives that framed the direction of the interviews. One set was for the Black ensembles, one was for the White ensembles, and one was for MUSE (Appendices B, C, D). The sets shared a common shape. The first part of every typical interview was generally directed at revealing each woman's performance of traditional Black song as a projection – via the particular ensemble – of her idea of herself. In the middle of the interview I investigated the particular ensemble's relation to certain political and cultural trends and movements. The latter part of the interview challenged women to articulate their ideas about "proper" ways of singing oral-tradition music. Within this general scheme, there were some questions that I used with women from every ensemble and other questions that pertained only to the professional groups, only to the amateur groups, or only to MUSE.

My specific starting point with every respondent was to ask her to establish her identity. This gave me crucial information about the lenses through which she consciously perceives herself experiencing the world. The next step was to discover how she identifies her ensemble. In moving from the first

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<sup>12</sup> Except where otherwise credited, all quotes attributed to these women come directly from our interviews. All interviewees retain ownership of their words.



question to the second, each woman revealed explicitly the connections she makes between who she sees herself to be and the work of the performing group to which she belongs.

Conversations about the significance and value of each ensemble's work centered on repertoire. I asked the women in the professional ensembles directly about what the body of Black, oral-tradition music means to them. In speaking with members of the amateur groups, I began by asking them generally about all styles in their repertoires; each individual's particular responses determined the route by which we arrived at discussing Black song. I queried all respondents about how their groups acquire traditional Black repertoire, what their hopes and concerns are in performing it, and how singing it makes them feel.

Placing the amateur/White groups and the professional/Black groups in a wider political and cultural context necessarily required two different sets of questions. I was aware at the outset of the general history of Feminism and Womyn's music that had contributed directly to the creation of each Feminist choir, but I was interested to learn about individual members' experiences with these movements. My hypothesis was that the extent of White women's contact with cultural Feminism, especially at Womyn's music festivals, would have predictable effects on their ideas about Whiteness, racism, and singing Black music. This proved true, most resoundingly so in the "control" case of the middle-aged, Heterosexual woman who had had no exposure to cultural Feminism before having joined Sistrum only months earlier. Within these discussions about cultural Feminism, the other White women and I discussed their encounters with Black women artists, their work, and their ideas. Until only recently in my own experience, it was only within cultural Feminism that I had had any such contact, and I found that other White women, too, credit cultural Feminism as the only racially desegregated zone in their lives. When I was interviewing the sole Black members of these amateur groups, we discussed their experiences of being so heavily outnumbered in their choruses as well as in cultural Feminism as a whole.

I questioned the professionals in the Black ensembles about their histories with cultural Feminism. All acknowledged a debt to the producers of Womyn's events and to Lesbian and Feminist audiences. But in no case could the work of these ensembles be discussed as primarily the product and reproduction of Feminism. Respondents prioritized their inheritance of and contributions to political and cultural Black Liberation movements. That being the case, I was interested to hear these performers' responses to being claimed frequently by White Lesbians as icons of the Lesbian cultural movement. I also sought responses to my impression that the most important work in preserving and extending Black oral song traditions in the United States is being done by women.

MUSE is the amateur ensemble within which Feminism and Black Liberation converge most explicitly and extensively. While other Feminist choristers could only hypothesize about what achieving racial integration in a mostly-White and White-directed Womyn's group would entail, the MUSE women were able to speak to having created this reality. MUSE interviews were uniquely suffused with questions about the effects of this integration on individuals' lives within and outside the ensemble as well as on the ability of the ensemble to affect racial politics in its surrounding community.

Toward the end of each interview, I asked for opinions about ownership, borrowing, theft, and fair use of oral-tradition music. Every woman was asked to give personal definitions for the terms *cultural appropriation* and *authenticity* in music. One final question often remained to be asked specifically of the White respondents: “What is the music of *your* culture?” Most Black women had already answered this question spontaneously or implicitly by this point in the interview. I decided to include the question after a number of Black respondents had criticized a tendency among White people to be “ungrounded” in any ethnic traditions of “their own” and to view culture as something exotic that they couldn’t have unless they took it from People of Color. It was revealing that, while most Black women had swift and proud answers to the question, White women were stumped and unnerved by it, unless they had already concluded that White Americans have no culture that isn’t derivative and hybrid.

The results of all these hours of conversation exist in their most telling form on many hundreds of pages of transcription. Reducing the voices of twenty-eight women to a truncated and catalogued set of responses has felt more like a violation than an act of scholarship. At times, the most I have been able to do is to select choice excerpts that stand for common responses, present the rogue opinions that contradict the more usual answers, and attempt to interpret all of these in a way that will be useful for any reader seeking answers to the same complicated questions that inspired this project.

Before the results of the present investigation are considered, Chapter Two will place the study in the greater context of the politics of identity and the music of politics.

## CHAPTER II

### *SING TO THE UNIVERSE WHO WE ARE: IDENTITY, POLITICS, AND MUSIC*

*“When I sing...you are going to hear my political positions or my issues or the things I care about.”*

*– Bernice Johnson Reagon, founder of Sweet Honey In The Rock*

*“I needed a choir...where I could be all of me.”*

*– Rachel Alexander, founding director of Sistrum*

*“A lot of young African Americans, they're like: ‘That's old-people's music.’*

*But the thing is that without all that, they wouldn't be who they are.”*

*– Melanie DeMore of the Cultural Heritage Choir*

### **Introduction**

Each performing group in this study has some requirement for membership that is unrelated to skill. A person wishing to join AMASONG, Sistrum, MUSE, or Anna Crusis may sing anywhere from very well to somewhat poorly, but if that person is not female, that person may not belong to any of these choirs. With this explicit requirement come some implicit ones about what *kind* of female a member should be, and any one of the following will do: Feminist; Lesbian; comfortable being mistaken for a Feminist or a Lesbian; and – in the case of MUSE – non-White when the numbers of Women of Color are down, or anti-racist if one is White. To be a core performer with Urban Bush Women, Sweet Honey In The Rock, or Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir, an accomplished artist must be female and Black.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, while Urban Bush Women has had African, African-Caribbean, and African-American members, Sweet Honey is specifically for women who are African American.

In the previous chapter, I stated that “musicians in these ensembles tend to regard themselves as cultural workers of a sort. (so) their choices of repertoire and the conditions of its use and reproduction are at least in part consciously political.” The first part of this chapter concerns itself with the question of what it means to have a “cultural” identity. As a point of departure, it is basic to recognize that the perception of a “difference” of some kind as shared by a subset of individuals within a larger group is a precondition for the formation of a group identity. Given that the stratification of power in human societies is typically dependent on creating and manipulating differences, the experience of belonging to an identity group is shaped in important ways by the politics of its place in the larger society. The women in this study all see themselves as belonging to – or being in solidarity with – identity groups who have been historically

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*Sing to the Universe Who We Are* is the title of a 1998 recording by MUSE. This title is an adaptation of the text of the song “We Are.” from the cycle entitled *Lessons* by Ysaye M. Barnwell.

<sup>1</sup> UBW’s audition announcements and publicity literature stop short of stating these as specific requirements, though the company’s name and its self-description as grounded in African and Diaspora aesthetics suggest them strongly; one company member I interviewed was unsure that, theoretically, a non-Black woman who was nevertheless “grounded in some (other) kind of cultural tradition” would be beyond consideration, but in practice, all core performers in Urban Bush Women have been of African ancestry.

disenfranchised. Their choice of musical performance as, among other things, a political tactic reflects a pervasive belief: that music has the power to bolster or undermine specific political ideologies and orders. The second part of this chapter is a discussion of musical activism in the United States, historical and contemporary, that precede these ensembles and inform their practice.

### **Group Identity**

#### A Complicated Point of Departure

The first question put to each respondent in this study – “How do you identify yourself?” – elicited a range of responses. Some women were stumped, some were evasive, and some were stimulated to recite a list of very carefully chosen words that had been prepared to answer just such a question – for themselves and for others. Responses included information about race, age, sex, place within kinship groups, sexual orientation, religion, national or tribal origin, class, political orientation, physical disability, occupation, avocation, character attributes, or perceived purpose in life. On several occasions my predictions for a particular response were confounded, more often by what was not named than by what was named. The boundaries of this project are constructed most importantly along the axes of race, sex, and sexual orientation as they interact in various ways to give form and identity to the ensembles under study. Typically – but not always – when a respondent omitted any of these categories in her initial identification of herself to me, the interview was not long underway before she spontaneously revealed her quotidian awareness of being and experiencing life as that which she did not at first name. It is beyond the scope of this project to provide exhaustive treatments of theories on the formation of identities of race, sex, and sexual orientation. The discussion that follows presents selected work in these individual phenomena and in theories common to the formation of these and any other primary identification, building the case that identity is constructed and multifaceted.

#### The “Culture” Trap

The use of the word *culture* to identify a particular group of people and the products of their shared lifeways, habits, beliefs, mores, attitudes, and styles has been falling out of favor with social scientists. Original models for the culture concept were based on ideals of isolation, functionalism, and homogeneity. In other words, these were the ideas that: each individual culture had discernible and impermeable boundaries; any behavior exhibited by any member of the culture had its own role in upholding the cultural system; and the attitudes and behaviors of any single member of the culture presented a fractal image of the group as a whole. The isolationist model’s hold on the imagination is seen in the special zeal with which anthropologists have undertaken the study of formerly “undisturbed” populations; however, it is hardly useful in today’s populous and migratory world. Much contemporary scholarship is concerned instead with the production of meaning on the “borders” or “margins” of intersecting social groups.<sup>2</sup> Refuting the functionalist assumption is a new focus of attention on

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987).

transgression and subversion. And even in the absence of cultural syncretism or culture “treason,” the homogeneity model breaks down: it has been shown that one person’s report cannot represent the whole social group – something that Feminist anthropologists have demonstrated at a basic level whenever they have added women’s perceptions to a formerly male record.

To avoid some of the more confining connotations of the culture concept as traditionally used by social scientists, and to account for new directions of inquiry, scholars have been developing alternative language, some of which I will discuss. The use of the word *culture* is, however, anything but passé outside of contemporary social science. It is evoked regularly by people who see themselves as having one, and also by people who, feeling the lack of one, are attracted to what they see as its possession by others. It was some of my own and other women’s popular assumptions, and our disagreements, about culture that brought me to this study. Throughout my adult life and up until the latter weeks of writing this document, I used *culture* as a laywoman’s term – and was addressed by laywomen using the term – to mean *any group of which we were a part that we experienced as primarily constitutive of our identities*. It is in this light that the reader should understand the word when it appears in excerpts quoted from my interviews with performers, or when I report on my observations and experiences that predate the undertaking of this study. Despite its limitations, the word is extremely important. For, whether or not we can say with any precision what it *is*, we can easily see what it *does*.

The women in this study use *culture* to signify a sense of belonging in a society dominated by messages that we – as Lesbians, as Black women – do not belong. We invoke *culture* in an assertion of agency, redrawing for ourselves the political boundaries that have been drawn against us, naturalizing the confines from which we perhaps fear there is no escape anyway. We claim *culture* to keep the dominant out, to keep their hands off our treasures, or at least to regulate which of them may come in and the conditions under which they may handle our treasures.

For *culture* to work for us in these ways, it must suggest some sense of innateness and permanence. Subjecting the concept to more critical scrutiny leads, however, toward an understanding that identity is constituted far more by the malleable than by the inborn. This position has been articulated by scholars in that phenomenon commonly used as synonymous with culture: *ethnicity*.

#### Ethnicity as a Model for Identity Construction

What is ethnicity? Like *culture*, it resists definition. In common parlance, one may hear the word used variously to signal regional, national, tribal, linguistic, racial, or even religious affiliation or ancestry. The political contexts surrounding the labeler and the labelee determine the conditions under which ethnicity is invoked and the words chosen to invoke it. Consider, for example, the possibility that three people whom an observer in one situation might describe as ethnically Latina, Arab, and Kenyan could find themselves referred to by someone else in another situation as Mexican, Muslim, and Black, while all the while describing themselves as Mayan, Shiite, and Kikuyu. Furthermore, it is possible for these same three people to find themselves in contexts that would inspire them to take other names: Mestiza, Iranian, and

African, for example. These hypothetical possibilities point to the difficulty of defining *ethnicity* with any precision and compel us to consider the elements of malleability and choice inherent in identity formation.

The year 1975 saw the publication of *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience* edited by Nathaniel Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan. In their introduction, the editors bring attention to the newness of the term *ethnicity*, tracing its gradual appearance in several modern dictionaries and demonstrating by its various given definitions a lack of fixity in its meaning. As Anya Peterson Royce points out (1982, 18), the word's early use as a tool of "othering" in the arsenal of the socially dominant is implicit in *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*, which in 1963 defined it first as "neither Christian nor Jewish: HEATHEN." The second definition, however, points in the direction of its newer usage as remarked upon by several scholars in the later '70s and early '80s: "of or relating to races or large groups of people classed according to common traits and customs." Glazer and Moynihan state that "there has been a pronounced and sudden increase in tendencies by people in many countries and in many circumstances to insist on the significance of their group distinctiveness and identity and on new rights that derive from this group character." After the Second World War, the drawing of national boundaries without regard to "ethnic" demographics supplied the critical preconditions to numerous intergroup conflicts. With the withdrawal of European colonial powers in Africa (and later the collapse of the Soviet Union in Eurasia), cultural groups formerly under the repressive control of these massive regimes seized new opportunities to stake claims for recognition, resources, and self-determination as distinct political entities. A contributor to *Ethnicity*, Martin Kilson, observes that in the United States, the "pronounced and sudden increase" in group identification – which he terms *neo-ethnicity* – has been inspired by the successes of African Americans in the Civil Rights Movement (236).

Scholars represented throughout the Glazer and Moynihan volume locate the "newness" of the concept of ethnicity in its deployment as a political strategy by those who claim it for *themselves*, a significant departure from its former connotations as an inherent, immutable – and not necessarily positive – characteristic of someone *else*. Orlando Patterson gauges the importance of a group's characteristics and behaviors not by what they are but by how they function "to maintain group cohesiveness, sustain and enhance identity, and...establish social networks and communicative patterns that are important for the group's optimization of its socioeconomic position in the society" (306). Daniel Bell, in "Ethnicity and Social Change," says that ethnicity "is best understood *not* as a primordial phenomenon in which deeply held identities have to reemerge, but as a strategic choice by individuals who, in other circumstances, would choose other group memberships as a means of gaining some power and privilege" (171).

Bell identifies certain trends of the latter decades of the twentieth century that he posits have increased the attractiveness and the range of such choices. Of those that pertain to neo-ethnicity in the United States, the first he discusses is the widening of economic and political umbrellas (e.g., corporate monopolies, standardized school curricula) that organize ever-larger masses of people under common "sovereignty;" this massification, which devalues local tradition and contributes to a sense of uprootedness, compels individuals to seek the "psychological anchorage" of enhanced ethnic identification. The shift

from an industrial economy to one fueled by technical and professional workers has increased the necessity of higher education as a prerequisite for position and privilege. Bell contends that the only way for the masses of workers without access to technical and professional training to advance themselves is by entering the political arena. The replacement of free market forces by political allocation of monies compels individuals to join interest groups that are designated to benefit from the allocations. Connected to this trend is what Bell identifies as the political redefinition of “equality,” whereby equality of opportunity has come to be measured by the extent to which equality of *result* is achieved; the efforts at “leveling the playing field” – politically, economically, and socially – that this necessitates tend to stimulate citizens to stake claims either with groups poised to receive redistributions of advantages or with groups endeavoring to retain their advantages (142-152).<sup>3</sup>

Bell’s overview of strategic responses to the foregoing social trends accounts for the possibility that, in the first place, a Swedish-American club might earmark a college scholarship for a student of Swedish descent and that, in the second place, an applicant who has never danced a *hambo* or celebrated Santa Lucia might assert her Swedishness in order to claim that scholarship. In such a scenario, it seems unproblematic to view ethnicity as a political strategy first and foremost. However, in considering people whose “ethnicity” – particularly as defined by the dominant class – is always visible and has been the basis of their historic and current disenfranchisement, a reduction of ethnicity to a mere strategy of convenience for political gain can seem to be a troubling reversal of the truth. Though the ethnic/racial designation of *Black* is a social construct with no coherent geographic, linguistic, cultural, phenotypic, or genotypic definition, our national legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, and contemporary, institutionalized racism shape the material conditions of Blackness; the vast majority of African Americans (any who cannot pass as White) have no more strategized their way into this designation than they can strategize their way out of it. Where, then, is the element of identity choice for the maximization of political benefit?

Consider the difference between the ways that two of this project’s interview respondents – both Black persons whose African forebears were brought to the United States under slavery – identified themselves to me. Neither woman knows her actual African tribal ancestry or, for that matter, the genealogy of any European descendants in her bloodline, an information gap that works to unmask the element of choice in ethnic self-definition. One called herself an “African American,” and the other called herself “an African woman born in America.” Each woman was interpreting her Blackness for me in a different way. The first woman’s naming strategy claims her rightful place in a nation whose population comprises a plurality of peoples descended from various parts of the globe. The second woman’s strategy communicates her sense of wrongful displacement to this land from her true home in Africa. Both choices have implications for the different cultural networks, political affiliations, and relationship strategies these women might choose in any moment of maximizing their experiences of Blackness in America. It is important, then, to recognize that whenever people do not have the strategic choice of dodging a particular

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<sup>3</sup> Bell is clearly referring to programs such as Affirmative Action, which were fairly new at the time of his writing but which are now being dismantled along with many other rollbacks of progressive policies and legislation enacted in the ‘60s and ‘70s.

ethnic label and the disenfranchisement that goes with it, they may still exercise choices – aimed at resisting and reversing their oppression – about how to parse that label, which terrain of the label to inhabit, and how to represent their interpretation of that label to others.<sup>4</sup> My example of the ways two Black American women negotiate between ascribed and claimed ethnicities/identities bears out Anya Peterson Royce’s tempering of the ethnicity-as-strategy theory:

Individuals do not enjoy total freedom to manipulate identities. They operate within a system of constraints that includes physical, sociological, and psychological influences, and they are constrained as well by the structure of society and subcategories within it. All these constraining factors are relevant at two levels: that of their own physical reality; and that of the individual’s perception of them, which may or may not correspond to their physical reality. (1982, 202)

In the first chapter of her book *Ethnic Identities: Strategies of Diversity* (1982), Royce presents several scholars’ attempts at defining the concept of the ethnic group. To represent features of contemporary definitions, she offers the six criteria for ethnicity postulated by a 1973 symposium of the Social Science Research Council:

1. a past-oriented group identification emphasizing origins
2. some conception of cultural and social distinctiveness
3. relationship of the ethnic group to a component unit in a broader system of social relations
4. the fact that ethnic groups are larger than kin or locality groups and transcend face-to-face interaction
5. different meanings for ethnic categories both in different social settings and for different individuals
6. the assumption that ethnic categories are emblematic, having names with meaning both for members and for analysts (24)

This list creates a profile of the ethnic group as a unit whose constitution is clearly subject to negotiation on the part of its members from within and to the impact of political forces from without. Even the first criterion, which could appear to require specific objective conditions, is in fact subject to the control of the group members. Where necessary, myths, reinterpretations of history, and other stories can be created and assembled to supply a genealogy that will inspire members’ loyalty by naturalizing their sense of the group as a distinct and enduring entity.

In my observation, there are other primary identities not typically referred to as ethnicities that exhibit these same six characteristics, as well as the operation of strategic choices within social constraints. Are these other “large groups of people classed according to common traits and customs” simply ethnicities

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<sup>4</sup> For an incisive and challenging dialogue on this conundrum, see “Our Next Race Question: The Uneasiness Between Blacks and Latinos” in which, among other things, Jorge Klor de Alva and Cornel West argue over whether West is or should call himself *Black* (to which West says, “Hell yes.”) (Delgado and Stefancic, 1997).



of a kind? As I have pointed out, race is sometimes referred to as an ethnicity. Is sex a kind of ethnicity? What about sexual orientation? Though these identities are parallel to ethnicities in the ways they are constructed and the functions they serve, they are distinguished from ethnicities by their discourses of immutability. I will show, however, that these identities, too, are mutable.

### Lesbian Identities

Residents of the contemporary United States live in a society dominated by compulsory Heterosexuality.<sup>5</sup> This means that women's eroticism – if not also, *uncoincidentally*, our emotional and domestic loyalty – is assumed to exist or expected to be given for the direct benefit of men. When we give these things to women instead, our society marks us, “others” us, “ethnicizes” us. This is, of course, a strategy aimed at deterring the defection of more women from our “proper” relationship to men. As happens in any marginalized group, Lesbians have responded to our stigmatization and disenfranchisement with a range of strategies of our own. Somewhere between bringing fake boyfriends to the office party and taking up arms is the creation of positive and liberating images of ourselves as part of a *culture*. Judy Grahn's book *Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds*, from 1984, is a magnificent example of performance in Lesbian identity.

Because most Lesbian and Gay people are born to Heterosexual parents – and because what we mean by the words “Lesbian” and “Gay” is something we have observed to exist in people from disparate tribes, nations, and races – we cannot appeal to the inheritance of a particular bloodline for a positive sense of a distinct, group identity. Grahn's book represents a tendency of Feminist Lesbians coming into our own in the '70s and '80s to posit Queer folks' collective “origins” in some timeless, supernatural essence that inevitably expresses itself through us in a set of symbols, linguistic codes, and social behaviors, regardless of where on the planet and at what point in history we are born. Toward this end, she reports on imagery common to legends of woman-loving heroines from several continents, describes homosocial tribal holdovers in contemporary culture, posits a shared set of social offices held unofficially by Gay folk all over the world, and traces the etymology of common slang words used among or aimed at Queer people back to the names of deities with splendid and Queerish attributes.

As Grahn herself says in a section entitled “The Culture Is Everything”:

What gives any group of people distinction and dignity is its culture. This includes a remembrance of the past and a setting of itself in a world context where the group can see *who it is* relative to everyone else...  
The (worldwide) Gay culture I have set out to describe is...extremely old, and it is continuous. (xiii, xiv)

In this brief thesis statement, Grahn deftly assigns to Gay identity the six characteristics of an “ethnicity” identified at the Social Science Research Council symposium, most importantly the elusive connections to origins deep in the past. These she goes on to supply in nearly three hundred pages of extraordinarily

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<sup>5</sup> I borrow this language from Adrienne Rich's classic essay, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience” (*Signs*, Summer, 1980).

poignant and poetic writing. I first read the work as a twenty-year-old, and I have yet to be so transformed by another book. Its impact upon my life testifies to the veracity of Howard Isaacs' observation that "the function of basic group identity has to do most crucially with...the quality of (the individual's) self-esteem" (1975). Having just been purged under the most humiliating of circumstances from the summer-long company of coworkers and friends, I discovered finally in Grahn's bold, creative discourse the strength and the tools I needed to project myself as a woman in possession of not a criminal pathology but a *cultural identity*.

A more contemporary study on Lesbian identity is offered in Hinda Seif's "To Love Women, or To Not Love Men: Chronicles of Lesbian Identification" (1999). Seif interviews three women in the San Francisco Bay Area, all of whom claim sexual attractions to men and women but who signify and contextualize their sexualities in three different ways. One respondent calls herself a Lesbian in order to enjoy the benefits of Lesbian community. This choice regularly requires that she closet any erotic interest in and involvement with men, particularly within the Lesbian therapy group she joined after her traumatic breakup with another woman. The second respondent identifies as a Bisexual Lesbian, viewing the first part of the term as an expression of her organic nature and the second one as a signal of her political commitment. As a Woman of Color, she finds more opportunities for interaction with other People of Color within Lesbian community than in the smaller Bisexual community. Furthermore, she chooses to prioritize those aspects of her identity that are the most "embattled," emphasizing her love for women over her love for men as she does her Blackness over her Jewishness, even while confessing her awareness that categories of ethnicity, race, and gender are "human creations" and "incredible nonsense" (39). The third respondent formerly called herself a Lesbian but is now a Lesbian-identified Bisexual woman. Both of these namings represent what was the "most liberatory choice" at the time in her life when she chose them. Taking a Lesbian identity was her choice to claim and valorize her right to love women. Later, her emphasis on Bisexuality aligned her with a community that she perceived as offering more sexual freedom. She regards her sexuality as "a strategy" and says that it is nothing "so sacred and innate... It's very conditioned by...the times... And it could change" (43).

These women indicate very specifically their awareness of the operations of strategic choice, perception, and material and political reality on the formation of their identities, a kind of self-consciousness absent from *Another Mother Tongue*. Grahn presents her book as the result of research, not as a strategic creation. She speaks out of her pre-Stonewall<sup>6</sup> origins as one who has at last overcome the stigmatization provoked by the inescapable fact of her Lesbianism. Nor would most Lesbians who have lived beyond the reach of urban Womyn's networks find her contribution outdated or unwelcome today. In

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<sup>6</sup> *Stonewall* refers to a three-day riot in June 1969 that began outside the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, New York. As in all Gay bars at the time, the Stonewall's patrons had been subjected to routine police harassment that included beatings, fines, strip-searches, arrests, and subsequent "outing" in the next day's papers, the result of which was often loss of employment and family support. At the event referred to as *Stonewall*, the bar's patrons fought back for the first time, marking the beginning of the modern Queer Liberation movement. I have seen this event immortalized on a tee-shirt: "The First Gay and Lesbian Rights March was a RIOT!"

contrast, Seif's subjects' nimble negotiation of identities must be viewed as particularly privileged by their location in a contemporary mecca of political consciousness and alternative sexuality.

In fact, Lesbians must trick ourselves – and we do – to deny the lack of fixity in Lesbian identity. Most of us who think we are Lesbians once thought we were Heterosexuals, and many of us have seen Lesbians fall in love with men and either cease or continue to call themselves Lesbians. One condition remains constant: society has a name for women who love women as we are “supposed to” love men: we have a variety of ways of confronting that name, but confront it we must.

### “Male and Female He Made Them...”

Of all the attributes that every person has, sex is perhaps the one taken most for granted. Contemporary society is dominated by the assumption that there are two sexes and that every person is irretrievably one or the other. To confirm this belief, we may appeal to religious myths or popularly accepted versions of the scientific record for “proof” of our natural origins in ancient male and female archetypes. But current scholarship and even occasional reports in the mass-media are making it increasingly difficult to ignore the fact that, like so many other aspects of identity, sex is not fixed, and sex resists coherent definition at the chromosomal, hormonal, genital, and behavioral levels (Rios 1997).

Our society has sanctioned doctors to exercise the strategic manipulation of the physical sex of an infant who could not be determined to be unambiguously male or female. Most often, this manipulation has taken the form of surgically reducing what was judged to be too small for a penis and too large for a clitoris. The infant's parents have then been enjoined to participate in raising the child “as a girl,” a tacit acknowledgement that a girl is not necessarily what the child was to begin with. Further surgery and hormone treatment have sometimes followed when the child has reached adolescence. These manipulations, however, rather than disrupting assumptions about sex, have been presented as “corrections” of “mistakes.” Because a number of these Intersex individuals are now speaking publicly about the physical and psychological damage wreaked by this practice, the ethics of the practice are being re-evaluated, though it does continue.

Of course, an adult individual can now make the choice to undergo hormonal and surgical sex reassignment, but since long before this was possible, men have been passing as women, women have been passing as men, and the legions of the in-between have been presenting themselves as one or the other. Only recently, under the influence of the Queer, Transsexual, and Transgendered movements, is there some visible and purposeful resistance to the assumption that all humans must be either permanently male or permanently female – or that *male* and *female* are unitary categories.

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1999), Judith Butler argues that “female” and “male” personae express nothing inherent in our natures but are instead identities that we perform, relentlessly, to the effect of deluding ourselves that they exist outside of the behaviors we adopt to enact them. Her sophisticated and passionate argument seeks to unburden women of sexism as well as to end the violence so typically visited on the sexually ambiguous.

Rather than denying that *male* and *female* are real, however, a far more common response to the very real effects on women of sexism has been the insistence that there is inherent value in being a woman and that women have special attributes and perspectives. This is the strategy underlying the emergence of Womyn's music, Womyn's arts festivals, Womyn's organizations, and other Womyn's spaces, inventions of central importance to this study.

Defining *Womyn*, our music, and our "spaces" presents a familiar problem. Is an anti-choice, Republican, corporate (also known as "male-identified") ExecuDyke welcome at a Womyn's event? Does the image of *Womyn* include poor, Black Nationalists from urban ghettos and White suburbanites alike? Are Transsexuals allowed? Can Linda Tillery bring her male, backup tambourine player onto the stage and still call it Womyn's music? As with *culture*, we will do better to consider not what these concepts *are* but what they *do*.

Most importantly, Womyn's spaces provide environments where womanhood is defined by *women*, and where Lesbianism is deemed wonderful rather than freakish. This supplies our sense of belonging. The extremely varied cultural production that emerges from these spaces – whether music, comedy, dance, philosophy, hagiography, or humor – gives us something we can proudly claim as our own; even if it imitates or has been imitated by male artists, even if we as individuals had nothing to do with it, and even if we don't like it, the mere fact that women are in control of making it is salient enough in a sexist society to inspire our loyalty. If we feel that the integrity of these goods or the environments in which we create and enjoy them are threatened, we harden the boundaries between what is "ours" and what is not: many Womyn's festivals, coffeehouses, and chorus rehearsals are officially closed to men, certain nationally circulating newsletters are for female subscribers only, and particular books and recordings are sold only in places that serve a Womyn's market.

This Womyn's scene is commonly referred to by its devotees as a *culture*. In the interests of avoiding that term, I claim instead that it certainly constitutes a group identity. Looking back again to the six characteristics of an "ethnic" group on page 26, one can see immediately that the strategic creation of the category *Womyn* meets criteria 2 through 6. I find it interesting to observe the ways in which the need for meeting criterion 1 – "a past-oriented group identification emphasizing origins" – has also been satisfied: the completely useless Eve myth is supplanted by a profusion of Goddesses and Amazons whose images fly from banners, hang from necklaces, and grace potholders and book covers, whose names are called in musical compositions, taken by adults, or given to daughters, and whose personae are dramatically represented in rituals. The effective message is that we are the inheritors of a long line of powerful, autonomous, and awe-inspiring femaleness that predates patriarchal myths and ideas about who we are.

#### Black Identities

Race, like other identity categories I have discussed, is constructed, malleable, strategic, and impossible to define – except perhaps as a myth invented for the perpetuation of White supremacy. For the myth to be effective, it must pretend that races are distinguishable from one another and that each person

inherits an irrevocable one. In fact, there is more variation in genetic material within racial groups than between them, and no genetic test exists that can determine a person's race (Franke 1997, 468). Phenotypically White children can be born of phenotypically Black parents all of whose other children are phenotypically Black, and vice-versa. That a person's race can be absolutely ambiguous is seen in the legal record. Individuals have decided to change their racial classifications; legislators have decided to change the racial classifications of groups of people. Historically, numerous citizens have asked the courts to rule on their race in deciding matters of inheritance and marriage. Cases settled one way in one state would have been settled differently in another, and the nature of the "evidence" has varied from differing quotas of "White blood" to local, public opinion (Wright 1997). Still, this ambiguity has not yet had the power to explode White supremacy, any more than people of ambiguous sex have exploded misogyny or people of fluctuating sexuality have exploded Heterosexism. This is to say that, however mythical the concept of race may be, its effects in the United States are only too real, most positively for Whites and most negatively for Blacks.

When I was in high school I had a Black friend who was raised in the United States and whose parents had emigrated from Haiti. His strategy for coping with U.S. racism was to say, "I'm not Black; I'm Haitian." I see now that his words bore a core of philosophical truth, but at the time, it was clear that his strategy was more assimilationist than revolutionary; the practical effect of this strategy was that we White students pitied him for hating himself, and the Black students disdained him for hating them.

Given that our society makes it extremely difficult for most people to deny having a race (though segregated Whites can often forget or ignore having one, as I will discuss in Chapter Four), a far more common strategy African Americans use in coping with racism is to inhabit Blackness with pride and activism. This strategy typically involves positing *Black* as a unitary cultural concept. The strategy responds to what the Rodney King, Abner Louima, and Amadou Diallo cases show us, which is that in the United States, this African American, this Haitian, and this Guinean are all the same thing: a Black man. As practiced by many Black Americans, the positive identification with Africa as the Motherland of all Diaspora communities makes solidarity out of what has been the unseeing reduction of disparate groups of people to the same oppressed category. Furthermore, it supplies the sense of distinct, historical origins that seems to be so important in the formation of primary group identity. Appealing to *Blackness* as a single cultural concept creates for African Americans a beloved terrain to inhabit in response to forcible rejection from White-controlled physical or conceptual spaces. It also asserts a measure of control over or defiance of White entry and access, signaled, for example, by the slogan: "It's a Black Thing; You Wouldn't Understand." So, although the identity boundary of Blackness is impossible to draw firmly, and although some people within the boundary may have important things in common with people outside the boundary that they do not share with others within it, the boundary cannot be said to be meaningless as long as it responds in material ways to the material conditions that make it necessary.

In preparing to write this dissertation, I was fascinated to find that the metaphor Black Americans seemed to use most often to signal Black identity was *Black music*. I encountered this every place I looked

for it and in many places where I wasn't looking. James Baldwin called Black music "our witness and our ally." According to Barbara Omolade, Black historian and activist, "our music is our history is our future" (1985). Novelist Toni Morrison, as quoted by Paul Gilroy (1993), has credited music above all art forms with having sustained and healed Black Americans and believes that if she could apply the musician's resources to her craft, she could create a writing that was inherently, unequivocally Black. Cornel West, in an argument over whether the word *Black* was useful, said: "no matter what name we would come up with, we would still have the blues and John Coltrane and Sarah Vaughan" (Klor de Alva, Shorris, and West 1997). Ntozake Shange, in one of her poems, declares "I live in music." In this poem she constructs her body as a configuration of jazz instruments and describes sensing music with all her faculties: as smell, rain on her face, hot peppers on her lips. Urban Bush Women's Jawole Willa Jo Zollar has based one section of an evening-length work on this poem. Through the recitation and choreography of the poem, the performers dance Music as the full range of experience and emotion. The large work of which this section is a part is entitled *Soul Deep* and was created in collaboration with the David Murray Octet. The program notes for this work explain that:

*Soul Deep* is a journey to the Source through music, dance, and spoken word. The Source represents origins, forces and impulses that drive creative expression. Going back to the Source, for Zollar and Murray, is a sojourn to the historical memory of field hollers and spiritual states of revelation called forth in gospel shouts: it is a visit to the primal passion heard in the Blues; it is a return to sensual awakening; to earthy social dances and "blue light" basement parties. (UBW 2000)

In this passage, ontology becomes synonymous with African-American musical forms and the contexts in which they are sung and danced.

The African-American women I interviewed spoke regularly of Black music as a synonym for history, experience, struggle, liberation, communication, or strength. Some women seemed to experience it as so inseparable from their racial essence that they could not understand why anyone who was not Black would have the impulse to sing it; and more than a few women frankly disbelieved in the ability of non-Black people to sing it well. Women who were mystified by their instinctual or visceral experiences of certain music could account for their responses only by the fact of their Blackness. About songs originating in slavery, MUSE's Associate Director Lois Shegog said to me:

If your language was stolen, and you don't have your real language, you have to communicate some kind of way. So it was through those songs that made the circuit from plantation to plantation, to bring the camaraderie around. It's about a piece of my life that, um... that lives here (*points to her heart*) and not here (*points to her head*). Why should a song make me cry, you know? Only that it came from my tradition, and it speaks to me.

Shegog's words echo those of W.E.B. Du Bois, who says of these same songs:

They came out of the South unknown to me, one by one, and yet at once I knew them as of me and of mine.<sup>7</sup>

Stuart Hall (1996, 465–475) and Paul Gilroy (1991, 1993) have written about Black music in particular as the expression most tellingly connected to Black identity. Hall, writing about the significance of cultural art forms created in society's marginalized populations, asks his readers to note that:

Displaced from a logocentric world – where the direct mastery of cultural modes meant the mastery of writing... – the people of the black diaspora have...found the deep form, the deep structure of their cultural life in music. (470)

This echoes Lois Shegog's suspicion that something of the power of this music originates in its necessity as a mode of communication. Gilroy observes the same phenomenon:

The power and significance of music within the black Atlantic<sup>8</sup> have grown in inverse proportion to the limited expressive power of language. It is important to remember that the slaves' access to literacy was often denied on pain of death. (1993, 74)

Gilroy goes on to speak more descriptively about the functioning of Black music as language. He assigns to it the power of metacommunication, which, due to the orality of the settings in which it is developed, arises from its "distinctive relationship to the body." In musical performances, "identity is fleetingly experienced in the most intensive ways and sometimes socially reproduced by means of...signifying practice(s) like mimesis, gesture, kinesis, and costume." Musical antiphony (call and response), montage, improvisation, and dramaturgy are the devices that "supply the hermeneutic keys to the full medley" of Black artistic expression (1994, 75-78). The metacommunication enabled by this language has resulted in the reproduction of ethics and politics "as a form of folk knowledge" and has been used as a tool for "individual self-fashioning and communal liberation" (1991, 13).

Having encountered so many Black people who expressed opinions in this vein, I realized that my study was questioning something even more significant than I had imagined at the outset. These passages communicate some very important information about the almost literal extent to which many Black Americans identify themselves with Black music. There are some other things, too, that this discourse doesn't tell us. For example, to what extent have Whites participated in (led the way for?) the demarcation of certain musical styles as "naturally Black" by claiming that Blacks could not – and must not be allowed to – perform in European classical styles? How do we account for it when the performance by African-American soprano Barbara Hendricks, singing early-twentieth-century *chanson*, sounds more Parisian than

<sup>7</sup> This appears in the beginning of DuBois's Chapter XIV, "Of the Sorrow Songs." *The Souls of Black Folk* was first published in 1903 but has received many reprintings in various new editions with forwards by different scholars.

<sup>8</sup> *The black Atlantic* is Gilroy's term for expressing the interconnected populations of Blacks in Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean Islands, and England – the area triangulated by the slave trade.

Barbra Streisand doing the same repertoire? What do we make of it when an African American mistakes a recording by Harry Connick, Jr. for a performance by a Black man? Are the lined hymn and the Ellington cantata and the rap hit the same music/language/Blackness, will every Diaspora Black understand all three, and will all three escape equally the understanding of every White person? Why is the concert Spiritual – whose form and sound have been calculatedly Whitened – Blacker than certain hits by Elton John? It is the relationship of style to meaning and identity that must be questioned here. Are they absolutely synonymous, or do they simply happen to coincide frequently?

Clearly, analysis can be used to defeat discourses of a unitary Black Africa/Diaspora/culture/music. But what remains important is Black people's need under racism to draw the lines where they draw them. Where these discourses enable Black people to survive and flourish, arguments against them are irrelevant.

#### Style as Identity Performance/Construction

To discuss the concept of style, I return to studies in ethnicity as they bear on more general questions of identity formation. By the 1990s, much of the scholarship on ethnicity is suffused with the language of *performativity*. This scholarship theorizes not only that group identities are performed but also that our performances function to exert a dialectical, constituting force upon our identities. According to Simon Frith, "identity...comes from the outside, not the inside; it is something we try on, not something we reveal or discover" (1996, 122), and Stuart Hall asserts that "how things are represented and the 'machineries' and regimes of representation in a culture do play a *constitutive* and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event role" (1996, 443). Any analysis of group identity performance depends heavily on the concept of *style*.

This concept surfaces in Anya Royce's 1982 definition of an ethnic group as "a reference group invoked by people who share a common historical style (which may be only assumed), based on overt features and values, and who, through the process of interaction with others, identify themselves as sharing that style" (12). She proposes the use of the term *style* to enable discussions of choice and change where formerly the invocation of *tradition* tended to require fixity. By *style* she means "a complex of symbols, forms, and value orientations that, when applied to ethnic groups, signals both the overt cultural contents and the underlying subjective values and standards by which performance is judged" (28).

Ethnomusicologists assume that a social group makes itself heard and hears itself in the performance of its music: the music's style is the ethnomusicologist's key to the group's identity. Ethnomusicologist Jane Sugarman examines the role of singing in one cultural group's performance and creation of identities in *Engendering Song: Singing and Subjectivity at Prespa Albanian Weddings* (1997). In her introduction she explains that:

...Prespa weddings accomplish more than a mere depiction of society. As active participants in the event, members of the host families and their guests negotiate their way through a complex network of community expectations and individual assessments as to what constitutes proper social demeanor, defining



through their actions...the terms of the social order that the celebration constructs. Any Prespa wedding may thus be seen as one point in an ongoing process through which community members actively constitute, reinscribe, challenge, or incrementally renegotiate the terms through which they are connected as a community...

...Because singing is the principal means through which individuals participate in a wedding, it is crucial to the processes of social reproduction and renegotiation that weddings accomplish. ...singing allows individuals to convey a range of messages that they might wish to make about themselves as social beings. Each rendition of each song thus serves as an embodied performance of multiple aspects of that performer's sense of self and of community. At the same time, each performance provides one of the myriad images which individuals within the community may subsequently draw on as they formulate their view of themselves and their social world, and thus contributes fundamentally to the ongoing consolidation of the practices that together define the Prespa community. (2, 3)

Sugarman devotes the third chapter of her book to building the argument that wedding singing – which is the focal group activity dominating a series of gatherings over several days – is an important site for the Prespa reproduction of gender. Prespa singing is done in all-female or all-male groups. Songs are gender-marked by their positioning in one of two vocal ranges that are seen as the physical boundaries of the male voice and the female voice. The repertoires are further separated by stylistic differences in parameters such as vocal timbre, thematic content, metricity, and ornamentation. Because Presparë (the plural of *Prespa*) regard women and men as having fundamentally different natures, the two contrasting singing styles are experienced as naturalizing the specifics of these two “natures.” The high transgressive potential of cross-style performance is implicit here in what outsiders can easily see as an arbitrary complex of attributes, and it begs the question: how would Prespa ideas about gender be affected if critical numbers of singing Prespa women suddenly began elevating their eyes, dropping their registers, using full resonance, and singing highly-ornamented and hagiographic songs in the manner of “male” singing?<sup>9</sup>

It can be more difficult to see the styles of one's own cultural group as arbitrary rather than natural, especially when one is in a socially dominant (culturally “unmarked”) group, and particularly in the case of activities that are less likely than singing to be regarded as performances. For example, the taking up of less body space by Heterosexual women of the middle and upper classes in the United States than by the men in their classes is a cultural performance of gender and class that members from within – if they are aware of noticing it – are likely to take for granted as natural. As Judith Butler says in *Gender Trouble*:

The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. ...If gender attributes...are not expressive but performative, then (they) effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal.” (179, 180)

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<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Wood's “Sapphonics” (in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* edited by Brett et. al., 1994) discusses the mapping of gender and sexuality by vocal register, presenting evidence of the troubling effect upon heteropatriarchal narratives exerted by singers whose voices defy the expected limits of their genders.

To generalize the crux of Butler's argument, adopting the universe of style associated with a particular identity is to adopt that identity.

This, of course, is less easily accomplished than stated. In most cases where different identity groups exist, so, too, does some differential relationship of power between them. Where this is the case, members within both "top" and "bottom" groups police their borders, hardening them not only against incursions but also against defections. Typically, the hardest and most consistent blocks are those thrown up by dominants against others' attempts to assimilate.

The other difficulty of switching style, and thereby identity, is the extreme subtlety and complexity of any given style. A style responds in specific ways to the particular conditions that have helped form it, and these conditions and responses might be unfamiliar or unintelligible to an interloper. Steven Feld attempts to write concretely about this elusiveness of style. He presents a clear and compelling explication of style as "a gloss for the essence of identity" in "Aesthetics as Iconicity of Style (Uptown Title); or (Downtown Title) 'Lift-Up-Over-Sounding': Getting into the Kaluli Groove" (Keil and Feld 1994). He begins by presenting the idea of style in its musical manifestation, favoring Leonard Meyer's definition as that which "constitutes the universe of discourse within which musical meanings arise" (110). He goes on to talk about the significance of a feelingful encounter with music, saying that our pleasurable physical and emotional response to a performance in a given musical style is enabled to the degree that we comprehend the meaning of the discourse expressed in/created by it. From this theoretical introduction, he goes on to discuss the environs, basic lifeways, social organization, and music of the Kaluli people, a population of about fifteen hundred from the Southern Highlands province of Papua, New Guinea.

For the Kaluli, good music is what they describe as "lift-up-over sounding," a term descriptive of the ways they interact with one another and their forest environs when making music. Further into the article, the reader learns that music is not the only thing that the Kaluli praise when it is "lifted-up-over;" good Kaluli conversation is "lift-up-over" talking, and the result of good Kaluli body-painting is judged to be "lift-up-over"-looking. Feld describes the aesthetic in all its manifestations as "being in synchrony while out of phase." This texture characterizes Kaluli encounters and activities in general, which are governed by the egalitarian ideal of cooperative and collective autonomy, an "interactional style (that simultaneously maximizes social participation and autonomy of self" (122).

Feld continues by presenting several scholars' thoughts on style – musical and otherwise – as a metaphor for identity, worldview, consciousness. The article goes a long way in beginning to account for the unaccountable: why it is that we are so moved by the particular musics that move us, why different musics come out sounding the way they do, and why certain musics inspire intense feelings of territoriality in their creators. On the relationship between emotion and cognition in the aesthetic experience, Feld quotes Raymond Williams:

We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating community. (146)

To accompany this quote I present another, from Charles Keil, found earlier in the article:

The presence of style indicates a strong community, an intense sociability that has been given shape through time, an assertion of control over collective feelings so powerful that any expressive innovator in the community will necessarily put his or her content into that shaping continuum and no other. (122)

These two passages offer much to consider in questioning the formation and expression of Black identity through music, a problem that I will take up again in later chapters. I conclude this section on identity with two models, one general and one specific, that avoid the limitations of the *culture* concept and accommodate the inability of any identity to define itself by impermeable borders.

#### Some Answers to The Problem of Essentialism

The problem we have when we are tempted to say that all Black people identify with the same music, all White people are hopelessly racist, and all Lesbians are Feminists is the problem of essentialism. Ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino defines *cultural essentialism* as:

the belief that...members of a group will have a certain identity and cosmology, and will maintain certain practices and ideas simply because of where and to whom they were born – as if such things were natural, stable endowments, rather than social constructions. (1996, 469)

The essentialist assumption was foundational to the emerging discipline of anthropology, which was needed as a tool to justify the European colonization of Africa. One of anthropology's tasks was to "prove" (by such dubious "evidence" as measurements of cranial circumference) that Europeans were an inherently distinct and superior kind of human to sub-Saharan Africans and were therefore morally obligated to govern them.<sup>10</sup> Postmodern and Feminist scholars have struggled consciously and innovatively to salvage contemporary anthropology and cultural studies from the legacy of the "colonial gaze."<sup>11</sup> Today, to accuse a scholar of essentializing the person or group under study is to discredit that scholar's work as intellectually lax – if not ethically suspect – for, as Turino goes on to say:

Essentialist views of culture ignore individuals' subjectivity and historically specific relations to external conditions... (and) support the view of subaltern peoples' position as 'natural,' unchangeable, and incontestable. (470)

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<sup>10</sup> The New-Orleans-based People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, in its training program entitled "Undoing Racism," always presents this information at the outset of its historical account of the construction of the myth of race.

<sup>11</sup> See the introduction to *Women Writing Culture* edited by Ruth Behar and Deborah Gordon.

Ethics aside, it is obvious even to the layperson that individuals within the same cultural group regularly behave differently from one another and maintain divergent opinions, which clearly renders the essentialist position invalid. Were it valid, I should have been able to perform this study and offer absolute answers to its questions on the basis of interviews of only two or three women. As it is, I encountered disagreement among women I had expected would concur, and the sheer variety of responses from all directions has opened as many questions as it answers.

Still, the theoretical opposite of essentialism – in overemphasizing the socially constructed and situationally relative nature of identity, meaning, and practice – can be just as intellectually and politically flawed. Turino cites poststructuralist scholarship that dismisses the impact of history, cultural style, and social meaning, influences whose materiality are obvious to most laypeople. Taken to its logical extreme, this position would say to subaltern populations that if they could only construct their way to the top, they would not be on the bottom. Echoing my earlier warning against reducing Black Americans' experience of White supremacy to a lousy choice on their part in the game of ethnic strategies (p. 25), Turino says:

While I agree that social identities are constructed, they do have real effects in the world and they may not be quite as fluid as poststructuralists claim – witness the difficulty of combating, or escaping, racism in many societies. (470)

My own powers of observation and, moreover, my political commitment to the women and their communities represented in this study, align me with Turino's choice to "distinguish between essentialist ethnographic representations, and the feelings of **essentialness** that people may have about their own traditions, arts, and identity." It was primarily the *feelings* women had about music I was performing that compelled me to do this study, and its value for me lies not in enabling me to theorize my way off the hook but in enabling me to interact more successfully with their worlds of feeling. However, when there are so many competing feelings even within the same cultural group, it is helpful to consider theories that can explain what might be producing such variety. Several scholars have recommended that the opposing poles represented by determinism and agency be regarded as dialectically related. In *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), Pierre Bourdieu theorizes a process to account for such a relationship.

Specifically, Bourdieu's aim is to develop a "theory of the mode of generation of practices... the precondition for establishing an experimental science of the dialectic of the *internalization of externality and the externalization of internality*" (72). The language marked here by his italics can be read in the context of the present discussion as saying "the ways in which we construct our group identities based on how we and fellow members behave in various contexts, and the ways in which we make our understandings of our identities manifest through our behavior." Bourdieu's theory rests on the concept of *habitus*, which he has hypothesized as "a socially constituted system of cognitive and motivating structures" (76). On the dialectical nature of the formation and functioning of the habitus, he says:

The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment...produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively "regulated" and "regular" without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing to obtain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor. (72)

The "environment" invoked here may comprise an infinite variety of conditions and experiences. The order in which these are experienced determines the structuring of an individual's habitus, which will generate future practice based on the chronology of past events and influences. Therefore, for example:

...the habitus acquired in the **family** underlies the structuring of school experiences.... and the habitus transformed by schooling, itself diversified, in turn underlies the structuring of all subsequent experiences .... and so on, from restructuring to restructuring. (87)

This allows for any number of differences in behavior, ideology, and personality among individuals of the same cultural group, which differences are always only the inevitable outcomes of differences among their earliest environments. At the same time, for numerous individuals to call themselves members of the same group or culture, they must face certain common conditions:

Though it is impossible for *all* members of the same class (or even two of them) to have had the same experiences, in the same order, it is certain that each member of the same class is more likely than any member of another class to have been confronted with the situations most frequent for the members of that class. (85)

In the practical application of this theory, one can have certain reasonable expectations about the thoughts and behaviors of an individual from a given social group, but at the same time, one must be prepared for these expectations to be confounded in any number of possible ways.

Turino finds it useful to counterpose the fluidity and complexity of *habitus* against the more unitary and deterministic implications of *culture*. He conceptualizes Bourdieu's habitus as a Venn diagram of personality, wherein all the different attributes of an individual – gender, race, class, birth order, physical ability, etc. – intersect and interact with one another in response to particular circumstances and in a way belonging uniquely to that individual. Furthermore, each particular set of conditions confronting that individual at any given moment will activate unique areas in the Venn diagram, to the effect that no single aspect or cluster of aspects of the individual is at all times the salient arbiter of thought or action. The behaviors of each individual, motivated by that person's habitus, become constitutive elements of the habitus of the other community members.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Personal conversations, 1998 and 1999.

To theorize the processes that either preserve the societal status quo or transform a society's mores and power relations, Bourdieu uses the words *doxa*, *orthodoxa*, and *heterodoxa*, which he introduces in Chapter Four of *Outline of a Theory of Practice*:

Every established order tends to produce the naturalization of its own arbitrariness. ... This experience we shall call *doxa*, so as to distinguish it from an orthodox or heterodox belief implying awareness and recognition of the possibility of different or antagonistic beliefs. (164)

In other words, *doxa* is the set of beliefs held in common by a group of people who have not encountered – or who choose to ignore – other sets of beliefs: these beliefs, although socially constructed by the habitus of the group members, are experienced as natural and immutable truths. When the group confronts information that conflicts with and challenges its own beliefs, the innocence of *doxa* is lost, and individuals must choose strategies for coping with this challenge. *Orthodoxa* is the choice to insist on the superiority of the original beliefs. This need to insist, regularly accompanied by coercion and enforcement by the powerful, betrays the awareness that other possibilities do exist and posits the original beliefs *against* the alternatives (as in the forced surgical and social sexing of Intersex individuals). *Heterodoxa* involves some form of adaptation and incorporation of new information into the original belief system.

According to Jane Sugarman, Bourdieu's is a rather deterministic view of agency, one that she reads as ultimately pessimistic about humans' capacity to create social change:

Any instance of social action, shaped in line with the actor's habitus, both provides a new objectification of societal structures and serves as a vehicle for their ongoing internalization by other community members. Since an adult acts on the basis of structures, themselves historical products, which were inculcated in him or her beginning in early childhood, Bourdieu sees habitus as predisposing individuals to reproduce those structures through their actions in the great majority of instances, rather than to act in ways that might challenge and transform them. He thus views social practices as crucial vehicles for the reproduction of social relations, preserving the positions of those within a society who are able to exercise the greatest power and authority. (Sugarman 1997 27, 28)

In other words, in the "great majority of instances," individuals reproduce *doxa* or assert and reassert *orthodoxa*; only rarely does an individual's habitus – in intricate and unconscious ways that are beyond total explication – confer on her or him the ability to make heterodoxic adjustments.

Turino's conceptualization of Bourdieu's habitus as a Venn diagram of attributes recalls a separate body of work that deals much more concretely – and optimistically – with the concept of the multiply-constructed self. It was Feminists of Color who in the late '70s and early '80s articulated what have been for me the most compelling and useful arguments against the political limitations of essentialism. These women reported being regularly subjected to the pressure within Black Liberation groups to reduce their identities to purely racial terms and ignore their conditions as women; at the same time, when working with White Feminists they found no room for articulating the problems of racism or class oppression. Writers

such as Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Cheryl Clarke, and Barbara Smith began insisting in plain language on the multifaceted nature of their identities as experienced in and constituted by the political economy in which they were living:<sup>13</sup>

We examined our own lives and found that everything out there was kicking our behinds – race, sex, class, and homophobia. ...The concept of the simultaneity of oppression is still the crux of a Black feminist understanding of political reality and, I believe, one of the most significant contributions of Black feminist thought. (Smith 1983, xxxii)

These women found common ground – as *activists* – in their triple and quadruple status as outsiders. It might be observed that the cluster of female, Lesbian, working-class, and Colored identities forms in itself a particular, unitary identity that is as subject to essentializing as any other. But when a number of people sharing all these attributes join in political effort, there is a presence in the room of just as many individual personalities – and no guarantee of unanimity. On the other hand, the material conditions facing all of them guarantee the importance to them of their connections along these aspects of their identities. The women of the Combahee River Collective, a group of Black Feminists formed in 1974, issued statements that both insisted on the political relevance of these identities and signaled their belief that common cause with their politics was neither necessarily conferred nor prevented by the circumstances of an individual's birth:

This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity... (Smith 1983, 275)

As Black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic. (277)

Where Bourdieu's theory of the self and the community, expressed in language accessible only to the elite, practically forecloses the possibility of social change, these Feminists of Color see in their identities the source of a radicalizing force, a theory they have made accessible to – and put into practice among – communities of laypeople most in need of change.<sup>14</sup> The optimism engendered by this politics is expressed in the following exchange between Barbara Smith and Jane Mansbridge, a White Feminist:

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1981, 1983).

<sup>14</sup> For a scathing criticism of postmodern ethnography, see "The Postmodern Turn in Anthropology: Cautions from a Feminist Perspective" (Mascia-Lees *et al.* 1989). The authors point to the silencing of Feminist ethnographers by White men in the field claiming to have originated theories formerly articulated or under concurrent development by Feminist scholars. The authors also criticize the ultimate effect of these ideas as deployed within the "cultural helplessness" of postmodernism, holding up by contrast the acknowledged grounding of Feminist scholarship in an activist politics.

JM: It's possible that the great galvanizing moment of feminism has come and gone.

BS: I don't think it's too late. I'm betting on the intrinsic power of black feminism for generations to come.  
(Mansbridge and Smith 2000, 36)

Such an optimism has inspired a plurality of social-justice movements in the history of the United States. The next section of this chapter will look at the political use of music – particularly as a signifier and consolidator of identity – in a legacy of struggles whose ideas and aesthetics resurface in the contemporary Feminist choral movement.

### Music in Political Movements

#### Function, Form, and Content

Humans throughout recorded history and from disparate parts of the globe have ascribed to music *the power of expressing and embodying morality and ideology*. The foregoing discussion relating identity and world-view to aesthetic style helps to explicate this seemingly universal and deeply felt ascription. If people in particular human societies do not consciously recognize the collective influence they have exerted on the constitution of their musical styles, they certainly betray a recognition of the influence that musical styles can exert on their thoughts and their welfare. This recognition is perhaps most visibly articulated in the form of warnings or prohibitions against “wrong” or “bad” music. In the dynasties of ancient China, the “correct” tuning of instruments was deemed critical to the health of the empire (Yung, 1980). In Renaissance Europe, one of the most important rules for the generation of counterpoint in liturgical music was to avoid the interval of the tritone (augmented fourth/diminished fifth), which was referred to as the *diabolus in musica*. In more recent examples, Hitler condemned the serial music of Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg as cultural decadence – *Kulturbolschewismus* (Hausler 1980) – and emergent styles of urban Black music in the United States (jazz, soul, rap) have typically found White detractors who insisted on its sexual or social immorality (Perry 1988, 69, 70).

When activists in social or political movements make the conscious choice to use music as part of their strategy, they must engage in a process of deciding what will constitute “good” music for the furtherance of their goals. In *Sing a Song of Social Significance* (1972), R. Serge Denisoff discusses some common characteristics of songs “in the folk idiom” that have been deployed for political use in various twentieth-century movements in the United States. The meaning of the adjective *folk* when applied to music is highly contested. For the purposes of this discussion, “music in the folk idiom” should be broadly understood as music that is: 1) not in the tradition of European “classical” or “art” music, and not from Tin Pan Alley or any other machine of the popular music industry; 2) in the oral tradition of a given culture or, if newly-composed by an identifiable songwriter, then accompanied – when at all – by acoustic instruments such as guitar, banjo, autoharp, or dulcimer.

Denisoff points out that music in political struggles is used to accomplish two basic goals: to communicate information and ideology, and to stimulate the emotions of the activists. Political songs



aimed especially at the first goal are typically called propaganda songs, topical songs, or songs of persuasion. Of music in this (presumably) informational category, Denisoff identifies six specific objectives:

1. The song attempts to solicit and arouse outside support and sympathy for a social or political movement.
2. The song reinforces the value structure of individuals who are active supporters of the social movement or ideology.
3. The song creates and promotes cohesion, solidarity, and high morale in an organization or movement supporting its world view.
4. The song is an attempt to recruit individuals for a specific social movement.
5. The song invokes solutions to real or imagined social phenomena in terms of action to achieve a desired goal.
6. The song points to some problem or discontent in the society, usually in emotional terms. (2, 3)

Songs of this type tend to have several verses with complex textual content that is difficult to memorize. Creators of songs of persuasion often write new lyrics to well-known tunes. Choosing this parody technique both relieves the writer of the need to develop all the song's material and provides a familiar framework that aids others in learning to join the song.

Movement songs with a different primary goal, that of stimulating the emotions of people who are already in the movement or participating in a protest action, must create a depth of response typically evoked only by love songs, national and patriotic anthems, and religious music. In fact, it is toward this end that hymns are frequently adapted to political use. Their connection to tradition is one source of their emotional potency. Another – as in the case of adapted Baptist hymns like “This Little Light of Mine” – is the typically shorter, simpler, and more repetitive nature of their texts, a feature that makes it easy for large groups of people to learn them quickly and sing them together for long stretches at a time, usually with the effect of creating and maintaining a heightened emotional state. Denisoff argues that the use of these songs within political movements fulfills the same functions that Emile Durkheim ascribes to sacred rituals: the inculcation of self-discipline, the creation and reinforcement of cohesion, the perpetuation of tradition, and the enhancement of a sense of well-being (56). Denisoff goes even further in comparing religious and political movements: “Many secular, even anti-religious, social movements owe a great deal to organized religion for providing models and means for social action” (57). The salient example he gives, and the one most pertinent to this study, is the role of Black churches in the Civil Rights Movement.

In “Form and Political Expression in Social Action Songs,” Robert Glenn examines more closely the assumed and actual effects of heavily texted songs of persuasion versus simple, repetitive, near-ritualistic songs (1988). Glenn distinguishes musical versus discursive communication, arguing against the assumption that the “musical editorial” contained in a song of persuasion can prove a case or endorse a controversial position in the way that speech can. Drawing on the work of Basil Bernstein and Maurice Bloch, he points to the distinction between two communicative codes. The “restricted” or “formal” code is

used in homogenous systems of shared knowledge and belief. Variety in vocabulary is limited, references are concrete rather than analytical, and the speaker's meaning is left implicit. The "elaborated" or "adaptive" code, on the other hand, is used among diverse groups where information, ideas, and interpretations are contested. Speakers in this code have a wide range of choices in vocabulary and syntax, and because agreement is by no means assured, they make their meanings explicit.

A superficial consideration of these distinct codes would lead one to identify the propaganda song with the latter code and the repetitive, adapted congregational hymn with the former. Glenn claims, however, that both types of songs are characterized by the restricted code. As an example, he points to propaganda songs used by the Wobblies (International Workers of the World) in the 1920s and '30s. While the party elite were debating highly-contested matters of great intricacy, the content of the songs they put out to their constituents presented only "those themes on which there was the highest consensus" within the union. It must also be recognized that these songs – despite the hopes of their creators – were overwhelmingly sung to audiences of the "converted." Therefore, the actual effect of these songs was to express a pre-existing solidarity among members rather than to draw new members into its circle. What significance, then, is to be placed on the incontestable difference in the use of language between the song of persuasion and a song like "We Shall Overcome"? To answer this question, Glenn turns to the findings of Alan Lomax's cantometrics project.

Lomax collected some 4000 recorded singing samples from a wide cultural spectrum in search of a universal set of formal elements of singing that express and constitute social features. He analyzed each sample and plotted its position on a scale for each of thirty-six attributes (textual content, social organization, enunciation, vocal tension, etc.). Glenn acknowledges that the project has its critics, but he affirms the validity of Lomax's findings for his own argument, which is that political meaning in songs is communicated not by their textual content but by their form. For example: "...well-integrated, cohesive singing groups reflect and reinforce a high level of social solidarity. With respect to the text, ...frequent repetition reflects a high degree of consensus and shared information." Certainly, cohesion in singing is aided by frequent repetition, so the choice by a group of protesters facing riot police to sing "We Shall Overcome" is clearly motivated by the need for solidarity that this familiar and repetitive song helps to enhance. On the other hand, an "absence of (textual) repetition reflects a high valuation of information, usually in a diversified economy. ...And with respect to enunciation, precision varies directly with the size of the state, reflecting in songs a community's high valuation of verbal control as a means of coordination" (38). These two characteristics are related, for a propaganda song's high degree of textual variation depends on enunciation to make itself clear, something that a short, repetitive song does not demand. To return to Glenn's Wobbly example, a "high valuation of verbal control" aptly characterizes the party elite, who had typically received a formalized higher education and whose politics were informed by extensive readings in history and political philosophy.

Glenn's article reinforces theories relating aesthetic style and cultural identity, offering a useful background to the history of political uses of music that follows in this chapter. I will present summaries of

the work of a few scholars whose accounts build a particular chronology relevant to this study. The chapter will conclude with my interpretations of the scholarship I have presented and its importance to my own research.

“Red” Music in the United States: R. Serge Denisoff’s *Great Day Coming*

Denisoff devotes his book *Great Day Coming* (1971) specifically to the uses of folk music by Leftists in the United States. The history traced in this book highlights ideologies, methods, and even specific songs and personalities that resurface in the Womyn’s choral movement, so it warrants significant attention here.

The overall tenor of the book criticizes the urban and educated insularity of the Communist Party U.S.A. (CPUSA) as measured by the inevitable failure of its misguided attempts in the 1920s, ’30s, and ’40s to define a folk music for the laboring masses. The purpose of these attempts was to use music – among the other arts – as a means of creating a Marxian “true” or “class” consciousness in the doctrine of “art as weapon” that was so popular among American Leftists. The misdirection of the CPUSA’s musical efforts can be ascribed to their overly literal adaptation of the lessons of the Russian Revolution.

It was through the folk wisdom contained in the creative forms of folk song, fairy tale, proverb, and adage that the Bolsheviks had succeeded in politicizing the masses. These masses, however, were primarily rural, so the cultural artifacts used to reach them were their own. When the CPUSA decided that its most effective weapons would be propaganda songs developed out of rural American folk genres, it failed to realize that its primarily immigrant and urban audience would not recognize or identify with this music. The actual spirit of the Bolshevik approach would have indicated using the genres most commonly listened to by urban workers. This, however, would have meant turning to dance-club music, Broadway tunes, and Tin Pan Alley fare. These styles bore the taint of capitalist commercialism and were thus regarded as expressing “false consciousness,” so the CPUSA pursued instead its errant strategy (4-6, 17).

*Rural Field Contacts*

How did the New-York-based CPUSA leadership happen upon the folk-styled song of persuasion? Their initial encounters with the genre took place around 1920 when Northern activists traveled to the textile workers’ strikes in Gastonia and Loray, North Carolina, and the coal miners’ strike in Harlan County, Kentucky. Ella May Wiggins, a Gastonia striker of local fame as a balladeer, presented CPUSA members with their first examples of folk propaganda when she joined lyrics about workers’ concerns to her mountain song style. Wiggins was martyred during the struggle by vigilante gunfire, and visiting activists from New York brought her songs back home as emblems of their new aesthetic. In Harlan County, three women in particular were known for their propaganda songs: Sarah Ogan, the noted Aunt Molly Jackson, and Florence Reese, writer of the widely-known union song “Which Side Are You On?” Mill hands and coal miners were composing revolutionary lyrics to stock folk melodies. All these songs, too, traveled home with the CPUSA workers (18-26).

Denisoff makes the claim that a traditional melody suddenly sung to words like *bourgeoisie* is no longer a folk song. Furthermore, the person singing traditional music – whether altered or not – for political ends is not a folk singer but a *folk entrepreneur* displaying *folk consciousness*. Denisoff defines folk consciousness as an ideological orientation among people viewing themselves as spokespersons for “the folk” (26). Folk consciousness peaked in the late '30s, which was when the folk-styled song of persuasion and Southern hymns and Spirituals, first encountered by New York Communists in the early '20s, finally received ongoing use as propaganda tools. One institutional embodiment of folk consciousness that ultimately had a significant impact on the folk repertoires of Northern Communists was the labor college, especially the Brookwood, Highlander, and Commonwealth schools (26).

Labor colleges were established to organize rural workers into the industrial unions. Commonwealth and Highlander were in the South – Arkansas and Tennessee, respectively – and Brookwood was in upstate New York. Each of these schools employed or produced musicians whose work had a sizeable impact on the state of musical activism on the Left. Brookwood hired Tom Tippett, a former miner and United Mine Workers official, to provide guidelines for appealing to Southern workers through music. Tippett had participated in the Gastonia strike, among many others, making extensive use of songs of persuasion. He is the author of the book *When Southern Labor Stirs*, in which he stressed that Southern workers could best be reached through artifacts of mountain culture, particularly hymns, spirituals, and “hillbilly” (currently referred to as *Old-Time*) music. Some of Tippett’s songs reached the New York Garment Workers Union, though they were rarely used. The Brookwood school, founded in 1921, folded in 1936 under the rigors of the Depression, but its alumni turned up later in the Almanac Singers and at the popular New York Leftist song gatherings called “Hootenannies” (29-32).

The Highlander Folk School was founded in 1932 by three men, Miles Horton among them. Denisoff characterizes the school as “a local enterprise that used native folk material for social and economic purposes” (32). Organized as a cooperative in the Danish tradition, it engaged students in the lessons of sociology, history, and practice for the solution of social problems. After becoming involved in a nearby mining strike, the college adopted a labor orientation, and its courses were geared heavily toward serving union members and training union leaders. One Highlander student reports that singing was continuous at the college, and songs learned on campus were taken outside to union meetings. In 1935, a woman from a mining town who had a formal music background came to Highlander, and some time afterwards, she and Miles Horton were married. Zilphia Horton was appointed music director of the college, in which capacity she collected some 1300 songs from Left-wing groups and in Southern traditions both Black and White. These she disseminated for organizational use. The emblematic song of the Civil Rights Movement, “We Shall Overcome,” is one that she collected from the CIO Food and Tobacco Workers (32-34) and then shared widely.

The first students of Commonwealth College typically accompanied their farm chores with the singing of Soviet revolutionary songs and pro-Soviet Wobbly and Chartist songs, though it was noticed that the appeal of these songs was lost on the sharecroppers in the surrounding community. It was only in

Commonwealth's last years that Claude Williams, an African-American preacher, convinced the school of the appropriateness of borrowing folk songs, particularly Negro Spirituals, for communicating themes of social protest. This practice had a profound influence on two singer-songwriters in the Commonwealth orbit who later moved North: Lee Hays and John Handcox. Hays went on to become a cofounder of the Almanac Singers, which group eventually credited Williams with much of their repertoire and practice. Handcox, a local sharecropper, became a prominent singer and organizer with the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (26-29).

The Southern Tenant Farmers Union was one of the CPUSA's richest musical sources. The STFU was racially integrated and included many illiterate members. Meetings were charismatic in the style of local church services attended by poor Blacks and Whites together. They opened with prayers, featured the singing of hymns, used slogans built on biblical references, and built the intensity of participation to a fervid pitch. John Handcox led much of the singing, which often featured African-American Spirituals as particularly suited to the union program (34-36).

The Negro Spiritual brought to the North by Handcox and others impressed the Communist elite as the most effective and ideologically pure tool for organizing the masses. Many of the songs were deemed appropriate for protest or used as the bases for propaganda songs. Those that did not offer overt messages of resistance were exalted as true indicators of class consciousness and paradigmatic examples of *people's art*: expressions of the deepest emotions of members of the most oppressed sector of the capitalist social structure (36-39).

#### *The Development of Urban "Folk Consciousness"*

Meanwhile, up North, the preeminent musical activity in the New York Left in the early '30s was "mass singing" as practiced by the workers' choruses. Based primarily on the Russian model, these choruses were seen as one of the most effective media for reaching the masses. Among many such groups were the American Workers' Chorus, the Daily Worker Chorus, the Freiheit Chorus, and the I.L.D. Song Group under the direction of Elie Siegmeister. These singing associations performed mostly traditional European material and songs supplied by the musical apparatus of the movement, the Workers Music League (WML). The WML was created in 1931 under the slogan "Music for the Masses." It consisted of a federation of some twenty New York City choruses, orchestras, and bands of various party affiliations and language orientations. Its charge was to stand "ready with advice and help to all workers and their organizations," and toward this end it provided entertainment at rallies and gatherings, submitted its compositions to the *Daily Worker*, and published songbooks (41-42).

Composers for the WML were organized under the Pierre Degeyter Club, named after the writer of the "Internationale." They were charged with creating an entirely new music that the proletariat would identify as its own. The Composers' Collective ignored the sporadic incursions of folk-protest songs by Aunt Molly Jackson, Ella May Wiggins, and Margaret Larkin, turning out music that was classical in construction and often inaccessible to the untrained chorus. Noted composer Henry Cowell, working for

the WML, conceded that folk music could be used as a starting point for choruses but that technical innovations should gradually be introduced to inculcate an appreciation of musical sophistication in the singers. This stance came under steady attack by a handful of writers who denounced the WML's elitism and urged the adoption of Negro songs of protest, work songs, railroad songs, cowboy songs, and mountain songs, a repertoire that was homegrown and that workers would identify as people's music, as *their* music. In response to the concerns of their critics, the WML and the Composers' Collective were disbanded, and the American Music League was established in its place to serve as a broad-based, Popular Front organization. One of its missions was the collection, study, and popularization of American folk music. (42, 48-49).

One direction adopted in the AML's new mission, the so-called "Americanization program," idealized music that was no more familiar to or popular among urban workers than any other style the party had propounded. "The Star-Spangled Banner" appeared in place of the "Internationale" at the front of workers' songbooks. Thomas Jefferson's birthday was officially observed. And in 1936, a writer in the *Daily Worker* called for the rejection of all foreign material. In an issue one week later, former WML composer Hans Eisler exalted the emergence of the New Singers as the first Anglophone chorus comparable to European groups such as the Freiheit Mandolin Band, German and Italian workers' choruses, and the Ukrainian Workers Chorus. By 1939, the New Singers were performing war ballads from the American Revolution and the Civil War and adaptations of "John Henry," "Sistren and Brethren," and "Lamentation over Boston." Their example was followed by several choruses. This process of adopting native material contributed to the increasing popularization of "folk" music among New York Communists. At the same time, the pedestalizing of the genre led to the blurring of its definition: proponents of certain agitprop songs that were actually foreign in origin or of original, individual composership touted them as American folk songs (55-57).

In general, most union songs in folk styles were written by radicals for the workers. It was rare that songs emerged spontaneously from workers in a strike situation, and these tended to be parodied fragments of popular tunes. Still, the Stalinists remained convinced that folk material was the music of the industrial proletariat. Denisoff identifies the years 1939 through 1942 as the "proletarian renaissance...., a sort of folk revival in miniature," and describes it as representing "a subculture and a style of life which fitted into the working-class ethos of the Communist Party. (It) was a manifestation of all the elements of folk consciousness – field contacts, ideology, tactics, and personnel" (68).

A significant source of actual folk culture at the time was the Works Progress Administration's set of folklore projects, particularly the song-collection work of the Lomax brothers. Clearly, the federal government had been seized by a nativist sentiment at the same time as the Left was exhibiting it. Other WPA projects included: the Folklore Studies of the Federal Writers' Project under B.A. Botkin; the Index of American Design of the Federal Art Project; the folk recordings and activities of the Federal Music Project, directed by Ruth Crawford Seeger; the Folksong and Folklore Department of the National Service

Bureau of the Federal Theater Project; and the Folk Music Archives of the Library of Congress, directed by the Lomaxes.

In Leftist circles, this “folk renaissance” was characterized by nativism combined with Marxism and Leninism. The year 1939 saw a proliferation of concerts, skits, benefits, and other appearances by people’s artists and folk entrepreneurs. Among the most prominent artists were Earl Robinson, Maurice Sugar, Will Geer, and Burl Ives. By this time, the full range of what the Party considered to be American folk music included the jazz and blues of W.C. Handy and “Leadbelly” (Huddie Ledbetter), Southern White ballads and mining campaign propaganda songs in the style of Aunt Molly Jackson, the cowboy ditties of Tony Kraber, the repertoire of the American People’s Chorus, and the trade-union songs of persuasion performed by the Almanacs (68-74).

#### *A Succession of “People’s Music” Organizations*

The Almanacs were folk entrepreneurs who performed in shifting combinations from among a loosely defined pool that at different times included, among others, Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, Bess Lomax, Millard Lampell, Earl Robinson, Leadbelly, and Woody Guthrie. They were hailed as the icons of the folk renaissance and idealized as untrained musicians who hitched across the country, talking and working with the people and adopting their song repertoires. The truth is that most individuals in the fluid affiliation of singers calling themselves the Almanacs were musically and academically trained, and they wrote many of their songs in their New York and Detroit offices. Their repertoire also comprised a significant amount of music from Southern movements, most of which was unfamiliar to their Northern audiences. Their major contribution to the labor movement was the album entitled *Talking Union*, which included the songs “Roll the Union On,” “Talking Union,” “Union Maid,”<sup>15</sup> “Get Thee Behind Me, Satan,” and “Which Side Are You On?” This recording was wildly popular among bohemians and Leftist intellectuals, though it had few fans among the rank and file. A quote from an unidentified musician in *Sing a Song of Social Significance* admits to the fact that the Almanacs were presenting their folk songs from a position located at one or two removes from “the folk:”

I must regretfully class myself as an outsider in relation to any folk song, since my own community... (which) ... we might call the Urban Literate Southern California Sub-Group of the Early Atomic Period has not yet produced a distinct body of folk music of its own. My innovations are therefore spurious, not being a part of any folk tradition. (Denisoff 1972, 13)

However borrowed their musical ethos, the Almanacs made other daily lifestyle choices consistent with it. They remained poor as a matter of ideology and avoided the personal aggrandizement of individual performers, while artists like Burl Ives and Leadbelly cashed in on commercial work aimed at a rapidly developing audience. The original Almanacs’ shared apartment in Greenwich Village was the site of the

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<sup>15</sup> In a Salt Lake City hotel lobby during a family vacation in March of 2000, I met a Lesbian from California who was active in her trade union and who reported having recently used this song to animate a group of employees preparing to go on strike.

first Hootenanny, an event that went on to define the locus of Leftist musical life in New York as well as providing the means for the Almanacs to pay their rent (Denisoff 1971, 86). At a "Hoot," which was open to the public for a modest entrance fee, the person in charge for the evening would select a lineup of folk music performers. Far from being a formal concert, however, the Hoot was more of a community gathering at which all in attendance were encouraged to sing. Denisoff quotes Irwin Silber's description of the event from the liner notes to *Hootenanny at Carnegie Hall* (Folkways Records, FN 2512):

1. Audience participation. Hootenanny audiences come expecting to sing as much as possible.
2. Topicality. Hootenannies have always served as the basis for musical comments on the events of the world. In general, these comments have reflected a "left-of-liberal" political outlook characterized by belief in and support for the trade union movement, world peace and co-existence with the Russians, and an antagonism to such representative political symbols as Senators Bilbo, Taft, and McCarthy.
3. Variety of form. Hootenannies, while based on the folk song tradition, have always included many forms of musical and theatrical expression.
4. New performers. Hootenannies have always featured new and young artists. Many a hootenanny artist has never appeared before in audience larger than 250 people or so prior to getting up before the microphone.
5. The audience. The most important quality about hootenannies has been the fact that its audience is composed predominantly of young people – teenagers and college students – who have found that a hootenanny communicates *music, ideas, and a sense of the real America to them.* (114)

The Hootenanny formula was potent enough to survive the group that created it. In 1942 the Almanacs disbanded after a severe buffeting from turns in world political events. The group had begun as pacifists, composing several songs urging resistance to war. But when the Nazis invaded Russia, this position was no longer tenable for the Soviet sympathizers, who turned to pro-war material that urged the people of the United States to set aside domestic conflicts and unite against Hitler. One year after the invasion, the Communist press began to clamor for good war songs, which call the Almanacs answered with their 1942 album *Dear Mr. President*. By the spring of that year, the group's integrity was beset on all sides. Labor press suggested that they represented Moscow more than the American worker. They were Red-baited from outside the Left. Other press criticized their former non-interventionist position or denounced their alignment with labor as undermining the need for national unity in wartime. Some members were drafted into the war, and others joined the effort voluntarily (89-99).

While remaining critical of the Almanacs' ideological isolation from the American masses, Denisoff hails the long-term effects of this short-lived group:

The contribution of the Almanac Singers to the...folk music revival (of the '60s) is not insignificant. The group provided a form or structure for presenting folk music, i.e., trios, quartets, etc. (They) also furthered the practice of singing propaganda songs in the urban society, and they furnished a training ground for the majority of folk entrepreneurs who performed during the forties and fifties. (104-105)



Once World War II was over, Communists in the United States renewed their interest in folk music. Pete Seeger was universally loved, Hootenannies were revived, and veteran artists joined with new ones to form People's Songs, Inc. (PSI). PSI's ambitious goal was to get labor singing and, through the power of a singing labor movement, to affect the musical tastes of the entire nation. They used songs in union mobilization campaigns, taught classes on the uses of music for political action, and participated with high visibility in the Progressive Party convention, marking the first time that campaign songs originated in some source outside of the popular music industry. They published the *People's Songs Bulletin* for disseminating the work of individual songwriters who, as the national anti-Communist climate grew chillier, could not get published or produced by anyone else. The *Bulletin* issued regular calls for song submissions, claiming that the people were "on the march and must have songs to sing" and that "the truth must reassert itself in many singing voices" (109). In that year, *Fortune* magazine published an article on the threat PSI posed to big business. By 1947, the group had been denounced as Communists to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), though some of its members neither possessed party cards nor professed any faith in Marxist theory. In fact, both sides of the political divide had overestimated the group's actual influence, which was limited by the esoteric nature of its music. By 1949 the group was bankrupt (107-123).

In the vacuum left by PSI, People's Artists Inc. (PAI) sprang up, administered by some of the same individuals. Most PAI personnel were Communist sympathizers who still clung to the belief in the power of music to advance revolutionary goals. However, the introduction to the first issue of PAI's monthly, *Sing Out!*, betrayed members' suspicion that a broader definition of "politically-correct" music was in order:

What is this "People's Music?" In the first place, like all folk music, it has to do with the hopes and fears and lives of common people – of the great majority. In the second place, like that other music... it will grow on the basis of folk music. We propose that these...shall now join in common people and that is what we will call "People's Music." No form – folk song, concert song, dance, symphony, jazz – is alien to it. By one thing above all else we judge: How well does it serve the common cause of humanity? (119)

The contents of *Sing Out!* were characterized by a move back to the aesthetics of the Eislerian choral model. Articles promoted the formation of choruses under the slogan: "Sing, Perform, Organize." Printed music included Russian, Korean, and Chinese "folk songs." Writers praised the Unity Chorus, the Saint Louis Neighborhood Folk Chorus, the Washington Peace Chorus, and Minnesota's North Star Singers.

By this time the Weavers, a folk septet, had garnered a significant audience. Articles in *Sing Out!* criticized the Weavers for both a "White chauvanist" use of "Negro music" and for a lack of political content in their songs. The HUAC found them less innocuous, denouncing them and PAI – with the help of Burl Ives and other "stool pigeons" – as Communist fronts. PAI took up the solicitation of funds for the losing campaign of the Progressive Party and the defense of alleged atom spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.

With their increasing isolation under McCarthyism, PAI was losing money steadily. In 1956 Stalin was exposed, the American Communist Party disintegrated, and Pete Seeger sent out a letter announcing the disbanding of PAI (120-122).

Looking back on the efficacy of the strategy represented by PAI, PSI, and the Almanacs, Seeger remarked: "Most union leaders could not see any connection between music and pork chops" (127). The remainder of *Great Day Coming* looks at the trajectory of the Communist-inspired "folk revival" as it took shape during the '60s with the birth of the Newport Folk Festival, the emergence of the "star system" as encouraged by the popular-music industry, and the electrification and eventual depoliticization of the music of "folk" stars such as Bob Dylan. However, as Bernice Johnson Reagon remarks, "the presence of songs and the publishing and collecting apparatus developed during this movement also served the (Civil Rights) Movement of the 1960s. In many cases, this work was carried out by the same individuals" (Reagon 1975, 63).

### Freedom Songs

By "Freedom Song" is meant a song – usually in an African-American traditional style – that was sung within the context of the Civil Rights struggle. The period of this struggle is typically dated from the 1954 *Brown v Board of Education* case, but for the purposes of this study, I will consider events beginning in 1960 that bore importantly on the widespread use of music within the struggle. Bernice Johnson Reagon's Ph.D. dissertation, *Songs of the Civil Rights Movement 1955-1965: A Study in Culture History* (1975), examines the changing content and styles of songs used at every important locus of activism during this period, presenting these as essential oral documentation of the Movement's history. More specifically, her study highlights "the transformation of Blacks in terms of their own identity," "the story of a transformed people" that is told in viewing "the birth of their new songs" (23, 24). Reagon discusses the use of Northern-style propaganda or topical songs as well as parodies of songs by popular Black artists such as Ray Charles. But the greater focus of her document – and the subject of the present discussion – is the use of adapted Black Baptist and Methodist hymns and of Spirituals.<sup>16</sup>

The Spiritual can be viewed as the original Freedom Song. Along with the "moan," the field holler, the work song, the ring shout, and other forms, the Spiritual arose from the voices of slaves singing their experience of captivity and forced labor on American soil. All of these styles, taken together, form the American *Ursong* of the characteristically Black language of music and identity invoked in the passages by Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, and others quoted earlier in this chapter. But when Frederick Douglass was attempting to engage the attention and the activism of Northerners within the orbit of the growing Abolitionist movement, it was to the sounds and the words of the Spiritual alone that he urged his audience to listen for the true voice of the slave and the clearest testimony against slavery. In *Culture on the*

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<sup>16</sup> I use this term in its narrowest sense as a song created by slaves and relying heavily on Biblical – especially Old-Testament – texts for images of deliverance from bondage. In the 1870s, the Fisk Jubilee Singers established the "concert" Spiritual as a legitimate genre within European-style choral practice. African Americans outside this practice today generally use the term "Spiritual" to denote any style of Black sacred music; before I learned this, I had several conversations with African Americans in which we were unwittingly discussing two different things.

*Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation* (1999), Jon Cruz proffers several reasons for Douglass's singling out of this song form. In particular, with the slaves having been Christianized throughout the South – albeit in varying guises and with contrasting motives – the Scriptural basis of the Spiritual texts met with recognition and approbation in the dominant society. Cruz's book goes on to trace the forces that resulted in Whites' idealization of the Spiritual as the preferred mode of Black cultural expression. In later chapters I will discuss some of the implications and results of this history, but for now it will suffice to point out that though the Spiritual was not the only form of sung resistance created by enslaved Blacks in the United States, its appropriation by Abolitionists and other social reformers imbued it with an enduring prominence in the attention of White and Black Americans.

Of particular interest is the use of the Spiritual's coded text in calculated efforts of self-liberation from slavery.<sup>17</sup> In 1939 John Lovell published "The Social Implications of the Negro Spiritual" in the *Journal of Negro Education*. In this article, Lovell discusses the 1937 testimony of Sterling Brown on the textual content of the genre. Brown's case rested on the testimonies of Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass who explained that, for example, "deliverance" for the "Israelites" meant freedom for the slaves, "Canaan" meant Canada, and:

...of course, the chariot in "Swing Low" is some arm of freedom reaching out to draw (the slave) in; and the number of times it succeeded shows that it was no hopeless hope. Of course "My Lord delibered Daniel... why can't he deliber me" means just what it says. And the falling rocks and mountains hit the slave's enemies. You would never get the communities all over the South which tasted slave revolts, especially in 1831, 1856, and 1860, to believe that these rocks and mountains were ethereal or that they couldn't fall at any time. You would never get post-Sherman Georgia to believe that there was no fire in hell for sinners. The slave song was an awesome prophecy, rooted in the knowledge of what was going on and of human nature, and not in mystical lore. Its deadly edge threatened: and struck. (reprinted in Katz 1969, 130 & 135)

Reagon says that "the songs of the slaves and the purpose they served for group strength, unity and statement, provided a guide for the use of music in the Civil Rights Movement that was rendered with little urging and no rehearsals" (Reagon 1975, 40). Civil Rights activists in the '60s called on Spirituals and other Freedom Songs to supply them with cohesion, faith, and courage. Testament abounds everywhere to the power of these songs to inspire, rouse, and unify protesters facing the most life-threatening circumstances. Denisoff (1969) quotes Robert Sherman:

They are dramatic emblems of the struggle and mighty weapons in it. Their steady, surging rhythms, their lilting melodies, and their simple, inspirational words, repeated over and over again, generate a fervor that can only be described as religious in its intensity. Even the least articulate of people can join in these group songs and respond to them fully, often the music serves as the best, even the primary means of

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<sup>17</sup> Quilt designs were similarly encoded. See *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* by Jaqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard (2000).

communication between the people and their leaders. (50) ("Sing a Song of Freedom." in De Turk and Poulin, eds., *The American Folk Scene*, New York: Dell Publishing Co., pp. 173-174)

Southern Civil Rights activists saw these songs as so indispensable to the success of the movement that in 1960, Miles Horton, Guy Carawan (who had succeeded Zilphia Horton as music director at Highlander), and Septima Clark (who in conjunction with Highlander founded the Citizenship Schools<sup>18</sup>) organized the first Sing for Freedom workshop, held in August of 1960. Josh Dunson reports on the event in *Freedom in the Air: Song Movements of the 60's* (1965):

*Leaders and singers of the embattled southern communities came, as well as many outstanding topical and folk singers from the North. Attending and participating in the discussions were singers and individuals who were to have an important effect upon the Freedom Movement and the nature and dissemination of its songs. Carawan led the conference and, from Nashville, fresh from their experiences, were Candy Anderson and Julius Lester (a Fisk senior during the Nashville sit-ins; later became musical director of the Highlander School). Four girls from Montgomery brought their gospel renditions of freedom songs, while two important leaders in the SCLC, the Reverends C.T. Vivian and Frederick Shuttlesworth, set the tone for and keynoted the meeting. From the North came Gil Turner, Pete Seeger, Bill McAdoo and Ethel Raim... (40)*

One of the tangible products of the workshop was a mimeographed songbook containing material in use by both Southern and Northern activists. Dunson has separated these into two lists. A comparison shows the heavily traditional and Scriptural orientation of the Southern songs, while the Northern songs are mostly newly composed topical songs or parodied songs of persuasion.

#### SOUTHERN

We Shall Overcome  
Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning  
Sowin' on the Mountain  
I'm Comin' Home on the Mornin' Train  
We Are Soldiers  
Moving on to Victory  
Oh Freedom  
John Brown's Body  
Plenty Good Room

#### NORTHERN

The Beatitudes  
The Burning Cross  
Picket, Picket  
Jim Crow Has to Go  
Integrate the Schools  
For Just a Little Drink  
We Have Gathered  
The Ink is Black  
I'm Gonna Walk and Talk for My Freedom  
It Could Be a Wonderful World  
The Whole Wide World Around  
Man of the Whole Wide World (42)

Dunson observes that although the "best songwriters of the 1950s" were represented by the accomplished singing of Pete Seeger, this repertoire was not what the Civil Rights activists in 1965 were singing. He

<sup>18</sup> Spread throughout the south, these schools for poor African Americans were aimed at creating not just voters but active citizens. They taught literacy, community involvement, and political activism.

reports that songs like “We Are Soldiers” and “Oh Freedom,” which Black Americans had been singing for generations, could bring in hundreds at large gatherings from their first note: the songs were all well known, and changing just one or two words could adapt them to the specific situation at hand.

A year later, in the winter of 1961/1962, the streets of Albany, Georgia, erupted in protest. Charles Sherrod and Cordell Reagon, SNCC (Southern Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) field secretaries, had been on the campus of Albany State College for two months sounding out the students’ readiness and preparing them for demonstrations and arrests. The catalytic incident was the arrest of two Black students attempting to be served at the White-only counter of the Albany bus station on the very day that the Interstate Commerce Commission had outlawed segregation in public bus depots. One hundred people attended the hearing for the students and were themselves arrested, after which thousands of people, most of them adults from the community surrounding the college, poured into the streets (Dunson, 64). Bernice Johnson Reagon was involved in this campaign as a singing activist and reports that:

...the march occurred in silence. Returning to the Albany State campus, the students met in Union Baptist Church to discuss the next step. (I) was asked to sing. ...I don’t know where the song came from. I took a deep breath and there it was: “Over My Head I See Freedom in the Air.” I knew the song as “Over My Head I See Music in the Air” and “trouble in the air.” However, I had just seen a part of a defiant protest involving 200 students – I saw no trouble, just freedom. As I came to the end of each verse, a new line would pop into my head and I would sing it. “I see victory in the air.” “I see glory in the air, there must be a God somewhere.” (Reagon 1975, 134-135)

The resistance in Albany is remembered as the first singing movement. Its songs were taken from the old musical traditions still being observed in the churches attended by most of its participants. Among them were “Over My Head,” “Woke Up This Morning,” “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around,” “This Little Light of Mine,” “We Shall Not Be Moved,” and “Oh, Freedom.” Every song that was sung in the streets was given a textual adaptation to the current situation,<sup>19</sup> and by the summer of 1962, this music had caught the attention of the national press. SNCC field secretary Charles Jones told Robert Shelton, folk music critic of *The New York Times*, that without the songs there could have been no Albany Movement:

We could not have communicated with the masses of people without music, and they could not have communicated with us. They are not articulate. But through songs, they expressed years of suppressed hope, suffering, even joy and love... (from Robert Shelton, “Singing for Freedom: Music of the Integration Movement” in *Sing Out!*, December 1961/January 1962, 4-17, as quoted in Reagon, 1975.)

Interest in the music of the Albany movement stimulated the formation of the *a cappella* ensemble called the Freedom Singers, all of whom were SNCC members. The dissemination across the country of

<sup>19</sup> Adaptations of “This Little Light of Mine” included: “Every time I’m bleeding, I’m gonna let it shine” and “Voting for my freedom, I’m gonna let it shine” (Dunson 1965, 101). “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around” was easily adapted to name the Chief of Police: “Ain’t gonna let no Pritchett turn me around...” (Omolade 1985, 4).

the emerging Freedom Songs can be attributed in large measure to this ensemble. The first touring group of the Freedom Singers consisted of four members, including Bernice Johnson Reagon. Their goal was to raise money and spread the ideology of SNCC. The main body of their repertoire came from the Albany movement, the Nashville sit-ins, and the songs of Freedom Riders jailed for thirty-nine days at the Parchmen Penitentiary, Mississippi. Also on their song list was the rhythm-and-blues number "Dog, Dog." Though they began their travels by singing for any bed, board, and transportation that was offered, Toshi Seeger – wife of Pete Seeger – eventually managed a very successful tour for them that netted close to \$50,000 for SNCC and brought the message of the movement to tens of thousands of people. In 1963 the Freedom Singers made a huge impression at the Newport Folk Festival, which Cordell Reagon reports "turned into one big freedom sing" (Dunson, 65).

The year 1963 was also significant for the SCLC's long struggle in Birmingham, Alabama. Bull Connor's police force attempted by fire hoses, dogs, and riot squads to quash the demonstrations, but the strength of the resistance only grew. At nightly meetings, attended by thousands, the main attraction was Carleton Reese's Gospel Freedom Choir of the Alabama Christian Movement for Civil Rights. By 1964, the Reverend Andrew Young was teaching activists that forming a local choir of the best singers from the area's churches was a civil rights tactic of choice (67).

In May of 1964, the SCLC, SNCC, and the Highlander Folk School held the Atlanta Sing for Freedom on the old campus of the Gannon Theological Seminary. The invitation, addressed to Southern organizations, read:

Would you like to know more freedom songs and have better singing at your mass meetings and community gatherings? If so, please carefully choose one or two people in your group who are good at singing and songleading and will be able to learn something at this workshop and festival which they can use to help your organization and local movement. (99)

Publicity announced the participation of such esteemed activist leaders/singers as Fannie Lou Hamer, Bernice and Cordell Reagon, and Betty Mae Fikes. Emphasis was placed on learning old African-American songs and "the stories and backgrounds behind them." The application for scholarship assistance made it clear that the Atlanta sing was not a festival but a serious function of a movement depending on music as one of its methods of struggle. Section Two of the application read:

If you have participated in the Student Movement or civil rights work, briefly describe your activities: Have you worked with music? Describe: Why do you wish to attend this festival? What do you expect to get out of it to make you a better **musical worker** in your community? (100)

Dunson attended the Sing and reports that the diverse array of styles represented included "every local Southern tradition imaginable." Northern propaganda songs, Freedom Songs, and "traditional Negro songs and stories" (99-103).

In this latter category were the offerings of Bessie Jones and the Sea Island Singers. The debate that this ensemble provoked proved to be what Dunson experienced as the most important event at the gathering. The ensemble acted out their songs with dances, told old slave stories, and attempted to engage the audience in children's game songs. These attempts were greeted by rising tension and whispers of "Uncle Tom" until Jones was forced to address the attendees. She presented her group's repertoire as "the culture of the slave who despite the master's attempts to force him into an animal's life like that of his cow or dog, succeeded in making his own system of songs which not only provided a form of expression but also served as signals for escape" (103). An extremely emotional debate ensued that aired some Black people's shame at the past represented by the songs, others' regret that the songs had become ridiculed and forgotten, and others' pride in reclaiming them. But it was the Reverend Andrew Young whose argument finally settled the debate:

We all know you can't trust a Negro on the negotiating committee who doesn't like his people's music. We learned that in Birmingham! (104)

That evening, the Sea Island Singers were the only group performing on the concert to receive a standing ovation.

The Civil Rights Movement saw the apparent attainment of its immediate goals with the passage of the Civil Rights Act later that year and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. By this time, the Movement's ideologies, tactics, and songs had exerted a lasting effect upon the entire country, drawing supporters from different racial, regional, and class backgrounds and comprising many musical styles. The contemporaneous folk revival contributed to this material, which significantly influenced the direction of the popular music industry. Much of the substance of the singing struggle, its subsequent documentation, and the extension of its traditions has been shaped by the same Bernice Johnson Reagon who figures so prominently in the present study. Arrested in the Albany protests, she discovered the unifying power of singing while sitting in jail with sixty women. She subsequently realized her strongest contribution to the movement as a member of the Freedom Singers. She went on to write a dissertation on Freedom Songs and African-American Culture, compose songs honoring the lives of singing and fighting Black women like Fannie Lou Hamer, Joan Little, and Ella Baker, and compile recordings of Civil Rights songs and Black congregational singing. In the early '70s she organized the Harambee Singers, a Black women's ensemble whose repertoire linked traditional Black materials with contemporary protest songs in Africa and the United States (Omolade 1985). And it was in 1973 that she convened the group that was to develop into Sweet Honey In The Rock, the African-American women's *a cappella* ensemble so beloved all over the country and abroad, not least by adherents of the Womyn's music movement.

## The Music of Feminism

### *Beginnings*

Feminist researcher Bonnie Morris's book, *Eden Built By Eves: The Culture of Women's Music Festivals* (1999), provides much of the scholarship on which this section relies. Morris is a veteran participant at and documenter of festivals of Womyn's music – the crucibles of cultural Feminism in North America – and it is this experience on which so much of her authority rests. Her book is also heavily informed by extensive research through the issues of *Hot Wire: The Journal of Women's Music and Culture*, which was published between 1984 and 1994. The other significant voice in this section is my own, coming from my experiences as a festival attendee, performer, and production crew member.

Morris's account of her journey to and through Womyn's music begins where I left off of Denisoff's chronology in *Great Day Coming*. Her opening page hints at the same depoliticization and superstar orientation of the 1960s folk music scene critiqued by Denisoff:

I grew up in the 1960s, listening to women's folk music recordings by Judy Collins and Joan Baez. My mother played these albums over and over in our California living room when she did her modern dance exercises. I became convinced that both Judy and Joan were simply artistic extensions of my own mother. As a result of my early exposure to women artists of the 1960s folk and antiwar movements, I saw women as the moral and musical authorities of what was then a male-oriented and commercial "protest" genre. (xi)

Morris recalls that it was not until the next decade, however, that recordings of women's voices singing "unabashedly feminist" music could be heard. To set the stage for the flowering between 1973 and 1976 of music festivals in the Lesbian United States, she traces women's legacy of political singing in this country back to the union movements of the early twentieth century. She makes an observation that is missing from Denisoff's account:

Workplace songs in a plethora of languages gave voice to immigrant women's issues.... especially when unions excluded working women from their memberships. (2)

In the "folk renaissance" of the '40s and '50s, Morris finds important narratives of women's roles in unionization campaigns and strikes, and she reports that despite the restrictions during McCarthyism on "the work of outspoken women artists like Ronnie Gilbert,"<sup>20</sup> folk and protest music went on to become a fad among particular audiences nationwide. She critiques the commercial success of White folk performers for coming at the expense of the visibility of Black women (whose original songs went unplayed by mainstream stations during the '50s), a silence that was broken in the '60s:

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<sup>20</sup> Gilbert was a member of the Weavers. Morris's book includes her account of being introduced to the Womyn's music festival phenomenon by Holly Near. Gilbert eventually performed with Near on the festival circuit and also came out as a Lesbian.



It was the civil rights movement which gave national prominence to the voices of African-American women and transmitted their songs of commitment and challenge to white women across the land. (2)

Women of various racial and economic backgrounds organizing in the Civil Rights and anti-war efforts of the '60s regularly found themselves shut out of positions of leadership and expected to assume the roles of comfort-providers for male activists. Finding these experiences difficult to square with the ideals of emancipation and equality for which they were supposedly striving, freedom- and action-oriented women inaugurated a new era of Feminist organizing unequalled since the suffrage movement – though no less riven along divisions of race and class. An additional source of conflict among these women was introduced by the emergence of a literary and political Lesbian-Feminist subculture, whose new followers began to create women-only spaces for consciousness-raising, organizing, publishing, recreating, and *singing*:

With growing awareness that the lesbian quest for freedom was a civil rights issue like any other, some lesbians began proclaiming their right to love through song. For those women – lesbian, bi, and heterosexual – whose hearts responded to any message of woman-identified music, the next challenge was learning how to produce and market albums outside male commercial confines. (3)

The Feminist inclination to do things for and recycle their money amongst themselves was a significant motivator in this challenge, but the real provocation was the refusal of the male-dominated music business to record, produce, or give air time to openly Womyn-identified musicians. The determination, ingenuity, and sheer numbers with which women met this challenge attest to the power they found in Womyn's music to shape their Feminist world. Women with no background in sound engineering or events production stepped forward to train themselves in the skills necessary to "protect the political integrity of this new product called women's music" (4). Thus the phenomenon of the Womyn's music festival was born, and it happened that, beyond being used as a mere expression of developing Feminist consciousness, the pursuit of Womyn's music in the United States has constituted encounters in which – indeed, the very land on which – women from many parts of the world imagine, experiment with, and create new Feminist ideas, identities, networks, strategies, organizations, and movements.

A definition of "Womyn's music" is elusive, to be sure. Its meaning has shifted with evolutions in the movement that has produced it, and at no time have its boundaries gone uncontested. Its archetypal definition is "music by, for, and about women," by which is meant, more specifically: music that is written, performed, recorded, distributed, and promoted by women and whose content speaks directly to women's experiences and concerns. The pioneering recordings in the new genre – featuring Lesbian performers Maxine Feldman, Alix Dobkin, and Meg Christian – were instantly identifiable by a poor technical standard, a preference for the folk-revival-influenced "girl with guitar" format, and lyrical content that had never before been heard: songs resisted sexism, extolled the beauty of women as seen through

women's eyes, demanded public recognition for Lesbian relationships, and idealized these relationships as tender, egalitarian fusions of sexual and emotional love between strong and independent women.

These first recordings were funded out of the pockets of Lesbian-Feminist community members interested in supporting a music industry of their own. Distribution was no less informal at first. In 1973, the first women's recording company was formed, a collective calling itself Olivia Records. Olivia depended on the developing network of Feminist bookstores and on producers in the emerging Womyn's coffeehouse performance circuit to distribute its albums. In 1975, singer/songwriter/pianist Margie Adam and flutist/composer Kay Gardner produced albums on their own labels, and Holly Near – who had begun her career as an anti-war singer – came out of the closet and recorded *Imagine My Surprise* on her own label, Redwood Records. Four years later, Women's Independent Label Distributors (WILD) was created to handle a burgeoning and diversifying industry (Lont 1986, 45). By this time, technical standards were beginning to rise with the increasing expertise of women engineers, the discography included a greater variety of styles and instrumentations, song lyrics treated a range of social-justice topics identified as Feminist concerns, and the national Womyn's music festival phenomenon was well underway.

*Michigan: The Paradigmatic Womyn's Music Festival*

Womyn's music festivals, open to women of any sexuality, have always been produced and attended by a vast Lesbian majority. The first festival was an event produced by Kate Millet at Sacramento State University in 1973. In 1974 a festival was produced in Missouri, the Sisterspace Pocono Weekend was inaugurated in Pennsylvania, and the National Women's Music Festival, first produced by Kristin Lems, was born on the University of Illinois campus in Urbana-Champaign. Morris identifies nearly 30 festivals in the history of the movement, 20 of which occur annually today. The National Women's Music Festival – referred to simply as "National" – is the oldest of these and is generally regarded as the mother of the festival movement. Though it was relocated to Indiana University in Bloomington for several years<sup>14</sup> and has recently moved to Ball State in Muncie, Indiana, it has consistently drawn one of the largest crowds in the Womyn's festival movement (Morris xvii, 5, 28).

But if National is the mother, then the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, inaugurated in 1976 by Lisa Vogel and Boo Price, is her favorite daughter. In its size, longevity, and singularity, this festival has assumed near-mythical proportions as the utopian homeland of Feminist Lesbianism. When one Dyke asks another: "Have you been to Michigan?" she is not inquiring about random forays into the state north of Indiana; rather, she is taking a reading of the other woman's Lesbian cultural index. "Michigan" takes place each summer on six hundred fifty acres of virtually undisturbed forests and meadows. For those who identify with the common Second-Wave idealization of Lesbians as a tribal people, Michigan allows women to play the fantasy of back-to-nature, matriarchal, clan living. While attendees of National live in

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<sup>14</sup> Local lore among the founding mothers of Lesbian Feminism in Urbana-Champaign has it that the festival was forced from our campus by administrators who couldn't tolerate the annual influx of publicly affectionate Lesbians.

college dorms, coexist with men in public spaces, and must observe public “indecent” laws, the thousands of Michigan’s workers and attendees camp in a women-only enclave where clothing is optional.

All festivals, regardless of the particulars of their locations, share a common philosophy of operation: one of the things that defines their musical product – however varied – as Womyn’s music is that it is experienced in an environment that is as Feminist as its producers can make it. Michigan has the distinction of drawing the largest and most international crowd to a site that is owned by its producers. Therefore, its freedom to experiment with building Feminist Utopia is unparalleled, and the results of this annual effort are widely disseminated for imitation, development, and critique in many parts of the world throughout the rest of the year. The following discussion of aspects of Michigan’s physical, musical, and political environment should be seen as emblematic of the phenomenon by which spaces created for Womyn’s music have become some of the most fertile grounds for extra-musical innovation and organizing among Feminists and Lesbians. As Morris says:

Women’s music festivals are a culture as tribal and ritualized and sustaining to the participants as any spiritual movement, and this is because the diverse contributions of the women involved have forged a sum of art and politics that is richly nourishing. (xiii)

The Feminist principle on which Michigan is literally *grounded* is the veneration and preservation of Mother Earth. The only permanent structures on “the Land” are some underground pipes for the conveyance of warm water and a few asphalt paths to ease the mobility of women in wheelchairs. All other structures that form the festival village are erected and dismantled annually. The festival maintains a rigorous recycling program, urges the use of natural soaps and detergents, provides tips on low-impact camping practices, and marks off areas supporting fragile wildlife systems.

Another foundational principle of the festival reflects a definition of Feminism that MUSE’s Catherine Roma once gave me: “access; opening up the space.” Michigan’s commitment to serving the basic needs of every kind of woman – though it will always fall short somewhere – is visible at every turn. The entrance fee, inexpensive to begin with, is reduced for low-income women and covers everything for the week: camping, food, and admission to all performances, workshops, and events. This is made possible by the volunteer colony of summer-long festival workers and by the commitment of each attendee to two four-hour shifts of communal work. All performances and presentations are sign-language interpreted for the hearing-impaired, and foreign-language interpreting services are also available. A special camping area with round-the-clock staff makes the festival possible for women with a range of physical disabilities. Twelve-step recovery meetings of various kinds are held daily. The fresh-cooked, whole-foods meals are offered in vegetarian and vegan options. Camping sites and concert seating grounds are divided into areas such as “Deaf,” “Differently-abled,” “chem-free,” “chem-OK,” “loud-n-rowdy,” and “over 50s.” Daycare is provided for children so mothers can have a break. Professional allopathic and naturopathic medical treatment is available on demand, as is emotional support. Special affinity groups convene for teenage girls, senior women, Heterosexual women feeling suddenly displaced, single attendees

of the festival, and anything else someone feels the need to establish. The impact of experiencing this environment is life-changing. I remember being awestruck the first time I saw this village that seemed prepared to acknowledge and meet any need imaginable. I knew I had never been in such a profoundly *humane* community, and seeing that it might actually be possible for people to live together in this way made me ashamed that we ever settle for less.

A third aspect of the festival ethos that pervades Michigan is the high valuation of creative and whimsical expression. Any sign that is posted to issue prohibitions, identify locations, or give instructions has been painted in brilliant colors, decorated with fanciful designs, and worded with humor and cleverness. Women wander the festival grounds in various stages of dress and undress; nudity might be natural or beautified with body paint, and clothing might be a person's daily streetwear or her favorite costume. Every body shape and color, and every style of adornment imaginable, is seen on the land. Campsites are also personalized. My favorite one last summer was ringed by a border of shoulder-high and brilliantly painted dowels, on each of which was mounted a female action-figure doll whose commercial hairdo and clothes had been replaced by original designs: a fierce and colorful pantheon of goddesses keeping vigil about the tent.

As for the festival offerings that bring such a variety of women to the land, music is but one, and there is plenty of it. Concerts are ongoing throughout each day on several stages that also feature movement and spoken-word artists. Several ensembles open to anyone at the festival rehearse daily. Women-made films are shown nightly. Dance parties, ritual ceremonies, and athletic events are featured. A marketplace displays the work of women potters, weavers, jewelers, smiths, cobblers, drum makers, painters, and other artisans. An area called the One World Tent serves as a clearinghouse for petition, letter-writing, and informational campaigns to which any woman may bring her materials. And an overwhelming number and variety of workshops convene throughout each day, led by any women who have proposed them in time for printing in the program. Some examples that illustrate the range of offerings are: Custody Issues for Lesbian Mothers, Sonic Healing, Lesbian Teachers Network, Drum Tuning and Care, Safe Practices for S/M Lesbians, Women's Sacred Mysteries, Networking with Lesbians in Nicaragua, Interracial Lesbian Relationships, Raising Non-Sexist Sons, Class War 101, Mask-Making, Lesbian Polyamory, Introduction to Wicca, Building a Feminist Investment Portfolio, Shekere Rhythms, Dyke Scientists Network, Retirement Planning, Naturopathic Therapies for Menopause, and Unlearning Racism.

#### *Womyn's Music Festivals as Cultural Homelands*

In all their ethics and their aesthetics, Michigan and other festival spaces are holy land for the many thousands of women who make the pilgrimage. But their influence extends even farther as these women return to their home communities to host radio shows, convene reading groups, conduct women's ensembles, organize activist groups, build health collectives, and do whatever else they can manage in order to extend the visions of women-oriented living that they have witnessed and practiced at festivals.

Indeed, it was my specific desire to keep something of Michigan alive for myself throughout the year – and my Michigan-instilled sense of the possible – that was the final catalyst for my forming AMASONG upon returning from the 1990 festival. These quotes, collected by Morris at various festivals, speak to the importance of these gatherings for their attendees' sense of self:

"Life begins at your first Michigan Womyn's Music Festival."

"I feel most myself at this festival, free, unjudged."

"I felt safe and nurtured for once in my life."

"I have enjoyed every minute of my coming into being."

"It brings me such joy and strength to continue with my own struggles with identities and definitions."

"The spirit of (this festival) always allows my soul to rest in a way it is unable to in any other time or space."

"This place centers me, focuses me so that I can go back into the real world and breathe."

"I finally have found...the courage to let the real me be expressed.... I have found home and my family."

"The joy of seeing lesbian feminist culture as the norm."

"My very first festival and the first time I know that there is a place for a woman like me – like us. The most beautiful experience of my life – freedom, singing, dancing, finding my voice in a place of safety and warmth, spirit and love. Healing, we are free and fear does not live in this heart right now – love is the force."

"My first festival is empowering – realizing being a lesbian is more than who you sleep with; it's a whole culture, complete with art, music, creative expression." (322-351)

These quotes, selected from among many more, express some common themes. It is important to bear in mind that most of the speakers represent the predominantly White, middle-class, and Lesbian composition of the festivals. Therefore, the ubiquity of the identification of festivals with "home," "family," and "culture" can be largely attributed to the experiences of the thousands of attendees who have faced *as a primary crisis in their lives* the sense of not belonging to or the fact of not being welcomed by their families of birth, particularly those families whose shared lives revolve around holidays and customs associated with religions that stigmatize Lesbians. Insofar as a festival succeeds in creating the same sense of belongingness and normalcy for women facing different or additional primary crises, these women also experience festivals as places where they can exist in their "natural" state:

"I feel honored to be in Michigan's Deaf community. I've never felt so safe. This is the best place to be for womyn from all over, the best opportunity for us. I love it here and wish not to leave the land." (351)

Though anyone who attends a festival is guaranteed the revolutionary novelty of a heterosexism-free environment, the woman who is disabled will not find that the accommodations solve all her crises of access or ableism; the woman of Color will not find herself in a racism-free environment. Absent are working poor women who, despite the availability of reduced tickets, cannot afford the travel expenses or the days off from work. And by no means does any woman who goes to a festival enter a controversy-free

environment. Any honest treatment of these near-utopian gatherings must acknowledge these realities. Still, festivals offer something singular and elementally necessary to the many attendees who, whether they find all or only some of their deepest needs uniquely met, keep going back.

In fact, that festival controversies should be as bitterly fought as they typically are is an indicator that – as Morris and her subjects make clear throughout her book – the Womyn’s music festival phenomenon is, if not a *culture*, a source of identity. So many of its participants, radically displaced in their daily environments, have the need to define it as such and to defend their personal visions of what it should be. The history of the introduction and resolution of festival conflicts and controversies is salient enough to warrant its own chapter in Morris’s book. Here I refer back to the scholarship on group identification. Representing a common observation, Anya Peterson Royce states that “adequate performance in an identity is much more rigorously judged within a group than by outsiders” (1982, 185). Talcott Parsons comments on one pattern in the establishment of what come to be the standards of performance in an identity group: “At any given time, the current membership exercises, and is expected to do so, a fiduciary responsibility for the maintenance or development of...tradition, including (acting) for those inside its boundaries who cannot be expected to assume the highest levels of such responsibility” (1975, 61). In festival culture, it is the year-round organizers and the core group of workers who assume most of the responsibility for developing and maintaining traditions for the thousands of women who descend upon the festivals for a few days in the summer. Where a practice has become heatedly controversial, it is precisely because it has challenged the boundaries of the festival ethos, setting up rules about who can and cannot belong or implying a distinction between “good” Feminists and “bad” ones.

For example, the now-legendary ideological battles between anti-pornography/“vanilla”-hegemony Lesbians and pro-pornography/S-M Lesbians have erupted on festival grounds over issues such as whether sex-toy vendors should be allowed to display their wares in the marketplace and whether leatherwomyn should have their own camping grounds – or, indeed, be seen at all. Policies about male children on the land – whether they will be allowed, and if so, up to what age – have involved mothers who demand Feminist support of their choice to parent boys, mothers who demand Feminist, boy-free space for their daughters, and Feminists without sons who feel betrayed by (White) women who would raise the next generation of society’s chief oppressors. Musicians have been criticized and even “girlcotted” for content in their performances received as Biphobia, racism, or the eroticization of violence. And while women on all sides of these issues battle for the adoption of our views into the Lesbian-Feminist cultural orthodoxy of Womyn’s music festivals, contesting the inner drawing of the boundaries of our group identity, the dominant culture’s standards relegate all of us unproblematically to the same stigmatized category. This illustrates Royce’s observation about internal versus external judging of identity performance.

A current controversy rages in Lesbian communities worldwide over Michigan’s “Womyn-born-Womyn-only” admissions policy, elaborated from its formerly worded “Womyn-only” policy to specify that Transsexuals are not welcome on the land. The power of the presence of Transwomyn to explode common essentialist assumptions about what constitutes a woman is instinctively grasped by those among

the policy's defenders who are the most illogical, circular, and hysterical in their arguments. What underlies their inarticulate panic is the quite accurate perception that if the category "woman" is unmasked as a construct, then the borders defining the concept of the Womyn's festival lose their integrity; this represents nothing less than a crisis for women who derive primary identities from their festival experiences and from women-only groups in their hometowns that are facing the same challenge to their membership policies.

*The Sound of Womyn's Music Today*

Having argued that the Womyn's music phenomenon is the product and producer of an identity group, I return briefly to the question of what this group's music is. When one appreciates the centrality of the festival experience in the lives of so many who define themselves by it, one understands why any music heard in that environment – regardless of what the music sounds like – is subject to irrevocable identification by these women as *theirs*. As Morris says:

...I'm there to hear the sound of lesbian culture. ...Summer after summer, this pilgrimage has sustained an entire generation of women, each of us exclaiming: "*This is my tribe. And this is its music.*" (1)

In 1978, Therese Edell, one of Womyn's music's pioneers, was asked to define the genre for an interview in *Paid My Dues*, the forerunner to *Hot Wire*:

Women's music is... Let's see. Damn. Music made by women that makes other women feel like they are strong human beings in their own right. How's that? We'll take that one for now. (Morris, 57)

In 1991 Sue Fink, a composer and veteran festival performer, told *Hot Wire*'s Toni Armstrong, Jr:

I don't think we have "women's music." We have a women's music audience. We have a group of people who want to hear music by and about women. Usually, in the rest of the world you have people who like folk music, or reggae, or hip-hop; in women's music we basically have an audience of women, each one wanting to be at an event where women somehow are performing and speaking to her, and she gets to be in her community and have a night out in the company of other women, without necessarily going to a bar. (Morris, 14)

This last response shows the most conscious awareness that *women's music* cannot be defined, but that what is more important about it anyway is what we need it to do for us, not what it is.

The industry has changed markedly over the last quarter-century. After the successful example of the movements' pioneers, the pool of artists trying to get in on the action grew faster than the market. Olivia no longer makes records but instead, cashing in on the commercialization and mainstreaming of "Luppies," books passengers on Lesbian cruises. Redwood and other independent labels have folded, leaving artists to record with mainstream or crossover labels. Melissa Etheridge and the Indigo Girls are

examples of the kind of mainstream success that the Womyn's music movement made possible, and although their commitments are to the popular music industry, they are still welcomed – though not unanimously – as Womyn's music artists.

Womyn's music's archetypal folk-singer style is continued by new artists such as Dar Williams and Catie Curtis. But the stages of Michigan and National and all the other festivals have also featured klezmer, blues, slasher rock (not uncontroversially), classical chamber music (not uncontroversially), gospel (not uncontroversially), Taiko drumming, Bulgarian village song, Yoruba music from the Caribbean, bluegrass, reggae, and more. Song lyrics profess love and admiration for women, critique current events, express all manner of progressive politics, signify about sex, venerate Pagan deities, or continue old folk and linguistic traditions. Festival producers have a commitment to racial and cultural diversity on their performing rosters, and in every audience are many women for whom festivals provide their first exposure to any music beyond the offerings of their local popular-music stations.

It was at Womyn's music festivals where I first encountered the *a cappella* styles of Sweet Honey In The Rock, the rhythm-and-blues of Linda Tillery, the funk of Toshi Reagon and Nedra Johnson, the Diaspora sounds and movements of Urban Bush Women, the call-and-response of the Washington Sisters, the piano improvisations of Mary Watkins, the *orisha*<sup>21</sup> songs of Asé, the percussion mastery of Edwina Lee Tyler, Nurudafina Pili Abena, Ubaka Hill, and Linda Thomas Jones, the gospel of Melanie DeMore, the reggae of Stephone, and the offerings of other masterful Black women artists too numerous to name here. And although from the perspective of a Woman of Color, the racial composition of festival culture is still lonely, I experienced my first festival as the most racially diverse environment I had ever been in. It was also the only place where I had been given (and was expected to take) the opportunity to participate in workshops led by White women for White women aimed at revealing to us our White privilege and our particular role in either perpetuating or dismantling racism. I went to that festival as a very young Lesbian feeling completely alienated from all aspects of the Heterosexual world. I experienced the sense in my first minutes on the land that I had come home to the only place where I belonged. I was seized by a fierce pride in and protectiveness of everything wonderful that I saw there. So for years afterward, I felt that listening to Sweet Honey In The Rock was a *Lesbian* thing to do. Learning about and sharing in the traditions of women of many cultures was a *Lesbian* thing to do. Becoming an anti-racist was a *Lesbian* thing to do. And for years afterward, the strains of any song by any artist I had heard on a festival stage – or who I simply knew had once performed on a festival stage – gave me wistful and homesick memories of the land, like an anthem of Amazon Nation.

### Conclusion

If identity is both expressed through and shaped by performances in it, and if certain aspects of identity can be chosen, and if a political orientation is felt primarily enough that it becomes an identity, then the choice of that political identity's musical style is a matter of some gravity for those doing the

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<sup>21</sup> The *orisha* – or the *lou* – are the divine spirits of the Yoruba faith systems.



choosing. The musical campaigns of U.S. Marxist organizers and Womyn's cultural workers share several features in common that do not characterize the singing histories of African Americans in the Civil Rights struggle. In the United States, Cultural Feminists and Leftist party elites have been predominantly White, middle-class, and highly educated. Among the requirements for attaining the privilege of Whiteness in the United States is assimilation into the "melting pot," with the result that most Americans of European descent whose families have been in this country for at least two or three generations are typically only loosely connected to any of the ethnic traditions of their forebears. With their ethnicity and race so unmarked in White supremacy, they are likely to draw their sense of primary group identity from something more arbitrary. For the movers of the Communist and cultural Feminist worlds, their choice of a radical political orientation often became the salient feature of their identities. In fact, some claimed their politics as their culture, and like every culture, their politics had to have its music.

There was a good deal of disagreement among Communists about what this music should be, and many decisions were the result of trial-and-error. The mass of people whom this music was intended to embrace was extremely heterogeneous: immigrants from many countries, and Americans whose families had been established in this vast country for generations in regions as different from one another as the rural Ozarks and the industrial cities on the Great Lakes. The problem of selecting or newly creating a music that would have universal appeal is obvious. In fact, as Denisoff points out, the very idea that it was possible for a core group of the Leftist elite to *hand down* the "people's" music *to* them is fundamentally flawed. My observation is that these urban, White elites, many of them absent a sense of connection to family ethnic traditions, *handed to themselves* a set of cultural styles with a certain degree of agility: they failed to appreciate the possibility that this facile auto-redefinition might not be possible for or desirable to any in their intended audience whose circumstances had grounded them and their families more firmly in a sense of place.

Feminists as a group comprise a significant amount of heterogeneity as well, though – as with the Leftists – this heterogeneity attenuates somewhat the closer one moves to the core of Womyn's culture. At the time when the first recordings of Womyn's music emerged in the "folk" style (i.e., a style akin to the sounds of Joan Baez and Judy Collins), that style had become heavily popularized, so its appeal was far greater than when CPUSA's musical activists tried to sell it to urban workers. Still, the fact that the Womyn's scene was a new invention without an artistic tradition of its own to draw upon meant that the definition of its music would have to be consciously negotiated. This negotiation continues in arguments over style, lyrical content, and the involvement of men at any stage in the process from composition through accompaniment to production and distribution.

African Americans during the Civil Rights era were in a much different situation. The political saliency of their daily experiences under Jim Crow guaranteed a level of solidarity that tended to override any differences in their cultural backgrounds and identities. As one Black artist and scholar has remarked:

For black people, "history"...presents itself as earlier episodes of our current existence. We are the latest chapters of our history, and as such, we are scarcely able to deny or downgrade its centrality and its

importance in our lives. ...Who we are as black individuals becomes one and the same with who we are as black people, and vice versa. This is an inevitable consequence of how we are perceived and treated in this society. Racism fails, or refuses, to acknowledge our individuality, though it constantly forces us to consider our identity. History refuses to let go of us, and demands an active involvement in our present. (Chambers 1991, 96)

This is not to pretend that every African American supported the program as developed by the Civil Rights Movement's leaders. It is to propose that any two who did were likely to have felt more of a common bond between them than was felt between the Russian-Jewish immigrant factory worker in New York and the fifth-generation, West-European-American coal miner in Kentucky. In fact, Reagon points out that it was song that formed "for the first time a basic and common language between organizers who were middle-class Black college students and older adult members of the Black Belt rural area" (Reagon 1975, 178). That the music could function in this way is due in part to the importance and near-universality of the African-American's experience with church:

Most Blacks, at some time during their lives, became converted and joined the church. The Black church served the community as the center of Black creativity and a place of Black independence. ...In this institution, Blacks could be philosophers, teachers, financiers, orators, and artists. (Reagon 1975, 68)

In light of this and my earlier discussion of Black music and Black identity, it is clear that any particular song that was raised – whether it was familiar to all African-American individuals or not – would have been immediately and meaningfully perceived as *their* music. And its message did not need elaborating, for the long tradition of Black sacred music as a demand for worldly as well as spiritual freedom had been understood since the plantation songs. Though there was disagreement over such matters as the slave-time repertoire of Bessie Jones' group and where to draw the limit of respectability in adapting sacred song texts – disagreements that were deeply felt because of their implications for the people's identities – the leaders of the movement did not have to cast about to hit on a winning musical formula for unifying the masses.

As I have shown, Leftists and Feminists alike showed extra-musical signs of taking on whole identities as opposed to mere organizational affiliations. Both sets of identities were motivated by a repudiation of the dominant economic and social system. In fact, many of Feminism's pioneers had activist backgrounds in Socialism, so there was a certain transference of ideals and even personnel between them. The antimaterialistic lifestyles and the humble stage personae of the Almanacs saw their counterparts in Womyn's communities: a generation of downwardly-mobile Lesbians donned denim and flannels, joined communal households, and took low-paying work such as canvassing for progressive action groups, staffing rape-crisis centers, and growing organic produce.<sup>22</sup> Performers at the earliest Womyn's music festivals who were perceived as having too commercial an image received cool receptions, and it was

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<sup>22</sup> Festival producer Robin Tyler spoke for herself and others in the movement who had come from poverty by pointing out that "downward mobility is a middle-class ethic" (Morris 1999, 39).

common for pickup groups of lay women to appear onstage backing up the headliner. With the increased sophistication of the Womyn's music industry, these details have changed, though the core value of anti-hierarchy still has its manifestations at any festival.

Standing outside the dominant market as musical Leftists and Feminists did, they had to rely on their own institutions for the promotion of their music and musicians. The HUAC and the male-dominated music industry alike perceived the radical threats of the messages of Leftist and Feminist artists, blocking their access to mainstream exposure. Olivia Records, WILD, and the nationwide Womyn's concert circuit fulfilled the same function for Lesbian singers as the Hootenannies and PAI did for folk entrepreneurs. Just as *People's Songs Bulletin* and *Sing Out!* published scores to new songs as one way to get the music out, *Hot Wire* included a vinyl recording with each issue. Though these endeavors cannot be separated from their *ideological* moorings, they do represent material attempts to create an alternative *commercial* market that could support new musicians. Certainly, there was an undeniable element of entertainment to the Hoot and other Leftist folk-music events, a value that is even more pronounced at the Womyn's music festival. In contrast, the venues created for the dissemination of Freedom Songs were exclusively political and activist in orientation. Freedom Songs were not for the entertainment of passive audiences: they were to be learned and sung by everyone within earshot and used as tools for liberation. Although one intention behind the Hoot was to encourage audience participation, the extensive verbiage of the typical propaganda song would have restricted that participation to refrains or other repeated lines. At Womyn's music festivals, the audience member's most important contribution is her presence and her share of the work in the festival community. But the typical Freedom song, which might feature five or six or more slightly altered repetitions of a short verse, was not for anyone's listening enjoyment. It was participatory, and it was not for sale. (See my discussion of the copyrighting of "We Shall Overcome" on page 258.)

Late-twentieth-century Feminism was created in part by women of many Colors who had been involved to varying degrees in the Civil Rights Movement, by which most women in the United States, involved or not, had been affected. Anti-racism has always been universally articulated within Womyn's culture as a Feminist value. However, most White Feminists have failed to make the sustained effort needed to arrive at an analysis of racism and White privilege that could meaningfully transform our relationships and our organizations. The result is that in any Womyn's group where White women are not significantly in the minority, Women of Color can expect to be fighting many of the same battles that confront them outside of Womyn's spaces. Womyn's music festivals typically feature separate areas or events that are for Women of Color only, places for decompressing after the latest racist encounter or simply for spending some time together where racism is guaranteed not to intrude. White women's responses to these spaces range from denying scornfully that the need for them exists<sup>23</sup> through respecting and affirming them to averting their eyes in a paralysis of guilt when passing by them. These spaces – and the festival tradition of publicly airing grievances about racism – maintain the awareness of everyone in

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<sup>23</sup> I am forever baffled by the hypocrisy of White women who *live for* the women-only festival experience and then accuse Women of Color of the needless and destructive sin of separatism.

Womyn's circles that race is still problematic within Feminism, though individuals' responses to this awareness differ.

Still, it is only within Womyn's culture where I have consistently encountered White people – however few – who have held me accountable for a radical analysis of racism and White privilege and who have offered to me the discussions, experiences, and literature to help me acquire it. These are the women who understand that our nation's emancipation from racism was not accomplished in 1965, women who see the inseparability of gender liberation, class liberation, and race liberation. These White activists and activists of Color involved in Womyn's culture have fought for continuity between the Civil Rights and Feminist movements and created a discourse on race that must be noticed – if only cursorily – by anyone at any Womyn's music event. In Chapters Four, Five, and Six, I will discuss the forms in which this awareness surfaces in the Feminist choral movement, inseparable as this movement is from the influence of festival culture.

Before closing this chapter, I offer several examples of songs, practices, and personalities of the Feminist choral movement that have their precedents in Leftist musical circles and the Civil Rights movement. Most fundamentally, a continuous tradition of women using their voices to sing for justice is strongly represented by Ella Mae Wiggins, Aunt Molly Jackson, Margaret Larkin, Zilphia Horton, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Betty Mae Fikes, Bernice Johnson Reagon, and many more. A song sung in Yiddish by women garment workers in New York whose sit-down strike had earned them a shorter workday and a higher wage surfaced on an album by Lesbian singer Alix Dobkin and later in the repertoire of a prominent Womyn's chorus. Popular among several other Womyn's groups is a song in the textbook style of a workers' chorus propaganda anthem: entitled "Sisters, You Keep Me Fighting" (by Patty Huntington), this song's strophic form declares a commitment to a laundry list of women's causes including access to safe and legal abortion, universal health care, and an end to rapacious foreign policies. In fact, this song signals the fact that the very emergence of the Womyn's chorus was motivated by some of the same needs for social intercourse, political solidarity, and good public relations that drove the early-twentieth-century immigrant workers' choruses. Ethel Raim, specialist in Balkan song, Director of the Center for Traditional Music and Dance in New York City, and one of the Northern folk entrepreneurs who traveled South for the 1960 Sing for Freedom, was a featured guest artist at the 1993 National Women's Choral Festival and serves as a clinician and a source of repertoire for several Womyn's choruses. "Keep Your Lamps," one of the Spirituals taught at the 1960 Sing, is now in the repertoires of selected Womyn's choruses. A certain "folk consciousness" is apparent in the favoring of oral-tradition music by many Womyn's choirs, who hear in it the fitting representation of a "people's voice." MUSE performs the Freedom Song "Over My Head" as well as an arrangement of "Which Side Are You On?" Holly Near's "Singing for our Lives," written as a protest tool in the short, adaptable format of the Freedom Song, has been sung at many a Feminist gathering and demonstration as well as in concerts by Feminist choruses. Lois Shegog, the Associate Director of MUSE, has taken a musical research trip with Linda Tillery to the South Carolina Sea Islands, whose musical heritage was the center of so much attention at the Atlanta Sing

for Freedom. And, of course, there is the presence everywhere among Feminist choristers of the beloved music of Bernice Johnson Reagon's Sweet Honey In The Rock.

In the next chapter I will turn to the voices of the women of Sweet Honey, the Cultural Heritage Choir, and Urban Bush Women for insight into what their work in traditional Black song styles represents for them. For a departing quote on identity, aesthetic style, and politics, I present the words of Eddie Chambers. Chambers is a Black man, a native of England, and a visual artist. His words were provoked by the experience of being capriciously arrested and jailed on groundless suspicion of using stolen credit cards while on the way to install an exhibit on Black art that he was curating:

We find ourselves living in a country in which the flowering of Black Art is *absolutely assured*.

...The call for Black Art has become largely irrelevant and unnecessary, because White racism has gone further than our words could ever do to convince our artists that their skin color does matter, and that race is important. ...Racism has ensured that (Black artists) are ever more mindful of their marginalised political positions within this society; and their work can scarcely avoid reflecting this. (Chambers 1991, 93-94)

### CHAPTER III

## THE WOMEN AND THE MUSIC OF SWEET HONEY IN THE ROCK, URBAN BUSH WOMEN, AND LINDA TILLERY AND THE CULTURAL HERITAGE CHOIR

*“The real purpose of African/African-American music...is to be functional,  
to make things happen, to change things, to change people.”*

*– Ysaye Barnwell, Sweet Honey in the Rock*

*“Each (company member) is responsible for being an ambassador of how to live a fuller existence.”*

*– Consuelo, Urban Bush Women*

*“I engaged in this project as much for my own salvation as anybody else’s.”<sup>1</sup>*

*Linda Tillery, Cultural Heritage Choir*

### Introduction

Sweet Honey In The Rock was in the process of defining itself in the mid-1970s. Urban Bush Women was established in 1984. The artists creating these ensembles were operating in milieus that had been transformed by various Black and Feminist movements. By the time Linda Tillery convened her Cultural Heritage Choir in 1992, she and her fellow musicians had already been active in or enjoyed the fruits of two decades of African Americans’ and women’s autonomous political and cultural endeavors, among them the Womyn’s music movement discussed in Chapter Two. I open this chapter by setting the cultural stage for the emergence of these professional ensembles and the conditions that have brought them into regular contact with one another and with the amateur ensembles in this study. Then I introduce each ensemble with an overview of its history. I argue that the nature and substance of their work has the unique effect on their audiences of making us feel included somehow in their vision, something that enhances their popularity with us and our desire to share in their expressions. I go on to show that, in fact, all three ensembles are directly engaged with the public in song-sharing workshops and community gatherings. I devote some time to clarifying why and how it is that a primarily dance-based company (UBW) spends time on the road teaching songs in the communities they visit.

I continue with a line of questioning designed to elicit the artists’ accounts of what I have sensed as their material connection to the world through the songs they perform and teach. This line begins with the question: “How do you identify yourself?” Next, I ask them to identify their ensembles. Reading their answers to these two questions together reveals the extent to which their identities are expressed through their work. This leads to discussion of several significant images and messages that they feel their groups

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<sup>1</sup> This quote comes from the photocopy of an article included in CHC’s press packet. The article, “Interview with Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir: Storytelling Through Music” by Michelle Sylliboy, appeared in an edition of Vancouver’s *Kinesis: News About Women That’s Not In The Dailies*. The date of the article does not appear on the photocopy, but the article’s content suggests that it was published in the season after CHC’s appearance at the Vancouver Folk Festival in the summer of 1997.

convey. With this groundwork established, I ask very specifically about the impact they believe their songs have on the world. The final section of this chapter represents my attempt to theorize a relationship between the nature of the work these women do and the apparent domination of this kind of work by groups of women.

**Race and Gender Politics and the Rise of Three Black Women's Ensembles  
in the Latter Decades of the Twentieth-Century United States**

Black Movements, Women's Movements

Paging through the encyclopedic entries of *The Reader's Companion to U.S. Women's History* (Mankiller et. al., 1998) conveys in concise terms the extremely dynamic convergence of radical movements affecting women's lives in the latter decades of the twentieth century. The entry in *The Reader's Companion...* for "Racism" mentions Black Power, Black Nationalism, and Black Liberation as three political orientations of radical African Americans that between 1955 and 1970 "were more committed to empowering self-sufficient Black communities than to attaining government concessions and integration" (Reddy 1998, 496). Black Nationalism has its own entry, where its overarching ideology is defined as "a body of social and political thought that reflects the collective aspirations of African Americans seeking political, economic, and cultural autonomy in U.S. society" (Tate 1998, 63). The 1960s saw a proliferation of Black Nationalist organizations with distinct goals and approaches, including the youth-oriented Black Panther Party, founded in 1966. Although the Panther's party structure had sexist foundations, "women played important roles within it. Assata Shakur (JoAnne Chesimard), Angela Davis, Kathleen Neal Cleaver, Elaine Brown, and Ericka Huggins participated in the community survival programs as well as the party's internal leadership" (64).

The section in *The Reader's Companion...* entitled "Feminism and Feminisms" begins by defining the former, unitary term as "the belief in the full economic, political, and social equality of males and females" (Mankiller, Navarro, and Steinem 1998, 187). The article wastes no time, however, in exposing the limitations of White women's practice of Feminism from its earliest manifestations: "Women's rights activism, already weakened by the silences of the middle-class agenda, became deranged by racism following the Civil War. ...The sacrifice of racial justice for Anglo-American women's goals plagued feminist history into the twentieth century" (Mink and Smith 1998, 193). Against this acknowledgement is the affirmation that "nonetheless, the modern women's movement covers more diversity of race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and ability than any other U.S. movement. It has also created a laboratory for self-discovery, friendship, and struggle that often helps bridge similar divisions elsewhere"<sup>2</sup> (Mankiller, Navarro, and Steinem, 192). Signaling the "multiplicity of feminisms" that the diversity of women in the United States developed in the 1970s, this section of the book gives way to a series of entries for the following Feminisms: American-Indian, Arab-American, Asian-American, Black, Chicana, Cultural, Eco-,

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<sup>2</sup> This juxtaposition of criticism and affirmation echoes what I reported in Chapter Two about experiencing my most racially-integrated environment at my first Womyn's music festival while, at the same time, Women of Color were feeling vastly outnumbered and sometimes wary of the intrusion of racism on their festival experience.

Electoral, International, Jewish, Latina, Lesbian, Marxist, Puerto-Rican, Radical, Socialist, and Working-Class. The influence of three of these in particular will be heard in statements presented throughout this chapter: some excerpts from entries for these feminisms follow:

**Black Feminism** ...In 1977, the Combahee River Collective, a grassroots Black feminist organization in Boston... issued a position paper that analyzed the intersection of oppression in Black women's lives and asserted the legitimacy of feminist organizing by Black women. The Collective's work broke significant new ground because it was explicitly socialist, addressed homophobia, and called for sisterhood among Black women of various sexual orientations. In fact, the early commitment of Black lesbian feminists such as Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Margaret Sloan, and Barbara Smith was crucial to building the movement in the 1970s, when many heterosexual Black women were reluctant to identify themselves as feminists.

Black feminists' autonomous organizing began to influence strongly other parts of the women's movement in the 1980s. They challenged white feminists to eradicate racism, to broaden the scope of what they defined as women's issues, to integrate their organizations, and to share leadership with women of color. (Smith 1998, 203-204)

**Cultural Feminism** Cultural feminism refers to the multiracial, multicultural movement of women's expressive art that arose with and deeply influenced the women's movement begun in the 1970s. The flowering of a specifically lesbian culture and the sharing of lesbian life and experience were crucial aspects of this artistic revival. ...Not all cultural works produced by women in this period were self-consciously women-centered or committed to women's liberation, but they benefited from the strength of an explicitly feminist community.

A women's cultural renaissance swept the United States and many parts of Europe, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa in the 1970s and 1980s. Writers, artists, poets, musicians, photographers, journalists, and performers shared in a wellspring of energies released after centuries of suppression, erasure, and marginalization. Influenced by the movements of people of color and formerly colonized peoples in the United States and abroad, women were inspired both by the struggles of their respective communities and by their affinity with the women's movement.

In the United States, Native, Asian, African, Latin, and Euro-American women produced a marvel of works from Ntozake Shange's...*For colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is not enuf* to Judy Chicago's...*Dinner Party*...to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

Women's music festivals became annual events, drawing thousands. Poetry readings, concerts, dance recitals, repertory theatre, and art exhibits begun in obscurity burgeoned into major events. ...Traditional female art forms like quilting, needlework, and tapestry were newly recognized. Women's oral histories revised the historical record, and women's spirituality reclaimed ancient...goddess traditions on the one hand, while challenging the patriarchal conventions of established religions on the other.

Lesbian feminists including Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Barbara Smith, Irena Klepfisz, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Estela Trujillo, Meg Christian, Holly Near, Cris Williamson, Kitty Tsui, Rita Mae Brown, Susan Griffin, Judy Grahn, Michelle Cliff, Paula Gunn Allen, Charlotte Bunch, and Lillian Faderman produced a veritable avalanche of poetry, essays, plays, music, comedy, and scholarship that transformed both lesbian and feminist ideas. Giving voice to a multiracial and multicultural experience, these



women presented a new understanding of how heterosexuality is sanctioned and privileged in a male-dominated culture. Likewise, lesbian literature offered one of the first sustained analyses of the simultaneous and intersecting structures that enforce race, class, gender, and sexual oppressions.

From this outpouring a feminist scholarship arose that accorded this cultural renaissance a more overarching theoretical significance. It defined culture as the ordered system of meaning in terms of which people explain their world, express their feelings, and make their judgments. From this definition feminist scholars claimed that women produce distinct cultures, different from those produced by men. (Aptheker 1998, 205-206)

**Lesbian Feminism** Although lesbian and feminist communities have overlapped throughout U.S. history, the 1960s saw the development of an unabashedly proud connection between the two. By the mid-1970s lesbian feminism had become perhaps the most assertive arm of the feminist movement, espousing a politics that encouraged feminists to turn their energies toward other women in every aspect of their lives. Lesbianism had become the political shorthand for a radical woman's complete dedication to feminism.

...Feminists and lesbians of color often rejected lesbian feminism because it did not address pressing issues facing communities of color (such as racist violence or access to health care) and because lesbian separatism left feminists of color socially and culturally alienated from communities of color. Over time, these shortcomings limited lesbian feminism's appeal to a very specific and narrow group of women: as separatists, many lesbian feminist communities have become socially and culturally withdrawn. However, lesbian feminism remains an influential part of lesbian and feminist politics. Its strengths lie in the practical demand that women put women first, and, ideologically, lesbian feminism continues to assert the vital connection between gender and sexual politics. (Boyd 1998, 213-214)

Reading all these definitions together hints at the range of political choices available to women of varied, multiple identities. The mutual effect of all these approaches on one another is indisputable, especially when different political orientations claim the contributions of the same women. It is also clear that women ostensibly sharing the same set of identities have often chosen divergent political strategies: read the assertion in the last entry that "...Feminists and lesbians of color often rejected lesbian feminism..." against the long list of Lesbian Feminists of many colors presented in the entry for Cultural Feminism, some of whom also appear in the Black Feminism entry. Although much White practice of Lesbian Feminism has ignored racial and class oppression, women such as Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, and Gloria Anzaldúa have insisted on holding Lesbian Feminism to the ideals they believe its name inherently represents; other Lesbians of Color have abandoned the terrain for alternative associations. The essentializing tendency to expect that two women of the same class, Color, and sexuality will always find common political cause contributes regularly to frustrations and false assumptions.

By their very composition as professional ensembles of Black women, Sweet Honey In The Rock, Urban Bush Women, and Cultural Heritage Choir emerged into an historical context that guaranteed the political saliency of their existence. In ways that I have never been called upon to do when singing choral music of Bach or Monteverdi, the women in these groups have had to engage with one another in processes of agreement over the explicit and implicit political meanings of their artistry's form, content, and

presentation. Before presenting several of the artists' comments to me about the personal, cultural, and political importance of their work, it will be helpful to provide a brief overview of each ensemble's history.

### A Brief History of Each Ensemble

#### *Sweet Honey In The Rock*

The definitive source on the history and ethos of Sweet Honey is the book *We Who Believe in Freedom: Sweet Honey In The Rock...Still on the Journey*. This beautiful, unique, and revelatory book was created as part of the ensemble's celebration in 1993 of its twentieth year. It is a compilation of writings about Sweet Honey's impact on their lives by many of the women who have been its members, by individuals who have been involved in producing the group, by family and friends of the group, and by faithful audience members. Founder Bernice Johnson Reagon, the book's editor, has contributed two chapters to the book. "Singing for My Life" is an autobiographical account that leaves off where Sweet Honey begins; this includes particularly engaging narratives of her experiences as a singing Civil Rights activist. "'Let Your Light Shine' – Historical Notes" relates the genesis and evolution of Sweet Honey from Reagon's very personal perspective as the group's creator and visionary.

The group that came to be known as Sweet Honey In The Rock developed out of workshops Reagon led in her capacity as vocal director for the D.C. Black Repertory Company in the early 1970s. This company had been formed by screen actor Robert Hooks with the goal of training Black actors for professional careers in television, film, and theater. Reagon set up her workshops to be open to all men and women in the company regardless of ability or experience, but she established a very disciplined approach to attendance and participation. Ultimately, the progress of the workshops was limited by the fact that most participants held theater as their first priority. Even the first efforts of the very interested few to form an enduring performance ensemble were unsuccessful, and Reagon reports having been ready to abandon the experiment until regular attendee Louise Robinson urged her to make one more attempt. At the last-ditch-effort rehearsal in the fall of 1973, Reagon was initially disappointed to find only herself and three other women in the room. But when they began to sing, they found that they were well matched. By rehearsal's end, they knew they had a viable combination, and so Sweet Honey In The Rock was finally born: Bernice Johnson Reagon, Louise Robinson, Mie, and Carol Maillard (Reagon 1993, 14-17).

Today, Sweet Honey typically performs with five vocalists and a sign-language interpreter. Though this configuration has become the standard for the group, the specific personnel are not fixed. Over the years there have been more than twenty different women who have gone on stage at one time or another as members of the ensemble. Sweet Honey is a part-time, professional ensemble, and all the women who participate in it also lead full artistic, professional, or family lives outside the group. Keeping the membership flexible allows individuals to be involved even if they cannot commit to all scheduled appearances; at the same time, it allows the group to accept any commitments that can be met by relying on a list of singers to fill in for one another. Bernice Johnson Reagon has been the sole *sine qua non* of the ensemble, though the group did succeed in fulfilling a performance commitment the one time that her

health did not permit her to appear. The second most constant voice in the group has been that of Ysaye Barnwell.

The front matter of *We Who Believe in Freedom* includes a timeline of each year's personnel, awards, concert appearances, new songs and recordings, political involvements, and other projects. The group's first recording, *Sweet Honey In The Rock*, was released in 1976 on the Flying Fish label. They released their fourteenth album, *25 Years*, on Rykodisc in 1998. Concert tours and folk festival appearances have taken them all over the United States and to Canada, as well as to Cuba and several other Caribbean Islands, Mexico and Ecuador, Australia and Japan, various countries in Scandinavia and Western Europe, and several Central, Eastern, and Southern African nations. Their film credits include *Wilmington 10, U.S.A. 10,000* from 1978, *A Vision Shared: Tribute to Woody Guthrie and Leadbelly* from 1988, and *Freedom Song* from 2000. Demonstrations at which the group has appeared to sing, and sometimes to engage in civil disobedience, include the 1982 March for Disarmament in New York, a 1985 anti-Apartheid demonstration in front of the South African embassy in Washington, D.C., and the 1990 Welcome Rallies for Nelson and Winnie Mandela in New York City, Washington, D.C., and Oakland, California. Among the awards and honors they have received are "Grammies" and "Wammies" for Best Gospel Group, Best Ethnic International Group, and Best Traditional Folk Recording, as well as the Washington, D.C., Mayor's Arts Award for Excellence in Artistic Discipline.

The group has sung at events and gatherings of a range of organizations, including United Methodist Clergy Women, the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly, the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, the National Conference on Women and the Law, Musicians United for Safe Energy, the 1980 New Orleans Black Women's Conference, the People's Anti-War Mobilization, Deaf Pride Inc., the Kansas City Women's Jazz Festival, the National Black Women's Health Conference, the 1985 United Nations' Decade of the Woman international conference in Kenya, the 1987 East German Festival of Political Song, the Children's Defense Fund, Planned Parenthood, and the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses. They have sung repeat engagements at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and the National Women's Music Festival, and with their producer Amy Horowitz of Roadwork, they inaugurated the Sisterfire women's cultural festival in 1985.

Representative examples from *Sweet Honey In The Rock: Selections 1976-1988* give one an appreciation of the breadth of the group's repertoire and illustrate the connections between their original compositions and the traditional material that informs them. "Meyango" is a West-African funeral chant. "Wade in the Water" is a Negro Spiritual. "I Feel Something Drawing Me On" is a cover of a classic gospel hit by William Herbert Brewster, and "Sitting on Top of the World" covers a popular song by Sam Chatmon and the Mississippi Sheiks. "On Children," with text by Kahlil Gibran, is one of several songs written by Sweet Honey members to texts by great poets from various parts of the world. "Echo" is among the music written by Bernice Johnson Reagon for the soundtrack to the film *Wilmington 10, U.S.A. 10,000*. Ysaye Barnwell's "More Than a Paycheck" is one of many Sweet Honey original topical songs, the complete corpus of which addresses emergencies such as South African Apartheid, racism in the United

States, sexual violence against women, the life-threatening occupational hazards of the modern workplace, and the toll on Third-World communities of – and the place each one of us has in – global capitalism’s exploitive practices. “Fannie Lou Hamer” belongs among the songs Reagon has written to honor the freedom fighters and social-justice activists whose legacy she inherited. “Beatitudes” is her setting of the famous text from the Gospel of Saint Matthew, and “Seven Principles” is her celebration of the principles governing each day in the week of Kwanzaa. Several Sweet Honey women have written original songs about love and companionship, including “Gift of Love” by Evelyn Harris.

There are various hallmarks of traditional Black vocal ensemble styles heard regularly in Sweet Honey’s original songs. “Wodaabe Nights”<sup>3</sup> was created by Aisha Kahlil in the dense polyphonic textures and wide timbral spectra of Pygmy singing. Reagon’s “I’m Gon’ Stand!!!” is in strict call-and-response form; its verses differ from one another only by the change of a few words in the first line, giving it the structure of a protest song for use by masses of people. “Joan Little,” also by Reagon, utilizes the Black preaching ballad style<sup>4</sup> and contrapuntal body percussion. Carol Maillard’s “Stay”<sup>5</sup> reflects the close-harmony practice of the early gospel quartets and Doo-wop. Barnwell’s “Breaths” and “Wanting Memories” involve the rhythmically contrapuntal ostinatos of a vocal, tonal-percussion complement. Reagon’s “Oh Death” could easily be mistaken for a traditional song from slavery time in the Deep South; it sounds like a combination of a “moan,” a proto-minor-blues lament, and a lined hymn. “A Tribute,”<sup>6</sup> by Nitanju Bolade Casel, is a virtuosic *a cappella* rap. And heard almost ubiquitously are the choral expressions of the value of collective individualism (about which more will be said later), signaled by each singer’s vocal ornamentations and improvisations and by the constant offsetting of synchrony in textures that are more or less homophonic.

To my ears, the most emblematic and astonishing example of this ensemble’s vocal and stylistic virtuosity is the song “Long Journey Home”<sup>7</sup> by Bernice Johnson Reagon. Though the song carries no specific religious references, its texture’s staggered entrances recall the lined hymn. The satisfaction of each exquisite harmonic change is deliciously prolonged as each singer wends her own way to the end of her phrase. The composite ambitus within which the singers weave their lines defies common belief about the capabilities of the female voice: the topmost singer attains the threshold of the “whistle tone,” and I had to listen to the drone at the bottom several times before I could convince myself that it was not a didjeridoo but a human voice intoning sub-harmonics.

Finally, I urge anyone not familiar with Sweet Honey In The Rock to listen to their recordings, attend their concerts, and read *We Who Believe In Freedom*. The inspirational impact of this group’s music, as well as the manner and the contexts in which it is presented, far exceeds my capacity to write

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<sup>3</sup> This song appears on the 1993 recording, *Still On the Journey*.

<sup>4</sup> letter from Bernice Johnson Reagon to the author, 8/00

<sup>5</sup> *Still on the Journey*

<sup>6</sup> *Still on the Journey*

<sup>7</sup> *Still on the Journey*

about it. Sweet Honey has vastly expanded my vision of the possible – for the female vocal instrument, for the ensemble art, and for ways to engage beauty at the service of justice.

*Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir*

As Melanie DeMore remarked to me, Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir is frequently mentioned in the same mouthful with Sweet Honey In The Rock: “Of course, people are constantly comparing us, and we are nothing alike.” In a music market where a five-voice, *a cappella*, African-American women’s ensemble devoted to traditional Black sounds is a rarity, the distinctions between the groups can easily escape recognition. In fact, while the majority of Sweet Honey’s work is composed by group members, it is rare that CHC sings an original song. The groups also differ markedly in their use of percussion instruments. Sweet Honey sometimes uses light accompaniment, most often on shekere. In contrast, many a CHC song is driven by the deep and agile pulse of Linda Tillery’s *cajón*,<sup>8</sup> West-African-style bells often call the groove, and Diaspora percussion artist John Santos is a frequent guest on CHC appearances and recordings.

The fourth chapter of Bonnie Morris’s *Eden Built By Eves* (1999) is a collection of “self-portraits” written by prominent artists on the Womyn’s music festival circuit. Linda Tillery, legendary as a star performer on festival stages, is one of the contributors to this collection. In her self-portrait, she speaks about the influence of Womyn’s music festivals on her career before and since the founding of CHC. Weighing in as one of the performers at the first “Michigan,” in 1976, she writes about the challenge of playing to Womyn’s audiences that were mostly White:

My musical background’s based in jazz, rhythm and blues, and some gospel, with a very heavy dose of the blues. In the beginning I wondered, “What on earth am I going to do for these women? How do I present who I really am to this audience, which may or may not have had exposure to the kinds of music that (are) important to me?” It was a matter of the artist wondering about how to reach her audience without compromising herself. ...I think the audiences I’ve performed for within the women’s music circuit were being educated just by virtue of being exposed to what I had to offer. (107)

Tillery elaborates on the didactic effect of her festival performances, a value that was to carry into the ethos of the Cultural Heritage Choir’s founding:

What emerged as a blessing for me is that one of the producers of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival made it possible for me to present some programs that were really kind of groundbreaking. ...One of these was called A Tribute to Black Women and the Blues. The scope of that project itself was so overwhelming

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<sup>8</sup> This instrument, which I have seen played by Flamenco musicians in Spain as well as by Afro-Peruvian and other Afro-Latin artists, is sometimes referred to as “the poor man’s drum.” It is a box, fashioned of wood, with one face open. A fully-functional cajón can be made of five inexpensive pieces of lumber. It can be rectangularly shaped, with the “head” larger than the sides, so as to permit the player to sit atop it while playing the head between her legs. Tillery’s instrument has a head no larger than an average djembe, and its long sides are angled down toward one another so that the sound hole is narrower than the “head.” She plays it between her legs or across her lap.

and so powerful that it became much larger than the people involved. And that unfolded during the performance. I actually stood backstage and watched in awe this artistic expression of respect and gratitude paid to some women who might have been otherwise ignored. And it was one of the most satisfying moments of my life. I also had the opportunity to bring my version of a Motown band to Michigan and had the opportunity to bring the Cultural Heritage Choir to Michigan. So I can say that I was one of the women who was instrumental in exposing women's audiences to African-American music. And that too is a very satisfying thing for me. (107, 108)

In the absence of an interview with Tillery about her vision for the Cultural Heritage Choir, we can read in these passages her own report on several of the influences and priorities that have characterized her career up to and inclusive of CHC's existence. In the first place, she commands a variety of Black musical styles. We can also hear in her words the importance she places on honoring the voices that have helped to create the musical traditions in which she is steeped. She seems to feel especially proud of women's accomplishments and to place a priority on recognition of and opportunities for women musicians. She finds it important to interpret Black musical sounds for underexposed listeners. She acknowledges that because her connection to these musics is so personal, she has a need to assure that the circumstances of her performing will promote as respectful and comprehending a response as possible.

In an interview with Laura Post (1995), Tillery speaks about the moment in 1989 that catalyzed her decision to create the CHC. She had been working in the music industry for several years with her own bands and as a vocalist for several other artists, including Carlos Santana, Kenny Loggins, and the Zazu Pitts Memorial Orchestra. At the time, she had been selected to sing in Bobby McFerrin's Voicestra. One night, while channel-surfing:

I found a PBS show with Jessye Norman and Kathleen Battle singing spirituals. I had my VCR and TV hooked up to my speakers so I turned the shit up, and it blew me away, song after song after song. I'm having my life flash before my eyes. I'm thinking about my grandfather; he used to sing hymns in the house. I'm thinking about church services and stories my mother used to tell me about her grandmother. It was like a volcanic eruption inside of me, and I thought, "I gotta do something with this music." It felt so comfortable. I knew that there was a folk-based component to my creative identity, and I had to find it. (24)

Tillery's first attempt to "do something with this music" was to ask Elizabeth Seja-Min about the possibility of singing on a concert of Black spiritual music with the Oakland Youth Chorus, which Seja-Min was directing. Seja-Min's agreement led to the development of a five-year project that received support from local and national granting organizations (Patino 1998).

But Tillery's interest in traditional African-American song extended beyond the sacred genres represented in her concerts with the Oakland Youth Chorus. Her involvement in secular genres was stimulated when Benny Sato Ambush hired her and five other singers to perform music for the play *Letters from a New England Negro*, a production of San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater. Ambush provided Tillery with field recordings of moans, hollers, and work songs. When Tillery asked him where

to find more of that kind of material, he directed her to the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institute (Patino).

Tillery thus became a researcher as well as a songwriter and performer. According to Melanie DeMore, Tillery has listened to “countless, countless hours of field recordings,” many of them made by Alan Lomax and catalogued in the Library of Congress. Tillery cites as other important sources Harlem’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the ethnomusicological work of Bernice Johnson Reagon, Eileen Southern’s *Greenwood Encyclopedia of Black Music*, and her own fieldwork in the Georgia and South Carolina Sea Islands among elders who remember the song culture as it existed before the islands were joined to the mainland in the 1940s. Tillery comments on the change in her profile and her motivations since her years as a solo artist when – especially at Womyn’s festivals – she looked forward to the “gratuitous sexual admiration” accorded to star performers:

We...change with time. And what we look for as expressions of gratitude and admiration becomes real different. ...As we change, our audiences change as well. Since my life now involves a good deal of time spent on research and reflection, that’s what I’m radiating – I’ve become Professor Tillery, and that’s that. (Morris 1999, 108)

After amassing a body of material, Tillery began her first experiments with performing it. She started by working with eleven singers but soon realized she wanted a smaller, “more fine-tuned” ensemble. So she assembled five other women singers from the Bay Area and with this configuration inaugurated her Cultural Heritage Choir. The ensemble’s current membership, reduced from six to five, includes Tillery, Melanie DeMore, Rhonda Benin, Elouise Burrell, and Emma Jean Foster-Fiege. DeMore has her own history as a performer on the Womyn’s circuit as well as having directed both the Oakland Youth Chorus and Voices, a Lesbian/Feminist chorus based in San Francisco. She and the other singers have extensive performance credits with a number of prominent Motown, folk, rhythm-and-blues, South African reggae, and World-beat artists (Patino, 2). Of particular interest here is that DeMore and Burrell as individuals, and the CHC as a group, have shared the stage with Sweet Honey In The Rock.

Tillery says the following about her goals for CHC:

I want kids, particularly young black people, to hear this music. I want a lot of grandmothers who are from the South to teach me. I want a lot of people who are interested in celebrating history and culture. I want all people who recognize the importance of history and ancestry and family and community. It’s a celebration for all of us to connect with our cultural past and this is celebratory music as far as I see it. (Post 1995, 24)

The group’s celebratory approach is evoked in the title of CHC’s first recording, *Good Time, A Good Time*, from 1995. The title of their 1997 recording *Front Porch Music* signals the communal nature of their songs, recognizing the importance of the front porch as a neighborhood gathering space in African-

American communities.<sup>9</sup> In a project created especially for young people, CHC collaborated with prominent blues artists Taj Mahal and Eric Bibb on *Shakin' a Tail Feather* (1997), which received a Grammy nomination for Best Children's Album.

At this writing, I have been unsuccessful in locating any literature that comprehensively records the creative and performing history of CHC, though I believe it will not be long before the group is found worthy of close examination by musical and cultural scholars. Perhaps at a date not too far in the future, someone will succeed in compiling and making public the comprehensive history that is missing at this time. Responding to my request for some kind of documentation, Linda Tillery sent me the group's press packet, which includes reprints of articles and concert reviews. Piecing these together with similar sources I had gathered gave me a partial picture of the group's history.

From conversations with DeMore, I know that the CHC has toured repeatedly and extensively in Europe. From disparate sources I have learned of the group's engagement at several festivals in North America, including the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival (mentioned in Chapter One), the Lotus Festival in Bloomington, Indiana, and the Vancouver, Calgary, and Canmore Folk Festivals in Canada. I have already quoted Tillery about CHC's appearance at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, and the publicity I have received from the National Women's Music Festival includes the CHC in the lineup for the year 2000. Mimi Fariña's nonprofit presenting organization, Bread and Roses, brought the CHC to a 1995 performance in the Santa Rita jail given for minimum-security inmates.

To date, it is the CHC's discography that speaks most clearly to its contributions. *Good Time. A Good Time* (1994) includes only oral-tradition songs, all of which are identified in the booklet as simply "traditional." First on the recording is a work song called "Hammer, Ring." The song's use for keeping the time of actual hammer swings is made clear on the recording by a deep pounding or stamping sound on every first and third beat, with handclaps on two and four. The text makes references to the Biblical Noah ("Norah"), hammering to build his ark. The song is in call-and-response form: the lead singer improvises on the Noah story, while the group answers "Hammer, ring" to each phrase. From a conversation I had with Melanie DeMore, I would identify the song as Gullah in origin. As she explained to me, Gullah music is typically sung in unison or octaves; she lamented contemporary musicians' tendency to add harmonies, failing to appreciate the characteristic strength of the music's original, spare form. In this recording the calls, responses, hammer blows, and handclaps are interspersed with spontaneous hoots and yells from the chorus.

"Boll Weevil Blues" is arranged in classic New Orleans jazz style, with voices simulating snare drum, string bass, clarinet, trumpet, and trombone. "Fix Me, Jesus" is a slow, contemplative hymn sung by a lead who is answered in congregational harmony, while "Throw Me Down in the Old Field" – formerly in the repertoire of Bessie Jones's Sea Island Singers – is a spirited declaration of the salvation that defies all worldly oppression: CHC's interpretation ends by arranging the material in the style of music for full

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<sup>9</sup> For more on this, see "Architecture in Black Life: Talking Space with Laverne Wells-Bowie" in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* by bell hooks (1995).



gospel chorus and plugged-in, instrumental bassline (simulated by voice). "That's Alright" is sung in early gospel-quartet-style harmonies. "Yemayá,"<sup>10</sup> a traditional Afro-Brazilian chant, is led by John Santos's vocals and features his percussion arrangement; the women sing the refrain and clap one rhythmic layer in the texture. The last of this disc's sixteen offerings is the title track, a sung and clapped ring shout in the praise-house tradition.

*Front Porch Music* (1997) features some original songs, including DeMore's "Voice of Mother Africa." The booklet also offers a bit more information on the traditional selections, which are identified as: "spiritual," "South African greeting," "Alabama reel," "Alabama playsong," "Texas prison work song," "Mississippi cornfield holler," "S. Carolina Sea Islands." Prose in the booklet encourages the listener to perceive the ways in which "this music makes up the foundation for all of contemporary American popular music." In fact, those original, popular tunes that are presented are done in arrangements that make their folk roots apparent. George H. Bass's "See Line Woman" is accompanied by djembe, shakers, and bell in a West-African style; stripped of the usual instrumental and harmonic support, the melody's pentatonicity is suddenly obvious, audibly connecting the song to the traditional tracks that surround it. John Santos's haunting song about dying, "Goin' Home Tomorrow," uses the same scale as "See Line Woman; it is sung by a soloist who is answered by the chorus with a chant, while the *gankogui* – a large, iron bell – keeps time.

Two other tracks seem especially designed to draw connections. The "Spirituals Medley" is interesting for presenting three Spirituals – "Wade In the Water," "Way Over in Beulahland," and "Run, Mary, Run" – one after the other and then simultaneously. "Gankogui/ Welcome" is a traditional South-African greeting chant, presented in an arrangement using voices to simulate the rhythmic patterns of Ghanaian bells; it also features accompaniment by *qutiplas*, pitched bamboo stamping tubes commonly used in Afro-Venezuelan music. This seems a deliberate statement uniting various Diaspora styles under a unitary aesthetic and ethos.

Accompaniment by handclaps, stomping feet, and pounding stick is ubiquitous throughout the recording. In many parts of the United States, the slaves had been forbidden the use of drums (Southern 1971, 157).<sup>11</sup> Because the drum had been at the center of musical and spiritual life in Africa, it seems that these substitutes would have been used whenever possible. Other sound-makers fashioned from natural materials – as well as effects such as wind simulations and sampled cricket sounds – are used throughout the disc to create the feeling of being outdoors in a wild setting, whether in the African flora or the woods and swamps of the Deep South.

Closing the album is Tillery's solo rendering of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" – the Black national anthem, by James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamund Johnson – driven by cajón; she closes the song with a rap recitation of the names of twenty-five legendary African-American jazz, blues, gospel, soul, and rhythm-and-blues artists including James Brown, Aretha Franklin, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Muddy Waters,

<sup>10</sup> In Yoruba, the mother of all orishas, and – as the ocean – mother of life on earth.

<sup>11</sup> In contrast, the vital drumming traditions of Caribbean island and coastal Latin American Diaspora communities are testament to policies that encouraged slaves to "divert" and "entertain" themselves by drumming.

Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Roberta Martin. The album is a beautiful tribute to Black musical creativity throughout the Diaspora and across the generations.

*Shakin' a Tail Feather*, the collaboration with Taj Mahal and Eric Bibb, is a departure from the CHC's usual aesthetic. Two traditional tracks, "Miss Mary Mack" and "Little Sally Walker," are performed *a cappella* by CHC only. "Draw Me a Bucket o' Water" and "This-a-Way Valerie" incorporate the men's voices. Most other tracks involve a three- to six-piece band. "Ask Grandma" dispenses good moral advice in uptempo blues. Fleecy Moore and Fred Clark's "Beans and Cornbread" delivers humor about relationship conflict in rhythm-and-blues. "Rockin' Robin" by Bobby Day introduces young people to '50s-style rock and roll.

The disc as a whole is playful and upbeat, featuring plenty of humorous banter during songs' improvisational sections. However, it ends with the Spiritual "Follow the Drinking Gourd," a deep and sublime rendering. This song was a coded message telling escaping slaves to guide themselves by the North Star in the Big Dipper. Each verse gives specific information about negotiating the Underground Railroad, moving into the refrain with the words: "For the old man is a-waitin' for to carry you to freedom." Here, solo verses are sung by Eric Bibb, Linda Tillery, and Taj Mahal. The CHC lends harmonic accents on the refrain, and Bibb uses his acoustic blues guitar to provide a spare accompaniment throughout. The song and its performance convey an unmistakable and moving message of a community that cooperates to ensure the well-being of its members despite unthinkable obstacles. Any child listening should hear the encouragement and loving care of elders shepherding them and pointing the way through trouble to new opportunities that they themselves can no longer seize. Of all the superlative work that Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir has done, this simple song is the one that, coming through my car stereo, still makes me pull over to the side of the road.

### *Urban Bush Women*

The work of this company of artists is the most difficult to typify and summarize. In their sixteen years of existence, they have created an impressive variety of multi-disciplinary works for the stage, collaborated on independent film projects, and brought their artistic responses to the needs of communities through engagement projects with schools, churches, housing projects, amateur performing ensembles, drug-rehabilitation programs, and social-justice organizations throughout this country and abroad. A recent dissertation by Ama Oforiwaa Konadu Aduonum, a Ghanaian woman now on the ethnomusicology faculty at Illinois State University, provides a comprehensive account of UBW's history, philosophy, and artistic output. I met Aduonum at the first Urban Bush Women/Florida State University Summer Institute, where we began a friendship that we continued each successive summer. When we met, she was completing her doctorate at FSU and participating in the Institute. Because I knew that her dissertation would contain information that was valuable to my own project, I offered to edit its first draft in exchange for receiving my own copy of the completed work. During my residence at the third Institute, in 1999, Aduonum handed

to me her study: *Urban Bush Women: Building Community and Empowering the Disempowered Through a Holistic Performing Arts Medium* (1999).

Aduonum's point of departure for examining UBW is her own experience in Ghana, where dance, drumming, song, and theater form a unified entity, the components of which do not stand alone. Aduonum identifies this integrated, holistic approach to expression as one among several Africanist characteristics of UBW (3-5). Another is the value of collective individualism, which UBW's artistic director Jawole Willa Jo Zollar defines in a conversation with Aduonum:

The individual finds and maintains her individuality in relation to the group – the group respects the idiosyncratic voice of the individual – the individual accepts responsibility to be a part of and have a voice in the group – the group nurtures individuality – when needed, the individual plays in harmony with the group, blending when necessary, standing out when the “need is right” – but the commitment stays with being part of the group – understanding how important it is for the group to nurture how to take leadership and when to be a team player and when it's time for your solo – this idea directly relates to the Jazz Aesthetic. (7)

This quote could as easily be a description of the musical workings of a performing ensemble as of the daily activities of a community of people devoted to the principle of collective individualism. Indeed, if we read it in light of the hypothesis, suggested in Chapter Two, that musical form communicates political content, we see the jazz ensemble as a musical enactment of this type of social organization, which is popularly claimed as an African retention in African America.

To this understanding of jazz form, Aduonum adds an extra-musical definition of the jazz aesthetic. She quotes William J. Harris, for whom the word *aesthetic* implies not only a theory of beauty but also a theory of action and of politics. Harris defines the jazz aesthetic as:

...a procedure that uses jazz variations as paradigms for the conversion of white poetic and social ideas into black ones. It is important to note that the jazz aesthetic process has social as well as formal dimensions. The jazz aesthetic process...exists in the social world, a world where blacks are still too often second-class citizens. (8)

According to Aduonum, “the jazz aesthetic, then, is about transformation and subversion for political ends, and at this level, too, the concept has profound relevance in relation to the works and artistic philosophy of UBW” (8).

In discussing UBW's social activism, Aduonum uses Michelle Wallace's definition of “black feminist creativity,” which is:

...black female creative production that is 1) informed by socialist feminism, ...whose primary goal is a liberatory and profound political action and 2) inherently critical of current oppressive and repressive political, economic, and social arrangements affecting not just black women but black people as a group.

...Black feminists want to make the world into a better place that will be safe for women of color, their men, and their children. (9)

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar unequivocally claims Feminism as an abiding influence throughout her life:

I think I was a feminist before I knew what that meant. As a young child, I would comment to my parents that I would not change my name if I got married. I did not think it was fair for a woman to give up her name: that did not come from reading any feminist ideology; I don't know where it came from, but it is something I realized early on that the system seems to be unfair to women. I was naturally drawn to it (*Feminism*). (Aduonum, 64)

Aduonum goes on to list the Feminist writers, as well as writers from the Black Arts Movement, that Jawole did read in her years as an undergraduate student, building a case for the mutual influence on UBW's art of the outpouring of Feminist and Black radical thought, writing, and cultural production during the years of Zollar's early artistic development.

As mentioned in Chapter One, Zollar is a native of Kansas City, Missouri. After earning her dance degrees from the University of Missouri and Florida State University, she moved to Harlem in 1980 to study with Dianne McIntyre, who at that time was artistic director of a dance company called Sounds in Motion, as well as an extremely supportive teacher and mentor. McIntyre encouraged her students to choreograph their own works, providing them with space, production support, and sometimes a small stipend. Zollar studied with McIntyre for "about three years" before forming her own fledgling company, Urban Bush Women, in 1984 (70).

I have heard Zollar speak many times about discovering the power of the media during the opening weekend of Urban Bush Women's first show. She recalls the low-budget, near-grassroots nature of the enterprise and her expectation that, as an unknown, she would be playing to a total of no more than forty of her family members and friends throughout the weekend. On opening night, the house was small but happened to include Jennifer Dunning, a dance reviewer for the *The New York Times*. The next morning, the *Times* carried Dunning's rave review of the performance, and that night the line for the box office wound around the block.

Between 1986 and 1992, UBW operated under the aegis of the Foundation for Independent Artists. Since 1992 the company has existed as an independent entity. The company tours extensively throughout the United States and has also performed in Brazil, Singapore, Hong Kong, Australia, England, and throughout Western Europe. In 1992 the company spent two weeks in Jamaica on a research trip participating in *Nyabinghi*<sup>12</sup> ceremonies and researching traditional Revival, Kumina, and Rastafari music and dance. In this same year, UBW won New York's BESSIE award for dance performance, and in 1994 UBW was granted the coveted Capezio Award for outstanding achievement.

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<sup>12</sup> Village rites lasting three, seven, or twenty-one days, during which traditional drum rhythms are played with the goal of synchronizing the heartbeats of the community members.

In creating works grounded in the real experiences of Black people, Zollar turns to various sources for material. She has collaborated with African-American writers Jewelle Gomez, Hattie Gossett, and Carl Hancock Rux as well as choreographing existing poetry and prose by Langston Hughes, Ntozake Shange, and Ugandan poet Okot p'Bitek. She has taken oral histories from friends, performers in the ensemble, and significant African-American figures such as Abiodun of The Last Poets. The various dancers and musicians who have performed with the company have brought to the repertoire their own backgrounds in the rhythms, songs, and movements of Haiti, Cuba, and Brazil, and of the Bambara, Malinke, and Soussou peoples of West Africa. An evening-length work, *Praise House*, tells the true story of Minnie Evans, a young African-American girl who received and then drew spiritual visions; premiered at the 1990 Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina, this work caught the attention of filmmaker Julie Dash,<sup>13</sup> who adapted the work for the KTCA-TV public television series *Alive From Off-Center*. In the spring of 2000, UBW toured *Soul Deep*, a collaboration with the David Murray Octet.

Aduonum identifies six themes that characterize and recur in UBW's opus: 1) African-American history and culture, 2) African-American women's bodies, sexuality, and empowerment, 3) resistance against violence, 4) spirituality, 5) urban and contemporary issues such as poverty and reproductive rights, and 6) community and family (131). These themes are danced, sung, recited, and acted to the accompaniment of live percussion. The choreography combines modern, African, and Diaspora movement forms. The percussion accompaniment combines traditional rhythms (such as Mozambican *xigubu*, Afro-Cuban *guaguancó*, Haitian *yanvalou*) with free composition and improvisation. The songs are typically from the oral tradition or newly created by the company in traditional styles, although *Hand Singing Song* opens with an original song by Bernice Johnson Reagon, the vocal score to *Bones and Ash* was composed by Toshi Reagon,<sup>14</sup> and the score to *Praise House* was composed by Carl Riley. Aduonum's dissertation provides brief descriptions of the thematic content of the many works Zollar has created for UBW. Some representative examples of UBW works that engage the audience in considering real political and cultural issues are: *Womb Wars*, which deals with date rape, abortion, adoption, and motherhood; *Shelter*, which links the destruction of natural plant and animal habitats to human homelessness; and *Song of Lawino*, which portrays the response of a community of Ugandan women whose husbands, returning from European schooling in England, ridicule their traditional ways.

Zollar's attention to the struggles and victories of real people in real communities is not confined to UBW's onstage expressions. The company offers a variety of workshop experiences to community members in the cities they visit on tour. These include the Community Sing (which will be discussed in detail later), theater-improvisation classes, movement classes, and lecture-demonstrations. These programs communicate the message that creative expression is for everyone, and that people in communities can

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<sup>13</sup> renowned for her film *Daughters of the Dust* about an early-twentieth-century Gullah community facing the allures/perils of joining mainland life.

<sup>14</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagon's daughter and a recording and performing artist on Womyn's, rhythm-and-blues, and alternative rock circuits.

enhance their relationships with one another and their collective responses to problems by engaging in creative-expression together.

From time to time, UBW undertakes a long-term artistic residency aimed at enhancing community empowerment. These Community Engagement Projects (CEPs) are based on the Freirean pedagogical model<sup>15</sup> and its manifestation in the dramatic arts. Theater of the Oppressed. A CEP begins with the identification by spokespersons from the target community of a current challenge facing them all. The initial stages of the residency involve discussions, story circles, and other means of eliciting community members' own knowledge, experiences, and ideas related to the problem. Using these communications as the bases for composition, the artists then collaborate with the community members in making dances, songs, dramas, and other creative expressions aimed at addressing and healing from the problem. Cities in which UBW has carried out CEPs include Philadelphia, Miami, New Orleans, and Campinas, Brazil. And the Summer Institutes in Tallahassee, as schooling grounds for artists interested in this kind of work, have involved those artists in CEPs in the greater Tallahassee community, addressing issues of public health and wellness.

To be sure, the powerful, multifaceted, and virtuosic performances of the women of UBW leave an impact that few dance companies equal. The added miracle is to see their community engagements spark transformations of which any social worker would be proud to boast. For example: In the first year of the Institute in Tallahassee, community leaders asked UBW for help in combating what were some of the nation's highest rates of HIV infection. It was reported that discussing HIV was particularly taboo among local African Americans. Therefore, every artistic endeavor undertaken with community members addressed HIV in some way. When we returned for the third summer, we learned that the past season's performance schedule of the Tallahassee Boys Choir – an ensemble of young boys, most of them African American – had included a concert to benefit the county's HIV/AIDS organization.

### Sharing Songs in Communities

#### Connection Versus Separation

Audience members find the work of these three ensembles approachable in a way that might not characterize their relationships to mainstream recording luminaries, symphonic orchestras, or ballet companies. In the first place, standing outside the popular superstar system, the women of these ensembles are not separated from the public by bodyguards and other high-security measures: they perform in venues where they can be seen up-close, where they can interact with audience members, and where no backstage pass is required for greeting them after the show. Admittedly, few bassoonists have ever needed bodyguards, and it might be only the dream of any ballerina who was not the *prima* to find lines of elated

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<sup>15</sup> Paolo Freire's revolutionary practice of literacy work among the poor, outlined in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), stresses that the only effective and moral approach is to base initial learning on the words, sentiments, and observations spoken by the students themselves when invited to discuss their quotidian experiences; any other approach will necessarily impose upon the students the very values of the oppressor class that consigned them to poverty in the first place – and in the exceptional cases where this will not fail to produce a functional literacy, the end of that literacy will be only to perpetuate the oppressions that literacy should be aimed at eliminating.

strangers waiting for her embraces, conversation, and autographs. But that is because the nature of so many bassoonists' and ballerinas' work can be very effective on its own in maintaining their separation from their audiences. Typical performance venues and conventions – such as dark house lighting, physical gulfs separating the performing stage from the house seats, and the implicit rule against speaking to the audience – help to create this alienation. But more subtle is the recognition among performers and audiences alike that the artistic medium in question is an elite form: even gaining entry to witness it and being able to understand it in the witnessing, to say nothing of being able to execute it, requires considerable investment of time and money. Caricatures of performers in these media ascribe to them the attitude that their art forms are completely divorced from the experiences, concerns, and comprehensions of the general public: in reality one would not have to look far to find performers who – even without arrogance – believe that their art's relationship to daily human life is significant only in the opportunity it provides for escaping life into abstraction from reality. (In chapter Five I discuss the theoretical extremes of musical escapism.) I do not mean by this to deny the value of such media, for I hunger after the abstracted brilliance of a Bach fugue as much as the next person.

But somewhere between the mass-commodification of the popular superstar and the elite virtuoso's untouchable art, the work of Sweet Honey's, CHC's, and UBW's virtuosic women in vernacular song and movement forms engages the passions, concerns, and experiences of their audiences in a way that makes us feel we have a point of entry into their expressions; they make us feel as though they *see* us. Rooted as these ensembles are in the politics of liberation from race, class, and sex oppression, their work necessarily addresses the everyday realities of common people, among whom they number themselves. And though they have spent lifetimes training their ears, voices, and bodies to do things that most people cannot do, their stunning performances always communicate the recognition that the forms in which they work have been created by communities of very regular – often very oppressed – people. Their political attention to the histories and contemporary realities of communities of regular people results in creative expressions and modes of presentation that are widely accessible, immediate, and comprehensible. And it is not unusual for any one of these groups to interact with an audience in a way that invites or even demands participation. Their political commitments also mandate that they interact with communities outside of the concert hall, as in the Urban Bush Women Community Engagement Project.

I am suggesting here some important reasons why the repertoires of Sweet Honey, Cultural Heritage Choir, and Urban Bush Women *feel* so familiar to and are so loved by the communities among whom they circulate, why we feel we can learn from and talk to these women, why we feel we want to and are able to sing their songs. Melanie DeMore is very enthusiastic about the wide appeal she has perceived that this music has for people:

One of the things that makes African-American traditional music in particular so appealing to every person on the planet... – in particular, I think especially something like Gospel music or traditional African-American music in that way... one of the things that makes it so exciting to people in a broad way is its congregational nature.

And DeMore and others have been generous with this music. Even before embarking on this study, I had personally attended numerous gatherings in different parts of the country where members of each of these ensembles were teaching their songs to everyone who had come in the door.

#### When and Where They Enter

Women in all three groups have long been engaged in activities offstage and outside the recording studio that involve teaching Black oral-tradition song to community groups or workshop attendees. The women of Sweet Honey, feeling a specific obligation as a “community group” to give gifts to their community, began in 1980 to hold workshops in *a cappella* singing for African-American women in the D.C. area; these experiences developed into the ensemble called In Process... which thrives today as a first-rate performing organization. Ysaye Barnwell published her recording and booklet package entitled *Singing in the African American Tradition* (to which I referred in Chapter One) as a kind of stand-in for workshops she gives regularly, helping users to recreate part of the workshop experience at will. Bernice Johnson Reagon is invited to give workshops nationally and abroad, having worked with various kinds of organizations such as church groups, choral ensembles, dance companies, and even a class of visual artists. Linda Tillery and Melanie DeMore have long histories of sharing songs and teaching vocal techniques to amateur choral groups, notably the Feminist ensembles that convene at Womyn’s music festivals or function throughout the year in so many U.S. cities. And the women of UBW offer their Community Sing to the cities on their touring itinerary.

The UBW Community Sing is actually Jawole Zollar’s adaptation of another of another of Ysaye Barnwell’s activities. Barnwell leads a Community Sing once a month in her home city of Washington, D.C. She commented to me on some of her practices in her workshops and Community Sings, practices that resurface in the UBW format. In particular, she was adamant about respecting the oral method of transmission by which the songs she teaches have been created and shared. She tells participants:

“You can’t take notes. You can’t record. If you have a problem with that, go get your money back. That is the tradition we are working with. Okay?” ...You know, every month I do a Community Sing. And people come for two hours. And in about a half an hour, we have a choir of people – maybe a third of them come every month. And we’re talking 80 to 100, 120, 130 people. okay? ...Where are they coming from?! And not a piece of paper gets passed out. And we sing some pretty amazingly complicated things.

When choosing material to teach, Barnwell looks for a balance between representing her own voice and respecting the variety of her participants’ backgrounds:

I’m very careful about offending – not people’s *political* views, because I feel like you come to my workshop wanting to know who I am; and who I am is someone who comes out of a tradition of music that is sacred, spiritual, you know, in many, many ways. And I say that at the beginning of the workshop. I say: “If you have a problem with doing sacred music, you are free. You can have your money back; you don’t have to



stay.” ... (But) I avoid working with songs that mention Jesus – although “God” and “Lord” are just so integral in the music that that’s just how it is. But I very rarely will do Jesus music. Because I understand that a lot of people have a different religious tradition. They can sort of tolerate “Lord” and “God,” but they have a harder time tolerating Jesus. You know? And so I don’t need to slam that in their face. I’m not using the workshop as a form of proselytizing. I don’t have that kind of need.

Barnwell and I spoke no further about her Community Sing, and I am unfamiliar with its particulars. I am, however, well acquainted with The Urban Bush Women Community Sing.

The UBW Community Sing is designed to last about an hour, though when attendees become involved in sharing music that they know, the company is happy to extend the experience. This is most likely to happen when several members of the same local choir turn out for the event and proudly share some of their material. When Zollar is on the road with the company, she will usually take the primary role in addressing the participants, determining the order of the songs that will be sung, teaching and leading songs, and inviting specific company members to present certain songs from their backgrounds and experiences. When Zollar cannot be present, she designates someone else to take on this role. Chairs at a UBW Community Sing are set up in a circle of which the company is a part. The Sing invariably opens with a very simple chant that Zollar learned from Barnwell, a failsafe exercise that accustoms participants to the feeling of putting their voices out into the room. Any song that is subsequently taught in the Sing is preceded by an introduction to the cultural and historical context from which it arose and an identification of the people from whom it was learned. Sometimes the participants will be encouraged to add any harmonies that come to them spontaneously. Other songs have specific harmony parts that are divided up among different areas of the circle. Company members are often deployed to the separate areas to help lead the parts. As in Barnwell’s format, all material is taught orally, and all of it is in the oral tradition, with the exception of a few songs and chants from scores composed for UBW performance pieces. This avoids copyright issues in situations where tape recorders and video-cameras may be present, but more importantly, it reflects Zollar’s interests:

There’s something more about oral tradition that I really want to – you know, what’s being *handed down*? What information is *there*? I want to get even more information around that. ... And not just oral tradition, but *body* tradition: you know, why are we dancing the way we’re dancing at any given time?

Though we didn’t speak about it, Zollar seems to have agreed with Barnwell that too much specific, Christian doctrine in song texts can inhibit the success of a public Sing. Nicole, a former UBW member, commented on this:

We don’t do too many Spirituals about being baptized; it might be a concern – I don’t know that it has ever been voiced – but we don’t want to, you know, step on too many people’s religious-freedom toes.

### Urban Bush Women on the Community Sing

Urban Bush Women's stage performances feature Black oral-tradition songs and songs composed by or for the company in Black traditional styles. The audience member with a deft ear can leave the theater with a new song in her voice, but the most significant transmission of song between the company and its public occurs in the Community Sing. I asked every UBW member whom I interviewed to talk to me about this practice. I was curious about how each woman understands the uniqueness of its role within what is primarily a dance-based company. Before presenting the performers' words, I will introduce each one briefly.

Of the seven current UBW members who were in residence at the second Urban Bush Women Institute where I carried out the interviews, I spoke with five. Georgette is a New Jersey native, and Jacquelyn is from Brooklyn; both women had spent most of their lives and attended college in the New York City orbit and had been involved in the modern and African dance scenes in New York prior to joining UBW. These women, both in their twenties, had just completed their first year with the company. Tina was raised in the Chicago suburbs and attended Stanford, where she majored in American Studies with a minor in Feminist Studies; she began her professional dance career in the Bay Area. Consuelo was born in Miami, graduated from the New World School of the Arts, and performed in Miami in modern and Afro-Cuban styles before moving to New York. Also in their twenties, Tina and Consuelo were in their third year with UBW. Iris, UBW's veteran performer and rehearsal director, hails from Michigan, is a graduate of Grand Valley State, and had performed with various New York choreographers and companies before joining UBW. Forty-one years old at the time of the interview, Iris was in her ninth year with the company.

Also in residence as Institute faculty artists were two former company members. Maya, who had only just left full-time engagement with UBW, continues to join the group for specific performances or tours. She is from the San Francisco Bay Area, where she has trained and worked in drama, mime, and dance; Maya has also lived in Brazil, where she has studied capoeira, as well as Bahian traditions in the Yoruba faith, of which she is a priest. Maya was in her late twenties at the time of the interview. Nicole's tenure with the company dates back several years. Originally from Philadelphia she is a master in the Dunham technique and holds her doctorate in dance history from Temple University. Nicole had a conspicuous role as a teacher and leader at the second Institute; by the third Institut e, she was functioning as co-director with Zollar. I neglected to ask her about her age, but I believe that she was in her late thirties at the time of the interview.

I asked Georgette about the *Community Sing* and its place in all of UBW's outreach programs – lecture-demonstrations, workshops, and long-term residencies. She explained what UBW's community work has to do with the onstage product:

It connects with UBW because we use a lot of the stuff that we get from our community classes on stage. We try to portray that; we try to have a re-enactment on the stage so that people know this is true, that this can happen, or it does happen to people. There are people who have these experiences. They may not be our

experiences, but they are somebody else's experiences. ...And (the community) gets to know a little bit about us, and we get to know a little bit about them. ...I think it's just wonderful to be able to go out there and *see* where we're performing. Because a lot of times you just go out, perform, and leave. And they don't know anything else about us. And sometimes they have these preconceived thoughts that we're this untouchable thing, that we're on stage and they're out there, and then they don't have any contact with us. And so that gives them a chance to see that we are real people who make mistakes. We're just like them. We're no better. You know, we're no worse. We are human. We do a lot of the things that they do.

This appreciation for the opportunity to meet face-to-face with the public is something every member emphasized. The members of UBW are infallibly gracious to their audiences and workshop participants, even when strangers gather backstage after a grueling performance to meet and talk with them. And their unusual commitment to working with people in impoverished areas goes beyond philosophy or philanthropy: even those performers personally unacquainted with poverty recognize that the raw materials of so many of the expressions in which they perform have been created in poor, Black communities.

Consuelo values the democratic opportunity afforded by the Community Sing for her and others to express themselves vocally:

I love (Community Sings) because I'm not a singer, per se, but it's so great because I feel like a singer when we do them! And another reason is because you can involve so many people. Everybody can do it. You just sit down, so that already brings a lot of people in, because a lot of people are already so conscious of their bodies, and they don't want to (dance), and – so, that's the way to include everyone.

Nicole, too, enjoys the opportunity to experiment with her voice, as well as the sense of connection to distant people and places wrought by the songs:

I...like the fact that I can use my voice in all kinds of very experimental ways (giggling) that I am not able to do on stage, where I have to try to hold my harmony part. At a Community Sing I can just go off and do all kinds of different parts and run on the other side of the room and do a different harmony, and just try out things that I'm not very good at, but it doesn't matter. You know? It's just I get involved with lending my voice. And that just frees me up as a person and frees up my soul in those moments. I also like the fact that in mostly every community that we go into, there's always some African-American songs that everybody can identify with. *everybody* knows. And it just brings me – the world community just seems like one, global community. Even when we were in London: we did African-American songs and some of the Civil Rights liberation songs, and everybody knew them.

Zollar typically uses several Freedom Songs in one evening, offering many opportunities for participants to contribute their own verses. In our conversation, she placed a high value on the way these songs call forth individual participation. Among several who mentioned appreciating the same thing, Nicole was the most enthusiastic about the effect of these songs:

We have those songs where you can come in and shout out a word and everybody goes for it – lending their *ideas*. and you get to know people. You get to *know* the community. You get to know what's on people's minds and what people's concerns are. People open up and sing what they want. They talk about their issues through their song. So you get to know communities pretty well.

In reality, these songs seldom allow individuals to insert more than a word or two – four or five at the very most. Nicole's sense that by these songs she is getting to know a community "pretty well" suggests to me that in sharing the songs, she experiences an empathic connection with the singers, one that implies to her a wealth of intuited or assumed information and communication – far more than could be carried solely by the words that are contributed.

According to Tina, the most important goal for a Community Sing is to attain a feeling of group euphoria so that all participants will have fun and leave feeling happier than when they arrived. She identified this effect as:

...that nebulous thing: the *vibe*. I can't quite say what it *most* depends on, but I can tell you *some* of what it depends on: if it's mixed racially, and they really don't kind of want to open up to each other, then you really feel that. You really hear that in the vocal quality in the room. Or, if they're just afraid, you know, to actually make sound. It's not their age or their religion, nothing like that. I think it's their willingness to be free, to be open, to learn, and *their willingness to be a community*. (*emphasis mine*)

According to Tina's observations, the vocal sound a group achieves has direct political implications for the members' lives outside of the Sing. This recalls Robert Glenn's contention that political meaning is expressed by the very sounds people create when they sing together (see page 44).

Zollar identified more specifically some conditions that inhibit a fulsome community response in a Sing:

Some places we go to, you can tell that Black people and White people never come together. ...I think particularly in small communities in the South. I remember one Community Sing in Wilmington, North Carolina. And it's so segregated, and so – I mean, there was just so much discomfort in the room. We had an upper-middle-class White group, we had a very working-class Black/White group, and it was difficult. We did one at Penn State where it was mostly working-class White people, and so it was difficult. Sometimes it can be really hard to get going.

I asked Jacquelyn whether she thought that the racial makeup of the attending group affected the experience of the Community Sing:

When you're in a White community...things are rigid, you know? Most people don't open up. Either they open up too much, and start suffocating you, or they don't open up. And, um, the whole thing with the rhythm: the church. That clapping thing with "This Little Light of Mine," you start throwing that in there?

That won't happen in a White community. I think that's the only difference: the comfort zone. We have to warm them up a little more. Whereas the Black people are just there, and they're ready. They're ready to go to church!

Maya has also observed the "suffocating" effect of White people who get overzealous about racial unity. She has some strategies for addressing the discomfort that can accompany the experience of being confronted with politically charged cultural difference:

...Usually...the White Americans are like: "Yeah! We're coming together; this is what it's all about! And African Americans are like: "We're not really together. This is bullshit." ...If I have a vast repertory to work with, I'm going to say: "Okay. Maybe there's a lot of division in this room. So maybe I'm going to pull out a song – " You know, maybe I might start with a praise song to Elegba<sup>16</sup> and maybe find the similarities into some Christian philosophy and say: "We're saying the same thing."

When a Sing engages the participants especially enthusiastically, part of the ethos is to allow it to take the direction in which the participants seem to want to go. This is a sign that the facilitators have been successful. For the less need there is for direction, the stronger the collective response has been. Nicole commented on the importance of resisting the urge to maintain leadership, of recognizing when to step out of the way:

Another thing about a Community Sing: we don't have a director or a leader. We have people that are *guiding*; we talk about *guiding* the Community Sing along. Because the Community Sing takes on its own flavor. You know "Take Me to the Water to Be Baptized"? You can do it fast, but then we got to a Community Sing, and we had some *real* spiritual Black folk in there! Like from those...kind of churches that *drag* it out. (*demonstrates "lining out" a hymn*) And they were just lending all their own little sounds and we would just go with their flow, you know? And a lot of times, we would try to keep it going in a certain direction that we thought we wanted to go, but that wasn't the purpose of the Sing.

Most members reported a definite sense that they are teaching something in their Community Sings, engaging in a didactic process:

I like to see them figure out what language we're talking in, you know, when we break down the different languages and stuff – try to sound out the words and the different intonations. I love to see that whole process going on. (Jacquelyn)

One thing from cultures that's really strong is their music. Their songs tell a lot about a culture or a people or an era or whatever. And, so I think it's great for people to learn that way. For example, you could read a

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<sup>16</sup> The orisha of the crossroads, the trickster spirit of change and choice, the keeper of the gate between the mortal and the spirit realms.

whole book about a certain painting era in another country. But if it has no pictures and you never get to go see the art yourself, it's not going to affect you in the same way. (Tina)

I think it's a really good way to get your political point of view across in a way that it's easy for people to hear. Like talking about slavery. Like talking about injustice. It's an easier way to do it. Because I think history is political. Any time you give history, you're giving a point of view. There's no such thing as a neutral history. ...I can really give my view of history, in the same way that the history-book writers give their view and claim that it's valid. (Jawole Zollar)

Maya feels strongly about providing a song's cultural background and gave a vivid example of the didactic potential inherent in any song, however simple:

When I'm teaching these songs, what I'm hoping to impart is the importance of what (they) represent. A song that's as simple as "O sim, sim, sim; o não, não, não"<sup>17</sup> – some of the lines really are deep and simple at the same time. You know, you're singing about capoeira, and basically what you're saying is, "Here today, gone tomorrow." You know, this is very indicative of the reality in a place like Brazil with ninety percent of the population in poverty. There is a quality in Brazil of where people are like: "You know what? I have to sing. I have to enjoy what I have right now because nothing is guaranteed." And there's a way in which people in poverty bring – especially what I noticed when I was in Brazil and doing capoeira is that people would just, like, find music in every little thing. You go to a little bar, nobody has money, and everybody's splitting a bottle of beer, and somebody starts putting a Samba rhythm on the table. Somebody else takes a glass and a stick and is like: (*sings a bell rhythm*). So, it's like that line says *that* to me.

I asked the company members to identify the sources for the songs they teach at Community Sings. Several women made special mention of Consuelo's contributions from Cuban orisha music, Maya's Brazilian songs, the secular tunes taught them by their previous drummer, who was Jamaican, and the Revival songs they had learned while on a research trip in Jamaica. Jacquelyn taught the group a song in Swahili that she had learned from a drummer in Chicago. Nicole pointed to contributions from Sweet Honey In The Rock and from Tiye Giraud, a singer and *shekere*<sup>18</sup> player formerly of the group Women of the Calabash and an early collaborator with UBW. Zollar spoke about her own contributions to the repertoire:

Some of them are songs I grew up with. Some of them are songs I learned from different people, and sometimes I hear a song – you know, generally it's just hearing a song that grabs me. Or a song will come back to me. Like I remember one day I started singing "Do, Lord, Remember Me." And it was a song that just came back to me – 'cause I grew up singing a lot of Spirituals...in church. Sometimes it's how I hear a song, something about the power of songs from other cultures that strikes me.

<sup>17</sup> "Oh Yes, Yes, Yes: Oh No, No, No"

<sup>18</sup> A dried and hollowed-out gourd strung on the outside with a web of shells or beads; an extremely versatile percussion instrument ubiquitous in West-African and Afro-Caribbean ensembles.

Two statements aptly sum up what I found to be an extremely positive overall feeling about the Community Sing among UBW company members:

People need to know that you don't live in this world like this by yourself. There's a whole world out there, and we need to start sharing. You know, get used to sharing. Get used to seeing and being with each other. 'Cause we need each other, is the bottom line. So, let's start with a song! (Jacquelyn)

If it brings about inside of you a feeling of joy or -- or it just kind of taps whatever emotion that needs to come out, then that is one of the ideas behind doing the Community Sing. (Iris)

### **In Their Own Words:**

#### **The Artists Define Themselves, Their Ensembles, and the Messages They Convey**

##### Who They Think They Are: Individually and Together

When I was interviewing an artist, I customarily began by asking her how she identified herself. One of the Urban Bush Women I spoke with was on a very tight schedule, and this was one of the questions I passed over in order to move more quickly to her ideas about Black music and its performance. Of the ten women in the professional groups who answered the question, five named themselves African-American women. One identified herself as African/Native American, another as an African woman born in America, and another as Cuban American. With this last respondent, the conversation went quickly into a discussion of being raised in Florida by Cuban parents, and from there we found ourselves talking about Cuban dance; it is probable that if we had lingered on the identity question, she would have named some other aspects of herself, and later in the interview, she did speak at some length about valuing the experience of being a woman and working in a woman-only ensemble.

Ysaye Barnwell's answer spoke to her professions and vocation, making no reference to race, and mentioning gender only in passing:

...it's hard to know how to categorize, 'cause it means putting labels on yourself, and I find that women are very multi-dimensional. And I feel like that's definitely part of who I am; I'm a multi-dimensional human being. I just try to do as many things as have captured my interest, along with trying to figure out what I was called to do in the first place and be sure I try to fulfill that mission before I leave out of here.

From there she went on to list the many skills and professions in which she had been active, stating that her current incarnation as a vocal musician "had to have come from Someplace Else, because it was just not on (her) agenda." Later in the interview, and throughout it, she spoke emphatically as an African American and a woman, both of which she felt she represented with equal importance. Among all the Black women I interviewed in both the professional and the amateur groups in this study, there were several who mentioned believing in some specific, pre-ordained purpose for their existence; no White woman mentioned such a thing. Jacquelyn, of Urban Bush Women, was even more specific about this:

I identify myself as someone...who was sent here to teach and pass on tradition, and to help guide the youth so that they will be able to take care of themselves, *and us!* I see myself more than anything as a teacher. I feel that I've been put on this earth to teach.

Two respondents who did not specifically mention identifying themselves as women did name themselves as Lesbians, by which each most likely meant to communicate the information that she both loved women and was a woman:<sup>19</sup> they spoke later in the discussion about the value to them of being in women-only ensembles. Two respondents who I know to be partnered with women lovers did not mention being Lesbians at this point in the interview; one brought this up as significant very soon afterwards, and the other – late in the interview – imparted some wisdom about “Homosexual” perception without claiming that vantage point for herself. Of the eight women I know to be Heterosexual, two mentioned this explicitly, and the others implied it, but this was not until later in the interview when we were discussing their ensembles’ gender politics.

Several women expressed other aspects of their identity as automatically as they named their race/ethnicity and gender. These aspects included: “from the inner city,” “radical,” “dancer,” “artist,” “teacher,” “Christian,” “priest of Yemayá,” and “forty-four-year-old.”

Eight of the ten women mentioned their artistic work as part of their identity, if not their divine purpose. This confirmed in conversation what is clear to any audience member who sees these ensembles perform: that their professional lives represent more to them than mere jobs. In fact, the longest-standing member of Urban Bush Women, Iris, said the following when I asked her to identify herself:

Well, I guess I'm an Urban Bush Woman, and I guess I'll always be one, even when I'm not in the company... for the fact of my exposure to the community, the work that I've done. That's important because I want to feel that connection, you know – have it be something that's a part of me.

To establish the specific connections these artists draw between their identities and their work, my next question asked them to identify the ensembles with which they perform. Ysaye Barnwell said of Sweet Honey In The Rock:

This (oral-tradition) music comes specifically out of African-American cultural tradition, and further back than that: African vocal music. I feel like the whole mission of Sweet Honey, whether it was intended or not, is to preserve...Black vocal music. And to extend that tradition. ...It is sacred space for African-American women.

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<sup>19</sup> Lesbian philosophers Monique Wittig and Sarah Hoagland argue that the term “woman,” having been mutually constituted with its binary opposite “man” under male-supremacist and compulsory Heterosexuality, excludes the category “Lesbian,” and that this is what people mean quite literally when they accuse Lesbians of not being “real women.”



Melanie DeMore of Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir began with similar words about the preservation of tradition and then elaborated on the importance of the group's work to their audiences and to her:

The whole thing about Cultural Heritage Choir is the preservation of the African-American folk tradition... Because...this music that we're doing – old slave songs, music from the Gullah South Sea Islands, work songs, children's game songs, ring shouts, moans, and hollers – is the basis for every single other kind of music, practically, in the United States... And especially going into the next millennium, it's so important to know where we're coming from – and the preservation of this music – there are so many people who aren't aware of this music. ...I know that for me, singing in the CHC has allowed me...to bring all of my parts to the table: as a singer, as an African American, as an African-American *woman* – because those two things are very different – just to bring all of those parts of me together.

Each Urban Bush Woman speaking about her understanding of the company's purpose mentioned UBW's role in the preservation of Black tradition. Like DeMore, Tina commented on the benefits to her of the work UBW presents to the public:

(UBW is) a company that's consciously utilizing and expressing and passing on culture – African-American culture, but also cultures of the different aspects of the Diaspora, whether that be Cuban, Haitian, Jamaican, Brazilian, whatever. That's really important for me just in terms of finding who I am and the different links in terms of my history and my ancestors. You know, it's connected to other things in my life: my hair – you know, I used to have straightened hair. All those transitions in the way you see yourself and the way that you want to see yourself, the ways that you want to connect to your community, ...and trying to affirm something you believe in or who you are.

For Tina, allowing herself to wear dreadlocks instead of straightening her hair represented a rejection of White standards of female beauty and marked her journey toward a fuller acceptance of herself as a Black woman, a journey in which her work with UBW has been influential.

Jacquelyn has a very strong sense of the importance of UBW's work within her generation's place in African-American history:

I feel like we're here...to educate our families, to educate the generation that was skipped over: they ran away from their culture, you know: fear of us. And now it's our job to educate them, help them to find happiness in their culture, because they were so, um... they were fighting, fighting, fighting, and they ended up running away from themselves. You know 'cause they've kinda forgotten about that. It's always been about the struggle. Which is cool, you know; that had its place. ...I know before I got here, UBW was more on a political trip. But we are all young. So a lot of this stuff, well, we didn't live it. We're only going by what we've read and heard. And some of us are still committed to it and some of us are not. ...We represent the children of the Black Panthers: the communities, and the products of the independent schools that were

built, the products of all the African institutions and community centers, all those projects. So we have a responsibility to our elders as well as to the people behind us, because that's what they taught.

### Black Womanhood: A Profusion of Images

All UBW members but one remarked on the beauty of a dance-based company that uses women of many skin tones, hairstyles, and especially body sizes and shapes. Jawole Willa Jo Zollar has often said that she maintains no ideal for body type in her dancers: in rejection of standards for dancers' bodies that can encourage eating disorders, she says that she is simply interested in seeing healthy women's bodies move. Consuelo, who is solidly built and quite short in stature, shared one reaction she had the first time she saw UBW perform:

They weren't all like skinny little ballerina things, you know, with no personality. Everybody was really unique. And I was like: "Well, if everybody's different shapes and sizes, it wouldn't matter that I'm such a *different shape and size*."

Georgette, too, was personally heartened to see UBW's inclusiveness of women who look very different from one another:

I wanted to be a part of UBW because I *saw* the individualities in these women. I saw that size didn't matter. And that was important to me. In learning to be a dancer, you know, I received all kinds of comments like: "You're too short; you're too fat." One comment by my ballet teacher was: "Oh, your body was made for the street, not for the dance – not for ballet."

This instructor's racism and sexism are but thinly veiled in his remark. It is the persistence of these attitudes in the dominant culture – particularly the stigmatization of ample hips and hip movement in Black women – that inspired the genesis of one of UBW's most loved pieces, *Batty Moves*. The word *batty* (pronounced "BAHT-tee") means "buttocks" in Jamaica, and Zollar's dance celebrates the naturalness, variety, beauty, and joy of hip movement that is so commonly appreciated in African and Diaspora cultures. *Batty Moves* resists messages from classical ballet instructors and Christian missionaries alike that this part of the body must be tucked in, de-emphasized, and kept still. Female audience members of every race and shape always respond loudly to performances of *Batty Moves* with an exuberant sense of vindication and liberation.

When the performers find the work they do so personally validating, they can share this validation, conferring it on their concert audiences and community-workshop participants. Urban Bush Women's positive effect on the self-image of others was mentioned by several members as one of the company's defining aspects. Iris feels that their variety of appearance is important to this goal:

We represent many shades of African-American women, too, and also to be able to say to women of whatever shape, size, and what have you, that you don't have to be a particular size to be a mover... 'cause we've had the gamut, up the scale and *down* the scale, in this company! And I think it makes for an easier working environment in a community, because I think it could tend to make people so self-conscious if we went in there and we were all the same size, we looked the same, and we were just trying to manufacture people who look just like us. We're going in to try to help bring out the qualities that people have, not put our qualities on someone else.

Working out of a tradition that recognizes no separation between dance, drumming, and song, both CHC and Sweet Honey incorporate some degree of percussion and movement into their vocal performances; thus, it is not only the professionally trained dancers in this study who value using their bodies onstage with women of different sizes. Melanie DeMore spoke about this within Cultural Heritage Choir:

Young women: it just blows them away. And I think one of the reasons that happens is just the way we look. We represent many different ways of womanhood. We have *definite* different sizes in CHC. And so for people to see us up there throwing down really hard with percussions and dancing and doing all those kinds of things I think is really, really important. Singing in CHC has really changed my life. It has completely changed the way I see myself in the world.

Appreciation for differences among women in CHC and Sweet Honey is not restricted to the visual. Both Barnwell and DeMore spoke about the importance to them of singing that represents all possible ranges for women's voices. Barnwell, who can sing from bass to soprano, named the early influence on her of hearing Marion Anderson and Odetta use their full vocal ranges in ways that women recording artists were not usually heard to do.<sup>20</sup> DeMore said of CHC:

...one of the things that makes a difference is that we're based on a vocal configuration that a lot of women's groups are not. We have two very low voices, two very high voices, and one in the middle. ...We have a very wide range. So that sets us apart from other groups because we can sing really low and really high and anything in between.

While the performers in all three groups typically reported an appreciation for working in women-only ensembles, it was sometimes difficult for them to be specific about why they thought this was a good thing:

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<sup>20</sup> Again, I refer the reader to Elizabeth Wood's "Sapponics" (*Queering the Pitch*, 1994). Wood suggests that women whose vocal ranges span several registers find great favor with Lesbian audiences, as they transgress conventional limitations on women and carry messages of unrestricted physical prowess and sensuality. Taken together, Wood's observations and the remarks of Barnwell and DeMore suggest viewing gender norms for vocal sound as racially constructed.

I do think that there are advantages to (it). I think there are lots and lots of African-American male ensembles who have defined themselves and who do what they do. I think that – you know, I can't exclude from reality the fact that people look at us and see us as *women* who are *standing* on that stage and *making* statements about things we feel. I take that very seriously. I think the nature of what we do would be changed in some way that I'm not sure I could even define if men – or if White people, male or female – were to enter. (Ysaye Barnwell)

Here, Barnwell seems to be suggesting that if Sweet Honey were a mixed-sex group, the specifically-female identities and perspectives of the women would be subsumed within it and made invisible to their audiences; the effect on their ability to represent themselves as African Americans would be the same if their group involved White people.

Georgette also feels that it is in the absence of men that the members of UBW can make significant statements *as women*:

For me, seeing women on stage is a powerful statement. Just seeing women on stage being women, being, um – provocative, being strong, being conscious and aware politically and socially – just having that onstage is such a powerful statement: that we can stand on our own, that we can do things together as women. Because a lot of times in this society, women are just torn apart. You know, there's a lot of negative connotation that women are always enemies and fighting against one another. It's all this, you know, jealousy and stuff.

For Georgette, who is Heterosexual, UBW's work provides a meaningful antidote to what she sees as women's typical competition with one another for male attention. (This perspective will be reiterated in Chapter Six by the only Heterosexual African American I interviewed in the amateur groups.)

Melanie DeMore's comments reveal an experience and perception of interactions among women that directly contradicts Georgette's observations:

It goes back to the old tradition of sitting on the porch, that tradition of talking, that whole way of working through your problems. Ah, that whole congregational connection was the connection that women had culturally. And it's certainly something that our grandmothers and our mothers understood. And as young women in our own generation, it *feels* familiar. And we don't get the chance to do that very much. And there's a certain place that women go together – that you don't necessarily do in a group that's mixed. You just – you know, you just don't. It's that thing of cycles, that we just know intuitively in our minds and physically in our bodies. ...Because it's just women, there's a certain kind of energy; there's a place that you are not afraid to go to because you have that support.

For DeMore, who is a Lesbian, her sense of comfort among the women of CHC is simply an extension of her ideal of elementally female ways of interacting. Standing outside the dynamic of competition for male mates, she very likely has spent a good deal of her social time among women who are similarly disinterested or who refuse to attract men lovers at the expense of respect for and solidarity with women

friends. DeMore's comfort among women is so natural for her that she cannot be specific in describing it; she resorts to an essentialist, socio-biological reference to menstruation to substantiate her experience.

Jawole Zollar is able to identify a bit more specifically the cultural influences that characterize her women-only work experiences:

*(Working with a women-only company) has been very comfortable for me. I think that the more I learn about men, the more I learn how they're socialized towards competition. And, um – I'm also starting to accept that as okay. But I prefer to work in a less competitive environment, where you're competing against yourself. ...I think it's hard even having a man in the group – one man around. I think we are very lucky with Michael.<sup>21</sup> ...It is definitely a difference between female and male culture – and what we talk about, how we talk about it, when we bring it up. ...So, I'm learning that I really appreciate women's culture. But I'm also becoming more and more comfortable with male culture.*

Zollar did not set out to create a women-only company, but the male dancers she began working with typically disappeared at the first sign of better prospects in a profession saturated with women and short on men. Having men in her company was not important enough to her to force the issue, so she set out to capitalize on the strengths and possibilities of a women's group. Special UBW projects involve men as guest artists, and the musician providing the live percussion music onstage is almost always a man.

Similarly, the vocal-ensemble rehearsals led by Bernice Johnson Reagon that eventually led to the genesis of Sweet Honey were open to both men and women at first. As I recounted earlier in this chapter, Reagon held rehearsals over several months, during which time the personnel kept changing. Of the last attempt that ultimately resulted in the creation of Sweet Honey, Reagon said:

*So there were four of us. And when we started to sing the songs I threw out, the sound was very much matched. And we just accepted that this was it. This was '73. ...Most of...the work in those three years had to do with accepting something that was. It was as if: "This works. It works so well. There's no issue about it." ...So, the *surrendering to* a phenomenon. ...And by... '75 I became conscious that there were probably no men in Sweet Honey In The Rock. It was not a decision of my own. It was certainly not a vision of mine.*

Some of the members of UBW mentioned that at times they miss the greater physical strength of male dancers. Even so, they appreciate the ways that being a group of women shapes not only their work but also their lives on the road, when they party, shop, cook, sightsee, and relax together. Consuelo measured her experience with her coworkers against family relationships and old friendships:

*If there were men...with us, it would be different. It would be a whole different thing. ...I think the fact that it is all women structures just about everything. It's very dynamic because of that, because as women we're all very independent. ...Because we're women, I think we – because we nurture, I think that we reach more*

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<sup>21</sup> One in a rotation of musicians who serve UBW; Michael Wimberly has done most of the composing for and touring with UBW in the last years.

people... And just among ourselves, I've never been in a group of women that's this tight, you know? I don't have any sisters, and I have very, very tight girlfriends that I have known since I was young. But never a group. And the freedom that you feel being amongst a group of women: ...it's a real safe place and free place to just really be yourself.

It seems clear that members in all three groups experience their work as an important projection of themselves as Black women. Artists in ethnic-based groups and other cultural workers are often jokingly referred to as "professional Blacks," "professional Chicanos," "professional Lesbians," and the like. Denisoff's distinction between people living among their folk and "folk entrepreneurs" carries the same hint of cynicism. Whether any singer in CHC is more or less closely connected to nineteenth-century Sea Island community life than Woody Guthrie was to Appalachian mining towns is debatable – and will be debated in Chapter Five. What is significant is that the women in these three ensembles *feel* that the cultural artifacts of Nigeria, Brazil, Jamaica, the Mississippi Bayou, and Harlem are part of their inheritance. And any casual comment about their being "professional Black women" actually strikes at the heart of the truth: these artists earn their living by engaging in performances that express and experiment with their ideas of themselves as Black women; their self-concepts are in turn shaped by these expressions. And the wide audience that they reach becomes involved in this dialectic with them. Their transformation of an embattled identity into a source of pride and creative expression is a sacred alchemy that cannot be dismissed.

#### The Lesbian Assumption

At the outset of my interview with Iris, she identified herself as African American and female. When I asked her about her identification with her job, she brought up another aspect of her identity, one that has an integral place in her work with UBW:

K: Why do you feel like (working with UBW) is more than a job?

I: Because you have a sense of yourself. I have a sense of myself because I can be who I am. And be who I am in the sense that – well, sexual preference. It's important that your sexual preference is actually known as being whatever it is, because it says that people of any kind can be and work together and do the job.

K: So, who you are is acknowledged and accepted?

I: Mm-hmm. Exactly. And used to the advantage that is necessary. Like, you know, when we were down in Tallahassee and I was asked to do that interview for that Gay and Lesbian magazine – it became something to be proud of, you know, because we were doing this work in this community and in many communities.

K: Tell me how honoring your sexual preference fits in with UBW's work. And why are you proud of that?

I: Well, we're trying to say that you can bring out a sense of community wherever you are. With that sense of family, you don't get a breakdown of the "family structure" as much. Because it doesn't matter what the family structure is. It doesn't have to be the man, the woman, the head of the household, you know – a family is a group of people who care about what's happening to you.

In this conversation, Iris identified another way that the work and the composition of Urban Bush Women give alternative messages of hope to embattled communities. For decades, the White press has stigmatized the Black, female-headed household as the cause of poverty, crime, and other social ills.<sup>22</sup> On the one hand, the high unemployment, incarceration, and death rates of African-American men – which so commonly preclude the Ward-and-June-Cleaver model of family – are treated as pathologies without root causes in institutionalized racism, while on the other hand, the cooperative kinship and friendship networks among Black women that have historically constituted families and communities are discounted. Urban Bush Women's evening-length adaptation of Jewelle Gomez's Lambda-Award-winning<sup>23</sup> novel *Bones and Ash: A Gilda Story*, which the company toured in 1995 and 1996, addressed the question of defining and creating family after forced displacement from one's biological kin, in response to shared economic or other social pressures among neighbors and friends, and out of love – in whatever form it comes. As a Lesbian, Iris has experienced more than mere tolerance on the job: an important aspect of herself that meets with disrespect in other contexts is valued within UBW as her unique contribution to the company's recognition and projection of healthy images of Black women and communities.

Lesbian content in UBW's material, along with the group's history of performance at Womyn's festivals, has contributed to a widespread perception among Lesbians and Straight people of all races that this is a specifically Lesbian group. One member has heard the company referred to as "Urban Butch Women." The perception is so common that whenever Jawole Zollar is interviewing auditionees, she asks them how they would cope with the assumption that they were Lesbians. Zollar and I had a conversation about this perception:

JZ: Well, it's just interesting, because the company in the beginning...didn't even know that that was a perception for a long time. On one level we didn't care. But I think it was kind of shocking that if you were strong women and you were presenting ideas about women, then you had to be Gay. I know that that perception came from a lot of the male community, and also out of the African dance community – very patriarchal organizations. But I think it came from a lot of different places. So, I like to make (auditionees) aware of that, but I also ask the question because it gets at their level of homophobia. You know, and if they have a high level of homophobia, they're going to have a hard time in the group!

<sup>22</sup> This is thanks to the infamous 1965 report by Senator Moynihan (the same Daniel Patrick Moynihan who co-edited the volume *Ethnicity* cited in Chapter Two), which recorded high correlations between these social ills and the Black, female-headed household. What made this report infamous among anti-racists is that its author's conclusions had been neatly censored from its mass-media coverage and subsequent widespread use in literature and discussions on sociology and public policy: Senator Moynihan had in fact observed that the only solution to these problems was for the government to commit itself to the elimination of poverty.

<sup>23</sup> An annual award for Lesbian and Gay American literature.

KB: I'll tell you why I had that perception. The first time I heard of the company was during my first time at Michigan, and you guys were performing. And at that point in my life, I hadn't seen anything that would tell me that anybody who was Straight would come and dance for me at my festival. You know? Like: "They *must* be Lesbians. Why would they *be* here? Why would they be *seen* here?" That was my assumption. And, you know, I think that happens – I think for a lot of White Lesbians, that's – I mean, I made the same assumption with Sweet Honey In The Rock, because I had only seen them in Lesbian contexts.

JZ: I had, too. I mean, I had – I made the same assumption about Sweet Honey that people had made about us!

KB: Based on...?

JZ: Based on, I think, maybe knowing that \_\_\_\_\_ was Lesbian. But then \_\_\_\_\_ came into the group. Uh, I think (she) was kind of like the real hot Heterosexual, and so...I remember that I was, like, *surprised!* Um, but I – you know, that was the same assumption that I had made.

KB: Now, I remember last year Iris and I brought a Straight and fairly conservative guest to see the company perform. After *Transitions*, she wanted to know whether Michelle and Maria were lovers because they danced so well together. So, obviously, her assumption was: "Well, if they would let a big Lesbian like *Iris* be in the company, they must *all* be Lesbians."

I have shown that both Lesbians and Straight people are subject to the misperception – whether favorable or critical – that UBW is a Lesbian troupe. This misperception is typically attributed to the undertaking of a public endeavor that does not involve men, the assumption of public functions formerly restricted to men, the performance of Feminist or Lesbian content, and an automatic "guilt by association" with any Lesbian or Lesbian event:

Well, I think it kind of got started as a rumor a long time ago. I think when the company was first formed, they worked with Edwina Lee Tyler. Because of Edwina's...presence in the Lesbian world... She was this drummer with this powerful sense; she went against the grain by playing djembe between the legs.<sup>24</sup> That's really, you know, something that made a statement. ...Of course, then we did a Lesbian vampire piece, so, – ! (Iris)

I think (it's) because of Jawole's way of saying exactly what's on her mind and speaking out against injustices against women. And *of course* when people hear that, especially Black folks: "Oh, she's a *Lesbian!*" (Nicole)

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<sup>24</sup> Tyler's struggles to learn and then gain opportunities to perform on this West-African hand drum, which tradition has been dominated by men, are legendary in Womyn's music circles. She is credited with paving the way for several women professionals who came after her. Tyler is a master player, and she was the first to notably violate what some traditionalists have maintained as the last boundary between men and women drummers: "Women must not play the drum between their legs. It will fry their eggs. It will turn them into men."



There are people who believe that either everyone in the company is Gay or that that's a really major part of our art. ...And I actually feel like it's definitely something in there: it's like an underground statement, sort of, in this company, that your sexuality is up to you and that discrimination is not right. ...It hasn't affected me, and I don't know that it's affected any of the (other Straight) company members we're working with now. I've never heard anyone tell a story about it. I mean, a couple of times people have maybe been hit on or something, but I don't – I don't know, it wasn't a big deal. (Tina)

Zollar has clearly succeeded in hiring performers – whatever their sexuality – who can handle working in the company of Lesbians and being seen as Lesbians. In fact, an Urban Bush Woman will not be heard to treat this impression as a stigma or to distance herself or the company from it in any way:

It really does not phase me that people speculate. (Georgette)

I just thought it was funny, you know? And I was like, "Oh, people are going to see me like I'm in a company of Lesbians! Okay!" ...I think every...woman in this company right now is really comfortable with themselves. And when you're comfortable with yourself, you don't have to go around defending everything. As a matter of fact, we're very, like, touchy-feely. ...Sometimes I think we do things that...might give people the impression that we *are*. (laughs) ...I mean, we're definitely in an environment where we grab each other, you know? (Consuelo)

To me, I'm just like: "I'm who I am. Come see the show." If you say: "Oh, I'm gonna stay away from them because I think they're man-hating Dykes," then stay away. But you're going to miss something really important. And *that*: I can't do anything *about* that. You're closed-minded. It's not my job to go: "Look! We're not all Dykes!" (Maya)

Melanie DeMore reported enjoying the mixture of Lesbians and Straight women in Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir as part of the diversity of womanhood experienced within the group. She finds it unsurprising that the CHC would be mistaken for a Lesbian group. According to her, the only false assumption that concerns the ensemble has to do with something else entirely:

I mean, everybody thinks that if it's an all-women's group, (Lesbian is) pretty much what it's going to be. And why? They don't assume that about all-men's groups, necessarily. We are a mixture of Lesbian and Heterosexual women: ...we represent a lot of different things. ...For women that are not Lesbians in our group, they've learned – I know this 'cause we've had this talk before – they've learned a lot about how they feel about themselves as women. ...And once you feel comfortable in your own skin, you don't really care what anybody else does. ...And people can pretty much assume anything that they want. Primarily what we don't want people to assume is that we're a gospel choir. After that, they can do whatever they want. Really. Because we're pretty clear. The thing about CHC is that there's something for everybody, and it's obvious.

I spoke with Ysaye Barnwell about the public image of Sweet Honey In The Rock within different communities. As veteran performers at Womyn's music festivals, as a group that has sung music challenging heterosexism and honoring love of every kind between women, and as women who appear together or as solo artists at Lesbian and Gay events, Sweet Honey is no less subject to the same assumption that all of its members are Lesbians:

KB: There are many women – ...White Lesbians in particular – who claim Sweet Honey's music as Womyn's music, even Lesbian music.

YB: Yes, I know that people do that. I know that women do that. I know that every single group who feels themselves represented by Sweet Honey In The Rock does the same thing. And I feel that's the kind of group we are. ...You see, that is the point around accountability and commitment. Okay? How can I say I'm singing for everybody's rights and then (say): "I can't go to GALA,"<sup>25</sup> okay? Some of these circumstances have put me in a very interesting position where people do make the assumption, you know, that everybody in Sweet Honey must be Gay. And, I can't tell you what a *hoot* it was to be going to GALA and doing interviews. Because everybody tried not to ask The Question. But all questions led to it, you know, and what I had to ask myself was: "What is more important? Is it more important to play this cat-and-mouse game and let people guess, or is it more important to say, 'I'm not Gay. I don't have a problem with being a part of this event and supporting people who are.'?" And so finally I think there was an interview where I said, "You know, this interview is filled with a lot of assumptions. You are not saying things that you really want to say. Let me just say to you: I'm not Gay. I don't give a fuck about somebody's sexuality except – and unless – people are being discriminated against, people are being hurt and abused because of the way in which they are living. And I will...show up at GALA in the same way that I will show up at a rally for African-American civil rights because I feel like that's what the struggle is all about. Okay?"

...You know, I think the women's movement challenged us in that way, to say: "If you are going to be for Civil Rights, are you also going to be for these other rights?" And: "Will you go to these other places?" And it was not easy. It was not easy at all. When I joined Sweet Honey In The Rock, some people who had been my friends for twenty years...looked at me as though I had suddenly become an amoeba or some kind of mutant something...that they didn't know, because now I was singing in a group who would perform and there would be Lesbians sitting in the front row holding hands, and maybe even kissing, and: "Well, my God, if they're here, why am I here?" And, you know: "Why are you singing with this group who attracts these people?" And so, it was not an easy thing, but I think it really does push those of us in the group to really figure out: "Okay, where *is* our accountability? To *whom* are we accountable? And for *what*?"

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<sup>25</sup> Barnwell is referring to conferences of the Gay And Lesbian Association of Choruses, where the women of Sweet Honey In The Rock have appeared as guest speakers and performers.

In “‘Let Your Light Shine’ – Historical Notes” (Chapter Three of *We Who Believe in Freedom*) Bernice Johnson Reagon writes about a song from early in Sweet Honey’s repertoire that established the group’s accountability to Lesbians:

Out of Sweet Honey’s experience, in 1977, with the radical women’s movement, the phrases of a new chorus began to make itself (*sic.*) known inside my head. I began to create a song about women loving women: *Every woman who ever loved a woman/You ought to stand up and call her name/Mama, sister, daughter, lover.* This song scared me to death when it came out. I thought: Good God, what am I going to do with this? It was not an old song; it was *new* and running around in *my* head! When I sang it to Sweet Honey, Evie started to cry – we were all scared.

Would Sweet Honey survive in our base if we sang this song? Would Black people leave us before we got started? Would people think everybody in Sweet Honey was sleeping with women, or each other? With trembling, we decided to go on. At that time, and for all time since, we began to clarify for ourselves that we would not check Black singing women who came to Sweet Honey’s door about their lives as sexually active adults. We would honor private spaces. We would sing richly about being lovers and loving, the songs and singing centered and coming from places of personal experience, but not offered as entrée into the personal details of our lives. We would sing about oppression of every kind, including the oppression experienced by the homosexual community. We would sing of the joy and the healing of love between two people. We would sing to celebrate and give comfort to women who were finding strength in spaces with other women. We would sing for freedom! (Reagon and Sweet Honey In *The Rock* 1993, 33-34)

Of the seven performing ensembles in this study, all but one were created by Lesbians, and all are shaped significantly by the presence of Lesbians within them. The ensembles vary in their degree of explicit identification with Lesbian communities, and individuals in the groups vary in the degree to which they make their sexuality – whatever it is – known to their public. What is common among all these groups’ members is the commitment to resisting heterosexism and affirming the dignity of Lesbian relationships; whether they themselves are having one is immaterial to this political commitment. In the case of all three professional groups examined here, this commitment seems to read clearly to their audiences, and merely standing on that commitment is transgressive enough in our heterosexist society to get all their members scornfully dismissed – or proudly claimed – as Lesbians. In the remarks by Ysaye Barnwell previously quoted, she referred to the challenges of Feminism that influenced the development of Sweet Honey In The Rock’s anti-heterosexism. The environment in which Jawole Willa Jo Zollar formed Urban Bush Women was imbued with the same influences. By the time Linda Tillery was creating the Cultural Heritage Choir in the early ‘90s, she – and Melanie DeMore – had spent years performing as part of the same Womyn’s music phenomenon from which the Feminist choral movement emerged. So it is that the three professional groups and the four amateur groups in this study share certain foundations in cultural Feminism that bring their members into empathic contact with one another’s work.

### Feminism?

All of these ensembles acknowledge some debt to “Second-Wave” Feminism, whether for the conditions of their very existence or for some of the content of their work. It was the folk festival movement, as well as the burgeoning Black Studies Movement on U.S. college campuses, that first brought Sweet Honey In The Rock to venues outside of Washington, D.C. In 1977, however, Womyn’s music pioneers Amy Horowitz and Holly Near sponsored a California tour, after which Horowitz began to promote the group widely throughout the country and to introduce them abroad.<sup>26</sup> Ysaye Barnwell credits cultural Feminism with giving important early opportunities to Sweet Honey In The Rock:

(The Women’s Movement and Sweet Honey) were growing up together. And women sponsors were putting on festivals, producing concerts. And, you know, White women invited Sweet Honey and took the risks of producing Sweet Honey in various venues outside of Washington, D.C.

The second-largest section of Bernice Johnson Reagon’s “‘Let Your Light Shine’ – Historical Notes” is devoted to Sweet Honey’s relationship to the Women’s Movement. Reagon begins by describing the evolution in her consciousness of the politics of gender as played out in the lives of Black women. She goes on to identify the chain of women friends and musicians that eventually brought her into contact in 1977 with Amy Horowitz. Commenting on her decision to accept for Sweet Honey the concert promotion and production efforts of an essentially White, Lesbian, and Feminist music movement, she says that:

Having been nurtured and reborn through the rich sands of Black Nationalism, I understood this as a radical movement, and Sweet Honey decided we could do this collaboration... There was clearly a Movement energy that I understood and respected. ...The 1970s women’s cultural network was doing some of the most radical work in changing the face of American culture by providing new forums for women to be heard. (1993, 31, 32, 33)

In the pages that follow this quote, Reagon writes about the opportunities afforded by the network, as well as the culture shock and the racism experienced within it.

Zollar spoke about the effect on her creativity of the Feminist commitment to encouraging and listening to women’s expressions:

At that time in New York, a lot of women’s circles were Straight women, Bisexual women, and Lesbian women. And so, from hanging – from being influenced by that, that’s where a lot of my thinking – I mean, who came to my concerts? It was mostly women. The women’s community was very supportive of the company. And the thing that I liked about it was that I experienced it as less of a critical community and more of a Get-It-Out-There-With-Your-Voice, you know: “Go on out there!” And that was really important to me.

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<sup>26</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagon, personal communication with the author, 8/00.

Melanie DeMore spoke of her evolution as a musician who began on the Womyn's circuit and who is now performing in a group with other audiences:

My whole thing with Redwood<sup>27</sup> was a whole different decade. The last time I was at Michigan was the twentieth anniversary (1996). It's a different thing. And I think it's really great but that we are in a whole different time now. I think that we're moving from a place of necessarily being separate from everybody else. You know, I think there's less of a need on some level for strictly women's music festivals. ...as a performer who has played countless numbers of the Womyn's festivals over the years. And I loved them when I was doing them. But I'm in a place now where that's a little bit too small. And contained. Because the thing is that though I've been on the Womyn's circuit for a long time, I've also been on the folk music circuit. And I like the idea of a more international, multi-ethnic, multi-gendered world, because that's the world we live in. And the thing is that it's like anything else: you need to be with your own folks. Because how are you going to know about yourself if you don't? And then you have to get out there in the world and be your own self in the midst of a whole bunch of other people that are being their own selves. I mean, to me that's really, really important. Because we're not going to – we don't live in a world where it's just us. There's a lot of folks out there.

DeMore seems to be saying that the Womyn's music movement served her self-definition and self-realization in a way that enabled her eventually to present herself to a more diverse audience. Currently, her priority on knowing and celebrating her own identity is adequately fulfilled by performing with a group of African-American women; from this base she presents herself in a variety of venues as a citizen of the many-cultured world.

Linda Tillery wrote the following comments about Womyn's music festivals for her "self-portrait" in Morris's *Eden Built by Eves*:

I've always had one foot in mainstream music and one foot in women's music. ...It's pretty doggone unique that a group as small as ours can do such amazing things. I have witnessed things at women's music festivals that I'd never seen before, like...how they build and then take the city apart. ...To see women...erect speaker towers and build a stage...

What I look forward to, most of all, is the networking. There are women I see once a year, every August. I count on it, I look forward to it. And as a woman who appreciates and respects New York culture, I look forward to the women from New York like you can't believe. I get into conversations – if I want to know what's going on in Latin music, I pull aside one of the New York women and say, "Who's playing?" And they don't just talk to me about the women, they talk to me about the Latin *music* – what's new from Cuba, who just put out the hottest record from Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic. If I want to know what's happening in African drumming or theater arts, who's been at the Met lately – all of that I can get without going there. I look forward to the networking: interacting with other working women. (109, 110)

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<sup>27</sup> Holly Near's record label, one of the few to carry performers from the Womyn's circuit.

Clearly, regardless of evolutions in the Womyn's music scene, the national political *Zeitgeist*, and her own career, Tillery finds that the festival phenomenon in which she has been involved for two decades still fulfills needs that aren't likely to be met elsewhere.

Because I was aware of a history of African-American women's problematic relationships to the Women's Movement, I was very interested in these performers' individual reactions to the direct question: "Are you a Feminist?" Maya's answer was somewhat indirect, though this seemed mostly related to her journey as an initiate of the Yoruba priesthood rather than to any unfavorable associations with Feminism. She was, though, very clear about the place of Feminism in the ethos of UBW, so she deflected her answer away from her personal response and back to her work:

I'm in the process of redefining for myself what Feminism is. Because it's so political. And there's a way that for me, everything derives from the spiritual. That's just where I'm coming from. So, yes: there's a way in which I need to get to know myself, empower myself as a woman. There are ways in which, as a woman, I have lost power because there are certain systems that have oppressed me over the centuries. So, as far as UBW's stand on...the Women's Movement, the way that I understand it is that it's about liberation from oppression. Period. And that because we're women, we have to address...issues that have to do with liberation from oppression *as women*. ...The issues that we deal with have to come from ourselves first before we can include anyone else.<sup>28</sup> Then we have our issues of being African American or Women of Color, because another (basis for oppression) in this society is the color of your skin. So it's going to be inclusive. As far as I understand Jawole's vision, *that is important*: ...dealing with oppressed conditions as they relate to people in the company: what we represent.

Some respondents felt a need to decouple Feminism from a direct association with White, middle-class women, specifying race and class oppression as crises of equal importance to sexism:

For me there has always been a cognitive split between White Feminists and me as an African American. So that was not the grounds on which I necessarily came to (Sweet Honey) or was influenced by movements outside the group. I don't know that *Feminist* was a label that was applied to the group from inside. You know, we are what we are. And we are Feminist in our very nature. But not Feminist in the way the White Feminists described it. You know, it just didn't necessarily apply. It didn't necessarily make sense. And certainly, when I saw White Feminists in the context of, say, Kenya, at the World International Conference of Women, or even at Beijing – but at Kenya I think it was even worse – because I think women, you know, came from the Western world that didn't have a clue. And for them the only agenda was their agenda. And women from East Podunk Nowhere in the World were saying: "Equal wage? I gotta walk five miles in the morning just to get water!" And yet, you know: "We have a co-op. We weave and sell what we weave." Hey! ...White women's agenda just wasn't the be-all and end-all. And other women started saying: "That's a luxury! You can just *take* that back home!" (Ysaye Barnwell)

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<sup>28</sup> This is an example of the simultaneous influence on UBW of the Freirean and Black Feminist approaches to liberation.

I did not have time to ask Bernice Johnson Reagon about Feminism, but she writes about experiencing this same “cognitive split” in the early ’70s when a White woman defined Feminism for her:

“It’s like when you don’t have to wash diapers and dishes. Women want and can do more than housework.” I remember my face gettin’ hot. I felt she was talking down to me, underdefining, simplifying her answer. Did she think I couldn’t handle more complexity? Her example struck me as wrong! At the time I was the sole support of my family with two small children. I told her I would love to have someone sit me down so I could wash dishes and clean the house.

The truth is, I was feeling that the work I had to do outside the home to get money to sustain my family had little to do with a personal calling. I saw looking for work as a kind of prostitution. I was offering myself daily on a market corner to the highest bidder, which was then \$75 a week tops. I was also sole housekeeper, dishwasher, and parent. I felt deeply that being part of a team, so I could get a break and do less, would make me feel more normal in my day. Today I know more about why those women, primarily White from middle-class backgrounds, were gathering in those rooms. They were trying to rewrite the definition of who and why they were. In 1970, their search was not mine. (1993, 28)

Because I knew that Tina had earned a minor in Feminist Studies, her ambivalence when I asked her whether she was a Feminist surprised me:

Oh! Um – (*pauses*) yeah. Okay, the reason I say that – not with hesitation, actually, but just with whatever I put in that word – is that I definitely say “yes I’m a Feminist” because I know a lot of the views that I have, a lot of people would classify as Feminist views. ...But I also know there are a ton of women out there that think along those same lines but who don’t consider themselves Feminists, or they don’t know what that means – or because they purposefully shun that word because it’s had a lot of different things attached to it. I also know that you can be a Feminist and you can be on one side of an issue or you can be on the other side of it. So that’s why, even though I do consider myself a Feminist, it’s not like a big title that I really carry around, or even care about that much. Because it means so many things to so many people and because it turns so many people off – some people off. ...I’m not too much of a stickler on those titles, because sometimes they get you in more sticky situations than – it’s just that identity is really slippery, and labels, really, are really slippery, and that one in particular.

Though she privately claims *Feminist* as an identifier for herself, she feels that doing so publicly subjects her to false assumptions (which she did not name) and that it is therefore both possible and preferable for her to articulate her individual positions without naming them as Feminist. She did not care to be specific about any of her own associations with the term, positive or negative.

Georgette seemed to have the same unfortunate association of Feminism with the agendas of corporate, White women that Barnwell was so vehement in resisting. In fact, though, she had some trouble supplanting her images of what Feminism shouldn’t be with firm ideas about what it should be, reverting to the workplace issues she had begun by dismissing:

G: A Feminist? I'm concerned about, um, what goes on in terms of women. I don't know. It's hard to say. I think that the term "Feminist" has been used *too* loosely. It's just kind of scattered now. And I would – I don't know. I would have to redefine it. I would define it as women who are concerned about women's issues, not just having equality, but having, um – not equality in, you know, just the workplace, but equality in health care, equality in childcare. I think a lot of times women are just left to raise these children by themselves, and I don't think that's fair. I see it happen to my sisters all the time who have children. And, they lose out on the job all the time because they don't have anyone to help them take care of the children. And that really makes me mad. I think, to be Feminist, you would have to have betterment – for a woman to be educated, to be aware...

K: Is homelessness a Feminist issue?

G: Yes.

K: *Nuclear disarmament?*

G: Yes. All of that.

K: Most Feminists I read would agree with you on all of that. You are echoing the perspectives of the women who I think are the most amazing Feminist writers and thinkers. And most of them are Feminists of Color, *Lesbians* of Color, who have what I consider to be the broad view. And still today, the common association of Feminism is with kind of the middle-class, White woman, you know, who's talking about the corporate glass ceiling, which is of concern to only a handful of women. And I think there are *fewer* women who define Feminism that way than in the broader way.

G: Yeah, but that's because that narrow way was the mainstream for so long.

K: Because those are the women who could get access to mainstream media, to put that across.

G: Exactly.

K: Oh, yeah. It's really too, too bad.

My prompting was calculated to draw Georgette into alignment with a concept of Feminism that approximates my own; this gave me the personal satisfaction of defending Feminism by saying, in effect: "See? You *are* a Feminist after all!" But the greater point is that Georgette, like so many Heterosexuals in their twenties at this time – and being new to UBW – seems not to have received or sought exposure to the wealth of Feminist thought and action that lies beyond the occasional *Newsweek* poll about pay equity in the Fortune 500. Therefore, regrettably, Feminism is something from which she feels a need to distance herself, even while sharing concerns that appear on most women's Feminist agendas.



Consuelo, after making sure that she wasn't being trapped in someone else's unsatisfactory definition, made it clear that she had worked out a definition for herself and had no trouble standing on it:

K: Are you a Feminist?

C: Um, what does that mean?

K: *I'm* not gonna define it!

C: Yeah. Ah, yeah I am. Definitely.

And the ease of Melanie DeMore's similarly unqualified answer may reflect her recognition that, as Lesbians influenced by the values that prevail at Womyn's festivals, she and I likely share similar understandings of what Feminism is:

Oh, yeah. Sure. Always have been.

### **The Songs and Their Singers: Essential Effects, Essentialist Discourses**

#### **Black Liberation through Black Song**

Having established these artists' relationships to the Women's Movement, I asked about the place of their ensembles' work within the history of Black Liberation movements. Several women, in speaking generally about the work of their ensembles, had already indicated their function in keeping cultural traditions alive. Some artists were able to be a bit more specific as to what material effect this work might have on people's lives:

I think (Black Liberation) is the main focus of the work of UBW. You know? And not just to educate or to involve the Black community, but also other communities – if not to give them the incentive to do things, then to educate. Because the fact is that racism or discrimination is everybody's responsibility. It's not just the responsibility of People of Color to get past that, and it's not just the responsibility of White people to do away with it. It's everybody's responsibility. So I think it's the root of the company because Jawole was so active in the Movement and it's so much a part of who she is. (Consuelo)

When you ask how Sweet Honey is impacted by the whole African-American struggle, I have to say: those are our roots. That is the frame of reference for the kind of music that we do, for the use of the music as a tool for teaching, organizing, and being activists. (Ysaye Barnwell)

I think that when a young person (is) proud of where they come from and who they are, and they feel like they do have a sense of history, some rootedness – then they're not going to so much think that something can be taken away from them. When they think something can be taken away from them, that's when they're going to reach out and try to wreck somebody else. (Melanie DeMore)

I feel like people in my generation are in a lot of ways at a loss. I think people that are older than us look at us and maybe think that we're apathetic, or that maybe we just don't have the same clear-cut path of what to do. So, we have issues, obviously, ...but you just don't see us protesting as much – not even quite close to as much. ...I think that one thing that is happening is that we're shifting into – maybe it's softer. I don't know. Maybe it's more a personal, spiritual, or communal kind of aspect of a Black Liberation movement. But one thing I see happening – and it happened in the '60s, too, with "Black is Beautiful" and people getting to their African roots and stuff – is a resurgence of that. I mean, African dance classes are more popular now than they have been ever, you know? It's become fashionable. ...And I think people feel like they really need to work in their communities and their own families, having strong families, and really loving ourselves. I think Urban Bush Women falls right into all of that – in terms of, first of all, just trying to get our community together, you know, and to do community work, but also in terms of loving our natural selves. It...has to do with a feeling that – that you're not alone, you're not just you, out in the world. Like, I'm not just me, disconnected from my ancestors and their history and those behind them, but that I'm actually very connected. (Tina)

A lot of the songs I know I learned from my childhood – on the block, pretty much. My sisters, who were older, had friends who were in the Black Panther movement, or they were in some other type of African-American movement. They were always trying to have empowerment of Black people, so they knew all these different songs. So they taught them to us. (Georgette)

There were women in all three groups who reported believing that involvement with African-derived musical traditions can inspire Black Americans to do racial justice work. Consuelo shared hopes that this effect can also work itself on people of other races. Everyone reported or implied the conviction that knowing Black song traditions increases Black Americans' love for themselves, something they identified as crucial to healthy families and communities.

The conversations I have presented up to this point help to locate the work of these ensembles in the lives of the individual members and in a national context of culture history. My next goal for the interviews was to discover the artists' opinions about the specific meanings carried by and the actual effects produced by particular songs and styles. Responses typically emphasized the origins of Black song in the daily, material conditions of Black communal existence, which in the Americas has always involved struggle. Clearly, none of these artists regards these songs as mere entertainment:

When Black people sing their songs, it's not just – a concert thing. It's from what they have experienced. It's from what their ancestors have experienced. It has a lot of weight to it. (Georgette)

The music is...giving messages of resistance and messages that keep people moving forward and giving voice to certain causes and reasons. ...Many times in our history and in our cultural legacy we've used *other means* to fight our battles. ...Our music and our dance (are) a lived experience. (They're) the way we voice our oppression and try and get out of oppression. (Nicole)

Ysaye Barnwell gave some concrete examples of ways that Black song has been used as resistance:

(In) the music of Civil Rights Movement...the songs...were the newspapers in circumstances where the newspapers were not printing what was going on. ...The songs were that sort of glue that pulled people together in mass meetings and gave them the courage to decide that they were going to boycott the next day or picket or go on a march or whatever. It was a nonviolent struggle, so the use of music as the thing that *announced*, you know: "Here we come!" ...was in some ways the only weapon that people had, other than their bodies. They weren't carrying any other weapon. Their voices were the only thing. Their voices were the thing that people had to penetrate with hoses and billy clubs and things like that. (Ysaye Barnwell)

Barnwell continued with an anecdote about one song in particular and its function within Civil Rights activism:

The Reverend James Bevel during the Civil Rights Movement...used to say: "I'm gonna teach you all the easiest song you'll ever learn and the hardest song you'll ever sing!" And then he'd start singing (*slowly and deeply*): "I love everybody. I love everybody. I love everybody in my heart." And he'd say: "Now, if you can't sing that, you need to just go *stand* over in the corner and *pray*." He was *dead serious*. Because if you couldn't sing that, you *could not* go out and stand on a line with somebody who's going to spit in your face, beat your head up against a brick wall with a billy club, and *you do nothing!* If you could not, in spite of all of that kind of stuff coming at you, declare openly and *believe* that there was *something* in this person that you could love, you couldn't go. You couldn't be in the demonstration!

Bevel's injunction was no mere moral platitude. It was a safeguard for the demonstrators' very lives. Any physical or even verbal reaction to racist humiliation and assault could provide the excuse for escalated brutality, placing all the demonstrators' lives in increased jeopardy. This song's plain language lays bare any insincerity, affording no room to hide, no possibility of fooling oneself. Bevel had no doubt that anyone attempting to sing the song – forced by its unhurried meter to dwell on the unequivocal challenge of its words – would receive an instant and accurate reading of her or his own readiness to join the protest. The gravity of this anecdote makes it clear that when Barnwell and others urge an understanding of Black song as functional, they are speaking in very concrete terms.

I asked Iris whether Black oral-tradition songs had power:

Oh, yes! Oh! Definitely! There are certain songs that have power. The songs have power to change. They can change the energy in a room. And there's healing powers behind songs, power in getting somebody through a sad, sorrow time. Let's say someone was going in for an operation or something and you got together a whole group of people...just to sit down and sing the song for a long time: it just kind of makes the energy start in one place and then kind of travel out...in a telepathy kind of way. It's just creating the energy that can help someone get through a hard time – or even get yourself through, if it's someone that's close to you, you know: being strong for them.

Jacquelyn recounted an experience when she witnessed the healing effects of sharing Black song. This occurred at a Community Sing shared with adolescents in a drug rehabilitation program:

There was this one girl that was really depressed. ...And it was so *cool* to watch her, like, *open up!* And I felt like saying to her: "Wow! Look at you! When we walked in the door, you were all folded up. And now look at you: you're all up and about and this and that!" And she wrote us a letter. She was like: "You know, I was so sad, I was so depressed, and then you guys came and I feel happy and I like myself *again*."

Jawole Zollar agrees with Iris and Jacquelyn on the healthfulness of singing. She identified one genre that she feels is particularly effective in healing:

I think what song does is, when people say that they "sing their hearts out," I don't think that's a coincidence. Because the heart meridian is connected to singing, in terms of Chinese medicine. Singing is good for the heart. It literally is good for the heart! ...And the Spirituals – the Spirituals for me are just beautiful! ...There's a part of me that fears...that the Spirituals are just kind of dying out. You know, the gospel music is, um, easier. Easier for people. ... (When we talk about slavery) sometimes you see White people and you start seeing guilt and shame; you see Black people, you start to see embarrassment. If there's a *big* level of discomfort, often I'll talk about it *more!* (*laughs*) You know, because I think that's one of our big problems as a country is that it's hard to talk about, and because it is, we don't talk about it. But I think that the people who study healing and, you know, *sound* would find that those tonalities are healing that you find in Spirituals. Because they're coming out of a people's pain.

Zollar's remarks give evidence that the kind of resistance Bessie Jones's Sea Island Singers encountered at the 1964 Atlanta Sing for Freedom (see page 57) has not been fully overcome. In fact, when Zollar teaches a slave song to uncomfortable groups of people, she uses the song in two functional capacities: first, it is her diagnostic tool for measuring the severity of what she sees as a national wound still unhealed; second, it is the medicine she offers for healing.

I asked UBW members to identify their favorite songs for sharing at Community Sings. Several respondents favor the adapted hymns used as Freedom Songs. They value seeing community members contribute verses of their own, and they appreciate the genre's adaptability to any challenge someone might face. Iris's favorite is "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around":

People can express some things of what they're not going to let somebody do, and it doesn't have to be specific to what was happening in the time when this song was most used, the Civil Rights era. It could be what your life is right now. And it could be about anything, like you're not gonna let nobody cut your pride down, you're not gonna let nobody stop your education – you know, those songs that keep people going and moving forward in their lives. Another one I really like is "Redemption Comin'." That song is always really nice, because it talks about you're stepping out of your bondage. There's something in your life that's holding you there, and you can step away from it.

I received many similar responses, testimonies to the power of a song to help the singer overcome obstacles. For a long time I failed to understand these statements as anything but metaphorical. But eventually I had heard them often enough – and come to understand enough about Black American experience – that their meaning penetrated to another level: when people in the dominant social class face obstacles or hardships, they call the ombudsman, the police, their lawyers, their familial benefactors, their loan officers, their insurance agents, or the press; when the disenfranchised and their families have no wealth and no credibility in the institutions that dominate society, a song becomes an actual material resource.

Jacquelyn's favorite song is "Ise Oluwa," a song in the Yoruba language that says: "What the spirits have created can never be destroyed." She observed the song's ability to put closure on a gathering by bringing people into close and attentive contact with one another:

You know, it is such a calming, meditative sort of thing. It's a good way to close and bring people together. They feel compelled to hold hands. (*giggles*) You know? It's a *connecting* song. And it's just like, you know, it solidifies what we did; puts the period on the end of the sentence, and people have to feel each other's energy.

It is the summoning of collective energy that defines for Maya the special utility of song, which she has experienced most powerfully in the dynamic music of Yoruba ritual:

The song is very important. Because when you sing together, you're speaking together. You're speaking the same words together. You are affirming whatever that song is about, and that single voice that comes out of many voices is the unifying strength that is, I think, ultimately our power. Our individuality is important as a being, and your personal experience with, say, God. But it is the collective connection to God that is the most powerful in my mind. ...Whether you're singing about, um, you know, liberation, freedom, praise, songs of praise, songs of happiness, you – you strengthen it by the numbers of people with the same focus. In my spiritual practice, when we have our rituals, like when we're praising the orishas, the gods, we *sing* to them. We sing and play music and we dance for them. All at once. You sing – you bring them close to you because you're collectively calling their names, in a way that is really difficult to do by yourself. It doesn't have the same effect. ...You can call an orisha and say, "Yemayá, I'm struggling." And that speaks to your individual situation. However, when you're in a ceremony and everyone is calling: "Yemayá! Yemayá, come!" and She comes. She mounts someone and She makes Her presence known and She speaks.<sup>29</sup> ...When you hear tons of voices, it resonates. It has another power that cannot be denied.

The artists' answers to my questions about the songs they sing, taken together with the commentaries on the UBW Community Sing, spontaneously reproduced an index of African-derived

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<sup>29</sup> To learn about Yoruba beliefs and the musical practices that bring the orishas to "mount" – or take over the bodies of – their priests, see *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora* by Joseph Murphy (1994) and *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* by Maya Deren (1953).

approaches to music that Ysaye Barnwell prepared and published in 1989 in the booklet for her recorded "workshop," *Singing in the African American Tradition*:

#### VALUES AND ASSUMPTIONS FROM AN AFROCENTRIC WORLD VIEW

1. A Zimbabwean proverb says "If you can talk you can sing and if you can walk you can dance." The assumption and expectation is that "all can and WILL DO."

2. Music, when viewed from an Afrocentric world view, is not art for art's sake but a functional tool for engaging in all of the activities of daily living and for coping with the full range of human emotional and spiritual responses to life.

3. There is a continuum which is acknowledged by Afrocentric communities:

past	--	present	--	future
ancestors	--	the living	--	the unborn

Music is a means by which we communicate between and among these elements on the continuum.

4. Shared diversity is absolutely necessary in community. It is through the layering and interweaving of multiple rhythms and melodies that African music is created. The end product of this shared diversity is a new creation which is the sum total of all the parts. The sum is indeed greater than the parts and the new creation is not and cannot be played or produced by any one of the parts alone. More broadly, it is through the **coalition work** of diverse interest groups that enormous political and social gains can be made.<sup>30</sup>

5. People (diverse entities) must agree to cooperate instead of competing, in order to make the parts work well together. There is power in shared/communal celebration and creation. There is no audience because everyone is a participant and everyone must help to create the song.

6. There is power in spontaneity. We must be open at all times for spirit to work through us as this is the basis of improvisation. Musically, spontaneity/improvisation occurs within the boundaries of the musical form being performed. The social analogy is to the practice of freedom which cannot exist without the exercise of responsibility and respect for boundaries. (8)

#### A "Woman" Thing?

As I subjected my own musical practice to critical scrutiny, I saw that at some point I had developed the impression that the *a cappella* ensemble singing of oral-tradition music was a particularly suitable thing for women to do. Evidence of this attitude surfaces in the mission statement I wrote for AMASONG, part of which reads:

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<sup>30</sup> Here is another articulation of the value of collective individualism.

...our repertoire is distinguished by its persistent inclusion of music composed by women, love songs to women, musical settings of women's words, and other music that gives voice to the experiences of common women. Folk songs, rich sources of information about women's lives, are often transmitted by women as the keepers of their cultures. Our emphasis on folkloric music allows us to honor and participate in the cultural expressions of many peoples from around the world.

Where did this come from? When I think back to why I began the practice of programming oral-tradition music, I can remember a few things that made it attractive to me. The first was that it cost nothing to use and refashion, which was very important when my chorus had no money and a limited set of vocal and musical skills. But even after tremendous strengthening of our budget and our skills, I continued to program a high proportion of oral-tradition music. In part this was because there seemed to be a good chance that women had participated in the shaping of it, whereas in the "art" music I was performing with other choirs, there was seldom a trace of a woman's hand in either the words or the music. Furthermore, my folk repertoire choices covered a wider geographical range than I could have represented by sticking to the art music canon; this suited a typically Feminist program of multiculturalism and anti-Eurocentrism. Related to this is the non-professional, non-commercial nature of the music and its typical origins in communities of little monetary wealth; my response to this recalls the "folk consciousness" of the Leftists of the proletarian renaissance discussed in Chapter Two.

Other directors of Womyn's choruses have pursued similar strategies, as I had observed, and as these excerpts from mission statements show:

The Grand Rapids Women's Chorus is dedicated to singing culturally diverse music that promotes appreciation of women composers and arrangers. *(This chorus reported singing no art music and a large proportion of Balkan, African, African-American, and Jewish oral-tradition music.)*

We often sing folkloric music from a variety of music traditions. We have already sung in English, Latin, Italian, Spanish, French, Romanian, Bulgarian and Hebrew. We are proud of the diversity of our members ...and sing repertoire which represents that diversity. (Vox Femina Los Angeles)

Women With Wings, the 40-voice Bangor Women's Chorus, was founded in October '93 to sing chants and rounds from our oral tradition...

As a characteristic of other Feminist choruses, the programming of oral-tradition music became part of my definition of a Feminist chorus.

Some of the quotes from earlier in this chapter reveal their speakers' sense that passing on Black oral-tradition ensemble song is a female thing, or something women do better for being female. As Linda Tillery told Laura Post about her goals for CHC:

I want a lot of grandmothers who are from the South to teach me. (1995, 24)

I have already shown that the Community Sing, a primary component of UBW's outreach, is regarded by the members as a form of social action, and the songs as resources. Consuelo had been telling me about the transformative power of the songs UBW teaches when I asked her whether being an all-women's company had any significance for that work. Her answer (which I previously quoted on page 103) follows, as does the continuation of that conversation, in which I asked her to elaborate on her answer:

C: I think the fact that it is all women structures just about everything. ...Because we're women, I think we – because we nurture, I think that we reach more people...

K: How does that translate into your work?

C: Well, I think we're very responsible. Because we are women, and women have more of a tendency to think about the other, because we have the ability to bear children, and part of preparing us for that is thinking of others. Not to think so much about yourself. So I really think that that affects our community work. We really are genuinely interested in helping people and in making a difference, even if it's tiny... you know?

The equation here seems to be that they do Community Sings because they are caretakers, and they are caretakers because, as women, they might become mothers.

Consuelo is not the only one who thinks that child-bearing capacity makes for good *a cappella*, traditional, group singing. I repeat Melanie DeMore's comments from page 102, this time including the question that prompted them, as well as parts of her response that I did not include earlier:

KB: Why did Linda want a group of all women, and what's the significance of being in an all-women's group for you and for the music and for the goals of the group?

MDM: Well, I think primarily, there is something about women as the – like – the keepers of the history, the preservers of the past, you know. I mean, we make the babies, we feed the babies, we work with the babies behind us. And, it also goes back to the old tradition of sitting on the porch, that tradition of talking, that whole way of working through your problems. Ah, that whole congregational connection was the connection that women had culturally. And it's certainly something that our grandmothers and our mothers understood. And as young women in our own generation, it *feels* familiar. And we don't get the chance to do that very much. And there's a certain place that women go together – that you don't necessarily go in a group that's mixed. You just – you know, you just don't. It's that thing of cycles, that we just know intuitively in our minds and physically in our bodies. And, you know, we have...people that play with us occasionally. ...We did a collaboration with Crosspulse – they're a group of five people, and I think it's three men and two women. And they're all percussionists from different countries – from different traditions, you know? Uh, Venezuela, Africa... all those different things. And all the stuff goes together. And –



but there's something that's just intrinsically Cultural Heritage Choir that's always there, that always comes through. And, I think that...because it's just women, there's a certain kind of energy; there's a place that you are not afraid to go to because you have that support.

DeMore's response begins with what could have been a paraphrase of part of my mission statement for AMASONG. I am unable to prove whether it is actually true that more women than men sing *a cappella*, oral-tradition group song, or that women do it better. But it is clear that those of us who think so are participating in a discourse characterized by essentializing ideas of womanhood as nurturing, oral, culture-bearing, and predisposed to tight, intuitive connections with one another. Of course, any discourse, however fabulous, exists in a dialectical relationship to reality, tending to produce material evidence of itself: the more it is thought that a particular activity is a "female" one, the more often women will engage in it and men avoid it.

My interviews revealed that this particular musical activity is gender-marked in the minds of several of the respondents, though Bernice Johnson Reagon provided the notable exception:

I don't know. I think I learn as much from men as from women. ...My lead style, my central lead style – one part of my lead style is very, very clearly what I've heard male singers do. So I don't know if I have that – that split. ...I came up in a church where the services were opened by women. ...I was not aware that that was not a given in country Baptist churches. ...There was something in the singing and the praying that went on, that I saw people doing: women and men were equal powers. And they were often – you know, a woman could pull a congregational song as effectively as a man. And being female or male was not an issue. So one of the things that happened was that a lot of the stuff I came into was not gendered.

Reagon's colleague, Ysaye Barnwell, shares with Consuelo and DeMore the instinctive feeling that something in the female reproductive biology – or at least the acculturation of people who possess it – predisposes women to maintaining the continuity of oral culture from generation to generation:

Somewhere in my gut I feel like that's a particular thing that women do well. I feel like men are often good storytellers, but I feel like there's something about the process of communicating orally that is – I mean, that's who we are from the time we begin talking to our children, you know, if we have them – and passing on the values and the knowledge and all of that at the breast, and I think that's very much a part of what women do and how we communicate, which – you know, the whole debate about: "Women are more open, women can communicate their feelings," blah, blah, blah. I think that there is very much to that. I think that is part of our woman-ness. And I think that – I think it's reinforced by the process of childbearing and raising children. You know: How do you comfort? How do you teach? How do you pass on values, information, skills? And it is *oral*.

Like Barnwell, DeMore ascribes a greater emotional impact to women's communication:

I think that there's a way women have of telling stories. And, you know, lots of times even women's stories are not told by women. You know, they're told by someone else. But I think it's *very* significant that there are more and more women out there doing this. And that there's a way that women have of imparting information in a way that people can hear. ...Most of our information comes from men. Generally, I think there's a way that we as women can say things – because it comes from a real basic, primal thing – a primal place, you know? And, um, since all men come from women anyway, it speaks to them in that place. We're able to say things, you know, that actually gets to that place before it gets to the brain. Speaks to a very natural kind of primal place. There's nothing really very analytical about it. Because really, when you get right down to it, the brain is really – something affects you long before it gets to the brain. So we can speak to that. You know, touch people in places where normally they protect themselves, they protect themselves *hard* from being touched in those places. This music – our music and our performance generally gets people in the heart place. Men and women. I mean, it is amazing. It constantly amazes me the effect that our performance has on people.

This is a very interesting commentary. At first glance, DeMore appears to be contradicting herself on the question of whether it is men or women who talk, tell stories, pass on information. Reading more carefully suggests an implicit distinction in her mind between private talking in the domestic sphere and public “talking” in forms such as written history, formal address, or media coverage, forms that assert themselves as representative of everyone's truth; women typically engage in the former kinds of talking (always oral), whereas men tend to dominate the latter (oral, written, taped), often to the misrepresentation of women's truths. DeMore goes on to laud the trend by which women are increasingly claiming public forums for telling our truths in our ways of “talking.” Her assertion that womanly communication bypasses intellect on a direct path to affect reproduces the classic patriarchal discourse of *femaleness/nature/emotionality* against *maleness/civilization/rationality* that has historically been a primary excuse for relegating women to the domestic sphere and projecting men into the public.<sup>31</sup> Her strategy for dealing with this construct is simply to favor the half of the construct that patriarchy devalues.

This rather essentializing narrative about the “nature” of women is common in the musical orbits where all of the groups in this study circulate and encounter one another, so it is not surprising that many of my interviewees endorsed it. In fact, I would expect to find this perspective in any women-only group (and have been heard to say such things myself), even though I would not expect all members to share it, necessarily. In order for women-only organizations to be created and maintained, there must be a critical number of women who love and privilege the experience of gathering without men, at least some of the time. For this experience to feel as unique as women frequently say it feels, it must be distinguished by the quality of the interrelationships it comprises. This quality is made manifest in *communication*, verbal and nonverbal. Hence, it is the observation of many people that women “speak” one “language” and men

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<sup>31</sup> See the work of Sherry Ortner, in particular: “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?”

another. Whether biology, divine intention, or acculturation is credited for it, this difference is part of a constellation of attributes that gives sense to the words “woman” and “man” as discrete categories.<sup>32</sup> This larger distinction, historically drawn to the political disempowerment of women, makes the existence of the women-only organization necessary; and the women-only organization makes this distinction necessary to its existence.

It is Maya’s observation that women are more involved than men in continuing Black oral song culture, but she has a very consciously political analysis of gendered differences in behavior and circumstances. She resists the idea that these differences correspond to anything in our original essence as humans. At the same time, she acknowledges the real power of our attitudes and experiences to imprison us in even those sexist misconceptions that make us miserable:

M: The reason to me is because...more and more people are coming through single-parent families raised by a mother. You know, raised where they don’t even have a connection to a father. So where are they getting their information from? It’s going to be the mom. ...It’s the mother who’s the one passing on whatever there is, whatever’s left.

K: Mm-hmm. At the Community Sing in New Orleans, while it was just jam-packed, there were maybe this many men (*indicating a tiny number with my fingers*).

M: Mm-hmm. Right. I think it’s, once again, you know, what’s happened is in African-American communities – generally speaking the problem has been that we’re losing our men. They’re in prison. They’re being murdered. You know? This is so common that when you hear – you may have heard when they say that “the Black man is an endangered species.” That’s no joke. Because it’s true, you know: the structure is set up that if you are a Black man growing up in the 90s – you’re a Black man and you don’t *ever* visit a prison, you never spend time in prison, you make it, you live to be in your 60s, 80s – you are almost a minority. It’s very tragic. It’s like the whole society is targeted against them. The same in the Native-American communities. The men are goin’ down. It’s been – this is how you affect the structure. Because, especially in cultures where the men are, like, the – you know, you’re the warrior. And to be stripped of that, it strips who you are. And when I say “the warrior,” I’m saying that every person has their place. You know? I mean with women there’s a way in which the feminine energy works in a different way. You know: you’re always going to be the one to give life. You’re going to always be the one to raise that baby. Even if you’re being beaten down for being a woman, there is a role that you will always – there’s a responsibility that you’re always expected to have. The man, you know, when we look at, sort of, like, even in historical times – in hunting and gathering times, the man’s going out to hunt. He’s physically stronger, and that’s his role. The woman is the one who keeps the society together. Right? So you strip this man of his very purpose in life – you know, what’s left of him? I’m not saying, by any means – this is no excuse: “Okay, this is what’s happening against you; you still need to pull it together.” But this is like the strikes that are against you from Day One. You’ve been stripped

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<sup>32</sup> In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler suggests that we are stuck with the language of our gender labels but that we can inhabit and manipulate these labels in subversive and innovative ways to expose gender as the fable that it is; this accomplished, humans’ gender behavior and identity on any given day will be understood and unrestricted as pure choice.

of your sense of – you can't – you don't even make as much money as anybody. Even if you're a sexist individual, all the worse for you if you think you should be making more money than a woman! And a White woman is making more money than you and a Black woman is making more money than you, and you're a Black man. It's like, "Oh, God. How low can you go?" Of course, I'm like: "You know, well, yeah: this is your fragile ego!" We have a sexist issue here, definitely; that's very strong. And, at the same time, I can also be compassionate to the fact that – where you've been stripped of your whole identity. And because men in general are not encouraged to nurture their spiritual self, which is their feminine self – because we're all masculine and feminine when it comes down to it. My physical makeup dictates that I'm a woman, but I'm very in touch with my masculine side and that I need that. You know, I need my feminine and my masculine. Men need their feminine side. It's their intuitive – it's their spiritual – it's the, the direct connection to God. Their male self connects them to the earth. It's that – it's the machine, and the feminine is like the motor, to me. And we're both equally that. And so that's why I feel like it's important to have both, like Consuelo said today: Yin and Yang. So then, where are men to be passing down any traditions? What are they gonna be passing down? The struggle of their father in prison and their, you know, this and that, and it's like they're further – they get further removed. And this is, – I would say the problem aspect of our communities is why this is happening. And there are definitely men who are defying that. In my spiritual community there are amazing priests. My godfather is also a priest of Yemayá. He's *powerful!* He's just like – he is the nurturing force in my spiritual practice for me right now. He's just so nurturing. And I totally believe that it's his connection to his feminine self. And he's very much a masculine man, you know? He's a Straight man married with kids, and he's very in touch with his feminine side.

K: Isn't nurturance one of Yemayá's most important qualities?

M: Absolutely!

Maya makes clear her observation that gender attributes are no more than what society has "encouraged" in individuals: a man can embody the nurturing essence of the "Grand Mother" Yemayá, and a woman can be, as Maya is, a fierce *capoeirista*. Maya observes that she and other Black women are disproportionately involved in building community and carrying culture, not because that's what women are for, but because racism's assault on Black manhood has taken so many African-American men out of the picture.

There are other parts of the world where discourses on gender have traditionally had the effect of concentrating a *cappella* ensemble singing in women's voices; at the same time, instrumental proficiency is reserved as a male prerogative. In "Balkan Women as Preservers of Traditional Music and Culture,"

Patricia Shehan writes:

Throughout the Balkans, women are the principal transmitters of the song tradition. Since their labors almost constantly occupy their hands with weaving, knitting, carrying, and cooking tasks, song in its vocally presented medium rather than instrumental music is their main musical outlet. Most aspects of daily life that

are accompanied by songs are the domain of women. Only in festive occasions do men dominate the singing in a genre known as heroic or table songs. (1989, 47)

And Susan Auerbach, in "From Singing to Lamenting: Women's Musical Role in a Greek Village," points out that:

...enjoined from playing instruments, women are the designated guardians of vocal forms in rural Greece. They preserve folk songs as keepers of traditional lore... (1989, 25)

The sexual division of musical labor and meaning plays itself out uniquely in every culture but can be assumed to exist as long as other social functions are divided by sex. The dominance of instrumental music by men – and the restriction of women to vocal expressions – is certainly not unique to the Balkans. A prohibition against women instrumentalists survives in the Vienna Philharmonic, and the custom of blind orchestral auditions in the United States signals a concern that in our society, a player's sex (and race, certainly) can still bias the judging of a performance. Jean Fineberg, saxophonist with the women's band ISIS, recalls an audition for A&M Records as typical of the attitudes women players face in the music industry:

I specifically remember Herb Alpert saying, "They're great, but women look stupid playing horns." That attitude is very pervasive. I know exactly where he's coming from: They need to keep it an all-male club. ...It's a way to keep out a lot of competition. If you can eliminate half your competition with one stroke – ...A lot of my male saxophone player friends will be real friendly with me, but they won't call me to sub for them. Some of them have actually come out and verbalized this. They think I'm a great player, but "I couldn't send you into the band because the other guys would object." ...It (would) actually affect their reputation. (Morris 1999, 105-106)

Consuelo's observations about the sexual division of musical labor in Cuba led me to consider some implications for the value of the work of UBW, CHC, and Sweet Honey in dominant society:

Well, in Afro-Cuban traditions, the musicians are usually men, because it's traditional. ...But a lot of the singers are women, so they know the songs, too.

Being a vocalist, I understand the word "musician" to encompass singers. Therefore, Consuelo's statement made no sense to me until I regarded it a second time and realized that "musicians" meant *instrumentalists* (percussionists in this case), and that singers were not "musicians." This reminded me immediately of Auerbach's finding that among the Kalohorians of rural Greece, laments – sung only by older women and being the only form of singing allowed them – are not regarded as music (1989, 27).

Pondering the Kalohori orientation toward women's traditional expressions recalled an attitude displayed to me years ago by a male acquaintance who was working toward a degree in the visual arts. He

engaged me in a heated argument by claiming that Judy Chicago's *The Birth Project* – a series of stunning artistic representations of women giving birth made in needlepoint techniques – was not art but mere handicraft. First, he dismissed the medium as one of the utilitarian and ordinary skills that women have traditionally learned as part of their domestic responsibilities. Second, he felt that Chicago's enlisting of mothers who were master needlepointers as collaborators in the design and execution of the tapestries disqualified her as an artist.<sup>33</sup> Interestingly enough, he had no quarrel with men who establish themselves as artists in media as utilitarian or pedestrian as plaster, wrought iron, or even garbage. Neither was he disturbed by examples I gave him in which the masterworks of prominent artists Marc Chagall and Andy Warhol had been realized only through the painstaking, expert, and thoroughly anonymous labor of highly-trained, struggling, young artists. Clearly, what really made *The Birth Project* “not art” for him was that women had given expression to an exclusively female experience and had done it on their own terms.

Finally, I recalled all the times that, while preparing to sing performances of symphonic choral works, I had heard the orchestra members referred to as “musicians” in contradistinction to us lowly singers. Why was this language – instead of the much more specific word *instrumentalists* – used so relentlessly for this purpose? And are the assumptions underlying this language somehow connected to the very real difficulty I face making a living wage as a choral musician? I suspect that on some deep level, this is part of a discourse that singing together as a group is something that women just *do*.

To the extent that I could prove that this discourse – together with a discourse about the inherent femaleness of oral culture – existed in the contemporary United States, I would expect to find the following symptoms: public ensemble singing – like other “women’s work” – would be given very little market value, always less than ensemble *playing*, and only slightly more when men also participated in it; boys singing in church or school choirs would be Gay-baited by other boys for threatening masculinity in doing what was “for girls;” naturally, female singers would then vastly outnumber males in most of our choral programs, reinforcing the idea that ensemble singing was “a female thing;”<sup>34</sup> males seeking to legitimate and distinguish themselves as musicians would typically endeavor to master instrumental forms, though they might sing along with their playing – or better yet, find an attractive female vocalist/*non-instrumentalist* to “front” their bands; marking out instrumental territory as their musical proving ground, men would discourage women from playing; men who did sing together *a cappella* would invent new songs or sing songs invented by other men, finding no challenge or interest in the songs of hearth and home.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Each collaborator’s name, photograph, and biography hangs by the tapestry she helped to create.

<sup>34</sup> That most *directors* of serious choral ensembles (even women’s ensembles) are men should no more disprove my point than the fact that the very “female thing” of giving birth has been judged to require oversight and control by the historically-male practitioners of the male-invented “science” of obstetrics.

<sup>35</sup> The prominence of the early gospel quartet – often all-male and often *a cappella*, – has to be acknowledged here. The proliferation of such groups significantly influenced the development of gospel and other popular styles (Barnwell 1989, 17). Recognizing the appeal of their sound, record producers sought groups of White men who could imitate it, giving them contracts at the expense of the Black originators (Shaw 1986). Currently, groups such as Take Six and Boyz II Men, though their material is original and makes heavy use of instrumentals, represent the enduring appreciation among African Americans of small ensembles of men skilled in the execution of close vocal harmonies.

Of course, my conceit in the preceding paragraph is to pretend to build a hypothetical, inductive argument by describing what have been my actual experiences and observations. What I can say with certainty is that most of the women interviewed for this study clearly perceive ensemble singing of traditional, *a cappella* music as “a woman’s thing.” As I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Four, the pre-eminent ensembles of the Womyn’s choral movement regularly program a conspicuously high proportion of oral-tradition, *a cappella* music. I believe that it is under the influence of these female ensembles that their other-gendered counterparts – the men’s and mixed ensembles in the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses – are heard to include token examples of such music in their repertoires, which have typically been heavy on art music (though this seems to be disappearing), Broadway tunes, and new songs in a quasi-popular style that almost always require piano accompaniment (if not also trap set).

There is a common problem undergirding the feelings that singers in certain contexts are not musicians, that *The Birth Project* is not art, that women make unacceptable instrumentalists, and that singing traditional music in *a cappella* ensembles is something that women just naturally do. This problem is the interaction between a particular sexual division of activity and a particular cultural interpretation of the act of creative expression. By signaling the latter, I mean to highlight the difference between creative expression performed by experts for its own sake (otherwise known as “art”) and creative expression as an integral and participatory part of every community member’s daily approach to living (called “folklore” by outsiders and taken for granted as The Right Way To Do Things by insiders). The statement by Ysaye Barnwell that I presented at the beginning of this chapter points in the direction of this distinction, which has been supported by the words of several women quoted here, and which I will discuss again in Chapter Five. The trope that traditional Black song is functional rather than merely diversional reflects its origins in African cultures whose languages typically had no word for “art.”<sup>36</sup> In these non-industrialized, cooperative societies with unified economies and earth-bound spiritualities, songs set the pace for the pounding of grain, body decorations invoked the energies of hunting deities, and dances summoned rain. In contrast, the history of Medieval Europe, with its rapidly diversifying economy and violent Christianization of Pagans, records the professionalization of creative expression – by men, of course. Any peasant woman could still sing a ditty while hanging out the laundry, but a *musician* was a man expertly bowing his instrument and composing original music in remunerated service to the court or the Church.

Up to this point, my discussion has introduced or implied the following culturally constructed dichotomies, which are often deployed in different combinations as synonymous with one another in dominant discourses: female/male, domestic/public, emotional/rational, fleshly/cerebral, folkloric/artistic, functional/diversional, traditional/original, oral/written, communal/individual, shared/owned, anonymous/credited, lay/professional, wild/civilized, primitive/modern, African/European, Black/White... worthless/valuable. For my argumentative artist acquaintance, *The Birth Project*’s female-made images of

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<sup>36</sup> Problematically, it also has its roots in an earlier ethnomusicological discourse about African music that – finding the music structurally and aesthetically wanting – propounded its “functional” value in contradistinction to the presumed beauty and complexity of European-style art music, which in its most abstracted manifestations is referred to as “absolute” music (Thomas Turino, personal communication, 2000).

a primally female, biological experience rendered in a domestic medium by a group of laypersons were unworthy of public display in a museum of art – were absolutely disqualified as art of any kind, bad or good.

Of course, the neatness of these dichotomies and their substitution for one another breaks down – or is actively contested – in the contemporary United States, where a plurality of cultural values exert mutual influence on one another. The women of Sweet Honey In The Rock sing and create in communal, African-derived, oral traditions, asserting the value of their ancestry where racism has denigrated it. However, when they play to paying audiences, they necessarily bring these traditions into the realm of the diversional, the professional, the artistic (even without the use of men or electric guitars). The replacement in time, geography, and economy of a Black song from its origins at a traditional West-African funeral or a 1960s demonstration in Georgia to a contemporary, New York concert stage or the commercial recording industry involves new interpretations of its meaning. The interpretations made by concert audience members and record consumers cannot be controlled by the singers. When this re-placement brings White Americans into contact with the song, their interpretations will necessarily be made through the added filter of their position on the privileged side of racism's fence. Chapter Four will present the experiences and interpretations of White women actively involved in singing Black oral-tradition music. And Chapter Five will examine the contribution of this commonly held set of dichotomies to the problem of White appropriation of Black traditional song.

### Summary

I began this chapter by arguing that Sweet Honey In the Rock, Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir, and Urban Bush Women exist as they do because of the proliferation and interconnection of various Feminist and Black Liberation movements in the latter third of the twentieth century in the United States. Prior to involvement with their performing ensembles, founders and members of the three groups had studied, organized for, and circulated among proponents of a variety of these movements. The question facing the ensembles was never *whether* they would be political as well as artistic, but rather *what* their group's political commitments would be and *how* they could use their creative expressions to communicate these commitments. I presented details from the ensembles' histories and creative outputs that demonstrate many of the ways they have answered this question. The content of their work as well as the venues they choose articulate resistance to race, class, and sex oppression, promote efforts for health, safety, and peace, and warn about environmental destruction. In the Santa Rita "corrections" facility, at the Gay And Lesbian Association of Choruses, and in the public housing projects and drug rehabilitation centers of Tallahassee, these artists stand in solidarity with dominant society's Least Wanted. By the styles in which they work, they remind audiences of the history that brought them here, claim connections to communities all over the Black Atlantic, and celebrate the sounds and movements that tell the continuing story of Black struggle, survival, and resistance. This is the kind of practice that produces theory such as Michelle Wallace's "black feminist creativity" (page 85).



My interviews with the individual artists revealed that, though they have different ways of naming their ancestries, they identify consciously and proudly as Black, and they appreciate working at jobs that affirm their Blackness as well as their femaleness. Of the four women in the sample who I knew had women lovers, three came out as Lesbians in the interviews, and one in particular explained that her Lesbian identity contributes something valuable to the work of her ensemble. All of the other women in the sample are accustomed to working with Lesbians in their ensembles, and they understand that a political commitment to the freedom and dignity of the Lesbian choice means willingness to perform Lesbian content, to appear in Lesbian venues, and to face audiences that mistakenly either dismiss or embrace them as Lesbians. These factors contribute to their ensembles' familiarity and popularity in Womyn's circles, which are predominantly White. Other important aspects of their identities that the artists listed include spiritual practice, age, background in poor neighborhoods, radical political orientation, and Native-American ancestry. Almost every artist placed a very high priority on her group's projection to the public of diverse images of Black womanhood; their ensembles reject male and White standards of female beauty and disrupt the racial-sexual stereotypes that persist in the national imagination.

I demonstrated that, although respondents from all groups appreciate the inherently Feminist nature of their ensembles' endeavors and acknowledge a debt to Feminism for making their jobs possible, claiming a Feminist identity for themselves is problematic for some of these Black women. This was most clearly the case for two of the older women in the sample who – being somewhere in the neighborhood of fifty years old – had too long seen White and class-privileged Feminists use the word as an emblem for agendas that ignore the realities of ninety-nine percent of the world's women. Of the two women in their twenties who were evasive about the term, one had had considerable exposure to its theory and practice but felt that using it would convey false impressions about her; the other seemed inclined to accept a Feminism that would represent her concerns but did not seem to have enough exposure to Feminisms to know that many such models existed. Among respondents who claimed Feminism without apology were women in their forties and women in their twenties, Lesbians and Heterosexuals.

In the last section of this chapter, I presented the artists' beliefs about the material effects on the world of the songs they sing. The artists understand African-American oral-tradition songs as tools that their forebears used to help them endure or escape slavery, resist Jim Crow, and find joy and human connection amid the challenges of poverty, disenfranchisement, and racist contempt. These women claim these songs as their inheritance, available to them today for use in their generation's own struggles and celebrations. According to the artists, Black traditional songs have the power to instill Black pride and self-esteem, inspire anti-racist action, communicate illicit information, build individual and group resolve against oppression, sound warnings, identify contemporary challenges, convince people of truths that they can't accept in other forms, heal psychic wounds, bring people into empathic connection with one another, diagnose a person's emotional state, give energy to the ill and grieving, create an atmosphere of joy, and summon divine energies into communities of believers.

Most of the women in this sample reported a sense that the work of keeping these songs alive and making them available to other people is particularly suited to their ensembles as groups of women. One artist attributed this to women's higher rates of survival within Black communities. The others reproduced a discourse that associates femaleness with orality, preservation of tradition, group communication, emotional directness, instruction and nurturance of children, and maintenance of community life. As Consuelo said to me:

I think it's inherent in the way we are. You know, traditionally, women have been responsible for the village. And men have just been defending it. You know, they just fight. (*chuckles*) Which is pretty much what's happening today! ...They're just fighting, basically. And women are mostly maintaining things.

When the artists report that their work in transmitting oral song culture is one way of administering to the emotional states of individuals and groups, they reveal their involvement in a caretaking function that is as heavily marked as any under patriarchy as "women's work."

In the next chapter, I will begin to consider the crossing of this music into the repertoires of White Womyn's choruses. To bring us to this question, I present an exchange I had with Jacquelyn about the presence of White people at an Urban Bush Women Community Sing:

K: What do you hope for when you sing to White people?

J: See, when I sing to White people, I just want them to be very aware of the struggle. Very aware of what it took for me to get to this place, very aware of what goes on in my community, um – that it's not all that you see on television: that there's so much other stuff happening in the Black community! (*laughs*) I just want them to know that: "Yeah, we do cultural things. We sing, we get along, we go to each other's houses and cook, we do – " you know, we do all that stuff. We have parties that are safe, you know – we live normal lives. I don't know what their perceptions are when we step into their churches or their community centers, but through our music, through our songs, we kind of give them a little look inside of what our lives are like. So I think that's what we do. We kind of open up and say: "Okay: this is who we are. For *real*. Not from the media's perspective."

## CHAPTER IV

### THE WOMEN AND THE MUSIC OF SISTRUM, ANNA CRISIS, AND AMASONG

*“Really, the birth of myself was coming to Lansing, getting involved with Sistrum,  
and getting all these new political ideas.”*

*– Ginger, Sistrum*

*“Singing together is powerful. It’s a kind of intimacy. It’s a kind of being part of something bigger.  
...It’s a major way of building community.”*

*– Ruth, Anna Crisis*

*“The warming up and blending the sound and how your body responds to that, and how you feel  
when you’re breathing and singing and listening: I had no idea what that was like!  
When I talk about the mystery and the grace of the experience,  
that’s really what I’m talking about.”*

*– Lynnette, AMASONG*

#### **Introduction**

It is this chapter that will tell the reader the most about the primary object of this project’s study, the Feminist choral movement. Before questioning the movement’s specific practice of performing Black oral-tradition music, it is important to understand the universe of meaning within which that practice arose. Three particular choruses are introduced here to represent – I hope with an acceptable measure of fairness – the more than fifty ensembles officially affiliated with the movement. I devote quite a bit of space to presenting the words of twelve individual women (including myself) from these choruses, for I believe that hearing them out, one after the other, even when their very different words repeat the same messages, is the way that the reader can come to understand what any one of them is saying and also to believe that what all of them are saying is true.

However, before presenting the words of all twelve individuals, I spend some time on the various cultural and historical contexts that define them and their ensembles. Of primary importance here is these ensembles’ existence in the culture of Whiteness. The next most important cultural influence on the singers and their choirs is the phenomenon of the Womyn’s music festival, to which I introduced the reader in Chapter Two; here I will present the specific role of festivals in the historical development of the Feminist choral movement, as well as selected interviewees’ testimonies to the impact of festivals on their lives, within the chorus and without. Following that, I summarize the history and describe the nature of two national associations that promote the interests of Womyn’s choirs. Communication among women members of these associations is facilitated by a listserv, which medium I used to survey Womyn’s

choruses and eventually select two for study; the compiled results of this survey help to complete a general profile of the Feminist choral movement.

I turn to the words of the founders and directors of Sistrum, Anna Crusis, and AMASONG to provide background information on each group. From there, I present individual musicians' answers to the same question I put to the members of the professional ensembles examined in Chapter Three: "How do you identify yourself?" The rest of the chapter – fully half of it – presents and interprets all twelve women's narratives about what their choruses mean to them, what they most love to sing, and what they mean when they sing Black music.

### **The Feminist Choral Movement: Socio-Historical Notes**

#### Whiteness

Like most ensembles in the Feminist choral movement, Sistrum, Anna Crusis, and AMASONG are White groups. This remains the case even when their memberships for a given season include a Woman of Color, or two, or a few. At the time I performed these interviews, both AMASONG and Sistrum had one Woman of Color in their ranks, in each case an African American. Of the five Women of Color in the forty-voice Anna Crusis, two were African American; at one time in Anna's history, there had been six African Americans in the choir. A few years ago, Sistrum had three African-American members (all of whom had the same name and two of whom were blind). Over the nine years that I conducted AMASONG, our rolls included one African American, one Zimbabwean, one Chinese, two Japanese Americans from Hawaii, and one Brazilian who – like so many Brazilians – looked as though she could have had any combination of Iberian, African, Middle Eastern, and Amerindian ancestries.

Because the word *White* is a non-scientific, mythological indicator of social class that is constantly under redefinition (Ignatiev 1995, Daniels 1997), I find myself unsure as to whether I have just now accurately included all AMASONG members who would consider themselves to be *not White*. I have more than once mistaken for White someone who identifies as Native American; perhaps our choir's membership has included someone like this who did not reveal herself as such. Some of our Jewish members may feel uncertain about the degree of their Whiteness. And if *White* is the word for the dominant group in the United States, I wonder how our Serbian soprano, however pale her skin, could have felt like a member of that group while the White White House and the White Congress and the White Pentagon – supported by the White mass-media and all its White believers – were dropping bombs on her country.

Indeed, historically, Whiteness in America was first used to designate exclusive ancestry in England and northern Germany, the tribal homelands of the so-called Anglo-Saxons whose descendants in this country are of that most American of flavors: WASP (Horsman 1997). Despite the word's etymology, *Whiteness* has never been a description of color; the first waves of Irish immigrants were considered to be of a non-White (read: undesirable, subordinate) race. The process by which the Irish became White has been documented and presented as a paradigmatic case challenging assumptions that *White* defines skin

color or ancestry from north of Africa and west of Mongolia (Ignatiev, 1995). After the Irish, immigrant groups from southern and eastern Europe were similarly considered *not White* before they had submitted to the demand for and successfully achieved assimilation into WASP cultural values in exchange for membership in the dominant class. The power of Whiteness has depended on the choice of masses of people to opt for White privilege rather than aligning themselves with Blacks – who as the mutually-constructed opposite of White cannot become White – against an economic, political, and social order built on the oppression of an underclass. In fact, there is ample documentation that poor and laboring Whites have always consoled themselves with the assurance that, regardless of how bad things got for them, they at least would never be Black. In this way, the maintenance of the Black underclass as a target of contempt has served to draw poor Whites' rage away from the systematic sources of their own exploitation and onto the system's worst victims.

The effect of immigrant families' assimilation into Whiteness has been a near total disappearance of ethnic difference by the second or third generation born in the United States. The deliberateness with which powerful industrial interests promoted this process is revealed most concretely in this example:

While some nativists wished to exclude all or most immigrants who were not English, other influential Americans wanted the immigrants to be allowed in, but only on Anglo-centric terms. Indeed, the view that immigrants must quickly "Americanize" was widely shared by powerful U.S. capitalists. The nation's most famous capitalist, Henry Ford, pressed strongly for immigrant Americanization. Working with his firm's executives, Henry Ford recruited southern and eastern European immigrants for his auto plants. The company then set up a "Sociological Department" with investigators who visited workers' homes, providing advice on family matters and personal morality. In addition, the workers had to attend a "melting pot school," where they learned English and certain Anglo-Saxon Protestant values of great concern to men like Ford. Remarkably, during graduation ceremonies Ford's employees, at first dressed as in their home countries, walked through a big pot labeled "melting pot" and emerged in business suits holding American flags. Although this process was labeled "melting pot" assimilation, the actual model is one-way assimilation to the dominant culture. (Feagin 1997, 352).

Something in addition to de-ethnicization typically characterizes White people, and that is the lack of awareness of ourselves as White or of White as a racial category, except when we come into contact with people of other races. *White* is the name of the dominant, "unmarked," privileged class in the United States. Therefore, those whom it describes often experience ourselves and our cultural expressions and values as the norm for personhood; race and culture are things that *other* people have, and these we typically exoticize or devalue. Among those of us who are willing to admit that institutionalized racism puts others at a disadvantage, few will admit that Whiteness confers upon us *unearned* advantages. The

ease, unselfconsciousness, and arrogance typical of those of us who experience ourselves as the human norm are privileges of Whiteness every bit as significant as our material advantages.<sup>1</sup>

In *The Social Construction of Whiteness: White Women, Race Matters* (1993), Ruth Frankenberg identifies three “discursive repertoires” about race in her conversations with White women. The first, which she calls *essentialist racism*, views race as a category of “ontological, essential, or biological difference” (138). Most women in Frankenberg’s study see this discourse of bigotry as racism’s paradigm, and in disavowing it (“We’re all the same underneath the skin”), they excuse themselves from considering racism’s structural and institutional dimensions. This response forms the far more common discourse, which Frankenberg calls *color and power evasion*. As another writer points out, this discourse, commonly referred to as “colorblindness,” really means “blind(ness) to the effects of prejudice on people because of their color” (Gallagher 1997, 9). The unconscious agenda of this assimilationist discourse is to reinforce the superiority of White cultural norms. The third discourse Frankenberg identifies is what she calls *race cognizance*, which insists on “the importance of recognizing *difference* – but with difference understood in historical, political, social, or cultural terms rather than essentialist ones.” Race-cognizant women, though they differ in perspectives, opinions, and approaches, share two convictions: that “race makes a difference in people’s lives,” and that “racism is a significant factor in shaping contemporary U.S. society” (Frankenberg 1993, 157).

Frankenberg identifies the influence of Feminist anti-racism on the race cognizance of several women in her study. This mirrors my own experience as a White woman whose tools for thinking my way beyond essentialist racism and color/power evasiveness have been handed me at Womyn’s music festivals, in Women’s Studies classrooms, and among other gatherings of Womyn. I have stated earlier in this study that the Feminist choral movement has not only developed alongside but has also been profoundly influenced by the Womyn’s music festival movement. As I interviewed the White women in these groups about their identities and their feelings about some of the music they sing, I was alert to the influence on them of race-cognizant discourses common at Womyn’s festivals. I also enjoyed seeing so many other reflections of the festival phenomenon in the individual singers and their ensembles.

#### Feminist Choral Musicians and Womyn’s Music Festivals

Nine of the twelve women featured in this chapter, including the three directors, have attended a Womyn’s music festival at least once. Since the early festivals of the mid-’70s, these gatherings have served as networking grounds for the organizers of the Feminist choral movement, as well as offering performance venues to Womyn’s choirs. In fact, the appeal to Feminists of the amateur chorus as a low-budget, inclusive performance medium has led to its institutionalization at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (“Michigan”) and the National Women’s Music Festival (“National”). Both of these festivals offer

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<sup>1</sup> For the reader to whom these perspectives are unfamiliar, I recommend *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror* as an excellent starting place. This volume, compiled and edited by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (1997), contains 114 short essays that, taken together, unmask the history of the myth of race in America and its continued effects on Americans’ perceptions of self and others, the law and other major institutions, and the life-chances of individuals.

opportunities for attendees to join choruses that rehearse for several days and then perform under the direction of noted musicians. More significantly, the festivals' experiments in building Feminist communities have had a strong ideological influence on the formation and governance of Feminist choirs. Most of the typical characteristics that distinguish Feminist choirs from any other ensembles in which I have sung also characterize the festivals: anti-hierarchical models of organization and operation, accessibility to poor women and women with disabilities, a stylistic eclecticism highlighting oral-tradition and popular expressions from several continents, preferential or exclusive use of women's creativity and labor, attention to global social-justice issues, playfulness, and a sense of freedom to dispense with mainstream conventions.

Rachel Alexander, who is Sistrum's director, has the most extensive experience among us with immersion in the Womyn's music festival phenomenon. She works every summer Michigan's piano technician and head carpenter. She is widely admired as the designer of Michigan's Acoustic Stage. Erected each summer at the bottom of a natural landform in the shape of an amphitheater, this venue features dance, spoken-word, choral, and acoustic instrumental performances that, by virtue of the stage's design, require little or no technical sound reinforcement. I knew that Alexander would have much to say about the influence of the festivals on our work as choral directors:

KB: I want to know about your involvement with the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, the Womyn's music culture, and how you see that feeding or relating to the Feminist choral movement.

RA: Well, my personal involvement with the festival goes back to its second year (1976); that was the first year I attended. I started being an official staff person in 1980. ...I've coordinated the carpentry crew since the early '80s. And I also have performed there a number of times. I've performed with Kay Gardner on cello and also with Therese Edell, Betsy Lippett, and Debbie Fyre. ...And also, there used to be a Festival Chorus.<sup>2</sup> And Cathy Roma used to be the director of that. And I was for several years her assistant and directed a couple of songs. And one year she was sick and couldn't come, and I did the chorus.

KB: Did you already have Sistrum at that time?

RA: Oh, yeah. That was in '92. And I started Sistrum in '86. ...When I first found Womyn's music was in '77. Most of the Womyn's music that I knew about at that point was, kind of, Girl-with-Guitar. There were definitely some exceptions, but that was the dominant component of Womyn's music. And the festival has been a...vehicle for the emergence of so much more, for...that definition to expand and explode and become so much other stuff.

KB: For example?

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<sup>2</sup> The Michigan Gospel Chorus (first directed by Melanie DeMore) and the Michigan Festival Chorus (which sang a broader stylistic range) once co-existed; now only the Gospel Chorus continues, currently under the direction of Aleah Long.

RA: For example – let me just back up and say that I don't mean that the festival made these things happen. I mean that the festival allowed us to know about these things. and for these various women to know about each other. and – really just grow in ways that wouldn't have happened without something like the festival network. and Michigan in particular. I think. The festival is where I first heard Sweet Honey in the Rock. and just all sorts of gals. And these days, the range of performers: Crazy. and Zoe Lewis and her Rubber Band...!

KB: I have this sense that the existence of Michigan and some of the other festivals has a lot to do with why my choir exists. And I'm kind of trying to trace that, either to specific exposure to certain artists. or the *Zeitgeist*. or whatever. Do you have anything to say about that?

RA: Well, the reason that the Saint Louis Women's Choir existed was because Carrie – who was the director – and I were at Champaign-Urbana at one of the early festivals – it would have been '77 or '78 – and heard Miss Safman's Ladies' Choir. ...Carrie turned to me and said: "I want one of those!"

KB: What did they sing? Do you remember?

RA: I have no recollection. My main recollection is that little side conversation with Carrie. And so, we went home and started a choir. And also at that festival – in fact, in those years, several of the others used pickup players, you know: had a little workshop some time before their performance and taught women some of their songs to sing with them onstage. And you could be in the choir! And it kind of gave, I think, the spark to the idea in a lot of women that this Womyn's music thing could be a choral thing. So it definitely had that effect on a lot of us, I think. But also, going to festivals – going to Michigan or going to National early on – and listening to the women perform – there were so many of us that weren't going to be those few women onstage but who wanted to sing that music, and who wanted to be doing that kind of thing in our communities. And a chorus was a really logical way to bring that about, because it's a way that women without training can make music together and have it be a musical experience and a social experience and a political experience.

I was fascinated to discover the very material ways in which the 1970s history of Feminist music-making right on Champaign-Urbana soil had contributed, quite without my realizing it, to the emergence of AMASONG in 1990. Some of the influences I was seeking to identify turned out to be more direct and local than I had known. Over the years I had heard passing references to Miss Safman's Ladies' Choir by some of the mothers of Womyn's community in my town, but I had known nothing specific about it. I will present what I have since learned about MSLC in the upcoming section on AMASONG's founding and history.

Later in my conversation with Alexander, we had occasion to agree on the dissonance we sometimes experience between our cultures of origin and our identities of choice. From there, I tried to get her to speak more specifically to the question of whether she and I, as Womyn's music festival disciples, were part of a shared identity group:



KB: Is Feminism *culture*?

RA: Hmm... I think it's an overlay. I think it's a way of looking at the world and, uh – I mean, probably twenty years ago I would have said, "sure it's a culture!" And maybe it was more, then. And now it's more a lens through which I look at the world and make decisions about the world.

KB: Dr. Morris talks over and over again in *Eden Built by Eves* about "festival culture." Does that mean anything to you?

RA: Oh, sure.

KB: Is it a useful phrase?

RA: Yeah. I can definitely feel that I'm in a different culture for the weeks that I'm at the festival. And part of that is because it's *Lesbian culture*. But I don't think it's just *Lesbian*. I think it's beyond that. It's how we are with one another there. And there's something about...the Feminist process that goes on there about making that space and that time be as empowering and as positive and as wonderful a place as we possibly can; that's such a high-held value of Lisa Vogel (*Michigan's producer*) and of those of us who work there. We just are constantly, creatively questioning how things are and working to make them (better).

KB: Does that culture exist when the tents come down? From take-down to the next set-up?

RA: Mm, yes – certainly in – I mean, more and more for me over the years there's more continuity between that and the rest of my life, partly because of my associations with a lot of the women who also work there. And it's kind of an ideal that we can hold onto. So it exists in that way.

KB: So, throughout the year, when you're not there, you're holding up this ideal that other people on the block don't see.

RA: Right. Exactly. It informs me. It feeds me. It really feeds my soul in so many ways.

AMASONG's Diana had much to say about the effect on her soul of the values lived at Michigan, where she takes her family every summer:

D: I have just completed celebrating my tenth anniversary of going to Michigan with my two daughters.

K: You *mark* this! I mean, it's not like, "Oh, yeah, we go on this vacation every summer..."

D: No! My daughters are so – this is the high point of their year, and in fact, it has been a great guide

and teacher (for them), who are now thirteen and soon-to-be fifteen. They really refer to – it's a reference point all year long for what can be, or what to strive for, or, like, how to judge what's coming at them in the world. They kind of can sort it out using Festival actually quite a bit. I'm surprised how often it comes up through the year as kind of gauge as to what is acceptable and what could be in that situation, or how that classroom is functioning or what are the dynamics there, you know? And I like that. I love that. That was really a big part of me getting up to Michigan. Not only do I love the music and love to dance myself silly all day long and have to work through a thousand issues of my own (*laughing*) and make connections with women that are *so amazing* – ! I mean, all that is good, too, but I like to put forth that it was *for my daughters* (*big laughter*) that I've spent these many thousands of dollars going to Michican all these years! But when I think of raising my daughters, that is very key in mind to me. What is going to fill their lives with a lot of breadth, perspective-wise, and fill them with joy as well, you know? I really feel like we can get so much further in our potential, whether we want to explore physics or do a serious inquiry into a political theory, wherever our journeys are going to take us or our curiosities are going to lead us, if we have *joy* at the basis, we can just be so much more *live* in all of that! We can *feel* our feelings, we can have *energy* for that work – *while* we're holding a baby on our knee if that need be, or if we choose to do a bike marathon on the side, or whatnot! You can glue it together if you've got that kind of base, and I feel like an environment like Michigan affirms that all ways of being are just fine, you know, as long as they're being respectful, if they've got respect at the base and a measure of compassion there, too. All ways are fine. All sizes are fine! All colors! The more color you can get, whether on your food plate you're getting more and more colors, or whether in the people spectrum, or whether you're going into an environment where you can see more diversity of species – the more colorful that be, the healthier it is! Like, move toward the places that fill you up with a big spectrum of diversity. And that's desirable! It's not scary! It's actually exciting that that's what you want to lean towards. And I feel like Michigan is really successful. You know, we go to all sorts of music festivals throughout the year, not just exclusively women's festivals. And Michigan by far exceeds them all in the wide spectrum of experience where tolerance is so great, diversity of music and performance is just – almost – it almost humbles you. I mean, it quiets you, in a way. I mean, you're just in awe that women, from very budding artists to very accomplished, ...have so much talent that they have honed! They've really made it into something beautiful. You can just feel the hours, the dreams – the long dreams of making that happen – just kind of come out on those performance stages there.

Diana's response was a welcome confirmation of my own feeling that being a passionate Michigan devotee was importantly constitutive of my identity. I had been claiming the Michigan milieu as part of my "culture." Two months earlier, Jawole Zollar had unsettled me by challenging me on this, suggesting that perhaps I was missing the difference between a culture and a mere community of people who hang out together. But unmistakable in Diana's rhapsody, which came out almost in one breath, is the absolute centrality and indispensability of the Michigan experience in her efforts to raise daughters with values and judgments that will make them flourish. Somewhere in Diana's words about this, and in Alexander's words about "how we are with one another there," is part of a lay definition of *culture*, or of whatever substitute would be more scientifically serviceable. This shared set of values is irrepressibly reflected, formally and informally, in any chorus created and peopled by women who have elected time and

again to immerse themselves in the Michigan and other festival environments. As for Diana's children, anyone meeting them can feel immediately that they have been raised in a universe that their peers have never seen or imagined. In their rare exuberance, generosity, creativity, affection, whimsy, kindness, maturity, and originality, these teenagers have felt a special affinity with the AMASONG community. And to see them in the Michigan environment is to see them undeniably at home.

A final note: I had Zollar's challenge well in mind during my short stay at Rachel Alexander's home in East Lansing, just weeks after the end of the Michigan season. As I looked around Alexander's apartment and groomed myself in her bathroom, I found myself laughing out loud and wishing Zollar could see: Alexander and I had many of the same books and recordings, we wore the same brands in jeans, shoes, and underwear, we had identical pairs of earrings in common, we brushed with the same non-commercial brand of toothpaste, and we used the same brand and scent of earth-safe shampoo, which we kept in identically-sized, refillable bottles; in fact, I had left my bottle at the showers in the Michigan worker area, and when I saw the bottle in Alexander's shower, I was convinced that she had picked it up there, though she denied this emphatically. Who could tell us that we did not belong to a shared culture, of which the festivals were an important basis?

#### The Sister Singers Network and the Gay And Lesbian Association of Choruses

The ensembles examined in this chapter all belong to the Sister Singers Network of women's choirs. It happens that they also all belong to the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses, which is not true of all Sister Singers groups. These two organizations were created in the same historical moment and share some overlapping goals, though their continued independence from each other is ensured by the significance of their divergences.

MUSE's Catherine Roma contributed an article to the January 1992 issue of *Hot Wire: The Journal of Women's Music and Culture* entitled "Women's Choral Communities: Singing for Our Lives,"<sup>3</sup> in which she gives a brief history and contemporary overview of the Feminist choral movement. She states:

In the mid '70s, when many of these choirs began, their members were involved in reproductive health issues, abortion rights, equal pay and workplace issues, the ERA, the post-Stonewall movement for gay/lesbian civil rights, and/or the international peace movement. Thus the choirs became the musical arm of the political activism of the singers.... Their multi-faceted mission statements speak of musical excellence and social change as complementary goals and objectives. (36)

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<sup>3</sup> Roma borrows the words "Singing for Our Lives" from a song by Holly Near written in the form of the Civil-Rights-era Freedom Song; the song known to virtually every Womyn's music devotee who came to the genre before the 1990s, and it has been sung by many Feminists at protests and choral concerts.

In light of the history of early twentieth-century, Leftist musical efforts presented in Chapter Two, these “musical arms of...political activism” are revealed as the continuation of a national tradition rather than a brilliant, new idea stumbled upon late in the century.

Roma goes on to assert that:

The women’s choral movement arose hand in hand with what we now know as women’s music. Alix Dobkin/Kay Gardner’s *Lavender Jane Loves Women* and Meg Christian’s *I Know You Know* both came out in 1974, the same year two women’s choirs were formed. Roberta Kosse started the Women Like Me choral ensemble in New York City, which sang works by her exclusively, and I started Anna Crusis (West) in Madison, Wisconsin. Sweet Honey in the Rock...began in 1973 and continues to have an indelible impact on the repertoire of many women’s choruses. (36)

The year 1974 also saw the founding of the National Women’s Music Festival, whose first home base was the University of Illinois campus in Champaign-Urbana. At that and subsequent National, Michigan, and other festivals, Feminist choristers from the steady proliferation of new ensembles gathered to exchange music and information, perform together, and discuss ideas for a national network. It was after one such joint performance at the 1981 Midwest Wimmin’s Festival, held in the Ozarks, that the Sister Singers Network (SSN) was finally launched as a viable organization. The two visionaries whose energy birthed the network were Echo – a.k.a. Linda Ray – from the Kansas City Women’s Chorus and Linda Small from the Saint Louis Women’s Choir (Roma 1992, 37).

The mission of the Sister Singers Network is as follows:

Sister Singers Network nurtures the spirit, energy, and diversity of the women’s choral movement by serving as a resource for: responsible music sharing, communication among women’s choral groups, production of regional, national, and international choral festivals, and active support of women composers and arrangers. Membership is open to women’s choral groups, women composers and arrangers, and individual women. (Sister Singers Network, 2000).

It should be noted that nothing in this material describes the network or its members as Feminist- or Lesbian-identified. The only clue to the nature of the organization is in the words “women’s choral *movement*,” which separates ensembles joyfully designed for women only from ensembles – such as university women’s glee clubs – that are women-only by default to the heavy gender-marking of the behavior of choral singing. In other words, in the United States, where the mixed-voice chorus is considered the ideal and the men’s chorus a valued rarity, to actively *desire* a chorus of women’s voices is inherently a Feminist act.<sup>4</sup>

The first Sister Singers National Women’s Choral Music Festival held separately from a national Womyn’s music festival was hosted by the Kansas City Women’s Chorus in 1984. Subsequent festivals,

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<sup>4</sup> In Chapter Three I quoted several women who acknowledge the inseparability of Feminist meaning from the choice to present their ensembles as women-only groups.

occurring at average intervals of two years, were hosted by Madison's Womonsong, Chicago's Artemis Singers, Minneapolis's Calliope, Houston's Heart Song, and – in 1993 – Cincinnati's MUSE. Plans for a 1996 festival hosted by the Portland Lesbian Choir fell through abruptly, and the SSN went into a period of declined activity. In 1999, however, SSN members meeting at the National Women's Music Festival and the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses conference revitalized the network, an effort that resulted in the offer by the relatively new Grand Rapids Women's Chorus to host the next Festival in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 2001 (Sister Singers, 2000).

Currently listed in the SSN directory are five Canadian choirs, one choir in England, one in Germany, and 50 choruses in the continental United States and Hawaii. Of these, only the choirs in Portland, Oregon, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Champaign-Urbana use the word *Lesbian* in their titles. Five other choruses – and AMASONG – use the word *Feminist*. One group uses *Womyn*, three groups incorporate the code-word *Rainbow*, and a few others employ a turn of phrase – such as “A Chorus Celebrating Women” or “Silent No More” – that gives a clue to their political nature. However, SSN groups typically develop mission statements that express their ethos more specifically, and whatever else remains unsaid is made unmistakably clear in the particulars of concerts and festival events.

For example, the Seventh National Women's Choral Festival, hosted in Cincinnati by MUSE, took place over Independence Day and was entitled “A Feminist Fourth.” Like the grand Womyn's music festivals that have influenced so many Feminist choral musicians, the festival featured a variety of workshops on creative, political, practical, and whimsical topics. Among these were: “Dealing with Conflict in Our Chorus,” “Panel on Diversity,” “Consensus Process,” “Looking at Our Racism,” “Heterosexual-Bisexual Networking,” and “Lesbian Teachers Network,” a range of issues from the characteristically to the explicitly Feminist. Among the music sung from the stage were songs with the following titles: “And She Will Rise,” “Leaping Lesbians,” “Lesbian Nation,” “Roe v Wade,” and “Women, Raise Your Voice.” In another section I will address the question of repertoire among Sister Singers groups more comprehensively.

It was in 1982, one year after the official establishment of the SSN, that the Gay And Lesbian Association of (GALA) Choruses was born. GALA's motto is “Our Voices Win Freedom.” Its mission statement reads as follows:

GALA Choruses inspires and strengthens the international Gay and Lesbian community. Through its programs, GALA Choruses promotes excellence while building bridges of respect and understanding.

GALA Choruses is the world's only organization committed to serving the Gay choral movement. Our 189 member choruses and 9,000 singers look to us repeatedly for support and leadership. We are dedicated to providing that support and helping our choruses to be strong – artistically and professionally.

GALA Choruses fosters the artistic and organizational development of member choruses through a wide variety of programs and services. We produce choral festivals, educational conferences, and publications.

We engage in advocacy; provide grants for the commissioning of new choral works; facilitate networks among our members; and serve as a resource center for choruses and individual members. (GALA 2000)

The Gay choral movement began in 1978 with the establishment of the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus, the first known chorus to use the word *Gay* in its name. The original purpose of the Gay choral movement was twofold: to provide Gay people and their supporters with a social alternative to the bar scene, and to battle anti-Gay bigotry through the public presentation of quality performances. By 1981, Gay men's choruses had sprung up in various major cities, including New York, Los Angeles, Dallas, Seattle, and Chicago. In that year, the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus went on a 12-city national tour that inspired the formation of several more ensembles, and by 1982 GALA was inaugurated with the 14 member groups who met in San Francisco in conjunction with the first International Gay Games.<sup>5</sup> Today GALA serves its 189 member groups on an annual operating budget in the millions of dollars and has a reach that extends to Europe and Australia. Though it began overwhelmingly as a men's movement, GALA includes many women's groups and, more recently, several mixed-sex ensembles, some of which were created and supported under the auspices of already-thriving men's groups (GALA 2000).

GALA and SSN are sympathetic contemporaries because Second-Wave Feminism and Post-Stonewall Queer Liberation are contemporary and overlapping movements. Most Sister Singers groups share with GALA choruses the goal of Queer visibility. With this value held in common, Sister Singers groups who choose to join GALA are typically attracted by the practical benefits of affiliating with an organization that amasses and redistributes so many informational and material resources. The common interests often end here. Despite the involvement of many White women – and some men and women of Color – GALA remains a primarily White men's organization in membership and in *modus operandi*.<sup>6</sup> In fact, GALA and SSN are paradigmatic examples of the typical contrast between Gay, White men's organizations and organizations of Feminists/Lesbians. With their White, male earning power and their often childless status, the men in GALA choruses and the communities that support them command much more disposable income than the average Womyn's chorus, many of whose members are often raising children and/or subsisting on the "women's wages" of educational and social work, alternative health practices, artistic endeavors, and progressive political work. Furthermore, Feminist commitments to anti-hierarchical organizational structures and socially responsible financial politics can hinder the development of efficient and lucrative governing practices.

What cannot be satisfied for women's groups within GALA are any needs they may have to articulate and practice a revolutionary Feminism. This is especially true today, when the mainstream Gay movement has abandoned the radical social critique of its Stonewall-era origins in favor of a bid for

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<sup>5</sup> This event is modeled on the Olympic Games and always features many Olympic competitors. It was originally called The Gay Olympics until the (Straight?) Olympics – who permit Special Olympics, Senior Olympics, and Canine Olympics – became suddenly territorial about their name and sued the organization for trademark violation.

<sup>6</sup> I must acknowledge here that there are some groups in GALA that have few or no White people in them, particularly gospel-based choirs from the Metropolitan Community Church and other pro-Queer ministries. And then there is the choir with the most wonderful name in the movement: New York's Lavender Light Black and People of All Colors Gospel Choir.

“normalcy” by the standards of White, corporate America. To give an example in concrete terms, a Sister Singers chorus that is also GALA-affiliated may be very interested in the opportunity to win one of GALA’s annual grants for the commission of a new choral work from a Feminist composer; the same group, however, may be alienated by a GALA fundraising workshop that advocates accepting many thousands of dollars in sponsorships from alcohol and tobacco corporations. Where a Feminist chorus desires affiliation with other ensembles dedicated to practical matters of economic justice, shared decision-making, and radical social critique, SSN can never be supplanted by GALA. Still, I would like to go on record with my appreciation for the very real organizational, musical, and networking benefits to AMASONG of my participation as a GALA Choruses conferee. Overall, GALA’s strengthening influence on the Gay and Lesbian choral movement of which AMASONG, Sistrum, and Anna Crusis are a part cannot be overstated.

### Survey Responses

To proceed with this study, I had to confirm two perceptions I had of the Womyn’s choral movement. The first was that most of our choirs were directed by White women and did not have more than token numbers of Women of Color among their memberships. The second was that most of our choirs, however White, regularly sang music in traditional Black styles. To discover whether these perceptions were accurate, and to identify two Sister Singers choirs to include in my study, I developed a simple survey (Appendix A). This I distributed over a listserv called Choruswomen, to which most directors and many members of Sister Singers and GALA choruses subscribe. I knew that this medium would be the most efficient one for achieving wide dissemination of my survey, and I also expected that answering my questions via e-mail would be easier for the respondents than having to deal with the postal service. Despite the wide and convenient reach of this medium, my repeated entreaties over a period of a year elicited responses from only twelve choirs out of what I would estimate to be some forty Feminist choirs represented on the listserv.

### *Profiles of the Choirs Responding to the Survey*

I received responses from representatives of the following choirs: Anna Crusis in Philadelphia, Bread and Roses Feminist Singers in Washinton, D.C., Calliope in Minneapolis, Canta Bella (based in Northern California, drawing on women from a wide region, and gathering sporadically to prepare for appearances at special events on the West Coast on the average of every eighteen months), Central Pennsylvania Women’s Chorus in Harrisburg, Crescendo in Tampa, Grand Rapids Women’s Chorus in Michigan, Jacksonville Gay Chorus in Florida (a men’s and women’s group whose women perform independently as well as with the men, and who call themselves “Gay” rather than “Lesbian”), Rainbow Women’s Chorus in San José, Sistrum in East Lansing, Vox Femina in Los Angeles, and Womonsong in Madison.

Several respondents included mission statements or other narrative descriptions of their ensembles. Some representative examples follow:

We are a chorus that brings together a diverse group of women, united by the joy of singing, to celebrate and empower women, and to affirm a positive image of lesbians and feminists. (Central Pennsylvania Women's Chorus)

All of our concerts are scripted and usually address women's conditions and issues, political issues, contain comedy. Sometimes the script comes from stories written by chorus members, sometimes the script is written around a central character. (Crescendo)

The Grand Rapids Women's Chorus is dedicated to singing culturally diverse music that promotes appreciation of women composers and arrangers. Established for the education, enjoyment, and enrichment of its members and its audience, the organization seeks to create and inspire meaningful experience through musical expression.

VFLA is dedicated to performing quality music written for women's voices with an emphasis on music written by women. We are proud of the variety in our repertoire and can be found singing the music of Hildegard or Aleotti as well as contemporary composers Gwyneth Walker, Carol Barnett, or Ysaye Barnwell. We often sing folkloric music from a variety of music traditions. We have already sung in English, Latin, Italian, Spanish, French, Romanian, Bulgarian and Hebrew. We are proud of the diversity of our members (re: sexuality, race, ethnicity, age) and sing repertoire which represents that diversity. (Vox Femina Los Angeles)

Diversity (of repertoire or of membership), emphasis on women composers and arrangers, overtly-political content, and the affirmation of Womyn are common themes in the Feminist choral movement that are articulated in these examples.

Among the choirs in my sample, the average length of existence is eleven years, with the oldest choir being twenty-five and the youngest two years old. Average size is twenty members, with eighty on the high end and five on the low. Most choirs comprise an age range between twenty and sixty-five, though one group has no one under forty: the youngest reported member in the sample is eighteen and the oldest eighty-four. One choir is a Sister Singers member only, one is a GALA member only, one has neither affiliation, and the rest are dually affiliated. Almost all groups reported a mixture in their ranks of Lesbian, Straight, and Bisexual members: some reported being predominantly Lesbian or mentioned the presence of token Straight members, and one respondent reported on the fact that most of the Lesbians in the group are closeted in their other environments. Respondents who reported on members' disabilities most often mentioned singers who have to sit while performing because of back or knee problems; one group has a member in a wheelchair. The director of another group said that several of her members seem to struggle with clinical depression, and another director identified multiple personality disorder, extreme obesity, and hearing loss among the challenges her singers face. Descriptions of choirs' political profiles



typically included language like “predominantly liberal,” “liberal Feminist,” and “Democrat,” though one woman reported her group as “left-leaning.” Many respondents reported considerable diversity of spiritual practice in their groups including Christianities, Judaisms, Wicca and other Paganisms, and Buddhism and other Eastern practices. Almost all identified their groups as mostly middle class, one as lower-middle class, and one as of “very mixed” socio-economic status. All groups incorporate a broad range of musical abilities in their choirs, and several respondents made a point of saying that their groups were non-auditioned; only one mentioned that her choir was auditioned, but because this question was not specifically asked, there may be other auditioned choirs in the sample.

The reports on the racial demographics of the choir were almost entirely as I had expected (see Appendix E). One choir is “mostly White, with a variety of white European ethnicities...represented.” One is “predominantly White.” One has “little racial diversity.” Some respondents provided percentages of White members to members of Color: ninety-five percent to five percent, one of those being African American and two Native American; eighty-five percent to fifteen percent (with “one African American, one Korean American, one Native American, one Hispanic”); and one-hundred percent White. For some ensembles I have numerical figures: twenty-six White members, one African member, and one African-American member; seventeen White members and one African-American member; and twenty-two White members and one African-American member.

The presence of a certain consciousness among Feminist choristers that our memberships ought to be as racially diverse as possible was indicated in several comments. One report on racial demographics was preceded by the word “regrettably.” Two respondents qualified their low memberships of Color with “at this time” and “currently,” as though this – and only this – aspect of their choir’s makeup was expected to change or was unacceptable as a permanent condition.

Two respondents made no mention whatsoever of race, though my question had asked about it specifically, and when I followed up with them, their answers were as I expected: they had skirted the issue because, their groups being all White, they felt they had nothing to report. Two women seemed to be compensating for lack of racial diversity by overemphasizing the variety in their members’ different ages, religions, sexualities, musical and physical abilities, and political orientations.

One choir in my sample defied my expectation that the only extant Feminist chorus with more than token numbers of Women of Color was Cincinnati’s MUSE. The respondent from Bread and Roses Feminist Singers in Washington, D.C., reported the following:

Right now: 2 African Americans (one is the Interim Conductor), 1 Asian Indian, 1 Shepardic (I believe) Jew (she’s out of town for a month), 6 European/White descent, 1 Virgin Islander of mixed European/African descent. (Think that’s everybody at the moment).

We have in this report an interesting mix of data on race, national origin or ancestry, and perhaps religion (depending on how one resolves the argument over whether Jewishness is a category of religion or tribal bloodline). The report does reflect the continued befuddlement about the definition of *White*. I have

formerly suggested that Whiteness can be a contested attribute in Jews. It would appear that the Sephardic (with ancestry from Spain and Portugal) Jew identified here is not being considered as part of the group of six members who are White and/or descended from Europe; we cannot know whether it is the Jew herself or the respondent alone who finds it important to distinguish this category from Whiteness. The woman from India (whatever her “race” is presumed to be) and the woman from the Virgin Islands are remarkable within the group for being born outside the United States. My guess is that if any of the people identified here as White had been born in Europe, their specific nationalities would have been mentioned; as it is, their distant ancestors come from that undifferentiated source of melting-pot ingredients, Christian Europe. The Virgin Islander’s “mix” between European and African ancestry must include a White ancestor fairly recently in her line (probably a parent or a grandparent); otherwise her “mixture” would probably not be signaled, as it is not in the case of most Black Americans – or for that matter in the case of White Americans, whose bloodlines are more likely to contain African genes the more generations our families have been on U.S. soil (Piper 1997, 426). But whatever the ratio of her mix, she is Black in the United States by virtue of the way her acknowledged African ancestry is seen here under White supremacy.

Within this chorus of eleven singers, the three Black women exceed the national percentage of Black people in the United States, though they underrepresent by far the Black-White ratio of their home city. In all, it must be remarked that this small ensemble currently has the lowest percentage of White members in all the Feminist choirs with which I am familiar, and that includes several groups not represented in the sample of respondents to my survey. One of the Women of Color in this group, an African American, is in a position of leadership as interim director. I will be interested to follow the development of this chorus. Its recent history has not been stable, and the respondent reported that the current membership is down from a total of twenty-five, more than double its present size. If the group persists with its more-than-token racial mix and its visible Black leadership, it should be possible for any future growth to include significant numbers of Women of Color, if that is understood as a priority. Chapter Six will explore in depth the question of attaining racial balance in Feminist choirs.

### *Repertoire*

To describe their repertoires, most women combined the use of my suggested categories as a checklist with narrative descriptions of their practices. Several respondents explained that their groups seek out music composed or arranged by women and bearing strengthening messages for women. Two women mentioned the goal of programming something humorous on each concert, and one mentioned striving for at least one piece that is explicitly about Lesbians on each concert. A few choirs in the sample are described as extremely resistant to music by “old, dead, White guys” or music with references to Christianity, though – as one director wryly remarked – the music of other patriarchal religions such as Judaism seems to be acceptable. This director also lamented her group’s resistance to anything “atonal or even mildly dissonant.” One chorus does one piece per concert in which all singers communicate the text in sign language.

Of the twelve groups in the sample, one sings no “classical,” or European “art” music. Three respondents reported that their groups sing “very little” in this style, one group’s only genre in this tradition is the madrigal, and another group will on rare occasions sing something by a living woman composer in the tradition. Among the remaining groups in the sample, there are three that consistently perform some art-music repertoire and one that consistently performs a substantial amount of it. The chart below shows a “1” for each choir that reported performing in that style. Some respondents reported performing in this tradition without specifying the style periods represented in their repertoires; these responses are reflected in the first line of the chart. Markings in bold face indicate choruses whose repertoires are substantially represented by a style:

Western Art Music in general, unspecified	1111
Medieval	11
Renaissance	1111
Baroque	111
Classic/Romantic	11111
Post-Romantic	111
20 <sup>th</sup> -Century/Contemporary	11111111

The latest style period is the clear favorite here, and this can be attributed in large part to the fact that women composing today are connected by Sister Singers and other Feminist networks to these choirs, most of which prioritize music by women. AMASONG, whose repertoire is not represented in these charts, has sung music from all these style periods, with emphases on the pre-Baroque and contemporary eras.

Jazz, the indigenous art music of the United States, has been attempted by some groups:

Vocal jazz	11111
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One woman expressed a desire for her ensemble to improve so that they could tackle the genre. AMASONG has attempted it once.

As shown by all but the last category in the next chart, show tunes, popular songs, and songs in other popular styles turn up frequently on most groups’ programs:

Broadway tunes	111111111
Mainstream popular music	11111111
Pride songs written especially for the Gay choral market	111111111
Womyn’s music in general, unspecified	111111
Choralized arrangements of solo songs	111111111
Sweet Honey in the Rock originals	111111111111

With Sweet Honey's music as the notable exception, these styles typically require piano accompaniment, the preferred crutch of the amateur choral ensemble. Most examples of the "pride song" genre are extremely formulaic reductions of popular music's most undistinguished habits. Although "choralized" popular music, Gay-pride songs, and Womyn's music can sound like a single, undifferentiated genre, their use by these choirs seems to be differentiated according to how specifically Womyn-oriented the genres are in origin or content. AMASONG sang one Broadway tune in our first season, and two years later I made an arrangement into call-and-response format of a Womyn's-music icon's reinterpretation of a brilliant and quirky song by an alternative rock artist. In another year we sang several chants from the repertoire of Libana, an *a cappella* group specializing in European folk music that is very popular with Womyn's music festival audiences. I would never have considered performing mainstream popular music or pride anthems. If not all Womyn's choirs agree with me on what constitutes bad taste, however, we are unanimous in our acclaim for Sweet Honey In The Rock. Every woman responding reported that her choir sings Sweet Honey music, as has AMASONG. In fact, one woman wrote that her choir never performs a concert without including something by Sweet Honey.

There are other genres to which some choirs turn for political content, though less commonly:

U.S. Protest music in general, unspecified	111111
Labor movement songs	1111
Civil Rights Era songs	1111
Feminist	1

The "Civil Rights Era songs" category gave me some information about one kind of Black, oral-tradition music without my having to identify it as such. This, of course, is the most important information I was after, and most of the rest of the survey was devised as much to camouflage the nature of my inquiry as it was to identify the choruses to me in general. The rest of the information on Black, oral-tradition music I sought emerged from the camouflage of the list that follows. (See Appendix F for each choir's reported use of Black music.)

As I have shown, the inclusion of oral-tradition music from many parts of the world – regardless of its content – characterizes Womyn's music festivals and is articulated in the mission statements of several Womyn's choirs as a political act in itself. The chart below shows what respondents reported about their choirs' involvement with folkloric – or oral-tradition – music:

Folkloric music, unspecified	11		
Balkan choral song	111111	Hebrew song	11
African-American Spiritual	111111	Yoruba song	1
Appalachian hymn	1		
Irish ballad	11		
African song	11111111		
Yiddish song	11111		

The two groups represented in the first line both stated that they perform Black music on every program. Every group reporting has Black oral-tradition music of some kind in its repertoire. For one group, the Spiritual represents their only foray beyond commercial music into oral-tradition music. African village songs and freedom songs are the most popular item on this list, followed closely by the Spiritual and Balkan village music. On the one hand, when one considers that Africa is a vast continent of many nations, tribes, and traditions, one might criticize its monolithic representation on a list that also includes smaller regions – such as the Balkans – or even single nations such as Ireland; as such, what would be remarkable about Africa’s domination of the list? Indeed, there is a typical problem in the American imagination with remembering that “African” is not a nationality. Most Americans cannot differentiate among the larger regions of the continent, let alone its peoples and nation-states. On the other hand, most of the songs represented in this tally are either from the Zulus of southern Africa or from the area of western Africa now largely mapped as Nigeria and Ghana, which taken together comprise a small part of the continent. There are historical and political reasons why these are the African regions whose songs are more commonly known to us. In the first place, it was in Nigeria, Ghana, and their environs where most of the trade supplying slaves to the United States took place. These, then, are the regions to which many African-identified Americans have looked for connections to an ancestral past. The accessibility to us of southern African music arises in great measure from the high profile and the political saliency of the struggle against Apartheid, to say nothing of the significant amount of musical commerce between urban centers in the United States and South Africa.

In the list on my survey, I gave “Yoruba music” its own category because, though it all has roots in West Africa, more recent versions of songs may have been developed in the Caribbean islands or the coastal Americas. AMASONG has sung a Yoruba song still widely known in Nigeria, another from Cuba, and another from Brazil. I had hoped that respondents would take my list as a cue to add other categories represented in their repertoires. This happened under “U.S. protest music,” where one woman specified “Feminist” as a sub-genre. In the folkloric genre, two women mentioned Hebrew song, so I include it here where it did not appear on my original (avowedly non-exhaustive) list. Otherwise, beyond checking off the categories I had provided, respondents tended to say things like: “We sing a wide variety of folk music.” In AMASONG’s case, it would be ponderous to list here the origin of every oral-tradition song we have sung, but the rest of our Black oral-tradition music has come from Zimbabwe, South Africa, the Bahamas, the Georgia and South Carolina Sea Islands, and the continental southeastern United States.

All of the foregoing material confirms quite solidly my impressions about the Womyn’s choral movement: we are very White, and we perform Black traditional music more regularly than many mainstream White choirs – certainly more than any religious, academic, or professional choir in which I have ever sung.

**Three Individual Choirs, Twelve Individual Women**  
Brief Backgrounds on Anna Crusis, Sistrum, and AMASONG

*Anna Crusis Women's Choir*

Anna Crusis is the oldest chorus in this sample and is, in fact, the oldest extant Feminist chorus. Catherine Roma, currently the director of Cincinnati's MUSE, created the first Anna Crusis in Madison, Wisconsin, where she was a master's degree student in choral conducting at the University of Wisconsin. That experiment proved crucial to the subsequent formation of Anna Crusis in Roma's hometown of Philadelphia, and these two efforts are at the very foundations of the emergence of the Feminist choral movement. Roma's own words, from my interview with her, tell the story best:

CR: In the '74 summer...I stayed with a woman, Anne Gordon, who I knew all the way from Philly, who went to Germantown Friends with me, but who also got her degree in Colonial History at Wisconsin. She's Straight. Ah, but incredibly political, just pot-smokin', beer-drinkin' – same as me. And so I stayed with her, and we just, you know: conversation, right? So for my master's conducting experience, I was working with a boychoir. So, I said: "1976 is coming up. I don't know where I'll be, but I want to tell the story of women. But I have a *boychoir*. I can't dress them up as girls!" And she said: "Cathy, why don't you start up a women's choir?" And I said: "Women's choir? Women's choirs are the dregs of the people who don't make it into the SATB choir." Because I'm in...the university mode. And so what do I see? I see male directors at the head of women's choirs, and women's choirs are made up of people who didn't get into the elite Concert Choir. But she said: "Look: if you go back to Madison and start a women's choir, I will gather songs of women starting from 1620, the Colonial period, up till now." And I was like: "Oh! Start a women's choir." Of course...my politics are, you know, the Women's movement – I'd been teaching at a Free School and using *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and getting kids to – you know, everybody's looking at themselves –

KB: With the speculum and the mirror. Yeah! (*we laugh*)

CR: So, anyhow, there's this thing going on, right? *Lavender Jane*<sup>7</sup> is out, so there's this little awareness. And so I said, "Yeah, okay. I'll go back to Madison and start a women's choir." So that was in July of '74. And I went back and got a choir of thirty women together.

KB: Where'd you get the women?

CR: I put it in the newspaper in Madison; I had a flyer made and tacked it up all different places.

KB: How did you – what did you say so you would get the right kind of women?

CR: Well, first what I said was we wanted to – I used a favorite sentence that I used for the first couple of

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<sup>7</sup> By Alix Dobkin and Kay Gardner, identified as the first Womyn's music LP.

years: I wanted to bring out "the slighted sonorities of the all-women's chorus." I started out there, because what I eventually started to do that summer was educate myself about how there was no music, really, written for women's choirs. There was some of this stuff from the Seven Sisters that was written, and then, you know, Brahms had a women's chorus, so there's that stuff. So, the limitation I set for myself on this concert was that we would do only things written for women's chorus. So we did Porpora; it wasn't necessarily women composers. I commissioned a woman; that was the first time I did that.

KB: First time around!

CR: Yup.

KB: Where'd you get the money?

CR: Ah, you know: fifty dollars. Maybe we pooled money. I have no recollection of it. And I still have the piece. The woman set "The Little Ghost." Is that Edna Saint Vincent Millay? And so I was conscious of that: a woman composer setting a woman's text. And so we did Poulenc, we did Persichetti – I'd studied piano with Dorothea Persichetti in Philly. And... I can't even remember what else we did: I guess some Schumann, Brahms – no other women. I mean, there wasn't any research on Hildegard and stuff; that hadn't happened. So that was the limitation that I put on it. And I had thirty singers, and all my altos were Dykes, and all my sopranos were Straight! *(we laugh again)*

KB: That is so funny!

CR: So, we gave a pretty good concert. That was April '75. I went down in May to Chicago, and Anne had music piled this high. So we started whittling it down to about thirty songs from 1620 to 1935. It went sort of through Mother Jones and suffrage and everything. And she, being a historian, shaped it into three sections. And so I brought all this music back, and I started learning it –

KB: Did you like the music?

CR: Oh, yeah. It was a variety. It was sort of straight, sacred songs, and then we did children's songs and work songs, and a Bessie Smith tune: we did "Winning the Vote," which was more middle class. "What are Little Girls Made Of?" You know, socializing songs. So I went back all excited to do this in Madison. And then the Socialist Feminist conference happened in Antioch. And then I got a job in Philly. And I said, "I'm takin' the name, I'm takin' all this music." And of course I was from Philly originally, too. So I started – in '75 fall – Anna. As soon as I got there, I did the same thing: Women's Studies programs, newspapers, the Women's Center – here, there, and everywhere. And took those pieces of music and started in '75 getting ready for '76, somewhere, to perform this bunch of pieces... which Anna was molding and shaping. And that was really our first big thing was in spring of '76 at Bryn Mawr College: we went and performed this bunch of pieces, with Anne as the historian

introducing it to these people, which was a pretty big thing. You know, we had only about twenty-five singers at that point, or twenty-eight. So that was sort of the beginning of putting it all together.

At several points in this narrative, Roma gives examples of the political ferment in the mid-'70s out of which the Feminist choral movement emerged. Women were taking control of their own reproductive health, critiquing capitalist economics, revising the academy, refusing compulsory erotic and domestic service to men, and coming out of the closet. It is unsurprising that in this historical moment, many of these same women grew impatient with singing music about a male God written by men and performed under the direction of men.

Roma's successor in Philadelphia, Jane Hulting, had worked in Feminist organizing and had been to her first Womyn's music festivals before moving to Philadelphia and looking for conducting opportunities:

I (had been) living (and) working in campus ministry in Iowa. And teaching music and also working as a fundraiser for various women's political groups there. Some people I met said: "Come on, Jane. We're going to Urbana."<sup>8</sup> And I said: "What is this?" Because it wasn't my thing at the time. But anyway, we took off, and it was really my first experience of having lots of Lesbian, you know, women around. And the whole music thing was wild. You know, it's kind of interesting: when I first moved to Philadelphia...I was taking voice lessons. And...I told my teacher: "I really want to conduct. But, what am I going to do?" And he said, "Well, you know what? I know this women's choir that's available." Cathy (Roma) was studying with him as well. And so I called up Cathy.... And I'd started a few groups in Philadelphia, but I was kind of looking around for something else. So I talked to Cathy, and Cathy said, "You know, Jane, I really need an accompanist. Do you want to be an accompanist for this women's choir?" And I said, "No, I really don't. I really – really, I love men's voices, and I want to be with men's voices as well as women's voices." So I didn't do it. (*laughs*) And then it was about... a year after that or so, you know, she left. And then I went through this audition thing.

That was in 1983. Despite the fact that Hulting, too, felt that a choir of women's voices was inferior to a mixed choir, she has led Anna Crusis for seventeen years. In fact, she has assumed a high profile during her tenure, not only as director of one of the premier ensembles in the movement, but also as a member of the GALA Board of Directors. Under her leadership, Anna has appeared regularly at GALA conferences and Sister Singers festivals, and she has served repeatedly as the conductor of mass-choir performances at these events.

In 1993, Anna Crusis released *Fresh Cut*, a recording of thirteen selections reflecting the diversity of styles to which the group is committed. *Fresh Cut's* liner notes include the following statement about Anna Crusis:

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<sup>8</sup> To attend the National Women's Music Festival.



Anna Crusis Women's Choir, founded in 1975, is a progressive group of women singers and performers whose multicultural repertoire reflects the rich diversity of human lives and struggles, especially those of women. Enacting a feminist vision, we gladly acknowledge our differences in sexual orientation, cultural heritage, race, age and abilities, and struggle to learn from each other how to be allies as we make music together. Ultimately, we see all that we do, both internally and in performance, as a political act. As always, we made this music with the goal of creating, in relationship with our audiences, an environment in which we can all experience enjoyment and empowerment.

The recording includes music from the Sweet Honey repertoire, Balkan women's song, compositions by Maurice Duruflé, Zoltán Kodály, and Philadelphia-area composer Janice Hamer, a song by Nigerian drum master Babatunde Olatunji, popular-style songs from the repertoire of the Flirtations (originally a Gay *a cappella* quartet; it is now a trio of two men and one woman) and the Roches (a trio of sisters), originals in the style of the English folk song and the Andean *nueva canción*, and a gospel-style song with secular lyrics.

During the season of 2000, the choir is releasing a second recording, as well as traveling to San José, California, for a GALA festival that promises to be the largest gathering of Gay- and Lesbian-identified choristers in history. In subsequent sections of this chapter, the voices of the women of Anna Crusis will provide a rare glimpse of a Feminist organization well into its third decade, one that necessarily reflects some of the changes in the political *Zeitgeist* over the last twenty-five years.

#### *Sistrum, Lansing's Women's Chorus*

I have already introduced Sistrum's founder, Rachel Alexander, in my narrative of the emergence of Feminist choirs during the genesis of the Womyn's music festival phenomenon. Alexander co-founded the Saint Louis Women's Choir in the late '70s. When she moved to East Lansing, she found that she could not be without a similar ensemble in her new hometown. Therefore, she created Sistrum, whose current mission statement reads:

Sistrum was founded in 1986 as the Lansing Women's Chorus. We sing together as a community of women, celebrating our strength and our diversity. We welcome women of varying musical abilities, political interests, and life experiences. Some of us identify ourselves as lesbians and some do not. We sing the stories of our lives, and add our voices to the worldwide struggle for freedom, justice, and peace. Our name comes from a musical instrument, a rattle used in ancient Egypt. It was kept in constant motion as a symbol of Isis, the sacred and ever-changing Life Force. Sistrum is committed to the development of the musical skills of our members. We draw upon the words, music and energy of women composers, arrangers and poets to educate, entertain, and inspire our audiences.

My research trip to East Lansing was very enjoyable. In the first place, I have long appreciated Alexander as a musician and a friendly colleague, so I was glad for the excuse to see her again and grateful for her generous extension to me of the pull-out sofa in her cozy apartment. In the second place, I was

delighted to discover her neighborhood situated in an unusually Womyn-friendly community. On the street level of Alexander's apartment building is a women's art gallery run by one of the Michigan festival's legendary workers. In the block next to Alexander's home is Goldenrod, a national distributor of – and often the only source or one of very few sources for – the music of alternative-market women recording artists.<sup>9</sup> A Lansing production team holds a sort of miniature, weekend-long Womyn's music festival every November, during which Sistrum prepares and sells food as their largest fundraising activity of the year. East Lansing is also the headquarters of one of the pillars of Lesbian Nation, a bimonthly publication (for Lesbians only and therefore not named here) consisting of news items, critical reviews, business and classified advertisements, global contacts, opinions, debates, editorials, requests for help or information, and anything else sent in by and of interest to its Lesbian subscribers. At one point during my visit, returning to my car's parking space on a Lansing city street, I found a piece of paper under my windshield wiper: someone, seeing my bumper stickers' references to Lesbians, racial and gender justice, The Goddess, magic, Witchcraft, and peace, had bothered to scribble a friendly note inviting me to join a newly forming, Feminist spirituality circle. And the venue where Alexander and I shared breakfast and our interview was the Dyke-owned greasy spoon just blocks from her home.

Alexander is a professional choral director, cellist, piano tuner, and carpenter. She shares a friendship with Catherine Roma that dates back to the years when they and others were first envisioning and building the Feminist choral movement. The two women are connected not only by music and Feminism but also by Quaker ideologies and networks: Alexander is a Quaker from Quaker stock, and Roma became a Quaker at age seventeen. This is a connection of some significance: it is not only radical Feminists but also Quakers who practice decision-making by consensus, a process both women hold dear and utilize in their choral work. Alexander identified this commitment in our discussion of Sistrum's origins:

KB: Why a Sistrum, in this form?

RA: I moved here to study piano technology and started the chorus four months after I got here, because I couldn't stand it.

KB: You had to have a choir like the one in St. Louis.

RA: Well, kind of like it, yeah. And I didn't really think I was wanting to be the director until I started doing it. I thought I would find someone else to direct it, but then I started doing it and decided I liked it.

KB: And, why this choir instead of joining another choir that already existed? What were your needs for this particular group?

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<sup>9</sup> Together, Goldenrod and the Durham-based Ladyslipper are this country's primary distributors of Womyn's music recordings. Both companies distribute the work of Womyn's choirs, and it is Goldenrod who is responsible for placing Amasong's recordings in Border's Books and Music stores all over the United States.

RA: Well, I needed a choir that had a Feminist context. I wanted it to be where I could be all of me, where we could sing music that talked about me, and where women were welcome to join us with a wide range of skills. And we've had to narrow that just a little bit over the years, but not much; basically, women who want to sing can sing with us.

KB: So, a choir that sings about all parts of you is part of the Feminist context that you talked about needing.

RA: Uh-huh.

KB: What else? People always ask me: "A *Feminist* choir? What is *that*?" What is your answer?

RA: Ha! (*we laugh*) Um...part of it is about how decisions are made. There's a lot more whole-group participation than there would be in most choirs, which are pretty autocratically run.

KB: What kinds of decisions get yielded up to the group in Sistrum?

RA: When and where we'll perform, what we will sing...

KB: Of the pool of repertoire that you have, or...?

RA: Yeah, we have a repertoire committee. And they kind of decide. But the other women also have a voice in saying: "We haven't sung *that* song in a couple years; let's sing *that*." Or: "I *hate* that one! I wouldn't care if we didn't do *that* one again!" ...So, that group decision-making process... and I think the other cool piece is really about repertoire and the content. I don't do at all stuff that's exclusively by women, but I do look for stuff by women, both music and words. And I definitely look for stuff that's about women's experience. And I reject or alter stuff that doesn't – that is anti-Feminist, that is degrading to women.

Later in the conversation I wanted to learn more about the degree to which Sistrum – which belongs to both the Sister Singers Network and GALA – is not only a Feminist choir but also a Lesbian choir. Given that Dyke community seemed to me to be so ubiquitous and strong in the Lansing area, I was surprised by Alexander's comments:

RA: Well, "the 'L' word" is not in a very good way in our mission statement, I don't think. We had a real struggle over that mission statement, and actually one woman left over it, and we kind of came up with this compromise, and no one is thrilled with it except for the woman who suggested it.

KB: You'd like to be more out?

RA: I'd like to be less apologetically out! ...What I want to say is something like Calliope has, which is

something like: “We cherish our roots in the Lesbian community.” I love (that)! And another thing we used to say kind of informally was: “We are Lesbians and women who enjoy Lesbian company.” I mean, (now) there’s this line in the mission statement that says: “Some of us identify ourselves as Lesbians and some of us do not.” It’s not even apologetic, necessarily, but it’s, um...

KB: It’s geared toward the comfort of Heterosexuals, is my impression.

RA: Well, yeah. Or *closeted Lesbians*.

KB: Oh! Oh, right! Yeah.

RA: Remember those?

KB: I forgot!

RA: That’s really where it was coming from.

For Lesbians like Alexander and me who believe in outness as a personal and political necessity, and who have faced fear and trouble to achieve it, a failure of courage to do the same within a movement we helped build to make outness more possible is, frankly, exasperating. The only other Sister Singers choir I know that has been so skittish about the undeniably Lesbian sources of its origin and continuation was located in an industrial Midwest city where no other positive reinforcement of Lesbianism could be found anywhere. In fact, the conflict over how closeted the chorus should be eventually destroyed the group. But given the atmosphere I encountered in Lansing, I am confused about how to account for the nervousness of the Sistrum women. To be sure, Lesbians can still run serious risks by coming out, depending on local law, their workplace environments, any threat to their custody of their children, and other factors. It would seem, however, that anyone so dependent on the closet for her family life, livelihood, or safety would steer completely clear of an organization like Sistrum. As I showed in Chapter Three, simply belonging to a women-only organization – let alone one that is out, however apologetically – routinely results in Dyke-baiting.

Despite this internal conflict, Sistrum endures. I am only superficially aware of another conflict in Sistrum’s history, a serious one that resulted in the secession of many of its members. The question was whether to impose a higher standard of ability for membership, something the more accomplished singers were demanding. Alexander had told me about this rift years ago at a convention of the American Choral Directors Association, when she was still stinging from the blow. By the time of this interview, however, the episode did not even merit a passing mention. Now in its fourteenth year, Sistrum is well known and highly regarded in Sister Singers and GALA, having appeared at several regional and national gatherings. Like Hulting, Alexander has conducted mass-choir performances at these events, and under her leadership,

Sistrum is assisting the Grand Rapids Women's Chorus in producing the Sister Singers' Eighth National Women's Choral Festival in 2001.

*AMASONG: Champaign-Urbana's Premier Lesbian/Feminist Chorus*

The cities of Champaign and Urbana have been mentioned several times in this study as the birthplace of the first National Women's Music Festival, which was held on the campus of the University of Illinois for seven years before moving to Indiana University in Bloomington and more recently to Ball State in Muncie, Indiana. So it is that AMASONG emerged on ground that had long since been prepared for Womyn's musical endeavors in general. And in fact, AMASONG has a local foremother in choral music, the same Miss Safman's Ladies' Choir that had inspired the founding of the Saint Louis Women's Chorus. Having heard that a friendly acquaintance of mine, Karen Mardell ("Mardy") Keener, had been a member of MSLC, I phoned her and asked her to tell me about it.

The full name of the ensemble was Miss Safman's Ladies' Choir and Sunday Afternoon Tea Society. As Keener reports, "the name included irony and misdirection – 'Miss Safman' was a divorcée with two children, and the group intended to sing feminist and other counter-cultural/protest songs." Phyllis Safman was an avocational musician inspired by the National festival atmosphere of the Champaign-Urbana summers to convene the choir, which had an existence of some three years in the late 1970s. The un auditioned group comprised up to twenty-four women at its height, mostly Lesbians with "a very few Straight Feminists." They met once a week in Safman's living room for rehearsals that Keener describes as "very relaxed." Their goal was to gather together to sing and enjoy women's music in local venues, which included retirement homes and shopping malls. In addition to performing at National, they appeared at the Mountain Moving Womyn's Coffeehouse with Ginni Clemmons and in Bloomington, Illinois, with Holly Near. There was no official budget or dues structure; as expenses arose, the members covered them out of their pockets. Keener reports that the group had "some" awareness that there were other Feminist choirs out there. In fact, Keener is credited in the Sister Singers annals with circulating a letter in 1980 suggesting *Sister Singers* as a name for the network that was under discussion in the growing movement. Though she doesn't deny having done so, Keener has no recollection of this.<sup>10</sup> When I founded AMASONG in our cities in 1990, I was completely unaware of the MSLC precedent or that any local women had ever been involved in the Sister Singers phenomenon. But now I am sure that the encouragement we received from our audiences in our early, rough seasons is partly owed to the local history of appreciation for and participation in similar endeavors, and I know that several of our supporters were from the generation that had sung in or listened to MSLC.

In Chapter One I mentioned or alluded to several of the motivations behind my founding AMASONG. At that time, I thought of myself primarily in two ways: as a classically trained musician and as a Feminist Lesbian. As some of the anecdotes in Chapter One illustrate, I had been having a difficult time being both things at once. Certainly, my study and work environments had ranged from chilly to

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<sup>10</sup> personal communications. May 2000

openly hostile toward my Dyke Feminist self. And though no one in my social environment in the Womyn's community was ever hostile to my music-making, I did receive the occasional challenge to the political validity of giving ever more air time to dead, White, Christian men who composed music about the obedience of Virgins to their omnipotent Fathers. More common than any challenge, though, was the simple failure of most of my friends to comprehend what was so compelling to me about music I love, and this made me lonely. I knew that if I could only get their attention on the music long enough, they would experience its power. When I created AMASONG, I was refusing finally the enforced split between the two (were they two, or really just one?) most passionate aspects of myself. I believed that isolating them from each other was a tragic waste of creative potential – that allowing them to be expressed through each other might be unaccountably wonderful, for my music and for my friendships.

So, I created AMASONG to meet some of my deepest needs, and also for the following reasons: to create more Womyn's culture in Champaign-Urbana, to serve as a supportive community for Lesbians, to invite non-Lesbian women who appreciated Lesbian culture to participate in it with us, to have a medium for performance in a wider stylistic range than my other choirs offered me, and to continue my activism to make our local environment increasingly welcoming of Lesbians.

My handwritten posters, described in Chapter One, brought in just over a dozen women for the experiment. I felt the need from the very beginning to be extremely clear with them about what any chorus I directed would and would not be. I had been a part of the Womyn's scene long enough to know that there would be Feminists who wanted to use rehearsal time socializing or processing their personal problems. I also knew that there would be women who felt that the traditional conductor model was oppressive and that everyone should be included in decision-making. Not only was I unwilling to capitulate to these impulses, but I was also aware that several Womyn's choral groups operating in these ways had suffered from widespread internal dissension, disabling schisms, or a kind of general dysfunction that in two cases actually found entire choruses submitting to group therapy as a last hope for continuing together. While as political experiments, these models may well have presented invaluable and revolutionary Feminist lessons, I was too impatient for the music to lead my chorus in any but an extremely focused and top-directed way. Finally, I knew something that I couldn't explain with any credibility to inexperienced singers, who would have to stay with the routine long enough to discover it for themselves: the disciplined, collective pursuit of musical excellence in a supportive environment has the result of creating a community of people who feel good in one another's presence, who treat one another with genuine goodwill, and who share friendship and support outside of the rehearsal environment. I had experienced this effect working itself out between me and Heterosexual, Republican, Fundamentalist Christian men: how much more guaranteed it was to work for the women walking through the doors to be a part of AMASONG!

With the contract of disciplined, top-directed rehearsal established, I set about to incorporate into that model several practices that would help to set us apart as a Feminist choir from choirs that were not Feminist. I was willing to cede non-musical decisions to the group, the name *AMASONG* – suggested by one singer and voted upon by all – is one example of this. I varied our repertoire as much as possible,

avoiding texts that were blatantly misogynist. My standard for a passing audition to join the group was extremely inclusive. Everything we did that cost us or our audience money was paid for by the principle: "from each according to her ability; to each according to her need." My attitude toward attendance was extremely forgiving, in recognition that women are typically overburdened by balancing motherhood, partnership, low-wage employment, and the difficulty of carving out time for self-development or self-care. Although I alone chose our music, I invited women from the chorus and the greater community to suggest their favorites for our use, and many of the selections from our repertoire reached me that way. I always spoke to our concert audiences about the conditions and experiences of women in the historical and cultural contexts from which our music came. We performed at several public events of interest to women and donated money to Feminist efforts. Although I was in charge of every moment of rehearsal, I (usually) approached the singers with an attitude of patience and encouragement rather than ridicule or punishment; if something was not right, we would simply keep trying it until everyone had had a chance to be successful in it. And most significantly, I built into the middle of each rehearsal a period for the sharing of community announcements. This was the time when women could pass flyers or petitions, plead for a new home for a kitten, announce a potluck, or ask for support in a time of grief. Sometimes this period threatened to exceed twenty minutes, and though there were a few rehearsals when, nervous about being prepared for an upcoming performance, I truncated or skipped it, I knew that if I were to do away with the practice altogether, I would have mutiny on my hands; it was an integral part of the soul of AMASONG.

My vision proved successful. In my nine years as AMASONG's director, we grew to a chorus of sixty members with a thirty-thousand-dollar annual budget, appeared at regional and national Sister Singers festivals, performed at the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts and the National Women's Music Festival, released two award-winning recordings, became the subject of a national public television documentary, toured the Czech Republic, became an extended family, and challenged the assumptions, opened the ears, and warmed the hearts of countless residents of our home cities. All of this proceeded from the mission statement I wrote for the group:

AMASONG is dedicated to the pursuit of choral excellence within an atmosphere that celebrates all forms of women's devotion to women. To make music in this spirit is for us a deliberate act of cultural expression. With beauty as the ultimate criterion, we will sing music from any source. However, our repertoire is distinguished by its persistent inclusion of music composed by women, love songs to women, musical settings of women's words, and other music that gives voice to the experiences of common women. Folk songs, rich sources of information about women's lives, are often transmitted by women as the keepers of their cultures. Our emphasis on folkloric music allows us to honor and participate in the cultural expressions of many peoples from around the world. With the goal of teaching women to sing compellingly together, Amasong is adamant about remaining open to women at varying levels of experience and ability. The choir includes music professionals, seasoned amateurs, and beginners with no music-reading ability or previous choral training. Every woman is welcome to audition for Amasong.

Who The Interviewees Think They Are

To open this section, I will answer for myself the question I first put to the others about how they identify themselves. I am a White, class-privileged, first-generation German-American, Feminist, anti-racist Lesbian musician of animist spiritual leanings. This list has evolved over the last decade. As recently as 1995, I was largely invisible to myself as a White person and a person with an advantaged class background. It was even more recently that I began to appreciate the impact of my German heritage and my first-generation status on my personality and perceptions.

In my visits to Anna Crusis and Sistrum, I interviewed their directors and three members from each chorus. From AMASONG I interviewed four members. In this pool of twelve subjects, two are African American and the rest are European American; two are Heterosexual, one is Bisexual, and one, from AMASONG, has always been known to us as steadfastly Undefined, Undecided, or Undisclosed. Both of the Heterosexual women are married, and it was in commenting upon their identities as wives that they disclosed their sexuality. With two exceptions, the Lesbians made themselves known as such in direct response to being asked how they identified themselves. Interestingly enough, these two exceptions were the African-American women, one being the only Black woman in AMASONG, and the other being the only Black woman in Sistrum. What is even more interesting is that both of these women were as indirect about being Black as they were about being Lesbians.

*On Being Black and Lesbian: Eva and Chris*

Here is an excerpt of my conversation with my friend Eva. Eva owns her own home-construction and remodeling company but has a long history of singing, playing percussion, deejaying, and dancing at Womyn's cultural events.

K: The first thing I want to know, Eva, is how do you identify yourself?

E: Mmm. That's an interesting question. Who am I?

K: Yeah! Who are you?

E: Okay. I think I – I'm a pretty diverse individual. I think after going to Michigan, at least this past year, I think of myself as an entertainer. I'm a business person. I'm a person who's got a message for the world, for whatever it is. I fit into this space, this specific – there's a specific requirement for me in the world. So, it's a lot of stuff. It's not just entertainment. But there's a lot of things. I think I have a purpose. And I've thought that ever since I got off drugs: that there was a reason for me being here. And entertainment is one of them. Teaching is another. Just being able to talk to people in a reasonable way – trying to be an understanding person, all of those things. There's a lot of things that I think make up who I am.

K: Who do you speak for? Or, to whom do you speak?



E: I think in a lot of cases I've tried to teach some people – because I think they can't speak for themselves.

K: For example, who?

E: Recently I've – and it's sort of backfired a little bit – I've tried to help someone not lose money. It was a \$15,000 deal, and I thought: "Well, here, I can show you how other people do it. And so, therefore, you know, it's going to help you. Why do you want to do it this way? This is not what you have to do; this is not required of you." A lot of people just don't know what their rights are, what they're capable of getting out of life. And so I – there's a lot of people that you have to speak for, you know? That you kind of have to represent. And it seems weird that I would have to say this to you, because it's not something that I necessarily talk about.

K: I haven't heard you talk about this before.

E: Yeah. But there's a lot of us who just can't talk for our – can't speak for...

K: "Us?"

E: A lot of people. A lot of women, in particular, I think, are not as aggressive and not as knowledgeable as I am about a lot of things. Business. Because I grew up in a business family. ...My mother...also is a very aggressive woman who takes care of her own business. And she's probably passed some of that on to me. There's a lot of wrongs that have gone on for especially Black people, and someone has to speak up, you know? And I think that's probably where I get it from. ...I represent other people who can't be the way I am. You know. And probably set an example for a lot of women who can't be the way I am. I don't know if I've answered your question.

K: Sure! Part of it.

E: (*chuckling*) Part of it?

K: In a nice way that a lot of people don't respond.

E: Yeah, and what part haven't I answered?

K: Well, if you feel like you've answered it, then you've answered it. You know, I mean there are people who will automatically make a list, you know, like their race, their class background... or cultural groups with whom they identify or to which they belong – that are important parts of who they are.

E: Yeah, I think I identify more as just a person who can say something. I remember I had the most exciting

time of my life being Lady Day<sup>11</sup> and doing mobile music and dancing and playing percussion – because the message was Love, you know? And I thought I pulled a *lot* of people together with that message. ...And I assume that's part of my purpose, just kind of pulling people together a bit more. And teaching them patience!

At first, I thought that Eva's vagueness might be due to some sense on her part that, knowing each other as well as we do, there was no need to be more specific with me: after all, we both knew that I knew she was Black woman. But Eva's actual ambivalence eventually became clear: at the same time as she feels responsible for speaking out as a Black woman, it seems that she would sometimes prefer not to (have to?) call herself one.

A bit later in the interview, Eva mentioned being a Lesbian in the context of performing with musicians in the southern California Womyn's scene. I asked her whether the identification of AMASONG with Lesbian community was part of its appeal for her. Her response betrayed a similar kind of ambivalence about claiming Lesbian identity:

E: Being that I have a little bit of homophobia, as a Lesbian, I was a little bit – I felt like I couldn't – I was apprehensive about being involved with a group that was Lesbian-identified, even though there was probably – and there *are* women in there that are not. Because my phobia in terms of not letting people know what my business is, because I feel like it's nobody's business what I do, and especially if they're going to talk bad about me as a result...

K: So *that* was *not* a pull for you!

E: No! It was not a pull for me!

K: That's interesting, because for some women that's like the lifeline that they grab onto, and that's how they get in. It didn't work that way for you.

E: No. I was not sure I wanted to be identified with that group. I was not sure what people would think of me being a part of that group: "Oh, yeah, I *thought* she was a Lesbian!" I've never wanted to be identified as a Lesbian.

K: By other people?

E: Yeah. And it's probably – it's a distant problem, one that I've had for a long time. And maybe it has something to do with that feeling of not being accepted in the past because I was a *Black* Lesbian – not being accepted by White women in the past. And it probably helped that feeling of not wanting to be a part of a group..., especially a Lesbian-identified group.

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<sup>11</sup> Eva's deejay persona in the Womyn's communities of southern California

Eva's narratives reveal the unique pressures of living as a Lesbian of Color in a society of White supremacy and compulsory Heterosexuality. Unless she is enjoying the exclusive company of other Lesbians of Color (not a regular experience in Champaign-Urbana, IL), she cannot feel certain that she will not be disrespected for some aspect of her identity. Unlike UBW's Iris, she has not had the emotional and financial affirmation of professionalizing her identity; far from being able to capitalize on it regularly, she rather *manages* it. Of course, I know Black Lesbians in Champaign-Urbana who would never under any circumstances let themselves be seen at a public, Lesbian-identified function, while another friend of mine jumps at every chance. Each woman builds her own coping strategies from her personality traits, experiences, and circumstances. The given that all these women face is the necessity of strategizing in the first place, the need for which is guaranteed by racism and heterosexism.

The other African American in this sample, Chris from Sistrum, manages a physical challenge in addition to being Black and Lesbian. She implied her Lesbianism in very original, somewhat ambiguous terms. She did not mention her Blackness until much further along in the interview (though she might have thought there was no need, as she knew I could see that she was Black). But she was explicit about her physical challenge from the beginning of the interview:

K: The first thing I ask people, Chris, is to identify themselves. ...Who do you see yourself to be? What people do you come from or belong with, however you interpret that. What do you have to tell the Census Bureau?

C: I'm just an ordinary person who enjoys music very much. My life is singing. Um – I'm not much of a talker!

K: I'll help you!

C: I've been with (Sistrum) now for – this'll be my sixth year, and I have enjoyed doing that tremendously. I am legally blind, and I get my songs done in Braille, although I learn them; I memorize them so I don't have to stand up there holding the book. I'm laid-back, I enjoy doing a variety of things. That's about it.

K: "That's about it." Those are the important things about who you are?

C: Yeah. I – I don't know; everything's important. I just take it one day at a time. I'm really interested in women's issues, anything to do with women. I'm a *woman* person!

It became clear shortly afterward that what had attracted Chris to Sistrum was its "*woman*" orientation, and she reported being especially excited whenever she got to travel with Sistrum to larger gatherings of Womyn's choruses. At no point in the interview did she mention other groups of people with whom she spends time, and my impression is that Sistrum is her sole regular social context outside of the workplace. If she was ever especially troubled by daily alienation as a Lesbian, this could only be inferred

from her excitement at finding a chorus that provided a Lesbian social outlet. But she had much to say throughout the interview about her pervasive sense of isolation as a blind, Black woman within what seems to be her most important social outlet. Although from the discussion just quoted, she seems to have wished to de-emphasize the importance of race in her life, it was she who eventually brought it up in our conversation, and from that point on it was an ever-present theme.

Chris and I were almost one-third of the way through our interview when she first made mention of her own race or the race of anyone else in Sistrum:

C: At first I didn't feel like I fit into the group.

K: Can you say why?

C: Yeah. I was the only Black person, and yet, here they were singing songs by Sweet Honey In The Rock, stuff I'd never heard before. I'd never heard those groups.

This was the moment that opened up our discussion about White performance of Black music, other fragments of which I will present in subsequent sections and chapters of this study. Chris had immediate responses to many of my questions on the matter, as if her thoughts had been only barely held back for a long time. But even when she wasn't quick with an answer, it was clear that my questions addressed things she had been pondering: her hesitation in answering had to do with not being sure what to make of her feelings, or worrying that they were inappropriate:

K: Have you ever been offended or upset by the way White singers sang music that was created by Black people?

C: *(Pauses)* It depends on if they're – *(pauses again)* Well, no – I shouldn't say that! I shouldn't –

K: Please say whatever you feel!

C: Well, I was going to say that –

K: I've heard it all! So, go ahead.

C: Yeah; I was going to say that yes, I would get offended, but I would be wrong, because I would do the same as those people would do. For example, if they're trying to sing "This Little Light of Mine," and it sounds silly – to me – it may not feel silly to them, because they're singing it, and they really think they're doing good, sounding good – I mean, me and my friends do it all the time. We will make fun of, say, groups like Sistrum *(we both laugh)* –

K: Ha! Or Amasong?

C: Or – (*with hesitation*) Amasong –

K: Go ahead! *Go there.*

C: We'll take a Sweet Honey In The Rock song. And they're really: (*sings a soulful lick from "I Be Your Water"*) You know? They really sound – Black. And we will turn it around; we'll sing: (*sings the same lick with over-enunciated consonants, rigid rhythms, and straight-on pitch attacks*) You know?

K: Yes.

C: You know, we'll just think it's *so funny!* We just have a good time with that stuff! But, who's right and who's wrong? You know?

K: Well, what do you think?

C: I think it could be all in fun. But I think it's wrong. I do it, but I think it's wrong.

K: Oh, you mean you think it's wrong to make fun of that?

C: Yeah.

K: Do you?

C: I think it is. I don't think it's fair.

K: You have a very generous heart, don't you?

C: I don't think it's fair. But people do it. You know. I do it!

Over the course of her years with Sistrum, Chris has gone from feeling embarrassed – as the only Black member of the group – about being unacquainted with Sweet Honey In The Rock to feeling especially competent among the group at singing Sweet Honey's music. In matters both musical and extra-musical, as later excerpts will show, Sistrum is an environment where Chris thinks about race.

When Eva and Chris avoided calling themselves Black, it was certainly not because they could escape awareness of being Black on any given day, something that became obvious the more they talked with me. Among the White women in this sample, I expected to find at least one who was unconscious of her Whiteness as a state of being. It is typically only in encounters with people of other races that Whites remember our Whiteness. For the majority of Whites in the United States, whose lives are extremely segregated by race, these uncommon and brief encounters cause a discomfort that is gratefully forgotten as soon as the situation can be escaped. Some Whites, on the other hand, take this discomfort as a symptom

of a problem – racism – that requires our attention and transformation. As I have written earlier, I find White Feminist Lesbians to be more likely than other White people to take up this challenge. As such, I expected that the race consciousness of the White women in my sample would vary directly with the amount of their exposure to Womyn’s environments and ideas.

*When White, Feminist-Lesbian Choristers Race Themselves: Ruth, Heidi, Ginger, and Rachel Alexander*

Ruth, from Anna Crusis, fulfilled my expectation that White women steeped in cultural Feminist-Lesbianism would be quicker than others to remember the importance of being White. She described herself first as a “Radical Dyke Feminist.” Her next self-identifier was “Caucasian,” after which came “Jewish.” “thirty-four years old,” and: “urban, though in my heart, I’d rather be in the country.” When our conversation turned to matters of race and music, her use of the pseudo-scientific term *Caucasian* gave way to the cultural term *White*.

Heidi, from AMASONG, majored in Women’s Studies as an undergraduate and has a long history of involvement with Womyn’s ensembles and attendance at Womyn’s festivals. She identified herself first by her occupation and would have been content to leave the matter there. At that point I recognized the need – common in my interviews with the amateur women – to coach her in the direction I wanted to go:

H: Well, since my job’s pretty important, I sort of identify by what I do for a living. I’m a librarian at the Illinois Natural History Survey Library, and I really like my job because I feel that I’m working for a great organization that’s trying to repair...the ecological damage that’s occurring today. So, that makes me happy.

K: What if I were coming in and taking the census? What would you have to tell me about who you are?

H: Single, head-of-household, White female, basically. Forty-four years old. German heritage – my grandparents came from Germany, so I’m second-generation. Middle class, from a middle-class background. I love sports.

My “Census Bureau” cue, which had failed to elicit from Chris any comment whatsoever about race or ethnicity, launched Heidi into a comprehensive list that went through ethnicity and race all the way to her locally legendary affinity for softball, something she would never be expected to tell the Census Bureau. Of the various approaches I used – when necessary – to coax answers to the identity question, not even this fairly explicit one could either provoke women to say what they did not want to say or restrict what they did want to say about themselves.

Ginger, who has immersed herself in Feminist thought and Womyn’s environments, named herself as a Lesbian first, and told me that because her dad was Gay, she had “Gayness in (her) heritage.” She went on to describe herself as “very mundane” (which could, no doubt, be read as a kind of code for WASP), “very Midwest.” She identified English, “Scotch,” Irish, and Dutch as her “major ethnicities,” although her family has been in the Midwestern United States for so many generations that all identifiably

ethnic practices have disappeared, leaving her with a sense of the need to make up her own traditions. All this bespeaks – even defines – Whiteness, though the word *White* did not surface until much later in the interview, when she was speaking about performing a song by Sweet Honey In The Rock on a Sistrum concert:

It was sort of done in fun. Toni came out – she was also doing one of the parts – and she said: “We’re going to do this rap, and, you know, we recognize that we’re a bunch of White girls trying to rap, and – Yo!” And she had a yo-yo. So it was done with a sense of humor, but we wanted to acknowledge that we’re not trying to rip off a culture, but that this was a fun song, it had a lot of energy to it, it was sort of more hip than some of the other stuff that we do in the chorus.

The conversation that followed, about “ripping off a culture,” will be examined in Chapter Five, but it reveals implicitly and explicitly Ginger’s exposure to Feminist dialogues on race and to anti-racist lessons and trainings available at Womyn’s festivals.

In the conversation with Sistrum’s director Rachel Alexander quoted here, I had just resorted to my Census Bureau prompt and was again flummoxed in my attempt to elicit any comment about ethnicity or race:

RA: Well, I’m Rachel Alexander. When the Census came around ten years ago, my non-lover roommate and I told them we were domestic partners, because we thought they needed to hear that! What else do I need to say about me? I come from Quaker stock, and I’m Quaker myself. My maternal grandmother was quite a musician: she went to the Peabody Conservatory and graduated in 1902.

KB: Wow! How many women were at Peabody then?

RA: I don’t know. Did you see the piano recital thing on my wall? That’s my grandma. 1910. Yeah. So, that’s enough for now, huh? Or do you want more of an answer?

KB: It’s an open question, and it needs to be complete to the extent that you feel it’s complete.

RA: Oh. Well, it’s not complete. But it’s enough for now! (*laughs*)

The first information Alexander provides is that she’s a Lesbian who sees that identity as politically relevant. The next two important influences on her life are spiritual and musical. It was very soon afterwards that she made her Feminism clear. But it was not until late in the interview that Whiteness surfaced in the conversation. This happened in a discussion about singing music of Black origins and her concern not to “sound like a bunch of White girls, singing something from their *own* culture.” Our ensuing conversation about cultural appropriation predictably reflected her assimilation of dialogues and experiences at Michigan and other Womyn’s music events.

*Class Matters: Lynnette*

Lynnette, from AMASONG, provided another example of a White woman with a fairly sophisticated and Feminist-informed race consciousness who nevertheless did not mention her own Whiteness until we were involved in a conversation about singing Black music. Her unique contribution to the study, however, was her discussion about class, something no one else mentioned. Although Lynnette, as a faculty member at the University of Illinois, is usually in middle-class milieus, she is not from middle-class origins:

L: I come from a long line of working-class folk. My father was a steel worker. I had a grandfather who was a coal miner, and I come from a long union tradition on both sides of my family. Blue collar, working class pretty much all the way. Until my generation. And now, of my two brothers and myself, two of us are desk-jockeys, and one of us...is a steel worker. He went to work in the same steel plant my dad worked in.

K: Where is that?

L: Alton, Illinois. If you think about Saint Louis and how the river bends – north of Saint Louis, actually, in Illinois. So – should I elaborate more?

K: If you want to.

L: Gosh! ...Working class versus middle class is kind of a – it's something that I struggle with. And it's something I've had a lot of discussions with people about. I remember when I was in college I was taking a sociology class. And the professor said: "Okay. How many people in this room identify themselves as middle class?" And a lot of people raised their hands. And I was paying attention, and I didn't raise my hand. And then he said: "Anybody who identifies themselves as anything else?" *No one raised their hand. I didn't raise my hand!* I was like this, and then I went (*acts out beginning to raise her hand, then noticing that she's the only one and retracting it*): "Oh! Apparently we're all supposed to be middle class!" And I was not brave enough to say, but I never considered myself middle class.

K: So, is there any kind of a discontinuity between working class as your background and – I mean, do you consider yourself middle class now? Do you think –

L: I'm not sure.

K: I mean, is it like religion? Is it a thing you're born with in the blood, or –

L: I don't know. I certainly wouldn't have the chutzpah in a group of working-class, blue-collar people to try to pass myself off as a working-class, blue-collar person. Because that's – I mean, I've never worked out in the sun at noon for my living. I've never done it. I've never done hard, physical labor for my living. And I don't think I can claim to know what that's all about.



Lynnette's respect for the integrity of identities formed by rigorous conditions resurfaces in her conversation about singing Black music, which is when she first discusses Whiteness:

I think that is where the discomfort with some of the Negro Spirituals comes from. You know, here I am, a White woman, singing songs that came directly from the experience of Black folks' being suppressed, repressed, abused, misused – by my folks, you know, White folks.

*The Two Heterosexual Women from Different Political Camps: Jane Hulting and Stephanie*

Anna Crusis's director Jane Hulting was very forthcoming with information about her cultural background:

KB: The first thing I ask everybody to do is to identify themselves: culturally, or in terms of what groups of people they come from or hang with or belong with, or who they understand themselves to be in this world.

JH: Oh! Okay, I'm Jane, and I've always called myself "Plain Jane." ...I come from a small town in northern Minnesota. ...It used to have five thousand people in it when I graduated; now it has four thousand. It's really emptying out, unfortunately. And my mom still lives there, so we go there, year after year.

KB: Do you listen to *A Prairie Home Companion*?

JH: You know, it's really interesting that you mention that, because I was just listening to that coming over here, on the radio. ...I've often felt as though I was raised in Lake Wobegon; that's really where I'm from. My parents, when they listen to music, they always listen to Lawrence Welk. That's the kind of thing I'm coming from. Very WASPy.

KB: Church-goers?

JH: Oh, yeah, we went to church. United Church of Christ, very middle-of-the-rails, the kind of family that didn't want to make any controversy. ...I'm the youngest of three kids. Both my parents were raised on farms in Illinois, near Geneseo.

KB: How many generations of your people have been in the U.S.?

JH: Probably about six. ...My mother is Scots-Irish. ...My father was one-hundred-percent Swedish-American, all the way down. ...They all married Swedes. And none of them drank. There was never any liquor in my father's family for as far back as – there was not any liquor. No one divorces on either side of my family. I mean, this is, like, *clean stuff!* And when people argued – I just didn't hear arguments very much. It isn't that people got along, they just didn't get angry. So there was never any

sort of expression of anger. Anger was horrifying to everybody. So there were no skills around that at all. So, that's where I come from! Where I live is another different thing.

Hulting has broken the pattern on her paternal side by marrying a man who is culturally Jewish. She and her husband and their son attend a Unitarian Universalist church and celebrate the major Jewish and Christian holidays of the year as family traditions but not as religious observances. She considers herself to be a Feminist.

Stephanie, a Heterosexual woman from Sistrum, serves as a kind of one-woman control for this whole study. She was new to Sistrum when we spoke, having joined the group midway through its previous season. Outside of Sistrum, she is completely unacquainted with Womyn's culture, and the word "Feminism" never came up in our conversation. Her initial identification of herself leaves race and ethnicity completely unmarked, and nothing later in the conversation elicited any recognition of the significance of her Whiteness:

K: Stephanie, I'd like you to begin the way I'm asking everyone to begin, which is by identifying yourself. Who are the people you come from, who are the people with whom you belong? It's sort of an open question.

S: Wow! (*pauses, stumped*)

K: You know: what do you tell the Census Bureau, or – however you want to answer that. But be as complete as you can.

S: Well, I was born in Illinois. My family is pretty musical: my sister plays the violin, my father is a professional musician. I work on computers. I work with words. I guess, a lot – web pages and stuff. I used to do some professional singing; don't really do it anymore, but I'm singing for fun now when I have a little time. I'm thinking about trying to go professional again, if we are not in such a small town. What else? I don't know. I'm married, I have a fourteen-month-old daughter; she keeps me running.

K: Do you think of yourself in any other kind of cultural terms?

S: If I were to say that, I think I live what people would consider a very traditional lifestyle.

It happens that Stephanie has a bachelor's degree in Vocal Performance from the School of Music at the University of Illinois, having graduated in the spring before the autumn of my freshman year. We have had some of the same professors, and we certainly share in common the influence of one particular approach to music education and training. Stephanie's involvement with Sistrum came about in an atypical way. She met Rachel Alexander when Alexander came to her house to tune her piano. In the course of conversation, she revealed that she had professional singing experience in her background. Alexander, in

need of a soprano soloist for an upcoming Sistrum concert, hired her for the engagement. She found that she enjoyed the chorus's sound and its repertoire, and so she joined the group soon after the concert.

*The White Boundary Resisted and Muddled: Diana and Thea*

Diana is the AMASONG member with the ten-year history of attending the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival with her two daughters. She is a longtime friend of mine, and I know her to be particularly resistant to conventional "labels." I also know that in her lifestyle and values system, she experiences a near-total discontinuity with her family of origin. I have observed the importance to her of distancing herself from their world, as well as the pain this necessity has caused her. Her answer to my question of identity leaves out any reference whatsoever to her origins, though she signals these obliquely in prioritizing the choices she has made *against* what was for her a very confining upbringing:

K: The first question I ask everybody is: How do you identify yourself? Who are the people you come from or belong with?

D: Oh, that's interesting. I guess I'm largely involved with fun-loving, justice-minded, peace-loving, vibrant souls. Yeah.

K: And since the Census Bureau doesn't have a box that says that (*chuckling*), what do you have to check when they come? And what else do you wish you could say, besides what's on those forms? Any other way of identifying yourself culturally that is important to you?

D: Hmm. I guess – I'm a nonmonogamous Bisexual woman. That's important to me. They're not interested in that.

K: They don't want to know that. (*snickering*) Okay. Anything else?

D: Nope.

It was later in our conversation when Diana first spoke about being a White woman. She was talking about the experience of singing in the gospel choir at Michigan:

It was just so exciting because the majority of the group was African American, and that to me alone, just being in a group, I've been pretty isolated a lot of my life into little White groups, like a lot of us: (*in a pinched voice*) "Keep in your crowd! Keep with the Whiteys! Come on!" You know. ...Actually there was one semester when I really gave serious consideration to singing with the U of I Black Chorus. Because I felt...really estranged from the Black community here: "What bridges – where can I enter? Where is my entry here?" I'm always looking for that. ...But in the end they wanted too many hours of commitment.

Like me. Diana has found the high degree of racial segregation in our town to be unacceptable, and she relishes the annual Michigan retreat for its opportunities to share in communal experiences with Women of Color.

On the matter of identity, my discussion with Thea from Anna Crusis was the most interesting.

K: The first thing I ask everybody is to identify yourself. How do you identify yourself culturally? Who are the people you come from or feel you belong with? It's an open question, but I'd like you to be as complete as you feel you can be.

T: Well, I guess that's a tough question, because – well, I guess the two biggest parts of my identity are as a Greek and as a Lesbian. So those are two kind of – I wouldn't say *opposite* things, but – I grew up with a very strong ethnic identity. And so that was at one time a very important part of my life.

K: Are your parents immigrants?

T: My father was. My mother was born here, but she was Greek also. And they came from – her family, too, even though she was born here – they all came from Turkey, actually – from Asia Minor. So we're Asia-Minor Greeks, which is sort of a category all its own, although there are not many of those left anymore. But, you know, I went through a certain period of time when I didn't want anything to do with that, either, because I just wanted to be a sort of nondescript American person! (*chuckling*) But...I guess that was in my teenage years, and then after that it became important again. And now I'm doing a lot of trying to find out what happened to the – I mean, I know what happened to the Greeks in Asia Minor, but just more historical things about that. And I guess one of the sad things about my life as a Lesbian is that I can't really have both communities, because when I was growing up, a lot of the social activities that I had were around the church. It wasn't just a religious thing. It was kind of like the glue that held the whole community together and passed on the culture. So, I miss that in my life – not necessarily the religious aspect of it, but the aspect of belonging to that community. ...I grew up about sixty miles from here, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. ...My brother still lives there. ...He's single; he never got married. But he's kind of enveloped by this community. And people look out for him, and all of that stuff. On the one hand, it feels so comforting and comfortable when I go there. But on the other hand, I know that I couldn't live there, either. So it's a real pull.

K: I'm interested to know whether there are things in your daily life that you identify as part of your Greek heritage. Diet? Or habit, or – ?

T: Well, music, for one thing. I love Greek music, and that's kind of extended to other international kind of folk music. I'm studying Balkan music now with Ethel Raim.

K: Ooh! You go to New York?

T: Yeah, with about three other people. They all used to be in (Anna Crusis) at one point.

K: That's wonderful!

T: Now only one of them is in the choir, and me. But we've been doing that for about five years. And I just love doing that.

K: So, you have a good handle on the vocal technique by now?

T: Well, I hope so!

K: How long did it take you to feel like you had it?

T: Well, when you listen to some of those women, you realize that you still don't have it. It's a lifetime kind of thing. Like, Ethel was going to teach us this one song, and she said: "You realize, this song is a lifetime commitment!" And I can understand what she's talking about, because – you can sort of imitate it, but you really can't do it the way those women sing. You know? It's such a natural thing for them. But anyway, that kind of thing is an extension of – you asked me about Greek identity?

K: Yeah: culture, ways that you are noticeably Greek, to yourself.

T: Yeah.

K: Like, for me, I'm judgmental and punctual, so I remember that I'm German!

L: Oh, I'm the total opposite! I'm always late. I can never be on time, no matter how much time I have. I'm on Mediterranean time, whatever that is. And if I have more time, then I just take my time more, so I'm *still* late! It *kills* me! I've been that way all my life. I guess free time – and enjoyment of life – is more important to me than a career. And, I mean, doing good things is important to me, but I'm not career-driven. I'm – if you ever went to Greece, you would know what I'm saying. I mean, it's kind of – it's just that the things that are important are kind of a joy of living and your family, friends. They all seem to be more important than making money and being on a treadmill. So, people in my life have always been more of a priority than how far up the corporate ladder or whatever that I climb. And even though I don't go to church much, I guess I identify somehow in my mind with the Greek Orthodox Church. The rituals are important to me, and –

K: Do you go on the big holidays?

T: Yeah. And I feel really strongly identified with that, even though I don't do it much, except for the holidays. And sometimes, you know, I also feel like I'm carrying on some sort of tradition, even though I don't have any kids to pass it on to. Maybe it's like a connection to my mom and dad. I know it was important to them, so – I guess maybe those are – those are the main things that I can think of.

K: You talked about – you know, there’s a huge and important aspect of you, which is your Lesbian self, which separates you from your ethnic Greek self. Are there ways that your public life or communal life or your life with people you know here as a Lesbian has maybe supplanted or made alternatives to that kind of being at home within a Greek family or society?

T: Sure, yeah. I think I have a really good family of friends here that are – you know, they really *are* like my family. We’ve been friends for I don’t know how many years – just maybe about six or eight people. I mean, I have other friends, too, but it’s just like this core group that feels like a family. And they’re all in couples, and I’m not right now; I used to be. And, you know, it doesn’t seem to matter. I mean, I’m still part of that family, even though I’m by myself. And that’s really important, because I broke up with my partner about four years ago, and –

K: You really needed people around you!

T: Yeah.

K: I know. I went through that three years ago, and that was certainly the truth.

T: And, you know, I’m glad that – I don’t know whether this happens to other people or not when most of their friends are still in couples, but I don’t get left out of things, and I don’t feel weird if I’m the only one there who’s not in a couple. It’s good. They’re just really good friends. And I know that I can always count on them. So that’s a really good feeling. And I think the choir provides a lot of that community, too – a little bit of a larger community. I’ve been in the choir for a long time. I’ve been in it since ’81. So I was in it when Cathy Roma was director.

Throughout the interview, I sensed that Thea and I had much in common, especially as Lesbian daughters of European immigrants creating our identities in very similar musical, Womyn’s communities. The extent to which I experienced myself hearing much more information than she actually reported is especially clear to me at this writing, when I have just finished thumbing through my transcript looking for whole conversations only to discover that they did not take place except in my mind. At one point well into the interview, we were discussing the demographics of Anna Crusis. I interrupted Thea’s description when my accumulated “hearings” between her lines suddenly coalesced in the feeling that there was an important question I should ask her because its answer was by no means clear:

T: This year we have two African-American women...(out of) about forty, I would say. ...And we have three Asian women. And there’s been times in our recent history when we’ve had more; we’ve had maybe five or six African-American women, we had one Indonesian – every now and then...we’ve had one or two Latina women, not too many. So some people...within our group say that we’re not culturally diverse. But then, we *are* very diverse. I mean, unless you want to lump all women together as –

K: Are you White?

T: Um (*pauses*) – I don't know. It depends on who you ask!

K: How do you feel?

T: (*Another pause*) That's a good question. I don't feel totally White. But I certainly don't feel like a Woman of Color or anything, but I don't feel like a typical, White, American woman. I don't know what that is, but – ...when we talk about a lot of these things, I really don't think that my experience growing up was like a lot of other people's experience growing up. So I don't really put myself in that category ...I had a friend, a Greek guy who grew up in Alabama, and he was not considered White down there. So, I've never had that experience –

K: You mean, by White people?

T: By White people.

K: He's Greek American?

T: Yeah.

K: So, he was born in this country.

T: Yeah.

K: Were his parents immigrants?

T: I don't know, but I would say probably. I never met his parents.

K: That's very interesting.

T: Uh-huh. But, he told me; he said: "I'm not White down there." I have also been taken for Black by Black men. When I came back from Greece after a whole summer, I was really dark. And Black men here thought I was African American. And when I travel abroad and if I have a tan and have been over there for a while, nobody thinks I'm American.

Thea's experience of being "taken for Black" is not among our many commonalities, since my particular North-German, Irish, and Scottish ancestries have left me with very pale skin. In fact, no one today in the United States would take me for anything *not White*. But it is important to remember that when the term *White* was first being constructed as an identifier of the class that would hold the social, political, and economic power in the United States, there was a period in history when no Irish people, no matter how pale, had the privilege of calling themselves White. After the Irish had "become White" by assimilation into dominant WASP and capitalist values, the next groups of European immigrants accepted

into wage slavery as citizens but denied Whiteness – whether they were pale- or olive-skinned – were those from Mediterranean- and Eastern-European countries. My question to Thea arose from my sense that her assimilation out of her European ethnicity and into the upper social strata of the “melting pot” is far from complete, and that this unmelted state – combined with the fact that her particular ethnicity happens to be somewhat “colored” as one of the last admissions into Whiteness – might make her feel only dubiously White.<sup>12</sup>

Thea’s responses reveal that the terms “White,” “Black,” and “American” are still subject to the same inexactness inherent in the definitions of most identities: “White” and “Black” can get confused, and “White” and “American” can get conflated. She is generally regarded in her community and her region as White. However, judging by the experiences of her Greco-Alabaman friend, if she were to move to the Deep South she might find that this was not so. She reports that when she has been in Greece and is deeply tanned, she may be assumed by African Americans to be Black; alternatively, she may be assumed by other people to be from somewhere other than the United States, which betrays the abiding image – among White people in the United States as well as beyond our national borders – that “Americans” are White (as in her teenage desire to be a “nondescript *American* person”). In fact, this conception strikes regrettably close to the actual truth whenever People of Color in the United States receive the treatment of second- and third-class citizens. Thea herself is not sure how completely White she is, and this perception of herself is surely connected to conditions more enduring than the ephemeral tan others may see on her skin after a vacation. My questioning her *Whiteness* led her quickly to a disavowal of her image of the “typical, White, American woman,” which suggests to me that, far from being a matter of mere skin tone, Whiteness signals for her *entire constellation of social and personal traits* such as: political consciousness, relationship to money and material goods, gender role and sexual orientation, religion, concept of family, type and quality of community life, and susceptibility to the tastes, diversions, and information promulgated by the national mass-media. Considering Thea’s comments together with my own experiences has led me to an analysis of my own Whiteness that is relevant to me both as this study’s questioner and as one of its subjects.

Like Thea, I was raised almost wholly by European values, traditions, and tastes, and therefore I experienced a good deal of alienation from my peers and their families during my public school years. As young people will do, I regarded myself and my family as the norm and anyone different as weird or deficient. I was an adult before I recognized so much of this “weirdness” and “deficiency” as absolutely normative, identifying instead my European upbringing as the actual source of most of my discomfort.

At the same time, my European-ness is of the northern variety, the kind stereotyped in the United States as intelligent and industrious, the kind that the most “ideal” White people come from, the kind that opens all the doors to citizenship, those doors having been built by people from the “same” stock. I may have felt like a social alien in “Middle-American” environments, but I certainly never felt disenfranchised. The few times that I had to think of myself as having a race, there was no question in my mind that I was

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<sup>12</sup> Long after my interview with Thea, I encountered several examples in the literature on Whiteness that document the initial *non-Whiteness* of the early Greek immigrants, including the facts that Jim Crow laws were applied against them in cities in Idaho and Arizona, and that in 1909 in Omaha, they were targeted in a race riot (Barrett and Roediger, 1997).



White, nor could anyone else ever have questioned that. I have enjoyed a life of considerable race and class privilege. Not until I was a young adult and had experienced heterosexist discrimination did it occur to me that some citizens of this country have more rights and privileges than others.

It is as Lesbians, of course, that Thea and I share something else in common that places us outside the culture of the “typical, White, American woman.” Being a Lesbian produces a negative sense of alienation from dominant society, but at the same time, it facilitates a positive turn toward an array of alternatives to dominant culture. I would never say that I was “not White,” but I have also felt that being Queer is to have a kind of “color” at the same time. Straight people who are White commonly tell White people who are Queer that we introduce “color” to their environments. And after all, one of our most widely used symbols is the rainbow-colored flag. In more political terms, the progression through the social spectrum from White to Colored is a measure of the distance from power to disenfranchisement; therefore, as a Lesbian, I am just a step away<sup>13</sup> – what feels like a sort of “off-White,” a “color” that is enhanced by my anti-racism.

In fact, Radical Feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye, a White Lesbian, has suggested the following about Lesbians and White privilege: any privileges that White men extend (always under duress) to White women through the institutions they control are merely concessions to preserve the cooperation of and give a measure of protection to White women; this is necessary so that they can continue to use White women to produce the next generation of White, male heirs for the perpetuation of White, male supremacy; therefore, Lesbians born to White parents, in refusing domestic, emotional, sexual, and reproductive servitude to White men, commit race and gender treason – are effectively nullified as “women” and as “Whites” – are living an active resistance to racism and heteropatriarchy (Frye 1983, 110-127).<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, though I have seen White men behave as if it were surely so, my being in love with a woman does not appreciably redistribute their unearned entitlements – would that this were all I had to do! After my living for eighteen years as a Lesbian, White people in the United States still have “the most of the best and the least of the worst,” while Black people have “the most of the worst and the least of the best.”<sup>15</sup> Being Lesbians – however treasonous the implications – does not guarantee that those of us who are White will cease to be enamored of our race privilege: it does not put food in the mouths of the hungry, build affordable housing, eliminate police brutality, expand health-care coverage, equalize lending practices, or clean up toxic dumps polluting poor, residential areas. Neither is any of these things accomplished by standing up in a concert and singing a Spiritual, a Zulu village song, or a composition by Sweet Honey In The Rock. What do White Womyn *think* we are accomplishing or expressing when we do

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<sup>13</sup> Many Heterosexuals are unaware that the provisions in the U.S. Constitution for equal protection under the law have consistently been interpreted as *not* applying to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered people. Only in those individual cities or states that have passed specific civil-rights protections for us is it illegal to discriminate against us in the basic matters of employment, housing, and public accommodation; our rights to child custody, adoption, hospital visitation, family leave, insurance, inheritance, and the like are even more spottily granted.

<sup>14</sup> See also “Race and Parentage” (Roberts, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> This definition of U.S. racism comes from the lectures of Professor William R. Jones of Florida State University, who studies and teaches oppression, racism, and Liberation Theology.

this? To answer this question, we need to understand why these women gather together to form these choruses and why they sing what they sing.

### What Their Choruses Mean to Them

#### *Sistrum*

Earlier in this chapter, I presented Rachel Alexander's words about why she founded Sistrum and what it means to her. The three women whose words about Sistrum follow represent the widest divergence in perspective that I was to encounter within any single group in this study. I begin with Ginger, whose experience accords most closely with Alexander's. She began to talk about the centrality of Sistrum in her life when she was answering my question about who she was:

Well, I identify myself as a Lesbian, and I'm very happy about that; that's exciting to me. And actually, when I moved to Lansing, I was just sort of newly coming out. So I'd only been with one woman, and I was single, and I got involved with the community here, mostly with the chorus. So, it was a huge, huge part of my life, being in the chorus.

After Ginger had talked to her satisfaction about all the other aspects of her identity, I asked her to identify Sistrum for me:

Well, that's a good question, because it's certainly very different for me now than when I first came. There was a lot that happened in the time that I was there. One of the major things was deciding whether or not to use the word *Lesbian* in the mission statement. That was a huge thing. And we went through all this process around it, because many people were not out on their jobs, and it was this whole, big deal: we went through this whole thing, and then we decided that, yes, we would use it. And we went with this really obscure statement like: "Many of us identify as Lesbians; some of us do not." Which sort of sounds like: "Some of us don't have the *guts* to come out." You know? (*we laugh*) It was a really difficult process. And we don't say "Lesbian" hardly at *all* anymore. ... (But) it's absolutely a place for me to go to be around Lesbians, whether or not it's being identified right now as a Lesbian chorus. And it's a place for me to be around women, too. And to sing stuff that is completely unique to my background as a musician.

Ginger is a music therapist and has had college-level music training, much of which consisted of singing in oratorio groups and collegiate women's ensembles. The Sistrum experience was a revelation to her after singing in these more mainstream choirs:

G: It was all like, you know, sing the notes on the page. I'd get into it some, but it didn't really mean anything to me. The music didn't speak to me. And when I...first heard (Sistrum), when they did the preview show before Kate Clinton.<sup>16</sup>...I was like: "Oh, my God!" It was totally revolutionary to me! Singing about real issues was like a really big deal. One of the songs was "Lesbian Nation." And "Harriet Tubman." You know, those types of songs. I'm like: "God, I have to sing this!" And that was one of the major influences of me moving here, was to get involved in the chorus, as much for the connection with Lesbians as with the music they were singing. So that was a huge difference to me. And also, another big difference is that there's all (levels) of musical skills, and so there's not that competition that there is in a collegiate choir, you know, of who's singing what; and the conductor automatically expects that you will know the music, so when you come into the room, you're fine-tuning – you're not learning notes. Or you're going to get an eraser thrown at you!

K: So in Sistrum you get to not know what you're doing.

G: Right! Exactly! Which is a little bit frustrating at times. And there's a lot more we could do. But Sistrum serves a lot of different roles for different people. Some people, they come for the social connection, some for the music connection.

Later, Ginger returned to the theme of finding her true self in joining Sistrum, going subsequently to Womyn's music festivals, and being infused with new Feminist ideas. This was when racism was first introduced into the conversation:

G: I never had (these ideas) before. Or I had them and it was like I didn't know who to talk to...to discuss stuff like that. And, you know, I wanted to deal with some of my own racist issues. So I started taking some workshops on racism, and –

K: Where did you find those workshops?

G: That was at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival.

K: With Alix?

G: No, that was with Amoja Three Rivers.

K: Oh, sure!

G: And (someone else) – I can't remember her name – anyway, she did one on White privilege. And I just learned a ton. And Sistrum, I think, also wanted to have an awareness. I think it used to be a lot more politically active – of course, I think everyone used to be, ten years ago or whatever! That's one of the

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<sup>16</sup> The original stand-up, Lesbian-Feminist comedienne; there are now many notable women in the profession, including Karen Williams, Suzanne Westenhoefer, and Elvira Kurt.

ways you would connect, was by doing this political action. And I think that's one of the things that Sistrum did, is be this presence and get people to think about things through music.

K: Things like racism?

G: Things like racism, things like slavery, things like the Holocaust, that I never encountered in my college chorus. We'd sing all these German pieces and not know what the heck they were from!

K: What are the messages you feel you have sent while performing with Sistrum?

G: I think we send messages that all people are important; that there are bad things that happen, and that people write music about it, and here is something that happened, and it gives a message of survival and that it's not okay to oppress other people. And that there's also joy in life to celebrate, too, particularly for Lesbians! ...I think that's a big part of Sistrum's concerts is the talking that we do (to introduce each piece), and the sharing of some of our stories. There's all kinds of diversity within the chorus...

K: What kind of diversity?

G: Well, there's Straight women, there's –

K: – closeted women!

G: Closeted women! Lesbians, Dykes, Butches, Femmes – we have all of that going on. There's a woman who is...blind, a visually-impaired woman. We have a signer<sup>17</sup> at our concerts; I mean, *who ever had a signer*, at college choruses, you know?

K: Do you have a Deaf audience?

G: Yes, we do. It's not very big, but there are some hearing-impaired people who come. So even just *that* awareness is stuff that I would consider normal now, but when I first got here, it was like: "Oh, my gosh! *Why* would you – " You know, all that stuff that I don't even want to *say* right now!

It is quite clear that Sistrum is intimately connected with Ginger's identity as a Feminist Lesbian and has transformed her outlook in a number of ways. Naturally, Stephanie, who is Straight and rather apolitical, had very different things to say about the group:

K: Could you identify Sistrum for me?

S: Well, I haven't been in the group that long, so I don't know that much: it's kind of a first-impression sort

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<sup>17</sup> A sign-language interpreter serving hearing-impaired audience members.

of thing. But the way it was described to me is that it started off as being a Lesbian choir – or maybe it didn't start off that way, but it was for a while – and Rachel opened the doors, I guess, to non-Lesbians. I have no idea who in the group – well, some of the people I do know are Lesbians, and some I actually know are not, but for the most part, I really don't know what people's sexual orientation is. (*laughs*)

K: Anything else about the choir that would describe it? Or distinguish it from other groups you've sung in, perhaps?

S: Well, one thing that sort of struck me right away: I was sort of brought in to do a certain solo, and then Rachel asked me to join the group. And that caused some flap in the group, which sort of surprised me. I mean: "Why do you care? Warm body in the choir, right?"

K: Were they freaked out because you were a professional-caliber singer?

S: No. They were freaked out because I didn't join based on the rules of the group, which are that you have to come in at the beginning of the season, or something like that. It was really funny, because Rachel – I went to my first rehearsal, and she said: "Stephanie's going to join." And then they sent me home early because –

K: Oh, they had to *process* about it, right?

S: Right! And, like, three people called me and said: "Are you okay? Are you all right?" I said: "Well, I thought it was kind of funny, actually." And then Rachel called me to see if I was all right, and I just said that I thought it was really funny that in *any* group you would have this sort of committee meeting like that. And she said it was because it was a bunch of Lesbians, and they talk about everything, I guess, was the way she put it.

K: Uh-huh. But they decided you could stay, huh?

S: Well, yeah, they did. I'm still around! I was not insulted.

K: Oh! Good woman! Well, why did you decide to stay?

S: Well, a number of reasons. The very first concert I sang with them I just sang in that solo number. ...They really did a good job. I was really impressed with their performance, you know, for a non-professional group. I thought: "This is pretty good singing." I really like Rachel: she's a neat person. She's got a really great attitude about music, because she has very strong feelings about how it should go, but she always has a sense of humor about it, and it's really nice. I've worked professionally, and it can get really ugly sometimes when you're really – man, when you can't do something that they want you to do! A problem that I've had with a quartet I used to sing in (is people saying): "You're too loud, you're too loud, you're too loud, you're too loud." And I just get tired of that, so it's not fun for me if I can't do what I want to do. And that's not happening in Sistrum at all. I appreciate that.

For me, the most telling manifestation of cultural difference between Ginger and Stephanie is the fact that Ginger expects “process” in her choir, while Stephanie is nonplussed by it. What I found surprising is that both the amateur and the professional appreciate Rachel’s relaxed rehearsal style. Ginger and Stephanie enjoy Sistrum’s music for different reasons – Ginger’s response is overwhelmingly determined by its content, and Stephanie’s, as I will show, depends almost exclusively on its sound and its suitability to the *bel canto* voice.

Though I am presenting Chris’s voice last in this section, she was the first Sistrum woman I interviewed after newcomer Stephanie. When Chris had answered my identity queries without mentioning race, I thought that initiating a discussion about the choir’s demographics – something I needed to learn anyway – might elicit some mention of being the only Black woman in an otherwise White choir, though this was not to happen:

K: What is Sistrum?

C: Sistrum is a women’s chorus – made up of all women – with different issues – women’s issues...

K: For example?

C: For example, singing about women who have struggled in a man’s world. About togetherness with women – singing about abuses that happen as a woman, etcetera. Just so much! I mean, it’s like a family of women, and it’s not all Gay women. It’s Feminists, it’s Straight women. So everybody has something that they want to say through their songs.

K: AMASONG has university women, we have women who are professionals, we have blue-collar workers – we’re broad and diverse in some ways and not in others, and I’m sort of going around comparing the demographics of our group with other groups in the Sister Singers network.

C: Sistrum is a more professional group. Nurses and health care – people who have worked with the physically and mentally challenged, as I have in the past. Just a variety. But mostly professional, out there in the community trying to survive.

K: What is the age range, would you say?

C: I would say from twenty-five to fifty.

K: Anything else about who’s in the group that’s important to who the group is or how it feels to be there or what you sing?

C: I guess what we sing is the most important thing for me.

K: Go ahead. Talk about that.

C: The challenges of women is the thing I like the most. Some things that I had never heard before, but you hear them in song.

K: Can you think of an example?

C: Oh, boy! Well, let me put it like this. I guess I didn't know that this kind of group existed before, that sang about slavery issues, about Black women, Yellow women, all the cultures. Even songs that are sung in different languages, telling the stories of women. I was used to growing up with women singing, but they were singing about love or men. That was what it was all about.

At this point in the conversation, I was not sure whether Chris thought she had come out to me or not (she had already made her statement about being "a *woman* person"), but her comment about the relentlessly Hetero-romantic content of so much mainstream music reflects an annoyance common among Lesbians. Chris's first contact with Womyn's music was at the grand opening of a local Womyn-friendly bookstore where Sistrum put in an appearance:

C: That was the first time I heard Sistrum. And I thought: "I love this group!" (But I thought) there was no way this group would let me join.

K: That's what you thought?

C: Yeah. They were an older group when I joined, and I was fairly young – younger. I just didn't feel that I knew the songs they sang. ...I grew up on the other stuff. ...So I was reluctant to want to get involved, because, number one, I never thought about them being able to put stuff in Braille for me. So, I thought: "They learn from books; they have these books of music." I don't know music. Can't read music, even in Braille. They do have Braille music, but I can't read music. So I knew that was a no-no. I couldn't do that – no way! And it was going to be a challenge, and I didn't think I was up for a challenge. I was working, and that was my life, and that was it: "Sorry, don't have time for this. And I'm not going to go up and audition for this group. I can not sing; I'm not gonna do it!" You know? And I didn't. But a couple of friends who were with me squealed on me: "This woman here has a nice voice." And I'm saying: "No, I don't! Don't even think about it." The next week, I was sitting, auditioning for Sistrum! It was exhilarating, new, a change. Being around all these women – I think that made the biggest difference! ...Sistrum just changed my life. I'm not a very social person. I don't go out a lot. So I was used to kind of working and coming home, go to bed, work. Until I got with this group, and then I was traveling all over and doing things that I never thought I could do before. ...It was just amazing for me.

The same Feminist ideal of accessibility that admits women regardless of musical skill also mandated that membership be made possible for Chris despite her visual impairment. As it happened, a Sistrum friend with access to a Braille machine offered to make scores for Chris. This was one of the

welcome surprises of Chris's first encounter with Womyn's organizational values. Conversely, as an African-American Lesbian who had not formerly been involved in virtually White, Feminist endeavors, she was neither familiar with nor entertained by the propensity of this chorus to process issues in rehearsal, or even to proceed in a way that was anything but a disciplined and direct approach to preparing music for performance:

C: There was something about the women in Sistrum that was kind of odd, because we would struggle during practices, and we would forget what we were supposed to be learning. No one would listen to their tapes, and they'd come in and be tired: of course, you know, you work all day and you're tired. And they would not be in a good mood. Therefore, instead of learning the music and getting out of there, which I wanted to do, we were stopping, and people were asking questions that they had asked the previous week, time after time! I would think: "Oh, God, can we get past this? I just want to sing!" Okay, I understand that you have to have a breath here. You've got to write this down: okay – put a breath after this word, or whatever it was. I would get so tired of it, because I didn't have anything to put a breath – I had to *remember!*

K: Oh, and they could have *written* it down and gotten it right.

C: Yeah! And then, everybody's talking all at once.

K: Ugh!

C: So, you're having to wait until everyone – and then, they're going: "What did she say? What did she say?" So that wasted a lot of time. So I was getting disillusioned for a while. But that seems to have gotten better.

K: How did that get better? Did Rachel crack the whip? Or did people realize it was wasting their time?

C: Well, Rachel did get a little tougher. It's hard for Rachel to get tough. You know that if you know Rachel.

Though some Sistrum women appreciate Alexander's non-dictatorial approach to leading the group, it does not meet with universal favor. I listened to Chris's description with a bit of amusement. In creating AMASONG, I knew that the nature of the chorus would draw some women who felt that disciplined rehearsals violated the ethos of "Womyn's space," and I warned them ahead of time that no one joining should expect a coffeehouse or campfire-sing-along environment. After it became clear that I really meant it, several women stopped coming, including one (rather unstable) woman who, on quitting, accused me of employing the tactics of an SS officer in a Nazi concentration camp! As the ensembles in this sample reflect, the traditional model for choral leadership has been under contestation in the Feminist choral movement. Anna Crusis is an example of a choir that is still negotiating its terms.



*Anna Crusis*

Anna Crusis is the only ensemble in this study that is operating under the leadership of a successor to its founder. Because these ensembles – much more so than typical academic, religious, or civic choirs – are uniquely the expressions of the individual visions of their founders, a change in leadership can significantly alter the group's ethos. My interviews with Anna women make it clear that Jane Hulting's vision for the choir differs appreciably from that of its founder. Catherine Roma: some members accept this difference more easily than others. It was my question to Hulting about her own Feminism that led her to comment implicitly on the Roma legacy and on current evolutions within Anna:

KB: Are you a Feminist, or no?

JH: Yes.

KB: What's that mean?

JH: *Feminist* to me means that women speak up, that women know who they are: they go about seeking who they are in relationship with others and also alone, in terms of one's own personal development. It also has to do with a certain kind of, you know, economic kind of thing.

KB: What do you mean?

JH: Well, if you take it farther, I mean, it is sort of this personal-development kind of thing, and a way of being in the world that puts her voice out, but it's also – issues of power, in a certain kind of way – sharing resources to a certain degree. I feel very conflicted about this because of (Anna's) situation right now.

KB: Yeah, I think I've begun to get a picture of that.

Hulting and I are referring to some conflicts she has with one member in particular – whose voice I will present later – about what it should mean for Anna to be identified as a Feminist chorus. Hulting's own definition of Feminism emphasizes individual assertiveness, self-discovery, and personal development; she is vague or hesitant on material issues. This reflects the Liberal kind of Feminism common among White and middle-class women of which Women of Color have been critical. It is Ruth, the self-defined Radical Dyke Feminist, with whom Hulting has predictably had the most conflict. Here are Hulting's ideas about the chorus:

KB: What is Anna Crusis?

JH: Anna Crusis is a place where people who are different from each other can come together and, ideally,

learn how to be together, learn how to function together, and make music that makes us each much more than what we are as individuals.

KB: Anna is a member of GALA, as a lot of Sister Singers groups are, even though they might not call themselves Lesbian choirs. So, in some sense, it's a Lesbian choir.

JH: Sure. It always has been. Most people in Anna have always been Lesbians. We don't ask people to declare themselves, but I would say it's always been somewhere between seventy and ninety percent.

KB: And they don't have to sign up, either, for their version of Feminism –

JH: No.

KB: – although it is considered a Feminist choir too, right?

JH: It's considered Feminist – you know, we're very up-front. We tell people right away that this is a Feminist chorus, we sing about issues, we sing about things that we care about and we think make a difference in the world, and we want to challenge people.

KB: So something that makes this a Feminist choir is the repertoire? The content of the repertoire?

JH: Well, that's part of it.

KB: Okay. What else makes Anna a Feminist choir, as opposed to, say, the University Chamber Singers or whatever?

JH: Yeah – but I also want to say that the Gay and Lesbian thing is a very important part of Anna. It's very important. And we call it a Feminist chorus because not everybody's Lesbian, but that is a really strong thing. And there's a real strong commitment on the part of everybody to make sure that that's a safe place for people to be. To the point where a lot of Straight women feel like – a little – like they should just be quiet. Like, they get a little silent. They feel – that they should be silent.

KB: Hmm. Because they're scared, or because people give them that vibe?

JH: Well, you know, because the Lesbian thing is so strong that they feel as though: "This is a place for the Lesbians, and I should just be quiet." So, you know, we should probably have a conversation about this, but it does come up.

KB: So: the Lesbians want them to be quiet, or they're putting that on themselves?

JH: Well, I think it's probably some of both. I think Lesbians feel like there's no other place outside Anna to

be. I mean, most people are not out at work, and so this is really a place where people really can be – safe. And everybody has some sort of instinct about wanting to protect that. But nonetheless, you know, there are differences. There are differences. *(laughs)*

KB: Anything else about Anna that makes it Feminist in your mind?

JH: Well, you know, we've always had this sort of Feminist process.

KB: You inherited that, didn't you?

JH: I inherited it. And I find that it's much easier to start a group yourself and set it up the way you want it, and if people don't like it, too bad; they don't have to be here. But this is – I mean, Anna does have a really strong history of Feminist process. And I think it's changing a little bit now, and Anna's becoming a little bit sort of mainstream, in a way. I don't know if that's really true or not. But there have been times in the history of the choir when there have been very strong feelings politically about a lot of things, and then the people with the loud voices tended to sway – you know, they have really strong feelings and they feel they have a right to say something about them. And in my experience, it's the people who can speak really emotionally and articulate a position really well who tend to sway the whole group. So, this is a place – it was declared in the very beginning as a place where people can have a voice. So, people come in with a voice. And then – all this stuff. And then you have to deal with it. So, you know, it's both a good thing, in a lot of ways, and it's also a pain.

It is interesting that Hulting's first words to describe the choir emphasize its social or political function as a gathering place and interpersonal training ground for "different" "people." To most readers, this would hardly sound like a description of a chorus. "People" here actually means "women," and the most salient "differences" that demand negotiation are those between Lesbian and Straight women and between Radical and Liberal Feminists. Hulting's comments would seem to suggest that neither of these negotiations is going so smoothly. Later comments reveal that although she accepted the directorship of a chorus that was founded with a heavy emphasis on politics, her primary interest is in her musical craft, not in the facilitation of an interpersonal laboratory of diversity:

I'm not primarily a political person. That's *not* where I come from. I have an artistic sensibility. And I want to make a difference in these people's lives. And I want to use sound, in these situations, to lift people up. And to draw them forth into a higher ground, into a better space. That's what I'm about. ...And my joy in that is being able to – I mean, I just love to conduct. Having everybody on the same wavelength, and I get to be the sculptor. I've often thought of myself as the sculptor. I get to shape all the stuff that happens. And I get to make a difference in the world through all of these people.

I listened to these and related comments with a measure of empathy. In this chapter I confess to a range of practices as AMASONG's director that, motivated purely out of my musical need, would be

denounced by many as “un-Feminist.” Hearing about the internal conflicts in Anna Crusis made me wonder how I had gotten away with my relatively autocratic and musically elitist approach; or was my chorus suffering similar strife, unbeknownst to me? I queried Hulting further about one of the fundamental questions I still struggle to resolve:

KB: Do you have anything to say about what the relationship between music and politics can or should be?

Or: what can it *not* be? Are you arguing over where the balance tips, here, in your choir?

JH: I think so, yeah. Well, I think – I don’t know; I think that for some people part of it is the fact that I’m not Lesbian. You know, that kind of issue. And I think that sometimes colors things. So that thing gets in that dynamic a little bit. Not for many people, but for people who are, you know – it’s an undercurrent. It’s never talked about. But that can impinge on the sort of political-musical discussion.

Hulting’s response did not answer my question, but it did reveal how personal some of Anna’s conflicts are to her. This reminded me to consider one factor that had surely enabled me to pass off certain practices on a group who might not have accepted them from just anyone else: when a chorus or any other kind of group is identified with the Lesbian community, the choices of a non-Lesbian leader may be subjected to closer scrutiny and more frequent criticism than the same choices made by a Lesbian leader. An anecdote from AMASONG’s recent history will prove the case. My Heterosexual successor as director, Deborah Skydell, refused membership to an auditionee who had trouble matching pitch. The auditionee happened to be the new lover of a longtime AMASONG member. Though it was seldom that I had turned away an auditionee, I had never been questioned for doing so. Suddenly in this case, the suggestion was floated (probably by no more than two or three people) that Skydell had rejected the woman because she didn’t want so many Lesbians in the choir. Skydell’s decision had been a good one, but she got challenged, whereas in my nine years as director, I doubtless made a few bad decisions that went unchallenged. Regardless of the relative merits of any of Hulting’s decisions, she cannot establish unanimous credibility with this group on her musical expertise alone.

Ruth, Hulting’s most persistent critic, had this to say about the merits and liabilities of Anna Crusis:

R: I have very mixed feelings about Anna Crusis. I really like that it identifies itself as a Feminist choir.

Although one would be hard-pressed to say what that means these days.

K: Uh, in general, or just in relation to Anna?

R: Well, “in general” is a whole ‘nother question. But specifically I mean in relation to Anna. I like being in a choir that’s mixed orientationally. Because, especially these days, what’s important to me is the Feminist piece. Like, I’m definitely way past the point that I think all Lesbians are good! (*big laughter*) Or even that all Lesbians are Feminists. They’re not. And I find my most important relationships and my

closest friendships with Feminists, whether they're Lesbians or Straight. I feel more at home with Lesbian Feminists, but there are Straight women out there who *get it*. And I'm much more likely to want to pursue a deeper relationship with them –

K: – than with a non-Feminist Dyke.

R: Than with a non-Feminist Dyke. Right. Because I don't get how they – it's kind of like, you know. Gay Republicans! (*we laugh*)

Ruth and I agree that being a Lesbian does not automatically imply having revolutionary Feminist politics. Though Anna's political identity is not what Ruth would like it to be, she feels that the mere fact of calling itself a Feminist choir at least increases the chances that she will find like-minded friends among the membership, and that is still of value to her:

R: Cathy Roma started this choir, I think, with a very strong, Radical-Feminist vision. ...I wasn't there. But I know of Cathy, and I know some of what – . (*pauses*) I guess what it feels like to me, and this is somewhat conjectural on my part, is that we have a watered-down version of what was originally a very strong Feminist vision. ...I think that the original idea was to really give voice to Feminist ideas, to really look for ways to sing about women's power and strengths, and to create it by doing it. To create a community that was organized around singing this and bringing this to new audiences, and also, in the world of choral music, to find other things to talk about. Singing together is really powerful.

K: More so than just getting up and reading a platform?

R: Absolutely.

K: Why?

R: Well, because that was also going on at the time, right? But now that's not going on.

K: Maybe we ought to be doing that, too, now.

R: Well, we *should* be doing that, if you ask me. But it's really hard to get that one past the committees! I mean, I think we've just become mired in what's not even very good process. But singing together is powerful. It's a kind of intimacy. It's a kind of being part of something bigger. It's very stirring to audiences and singers. So, it's a major way of building community, I think. In fact, at this point I think I would say that I'm in Anna Crusis much more for community right now than for any other reason, because musically, I'm bored. And politically, I'm bored.

Ruth's observations about the power of singing together reminded me of Maya's comments on summoning the orishas through communal song (page 119). And her conviction that singing together is "a major way

of building community” is the founding principle of the class “Community-Building Through Voice” that Jawole Willa Jo Zollar invited me to co-teach at the third UBW Institute.

After further discussion, I learned what Ruth meant in her criticism of Anna’s “process.” Part of Ruth’s Feminism is a commitment to some form of consensus process or other system of “shared power and leadership.” The current committee structure – which for Hulting shares out *too much* of the leadership – falls short of Ruth’s ideal; governed by the rule of the majority, it does not allow for representation of minority positions, a situation diametrically opposed to Ruth’s Feminism. She has a clear ideal for the balance between music and politics, though she concedes that this can be difficult to create in reality:

To me, *how* we are Anna Crusis is just as important as *where* we are and *what* we sing. How we do our business, how we create our community, is just as important as the musical message... Since I’ve been in (Anna), there is a tension between focusing on the music and focusing on the process. It’s a tension because there are limited amounts of time. In a world where we had unlimited amounts of time to do this, they wouldn’t have to be opposed.

No others in my small sample of Anna women felt as strongly as Ruth about the importance of process. This is not, however, to diminish the salience of Ruth’s position. Hers is no lone voice outside of all cultural and political context. To the contrary, I have always been aware that many women in the Sister Singers network share her views, and I have observed the workings and the products of ensembles that are governed in a way that I believe she would appreciate politically. In fact, I knew I would have to work very specifically at AMASONG’s beginnings to combat any expectations that we would operate even democratically. The following criticisms Ruth made seemed to sum up most vehemently her objection to the current state of Anna, and some of them sounded as though they could just as easily have been designed for me:

When Cathy left (and) they interviewed for a new director...as I understand it from women who were involved at the time, the choice came down to two: one who was a stronger Feminist, and one who had more musical experience. And that was Jane. Jane is a full-time professional musician. ...I really see a major difference between (her) and what I see in some other leaders of some other women’s and GALA groups: where it’s really about that they’re in a leadership position because they have specialized knowledge, but what they’re doing is a service to their community – and that the way that they understand what they’re doing is being of service to their community. ...I really believe that Jane sees this as *her* choir: that she has an artistic vision that she wants to express, and that this choir is a means for *her* art to be expressed, for *her* professional career, for *her* image, for *her* achievement.

As Hulting’s comments about being Anna’s “sculptor” reveal, Ruth’s evaluation is dead-on. Community-building is not Hulting’s primary motivation. When Rachel Alexander says “I needed a choir...where I could be all of me,” she is not talking about what she can do for other people. I certainly was not directing AMASONG out of altruism; I regarded it without question as my choir, as the means for

the expression of my artistic vision. And I would imagine this to be true of most skilled conductors. We conduct because we will not be happy if we don't, and that need is what compels us to develop our "specialized knowledge," something we are usually conscious of doing at the expense of secure career futures. I believe that most people "specialized" enough to lead a fine ensemble are unable to avoid plying that knowledge in the service of their own artistic compulsions. I think that as AMASONG's director, it was my good fortune either to have wanted what most community members around me wanted or to have successfully convinced them that they wanted what I wanted. As a musician, Ruth is competent enough not to be satisfied by those types of ensembles that, distrustful of professional specialization, are truly leaderless and truly unbeautiful. The only scenario in which she could have it both ways would be under the direction of a highly skilled conductor whose own passions happened to be a good match for the desires of "the community" as Ruth perceived them.

The two other Anna singers whom I interviewed reported having their needs met in the group, and it is interesting to note that both of these women had been in the group when its founder, Catherine Roma, was still director. Certainly, each woman had noted the change after Roma's departure. In fact, one woman, Irene, had quit with Roma, doubtful that the change would be satisfying to her. But she eventually returned, as Anna offered unique gifts she could not find elsewhere:

K: I understand you've just gone back to Anna after a long absence.

I: Yes.

K: How come you had to go back?

I: I missed singing! I missed having a forum for some of my own creativity, my own writing.

K: Oh! So, you can write for Anna?

I: I do, but – you know, Anna as an entire group, we don't really sing anything that I write. But what happens is I assemble people from the choir and we form ourselves into a small group, and the small group performs.

K: That's great. That's one of the really special things about our choruses, is that the talents and special inclinations of individual members are encouraged and given a public platform. I really enjoy doing that with my group.

I: Yeah, where else would a dabbler like me be able to do something along these lines?

Irene's experience recalls Jawole Zollar's appreciation of the Womyn's cultural scene for its encouragement to "Get-It-Out-There-With-Your-Voice," even if that "voice" is unrefined.

I have already shown Anna's importance to Thea in providing her with a sense of community. This sense has endured since the Roma days, though Thea does note some changes, especially since the group's completion of a three-year training process with the LaSalle Center for Non-Profit Board Development:

There (has been) tension between the people who want things to be the way they were, like at the beginning of the Feminist movement, and things to be the way they are now. ...Some of those people were always sort of a little bit disgruntled as the choir got more and more organized. ...It's more of a professional-feeling kind of organization. ...I guess we don't want to be slipshod about our musical performance, that kind of thing. The organization is just not, maybe, as grassrootsy feeling as it was. ...But we still have our connections to grassroots. We don't ever want to lose that: singing for women's prisons – women in prison or shelters, things like that. But we do a lot of other things now that are, maybe, more quote-unquote mainstream. Like, we've sung for Hillary Clinton a couple of times.

In fact, singing in women's prisons is one of the most common activities of Feminist choirs articulating their commitments to women, community involvement, and social justice. I receive regular announcements over the Choruswomen listserv giving information about other choirs' prison performances.

Later in the conversation, I asked Thea to define Feminism:

T: Oh, boy! I was hoping you wouldn't ask! There's some people in the choir that think we have to have this whole discussion again, because everyone has a different idea of what Feminism is.

K: Do they think if you discuss it, you're all going to have the same one?

T: Oh, no. I'm sure we won't have the same one! But I guess some people think it's important to define, or to know what it means to each other. You know, I guess it is, but I find it very hard to define. I mean, I don't know that – *(pauses)* For instance: I think that it's more about understanding – creating understanding and building bridges, and, you know – not necessarily getting your message across by being in-your-face, being in someone's face so they can't hear what you're saying. I think there's a way to protest and get your message across, like through the music. I think that's the way I express it more than any other way: to try to use the music to reach people to create understanding and create more open minds. ...I think music is a really powerful way to reach people.

Thea and Jawole Zollar agree that music can sometimes bring politically transformative messages to people who are unable to hear polemic arguments, speeches, or protests. I questioned Thea further for information on the specific content of Anna's music:



K: So, what do you sing? What messages does the repertoire give?

T: Well, one thing that we at least try to insert into our concerts: some music about Lesbians. So, that's part of the message that we try to get out. And then we try to...promote understanding sometimes through our international repertoire. We like to do a lot of that. ...That's one of the reasons I love the choir so much: because I get a chance to sing all kinds of neat music. ...I have to say that lately – I'm not sure why – we haven't done any – we used to do a lot more blatantly political songs about particular issues. And we still do them, but not as much as we used to.

K: For example?

T: Well – I have to go back pretty far! Like, we used to do songs about El Salvador and different things that were happening in South America. We've done songs about nuclear power, things about abortion. Our June concerts have a beneficiary, usually, and so that'll be something like – we've done the National Abortion Rights Action League and a camp for kids of Gays and Lesbians, and...the Kensington Welfare Rights Union; they're people that advocate for the homeless. Different organizations like that. But sometimes the music, the songs are not specifically about these things. See, that's how I feel: I don't feel like each song has to be *about* an issue or something.

In her enjoyment of an international repertoire and her feeling that music without overt political content can still be compelling to sing, Thea would have found herself equally comfortable in AMASONG.

### AMASONG

Of the four AMASONG members I interviewed, three reflected with near unanimity the goals and priorities I had set in 1990 for what the chorus would become. To play the cynic, I must acknowledge that this could be the result of a lucky or subconsciously apt selection of subjects on my part; or perhaps these women were trying to please me by telling me what they knew I wanted to hear. My honest impression, though, is that I succeeded in communicating my vision for AMASONG quite clearly to most members, and I take the group's low attrition rate and steady growth to mean that my vision was not only understood but appreciated and shared.

Diana's observations about AMASONG were the most effusive and the most extensively thought-out:

K: What does AMASONG represent to you?

D: Let's see. I joined AMASONG in November of '93. I had just come back the previous month from being away in Central America for two and a half years. I was *starving* – I felt like I had just been *starving* for women's community...and to be with women's groups that were functioning. And I had long kept my eye on AMASONG, even when it was just a few people standing up there singing with their wavery voices! I still just couldn't believe it! I mean, here was this *Lesbian/Feminist* group up there!

And I thought: "How bold! How wonderful for this woman to create this amazing thing that women can just come on out and be out and sing their music together!" I was really anxious and thrilled to have that opportunity, where it had already been formed, this nook – and where the group had no trouble and were in fact quite proud to declare that they were a Feminist, Lesbian group and identified that way. That was really important to me.

K: In what ways did you find what you expected in terms of being a Lesbian and a Feminist group, and in what ways were you maybe surprised by what that meant?

D: Hmm. Yeah, I guess being – you know, there was no – I mean, it could have been – I guess I thought – I'm not sure what I was thinking back then, if I thought that you would have to take an oath of some sort! (*laughing*) I had definitely at that time even been in a coupled relationship with a male partner. ...But I didn't have to *say*. I didn't have to say I was Bisexual. I didn't have to say one thing! ...You took me in just on the merits of being interested in music, loving music, wanting to be a part of a group that did have that label – that I would be attracted to such a group. I was very heartened that there was a political edge to AMASONG. That was very compelling to me, that if there was a new women's shelter opening in town, AMASONG was there. There we would be when there was a murder of a woman on campus. That there were so many events in the community that tied us together with important social causes was very, very important to me. I guess I didn't expect the musicianship, the musical quality to be as high as it was and the demands on us to be as great. ...It wasn't just fun, hold hands with a group of women and sing popular songs; in fact, it's quite the opposite. It meant... "Get serious! We're gonna do some beautiful music, and that takes work. Roll up your sleeves!"

K: I've been trying to understand just exactly what it is that we have done together, and how the music and the politics complement each other or detract from one another.

D: See, I think they complemented each other greatly, actually. ...We were able to keep the focus on music, even though, here we would be at the women's shelter, and here we would be at the African-American cultural celebration and be up there on stage. The fact that we were actually musically strong made us attractive to be at the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts! You see what I mean? And allowed us to get into places where a Lesbian choir would never see the light of day! Would we ever have a CD? No, no, no, no, no! If we didn't have that emphasis on musical quality, on tight sound, on exploration of very difficult and challenging music – no. ...I can't believe the number of people that have gotten *somewhat* comfortable with the notion of a Lesbian/Feminist choir! And can open their mindset because the music is so compelling. And it brought a big slice of the community into our music and into radical politics almost unwittingly, you know?

Some GALA and Sister Singers choirs in the United States balance politics against musical content and accomplishment in a way that guarantees them but a perpetual audience of the "converted." In Diana's opinion, AMASONG's emphasis on musical excellence has enabled the group to execute a kind of "stealth" politics, commanding through beauty the respectful attention of people who would otherwise be

offended by or hostile to a public gathering of Dykes. Diana is the perfect example of my good fortune in finding a critical number of singers and audience members who were interested in the same things that interested me.

Like Diana, Heidi found AMASONG out of an explicit desire for women's community. Having sung in the Sister Singers chorus in Cleveland before moving to Champaign-Urbana, she knew that all she had to do was look us up in the Sister Singers directory. I asked her about her motivation to do this:

K: What's good about singing in an all-women's choir or a Lesbian-identified choir?

H: For me it's essential. ...It's not that I don't like men. It's just that being around men is different. That's sort of hard to describe, but I just think that being around all women is a more positive experience. And it's not necessarily that I can be more relaxed, it's just that there's something different when men are around, even how other women act. Just the dynamics – the dynamics change when it's a mixed group. I think that with just all women it's more open, and I prefer that.

K: And how about being in a choir with Lesbians? Can you talk about the impact of that, coming into this town from outside?

H: Well, right: that's also one of the more important aspects of it, that I can stay in touch with my community, learn who's in the community, and develop friendships. You know, that's essential. And then, the nice thing about AMASONG was that you could learn about what was going on about town, what Lesbian events or Feminist event were going on. Of course, I'd rather be with Lesbians than Straight folk! (*laughs*) But – it's just a nicer feel because they obviously know where I'm coming from.

K: Mm-hmm. I'd love to hear you comment on the repertoire in Amasong, and if you want to, you can compare it to the group you came from.

H: Well, you know, the repertoire I really enjoyed because it was very challenging. In Windsong the songs were more simplistic melodically, but they were also more politically – you know, they had a stronger political message. But unfortunately, they weren't that challenging to sing. You know, even though I appreciate that political message, I'm sort of at the point where I like to have music that's more challenging to sing. And I thought that was really great that not only were we a Lesbian choir – well, *Feminist/Lesbian* choir; it wasn't all Lesbians – actually, I think it's about half Lesbian. A million Bi's! I've never known so many Bisexuals in my life! (*laughs heartily*) But anyways, I preferred the music in AMASONG because it was much, much more challenging; it was much more international. I did like having to learn other languages, and I know we weren't a professional group, but I felt like we were up there with the professionals with the types of music that we were singing.

AMASONG has allowed Heidi to be around the kinds of people she considers to be her community. That was of primary importance to her when she first moved to Champaign-Urbana. Making itself known as a

group of Feminist-identified Lesbians and friends of Lesbians has been the group's most consistently political act, and for Heidi this has been sufficient: from this base she has enjoyed and taken pride in the high level of musicianship demanded by AMASONG's repertoire, even when it does not carry overtly Feminist messages.

Lynnette joined AMASONG in 1992 with the specific goal of becoming part of a community, and she found what she was looking for, though she, like Heidi, had trouble describing the value of this in concrete terms:

K: How did you come to join AMASONG? What did you expect to find, and what has it represented for you?

L: That's a huge question. Well, I guess it has to be broken down into two pieces: what I thought when I joined, and what it's meant to me since then. When I joined it was pretty simple: I was looking for a community, and I didn't know what kind of community I was looking for. ...I'm a little social-phobic. I have a lot of social anxiety. And it really only manifests itself socially; when I'm doing work, it really doesn't. But I have certainly struggled to find my people most of my adult life. And so I was really looking for that. ...And then I just saw the poster. And I thought that this was a good way to get in with a community of women. It was like: "Oh, this would be so great, to have a place that's all women, and that must share some of my political feelings about Feminism and everything." I mean, I saw the "Lesbian-slash-Feminist" and probably keyed in more to the "Feminist;" the "Lesbian" didn't really matter so much to me – except that it told me that these people were progressive, open-minded, etcetera. They had to be, or those two words wouldn't be there – either one of them, let alone both of them. So that was what I was looking for.

K: Why did you think it would be great to be with women only for one night a week? Why is that important to you? What's good about that?

L: I guess – boy, I have to try to sort of go back to that time. Um, it just feels – I don't know. I'm not sure I can express why that feels like a good idea to me.

K: Can you say in what way it feels different from mixed company?

L: Oh, wow! You'd think after all these years I would have thought consciously about some of this stuff a little bit more! Um, hmm – can I verbalize that? Let's see. I'm usually articulate. Well, all the things that you almost want to say just don't work.

K: Isn't that weird? You know there's some truth in there somewhere, but –

L: Right. Because I don't believe that there are no good men. And I don't believe that men and women can't be friends. And I don't believe that there always has to be sexual tension there. And actually, coming into a group of Lesbians is not a way to avoid sexual tension anyway!

K: Right! (*we laugh*)

L: So, you want to say that, but it doesn't make any sense. So – so it's – I don't know – there's just something – the ways women are – and, well maybe I should just say there are ways *I* feel when I'm just with a group of other women, and it doesn't have to do with not liking men, and it doesn't have to do with sexual tension! It's just something *else* that's freer. And – I don't know what that – I just have to admit that I don't know what that is. But it's a feeling of just being able to be more natural, and just being able to *think* you know – and maybe it's an illusion in some ways – but you *think* you know on some deeper level about a lot of the experiences of the people that are around you.

Among those of us who know her, Lynnette has no need to overprotest in defense of men; she keeps the very regular companionship of a man who is dear to her and who has been a great friend to the chorus in his faithful help at our events, enthusiastic cheering of our accomplishments, and tireless promotion of our music on his community-radio show. Interestingly enough, it has been the Heterosexually married women who have rallied most vociferously for preserving the women-only-space policy I established for AMASONG rehearsals back in 1990 – when we didn't have any Straight members – because I thought it would be important to the Dykes. Lynnette seemed tempted to lapse into some of the more essentialist, socio-biological language about women-only environments that were expressed in Chapter Three. Knowing that none of these could be rationally substantiated in absolute terms, she tempered her statement by ascribing her evaluation to her own behavior rather than to something inherent in the environment; furthermore, she allowed for the operation of some degree of illusion in the perception that a women-only environment is necessarily more empathetic. Still, her feeling – and the feeling of so many of us who choose these environments – that this is true is no less relevant for being difficult to defend.

Lynnette comments that the words “Lesbian/Feminist” in AMASONG's name gave her a clear message of “progressive,” “open-minded,” and woman-oriented politics. Her response reflects my exact purpose in choosing that language. I had always counted on those words to bring certain kinds of people together in the organization and to repel others. From a public-relations standpoint, I suspected that anyone hearing our name would instantly feel either affirmed, provoked to curiosity, challenged, or scandalized, depending on her or his political consciousness. I doubted that the immediacy of this effect could be appreciably enhanced *or* diminished by our repertoire, whether we sang a ditty about two young women attending their high-school prom together or liturgical music by early-Baroque composer Heinrich Schütz.

Further confirmation of this approach came up later in my discussion with Lynnette. We were remembering a piece we had been asked to sing in a concert we shared with a Sister Singers group in another Midwestern city. The piece was a sort of anthem to progressive political causes in the style of the music for Leftist choruses in the 1920s and 1930s. Though the piece articulated the need for better health care, women's control of our own reproduction, freedom from sexual assault, nuclear disarmament, and other issues, I found the text awkward and the music hideous, and I don't recall that any of us was able to bring better than a begrudging attitude to the rehearsal of it:

K: Remember the *lovely* song we had to sing in \_\_\_\_\_? (*I sing a phrase. and we laugh*)

L: I know. Which was hitting on all the right political burners –

K: You'll notice there was nothing left out of there!

L: Yeah. And I can't say that I disagreed with any of it. But it just was not very beautiful music! You know, I've talked about how I don't have a very developed appreciation for different kinds of music, and I don't have a vast musical background, but – well, I'm sure from the first time humans were singing, they were singing to some kind of god or deity. I mean, you just sort of feel that that's where it comes from. So, the way that you and we try to approach it being about *music* was – I came to see that that was the most important thing. And I guess the year that I spent in D.C.<sup>(18)</sup> just really solidified that for me. Because this interesting thing happens: you're trying to give people these messages, and you're trying to convince them, but if it's not beautiful, people don't listen to it. And – using an expansive definition of "beautiful," because it's not always *pretty*, but: *musical*. And I think because (AMASONG is) beautiful, people listen to us. I think we're a strong political message by being what we say we are and standing up there and just – you know, the enterprise is inherently political.

I had always felt liberated by the powerful message of AMASONG's name – and the community of women it succeeded in creating – to indulge in musics I desired, whether they carried explicitly Feminist messages or not. On the other hand, groups such as Sistrum, Lansing's Women's Chorus and Anna Crusis Women's Choir – whose names equivocate on the matter of their solidarity with Feminist and Lesbian communities – must either rely fairly heavily on song content to bear their messages or else negotiate challenges from members who feel that a stylistically-varied and musically-challenging but not-explicitly-Feminist repertoire leaves their need for radical identity expression unsatisfied.

Lynnette went on to talk about the aspect of the choir that she could not have guessed from our name:

L: In terms of community, (AMASONG) was probably right on par with my expectations. ...I think the unpredictable part, the part that I could not have even guessed about the experience, was what it was like to sing with a group like that. I'd never really done that. I mean, I sang with the chorus in high school. But, you know, it wasn't very good, and the director wasn't very good, and you know – the whole thing, the music-making part of it – and even before the music, the warming up and blending the sound and how that – how your body responds to that, and how you feel when you're breathing and you're singing and you're listening – I had no idea what that was like! I had *no idea*. And that really, I think – you know, when I talk about the mystery and the grace of the experience, that's really what I'm talking about, that sort of mystical side to it. And, you know, I don't want to get too (*spookily*) "Wooo!" about it –

K: I've heard that so many times from people in the choir! (*laughing*)

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<sup>18</sup> when, having sung with AMASONG for a few years, she joined a Sister Singers chorus there

L: But there is! There's just a mystical, spiritual side to it. And that was completely unexpected, completely wonderful, and that has been what has marked the experience, really, for me, more than meeting people or any social aspect.

Lynnette has just identified the very reason I am striving to make a life as a choral musician: not for altruism, not for Feminism, but because when people sing well together, the experience is ecstatic; it augments our joy in living and our appreciation of ourselves and the people around us. It might be said that the most concretely Feminist thing I have managed to accomplish through AMASONG has been to enhance the well-being of some one hundred women in East Central Illinois over the last decade.

In this chapter's section on the identities of the chorus members, I have already shown that Eva's entrée into AMASONG was not motivated by any particular desire to be counted as one of its community members: she was nervous about being publicly identified as a Lesbian, and entering a White group as the only African American is not the way to find that immediate sense of empathy that Lynnette reported enjoying. It was music and nothing more that brought Eva in:

K: I'm curious to know how you ended up singing in this choir. What brought you to it? What did you expect, what did you find?

E: Well, I knew a couple of people from there – Grace was one of them – who kept saying, “You’ll just *love* it! You’ve gotta come! The music is so wonderful!” ...And I don't think I ever went to any performance. Also, there was Anne who was in the choir, and she was, like, *exuberant* about it. You know, she really was excited to be a part of this group. And then I just decided, I guess, one day, that: “Okay, I’ll try it out.” That’s basically what brought me, those two women. ...And I came to something where you were singing on the street around the corner from that studio, and so I was like: “Oh! It doesn't seem that bad!” That was what kind of got me involved.

The performance Eva saw was the annual outdoor fundraising festival for WEFT, Champaign-Urbana's community radio station. At the time, we had been learning a body of Zimbabwean village songs, and because these were well suited to outdoor performance – which most of our repertoire was not – I accepted the request to appear.

I asked Eva what had made her stay in the group:

E: Well, I think using my voice – finally getting past the fear of: “Well, I don't read music very well,” and I think that's been a fear of mine in music for a long time. I think you made it easier for me by the way you handled the group, so I was able to feel like: “Oh, well. If I don't know it today, it's not going to hurt anything.” But I finally learned that I could learn the music. And I've always been a person who was very diverse in terms of music. I'd get criticized when I was a kid because I liked classical music. (AMASONG) didn't seem that difficult after a while. And so, you know, I don't know if I learned everything perfectly, but I did find the music interesting after singing it for a while. The fact that I knew it and I recognized it, and: “Oh, yeah! *This* is how this piece goes!” My wanting to become

accomplished with the group probably made me stay. And I thought: "Well, it gets me out, too." I like – even though I was fussing about it – it was good for me, to do music and to go into an area I hadn't been into for a long time. It was challenging for me after that, to stick with the group and know the music."

The responses in this section show that these three choirs fulfill for most members the Feminist choral movement's dual commitments to Womyn's community and the choral art. Individual groups' emphases differ from one another, as do the priorities of their individual singers. Stephanie and Eva provide atypical examples of singers whose sole attraction to their groups is musical; White Womyn's community is no more "family" to White but Heterosexual-and-nonpolitical Stephanie than it is to Lesbian but African-American Eva. And while Chris loves both singing and Lesbian-identified community, as a Black and blind person she is less comfortable within her group than any other Feminist chorister I have encountered.

### What They Most Love to Sing

#### *Sistrum*

My conversation with Rachel Alexander about favorite repertoire turned quickly to the challenge of finding appropriate music for Sistrum:

RA: The repertoire committee gets together once or twice early in the summer and once or twice Post-Fest!<sup>19</sup> (*chuckles*) And each of us brings ideas and lists or whatever, and we divvy up the task of getting music, if it's stuff that we need to send away for, and – just talk about what kinds of stuff we want to be doing. Some years we've developed themes; usually not. Usually we just find things that we like. It's one of the (aspects) that I find most difficult, is finding appropriate music for us that we want to do.

KB: Where do you look, Rachel? What are your sources?

RA: We tend to look a lot to other choruses. This year we downloaded some stuff off of MUSE's website. I get a lot going to the GALA Leadership Conferences and Music Directors Conferences, because we always have a reading session, and I pick up stuff there. I also pick up stuff at reading sessions at ACDA,<sup>20</sup> although less of that is stuff that I'm interested in for my group.

KB: Does Sistrum send you, or is that out of your pocket?

RA: No, it's usually Sistrum. I think they spend about \$300 a year on me, which doesn't get me everywhere, but it helps a lot. ... And I pick up some stuff at the store, you know? Somebody will say, "let's do this song." And I'll go and pick up a pop song and arrange it. I also go down to Musical Resources in

<sup>19</sup> On the calendar of a Michigan Womyn's Music Festival worker, the period in late summer after the festival has closed for the year; this usage reflects the sacredness of the festival season, during which everything else is put on hold.

<sup>20</sup> The American Choral Directors Association.



Toledo and look through their bins. Women bring stuff. And I write things. I arrange things. I've done a fair number of arrangements for us. Some of it is Womyn's music from women who are out there doing non-choral stuff in the Womyn's music movement, and some of it is pop stuff, and just a few are things I'm writing myself.

It was one of Alexander's compositions, a setting of an Emily Dickinson poem, that Stephanie reported loving the most out of all the pieces she had sung thus far with Sistrum. She also appreciated singing a chant by Hildegard von Bingen. I asked Stephanie what she most enjoyed listening to or singing outside of Sistrum. She identified Bach's *Goldberg Variations* as a listening favorite. Her most cherished performing experience was Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*. With her training and her tastes running toward the classical, she is far less enamored than other Sistrum members of the "choralized" pop songs common in the repertoire; she finds these anti-lyrical. She mentioned "Shenandoah" as another Sistrum favorite, which she loves for its lyrical quality.

Then Stephanie astounded me by mentioning a title that I recognized as an Afro-Cuban Yoruba chant to Yemayá that I had learned from Consuelo at an Urban Bush Women Community Sing in New Orleans. I asked Stephanie to tell me what she liked about it:

S: Well, I think this is the kind of thing that Sistrum does best. Because it sits in the voice really well; it doesn't have to be a big, loud thing.

K: Less is more, huh?

S: Yeah. And it's the kind of piece I like. ...I tend to like slower things that you can really hear the harmonies. I'm kind of a slow person in some ways. People used to tell me I talked really slow. And then I started thinking that maybe that's why I liked singing, because that's what singing is –

K: Elongated speech!

S: Yeah, really elongated sometimes. But this is very mysterious sounding, and really – it was really beautifully – it was really neat – it was really *intimate* to perform it, I guess. You know, you really felt like everybody was – you could really hear the harmonies within the group, because you had that amount of time. And even the audience – you could really get close to them.

K: Did you learn anything about the song? What do you know about the song?

S: I don't know anything about it. It might be that (Rachel) talked about it before I was in the group. They all knew it. I mean, this is someone else's copy.

K: Do you know what the words mean? Any of them?

S: No.

Because she asked me, I proceeded to explain to Stephanie who Yemayá is and the kind of ritual context in which songs like this would be sung to the orishas. She was interested in and impressed by the information, but this did not lead to any other issues or questions. We thumbed through her music folder, which also held a Ghanaian play song, a South African freedom song, and some arranged songs in popular styles such as Carole King's "Natural Woman" and something from Holly Near's solo repertoire; none of these pieces stimulated any conversation on the matters with which this study is concerned. Stephanie summed up her orientation to the music she sings in the following comments, which typify the European-derived cultural approach by which music can be defined as "absolute" and in which "art for art's sake" is the most highly-valued kind:

S: I liked singing this one a lot. But that may not have anything to do with what it's about. I'm really bad that way: *I don't care much about what I'm singing about a lot of the times.*

K: What do you care about?

S: I care about what it feels like.

K: In the voice?

S: Yeah. And, you know, just if I think it's beautiful sounding.

The first favorites that Ginger identified were:

G: All the corny ones. Like "Marie."

K: I don't know that one.

G: It's about those high-school girls who went to the prom. It's a little waltz. And we had people dress up in a prom tux and dress and waltz around while we were singing that. That was really fun. I love all the Sweet Honey songs, every single one of them.

K: What do you love about them?

G: Well, they're very challenging because the harmonies are so tight. And I love the lyrics. The whole thing just...meshes together really well with the words and the music. ...They make you feel. Like, we sang "Patchwork Quilt." That was incredible. My dad's partner died from AIDS, and I saw his quilt. The day we were singing, I saw his quilt piece. I could hardly sing. You know, their music speaks to us.

The first two favorites that Chris identified also spoke to directly to her experiences and emotions:

K: Could you name a few of your favorite songs that you've sung with Sistrum? The ones that you most loved singing.

C: "Music in my Mother's House."

K: I know that one. Because?

C: There was music in my mother's house. We always sang, whether it be gospel or just singing songs. My godmother was a pianist, and we'd all stand around the piano and sing. "Something Inside So Strong" was another one.

K: Why did you like that one?

C: I think because the times that I didn't feel strong, when I thought about the words of that song, it gave me strength to want to be stronger. ...It just did something for me, made me feel good about myself at that time. And it's one of those songs that just picks you right up out of whatever mood you were in and put you right up there.

These two songs are choralizations of popular-style tunes. Chris went on to rhapsodize about singing Ysaye Barnwell's "We Are" in a massed performance involving several Womyn's choruses from the Midwest who had gathered at Northern Illinois University for a regional Sister Singers festival. This song from Sweet Honey's repertoire was conceived in choral texture, and its text establishes the place of each new child in the universe:

"We Are." That was powerful, because we sang it in DeKalb! It was a *bunch* of us women! "We are our grandmothers' dreamings..." We all sang it together, and it was *all these women!* And we were singing this *powerful* song. Wow! It was just beautiful!

Chris also said that she loved "Asesú," the name given to the arrangement of the Afro-Cuban song to Yemayá that I had been astounded to see in Stephanie's folder. In the case of this song, it was not its content but its "smooth, flowing" sound that attracted Chris; she did not remember knowing what it meant until the information I gave her jogged her memory.

My overall perception from talking with Alexander and the three Sistrum members is that textual content is at least as important as musical sound in selecting and enjoying repertoire pieces. This being the case, I found it puzzling that two people in the sample had no idea what their Yoruba song was about, or even that it was Afro-Cuban Yoruba, or what Yoruba was.

*Anna Crusis*

Thea reported that one of her favorite things about Anna Crusis is the international eclecticism of the group's repertoire. In fact, this is also one of the reasons I have enjoyed Anna. Many amateur groups in the United States, particular GALA and Sister Singers groups included, are hesitant to sing music in any language but English, a limitation that narrows their stylistic options considerably. When I created AMASONG, I took my cue from those Sister Singers choirs with adventurously international programming. If the 1980s *Zeitgeist* seen in the expanding "world-beat" music market and the push for "multiculturalism" in education had not yet hit the university ensembles in which I had been singing, it was alive and well in Womyn's music. Jane Hulting and I talked about the appeal of culturally diverse programming to Feminist performers and audiences:

JH: Anna's repertoire has always been very diverse, and long before other choirs were doing international music. Anna was doing tons of stuff from all over the place.

KB: Did you start that?

JH: I think Cathy (*Roma*) started some of it.

KB: Why was Anna doing it and other choirs weren't?

JH: Well, because it was part of the Feminist kind of thing, you know? As far as, like – it's a Liberal thing about giving voice to the voiceless. ...And wanting to make other cultures available to a more monochromatic kind of audience here. So now, it's amazing: I can just go to the store and buy tons of "world" stuff. I mean, I'm finding stuff out there that is now published that we did six, eight, ten years ago. You know: Latvian stuff, Yoruba stuff, all kinds of this stuff.

KB: Did you go to any of the Womyn's music festivals? Were you part of that culture?

JH: Actually, not as much as many directors or singers have been. Like, I've never been to Michigan. I went to NEWMR.<sup>21</sup> ...I've been to (National). And I think it was at the University of Illinois –

KB: A long time ago! You were in on the beginning.

JH: I went to a couple of those. ...I hear people's recordings and I listen to a lot of Womyn's music, but I don't really go to the festivals.

KB: I'm asking because you mentioned seeing on the shelves now things you didn't see six years ago. And I think that the Womyn's music movement has had a considerable effect in many parts of the country on the broadening of the palate.

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<sup>21</sup> New England Women's Music Retreat

JH: I think it has. I think the Womyn's music movement has, and I think the Gay and Lesbian choral movement has, too. ...Of course there's that whole international thing, that choral organization that has meetings, this International Federation of Music of something, that meets every four years. So that's a big thing, too. And then all the incredible technology that just makes everything available all the time. I mean, it's all so wild. But the Womyn's movement – I mean, it's really clear that a lot of things that we were doing a long time ago are now being bought.

This conversation soon led to a discussion of how it was that our predominantly White groups were singing more Black music than White groups outside of the Feminist choral movement. I mentioned the influence on me of Urban Bush Women, Sweet Honey In The Rock, and Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir, something that Hulting recognized as significant:

JH: These three groups, you know, have had such a big effect on Lesbian and Feminist groups, and less on standard women's choirs.

KB: Yeah, and I think part of that is something that certainly relates to my experience, which is that I'd had no personal contact with the cultural offerings of Black America until I went to the Womyn's music festivals. And all of a sudden, here are all these Women of Color teaching songs, sharing this and that, everything – and so, it became like a Feminist thing to notice and to learn and to take interest in.

JH: Sure. Absolutely. That happened to me, too.

KB: And that hasn't really touched most middle-class, White women. That happened to you, too?

JH: Oh, yeah.

KB: That's how it happened?

JH: Yeah. I mean, I had lived in Minnesota and Iowa. I had traveled a lot; I'd traveled around the world. But, I hadn't – in terms of living, it was very Midwestern. And so it wasn't until I started going to the festivals. In fact, that thing in Urbana was my first contact with a lot of Black groups.

To Hulting, "Midwestern" is synonymous with "White;" either the particular Midwestern cities where she lived were extremely segregated or they had few or no Black residents. In any case, the point is clear: coming from White, middle-class families in small Midwestern cities, both Hulting and I experienced the racial and cultural environment of the Womyn's music festival as revelatory.

I asked Thea to identify her favorite music from Anna's repertoire:

T: Well, we always do some kind of Balkan piece. So I always enjoy those. I enjoy those more than anything, because that happens to be my thing.

K: Do you get to help? Or is Jane pretty good at coaching them?

T: She's pretty good at coaching them. She asks me to help a little bit, and this other woman who goes to Ethel with us. And sometimes we do help with the rhythms and how to try to get the Balkan voice and that sort of thing.

K: Uh-huh. Any other favorites from the repertoire?

T: Well, I happen to like this music by dead, White men that isn't very politically correct!

K: Yeah, you and me both!

T: I wouldn't want to sing exclusively classical music, but I do love singing it. We do a lot less of it now, and that's something that I miss. ...We have some people that object to Christian content. ...It's been such a bitter dispute in Anna Crusis. ...There are some people that have had bad experiences in church; it wasn't even that they were of other faiths – they just felt like they had been abused by their church. ...People's feelings on that issue keep changing, so I'm just hoping we can reach a more reasonable balance on that. ...Randall Thompson's "Alleluia" was one we did a long time ago that I really loved. And "Tota pulchra es" –

K: Duruflé!

T: Yes. And I really like some of the African stuff that we do. We did a (South African) piece at GALA (that) tells about all these women who packed the town hall for a protest of some kind, and there were so many of them, and they were so powerful, that the whole town hall was shaking. So that's what the song is about. ...I like those kinds of things: I like really rhythmic things.

Thea's criteria for judging the merits of a piece seem weighted toward its musical properties, though she was visibly thrilled to communicate to me the content of the South African song. Her stylistic tastes are wide-ranging.

It was challenging to get Ruth to identify Anna repertoire that she loved. Her responses kept turning toward her frustrations as a member of the music-selection committee that works with Hulting to create each season's programs. Apparently the music-selection committee members take responsibility for researching and recommending repertoire, but any of their suggestions are subject to Hulting's veto. When I asked Ruth to describe her ideal repertoire, she responded:

R: Well. I would like to see more pieces that say something about – just positive messages about women.

K: Give me some examples of pieces you know of that do that to your satisfaction.

R: Well. our twentieth anniversary year we did kind of a retrospective. We did “Still Ain’t Satisfied.” “Sister Spring of Vietnam.” and we were singing... “La Andina.” It’s a good piece.

K: It is.

R: ...I like Alix Dobkin’s stuff a lot, although it’s a lot of work to make it choral. Because it’s not choral to start with. Part of the problem is a real dearth of choral repertoire that does this. So what we have is a lot of Womyn’s music classics that got arranged.

K: Holly Near Stuff? Margie Adam stuff?

R: Sure. Any of that kind of stuff.

K: You like it?

R: Um – I do.

K: Because – ?

R: Because of what it says.

K: Does it matter to you what it sounds like? The music?

R: Well. I mean, you know, being a kind of folky, singer-songwriter myself, I like that stuff. But it has to be well arranged, otherwise it sounds like crap. ...I think that finding music that is specific to communities of women from other cultures – and working to learn both about the culture and the music, and to perform it in a context where it’s not usually heard – I think that’s a Feminist thing to do. ...But in terms of repertoire – and in terms of the way the repertoire is in some ways our outward identity – I feel like on the music committee I’m always struggling to try to get more content: more words, more images, more Feminist messages.

The differences between what Ruth most loves to do and what Thea most loves to do are obvious here. For Ruth, textual content is at least as important as musical sound. She might have been unhappy in my choir, where, in seeking the sounds I needed to hear, I rather more avoided anti-Feminist content than I sought out explicitly Feminist content, and where there was no committee even to operate under the pretext of shared artistic decisions.

My sense from Jane Huling’s words and from my knowledge of her practice is that her emphasis

in choosing repertoire is on style and not on content. The extremely international nature of her programs is, in itself, the content of her message. It happens fortuitously that many of these songs, culled as they are from various vernacular traditions, carry texts with overtly political or otherwise Feminist-approved messages. But it is not the search for Feminist content that drives Hulting's choices. For all the statements about communicating "messages" that "make a difference in the world," Hulting herself says that she is "not primarily a political person." An anecdote from Ruth illuminates this point:

Right now, Jane is really wanting to do this song from the Mahotella Queens called "Women of the World." It's *Afro-pop*. And the song has this general, kind of gumball message that says: "We're women of the world, and we have something to say, and we have to make the menfolk understand that we have ideas and priorities." The only...redeeming feature...of the piece was that at least it *named* that we have something to say to *men*; that *men* need to listen! ...And then she – because she was doing this GALA choruses thing in D.C. – she took out the word "menfolk" and said "people." So now we're "women of the world who have something to say to *people*"?

### AMASONG

My emphasis in repertoire selection for AMASONG was almost exclusively aesthetic. I looked for as many different kinds of vocal ensemble sounds as possible that were beautiful or thrilling to me and could be approached by the chorus. I also sought out texts not for their specific content but for the quality of their poetry. Usually I found that the musical sounds I loved had texts that were compelling, or alternatively, that those texts that called my attention turned out to have been set to compelling music. In the case of original music, the first mark of a fine choral composer is the choice of an evocative text. In the case of oral-tradition songs, I trusted in the strength of musical materials that had endured the winnowing process of generations of transmission: their texts were reliably uncontrived and communicated with a directness that appealed to me. These considerations led me to bring an extremely wide variety of music into AMASONG's repertoire. I was delighted to find that members of AMASONG identified a diversity of selections as their favorites.

It was this diversity in itself that Lynnette loved:

L: One of the things I loved best was all the different singing styles. You know, like to try to do the Balkan stuff. And in the Irish, all those little steps that were just beyond what was on the page – you know, more than just tapping your "r"s the right way. And I liked trying to do all those different things in your head with your voice. Yeah. That was probably the most fun part of it. And I liked all the different languages. ...I mean, they were challenging, but it was fun to do them.

K: Can you name some of your favorites? Name three. Take your time.

L: Um, okay. Just three!



K: You can name five.

L: Um, well –

K: The first ones that come to your mind.

L: Well, I love “Strange Fruit.” I’ve always loved “Strange Fruit.”

K: Why?

L: Oh! Well, is it “burning flesh” where the (harmony) just kind of twists your head sideways?

K: Yep.

L: I love that. ...I remember when we first sort of got that, and it was just – I don’t know what to say: it just really twists your head sideways. And it was a song that I had been familiar with from Billie Holiday, and I remember when you first gave it to us: “We’re a *chorus*. How’re we gonna do *this*?” You know, it was a much different version. And the lyrics are very powerful, and the arrangement of it just sets your hair on end. It was really cool. And it won us an award! I mean, how can you not like a song that brought us so much joy?

Because “Strange Fruit” was made famous by Billie Holiday, it is often assumed to have been written by her or by another African-American artist. In fact, this anti-lynching song was written by Abe Meeropol, whose pen name was Lewis Allen, a Jewish Leftist noted for adopting the children of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg after their electrocution as alleged Russian spies. My arrangement of the song for a *cappella* treble chorus employs some surprising dissonances, which is what Lynnette meant by feeling her head “twist sideways.” Our performance of this song appears on our first compact disc recording, *Over Here the Water Is Sweet*, and garnered us the 1998 Gay and Lesbian American Music Award for Best Choral Group, which was one of the most exciting events in AMASONG’s history.

Lynnette went on to identify other favorites, which included a set of Irish songs, as well as the greater proportion of European art music I tended to program for December performances, though I remembered that there was one of these concerts that had frustrated her. When I asked her what she liked about the Irish songs, she said:

L: Oh, they were just so fun to sing. And “The Game of Cards” I remember, actually, because I never knew I could sing that high, before we did that song! So I learned some things about my voice doing that song. Um, I kind of liked the stuff from our winter concerts...

K: Except the one that had too much God in it?

L: Except the one that had too much God in it. Yeah. ...But "Snow-Covered Bridges"<sup>22</sup> – that was probably the coolest thing out of the last winter concert.

K: You're the second person to name that.

L: I love that! It's so exactly evocative of what the (text) is about. I mean, it doesn't even matter that it's not in English. It really just sounds like what it is.

Lynnette has enjoyed musical variety, intense harmony and intense poetry, challenges to her vocal technique and language diction, and the musical illustration of textual content.

My interview with Heidi preceded my interview with Lynnette: Heidi was the first one to identify "Dream of Snow-Covered Bridges" as one of her favorites. From there she went on in the direction I had expected at least some respondents to take:

K: What were some of your favorites?

H: Oh, that's a hard one! The one favorite was that song with the bridge, you know, where the snow was on your sleeve?

K: Really?

H: Yeah, that was one of my favorites. "Vintern...?"

K: "Nedsnødde bruer." Why did you like that one so much?

H: I loved that one! It just – it really, when my voice – it was something my voice could handle very well. Um, "Keep Your – ." "Keep the Lamps Burnin' –"

K: "Keep Your Lamps." What did you like about that one?

H: It was exciting to sing, and it was a Spiritual. I liked what it was representing.

K: Which was what, for you?

H: Um, a Negro Spiritual. African – Afro-American rights. And it just touched upon the horrors of slavery, and that's – I find that very important. ...I'm very conscious of people's rights and trying to – I don't know, spread the word.

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<sup>22</sup> "Draum om nedsnødde bruer" – or "Dream of Snow-Covered Bridges" – my setting for treble chorus and double bass of a poem by Norwegian writer Tarjei Vesaas. AMASONG's performance of this piece on our second CD, *Ami*, won for me the 2000 GLAMA for Best Contemporary Classical Composition.

This observation prompted me to ask Heidi about her perception of my repertoire choices:

K: What's your understanding of why the repertoire of AMASONG has looked the way it has?

H: Well, I would think that that was mostly your choice and that you were trying – for one, you chose pieces you enjoyed or you liked. Of course, you had your own pieces that you wrote and arranged. And I'm sure you chose things that you thought were politically correct or had a message that you wanted to spread to the audience – maybe wanted to hear yourself. I know your studies probably had some influence on some of the things you chose. But I always wondered where you heard all this music.

K: It's kind of interesting to me to see what the singers' impression is about why we do certain music.

H: Well, I think the other reason is that you knew your choir so well that you knew what would sound good. I think you were able to pick music according to what the choir could do and what suited the choir. I think that was one of the reasons. Which is probably why we were so successful.

Although I did not sacrifice my musical standards to communicate progressive messages, Heidi perceives nonetheless that our concerts did feature the conscious articulation of a politics. In the case of “Keep Your Lamps” and other Spirituals, I was always compelled equally by the music and the message, which is why this genre had such a favored status in our repertoire. The same is true of other Black styles we performed: Gullah and Yoruba music, and songs from the repertoire of Sweet Honey in the Rock.

Diana spoke at length about why she loves the music of Sweet Honey, a group she has seen in many venues since discovering them at Michigan years ago. Her words represent sentiments expressed by many respondents:

D: Let me tell you, they have meant the world to me for years and years!

K: Amen!

D: I'm telling you! I cannot say how much they have inspired and influenced me! I love those women.

K: Can you say why?

D: Ha! How to narrow it down? They make such beautiful music, to start out with. I mean, gorgeous harmonies, and – oh! – they just go so many directions with it. (They) are *not* bounded. They aren't. They are very, very good musicians. And they're also very creative. That's a unique combination. And they get very directed on making a certain type of music accessible to us all. They have brought such a range, from traditional music that – a lot of them would not be familiar to people's ears, were it not for Sweet Honey. ...And this is music that at one point was sung over and over and over and was part of the being, and – wow, that stuff would've slipped away! Oh, my! ...And then, just a lot of the music they've

created themselves – wow! They really know how to think about some of the deep issues that underlie a person's life. You know? That's what I like. They think very profoundly about life's experience, and often from the point of view of a woman, and not from a privileged woman either. And it's not always: "Oh, woe is me!" It's oftentimes: "I've learned this. I know this. I've been given this. I want to pass this along." I mean, it's just so very deeply thoughtful that I appreciate it like you can't believe. ...Back in 1985 I was on an international work camp and there was one woman that was playing this – "You get more for a paycheck – ?"

K: Yes! "We bring more than a paycheck..." (*we sing the chorus together*)<sup>23</sup>

D: Oh, and (this) woman from camp, she was from Denmark. She was just playing this over and over, and I was thinking: "You know what? That woman is thinking real deeply about work and what it means and how it's all interconnected to our children, to the environment, you know? And here she is from Denmark, and she's able to access that idea with a *song* that's sung *so beautifully*; it just knocks you off your feet! ...And yet, it's got that lyric going that's allowing that woman – I mean, if she listened to it as many times as she did, that's going to be in her in a way that reading an article or even being part of a demonstration somewhere isn't going to feed her. Because that's the thing about music: the way it feeds into your *heart*. It gets into your *heart* as well as your head. And I think that when you can get heart and head together like that, it makes you – it locks into your DNA. And I think that's what you're going to pass on.

There were times in AMASONG when we performed gorgeous music whose textual content held no particular appeal for most members. A good example of this is Gabriel Fauré's *Messe Basse* ("Low Mass"). That its text is in Greek and Latin helped to distract the non-Christians from the fact that we were actually singing "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy" and "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world," allowing us to take pleasure in the sheer vocal and musical sensations. But AMASONG's orientation also allowed us to perform some selections that not only were outstanding as music but that also articulated some of our most passionate concerns, an experience most of us had not enjoyed in other choirs. In AMASONG as in Sistrum and Anna Crusis, this is among the things that the singers value the most about their ensembles.

### What They Mean When They Sing Black Song

#### *Sistrum*

I had a sense that something explicit in Sistrum's *raison d'être* dictated the inclusion of Black traditions in their repertoire, so I asked Rachel Alexander about it:

KB: I was looking at your mission statement where it says: "We sing the stories of our lives and add our voices to the worldwide struggle for freedom, justice, and peace." How does that work?

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<sup>23</sup> By Ysaye Barnwell, "More Than A Paycheck" draws attention in poetic and direct terms to the daily workplace's assault on our health, whether we are subjected to industrial pollution, physical injury, or emotional stress.

RA: Ha, ha! "How does that work?" Well, we sing a lot of songs that relate who we are to things that are going on in the world, sometimes in places that are very far away. We'll sing South African freedom songs. And they are about the people of South Africa, but we resonate with them. And we invite our audience to resonate with them as well. And we invite our audience to notice with us that, you know, we're all one people, and we all – we're all after the same thing, which is peace – freedom.

KB: Is that what the "resonance" is? That we all want peace and freedom?

RA: Well, that's part of it. I think the resonance also is that as Lesbians, we experience discrimination, oppression. I think, you know, because we come together as a chorus of women, primarily as Lesbians, we – there's an empathy with people in other kinds of struggles who are working for human rights in other places and in other communities.

Alexander articulates what I think is a very common idea among White Womyn choristers, something to which I will return in subsequent chapters.

Ginger feels that singing Black music – particularly the music of Sweet Honey that she so loves – teaches her things that she wasn't learning from the European repertoire of her collegiate choirs:

K: What's been (Sweet Honey's) impact on this country?

G: Well, certainly to educate about race issues, about justice. They make you feel. ...I like that they're from a different culture than I am. You know, and I feel like I learn about culture and – the different harmonies. And it's also, being more classically trained, you have to let go of that when you're singing Sweet Honey In The Rock, or music that's different from my culture. And I like the challenge of that. It's not easy for me to do that. With Sweet Honey, I have to let go of the written music and go more with the feeling of the music. And that's not always comfortable for me. It's easier for me to look at the music; that's where I feel secure.

K: (Does Sistrum) listen to tapes of Sweet Honey singing?

G: Yeah. We do that first sometimes.

K: Because there are aspects of what the Sweet Honey women do that are not on the printed page, right?

G: Mm-hmm.

K: Are you conscious of what those are? Could you identify them?

G: Uh-huh. There are little do-dads – you know, little inflections here and there – that just add so much. And here we are, a mostly-White chorus singing the song, you know, and I want to be, like, as authentic as I can be and respectful at the same time. So – so it's a challenge sometimes to do that.

Later in our conversation we were discussing how South African freedom songs fit in with Sistrum's overall repertoire. Ginger seemed to agree with Alexander about "resonating with" their message:

I think the message is universal in that – I think particularly for me in terms of Lesbian rights and gaining equality – in that way, it's the same.

This brought us to the value of perpetuating musics that would otherwise not be heard in our environments, something AMASONG's Diana had identified as important:

G: It's keeping that culture alive. And as with anything, it's going to change as it goes through different hands. So, I think it's good to keep it alive.

K: Do you think that when you present music of other people's cultures, do you learn? Does your audience learn? What effect does it have?

G: I feel like I've certainly learned. I don't know if our audience learns. I certainly hope so.

K: Does it accomplish anything political or social?

G: Yes, it does. I believe it does. In that – well, for the same reason when I first heard Sistrum sing, I didn't hear that kind of music anywhere else. I didn't hear "Harriet Tubman" anywhere else. You know, it wasn't on the radio, it wasn't anywhere else. So in that way, yes: it taught and educated me. It had high socio-political value. And I think that it does, even if you have heard it and you're familiar with it and you've sung it a million times, it's comforting. It's familiar now. It's a way to send a message that's not threatening, which I believe about music anyway: it's a universal language, and it's not threatening to a lot of people who can relate to it in a way that they couldn't relate if you were saying: "Well, Harriet Tubman did this, this, and this." It sticks with people more, in a back-door kind of way.

Here, again, is the trope that music can seduce people into accepting ideas that would be unacceptable coming from a bullhorn or a pamphlet.

Chris, as the only Black person in Sistrum, has a much more ambivalent experience any time Sistrum sings Black music. Sometimes she feels that the style of performance falls well short of the mark:

K: What goes through your head when you and Sistrum are singing Black songs?

C: (*laughs*) That they can't sing this music! Oh, boy, I *dared* them to try to sing like Sweet Honey in the Rock, but they just didn't seem to have the beat for it, the rhythm – the soul. But when we started singing it and we got it all together, it was like magic! They didn't sound like Sweet Honey In The Rock, but they sounded *good*.

But how the group sounds is not the only issue for Chris. She seems to be unsure about what motivates Sistrum's choice to sing Black music:

C: That they wanted to sing something like that – I guess that surprised me. That's the question in my mind – that these people in the group do not want to sing African songs.

K: Really?

C: I wouldn't think so. *Rachel* – but she's the director.

K: Oh, so *she* wants to do them, but the other singers aren't so hip to it?

C: I don't think so. You know, I couldn't say it was "gospel," but there's a lot of moaning and groaning when we sing African songs.

K: Really?

C: Yeah. That's the way I feel. And I don't know.

K: What are they moaning and groaning about?

C: Just that it's Black. Because it's Black music. That's how I think about it. Maybe I'm way off.

K: Do they feel like they don't like it, or like they *shouldn't* sing it, or – you don't know...

C: Maybe they don't want to sing it because it's not their culture. "Why are we singing the Black culture?" You know? "Why aren't we singing our songs?" Whichever they may be.

Talking together some more revealed that Chris is not always sure that she wants to sing certain Black songs either, especially songs from slavery in this country. The comments that follow recall Jawole Zollar's observations about contemporary responses to Spirituals and even the audience's reaction to Bessie Jones's performance at the 1964 Atlanta Sing:

C: It makes me sad even to think about stuff like that.

K: Oh. So you'd rather not even –

C: I'd rather not sing them. It's just so sad. ...They're sad, but they're touching. And I've learned to deal with it and realize that, okay, it's *healing* to sing about those things. Because we've overcome a lot of what happened back then. We have a long ways to go, but we've overcome a lot. That has been something for me to be proud of in my race – the women who have changed things for the Black people.

K: Yeah. When you say it's "healing," do you mean that it has become healing for you, or you mean for the people who wrote it, or – ?

C: I think it's healing for everyone to hear. And, yes, of course, it's healing to me to know that other people *want* to sing those songs. I used to be *embarrassed* to hear those songs. And now I can sing them with White people, people from other cultures, and it doesn't bother me anymore. Sometimes my mind gets wandering, and I think: "Are they serious about this, or are they just – what are they getting out of this? Is this perverse for them to be singing these songs?" Sometimes I will hear, you know, laughter, and I will wonder: "Are they laughing because of the song? Or are they laughing at somebody's jokes? Are they laughing at my expense?" I'm really sensitive about that.

In Chapter Three I quoted Zollar as saying that the Spirituals – which she uses as both diagnostic tool and medicine – have "healing tonalities." Chris used the very word "healing" in describing how she has moved from absolute embarrassment over slave songs to a point where they give her a sense of pride. Still, it seems clear that she would find it easier not to have to confront them, and this seems to be especially so because the context in which she is asked to confront them is one in which she is the only Black person.

In fact, Chris is consciously less comfortable in her life being Black than being Lesbian:

I mean, the Gay part is almost, to me – I'm saying that that's me. I'm Gay. I *accept* that. I accept being Black, but I still have issues, because I don't know – what to expect. I don't know what to do, how to act.

Coping with feeling racially isolated within the context of Sistrum is made particularly difficult by her blindness:

I can't see if (they're) looking at (me) funny. All I can do is sense. And so, my thinking goes haywire, you know: "They're talking about me; they're laughing at me." You know, I can't read their eyes: "Are their eyes laughing?" I can't see that. So I don't know if I'm talking to them and they're making these funny faces at me.

Chris herself is not sure whether her reading on Sistrum's attitude about singing Black song is accurate; she knows that she is prone to oversensitivity. At the least, her fears are not borne out by the White women in this particular sample, who identified certain Black songs as some of their favorites. Regardless of whether Chris's concerns reflect the actual overall attitude of the chorus, they do express a suspicion that I have heard from many African Americans. Chris is not the only one who wonders: "Are they serious about this, or are they just – what are they getting out of this? Is this perverse for them to be singing these songs?" Stephanie finds serious musical and vocal pleasure in singing "Asesú," and Rachel Alexander and Ginger are serious about the political importance they assign to singing in Black styles. But what is for them a serious and politically progressive act can be judged insincere and retrogressive by others, a response that



many White musicians are not prepared to anticipate. That is one important issue that will be taken up in the next chapter.

### *Anna Crusis*

I have already quoted Jane Hulting as stating that her multicultural programming is a way to “give voice to the voiceless.” and ostensibly this statement would apply to Anna repertoire from African America as well as from Africa. An Anna Crusis program always includes Black music, whether Blues, gospel, Sweet Honey material, the Mahotella Queens, Yoruba song, or the African-American and South-African national anthems.

I asked Irene what she thought was valuable about being White women singing in Black musical traditions. These are excerpts from her response:

Well, I guess I’m coming from a point of view here, aren’t I? ...The point of view that I’m coming from is that the cross-fertilization of these traditions, and the richness that can develop from that, is a wonderful thing, or at least can be a wonderful thing. Now, not everybody may think that. ...I know why I’m coming from this point of view. It’s because, if for no other reason, we all *are* here. We have to do much better than we always have done. Isn’t it a wonderful thought that music could lead the way? Or maybe *one* way? And maybe the women are going to lead the way. So, that’s why I’m responding this way, because I’m coming from that point of view.

Irene is the one person in the amateur sample with whom I did not have time to do a full interview. I had gone directly to this question and followed it with a discussion of cultural appropriation. Among the things I had skipped over with her was the usual questioning about identity. When we were speaking, I found that I could not tell whether or not she was a Lesbian. Later, I was to find out from acquaintances of hers that she is, in fact, partnered with a woman. Furthermore, she and this other woman, who is also White, are raising a Black boy. This illuminates her repeated statement that she “comes from a point of view.” Given the choices that she has made, her point of view must of necessity involve a belief that there is value in cultural contact and “cross-fertilization” of some kind between Black and White Americans.

I asked Thea to name the pieces in Anna’s repertoire that came from Africa. One of these was “Ara Mi Le,” which is on *Fresh Cut*. This short, cyclical chant in Yoruba is a composition by Nigerian drumming master Babatunde Olatunji. Its translation is: “I am well. My whole self is very well.”

K: What do you love about that one?

T: Well, I don’t know what it’s like to listen to it, but when you’re singing it, you really do get into a meditative state. I remember when Jane first brought it to the choir, I thought: “Well, this is boring: we’re just doing the same thing over and over again.” But you really do get into a place of that – it’s kind of a nice, soothing feeling to be in that place.

K: Changes your brain waves. I think. I believe that it does.

T: Yeah. That's what I like about it.

Thea's doubts about the merits of the song for listeners are well founded. As a song in the style of West-African village music, it is participatory in nature. It is not intended for the European concert experience that separates performers and audience members. In fact, it produces sensations in the singers that are not typically experienced in classical music, folk ballads, or other linear forms; this is why Thea values it.

Ruth mentioned that Anna had sung a Pygmy chant. I asked her about it:

K: Did you like it?

R: Yeah! It was interesting. I mean, it was different, you know? It was something different. I actually like it when we do something like that.

K: Did you learn anything about Pygmies that you didn't know beforehand when you started working on that song?

R: Well, I think it would have been better if we done some – if we had even read one article about the culture. I did learn something from it. I learned something about rhythmic expression in Pygmy music. And I think that probably everybody who sang the song did also. But I think that not everybody would say that they were aware of learning it.

K: Why did you like the piece? What did you like about it?

R: I liked that it was a different cluster of tones, and the rhythmic texture created a kind of a sound that is unusual for us to sing and unusual for us to hear.

Ruth went on to relate her experiences studying West African drumming, which was outside of Anna Crusis, but which reveals more about what she attends to and enjoys in performing music from Africa – and any other place unfamiliar to her:

R: It blew my experience of rhythm wide open. Changed me forever. Learning how to understand the rhythms was part of that experience. But learning the movements that went with those rhythms –

K: Yeah, you always learn those together.

R: Well, if you're doing it right you do, because they are not separable, in a way that's authentic to that

culture. So, if you know that the rhythms and the dance are connected, you learn also that the way the soil is experienced by the dancers affects the dance and the rhythms; it's much deeper. It's a much deeper experience, and more moving to me to be thinking about it, to be understanding it in that way.

Ruth is talking about the value she places on learning a culturally different approach to music-making, something she recognizes as a key to different ways of living and thinking in general. Later in the conversation, she had some final comments about this:

I mean, if we all only sing what we know, if I only say what I know, how boring is *that*? I already *know* what I know! ...I think that one of the most powerful things about music is that we can understand some of the things that we can't verbalize – by learning each other's music.

According to the White women of Anna Crusis I interviewed, when they sing Black music, they are introducing voices typically ignored by dominant society, having new experiences, learning about other cultures through their music, and healing the breach between Black and White Americans.

### AMASONG

Most of the themes that together form the point of departure for this study emerged in my discussions with Lynnette, Heidi, and Diana about being White Feminists singing Black music. Their evaluations reflect much of what I had intended by programming the music, and they echo similar ideas expressed by singers in Sistrum and Anna Crusis.

When we were talking about African-American oral-tradition music, Diana said:

D: I think there's something really strong about keeping... that stuff alive in us, keeping it a part of us. I think there's something really strong about a music that's survived over some generations. I think it does pull together the history of those people. I think it brings their presence forward. And it kind of gives us *their* (former generations') energy to feed off of for the work we do, for the challenges we have.

In Chapter Two I quoted several African Americans who equated Black music with Black history. Diana's use of the possessive article "our" implies her feeling that Black American history and culture are entwined with White American history and culture and are of concern to all of us. This orientation is consistent with her earlier refusal to identify herself in any way by her actual ancestry, as well as with her search for racially desegregated experiences. Although she does recognize divisions between herself and Black Americans, she rails against the assumption that these are desirable or inevitable.

Later, we were discussing AMASONG's Zimbabwean music project from the summer of 1996, our most lengthy and in-depth encounter with Black music. That spring, I had met a woman named Patience Mudeka, a native of Harare who had just married a (White) man from Urbana and moved here to live with him. Mudeka is a former member of one of Zimbabwe's traditional song and dance troupes; singing and dancing have always been her passion, and when she arrived in Urbana, a community of

(White) dancers and musicians gathered with her to discuss possibilities for her to teach and perform. What resulted was a collaboration involving Mudeka, an intergenerational and interracial group of amateur community dancers from Champaign's White Street Arts Center, dancer and White Street's director Shelley Masar, the voices of AMASONG, ethnomusicologist and Zimbabwean music specialist Thomas Turino, percussion artist Rocky Maffit, and a handful of AMASONG and other community drummers. The music we sang required entirely new approaches to texture, meter, vocal timbre, and learning process, to the unsettling and exciting effect that we truly felt ourselves entering a different cultural space through the experience. This project played over a period of months at several important community venues, generally to wild enthusiasm on the part of participants and audiences. Diana talked about this as one of her most "amazing" experiences with AMASONG:

D: Why I loved it so much was that it was so fresh, so fresh for us all. I had listened to some of that music before. But to actually try and get inside it – it's very different to listen to something and really enjoy it, but to try to replicate it –

K: Yeah! To feel it in your mouth.

D: Mm-hmm. And to feel okay about it so you can get it into your body. It's another kind of music that needs the whole body to sing it. To perform it well, you have to feel it in your toes, you have to feel very comfortable in your hips with it especially, but your bosom – I mean you just have to feel it in your body. You have to be okay. You can't be holding back. So it was very exciting because it was a kind of music that we hadn't explored yet in that kind of a way, a full way. And then here was a channel that felt so, um – I hate that word *authentic*, but it just was a real experience. Here is a woman displaced from her culture. Here is a woman who has been steeped in music and dance all her life. Here is a woman who needs to express it somewhere. And we might be able to help her do that, and then bring a little piece from her (*mocking*) "Dark – oh, my God! – Continent" (*laughter*), which we *only* think of in terms of war – you know, we just get so many (negatives) about "The Dark Continent," and what we learn are these terrible civil wars, famines, (*assuming the tone of a sensationalist broadcaster*) "HIV Now Out Of Control!" You know? "Land Issues Amok!" We just have all these incredible, horrible, horrible images coming at us from the media –

K: Like nothing good is happening there.

D: Right! It really is true! And so here was a way that we in this lily-White community, basically, our college town, could just burst open the doors! "Here it is! Here's something gorgeous from a beautiful place in the world!" I loved that. I loved that a lot. I felt that there was a lot of energy for it. I felt that you were really excited about it, I felt the group was – you know, I felt the whole community was thrilled.

Diana loved the bodily sensations particular to this music, she loved the creative product of our collaboration with a woman who had so much to teach us, and she loved what she saw as its enlightening

effect on a citizenry largely unexposed – or negatively predisposed – to human experience in sub-Saharan Africa.

I asked her to speak a little further about this educational effect:

K: So, you feel like, personally, when you sing a song from another country or of another culture, that does something for your curiosity about those people, or your awareness?

D: Absolutely. Absolutely.

K: Does it stay with you later?

D: Mm-hmm! I think it's beautiful. Seriously. As I said, I think it's because of the heart-mind connection, and then when you sing it, too, you get your whole body into it. I think that excites me a whole lot more than, like, a beautiful painting of a particular spot, or – because then I've been a part of that experience, too. And even after reading or seeing a good documentary that tells a very compelling story of a given spot, there's something different about something that's participatory. For me, that's very true, that it sinks in deeper. ...Trying to stretch and reach and feel and understand, trying to feel another person's experience through musical channels gives you quite an insight into who they are and what their land is like. I mean, it *evokes* that. What their architecture might be like. What kind of animals exist there. I mean, it's *in* the music.

The trope that music reaches people's understanding where other kinds of messages fail is by now familiar. It underlies the goals of Urban Bush Women's Community Sing and has been expressed by many women throughout these pages. Diana's statement about getting "quite an insight into who (other people) are" reminded me of Nicole's enthusiastic feeling that in the sharing of Freedom Songs in a Community Sing, she could come to know a community "pretty well."

Finally, I asked Diana why she thought it was that AMASONG and other Womyn's choruses are heard much more frequently than most other kinds of White choruses to be singing Black music:

D: Oh, I think that in part because Lesbians as a group – I mean, if you want to lump about as diverse a group of people together as you can! – as a *group* have been extremely oppressed, in all cultures; oh, *extremely* oppressed. And I think that does bore into us this desire for more acceptance, and knowing that tolerance and acceptance of difference is *key* to a healthier society. And if you can dish that out musically, that means a lot.

Heidi had already told me that one very important thing for her about singing "Keep Your Lamps" was that it kept human rights abuses at the forefront of attention. Before moving to Champaign-Urbana, she had sung in another Sister Singers group whose diversity of programming had included "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the African-American national anthem. When I asked her why this song was in that (White) ensemble's repertoire, she replied that the choir "knew it was important to represent all people.

And we wanted to do that.” She, too, shared the observation that singing songs from cultures not her own helps to educate her about those cultures. I queried her further about the actual effects of these kinds of programming choices:

K: What does it *do* when we hear or sing a song about the *maquiladoras* in Mexico after NAFTA, or “Keep Your Lamps?” what does it have to do with anything?

H: Well, it works on a lot of different levels. Obviously you’re going to hear the story, and you have to consider what it means. You have to give it some thought. And for those of us who have already thought of it, it reminds us. Because you do need to be constantly reminded, no matter how well intentioned you are. And then, of course, since I am a singer, it also evokes an emotional response, an emotional feeling, which is why I like to – well, it’s one of the reasons you would choose some songs over others, because it’s something – I don’t know how to describe it, but it’s something you *feel*. It’s an emotion.

K: So, let me ask you, for example: what did you feel, or what were you reminded of in singing “Keep Your Lamps?”

H: Well, you could almost feel – not that you were *there*, but you always had that tension. I know you wanted to make sure that tension was there.

After having found that three out of three Sistrum singers were between vague and blank about the meanings or origins of “Asesú,” I had begun to wonder whether my own knowledge about and intentions for songs had similarly become scuttled in the nuts-and-bolts process of rehearsal. So I asked Heidi to be more specific:

K: What was that tension representing? What do you remember, either about what I said or what you felt?

H: Well, the tension was we were putting ourselves into those people’s places. I mean, singing can be very close to acting in some ways. If you’re going to sing a message, you might as well try to have the audience interpret it as – I don’t know how to say this, but you know, instead of acting it, we’re telling a story, and you want the audience to believe – you know, make it believable and sort of feel and experience what people you’re singing about once experienced. And of course they were – it was a life-threatening situation that the past slaves had. And so they had to be very wary and be ready to go whenever they could, when they knew that if they got caught they were going to be brutally killed or tortured.

K: I don’t know if you’re able to cycle your memory back, but did it have any modern implications in your mind when you were singing it? Did it have any modern significance, aside from its historical significance?

H: Well. I just listened to a book on tape called *The Bean Trees* by Barbara Kingsolver<sup>24</sup> –

K: Oh, God, that is one of my favorite novels!

H: Yeah. And of course, you know, what occurred then is occurring now. I just know that the horrors that were happening to African Americans who were forced to come to America are still happening now in different countries. ...People all over the world are in fear for their lives.

For me, the critical information communicated in “Keep Your Lamps” is contained in its need to hold several particular emotions in tension. The refrain, “Keep your lamps trimmed and burning; the time is drawin’ nigh,” uses a Biblical reference as a coded message alerting slaves to prepare for opportunities to escape. Competing with the excitement and anxiety about escape at a moment’s notice would have been the need to project to the overseers an outward appearance of resignation to captivity. Another phrase, “Children, don’t get weary till your work is done,” suggests the encouragement of a kind of dogged commitment to freedom; if a chance to escape were missed or foiled, one had to hang on for the next chance, however long in coming. In performance, I aimed at moving our voices from surreptitiousness through doggedness to fervid anticipation and back. It pleased me that my decisions about dynamics and articulations were connected in Heidi’s mind to extra-musical considerations.

I asked Lynnette to talk about the same thing:

K: When you’re singing something like “Keep Your Lamps,” what are you thinking about? What are you trying to communicate? Or, what do you feel is being communicated when we sing it?

L: Oh, wow. Honest to God? When I’m singing it in a concert, I’m just trying to present it the way we’ve worked on presenting it. I’m trying to listen, I’m trying to be in it, I’m trying to enjoy that the audience is there. Any political thinking I might have done before. I usually don’t even try to mess with that stuff when we’re performing. I just really try not to think, and click into the performance.

K: What might you have been thinking before?

L: Well, you know, trying to understand where it sits in the tradition – you know, the double meanings of the Spirituals, and just trying to – as we sort of develop the song – just think about both those meanings and how those come out in the words, and – I don’t know. I guess I sort of try to connect emotionally with the song first, and they all give you different – you know, some not very dramatically, but some very dramatically give you different feelings in your body, you know, to sing them. And that one, you know, it’s not so subtle: that one gives you this very heavy – you know, it kind of goes from this very heavy, ponderous, overwhelming – but then it kind of takes off at some point, too, and start to fly a little bit. But, you know, the rhythm is very slow, kind of – it’s kind of a walking song. So I think about that. And just

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<sup>24</sup> The protagonist in this book is a White, Kentucky native. While living in the Southwest, she meets a couple from Central America who are refugees from U.S.-supported governmental terrorism in their home country.

what the song meant to the people that it came from. what it represented to them in terms of hope and what it represented for them in terms of despair. I really think there's both in that song. But I guess you could look at the Christian message of it as sort of overwhelmingly positive. But it's not. It's not an overwhelmingly positive song. It's pretty dark. So, yeah: thinking about the hopefulness and the hopelessness that are sort of simultaneously expressed.

K: Is that good for anything?

L: Is that "good for" anything? Um, gosh! I don't know!

K: I mean, does that – what you said before about keeping this history in the forefront of our attention: does singing that song bring that history to your mind or help keep it – is that one of the things, one of the ways we do that? Is it significant at all, as a musical encounter?

L: I think it's significant. Well, I guess it felt significant to me, and I think it felt significant for the other performers. What it means in terms of how deeply the audience goes into that, or – you know, is it ever going to change the world and make us treat Black people better? Is it good for that? Boy, I don't know! I don't know. Have I – ? You know, I can say that probably because of AMASONG I made one stab at singing in the Gospel Community Chorus, and it was – it was just too religiously based. *(laughs)* But, I mean, that's what it was supposed to be! But, you know, I just had to say: "This is not for me; this is not a way that I am going to successfully interface with the Black community, because I'm sitting here going: 'puh-leez!'" You know, and a couple of times actually getting kind of offended, and – not for racial reasons, but for reasons that have to do with how you act when you're singing music to God. Anyway. So has it made me or anybody I know *do* any better? I don't know that it has.

White women in AMASONG find that the group's many experiences with Black music have not only provided them with the musical challenges and rewards they have come to expect but have also stimulated them to consider political and cultural questions that are worthy of attention. These respondents seemed to accept the programming of this kind of repertoire and the communication of its messages as consistent with the nature of a Feminist-identified chorus.

Eva, our only African-American member, reported a very original opinion about why the repertoire of White, Lesbian choirs includes more Black music than many other kinds of White choirs:

It's just the daringness of Lesbians! *(laughs)* They're willing to take a larger risk. ...I think Lesbian groups do things that most normal people wouldn't. You have to be able to take a chance in some area. And I think that's why. ...I don't think from my observation that they're as concerned about what other people are thinking. And that comes from being in the position – being a Lesbian to begin with. So, you're able to take chances.



What did I mean when I programmed Black music for AMASONG? The answer is manifold. I meant to sing music that would identify us as non-Eurocentric. I hoped that a notably non-Eurocentric repertoire would give a message of welcome to Women of Color who might think of joining the group. I meant to keep the need for anti-racism at the forefront of attention. I meant to express a connection among various groups' struggles for self-determination. I meant to work in music that was free of copyright restrictions. I meant to work in styles that were made to sound fabulous when sung by large communities of people regardless of what kind of voices they had. I meant to give the singers music whose sounds their ears understood. I meant to perform music whose sounds and words I loved.

### Summary

I started this chapter with some basic concepts from the literature on Whiteness in the United States. Whiteness is the all-too-often unacknowledged aspect of the identity of the organized Feminist choral movement as a whole, and therefore, it was especially important for this study that it be made visible. In summarizing the degree to which their own Whiteness was visible to the twelve women interviewed here, I will borrow Ruth Frankenberg's language for White discourses on race, identified early in this chapter. Frankenberg generally uses these to describe White people's orientation toward people of other races, but I find that they often imply the same orientation that White people have toward their own race. For example, for White people to be *color- and power-evasive* toward – or blind to the effects of racism on – People of Color, we must deny the privilege of our own racial status.

Stephanie was the one interviewee in this entire study who seemed never to have seriously considered that she lived in a system of White supremacy and that this shaped her daily experiences; she was certainly blind to herself as a racial being. Color evasiveness or colorblindness surfaced tellingly in White women who, when asked, identified themselves by a number of characteristics, none of which included their race. This occurred in the majority of White respondents, whereas a majority of the Black respondents questioned in Chapter Three signaled their Blackness or their African ancestry at the outset, without prompting. This would seem to prove the tenet that one of the privileges of Whiteness is not having to think of oneself as having a race. In Diana we saw an example of a White woman who was at first evasive about her own race, but who in later conversation proved to be well aware of what side of the racial divide she occupies and how damaging that divide is; her apparent evasiveness is really a conscious attempt to supercede a segregationist mentality, something she knows depends upon racial justice.

Like Diana, most of these women could not maintain evasiveness about their own race once they began to discuss their encounters with Black music. Of course, as Frankenberg and others have pointed out, Whiteness is something made visible to most Whites only when seen against the borders formed by the presence of those who have not been allowed to join the club. But several of these respondents gave evidence of varying degrees of *race cognizance*, whether in signaling the importance of anti-racist messages in music or expressing their concern not to engage in poor imitations or "rip-offs" of Black creativity. My own experience of race cognizance as one of the beneficial effects for White women who immerse ourselves in Feminist Lesbian practice was corroborated in every case (though individuals varied

in the level of their cognizance – about themselves and People of Color); the woman who defined herself as the most radically Feminist and Lesbian was the quickest to race herself, and the woman with the highest degree of colorblindness had only recently begun spending time in Womyn’s cultural space.

In Chapter Two I referred to Womyn’s music festivals as “the crucibles of cultural Feminism.” and in this chapter I proved the case – with specific historical data and personal testimony – for the festival phenomenon as a significant influence on the Feminist choral movement. Festivals have provided networking and performing spaces for choristers. They have given exposure to artists and musical styles whose repertoires have been adapted for use by Feminist choirs. And their examples of cooperation, accessibility, creativity, political consciousness, diversity, inclusiveness, compassion, and playfulness are held as ideals by many Feminist choristers. The recollections of Catherine Roma and Rachel Alexander, festival attendees since the early experiments of the mid-1970s, served in this chapter to illuminate the historical moment in which they and others created what were to become the foundations of the Feminist choral movement. To the uninitiated, the idea of a Womyn’s chorus is still today a curiosity. But these narratives demonstrate how unsurprising – even inevitable – it was that the movement should have emerge when it did. The development of the Sister Singers Network as the movement’s organizational umbrella coincided with another historical inevitability, the Gay and Lesbian choral movement and its organization, the Gay And Lesbian Association of Choruses. Many Womyn’s choruses maintain affiliation with both networks, and this chapter discussed the range and orientation of each, explaining the different ways they serve Feminist choruses.

A general profile of the Feminist choral movement was offered in my discussion of the compiled results of the survey I had used to select ensembles for study. Narratives about the twelve choirs represented in the results revealed common emphases on inclusive membership, stylistic diversity of repertoire, texts and compositions by women, and messages of empowerment for Lesbians and other women. Based on the survey returns, the national composite of the Feminist choral repertoire includes: some European art music, most of it secular in content and by living women; a small amount of vocal jazz; some protest music from the Labor, Civil Rights, Feminist, and other U.S. movements; substantial programming of Broadway tunes and music in popular styles, most especially songs by artists from the Womyn’s circuit and a newer genre, the choral Gay-pride anthem; and significant amounts of oral-tradition music, particularly from African, African-American, Balkan, and Yiddish- or Hebrew-speaking communities. Every group sings Black oral-tradition music, and every group performs Sweet Honey In The Rock originals. Nearly every group is White.

I gave general background information on the three White choruses in this study, one of which is my own. Excerpts from interviews with the respondents completed the picture of what these ensembles represent in the singers’ individual and communal lives. Two women were drawn to their choirs for purely musical reasons: most singers not only loved the music they were singing but also emphasized their groups’ importance as sources of community, even family. Most also reported an investment in the political impact they expected their groups to have on the wider public. One singer is profoundly dissatisfied with what she

views as her choir's shortcomings in realizing a Feminist political mission. Two singers do not feel entirely comfortable in their choral communities: both of these women are Black, and one of them is blind.

The pieces that the respondents reported loving the most were extremely varied, as were the reasons for loving them. Some individuals clearly identified their favorites on the basis of textual content, while others prioritized the sound of the music. Respondents of both types, and in all groups, named examples of Black, oral-tradition music among their favorite pieces. This brought me to the most critical questions of the chapter: Why do we White Womyn choristers sing this music? What do we love about it? What do we imagine we are accomplishing when we do it? According to the respondents, we are experiencing new musical structures, learning and educating others about different cultures, retelling history, embracing diversity, building bridges between White and Black people, communicating anti-racism, preserving cultural artifacts, and singing wonderful music. All of these things are generally accepted within Feminism as worthy goals for a chorus, so why is it that Black members of our audiences have often been offended by our presentations of Black music? Chapter Five will attempt to answer this question by reading the discourses about Black song from Chapters Three and Four in light of the problem of cultural appropriation.

**CHAPTER V**  
**TOWARD A FEMINIST CHORAL MUSICIAN'S DEFINITION**  
**OF CULTURAL APPROPRIATION**

*"It happens all the time. And there's a lot of anger about that.  
 There are people who are laying claim to stuff they shouldn't be laying claim to.  
 You know, ...you just get pissed off after a while if you do all the work  
 and somebody else gets all the gravy."  
 –Melanie DeMore, Cultural Heritage Choir*

*"Those with more power can always go 'down' and do culture.  
 It's most difficult for the oppressed to come up and do (the oppressors') cultural forms.  
 What belongs to the poor folk belongs to the rich. But not the reverse."  
 – Nicole, Urban Bush Women*

*"For me it's not racial: either a piece rings true, or it doesn't.  
 And I don't care if the conductor is green, yellow, purple, or Black.  
 ...Either it works or it doesn't. ...If it's tacky, it's tacky. And it's sad if it's tacky."  
 – Bernice Johnson Reagon, Sweet Honey In The Rock*

**Introduction**

Shortly after deciding upon the topic of this study, I happened to begin a friendship with a singer, dancer, and actor who, though born in Barbados, had been living in the United States for several years. She is Black. In the process of learning about each other, she asked me what I would be writing about in my dissertation. I told her that I was interested in the use of traditional African and Diaspora music in the Feminist choral movement. "Oh, that's excellent!" she said, knowingly. "So, you're going to be addressing all this cultural vampirism. It's such a serious problem." At the time, it was by no means clear in my mind that this was at the heart of the question, but I outwardly pretended as though she had read my intentions perfectly; inwardly I began to ponder her comment. I felt unsettled, having thought that the focus of my study would be something else, something that did not so directly implicate me in unpleasant matters. However, as swift and unequivocal as her reaction had been, I knew I needed to take it seriously as a clue to what the utility of my study might be.

A few months later I e-mailed Jawole Willa Jo Zollar to ask whether I could include her and Urban Bush Women company members in my study. She responded positively without hesitation, but she also had a question for me, one that she expected me to begin answering: "What is your responsibility as a White musician working in Black styles when White people typically have more access to opportunities and exposure and are more likely to get recognized and rewarded than Black musicians who can far

outperform them?" Somehow, I thought that I was supposed to answer that question in the next e-mail, perhaps to pass some test of my inner credentials. I spent a good two hours sweating earnestly over an account in my own defense of anything I could remember ever having done, and a list of other things I could try to do in the future, to meet this responsibility. I e-mailed this response that same day. On the day after, Zollar's reply gently pointed out that, far from expecting me to answer her personally in one day, she had hoped that I might learn to see the question as an abiding challenge that I would always have to answer for myself. At that point I had to admit that my topic and I were part of a much bigger story than I had anticipated, a story that my African-American artist friends wanted me to tell, and one that would not be comfortable to evaluate, regardless of the conclusions I would reach.

I begin this chapter with a broad look at the White use of Black music in the United States, examining certain popular discourses about it. I then discuss some ethical questions about the commercialization of Black music in the international arena, where the United States and Europe dominate a global music industry fueled significantly by African styles. Following this, I contrast the differing values attached to music that is transmitted orally and music that depends on notation, music that is copyrighted and music that is in the public domain. The first section of the chapter ends with my comparison of two musical – and often racialized – discourses: the doctrine of "art for art's sake," epitomized in the ideal of *absolute music*, and the trope of the "functionality" of Black music.

Turning to the words of the study's interviewees, I present their ideas about ownership and appropriation of oral-tradition musics, definitions of performance authenticity, and opinions about whether White musicians are able to sing Black music well – or even whether it is ethical for us to attempt it. The tendency of White singers, especially Feminist ones, to change the words of African-American sacred music is discussed. One African-American performer reveals her feeling that she is culturally closer to people in African than I am to her, and I ask other African Americans to respond to that assumption. Finally, I present Black artists' challenge to White people – and White people's responses to the challenge – to sing some music and explore some culture of "their own."

### **Cultural Appropriation as Seen Outside the Feminist Choral Movement**

#### **The National Context of White Appropriation of Black Music**

When people identified as White perform music identified as Black, we are unlikely to escape scrutiny for taking something that isn't ours, for enacting or perpetuating the White rip-off of any and all things Black. We are performing against a backdrop of European appropriation of African land, and in the United States, a backdrop of White slavers' appropriation of Black manual labor, Black reproductive capacity, and – even then – Black music-making. The end of slavery did not end the uneven flow into White hands of the benefits of Black productivity and creativity of all kinds. Most African Americans are conscious of this on a daily basis, and wherever they challenge a White musician's right to perform something they see as theirs, they are expressing their desire to stem the flow.

*Jon Cruz on the Early Appropriation of Slave Music*

Jon Cruz discusses the “harnessing” of slaves’ musical expressions in *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation* (1999). Slave overseers induced slaves to sing quick-paced songs to speed up their labor or commanded them to sing continuously so that their movements could be aurally monitored. Owners hired out slaves with skills on musical instruments, profiting directly from the slaves’ performances (43). Certain spontaneous musical expressions, however, were disallowed.<sup>1</sup> Slaves heard to be singing music of a plaintive character were often directed to change to something more cheerful. It was worried that plaintive music might either depress the singers or incite their resistance. More fundamentally threatening was the frank evidence heard in sorrowful songs that slaves possessed human subjectivity, the denial of which had been a crucial justification of slavery (53). Even after Emancipation, the singing Black man continued to have particular workplace value to White business owners. Cruz cites several accounts of extra pay or special treatment for the one among a crew of Black factory or field laborers who could lead the crew in song for the purpose of elevating productivity and morale (56).

The Abolitionists, too, relied on the songs of slaves. In fact, it was aspects of their strategy that were responsible for bringing the Spiritual to the attention of the world beyond the plantation. This strategy was built on severing “the utilitarian linkage between music and forced labor.” Cruz says about this linkage:

(It) cultivated the notion of a black essence naturally yoked to forced labor. This linkage was the cultural underpinning of the dominant mode of conceptualizing and appropriating black music, and it grew out of the predominantly utilitarian orientation toward slave music. It was this cultural anchorage that offended the most radical sensibilities of the abolitionists and the one that they tried to dislodge. (59)

The leading example for Abolitionist use of the Spiritual was published in Frederick Douglass’s autobiography of 1845. In this account, Douglass urged the nation to listen in the “songs of sorrow” for the authentic African-American experience of and protest against slavery. Cruz makes the argument that the creation of the Spiritual, and its ultimate singling out from among all forms of slave music as *the* authentic form, are themselves the products of some of the same cultural forces.

In the first place, the precondition for the emergence of the Spiritual was the program of Christianization of the slaves. This program was highly contested among several parties: social reformers who felt it was their duty to carry it out, slave-owners who hoped it would pacify the slaves, and slave-owners who feared it would encourage slave rebellion. As a result of the influence of multiple denominations and motivations, the program was implemented unevenly in a variety of regional forms. The one incontrovertible effect of the program was to force the recognition that slaves had souls. On this recognition the Abolitionists based their argument that slaves were subjective beings rather than objects.

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<sup>1</sup> Drumming was one of them, as I mentioned on page 82.

And the voice of that subjectivity could be heard in these songs that interpreted Biblical scripture. The messages contained in their texts had the power to appeal to the values of the nation's dominant institutional ideology. Furthermore, because the musical parameters of these songs had been influenced by White hymns brought to church services for slaves and heard in open camp meetings and tent revivals, they were comprehensible to the ears of those whom the Abolitionists would reach. In these ways, the Spirituals could communicate to White audiences where field hollers, Africanist "shouts," or other forms of plantation singing could not (70-88).

It was during the Civil war that Northerners – soldiers, missionaries, teachers, and Abolitionists – accepting Douglass's invitation to attend to the "songs of sorrow," began a flurry of transcription resulting in the publication of Spiritual melodies and texts, as well as detailed observations of gatherings where they were sung. Cruz identifies in this new quest for "authentic" cultural expression the beginnings of a protoethnography – the roots of "ethnosympathy" and cultural interpretation. The two publications that exemplify these beginnings are Thomas Wentworth Higginson's *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (1870) and the compilation by William Frances Allen, Charles Picard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison entitled *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867). Cruz contributes a sharp analysis tracking the political impetus for the publication of Spirituals and the depoliticized results to which it led. His observations have direct implications for modern-day singers of this genre:

It was at Fortress Monroe<sup>2</sup> where events led to the publication of the first Negro spiritual. The incident is worth noting because it illustrates the initial ties that the discovery process had to the great moral crisis of slavery and war. And as the war proceeded, so too did the discovery of the spiritual. ...Yet, it appears that soon after the Negro spiritual had been discovered as an indisputable testimony to slavery, a shift in interest emerged. This shift severed the spiritual from slavery, the social context in which it was produced. The result was that the initial moral connections that the spiritual had with slavery, the social and political tensions that had given slavery its initial grammar, withered by the late 1860s. ... (In turning) away from politics and toward culture, (the new interpretation) failed to entail any serious commitment to institutional transformations beyond the juridico-legal abolition of slavery. Rather, the new culturalism continued to promote what I (refer) to as *disengaged cultural engagement*. ...What is striking about the new culturalism...is its reticence if not its incapacity to include and embrace any additional dialogue that might imagine alternatives to postslavery racial subordination. (127-131)

The concrete result of this "cultural turn" was that emerging professional disciplines in anthropology and folklore were being built out of romantic, White interest in the Spirituals, while the promises of the Reconstruction were being forsaken:

The new culturalism's withdrawal from the politics out of which it developed was coupled with the professionalization of cultural analysis. (131)

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<sup>2</sup> where the first wave of former slaves crossed Union lines

Cruz argues that it was within the development of this new scientific interest in culture on the margins that the concept of *cultural authenticity* emerged. He argues further that it was precisely the new scientists' particular interpretation of authenticity that contributed to "the tendency to separate sympathetic cultural observation from social life" and to the reification of music as an object, an artifact, a "fixed cultural good" (23). Attention to the "authentic" voice of the slaves somehow silenced their implicit critique of the larger political and economic system, abandoning them to a new era of lynchings and Jim Crow – and legions of other citizens to only lesser ravages of the system.

*From "Ethiopian Songs" to Hip-Hop: a Discourse of Rip-Off*

By the time Douglass propounded the "authentic" sound of the Negro, White audiences had already been introduced to a form of entertainment appropriating stereotyped images of Black Americans. This performance genre endured for over six decades, and its profound effects on discourses about the public representation of African Americans are still felt today. I am speaking, of course, about the minstrel show. In its initial form, minstrelsy involved White performers who blackened their faces with burnt cork and sported painted mouths of exaggerated size. Their onstage antics caricatured slaves as happy-go-lucky, clumsy, shuffling dancers and songsters. They performed tunes – called "Ethiopian songs" – composed for their shows and typically featured instrumentalists on banjo, tambourine, and bone castanets. Some examples of minstrel song titles include: "The Coon that I Suspected," "Nigger, You Won't Go," and "There'd Never Been no Trouble if They Kidnapped a Coon." Two stock caricatures, Zip Coon and Jim Crow, represented the urban dandy and his opposite, the plantation slave (Shaw 1986, 17-31).

Most ironically, this entertainment format became even more wildly popular after the Civil War, when Black Americans were hired on to write "genuine" *Coon* songs and to enact "more authentic" caricatures of themselves – *blackface and all*. The unprecedented opportunities for employment and travel – and even for the expression of musical and dramatic talent – afforded by minstrelsy attracted a consistent surplus of Black applicants. Those who were hired persisted in the trade despite constant racist harassment, violence, and even lynching by Whites who were never amused by encountering gainfully employed African Americans in public streets and accommodations (26-27).

One could be tempted to omit consideration of this appalling chapter in the musical history of the United States, but as Arnold Shaw writes:

(Minstrelsy's) importance, despite its pejorative black caricature, cannot be overestimated, since it was not only America's first export in the world of entertainment – Spirituals came later – but it was the incubator of Ragtime, vaudeville, the revue, burlesque, and musical comedy, the major forms of American entertainment before the advent of radio. (1986, 18)

It was minstrelsy that made the careers of premier White American songwriters Daniel Decatur Emmett and Steven Foster. Black luminaries with beginnings in minstrelsy include W. C. Handy ("Father of the



Blues"). Sam Lucas (the first Black male to play the lead in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith.

The continuation of Shaw's book *Black Popular Music in America* examines the development of ragtime, musical theater, blues, boogie-woogie, jazz, swing, doo-wop, gospel, soul, rhythm-and-blues, rockabilly, rock-and-roll, heavy metal, funk, disco, black pop, and hip-hop. Almost all of these styles can be traced to Black originators. Wherever this is the case, Shaw discusses these originators, as well as any influence of European music on their innovations; he follows this with a section on White "syntheses" in the style – and, where applicable, a third section on "Black backlash" against the White synthesis. In his introduction, he lays out the principal points he hopes this format will establish:

In the opening segment of (my 1961) survey, "Popular Music from Minstrel Songs to Rock 'N' Roll"... I concluded: "The influence of no group has been as pervasive and decisive, or as frequently denied and depreciated, as that of the American Negro." ...In the more than two decades since I made that observation, the denial and depreciation have been corrected. ...But I am...concerned with a more complex problem: the precise nature of...how the commercialization of the black original has affected the black style as well as the white, and the overall result of that interrelationship. ...The dialectical character (of this interrelationship) ...has not been properly annotated. As black music accomplishes a transformation of white, it, too, changes. Moreover, the white transformation is sometimes performed by blacks. In recognizing that white musicians, singers, and songwriters have profited greatly – I have used the word *rip-off* in some of my writing – and that blacks have suffered economically and in other ways, we have tended to disregard the *musical* contributions made by whites. ...Popular American music is neither white nor black, but a fusion, and the result of an interplay. ...(It) is a *blend* whose designation should properly be *Afro-American*. Regardless of the social situation and the relations between black and white musicians, our popular music has always been integrated. (vii, viii)

The long history of White "rip-offs" and Black "suffering" in American popular music picks up where minstrelsy leaves off in the backdrop against which White performers of music identified as Black find ourselves challenged to justify our performances. Nearly every African American I spoke to for this project regarded it as self-evident that throughout the history of American music, Whites had stolen Black songs and called them their own or copied Black styles for their own profit, shutting Black performers out of the industry. Shaw's book cites examples of this as in, for example, White musical theater producers who claimed copyright ownership of music created by their hired, Black songwriters (76). In fact, given the pervasiveness of the social institution of racism, the effect of stylistic rip-off and domination will produce itself quite in the absence of any such calculated and direct effort on the part of individuals to achieve this specific goal. For example, any White jazz musician from the 1940s who developed his "chops" in relationships of mutual appreciation with Black players went on to practice his trade in a country where important venues were segregated, radio stations were owned and run by White men, recording and publishing industries were White-owned, and the critical media were owned and generated by Whites.

In fact, in 1945, resistance to White domination of Black-originated styles took the form of a new stage in the evolution of jazz, namely Bebop:

The Black boppers'...concern...was to create something that "Charlie," meaning white musicians, could not steal – as Charlie had done with Swing. The new Jazz was unabashedly anti-white, and that included audiences as well as musicians.

Dizzy and other boppers played with their backs to paying customers, and Dizzy occasionally waved his rump rhythmically in their faces, as if he were conducting. Boppers did not wait for or acknowledge applause. As for the musicians, they consciously sought to make the music a tantalizing puzzle to the listeners. They searched out new chord structures involving ninths, elevenths, and thirteenths (instead of using the smaller triads and sevenths), explored new scales such as the whole-tone scale, and favored an interval generally avoided in traditional Jazz and even in classical music, the so-called flatted fifth. Instead of working within the framework of the traditional repertoire known to musicians from the twenties on, they turned to recent show tunes, with their more complex chord patterns – and even these they did not identify. Using hit songs from Broadway shows, they concealed the chord sequences behind new titles and invented new melodies over them.

Bop polarized the world of Jazz, with black artists pointedly rejecting whites, as they had been rejected over the years. The motivation is not difficult to understand. Black musicians had gone through the Swing years watching their White brothers reap the glory and the rewards. They had fought in the war to end racism, anticipating and hearing promises of a new world to come. But once World War II was over, it was segregation, discrimination, and exploitation all over again. Except for occasional tokenism, studio orchestras and executive positions in the recording industry and broadcasting studios continued to be white. The pit bands of Broadway shows remained White. Opportunities for Blacks in symphony orchestras and the concert world showed (few) signs of improving. In social and psychological terms, Bop was an expression of anger, frustration, resentment – and challenge. (161-163)

The anger, frustration, and resentment signaled here are contemporary as well as historic, as excerpts from my interviews with Black musicians will later show.

*The Flip Side of Rip-Off: Racial Sellout and Rock 'N' Roll*

Steve Perry, in "Ain't No Mountain High Enough: The Politics of Crossover" (1988), analyzes racial discourses of "authenticity," "sellout," "theft," and economic separatism in critiques of the national popular music industry since the mid-1950s. These tropes surface repeatedly in discussions of cultural appropriation, so it will be useful to consider Perry's arguments.

Perry points out that between the "tacitly racist" anti-disco backlash of 1978 and the explosion of Michael Jackson's solo career with *Thriller* in 1983, Billboard's charts were as racially segregated as ever before, with a concentration of White musicians on the Pop chart and Black musicians on the Rhythm-and-Blues chart. But by the late '80s, "the American pop charts featured a more balanced combination of black

and white music than at any time since the soul explosion of the late 1960s"<sup>3</sup> (51). He goes on to observe, however, that the Black musicians whose hits crossed over onto the (White) pop charts drew Black criticism for selling out, stylistically and economically. The sellout criticism is the corollary to accusations of White appropriation: both are aimed at "stemming the flow" of the benefits of Black work and creativity into White hands. Perry teases apart and deconstructs the arguments of stylistic and economic sellout, stating that "nationalist economic agendas are frequently submerged in arguments about musical authenticity" (52).

Perry points out that the stylistic sellout argument "presumes a pure – and thus necessarily static – body of black music, and requires a set of culture czars qualified to distinguish 'real' black music from 'fake' black music" (54). As a counterargument, he points to the impressive variety of chart-topping musical styles currently being performed by Black musicians and further asserts:

It's easy to condemn the schlock produced in recent years by Lionel Richie, to be sure. But it's impossibly patronizing to suggest that his music isn't a "genuine" variety of black pop. It's a conceptual dead end, too, leaving little room to affirm evolution and change in any direction. (55)

Next, Perry takes on the criticisms of Nelson George, *Billboard's* Black music columnist and author of the Motown history *Where Did Our Love Go?* By examining several of George's quotes equating pop success with the surrender of racial identity, Perry concludes that George's "incoherent" arguments, while presented in the language of aesthetics, are actually economic:

The manifest appeal of George's argument to black capitalism is clear, but so is the extent to which his vision would harden the lines that keep black artists and black audiences segregated in economic ghettos. For every black artist who becomes a crossover success, he elaborates, "there are many more who fail." ...If George were commenting generally on the record industry's version of late capitalism, in which fewer and fewer products are released to more and more hype, he'd have a point. But he's speaking in specifically racial terms, and his implicit point – which can hardly be made explicit since it isn't true – is that black artists would stand a better chance of succeeding with small labels, or with record divisions that appeal to principally black markets. It is no accident that artists tend to flee these smaller labels for larger ones as soon as the opportunity presents itself. (59)

Perry's analysis succeeds in demonstrating to his readers that George's economic argument has no specific stylistic implications. It is actually the entrenched relationship between race and capitalism that is at issue. It is true that the system of capitalism in general does not require race for its functioning. But capitalist wealth in the United States was created by the surplus labor of the slave caste, whose descendants today still disproportionately populate the underclass. And when Whites disproportionately control access to economic and other institutional power within the music world and without, the question of class is

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<sup>3</sup> Perry does not specify working definitions of *black music* and *white music*, though from his ensuing discussion we can infer that he is referring more to the personnel of the headline performers than to the music's stylistic features.

always clearly – at least to Black Americans – a racial question too. In “the record industry’s version of late capitalism,” the dominant companies represent the only viable game in town. As of Perry’s writing, the dominators of the game were – not incidentally – White.

But neither can emerging Black-owned companies such as Def Jam suffice in themselves to quell George’s stated concerns. It is still the case that for every Black artist who signs with such a company, “there are many more who fail.” Furthermore, those who succeed are buoyed by dollars from White consumers as well as Black. And regardless of any artist’s race or that of the recording executives, there are general stylistic implications of aiming at a market in which “fewer and fewer products are released to more and more hype,” something that Perry recognizes. George seems to be arguing for a state of affairs in which a profusion of Black-owned companies would have no need to market to White consumers: these companies could support all Black musicians wanting to record their stylistic innovations, and these innovations, of course, would have been made in a complete vacuum of the influence of White musicians.

Perry first challenges the argument for Black separatist capitalism:

In view of the four centuries of black experience in America, the appeal of nationalist rhetoric about pride, unity, and economic self-help is clear. But the real economics of separatism are more troublesome. The central premise, after all, is that a separatist black economic community will serve the interest of all blacks in a way that capitalism generally does not. But it’s impossible to abstract black capitalism from its place in the larger matrix of industrial capitalism. Historically, the black working class has functioned much like the labor pool of a colonized nation, providing a source of cheaper labor that helped to depress the wage scale for all workers. To remedy this split and achieve general radical reform would require class unity between black and white workers; so long as these workers remain separated along lines of race, it works to the advantage of black and white capitalists alike. And the black working class, being far more economically depressed from the outset, suffers proportionately more. (63)

It is no hyperbole to state that the women of Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir, Sweet Honey In The Rock, and Urban Bush Women have depended not only on White audiences but also on grants from White funding institutions for their independence as artists. In fact, there have been times when I have wondered whether some of the individuals in these groups would prefer *not* to have to share the tools and materials of their art with White people in workshops as part of their professional sustenance. Regardless of how they might feel about it, they surely know that separation from White markets is impossible. It is the harsh reality of subservience to White-controlled economic markets and other social institutions that makes the concomitant impossibility of stylistic separatism difficult for many Black Americans to bear without bitterness. As such, some are tempted to deny or ignore the Black-White hybridization of American musics.

When Whites, too, deny this hybridization, the motivation is racism. The next targets in Perry’s article are racist discourses that ignore the racially integrated nature of rock-and-roll’s early development. Perry reports that in the “conventional explanation,” the emergence of rock-and-roll in the mid-’50s is accounted for as an “organic response to the baby boom...., the voice of a self-conscious, rebellious

generation of unprecedented size and affluence” (65). Naturally, this explanation is a White one, since it is only White people in our society whose evaluations have the power to become “conventional.” Taken together, the words “fifties,” “baby boom,” and “affluence” paint a reflexively White picture for anyone born too late to remember the decade and whose images of it depend on mass-media productions such as *Grease* or the *Happy Days* sitcom. Clearly, a big part of the picture is missing from this account, and that is the picture of growing Black populations in the Northern urban centers to which so many Southern African Americans had migrated in search of industrial employment:

The concentration of blacks in cities made them a commercial market in a sense they hadn’t been before: the diffuse “race music” market of the South became a thriving urban R&B market. (65)

Independent R&B labels sprang up nationwide in the country’s major cities, and a profusion of new radio stations exposed more White and Black people to more White and Black music than ever before.

Though the foregoing information has been omitted from “conventional” accounts, “unofficial” discourses have circulated that also require correction. Perry explains:

Most histories of rock have little to say about the racial dynamics of its origins, but the truism I alluded to earlier (that early rock ‘n’ roll amounted to black invention and white theft/cooptation) still persists. There’s a lot of truth in this observation, and it’s probably necessary to insert a caveat here: as I talk about the interaction of black and white music in America, which seems to me remarkably rich and extensive given the racist setting in which it occurred, I don’t mean to imply that black and white musicians have received anything approaching equal rewards – either in money or acclaim – for their talents. They have not. But to jump from that fact to the conclusion that the story of American music is the story of “original” black music and “derivative” white imitations is too far a leap. (66)

To refute this popular conclusion – often epitomized in false allegations of Elvis Presley’s note-for-note piracy of songs on Black demo records – Perry offers the real story of “Hound Dog,” which he claims is representative of much that went on at the time. Perry quotes Greil Marcus:

Jerry Leiber and Mark Stoller were Jewish boys from the East Coast who fell in love with black music. ...They wrote “Hound Dog” and promoted (it) to Johnny Otis, a ruling R&B bandleader who was actually a dark-skinned white man from Berkeley who many thought was black. Otis gave the song to [Big Mama] Thornton, who recorded it in a slow, bluesy style, and Otis also took the composer’s credit, which Leiber and Stoller had to fight to get back. Elvis heard the record, changed the song completely, from the tempo to the words, and cut Thornton’s version to shreds.

Whites wrote it; a white man made it a hit. And yet there is no denying that “Hound Dog” is a “black” song, unthinkable outside the impulses of black music, and probably a rewrite of an old piece of juke joint fury that dated back far beyond the birth of any of these people. Can you pull justice out of *that* maze? (67)

Perry perceives that the most important effect of Presley's music was to top *Billboard's* three major charts, whose audiences had formerly been demographically segregated: the Pop chart audience had been White, middle-class, and urban consumers of Tin Pan Alley fare; the R&B audience was Black; and the Country chart recorded the listening habits of rural, White Southerners and Midwesterners. Rock 'n' roll "tore up these boundaries," though it was only White rockers who ever topped all three charts, since the Country audience consistently rejected Black performers (68).

Perry delineates the contribution to rock style of developing trends in both R&B and country. With this stylistic integration came the integration of radio shows, performer lineups in rock concerts, and rock concert audiences. As he states:

Virtually all early rockers played to mixed audiences when they toured. ...Rock 'n' roll was the first place where American blacks and whites began to approach genuine, willful integration, and if that point has been lost or undervalued through the years, it certainly wasn't lost on *anyone* at the time. (69)

It was especially not lost on overt White supremacists, who denounced the new music in the most vitriolic of racist terms, or on more genteel bigots, whose concerns were clearly class-motivated as well as racist (69, 70). To such conservatives, the threat of early rock was double, characterized as it was by "the mutualism with which these mostly southern, mostly working-class black and white musicians influenced each other" (72).

That mutualism was fostered in the operations of Stax Records in Memphis, Fame Music in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, and Quin Ivy's Muscle Shoals Studio. Though their principal owners were White, "the nucleus of creative personnel at each place was integrated" (73). White men are credited as writers, producers, or players on hits by Otis Redding, Aretha Franklin, and Wilson Pickett. Perry remarks:

It would be easy enough to pass off this integration as something imposed on black artists by white bosses, but that's simply not true. Nearly all the white players came from backgrounds that mixed up country and R&B in reckless fashion, and many had played in proto-R&B bands since high school. Besides, if you believe that these men were cut of a different cloth, that they weren't expressing the *same* heritage as their black colleagues on some level, then how can you account for such a wondrous piece of gospel-soul as Aretha Franklin's "Do Right Woman, Do Right Man," written by (whites) Dan Penn and Chips Moman...? (73, 74)

Perry accounts for the phenomenon by a long history of cooperation and musical cross-fertilization between poor, Southern Blacks and Whites dating back into the eighteenth century. He reminds readers that the shared experience of subsistence farming in small communities constituted a significant common terrain between postslavery Blacks and Whites. He gives examples of cross-racial musical hybridization including: the influence of White hymnody's harmonic structure on Spirituals and gospel music; the borrowing into ragtime of formal structures used in the keyboard literature of European art music; and the heavy influence on country music of the blues (75). None of these pre-rock stylistic

borrowings – or even mutual developments – has been made the subject of arguments about racial sellout or theft. Perry's larger point would seem to be that, although sellout in *quality* – after the example of Lionel Ritchie – is possible for any musician, African Americans cannot sell out their *race* by creating in popular styles when all popular styles have, by definition, Blackness at their roots.

Two of Perry's statements can be read together as expressing his concluding theses:

If racial barriers have always counted for a lot in the development of American popular music, they nonetheless counted for less in music than in any other facet of culture. ...The popularity of black music also exposes to anyone with eyes and ears just how profoundly black experience has shaped the cultural mainstream. To deny blacks their rightful place in the heart of American culture is not only a gross political injustice, but a denial of reality which, so long as it prevails, makes it impossible for *anyone* to understand the lifeblood of the culture. (77, 87)

This raises some questions that will be considered later in the chapter and in the conclusion to this study. At the heart of my inquiry into cultural appropriation (and at the heart of the racial sellout argument as well) is the unqualified assumption that Black and White are separate cultures. If this is so, then in light of some of the discussion on style and identity in Chapter Two, each culture shall be expected to have produced a separate music that cannot be grasped on a deep level by someone from the other culture. But the record of the development of rock-and-roll and its fans suggests that the musical innovations of Black Americans have indeed held deep resonance for White Americans – and vice versa. This would indicate that Black-American and White-American musical styles/cultures may not be so discrete. In fact, Perry places Black Americans in the "heart" and the "lifeblood" of American culture, a kind of recognition that many African Americans have long demanded. If he is correct, then the original assumption of Black and White as discrete cultures in the United States is threatened.

### *Musical Imperialism*

Matters of race, cultural ownership, and cultural theft are complicated much further when musical expressions from Africa or other regions of the Diaspora are brought into the definition of *Black music*. Roger Wallis and Krister Malm, Andrew Goodwin and Joe Gore, and Steven Feld have written articles on the politics and economics of the "world music" and "world beat" phenomena that elucidate some of the dilemmas and arguments with which this study is concerned.

In "Patterns of Change," Roger Wallis and Krister Malm posit four models by which cross-cultural musical exchange can be conceptualized. Each of these four models represents a new stage in a cross-cultural pattern of musical change. The first one is termed *cultural exchange* and refers to nothing more than the rather informal and basically equal trading of musical features between two cultures or subcultures. This exchange can be far more complicated than a single, finite interaction between two individuals. The authors' example, which has important implications for this study, traces the migration of Afro-Caribbean music to Zaïre via encounters between Caribbean and African intellectuals in Europe:

Zairean musicians experimenting with rumba and calypso migrated to East Africa where their experimentations formed the basis for the development of Swahili jazz; recordings of these evolutions later reached the Caribbean and inspired Trinidad's Afro-Dada music and the Afro-jazz of Martinique and Guadeloupe (173, 174).

The second stage is *cultural dominance*, in which "a culture, usually that of a powerful society or group in a society, is imposed on another in a more or less formally organized fashion" (174). One illustrative example provided is the relationship between slaves and slaveholders out of which Afro-American music developed. Differences in the terms of imposition of slaveholding culture on the slaves had different musical results; for example, in the Caribbean islands where the large concentrations of slaves were allowed to drum, African percussion traditions were retained and fused to a far greater degree than in the United States. During the colonial period on the African continent, missionaries in Kenya and Tanzania banned the use of indigenous instruments and taught children to read and sing European hymnody. Today, the missionary-style method of music pedagogy has been incorporated into the Kenyan school curriculum (175).

In the third stage, *cultural imperialism*, "cultural dominance is augmented by the transfer of money and/or resources from dominated to dominating culture group. For examples: collectors have acquired traditional African instruments for museum display in the United States; music has been taken from small countries and copyrighted in the United States; gifted artists have immigrated to this country from Latin America and the Caribbean in search of financial advantage. This model places the dominated culture under increased pressure and speeds up the pace of change, which sometimes results in "counteractions" such as the establishment of small, independent record labels or local performers' rights organizations (175, 176).

The authors identify the fourth stage, *transculturation*, as the result in 1970 of "the worldwide establishment of the transnational corporations in the field of culture, the corresponding spread of technology, and the development of worldwide marketing networks for what can be termed transnationalized culture, or *transculture*." Musical transculture is created when "the lowest common denominator for the highest possible market is identified by building on the changes caused by the three previously described patterns of change." The results can include a processing, packaging, and marketing of a style originating in a specific ethnic group but "stripped of its most original features," or in a newly-synthesized music "that has not originated within any identifiable ethnic group." In transculturation, music products created by the dominant culture can absorb features from and be cross-marketed back into any number of donor/target cultures. (176-178).

Of these four stages, it is only the first one, *cultural exchange*, in which the relationship between the donor and recipient cultures is free of an imbalance in power, and thence, of ethical implications. The authors point out that all four stages of change coexist today, bolstering or mitigating against one another in a complex system of relationships. Any piece of music that reaches a Feminist chorus in the United States from a culture in a less developed nation has been shaped and transmitted by a series of these relationships.



In “World Beat and the Cultural Imperialism Debate,” Andrew Goodwin and Joe Gore suggest some ways to approach the question of whether World Beat music (including World Music – or “folk” – that is marketed as such) is exploitative. They identify earlier critiques that they see as too reductive: pessimist, neo-Marxist critics see culture and the arts as reflective of the international organization of social relations; optimists see World Beat as “a progressive intervention within Western culture” (64). Goodwin and Gore suggest that, rather than choosing a side in this all-or-nothing dichotomy, we must weight examples on a case-by-case basis, giving attention to some considerations that have been left out of the debate.

One assumption in the debate that Goodwin and Gore seek to disrupt is the “purity” of Third-World musics, and their argument reads like an international version of Shaw’s and Perry’s accounts of the development of popular music in the United States. They give the example of *Remain in Light* by the Talking Heads, who acknowledge the influence of Nigerian Afrobeat on this album. Afrobeat’s founder, Fela Kuti, credits James Brown for heavy influence on the genre. As for influences on James Brown, one must consider the roots of Africanist musical expressions in modern pop, which, “if (it) were stripped of its Europeanisms... would *sound* a lot more like Western pop than if it were stripped of its Africanisms” (71). To further disrupt ideas about cultural “purity” in music, it must be recognized that – as pointed out by Philip Tagg:

Most of the elements considered quintessentially “black” in Anglo-American pop are to be found in European and/or other non-African musics [blue notes, call-and-response patterns and improvisation], while the one major contribution which is truly alien to...European tradition(s) [polyrhythm] is so peculiar to specific areas of the African continent that to label it generically “African” is a misnomer. (71)

Some suggested remedies for the typical lack of “adequate recompense” for Third-World musical materials used in World Beat have relied on the “cultural purity” assumption. The 1976 Tunis Model Law for Folklore stipulated that commercial users of traditional cultural goods must obtain licensing from the goods’ original owners. When any cultural expression has been created via such circuitous routes of transmission and transformation as the music of *Remain In Light*, the challenge to obtain licenses from all relevant groups and to determine proportional compensation to all of them is formidable at the least.

The authors concede that World Beat cannot be evaluated outside the phenomenon of inequalities in global resources and discourses. World Beat exists because of the impact on Third World musicians of rock and soul. The capital it generates flows unevenly into Britain, France, and the United States. The influx into Third World countries of Anglo-American musical product far exceeds the outflow of Third-World product. Furthermore, the “Westernization” heard in products of the outflow demonstrates that Anglo-American ideas of what counts as “good” music exert a constitutive effect on local values in these countries. When Anglo-American musicians are not adopting these countries’ aesthetics at a concomitant rate, what we have is musical imperialism. The authors also affirm that “World Beat has generated

instances of exploitation, rooted in the privileged position of Western musicians vis-à-vis the recording and publishing industries” (73).

But media-imperialism theory has its critics. The authors list Jeremy Turnstall, Thomas McPhail, and Chin-Chuan Lee among them. These scholars have pointed to the development of media powers within the Third World as positive effects of – and significant sites of resistance to – First-World cultural hegemony. They have also warned against “reductively conflat(ing) economic and cultural power” (74), cautioning that ownership patterns do not impute cultural effects. Roger Wallis and Krister Malm have suggested that language differences “act as a brake on homogenizing trends in the global market for culture” (75).

The authors conclude that these criticisms cannot necessarily discredit sophisticated deployments of media-imperialism theory, based as they are in recognition of the imbalance in power between Third-World musicians and the multinational mass-media. They do, however, attempt to soften the theory by drawing attention to “relative autonomy in the sphere of culture” and “the active, creative role of popular-culture consumers” (75). Of particular relevance to this study is the need to question what World Music and World Beat means to listeners in the United States:

World Beat is not necessarily “progressive” solely by virtue of its country of origin, the color of the musicians or the name on the record label. The question of use was painfully spelled out in the 1970s, when British skinhead groups saw no contradiction between their violent racism and their devotion to reggae music.

...Stuart Cosgrove has pointed out that for many World Beat fans in the West, what is offered is exoticism – world music sounds as aural tourism. Here we confront the problem of the construction of an undifferentiated, usually African, “Other.” Any view of “Africa,” for instance, as either unitary or “pure” is quite clearly empirically unfounded and potentially racist, and the creation of an “African Other” in the western subcultures of World Beat (and in rap music’s new-found Afrocentricity) needs to be examined directly. It is here in particular that one needs to consider the pervasive presence of discourses of imperialism which have long outlived the actual practices of colonialism. In merely inverting the interpretation of an Africa or the Orient that remains undifferentiated, do contemporary World Beat and rap culture notions of globalism actually help to reproduce ethnocentric ways of seeing (and hearing) the world?

The alternative to economically reductive approaches using theories of audience passivity is too often a simple inversion, in which an autonomous sphere of culture is the site of creative freeplay of meaning and progressive politics. In fact, it is quite possible (indeed likely) that audiences will sometimes construct *reactionary* meanings from the products of the global culture. (76-77)

The assumption challenged at the beginning of this excerpt is the same one underlying the “folk consciousness” of the musical Leftists discussed in R. Serge Denisoff’s work, one that – as I have reported – surfaces in the internationally folkloristic programming of leading Womyn’s choirs. To borrow Pete Seeger’s words, Goodwin and Gore’s challenge is that there is no necessary connection “between (World) music and pork chops.”

I have seen Goodwin and Gore's concern about audience interpretation surface in the work of the ensembles I am studying. When any of the performers in these groups takes pains to explain in liner notes, concert programs, or comments from the stage the cultural and historical origins of their Third-World music selections, she is making some attempt to ensure "right" hearing of the music. These attempts are usually not sufficient in themselves, however, to disrupt their listeners' – or sometimes even their own – undifferentiated concepts of entire continents or vast regions. Pierre Bourdieu's theories about the functioning of *habitus* suggest why an intervention more sustained and powerful than a set of program notes is usually required to significantly alter the filter through which a listener passes a piece of "foreign" music. I quote again an excerpt from Jane Sugarman that I presented in Chapter Two, substituting the words *perceive/s* and *perceptions* for *act/s* and *actions*:

Since an adult (perceives) on the basis of structures, themselves historical products, which were inculcated in him or her beginning in early childhood, Bourdieu sees *habitus* as predisposing individuals to reproduce (societal) structures through their (perceptions) in the great majority of instances, rather than to (perceive) in ways that might challenge and transform them. (Sugarman 1997, 27)

I quote my own comments on the excerpt:

In other words, in the "great majority of instances," individuals reproduce *doxa* or assert and reassert *orthodoxa*: only rarely does an individual's *habitus* – in intricate and unconscious ways that are beyond total explication – confer on her or him the ability to make heterodoxic adjustments.

Reintroducing *action* into the equation now, it must be acknowledged that "right" perception, when it can be ensured, does not ensure "right" action. As Jon Cruz argues, when Frederick Douglass interpreted for listeners what they should be hearing in the Spiritual, he envisioned that this hearing would inspire them to radical political action rather than to the development of new scientific disciplines within which they could profit from their hearings. The implications for me of this line of argument are suddenly rather staggering as I, an avid consumer and performer of traditional Black musics, sit here feverishly typing about them in pursuit of my next academic credential.

Goodwin and Gore have something to say about the ethical import of decisions made by individual musicians:

We see a displaced account of the debate about cultural imperialism, in which the real issue of Western domination of channels of cultural production and (more importantly) distribution is taken up as a narrowly *moral* question concerning the practices of individual musicians. This accusation of musical "theft" thus constitutes the simplest and most commonly aired link between the World Beat phenomenon and the debate about cultural imperialism. ...However, media imperialism is not perpetuated by pop musicians but by the Western cultural hegemony inherent in the structure of the global mass media. ...Musicians themselves

confuse this issue (as do most rock critics and journalists) by reducing the broad problem concerning the organization of the cultural industries to issues of personal ethics. (68, 78)<sup>4</sup>

What does this say to me and other directors of Feminist choirs? In the first place, AMASONG was not a capital enterprise. To my knowledge, the extent of our penetration of Third-World markets consists of exactly one copy of each of our two compact-disc recordings, which have reached the Mozambican National Song and Dance Company. Mozambican money didn't buy them; I gave them as gifts to the company's director, who is a friend. Our music is not "pop" in style and is therefore not a candidate for distribution more *mass*-ive than listings in three national, special-interest music catalogues and a spot in the "choral" bins at national outlets of Borders Books and Music. My chorus, a 501(c)(3) organization, paid my (humble) salary while I produced these recordings; revenues from their sale go into the organizational account, slowly replacing what we spent to produce them. Guest artists on our recordings were paid the honoraria they requested. Composers and arrangers receive standard royalties. Our adaptations of traditional material were made absolutely for free. We have paid general social debts through benefit performances and donation of monies, but we have not tied these specifically to nations or regions from whom we have borrowed music: looking back, I think this would have been a fine idea. But if even the individual choices of mega-stars like Sting, David Byrne, and Peter Gabriel cannot address cultural imperialism, the women of AMASONG and I are hardly positioned to pull this off. If we are lucky, our involvement with Third-World music might prod or nourish any inclination we and our audience members already have to "think globally; act locally," a matter I will revisit in my concluding chapter.

#### *On the Vulnerability of Oral Musics*

The different musics discussed thus far in this chapter have been either exclusively oral – as in the earliest singings of slaves in the United States – or have relied for their influences and their perpetuation on different combinations of live, oral transmission/aural reception, musical notation, and audio recording. The music with which this study is chiefly concerned is music that, whether it has been recorded or even transcribed, is unattributable to an individual creator and has a tradition of circulation by oral means. Though particular recordings and arrangements of the music are likely to be copyrighted, the source tunes themselves are not. In this country's system of protection of the private ownership of musical property, these tunes and their lyrics are in the *public domain*. This means that anyone may use them without paying royalties.

Music in the oral tradition is highly subject to change as it passes from one use to another. There are a few reasons for this. In the first place, even when humans strive to copy exactly the pitches, rhythms, and words we have heard, we make errors in hearing or memory and either knowingly or unknowingly

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<sup>4</sup> Steven Feld, among others, nevertheless holds that the actions of individual superstars *do* have ethical salience. His article "Notes of 'World Beat'" (in Keil and Feld 1994) is one among several case studies of Paul Simon's *Graceland* that examines Simon's payments of royalties and honoraria, his promotional activities on behalf of guest artists, and his copyrighting practices in songs that rely to greater and lesser extents on the creative work of other musicians.

make substitutions. In the second place, singers/players will invariably inflect the “correct” pitch and rhythm content with the stylistic nuances of our own place and time. Finally – and very significantly – we often see music in the public domain as a fair vehicle for individual creativity; un beholden to composers or copyright owners, musicians can adapt traditional songs to our own local needs and expressive impulses. Folklorists and folk entrepreneurs refer to this dynamic of change as the *folk process*.

A notated music – say, a Beethoven piano sonata – is a much more static entity, though it is not immutable. Its notated pitches and rhythms are the only ones that may be played. Tempi are suggested. Dynamics, a relative matter, are outlined. Some phrasings and articulations are also given. Between the ink marks on the printed score, there is room for some variation: performers are expected to lend their own interpretation to the music, as long as they remain within the stylistic boundaries of “acceptable” performance practice. Scholarship suggests ways that these boundaries have shifted under influences as tangible as changes in instrument construction and as intangible as the effect on contemporary ears of the intervening one hundred seventy years of evolving compositional practice.<sup>5</sup> In fact, any score in the Viennese keyboard sonata tradition captures far less of the music than the average layperson suspects.

Looking backward in European art music from the Beethoven piano sonata, we pass through traditions of unwritten cadenzas in keyboard concerti, improvised organ fugues, and figured charts for continuo harpsichord that suggest as much as they stipulate. Looking forward into the twentieth century, we see experimentation with all possible relationships between composer control and performer choice. On one extreme are heavily marked scores that attempt to micro-manage all aspects of the performers’ sound. On the other extreme are compositions that do no more than give a broad framework – in a few sentences – for how the performers should go about generating sound.

My point is that, contrary to the assumptions of some who are unfamiliar with it, Western art music played by living humans does undergo significant changes from performance to performance and generation to generation. Furthermore, all of it depends rather considerably on an *aural* tradition for what cannot be stipulated on the page; we learn to sound our instruments and shape our stylings based on countless, accumulated hearings of our teachers, of concert performances, and of recordings. Still, regardless of what the printed score cannot stipulate, the music’s inarguable, absolute limits do reside in the ink.

On music in oral traditions there is no such brake, even where it has been written down. Communities who create an oral style follow their own, largely implicit, rules about what choices can and cannot be made in performing it. A style that remains long enough in the same community will undergo changes in its rules, just as has happened in the interpretive practices of keyboard artists in the Western art tradition. But when songs from a community’s style are chosen for use by someone outside the community, the original rules may not travel to the next community along with the tunes and their words. Furthermore, if the outsider’s concept of belonging or ownership is limited to the values underlying our

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<sup>5</sup> See *Performance Practices in Classic Piano Music: Their Principles and Applications* by Sandra P. Rosenblum (1988).

copyright system, a song that has no attributed composer appears to have no brakes on it of any kind; its style, content, and conditions of use are all seemingly up for grabs.

This matter of the values underlying our copyright system is a crucial one. The dominant view of ownership in the United States is that it is individual, exclusive, legally protected, and fiscally profitable. These ideas were, of course, imported by European colonists. The most entrenched underpinning of this view of ownership is the Western concept of the self, which is as an individual being with an individual will that is to be put at the service of an individual destiny (Taylor 1993). There are other parts of the world where the concept of the self is much more dependent on its place in a group. Japan is one of them, and I saw evidence of this in numerous conversations with a Japanese friend from my conducting class. Over shared meals, he and I would posit hypothetical dilemmas in our personal and professional futures. I was struck by how regularly our conclusions about what we would do in these dilemmas were diametrically opposed. I always decided in favor of satisfactions and gratifications that were entirely my own, with the assumption that doing otherwise would make me miserable and thereby cause me to make my companions and colleagues miserable as well. He, on the other hand, always indicated that he would capitulate something precious to him in order to secure the happiness or approval of his loved ones or coworkers; the first determiner of his happiness was harmony within his group, and if having anything else he loved meant disrupting that harmony, he would forgo it or be miserable. My choices must have been as unthinkable to him as his were to me.

As Timothy Dean Taylor discusses in *The Voracious Muse*, there are regions in sub-Saharan Africa where the self has traditionally not been imagined independently of the group. In fact, there are Black Americans who identify collective individualism as an Africanist worldview deriving from this different concept of the ego (see page 85), a contribution brought by their ancestors to a culture that may ultimately need it in order to save itself. The collective identity of the self has significant implications for views on ownership, for if the self is not an individual, then ownership must consist in something other than the legal deed to a private possession held by an individual. A person with Western concepts of selfhood and ownership who encounters something (a song? a tract of land?) apparently free of institutional attribution of ownership to an individual may assume that *no one* has any proprietary claim to or feelings about it. That person's habit of acting according to individual impulses toward individual goals easily preempts any consideration that use of the encountered thing may violate others' sensibilities or needs. And here I am coming very close to a definition of the White, class-privileged, arrogant self-indulgence that two Afrocentric musician-acquaintances have accused me of displaying, in matters musical and otherwise.

What I have been doing in the last several paragraphs is establishing the dynamics by which and the context in which White Americans make free and auto-determined use of traditional songs from Africa or the Diaspora. Black Americans angrily charge theft or violation of the music, and White Americans are left dumbstruck by the charge. Of course, the picture I am drawing here has to be viewed within the larger history of White theft of Black everything as discussed in the earlier sections of this chapter. And there is

one more clash of discourse between oral and written cultures that I must add to this picture before turning to the words of my interviewees about oral versus written musics and cultural appropriation.

*On the "Functionality" of Black Music*

When African-American musicians such as Ysaye Barnwell tell White choral musicians that Black music is *functional*, they are implicitly distinguishing it from White music. Clearly, the White music implicated here is not Balkan field singing or Appalachian miners' songs, both of which are obviously functional. It seems to me that the distinction is being drawn especially to White concert music on the order of, say, the Beethoven piano sonata. But as Thomas Turino says, "all music is functional, or people wouldn't make it." The point of the argument, then, has much more to do with the degree to which the functions of different musics are acknowledged or made explicit. An exchange I had with Bernice Johnson Reagon leads in the direction of some of the points I will make in this section:

KB: There's a long argument between art and politics; probably you're familiar with it, you know: that strong politics are not artistic and that fine art is degraded by having a political message or an agenda. And I'm interested in what you have to say about that.

BJR: It's not been an interesting discussion for me. I don't know what people mean when they even have the discussion. I feel that our people deserve the very best and that as an artist, I have to try to offer out of my deepest experience and training when I offer my work to our audiences, whether it's teaching or performing in concert. When music began to make sense to me, conscious sense so that I actually felt that I could participate in placing it, it was when I understood music working along with a fight against racism. And there wasn't anything about that that was not artistic and political. And I hesitate when I use the word "artistic" because it is a word that is problematic for me.

KB: Yes.

BJR: In a lot of the cultures that I study, there is no word for it. And a lot of the people who have that kind of discussion will do, you know: "Let the art speak for itself." They don't really talk about it, or – I don't know. There's some kind of really strange way in which these expressions are not tied to the things out of which they come. And it's almost like some people like to disassociate themselves. And I don't understand the point, because if it's an artistic expression, no matter what it is, if you created it, there's a way in which you really could present it in the context that drove its creation. But that's my bias. So I have difficulty dealing with the idea of "art" in the very conventional ways it's sometimes used when you have those kinds of statements, like, you know: "If it's propaganda, it's not good art."

It was in encountering cultures that had no concept of art separate from the daily functions of communal living that early (White) ethnomusicologists initiated the African-music-as-functional discourse (see the footnote on page 129). The discourse was less than flattering, as it was the attempt of academics to salvage something of worth from sounds that they were unable to hear as aesthetically valuable or

intelligently organized. Clearly, the researchers who drew this distinction were building on pre-existing discourses that make opposites of beauty and functionality (which really means “art” and “craft”), to say nothing of literacy and orality, individualism and collectivism, Europe and Africa, Whiteness and Blackness – and, as I argued in Chapter Three, value and worthlessness. It was not ethnomusicologists who invented the discourse on the superior beauty and achievement of “art for art’s sake” (as created by individual European masters). The idea had been percolating long before nineteenth-century German philosophers coined a term to epitomize its manifestation in music: *absolute music*.

Here is a quote from the first paragraph of the entry for *absolute music* in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*:

The term ‘absolute music’ denotes not so much an agreed idea as an aesthetic problem. The expression is of German origin, first appearing in the writings of Romantic philosophers and critics such as J.L. Tieck, J.G. Herder, W.H. Wackenroder, Jean Paul Richter and E.T.A. Hoffmann. It features in the controversies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – for example, in Hanslick’s spirited defence of *absolut Tonkunst* against the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of Wagner – and also in the abstractions of 20<sup>th</sup>-century musical aesthetics. It names an ideal of musical purity, an ideal from which music has been held to depart in a variety of ways; for example, by being subordinated to words [as in song], to drama [as in opera], to some representational meaning [as in programme music], or even to the vague requirements of emotional expression. (Scruton 1980)

This passage admits of several genres in Western art music that cannot even stake a claim in the pursuit of the *absolute* ideal; even so, these genres are part of the same cultural tradition in which this ideal has actually been seriously considered. One might be tempted to charge that it was only philosophers, never composers, who pondered such an absurdity – for no matter with what degree of detachment creators and listeners might experience their European art music today, one would be hard-pressed to identify a beloved composer in any era preceding these German philosophers who would have endorsed such an ideal. Yet there were music theorists/composers – in the Medieval and Renaissance periods whose writing hinted towards it, including Boethius, Tinctoris, and Zarlino. And in the twentieth century, Igor Stravinsky and Paul Hindemith were among those composers who made experiments with musical absolutism (Scruton).

I quote further from the *Grove* entry:

It is music that has no external reference. ...Having removed representation from the ideal of music, critics have sought to remove expression as well. ...Absolute music is now made wholly autonomous. Its *raison d’être* lies entirely within itself: it must be understood as an abstract structure bearing only accidental relations to the movement of the human soul. ...It is not subjected to any purpose independent of its own autonomous movement. (It) must be understood as pure form...(that) acquires objectivity through... producing appropriate patterns and forms. These forms satisfy us because we have an understanding of the structural relations which they exemplify. The relations are grasped by the ear in an intuitive act of apprehension, but the satisfaction that springs therefrom is akin to the satisfaction derived from the pursuit of mathematics. It is not a satisfaction that is open to everyone.



I am struck by how neatly the idea of such a “disassociated” music, one “that has no external reference,” accords with the Western concept of the autonomous ego I discussed previously. Let us say that we wanted to use this description of a European musical ideal in the service of a criticism of European/Euro-American colonial history. Bearing in mind that “all music is functional,” we might decide that absolute music functions to: reinforce an approach to the world that denies or downplays the interdependence of people, communities, and other life forms; anaesthetize its devotees to the pain of approaching life in such a disconnected and disconnecting manner, while offering no ecstasy that would lure devotees from this approach; create in its devotees a sense of belonging to an exclusive elite.

I have never practiced art music without passion or without reference to external meaning. Leaving the piano in order to become a choral musician enabled me to deal in art music with more explicit connections to meaning, and most importantly, to other people. Though I recognize that some genres and individual compositions – even ones I love – are far more abstracted than others, it is clearly erroneous to generalize all of Western art music, musicians, and musical practice as abstract, emotionally vacant, and devoid of external purpose. Still, elements of the absolute-music discourse adhere to Western art practice, especially when its detractors contrast it to vernacular forms.

In the first place, the charge of elitism is difficult to dismiss in the United States. Acquiring the notational literacy and the technical skill to master the instruments of the art is expensive. Tickets to performances are expensive, and buying one is no guarantee of understanding what occurs onstage. Venues are typically upscale, if not by location then by the standard of attire that is tacitly expected of audience members. It is not a milieu that is especially welcoming of low-income members.

The perception that the music has no relation to the world beyond it is encouraged by the rarefied atmosphere in which it is typically practiced. Something else, too, contributes to this sense, and that is the gross preponderance on radio playlists and concert programs of the music of foreign composers long dead. Even when American audiences might be informed of any historical occasions or concerns that a composer might have been addressing in his work, these are often seen as fossilized in the record of a distant – and no longer relevant – past. In fact, both practitioners and consumers tend to lend most of their attentions to the considerable demands of the music’s technical mastery, often leaving anything else about it by the wayside. Numerous players of art music have told me that they studied for years without ever knowing a thing about where the music came from or why. And in Chapter Four I quoted Stephanie, who has worked professionally in European art music, as saying: “I don’t care much about what I’m singing about a lot of the times” (page 204).

If it is too far a stretch to posit the absolute-music ideal as a symptom of a culture bent on hedonistic individualism and the unfeeling division and conquest of lesser peoples, perhaps we can at least say that playing through Hindemith’s *Ludus tonalis* certainly does not *foster* connections with other human beings, computer-generated composition based on fractal equations does not *encourage* connection with

one's own feelings,<sup>6</sup> and neither of these things – or even Bach's *Die Kunst der Fuge* – can be shared in mutual understanding at a neighborhood potluck. At its heart, this body of music is an exclusionary one, not a participatory one.<sup>7</sup>

When Afrocentrists say that Black music is functional, implying that White music is not, they are really saying something more elaborate. In the first place, they are saying that they *know* the nonmusical functions that the music they are talking about can serve. For example, "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round" has functioned explicitly to gather, inform, and strengthen people who are fighting for their freedoms. By contrast, Debussy's "Dieu! qu'il la fait bon regarder" functions as music for music's sake; whatever other secondary functions it actually fulfills go largely unrecognized by its singers and listeners. Work songs like "Hammer Ring" once set the pace of manual labor and helped the time to pass less odiously. A community ensemble's performance of Mendelssohn part songs is prepared by and for people who have leisure time in which to pursue beauty.

In fact, one person's functionality is another's uselessness, and that depends largely on differences in what those people need. Singing "Here's That Rainy Day" over a glass of beer with my musician friends provides for me a relished piece of aesthetic recreation, and when I need to unwind, that is functional for me. But to Ethiopians who are addressing the ravages of drought conditions, recreation is not functional; what they need are their rain chants. For an African-American singer and social activist who needs to help protesters raise a formidable sound in front of the local police station, Charles Ives' "The Circus Band" is definitely *not functional*.

What I hear some African-American musicians expressing, then, when they caution White musicians to remember that "Black music is functional" is the concern that White musicians will regard songs of resistance, songs of labor, and songs of spirituality as vehicles of musical diversion for its own sake – or that we might mold them to intents and functions that violate their original meanings and purposes. And I state again that, given our national history, this can be a painful thing to witness.

#### *DeMore, Barnwell, and Reagon on Issues of Written, Oral, and Copyrighted Music*

Members of Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir and Sweet Honey In The Rock regard a music's original method of transmission as part of its heritage. In Chapter Three I quoted Ysaye Barnwell on her requirement that no notation be read or made in her workshops. As a director who had often felt pressured by performance dates to supply singers with written charts for oral-tradition music, I was interested to find out whether these ensembles ever used paper in their rehearsals. Melanie DeMore spoke to this issue in three different contexts in which she has worked:

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<sup>6</sup> A friend who is a music theorist and a composer was told by the chair of the department where she teaches that her composing would jeopardize her tenure chances because it was "too emotional."

<sup>7</sup> For more on participatory music, see Turino 1995 and 2000.

KB: I'm interested in how you approach the dichotomy between oral-tradition music and notation, the use of different devices for remembering, recording, passing on, and also how that affects the rehearsal process when CHC gets together. You've all listened to the same stuff? How do you create your arrangements?

MDM: Somebody may hear a song and say "Let's try this." And very rarely do we learn the music from notation.

KB: And, do you notate what you do from one rehearsal to the next?

MDM: No.

KB: Do you record it on tape?

MDM: Sometimes. Like, we do record in most of our rehearsals. But Linda kind of spontaneously combusts with arrangements. She's really quite a brilliant arranger. Because you know, we have to put our own modern, twentieth-century stuff on things while being true to the traditional presentation of the music. For me, if I'm working with my kids in the youth chorus (on) a song that is from oral tradition, that's how I teach it to them. If the song is learned by mouth, orally, by being handed down, then I never teach it to them by having them look at a page. If it's Bach, we learn it off the page. You see what I'm saying? That's part of the authenticity of it. I remember when I was with VOICES<sup>8</sup> and we'd be starting something, and they'd say, "Well, what does it look like?" And I'd say, "No, you have to learn to use your ear. You have to use your ear, close your eyes, use your body, and that's it." I remember they were learning a Sweet Honey piece when I first got there. ...They were trying to read it off the page. Because, when you try to notate it – which, you know, Sweet Honey has, because people want to learn their new pieces. And they try to notate it exactly, you know, like all the wiggles that you do when you sing. So, I said, "You know, you're missing the whole point." So when I took over, I said, "Okay, everybody. Pick up your music and turn it in. Now we're going to just sing it. Because you're not going to get it that way because you have to hear it and you have to feel it." Because where it stemmed from was out of an oral tradition. Even if it's something that she just wrote, or whatever. It stemmed from that kind of style. And you have to go from there, or you're never going to get it. You know? So, depending on what the music is, I try to teach it in the same way it was taught to me, or how traditionally it was taught. That makes more sense.

Ysaye Barnwell spoke to me about Sweet Honey's direct location at the heart of African-American oral traditions. Even their new compositions, by their forms, techniques, and intents, are extensions of those traditions. So, also, is the method in which the group works:

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<sup>8</sup> San Francisco's Womyn's chorus.

YMB: And the music is both studied and improvised. We teach each other through an oral method, so the process by which we learn and develop the music dates back to oral tradition –

KB: Can I ask you just another thing about that?

YMB: Mm-hmm.

KB: Do you ever use a tape recorder in rehearsal to preserve options that you've tried –

YMB: Mm-hmm. Sometimes.

KB: – or scribble any charts? Do you ever scribble anything on paper about what –

YMB: Not for Sweet Honey rehearsal purposes. I mean, I have scores of all my stuff, but I don't write for Sweet Honey. ... Yeah, we use tape recorders. Sometimes even bring in parts if we're really up against a time crunch and people need to really try to learn things fast. People give tapes to each other so that we're not totally starting from scratch, sitting there looking at each other when the time is really, really short. In that sense, you know, the tape recorder is an extension of the tradition, which is, I think, acceptable.

KB: I'll ask your opinion on this. In teaching oral-tradition music from many parts of the world, depending on the song and how much time we have, I have gone strictly with oral teaching of it; when possible I've played recordings so the singers can listen to what the people who created the music sound like. I have used graphic charts – you know, a minimal kind of a score for those women who are convinced that they can't learn it without seeing it. And I have done full transcription. So, pretty much on a spectrum. And I'm just wondering whether you feel it's inappropriate in any case to use score transcription for a piece of oral-tradition music, to teach it.

YMB: No. I don't feel like it's inappropriate. I don't feel like that's what Sweet Honey does. But if I thought it was inappropriate, I wouldn't have the music myself, and I wouldn't be editing Sweet Honey's songbook. ... I feel pretty clear that there are people who are absolutely dependent on paper music and haven't a clue, you know, where to begin if they haven't got that thing to guide them. One of the things that I hope with the Sweet Honey songbook is that people really do read the text and what the composers have to say about trying to lift the thing up off the page, you know, so it's not: every eighth-note has the same value and, you know: "Let's argue about what she meant here with that little sixteenth-note thing." And lifting it up off the page is different from doing what you feel like.

KB: There are parameters.

YMB: Absolutely. And I try to say that. You know, a lot of times people think that – particularly with Black music – oh, you can do what you feel like. And that is, like, *so far from reality*. It only means that people have no awareness of what the structures – you know, of what they’re dealing with. So, yeah: I don’t think it’s inappropriate. I just think that people who function in the oral tradition function in the oral tradition, and music is available for people who can’t function in that tradition.

The adoption of the tape recorder into the oral process is one adaptation within a song tradition whose context has changed. These ensembles’ traditional songs arose among communities of people who lived, worked, and worshipped together. But when these singers gather and work together, it is generally for the sole purpose of developing, learning, and rehearsing their repertoire. Furthermore, given that they are typically preparing to sing in professional concert or recording situations, they face the pressure to standardize and “perfect” at least some aspects of their delivery.

In my interview with Bernice Johnson Reagon, she discussed the relationship between notated and aural information in the performance tradition of gospel music. In the excerpt that follows, she begins by addressing the limitations on someone approaching a gospel score who has been trained only in the Western art tradition:

If they operate out of a system that is within the Western system, which uses primarily paper to transmit, that particular culture says: you seek to understand the intent of the composer and maintain a kind of integrity with him. It does not restrict you from some personal space. But it is not like the law of the African cultures that says: “Until I *hear* that you have stamped this with your sound, you have not learned it.” If it is gospel music, which has a paper literature, the score on paper is only a skeleton of the composition. So when you’re looking at the paper, you’re never looking at the full composition. If you take that paper, you actually don’t know what the composition is unless you have *heard* it, full-blown, by masters, or you’ve grown up in the tradition or studied the tradition enough to know what you can do -- what you *have* to do with it for the composition to leave the paper. In that case, paper assists in transmitting. But paper operates inside of an oral-transmission system and is never to operate by itself, or you never get the composition.

At the outset, Reagon speaks to a problem facing the interpreter of Western art music – namely, the degree to which “a performer’s personal interpretation of what the music communicates” really means: “a performer’s uniquely informed and profound understanding of – or musico-emotional sympathy with – what the *composer* intended the piece to communicate.” These two are often difficult to tease apart in guidance given by teachers or evaluations made by critics: in fact, they are sometimes difficult for me to separate in my own explorations with classical music. What is clear is that composer intent supercedes performer impulse, and to a greater degree – as Reagon states – than in gospel music. Also notable is the minute level at which a performance of Western art music can be judged against stylistic norms or composer intent: the difference can reside in the delay or prolongation of a fraction of a second between two notes, or in shadings of tone color that depend on razor-fine adjustments in a mastered technique. The

sheer difficulty of bringing a performance into line with expectations such as these is an important aspect of an exclusionary music, one that requires a lifetime of expensive, private tutelage and isolated practice.

Gospel music operates within a participatory tradition and is used as an integral component in the inclusive and congregational setting of the church service. But this does not mean that everyone can automatically perform it well, especially not just by reading a score, and that, I think, is Reagon's most important point. Gospel music, too, has its masters, and a performer cannot succeed in it without studying their work or growing up surrounded by their examples. In particular, there is a mandate in gospel music performance – and other Black traditions – for an absolutely personalized response to the music that cannot be compared with the ethos of “interpretation” in Western art music. In the latter sphere, for example, one artist's virtuosic performance of a piece would not necessarily be criticized just because it could not be appreciably distinguished from another artist's exemplary performance. Reagon is emphatic that the opposite is true in gospel and other Black traditions. But the boundaries within which performers are expected to individualize their responses cannot be discerned from the printed score.

I would not agree that in general, Western art music scores are any less dependent than gospel scores on traditions of *hearings*. The importance of a *heard* tradition was at no time more apparent to me than when I first attempted to teach a piece by Handel to a choir of public-high-school students who had only ever listened to popular radio stations. Certainly, a score from total-serialist composers dominates the composer-control end of the spectrum I alluded to earlier and leaves exceptionally little up to the performer. By contrast, to prepare a score of a Mass by the Renaissance composer Heinrich Isaac, a conductor must decide which tempi, dynamics, and articulations to use, how to distribute the text, when to inflect written pitches up or down by a half-step, which proportional rhythmic relations to use in mensuration shifts, and how to make groupings of arsis and thesis. Isaac depended heavily on the *heard tradition* of Renaissance polyphony for his singers' ability to use his scores. (He likely also did not anticipate that a conductor in the late twentieth century would find herself missing vast amounts of information about how he wished his music to sound.)

For me, the significance of Reagon's comment for the classically trained musician is the *recognition* that no music is captured in its printed score. Working with scores in styles which we have mastered, we are often unaware of the extent to which we read in the ink information *that is not there*. It must be noted that there is a whole set of sound possibilities that is left out of a gospel score – and furthermore, that this is not the same set of sound possibilities that is left out of a Baroque cantata score. And a far more significant difference to me resides in the issue of *who* is making performer choice. When I prepare an Isaac score, I am deciding for all the singers what they shall do. In so much gospel music, the most important moment for performers to “stamp the music with their sound” is in soloing. Due to its participatory nature, gospel music is adaptable to – and depends on the emotional effect of – the insertion of solos as suits the occasion and by as many individuals as are equal to the task. It is most especially in these improvisatory spaces where no convincing performance can be attempted in the absence of prolonged exposure to masterful work.

Dr. Reagon made important statements about the processes of musical change during transmission and on the implications of these changes within an African-American cultural aesthetic and, by contrast, within the copyright system:

From the African-American perspective, we're caught in a bind living in this culture. Because coming from our culture, the expression is not yours until you have put your unique stamp on it. If you express the phenomenon exactly as you heard it or learned it, then you, in fact, are not doing it. It's not alive. It's dead. It's a score. It does not become a performance until you have actually transformed it so that it resonates with your life force and your voice. In Western tradition, that very phenomenon – we read that as a new arrangement or a new composition, depending upon the extent to which you have actually transformed the piece. There is a thing that happens in the system that we have here that was created to assist people who have created music in participating in the money that was coming from music. And so you have a system where people can copyright as their own creation original compositions and arrangements of traditional compositions or arrangements of existing material. And then if somebody uses that, you know, you get paid some pennies. It works well in certain genres. But if you operate out of what they call a folk genre, people who stand at the door of those places actually question whether you should be submitting your arrangements as (your own). Because isn't what you're doing what *everybody* in your culture is doing? So if it's a law of your culture that anybody who sings a song has to make it new, ...just abiding by your culture, how can you say that's a new arrangement or a new composition? It's a new composition in the other culture. And since the other culture is where the money comes, you have to fight to be sure your work actually is entered in that other culture.

And the other thing is, in our tradition, when there is a composer whose material moves into that oral tradition, it often moves without that composer's name. And it's almost a salute to the composer, in terms of the composer's prowess, that they've created something that the people embrace. So much so, they almost can't know where it came from or when it came. And sometimes they actually think they wrote it themselves. And one of the interesting thing about my training as a historian is entering a process where I have begun to put composers' names back with their work as they continue to move through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

But I'm very conscious of a clash between these systems. I very much support operating in both systems and not allowing someone who operates in the money-driven system to use the logic and the meaning in the traditional system to keep me out of the money-driven system. So when I go to court, I don't want to hear anything about "all Black people do this," even though I know that that is a part of that system, because we're not in court about that particular culture; we're in court about this culture that has been set up for the express purpose of giving money to people who arrange music. And when I look at what people call original compositions historically, there's no problem with people who take the folk melodies of blah-blah-blah and write a symphony. It's never a question about whether the symphony is an original composition. It's never called an arrangement. It's always called a new composition, even though it's acknowledged that this stuff is built on the expressions of the people.

So there's a very complex, conflicting series of things unleashed in this particular culture by the system that was set up to give money to composers and arrangers – *and* the fact that a lot of the money generated in the industry comes from the culture that doesn't operate by those principles: the Black culture.

So, music that drives mainstream industry is African-American music. And so as African Americans began to hear about that, they did a number of things. They make a record, they say they wrote it. Mahalia Jackson says she wrote "Move On Up a Little Higher;" it was written by William Herbert Brewster. Clara Ward says she wrote "How I Got Over;" it was written by William Herbert Brewster. And what they're doing is: "I'm making a record. And either my name is going to go on here, or the owner of the record company's name is going to go on here. So my name is going here." And Brewster never got money for his compositions. He produced the first two million-copy sellers in gospel music. Never got royalty money. So that is complex.

It is complex indeed. Reagon's example of the Brewster songs disrupts the neat assumption that it is always Whites who rip off Black artists in the quest for financial gain.

The issue of what constitutes a new piece of music – and whose it is – is even thornier. Reagon discusses this problem in her doctoral dissertation, *Songs of the Civil Rights Movement 1955-1965: A Study in Culture History* (1975). The following excerpt addresses *folk process* and its implications for the attribution of a song's origins:

Another characteristic of the "group participation" songs was the difficulty of establishing authorship. In cases where one or two persons could be identified as forming or adapting a new freedom song, very little value was given to their authorship. Each execution or performance of the song made a new song, which changed with each singing. Singers felt free to mix verses, make up new ones, add new inflections without much attention to the individual who had originally brought it to its new status as a freedom song. In a collection of American folk songs, Alan Lomax, American folklorist, wrote of Negro choral style stating that:

"Since the majority of Negro choral songs are not only polyrhythmic but choral, each version is a group re-creation, and the song grows as it lives, as a continuum of varying group performances. Anyone who has ever sung with Negroes knows how wonderful it is to be backed up by such an inventive and sympathetic group. Each participant contributes a bit of harmony, a small rhythmic device, a shade of vocal color, which, if heard separately, might seem slight and unmusical, but when performed in concert, produces a bewitching effect. The Composer is hard to distinguish from the song leader, and often he does no more than suggest a new line or refrain to his congregation, who will then orchestrate it and later alter it in a number of performances."

(27)

Later in the study, Reagon gives an example of some musicians' attempts to square the contradictions between folk process and the copyright system:

By this time, "We Shall Overcome" was widely known. Concerned that the song might be used for profit by those who had not been involved in the struggle from which it developed, Guy Carawan consulted Pete Seeger on the need to copyright the song. According to Seeger:

"I guess it was in the early 60's when the song suddenly got well known and Guy Carawan said, 'this song is going to get printed. What kind of copyright should we put on it?' My first reaction



was, 'just say by American Negro people.' But the publishers, Howie Richard and Al Brackman, said that that was illegal. We had to have somebody's name on it or we could not copyright it." (Pete Seeger, interview)

It was decided that the song would be copyrighted in the names of Guy Carawan, because he had taught the song to the Nashville students and had evolved a guitar accompaniment that put more rhythm and pulse into the ballad-like version of Highlander; Frank Hamilton, because he had added a verse and had taught it to Carawan; Peter Seeger because he had added two verses and changed "will" to "shall"; and Zilphia Horton, who had collected the song in its socio-political context from the tobacco workers of Charleston, South Carolina and had shaped it and made it a part of the Highlander musical family until Highlander returned it to the Southern Black community.

When approached about the copyright plan, Miles Horton stated that Zilphia Horton had been totally opposed to copyrighting songs that belonged to the people:

"I did not ever want it to be said of Highlander or of me that we had gained royalties from the songs through the exploitation of the people and their struggle.... Zilphia would come back to haunt me." (Miles Horton, interview)

After it was arranged that neither Highlander or the specific copyrighters would achieve financial gain, but that all royalties would be placed in a special fund for music in the Southern Movement, Miles Horton agreed to allow Zilphia Horton's name to be listed on the copyright.

Based on the special arrangements of the copyright provision, the "We Shall Overcome Fund" was set up at Highlander. Its function was to make small grants available to persons working in the South in the area of Black music. The selection of applicants was made by a committee set up June 1, 1966 for that purpose. The committee included Bernice Reagon, Dorothy Cotton, Vincent Harding, Faye Bellamy and Guy Carawan, all active participants in the Movement.

Review of the copyright history reveals severe shortsightedness in the 1963 copyright. There can be found no acknowledgment of the fact that it was Blacks who had interpreted this song in a socio-political context in Charleston and Winston-Salem before it came to Zilphia Horton at Highlander. It was Blacks again in the sixties who utilized the song functionally and musically in such a way and with such power that its value as a commercial product would warrant copyright considerations. (85-87)

Here we see clear evidence of the dominant system's resistance to the concept of group ownership: several *individuals* may hold something together, but something that belongs to *a people* is seen as belonging to nobody at all and is hence subject to appropriation by an individual. To prevent this, these musician/activists, having no desire to claim personal credit for the song, nevertheless took measures to ensure that any royalties it generated would at least be put to uses consistent with the song's history. As Reagon points out, their compromise was not enough to ensure, however, that the song's legacy would follow it through its printed distribution.

### In the Interviewees' Words

In this section I have chosen to present the singers' ideas in a certain order. Each topic begins with the opinions of African-American women – specifically, the members of Urban Bush Women. All of these women clearly had strong feelings about most of these topics. Several of them, though, gave evidence of not having thought through these feelings in pursuit of concrete and workable principles or definitions that could practically govern the use of oral-tradition songs. The reasons for this are several. In the first place, the primary discipline of these performers is dance. In the second place, most of them are young: five of them were not yet out of their twenties when I interviewed them. Finally, they have not been as responsible as their artistic director, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, for negotiating and determining praxis for the ensemble. Zollar had clearly given these matters more thought; her answers were concise and unequivocal.

The next set of voices presented in each topic comes from the amateur ensembles in the study. Two of these voices are African American, and where they have commented on the topic, they speak first, followed by their fellow chorus members and then by their directors. The amateurs' positions are similar to those of most Urban Bush Women members; usually based on firm ideas or feelings, they are often less firm in the details of what these ideas and feelings mean for praxis. In some cases, it is clear that their directors have given these matters some more deliberate thought.

Most topics conclude with the voices of Melanie DeMore, Ysaye Barnwell, or Bernice Johnson Reagon. As African-American, vocal-ensemble artists with decades of experience evaluating these issues from positions of leadership, they speak with voices of authority indispensable to anyone attempting to answer the questions asked in this chapter.

In light of the foregoing deconstruction of discourses on racial purity in musical styles, I offer two working definitions. For the purposes of this discussion, *Black music* shall refer to genres that, regardless of any non-Black influences on them, are commonly identified as having emerged from communities of Blacks in Africa or the Diaspora; *White music*, regardless of any non-White influences on it, shall have an analogous definition.

### Belonging, Ownership, and Appropriation

From slightly different stances, these three concepts address one issue: that of whether songs can be stolen or violated. I alternated my use of these words in questioning interviewees about their opinions on the issue.

#### *Urban Bush Women*

Georgette feels that no Black, oral-tradition song is owned. It is passed by elders to younger generations in a practice of wide sharing. Her particular view of such a song's origins demands that it be shared and precludes its being owned by anyone:

K: Why can't you own it?

G: Because then it wouldn't be accessible to other people. ...I don't think it's something that you can just claim your own ownership to. These songs are God's creation. No one can own them. You can pass them and share them, but those words, they came from God to that person, just to relay that message of what was going on then, to let the people know that...Black people had it hard.

Still, Georgette has observed what she regards as disrespectful use of traditional materials, and she drew for me a non-musical analogy from outside African-American culture:

G: When we were watching the fashion show last night, there was one designer who was using a lot of Native American prints in his work and mixed it in with some Victorian-style –

K: I'm guessing that the designer was not Native American.

G: He was not Native American. And so it upset me, because I was wondering: does he even know what he's doing? Did he even study these prints, does he even know where they come from? Are they Sioux, are they Crow? You know, whose prints are these that you're using? And are you giving them credit for it?

Maya's concept of spirituality, though a different one from Georgette's, is similarly generous. At the time of our interview, she was in her year of initiation into the Yoruba priesthood of Yemayá. Having been present at a Community Sing a few months prior at which Consuelo had taught a song to Yemayá (the same song that the Sistrum women had in their repertoire), I asked Maya about this practice:

K: Are there people in that tradition who would say you shouldn't teach an orisha song to people who aren't in the tradition?

M: Yeah. Sure there are. Sure there are. Nobody's perfect, and everybody's got their own way, even within a traditional system, no matter what that system is –

K: You're not going to get unanimity of opinion.

M: No. Absolutely not. We're imperfect.

K: So, you think it's okay to share orisha songs.

M: I do. I do.

K: Why?

M: Because my philosophy says to me that we're all children of God, we all come from the same Source. ... There's nothing wrong with singing a song to an orisha, no more than it's wrong to sing "Jesus" or "Lord" if I'm not a Jesus-worshipper. To me, there's nothing wrong with singing the praises of any god. It's like your recognition of those higher forces. With *respect*. And that is the ultimate for me. You don't have to practice what I practice. You don't have to agree with everything I do. You don't have to like it, necessarily. But respect. That's all. And if this is the system I stem from, it's going to be the thing that I can relate to and speak about best. ... You know: "*Learn* this song. This is the Goddess of the ocean. This is Yemayá. Yemayá is the Life-force. She's the – She's the *One*. She represents fertility. She's the *Grand Mother*." And, you know, I can teach that to you with love, and that's what I can give you.

K: It's a more direct vehicle for your voice.

M: Exactly. Exactly. So, there may be people who disagree with me, but to me, nobody can take *anything* away from me.

I questioned Maya further about the dilemma presented to would-be users of a song when there is no unanimity of opinion among the "experts" on the ethics of the choice:

M: I just feel like there are a lot of people who, ... as far as they're concerned: "I have the right to do anything I want." "Okay, that's how you believe. No, I don't agree." But I'm also not in a place where I'm going to get hung up on what you do wrong. Because that's between you and the Creator. That's not my role. And I think that ultimately, when you've done everything you could do and you don't get clarity around that, you have to on some level sort of sit with yourself and sort of intuit that. And that's where if you're really listening to your inner self – and not just listening to the self that wants to do something, but trying to just detach yourself as much as possible and make that connection with the Creator – . If you're going to do a song for, like, Oshun, and you're like: "Oh, this song, I really want to record it, but this priest said 'no' and this one said 'yes' and who do I believe?" You know, I would say, pray. Pray to Oshun and try and be as open about that as you can, in your own words.

To musicians who do not pray, this is a clear directive at least to consider honestly what their (*informed*) consciences tell them. Incidentally, in the following summer's UBW Institute, Maya made available to me a printed score of her god-brother's arrangement of a song to Oshun: this was for my use in preparing the Institute Community Chorus for a ritual to Oshun that would take place at Waukulla Springs to open that year's Community Arts Festival. Maya's condition for the use by anyone of any traditional song is recognition of its history:

But when you start capitalizing on certain music and saying it's – you can say it's yours in the sense that you made it yours, your rendition. But, it's like: "Where's this coming from?" ... (As) an artist, what's my connection to that song that allows me to say: "Okay, I'm going to be famous; this is how I'm going to represent myself." What am I representing? You know? Am I saying: "Look, I'm singing this song as part

of a folklore tradition, and I'm going to teach you something by singing it. But *this* is where the song comes from." Recognizing where it comes from is important. It's just like a child, and you say *who* this child's parents were. It's very important, you know, in the identity of the child.

Consuelo has not been initiated into Yoruba, but she does practice it to a significant extent, maintaining household altars to certain orishas and studying and teaching Afro-Cuban orisha songs and dances. She indicated that there was a practice by guardians of the tradition of sharing some of its aspects while shielding others. She mentioned that sometimes when she takes orisha dance classes, she perceives that the instructor is holding something back. She admits that she has adopted some of this protectiveness into her own teaching. I asked her to explain how she decides when to withhold information:

C: I hate to say this, but it has a lot to do with the people that are in my class. Sometimes (*pauses*) – if I see that the people in my class are grounded in a cultural tradition of their own, I feel like I want to give them more. If I feel like people are just searching for something because they have nothing of their own, I won't want to give them as much. Because I feel like they need to search for themselves before they come looking for it like that. Because they won't be rooted in anything. You know? And it has nothing to do with – I mean, I could be in a class with all Cuban Americans and not feel like people are grounded in – I could feel like they – they're not ready for it. I'm not going to give that to them. So I don't think it's precisely a culture or, you know, or a race or anything. But it's definitely an attitude about people who just aren't grounded in anything. You need to get grounded before – you know? ...I'll still teach them the song, and it'll be the same words and the same chorus. I just won't give them as much intro. Like, I might say: "This comes from Cuban traditions, and Yemayá is the personification of the ocean." I might not say she's a goddess. I might just make it more abstract, and more – you see? Or they just might translate it like – like, negative! Because you're talking about gods, plural! And some people are like –

K: Oh, yeah, and then you can feel that judgment coming –

C: Yeah!

K: – and it's so dear to you.

C: Yeah! And so a lot of the time I weigh that, and the way I describe it really has to do with the way I feel that people are. So sometimes I just keep it strictly – on a level based strictly on nature: "This is a song to the oceans."

Consuelo admits that her criteria for evaluating the receptiveness of her audience are not racial. In light of this study's earlier discussions on the de-ethnicization of White people, it is clear that she would often find White people lacking the cultural "grounding" she looks for – assuming, as I do, that she does not mean "grounding in dominant, mainstream, popular United-States culture." However, given the pervasiveness in

the United States of conservative Christianity and its hostility to polytheistic animism, she could well feel protective of her beliefs before an audience of any color.

When I asked Consuelo more directly about ownership of the song to Yemayá that I had learned from her, she revealed concerns that, taken together with the preceding discussion, could have contradictory implications for her practice:

K: Does this song belong to anybody?

C: What do you mean?

K: Does anybody own it?

C: No. It's a traditional song. Nobody owns it.

K: No single person.

C: Nope. It's a traditional song –

K: Any group of people?

C: Yeah. The Yoruba.

K: They own it?

C: Yeah.

K: And if you teach it in public and people like me go home singing it who don't practice Yoruba, it still belongs to the Yoruba people?

C: Absolutely. That's where it comes from.

K: If it is owned, can it be stolen?

C: Absolutely.

K: What would constitute theft of that song?

C: Not giving it the recognition of where it comes from and what it means. That to me would be theft.

By this criterion, when Consuelo teaches “Yemayá asesú” to a group without revealing who Yemayá is, her act of protection actually enables a commission of theft. This is a clear demonstration of conflicting

feelings. The dilemma results from the effects of the use in professional situations of what originated as an expression of a community's spirituality. If Consuelo is to make her living as a folk entrepreneur, she must participate in altering the course of the very traditions she wishes to preserve. Of course, as I have already acknowledged, every participant in a tradition contributes to its change. The challenge here is determining the kinds and degrees of change that are acceptable to those who feel themselves the owners of the traditions.

When I asked Jacquelyn about cultural appropriation, she gave an example of a White woman whom she perceived to be completely "ungrounded" in any heritage that could be her own and to have appropriated a particular Black culture instead. The woman in question, "J.D.," was a participant at the UBW Institute. A pale, blonde woman, J.D. went barefoot, kept her hair in "matlocks,"<sup>9</sup> and wore tee-shirts sporting images of Bob Marley and quotes from Haile Selassie. During a session of "cultural sharing" when each of us was invited to share a song, a recipe, a legend, or an anecdote from our traditions, J.D. had read to us from a book on Rastafarian spirituality. It was not long thereafter that Jacquelyn had confronted her, and this encounter was still on Jacquelyn's mind during our interview:

K: Does the term "cultural vampirism" mean anything to you?

J: Well, it brings me back to (the) Undoing Racism (workshop) when he asked, "What do you like about your culture?" I have White friends that are very secure with themselves and who deal with what they deal with; you know, they respect my culture, I respect theirs. But they're not trying to lock their hair, they're not trying to wear African garb, they're not trying to – ...you know, they're not doing it that way. They respect it, but they know where they are, they know where they stand; they're not *all up in it*. You know, and that's what kills it for me. You can respect it from a distance. You don't have to jump in with both feet. Because you're not supposed to! That's not what you were put here for. We've been put here to do separate things for a reason. You know, if we were all the same person, it'd be boring. Respect who you are and what you have, and live it to the fullest.

K: So how do you balance that with the kind of sharing you were talking about? In Community Sings, for example: sharing what we do, and involving people from different backgrounds, and you know, singing music –

J: Yeah! If you studied your culture, you would have a lot to offer me. And we could do an exchange. Instead of the one-sided thing that always happens. You know, how many Irish (Americans) know an Irish song? How many Jewish (Americans) know a Jewish song? They don't study who they are! They don't study their heritage, their background, their culture.

K: Do you have an idea why that is?

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<sup>9</sup> Describes hair that, too straight to have formed dreadlocks, has had to be joined by matting instead.

J: Um, maybe they're running away from it. Maybe from guilt. I look at J.D.: I know that she knows who she is, and I know that she's angry about who she is, so she wants to, like, dump all her –

K: Angry about what?

J: She has – I think she has some guilt; I don't know, maybe she found out that her forefather was a slave-owner or something like that. You know. I don't know what it could be. But she is not happy with her background. And she's not happy with her culture. And she feels a lot of guilt towards the Black community. So she's trying to transform herself: shed her White skin and be as Black as she can possibly be, I guess! She's Blacker than I am, you know? (*laughs*) I was like: "J.D., you know, you can respect us; you can love us. But you don't have to turn into us! ... I was talking to Jawole about it, and Jawole was like: "Yeah, she's just trying to shed that White skin so she can save her family's karma or something." I'm like: "How can you be Rastafarian when they wouldn't even accept you into the community?" I just couldn't understand that. ...That – that culture came from the Maroons. They were the slaves that escaped slavery and went up into the mountains and lived in their own cult. So where does she connect?

K: Yeah. And she didn't have an answer for that?

J: No. You know, she's still thinking; she's still trying to figure out where she's at. Hopefully this process will help her to let down her guard and help her to shed her locks and just be herself again. You know, she doesn't have to take on the guilt of all these people that decided to do other stuff. That's not her responsibility. She needs to live real, live true to herself. And that's it. She doesn't have to be a Black person.

In this case, Jacquelyn is discussing the appropriation of an entire identity, not just a single song. J.D. provides an example of someone whose attempts at adopting the style/identity of a group in which she was not raised are being blocked by those already within that group. Jacquelyn is not herself Rastafarian, but she elides the Blackness of Rastafarianism with her own Blackness and thus feels J.D. moving in on her identity space. This dynamic not only threatens the integrity of her own cultural borders but also impoverishes the larger field of cultural practices, the maintenance of whose diversity she regards as desirable.

Nicole surprised me by reporting having seen video footage of the GALA Choruses Festival in Tampa, Florida. In that very program, she saw White choirs singing traditional Black music and was therefore able to speak very directly to the issues of this study:

N: A lot of their music was music that I identified with. I could identify with it because it was: "Oh! That's from the South Sea tradition. Oh! That's a church song. Oh! That's an old Spiritual." But of course, they had changed them around and made them applicable to their own singing style and purpose and focus and all that stuff.



K: So, what did you think about that? When you saw that, how did you feel about that?

N: Um, I always feel like there's some kind of cultural appropriation. I didn't feel anger. And I wasn't shocked, either. I just thought: "Yeah, you know, our music is always being used for these kinds of identifications." Because it's also used by many Jewish groups and other White groups that came down into the South during the Civil Rights Movement.

K: And the labor struggles –

N: And the labor struggles. Right. Exactly. So, I kind of thought – on the one hand I felt kind of proud that it was our music, but at the same time, I'm thinking, you know, why not give Black people credit? A lot of times I think that. Often. You know: Why not give Black people more credit for things that they do? ...The music and the dance and the way that it is, um, giving messages of resistance and messages that keep people moving forward and give voice to certain causes and reasons. ...We're often looked upon as victims. And many times in our history and in our cultural legacy, we've used *other means* to fight our battles. And if people understood that we don't always just sit back and be victims, then we wouldn't be dismissed as these lazy, don't-care, victimized group of people. Then other groups will come along and use the *same methods* we used and get attention, get *heard*, have *voice*. And they're using our methods: our music, our dance, and the way we voice our oppression and try and get out of oppression.

K: So, in that documentary in particular – and in general – you didn't see this happening: acknowledgement of the source –

N: No. No. I rarely see the acknowledgement of the source. And that's the point at which I have problems with it. Not with the cultural idioms or means. I feel proud; I feel glad and happy to share something that at one point worked so well or was used to help our group of people – and another group of people can see the purpose for it. And use it. I feel proud. But I also feel – it's like a double-edged sword. I also feel a little bit of sadness and a little remorse because it's not – we're not credited. And the same thing with the dance.

It is not possible to know from Nicole's report – or perhaps even from the documentary – what kinds of acknowledgments may or may not have been made in the rehearsal processes of the choruses or in their performances. What is significant is Nicole's perception that, all too often, the acknowledgement is not made. Whenever this is the case, there will be people who feel "sadness" and "remorse."

My conversation with Tina was remarkable in the degree to which she was conscious – and expressed her consciousness – of the dilemmas involved in the question of ownership of traditional materials. Her discomfort came from the struggle between her *feelings of essentialness* as a Black woman and her awareness that she could not viably *essentialize* Black people or anyone else:

K: Does anybody own these songs? What do you think about that?

T: Well, not exactly. ...In one sense they don't belong to anyone; they belong to all of us. In another sense, however, I think there is a way you can say that a song *belongs to* or *comes from* a certain culture, a certain place, a certain people where the song actually originated.

K: So, what does that mean for the song after *you* sing it? Like, okay: let's take that Spiritual you said you liked so much. Does that belong to you?

T: Mm-hmm.

K: Because?

T: Well – (*chuckles*) I wonder if I'm contradicting myself on these two things. On the one hand I feel like it can belong to anyone. It belongs to all of us.

K: Because it's not copyrighted? Or –

T: No. No, no. I kind of feel like the song can belong to anyone – what does “belong” mean? Oh, my God! I'm stuck!

K: (*laughing*) We're in the nitty-gritty now!

T: Because *belong* – see, *belong* can mean ownership. But, like, ownership in the sense of: “This is mine. I control this.” Or whatever. But *belong* can also just mean: “Oh, I feel like I belong with this group.” But it's not that this group owns me. Or that I am this group. It means that I feel – I don't know, like I feel comfortable with this, or that it's a part of me, or that it's something that I've decided to see as a part of myself, or I've decided to encompass within myself. And that's why I think I feel that songs can belong to anyone, anyone who chooses to sing them, to listen to them, to believe in them, to hear them, to understand them. But I do still think that songs come from a certain place. And I don't know what that means, exactly, but that's still there. Does that make – say, an African-American Spiritual: it originated with a certain group of people. Um, and it might be – it could belong to anyone. It could belong to anyone's heart. And it's become linked to a lot of things, and anyone can make connections with it. But I feel like it originated from a certain group of people.

K: Given that it originated with slaves, are there degrees to which it belongs to anybody else who was not a slave? Like – okay, here's an example. Does that song belong more to you, as an African American, than it does to me as a European American?

T: Mmm...

K: Without thinking too hard about that, do you have a gut response to that question?

T: Yes.

K: And then do you have an urge to think about it more?

T: I have an urge to think about it more. But my gut response says “yes.” My gut response says that someone who does Irish dancing – I can learn Irish dancing, and I can love it and it can belong to me in a certain way, but my gut response says it still belongs more to the person of that tradition or of that heritage more than it belongs to me. And so, the same with the music that comes from an African-American heritage. Or you can even spread it out further and say from the African Diaspora. Even Afro-Cuban. And that’s really making lots of steps, lots of delineations, but my gut feeling says that, yeah. Mm-hmm. Yeah. In some ways I say that because of – I feel like emotion – well, that’s not necessarily true: not emotion. Maybe it’s an assumption that – which is not always true – but that someone African American here today, in 1998, *me*, would have a deeper understanding of the feeling that that song is about. *You know, it’s not really true, necessarily.* You could have the same understanding of it that I do. Or someone else my age who’s African American could be less connected to it. Could be totally less connected.

K: It’s hard to know, because I can never get inside your head –

T: Yeah.

K: – and you can’t get inside mine.

T: Exactly. And, I don’t know, but that’s what my gut wants to say. You know? And my gut wants to say that even though it can belong to anyone and anyone can reach out to it, only certain people can *claim* it.

K: What is “claim?”

T: I guess – I don’t know! “Claim” as coming from themselves. I – it – I don’t know. I don’t know. Kristina, why are you doing this to me?

K: Because I can’t figure it out myself! So I have to talk to thirty other women about all these things! ...Well, let’s say we both agree that there are levels of, maybe, belonging, or identification with a certain song. I feel that that’s true for myself, and I think I hear you saying that you feel that’s true, too.

T: Yeah. In my gut.

K: To the extent that a certain song can belong in certain ways to certain people, can it be stolen?

T: (*pauses*) Mm-hmm. My gut says “yes” on that, too.

K: What would constitute a theft of the song or a violation of the song? And what about the song would be being stolen or violated?

T: I think a violation of the song would be for someone – anyone – to utilize that song in whatever way – like teaching it, performing it, recording it – without respecting its origins or who it belongs to. Without maybe saying: “This is an Afro-Cuban song. I’m not Afro-Cuban, this is not my tradition, but from what I know, it’s blah-blah-blah.” That is one way you could maybe use a song and respect the tradition that it comes from. People that don’t acknowledge its origin or try to pretend that its theirs or just – I’m trying to think of good examples, but – do something which just sort of disrespects the song or the people it came from.

K: Are you ever worried about being at a Community Sing and putting this stuff out there when you don’t have any control over what’s going to happen with the music after that?

T: Not really. Not too much.

K: Because?

T: Well, because one way in which violation happens, or one of the ways that I’m sort of aware of is commercial exploitation of things, and I guess when I’m at a Community Sing, I just don’t really feel like that’s something that’s about to happen. When Jawole is teaching the songs, I feel like she teaches them with respect, and she acknowledges where they came from, and maybe just that example –

K: You feel like it would be followed.

T: I feel like it helps, anyway. And maybe just the vibe of what the Community Sing is about, I think that helps. But, yeah, I know it doesn’t mean that someone’s not going to rip it off.

Tina is another one of the many women in this study whose primary concern about appropriation is for acknowledgement of a song’s heritage. An artist who makes money using traditional songs is not beholden by law to share that money with anyone. Tina didn’t stipulate that such an artist should donate money to interests commonly held by people identified with the creators of the songs. She said that such an artist should be explicit about where the songs were born and not claim them as original. Whether artists do so or not, their profits remain constant. But this material consideration is not at the forefront of Tina’s concern. The concern that the songs’ origins will be misrepresented or erased supercedes other considerations. This concern, for the frequency of its reiteration in the voices of so many women, takes on a materiality of its own.

Iris, too, is concerned about the preservation of a song’s “story.” She feels that this is owed. But she also believes that understanding and sharing a song’s story helps any performer achieve an effective aesthetic communication through the song:

I think it's important that whoever's singing the song, the integrity of the information is there. And it's *read* if the context is kept intact. It's going to *read* to somebody who hears the song. The feeling is going to come across if you know the energy behind it.

Jawole Zollar did not equivocate:

KB: Oral tradition songs: are they owned? Does anybody own them?

JZ: I don't think anybody owns them.

KB: You don't think anybody owns them. Then they can't be stolen?

JZ: Well, I think they can be appropriated, yes, and misused. I can say that for sure.

KB: Are there things that you don't want to share because maybe you'd be taking them across a particular cultural barrier and maybe you don't want to do that at that point, for whatever reason?

JZ: Pretty much no. In terms of African-American church experience, things were widely shared. So I don't think there's really been that kind of taboo about it.

Some of Zollar's ideas about what constitutes misuse appear later in the chapter.

#### *Members of the Amateur Ensembles*

Chris, from Sistrum, is African American and grew up singing Broadway songs and Black church music. It was clear to me from the whole of her interview that singing has been one of her distinguishing skills and has served as an important refuge in a life filled with challenges. Her answers to my line of questioning were atypical. She definitely felt that oral-tradition songs were absolutely free of any kind of belonging or ownership. So I asked her about "Summertime" from *Porgy and Bess*, a song she had sung throughout her life. She knew that the song had been written by George Gershwin:

K: So, does it belong to him?

C: Because he *wrote* it?

K: Yeah.

C: I don't think so.

K: Does *any* music "belong?"

C: I don't think so. I really don't. Because if I wrote a song, I would write it to be universal, so that everyone would get some kind of a message. That's what I would do.

K: Mm. Would you want to get paid if someone else was singing it?

C: Well, you gotta eat! (*we laugh*) Um, that's a tough, tough question. If I were on the other side of the fence, I would say, "No, they shouldn't get paid for it!" (*laughing*)

K: If you were on *which* side of the fence?

C: If I were on the side of wanting to sing one of their songs, I wouldn't want to pay them. But I know that they diligently, hard-workingly wrote the song, so that's their due. Me, myself, I would probably say, "sing it." 'Cause that's just me. It would be a sharing thing. I think that no one should own music. That's the way I feel, strongly.

K: Do you think there are ways that a song can be disrespected?

C: Well, if you take somebody's made songs and you tape them and try to sell them that way? I think that's wrong. That would turn me off. I wouldn't want to buy something like that. That's like buying off the black market.

I was flabbergasted when Chris at first didn't seem to think that even composership gave anyone claim to music. Eventually she made clear her feeling that no one should profit by another's original songs; what she doesn't want are any restrictions on what she, personally, can sing.

Eva is AMASONG's only Black member. I asked her whether songs could be stolen. She adopted the word "stolen" from my question and continued using it to refer to any time people sing material from outside their group. She gave some advice for ameliorating the severity of the "theft," beginning with the now familiar admonishment to provide information on songs' origins:

E: I've always enjoyed music, and "stolen." I guess, seems to be a strong word about the music, but I guess you really don't have much choice if you want to be a diverse group but to sing other people's music. I think certainly if you kind of give people background about it, which I think you generally did, that helps a little bit. I think if you're a person who's in music a lot, you can just go to an area and just be a part of... kind of like actors, you know?

K: Method actors?

E: Yeah. If they're going to play doctors, they can just go into a hospital for a little while, follow people around, and see what they really do so that they can be as authentic as possible. And I think that's the hard thing with music is it's so easy to replicate without having that. You can just take your ear and say, "Oh, yeah. I can *do* that." I think you probably did the most that you could in terms of preparing people

to do the music. It's stolen, nonetheless, because you just cannot replicate it the way the original person can.

Eva went on to echo Iris's feeling that understanding of a music's history fosters a sympathy with it that can make the difference between a bad and a good performance:

E: I think it's important to know why you're singing this music; you know, why this music came about. You need to know something about it. ... Because never thinking about what has happened and why this person is trying to tell this story and share this experience with you, to just say, "Oh, yeah! This is a good song! I'm going to play this song!" and not take it any further than that – that's why we end up with people doing the music – they like the rhythm, but they don't know *why*. And most of the time it doesn't come across as being that good. A lot of people have stolen the music of the Blues. A lot of people have replicated it very well that are not African American. And, I feel some of them have joined with it and feel it and know what's going on. Others are just playing it because they think it's going to make them money. And getting more recognition than the people who did it originally. And we've had that in many instances. ... When you have sincerity, it's a little different than someone who's just taking the music and running with it. When you have sincerity, then you really – you perform the music the way it should be done. Bonnie Raitt, I think, is a woman who has sincerity in her music and love for the Blues, even though it doesn't all sound like it's coming from someone Black. But I *hear* that she understands the music just in her presentation. And that makes a difference to me. You know, people who just take it just for the hell of it, I don't appreciate that.

K: So, you can hear the sincerity.

E: Oh, yeah. You know it. You can feel it. And music is about feeling. You know, all of it is. Whether it comes from the little island wherever and it's People of Color music, or Africa, or – you can feel when it's right.

K: Is that what you were missing in \_\_\_\_\_?<sup>10</sup>

E: Yeah. I got no – it's flat. It's like a tone – you know, when they go flatline? (*mimes the trajectory of a heart monitor attached to a dead patient*) It's just flat. It doesn't have any peaks or valleys so that you could tell what's going on with the music. You know, you need those peaks and valleys. And it's a feeling inside that you get – so you can tell when the people are really sincere about it.

I, too, had been unimpressed with some of the singing by the "flatline" group. But what I had judged to be the result of inferior talent and skill on the director's part, Eva diagnosed as a lack of sincerity. She appears to find this lack particularly galling when it accompanies Whites' financial gain at the expense of Black musicians.

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<sup>10</sup> a city where we shared a billing with another Womyn's chorus

I asked Ruth, from Anna Crusis, about the most stylistically far-flung piece in their repertoire:

K: Does that (Pygmy song) belong to anybody?

R: Only in that they are the only ones who know what their experiences are. But I think that it's right to share it, to share music. And I think that it's not taking anything away from somebody to share their music. I think it is very important always to acknowledge that this is outside our experience; the way we perform it or talk about it is going to be shaped by – we're rooted in our cultural experience, and so we can only access it through that. ... And to the uninformed ear or the ear that doesn't have the finesse to pick that up, you probably wouldn't notice. Somebody who's never heard Pygmy music would hear Anna Crusis and go: "Oh, nifty! Now I've heard Pygmy music!" Probably Pygmies would be embarrassed!

K: Are you familiar with the term *cultural appropriation*?

R: Mm-hmm.

K: What does it mean to you?

R: I think what it means is claiming experience that doesn't belong to you. That doesn't mean that we can't study and learn from each other; we have to! ...But if I then start claiming (others') experience as my own, and speaking for (them), I think that would be cultural appropriation. Especially if I'm selling it. Especially if I'm selling myself as such, if I'm making that claim and marketing myself on that basis.

Ruth, too, mentions acknowledgement as her first concern, moving ultimately to issues of financial gain. She observes the danger of misrepresenting unfamiliar musics to audiences whose hearings may be as stylistically limited as the choir's performance.

Ginger, from Sistrum, ascribes belonging to traditional songs, a belonging that does not exclude others' use. She is one of the people who prioritizes parallels between the content of a "foreign" song and her own life:

K: Does the South African Freedom Song that Sistrum sang belong to anybody?

G: Yes, it does. But I think the message is universal in that – I think particularly for me in terms of Lesbian rights and gaining equality. In that way it's the same.

K: To whom does it belong? You said it belongs to someone.

G: To – to the people in South Africa, the people who originated it. But by that I don't mean that other people can't sing it or adopt it. You know what I mean? But I guess to me it's like saying: "Where does



it originate?"

K: The question I've been asking people is: if a song belongs to someone, can it be stolen?

G: Yeah. Well, I think it can, but that's a hard question for me.

K: When you were doing it with the choir, did you ever think: "Should we be doing this?"

G: No. Because that's the kind of music we sing, is what it felt like. And I think the choir – I can't remember who was introducing this song – but I know that there was a story about it, where it came from, why it was important to them, why it's important to us. And I think that's the key about how to use other people's expressions or music in a respectful way. So that you're not ripping it off, you're not stealing it. I don't know; it's like that controversy at the Festival about the didjeridoo. Do you remember that?

K: I wasn't there that year, but I've heard it referred to many times. And I play didjeridoo, so...

G: Yeah, there was an Aboriginal woman on The Land, and a White woman was playing a didjeridoo, and she got very upset, because she was – I'm not sure of the whole story, but it was this huge big deal. And now there's didjeridoos all *over* Michigan! And there's a didjeridoo workshop, and – is that ripping off their culture, or is that *continuing* their culture?

K: What do you think?

G: I don't know! It's a fine line, a really fine line. And there's shades of grey. If someone of the cultural descent is teaching you how to use it and – you know, kind of passing it on, maybe that's a *good* thing; it's keeping that culture alive. And as with anything, it's going to change as it goes through different hands. So, I think it's good to keep it alive. But I think it's good to keep it alive with respect to where it came from.

Thea from Anna Crusis contributed some other thoughts about the preservation of traditional materials by people outside the originating group:

K: Let me ask you about some of the songs you've learned from Ethel Raim, the village songs. Do you have any sense of belonging or ownership about these songs?

T: Well, I think that the Bulgarian people have a real sense of ownership of those songs, because I've met some people – I went to Balkan camp last summer – and ...one of the things I learned from all these people is how important this folk music is to them, and how much a part of them it is, and how sad they are that it's disappearing from their culture. And that actually, people over here are more interested in it than people in Bulgaria, who now want to listen to pop and rock and all that stuff. So, they feel like

they're preserving it by coming over here and teaching it to people over here who aren't even Bulgarian or whatever. They feel like that's the only way it'll be survivable.

K: Have you ever heard anybody express a concern about what will happen to it when they disseminate it in another country or to people who are not Balkan? Or whether these songs can be stolen or corrupted in any way?

T: I don't know. I think they're so desperate to have the music continue; that's the main concern. I think they care that people know about their culture and everything, and know about what's going on over there and what went on over there during the Communist regime and everything...

K: You mean, not just sing the songs, but have an idea –

T: Yeah. Yeah.

K: Do you learn about that with Ethel?

T: A little bit. We learn something about the background of the song, the region that it comes from...

Here, Thea is reporting on the very pattern analyzed in the cultural imperialism argument whereby the Western-dominated global music market shapes other countries' concept of Good Music in ways that increasingly feed the market's dominators. The shift in Bulgarian musical tastes did not, of course, occur in a vacuum of other kinds of changes. All political impacts and foreign influences upon what might be imagined as "traditional Bulgarian village life" have been working in concert to change or obliterate that life. The music that responded to that context has become less and less functional as the context for it has altered or disappeared. The music will survive only through other people, like Thea and Ethel Raim, who find other functions for it. According to Thea, Bulgarians anxious for American adoption of their music are not preoccupied with any concerns about rip-off. This is doubtless because they have not suffered centuries of oppression at the hands of the people of the United States.

Heidi, from AMASONG, added her voice to the many that equate "belonging" with "origination," believing that this kind of ownership admits of use by anyone who will acknowledge the source. She also pointed out, using Blues as an example, that most musical styles are cultural hybrids. We went on to discuss one of the incidents that prompted my development of this study:

K: So, the "Keep Your Lamps" that we sang was my arrangement; you probably remember that. Did you hear the story of how it was rejected by Lesbian choirs because it was a Spiritual arranged by a White woman?

H: Oh, yeah.

K: Okay. What did you think of that?

H: Well, obviously I didn't agree with that, because I had performed it and I know you.

K: What difference does that make?

H: Because I know where you're coming from.

K: Where am I coming from?

H: Well, I just know you're a dedicated Lesbian-Feminist, and I also know you're dedicated to human rights. But does that really make a difference? I don't know. No, I disagreed with them not accepting that. And, I don't know. That's a really – I mean, there's both sides of that. I sort of have an understanding of both sides here, where, yeah: White people are really very greedy, and they're always taking, taking, taking. At the same time, you just can't – no one really knows what it's going to take for the world to lose all of its prejudices, and personally, I think this is one of the ways to bring people together. And I don't think it's disrespectful, opportunistic, you know, when you take things from other cultures. At least, in this case, I do not believe it was done to be opportunistic.

K: I haven't gotten rich off it yet!

H: Right. It's just to talk about a story, tell what the people went through.

Again, the intent behind a song's use emerges as critical. Heidi demonstrates some typically wishful thinking about a Spiritual's ability to "bring people together," the underwhelming actual results of which I addressed in the previous chapter and will examine further in the next one.

When I interviewed Diana, I used another Spiritual from AMASONG's repertoire to elicit her ideas about ownership:

K: You were with us when we sang "Soon I Will Be Done." I'm wondering if you have any thoughts about whether anybody – who does that music belong to?

D: Hmm. Well, I kind of wish it belonged to everyone, to tell you the truth. I wish it were – *(pauses)* Yes, it definitely comes from a north-American, U.S. experience. I think it does need to be a part of our tongue: I mean, the White-conqueror tongue as well, you know? Just so we can have an understanding of the whole picture of yesteryear.

K: What part of the picture do you think we need to understand while singing that music?

D: Oh, of those people that were oppressed, that were used, that were enslaved, that were dominated, that

were sold on blocks, that were impregnated by White slaveholders and made to raise children of White people; to learn of a sub-group from *their* words, from *their* views. I think it's really important. I do. Often, you wonder how much has been lost or how much was never able to be repeated, musically, above a whisper. You know? You wonder about the beginnings of what was whispered. Because, of course, a lot of what was allowed to survive had to be *somewhat* cleaned up; it does, necessarily so.

Diana's last comment is very astute, especially given the fact that it was the European-style "choralization" of the Spiritual that gave it the popularity with which it endures today. Her emphasis on "yesteryear" is troubling to me, not necessarily for what it says but more for what it doesn't say; where my performance of a Spiritual allows any White person's focus on racism to escape the present, I have failed in one of my purposes.

To elicit Lynnette's ideas, I referred to AMASONG's Zimbabwe project with Patience Mudeka (see page 222):

K: I'm exploring some of those questions. Like: "What are a bunch of White women doing singing songs from Zimbabwe?"

L: Right. Right.

K: What does that question mean to you? Have you made any answers in your mind?

L: Um...

K: Are you troubled by it?

L: No.

K: You just dismissed it?

L: I guess when it comes to the Zimbabwean stuff, ...Patience...was there and passed that music to us. And, I know that an individual can't speak and act for their culture of their country, and I guess that doesn't say that no one else can object, but in my own mind, working with her – I don't get how it was improper for us to do.

K: You felt like it was legitimate.

L: I felt like it was legitimate. And even if we hadn't worked with her – and I might have to question myself a little more on it – but, we're not Finnish, either. Now I understand that Finnish and Swedish folks are White folks, and I understand that there's a difference there.

K: What is the difference?

L: Well, that there are for people issues of appropriating the cultures of countries in a sort of – . (pauses) I think because we've taken so much from those (African) countries: so many of their people, so much of their resources. And cultural appropriation is, like: "Now you're coming after our *souls*." And it's a dynamic that just doesn't exist with Sweden! You know, so I understand that. And that, I think, is where the discomfort with some of the Negro Spirituals comes from. You know, here I am, a White woman, singing songs that came directly from the experience of Black folks' being suppressed, repressed, abused, misused – by my folks, you know: White folks. I mean, I don't know that anybody in my family was well-off enough to own slaves, but that just really doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. And we're still abusing and misusing Black folks; and I *am* here now. So...

K: It's relevant to you.

L: It's relevant. So that feels very close to the line that you tread as a White person in society of issues of racism and all that stuff. So, you know, going over there, going over this line to doing some of their music is kind of okay – I think it is okay, but then things like the pronunciation (in that one Spiritual) – where we were trying to sound like Black folks and I wasn't sure we were doing a very good job of that – just nudged a little too close to the edge for me to feel comfortable.

Lynnette had clearly thought carefully about issues of cultural borrowing, displaying a conscious awareness of issues of power that was rarely articulated by most interviewees. Specifically, she recognized that our borrowing from Zimbabwe was not the same thing as our borrowing from Finland. She accepts contemporary responsibility as a race-privileged woman, and she finds that that has implications for the kinds of performing that she can do effectively or comfortably. Her concern about doing a poor job of simulating certain aspects of African-American diction reflects the abiding sting of minstrelsy in United States culture.

Lynnette's definition of cultural appropriation, too, was rather developed:

K: You used the term *cultural appropriation*, and I'd love for you to give me your definition.

L: Well, I think it's generally used in the negative sense of developed countries' looking at the cultures of less-developed countries and taking most often superficial aspects of those cultures and using them for superficial purposes. Like hanging a mask on the wall of your house, or whatever. And I think a lot of it is done with *almost* the right sentiment behind it. I mean, I think it's done often with a desire to try to understand those cultures. But the truth is, you don't really want to go that deep. And most people don't know how to go that deep. I guess...I think about it as trying to take the pieces out of (a culture) that are more aesthetically pleasing to you, pulling them back into your culture, and thinking that you are somehow (in a mock New-Agey voice) *in tune* with people in other parts of the world. And, you know, you're not. You're not, unless you go a lot deeper.

K: What do you think is a good way to balance concern about engaging in that against having a diverse repertoire or opening yourself in some way to other people's experience in the world?

L: Well, I think you just have to try to know as much as you have room for or time for – and then you just have to be honest about what that is. And I think you would at least have to know enough to be sensitive about what you can and cannot do with this stuff. Like when we worked with Karen Roberts Strong, she said: “You cannot sing these things except with me; I got special permission.” So she brought her culture to us and told us how we could use it, and we respected that.

K: So, honoring in some way the wishes of the people –

L: Honoring the wishes of the people, and just not trying to put on – I mean, it’s fine to sing a song from another culture and share it with our audience, but I don’t think we should try to pretend that – oh, what am I trying to say? You know, I don’t want to try to invoke any other culture’s deities.

Karen Roberts Strong is a member of the Tlingit nation, which is native to Alaska. She taught AMASONG a set of songs from three Pacific Northwest tribes. We performed with her and several of her Native friends for her appearance at a folk festival in 1997, and later in the season, she and her friends joined us on our concert. The terms of the music’s ownership and its use were made explicit. The songs belonged not just to specific tribes but even sometimes to subgroups or individuals within the tribes and could never be sung by others – within the tribe or without – unless the owners had given specific permission. Permission was usually conditional, and there was one song in the set that we were given permission to sing and teach to anyone at any time as long as we told its story; the other songs we will never sing again. I remember feeling a certain sense of security in having the terms of our use of this music so plainly laid out. Our encounter with this music was a perfect example of the dependence on people outside one’s group for the experience of singing that group’s music. These songs are made for many voices, and if Strong had restricted herself to singing them only with other Tlingits, or even only with other First Nation people, she would never have been able to really *sing* them any time during her years as a graduate student in Urbana. We in AMASONG felt blessed to see the pleasure it gave her to hear her songs ringing out so fully.

Sistrum’s director, Rachel Alexander, and I had much to discuss on the question of ownership and use of traditional materials:

KB: I’m interested in your ideas about various stages – or extents – of belonging in different musics. What makes a song belong to someone: what makes it, uh, up for free access?

RA: Hmm. (*Cuts the tape for moment to think about it*) I’m realizing that one of the things that makes it hard to define...belonging...is the very fact that women share music just informally in group sings and such so readily and so often, and I guess – I guess I haven’t really thought about what that means about ownership. And certainly, if you’re learning something by rote, there aren’t issues of copyright and making copies or something, or paying royalties. And – I don’t know. I don’t know. Let me just think about some of the stuff I’ve done. I think it’s a really interesting question, because some of the stuff we’ve done is stuff that we’ve learned so informally.

Here, Alexander gives evidence of my argument that the attributes *female, collective, anonymous, and oral* combine to affect the values we attach to traditional songs.

KB: Well, have you ever been challenged when doing Black music – from Ghana or Cuba or African America – have you ever been challenged by anybody about your right to do it?

RA: No. Not to my face. And, you know, if somebody has objected, they haven't let me know about it.

KB: Is it news to you that sometimes people object to that?

RA: Oh, no.

KB: What would your answer be to that challenge?

RA: Well, I think I would – (*long pause*) I don't know that I'd have a good answer. I guess I haven't really thought about it a lot. I think what I've thought about more, where I've felt insecure about it, is that I might not be doing the music in the *right* way, because of my ignorance of the culture or the style of that music. I don't know. Hmm.

KB: But your insecurity hasn't made you say: "Nope: not gonna touch that."

RA: No. I mean, it seems to me that there have been things I have rejected for that reason; you know, feeling like: "I don't know that this is appropriate." But I'm not remembering what that was or when or why. It's been a while.

KB: Well, I know you didn't learn to have that concern in your graduate conducting studies –

RA: (*laughing*) That's correct!

KB: – so, can you talk about where those insecurities might have gotten planted?

RA: Because of the whole discussion on many levels about cultural appropriation –

KB: Who's having that discussion?

RA: Women at festivals. It comes up not just around music; it comes up in the crafts area, around women doing art that has indigenous aspects and it's not from that woman's culture. I mean, that discussion's been around for a long time.

I was at Michigan the year that some women organized a march through the marketplace to protest White women's making and selling of djembes, dreamcatchers, and other artifacts of non-White cultures. This

moment in Michigan history is paired with the didjeridoo incident, the two serving as the twin germs of a general awareness within White Womyn's circles that cultural appropriation is a bad thing. I asked Alexander to define cultural appropriation:

RA: I guess cultural appropriation is, probably, unaware use – and not necessarily all use. I don't think – but, unaware use of facets of a culture other than one's own (*pause*) with the assumption that any use of them is fine (*pause*) and (*pause*) without any recognition that any of it belongs not to you but to that culture.

KB: So, what do you do if you're preparing something from a culture not your own and you're concerned about cultural appropriation or authenticity. How do you prepare yourself?

RA: Well, one of the things I do often is try to find people to talk to about it who have more information about it than I do – either people from that culture or people who have more information about that culture, or just who have got some piece of the thought process more in place than I do about it – about whether what I'm envisioning is okay, or about what other path we need to travel with it. And I think it's really important to give the audience information about the piece.

KB: How do you give it?

RA: Usually in a spoken introduction of the song. Sometimes we put a translation in the program, depending on what the piece is like. But usually we'll give a translation and just some information about the culture, how we resonate with it, just kind of what we know about it.

KB: Are there any other kinds of music – kinds of European music that you've had insecurities about performing?

RA: Oh, yeah. Balkan music. And a lot of that is just not feeling like I know how to teach that style of production. And not really knowing how to do it myself, either.

KB: I've been there!

RA: Yeah! I've been to a couple Ethel Raim workshops, and it wasn't enough! (*we laugh*) We did do one Macedonian song years ago, and we sounded like – we sounded like us!

KB: Do you regret having done it?

RA: No.

KB: There's value in doing it anyway?



RA: Oh, yeah. I think there's value in kind of familiarizing ourselves with different styles of harmony and rhythms and stuff. I mean, I love that. And I'd love to know how to teach Balkan stuff so that we could do more of it. No, I never regret having done it.

Alexander's definition of cultural appropriation does not depend on any difference in power between the donor culture and the borrowing culture. It also does not address the matter of money. She does not feel bound by a demand to reproduce a tradition's sound before she can perform it. What she does feel bound by is the criterion that has emerged as the standard in this study: informing her singers and her audiences about traditional songs' origins.

I knew that Alexander had been present at the 1993 Sister Singers Festival in Cincinnati, and I wanted her evaluation of the event and its aftermath:

KB: Well, you were in Cincinnati in '93, and, do you remember the, um – do you remember anything from that year along the lines of the things we've been discussing?

RA: Like a controversy about somebody using something – I'm trying to *remember*!! Uh, no; help me out a little bit.

KB: – “Sing low...”

RA: Yeah, yeah! Right. I remember that! Yes. I remember that. I think there were a couple things that they sang that were objected to. Yes. That was definitely a place where a light bulb went off in my head about, you know, taking music that has special meaning – more than special meaning: *sacred* meaning in a culture – and using it in a way that gets some laughs and is – and at the same time can be really offensive. I *got* that.

KB: That light bulb started going off for me there, too. I remember being in the audience and my face getting really red.

RA: Yes!

KB: But at that time, I was simply embarrassed because it was so *dumb*.

RA: Yes.

KB: There was nothing aesthetically valuable about it. And I was thinking: “Why would you do something so *unmusical* when this song is so moving in its right way?” What didn't go through my head is: “Once again, hundreds of years of Black American history being ignored and obliterated.”

RA: *Yes*. Right. Exactly.

KB: So, I was glad I was there, because like you said, it started light bulbs going off in my head. But I'm curious about – I'm trying to gauge the impact of that on the women who were there and came back to our cities –

RA: Right. Well, I think it definitely had an impact on me. It wasn't the first time I'd heard – it wasn't a new concept to me, but it brought the concept into three dimensions, right there. It was like: "Oh! This is *it!*"

As Alexander and I talked further, I related the story of the outright rejection of my arrangement of "Keep Your Lamps" at the next gathering of a committee of Sister Singers representatives from around the country. She was pretty sure she knew what had motivated that decision:

RA: I can guess that it's out of fear of doing something wrong; that it's about insecurity about not knowing what the rules are and what would step on somebody's toes. Because I think that White women who have some amount of awareness – the more awareness you have, the more you know that you don't necessarily have all the pieces of it. So I think there's a lot of erring on the side of caution that happens, and that that is probably a perfect example of that.

KB: I'm interested in when someone's realization that she doesn't have a clue translates into: "What can I do to get a clue?" Translates into: "I'm not happy living in this country not having a clue. What can I do to get a clue?" Or how often we just stop short and say: "Hands off; I am not worthy; I can't –"

RA: Right! Exactly.

KB: I'm seeing this spectrum between: "We're White people; we have access to everything; grab it and use it, no problem," and: "Oh, we're White people; *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea culpa*. We can't –"

RA: Can't touch that. Right.

The women in the next section have some clear ideas about cross-cultural use of traditional materials and how to go about it.

### *DeMore, Barnwell, and Reagon*

Melanie DeMore, gives familiar advice, but in her own colorful and emphatic language:

This goes back to the whole thing we were talking about at the (Sister Singers Festival in Cincinnati). About not acknowledging and not giving people their "props." Really knowing where you came from. Knowing the origins of something. And giving respect for that. And not thinking that just because it's out there, you can turn it into something else. That's just ridiculous. It's like you build a house, and while you're gone, someone comes along and completely remodels it without telling you. But it's still your house. The address

is the same, but it don't look like you! And that's pretty much just letting people know: "This is where this came from. This is what connects this to this." And how important that is. And that we acknowledge our own ancestors and talk about where those things come from. And we have to go through major processes. I did it with my women's choruses, when I directed VOICES; talking to other people. I would no more, say, take a traditional Yiddish piece that I knew nothing about and try to teach it to my chorus from my point of view. That's absurd. That's disrespectful. It's entire disregard for, you know, millions and millions of people and their whole struggle. So, that's one of (Cultural Heritage Choir's) things, is to get people to realize where things come from, and to see the similarities, how if you *listen* you can see how those things connect us together. And I am not averse to people doing other people's stuff as long as they will ask the questions and be willing to go through it and be willing to listen to those people's stories.

Ysaye Maria Barnwell gave me the unanticipated chance to answer my own most important question:

YMB: "Cultural appropriation." Well – (*laughs heartily*) I have – let me ask *you* to define what you mean when you say that.

KB: Um, using the creative expression of a culture of people not my own and also in a position of lesser power than the culture to which I belong, in a way that – either – and/or misrepresents the group from which it came, um – brings me heaps of money –

YMB: – and brings them nothing...

KB: And brings them nothing, misses whatever the essential point of that expression was, perhaps communicates disrespect –

YMB: Mm-hmm.

KB: – in any way. And that's tricky, too, because anything that I may do could be received differently by people outside my culture: one person may receive it as respectful and another person may be pained by it...

YMB: Mm-hmm.

KB: (*heavy sigh*) I don't know. Do you want me to get more specific? You can keep grilling me.

YMB: Ah, no. I think that's, uh – I think that's good. In some ways it's very, very simple. And in some ways it's very deep and very complicated. In *this* society, it becomes *very* complicated. And all the things that you mentioned: the lack of knowing – and not taking the responsibility for knowing – the piece, the circumstance from which it came, the context, not attributing credit to the culture or the composer, using it out of context without regard – all those things, I think, are part of it. ...And a lot

of times, people are just like: “Oh, yeah, this is a Black song” or “This is a Negro Spiritual,” and they just toss it off, without any understanding.

Reading this excerpt after subsequent communications with Barnwell, I have an idea why she was laughing so hard and why she turned my question back on me. I will reveal this further along in the chapter.

Barnwell has much more to say on this matter, and her words feature prominently in upcoming sections.

Bernice Johnson Reagon, with her characteristic concision, addressed several themes already elaborated in this study: the operation of rules in distinguishing one style from another, the importance of acknowledgement, the frequency with which acknowledgement is withheld, the heavy impact of these withholdings when the withholders are socially dominant, the hybrid and evolving nature of culture, and the human creative drive:

...I think the integrity issue of singing things that don't come from your culture has to do with the kind of work you're willing to do to understand it and to understand what the laws are. And even if, after understanding the laws that operate for the people who do these expressions, you construct another system of laws for what you will do with it, *integrity requires acknowledgement*. And I find too many people *not being able to talk* about where they get their material from and what they stand on – what they're standing on when they do expressions that are not the ones they were born into. And, they operate as if they were wandering down the road somewhere and this thing came into the air, and they just totally picked it out of the air and it was free and they are off with it. And in my mind, that is a fraudulent kind of activity. It does the most damage in a multi-cultural society where you are mining the work of a group that is underrepresented in terms of access to forums of recordings or performances or having their material heard. And all of that does not say anything about whether you can do it or not; whether you can take something you heard and make it your own in some particular way. Because that really is what human beings do. There are no pure human cultures: all human cultures are hybrid. And therefore, being human and being involved in group culture – to have contact with other cultures – just by definition means you're not going to be left with what you're born into. And that if you move with other groups and other cultures, it's going to be reflected in some way in what you create.

#### Authenticity

The concept of *authenticity* is used as a critique for performances in many traditions and various media. Though its definition is elusive, its connotation of *goodness* is commonly understood. The quest for authenticity in, for example, Baroque music has resulted in performances on replicas of “period” instruments, the use of tunings proper to the times and locales of a piece's origin, the downsizing of ensembles to approximate the forces available to the composer, and many other alterations aimed at keeping nineteenth-century practices out of the performance of music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The effects of the movement for “authentic performance practice” on the resultant sound of Baroque music is generally deemed *good* by the cognoscenti, but there is also a complaint that the over-preoccupation with exact replicas of seventeenth-century and localized sounds has a straight-jacketing effect on performers. Typically, then, we adopt the “authentic” features that we wish to or are able to

emulate and then take artistic license with the rest, stating that it is impossible anyway to recreate for a contemporary audience what listeners experienced two and three centuries ago. More than just an excuse, this claim is, of course, an accurate one. The original audience's hearing of a concerted motet by Heinrich Schütz depended on the acoustics of the church (if not its temperature), the condition of their faith, the degree of their current misfortune in the Thirty Years' War, and the sum of their accumulated musical hearings prior to the motet. Drawing an analogy, then, to what would be required to recreate the authentic conditions of the experience of a West-African funeral chant, one can see that the issue of proper vocal timbre is perhaps the least significant.

The concept of authenticity surfaced repeatedly in interviewees' judgments about the fair use versus the misappropriation of traditional musics. I asked most respondents to tell me what they meant by it. The importance of learning and passing on a song's history reappeared frequently in these discussions, but for many respondents, this was only the precondition for something else, something that had to do with performance authenticity.

### *Urban Bush Women*

Having made investigations of her own in a similar vein to mine, Nicole understood the trap inherent in conventional definitions of authenticity in performance practice:

N: That is somethin' *else!* Authenticity! ...That's a question that I had to look at in my dissertation, too, on the dance, at the time in the '30s: what was authentic African dance, and what was – (*sighs heavily*) who was being authentic in their presentation of what they learned as African dance.

K: So, what did you come up with?

N: Well, I didn't really answer it, except that people – not even continental Africans who were in the country at the time – not even they could claim to be authentic, because it was taken out of the context of the village. It was a re-enactment on the stage. They had to re-set everything for the stage – set up the proscenium, and theater, where originally things would be done in-the-round.

Rather than modify the concept of authenticity to something useful for her, Nicole has left its dilemmas unanswered.

Jacquelyn also framed her answer in the context of traditional African dances. For her, authenticity has something to do with the continuation of stylistic features:

K: Let's talk about tradition, authenticity: what constitutes keeping a song or a dance or a piece of cultural expression intact? And what constitutes its being unacceptably altered?

J: That's a good question.

K: It is.

J: You know, because there's a Brother in New York...who gets information and makes it his own, and he ends up turning it into some monstrosity of – ugh! I don't know, it's just ugly. He'll take something like *Kou-kou*, a harvest dance, and add sticks and have people jumping around and do really tricky foot movement and just make it really confusing.

K: Does he say that he's adding stuff when he presents it?

J: Yeah. He says it's an adaptation of –

K: At least he's clear about that.

J: Yeah, he has to be. At first he wasn't, but people were having fits. His teachers would come up to him and say: "If you're going to do something different, call it something different. Don't call it this, because that's not what it is. You're educating a whole audience full of people to the wrong shit." you know? So he has to be clear about that stuff

As we continued talking, Jacquelyn revealed her special love for the dances of Mali and her feeling that perhaps her ancestors had come from that part of Africa. She sometimes teaches Malian dances, and in discussing this, she made a comment that reveals some ambivalence about how "authentic" she – and some other people – really want to be in transmitting the dances:

J: I've become secure enough in myself to not be afraid to pass on certain things, to not be afraid to give it up.

K: Secure in yourself?

J: Yeah. Because sometimes you're like, "Ooh, I don't want to give away my favorite steps." You get like that.

K: Oh.

J: But then you grow to see that you're the only person who can do the step that way. You know, so it's okay.

K: So, let's say you're doing your favorite step in a sacred dance from Mali. It's not exactly the same as, maybe, the first person who ever danced it in Mali?

J: Right.

K: So it has changed.

J: It has changed. You try to keep –

K: What does that have to do with tradition and authenticity?

J: Mm. You try to keep it as authentic as possible, but –

K: What does that mean?

J: Studying the fingers, the way their head is tilted, the way that the foot is hitting the floor: are you on the balls of your feet, are you letting your heels drop, are your knees bent or are they straight: where's the bounce: is it on the rhythm, is it a half a count off the rhythm? You know, little nuances.

K: These are the stylistic hallmarks for you that would identify it as coming from where it comes from.

J: Definitely. And those are the things you would want to keep intact. And without those things, it would not be authentic West-African dance. It wouldn't be from Mali.

K: Is there anything else that makes an authentic encounter with a dance or a song? An authentic experience recreating it?

J: Um – (*pause*) when Africans come over here and pass stuff on to African Americans, they – okay, the dances that I learned in Brooklyn? I learned those same dances in Manhattan, and they were totally different.

K: Totally different? (*both laugh*) My God, that's so interesting!

J: Yep. It's – I don't know. It's the same thing. They trust certain people with certain things. There are certain dances that are taught in Brooklyn that will *never* make it to Manhattan.

K: Wow!

J: They teach the songs, they teach the culture, they break down intensely where it's from, why it's done, who does it, all that kind of stuff, in Brooklyn. They don't do that in Manhattan. They never sing songs in Manhattan, never. They barely tell you what the name of the dance *is* in Manhattan –

K: Why?

J: Because there are so many White people in the room.

K: Oh! Okay, okay.

J: And they won't give it up. Or –

K: They'll give a cheap – a sort of Muzak version. kind of?

J: Oh, *yeah!*

K: And they know that.

J: The rhythms will be okay. But the dance will be a little off.

K: And they know this, that they're doing it.

J: Oh, *yeah*. They're very clear about it.

So, as we went on to discuss, the joke in Manhattan is on the White people who are paying money to learn "authentic" African dances. As the rest of our conversation revealed, this is a kind of sabotage in a situation where Whites stand to profit from what they learn in these classes:

J: You know, I don't want to feel like I'm holding back, but I'm very clear about what I'm willing to share, you know, just for the fact that there are White people teaching African dances in institutions. That really kills me. I'm like: "What?" It makes me just want to –

K: I know. It's like a male professor teaching Women's Studies.

J: See? Exactly!

K: "Get away from me!" Or male gynecologists –

J: Ha! See? It's deep. It's really deep. And I'm not going to contribute to the culture being watered down any more. There are things that you share, there are things that you don't. There are family things that you share, there are family things that you don't. You know?

K: Let me ask you this: are there Black people whom you wouldn't teach as well because they would water it down?

J: Yes! *Oh, yeah!* I'm very picky about who I pass the information on to.

For Jacquelyn, authenticity is stylistic. Its fundamentals must remain constant, but individual transformations are inevitable. Authentic style is the privileged information possessed by those within a select group who can somehow be trusted to honor and protect it. In the transmission of African dances, Blackness is no guarantee of admission to the "in" group, but Whiteness is likely to guarantee being kept



out. When a form is being shared outside of its guardian group, it is “de-authenticized” by the altering of its details and the withholding of information about it.

It seems that the idea beneath this strategy is that what is being given away is not the original treasure at all, but rather a forgery, a counterfeit currency; only by substituting a counterfeit can the original wealth remain undepleted. This strategy is the opposite of ideas of authenticity that depend on the *prevention* of “counterfeit trade.” The many voices in this study who insist that traditions must *not* be shared without their proper stories, as well as attempts to replicate style as much as possible, view counterfeit versions as devaluating – rather than protecting – the original stores. In fact, Jacquelyn’s initial anecdote about the choreographer in New York, whose *Kou-kou* fusions educated whole audiences “to the wrong shit,” reveals elements of this view of counterfeit forms. She, like Consuelo, is caught in a contradiction of impulses about what to make of traditional village forms when they no longer reside in the village.

Consuelo has a radically different understanding of the concept of authenticity:

C: If they’re imitating, it’s not authentic.

K: What is authentic?

C: Authentic is feeling it!

K: Ah!

C: Yeah. It’s not imitating it.

K: What if I sing “Yemayá asesú” and I fully embrace the concept of this Goddess, and I’m feeling a real connection with Her, and – but my voice doesn’t quite sound the way somebody in Cuba’s does: am I having an authentic experience with the song?

C: Yeah. It’s not about the way you sound. It’s about a feeling. And I think that if you’re honest, it will show. And I think that’s one of the most important things.

The idea that “honesty,” “integrity,” and “sincerity” of *feeling* can be detected in performance surfaced in the previous section, in discussions of appropriation. The two concepts are very closely connected, especially when knowing a song’s origin and meaning is seen as indispensable to “feeling” the song. What is significant about Consuelo’s view of authenticity is its freeing – rather than straight-jacketing – quality.

The emotional quality of a performance also figures importantly in Iris and Georgette’s definitions of authenticity. They view this quality as dependent on a performer’s imaginative powers, powers that sometimes need to be supplemented with researched information:

G: "Authentic," meaning *true*. ...I think there are a couple of ways you can have an authentic performance of a cultural song. One is to know what you're singing about; to truly sing it from your heart. Another way is to tell people something about it, even (if you're) not really sure what is being said or what it means: like, we have songs that we're not completely sure what they mean, but we have the gist of it.

K: Like the Yoruba songs?

G: Right. I try to use my own voice, because I'm not really sure what they sounded like. That's my *most* authentic way to approach a song – to try to sing from my gut, and to try to envision what those words mean and what the Yoruba people did with those songs. ... The most authentic right for a person to sing an African-American Spiritual song is to actually have that experience – is to know where it's coming from. That would be the most authentic thing. But, if you have those feelings – and I don't know exactly how to express those feelings – that when we are taught about slavery, for me, I felt it. I saw my family there. I saw my family in West Africa. I saw all of that stuff, and I felt it. It automatically came to me. And the way my ancestors are in me. I feel them. So, it's that – that gives me the right to sing about it, because my ancestors have sung it. Um, if you don't have that experience, then you need to do research. You really need to listen to those people singing to know what those songs are talking about – and just not recite it from sheet music.

Georgette's emphasis on her *own voice* echoes Consuelo's idea of authenticity. Authentic singing requires "envisioning," and if one's own experience does not promote clear visions, then one should look for written and aural information provided by those whose experiences have shaped the song. Finding one's *own voice*, then, is contingent on hearing other voices that have gone before, which is another articulation of the ideal of collective individualism.

Iris's answer begins with an anecdote from a time when she was challenged to find an authentic voice:

I: An example I'm going to use: You know the part in *Bones and Ash* when I had to (give) that sense of (being) raped? I think that's being authentic because I had to imagine that that was happening to me, although it had never happened to me before. You want people to use their imaginations – their own inner feelings about this song that is coming across. ... There's no way you're going to get an *authentic* performance. If you're trying to get an authentic performance of a song that Mozart wrote, you'd have to go back – I mean, an authentic performance would be seeing him in person doing it. You know, that is the most authentic you can get.

K: Which none of us can –

I: Which you can not do. I can't go back to slavery time and hear them singing their song. I can't do that. So, the authenticity is going to come when you have the information about when this piece was created, how it was sung, where it was sung, what it was sung for. And this information is then transferred into how the song is sung. If you are in touch with your emotions about the dance you're doing or the song

you're doing, and if it's expressed through your body and through your face and through your song, it's going to come out with some emotion. Like, if I did a dance that I didn't show on my face – you know, I just kept it kind of plain. ...something's going to be missing, and I might as well dance with a bag over my head and call it a Bag Dance, basically! (*laughing*) Instead of, like, depicting some kind of energy or person or historical event. I mean, even doing the Haitian dances, working and moving in those styles and learning about that information: like in *yanvalou*, you try and do it as if you were that kind of, that spirit –

K: Like you lived on an island...

I: Yeah, you lived on an island with water. You try to do it in that kind of vein. But there's also that kind of individual part that says, I can go to that point to a certain degree, but I also know I have to be on a grounded level. I'm not touching soil, basically, at this moment. I'm doing it inside a theater. I'm not touching the soil in the sense that it was done touching the soil; I'm not, you know, as you said, close to the water. I'm not out –

K: You're not seeing the marine birds...

I: Yeah, exactly. I don't have that perspective. I have to conjure that up in my body.

For Iris, there's "authenticity," and then there's *authenticity*. One of them is impossible to attain, and the other is useful. Her operative definition has much to do with how she views the demands of her art. She must self-consciously reconcile the power of her imaginative space to the physical limitations of her performance space, keeping one foot, so to speak, in each of them. Her comments help to lead in the direction of an agreement between the concept of a Good Performance as a sincere one and the concept of a Good Performance as a highly talented and trained one.

Jawole Zollar sees authenticity as attainable through either route:

KB: What are your thoughts about authenticity, the word "authenticity" as applied to performance? Do you have a definition for authenticity?

JZ: I don't think about authenticity as much, because I think that part of what technique gives you is that when you are in a performance situation, and you have to put it out, and it's not an inspired performance, then you have the technique to back you up. So sometimes I think about inspiration and technique: that when you're inspired, you know, technique – you don't need it, really.

KB: An authentic performance is an inspired performance?

JZ: Well, I think either one, but I think both of them are authentic. I think even a technical performance is authentic. ... Because there are some times you go out there, and you're not *there*. But then the technique of: "Let me put myself in this condition." You know. "Let me concentrate on my breath." When you're thinking technically like that – you know, it's still authentic. It's just a different kind of

experience. I think that there are performers who have different degrees of *contact with self*, which I guess you could say is authentic. There are some people who *act* real well, and there's other people who are more comfortable with letting where they are just come through. And I think that the second one is the one that I try to cultivate.

Assumed in Zollar's references to technique are the knowledge and the ability to perform convincingly in whatever styles are being used. But for her, the most important connotation of the concept of authenticity has to do with a performer's "contact with self."

### *Members of the Amateur Ensembles*

Chris, from Sistrum, supposes that authenticity is restricted to ownership or origination:

C: Excuse me: I'm not even sure what it means. *Authentic* –

K: Have you ever heard someone say: "Now, *that* was an authentic performance!"

C: I've *heard* it, but it doesn't do anything for me. I would say it was something of their own. But that's the only thing I can say; I don't know what else it would mean.

K: Okay. Let's say Sweet Honey's doing a song that they didn't write but that they are performing. Are their performances authentic? Do you know "Meyango?"

C: Yes. I do.

K: Okay. Let's take that one for example. Do you know where that's from?

C: I assume it's from Nigeria.

K: Yeah; it's from West Africa, which is as close as we know. So it could be Nigeria. Is that an authentic performance?

C: I kind of would say no, unless they were Nigerians.

K: So it has to do with coming from where the song came from.

C: Yeah, that would be more authentic. And I don't know how it would be if it were a different type of song. Like, do you know "Eli, Eli?"

K: Oh, yes, I do. We sang that in DeKalb.

C: It's a beautiful song.

K: Yes, it is very beautiful.

C: And we sang it, and I didn't think it was authentic!

K: Right: because you're not a Hungarian Jew.

C: Right. But we could sing it, and we could sing it well. So, it's kind of confusing.

For Chris, African-American-ness is not the same thing as Nigerian-ness; only Nigerians can sing a traditional Nigerian song authentically. But even performances that by Chris's measure are inauthentic can be inspired and inspiring. She spoke later in our interview about the impact on her of "Eli, Eli" by Hannah Senesh, a song that prays in Hebrew and in English for the continuation of grace in the face of political repression. Perhaps the confusing part for her is the way music sometimes makes it possible to share in the emotions of people so distant and ostensibly different from ourselves.

Eva's first idea about what *authentic* could or should mean relied on fixed, discrete musical and racial categories. I attempted to see whether asking her to measure herself against a distant Black population would disrupt this idea:

K: What's your definition of *authentic*?

E: *(long pause)* In terms of music?

K: Yeah.

E: Well, if you're born and you're Black and you sing Black music or you're White and you sing White music...*(laughing)* I noticed that the other night, *(my girlfriend)* was watching Cher *(more laughter)*, and I thought: "Oh, my God! I can see why you're watching that! You're White!" You know, I would never watch it! I think – and you know, I think I'm sounding racist – but there's some music, it just doesn't have any *depth* to it. You know, so a lot of White music, *(I know)* it's pretty authentic White music because it doesn't say anything to me. It doesn't. I don't know why they sing it the way they do or why it sounds the way it does. Um, authentic, in terms of my definition, is doing the music of your culture, and that makes it authentic.

K: So, was your singing a Gullah song authentic?

E: A what?

K: Gullah song: "Job, Job" from the Gullah islands.

E: Um, I wasn't – I have no, uh, idea about the island, so – no. If I went there and experienced the island, then I could have a little more authenticity.

K: Okay.

E: Because I don't know what they want unless I experience their music or what it's supposed to sound like.

On more careful scrutiny Eva decided that mutual Blackness did not guarantee authenticity, though her words "more authenticity" suggest that she has a better chance of being authentic in any Black style than I do. This conversation led quickly to a complaint Eva has about what she sees as some African Americans' violations of the authenticity of African American musical genres:

E: I have a problem right now with Black (sacred music). Because it's changed. It's no longer what I feel is guttural music that's expressing hundreds of years of trying to stay alive. It's now become a very commercial-type music. Sounds more like, oh, I don't know, maybe something Prince might do. Just so that they can get the younger people in. To keep old people in church is not enough. It's a financial thing as well.

K: So that's the changing of a tradition in Black church music that has departed from its authentic roots in your opinion.

E: Right. When you can turn on the television and bounce your feet up and down and almost dance to the music, I don't think of that as church music. You know, I think of that as Four Tops, Temptations, you know, Diana Ross. And you may not even know that it's church music.

The dialectic between sacred styles performed in African-American churches and secular styles performed by African-American musicians is a long and extensive one. Eva is identifying the point at which it has become obvious – and unacceptable – to her. At this point in history, when the secular influence on Black church music comes from styles that are so highly marketed, the use of those styles in churches is, according to Eva, inauthentic in purpose and effect.

I found Heidi's response to the *authenticity* question to be the most fascinating. Clearly, she had heard the word used before to mean something on the order of: "I'm allowed to sing this, but you aren't." Her off-the-cuff musings about that argument, as informally as they are expressed, go right to the heart of the problem of racial, cultural, and stylistic "purity:"

H: I think it's impossible to keep everything authentic. I mean, you can't just assign certain songs to certain people. It's just impossible. You can't just be telling people that they can do certain things. I mean, how are they ever going to learn to broaden their horizons, to try different things? .....And, you know, nobody can tell me – and maybe this is sort of a White thing, but nobody can tell *me* what I can and cannot do! (*we laugh*) ...I don't know; I just can't agree with that.

K: So, that's a word that's very restrictive to you? The word *authenticity* is limiting?

H: Yeah, I do find it very limiting. I mean, who decides who can sing what? You know, you're gonna have to get the song police out there!

K: Right; and with that definition, what would an authentic performance of "Keep Your Lamps" be? What would it look like? What would the conditions of that performance be?

H: Well, if it – to me, if it was authentic, what I would envision – well, of course, I would think an Afro-American group should have been performing it.

K: Even if they're not slaves?

H: (*snickers*) Oh, that's right, you know, because the first thing – well, or should it be a church group? ... You know, as you get more and more into other cultures, even as the Afro-Americans get into the White culture, they are getting things from us. They are. You know, nobody wants to look like a racist; I could look like a racist. But they are getting things, and unfortunately when you get things, you have to give things up. You know, just as Gay people – right now, we've got Gay ghettos: ...if you're Lesbian or Gay, you can go into community, and there's a sense of community. Just like the immigrants; they took care of each other because they had to. Because society wouldn't take care of them. But as soon as Gays get our rights, we're going to lose that Gay-ghetto feel. And I think that's sort of where having your cake and eating it too – yes, Afro-Americans had that culture that was somewhat exclusive, that was something they developed. And I understand that they don't like other people infringing upon it, particularly White people, but they're losing that in, like, a ripple effect: they *are* becoming American. More and more, they're gaining the rights that, of course, I've always been used to. And when you get more and more integrated like that into society, then you have to lose something, too. Just like we will lose our – that Gay-ghetto effect.

K: Yeah, I'm so divided about that. I've started to feel that – you know, with all the corporate Gays and Lesbians: Let's just have a potluck! Let's just be a little oppressed and have a potluck! (*laughter*)

H: But you just can't hold back the future. I mean, it's just the future, and new things are going to come, and new art forms are going to develop out of the old ones. It's just going to get mixed. It's just what happens. You can't hold that back. I don't know; in some ways I am a purist, but – it's just not that type of world.

Heidi, who earlier reported that most of her lovers had been African American – one of them quite radically active – is not unused to seeing herself as a race-privileged being. Some of that self-awareness shows here when she recognizes that her indignation at having her access blocked could reflect as much about her experience of Whiteness as it does about the merits of the argument. Nevertheless, she maintains that the idea of policing who sings what is untenable, and not just because there can never be enough police in our country where there is so much contact among people and products from different groups; she recognizes

the inevitability of stylistic hybridization, which, as I have shown, makes even self-policing a tricky business.

Heidi's observations about separation versus assimilation are astute. There are White Lesbians and there are African-Americans alike who cherish our cultural ghettos. But it is useful to remember that these ghettos were not of our own making; what we love about them is what we have made out of our forced choices. And she is absolutely correct that every bid for inclusion into dominant society further corrupts the purity – in substance and in ownership – of what we have created in our separate spaces. In fact, this is the problem that Jacquelyn and Consuelo face in their shared conundrum.

What makes cross-group hybridization such a bitter pill to swallow for many African-Americans is that, contrary to what Heidi has suggested, African Americans are *not* as a group gaining "more and more" the rights that she is "used to." In fact, there has been a significant erosion in the protection of African-Americans' legal rights since the beginning of the Reagan administration. This is to say nothing of the huge and unmitigated disparity in *privilege*, which cannot be fully accounted for by the legislative record. Therefore, in effect, not all United States citizens can enjoy *in equality* the cultural richness of our nation, to which Blacks have contributed so much. Heidi unwittingly confesses as much when she says that Blacks born in this country are not American but are only still "becoming" American.

With Heidi's – and others' – understanding of *authenticity* as a measure of and a gatekeeper for illusory notions of cultural purity, the word is of little real use to practitioners and consumers of music. Diana thinks that authenticity does exist as a stylistic attribute of a musical performance; she does not use it as an arbiter of who may perform what and how, but rather of how performances should be identified:

K: Do you have a definition for authenticity in music performance? Do you have any ideas about any of that?

D: Well, I don't know. I've been exposed to a lot of different arguments about that, me being part of the community radio world, and also being a part of this contra-dance community that upholds Old-Timey music where there's all sorts of arguments about what's corrupt and what's not, you know. And here we are today faced with World Beat music where people are taking little bits of Celtic, taking little bits of African, and trying to blend them together. There's all sorts of interesting arguments going on about preserving – trying to preserve something that's unique in a time period, in a place, and I think – I don't know, on just a general level, I think there's room for all sorts of things. I think there's room for blending, I think there's room for truly authentic, and I think I like to see that happen as well. I like to *know* better, the spectrum: "Oh! This is from the late 1800s, and this is done with period instruments, and this follows as close as we can at this time to what was written and how it was performed at the time." "This is the same piece played on modern instruments, some adaptations have been taken with the music by this particular person – and this is this person's bio."

K: So, you want to know how music got this way.



D: I do love that. To have that knowledge really helps fill out the music for me. It does. It makes me better know how to take it deeply inside. You know?

With *authenticity* signaling “uniqueness” to a time period, a location, and a set of circumstances, Diana wants to know the “authentic” story on the music she is hearing. She enjoys music that is more or less geographically- and chronologically-bounded as well as mixtures of styles from eras and areas that may not even be contiguous. But she wants to be made aware of the influences and decisions that have determined what she’s hearing, and *authenticity* is a concept that helps her to organize that stylistic information in her mind.

Thea suggests an aspect of authenticity that has to do with feeling, and even more significantly, with the music’s *purpose*. I asked her about a chant for voices and percussion by West-African drum master Babatunde Olatunji (see page 220):

K: So, was your experience with “Ara Mi Le” – did that feel authentic or inauthentic? I picked that one because you talked about liking about that one.

T: Well, I’m not sure I could say it was authentic. I know that it felt nice to be in that meditative place, and if that’s what’s supposed to happen when you sing that song, then maybe it was authentic. But I – I don’t know that I – well, maybe I felt it more than I understood it – I don’t know, just about being in that meditative place. So, maybe that was authentic. But I don’t think that I know anything about the part of Africa that it came from or what it means to people or anything like that – what part it has in the culture. So, maybe that was a different kind of – if you can call that authenticity, because it was accomplishing its purpose.

Rachel Alexander, Sistrum’s director, understands *authentic* to refer to stylistic faithfulness:

KB: Do you have any use for the word “authenticity” in music performance?

RA: Yeah.

KB: How do you define it?

RA: I would define it – (*pauses*) I don’t know how to define it, but when I think of something inauthentic, I think of a bunch of White girls singing something from another culture and sounding like a bunch of White girls singing something from their own culture!

KB: So that’s something specific to the sound.

RA: Sound, and probably also form. For instance, I could imagine something – like a call-and-response kind

of thing. I can imagine an authentic way of doing it where the caller is improvising. And an inauthentic way where the caller is reading music. That would be one of the things I would consider inauthentic.

KB: So, let's talk about "Asesú" again. What would your Authenticity Meter say about your performance of it or your encounter with the piece?

RA: Hmm. Well, I would probably say it's not particularly authentic, because what we did with it was take Elizabeth Min's arrangement of it, the notes on the page, and then I did a little thing with it at the end, making an ending for it. And – I guess I don't know now I feel about that, you know? In terms of how okay or not okay that is.

It is interesting to notice how immediately the idea of inauthenticity is connected in Alexander's mind with White singers who sing music by People of Color badly. In the example we discussed, the orisha song to Yemayá, Sistrum worked from a notated arrangement of an oral-tradition song, ultimately performing a new adaptation of it. Alexander has trouble evaluating the authenticity of Sistrum's performance, in part because she does not know whether they violated any rules – stylistic or otherwise – that the Yoruba might have for the use of the piece.

Anna Crusic's director, Jane Hulting, is loath to hold herself up to standards of stylistic authenticity that would impinge on her own creative responses to a piece:

KB: I'd love to know whether you have any use for the word *authenticity* in describing or critiquing musical performance.

JH: Ah, yeah, of other groups!

KB: How would you define it to make it a useful word for you?

JH: Um, in authenticity, you know, I find somebody who speaks the language. I find somebody who is from the tradition – I talk to them; they may come to rehearsal, they may not. And then, ah, I guess I'm a fluid enough person that I'm willing to take that and to use it in my bag, you know, to make the piece sound different.

KB: Uh-huh. So, *authentic* for you doesn't need to mean "as strict a copy as possible." What else that you might do, even with a changed product, is authentic?

JH: Um – um, you mean – um...?

KB: What makes your encounter with a piece of music authentic? I mean, even if we can tell when we listen: "Oh, they're not Yoruba."

JH: Yeah. Um, I don't know. I try to – I guess I have respect for what I bring to it! (*giggles*)

KB: Yeah. Okay. So, what is that? What's the authentic part of that?

JH: To do something until it rings, for me. It's just an artistic judgment on my part.

KB: "It rings?"

JH: It rings my ears; it sounds true. Something about the sound sounds true, feels true.

Hulting's response brings us back to authenticity's dialectic between: contact with the originators' feelings about the piece and *contact with self* through the piece. Where she seeks information about the former, it is to place it at the service of the latter. The word *true* as a synonym for *authentic* is something that UBW's Georgette has also suggested. And at the beginning of this chapter, I quoted Bernice Johnson Reagon as using the same words: *rings true*.

### *Melanie DeMore*

DeMore's responses to my questioning recapitulate several issues I have already discussed: the performer's informed intent, the impact on contemporary hearings of what has been heard since a piece's creation, the "ring" of "truth," reliance on technique, the chimera of an original and replicable sound, and music's ability to alter people's consciousness. For DeMore, *authenticity* is a useful concept rather than a bothersome one. It guides rather than restricts her praxis:

KB: Do you as a musician have any use for the word *authenticity*, and if so, what is your definition of it? What does it involve?

MDM: Oh, I definitely have a use for the word *authenticity*. Again, it involves respect. It really, really involves respect. For example, in this show that we're doing with Zaccho Dance, we had a whole discussion about doing our parts in slave dialect. And one of the things that's really important is that we, in our twentieth-century selves as African-Americans, do not make a mockery of our ancestors by trying to adapt the speech of our slave ancestors. It's a *thin* line between what becomes caricature and what becomes representation.

KB: What has the decision been?

MDM: Well, I think it's – we're really being very careful about how we say things. And it's putting in some words that we know – you know, I don't really like to go out there and sound like Stepin Fetchit. I don't. Because the thing is that even as African-Americans, modern-day, a lot of times all that we have as a reference is what the stereotype is. And so we have to be really careful not to stereotype and mimic our own selves. "Am I respecting or doing a caricature?" I think the same thing has to happen when you're going to be doing somebody else's music. And being authentic. I

think, is just asking those kinds of questions. And saying: "How can I best represent this music and be as true to this culture as I can get, without going over that line?"

Here again is the impact on our sensibilities of minstrelsy's legacy. I was interested to see that this group of Black women were struggling with the same issue that had troubled some of AMASONG's (White) singers in the performance of slave music. Indeed, as the record of minstrelsy shows, Black performers as well as White had been enlisted to mock Blackness. And minstrelsy is by no means the only medium that has featured stereotyped images of African Americans. Today, anyone representing Blackness must take pains to separate the representation from any hint of caricature.

KB: In some of my discussions with other artists about authenticity, the answers have broken down into two camps. And one is kind of the camp of intent, and one is the camp of technique.

MDM: Well, I think that both of those things are really important. Your intention has to be really clear. And I think that those sorts of things need to be really discussed. And if you're not clear about what your intention is, think about what it is that you're picking to sing and why you're picking to sing it. How does it make you feel? Because you've got to go through a lot of steps to get there, to be able to tell the truth as you know it. Because, let's face it: all of us are twentieth-century beings, trying to – you know, some of the stuff we sing is hundreds and hundreds of years old. And it's hard – it's almost impossible for us to even *know* back then –

KB: – what it sounded like and what it felt like.

MDM: Yeah! So, you have to take yourself to a place there, and really – god, it's an amazing thing, really. You know, I teach a lot of kids, and we talk. I think it is really important, whether we're singing what seems like a simple song or something really complicated, that they always know what they're singing about. Always. ...We do this South African thing: we want you to know what's going on when we're doing this. I said: "Okay, everybody's going to run in place. Because they never stood still and sang. So we're going to run in place." You know? "Don't let the rhythm sag, and don't let me hear you breathing like a bunch of old freaks. I want you to know how kids fifteen years old would be singing this in South Africa, running down the street in rhythm, singing." That puts it in a different context, if you try to really think what made this person write this song or what you think was going on. ...Figure out some way to be connected. Because if you're really connected to it, chances are you're not gonna fuck it up.

KB: You can hear that, can't you?

MDM: Yeah. If you know what the truth is about it, chances are you're not gonna fuck it up. Because you're coming from a real place with it. That's why, sometimes with my kids, I don't care if they sing every single note right. That's not the point. The point is that they get it. And the people who listen to it get it. That's the point.

DeMore's position would suggest that a quest for technical perfection at the expense of emotional connection is not worth it.

Finally, DeMore suggests that as conductors, we may be responsible for more than we realize:

Most of the time, especially with young people, they're just mimicking. They don't really know. But it's also amazingly true for a lot of adults. They don't really know what they're singing about. They're not thinking about what they're singing. They're just not aware or awake. And I think one of the things that happens with us conductors that we need to be really aware of is that we – we really help set patterns in people's minds, depending on the repertoire that we choose. And how you can really change people's way of walking in the world by what music it is you choose. And I think we have to be really aware and conscious of that. And I've met too many conductors who aren't. Who have no idea what it is that they're doing in terms of what repertoire they're picking. ...I've just heard a lot of different choruses where I was like: "Do they have *any* idea what they're doing?" And the thing is that you've *got* to, because music is probably the one thing that affects people more. And people are also not really very conscious of the fact that it is affecting them. So when you put it out there in the world, you've got to be careful about what kind of map you're drawing for your audience and for your singers. Because they're going to follow it, whether they're conscious of it or not!

#### Should White People Sing Black Music? Are They Ever Any Good?

Posed this way, these are racially specific restatements of the general questions discussed in the two preceding sections. These specific forms of the questions were at least implicit in most of the conversations already presented. Sometimes they became explicit when I had not initially presented the issues in racial terms. In this section I present interviewees' responses to very direct questioning about whether White people *should* attempt to sing Black music – and whether such attempts are necessarily doomed to stylistic failure. The responses often lead back to ground already covered in the more general questions, which only proves the salience of "Black versus White" in these matters.

#### *Urban Bush Women*

It was the following conversation with Nicole that prompted me to ask these and certain other questions in subsequent interviews. Nicole is referring to a public performance of the UBW Institute Community Choir of which Iris and I were co-directors. The choir was roughly half Black and half White, though on this afternoon, there were more Black members than White who could not make it to the performance; the group in this instance, then, was about one-third Black and two-thirds White. In question here is a Zulu song called "Babethandaza." I had taught the song in rehearsal, but Iris led this public performance of it. What fascinated me about this conversation, first of all, was the way Nicole's hearing seemed to be influenced by what she saw, as well as the way what she heard told her what she was seeing:

N: When Iris had an almost completely European group singing a South African song, there was something missing, and for lack of a better word, I'm going to say *essence* – it's the quality, the essence of soul. There's some quality that was just missing for me, and I listen to a lot of South African music. I love South African music. However, I *was* very pleased – and I was thinking "maybe Kristina might not have been able to pull this out." – I was very pleased to hear that nasal sound. That nasal sound, and some other things that I – I'm very ignorant about using the various terminology – that I could easily recognize: "Ahh! That's a South African song!"

K: Nice! I'm glad you could recognize that.

N: I could recognize it, that it was South African. They did – they did an admirable job.

K: The, ah, arrangement is one that I made, to fit the voices we had. So I'm glad it sounded somewhat recognizable. (*laughing*)

N: It did. It definitely did.

To my hearing, the only thing that was missing with our absent members was a bit of volume. The quality of sound was never appreciably different when, with everyone present, what we had was anything but "an almost completely European group." Furthermore, there were members both Black and White who had trouble delivering the vocal quality we had been coaching; and there were members both Black and White who excelled in it. That vocal quality was the sole aspect of the performance that Nicole identified specifically as successful. Seeing Iris direct the song, she made the reasonable assumption that it was Iris who had coached the sound. From there, she jumped to the suspicion that I might have had more trouble coaching it. In fact, Iris and I had cooperated in coaching the sound, and it was a sound that I had coached in the past, on the same song, with other choirs, before ever meeting Iris. I refrained from pointing this out, but when Nicole stated that she clearly recognized the style of the song, I had to let her know that she had heard the style through what was my (White) arrangement of it.

Nicole had opened an opportunity for me to pursue her ideas about White people's success in singing Black styles:

N: Generally, White folks'll work very hard at it. Very hard at it. And they'll do – in many cases they'll do an admirable job: they'll do *okay*. But the effort they put into it would – they could have really created something *outstanding* on their own, I think. They put in so much effort. And I always go back to what Zora Neale Hurston said in her book, um, *The Sanctified Church*. She's talking about this very thing in 1934. And she's talking about Black people's music. By the way, you should read this book. She breaks it down about Black people's music, and she uses some very interesting parables. Like of somebody building a house: a White person, and their singing – the house has to be completely built with all the walls finished, and everything, you know, just right. So a Black person's house, they will leave all of the beams open and showing. And that is beautiful. So she said that that is the way the songs are: White

folks singing choral music of that kind of classical singing at that time, as being very refined and everything finished, and in Black folks' music, the *unrefined* and the *unfinished* is celebrated. And that's what made it beautiful. And she said that what folks are beginning to recognize – what people *fail* to recognize but are beginning to *know* is that they think the Black person...is very easily imitated. But the Black person...is the most difficult person to imitate. And that's what I think about when I see folks trying to – taking on various cultural forms that were derived out of a Black cultural experience or a Black experience.

K: For all the work that we have to put into it, we – we're not quite going to get there.

N: No. Not for me. Okay? Not for me.

When Nicole spoke about the effort White people waste being mediocre in Black music when we could be doing something outstanding "in White," all I could think about was the sheer magnitude of the effort AMASONG had had to spend on preparing a convincing – not an outstanding – performance of a rather simple piece by Heinrich Schütz. I would agree that the "open beams" and other "unrefinements" of some Black styles are part of their characteristic beauty, and also that even those White performers who recognize that these are to be emulated – rather than smoothed over – will have a hard time doing so convincingly if they have not been steeped in the style. But I believe that the "finished walls" and the just-so placement of the details of "classical" style make that style, too, extremely difficult for White people or anyone else. AMASONG's concerts, all greatly varied among Black, White, and other styles, were consistently convincing at least. Sometimes we were unconvincing on individual Black pieces, sometimes on White pieces. We also managed several times to be outstanding, in musics Black and White.

One afternoon, Tina and I had been chatting informally about the male domination of drumming circles and how difficult it is for women to be accepted into and coached within them. During this conversation she brought up the name of a fine percussionist in Afro/Diaspora styles, a White woman who is well known as a dance accompanist. Tina told me about a time when Urban Bush Women had participated in an event that this woman was accompanying. One member of UBW, whom Tina pointedly avoided naming, had expressed resentment over this woman's involvement in the event. In my interview with Tina, I asked her to return to that anecdote:

K: I want to revisit the comment you made to me about \_\_\_\_\_. And I know you don't want to tell me who said it, and I'm not trying to dig for that. But I'm curious to know whether that was in the context of a time when she was actually playing for the company.

T: Oh. Not playing for the company, but she was playing along with other drummers for a masterclass that Urban Bush Women attended.

K: Oh, okay. And the idea was, she shouldn't be getting – was she being paid?

T: No. She was not.

K: That was not the issue.

T: No. Money was not the issue. The whole issue was: "Well, she's White. Why doesn't she go find something else to do?" Like, something in her culture. "Why does she always gotta be over here? Why are they always trying to take our stuff?" You know? Which I definitely feel about a lot of things. It's just interesting because everybody has sort of gradations of that feeling, or of how strong it is or how reactionary it is, or whatever.

K: What does that come from?

T: It comes from protectiveness, it comes from defensiveness, it comes from – a lot of things. It comes from a feeling of something being sacred, it comes from a feeling of something needing to be protected. *because you're coming from a place of minority or inferiority complex or whatever it is. It comes from a place of less power, and so you see a lot of times – and especially in a very commercial sense – the White men, usually, taking our culture and making a whole bunch of money with it in a Coke commercial, and you're like: "Wow. How did that happen?"* And so, it definitely comes from that place. To me it's very clearly from that place where you feel you need to protect – and also claim things, you know?

So I asked Tina more about her personal feelings on seeing White people perform in Black traditional styles. She recognized the tug of her ambivalence:

I feel that if you really made an attempt to tell where it came from and who it belongs to, um – although I can't say it wouldn't annoy me. Because, you could be a really respectful, sincere (White) person teaching African dance or something, I don't know. Whatever. And it could still get totally on my nerves, though. But it also depends. Because I'm sure there are some moments where I feel like a struggle within that, because... what if the person really has it? What if more than just respecting it and understanding where it comes from, you *see* in their physical body or *hear* in their actual voice that they *have* it? ...So then this is a kind of contradiction inside me. Like, "Does it still bother me? ...It really seems like it's *in* them somehow." Then I have a little more of a contradiction. I'm less quick to be, like, "Ugh!" Annoyed. You know? And I don't know if that's just because maybe at that point I'm open to the possibility that in whatever way, it is coming through them. That it doesn't matter that they're White and they're doing African dance or whatever. The spirit of it is coming through them. And that's a beautiful thing.

Jacqueline's voice was one of several in the preceding sections of this chapter that spoke of a need to be protective. I have quoted her as admitting that there are Black people from whom she feels the need to protect certain traditions. But that whole discussion had actually begun with the following comment, which reveals even further that Whiteness is really at the center of the problem and the forefront of her consciousness about it:



There are certain dances and certain songs that I don't share with the White community. They were taught to me in confidence by Africans who were very leery about bringing them over here because they're coming here all watered down.

It cannot be determined from Jacquelyn's comment whether her African teachers' chief concern was about White people's corruption of their songs and dances, or whether theirs was a more general concern about corruption by any kind of American – or, for that matter, by people from anywhere outside their own ethnic groups.<sup>11</sup> Most people, race or ethnicity regardless, do not have Jacquelyn's outstanding ability or her earnest inclination to observe, emulate, and respectfully transmit dance traditions; she is a worthy repository of her teachers' confidence. In any case, whatever their chief concern was, hers is White people.

Georgette feels generous about White people's *acknowledged* use of Black traditional materials. She diagnoses stylistic shortfall as a lack of experience or ancestry – or of exposure to people who have the right experience or ancestry:

K: So, it doesn't bother you, necessarily, when White people sing a song that comes from Black culture.

G: No! It doesn't bother me at all. As long as they understand where it comes from.

K: Let's say you have a choir of White people, and they're going to sing a Spiritual. *Probably* when you hear the choir, you can tell that it's a White group. You can usually tell. Sometimes you can't. So, let's say you hear this White choir, and they do a good performance. They stay in tune, and they're expressing the music, but, you know, they sound like a White group. What's your feeling about that? How does that make you feel when you have to listen to that?

G: (*laughs*) The first thing I ask myself is why didn't you get any (Black) people? You know: why is it just all White? Why doesn't she have any Black experience or people who may – African Americans or People of Color who really know what these songs feel like.

K: So until I can get more Women of Color in my group, should we not be singing Black song?

G: No, I – I – you could sing those songs, but I think you need to do more research. And they can even do more research about those songs. They need to *listen* to more African-American songs. They need to *listen* to more gospel, more Christian rock –<sup>12</sup>

K: To inform their sound?

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<sup>11</sup> For more on the political shifting by Black Africans among identification by tribe, nation, and race, see Turino 2000.

<sup>12</sup> This is an example of a conversation in which, by *Spiritual*, I meant a particular genre from the time of slavery, whereas the interviewee understood the word to mean any kind of sacred music; hence the references to gospel and Christian rock music.

G: Yeah. To really learn from their sound and to try to *hear* what they're saying, *hear* their emotion. Because when Black people sing their songs, it's just not a concert thing. It's from what they have experienced. It's from what their ancestors have experienced. It has a lot of weight to it.

K: And it sounds like you feel like you can hear whether that's happening or not – that that's one of the things that tells you whether it's a White choir –

G: Exactly. Even though they may have the words and they're singing the song, they don't have the history behind it because they never experienced it or their ancestors never experienced it. So they – they don't know exactly what's going on.

K: Why do you think they love that music anyway?

G: I don't know. I don't know why they love it.

At this writing, I see Georgette's instinctual question, "Why is it all White?" as far more relevant than I did when I heard it. Its implications are the subject of the entire chapter that follows this one. Essentially, the problem is this: especially in any city with a significant Black population, how seriously will Black audience members take a choir's interest in Black cultural forms when it is a *segregated group*? Nevertheless, Georgette doesn't mind that White people sing Black songs; but if we want to sound good, we have to learn what Black experience and ancestry *sound* like.

Jawole Zollar agrees that White performances usually sound different from African American performances. Furthermore, she recognizes that style inevitably changes as it moves from any group to another one. She also concedes that conscious and deliberate stylistic alterations of a piece can be made to valid, interpretive effect. The matter is not a racial one for her. What she sees as politically significant – and often racialized – is the question of whose version of a style receives more exposure and reward:

KB: Should White people sing Black music if they can't make it sound like it sounded in the voices of the people who created the music?

JZ: Well, I'll speak to that question from two different points of view. The first point of view is that I think every group – every way that a song is interpreted has to do with a specific style. So there are White styles. And I don't have a problem with that. The economics of racism often says that the White style will be validated more than the Black style. Or the White person will get more credit and more access. So that then complicates the first thing. But I think each group develops a style, even each choir. Even each group within UBW in terms of different periods of time: we interpret the works very differently. So, I think that's absolutely valid because people are interpreting the work in terms of what they're experiencing and what their preferences are. I mean, I have some preferences about how I like to hear Black music. Does that invalidate another particular way of hearing it? I don't think so. But my prejudices towards that don't really have that much power! (*laughs ironically*) So, if I was over (at) the

National Endowment. say, well then I'd be able to say: "This person's not really authentic in their sound:" then it's not going to get funded. I think in some ways it – it comes back the other way. Like. I think when Black people do a *Porgy and Bess*, there's always the question: "Was that authentic?"

KB: That's a big circle. there!

JZ: So. I think it's been where the power lies. Like, I find it interesting: even when you see differences between the way African Americans do African dance and the way Africans do African dance. There's different styles. And one of their critiques is we don't do it right. Well, we do it with a different sense of history. So again, there are prejudices, maybe to see it done by Africans. And so, if they were able to control what gets done, that would be what got funded. But I find it interesting, also, to see the different groups do – well, I think the most severe reaction I've had is when a song is just really not respected; its historical context is not respected. (There was) this suburban, (White.) wanna-sing-a-Gospel-song group, and I can't remember the song. It wasn't "This Little Light of Mine," but something like that. And it was: (*imitates really peppy, "White" singing*). It could have been a, a –

KB: – toothpaste commercial!

JZ: Right! Right! I think that's when I get my goat up! (*laughs*) You know, I was horrified, because they showed it to us, and they were so proud. And really – I mean, literally – I'm not exaggerating: they were doing, like, step-kicks and –

KB: Gross!

JZ: Oh, but I do that with Black performers, too. With Cassandra Wilson: I really didn't like the way she interpreted "Strange Fruit." It didn't – to me, you would not know what that song was about. I thought she turned it into a little, jazzy song that, you know, was very pretty, that if you weren't listening, you wouldn't know it was about a lynching. And maybe that was the intention. But I prefer to hear it sung with the intention that this is a song about lynching, and it should be disturbing. So I have that same response to – it's not just Black or White. It's something about the history of the song and the intention. I think if you change that, then is the change just from arbitrariness, or is the change for a particular point of view that you want to get across?

Here Zollar reveals that her concept of *authenticity*, which she did not elaborate when I questioned her directly on the term (see page 293), does have something important to do with faithfulness to the style in which a piece was created or the intent behind its creation. She does not believe that race necessarily guarantees or precludes that faithfulness.

#### *Members of the Amateur Ensembles*

Eva has strong feelings about the probability of hearing White people deliver a convincing rendition of a Black song. She, like Georgette, identifies Black "struggle" as the determinant of Black

musical style. Like Nicole, she uses the word *soul* to describe Black music's stylistic essence. Her sung phrase of a hymn from her childhood, and her musings about the song, reveal the extent to which she identifies with traditional, Black sacred music, even though she is not a churchgoer:

K: Why don't you take up some tape here just talking about White groups singing Black music – or AMASONG's doing it. I mean, how did you find that experience with us when we did those songs?

E: Well, it certainly is different. Because, I feel that when we sing religious that are our songs –

K: You mean Black people's songs?

E: Black people's songs. We have a different depth about it. I think because we have a different struggle. The music is a struggling music. It's a music that has evolved from a group of people who have struggled. And so the soulfulness and the depth of it is different. It seems when I hear, you know, forty or fifty White women singing spiritual music, I feel there's no spirit – that they really don't know why that is supposed to feel a certain way, or why your voice may tremble here and not there, or why it may just be deeper there and not somewhere else. Or the emphasis on words would be totally different. I've always been a little troubled about White people singing Black (sacred music) because I think they don't *know* it. How can you sing something that you don't know about? We've spent years singing this music, you know. And when I hear (*singing*) "Father I stretch my hands to Thee." I think of my mother. I think of sitting there as a child hearing that every Sunday, you know? I think of all these old people that have a *reason* to say "Father I stretch my hands to Thee." Now, (AMASONG) didn't do any kind of music like that, but we did some kinds of music that were similar, you know, where you would hear a different reply. The energy generated in the reply would be totally different, and White people just can't do that.

K: Mm-hmm. Do you feel like we just shouldn't attempt it?

E: No, I think it's not fair to not have you attempt it, but, you know, as a music director it would be good to have more experience about – in terms of what it should sound like. You know, if you were to give this song, the same song, to Salem Baptist Church's choir and see what they do with it, you know, I think they would give you more direction in terms of how it could feel.

Despite what White people "just can't do" with Black music, Eva wouldn't deny us the attempt, and she believes that we can at least get better at it as we attend to appropriate models. As she spoke further, she did confess to being "bothered" by White performance of Black music, and I tried to learn more about her feelings on the question:

K: I'm interested in just probing you a bit further when you say it bothers you to hear that.

E: You mean, to hear White groups singing Black music?

K: Yeah.

E: It just feels like it's stolen or something. You know, like – I think everyone should have their own thing. You know, each one of us has our own – you know, Jewish people sing certain songs (*chuckles*). I just know that once you step out of the culture and you try to get another group to understand – it takes *years* to feel this music, and I have to go back to that word: to know that *struggle*. You know, so that when you sing that song, it comes out the way it's supposed to.

The contradiction here is that, as Eva reported elsewhere in the interview, her attraction to AMASONG was its opportunity to sing music from so many different times and places. I used one example from the past year's repertoire that I hoped would reveal the contradiction to her:

K: Mm-hmm. Could you compare (the) gap (between White singers and Black music) to your singing the Stravinsky *Four Russian Peasant Songs* – or even *my* singing them? What would you say about that as a valid or invalid comparison?

E: Well, I've always thought that Black people can work miracles. And, you know, we're a very adaptable group. And so, just as I (can) talk and sound like a person that's White, it's possible to emulate almost anything. And, uh, I think it's easier, and I think – and excuse me if I sound a little biased (*chuckles*) –

K: Go ahead!

E: – but I think that we add to classical music as opera singers a quality that some White people don't have. And it's the feeling that we've experienced in our lives to make the music, um – to *make* the music. I think Black people *add* to classical. Especially those who do it well.

K: For example?

E: Uh, William Warfield.

K: Oh, yeah.

E: You know? Leontyne Price. You know, there's a whole list.

K: Could you have – could you have heard her sing Verdi arias, not knowing what she looked like, and known she was Black?

E: Oh, yeah! Yeah. There's a, a depth and a quality in the voice that you *know* and you *hear* if you grew up – you *know* what that voice is. And so, uh, when I hear, I can *hear* if someone is Of Color when they're singing classical music because I know – I just know that voice. ... It's a different sound. I just think,

personally. Black people *add*. And why would you *not* want that quality in the music? So, I don't know. I don't want to sound prejudiced or something, you know.

So, in Eva's opinion, not only can White people not sing Black music, but they also cannot sing White music as well as Black people can. This unreasonably chauvinistic attitude actually contains elements of political truth, as most generalizations – or *essentializations* – do. By her speech, Eva can pass on the telephone as a White person. She can also speak in a style that is unequivocally African American. The “adaptive” prowess of Black Americans that Eva identifies comes from the necessity under racial oppression to learn as much as possible about how White people behave, what White people value, and how White people think. White people have generally been able to avoid cultivating an equal level of awareness about Black behaviors, values, and thought. As Bernice Johnson Reagon said to me: “It has never cost you your life not to know what Black people think.” In general, people in oppressed groups know more about their oppressors than their oppressors know about them, something that any Lesbian reading this study has surely observed about herself in relation to Heterosexuals.

However, I have heard singers who I mistakenly swore were Black; their success at emulating Black style was the result of study and practice as surely as was Leontyne Price's success at nineteenth-century Italian opera. And it is still on my “To-Do” list to invite Eva over for a marathon of listening to my audio recording collection: I suspect that she will not know which of my duplicate and triplicate recordings of songs by Ravel and Strauss are by African-American sopranos.

Chris has agreed with Eva that White singers who undertake Black music can generally be expected to botch the job. On page 166, I quoted her admission that she makes fun of what she hears as “silly.” As we talked a bit more about what this means, she softened her divisions between Black and White singing. Here, she demonstrates her own stylistic adaptability, as well as the importance to her of the Black church as a site for the feelingful encounter with music:

K: It sounds like you have in your mind's ear sounds that you would identify as Black singing and songs that you would identify as White singing.

C: I do. Although, I sing mostly White songs. I don't think I'm a good Black singer at all. Except when I'm in church.

K: Oh. What makes the difference?

C: I feel it more. For example, if I were in a church with a White congregation and I would sing “Precious Lord,” I would sing: (*sings very metrically, with direct pitch onset*). But if I were in a Black church, I would sing: (*now the melody has ornamentation between its intervals; she lingers on long notes*). You know? It's different. And I don't know why.

K: I'm studying hard to learn more about why, so that when I choose to do Black music, I can make it sound

as un-silly as possible.

C: I think it's the *feeling* you put into it. I've heard White people sound *better* –

K: Yeah, every once in a while. And you remember that, because it's such an exception, right?

C: You know, because you feel it. If I can feel the music, that's music. With singing the White music, like the "Precious Lord:" *that is beautiful* the way I sang it with the White congregation. And the Black congregation – *that is beautiful*, because you're feeling it. So both ways, you're feeling it. It just all depends on how it comes out. You know? Which doesn't make a whole lot of sense as I'm saying it, but...

Chris is bumping up against the unaccountable effect of *style*. She knows it cannot be something inborn, or she wouldn't be able to sing in both Black and White styles and find both of them beautiful. A culture evolves its own sounds at the service of its own needs and its concepts of beauty; that doesn't preclude anyone in that culture from understanding what is beautiful about another culture's style.

I asked Ruth why she thought singing Spirituals was relevant to her as a White woman:

R: Because our society is built on – our American history is built on that experience: our society is still very deeply divided along racial lines. How can we hope to understand people's experience who are different from ourselves if we don't take the time to learn what they have to say? Now, if I'm singing that song, I might think about the parallels between that kind of experience and the experience of my forebears escaping the Cossacks. I might think about what I have in common with that experience, not claiming to have had that experience personally – but I can relate to it in a way.

K: And that's valid.

R: Not only is it valid, it's the key to change! The key to social change is being able to understand that we have parallel experiences of oppression, and that it's all connected. Oppression is connected, and resistance to oppression is connected. We can understand that these things are connected without getting confused that they're exactly the same. I mean, the experience of African-American slaves in this country was not the same as the experience of Jews in the Ukraine, although, you know, my great-grandmother's head being clubbed was probably not that different from, probably, Iris's great-grandmother's head being clubbed; who the hell knows? Or my neighbors'. But if we're going to be allies to one another, we need to understand what's different and what's common about our experiences. So, in the interest of being allies to each other, we have to think beyond the limitations of identity politics. I mean, identity politics: I understand how we got there, but it's deeply limited. You know, and our lives are never as simple as those categories are. Our current experience, our ancestry, our cultural experience is just never as simple as our little laundry-list of identity groups. And we can't think that we can avoid the complexity of real experiences by kind of scapegoating these songs or these decisions or

these processes or whatever it is that we do because we've decided that: "This is the thing that is impure, and so we must *purge* it from our society!" And then we feel better about ourselves, but it doesn't *work*.

K: What do we get after having done that?

R: We don't get anything. What we get is (poorer) repertoire!

Ruth strongly feels not only that Whites *may* sing Black music but even that we *should*. In fact, she would view any suggestion to the contrary as politically regressive.

As a White woman, AMASONG's Diana has been conscious of stylistic shortcomings in our choir's singing of Black music – and music from other parts of the world as well. As is typical of Diana, she did not confine her concerns within a Black-and-White framework. She is well aware that style, Black and otherwise, can be learned through conscious effort. She does not feel that any particular styles are politically foreclosed to her, and she enjoys experimenting widely:

D: Have I felt comfortable, always, singing (Black) music? Sometimes I feel like we *don't* do it well. I think there have been pieces – and what pieces, I'll try to remember – but that felt like: "We were way too White on that." It just felt way too White. You know, for the most part I felt like we gave a good rendition, so I'd feel strong enough. But (sometimes) I just felt too White.

K: Uh-huh. Stylistically, vocally, the intent, or...?

D: Um, I would say definitely the energy of the group, for one. And then oftentimes we just couldn't get the voices to come out. They'd sing clean and beautiful instead of beautiful and forward.

K: Uh-huh. Certainly, in a blind listening, one can usually tell when we're singing Black music that we're White people singing Black music. No question about it. So that's given you some concern at points.

D: Mm-hmm.

K: And, have you thought that maybe we shouldn't be doing it?

D: Um, yeah.

K: So it sounds like one of the goals for you is to try to replicate the sound as much as possible.

D: Mm-hmm.

K: Anything else?

D: Well, I mean, it's been tricky. Like, I've really loved, for example, when we've been able to have the



Brazilian piece with the woman from Brazil, who really heads it off and helps us through that, and, like, give us a really good feeling about it. That's always exciting. Like when Danielle and Katie came and helped us out (on the Slavic songs), that was really neat. That helps a tremendous amount. Sometimes I feel like we go kind of blindly into a musical style, and something about not – I mean, a lot of the women I don't think ever listen to a wide range of music. So they don't quite get the nuances of a given sound from a given culture or a different time. Even when we did the Jewish pieces with Norma helping us – and again, there was another human link, and I always think the human links are really important. But *still*, I kind of felt like: "Listen *harder*, Ladies!" I mean, me included; I'm not like: "Ooh, I have it and they don't!" But I just felt like saying: "If you're not getting it, take out some music! Go to the library and take out some music! And listen!" Because there's so many subtleties in what you do with vocal expression that *you can pick up!!* You know, you *can* pick up from listening to it on recordings. I mean, we don't have a large enough Jewish community here that you could just go out and pick it up live everywhere. So, use the resources: we have a *fabulous* library! So sometimes I wish there were more – you know, I think the human connections you brought in were very important in that way. Sometimes I feel like we've *fallen short in replicating the sound*. And I feel like that is *important to me, not only with my stumblings over trying to get pronunciation of lyrics!* (*laughs*) I've got to get that down! But also: make the *sound* come fairly close if not on the mark.

K: Mm-hmm. Maybe I bit off some things I couldn't chew.

D: Well, mayb- I think you can chew about anything! You know, it'd be quite a huge banquet that you could take on! But, the group. I think sometimes the group, you know – I've marveled at what you've been able to do with that many women who come with quite a range of ability in various ways, not only their abilities to read music, but also to stretch and take on different musical styles. And some are more challenging than others. And it's kind of surprising sometimes what ends up being more challenging than another. So, you've taken a lot of chances, and I would *much* rather you have erred on taking chances than on playing it safe. That made it so much more interesting over the years with you.

I asked Thea whether anyone – within the choir or without – had challenged Anna Crusis on the propriety of their singing Black music:

T: Yes.

K: Where did that come from?

T: Within the choir. I've never heard it from people outside the choir. Maybe people think that, but I haven't ever heard it. And I don't know that it was. It might have been on occasion about an African song, but it was more about, oh, the African-American national anthem. What is the name of that? "Lift Every Voice and Sing." And also maybe a little bit around "Nkosi Sikelele;" it's the South-African national anthem. And, um, more about things like that than some kind of more folksy kind of tune...

K: “Folky?”

T: Well, something in Swahili, or – although, “Nkosi Sikelele” is also in another language. I’m not sure why those would stir up more controversy than the others –

K: “Lift Every Voice” more than the Zulu song?

T: Right. Because here we are, a bunch of White women singing the African-American national anthem... you know, that had some people concerned that it wasn’t appropriate.

K: Because?

T: Because we don’t know what that experience is like.

K: *Uh-huh; but you know what the Zulu experience is like?*

T: No, we don’t know what that’s like, either!

K: But that didn’t come up in the same way.

T: Not in the same way. The other issue’s not as politically charged, for some reason.

What Thea did not put her finger on is that both “Nkosi Sikelele” and “Lift Every Voice and Sing” respond to and refer directly to struggles against White supremacist national governments and social systems. The latter song is more “charged” than the former, as it names our own and continuing national tragedy. Both of them are more charged than, for example, a “folky” (read: *nonpolitical*) East-African village song that prays for safe travel. Being unfamiliar with the experience addressed in a song is not the issue at all and would not have been raised about the performance of a sea chanty, though no member of Anna Crusis is a sailor.

Jane Hulting is aware that many of her programming choices will come under some criticism having to do with the choir’s Whiteness. She identifies that there are stylistic as well as political challenges to the music she chooses, but she is careful not to make choices unless she can stand by them:

KB: You mentioned having done Yoruba music, and we have, too, and so has Sistrum. Has anybody ever challenged your right to do that music? Anybody within or outside the choir?

JH: That’s always an issue, whether it’s African music or Chinese music or whatever it is. You know: do White people who have privilege have a right to just take this music – steal it – and do it? So there’s that political issue and ethical issue. But then there’s also sort of the musical issue.

KB: *Can* you do it well.

JH: Is it going to sound okay? Can White people really sing gospel? I mean, it's the same kind of issue.

KB: What's your answer to that?

JH: Well, my answer is the same one that Ysaye Barnwell gave, actually, when I was talking to her. And that is, you know: the music is the music. You can take the music, you can listen with your ears, you can find out where it came from, you can be an informed person about it, and then – first and foremost, very primarily – give credit to the source. Give credit to the teacher. From whence did this come? You know, it was a gift. And so, with the gift comes this need to give back. And you give back by way of acknowledgement. And so we do that. I do that no matter what group I'm working with, whatever music, wherever I am. That's kind of the way I've dealt with that. And I think that in terms of the voices – the style of voices – I think it's possible to work with voices and do the best you can. Do I like the way a lot of White groups sound singing Sweet Honey? Not particularly. Do I like – I'm being *pushed* now, by the music committee, to do one of Sweet Honey's pieces. Do I feel like this is right for the choir? No.

KB: What is the piece?

JH: "I Be Your Water." It's an important song, historically, for Sweet Honey, and it also has a great text. But one thing that's happened repeatedly in Anna is that, you know, I as a director get pushed to do repertoire that I think is not particularly good music, or that doesn't fit us in some way. I think "I Be Your Water" is a great song for Sweet Honey.

KB: What is the way in which it wouldn't work with Anna?

JH: Well, you need a certain kind of sonority. You need a certain way of enlarging on each note. I – you know, it's not clear to me how I would do that.

From an earlier quote, we know that Hulting does not necessarily feel bound to making exact replicas of "authentic" performances. But if she feels she will be unsuccessful in coaching aspects of a style that she hears as indispensable to a convincing performance, she will decline to do the piece.

#### *DeMore, Barnwell, and Reagon*

I asked Melanie DeMore how she accounted for the frequent use by White, Feminist choirs of traditional Black music:

MDM: That's the music of freedom, and that is the music of struggle.

KB: Is that a legitimate point of connection for you, when a White woman, a White Lesbian, uses that as her

jumping-off place for connecting to the music?

MDM: Um – (*pauses*) you know. I think the thing is that every group that's gone through some kind of struggle has always used African- American music. You know, the Labor – all of it. Because that is the music of struggle, once again. And I think that we connect struggle, change, trials, and tribulations – because, you know, African-American folk music is survival music. That's why people are drawn to it when they feel like they're being oppressed at some level.

KB: Yeah, but is that *okay* with you?

MDM: I – (*pauses*) I get it; I understand it. People need to have some kind of voice for what they're feeling. And, you know, it's almost like the original voice in this country. That African-American struggle of the slaves, that's like the original struggle of this country. So, I guess, as long as they know where it comes from, it makes a difference to me. Just don't – you cannot claim it as your own. Because it's not. And so, yeah, it speaks to how I feel about something – it speaks to that. You know, which is why African-American music is so powerful, because it speaks to those real human feelings of struggle and survival and pain and courage and all. That's not to say they're the only – in this country, that's just the origins of it.

Actually, the “original struggle” in the United States is the one between the European colonists and the First Nations to live on this soil. Dominant society's success in diminishing this struggle's salience in the national imagination is another problem altogether. For many political progressives, the Black struggle in America has indeed been the emblematic one, something I began to discuss in Chapter Two, and something that has resurfaced in the voices of various interviewees here. DeMore is clearly conflicted between her feeling that cross-cultural musical sharing is valuable and her feeling that when White people use and identify with African-American songs, something precious to her is likely to get lost. Her comments recall Nicole's combination of pride and “remorse” at seeing White people adopt what African Americans have developed as a powerful voice of resistance (page 267).

I told Ysaye Barnwell about the fate of my “Keep Your Lamps” arrangement at the Sister Singers Festival planning meeting in Portland. I wanted her opinion on the White women's conclusion that it had been inappropriate for me to arrange a Spiritual and that therefore, despite how much they loved the music, they could not endorse its performance. Dr. Barnwell did not tell me what I had hoped to hear from her:

The fact that you have the skill and *can* do is one thing. Whether it means you *should* do... or whether it means, since this comes out of a particular culture, if there are people you can identify and approach who can and will do it – you know. And in this instance, there are many of us. Maybe that is the choice that should be made.

These comments were extremely challenging to me. I considered them for many months without knowing what to make of them for myself. This was not the end of our dialogue on the matter, which I will revisit in Chapter Seven.

Bernice Johnson Reagon quickly dispenses with essentialist attitudes about race and musical ability. Stylistic mastery is a matter of exposure, study, talent:

For me it's not racial. Either a piece rings true, or it doesn't. And I don't care if the conductor is green, yellow, purple, or Black. It can be a Black conductor doing a Black composition who don't know *anything* about the expression. It's not in your blood. You're not born knowing it. And if you did not come up in a system where you learned it as an apprentice because it was in the air and you learned it as it was being done, you only know it if you study it. And, if you have some talent to being open to it. And that's not a racial thing. And for me, it is not complex. I don't spend a lot of time with it. Either it works or it doesn't. And, you know, it's not even a struggle. If it's tacky, it's tacky. And it's *sad* if it's tacky. But some people seem to think, you know, "All Black people can sing; all White people can't sing." It doesn't work. That doesn't work.

Reagon is not saying, however, that there are no conditions on the use of Black music by White people – or the use by anyone of traditional materials from a culture not her or his own:

I think in cross-cultural situations, people who have the capacity to cross cultures have to be willing to explore ways to construct doors that people from another culture can enter. And taste. And leave. And enter and taste and leave. And everything's respected: the people who came in to taste from another culture; the culture they're tasting; and the leaving. And both cultures and participants are taken care of and *more* protected because of the exchange. And I think there have to be people who construct those doors. For me it's like windows of accessibility. I'm always trying to find the window. When I sit down with a group and I've never worked with them before, I'm looking: *Where is the window?* ...That work is very sacred work in our culture. And it's very important not to confuse it with transmitting a particular cultural expression. Because it requires so much to be able to do that work and do it well. And there are things you teach about cultures when you're doing it, because you're always using cultural material. So you take the time to tell the story about whatever it is you did. But it's important not to be confused: that you're not really transmitting culture – a particular culture. You're actually using cultural products to lead people to experience the power of healing within themselves when they open themselves to art in almost any form.

Here Reagon pronounces false the assumption, articulated by Ginger (page 275), that anyone not belonging to a culture can transmit or sustain that culture. What we can do in cross-cultural performance is learn and promote learning, and we can "experience the power of healing" that human creative expression holds for any of us. This, however, is only possible with the guidance of individuals who have attained the skills and insights necessary to ensure that the outcome is positive for everyone whom it involves and represents.

On Particular Uses and Misuses of “Folk Process”

This section begins by addressing a particular practice of some White Feminists that is identified by several African-American women as the most common and the most egregious form of cultural appropriation within Feminist choral performance.

I have already made the case that many White members of Womyn’s choirs are particularly averse to singing sacred music from Christian traditions. Some of these women have felt directly persecuted by misogynist and heterosexist church teachings; many others are politically outraged at the church’s global and centuries-long history of religious persecution and colonial expansion, as well as the general, normalizing effect that its Father-God theology exerts on institutional male supremacy. Resistance in Womyn’s choirs to programming Christian music takes several forms. Some choirs will not ever be heard to sing it. Some will tolerate it in languages other than English. Some will tolerate it in English so long as its language remains within the shared terrain between Jews and Christians. Commonly, references to the Divine will be changed from masculine to gender-neutral, or even feminine. When a piece of music uses words like *Jesus*, *Savior*, and *sin*, it is far less likely to find its way into the repertoire of a Womyn’s chorus – unless, of course, it is deemed adaptable to word substitutions.

White Feminists who have purged Christian content from Christian songs have typically assumed that the act would be universally hailed by our audiences as a progressive adaptation. What we usually have not anticipated or understood is the importance to so many African Americans – churchgoers or no – of retaining those words intact. I have already presented several quotes that reveal Black women’s deep identification with Black sacred music, and this question will be more fully explored in the next chapter within the context of the case study of MUSE. I was certainly ignorant of this the first time I stood up before a national audience and directed my choir in the performance of a de-Christianized Spiritual.

In my first two years as AMASONG’s director, I programmed no sacred music. By the third year, I felt I had successfully distinguished us from choirs that sing a preponderance of church music, so I began to introduce a Fauré motet here, a Spiritual there, a Marian antiphon somewhere else. One of the first Spirituals we performed was my arrangement of “Soon I Will Be Done.” In this song’s successive verses, singers look forward to encounters with those on *the other side*: “I want to meet my mother,” “I want to meet my brother,” “I want to meet my Jesus,” “I want to meet my Saviour,” and the like. I chose to make substitutions for these latter two. I knew that all of us would have had trouble performing them with conviction. I also knew that, by putting our own mark on the song via what I saw as our responsibility to the *folk process*, we could sing something that all of us felt fervently. I decided that we would signal our unique, Feminist encounter with the song’s history by singing about meeting “my mother,” “my sister,” Sojourner,” “Harriet Tubman,” and “Audre Lorde.”<sup>13</sup> It was this version of the song that we performed at the 1993 Sister Singers Festival in Cincinnati, after which Melanie DeMore came backstage to meet me.

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<sup>13</sup> This last was suggested by chorus member Hadley Ravencroft. Audre Lorde (1934-1992) was a self-described “Black lesbian feminist socialist mother warrior poet:” her poems and essays changed my life.

When DeMore and I saw each other again five years later, I was prompted to bring up that performance. We were discussing the question of whether White people should sing Spirituals:

MDM: If you're going to sing (a Spiritual), do not change the words! What are you doing? You don't change the words!

KB: Let's go back to the day that we met. That was in the day that I regarded anything that was public domain – not copyrighted to any particular person – as free for whatever use. That was my framework there. And we did "Soon I Will Be Done," my arrangement. And I made some substitutions for "I want to meet." We put in "I want to meet Soujourner," "I want to meet Harriet Tubman," "I want to meet Audre Lorde." At that time another aspect of folk music that I thought was important was that it bear the hallmark of whoever was singing it, because I'd studied some – you know, the evolution of – like, if you track what began in England as "The Unfortunate Rake," it came over to the American southeast as "St. James' Infirmary;" by the time it got to Texas, it was "The Streets of Laredo."

MDM: Right.

KB: So I thought: "Okay, we're singing this. An authentic way to sing this would be to put something of ourselves in it." It never entered my mind that I might want to be careful about that, because, hey: nobody owns the song! We're a group of Feminist-identified women; how would we put our stamp on this? And so I chose to have us acknowledge the lives of African-American women that had inspired us and that we wanted to remember in history. Your response to that arrangement was favorable.

MDM: Yeah. Well, one of the things that you'll notice in a lot of African-American music is there'll be a lot of different (versions). Like: "Oh! Well, you know, I know it, but I learned it this way."

KB: Oh, sure. Even the melodies are a little different.

MDM: Right.

KB: I've even seen a song change within the same group of performers, and they're not even aware that they've shifted the melody.

MDM: Right. The thing is that in something like that, where you're acknowledging the people that have affected your lives today, that's different to me than essentially taking the meaning of a text and changing it around. You know what I mean? That's different. And if you add a verse, that's something a lot of people do. That's part of the tradition. That's part of the folk music tradition. You know, adding it as it passes on through the years and generations. I have no problem with that. It's when you change, literally, the meaning and the context of what that song means. You know, "Sing low, sweet altos" *sucks!* I'm sorry! That is so disrespectful, that is so – you know, just not even realizing what it is that you're doing when you do something like that. And again, to their

credit – to the people (from that choir that) I talked to – they were great, because they just listened. They were great. And you know, again, the conductor is really responsible for what they put in their singers' mouths to sing. It's not the responsibility of the singers. It's the responsibility of the conductors to think before you do something like that.

In DeMore's opinion, White Americans have as much right to participate in the folk process on an African-American, oral-tradition song as African Americans do. The caveat is to exercise judgment about whether the proposed alterations are likely to be seen as respectful of or in violation of the song's tradition.

Ysaye Barnwell had, in fact, been sitting with Melanie DeMore during our performance of "Soon I Will Be Done," though when we discussed it in our interview, she didn't indicate any recollection of it. Still, by my description of what AMASONG had done, she reached a conclusion similar to DeMore's:

KB: Years ago, before I was as conscious as I am today about the effects my performance choices might have, I did an arrangement of "Soon I Will Be Done." And I made some textual substitutions. At the time, I was operating out of my understanding that one of the things that characterizes oral-tradition or folk music is that each people who performs it puts its stamp on it somehow. And, in the latter verses, after "I want to meet my mother," I had "I want to meet Sojourner;" in another verse, "I want to meet Harriet Tubman;" and another verse, "I want to meet Audre Lorde."

YMB: Mm-hmm.

KB: Um, truly, in part, at that point in working with my choir, I felt that I wanted to avoid "Jesus" and "My Savior," which we don't do anymore; I don't avoid those anymore. And I don't have to, 'cause most of them will sing anything that I give them at this point. But I also wanted to acknowledge the lives of those particular women who had inspired my own. And I'd love to hear your opinion of my German-American adaptation of that Negro Spiritual in that way. .

YMB: Mm-hmm. Um, that adaptation feels consistent with the spirit of the song. And so I don't think I would object to it. Sometimes it's helpful... to acknowledge in program notes that you have taken that liberty.

KB: I've always done that.

YMB: Yeah. So at least you are saying: "This is the culture out of which this comes. This is an aspect of the *folk process*." The folk process is interesting. *Folk process* is kind of like *World Music*, as a wastebasket term. And it erases cultural boundaries.

KB: Yes, it does. Definitely.

YMB: Which is why I have a problem with it. If you were talking about American music of the Wild West,



or if you're talking about Labor songs, or if you're – you know? Then you have to *say*: "This is the tradition." Ascribing the folk process gives you permission to do things that are out of – that are inappropriate for a culture.

KB: Mm-hmm. I definitely felt like I had absolute *carte blanche* with that song because it was not attributed to any single composer.

YMB: Right.

KB: Of course, I think differently now, but you're right about that.

YMB: Yes. Yes. Yes. The composer is not the only issue. And you know that now. It's the tradition. It's the tradition and the culture. So I sort of feel like if you understand what the song means, if you understand the context in which the song was written – whether it was by an individual who *copyrighted it* or whether it was by a community – and if you understand the parameters in which the people who created the music made changes in that music. (and) you work within that parameter, then I feel like: "Okay, fine." And I feel *better* about it if you acknowledge that in program notes and say, you know: "This song comes from here; in what we think is consistent with the tradition, we have done so-and-so."

What Barnwell adds to this discussion is the suggestion that any adaptations be explicated.

Dr. Barnwell shared an anecdote with me about what she saw as an absolutely unacceptable – as well as idiotic – adaptation of a gospel song that she had taught in a workshop:

YMB: I don't need for you to know who the group is, but I want to *discuss* with you *what they did*: it *drives me MAD!* This is a song which was written by Thomas Dorsey, not to be confused with Tommy Dorsey. The song says: "Amen, amen. Master, hear your servant's prayer once again. I'll be honest, I'll be fair. Yes, I'll *own* you anywhere. This *is* your servant's prayer, Amen." Now, this is not a Spiritual; it's a gospel. ...You cannot help but hear all the things that would possibly be objectionable to radical, Lesbian Feminists.

KB: Right. Absolutely.

YMB: Okay? That being the case, *why* would you want to sing the song? Just tell me *why* you would want to sing the song?

KB: If you can't cope with the text. They sang it and changed it, yeah?

YMB: But they changed it in the most bizarre way! ... Now, I think first you have to understand: "Why would a Black person in the twentieth century write those words? What could that possibly mean?" He was obviously not talking about a slavery circumstance; slavery is over. But why would he use

that analogy? And, my sense – and it is only my sense; I haven't talked to anyone else about what this song means – is that he purposely used that analogy to establish his relationship with God. Okay”?

KB: Mm-hmm. As a *legitimate*, in his mind, master-servant relationship.

YMB: Absolutely! “I am subservient to You, I will do Your will.” And, “I will own you” doesn't mean physical, buying-selling possession; it means “I will testify to the world what this relationship is all about.”

KB: Right.

YMB: *One* of the changes that they made was: “Amen. amen. *Father –*”

KB: Duh! I mean, they might as well go all the way if they're going to – (*both of us are snickering*)

YMB: That's what I'm talking about! And I don't even get it. I don't get it. It just makes me so angry.  
*IT'S JUST STUPID!! (Guffaws) I'M SORRY: IT'S JUST STUPID!!*

KB: Well, (and) the presumption that *you* would teach to them language that was offensive to Black people and therefore *they* shouldn't sing it is more than just stupid; it's – that's angering to me.

YMB: But that language is *not* offensive to Black people.

KB: Right! But they obviously assume that it is. I mean, I'm guessing that it was a White group.

YMB: It's a – very much so! ... But clearly, I would not teach something that was offensive to me, and I would not blatantly throw something in their faces if this was a crowd or an audience that I felt was so varied and diverse that I might have that difficulty. But why they would feel such a *strong, strong* draw to the song that they wanted to *record* it, and then felt like they needed to change it – I just don't get it. And then to change it in a way that just complicates the problem in such a bizarre way that I just don't get it. So, I guess what I'm saying is, it can happen in so many different ways.

KB: Appropriation?

YMB: Mm-hmm. The appropriation thing. And changing things without understanding.

Barnwell indicates that there were other word changes – seemingly one of them involving the word *own*, and ostensibly one involving *servant* – that combined with this one to produce an intolerable result. Our conversation diverged before we discussed what any of these other changes were. As I examine our discussion, I see one possibility that did not occur to either of us at the time: the women may have changed

*Master* for reasons having nothing to do with African-American slave history and everything to do with their own objections to referring to the Divine as *their* master. In other words, though I originally shared Barnwell's conclusion that the women had acted out of some presumably (and errantly) anti-racist sentiment, I think it is also possible – and no less disturbing – that *they did not have Black people in mind at all*. I remain puzzled as to why, if they were interested in subverting hegemonic Christian concepts of the Divine, and if they felt that the lyrics were negotiable, they didn't substitute something like *Creator*. It seems to me that the jump from *Master* to *Father* – in its common theological connotations – is a small one. I am not sure why Barnwell found this change more provocative than some of my changes in "Soon I Will Be Done." Certainly, in the language of the Spiritual, the jump from *Savior* to *Harriet Tubman* may be no jump at all, except in what can now be sung out loud. But I think that some people, at least, would have more trouble equating Audre Lorde with Jesus. Perhaps the answer to Barnwell's reaction is in the combined effect of all the changes this choir made, as well as in her personal connection to the song as one of its teachers. Furthermore, I find the alteration of songs with original and identifiable composers more disconcerting than the alteration of "folk" texts. Barnwell may share this feeling, even though, as we have read in the words of Bernice Johnson Reagon, there is some elision in African American traditions between songs of unattributed, collective origins and widely loved songs by known individuals (page 257).<sup>14</sup>

In fact, Barnwell moved directly into a discussion of one of her compositions that has become extremely popular with Womyn's choruses (including AMASONG) nationwide:

A group that will be nameless performed "Breaths" – which is *my* composition: I'm a *living* composer; if you want to change it, you can call me up and *ask* me. You know. They left out the rhythm parts. The rhythm parts are *fundamental* to the composition! You know, it's a lack of understanding. And I find it disrespectful. So, the whole cultural appropriation thing is so serious.

What Barnwell means by "the rhythm parts" is a texture of interlocking vocal ostinatos on syllables such as "bum" and "dee" that surround the homophony of the texted voices. As Barnwell revealed to me, the importance of these rhythm parts is symbolic as well as musical. In my observation, it is fair to regard "Breaths" as an example of music by a known composer that has begun to cross into the "folk" domain, even in the composer's lifetime. Because Barnwell consciously extends traditional African-American idioms in her writing, there are always aspects of her music that feel familiar and are easily remembered after a few hearings. Her texts speak to the heart of human experience in language that is compelling to and inclusive of people from various cultural, spiritual, and political backgrounds. "Breaths," a setting of a poem by West African writer Birago Diop, proclaims the continuity of life among the living, the ancestors, and the natural world. AMASONG was asked to sing it at several funerals.

Here is where this story gets interesting. As Barnwell aired her complaint to me about the "nameless" group, I froze in the realization that she was describing the song exactly as AMASONG had

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<sup>14</sup> This effect is not restricted to Black cultures; it can occur anywhere where composers write in styles that approximate oral traditions. I have known it to operate in many U.S. styles, as well as in Israel and in Ireland.

sung it. In fact, we had sung it that way in Cincinnati, with her in the audience. As she spoke, my mind raced: "Does she not realize it was I whom she saw in Cincinnati?" "Are there other Womyn's groups that have performed the song as we did?" "Is she testing me to see whether I have the guts to confess?" I detected no outward indication that she was expecting anything from me, and as she launched without pause into an impassioned complaint about White tourists who acquire African ceremonial masks for their walls without having any idea what they represent, I kept my mouth shut.

I went home from our interview in Washington, D.C., puzzled as to how I could have unwittingly screwed up Ysaye Barnwell's piece. I knew I had to own up to my error, but I needed to retrace my process first. I was sure that I had faithfully copied my model, which was a recording by a duo on the Womyn's music circuit. Unfortunately, the friend from whom I had borrowed the recording had long since moved out of town. But four months later, when I was at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, I found a copy of the tape sitting in a bin at Goldenrod's listening booth in the marketplace. I put on the earphones, popped in the tape, and listened to "Breaths" playing back at me exactly the way AMASONG had sung it. So, my ears had not deceived me, which was a great relief.

Furthermore, I *had* called Dr. Barnwell, back in 1993, for permission to sing the piece. And in that phone call, I had identified to her my model and described to her precisely how we would be able to sing it: in three parts, with the middle voice taking the melody, the top voice moving parallel to it, and the bottom voice alternating between the tonic and the dominant. She gave her permission and asked for no money. In July of that year she heard us sing her piece in this way. I was unaware then and for years afterward that our model had been stripped of important material.

Months after our meeting, when I sent Dr. Barnwell an approval copy of the interview transcript, I admitted to knowing that her indictment of the unacceptable "Breaths" performance described AMASONG's version exactly; had she realized that at the time? She responded by e-mail that she had, in fact, been referring consciously to my performance and no other, but that she had refrained from being direct with me in the interest of "getting through the interview." No wonder she had laughed and turned my question about cultural appropriation back on me during our interview! I explained to her that my model had been the well-known duo's commercial recording of the piece, the faithfulness of which I had not thought to doubt. Barnwell responded that she had been unaware of that recording.

As understandably angry as Barnwell was – with *me* – about the denuding of "Breaths," she had been remarkably hospitable to me and generous with her time and her thoughts. I have seen a composition of mine undergo a similar process of denuding, and it is infuriating. I have a setting of an Emily Dickinson poem for treble chorus and piano accompaniment in which the piano is essential. In fact, though the chorus is indispensable for the delivery of the text, the piano's musical role is the greater one, and if I had to choose one or the other to stand alone, I would choose the piano. However, one Womyn's chorus that used my piece apparently did not have a pianist skilled enough for the part; I discovered this years later when I heard, to my *horror*, a tape of this choir's performance of my composition *sans piano*. The feeling of being

misrepresented – and of having no control over one’s representation – is a sickening one. In this case, the violation had nothing to do with cultural appropriation: it was a mere matter of musical bad manners.

In fact, the very same was true in the duo’s denuding of “Breaths”: the singers in the duo are African American. I had emulated them faithfully. The difference between “Breaths” as Barnwell wrote it and “Breaths” as AMASONG sang it was not the result of cultural arrogance or racism. This, however, is likely to be the conclusion when White musicians are seen to fall short in performance of Black music – which, according to most of the African-American women in this study, is the likelihood any time we attempt it. White musicians who are aware of this are likely to “err on the side of caution,” as Rachel Alexander observed.

### Measuring Relative Cultural “Distances”

The following conversation with Nicole is one that I pursued to clarify certain assumptions I thought I had detected in her earlier comments. During the week when we met for this interview, she was attending UBW Institute classes in Mozambican dance taught by a member of the Mozambican National Song and Dance Company. I was sitting in from time to time with the percussion group. As a shared experience between us, the class offered a concrete reference point for my analogies:

K: So if you can dance a Mozambican dance with integrity and a degree of authenticity that allows you to justify doing it, can a White singer sing a Black American work song with authenticity in the same regard? How would you compare those two situations?

N: I wouldn’t compare those two situations.

K: Because?

N: I wouldn’t compare those two situations mainly because, um, depending on the nature of what that work song is, and, say, for example, what this Mozambican dance is all about. Like, today the dance we’re learning is a social dance, a dance you can do in social settings, you know – as opposed to learning a Mozambican war dance. It’s very different, you know: “Why am I doing this certain dance? Why am I singing this work song? For what purpose?”

K: Let me try to draw a better comparison –

N: “Because it’s a song and I like it?” *(with a tone that suggests that that is not enough reason for a White person to sing an African-American work song)*

K: I’m trying to ask about this: Does an African American have more connection to/right to native African forms of expression than a White American has to Black American forms of expression? What’s the relative distance between these groups: White Americans, Black Americans, Africans?

N: Well, first of all, African American *is* – we're *A-fri-can!* We're African people! So, we're not really going that too much far outside of our roots to do this particular cultural borrowing. And there are so many things I can identify with in Mozambican dance forms, because there are so many things, in tap dancing and other forms that I've studied, that I *see*, that I've learned in my body already! That's why I can learn them more easily, too! I went in there and I saw – I saw people around me who were not Black who were totally struggling with these particular steps and movements that a lot of us Black folk were not, because we have always been introduced to these same structures in other African-American forms. So we're not going too far, you know? So I just think that the jump of a White person going into even African *American* is a great big jump, another leap.

This was the assumption that I had detected and that I had been trying to draw out of her: that Black Americans are closer in “cultural proximity” to Black Africans than White Americans are to Black Americans. For Nicole's purposes, it is a better strategy to emphasize sharing African-ness with Black people in other countries than it is to acknowledge sharing American-ness with Americans of other colors. Her assumption had not been disrupted by the fact that one of the White students in Mozambican class was among the best movers, while there were several Black students among the “strugglers.”

Nicole's argument made me think about two stories in particular. At the previous summer's Institute, a participant from Ghana spoke about the trauma of coming to the United States to attend school at Fisk University, that most historical of Black colleges. The culture shock in general had been severe for her, but the worst of it was the outsider treatment so many African-American students gave her, throwing food at her in the cafeteria and calling her “monkey.” She had thus spent her first years in the United States avoiding social contact with African Americans in favor of Whites, and she reported that it was only at the Institute where she had finally experienced true connections with African Americans. For her, at least when she first came to this country, the distance between Black Africa and Black America was the longest one.

Also in the first year of the Institute, one of UBW's drummers, who is also a dancer and choreographer (and an African American), performed for us an original piece in movement and spoken word. He introduced it as a piece about his long-awaited cultural and spiritual pilgrimage to Nigeria. The piece opens as he mimes arriving at someplace, setting down his luggage, looking around in wonder, taking the air deeply into his lungs, and exclaiming as if overtaken with emotion: “Home! At last, I'm home!” After allowing the poignancy of the arrival to sink in for a moment, he reaches abruptly for his wallet and dashes off in frantic search of the first ATM machine, his first MacDonald's hamburger, his first flushing toilet and hot shower: only here is the audience's expectation disrupted as we realize he is in New York, not in Lagos. The rest of the piece is presented as a set of flashbacks on his traumatic encounters with Nigerian values and customs that violated so much of what he holds dear.

With these stories in mind, I was privately convinced that I would feel less displaced spending a vacation in Nicole's parents' home than UBW's drummer had felt in Nigeria or the Ghanaian student had felt at Fisk. Therefore, I was astonished to hear Nicole imply that she would draw the opposite conclusion.

I tried to call her attention to the familiarity I had as a White American with certain Black American cultural expressions, especially musical ones:

K: I spent some time this summer examining the soundscape that the American ear experiences in the United States: what we hear on popular radio, commercial jingles, Broadway, etc. – and how all those popular forms of American music came out of different fusions of Black music of the South, White Appalachian music, European forms – how the harmonic and musical structure of the Spiritual, of Blues, etcetera underlies *all* of American popular music –

N: True.

K: Which is not news to you. And I'm asking myself about the conditioning of our ears – of White people's ears in America – that we receive from that, and the fact that I can *get* a group of singers to be *able* to sing a Spiritual because of the familiarity of the structure, but to try and teach them – and I have *done* it – a piece of Baroque polyphony by one of my favorite composers, Heinrich Schütz: it's like *killin'* myself to try to get that across. So, then, to a certain extent, the music of Black America is the music of my culture. If I'm surrounded by it all the time, right? So I'm struggling with where do we delineate what's mine that I can sing, ours that we can sing – or should we not touch? Or if we're going to sing it, how do we want to do it respectfully, and all of that.

N: Yeah. I see what you're saying. That's interesting. There's been a conditioning of all Americans in terms of our cultural forms. Our cultural forms are basically very much rooted in African – definitely in African-American culture. And America has definitely taken on that culture.

K: Absolutely.

N: America claims jazz as the gift that she has given the world, but that's African-American culture.

K: Right.

N: And like you said, in the jingles that you hear on the radio – everything that's been commodified, just about, in terms of song and dance, has an African-derived root.

K: Yep.

N: So you've all been conditioned – there's some Black folks that say there's no White people living in New York, because of the way they talk, dress, and – and attitude and all that, because – there's just no White people in New York; they're all Black or of Color. So, that's the same kind of idea, the same kind of thinking in terms of our culture in America: that, if you really want to go deep with it, all of us have been conditioned, and the conditioning is the African-derived aesthetic.

K: Absolutely.

N: And, you know, folk don't recognize it, but that's what's selling, that's what's commodified, that's what's commercialized, that's what sells. And so, once again, you know, *sure* you have a much easier time teaching certain kinds of songs to your group of all-White students or performers, and getting them to do it well. But like I said earlier, those things that you can't teach, that made the music what it is – the creativity, the improvisation and all those other things, *soul* or whatever – those things that you can't teach: you won't be able to hear those in the music, unless you have folks who were the *creators* do it.

K: Mm-hmm. Although, I have the same problem doing German Baroque music. We can't do an authentic performance of that, either.

N: Okay. And if you could answer the question for that, you might be able to get the answer to your other question: “Why *can't* I get these White folks to do this Baroque music which is European-based, which comes out of their cultural experience, supposedly their *ancestral* cultural experience – why *can't* I get them to do it?” So, maybe the White folk in America now are up in this Twilight Zone: they're not really here, all their all White ancestors, in this thing called Americana...

When I worked with AMASONG on the music by Schütz, there was no one else in the room who would have said that it had come out of her cultural experience, even if her ancestors had been German Lutherans in the seventeenth century. The biggest barrier between AMASONG and the music's style was its language: no one else in the room had been raised on German, and only a few had studied it. The subtle ways that the inflections of the language had shaped Schütz's compositional choices were lost on the singers, and the result was that the performance, though lovely and very worthwhile, wasn't quite Schütz. German, of course, wasn't the only barrier. I had been a student for most of my life of the European musical traditions of which Schütz's opus is a part. In AMASONG there were a very few other women who had attained specialized proficiency in these traditions; for the most part, our singers' culture was American, and as Nicole pointed out, most things American have Blackness in them.

I question Nicole's assumption that there are proportionally fewer White Americans studying European traditions than there are Black Americans studying African traditions. I think that both races might be equally disconnected from our ancestries. In this “Twilight Zone called Americana,” the forebears of most Whites made a forced choice for de-ethnicization, and the forebears of most Blacks had no choice at all about being severed from their roots. Still, despite the feeling typical among White Americans of being unmarked by any culture, there are significant numbers who do practice forms such as Irish step-dancing, Balkan singing, and Wiccan circle-casting; might these be comparable to the numbers of Black Americans who study djembe, capoeira, and Santería? Are African Americans today who wear dashikis more connected to their ancestors across the water than European Americans who wear shirts that button down the front? Maybe the only difference is that the Black people *know* that their shirts are African, while the White people don't recognize that their shirts are European. In the United States, much



of what is European-derived goes unmarked as the product of any culture. But I wonder: If Eva, from AMASONG, traveled to Mozambique, would she find it more or less foreign than she has found England during her European travels?

The strength of Nicole's conviction that she is closer to Africans than I am to her – as well as her suggestion that any influence of Blackness on me is some kind of a "condition" but not legitimately part of my culture – led me to pursue the matter with my next African-American interviewees. If this was a common conviction, I felt I needed to be aware of it.

Ysaye Barnwell has a hunch about a special kind of continuity between Africans and African Americans, but her conclusions are different from Nicole's:

YMB: I believe that there is a collective unconscious.

KB: A collective unconscious. Okay.

YMB: That's metaphysical. That's not even political. Okay?

KB: Okay. I gotcha.

YMB: Okay. I think there is...a common African world-view or sensibility that absorbs or is embodied in a collective unconscious that we all share. Some big pool, you know?

KB: So, given that you have that belief or hunch... are you closer in cultural proximity to a rural woman in Mozambique than I am to you?

YMB: Wow! *That's* a really interesting question! How did you come up with that question? ... (*long pause*) I don't know how to answer that question. I think it would take me a while to think about it. When I talk about a collective unconscious, I'm talking about something that you can only get at if you keep asking questions and going back deeper and deeper and deeper and deeper, to stuff that we no longer know the answer to. And yet, we still do them. We still do these things without knowing the reasons anymore: we still do them as if we would die if we didn't do them. Part of it is exemplified in the fact that there probably is very little music created by Africans anywhere in the world that doesn't serve a functional purpose. We don't *look* at music as *art*. That is fundamentally different. And I can't tell you why. Okay? I can't tell you why. Except I feel like, in our fiber, music has to do something. And that we don't sit and appreciate it as fine art; we have to be a part of it. I don't know why that is. But I guarantee you that you will find it wherever African people are in the world. But that does *not* help me to understand the mortar and the pestle in Mozambique. It does not help me to understand that. It does not help me to understand somebody who walks five miles to get their water and comes back and makes a pallet on the floor; it don't help me to do that. It doesn't help me to understand you. It surely doesn't help you to understand me. Because your world-view may be impacted by a whole *nother* set of collective unconscious things. ...But having said that, we

exist in a cultural milieu and are being impacted by very similar stimuli; how we interpret them is out of this collective unconscious. But we are experiencing some very similar things.

KB: You and I?

YMB: You and I. We're experiencing similar things – more similar than I am experiencing with the women in Mozambique. I don't know what that's worth, but it makes the question a difficult one.

KB: It's a simple question to some people.

YMB: Is it?

KB: It is.

YMB: Hm. I don't think it's simple. But I have a problem like that. I don't think things are simple. I think things are very layered. But that's how I think. ...And that comes out in my music, the layers!  
(giggling)

Jawole Zollar also felt that the question was a complicated one.

KB: I want to ask you a question: Are you culturally closer to village Zulu people than I am to you?

JZ: I don't think you can answer it that way.

KB: But people do.

JZ: I don't think you can answer it that way, because I think that's a too-polarized way of thinking, and we live in a much more complex, circular – thing. Am I going to identify on a gut level with the Apartheid struggle that the Zulu people have gone through in their overcoming that struggle? Yeah! On a gut level. Is their music, in terms of the *a cappella* – particularly the deep harmonies: does it remind me of some of the older styles of Black singing, which Sweet Honey is a current keeper of, but, I mean, it certainly has been in the Black community for a long time – and then, so, does it evoke something because I hear that style? Is that style also closer to what doo-wop is, because doo-wop, when it is just *a cappella*, uses the heavy bass voices the way South African singing does...

KB: Do you know where a lot of that harmonic structure comes from? I think you do.

JZ: Not a clue.

KB: Dutch hymnody. The hymns that the Dutch Protestants –

JZ: No! How interesting! So there's probably some relationship of that to the U.S. also, too!

KB: Well, the question, now, of the music that surrounds us here in the United States – which is so much dependent on African-American musics – and sort of the circuitous routes back and forth between Africa and the United States, it's hard to find a beginning and an end point. If you're looking for the Black origin of this music, or the White origin, or the African, or the American, or the African American, you – you start going in circles. Because –

JZ: Yes! Because one of them influences the other. And that's why I think you can't answer that question in that direct a way, because on an emotional level, in terms of Apartheid, because African people in South and southern Africa and in the U.S. heavily identify with one another. And southern Africa really took up jazz. Probably more than any other part of the continent. Because it was these urban towns. So, there's a lot of similarities between South African culture and American culture because there's an urban culture that exists there. So on an emotional level, that connection's going to be there. Now, culturally, if we went to a restaurant there, what would we order? You and I would probably be closer to ordering the same things or liking our food made in the same way. Or maybe not. I'm just thinking about when we were in Johannesburg and we had monkey gland soup. And we were like: "No, I don't *think* so!" You know, so, it's hard to know. If I look at the flamboyance of style in southern Africa and those hats... and the colors, then that would be a shared aspect of culture: that love of color, between African culture and African-American culture. And thinking about when I went to Nigeria: I mean, it's so clear to me that in the inner city, the styles of flamboyance with that color is because of that connection with Africa. And the more middle-class you get, then the more you don't identify with that. Like in the '70s, with that whole *Super Fly* – and the men were wearing lime green, and citron – and in Nigeria you would see men in pink lace outfits, yellow, green – there was no sense of color in relationship to feminine or masculine.

KB: Yep. I saw that in Consuelo's video of the Afro-Cuban dancers. You know, they had on pink with polka-dots, and ruffles...

JZ: Right, right. And so you see that in the inner city. So again, on that level, I think that, yeah: there's definitely a closer connection. Because if your father went out in a pink suit – (*laughs*)

KB: They'd send him home from the office.

Melanie DeMore has a concept similar to Ysaye Barnwell's collective consciousness:

KB: Here's a sort of a rhetorical question that I'm asking out of opinions and responses that I've heard: Are you culturally closer to a Zulu villager than I am to you?

MDM: Culturally closer? Probably not. I've never been to a Zulu village before. ...But I have – but – but, um, culturally, I'm a *step* closer than you; my experience may not be, but culturally I'm a step closer than you are.

KB: To Zulu culture.

MDM: Yeah.

KB: Right.

MDM: But, you know – and that's like, um, cellular memory.

KB: Mr. Nash<sup>15</sup> was talking to me about that yesterday.

MDM: It's like there's a component there that I would understand non-intellectually – that you might not. You'd have to study it a little bit more, but I'd just go: "Oh, yeah!" Even if I didn't know what to call it, I would recognize it. And that's that.

As expressed in these conversations, "cellular memory" and related ideas rely on conceptualizing Africa as a unitary, undifferentiated cultural whole. Considering what we know about the areas from which most slaves in the United States were taken, it is unlikely that DeMore's African ancestors were Zulu.

The most interesting information I received from these conversations was that the answer to my question was never simple in the way that I expected it to be. It was either simply "Yes, African Americans are culturally closer to Africans than European Americans are to African Americans," or the answer was complicated: I was the only person who thought that the answer was simply: "No, African Americans are not culturally closer to Africans than European Americans and African Americans are to one another." I also observed, here and in subsequent conversations that I do not have on record, that African Americans often heard the question instead as – or redirected it to – the issue of whether they were closer to Africans than I am to Africans. In these exchanges, I received an undeniable lesson about some assumptions I have that Black Americans may not share. Some may be less quick than I am to recognize the extent of the shared cultural terrain between us – or may at least view it less cheerfully than I do, being more acutely aware of how unequal the terms and results of this "sharing" have been. For some, the recognition may be easier to give when it is foregrounded against an underlying sense of cultural connection to Africa. This seems to be a clear example of the importance in identity formation of an emphasis on shared origins in a historic past. The problem of constructing a positive group identity for Black Americans without referring back to Africa is this: the history of the original cultural distinctness of Blacks and Whites on this continent is grounded in the history of slavery.

Among those artists whom I questioned "off the record," there was one who concluded without qualification that she and I share much more cultural terrain than she would share with any African.<sup>16</sup> It seems obvious that the Fisk students who tormented our Ghanaian friend would have reached the same

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<sup>15</sup> Joe Nash, eminent African-American dance historian.

<sup>16</sup> Surely it is not wholly irrelevant that the person who thought this was my lover.

conclusion (by a less respectful route). I do not mistake the aspects of agreement among DeMore, Barnwell, and Zollar for a view that represents all of African America. However, it is unsurprising that when I did encounter these views, it was among groups of Black cultural workers. It is helpful for me to be familiar with this perspective and to appreciate its importance any time I am working in Black styles or with African-American people.

#### On the White Singers' "Grounding" in "Their Own" Cultures

As I have shown already, several of the professional artists look unfavorably on White Americans who, disconnected from or uninterested in European cultural expression, turn to the cultural products of People of Color to fill their cultural voids. I open this section with two more quotes from Urban Bush Women that reveal this concern, continuing with White choristers' answers to the question of what "their own" music is.

The following is the continuation of Consuelo's rationale for holding back certain Afro-Cuban cultural information from some audiences:

C: I feel like: "Why don't you learn a little bit more about your own culture?" Not that I don't want people to learn about each other's cultures. But I find it hard to believe that you can really be grounded in something that is not a part of you. You can appreciate it. And you should know about other people's culture. And, see, if you have something that's a foundation for you, then you're going to understand it better because you're going to have something to relate it to. But if you have nothing to relate it to, I don't see how you can be getting that much from it. I mean, you can love it; I understand that. And I appreciate that. *(sighs)* But, yes – I do: I sometimes have a problem with that. Because, it's like: "You have a foundation. You have a root. Don't you believe that? What do you think: you were just thrown on here?" Yes, a lot of people do feel that way. And it's not just White Americans. There are other people who are like that, too. And I think (that) violating (the tradition) in that sense would be not recognizing that you're learning it and that you're good at it but that it's not really a part of you, of where you come from. It's a part of you because you learned it, and it's a part of you because you appreciate it. But it's not who you are.

KB: Mm-hmm.

CG: And, that's hard. It's hard for me to really admit, a lot. Because I don't want to sound like –

KB: To me, or in general?

CG: – I'm discriminating –

KB: Hard to admit it to me, or just hard to acknowledge feeling that way?

CG: Not to you, and not in general, just depending on the situation. I don't – I – it's not that I'm discriminating. It's just that I want people to know more about themselves. And if (you're) so lost in somebody else's culture, then what do you – what kind of tradition are you creating for yourself?

Jawole Zollar is in total agreement with Consuelo's position:

JZ: One of the things...I love about the Undoing Racism workshop is (that it) really challenges White people to deal with their culture. You know, to *deal* with the culture. And not escape it. When you give up your culture, see, I think that's when the appropriation happens. Because I think that when you're grounded in a cultural idea, you will use other cultural information to enhance your own information.

KB: And you have a reference point for understanding it.

JZ: I think that's what Consuelo is saying.

What is it that Consuelo and Zollar are really saying? The trope about "giving up" one's culture requires some examination. Urban Bush Women's Iris, for example, grew up with eleven siblings in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She reports that her siblings all regard her as somewhat of an oddball. The cultural, artistic, and political influence on her of many years of performance and worldwide travel with Urban Bush Women has encouraged her to adopt different hair and clothing styles, dietary habits, musical listening tastes, spiritual practices, and world-views from those commonly shared by the rest of her family. Many African Americans would conclude that by locking her hair, wearing mudcloth, doing Guinean dances, making offerings to multiple spirits, and eating plantain stew, Iris is *claiming* "her culture." From her siblings' point of view, however, she has *given up* or stepped outside of the decidedly Midwestern, middle-class, African-American, Heterosexual, mass-media-influenced and Christian culture that they all continue to experience as normative and that is legitimately *theirs*. Judgments about whether Iris has abandoned or delved into culture – and which cultures are hers and which ones aren't – depend on the identity strategies of the judges. Meanwhile, Iris dispels this insoluble argument by stating calmly that her culture is whatever she decides feels right to her.<sup>17</sup> In this country's vast and diverse population, and with our ability to access information and ideas from so many parts of the globe, the very possibility – and popularity – of *choosing* from an array of cultural practices is in itself one of the distinguishing features of contemporary, urban, United States *culture*.

But Consuelo and Zollar are not talking about Black Americans. Their argument would seem to refer to White Americans who claim no European-derived practices or influences from outside of mainstream popular culture. In fact, such persons have usually been born to parents of whom the same was is/was true: in this case, it is not the people in the younger generation who have *given up* anything. Like

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<sup>17</sup> This paragraph is informed by numerous personal communications with Iris.

Iris's siblings, their culture is, legitimately, the one with which and in which they have been raised. The *giving up* likely happened in former generations – the immigrants and their children – whom they never knew. The question, then, is really: When White people decide to *adopt* cultural practices from other places or times, which ones do we choose? Are our choices more European-derived than African-derived, or is it the other way around? Does it matter? Consuelo and Zollar suggest that it does. And although I have subjected their argument to some criticism, I hear in it the perception of something profoundly relevant.

Toni Morrison's essay, "Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination," belongs to a particular body of literature aimed at answering the question – in terms of White and Black – of how one group of human beings can allow itself to treat another so cruelly. The suggestion is that, in general, oppressors project anxieties about themselves onto a group of "others;" in oppressing these others, the oppressors give themselves the illusion of controlling or purging their anxieties. As Morrison states:

In (the) construction of blackness and enslavement could be found.... with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, *the projection of the not-me (emphasis mine)*. The result was a playground for the imagination. What rose up out of the collective needs to allay internal fears...was...a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire.... This black population was available for meditations on terror – the terror of European outcasts, their dread of failure, powerlessness, Nature without limits, natal loneliness, internal aggression, evil, sin, greed. (Morrison 1997, 82, 81)

A concrete illustration of the dangerous potency of this kind of projection will be helpful to those who are unfamiliar with the theory. One of the most pervasive Europeanisms in the United States has been the Christian preoccupation with the sinfulness of sexuality.<sup>18</sup> White people unable to square their sexual impulses against this preoccupation have developed a discourse of the hyper-sexuality of Black people. By this maneuver, they have ostensibly removed the source of their anxiety from themselves, locating it in Others. Assigning blame to and then abusing the scapegoats creates the illusion of a justifiable purging of the evil influence. The power of this discourse is proved by the many forms in which it has been and continues to be manifest. For example, the most common justification Whites offered for lynching Black men was the false charge that the Black men had perpetrated or intended to perpetrate sexual violence against White women. The public lynching spectacle, while reinforcing White supremacy, offered Whites a mass purging of sex hysteria in place of a consideration of their own sexual feelings, mores, and behaviors – and conveniently enabled the real rapists of White women to go unchallenged.

In essence, I hear Consuelo and Zollar saying that when White people don't understand ourselves as White people – which understanding necessarily involves grappling deeply with race and racism – then our approach to People of Color and their cultural expressions will be dangerous to People of Color. I

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<sup>18</sup> This particular problem cannot, of course, be fully examined outside the politics of gender. For a discussion of the ways that men have projected their anxieties about sexual evil onto women – and an argument that this lies at the heart of male supremacy – see *Beyond Power* by Marilyn French (1985).

understand this concern through my own experiences with an analogous dynamic: the Heterosexuals who are the most likely to misunderstand, disrespect, or abuse me are the ones who are the most conflicted about their experiences of themselves as sexual men and women. In other words: if you are in denial about yourself, then I have little confidence that you can see me with understanding; and if you have the power to place oppressive limits on me, the implications of your distorted vision are serious for me. To return to the context of White interest in African-derived cultural forms: if White students are still in the thrall of the sex-as-sin and Black-as-sexual discourses, how comfortable should Consuelo feel sharing with them a dance that is characterized by accentuated pelvic movements? How can she prevent their misappropriation of the information when they are seeing it through the lenses of their own (and, in fact, *very* “culturally-grounded”) confusion? More generally, when White people seem to recognize only non-White musics, dances, spiritual practices, and symbology as interesting, exotic, or “cool,” the effect is to further the “othering” of People of Color, while leaving Whiteness unexamined, unscrutinized, unmarked.

Let us leave the realm of deep psychology and return to musical matters. I took Consuelo and Zollar’s challenge into my subsequent interviews with White women, asking them what they would identify as the music of “their culture.” Their answers give some insight into the degree to which they experience themselves as cultured beings and the influences that they claim as theirs.

Anna Crusic’s director Jane Hulting was raised on White music of one kind:

K: Any musical heritage shared in your family or your village? I mean, what would you consider to be the music of your background?

J: Classical. ...On my father’s side...everybody had a piano. And all the kids were expected to take piano lessons. And whenever we got together in the afternoons, everybody had to either sing or they had to play a song: it was a performance kind of thing: “Now it’s so-and-so’s turn.”

K: “Hausmusik”

J: Yeah. That kind of thing. ...I still cringe at the thought. And in the town, there was really no German music or Swedish music. There was no folk music. All the music was classical music. All of it.

The absence of folk music among Hulting’s neighborhood population of Nordic descendants is evidence of the de-ethnicization that had occurred several generations earlier. That their tastes ran to classical music may be evidence of the kind of privileged-class aspirations that typically motivated the abandoning of ethnic “folk” practices.

Sistrum’s Ginger, on the other hand, hears in certain American folk genres the sound of her upbringing:

K: Well, we’ve talked about music of other people’s cultures. What if someone said to you: “Why don’t you sing the music of your *own* culture?” What would that be, Ginger?



G: Well, I think we do. One example I can think of is "Music in my Mother's House."

K: Where does that come from?

G: I don't know exactly where it comes from, but I think of it as being typical of Midwestern – the images that it stirs up for me are a big front porch on a farmhouse, people sitting around playing music, farm life – and, like, we used to have a farm life. We don't anymore.

K: So, somebody in your family used to have a farm?

G: Yeah, my mom was involved in a farm when she was a kid. And we spent some time with some friends of hers that she met in vet school, and they would *do* that. All of them played different instruments, and they would have these music nights, and they didn't have TV, they didn't have stereos or any of this other crap. They would just make their own music. It was all, like, folk stuff.

K: So that would be music of your culture.

G: Yeah, I guess it would. That's what I would identify with, I think. And I do like folk music.

K: Can you name some favorites?

G: Well, I was thinking of "The Water is Wide."

Rachel Alexander recognizes the pluralistic connotations of the word *culture* in the United States. She also gives a clear example of the rupture many White, Feminist Lesbians experience between the cultures of our origin and the cultures we have adopted:

KB: Um, what would you say if someone said to you: "Why are you singing everybody else's music? Sing your own music!" What would that be?

RA: What would my own music be? Well, I think what I would say is, partly, that all this other music informs my music – I mean, has contributed to the music that is my music, and that there aren't huge lines between somebody else's music and my music. But, are you asking my, like – what is – I mean...?

KB: What's the music of your culture?

RA: *My culture!* (*chuckling*) Well, the culture – the music of my culture is music that comes from all over the place. I mean, there's music that you can say is – (*pause*) Music of my culture? Oh, boy. Well, my Prairie song is my music because I wrote it! But it's got jazz harmonies in it! I mean, you know –

there's nothing that is of my culture that is not also of some other contributing culture. That's who I am musically – well, and in every other way! But who I am musically is a product of the music that I have heard and the music that writers of mainstream American music got their inspiration from. So, it all comes from a lot of different sources.

KB: Do you have any kind of an oral song tradition in your family?

RA: Yeah. My dad used to sing a lot of sea chanties and a lot of folk music from the British Isles.

KB: Does that feel like it's part of your culture?

RA: Oh, definitely!

KB: Have you done any of that with Sistrum?

RA: Uh, no. I haven't. Is that true? Is that true that I haven't? I mean, most of it isn't particularly Feminist! *(laughing)*

AMASONG's Lynnette also speaks to the diversity of influences on United States culture. Our conversation leads to the emotional risks involved in recognizing that Blackness and Whiteness cannot ultimately be separated in the discussion:

K: Let's say someone said to you: "What are you doing singing everyone else's music? Sing your own music; sing the music of your culture!" What would that be?

L: Oh! Well, welcome to America! What *is* the music of our culture, first of all? White Americans don't *have* a culture that's not derivative. We just don't have one. We are in a place where we don't belong; well, we're in a place where we don't come from. So it's not appropriate for us to call the cultures that existed here our culture. The Native Americans: that's not my culture. But we also didn't stay in ethnic groups, so we can't pretend to have a pure ethnic culture in most parts of this country. I don't even know what that *means*, "sing music from your culture."

K: I've been challenged in that way, and so...

L: Whoo! I guess that means that you could only sing things composed in the last two hundred years in America?

K: You mean, like Negro Spirituals?

L: Well, yeah *right!* *(laughing)* But I think they mean White folks!

K: Right.

L: Okay, so by White folks. But, does that mean only by woman folks? You know, does that mean only by red-haired, pale-skinned folks? I mean, how narrowly do you want to go into "your people" before... basically – you just hum a little? (*we laugh*) "Okay: everyone just spontaneously compose! Thank you very much for coming! Goodbye!"

K: Well, no one who says that to me is very clear on it either. But it's been instructive to know that that sentiment is out there, no matter how ill-defined it might be – and to try to get underneath the feelings that would make someone say that.

L: Right. And how you are not *their* people – what (it is that) they feel separates them from you, that makes them unwilling for you to do the music of their people. I suppose more than wanting you to do the music of your people, they're telling you not to do the music of their people.

K: Sometimes. And for me to say that I feel that slavery is a part of our common history, and that our shared legacy of that is with us every day all over this country: that cuts mustard with some people; it doesn't cut any mustard with some other people.

L: Yeah. Well, we live on the White side of the fence. We live on the privileged side of the fence. And I can't even pretend to begin to empathize, you know...

As I showed in Chapter Four, AMASONG's Diana resists being identified with any ethnic, racial, or national group (something that, as I have discussed, is far more possible for White Americans than for Americans of Color). Her experience of music is consistent with this strategy:

K: Well, my last question to you, Diana, is, if someone were to say to you, "Why do you have to sing everybody else's music? Why don't you sing your own music?" what would that music be?

D: Oh, my music is all over the place at this point. It just is all over the place. One thing I've really enjoyed *is* music from all over the world. And it's in me. I mean, you cannot separate it from who I am today. You just cannot. I mean, Glenn Gould's *Goldberg Variations*: I've listened to it probably over a thousand times. And it still moves me to tears. It still moves me to tears today. You can't take that away from who I am.

K: Well, I've met several people who would say that that is our music because Glenn Gould is White and Bach is White and we are White. But you've cited it as an example of something that wouldn't have been yours except that you've taken it in. Those are two different dialogues. You didn't hear that growing up in your home?

D: No, not that. Not that piece at all. It is true that my mother was into classical music and took me to

concerts, so that predisposed me. And we all had to play instruments growing up, so that's true. But there's a lot of music that's deep within me from different cultures that – I mean, I could start *trying* to fill pages with what's mine...

K: "*The music of your culture.*" What does that mean?

D: Well, of my life experience. Of my "culture" I don't know. Because I don't identify with one culture.

K: Right! You identified with nonmonogamous Bisexual women who are fun-loving and free-form. There's no musical category for that, particularly, except maybe what we hear at festivals of other (*laughing*) women like that!

D: I know.

Heidi is the interviewee whose ancestry is the most similar to mine, though she is a generation further away from Germany than I am, and her family has not lived and traveled as internationally as mine has:

K: Well, if someone said to you: "Why are you singing everyone else's music? Sing your *own* authentic music!" What would that music be?

H: (*long pause*) Um – well, see, I can stake claim to German music...

K: What, for example?

H: Oh, gosh! I don't – ! For example?

K: Yeah. What German music do you sing/did your family sing/*can* you sing?

H: Oh, I don't know. A lot of the Christmas songs. You know, they were a lot in German, and –

K: Which ones did you sing?

H: Oh, "Stille Nacht" and "O Tannenbaum." (*chuckles*) "Waltzing Mathilda!" I had an aunt that always used to sing that song.

K: Did you sing: "Alle Jahre wieder kommt das Cristus Kind"?

H: No. My grandparents spoke German; they were from Germany.

K: Is that song familiar to you?

H: No. I don't know about that one.

K: How about "Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen?" I'm just curious. Because those are some of the ones my grandparents sing.

H: Well, we went to church for the German service. So I'm sure –

K: They did all the hymns in German?

H: Yeah.

K: Okay, uh: Christmas songs and Lutheran hymns. Anything else?

H: Well, yeah, the polkas! (*giggling*)

K: Listen to those a lot, do you?

H: I was raised on polkas! I really was. And Lawrence Welk.

K: God!

H: I'm sorry! (*laughing*) And all the rock-and-roll..

K: You know: not too adaptable to a choir, rock-and-roll.

H: Well, right!

K: And how long can you go with "Stille Nacht?"

H: Right.

K: Well, if you and I were to go by someone else's rules of Sing Your Own Ethnic Music, you and I would have some of the same music to look back to. And, you know, I'm not going to do a polka with the choir. Um, I'll do Bach! And Schütz.

H: Right. Well, then you have to go to the Europeans...

K: That's really great choral music. Um, what German customs or practices or behaviors do you maintain in your regular life?

H: Um – well, I was raised a Lutheran, and that was very German –

K: *That's* over with!

H: Yeah! Some of it's still there – hopefully the good parts. Um, I don't know. I think Germans have a strong work ethic.

K: Yeah. Amen!

H: And I'm judgmental, pretty judgmental...

K: Oh, this is great for me to hear!

H: But, um, I don't know what other things I have retained. You know, a love of life. I like to laugh, like to sing.

K: Did you grandmother bake?

H: Yes.

K: Do you bake?

H: Not lately. She made a *great kuchen*.

## Conclusion

### Chapter Summary

I began this chapter by demonstrating that any White person's performance of music identified as Black takes place within a long history of what is popularly regarded as White "theft" of Black music. As Jon Cruz writes:

The modern history of white musicians and entrepreneurs drawing heavily upon black musical culture and obtaining great economic rewards at the expense of black musicians and the communities that generate such cultural forms is an important dimension of the relationship that black music has had with the larger culture of popular music. (1999, 22)

In the United States, this history began with slave-owners' utilitarian and commercial appropriation of Black people's music making. Frederick Douglass saw a better use for Black music; he invited a national, White audience to regard the plantation Spiritual as the *authentic* voice of the slave's experience of and outcry against slavery. Inspired by Douglass's invitation, Northern Whites engaged in a spate of Spiritual collection and publication and, instead of dedicating themselves to the Reconstruction effort, inaugurated what Cruz identifies as the beginnings of professional ethnographic scholarship in the United States. The new scientists developed the concept of cultural authenticity, regarding it as a feature of an historic,

collectible past; this orientation to the concept effectively neutralized any revolutionary power originally invested in the creation of cultural goods later deemed by their scholarly collectors to be “authentic.” From the misappropriation of the Spiritual through the development of popular music in the United States and to the rise of the global music industry, there is ample evidence that could be used to support any anti-racist’s contention that little good ever comes of it when White people put their hands on Black music. Even though proponents of this opinion may believe in oversimplified or inaccurate versions of this history, the opinion is too widespread and deeply held to be dismissed. Furthermore, it is, on balance, true that when White musicians use the products of Black creativity, it is seldom with the goal or effect of eroding White supremacy and enhancing Black self-determination.

There are musicians for whom any political effects of their music-making are irrelevant, if not wholly out of mind. These musicians are in the camp of *art for art’s sake*, and I spent some time discussing the nineteenth-century European concept of *absolute music* as the epitome of this doctrine. The extreme opposite of the doctrine is seen in societies whose use of music accompanies other daily social practices, is regarded as integral to these practices, and is performed by every participant in the practices. Early ethnographers encountering this kind of music in Africa – and being unable to find it beautiful if even intelligible – pronounced it *functional*, something that ostensibly set it apart from European music. I showed that the *functionality of Black music* has survived as a discourse, though it is now being used by American Afrocentrists to protect Black music from use in contexts that violate the music’s original ethos. In fact, all music is functional, but I proposed a difference between the conductor of a community chorus’s performance of European part-songs and a songleader at a rally against Apartheid: the latter is *aware* that Freedom songs have been used and can still be used to fulfill functions in which that person is politically interested.

It is not only the proponents of art for art’s sake who use Black music outside of its intended function. For example, when Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir went into the recording studio to sing “Tampin’ Ties,” the song helped them to lay audio tracks, not railroad tracks. The argument about cultural appropriation in the use of Black music, then, is really not about whether the music is being used for the purposes that drove its creation; it is about where to draw the line on who can use it, how far from its original intent it can be taken, and who may rightfully benefit by it in which ways before it is judged to have been violated or stolen. The oral nature of much of Black music’s creation and transmission leaves it vulnerable in particular ways to violation and theft. I presented the concerns of Melanie DeMore, Ysaye Barnwell, and Bernice Johnson Reagon about the tendency of the *folk process* and the copyright system to obscure songs’ original meanings and the identities of their creators. I add my own observation that much about these songs predisposes them to being viewed casually and treated as un-valuable or un-precious in our society. As I argued in Chapter Three, they are often characterized by the “lesser” of two attributes in a particular set of dualities: tradition rather than innovation, anonymity rather than attribution, creation by groups in cooperation rather than by individuals in competition, classification as folklore rather than art, creation by the unpaid rather than the professional, a *cappella* performance rather than use of ensemble

accompaniment, Blackness rather than Whiteness, and – when performed by the groups in this study – femaleness rather than maleness.

No African American I interviewed felt that “ownership” of traditional Black materials restricted them absolutely to use or enjoyment only by Black people. However, all but one<sup>19</sup> protested the history of White use of Black music to the detriment of the music or at the expense of its creators. Individuals varied in the degree of their protectiveness of Black music. Some performers identified conditions under which they would hold back information or material from audiences, particularly White ones. Some expressed a combination of pride and resentment over other groups’ use of Black music. Even those who felt the most generous about traditional Black music emphasized the need for its meanings to be better understood by its White performers. The unanimous concern among the professional, African-American performers was the use of traditional Black music unaccompanied by information about its origins and meanings. Even the women who reported holding back on information shared this concern, which brought their positions into internal contradiction. A few of the respondents also raised the issue of monetary compensation, but overall, money is clearly less precious to this group than history.

The White women in the amateur ensembles were similarly unanimous in the opinion that the origins and histories of traditional materials have to be passed on if cultural appropriation is to be avoided. In fact, most of them felt that learning the stories that accompany the music is part of what makes singing the music so intellectually or politically valuable. No one in the sample thought that traditional music from outside their cultures shouldn’t be sung; quite to the contrary, some felt that by singing traditional songs they were helping to keep certain cultures “alive.” Only one White singer articulated a definition of cultural appropriation that involved analysis of economic and political disparity between the creating and the performing cultures. Respondents remembered experiences with individual pieces when they had felt uncomfortable about their performances: their concerns were about stylistic or technical shortfalls in Yiddish or Bulgarian music or about poor imitations that might be heard as disrespectful in African-American music. I argued that this last concern owes its acuteness to minstrelsy’s legacy. Several respondents referred to high-profile conversations about cultural appropriation at Womyn’s gatherings – specifically the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival and the 1993 Sister Singers Festival in Cincinnati.

The concept of *authenticity* is entwined in many people’s minds with questions of musical ownership and appropriation. There were Black and White respondents whose definitions of authenticity reflected its use in America’s proto-ethnomusicology as critiqued by Jon Cruz: they tended to view traditional song practices as fixed cultural goods, which view had implications for who they thought could use certain songs and in what manner. These individuals’ most common concern was for the faithful emulation of a tradition’s hallmarks of technique, form, and style. But there were also Black and White respondents who understood *authenticity* to mean something about a performer’s feelingful and individualized encounter with a song. Women holding these views tended to be forgiving – if not welcoming – of stylistic evolutions that result from singers’ spontaneous or conscious personalizations of

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<sup>19</sup> Chris, from Sistrum



traditional materials. In short, for them, imitation doesn't count. Holding these contrasting ideals in a dialectical tension, some artists regarded technique and intent/inspiration as complementary ensurers of performance authenticity: knowing what a tradition represents and possessing the skills to communicate the knowledge in performance results in a product that is recognizable within the tradition's continuity and provides the performer with a point of emotional entry; emotional contact with the expression necessarily results in a new interpretation of the piece or tradition, something that is in some cases *demand*ed as a sign of authentic performance.

Often implicit in my conversations with interviewees about appropriation and authenticity was the question of whether White people could or should sing Black music. When I made the question explicit, some African American respondents betrayed a clear preference for seeing Black music go undisturbed by White performers, though they were hesitant to state this is an absolute rule. One respondent couched this preference in the argument that the music was too hard for White people anyway to be worth our effort. Most African Americans agreed that White people can't sing Black music well, whether for a lack of lineage or a lack of the kind of life experience that would open us to the music's expression. There were also White musicians in the sample who reported sometimes feeling inadequate to perform certain Black music. A member of Anna Crusis reported that there have been discussions within the choir about whether they *should* sing songs of Black resistance to White-supremacist governments. Ysaye Barnwell felt that the ability of a White person to work convincingly in Black musical forms as an arranger did not necessarily mean that she or he shouldn't pass the work on to a Black person. Bernice Johnson Reagon spoke to the healing power of creative expression in virtually any medium. She warned of the need for experts to make cross-cultural musical experiences available in ways that take care of the "visitors" as well as the goods and the people being visited. She also insisted that such experiences are not to be confused with transmissions of culture.

One African American in the sample believed that she had more of a cultural connection with people in southeastern Africa (where she had never visited) than I had with her. She supported her argument by emphasizing that African Americans "are *Af-ri-can*," rather than recognizing that both White Americans and Black Americans are *American*. Other African-American respondents found the matter less simple, acknowledging the shared cultural terrain between Black and White Americans but still insisting on the potency of ancestral, subconscious, or "cellular" connections to Africa. One respondent pointed to the complicating cycle of mutual influence that urban African and urban American cultural developments exert on one another.

Several members of Urban Bush Women, as students of songs and dances from the continent of their African ancestors, expressed impatience with what they see as White people's lack of connection to or "grounding in" the cultures of our European ancestors. They felt that this lack predisposed White people to the parasitic adoption of the cultural practices of People of Color. This argument assumes that for White people, "our" culture is not what surrounds us here in the contemporary, hybridized United States (which

does include things like Rap music and Salsa dancing<sup>20</sup>); rather, “our culture” *might* be found in remote, White pockets of the United States that have gone largely unhybridized, and it is *certain* to be found across the Atlantic and north of the Mediterranean. This argument is the complement of Afrocentrism, the assumption that any culture from the continent that lies directly across the Atlantic and south of the Mediterranean is the proper culture of any Black American.

There are Black Americans and White Americans who agree with this exclusively race-based and past-oriented view of *culture*: there are Black Americans and White Americans who argue against it. Where the implications of the discussion become challenging is in the case of White Americans whose only concept of something “cultural” is something Colored. I detect a fairly widespread sense among People of Color that there are many White Americans with this concept, and as I argued in this chapter, the concept is more threatening than dignifying. It tends to essentialize People of Color as more “spiritual,” “expressive,” “moral,” “natural,” or “authentic” than White people. And, as in Jon Cruz’s argument about White attention to the Spiritual, White Americans’ “cultural turn” toward the ideas and expressions of communities of Color is seldom accompanied by the kind of political analysis and action that would challenge White supremacy; in fact, this “turn” is often seen to operate on the troubled White conscience as a placating substitute for anti-racist action (Cruz 1999, 201-202). What I hear, then, in the artists’ challenge for White people to become more “grounded in (our) own culture” before immersing ourselves in the cultural practices of communities of Color is this: “Until you have grappled with the attitudes and behaviors of your ancestors that enabled them to establish and maintain White supremacy, and until you have grappled with what that means for your own attitudes, behaviors, and privileges today, don’t come to us looking for meaning and expression.”

I asked several White respondents to identify the music of “their” culture and to describe their involvement with it. One respondent was raised exclusively on European art music, and she still practices it today, among many other traditions. Another respondent identified with and still enjoys singing the folk music of early WASP communities in the United States. A woman who was raised on sea chanties finds them unfit for performance in Feminist contexts; she claims the influences of classical, jazz, and popular music as among her own. Two respondents insisted that musical culture in the contemporary United States is even more derivative and hybrid than their own ethnic lineages. One second-generation German-American identified several styles from her upbringing, including Lutheran hymns, polkas, and Lawrence Welk; but this is not the music she listens to now, and her other connections to German-ness were tenuous.

### Personal Conclusions

In Chapter One, I devoted a section to my own cultural background. In many ways, the culture inside my home felt like a different one from the culture around me, musically and otherwise. I remember the day in sixth grade when, crumbling under the intolerable weight of my social-outcast status, I made the

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<sup>20</sup> which I studied with two expert teachers: a very pale and blonde man from the United States and his partner, a woman from Turkey.

decision to find a popular-music station on the radio and listen to it religiously. Not knowing any of the current hits or acts had cut me completely out of the loop. I began waking up early on Sunday mornings and grabbing pencil and paper to take careful notes throughout the four hours of *American Top Forty*. I had taken a paper route so as to buy myself some drums, but I found myself delaying that purchase to buy my own radio and cassette recorder. Until that time, the music of my background had been European art music, jazz, German folk songs, old Girl Scout songs that my mother sang to me, Flamenco, Venezuelan harp music, Haitian and Dominican dance music, Bossa Nova, Joan Baez, classic Simon and Garfunkel, and the soundtracks to *West Side Story* and *The Sound of Music*. Ultimately, contemporary popular music joined the list under the immense pressure of the culture all around me. I could sing or play along with all of these musics: all of them were mine.

I began singing concert Spirituals in the chorus at my middle school. I was an adult before I discovered the early Baroque music of Heinrich Schütz. Both of these musics feel like “home” to me, but I would be less hesitant to claim Schütz than Spirituals as the music of “my culture.” I am no more a Christian worshiper in the Thirty Year’s War than I am an African-American slave, but I have had far more empathy with the concerns of the latter than the former. I believe, then, that the greater ease with which I feel I could claim the former music as “mine” has only to do with the fact that no one whose feelings I care about would challenge my right to do so in terms that were highly politically charged. When I find a route through Schütz’s settings of scriptural texts to my own feelings – in other words, when I *appropriate* his expressions for my own practical and emotional purposes – no one accuses me of an ethical breach. This is because the culture to which I am seen to belong is not oppressing the culture to which his music is seen to belong. The same cannot ever be said between people and musics seen – even if inaccurately – to be White and Black in the contemporary United States.

For most of my life, I felt that all music was free for me to sing and play in the way that the air is free for me to breathe. I assumed that it was my birthright as a lover and practitioner of music to study and express myself through any music that compelled my ear. Today, I can no longer view my use of all music as equally unproblematic. I know that People of Color, as well as White women sensitized within cultural Feminism to issues of appropriation, will scrutinize – and perhaps criticize – my performances of non-White music; some will insist that I have no business attempting what I attempt. Still, if there is music that I love and that I think I can perform convincingly, I will look for a way to present it that is likely to be appreciated – or at least tolerated – by any audience members who might feel that it is theirs. The discussions presented in this chapter suggest several directions for those of us who take seriously the concern about cultural appropriation.

As a starting point, it is useful to recognize the following: Most members of White, Feminist choruses singing Black traditional music have not learned that music through congenial interactions with the people who created it. The social forces and the physical means of transmission that have brought the music across racial, class, generational, regional, and sometimes geopolitical barriers into the choral rehearsal room are likely to have involved some form of uneven exchange at some point in the music’s

journey. White professional folklorists, White recording executives, or White music publishers may well have made money or feathered their caps with the music. A centuries-old song from Yorubaland does not arrive in a White, residential area of late-twentieth-century Champaign-Urbana by dint of its beauty alone. The argument could be made that the White use of any such song necessarily involves a debt to be paid. This, I believe, is the perception underlying charges of cultural appropriation.

There are several possibilities White choral conductors can consider for the monetary payment of this “debt.” Compliance with any relevant copyright laws goes without saying, though it often also goes undone. The GALA Choruses handbook *Embracing Diversity* (1994) offers a suggestion for choirs performing oral-tradition music in the public domain: in lieu of royalties, donations can be made to organizations serving the identity groups from which the music came. When another choir requests my arrangement of “Keep Your Lamps,” I charge my fee and then divert it to the racial-justice effort of my choice. As I have discovered by my own experience, conductors with any amount of community influence, notoriety, or access can easily arrange opportunities for Black musicians to gain increased exposure and employment. For example, after I had several times been paid by other White choral directors to provide percussion accompaniment to their White choirs’ performances of Black music, I decided I had to start fielding the requests in a different way. I knew that my playing was merely serviceable, while there were Africans and African Americans in town who could do as well or better. The next time I got a call, I tried to refer the conductor to an Afro-Latino percussionist who was more expert. The conductor was unwilling, however, to call someone he didn’t know (or someone with a Latino-sounding name?), which was a perfect example of the way opportunities are granted on the basis of “in-club” membership rather than merit. So I adopted the strategy of refusing to play unless Black drummer friends were hired on with me. I have also been able to invite local newcomers as guest artists on my concerts, as well as to lend my familiar name as a supporting artist on their performances: the result is that they are now more successful at generating their own work. For me, one way of paying back the “debt” is not to hoard every opportunity to make money in Black music.

However, it is absolutely clear from the interviews quoted in this chapter that the first payment on the “debt” is one that money cannot cover; it must come in the form of acknowledgement of a song’s origins and meanings. This is part of a larger, more general debt of “respect,” a word that interviewees used repeatedly. Another non-monetary payment of respect, one that is also extremely important, is the performers’ serious engagement with the music. Though it is difficult to describe in concrete terms everything that might constitute proof of this, it is something that many musicians in this chapter reported being able to *hear*. The stylistic “ring of truth,” the vocal sound of emotion, and the evidence of hard work – even when the result differs from “expert” versions – are *heard* as signs of *authentic* encounters with the music. I believe that when knowledge of a song’s history is the starting point from which an ensemble strives for these audible hallmarks, the result is likely to be met with acceptance except by those for whom no White performance would be acceptable. Getting from “Swing low, sweet chariot” to “Sing low, sweet

second altos” is possible only if the singers have not known or cared about what the song was created to express – only if they have not taken it seriously enough to be able to *hear* it.

I have concluded that the word *authenticity* is not a useful one for me. Its connotations are too highly contested, its most popular definition is chimeric, and it usually measures something other than what it purports to measure. As Jon Cruz puts it:

When we probe the various ideas of what is considered “genuine” and “authentic” black music, strange shadows appear that come not from the music but from the extramusical interests that surround it. These invariably involve social movements, struggles, conflicts, and histories that were invoked and played out for those who discovered (the) music. (1999, 21)

My own standards for what others mean when they demand authenticity in the singing of Black song rest with the requirements suggested in the preceding paragraph: informed, informative, attentive, absorbed, vocally gripping, and heartfelt performance.<sup>21</sup> These are my standards for the performance of any kind of music. In fact, it is the power of the transformative effect on my psyche produced by this approach that has made me need to be a musician. There is no match that I can make between my multifaceted identity and any existing body of music that would make that music “mine” or make it “true” in the way that this kind of practice does. Only the few pieces I have composed are more truly mine than anything else I have performed – for it is only those pieces that are *White, class-privileged, first-generation German-American, Feminist, anti-racist, Lesbian, animist-leaning* music. Beyond them, what I am left with is “other people’s music.” Some of it is so culturally far afield that I cannot love it or comprehend it deeply enough to consider performing it. Classical Chinese opera is one example. The African-American Spiritual is not. And when I create for my chorus my own arrangement of a Spiritual in consideration of the particular voices that will be singing it, I increase the depth of my engagement and their engagement with the song.

In short, my Feminist choral musician’s definition for cultural appropriation involves failings in two general areas. The first of these is contingent on politics. Where a song’s performers belong to an identity group that exercises oppressive control over the identity group of the creators, the failure to communicate some extra-musical acknowledgement of respect or debt effectively consigns the song to the same category as the creators’ labor, land, ingenuity, symbology, *etcetera*: it becomes another product of rip-off rather than the product of fair exchange. It is disastrous when this failing is combined with the other, completely non-political, failing, one that must be a concern in performances of every kind: irresponsible and uninspired musicianship.

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<sup>21</sup> When Thomas Turino was helping me on AMASONG’s Zimbabwean music project, I expressed to him a concern about whether the chorus’s vocal production was close enough to an authentic Zimbabwean sound. He replied that we were doing just fine, and that we shouldn’t worry about it too much besides: the authentic sound of the songs is *the one that is made* whenever a bunch of people from a community get together to sing them. I found this emphasis on what the songs enable people to express and experience extremely freeing. Furthermore, it brought the songs to life for me, whereas my previous approach to them as only daunting objects of study had somehow frozen them – had kept me from knowing them.

## CHAPTER VI

### TOWARD THE RACIAL DESEGREGATION OF THE FEMINIST CHORAL MOVEMENT

*“How can you get Black people in your group if you don’t have Black friends?”*

*– Eva, AMASONG*

*“The odds are so overwhelmingly working against real connection, coming together.”*

*– Irene, Anna Crusis*

*“I couldn’t answer the question ‘Am I a racist?’*

*... if I was only circulating (among) people of European background.”*

*– Catherine Roma, Founding Director of MUSE*

*“White people don’t know shit about what Black people think.”*

*– Bernice Johnson Reagon, Sweet Honey In The Rock*

#### Four Parables

One Thursday evening, around 6:30; Unitarian Universalist Church, Urbana, IL

*This is the hour before AMASONG’s weekly rehearsal begins. I’m in the church sanctuary setting up fifty-five folding chairs, planning my strategies, and coaxing myself into the psychic state I must adopt in order to help the women learn and sing their best. I love this time. The room always feels peaceful but full of portent, holding its breath for the carnival of women whose laughter and music will converge here for three hours. I spend this time re-acclimating to the space after the week’s absence, filling it up with my energy so that I will not be overwhelmed when the singers arrive.*

*I have grown accustomed to the doorbell’s frequent interruption of my preparatory ritual. Other groups meet in different parts of the building, but the bell cannot be heard everywhere. If the conveners of the groups – who are the only ones with keys – do not come early or do not post themselves where they can hear and answer the bell, it falls to us in the choir to let folks in. The bell usually calls me out of the sanctuary two or three times before the first choristers arrive and take up sentry in the lobby so that I can finish getting ready.*

*Tonight has been quiet. I’m still the only one in the building. As I pass through the lobby on the way to the bathroom, I see through the large glass panes of the breezeway that an African-American man is coming down the walkway to the door. In the next instant, an argument explodes in my head between a voice that comes automatically and a voice that I summon to discredit it:*

*“Uh-oh. Who’s this? I’d better ask him what he’s doing here before I let him in.”*

*“Wait a minute. When have you ever thought to screen anyone who has come knocking here?”*

*“But – but I’m being held responsible for the security of this building. What should I do?”*

*"Well, you might have thought of that the other fifty times when people you didn't recognize came to the door. But I guess since they were all White, it never occurred to you, did it?"*

*"You're right. We never ask. We never get asked."*

*"No fair changing the rules now!"*

*"I guess not. That would make me the ninety-ninth White person this week to look at him like he's a criminal. I don't want to be that person."*

*"Yeah. You'd better just hustle over there and hold that door wide open before he even has a chance to knock."*

*I open and make the guest welcome, as if I have been expecting him. He looks unsure that he is in the right place, but I take care to demonstrate that his presence here is not being questioned before I inquire – so that I can assist him – whether there is a room or a person I can help him find. He says that he is to meet a woman named Kathleen Chesterfield; is this the Unitarian church? I assure him that it is and that I expect she will arrive shortly. I give him a description of her so that he can recognize her when she does, and I tell him that I'll be in the sanctuary if he needs anything while he's waiting.*

*I return to my preparations cursing a world in which I sometimes have to think so deliberately before I can act with humanity. Will that automatic voice always be there, getting in the first word? Well, I think, at least now I can hear it, and I know what to tell it. The voice of the person I want to be can always have the last word. So I decide to stop cursing and give thanks instead. This is going to be a good rehearsal.*

Late on a Thursday night in March, 1999; Urbana, IL

*I have just come home exhausted from a demanding but successful AMASONG rehearsal. We have recently accepted the invitation of a choir from the Czech Republic to tour their country in June, and we must raise \$23,000 in airfares in the next several weeks. Kye from the second altos and I have designed a Serve-a-Thon for this purpose. Fans who want to help send us abroad as cultural emissaries of our community will have the opportunity to sponsor singers for an eight-hour day's labor at minimum wage, in return for which the singers will spend a day working at a local nature preserve. Intervention is needed at the preserve to reverse damage to the original ecological balance, and the site must also be prepared and maintained for public use. We will plant trees, seed wildflowers, mulch trails, and build cages to protect saplings. One singer, Anna Lisa, has already raised more than double her quota by distributing a letter she wrote about the chorus, the tour, and the Serve-a-Thon. Because the letter proved so effective, she and Patricia, another singer have adapted it somewhat for any chorister who wants to use it or to base her own version on its model. All of us have gone home from rehearsal with a copy of the modified letter. I sit down to read it.*

*The letter opens with a glowing description of the chorus that makes me proud to read. But I come across a sentence that stops me cold: "AMASONG has always been a comfortable and welcoming place for all women regardless of age, musical ability, sexual orientation, race, religion..." A flurry of*

questions crowds my mind: How did “race” get in there? We have one Woman of Color in the group. If AMASONG had always been comfortable and welcoming for women of all races, wouldn’t we have more Women of Color with us? As long as we do not, is it possible for the environment to be comfortable and welcoming? Why did the authors of this letter think they could say that? Did they ask Eva whether this was how she felt?

I know that if this letter contradicts Eva’s experience, and if it passes without comment, she is going to feel even less “comfortable” and “welcomed.” If it is a false statement, which I feel sure it is, I have to act quickly before it goes out all over town. As much I want those words to be true, I cannot stand for us to misrepresent ourselves to the public on this matter, nor to allow our group to persist in this fantasy – not on the principle of the thing, and not at the expense of Eva’s feelings.

I dial Eva. She has read the letter. I ask her whether the statement in question is accurate, and she confirms my pessimism: “Of course it’s not comfortable!” I promise her that I will draw everyone’s attention to this in the next twenty-four hours; no letters will go out making this delusional claim. “Hey, Kristina, didn’t I ever tell you what happened to me that one time at rehearsal?” My heart sinks in dread as I settle in to hear the story that I can’t believe she has kept to herself until now.

#### Eva’s story, Part One (paraphrased)

“It was pouring rain outside before rehearsal and the entrance was blocked off because the sidewalk was under construction. It was only my second or third rehearsal with the group. I had gotten off work late, and so by the time I got to the church, everyone had gone in already. I couldn’t figure out how to get into the building. Finally I found my way around to the other door, and there were women going back and forth in the breezeway, between the sanctuary and the bathroom. So I knocked on the glass, but nobody would let me in! I kept knocking, and then Sue looked right at me and freaked out like she didn’t know what to do. She wouldn’t even come close enough so she could see who I was or ask me through the glass what I wanted. She just started looking around for someone to tell her what to do or to handle it for her. Finally somebody else came and let me in. Walking into the sanctuary, I caught Sue’s face when she realized I belonged in the choir. She didn’t look at me again for a long time.”

#### The Reincarnation of Dives and Lazarus

One of the favorites in AMASONG’s repertoire is a Spiritual called “Poor Man Laz’rus.” In the Biblical scripture that is its reference, Dives is a rich man who lives large at the expense of the destitute; Lazarus is a sick and disabled beggar who lives outside the gate to Dives’s compound, eating from the refuse cast out of Dives’s kitchen. By and by, the two men die. Lazarus, who has lived a harmless life, receives his reward in Heaven. But Dives is sent to the torture of Hell, where oppressors suffer the consequences of their behavior. Driven mad by his agony, Dives calls out to none other than Lazarus to come and relieve him with a ministration of the soothing waters of Paradise.



*The creators of the Spiritual “Poor Man Laz’rus” knew Dives well. They had met him and observed him time and again. They drew attention to his audacity by making it the stuff of the Spiritual’s refrain: “Dip your finger in the water, come and cool my tongue, ‘cause I’m tormented in the flame.”*

*Eva’s story, Part Two (paraphrased)*

*“It felt bad, Kristina. All I could think was that here was another group who didn’t really want me there. I wasn’t really one of them. I kept thinking that maybe Sue would come over and apologize, but she couldn’t even look at me, let alone speak to me. Weeks went by until I couldn’t stand it anymore. Finally I went over to her and told her how it had felt standing out there in the rain, and how racist it was that she wouldn’t even come closer to see who I was or what I wanted. She got all upset then, saying: ‘See, I knew you would think it was something like that! It didn’t have anything to do with that!’ I told her that of course it did, and it was even more racist that she hadn’t even been able to come up to me once in all that time to speak to me about it.*

*“Later that night, after rehearsal was finished, her girlfriend came over to me and said, ‘Gosh, Eva. Sue’s feeling really awful. I think she needs you to go over there and give her a hug.’ I thought that was pretty interesting! Nobody was asking me how I felt. Nobody asked me if I needed a hug.”*

*“Dip your finger in the water, come and cool my tongue...”*

### **Introduction**

Few White women in AMASONG would have been prepared to admit the likelihood of their behaving in ways that would make Black women feel unwelcome. The intention to be welcoming is not the same as intentionally informing oneself about the manifestations of racism that African Americans face on a daily basis in routine encounters with White individuals and institutions. As I listened to Eva’s story, I recognized that there had been a time in my life when, despite what I might have called good intentions, I could have responded just the way Sue did. In Chapter Four I presented Chris’s words about her feelings of isolation as a Black woman in Sistrum. To begin this chapter’s discussion I present Eva’s comments on the same difficulty, shared in the course of a conversation we had about her story. Then I turn to the thoughts of the White women in AMASONG, Sistrum, and Anna Crusis about what it would take to have racially integrated choirs. The remainder of the chapter comprises a case study of MUSE: Cincinnati’s Women’s Choir, a model anti-racist Womyn’s musical organization. Because Black musics, and thus Black and White identities, are the concerns of this project, most of my comments about racism and integration address themselves specifically to Blackness and Whiteness only and should not be taken as a denial that racism involves people of other Colors.

### Eva on Being Black in a Virtually White Group

K: How does it feel to be one Black woman in a White chorus?

E: (*laughs*) Yeah, it's like the feeling of being the one Black woman in many situations in life! I've learned to fit in to White groups knowing that in many cases I'm the only Black person there. I know that being part of this group means that I'm going to have to make a lot of concessions to what I think – how I think things are going to sound. I'm not going to be able to exercise what I know as Black sound, and not that I truly have to do that, but, you feel a little lost and scared and unsure in a lot of cases.

K: Are you just talking musically now, at this moment?

E: Musically and actually being in the group.

K: Yeah. I would hazard a guess that many of the women in the group are unsure about what they're doing with their voices because we sing such a variety of unfamiliar music. But I certainly wouldn't say that – I mean, we've talked about this before: the level of comfort that some of the other women can go there and count on finding is not the same thing that you can go there and count on finding. But we found out, when Patricia and Anna Lisa wrote that model fundraising letter, that it hadn't occurred to some of the women in the choir that it might not be a place where you can just kind of let down like most of them can.

E: I can't.

K: So, what is it that they need to know, and what does everybody who's going to read my dissertation need to know?

E: I feel that there's going to be more expected of me in that group because I'm the only – I stand *out!* Because I'm the only Black person. Kye recently congratulated me on returning and talked about feeling like there should be more done in terms of getting more Women of Color participating.

K: What did you think about her saying that?

E: She said, "I don't know why it doesn't happen, why it can't happen."

K: Uh-huh. Did you tell her why?

E: Well, no. I didn't go into it. I think a lot of Women of Color are not going to want to participate in a group that – unless they're music professionals – that's not singing more music that they feel is something that they understand and something that they really want to sing and feel. I just don't think that you're going to be able to get a lot of Women of Color who are going to want to participate in a Lesbian-labeled

group. And it goes back to what I said originally about not wanting to be known – having some homophobia, not wanting to be known as a Lesbian. We have a hard enough time being just people in this world without also being labeled something else. Those are some of the struggles.

K: Before you go on, can I ask you in what ways singing music that's unfamiliar – I mean, I think I pick music that's unfamiliar to most of the people in the choir. So why are groups like this able to pull in White women to experiment with this music much more successfully than Black women?

E: Mm... that's a good question! Because White people just seem to be more interested in doing weird things than Black people! (*laughing*) They're not willing to take those kind of risks – Black women are not, really. White women are much more open to taking those kind of risks. Now, there are some. I think I'm an exception to this. And I hung in there. Once I was more comfortable with the people in the group and they weren't treating me badly, then it was easier for me to stay. You just – when you feel like you're the only one, you just feel like you're sticking out. It's obvious who I am, and I can't blend into the woodwork! It just doesn't happen. And so unless you really like the music or you really like what's going on, you probably won't be there. I acquired a taste for the music and stayed in there. I think it's – you have to make those kinds of groups a little more diverse musically so that you can get people in there who are not all the same, who are not all White.

K: Mm-hmm. That was one of my goals for diversifying the repertoire, but I have learned a lot about why that's not enough.

E: Mm-hmm. You just always feel, if you're in a White group like that, that nobody wants you there. That's generally – nobody wants you there! You know: "Why am I still *here*? (*laughing*) Because I'm the only Black person; I can't imagine why they want me here!" I think a lot of people are changing, and we have a lot of more mixed – you know, people are more interracially mixed. So, it makes a little bit of difference. And we have Black people who are growing up with White people, so they're going to be a little more comfortable just walking into a group like that. That music – you know, any school has to be able to offer those kinds of music in order for them to be interested.

K: You know, that's when I started learning and acquiring different Black styles was when I was teaching public school and I knew that I couldn't purport to be serving all the students in my class unless I did that.

E: Yeah. It's just a one-sided thing. It's just like everything else; it just becomes one-sided. You know, history: if it was including us, maybe we would want to be more included in these kinds of groups. But, we're not included, so why would we want to be in this group? You know? I think psychologically it just doesn't make sense that you're going to get people to come to these things when over time you've said, "You're not included." It just takes an interesting – a strong-willed person to want to hang in there, and certainly I think I took a liking to the music, and wanting to learn and be a part of it, which is why I stayed. I wasn't doing it for anybody else! Because I just get the sense that most White people don't like me. I mean, that's probably not the right sense...

K: Uh-huh. In the choir, too, still?

E: Well, I just think that generally speaking, if you have forty people, twenty of them are racist!

K: Right.

E: And I'm sorry! So, why would you want to subject yourself?

K: Yeah. Because the other shoe's gonna drop at some point, right?

E: Yeah!

K: Which it did that night you were stuck out in the rain.

E: Yeah! I thought: "Oh, boy. Here it is again!" You know, I had thought: "I'm in with a *group*! A group of Lesbians that like me." And then I find, they don't want me. You know, as a young person I would think: "Oh, I've *found* somebody who's *accepting* me!" And then you go: "They don't want me either! Even though I'm like them; I'm a Lesbian." You go to a school, you know, most of the people are going to be racist. That's just their upbringing.

K: Mm-hmm. *That's* what most of us don't know about ourselves – what most *White* people don't know about ourselves. We assume that if we don't call Black people "the 'N' word," and that because we would hire a Black person if we thought they were qualified, we think that means that we're not racist. That assumption that we saw in that letter that Patricia and Anna Lisa wrote, that assumption that AMASONG has always been a comfortable place for Women of Color – it's what Bernice Johnson Reagon said to me: "White people don't know shit about what Black people think."

E: Yeah, it's this forced feeling that, "Oh, it's just wonderful!" And it's not true. And I found out that it's definitely – that I'm a scary item! You know, you can't open the *door* for me. So I'm sure most Black people don't feel welcomed! And I think if you had more Black friends, you know, there's gotta be – that's part of the branching out. Grace kept talking to me. I'm a Black friend. She kept saying to me, "Please come! I think you'll like it."

K: How many women in the group have Black friends?

E: It's got to start there, Kristina.

K: Exactly.

E: You know, so how can you get Black people in your group if you don't have Black friends?

K: Right.

E: Grace just finally hassled me enough that I came. But, you know, you've got sixty women there, and they don't know anyone Black that can *sing*? And it's because it's not part of their social program.

K: Right. You know, if I were to start this group all over again today, I would start it differently, with some different priorities. I've definitely learned that once you start a group that's all White and then try to integrate it –

E: You can't get 'em in. Nope. Like, you know, I still have to say: I'm in because I've been Grace's friend for a long time. So where are the other friends? I know *someone's* gotta have a friend they can talk to and keep saying: "Hey! Come and join the group!"

K: Right. And then, for everyone that you talk to to come and join the group, some people don't want to sing, or some people have a conflict with Thursday nights, so it's not like if you have one Black friend you're necessarily going to be able to get her in the choir!

E: Right. And they may not want to come in. There are several new people in the choir now; there were like ten or fifteen people that stood up (to introduce themselves at the first rehearsal this year).

K: Yeah? All White?

E: Yeah. All White. And they knew people in the choir; that's why they were there. So, they're recruiting not People of Color, but more White people. And no Black person's going to feel comfortable. I thought pretty extensively about whether I wanted to continue in the group, and the thing that motivated me the most was advancing my own personal ability to sing. I found that, you know, over the summer my voice deteriorated a little bit, and that I was enjoying having the wind and the control in order to get a good song out. So that basically was my motivation to come back. There's a lot of people in that group, and a number of people have come and said: "We're glad you're back." But there's a lot of people that I don't really talk to, that really don't say anything to me. And I certainly don't try to push for people to talk to me who don't want to, and I certainly don't want people to favor me because I happen to be a Person of Color in the group. But, you know, you get a feeling when you first go into the group – you say: "I'm not sure I should be here; it's a group of White people. I don't think we share the same background, we're culturally very different, and I'm not sure I'm really accepted." Um... but I do appreciate the people who did come forth and say: "Hey, Eva! We're really glad that you're back!" That really makes me feel a lot more welcomed.

When White Feminists asks ourselves why (more) Women of Color don't join our groups, we are not assuming about ourselves what Eva assumes, and what other Women of Color are likely to assume: that of any forty White women assembled, "twenty of them are racist." I have a similar assumption of my own, which I frame in somewhat different language after the example of numerous Feminist and Black Liberationist scholar-activists. By the word *racism* we mean – rather than merely the practice of

interpersonal bigotry – the entire system of race-based prejudices that in practice produces institutionalized White power and privilege. Every White person receives a benefit from racism: our lives are the practice of it whether we will this or no. Seeing racism in this way, it becomes problematic to pronounce ourselves or any other White person as racism-free. I have found it more useful to identify myself and other White people as “anti-racist.” By anti-racism I mean an abiding commitment to the active study, identification, confrontation, and elimination of racism in our perceptions, personal interactions, and social institutions. My own assumption about any random assemblage of forty White (and therefore, by definition, racist) women is that thirty-five of them are not anti-racist. It is to this kind of environment that Eva asks why, in the absence of something particularly compelling, a Black woman would want to “subject (her)self.”

Eva’s references to mainstream historical discourses, school social environments, and groups to which she has belonged communicate quite clearly that as an African American, she has regularly had to cope with being cast as the outsider. It seems unsurprising that the psychological toll of experiencing this “over time” would discourage someone from joining the endeavor of a virtually White group whose anti-racism has not been unequivocally demonstrated. As Peggy McIntosh, a White, anti-racist, Feminist scholar writes: “At the very least, obliviousness of one’s privileged state can make a person or group irritating to be with” (1997, 292).

McIntosh’s article, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies,” has been frequently cited in Feminist scholarship and used in Womyn’s anti-racism workshops. In it, she lists forty-six examples of the everyday effects of White privilege on her life. These range from matters of passing importance to issues of physical survival. Here is a small selection from her list:

- I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my color.
- I can be sure that if I need medical or legal help, my race will not work against me.
- I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
- I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
- I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.
- When I am told about our national heritage or about “civilization,” I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
- I can arrange my activities so that I will never have to experience feelings of rejection owing to my race.
- If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege. (293-4)

Using the negative image of McIntosh’s analysis helps to elucidate what Eva’s experience in AMASONG might have been like. Although Eva was not the only member who did not socialize with every other woman in the group, she was the only one who had to worry that the failure of any one of them to connect with her was race-based. Eva’s seemingly unreasonable statement that White people are more prone to taking “weird risks” might be understood as follows: certainly, within mostly White groups, the “weirdness” of anything we are doing – or any failure to do it well – will not be ascribed to our race.

Because no woman in AMASONG was likely to find her most familiar styles represented by more than a handful of pieces in our repertoire, many of them could have felt at any given time that they were working at something weird, risky, unfamiliar, or difficult. And regardless of how many of them felt out of their element singing the Black music that was the most comfortable for Eva, Eva was the only person in our group who could worry that her difficulties on any repertoire would “stand out” by being evaluated on racial terms. Most of the women found that AMASONG’s repertoire stretched their abilities and tastes, but Eva is suggesting that when a preponderance of the repertoire is not in African-American vernacular styles, that stretch combined with the emotional stretch of being in a mostly White group is, for most African-American women, simply too much stretching.

Eva’s observation that the Lesbian identification of the group deters African-American women is an important one. In cities where large and diverse populations of African Americans create a plurality of cultural, political, and other affiliational choices, it is possible to join Queer-identified groups and still remain within – rather than sacrifice – connections to Black community. New York’s highly visible and successful Lavender Light Black and People of All Colors Gospel Choir is an example of this. In Champaign-Urbana, however, there is no public Black and Queer-identified organization of any kind. Furthermore, a preponderance of organizational Black community life is centered around or otherwise influenced by a handful of church ministries that are frankly heterosexist – in some cases quite fervently so. In fact, there is a connection between one of these more fervent ministries and the largest Black performing-arts organization in town, the University of Illinois Black Chorus. This ensemble’s director, in addition to serving on the voice faculty at the University of Illinois School of Music, also directs the choirs in a large and highly organized Black, Baptist church in Urbana. This church’s mission is characterized by, among other things, frequent exhortations to fight against the evil of homosexuality.<sup>1</sup> The University of Illinois Black Chorus, as an organization serving the students of a state institution, is open to singers of any race who are interested in singing gospel music, Spirituals, and other Black vocal ensemble styles. Its membership is, however, predominantly African American, and it serves as a crucial nexus for community among Black students in a town and an institution where Blackness is, all too often, a source of alienation. An anecdote involving a singer in the orbit of these organizations will serve to illustrate Eva’s point:

In the year that I created AMASONG, I also convened a radical-Feminist reading group, both of which I advertised by posting handwritten fliers in public spaces. On the poster for the reading group, I listed my plans to study the work of various Feminist Lesbians of Color. One evening, I received a phone call from a woman inquiring about the reading group. We chatted for a while, and I eventually mentioned the chorus I was also creating, in case she would like to join that, too. Suddenly, the caller, who was an African-American Lesbian, interrupted our conversation with the realization that she knew exactly who I was. She was a vocal performance major at the University of Illinois School of Music. I received this news with great enthusiasm, as Lesbians and radical Feminists had seemed to be in short supply at school.

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<sup>1</sup> This has been reported to me by friends who have attended services at the church. Furthermore, when working with a Queer youth group, I saw several casualties of this mission in high school students who had been harassed by teachers from this church’s congregation.

But she refused to identify herself to me and made it clear that she would be neither joining the choir nor coming to the reading group. She warned me, in fact, that if her voice teacher and ensemble director ever asked her whether she knew me, she would deny it rather than risk their relationship. This teacher was, of course, the director of the Black Chorus and the Baptist church choirs mentioned in the previous paragraph.

In the Champaign-Urbana environment of the 1990s, racism and heterosexism converged in the phone caller's life in such a way that she felt forced to choose between Lesbian community among racists or Black community – to say nothing of her success in her college major – among heterosexuals. The choice she made was not atypical, and it meant that AMASONG would not be seeing her in our audience, let alone in our ranks. The choir that I created in my own image served beautifully the needs of White Lesbians and Lesbian-supportive, White Feminists. As I designed it, I had limited its ability – however unknowingly – to serve people of certain other descriptions.

### **Members of White Choruses on Integrating Their Ranks**

I have already shown that workshops on anti-racism and “diversity” are common features of Womyn's music festivals and that they also appear on the programs of Sister Singers and GALA concerts and festivals. Among GALA's many publications, which are made available to member choruses, is an eight-page guide called *Embracing Diversity*, created in 1992 by GALA's then-newly-formed diversity committee. The five sections of the guide are “Music Selection,” “Building Audiences,” “Diversifying Membership,” “Where to Get Help,” and “What to Expect.” Under “Diversifying Membership,” the guide states the following:

Creating an organization where all members of the gay and lesbian community feel welcome is (a) challenging task. Many organizations unintentionally create barriers to participation which are difficult to overcome. Because of those barriers, it takes determination and hard work to create a chorus where all people will be welcome and respected. Diversifying membership is a long-term goal. (GALA Choruses 1994, 6)

The guide lists eight suggestions for diversifying the membership of a chorus:

Set a goal. Diversity is intentional and will not happen accidentally. This goal should be realistic and long-term.

Be aware of the various ethnic communities in your area.

Educate and sensitize existing members about these communities and about racism and other oppression issues through training sessions for members.

Review formal chorus policies about staff hiring.



Develop an explicit policy on non-discrimination.

Develop an advisory board or board positions from communities which are underrepresented in the chorus membership.

Explore and utilize members' personal connections with community organizations. Encourage personal recruitment by existing members.

Consider designating a certain percentage of available openings for people from underrepresented groups.

(6)

MUSE has employed many of these approaches, though one of the most important ones – consideration of repertoire – does not appear on this list. In my interviews with White members of AMASONG, Sistrum, and Anna Crusis, I asked singers and directors for their ideas on how their choirs could racially desegregate themselves.

#### AMASONG

The time when I was most conscious of the Whiteness of our group was when we were working on our Zimbabwe project. At that time, we had no Black women in the chorus. Also at that time, my social life was as segregated as our chorus. I had friendly acquaintances who were Black, but no one with whom I shared what could be called a friendship.

Because the nature of our project was communal and participatory, and because the effect of it could only become more marvelous as more people of any description and ability joined us, I made a concerted effort to interest African Americans of all ages in the project. Because part of the funding we received from the Illinois Arts Council was earmarked to help us present our project in public schools, any print material we generated about the project omitted the part of our name that identified us with Lesbian (and Feminist) community: this was a compromise we decided to make in order to achieve some of the special goals of the project. As I proceeded – through my acquaintances and through friends of friends – to get flyers placed in local Black churches, I wondered whether our Lesbian reputation were preceding us anyway, or whether as a suddenly neutered group we might actually succeed in attracting the involvement of African-American community members.

My efforts were in vain. Though the White woman who assembled the class of dancers for the project had succeeded in recruiting a balance of Black and White youth, our chorus remained White. Neither the flyers nor the announcements on Black community radio programs nor my personal contacts nor our performances in racially mixed and predominantly Black public venues compelled any Black people to join our White (and identifiably Lesbian?) chorus. I was not the only one who was disappointed and stumped by this. The matter came up in my interview with Diana. In reminiscing about performing the Zimbabwe project to audiences that included large numbers of African Americans, she remarked:

D: It just made me so hungry to get more of those people on stage. ... (There's) been a discussion among various groupings of people I've been in, about AMASONG and what right we have to perform the music. And why there isn't more of an active recruitment of African-American women.

K: ...I'm just wondering if you've ever thought about where we're missing the boat: what could we do to become more racially balanced? Have you ever thought about that at all?

D: Well, a while back there were some of us, if not all of us, who were trying to think pretty proactively about that. And I always feel like one-on-one invitations – like, speaking to the people in our circles that we know and trying to move throughout those circles.

Diana is herself involved with convening a community singing activity. Two times a month she hosts a potluck and “song circle” in her home. The circles are open to anyone and are conducted on a drop-in basis, though there is a faithful core of people who attend regularly. The singing is largely facilitated by her personal stash of copies of *Rise Up Singing*. This book, a virtual compendium of Leftist musical “folk consciousness,” contains the lyrics and chord changes to hundreds of songs in a variety of styles, including Spirituals, labor songs, Freedom Songs, campfire songs, folk ballads, and even some early Womyn's music classics. Diana related her experiences as the convener of community song circles to AMASONG's recruiting concerns:

D: I know when I do song circles I've had the same concern. And we have been successful in bringing a couple People of Color in. And at the same time, it's a tricky business. And it was through people we knew; we asked several people, and there've been a couple who showed up and who have kept coming back. And one guy, for example, was Nigerian by birth until he was eighteen. Now he's thirty-six; he did the half-way-mark celebration: half of his life here and there. And he comes regularly, and, oftentimes, though, it's kind of funny. You do feel a little funny, like: How to make it a good experience for him? Because it does make you change things a bit. Like, make sure you get some music that has a little more, as I'll say, “hips” to it as opposed to what we were singing earlier. I like that dimension. But, I mean, you are more mindful to stretch the music that way, to make it open a little more. Um, you know, given the repertoire we've had (in AMASONG) so far, almost anybody could've walked through that door. But, I know, in recruitment, sometimes I think we are accustomed to us White people – White, middle-class women – looking at posters or looking at an ad in an alternative paper or some rag on the scene: what are the opportunities when we're moving to a new town or looking for something to take on? We go to those channels. And I think that other groupings, you know, don't. So I do think what strategies other than inside our group, moving out – there's always trying to go to clubs: like, the (Boys and Girls club) here has mostly young people, but you try to think of groupings in town that have a more liberal – because it would have to take a pretty liberal mind to step into these groups. It would. Whether you're a woman-identified woman or not, you'd have to be open-minded to be with the group, so I can see the – I keep thinking: “Well, the women's shelter (staff), maybe there's people associated with that.”

Women's Studies on campus? Maybe putting something through there? You know, trying to think of pockets in our community that are already established that have Women of Color associated with them that are at least open-minded and tolerant people, and then trying to recruit from there. But number one would be people in our group being more active. I mean, we could have made a concerted effort to, like, really, really try. On one hand, I know you've thought about it a *lot* – you don't want to be (*plaintively*): “*Please* come into our group because we want –”

K: “– your presence to legitimate our existence.”

D: Right! It's tricky. But how to make an invitation that seems like an invitation you'd give any woman – which isn't the *feeling* behind it! The feeling behind it is just a little desperate, like – (*we crack up*) And maybe that's unfair, to put that kind of pressure on it to give them that *magic seat*. You know, like: “We'll give you five solos if you come!”

Diana brings up an important point. The sense that our choruses *ought to have* Black women in them can inspire thoughtless acts of tokenization. A woman from another Sister Singers chorus who wishes the group to go unnamed here related an example of this behavior. Her group, bent on getting Black membership, waived the audition process for an African-American whom a member had introduced to the chorus. It became clear over the course of a few rehearsals that the woman was a rather bad singer, presenting in many members' opinion much more of a liability than an asset. The awkwardness of the musical situation, combined with most members' awkwardness in socializing with an African American who also happened to be poor, resulted in an extremely isolating experience for the newcomer. By the time this woman quit attending, the emotional arguments in the chorus over what had been done and what should have been done were seriously threatening the group's cohesion.

Diana's comment about holding out “five solos” to motivate Black women's participation is a direct reminder to me of her disagreement with a choice I had made that ultimately resulted in Eva's joining AMASONG. Several seasons earlier, I had programmed for us a song called “Job, Job” (as in the Biblical hero). This song from the Gullah islands appears on Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir's recording *Front Porch Music*, which arrangement I used as the model for our own performance. In call-and-response form, this song requires the lead of a strong soloist. I was hearing auditions from several AMASONG members who wanted to sing the solo. I had provided auditionees with a tape of CHC's performance and asked them to attempt to emulate the style as closely as possible. I was consistently disappointed with the auditionees' renderings, which fell short in one of two ways: either they were simply not vocally strong enough, or they were vocally and stylistically exaggerated toward an urban Blues or gospel style unbecoming of the song. There was one auditionee who sang rather close to what I had hoped to hear. At the same time, my friend Eva had been talking somewhat noncommittally about the possibility that she might want to join the chorus in the coming season. I had heard her sing, and I knew that she would do a marvelous job with the “Job, Job” solo. My truest desire was to give the performance over entirely to her as a guest artist. This was the best answer, musically. I also felt that politically, if we were

performing Black music poorly on our own when we had the possibility of involving Black women who could perform it well. we were missing an important opportunity to begin transforming our apparent image of racial insularity to one that might be more welcoming to Women of Color. But I had already held out the solo to current members, so I didn't think I could in fairness foreclose that opportunity entirely.

I consulted with several trusted members of the chorus before announcing my ultimate decision, which was to feature the best auditionee on the first night of our concert and Eva on the second night. As was my habit in making decisions that I knew would not be universally popular, I issued to the chorus a full explication of my reasoning, acknowledging that some singers would love the decision while others would disagree, and asking everyone to accept and work together with this solution. Diana was one of the singers who strongly opposed my decision, though neither she nor any of the other opposed withheld their cooperation and goodwill.

The musical result of my decision was excellent; Eva's performance is preserved on our second compact disc recording, *AMAI*. My decision also had the intended recruitment effect. Eva did join the chorus in the following season, and she encouraged another African-American friend to audition. This friend sang quietly but prettily and in tune, and I invited her to join, which she did; however, she realized after a few weeks that the rigors of her work schedule did not permit her to attend regularly enough to remain with us.

I asked Heidi what she thought it would take for AMASONG to attract Black members:

H: Well, I think it would take a few things. First, recruiting.

K: How and where?

H: You would have to start going into Black communities.

K: Where?

H: Um, I hate to say churches, but churches really are a pretty big place to start.

K: You know, I was looking for a Black church in the area that really wanted White Lesbians to come in and look for members –

H: *(laughing)* Yeah!

K: – but I just couldn't *think* of one!

H: And I don't know how many Afro-American bars there are around here – Gay bars. I don't know what's really in town here. But there must be some, where you could get flyers up in there. It's just a matter of knowing people. And it's really hard. That's what it boils down to, since it's such a friendship kind of

thing. And it does get cliquy, although AMASONG was not real cliquy; there was always someone there that you could relate to – a number of people.

K: You mean, in comparison to your choir in Cleveland, or women's groups?

H: Yeah, or just groups in general. You know, groups can become very cliquy, but AMASONG never was that cliquy; there was always someone you could relate to. ...But I mean, it's just who you bring and who you know – and how they feel once they get there. It's just really hard. And – I don't know.

K: How many Black friends do you have here in town?

H: In town? Um – *(pauses)* mm –

K: That you hang with socially.

H: That I hang with at all? Mm – not too many. My best friend's in Columbus; I saw her last weekend, one of my exes. But, um – I have to admit: no, not really.

K: I'm sure that's the case for most of the women in AMASONG, and it really was the case for most of my life here.

Earlier in the interview Heidi had mentioned that most of her lovers had been African-American, including one highly visible Black cultural activist. But since moving to the very racially segregated cities of Champaign and Urbana, she had not made social connections with any African-American women. There are, in fact, no Queer bars in our towns that cater to an exclusively or even sizeably Black, female clientele. Church was the only other possibility that came to mind, and as I have made clear, it was never really a possibility for us.

I asked Lynnette about her social circle:

K: Do you have Black friends here that you hang out with socially?

L: No. Not at all. I mean – people that I've worked with, people that I've worked with in volunteer groups... in those ways. But, no, there's not a single Black person in this town whom I know well enough to go watch a movie at their house or invite them to come watch a movie at my house.

Lynnette had had the experience in another city of singing in a Womyn's chorus that was more racially integrated than AMASONG. She had spent a year on professional assignment in Washington, D.C., where she joined Bread and Roses Feminist Singers (see page 147). I asked her to talk about that experience:

- K: I'm anxious to hear what you have to say about Bread and Roses. At last count, they had two African Americans in the group, which, since they're pretty small, is a percentage pretty much in line with the overall national population. But what was it like when you were there? Was there any discussion about the racial profile of the group?
- L: Um, let me think about this. There were three Black women when I was there.
- K: How many in the whole group?
- L: Um, fourteen-ish? Two were partners, and one was a partner with a White woman in the group. And she was in the group first and pulled in the White woman. The one thing I can remember – we did, not a Spiritual, but more like a gospel song. And one of the Black women acted as conductor for that piece.
- K: Was the group using a rotating conductorship?
- L: No, not really. But sometimes – I guess there were two or three times when somebody stepped in, either because there was a piece that they had arranged or composed, or it was a piece that they had some special insight into or affinity for. I think in one case a piece that the group wanted to do, the conductor just really *didn't* want to do! (*laughter*) So she was like: "Okay, but *I* don't want to do it!" I mean, it was a much looser kind of construction. And I remember the woman who had the White partner, actually, was in the military, and her partner was German and had come over with her and was there, actually, illegally, and then got sent back to Germany.
- K: Oh. That sucks!
- L: Yeah. And they could do *nothing* because they were not any kind of partners that the military or the U.S. government would recognize. And she couldn't come out and be in the military anyway. And so it was just a whole shitty situation anyway, from the top down. And somewhere in the middle of that, she got kind of angry. And it had a racial spin, and it was about the people in the group not really – not really understanding the pressures that were on her that resulted from a variety of things: from being a Lesbian in the military, and from being a Black woman in the military. And being a *Black woman*. You know? And what people essentially tried to do was just let her have that, and just not – just try to be supportive and understanding and not argue with her about it. I think there were a couple of people who tried to maybe say: "Oh, but you know, we're your friends, and we've been together through this thing and that thing. We can understand, even though we have this racial divide." She just wasn't buying it. She wasn't buying it. And, for the most part, I think, we just stepped back and said, you know: "Let her have her anger over this." But that's the only time I can remember there being a real overt incident, an angering situation that involved, sort of, racial dynamics. Um, I think, you know – I think that three of fourteen was comfortable for them in a way that –
- K: – one in sixty –

L: – one in sixty or even two in sixty is not.

K: Yeah. I'm amazed that Eva stayed.

L: Yeah.

In Bread and Roses, simply belonging to the same interracial group for years was not enough to close what at least one member experienced as an unbreachable gulf in understanding between Black and White members. Still, having company on her side of the gulf likely helped make the gulf more tolerable.

At that point in my conversation with Lynnette, I recounted the events of the night when AMASONG members had left Eva out in the rain. At first, Lynnette seemed not to remember. Then something triggered her memory:

L: Oh, I do remember that now! I had conveniently put it out of my memory!

K: Yeah, and the aftermath of that was really bad because in the ensuing weeks, not one of the women who had left her there had found it in herself to approach her and say: "God, I'm so sorry that we left you sitting out there –"

L: Uh-huh: "– that we saw your Black face and said: 'Nope; not one of us.'" Essentially.

The responses of the AMASONG women who left Eva out in the rain were the responses of White people whose lives are racially segregated at all meaningful levels. I had cultivated a racially integrated intellectual life throughout my adulthood, but it was not until late in my tenure as AMASONG's director that I succeeded in living a life that – at long last also socially and professionally desegregated – could begin to be anti-racist in practice and not just in theory. Had I managed this earlier in my life, and had more of our members managed this, AMASONG might have been a different organization.

The extent of the rest of our involvement with Black members or potential members is as follows: After the summer of our Zimbabwe project with Patience Mudeka, she joined us for a year. Following that, her work situation forced her to leave us, though she did return as a guest artist from time to time. A close friend of mine who is an African-American Lesbian was anxious to join us, but in her audition I discovered that she had poor tonal memory, which, combined with what I was sure were vocal nodes, meant that she would not be successful integrating her sound with the other voices in the chorus. I managed to interest a former co-worker of mine, a Heterosexual African American, in auditioning. We had both been employed years before in our local domestic-violence shelter, spending lunch breaks in lively exchanges about racial and sexual politics. Much later, when I discovered that she was involved in some singing activities, I contacted her and invited her to audition for AMASONG. She took and passed the audition, but after attending her first rehearsal, she called to tell me that she had had to make the choice instead to spend Thursday evenings attending a class for a degree she was trying to finish. I never saw her at any of our

performances, and she never attempted to rejoin us in subsequent seasons. Other Black friends and friendly acquaintances had various reasons for declining to become involved. Any other possibilities or ideas for the involvement of Black singers that other AMASONG members may have had are unknown to me.

### Sistrum

As I have shown, of the two White singers from Sistrum whom I interviewed, one actively nurtured a progressive Feminist political consciousness, and the other seemed virtually untouched by current race and gender politics. Stephanie's commentaries on repertoire never betrayed any sense that the music she sang had been created or influenced by communities of people, and no other direction in our conversation stimulated remarks on race. My impression is that Ginger would have had something to say on the matter of Sistrum's racial makeup, but by the time we had exhausted matters of identity, repertoire, and cultural appropriation, she had to go to class. I did, however, discuss the matter with Sistrum's director, Rachel Alexander:

KB: Do you have discussions in your head or out loud about: "Gosh, I wish we had more than one Woman of Color in Sistrum!"?

RA: Oh, yeah. We have had as many as three at one time, all named Christine – two of whom were blind!

KB: *No way!* Dykes, too?

RA: No, one of them was Straight – the other blind one. And then my friend Christine, the one who died this year, was in for a little while.

KB: And how many women were in the group, total, when you had three Black women?

RA: Oh, about eighteen.

KB: Wowiee.

RA: Yeah. It was something.

KB: How did it happen? And why hasn't it happened except then?

RA: Well, Chris and Christy joined at (about) the same time. ...They had gone to the School for the Blind together; they were friends from way back. ...And Christine joined when she came back to the States after living in Angola for a long time and, you know, had thought about Sistrum off and on. She didn't stay long because she was working on her dissertation! (*laughing*) There had been one other African-American woman early on, for maybe two years. And – I mean, *I* know that Sistrum as a group hasn't done enough – hasn't done any homework on – we haven't done any outreach to Black communities –



KB: How would you do it?

RA: Well, um, *(pauses)* probably, um – there’s I think a couple of Black newspapers in town: maybe advertising to open membership that way. Uh, I haven’t even really – I’m drawing a blank right now on what other things have come up as possible means of outreach. And I’m really aware that that’s something that just hasn’t happened.

It was at this point in the conversation that I asked Alexander about how widely Sistrum was recognized as a chorus with Lesbian affiliation. This was the stimulus for the conversation quoted on page 157 about how “apologetic” the group was about being Lesbian-affiliated. Alexander was not sure how much recognition of Sistrum’s ethos there was outside of the Feminist and folk-music communities. I was trying to ascertain whether, as in Champaign-Urbana, being a Lesbian chorus deterred African-American participation:

KB: I’m trying to take a stab at how you see the climate in Lansing. *The racial climate, and the climate for Queers.* And the intersection of those two.

RA: I think the climate for Queers is – I think there’s a lot of acceptance or friendly tolerance. The men’s chorus is called the Greater Lansing Gay Men’s Chorus. And they’ve been out there, though not so much in the last few years. They’ve done holiday concerts at the mall with their name on a big thing. And they’re just – their name is out there. When our name is out there, we are less – until you come to a concert or read something about us, you might not know. Usually when they’re doing promotional stuff about us, like newspaper articles, usually “the ‘L’ word” is in there somewhere.

KB: So you’ve been in the press.

RA: A little bit. Um, the racial climate feels, to me – It’s really – I don’t know how to gauge that. If I compare it to other cities, I’ve certainly been in cities where just kind of walking down the street it feels a lot more tense and places where – have you spent time in Atlanta?

KB: Briefly.

RA: I just was so really struck. I was there for a GALA Music Directors weekend. I was so struck by – as soon as I walked off the plane, actually. I think their population is more than 50 percent African American. But the thing that struck me is how African Americans carry themselves with a sense of entitlement.

KB: I noticed the very same thing the first time I went down to that region.

RA: You know, it’s almost palpable. It’s a thing that you might think would be subtle, and

it's not subtle. It's really wonderful! And then you think about how that isn't there for African Americans here, or many other places.

In a follow-up conversation with Alexander, I learned that the Greater Lansing Gay Men's Chorus has never had more than token representation by Men of Color. This may be another indication that public, Queer life is no more racially integrated in Lansing than in Champaign-Urbana. Alexander could not say whether Sistrum is stigmatized or even noticed within Black communities in Lansing. Certainly, heterosexism is not the only barrier to racial integration in most cities in the United States.

#### On the Need for Putting the Horse Before the Cart

Chris, the only Black member of Sistrum, seemed skeptical about the possibility that her group could become racially integrated, or even comfortable for her as an African American:

C: You as a White person have no way of knowing what I'm feeling like. So, how would you make me feel welcome, you know? How would you know what I'm thinking? I guess that would be one of the things to work on. But you would have to do it together, you know – both sides would have to be willing. And it's not just the director; it would have to be the group. And that's where the problem lies: in these individuals.

Here, again, is the feeling, expressed by an African American, of being an enigma to White people. Chris does not think it would be impossible for her White cohorts to learn to understand her better, but she doubts that critical numbers of them would be willing to make the investment that this would entail. That so few of us do make that investment is what Bernice Johnson Reagon critiques when she says that "White people don't know *shit* about what Black people think."

There is a related sentiment sometimes expressed by liberal<sup>2</sup> White Feminists: "Oh, we can *never* understand what it's like to be Black!" But where observations like Reagon's are critical of Whites' unwillingness to undertake the possible, I hear White liberals using this statement in attempts to deny the possibility of the undertaking. The subtext goes something like this: "Because of our inability to understand African Americans, we will inevitably continue to hurt and mistreat them with our ineradicable racism; therefore, we are not worthy of sharing their company." This is a cop-out, motivated and justified by that great immobilizer, guilt. Whatever the supposed intention, the material result is a decidedly conservative one: White people again make the decision to maintain racial segregation. Even more dangerous is the racism effected when White people pronounce the emotions of Black people incomprehensibly alien.

The unsettling feeling of being isolated in a group that is likely to misjudge us prejudicially is anything but alien to White Lesbians. Patricia and Anna Lisa, both Lesbians, could have known better than

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<sup>2</sup> The reader should understand my use of the word *liberal* to mean a completely noncommittal – and thus eternally co-optable – position held by one who, while offended by conservatism, declines to imagine or actuate radical alternatives that can succeed in undermining its power. *Liberal*, as I use it, is not a compliment, but a diagnosis of cowardice.

to represent AMASONG as a comfortable place for our sole Woman of Color had they long since broken White habits of ignoring or denying racism and White privilege. When I read their words, I had no trouble understanding instantaneously how Eva would feel on reading them: misspoken for, silenced, tokenized, invisible – in other words, angry and sad. There is nothing so difficult to grasp about these eminently human responses.

Still, my friends Patricia and Anna Lisa were unable to catch themselves in the act of erasing Eva's experience. This was not the problem of denying that they could ever understand Black people but rather the one of missing that there was something significant to understand – of not knowing "shit" about what Eva thought. As I told first them and then the rest of the choir when addressing the problem with their letter, I expected that virtually any of the others could as easily have made the same mistake; we could all learn from this without casting them as the "bad guys." One of the general conditions of Whiteness that is critical for the maintenance of White privilege is just this kind of inability to look at and see the humanly obvious about racism and People of Color. Born into the culture of Whiteness, even the nicest among us necessarily suffer from this myopia, quite in the absence of any malicious racist intent. Still, most of us would report being aware in a general sense of pervasive – if unidentifiable – barriers to our connecting with African Americans. It requires sustained, active attention before we begin to see the systemic forces of racism converging daily in large and small ways on the human experiences and feelings of People of Color. It was my outrage over the gulf separating my humanity from the humanity of People of Color that mandated me to pay attention. The longer I pay attention, the more the gulf narrows.

The remedies that the White women of AMASONG and Sistrum suggested for desegregating their choirs focus almost solely on recruitment in the right places, as if it were just a matter of discovering and entering heretofore unexplored enclaves of Black women just waiting to be invited. This may be putting the cart before the horse. Eva's suggestion that we can't have Black choir members if we don't have Black friends seems more to the point, as both would be the results of the same necessary precondition: in order to sustain genuine friendships with African Americans, White Americans have to have been engaged in the kind of gulf-breaching that can transform our vision; when we become people who see with and act upon anti-racist vision, we will find that there are Black women willing to enter into friendships and create organizations with us.

Two summers after AMASONG's Zimbabwe project, we began rehearsals on what we hoped would be a second phase in our collaboration with Mudeka. This set of performances was to include Clifford Jakopo, a member of Mudeka's original company who was visiting from Harare. A large cohort of the chorus had agreed to meet weekly throughout the summer to work on this project. Not long into the undertaking, relations between Mudeka and Jakopo broke down, and the project had to be scrapped. I suggested an alternative summer project for the chorus, which was that we read and discuss several writings on anti-racism toward the goal of desegregating our organization. I can remember no more than one woman who responded that she would like to spend her summer that way. Discouraged, I conceded that this horse would not be drinking from waters to which I did not even know how to lead it.

Anna Crusis

The member of Anna Crusis's Board of Directors who sought approval for and arranged my interviews mentioned to me that Anna has a "Diversity Committee." No one I spoke to mentioned the committee, but evidence of what would presumably have been that committee's work surfaced in our conversations. There is a history of discussions about racial integration and attempts to achieve it within Anna Crusis that extends beyond questions of recruitment. I was not able to piece the history together, but it was clear to me that it had been an emotional one and that the issues it had raised were perhaps still unresolved. As I explained on page 17, at least one of Anna's Board members judged the morale of the group to be in a fragile state. Ruth made a comment about what she perceived as Anna's habit in response to conflict:

Well, I think that what happens is: when something...goes awry, it leaves everybody startled, and for the next five years, we do everything we can to avoid having that conversation.

I do not know to what extent responses to the challenge of racial integration may have been part of anything that has gone "awry" within Anna. I did, however, get a strong sense that the members have had to make a conscious assessment of the profile of their group. This was clear in my conversation with Thea about Anna's demographics:

K: What's the ratio of Lesbian to non-Lesbian? What are the racial demographics? How diverse or not is Anna?

L: Well, that's a hot topic. It depends on how you define diversity. If you define it by the number of Women of Color we have in the group, we don't have too many. This year we have two African-American women –

K: Out of how many? How big a group?

L: Um, we just had auditions and are bringing in a bunch of people, so I'm not sure how many. About forty, I would say. ...And we have three Asian women. ...In our recent history...we've had maybe five or six African-American women. Even if we get African-American women in the choir, we can't keep them; they seem to leave. We had one Indonesian – every now and then we have – we've had one or two Latina women, not too many. And we have a number of Jewish women, and – let's see: the number of – well, one of the African-American women that's joining this year – she had been a member in the past, and she's coming back this year – has recently become a Muslim, so that's something new.

K: Did she change her name?

L: No. But she was saying that she celebrates Ramadan, and that –

K: Is she a Dyke?

L: Yes, she is.

K: Okay. So, it wasn't that she married a Muslim man.

L: No.

K: Well, that's *interesting*. I'm trying to think whether I have any Muslim Lesbian friends! I don't believe I've ever had a discussion with any Muslim about how the practice of Islam can embrace Lesbianism.

That the individual members of Color who have been a part of this longstanding group can be enumerated indicates their salience as exceptions.

Thea's suggestion that *diversity* can refer to characteristics other than race seems to have been part of a public conversation within the choir. Ruth made this point early on in what was a fairly lengthy exchange about race in Anna:

R: (Jane) really would like us to do some gospel music. ...That's problematic because of the issues of religious pluralism in the choir.

K: Oh. Yeah.

R: And, like, yeah: I actually love the sound. But I sang Jesus music for a lot of years, and I joined Anna Crusis *so I wouldn't have to!* I don't *want* that to be what we sing. I don't *want* that to be who we are.

K: Uh-huh. And Jane wants to do it because – ?

R: I think partly she wants to do it because she thinks it will attract African-American women to the choir. Although, in a city like Philadelphia, I gotta tell ya': if you wanna sing gospel music, you sure ain't comin' to Anna Crusis! (*laughs*) There are *many* better venues, many better groups to sing gospel with! I guess I think it's a little bit tokenizing and insulting. But mostly I think that we shouldn't be apologetic about who we are. You know?

K: In terms of – ?

R: That we shouldn't try to mold ourselves to suit a certain audience's taste or to try to recruit certain kinds of people. I mean, I think it's important for us to try to get out to different kinds of audiences: I think it's important for us to consistently deliver Feminist images and messages. But I don't think that we should – it often comes down, when talking about diversity stuff – it often gets polarized to be about race and

Black and White in this city. And sometimes when we do that, we forget to look at the diversity that already exists within the group, along many different axes – not just racial.

K: Sexuality? Religion? Political orientation?

R: Sure. Age...

K: Class?

R: Some. Some.

K: Musical background?

R: Lots.

K: Physical ability?

R: Some, but mostly hidden. Certainly different learning styles, and those sorts of things.

Thea's and Ruth's comments reflect their exposure to a particular discourse heard in Womyn's cultural spaces that is familiar to me. The use of the word *diversity*, which became politically trendy among liberals toward the end of the twentieth century, typically does not indicate overtly what kind of diversity is meant. Unless otherwise specified, its default meaning has been *racial* diversity; more specifically, it has most often been used to indicate the measure of White people's success in involving the representation of People of Color. As critics in Womyn's (and other) circles point out, this exclusive focus on non-Whiteness as the sole element of difference has several undesirable effects. First, it ignores other attributes that are of particular salience in determining the conditions of women's lives. For example, differences in class, age, sexual orientation, and physical ability have deep ramifications for women's experiences and identities. Ignoring these makes it difficult for women to relate across such differences and often works to the detriment of poor and working-class women, Lesbian and Bisexual women, old or young women, and women with disabilities. Secondly, when Whites see *difference* as a synonym for *Color*, then we recast ourselves as the norm against which non-Whites are exoticized. And if we comply with the social construction of Whiteness (as discussed in Chapter Four) by seeing all of it as undifferentiated and uncolorful, we are particularly prone to turning always to People of Color to supply us with a sense of "culture," one of the problems discussed in the previous chapter.

The danger, however, of adopting a more comprehensive view of the word *diversity* is that we may use it to let ourselves off the hook for maintaining racially segregated organizations and mindsets. When, in the absence of racial integration, a "hidden" learning style is held up as proof that a group is diverse, the word "diversity" is revealed as having little power to undo racism. Notice that for Ruth, an

interpretation of *diversity* that excludes all but token Black representation is not inconsistent with her idea of “Feminist images and messages.” To be fair, when I founded AMASONG, I was not conscious of any significant dissonance between the image of a virtually White group and my idea of Feminism.

Anna Crusis’s director Jane Hulting had much to say about race within the choir. She brought up the topic in the midst of a conversation about general conflicts she has had with certain members about the balance between music and politics:

JH: I think if you’re really going to do Feminist politics, then you have to deal with issues of race. I mean, in a major way. Particularly in a city like this. And I think that it’s necessary to do, you know, repertoire that is – that other races, you know, want to sing. But I have found, also, in dealing with race and bringing in – particularly in our city, Black women – Black women, generally speaking, don’t want to deal with the kind of process that we have.

KB: Which is pronounced to be so Feminist.

JH: Right. But really what it is, it’s kind of a White, middle-class, educated – very educated (thing) – ...and being articulate: it’s the ability to construct arguments. That’s really what it is. And we find that often, people from the Black community are saying: “Come on. We just want to sing! Can we stop all this talking? I came here to sing.”

KB: I’ve heard that.

JH: So that is – that’s kind of a tug.

KB: That’s a serious contradiction.

At other points in our conversation, Hulting admitted frankly that she, like me, would rather have autonomy as the artistic director than subject decisions to a group process. Here, she does not specify how “often” Black women in Anna have objected to the group process. I do know from a conversation with another member that one Black singer who had quit the group cited the “White women’s process” as her reason. Hulting’s representation of Black women’s response to Anna’s process reflects the feelings that Chris, Sistrum’s only Black member, reported about any rehearsal time that was not spent rehearsing. Surely, though, these objections are not race-based: there were always White women in my choir who became quickly impatient to sing during any of the few times that I felt the need to involve the chorus in decisions.

Hulting’s explanation for her contention that Feminist process deters African-American membership is somewhat problematic. She elides “middle-class,” “educated,” “articulate,” and rhetorically skilled as suggested properties of Whiteness and not Blackness. Under racism it is a fact that African Americans have a higher per-capita rate of poverty than White Americans and, concomitantly, a lesser rate

of attainment of post-secondary-school degrees. To essentialize Blacks and Whites by these generalities, however, would be to ignore educated or middle-class Blacks as well as the legions of White poor. Still, Hulting's statement implies something worthy of attention. Wherever intellectual elitism goes unchallenged, there is a tendency to rate the value of a speaker's argument according to that speaker's mastery of academic, or "standard" (White), English. If the most masterful elocutors in Anna Crasis have the power to carry the day, then the problem – rather than being one of uneducated Blacks' "inability" to say what they perceive, want, and mean – may be one of the group's inability to hear the sense in any woman's argument, regardless of the language code used to express it.

There is something else about using "Feminist process" in choral rehearsal that could seem "White" or "educated-class" to someone struggling under racism or poverty. I agree that the pursuit of models of shared power and decision-making is a crucial revolutionary experiment. AMASONG's Board of Directors chose to operate by modified consensus, something I appreciated because our encounters were wholly for the making of group decisions, decisions for which each one of us was morally and financially liable. But my ideal *chorus* is not a group-decision-making body. To join a chorus with a director is to surrender autonomy – by unforced choice – for certain hours in the week, though a good director knows which decisions should not be made without consulting the singers. The decisions made by a choral director do not limit the physical, social, political, or economic well-being or the life-chances of the singers. Therefore, to spend precious music-making time asserting the right to shared governance as if one's security or civil liberties were under threat could seem – to some women who experience that actual threat regularly outside of the rehearsal – a misplacement of revolutionary zeal.

Despite the bias that Hulting and I share against chorus-by-consensus, we cannot deny the example of MUSE, which involves Black and White women of varying economic and educational backgrounds in governance by consensus, all while delivering a consistently polished musical product. Anna Crasis's problem, therefore, may not be the commitment to "Feminist process" but rather the details of its execution. Ruth suggested as much to me:

R: I think that if Anna Crasis was really serious about being a multi-racial choir in greater proportions, what it would take would be to take apart our systems, to find Women of Color who were interested in building something different, and listen to what they had to say about what works and doesn't work for them, both in terms of structure and of repertoire and in terms of process – in terms of all aspects of the choir's life. The reality of this choir is: we are a White-Feminist-legacy group. We are. Now, that's not to say that all of the singers in the choir are always White, but the way we do things and the kinds of processes we use –

K: What's White, Feminist process?

R: Um...

K: Do you claim it, and would it be hard to give up?



R: (*long pause*) The reason that I'm hesitating is I'm not sure I would give the same answer to what's White, Feminist process and what's Anna's process – because I think in many ways we've even abandoned Feminist processes. We're down to democratic processes, but with far more arguing!

K: In other words, "majority rules" instead of consensus.

R: Right. I mean, I think that there was a time when many Feminist groups were using consensus process, although most of them not using it well. I should say "most of *us* were not using it well." I'll own that! And, I also don't think that consensus process is necessarily the best way to run a choir; it takes too long. But that doesn't mean that you shouldn't have shared power. And that doesn't mean that you shouldn't have accountability. And that doesn't mean that you shouldn't have a lot of participation from everybody in the group in the way things operate. And I think that there are ways to do that. But I think that what has happened in a lot of Feminist groups, and I would say in Anna Crusis as well, is that the frustrations with the limitations of consensus process have led to a kind of degrading not just of the process but of the values that lie beneath the process. So we're down to a kind of committee structure and majority votes because it's easier, but when you have majority votes, you *never* serve the minority. I mean, it's built in! So, how can you say that you want a group that reflects what I would consider to be Feminist values of shared power and leadership if – and that you say you want to have a group where diversity is increased and where you've got minority viewpoints represented – well, how can you have that and have a majority-rules structure and *think* that those things are going to be compatible? And I don't think they can be.

K: So you're saying that if you had six African-American women in the group, they would still be a minority, but if they all happened to share a position that the White women didn't happen to, the democratic process would never –

R: – never allow them to have their way. That's right. Unless women decided that they were guilty enough!

K: Right, right! (*laughing*)

R: But then it would still be the majority *giving* something to the minority like some kind of magnanimous gesture. It's not – it can't work that way.

Ruth, too, is claiming that the decision-making process Anna adopted was – at least before it devolved – somehow culturally White, independent of the races of the women involved in it. Though she values having some system of shared decision-making whereas Jane would rather do without it, both agree that it is one of the aspects of Anna that might have to change as part of a program of involving significant numbers of Black women.

Hulting mentioned other possible changes that seem to have been discussed, including the institution of some policy that would limit the numbers of new White members:

JH: Over the last few years Anna hasn't been very good, and we really haven't been working at it very hard, to handle the race thing. Because it means – a lot of things, you know, that I think the choir's not particularly willing to really work on.

KB: For example?

JH: Well, you know, the whole process thing. You know. I mean, do we always advertise in the Black neighborhoods? Do we always advertise in the Hispanic neighborhoods? You know, do we always do all this stuff? Do we always incorporate Black repertoire? Yes. Do we always incorporate Spanish repertoire? Yes. You know, all this kind of stuff. But, we don't really do the work that we really need to do. Like, this year, we have two Black women. In a city like Philadelphia? That's crazy. I mean, the city's almost forty percent Black. That's crazy.

KB: So, you'd have to give up process, would be one thing?

J: I think so.

KB: What else would you have to do?

JH: I think you'd also have to do sort of an affirmative-action thing.

KB: Oh, you mean saving a certain number of seats for Women of Color?

JH: Yeah.

KB: And the group wouldn't want to do that.

JH: Possibly –

KB: Or *you* wouldn't want to do that?

JH: I'd be open for doing that.

Though Hulting would be willing to make this change, Ruth thinks it's a bad idea:

I've seen this happen a lot in terms of, like, years ago when I first moved to Philly, I was looking for a place to live, and I was interviewing in this house – sort of a notorious group (of women) up in West Philadelphia – and they were *so particular* about their ratios and proportions of who could live there. And they had a land-grant house, or something like – there's a few of them in West Philly that were probably bought back in the '60s or something, so that they're owned by some sort of collective, non-for-profit

something or other. Which means that you're not paying rent to a slumlord, which in a university area is a big deal, right? So there was this huge, wonderful house in West Philadelphia that they allowed to, like, basically go empty because they couldn't find the right woman with the right demographic characteristics for their balance to be right. Similarly, in a local organization called Women Organized Against Rape, there was – I don't know if they still operate this way – there was a time when they were looking for someone to do work with survivors of sexual assault, a group for Lesbians. But because of their ratio politics, they had to find an African-American woman. Well, they *didn't* find an African-American woman who had the right combination of experience, so that they allowed the position to go unfilled, and they lost the funding line! So not only are the Black Lesbians in town not getting served, but neither are the White Lesbians, or anybody else, for that matter, because the position goes unfilled and the services go unprovided. So, who does that benefit? It's kind of like there's a point at which, if you're not going to make root-level change where you totally reconstruct the whole organization, which is what you really have to do – if you're not going to do that, quotas aren't going to do the work for you.

Ruth's frustration at not being able to move into the house in West Philly because she wasn't African-American is palpable here. Her larger point that services can go unprovided when racial quotas are unmet is worthy of ethical debate in matters such as the staffing of a rape-crisis center. It is unclear to me, however, that if Anna were to set aside six seats (for example) for African-American women, and if those seats were to go unfilled, that Anna would disappear as a choral organization serving Philadelphia Womyn. My discussion of MUSE will show that reserving seats for Women of Color is another of the policies that has helped them maintain a racially integrated, Feminist chorus.

Ruth's observation that quota systems are no substitute for radical change is an important one. I have made the same observation about the busing of African-American students. Sending them out of their communities and, handful by handful, into schools in White neighborhoods is no substitute for addressing poverty, residential segregation, and the unequal distribution of public school funds. As a public school teacher, I suspected daily that this policy did the African-American children more harm than good. But I see no active harm inherent in Affirmative Action, and though there is much radical good it cannot be said to accomplish, abolishing it in the absence of more effective, "root-level" change sacrifices the racial integration of our workplaces and the other opportunities it does provide. How far, then, should a chorus have to dig for the root level before justifying changes at the level of a quota system? The bedrock of any chorus, however radicalized, still only skims the surface of our larger societal systems, which will continue to shape the chorus. One either decides to begin somewhere anyway or else to insist on the futility of the enterprise.

It seems that Anna Crusis has had a discussion about whether to adopt radical organizational change as an all-or-nothing approach. Ruth has seen another group accomplish this successfully:

K: Is it (Jane's) idea that a Feminist choir should have a representative ratio of Black women to White women? You were talking about her wanting to do gospel to get more Black women in. Is that because she thinks that's a Feminist thing to do, or why does she want to do that?

R: Well, I mean, she is liberal. You know, she has some progressive ideas. She thinks diversity is important; I think diversity is important, too. But I don't think that doing gospel music is the way to increase racial diversity in the choir. Like, I don't think that's going to make any lasting change.

K: Is that of value to you, that there would be a way to do it?

R: Oh, yeah. Sure.

K: How do you think you could set about to do it?

R: Well, I mean – first of all, it's tricky, you know? It isn't easy. We're in a city here where communities are very separate. There's only one Feminist organization that I know of that has successfully navigated those waters, and that's called Sisterspace.

K: Oh, what is it?

R: It's an organization that puts on a retreat weekend every year. And in the past they've sponsored softball teams, and – once upon a time...their idea was to raise enough money to have a space.

K: Is it Dyke, or Feminist, or Feminist-mostly-Dyke, or – ?

R: Dyke. Dyke-Feminist. And they really got it somewhere along the line that White Feminists were organizing this stuff and it was going to continue to be like that unless they made real root-level, radical change; and they *did*. They took apart their leadership structure, and they said: "We need to invite Women of Color to be involved at every level of the process and to ask them what would make this be something that was of interest to them – and be willing to *do* it – in order for this to really change." And they *did* it.

Ruth knows it is possible for women in a White organization to dismantle their structure and enter into partnership with Women of Color to recreate themselves together as a racially integrated group. Still, she either favors or perceives that the majority of Anna Crusis favors maintaining the status quo, not necessarily by choosing it willfully, but by being unprepared to discover and then implement the changes that would be required. She would, however, like the chorus to maintain its current identity without apology and without purporting to represent all women; this means acknowledgment of the group's specificity and limitations, and honest recognition that it is a "White-Feminist-legacy" group. This kind of awareness and honesty about ourselves as *White Womyn's* choruses would be in itself a progressive step. After all, what message is being reinforced when the University of Illinois Black Chorus represents itself as such but the University of Illinois Chorale – which in my four years as a member never sang anything not written by a White (and male) person – has no color (to say nothing of gender)? White singers may and do

join the Black Chorus, but it is acknowledged that they are partaking of the goods of Black cultural production. My guess is that Black people in that group are seldom concerned about why more White people don't join. But directors of groups like the Chorale who do not think of themselves as working in markedly White traditions are stumped by the infrequency of Black involvement in the enterprise.

As I have already written, by the time I felt that my Feminism could no longer be represented by virtual Whiteness, AMASONG was too long underway – and I was too soon to be leaving Champaign-Urbana – for me to feel that I could possibly summon the energy it would take to make a serious attempt at integration. Members within Anna Crusis are daunted and discouraged, too. This is partly the result of failed attempts. Hulting assigns the failure to a lack of commitment to the undertaking on the part of some singers. She, too, is uncommitted to the project – perhaps not in general, but certainly with Anna:

JH: I think race is one of those things that's deeply imbedded in the infrastructure of the ensemble. It's not like something you can apply – you can't keep the structure of your old group and just sort of add race. It doesn't happen. See, it is such a big one that it has to be incorporated in the roots. And if the roots are committed to that whole thing, I believe it'll happen. In a town like this? I believe it'll happen. But, you see, Anna is not committed to that. It says it is, but the actions are not that.

KB: Mm-hmm. Let me ask you a question that I've asked myself. And, uh, sometimes I don't want to know what my answer would be. But, given that there were an opportunity to do that kind of root-level change that would be necessary to change the racial profile of Anna, would you be up for doing that, or would you have concerns about how that energy would detract from your musical involvement/output/process?

JH: Well, it would take a lot of time. Like, the first season –

KB: I mean, at the *gut level*. Would it make you nervous?

JH: *(pauses)* Um – *(pauses again)* Well –

KB: I mean, I ask because it does make – I mean, the thought of it: “Oh, wow. Yeah. This is what it would require.” And also: “Can we give the amount of energy that it would require and still not subtract energy from what we need for *(melodramatically and self-mockingly)* *My Artistic Vision?*”

JH: And still do the music. Well, yeah. Well, I know. You see...

KB: I mean, this is my barest naked – my most embarrassing confession, that this goes through my head sometimes.

JH: Yeah, I hear ya'. I know. It's a big one. It's a big one. Um, I'm not sure that I would.

KB: That you would *think* that? Or that you would *want* to go there?

JH: Well, I think the choir should grapple with those issues. I think the choir is also pretty old. And it has so many things embedded; it takes –

KB: Ossified?

JH: Well, I mean, it moves. It changes. It changes all the time. But there's still some core kinds of things, you know? So, it is – I don't know; I hate to use "ossified," but there is a sort of a – *waxed* kind of thing. I mean, it would take at least a year, if not a couple years, of major work, conversations, dialogue...

KB: Right. Some readings...

JH: But you see, we used to do all that. We've done a lot of this. And it doesn't stick.

KB: Wow!

JH: We've had reading groups before rehearsal: "Come out early and share your thoughts about this." We have people handing out articles on race all the time... I mean, it's not that this is a new issue. It's just that in the last couple of years, when we've been really, you know, setting up the Board – we have a new Board structure – we didn't have, really, the energy to do it. You know? And keeping the Board going is tremendously energy-involving. And, you know, you choose your priorities. I don't know. When the choir is fifty years old, will the choir have done it? Not sure. But I didn't really answer your question, which is whether or not *I'd* want to do it. Ideally, it's a – (*pauses*) I think I would consider doing it with, like, a different choir.

KB: Yeah, starting fresh, and –

JH: Starting all over again and building something. I don't think that I would really want to put in the effort that it would take to deal with this particular mechanism that's already in place.

At the end of my conversation with Irene, who was a member of Anna when Catherine Roma founded it, I mentioned that I was going to be comparing other Sister Singers choirs to MUSE:

K: Diversifying the racial membership is a difficult thing to do. And it's something we all say we want to do. But Cathy's the one who says she wants to and then does it.

I: Yeah. So you're going to zero in on how it is that it has worked there and hasn't happened here.

K: Yeah, zero in, and then make that information available to other people.

I: I myself feel that it mainly is the enormous energy and personality of Cathy Roma, and that's the big difference: that this is something that she has personally and wholeheartedly committed herself to. Above everything else that she's committed herself to, that is like a central tenet. And that being the case, you know, she'll make it happen like she's been able to make so many things happen.

K: Yeah. And I think that in this country, anything less than that is going to fall short of the mark.

I: I think so, yeah. Because the odds are so-o-o overwhelmingly working against real connection, coming together.

The remainder of this chapter examines the accomplishments of that visionary, Catherine Roma, and her *comadres* in MUSE: Cincinnati's Women's Choir.

### MUSE: A Case Study

The first rehearsal of MUSE: Cincinnati's Women's Choir was in January of 1984. Begun like most Sister Singers choirs – on a shoestring – MUSE moves into the twenty-first century as a vital organization with broad support from community members, corporate sponsors, and city, state, and national funding agencies. The current statement of MUSE's philosophy reads:

MUSE is dedicated to musical excellence and social change. In keeping with our belief that diversity is strength, we are feminist women of varied ages, races, and ethnicities with a range of musical abilities, political interests, and life experiences. We are women loving women; we are heterosexual, lesbian, and bisexual women united in song. We commission and seek out music composed by women, pieces written to enhance the sound of women's voices, and songs that honor the enduring spirit of all peoples. In performing, we strive for a concert experience that entertains, inspires, motivates, heals, and creates a feeling of community with our audience.

This philosophy contains several themes already discussed in this project: the joining of artistic and political goals; the relevance of performers' identities; an interest in diversity of several kinds; and an ethos of connection with audiences.

Many women have contributed to the making and shaping of MUSE, but the best insight into its history and evolution is provided by the words of its visionary founder and leader, Catherine Roma. I begin this case study by presenting in large portion the interview Roma granted me late one Monday night after a MUSE rehearsal. Her narrative is rich in important factual information about the MUSE phenomenon and its wider musico-political context. Rather than reporting these in a summary, I prefer to let them be heard in Roma's voice; this gives the reader a sense of Roma's character, which is the *sine qua non* behind the historical facts.

The last section of this chapter presents the voices of five singers in MUSE, one of whom is also the group's Associate Director. I asked them to respond to virtually the same set of questions put to the women of AMASONG, Sistrum, and Anna Crusis. In addition, they have something to say that none of the women in the other amateur groups can talk about, which is to report on the experience of singing in a choir that has been racially desegregated.

### An Interview with Catherine Roma

#### *A GALA Event*

On the night that I stayed at Roma's house to interview her for this study, she had recently returned from the annual Gay And Lesbian Association (GALA) of Choruses Leadership Conference and Singers Weekend. At this gathering, chorus directors, managers, office staff, and Board members attend a range of workshops in matters of chorus creation, development, administration, and growth. Concurrently, guest conductors prepare and perform concert sets with a men's chorus, a women's chorus, and a mixed chorus, which any member of any GALA ensemble is invited to join for the weekend. At this year's conference, it was Roma's particular privilege to introduce the keynote speaker, Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon. I had been frustrated by my inability to attend, so I was anxious to hear Roma's report. Her narrative helps to place both her and Dr. Reagon in the context of this study, as well as revealing many of the concerns that inspire her practice:

KB: So tell me! What did Bernice say at GALA?

CR: All right. I'll try. You know I can't even begin to capture it. But I'll give you the outline, the idea. I was nervous as anything.

KB: Were you introducing her?

CR: I was introducing her, yeah. I helped get her.

KB: What were you nervous about?

CR: Well, every time I get together with her, we're working. And, you know, I just – I just care about her a lot and that relationship. ...Sometimes she has – interesting ways of going about teaching people things. So I didn't have any question that she was going to do something very special. I had absolutely no idea what it was going to be. So I wanted to do something that was really special. I essentially said in my introduction that this was a love letter to her. ...And I had practiced a lot – you know, I had spent some time, wanting to write something really good, just to let the audience – there were about five or six hundred people there – let them know about her background and how there was nobody better to be talking to that group. Because she put her life on the line for her beliefs, and she did it through music. And she has a Ph.D., and so she's a scholar, she's a performer, she's a conductor, she's a singer, and



she's everything that all of us are. And practically everyone in the room had probably sung something by her; if it's "Ella's Song," or whatever. So, placing her in time and, of course, what she's doing now. And then, what I learned from her... – some of things I've learned that had to do with – my litany, you know; you've probably heard this before: from the time I was with Anna and she came up to work with us from Washington to Philly on four consecutive Wednesday nights in April of '79.

KB: Why?

CR: To do four workshops and teach three songs.

KB: Had you met her before?

CR: Oh, yeah. And I went down to her house, to talk to her about it and everything. That was my first visit. So, how did we meet the first time? I have absolutely no idea. Except that I was asking her for her songs; I know that. ...I might have helped produce her in a concert somewhere. So, anyway, I started asking her in the late '70s: "How do I attract more Women of Color to Anna?" And then she came here; she's been here to work with (MUSE) a few times. And so, she kept harping on this – like she was knocking on a door that I had closed: "What kind of repertoire are you doing?" She repeated that, because I would ask her again, and she would say the exact same thing but in a different form. Because I was still struggling, you know, doing this classical music. So finally I began to get it. I began to get it. And so (at GALA) I talked about that discovery. Then she got up. She knew everything was in place: everybody was standing up, and: "Who better than she to have – " blah-blah-blah. So, she gets up there, and she's just taking it in, you know, just: (*imitates Reagon's very centered and regal public persona*). She starts to sing. "There is a Balm in Gilead." Everybody – everybody, to a person, sang. And that place just – ! And when she stopped, it was electrifying. It was *electrifying*! It's a sacred song: I mean, she started with "sometimes I feel discouraged and think my work's in vain." You know, and then she went to "preach like Peter, pray like Paul." So...the point was to start there and then bring people in. And then she proceeded to describe and read historically a primary source from a letter written by some African-American people in the infantry from the Massachusetts Four Hundred Twenty-Third, I can't remember, who were down in Virginia and who were going to get massacred the next day. I mean, they were just going to get –

KB: Fodder.

CR: Yeah. Anyway, what did they do? She described the situation in this wonderful way. They *sang*. And they were *connected* to one another. And they raised up a voice together. And when one started, another picked it up. And she talked about that whole *community* of singing and sound and what it was like. And then she began to talk about the Fisk Jubilee Singers and their work. And she called them the first crossover artists. And she talked about how when they were in Ohio was where it really happened; how... they weren't very successful at first until they started singing the Spirituals. So that was her whole way of starting to make connections of this music then crossing over into a White audience, and the Black people taking it into a different milieu; Lesbian and Gay people taking that music of theirs

into – she would intimate and – and say little, connecting sentences that weren't really overt, but that were meaningful and that lots of people connected to.

KB: You lost me for a minute: Lesbian and Gay people taking "their" music: Black music?

CR: Their music: Lesbian and Gay music. So, *making* those connections: which is what I kept saying she was doing with her life. That's what she always does. So we sang another song, and I can't remember what it was. But anyway, she didn't talk long, but...there was an academic part of her delivery and a very warm, connecting part. You should get some interaction from the women on the choral net. Everyone got something different: that's what I kept hearing: "What did you get?" "Well, I got this." Especially, it was so good for the men. The women, you know, they were right there – probably making a lot of the connections on their own. I think it took the men a longer period of time. And they, I think, were so blown away by her presence and who she was. I think they were beginning to get it, but she was not a known person to a lot of the guys. Of course, a lot of the people that go there are not just the directors, who would know her. You've got this singing thing going, and you've got Board people –

KB: Managers –

CR: Right. So. It was good.

KB: Anything about the place of Black music in GALA? Or how it's been, or how she would like to see it used?

CR: No. But, the "what kind of repertoire are you doing" thing –

KB: She did put the question?

CR: Well it was running through what she was talking about, but unstated in that way.

KB: Well. I'm really sorry I couldn't be there.

CR: Yeah. There were some good things (at the conference). There always are. And it's good to network with people. And there's so much diversity in women's choirs: it's pretty incredible. I mean, I'm trying to articulate a lot of this because I'm writing this chapter on the women's choral movement for this book. And, you know, I'm glad to see where it is now and what's happened to it in the last 25 years. It's going to be a fascinating thing, and I'll be wanting to talk to you about it probably soon: I'll probably come up there with a tape recorder.

KB: That'll be great! Cathy, what publication is this going to be in?

CR: Ah, there's a book coming out from the University of Illinois Press called *Radical Harmony: The*

*History of Women's Music*. And there are five of us that are equal editor-author people at the moment. And I am doing either two chapters or one, long chapter. And the two chapters are The History of the Women's Choral Movement and Women As Composers – Women's voice in a, sort of classical, but not just classical: Bernice will be in that chapter, Ysaye will be in that chapter, Kay Gardner, um, maybe even Libby Larsen: some people whom women are using to – who are being commissioned. (Also) Bonnie Morris who wrote that book (*Eden Built by Eves*) –

KB: Yeah, yeah.

CR: Okay. Toni Armstrong from *HOTWIRE*. Do you know Boden Sandstrom?

KB: You know, I *don't* know Boden personally.

CR: She goes way back to – she's a sound person – she did *Sweet Honey*; she's finishing up her Ph.D. in *ethnomusicology* at University of Maryland, College Park. (Also) Judith Casselberry. So. It's a trip, because we had a Sister Singers meeting at GALA. I don't know how many of these choirs were represented, plus some mixed choirs – women in mixed choirs. But, you know, man, everybody's all over the place. That hard-line or sort of grassroots Feminism is not so apparent at the present. Because, there's nobody talking about money/capitalism/class or anything like that at GALA. You know. And Sister Singers always has been careful when we've had gatherings, to make sure we had community housing so women could come – to make it accessible, and of course critiquing the system.

KB: GALA's *working* the system!

CR: Yeah, right. And, you know, not that that's bad, but: who is critiquing GALA? Certainly nobody from within. Love it or leave it, kind of. It's just interesting. It's important that it exists, but it's still very male in concept, even though now there's a woman president.

Clearly, Roma had wanted the audience to understand that the Queer choral movement in the United States occupies a recent place in a history of musical community-building and activism, and that Reagon has been a particularly significant participant in, shaper of, and carrier of that legacy. With Reagon's music appearing in the repertoires of so many of our choruses, Roma felt that her presence before and address to this audience was essential in elucidating the connections between African American and Queer struggles for self-determination, connections whose implications the largely-White, Queer choral movement has not always considered fully.

Roma's narrative tells us that there was a period of at least ten years between the time she began asking about how to desegregate a choir and the time she started to understand what might be needed and to began to accomplish her goal. Reagon had been making it clear for years that a consideration of the group's repertoire was indispensable to the project. The theme of the concert *Spiritual* as the first African-American crossover ("appropriated"?) genre is revisited here. We also learn from Roma about other

scholarly interest in the Womyn's music movement. This scholarship – like the present study – is being carried out by the women whose musical, technical, and promotional work made the movement happen. These women are looking back on the phenomenon at a time when its catalytic radicalism has in many instances become liberalized, as veteran members of the longstanding Anna Crusis have observed about their group. This trend is especially apparent among women choral musicians with close or even exclusive ties to the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses, whose predominantly White and male membership generally aims more toward assimilation into the (privileged levels of the) existing social hierarchy than toward revolutionizing the power structure.

### *An Autobiographical Narrative*

After Roma had completed her report on her trip to the GALA conference, I asked her to tell me about herself:

KB: Okay. Cathy Roma. Identify yourself! Who are you in this world?

CR: (*pauses*) You didn't tell me you were going to do *that!* (*laughs*) Do you want the, uh, factual?

KB: Well, it's an open question, but I'd like you to be as complete as you feel you need to be. How do you identify yourself?

CR: To myself?

KB: Sure.

CR: Um – I am a positive, optimistic person, and I – music is my passion, and, ah, I love choral singing, and I love to combine my love of music and my love of women and my love of politics into a – into a *one*. And that's how I've been so involved with women's choirs. That was my original thinking of bringing women together, and what was urging me on, was to bring those things together. But in the process of doing that, I realized that I had so many questions to ask myself and so many things to learn, and I had to take new steps and – so part of me learning with women's choirs was that I was getting a new sense of music-making and a sense of weaknesses within myself, being classically trained. So, I've along the way found mentors. So I would say that mentors and teachers and people have helped me be who I am. And then also realizing as I started to look at some of the questions I was asking – I couldn't answer the question "Am I a racist?" without existing in communities of different people – if I was only circulating in people of European background and saying: "Oh, well, I think this and I think that." And so I needed to move and I needed to change and move into some new environments. And so with that came wanting to bring people together such as the Martin Luther King Chorale, which is the tenth year I've been doing that. And the Unitarian church choir, where I could begin to experiment and bring anything there; they were very tolerant of me. So it was not only MUSE; MUSE created the first opening. So –

who I am: I love to bring people together through music and understand music in its cultural context and perform music with that kind of knowledge.

KB: What's *your* cultural context?

CR: My cultural context? Um – what am I? I'm Italian American, middle class –

KB: How many generations?

CR: My mother was born in Italy; my father's family was from Italy. So, my mother's family came over about 1912, and my father's family came over in the last decade of the nineteenth century. So I'm one-hundred percent Italian. ...I'm definitely middle class. My father's family was definitely middle class. My mother's family was more working class, but she wanted to bring herself up. So that's my background. Philadelphia, urban, private school – Quaker school, which I think is different than private school, because it's where I grew to be a political person and not a Catholic person.

KB: Were your parents still practicing Catholics?

CR: My mother was. My father was a European Catholic – you know: "Just the sacraments, please." And then I became a Quaker at seventeen and my father said, "Oh, if I had it to do over again, I'd be a Quaker." So, good Quaker school from K through Twelve, which was the best thing my parents could have done for me. It was a gift. It was a colossal gift, and I loved it. ...That's where I got so much of my musical training. I mean, I had piano lessons that were not at the school, but I went to Europe with the choir from the school. I had people there who cared about me as a little musical being.

KB: Italian spoken in your home?

CR: Um, only bad words and Christmas presents and things that weren't for my ears.

KB: Italian songs sung?

CR: No. My mother played piano.

KB: Classically?

CR: Yeah. Yeah. I think she was good. I wear a silver medal that my mother won in 1925. It's Second Place for playing Chopin, a Chopin prelude when she was in high school. So, she had that passion and love. My father: not so musical. His uncle was in the Philadelphia Orchestra for one year. So, there's a musical "gene." But no, no ethnic songs; there was no Italian – there was a real mixed thing on my mom's side about – I wanted to get my ears pierced: "No, you're a Gypsy if you get your ears pierced." I mean, so, really wanting to move out of that identification. She was a bourgeois – you know.

KB: What would you say is the music of your culture?

CR: Oh. Um. that – or – ? *(pause)* Well, I mean, music of my culture and my training and stuff that's deeply important to me is classical, because that's where I've been from a tiny person. And it was imparted to me without its cultural context, in a sense, so I knew nothing about that. And I had wonderful teachers, so I feel like I have a wonderful sense of performing and musicality, and I feel wonderful about all that. There's an incredible amount of joy I get out of it, and spirituality, and things that words can't say that music can. But, as I came of age, I think music played an incredible role in my sexuality without my having come to terms with this yet or being able to articulate well. ...*(And)* my political consciousness and my musical appreciation – they're all mixed up in there, and it's really important. So, my musical culture is pop music that became so important in my culture's life, you know? And that's everybody from Bob Dylan and the Beatles and the Rolling Stones and Jefferson Airplane to all of the Motown, all of the Black music that was starting to get under my skin. And my realizing that I'm starting to get drawn to all this Black music, you know, whether it's gospel music, whether it's Spirituals – so there was something that started happening – and Stevie Wonder. You know, and I was teaching high school using a lot of Black music for teaching about contemporary times, commentary and stuff like that. Um, the Civil Rights movement, music from that, Black Power, soul music. So... – and expression of what *I* was going through! Whether it was Bob Dylan and his interesting voice, his poetry, whatever. All that is my culture, right? And very important. And then, of course, in the early-mid-'70s, it was *Lavender Jane Loves Women*. And so, beginning to realize that that was something that was very appealing – that was the beginning of realizing that there was a consciousness about music that didn't exist about women's lives.

KB: Were you out at that time?

CR: Oh, yeah. I got to college in '66 and had mad crushes, pretty much, but I had mad crushes on guys, too, and I was Italian, and I was romantic, and I loved everybody and life and music and people, and – you know, I got up to my freshman year, and I absolutely *worshipped* this junior, an incredibly bright Jewish woman from New York. Rachel Margolis.<sup>3</sup> Whoo!

I omit here Roma's delightful reminiscences of disabling crushes on a series of brilliant and colorful college women, her visits to a Leftist therapist who, quite ahead of his time, encouraged her to pursue and enjoy her attractions,<sup>4</sup> and her eventual first experience with a woman lover (who happens to be a well-known Womyn's musician). Our next exchange locates her in the chronology of Womyn's music as well as establishing our relationship to each other as women in successive generations of Lesbian Feminism:

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<sup>3</sup> pseudonym

<sup>4</sup> This was in the late '60s: it was not until 1973 that the American Psychiatric Association removed "homosexuality" from its list of mental disorders, something that does not prevent all practitioners from approaching it as such even today.

CR: So, then it was only a matter of months before I fell in love with a married woman; they had “an arrangement.” those were the days. ...So that happened my junior year in '68-'69.

KB: God; I was three years old!

CR: And *Lavender Jane Loves Women*<sup>5</sup> was '73.

KB: How did you find it? Where did you hear it?

CR: Uh, well, I was in a relationship. I was with this person I fell in madly in love with in 1970 and we were together for five years, and we're still friends. ...I'm not sure whether we got wind of that in Madison. We were part of a pretty political group. I have a recollection of it being in the bookcase where we were living with a couple of women, but I don't have a recollection of how it got there – none of whom were Lesbians at that time and probably still aren't.

KB: So, the significance of that LP in your life?

CR: Well, it fit into – it was just sort of the stream of things that were happening. My politics, my life. Okay, because music was an expression of my activism in the street, my awareness of the Black community, and my anti-war – music was a part of all that. So here was the beginning of the Women's movement, and the Womyn's music movement taking expression from that.

Roma's irrepressibly passionate approach to life – which she sees in part as an aspect of “the Italian character” – is evident throughout this account. Her refusal to suppress her passion for women, music, or social justice drives her insistence on the successful integration of all three. Her strong backgrounds in music and politics converged on her development during one of the most activist periods in United States history. She cherishes her early classical training but observes that it failed to meaningfully relate the music she loves to its cultural and historical context. Part of the appeal to her of popular music in her young adulthood was its comment upon her daily concerns. She notes the prominence within popular music of African-American thought and creativity.

#### *On Womyn's Music and the First Feminist Choirs*

One aspect of Roma's life that was not expressed in mainstream popular music in the late 1960s and early 1970s was her Feminism. When she encountered Womyn's music in her radical friendship circles, she found that it supplied something she needed:

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<sup>5</sup> The groundbreaking Womyn's music LP by Alix Dobkin and Kay Gardner.

CR: It was a voice that was missing; it was a voice that I related to. And it was delightful. But then again, it was so poorly done, that if you want to get critical – I mean, in terms of: “Here I am in classical music and I’m getting my master’s, and I’m *listening* to this stuff!” But that’s not the level at which I was critiquing it. I’m really not doing that. But that was in my mind. Then at the same time, it was not long after that, really – well, Socialist Feminism was happening then. The Womyn’s music festivals hadn’t really started yet, right? Seventy-five. But Antioch had this big Socialist Feminist conference in the summer of ’75. And there were some music people there, but it was more folksy. So there was this whole mix of things going on. And that was really more folk music. So that was really coming out of the folk –

KB: By which you mean, like, Woody Guthrie? Pete Seeger?

CR: Yeah, that sort of Folk Revival that was happening: Malvina Reynolds and Joan Baez, and that group of people. Okay? Pete Seeger. ...And so then, my first women’s chorus comes out of this.

KB: After the Antioch – ?

CR: Well, no. It happened before that.

KB: Before the festivals?

CR: Yeah.

KB: No shit!

CR: Well, was the first one in ’75? I think Champaign was.<sup>6</sup> I finished my master’s, and you know, you always finish these things: “What did I just go through, and how come I feel like I’m not what I’m supposed to be?” I felt that after my doctorate. You know. There are just all these holes. How can you do it all? You have this Ph.D. and you’re called “Dr.,” and – . So I had this master’s. Or at least I was working on it. In the ’74 summer, I went to work with Margaret Hillis. A woman.

KB: To say nothing of –

CR: Right, *exactly!* Two-week workshop, we went to Ravinia, you know, we worked at Northwestern. And I stayed at that time with a woman, Anne Gordon, who I knew all the way from Philly, who went to Germantown Friends with me, but who also got her degree in Colonial History at Wisconsin. She’s Straight. Ah, but incredibly political, just pot-smokin’, beer-drinkin’ – same as me. And so I stayed with her, and we just, you know: conversation, right? So for my master’s conducting experience, I was working with a boychoir. I had a church choir and a boychoir. So, I said: “1976 is coming up. I don’t

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<sup>6</sup> She is referring to the first National, which was actually in 1974.



know where I'll be, but I want to tell the story of women. But I have a *boychoir*. I can't dress them up as girls!" And she said: "Cathy, why don't you start up a women's choir?"

I have already quoted the continuation of this conversation on page 152, where it supplies the background information on Roma's founding of Anna Crusis (West) in Madison, followed by her founding of Anna Crusis (East) in Philadelphia. Roma went on to reflect on the impact of her early Anna Crusis program, the collection of songs and orations on women's history that she and Anne Gordon had prepared for a performance with Philadelphia's Anna in the Bicentennial year:

CR: Connecting politics with women's lives. ...You know, it's pretty incredible, the whole story of women in the United States – coming to power in, ah, the more working class and the middle class. We sort of stopped there in '36 with Mother Jones; I wish we'd have gone on further. But, we did "Bread and Roses –"

KB: How many Dykes in Anna? What did that look like?

CR: It was a real mix. So that was good.

KB: And the Dykes were out? With the choir?

CR: Mm-hmm. The night before we performed at Bryn Mawr College, we went down and performed at Kent. And this man who was one of my bosses – he was headmaster of the middle school; I worked in a Quaker school – and his daughter was in the choir, and she was out. But he didn't know his daughter was out. And he made this comment to a very close Straight friend of mine and of his daughter's: "Oh, I couldn't stand it!" You know, women were making out and everything in the audience. And this crowd was a pretty Dykey crowd, too. So that was very important. (The chorus) wasn't overtly Lesbian at that point, but then, of course, we had Margie Adam, and a whole series...: Kay Gardner, and Meg (Christian) and Holly (Near), and –

KB: How did you get hooked up with all these women?

CR: Because I went to the second National Women's Music Festival in '76. I made that trip. And I didn't go to Michigan, but I went steadily, all the time, out to Champaign. And I loved it. I met Rhiannon there, and I met Bev Grant, and I met Holly there; I met all those people there. And, you know, I was a musical person with a musical group. Kay Gardner was there, and she was classically trained, so we connected right away. I was doing pickup choirs very early on at Champaign-Urbana. We did a piece by Francesca Caccini. And then, a piece by \_\_\_\_ (*my tape is ruined here*) appeared. And I think she conducted it. And then a woman who was a conductor from New York, named Roberta Kosse, who had started a women's choir before any of this Second Wave. She had a choir called Women Like Me. She was a composer, and she was out, and she was teaching at Mannes or the Manhattan School of Music. But this was a women's choir to perform her stuff. So it wasn't – (*tape is garbled and then cuts; it*

*comes on again as Cathy is talking about knowing Sue Fink, another prominent Lesbian musician on the Womyn's circuit)*

KB: She sang for (the) Roger Wagner (Chorale)?

CR: Yeah. And recorded with them.

KB: So she knew about Anna?

CR: Oh, yeah.

KB: So, four months after you founded Anna (East), she formed her group. Did she get the idea from you?

CR: No. But I had done this whole women's choir before (in Madison). So in '76 I went to (the festival in) Champaign-Urbana having already done all this women's music: "What are we singing? What can we perform? What's been written for women?" And then: "Oh! Let's get this – " you know, the consciousness effort " – going" in '75, '76. "Oh, see this music – we could get a really good arrangement of this. This is about Take Back the Night. This is about our lives. This is about women falling in love with women. Where is *that* on the Top Forty? How can we get good arrangements to do?"

KB: And: "What is Womyn's music?" Was that being argued at that point?

CR: Well, yeah. There was the whole Separatist thing going on, you know, at these festivals –

KB: I mean, like: Caccini does not equal Margie Adam. Or does she?

CR: Right. Well that was a dialogue that was going on. That wasn't tense, but it's just that it was marginalized, in a way, classical music. But it was – that field was beginning to grow. So people had to deal with it and recognize that it was there. And they paid homage to it. You know, Antonia Brico conducted there. Victoria Bond put together orchestras there. So people said: "We are honoring this." That was sort of earlier on, I guess – maybe in the late '70s. Oh! Actually, Antonia Brico I met earlier than that. Because a professor of mine from Madison...brought her to a rehearsal (of Anna). And it was great. So I knew about her by the time she came to Champaign-Urbana. Yeah, there were tensions about whether men could tag along. We were on a university campus, so: could men come in? There was tension more around could men be in women's spaces there rather than – well, there was some tension about class, and stuff, because you have people there like Bev Grant, who was doing working-class, Socialist-type music in New York and some women's stuff. But everybody – and then, there were tensions, too, between Lesbian and Straight women, about who had more ownership of Womyn's music and stuff. There was that going on.

KB: Well, *that's* obvious! (*snorting*) How do you debate *that*?

CR: Well, you have these people – I mean, Holly Near was Straight when she started –

KB: She was?

CR: Oh, she was totally Straight when she started in the Viet Nam and all of that –

KB: Well, yeah, right.

CR: And so, when she's traveling with Margie Adam and Meg Christian and Cris Williamson, she's Straight. Margie wasn't, Cris wasn't, and Meg wasn't. And then, you know: "You Know I Know" or whatever (*more snorting*); "You Can Know All I Am" – whatever it is!<sup>7</sup> And now, of course, she's going to this (activist music) conference in England, and she's talking about Lesbian music, and she's *Straight!* She's *back* again!

KB: Right! (*guffaw*) Truth is stranger than fiction.

CR: I mean – yeah. Once you put somebody in a box –

KB: *Outta there!* So, this whole Womyn's choral thing is your fault.

CR: Well, I guess I had a lot to do with it.

KB: When did you get the sense that this could be a nationwide phenomenon?

CR: Oh, it was never really that way, although I remember – and Rachel (Alexander) might have told you this – but we met on some street in Philadelphia, and I had a bunch of music for her, because she was starting a women's choir in St. Louis. And, you know, I just –

KB: Had you met her at a festival, or what?

CR: I don't know what it was – whether it was Quaker ties, or what! Shoot! I don't have any idea! But it was – yeah, I mean, I didn't have that concept. I wanted to have all these choirs begin, because there was all this energy, and there was all this music, and – I mean, another thing that was part of this whole thing was the Women's movement wanting to get away from the solo performer, the Womyn's music movement wanting not to wave that male model up.

KB: That's been forgotten.

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<sup>7</sup> We are laughing at Roma's satirization of cryptic references to coming out in early Lesbian music. Meg Christian entitled one album *I Know You Know*, and Holly Near entitled another *Imagine My Surprise*; she also wrote a song called "You Can Know All I Am."

CR: Right. Well, yes. That was at the beginning when people just sort of sat around at Michigan and sat around in Champaign-Urbana and sang, and if one person got up on the stage, the whole bunch of friends that they were playing with last night got up with them. But really, the exemplification of that was the women's choirs. Because you had just regular old people who couldn't play an instrument, (or) women (who had had) musical training, whether it was piano when they were four or clarinet when they were eight or something, but they leave it behind. But they might have had five, ten, fifteen years of training. But they can sing. And they *want to* sing. So even then, that was really, I think, important. And then my role as a Feminist person trying to look at the typical dictatorial place of the conductor, questioning that role and: "How can I be a responsible leader and share that leadership and share voice?" And we talked about women's voices being important and honoring each woman's voice, and: "How do we do that?" Somebody was asking me in GALA, you know, what are the things that I remember about Anna. And I was mentioning a whole bunch of things, and one of them was that when we had an issue: (*snaps her fingers*) we sat down on the floor and talked about it. That's what you sort of – in 1975 and 1976 –

KB: Like, *right then*.

CR: Like, *right then*. You know: changing a word, or a political question, or – we weren't talking about cultural appropriation then, but the equivalent of, you know – sit down right now and have a conversation about it. And then I got a little more organized and started thinking, you know, that maybe we could have a *time* for talking! (*we laugh*) You know, but it was so new, and everybody was so invested. And we did sing at music festivals. Anna did. We sang at NEWMR. And MUSE, of course, has sung at (National in) Bloomington, and all those little music festivals that were happening on the East Coast: Sister Space –

KB: So, let's look a little bit later down the road in your involvement with festival culture and Womyn's music: the fact of the changing faces and expanding repertoires in Festie culture and Womyn's music – the effect of that on Sister Singers repertoire.

CR: Do that one again.

KB: Yeah – I'm sorry. That wasn't so clear. Where I'm going with it is that when I talk to all these women and ask them what acts they love and the first thing out of their mouth is Sweet Honey – White women who said they never would have heard that music before, but they saw it at festivals. And now all the Sister Singers choirs do Sweet Honey repertoire. So I want to know about when Womyn's music stopped just being White-Girl-with-Guitar: when it started to be something else, and what that did for the music our choirs sing.

CR: Okay. I was going to say something about that. ...I always had trouble (performing) these sort of feel-good-Sister songs. Not for me. Not for me.

KB: Because?

CR: Well, for me they had no guts, no substance. I think it takes a really good song to capture what it is for women loving women. You know, if you're going to have a love song, it can't just be a reproduction – except that you change the pronouns – of what you hear on the radio. Okay? You've got to start with something that is engaging, and not this – oh, I don't know, this sort of Lesbian feel-good stuff. It's wonderful in a sense for everybody rocking together and listening and feeling good: I'm not necessarily putting it down. I'm saying that that doesn't for me translate, necessarily, into good women's choir repertoire. At all. So, you know, we early on were doing a lot of Holly Near. Holly Near has all this music that's (wonderful because of) what it *says*. To me, the text is really important. And how it connects people. In other words, women are – these choirs are *community*. People are getting together to sing. And for whatever other reasons. I'm sure you've met a lot of people who say – you know, some people are doing it to find a lover, some people are doing it because they love to sing, some are doing it for political reasons. Everybody has a different reason. For me, ...connecting the music to people's lives is what's important. So when you get together to talk about repertoire, what's missing? Is there humor that's missing? Is there a strong song about domestic violence? Is there a strong song about *making connections politically with other groups that are going through things*? I mean, Three Mile Island happened in Philly in 1979: what kind of music are we singing to speak to the lives and the health of women who are reproducing, and – so, you know, making those connections, sometimes doing it through humor. But what is music that is really *quality*, with quality text? And then, of course, all along this time period is people like – you probably haven't heard of these groups, but: Lucha. Sabiá –

KB: I know Sabiá.

CR: They're two similar kinds of groups that, you know: what's going on in the '70s? They're aware of the whole Sanctuary movement and what's going on, and the *juntas* and *nueva canción*. What comes with the women's movement – the part that I relate to because I'm trying to identify and make connections – is: what's happening with women's lives, not just right here, but in a wider context. So then you're bringing in music from a wider context, music that speaks about women's lives. Now, it might not be your life, but it is related to all that we're doing here. Does that make sense? So, there's already stuff coming in before Sweet Honey. Of course, Sweet Honey's really early on, but their albums aren't circulating until '77 or '78. And Bernice had her early album out. So there are musics that are – the Womyn's music movement is awakening people. Alix Dobkin did that on Day One with *Lavender Jane*. Didn't she do a Balkan thing? She sang with Ethel Raim. So even then there's that awareness. Because it's a folk music, and that's a women's culture and a women's music. So that's what was tuning into me, as well as this wonderful culture of Lesbian and Womyn's music. So I would take, you know – Kay Gardner did “When We Made the Music, the World Stopped to Listen.” That was an early one of hers. And so, Margie Adam did one and made a choral arrangement of this: “We Shall Go Forth”.

KB: Sistrum's doing it, or just did it.

CR: I think that music was really important. And it was important because – I'm talking about Womyn's

music and Lesbian-identified music – because it was empowering people. It was empowering women. It was enabling – well, it was a sense of pride in getting to know everything about yourself. You know, from the inside of your vagina and what it looked like, to any kind of health or strength, to self-defense, to, then, loving! Relationship! Let's talk about the depth of women interacting! Holly Near's "There's Something About the Women," 1980. But then, you know, the political things: "It Could Have Been Me. But Instead, It Was You," 1970. We were singing that kind of stuff. So it's all a big mix. But it was women saying: "We can sing about our lives." And it wasn't just about who we were loving. It was about the work we were doing. Women are teachers. Women are social workers. Women are taking care of each other, raising children. Am I making any sense?<sup>8</sup>

KB: Yes.

CR: So. Then. Sweet Honey comes along. And Bernice – because at first, they mostly did her stuff – she's making the connections. She's singing about Biko. South Africa. This is related! We're buying Shell Oil! We're supporting it! Women are becoming more politically aware. "Are My Hands Clean?" Women are looking at themselves and asking these questions. So, it's all making a great deal of sense. And she's doing it because she has lived through those movements that she's talking about that made her be able to deliver the speech that she delivered at GALA.

Roma's account shows that the first Womyn's choruses included women of various sexualities; even when not calling themselves "Lesbian" choirs, they and their audiences were characterized by the open expression of Lesbian identity and affection. The centrality of the Womyn's music festivals in fostering the development of a national Feminist choral movement is quite evident here. Roma spent festival time meeting, networking, and performing with various professional musicians. Furthermore, her direction of pickup groups placed the model of an amateur, Feminist chorus at the center of attention. The first Womyn's music festivals grappled with the question of classical music, which as performed by women received some early exposure, though it has now been largely eclipsed as insufficiently female – or insufficiently popular with festival audiences.

Similarly, Womyn's-music veteran Holly Near has been the subject of debates about the political correctness of booking her at festivals ever since she took a male life-partner. In my observation, these debates have been confined to enclaves of Lesbian Separatism, leaving Near's enduring popularity largely unscathed. Indeed, throughout all the changes in her personal life, Near has been more consistently and publicly radical and Lesbian-affirming than virtually any other performer, Lesbian or otherwise. In evaluating Near's music, Roma reveals the extent to which she prioritizes textual content in choosing repertoire.

Roma refers to Womyn's music as a "culture" that empowers women and instills pride and self-knowledge in us. These comments reflect theories about musical performance as the simultaneous

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<sup>8</sup> Up to this point, all the individual musicians Roma has talked about, except for the Sweet Honey women and Judith Casselberry, are White.

expression and construction of identity. Some familiar tropes surface here, including the idealization of Balkan ensemble singing as a women's folk tradition, the characterization of women's interactions as especially deep, and the challenge to decentralize systems of power and give every woman "a voice." This latter concern produced the urge to process conflicts and issues publicly and immediately, a practice so apparently reflexive that it had the power to halt a choral rehearsal in its tracks.

Roma's primary emphasis in programming is on texts that make connections between the experiences of women in her community and those of women living under different circumstances in other places and times. After the first Womyn's musicians entered the scene with a plethora of romantic love songs, the music of Holly Near, Kay Gardner, Alix Dobkin, and others began to introduce a more global consciousness into cultural Feminism. Roma feels that this trend paved the way for the tremendous popularity in Womyn's circles of the music of Sweet Honey in the Rock.

### *Roma Conducts at Michigan*

At the point in our conversation where I last left off, Roma's phone rang. We took advantage of that break to make some business calls of our own before the hour got too late; coincidentally, both of us had Jane Hulting on our lists of people to call. When our telephone break was over, I asked Roma about her activities as a director of pickup choruses at Womyn's music festivals:

KB: I know that you have in the past, at Michigan, conducted the Festie Chorus. Could you talk about how that happened, what you taught, what the purpose was?

CR: Okay. In '89, '90, '91, and '93, I did a Festival Chorus up at Michigan –

KB: Was the Gospel Chorus happening also?

CR: Oh, yeah. Always. That's the oldest, and that's still going on. That's always been. So they decided in '89 to have a band and a women's choir. So people did this because of GALA. We'd had our first GALA (festival) out in Seattle. So, I wanted to bring to them really good arrangements of women's music. I remember the first concert we did in '89, we had Edwina Lee Tyler.<sup>9</sup> Now, I had brought Edwina Lee Tyler down to Philadelphia from New York. I adored her! I went up to New York City and drove her back to Philadelphia. It was wonderful. Great performance, a big concert for Choice. Remember that? Those things?

KB: *(pause)* No. I don't.

CR: Oh, yeah! You don't! *(chuckles)* Anyway, so we did a piece in the Festival Chorus that she played on.

KB: Do you remember what it was?

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<sup>9</sup> An African-American percussionist; see page 105.

CR: I might have it somewhere. We did – I wanted to do music by women that were there performing, or that everybody knew. So I did Bernice, because she was there. I did Holly. I was doing music that people knew of and trying to get good arrangements of them, and trying to connect people to political issues, as well. I'm sure we did "Crying for Freedom,"<sup>10</sup> and I think we did "Hay una mujer."<sup>11</sup> Um – you know, ten years ago I didn't even *know* Ysaye! In '89! Oh, we might have done "Paycheck;"<sup>12</sup> you know, I knew that before I had worked with her. Oh, I know we did "Simply Love," and I think we did "Something About the Women."<sup>13</sup> I know we did some other Bernice songs. But that's me; I have a propensity for those people.

KB: How many women sang? Did you have enough?

CR: Yeah. I guess I always wanted it to be bigger. We had anywhere from, probably never less than forty, fifty, sixty in there. People gave their time; it was pretty amazing.

KB: How was the turnout by Women of Color?

CR: Never a lot. They were always more drawn to the Gospel Choir. I always had a couple.

KB: If there's anything else you want to say about that experience, go for it.

CR: No. It was harder than hell. You know, just because you're up against so much, in terms of – I mean, this woman came up to me and she was in an S-M area,<sup>14</sup> and she was up all night hearing people slapping each other, and, you know: "I'm really tired from that; I don't know if I can sing." You know, I mean, dealing with stuff like *that*! And it's hot and buggy, and people falling in love and not coming – who met *at the choir*! You know? But besides that: Do I have low voices? Do I have high voices? Can we do this? "Oops – we can't do that one; will you go copy this in the trailer for me?" "Edwina, can you come to this rehearsal?" Coordination, trekking over in the rain – you know.

Despite the very unique obstacles of her job, Roma persisted in bringing stylistically diverse music of political consciousness to hundreds of singers and thousands of audience members in her four years as director of the Michigan Festival Chorus. She also elevated her national profile and that of MUSE as leaders in the Womyn's choral movement.

<sup>10</sup> An anti-Apartheid song by Bernice Johnson Reagon in the repertoire of Sweet Honey.

<sup>11</sup> By Holly Near, about women victims of "disappearances" by the U.S.-backed military junta in Chile.

<sup>12</sup> By Ysaye Barnwell, about workplace hazards; see page 213.

<sup>13</sup> These are Holly Near songs about loving women – as a class of people and in personal, intimate relationships.

<sup>14</sup> In other words, she had been camping in a segregated area for practitioners of sexual sado-masochism.



*MUSE: History, Ethos, Transformation*

KB: Let's talk about MUSE now. When did you make MUSE? When and how?

CR: Okay. I came to Cincinnati in the fall of '83 to do my doctorate and got busy right away with posters! Story of my life: posters. And I got something in the newspapers and talked to people, and I went to a women's gathering and stood up and said that I wanted to set up a women's choir. And there was a women's choir that had been here that was Lesbian and Separatist, and it had been defunct

KB: What was it called?

CR: DINAH. So early on I met some really political women who were Straight; Elizabeth<sup>15</sup> was one of the first people in that. Because my next-door neighbors in Philly told me about her in July before I moved here and was looking for places. She was political; she was in a group called Band Together, so she did political music. And then Angie early on, too. So, then, here were some people already here, some political, Socialist Feminists. And then there was this defunct Lesbian choir, and people wanted to sing, and so in January of '84 we had our first rehearsal, but I had heard people sing in December of '83 and started the whole ball rolling in the fall of '83.

KB: And did you know what kind of a group you wanted it to be, what the mission statement was going to be, how it was going to look, or did you already know you wanted to develop all that with the women who turned up? When your mission statement began, what did it say?

CR: I wanted it to be a lot like Anna. I was determined that I was going to have a women's choir, and "women" meant: *women*. Straight and Lesbian and Bisexual. Different women. Honoring *that* diversity, to start with. So I knew that. I didn't come here with a concept of knowing diversity in a bigger way – even though, of course, I had broached it with Bernice. So, did I want to do classical music? It was – it was created in the image of Anna, you know. And to create a community where I had to live while getting my doctorate at a new place. That was important. But I wanted to let it evolve. So, except the image of that, I didn't have a mission in mind. Actually, I don't think Anna back then had a statement. It'd be interesting to go back and look, but I don't think we sat and honed one out like we did fairly early on in MUSE.

KB: So, what is MUSE?

CR: What is MUSE? To me? Or to the world? (*I shrug my shoulders*) Mm – . (*pauses*) MUSE is most definitely a community choir. It's a community arts organization. But I say "community choir," because: (*chuckles*) triple entendre! It's a community within itself. And you will hear, if you talk to MUSE people, that that community has changed. And after sixteen years, I'd say: "Of course!" But when we started, we were more homogeneous, and so people felt safe.

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<sup>15</sup> The pseudonym for one of the MUSE interviewees in my sample.

KB: Can you say the ways in which it was homogeneous?

CR: Okay. Well, homogeneous – there was less diversity racially, or in overt belief systems. There's always been a diversity of sexuality, and always the up-frontness to deal with that. The experience of dealing with that, and that being okay: people can make mistakes, and we fix them. We got that out early on. So that's what I mean, "safe" in the more – and White women would use that word. "safe:" Black women wouldn't use that word. Because, you know – *safe*: here they are in the *world*! You know what I mean? And that's what I think: some people have come to understand that there are words that don't have meaning in the same way. So, some people feel – as we've gotten more diverse within MUSE as a community, some people didn't feel that safety. Because they started dealing with race. And, there were a couple of steps. First of all, we sat around on the Board looking at our philosophy and said: "Well, we say we honor diversity. But we don't honor *all* diversity, because I look around, and I don't see a lot of Women of Color, for example." So, we had seven – I forget what size we were, but we had seven slots. And we decided that five of them would be filled by Women of Color. "Ohh! That's a *quota system*!" You know, that whole thing. "Wait. Wait. How are we going to change this thing if we don't – how are we going to change MUSE? What are the things we can do?" So we talked and talked and talked, and we decided we had to do a greater outreach, and we had to go to more different places. "This is the way we can change who we are." So I think people bought into it pretty well. So we did pretty well, in terms of outreach and getting more Women of Color to audition.

KB: How did you do that?

CR: Black newspaper, Black areas, people talking to each other. Actually, I think we got a really good article in the newspaper. We had just sung a lot of South African material in one of our concerts, and we had gotten four South African students, and we'd gotten some African-American dancers at the concert, and were asked to sing for Archbishop Desmond Tutu – I think this was around the same time he came to town. So, there was an awareness of what we were beginning to try to do. And this was in 1990, and Gilda and I went down and joined the Martin Luther King Coalition.

KB: Which is?

CR: It's the city group that since Martin Luther King's assassination has had marches and (celebrated Martin Luther King Day and) worked toward (it) becoming a national holiday. My intention was to move into some different communities. Because I needed to do that if I (was) going to be an impetus and this choir (was) going to change. You know? I had just gotten my doctorate in '89 and started working in the prison:<sup>16</sup> I joined the Coalition in '90. We were having these talks in MUSE. So, I said I'd do the music (for the Coalition). For one year. And Gilda went to the Black churches and I went to the White churches.

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<sup>16</sup> Roma conducts the UMOJA Men's Chorus, a program of Wilmington College at Warren Correctional Institution. The membership and the repertoire are predominantly Black.

KB: Is Gilda Black?

CR: Mm-hmm. And a Founding Mother (of MUSE). And so we had seventy-two singers, a very mixed Black-White group for the MLK. And we performed a piece called *Requiem for Brother Martin*. And so then that builds and builds and builds. So then some people come into MUSE from that. I think Lois<sup>17</sup> did. Lois doesn't remember this. But I'm pretty sure Lois came in this way. She was at Zion Baptist, and we rehearsed at Zion. So MUSE's name gets out. Because I said, "Me and Gilda are co-founders, and I'm the director." And the King Chorale happened to go on every year. It was pretty successful. So that's the kind of work that people were doing. And in '91, Melanie DeMore came, and MUSE did a big concert for Homeless and Hungry with a Black gospel choir. So, who are we performing with? Where are we performing? We used one-third Melanie, one-third gospel choir, and one-third MUSE. And then a couple women from MUSE took a tour of women's prisons with a gospel choir – starting to do the very different kinds of things in different places. Different people came to hear us, different people would see us, and, as Bernice would say: "What kind of repertoire are you doing?" So, as you do this repertoire, and even if you don't have that many Women of Color – a nominal amount – but, a Black person in the audience can say: "Oh! I see me. I hear me. That's – I can see myself being there."

KB: Can you be specific about the repertoire you adopted when you realized you had to change your repertoire?

CR: Okay. Of course, it was some stuff we'd already been doing, like Sweet Honey. Ysaye came in '91 and did a workshop. I think some of the music from South Africa, and doing that in an authentic way – getting South Africans there coaching it – in rehearsal we had two men and two women come, that was really important. Because obviously people in the Black community were supportive of that struggle. We've always done Spirituals. But, choosing music that made the choir sound – having to do with what particular arrangements of stuff. In other words, how the voices lie, and stuff that. If the sopranos were real high, and Bernice would say – we did a workshop with Bernice – I would say, "Bernice, I've got only two sopranos who can do that." She'd say, "That's all you need!" So, if you have forty altos and – that's fine! Because that's her concept of what's needed. You know, you need that strong – . And, of course, especially Ysaye and Bernice have a way of writing that makes the voice come from a different place. So that helps make the sound change. So part of it is looking for particular arrangements that make the choir sound a certain way. Or getting them arranged that way.

KB: What way?

CR: Making them sound – how do I want to say? Having the arrangements be such that the voicing enables the choir – to, ah, sound, uh – more authentic, more real. I don't know what kind of words to use. Um, but not to have, um – . More full-voiced. Less Western, less *bel canto*. Let's use that. "Full voice." In

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<sup>17</sup> Lois Shegog, MUSE's Associate Director and an African American.

a place where the voice can be strong and be seated. You know, like when Lois directs. Lois directs from down here. (*indicates her hips*) And she moves. Her whole body moves. And when we did this piece I started noticing it, when she came on as Assistant Director about four years ago, and she did "I Remember, I Believe," a piece by Bernice – awesome. She – it sounded like a different choir! And it was so great. So, it's what is sung, it's how it's arranged, and then, of course, we made this shift into the New Spirituals project.

Roma and the other leaders of MUSE relied on several decisions and approaches in working toward a closer approximation of the racial demographics of their city, where half the population is African American. MUSE's collaboration with visitors from South Africa on anti-apartheid music from that country garnered strong publicity when the project was performed for Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The choir instituted a policy of letting seats go unfilled if Women of Color didn't take and pass the audition to fill them. Roma involved herself in a highly visible role with a local organization created to affirm and continue the struggle for recognition of Black civil rights. This gave her visibility in Black communities not only as a choral director concerned about civil rights but also as a White woman who had collaborated with an African American in the founding of a choral organization. With their success at securing grant monies, MUSE had been able to engage African-American guest artists Bernice Johnson Reagon, Ysaye Barnwell, and Melanie DeMore for private workshops and public projects, one of which involved appearing with a Black, gospel chorus to benefit the area's poor. Black leadership is highly visible within MUSE, as the group's Associate Director, Lois Shegog, is African American. With all of these efforts and innovations in place, recruitment in Black spaces has been successful.

On the matter of repertoire, Roma feels that consistently programming arrangements of a variety of Black source tunes is not enough in itself to appeal to the tastes of potential African-American members. She perceives that the arrangements need to have a lower "center of gravity" than choral music scored for *bel canto* women's voices so as to allow for more embodied, full-throated, and frontal singing. I find this to be the most interesting and unanticipated piece of advice. Here Roma recognizes that *bel canto* vocal production on any repertoire is highly marked as a European art-music sound; that is to say that it is a sound associated with a certain race and a certain class and is therefore a distasteful, if not offensive, overlay when applied to music of other origins. A tendency to characterize Black music by kinesis, specifically in the hips, surfaces again here. Certainly, this kind of movement in the performance of most European art music is considered unacceptable practice. The suggestion here is that Shegog's more kinetic directing of certain styles helps to free the singers from any entrained habits of stasis that inhibit the desired sound.

### *New Spirituals*

MUSE's most significant work in Black music is their annual New Spirituals concert, which they give each February. The New Spirituals project began in 1993 under Redwood Cultural Workers, an outgrowth of Holly Near's now-defunct record label, Redwood Records. The initiator of the project was

Elizabeth Seja-Min (now familiar in this study as the director of the Oakland Youth Chorus, a collaborator with Linda Tillery, and the source of Sistrum's Ghanaian and Yoruba music). The original New Spirituals project involved a consortium of choruses from different parts of the country: The Harlem Boys Choir, the Temple University Concert Choir, the University of Texas at Austin Concert Choir, the Oakland Youth Chorus, and MUSE. Roma explained a little bit about the genesis of the project:

CR: Redwood Cultural Workers...were...producing multi-cultural concerts in the Bay Area, bringing a lot of that music that they were recording to the public. Groups from Central and South America. Did you remember they did a series of concerts on the West Coast called Skin Talk – I think that's the right name. It was different drummers from all different cultures. And the New Spirituals grew out of that same kind of mindset. So it was to commission Women of Color to compose New Spirituals. What are New Spirituals? New Spirituals are pieces written today that have all that tradition going back to the nineteenth century. So there's jazz, there's Blues, there's gospel, field hollers and ring shouts. A New Spiritual is what's happening today. Let's talk about – lets use rich traditions to –

KB: Extending traditions, basically.

CR: Right.

KB: But with identifiable composership.

CR: Right. Exactly. So Mary Watkins<sup>18</sup> did the first one, so the piece was more jazzy. ...Ysaye did the second one.

KB: Which one?

CR: It's called, um, *Lessons*. "We Are" is the culminating piece of that set of five. Then came Jackie Rago,<sup>19</sup> and then Bernice. And then MUSE. So, the choir's buying into this New Spirituals thing.

KB: So, which of these are scored for women's voices?

CR: Heh-heh. Good question. Because all the West Coast is SATB.

KB: And Temple. Austin.

CR: Right. Everybody. All right; so the first two we did with men. (*makes a face*)

KB: Never again?

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<sup>18</sup> An African-American jazz pianist who is legendary on the Womyn's circuit.

<sup>19</sup> A specialist in Venezuelan music.

CR: Well, Jackie wrote hers for SATB, so I said, "Jackie, I've got to change it. Can I shift this voice?" So we worked together to get that done, and we were really happy. Everything sounded fine. It just wasn't in the original voicing.

KB: So, what happened when you sang with the men? Which men?

CR: The Cincinnati Gay Men's Choir. Um, they didn't – they weren't prepared! And, you know, they were badly, badly behaved. The first one, I think, went well. And that was because there was a director who – would call himself a Lesbian. You know what I mean? He was *that* kind of Gay man, who understood MUSE, loved it. So by the third one, by the time Bernice wrote hers, I was transcribing her music. So I wrote it out for us. And even though it was low, it spoke.

KB: It's very time-consuming work.

CR: Very time-consuming. Okay. So, Bernice's piece was not (originally scored for women's voices), but, you know, it worked for us SSAA. And then MUSE said: "This project is so of value." It attracts a bigger Black audience than anything else we do. Linda (Tillery) comes every year to do this, because it's partly her brainchild. But then it ended. Redwood closed. So, um, we said –

KB: Wait a minute. When she comes for this event, what does she do?

CR: Oh. Each piece has a movement written for her. Because that was the setup.

KB: A solo movement. I got it.

CR: This really started before she had really gotten in gear with the Cultural Heritage Choir. So, she comes, and she always does some gospel, she does some stuff with us, and she does stuff with the audience; there's always a congregational part. So, we always do stuff together. Usually one half is commissioned work and her, and one half is MUSE doing some sort of Spirituals or something. And one year John Santos<sup>20</sup> came and got on stage with us. Bernice came one year. So, we've done different stuff. And we just decided we'd go on with this. Because we knew it was building momentum. It was attracting more People of Color to MUSE, it was attracting more People of Color to our audience, people love Linda Tillery. So, the next year after we decided to take it over, I invited Dorothy Cotton... She was recommended to me by Bernice. She was a really important organizer in the South for twenty years or so and worked very closely with King. She was one of the songleaders. So, we sang music from the Civil Rights movement. She came up and did a whole songleading thing like she would have done to organize people to register to vote, to get people psyched up and things like that. And we did "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around" and "I Woke Up this Morning with my Mind Stayed on Freedom." And Linda was there and sang some songs; then we did congregational

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<sup>20</sup> As I wrote in Chapter Three, Santos is a specialist in percussion traditions of the African Diaspora and a frequent collaborator with Tillery and the CHC.

songs. And the next year, we decided to do Underground Railroad stuff. Cincinnati is going to be the home of the new National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in 2003. So we collaborated with them, and that was awesome. That was last year. And then Linda Tillery came, and so did Cultural Heritage Choir. They had just been doing Jacob's Pillow, the Underground Railroad. So MUSE had just gotten some awesome commissioned arrangements done by Jaqueline Hairston, who's a cousin of Jester. And we did research; the music committee got together here and looked through all these books and chose which ones would be great for her to arrange. So we did that last year. And this year Ysaye and Jackie are writing a commission together. And Linda's going to be here. And I don't know what the topic of that is yet. So, this is an ongoing thing that is really important to the choir. And important to our community. And it's doing wonderful things for us musically. I couldn't believe the choir, how quickly they picked up the stuff when they accompanied Linda last year. We had one rehearsal. She said, "Here's what I want you to do." And people were just *bolder* about improvising, *bolder* about harmonizing. I mean, when Bernice came here in '88 and asked people to sing a chord, it was like: "Do harmony! Fill it out!" And the choir, you know, just (*makes choking gestures*) dropped their jaws. Uptight. "Harmony?" It's because they hadn't done it. So it's wonderful. And they felt great. You could tell the choir felt great last year. So, that's the New Spirituals.

This narrative makes it clear that for MUSE, doing music in Black styles involves more than just taking a source tune, arranging it for the choir's voices, and inserting it into a program. Substantial amounts of money, organization, and preparation time are committed to the creation of an evening-length event involving premier African-American performers and activists.

### *On Cultural Appropriation*

In the next part of our conversation, I asked Roma for her definition of cultural appropriation. She began by giving me an example of a dilemma MUSE had faced with a particular octavo:

CR: We did a piece by Alice Parker called "Invocation." And, it says on the left-hand side of the page – I can't remember – "Iroquois text." So, she did a lot of listening to Native sounds, and she did a piece that was partly a combination of her listening to Native-American music and then doing some of her own creative, Western – from her own pen. And then we came to thinking about: "Well, are we going to record this piece?" And *then* it came up: "Wait a minute: *can* we record this piece? What did she really do? How did she honor these people? Did she ask them to take this? Was she giving money to them?" And then we said: "Okay. We've got to do some work. We can't record this until we do some work." So I called up Portia Maultsby at Indiana University, I talked with Ysaye – I think I even talked to this Native-American woman Amalie – and came to the conclusion that we couldn't do it. Because we weren't sure. And we probably should have called Alice Parker up but didn't. It didn't seem like she had thanked or done her homework or honored or given *back*. She had taken, but she hadn't given back. So we didn't do it.

KB: What are the ways in which one can give back?

CR: Well, I think you can describe – you can talk to people. Alice Parker could have gone to talk to people whose Iroquois text she took. And then she could have explained in program notes or on the left-hand side of the page her process and their agreement, or financial remuneration: “I’ve used this, so fifty percent of the music that I make from this published work will go to the Iroquois nation or work that’s being done, or blah-blah-blah.” Those are examples of things she could do. Or not use it at all. And of course there’s that thing about Native-American music: it’s really not necessarily to be put onstage.

KB: It’s often not for anybody else’s use, not even within the same tribe. In several tribes, you need to get explicit permission to sing someone else’s song.

CR: Right. So, all of that.

KB: So, you were about to go somewhere else when I brought that up.

CR: Oh, yeah. (The 1993) Sister Singers (Festival), when you were here. Some of the discussions we had around that. Changing things from their original intention, changing words, not being – “not doing your homework” is the best way that I can talk about it. See, when you enlarge and you diversify your ensemble, there are people who won’t let you get away with shit. Like, when Gilda or Lois or other African-American women in the choir say “this sounds too White,” all of us can hear that. Because we don’t *wanna* sound too White. Right? Because this is music from a tradition – and we don’t *have* to sound too White. We can have integrity; we can sound – you know, by Lois directing a piece – sometimes people say, “Have Lois direct it.” And I have to step out of the way. And I will *willingly* step out of the way. Because I have to. I mean, there’s no choice. And why would I want to be in the way when moving out of the way enables something else to happen?

KB: Right. So, what’s an “authentic” performance? What’s an “authentic” encounter with a piece –

CR: Yeah, I don’t know if I like that word, and I’ve used it a couple times. But I’m searching. Here, to me, is what authentic is, if that’s the word we’re using: I can use it in relation to the South African pieces that we did. When the South African people come back after they’ve worked with us for a couple hours, and we then – you know, they go away, we do our homework, and they come back, we invite them back before we go into performance – and we’re singing to them and tears are coming down their faces because they feel like this is the closest they’ve been to home. That’s – that would be authentic. Or, I mean, you know, obviously for someone to write a piece – for Ysaye to write an arrangement, to (have her) call and scream on the phone: “It’s incredible!” You know, because it’s what she heard or intended. Um, there are other conversations. Linda Tillery and I have had some of these, and it’s mostly differences of taste. She’s coming from – for Spirituals – that raw, nineteenth-century, um – what’s a better word than “authentic?” It’s real; it’s closest to its roots, the Spiritual that she does and that Cultural Heritage Choir does. And they’re different even from Sweet Honey. Because they’re – they’re really coming from a different place. The arranged Spiritual is something that’s more – it’s a crossover. And something that’s more from my tradition. So, Linda and I have this thing; she doesn’t



like some things as much as I do, some of the arrangements that we do. Even, you know, some of Ysaye's stuff, for example. Because it's just not her style. And, you know, some of those arrangements are the classic Spirituals, whether it's Dawson, or whether it's by Barnwell. You know, they can be really bravura and virtuosic and what we love, in terms of choral sound, to do. So, I guess, um – I think we have to be able to go into a Black church and feel okay about every note we sing. I don't know how to say that. I don't know if "authentic" is a good word.

KB: I had someone suggest a marvelous substitution.

CR: What's that?

KB: "Genuine." I liked that a lot.

CR: "Genuine."

KB: Because it seems to me that who we are, singing, is going to be heard at a certain point. And we are not going to be able to masquerade as someone else all the time. So if you can't sound like Hungarian peasants, for example, what can you do instead? Can you still sing the song?

CR: Oh, yeah. I wouldn't say that. But I would say – it's a question of doing your homework.

KB: So, what goes into a genuine encounter with a piece of music, besides homework? Or, maybe: what are the effects of the homework that result in a genuine experience for the singers?

CR: All right. Well let's say, taking "We Are." Ysaye's piece. You know, all those bottom parts are drum rhythms. They're West-African drum rhythms. And so, how do you get the choir to sound like West-African drum rhythms? Well, me being who I am, I'm lucky to have Lois.<sup>21</sup> And Lois will dance them. Lois will get people to do different things with their mouth or their lips or their tongue, and get people to move and sound like they need to sound. So I'm just using that as an example. Things like that really, really, really help. Obviously for me, a lot of listening to recordings. Um, being out of the music.

KB: Mm. What does that enable?

CR: Well, I think it enables connection to everybody – to people who are performing and to the audience. And because this music didn't have – it was not a written-down music. So, um, to use that as a reference, to look up off the page and just be out of it. Yeah, I mean, people who are connected *make a different sound*. I mean, that's part of what Bernice is saying: in that evening before people are going to get slaughtered – that connection – one person raised up a song, and everyone else, the way she described it, just organically brought it forth, you know – created. That's the kind of community. And

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<sup>21</sup> Lois Shogog is not West African but African American. However, she is a practitioner of the West-African spiritual system of Ifa (Yoruba), whose central rituals are dominated by drumming traditions.

so, when MUSE is a community within, and communicating, and allowing all of us to teach each other – it's not just me – then I think something changes, something happens.

KB: You feel it when it's there, and you miss it when it's absent. Right?

CR: Yeah. I mean, so much of music is energy. Just sheer energy. So, how do you shape that energy, and how do you give it away? I wish I could explain it better.

KB: No. That's why we have music: because it says something we can't say in words. That's what's at the heart of what we most love about it.

Roma suggests several practices that can make the difference between “fair,” respectful use of traditional materials and their appropriation. She suggests getting permission for its use from representatives of that tradition, sharing proceeds from the music with projects of interest to people in the tradition, and acknowledging any processes by which the traditional material has been adapted and fused with original ideas. Getting expert consultation or yielding directorship to someone more skilled in the tradition when possible enhances the group's ability to replicate the sounds and practices associated with it. Putting in the effort to know the music well enough to “connect” with it takes singers' encounter with it beyond arduous study and into an *experience*, something that also helps make the music more vivid for the audience. Roma also acknowledged the possibility that two experts in a given tradition may disagree on the best way for the tradition to be used, something that can complicate the enterprise.

### *Black Music: Meaning for and Effect on MUSE*

I asked Roma about the effect on the MUSE community of all their experiences with music in Black traditions:

KB: I want to find out to what extent the joint performance of this repertoire advances Feminist and anti-racist goals within the ensemble and in Cincinnati at large. What do these songs do? What difference do they make? What does it matter?

CR: (*long pause, then a chuckle*) I have so much to say on this, but I'm getting really tired. I'm very conscious of the changes and what's going through people's minds. But, okay: we go down to sing at the vigil against domestic violence and abuse. This'll be the twelfth year we do that. We started twelve years ago because one year, thirty-seven women were murdered at the hands of their husbands in Hamilton County – or twenty-seven – I don't know: *too many*. Too many. What is MUSE going to sing there? “Balm in Gilead.” What is MUSE going to sing there? “Feel Like Goin' On.” Um, “Bright Morning Stars Are Rising.” I mean, we go there, and what are the songs we choose to sing? Songs from the African-American tradition! Songs that – Bernice could start them and sing “Balm in Gilead.” and every single person – women who would not call themselves Christian or anything like that – there is a comprehension of transcendence – that that song transcends boundaries, transcends categories.

When we went and sang for a very important Lesbian in all of our lives, one of the first people I met when I came to Cincinnati, who just died of ovarian cancer in July, what did we sing? What did she want us to sing? She asked her partner to ask us to sing. "Feel Like Going On." She wanted everyone to have that feeling at the end; that was the last piece she wanted. All right: so here are these ritual passages that we go through, and what are the things that come to us, Black, White, Yellow, Brown, old, young, rich, poor? You know? I don't know; there's something that, you know – *no categories*. And I think that is the most wonderful place to be. And, I mean, I'm not a person *at all* that thinks we should be a "colorblind" society. I mean, I am *not* there! But I'm saying that women who are in MUSE who say that they hate Christianity because they were abused by their father who was highly respected in the church – and so that when they hear sacred music they identify it with their own ritualized abuse – but they can somehow sing this music. (*pauses*) Well, there's no question about enhancing anti-racist goals within the ensemble. After we did the prison tour, eighteen women read *The Spirituals and the Blues*. It's a book by James Cone. It's a fabulous book. Because people didn't understand the context of the music. They didn't understand what *happened* to them. It was so intense; it was so *emotional*. When we were in these essentially Black spaces, which were women's prisons – and women were screaming and they were – they were being forgiven. It was church, it was – an *absolution*, when we were singing. And some of the White women who couldn't take the heat and the intensity were freaked. Totally freaked. So, the seven Black women who went with them, all of them lined up with it, and they were all different – all different sexualities and – and they said: "Wait a minute, you guys. You're not getting something." And they were, like, totally together, and they're never usually – or not necessarily together on any issues. But they said: "You were in a Black space. The intensity made you uncomfortable." They all said it together. And that never happens. So out of that came eighteen of us reading that book and talking about it. Out of that also came White Women Against Racism, a group of about eight of us meeting and reading a book called *White Awareness*, and discussing chapter by chapter. And people talking to each other. We started out being able to say – like, when a Lesbian would come to choir, and she'd say: "I hate all men!" And she'd sit down next to a woman who's married and has three male children, and so – all right, so the group cared so much about both these people and didn't want to see either one upset, so everyone helped them deal with it. Leslie said: "I was dealing with women who are being abused by men. I'm a therapist, that's what I do all day." And, you know, Rhonda is understanding that, and then Leslie is saying, "I understand that you have a very loving partner." And so then, everybody's interested in having them talk about that. Well, when you have more and more African-American people, and you have African-American and White people beginning to have that relationship with each other, and somebody says something stupid and insensitive or whatever, there's enough trust that people can talk to each other. We've done anti-racism workshops; we had three women come, and we spent all Friday night, three or four hours – people telling stories.

KB: Did you do story circles?

CR: Yeah. And then Saturday we went away on a retreat, like we did this year, and these women came with us and did more work out at the retreat.

KB: Story circles are so amazing. It's such a simple tool, and it's so powerful, every time.

CR: Yep. People can't even *guess* what other people have been through. They can't even *guess* the backgrounds of everyone in the choir. So that – and we're going on another retreat in two weeks, and we're going to do more stories. And I have another interesting one; we're going to just broach the subject. Are you ready for this?

KB: Okay...

CR: Some of us believe that we had a Transsexual person audition.

KB: Oh! Okay.

CR: We weren't sure. But some of us just thought about it enough that we brought it up at a Board meeting. I just couldn't sleep the whole night.

KB: There's the cutting edge, right there.

CR: So, the conversation's going to come up while we're on retreat. It's just going to be the beginning of it.

KB: You must be scared! Or – you trust the process enough to hold the group together?

CR: Well, yeah! Well, I mean, because that person that I think – that some of us think – auditioned, didn't come in.

KB: Yeah, but, still: you're going to have to now decide where you stand on this.

CR: Exactly. We need to go through it, because –

KB: That's not going to go away.

CR: There are more Transgendered and Transsexual people in the Unitarian community, and we sing at the Unitarian church. And many of us felt – now, whether it's true or not – I sort of think yes –

KB: Well, it doesn't really matter if it's true or not. If it wasn't true yesterday, it's going to be true tomorrow.

CR: Exactly. And we have to have the conversation. The only way we do this is to walk into it. I mean, how can you know what's going to happen when twenty to twenty-five percent of your choir is African American? You have to move into it.

Roma began this part of our conversation with great enthusiasm about the popularity in the MUSE community of Spirituals and Freedom Songs for expressions of grief and struggle. Elsewhere in this study, I discussed several factors that have contributed to these genres' widespread adoption as this nation's paradigmatic expressions of sorrow, resistance, hope. I have also explained why they are particularly suited to singing at community gatherings, as in, for example, when a choir is asked on short notice to perform with whatever singers can be available at a funeral. Something else is evident in Roma's recitation of the long list of Spirituals and Freedom songs that MUSE requests for community appearances: there is a lot of this music in MUSE's repertoire.

Regardless of how popular these genres are with non-African Americans, however, Roma's earlier comments reveal her feelings that its transcendence is limited. She yields direction to Lois when she is too White – and Lois is Black enough – to conduct the music well. And if she felt that this music belonged to everyone equally, there would be no discussion of its appropriation; you can't appropriate what is yours to begin with.

For Roma, the greatest value of this music lies in what it has done for MUSE. It has enabled the recruitment of African Americans into her chorus. And it has ultimately brought White women face-to-face with the limits of their comfort among African-American people and expressions. From one such crisis arose two projects that White women in MUSE undertook together to learn more about African-American music, racism, and White privilege. These choices set an example for the other White women in the chorus and also demonstrate to the Black women that anti-racism is being taken seriously within their organization.

Roma shared an anecdote that demonstrates the existence within MUSE of a proven model for resolving conflict. The underlying assumption is that everyone in the chorus cares about the feelings of everyone else. MUSE long ago developed this model and proved its ability to foster honest and positive relationships across differences in sexuality. Now it is being used successfully to enable the same kinds of relationships across racial difference. Roma points out how important it is that there be critical numbers of African-American members before this kind of communication can take place. Being only a token member of a group does not enable one to speak up in response to offense or misunderstanding with any confidence of being heard and supported. The next challenge facing MUSE is threatening enough that it has divided other Womyn's communities, even provoking physical violence within them. Roma trusts MUSE's conflict-negotiating abilities to produce consensus on the matter. I anticipate that before long, MUSE women will be reading articles on Transsexualism and having Transphobia-reduction workshops at their retreats.

### *Accepting Change*

The racial desegregation of MUSE, as well its growth in numbers, has been achieved at the cost of a certain intimacy that some longtime members miss. Having heard reports from the other MUSE interviewees of complaints of this nature, I asked Roma about it:

KB: I want to ask you this because somebody else brought it up, too. But when you're thinking about how MUSE is no longer what it was before, what are you talking about?

CR: Well, I was talking about how MUSE is not the homogeneous group that it was. And, it's – oh, it's full of so much talent and potential, and yeah, it's a challenge. It's a continual challenge. And I always take everything to heart. Someone says, "oh, it's not what it used to be," and I go home and go (*mimes sobbing*), but then I think: "Wait a minute: *I'm* not like I used to be!" I mean, thinking about sixteen years ago and MUSE starting? People will tell you, I was a mess. And I think I didn't treat people the way I do now, because I was in school, I was under pressure, I was tense, I'd come to MUSE and say: "I want you to sound this way," or something, you know. And I loosened up a lot, and they've helped me do that, and so, I need to get off of that, in other words – the worry. And I hope it's still a place where people are striving to be able to be who they are and confront and open up and stuff like that. And probably it is different, so it doesn't – it's not so forthcoming, people being able to just say (*makes careless, blurring, diarrhea-of-the-mouth noises*) about who they are. Because there's such – it's a little bit bigger: the choir's bigger than it was, and people probably feel a little discomfort about that. But that had to happen, because being a community choir means we're responsive to the community, and when we're asked to sing at all these things, we can't just say no.no. no.

KB: You need a critical number to accommodate all the requests.

CR: Right. You know, people within our choir say, "Well, I want us to sing over here." "I'm a member of this group, and I want you to sing here." "My friend just died of Lupus, and I want us to sing at the Lupus Society." So you say: "Okay, this is a community choir, it's important to sing *to our needs*, what groups we're a part of." So then you have to have a big enough group. And sixty is the outermost limit. I really want to respect that. And then on run-outs we can have smaller numbers. So it's partly that. And I think, probably with a decent group of sixty you get a better sound. You can have as diverse a group of people as we do: older people, ear people, reading people –

KB: It comes out in the wash enough.

CR: Yeah. So, there's that. So, you know, but I do get a sense that we're not like we used to be, and – and what does that mean, and: "Oh, gosh, they think it was better then, and so they're not gonna sing anymore," and – and there are people who are going to be moving in and out, and I can't – I have a tendency to hold on, because I want to –

KB: You want to make it the best for everybody.

CR: Yes.

When MUSE comprised mostly White Womyn, it was for those women a haven of comfort apart from other public spaces hostile to their Feminism and their membership in or support of Lesbian community. The differences among them were likely less salient than the importance to them of the common ground (White cultural Feminism) that had brought them together. When the group became racially integrated, that sense of being “at home” in familiarity and mutual comprehension would have been disrupted for any women whose lives had been essentially segregated.

Several months prior to our interview, Roma referred me to an essay by Bernice Johnson Reagon on this matter. The essay is adapted from an address that Reagon delivered to the West Coast Women’s Music Festival in 1981. In this address she speaks about separatist space – calling it “home” – versus coalition: the need for both of them and the differences between them. Though her comments are applicable as general statements, they specifically address the assumption on the part of White Womyn at festivals and other Womyn’s spaces that we are entering “homes” where we can “bar the door” to keep other kinds of people out, and the disruption of our comfort when we realize that Womyn of Color are present in and shaping the space in unforeseen ways. Reagon cautions that “coalescing” in such spaces must by definition be anything but comfortable:

The first thing that happens (once you let us Black folk into your barred room) is that the room don’t feel like the room anymore. And it ain’t home no more. It is not a womb no more. And you can’t feel comfortable no more. ...When you walk in there, you in trouble – and everybody who comes is trying to get to their home there. ...It is very important not to confuse...home and coalition. (Coalition) ain’t no refuge place! And it’s not safe! ...Most of the time, you feel threatened to the core, and if you don’t, you’re not really doing no coalescing. (Reagon 1983, 356-360)

Wherever African-American women sense that part of the function of a Feminist choir is to provide for its members a safe haven for White Womyn’s identity, they may well question why they should join. When Eva reports feeling that (some?) women in AMASONG don’t really want her there, this is what she means.

#### *MUSE as a Nexus for Progressive Politics in Cincinnati*

The last thing I asked Roma to talk about was the impact of MUSE on politics in Cincinnati. Despite the liberalizing presence of a major university and a mayor progressive enough to have declared a citywide Catherine Roma Day, most liberal and radical residents of Cincinnati describe the overall environment as oppressively conservative, as well as extremely segregated. I remembered that in a former conversation, Roma had mentioned to me a collaboration between MUSE and the Martin Luther King Chorale at a time when there had been a ballot initiative afoot to remove the municipal protection of civil rights for Queer people. During our interview, Roma gave me some more information about this:

CR: A Human Rights Ordinance passed seven to two in City Council. And Issue Three was to take out the sentence that protected –

KB: The “sexual orientation” part.

CR: Yeah. People came to MUSE to ask us about the diversity work we had done. Because the Lesbian and Gay (activist) community in Cincinnati realized they needed to reach out to other communities. Because here was an issue we were going to get *trampled* on. We lost sixty-two to thirty-eight! And why? The Religious Right went into Black churches. Systematically into Black churches. The video footage that they put together – did you see the video that the Religious Right put together? They sent it to all the Senators in Congress.

KB: I think I heard about it.

CR: It’s some White, Gay guy using the Martin Luther King speech. And changing all the Black references to Gay. Now, you show that in a Black church, and what’s going to happen? So there’s just a long way – and that’s what Bernice and I have been saying about the Lesbian and Gay community in relation to GALA. And she’s seen it, because she was commissioned (by GALA) in ‘89, and she went out to (their conference in) Seattle. Because we did one of her pieces with the pickup choir. So, you know, my thing is, the Gay and Lesbian community has not always done the homework of connecting their liberation movement, *in a respectful manner*, all the way back to the Labor movement, the Women’s movement, the Civil Rights movement – look on back to Abolition! That’s where Black and White people worked together to change the world. You know, the Underground Railroad, and all of those freedom movements. Now, if there’s knowledge about all that, then you’re connected. You’re not holding yourself apart and making all these other analogies. And so, people clearly saw, in ‘93, that MUSE had been doing some of that work, and they wanted us to be able to talk about it. It’s a hard thing to do, because we’re sort of putting one foot in front of the other: you’re asking me these questions, and who’s *our* model? What are we – you know, how do we *do* this? So, it’s the combination of Socialist Feminists who’ve been making all these connections and putting all of this together, and that’s not to say – I’m a Lesbian – that, you know, Lesbians haven’t been doing it, too. But, within the general Lesbian and Gay community, the ability to see that this issue is completely related to every other issue is – is – beginning to happen, hopefully.

KB: Mm-hmm. Well, see, what I see happening is that lip-service is payed to that awareness as a way of legitimizing this struggle. But that does not translate into effort, action, and intention to – you know, any of the other issues.

CR: Standing up right beside them.

KB: Right. And the people in the mainstream Gay Rights movement are the only ones who don’t get that they’re missing that. Everybody out here smells it a mile away. That was some clever footage, man!

CR: Oh, you should see it! It would –



KB: You cannot come up with anything more immediately divisive. Really. I mean, that's brilliant. We don't think those assholes are smart enough to know what's going on. But somebody that's working for them knows exactly what's going on!

This story is a vivid illustration of the adage that "no one is free while others are oppressed." White Lesbian and Gay activists unmotivated to make credible common cause with African Americans are failing to see the many ways that this would serve even our own self-interest. We often assume that no African American would stand in the way of anyone's civil liberties. But where African Americans have not seen us fighting racism, heterosexist diatribes have great power to define their feelings about us. And where the mainstream Gay movement as popularized in the *Ellen* and *Will and Grace* sitcoms is seen as a White and wealthy one, the granting to us of more privileges can seem to Heterosexual African Americans like paving the way for yet another group of White people to stand on their backs. These considerations are unfortunately sufficient to distract many Black Americans from the awareness of being manipulated to strengthen political forces that are at least as hostile to them.

The video footage Roma describes features a stunning example of appropriation. What is being appropriated is not a song but a text, a set of ideas, a historical moment of great political and emotional significance. Like the Spiritual that says "All my trials soon be over," the original speech appeals to human concerns that transcend the particular circumstance of its creation. But as is often the case with Spirituals, African Americans are very likely to have strong feelings of cultural ownership of the words of Martin Luther King. Virtually any of the criticisms of White use of Black music that the women in this study have made could be applied to this use by a White man of the "I Have a Dream" speech. And perhaps viewing this example as a metaphor for the White appropriation of Black music helps illuminate the feelings that many African Americans have about it:

Taken out of the mouth of its creator, the speech has lost its characteristic – in fact, *musical* – sound. The way in which its words have been changed completely obscures its original intent, removing any evidence of its Black origins. The speaker is presumed to be unengaged in the struggle to which the text originally referred, and he has presumably paid or acknowledged no debt to the people whose struggle produced it. Once again, White people are using the fruits of Black creativity for free as tools to further their agendas. The result is the further alienation of the African-American audience from the White performer, though the White performer, in his ignorance, may well have expected the opposite.

When organized (White) Gay activists in Cincinnati suddenly realized that they needed to know how to talk to African Americans, they turned to MUSE as a visible model of an organization that was ahead of the game. Clearly, their effort was too little and too late. While the Cincinnati residents associated with the MUSE community surely opposed the ballot initiative, MUSE's impact alone was not enough prevent the initiative's passage.

MUSE. According to Five Members

In this section I introduce four singers from MUSE and one singer who is also the group's Associate Director. After introducing them, I present their words about the music and the community of MUSE. Most of the questions put to them were the same ones I put to the women from the other amateur ensembles. But instead of having to ask them what they thought it would take to have a racially integrated choir, I was able to ask them what it was like to be a part of one. All these women are in the vicinity of fifty years old. They differ from one another by race, sexual orientation, political ideology, and educational background. None of these women is poor, though some came from or presently enjoy more economic comfort than others.

*Lois Shegog*

My first MUSE interview was with Lois Shegog, who sat out in the lobby of the Saint John Unitarian Church with me while the rest of the choir rehearsed in the sanctuary. She remembered me from the previous year's GALA Leadership Conference and Singers Weekend in Dallas and also from my presence some six months earlier at an Urban Bush Women Community Sing that MUSE had hosted in the church. Shegog had much to say about everything I asked her, and she was very forthcoming in what proved to be one of the longest interviews of my study.

KB: I'd like to start by asking you please to identify yourself. Who are you, Lois? What's important about you?

LS: Ooh! I'm Lois Shegog, and I happen to be the Assistant – I gave myself a promotion last week and said I'm the Associate Conductor –

KB: Do you get a raise with that?

LS: No. (*laughing*) It doesn't come with much money; just the words are different: *Associate Conductor of MUSE*. I also teach public school. I'm a music teacher for (Kindergarten) through (eighth grade).

KB: That's that halo I'm seeing!

LS: Either that or the penance that you have to do! But I'm lucky enough to have enjoyed what I do, so I've been teaching now twenty-six years in several school systems. ...I've been fortunate enough to have worked with Ysaye Barnwell and some other people that I got exposed to through MUSE, and it seems like I'm getting ready to step into a new career here. With retirement is going to come just a lot more opportunity to work in the community and just branch out, so I'm really excited about (that). I retire in about four years. So it just seems like other doors are opening up for that. I guess who I am is that my vocation and avocation all have to do with music and the healing that music can do to communities that I come in touch with, both children and adults, and helping – I never was a history buff before, but

now that I can do it through my hook, it seems to be much more palatable to me, and I understand it much more from that link, that music is an expression of people's history.

KB: That's my hook to history, too. I wouldn't know anything about history if not through the music I do.

Lois, are there ways that you identify yourself in terms of: who are the people you come from, who are the people that you choose as your community, what do you tell the Census Bureau? Any and all of the above.

LS: Well, I haven't taken that type of poll in a long time. ...But I think within the last ten years, or the time I've been with MUSE, and just my own maturation, that whole community has begun to shift. You know, because of experience and because of your own enlightenment, depending on who you came in contact with touched your life and shifted you and gave you a new interest and a new perspective. So I think MUSE has been integral in that part. I wasn't exposed to the Lesbian lifestyle so much in the Black community at all. So that was kind of a shut door. Most of the African-American women that are Lesbian are closed. Mostly. Because our community is so closed, even though it shouldn't be. So, as I became more involved in being enlightened, then my sphere of people that I come in contact with are in the process of changing, and changing how I look at things and view things. So, I guess I am an African-American woman who is in love with her African roots, but loves them to the point of having a home, but also having a ground base in order to experience every other culture I come in contact with. Not that my culture is right...and your culture is wrong, but more that this is my culture and this is what I do and this is what feels really good to me and nurtures me, and let me see what nurtures you! ...So, you know, it's made me more accepting of where people are on their own walk.

Then there's the whole piece of spirituality.... and I've started to realize that it's not so separate as I learned it as a child: "Here is your Christian life, and here is your worldly (life)." That's the way it was taught; ...a very European way of looking at things. But, the more I study other spiritualities and my own spirituality, I realize that really, European culture is not so much that way too, if you look at the more holistic, the more Pagan – what they call Pagan worship and things like that: it is not a separate life. You know, all of life is spiritual and so forth. So, as I've begun to make that particular quest and the music quest, all those little spheres are changing. I've gone through some losses, you know, with people that may not understand you as much, you know: "Ooh, you're getting weird!" So I've had old friends fall away and not be as friendly and, you know, like, love me still, but: "She's over there with *those* people now." And we just don't communicate as much. And then what they communicate about just about drives me up the wall. And so it's like you can take them in little bits and pieces and just kind of keep – because they were childhood friends and things like that, you keep a little bit into them and say: (*singsongy*) "Oh, how are you? How are your children?" Things like that, but not the deeper issues, because we can't go there; it will rock their world a bit too much. Although you put a little bit – you can't help it – it's who you are.

KB: It's a coming out of sorts.

LS: Exactly. And so you try to move 'em where they can be moved, when they're ready, you know, to be

aware of what's going on in the world, and that the white, picket-fence thing is just kind of gone. They're still believing in it! And... I don't know if it's appropriate to say: I am a Heterosexual woman, but –

KB: Of course that's appropriate.

LS: Okay. I – I don't mean inappropriate, but I know that's who I am, but I – I'm not going to say: "Some of my best friends are –" No! (*we laugh*)

KB: I heard you talking about solidarity, Lois, when I heard you talking about this journey. That read pretty clear.

LS: It's coming together and understanding people and where they are. And where they find love is important for them and for me. It's not about changing people, but it's about understanding who they are. Now, if they want a little changing and a little shaping, it's only for us to listen and be the soundboard for them to find their way. ...I'm just in this wonderful time of transition in my own life, so it's like I'm not done yet, so I can't say who I exactly am. I think I have a lot of things to share. I think wisdom has been gifted to me through my experiences and being able to pass those on to other people where it's appropriate, and – you know, I just really am an evolving kind of person. I would say.

Shegog could not talk about who she was without talking about MUSE, and not only about her role as one of its leaders, but also about the ways that being a part of the MUSE community has changed the way she sees herself and others, as well as drawing her into new alliances and moving her away from some of her old ones.

Among her new alliances is her alliance with Feminism:

LS: Feminism in my days, coming through the '70s – you know, I was more into the Freedom movement as opposed to the Feminist movement, because *then* it was more of the burning your bra type thing, and I'm going: "That does not even make sense to me."

KB: Did you know that that never even happened, that bra-burning thing?

LS: I know that now. But the women talked about it. And I thought: "What a frivolous thing!" And then, realizing that Black women *were* breadwinners already. We were already getting a piece of the pie. It was not as much. But it was more than White women, as far as the respect that went along with it. It was lower-end jobs, but we were already out in the work force, you know, vehemently. We were already the main breadwinners. So it didn't have the same sense to me. So, I would never have called myself a Feminist back in the '70s. Because all it meant was burning your bra at that time.

Later, Shegog shared another aspect of her identity:

LS: I'm a student of Ifa.

KB: Is that Eleguá around your neck?<sup>22</sup>

LS: Yes. I am a recent initiate.

KB: Congratulations.

LS: Not of Eleguá: I'm Shangó.<sup>23</sup> When you're initiated, you get a new Elegba.<sup>24</sup>

KB: Oh, right: because you can't get to the others without going through him.

LS: Yes. And then you also have this – my godmother is Obatalá.<sup>25</sup>

KB: Yes! All white. That's wonderful. So, there's an Ifa community here in Cincinnati.

LS: A very teeny-tiny one! Um, there's an Ifa community that is mine that – there's many Ifa communities, but most of them are very small and very cloistered, more of a house type thing: who you're studying under, that type of thing. So, some houses study one way, some houses study another. I am a member of an international one that is called the International Institution of African Spirituality and Knowledge. And there's about six groups in the United States, and in Jamaica, Africa, Nigeria, those places; we're connected that way.

Shegog's earlier comments about integrating her spiritual and worldly lives, and about her appreciation for the spiritual practices of pre-Christian Europe, take on added significance in light of information about her study of Ifa.

### *Jo*

I went to meet Jo in her office at the university where she teaches English. Her office door and walls were festooned with Feminist and pro-Lesbian material, including a collection of posters advertising the many MUSE concerts in which she had sung.

K: What I'm asking everybody to do in the beginning is to identify yourself. Culturally, religion – you can answer that any way you want. It's an open question, but I'd like you to be as complete as you care to be.

J: Okay. I'm a middle-class, White girl, a university professor... I have a partner. I have two grown children. I'm fifty years old. That's good enough for now.

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<sup>22</sup> I am referring to a string of red and black beads she is wearing.

<sup>23</sup> This orisha's properties are courage, vigor, and physical strength; his concern is justice. He is represented by lightning.

<sup>24</sup> One of many alternate spellings for this orisha, who is invoked in many languages and regions of the Diaspora.

<sup>25</sup> The supreme and fe/male deity of the Yoruba pantheon.

Jo was quick to acknowledge her race and her class, something I expected from White women in MUSE. Jo was raised in Washington, D.C., though her parents were from elsewhere:

J: I'm an adopted person, to start with, so everybody looks at me and thinks that I'm Scottish or Irish, which is probably true, ethnically. But my mother's a nice Jewish lady from Chicago, and my father's from Brazil. So I had this oddly interesting mix. ...His father had been born in the United States. But his mother was born in southern Brazil. And her family was German.

K: Oh, so is your dad strictly of European stock?

J: Yes. His mother was Brazilian-born, but her family was German, as I said, and his father was from America. He was born in Pelotas, which is in the state of Rio Grande do Sul in the extreme south. But then he moved with his family to Rio when he was a little boy.

K: You're fluent (in Portuguese), aren't you?

J: Yeah.

K: That's great.

J: Well, yeah, that was the language spoken in my house. I came from a kind of a mixed ethnic family.

In a later conversation, which I present in an upcoming section, Jo talked about being a Butch Lesbian. And she also offered the following background information about growing up in Washington, D.C.:

I came to political activism because of the Civil Right movement, because of my age and the time, and because of where I grew up. I mean, Washington, D.C., is an interesting place to grow up. So I marched in the March on Washington in '63. I was fourteen. ...I came to the Women's movement and I came to the Gay Rights movement through the African-American Civil Rights movement. You know, I was a member of SNCC. And I was one who was there when they threw the White people out. And that was a trial for me; you know, I'm fifteen years old! But the point is that was traumatic. And I had to come to terms real, real early, at age fifteen or sixteen, that my Whiteness – I couldn't be a part of that. I could not be a part of that. That my Whiteness really just meant too much. And I think I've had that understanding ever since that time. It was a very painful experience for those of us who had been in that organization and felt very committed to that and then were given the heave-ho. But, I think it was an important awakening. And it happened to me so early that I guess I'm grateful for it.

When I asked Jo about the music of her culture, she told me she had an "oddly interesting mix," which included klezmer on her mother's side and Afro-Brazilian music on her father's side. Then she added:

J: And then, of course, I sort of grew up in the folk song generation.

K: Meaning Pete Seeger and the Hootenanny –

J: The Hootenanny. One of the first songs I ever remember hearing on the radio was “Goodnight, Irene.” in the ’50s, before they were blacklisted. So, you know, it was very eclectic. I didn’t have a particular thing that overrode everything else. I had all kinds of sounds.

Jo also observed that, having grown up in Washington, D.C., she had had the sounds of African-American music in her ears “since infancy.” In addition, she graduated from Wellesley College with a double major in English and voice and is thus highly trained in Western art music.

### *Elizabeth*

Elizabeth is one of the founding mothers of MUSE. Her ancestry is German, and her families have been in the United States since the eighteenth century. The music of her background includes German Protestant hymns as sung in English in the Church of the Brethren, “one of the peace churches” related to the Mennonites. Her mother was musical and urged her and her siblings to practice their instruments daily as children. Elizabeth started college as an organ major until realizing that the only steady employment for an organist was in church, an environment she chooses to avoid. She holds a graduate degree in German literature and has taught German at Cincinnati’s School for Creative and Performing Arts, which has a predominantly African-American student body. Elizabeth is a Heterosexually married woman with children. She “came out of” the Marxist-Feminist movement and has sung in small, *a cappella* groups dedicated to folk, doo-wop, and Labor music. I wondered whether she had been a “Red-diaper baby:”

K: Were your parents radicals?

E: My father was a Kansas Democrat – you know, just your sort of hard-core, working-class guy. My mother was more the intellectual and the radical in the family. And her brother, he left the Second World War, stayed on the West Coast, and married an African-American woman and was in the Communist Party for a while, and he used to send stuff to our house. My older brother’s a political science major, really into global studies.

In Elizabeth’s family, it was not the father’s labor but the mother’s intellectualism that produced radical politics. Elizabeth has been politically active outside the United States as well as at home:

E: I went to Germany in 1967. \_\_ (inaudible)\_\_, demonstrations in the streets, war in Viet Nam, and worked with the Panthers in Germany and did all this G.I. resistance stuff, which is where I got politicized. ... I sort of fell in with this group of German folks, and I met this woman, and she and this other woman had

this Feminist cabaret group that would do all these parodies and stuff. So, I fell in with her, because I sang in the Bach choir, and we met at one of the rehearsals for the *Weihnachtsoratorium*. And then in 1967 *The Political Economy of Women* (came out)! There was this huge thing...all over the world. People were reading these essays about women and the fact that they created surplus value in the homes and had never been recognized, so it was all this – all this stuff.

K: See, I was born a little too late!

E: Yeah! (*we laugh*) Well, I'll tell you, it was fun!

### *Casey and Patti*

Casey and Patti are an African-American couple. I interviewed them in the living room of their home. Patti was not feeling well, so she left after the first half of the interview to go upstairs and rest.

C: Well, let's see. I'm a retired communications worker. I've been in the military, I'm fifty-plus, native Cincinnati, Democrat. I've been a union steward and I've been a manager, too, so I've seen both ends of that. ... My mother died when I was five, and my father remarried. I have two sisters. One is eleven years older than me, and she's a minister, and the other one is thirteen years younger than me and works for Proctor and Gamble. The older sister and I had the same mother, and the younger sister and I had the same father. And we're all three close. So that works out well. Everybody knows I'm Gay; that's not a big point of contention or anything. ...I'm just a regular, ordinary, over-fifty, Black Gay woman!

K: All right! Believe it or not, you're not the first one of those that I've spoken to in the last week! (*we laugh*). Okay. That sounded like a point of finality there. Should we pass it on to Patti?

P: Well, if we're being honest...

K: Please!

P: Are we ready?

K: Sure.

P: I'm separated for fifteen years. I am still officially married. My ex-husband – that's the way I go around saying it – and I are very good friends. I have one daughter, twenty-nine, two grandchildren that I'm proud of, and I've been with the communications department for twenty-six-plus years. Looks like I'm getting ready to be laid off in the downsizing. ...I'm going to retire – I'm going to take ECOS, which allows me to be paid for the next two years. I'll be fifty in a year, and then I will get full benefits and some pension. I'm going to school after that, and I'll find a new job. And I'm very close to my family. Except for my dad. And I think that's my fault.



Both of these women are proud of the careers they have had, and both place a high priority on connections with their families of origin. Patti did not mention being African American here, or Gay, for that matter. She may have felt that Casey had covered that information for the two of them. Later in the conversation, she had important things to say about both of these aspects of herself.

Patti had already left us when I asked Casey what the music of her culture was. Casey had sung in church choirs as a child, so she named gospel, as well as the soul, funk, and rhythm-and-blues of artists such as the Temptations, Stevie Wonder, Prince, Roberta Flack, KC and the Sunshine Band, and Patti LaBelle. She also claimed “folk,” by which she meant Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, and Peter, Paul, and Mary; she mentioned that no other Black people she knew listened to this music that they considered to be for White people.

I asked both women whether they were Feminists:

P: I don't know!

C: I don't know. I guess I'm probably closer to Feminist. I never really thought about it until MUSE, in particular. And I still would not probably say I'm one of the hard-core, gonna-march-down-the-street types. But it still has opened up a lot of thought that I had not, you know, pursued before.

K: Uh-huh. For example?

C: Well, as we were speaking before about the different pieces, the musicians you can find. We've got women composers! ...I didn't know that! You know, because it's not what you see on TV or in the movies. It may be another culture in itself, but it's there. Just because you're not aware of it doesn't mean it doesn't exist. And I think MUSE is a real eye-opener for that. So I guess I would say I'm a baby Feminist!

K: How would you define your Feminism?

C: Um, “women-empowering.” Full circle.

P: I'm like Casey: I don't think I ever thought about whether I was Feminist or not. MUSE brought that to light. And I can't honestly say. We had a meeting over at Kate's; we got together in different sections talking about Feminist issues –

K: For example?

P: Well, let me go back a little bit: I did not go into the meeting. Unlike Casey, who attended the meeting, I stood out front with some of the other women, and it was like I was being forced into something I didn't really – and maybe that's it. Maybe I didn't know enough about it. I just – I did not want to be forced into a room in a meeting about Feminism. So we sat outside and we had our own little group!

K: And what did the group inside and what did the group outside look like: age, race, sexual orientation...?

P: I was the only Black (in the outside group). Actually, I was the oldest. The others, I would say, were in their late thirties or early forties. And, I don't know. It just wasn't a meeting I was into. And I can't explain. We just decided to be friends outside there amongst ourselves.

K: Uh-huh. Any punishment for that?

P: I don't think Cathy knew we were out there!

C: I think it was that they were being forced to have a discussion. I don't think they particularly had a problem discussing it *some time*. But it was like: "You've got to discuss this, and we're going to discuss this right now."

K: But do you know what the purpose of the meeting was or what the hoped-for outcome was?

C: I don't remember.

P: I don't remember either.

C: I don't know if it was something that came up in MUSE and they thought it merited additional conversation but they didn't want to take up rehearsal time. So this was just an eat 'em-and-meet-'em kind of meeting, and I think they tagged onto that. So I think that's why those who didn't wish to join them just didn't.

K: And that was okay.

C: Oh, yeah. I was just nosy; that's why I went!

Whatever the issue was that prompted several MUSE women to gather to discuss their Feminism, Casey and Patti were not especially compelled by the matter. It appears that before MUSE, neither had had much experience with Feminist activists or organizations.

#### *What Their Chorus Means to Them*

I asked Shegog what had drawn her – an African American, a Heterosexual, and not a Feminist – to MUSE. Her answer has strong implications for directors of other Womyn's choirs:

LS: First, the excellence of the music. You know, when I first heard MUSE, they were doing a collection of African-American music. I had never in my life heard a predominantly White choir give African-American music the honest work that it needs to do to make a transition in the people. They sang it as if

they understood the meaning of the words, where it came from, its context, all of it. So it was the repertoire that drew me to MUSE, in essence: that they didn't choose a quote-unquote White, milquetoast, Broadway theater – you know, kind of happy-go-lucky “oh, isn't this fun” (music). I'm not unfamiliar with barbershop quartet: ...it's not that kind of Sweet-Adeline type work. It goes much deeper, and the words are so heartfelt and mentally provocative from an audience point of view. So, someone asked me to come and audition. ...So I joined, and then what continued to be an impressive part for me was the work that goes into producing that kind of sound, and realizing that that group did their homework. It was just that that group was going to sing “Asikatalia” and could do it well. They had South African college students come over and help them with the pronunciation of the words. People did the research and said: “This is from blah-blah-blah,” and they had all the historic context for the work. And when the people do the work, then it's not appropriation. Then you're not embarrassed that a predominantly White group is massacring your music. Everything is done with dignity and understanding.

KB: What's the significance of working in a group of all women?

LS: ...It's safe space. It's very empowering. It lets you be a little bit, um, undressed, if you will, so that you don't have to have all the foibles around you...that I perceive in my world that you have to have around men. There's not that necessity of listening with two ears: “What are you really saying? What do you really mean?” (*laughs*) You know? “When you say that, what are you really saying?” Or the control issues, although we got some real controllers *in* here! It's from a different perspective. It takes away at least a couple layers of the onion so you can get down to the meat of it and say: “Okay, what I am really trying to have, here? And who are we?” You know, when you read our philosophy, that gave me a base. But it's so much more than that. I mean, it's women loving women – you know, that kind of puts us out there, that front street kind of thing. But after that, it becomes a safe place to have discussion. I don't know all the women *personally* personally, but I know a general, basic starting point – that this is our ground, the space we start from. And based on that, I can trust you with certain information. I (can) choose to say: “This is confidential: this is meant for us here.” for the family, more or less. MUSE is a very family kind of thing. The commitment is too heavy for it to even be anything other than family. You cannot – I was talking with Cathy that it's a familial commitment. Because usually choir commitments at church or some other community level, if the kid has a baseball game, it's like, out the door for the choir – you know, *later*. But in MUSE, you're expected to be here. It's like the choir comes next to God and family. Only because you feel a commitment to the women to hold up your part, and to whatever issue we're singing for. Because we're either singing for ourselves at a concert, or whatever – but we have such a loving constituency, and so you want to give to them. But then there's the walks and the different women's organizations and things that need our support, that our music speaks to.

KB: You were talking about trust and safe space among women and peeling away the layers of the onion. Is that something that you had understood in your family, in your community, before MUSE?

LS: I think I understood it in my family, because family...was the only place that I knew this kind of trust.

KB: Uh-huh. I'm talking about women-only space as something special and different. Was that something that you had experienced?

LS: No. No. That was very new. I mean, I had girlfriends and all of that, but there was always that layer of cattiness, *per se*. Especially in African-American communities: "She'll *take yo' man!*" That competition *thang*. And I say that only because that's what I know. Because our communities were pretty much segregated. Even though our schools were integrated, the communities we live in are still pretty much segregated. So, the girlfriends that you had and really hung with and did the Saturday-night thing with and bowled with or whatever you did were your Homies. And so you trusted them up to a level, but there wasn't *this* kind of sisterhood. This camaraderie is a new thing for me – you know, to really trust women like *this*. And I trust ones more than others, just because of personality and where ...you live in terms of being comfortable to talk with that person. There are some really in-your-face women. And I can deal with them, but I have to be ready; I have to have my armor on. 'Cause, you know, the Sistah's gonna come out with *whatevvah!* (*laughing*) You know? I have to be ready. If I ask her opinion, I have to really want it! (*guffawing*) You have to be ready for that. And so you learn (that) ...if you want a milquetoast reaction to what you're doing, you go to somebody else. Yes, it has been a new experience for me. ...And delightful. Very delightful.

Shegog finds that within MUSE, the absence of men allows for the establishment of more natural and trustworthy communication, even among women of different races. In fact, the commitment established among all these women across their racial and other differences has in her experience forged a closer bond among them than the bonds she shared with the African-American women of her neighborhood. Her remarks on the newness to her of this kind of connection among women echo the observations Georgette made about being with the members of Urban Bush Women (page 102), where women support one another rather than fighting one another for male attention.

Shegog was explicit about her appreciation for the opportunity within MUSE to come in contact with Feminist Lesbian community. She sees Feminist Lesbianism as having a positive impact on women's psychic health in general and on the ability of White and Black women to have genuine relationships with each other:

LS: With Lesbians it's a more open relationship than I've ever seen before. Because I've seen a lot more (African-American) Lesbian women that are willing to be uncloseted that find wonderful relationships, *enlightened* relationships, with Caucasian women, White women. ...And that's where I would say that (Lesbians) are more enlightened than just glibly going along with what is happening. Because I can't *have* a decent conversation with Heterosexual women! (*laughs*) Because if I have to have one more conversation about how to texturize my hair, or color it, or – (*guffaws*). ...If I can help another woman be true to herself, then that's fine. All the other things – . So, yes: I really applaud...Lesbian culture. (It) has taught me so much about acceptance and even about myself.

Shegog is one of many women in this study – and throughout the nation’s Feminist choruses – who finds that being a member of her choir feeds her and even challenges her in ways that have nothing to do with music.

Jo, before joining MUSE, had been a member of a large, mixed chorus that sings the “warhorses” of the symphonic choral repertoire. She grew tired of repeating the same repertoire, and she was also offended by the male conductor’s sexually “harassing” and “predatory” behavior toward individual young women, as well as the misogynist comments he was wont to make to the group in general. It was in this group that Jo met her partner, and though within the choir they were out as Lesbians “in a manner of speaking,” the many Gay men in the group obeyed the unstated expectation to be “sort of pleasantly closeted.” Overall, Jo characterized this choir as “an oppressive atmosphere” and commented that she and her partner “just needed to be away from there.” About MUSE she says in contrast:

J: ...In MUSE, the rehearsal atmosphere, obviously, is pro-woman. I know there are some certain issues among the different parts in MUSE. The (second) sopranos, we don’t have too many difficulties, although some of the people don’t want to sit next to us when we’re babbling. Because this one never knows her music or that one smells like liquor – you know, there’s some of that kind of issue. But on the whole, I think our section is probably the least dysfunctional in the choir. But I know there are some others where people do have difficulty; where the whole section can be kind of dysfunctional. Ask a (second) alto! (*chuckles*) When they were kidding around last night – because we had our new people there for the first time – two of them mentioned in their introductions that they were social workers or psychiatric nurses or something like that, and one of the therapists in the choir said: “Well, you’re in the right section! They need you there!” And that’s actually true; they actually could use therapy! (*laughing*)

K: Just a bad combination of diametrically-opposed political ideologies in that section, or what?

J: It’s not so much political ideologies as it is personality clashes. You know: this one is real judgmental and that one is real clingy, and – whatever. This one’s real needy and that one’s real assertive, and –

K: They don’t balance one another out so well.

J: No. But that’s just –

K: That’s family life!

J: Sure it is. And it’s not any worse than anything else. It’s just that within the sort of comfort zone of having this nice women’s choir that you can go and take a bath in emotionally and musically, there are certain buzzes that are going around as well.

Jo identified MUSE to me as follows:

J: Well, MUSE is an interesting thing! It's a thing. It explodes, I think, beyond a chorus or a choir. It goes beyond that. I think it begins and ends with the quality of the music, with the musical experience. But it's a community of women that has consciously struggled to be a community of women when there have been forces or issues that have seemed like they could make us less of a community. MUSE has struggled to find a way to continue to be a community. So I'll say it's a musical thing with a big community component.

K: Well, it's tempting now for me to ask you about those challenges or forces that maybe could have caused MUSE to be less of a community, as you said.

J: Well, there are a number, and they go around both issues and process. In terms of process, that's sort of general. I'll talk a little bit about that, and then I'll get more specific. But process is so difficult with a big group whenever you try to do any kind of consensus. And MUSE has always tried to go by consensus. It really tries to be a Feminist organization in whatever senses that may mean. So, we don't just simply take a vote and if the majority says "go" then we go –

K: – at the expense of those who didn't say "go."

J: Right. So, we try to do a sort of modified consensus when that's necessary. In other words, you could say: "Yes, I'm for it." But "no" or less than "absolutely yes" has a number of possibilities. You could say: "I'm not crazy about it, but I'm not willing to block it." Or: "I hate this so much that I would block it." I mean, there are ways to do it. And that, of course, means that our decision-making is absolutely painfully slow sometimes. So, something like the process in which we wrote our choir's philosophy, which appears in every concert program, took ages. Because every word was fraught in some way... with just all sorts of things. What did the word *Feminist* mean to people? What did the word *diversity* mean to people? What would happen if you put the word *Lesbian* in? And if you put *Lesbian* in, what other sexualities did you have to put in? So, I mean, it's never over, this sort of struggle to make decisions and to make them as a group. So, the struggle with process sometimes feels difficult, because I think there are people who get kind of – impatient.

K: What are the kinds of decisions that get yielded up to the consensus process? It's certainly not about where to put the cutoff. Right?

J: No. It's things like our clothing. I can't even begin to describe to you how painful the last go-around was about what our concert dress would be!

K: How many times has that been gone around?

J: Well, I've been in the choir eleven years, I guess – quite a while. And I guess I can think of two or three only. So, it's not something that comes up every concert!

K: Oh, okay.

J: God, no! We couldn't handle it! We'd have no members left! As it is, it's terrible painful. Because everybody's got some sort of issue. "Don't make us all wear the same thing." Okay. Then, what? "Let's have common colors." Okay. Then, what? What colors? What season? What type of thing? Solid? Polka-dots? What? There are just endless things. I remember one issue – one discussion where we actually had to have a mediator come in to mediate a choir discussion on clothing. So, you know, that was – it's difficult. And we have some issues. That, of course, has been less fraught than the issue of race and racial diversity, which I think has been more painful for some choir members than others. ...And we have very high expectations of MUSE. Too high. A lot of us expect MUSE to handle all of our needs – emotional and community needs – as well as being a musical group. And I think if you make it be too much, you will always be disappointed in a way. So, some people are always feeling like MUSE is letting them down a little bit because they want...

K: So, they're not taking responsibility for placing expectations on MUSE that MUSE can't fulfill.

J: Oh, yeah. I think the problem is when you don't realize what you're doing, when you're placing the expectation but aren't willing to see that's what you're doing. So, there's still some people worrying about these issues. But my feeling, my take on MUSE, is that people are committed enough to the idea of MUSE, whatever that is – you know, it shifts – but whatever community/musical/personal things that is – I think that if people are committed enough to it, then in spite of occasional problems – maybe not problems, but little throes of emotion, and maybe some negative energy, questions – MUSE seems to me to be strong. It doesn't seem to me to be something that's falling apart.

Shegog ascribes any discomfort in MUSE to personality clashes. Jo, however, goes as far as to admit that there are clashes of opinion as well, some of which are expressed in unreasonable terms and some of which may go unresolved. Shegog sees MUSE as a family and a place of emotional comfort; Jo perceives that some women who want it to be these things for them also expect it to accommodate them in ways that it cannot. Throughout our conversation, Jo made references to the fact that the process of racially integrating MUSE had been difficult and painful for some of the White women, and she thinks that some of the negative feelings that are still unresolved have to do with members' responses to that challenge. Whatever tensions they report, Jo and Shegog agree that MUSE women are strongly committed to their organization.

I asked Casey and Patti to identify Muse:

C: MUSE is a wonderful, wonderful organization. It's women – they run every gamut you can possibly think of. I think we have a midwife all the way up to – I don't know how many people with doctorates in there. Medical doctors, housewives – it's just a whole array of women's experiences that are in MUSE. We're trying to recruit a few younger ones. I guess we probably go from about eighteen to sixty-five, maybe. It's interesting that they address so many issues that are women's issues: ...“Do I need to sit (during performances)? How old am I? My bones are a lot older than this eighteen-year-old's bones.”

So they address all these issues. So they'll bring in people to show you how your bones are put together, and how you can stand differently. Like, now I don't wear shoes in the concert; I wear black socks. Because it's more comfortable for me, because singing is the thing; they're not so much on the appearance. We have our uniformity in the colors, but you'll notice that there are no two people dressed the same. Never. They address every issue under the sun. I don't know if you were there last night when they were talking about the Balkan music and someone wanted an explanation and: someone did research. They'll come back to you and tell you what it's about. Or if we're singing in Yiddish, we'll have someone teach it to us so we're not faking it. Because we might sing somewhere where that's their language, and they'll know you're not really what you're about. I love it. It's just an all-encompassing kind of experience.

P: MUSE for some of us is home, friendship, comfort sometimes. I've always loved to sing, and it always puts me in a better mood. I find I like that. Good friends. If you want, being able to talk. ...MUSE is just – it's comfort. That's the best way I can put it. It's a nice comfort zone.

Bernice Johnson Reagon's remarks in her address about "home" versus coalition would seem to predict a different picture from the one that my interviewees draw about the atmosphere of MUSE. Shegog, Casey, and Patti have described MUSE as "home" and characterized it as a "wonderful, wonderful" "all-encompassing" place of "comfort," "safe space," and "trust." How can this be explained? Perhaps these particular African-American women happen to have very different requirements from Dr. Reagon's for personal comfort. Perhaps the rest of the Black women in MUSE would have reported feeling the "trouble" that Reagon says characterizes coalition. The cynic would suggest that these women were occulting their true feelings about MUSE. I cannot disprove this; I can only say that the zeal they displayed in their interviews, as well as at the MUSE functions (one concert, one UBW Community Sing, one party) where I have observed, sung with, and socialized among them, leave no doubt in my mind as to the sincerity of their comments to me. Is it possible, then, that the women of MUSE are "not really doing no coalescing"? Are they so much like one another – despite differences in race, sexuality, politics, musical background, and formal education – that the fundamental definition of *A MUSE Woman* has remained unchallenged?

If these three Black women think so, not all White members do. Roma's and Jo's comments about White women's discomfort over the racial integration of the group bear out Reagon's analysis quite neatly. Clearly, there are White women in MUSE who felt the stretch, the challenge, and the threat of interracial coalition. When Roma reports women's complaints that "MUSE is not what it used to be," and when Jo reports that some women place unreasonable emotional expectations on MUSE, I think they are talking about the same people and the same expectations. What the malcontents among the White members require to feel "safe" in and to "trust" the environment is clearly more than Shegog, Casey, and Patti need. Where White women feel discomfited by the changed face of MUSE, they are basing their expectations on their former experiences in MUSE or in other virtually White groups; they have been unable to meet these expectations in MUSE's racially integrated environment, and this is the source of their disappointment. In



contrast, it is likely that Shegog, Casey, and Patti had more reasonable expectations of what it would be like to join a formerly White group – or perhaps the experience turned out to be even better than they had expected it could be. In fact, Shegog says as much when she reports having found in MUSE a kind of sisterhood and trust that she had not known could exist, a group in which communicating between Black and White does not even require “listening with two ears” the way she feels she must when communicating (*coalescing?*) with men of her own race. Perhaps for the women, Black and White, who are happy and satisfied within MUSE, the reason they are “not doing no coalescing” is because – after years of effort and experimentation – they *have coalesced*.

*Turning the Corner: White Feminists Struggle with Jesus*

There is one moment that seems to occupy a primary place in the MUSE lore about the group’s transformation into an interracial community. Every MUSE woman I interviewed referred to it eventually in some context, although I did not always recognize at the time that this was happening. When I pieced the narratives together, I was able to see a full picture of what had led up to this moment. I will reconstruct that story here and then present some of the women’s comments about it.

Apparently, when Roma had started programming more African-American sacred music as part of the effort to integrate MUSE, there was some of the typical, White-Feminist resistance to singing music created for Christian worship services. Even after several new African-American members had joined, there were veteran White members who continued to feel resistant, however privately. But it was somehow known that one woman in particular simply could not stand to sing this music. Several of the Black women in the chorus interpreted her distaste for the music as racist. The bad feeling that this created impeded the chorus members’ progress toward mutual understanding and trust in their newly integrated environment. Finally, at one of the chorus’s weekend retreats, this woman shared with the group her reasons for resisting the music. Her father, a highly respected church minister credited with great moral authority in her community, had abused her throughout her childhood. Singing this music brought back associations of him and his treatment of her, as well as all her emotions about the hypocrisy and corruptibility of his faith system. Hearing her testimony apparently made a tremendous impact, especially on the African-American women who had formerly taken her distaste for the music as a personal insult. The ensuing discussion among the group at that retreat was a watershed for MUSE. This event is repeatedly held up as MUSE’s paradigmatic example of the need for open communication in a situation where there is a high potential for misunderstanding – as in the coming together of Black and White Americans.

Casey brought up this moment while we were discussing her feelings about hearing a mostly White group sing a traditional Black song:

K: So how does a song like that sound in all those women’s voices when they start working on it?

(*I pause, but Casey doesn’t seem to have a response.*) Did you ever feel uncomfortable with the way –

C: I see. I see what you’re saying. No. I didn’t. But I think there may have been some non-Black

members who may not have – that wouldn't have been their first choice of songs to sing. We had (a) discussion up at Grailville. A woman...took issue with (singing Black sacred music) because she was raised in an abusive family, and her dad was a minister, and he would beat them and whatnot and make them go to church, and she'd hear these songs. So, she could not equate the treatment at home with what she was hearing in church, so she had a problem singing it. And you had to realize that she's not saying she hates the song, or even why the song was written. She has a problem with it because of the context in which it was presented to her as a child; it makes perfectly good sense. ...When (she started) talking about why she didn't like the New Spirituals (concert), we were starting to get all upset. But then she told us why, and we all got up and gave her a hug. You know, because that's a rough way to grow up. You can't take it personally: "Oh, you don't like Black people!" No: you just don't want to sing these songs. I don't have a problem with that.

Lois Shegog brought up the incident while explaining to me the importance that MUSE places on discussing conflicts and misunderstandings:

I respect (MUSE) women for doing that (communication) work, for realizing it needs to be done, and don't continue sweeping things under the carpet. ...We have a *lot* of conversation, you know? And then it's understanding why people say some of the things that they say. And some of it is not coming from a cultural background; it's coming from personal experiences. So, when people don't like singing the "God" and "Jesus" words and things like that? Those issues – some of them are not based around the fact that it's about my culture – which I could immediately lead to, until this woman explained to me that, through an abusive situation, those songs were the songs that the abuser sang with vehemence... And so those songs brought great pain to her; it had nothing to do with my culture. But I didn't know that until she was willing to tell me her story. ...When she was able to voice her story, ...I could say: "Oh, but I never knew that part! I thought it was just this!" Because I *assumed* I knew. I thought her upsettedness was the coming from the fact that it was African-American music, because I was making that standpoint that when we sing "adoramus te" and we sing about the Virgin Mary, and we do it Latin, nobody gets upset! And then when we come to *my* music – ! (*laughs*). So for me, I didn't have a frame of reference, and she was not at a point yet in her road to be able to share it when we first went through it. She shared it in open forum. Those are risks that the people have to take. And to be in this kind of group, it's a *lot* of that. You know, we talk a lot about safe space and being able to do things and not be ridiculed and being able to speak your mind. And that, I find, is not as easy as people – we *say* we have safe space, but people really don't believe it. And so working constantly to try to get that is just another work.

According to Jo, MUSE has not always been innocent of "sweeping things under the carpet," at least temporarily. We were discussing MUSE's shift to a new emphasis on Black sacred music when she – who is not a Christian – brought up the incident:

K: Did you – or in your perception did anyone else – have any concerns about performing the music?

J: Oh, yeah! The Jesus thing. It was a religious thing, really. The kind of revival-type feel. Which I'm not

awfully comfortable with. But I find that I can sort of – I like music, no matter what kind of music it is.

K: Yeah. I mean, how many times did you sing Brahms' Requiem?

J: Yeah. I mean, how many Masses have I sung? How many *Kyrie eleison*? How many "Ave Maria, gee, it's good ta see ya'!" I've done that for so many years that it doesn't bother me. I know what the words mean, but the music is so beautiful that I can put it in a place where it's simply good music. And therefore, it's okay.

K: You don't feel like you're bearing false witness against yourself to let those words come out of your mouth.

J: No. When MUSE started to do it, I was a little uncomfortable with some of it.

K: For example? Do you remember what pieces MUSE began with?

J: Well, the first time we started singing about Jesus – and I can't remember what the song was – it felt sort of odd in that group, because it seemed like we were suddenly doing that without – we were so conscientious, usually, about thinking about how what we sing affects people in our own choir. You know: "Can we sing this?" I remember something – I think it was a line from Therese Edell's "Take Back the Guns" that – maybe I'm in the wrong piece. But it seems to me there was one line in there that people thought was unnecessarily violent. And when that line came up, people would just sort of temporarily dissociate. But you sing through it, you know? You sing through it. But we talked about it. The point is that we talked about it. But it seems to me that if I was upset at all, it was because the change – we weren't examining how people were feeling about the music. And in fact, it really wasn't until our Grailville retreat a year ago – so this is probably five or six years after the big change had come – that somebody said: "I need to explain why I have trouble with this music."

K: You're the third person who has spoken to me about that incident.

J: It was a huge, expansive time. And that was, like five years after there had been some kind of angry words exchanged when the choir, it felt like to me, was being dragged kind of kicking and screaming into a different type of thing; into singing with a Gospel pianist – a man who is a terrific person; I'm very, very fond of him. But, it felt like we had not talked about how this would go and what kinds of compromises it was going to take. And that was where my discomfort came from.

I found this information fascinating. According to Jo, the matter of what to wear at a performance has historically merited group consensus, but programming a considerable proportion of music that was likely to offend the sensibilities of the many women who were "recovering Christians" did not. A single, unsettling line of text in a song by a White Lesbian pioneer of the Womyn's music movement received group discussion, but the decision to take on whole projects of Black, Christian, congregational song did

not. If Jo's recollection is accurate, it would seem that Roma and the Board saw this decision as critical enough – and potentially controversial enough – to either make or break the goal of racially integrating the chorus. Jo's narrative suggests a feeling on the part of the decision-makers that this change had to be made at any cost – and that if it had been up to the consensus of the group, it would not have happened. This seems to contradict what Roma reports about trusting MUSE's process to handle the most difficult and potentially divisive issue. However, Jo is reporting on events some seven years in the past. Much has transpired in MUSE since that time, and any trust that MUSE women report feeling has surely been established over time and through a series of challenges and their resolutions.

*Turning the Corner: As Elizabeth Sees It*

Elizabeth is consistently positive when talking about the changes and the challenges within MUSE. She made some passing references to the moment at Grailville when the White woman allowed the Black women to understand her problem with congregational music, but if I had not heard the story from other women, I would not have understood these references. Instead, what was more important for Elizabeth were the moments when White women came to understand Black women better, and when her activities within MUSE had helped her better integrate herself into Black spaces outside of MUSE:

E: (Cathy) brought in two women from the Temple University Women's Center, a White woman and a Black woman, and they did a workshop with us for two days. Some of the activities were paired activities when we talked about certain kinds of things, and when African-American women told stories, like about being excluded from birthday parties, or going to birthday parties – this one woman told a story where the other kids asked her to get in the closet. Some *outrageous* story. I mean, and when people started hearing these stories about people – you know? For some people it was really a revelation. It was really a revelation. So I think those kinds of experiences have built community among the choir in real positive ways. Because it's been – I mean, you know: it hasn't been easy for a lot of people. And I guess I just feel lucky because, teaching in an urban setting, I get to work with a lot of African-American people, and I've had a lot of lessons – some easy, some hard. I've had a lot of learning experiences in the last twenty-five years. But there are people in MUSE for whom choir is their only integrated experience.

K: And their first one, for some of them?

E: Right. So, I mean, there's just a lot of different levels.

Elizabeth did not indicate that the decision to sing gospel music had been at all problematic for her, even as someone who gave up organ because she didn't want to work in a church. In fact, she felt very positive about the decision, both for its political implications for MUSE and for its effect on her life outside of MUSE:

E: If you're only going to do European *bel canto* music, then you can't really say you're an integrated choir, because you're always asking the same people to make compromises, to give up any other traditions. ...So I see it as...helping us as White folks gain a respect for African-American culture and put things in perspective, and – we sing with Todd sometimes; you know about Todd, right?

K: Is he that pianist?

E: Yeah. Todd's wonderful.

K: He's a gospel pianist, and he works in a Black church, right? He's a Black man?

E: Yeah. And political. He's got a real political consciousness. And he was the music director at the women's prison. When we did the prison tour?

K: That was the link.

E: Right. So, singing with Todd – I guess I've always felt so privileged. I feel like I've had chances to experience African-American culture in its true form, as opposed to in its adulterated form – which we get to experience on many occasions, but – not in a commercialized form or a second-hand version, but to really have a chance to sing and feel and experience the African-American experience in this country, and to gain much more respect for it. I've always taught in schools that are primarily African American, so I've had a chance to go to church with my kids and go to different family celebrations and do stuff, but just to have this experience allows me to integrate myself much more into the lives of the people I work with every day.

The prison tour Elizabeth refers to here is the same one Catherine Roma discussed in my interview with her. It was another watershed in MUSE's evolution, and Elizabeth had important things to say about it:

E: And then with the thing with Todd in the prison, the struggle broke out on the surface over: "Did we get sucked into singing about religion when nobody really asked us to?" And: "Is organized religion oppressive to women?" And, "was this something we really wanted to do?" was how it started out. But it *really* got much deeper into: "Oh: were we pulled into African-American culture against our will?"

K: In other words, what's really the source of the discomfort here?

E: Yeah. Because at the time, people were really excited. On the bus ride back there was just this sense: here we were in a women's prison, where probably seventy-five percent of the women were African American. And the African-American women in the choir were seeing women from their high school class, women they knew from their neighborhoods. I mean, it was a very heavy experience for them. We were in the gym, and the newly-initiated people in their orange jumpsuits got to sit over here. The rest of

the people sat over here. And the choir was here in the corner. There was all this empty space: we weren't allowed to go anywhere near them.

K: Oh. wow. That is heavy.

E: And, they were like this with MUSE (*demonstrates polite clapping*). But Todd lifted them up off their seats. And so it was this stark question of what spoke to these women and what they needed. And – and it's not to say that some of our music may not have challenged some of their ideas and may not have left them with things to think about. But what they *felt*, what they *needed* was catharsis. What they *needed* was a chance to be emotional. And so, his music – I mean, people were just like –

K: The Spirit came in, is what I've heard from other people about it.

E: Yeah. And so, it took us a long time to figure out what to do with all that and what all of that meant.

K: And you concluded?

E: Personally?

K: Or the group. Both.

E: Oh, well, there was just a lot of talk. A lot of talk. To me it just added a whole new dimension to the depth of African-American music in terms of speaking on so many levels and playing this role in a community that's so oppressed, of being able to name it – whether it's the Blues, or whether it's gospel music: being able to just reach deeply and let people who may be – I mean, I see this with parents I serve who work two and three jobs, and they're just so tired, and they don't have a life. It lets them be alive. Just really alive, for however many hours in church. Because in my German background, church is sixty minutes long! Okay? And then you're in the Black church, and it's: "Oh, let's see: it's been three hours? Maybe it'll be another hour, depending on what the Spirit says!" But then you think: it's a chance for people to dress up who maybe work in uniforms, and it's a chance for people to just be themselves in a world that says: "Stay in your box. Stay in your place. Act the way I want you to act."

The longevity of Elizabeth's commitment to anti-racism, the extent of her experience with African Americans, and the level of her cross-racial understanding are evident in all these narratives. One wonders what our choruses and other organizations would look like if her perceptions were more typical among White Americans.

### *Tit for Tat?*

Among the MUSE members whose difficulty stretching beyond their comfort zones has brought racial tensions to the surface are also some African Americans. In one particular conflict involving this dynamic, religion was once again the point of contention – or the red herring. Lois Shegog brought up the

conflict in rather brief and general terms. Because she was my first MUSE interviewee, I lacked the background to appreciate the importance of her comments at the time:

Many times, in African-American music, the way you get through, get over, is a belief in a power greater than yourself. And we have learned – or are beginning to learn – that that translates to many different things: to the gods and goddesses and all that. Now we have had some situations with Goddess music that just threw some of the Christian women completely off the deep end, you know? They just could not deal with it, and they just chose not to sing in that concert.

As I learned later when talking to Jo, “that concert” was a performance of Kay Gardner’s *Ouroboros*, an oratorio for women’s chorus, six female soloists, and women’s orchestra. The libretto associates eight stages in the life-cycle of a woman (birth, childhood, menarche, sexual initiation, motherhood, menopause, elderhood, death-rebirth) with the eight major seasonal holidays (Winter Solstice, Imbolc, Spring Equinox, Beltane, Summer Solstice, Lammas, Autumn Equinox, Samhain) in the European Pagan calendar year. The Great Goddess is invoked throughout the work by Her many names. The work was commissioned by a White Lesbian of modest means in her eighties who had built up a nest-egg over decades in order to be able one day to fund the creation of a significant work of Lesbian art. The work’s premiere took place at the twentieth National Women’s Music Festival in 1994. Roma prepared the chorus for that performance (in which two AMASONG members and I sang). Recently, MUSE mounted their own performance of the work, an enormous undertaking. This is the performance from which “some of the Christian women” absented themselves.

Lois did not mention the race of these Christian women, and I did not at the time see race as relevant to the story; I had not yet heard the stories about the challenges non- or anti-Christian White members had had to meet in order to be able to sing Black Christian music. Then Jo and I had a conversation about how it was that MUSE had managed to become racially integrated:

K: What kinds of decisions did you have to make together as a choir regarding race?

J: Well, when I first joined the choir, whenever it was – fall of ’88, maybe – it was much more pale-colored than it is now. And, like a lot of groups of White women – White Feminists, White Lesbians, White whatever – people were talking about: “Well, we should be more diverse.” But the first impulse of White, middle-class people is to want to be diverse by having other people be just like you and join you. So: “Why aren’t there a whole bunch of Women of Color who want to join us? We’re not willing to change our paradigm, our basic way of thinking about the world. We would just like to have more Women of Color who are just like us.”

K: There’s the assumption, right?

J: That’s the assumption. And, how painful it was to change our choir; the choir has changed. And if you

meet us now – one of the first things that people notice is that we have a significant minority population. And, how do you do that? How do you make women want to come? You've got to change what you sing. You can't just sing the same stuff you were singing before. ...Until we made this major commitment to change our way of thinking, to make ourselves as a choir the kind of group that would be interesting to more different kinds of people rather than to people just like ourselves, we – well, we did some repertoire by and for African-American women. We didn't make that a central part of our schedule. But, once we went to the New Spirituals project, committed ourselves to...certain kinds of Gospel singing, certain religious references, references to Jesus that are very offensive to some members of the choir, then the choir changed. Drastically, and quickly, I would say. We did two things. We changed the repertoire, and we enlarged the number of singers so that we could pull in people rapidly.

K: So the size had been capped at a lower number.

J: It had been capped at forty-eight. Now it is kept to sixty. And so, we didn't go from forty-eight to sixty in one week, but we said that we would grow with sixty as a cap. So that gives you room to add more people.

K: And you don't have to wait for some White woman to drop out before you have a spot for a Woman of Color.

J: Right. We were willing to do that. So, the choir changed. And it was painful. We had some discussions where people left in tears. And people were sort of accused of saying something that sounded (*pauses*) upsetting. (*pauses again*) And then I know there are still issues around – there was some anger last year when we sang the New Spirituals in February, and then a couple of Women of Color were not willing to sing *Ouroboros*.

K: Oh, what a shame!

J: They weren't willing to sing that because it was Pagan. You can't have it both ways. If you're going to have the same obligation, it has to be common to all choir members, I think. And so, times when it seems like people are not willing to do that, there's been some anger. I think it's just not over. But, you know, Bernice Johnson Reagon said if you're in coalition and you start feeling comfortable, you're not in coalition anymore! And I think we're coalescing.

For the anti-Christian White women who found it difficult to sing the New Spirituals concert or the prison tour, seeing "Women of Color" (Black women) bow out of the very heavy undertaking of *Ouroboros* probably made them feel like they were not being met halfway. And as personally as any Black woman had been inclined to take White women's resistance to gospel music, so personally would some of MUSE's White Feminists have taken the rejection of *Ouroboros*, given that it is built on a panoply of symbols that have been used as iconic of and sacred within White Womyn's identity.

As an aside, Patti named *Ouroboros* as one of her favorite pieces:



P: We fussed, we complained. We didn't know if we liked that song. But the more we did it, the more we got into it. Then, when it was all put together, it was like: "Wow! That was great!"

K: What was great about it for you?

P: Not just the sound, okay? You know, we're all into that menopausal age. So you never think about singing something like that. I never realized there were cultures that celebrated this type of thing. I call it a curse, personally. But there's a couple in our group who, their daughter just started. And they gave her gifts and all. And they explained it all to me, and listening to them explain it, it was very nice. That was nice. We didn't go through that in my family. It was a curse. And so, to sing about it was like: "Well, what kind of music is this?" But it was beautiful! And it says a lot of beautiful things. We just didn't listen right away. We complained. But it's actually beautiful if you sit and listen to it. It's beautiful. So that would be top on my list.

### *Evaluations From Around the Corner*

At some point in my discussions with Elizabeth, Lois Shegog, and Jo, we had exchanges that summarized our observations – and their feelings – about the processes and the results of MUSE's racial transformation. Elizabeth credits Catherine Roma with the uniqueness of MUSE:

K: It's an exemplary balance, I think, between politics and musicianship.

E: Well, like Cathy Roma's life! She's managed, somehow, to make the choir reflect who she is.

K: Yeah. Well, all of us do, for better or for worse. The proof is in our pudding.

Shegog is impressed with the kind of commitment that so many women have given to MUSE's growth process, and she celebrates the group's willingness to continue learning through the open and respectful discussion of conflict and misunderstanding:

LS: MUSE is pretty special, a pretty special group of people. But they don't ignore the fact that we have not arrived. I was around for the time when we did work around racism, and for some of these women to really scratch the surface of realizing that: "I'm not really there yet. I still have a lot of 'isms' and schisms that are in me because of my rearing – " and, me as well.

KB: Did the group lose anybody over that? Any White people who just couldn't go there and –

LS: We thought we might. We were all very scared. And we brought in counselors to work with us, and clinicians to help us get through this work – and teary, heart-rending. "I didn't know." And then after that a group within the group was formed: WWAR, White Women Against Racism. And it was a group

basically to educate themselves – which I respect them for. They realized that there was some work that they needed to do that I really can't help them with. But at the initial situations, it was us coming together and listening to each other. And we've been in each other's faces, too, about stuff. We make people – if they say something that's a racist comment, the Sisters will: "That's a racist comment, and take it back!" (*chuckles*) Or: "What do you mean that you said such-and-such? I need to know what you meant by that." Or a phone conversation after choir rehearsal, you know, where you go home – you might go home mad at first. But then you think: "Now, who is this, really?" And then you call each other and say: "You know, I'm a little concerned about what you said. And I need to understand where you're coming from." And then the doors are open. "I need to talk with you. Can we do coffee so I can talk with you face-to-face and see your eyes and see what you're saying?" (But) people had to *come* to that. People had to come to that.

KB: It had to be important enough.

LS: (*pauses*) Yep. It had to be important enough. Staying power, be there –

KB: – get a reading list, take home a book –

LS: Oh, yeah. We had lots of books.

Jo's concluding comments began by referring to having been "dragged...kicking and screaming" into the singing of gospel music without having first discussed within the chorus what that would mean:

J: One of the results of that, for me, was – and time has passed, so it's easier for me to say this: MUSE has felt less like that sort of community to me since then. I don't trust it as much as I used to. Which is okay. It's kind of like growing up. Which is fine. I love MUSE; I'm not going to quit MUSE. But it has a different feel to me. You know, it feels like there are, sometimes – and it doesn't always come around race – but there are people in MUSE who want a different standard for themselves than they are willing to extend to others.

K: And this comes from what? A change in your perception? A change in the *Zeitgeist*?

J: Well, I can't really say. I mean, I think – maybe both. Maybe *my* perception. But maybe also the *Zeitgeist*, in the sense that – and more than the *Zeitgeist*, the actual nature of the community. Because all of this kind of coincided with the choir getting bigger, with people coming to us whose experience of music was church choir – and so, a church-choir orientation of a sizeable number that had certain expectations and intention. So there really was a different – I'm not sure to what extent it's really my perception. I'm not sure. I don't want to say that making it sound like I take that as a change for the worse. Because I *don't*. I think it was a change for the *better*. I think it changed me, but it also changed the choir. I think we needed that. And I think it's not ever good – for me, anyway – to allow a group to seem like it's going to answer too many of our needs. I mean, back to our very, very early point: I think

it's better to see it as a group of people who have different priorities and different needs, and that the choir as a group can fill some of them for some people. It has to fill something for everybody, or else you wouldn't be there. But that that thing could be very different.

K: Yeah. It sounds like you're saying that the group is actually experiencing the effects of becoming more diverse and what that really *means*.

J: Sure. Precisely what I'm saying.

### *On Using Songs to Make Change*

For MUSE, singing is always more than enjoying the sound of a piece of music. In fact, the women of MUSE believe strongly that their singing changes them and their audiences. It is precisely because they ascribe this power to the texts they sing that some members simply cannot sing certain things with which they do not agree.

When you're singing the ideas. ...they have a time to marinate around the heart and soul. When you have to work on them, when you sing them to an audience. They don't know why they went out singing that tune, but then that tune and those words come back. (Lois Shegog)

People are *attracted* to music. They'll listen. They'll listen to things they would never listen to if you were just talking. ...And so, I think there are a lot of ways to use music to speak to people. ...I guess I've always thought choral music had so much power to build community. Even more than instrumental music, which can do that somehow, but the fact that words are there. There *are* ideas that are coming through this. It's just, I think, *the* most powerful thing that can happen. (Elizabeth)

I think (our audiences learn) kindness. I think we're reworking things that never change. You know, love never changes. You can tack any names to it, or whatever. It's still love. It doesn't make a difference if it's male-male, male-female, or female-female; love is still love. And I think audiences forget that. And I think MUSE reminds them. We're talking about the next venture to learn more Appalachian songs. And that was a huge discussion, because we have a large Appalachian population here, and we have a lot of teachers in MUSE – schoolteachers. And they were saying, you know: "It's a good idea, but we need to be aware of some obstacles that we may encounter; not only that they may not like us because we're Gay and they may not like us because we're women, but they just might not like us because we're *there*, period." And there's a lot of racial tension between the low-income Blacks and the Appalachian population. Especially on the western side of town. So it may not be a crowd that's as accepting as some of the other ones we've dealt with. But the idea is to *reach* out to the different communities who may not have a reason to come see our concerts, who may not even know we exist. I think MUSE feels that the mission is to get the message out. You may not get it out to everybody at the same time. (Casey)

I really think that the kind of personal commitment we make to the music and to the diversity of the music breaks down our own barriers and enlarges our own brain-set. I think it really does change us. I think we

sing things we would never have sung. I would never have sung Sanskrit! Ever! It just wouldn't have occurred to me to do it. And so, the kind of opportunities we have just, kind of, change our ways of being in the world. ...The more things I learn, the more things I want to know. Because I discover when I learn new stuff how little I really know. The kinds of knowledge I get from MUSE are...the kinds of things that just help me grow. That's the part of MUSE that I value the most, is the way that that makes me feel: like my brain's alive – that as I sail, you know, headfirst into menopause, with brain cells dying at an alarming rate, that there is this time that I can just go and learn a totally new thing. And put aside everything I know, let's say, and open myself up to something quite new and different. I really like that. (Jo)

For me to be able to sing with them, politically, when Issue Three was being bandied all about: was I gonna appear onstage with these women and possibly be in pictures, you know? Was I gonna flake out then? Those were decisions that needed to be made. Am I going to be a faky person? Am I going to stand with you in any cause? And, you know, we started to make those kinds of decisions in here in choir. You know, I take off a pretty big piece when I come up here and stand with you, because I will be – you know, the whole concept of the Freedom movement: those who chose to stand with Martin Luther King and all those and go to the Bull Connors and be hosed and all that. *Are you willing to make that kind of a statement?* So, yeah – the repertoire and the willingness to put your life, in essence, on the line. I don't think any people really think they're putting their life on the line here, because nobody's really here in Ohio stoning or doing anything to them. But, I think you have to be ready. It could happen at any moment. Because people are crazy now. ...All you need is one small faction with some persons with that hate in their heart to get that crowd mentality going, and you're in a bad situation. You know, and you can be afraid, but are you gonna *stand?* The whole concept of "Which Side Are You On?" And are you really a fair-weather believer in this thing that we're doing. (Lois Shegog)

Some members expressed a concern over the danger of bringing their messages only to audiences of "the converted." MUSE's answer to that is to continually seek new venues at a variety of community gatherings. Jo shared one anecdote about what she saw as a foiled attempt at reaching out to a particular population. As this quote reveals, being received enthusiastically as wonderful performers – in the manner that audiences would applaud a string quartet or a recitalist of French *chanson* – is not enough to fulfill MUSE's performance goals:

I remember singing a full concert for the B'nai B'rith and the Jewish senior citizens and stuff, and they sat quietly, and they just *so* appreciated the whole thing. And at the end they clapped politely, and this little old lady came up to Cathy and said: "Such a nice choir! All girls, except only one boy!" (*we guffaw*) So, you know, I think it's safe to say that I don't think we reached that audience!

In order for MUSE women to feel that they can use a song to change people, they have to strive to understand – and explain to their audiences – the following things about it: the culturally based experiences of the person or people who created it; the particular purpose or occasion for which it was created; and the connotations and denotations of its text. MUSE members' process of discovery about the

origin of a song and their deliberate contemplation of its meaning is their first safeguard against engaging in what creators of the music might deem a misuse or a theft. Elizabeth spoke most descriptively about this stage in the learning process:

The songs themselves raise issues and political consciousness. All of us, when we start a song, we try to read what's in the book, read the background, share what we know about the topic – even if somebody has to go off and do some research or call somebody. We do that. ... And that's one thing that I'm very proud that we do very well. People take it seriously, trying to understand: "What does this mean? Where does it come from?" So, when we do the Ella Baker song, people stand and tell everything they know about Ella Baker, and talk about what the voting rights struggle was like, and who the leadership – all these *poor* women, you know? With *little* education, just rose to leadership in this neighborhood sort of struggle that went plantation by plantation and neighborhood by neighborhood. And women took a lot of leadership, and so you had these people with a sixth-grade education put stuff forward. So, I think: just learning respect for these people.

Sometimes this discovery process yields information that leads to a decision against using certain music. When this decision is made, it is because the women feel that singing the music would create unwanted material effects. In the case of the Alice Parker setting of the Iroquois text, MUSE feared that to sing it would reinforce the message that First Nation cultural artifacts are fair game for anyone's use and representation: this they consider dangerous in a country whose government has treated First Nation lands as free for the taking and whose popular culture purveys stereotyped and caricatured images of "Indians."<sup>25</sup> In the case of the Kodaly arrangement of the Hungarian peasant song, MUSE found its authenticity unassailable, but they felt that its text contributed to anti-Gypsy sentiment: MUSE considers bigotry to be dangerous generally and also recognizes that the particular historical oppression of people of Rom and Sinti<sup>26</sup> heritage continues today.

Most often, MUSE's discovery process leads to what the singers and their audiences judge to be respectful and convincing performances. Lois Shegog shared an anecdote about the connection between understanding a song and shaping its sound into something convincing:

LS: I think there are more people doing music from other cultures *badly*. ...I went to the Indianapolis Men's Chorus, and they wanted to do this piece of (Black) music.

KB: Mostly White?

LS: Mostly White. They had two African-American males. You know, they were concerned about the appropriation, and: "Can we little White boys do this?" They were a Gay men's chorus. And I said: "You can't sing it (like this):" (*sings "Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child" in the style of a Purcellian ode*) I said: "They didn't sing it that way pickin' cotton, Baby!" And they said: "Oh!"

<sup>25</sup> as in "Chief Illiniwek," the athletic mascot and official symbol of the University of Illinois

<sup>26</sup> the names of two major ethnic groups, or "tribes," to which people commonly called *Gypsies* belong

You have to understand the pathos of it. And I keep going to that word "pathos," but it's just the understanding. Once you get the understanding in place, then the magic happens that comes out the mouth. The understanding and the mind and the heart begin to translate into what's heard.

It is difficult to imagine missing the pathos of a melody in minor mode whose words are as desolate as this song's text. Furthermore, it can surely not have been news to anyone in the choir that this song had come out of the experience of slavery. But when Shegog first heard them sing it, whatever was passing for pathos in their minds was not going far enough for her, and her example and encouragement were needed to bring them to a sound that was, for her, believable.

Shegog's point has general relevance for musicians in any tradition. For example, any musician studying classical performance under an excellent teacher has experienced the transformation in sound that the teacher can encourage through illuminating and motivating verbal interpretations of the piece's meaning. Being a convincing interpreter of a piece's text is not a requirement exclusive to Black music. The relevance to this study of Shegog's point is this: Lay White persons happening into a performance of the Spellman College Concert Choir is unlikely to know whether their interpretation of the Rautavaara *Suite de Lorca* is sublime or simply passable – and even if they observe that it is merely passable, they are unlikely to feel personally affronted by this. In contrast, African-American lay persons happening upon a White choir's performance of a Spiritual or a Freedom Song could well hear instantly its stylistic shortcomings or the absence of any serious encounter with its meaning – and this is likely to be angering when the harder realities of Black life in the United States are so relentlessly ignored by the people who benefit from them.

When a cognitive and emotional understanding of the context surrounding the creation of a piece is not enough to produce a convincing performance, MUSE relies on coaching from experts in the traditions they are learning. Elizabeth finds that the earnest attempt to replicate a traditional sound is important in avoiding acts of appropriation, and she values the contribution that guest clinicians can make toward that effort:

It's going to be very interesting when we have Ethel (Raim) back to try to get us back into what (the Balkan style) sounds like and where those sounds come from, because they were communicating over distances. How (they) use the voice and what it's used for and why it sounds that way (is that) whole sense of, again: "Where does it come from? Where is the music coming from?" And getting outside the vocal quality that you might use in the shower because you're most comfortable with it, or whatever.

#### *On the Ownership of Songs and Who May, or Can, Sing Them*

I asked the MUSE women for their ideas about ownership of traditional music. All three African-American women had spontaneously indicated their proud sense of ownership of Black styles. I previously quoted Shegog's discussion of the offense she had taken at first when the White, anti-Christian had problems with the New Spirituals concert repertoire:

...when we sing "adoramus te" and we sing about the Virgin Mary, and we do it Latin, nobody gets upset!  
And then when we come to *my* music... (*laughing*)!

Shegog, as has been shown, is not Christian, though she was raised in a Christian community. She feels a connection to Spirituals, gospel anthems, and Black congregational hymns – *her* music – which, as I discussed in the previous chapter, is a feeling typically reported to me by even ex-Christian African-Americans.

Shegog's experience of musical ownership involves sharing *her* music with anyone who will give it the respectful treatment she feels it deserves. We were discussing the work of women who teach songs from their backgrounds to people of other backgrounds, something in which she is herself engaged:

LS: You have to spend the money sometimes to get the clinicians in, but we're finding that the better you are and the more sincere about what you're doing with the music, the less they'll come for. When they respect your work. You know, they want their music *done*. They want their music to live on.

KB: "They want their music done." Yeah. Nobody's saying: "Don't touch this!"

LS: No! Not at all!

KB: So, why do think MUSE and all these other groups of Feminists are so often the ones who are interested in helping this music live on ?

LS: Because they see the need for it. They see that we live in a world where...our communities are separated, and that something must be done. And very fortunately, it's women. You know, women are the bearers in every culture, of the culture! Therefore, in order to save our *children* – you know, we sing this music out of a desperation: "You *gotta* be better than *we* were!" You know? "You've *got to get it*!"

Here again is the trope of women as child-rearers and culture-bearers. Shegog sees *her* songs as something almost material that she carries, something handed to her by the former generation of her community's mothers: she feels a responsibility to hand this package to the next generation – within and without her identity group – because she believes that it holds indispensable lessons for humanity.

At the end of my visit at Casey and Patti's house, I took some time to play a tape of AMASONG's performance of a Gullah song, "Job, Job." I asked Casey to guess who the performers were. She correctly identified the caller (Eva) as Black, by her diction, and the choiristers as White, by what she thought was too much uniformity in their responses. Despite this latter observation, she liked the performance:

K: You did? You liked it anyway?

C: Oh, yeah! Yeah.

K: Why?

C: It's my music! (*laughter*) I don't care who's singing it! It's my music.

Casey is, of course, not Gullah, but she did recognize instantly that the music was African-American, which was enough to make it hers. An earlier conversation we had shows that Patti, too, feels a proud sense of ownership of African-American music, but our discussion of what that meant led Casey to clarify what she felt were the implications for non-Black people who might want to sing it:

K: Does a song like "Wade in the Water" belong to anybody?

P: Yes. It belongs to us.

K: "Us"?

P: The Black culture. Okay? It's a struggle. And I think every time any of us sing that song, we look at how far we've come – and Lord knows, we've still got a long way to go. But –

C: Now, I'm going to disagree. (*they chuckle*) Not disagree, but, it does – it belongs to all. I think. I think we *expressed* it the best. Because that is our way: we sing with rhythm. And – well, not all of us! (*laughing*) That's an inside joke! But, it's hard to stay still when you're singing it. Because Black people tend to keep rhythm; don't know why; just do. But I think the song belongs to anybody that had a struggle. I think it belongs to the Jewish people. I think their "wade in the water" might've been a different "wade in the water" than ours, but I think the principle of the song is the same. I think any kind of group that had to beat back oppression for any kind of reason had their "wade in the water." I think we just got there first with the song! (*more laughing*)

P: You state it so well!

C: Darling!

K: So, you claim some proud ownership of the song, but you also seem to have a sense of sharing it for people who might need it –

C: I think it's a struggle song. I think it's a liberation song. And I think anybody's story that fits into that – whether they want to sing it that way or some other kind of way – I think it's all the same. I think it's more universal than maybe what it was originally intended to be.

Though Casey feels generous about non-Black people's use of Spirituals to express their struggles, Jo sees in this the real danger of what she would consider an unacceptable appropriation of the genre's



meaning. I asked her for her opinion on the use by White, Lesbian choirs of Spirituals to express our experience under heterosexism:

J: Whoa! Do I think *that* is bullshit! ...This has come up in my own thinking about something else recently. Years ago I first came in contact with this chart that many...Women's Studies scholars have seen, which lays out aspects of a person's identity in a kind of Power category and Power-less category. So the top row is all these power categories: male, White, young or middle-aged, well-educated, able-bodied, Straight, Christian – I mean, there's just a line of them. And then, there are the people in the Less Power positions, you know: female, Lesbian, working-class, illiterate or ill-educated, etcetera – that whole line. And of course, those things all kind of leave out the complicating factors, such as the difference between working class and impoverished, which you can oversimplify. I would even put things like Butch and Femme on my chart; I think there are all kinds of complicating factors that have to do with power and identity. But it seems to me that, generally speaking, I can sort of look at one version of that chart and – there are ten versions of it; this particular one has nine. ...So, I come off five to four privileged. Privileged. And I would say that is absolutely true to my experience: that in many ways, I have had many benefits from the society by virtue of my Whiteness and by virtue of my middle-classness, my education – you know, there are a number of things that give me power and access to power in this society. And, my Queerness is partly mitigated, I believe – but this is controversial – by my Butchness. Butchness, I think, has power – partly through visibility, and partly through male-identified characteristics. You know, there are all kinds of things. But it seems to me that there are many ways in which I partake of the good things in this society. I mean, I would not deny that having grown up a little Lesbian had its hard moments. It certainly did. But none of those difficulties prevented me from getting what I needed from society. And I really think that it's just way simple to over-emphasize the nature of one's oppression. And I have always found it particularly galling – and this is partly because I just see it as so empty – when a White, Gay man suddenly discovers that, you know, he can't get married to another man, or someone wants not to rent him an apartment, and it's the first time in his entire life that anybody ever said "no" to this privileged brother. And he's outraged! He's absolutely outraged; he never knew such a thing existed. And all of a sudden, this fella is radicalized by –

K: To his own situation, or to everyone's –

J: To his own situation, often. Often it doesn't go – sometimes to others, but all too often it remains very closely tied to his own experience of rejection because of being Gay. And that blinds him totally to his sex, race, and class privilege.

By Jo's standards, any GALA chorus singing a Spiritual as a gloss for Gay troubles and not as a way of focusing their own and their audience's attention on the tragedies of racism and poverty is appropriating that Spiritual, in the same way that the White, Gay activist appropriated the "I Have a Dream" speech.

I asked Shegog a direct question aimed at her idea about songs' belongingness as well as at her attitudes about her cultural proximity to African peoples. I used the example of the song Iris had directed at the Tallahassee Farmer's Market (see the discussion on page 303):

KB: "Babethandaza:" Does that belong to anybody?

LS: No. It's a folk song. Is that what you're asking me?

KB: I'm just asking for opinions about belonging of music in oral tradition, basically. You know where "Babethandaza" comes from.

LS: Yeah. It's a Zulu song. And it's – so, belonging to the Zulu culture. As far as who wrote, it: no, I don't know that. I think it's a folk song. Like, written years and years ago – at least a hundred years ago.

KB: Right. Right.

LS: So, as in: no one else should do it? But –

KB: If songs belong, can they be stolen?

LS: Oh! See, I think the only songs that I think can be stolen is a person's song that is written and composed by a composer.

KB: So, *stolen* is a word for you that fits into the whole complex of private-property ownership, copyright law, and whatever?

LS: Yeah, copyright law. But folk music – when I say "belongs to" the Zulu culture: if you're going to sing "Babethandaza," and you're going to sing it with those words and everything, that belongs to that culture. But as far as me not being able to do it because I'm an African American and have never been to the Zulu nation: no, I can do it. I can do it. I think I have to know the background. I have to do an awful lot of listening to music that is of the Zulu culture.

Shegog did not elide her culture and Zulu culture in this conversation. She does not share the assumption of UBW's Nicole that by virtue of being Black she would somehow naturally reproduce convincing Zulu sounds. She acknowledges that conscious study is required for her to perform Zulu music well.

When Casey brought up "Babethandaza," I pursued a similar line of questioning with her:

K: You mentioned "Babethandaza." Do you remember where that's from?

C: Hmm. I believe it was Zulu. "We are who we are because our mothers prayed."

K: It's a nice text.

C: Yes.

K: So, that's the music of Zulu people?

C: Mm-hmm.

K: So, it's not mine. It's not yours?

C: Nope. It's their thought. I can't say that somebody else didn't sing it in another language singing the same thing: I don't know that.

K: Good point. So, when it's your turn to sing a Zulu song, what's your job?

C: "Job"?

K: Your responsibility.

C: Other than just the obvious learning my music, that sort of stuff?

K: Yeah.

C: Hmm. I'd say that my job is just to *convey* the spirit of the song. And as with most Black songs, we move!

K: So you feel a relationship between the Zulu music and African-American music.

C: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. I don't know why that is. If you watch any Black gospel choirs or anything like that, for some reason the rhythm comes through. I have no idea why it is, and we're all together when we do it. But you can look at the Indians or any Brown people: for some reason, there's a rhythm that they keep. Little babies have it. I can't explain it. You may not be able to carry a note, but you probably have rhythm.

K: So, you feel a little bit of cultural proximity, in a certain sense.

C: Yeah. Yeah. But I see what you're saying: I guess more of an ownership. Because I will probably learn it faster.

K: That's been your experience?

C: Uh-huh. Regardless if it's English or not. It just happens.

K: That's kind of mysterious!

C: (*laughing*) Yes, isn't it! But, I would say others probably have the same experiences when we sing songs that are more pertinent to their culture.

K: Yeah, but you know, it's interesting. I mean, how pertinent is Zulu culture to African-American culture in Cincinnati?

C: I'd say it's still "wadin' in the water."

K: If you tried to imagine daily life for a woman in a Zulu village, would you know what that would look like?

C: (*sighs heavily*) Taking care of children and men, probably! (*we laugh*)

K: Okay! There we go! *No* woman in America is too far away from *that*!

C: I know there's oppression there somewhere! But, ah, I would say probably more family-oriented; probably not career-oriented at all. And I could be very well misinformed; I'm sure there are some people who do go to school – go to college, but I would tend to think they're probably exceptions that had somehow managed to keep their grades up and get recognition or a scholarship or something like that. Whereas I know several Black African men – they're all over this city. But you very rarely run into a woman.

K: Now, this is a purely hypothetical question. But let's say you were going to spend – you had two months' vacation. You were going to spend one month of vacation in my parents' house in northern Michigan. And you were going to spend one month of your vacation in a Zulu village.

C: Okay.

K: Where do you think you would feel the most culturally displaced?

C: Displaced?

K: Total guesswork. Just wondering if you have a –

C: Is everybody speaking English? I know your family probably speaks English, but are the Zulu people going to speak English, too? Because language is going to be a large barrier right there that you have to overcome.

K: Well, let's suppose that they are, just for the sake of the argument. Do you think things would be equally strange in both places?

C: "Equally strange." Well, we're Americans; we share that experience. Michigan is just up the road; we

share that experience. Ah, going to a Zulu culture – *(pause)* I consider myself a Black American. They consider themselves Black Africans. They do not necessarily recognize Black Americans as kindred, as you may think.

K: That's actually true, yeah.

C: Yep. So, hmm. Wow, that's a *hard* one! A hard one! I don't think I would feel *displaced* either place. I think I would probably have an easier time communicating and just going through daily hobnobbing at your house. I think the interest would be on both sides if I went over to Africa. You know, I'd want to know about them; presumably they'd want to know about me. But as far as feeling like I'm home, I don't know whether I could really claim that. I'd like to say that, because as we say, that is the "Motherland." But I think you need to spend time with the Motherland and stay there and learn their cultures and *then* make a decision on that. I think we're many generations removed.

K: And probably from a completely different part of the continent, as well. Yet still, you say you feel a certain direct understanding –

C: I know as soon as the music goes, we're all going to be doing the same thing. Even though we may not understand each other speaking-wise and everything, I know there are some things we are going to do alike.

K: Ysaye Barnwell had something similar to say about this very question. She spoke about her belief in a racial subconscious – a collective, racial subconscious. She said: "We do some of the same things, even though we don't –"

C: "– know why." Yeah, there's such a great push ever since *Roots* really just kind of brought to light everything that a lot of people had been thinking but just maybe not vocalizing. You want to claim the kindredship, but I think you have to do more than just talk it. I really do. I think we're many generations removed, and I think it's more than just getting dreadlocks or your nose pierced or whatever it is you *think* you are imitating from that culture. It's not that. It's not that. That's the form; that's not the substance *at all*. Not at all.

Casey does not at first indicate that "Babethandaza" is any more hers than mine. However, it does not take her long to put it in that large, unitary category – *Black music* – which she sees as universally characterized by Black people's physicalization of pulse. In fact, she feels that this "Black" tendency makes her a quicker study of this music than I might be. As she talks a little further, she reveals her sense that this tendency is not exclusively Black; she actually seems to think that it is rather *not White*. By this point in her response, *Zulu* and *African American* have become somewhat conflated within a larger conflation of People of Color. Of all the identities that are getting conflated, none of them is mine. I stand outside the circles Casey is drawing, and when she sees that, she admits to feeling "more of an ownership" of this song, which she sees as more culturally "pertinent" to her than to me.

When I ask her to describe the nature of this cultural proximity between Zulus and African Americans, she posits several shared conditions, any of which could actually be found among communities of women in most regions of the globe: restricted access to higher education, relegation to the domestic sphere, disproportionate responsibility for the caretaking of men and children – a general “wade” through the waters of oppression. It is my “vacation” scenario that prompts her to recognize that she and I share much more in common than she shares with Zulu villagers. She points to the desire of African Americans to claim pre-slavery cultural roots in “the Motherland,” which is no less real for being in many cases unrealistic. She also knows that Africans do not necessarily return Black Americans’ sense of being kin. To Casey, a Black American who by facial piercings and locks alone claims to be culturally African is imitating – (*appropriating?*) – surface cultural behaviors while leaving the substance of the culture untouched. Still, she holds on to one connection between herself and Zulu culture, and that connection, she hypothesizes, is *music*.

### *Defining Cultural Appropriation*

I expected every MUSE woman to have a sophisticated definition of cultural appropriation at the ready, though this turned out not to be absolutely uniformly true. Here are some excerpts of conversations I had with MUSE women in which I asked them to define the term.

LS: I think it’s when you take a piece of music, slap it on a choir, usually *a cappella*, or usually without having something written down. I’m not against teaching by word-of-mouth, because that’s the way the music was given. But when there’s no context of any kind, no history, no understanding of where the music came from, no understanding of the pathos or passion that was behind this music – . Then you take it completely out of its setting and put ghastly words to it, and especially if it’s a sacred music, you have no respect of what was done. And then it’s just – then it’s appropriation, and then it’s an abomination. So I guess those qualities. If it’s taught by rote, and it’s just “oh, this is a cute little ditty,” and there’s no history, no – well, just completely out of context.

KB: It sounds like you think there’s something about a song that hasn’t been published that can cause people to take it lightly.

LS: Yes, because... there are people that take the fact that it hasn’t been published as a license to rip it to shreds.

KB: Gotcha. About keeping the song “in context:” clearly, there are certain experiences at the origin of these songs that we cannot replicate.

LS: Correct. We can’t.

KB: All right. So what *can* we do? Take it from there.

LS: We can understand where they came from. Because the music is done over and over again. (there's) just little changes. due to the folk process. People need it to be different. and my voice will never sound like I worked in a cotton field for twenty-five years or whatever. ...But I can listen to enough recordings to emulate that. But if I teach it and leave off the fact that I listened to this woman who was a sharecropper for twenty-five years – !

Lois Shegog's concern is for the preservation of the history and intent of the music. She does not address any economic issue. In her opinion, "fair use" does not demand strict imitation. She appreciates the inevitability and the value of transformations that occur in the process of oral transmission. but she cautions that word changes need to be consistent with the original intent of the song. She acknowledges that perfect copies of another people's vocal sound may not be possible for singers whose contrasting life circumstances have shaped their vocal instruments differently; still, she believes that there is a way for singers to communicate – in the voices that they have – what the song's creators might have been feeling.

Elizabeth's definition of cultural appropriation is similar to Shegog's:

We've had some really good discussions about that. Jo really has a key analysis on that, I think. I guess: people who sing things and don't understand them and don't understand where they're coming from. It's on the level of imitation: they do it because it sounds good or because it feels good. but they don't understand what it means to that culture – whether it's a sacred song or a dumb song or a joyous song: when you don't take the time to stop and say: "Who's song is this? What does it mean?" ... And people who don't feel the need to do that will just take a cute song, or take something and make it into – remember at Sister Singers the struggle that broke out after the routine?<sup>27</sup> Taking a (Spiritual) and doing a routine. and – is that really respecting – I mean, couldn't (they) have done a routine to a *show* tune?

Jo's understanding of cultural appropriation includes an element that went unstated in Shegog's response:

I think it is cultural appropriation when the power culture makes artistic incursions into oppressed cultures and takes from them elements of their culture – art, music, whatever – which will then be used for the benefit of the power culture. Okay, an example might be – and to take an example that's not musical – when you have White, kind of New-Age Feminists getting into doing sweat lodges. I consider that cultural appropriation. We're not Native Americans. We don't just get to walk in and take the nice, little rituals, which we can make have some meaning for us – take those away without also having to also sort of own up to where we stand in relation to the other culture. And I feel like that is... in music it's the same type of thing.

For Jo, appropriation takes place between two cultures, one of which is oppressing the other. Economic issues are implied here. Her words "used for the benefit of the power culture" suggest that there is not a

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<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth is referring to the White group's performance of "Ezekiel Saw the Wheel" complete with Las-Vegas-revue-style "choralography" that I mention on page 7.

concomitant return benefit to the oppressed culture. “Owning up to where we stand” in relation to the oppressed culture could imply several choices: offering economic remuneration is an obvious one, as is engaging in activism of some kind.

Jo is interested in knowing all she can about the original circumstances and sounds of a piece. She values the effort to reproduce its style when that is the performance goal. But she also allows for the conscious decision to reuse traditional materials in new ways, when done respectfully and with disclosure of the process:

I definitely prefer singing in the original language. And I want to know what the text means. In general, there's always arranging. And I have no problem with arranging. But before I would want a piece to go and be arranged, I would want to know what is the text is that was used, what's the style. Because I think that there's another process. There's a kind of referential process in music that is important and layered and is not cultural appropriation. It's a layer, a commentary.

When I asked Casey and Patti what cultural appropriation meant, Patti didn't know. But Casey thought she had a pretty good guess:

Sounds like stealing music from Black folks.

#### *On Authenticity*

Some of the women I spoke to perceived that the critiquing of musical performance by the yardstick of “authenticity” had a tendency to make unreasonable demands on performers and perhaps even suggest undue limitations on what they should undertake. All MUSE women in this sample agreed that striving to replicate a model sound was an important goal, but that other aspects of performance were equally important – sometimes more important than successfully masquerading as a community of people from a different place and time. Lois Shegog suggested a word that she prefers to use in place of *authentic*:

KB: What is your definition of an authentic experience with someone else's music? An authentic performance? If you know one when you hear one, what are you hearing?

LS: I don't think I can have an *authentic* – . I can have a *genuine* experience.

KB: “Genuine!” Oh, you're the first person to suggest that word as a substitution. That's *nice!* What is that, Lois?

LS: A genuine experience is one that moves *me*.

KB: Even if you've got the bell pattern wrong and you're playing 2-3 *clave* instead of 3-2?



LS: I think when it's genuine and the people have responded – not necessarily the people out there, but the people up here, that are performing the music together: we are trying to recreate a happening. We together are trying to create a happening here, an understanding and all of that. Because there's more fun going on onstage than might be happening out in the audience! But when it's genuine, there's something that takes over, other than just getting the notes right and having the bell pattern in the right place all the time. There's an understanding that – you know, trite phrases come to mind, but there's that spirit that runs from breast to breast, and there's a connection, and we all know when it happens, when music is just like: "All *right!* We're in there! We're in the pocket!" And that is a genuine experience. I can't have an authentic experience unless I was the creator. But I can have a genuine experience, where there's something that happened to me that transformed my feeling in that moment of doing the music. And you may not always have a genuine experience. But there's something that happens sometimes, in a concert, that brings even the performers to tears after it's over – of joy. Of absolute, wonderful joy. To the point where: "We have to stop now, or we will not get home!" Because it'll be electric.

For Shegog, framing her performance goal in terms of genuineness rather than authenticity places an emphasis on herself, on her own personal encounter with the music. It is forgiving of mistakes, and perhaps in that, it allows her to have a closer encounter with the music than might be possible if she were too exclusively preoccupied with technical matters.

Jo brings understandings from her academic discipline to the question of authenticity and arrives thereby at essentially the same conclusion as Shegog's:

K: I'm sure you've heard musicians arguing about "authenticity" in performance.

J: Sure.

K: Do you have any use for that word as a critique or as a measure of a musical experience?

J: Well, I think of authenticity both inside and outside of music. As a musician, I always think of authenticity as having something to do with trying to reproduce the way the piece might first have been heard. Like, playing on period instruments or doing it *a cappella* with a hand-stick, or whatever. I guess I think of authenticity in performance practice, which I support, as much as one can. Although, I've got to say, I am a major fan of Glenn Gould and what he did with Bach.

K: I'm willing to bet Bach would be, too.

J: Well, how can you turn that genius aside? But the point is that that would be not authentic, but authentic perhaps in a different way.

K: Well, yeah. Give me some definitions that you can –

J: Well, I guess I wanted to move to another definition of authentic, which is a more – has more to do with what I do for a living, which is to teach English and teach language. And when we talk about authenticity, we're talking about a person writing or speaking in an authentic voice – so, your own persona, your own self, comes through in whatever you create. And, so, when I take that out of English and take it back over to MUSE: you know, MUSE is going to be MUSE. We're going to be all sixty of us that we are. And so we have to produce a sound that reflects who we are. And when we do that successfully, when we put enough of us into a piece, emotionally and musically and stylistically, then we are authentic. We are making the sound that we can make. And that's authentic, I think. And so a different kind of authentic. An *honesty*. It's a performance *honesty* that comes through; it's a kind of voice that comes through. And I think we should never sing anything that we cannot perform with that kind of authenticity. And occasionally I think we do. Not typically, but sometimes we'll do a piece, and I will think, you know: "We have *never* done that damn piece *any* well! We've *never* done it right." That there's always been something about that we never got right. Not notes, but a sense of how the piece should be. And it seems to me that usually the problem with that is that somehow we haven't found the right place, within ourselves, communally, to sing it. So that it doesn't sound authentic.

K: Yep. So, if we put authenticity together with our discussion of cultural appropriation, it seems like there's a path somewhere in our attempt to imitate or adapt as much as possible the stylistic hallmarks of the music – I mean, that's one goal that has to stand beside the goal of not masquerading as something else. Do you see what I'm saying? It's like trying to keep two things in a nice balance: choosing the things that are like the way "They" do it, and keeping them in balance with what we truly do.

J: Sure. Yeah. Because you *can't* do what they do. By definition. You are not them. So, you can try to pick up on the style, the hallmarks of their style to perform it in a way that they would not find offensive, but perhaps to perform it in a way that makes it yours. And I think artistic license always permits that. ...You've got to be able to make the music your own, because it has to come out of you, or you are not performing it; you're just doing some kind of mimic.

Jo makes a very strong assertion when she says that we cannot, by definition, do what a group to which we do not belong does. Even in an instance when we might somehow produce a stylistically flawless imitation, we cannot have arrived at that sound through the same processes by which it was at first developed, and our relationship to the material cannot have been the same relationship that the originating group had to it.

According to Lois Shegog, Linda Tillery has some explicit advice for musicians who would find that balance between learning a new style and bringing part of oneself along into the endeavor:

The best directive I got from Linda Tillery is *listen*. Listen, listen, listen...to enough different (performers) that you want to sound like. And then, *stop* listening and *do* it. You know, because then you'll come with a sound of your own.

A conversation that I had with Elizabeth about one particular song illustrates the relevance of the question of genuineness, as well as the application of other issues discussed in this chapter: songs' material effects on people, MUSE's effort to seek audiences of the "unconverted," MUSE's struggle to become racially integrated, and the importance of relying on experts in a style. The song in question is Bernice Johnson Reagon's "I'm Gon' Stand!!!" This call-and-response song takes the short, strophic form of the Freedom Song, with small word substitutions suitable for fast learning by crowds of people and adaptable to a variety of situations. The caller sings, "We will not bow down to –" "We will not obey –" and, "Just can't tolerate no – ." while the group responds with the words "racism," "injustice," "exploitation," and perhaps something else pertinent to the moment. At the end of each verse, everyone sings, "I'm gon' stand!" Elizabeth told me about singing this song in a venue where its message might have been unexpected:

E: When we sang at Speaking of Women's Health last year? I was like: "Gag me with a spoon." The corporate community gets together and sponsors these things. So every drug company was there, and –

K: "Take *my* hormone-replacement therapy." "No! Take *my* hormone-replacement therapy!"

E: Right! We opened the conference last year; there were a thousand women in the hall! So it became important for us to do it. And we sang – we often open things like that with "I'm Gon' Stand!!!" just to make a strong statement.

K: So people know where you're coming from!

E: You know? And then, we sing a lot of other stuff. But, either we open with it or we use it as an encore. It really works for us, because Lois really delivers it so well. And it's easy, you know; you don't have to practice it. Our part? Two notes!

K: Right. Ysaye Barnwell said something interesting about that song. I had said I was exploring the ways – you know: was it possible for me to articulate anti-racism through my musical practice. And she said: "Not necessarily." And she mentioned this song. Which I've heard – do you know \_\_\_\_\_  
Chorus in \_\_\_\_\_?

E: No.

K: They're a White choir in the sense that we're a White choir: they might have a Woman of Color now and again. And they sang that song at a concert, and I found it ridiculous. I have loved the song, but something had always kept me from programming it for AMASONG, and when I heard this choir, I was thanking god that I hadn't programmed it! But even so, I couldn't understand at the time exactly why I found it ridiculous. Because that was several years ago, and I've learned a lot since. But anyway, Ysaye

said: “You can’t just get up there and say that. You know, to *say* that is to take a vow, to hold yourself accountable. And if you can’t live up to those words, you better not sing it.”

E: That’s why it’s a very powerful experience for our choir to sing it. It’s a *very* powerful experience to stand up in MUSE and sing it. It does feel like a commitment. I feel every time I sing that song that I am recommitting to that. And I think that’s why (MUSE) people love singing the song. Because that’s what it is. I think the fact that we *do* struggle around being an integrated choir, and that sometimes that’s wonderful and sometimes it’s painful – and being able to sing that song and stand there as a choir for better or for worse – . We’ve had some good experiences; we’ve had some bad experiences that have happened, you know? And things that I still feel bad about. ...But, I mean, all those experiences add up to who we are. So, I like doing that song, because to me, it’s a commitment to continuing to do the work, every day.

K: I would love to hear MUSE sing that song. What I realize, when I listen back in my memory to that other group doing it – I understand now that it wasn’t working because: the women who were singing it may have thought they felt it deeply and really meant what they were saying, but I would bet money – and I don’t know this, but it’s usually a safe bet – that their understanding of what that meant was: “I won’t let anybody call Black people names.” You know, the analysis doesn’t necessarily go any deeper than that: there’s not a picture of what institutional racism is or what it means to be White or what that really involves when you sing it. And I have to just sort of believe that when you hear something ringing false like that, then it’s because there’s some kind of understanding that’s missing: because the understanding that gave the song its substance – is not there. And so then what? A song that can be powerful sounds silly. Why else would that very serious song come off sounding silly?

E: Well, and I think that just having Lois sing the lead, too, with her *powerful* voice, and her center with who she is – I mean, she stands planting both her feet on the ground and *sings* that song! And, so, people respond to her lead. People *sing* like her lead. And I think we’ve talked a lot about voice quality, and ...so I think that people are trying to – they have an image of what they want to say and what they want to sound like when they do that song.

Elizabeth is inferring that the song may have sounded silly because there had been no one coaching the choir to a stylistically successful approach. Presumably, the most convincing coaching would have been most likely to come from an African-American singer, particularly one who had been involved in the Civil Rights movement. If there was no one in the choir approaching that description, and if no one in the choir thought to invite – or succeeded in inviting – someone of that description to coach them, and if there was no one of a different description in the choir who had nevertheless done enough outside listening to know what kind of sound was needed, then the aesthetic result can actually be seen to have ethical causes. For in that case, the people in that choir may be doing a number of valuable things well together, but standing together to fight racism – however loudly and dramatically they were singing about it – is not one of them. For better or for worse, the proof is in our pudding.

### Summary

The preceding four chapters were directed at the question: “Why is there so much Black music in the Feminist choral movement?” This chapter was directed at the question: “Why are there so few Black women in the Feminist choral movement?” The boundaries of this study have left races other than Black and White out of my discussion; that in itself is part of a much larger issue that this study cannot address. Therefore, the working definition of “racial integration” in this chapter was not a total one; it addressed the overwhelming predominance of White women in the Feminist choral movement and what it takes to achieve more than token representation of Black women in our choirs.

I quoted the thoughts of several women in AMASONG, Sistrum, and Anna Crusis on overcoming the persistent segregation of their choirs. The most common assumption was that “outreach” in Black spaces was the missing ingredient. Actually, each choir had a history of attempting this, but the racial profile of each choir had remained unchanged during times when the effort was current as well as times when it had lapsed. In fact, if the other directors were like me, they allowed this effort to lapse precisely because it had borne no fruit.

One choir, Anna Crusis, had also made attempts to share readings and discussions on anti-racism; this may have been a program of the choir’s Diversity Committee. Whether it was due to uneven participation or to something else, the effort “didn’t stick.” My general sense was that the women of Anna Crusis have a difficult time listening to one another during group process; the cumbersome nature of their process had been cited by two (White) people as a deterrent in itself to Black participation. Whether or not this is actually the case, it can certainly be predicted that dysfunction in group process will always prevent Anna from transforming its consciousness about race. On the other extreme, I can see now that my own choir – with almost *no* tradition of process – was not equipped in any way to undertake the challenge of desegregation. My expecting them to engage in a summer reading and discussion project when they were accustomed only to showing up and following my musical direction was perhaps unreasonable.

Most women in the three White choirs lead segregated social lives and had nothing positive to report about their cities’ racial climates. With only one exception, the other Feminist and Queer organizations that they knew of in their cities were also White. I discussed the predominance of conservative Christianity’s influence on Black community life in my city, particularly the ministries of highly visible and fervently anti-Queer churches.

As I have come to see it, the first and tallest obstacle to integrating our choirs is White women’s blindness to our own race and to the effects of our race privilege on our experiences, behaviors, and perceptions. We cannot see that our choirs are White spaces. Most of us would have trouble even identifying what that means, apart from the actual color of our skins. This difficulty is explained in the literature on identity formation, which points out that in order for people in a group to be distinguishable to themselves as belonging to a group, they must come in contact with what they can see as *another* group. As the interviews with White women in Chapter Four showed, it was typically only when discussing their

encounters with Black music that they gave any evidence of knowing that they were White. But even when coming up against non-Whiteness enables us to see that we are White, it may not help us identify what the attributes of our Whiteness are. Being both in a numerical majority in our country and also in the group that holds the most institutional power, most of us can – as Peggy McIntosh says – “arrange to be in the company of people of (our) race most of the time” (1997, 293). In fact, most of our lives are that segregated through very little conscious arranging on our part. As such, we receive scant information telling us which of those things that we view as absolutely normative for all people are really products of our White environments and experiences. Certainly, it is People of Color who generally can see the attributes of our Whiteness more clearly, especially when their survival depends on this vision.

The familiar danger in the previous paragraph is the advancement of an essentialist concept of The White Character. In a country this vast and diverse, such a concept is, of course, hardly reasonable. However, the population of the typical Feminist chorus, as a subset of Whiteness, is much more uniform than the larger set of all White people in the United States. This is precisely why these choruses function as affinity groups and “home communities” for so many of their members. Though differing from one another in sexual orientation, all members affirm the dignity of Lesbian relationships, which brings them together far more than this difference separate them. Usually, the women are neither particularly rich nor particularly poor, neither especially old nor especially young. They all live in the same region. They share a general concept of Feminism as has been articulated or assumed among them. They enjoy gathering in this concept without the men of their families or neighborhoods. The Whiteness among them, then, is a Whiteness that is mutually constructed by region, socio-economic status, age, and political orientation. A certain general character emerges from this, even though – as in any group – there are always individuals who don’t quite “fit in.” Nevertheless: even the White woman with attributes that distinguish her from the group’s general character *is still White*, something that has common effects on every White person. If nothing else, most of us can be counted on not to be *aware* of our Whiteness and its effects on us. When this is the case, we are capable of assuming that a Black woman who comes to be with us is a dangerous criminal, leaving her standing out in the rain, avoiding contact with her for weeks afterward, refusing to apologize, denying that our act was racist, demanding comfort from her, and then representing ourselves as welcoming of Black women. Let me say restate my point in slightly different terms: The first and tallest obstacle to integrating our *lives* is White women’s blindness to our own race and to the effects of our race privilege on our experiences, behaviors, and perceptions.

If we manage to see and admit that our choirs are White spaces, we can then either decide that the best thing is to keep them that way and be forthright about it with anyone who would want to join (for example, “*Anna Crusis: Philadelphia’s White-Feminist-Legacy Choir – All women welcome!*”), or we can decide to change them. But if in our attempt to change we do not identify and set ourselves to dismantling the first and tallest obstacle, efforts to sing Freedom Songs and advertise in Black newspapers will not on their own integrate our groups for us. When our perceptions and our lives outside of our choirs begin to change, our choirs will change.

Of course, this is all far more easily stated than done. I quoted a conversation in which Jane Hulting and I both admitted feeling unwilling or unable to invest in the kind of root-level change that would be required to integrate Anna Crusis and AMASONG. My case study of MUSE showed that the undertaking does indeed consume great amounts of time, legwork, and emotional energy. And it involves tradeoff, by definition – the willingness to let something go in order to get something new.

Several women attributed the transformation of MUSE to the uniqueness of Catherine Roma's vision and commitment. Therefore, I began the MUSE case study with my interview of her. Roma's autobiographical narrative, as well as her commentaries on music and politics, elucidated the ways in which – as one singer observed – MUSE is her own reflection. Roma characterized herself by her passion for women, music, and justice and by her goal to integrate the three as much as possible in her life. She reported on her politicization in the progressive wing of the "Friends" (Quakers, or Society of Friends) and in the peace and Feminist movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Roma has had extensive training in Western art music but has also been a listener of mainstream popular music and Womyn's music. She was heavily involved in the Womyn's music festival phenomenon from its inception, and her narrative included many examples of festivals' influence on the Feminist choral movement. She also gave accounts of her founding of Anna Crusis East and Anna Crusis West, two of the very first Feminist choirs.

Roma has been with MUSE for seventeen years. The group's success at racial integration must be attributed in part to her longevity as its leader. In her interview she revealed that she had pondered the challenge for years before she understood how to begin meeting it. But even while in the pondering stages of that dilemma, she was guiding MUSE through a practice of open and respectful group resolution of other dilemmas that would prove indispensable later.

The starting place for integration suggested to her by Bernice Johnson Reagon, whom she deeply admires, was repertoire. There had always been some Black repertoire in MUSE, but it avoided most Christian references, and it seldom allowed for the production of a vocal sound that was not heavily marked as White. Turning to some of the congregational music that is so well-loved by so many African Americans addressed both of these shortcomings and had fast results.

Other successful decisions and efforts included: expansion of the chorus and reservation of several seats for Women of Color; a high-visibility performance for Desmond Tutu of South African songs that had been coached by visiting South African students; Roma's commitment to the musical leadership of the Martin Luther King Coalition; collaboration with a local gospel choir and Melanie DeMore on a benefit performance; shared directorship with Lois Shegog; commitment to the New Spirituals project; and workshops engaging artists from Sweet Honey in the Rock and Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir. Recruitment in Black spaces – and by Black members – is routinely carried out, but it has been the commitment to projects like these that has given credibility and appeal to the recruitment effort. Underlying all this public work has been an internal series of retreats, mediated discussions, and study groups. These have been crucial to the ability of MUSE women to accommodate and adapt to the changing racial profile of the group.

Roma expressed great enthusiasm for what she sees as the universal appeal of music in traditional Black American styles. There is much of this music in her choir's repertoire, and it is particularly useful when subgroups do "run-out" performances to community gatherings. Much of this music delivers a heavy emotional impact regardless of who shows up to sing it and whether or not there has been time to rehearse. Insofar as this music has therefore often served as MUSE's connection to the outer community, it has had important effects on the group as a whole and on the individuals within it. The most poignant example Roma gave was the effect on the White women of MUSE's prison performance. The charismatic response of the prisoners jarred the White women into deeper examination of their own misunderstandings and fears about crossing into African-American cultural spaces.

Roma gave a nod to a history of certain lingering conflicts and feelings of discomfort that have accompanied MUSE's integration, but she preferred to focus instead on her faith in MUSE's ability to stay together and grow as a community. While on the one hand her urge is to be able to fully satisfy everyone, she recognizes discomfort as a sign of success in creating a coalition of a diversity of women. She has been strengthened in this conviction by the ideas of Bernice Johnson Reagon on the nature of coalition versus separation. I quoted from Reagon's essay, which challenges White Womyn's assumption that we can have separatist "women's" spaces where everything feels familiar, nurturing, and comforting.

Roma's interview ended with an anecdote about the success of Right-wing forces in Cincinnati in mobilizing African Americans against civil liberties for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered people. MUSE is recognized in Cincinnati as an exceptional organization whose political analysis and praxis are broad enough to unite all targets of conservative forces across divisions of race, class, religion, and sexual politics. One can only hope that their radical example will be taken up by ever-larger numbers.

The individual voices of the other five MUSE interviewees bore out the success of Roma's vision and efforts. These women are all near the age of fifty, but they differ from one another by race, sexuality, religion, political orientation, musical training, and formal education. One woman in the sample identified MUSE as importantly constitutive of her identity. These women reported loving their chorus for its interesting and well-prepared music, its refuge from the sexism of other performing organizations, its educational challenge, and its sense of community. Some women were more focused on the negotiation of conflict that being in community can entail: others described the MUSE community as wonderfully comforting and "safe." Interestingly enough, the Black women in this particular sample reported feeling a higher degree of comfort and trust within MUSE than the White women did. Hearing this against Eva's and Chris' substantial discomfort over being Black members of AMASONG and Sistrum starkly highlights the difference in atmosphere between those choirs and MUSE. In the case of one White interviewee, it was clear that she was missing some of the comfort she had felt years before when MUSE was smaller and segregated. While both she and Roma reported that there had been other disgruntled or disillusioned members, I heard none of that disgruntlement firsthand and so cannot say to what degree it also stemmed from having been in the choir since long before its integration. The difference in the levels of trust reported by the Black and the White women in this sample might be nothing more than a random result, and perhaps



a poll of all members would contradict it. I suggested, however, that it could have more to do with a difference between the expectations that the Black women and the White women brought to the chorus, as well as to a difference between the former experiences against which they were evaluating the choir.

The issue of religion resurfaced in this chapter as a site of conflict between African-American women and White Feminists. It is typical of Womyn's spaces that most of their (White) members are objectors to Christianity. But MUSE began singing Christian music to attract more Black women, with the result that several of the Black women they attracted were Christian. And as I discussed in Chapter Five, it is rare even for African-Americans who have left the church not to love and identify with the music of their childhood church communities. MUSE's commitment to a substantial portion of repertoire with "Jesus" in it was made at considerable emotional cost for many members, a cost that went unaddressed for years. The relative silence on the matter was difficult for some to accept against the usual standard of discussing anything controversial. This was followed by what some members viewed as another double standard in deference to Black women when, after so many White, anti-Christian women had struggled to sing entire concerts of Black sacred music, some Black members felt free to withhold their participation in an oratorio based on the spiritual lore of pre-Christian Europe. It appears that the negative effects of these choices linger, coexisting with all the positive change that depended on these choices.

MUSE women believe that their singing changes people, but only when they have "done their homework" to understand the origins, intents, and meanings of their songs and can perform them with stylistic and intentional integrity. I was very impressed by the sense of personal investment and initiative that individual singers displayed in the discovery process of a piece. It struck me that this was one of the many positive results of MUSE's history of shared governance. In striving for performance excellence, MUSE relies regularly on experts from within and without the chorus on matters of language diction, vocal technique, and style. Guarding against cultural appropriation is a moral imperative in MUSE. The most typical aspect of a definition of cultural appropriation given to me was the use of music in ignorance of – or without informing the listeners of – its origin, intent, and meaning. One singer's definition stressed the institutional power of the appropriating culture over the culture whose artifacts are being used. Her definition implied that the absence of economic remuneration may be one symptom of appropriation; Roma had explicitly suggested as much in her interview. The overall sense communicated to me was that something must be "given back" to the creating culture, whether in the form of money, acknowledgement, cooperation in an effort, or education of audiences on the culture's behalf. MUSE women reported a flexible and forgiving definition of "authenticity" that allows – in fact requires – their own voices to emerge in the process of their feelingful engagement with the music.

Black women within MUSE reported common, essential feelings of ownership of and connection to Black music from the United States and Africa. Their sense of ownership is, naturally, a very generous one, as they are regularly engaged in performing Black music with non-Black people, to say nothing of the eagerness with which they learn music from cultures not their own. Another essentializing discourse that

re-emerged here is the sense that as Mothers, they are responsible for the continuation of oral culture. They take this job seriously, sharing their songs/tools in an effort to impart wisdom and bring justice.

I closed by discussing the performance of one song by Bernice Johnson Reagon, "I'm Gon' Stand!!!" My thoughts and conversations about this song, and my hearings of different performances of it, have involved virtually every important issue that has been taken up in this study.

The women of MUSE are leaders and models for anyone who would desegregate a chorus, a workplace, a softball team, an activist organization, a friendship group. To conclude this chapter I offer Catherine Roma's final comments to me about her odyssey with MUSE:

I really want to say, in terms of "Who are our models?" that I really do feel good about the steps we're taking. And you can't go back, once you're on the path. You walk. You walk into it, just like with the Transgender/Transsexual thing. Because I could not sleep that night, thinking about it. We have to talk about it. It's gonna be bonkers; the conversation is gonna be bonkers. But, then, we've been through some bonkers, some things that are really close to where people live.

## CHAPTER VII

### EPILOGUE

*“Like all successful politics, this political act is rooted in love.”*

*– Maureen T. Reddy<sup>1</sup>*

#### Desegregation: Last Words

My sister, Karin, who is ten years younger than I am, is doing her own reading, studying, and thinking about race/racism/White privilege/anti-racism. Recently she woke me one morning with a phone call:

Karin: Sis, there's a problem.

Kristina: What's that?

Karin: All the reading I do in books about race doesn't bring me any closer to Black people.

As Maureen T. Reddy says, “White women must *do* something beyond reading and theorizing that places us closer to black women's positions in society” (1997, 168).

Kristina: Right. You know, I was reading books for years and years, and all that time I felt like my anti-racism was only theoretical. It existed in a vacuum until my life became desegregated.

Karin: Well, how do you do that? I can't just pull Black people off the street and say, “Will you *please* be my friend?”

I tried to explain how that had become possible for me rather suddenly at one point in my life after eluding me for so long. Somehow, I had managed, finally, to situate myself in contexts where I had a reasonable chance of meeting African Americans with whom I might share some real bases for connecting. I found ways to engage in music and politics that brought me into contact with African-American women who then became my friends. To me it seemed as though the first meaningful, cross-racial connection I made opened the door for all the others at once. But I know that it was all of my reading that had prepared me to be able to contribute as much to these connections as I was getting out of them; I had not, in Bernice Johnson Reagon's words, “come to (that) place *ignorant*.” I pointed out to my sister that her study and contemplation were already bearing fruit in her practicum work as a speech pathologist; several of her anecdotes had demonstrated that she was much more aware of the operation of racial, class, and cultural influences on her interactions with African-American clients than her colleagues would ever be. If she I s

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<sup>1</sup> From *Crossing the Color Line: Race, Parenting, and Culture* (Reddy 1997, 171).

not going out with African-American buddies on the weekends, she is giving decent service to her African-American clients. As a friend of mine said: “What White people want out of anti-racism is friendship from Black people. What Black people want from White people is *justice*.” I think that if we are able to begin genuinely with either one, the other will necessarily follow. As Maureen T. Reddy says:

*Although personal and political relationships are not necessarily coterminous, I think their trajectories intersect at a point that I would call love. (1997, 156)*

To date, it is only within MUSE where such an intersection has happened in critical numbers between Black and White women in the Feminist choral movement. Both Ysaye Barnwell and Melanie DeMore have addressed the question of the Whiteness of the movement from their standpoint as professional, African-American ensemble singers who have interacted in various ways with the movement. In July of 1993, Ysaye Barnwell authored a statement about her experience at the Sister Singers Festival in Cincinnati. This she submitted for circulation in the now-defunct Sister Singers newsletter. I do not have this newsletter, but I am quoting from a copy of a draft that Barnwell faxed to Catherine Roma for review. I present it nearly in full for readers to contemplate in light of the foregoing chapters of this study. Barnwell opens this statement as follows:

*Some experiences really illuminate and crystallize what you have felt and/or only observed superficially. Such was my experience at the 7<sup>th</sup> National Women’s Choral Festival. What was illuminated was the distance which I felt existed between White feminists and Women of Color – in my case, African American women. (1993)*

She continues by describing some aspects of what she claims as an African American “core aesthetic” and “world view” that she felt set her apart from the aesthetics and views of White Feminists at the festival. These include a more formal and stylish standard of appearance and presentation (than that maintained by some White singers who took the stage in cutoff blue jeans), a standard for performance that demands reaching beyond mediocre or lukewarm encounters with the music, a love for and adherence to a spiritual tradition (in other words, the willingness to sing traditional songs about Jesus even when not being a practicing Christian), and a strong sense of cultural rootedness.

Barnwell paints in rather broad strokes in this part of her address, speaking in essentializing terms for all African-American women – and, by implication, about White women. She is at the same time conscious of the forces that motivate her to do this; in her section about cultural rootedness, she says:

*Most of us (would) take our roots for granted...if we could. The reality is that in every instance where Whites have come in contact with non-whites, we who are of color have had to turn inward, to dig deep into our roots, and have had to reaffirm who we are in order to survive.*

She is no doubt aware that she could find African-American women to depart with her on any of the points she makes. However, it can at least be said that the Black women who were present at that Festival shared these aesthetics and views with her and were able to see all around them examples of White women to whom these things were foreign.

She goes on to say:

I experienced the 7<sup>th</sup> National Women's Choral Festival as both participant and observer. As I reflect on the experience I wonder if my participation had any impact on what I observed here or might observe at future festivals. But more obvious questions require attention as well:

1. Why is the network so White? Why are there so few women of color in these feminist choirs even from cities (to my great surprise) like Philadelphia and Washington, D.C.? Why are there no Women of Color choirs which are members of the network? Are there any Feminist Women of Color choirs?

As I think about our core aesthetic and core world view, I am left with the feeling that most Women of Color would find little that was familiar, welcoming, appealing, empowering, or satisfying about being part of this network, particularly if they had other avenues for self-expression.

#### Individual Women of Color

- would find little sense of self or affirmation of themselves as Women of Color and might not (as is often expected) have the knowledge, skill, or where-with-all to be the resource on, for example, Black Music or South African Music.
- might not (personally or inside their community) identify with being feminist or lesbian and/or may not feel that a public affirmation of these issues in the context of a White group is an appropriate battleground for (them).
- may prefer joining a choir that will satisfy their spiritual and emotional needs rather than their political and social needs if such a dichotomy is presented.

#### Women of Color choirs/ensembles

- are most often found in church-related contexts
- sometimes have male accompanists or directors
- often sing only sacred music, e.g. gospels and spirituals
- may be constituted as a small ensemble of 5-10 and may not be considered a choir
- may be a college or university affiliated group but not a community group as such
- have probably not been sought out to be members of the Sister Singers Network

2. Why do White Feminist choirs feel that they can use the (often sacred) music of other cultures

- to add levity to a program? Often the music is not performed well musically, or it is not performed with appropriate seriousness, or it is performed with a choreography which is inappropriate, trivializing and/or demeaning.
- as the vehicle for expressing concepts which are in no way equivalent to the import of the original context? Lyrics are rewritten and the original song is trivialized: e.g. "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" becomes "Sing Low, Second Altos."
- as a platform for experimentation with regard to gender linguistics? The words "Jesus," "Lord," and "God" are changed without regard for the literal or symbolic import

and significance in the lives of those who wrote the songs and those who continue to use them in their lives and traditional practices.

Senegalese Proverb: "In the end, we preserve only what we love. We love what we understand and we understand what we are taught."

White women and Women of Color have been taught differently and have not shared many of the same core experiences. In this country and in this time, that is what we call diversity and diversity is in fact the natural state of things. The questions then are:

1. Are we to teach each other? and if so,
2. How shall we teach each other? and
3. To what end?

The sense of "distance" between White and Black women that Barnwell identifies at the beginning of her document is palpable throughout it. White and Black women's pervasive segregation from one another's meaningful company everywhere outside of our choral gatherings makes the attempt to gather meaningfully for a singing festival very difficult. This brings me back to Eva's question: "How can you get Black people in your group if you don't have Black friends?"

Melanie DeMore is among those who are skeptical about the probability of racially integrating what has historically been a White organization:

KB: You said that people ask you all the time about how to racially diversify a White choir. What do you think of that question, and how do you answer it?

MDM: Well, I think there are a lot of different things. Um – first of all, I'm not really sure you can do it. Because of the way that things are set up in this country. You know, there's so many predominantly White groups: they want so much to have diversity that they make the mistake of going in and saying, "We can do this and this and this and this," when what they ought to be doing is asking: "What can we do for you? What do you need in order to feel – what kind of things do we need to learn?" Instead of going in there: "We can give you this and this and this." That doesn't matter. It's like, "What do you want? What do you want us to do?" And is it possible? ...Because, you know, everybody's looking for (diversity); it's the kind of catch-word. And I also think –

KB: Do you ever mistrust that?

MDM: Depends upon who's saying it. You know, with some people it's just the catch-word of the decade, or something. You know, I don't buy it and I don't trust their intention. And it's primarily not because they're bad people, but I think it's that they're not sure what their intention is. They're not clear about what their intention is. And I think it's also really important for each chorus to decide who they are, who they represent. You've got to be really clear about what your identity is.

Thus far, it is MUSE and MUSE alone who has been “really clear” that her Feminist identity *cannot* be a virtually White one. Most other groups – and the individuals within them – are vague about the fact that their Feminist identities *are* virtually White ones.

#### Drawing, Respecting, and Crossing Borders

In this study I have discussed the fluid, strategic, and ultimately undefinable nature of identity. We are who we say we are: all too often, who we say we are is a response to having been negatively defined by others. As women, as Black people, or as Lesbians, there is no distinct border we can all agree upon drawing to separate us from the not-women, the not-Black, the not-Lesbian. If individual people cannot be physically or behaviorally defined as unequivocally one or the other, then the products of our creativity must also be resistant to ultimate definition by the same categories.

Still, in the political world, identity has meaning, and if people or practices cannot be identified as *purely* the products of one culture or group, they are usually commonly identified *more* with one group than with another. And as I have stated, the important thing about an identity group – however resistant to definition it might be – is recognizing *what it does* for the people who number themselves as its members. Having in these pages subjected Afrocentric discourses to some critical scrutiny scares me a little. I see the real possibility that this will hurt some of my friends, some of the people I admire, and some of the people who have helped me in my work. I think about how I felt when Jawole Willa Jo Zollar refuted my claim that the Michigan festival atmosphere represented *my culture*. As I said in Chapter Two, we invoke *culture* “to signify a sense of belonging in a society dominated by messages that we...do not belong.” This is why I felt such a strong need to resist Zollar’s argument: not because she was so obviously wrong, but because if she were right, it might mean that there was a part of me that did not *belong* somewhere after all.

One of the results of this study for me has been an increased appreciation of the fact that I *belong* in numerous places, with different people, at different times. During the second week of August, I definitely belong in Michigan, in a way that I can belong nowhere else. But on Christmas Eve, I belong in the formal, elegant, loving, musical, traditional, and multi-lingual environment of my extended family, as I can belong no other place. There is my home among musicians who can sing a Renaissance Mass beautifully the first time through. There is the home I share with my partner, where birembaus and shekeres adorn the apartment, where we know songs to sing along with them, and where it goes without saying that neither of us would ever eat at Denny’s. Always, there is the home with my parents and my sister. They aren’t Queer, they can’t sing Monteverdi, they don’t know a 6/8 bell from a shout rhythm, and they all have different ideas about what anti-racism means. Though there was a time when I didn’t know it, I belong with them no matter what. To name my Lesbian Feminism, my German-American-ness, my musical practice, my involvement in an interracial partnership, and my anti-racism as aspects of my identity is to name those parts of me that seek homes among other people who appreciate them, parts of me that need belonging, parts of me that cannot be articulated in solitude. These are the ways in which my identities are real. Some of them put me in the same groups with Black people; some typically do not.

I am also aware that just because I think I belong somewhere doesn't mean that everyone else in that place thinks I belong. If I am in a working situation with an African American who resents having to cooperate with me in performing a song from Jamaica, I will not be able to improve our relationship by pointing out that race is a myth, that we both have European ancestry, that I might have African genes, that we are both citizens of the United States, that neither of us is Jamaican, and that the song has features of White musical styles. Rather, I need to understand that: under racism, our racial difference is far more salient to her than our shared national citizenry; her European ancestry may be the result of appalling circumstances and thus not something she chooses to recognize; her solidarity with other Diaspora cultures is a positive response to the same negative, historical forces that brought her ancestors and the ancestors of modern-day Jamaicans to this hemisphere; she may well derive some of the most strengthening and beautifying messages about herself from the music of Black people throughout the Black Atlantic; and too many of her encounters with White people involve their disrespect of her and the things she holds dear. If we are to have a positive music-making experience together, I must be able somehow to communicate to her very quickly that I am aware and respectful of all these very real things. I will not always be successful.

Bernice Johnson Reagon warns of as much:

White people don't know *shit* about what Black people think. And if they're going to be cross-cultural, they have to learn. And it has never cost you your life not to know what Black people think. But if you want to be cross-cultural, you've got to learn as much about Black people as Black people have had to learn about White people in order to survive. And it *is* a survival issue. Because if you're *committed* to being cross-cultural, you have to learn how not to get *killed* in the process. Because it's not the people in there who are going to get killed. It will be you who'll get killed. Because they will kill you. And it's *hard* work.

...Coming out of a Black situation, I have lots of things I know. And then when I'm working in a mixed group, I should not come out with everything that comes up in my head. Sometimes I make errors because I've not worked hard enough to know where I am, to be *intelligent*. So I come to a place *ignorant*. And when you come to a place ignorant, you have to be taken care of by everybody. And they're like: "Oh, yeah, she's got a good heart. But, God! Couldn't she just go *learn*?" You know. So I think it's a lot of work if you're going to be cross-cultural. But I think it is probably some of the most important work that can go on in this society. And what this society is missing are managers who cross cultures. I think everybody on a managerial level – which means in some way you're *coordinating something*, or you're *presenting something* – everybody who operates on that level ought to be cross-cultural. But most managers are ignorant. And they depend on people who are good-hearted to forgive them for their stupidity. And people get tired. But it works in *all* ways. ...You hear about White people doing it to Black people a lot. But anybody who comes from a cultural grounding has a bunch of stuff that comes up when they see another person that should never come up. But it's in your head; you just say: "Oh, God. Let me keep that *gate* down!" And it's not for the *people*. It's so you don't get killed. It's self-protection. When you're committed to being there – and I think, of course, that some people would not do well being there – but the only way you can make those decisions is to spend time understanding where Black people might be –



understanding they are never going to be the same, because the group is not a monolithic people. It's a multi-racial group, too. So, you know, you can't come up with one line. And you'll have eighty percent of the people like it, but the ones in the ten percent who didn't, you know, are the ones who will string you up and lynch you. That's all you need, is just one or two people to lynch you; you don't need the eighty percent who really think you should live.

Reagon's words validate the effort to work cross-racially with music and performers; at the same time, she confirms some musicians' choice to err on the cautious side of disengagement from the challenge.

#### When Cross-Race Hearing is Possible

Sometimes, when we take race to be the defining boundary between two people or two musics, we are ignoring boundaries that may be more operative. The infamous story of the White woman in MUSE who couldn't bear to sing Black congregational songs illustrates my point. I quoted Lois Shegog's initial frustration with the fact that a White woman who had had no problem singing Latin Mass parts by European composers suddenly balked when it came to African-American sacred music. For a long time, Shegog and others took this resistance as a sign of racism. It was not until the White woman disclosed her associations between the music and the abuse she had suffered as a child that the issue became de-raced.

Shegog's emphasis on the word *my* for music from Black American church traditions (page 436) suggests a certain feeling that music with "adoramus te" in it, on the other hand, is *theirs* – in other words, White people's. But if there are White women in MUSE who do feel a sense of cultural proximity to or ownership of classical music from another country in another language for a religion they do not practice, the woman in question is not one of them. To the contrary: the fact that singing such music does not upset her shows how far-removed it is from her own experience. Her difficulties with "Shegog's" music stem from the fact that it is far too close to home for her comfort. For her, it is not race that meaningfully separated the Latin Gloria from "Precious Lord;" it is language, era, and national style. And race cannot separate this White woman from the language, the currency, and the stylistic familiarity of the music that Shegog claims as her own.

Linda Tillery has said of the Cultural Heritage Choir's repertoire: "To play it properly, you have to have had black experience" (Zane 1997). I believe that there are White people who can perform this music well. Does being present often enough where this music is played, and thereby learning to play it, count for "black experience" even if one is White? I don't think that is what Tillery means. While I would not agree that one has to be Black to play the music well, I would agree that having White people in the Cultural Heritage Choir would be highly undesirable, given that an important aspect of the group's ethos is the performance of Black identity.

The "learnability" of style is something I have experienced outside of music as well as within it. My experience with languages other than English is my strongest proof of the argument. Native Spanish-speakers regularly ask me where I come from, expecting me to name Spain or a Latin-American country; when I name Milwaukee, Wisconsin, they are nonplussed. During the sixth day of my first visit to France,

a shopkeeper with whom I had been chatting mistook me for a fellow native. And the sound of my German presents me as German-born and -raised, though the ruse cannot continue long before I run out of vocabulary or violate a grammatical rule. When I shift into another language, I feel other, indescribable things shifting in me, along with my phonemes, words, and sentence structures. My attitude changes, and along with it, the sound of my voice – the ways I use it tonally to express sympathy, humor, or irony. I even experience a shift in my perceptions of what is funny or ironic. I feel like a subtly different person. All of this is a matter of hearing, listening, paying close attention. Much of it is a spontaneous response to my surroundings, such as the way I now sometimes hear my own thoughts expressed in the sounds and structures of Black English.

So, if most White Americans can't play good blues guitar or sing good gospel, it is for the same reason that most women can't throw a decent football: we have not been taught it, and we have not studied it; in fact, we have been expected – for political reasons – *not* to learn it.

In Chapter Two I discussed certain scholars' ideas about style and identity. If we accept that there is a dialectical relationship between the two, then we can understand why the stylistic crossing of a highly politicized identity border is resisted by people on either side. The first strategy for preventing such a crossing is to deny that it is possible. Indeed, attempted crossings often fail, due to the extreme subtlety and complexity of any style. To re-quote Charles Keil:

The presence of style indicates a strong community, an intense sociability that has been given shape through time, an assertion of control over collective feelings so powerful that any expressive innovator in the community will necessarily put his or her content into that shaping continuum and no other. (Keil and Feld 1994, 122)

The "shaping continuum" here involves "characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships" and "the universe of discourse within which musical meanings arise" (see pages 36-37). How, then, can someone from outside the "community," the "shaping continuum," the "consciousness," the "relationships," and the "universe of discourse" comprehend and reproduce that community's style? If African-American cultures are so distant from me, why does listening to certain Sweet Honey recordings make me shiver and cry? Why does my arrangement and performance of an African-American oral-tradition song make my African-American musician friend Kwame lose his words and pound the table?

To answer this mystery, I suggest that, while the *development* of a given style is absolutely contingent upon the shared experience of a group of people who must put their content "into that shaping continuum and no other," the *learning* of a style once created by this dynamic is not so dependent on membership within the group. In other words, though it was only – and could only have been – African-American slaves in the Deep South who developed the ring shout, there are now many kinds of people who can learn to sing and dance and clap a shout if we study it enough. What the shout will represent to each one of us and what we will experience in doing it cannot be determined or controlled; only one thing is

certain: no matter *who* we are or how well we do the shout, we will not be having the same experience that the slaves had who developed the style. But learning the style may bring us closer to what that experience might have been, just as speaking another language makes me understand just a bit more about the people who developed that language. Or is it the other way around? Perhaps it is in the performance where we are able to see just what it is we have learned or come to understand. As I summarized Steven Feld's argument about what it is we are experiencing with music when we are *in the groove*: "our pleasurable physical and emotional response to a performance in a given musical style is enabled to the degree that we comprehend the meaning of the discourse expressed in/created by it" (page 36). When the African-American artists quoted in Chapter Five assert that a performer's attention to the historical context of a song is *heard* in the "ring of truth," this must be what they are talking about.

Several scholars on the problem of identity have suggested that it is music above all that can enable us to cross, or transcend, cultural borders. Simon Frith states:

Anti-essentialism is a necessary part of musical experience, a necessary consequence of music's failure to register the separations of body and mind on which... 'essential' differences (between black and white, female and male, gay and straight, nation and nation) depend. (Frith 1996, 122)

Steven Feld's quote from Raymond Williams (pages 36, 37) seems to make the same claim for music's ability to unify body and mind: in music, the aesthetic experience is "not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought." These writers speak in terms that cannot be empirically defined or measured; at most, these words are a measure of what their authors have experienced. I have had the same experiences in my encounters with certain Black musics, but I know that not all White people do – certainly not the women who sang "Sing low, sweet second altos." For music to have the effect on us of fusing our cognition and emotion and challenging our assumptions of cultural essentialism, we must be able to *hear* it. Our hearing may depend very heavily on what we *know* about the music. What we can *know* may depend heavily on how close we are to the music's culture. For me, working with the Negro Spiritual feels like working on familiar terrain, whereas rural Zimbabwean songs confused me for a while, and classical Chinese opera eludes me totally.

There is something else in my life that tells me that the racial border is not necessarily the hardest one to cross: my girlfriend and I find an easy empathy and multi-leveled communication with each other that neither of us experiences with the men of "our cultures." Our acculturation as women, as Feminists, as Lesbians, and as performing artists has counted for much more than race. If I can hear her when she talks to me – even without words – I can hear her music-making, too.

#### The Continuing Saga of my Spiritual Arrangement

When the Sister Singers committee in Portland rejected my arrangement of "Keep Your Lamps," I knew something was afoot in the Feminist choral movement. I was determined to discover how closely that group's opinion, which purported to represent the feelings of African Americans, accorded with the

actual feelings of African-American musicians. I did receive several answers to that question, and quite apart from my studies, I discovered that it was not only within choral Feminism that my arrangement presented a problem to White people.

But first I will report on the piece's reception among Black artists in this study. Of course, my girlfriend liked it. This is what she said to me:

(AMASONG's singing) made it so powerful that you could actually start to *see* how people were keeping this energy alive because they knew they had to continue *on*; you could *see* that. ...There's a sense of having them paint the picture of something that had happened a long time ago. You know, you could see this being sung by people in history, on a plantation or something. And the quietness of it: how they had to be quiet in that way so their masters wouldn't hear them singing. Or even – it also conjures up an energy or a vision that if you were in a church – you know, what do you call it? Those revival meetings at night, and they're singing this song... or a long line of people traveling somewhere. So I think that when those images come, it creates that authentic feeling which I think the song is about. A journey.

Next I played it for Kwame Ross, one of Urban Bush Women's musicians and the coordinator of the drumming community for the summer Institute. That was when he pounded the furniture, and when he finally could speak, he blurted out that the music was "messin' with" him.

I played the performance for Casey (of MUSE) at the end of our interview:

C: Ooh, that's nice! (*listening pause*) We gotta do this! (*another pause*) I gotta tell you right now. I wouldn't be able to tell who's doing this, (Black singers or White). (*pause*) Has Roma heard this?

K: Roma has not heard this. But Roma's going to hear it when the CD comes out! Of course, you can always twist her thumbs a little.

C: (*responding to last verse*) Yeah-h-h! (*pause*) Yeah-h-h, that's got a *hump* in its back! Oh-h-h, that is excellent! We ought to do that for New Spirituals. That's very, very good.

K: Thank you.

C: And in answer to your question: No. I could not (have guessed the race of the performers).

K: Well, I think I might have been able to. It's hard to judge, 'cause I'm so close to it. But I think sometimes you can masquerade and sometimes you can't. And as you said before, you don't think that's necessarily the be-all and end-all. And I don't either. I think that who you are is going to be heard at some point.

C: Mm-hmm. And you don't *want* somebody to do an imitation. What's the point?

K: What did you like about it? And what does the song say to you?

C: Like I said, it's got a hump in its back. Now, that: that's very good. That's very good.

K: Okay; now, if I try to write that in my dissertation – can you just put that into White English for me, or something else so I know what you really mean? (*we laugh*)

C: That's a song that's going to make you move. If it makes you move, there's something you feel about it. Because you could sit there and have the jammin'-est song goin' but if it ain't jammin' to you, you know, it's just another song you're singing. But that's one that's got a *groove* in it. That's good!

K: What does it say? What's that groove about?

C: It's a "wade in the water" kind of a song. It's persistent. It's driving. But it's no hollering, it's no preaching. It's just like this message: you – got – to – *keep* – (*pauses*) That's a *wade* song.

K: I love that song like I cannot tell you. And I couldn't find any versions for women, so I made this version for us.

C: Oh! Excellent.

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar praised the performance, too, though I do not have her reactions on record. I did, however, tape Melanie DeMore's responses:

MDM: Well, I really *like* that arrangement. I like it a lot. I think there's a lot of strength in it. I like the, uh – there's a doggedness about the tempo that I really like. It's – pushing against the air; I kind of like that *feeling* a lot. And I do – I really like the chorus and the verse happening at the same time. I think that's really nice. I like that sound, the "Children don' get weary" section going on with the verse; I like that a lot. Ah, I like the dynamics, and I also like the use of the octaves in the voices in the last chorus. I like that a lot. I think that's very strong, because I think that, you know, in our quest to try to be innovative, people want to do too much business, and they're not just singing the song. And unison is very powerful. ...Yeah, I like that arrangement. It's really strong. It's a very strong piece. Your intention has to be really clear. You have to sing the way I tell my singers all the time: "Full body forward." Should be. Absolutely. So that the people who are listening to you and watching you have no doubt as to what your intention is. ...(And) I *heard* that! I actually heard that. ... *A cappella* is like really, really listening to each other and blending that sound, and I was really pleased with the – you know, you can really tell where that blend is in octaves!

KB: Octaves tell no lies!

MDM: There's some pretty good sound happening there.

KB: Thank you. They'll be really proud to know that you liked it.

On page 318, I presented Ysaye Barnwell's feeling that perhaps it is less ethical for a White woman to arrange a Spiritual than to hire an African-American woman to do it. As I have written, her comments were extremely challenging to me. By the time I wrote to her months later, I had decided for myself that my having made the arrangement was part of AMASONG's success with it. By working with the material and its possibilities, I was able to get as far inside the piece as was possible for me. The results of this were audible when I conducted the performance, a moment that I remember as one of my most connected experiences ever as the director of a piece of music of any kind. By teaching and performing the piece as I had arranged it, I was able to give it that "ring of truth," that "contact with self," and that "feelingful encounter" that is the stuff of a *genuine* or *authentic* performance as discussed in Chapter Five. Therefore, my personal conclusion was that if it was permissible for me to perform a Spiritual, it had to be permissible for me to go "all the way" with it: full engagement or nothing. I wrote all this to Dr. Barnwell, saying that I didn't hope to argue her out of her position but that I simply wanted to report to her on what I had made of her challenge. I also included a copy of AMASONG's CD *Amai* so that she could actually hear what kind of music I was making out of everything that we had been discussing.

Barnwell responded to me on e-mail. She did not state whether she had changed her opinion about the propriety of my decision to arrange the Spiritual. But she wrote to tell me that she "loved" our performance of the Gullah song "Job, Job" *and* our performance and my arrangement of "Keep Your Lamps;" in fact, she asked me whether she could have a copy of this latter. Of course, I could not have been happier to send her one.

Just prior to receiving Barnwell's accolades, I went through a strange experience with a White publisher I had met before. I receive regular requests for my work, and I was growing tired of filling the requests myself. I anticipated that once our *Amai* CD came out, people would be asking for "Keep Your Lamps" and perhaps some other pieces. So I sent a packet to this publisher. She responded quickly with a warning that I had better think twice about including "Keep Your Lamps" on the CD, as it looked too similar to an SATB version already in publication – one by André Thomas, an African-American choral director. Her reasons were as follows: both versions employ a four-part division of the chorus, their harmonies are similar, both are homophonic, and both use drum accompaniment. She felt sure that I had studied Thomas's octavo, and she urged me to contact its publisher, a friend of hers; in fact, she would tell her friend to expect a call from me.

I went out to procure a copy of Thomas's arrangement so that I could ascertain the merits of her argument. In answering her, I stressed that I had not studied the octavo in question when making my arrangement, though it was among arrangements I had heard. I reminded her that there is nothing unique about a four-part division of a chorus, though if she had actually looked at my piece, she would have seen that each verse uses a different division, whether four-part, three-part, or unison/octaves. The similarity between Thomas's and my harmonies – though it is not absolute – has to do with the fact that both of us

hear the same implied harmonies as *belonging to* the song, as part of its tradition. To choose any harmonies outside the handful of chords that we both used would have been to impose on the song a jarring originality for the mere sake of innovation, something that I certainly did not feel was my place – let alone my aesthetic desire – in working with the piece. As for the charge of homophony, this was more evidence that the publisher had not even *looked* at my piece; one verse – as I have said – is in octaves, and another pits the sopranos in counterpoint against the altos, with each half of the chorus singing completely different musical and textual material. The charge about the drum accompaniment was the most astounding. Thomas's version employs an ensemble of congas in a melodic conversation; mine uses one deep drum playing a simple, unchanging heartbeat rhythm. As I remarked to the publisher: perhaps to her a drum is a drum is a drum, in the same way that to so many Americans, a Senegalese is a Kenyan is a South African.

Her terse response was to suggest skeptically that if I had truly made my arrangement in the absence of Thomas's or someone else's printed score, then I must surely be the second Mozart. She stressed that I should not delay in calling her publisher friend, the one whose company sells Thomas's version; she was sure that I would have a difficult time establishing that my piece "had no connection to" his.<sup>2</sup> I called the other publisher, and after consulting with Thomas, her company sent me a letter conceding that my arrangement was indeed mine and not Thomas's.

What I found so interesting was the first publisher's assumption that my arrangement of this Spiritual could not stand up legitimately in a market where an African-American man already had an arrangement, that my arrangement could not be but the imitation of his work, and that I surely could not possess the ear to have rendered out of thin air an arrangement that was audibly recognizable as connected to other versions. There are only two possibilities: either she assumed all of these things with such conviction that she did not look past the first section of my piece, or to her a Spiritual is a Spiritual is a Spiritual – in other words, what are to me and André Thomas significant differences in our arrangements are to her invisible.

The latest development in the life of my arrangement of "Keep Your Lamps" involved a review of *Amai* in a local paper. The White reviewer rated the CD "excellent" as a whole; her *only* criticisms were of "Job, Job" and "Keep Your Lamps" – the only African-American selections on the CD – which she said "defeated" us, and which she implied were *horrid*. ("Like the girl with the curl in the middle of her forehead, 'when they are good, they are very, very good...'"<sup>3</sup>) She went on to comment that we were too White and class-privileged to invest the pieces with their requisite "passion" – though she never commented that we were too American to capture the cold loneliness of our Finnish pieces, too Goyish to find the proper stylistic expression of Jewish pathos on our Yiddish song, or too amateur to handle the

<sup>2</sup> Here is a perfect example of a clash in values between the copyright system and the ethos of the oral-tradition song. By Bernice Johnson Reagon's definition of performance in traditional Black styles (page 256), probably neither Thomas nor I should have submitted our arrangements as our own. The purpose of my doing so is simply so that other choirs who want to sing it or work from it will know where to find it. But the challenge under copyright law to prove that my version has "no connection" to other versions directly violates my intent, which was to make a version for women's voices that would *audibly stand in line with a tradition*; in other words, if it sounds "connected," I have succeeded in my goal. The standards for originality to which some publishers might hold me (the first publisher suggested adding freely-composed transitional material, for example) would compel me to decisions that I feel violate the standards of the music itself and the communities that consider it their own.

<sup>3</sup> To complete the reviewer's sentence in the manner of the saying that is its model: "...and when they were bad they were horrid."

sophistication of Stravinsky. I suspect that, feeling compelled by her job title to find something to criticize, she must have thought that picking on our African-American songs was a good bet (she even left our Zimbabwean song alone). I also suspect that her benchmark for “passion” in any kind of African-American music is the full-blown sound of a gospel choir in high gear;<sup>4</sup> how else could she have missed our undeniably emotional engagement with the Spiritual?

Of those with whom I have spoken, Ysaye Barnwell is the only African American who has suggested that perhaps I should not have arranged that Spiritual. I do not know whether she has modified that position in light of loving what I have done with it; a modification may or may not have been implied in her compliment of my work. White people, however, have been showing all kinds of resistance to this piece of music. The Sister Singers delegates were able to hear it as excellent music, and they were completely forward about the nonmusical nature of their objection: as a White woman, I *should not* have made the arrangement. I cannot be sure about the real nature of that first publisher’s objection, but whatever it was prevented her from accurately perceiving the music, which she was convinced that, as a White woman, I *could not* have made. The reviewer, whatever was motivating her, was convinced that what I had made as a White woman could not have been any *good*.

#### Why I Must Defend my Engagement with Black Music

I have repeatedly emphasized my understanding of the historical and political realities that weigh on any White person’s performance of Black music, including my choice to arrange and perform a Spiritual. I have not concluded that, due to this baggage, White musicians should refrain from performing Black music. I have concluded instead that for such performances to be successful among People of Color or White anti-racists, they must somehow be seen to consciously respond to the historical and political realities that they inevitably invoke. Only once have I heard and loved a version of a traditional African-American song but declined to use it with my chorus for a purely political reason. I had learned the song by being present with Urban Bush Women at an event where White people were not exactly expected to be. This version of the song had been created and was being performed by a community that according to Jawole Zollar is fiercely protective of its traditions and particularly disdainful of White people. It seemed clear to me that if asked, they would not have given consent for a group like AMASONG to perform their material. So my personal decision was to refrain.

In talking with Ysaye Barnwell, I admitted to one of the motivations for my study:

KB: And of course, my deepest *problem* is that I so much love all these kinds of music! And I need them. I *need* them. And, you know, to be honest: yeah, I’m looking to justify –

YMB: – why you –

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<sup>4</sup> Melanie DeMore has commented to me that most people try to “dress up” Gullah song too much rather than letting the strength of its simplicity speak. Linda Tillery says that despite CHC’s varied repertoire, “a lot of people still call us gospel, no matter how sinful the material. I think it says something about the North American mind-set. They think all African American songs are gospel. They can’t seem to separate a prison work song from “Roll, Jordan, Roll” (Selvin 1997).



KB: Yes!

YMB: Right. It's very interesting because in some ways, that is the dilemma that the researcher sometimes finds themselves in; it's the dilemma that a philosopher finds themselves in. You know, you have a personal commitment – it's not even a commitment; it's a *passion*. *It is a passion*. You know? Now: given your passion, what are the parameters here? What's the hypothesis here? Why do I, why do other people, have such a passion? What creates that passion? And what destroys that passion, on the other side of the coin?

KB: You mean, for the audience?

YMB: Yes.

KB: Yes. That's right. As soon as I realized that the expression that I felt and that I hoped I was giving was not necessarily being received by the audience members, I thought: "I've got a problem."

YMB: That's right. That's exactly right. Okay? Because what is your passion is somebody else's poison.

For me, there are very personal implications of my conclusion that it is possible for me to competently and ethically perform Black music. For, in effect, challenging my right to participate in the meaning and the beauty of Black song feels the same to me as challenging my right to be with my lover. There certainly are those who find it unjust that I as a White woman should be receiving the best of this exquisite African-American woman's attention, kindness, support, and beauty. In fact, long before anyone had challenged me directly about this, I spent some time plaguing myself with the question. But it seems clear at this point that I am not about to step out of the relationship to satisfy one version of political correctness. So my option is to do what I am doing, with my partner and my music, with the conviction that there are politically acceptable – maybe even valuable – ways to do it.

#### Connecting "Music and Pork Chops"

Jon Cruz observes that White people's hearings of Black music can sometimes have less to do with Black people than with their own situations:

Black music...is sometimes used to help whites negotiate aspects of their own society that they find stifling and repressive. (1999, 33)

This phenomenon is not restricted to the United States. In Germany during the flourishing of Nazism, young people who resisted joining the Party's youth organizations built their culture of resistance around

swing music, which was their emblem of freedom.<sup>5</sup> Closer to the concerns of this study, however, are the members of Sister Singers ensembles who indicate that as Lesbians, they “resonate with” the messages of social struggle heard in so much Black music.

When I was younger and coming out as a Lesbian, I experienced that crisis as cataclysmic enough to compare it unproblematically with slavery or modern-day racism. When I was still convinced that being a Lesbian spelled my utter doom, I more than once sang “Let my people go” with the class of Queer people – and not necessarily the class of African Americans – in mind. Certainly, the enforcers of compulsory Heterosexuality had *wanted* me to believe that as a Lesbian I would never be able to hold a job, earn the respect of anyone respectable, or walk the streets without fear of assault; but I eventually figured out that I had been holding myself hostage to what were mostly nothing more than hollow scare tactics. Today, I still have concerns about the suicide risk for Queer teens, immigration laws that keep lovers on opposite sides of oceans, custody rulings that separate children from Lesbian mothers against the children’s best interests, and the anti-Queer violence that escalates wherever the Right Wing mounts campaigns against our civil rights. But like MUSE’s Jo, who thought it was “bullshit” for the typical urban, middle-class, White Lesbian to compare her vicissitudes with racism, I now realize how much privilege I enjoy and how serious our national race tragedy is. It would be impossible for me today to sing a Spiritual without having the experiences of contemporary African Americans at the forefront of my attention.

Radical Lesbians of Color remind us that racism, hetero/sexism, and classism cannot be considered in isolation from one another. As the Combahee River Collective Statement says:

...we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based on the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. (Smith 1983, 273)

I have many times witnessed a problem, however, when White Lesbians’ attempts at linking heterosexism to racism take the form of a mere analogy, one that African Americans angrily reject as invalid. Sometimes the angry rejection is based on nothing more than heterosexism, but more often the problem resides in the White person’s failure to communicate clearly that her analysis does not automatically backseat the concerns of Black people. For, as Trina Grillo and Stephanie M. Wildman write, this is typically the effect. In “Obscuring the Importance of Race: The Implications of Making Comparisons between Racism and Sexism (or Other Isms),” the authors begin with a claim about analogies in general:

The analogy makes the analogizer forget the difference and allows her to stay focused on her own situation without grappling with the other person’s reality. (Grillo and Wildman 1997, 619)

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<sup>5</sup> The feature film *Swing Kids* (1993) is a piece of popular, historical fiction dealing with this subculture and the Nazi Party’s response to it.

They go on to discuss their observation that:

...several identifiable phenomena occurred without fail in any predominantly white racially mixed group whenever sex discrimination was analogized...to race discrimination. Repeatedly, at the annual meeting of the Association of American Law Schools (AALS), at meetings of feminist legal scholars, in classes on sex discrimination and the law, and in law school women's caucus meetings, the pattern was the same. In each setting, although the analogy was made for the purpose of illumination, ...another unintended result ensued – the perpetuation of racism/white supremacy.

When a speaker compared sexism and racism, the significance of race was marginalized and obscured, and the different role that race plays in the lives of people of color and whites was overlooked. The concerns of whites became the focus of discussion, even when the conversation had supposedly centered on race discrimination. ...People with little experience in thinking about racism/white supremacy, but who had a hard-won understanding of the allegedly analogous oppression (sexism or some other ism), assumed that they comprehended the experience of people of color and thus had standing to speak on their behalf. (620)

The authors identify three “patterns of racial domination” that are perpetuated in the kind of analogy-making that is under discussion:

(1) the taking back of center stage from people of color, even in discussions of racism, so that white issues remain or become central in the dialogue; (2) the fostering of essentialism, so that women and people of color are implicitly viewed as belonging to mutually exclusive categories, rendering women of color invisible; and (3) the *appropriation of pain* or the denial of its existence that results when whites who have compared other oppressions to race discrimination believe they understand the experience of racism. (621) (*emphasis mine*)

Finally, the authors comment that:

White supremacy creates in whites the expectation that issues of concern to them will be central in every discourse. ...The problem of taking back the center exists apart from the issue of analogies: it will be with us as long as any group expects, and is led to expect, to be constantly the center of attention. But the use of analogies exacerbates the problem, for once an analogy is taken to heart, it seems to the center-stealer that she is *not* stealing the center, but rather continuing the discussion on the same topic, and one that she knows well. (621, 622)

Though seeing these observations in a scholarly article may give them some cachet among White readers, they are nothing that the average African-American couldn't tell us based on her own experiences, scholarly or not. (Dare I point out to any White Lesbian-Feminists reading this study how conscious we are of these same patterns when having to discuss women's issues with men or issues of sexuality with Straight people?) This helps to explain, then, why White musicians performing Black music face a particular

challenge to attain clarity about what we are hoping to communicate, and to then communicate our messages clearly.<sup>6</sup> When we as White musicians sing a Spiritual or a Freedom Song, Black and other anti-racist audience members will likely be looking for some sign that – whatever else we might also be singing about – we *are* singing about Black people – that we are not appropriating the sounds of Black people’s struggles entirely for our own purposes.<sup>7</sup>

And if our cross-race hearings of traditional Black music make of us only passive objectors to racism, have we really *heard* it? Jon Cruz warns above all that the “cultural turn” is a turn away from political engagement, an argument that should sound an alarm for all White people who consume Black music in the name of progressive politics:

The propensity for culturalism to eclipse politics is a problem that continues to trouble. As Hazel Carby suggests, “The publishing explosion of the fiction of black women has been a major influence in the development of the multicultural curriculum,” but the unprecedented assimilation of black fiction appears to take place in ways in which “the texts of black women and men sit uneasily in a discourse that seems to act as a substitute for the political activity of desegregation.” (Cruz 1999, 210-202)

Cruz’s book helped me to recognize that, in fact, my performance of Spirituals and other traditional Black forms was at one time *most decidedly* my substitute for anti-racist political organizing. And a completely ineffectual substitute it was, too, given that women *within the chorus* managed to replicate the very behaviors of a famous oppressor criticized in one of our favorite Spirituals (see my “parables” in Chapter Six). Any White choristers who think that by singing Black and freedom-oriented material they are necessarily striking a blow against racism may need to think again.

The viability of expressing anti-racism through my musical practice was one of the matters on which I sought opinions from Bernice Johnson Reagon and Ysaye Barnwell. There had been times, such as AMASONG’s art-museum performance of the Zimbabwe project, when I had thought that this was what I was doing, only to find that the result had not been received as such – at least, not by everyone. The discussion with Dr. Reagon was short. I posed my question by quoting from my dissertation proposal:

KB: “I have long sought to answer the question of whether it is possible for me to express anti-racism through my particular musical practice – or at the very least, to avoid reinscribing racism.”

BJR: I don’t know why it’s a question.

KB: Do you want to know why?

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<sup>6</sup> For example, for a concert on which AMASONG performed a song from Nigeria, we set up informational tables with literature about the U.S. oil industry’s spoilage of Nigerian land and the near-total lack of any compensation to the people living in the areas from which such enormous wealth is extracted; we also generated hundreds of protest letters to the President and to the major corporate offenders.

<sup>7</sup> In a country where the radio blares the characteristically Black sound of a gospel chorus calling “Freedom! Freedom!” in a jingle for a vision-correction commercial, we can easily be desensitized to what that sound originally meant.

BJR: No.

KB: Okay.

BJR: *Anybody* can express anti-racism in *anything* they do if that's important to them. But it has to be *key* to why you're in the universe. It has to be one of the reasons you're in the world – that when people look at you, they say: "God, here she comes. She's gonna come up with some anti-racist shit." If that's not who you are, you might do it every other Martin Luther King Day. But if that's who you *are*, you can do it, and it doesn't matter what you're doing. It doesn't matter.

Ysaye Barnwell's more complex response led to the same conclusion – that there is only one way to do it, and that is all the way:

KB: "I have long sought to answer the question of whether it is possible for me to express anti-racism through my particular musical practice – or at the very least, to avoid reinscribing racism."

YMB: Stop.

KB: Yes?

YMB: I think there are levels to that. One level is the performance of the music and the programming of the music. But the other is to understand the functionality of the music and to understand that if you sing the music, you are making a commitment. So, for example, something like Bernice's song ("I'm Gon' Stand!!!"): "We will not bow down to racism." Okay?

KB: Yeah. If you're going to say it out your mouth –

YMB: *Mm-hmm*. Then you need to feel as if you can be held accountable *to that statement* –

KB: And that's one reason why I have not programmed that piece with my choir –

YMB: Aha! *There* you go! There you go.

KB: And I couldn't – I've heard other White groups blithely sing it and thought: "Now, I know you don't even know what that is going to involve."

YMB: *Yes*. ...If you can not hold yourself and cannot be held accountable to the statements in the song – by yourself, your choir, your community – ...I mean, that's one of the things that really *hard* in *Sweet Honey In The Rock!* You know, we go 'round and 'round and 'round about issues sometimes, and we can't – we will not sing things that we can not all agree to. *We can't*, because *we can be held*

*accountable*. And people look at us. They *look* at us! So I'm not going to stand up there and sing something that I can't back up – that I'm not going to be willing to, like, put myself on a line *tomorrow*. You know? So, I think that's a big part of the *commitment index*. There's *belief*. But then there's *commitment*: "Okay, you believe so-and-so and so-and-so? What're you gonna *do* about it?" And I really feel like understanding the function of that music and the culture out of which it comes should say something to you about your *responsibility* as a social activist. Okay? And if you're going to *sing* music that is socially-active music, it's not a luxury! It's a thing that you do because you can't do otherwise. And if you're not going to take your choir and sing that music on the steps of City Hall, you know, then singing it in a concert isn't enough. It's not enough. And it *means* a *conversation* in the choir about: "How do you all feel about this? Where can we go with this? Is each one of us accountable for singing this?" Because I guarantee you that if you start to ask those questions, and if people really start to talk about that stuff, you will have a criterion for deciding what you can sing in your choir and what you will not. I guarantee you. And I also guarantee you, you'll have a different group. You'll have a group that's talking, that knows more about each other, that understands more about who they are, is challenged to at least think about what they're doing. And if that's not the kind of *organization* it is, you will know that. And then you'll program some other stuff. You know? Because maybe people can only do a certain kind of thing, in terms of putting their fiber into it. But you need to know that. You know, maybe there's another group of women that you can get together with.

It is not enough for me anymore to let musical performance pass for activism. I might be able to argue that it was my engagement with Black music and musicians that helped me make the decision to join anti-racism activist groups, even though I know that the music doesn't lead everyone to the same commitment. Perhaps I would have come to that commitment without the music. In any case, the music reinforces my commitment, and though my musical practice and my activist practice enhance each other, it has become important for me not to confuse the two. And although completing this dissertation has required me to think and write about the need in our country for racial-justice activism, I do not mistake this dissertation as an example of such activism. As Barbara Smith writes in "Doing it from Scratch: The Challenge of Black Lesbian Organizing":

I believe that (one) serious roadblock to activism is the ideological content of much current theory, especially in the academy. Black lesbians who have been in school recently have often been exposed to the airless, inaccessible abstractions that dominate literary studies, women's studies, and queer studies. The varieties of academic theory that are most popular have little to say about collective struggle and less to say about the inhumane material conditions that motivate people to want to make change.

Despite the largely incomprehensible arguments that proponents of such theories offer when challenged about the political usefulness of their ideas, most of these modes of thought are frighteningly successful at maintaining the political status quo. Very little is said about why and under what conditions people begin to move, about how successful movements happen. One criterion I often rely upon for assessing the revolutionary content of ideas and actions is to ask the question originally posed by the

visionary poet and activist Sonia Sanchez, which is. "But how do it free us?" Sanchez is asking about collective strategies, not individualized solutions. When most popular theoretical models are interrogated in this way, they do not have much to offer. (Smith 1998, 172)

I will be happy if this study helps White musicians to better cooperate and communicate with Black musicians and audiences, but I would be *elated* if readers who love Black music found themselves compelled to join neighborhood efforts against racial profiling in police practices or banded together to demand equitable lending policies of their local banks.

One of the things I've felt is that it's important to live *in the world* reflecting what you believe. And the way to do that is to express what you believe in the area of your strength. That will keep you doing it the longest. So, for me that's meant that when I teach history or when I sing or when I create music, you are going to hear my political positions or my issues or the things I care about. (Bernice Johnson Reagon)

Realistically, it is probably not my music or my scholarship that will motivate others to action. Still, my performing and my writing – the areas of my strength and joy – are at the very least my unique opportunities to remind myself of my own commitments and to express my desires for a more just world.

## APPENDIX A

## Survey for Feminist Choirs

1. Chorus name and location
2. Director's name
3. Is this group a member of GALA or Sister Singers?
4. How many years has the group existed?
5. How many singers does this chorus have?
6. Please describe the group's repertoire. If you have general aesthetic or political principles regarding style, content, or origin on which you base your repertoire choices, please share these. More specifically, I am interested in getting an idea of all the different kinds of music you do perform/have performed as well as the *relative amounts* of each. You could answer by writing a descriptive paragraph, by preparing a list of genres in order of their prominence, by including programming lists, or by using any other means that will give a clear picture. I am providing a suggested -- though not exhaustive -- list of genres, some of which may overlap. I have given some examples of how to break down the broader categories. Your response is in no way bound by these suggestions. As much as you can, identify specific pieces in your repertoire as examples of your programming in the various genres your perform.

Western art ("Classical") music

Medieval

Renaissance

Baroque

Classic/Romantic

Post-Romantic

Contemporary

Vocal jazz

Popular music

Broadway tunes

Pride songs written especially for the Gay choral market

Womyn's music

Choralized arrangements of solo songs (by Cris Williamson, Holly Near, etc.)

Originals written for vocal ensembles like Sweet Honey In The Rock

Protest music

Labor movement songs

Civil Rights Era songs

Folkloric music

Balkan choral song

African-American Spiritual

Appalachian hymn

Irish ballad

African village song

Yiddish song

Yoruba chant

7. Please describe your group's composition -- *based on what you know at this reading* -- in terms of the representation among the members of different ages, political leanings, spiritual practices, sexualities, races, ethnicities, class backgrounds, physical challenges, levels of past musical training/experience, and/or anything else you believe is relevant in identifying this particular community of women.



## APPENDIX B

### Objectives for UBW, CHC, and Sweet Honey Interviews

- To learn the general history of the ensemble.
- In the case of speaking with the founder/director: To discover the reasons that compelled her to lead the group.
- To establish how each ensemble member identifies herself.
- To establish how she identifies her ensemble.
- To explore the meaning she ascribes to performing in a women's ensemble.
- To discuss how she perceives her work within the context of Black Liberation movements.
- To elicit accounts of the personal significance to her of the ensemble's song repertoire.
- To discuss the group's methods of song acquisition, arrangement, rehearsal, performance, and teaching.
- To explore her hopes for the performance/teaching of this body of music to audiences in various contexts and of different racial makeups.
- To trace her involvement – independently of and within the ensemble – with cultural Feminism.
- To learn how she accounts for and feels about being claimed as an icon of the Lesbian cultural movement.
- To elicit opinions on the primacy of women as carriers of Black song traditions.
- To discover her opinions about whose songs these are, who should sing them, and how they should be sung.
- To encourage her to define "cultural appropriation" and "authenticity" in music.

## APPENDIX C

### Objectives for AMASONG, Sistrum, and Anna Crusis Interviews

- To learn the group's general history.
- To establish how each ensemble member identifies herself.
- To establish how she identifies her ensemble.
- To explore the meaning she ascribes to performing in a Womyn's ensemble.
- In the case of speaking with the founder/director: To discover the reasons that compelled her to lead the group.
- In the case of an African-American respondent: To discuss her experience as part of this White group.
- To ask each member to characterize her ensemble's repertoire.
- To discuss her favorite repertoire styles or selections.
- To determine the extent of her involvement with songs in *Black traditions*.
- To discover the processes by which her ensemble acquires, arranges, rehearses, and performs this music.
- To explore the significance of this music to her: why her group performs it and what she enjoys or fears about performing it.
- To trace her involvement – independently of and within the ensemble – with cultural Feminism, particularly Womyn's music and festival culture.
- To discuss any encounters she has had with Black women artists and their ideas as well as the effects these encounters may have had on her understanding of this music and her role as its performer.
- To discover her opinions about whose songs these are, who should sing them, and how they should be sung.
- To encourage her to define "cultural appropriation" and "authenticity" in music.
- To discover which song traditions she considers "her own"
- To elicit her ideas about what integrating the chorus would involve.
- In the case of a White respondent: To determine whether she has Black friends in her city.

## APPENDIX D

### Objectives for MUSE Interviews

*Most of the questions for the previous two sample groups will apply to interviews with MUSE women.*

*In addition, I will strive for the following:*

- To trace Catherine Roma's history as one of the founding mothers of the Womyn's choral movement.
- To explore how MUSE's racial integration has been achieved, giving special attention to the role of Black song repertoire and the manner in which it is rehearsed and presented.
- To trace Roma's and MUSE's organization of and participation in events featuring the transmission of song from the artists in UBW, CHC, and Sweet Honey to other White people, particularly performers in the Womyn's choral movement.
- To elicit opinions from members on the ability of joint performance of Black song traditions to enhance Feminist and anti-racist goals within the ensemble and in their greater community.
- To discover whether the singing of Black song traditions by this racially-mixed group involves any frustrations or concerns.

## APPENDIX E

### Womyn's Choruses Representations of Their Racial Demographics

#### AMASONG: Champaign-Urbana's Premier Lesbian/Feminist Chorus

In nine years of a membership that began at just over a dozen and grew to sixty members, we have to my knowledge all been White except for one Zimbabwean, one African American, one Chinese, two Japanese Americans from Hawaii, and one Brazilian who may or may not have considered herself to be a Woman of Color during her short stay in the United States. We never had more than three of these in the choir at any one time, and the two Black women were never in the chorus at the same time.

#### Anna Crusis Women's Choir, Philadelphia, PA (40 singers)

"Most of us are white, with a few women of color. A variety of white European ethnicities are represented (particularly Jewish, Irish, Italian, as these are characteristic of Philly)."

#### Bread and Roses Feminist Singers, Washington, D.C. (12 singers)

"Right now: 2 African Americans (one is the Interim Conductor), 1 Asian Indian, 1 Shepardi (I believe) Jew [she's out of town for a month], 6 European/White descent, 1 Virgin Islander of mixed European/African descent."

#### Calliope Women's Chorus, Minneapolis, MN (35-40 singers)

"95% Caucasian, 2% Native American, 1% African American."

#### Canta Bella Women's Chorus (gathering in various locations of Northern California: 65-100 singers)

"...we are predominantly liberal, white, and lesbian."

#### Central Pennsylvania Womyn's Chorus, Harrisburg, PA (12-15 singers)

"...our ethnic make up at this point is all caucasian..."

#### Crescendo, the Tampa Bay Womyn's Chorus (25-30 singers)

"Mainly white, with two black (one African, the other Afro-American) and an hispanic."

#### Grand Rapids Women's Chorus, Grand Rapids, MI (31 singers)

"We are 85% Caucasian, 15% other (African American, Korean/American, Native American, Hispanic.)"

#### Jacksonville Gay Chorus, Jacksonville, FL (5 singers in the women's group; 12 in the mixed group)

No information on race was initially provided; when I wrote back to ask about it specifically, I was informed that all members are White.

#### Rainbow Women's Chorus, San Jose, CA (25 singers)

N/A

#### Sistrum, Lansing, MI (18 singers)

"One of us is African American; the rest are white."

#### Vox Femina Los Angeles (28 singers)

"22 Caucasian, 1 Japanese, 1 Filipino, 1 African American, 1 Middle Eastern, 2 Hispanic"

#### Womonsong, Madison WI (30 singers)

"...little racial diversity..."

## APPENDIX F

**Womyn's Choruses' Representations of Their Black Repertoire**

*Italics represent a respondent's adoption of categories listed on my survey. Some respondents placed check marks by the categories they had sung, some gave numerical tallies of the number of times they had sung them (in their last program, or ever), and some made comments after them. Anything not in italics represents a respondent's own additions to and adaptations of the questionnaire. The additions in parentheses are mine.*

**Womonsong**

Madison, Wisconsin

<i>Sweet Honey In The Rock</i>	X
<i>African Village Song</i>	X

**Vox Femina**

Los Angeles, CA

*Sweet Honey in the Rock* – at least one or two selections per concert

It has been our practice in the three concerts we have given (and our upcoming one as well) that we have always performed music with Black roots (as you defined). I suspect we will continue that practice for I love the music!

**Sistrum**

Lansing, MI

*Yoruba* – “Asesu”

*Protest music* – Especially South African freedom songs: e.g. “We Shall not Give Up the Fight”

Lots of Sweet Honey tunes, beginning with “Breaths” and “On Children;” more recently “We Are,” “Wanting Memories,” “Patchwork Quilt,” “Would You Harbor Me?” and others.

Ghanaian play music: “No No Le Domi”  
 “I Feel Like Going On” (African American sacred music)

**Rainbow Women's Chorus**

San José, CA

*Protest Music* – “Freedom Is Coming”/ “We Shall Not Give Up the Fight” Anonymous, collected  
 (in South Africa) by Anders Nyberg

“We All... Ev'ry One of Us” Bernice Johnson Reagon

**Jacksonville Gay Chorus**

Jacksonville, FL

*Originals written for vocal ensembles like Sweet Honey In The Rock* – a little  
*African-American Spiritual* – some

Our June concert will include “We Shall Overcome”

**Grand Rapids Women's Chorus**  
Grand Rapids, MI

*African village songs*  
*Sweet Honey*

---

**Crescendo**  
Tampa, FL

*Sweet Honey in the Rock*  
*Civil Rights era songs*  
*African-American Spiritual*

---

**Central Pennsylvania Women's Chorus**  
Harrisburg, PA

"Study War No More"  
"Rocka My Soul"  
"Bandari" (from somewhere in Africa)

---

**Canta Bella**  
Northern California

"Ella's Song" (Bernice Johnson Reagon)

---

**Calliope**  
Minneapolis, MN

<i>African American Spiritual</i>	3
<i>African village song</i>	1
<i>Original music written for vocal ensembles such as Sweet Honey In The Rock</i>	19
<i>Civil Rights era songs</i>	1

---

**Bread and Roses Feminist Singers**  
Washington, D.C.

*African-American Spiritual* – yes  
*African village songs* – freedom songs in Swahili and Zulu  
*Civil Right era songs* – yes

Lots of Sweet Honey songs!

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**Anna Crusis**  
Philadelphia, PA

*Sweet Honey In The Rock* – yes. lots  
*African-American Spiritual*—occasionally; the religion thing needs to be considered  
*African village song* – yes – we like these. hard to find arrangements, though, so we usually do our own off of recordings.

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## VITA

Kristina Gisèle Boerger received her formative training from pianist Annie Sherter, who lives and teaches in Geneva, Illinois. Boerger entered the University of Illinois in piano performance, ultimately completing her B.S. in music education with a concentration on choral music. After one year directing choirs in the public schools of Kenosha, Wisconsin, she returned to Urbana to pursue her M.M. in choral conducting, also founding AMASONG: Champaign-Urbana's Premier Lesbian/Feminist Chorus, a community ensemble. Under Boerger's nine-year directorship, AMASONG became a nationally acclaimed chorus with two award-winning compact-disc recordings, performances at several national venues, and a tour of the Czech Republic to its credit. Boerger's work with AMASONG is the subject of a television documentary slated for national broadcast in 2001. During her tenure with AMASONG, Boerger also conducted at Bloomington (IL) High School, served as choral director and lecturer on the faculties of Lake Forest College and the Millikin University School of Music, and completed two graduate degrees in choral conducting.

Beyond her formal training as a choral director, Boerger pursues interests in arranging and composing, solo vocal performance and recording, and group vocal and instrumental expressions in traditional styles from various cultures. Her choral arrangements are sung nationwide and outside the U.S.; she has composed and recorded two commissioned instrumental themes for dramatic works; she received the 2000 GLAMA for a composition for treble chorus and double bass; she has sung early and contemporary opera and oratorio roles in the U.S. and Canada; she has appeared onstage and recorded with artists in various styles including The King's Noyse, Concerto Urbano, B.A.Ch., Urban Bush Women, Rocky Maffit, Pan Morrigan Welland, and Andrea Larson; she plays guitar, mountain dulcimer, didjeridoo, and percussion; she served as a guest faculty artist at the 1998 and 1999 Urban Bush Women Summer Dance Institute: A New Dancer for a New Society.

In the summer of 2000, Boerger relocated to New York City to serve on the music faculty of Barnard College, sing as much as possible, and conduct Cerddorion, a 28-voice, mixed chamber ensemble with an emphasis on Renaissance and Baroque repertoire.