ART PAPERS

STRIKING IDEAS + MOVING IMAGES + SMART TEX
NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2012 US $7 CAN $9 UK £6 EU

11>
0 74470 75087 1

PROPOSITION
CINEMATIC CREATIVE MALADJUSTMENT

COMPOSITION
AN ANTARCTIC EXPLORATION

TRANSMISSION
CROSSING BORDERS IN A DIGITAL AGE

REPRESENTATION
AFROFUTURISM & THE GROTESQU

She put a spell on us: the persisting and mercurial legacy of Nina Simone

TEXT / CARMEN WINANT

Nina Simone's voice is ringing right now in your head, even if you don't know it. Almost a decade after her death, Simone's music has found its way into a range of cultural outlets as a tool to identify with social struggle, reference creative mastery, and push consumer products. In their collaborative album, Kanye West and Jay-Z sampled Simone's "Feeling Good" by auto-tuning her voice into a slack, reverberating chorus. In Season One of HBO's *The Wire*, "I Want a Little Sugar in My Bowl" memorably droned from a stereo as a Baltimore policewoman laid unconscious in the hospital, her girlfriend weeping bedside. Perhaps most peculiar of all, Lexus used her dissident song "Blacklash Blues" in a commercial that featured John Legend behind the luxury vehicle's wheel. I am tempted to argue that these are all misapplications of her message—swatches taken arbitrarily from a much larger and more textured fabric—until I remember that Nina Simone was herself a kind of invention, whose own proximate geography, musical style, and political values shifted dramatically throughout her seventy-year life. I proceed, then, with the curious understanding that Simone's legacy is most faithfully preserved through its unstable and wide-ranging adaptation. Nina Simone, lest we forget, is not Nina Simone's real name.

Simone was born Eunice Kathleen Waymon in February of 1933 in Tyron, North Carolina, the sixth of eight children. It was a particularly cold winter for the American South, with temperatures down to forty degrees. People who knew her as a young child reported that she could play proficient piano by the time she turned three years old. Here is the first part of the story, ending in 1962: After finishing high school, Simone moved to New York City, where she worked as a maid while attending the Julliard School of Music. She studied Billie Holiday backwards and forwards, and would later memorably cover "Strange Fruit"; married a beatnik at twenty-five and divorced him shortly thereafter; secured a record deal and was contractually maneuvered out of her due profit ("Everybody took a chunk of me," she said in the midst of a 1976 performance); then married again to a police detective and had a daughter.

And here is the second half: In the summer of 1963, anti-segregation activist Medgar Evers was killed by a Klansman in front of his home in Jackson, Mississippi, and two months later a small black church in Birmingham, Alabama, was bombed, killing four girls between the ages of eleven and fourteen. The grievous events, both of which helped galvanize an already active civil rights movement, took place when Simone was just thirty years old. Though she had previously disdained protest songs as too didactic and limiting, she now felt she had no choice. Simone wrote of her struggle in her 1991 autobiography, aptly named *I Put A Spell On You*:

> How can you take the memory of a man like Medgar Evers and reduce all that he was to three and a half minutes and a simple tune? That was the musical side of it I shied away from; I didn't like "protest music" because a lot of it was so simple and unimaginative it stripped the dignity away from the people it was trying to celebrate. But the Alabama church bombing and the murder of Medgar Evers stopped that argument and with "Mississippi Goddam," I realized there was no turning back.

That song, brimming with wearily unbridled anger—"This whole country is full of lies / You all gonna die, die like flies"—was released the next year, and subsequently outlawed in several states. After that, Simone befriended Stokely Carmichael and James Baldwin, marched at Selma, and became acquainted with the African nationalists. The songs rolled in: "Four Women," "Old Jim Crow," "Revolution," "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black," "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free," "Why? (The King of Love is Dead)" and "Backlash Blues" (written by Langston Hughes in the weeks before his death) were all recorded over a prolific six-year period, between 1964 and 1970. The lyrics to the 1965 song "Go Limp" still leave a welt: "I'll go on that march and return a virgin maid / With a brick in my handbag and a scowl on my face / Barbed wire in my underwear / To shed off disgrace."

Simone's voice was a low, rolling timbre. Incredibly raw without being gravelly, it was simultaneously smooth and raspy, assertive and hushed. Simone's act was meant to command rather than to animate, and she rarely smiled during or after performances. With a few notable exceptions, Simone was possessed by an unsettling stillness and restraint while singing; her mouth flew open and closed, but she betrayed little emotion in her eyes, which usually remained on a fixed point. Even in her most generous performances, it is easy to sense that Simone is holding something back. Perhaps even she feared drowning

OPPOSITE: **Nina Simone**, October 30, 1969 (Photo by Jack Robinson/Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

in the rush of her own dams, hardened by a lifetime of suppression, breaking open (I am reminded of a friend who once told me, after sitting dry-eyed at her own mother's funeral, that if she started crying she would never stop). Ironically, it is this very quality—this sense of measured, ineffable withholding—that lends Simone her deepest and most formidable power.

Though Nina Simone's life and work was entangled with melancholy and anger, at its heart it was about garnering due respect. She sang of companionship and even desire, using the old feminine blues trope "I want a Little Sugar in my bowl / I want a little sweetness down in my soul." Yet she never pandered to a sexualized image, as would Tina Turner, Etta James, Lena Horne, and Diana Ross after her. Simone wore her hair short or in an Afro, and rarely left the piano to sing in full view. To create an image of herself as anything less than a complete person deserving of the same expectations as her white or male peers was an indignity that she was frankly tired of, and no longer willing to suffer. I surmise that, for similar reasons, Simone also had difficulty navigating the inherent problem of being on stage at all, her body "consumed" by her anonymous onlookers as in a grotesque minstrel show. She often retaliated at her unassuming audience: "I will never be your clown," she yelled at a group in Cannes in 1977. "I don't wear a painted smile on my face, like Louis Armstrong." Other times, she claimed often only to be singing to the black people in the crowd, asking them to stand and be acknowledged. Music was, in Simone's own words, a tool of "deep, deep resentment"; it was a blade that cut both ways.

Simone's later life is stranger, sadder, and less resolved. Her husband—who had become her manager and was in charge of her finances—suddenly disappeared in 1970, and Simone fled to Barbados to evade arrest for the outstanding taxes that she had refused to pay in protest of the Vietnam War. It gets stranger: Simone had a lengthy affair with the country's prime minister, Errol Barrow, before moving to Liberia, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and, finally, France on her self-imposed exile, where after struggling against her deteriorating physical and mental heath (biographers have asserted that she was diagnosed with schizophrenia and/or bipolar disorder during the 1980s), she passed away from breast cancer in April of 2003 during the hottest European summer since 1540.

Perhaps because she flew so unflinchingly over the boundaries that divided pop, folk, jazz, soul, gospel, and blues genres—calling herself above all, a "black classical musician" who covered Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, and Leonard Cohen—Simone's own material has been covered by an incredibly wide array of performing artists. Lauryn Hill (whose noted line "I be Nina Simone / And defecating on your microphone" still echoes), Nas, The Animals, Nick Cave, Jeff Buckley, Adele, Peter Gabriel, Janis Joplin, Aretha Franklin, Cat Stevens, Talib Kweli, Antony and the Johnsons, Cat Power, David Bowie, and Feist have all drawn from her songbook; Meshell Ndegeocello will be releasing a tribute album to Simone this October. It's hard to think of anyone who has been drawn from by such a diverse set of musicians. A major biopic is purportedly in the works, which would star the far lighter-skinned Dominican-American actress Zoë Saldana. It's a complicated legacy that the film industry is sure to flatten and finesse (as have many in the recording and commercial industries), but that is the price of reverentially sustaining and evolving a cultural inheritance. To fossilize the collective memory of Simone would be an underestimation of her own complexities and a misunderstanding of both her personal and public lives.

Simone was indubitably tortured by the cruel and unjust circumstances of her life and time. As a creative genius, she was able to transmute the myriad of injuries that she faced as a woman of color into cogent art, and in so doing, became an American radical of unparalleled stature. It was a burden that tore her to pieces, ultimately unraveling her sanity and health. Nina Simone still matters because I still can't get her out of my head, and if you are listening closely, you shouldn't be able to either.

Carmen Winant lives and works in Boulder, Colorado, where she teaches in the Painting and Drawing Department at the University of Colorado, and Brooklyn, New York. Winant is a graduate of UCLA, where she received her BA in 2006, and California College of the Arts,where she earned Masters degrees in Fine Art and Visual and Critical Studies. In the summer of 2010, she participated in the residency program at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Winant is a regular contributor to *Frieze*, *WAX*, *The Believer*, and *Aperture* magazines, *The Highlights Journal* and Artforum.com, among others.