

### Homework 16 Reading Response

In “Big Mama Thornton, Little Richard, and the Queer Roots of Rock ‘n’ Roll” of *American Quarterly*, Tyina Steptoe uses queer Black performers such as Big Mama Thornton and Little Richard to examine how queerness and the politics of the Cold War influenced the development of rock ‘n’ roll as a musical genre. Specifically, she argues that the “racial and gender politics” of the Cold War restricted Black performers because of their queerness, but these performers continued to push the bounds of heteronormativity, therefore influencing rock ‘n’ roll by allowing more queer themes to the genre.<sup>1</sup> Steptoe first explains that queer Black performers were influenced by queerness in blues music during the classical blues era, which is what enabled them to introduce queerness to rock ‘n’ roll. She then argues that the politics of the Cold War cast queerness as “disloyal” to the US, causing record labels and civil rights activists to push for and promote more heteronormativity in queer Black performers. Although this did force queer Black performers to limit the queerness in their music, Steptoe argues that performers still found ways to express their queerness in their live shows—Little Richard by wearing certain makeup and hairstyles, Big Mama Thornton by kicking her legs to show her cowboy boots. Hence, Steptoe argues that even through the restrictions that the sociopolitical climate of the Cold War caused, queer Black performers still allowed queer themes into rock ‘n’ roll.

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<sup>1</sup> Tyina Steptoe, “Big Mama Thornton, Little Richard, and the Queer Roots of Rock ‘n’ Roll,” *American Quarterly* 70, no. 1 (2018): 56.

Step toe's argument is effective because she uses a chronological structure that emphasizes the causal relationships within her argument, clarifying the process through which queer Black performers influenced rock 'n' roll. For example, the first subsection of her argument explains that queerness was introduced to rock 'n' roll because of blues artists' influence on queer Black rock 'n' roll performers. Step toe explains that singers such as Thornton "admired" blues artists during a time which Black queerness was a prominent element of blues music; Thornton even considered blues artist Bessie Smith her "idol."<sup>2</sup> Here, her use of a chronological structure—considering the classical blues era before rock 'n' roll—emphasizes a causal relationship between blues music and queerness in rock 'n' roll. By first addressing queerness in blues music, Step toe clarifies that queer Black performers were only able to allow more queer themes into rock 'n' roll music because of their admiration for blues music and artists. This chronological order is especially important when she considers the factors that limited queer Black performers in rock 'n' roll. Step toe argues that politics of the Cold War portrayed queerness as disloyal to the US and hence performers were forced to limit the queerness in their music. However, she explains Black queer performers still found "transgressive" ways to not conform to heteronormativity in their music.<sup>3</sup> Step toe's choice of first addressing Cold War politics and then queer Black performers' response to the restrictions they faced highlights the causal relationship between Cold War politics and queerness in rock 'n' roll. By doing this, she again clarifies the process through which queer Black performers influenced rock 'n' roll. She demonstrates that it is because of persistence of not conforming to heteronormativity—even amidst restrictions caused by Cold War politics—that queer Black performers allowed queerness to become a large part of rock 'n' roll. Overall, Step toe's

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<sup>2</sup> Step toe, 58.

<sup>3</sup> Step toe, 71.

chronological structure emphasizing causal relationships makes her argument effective, as it clarifies how queer Black performers influenced rock 'n' roll.