Coalitional Auralities: Notes on a Soundtrack to Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens

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As a scholar of Black popular music, it might seem odd that I am contributing to this discussion of Cathy Cohen's foundational article "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens." Music is, after all, virtually absent from Cohen's powerful reimagining of radical queer politics. And yet, I believe that there are significant ways that Black popular music and "Punks" can and do find meaning in each other. Indeed, the punk, bulldagger, and welfare queen, Cohen's exemplary nonnormative sexual categories whose relation to power inform an intersectional queer analysis and politics, have historical and contemporary legacies in Black popular music. For example, Tavia Nyong'o's work (2005) has reshaped the contours of punk rock by considering the history and circulation of the "punk" in African American culture; the butch bulldagger is found throughout much of Black music history from early twentieth-century blues songs like Lucille Bogan's "B.D. Women" to contemporary rappers like Young M.A; and, as feminist hip hop scholars like Tricia Rose (2008) have long pointed out, the welfare queen trope is one that frequently frames rappers' (irrespective of gender) responses to Black women's sexualities.

But while Cohen is interested in these *individual* marginalized subjects, she's more concerned with theorizing a broad-based *collective* political vision that centers the overlapping experiences of oppression among these marginalized subjects. Cohen (1997: 441) critiques the single-issue framework of mainstream queer politics that privileges nonheterosexual identity as the sole site of oppression (and that thus ignores social formations like race) to instead propose a different kind of liberatory project, one that is intersectional and leftist based, and that is organized around "those who stand on the outside of the dominant constructed norm of state-sanctioned white middle- and upper-class heterosexuality." Cohen refers to this new queer politics as "principled coalition work" and does so because it radically challenges the homogenizing logics of sameness that frame most articulations of coalitions. To pursue principled coalition work, then, as far as I'm imagining it, is to redefine coalitions as a relational politics of collective resonance. To resonate is

to resemble, but not exactly to be the same. In particular—and this is where I find its connection to music most salient—to resonate is to amplify and animate; it is to simultaneously vibrate out and vibe with in unexpected, unintended, and uneven ways; and it is to then mark, draw, and produce a collective with those who share and experience such resonance, but are differently affected by it.

This kind of relational politics of collective resonance, this kind of refusal to elide varied histories and lived realities of marginalized people, is what makes Cohen's article so important in, of, and for Black popular music. To that end, what I want to do is briefly think through what principled coalitional work sounds like. How might we imagine the workings of these kinds of sono-social and sono-political performances of collectivity—what we might call "coalitional auralities?" Simply put, I want to make a case for the soundtracks of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens. And to do so, I want to choose a somewhat unlikely candidate, Miles Davis, and his often-overlooked and forgotten 1972 album *On the Corner*.[1]

It is with *On the Corner* that Davis, for the first and only time, sought to appeal to the youth of the Black Power generation. Sonically, the album is a jazz-funk album that draws inspiration from Black Power musical favorites like James Brown, Sly Stone, and the Last Poets. Visually, the album cover uses the mode of cartoons to represent the then-contemporary street corner life, hence the album's title, of Black working-class and working-poor urban ghettos. The cover depicts men dressed in Black Panther Party–inspired black leather jackets and berets as well as men wearing Pan-African colors of red, black, and green with phrases like "Free Me" emblazoned on their clothing, gesturing to the "Free Angela" and "Free Huey" slogans during Angela Davis and Huey Newton's incarcerations.

And yet, as *On the Corner*'s music and album cover speak to dominant Black Power ideologies, the album also reframes them. Indeed, *On the Corner* is Davis's only studio album to contain South Asian musicians and instrumentation, and the album cover also features female sex workers and what appears to be a gay Black man, a punk—he is sporting a midriff, often extends his pinky finger, and is giving devastating side-eye on the cover.

When I interviewed Bangladeshi *tabla* player Badal Roy about the recording process of *On the Corner*, he informed me that Davis instructed him to "play like a nigga" (pers. comm., July 26, 2016). I read this directive not through ethnoracial essentialist logic but through the Afro-Asian coalitional lens of what Vijay Prashad (2000) calls "model minority suicide." The model minority category was not as firmly rooted in US politics and culture in 1972 as it is today, but, as Susan Koshy (2001) notes, 1970 was the only time that the US Census counted South Asians as white. This Census change worked in tandem with the class- and normative-

kinship-biased legislative provisions of the Immigration Act of 1965 that disproportionately increased the number of middle- and upper-class Asian immigrant nuclear families in the United States, and thus created a political and cultural assimilative space and incentive through which South Asian immigrants like Roy could identify with whiteness, middle-classness, and nuclear housing formations through and against the criminalized, policed, and often deemed sexually nonnormative, Black working-class communities. Such context allows us to interpret Davis's charge to Roy to "play like a nigga" as a call to reject the hailing of white middle-class normativity—that is, "model minority suicide"—and to form alliances between marginalized communities against such race, gender, class, and sexual normative systems of oppression. *On the Corner* makes audible such coalitional auralities through the linking of Roy's tabla playing and James Mtume's Afro-diasporic drumming. In fact, Roy and Mtume's collaborative sounds are the result of recording techniques that spliced and sutured together different recording sessions, further manipulated Mtume and Roy's playing so that their percussive patterns refused the sonic norms governing their instruments' traditional (and masculinist) histories, and then juxtaposed their playing against each other. And it is due to this kind of queer approach to recording that Roy and Mtume appear as sharing the same aural space and creating an interlocked, homosocial, and Afro–South Asian sonic collective.

Such queering in the music of *On the Corner* is made even more evident on the cover itself. Its inclusion of Black women sex workers and the Black punk centers the subjectivities that Cohen insists we organize our queer politics around because their sexual practices render them outside the privilege of heteronormativity and homonormativity. Cortez "Corky" McCoy was the album's illustrator. McCoy and his wife and collaborator Sandra McCoy were known for their erotic representations of Black women for the Black pornography outlet, *Players*, a magazine where, during McCoy's stint with them, the poet Wanda Coleman served as the editor and sought cultural work whose nonnormativity was "wholly unaccounted for in the black arts movement or the womanist movement" (Stallings 2015: 69). McCoy brings such radical depictions of black women's sexuality in *Players* to *On the Corner* in the form of sex workers, recasting the corner as not simply a race- and class-based space of Black working-class and working-poor life but also a site of sexual labor and desire.

McCoy extends such sexual valences of the corner by also drawing a Black man posing on the outskirts of the street corner and whose gender expression is vastly different from the other men on the cover. When I asked McCoy about this character, he told me, "Do you know why he's off to the side? Because that's where

Figure 1. *On the Corner*, by Miles Davis, Columbia Records, album cover (front), 1972. Artwork by Cortez McCoy

we push gay people. . . . This country is a great marginalizer" (pers. comm., September 27, 2016). McCoy's words speak to his drawing of the punk character not as a liberal assimilative representation of inclusion but a depiction that underscores Black queer men's marginality. It is this marginality that positions him and the female sex workers in relation to each other, gesturing toward nonnormative marginality as the basis through which to organize a leftist-inspired street corner political vision. And when paired with the Afro–South Asian sonics of the album, *On the Corner* destabilizes a kind of coalitional project that is trapped within category-based identity politics and enacts a more progressive politics of transnational and comparative work; it creates Cohen's push toward principled coalition work.

And yet, how do we interpret *On the Corner*'s coalitional auralities in the face of Davis's documented history of sexism, misogyny, and domestic violence?[2]

Figure 2. *On the Corner*, by Miles Davis, Columbia Records, album cover (back), 1972. Artwork by Cortez McCoy

Rather than ignore this history or argue that it undoes the transformative work of the album, I contend that we must go back to Cohen (1997: 480) and take heed of her argument that principled coalition work "is not an easy path to pursue" because it requires us to uncomfortably confront "the relative power and privilege" of our positionalities that "challenge dichotomies such as . . . enemy/comrade." *On the Corner*, as an album by a Black man who beat women and whose career and life are shrouded in rumors of his nonnormative sexual desires and practices, is a prime candidate for the complex struggles and challenges of coalition building. It is a cultural work that visually and sonically represents the process, and not the product, of principled coalition work. And as such, it is an emblematic soundtrack for how we might see and sound the kinds of political possibilities of and for organizing around punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens.

Further Listening

As a bonus, here are a few albums that I believe also soundtrack "Punks" (in chronological order): Rick James's *The Flag*; Lil' Kim's *Hard Core*; Missy Elliott's *Miss E . . . So Addictive*; and Janelle Monáe's *Electric Lady*.

Notes

1. This analysis is part of my current book project, *The Other Side of Things*.
2. I want to thank Bettina Judd for pressing me on this question.

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