A Loving Reclamation of the Unutterable: Patricia Hill Collins, Hortense J. Spillers, and Nina Simone as Excellent Performers of Nomenclature

I. Augustus Durham

Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International, Volume 2, Number 1, 2013, pp. 28-46 (Article)

Published by State University of New York Press

⇒ For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/505528
A Loving Reclamation of the Unutterable

Patricia Hill Collins, Hortense J. Spillers, and Nina Simone as Excellent Performers of Nomenclature

I. Augustus Durham

And I will show you still a more excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal . . . [L]ove is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

—1 Corinthians 12:31b–13:1; 4b–7

There is something to be said for the unadulterated agency of a person who is preoccupied with changing her name. Sans biological features, a name, one’s name, is the initial marker of identity at the very moment of nascence. And yet, names are given painstakingly; they are labored over and put through a series of permutations, with other names, in order to find the proper timbre for optimal acoustic quality. People are often given this identifier in order to live into something, for better or worse, that may signify their progenitors’ current circumstance, or even as a response to occasions of intrauterine vicissitudes prior to in-breaking. An example of this would be African cultures such as that of the Zulus in South Africa. In Zulu culture, one’s name is not chosen—the name chooses her.¹
For perhaps a more local example of this methodology, we need only to look to Audre Lorde:

I did not like the tail of the Y hanging down below the line in Audrey, and would always forget to put it on, which used to disturb my mother greatly. I used to love the evenness of AUDRELORENDE at four years of age, but I remembered to put on the Y because it pleased my mother, and because, as she always insisted to me, that was the way it had to be because that was the way it was. No deviation was allowed from her interpretations of correct.

“Y” as a linearly dangling modifier literally wears on Lorde inasmuch as she “puts it on” in order to oblige her maternal piety. And yet even with the eventual correction, or better yet deletion, of her nomenclatural y-chromosome, we find that Zami becomes the new spelling of her name, that is, that which was once unutterable by Lorde’s fellow mortals is lovingly (re)claimed by Lorde so that she can become herself: an ordinary, brown braided woman. And should the reclamation of a name, in its most basic actualization, be nothing more than an act of love?

From our earliest African predisposition toward naming to our recently historic proclamation as African Americans, black peoples’ status as American citizens is bound up in what we are called by others and ourselves. A sociolinguistic retrospective on the transformation of black bodies from nigras to niggas may itself suggest that comprehending the chasm existent between our African ancestry and our acclimatized Americanity is as abecedary as the differentiation of what an “r” is from a “g.” Nevertheless, though these preoccupations permeate the black American existence, unloving gongs and cymbals, who have throughout time attempted to haphazardly coin terms and phrases that remain costly to said black Americans, still stand to be shown a more excellent way of performing nomenclature. And these excellent performances are most certainly exemplified in aspects of the African American intellectual tradition. Hence, I assert that the contributions of black women, specifically Patricia Hill Collins, Hortense J. Spillers, and Nina Simone, provide a glimpse into realms of excellence that impart the inherent failures of naming systems that are deficient in rudimentary iterations of love. As such, their respective intellectual milieus allow for the deployment of the proverbial name-it-and-claim-it ideology that pervades (post)modern culture. These women merge the cerebral with the ontological in order to illumine both the importance of naming as well as the methods by which proper names were and are sullied by improper pronouncements from within and without. Thus, whether through the utility of scholarly research or music, these women not only undertake a loving reclamation of the mortally unutterable, specific to women, but they also unearth a bearable, believable, hopeful, and enduring truth.
She early appeared on the plantation and found her function as the healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, the supernatural avenger of wrong . . .

Before we can adequately begin to engage the performances of excellence carried out by Patricia Hill Collins, Hortense J. Spillers, and Nina Simone, it is necessary to examine the act of performing itself. This is integral to these women’s works insofar as it contextualizes the spaces in which they respectively reside.

The act of reclamation these women partake in takes on quasi-biblical proportions when we acknowledge that love is the impetus behind their performances. In many ways, the preceding Corinthian notion of love as mediated through one’s utterance is exemplary of what these excellent performances entail: these women are predisposed to speaking the truth, in love, of the history of nomenclature regarding the black female body. And by expediting said historicity of naming to our current state of cultural sensibility, we are enabled to comprehend an all-too-forgotten reality: though free(d), we may currently dwell on plantations of the (post) modern sort where black bodies, in all forms, continually suffer the sting of psychosomatic tongue lashings. Hence, these women truly become aligned with the aforementioned Du Boisian classification as it relates to cultural paragons who have aided in cultivating black folks’ souls. In a word, these women are kerygmatic.

With the assertion that these women, through their excellent performances, step into the African American religious tradition of the preacher, we must recognize the linguistic and artistic performance such an office requires. In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler writes:

> My theory sometimes waffles between understanding performativity as linguistic and casting it as theatrical. I have come to think that the two are invariably related, chiasmically so, and that a reconsideration of the speech act as an instance of power invariably draws attention to both its linguistic and theatrical dimensions. . . . I sought to show that the speech act is at once performed (and thus theatrical, presented to an audience, subject to interpretation), and linguistic, inducing a set of effects through its implied relation to linguistic conventions. If one wonders how a linguistic theory of the speech act relates to bodily gestures, one need only consider that speech itself is a bodily act with specific linguistic consequences. Thus speech belongs exclusively neither to corporeal presentation nor to language, and its status as word and deed is necessarily ambiguous. This ambiguity has consequences . . . for the insurrectionary power of the speech act, for language as a condition of both bodily seduction and the threat of injury.
Butler’s ruminations on the act of performing dictate a myriad of interpretations regarding those involved in the art of kerygma. The convergence of the linguistic and the theatric simultaneously produces a moment where the invisibility of the voice becomes exhibited in the unequivocal gesticulations of the body. Akin to black women of yore, Collins, Spillers, and Simone take up linguistic exercises as panacean matters or, in kerygmatic terms, to spread good news in a world gone (and going) bad. The rhythmic articulations intrinsic to an orator and her sermonizing—assonance, consonance, the improvisational techniques rendered in the close, etc.—are linguistic applications that are shaped out of a tradition, religious and otherwise, born on these shores yet beckoning a legacy of artistry that is ruptured through the Middle Passage. Essentially, the black American kerygmatist is the Maafic manifestation of the African griot:

If we apply the processes of oral composition that many European epic singers have used over time to train as artists, we can see pronounced similarities between their journeys and those of the West African griots. West African oral narrative practices date back thousands of years. . . . [T]he griot tradition is one that often operates in contradiction. Many griots are regarded as mouthpieces for the Divine who bring prophecy and important messages to the community. Others are viewed as oral epic singers, community storytellers that document the histories of families and tribes for centuries without ever writing down a single word. Whether seemingly divine or generationally appointed and/or professionally employed because of oratorical skill, all griots that are successful must have the capacity to improvise and tell a story that is compelling. . . . This means that the roles of the oral epic singer and the griot are not simply those of musicians and storytellers, but also as performers who weave their personal stories within the tales they tell of the community’s past to comment on the present.

The mixed metaphor innate to the work of the griot imbues our understanding of these women’s moments of performative excellence. Persley suggests that certain oral (and aural) traditions, especially with regard to narrative practices and oral composition, may perhaps be idiosyncratically African, and even more so considering that this African artistic process predates that of its European counterpart. These speech performances in their given contexts are at once subversive and rehabilitative inasmuch as they speak to an American consciousness of (mis)naming, utilizing pre-Maafic, African constructs of the griot, while aiming to heal the sick, interpret the Unknown, comfort the sorrowing and supernaturally avenge wrong (cf. fn. 4).

Furthermore, remaining cognizant of the paradoxical nature of being a griot, our encounter with these women’s performative postures of naming
and claiming *it* is equally contradictory. Naming *it* is certainly a work in acknowledging the conundrum at hand. However, claiming *it*, from the standpoint of the kerygmatis/griot, may not lead to any form of holistic wellness, especially if what has been (re)claimed is reified in the negativity surrounding the named (and for that matter, the name itself). But that is exactly it: by undergirding their performances with levels of linguistic precision that “surprise like a dancer’s extra second of stillness in mid-air,” the claiming bound up in the naming proves that living still gives us opportunities for telling the truth:

But there is no question that precision is difficult to achieve. Imprecision is easier. Imprecision is available in a wide variety of attractive and user-friendly forms: clichés, abstractions and generalizations, jargon, passive constructions, hyperbole, sentimentality, and reassuring absolutes. Imprecision minimizes discomfort and creates a big, soft, hospitable place for all opinions; even the completely vacuous can find a welcome there. So the practice of precision not only requires attentiveness and effort; it may also require the courage to afflict the comfortable, and consequently, tolerate their resentment. (McEntyre, 44)

These performances of excellence are compellingly and doubly discomfiting for the actors and the receptors of the presentations. Firstly, these women linguistically seek to artfully speak the truth of the extracommunal naming of the black body because history has shown that those who initially performed the haphazard nomenclatural task have been unable to claim the flippancy of their actions. Secondly, by approaching the reclaimatory act under the auspices of being immensely precise, they boycott judgments, both gendered and racial, that would align them with the faulty assigners of the words and phrases that have defined said black bodies, more specifically black women’s. Taking this into consideration, the courage of these women to afflict the comfortable is equally met with their obligation to comfort the vernacularly afflicted. The proclamation of good news, the kerygma, occurs because these three women take the risk to genuinely realize and confirm that black bodies on this continent may have been dealt—orally, physically, psychically—four hundred-plus years of bad news. This is twisted gospel insofar as

[p]aradox and ambiguity are fully acknowledged as one sentence begins not where the previous one left off, but somehow anew, trying again to get at what is so fast, unfathomable and deceptively still. Nouns and verbs do all they can to help us imagine, and they succeed wonderfully in reminding us that finally we cannot. Not quite. Not ever. Because we live in mystery. So precision requires not only a close and patient observation, but also daring imagination and what Keats called “negative capability”—the capacity to dwell in paradox
or ambiguity without straining after resolution. To inhabit, as it were, two dimensions or points of view at once, and calmly. (McEntyre, 54)

After various and sundry forms of intercommunal contact, a black existence, colored by white notions of who and what darkened bodies are, is grayed by these women’s insistence on housing a corporeal tabernacle in the in-between (cf. fn. 12). Within the borders of housing a corporeal tabernacle in the in-between (cf. fn. 12). Within the borders of black and white, Collins’s, Spillers’s, and Simone’s performative willingness to “press beyond/the sharp lines set as boundary/named as the razor names/parting the skin” creates an epicentral space to maintain their safety when they transgress limits and identifies them as border intellectuals. The gender, race, and name of these women are bound up in their performances of excellence and such truthfully precise exhibitions allow us to experience love as an always-protecting, never-failing agent (I Cor. 13:7–8a).

The Black American woman has had to admit that while nobody knew the troubles she saw, everybody, his brother and his dog, felt qualified to explain her, even to herself.11

The act of conveying an explanation would suggest a genuine understanding of the problem. This is the fertile ground upon which Patricia Hill Collins and Hortense J. Spillers catapult themselves into the sea of the suspended American psyche, wading in the waters of a willfully forgotten past. In Collins’s book Black Feminist Thought, and more specifically in chapter 4, entitled “Mammies, Matriarchs and Other Controlling Images,” we find Collins attempting to sociologically uproot the contaminated tendrils of black female subject-object body politics in America. She does this by naming the untruthful “creation of four interrelated, socially constructed controlling images of Black womanhood, each reflecting the dominant group’s interest in maintaining Black women’s subordination”: the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, and the Jezebel. Each of these social liminalities is reducible to an America selectively remembered or, better yet, “a socially unreconstructed region where blacks who asserted their basic human rights invited retribution or death”:12 the slavery-colored South. Hence, what the black woman was deemed, regardless of her silently (or loudly) writhing under a mighty wrong,13 was what she was. The servile inducements attached to the black female body sought to hyper-effeminate her otherness, while still accessing her perceived animalistic productivity. That being said, Collins is careful to reference the sexual biopolitics associated with each of these sur-realities:

Each image transmits clear messages about the proper links among female sexuality, fertility and Black women’s roles in the political economy.
For example, the mammy, the only somewhat positive figure, is a desexed individual.—in brief, as an unsuitable sexual partner for white men. She is asexual . . . the clearest example of the split between sexuality and motherhood present in Eurocentric masculinist thought. . . . The matriarch represents the sexually aggressive woman, one who emasculates Black men because she will not permit them to assume roles as Black patriarchs . . . Similarly, the welfare mother represents a woman of low morals and uncontrolled sexuality, factors identified as the cause of her impoverished state.

These controlling images are mediated through the lens of sexuality because the spectral gaze of European progeny, namely men of privilege, mentally suspends the black female body. In this object formation, more is revealed about the masculinely lax cathexis of the European with regard to nomenclature than the intrinsic worth of the black female body. With no effort toward care, or love for that matter, these pale definitions seek to weigh down these chromosomally double-xed others. Furthermore, these characterizations are only compounded when cycled through the machine of American racism, a strain of othering unlike any other. Collins further explicates this detrimental catalyzing when she speaks to issues of skin color, hair texture, and standards of beauty.

Collins situates the aesthetic within confined sites of the ugly. These truths prove to unmask one aspect of the nature of African American women’s existence:

Race, gender and sexuality converge on this issue of evaluating beauty. Judging white women by their physical appearance and attractiveness to men objectifies them. But their white skin and straight hair privilege them in a system in which part of the basic definition of whiteness is its superiority to blackness. Black men’s blackness penalizes them. But because they are men, their self-definitions are not as heavily dependent on their physical attractiveness as those of all women. But African-American women experience the pain of never being able to live up to externally defined standards of beauty—standards applied to us by white men, white women, Black men, and, most painfully, one another. (79–80)

The measure of beauty Collins outlines is a wholly American disposition in which residence at the social margins may inhibit seeing beyond one’s exterior. Black women must confront their womanhood and their blackness while circumventing historically controlling images that suggest that “no matter how intelligent, educated, or ‘beautiful’ . . . those Black women whose features and skin color are most African must ‘git back’” (79). Collins’s supposition about black beauty is interesting in that she seemingly locates the highly aesthetic in one’s proximity to his/her Africanity, that is to say, the further (and farther)
removed African Americans are from their nostalgia for the motherland, the more susceptible they are to denying their resemblance to their matrilineal parentage.\textsuperscript{15}

Collins continues this process of naming \textit{it} by revealing spaces where issues of darkened beauty still persist with positive and negative effects; this is pivotal to her understanding of the application of standards of beauty by other black women. Her theorization of in-the-privacy-of-the-home hair consultations and public beauty salon ruminations presents moments of melancholy which mask self-effacing ugliness in festooned boxes of the “presentable,” even in the presence of the (w)ho(l)ly Other.\textsuperscript{16} In like manner, the intra-othering of black females is not relegated to stereotypically African-featured women only; their brighter counterparts occupy a fetishized space wherein they are black enough to be exotic conquests and simultaneously white enough to be paraded as a savory sweet for one’s externally hanging digit.\textsuperscript{17} The home and the public, as well as the church and the academy,\textsuperscript{18} are exposed as locations where black women, on a quotidian basis, traverse an ever-tautening tightrope. And yet, the methodology used in Collins’s process of naming seeks the same end, through different means, when juxtaposed to that of Hortense J. Spillers.

In Spillers’s prolific essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” the approach to the history of naming is situated in the marking of the female body and not necessarily the construction as per Collins; construction plays a role in Spillers’s naming project, but it is not as systematically imagined as Collins would suggest. In fact, Spillers seems to convey a sense of the immense complexity of not only naming, but misnaming as well.\textsuperscript{19} This is no sooner understood than at the onset of her work:

\begin{quote}
Let’s face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. “Peaches” and “Brown Sugar,” “Sapphire” and “Earth Mother,” “Aunty,” “Granny,” God’s “Holy Fool,” a “Miss Ebony First,” or “Black Woman at the Podium”: I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented. (203)
\end{quote}

The invention of a national identity is a novel proposal when faced with the reality of nonexistence via having an unutterable name. And though she begins with a kind of loose colloquialism, she tightens her critical gaze with regard to the politics of marking. Spillers’s incorporation of familiar metonymic conventions conveys that even in the apparent ambiguity of these titles, the human preoccupation with power propagates the definition of \textit{things}, even at the cost of polluting their meaningfulness. This confounded identity gives rise to a political necessity. Moreover, the historicity Spillers seeks to explicate manifests a reading of African cultural naming and the slave trade which
Spillers seems to assert that the African intellectual tradition may in fact reveal that the fundamental fulcrum for naming is wholly African from the outset, that is, capabilities and/or dispositions for nomenclature are the projects of peculiarly excellent performers (cf. fn. 7).

These processes of naming permeate the cultural acumen innate to the African and in a real sense, concretize the attempted European *modus operandi* for naming, though the final transcriptions are misspelled. In turn, by destroying the very African Zeitgeist for naming it, these Europeans allow themselves to make claims on it without realizing the mimesis they utilize and have yet to properly cite. This quality of European *aping* misses the semantic mark when it reimagines naming, instead engaging in levels of categorization on par with biological classifications as specific as species. Furthermore, these classificatory moves forward their animalizing projects:

Even though the European hegemones stole bodies—some of them female . . . we regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the flesh, as the person of African females and males registered the wounding. . . . The anatomical specifications of rupture, of altered human tissue, take on the objective description of laboratory prose—eyes beaten out, arms, backs, skulls branded, a left jaw, a right ankle, punctured; teeth missing, as the calculated work of iron, whips, chains, knives, the canine patrol, the bullet. . . . A female body strung from a tree limb, or bleeding from the breast on any given day of field work because the “ overseer,” standing the length of
A Loving Reclamation of the Unutterable

a whip, has popped her flesh open. . . . This materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh “ungendered”—offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations. (206–207)

We recognize that Spillers seems to associate the nature of the scientific with this manner of marking. This “laboratory prose” is reminiscent of an autopsy, carefully examining the cause of bodily death. Yet, Spillers is careful not to conflate the “body” with the “flesh.” She opines that what the oppressor views as a fleshly end is actually a transient bodily wound from the viewpoint of the oppressed. Therefore, what the wielder of the whip presumes to be a prelusory moment of autopsy is actually an instance of precognitive suspension, allowing the already marked body to prepare for local anesthesia; the enemy stumbles, falling victim to his own preconceptions of the power inherent in his wrist. This is objectification to the hilt: women are genderless and rendered asexual (cf. Collins’s reading of the sexuality of the “mammy” figure), such that they are no longer people but literally objects that blend it with their surroundings, even if they embody the quintessential slave. From the tree limbs upon which they hang or as the receptors of a whip’s end, these women remain voiceless in the dearth of knowledge surrounding slavery.

And the sociological ramifications of that silencing perpetuate aesthetic values that mirror the issues offered by Collins, even in their subsuming:

Three genetic distinctions are available to the Portuguese eye, all along the riffs of melanin in the skin: in a field of captives, some of the observed are “white enough, fair to look upon, and well-proportioned.” Others are less “white like mulattoes,” and still others “black as Ethiops, and so ugly, both in features and in body, as almost to appear (to those who saw them) the images of a lower hemisphere” (1.28). By implication, this “third man,” standing for the most aberrant phenotype to the observing eye, embodies the linguistic community most unknown to the European.

Spillers’s reading of Gomes Eannes de Azurara’s characterization of black bodies, based on skin color, presents a doubly problematic reality. Firstly, de Azurara names members of a community of which he is proximally unaware; their skin complexion others them insofar as it complicates their humanity and renders them subhuman. Secondly, the female, even in her “negative” state, still remains invisible. This is the ungendering of the black female body, or for that matter, the nongendering of her altogether; she is a stranger in her new “home” and among her new “neighbors.” We again realize that a biological classification that essentializes black male bodies as otherworldly
(because of a phenotypic reality), while not acknowledging the ontology of black women, is itself otherworldly. These instances of brutality, physical and psychic, compel Spillers to reclaim a history of “cultural fictions” and selective remembering and in turn, proverbially speak the truth—bearably, believably, hopefully, endurably—in love. Furthermore, the manner in which Spillers connotes this brutality with the scientific appears to perhaps be a dissociative move. Inasmuch as her position deals with naming these occurrences, the occurrences themselves posit a manner of reading these “hieroglyphics of the flesh” (207): though they may conceal the hurt suffered, these hieroglyphs simultaneously enlighten a memory that is all too quickly being erased.

i found god in myself & i loved her/ i loved her fiercely
—Ntozake Shange, for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf

Through their scholarly pursuits, Patricia Hill Collins and Hortense J. Spillers commingle to truly and wholeheartedly name the problem; they theorize histories that live and breathe an air of remembrance that still wafts through the nostrils of the contemporary black body. These performances of excellence showcase neither envy nor boastfulness, neither arrogance nor rudeness, but rejoice in truth rather than wrongdoing. However, they each leave room for an excellent performance of reclamation that stands apart from their own forms of it. Nevertheless, this new presentation transpires in part because of their nomenclatural tasks. It is at this nexus that Nina Simone’s Four Women claims a space for every woman inclusive of and between Granny and the Black Woman at the Podium, the “Bright” and the Ethiop.

With a bass line that registers as only four notes, each note pitching a different color for each of these female personalities, Simone takes us on a journey through

[The lives of] four women, four Negro women. One, each one with a different color, each one with a different grade of hair. And one of the women’s hair is like mine. Each one with a different background. Four women.26

Nina Simone conveys what she is about to deploy before she actually begins singing. This signifies that from the onset, she seeks to name these identities before anyone else can claim them. These are four women, four Negro women—each with a different grade of hair, different skin color, and a different background. She maintains her agency and those of these four fantastically real figures in order to destroy the monolith to which these
identities are deemed to historically cling. Therefore, when we meet Aunt Sarah, she utters:

My skin is black
My arms are long
My hair is woolly
My back is strong
Strong enough to take the pain
Inflicted again and again
What do they call me?
My name is Aunt Sarah

Aunt Sarah occupies the space akin to the proverbial Ethiop; she is strengthened to the point of having congenital analgesia. Her consistent experiences of pain, perhaps at the cost of her skin or her woolly hair, foster a level of immunity to the pangs inflicted upon her body and her spirit. Furthermore, the fact that she is referred to as “Aunt” would suggest the presence of children, most assuredly not of her own womb or even lineage. A strong back and long arms, fit for quite possibly taking care of said children, Aunt Sarah is mammy, “a surrogate mother in blackface devoted to the development of a white family” (Collins, 72).

The second woman we meet shares with us:

My skin is yellow
My hair is long
Between two worlds
I do belong
My father was rich and white
He forced my mother late one night
What do they call me?
My name is Saphronia

A mulatto, Saphronia has to negotiate the raping of her mother while also having to address the privileges afforded her by that violence: yellow skin and long hair. There is no clear reference to her having access to her father’s wealth, yet she knows her father and the circumstances surrounding her conception. Saphronia is a woman who, “because she experiences [her] biological and human destiny by way of women and must sooner or later face [her] mirror and catch [her] own reflection of imagination in it, [she] does not live out her destiny on the periphery of American race and gender magic, but in the center of its Manichean darkness” (Spillers, 174).
We then encounter a personality who imparts:

My skin is tan
My hair is fine
My hips invite you
And my mouth like wine
Whose little girl am I?
Anyone who has money to buy
What do they call me?
My name is Sweet Thing

When we encounter Sweet Thing, she, like Aunt Sarah and Saphronia, has a name and an identity that others have given her; Sweet Thing is what they call her. Referencing herself as a “little girl” may signify the loss of her innocence in the throes of her enactment of sweetness. An inviting presence with “fine” hair, Sweet Thing is “the Jezebel, whore, or sexually aggressive woman” (Collins, 77).

And finally, we encounter the last personality, who states:

My skin is brown
My manner is tough
I’ll kill the first mother I see
My life has been rough
I’m awfully bitter these days
Because my parents were slaves
What do they call me?
My name is Peaches

Peaches, awfully bitter, proverbially “tells it like it is”; she is tough. We do not know about her hair but she is brown-skinned, a child of slaves, and ready to defend herself; she “breaks in upon the imagination with a forcefulness that marks both a denial and an ‘illegitimacy.’ . . . who bears life against the could-be fateful gamble, against the odds of pulverization and murder, including her own” (Spillers, 228).

Musically, this performance of excellence is virtuosic in nature—a simple bass line, simple lyrics, simple accompaniment. Yet the panoply of meaning Simone conveys undoes the very system of naming that she references. What is most interesting about this piece is perhaps seen in one specific performance of the song. (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qCwME6Jpn3s.)

At the 1969 Antibes Jazz Festival in France, Nina Simone, with her hair wrapped and in a halter top dress with half of her back exposed, proved
that though they may too often be concluded to be the same woman, these are four different women who often speak to and on behalf of different women. She first explains the song and then proceeds to, in her own words, speak a little bit of French, telling the audience the colors of the women. The audience then applauds (almost as if to say, “How excellent she is!” or “How does she know French, even if a little bit?”). As she continues playing the interlude, she reiterates, “So I hope you understand this; it is a picture of four different women, Negro women.” It is as if she is concerned with a kind of prehistory that expedites itself to 1969 France and violently jostles the moment of her musicality. She further exemplifies this musically because the melody under each woman’s utterance is the same; there should be no significant changes as the song persists in these instances of naming. Yet something changes in Simone halfway through recounting these personalities.

As she begins to talk about Aunt Sarah, she steps into her being; Simone’s face changes its countenance and she shows the audience her hand and the skin on it; she shows them her blackness ("My skin is black"). She shrugs her shoulders ("My arms are long"); she caresses the air where her woolly hair would be, if not for her head wrap, and moves her shoulder blades to express the strength of her back. She takes pains to extend the vocal line when the lyrics signal her infliction. She speaks French again. Simone is Aunt Sarah. Simone stops playing the piano and uses her fingers to gesticulate waves for Saphronia’s long hair, she speaks French again—Simone is Saphronia. And then it happens. She mumbles an incoherent phrase. She stops playing and removes herself from the piano and begins to dance. Her body sways back and forth like the whims of oft-changed names. It is as if she is possessed by the former two women or is preparing to be enveloped by the latter two. The in-between of these first two women and the last two is perhaps where we hear a muffled beckoning which states, “What do I call me? My name is Nina.” Then she sits down and does not miss a beat when telling us who Sweet Thing is. And then she and the band surprise us: the music becomes a bit louder, she plays a randomly blue chord (4:57) and the organ proceeds to get a little heavier. She stops playing and her fingers are snapping, if only briefly. Then she and the band surprise us again: the interlude between the third and fourth woman is unlike that of the first and second. She gives us more chords to work with; she plays a new kind of melody. And then, as only Nina Simone can do, the melody behind Peaches becomes a musically indeterminate mess. The bass continues to uphold its four notes but she begins playing herself into a high frenzy, up to uttering the name “Peaches.” And then she follows with what would perhaps be a more typical ending to the piece. However, a piece that was largely minor in it chords is completed with a major chord.
In Collins’s purview,

Simone explores Black women’s objectification as the Other by invoking the pain these three women actually feel. But Peaches, the fourth woman, is an especially powerful figure, because Peaches is angry. . . . These words and the feelings they invoke demonstrate her growing awareness and self-definition of the situation she encountered and offer to the listener, not sadness and remorse, but an anger that leads to action. (105)

These four women are for women and speak to their plight and the multifaceted dimensions of their existence. Just as Simone actively participates in the musical revelation of this history, we all experience the Divine of a different sort and in turn, embrace the God in Aunt Sarah, Saphronia, Sweet Thing, and Peaches and love each of them fiercely.

Conclusion

What do Nina Simone, Hortense J. Spillers, and Patricia Hill Collins show us about reclaiming the unutterable? Perhaps each of them points us to the gravity of a name—its denial, its acceptance, the tone of its utterance, the refusal to pronounce it correctly—all of these things perpetuate a level of love and care for how and what we are named. Similarly, I believe Toni Morrison has something to say about the naming process. In Beloved, when Paul D steps into Sethe’s house after their reunion, Morrison writes:

Paul D tied his shoes together, hung them over his shoulder and followed her through the door straight into a pool of red and undulating light that locked him where he stood.

“You got company?” he whispered, frowning.

“Off and on,” said Sethe.

“Good God.” He backed out of the door onto the porch. “What kind of evil you got in here?”

“It’s not evil, just sad. Come on. Just step through.” (15–16)

Whereas I agree with Collins that these reclamative acts should spur us to action, there is a therapeutic quality, for both men and women, in having a visitation with sadness, or better yet melancholy. Hence, this process of naming and reclaiming names, as an act of love, does not enlighten us to evil (especially if we are already aware of it), but rather to melancholy, a melancholy that perhaps “somebody almost run off wit alla [our] stuff/. . . [and] almost got away with [us]” (Shange, 50–51). However, I wonder if Sethe’s invitation to Paul D calls us all, man and woman alike, to step into the house that has been
A Loving Reclamation of the Unutterable

built for us, to just step through, and face both the evil and the melancholy that reside in that abode as its cohabitants. Maybe in addressing our gendered locations individually and then convening collectively, we will be enabled to “choose [our] words [and names!] with the same grave concern with which [we] choose to push speech into poetry, the mattering core, the forward visions of all our lives.”

Notes

* To MFD, who when angry, always lovingly called me by my full name.

1. The Zulu process of naming is quite complex. The name is not just a label, but also an integral link to who that child is. Names such as *Zondiwe*, the hated one, would be a case where the child may have been born out of wedlock, the father denied the child or the family feared for the well-being of the child and named it in a negative way so as to deceive the enemies and in turn, protect the child from evil. A name such as *Jabulani*, be happy/take delight, would be given to say to the family or to the ancestors, depending on the family's belief system, that we have finally given you a son. Names are also given as a way of guiding the child as he or she gets older, i.e., *Thobile*, the humble one, is given in hopes that she will grow up and be a humble child; *Vusumuzi*, the one who builds the family, is given so that this son will be successful and do well and help his family along as he grows up. (This information is from an e-mail correspondence with Dr. Mary Gordon, professor of Zulu Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, January 29, 2009.)


3. Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (New York: Scribner Poetry, 1997), 34. The association of “brown braided woman” with Lorde is in part because subsequent to the moment of loving the rewriting of her name in *Zami*, she writes, “So by the time I arrived at the sight-conservation kindergarten, braided, scrubbed, and bespectacled . . .” See Lorde, 24 (my emphasis).


6. “As in regular churches, slave women were not preachers in the ‘invisible institution,’ but they exercised religious authority nonetheless. Some served their communities as experts in the healing arts, . . . Others acted as ‘spiritual mothers,’ respected for their spiritual wisdom and gifts of insight, including the ability to explain people's dreams and to advise them on the state of their souls.” See Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 47 (my emphasis).


9. This idea of afflicting the comfortable and vice versa is rather powerful when considering an aspect of Khalil Gibran’s *The Prophet*. In the chapter “On Houses,” Gibran writes, “And tell me, people of Orphalese, what have you in these houses? And what is it you guard with fastened doors? Have you peace. . .? Have you remembrances. . .? Have you beauty. . .? Tell me, have you these in your houses? Or have you only comfort, and the lust for comfort, that stealthy thing that enters the house a guest, and then becomes a host, and then a master?” See Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 35–36.

10. Audre Lorde, *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 379. “In raising the issue of what is at stake in boundary crossing or working ‘on the edges’ in literary and cultural studies—in particular the investment of being ‘safe’ and ‘unsafe’—we are also reminded that borderland inhabitants are always considered transgressors and aliens. . . . Therefore breaking down structures of resistance not only speaks to breaching the ramparts that bolster the system of containment and categorization . . . it also concerns the modifying of limits in order to transform [and interpret] the unknown or forbidden (metaphorical borderlands) into inhabitable, productive spaces for living and writing. . . . Often, for the border intellectual, the contested existence of borders (both internal and external) creates the desire, or even the responsibility, to transgress. . . . Such a subject position carries with it the intellectual obligation, as George Steiner says, of ‘pressing the unpleasant questions, the questions which are in bad taste, the embarrassing questions, the taboo questions.’ Because daring to trespass, to ‘step on someone else’s toes,’ may well put at risk professional security and cultural authority, surely the border intellectual must share Steiner’s belief that if it is safety and legitimation that matter most, ‘then the intellectual is in the wrong business.’” See Mae Henderson, ed., “Introduction: Borders, Boundaries, and Frame(work)s,” in *Borders, Boundaries, and Frames* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 2–3.


14. Collins, 78. In addition to these controlling images, Collins’s historicized reading of Jezebel shows her documentation as “having an excessive sexual appetite [such that] increased fertility should be the expected outcome” (see Collins, 77).

15. Spillers speaks to a similar kind of distance, even though she is addressing African American males. She writes, “The African-American male has been touched, therefore, by the mother, handed by her in ways that he cannot escape, and in ways that the white American male is allowed to temporize by fatherly reprieve . . . the African-American woman, the mother, the daughter becomes historically the powerful and shadowy evocation of a cultural synthesis long evaporated—the law of the mother—only and precisely because legal enslavement removed the African-American male not so much from sight as from mimetic view as a partner in the prevailing social fiction of the father’s name, the father’s law . . . . It is the heritage of the mother that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood—the power of ‘yes’ to the ‘female’ within.” See Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in *Black, White and in Color* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 228. After reading her perspectives on representations of beauty in *Black Feminist Thought*, I believe Collins may connote the same kind of affirmation of the “‘female’ within” to African American women as well.


17. “‘Brights’ fare little better . . . . Her straight hair and fair skin, her appearance as a dusky white woman, made her physically attractive to white men. But the fact that she was Black, and thus part of a group of sexually denigrated women, made her available to white men as no group of white women had been.” Ibid., 81.

18. “[T]he church as one key institution whose centrality to Black community development may have come at the expense of many of the African-American women who constitute the bulk of its membership . . . . [S]ome historically Black colleges may also foster Black women’s subordination.” Ibid., 87.

19. “The stunning reversal of the castration thematic . . . becomes an aspect of the African-American female’s misnaming. We attempt to undo this misnaming in order to reclaim the relationship between fathers and daughters within this social matrix for a quite different structure of cultural fictions . . . . ‘Sapphire’ enacts her ‘Old Man’ in drag, just as her ‘Old Man’ becomes ‘Sapphire’ in outrageous caricature.” See Spillers, 204 (my emphasis).

20. “The colonial world is a Manichaean world . . . . Sometimes this Manichaeanism reaches its logical conclusion and dehumanizes the colonized subject. In plain talk, he is reduced to the state of an animal. And consequently, when the colonist speaks of the colonized he uses zoological terms . . . . But the colonized, who immediately
grasp the intention of the colonist and the exact case being made against them, know instantly what he is thinking. The colonized . . . roar with laughter every time they hear themselves called an animal by the other. For they know they are not animals. And at the very moment when they discover their humanity, they begin to sharpen their weapons to secure its victory.” See Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 6–8 (my emphasis).

21. “But I would make a distinction in the case between “body” and “flesh” and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the “body” there is the “flesh,” that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of iconography.” Spillers, 206.

22. “When the wicked, even mine enemies and my foes, came upon me to eat up my flesh, they stumbled and fell.” See Psalms 27:2, King James Version (my emphasis).

23. “[T]hat the African female, in both indigenous African cultures and in what becomes her “home,” performed tasks of hard physical labor—so much so that the quintessential “slave” is not a male, but a female—we wonder at the seeming docility of the subject, granting her a ‘feminization’ that enslavement kept at bay.” See Spillers, 215.


25. “[W]e observe males looking at other males, as ‘female’ is subsumed here under the general category of estrangement. Few places in these excerpts carve out a distinctive female space.” Ibid., 212.


27. “Predetermined actions are known before the performance begins, represented to the performer as a notated score. . . . Even within a traditional performer’s score, however, there are many indeterminate elements open to interpretation (such as subtleties of intonation, timing, phrasing, and articulation). Thus, indeterminacy exists on several levels, based on the ability to predict the final outcome of a performance. . . . Improvisational processes have a high degree of indeterminacy since musical features are not precisely fixed or determined in advance.” See Todd Winkler, Composing Interactive Music (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 28–29.

28. Lorde, Zami, 256.