SO! Reads: Alexis McGee's From Blues To Beyoncé: A Century of Black Women's Generational Sonic Rhetorics

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Abstract

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Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Black Studies, Book Review, Capitalism, Cultural Studies



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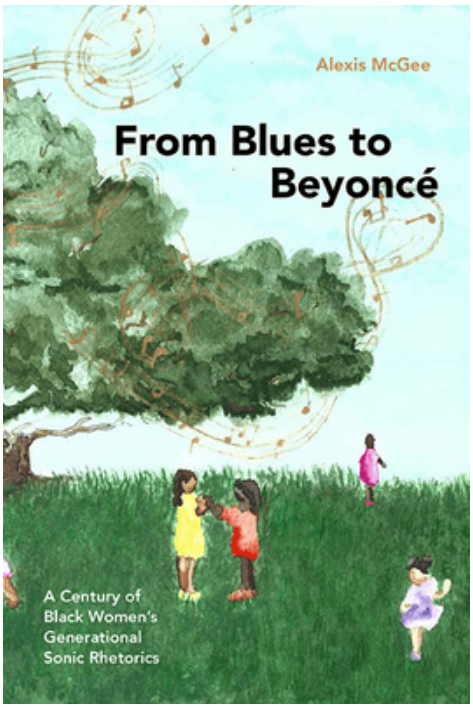


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From Blues To Beyoncé: A Century of Black Women's Generational Sonic Rhetorics (SUNY Press, 2024) by Alexis McGee explores Black women's creative labor and cultural production. The book offers a searing critique of both record industry exploitation and sound studies' white gaze. By focusing on quotidian engagement with sound, McG**e**e speaks simultaneously to linguists, rhetoricians, and ethnomusicologists, demonstrating how each discipline has overlooked Black women's fundamental contributions to our understanding of language and cultural expression. This is not merely an additive project seeking inclusion within existing frameworks, but rather a fundamental reconceptualization of how we study Black women's sounds.

McGee, currently Associate Professor at the University of British Columbia's School of Journalism, Writing, and Media, mobilizes her training in linguistics, rhetoric, and composition to analyze everyday communicative practices and generational knowledge systems passed down between Black women. McGee joins other recent texts such as Earl Brooks's *On Rhetoric and Black Music* (2024) in critical conversations around "sonic rhetoric." *In From Blues to Beyoncé*, McGee theorizes sonic rhetoric as a collection of cultural technologies for storytelling that "act as methods of communicating knowledge that can be used to persuade or inform (younger) generations about topics like survival, liberation, and care" (6). Examining artists from the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries through personal experience, archival material, biographies, interviews, and popular media, McGee demonstrates the critical necessity of taking seriously the generational cultural

knowledge embedded in Black women's creative practices within an anti-Black and misogynist world.



At its core, the book introduces "sonic sharecropping" as a term that illuminates the lopsided relationship between Black women creatives (tenants), their sonic and musical creations (crops), and wealthier, more powerful recording industry players (landlords, music labels, copyright holders). The sharecropping metaphor reveals how the music industry extracts value from Black women's cultural labor while denying them ownership and fair compensation. McGee further develops the concept of "audibility of advice" to name the intergenerational mentorship and fugitive pedagogy that Black women practice as they navigate this exploitative system—showing how even the transmission of survival knowledge between generations becomes entangled in the same structures designed to profit from Black women's creative work.

The book's chapters traverse an impressive range of cultural moments. Opening with Cardi B's attempted trademark of "okurrr," McGee demonstrates how legal and social structures systematically prevent Black women from securing intellectual property rights over cultural innovations that white industry executives appropriate without restriction.



https://youtu.be/JZPkCntVNSo

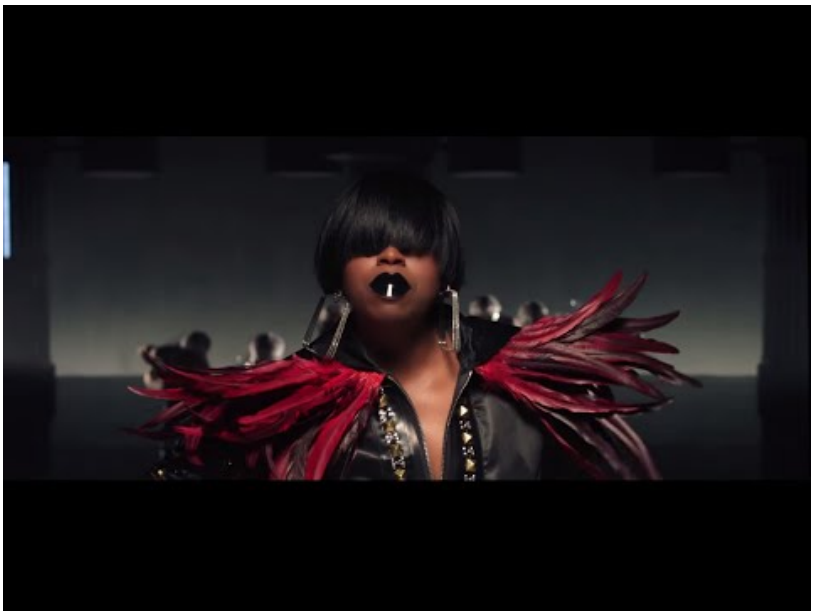
This contemporary case illuminates sonic sharecropping: Black women are expected to create cultural property that record labels then own and sell back to them. McGee then traces these dynamics historically, analyzing business practices of major labels like Atlantic Records. By drawing parallels between sharecropping contracts and recording agreements, the analysis reveals how the music industry has historically relied on discretionary ethical conduct by executives rather than equitable contractual structures, perpetuating exploitative relationships reminiscent of post-Reconstruction economic arrangements.

In what is perhaps the book's most compelling chapter, McGee examines successive performances of "Strange Fruit," tracing how Nina Simone and later artists like Missy Elliott and Janelle Monáe have reinterpreted Billie Holiday's haunting meditation on lynching.



https://youtu.be/649wWWkW_1o

McGee builds on Amiri Baraka's concept of the "changing same", to show that antiblackness persists throughout time though it changes form. McGee demonstrates how Black women performers resist being treated as interchangeable vessels for Black cultural expression. Rather than presenting generic renditions, each artist asserts her distinctive voice and perspective that reiterates the enduring violence perpetuated against Black bodies.



https://youtu.be/TwyPsUd9LAk

Each performance carries its own rhetorical power while participating in "sankofarration," a neologism from artist, writer, and media studies professor John Jennings that combines "sankofa" (a West African concept symbolizing learning from the past to move forward) with "narration" to describe a rhetorical worldview premised on understanding time as cyclical rather than linear. Sankofarration positions past and future as interconnected forces that actively shape the present. Crucially, McGee connects Lawrence Beitler's commercial sale of lynching photographs (depicting the hanged bodies of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith) to the visual and sonic rhetorical devices in these musical works. Through this framework, Black women artists transform historical trauma into ongoing political commentary and visions for future liberation. Black women's creative work, she argues, consistently foregrounds documented histories of racial violence alongside the willful ignorance that upholds white supremacy and patriarchy. By listening critically to Black women's sonic rhetorics, we can access pathways toward collective liberation.



This is a still from Janelle Monae's Emotion picture for her song, "Take A Byte" from 2018's Dirty Computer. Here is the link where you can watch this section of the film: https://youtu.be/jdH2Sy-BlNE?t=766

Despite the book's title, McGee's engagement with Beyoncé focuses narrowly on the lemon-to-lemonade metaphor in the album, *Lemonade*. Her analysis of other Black women artists, however, anticipated critiques later directed at *Cowboy Carter*, highlighting a double standard: as a Black woman, Beyoncé faces moral scrutiny for engaging with country music—positioned as both capitalist enterprise and white cultural property—while white and male artists have participated in the same commercial structures for centuries without comparable ethical condemnation.



https://youtu.be/fpxHAiAzH4Y

This defense raises the book's most provocative question, one McGee gestures toward but leaves unresolved: if the inequitable standards applied to Black women artists are symptoms of a fundamentally exploitative system, what would liberation from that system actually entail? Does it require dismantling existing structures of cultural ownership and profit, or can it be achieved through expanded access and recognition within them?

While McGee does not directly engage Matthew Morrison's recent work *Blacksound: Making Race and Popular Music in the United States*, her analysis clearly converses with his examination of how Black cultural products have been reproduced for white consumption, particularly through the ongoing afterlives of blackface minstrelsy. McGee's focus on Black women specifically adds crucial gender analysis to ongoing scholarly conversations about racial capitalism and cultural appropriation.

McGee acknowledges that capitalism itself, rather than Black women's participation in it, constitutes the fundamental problem. However, the analysis stops short of fully theorizing alternatives to existing structures of Western sound production and commodification. Readers familiar with Sylvia Wynter's insistence on distinguishing the map from the territory, or Audre Lorde's warning that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," may desire more sustained engagement with radical alternatives and additional tool building necessary for Black liberation from existing antiblack social and political structures. What might Black women's sonic practices look like in anticapitalist frameworks of collective ownership and exchange? How might Black femme and queer performances expand or complicate these intergenerational transmissions of knowledge? How might Black women's intergenerational knowledge systems point toward alternative epistemologies that refuse the terms of racial capitalism altogether?



Janelle Monae on the Dirty Computer Tour at Madison Square Garden in 2018 by Flickr User Raph_PH. License: CC BY 2.0

This theoretical restraint appears strategic rather than accidental. *From Blues to Beyoncé* navigates carefully between colleagues unfamiliar with Black feminist and womanist theory, who require accessible entry points, and specialists seeking new takes on traversing multiple

disciplines at once. In threading this needle, McGee prioritizes disciplinary bridge-building before radical dismantling of capitalist structures and academic knowledge production systems.

These limitations notwithstanding, the book represents an essential contribution to multiple fields. It insists that scholars of sound studies, rhetoric, and Black feminist thought must engage one another—that these conversations can no longer proceed in isolation. Methodologically, it offers both theoretical sophistication and practical analytical tools, making it intellectually substantive for non-specialists while providing specialists a compelling model for interdisciplinary synthesis. Most importantly, McGee demonstrates that we cannot understand American culture, sound, or rhetoric without recognizing Black women's voices as foundational rather than supplementary.

This book transforms its disciplines by interrogating their foundational assumptions, asking us not simply to include Black women in sound studies, but to recognize how their systematic exclusion has rendered the entire field epistemologically incomplete. In raising these questions, even without fully resolving them, McGee provides both rigorous foundation and invitation to continue the work.

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Featured Image: Janelle Monae on the Dirty Computer Tour at Madison Square Garden in 2018 by Flickr User Raph_PH. License: CC BY 2.0

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