

# Appropriation as Appreciation: Afrocentric Testifying in the Discourse of Teena Marie

CARLOS D. MORRISON AND JACQUELINE ALLEN TRIMBLE

One of the major debates or controversies in the Black<sup>1</sup> popular sphere concerns the role of White artists in Black culture. Some Black scholars, artists, journalists and writers argue that white recording stars such as Taylor Swift, Macklemore, Robin Thicke, Miley Cyrus, Justin Timberlake, and others appropriate Black idioms, practices, and nuances. The thinking is that these White artists have little understanding of or appreciation for Black history, political struggle, or condition but mimic various aspects of Black popular culture in their music and videos for profit and street credibility within the Black community. Moreover, many have suggested that radio stations and record companies are the real culprits behind the rise of White artists: “The gatekeepers of the radio stations and record companies who have less investment in Black people and culture are more likely to elevate an Iggy Azalea over an Azealia Banks” (qtd. in Thompson 99). The current debate has roots in a long history of cultural appropriation extending from minstrelsy to Pat Boone’s making millions singing covers of Little Richard’s “Tutti Frutti” and Fat’s Domino’s “Ain’t That a Shame” to Taylor Swift’s recent rendition of Earth Wind and Fire’s “September.” Undergirding each of these examples are artists and record

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<sup>1</sup> The terms “African American” and “Black” are used interchangeably throughout the article.

CARLOS D. MORRISON is Professor of Communication in the Department of Communication at Alabama State University. He received a Ph.D. in Intercultural Communication and African American Communication from the Kathy Hughes’ School of Communication at Howard University in Washington, D.C. Dr. Morrison teaches courses in both Communication Studies and Mass Communications. His research area focuses Black popular culture and African American rhetoric. He can be reached at [cdmorrison@alasu.edu](mailto:cdmorrison@alasu.edu).

JACQUELINE ALLEN TRIMBLE is Professor of English and chairs the Department of Languages and Literatures at Alabama State University. A Cave Canem Fellow and an Alabama State Council on the Arts Literary Fellow, her poetry has appeared in *The Louisville Review*, *The Offing*, and *Poet Lore*. A recent essay, “A Woman Explains How Learning Poetry is Poetry and Not Magic Made Her a Poet” appears in *Southern Writers on Writing*. Her other work is online, in journals, and in anthologies. *American Happiness*, her debut collection, won the 2016 Balcones Poetry Prize. She can be reached at [jtrimble@alasu.edu](mailto:jtrimble@alasu.edu).

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companies making money off of Black creativity, often with little benefit to Black artists.

Yet, is it fair to suggest that most (which is often how the discussion is framed) White artists who embrace Black cultural idioms, practices, and nuances care very little about Black people and love Black culture for profit only? Is this true of artists such as Christina Aguilera, Hall and Oates, Joss Stone, and Lisa Stansfield? The Black community often claims to know the difference between those who are appropriators and those who have an appreciation for the culture: “We’re pretty good at splitting up who is genuine” (qtd. in Thompson 99). Are we? This line between appreciation and appropriation was the source of criticism leveled at Latino Bruno Mars’s 2018 Grammy win in the R&B category. The trepidation of encroachment in many critics’ displeasure for that win shares a fear with the speaker in Langston Hughes’s “Note on Commercial Theatre”:

You’ve taken my blues and gone—  
 You sing ’em on Broadway  
 And you sing ’em in Hollywood Bowl,  
 And you mixed ’em up with symphonies  
 And you fixed ’em  
 So they don’t sound like me.

Yep, you done taken my blues and gone. (215-16)

Black creativity often has been and continues to be a response to oppression, erasure, and pain. Black music—from the spirituals, which functioned as coded messages, laments, and sources of comfort, to Hip Hop, which expressed the anger of Black youth and deconstructed White power structures—is resistance against the erasure and the inferioritizing of Black people. It has been and continues to be a way to own our spaces, our bodies, and our history. How, then, can it be desirable for this art form with a legacy rooted in the specific struggle of Black people to be co-opted by people who do not share the history, the struggle, or the pain out of which much of this music arises? Culture, however, is a fluid thing, and though bell hooks astutely observes that cultural appropriation is likely a means to mitigate Black resistance while evoking nostalgia for a past in which White supremacy was comfortably and overtly asserted (26), is it not possible for an artist outside the community to produce music within genres identified as Black who appreciates, rather than merely appropriates?

In a 2015 *Ebony* magazine article on the misappropriation of Black culture, illustrator Gluekit presented a visual collage of White recording artists, which

included Iggy Azalea, Van Morrison, Robin Thicke, Miley Cyrus, and others. In the picture, Teena Marie appears next to Elvis Presley. Are we to infer, then, that like Elvis, Teena Marie has taken Black music and made it her own, yet remained indifferent, at best, to Black people? This essay argues that while profit and street credibility drive appropriation of Black culture by many artists, Teena Marie is an exception. To do so, we will situate Teena Marie's discourse via her music lyrics, public statements, and interviews firmly within a Black cultural space to reconfigure appropriation as appreciation via Teena Marie as a case study. First, we will catalog Teena Marie's production as an artist to illustrate her decades-long commitment to Black musical forms and her acceptance within the Black community. Then, relying on Molefi Asante's notion of location as method, we will reveal an Afrocentric space in the discourse of Teena Marie, thus examining the way in which her rhetoric testifies to and affirms Black cultural space. Finally, we will conclude with a discussion on appropriation and make suggestions for future study.

### In the Beginning: Mary Christine Brockert

One of the most successful White female R&B singers, instrumentalists, songwriters and producers was Mary Christine Brockert, better known as Teena Marie. Also called "Lady T" by her fans, Teena Marie was born in Venice, California, in 1956 and grew up in a predominantly Black West Los Angeles neighborhood called "Venice Harlem." As a result, she was very comfortable living around and interacting with African Americans. Teena Marie recalls how growing up in a predominantly Black neighborhood affected her: "I had a lot of black friends and I learned a lot about blacks and black music... All the kids used to call me Off White because I acted sort of black and I was comfortable with the black kids" (qtd. in Perrone 7). Perhaps influenced by this environment, Teena Marie, in her early teens, formed her own R&B band. Her musical tastes were shaped by the Motown Sound, particularly by artists such as Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye who were on Motown's *Tamla* label. While her band was moderately successful, Teena Marie, more importantly, made the music world take notice of her voice.

In 1976, Teena Marie began her career in earnest at a Motown-affiliated Gordy label in Los Angeles, California. Though she worked with a variety of producers, no recordings were "green lit" by Berry Gordy and she was becoming frustrated until she caught the attention of singer, instrumentalist, and producer Rick James,

who, impressed with the alabaster-skinned artist with the powerful Black-sounding voice, produced her debut album entitled *Wild and Peaceful*. The album is significant because it was produced by James, gave Teena Marie her first top-ten hit single, "I'm a Sucker for Your Love," and allowed Motown to assess whether Black listeners would respond positively to a Black-sounding White artist. The record label was so uncertain about the response to having a White face on the album cover, the *Wild and Peaceful* sleeve featured a picture of a seascape instead of Teena Marie. Motown's public relations strategy created a "Who is that?" buzz around the new artist which made record sales soar. Teena Marie went on to grace the cover of several Motown albums which included hits such as 1980's *Lady T*, ("Behind The Groove"), *Irons in the Fire*, ("I Need Your Lovin," Teena Marie's first top-40 hit), and 1981's *It Must be Magic*, her first gold record. The album included such R&B hits as "Portuguese Love," "Square Biz," and the title track, "It Must be Magic." These songs established Teena Marie as an R&B artist who could produce danceable hit records for Motown's Black audience.

However, while Teena Marie was successful, she wanted more control over her musical destiny and her money. As a result, she entered a contractual dispute over the payment of royalties and the release of new material. Pierre Perrone posits that "her desire to control her career led to conflicts with Gordy, who refused to release her from her contract, yet wouldn't sanction any more records by her either. This resulted in a legal case and an historical ruling that granted her freedom in 1982 and became known as the 'Brockert Initiative' after her real name" (3). The "Brockert Initiative" essentially dictates that a record company has to release new material from an artist if the record company is going to keep the artist under contract. Otherwise, the record company has to relinquish its legal control over the artist. After winning her legal battle against Motown, Teena Marie parted ways with the "Sound of Young America."

### Epic Records, the 1980s, and Teena Marie as R&B Balladeer

After leaving Motown, Teena Marie signed a recording deal with Epic, a Columbia Records subsidiary. It was at Epic Records that Teena Marie produced some of her most memorable work. Cultural critic Barry Walters claims that "Teena recorded most of her dance floor anthems while at Motown, but at Epic her ballads blossomed [with songs such as] 'Shadow Boxing,' 'Out On a Limb,' 'Dear Lover,' and 'Casanova Brown'" (9, 10). "Shadow Boxing," "Dear Lover," and "Casanova

Brown” were not only big hits for Teena Marie on her first album for Epic entitled *Robbery* in 1982, but, also, are some of her most powerfully, soulful R&B ballads, suggesting that, though she had left Motown behind, her sound and relationship to Black music were not just superficial trappings but an essential part of her identity. The mid-1980s continued to be good for Marie. In 1984, *Starchild*, her biggest selling album with Epic Records, produced two top-selling hits for Teena: “Lovergirl,” and “Out on a Limb.” “Lovergirl,” which was in heavy rotation at R&B radio stations throughout the country, peaked at #4 on *Billboard* in March 1985. The album also included a tribute to one of Teena Marie’s heroes, R&B singer Marvin Gaye, in a song entitled “My Dear Mr. Gaye.” In “Out on a Limb,” Teena Marie finds herself loving a man whom she cannot let go. She laments that she does not understand his hold over her (“Baby, baby, baby, it’s a mystery”) and that whatever he has done to her has her “spinning around” and feeling “insecure.” Because she is powerless to resist him, she finds herself “giving in to [him] again.” The vulnerability in these words recalls the plaintive lyrics of Black singers like Nina Simone, Billie Holliday, Etta James, and many others who love in spite of their better judgment and to their own detriment. Perhaps for this reason, “Out on a Limb” resonated most with her Black audience, which found the emotion believable and familiar.

In 1986, Teena Marie released *Emerald City*, an experimental mixture of rock and funk. While not a commercial success as Teena Marie’s previous albums, it is significant as a cult classic and stands as her only concept album: “On wax, Marie cast *Emerald City* as a modern city gripped in perpetual night, its green glow eerie, hypnotic and dangerous” (*QH* 2). As a concept, *Emerald City*, which includes “Emerald City,” “Once is Not Enough,” and “Shangri-La,” chronicles Pity’s (Teena Marie’s alter ego) quest to find an emerald stone that will make her turn green since she has lived her life as all of the other colors. Notably, the album’s “You So Heavy” included a guitar solo by the late blues/rock guitarist Stevie Ray Vaughn. As a result, music critic Chuck Eddy ranks *Emerald City* “#9 in *Stairway to Hell*,” a catalog of ‘The 500 Best Heavy Metal Albums in the Universe,’ even though there’s nothing conventionally heavy metal-ish about it” (Walters 10). In addition, “You So Heavy,” like “Casanova Brown,” was also a tribute to her mentor, Rick James, harkening back to her musical roots.

In 1988, Teena Marie decided to return to R&B with the release of *Naked to the World*. While some might argue this return was precipitated by the commercial response to *The Emerald City*, we suggest that she returned to the category not only

because of previous financial success but also because this was her musical bailiwick. This idea is corroborated by the Black audience's response to "Ooo La La La," one of the album's songs, which resonated with her African American audience so well that it went #1 on *Billboard's* Hot Black Singles chart. While "Oh, La La" was her only #1 single, other notable songs that saw air play included "Trick Bag" and the title song "Naked to the World."

### Hip Hop, the 1990's and Beyond

Due to poor record sales and a shift in musical tastes from R&B to rap, Teena Marie's final album produced with Epic in 1990 was *Ivory*, which included "If I Were a Bell" and "Here's Looking at You." "If I Were a Bell" went to #8 on the R&B charts. In the song, Teena Marie proclaims proudly her desire to tell everyone about her one and only lover and that "it's wonderful," yet, it was clear at the beginning of the new decade that Black listeners were not feeling too "wonderful" about hearing R&B ballads from the "Ivory Queen of Soul." The bell was ringing but it was for hip-hop culture now. Rap music dominated the musical landscape in the Black community. "New Jack Swing" was in full effect. Groups such as Naughty by Nature, Soul II Soul, Salt N Pepper, and Public Enemy were the rage, and R&B seemed old-fashioned and out of touch with the realities of the urban youth culture. However, despite not being signed to a major record label or having any major hit records on 1994's *Passion Play* (released on independent label, Sarai Records) or 1999's *Black Rain* (promotional pressing only), Teena Marie benefitted from hip-hop culture. Perrone posits that "throughout the '90s, many rap and hip-hop acts sampled classic Marie tracks such as 'Square Biz' and, when she made *La Dona* in 2004 for Cash Money Records, she could call on guests like Common, Lady Levi and MC Lyte, as well as [Rick] James and the soul singer Gerald Levert . . . [for collaborations] respectively" (4).

After being away from the music industry for ten years raising her daughter Alia Rose and occasionally performing—sometimes with her daughter who she exposed to the business of Black music as well (Brown 2), Teena Marie signed with hip-hop label Cash Money Records. This blending of hip-hop overtures and R&B birthed *La Dona* in 2004, Teena Marie's eleventh album. *La Dona* earned gold record status and the album rocketed to the #3 spot on *Billboard*. Moreover, it was the song "I'm Still in Love" that propelled the album forward making *La Dona* the top charting album of Marie's recording career. "Lady Tee" was later nominated

for Best Female R&B vocals for “I’m Still in Love” at the 2005 Grammy Awards. The success of *La Dona* led to the 2006 follow-up *Sapphire*. The album had a heavy influence of R&B, soul, and hip-hop. The album featured collaborations with Smokey Robinson, Gerald Albright, George Duke, rapper Kurupt, and Teena Marie’s daughter, Alia Rose. Featured songs included “You Blow Me Away,” which was another tribute to Rick James, “Ooh Wee,” and “Cruise Control.” Henderson claims that “though both *La Dona* and *Sapphire* peaked at number three on the R&B/Hip-Hop Albums chart, [Teena Marie] switched to Stax for her next album, 2009’s *Congo Square*” (2).

Now signed with Stax/Concord Records, Teena Marie released her most ambitious recording, *Congo Square* in 2009. While the album includes signature R&B and funk tunes, it also has a strong jazz influence. Teena Marie said that she named the album in honor of the rich musical tradition associated with Congo Square in New Orleans, Louisiana. In “Congo Square,” Teena Marie sings a roll call of Black artists, old and new, who have performed in that space—Lester Young, Erika Badu, Louis Armstrong, Nancy Wilson, Jill Scott, Ella Fitzgerald—applauding their legacy and their resilience. As writer Gail Mitchell notes in, “‘Congo Square,’ Marie pays tribute to artists who inspired her, ranging from Sarah Vaughan and Curtis Mayfield to Marvin Gaye and Billie Holiday. The album borrows its title from a section in New Orleans’ French Quarter where slaves were allowed to wear their fancy clothes to dance and sing on Sunday” (2). In addition to “Congo Square,” the album included “Can’t Last a Day,” a duet with Faith Evans, “Ear Candy,” and “Ms. Coretta,” which was a tribute to Mrs. Coretta Scott King.

Teena Marie’s jazz influenced album proved to be a hit with her audience. *Congo Square* soared to the Top 20 of *Billboard*’s Top 200 chart. “Can’t Last a Day” made the Top 10 in the R&B category. *Congo Square* illustrates an important feature of Teena Marie’s career as an artist who consistently sang, identified with, and paid tribute to Black music and performers. She did not dabble, slipping into the R&B vernacular from time to time, but rather she built her career on ballads, funk, and blending various genres associated with Black culture. Even her foray into rock was mitigated by funk and short-lived at that. Furthermore, Black audiences accepted the White woman with a Black voice as one of their own and made her a star from the beginning, Teena Marie’s entry into the music business was an enigma. Fans frequently asked “Who is this petite White woman who sounds Black” and “How is she so immersed in African American culture”? To

answer these questions, we must locate Teena Marie in Black cultural spaces. To do so, we will look to Molefi Asante's notion of location as a method of analysis.

### Asante's Location as Method

To locate Teena Marie in a Black cultural space and thus, within Black popular culture, we will rely on Molefi Asante's thinking about location, text, and Afrocentricity. In his article "Locating a Text: Implications of Afrocentric Theory," Asante posits that scholars have at their disposal an "Afrocentric viewpoint on texts" and do not have to rely on "the staid domains of an encapsulated theory" (Asante, *Locating a Text* 1). Furthermore, Asante argues that "Afrocentric theory. . . establishes two fundamental realities in situating a text: location and dislocation. The serious textual reader is able to locate a text by certain symbolic boundaries and iconic signposts offered from within the text itself. However, much like any traveler, the reader's [or recording artist's] location is also important in order to determine the exact location of the text" (1).

Asante claims that there are three critical elements associated with location. These elements are language, attitude, and direction (Asante, *Locating a Text* 3-4). In locating a text, it is important for the critic to identify the language in the text and/or the language used by the artist such as Teena Marie. This identification of language may take the form of "grammatical rule, nuances, words and deep systems" in the text under study (3). These linguistic nuances become "markers" or "residue" of the cultural identity of the artist and, thus, tell us about the thinking of the writer or artist and where he or she is located. Asante posits that "my attempt is always to locate a situation, an event, [or] an author. Location tells you where someone is, that is, where they are standing. It may not tell you where they are heading, but you do know where they are given certain markers of identity" (Asante, *Malcolm X as Cultural Hero* 100). So, if one sees "a reference to Africans as primitives or to Native Americans as 'a bunch of wild Indians' or Latinos as 'greasy,' then one knows the cultural address of the author" (Asante, *Locating a Text* 6). Relocation, on the other hand, involves the subject (Teena Marie) occupying a space not of her choosing. Here, Teena Marie's reality is defined by some other entity such as the dominant culture.

### Teena Marie and the Location of a Black Identity

Molefi Asante posits that Afrocentricity is the “placing of African ideas at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior (Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* 2). An important African concept that situates Teena Marie within a Black cultural space is the fact that she grew up as a member of an African American collective known as Venice Harlem. As a member of this predominantly Black neighborhood, Christine Brockert, aka Teena Marie, interacted and communed with other members of the Black community—not as an outsider but as a member of the village. No doubt, her multi-ethnic background of Portuguese, Italian, Irish, and Native American ancestry gave her a broader, holistic understanding of herself as “other.” As we suggested earlier in the essay, Teena Marie had numerous Black friends who taught her about Black culture and Black music. Teena Marie even appeared on an episode of *Soul Train*. These experiences place her within a Black cultural space.

Teena Marie also experienced the “burden of Blackness,” to borrow from writer and cultural critic Greg Tate, when she was called derogatory and racist names such as “off white” and “nigger lover” by Whites observing her friendships with Black people and her embracing of Black culture. These “non-villagers” sought to mark Teena Marie’s identity and her reality by relocating her to a space of inferiority and degradation. Teena Marie notes, “I can remember being chased home a couple of times and being called nigger lover. I was only 13 or 14, and to a young mind, that’s heartbreaking. I can remember going in my house and sitting in my room and crying” (qtd. in Perrone 7). Nevertheless, she regained control of her identity by changing her name at the age of seventeen from Christine Brockert to Teena Marie as her interest in pursuing a recording contract in R&B continued with Motown. The name change serves as a marker of African American culture because (1) the *spelling* of the name “Teena Marie” connected her to a Black cultural space while “Christine Brockert” associated her with a White cultural space; (2) the name “Teena Marie” also connected her to the Motown label while cloaking her Whiteness in darkness on her debut album *Wild and Peaceful*; and (3) the name “Teena Marie” helped her audience identify with her Black identity via her soulful singing which, like her name, is the embodiment of the African concept called *nommo*. Carlos D. Morrison and Ronald L. Jackson II suggest that “from an Afrocentric perspective, *nommo* serves as the foundation for the creation of reality; it possesses the magical and generative power of the word manifested in the naming process. . . Naming is a powerful phenomenon of self-definition” (19-20).

In addition to the name “Teena Marie” being a marker of a Black identity, Teena Marie had a series of nicknames that further identified her with African American culture. In the song “Square Biz” from the *It Must be Magic* album, Teena Marie chronicles the litany of names she has been called: Casper, Shorty, Lil’ Bit, and even Vanilla Child. However, she dismisses these names that are meant to diminish her by saying not only do they not determine who she is but also that they cannot deter her because they don’t “cramp [her] style.” Asante claims that nicknames, like the ones above, “serve as markers of the African presence in the ‘sounding sense’ of black America. Almost all young men and women receive nicknames at an early age, and these names are designatory, referring to one’s physical appearance [as in Teena Marie’s case] . . . character . . . or relation” (Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* 85). Though racially White, it is clear Teena Marie identified with Black culture. From changing her name to growing up in a Black neighborhood to appearing on *Soul Train* to feeling the burden of racism, Teena Marie’s lived experiences were within a Black cultural space. Further, Teena Marie’s diction was rooted in an attitude of Blackness that she willingly embraced. Asante posits that “attitude refers to a predisposition to respond in a characteristic manner to some situation, value, idea, object, person, or group of persons. The writer [or artist] signals his or her location by attitude towards certain ideas, persons, or objects. Thus, the critic in pursuit of the precise location of the author [or singer] can determine from the [artist’s] characteristics or persistent response to certain things where the writer [or artist] is located” (Asante, *Locating a Text* 4).

One of the first areas where one discerns Teena Marie’s Afrocentric attitude is in her self-identification. Teena Marie once said, “Overall my race hasn’t been a problem. I’m a Black artist with White skin. At the end of the day you have to sing what’s in your own soul” (qtd. in Coates 1). In this profound statement, Teena Marie acknowledges that the music she sings and loves is a production of the culture she has embraced. Teena Marie understood that Black music was in her soul, and, in embracing it, she had to give voice to what was in her soul by wielding *nommo*, the magical power of the word made manifest in her soulful singing. In so doing, Teena Marie became a part of a continuum of African American singers. “She [Teena Marie] was not simply in the George Michael ‘Father Figure’ category, she was of that Chaka Khan/Freddie Jackson/Jeffrey Osborne/Denise Williams stamp. You didn’t hear Teena Marie and say, ‘I thought she was black,’ you said, ‘No, seriously, I’m sure she’s black’” (Coates 1). *Los Angeles Times* journalist Gerrick Kennedy further solidifies the point by saying that, “unlike some rap purists

who downplayed Eminem as he was rising, Marie made it impossible to question her authenticity. She sang with such passion, conviction and blues that she was often labeled ‘a black girl trapped in a white woman’s body’” (2).

Another area where one discerns Teena Marie’s Afrocentric thinking is in her love for Black history and Black musical icons. As we suggested earlier, Teena Marie wrote several songs that paid homage her mentor, friend and singing partner, Rick James. On her final album, *Congo Square*, Teena Marie dedicates the song “The Pressure” to James. In reflecting on James, Teena Marie says “[Rick James] was my musical soulmate and I think it’s kinda obvious through those records. . . I think God places certain people together to make magic and that’s what the combination of Rick and Teena did” [on the song, “Fire and Desire,” for example] (qtd. in Tyler 8). Teena Marie’s “My Dear Mr. Gaye” on the *Starchild* album also paid homage to the musical legend, Marvin Gaye. Teena Marie notes her proclivity for the Black sound and the way it shaped her imagination: “Each song I come up with began to sound like the style of some favorite artist of mine from the past, Curtis Mayfield and Marvin Gaye, Billie Holliday, the old Chicago soul of The Emotions and the new Chicago vibe of Kanye West. Ice Cube’s bumpin’ trunk vibe and, of course Rick James” (qtd. in Perrone 7). In “Congo Square,” Teena Marie demonstrates an understanding of the history of African American music and spaces when she notes, “Congo Square is in New Orleans and . . . in slavery times the slaves were allowed to go dance and sing on Sundays...I thought about Congo Square, I thought about the great jazz era-people like Louis Armstrong, who is the father of Jazz and I thought about Billie Holliday (qtd. in Tyler 6). Teena Marie’s thinking reflected an Afrocentric disposition. It was a disposition geared towards African American history and culture with an emphasis on Black music. Teena Marie was influenced by Black music artists such as Rick James, Marvin Gaye, and Smokey Robinson. Moreover, she understood the importance of Black historical figures like Coretta Scott King and Black historical locations like Congo Square, as evidenced by the appearance of these cultural touchstones in her music.

In addition to language and attitude, direction is the third element that assists the critic in locating an author or artist’s text. Asante defines direction as “the line along which the author’s sentiments, themes, and interests [lie] with reference to the point at which they are aimed” (Asante, *Locating a Text* 6). Here the critic attempts to surmise the “point at which they are aimed” or the objective through identification symbols: “One is able to identify. . . [the objective] by the symbols which occur in the text. For example, a writer [or artist] who uses Ebonics, African

American language, in his or her works demonstrates [an objective] along the lines of Afrocentric space” (6). There are elements related to African-American communication that “push” Teena Marie’s rhetoric in the direction of an Afrocentric space. These three elements are call-response, *nommo*, and testifying. We will now examine a specific text by Teena Marie, “Fire and Desire,” through the lens of these concepts.

### Call-Response, *Nommo*, and Testifyin in “Fire and Desire”

Sociolinguist Geneva Smitherman defines call-response as the “spontaneous verbal and nonverbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all the speaker’s statements (“calls”) are punctuated by expressions (“responses”) from the listeners” (104). One of Teena Marie and Rick James’s most memorable and enduring songs is “Fire and Desire.” The song is about two previous lovers who reminisce about their defunct relationship. Rick James calls and Teena Marie responds as they chronicle the ups and downs of a tempestuous union, its warmth and coldness, and its solidarity and disconnection. While both lovers (James and Teena Marie) had “played the field” and had a good time doing it, by the end of their exchange, they come to the same conclusion: the relationship was rooted in “fire and desire” and its dissolution or disharmony could be blamed on both of them. In the exchange during this song, James and Teena Marie are immersed in a communicative dynamic that is indicative of the African Cosmology. Smitherman suggests that “the traditional African world view conceptualizes a cosmos which is an interacting, interdependent, balanced force field...Consequently, communication takes on an interactive, interdependent nature” (108). Given that James and Teena Marie’s discourse was rooted in blame and disunity, their communicative interaction demonstrated a “desire” to move in the direction of unity and harmony, which is the aim of Afrocentric discourse and the foundation of African cosmology. “Thus, call-response seeks to synthesize speakers and listeners in a unified movement” towards unity and harmony (Smitherman 108). James and Teena Marie achieved this objective through the powerful nature of their interactive discourse.

As suggested earlier, *nommo* is the generative power of the word. It is the notion that the spoken word, in the hands of the right rhetor, has transformative power. Thus, *nommo* is grounded in the African oral tradition where the village griot uses the power of orality to tell stories of epic battles or oral histories of the tribe. Teena Marie, like Rick James, was a griot, steeped in African American history and

culture, who welded the power of *nommo* to move the African American masses. The overwhelmingly positive response to her music by the Black community is testament to her power to tell stories with which the audience could identify emotionally. When Teena Marie sings in “Fire and Desire” “You burned me, you burned me” or better yet, “Love them and leave them...That’s what I used to do,” she evokes the presence of *nommo*; her vocal expressiveness rises and falls evenly with her singing partner James bringing the Black listener into the discourse. When Teena Marie died, Black performer after performer noted the power of her influence on their own work, the beauty of her music, and her indescribable ability to move them with her voice and lyrics. Mary J. Blige remembers her as “a model and a muse,” and writes, “She inspired me vocally as a child. . . Her songs I sang in the mirror with a hair brush...Every girl that grew up in the hood, with her blasting through the windows, cars and radio waves can feel me...All of your music will live forever through me” and Alicia Keys describes “Fire and Desire,” in particular, as a “beautiful song” that “just [had] that THING!” (qtd. in Michaels). These Black artists and many others lamented the loss of a woman who had spoken their deepest feelings and with whom they felt a familiarity and a connection. When Blige notes “your music will live forever through me,” she is implying that Teena Marie has become a part of African American cultural heritage.

In addition to both call-response and *nommo*, testifying is another key concept present in Teena Marie’s discourse. Smitherman claims that testifying is “a ritualized form of black communication in which the speaker give verbal witness to the efficacy, truth and power of some experience in which all blacks have shared” (58). While Smitherman suggests that testifying is generally thought of within the context of the Black church, “testifyin can be done whenever anybody feels the spirit—it don’t have to be no special occasion....[When Teena Marie] talks about the greatness of her man and how he makes her feel . . .that’s testifyin too (58). In “Dear Lover,” Teena Marie writes a passionate letter to her lover who is on the verge of moving on from the relationship. She commands that he listen to her, telling him that she has “been wishing on the rings of Saturn” and otherwise “praying” to the universe to intercede on her behalf to sway her lover’s thinking. Teena Marie’s own thinking is very spiritual and very “deep and like Stevie [Wonder] and Marvin [Gaye], two of her obvious heroes—sometimes a bit spacey in the best way” (Walters 10). However, Teena Marie’s desire to hold onto love does not mean she is blind to the faults of her beloved. In “Cassanova Brown,” Teena Marie testifies to the trials and tribulations of falling in love with a playboy,

namely Rick James, and she notes that though his women were numerous, “he loves me only.” “Cassanova Brown” pays homage to James, who jump-started her career and with whom she had both a professional and personal relationship. Teena Marie observes, “Rick knew there were feelings in my heart and songs upon my lips. He didn’t say: ‘This is a white girl, I can’t produce her.’ Our relationship grew into something really beautiful” (Perrone 4). In both “Dear Lover and “Cassanova Brown,” Teena Marie testifies to the power of Black love. While “Dear Lover” speaks to the transformative nature of spirituality, “Cassanova Brown” speaks to the ideal of reciprocity being a transforming agent.

## Conclusion

Mary Christine Brockert, who became Teena Marie, was not the typical young, White girl growing up in Los Angeles, California. Born in Venice, California, Brockert grew up in Black West Los Angeles in a place commonly referred to as “Black Venice.” In this predominantly Black neighborhood, she became immersed in Black culture and Black music: an immersion that would later undergird her appreciation for the culture and provide the foundation upon which her sound and her music would be built. Further, Brockert’s early identification with Black people led other Whites to label her “off white” and call her a “nigger lover.” Clearly, many of her White peers no longer viewed her as White. Teena Marie’s love for Black music continued to grow. She became known in the community as a young woman who could sing, and her style of singing was molded and shaped by the R&B sound that permeated West Los Angeles at the time. Teena Marie was influenced by the Motown Sound and admired artists such as Smokey Robinson, Marvin Gaye, and Stevie Wonder. The influence of these artists, her unique sound, and her association with Motown along with changing her name catapulted Teena Marie into stardom and allowed her to connect with Black audiences who accepted her as one of their own.

To be sure, Teena Marie’s music reflects a wide range of Black cultural expression: traditional R&B love ballads, rapping call-response, *nommo*, “artist as storytelling griot,” and testifying. Though she was not Black, and, therefore, could be said to have appropriated Black culture, Teena Marie did so with appreciation, love, and care for the Black community. The evidence for this lies not only in her immersion in the community in her youth but also in her continued appeal and her acceptance by the community. In her last album, *Congo Square*, Teena Marie plays

tribute to such music greats as Louis Armstrong, Sarah Vaughn, Ella Fitzgerald, and Billie Holiday as well as to Congo Square itself in New Orleans and Coretta Scott King. Her music was such a part of the R&B playlist that Teena Marie was often sampled by rap and hip-hop groups. The African American community generally does not think of Teena Marie as an appropriator because, as one Black colleague pointed out to me, “Black folks *liked* Teena Marie.” As Barry Walters points out “other white R&B singers have been briefly accepted by black radio and fans. Teena is the only one to be totally embraced” (9). Ta-Nehisi Coates further suggests that “Teena Marie died with an eternal hood-pass. The term ‘blue-eyed soul’ is presently being affixed to her” (1). Even the spelling of her name connected to Black cultural identity allowing her to marginalize her Whiteness. Her attitude reflected Afrocentric thinking. It is clear from her lyrics and interviews that she not only used the Black musical tradition, but also that Teena Marie embraced and celebrated its importance.

If it is true that Teena Marie had a “hood-pass,” why was illustrator Gluekit’s picture of Teena Marie placed next to a picture of Elvis Presley in the *Ebony* magazine article? This gives the impression that, like Elvis, Teena Marie was an appropriator without appreciation. One explanation for the picture may be that Teena Marie is included just as an example of a White performer who sang Black music. The Black community aware of a history of cultural appropriation feels the need to police or to serve as gatekeepers of their cultural heritage, scrutinizing which White artists may be acceptable and which may not be. “Today, a performer’s sound and image are scrutinized for street credibility before making the playlist, white singers have vanished from the R&B charts and the rap groups have stopped sampling pop acts” (Walters 9).

While it is important for the Black community to serve as gatekeepers, the problem here is that many African Americans believe that no White artists should be singing R&B, or any other Black art forms, barring the way for a future Teena Marie. A history of White artists making money off the backs of Black creativity while Black artists were minimally compensated or not at all has added to the skepticism of Black cultural critics and audiences alike. Given the complications engendered by the commodification of Black culture, the power of White privilege, and the aforementioned long, unpleasant history, how are we to distinguish between appreciation and appropriation?

For future studies concerning the evaluation of “blue-eyed soul” artists, we recommend three fundamental questions to be addressed in the research moving

forward: (1) What does the White artist's background and experiences say about his or her connectedness to or care for the Black community; (2) In what way does Asante's notion of language, attitude, and direction concerning the White artist shed light on his or her location; and (3) Does the White artist "catch the burden," meaning does the White artist face humiliation and discomfort for taking on a Black cultural identity? These questions assess whether White artists risk as much as they benefit from their cultural appropriation or whether they are merely taking on the "cool" fashion of Blackness which may be discarded once the money has been made. Appreciation implies a lasting connection, one that is more than a passing embrace, and one not designed merely to inscribe White privilege.

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