

TRADITION VS. GRID

Danny Hayward on Simone White's "Dear Angel of Death"

The path of enlightenment is a winding one, where one area of inquiry can often morph into or give way to another. Author Simone White made the surprising transition from US-American legal philosophy to a practice of poetry and writing that explores issues of black culture and identity within that country. What is perhaps even more remarkable is the extent to which White succeeded in using such a specific area of academic interest as a springboard for such a wide-ranging project of personal and philosophical exploration, one that covers her own biography, political philosophy, and the role of music and its metaphors in forging black consciousness. Here, poet and author Danny Hayward reviews her new book, "Dear Angel of Death."

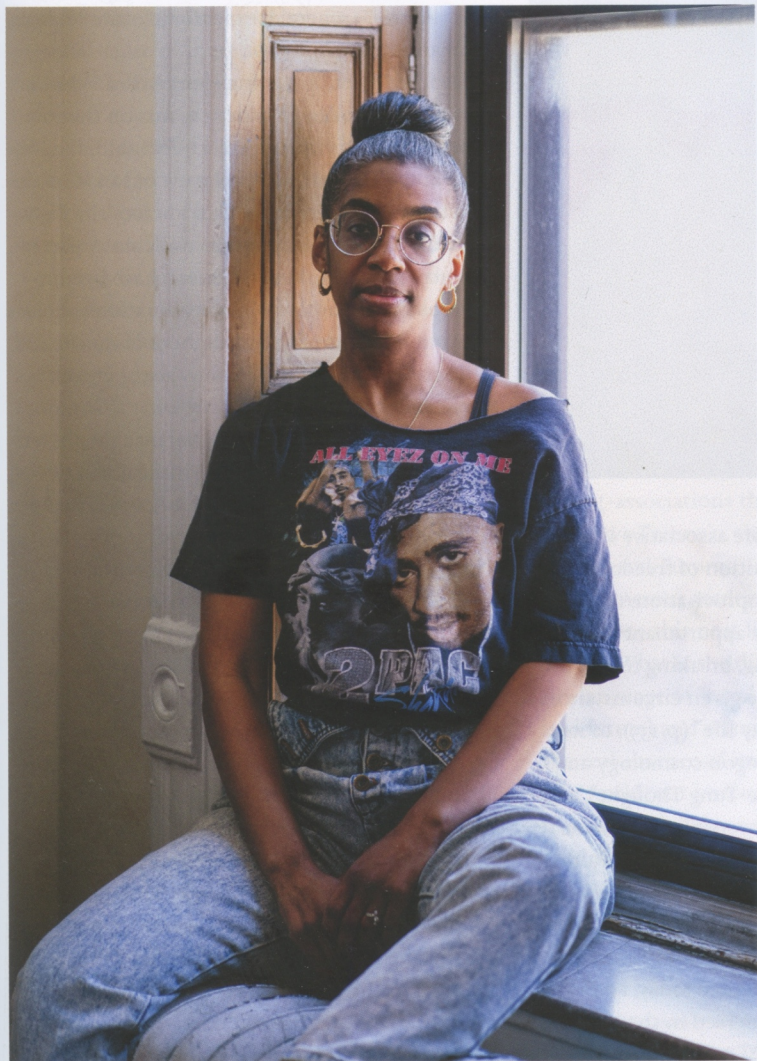
Simone White's *Dear Angel of Death* collects two sequences of poems and a long essay on black music and music criticism, and it takes its place in a longer project on contemporary US rap music that is at once an ongoing love poem to the form and to a particular (unnamed) person. It is, in an unconventional sense, an outsider art; also a latecomer art, a party-crasher art, and (in an even more unconventional sense) an insider art as well, composed in a language of blatantly pyrotechnical brilliance and occasional truculence by a poet who is in full control of her (and our) situation, whatever that might be.

White's poems and essay form a whole, and they share a set of related concerns with black life, new motherhood, the "Tradition" of black radical writing on music ("the Music"),¹ biscuits ("cookies"), the Atlanta rapper Future and the Californian rapper Vince Staples, "ceaseless negro apocalypse," mortality, R&B, and balloons. Occasionally, through the editorial cracks of the writing, traces appear of an earlier inquiry into US liberal legal philosophy and the tradition of US individualism represented by Ralph Waldo Emerson, the discontinuation of which bears

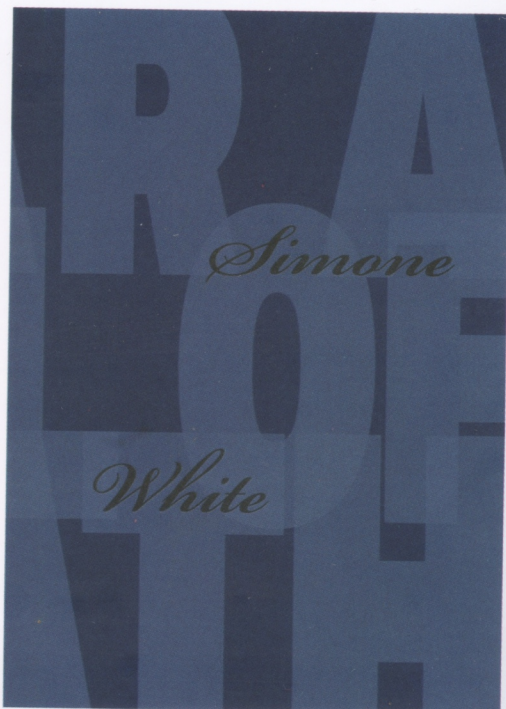
important responsibility for the deeply lyrical tone of the work now being presented.² White's ability to fully enter into a thought-world only to abruptly and lyrically reject it is of peculiar importance to her work, and this is also reproduced at the micro-level of her poems' and essay's arrangements, creating much of their atmosphere of living, breathing cognitive vitality and movement; the constant sense of a person fighting, as White herself says, to think "inside thinking formations that are still being built" (p.86). In this very limited but striking sense, her writing is reminiscent of that of Amiri Baraka, with whom she otherwise so consistently and brilliantly disagrees.

Politically, and as a woman writer, White is interested in the supposed connection of black music to black people's Freedom; which is to say that she is interested in the idea (or in the Tradition of asserting) that it is through the "theory" of black music that the theory of black freedom, or the movement to get free, is principally and (to use Baraka's term) classically expressed. She is "interested" in these ideas in the sense that she is skeptical of them (because they are the intellectual sustenance for a conversation about freedom conducted, until recently, mainly by black men) and also, I think, because she is not able to feel anything as intensely about the(ir) Music as she is about the claims that they rest on it, such that the asserted connection of black freedom to the Music (or to "playing and hearing") seems not to move this freedom closer but on the contrary to drive it further away.

It is perhaps obvious that this is at root a feeling about jazz. White's objection to the definition of black freedom through the language of the Music is (in necessarily crude terms) an objection to the definition of that freedom as jazz freedom.



Simone White, 2019



It is an objection to the entire associative life of the problem: to the definition of freedom in the compulsory idiom of improvisation; to its vernacular and discographic appurtenances; to its ideas of going out, ascending, breaking through, "Way Out West," "beyond the given circumstances and curtailments of everyday life" (p. 135); to its outer explorations in the Dogon cosmology and "Marxism-Leninism Mao Tse-Tung Thought"; and to all the silent slights and aversions that those particular freedoms might be taken to imply, on the other side of all their intoxicating yeses and cries of affirmation. And so her essay asks, What does it mean for this tradition to be foreclosed, to Simone White, to black people today, and, perhaps also, to anyone immersed in the black culture of the present (p. 87)? And since the Tradition is not only a tradition of performance, but also a political tradition – a complete and beguilingly "total" vision of the nature of black freedom in and against US capitalism and white supremacy in the central postwar decades of the

20th century – where does its foreclosure leave us, or anyone, today?

Before I try to get some elements of White's answer into focus, a few more words on the role of personal crisis in the project: As I said, the essay at the end of *Dear Angel* grew out of White's PhD thesis, submitted two years before the Ugly Duckling Presse book became available. A part of the project of that thesis seems to have been to attempt a move away from considerations of black freedom in terms of the metaphors of music, and to do so for some of the reasons just sketched out above. But it is not clear exactly what that movement would have been toward, because the project is interrupted by events that White herself described in an interview in the *LA Review of Books*:

"The essay itself develops through methods of poetic composition. You can't easily place it in American literary-critical history, although in some ways it's about American literary history. And by saying the dissertation 'exploded,' I mostly mean I started investigating new questions (I had been deeply engaged with Emerson as a philosopher moving around questions of individualism, and with legal philosopher Duncan Kennedy's work in relation to Emerson's). And I also mean that after I wrote those first two chapters, I got pregnant. I don't mean like I suddenly got full of lady magic. I mean I stayed flat on my back for a couple months. [...] Anyway I had some time to cogitate around what to do next, and decided that if I ever finished this dissertation, it would happen in some manner more relevant to my work as a poet."³

It is not out of that crisis but within it that the question of the relation of black freedom to black

music, in the most abstract but also the most personal sense of these sets of terms, seems to reassert itself. A project that had initially been intended at least in part as a settling of accounts with "the Music" – most recently conceived as the centrality of jazz tropes of improvisation to the political theory of black freedom – now increasingly appears as an engagement with two Musics, two potential ideas of black freedom played out as two rivalrous noises, with two distinct visions of the relationship of black freedom to history and suffering and pleasure and love and movement and vitality.⁴ In *Dear Angel of Death*, in other words, the Music is at first suggestively denied and then, in the scene of the author's crisis, ineloquently cleaved in two; an alienation that at first belongs only to the author herself morphs suddenly and violently into an alienation within the object of analysis, within black music, flowering in the massive echoing space of projection that is the mental venue for any real, loving relationship to an object or person.

There are space constraints to this text, and so I will try to set out very briefly a list of the "problems" that White's writing sets out in relation to "the Music" that she has newly defined. Her criticism is too exquisitely receptive, and her poems too modally various, for me to really do them justice here, and so what follows is more like a set of pointers for reading than a "review" in any conventional sense.

1) Immanence: The first poem in White's collection comes from a sequence titled *Dollbaby*. The text, which begins by describing the feeding of a baby ("the great shock of suck"), ends with the lines "Secure the milk / and we'll talk about / 'Marxism Leninism Mao-Tse Tung Thought' /

which is milk thought / which is what I believe." An ungenerous reader of this poem, and of the book as a whole, might see this opening statement as a withdrawal from the political aspirations of *The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (the subtitle of Fred Moten's great book *In the Break*) in favor of what White herself, in the very final lines of *Dear Angel*, provokingly calls a "nihilistic, endlessly repetitive and narcotized kind of peace" (p. 149). The opening poem would then be, in addition to whatever else it is, a satire of the trajectory of that Tradition and its most easily mocked "outside" in the dogmatic turgidities (the "milk thought") of Amiri Baraka's 1970s "Maoist" Third Worldism, reverberating along a chain of part-associations that for me at least includes Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, the Black Panthers, Bertolt Brecht, and Future.

A generous reader of this poem, pressed to respond to this neat line of attack, might begin by asking, What is the difference between denying the language of "revolutionary" politics (its promised future) and recognizing to the fullest extent the real absence of its object? We do all live in this world, our bodies continue to age in it, our friends step off from the top of its buildings, and we drift around saying things like ITS BUILDINGS trying to be beautiful and intellectually precise, and the "poems" we write are terrifyingly fragile, porous things into which all of the vagueness and historical imprecision of our language pours constantly like rain through a roof. We are "crushed as a matter of criticism into nonspecific talk" (p. 60), says Simone White. Is "milk thought" the opposite of "an expression of the receptive possibilities of the one who receives the message" (p. 139), or is it something else? And which kind of reader are you?⁵

2) Violence: White: “the antiphonal accompaniment to gratuitous violence [...] is a sound that includes not only the unassailable music of Miles, but also the assaultive music known as ‘trap’ that takes violence inside itself in a manner that no one could take for ironic” (p. 121). The British poet Sean Bonney once said that his line “When you meet a Tory in the street, cut his throat” was the least violent thing he had ever written. The French novelist Édouard Louis talks somewhere about how the violence that passes through our bodies is not our violence but the violence of the relations to which we are made subject. Our current political culture makes it almost completely impossible to talk about this.

3) Time: “Taste is the true prophetic word.” Since I first read *Dear Angel of Death*, I have thought a lot about White’s description of Vince Staples’s music as “a terrifying manipulation” of a “grid [of] [...] emotional and ideological materials” that “Staples has access to, but hasn’t built.” On this account, Staples is also a manipulator of the violence that “passes through him” but is not “his.” He is like the French novelist Édouard Louis, in the sense that he knows this (which is part of the reason why White finds his performances “terrifying”: knowledge in this case is NOT power); but he is unlike him as well, because the violence that passes through him but which is not his is not only a reality to be described but also a “material” to be composed with, “repeating what we already know, repeating facts to which it is possible to nod our heads.” I have thought a lot about this passage of White’s thinking because its meaning is so fucked up and internally contrarious and hard to grasp, and because it lights the same fuse in me as the other writers who I just mentioned. Structurally, which

means to set aside for a second the central question of how we feel about it, the Grid represents in the theory and history of black music something like the opposite of the Tradition as I have described (or travestied) it, which is to say that it is a tendency whose essential movement is not outward but in, repeating and elaborating forever the already recognizable, the already present, the already known and felt and bought and sold and discarded, as well as the cynical satiety that comes from consciousness of all this and is, perhaps, the single most elaborated affect of them all (“We Just Want to Have Fun”). From this position, the artist is not afforded the luxury of non-contradiction. In the Grid, as opposed to in the Tradition, assaultive violence is taken inside the subject and becomes abstract, conventional, generic, metaphorical, and nevertheless absolutely real and more painful by the minute. Facts “such as ‘the music and the people is the same’” are invalidated and then reconfirmed in the sense that each is more torn apart than ever. Black musicians move into the bourgeoisie in the unwanted Marxist sense that they are always seen digging their own graves.⁶ “The despicable enjoy a beautiful invisibility.” “Future” is a shorthand for aperspectival stupor. And there is no easy affirmation of any of this, and no way to rise above its cruel ironies, but only a trail blazed more and more deeply into the familiar embrace of your arms, and the music of that embrace, as the totally ambiguous and in every sense utterly plausible belief that apocalypse takes place in the present.

Simone White is one of the artists who in the face of our culture speaks impossibly inside of it.

Simone White, *Dear Angel of Death*, New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2018.

Notes

- 1 Throughout this review, capitalized instances of "Music," "Tradition," "Freedom," etc. are meant to indicate the particular meaning that these terms acquire within the idiom of US black music criticism. It is important to White that she is intervening in a discussion of black music whose codes of argument are already highly elaborated and self-referential. Capital M Music means black music; capital T Tradition means the black music tradition; but the capitals are themselves an argument about US culture and not just a convenient shorthand.
- 2 The thesis can be read here: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2360&context=gc_etds.
- 3 Andy Fitch, "Questions of Inside and Outside: Talking to Simone White," <https://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/interviews/questions-inside-outside-talking-simone-white/>.
- 4 As with all descriptions of crisis, I am making this one sound more clear cut than it probably was. But it feels like the only way to get at the way in which a desire to have done with "the Music" in the essay is overlaid with a deeply, obsessively close preoccupation with black music in a more contemporary mode.
- 5 I think that for Simone White, trap supplies the promise of a total immanence in the experienced historical-affective present (what the artist Hannah Black calls "the Situation") that "language" reliably betrays.
- 6 "Young graves get the bouquets / Bouquets, the bouquets, the bouquets" (Vince Staples).