



A sociological and ethnomusicological analysis of
HOT NIGHT, Meshell Ndegeocello, 2002



From Chapter 4, "MeShell Ndegeocello: Musical Articulations of Black Feminism," by Martha Mockus

II.

MAMA: Son—how come you talk so much ‘bout money?

WALTER: (*With immense passion*) Because it is life, Mama!

MAMA: (*Quietly*) Oh—(*Very quietly*) So now it’s life. Money is life. Once upon a time freedom used to be life—now it’s money. I guess the world really do change . . .

—Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*

In *Cookie’s* next tune, “Hot Night,” we hear Ndegéocello’s compositional process informed by her burning desire to reinvigorate the concept of ‘revolution,’ but at the same time she is fully aware of how easily revolutionary ideas, such as hers, are coopted by the entertainment industry. “Hot Night” begins with the voice of Angela Davis in an excerpt from her speech *The Prison Industrial Complex*: “I was a member of the communist party. I’m not a member of the communist party, anymore—but I still consider myself very much a socialist. So we’ll get to that later. One of the reasons why the war in Vietnam was able to happen as long as it did was because this—of this fear of communism. And people pointed to the Vietnamese as their enemy. As if somehow or another, if the country defeated the communist enemy in Vietnam, things were gonna be okay at home” (1999). Accompanying Davis is a sample of a two-measure horn riff from “La Fama” (1974) by Hector Lavoe, a well-known Puerto Rican salsa singer and bandleader. Musically, the salsa horn sample forms the groove for this piece, setting the tempo and harmonic flavor and providing the only truly melodic material. After the second cycle of the horn

sample, Ndegéocello adds hip hop drums and bass line, accentuating the groove and defining the lower range left open by the trebly brass. In the salsa horn riff, the last two beats are unmarked—and in that space one hears Ndegéocello's creativity as a bass player, filling it in and taking us to the next downbeat, occasionally punctuated by a well-placed grunt. Politically, the combination of these two samples—Davis and Lavoe—creates

a sonic realm in which both Vietnam and Puerto Rico are located as sites of American imperialism.

Furthermore, Angela Davis's vocal presence functions in two very important ways. First, her voice begins and ends this piece, forming a vocal frame around the rest of the music and clarifying its structure. She initiates the political dimension in global terms (Vietnam), and she concludes in local terms, with her indictment of the devastating effects of "welfare reform" on poor women in the United States. Second, sampling Davis also works as a musical tribute to her own long-term commitment to black women in music, culminating in her book *Blues Legacies and*

Black Feminism but also apparent in many related articles prior to that book (Davis 1984, 1990, 1995).

Ndegéocello's own lyrics examine "the plight of a revolutionary soul singer" who struggles against a "romanticized idea of revolution/with saviors prophets and heroes" and laments that

we all living in a world built upon
rape, starvation, greed, need, fascist regimes
white man, rich man, democracy
suffer in a world trade paradise hear me now

In the second verse, Talib Kweli (of Black Star) attacks capitalism head-on in his rap filled with humorous rhymes and clever wordplay, and performed at breakneck speed. Kweli exposes the commodification of music and the need to confront a music industry interested only in markets and profit. Ndegéocello shares this view but knows that working as a musician—even as a "revolutionary soul singer"—in the larger machine of commerce is fraught with contradictions. In an interview with *Bass Player* magazine, Ndegéocello talks about visiting the plant of a company that wanted her to endorse their basses. She says that "they wouldn't send me one that worked, I knew I'd be their only black endorser, and when I went down to the plant there were all these older black women doing all the painting. I know I seem like I'm a fist-in-the-air rah-rah-rah activist, but it was hard for me" (Leigh 2002, 81). (Mark Anthony Neal also quotes from this interview but does not pursue a specifically feminist analysis of Ndegéocello's music [Neal 2003].) Likewise, Angela Davis in her work has documented the recording industry's exploitation of African American

women blues musicians, as well as their efforts to assert artistic and economic control. Thus, in “Hot Night” Ndegéocello creates and shares musical space with a like-minded activist and revolutionary soul singer passionately concerned with economic strife. Sonically and conceptually, each

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woman amplifies and clarifies the other’s feminist voice, especially as we arrive at the end of this piece and Ndegéocello’s phrase, “soul singer,” embellishes Davis’s words: “And now of course, that the welfare system has been disestablished and there are no jobs, so to speak, for women who are told that if they don’t work, that’s just too bad. They can only get welfare for a certain period of time and then they have to find a job. Now, they haven’t had the opportunity to go to an institution like this [college]. They may not have the skills. Where are they going to find a job? And if they have children, how are they going to pay for childcare, in order to guarantee the conditions which will allow them to work?” (Davis, 1999).

Lyrics from “[Hot Night](#)” (track 2 from “[Cookie: The Anthropological Mixtape](#)”, 1999).

[Angela Davis Sample]

"I was a member of the Communist Party. I'm not a member of the Communist Party, anymore - but I still consider myself very much a socialist. So we'll get to that later."

[Talib Kweli]

Let's go

[Angela Davis Sample]

"One of the reasons why the war in Vietnam was able to happen as long as it did - was because this - of this fear of communism. And people pointed to the Vietnamese as their enemy. As if somehow or another, if the country defeated the communist enemy in Vietnam, things were gonna be okay at home."

[Chorus: Meshell Ndegeocello]

But it's a hot night

Let's talk about the sign o' the times

Politics

And the fight of a revolutionary soul singer

It's a hot night
Head down to the club
For the piña coladas
Without the alcohol
And let's talk about the world, y'all

[Verse 1: Meshell Ndegeocello]

Can you pick me up?
You know I hate driving in the evil city
And baby, read my mind, hit La Caridad
So I can get some coffee
And we can get our talk on
Seems I got caught up in this romanticized idea of revolution
With saviors, prophets, and heroes
But in the silence of my prayers
I had a vision of my hatred dissolving to grains of sand
Realized that to the universe that's all I really am
Just a grain of sand
I don't want to get caught up in all that spiritual shit
But it ain't much to hold onto
We all living in a world built upon
Rape, starvation, greed, need, fascist regimes
White man/rich man democracy
Uh

Suffer in the world trade paradise
Hit me now, come on

[Chorus: Meshell Ndegeocello]

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Let's talk about the sign o' the times

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[Verse 2: Meshell Ndegeocello, Talib Kweli]

Let me be the first to say this

*Fuck the first b***h ever ask me to buy her some dumb shit*

N****s be fightin' for Jordans they can't afford
Bought in a store, costing more than a hun-dred, yeah
Capitalism got 'em trapped in a vision
That tell lies they watch way more than a sunset, uh
I feed my babies with music, I tell the truth
But now I'm a target in they market, ain't that a sumummabitch
It's a urgent emergency courtesy of the counterinsurgency
Tryna murder me, yeah, and now it's on, and uh

It's cause I verbally hurdle all they absurdities
Accurate rhyme poem and I survive the storm, and uh
Certainly words can be weapons, if people heard me
They thinkin' they God and they decide what's right or wrong
They live in a bubble, I live for the struggle
After the fight, we home on a hot night
My woman, it's nice and warm, but uh
[Chorus: Meshell Ndegeocello]
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[Talib Kweli]
Let's do it, come on

[Bridge: Talib Kweli, *Meshell Ndegeocello*]
Join the party, fists in the air, everybody for the
Revolutionary soul singer
Side to side, third eye on the prize, we take a ride with the
Revolutionary soul singer
Give the seeds what they need to breathe and proceed, it's the
Revolutionary soul singer
Word up, yeah, y'all, we prepared, y'all, no fear, y'all
Come on

It's a shame the way we all run around
It's a shame the way we all run around
Cause you're blind baby! Blind to the facts!
It's a shame the way we all run around
Cause you're blind baby!
It's a shame the way we all run around
I said you're blind baby!
Blind to the facts of who you are!

[Chorus: Meshell Ndegeocello]
But it's a hot night
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Politics
And the fight of a revolutionary soul singer
It's a hot night
Head down to the club
For the piña coladas
Without the alcohol
And let's talk about the world, y'all

[Talib Kweli]
Let's do it

[Angela Davis Sample]

"And now of course, that the welfare system has been disestablished - and there are no jobs, so to speak - for the women who are told, that if they don't work... they can only get welfare for a certain period of time and then they have to find a job. Now they haven't had the opportunity to go to an institution like this. They may not have the skills. Where are they going to find a job? And if they have children, how are they going to pay for childcare, in order to guarantee the conditions which will allow them to work?"

