Sounding Like a No-No
Royster, Francesca T.

Published by University of Michigan Press

Royster, Francesca T.
Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/21092.
ONE

Becoming Post-Soul

Eartha Kitt, the Stranger, and the Melancholy Pleasures of Racial Reinvention

I first come across Eartha Kitt in my parents’ record collection when I am six, grouped with other female vocalists of the recent past. I add her to my gallery of “va-va-voom” ladies: glamorous, sequined, sultry performers like Eartha or Dinah Washington or Celia Cruz, women with elaborate Cleopatra eye makeup who wear their dresses tight like mermaids. They pose on the covers in midshout in front of microphones, caught in time. They enjoy a martini or a boogaloo in bachelorette apartments in unnamed cities. These album covers plant the seeds for my growing taste for camp and for my use of music as a space for dreaming up new selves. On the cover of Down to Eartha (1955), Kitt enjoys a good smoke with her trademark long Bakelite cigarette holder—the kind my sister and I liked to imitate with our candy cigarettes. She sits with her legs folded beneath her on a tiger-head rug, looking up at the camera through nylon-eyelashed eyes as if to say, “Who? Me?” Eartha’s false eyelashes remind me of those of other people’s mothers. When I come over to play dress-up with my friends, their houses are stylish in an unfamiliar, futuristic way, with plush white carpets and glass tables and plastic furniture. We are given old tubes of lipstick in frosted colors to play with, and pink plastic Mary Kay compacts with the dark, red blush worn down to the metal. In contrast, my own mother proudly never wears makeup, and wears her hair as a political statement, unstraightened and unbossed. Over the years I learn the natural processes of change that age makes on her skin and body, the laugh lines and freckles, the places where gravity wins. She rejects the devices that Eartha and her own mother used: wigs and eyelash curlers, foundation and foundation garments, to create her own funky, down-to-earth self. Watching my mother, I also plant the seeds of my own future rebellion, learning from her the insistence to be true to my own self. But sometimes I find myself traveling back (or is it forward?) to the land of nylon, sequins, and Bakelite. I discover in Eartha’s voice, in her va-va-voom style, her own demand for liberation, something that bridges the future with the past.
Hear Eartha Kitt’s “I Want to Be Evil” (1960) and listen for the echo of Zora Neal Hurston: “I love myself when I’m laughing, and then again when I’m looking mean and impressive.” Hear “I want” and be pulled into the growl that some say is the purr of a kitten, but you know it is the growl of hunger barely held back, the trained muscular vibrato that starts deep in the stomach, traveling up to the throat. Hear in that “I” the shared story of a generation of black women up from the South, going about the business of remaking themselves. My grandmother, like Eartha, was one of these women, up from Waxahachie, Texas, to Chicago, like Eartha, who was up from the small town of North, South Carolina, to New York, the sulfur well water and no shoes and no daddy taunts left in that red clay dust. Hear in that “I want to be” wild yearning, homesick wanderlust, and remember those early Black Bohemians: Katherine Dunham, who trained Eartha to dance, Tommy Payne, Pearl Primus, bringing home the dances and beats, the isolations, the neck moves and the shoulder moves and full pelvic extensions from the homes that have been lost to us. Nod in recognition as Eartha whips ahead of those bongos, always anticipating the beat. (She knows that behind the mask of sweet flutes and Cole Porter jazz-wit are the ghosts of Africa: Chano Pozo, Cal Tjader, Afro-Latin jazz, the white-taped fingertips popping the tightly stretched skin of the drum.) Say it with me, “evil,” and fully enjoy the stretch of lips into an almost smile, the soft scrape of teeth over lip, and then the roll of the tongue. Enjoy that tongue, stretch it out, and let it lick from the roof of your mouth to your lip. Love the pleasure of words, of “e-nun-ci-a-tion,” of the mastery of the English language enjoyed best by self-taught women, and I’ll think of my grandmother with her Reader’s Digest books and dog-eared Webster’s dictionary, beating us all at Jeopardy. ἀινόκτις of the secret pleasures of a southern accent that has been set aside, to be returned to when gossiping with a friend from down home, or the “Hey, now!” when your favorite Louis Armstrong tune comes on, or the cry of triumph with a winning hand of bid whist. Whisper with Eartha when she slips into “bahd” and “Nevah been kissed”—push that extra “ah” into it, and learn what she has learned, that “talking proper” is a hoax, or at best, a strategy that can win you a job, a role, a fig. ἀἰατος spirit will be a bridge to keep the selves united.

My own grandmother, Gwen, Eartha’s contemporary, fought hard to be seen as proper and respectable. Moving to Chicago as a teen in the 1930s from Waxahachie, Texas, she had wanted to be a doctor, but was told by her teachers that she didn’t have the physical strength to
work a doctor’s long hours. So, ironically, she cleaned houses, sometimes juggling two households at a time, mopping, scrubbing, and lifting for sometimes ten hours at a time, and later worked as a janitor for the Chicago public schools. She bragged that she could wring a rag so tight that it would tear in her hands. In summers, she’d clean out three floors of students’ lockers, and would take home, clean, and “liberate” (she called it) what was left—hordes of abandoned dictionaries, pencils, notebooks, book bags, knit caps and scarves—to us, her grandchildren. She raised six children and on the side read science textbooks and *Gray’s Anatomy* and medical prescription guides that she found in the student lockers or collected from used bookstores. Like Kitt, she also rebelled against her circumstances, expressing herself through extreme domestic arts: elaborately themed birthday parties squeezed out of paltry paychecks and food stamps; and slinky homemade dresses fashioned after Jackie O, and later, Lola Falana and Eartha herself. Her holiday dinners sometimes featured weirdly Dickensian experiments: a goose outfitted with white paper socks, plum puddings, or rabbit or venison, along with the traditional turkey and chitlins. Fueling these heroic efforts at making a way out of no way was rage, which would sometimes be manifest in the form of drinking, and sometimes through the mask of bitingly sarcastic humor and commentary. “Don’t try to be too hip,” she’d warn us, “cause you know what two hips make.”

Kitt’s “I Want to Be Evil” takes pleasure in the desire to be naughty, while also exposing this naughtiness as a fantasy, a mask, a code for something else that’s harder to say. The speaker of the song is a contemporary working girl of the advertising age, at home with Ivory Soap and Rheingold beer, but always watched by the (white) eye of respectability. Most of her fantasies of revenge are laughingly toothless: throwing mud pies, stepping on folks’ feet at the theater. But behind the coquettish opening rap, breathy and bored, the theatrically rolled *rrrr*, there’s the burst of laughter, head thrown back, teeth gleaming; there is a knowing, a full-on critique of washed out, prim and proper respectability, available for anyone able and willing to keep up. (Once she gets going, she can’t be bothered to wait.) Eartha works us, spits out kitsch like she’s spitting tacks, working those hard *ts* of “brilliant” and “sweetness” and “nasty.” But we hear shadows in her lowering pitch. Coating the back of her throat, coloring her notes, is the phlegm of fury, disguised by speed. She alludes to the “dark brown mood” of the working world, too.

There are many kinds of work for this generation of women up from
the South, with hopes of moving from cotton picker to chorus girl, from taking in wash to mopping up floors after hours at the Sears and Roebuck, or sometimes just from cleaning up other people's messes in Waxahachie to cleaning up other people's messes in Wilmette, Illinois. Inflicting her words with bite and a question, sometimes shouting them, letting the questions linger in this song, Eartha lets us know that there are many meanings of "work," and sometimes the demand for work of a particular and all too familiar kind from a high yellow gal translates from South to North, too. Eartha's so-called unreadable skin and voice have brought her to New York, and to Paris, and to Turkey and Leningrad, have delivered champagne and furs and jewels and a secret lover—the heir to an old money fortune, as well as a legendary bite on the ear by Orson Welles. My grandmother's unreadable skin gave her a seat in an otherwise all-white elementary school, and later, three darker-skinned husbands and six children of a rainbow of hues.

Kitt sings for herself and for a generation of black women. If we are lucky, those women might tell us more of what "I Want to Be Evil" only suggests: if we can make it backstage, to watch them remove the tight pumps from their worn-out feet, aching from dancing, or maybe waiting tables or scrubbing floors, they might let us in close enough to smell the undertow of bourbon in their sweat, or my grandmother's drink of choice, Fresca and Seagram's gin. But if not, we should listen out for the suggestion of bitterness, cut with neck-popping swing and the mocking shimmy come-on. Caught in time in this song, cynicism hasn't yet settled in her skin, hasn't atrophied her muscles, so when Eartha lets loose her final note and smiles her gleaming smile of satisfaction, she is still flexible, buoyant, becoming.

*  
Singer, dancer, performer on film, television, and stage, and original writer of four autobiographies, Eartha Kitt was a multimedia performer—one of the first black celebrities, and one who, performing until the age of eighty-one, had an amazing capacity to reinvent herself. The title of the final book—Rejuvenate! It's Never Too Late (2001)—is emblematic of her ability to shape-shift and resuscitate her career. As a performer who continued to survive and thrive from the period of black migration from South to North in the 1930s through the Post-Soul moment of the late 1970s and into the twenty-first century, Kitt's often mythic and highly theatrical presentations of self produce a sometimes slippery, embodied
archive of racial, sexual, and gender “strangeness” that became an important resource for performers and audiences of the Post-Soul generation.

Kitt is strange, particularly in her oddly seductive, nasally voice, which shifts unpredictably between accent, in her angular face, which eventually softens into grace as she enters her eighties, and especially in her stare, which seems to say less “come hither” than “Get over here!” But Kitt is also strange in her very public explosion of mid-twentieth-century community standards of American black femininity—as both subject and object of sexual desire and need, in her insistence on professionalism and unabashed ambition, and on her political outspokenness.

In Farah Jasmine Griffin’s analysis of narratives of African American identity during the black migration from South to North, “Who Set You Flowin”: the African-American Migration Narrative, she talks about the importance of the “stranger” for emerging black identities in the twentieth century—a figure sometimes in opposition to the “ancestor”—who offers a cosmopolitan alternative, a space outside of the everyday struggles of assimilation, a figure on the border. Griffin draws from the work of sociologist Robert Park, whose theories suggest that human migration produces a new personality, both emancipated and marginal.

According to [Robert] Park, for this character type, “energies that were formerly controlled by custom and tradition are released. . . . [Such persons] become . . . not merely emancipated, but enlightened. . . . The emancipated individual invariably becomes in a certain sense and to a certain degree cosmopolitan. He learns to look upon the world in which he was born and bred with something of the detachment of a stranger.”

Might Kitt have served, for all of the fans who saw her photos on the walls of black barbershops and beauty salons in the 1950s and 1960s, or who watched her on borrowed or newly purchased television sets and at the movies, as the stranger who defied the borders of their own experiences—a sign of not-quite-yet-achieved freedom on the one end, and scandal and exile on the other? And might she, in turn, serve as a prototype for the Post-Soul generation that followed, offering a recipe for how to become a willful exile, leaving home, crossing racial, sexual, national, or class borders to create something resistant, something beyond assimilation? As a part of the black migration herself, Kitt’s experiences as a celebrity and a black woman are both exemplary and eccentric, subject
to the constraints of institutionalized racism and sexism, while at other times seemingly able to resist and transform them.

Eartha Kitt’s longevity as a performer, her fifty-year career spanning the 1950s through 2008, gives us the chance to view the shifts in the ways that odd or eccentric black performers are read and received over the course of the mid- through the end of the twentieth century. She was one of the first successful black performers associated with the turn of interest in African diasporic folk dance and music, performing with anthropologist Katherine Dunham’s dance troupe at age sixteen, and traveling internationally with the troupe to Mexico, South America, and Europe. Kitt’s internationalism would become one of her trademarks, and she would record multilingual hits with RCA records in the 1960s, including “C’est Si Bon,” “Urska Dursa,” and “Angelitos Negros.”

Kitt is an important icon of contrariness and pleasure—a key, if often unnoted, source of inspiration for the formation of a queer black feminist sensibility seen in commercial and pop sources emerging in the early 1980s and 1990s. We might hear echoes of Kitt’s sex-kittenish claim for sexual and economic control (in “Let’s Do It,” “Santa Baby,” “Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend,” “Love for Sale,” and “All I Want Is All α α’ en Some”) in Grace Jones’s demands for sexual satisfaction in “Pull Up to the Bumper.” And her commitment to campy humor and visual outrageousness—showcased most provocatively in her role as Catwoman on the television show Batman in 1966–67—has echoes in George Clinton’s sartorial outrageousness in his and Parliament/Funkadelic’s stage shows. Kitt would later become a Post-Soul queer icon as an outspoken advocate for gay rights and same-sex marriage. Her disco hit, “I Want My Man,” her first gold record, and her collaborations with Bronski Beat became part of the soundtrack of the New York gay club scene. She participated in multiple benefits for HIV/AIDS research, and she was widely imitated in local drag scenes. Her long-running cabaret show at the Café Carlyle became a mainstay of New York nightlife for fans, tourists, and connoisseurs of kitsch, performing there regularly until her death on Christmas Day, 2008, at the age of eighty-one.

At the same time, Kitt’s performance of pleasure often includes the tinge of regret, pain, and loss that might well be informed by living through a period of transition in terms of sexual and racial politics and freedoms. Indeed, I choose to focus on Eartha Kitt as an example of a Post-Soul precursor not only because she was controversial and theatrical but because she uses her body in her performances as a sign of the
cost of wrestling with racial and gender norms. I hear manifest in her sound, as well as in her stagecraft, the costs of the contradictory desires for recognition and freedom.

Even in the heat of her greatest acclaim, Kitt was often a figure of controversy. She was publicly reprimanded for lewd lyrics and dancing,\(^2\) tailed by the FBI and the tabloids in connection with her romances with powerful white men like movie theater CEO Andrew Loew and make-up magnate Charles Revson,\(^3\) and accused of not being black enough in her style and dating choices by the black press. Some of her early reviews in the black press see her as overly polished, calculating, and lacking “soul.” In a May 1954 issue of the *Chicago Defender*, reporters George Daniels and Robert Elliot debated whether Kitt was merely a “stylist,” basing her performance on sex appeal, or a soulful singer with the promised longevity of Ella Fitzgerald or Nat King Cole. The story was so popular that the debate opened into a larger one involving reader letters the following week. One *Defender* reader, a Miss Morris, wrote that “Eartha must still meet the test when public taste changes. And when she does, John Q. Public will give the answer. Until then, there are those who like kittens and those who don’t.”\(^4\)

Kitt took outspoken and often complicated political stands that often kept her stranded between groups. For example, her 1968 public criticism of the Vietnam War at a luncheon given by first lady Claudia “Lady Bird” Johnson gained the praise of Martin Luther King Jr., Jackie Robinson, and the Black Panthers, but others in the black community suspected her of staging a publicity stunt.\(^5\) Many in the white press critiqued her as “brash,” “rude,” and unpatriotic. The *New York Times* ran two days’ worth of letters for and against her, in which Lady Bird was often portrayed as Kitt’s “victim.”\(^6\) She was blacklisted from performing as a result of this scandal and could not find work in the United States until 1974. In the early 1970s, when Kitt joined a handful of other black entertainers to perform in South Africa in the face of apartheid, she angered many in the black community.\(^7\) When she returned, and denounced the racism she experienced in South Africa, she received a chilly reception from the black community.

Kitt provides a vocabulary for understanding the generation of eccentric black performers that follow her precisely in the ways that she makes her audience uneasy, and her embodiment and artistic exploration of that dis-ease within the space of celebrity. In addition to her political outspokenness, it might well be her theatricality of style that
makes her audience uneasy, particularly in the ways that theatricality has historically been associated with excess, dissemblance, and lack of truthful representation—traits often attached to the feminine. She, like Grace Jones, Michael Jackson, and others, explores what it feels like to be a “problem,” suavely using not only her music but other forms of public performance, including interviews, political appearances, and most significantly her autobiographies, as a form of “blaxploration.” Kitt, then, is an important model for the ways that black eccentric celebrities push and blur the boundaries of public and private, particularly in terms of sexism and racism.

Kitt’s complex persona challenged norms of ideal black womanhood and black authenticity circulating in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s and into the twenty-first century. To highlight Kitt’s eccentric take on codes of black female respectability, we might contrast her performance of black femininity with those of two of her contemporaries: Lena Horne and Diahann Carroll. Horne and Carroll, actor-singers like Kitt, were highly visible, glamorous, and successful black entertainers in a period of tenuous racial integration in Hollywood, all beginning their careers in the early 1950s and continuing long career paths through the twenty-first century. (Indeed, Kitt and Horne often crossed paths and competed for the same roles in the 1950s.) In contrast to Kitt’s aggressive, even predatory performances of female sexuality, Horne’s and Carroll’s dominant onstage and offstage images most often signified gentility, achievement, sexual restraint, and socially approved class mobility—respectable images of black womanhood. Horne was cast as elegant ingenue (in *Stormy Weather*), a goddess (as Glenda the Good in *The Wiz*), or herself—a little bit of both! (in *Meet Me in Las Vegas* and other films); Carroll’s roles included the less rambunctious friend to Dorothy Dandridge in *Carmen Jones*, fashion model (in *No Strings*), widowed nurse (in her TV show *Julia*), hardworking single mother (in *Julia* and *Claudine*), and eventually corporate magnate (as Dominique Devereaux in *Dynasty*). In contrast, Kitt was often cast in roles associated with the sexual underground: prostitute (*Anna Lucasta*), nightclub performer (*St. Louis Blues*), cat burglar (*Batman*), and comic aging seductress (*Boomerang*). And, too, of the differences in their voices and performance styles: Horne’s warm, southern melodiousness and Carroll’s clipped northern properness versus Kitt’s oddly unpredictable vocal rhythms, “placeless” voice, and scratchy, nasally growls. Rather than taking roles that would reflect respectability for black women, Kitt took roles of the outcast. And within
the small circle of other black female celebrities during this period of high scrutiny, she also stands out for the ways that her private life was often as much the subject of audience interest as her public one. Yet despite these differences in image, Carroll, Horne, and Kitt all struggled with the backhanded racial tactics of a still segregated Hollywood, and fought hard for their roles.

The Body and Its Secrets: Performing Racial Melancholy and Racial Shame

In Kitt’s autobiographical narratives she takes as her subject her experience of exile within her own community as a “yella gal” and bastard child. These stories present a complex picture of black identity and community disunity in these years before the Post-Soul moment. She sheds light on her celebrity as a situation of both possibility and constraint, as she negotiates ongoing strictures of racism, and emerging standards of sexual respectability and authenticity. Kitt’s experiences of tension, conflict, and grief, as well as her embrace of cosmopolitanism and “homelessness” in the quest to remake herself, serve as examples of the disidentification that is important to Post-Soul identity. In Anne Anlin Cheng’s pivotal study *The Melancholy of Race*, she discusses how the experience of racism creates patterns of grief that are often repressed, and reformed into a kind of melancholia—mourning usually banished below the surface of narratives about self and community.

Cheng uses Freud’s melancholia to explore two important aspects of American racial construction: dominant white society’s attraction/repulsion to the racial other and the ramifications of that paradoxical relationship that white society has for the racial other, placing the other in a suspected formation of self. Such mourning processes can become the stuff of imaginative production, including performance. As Cheng suggests, “Even as racism actualizes itself through legal and social sanctions, it is animated through imaginative procedures.” Kitt presents her life as one of racial melancholia—and this melancholy in turn informs the tense, high-energy contrariness of her performance aesthetic. At the same time, we might think of her impulse to write and continue to rewrite her life and her documentation of her process of interpolation into racial, gender, and sexuality schemes, as well as her disidentification of it, as a form of theorization that is repeated and developed in her theatri-
cal performance style: her denaturalized vocalizations and her pushing of her body and gestures into the extremes of gendered and racialized gestures.\textsuperscript{13}

Following Audre Lorde’s invention of biomythography as a new form of autobiography that allows for the melding of autobiography, history, and myth, Kitt aptly captures the yearning to reinvent a racial self, while at the same time dramatizing with explicit and sensual language the traumas of racial and sexual violence that led her to that point. And most important, in her drama of self-invention she implicates both black and white participants in the violence she suffers. While her autobiographies document a clear understanding of the institutionalization of white racism and the life-and-death impact of those institutions on her life, she is careful to also show how the black community has internalized these same racist hierarchies. She refuses innocence for herself and others, all the while reminding her readers, black and white, of the psychic costs of reinventing a racial self. In Kitt’s autobiographies, we might see in action “interior patterns of grief and how they both constrain and are constrained by subjectivity. . . . How a racially impugned person processes the experience of denigration exposes a continuous interaction between sociality and privacy, history and presence, politics and ontology.”\textsuperscript{14}

If the body is a key site of racism and racial surveillance, through skin, hair texture, gesture, and movement, then it is also the container for racialized grief, and the drama of racial mourning. But bodily performance—onstage, in recorded song and film, and as recalled through written narrative—are powerful examples of the ways that the grief and shame of racism can be animated, and perhaps exorcised, through art. Kitt reclaims the body and its difficult knowledge in her autobiography as she does in live and recorded performance. In the same ways that Kitt’s stage performances present an aesthetics of contrariety in the face of stifling norms of black female sexuality, her autobiographies chart the ways that racial and sexual oppression are experienced bodily in unpredictable ways. She takes the dual images of the black woman as “earthly”—southern plantation born, grounded in her body and nature—and as the exotic—the body reinvented, the fantastic body from “elsewhere”—and exposes the process of the formation of these identities in a shared history. Kitt’s performances are powerful and perhaps also shameful to some in her audience—because of the wounds that they potentially open, reminders of the melancholic state of the racial other—here, black women. áï’s shame might be one factor to account
for the criticism and sometimes suspicion that Kitt faced from many in the black community. Kitt takes on the drama of black female shame through satire, as well as the direct tactics of naming and protest.

In her autobiographies, Kitt presents her racial and sexual formation as one marked by interlinked racial violence and sexual abuse. In the process, she performs a deessentialization of the process of racialization, reminding us of the structures of power in play. In a story that becomes more clear over the successive accounts of her life, Kitt was born in North, South Carolina, in 1927, the product of a rape of her mother Anna Mae by the white son of the owner of the plantation in which all of her family labored. The very circumstances of her conception—a rape whose secret is reinforced by the unequal power of white over black, owner over worker—are a repeated pattern in the shared history of black people in the United States, even as the shame and exile that she and her mother suffered in her family as a result made this act seem exceptional to her young self. Kitt’s shame haunted Kitt throughout her life, and fueled her struggle for achievement and acceptance, adding an undertow of melancholy to the image of sexual experience and worldliness that she projected in her performances.

The violence is then reperpetuated by family members, who ostracize Kitt, her mother, and her sister, leaving them out of the circle of community. Kitt’s act of violence not only marks Kitt racially—as “yella gal”—but also, it is implied, as sexual outsider, the inheritor of her mother’s supposed sin. Kitt, her mother, and her half sister are left homeless and hungry, sleeping in fields and neighbors’ yards. Eventually, Kitt’s mother finds another lover, a black man, and she and Kitt’s half sister, Pearl, move in with him on the condition that she leave Kitt’s raising to others. (Kitt’s lover tells her mother that Kitt’s light skin will create contention and competition between his own children.) Kitt moves in with a neighbor, Mrs. Stern, who treats her like a servant and outsider, often punishing her for eating too much. Her position as outsider and scapegoat in this household leaves her vulnerable to teasing, beatings, and molestation by Stern’s children. The rough treatment that she receives from the black community because of her lighter skin dramatizes the continuation of the dynamics of slavery, and the internalization of racial hierarchies within the black community. As Kwakiutl Dreher suggests, “Kitt informs us of an ominous post-slavery color hierarchy breeding abandonment, molestation, and abuse.”15 At the same time, Kitt’s childhood of abandon-
ment becomes an important staging point for her reclamation of a new, self-made, racial and sexual identity.

It is through Kitt’s reclamation of embodied knowledge and voice denied her mother, that she counters the racial and sexual expectations that bind her. In the opening chapters of *A Thursday’s Child* (1956), I am astounded by her eloquent and frank descriptions of her sensual awareness as a child, and the ways that the codes of racism shape this knowledge. Kitt presents herself as being at home in the natural world, seeking solace and nurture from the sky, trees, and earth when her family and community fail her. Ultimately, her body becomes the source of knowledge when social bonds fail her. Bodily knowledge—pleasure and pain—shapes the memories that ultimately allow Kitt to understand how the community sees her body, and eventually allows her to assess and intervene in it. She begins *A Thursday’s Child* with her first experience of exile—reconstructed through the sense memory of a child.

The wheat began to sway in the evening breeze and the cotton stood still and glared out at me with bulging eyes as we walked the narrow road through the fields.

I couldn’t figure out why we were way out here so late or where we had come from or where we were going. I wanted to ask Mama, but I was afraid I would get her annoyed. Mama heaved a sigh as she adjusted Pearl in her arms. She looked down at me with wet eyes and stroked my long bushy brown hair. Something did not rest right in me—I felt as though I had done something and was going to get a whipping for it, but I couldn’t remember what it was.¹⁶

Kitt’s encounters with nature here help her eventually to name what can’t be said: the bulging eyes of the cotton speak to the suspicion with which her uncle and neighbors regard her as they seek shelter. And her awareness of the bushiness of her own hair shows her growing sense of difference from others, the ways that her body, skin color, and hair are seen by others as signs of the rape and shame that her mother has experienced. In her description of feeling like she’s going to be punished, but without knowing why, we see the effects of internalized racism and shame.

At the same time as Kitt’s sense of the world is marred by sexual and racialized violence, she insists on the importance of pleasure and sensu-
ality as a means of survival. Kitt claims and discusses the development of childhood sexuality in the face of violence, complicating the image of black female sexuality as purely procreative and victimized. In the following passage from *aursday's Child*, Kitt describes running away from the constant hard work and the surveillance of her guardians to find solace in a sandbank. Kitt’s body becomes a resource, a place of self-soothing and pleasure in the face of the racism of her community.

I was absolutely alone in a road that was pure white sand. I stopped to play for a while in the silvery, soft ground. I remember the place distinctly. It was on the edge of the pine forest. On one side of the road we had a patch of watermelon. At the edge of the melon patch was an old well. As I sat in this spot of glowing sand, I picked up a handful of dirt and licked it out of my hands like sugar. It became damp with the saliva in my mouth and seeped its way down my throat like honey. I sat crumbled up on my knees in the softness and gloated in the discovery of a new and different pleasure. I could smell the rain and the wonderful dust that is in the air before a rainstorm.

Kitt links her hunger for sand to the scarcity of food. Yet on some level she leaves her desire unaccounted for as pure pleasure—unattached to a particularized need or object—floatingly queer.

A few days later, as my sister and I were playing in a ditch, I discovered an even newer pleasure, the taste of clay—red, yellow, purple, all the colors in the rainbow, all had that same rainy taste. Whenever I was alone, I would combine my secret feasts, and for dessert I’d suck my tongue and feel the middles of my breasts.¹⁷

*This passage is a powerful model of self-soothing, but also transformation: sand becomes honey. Even in the face of starvation, Kitt claims the right to hungers that go beyond necessity. Pleasure and awareness of her body become the site for survival and self-assertion. As I’ll discuss later, Kitt’s “odd” or outlandish expression of hunger will become an important aspect of her performance style, and will become the embodiment of the tensions in her life between insider and outsider. But Kitt’s childhood expressions of desire are never uncomplicated. She represents her experience of her body as mediated by racial and sex-
ual shame projected by her guardian, Mrs. Stern, who always reminds her of her precarious position in the household, and, by extension, her link to her mother’s rape. Kitt writes:

I’d hide behind the house, run my hand inside my shirt, and feel the centers of my breasts. At my age there was nothing there of course, but I wanted there to be. It seemed perfectly natural and harmless to me, but the Stern woman apparently thought it to be a sign of evil. I thought it no worse than eating sweet potatoes from the garden—for which I also got a sound beating.¹⁸

Kitt’s insistence on her own pleasure in her body is in contrast with the sexualized violence that she experiences at the hands of her cousins, Mrs. Stern’s teenage children, Willie and Grace. Indeed, it will take Kitt all three autobiographies to be able to name explicitly the sexual assault that she experiences at the hands of the Stern children. This reflects a shift in terms of the respectability of naming sexual abuse, especially the loosening of taboos of naming sexual abuse from within the black community. Kitt further complicates the issue of sexual abuse by linking it to her space on the margins of her family because of her light skin.

“Eartha Mae, come here, let me see what you look like. Pick up your rags,” he said, “More!” As the private parts of my tiny body became exposed . . . [Gracie and Willie] started laughing: “Damn, you’re yella all over, ain’t cha? Turn around,” Willie suddenly said. As my body turned, the switch came across my backside with a sting that would make the devil cringe. I gritted my teeth.¹⁹

Kitt describes being assaulted by the Stern girl, who forcibly penetrates her with a dildo made from rags. The assault is interrupted by the return of adults, and this act is never repeated or spoken of again. Though this event, Kitt exposes the hypocrisy of the Sterns’ self-appointed role as keepers of standards of racial and sexual purity. Kitt will continue to critique and expose other examples of such hypocrisy over the course of her career.

The experience of sexual exploitation and violence is important throughout Kitt’s autobiographies, and we see that it is something she never escapes, even as she moves to New York, even as she flees the United States for Paris, London, and Istanbul. She tells of multiple vio-
lent encounters in part connected to her path as a woman who is trying to find her own sexual destiny. As a teen, a gang in New York kidnaps her and harasses her because she won't be the leader's “girl,” ending in her nearly being pushed in front of a train. Later, in her travels as a dancer in Katherine Dunham's troupe, she and a friend are assaulted by two men. The autobiographies are rife with examples of racial and sexual harassment and abuse by lovers and fans. These examples become part of the fabric of Kitt's life and quest for sexual freedom, as well as artistic recognition. Kitt's identity as black and female informs her experience of both desire and violence.

Kitt doesn't limit herself to exploring the South as the place of sexual exploitation; indeed, her narrative shows the pervasiveness of sexual exploitation for black women. In many ways, the CIA's surveillance of Kitt in the 1960s is another form of sexual violation. It is clear from the language of the file that her sexual privacy has been violated, that she has been watched and then castigated for her quest for sexual freedom. The file accuses her of leading a “lurid sex life” and exhibiting “loose morals” and “sadistic nymphomania.” Kitt uses the opportunity of the autobiography to name the investigation as abuse, dedicating an entire chapter to the files in Alone with Me, and opening her acknowledgments with a slam against the CIA, which “should leave the writing of fiction to authors who don't write it at the taxpayer's expense.”

Kitt’s insistence on using her autobiographies as a form of resistance—sometimes through humor, sometimes through the use of precise detail—is a key component of her complication of her public persona as black “sex kitten.” While she coyly subtitles her autobiography Still Here as Confessions of a Sex Kitten, the autobiography offers a serious disavowal of this rather shallow description. An important legacy that Kitt offers to her Post-Soul kindred is her exploration and then refusal of shame, and her spirit of sexual resistance against the grain of the norms of other celebrities of the period.

Another important way that Kitt dramatizes the melancholy of racism is her complex relationship with the white gaze. Formative is Kitt’s first and only encounter with the white man who was her father.

In my first or second year at the Stern house, I saw my father for the first and last time. I was behind the house by myself, as usual, when I noticed a white man leave the nearby road and trudge across the field toward me. I don't remember what I thought at his approach. Not fear. Perhaps curiosity. I was sitting on the ground
in the sun, my legs tucked beneath me, and I remember his pausing, towering above me for a second and blocking the sun, before he crouched slightly and gently cupped my face in his hand and turned my face up to him. He studied my face for what seemed like a full minute or two; then he turned, walked back across the field to the road, and was gone.22

The white man’s appearance and power to block out the sun is like a planet. His attention, at once gentle and acquisitive, is curious to her in its combination of intimacy and distance. Whiteness here is powerful and inscrutable; distant, yet claiming its own undisputed right to touch and possess. This scene echoes several other moments in the autobiographies where Kitt finds herself measured and assessed by the white gaze, and where she responds with the need to justify her own humanity and worth. Several decades later, at a club performance in London, she overhears a table of white men debating her racial origins and her beauty.

“She is beautiful.”
“I wonder what nationality she is?”
“She must be from Indonesia.”
“Ah, she’s nothing but a nigger.”23

Kitt is horrified and embarrassed. She finishes her set and then runs to her dressing room. Eventually, her white manager convinces her to return to the stage. Not only does she complete the performance, but she decides that she will charm the men. She allows them to wine and dine her “until the wee hours of the morning,” and even lets one of them escort her home. Before parting, she turns to him and asks, “Now do you think I am ‘just a nigger’?” She boasts that her words are rewarded with flowers the next day.24

On the one hand, Kitt describes the white gaze as controlling, and often linked to violence. On the other, Kitt negotiates the need for white approval and regard, even when the price of assimilation to standards of whiteness proves to be a double-edged sword. She takes pride in her ability to speak to and reach multiple audiences, yet she depicts her growing regard by a white fan public as arbitrary, and ready to turn on her. Kitt describes many moments of compromise and negotiation in the face of white supremacy. When told by her Jewish landlord that she must move out of her New York apartment because they don’t rent to blacks, Kitt has other friends rent the apartment for her, in their name.
travels to South Africa in 1974, performing despite a boycott by other black intellectuals and artists, she engages in a series of acts of subtle protest: she takes her daughter to a whites-only amusement park; she causes a scandal by sitting on the lap of a white man in her audience; and she performs a number during which white audience members are invited to drink from her own personal bottle of champagne, breaking South African law. Kitt simultaneously offers a critique of white institutions of power and describes and reflects on her own assimilation. This may give both white and nonwhite readers the chance to face their own racial shame.

Kitt’s depiction of an unpredictable pattern of cruelty and sometimes arbitrary reward by whites is further complicated by moments of black betrayal and rejection. She recalls being punished for being late for school by her black teacher after she is attacked by the white kids, “the sting . . . sharp, leaving wide red marks where the blood had come to the surface, giving me visible evidence of another form of meanness.” Later, as her career gets under way, Kitt confesses to not being fully accepted by her black fans for her recordings because of her singing style and choice of material: “[T]he black people said, ‘Oh, she thinks she’s white,’ which is ironic seeing as they accepted Elvis thinking he was black, until they saw his photograph on his records. I was accepted by the whites, the international whites, but it took some twenty years on the American scene before I was accepted by the blacks.”

Kitt’s repeated public insistence that as a mixed race person she is “someone essentially without a race,” as she puts it later, in an interview near the end of her life, anticipates recent and ongoing debates about “Post-Black” identity, at the same time that she repeatedly publicly defends her loyalty to the black community. In Still Here, Kitt writes about her first travels to Europe and how seeing the physical devastation of World War II helped her to better understand her place in a world of racial hate, from the perspective of someone “in between.”

Confusion and more confusion. Germany against the Jews—no place for them to rest their heads, no place for blacks to rest their heads. Is the whole world only for whites? And what about those of us who are in between, neither white nor black? My childhood experiences flowed through me. The more I saw of blitzed London, the more curious and confused I became. Where and to whom do I belong? Here? Everywhere? Nowhere?
Becoming Post-Soul

Kitt’s self-conscious and often futuristic performance of her own racial identity as always in formation makes her an important figure in the history of black identity as “performed.”

Throughout her autobiographies, Eartha Kitt conveys her experience of racism as an embodied experience in which loyalties are unclear and power can be unpredictable, irrational, and harsh. She exposes the painful moments of black and white community exile and rejection. At she doesn’t leave out the cruelty of the other black children, as well as that of white racists, shows her willingness not to leave out the messiness of human experience, and seems part of her overall value of contrariness as a form of truth telling.

If, as Farah Jasmine Griffin suggests, the black South is figured in migration narratives as a place of pain, as well as a source of home, for Kitt, the South stands for sexual pain and rejection that never becomes the source of a comfortable nostalgia. Kitt eventually finds community elsewhere, moving outside of the black community, but always circling back to reflect on the meanings of blackness in these new contexts: first through white friends and teachers at the School for Performing Arts in New York City, then movement to various diasporas through Katherine Dunham, and then through her travels to Europe, Greece, South Africa, and India. She returns to the South through her autobiographies, yet also claiming a more cosmopolitan self.

Kitt’s response to the melancholy of racism, I’d argue, is precisely in the methods of disidentification and contrariness that we see as being central to Post-Soul performance. At times she is brutally frank and explicit about the everyday violence of racism; at other times she negotiates this pain through strategies of distancing, masking, and contrariness. Kitt’s public performance of self, her shifting of accent, her performance of polyglot European sophistication on- and offstage, her severing of familial ties, might seem to be turning her back on the past. Yet, as I’ll discuss below, Kitt’s performance style embodies this struggle and tension in its very strangeness.

From Eartha Mae to Stranger: Sounding Strange

Kitt’s success as a “stranger” for her black audiences, as well as for her larger audiences, is in part due to the ways that she presents her marginal identity as a point of tension, always still “in formation” or becoming.
Rather than suppressing the psychic costs of racial reinvention, she self-consciously embodies them, so that we hear this tension in her voice, in her movements, as well as in the palpable presence of anger in her writing.

Despite her cool persona, in her biographies and interviews, Kitt repeatedly represents herself as split between stranger, “Eartha Kitt,” and home girl, “Eartha Mae”—the bastard child, the homeless “yella gal.”

My child is Eartha Mae: ugly, unloved, unworthy, and therefore a loner. The adult I’ve molded is Eartha Kitt: self-reliant, afraid of nothing, even defiant. Ironically, I think of Eartha Kitt as practically nothing. True. She is so far removed from the basic nature of Eartha Mae that I can—and do—think of her in the third person. She’s she, not me. She’s a name on a marquee. I’m curiously detached from her and yet suspended within her and totally dependent on her for my survival.

Kitt’s constant negotiation between black southern experience and pain and the demands of reinvention through celebrity informs her analysis of the social construction of blackness and the pressure placed on that blackness as it travels outside of home, as is evident in her writings and the performances themselves. It is the element that both keeps Kitt from ever fully being at home, or at rest—a shimmering energy that takes the form in her embodied performances of a kind of desire.

Perhaps it is this restlessness that critics hear when they call Kitt’s performances “volatile,” “combustible,” and “incandescent.” Certainly, there is something in Kitt’s performance of sexual desire that has always been unsettling. As Kitt matures as a performer, she taps into the subversive potential of this restless homeless energy, converting it into a form of pleasure—and sometimes disruption and discomfort—for herself and her audience. Los Angeles Times pop music reviewer Dennis Hunt describes Kitt’s stage persona as “an unpredictable, erotic temptress capable of romance, passion, humor, even aggression.” Critic John L. Scott describes one live performance of Kitt’s that seems to border on sadism in its coolly punishing control of affect.

As an entertainer Eartha Kitt remains the sex symbol, but her visual and vocal projection are so cool and her mannerisms so stylized that one begins to wonder whether she’s putting her audience
on. . . . Regulars in the capacity first-night audience responded to her tactics enthusiastically, but I’m afraid newcomers to her art (or is it artifice?) never quite caught up with her. During one number she stopped singing and stared at the ringleader for an entire chorus, a ploy that convulsed some listeners and confused others. . . . She also danced in a quite remarkable fashion, seeming to move without much motion. In other words she has an almost perfect control of her body.34

Kitt has created a persona that is at once highly sexualized and closed, specifically rooted in the history of migration, and the epitome of the achieved ideal of assimilation: the stranger. Indeed, in Alone with Me, Kitt claims as her particular power, her “strange influence” over her audience, that of being mysterious, her disorientation from a particular time and place. She characterizes her voice as “placeless”—the expression of her distance from her black southern past, or more important, to a particular people or community.

I don’t remember ever having a Southern accent. I don’t remember speaking any differently from the way I do today—which someone once described to me as Continental, a British accent with American and French influence. How I could possibly learned this from South Carolina and Harlem is totally a mystery to me, as mysterious as that strange influence I had over my classroom and assembly audiences.35

Kitt’s “rootless” voice, and cosmopolitan choice of homes and lyrics, becomes an important point of tension for both her black and white audiences. Yet the voice itself, in its strangeness and theatricality, embodies rather than erases the drama of reinvention. Kitt’s voice becomes the site for yearning for another place and self, quavering between the familiar and the unexpected.

But like the other eccentrics discussed in this book, Kitt’s masked distance is only part of the equation of her performances. Her ability to whip back and forth between the familiar and strange, restless desire and pleasure, emotional access and control, keeps her audience at full attention, while still keeping them at bay, sometimes making them squirm. Often her songs include a kind of build from slow to fast, cool to hot, distanced to connected, by means of a penetrating stare. ãi s highly
theatrical style itself mimics the construction of “Eartha Kitt” that she self-consciously deconstructs in her autobiographies: a polished, sophisticated, mediated self, under which lurks her “soul,” signified by her blackness and her southern roots.

We see Kitt’s performance of contrariety at work in St. Louis Blues, the 1958 film directed by Allen Reisner. The mise-en-scène is one seemingly set to highlight Kitt’s contradictions between controlled and explosive, which become racialized and classed in the visual vocabulary of the film. Kitt is dressed formally and demurely in a long, white gown, white gloves, and tight, pointy-toed, white pumps. The song, “St. Louis Blues,” is staged as a performance within the film, with tuxedoed symphony and an all-white audience dressed as if attending the opera. Kitt delivers the song “straight” at the beginning, making the most of her upright bearing and formal enunciation. She sings the first verse with a controlled, not quite operatic vibrato, carefully adding a hard t at the end of her ain’t. Her hands are clenched, body still, eyes downcast, but in the second verse, she raises her eyes to show that they are smoldering. As the song gets to the third verse, Kitt closes her eyes, and her hands travel up to her throat—the site of vocal erotic action and feeling. Her body slowly melts into a shimmy that starts at her hips, and moves to her shoulders, traveling up to her neck and head, until by song’s end her eyes pop open, and she ends in confrontation, staring bright and hard at the audience.

In the film’s trailer, Kitt is billed as “The Temptuous Eartha Kitt” (my italics)—a conflation of her tempting and tempestuous performance. In this “St. Louis Blues” sequence Kitt provides a sense of an internal battle—between the power of maintaining a mask of control and the pleasures of losing it—that becomes a signature trademark of Kitt’s delivery. The thrill of watching her slow burn in “St. Louis Blues” is both the voyeuristic pleasure of watching Kitt get hot under the collar and the subversive thrill that she has somehow infiltrated this scene of formally dressed whites and heated them up, exposing the lie of white propriety and distance. Since St. Louis Blues is a biographic film about blues pioneer W. C. Handy and his women, its depiction of the explosive powers of black musical performance have both intrafilmic and metasfilmic significance. Kitt is both playing the wily temptress who lures Handy into the world of pleasure—and soulful musical creation—and playing herself, the temptuous Eartha Kitt, making her way into the hearts and heated-up imaginations of white and black theatergoers all over the country. She might be said to be performing Duboisian double-consciousness, the self beneath the veil. But there is also a third level of Kitt’s mastery—
her ability to move between audiences and mediums, using her cabaret chops to master film, and creating a level of intimacy and pleasure for a multiracial audience. Here and elsewhere—as Kitt moves from kitschy cameo to serious film role, from live nightclub to record, from the New York Times to Jet, from talk show to a luncheon at the White House—we see Kitt’s triple consciousness, a third layer of performance that is savvy about the mass mediation and circulation of images in a racially unequal world.

Kitt’s performance of contrariety makes her an important precursor for Post-Soul performance and aesthetics. Like the other performers explored in this book, Kitt has a very theatrical and visually astute performance style—one that lends itself both to high produceability and circulation in mass culture and heart-stopping, one-of-a-kind live performances. (akin to Grace Jones’s high-concept stage shows, or Michael Jackson wowing the crowd with the premier of his moonwalk on the Motown 25: Yesterday, Today and Forever.) She combines a high professionalism and knowledge of the business of entertainment with a perversity and willingness to turn expected codes of gender and race on their ear. Finally, she embodies the expansive musical and performance vocabulary that will be embraced by the Post-Soul generation later as cultural mulattoism.

Kitt’s sound and vocal style reflect the complexity of performances of black Atlantic identity and counter more narrow conceptualizations of authentic blackness. Indeed, Kitt draws from a wide variety of black traditions and other influences: the tremulous hummingbird of a Fisk Jubilee solo, the charmed crooning of jazz icon Nat King Cole. She shares with Post-Soul singer Grace Jones the soulful, polylingual identity play of chanteuse figures like French songbird Edith Piaf and expatriate performer Josephine Baker; the shouts of both church and of musical theater; the bluesy, bent-noted wails of Bessie Smith; and, as transmogrified into rock, 1960s hipsters Grace Slick and Donovan. Likewise, Post-Soul eccentrics have a borderless approach to musical and performative influence.

In many ways, Kitt’s complicating of authentic blackness is illustrated by her sound. Listening to a range of Kitt’s music over the course of her career, I am struck that she is a musical magpie, picking up the brightest and juiciest—and sometimes showiest—trends in popular music. Kitt has covered and made her own virtually every pop style, from blues to Turkish folk songs, psychedelic to mellow Burt Bacharach, Duke Ellington standards to disco’s Bronski Beat. Kitt makes these styles her own by pushing against expectations of performing race and gender—often
turning on their heads interpretations of songs made by other, often untouchable “greats.” For example, she takes Duke Ellington’s jazz standard “In My Solitude,” which, when covered so elegantly in the past by virtuoso Ella Fitzgerald, is delicate in its yearning movement along the scale, and instead performs it in a rough, naturalistic, almost “folk” style. She sings the song in a low register, the grain of her voice nubbly where Ella’s is mellow and smooth. She extends each chord tone long, until she seems to run out of breath, sometimes wavering a little from the key. Her vibrato here is slow, and very basic, something like the folk style of 1980s performer Joan Armatrading. Her breath work in the song is audible, marking her effort. ái s work-song version of “Solitude”—sung as if sung alone while doing the chores outside, and seemingly unself-conscious in its inattention to vocal control—presents a rebuttal to Ella Fitzgerald’s widely embraced aesthetic of beautiful jazz singing. On the other hand, she takes a more controlled and stylized approach to her cover of Donovan’s “Hurdy Gurdy Man,” lending it her deep, nasal, androgynous voice, and creating her own wah-wah pedal with a styled vibrato. If rock is, for many performers, the space of vocal “roughness” and seemingly off-the-cuff style, Kitt’s rock voice is studied, thoughtful, even if haunting in its oddness. Kitt’s contrariness becomes her signature—signally her “Kittness” in its very unpredictability.

Within this unpredictability is a tension between recognizable, historically rooted sound and a kind of iconoclastic individualism. Yet, as Brenda Dixon Gottschild notes in Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance, contrariety is itself a primary premise of an Africanist aesthetic: “In a broad sense, the Africanist aesthetic can be understood as a precept of contrariety, or the encounter of opposites. á e conflict inherent in and implied by difference, discord, and irregularity is encompassed, rather than erased or necessarily resolved.”³⁶ Such aesthetic valuing in discord is key to the sounds of blues, Soul, and funk, as well in aspects like high-affect juxtaposition in dance and other forms of performance. Kitt takes this black aesthetic and expands it, applying contrariety not only to her vocal performance but also to her public performance of “self.”

**Conclusion: Eartha Kitt Unmasked**

áough Kitt began her journey of deconstructing her stage self in the 1950s with áursday’s Child, it’s the Post-Soul space that allows her to
give full recognition to the forces of racism, sexual violence, and poverty that have haunted her and, by extension, fueled her performances. In her earlier autobiographies, she was willing to talk about internalized racism, sexism, and the patrolling of white men as financial providers—way ahead of her time. But her frankness was always with a cost: her books were often dismissed by critics as tell-alls (particularly in the white press), her sexual play was the source of scandal, and her “telling it like it is” confrontations of lockstep political and racial identities were persistently under suspicion. Like Little Richard, another contrary eccentric who is even now still receiving his due, Eartha Kitt’s onstage and offstage deconstructions of her own persona and its limits are part of a Post-Soul turn.

The tensions between Kitt’s highly theatrical performing style and her embodied voice in her autobiographies and interviews presents a particular style of balance between public and private exposure that we’ll see taken up by other Post-Soul eccentrics. Kitt was constantly telling difficult stories, laughing at and naming her persona, and taking seriously the work of being in public while not taking herself seriously. Perhaps this is the way that she managed to stay alive for eighty-one years. This becomes clear in a 1989 appearance on a British talk show, The Terry Wogan Show. Kitt performs “I Want to Be Evil” in true Cruella De Vil camp fashion, and I see her scary stare, her hand as claw, her intimidating scowl and star-power legs. But she also keeps her hand on the piano player as if to keep herself steady, a quiet gesture of vulnerability. After the song, Wogan does his fried-by-the-sunlamp best to flirt, and Kitt turns up the heat, taking her stilettoed foot and resting it on Wogan’s thigh, threateningly close to his crotch. But after five minutes of double entendre, this tone shifts to earnestness. Kitt begins to dismantle her invulnerable man-eater image, and suddenly the center cannot hold. Wogan watches with wonder as Kitt reveals being abused by her guardians and riding the subway back and forth all night as a homeless teenager in New York. She tells, voice breaking, of the racism and loneliness that she’s faced. At first, Wogan seems nervous, then empathetic, until he finds himself talking to Eartha Mae, Kitt’s down-home self. Suddenly, the space of the syndicated talk show gains intimacy and political heft. A throwaway interview becomes unforgettable.

In his 1996 essay “Cultural Politics and Black Public Intellectuals,” Michael Hanchard includes Kitt in a roster of black public figures who have struggled, often in vain, to create cultural change from public roles that lack political power. While highly visible, Hanchard notes, some
of the most significant figures in US African American communities—including Martin Luther King, Muhammad Ali, and Hank Aaron—haven't held public office. And while this underscores the ability of marginalized groups to make the most of spaces in the cracks of civic life, when more central roles are barred to them, these spaces in the cracks are often limited in terms of the ability they offer for direct political engagement and long-term impact, Hanchard suggests. I'd like to suggest that Kitt’s forty-year occupation of the public’s imagination, her persistent insistence on edginess as a politicized act, must be accounted for. We must consider not only her role in terms of music, and style but her embodied rebellion against respectability. As, too, is “real” political work.

**Outro: Eartha Kitt, *Live from the Café Carlyle***

Click on Eartha Kitt’s *Live from the Café Carlyle* (2006) and become a part of the live audience. Forget the frustration of earphones, the hum of your air conditioner, children playing outside, the daylight from the window by your desk. Imagine your body now in darkness—knees, elbows, your white tablecloth, floating. You wait in the dark for the music to begin. The darkness gives you a sense of anonymity, but joins you with the others. You sniff whisky, cologne. Skin. The clapping tells you where the walls are, restarts time. The clapping makes her appear. Take the tiny icon of Kitt’s album cover provided by iTunes and expand it. Remember all of those faces you’ve seen of her: as young dancer on the Paris stage with improvised thigh slit; as beatnik in black turtleneck; as Catwoman, masked and sly. As a centerfold in *Jet*. Add to this composite, Kitt’s face at eighty as it appears on your screen. Imagine the conspiratorial gleam, the cocked eyebrow of Kitt looking just at you. Remember how beautiful you know black women can be as they age, rocking their crowns on Sunday. Remember watching your grandmother powdering herself, choosing her jewelry, insisting on earrings at the hospital; her care and her pleasure showed you that old age is still glamorous, the body still powerful. Still here. In the Post-Soul New York of Café Carlyle, cabarets are multiracial, queered spaces. Forget Liza in her bowler hat and think Vaginal Crème Davis and Carmelita Tropicana; think new burlesque, Kiki and Herb, and Julian Bond.

As Kitt moves from song to patter, try to pinpoint her accent. One part Katherine Hepburn, one part Edith Piaf? One part Diahann Carroll,
one part rolling-tongued Yul Brynner in the *King and I*? Give up. Pretend that you understand French. Feel sorry for those people who don’t know what “C’est, Si Bon” means. Get seduced and code-switched from French to Swahili to Spanish and then English. “I may be 80, but I’m still hot!” she tells us.

Hear Kitt’s laugh as it punctuates the end of each song and imagine how that laughter transforms her. Still here. Imagine shoulders rocking with laughter. Imagine shimmy and finger pop. Imagine laughing her laugh, growling her growl. Imagine yourself and others, a sea of black-brown-and-white-joined-shimmy, as seen from the stage. Imagine tapping your foot to the drum set’s high hat.

The stage is so close you can feel the waves of heat from the lights and the musicians. You can see the horn player’s steady, circular breathing, the rise and fall of his chest, the sweat on the drummer’s wrists, the working of his forearms. Watch the piano player as he watches his singer; watch him cue the others with a nod to slow down the rock tempo to ballad. If Kitt rules us with her gaze, it’s the band that keeps her steady, keeps her moving.

Hear Kitt’s confessional whisper toward the end of the set: “I want to thank you for loving me. Because of you, I’m still here.” Imagine her looking directly at you. Feel your heart leap. As she segues from “September Song” to “It Was a Very Good Year” to “Here’s to Life,” think a little about dying. And then admire the control of her breath and her volume. She can still shout, using the cage of her chest to hold the sound deep, then push it free. Imagine the grace of her body, and of all the parts needed for singing: stomach and spleen, diaphragm and lungs, rib cage and chest and throat. Snapping fingers, lilting tongue. Nostrils and lips and shoulders. Hips. Imagine breath and spit. Imagine her beating heart.