Let’s end how we began: with a story. It was a Sunday night—February 7, 2016, to be exact. I was on my couch eating ice cream and cake when I received a text from a friend: “Did you watch it? What did you think of it?” The “it” in question was the Super Bowl 50 halftime show, where Coldplay, Beyoncé Knowles, and Bruno Mars performed. I informed my friend that I had, indeed, watched the set, and that I found Coldplay’s performance a bit confusing. My friend responded, “I know, right?!? It should have just been Beyoncé! Or maybe Beyoncé featuring Bruno. But definitely Beyoncé! I know she headlined a few years ago, but still. She’s grown so much since then. She’s basically a different artist now. Her performance now would look nothing like her performance then.” I agree that Knowles had developed into a different artist during the intervening three years. By 2016, Knowles was increasingly interested in recording and releasing concept albums like her self-titled audiovisual work *Beyoncé*, in which she explicitly proclaimed that she was a feminist. Moreover, one day prior to her 2016 Super Bowl performance, Knowles released the “Formation” song and video, the latter of which addressed issues of environmental racism—via the U.S. government’s response to Hurricane Katrina—police brutality, and other forms of anti-Black violence, especially as they manifest in the South. “Formation,” of course, set the stage for her album *Lemonade*, which centered the social lives of Black women in the South. With all of that said, however, I still disagreed with my friend that Knowles’s 2013 and 2016 Super Bowl halftime sets did/could/would not share anything. In particular, I believe that both performances overlap in their engagements with South Asian music and culture.
Knowles headlined the 2013 Super Bowl halftime show in New Orleans. Her set comprised an array of her recent solo hits—“Run the World (Girls)” and “Love on Top”—her classic hits—“Crazy in Love”—and even a reunion with the members of her former girl group Destiny’s Child—“Bootylicious” and “Independent Women Part I.” While I was impressed with the complexity and sharpness of Knowles’s halftime show, I was most struck by her performance of her 2003 Billboard #1 hit song “Baby Boy,” and how it resonates with the framework of the other side of things. An electric sitar-driven song, and one that is part of the litany of South Asian–inspired rap and R&B songs that Truth Hurts’s “Addictive” inspired and that Rajé Shwari’s sample-like demo responded to, Knowles’s Super Bowl rendition of “Baby Boy” upped the South Asian cultural aesthetic by fusing “herself into an image of Mahadevi . . . the female deity that serves as the foundation of [the Hindu goddesses] Durga and Kali” (Figure 13). Rebecca Kumar rightly points out that Beyoncé’s performative allusion to Durga, and its workings alongside her all-female band and dancers, operates as a women of color feminist “interruption” of the heteropatriarchal impulse of the National Football League. While her engagements with Indian spirituality and its disruption of heteronormativity recalls John Coltrane’s similar approaches to Indian spiritual traditions and how they helped to mark his illegible masculinity and place him outside the normative jazzman archetypes, Knowles’s invocation of Durga also occurs alongside a powerful display of Black women’s eroticism. Her Super Bowl performance of “Baby Boy” involve her slowly caressing her inner thighs and crotch. Such sexually explicit acts performed in relation to punctuated sitar plucks powerfully signify on Truth Hurts’s erotic play in “Addictive.” But given that “Baby Boy” is also a dancehall-inspired recording that features Sean Paul (whose voice plays during this Super Bowl rendition), her crotch and autoerotic play situate this set within Black Caribbean women’s “punany powah” erotics that Carolyn Cooper famously describes in her analyses of Black women’s sexual politics in Caribbean music culture. In so doing, Knowles taps into much broader African and South Asian diasporic connections. Her halftime performance of “Baby Boy” makes use of South Asian and Black Caribbean culture in ways that bridge feminist, sexual, and spiritual politics, and that are exercised in New Orleans, a port city known for its (both violent and nonviolent) racial and cultural migrations, meetings, and mixings. As Daphne Brooks has argued, Knowles often embraces her creole heritage and ties to New Orleans. But her use of Durga also speaks to another kind
of New Orleans history, one that, as Vivek Bald notes, involves Indian immigrant men who settled in New Orleans and married and had children with Black women and other women of color during the early and mid-twentieth century. Knowles’s Super Bowl version of “Baby Boy,” then, is a layered performance of Afro-South Asian sound that is feminist, erotic, and transnational in politics and scope. It continues to express the import of the other side of things in Black popular music.

And it’s against this backdrop that we can analyze Knowles’s return to the Super Bowl in 2016 in Santa Clara, California. As mentioned above, Knowles was not the sole performer for this show; Coldplay and Bruno Mars joined her. The set went as follows: Coldplay opens with a medley of their hits, Bruno Mars then takes the stage to do “Uptown Funk,” Knowles follows Mars and performs “Formation,” Mars and Knowles do a collaborative mash-up of “Uptown Funk” and “Crazy in Love,” and the set closes with all three acts performing another Coldplay medley.

What interests me here is the connection, or disconnection as it were, between Coldplay and Knowles during their respective solo sets. A couple of months prior to the event, critics attacked Knowles and Coldplay for engaging in cultural appropriation for the music video to their collaboration “Hymn for the Weekend.” The video features Knowles as a Bollywood figure and Coldplay, a white British rock band, participating in the holi festival. Many charged Coldplay and Knowles with “perpetuating a colonial trope

Figure 13. “Baby Boy” sequence by Beyoncé, Super Bowl halftime performance, 2013.
that misrepresents India as an exotic playground or Orientalist fantasy . . . [and] consolidates singular narratives about India that romanticize color and song at the expense of Indians’ everyday lives.” Perhaps because of the backlash, Knowles and Coldplay do not perform “Hymn for the Weekend” during their halftime show. But Coldplay does open their set on a stage inspired by the 1960s white hippie counterculture movement in San Francisco, replete with Hindi writing and South Asian–inspired “marigold flowers and colourful garlands.” Knowles (and Bruno Mars for that matter) continues the Bay Area 1960s theme, but does so in such a way that places her set strictly within Black Power politics. She performs her brand-new single “Formation” while occasionally pumping a Black Power fist and while an all-Black-female dancing crew dressed in Black Panther–inspired garb (the Panthers originated in Oakland) support her. The song and Super Bowl performance of “Formation” also include Knowles using Black queer vernacular (e.g., “slay”). Importantly, there is not a stage change for Mars and Knowles’s sets, and so they perform on the same Indophilic stage on which Coldplay opened.

This fact of Knowles and Coldplay using the same South Asian–inspired stage for their respective sets is important because it encapsulates what I’ve framed throughout this book as the other side of things. While the shared stage becomes the site from which Coldplay and Knowles perform in general and engage with South Asian culture in particular, their performances as well as the space of the stage hold and produce different meanings. With songs like “Yellow” and “Adventures of a Lifetime,” Coldplay’s set taps into the 1960s hippie culture, and involves South Asian culture (again via the stage) as a site from which to articulate universality and love. Conversely, Knowles uses that same stage, that same foundation of South Asian culture, for “Formation” and lyrically expresses pride in Black hairstyles—Afros—and gay slang derived fantasies of Black women’s sexual pleasure—“If he hit it right, I might take him on a flight on my chopper (’cause I slay)” —and sartorially signal Black Power—Knowles’s backup dancers’ Black Panther–inspired outfits (Figure 14). For Knowles, South Asian culture both figuratively and literally sets the stage for her Black feminist and queer political performance. And so this is all to say, and to illustrate, that the other side of things demands that we must refuse to use white artists’ engagements with South Asian culture as an origin point or a nexus of comparison through which to analyze Black musicians’ South Asian musical encounters and/or collaborations. The other side of things illuminates how Afro–South Asian music making endeavors
produce their own knowledges and envision their own possibilities that are often distinct from those performed by white artists. The other side of things demands that we understand Afro–South Asian collaborative sounds as musical performances that imagine coalitions and relationalities differently.

Of course, the Super Bowl performance ends with Knowles, Mars, and Coldplay collectively performing on that same stage and singing Coldplay’s “Up & Up,” a song that posits universal love as the solution to systemic inequities like poverty. Some might arguably read Knowles’s participation in such neoliberal logics and liberal politics of equality as depoliticized practices that undermine her performance of “Formation.” But I choose to see the performances of “Formation” and “Up & Up” differently and separately. As we saw with the short-lived performance of Truth Hurts or the largely forgotten Rick James album The Flag, the other side of things often resides in spaces of limited temporality. It manifests and creates meaning in the brief and the overlooked. And so both of Knowles’s performances of “Baby Boy” and “Formation” carry the Afro–South Asian political impulse of the other side of things. They are a part of the Afro–South Asian genealogy of sound that I’ve discussed throughout this book. Whether it was John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Rick James, André 3000, Missy Elliott, Truth Hurts, or Timbaland and Rajé Shwari, each artist’s music during the civil rights, Black Power, 1980s AIDS, 1990s model minority, and post-9/11 eras joined aesthetics and
politics in ways that transgressed assumed boundaries of and between race, culture, nation, gender, and sexuality. This music moves beyond vertical interactions that (re)centered whiteness, and instead gestures toward horizontal alliances, to the political struggles and possibilities of creating music among and between the margins. The music that these artists created highlights the braided histories, overlapping presents, and connected futures of the African and South Asian diasporas. And it is this music that articulates an imaginative space that queerly fosters and foregrounds Afro–South Asian bonds. It is an alternative guiding political vision of the world that I call and will forever hold on to as the other side of things.