

# Listening to colonialism and hearing liberation

Napoleon Maddox

Writer, musician, educator; Cincinnati, Ohio

## ABSTRACT

The goal of this essay is to hear the ‘vocality’ of Black liberation ‘in response’ to colonialism. Considering the widely held assumption that Black liberation movements are found across the African diaspora, where there are concentrations of Black bodies, in this essay I explore an approach of listening to colonialism where Black voices are not immediately apparent. After questioning the way contributions made by leaders and artists are often conceptualized as contrasting, I elaborate on the main questions: “what if we could really sense the continuum of the contributions we have made?” As I build a reply to such a question, I use Franz Fanon, Jay-Z, Nina Simone, bell hooks and Ralph Ellison, as well as my own songs. In conclusion, I suggest that understanding the continuum means to hear the result of a million collective unheard voices.

## Keywords

Black voice, rap, connections, liberation, pop-icons, Toussaint Louverture

Two siblings born and raised in the predominately Black community of the West End in Louisville, Kentucky, gather in the Caribbean with their children and grandchildren for a reunion. They are sisters, Naomi and Priscilla, who grew up in the late 1950s. Naomi left Louisville after high school to attend the University of Dubuque in Iowa. After graduating she settled in Dubuque, married and raised 3 children, who now all have children of their own. Priscilla stayed in Louisville. After high school she attended the University of Louisville, moved out of the West End, but remained active in the community. She also has grandchildren in middle school and high school.

Lounging on the patio of the Airbnb the family rented for the week, the youth of the family begin to debate whether or not contemporary African-American entertainers could be considered leaders. The discussion began with a clip of a Malcolm X speech that had recently been inserted as an ironic intro to a popular rap track with the slain leader saying, “we are the only race of people where entertainers can be passed off as leaders.” An impassioned debate ensued, where another outspoken cousin proclaimed that – through wealth, job creation and influence – artists like Jay-Z, Drake and Kendrick Lamar have actually done more for the advancement of Black folks than the NAACP and the entire Civil Rights movement put together.

The elders of the family sat, looking from their chairs at a nearby table in utter shock, “how can they fix their mouths to say?!!”

However, before they gathered words to denounce the uninitiated youth, a cousin from Iowa said to the others, “isn’t it all interconnected, though? We just gotta be doing the work of seeing the connections.”

Peering out of a window from a seat on a train crossing France, I’m asking myself the same questions, “what if we could really sense the continuum of the contributions we have made?” It was when the train passed a Buffalo Grill steakhouse franchise that I asked myself how many people know of the profound impact Africans enslaved in America had on American cuisine and dietary tendencies. I’m thinking at first of the seemingly endless list of recipes that came from Black hands, souls, hearts; meals that 95% of the American public take for granted as American cuisine but resulted from Black hunger.

I’m thinking of a specific moment in the second episode of the Netflix series *High on the Hog*, where one of the subjects says, “no matter what *they* thought of us, there were those of us that valued us enough to think we should at least eat well” (Satterfield 2021). These master chefs in the slave quarters or in the kitchens of the big houses made new traditions of taking the worse and making the best. This is exactly what Jay-Z is referring to in a verse where he says, “My ancestors took old food and made soul food” (2020).<sup>1</sup>

This line represents an awareness that is more meaningful than a catchy rhyme. It tells us that the writer is in tune with the rich traditions African resourcefulness brings to mainstream American and global pop culture. Of course, socially engaged rap music is known for celebrating Black cultural heritage. In fact, rap artists have long been divided, backed by ‘respectability police’, along the lines of which artists are worthwhile because they have ‘something to say’ and which should be ignored as just rap, and dismissed as ghetto music. So-called ‘conscious rap’ held less and less sway in the market and seemingly socially debased music set sales records. Artists became keenly aware of these tropes and played with them. Jay-Z may be the best example, a pop-icon and mogul, far from fringes of the underground, putting the exploitation of Black value center stage with ever increasing frequency.

However exceptional as an artist and entrepreneur, Shawn Carter (Jay-Z’s legal name) is doing what Black artists have always done. While some choose to be more outspoken and deliberate, others see it as a distraction. Nina Simone declares that it is the artists’ duty “to reflect the times.”<sup>2</sup> Simone is loved for embodying this obligation and continues to touch younger generations. This can be attributed to the sense that reflecting the times is intrinsic to Black art, and Black people are not commonly making art in a void. The important life cycle ceremonies – births, weddings, funerals – anchored ancient African traditions, so meanings

always held a place in Black culture. It stands to reason that, when we face white violence, often misnamed ‘white supremacy’, our arts will emerge from survival tools and techniques.

As early as it has become aware of its proclivity, the European world has had an appetite for African aesthetics without much interest in what produced the aesthetics. This goes back generations. What has resulted is what I would call the benefit of Ellison’s invisibility. I’m considering what he describes in *The Invisible Man* (Ellison 1952) as an advantage: to be unseen in the so-called dominant white culture, but to have no choice but to see all that comprises that culture in order to survive. In fact, the not seeing, not tasting, not hearing is obviously selective and thus pretended. If we are not seen, our dances and styles of dress cannot be imitated. If we are not heard then our Blues and Soul cannot be imitated. The advantage, then, is in the reality that while much of the white world has pretended not to recognize the humanity and genius of that which it has labeled Black, the consumption thereof has infected the colonizer with pathogens of liberation. Our cultural invisibility is a trojan horse.

I wrote a song entitled “Shark Men.” One of the most powerful and provocative lines goes, “the mind of the African is poison to the system, affecting every aspect of how you living” (Maddox 2018). The song is used to open a multimedia production called “Millie-Christine: Twice the First Time.” With a team of musicians, DJ, VJ, stage design and costuming, I tell the story of my grandmother’s aunts, Millie-Christine McKoy. They were conjoined twins born in 1851 in North Carolina. Their family was enslaved at the time of their birth, thus they were exhibited for the profit of the enslavers. It was important to me, in the construction of the show, to give the history of Millie-Christine, their family, time and context a contemporary voice. This choice was not for the purpose of aesthetic but to research, rediscover and apply the lessons their story offers us today.

Every time I launch this line about the African mind, it feels like a few seconds of revolt. I call it a poison to the system of white violence because it disrupts. Yet as it is ingested, the appetite grows. It’s alluring to the voyeur, yet deconstructing the way he sees the subject of his objectification. He came for the show, but the lens is turned on him as he is transformed, even if this transformation has to be assessed long after the show has concluded. It is this voice of liberation that we amplify in “Twice the First Time.”

In their poem, published in 1895 with the title *Biographical Sketch of Millie-Christine*, the lines, “None like me since the days of Eve / None such, perhaps, will ever live / If marvel to myself am I, / Why not to all who pass me by?” calmly declare their Black Lives Matter (Martell 2000, 130).

I celebrate Millie-Christine for their personal, intimate unity and use this as metaphor to insist on unity in the larger social sense.

The trojan horse here, though, is that just by telling the true incredible story of them spending most of their early life being exploited in the circus, we are bringing audiences into

celebrating Pan-Africanism. Millie-Christine were known for investing in and building the Black community Welches Creek, near Whiteville, North Carolina, once they gained their freedom. Listening to the Jim Crow oppression that made itself heard loud and clear from the late 1800s up until the 1960s, we can hear the harmonious voices of Millie-Christine singing songs of freedom. Clearly, they made a deliberate choice to bring their wealth back to the Black community. This was not an investment in the American dream. These same women who were exploited under the exotic marketing of “African Twins” were investing in African people, in the Jim Crow South. There is no way to deny that.

The more we understand about the colonial white terror they faced in their time, the more clearly we hear their voices. The McKoy sisters didn’t know of Marcus Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association. He founded this organization in 1914, two years after they passed away, in 1912. I am impassioned at the thought of historic figures known, lesser known and unknown, connected by their responses to colonialism. It leads us to understand that voices of freedom do not come from individual leaders, like a solo MC on the mic, or a lone minister in the pulpit. Instead we can see time after time that these leaders are responding to a chorus of liberation. As Kwame Turé eloquently explained in the song *Exhibit B*, of the Boogie Down Productions album, “Edutainment”: “history is never made by individuals, history is made by the masses of the people... Take any leader and surround them by thousands of people willing to make their dreams reality and the situation changes drastically” (2009).

An example history offers is that of Haiti’s successful fight for independence led by the enslaved Africans, articulated by Toussaint Louverture. No doubt, Toussaint was a great strategist and general. Napoleon Bonaparte knew and feared him, as he had already proven his military prowess. In a repertoire of songs reflecting on history and imagining possibilities, I celebrate Toussaint’s awareness that the people were ready, thus he joined the uprising in progress and used the knowledge he had of global politics to write Haiti’s constitution, establishing its independence. Seeing his leadership and understanding the threat he posed to the colonial empire of France, Bonaparte sought to isolate and silence him in a dungeon far away, instead of executing him as to avoid martyrdom. Fortunately, neither the voice of the people nor the voice of Toussaint would be silenced, as Toussaint was not a lone preacher in a pulpit, but a servant of the revolution answering the call, that said now is the time to use what you know to serve your people.

Our challenge then becomes seeing how much we agree on our pending liberation and the faith that we are continuing what our ancestors started collectively. It is not only the voices we raise at rallies with banners and chants, it’s also the quiet warmth, care and inventiveness we serve in a recipe that comforts troubled souls, facing oppression on fronts we may not know. With compassion we can be in tune, not needing to know every note. Sufficient evidence is there for us to hear, connect and harmonize. We have to retrain our senses to liberation.

Envy, post-traumatic stress disorder and other forms of physiological dysfunction receive the limelight to serve as deliberate distractions.

Thinking again of the visual poetry one experiences realizing that Millie-Christine spent their entire lives connected to each other is persuading. With just a little reflection we can each think of someone that we have decided not to *tolerate*, but in actuality we may be the one who has to be tolerated. In developing the performance “Twice the First Time,” I sought to weld our interpersonal obligations to our struggles against injustice.

When we look at the recent uncovering of manipulations carried out by oppressive institutions to distract, divide, disorganize and immobilize El Hajj Malik Shabazz and effective members of his organizations, it should be a sobering reminder that zeal, even in earnest, can be manipulated.

While the settler or the policeman has the right the live-long day to strike the native, to insult him and to make him crawl to them, you will see the native reaching for his knife at the slightest hostile or aggressive glance cast on him by another native; for the last resort of the native is to defend his personality vis-à-vis his brother. Tribal feuds only serve to perpetuate old grudges deep buried in the memory. By throwing himself with all his force into the vendetta, the native tries to persuade himself that colonialism does not exist. (Fanon 1965, 42)

Wanting to forget the real source of our colonial trauma we bury severe offenses made by institutions and its representatives, which we feel we cannot defeat. For example, we hang up the phone, surrendering, dropping the demands we had when we had called any number of corporations that skillfully avert us with layers of automation and mind-numbing ‘elevator music’. We say, “ah (insert expletive) forget it.” However, the stress of that surrender and defeat is still in our system. Someone has to pay. It won’t be the corporation that suffers the consequences, but those near us, sisters and brothers who suffer the same invisibility that enrages us.

The collectively unsighted referred to by Ellison in his masterpiece will be puzzled by the relation I am making between colonial trauma and corporate institutions. The *invisible*, however, will get it, all of it! I ask myself if acknowledgement and remedy of compounded corporate invisibility could save lives of brothers loosing each other in tribal feuds described by Fanon. Could it serve as therapy if financial strapped heads of household read and discussed Ellison’s character, sounding delusional but victorious?

I have been carrying on a fight with Monopolized Light & Power for some time now. I use their service and pay them nothing at all, and they don’t know it. Oh, they suspect that power is being drained off, but they don’t know where. All they know is that according to the master meter back there in their power station a hell of a lot of free current is disappearing somewhere into the jungle of Harlem. The joke, of course, is that I don’t live in Harlem but in a border area. Several years ago (before I discovered the advantages of being invisible) I went through the routine process of buying service and paying outrageous rates. But no more. I gave up all that, along with my apartment, and my old way of life: That way based upon the fallacious assumption that I like other men, was visible. (Ellison 1952, 36)

We laugh a little at the pretzel logic strategy of Ellison's protagonist, but we say "right on!" We fantasize, "if I could find a way to do what he's doing for real, I would." Then a challenge from the mundane world slaps us back from our fantastic personal revolutions, and we get back to the task of keeping the lights on, rent paid and children fed.

But, still, when we study the history of colonial manipulation, even it sings back liberation. Historians say the body of Toussaint was dismembered after he died a slow death in the captivity of his cell at Fort du Joux. He was allegedly dismembered in an effort to diminish the chances that his place of burial could be a shrine to those he inspired. For this reason, we do not know where the body of Toussaint Louverture is buried. However, thousands of people make the pilgrimage to Fort du Joux annually. I have been there to spiritually prepare, research, create and perform *L'Ouverture de Toussaint*. Visiting this place, you find yourself in the middle of nowhere on an isolated mountain, that is cold and damp even on summer nights. It is as beautiful as it is chilling.

We would have a completely different experience if Toussaint had been imprisoned and killed in Paris or another French city. Those making the pilgrimage often spend moments of reflection in Toussaint's cell. Some light candles, some whisper a prayer, some sing. When we exit the chambers and networks of tunnels and return to the open air, outside the walls of the fortress, the contrast of the force and freedom of nature can be disorienting at first, then comforting.

In her book *Belonging* bell hooks writes, as she talks about freedom in nature: "Nature was the place of victory. In the natural environment, everything had its place including humans. In that environment everything was shaped by the reality of mystery" (2009, 8).

Realizing the likelihood that the remains of Toussaint's body are scattered across that cold stone mountainside in order to subdue the inspiration conjured if he had a single burial site, I offered a song entitled "Bones."

The refrain blends lament and admonishment: "bones buried in the earth might fail you / if you don't know then who gone tell you / not the work of the merchants to pause and help you / nor dig up for self all the gems you ought to" (Maddox 2022).

Because freedom is natural. The voices of the natural world are calling us to seek liberation. Colonialism is pregnant with the challenge for us to dig up the freedom that is naturally ours, to find harmony within our individual selves, with humanity and the natural world. Finding our keys, we rediscover that songs of freedom are in harmony. We might believe ourselves to be humming a uniquely personal blues, between that which *is* but yearning for that which *should be*, and it *is* indeed uniquely ours, but in as much as we are facing related forms of oppression. We will discover deeply moving lines in harmony, listening to each other raising our voices for liberation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The quote comes from the featuring of Jay-Z in the track “Ghost of Soulja Slim” included in Jay Electronica’s album *A Written Testimony*.

<sup>2</sup> Nina Simone made this famous statement in a well-known interview (circa 1968), also included in the compilation “Definitive Rarities” (Artwork Media 2009).

## References

Ellison, Ralph. 1952. *Invisible Man*. Cambridge: Random House.

Fanon, Frantz. 1965. *The Wretched of the Earth*. London: McGibbon & Kee.

hooks, bell. 2009. *Belonging*. London: Routledge.

Martell, Joanne. 2000. *Millie-Christine. Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*. Saline, MI: McNaughton & Gunn.

## Audiovisual Works

Boogie Down Productions. 1990. *Edutainment*. Jive RCA.

Jay Electronica. 2020. *A Written Testimony*. Roc Nation.

Maddox, Napoleon. 2018. *Shark Men*. Alter K.

Maddox, Napoleon. 2022. *Bones*. Sans Sucre.

Satterfield, Stephen. 2021. *High on the Hog*. Netflix.

Simone, Nina. 2009. *Definitive Rarities*. Artwork Media.

Soundcloud links (permanent playlist available on Friday, November 18, 2022):

[https://soundcloud.com/sorgandnapoleonmaddox/bones/s-BjAcFcUCjpD?si=de4e7fdb4fc94e71a2c07a9328839892&utm\\_source=clipboard&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=social\\_sharing](https://soundcloud.com/sorgandnapoleonmaddox/bones/s-BjAcFcUCjpD?si=de4e7fdb4fc94e71a2c07a9328839892&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing).

[https://soundcloud.com/sorgandnapoleonmaddox/sharkmen?si=4f5898517ed54f5cbf0fdc2cb5ad6ab7&utm\\_source=clipboard&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=social\\_sharing](https://soundcloud.com/sorgandnapoleonmaddox/sharkmen?si=4f5898517ed54f5cbf0fdc2cb5ad6ab7&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing).

**Napoleon Maddox** is a writer, musician, and educator. As hip hop and jazz artist, his work has been based on historical documentation and social engagement. His first substantial work in terms of community involvement focused on the suburban areas of France, where he created the musical action “A Riot named Nina,” in which he explores both less-known repertoire of Nina Simone and the social conditions of the Parisian *banlieues*. In 2017 he premiered the multimedia production “Twice the First Time.” Through document analysis and collections of oral histories, Maddox unfolded the narrative of conjoined artists Millie-Christine McCoy, born in slavery in 1851. He used a similar approach in his most recent production, “L’Ouverture de Toussaint” (2021), inspired by the life of the leader of the Haitian revolution.