Led by a Franco-Brazilian team of scholars in the humanities, social sciences, arts and literatures, this joint research project is developing a digital platform for Transatlantic Cultural History to be published in four languages. In a series of essays exploring cultural relations between Europe, Africa, and the Americas, it presents a connected history of the Atlantic space since the 18th century, highlighting the cultural dynamics of the Atlantic region and its crucial role in the contemporary process of globalization.

Nina Simone's Soundscapes of Exile and Return

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- North Atlantic - Africa - Europe - Caribbean - North America
- The Atlantic Space Within Globalization - The Consolidation of Mass Cultures

Analyzing songwriting, performances, and interviews, this essay explores Nina Simone as a transatlantic cultural figure through the themes of protest, exile, and Black womanhood. Tracing Simone's movements across the Atlantic illuminates enduring questions of race, refuge, and cultural belonging that continue to shape Black diasporic life today.

Voicing the Diaspora: Nina Simone and the Transatlantic Imagination

In April 2025, I was invited to moderate a Q&A session with French artists Ludmilla Dabo and David Lescot after their performance *Portrait of Ludmilla as Nina Simone*, part of the Alliance Française de Seattle International Women's Day Celebration. I had just published a book on "Ne me quitte pas," a song by Jacques Brel that had first come to my attention through Nina Simone's 1965 cover. Brel's original is iconic, but Simone's version changed my life. Hearing Simone use French to emote profound sorrow and pain while seeing myself in her Blackness and Americanness somehow gave me permission to dream beyond my English-speaking world.[1] As I sat in the auditorium nestled under Seattle's Space Needle, I was overcome by Dabo's presence as she transmitted the ups and downs of Simone's life through the French language of her storytelling and the predominantly English lyrics of Simone's songs. Here was Dabo, a French woman, but also the daughter of a Senegalese father and a Cameroonian mother, embodying one of the most important American performers of all time. Five thousand miles from her home in Paris, Dabo reminded an American audience just how deep and expansive Simone's influence was and continues to be. Dabo was engaging in a transatlantic voyage, bringing back the gift that Simone had given the other side of the Atlantic all those decades ago.

This essay explores Simone as a transatlantic cultural figure through the themes of protest, exile, performance, and Black womanhood. Simone used her music to speak up against social and racial injustices in the United States. As she explained in an interview with Maya Angelou for *Redbook* in 1970,

> "No Black person can be unaware of the climate in the United States. But during my early years I was no more aware than most. My sense of responsibility unfolded slowly… Then four babies were murdered in the church. Four Black girls. I wrote – or, better, 'Mississippi Goddam' wrote itself through me. I had to say something – express or explode… At this time I must stretch to reach my fullest potential. I must address myself to the needs of my people… People need inspiration." [2]

As the horrors during the Civil Rights Movement rocked Simone, she found herself relying on her craft both to channel her anguish from witnessing Black death and to incite others to protest these abuses.

However, the backlash to her speaking truth to power forced her into exile in places like France, Liberia, and Barbados. Sojourns in these and other parts of the Atlantic world allowed her to escape horrible treatment at home. Just as importantly, as the collection

of essays entitled Women Artists Across the Atlantic shows in the experiences of various women, this "geographical displacement opened up spaces for creation and opportunities for emancipation." Simone influenced and was influenced by the various worlds she visited. Through her songwriting, performances, interviews, and other forms of self-expression, this article analyzes how Simone got to know herself on her own terms while changing the world in the process. The accompanying Story Map with audio and visual clips provides readers with multimodal insight into Nina Simone as a performer and a mouthpiece for protest movements in the United States and beyond. Tracing Simone's movements across the Atlantic reveals not only the routes of exile and artistic reinvention she carved for herself, but also illuminates enduring questions of race, refuge, and cultural belonging that continue to shape Black diasporic life today.

Becoming Simone: Genre, Protest, and the Desire to Flee America

Even before feeling compelled to speak out against racial injustices as an adult, Simone was no stranger to subversion. Born Eunice Waymon in 1933 in Tyron, North Carolina, she dreamed of becoming America's first black classical-trained concert pianist as a young girl. While this was a lofty goal for a Black girl in the segregated South, Simone had been surrounded by music her whole life and believed she was as deserving as anyone. Her family had a pedal organ at home, an item so important that it was the first thing they saved when their house caught fire.[3] Her parents and siblings played the piano and were active in the church choir, so Simone picked it up from them. She finally received formal training when her mother's employer, a white woman who had hired her as a housekeeper, offered to pay for piano lessons. Simone excelled under the tutelage of an Englishwoman she called Miz Massy.

In her autobiography, Simone recalled having a pretty good childhood, but as she grew older, she started noticing societal inequities. Her most formative experience was at age eleven during her piano recital at town hall. When the organizers tried to move her parents from the front row to make room for a random white family, Simone threatened to cancel the concert. Her parents returned to their original seats, but something inside Simone changed: "I walked around feeling as if I had been played and every slight, real or imagined, cut me raw. But the skin grew back again a little toucher, a little less innocent, and a little more black."[4]

Due to experiences like these, when the Curtis Institute of Music rejected her application in 1951, Simone attributed it to discrimination. Her dream of being a concert pianist fizzled that day, and she had to pivot to make a living. Simone used her years of training to find work at a bar in Atlantic City. As the daughter of a preacher, however, this was the ultimate taboo: "The only problem was Momma finding out I was going to be playing piano in a bar. To her that wouldn't be any different from working in the fires of hell. I could already hear her voice in my head: 'A bar? My God, in my own family I have the devil himself!'"[5] To avoid detection of her unsavory career choices, she created a stage name, inspired by the Spanish word *niña* (girl) that a boyfriend had affectionately called her and by her adoration for French actress Simone Signoret.[6] Nina Simone debuted her new persona at the Midtown Bar and Grill.

Simone began cultivating a jazz aesthetic to match the locales where she found work. As she assumed this new musical role, including becoming a singer to keep her job, she pushed against what she saw as limiting:

> "I didn't like to be put in a box with other jazz singers because my musicianship was totally different, and in its own way superior. Calling me a jazz singer was a way of ignoring my musical background because I didn't fit into white ideas of what a black performer should be. It was a racist thing; 'If she's black she must be a jazz singer.'"[7]

Simone used her classical training to set herself apart, structuring jazz and blues with the precision of a Bach fugue and the intensity of a concert pianist. Even when performing at bars, she would stop playing if patrons disrupted her concentration, expecting the audience to respect her as they would a performer at Carnegie Hall.[8]

As Ruth Feldstein demonstrated, Simone was doing more than questioning racist logics that limited Black artists to nothing more than natural entertainers. She was also countering gendered assumptions that privileged African American men in showbusiness.[9] As such, Simone was not just Black, or a woman, she was the

intersection of the two; and she found a way to navigate Black womanhood in white and male spaces through the power of music.

Daphne Brooks characterized Simone's raced and gendered defiance as a type of musical maroonage – a breaking away from the genres and expectations that tried to contain her. Simone's genre-crossing wasn't just stylistic. It was political. She claimed freedom not only in the themes she sang about, but in the way she sang them by bending form, refusing categorization, and staging what Brooks called "musical integration and performative agitation." But Simone's maroonage was never a full retreat. Rather than fleeing systems of patriarchal and racist oppression, she brought them into her work, engaging their contradictions head-on. Her performances didn't escape the Atlantic world's violences. They confronted them, rewired them, and made them audible. In doing so, Simone did more than navigate Black womanhood. She reimagined it from something to be confined or explained to something that could erupt, shapeshift, and command the room.[10]

The defiance underpinning Simone's musical maroonage laid the foundation for her move toward incorporating social activism into her musical repertoire, and New York City was the setting that helped nurture this new focus. According to Feldstein, "Musically, socially, and politically, she came of age in the late 1950s and early 1960s as part of an interracial avant-garde in Greenwich Village and Harlem that included Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, Leroi Jones (later Amiri Baraka), Abbey Lincoln, Miriam Makeba, and James Baldwin, among others."[11] This cosmopolitan and international group of Black intellectuals and artists was important for Simone's transformation into an activist. In particular, she credited Lorraine Hansberry for this awakening: "I started to think about myself as a black person in a country run by white people and a woman in a world run by men."[12] Both Hansberry's art – her play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), which chronicles a Black family dealing with racism and discrimination, was the first Broadway play by an African American woman – and her untimely death from pancreatic cancer in 1965, demonstrated to Simone the precarity of Black life and the need to speak up for change.

The general public witnessed Simone's transformation in 1964 through her performance at Carnegie Hall and through the recording of the event immortalized in the album *Nina Simone in Concert*. Simone dexterously wowed the audience with a mix of love songs and activist anthems. Brooks offered a deep analysis of how Simone's cover of Weill and Brecht's "Pirate Jenny" used a showtune set in Germany's 1930s Weimar Republic to make a statement about the US Civil Rights movement.[13] However, it was "Mississippi Goddam," a song she wrote in the wake of the 1963 Birmingham church bombing when Ku Klux Klan members killed four young girls in a terrorist attack, that left the deepest impression.

The song's deceptively jaunty show-tune rhythm served as biting irony. The refrain – "This is a show tune, but the show hasn't been written for it yet" – mocked the absurdity of packaging Black pain for white audiences, even as she performed within a musical form familiar to them. Lyrics that raged against the brutality of white supremacy bubbled to the surface: "Alabama's got me so upset/Tennessee made me lose my rest." Her naming of Southern states was an act of indictment, and her refusal to self-censor signaled a shift in her politics of performance. The stage was no longer just a venue for entertainment, but a platform for protest. As much as "Mississippi Goddam" was a song of fury, it was also a turning point that marked Simone's transition from reluctant protest singer to unapologetic cultural insurgent.[14]

"Mississippi Goddam" was a tour de force that both confused and impressed the Carnegie Hall audience, evidenced by the nervous laughter throughout. However, the reception of the song in the larger United States was much more fraught. Many radio stations refused to play the song, not only for its militant lyrics and profanity, but because of the identity of who sang them: "an entertainer, and a woman entertainer at that, had dared to put them to music."[15]

Simone finally succumbed to the torrent of backlash that made it difficult for her to record and perform. According to a 1986 article in *Jet Magazine*, "She was so torn by her emotions in the freedom struggle that she sent herself into self-imposed exile in Europe and Africa in 1974."[16] As the following sections will show, the various destinations she tried out offered temporary relief but presented their own challenges, causing Simone to wrestle with who she was and what she was doing as an artist and a person.

France and Francophone Europe: Translation and Tension in Singing Across Borders

France and Francophone Europe would not be Simone's first place of physical refuge, but in some ways, it represented her first taste of freedom. She was drawn to the Francophone world very early in her career, most notably when she recorded Belgian singer-songwriter Jacques Brel's "Ne me quitte pas." As she recounted in her memoir, "The day I discovered the songs of Jacques Brel was one of the most exciting in my whole life."[17] "Ne me quitte pas" was one of three French-language songs on her 1965 album *I Put a Spell on You,* signaling a growing interest in crossing linguistic and geographic boundaries. The other two French selections on the album, both drawn from the work of Charles Aznavour, were translated into English and transformed musically in tone and arrangement to fit Simone's repertoire. Meanwhile, Simone left this recorded version of "Ne me quitte pas" almost entirely intact, including keeping the French lyrics.

While I do not know the artistic reasoning for the different treatments of these French songs, Simone shared insight into why "Ne me quitte pas" left such a mark on her in a 1988 interview with French nighttime television host Thierry Ardisson. She explained how when a friend, who often traveled between Paris and New York, shared the song with her, she was overcome by its sadness and realized the importance of incorporating it into her oeuvre:

> "So I started to study the song to make it a hit in America. I had no idea that the French would like me for it. I learned it and part that says 'Je creuserai.' I couldn't pronounce the word *creuserai* and I couldn't pronounce the word R-O-I and L-O-I. And for two years in Switzerland when I was studying this song, I had to make exceptions for those two words R-O-I, which means 'king' right, and L-O-I, which means 'law.' Where love will be law, and love will be king, and I will be queen. It took me all that time to learn the difference between R and L and I still couldn't get it right. By that time the French loved me for singing that song. I saw Jacques Brel one time in the elevator in Geneva, Switzerland, and he said, 'I'm happy that you are singing my song.' And I would like to say something else. This song is loved in Morocco, Senegal, and all the French-speaking countries."[18]

This reflection offers us rich insight into Simone's complex relationship with the song, the French language, and the various worlds that she inhabited.

The song catapulted Simone into the consciousness of Francophone audiences. To sing in French was a sign of respect, an act of cultural crossing that resonated deeply with listeners who already admired her as a performer. Yet Simone herself was acutely aware of the fragility of that linguistic gesture. During a 1971 performance in Paris, Simone code-switched twice into English. The first time was when she inserted an "Oh Lord" in the second verse. The second was when she ended the song abruptly with the apology "Sorry about the words, y'all." One could read this bilingual interpretation of "Ne me quitte pas" as an act of musical translation, but I would argue that it was more than that. It was a translingual expression of exile and escape, voiced from the margins of national, racial, and linguistic belonging.

Performing "Ne me quitte pas" allowed Simone to momentarily slip the yoke of American racial politics, to sing from a space of personal loss rather than collective struggle. The song's focus on heartbreak, rather than protest, gave her a reprieve from the exhausting emotional labor of bearing witness through music. Singing in French was not just a stylistic choice but a gesture of transatlantic exile. It allowed Simone to distance herself linguistically and emotionally from the brutalizing realities of the United States, especially in the aftermath of the condemnation she faced for "Mississippi Goddam." France offered a cultural and symbolic space where she could reshape her identity on her own terms, outside the constant racialization imposed by American audiences.

Yet even within this escape, traces of the diaspora remained. Her anguished "Oh Lord," which reminds me of a gospel inflection, made clear that Blackness, and the weight it carried, was never absent. Meanwhile, the apology in English for faltering with the French lyrics revealed both her vulnerability and her desire to reach across cultural boundaries despite linguistic imperfection. The performance became a diasporic lament, rooted not just in romantic despair but in the longing for a place to fully belong. It also previewed her escape from the United States and her move away from focusing

all her energy on civil rights.[19]

Eventually, Simone would settle down in France. In the 1980s, she decided to move to Paris for both professional and personal reasons: “The French also have a lot of respect for serious artists: they are not too bound up in the commercial side of the music industry… Paris also has a wonderful African community, containing people from every country on the continent, so I would be able to create my own Africa in the heart of Europe, Africa in my mind.”[20] Paris seemed to be the key in her quest to be taken seriously as an artist as well as to live fully in her Blackness by finding belonging in the African diaspora.

However, her relationship with France was always a complex one. She was never free from her activism. French audiences expected her to shed light on American racial politics through her music. As Jordan Stein contended, “Many European countries, especially France, and some African nations, especially Algeria, received her politically, a kind of a black ambassador from the United States, reporting on race relations back home.”[21] By her own account, Simone leaned into this calling, as seen in an interview published in the French-language publication *Jazz Hot*: “Because of the lack of respect that has lasted for hundreds of years, each time I go to a new country, I feel obliged to include in my repertoire songs that proudly affirm my race.”[22] This was the tension at the heart of her diasporic belonging: finding recognition and even reverence abroad, while feeling estranged from the country that made her an artist and an exile.

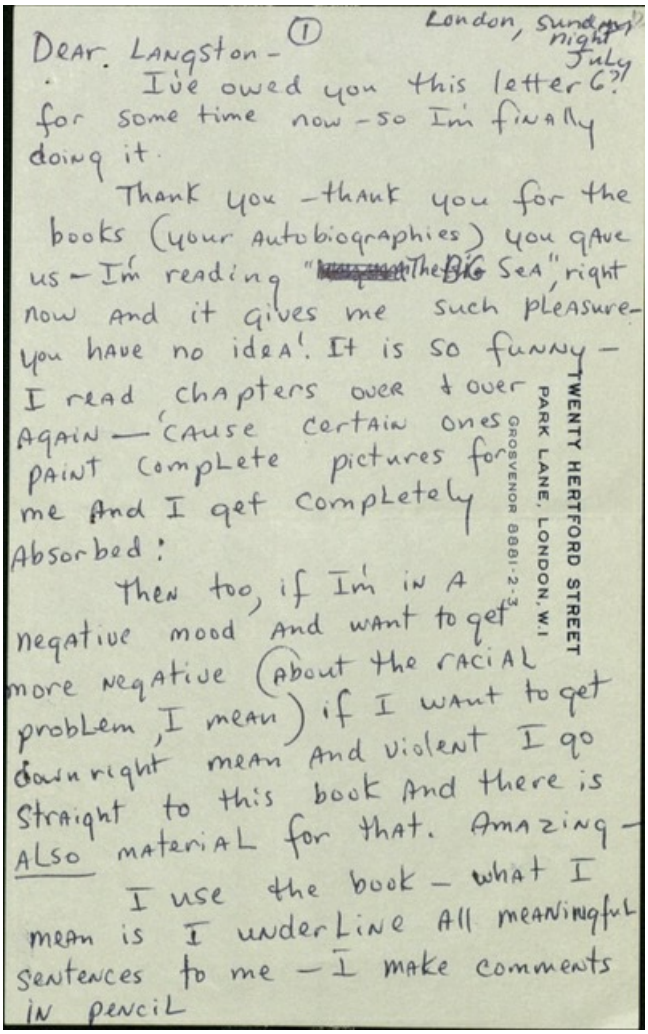
Simone found solace in the experiences of other African Americans who had been to France. For instance, her friend Langston Hughes spent part of his youth in Paris during the 1920s when a steady stream of African Americans flocked there after World War I. He recounted his time in his autobiography *The Big Sea*[23], which Simone read while traveling in Europe in 1965.

Langston Hughes, *Big Sea* (New York: Hill and Wang 1963)

Source : archive.org

From London, Simone wrote Hughes a letter:

> “I read chapters over and over again – ’cause certain ones paint complete pictures for me and I get completely absorbed. Then, too, if I’m in a negative mood and want to get more negative (about the racial problem, I mean) if I want to get downright mean and violent I go straight to this book and there is also material for that. Amazing. I use the book – what I mean is I underline all meaningful sentences to me – I make comments in pencil about certain paragraphs etc. And as I said there is a wealth of knowledge concerning the negro problem, especially if one wants to trace the many many areas that we’ve had it rough in all these years – sometimes when I’m with white ‘liberals’ who want to know why we’re so bitter – I forget (I don’t forget – I just get tongue-tied) how complete has been the white race’s rejection of us all these years. And then when this happens, I go get your book…”[24]



Dear Langston - ① London, Sunday night July 6?

I've owed you this letter for some time now - so I'm finally doing it.

Thank you - thank you for the books (your autobiographies) you gave us - I'm reading "The Big Sea", right now and it gives me such pleasure - you have no idea! It is so funny - I read chapters over & over again - 'cause certain ones paint complete pictures for me and I get completely absorbed!

Then too, if I'm in a negative mood and want to get more negative (about the racial problem, I mean) if I want to get downright mean and violent I go straight to this book and there is also material for that. Amazing -

I use the book - what I mean is I underline all meaningful sentences to me - I make comments in pencil

TWENTY HERTFORD STREET
PARK LANE, LONDON, W.1
GROSVENOR 8881-2-3

Letter from Langston Hughes to Nina Simone, October, 2, 1960. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Langston Hughes papers (JWJ MSS 26), Series I: Personal Correspondence

Source : Yale Library, Digital collections

It is telling that Simone would evoke the problem of "white liberals" (similar to what King said about white moderates in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail") during a trip to England, France, and other countries in Europe. In reality, the haven that Simone had conjured into her mind when escaping American brutality had its own shortcomings. Europe might not have had Jim Crow, but there were plenty of structural and interpersonal issues that dulled the shine of this supposed refuge.

Simone's experience was complicated by how the reception she received waxed and waned depending on how well she was doing in her life: "The French admired me not only as a musician but as a star… and they didn't separate the life from the music… The French, especially Parisians…demand that a star lives the life of a star every minute of the day."[25] If she wasn't staying in the fanciest places, eating at the most expensive restaurants, and performing at the most sought-after venues, then they wouldn't show up to support her because they didn't believe it was actually her.

Part of the problem was that the success of her music never seemed to match her financial predicament, and she felt the music industry was constantly taking advantage of her. When Simone's recording of "My Baby Just Cares for Me" became the theme song of Chanel No. 5's rebranding, Simone quipped at a concert in Montreux in 1987, "This song is popular all over France with Chanel No. 5 perfume – unfortunately of which I have none, and not the money either."[26] Furthermore, Simone noted her Blackness as a factor in her poor treatment:

> "When I found there were more bootlegs in countries like Britain and France than anywhere else I got mad; my records had always been available there from the very earliest days. In jumped the reality of my black face again: I knew that all artists were exploited in this way, but how come black artists always seemed to get ripped off more often, more extensively, than whites?"

[27]

So while she may have escaped the oppressive, violent anti-Blackness of the United States, she still had to confront France's arguably more insidious version, something that has been documented in discussions of France's colorblind approach to race.[28] In the end, Simone's depiction of Paris was a negative one: "I came to regard these days in Paris as my fall from grace, a sort of punishment, but for what I didn't know."[29]

The financial, social, and racial struggles Simone endured in France were not enough to scare her away completely. The last ten years of her life were spent living in the South of France, first near Aix-en-Provence and then in Carry-le-Rouet in the Côte-d'Azur region, where she succumbed to cancer in 2003. It's important to note, however, that Simone is not interred in France. She specifically asked that her ashes be scattered across several African countries. Simone was enamored with Africa. Judging from her funeral service, where friend and singer Miriam Makeba "offered the 'condolences of the whole South Africa,'" the feeling was mutual.[30]

Toward a Diasporic Consciousness in Africa: The Myth of Home

Simone's US-based Civil Rights activism did not happen in a vacuum. It was forged in dialogue with Black liberation movements unfolding across Africa, the Caribbean, and the wider African diaspora. In the 1950s and 1960s, decolonial struggles intensified. Black artists in the United States increasingly saw their cultural work as part of this global movement for freedom and self-determination.

A wide network of friends and collaborators influenced Simone's activist awakening: African Americans such as Lorraine Hansberry and Langston Hughes; African artists such as Mariam Makeba; and members of the global African diaspora such as the Bahamian Tony McKay a.k.a. Exuma. Simone's first visit to Africa came in 1961 when she traveled to Nigeria as part of a delegation supported by the American Society of African Culture (AMSAC), an organization "committed to promoting African culture as 'high' culture in the United States and to encouraging collaboration between African and African American artists and intellectuals in particular."[31] This early trip was formative, sparking a lifelong identification with the continent. "All around us were black faces," she remarked, "and I felt for the first time the spiritual relaxation any Afro-American feels on reaching Africa… It wasn't Nigeria I arrived in – it was Africa."[32]

The insistence on "Africa" as a totality rather than "Nigeria" as a nation is noteworthy. Like many African Americans whose ancestral history and knowledge were severed through the violence of the Transatlantic Slave trade, Simone did not claim a particular ethnic origin. Instead, Africa existed for her as a pan-African spiritual anchor. It was a mythical homeland and eventually a political orientation.

This identification deepened over time, shaped not only by travel but by aesthetic choices. From hairstyles to clothing, Simone aligned herself with a pro-African sensibility visible in the rise of Black Bohemia, a community of politically engaged Black artists in 1950s New York. Robin D. G. Kelley described the scene as one where "the emancipation of their own artistic form coincided with the African freedom movement."[33] Simone, Makeba, and others rejected the pressure to conform to white standards of beauty – eschewing straightened hair and Western fashion in favor of natural Afros and vibrant African prints. These were more than stylistic choices. They were acts of resistance and self-fashioning, challenging both racial and gendered norms.

Her eventual move to Liberia in the 1970s, encouraged by Makeba and triggered by tax trouble and personal disillusionment in the United States, marked a more forceful attempt to root herself in the African continent. "I was seduced by the Africa in my mind, my mythical home," she wrote in her autobiography. "My Africa had no countries, just hundreds of different Peoples mixed through history into a rough cocktail and forced to seed an exiled nation in a far-off country: my great grandfather, Grandma, Daddy, Momma, me." Naming her lineage reestablished the link to the mother continent while the "rough cocktail" depiction allowed her to tap into its breadth and diversity.[34]

In Liberia, this mythical home briefly felt real. Simone mused, "Everyone in Liberia knew who I was… and the fact that a famous black America had decided to come home – which was what they called it – to stay, meant something special to them…"[35]

The warm reception reinforced a sense of belonging that had always eluded her in the United States.

Simone also marveled how most Liberians owned her records and how Makeba had first become acquainted with Simone by listening to her on the radio in South Africa. This example of transnational cultural production and circulation demonstrated how artists like Simone and Makeba created distinct but resonant musical works that contributed to a shared repertoire of Black resistance. It wasn't only that the music traveled. It was that artists across the diaspora were actively producing politically engaged art that, through circulation, helped articulate a collective opposition to anti-Blackness on a global scale. Furthermore, the fact that Makeba, like Simone, was in exile, not only from South Africa for her anti-apartheid activism and but also from the United States after losing her visa for marrying Black Panther Stokely Carmichael, showed just how precarious Black belonging was throughout the world. However, in 1974 both Simone and Makeba had found acceptance and community in Liberia and Guinea, respectively.

No story quite conveys the feeling of belonging as Simone's description of her third day in Liberia, which captured a rare moment of unfiltered joy: "I started dancing, and the champagne and my happiness and the music got to me all at once, got to me good. I started stripping my clothes off while I danced." The experience inspired her to write "Liberian Calypso," a sonic artifact of newfound freedom.[36] Unconstrained by clothing or societal pressure, she could just be. To her, this was what a true home was.

And yet, as with so many chapters in her life, this sense of home did not last. By 1976, Simone left Liberia. Officially, she claimed it was to seek a better education for her daughter in Switzerland, but likely it was also due to romantic heartbreak, conflict with local authorities, and the country's impending political instability.[37] Once again, Simone was unmoored, but for a brief period, Liberia allowed Simone to experience the joys of going home, being seen, and being free.

The Caribbean: Escape and Diasporic Reinvention

Before Liberia, there was Barbados – another critical chapter in Simone's life, marked not by the utopian dream of a return home, but by the urgent desire to escape. Simone fled to Barbados in the early 1970s, exhausted by her marriage to Andy Stroud, the backlash to her activism, and the emotional toll of performing. While on the island, she reflected on the multiple betrayals in her life: "America had betrayed me, betrayed my people and stamped on our hopes. Andy had betrayed me too. And I felt let down by the black men who ran away from the showdown with white America." [38] Simone's tendency to conflate the intimate and the political resurfaced here, echoing the heart wrenching "Oh Lord" that opened her 1971 rendition of "Ne me quitte pas." The intersectional disappointments she articulated – betrayed as a Black woman, an activist, an artist – underline the emotional toll of a life lived at the crossroads of race, gender, and global politics.

Barbados was more than an escape route. The Caribbean, like Africa, resonated for Simone as part of a cultural and sonic diaspora that transcended borders. Jordan Stein conveyed how the sounds of New York's Harlem and Crown Heights inspired Simone as much as her travels abroad.[39] Her early 1970s recordings marked a deliberate turn toward Caribbean and Afro-diasporic music, imagery, and sound. This included an intensified focus on percussion, tributes to Bob Marley, and notably, a deep engagement with Exuma, the Bahamian musician who introduced Simone to the mystic sonic vocabulary of obeah, a system of Afro-Caribbean spiritual and healing practices rooted in resistance.[40]

Simone's engagement with Caribbean culture was deliberate and transformative. Her cover of "Exuma, the Obeah Man" (recast as "Obeah Woman" in 1974) is a prime example. It's not a simple homage, but a bold act of reappropriation by repurposing Caribbean spiritual aesthetics. Stein noted how with intentionality, Simone absorbed these influences and transformed them into part of her performative identity:

> "What Simone retains from Exuma's version is music. She employs the original tune's polyphonic rhythm but translates it to many fewer instruments than Exuma's ensemble sound and, notably, eschews the backing vocals on which his version relies. The only voice in 'Obeah Woman' is Simone's, though it alternates meaningfully between speaking and singing… What these spoken verses have in common is a concern for history – where she started, where her roots are, of whom she was born. The tense of Simone's speech alternates

> between the present and the past, and her glance is directed unmistakably backwards. Meanwhile, the origins described here line up pretty indisputably with Simone's own life story."[41]

"Obeah Woman" thus became a vehicle for Simone's self-fashioning, not as a passive recipient of diasporic traditions but as a conjurer who remade them in her own voice. This echoed Simone's broader practice of covering, where she reinterpreted the works of others (e.g. Jacques Brel, Bob Dylan, Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill), not to inhabit them, but to recontextualize them and give them new meaning.

The Caribbean offered Simone a liminal space where she could reimagine herself. Unlike the rootedness she sought in Africa, her relationship to the Caribbean was more fluid and improvisational. It invited exploration rather than return. It became a site of transitory belonging, a place where Simone could recalibrate, mourn, and transform. Through her music, Simone invited her listeners into the process of becoming and of imagining other ways to be.

Conclusion

I first came to Nina Simone's music through my parents' record collection. The pain in her voice reached me before the words did. When I started to listen to her lyrics, I realized how viscerally she conveyed feelings of anger, despair, loss, love, and longing – emotions not simply expressed but wrestled into being through the force of her piano and voice. Underneath them all, I sensed a restless search for belonging, which she pursued across languages, nations, and revolutionary movements.

In tracing Simone's journeys across the Atlantic from North Carolina to New York, from Barbados to Liberia, from Paris to the South of France, I don't see a retreat from the world but a turning into it. Her exile may have been motivated by self-preservation, but it was also creative, political, and above all, strategic. Each place she lived in or performed in became a site of negotiation: between her identity as a Black American woman and her embrace of diasporic and global Blackness, between her artistic autonomy and her sense of responsibility, between survival and transcendence.

To sing in French, to embody Caribbean aesthetics, to dance freely in Africa and write a song about it, was never just artistic play or gestures of escape. It was about living and performing fully while also claiming Black womanhood on her own terms. Her voice didn't just traverse oceans. It moved through time, reshaping the way we understand Blackness, womanness, resistance, and belonging. Even now, her sound calls us to listen, to remember, and to imagine freedom.

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1. Maya Smith, *Ne me quitte pas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2025).
2. Maya Angelou, "Nina Simone: High Priestess of Soul," *Redbook* 136, no. 1, (November 1970): 77, 134.
3. Nina Simone and Stephen Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1991), 14.
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5. Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 48-49.
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9. Ruth Feldstein, "'I Don't Trust You Anymore': Nina Simone, Culture, and Black Activism in the 1960s," *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005): 1356.
10. Daphne A. Brooks, "Nina Simone's Triple Play," *Callaloo* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 79.
11. Feldstein, "'I Don't Trust You Anymore,'" 1352.
12. Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 87.

13. Brooks, “Nina Simone’s Triple Play.”

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15. Ruth Feldstein, *How It Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 100.

16. “Nina Simone Reveals: ‘Mississippi Goddam’ Song ‘Hurt My Career,’” *Jet*, March 24, 1986, 54.

17. Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 165.

18. Thierry Ardisson, “Nina Simone parle de Jacques Brel,” *Bains de minuit*, June 10,1988, INA.

19. Smith, *Ne Me Quitte Pas*, 41-46.

20. Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 165.

21. Jordan Alexander Stein, *Fantasies of Nina Simone* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023), 213.

22. For the quote and the original French, see Feldstein, “‘I Don’t Trust You Anymore’”: 1373.

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32. Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 80-81.

33. Robin D. G. Kelley, “Nap Time: Historicizing the Afro,” *Fashion Theory 1*, no. 4 (1997): 344.

34. Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 138.

35. Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 138.

36. Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 140.

37. For instance, Simone recounted being questioned menacingly by police about a car crash she was in with a French lover. They seemed to take particular issue with him being French and had him deported. Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 152-53.

38. Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 123.

39. Stein, *Fantasies*, 125.

40. Stein, *Fantasies*, 27.

41. Stein, *Fantasies*, 142.

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  Maya Angela Smith began her career primarily focused on issues of language and identity among members of the Francophone African diaspora. Recent writing continues exploring this intersection but through the lens of music. Her book, Ne me quitte pas, analyzes how the song—a text, a piece of cultural production written in a specific context, and a work of mass/popular art—travels across languages, geographies, genres, and generations by using Nina Simone’s single as a point of departure.