

Tina Theory: Notes on Fierceness

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Touching Queerness

Everything I know about being queer I learned from Tina Turner. More specifically, you might say that Ike and Tina's cover of "Proud Mary"—the soundtrack of my childhood—taught me, through camp performance, how to be a "Mary." During the holiday parties at my great-grandmother Lucille "Big Momma" Jones' house, for as long as I can remember, we kids ended up in the "Children's Room" so the grown folks could curse, drink whiskey, smoke, laugh, and be as loose as they felt. The "Children's Room" was not that special. It was usually a bedroom with a computer or television and a few board games, located next to the food which was always laid out buffet style. My favorite moments were when we would lip sync for our lives by doing drag karaoke, where my cousins and I would lock ourselves away and perform great popular music hits for an invisible audience. We pulled songs from Christina Aguilera or Britney Spears' latest album to older joints that circulated long before our time, songs like "Stop! (In the Name of Love)" by Diana Ross and The Supremes and Patti LaBelle's "Lady Marmalade." But one song we kept in our catalog and that we seemed to have the most fun with was the Ike and Tina Turner cover of "Proud Mary."

Whenever we did "Mary" I insisted in being Tina. But what was it that drew me—a black gay boy rooted, like Tina, in Saint Louis, which is either the South or the Midwest depending on who you ask—into her style of performance? And why "Proud Mary" in particular? Was it Tina's way with sequins and fringe that turned me on? Or did it have to do with the way she instinctively knew how to work a stage? Gay men idolize many kinds of divas, as the cultural critic Wayne Koestenbaum has revealed.¹ But perhaps the one commonality they share among them is the virtuosic styling of the body: the use of sequins, fringe, sunglasses, big shoulder pads, and bedazzled hats—accessories that help transform the diva from a mere mortal into a fantastical image, or what Guy Debord might describe as "capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image" even if the pearls are fake (24).

I did not have a bedazzler when we did “Proud Mary,” but I did put a T-shirt on my head since I did not have hair or wigs. There we were, performing Tina’s exact choreography, quoting her dance moves and facial expressions. Eyebrows furrowed, I would strut around the room back and forth on the tips of my toes, mouthing the lyrics to the song. I felt like I was wearing a pair of stilettos, swinging my makeshift t-shirt hair extensions in the service of working an invisible crowd. As I now arrive at my own theorizations of black glamour and the political thrust of spectacular sartorial style, I’ve come to realize that it was through my performances as Tina Turner that I learned what queerness meant for me—it meant a spectacular presence—and this is how, as a Midwestern boy trapped in a basement and quoting a diva five times my age, that I was able to touch queerness.

I idolized many divas and pop singers during my youth but there was always something extra that drew me to Tina Turner. Now, as I join scholars such as Deborah Willis, Monica Miller, and Nicole Fleetwood in thinking about how black and queer bodies are made visible through fashion and performance, and as I hone my thinking around black sartorial culture and the political potential of black glamour, I’ve realized that my interest in Tina Turner has to do with her embodiment of “fierceness” as a disruptive strategy of performance. By fierceness, I mean a spectacular way of being in the world—a transgressive over-performance of the self through aesthetics. This over-performance works simultaneously to change the dynamics of a room by introducing one’s sartorial, creative presence into the space as well as it is to crystallize, highlight, and push back against limiting identity categories. Like divas, to quote Alexander Doty in a special double issue of *Camera Obscura* devoted to divas, fierceness “offers the world a compelling brass standard that has plenty to say to women, queer men, blacks, Latinos, and other marginalized groups about the costs and the rewards that can come when you decide both to live a conspicuous public life within white patriarchy and try and live that life on your own terms . . . the diva will make certain that it is tradition and convention that yields to her” (2). In other words, to be fierce is to transcend and to unravel, to self-actualize and to return the gaze. Because of its transgressive potential and deep connection to showmanship, fierceness allows its users to fabricate a new sense of self that radiates a defiant sense ownership through aesthetics, and in this way fierceness becomes a social, political, and aesthetic intervention.

In many ways fierceness is It: “a quality that makes certain people interesting all the time” (Roach 9). But even as I front load my remarks on fierceness with a definition of the term, I need to point

out that, like It, fierceness embodies several contradictions all at once. As I will show, fierceness is both ownership and the loss of control, simultaneously deliberateness and spontaneity. If fierceness presents this set of contradictions, it is because, as Joseph Roach describes, “‘It’ is the power of effortless embodiment of contradictory qualities simultaneously: strength and vulnerability, innocence and experience, and singularity and typicality” (5). This set of contradictions allows the term to be noticeable yet unpredictable which, the way I see it, helps to keep it interesting.

To illustrate my theory of fierceness, I’d like to focus on how Tina Turner employs the term by doing a close reading of a range of Tina’s performances and images across media. I look at Tina Turner as she appeared on the first cover of *Rolling Stone* in 1967; I play the athletic twelve-minute rendition of “Proud Mary” on Ike and Tina’s 1971 live album *What You Hear Is What You Get*; and I conclude by moving away from “Proud Mary” to consider her live video performance of “I Want to Take You Higher” as performed in Holland in 1971. What links this select archive is the way in which Tina’s voice—her literal voice as well as the vocality of her fashion image—shows the process of fierceness. Whether Tina appears in print, sound, or through a video-documented live performance, the fact is that fierceness remains.

Fashion and Fierceness

On November 23, 1967, a roaring Tina Turner, born as Anna Mae Bullock in Nutbush, Tennessee, appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine—only the second issue of the newly formed San Francisco-based rock journal. The black and white image, a still from a live performance, captures the magic of Tina Turner’s fierceness. Her mouth agape and muscular arms outstretched, Tina wears a short, form-fitting dress made entirely of sequins. The image of her open mouth, coupled with the creases in her be-sequined dress proffers the sense of movement. When we look at the image, we know that something *happened* at the moment during which the picture was taken. Tina’s “Tinaness” is what this image is about; she is frozen, caught in *medias res*, and this image summarizes how she will look from 1967 onwards. More than simply a performance shot placed on the cover of a magazine, Tina’s pose raises important questions about the specific role that fashion played in framing her specific brand of performance. But what is the visual power of her look as a black female on the cover of a mainstream rock journal? Is this simply style for the sake of glamour?

To address these questions, it is important to note that a few studies of glamour have sufficiently addressed the crucial role of people of color in the making and consuming of glamour. This omission may have to do with the historical lack of people of color across all mainstream media. In fact, Tina Turner appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone* at a moment when black women were emphatically not on the covers of any magazines, and it would take still another seven years—in 1974—for a black face to be splashed across the cover of American *Vogue*, the most coveted fashion magazine in the United States. The silence around black bodies in the marketplace of glamour led literary critic Francesca Royster, in an article on Cleopatra, to beg the polemical question, one I share: “What color is glamour” (“Becoming Cleopatra” 97)? As Royster describes, notions of glamour are tied to Hollywood, which has always been about framing a specific vision of idealized white femininity. For Royster, “Hollywood glamour is framed by a white, western eye . . . thus we might think more about what glamour and whiteness have in common” (98). Other scholars, most notably Richard Dyer, have written about the relationship between Hollywood and the construction and maintenance of whiteness in visual culture, as well as through the technologies of lighting in particular.²

But the fact is that the silence around black bodies and glamour does not only surface in visual culture. Even in scholarly conversations about glamour—a subject that over the past several years has come into vogue as a serious academic and curatorial line of inquiry—there is a peculiar lack of focus on black bodies. Film historian Stephen Gundle’s own book *Glamour: A History*, one of the first academic tomes devoted to the historical study of modern glamour, makes virtually no mention of the African American consumption or production of glamour, though it is rigorous otherwise.³ But scholars of late have attended to this lack of discussion by ushering in new ways of thinking through the color of glamour. Anne Cheng, in her work on Anna May Wong, sees celebrity as “a politics of recognition and glamour as a politics of personhood,” which places an emphasis on personhood and humanity, rather than whiteness and not-whiteness. To think through race and glamour “presses us to think in more nuanced terms about what celebrity and glamour mean for the woman of color,” which points towards the study of the use-value of glamour and celebrity for people of color (1023). The way I see it, fierceness and its use-value have much to do with the way fierceness gets used as a strategy of transgression, and in particular for the disenfranchised and groups of color.

My thinking around “fierceness” follows a sentiment that a number of scholars, such as Monica Miller and Richard Powell, have theorized as a way to talk about the relationship between excess, style, and performance in black popular culture. Miller calls black sartorial practice “stylin’ out”—a colloquialism describing the act of “dressing to the nines, showing sartorial stuff, especially when the occasion calls for it and, more tellingly, often when it does not” (1). In her history of the black dandy, Miller suggests that dandies “are creatures of invention who continually and characteristically break down limiting identity markers and propose new, more fluid categories within which to constitute themselves” (11). Powell, in his recent work on black portraiture, prefers the term “sharp”—another colloquialism used to describe someone who is ostentatiously stylish. Commenting on a nuanced sense of sharpness within the black sartorial community, Powell argues that “many fashionable people have a precise and exacting edge, a sense of how to look, of how, figuratively speaking, to ‘stand out’ and be ‘a cut above’ the dull and commonplace” (4). This notion of knowing how to stand out, of being above the dull and the commonplace, is key for understanding how fierceness functions as a category of self-making that challenges readymade categories of normative identity.

But as I started examining Tina Turner’s fashion and performances to develop a language for speaking about fierceness, and as I created an archive of spectacular performances by other recent black entertainers—Grace Jones, Sylvester, Freddie Mercury, Prince, and Michael Jackson to cite these few—I began to wonder whether “black glamour” was something different altogether, a not quite glamour, a not quite *not* glamour; a “something else.” I noticed in each black performer I studied a deliberate element of transgression in their performance persona, and the single trait that links the majority of artists I’ve examined is fierceness. Through fashion, style, and self-presentation, black performers used fierceness to transgress and transcend restrictive boundaries of race and gender. But what difference does performance make? As the cultural critic Daphne Brooks reveals in her in-depth study of the ways in which black artists and performers utilized performance as a way to forge revised notions of blackness, we see that black female celebrity performers turned to performance “as a place from which to explore and express the social, political, and sexual politics of black womanhood in America” (286). This suggests that performance has been the long space where black bodies have thrown quotation marks around particular identity categories as a way to test, revise, and debunk them.

This thinking fits in with recent scholarship that specifically addresses the relationship between the body of color and glamour, work that focuses on black glamour and performance with a particular interest in fashion, a major intervention for the field of fashion studies which still fetishizes white women's bodies and white femininity. But what does black glamour as a test or as a debunking look like?

Listen to this *Rolling Stone* reporter try to capture Tina Turner's unique style: "Tina Turner is an incredible chick. She comes in this very short miniskirt, way above her knees, with zillions of silver sequins and sparklers pasted on it" ("Ike and Tina Turner"). the reviewer said in 1967. One way to interpret this phrase is as a way to sexualize Tina by placing an emphasis on the visibility of the legs, but no matter how seductive or sparkly Tina's clothes became, her flashy style of dress had more to do with the politics of race and beauty at the time than with mere style or seduction. I said that Tina took the cover of *Rolling Stone* at a time when black women were emphatically not on the covers of any mainstream magazines, and it is impossible to understand Tina Turner's impact on the popular culture of the late 1960s without paying due attention to the fashion and styling of her musical peers. Seen this way, the real news of the 1967 *Rolling Stone* article is not that she wears sequins or short skirts, but that she does it as a contrast against the equally successful but more visually sedate acts of the time. "Unlike the polite handclapping Motown groups, (Tina) and the Ikettes scream, wail, and do some fantastic boogaloo," the article said. Look at this 1965 photo of The Supremes captured by Bruce Davidson, an iconic photographer of the Civil Rights Movement, and you will see a rather proper looking Supremes at the Motown recording Studio in Detroit. In the image, Diana Ross appears feminine and tasteful in a bouffant wig, her head wrapped in a silk scarf. A pearl necklace and white suit accentuate her value not only as the star of the group, but as a respectable black woman dressed in her Sunday best. Indeed, if Diana Ross appears diva-like, as the lead singer and visual focal point of this image, it may have to do less with projecting star quality than it does with the diva as a model of uplift. Brooks suggests the way in which divas "were often expected to shoulder the demands that the race puts its best face forward. 'Divine' as they may seem, these women were often forced to place the material and representational desires of their community before themselves, to perform the hopeful ideals of people above all else" (Brooks 320).

Tina and The Supremes, as well as other contemporary acts such as Martha and the Vandellas who penned the song "Dancing in the Streets,"

were making music at a time when black women in America were fighting for inclusion and representation in all areas of American culture, from real estate to the work place, and from consumerism to media. Positive representations of black women in particular became a highly political issue. As Maxine Leeds Craig shows in her study of the rise of black beauty and first black beauty pageants in America, African Americans had been subject to negativist and degrading images of themselves in the media, thus “donning fabulous hats on Sunday at church; wearing clean, pretty dresses; and having their hair straightened and styled to motionless perfection were ways of displaying dignity. A woman who put time and money into her appearance was dignified, and her dignity spoke well of the race. Grooming was a weapon in the battle to defeat racist depictions of blacks” (Craig 34). Indeed, as a number of popular music scholars have shown, Motown worked as a vehicle to promote positive images of middle-class black America. Motown “saw black progress in terms of the integration of mainstream and elite American institutions by blacks with highly textured middle-class sensibilities” (Neal 88-89). The narratives of sophistication, respectability, and upward mobility were crucial enough that Motown hired Maxine Powell—a well-known professional stage actress—as a finishing school consultant to groom a number of Motown acts, including Diana Ross. Powell taught each performer that they were being trained for concerts at “The White House” and “Buckingham Palace,” placing an emphasis on poise, glamour, and sophistication (Murphy). Contrast this image of finishing school primness with the fire-spitting Tina Turner—whose dresses rarely fell much below her knees—and the impact of Tina’s presence in 1967 becomes clear: glamour contra fierceness.⁴

But when we position The Supremes’ performance of glamour, of whiteness, next to Tina Turner’s performance of fierceness, of blackness, what we are actually witnessing is the performance of class. As scholars of conspicuous consumption such as Thorstein Veblen have shown, one marker of the leisure class is a certain style of dress that implies the wearer does no work. Fancy clothes do not necessarily lend themselves to sweat and physical labor. Reading the fashions of The Supremes, dressed as they were in evening gowns and arm length satin gloves, next to Tina Turner’s sparkly, cabaret-influenced ensembles, we notice that The Supremes are dressed for *class*. Tina Turner, on the other hand, whose skirts are shorter and who drips sweat, is dressed for labor. Read this way, Tina’s *Rolling Stone* cover frames her fierceness simultaneously as a particular styling of the body and as a type of *excess*.

Fierceness as Sound

At her highest point, Tina Turner was an unshakable vocal powerhouse. She changed the popular music scene. Speaking to a reporter in 1968, Janis Joplin described the impact Tina Turner had on her own performance: “currently, Tina Turner is my biggest influence. I saw her a short while ago and I realized that this was what I’m trying to do. I mean, she just comes on stage and *aaagh!* She hits you right there” (Jackson 182). What I’m interested in theorizing here is the astonishment of “*aaagh!*” that Joplin quotes. Specifically, I take Joplin’s term and call it fierceness, and I aim to show what this term means and how it relates to what Patricia Hill Collins has called “the power of self-definition.” In what ways does the astonishment of Tina’s live performance describe how fierceness can be used to assert social and cultural presence?

Throughout her career, Tina has perfected the notion of the volcanic stage persona, leading critics to pen a range of sensational headlines about Tina’s performances over the years that evoke the blaze of fire: “A volcano that just can’t stop erupting”; “Tina Turner: Sizzling at 45”; “Proud Tina Keep On Burnin’”; “Tina Turner Still Setting the Stage Afire”; and “Tina Treats Ravinia to Early Fireworks.” What are the racial implications of using descriptors such as “sizzling” and “fireworks” to describe Tina’s performance practice?²⁵ How can looking at Tina as a persona of fierceness complicate the colloquialism’s use and meaning in gay culture, and in popular culture more broadly?

All told, Ike and Tina’s version of “Proud Mary,” which appeared on their 1971 album *Working Together*, stands among the most prolific demonstrations of “fierceness” in black popular culture. The American rock group Creedence Clearwater Revival recorded the original song in 1969, but the original Creedence version was rather more Cajun flavored. As Tina remembered, “In the beginning Ike hated the Creedence Clearwater Revival song, but then he heard the version by the Checkmates and took notice” (Turner 139).

Recorded in 1970 at a studio in Florida, Tina recalls: “We made that song our own. I loved the Creedence version, but I liked ours better after we got it down, with the talking and all. I thought it was more rock ‘n’ roll. That was the beginning of me liking rock music” (146). Almost overnight, “Proud Mary” became the biggest song in Ike and Tina’s catalog. It reached Number 4 on the Billboard charts. It was their first million-selling record, and the song pulled their album *Workin’ Together* to number 25 on the Billboard charts. Tina even earned a Grammy for Best Vocal Performance

(Bego 108). Speaking to *The Independent*, John Fogerty remarked that he was surprised when Tina Turner decided “to cover ‘Proud Mary’ two years after we had a hit with it. They had a whole different take on it, with the slow start and then, *boom*, they went into the Las Vegas revue! Tina was shaking her moneymaker, just rocking out. Tina Turner shot my song ‘Proud Mary’ into the stratosphere” (Perrone).

The magic and fierceness of “Proud Mary” can be heard best during an iconic live recording of The Ike and Tina Turner Review at Carnegie Hall in 1971, which resulted in an album called *What You Hear Is What You Get*. As the concert begins, a series of musical interludes and announcements occur that serve to build anticipation for Tina’s imminent, dramatic entrance. Though we do not see her, the listener can tell when she emerges onto the stage as the audience applauds and cheers in excitement, and the band—which sways sonically in the backdrop—introduces her not just by name, but with a sudden, acrobatic-sounding, quick-paced tune called “Doin The Tina Turner.” At this point in the performance, Tina has been on stage for nearly two minutes yet she has not sung a word before, at last, she spins around once the music drops, hair flying in her face, this is what I imagine, and she grabs hold of the microphone to sting the audience at the top of her lungs with the question, “*Do you like good music?*” the opening verse of “Sweet Soul Music,” a 1967 classic originally performed by Arthur Conley and written with Otis Redding. The fierceness of this particular entrance hinges on the piercing quality of Tina’s voice—the peculiarly pleasant-sounding strain of the voice, which is evoked each time Tina sings “yeah.” I said that she had been on stage for two minutes before singing or otherwise addressing the audience, and in this way when she finally did sing, she cut through the vocal silence in the concert hall, literally piercing the audience with her raw sound.

But the crown jewel of this recording, aside from being one of the best live Ike and Tina albums ever made, is the rendition of “Proud Mary.” If anyone around in 1971 ever doubted the scale of “Proud Mary” as a major Ike and Tina hit, proof of its success lies in the fact that on this recording, Tina performed the song a staggering three times in a row. As the song begins—the tenth number out of sixteen—Tina teases the audience with the by then already familiar line, “And right about now . . . I think you . . . I think you might like to hear something from us . . . nice . . . *easy*” before the crowd erupts in anticipation. The Ikettes, at the background, cheer Tina on by singing “Go ‘Head!,” urging her and helping to build momentum for the crowd-pleasing, orgasmic release of the faster second half of the song.

But by the time Tina delivers the final “rollin’ on the river,” we can already hear the audience’s anxiousness for the good part. Ike shouts, “2, 3, 4!” and instantly we imagine Tina and The Ikettes spinning, running around on stage, all of which mirrors the music which sounds like a strobe light thrusting attention on the moment of action. Tina electrifies the audience by performing “Proud Mary” three times in a row, each time more energetic than the last. In other words, “Proud Mary” becomes a performance of endurance. At the precise moment we think Tina cannot keep screaming and spinning to “Proud Mary,” she does it one more time just to prove us wrong. One album review of *What You Hear Is What You Get* from *The Hartford Courant* warned: “Anyone who buys this record better like ‘Proud Mary,’ because there’s 12 minutes and 35 seconds worth” (McNulty).

“Proud Mary” stands as the fiercest song in Ike and Tina Turner’s catalog. But what was so exciting to audiences about “Proud Mary,” and how did the song capture Tina’s fierceness? What has always struck me about the song in particular is the drastic separation between the spoken word first half and the speedy second. This might seem obvious, but I’m not thinking in terms of fastness and slowness. Rather, I see it as it relates to what I would call the “diva moment.” By “diva moment,” I mean the special, unique quality that a performer brings to their version of a cover song that stamps their identity and makes the song their own. What made “Proud Mary” Ike and Tina’s was not simply the change in musical form, but the addition of the call-and-response. I have always thought that the one quality that separates divas from the conveyor belt of traditional pop singers is the ability to work a crowd through spoken word. We need the rawness and immediacy of the spoken. Sometimes the most interesting moments during a concert occur not when the singer sings, but when she or he narrates the space between the songs with camp stories and witty dialogue. The diva moment is precisely when fierceness *speaks*.

So far I’ve used “Proud Mary” to center my remarks on fierceness, but now I’d like to move away from that song to consider a live performance of a different, somewhat lesser known Ike and Tina cover. One archival video I found shows Tina doing a version of Sly and the Family Stone’s 1969 single “I Want to Take You Higher,” and the video stands as her most intense demonstration of fierceness yet. The performance occurred in 1971 in Holland—a rare full-length concert video of the Ike and Tina Turner Revue. The video opens with a funk interlude performed by Ike and his eight-piece band, who are all dressed in ’70s psychedelia—bell bottoms, sunglasses and floral prints abound—with Ike playing the guitar in the background,

dressed in an all red velvet suit and black wig. After the interlude, The Ikettes—“three very bold soul sisters”—emerge on stage, and they are all styled identically in short pink dresses that reveal their arms and legs, a specific fashion choice that frames blackness as different/other/desirable for a largely white, Dutch audience. The Ikettes, an all black three-piece that suggests a rawer version of the prim and proper Supremes, sing and dance freely around stage to build the anticipation and set the tone for Tina Turner’s eventual entrance.

“She’s known as the hardest working woman in show business today. Ladies and Gentlemen, Miss Tina Turner!” the announcer says before The Ikettes and Tina Turner emerge on stage. Tina, for her turn, wears a short, tight-fitting purple sequined dress that covers the arms but reveals the legs. She and The Ikettes dance back onto the stage to a medley of the songs they will play; their arms flailing about, hair in constant motion. Everything, in fact, is in constant motion. But what is immediately present the moment Tina takes the stage is the sense of her being possessed by the performance before she has even started to sing—her level of intensity. She and The Ikettes are all performing the same moves, but Tina is offering *more*—fierceness, that is, as a kind of generosity. At first, she and The Ikettes glide onto the stage performing balletic moves. But when the rock and roll medley begins, with classic rock and roll guitar riffs, “Tina Turner” is immediately turned “on,” ready to work. Her face stretches out of control, the mouth at turns wide open, the lips pursing themselves outward, her eyebrows are furrowed. All of this is to suggest the connection between music, possession, and the intensity of performing against it.

After the opening dance routine, Tina takes to the microphone and sings her first song of the concert, a cover of “I Want to Take You Higher.” As The Ikettes sing “Higher” behind her, Tina is constantly moving: her leg tapping the stage, shaking the hips to make the purple sequins sparkle. Hair creates drama, and its length in this performance allows her to work it from right to left in a way that sustains the sense of intensity and action on the stage. At the end of the song, Tina pulls away from the microphone and performs a dance which involves the rhythmic stomping on the ground and the simultaneous punching of the air with the head going from down to up on the downbeat, which turns the stage into a symphony of hair flying all around.

If this performance shows that half the power of the Ike and Tina Turner Revue is visual and kinesthetic, then fierceness emerges as a constant flux that pushes boundaries because of its sheer force. When something is

moving, say a falling object out of the sky, one is inclined to move out of the way because the object falls with such force that one could be injured if hit. Fierceness—in this case Tina Turner—is that falling object. Fierceness is cognizant of its own force, of its own disruptive strategy. We see this especially at the end of Tina's songs, which in this concert like many others she closes by saying "Yeah" or "Okay"; she knows the value of what she's just done.

At the end of the concert when Tina and The Ikettes walk off stage, the audience offers up warm in-unison applause and they begin to chant "We want more! We want more!" At this point, the audience can barely stay seated, and throughout the concert we see the theater go from respectful concertgoers to rabid fans. Tina has essentially, over the last forty minutes, succeeded at working the room. With Tina now off stage, a few moments of tantalization go by, and she struts back out and performs "I Want to Take You Higher" as an encore. It was as appropriate a moment for "Higher" as ever, as Tina sings: "The beat is getting stronger/the beat is getting longer too/music sounding good to me/I wanna, I wanna, I wanna take you higher." When the grain/strain of Tina's smoky voice wraps around those words, the meaning transforms the song into an anthem, a manifesto, about what "Tina Turner" brings to the stage as a performer. Tina has been sweating throughout the concert, but now the sweat is particularly telling. With each passing note, Tina's eyes flutter quickly, and she bumps and shakes rhythmically. Here, Tina's soul and fierceness takes the audience to a "higher" plateau of live performance. As the camera pans away from Tina to show the theater, one can see the audience boiling in their seats, unable to contain themselves through the intensity of Tina's performance. As she presides over the room, the audience claps, shakes, nods their heads, and reacts to the music, sometimes raising their arms in the air as if they have been spiritually possessed.

As Nicole Fleetwood reveals in her work on the way the black body is produced through visual culture and performance, "the black female body functions as the site of excess in dominant visual culture [...] in excess of idealized white femininity" (109, 111). She coins the term "excess flesh" to think through the ways in which black women "engage with visual practices as a re-inscription of their corporeality" (105). Tina's gymnastic choreography in "Higher" puts into motion the relationship between "excess flesh" and her ownership of her fierceness and sexuality—this is, in other words, about being in control of how her image is read. She knows the audience desires to see her body and her excessiveness in motion, and she allows them to have a taste. But like any good diva, she only gives them a

taste. Here, ownership and the contradictory nature of fierceness emerges with a particular force: you can have her, but you cannot really have her. She is on stage, but of course she is not really on stage. Fierceness is a mask that draws attention to the fact that it simultaneously is and is not a mask.

I said that Tina Turner is a nodal point in terms of fierceness as a whole-body aesthetic, and by whole-body I mean fierceness as the use of fashion, style, and movement. Across Tina's performance practice we witness fierceness as a spastic bodily possession—a seemingly uncontrollable, unrestrained energy. For Tina, every handclap, ad lib, stomp, and bead of sweat is a moment of possession; she is taken over by the performance. At several points throughout the performance, Tina's face appears glazed over, her eyes fluttering quickly. She reaches, both physically and emotionally, for the right character of note to sing, and makes heroic attempts to pull the song out. When she does a cover of "Come Together" by The Beatles and sings "got to be a joker he just do what he please," her eyes remain closed, the head tilted back and the neck pulled tight, as if she is trying to pull the song out of her vocal cords, as if not even she can tame the song. The live performance, like an exorcism, possesses her. This is what the cultural critic Francesca Royster has called a "playfully outrageous bodily knowledge" ("Nice and Rough" 4). But even as fierceness evokes the sense of being out of control, the fact is that it also requires a certain level of mastery, of virtuosity and deliberateness. In her performance work, Tina demonstrates a sense of control and expertise. More than simply singing the song, she means it. Meaning it implies ownership. Fierceness demonstrates a mastery and an ownership of the self that gives minoritarian subjects the power to re-create and assert themselves through aesthetics.

Conclusion

I have always thought that one of the most interesting things about Tina Turner was the way "she" circulates through popular culture even when she is nowhere to be found. How do we come to perform Tina, or to know Tina through performance? I knew her through standing on my tippy toes and putting a shirt on my head. Angela Bassett knows her—not unlike drag queens or cabaret performers across the world—through platinum gold fringe dresses. In the "Proud Mary" scene of the movie *What's Love Got to Do With It?*, where Bassett plays Tina, she *works* her dress, slowly moving the fringe from side to side. But when she pulls away from the microphone for the up tempo second half of the song, Bassett violently spins in

circles—seeming on the verge of falling several times—with the gold fringe, hair, and arms flailing about. During the dance sequence, Bassett and The Ikettes pull and stretch their arms and backs in a dizzying gymnastic workout which is keyed to mime “swimming” or rolling down the river, original choreography that helped shoot “Proud Mary” into iconicity, and which basically has not changed since it was first performed.

What draws me into this performance of “Proud Mary” as a way of concluding this article on fierceness is its *representation* of Tina Turner, its presentation of “Tina-ness.” Tina Turner the person becomes “Tina Turner” the specific, easily quotable idea. I do not mean to say that Tina is nothing but a fringe dress, but what is interesting about “Tina-ness” is precisely how quotable it is. “Tina-ness,” like fierceness, is about presenting a style that is so one’s own that that presence eclipses anything that tries to step into it; anybody wearing a fringe dress can automatically be read as Tina Turner, whether they intended it or not. And that is where I locate the value of fierceness—in its ability to crystallize a solid identity for people who might otherwise be overlooked. “The diva makes herself a force to be reckoned with, so that even in defeat there is something gloriously iconoclastic about the ‘bitch’” (Doty 3).

In writing about Tina Turner, I hope to restore the power and novelty of her performance practice as something that she owned and which was her own fierce labor. Famously, all Tina asked for in the divorce proceedings from Ike was her name—“Tina Turner”—perhaps because her name had become synonymous, like the wigs and the fringe, with the style of fierceness and ownership that she made her own.

Notes

1. For more on opera divas and homosexuality, see Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Da Capo P, 2001).

2. For additional context on the framing of whiteness, see Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

3. For more on Stephen Gundle, see *Glamour: A History* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008).

4. It is important to note that Tina’s stage image at the beginning of her career was in fact more in line with the visual performance of respectability, right

along with the Motown groups. It became the sexualized, “fierce” version around 1967.

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