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Popular Music, Protest, and Social Justice, Fall 2023

Sanger and the Songs of Kim and Reggie Harris

When you get to your breakout group, please create a GoogleDoc, share it everyone in your group, as well as Bill. Then, copy the below questions and paste them into your GoogleDoc. Project your GoogleDoc to the screen. Work on the questions as a group and then we will discuss as a whole class.

1. On page 22, Sanger writes: “Singing as a form of social commentary was a tradition that might have faded when Black slaves were exposed to white culture, but instead it grew stronger. The skills of singing and the use of subtle and purposely ambiguous language remained strong….” Kim and Reggie Harris write in their liner notes about the “coded language” slaves used in their songs. Locate 3 of the songs we listened to and Kim and Reggie Harris wrote about and discuss the “purposely ambiguous” and coded language in each. How might the use of that kind of language result in empowerment?
2. On page 22, Sanger writes that “slaves used both the act of singing and the words of the songs to overcome their cultural differences and to bypass white restrictions on their interaction. By doing so, they succeeded in building community and in uniting themselves with others in their group. From this position, they were better equipped to resist white oppression.” How so? That is, how does the act of singing lead to community, which leads to being able to resist?
3. Looking back to the part of the reading we read for last Wednesday, Sanger writes that after years of oppression and subservience, Black people needed to find a way to assert a redefinition of the self, to “craft a new and positive self-definition” (p. 8) free of the degrading definitions created by white oppressors. These became freedom songs. I’d like you to make a direct connection between some of songs we listened to from Kim and Reggie Harris and some of the songs by the contemporary Black women artists we listened to for Wednesday. Find 3 such connections and cite directly their lyrics (which you can find online).