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"Tar Baby and the Great White Wonder": Joni Mitchell's Pimp Game

Eric Lott

Tar baby and the Great White Wonder
Talking over a glass of rum
Burning on the inside
With the knowledge of things to come
There's gambling out on the terrace
And midnight ramblin' on the lawn
As they lead toward temptation
With dreamland coming on

—Joni Mitchell, "Dreamland," 1977

J. D. Souther tells the story of a day, in late 1977, at record producer Peter Asher's house. Souther was introduced by Asher and his wife Betsy to a thin black man with huge sunglasses and a big mustache. His name was Claude, and Souther concluded that he was a pimp. He was decked out in dark pants, white vest, and white jacket, his Afro tamed down by a fancy chapeau. Claude didn't say much as the group, which also included guitarist Danny Kortchmar, made small talk.

After a short while, as Sheila Weller recounts the episode in *Girls Like Us: Carole King, Joni Mitchell, Carly Simon—and the Journey of a Generation*, "Claude took off his hat. And then he took off his *wig*. Claude was *Joni*, in blackface. Souther and Joni had been lovers, but he hadn't recognized her under the costume. This was her new alter ego, a character she would imminently

name 'Art Nouveau,' her 'inner black person.'" Mitchell has often repeated what she says will be the first line of her autobiography: "I was the only black man in the room" (Weller 2008, 424–425; Marom 2014).[1]

Mitchell pulled this stunt more than once. A candid snapshot by famed rock photographer Henry Diltz surfaced not long ago, showing Mitchell at bassist Leland Sklar's 1976 Halloween party in full Art Nouveau regalia. Sklar's annual party was a mainstay of the closely knit southern California musical star system, and it was curious, says Diltz, to see this unfamiliar face at the affair.

> Everyone thought it was someone whom someone else knew: "Is that guy your friend?" "I thought he came with you." I was taking a picture of my wife—we went as pirates—and this guy happened to be in the background.
>
> I can't remember how this person's true identity came to be known, but it wasn't until an hour or two into the party that we figured out he was Joni Mitchell—she dressed herself up that way to see if she could fool all her friends, and she did. She was a dear friend of everyone in that room, and no one got it. Joni was very into observing street life—pimps and hookers, and characters like that—so she could write about it. She was fascinated by that side of life. [. . .]
>
> Joni was proud she was able to pull this off. (Diltz 2010, 88)

Such cagey acts of everyday performance art are of interest not least for the way in which they produce an offense against intimacy, registered in Diltz's vaguely miffed tone: Mitchell was proud to pull this off, in the midst of friends and ex-lovers who should have known better. It's more important to ask what she was trying to prove. The pose is hardly unprecedented, and its appeal hasn't yet departed, as Daphne Brooks observes in her rousing critique of Amy Winehouse as a "retro-soul Jolson in a dress." Brooks proposes that Winehouse's "real innovation" is that she "created a record about a white woman wanting to be a black man—and an imaginary one at that" (2008, 36; see also Brooks 2010, 37–60). If Joni, as she did on so many other counts, got there long before, she also did it in a more corrosively sociological vein, evincing her inner pimp in her music and her everyday life to make sense of the scene in which she found herself, which as she knew meant the "star-maker machinery" of the 1970s southern California culture industry. Something of a (Saskatchewan)

spy in the house of its pimps and pirates, she "observed" its rather different "street life" in a guise at once undercover and all too racially revealing—of it as much as of her. She was, after all, the only black man in the room.

As the 1970s began, Joni Mitchell was at the center of the Laurel Canyon singer-songwriter aristocracy, penning such countercultural anthems as "Both Sides, Now," "Big Yellow Taxi," "Woodstock," and "The Circle Game." She was the blond damsel with a dulcimer, crowded by other laureates of female autonomy such as Laura Nyro, Carole King, and Carly Simon, not to mention industry stalwarts such as David Crosby, Neil Young, Jackson Browne, and Graham Nash, but her early songs were quickly covered by other artists and her albums *Ladies of the Canyon* (1970) and *Blue* (1971) established her unusually liberated musical, lyrical, and political intelligence. Mitchell's following albums *For The Roses* (1972), *Court and Spark* (1974), *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* (1975), and *Hejira* (1976), if not indeed several subsequent records, constituted a period of sustained brilliance that, while certainly appreciated today, still has not gotten its full critical due. Always restless in her search for new sounds, even at the cost of her pop audience, Mitchell by the end of the decade had produced a concept album about jazz great Charles Mingus—the culmination of a gathering fascination across these years with African American culture and her relationship to it. The nadir (or maybe just the pivot) of this fascination came with Mitchell's appearance in blackface drag—as Art Nouveau, or Claude the pimp—on the cover of her 1977 album *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*. Mitchell here doubles, even triples herself (she appears as a little girl in First Nations costume on the cover's back), an insistent mirroring she deployed again in the 1980 concert film *Shadows and Light*, where during a song about bluesman Furry Lewis the face of her Art Nouveau is superimposed over her own. The mirror becomes literal in a short film she did around this moment titled *The Black Cat in the Black Mouse Socks*, one of nine female-authored contributions commissioned by producer Barry Levinson for a cinematic compendium called *Love* (1980).[2] Dressing up as Art before the mirror, surrounded by manifold accoutrements of "blackness" (a hustler's manual, bling, a boombox playing Miles Davis), Mitchell attends a Halloween party and meets up with a former lover.

With a couple of notable exceptions, Mitchell's decade-long plunge into black culture has more or less mystified most commentators, despite the professed admiration for her work by artists including Prince, who recorded a fabulous cover of "A Case of You"; Q-Tip ("Joni Mitchell never lies," he intones on Janet Jackson's 1997 song "Got Til It's Gone," which samples Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi"); and Herbie Hancock, whose fine 2007 album *River: The Joni Letters*, featuring Mitchell compositions sung and played by a variety of performers, won two Grammy awards. Greg Tate long ago remarked upon Mitchell's "black" and even "hip-hop" sensibility and attitude, "not a parrot, a pirate, or a parody." Kevin Fellezs counts Mitchell a defining figure in a field of male musical influences on the formation of jazz-rock fusion. Miles Park Grier has undertaken the most sustained study of Mitchell's blackface drag and the way it afforded the artist a way out of the singer-songwriter pigeonhole and into the ranks of the male rock canon (Tate 1998; Fellezs 2011, 148–182; Grier 2012; see also Nelson 2007; Whitesell 2008; Yaffe 2017).

I am interested in the way Art Nouveau's black mirror gave Mitchell the unlikely but provocative critical leverage she needed on the presumptively white and male 1970s LA social and musical scene. Mitchell's employment of backing jazz musicians; race-driven songs like "The Jungle Line," "The Boho Dance," "Furry Sings the Blues," and "Dreamland"; Beat garb like the beret she sports on the cover of *Hejira*; romantic relationships with black men like percussionist Don Alias; and, ultimately, her collaboration with Mingus form a revealing chapter in 1970s pop life, not to mention the cultural history of Los Angeles. Operating in a notoriously racist and segregated LA cultural scene, at the height of the post-Watts-riot "urban crisis," and amid a climate of race-war fantasy and fact (most obviously in the mind of Charles Manson and in the Hell's Angels' murder of a black man at Altamont), Mitchell left the folkie retreat of Laurel Canyon and, as it were, came down into the streets in imaginary cross-racial identification (the streets were those of Bel Air, but hey). Working with Mingus, himself from Watts, and formerly a pimp to boot, Mitchell walked some way out of whiteness; but given that *Mingus* (1979) was her least satisfying album of the decade—Robert Christgau rightly called it a "brave" but failed experiment—here I mean to ask what cognitive gain comes with her mix of interest in, identification with, and appropriation of black

sounds and styles (1981, 263). In a cultural domain known for its hideous racial entailments, Mitchell's valiant move certainly shows the limits of any merely individual attempt to undermine whiteness, but it curiously afforded a telling perspective on one ambitious woman artist's ascendancy, at a high pitch of second-wave feminism, in that weird new service industry to the American youth imaginary, commercial song.

Between 1963 and 1965, as Charlie Gillett long ago observed, the epicenter of US pop music shifted from New York to Los Angeles: where records made in New York stayed at No. 1 on the charts for twenty-six weeks (to LA's three) in 1963, by 1965 LA-made records had jumped to twenty weeks at No. 1 (to New York's one), and things stayed that way (Gillett 1983, 324–325). The political economy and social formation of Los Angeles are therefore key to understanding the consequences, and perhaps sources, of this westward drift. Eric Avila's *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight* offers one notable account of the way in which the postwar LA dialectic of chocolate city and vanilla suburb (or canyon) came about. Hollywood, Disneyland (opened in 1955), Dodger Stadium (built in time for the 1962 season), and the Eisenhower-initiated state-sponsored freeway system helped push-pull suburban/inner-city racial and class formations into being; mid-century Los Angeles was self-consciously made into a white or white-dominated city. As in other US conurbations, housing in Los Angeles was concertedly racially redlined by a host of agencies and activities, not least among them the New Deal's Home Owners' Loan Corporation and Federal Housing Authority. Disney's choice of Orange County's Anaheim for the location of Disneyland certified the sanitized suburban ethos he meant to foster there. Dodger Stadium was set down atop a working-class Chicano neighborhood (Chavez Ravine) in an attempt by city fathers to "renew" the historic downtown area. Key to this entire cultural geography was the freeway, whose supplanting of an extensive, demographically diverse, public streetcar system cemented the new urban regime of privatized racially segmented living. (As California historian and activist Carey McWilliams put it in 1965, the "freeways have been carefully designed to skim over and skirt around such eyesores as Watts and East Lost Angeles; even the downtown section, a portion of which has become a shopping area for minorities, has been partially bypassed.") The figurehead for

these developments, Avila observes, was Ronald Reagan, who aided the House Un-American Activities Committee in its quest for "subversive" influences in Hollywood, emceed the televised opening ceremonies at Disneyland, and appeared on live television to promote the building of Dodger Stadium. Reagan was, of course, governor of California from 1967 to 1975, precisely the years of Laurel Canyon musical hegemony (Avila 2006, 213).

The Watts uprising in 1965 made spectacular protest specifically against the racial dimensions of this urban regime. Southern in-migration, particularly during the Second World War, had radically recomposed the city's demographics and geography; while whites settled in such locales as the San Fernando Valley, African Americans swelled the ranks of South-Central Los Angeles, the LA black population actually doubling in the munitions boom-time of the war years. This gave rise, for one thing, to the sounds of LA's Central Avenue, with its crowds congregating in clubs like the Plantation, the Downbeat, and the Savoy. In his history of LA pop, *Waiting for the Sun*, Barney Hoskyns goes so far as to suggest we think of LA, not Memphis or Chicago or Detroit or New Orleans, as the defining American R&B town (Hoskyns 1996, 21). (Even Motown was to migrate there in 1971.) This scene was martially policed by an Los Angeles Police Department significantly shaped by white southern sensibilities; for this and other reasons, the LA black music scene had by 1965 been attenuated and supplanted by white pop reveling in one or another strain of endless-summer romanticism—this at a time when unemployment in Watts ran to a whopping 30 percent. In August, these tinderbox conditions ignited when a motorcycle cop's traffic stop escalated into insurrection, resulting in thirty-four deaths, thousands injured, more than that arrested, and $40 million in damage over six days of pitched battle. LA songwriter Randy Newman later remarked, "I always felt that the race situation was worse here than anywhere" (Hoskyns 1996, 107), while Thomas Pynchon wrote in a now-famous 1966 piece that Watts was a "country which lies, psychologically, uncounted miles further than most whites seem at present willing to travel," the so-called LA scene "a little unreal, a little less than substantial," "a white Scene" with illusion everywhere in it, the Sunset Strip itself a puny enclave of unfulfillment (Pynchon 1966, 4–5).

All of which is to say that mid-1960s Los Angeles became a racially segmented scene structured violently in dominance at the moment it emerged

as *the* port of entry into the US pop mainstream. The signature event of the British Invasion, for example, may have been the Beatles' 1965 show at Shea Stadium, but their label (before they formed Apple) was Hollywood's Capitol Records. The British Invasion, I would argue, is best understood as the invasion of Los Angeles. From the defining conceptual contributions to Los Angeles of Reyner Banham, Christopher Isherwood and David Hockney, to the LA presence of the Beatles and the Stones—1965's "Satisfaction" was recorded in Los Angeles, not Swinging London—to the import of British pop sensibilities through teen shows like *Shindig* and *Where the Action Is*, UK minds and mentalities had very much to do with the West Coast's opening of "the doors of perception," as LA emigrant Aldous Huxley had it (Jim Morrison heard the call). The aforementioned Peter Asher, producer in the 1970s of such artists as James Taylor and Linda Ronstadt, had been the Peter of the British duo Peter and Gordon, known best for their 1964 hit "A World Without Love" (Asher's sister Jane had been Paul McCartney's girlfriend). The organizing of youth as a pop collective in the late 1960s, that is to say, was very much a matter of a certain style of California dreamin'. The Sunset Strip was itself undergoing a perhaps Watts-emulating series of upheavals. The fall 1966 disturbances later depicted in the B-movie *Riot on Sunset Strip* (1967) were the Strip's answer to police repression in Los Angeles. The scene was politicized not around race, however, but rather around youth leisure rights; in response to a business consortium's plan to replace Strip pop clubs with high-rises, youth revolted, with at least one massive march (featuring fixtures such as Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper, and Sonny and Cher) and massive arrests. It is utterly symptomatic of this Strip scene that Stephen Stills' signature protest song of this moment, "For What It's Worth" ("Stop, hey, what's that sound / Everybody look what's goin' down"), is not about the Vietnam War, still less about injustices across town in Watts, but instead refers to the hassles on the Strip. The pop juggernaut fueled by revolting youth bore the decisive impress of LA white dominance.

In the wake of Watts, in other words, Laurel Canyon scarcely batted an eye. Buffalo Springfield; the Byrds; the Flying Burrito Brothers; Crosby, Stills, and Nash; Jackson Browne; Linda Ronstadt; The Eagles: amid the ashes, find me any real engagement with race in the United States of the 1970s. Even for Neil Young, racism took place in "Alabama," not, say, Malibu. (I mean

no disrespect to Young's brilliant songs broaching US genocide and Native American extermination, among them "Cortez the Killer" and "Pocahontas.") A budding Laurel Canyon cultural historiography, including the books *Hotel California* by Barney Hoskyns and *Laurel Canyon* by Michael Walker, mimics and perpetuates this racial complacency (Hoskyns 2006, 233; Walker 2007).[3] When Joe Smith took over Elektra-Asylum Records from David Geffen in 1975, he worried that his blackest artist was Joni Mitchell—which is to say that alone of all the white LA crew, Mitchell was paying attention to race. Beginning with *For The Roses* (1972) and *Court and Spark* (1974), Mitchell used jazz musicians (albeit the fusiony bunch of Tom Scott's LA Express) for her backing band, and the inclusion of a cover of Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross's "Twisted" on *Court and Spark* marked the start of her own foray into jazz singing. By this time, she had partnered with jazz-identified drummer John Guerin, whose playing was key to the sound and shape of this music. But it is really with 1975's *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* that Mitchell ventured self-conscious explorations of racial difference, blackness, and her own privileged whiteness (this was apparently Prince's favorite Joni album). From the celebration of rock 'n' roll in "In France They Kiss on Main Street" to the dissing of suburban whiteness in the title track, "Shades of Scarlett [as in O'Hara] Conquering," and "Harry's House," there's a new turn in Mitchell's work toward both social dissection and musical genre jumping. "The Jungle Line," with its Burundi warrior drummers in the background, is a witty satire of white primitivism and exoticism—"safaris to the heart of all that jazz" by "those cannibals of shuck and jive"—including, I think, her own; not for nothing does the song depict a slumming Henri Rousseau, like Mitchell a painter, and another in a line of powerful men perfect for the singer's inveterate transvestism, as in the previous year's channeling of David Geffen in "Free Man in Paris."

The *ars poetica* of this strategy is "The Boho Dance," Mitchell's nod to Tom Wolfe. "Down in the cellar in the Boho zone / I went looking for some sweet inspiration, oh well / Just another hard-time band with Negro affectations," she sings. But she's way too smart to leave it at that: "I was a hopeful in rooms like this / When I was working cheap / It's an old romance—the Boho dance / It hasn't gone to sleep." Rich boho Joni with Negro affectations: she sure knows who she is. And yet there's self-congratulation here too in Mitchell's defiance

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toward bohemia, a certain self-satisfaction: Jesus may have been a "beggar, rich in grace," she sings, but Solomon—whom I take as Mitchell's figure for herself—"kept his head in all his glory." "It's just that some steps outside the Boho dance / Have a fascination for me." Conclusion? "Nothing is capsulized in me / On either side of town / The streets were never really mine / Not mine these glamour gowns." Joni is large, she contains multitudes, and she is forthright about the resulting contradictions.

Thus, on one hand, the ever-so-slightly self-parodic "Blue Motel Room" from the following year's *Hejira*, an amusing romantic moue sung like a road-weary blues mama crossed with Billie Holiday. On the other, the same record's "Furry Sings the Blues," as striking for Mitchell's sudden mimicry of bluesman Furry Lewis—during a visit, Lewis looks Mitchell in the eye and says "I don't like you"—as it is for its rather withering self-portrait of Joni in Memphis longing to channel the souls of Lewis and W. C. Handy: "W. C. Handy I'm rich and I'm fey / And I'm not familiar with what you played / But I get such strong impressions of your hey day / Looking up and down old Beale Street." And then this, as self-scathing as a Steely Dan tune: "Why should I expect that guy to give it to me true / Fallen to hard luck / And time and other thieves / While our limo is shining on his shanty street / Old Furry sings the blues." You've got to credit her honesty here, even if the cross-gender, cross-racial yearning is a trifle embarrassing. No question that Mitchell counts herself as one of the above "thieves." In other words, here blackface or at least blackvoice has become a not altogether negligible mode of racial self-awareness.

These moves are especially arresting given that *Hejira* was the record of an extended, meditational solo road trip Mitchell made in the wake of her short stint with Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue in 1975, the latter documented in Dylan's film *Renaldo and Clara* (1978). Rolling Thunder was a sort of vagabond carnival extravaganza with a constantly varying cast of performers including Joan Baez, Ronnie Hawkins, Ramblin' Jack Elliot, Sam Shepard, Allen Ginsberg, and many others; "Coyote," Mitchell's beautiful signature song of this period (the one she plays, for example, in Martin Scorsese's *The Last Waltz*), addresses with a sort of wistful buoyancy her affair with Shepard.[4] Mitchell had any number of such liaisons and kept right at her business, which often involved conjuring art out of them; that was part of the point, that was very

much the persona and one of the reasons she was so compelling, that she sang (as the song "Help Me" summarized it) about loving her loving but loving her freedom even more, even if it often meant pain and isolation. This persona also occasioned a certain queenly rancor toward Joan Baez on the Rolling Thunder tour, alas, only one of the undermining forces besetting the tour's attempt to circumvent the star system by picking up artists in whatever locales it visited (including off the street). In any case, much of Rolling Thunder's importance to this period of Mitchell's work comes in the benefit concerts the Revue did for Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, the promising boxer convicted of murder who occasioned one of Dylan's most famous mid-70s songs, "Hurricane." Michael Denning has written of the benefit concert format as an artifact specifically of what he calls the post-1973 Great Recession, and the agitation and performing on Carter's behalf, including a show at Carter's Clinton State Prison itself, incubated a weird mix of activism, celebrity, and racial affect (Denning 2009, 28–41). Carter himself recounted one nasty episode in which Mitchell, after a poor reception at the prison, called him a "jive-ass nigger."[5] This post-countercultural address to the state's carceral apparatus thus both reveled in and foundered upon the white-Negro fantasies Mitchell had for some time been skewering in her music. It thickens the context for her subsequent exploration of such fantasies, as does the larger political-economic context of the Great Recession, a context to which I will return. Sexual freedom, female mobility, vested cross-racial interests, the lures and snares of male power: all would be condensed in the next turns of Mitchell's life and career.

It was at about this moment that Mitchell fell in love with Don Alias. Stanley Crouch could have been describing Mitchell's relationship with Alias in his novel *Don't the Moon Look Lonesome* (2000), in which a young, blond South Dakota (Mitchell hailed from Saskatoon, just to the north) jazz singer's relationship with a black jazz musician mixes crossover urgency with crossover's obvious limits. Mitchell and Alias, an Afro-Cuban music specialist who worked with everyone from Nina Simone to Miles Davis, had a deep but conflicted three-and-a-half-year relationship, and Alias thereafter remained close to her heart. His presence on *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* helps give that record its distinctive, bristling sound, and he commanded the drum kit on the Shadows and Light tour. But Mitchell surely tested his mettle; the

one-time premed student was alarmed, for example, to find Mitchell's nude portrait of him, complete with hard-on, suddenly hanging in the living room of their New York loft. She called it a "testament to his sexuality"; he called it "an embarrassment" (Weller 2008, 430). Alias insisted she repaint it, and she ultimately did, but Mitchell fought him every step of the way. This painterly investment in the black penis is of a piece with Mitchell's other racial and gender peregrinations, and it is the cover of *Reckless Daughter*, the music of this particular moment in her life, that sports Mitchell's Claude-the-pimp getup. The painting and the scuffle it occasioned are of interest for the race and gender reversals impacted there. The painting reverses the relations of looking by which hundreds of years of painted nudes have been structured; in assuming the male prerogative to look and to represent there is something of the self-portrait in it; its figuration celebrates but also appropriates, exoticizes as well as owns, recapitulating her fantasy of her own black maleness. Having a black man, for Mitchell, came satisfyingly close to being one.

The turn to the pimp guise, then, however bizarre it might seem, does bring all of Mitchell's 1970s concerns together, and more besides: the question of sexual dominance and its emotional fallout, the attractions of male power, particularly black male power, and the matter of money—who has it, who is in a position to dispense it, and what it will get you in a recessionary economy nonetheless governed in part by the pop power machine. When you contemplate Joni as pimp, you realize that in her work the dialectic or conflict between women's romantic susceptibility over against the desire for liberty and ambition, the pull of racial otherness and the street characters, including Rubin Carter, who seem to embody it, was all across the decade underwritten by a clear-eyed emphasis on cold hard cash. "He was playin' real good / For free," goes the self-deflating "For Free," way back in 1970, on the same record, *Ladies of the Canyon*, that features the myth-making "Woodstock" and the environmentalist whimsy of "Big Yellow Taxi." Mitchell was, from the start, able to offer withering critiques of her own willing place in the pop cash nexus. In so doing she offered up demystifying tales of what has been termed "countercultural capital." Michael Szalay and Sean McCann, in their introduction and conclusion to a 2005 volume of the *Yale Journal of Criticism* entitled *Countercultural Capital: Essays on the Sixties from Some Who Weren't*

There, assailed the magical thinking and "merely cultural" thrust of much of the post-Woodstock generation's artistic and critical production, its disregard of, for example, what McCann calls "presidential government" (and they take me to task for the same tendency, incorrectly I might add) (Szalay and McCann 2005; Lott 2005, 471–472; McCann 2008). Mitchell, I am arguing, always knew the "back to the garden" fantasy was precisely that. The song "Court and Spark," again, to take one of many examples, is structured in this fashion; though she falls in love with a deep soul who plays for "passing change" on the streets and in People's Park, she can't "let go of L.A. / City of the fallen angels." The very cover of *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* features Mitchell's painting of a long snake in the suburban garden, Mitchell as Tom Wolfe again, while inside the gatefold comes a double-album-sized photograph of Joni luxuriating in her backyard pool! And *Hissing*'s "Edith and the Kingpin" is a tale of pimp and stable outright, making clear not only that the political economy of sex (as Gayle Rubin called it the year the song was released) is an economy structured in gender and financial dominance but also, and crucially, that pimp and whore are locked in an ineluctable codependency. As in—or better, as a version of—Hegel's master/slave dialectic, both parties realize themselves each through the other, need each other to exist "for themselves," might at any moment upend the balance of power that holds them together: "Edith and the Kingpin / Each with charm to sway / Are staring eye to eye / They dare not look away / You know they dare not look away." Mitchell's perhaps characteristic response: Why not be both? (Rubin 1975; Hegel 1977, 111–119).[6]

A little backstory here. As David Yaffe has shown, a jazz-lore lineage of the pimp/whore dialectic extends back through such texts as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Billie Holiday and William Dufty's *Lady Sings the Blues* (1956), and most importantly for Mitchell, Charles Mingus's *Beneath the Underdog* (1971) (Yaffe 2005). An LA-centric pulp pimp heir to such representations suddenly erupted in the late 1960s. Justin Gifford documents how the Los Angeles pulp publisher Holloway House almost single-handedly made available vivid, visceral stories of the pimp game in dozens of books by such writers as Iceberg Slim, Donald Goines, and many others (Gifford 2013; see also Coleman 2003, 68–80). By the early 1970s, Blaxploitation film had emerged to throw such stories up on the big screen. Joni Mitchell seems

to have keyed into the persona's usefulness in commenting on what Jean-Paul Sartre might have called her "situation" in the culture industry of her moment (Sartre 1965). Transmogrifying the pimp figure's South-to-North migration and defiant self-making into her own passage from Saskatoon to Los Angeles via Toronto and then Detroit—Joan Anderson became Joni Mitchell through her Detroit marriage to Chuck Mitchell, and Joni, perhaps tellingly, experienced firsthand Detroit's late-1960s "urban crisis" (though not the summer of '67's Great Rebellion, by which time she had made her way to Greenwich Village)—Mitchell absorbed the pimp's stance and saw the logic of what Gifford calls a "pimp poetics." To wit, the pimp of Iceberg Slim's 1967 autobiography, Gifford argues, is a figure who adapts structures of white power and economic exploitation in order to achieve a radically individualized form of liberty: "Slim," an associate tells him, "a pimp is really a whore who's reversed the game on whores [. . .] a good pimp is like a slick white boss" (2013, 67). Which leads to the conclusion that pimping is not a sex game but rather a "skull game," all about ice-cold attitude and pile after pile of cash money (Gifford 2013, 68). Floated by second-wave feminism but never feminist-identified, Mitchell bought into the radically individualized perspective of all this—a perspective purchased through the "star-maker machinery" she was tough-minded enough to analyze so clearly because of her self-understanding as whore become pimp. If, as various critics have perceived, pimps and pimp writers both are service workers bound up in culture-industry protocols, Mitchell, I would argue, alludes in precisely this way to her own artistic practice. In this light, the great song "Free Man in Paris" comes to seem an act of pimp David Geffen being turned out by his friend, mack daddy Joni. Limning the pressures of the "star-maker machinery" on one of its own biggest operators, *she* hustles *him*, punks him into a character in a tune that *reads* him and that, not incidentally, made them both a lot of money. It's as though the best you could do in this crazy new exploding industry as a female artistic sole proprietor was aspire to hustle yourself, be your own pimp—that was Mitchell's implicit, and then explicit, claim.

Charles Mingus certainly understood himself this way in the political economy of jazz, as he makes elaborately, outrageously evident in his 1971 autobiography *Beneath the Underdog*, a bulging, sprawling, brilliant mixture

of self-psychoanalysis, sex manual, pimp narrative, and modernist character study that depicts Mingus, in whatever domain he chooses, always struggling to get a leg up, and over (Mingus 1971). One of the great minds in jazz history, at once composer, arranger, bandleader, and bassist, Mingus called Mitchell out of the blue in the fall of 1978 with six new tunes he wanted Mitchell to write lyrics for. If Mitchell had dreamed that someday her pimp would come, this was it: Mitchell immediately devoured Mingus's autobiography and agreed to meet with him. The result was *Mingus* (1979), released shortly after Mingus's death at 56 from Lou Gehrig's disease.[7] In the album's liner notes Mitchell writes about the experience: "It was as if I had been standing by a river—one toe in the water—feeling it out—and Charlie came by and pushed me in—"sink or swim"—him laughing at me dog paddling around in the currents of black classical music." The river is no longer frozen like the one Mitchell wished to skate away on in her famous 1971 song "River"; and pimped out or herself doing the pimping, little dog Joni swims in jazz, appropriating Mingus's voice and persona in songs such as "A Chair in the Sky," which riffs on Mingus's confinement to a wheelchair in the last months of his life. Mitchell here becomes one of what the song nicely terms "mutts of the planet"—an achievement that does not, however, preclude, and may even precipitate, some of the worst writing of her career to that point (it was to get much worse). The biggest payoff of black drag king Joni may be the discordant, angry guitar work on *Mingus*. But songs like "Sweet Sucker Dance" have an embarrassing tendency to claim ownership over Mingus's heart: "We're dancing fools / You and me / Tonight it's a dance of insecurity / It's my solo / While you're away / And shadows have the saddest things to say." And while Mitchell becomes white once more in her lyrics to Mingus's "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat," the slack, "Strange Fruit"-style lyrics meld Mingus and Alias into a single, iconic figure, and produce precisely the exoticism she lampooned just a few years earlier: "So the sidewalk leads us with music / To two little dancers / Dancing outside a black bar / There's a sign up on the awning / It says "Pork Pie Hat Bar" / And there's black babies dancing . . . / Tonight!" This cul-de-sac of cross-racial identification played out equivocally in the Shadows and Light Tour that followed it, buttressed as it was by an almost entirely white host of backing jazz musicians, among them Mitchell

veterans Alias and Jaco Pastorius as well as newbies Michael Brecker, Pat Metheny, and Lyle Mays.

If *Mingus* plays somewhat like a struggle for pimp supremacy, it also, like the whole pimp fantasy for Mitchell, gives new meaning to her idea of "Both Sides, Now," as Alexander Corey has suggested—Mitchell's oft-covered late-1960s song about love's and life's illusions. Traversing gender, racial, and class binaries, looking at them from both sides of the street, cruising between them as it were, Mitchell hits on the difference, or is it the sameness, of "being" and "having" the phallus, as Jacques Lacan's writings elaborate it (Lacan 1977; see also Grosz 1990). White woman and black man are twinned in the US racial imaginary as threats to white masculinity—it's why their coupling is taboo, and possibly why Mitchell wants to inhabit them both. The phallic investments of Mingus's autobiography might also have titillated her into this stance. As Corey puts it,

> when Joni Mitchell dresses up as the embodied possessor of the black penis, she is also drawing on her feminine ability to "be the phallus," which is her ability to turn the bodily allusion to the phallic symbol into the illusion of the phallus itself. It is a moment at which she triangulates a danger to white masculinity through simultaneous invocation of dangerous white feminine sexuality and a threatening black masculinity—a moment which may not have been fully realized, but maybe [sic] a kind of opening or unanimated potentiality that resists the racial and sexual power structures that continued to govern American culture, albeit in a constantly shifting way. Castrating the white male comes from both sides; the white woman like Mitchell and the black man like, say, Eldridge Cleaver and Amiri Baraka. (Personal correspondence)

Blackface drag is perfect for taking down or just surmounting white masculinist domination from "both sides now," a fraught way of negotiating the 1970s sex/gender system at the intersection of second-wave feminism and Black Power—a way, as Miles Grier writes, to criticize sexism as if it were racism against black men.[8]

California pimpin' in the Great Recession: in the words of Walter Sobchak (the John Goodman character in *The Big Lebowski*, another recessionary LA story), "at least it's an ethos." Walter's comic preference for Nazis over nihilists

might seem uncomfortably analogous to Joni Mitchell's late 1970s moves. However outré and racially problematic, they at least offered a figural meditation on an artistic political predicament that she understood as such. Consider the alternative, which I'm sure she did. Succeeding Ronald Reagan in the California governor's seat was Jerry Brown, who famously cozied up to the Laurel Canyon firmament—figuratively in the case of artists like Jackson Browne and The Eagles, who did a benefit show in 1979 to raise funds for Brown's 1980 presidential run, and quite literally in the case of Linda Ronstadt, who for a time became his girlfriend. Compromised politics met compromised music in a small-s state imaginary that The Eagles' *Hotel California* all-too-easefully assailed: they did indeed check out anytime they liked, and sure enough they never did leave. Brown addressed recessionary times with a fiscal austerity that was widely seen as to the right of anything Reagan had overseen, and the musicians mostly did a lot of blow, shilling for it all and soundtracking a late-1970s malaise. It was, in a way, a local version of what Michael Szalay examines in his study of the post-Second World War American novel, *Hip Figures*, which argues that the figure of the hipster, imagined above all in Norman Mailer's "The White Negro," was key to the postwar formation of the Democratic Party, clinched in the figure of "hipster president" John F. Kennedy but compelling in various guises beyond his life and example (Szalay 2012). To be "in," as Mailer had it, was to be in tune with the forces of history, out of office or in. It was no doubt difficult to dissent from this vibe in the late-1970s California pop-political landscape, so it was not nothing in this context for Joni Mitchell to ask, essentially, and with respect to race and the cash nexus, who's zoomin' who? Especially at a moment when the Bakke decision threatened to reverse significant aspects of affirmative action, and when the anti-tax revolt of Proposition 13 began to lay the groundwork for a national version of such revanchism. As Mike Davis argued in *Prisoners of the American Dream*, the groundwork for the Reagan 1980s was pioneered in California (Davis 1986, 157–180). Black drag-kinging the pimp gave Joni Mitchell purchase on several contexts and conundrums at once, and in a state whose politics would come to define the federal apparatus across the decades to come. It wasn't pretty, and it's hardly defensible, but as she put it in the song "Shadows and Light": "Every picture has its shadows / And it has some source of light / Blindness, blindness and sight."

Coda: for the roses

Edwardsville, Illinois, summer 1979, the Shadows and Light Tour: my friend Tom Byrne and I snuck backstage after seeing the show, filing in behind VIPs strolling into a little hut behind the outdoor festival stage. I was twenty and utterly starstruck. We were suddenly in the intimate presence of the band, several musicians including Jaco Pastorius and Michael Brecker gathered around an upright piano, Joni sitting regally in a wicker chair. She had gotten that late-1970s perm, blond kink, black and blond as Greg Tate has it. She greeted us warmly and casually and in doing so left us tongue-tied. Courteous and almost courtly, she asked us about ourselves, and when she found out that I play drums she called Don Alias over and introduced us: tongue-tied again. She recounted her enjoyment of her recent musical moves, particularly playing with Pastorius, and way too soon people started to split. Joni spontaneously offered us the good-luck flowers that had been sent over by the record company—I still have the note that came with them. It reminded me of her acid irony about the business in "For the Roses"—"And now you're seen / On giant screens / And at parties for the press / And for people who have slices of you / From the company." And then I was struck by the way, as she did with her music, Joni had turned a company man's obligation into a gift.

Notes

1 The origins of this getup are told in, among other sources, O'Brien (2002); another set of Mitchell tellings occurs in Swanson (2015), 88–94.
2 Joni Mitchell's official website. http://jonimitchell.com/library/video.cfm?id=412 (accessed: June 3, 2018).
3 Joe Smith remark in Hoskyns at 233.
4 Shepard's take can be found in *The Rolling Thunder Logbook* (2004, 117); more generally, see Kutulas (2010).
5 Rubin Carter documentary; the quote appears as well, in Mitchell's own telling, in Bego (2005, 145).
6 Tina Turner's version of "Edith" on Herbie Hancock's *River: The Joni Letters* strikes me as perhaps the definitive one, sung by one who was forced to know, and then left, the life.

7 Joni Mitchell, *Mingus* (Hollywood: Asylum Records, 1979); Santoro (2000, 374–376, 381–384); Bego (2005, 167–179); Monk (2012, 27–34).

8 I am indebted for these formulations to Alex Corey's illuminating, extended written responses to an earlier version of this work, personal communication on July 29, 2011; Grier (2012); Halberstam (1998, 231–66). Subject for further study: Joni Mitchell exploring ideas contemporaneous with and closely adjacent to Irigaray (1985).

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