Black Feminism and the Violence of Disco

Feature Article

Katharina Pawel
Freie Universität Berlin (Germany)

Abstract

This article interrogates the ways through which Black women and Black feminist perspectives have been written out of disco's history. Re-reading the dominant discoriogaphies in the U.S. from a Black feminist perspective, deconstructs the hegemonic male-centered discourse on disco, whilst intervening in the academic landscape at large, arguing for a genuine intersectional approach. This will be exemplified by a case study of the disco/funk group Labelle in the U.S. This allows us to revisit disco's political potential from a more inclusive standpoint that listens to and enjoys the voices of its Black female counterparts.

Keywords: disco, Black Feminism, revisionist history, U.S., Labelle

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Katharina v. Pawel-Rammingen is completing a program in North American studies at the John-F.-Kennedy Institute, of Freie Universität Berlin. Her interdisciplinary interests include modern cultural and intellectual history, American literature, as well as philosophy. Specifically, she is interested in theories of modernity, history of gender and feminisms and African American studies, informed by postcolonial approaches. She is a strong believer in the positive impact of care and engages in her local community. Katharina also likes to explore Berlin's music culture.

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Introduction

Recent revisionism of the 1970s has shifted our imagination from a decade of decline—void of political and cultural growth—to one abundant with political advancement, in which the seeds of change planted in the 1960s, finally bore fruit a decade later. This reimagining reveals the 1970s to be a contentious and contradictory period, as society grappled with newly gained women's-, racial- and gay rights. Shifts in identity and representation were formed, reflected and tested in the cultural sphere, reaching their most exuberant manifestations in the era's burgeoning nightclub and dance scene. Disco was not only the thumping heart of the new nightlife extravaganza but was instrumental in shaping understandings of femininity, Blackness and homosexuality. Although the many histories of disco emphasize its role in these processes most studies nevertheless exclude women's visions from disco's narrative(s) (Dyer 1979; Royster 2005; Echols 2010 and Haden-Guest 1997; Jones and Kantonen 1999). The recognition of women's importance to disco tends to be limited to their function as disco queens for the gay liberation movement (Haden-Guest 1997; Cheren 2000). Moreover, when studies have managed to challenge this conspicuous lack of agency and place disco in dialogue with feminism, they tend to do so through a narrow frame, unable to include a Black feminist analysis (Lawrence 2003; Shapiro 2005).[1]

In light of this absence, this article situates itself as a critical intervention into an academic landscape shaped by masculinist analytical categories that all-too-often fall short of a genuine intersectional approach, wherein disco's expressions of Black feminist ideas are routinely overlooked. This article joins a growing literature challenging these dominant analytical paradigms that implicitly erase Black women as critical agents from history. An analysis of emblematic discographies will interrogate the means through which this manifestation of epistemic violence take place. Revising disco's historiography (discoriographies) through a Black feminist framework attests to the survivalist and progressive potential of disco, voiced so clearly in the music and actions of lauded divas like Labelle. This allows for a more nuanced understanding of the ways disco changed and challenged the American cultural sphere and beyond, whilst recognizing Black women as active critical agents in music and sociocultural politics. It will highlight the urgent need to integrate Black feminist discourses into the histories of popular music.

The first half of this article will map the current literature on disco. Looking at two of the most prominent chroniclers of disco, Tim Lawrence (2004) and Peter Shapiro (2005), it will reveal how even the most nuanced discoriographers fail to acknowledge Black women (who dominated disco) as agents of change. Both Lawrence and Shapiro include women in their histories, but neither significantly engage with the meanings of Black women's contribution to disco for Black women themselves, and they certainly fail to incorporate a Black feminist perspective.[2]

Consequently, the lack of representation of Black women in these historiographies is unable to include Black women's musical practices as expressions of Black feminist thought and thus, shaping of 1970s American culture. Moreover, Lawrence and Shapiro are not

alone in their neglect of Black women: even promising recent titles like *Disco Divas: Women and Pop Culture in the 1970s,* a monograph ostensibly dedicated to women, affords only one chapter to Black women (Inness 2003). Unfortunately, the solitary essay, "Women Music from Carole King to Disco Divas" by Judy Kutulas, focuses on women in pop music, but rather than broadening our understanding, it reinforces hierarchical gendered divisions along genres that merely mirror a rock (male) centric critique of disco itself (2003: 172-193). A turn to one of the most read essays in music studies, Richard Dyer's "In Defense of Disco" (1979), deconstructs this problematic approach and opens up the discussion in more productive ways.

The second half of this article builds on Dyer's deconstructions to analyse exemplary passages from Lawrence and Shapiro through a Black feminist frame, thereby shining a light on the violence endemic within their disco historiographies. Outlining Black feminism's central ideas will help to revise the instances in which these chroniclers have arrived at detrimental conclusions through fraught intersectional interpretations. To show this I will take issue with three specific occurrences, all of which are symptomatic of problems in their work more generally, such as a poor intersectional analysis, a narrow reading of Labelle's lyrics deprived of Black feminist political potential, and finally, an instance of discursive erasure of Black women in Lawrence and Shapiro's work. This intervention enables the reader to (re)hear the radicalism of disco and its Black female practitioners, who imagined new spaces, found the potential for joy and beauty in 1970s America, and envisioned a future through feminist wisdom, a triumvirate that profoundly alters our understanding of disco's radical potential.[3] Ultimately, it challenges the masculinist academic hegemony that often continues to sideline Black women's historical contributions.

Mapping Disco(urses)

The importance of disco to gay communities and gay liberation is indisputable and has received growing scholarly attention. Studies have stressed the underground roots of disco, from the gay enclaves of Fire Island's "Tea Dances" in the mid-1960s, to David Mancuso's New York private loft parties at the beginning of the decade.[4] The equally loved and loathed disco craze swept the nation during the 1970s and, as early as 1979, journalist Andrew Kopkind dubbed the decade the "Disco Years" (1979). Yet, what exactly the disco years mean and to whom continues to be a contested field of enquiry. More recent revisionist histories have complicated the cultural cliches of a decade comprised solely of polyester suits, platform shoes, cocaine and glitter balls (which were, of course, no small feature of disco) to include disco's role in processes of changing ideas of Blackness, femininity and male homosexuality (Lawrence 2003; Shapiro 2005). Disco named a sensibility that went beyond a musical genre; it generated cultural spaces through clubs, fashion and movies; and provided a sense of community that was, not least, formed on the dancefloor.[5] The sexual revolution of the 1960s had profoundly shifted society's understanding and public acceptance of expressive (hetero)sexuality. Nevertheless, "homophobia and harassment

were the norm even in big cities" and "gays could still be arrested for simply holding hands", as cultural historian Alice Echols reminds us (2010: 42). Stylistic changes in popular culture in the 1970s subverted dominant heterosexual masculinity and paved the way for the acceptance of gay lifestyles (Lawrence 2003: 148). In this regard, dancefloors, and with them disco's open-ended, non-partnered dance formats, constituted a kind of protest that shaped understandings of identity and subjectivity in opposition to heterosexual norms (Dyer 1979: 412).

Cultural historian Tim Lawrence, as well as critic and journalist Peter Shapiro are notable in their work for historicising disco as serious cultural expression.[6] Although there exists a rich body of work around disco within musicology and dance culture studies, those studies tend to emphasise specific musical expressions, such as the effects of lush orchestration or the use of falsetto for changing expressions of masculinity (Halberstam 2007; Hubbs 2007).[7] Whilst there is much to be gained from these approaches, the accounts by Lawrence and Shapiro offer a historiographic approach to disco that reveal disco's centrality to the changing cultural and political landscape in America. In the following sections of this article, I will introduce and engage with Lawrence and Shapiro's oeuvre. Their work not only represents the most comprehensive attempt to historicise disco, but it is also emblematic of the many failings that have so far blighted disco's treatment by historians. The particularly gendered focus offered by Kutulas will be problematised via Dyer's seminal essay to lead into a Black feminist reassessment in the second half of this article.

By far the most cited and exhaustive account on disco's movement is offered by Tim Lawrence (2003) in *Love Saves the Day (LStD)*, named after David Mancuso's inaugural Valentine's Day party in 1970. It chronicles disco, or dance music culture as Lawrence prefers to call it, from its underground beginnings to its mainstream adaptation and musical development into the '80s dance genre. Venues "The Loft" and "Studio 54" compete for the spotlight in his reading of the "true" character of disco. Although Lawrence does not try to conceal his bias when he characterises David Mancuso's Loft as "the linchpin of the New York underground while the other [Studio 54] became the focal point of excessive midtown hedonism" (2003: 3). *LStD* stands out for its revisionism of disco via an in-depth examination of disco's underground beginnings and its nuanced view of the many early musical experimentations and discotheques. Perhaps Lawrence's most vital contribution is the inclusion of disco's African American and Latino roots in dance music historiography, though this aspect is afforded precious little attention. Lawrence prefers to divide his focus for the majority of *LStD* between the innovative sound technology—such as vari-speed turntable techniques or the use of 12-inch singles—that ignited the disco craze, and oral accounts of the people involved in the 1970s dance scene (2003: 87-90). The interviews comprise the heart of his work and make clear that disco was experienced in many different ways by various and diverse but often unifying groups. This extensive use of oral primary sources is commendable in many respects, but also proves to be a shortcoming of *LStD*, a critique which I will now briefly elucidate before turning to other discoriographers.

The predominance of interviews in *LStD* paints a vivid picture of the disco years and yet obscure the complexities of disco's sensibility. The many first-hand stories repeatedly describe a familiar and predictable trajectory: innovative sounds and technologies sparking a craze on the dancefloor, only to eventually be superseded by newer sounds (Williams 2005). Whilst certainly typical of disco, or any pop music for that matter, it fails to interrogate the reasons for this shift in popularity. Other than an at times purely descriptive narrative, the overload of detailed information is a veritable "who's who" of the 1970s disco scene, yet it is one that barely registers "unknown" voices. True, *LStD* includes an abundance of anecdotes by regular party attendees—as opposed to the usual DJs, producers, music critics or celebrities—but these denizens are regulars of exclusive clubs like the "Loft", "Paradise Garage" or "Reade Street". Although Lawrence addresses the exclusivity of those venues by pointing to the democratic beginnings of disco, the vast majority of his interviewees are nonetheless men (2003: 78-81). This masculinist frame of reference allows a narrowing of disco's history towards one only conducive for gay male liberation. True, he does acknowledge that "Black women had secured an unprecedented presence" (2003: 328), and mentions the likes of Gloria Gaynor, Donna Summer and Chaka Khan, but they receive only fleeting recognition and even then, are only glimpsed through the male (producer's) gaze. In contrast, Studio 54 DJ Nicky Siano is referenced over one hundred times, and Loft DJ David Mancuso clocks in at nearly double that. This interest in men as objects of study effectively erases the contributions of women in disco, and implicitly confirms the codification of disco as a gay men's genre (Traister 2000).

These same omissions tarnish journalist Peter Shapiro's influential and otherwise extensive work on disco's influence in American popular culture, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco* (2005). Expanding on Lawrence, Shapiro elongates the timeline of his narrative to include disco's European connections all the way back to the 1930s. In the U.S. context, special attention is paid to disco's indebtedness to Motown's sound and its promise of Black music ownership, and the genre's subsequent expansion into the mainstream. These "crossover" ambitions, not unique to disco, upended the usual racial dynamics of pop music and afforded greater recognition to Black artists in the mainstream (Shapiro 2005: 145-174). Just like Lawrence, Shapiro begins by stressing the diversity of early disco's dancefloors and emphasises disco's universal appeal, even going so far as to call it "populist music par excellence" because "disco belongs to everyone" (2005: 276). Nevertheless, and in a self-contradicting manner, Shapiro is not shy to tell us how rare female presence was (2005: 21). Women's scarce appearance is emphatically replicated in Shapiro's consideration of women: we are only introduced to three half-hearted and rather unfavourable illustrations of Labelle, Gloria Gaynor and Donna Summer, and only to be told that "disco was not about divas" (2005: 104). And yet, disco's divas embodied the tensions of 1970s women's liberation movements and sexual expressiveness that "carried this sexual dynamism out of the back room, onto the dancefloor and into the streets", as Shapiro recognises as well (2005: 51). As the second half of this article will demonstrate, a Black feminist analysis offers a richer universal approach, able to belong to everyone whilst centring on Black women's experiences (Hill Collins 1989).

Although *Turn the Beat Around* and *Love Saves the Day* offer valuable and discerning analyses of 1970s dance culture, neither author pay adequate attention to women in disco nor, specifically, Black feminist views.[8] It is notable that Lawrence even criticises Shapiro for this omission, lamenting that the diva "goes missing just when you would expect to deepen your acquaintance with her" in the work of his fellow discographer (Lawrence 2006: 162). Unfortunately, however, this is symptomatic of inadequacies in both of their work. It is even more surprising then that Lawrence goes on to describe other discographer's "fleeting recognition for establishing a milieu in which female vocalists were able to carve out a significant space for artistic expression" (2006: 148). But his own recognition amounts to little more than offering that "disco's core gay dancers took to these female vocalists because they related to their tales of hardship, pain, and emotional defiance in the face of adversity" (2006: 148). Pre-empting a critique of traditional diva worship, Lawrence points to the ability of disco's lyrics to transcend confining heterosexual notions of sexuality (Lawrence 2006:148; see also Koestenbaum 1993). This is certainly a powerful aspect of disco, and one that I wholeheartedly acknowledge, but what Lawrence does not include, however, is a feminist alliance. Shapiro is similarly culpable for his neglect of women in disco, even at one point inadvertently brushing against feminism when he states that "'the personal is political' was always implicit in disco culture" (2004: 280). Even this invocation of feminism's most famous aphorism fails to inspire an engagement with women. Instead, it serves as a springboard for his analysis of changing dynamics of masculinity on the dancefloor.[9]

Unfortunately, neither Lawrence nor Shapiro are exceptional in failing to disturb this male centric paradigm. At first glance, we might assume to find relief in a compendium edited by Innes entitled *Disco Divas: Women and Popular Culture in the 1970s* (2003), but the one essay afforded to women in music in this volume brings with it a whole different set of problems. "Women's Music from Carole King to the Disco Divas" by Judy Kutulas provides a brief assault on disco, sketching it as backlash music that eclipsed the "natural looks" and "authentic lyrics" of '60s era female singer songwriters (2004: 174-189). In the author's view, disco divas strut onto the scene only to "help contain the threat [of subversive elements] of women's movement". Divas, according to Kutulas, were understood as "unreal identities" whose empowerment was a "glamorous substitute for substantive economic or political power" (2004: 189). Whilst disco's relationship to women was certainly fluid and confounding, Kutulas' equation of divas with backlash and artificiality reinforces gendered formulations of musical genres that typically ascribe a sense of authenticity to rock and folk while simultaneously discrediting disco and other genres as inauthentic. Richard Dyer has famously deconstructed this authentic/inauthentic stratification that lionises rock and folk as genuine and sets up disco and other pop music as artificial (and effeminate) capitalist productions emptied of any political potential (Dyer 1979). This self-legitimising division solidifies rock as canon that values "authentic" notions of (male) virtuosity and "auteurship" at the expense of racial and gender collaborations (Brooks 2008). It invariably understands rock as "normative", whose mythologies would get "positioned predictably in opposition to what would turn into the rise of [B]lack, Latino, and queer disco cultures"

(Brooks 2008: 57). It is for this reason I propose a Black feminist intervention freed from these critical paradigms, that is able to adequately include the lives of the Disco Diva within disco's revisionism.

Dyer's defence of disco not only demystifies the authentic/inauthentic division of cultural production, but also theorises disco's radical political potential. One of the radical characteristics of disco is its ability to restore eroticism to the whole body, in contrast to rock's confinement of "sexuality to cock" (Dyer 1979: 412). This "whole body eroticism" is part of disco's focus around the politics of pleasure, and it opens new understandings of the body that "allow us to rediscover our bodies as part of . . . the possibility of change" (Dyer 1979: 415). Following Dyer's argument that disco "releases you in an open-ended succession of repetitions", historian Walter Hughes sees the sonically open-ended sound of disco as evoking the "seemingly endless cycles and plateaus" of the female orgasm (Dyer 1979: 410; Hughes 1994: 151-154). Disco's foregrounding of female desire signalled a shift in sexual politics: from the portrayal of women as submissive servants to *his* "sexual healing", to a more reciprocal understanding of pleasure (Echols 2010: 35). In this view, disco truly was the music of "jouissance"—female pleasure. In the following I will show how a politics of pleasure belongs to a Black feminist thought and broaden Lawrence's and Shapiro's cultural mapping of disco via a Black feminist inspired reading. It will become apparent that there is an urgent need to reassess discography, and academia at large, through the evolving ideas of Black feminist thought, in order to pave the way for more inclusive histories and futures.

Black Feminism in Disco

Before returning to Shapiro and Lawrence I will lay out some of Black feminism's central tenets. Black feminism is constantly evolving to meet the new challenges that arise from the intersection of racial and gender discrimination against Black women whose experiences of these compounding factors of oppression astutely inform this philosophy. In its essence, Black feminism is a philosophy that recognises all Black women as inherently valuable and thus centres on the struggle for Black women's liberation. Black feminists, like the Combahee River Collective in the U.S., have long raised concerns that their struggle for liberation needs to work towards Black women's own goals first, rather than being appropriated for someone else's liberation (1978). At the same time, Black feminism does not see its concerns as separate from other systems of oppression because it understands these to be interlocking within the oppressive power structure of "white supremacy capitalist patriarchy", as bell hooks famously terms it (2000: 109). In short, Black feminism stresses the compounding factors of oppression and as such understands that any one experience of these categories—such as gender, race, class, sexuality—cannot be understood or fought independently. Further, one of Black feminism's tactics is its focus on joy and beauty as means of resistance. This characterises a philosophy beyond mere survival to one envisioning a prosperous future. Finally, and as espoused in the teachings of Angela Davis, Black feminism does not belong to one group of people or gender, but rather functions as a frame of analysis for locating and overcoming dominant power relations (Davis 1981).

Black feminism's employment of joy as political tool, makes apparent that disco's sexual politics need to be re-evaluated through such a frame. However, Black feminism does not merely advocate disco's sense of self-satisfaction as relevant to the bedroom (which it does as well), but crucially as an acceptance of oneself. Black feminist and poet Audre Lorde's seminal "Use of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" sees erotic connections as a way to an "open and fearless underlining of ones capacity for *joy*" (1978: 89). She goes on to say (and I will quote at length to do her words justice):

> In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea. That self-connection shared is a measure of the joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling. And that deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible. (1978: 89)

The erotic knowledge, that Lorde has so beautifully located, goes beyond mere strategies of survival as it shapes the responsibility to create and demand a fuller and joyful life. It further stresses the importance of fostering and sharing meaningful connections that overcome differences through mutual understandings for a better future. These key aspects of Black feminism underline personal experiences as a source of knowledge and emphasise the sharing of joy as a way of fighting oppression from the inside out. It is this personal politics that "gives power to pursue genuine change within our world" (Collins 1991: 59).

Having elaborated one of the central tenets of this ideology, I will now proceed to a Black feminist informed evaluation of three case examples from Lawrence's and Shapiro's work. These examples reveal their discographies' implicit participation in reproducing existing power relations that erase the feminist legacies of Black women. In so doing, they continue the pernicious tradition of writing Black women out of music historiography. In the first instance, Lawrence's misuse of intersectional language highlights the inherent epistemic violence of a masculinist informed analysis, as does my second example of Shapiro's interpretation of Labelle's song "What Can I Do For You?" (1974). Before concluding, I will situate the work of Lawrence and Shapiro in my third and final example in relation to bell hook's enduring insights.

Let me begin with an excerpt from *LStD*: "If performers were black and female . . . then their ability to overcome the double oppression of race and sex through gutsy emotion and bodily expressivity made them an applicable candidate for the floor, especially if it was gay" (Lawrence 2003: 371). On the one hand, Lawrence's quote reveals what seems to be a misunderstanding of intersectionality. In his wording, Black women are doubly oppressed by racism and sexism, rather than experiencing the effects of *compounding* injustices as Black feminism reveals. The latter distinction is crucial as it insists that race is constitutive of gender and vice versa: race is always already gendered. A Black feminist analysis is inherently intersectional and would therefore not reciprocate the undermining masculinist

discourse that permeates disco's historiographies. Or, to use the words of bell hooks, sex and racism are inseparable and "separating racism and sexism was to deny the truth of our existence" (1981: 13). On the other hand, disco was of course profoundly influential for the gay liberation movement, and disco divas such as Labelle were happy to be aligned with the struggles of gay liberation (Echols 2010: 95-105).

However, this cannot come at the expense of recognising Black feminist's methods in a pop cultural terrain that helped to mediate their ideas through songs that navigated racial stereotyping, self-worth and self-ownership. A narrative solely focused on disco's legacy for gay rights appropriates disco's political potentials into a single liberation movement story.

On the contrary, a Black feminist analysis would not exclude disco's relationship to gay liberation because its philosophy is inherently inclusive. It is shaped by experiences of intersectional standpoints, including sexual orientations. The Black queer feminist Combahee River Collective (CRC) warns of the suffocating limitations that Black feminist struggles face when other progressive movements subsume Black women's liberation as a mere aid to theirs. To be clear, the CRC by no means call for the fractionalisation of liberation struggles but warns that they cannot work towards ending "somebody else's oppression" without focusing on their own. The failure of Lawrence to include even a single comment by disco divas on how they perceived their work, or any serious attempt to interpret on his part, co-opts a narrative otherwise conducive to resisting mutual structures of oppression into a singular masculinist frame. In light of this, "any consideration of disco's relationship to women must concern itself with the genre's actual women and the lyrics they sang" (Echols 2010: 118).

On this note, and for my second example, let me turn to a rare instance in Peter Shapiro's discography in which he engages with the actual self-expression of women in disco, in this case the lyrics of disco/funk/soul group Labelle. Recording in the U.S between 1971-1977 and comprised of members Pattie LaBelle, Nona Hendryx and Sarah Dash, Labelle were one of the most prominent disco groups, whose 1974 album "Nightbirds" is rightly regarded as a quintessential disco classic. One of the tracks, titled "What Can I Do For You?", is described by Shapiro as a "shockingly direct plea for justice and unity" that "sums up the tumultuous changes . . . of the post-civil rights generation" (2004: 111). We might be grateful to finally see an acknowledgement of Black women's politicisation in *Turn the Beat Around,* but what conclusion does Shapiro draw from Labelle's explicit political and feminist influences here? Nothing more than that "the Black music of the period should become the soundtrack to gay liberation" (2004: 112). Further, even though Shapiro describes the lyrics as "primarily concerned not with dignity and basic humanity but with quality of life", he yet again solely fixes his gaze onto the gay following Labelle attracted, side-lining any recognition of Black feminist thought (2004: 113). Once again, Black women are erased from the narrative to foreground their impact on gay liberation, as discussed in the previous example.

"What Can I Do For You?", as Shapiro rightly points out, is a blatantly political record, with lyrics like "people want to live, not merely exist- people want to enjoy, not suffer and fear", and the urge to "stop fighting" and "become sis and bro" (Labelle 1974). A Black

feminist revision of Shapiro's analysis incorporates his understanding of the song's plea for justice and unity, however it also broadens the frame to include the Black feminist ideas that the song extolls. For example, this anthem of empowerment and peace stresses the importance of quality of life, prefiguring Audre Lorde's reminder "to go beyond the encouraged mediocrity of our society" (1978: 88). For Lorde, this demand stems from the inner sense of satisfaction (the erotic) and represents a key component of Black feminist thought. Labelle make this connection explicit in their urge for joy, and, moreover, the call for unity among "brothers and sisters" mirrors the need for alliances in interlocking systems of oppression, reiterating the premise that Black feminism belongs to everyone.[10]

In this regard, Labelle's plea for unity can also be understood as a call to overcome traditional notions of sexuality. Most obviously, Labelle's encouragement of sexual non-conformity and freedom manifested itself in the huge gay and lesbian following they attracted—support that they revelled in (Echols 2010: 101). More radically, however, they went as far as to forgo any traditional understandings of sexuality. Nona Hendryx for example, expressed her attitude in a 1975 *Rolling Stones* interview, saying: "I don't know what a heterosexual or a bisexual or a homosexual or a monosexual is. I don't understand the differences" (Echols 2010: 102). Labelle not only voiced their radical Black feminism, they also performed it. Their performance strategies (futuristic outfits, each members' individual appearance, natural hairstyles, or literally "coming" on stage) helped to imagine new aesthetics that revolutionised representations of Black women artists (Echols 2010: 98-102; Royster 2013). As Labelle themselves put it when questioned about their performances: "you could be something that had never been before" (Echols 2010: 97). Even if Labelle were somewhat concerned at first about performing in sexually explicit ways, they quickly recognised Black women's hunger for change.[11] We might read this as Labelle answering their own question, "What Can I Do For You?", when seen as engaging with the sociopolitical climate of the 1970s and the call for radical reimaginings of racial, sexual and gendered understandings. Put slightly differently, re-reading/listening to Labelle enables us to revise and expand the concept of the archive, incorporating overlooked elements that, as Daphne Brooks reminds us, "stood in for and as memory of a people" (Brooks 2021: 4). Understanding this takes seriously various musical practices, not just song writing and production, as strategies to philosophise Black life (Brooks 2021). Incorporating these insights into music historiography renews disco's political potential, recognising Black women as voicing and shaping Black feminist ideas, and ultimately allows us to listen to richer histories than those transcribed through masculinist analytical paradigms.

Before concluding, I will highlight one last important aspect that further implicitly perpetuates racist and sexist tropes, which will become clear by submitting Lawrence and Shapiro's work to a Black feminist analysis. Several self-conflicting instances occur in the discoriographies of Lawrence and Shapiro, who both mention the exclusion of women from the discotheques and DJ booths (Lawrence 2003: 22, 91-92, 188-189; Shapiro 2004: 21, 148). At the same time, both authors stress the absolute universal character of the dancefloor, comprised of gay men and African Americans. Ultimately "universality"

is conflated with "diversity" (because women are excluded) but this seemingly minor confusion has grave consequences. Whilst most likely not intended by either Lawrence nor Shapiro, their inability to register the sexual and racial differentiation as part of what they call the "universal" character of disco effectively erases Black women from the discourse. This deduction may seem harsh, but it is necessary to point such examples out in order to work towards overcoming acts of epistemic violence characteristic in music historiographies.

In essence, Lawrence and Shapiro's language equates "African American" with "Black *men*" and therefore as different to Black women, thereby discrediting Black women's specific social location as Black and women. For bell hooks this evidences the perpetuation of racism and sexism, as it "denies the existence of non-white women in America" (1981:7). It is long overdue to point to those instances that (re)create dominant paradigms of exclusion and to employ more constructive modes that push against those power structures (Murchison 2018). A Black feminist philosophy offers an avenue to do so. It shifts our understanding of how to approach the archives, how to read the silences that perpetuate the erasure of Black women from history. But it does not stop there because Black feminism professes the importance of joy. The centrality of joy does not undermine its project of locating violence, rather it helps to move beyond a status of victimhood, highlighting means of resistance and visions for a better future. Disco is/was many things to many people, and it is important not to narrow disco's polyvalent characteristics into a one-dimensional history at the expense of its most fervent proponents.

Conclusion

Labelle's aforementioned "What Can I Do For You?" embodies central concerns of a Black feminist philosophy whose experienced-based politics urge for alliances in the struggle for peace. In a reversal of the song's titular question, it ends with the demand "What Can You Do For Me?" This interrogative reiterates disco's musical emphasis on women's needs but it also expresses Black feminism's view that the struggle for peace needs to include Black women at its centre. The decentring of women's experiences by music historiographies has largely written Black feminist voices out of disco. This article has shown how this is done via masculinist analytical categories that pervade disco historiographies. In this way, disco is historicised as synonymous with gay liberation, marginalising the Black women that dominated this genre and disinheriting disco's Black feminist legacies. I have presented my arguments via exemplary readings of the most authoritative discoriographers, Tim Lawrence and Peter Shapiro. This has shown the importance of deconstructing the normative categories that perpetuate their non-intersectional view. Instead, an analysis through Black feminist informed ideas has attended to the absence of Black women in discographies and located specific instances of epistemic violence. At the same time, in expressing Black feminist ideas, disco offers an opportunity not only to address historiographical injuries, but to highlight the joy, emphasise beauty and find strength for future visions. Disco remains yet to be explored for its Black feminist political potential and these inquiries can only come hand-in-hand with a shift in analytical paradigms.

Notes

1 A notable exception in this regard is Alice Echols' *Hot Stuff*: *Disco and the Remaking of American Culture* (2010). Her interpretative history of disco crucially includes the likes of Chaka Khan, Labelle, as well as Donna Summer in her chapter on women and disco. This article builds on Echol's insightful work to explore the interplay of disco and Black feminist philosophy.

2 Despite these books' publication being nearly two decades old, Lawrence's and Shapiro's work continue to stand as the "definitive historical accounts of disco" in the U.S. (Morris 2004; Echols 2010). This article itself builds on the in-depth research of Lawrence and Shapiro, yet it wishes to expand the notion of historical archives to disco's Black women performers who may otherwise fall outside of our collective cultural memory.

3 I build on Stuart Hall's (2018) notion of popular culture as a "terrain of struggle between resistance and incorporation". This is to say, I do not claim that disco is always already radical but that, like any popular expressive culture, it has the potential to challenge dominant ideas, whilst being played out in a resistive space itself.

4 Mancuso's private loft would evolve into "The Loft", continuing its original non-profit but exclusive admission policy on personal invitation-only basis. This article will not engage in the debates around the underground-overground dynamics that have more recently caught the academic attention of disco (see for example, Frank 2007).

5 As this article will discuss, for detailed accounts of disco's changing sensibility, see: Lawrence (2003); Shapiro (2005); Echols (2010) and of course, Dyer (1979).

6 Whilst they follow Haden-Guest (1979), Jones and Kantonen (1999) and Cheren (2000) in restoring disco from a "dreaded musical disease", in Lawrence's own words, Lawrence and Shapiro attempt to move away from studio-centered accounts to contextualise disco culturally and historically.

7 See for example Hubbs (2007) and Halberstam (2007). This is not to say musicology or cultural studies offer no valuable contributions. On the contrary, it is from these fields of enquiry that understandings of power dynamics and expressive effects have brought paradigm shifting insights. My point, instead, specifically addresses the inadequate historicisation of disco.

8 Black feminist thought in the U.S was no unfamiliar philosophy in the early 2000s but has its fair share of contributors from Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Marc McLeod Bethune, Toni Morrison, Barbara Smith, Alice Walker, bell hooks, Angela Davis and many more.

9 Shapiro convincingly analyses the politics of the dancefloor to have an ultimately anti-essentialist effect, in his (almost) queer approach that pays greater attention to fundamentally destabilising notions in music. Lawrence, too, reworks his analysis in a later piece (2006) through a queer (rather than gay) lens and specifically addresses the politics of the dancefloor. In *LStD* the one exception to this view of identity formation is found in Jorge La Torre's account who specifically states the influence of social spaces on his identity formation (Lawrence 2000: 189).

10 For an intriguing reading of Labelle's "Nightbird", see Royster (2013). Not published at the time of writing this article, Daphne A. Brooks (forthcoming) *Subterranean Blues: Black Women and Sound Subcultures—From Minstrelsy Through the New Millennium*, examines the "culture altering performative aesthetics of Black female entertainers who helped shaped modernity". On Nina Simone's influence on Black feminist ideas and the civil rights movement, see Ruth Feldstein (2006). There remains much work to be done in exploring the importance of disco's Black women in generating feminism.

11 Pattie Labelle reflects on this by saying: "I didn't want to change our name or style of clothing because I was afraid of losing our Black following" (Echols 2010: 97).

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