The performative and the politics of representation: the case of African American female RnB songs

Thesis

How to cite:

© 2007 Dounia Chama

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:
http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21954/ou.ro.0001000c

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online’s data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.
The Performative and the Politics of Representation

The Case of African American Female RnB Songs

Dounia Chama

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of The Open University,
Sociology Discipline.

November 2008

Submission date: 30 Oct 2007
Date of award: 13 Jan 2009
Abstract

The aim of the thesis is to explore the politics of representation in African American female RnB songs using the concept of the performative and, in doing so, to demonstrate the usefulness of speech-act theory. Using a method of textual analysis based on speech-act theory, the thesis investigates the socio-linguistics of RnB record-texts.

The key issue is to explore the scope and limitations of the political agency at play in black female RnB record-texts, given a racist, sexist, and class-based social context. The thesis shows how the strategies of resistance used by African American women in recorded song may be located along a continuum between two socio-linguistic poles. Marking the constraints of social structure, and thus defining the continuum, these two socio-linguistic poles expose the impossibility to perform effectively pure speech acts in an unequal society by pointing out the limits of subverted, nihilistic language, on the one hand, and of straightforward, celebratory language, on the other. Positioning the record-text in concrete social relations, the continuum brings out the social implications at stake in RnB songs.

Crucially, implication from music to social relations is what is at stake throughout and specifically the tension in contemporary female RnB between the social structures of race, gender and class, on the one hand, and black women’s political agency through music, on the other. In sum, the thesis shows how the strategies embodied in women’s RnB record-texts exemplify a form of on-going resistance to concrete historical conditions. In showing this, the thesis illuminates the productiveness of speech-act theory in the area of cultural studies and demonstrates how the method of performative analysis – though text-based - is reliable and valid enough to the extent that it allows plausible conclusions to be made about the social meaning of record-texts.
Contents

Introduction 1

Chapter 1: African American Women’s Politics of Representation 9

Chapter 2: The Performative and the Politics of Representation 49

Chapter 3: Black Music and Black History – the Conditions of Black Performance 82

Chapter 4: Introducing the Continuum 109

Chapter 5: ‘Pure’ Subversion 127

Chapter 6: Affirmative Subversion 159

Chapter 7: Subversive Affirmation 188

Chapter 8: ‘Pure’ Affirmation 219

Conclusion 236

Bibliography 241

Discography 247

Enc. 1 audio CD
Introduction

Research question

The aim of this thesis is to provide some insight into some of the themes and issues surrounding the politics of representation in the work of African American female cultural producers and, in doing so, to demonstrate the usefulness of the approach and methodology that will be presented in the following chapters. The practice of representation is a central issue that is worth exploring as it contributes to the production and circulation of cultural meanings and involves issues of racialised and gendered identity, political agency, and power relations. In white patriarchal America, black women have consistently been oppressed by both racism and sexism, and similarly racist and sexist representations of them have been perpetuated and circulated in popular culture. African American female cultural producers have long been involved in contesting the dominant racialising values and hegemonic representations that oppress and denigrate black people and in asserting the values of black resistance and the struggle for equal rights and self-definition.

But the key question is how effectively can the values of black resistance be asserted in mainstream white society; how far can emancipatory politics go in a racist, sexist and class-based society? The thesis will explore this question by considering the case of representation in song lyrics as they are performed in the work of contemporary African American female RnB artists. It will explore the scope and limitations of political agency in these songs considering the wider social context.
**Approach and methods overview**

Two main methods will be used in this thesis. These will consist of discussing the literature and synthesising the theory, on the one hand, and of applying a method of textual analysis to song lyrics, on the other. The primary source will be record-texts. Although annotated transcriptions of song lyrics will be used in the thesis, they will only be used as aids. The transcriptions will be included for practical reasons only, the object of the investigation being their recorded musical performance. The literature that will be discussed and surveyed will be mainly in the areas of black women studies, gender studies, black music, black history, and speech-act theory. The aim of this survey will be twofold. In a first instance, it will present the issues associated with the politics of representation in the work of African American female cultural producers, from both a thematic and a historical perspective. Then, literature on speech-act theory and derived concepts will be used to propose a theoretical framework to explore and provide answers to these themes and issues. The method of textual analysis that will be applied to the song lyrics in performance will be based on this theoretical framework informed by speech-act theory.

In the sense that the approach taken in this thesis will consist of an exploration of the formal aspects of language in song for the purpose of illuminating socio-cultural issues, it might best be described as the socio-linguistics of song lyrics as they are performed in recorded popular music. This is worth investigating because, apart from the familiar method of content analysis, little attention has been given to the study of song lyrics in sociology. Content analysis tends to treat song lyrics as texts or inscriptions, rather than as words in performance. Such an approach leads to a simplistic view of the relationship between song lyrics and 'social reality' and overlooks their significance as ordinary language. This thesis will investigate song
lyrics in popular music not in terms of their manifest content, but as words in performance, and specifically as sung words. To do so, this thesis will use a method of textual analysis that will be based principally on speech-act theory.

The action-oriented approach to speech provided by J.L. Austin’s (1976) speech-act theory makes it particularly useful for exploring agency in language use and so political agency in songs. Such an approach will then be useful as it will allow us to move beyond the manifest meaning of song lyrics and into their implications as words in actions, which is what is at stake in their overall social and political meaning. This study of the speech acts in song lyrics will also go beyond the limits of speech-act theory and it will do so in at least two respects. Firstly, since the textual analysis will consider the political aspect of speech acts in song lyrics, the aim will be to bring out their implicative dimension, which will involve moving beyond Austin’s definition of a speech act. Secondly, the method used in this thesis will also go beyond speech-act theory’s logocentric tendencies in that it will consider the relation between speech acts and musical expression. It will incorporate the semiotics of sound and voice.

The task then will be to provide some answers to the issues and problems surrounding the politics of representation in the work of African American female cultural producers by using an approach based on speech-act theory. The approach will consist in showing how the strategies of resistance embodied in African American female RnB record-texts may be located along a continuum between two socio-linguistic poles. Drawing on speech-act theory and moving beyond it, the continuum will provide responses to the issues and problems raised in the literature. In the way it will consider the formal aspects of speech acts in song lyrics within the wider socio-cultural context, the notion of the continuum of strategies will bring out
the social implications at stake in each of the strategies and how they relate to each other.

Chapter overview

This thesis will be divided into eight chapters. The first three chapters will be mainly in the form of a survey and discussion of the literature. The aim of the first chapter will be to review the existing literature on the subject of the politics of representation in the work of African American female cultural producers and raise some of the key questions and issues that need to be addressed. The chapter will set up an existing repertoire of types of black women in media representation, a recurrent theme in the literature, and show the usefulness as well as the limitations of such approach. Most significantly, the chapter will expose the lack of and need for an approach to the issue of the politics of representation in the work of black female cultural producers that focuses on language and music rather than on the visual mode, which appears to be the case of most of the literature. The literature presented in Chapter 1 then serves as a reference point, which the thesis will then both use and transcend.

In the second chapter, the aim will be to demonstrate how speech-act theory can bear on the kind if strategies used by African American female cultural producers; how it could illuminate what black female RnB artists are doing in and through their songs. This will be done through a discussion and synthesis of some of the literature informed by speech-act theory and its concept of the ‘performative’, which will involve an interdiscipliinary approach. First we will consider how the performative has usefully been adopted and widened into the concept of ‘gender performativity’ in gender studies, showing how gender is actually performed and
therefore involves agency. Narrowing the discussion down to more language-based uses of speech-act theory, the chapter will then review how the productive view of language offered by the performative also made it a very useful tool for characterising literary discourse. Then, to show why speech-act theory is useful for making sense of the political agency at stake in popular songs, the discussion will move to the work of 'performative' linguist Douglas Robinson (2003; 2006) and more specifically his concept of 'metalocutionary implicature' (a form of performative reflexivity), which will be key for this thesis. Having demonstrated the usefulness of a politicised approach to speech-act theory for the analysis of song lyrics, the chapter will end by arguing for the need to think about words and music together.

In Chapter 3, the politics of black performance explored in Chapter 1 will be considered from a historical perspective in order to show how the themes and issues brought up in Chapter 1 are the result of black history. In exploring the conditions of black performance, Chapter 3 will also move more specifically to the field of black music. Drawing on the literature, the chapter will consider some key aspects in the evolution of black music after World War Two as these relate to historical events. More specifically the chapter will discuss the changes in black music during the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. In doing so, Chapter 3 will bring to light the relevance of the notion of a continuum of strategies for exploring the politics of black performance.

Drawing on and expanding what has been discussed in the three first chapters, the continuum of strategies will be introduced in Chapter 4. The chapter will show how the strategies used by African American women may be located along a continuum between two socio-linguistic poles. Drawing on the existing repertoire of types of black women in media representation set up in Chapter 1 and moving beyond
it, the continuum between two socio-linguistic poles will provide answers to the problems raised in Chapter 1 as well as transcend them by bringing out the relation between the different strategies and the political implications at stake. Drawing on and going beyond speech-act theory, the continuum as it will be defined by its two socio-linguistic poles, will highlight many features in the way the strategies operate. Bringing back Austin’s overlooked concept of the ‘constative’ into the equation, the continuum will show how the intra-linguistic relation between the constative and the performative evolves from one pole to the other. On an extra-linguistic or social dimension, the continuum will show the relation and progression between oblique speech acts and straightforward speech acts. In this way, from one socio-linguistic pole to the other, the continuum of strategies will go from ‘pure’ subversion to that of ‘pure’ affirmation, through affirmative subversions and subversive affirmations.

Following this linking fourth chapter then, the next four chapters will explore the strategies of the continuum as they might be employed by African American female RnB artists. Each chapter will deal with one strategy, drawing on and moving beyond the themes and issues brought up in Chapters 1 and 3. Moving from the subversive to the affirmative pole of the continuum, Chapter 5 will deal with ‘pure’ subversion, Chapter 6 with affirmative subversions, Chapter 7 with subversive affirmations, and Chapter 8 with ‘pure’ affirmation. Each of these four chapters will include a general discussion of the strategy and its social context, a discussion of the formal aspects and social implications of the strategy, and a detailed analysis of one or two songs exemplifying how the strategy in question might be brought off in RnB. In each chapter the song analysis will take a slightly different approach or focus, which will further highlight the usefulness of the methodology proposed in this thesis. After these four chapters, the thesis will end with a conclusion that will bring together its
main points and ideas, demonstrating the productiveness of speech-act theory in cultural studies.

**Method of sampling and sample:**

The song analysis will be mainly based on the fifteen studio albums released in the U.S., between 1997 and 2006, by a group of 5 contemporary African American female RnB singers: Erykah Badu, Angie Stone, Kelis\(^1\), Jill Scott, and India Arie. Record-texts will be selected within this sample of albums according to how they exemplify the strategies that will be looked at in the analysis. The group of artists was selected using a non-random method based on time period and representativeness.

Each of the five artists selected released their albums within a recent time frame: between 1997 (the year Erykah Badu released her debut album, *Baduizm*) and 2006 (the year India Arie and Kelis released their latest albums, *Testimony: Vol. 1, Life & Relationship* and *Kelis Was Here*, respectively). These five artists have been selected because their repertoire is representative of contemporary politically conscious black female RnB. The artists selected are all successful contemporary African American female RnB singers. Each had albums and/or singles in the top ten of the US charts, albums that went gold, platinum or double platinum in the US, and most received several awards and nominations.

The sample then will be made up of the following fifteen albums released in the U.S. between 1997 and 2006 by the five African American female RnB artists cited above:

---

\(^1\) Kelis' second album, *Wonderland* (2001), will not be included in the sample as it was never released in the US.
Baduizm (Badu; 1997)

Mama’s Gun (Badu; 2000)

Worldwide Underground (Badu; 2003)

Black Diamond (Stone; 1999)

Mahogany Soul (Stone; 2001)

Stone Love (Stone; 2004)

Kaleidoscope (Kelis; 1999)

Tasty (Kelis; 2003)

Kelis Was Here (Kelis; 2006)

Who Is Jill Scott? Words and Sounds Vol. 1 (Scott; 2000)

Experience: Jill Scott 826+ (Scott; 2001)

Beautifully Human: Words and Sounds Vol. 2 (Scott; 2004)

Acoustic Soul (Arie; 2001)

Voyage To India (Arie; 2002)

Testimony: Vol. 1, Life and Relationship (Arie; 2006)
Chapter 1: African American Women’s Politics of Representation

In this first chapter of the thesis, the existing literature on the politics of representation as it involves African American women will be reviewed and synthesised in order to bring out the key themes and the issues that need addressing. The chapter will set up an existing repertoire of (mostly visual) types of black women in media representation, which emerges as a recurrent theme in the literature and which will therefore be used as a reference point in this thesis. As well as showing the usefulness of such method of analysis, the chapter will also raise the question of its limitations. Most significantly, the chapter will expose the need to transcend the relatively high focus on the analysis of the visual mode in the literature and begin to consider in addition language and music. The aim of Chapter 1 then will be to present the literature this thesis will use as a starting point.

The chapter will be divided into four sections. In the first section, the history of African Americans’ oppression and denigrating representation will be discussed drawing mainly on Patricia Hill-Collins’s (1991) typology of ‘controlling images of black womanhood’. In the second section, which will be broken down into three sub-sections, the discussion will move to the topic of African American women’s tradition of resistance against oppression and denigration. In a first sub-section this will be done by considering a repertoire of images of black womanhood in popular culture that challenge earlier externally defined denigrating images. In a second sub-section, Stuart Hall’s (1990) typology of strategies of resistance will be
presented and used to frame these oppositional images of black womanhood within strategies. In a third sub-section, the issue of the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in theses strategies and images will be discussed, questioning the notion of a clear and linear move from oppression to resistance. Then, in the third section, the issue of class will be introduced as a way to show how it relates to and complicates the typologies presented in the chapter. Finally, in the fourth and last section of this chapter, the case of the ‘mother figure’ will be used as an example to show the extent of the usefulness of applying the existing set of analytical tools presented in this chapter to the study of song lyrics – which the thesis will later use and improve on by proposing a different form of methodology,

**African American women’s oppression and denigrating imagery**

It is undeniable that as a group African American women have constantly been marginalised and oppressed by the dual effects of racism and sexism. The devaluation and stereotyping of African American women that started under slavery, in order to justify and rationalise the subordination and exploitation of African American women (hooks, 1982; Collins, 1991), still affects black women today. Indeed, many externally defined racist and sexist notions of black womanhood still persist in contemporary American society. Assessing the extent to which the portrayal of African American women in popular culture and the media contributes to the perpetuation and dissemination of oppressive and denigrating stereotypical notions of black womanhood has always been and still is a major task for black feminists. Understanding the politics of representation is thus a major concern as representation
involves issues of racialised and gendered identity, political agency, and power relations.

It will be useful to take the work of sociologist Patricia Hill-Collins as a starting point in this discussion as it constitutes a key reference in this area. More precisely it will be useful to start by discussing Hill-Collins’ often cited typology of the racist and sexist representations applied to African American women or, as she calls them, the ‘controlling images of Black womanhood’, found in her book *Black Feminist Thought* (1991). According to Patricia Hill-Collins (1991) externally defined ideological notions or ‘controlling images of Black womanhood’ are commonly applied to African American women in contemporary white patriarchal America in order to justify their continued oppression and marginalisation and maintain elite white male power. Hill-Collins identifies four controlling images as being the most frequently applied to African American women and ‘[t]aken together, these… form a nexus of elite white male interpretation of Black female sexuality and fertility’ (78). These four interrelated, denigrating interpretations of black womanhood are the nurturing, desexed and nonthreatening ‘mammy’ the overly aggressive, emasculating ‘matriarch’; the ‘welfare mother’ or ‘welfare recipient’; and the sexually aggressive ‘Jezebel’ (71-78).

Whereas the mammy, who ‘symbolizes the dominant group’s perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to white male power’ (71), is the only ‘positive’ image of black motherhood, the matriarch and the welfare mother both symbolise ‘bad’ black mothers or ‘failed mammys’. The black matriarch is an oppressive socially constructed image of black womanhood that works by denigrating African American women’s assertiveness and independence and by ‘serv[ing] as a powerful symbol for both black and white women of what can go wrong if White patriarchal
power is challenged. Aggressive, assertive women are penalized – they are abandoned by their men, end up impoverished, and are stigmatised as being unfeminine’ (75).

The welfare mother is, on the other hand, denigrated for not being independent enough. A modern adaptation of the ‘breeder woman’ image constructed under slavery, the welfare mother ‘appears tied to black women’s increasing dependence on the post-World War II welfare state’ and ‘provides an ideological justification for efforts to harness black women’s fertility to the needs of a changing political economy’ (76). Finally, the image of the Jezebel, created under slavery, served to portray African American women as sexually aggressive, promiscuous seducers in order to justify their sexual exploitation (77).

Hill-Collins shows how institutions such as ‘[s]chools, the media, and government agencies are essential sites for transmitting ideologies objectifying black women as the Other’ as well as how African American institutions also contribute to maintaining controlling images of black womanhood (85). Although Hill-Collins shows how a long-standing tradition of resistance exists among African American women and does not reject the idea that there are also resistant and self-defined images of black womanhood in popular culture, she only recognises the existence of such images in two forms of cultural expression, namely, in the songs of the classic female blues singers of the 1920s and, more significantly, in the novels by African American female writers. Hill-Collins argues that these forms of cultural expression constitute ‘safe spaces’ where African American women can resist and reject externally defined controlling images of black womanhood and express self-defined positive images (99-103). However, when Hill-Collins, drawing on the work of Angela Davis, deplores the commercialisation of the blues, she assumes that contemporary genres of popular music – with the exception of ‘the progressive raps of
the 1980s' (99) – do not constitute ‘safe spaces’ where black women’s voices can be heard and where positive images of black womanhood that challenge dominant ideological notions can be transmitted.

Commodification of the blues and its transformation into marketable crossover music has virtually stripped it of its close ties to the African-American oral tradition. Thus the expression of a Black women’s voice in the oral blues tradition is being supplemented and may be supplanted by a growing Black women’s voice in a third location, the space created by Black women writers (102).

In a broadly similar approach to that of Hill-Collins, Elizabeth Hadley Freydberg, in her analysis of the cinematic representation of African American and Latin women (1995), argues that these two groups of women are still invariably cast in contemporary American film in denigrating roles that perpetuate negative stereotypes. Freydberg identifies four prevailing degrading images of African American and Latin women in contemporary American film.

The “exaggerated images” depicted in film as representative of Black and Latinas are those of prostitutes – women who sell their bodies for monetary profit; concubines – women who are kept, usually by a White male; whores – sexually promiscuous women who do not profit financially but who appear to enjoy sleeping around; and bitches – sexually emasculating, razor-tongued and razor-toting, hostile, aggressive women who will fight man or woman at the slightest provocation (223).

In other words, like Hill-Collins, Freydberg discusses exclusively the denigrating images and, like Hill-Collins, she equates commercialism with misrepresentation. Towards the very end of her discussion, she briefly mentions the fact that accurate and divers cinematic depictions of African American women’s experiences do occur but only in the work of black women independent filmmakers and that their films remain unacknowledged by Hollywood (240).
While the typologies of oppressive and denigrating images of black womanhood provided by Patricia Hill-Collins and Elizabeth Hadley Freydberg are without a doubt valuable, they beg a question: are there any other types of images of African American women in popular culture apart from the denigrating and oppressive ones?

From oppression to resistance

The literature discussed in the first section focuses on oppressive images of black womanhood and seems to assume that contemporary forms of mainstream popular culture invariably reproduce denigrating stereotypical images of black womanhood. But there are other ways of thinking about the representation of African American women. This section will explore the possibility of moving from oppression to resistance with regards to the representation of African American women. This topic will be examined under three sub-sections. The first sub-section will discuss the issue of value by considering the shift, in the literature about the representation of black women, from the focus on the ‘negative’ images to a concern with the ‘positive’ images exclusively. It will then examine a second shift in the literature towards a more contrasted point of view that considers both the ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ aspects of black women’s representation. The second sub-section will discuss the kind of counter-hegemonic strategies that might be used by African American cultural producers to resist ‘negative’ representations of them. Finally, the third and last sub-section will question the notion of a clear and linear move from oppression to resistance by examining the ambiguities and contradictions of representation.
From ‘negative’ to ‘positive’ images

Following Hazel Carby’s (1986) and Angela Davis’ (1999) readings of the songs and performances of the female classic blues singers as reflecting an emerging black feminist consciousness, many studies consider contemporary forms of popular culture, including current genres of popular music, as sites of resistance where denigrating images of black womanhood are being challenged and ‘positive’ self-defined images are being generated and circulated. It is worth noting here that Carby’s (1986) and Davis’s (1999) studies are among the few which do actually consider the politics of representation in songs. Indeed, as we will see with the following examples, most writers focus on the visual mode, even as they are taking music genres as their topic. This reinforces the need to transcend the focus on the visual mode in studies of African American women’s representation in popular music and to start considering language and music in addition, which is the aim of this thesis.

A first example of such focus on the visual is found in Cheryl Keyes’s (2000) study of African American women’s role and contribution to rap music. Keyes argues that black female rappers ‘have created spaces from which to deliver powerful messages from black female and black feminist perspectives’ (255). Drawing on Jacqueline Bobo’s discussion of the ‘interpretive community’, Keyes proposes a typology of African American women rappers based on the interpretations of black female rappers, their audiences, critics and scholars. The typology consists of four categories of African American women rappers found in rap music performance in the female rap tradition: the regal and self-assured African-centred ‘Queen Mother’; the chic, erotic, and independent ‘Fly Girl’; the assertive and defiant ‘Sista with Attitude’ – also called ‘bad girl’, she is often a reclaimer of the word ‘bitch’; and finally the
black ‘Lesbian’ who is concerned with issues of race and role-play. As Keyes puts it, ‘each category mirrors certain images, voices, and lifestyles of African American women in contemporary urban society’ (256).

In other words, these images, which are concerned with visual presentation and attitude, are interpreted by Keyes as positive, self-defined images of black womanhood that reflect a variety of African American women’s experiences; they are not externally defined, one-dimensional, racist and sexist stereotypical notions of black womanhood. Keyes clearly sees the female rap tradition as a site of resistance against constraining and denigrating images of black womanhood and of empowerment and agency for African American female rappers.

Female rappers have attained a sense of distinction through revising and reclaiming Black women's history and perceived destiny. They use their performances as platforms to refute, deconstruct, and reconstruct alternative visions of their identity. With this platform, rap music becomes a vehicle by which Black female rappers seek empowerment, make choices, and create spaces for themselves and other sistas (265).

Like Collins and Freydberg, Keyes celebrates internally defined images, i.e. representations of African American women produced independently by black female cultural producers. However, these internally defined images examined by Keyes are not so different from the externally defined stereotypes discussed earlier. They are related in that they focus on the same themes: motherhood and sexuality. Indeed, there seem to be a continuity between the critical approach of people like Hill-Collins and Freydberg and the celebratory one of people like Keyes.

While Hill-Collins' (1991) and Freydberg’s (1995) images of black womanhood discussed in the first section were all oppressive and denigrating, Keyes, in her study of the female rap tradition, only draws attention to self-defined,
empowering images of African American women that resist the externally defined negative interpretations of black womanhood. Actually these examples reflect two tendencies in the study of the representation of African American women in popular culture. In her analysis of the images of black womanhood in the music videos of African American women performers, which again focuses on the visual mode even though it deals with a musical genre, Rana Emerson (2002) rightly explains that,

> [m]ost of the previous studies of Black women’s representation in music videos have, on the one hand, either focused on the hegemonic and stereotypical imagery and discourses of Black femininity or, on the other hand, exaggerated the degree of agency that Black female performers in music video have by emphasizing the resistant and counterhegemonic elements of the music video representations (116-117).

Although Emerson’s observation relates to music videos, it could also be made in relation to the analysis of the images of black womanhood found in other areas of popular culture. Indeed, the studies that have been discussed so far have focused either on the denigrating and oppressive stereotypical representations of black womanhood (Hill-Collins, 1991; Freydberg, 1995) or on the self-defined, resistant ones, emphasising the level of autonomy enjoyed by black female cultural producers (Keyes, 2000). However, there is another way of thinking about the representation of African American women. A shift can be observed in the literature, from a focus on either the ‘negative’ or the ‘positive’ aspects of the cultural representation of African American women to a point of view that considers both aspects. Indeed, many recent studies adopt a contrasted approach to the notion of cultural resistance by arguing that, on the one hand, the representation of African American women in popular culture perpetuates negative, dominant ideologies about black womanhood but, on the other hand, African American female cultural producers can also, and do actually, resist
these oppressive stereotypes and construct positive representations of black womanhood.

In her study of the representation of black womanhood in the music videos of African American female rappers, Emerson (2002) proposes to problematise the very notion of resistance. She wants to demonstrate the fact that, on the one hand, ‘music videos exhibit and reproduce the stereotypical notions of Black womanhood faced by young African American women’ but, on the other hand, there is also evidence to support the proposition that ‘Black women performers use music videos for contesting hegemonic racist and sexist notions of Black femininity and asserting agency’ (119). Emerson shows how some music videos perpetuate the objectification and exploitation of African American women by ‘emphasiz[ing] Black women’s bodies’, by ‘construct[ing] a one-dimensional Black womanhood’. Moreover ‘the presence of male sponsors in the videos and a focus on themes of conspicuous consumption and romance [which] further exhibit the types of social constraints faced by young Black women’ (120-122). However, Emerson also demonstrates how other music videos of African American performers resist dominant ideologies about black womanhood and assert agency ‘through the identification with signifiers of Blackness; an assertion of autonomy, vocality, and independence, and expressions of partnership, collaboration, and sisterhood with other Black women and Black men’ (125).

Another example of a study that takes into account both negative and positive elements of the representation of African American women is Christina Baker’s (2005) analysis of the representation of black and white women’s sexuality in magazine advertisements, again focusing on the visual mode. Using Jewell’s classification of the most frequent images of African American women in the media, namely, the ‘matriarch’, the ‘Jezebel’, and the ‘Sapphire’, as a starting point for her
study, Baker observes both positive and negative aspects regarding the media images of black women’s sexuality. For example, in relation to the representation of black women in black-orientated magazines, Baker finds out that although these magazines contained images that perpetuate some of the characteristics of the stereotypical media representations of African American women (the matriarch, jezebel and sapphire), ‘most of the characteristics of black women were not exaggerated in order to appear deviant’- black women were more likely to be portrayed with characteristics such as strength and independence, rather than appear submissive and dependent, while not appearing deviant (25).

It should be mentioned that Jewell’s classification of images of black womanhood used here by Baker, i.e. the ‘matriarch’, the ‘jezebel’, and the ‘sapphire’, is not unlike the ones discussed earlier. Indeed, all these images are not that different in the sense that they similarly focus on sexuality and motherhood, which emerge as central themes in the representation of African American women. In other words, despite their different point of views, there is, as pointed out earlier, a continuity or relation between these writers. Indeed, this idea of continuity between a critical and a celebratory approach emerges as one of the two main issues raised in this discussion so far. It questions the notion of a clear linear distinction between oppressive and empowering images and calls for a more contrasted approach. This dilemma between two analytical approaches reflects the inherent dilemma in black politics of representation. The speech-act theory based methodology with the notion of the continuum will provide an illuminating contrast in the sense that it will transcend this dilemma between a celebratory approach and a critical one by considering the continuity between the two. It will consider both the extent and limitations of emancipatory politics in the context of a racist and patriarchal society.
The other main issue that emerges so far is that almost all the studies cited focus on the visual mode. They do so even when they are dealing with a musical genre, in which case they will analyse visual aspects of music videos. In focusing on music videos, the visual approach that is taken in these various typologies of images of black female rap/RnB artists seems to be drawing on film studies. This reinforces the need to come up with another type of methodology; one that would be based on speech-act theory and that would allow us to transcend this focus on the visual and consider songs as well. Nevertheless, the strong focus on the visual in typologies of images of black womanhood means that they could usefully be complemented or framed by Hall’s typology of strategies of resistance, which will also serve as a reference point to which the thesis will return later on.

The strategies of resistance: Stuart Hall’s typology

So far the discussion has been centred on setting up an existing repertoire of (mostly visual) images of African American women in popular culture. These images beg the question of the type of strategies of resistance they might involve. In this sub-section then the aim will be to set up an existing list of counter-hegemonic strategies that would frame these images of black womanhood and provide a different angle from which to approach the subject. Thinking in terms of strategies is useful because it implies considering the range of the possible ways an oppressed group might resist oppression. A useful study of black resistance against hegemonic cultural representations that takes such a strategy-oriented approach is that of Stuart Hall (1997). In his typology, Stuart Hall identifies three main strategies of resistance
against white supremacist denigrating imagery of black people in popular culture. These three strategies consist of reversing, overturning, and subverting the stereotype. Hall’s typology will be a useful reference point for the continuum of strategies that will be devised later on in this thesis. But for now, the aim will be to review each of Hall’s three strategies of resistance and see how they intersect with some of the counter-hegemonic images of black womanhood discussed above.

The first strategy of resistance in Hall’s typology is that which, in his own terms, consists of ‘reversing the stereotype’. According to Hall, reversing a stereotype means giving a positive value to a stereotype or characteristic normally considered negative by mainstream society (1997: 270-2). An offensive and oppressive stereotype then can be reversed by turning its evaluation round. Hall explains that this strategy was first widely used in the 1970s in a series of black-orientated films such as *Sweetback’s Baadasss Song* (Martin Van Peebles, 1971), *Shaft* (Gordon Parks, 1971) and *Superfly* (Gordon Parks, 1972). These films, which have come to be described rather pejoratively by some critics as ‘blaxploitation’ films, cast black actors in roles that reverse all the traditional stereotypes about African Americans. Centred on ghetto life-style, the films presented angry and aggressive glamorous black male characters as heroes who take their revenge against whites and get away with it: ‘[i]n the ways their heroes deal with whites, there is a remarkable absence, indeed a conscious reversal of the old deference or childlike dependency. In many ways these

---

2 Hall’s typology also includes accommodationist and integrationist strategies, whereby black people could either adjust to externally defined images of them or take on white middle-class norms and values. However, these strategies, which have long been argued to be ineffective, have been left out in this thesis as it is concerned with resistant strategies.

3 Hall does not use the term ‘subversive’ in his typology. However, based on his discussion of the strategy, the thesis assumes he is referring to subversion.
are revenge films' (271). The black male heroes these films feature embody all the irrational fears and anxieties whites feel about black men.

What seems to be at stake here is exaggeration. In the case of this strategy (reversal of norms), exaggeration is then used by black people to enact externally defined 'negative' stereotypes about them convincingly in order to disempower their harmful social meaning. (As we will see later, exaggeration or caricature can be used to subvert the very concept of representation.) Such reversals of the evaluation of popular stereotypes can be found at play in the counter-hegemonic imagery in the black female tradition. African American female rappers have reversed the evaluation of the denigrating and controlling image of the 'bitch' by appropriating or reclaiming the word. They have convincingly enacting the stereotype of the 'bitch' to confirm it in the mind of white men in order to take control of it, to undermine its negative connotations. In her discussion of the 'Sista with Attitude' category in the female rap tradition, Keyes (2000) explains that '[f]emale MCs revise the standard definition of bitch, from an “aggressive woman who challenges male authority”… to an assertive female who subverts patriarchal rule’ (263).

In her study of the self-definition or representation of the African American female comedienne from the television programme ‘Russell Simons’ Def Comedy Jam, part of the hip-hop scene, Do Venna S. Fulton (2004), who refers to Keyes’s categories of images used by African American female rappers to present themselves, observes that these comedienne appropriate the word ‘bitch’ in the same way as some African American female rappers do, ‘with pride, derision or simply as a common name’ (86). They too then reverse the valuation of the image of the ‘bitch’. African-American women have appropriated the term ‘bitch’ in the same way African-African men have done with the term ‘nigga’, that is, through a strategic use
of exaggeration with the purpose of disempowering these images’ negative social meaning. Tommy L. Lott (1999), who explains that the image of the black criminal in gangsta rap is indeed a metaphor for resistance, also mentions that ‘[t]he appropriation and respelling [from “nigger”] of the term “nigga” by gangsta rappers displays resistance by embracing and rejecting the social meaning of this term’ (105).

The second strategy in Hall’s typology is that which consists of ‘overturning the stereotype’. Stuart Hall (1997) explains that this strategy has been used by black people to transform the externally defined ‘negative’ representations of them into ‘positive’ ones by reclaiming and reworking some these ‘negative’ images’ characteristics. Still according to Hall, the main advantage of this strategy is that it embraces and celebrates difference and diversity

It inverts the binary opposition, privileging the subordinate term, sometimes reading the negative positively: ‘Black is Beautiful’. It tries to construct a positive identification with what has been abjected. It greatly expands the range of racial representations and the complexity of what it means to ‘be black’, thus challenging the reductionism of earlier stereotypes (272-3).

There are numerous examples of applications of this strategy by African American women in contemporary popular culture. African American female cultural producers have frequently overturned externally defined ‘negative’ images of them and replaced them with ‘positive’ images that celebrate back womanhood and black culture.

As mentioned earlier, Emerson (2002) identified African American women’s ‘identification with signifiers of blackness’ in hip-hop and RnB videos as acts of resistance and agency and as a celebration of black culture and black women. Emerson explains that the majority of videos she analysed constructed a black context
and a black aesthetic, for instance, through their presentation and valuation of an urban hip-hop style and through featuring African American women with darker skin as opposed to light-skinned women. She cites Erykah Badu's *On and On*, a ““Color Purple”-style version of the Cinderella fairy tale’, as a good example of the construction of a black and feminine universe in music videos: ‘[i]t highlights the specificity, difference, and particularity of the B[b]lack experience’ (125). Fulton (2004) makes a similar observation about the ‘Def Comedy Jam’. She also observes that the African American women comedians featured in the show create a black context through the use of forms of black oral traditions such as call and response, signifying, dozens and black vernacular, and through the use of elements of the hip-hop scene such as music and dress styles (85).

These examples illustrate the point made by Hall (1997) about this strategy, i.e. that it embraces and celebrates difference and diversity. Another example of empowerment and celebration of black womanhood can found in Keyes (2000). Drawing on Roberts, she argues that the ‘fly girl’ persona - characterised by fashionable dress styles, jewellery and cosmetics - adopted by some African American female rappers such as Salt-N-Pepa is far more than a whim as it celebrates black womanhood: the ‘fly girl’ image ‘highlights aspects of black women’s bodies considered undesirable by American mainstream standards of beauty’ (260). In this respect, rap’s ‘fly girl’ image attempts to replace ‘negative’ images of black womanhood by ‘positive’ ones; African American female rappers who adopt the ‘fly girl’ image are attempting ‘to construct a positive identification with what has been abjected’ (Hall, 1997: 272), i.e., with their body, and are therefore celebrating black womanhood and more generally difference and diversity. Moreover, the ‘fly girl’ like the ‘Sista with Attitude’ is portrayed as a consciously erotic subject (Keyes, 2000:
and so it can also be argued that she overturns the controlling image of the ‘Jezebel’ to express sexual subjectivity and empowerment.

The third and last strategy in Hall’s typology that will be considered here is that of subversion. Hall explains that, rather than contesting ‘negative’ images and constructing ‘positive’ ones, this strategy attempts to deconstruct the very concept of representation by pushing it to its limits. Hall describes this strategy - referred to in this thesis as subversion - as follows:

[It] locates itself within the complexities and ambivalences of representation itself, and tries to contest it from within. It is more concerned with the forms of racial representation than with introducing a new content. It accepts and works with the shifting, unstable character of meaning, and enters, as it were, into a struggle over representation, while acknowledging that, since meaning can never be finally fixed, there can never be any final victories (1997: 274).

One advantage of subversive strategies is that they challenge one-dimensional representations of black people. Because subversion contests the process of representation itself, it also makes the assertion of ‘multiple black identities, varied black experience’ possible and it ‘challenges colonial imperialist paradigms of black identity which represent blackness one-dimensionally in ways that reinforce and sustain white supremacy’ (hooks, 1990: 28). In this discussion two different, though interlinked, types of subversive strategies will be considered. The process of representation can be subverted or challenged either through forms of tactical ‘role-playing’ that often involve duplicity and/or undefineability, or through exaggeration (caricature, parody).
Resisting traditional gender constructs and discourses surrounding racialised sexuality through the use of subversive forms of tactical ‘role-playing’, deceit and/or vagueness has long been an important aspect of African American female culture. An early example of this can be found in the work of African American female comedienne Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley in travelling tent shows in the beginning of the 20th Century. Drawing on the work of Watkins on the tradition of African American humor, Fulton (2004) explains that ‘Moms’ Mabley presented herself as a mother figure, a safe and acceptable role for a woman, in order to divert attention away from the ‘threatening’ and oppositional nature of her texts which ‘dealt with sexual and political issues’. ‘By creating a character that appeared nonthreatening, Mabley was able to subvert the gender constructs of the day’ (Fulton, 2004: 84). ‘Moms’ Mabley’s character is indeed subversive because it is not trying to contest the traditional and controlling image of the mother as such; Mabley accepts it and works with it to challenge the process of representation from within.

Another more recent but very similar example of deceitful tactical ‘role-playings’ can be found in the work of African American female rapper Queen Latifah. Influenced by Black Nationalism and Afrocentrism, she adopted the image of the regal and powerful but asexual ‘Mother Africa’. ‘As a female she can exploit the way cultural nationalists hold sacred Mother Africa’ (Stallings, 2004) to distract from the feminist stance of her lyrics which often deal with issues facing black women as well as the African American community as a whole. In other words, like ‘Moms’ Mabley, Queen Latifah the rapper adopted a nonthreatening character to divert the attention away from the oppositional nature of her lyrics. The feminist and subversive nature of this kind of play on ambiguities was also noted by Joan Radner and Susan Lanser who argued that it is a strategy of coding found in women’s culture known as ‘distraction’.
and that it is used to ‘draw out or draw attention away from the subversive power of a feminist message’ (in Keyes, 2000: 257). As mentioned earlier, these subversive strategies of deceitful ‘role-playing’ also known as ‘trickery’ (see Gates; 1988) often involve manipulating undefinability to resist one-dimensional and constraining definitions of identity.

In a study of Queen Latifah’s self-presentation, Stallings (2004) looks at how, throughout her career as a rapper and as an actress, Queen Latifah used a trickster figure to present and play with sexual identities in order to counter the one-dimensional dominant discourses surrounding racialised sexuality. ‘Trickster figures possess the ability to transform, change, or alter their society and culture’ (Stallings, 2004). Stallings uses the ‘Queen B(? )’ figure, a three-faceted trickster figure found in black female culture and whose characteristics include independence and autonomy, to give a reading of Queen Latifah’s self-presentation. Stallings finds the three facets of the trickster figure in her performances: as a rapper, Queen Latifah starts off as the heterosexual ‘Queen B(ee)’, and as an actress she becomes the homosexual ‘Queen B(ulldagger)’ before developing into the indefinable or polysexual ‘Queen B(itch)’. In using trickery, Queen Latifah ‘has managed to consistently divide those who would seek to define, label, or limit her based on race, gender, and sexuality’ (Stallings, 2004). In other words, this subversive strategy based on deceitful ‘role-playing’ and undefinability is used by African American women to challenge one-dimensional representations based on race, gender, and sexuality and to affirm the complexity of black women’s identities.

When we discussed the strategy that consists of reversing the valuation of ‘negative’ images we saw how exaggeration can be used to reverse a stereotype, that is, to enact it convincingly in order to disempower its negative social meaning. Now
we will see how exaggeration can also be used to deconstruct the process of representation itself. It is indeed worth noting that like the various images of black womanhood discussed in the previous sub-section, the strategies in Hall’s typology share common features. In both cases, we observe a lack of clear boundaries between the different images or strategies. Rather than criticising stereotypes or attempting to challenge them by constructing self-defined ‘positive’ images, subversive exaggeration embraces those stereotypes and pushes them to their limits in order to bring their constructed nature to light. Like ‘role-playing’, this strategy ‘locates itself within the complexities and ambivalences of representation itself, and tries to contest it from within’ (Hall, 1997: 274), and, like ‘role-playing’, it is concerned with challenging one-dimensional representations based on race, gender and sexuality. This strategy has also been used by African American female cultural producers to resist stereotyping.

Drawing on theories of cyborg feminism, Steven Shaviro (2005) discusses the subversive nature of the self-presentation of African American female rapper Lil’ Kim in her music videos. Shaviro argues that Lil’ Kim subverts the image of the ‘bitch’ by enacting it and turning it into a caricature:

[Lil’ Kim]’s a bitch and a ho, an updated and self-consciously racialized version of the *femme fatale* figure of *film noir*... [S]he’s a figure of misogynistic fantasy... Lil’ Kim does not critique these stereotypes, as other female rappers have done, but instead wilfully inhabits them, and pushes them as far as they will go. In the process, she virtually reduces herself to the status of a cartoon...She’s enacting stereotypes and objectifying the female body...(175).

Shaviro then goes on to observe rightly that Lil’ Kim’s persona is however problematic because caricature may be subversive but it is also conformist.
To the extent that Lil’ Kim is performing “blackness” and “femininity” for a white male audience, her mode of self-presentation cannot help being problematic. No matter how campy and ironic, drag exhibitionism ultimately does not break with an economy of gender based upon the objectification of black women’s bodies (177).

Shaviro’s contrasted approach to subversion then suggests that Stuart Hall’s proposition that subversion deconstructs the process of representation itself (1997: 274) is arguably over-optimistic. Although Hall does not raise the issue of contradiction in the case of subversive strategies, he does however question the limits of the other two strategies of resistance in his typology. With regards to strategies that reverse stereotypes by turning their valuation around, Hall explains that even though they represent an improvement, their effect remains limited because they tend to replace ‘old’ stereotypes with ‘new’ ones: [e]scaping the grip of one stereotypical extreme… may simply mean being trapped in its stereotypical ‘other’. Reversing the stereotypes ‘has not escaped the contradictions of the binary structure of racial [and gender] stereotyping’ (1997: 272). In the case of celebratory strategies that transform ‘negative’ images into ‘positive’ ones (overturning the stereotype), Hall asks whether these merely ‘evade the difficult questions, dissolving the harsh realities of racism into a liberal mish-mash of ‘difference’’ (273).

In other words, whether they are celebratory or subversive, strategies of resistance always involve complexities. The observations about the three types of strategies considered in this sub-section raise the question of whether the contradictions and ambiguities in the images of African American women in popular culture actually reflect the limits of the strategies of resistance, that is, the limits to how far emancipatory politics can go in the area of representation. Since this notion
of continuity between oppression and resistance emerges as the central issue in the discussion so far, it will be useful to focus on it before moving on to the next section.

The limits of emancipatory politics

Throughout this chapter the notion of a clear, linear move from oppression to resistance has been questioned. Indeed, whether we approach the issue of the representation of African American women with a repertoire of images of black womanhood found in popular culture or with a typology of strategies, complexities arise. In both cases, we observe ambiguities and contradictions; a lack of clear distinction between the oppressive and the oppositional. Still, thinking in terms of strategies is productive because it means considering the range of possible ways an oppressed group may use to resist oppression. In framing the images of black womanhood that have been argued to be oppositional by some writers within Hall’s typology of strategies of resistance, we have gained, in the previous sub-section, more insight as to how these might operate, on a visual level, that is. However, the issue of the way these images might operate within wider strategic moves on a linguistic and musical level remains unexplored. Like the repertoire of images of black womanhood set up earlier, Hall’s typology of strategies of resistance will therefore be a useful reference point for this thesis which will then show how it is possible to move beyond its limitations.

We have seen how many studies of African American women’s representation discuss either the ‘negative’ images of black womanhood perpetuated in popular culture (Hill-Collins, 1991; Freydberg, 1995) or the ‘positive’ images that
resist dominant stereotypes about black womanhood and assert agency (Keys, 2000; Smith-Shomade, 2003, Fulton, 2005). However, although valuable these studies are limited because they fail to examine the inherent complexities of the representation of black women. In this sub-section, drawing mainly on Emerson’s (2002) study of the representation of black womanhood in music videos, already cited earlier in the chapter, an argument is made about the necessity of taking an approach that considers the inherent complexities in the representation of black womanhood.

Emerson (2002), who takes such a critical approach, demonstrates how in the cultural work of African American women ‘hegemonic and counterhegemonic themes often occur simultaneously and are interconnected, resulting in a complex, often contradictory and multifaceted representation of Black womanhood’ (116-17). In other words, rather than being either ‘negative’ or ‘positive’, the portrayals of African American women in popular culture are often more complex and ambiguous. They often simultaneously contain elements that reflect the dominant notions of black womanhood in American society and elements that resist these oppressive and denigrating stereotypes. It is therefore not surprising that a particular performance or image can be interpreted in different and often opposing ways. But to agree that African American women’s representation is indeed inherently contradictory and ambiguous does not solve the problem. In order to understand what is at stake in black women’s politics of representation, it is necessary to consider its contradictory and ambiguous nature within the wider socio-cultural context in which it takes place.

In her discussion of African-American female rappers in *Black Noise* (1994) Tricia Rose proposes a solution to deal with the issue. Criticizing the tendency in critical writing to construct male rappers as sexist and female rappers as feminist, Rose proposes to see female rappers ‘as part of a dialogic process with male rappers
(and others), rather than in complete opposition to them’ and ‘consider the ways black women rappers work within and against dominant sexual and racial narratives in American culture’ (147).

Negotiating multiple social boundaries and identities, black women rappers are in dialogue with one another, with male rappers, with other popular musicians..., with black women fans, and with hip hop fans in general… [D]ialogism allows us to ground apparent inconsistencies and contradictions in rap’s sexual politics within the complexity and contradictions of everyday life and protest, and it also allows us to make sense of the contradictory modes of resistance in women rappers’ work (148-49).

While Rose’s approach is valuable, it is arguably over-optimistic. It too easily suggests a solution to the problem by assuming that the inherent ambiguities and contradictions in the cultural products of African-American women merely reflect ‘the complexity and contradictions of everyday life and protest’ and that we should consider African-America women’s work and ‘the contradictory modes of resistance’ they use from a dialogic perspective. A more critical approach which problematises the issue of resistance itself, its range and limitations, is needed here.

Emerson (2002) is helpful in this matter. Commenting on the studies that exclusively discuss the oppositional aspects of African American women’s representation, she argues that these studies are limited because they fail to question the issue of resistance itself: ‘in their effort to discover patterns of resistance and transgression, they overemphasize the degree of agency that Black women performers possess’ (118). Agency is indeed a key issue that should be considered when trying to understand why African American women’s cultural products often contain ambiguities and contradictions. The issue of agency is one of control over the issue of race; it is a question of power relations. While African-American women do possess
and indeed exert political agency, the extent of their agency is however limited by the fact that they live in a racist and patriarchal society. The ambiguities and contradictions in black women’s cultural products then reflect the limits as to how much agency they can exert in a white patriarchal society. Related to the issue of degree of political agency black women possess in such an unequal power structure, is the issue of control over their own identities.

For the ambiguities and contradictions in the work of African-American women also reflect their uncertainties about their own identity. Emerson (2002) shows ‘how contradictory themes in the music videos reflect a sense of ambivalence on the part of Black girls regarding the relationships between Blackness, womanhood, and sexuality’ (119). African American women have to deal with the often contradictory notions of black womanhood perpetuated in American society on a daily basis and it is, therefore, not surprising that ambiguities and contradictions appear in their work. When African American women react to such contradictory images of black womanhood by reclaiming explicit images of them as sexual, they are often thought to be accepting and perpetuating stereotypical images of black womanhood. But, Emerson explains, that actually this reflects African American women’s ambivalence regarding these contradictory notions about black women’s sexuality. The explicit self-representation of African American women as sexual actually reflects black women’s attempt to negotiate the contradictory images of black womanhood as well as their attempt to use music videos as a sites where they can gain control over their sexuality (128). ‘In this regard, music videos exemplify a tension between the structural constraints of race and gender on one hand and women’s resistance and self-affirmation on the other’ (127-28).
In other words, the cultural productions of African American women exemplify their attempt to take control over their own identity in a racist and patriarchal society. A key issue then is one of becoming, one of struggle as a process in a context of unequal power relations. It is from this perspective that the issue of representation in the work of African American cultural producers will be approached in this thesis. In considering the various strategies of resistance embodied in and through black female RnB record-texts as part of a speech-act theory based continuum between two socio-linguistic poles, the thesis will explore how political agency is exerted within the constraints of a racist and patriarchal social structure. This analysis will be carried out by bringing out the implicative power at stake in each strategy. From one socio-linguistic pole to the other, the continuum will highlight the continuity between the various strategies as well as bring out the different types of implicative power at stake in each strategy.

In this sub-section an argument was made about the necessity of taking an approach that considers the inherent complexities of representation in the work of back women cultural producers as these reflect the limits of emancipatory politics in a racist and patriarchal social system. Through the example of Tricia Rose, a critique of an approach that too easily suggests that there is a solution to the problem was also made. So far, we have pointed out many times the focus on the visual mode in studies of black women’s politics of representation, reinforcing the need to start taking into account language and music in addition. But it appears another crucial aspect has also been under-discussed: the issue of social class, which is always intertwined with issues of race and gender. In the next section, we will then explore how class relates to the issues addressed so far.
The issue of class

The representation of African American women does not only involve issues of race and gender; it also involves the issue of class, as these are indeed always related. The images of African American women also reflect and construct class ideologies and values. In this section, the literature on black women’s politics of representation will be reviewed from the perspective of social class in order to explore how it impacts on the issues discussed so far. That is, we will see how adding the issue of class further complicates the problem of interpreting the various categories of black womanhood found in the literature. In the sense that it will further highlight the limitations of such categorisations, the aim of this discussion of the issue of class is to show how the approach and methodology that will be used later in this thesis could help us move beyond some of these limitations.

To begin this discussion, it will be useful to go back to Patricia Hill-Collins’ (1991) taxonomy of the most frequent controlling images of black womanhood, taking this time a class-specific approach. The controlling image of the ‘welfare mother’ or ‘welfare recipient’, already discussed in the first section, was most notably constructed to stigmatise poor working-class black mothers who refuse to be exploited by holding them responsible for their own poverty. It functions ‘by labelling as unnecessary and even dangerous to the values of the country the fertility of women who are not white and middles class’ (76). Actually in the second edition of Black Feminist Thought, Hill-Collins (2000) updates and further develops her typology of controlling images of black womanhood, which now takes the issue of class even more into account. Drawing on Lubiano, Hill-Collins explains that the controlling image of the ‘welfare mother’ evolved into the even more denigrating image of the
'welfare queen': ‘in contrast to the welfare mother… the welfare queen constitutes a highly materialistic, domineering, and manless working-class Black woman’ (80).

Still drawing on Lubiano, Hill-Collins also added another class-specific controlling image of black womanhood, that of the ‘black lady’. Hill-Collins explains that the ‘black lady’, the image of the middle-class professional black woman ‘who represent[s] a modern version of the politics of respectability advanced by the club women’ (80) does not seem like a controlling image at first glance but it is. The image shares many characteristics with previous images of black womanhood: like the ‘mammy’ she represents the hardworking black woman; like the ‘matriarch’ she is deemed too assertive; and like the ‘welfare queen’ she is accused of taking something she didn’t earn, in this case, the jobs of white men. Actually the images of the ‘welfare queen’ and the ‘black lady’ evolved jointly (80-81).

Thus, when taken together, the welfare queen and the black lady constitute class-specific versions of a matriarchy thesis whose fundamental purpose is to discredit Black women’s full exercise of citizenship rights. These interconnected images leave U.S. Black women between a rock and a hard place (81).

Another development in Hill-Collins’ typology of controlling images of black womanhood worth mentioning here concerns the image of the ‘jezebel’. Hill-Collins explains that the image evolved into a more vicious and degrading image, that of the ‘hoochie’, which is, according to her, widespread in contemporary black culture. Hill-Collins actually produces a taxonomy of ‘hoochies that consists of the ‘plain hoochies’, ‘club hoochies’, ‘gold-digging hoochies’ and ‘hoochie-mamas’ (82-83). Hill-Collins explains that the ‘hoochie-mama’, ‘hoodrat’ or ‘ghetto hoochie’ ‘popularized by 2 Live Crew, [is] an image that links the hoochie to poverty’, it stigmatises poor black mothers who sell sex for money (83). In other words, this
image is also class-specific. It is worth noting how the issue of class is indeed closely related to motherhood and sexuality, which it was argued earlier emerge as the dominant themes in the representation of black womanhood. Hill-Collins’ discussion of class-specific controlling images of black womanhood is illuminating but again she only examines ‘negative’ images. This, again, raises the question of whether there are also characteristics or themes in the cultural productions of African American women that counter such class-specific oppressive and denigrating images and that affirm the values and ideologies of African American women belonging to those classes.

In her historical examination of the feminist implications of the recorded performances of Gertrude ‘Ma’ Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday, Angela Davis (1999), one of the few writers cited in this thesis that deal with music, shows how the music of these three female singers from the classic blues era exhibited expressions of a ‘feminist consciousness that reflected the lives of working-class black communities’ (xv). Davis’s findings are especially interesting since, as she explains, the vast majority of historical studies of black feminism tend to concentrate on the work of African American women writers, which means that, most of the time, ‘what are constituted as black feminist traditions tend to exclude ideas produced by and within poor and working-class communities, where women historically have not had the means or access to publish written texts’ (xi-xii). In other words, popular music seems especially suited for the expression of the ideas and issues of poor and working-class black communities and Davis’, as well as Carby’s (1986) studies of the early recordings of female blues singers demonstrate that indeed there exists a long tradition of working-class black women performers whose music exhibits characteristics and contains themes and ideas that resist dominant values and
ideologies and celebrate the lives of black working-class women and, more generally, black working-class people.

Davis notes that one central theme in both men and women’s blues was sexuality and that in the blues tradition sexuality is an expression of freedom (8). In his discussion of the critiques of rapper Lil’ Kim’s self-representation as a sexually assertive woman, Shaviro (2005) explains that Lil’ Kim, with her raunchy lyrics that address sexuality openly, is part of this tradition of working-class black women performers that includes singers such as Ma Rainey and Millie Jackson and that this tradition is in conflict with a tradition of middle-class black women striving for respectability.

One way that many middle-class blacks have historically responded to racist disparagement is by maintaining the strictest – indeed Victorian – standards of bourgeois propriety. Today, this attitude persists in images of black women as being deeply spiritual [and] strong (Shaviro, 2005: 177).

In other words, the critiques and concerns about how, far from being feminist, African American female performers who, like Lil’ Kim, present themselves as sexually assertive women only perpetuates and validates negative images of black womanhood usually come from black middle-class women. We saw in a previous section how the images adopted by African American cultural producers often contained ambiguities and contradictions. It was argued that these ambiguities and contradictions reflected the limits of the degree of agency black women posses and their sense of uncertainty about their own identity. Black women’s politics of representation, it was argued, reflected the limits of emancipatory politics in a racist and patriarchal society. But it seems, from the above, that the images adopted by African American women in their performances may also appear ambiguous and contradictory when not observed from
a class-specific point of view. The self-presentation of Lil’ Kim as a sexually assertive woman might appear contradictory and ambiguous when observed from the point of view of a middle-class black woman. What this suggests is that, by including the problem of class, it is possible to make more sense of some of the issues raised earlier. Adding the issue of class then further complicates the different categories and images discussed in this chapter, but it also enables a clearer understanding of the politics of representation at stake.

A similar example of black middle-class resentment towards representations of black people who do not comply with ‘proper’ middle-class values can be found in the male rap tradition. In relation to the African American community’s reaction to the media’s construction of black urban men as criminals, Lott (1997) explains that, while in hip-hop culture crime is used as a metaphor for resistance, ‘[t]he black middle class denounces as a negative image any association of black people with crime by media’ (120-21). But where does this middle-class resentment come from?

In his discussion of actress Pam Grier’s image as a ‘hot action babe’, Chris Holmlund (2005) who also notes that those who criticise ‘blaxploitation’ and contemporary action films in general usually express middle-class values, suggests Valerie Smith’s explanation for this middle-class resentment:

[B]laxploitation films … responded to the bourgeois propriety of early black independent films and of mainstream race problem movies with their focus on black and white criminality and the urban black working poor, [by] constructing these subjects and types as more racially authentic than members of the black middle class.” (in Holmlund, 2005: 108).

In other words, according to Smith, black-middle-class resentment towards representations of African Americans who do not comply with respectable middle-
class values comes from the fact that these representations are constructed as more racially authentic.

A very similar idea about the construction of black urban poor and working-class people and their experiences as more racially authentic is expressed by Lott (1997) in relation to the hip-hop culture and rap music.

Hip-hop culture is the basis of an authentic public sphere which counterposes itself to the dominant alternative from which black urban youth have been excluded. Middle-class social uplift has been exposed by rap artists as inauthentic role modelling. Such role models lack validity among black urban youth who are fully aware that they face structurally based unemployment (122).

That is to say, popular practices associated with poor and working-class urban black life resist the dominant (white) culture and construct more racially authentic representations of blackness and in doing so they expose the black middle-class model as inauthentic or, in other words, as integrationist. Indeed, we saw how, for example, the urban black male characters portrayed in ‘blaxploitation’ movies exposed the nonthreatening, assimilated types of characters played by actors such as Sidney Poitier as inauthentic (Hall; 1997: 253).

In this heading then we have seen how class always relates to issues of race and gender and how it further complicates the categories of black womanhood discussed in this chapter and exposes their limitations. The approach and methodology that will be proposed in this thesis should help us move beyond some of these limitations. Before summing up, it will be useful to illustrate how, drawing on the literature discussed in this chapter, songs could be usefully considered in addition to the visual mode. This will be done through the case of the ‘mother figure’ as it might be used in black female RnB songs.
The case of the ‘mother figure’

As we saw there are many controlling images of black motherhood perpetuated in media representation, and most of them are class-specific. With the exception of the somewhat controlling image of the ‘black lady’, it appears that actually most of the denigrating images of black motherhood discussed by Hill-Collins (1991; 2000) affect and stigmatise poor and working-class African American mothers. This is indeed the case with the images of the ‘mammy’, the ‘matriarch’, the ‘welfare mother’ or ‘welfare queen’, and the ‘hoochie-mama’. We also saw how ‘positive’ images of black motherhood can also be found in the cultural productions of African American women when we discussed the image of the regal and self-assured African-centred ‘Queen Mother’ adopted by certain African American female rappers such as Queen Latifah (see Keyes, 2000: 256-59).

In this section, we will highlight some of the complexities involved in the cultural representation of African American women that were discussed in this chapter by moving more specifically to the realm of popular songs. This will be done by looking at the ways in which the theme of the ‘mother figure’ might emerge in black female RnB songs. Two examples will be used: Jill Scott’s song ‘Rasool’ and Lauryn Hill’s ‘Doo Wop (That Thing)’. The aim of this case study is to show how the analysis of song lyrics can help us move beyond some of the limitations of the methods discussed in this chapter which focus mainly on the visual mode. Later in this thesis, we will be developing a different means of song analysis using speech-act theory. But for now we will use the existing cultural studies methods discussed in this chapter alone (the repertoire of images of black womanhood and Hall’s typology of strategies of resistance) to analyse song lyrics.
The first that will be considered is ‘Rasool’, performed by Jill Scott. In the song, Jill Scott addresses African American urban youth, whom she refers to as ‘you’, to warn them about the dangers of drug dealing by telling the story of Rasool, shot dead at the age of fifteen by a member of his crew, and she tells it in a way that is both maternal and authoritative. Here are the lyrics to the song:

His name was Rasool
Carmel completed boy from the 22
Rough on the outside
But on the inside he was cool
Rasool was a king
But also a fool
Back on the block again with the same crew
Tariq from the west side
Little John from the avenue
Always seen um bout a quarter to two
Shaking hands with everybody
But at the same time sharing the blues
And oh how he passed it on
Shaking hands till what was in his pockets was gone
He'd be outside in the cold with his bubble goose on
But inside
I knew he wasn't warm
Around 10:30 on that dreary night
His boyz said they were hungry they were hungry
Wanted to get a bite
But they didn't send a runner
Rasool knew it wasn't right
But he stayed anyway to get the chain he liked
And oh how the shots rang in the streets
Hitting everybody in the surrounding vicinity
Children of the children
One young father to be
And Rasool lay dead in my north Philly Street
At fifteen years old
It was the first death I'd seen
But the game ain't designed for no kind of winning
And oh this is a friend of Rasool
Telling you to think about what you do and who you call your crew
The very choices you make
May make a Rasool out of you
Now you don't want that do you?
Although the mother figure presented as narrator in this song resembles more the image of the regal, self-assured and African-centred ‘Queen Mother’ from the rap female tradition than those of the ‘mammy’ or the ‘matriarch’, she shares characteristics with them.

This mother figure is overturning the controlling images of the ‘mammy’ and the ‘matriarch’; she is appropriating some of their characteristics to create a ‘positive’ image that reaffirm and values black motherhood and more specifically urban working-class black mothers and communities in general. She is nurturing like the ‘mammy’ but unlike the ‘mammy’ she is concerned with the well-being of African American urban youth, i.e. with the children of her own community, rather than with the well-being of the children of her white family. She is assertive like the ‘matriarch’ but her assertiveness is not denigrated like in the image of the ‘matriarch’. Her sense of assertiveness reflects her status and authority within her community. She acts as an experienced advisor. This function of advising members of the audience about various everyday issues based on personal experience is actually a common theme in the African American female musical tradition. Davis explains that woman-to-woman advice songs are very common in the female blues tradition and that these songs, which worked by constructing an imagined audience, affirmed a community of women and, more specifically, a community of working-class black women (1999: 42-65). The song we are concerned with works in a similar way: it could be described as a mother-to-child advice song that constructs and affirms black working-class urban mothers and communities in general.

The mother figure presented in the advice song ‘Rasool’ is like the community ‘othermother’ discussed by Hill-Collins (1991). Unlike the externally (white) defined and controlling images of black womanhood she presents in her
typology, the image of the community 'othermother' Hill-Collins refers to in her discussion of black motherhood comes from within African American communities. In her study of the self-representation of African American female rappers, Keyes (2000) draws on Patricia Hill-Collins' discussion of the 'othermother' in African American communities to understand the particular type of mother figure represented by Queen Latifah.

Black women's involvement in fostering African-American community development forms the basis for community-based power. This is the type of "strong Black woman" they see around them in traditional African-American communities. Community othermothers work on behalf of the Black community by expressing ethics of caring and personal accountability which embrace conceptions of transformative and mutuality ... community othermothers become identified as power figures through furthering the community's well-being' (in Keyes, 2000: 258).

In 'Rasool', Jill Scott is indeed characterising herself as a community 'othermother', caring for and accountable to all the African American community’s children; she is a positive, powerful mother figure in African American communities.

However, like the majority of 'positive' representations of African American women, the image of the community 'othermother' is also ambiguous and contradictory. As Hill-Collins (1991) explains black motherhood may be empowering and bring recognition for black women within African American communities, it also puts pressure on black women; the image of the selfless and devoted 'othermother' is also a controlling one.

Black motherhood is fundamentally a contradictory institution. African-American communities value motherhood, but Black mothers' ability to cope with race, class, and gender oppression should not be confused with transcending those conditions. Black motherhood can be rewarding, but it can also extract high personal costs (Hill-Collins, 1991: 133).
Using the existing literature discussed in this chapter, we have been able to find out in this short analysis of ‘Rasool’ that the theme of the black mother does indeed emerge in contemporary RnB, showing the usefulness of the categories of images of black womanhood. However, the analysis could not go further than characterising the narrator in ‘Rasool’ as the community ‘othermother’ and saying that it is a contradictory image, something which could not be pointed out or explored in the lyrics. The analysis then also showed the limitations of such an approach as it does not provide means to explore the complexities it points at. The speech-act theory based continuum of strategies between two socio-linguistic poles that will be developed in this thesis will provide tools to explore the language and music and so move beyond these limitations.

The second RnB song selected to highlight the relevance of this study for exploring the complexities of black women’s politics of representations discussed in this chapter is Lauryn Hill’s ‘Doo Wop (That Thing)’. The transcribed lyrics suggest that, like ‘Rasool’, ‘Doo Wop (That Thing)’ is an advice song. The song advises African American youth, both female and male, about relationships. Here is the first verse of the song in which the narrator addresses young girls:

It's been three weeks since you've been looking for your friend
The one you let hit it and never called you again
'member when he told you he was 'bout the benjamins
You act like you ain't hear him then gave him a little trim
To begin, how you think you really gon' pretend
Like you wasn't down then you called him again
Plus when you give it up so easy you ain't even fooling him
If you did it then, then you probably fuck again
Talking out your neck sayin' you're a christian
A muslim sleeping with the gin
Now that was the sin that did jezebel in
Who you gon' tell when the repercussions spin
Showing off your ass 'cause you're thinking it's a trend
Girlfriend, let me break it down for you again
You know i only say it 'cause i'm truly genuine
Don't be a hardrock when you're really a gem
Babygirl, respect is just a minimum
Niggas fucked up and you still defending them
Now lauryn is only human
Don't think i haven't been through the same predicament
Let it sit inside your head like a million women in philly, penn.
It's silly when girls sell their soul because it's in
Look at where you be in hair weaves like europeans
Fake nails done by koreans

Come again
Come again, come again, come again, come again

Guys you know you better watch out
Some girls, some girls are only about
That thing, that thing, that thing

Like 'Rasool', 'Doo Wop (That Thing)' is enunciated from the position of the mother
who warns and advises less experienced members of her community – both male and
female – about everyday issues and relationships. As was mentioned earlier, advising
about everyday life and issues is a common theme in the African American female
tradition and serves to construct and affirm a sense of community. 'One of the
principal modes of community-building in women’s blues is that of sharing
experiences for the purpose of instructing women how to conduct their lives. Many of
the songs that describe the difficulties of romantic partnership are pedagogical in
character' (Davis, 1999: 53).

In other words, it could be argued that, like 'Rasool', 'Doo Wop (That Thing)' is an advice song that validates the image of the community 'othermother'
and affirms working-class black urban communities. But, on the other hand, it could
also be argued that 'Doo Wop (That Thing)' is actually articulating proper black
middle-class values and criticising working-class African American urban women and
men for lacking respectable middle-class values and behaviours. The image of black motherhood presented in this song could be located within the tradition of middle-class rather than working-class black women. In other words, the song could be presenting an image of black motherhood that ‘represent[s] a modern version of the politics of respectability advanced by the club women’ (Hill-Collins, 2000: 80) such as the image of the deeply spiritual, strong, and respectable middle-class black woman discussed by Shaviro (2005: 177). When we discussed the issue of class in the previous section we saw how black middle-class resentment towards cultural representations of African Americans that don’t conform to proper middle-class values could be explained by the fact that these representations have been constructed as more racially authentic (Holmlund, 2005: 108).

It could then be argued that the song is attempting to construct and affirm black middle-class motherhood as more racially authentic. But that argument can only be made if we decide to assume that the mother figure that emerges in ‘Doo Wop (That Thing)’ does articulate black middle-class values, as opposed to the working-class values of the advice-giving community ‘othermother’. In other words, here too we see the limitations of the existing approaches exposed once applied to songs. In the case of ‘Doo Wop (That Thing)’, the limitations became apparent as we confronted two different and opposing class-specific interpretations of the values that might be articulated in the song. We will see later how the issue of class can be approached differently in songs using a method of analysis based on speech-act theory.

Whether we interpret an image of black womanhood as oppressive or empowering and whether we argue that it articulates middle-class or working-class values,
discrepancies and complexities always arise. To the extent that the contradictions and ambiguities in the work of African American female cultural producers reflect the limits of emancipatory politics in a racist and patriarchal society, an approach that takes these contradictions and ambiguities as part of the process of resistance, rather than as limitations to it has much to recommend it. In this thesis, we will see how such an approach is possible drawing on speech-act theory. The action-oriented approach to speech provided by speech-act theory makes it particularly useful for exploring agency in language use and so political agency in songs. More specifically, the aim of this thesis is to explore how this political agency emerges in and through the very limits of emancipatory politics.

In the next chapter then we will see how by framing speech-act theory in a more general political philosophy that considers identity as being an issue of process or becoming, we can start to consider how political agency is exerted by African American women within the concrete limits living in a racist and patriarchal society entails.
Chapter 2: Speech-Act Theory and the Politics of Representation

In Chapter 1, we explored the issues and complexities surrounding black women’s politics of representation. We saw how the ambiguities and contradictions in their cultural productions reflect the limits of the agency African American women possess in taking control over the issue of cultural identity in a racist and patriarchal society. Or, as Emerson (2002) puts it, the ambiguous and contradictory nature of black women’s cultural products highlight ‘a tension between the structural constraints of race and gender on one hand and women’s resistance and self-affirmation on the other’ (Emerson, 2002: 128). A key issue is therefore one of becoming, of struggle for rights and identity as an on-going process in a society that is racist and patriarchal. Chapter 1 then argued for an approach that considers the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in the work of black women as part of the on-going process that is their resistance and empowerment, rather than as limitations.

In this second chapter of the thesis we will start considering how speech-act theory could be useful for exploring black women’s politics of representation through such an approach. The core idea behind J.L. Austin’s (1976) speech-act theory is that language is performative. To say something, Austin argued, is to do something, that is, utterances constitute actions or acts (as in ‘I promise you...’ or ‘I bet...’). Such proposition or action-orientated approach to language is significant for this study as it implies a politicised use of language in that it highlights how language involves agency. Speech-act theory will then be useful for exploring how resistance and the struggle over
identity is played out in popular songs. Speech-act theory can illuminate strategies embodied in black female RnB record-texts by showing what African American women are doing in and through their songs. The overall aim of this second chapter then will be to show how a contextualised and politicised approach to speech-act theory can help us move beyond the limitations encountered in Chapter 1 by considering how political agency is exerted by African American women within the concrete limits of a racist and patriarchal wider socio-cultural context.

To do so, this chapter will be divided into four sections. The first section will consist of a critical discussion of Judith Butler’s (1990) concept of ‘gender performativity’ which has to do with the cultural politics of performance and the agency at stake. Though useful Butler’s approach is too decontextualised and will therefore be counterpoised by Toril Moi’s (1999) concrete phenomenological approach to the issue of identity. Having provided the ground to contextualise conventional speech-act theory, in the second section the discussion will more specifically move to the area of language, showing how speech-act theory has been used in literary theory and criticism in order to highlight its potential as an analytical tool. In this second section, the work of Douglas Robinson (2003; 2006) will also be introduced as it re-politicises speech-act theory. In the third section the discussion will move more specifically to the realm of songs. Elisabeth Kuhn’s (1999) application of speech-act theory to blues lyrics will be reviewed. In this section, Robinson’s (2003) metalocutionary implicature will be introduced as a key concept in this thesis as it shows how agency is involved in language use. Then, in the fourth and final section of this chapter, a case will be made about the importance of thinking about words and music together in a speech-act analysis of record-texts. Erykah Badu’s song ‘Danger’
will be used as a case study for a preliminary analysis to demonstrate the usefulness of speech-act theory for both the linguistic and the musical dimensions of recorded songs.

Butler’s ‘gender performativity’ and Moi’s phenomenological rethinking of contemporary feminist theory

In this first section of the chapter we will start by providing a theoretical background for the kind of contextualised approach to speech-act theory that is taken in this thesis. To do so, two very different approaches to the issue of identity will be confronted and in some sense combined as both will contribute to the thesis. First Judith Butler’s (1990) concept of ‘gender performativity’, derived from Austin’s performative, will be discussed as it usefully highlights the cultural politics of performance and the issue of agency. Then, Toril Moi’s (1999) phenomenological rethinking of contemporary feminist theory will be introduced as better suited to the approach taken in this thesis than Butler’s extreme constructivism.

The importance of Judith Butler’s concept of ‘gender performativity’ lies not so much in the fact that it challenges the essentialist view of gender as a fixed category, as an ‘essential’ attribute. Butler’s central argument is that gender is not only a social construct; it is an act, a performance, a sort of ‘drag’. Gender is enacted through acts, gestures, enactments and these are, she argues, ‘performative’ because ‘the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means’ (1990: 136). In other words, the gendered body does not express or reveal an inner or essential identity; rather sexual identity is constituted in and through the performance of gender. If the gendered body is performative, a fabrication or fantasy and has, therefore, no
ontological status, then it follows that 'genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity' (136).

Butler goes on to explain that, because gender is an act, it is through repeated acts that a binary and hierarchical view of gender relations was instituted and naturalised and, therefore, paradoxically, it is also through repetition that subversion is possible, that gender configurations outside the 'heterosexual matrix' can be constructed and, at the same time, reveal the equally 'unnatural' and performative status of heterosexuality (146). For Butler, then, 'construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency' (147). Butler locates agency within the possibility of a variation on the process of repetitive signifying that constitutes identity. Since this study is concerned with the performative and the representation of racialised and gendered identity, Butler's idea of gender as being 'performative', as being created through actions rather than being the expression of an inner true identity is very useful. Indeed, Butler is useful as she shows how identity is performed and how it involves agency, bringing out the continuity between performative language and a notion of 'performativity' in everyday life.

However, although Butler's work is useful, its contribution to this thesis is limited because of the extreme constructivism of her approach. Part of the problem is that her argument about the possibility of change through agency seems to undermine the issue of power relations, suggesting that agency knows no socio-cultural constraints. To refer to speech-act theory, performatives can only be performed successfully in the appropriate circumstances or context (Austin: 1976; 14-15). If gender is performative, then the success of its performance will also depend on the wider socio-cultural context. A society in which a binary and hierarchical view of gender relations has been naturalised is hardly an appropriate context for the successful
proliferation of new gender configurations. This is not to say that nothing can be done, that change is impossible, but rather that the context will limit what it is possible to do. That is to say performativity is necessarily circumstantial. Moreover, Butler’s argument also lacks a sense of agency as historical process. It doesn’t explain why and how people go about changing power relations; she only explains that it is possible. Another issue that is worth raising about Butler is her focus on gender at the expense of other equally crucial dimensions of identity such as race and class. Butler’s concern with gender undermines the fact that performing identity also always means performing race, ethnicity, and social class.

In other words, although valuable to the extent that it shows that identity is performed and involves agency, Butler’s concept of gender performativity remains rather abstract and decontextualised. For this reason, it could usefully be counterpoised by Toril Moi’s concrete phenomenological approach, which is more suited to the approach taken in this thesis. Toril Moi’s work (1999) is indeed very useful as her rethinking of contemporary feminist theory avoids both determinism and constructivism by considering concrete, historical situations. Moreover, like Butler, Moi’s approach is also informed by the philosophy of ordinary language, showing yet again a continuity between, on the one hand, speech-act theory and, on the other, a more broad conception of ‘performativity’. In the title-essay of her book What Is A Woman? (1999), Toril Moi proposes an understanding ‘of the sexually different body’, inspired by Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, that challenges dominant poststructuralist theories of sex and gender. Inspired by Wittgenstein’s (1953) simple formulation ‘the meaning of a word is its use in the language’, Toril Moi ‘show[s] that the belief that any use of the word ‘woman’ (and any answer to the question “What is a
woman?”) must entail a philosophical commitment to metaphysics and essentialism, is mistaken’ (7).

According to Moi, if they are to produce a good theory of the sexually different body and subjectivity, instead of trying to rethink the concepts of sex and gender, contemporary feminists should completely abandon the sex/gender distinction. Moi argues that, instead, feminists should go back to Simon de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* as it ‘provides exactly the kind of non-essentialist, concrete, historical and social understanding of the body that so many contemporary feminists are looking for’ (5). Inspired by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, de Beauvoir understands the body not as a thing, but as a situation. Moi argues that what de Beauvoir means is not that the body is always in a situation, but rather that ‘[t]he body both is a situation and is placed within other situations’. Moreover, ‘[w]e are always in a situation, but the situation is always part of us’ (65).

Moi’s use of the term situation highlights the need for concrete, historical understanding of what it means to be a woman in a particular social context. This formulation is very useful as it shows how both determinism and constructivism can be avoided. Her phenomenological approach informed by de Beauvoir emphasises the importance of investigating particular historical situations (as opposed to making somewhat generalised abstractions) or, in other words, concrete lived experiences. We can see this approach in the following passage:

One aspect of that lived experience will be the way in which the individual woman encounters, internalises, or rejects dominant gender norms. But this encounter is always inflected by the woman’s situation, and that means by her personal and idiosyncratic history as this is interwoven with other historical situations such as her age, race, class, and nationality, and the particular political conflicts in which she may be involved (82).
Moi’s rethinking of de Beauvoir fits well with this thesis’ approach to the issue of the complexities surrounding the cultural representation of African American women. It was argued in the first chapter that the inherent tensions or contradictions in the cultural images of black womanhood reflect the limits to how far emancipatory politics can go in a racist and patriarchal social system. The co-existence of resistance to, and internalisation or perpetuation of, dominant oppressive images in the representation of African American women is then a historical condition of the struggle of these women to take control over their own identity in a racist and patriarchal society. The issue is therefore one of becoming, an attempt to make sense of one’s experience in a hostile society.

The aim of this first section was to revive or politicise conventional speech-act theory and provide a theoretical background to support the contextualised approach taken in this thesis by drawing on Moi and, to a lesser extent, Butler. Judith Butler’s appropriation and broadening of Austin’s performative to the more general concept of ‘gender performative’ is a useful contribution as it shows how identity is performed and involves agency. However, her extreme constructivist approach is problematic and was therefore counterpoised by Toril Moi’s more relevant phenomenological approach as it highlights the need for a concrete, historical and social understanding of the issues at stake when considering identity and the struggle for self-definition. In this way, we have reached in this section a historically situated and social understanding of the notion of the ‘performativity’ of everyday life - which is, in a sense, akin to Austin’s definition of the performative in language as circumstantial (see Austin: 1976). It is such a contextualised approach to speech-act theory that will be used in this thesis which aims at exploring how political agency emerges in and through the concrete constraints of racialised and gendered social relations.
This section showed how there exists a continuity between the performative in language and a broader idea of ‘performativity’ in everyday social interactions. In the next section we will move back to Austin’s original proposition about language as being performative. Focusing back on more language-based applications of speech-act theory, the second section of this thesis will show how the concept of the performative has also been appropriated by literary theory and used as an analytical tool in literary criticism. Drawing on Robinson (2003; 2006), it will also re-introduce a notion of intentionality in language use as well as critically discuss the distinction between two types of methodologies or approaches to speech-act theory based on two different linguistic traditions.

The performative – From Austin to Robinson, through Derrida

J.L. Austin’s speech-act theory can be found contained in *How To Do Things With Words* (1976 – first published in 1962), a collection of notes from his William James Lectures published posthumously. The core idea behind Austin’s speech-act theory is that language is performative, that is, utterances constitute actions. Austin identified three aspects of everyday speech. According to him, when we say something, we simultaneously perform three distinctive acts: a locutionary (or constative) act in which we describe or say something; an illocutionary (or performative) act whereby we intend to mean something; and a perlocutionary act to the extent that we intend to produce a certain effect or effects on the listener. Austin argued every utterance is made up of these three simultaneous acts, that is to say, all language is necessarily performative (Austin; 1976: 94-101).
Austin’s proposition that all language is performative is crucial because it means that utterances don’t merely describe but rather they perform the very actions they refer to. In uttering the words ‘[I promise you that] I will be on time’ I am not describing anything, I am performing the very act of promising. Performatives, then, create the situation or state of affairs they refer to - that is, saying can make it so (6). However, as already mentioned in the previous section, Austin argued that the performative or illocutionary act is circumstantial. To be successful a performative has to be brought off in the appropriate circumstances, that is, according to certain social rules which have mainly to do with who says what to whom and in what context (14-15). That is, as opposed to being either true or false which is the definition of a statement in the philosophical sense of the term, performatives are either brought off successfully in which case they are ‘happy’, to use Austin’s term, or result in a failure or are ‘unhappy’ if not brought off in the appropriate circumstances (14).

The action-oriented approach to language offered by the performative broke away with the traditional philosophical view of language as being mainly about making statements about the world that are either true or false. In this sense, speech-act theory had a significant influence on contemporary philosophy. We saw in the previous section how the performative was adopted and widened into the more general concept of ‘gender performativity’ by Judith Butler (1990). We will see below how this productive approach to language also made the performative a useful concept for exploring literary discourse. However, before moving to the use of the performative in literary studies, another important point regarding Austin’s founding work on the performative is worth mentioning here. Austin (1976) argued that the performative or illocutionary act is a conventional act in the sense that it derives its meaning or, to use Austin’s term, its ‘illocutionary force’ (100), from social and linguistic conventions.
According to Austin the conventional nature of the performative can be verified by beginning an utterance by using, what he calls, the appropriate ‘explicit performative verb or formula’, thereby making the illocutionary force of a speech act explicit. By beginning the speech act ‘I will be on time’ with the appropriate explicit performative formula ‘I promise you that...’, I can make the illocutionary force of my promise explicit thereby showing its conventional nature (103-4).

However, and this is a crucial point, Austin never rejected the idea that speech acts involve intention. To perform an illocutionary act is indeed to intend to mean something, which is not incompatible with the fact that this might be achieved through conventional social and linguistic means. Moreover, intention is also involved in speech acts through non-conventional means on a perlocutionary level in the sense that by saying something, we also simultaneously intend to produce a certain effect or effects on the listener. Many subsequent speech-act theorists have taken the idea of the conventionality of language too far, rejecting the notion of intentionality all together. As we will see, such rejection of intentionality defines literary theory and criticism’s appropriation of the performative. In order to bring back the idea of intention which is necessary for showing agency and re-politicising speech-act theory, the discussion will turn to the work of ‘performative’ linguist Douglas Robinson (2003; 2006) as his approach goes back to Austin’s founding work on speech-act theory.

The performative in literary theory and criticism

Although, in his discussion of the performative, Austin (1976) was concerned with ordinary uses of language, the concept has subsequently been appropriated by literary
theory and its potential as an analytical tool for literary language soon became evident. The aim of this discussion about the literary speech act and the use of the performative in the analysis of literary genres is to highlight how such an approach could also be useful in the study of popular songs.

Not only did Austin’s (1976) discussion of the performative not include ‘non-serious’ or ‘anomalous’ uses of language such as literary language, it also explicitly excluded them as *parasitic*.

[A] performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance – a sea-change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways – intelligibly – used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use – ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiolations* of language. All this we are *excluding* from consideration. Our performative utterances, felicitous or not, are to be understood as issued in ordinary circumstances (22).

However, Austin also recognised that all performative utterances may be affected by such *parasitical* uses; these can ‘infect all utterances’ (21). It is this general possibility, which Austin himself acknowledged, that will be used as a starting point and extended by Derrida to include *parasitical* uses of language to the discussion of the performative. In ‘Signature Event Context’ (1988) Derrida demonstrates that, actually, this general possibility ‘is in some sense a necessary possibility’ – namely language’s internal condition of possibility (15).

For, ultimately, isn’t it true that what Austin excludes as anomaly, exception, “non-serious,” *citation* (on stage, in a poem, or a soliloquy) is the determined modification of a general citationality – or rather, a general iterability – without which there would not even be a “successful” performative? So that – a paradoxical but unavoidable conclusion – a successful performative is necessarily an “impure” performative, to adopt
the word advanced later on by Austin when he acknowledges that there is no “pure” performative (17).

In arguing for the general *citationality* or *iterability* of language, Derrida shows that what Austin referred to as *parasitism* is actually structural to language, it is its condition of possibility and cannot therefore be excluded. This means that *parasitic* language and so literary language is performative, and speech-act theory can be applied to literature.

The concept of the performative especially has proved very useful and appropriate for analysing literary language and discourse. Jonathan Culler (2000) summarises why speech-act theory’s perspective on language as active fits the analysis of literary language:

Since literary criticism involves attending to what literary language *does* as much as to what it *says*, the concept of the performative seems to provide a linguistic and philosophical justification for this idea: there are utterances that above all do something. Moreover, like the performative, the literary utterance does not refer to a prior state of affairs and is not true or false. The literary utterance, too, *creates* the state of affairs to which it refers, in several respects. First and most simply, it brings into being characters and their actions, for instance... Secondly, literary works seem to bring into being ideas, concepts, which they deploy... (507).

So far, the points made by Culler about the suitability of the model of the performative for the analysis of literature are certainly relevant and highlight how the concept is equally – if not more – suitable for the analysis of song lyrics. Song lyrics, too, don’t merely *state* but *do* things. They, too, *create* the state of affairs to which they refer or bring into being characters, ideas and concepts. However, Culler’s second main argument about the usefulness of the performative for the analysis of literary language is problematic as it denies the possibility of agency:
Second, for Austin, in principle at least, the performative breaks the link between meaning and the intention of the speaker, for what act I perform with my words is not determined by my intention but by social and linguistic conventions...Since literary utterances are also events where the intention of the author is not thought to be what determines the meaning, here is another way in which the model of the performative seems highly pertinent (507).

The fact that performative utterances derive their meaning or illocutionary force from social and linguistic conventions does not by implication mean that intention is not involved. As already mentioned in the introductory part of this section, Austin did not clearly reject the idea of intention. Song lyrics too derive their meaning (or illocutionary force) from social and linguistic conventions but this does not mean that meaning cannot and does not also involve a certain level of intention. As already suggested, intention is crucial for showing the political agency at stake in popular music. Culler’s attack on intention does therefore need to be refuted in a thesis which aims to understand the politics behind the representation of racialised and gendered identity in popular music. In other words, while the first part of Culler’s argument about the usefulness of the model of the performative for analysing literary works shows how the same is true for song lyrics, his criticism of intention does not fit with the approach of this thesis we will see later in this section how the idea of intention in language use can be reintroduced (and Culler effectively rebutted) by drawing on the work of Douglas Robinson (2003; 2006) as his approach goes back to Austin’s founding work on speech-act theory.

Having discussed how Austin’s performative was appropriated by literary theory, and explained what makes it such a relevant concept for the study of literary language (and by implication song lyrics), we will now more specifically consider how the
performatives have been used in the analysis of literary works. It appears two main approaches to the performative can be identified in the field of literary criticism. To explain this it will be useful to refer to J. Hillis Miller. Miller (2001) explains that the phrase ‘speech acts in literature’ can have different meanings, which are not necessarily compatible (1). The two most common senses of the phrase ‘speech acts in literature’ are as follows:

“Speech acts in literature” can mean speech acts that are uttered within literary works, for example promises, lies, excuses, declarations, imprecations, requests for forgiveness, apologies, pardons, and the like said or written by the characters or by the narrator in a novel. It can also mean a possible performative dimension of a literary work taken as a whole. Writing a novel may be a way of doing things with words. The title of Anthony Trollope’s *Can You Forgive Her?* Asks not only whether Plantagenet Palliser can forgive his wife’s near adultery and John Gray can forgive Alice Vavasor (inside the novel) but also whether we as reader can forgive the two women (appraising the novel from outside)...(2001: 1).

In other words, ‘speech acts in literature’ can mean, on the one hand, ‘speech acts that are uttered within the literary works’ or, on the other hand, ‘a possible performative dimension of a literary work taken as a whole’, that is the literary work itself as a speech act or as performative. These two different understanding of the phrase ‘speech acts in literature’ correspond to two similarly different approaches to the performative analysis of literary works, each having its own specific purpose. To understand the difference between what can be achieved with each method, it might be useful to refer to two examples.

In a paper entitled ‘Speech Act Theory, Speech Acts, and the Analysis of Fiction’ (2003), M. Reingard Nischik provides an example of speech-act analysis of a literary text that is based on the first meaning of ‘speech acts in literature’, that is speech acts within the text. Nischik’s aim is to demonstrate that the speech acts
performed by the two main protagonists in Margaret Atwood’s short story ‘Polarities’ (1971), Louise and Morrison, in their interactions with each other, create and structure their relationship – a polar relationship which inevitably ends tragically. Using Schmachtenberg’s (1982) classification of illocutionary acts, Nischik analyses the types of speech acts they use in their dialogue, the sequence of the speech acts, and the indirect speech acts. In other words, the aim here is to understand how the narrative of the literary text is created and structured by examining the type of illocutionary acts performed by the characters.

An example of an approach that takes the literary work itself as performative can be found in ‘Doing Things With Odes: A Poet’s Pledges of Allegiance: Ibn Darraj al-Qastalli’s Ha’iyyah to al-Mansur and Ra’iyyah to al-Mundhir’ (2003) by Majd Yaser al-Mallah. Al-Mallah’s article examines two of Darraj al-Qastalli’s panegyric odes presented to al-Mansur b. Abi Amir (d. 392/1002) and al-Mundhir b. Yahya (d. 412/1022). Al-Mallah shows how these two odes perform a particular illocutionary act within the context of the community in al-Andalus (Muslim Spain), that of gift exchange, and how the historical context affects the structure of the odes in his comparative analysis.

Applying speech act theory reveals that these odes perform the illocutionary act...of obligating the patron to reward the poet as a symbol of establishing a mutual relationship that is based on the poet’s pledge of allegiance and the patron’s acknowledgment of obligation toward the poet. The analysis focuses on what the panegyric ode does and what effect it has on the poet and patron within a proper context in the community...This ritual [of gift exchange] establishes specific obligations between poet and patron that allow the panegyric ode to accomplish specific objectives. The paper also compares the function of each of the two odes in the context of the different political circumstances under which they were presented and shows how these circumstances affect the structure of each ode (1).
In other words, the aim of al-Mallah’s analysis is two-fold. On the one hand, it shows how a specific illocutionary act is performed by a particular literary genre (the panegyric ode) within the context of the community in which it is produced. On the other hand, the analysis also shows how the fact that the two odes examined were presented at different historical moments and under different political circumstances, means that they had to use different strategies in order to successfully perform the intended illocutionary act (of gift exchange).

Drawing on Miller’s (2001) distinction, what these two examples suggest then is that, while the first approach to the analysis of literature that considers the speech acts performed within the literary text uses the literary text as its context and is therefore more concerned with the type of illocutionary acts performed within it, the second approach which looks at the literary text itself as a speech act considers what specific illocutionary act is performed by the text or genre itself within its particular socio-cultural context and at a certain historical and political moment. In other words, while the first approach is structure-oriented, the second is action- and context-oriented. Or rather this is what the situation appears to be like at first sight. Indeed, if we observe these two apparently incompatible methods of speech-act analysis, it appears that the issue is not so much one of form against content. For while unlike al-Mallah’s study, Nischik’s does not consider the overall meaning of the literary piece within its socio-historical context, both do actually analysis the structure of the speech acts within the respective literary works they deal with. In his effort to show the social purpose of the ode in a particular historical situation, al-Mallah does actually examine what particular illocutionary acts are performed within each ode. Most notably, the importance of structure in al-Mallah’s action- and context-oriented approach is evident in the comparative part of his analysis in which he shows how the fact that the two odes
examined were presented at different historical moments and under different political circumstances means that they had to use different strategies in order to successfully perform the intended illocutionary act (of gift exchange).

Since this thesis aims at dealing with the issue of black women’s politics of representation by looking at contemporary RnB record-texts as embodying strategies of resistance – strategies that show how political agency emerges in and through the constraints of a historically produced and maintained racist and patriarchal social system – a (combined) analytical approach, similar to that of al-Mallah’s, will be taken. However, in order to deal with the issue of agency we need to restore a notion of intention in speech-act theory, which it might be argued al-Mallah’s study actually shows at play in the ode. To make the case this section will end with a discussion of Robinson’s (2003; 2006) work, using it to reinforce the argument against literary theory and criticism’s uncompromising rejection of intention.

Robinson’s ‘performative’ linguistics

As just mentioned, one important dimension has been missing in this discussion about the performative in literary studies, that of intention. Indeed, Culler’s (2000) attack on intention mentioned earlier exemplifies the rejection of the idea that the meaning of cultural texts involves any form of intention, a rejection which dominates contemporary literary theory. Such a view is problematic as it undermines the idea of political agency, which is essential in this study. For this reason, Douglas Robinson’s (2003) new ‘performative’ paradigm in linguistic pragmatics will be especially relevant as it reintroduces a notion of intention in language use. Using Austin’s early distinction
between performative and constative utterances (which he abandoned in favour of the three-levelled model discussed at beginning of this section), Robinson suggests applying the terms ‘not to utterances but to approaches to utterances, linguistic methodologies’ (4). Robinson then uses these two terms to distinguish between two linguistic traditions or methodologies: ‘constative’ linguistics and ‘performative’ linguistics.

Whereas ‘[constative linguists want to regulate language, stabilize it, objectify it] (28-29), ‘performative linguists would be those interested in actual language use in real-world contexts’ (4). Robinson places linguists such as de Saussure, Chomsky, Jakobson, Benveniste, Katz, and Searle within the ‘constative’ tradition. ‘Performative’ linguists would be those commonly referred to as philosophers of language, critical theorists, or literary scholars such as Wittgenstein, Burke, Bakhtin and Derrida.

We might say: constative linguists tend to be more attentive to those aspects of language that do not change contextually, and that therefore come to seem like stable ‘objective’ structures akin to the foundation of a building; while performative linguists tend to be more attentive to those aspects of language that depend on individual speakers’ and listeners’ perceptions of contextual features and desire to manipulate those features in personally and socially significant ways, and that therefore come to seem like social acts akin to smiling ironically or patting someone on the back (5).

Robinson argues that just as ‘Wittgenstein’s [constative] followers [have] needed to codify language games, to write books...rulebooks, basically, for various language games, imagined as distinct logics or grammars’ (29), so too have Austin’s constative followers such as Searle, Benveniste and Katz felt the need to codify speech acts, to reinstate the constative/performative distinction, to recuperate and assimilate the performative to the traditional, constative linguistic approach (24-25).
Robinson's aim then is to develop a new 'performative' paradigm by bringing together and building on different action- and context-oriented approaches and concepts from the 'performative' tradition. Robinson’s 'performative' paradigm will be very useful for the present study as it restores a notion of intention, and one that is grounded in everyday social interactions. Indeed, Robinson’s criticism of ‘constative’ methodologies shows that it is exactly the performative aspect of language that is useful for political agency. However, in line with the observation made in the previous subsection about the apparent distinction and incompatibility between the two approaches to the speech-act analysis of literary texts, although Robinson’s enthusiasm for a ‘performative’ linguistics that looks at actual uses of language in everyday life rather than its formal aspects is certainly valuable, the categorical way in which he divides the two approaches is somewhat arguable. For while he rightly criticises the purely ‘constative’ approach, we would argue here for a ‘performative’ approach that entails considering the constative aspects that are necessarily always intertwined with the performative function of language. As we will see in Chapter 4 such a ‘performative’ approach does not neglect the role of the constative and acknowledges that doing things with words may also include stating things about the world is possible.

4 Robinson’s performative linguistics or as he also refers to it, approach to ‘language-as-drama’, is based on the following four principles:

- **people doing things with words** (it is the people that matter, the people and what they do, how they interact, how they create drama)
- **the performative power of words to transform human realities** (it is the act of people creating meaning with words that gives shape to our beliefs and values, social and cultural structures)
- **emergent collaboration** (it is the collaborative work of people in groups that gives words their power to shape reality, in both regulatory and transformative ways: both imposing order and overstepping the order already in place)
- **the importance of the body** (we perform our lives in our bodies, and our bodies both shape and store how we perform and how we feel about how we and others perform) (2006: 8).
Having shown how speech-act theory and the literary performative may be re-politicised by introducing Robinson’s ‘performative’ linguistics which provides a notion of intention in language grounded in the social, in the next section we will move the argument to the realm of song lyrics. In doing so, we will bring in Robinson’s ‘performative’ concept of metalocutionary implicature (2003). Metalocutionary implicature will be a key concept for exploring how political agency is played out in record-texts because, as we will see, not only does it allow a notion of intention necessary for agency, it is also an illuminating way to characterise social relations.

**Speech-act theory and the analysis of song lyrics**

So far the usefulness of the performative as an analytical tool has been discussed in relation to literary genres such as poetry, short stories and novels. In this third section of the chapter, speech-act theory will be considered in relation to the analysis of popular song lyrics. The aim will be to demonstrate how the active view of language offered by the concept of the performative is as appropriate to the analysis of song lyrics as it is to literary criticism. Indeed, like literary language, song lyrics do not merely state but do things. They, too, create the state of affairs to which they refer and bring into being characters, ideas and concepts. However, this section will also go beyond the use of the performative in literary criticism in that, as mentioned above, it will introduce Robinson’s (2003) ‘performative’ concept of metalocutionary implicature which will be key for exploring political agency as it introduces a form of intention that is grounded in social relations.

The fact that speech-act theory can also be usefully applied to popular song lyrics and not only to ‘elite’ literary genres such as poetry, was demonstrated by
Elisabeth D. Kuhn. In an article entitled 'I just want to make love to you' – Seductive strategies in blues lyrics’ (1999), Kuhn uses speech-act theory to analyse seductive strategies in blues lyrics. Using more precisely Searle’s classification of illocutionary acts (1976), Kuhn’s aim is to show that blues lyrics work like ordinary language – which is one of the reasons why they feel ‘real’.

The songs in the study center around the high-cost request for making love, and it will be argued that the requests in the songs are composed of the same elements as high-cost requests in real life. While in most songs, there is a core speech act, which may vary in directness, songwriters add the same kind of supporting strategies that are used in similarly high-cost real-life requests: the core request can contain internal modifiers (i.e. hedges), and it is generally embedded in a variety of external modifying moves, which may include flattery, downplayers, promises, and reasons (525).

Kuhn’s analysis is very important as it shows that song lyrics do indeed work like ordinary language, a point also made by Simon Frith (1988), and that speech-act theory and especially its concept of the performative are relevant to the study of song lyrics.

However, from what has been discussed in the previous section about the different approaches to the speech-act analysis of literary texts, it can be argued that Kuhn’s analysis of song lyrics is structure-oriented only as it is concerned with the speech acts performed within the text. That is to say, like Nischik’s analysis of Atwood’s ‘Polarities’ (2003), which was cited as an example of such structure-oriented approach to speech-act analysis in the previous section, Kuhn’s study of blues lyrics relies on classifications of illocutionary acts with relatively little reference to socio-cultural context. One specific concept developed by Robinson (2003) will be particularly helpful in bringing back such context, that of ‘metalocutionary implicature’. Robinson’s metalocutionary implicature is based on a framing of Paul Grice’s (1989) concept of ‘conversational implicature’ (which is concerned with how
speakers can convey intended meanings that they do not make explicit) in Austin’s (1976) locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. Robinson distinguishes between, on the one hand, the three levels of implicature he adapts from Grice: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary implicature (i.e. three levels of implicitly doing or acting on others). On the other hand, he characterises a form of performative reflexivity (i.e. acting on oneself, one’s self-awareness) which involves creating new forms of implied meaning (Robinson; 2003: 144-45 & 150-51).

It is this latter form of performative reflexivity Robinson refers to as metalocutionary implicature. As he puts it,

I am calling this performative reflexivity metalocutionary implicature, the strategic step past the tactics of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary implicature. Where those three work within existing game-rules, by whatever ‘maxims’ each individual interpretive community has programmed its members with, metalocutionary implicature would be an explorative (interpretive or intentional) act that precipitates a metaunderstanding of the game you’re already engaged in playing according to rules you don’t even know you know, the act of coming to view the playing of the game from without, temporarily or partially lifting yourself outside of your own tactical situatedness and thus working toward strategic self-discovery (2003: 151-2).

Robinson argues that metalocutionary implicature or, as he also refers to it, a ‘political iteration of Derrida’s concept of iterability’ – iterability, according to him, is a general philosophical category, rather than a methodological tool for analysing specific ‘misperformings’ – suggests that speech also involves reshaping the game rules:

This political iteration of Derrida’s concept of iterability suggests that all conversation involves not merely tactical manoeuvres within shared game rules, but also strategic manoeuvres designed to reshape the game rules, to play the game by new rules. These new rules may be developed, advanced, and imposed (partially, tentatively, more or less successfully) on other speakers by a single speaker in rebellion against her or his collective conditioning, or by a group of speakers in search of a new (or constantly

Robinson's concept of metalocutionary implicature will be useful for exploring black women's politics of representation. Metalocutionary implicature will be a key concept for showing how political agency is played out in record-texts. We can expect to find in African American women RnB record-texts elements that show a realisation and understanding of the racist and sexist discourse underlying dominant images of them, and so a move towards attempting to take control over their own identity through an attempt to reshape the game rules more or less successfully, that is, within the overall limits of the prevailing social structure. An example of this in RnB songs would be the strategic reflexive performance of sexuality. Kelis' reflexive performance of sexuality in 'Milkshake', which references the environment of the school or neighbourhood playground, is ambivalent and ironic in that it suggests an understanding of the racist and sexist nature of the image of black women as sexual and an attempt to subvert it.

Another useful 'performative' concept, also referred to by Robinson, is Charles Altieri's 'expressive implicature'. Robinson explains that what Altieri calls expressive implicature is 'a way of implicitly drawing attention to how something is said and how style expresses the speaker's feelings or personality' (in Robinson, 2006: 164). This concept, Robinson argues, should be especially relevant for the study of literary texts as these involve expressive values. 'Expressive implicature is especially useful when you're performing a number of divergent speech acts in the same utterance, and want to draw your listener's or reader's attention to the complexity of the communicative event' (165). Different dramatic devices or cues can be used to draw attention to complex utterances (or convey expressive implicature). In conversation,
this can be achieved through body language and tone of voice. ‘Cue violins’ and drum rolls have a similar function in movies and television (165). Indeed, Altieri’s expressive implicature has similarities with Phil Tagg’s ‘episodic marker’ as we will see shortly.

The aim of this third section was to show how speech-act theory might be usefully applied to songs. It showed how the creative and active view of language offered by the concept of the performative is as appropriate to the analysis of song lyrics as it is to that of literary genres. This section also went beyond the use of the performative in literary criticism in that it introduced a form of intention that is grounded in social relations by drawing on Robinson’s (2003) ‘performative’ concept of metalocutionary implicature which will be key for exploring the political agency at stake in black female RnB record-texts. Indeed, the importance of Robinson’s approach (his application of Grice’s model of implicature) is that it both allows a notion of intention necessary for agency and provides an illuminating way to characterise social relations. However, since the speech-act analysis of song lyrics in this thesis will be based on record-texts, that is, on recorded performances rather than on the lyrics as texts, one important issue still needs to be addressed: that of musical expression. The next and last section of this chapter will consider the relation between the performative aspect of song lyrics and musical expression.

Speech-act theory and music - The performance of sound

Most work on or using speech-act theory tends to neglect the nonverbal or extra-linguistic dimension of speech. The aim of this fourth and final section will be to demonstrate the usefulness of thinking about words and music together in a speech-act analysis of record-texts. Erykah Badu’s song ‘Danger’ will then be used as a case study
to show the usefulness of speech-act theory for both the linguistic and the musical dimensions of recorded songs.

Although Austin himself argued that performative or illocutionary acts may be realised in different ways than by uttering words, the para-linguistic and nonverbal aspects of linguistic communication has often been neglected in studies based on speech act theory (which could have something to do with the fact that the theory was more often used to analysis written texts). Austin (1976) explained that performatives may be achieved verbally, by the use of speech devices other than the explicit performative verb, that is, other than performative formulas such as ‘I promise you…’, ‘I warn you…’. Such devices include: the mood, the tone of voice, cadence and emphasis, adverbs and adverbial phrases, connecting particles, accompaniments of the utterance, and the circumstances of the utterance (73-76). He also argued that performatives might also be achieved non-verbally: ‘In very many cases it is possible to perform an act of exactly the same kind not by uttering words, whether written or spoken, but in some other way’ (8). This act should be conventional: ‘Strictly speaking, there cannot be an illocutionary act unless the means employed are conventional, and so the means for achieving it non-verbally must be conventional’ (119). An attempt to further rectify the logocentric tendency of speech act theory can be found in the work of Alain Eraly (2000) concerned with a social theory of communication. Eraly uses an adaptation of speech-act theory which includes a fourth act that incorporates both the materiality and the subjectivity of everyday verbal interaction. He calls this fourth act ‘expressive act’ or ‘affective expression’ (50-7).

Similarly, the speech-act analysis of popular songs recordings in this thesis will also take into account the extra-linguistic and musical dimensions to establish what is being performed. As Frith (1988) argued ‘no musical events, no way of singing, no
rhythm comes *naturally* (4); singers use the same non-verbal devices as speakers ‘to make their points – emphases, sighs, hesitations, changes of tone’ (120). It is because singers follow the same rules of ‘*social* expressivity’ as speakers that we are able to tell that the way they sing certain lyrics indicates a certain affective state such as ‘sadness’ or ‘anger’ and so a certain illocutionary force.

Using a method informed by the semiotics of voice and sound, the aim will then be to explore the relation between lyrics and musical expression to see how words and sounds work together (or against each other) in a ‘performative’ way. It is essential to take into account the voice and musical signification in a speech-act analysis of song lyrics as these contribute to the creation of the specific context or setting of the songs, which will make clearer the illocutionary force of the performatives or, in other words, how they are meant to be taken. As Frith (1988) argued, ‘[i]t is not just what they sing, but the way they sing it, that determines what singers mean to us and how we are placed, as an audience, in relationship to them’ (120-21).

Dimensions of voice and musical signification that might be useful to analysis in relation to the lyrics include: the tempo and rhythm; timbre (rough/smooth), texture (thick/fine) and grain; the phrasing (rhythmic organisation of vocals, e.g. nursery rhyme style) and accentuation (onbeat, offbeat, syllabic, melismatic); the pitch (high/low), the dynamics (loud (foreground)/soft (background), constant/variable); the use of different voices (antiphony, double-tracking) to create different subject positions; units of repetition (verse-chorus structure); the diegetic sphere or para-musical sounds (e.g. sirens, bells, gun shots, background shatter, etc); and what Phil Tagg (1999) calls ‘genre synecdoches’ and ‘style indicators’. The former meaning ‘reference to ‘foreign’ musical style, thence to complete cultural context of that style’ and the latter ‘unvaried aspects of musical structuration for the style in question’ (23).
At this stage, an example might better illustrate the usefulness of speech-act theory for both the linguistic and the musical dimension of record-texts. The song that will be used as a case study is Erykah Badu’s ‘Danger’, from her album *Worldwide Underground*, released in 2003. The song, it will be argued, performs or brings off a black urban story world as it is experienced by a young black woman in her roles of lover and mother.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcript of the lyrics</th>
<th>Nonverbal and musical expression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intro</strong></td>
<td>- Slow tempo: 90 bpm (a slow tempo is a indicator of RnB).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(sirens)</td>
<td>- Voice is rough and thick. But in the intro it is foregrounded/ personal and in the chorus it is incorporated in the mix.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother’s got this complex occupation</td>
<td>- Voice sounds cool and detached, almost cynical in the intro. The grain can be perceived.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>{Hello?}</td>
<td>- Voice is nasal and tense throughout song. Screaming at the end.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[This is a collect call from the correctional facility from:</td>
<td>- Pitch is low and constant throughout song, except in scatting section at the end.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Its me baby]</td>
<td>- Use of different voices/subject positions: one voice in intro, another one in verses, and communal chorus which is double-tracked in unison to create resonance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[To accept this call say yes after the tone]</td>
<td>- Chorus is emphasised through repetition (ABBABBBBBB)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother’s got this complex occupation</td>
<td>- Use of genre synecdoche. Funk influenced (very strong multi-metric articulation). Scatting section at the end may also be referencing Jazz.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>{Yes}</td>
<td>- Use of para-musical sounds: phone operator, talking, police sirens, gun shots.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[You may not use two way or three way calling or this call will be disconnected]</td>
<td>- Voice is nasal and tense throughout song. Screaming at the end.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother’s got this complex occupation</td>
<td>- Pitch is low and constant throughout song, except in scatting section at the end.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[You are connected]</td>
<td>- Use of different voices/subject positions: one voice in intro, another one in verses, and communal chorus which is double-tracked in unison to create resonance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Verse 1</strong></td>
<td>- Chorus is emphasised through repetition (ABBABBBBBB)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me and this baby</td>
<td>- Use of genre synecdoche. Funk influenced (very strong multi-metric articulation). Scatting section at the end may also be referencing Jazz.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gon’ be up all night long</td>
<td>- Use of para-musical sounds: phone operator, talking, police sirens, gun shots.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walkin this wood flo’</td>
<td>- Voice sounds cool and detached, almost cynical in the intro. The grain can be perceived.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Till my man gets home</td>
<td>- Voice is nasal and tense throughout song. Screaming at the end.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m at the front do’</td>
<td>- Pitch is low and constant throughout song, except in scatting section at the end.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m listening by the phone</td>
<td>- Use of different voices/subject positions: one voice in intro, another one in verses, and communal chorus which is double-tracked in unison to create resonance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But I’m gon’ be here</td>
<td>- Chorus is emphasised through repetition (ABBABBBBBB)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With my make-up on</td>
<td>- Use of genre synecdoche. Funk influenced (very strong multi-metric articulation). Scatting section at the end may also be referencing Jazz.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s been a long time</td>
<td>- Use of para-musical sounds: phone operator, talking, police sirens, gun shots.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Since my man been gone</td>
<td>- Chorus is emphasised through repetition (ABBABBBBBB)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But when he get here</td>
<td>- Use of genre synecdoche. Funk influenced (very strong multi-metric articulation). Scatting section at the end may also be referencing Jazz.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You know I won’t be gone</td>
<td>- Use of para-musical sounds: phone operator, talking, police sirens, gun shots.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because I love him</td>
<td>- Chorus is emphasised through repetition (ABBABBBBBB)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love him strong (N’Dambi)</td>
<td>- Use of genre synecdoche. Funk influenced (very strong multi-metric articulation). Scatting section at the end may also be referencing Jazz.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me and this baby</td>
<td>- Use of para-musical sounds: phone operator, talking, police sirens, gun shots.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gon’ be up all night long</td>
<td>- Chorus is emphasised through repetition (ABBABBBBBB)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chorus (2x)</strong></td>
<td>- Use of genre synecdoche. Funk influenced (very strong multi-metric articulation). Scatting section at the end may also be referencing Jazz.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Use of para-musical sounds: phone operator, talking, police sirens, gun shots.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Because they got the block on lock
The trunk stay locked
Glock on cock
The block stay hot
Block on lock
The trunk stay locked
Glock on cock
The block stay hot

[Talking]
What she say?
I said,
Block on lock
The trunk stay locked
Glock on cock
The block stay hot

Verse 2
Got a box of money
That I keep under my bed
But we don’t spend it though
Might need it for more Yeyo
We need this money
Just in case we need to
Make a run
Gotta keep the clip in mama’s gun
Or run...

We like to keep the car runnin’
We try to keep the bitch humin’
In case the sweeper boyz are comin’
Runnin’ runnin’
We like to keep the car runnin’
We try to keep the bitch humin’
In case the sweeper boyz are comin’
Runnin’ runnin’

(Chorus 2x)

Verse 3
Well there ain’t no mistaken
That the money you’re makin
Leaves you nervous and shakin
Cause at night you’re awake and
Thinkin bout lives that you’ve taken
All the love you’ve forsaken
In yo zone
Niggas gon’ get they fuckin head blown

DANGER
You’re in DANGER
No hard feelings right or wrong
Weak or strong, I don’t make the laws
In yo zone niggas gon’ get they fuckin
Head blown
Drawing on the discussion so far the following speech-act analysis will briefly demonstrate how in ‘Danger’ the lyrics and sound work together in a performative way to bring off a complex and multi-layered black urban universe from the point of view of a young black woman and how such performance involves metalocutionary implicature (or performative reflexivity).

The song begins with, on the one hand, two para-musical elements: a police siren and a request for a collect call from a prison and, on the other hand, the speech act ‘Brotha’s got this complex occupation’, repeated three times in a foregrounded and personal voice and with a cool almost cynical tone. Implied meaning (the listener is expected to understand what that ‘complex occupation’, implied by the two para-musical elements, might be), the cool and detached tone and the foregrounded/intimate positioning of the voice all suggest that the intention is to establish a relation of complicity with the listener. In other words, the voice in the intro performs by inviting the implied audience to identify with the performer and enter her story world: a black
urban environment. The speech acts performed in the rest of the song and other para-
musical sounds such as gunshots continue to work together to develop this black urban
universe. However, in the rest of the song, the voice does not stand out as much as in
the intro, which suggests we have entered a more or less public zone. Indeed, the song
contains different voices or subject positions. While the voice of the intro performed by
inviting the implied audience to enter the song's story world, the voices in the rest of
the song suggest an implied contradictory dialogue as we will now see.

The speech acts performed in Verse 1 bring off the character of an urban black
woman. This character that is being performed through the use of an assertive public
voice is more specifically that of a proud young urban woman and mother involved in a
relationship with her imprisoned partner. She is optimistic about the future and
prepared to beat the odds. This confident character is thrown into contrast by the
chorus, which enacts an everyday scene of oppression in a black urban area, that is, the
controlling presence of the police. The Chorus is emphasised through repetition and it
is double-tracked which gives it resonance, emphasising a communal experience. In
other words, the voice in the verses and the communal voice of the Chorus are engaged
in a contradictory dialogue that contrasts assertiveness and repression. The same
contrast between assertiveness and repression is also found performed in the quality of
the singing voice. Generally, the voice is low-pitched, which suggests assertiveness,
and the pitch is in a relatively narrow range throughout the song. It is also relatively
rough and thick, both of which also suggest assertiveness. But at the same time, the
voice sounds nasal and tense which, according to Van Leeuwen (1999: 136), are both
associated with repression. Repression is also implied in the moaning and screaming in
the song.
Actually the song could even be said to contain a third voice or perspective. One that seems to go beyond this tension between assertiveness and repression, beyond the contradictory dialogue performed between the confident female character brought off in the verses and the communal voice of repression in the Chorus. Indeed, the end of Verse 3, in which the female character addressees her partner to warn him that he is in danger, seems to comment on the Chorus, that is, on the issue of black people’s oppression. This implication is especially suggested by the strong statement ‘In yo zone niggas gon’ get they fucking head blown’, followed by a gunshot. ‘Danger’, then, demonstrates a realisation of the situation of black urban communities in white patriarchal America through the acts of naming and commenting. It denounces the oppression of black people and in doing so it validates the lives of working-class urban black women and communities. The song is an example of a politicised performance of black female identity, an example of how metalocutionary implicature might emerge in the record-texts of contemporary African-American female artists.

In her study of black women in music videos, Emerson (2002), already referred to in Chapter 1, argues that the majority of videos constructed a black context or universe through the use of signifiers of blackness - often through the evocation of an urban hip-hop-style - and that this was a way of validating and celebrating black culture and the black experience. This example shows that the same effect can be achieved with song lyrics and musical and para-musical sounds - words and sounds do things, the same way images do. The aim of this case study was to show the usefulness of speech-act theory for both the linguistic and the musical dimension of record-texts by drawing in what has been discussed so far. In the coming chapters a more elaborate method of speech-act analysis framed by the notion of a socio-linguistic continuum of performative strategies will be presented.
The aim of the second chapter as a whole was to demonstrate the relevance and usefulness of speech-act theory for exploring the complexities surrounding black women's politics of representation - as discussed in the first chapter. Speech-act theory's action-orientated approach to language is significant for this study as it implies a politicised use of language in that it highlights how language involves agency. The productive potential offered by the performative makes it an especially useful concept for exploring how the struggle over politics and identity is played out in popular songs.

Drawing on Butler and to a larger extent Moi we contextualised conventional speech-act theory, framing it within a historically situated and social understanding of the notion of the 'performativity' of everyday life. Indeed it is such a contextualised approach to speech-act theory that will be used in this thesis which aims at exploring how political agency emerges in and through the concrete constraints of a racist and patriarchal social system. Then focusing back on a more language based approach to speech-act theory, we saw first how Austin's founding work on the performative was appropriated by literary theory and criticism, and secondly how the work of 'performative' linguist Robinson, who goes back to Austin, can be used to repoliticise speech-act theory. His concept of metalocutionary implicature was introduced as key in exploring how political agency is played out in black women RnB record-texts because of the way it restores a notion of intention and creativity in language use that is nevertheless grounded in social relations.

This chapter also critically discussed the common and categorical distinction between structure-oriented (or 'constative') and action-oriented (or 'performative') analytical approaches, arguing for a 'performative' approach that also entails considering the constative (about the world) aspects that are necessarily always intertwined with the performative function of language. Having demonstrated the
usefulness of speech-act theory, the discussion will now return to the issue of the politics of black performance as well as move more specifically to the field of black music. Taking a historical perspective, the next chapter will show how the themes and issues surrounding back female performance brought up in Chapter 1 are a result of black history.
Chapter 3: Black Music and Black History - the Conditions of Black Performance

Chapter 1 explored the politics of black women's performance. It showed how the contradictory nature of black women's performance is the result of the inherent tension between on the one hand their struggle for self-definition and empowerment and on the other the social constraints of race, gender, and class. In other words, the ambiguities in African American women's cultural productions reflect both the possibilities and the limits of the agency they possess in taking control over the issue of cultural identity in an unequal society. Chapter 2 demonstrated the usefulness of speech-act theory's action-oriented approach for exploring how this political agency is played out in RnB by showing what African American women are doing in and through their songs. Indeed later in this dissertation we will see how speech-act theory and the notion of a continuum of types of speech act in songs can illuminate the way this dilemma between possibility of action and constraints is played out in black performance. But before doing that, it will be useful to take a historical approach to these conditions of black performance in order to show how this dilemma between the possibility and limits of cultural-political agency is the result of black history.

To do so, drawing on the literature, the chapter will consider some key aspects in the evolution of black music after World War Two as these relate to historical events. More specifically the chapter will discuss the changes in black music during the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement as these highlight the dilemma between integrationist and nationalist tendencies that define the history of black
Black reaction to white America after WWII

The aim of this first section of the chapter is to highlight the necessary dilemma that defines black people’s reaction to white America. It will discuss how it is black people’s experience of racism in the U.S. that limits, as well as, paradoxically, makes possible their struggle for liberation and that, by implication, similarly shapes black performance. In other words, the forms black resistance and black performance take will be shaped by black people’s concrete experience of racist social relations. To highlight this dilemma this section will discuss race relations, black politics, and black music in America after WWII as a key historical moment.

Post-WWII black America was characterised by, on the one hand, its growing social and economic power and, on the other, the subsistence of segregation under Jim Crow and the rise of inner city poverty, a situation which led to a democratic upsurge among the black community in the 1950s (Marable; 1984: 15-16). As Marable puts it: ‘The growing social and economic power of the black working and middle classes seemed to many to provide the basis for an entirely new political relationship between blacks and whites’ (1984: 17). The post-war black freedom movement was in
fact shaped by the resurgence of the debate in black politics between self-sufficiency and assimilation, two contrasting approaches advocated by the dominant black thinkers of the early twentieth century, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B Dubois, respectively. While Washington’ s ‘separate but equal’ doctrine promoted black self-reliance and economic independence, DuBois’s assimilationism focused on politics and education. It was the assimilationist philosophy that prevailed in post-war black America (Marable; 1999: 42-58, McCartney; 1992: 60-66, Verney; 2000: 6-8).

In the early 1950s the black freedom movement’s demand for civil rights and racial justice was essentially reformist and characterised by its optimism and idealism. Black activism was driven by the ideal of cultural integration with whites. Leading the struggle for civil rights was the secular-spiritual coalition formed by the NAACP (the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People) and Reverent Martin Luther King, Jr. The first major victory of the Civil Rights Movement was the Brown Decision in May 1956, which ruled the desegregation of public schools. However, despite the Supreme Court ruling (later reinforced by the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960) and the many regional struggles (most notably, the Montgomery bus boycott of 1956 led by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.) desegregation was slowed down by violent Southern white opposition and determination to maintain the colour line (Marable; 1984: 43-45). As Verney (2000) explains, ‘in practice widespread school segregation enforced by state and local authorities continued in the South until the late 1960s and early 1970s’ (46). Towards the end of the decade, the integrationist dream began to wane and the mood became more militant. In the 1950s the main alternative to the NAACP-style middle-class integrationism was Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam who advocated black self-sufficiency and militant nationalism and whose growing
popularity among working-class blacks was perceived as a threat by white liberals and black integrationists (Marable; 1984: 61).

In the area of black music, the 1950s were marked by, on the one hand, the popularisation of rhythm and blues and the recognition of the black market by the music industry and, on the other, the beginning of crossover with rock ‘n’ roll, a marketing concept that, as Nelson George explains, tried ‘to disguise the blackness of [rhythm and blues]’ to make it more acceptable for a white teen audience (1988: 67).

In rhythm ‘n’ blues, like in the political sphere, there was a mix of secular and spiritual as gospel elements were incorporated, most notably by Ray Charles who created what will later be known as soul. As the popularity of this new gospel influenced rhythm ‘n’ blues was growing, black artists like Chuck Berry and Little Richard began to crossover to the pop market with rock ‘n’ roll (George; 1988: 67-70, Garofalo; 1992: 232-3).

Rhythm ‘n’ blues and crossover black music or rock ‘n’ roll were in many ways shaped by the racialised social relations in 1950s America and reflected the political context of the early Civil Rights Movement. To show how this may be the case, it will be useful to consider how blackness was performed in these two styles of black music by drawing a comparison between Ray Charles and Little Richard.

From the point of view of lyrical content, neither Ray Charles nor Little Richard were openly political in their songs and this is not surprising considering the deeply and openly racist context in which these songs were performed. In 1950s white America black people were still denied basic political rights and were often the victims of random acts of violence (Marable: 1984; Cook: 1998). While Charles’s songs dealt with adult passion (‘Hallelujah, I Love Her So’, ‘I Gotta Woman’), Richard’s were about the post-war teen experience (‘Tutti Frutti’, ‘Long Tall Sally’). As Garofalo
(1992) points out during the early years of the Civil Rights Movement changes in performance preceded changes in lyrical content:

If the movement itself avoided confronting pressing issues at the time, it should come as no surprise that civil rights themes were nowhere to be found in the lyric content of popular music. In this period, the movement exerted its influence on music in other ways (233).

In other words, while these songs may not have dealt with civil-rights issues in their lyrical content, the way they were performed highlights deeper implications. Indeed performance is key in understanding black music. Ray Charles’s strong reference to gospel and so the black tradition suggests that what he was actually celebrating through his love songs was blackness. On the other hand, it can be argued that Little Richard’s powerful and somewhat ‘campy’ performance style had the effect of subverting the trivial content of his lyrics (for example, ‘Tutti Frutti’ from 1955). Implicit in Little Richard’s exuberant music was then a rather pessimistic outlook on the world. More than a pragmatic compromise to achieve mainstream acceptance, Richard’s somewhat subversive performance strategy affirmed the virtual impossibility for a black person to speak openly and straightforwardly in the racist context of 1950s white America. In relation to this crossover (integrationist) strategy in black performance, rhythm ‘n’ blues emerged as a more ‘authentic’ and affirmative (more militant) alternative in 1950s America. Ray Charles’s celebration of blackness was however as contradictory as Richard’s. The excessive strength with which Charles celebrated blackness in his songs (partly as a result of the use of gospel elements) suggests that, beyond Charles’s celebratory black performance, what was ultimately implied was a critique of racism (for example, ‘Allelujah, I Love Her So’ from 1955).
Both types of performance were then contradictory, reflecting the limits of what performers can do in and through their songs. Racist social relations shape what can be done (socially) and what can be performed (musically), both in terms of possibility and limitation. Black resistance and black performance are then defined by an inherent dilemma as a result of racialised social relations. If this was the situation in the 1950s during a period of retrenched racism it is then important to carry on with the historical approach and see how this dilemma was played out in post-1950s black performance. In the next section we will consider black performance during the height of the integrationist phase of the Civil Rights Movement.

Black performance at the height of integrationism – negotiating crossing over

The rise of a more militant mood that started towards the end of the 1950s, as a result of white opposition to desegregation and violence against blacks, led to a non-violent uprising in the early 1960s. A significant incident was the student revolt of February 1960 in North Carolina which was aimed at desegregating lunch counters and which started a series of ‘sit-ins’ and non-violent direct action protests throughout the country and which led to the creation of the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) (Marable; 1984: 66-68). Carson (1982) explains that ‘SNCC’s founding was an important step in the transformation of a limited student movement to desegregate lunch counters into a broad and sustained movement to achieve major social reforms’ (19). However the initial idealism of the non-violent uprising faded away rapidly. The SNCC and CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) began to reveal
sympathies towards a Malcolm X-type militancy and nationalism. ‘The idealism of the early years had worn away quickly’ (Marable; 1984: 75).

Marable (1984) explains that 1963 was the dramatic highpoint of the desegregation movement with two major actions taking place that year: the desegregation campaign in Birmingham, Alabama (the citadel of white supremacy); and the March on Washington, DC, during which King gave his ‘I Have A Dream’ speech and which was used to promote the Kennedy civil rights bill pending before Congress (75-76). However, the non-violent celebration did not lead the Congress to adopting the civil rights proposals (82). The dilemma became more apparent post-march as black leaders started to question what would happen after equality with whites was achieved legally and whether integration and non-violence were the most effective strategies.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed Jim Crow in public accommodations, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, were eventually adopted under President Johnson. However, racist violence against blacks continued and, as Manning Marable explains, ‘[i]f anything, the adoption of the 1964 Civil Rights Act increased the institutional, political and vigilante violence against blacks across the South’ (90). The limitations of reform were finally recognised. ‘It was only then that some black activists recognised, at last, the limitations of reform. America’s political economy was still profoundly racist, and Johnson’s legislation had erased only the crudest manifestations of racial suppression’ (91).

While non-violent uprisings were taking place across America, a new phenomenon in popular music appeared in the early 1960s: the rise of the ‘girl group’.

Black female vocal groups such as the Shirelles (“Will You Love Me Tomorrow”), the Crystals (“He’s a Rebel”), the Chiffons (“He’s So Fine”) and the Ronnettes (“Be My Baby”) provided a polar opposite
to the white males in the pop market. Corresponding to the increase in
the civil rights activism, there were more black women...on the pop
charts in the early sixties than at any point in history (Garofalo; 1992:
234).

If, as Reebee Garofalo suggests, the rise of the ‘girl group’ phenomenon in the early
1960s was made possible as a result of the Civil Rights Movement then as a cultural
phenomenon it was just as contradictory as that political campaign. Being the result of
an integrated music market, ‘girl group’ songs were mainstream and conventional in
terms of their lyrical content. However, here again, looking at the way these songs were
performed, reveals that they were actually ambiguous. In her linguistic analysis of early
1960s ‘girl group’ songs, Barbara Bradby (1988) argues that, unlike with male group
singing, in girl groups the subject is divided against itself. She shows how these ‘girl-
group’ songs constituted a gendered, feminine space in and through their linguistic
organisation; how the fluidity of the subject in these songs articulated a female culture.
Through her analysis Bradby challenges Frith and McRobbie’s (1990) version of rock
history which presents men’s music as being in conflict with the dominant cultural
forms, as bringing innovations and women’s music as tending to reproduce mainstream
cultural forms. In the sense that it will map out political agency in black female RnB
songs, this thesis is also in conflict with Frith and McRobbie’s version of rock history.

As we will explore more deeply in the coming chapters, from a
performative-implicative perspective, a division of the subject indicates that some kind
of strategy is being acted out. If we consider the way these songs were performed
beyond the immediate pop lyrical content, we see that ‘girl group’ songs involved a
certain degree of contradiction. This then contradicts Brian Ward’s (1998) argument
that the ‘girl group’ phenomenon of, what he optimistically calls, ‘the biracial pop era’,
was not actually restricted to groups, or girls, or either race...Records by black soloists...by white soloists...by white groups...by black groups...and even by certain mixed-sex groups...shared similar production values, musical arrangements and lyrical themes. They all concentrated on the traumas and delights of young love, the vagaries of fashion, and the latest dance crazes. Girl groups, whatever their exact composition, provided flexible singing vehicles for the carefully crafted songs of the producers and songwriters at the heart of the new pop (156-7).

‘Girl groups’ were not merely ‘flexible singing vehicles’ of manufactured pop songs that existed beyond the constraints of race and gender. Black female performance in early 1960s ‘girl groups’ exemplified the paradox between the idealistic hope that integration would lead to a racially equal society, and the reality of the constraints of race and gender. In fact it is the very fact that these black female singers performed songs whose lyrical content dealt with non-threatening (‘biracial’) mainstream themes and concerns at a time when lynching and other random acts of violence against blacks were common place across America that paradoxically points to the reality of the constraint of racism – ‘girl group’ singers cannot speak openly both as black and as women.

As it started to become evident that the effects of the legislative victories of the Civil Rights Movement were limited without some form of black control, the notion of self-sufficiency advocated by Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam became more and more popular. In music, as crossing over became unavoidable, another important issue was therefore one of control – both artistic and economic. Sam Cooke (‘A change Is Gonna Come’, 1964), for example, managed to crossover with artistic integrity and economic control. As well as taking control of his own successful musical career (his second contract with RCA in 1963 gave him complete economic and artistic control), Sam Cooke was also a brilliant entrepreneur and a prolific songwriter (George; 1988: 80-81,
Guralnick; 2002: 39-42). Nelson George (1988) explains that as '[t]he ties between the music known as rock & roll and its original black audience were being severed' (92), 'black record buyers and black musicians were moving in another direction, one that would dominate their musical, cultural, and, to some degree, even their political style for the most of the 1960s' (93). RnB became soul music.

Closely associated with the Civil Rights Movement, the development of soul music meant that black artists could maintain some degree of artistic and economic control. In this regard, Portia K. Maultsby (1983) argues that:

Prior to the evolution of soul music, black performers of urban popular styles of black music had either been excluded from or assimilated into the American popular music tradition. The music industry, mass media and the adult segment of white America refused to accept black music played by black musicians according to black definitions (53).

While black music prior to the development of soul music may have been either excluded from or assimilated into the mainstream as a result of the constraint of racism, it was paradoxically this very condition that made it possible. It is this very dilemma between constraint and possibility that is highlighted in black performance's historically contradictory nature. While in the context of openly racist 1950s America crossover black artists could not speak openly and straightforwardly, in the early 1960s at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, black soul artists gained more artistic and economic control, which meant they could speak out more overtly than before.

Chicago soul, pioneered by Curtis Mayfield, was, according to Nelson George (1988), one of the best examples of the 'continu[ation] of Cooke's act of balancing art and business, crossover music and soul' (82). Reflecting the non-violent and cautious restraint of civil-rights activity in the early 1960s, Chicago soul, the 'sound of the early sixties', was 'a unique blend of social consciousness, emotional restraint,
and giddy playfulness’ (82). ‘Like a true non-violent civil-rights activist’, Curtis Mayfield, who preached commitment to social change (‘People Get Ready’, 1965), ‘looked for the best in antagonists as well as friends, gently prodding for change and rarely pointing an accusing finger in anger’ (85).

The first section of this chapter, concerned with the first wave of crossover black artists in the mid-1950s, explored how integration with no control or power makes it virtually impossible to speak openly, which is why the issue of performance is so crucial in understanding the implications at stake in the songs – Little Richard’s exuberant and ‘campy’ performance style had a subversive effect on the (integrated) lyrical content of his songs. The importance of performance in understanding black music was also highlighted in this second section of the chapter with the case of the early 1960s ‘girl group’ and the added constraint of gender. Through the example of Curtis Mayfield and Chicago Soul the section then dealt with how, at the height of the integrationist phase in the early 1960s, black artists – that is, black male artists - were already more able to incorporate pro-civil rights themes in the lyrical content of their songs, though still somewhat obliquely, as a result of crossing over while maintaining artistic and economic control.

Undoubtedly this shift needs to be linked to the advances made by the Civil Rights Movement. By the early 1960s the movement was in some senses growing stronger as legal reforms combined with the growing popularity of more nationalist concepts such as black self-sufficiency made it possible to integrate while retaining a certain level of control. In this situation, racism was paradoxically at once the condition of possibility as well as a major constraint over crossover black music styles such as black rock ‘n’ roll, the early 1960s ‘girl groups’ and Chicago soul. Racism, albeit within
the context of advancing civil rights, shaped what these black performers could do in
and through their songs.

Brian Ward (1988) argues that early soul artists did little to support the Civil
Rights Movement and that 1960s white rock artists ‘made political commentary
commonplace in commercially successful rock music at a time when soul was still
struggling to overcome its caution about recording such material’ (352). While Ward
does acknowledge that black artists’ vulnerable position in an openly racist society and
music industry meant that they could not afford to be as openly political as white rock
artists, his argument is nevertheless problematic. As Robin Kelly (2000) argues in his
response to Ward:

he [Ward] defines the Movement, politics, and participation in such
narrow, empirical terms that he misses crucial insights that might
further illuminate the relationship between culture, politics, and what
he is calling “black consciousness.” He sets out to debunk the myth
that R&B and Soul artists had much to do with the black freedom
movement (539).

Ward’s idea of what constitutes political commentary is quite narrow as it is essentially
based on a straightforward reading of the lyrical content of songs alone with little
consideration for their performative aspect, which as this thesis argues is key in
understanding black music.

This second section of the chapter has explored how the social and political climate of
the early 1960s shaped black performance, both in terms of constraints and in terms of
conditions of possibility. It considered the way in which the crossing over of black
music raises the issue of control, both artistic and economic – the same way integration
raises the issue of black power and self-determination. The issue of performance
emerged as key in understanding black music. More precisely, the meaning of black
music lies in the nature of the relationship between what is being performed (lyrics) and the way it is being performed (performance). And the issue of control or power, and indeed to a larger extent racialised social relations and history, is crucial in understanding this dynamics. Through the historical example of the early integrationist phase of the Civil Rights Movement, both chapter sections have considered how black performance may be played out in the context of an ‘integrated’/white America. In a first phase, crossing over with no power meant that black performance had to be subversive, and then, in a second phase, crossing over balanced with some level of black control meant a possibility to speak out obliquely. The next section will explore how this dilemma between constraint and possibility is played out in black performance during a third phase when black power takes over.

**Black performance and black nationalism – taking control**

The non-violent uprising of the early 1960s developed into a period of black militancy and rebellion that lasted from 1965 to 1976. Marable (1984) summarises the general mood during that period:

> If equality was impossible within the political economy of American capitalism, that system which perpetuated black exploitation would have to be overturned. No more compromises; no more betrayals by Negro moderates. Rebellion would supplant reform (94).

Malcolm X’s popularity was growing. According to Marable, ‘[a]s the civil rights united front gradually came unstuck, the only original voice which articulated an alternative vision for black Americans was that of Malcolm X’ (96). Malcolm X made the distinction between the fight for desegregation and integration. His programme was
both anti-racist and anti-capitalist. For Malcolm and the Muslims segregation was an issue of power and control, and the solution to desegregation was black self-sufficiency and this would be achieved through ‘complete racial separation’ (97-8).

Malcolm X was certainly a key figure. In this connection McCartney points out that since his assassination in 1965, Malcolm X ‘has become almost a cult figure in the United States, particularly in the African-American community’ (1992: 185). The reason has been a rising tide of radicalisation among the black working class. For as Verney (2000) explains, ‘[d]espite the advances made between 1955 and 1965, racial relations remained an acute problem in US society, not least in the large cities of the North and on the West Coast, which had been left largely untouched by the campaigns of the civil rights movement’ (61). As a result a series of ghetto riots took place in Northern cities between 1964 and 1972. As Marable (1984) explains, the outbreak of riots in the Northern Cities were largely predictable in the sense that the non-violent forms of protest that were used successfully in the South in the early 1960s would not have had the same appeal and impact in the context of the Northern ghetto (103).

A major development during this period of rebellion and militancy was the emergence of the Black Power ideology. The slogan Black Power came out of the Meredith March which took place in June 1966. As an ideology, the meaning of Black Power was quite vague and diffuse but, as Marable (1984) sums it up, it ‘simply completed the evolution from integrationist to black nationalist ideologies which had begun three years before’ (106). Reviewing the major contributions of Black Power, McCartney (1992) explains that it ‘started a debate in the black community and in the nation at large about the nature of American society and the place of the African-American in it’ (188). Moreover, McCartney adds: ‘Black Power’ has helped to
highlight the importance of ethnic identification even in an individualistic society like the United States" (188). Nevertheless, like integrationism, Black Power was contradictory ideology; it was never a coherent ideology. Marable (1984) argues that Black Power was more reformist than revolutionary in terms of its economic and political program (109).

Black Power may have been a contradictory ideology but its impact extended beyond its economic and political agendas. Black Power also had a significant influence on popular culture and the arts. Marable (1984) explains that "by 1968, the black nationalist renaissance had begun to inspire a tremendous outpouring of literary criticism, poetry, music, and art, all of which served to reinforce Black Power and the uneven nationalist movement in politics" (118). Popular music also played a role in forging a popular nationalist consciousness (James Brown’s 1968 ‘Say It Loud – I’m Black and I’m Proud’, for instance). Culture played a major part in the dissemination and popularisation of the Black Power ideology. As Van Deburg (1992) argues:

When activists entered the cultural arena – and utilized available culture-based tools of persuasion – they broadened the appeal and facilitated the acceptance of Black Power tenets. They thereby contributed importantly to making the movement a lasting influence in American culture – one whose impact could be seen long after its exclusively political agenda had disintegrated (10).

The influence Black Power had on popular culture lasted long after the end of the militant phase of the black power movement. As we will see later in the thesis, the impact of Black Power tenets such as black pride can still be heard in contemporary black music.

Although the militant phase of the black freedom movement went on for another six years, the election of Republican Nixon in 1968, the year Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis, anticipated the beginning of a destructive and
depressing phase for black America and black activism. Nixon advocated Black Capitalism but he was absolutely ruthless towards blacks. Marable (1984) explains that Nixon and his administration attempted to destroy the radical wing of the Black Power Movement through injustices against black activists (142). Four years later, in March 1972, the Gary Convention, the largest black political convention in the US history, took place. Gary represented a major attempt to unify the different tendencies that made up the black freedom movement and seize political power (137). However, by then massive damage had already been done to the black community and to the black freedom movement under Nixon’s repressive administration. Many structural crises confronted America’s major cities in the 1970s. Under Carter, elected in 1976, with his ‘Nixon-Republican’-style, the situation continued to deteriorate. The militant phase of the black freedom movement was over. Marable concludes that ‘[r]eform, once more, had supplanted rebellion’ (167).

The more militant mood of the black freedom movement between 1965 and 1976 was also reflected in black music produced during that period. As during the earlier integrationist phase, changes in performance style preceded changes in lyrical content. As Garofalo (1992) explains, ‘[t]his transformation [to a more militant mood] was also reflected in black popular music but, again, changes in form, tone, and production style preceded changes in lyric content’ (235). In the mid-1960s, the sound known as Southern soul emerged from the deep South and quickly gained popularity.

As the liberal Civil Rights Movement gave way to the more radical demand for black power, Motown’s hegemony over black pop was successfully challenged by a resurgence of closer-to-the-roots, hard-driving rhythm and blues from the Memphis-Muscle Shoals region of the deep South. Chiefly responsible for the popularization of Southern soul, as this music was called, was a short-lived but highly successful collaboration between Atlantic Records and a number of Southern
studios, most notably Stax in Memphis and Fame in Muscle Shoals, Alabama (Garofalo; 1992: 235).

Southern soul artists included Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, Sam and Dave, Arthur Conley, and Percy Sledge. ‘Echoing the spirit of the emerging new militance, their recordings were raw, basic, and almost angry in tone, as compared to the cleaner, brighter Motown sound’ (236). Southern soul involved a more assertive and angry form of black performance with no changes in lyrical content yet, suggesting a form of relatively covert affirmation of blackness. Southern soul’s assertive black performance and raw, simple production style suggested an affirmation of black pride which was not yet, or rather could not yet be expressed overtly in the lyrical content at this early stage of militancy in the mid-1960s. However, it was not long before black artists could perform songs that celebrated blackness more openly and straightforwardly.

The rise of Black Power in 1966 and the growing success of Southern soul meant that the lyrical content too could now become more militant and explicitly affirmative of black pride: ‘With Southern Soul in its ascendancy, unencumbered production was soon joined by social consciousness in black popular music’ (Garofalo; 1992: 236). James Brown’s soul (later known as funk) was the best example of overt black performance as it was possible in the confident mood created by Black Power. In 1968 James Brown released ‘Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud’: ‘Supported by the JB’s usual rhythmic intensity, Brown shouted out a testimonial to black pride that, like the phrase “Black Power,” was viewed as a call to arms by many whites’ (George; 1988: 103).

Nelson George (1988) explains that James Brown was ‘a living symbol of black self-determination’. During the 1960s, James Brown showed just how much
artistic and economic control black music could provide (98). However, James Brown was in some sense as contradictory as the ideology he symbolised. As well as being a symbol of Black Power, he was also, as Nelson George puts it, a ‘stone-cold assimilationist in the general political realm’ – he supported anti-black Nixon for his advocacy of ‘Black capitalism’ (104). James Brown may have embraced contradiction in the sense that he was, on the one hand, a symbol of black self-determination and pride and, on the other, a supporter of Nixon as he advocated Black capitalism, but the same cannot be said about his music.

Indeed, it seems unlikely that James Brown’s ‘black pride’ songs such as ‘Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud’ (1968) were intended to be contradictory. There is no contradiction between the rhythmic intensity and earthiness of his style and the open celebration of blackness in his lyrics. James Brown’s black performance is intended to be as straightforward as it sounds – an undiluted form of black expression, in touch with its African roots and unconstrained by white racism and artistic and economic control. Nevertheless, like integrationism and crossover black music, Black Power and soul/funk were also inherently contradictory. Marable (1984) explains that Black Power was a contradictory ideology in the sense that, despite its revolutionary rhetoric, it was reformist in terms of its economic and political program (109). And the cultural products associated with Black Power were also inherently contradictory. No matter how affirmative of blackness James Brown’s music was, it could not escape the reality of racism. Indeed, the excessive strength and intensity with which James Brown expresses his black pride in ‘Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud’ paradoxically suggests that something is being implied beyond the celebration of blackness: a critique of actually existing racism.
In the way James Brown’s affirmative black performance celebrates blackness and, by implication, involves a critique of the reality of racism, an inescapable tension is exemplified between black self-determination and the constraints of racialised social relations. James Brown’s black-pride songs are then examples of overt (affirmative) black performance pushed to the limits of its possibilities, as opposed to covert (subversive) black performance in Little Richard’s mainstream songs which show black music at its most constrained. Both exemplify the dilemma in black music referred to at the start of the chapter.

While James Brown exemplified an overt black male performance made newly possible in the confident mood of the Black Power era, between 1967 and 1971, the most successful soul artist was a woman, Aretha Franklin. Unlike James Brown, Aretha Franklin’s songs were not openly political: ‘Baby, I Love You’, ‘Natural Woman’, ‘Chain of Fools’, ‘Think’. It was her voice, Nelson George (1998) explains, ‘that spoke most directly to the aroused black psyche of the 1960s, though apolitical and preoccupied with struggles of the heart’ (105). It was, in other words, that uncompromising intensity of her voice, the strength of her performance that affirmed blackness: ‘what really accounts for her impact goes beyond technique: it is her fierce gritty conviction’ (105). Garofalo (1992) explains that Aretha Franklin’s 1967 version of Otis Redding’s song ‘Respect’ was instantly ‘transformed from a demand for conjugal rights into a soaring cry of freedom’ (236) as a result of the strength of her voice.

As with early 1960s ‘girl groups’, with Aretha Franklin we have a relatively less direct form of black performance than with contemporary black male artists, from the point of view of lyrical content, that is. Arguably, this is to do with the added
constraint of gender in the case of black female artists. As Nelson George (1988) explains 'in the late 1960s, feminist issues weren’t overtly part of the agendas of the nationalist or even civil-rights movements' (104). However, although Aretha Franklin’s songs were not directly dealing with political issues, they arguably produced the same effect on their black audience because of the way they were performed, which again shows the importance of performance in understanding black music.

The more militant mood of the Black Power era was reflected in the way black music was performed, as well as in the way it was produced and distributed. While Motown was being criticised for selling out to the Establishment (George; 1988: 106), in the early 1970s Stax was ‘turned into a black owned, black staffed, very political organization’ (139). A symbol of black self-sufficiency, the ‘new’ Stax was ‘one that used its resources to aid the black community in adventurous ways’ (140). However, Stax closed its doors in 1976 as a result of corporate entanglements (142) coinciding with the election of President Carter and the defeat of radicalism and militancy just four years after the Gary Convention.

As the defeat of radicalism and militancy announced the beginning of a new integrationist phase in black America, the demise of Stax marked the start of ‘the age of corporate takeover in black music’ and crossover black music (George; 1988: 146). Nelson George describes this in terms of ‘the death of rhythm and blues’ (147). This idea of ‘the death of rhythm and blues’ will be discussed further in the next and last section of the chapter which will deal with the notion of a central dilemma in black music. The chapter began by broaching this issue, and showing how it has been shaped historically in the post-War period. Now, moving on to the contemporary moment, we need to confront the political and analytical problems which it raises.
Black performance – the dilemma

The chapter has been concerned with showing how black performance is defined by an inherent dilemma as the result of racialised social relations and history. Black music is constantly involved in a sort of dialectical relation with mainstream white America. Racism shapes what black performers can do in and through their songs – from Little Richard’s covert (subversive) black performance to James Brown’s overt (affirmative) black performance. This actually existing dilemma is also found reflected in the literature on black music. To show how this is the case, it may be useful to contrast the work of two authors, Brian Ward and Nelson George.

In *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness and Race Relations* (1998), Brian Ward explores the links between black activism and rhythm and blues during the quarter century after the *Brown* decision adopted in May 1956 (which ruled the desegregation of public schools). While his views regarding early 1960s ‘girl groups’ and early soul singers were considered above, here it is more generally his approach that will be discussed. In *Just My Soul responding*, Ward sets out to tell this history from the point of view of the mass of mankind rather than from that of the ‘movers’ and ‘shakers’, arguing that changes in black music and in black consumers preferences provide ‘a useful insight into the changing sense of self, community and destiny among those blacks who rarely left the sorts of evidence, or undertook the sort of activities, to which historians are generally most responsive’ (Ward; 1998: 4).

Brain Ward sees integrationism and crossover ‘sweet’ black pop of the early Civil Rights Movement in an optimistic way. For Ward, all black people wanted was to integrate into white mainstream society, and their preference for ‘sweet’ black pop between 1956 and 1963, which he describes as ‘concessions to nominally white
musical and lyrical preferences’ (3), reflects this optimistic desire for integration. Ward sees the rise of nationalism, and the move to the more militant sound of soul, as being merely the result of the failure of integration and as reflecting a more pessimistic mood (3). In his response to Ward, Robin Kelly (2000) explains that Ward’s dismissal of nationalism as a mere ‘reaction to the failure of integration rather than a significant political impulse that existed simultaneously with – even inside of – the Civil Rights Movement’ doesn’t take into account the complexities of black politics (541). Kelly argues that, although valuable, Ward’s attempt to understand the relationship between black people’s political struggles and desires and the music they listen to ‘is deeply flawed because the driving force for change is black desire for integration into the mainstream’ (541).

Reflecting the other side of the dilemma is the approach taken by Nelson George in *The Death of Rhythm & Blues* (1988) – though, as we will see below, he later changes his argument with the rise of hip hop (1999). Nelson George traces the history and evolution of 20th century black music until 1987 in relation to changes in black America during that period. For Nelson George the issue is one between the assimilation of black music into the corporate, mainstream music industry, on the one hand, and black self-sufficiency in the form of black music produced within an independent black music industry, on the other. While he equates the former with dilution and white control, Nelson George sees vitality and empowerment in the latter. He talks of a ‘cycle of death and rebirth’ to describe the way black music is in constant motion from one condition to the other.

While Ward’s approach may be described as integrationist, George’s is more in favour of black self-sufficiency. While Ward, whose interpretation focuses mainly on lyrical content, reads optimism in crossover black music, George sees it as
dilution and is more optimistic about independently produced black music. Nelson George’s argument about the ‘cycle of death and rebirth’ in black music is in the same line of argument as that expressed by LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) in his pioneering book *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* ([1963]; 2002). Regarding ‘the continuous re-emergence of strong Negro influences to revitalize American popular music’ LeRoi Jones wrote:

> What usually happened... was that finally too much exposure to the debilitating qualities of popular expression tended to lessen the emotional validity of the Afro-American forms; then more or less violent reactions to this overexposure altered their overall shape’ (220).

In contradiction with Ward’s straightforward reading of crossover music as reflecting optimism, in this chapter it was argued that, from a performative perspective, crossover black music implies a pessimistic outlook on the world as it involves a covert type of black performance. But, more than a ‘cycle of death and rebirth’ in black music, it is argued here that the issue is one of a dilemma.

> Although Nelson George predicts the death of RnB he then changes his argument with the rise of hip-hop (1999). In the last pages of *The Death of Rhythm & Blues* he announces that black self-sufficiency on its own is impossible:

> Self-sufficiency alone has never been the answer to the problems of black America. The interaction between blacks and the mainstream culture are too intimate for a total separatist philosophy to work in the United States...What I’ve attempted to argue in this book is that a more committed effort at self-sufficiency, in politics and economics, would have given (and still might give) blacks a better base from which to work for integration and practical power (199).

The quote above and Nelson George’s subsequent work on hip-hop, support the argument that the issue is indeed one of a continuous dilemma in black music. To show
how this is the case and how the particular RnB texts that will be used as a case study in this thesis emerges from the ‘death’ of soul music in the mid-1970s, it will be useful to end this chapter by taking a brief look at black America in the post-civil-rights era and post-soul black music.

In 1976 Carter won the Presidential election and radicalism and militancy were defeated; reform had again replaced rebellion. Marable (1984) explains that the outcome of this Second Reconstruction⁶ was a division of the black community along class lines with, on the one hand, a minority black elite which gained from the Second Reconstruction and which has an optimistic and reformist outlook and, on the other hand, a majority of black underclass, ‘victims of the new camouflaged racism’ (176). In urban ghettos, the social environment continued to deteriorate as a result of oppression with the breaking down of black families, unemployment, poverty, drugs, crime, police brutality and murders of black males, as well as homicide (blacks against blacks). Marable asserts that ‘[i]n the wake of the demise of militant black nationalism, and with the flight of the black elite into the safe havens of suburbia, the ghetto’s black rage was unleashed against itself’ - as opposed to against white property as in the 1960s (1984: 174). This situation led to a fear of the ‘black criminal, rapist and burglar’ in mainstream white America which in turn led to a ‘more authoritarian treatment for blacks within the US criminal justice system’ (174).

As the defeat of radicalism and militancy announced the beginning of a new integrationist phase in black America characterised by the division of the black

---

⁶ Reconstruction was the political settlement which followed the Civil War and through which the southern states were re-integrated into the United States. Jim Crow was a consequence of Reconstruction.
community along class lines, the demise of Stax in 1976, a symbol of black self-sufficiency, marked the start of ‘the age of corporate takeover in black music’ and crossover black music (George; 1988: 146). Nelson George argues that this equated to the ‘death’ of soul music (147). In the post-soul era, economic integration and a crossover mentality dominated, the latter being exemplified in the advent of disco in the late 1970s and the rise of crossover stars such as Michael Jackson, Prince, and Lionel Richie in the early 1980s. Then out of the ghettos of Harlem and South Bronx came hip-hop. The Sugar Hill Gang’s ‘Rapper’s Delight’ came out in 1979. In Hip Hop America (1999), Nelson George writes: ‘[h]ip hop has brought America a new language of rhythm, speech, and movement that has inspired a generation to take to verse to say what was too long unspoken about this nation’ (xiii). RnB is not dead then; the dilemma continues.

For in a post-civil-rights black America divided along class lines, hip hop emerged as the voice of the majority of African Americans living in America’s urban ghettos. Rap is primarily concerned with the experience of disenfranchised black urban youth and social and political commentary. Rappers ‘say it like it is’ (Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five’s ‘The Message’, 1982; Public Enemy’s ‘Prophets of Rage’, 1988; NWA’s ‘Straight Outta Compton’, 1989) or as Tricia Rose (1994) puts it, ‘[r]ap music, more than any other contemporary form of black cultural expression, articulates the chasm between black urban lived experience and dominant, “legitimate” (e.g., neoliberal) ideologies regarding equal opportunity and racial inequality’ (102). While there have been many prominent black female rappers (Salt ‘N’ Pepa, MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, Missy Elliot, Lil’ Kim, Foxy Brown), the world of hip hop is nevertheless predominantly a male and masculine one. Arguably, the exaggerated nature of black male performance in hip hop could be due, as Jon Michael Spencer (1991) explains, to
the fact that in rap music, ‘the insurrection of subjugated knowledges’, that is, ‘the un gagged black mouth and the power of street knowledge’ already feared by whites in the 1960s, ‘is coupled with an insurrection of subjugated sexualities’ (4). Spencer explains that:

[m]ale rappers, flaunting exaggerated perceptions of their sexual capacities, tease white fears of alleged black illicit sexualities and fuel the fantasy of the black penis and the illusion of the black rapist... For oppressed black males aware of this white terror of black male sexuality, it is gratifying to wield such power (4-5).

In a sense, it might be argued that as well as being marked by a division along class lines, post-civil-rights black America or post-soul black music is also characterised by a wider gap between genders or gender performance. The emergence of a new generation of black female RnB in the late 1990s could then be seen as a gendered reaction to the male-oriented and hyper-masculine universe of hip hop. This new strand of black female RnB constitutes a specifically feminine, gendered space much like early 1960s ‘girl groups’. The aim of the second part of this thesis will be to explore the scope of this black female space created by contemporary RnB artists, both in terms of its specificities and as it is located within the ongoing historical dilemma in black performance examined in this chapter.

This chapter highlighted how the contradictory nature of black performance discussed in Chapter 1 is a historical situation which emerged as a response to racialised social relations. In the coming chapters we will explore this continuous dilemma in black performance through the notion of a continuum. Black performance, it will be argued, actually takes place within a continuum of strategies. In the next chapter, the specifics
of this continuum based on speech act theory will be outlined. We will develop a performative continuum, that is a model for applying the theoretical concepts presented in Chapter 2, in the song analyses that form the central case study of this thesis. It is a model which suggests that RnB not only involves performative intention, but a sophisticated metalinguistic implicature, and a powerful set of strategies for confronting race, class and gender oppression in American society.
Chapter 4: Introducing the Continuum

Drawing on and extending the discussion and theoretical background presented in the first three chapters, the aim of this shorter fourth chapter is to present the notion of a speech-act theory based continuum between two socio-linguistic poles which will serve as a framework for the method of textual analysis that will be used in this thesis. This thesis argues that more than an analytical framework, the continuum of strategies that will be sketched out here actually exists and is a historical condition, as highlighted in the previous chapter which showed the existence of a continuous dilemma in black performance as a result of racialised social relations. This thesis will show how the strategies of resistance found embodied in black female RnB record-texts can be located along this continuum.

Using the existing repertoire of types of black women in media representation set up in Chapter 1 as a starting point, the continuum between two socio-linguistic poles will allow us to provide answers to the problems raised in Chapter 1 as well as move beyond the limitations of such approaches. Indeed, in that it will consider the formal aspects of speech acts in black female RnB record-texts within the wider socio-cultural context, the continuum will highlight how the strategies at play in the repertoire of images relate to each other, as well as how they can be set apart in terms of the different social implications they bring off beyond their historically contradictory nature, which, this thesis argues, is what is centrally at stake.
Drawing on and going beyond speech-act theory, the continuum will then be based both on formal and social considerations of speech acts as they embody different strategies of resistance. This continuum will be defined by its two socio-linguistic poles, which as we will see have many attributes. On an extra-linguistic or social dimension, the continuum will show the relation and progression between two ways of creating meaning: (indirectly) through oblique speech acts and (directly) through straightforward speech acts. Bringing back Austin’s concept of the constative into the equation, the continuum will show how the intra-linguistic relation between the constative and the performative at play in the speech acts evolves from one pole to the other. So far we find at the two poles of the continuum:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oblique speech acts</th>
<th>Straightforward speech acts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(indirect meaning)</td>
<td>(direct meaning)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Extra-linguistic dimension**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performative</th>
<th>Constative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Intra-linguistic dimension**

The aim of this fourth chapter then will be to introduce the speech-act theory based performative-implicative continuum between two socio-linguistic poles as an illuminating way to explore African American women’s politics of representation and
to present and define the specifics of this continuum. As we progress and examine the complexities at stake here further dimensions of the continuum will be mapped out.

In Chapter 1 of this thesis an existing repertoire of (mostly visual) types of black women in media representation was set up. Because it emerges as a recurrent theme in the literature, it was argued this repertoire would be used as a reference point in this thesis. As well as showing the usefulness of such methods of analysis, Chapter 1 also raised the question of their limitations. One of the main issues was the relatively high focus on the visual mode in the literature. Indeed, even when they are dealing with musical genres, most of the studies cited focus on visual representation. This, it was argued, reinforces the need to come up with a methodology that would allow us to move beyond this focus on the visual and start to consider songs in addition. Considering black women's politics of representation from a linguistic and musical perspective will provide a useful complement to the many existing studies of the visual mode. The aim of this thesis, we might then say, is to show how speech-act theory can help us do that. In Chapter 2, it was demonstrated how the action-oriented approach to language provided in speech-act theory makes it particularly useful for exploring agency in language use and so political agency in songs. Speech-act theory allows us to move beyond the manifest meaning of song lyrics and into their implications as words in actions, which is what is at stake in their social meaning.

In this fourth chapter, we will explore how a continuum of performative-implicative strategies based on the sort of contextualised social understanding and politicised approach to speech-act theory sketched out in Chapter 2 can help us move beyond the limitations of approaches to the issue of black women's politics of representation that are exclusively based on the visual mode. It will also, more
generally, help us move beyond the dilemma between critical and celebratory analytical approaches to representation in black women’s cultural productions by considering the issue as a process or continuity. The point here is that we need to consider the scope and limitations of emancipatory politics within the constraints of racialised and gendered social relations. In such a society both celebration of transcendence of oppression, and total critique of actually existing oppression, are unlikely to be found in pure forms.

Indeed the dilemma between the two analytical approaches examined in Chapter 1 (celebratory and critical) reflects the historical dilemma in black politics of representation between oppression and resistance, between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic elements or, in Ostendorf’s (2000) terms, between ‘pathology’ and ‘celebration’:

African-American historical memory is torn between the dual and alternating heritages of pathological ascription and celebratory achievement, between outside habits of racist ascription and the appreciative inside view, and between past significance and present meaning. Both poles are inscribed, as overlayed palimpsests, in the representational logic of black cultural productions (218).

This thesis argues that, given the historically contradictory nature of black politics of representation which Ostendorf points to, the strategies embodied in black female RnB record-texts can be located along the continuum introduced above, that is to say between two socio-linguistic poles, between two ways of making sense of the world: indirectly through subverted language and directly through straightforward language. In this way, from one socio-linguistic pole to the other, the continuum will go from ‘pure’ subversion to ‘pure’ affirmation, through the intermediate positions of
affirmative subversion and subversive affirmation. The remaining chapters then plot
the ways in which these four strategies, ranged across the continuum, are used in RnB.

Here is a simple diagram of this continuum highlighting where each
performative-implicative strategy is located:

```
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>'Pure' subversion (Ch.5)</th>
<th>'Pure' affirmation (Ch.8)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affirmative subversion (Ch.6)</td>
<td>Subversive affirmation (Ch.7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
```

The continuum will make it possible to explore the contradictory nature of black
women’s politics of representation as well as move beyond it by bringing out the
social implications at stake in the strategies. The rest of this chapter will consist of a
presentation of the intra- and extra-linguistic specifics of the continuum.

**The intra-linguistic dimension – the ‘performative/constative’ binary**

In this section, the discussion will be concerned with the intra-linguistic specifics of
the continuum, that is, with what may be referred to as the ostensible level of the
speech acts as they embody the various performative-implicative strategies located on
the continuum. From this perspective, the continuum will be based on Austin’s early
distinction between the performative and the often-overlooked constative. In this
section it will be argued that both aspects, which drawing on Austin we will see are
always part of any given speech act, are always involved in the various strategies of resistance embodied in black female RnB record-texts. The continuum will bring to light how the 'performative/constative' binary evolves through and within the concrete limits of its two socio-linguistic poles.

The 'performative/constative' binary used in the continuum is derived from Austin's (1976) initial distinction between constative utterances and performatives utterances. Constative utterances, Austin initially explained, are those that state or describe reality; they are, in other words, statements, in the philosophical sense of the term, which have the attribute of being either true or false. Performative utterances, on the other hand, are those that do something; they don't merely describe but perform the very actions they refer to and, unlike statements which are either true or false, performatives are either successfully achieved or not (Austin, 1976: 4-6).

Austin (1976) later abandoned this distinction as he realised that actually all utterances are ultimately performative (91) and replaced it with the three-levelled model, already discussed in Chapter 2.7 To recap briefly, Austin argued that all utterances have three levels, that is, when we speak we simultaneously perform three distinctive acts: a locutionary act (we say something); an illocutionary act (we intend to mean something or perform a certain action); and a perlocutionary act (we intend to produce a certain effect or effects on the listener) (94-101).

7 While Austin's early distinction between constatives and performatives might be useful for characterising the binary at play in the strategies on the continuum, it is his three level model that will be useful for bringing to light how the actual speech acts embodying these strategies are brought off in record-texts. It will be especially useful for analysing straightforwardly brought off speech acts on the affirmative side of the continuum. The point is that they are not mutually exclusive; the constative and the three level model of the performative can be considered together as we will see.
While the locutionary act corresponds to the constative (grammatical) level of every utterance, the illocutionary act is their performative (meaning or function) level. Although, as Austin realised himself, all utterances are ultimately performative (they involve an illocutionary act), they nevertheless also always involve constative aspects (a locutionary level). His concept of the constative is therefore useful when considered as part of a binary relationship with the performative at play in utterances, rather than as a type of utterance. We saw in Chapter 2 how Robinson (2003) in a rather different way used the constative to refer to a linguistic tradition, which he criticises, arguing instead for a 'performative' linguistics. It was then argued in Chapter 2 that the thesis would take up this 'performative' approach, but in a way that, paradoxically, restores the constative. For while the emphasis on process and agency which Robinson emphasises is surely correct, it will also be important to examine how RnB record-texts make statements about the world. In other words, and as the continuum between two socio-linguistic poles will show, the constative also bears on the kind of strategies of resistance found embodied in black female RnB record-texts, and on the issue of the power relations at stake in a racist and patriarchal social structure.

The dominant racist values that define and marginalise black people as 'other' and as low have been historically produced and fixed through constative language and practice by white supremacists, that is, following Austin, through what is really performative language and practice masquerading as constative truths. The tradition of black people's struggle for equal rights, self-definition and identity has, on the other hand, been located within an ongoing performative tradition whereby the values of black resistance have been enacted performatively, that is, through subverted language, as a means of breaking through the fixed (constative) social
structure of racism. However, if the performative has been one of the key markers of black symbolic strategies, it is also the case that the constative has also been used in black resistance as a way to affirm the truth of a social reality in which racism actually exists. Indeed, as this thesis will highlight, resistance to racism is also found articulated in black female RnB record-texts through the use of traditional straightforward language (in the form of rebuttal), as opposed to indirectly through subverted language. Since constatives are by definition either true or false, to affirm the inside view of the truth of social reality has, by implication, the effect of bringing out racism as false.

The 'performative/constative' binary will then be useful for exploring how meaning is achieved through the strategies of resistance embodied in black female RnB record-texts as they are located along the continuum between two socio-linguistic poles. Indeed the continuum will explore how the relationship between the performative and the constative levels of speech acts evolves from one socio-linguistic pole to the other as we move from subversive to affirmative strategies.

So on the left hand side, we can expect to find in black female RnB record-texts that embody subversive strategies a misalignment or contradictory relationship between what is said (the constative) and how it is said (the performative) with a foregrounding of performative reflexivity (or metalocutionary implicature). At the pole on the left hand side, where we find 'pure' subversion, what is at stake is a nihilistic rejection of social conventions. As we move towards the right hand, affirmative side of the continuum, we should observe an increasingly greater alignment between the constative and the performative, with attention being drawn to the straightforwardness of the speech acts. At the pole on this right hand side, on the 'pure' affirmative pole, what is at stake is celebration.
However, as we will see in the next section as we consider the continuum from an extra-linguistic or social dimension, even in its ‘purest’ form at the affirmative socio-linguistic pole, affirmative language (in its celebratory mode) does nevertheless involve metalocutionary implicature, thus exposing the concrete and inescapable social reality of racism. In the same way we will see how at the other end of the continuum, ‘pure’ subversion (in the form of ‘nihilism’) does paradoxically produce an affirmative content in the sense that it exposes the limits of what can sincerely be affirmed about the world. Implicature is thus always at stake, even on the right hand side of the continuum where the speech acts are relatively straightforward and constative. We will explore this further in the next section.

The implicative dimension – social implications

On the extra-linguistic or social dimension, it is not the ostensible level but rather what will be referred to as the implicative level of the speech acts embodying the strategies on the continuum we are concerned with. Indeed, on this social level the continuum highlights how these strategies embodied in black female RnB record-texts relate to the wider socio-cultural context. It shows how each strategy suggests a way of dealing with the contradictory nature of social relations in a racist and patriarchal
social structure. In this sense, the two socio-linguistic poles of the continuum highlight the impossibility to make sense of the world beyond the constraints of social structure. These two poles show how neither the nihilistic critique of racism nor the celebration of a black identity beyond racism can ever actually be found in pure forms in black female RnB record texts. Thus there is ultimately no escape from the contradictory nature of representation.

In this section, it will be demonstrated how what is at stake in the strategies on the continuum, that is, what sets them apart from each other beyond the common features they may share on their ostensible level, is indeed their (social) implicative level which suggests different types of metalocutionary implicature. To explore the implicative level which shows political agency we will draw on as well as move beyond Austin’s notions of ‘happy’ and ‘unhappy’ speech acts in the sense that this will involve politicising these two types of speech acts. As already mentioned, performatives are either achieved or not – as opposed to being either true or false as in the case of the constative. Austin uses the term ‘happy’ speech acts to refer to speech acts that are brought off, in the appropriate circumstances that is (Austin, 1976: 14-15).

The straightforward speech acts on the right, affirmative side of the continuum referred to in this thesis are then ‘happy’ speech acts in Austin’s sense since they are brought off in a conventional way, as opposed to through subversion. In this way Austin’s notion of ‘happiness’ refers to the ostensible level of straightforward speech acts. However, using the continuum it can be shown that in ‘pure’ affirmation, on the affirmative socio-linguistic pole, ‘happy’ or straightforward speech acts actually involve the emergence of an ‘absent present’ implicative level which will be referred to as ‘happy 1’. Indeed, because boosting the ‘purity’ of
celebratory speech acts at the affirmative pole of the continuum will involve ‘purely’ affirming some general notion of human happiness, the issue of race will not be inscribed on the ostensible level of the speech acts. It is this omission of the issue of race on the ostensible level that somewhat paradoxically leads to its emergence on an implicative level; it is the excess of strength in the ‘pure’ affirmation of an optimistic view of the world that shows that what is at stake is indeed a celebration of blackness.

An ‘unhappy’ speech act, on the other hand, Austin explains, can be either successfully brought off (in which case it is an ‘abuse’) or a failure (and is a ‘misfire’). It is ‘abuses’ with which we are concerned here. An ‘abuse’ is an insincere speech act which is nonetheless successfully brought off (Austin; 1976: 15-16). The subverted speech acts on the left, subversive side of the socio-linguistic continuum are such kind of ‘unhappy’ speech acts brought off through insincerity. Subverted speech acts are then brought off through an abuse of the conventional procedure in popular songs (whereby it is assumed that lyrics are sincere or straightforward). The result is that ostensible meaning is inverted or fundamentally altered in some way. The new meaning might also be described as an ‘absent present’ implicative level, that is to say it is a meaning which emerges obliquely as a second order effect. We call this ‘happy 2’. In other words, what appears to perpetuate or confirm mainstream racist notions on an ostensible level is actually critical of racism on an implicative level.

What this means is that, while at both socio-linguistic poles of the continuum, the issue of race is never referred to ostensibly, it is indeed always affirmed through implicature, precisely because of the contradictory nature of the racist social relations in which these speech acts are performed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Pure’ affirmation (celebration)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Happy ────────► implicature ────────► ‘Happy 1’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
'Pure' subversion (nihilism)

Unhappy ←→ implicature ←→ 'Happy 2'

Therefore in relation to Austin’s ‘happy’ and ‘unhappy/abusive’ successfully brought off speech acts, this thesis uses ‘happy 1’ and ‘happy 2’ to refer to the emergence of implicative levels as the step beyond Austin’s locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. It is a step which suggests metalocutionary implicature at play. Metalocutionary implicature or performative reflexivity is, as we saw in Chapter 2, a way of strategically acting on one’s self-awareness that goes beyond the tactics of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary implicature which merely work within existing game rules. It is an intentional act that suggests a metaunderstanding of the game rules you are engaged in playing and so an attempt to reshape the game rules (Robinson, 2003: 151-53). Metalocutionary implicature is indeed what is at stake in political agency.

Drawing on what has been discussed so far we can then imagine the performative-implicative continuum between ‘pure’ subversion and ‘pure’ affirmation as one between the two ‘absent present’ implicative levels ‘happy 2’ and ‘happy 1’. Schematically the performative-implicative continuum would look like this:

```
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>'Pure' subversion</th>
<th>'Pure' affirmation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affirmative subversion</td>
<td>Subversive affirmation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Happy 2&gt;...'</td>
<td>'Happy ...&lt;1'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Happy 2'</td>
<td>'Happy 1'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
```
In this way from one socio-linguistic pole to the other, four main performative-implicative strategies, which this thesis argues can be found embodied in black female RnB record-texts, can be located along the continuum, distributed across two sides. While both sides involve social criticism, on the subversive side of the continuum this is achieved principally through subverted language (with a foregrounding of *performativity*) and on the affirmative side principally through straightforward language (with a foregrounding of *constativity*). Which means that the strategies suggest different social implications or types of metalocutionary implicature.

Because it shows how at its socio-linguistic poles, implicative levels emerge as ‘absent presents’, the continuum is as we saw useful as it highlights the limits of resistance through subverted language as well as through straightforward language. Indeed, to the extent that ‘pure’ subversion paradoxically introduces an affirmative content and that ‘pure’ affirmation does actually involve metalocutionary implicature, the continuum between these two socio-linguistic poles shows that there are indeed no pure speech acts. So, the use of the term ‘pure’ at the two poles refers to the strategies’ attempt to, so to speak, boost the ‘purity’ of the speech acts as far as it will possibly go. On the other hand, the use of the speech marks around ‘pure’ is intended to emphasise the fact that, nonetheless, absent present meanings emerge just because of the contradictory nature of the racist social relations in which such speech acts are performed.

Thus at one end of the continuum the emergence obliquely of the ‘absent present’ implicative level ‘happy 2’ in ‘pure’ subversion (nihilism) shows how an affirmative content is paradoxically produced in that the limits of what can sincerely be said about the world are pointed to. In other words, like ‘pure’ affirmation, ‘pure’ subversion is ultimately sincere through its performance of a statement about the
nature of the world. In black female RnB record-texts, we will see that it is a way of pointing out the complete impossibility of saying what it is to exist, if you are a black woman in white patriarchal America. At the other end of the continuum, the emergence of the ‘absent present’ implicative level ‘happy 1’ in ‘pure’ affirmation (celebration) shows that the speech acts do actually involve a further implication beyond their celebratory function. The thesis will show that ‘pure’ affirmation or celebration as it is embodied in black female RnB record-texts is a way of affirming how the world should be like but is not as a result of racialised social relations. ‘Happy 1’ does therefore also involve social criticism, thus showing how metalocutionary implicature is involved right through the continuum.

Having shown how meaning emerges at the two socio-linguistic poles on which the continuum is based, we should by implication have a better understanding of how strategies operate inside the continuum. Indeed, from a formal aspect, as the continuum highlights, the impure strategies of affirmative subversion’s and subversive affirmation’s implicative levels, that is, respectively ‘happy2>...’ and ‘happy...<1’, do not emerge as ‘absent present’ as is the case with the ‘pure’ strategies at both poles, but are rather inscribed in and through the ostensible level of the speech acts – to various degrees of explicitness along the continuum between the two poles, hence the use of the symbols 2>... and ...<1. What this means is that, unlike at the poles, inside the continuum, implicature and so the issue of race will actually be made more or less explicit. It is in this sense that the strategies of affirmative subversion and subversive affirmation may be described as ‘impure’. Rather than pushing the limits of the contradictory nature of the racist social relations in which they are produced by boosting ‘purity’ of forms, ‘impure’ strategies work in an through contradiction (in
and *through* 'impurity’ so to speak), thus actually making meaning more or less explicit.

On the one hand, affirmative subversion, on the subversive left hand side of the continuum, enacts the values of black resistance through subverted language as a way of obliquely breaking through the *(constatively)* fixed values of racism. On the other hand, subversive affirmation, on the right hand affirmative side of the continuum, suggests affirming the values of black resistance as the constative truths directly through straightforward language, thus bringing out racism as false. In other words, while the former suggests a more pessimistic form of social implication, the latter implies a more optimistic one. Affirmative subversion’s pessimistic social implication is nevertheless different than that suggested by ‘pure’ subversion at the subversive pole in the sense that it does involve an engagement with, as opposed to a nihilistic rejection of social conventions and the on-going process that is black people’s struggle against racism. Similarly, at the other end of the socio-linguistic continuum, subversive affirmation’s optimistic social implication is different than that suggested in ‘pure’ affirmation (or celebration) in the sense that it is explicitly critical of racism.

Before concluding this chapter, it will be useful to introduce Philip Auslander’s (2006) work on the performer in popular music as it bears directly on the way in which implicature is carried through across the continuum. Drawing on Simon Frith, Auslander sees the performer in popular music as defined by three layers: ‘the real person (the performer as human being), the performance persona (the performer’s self-presentation), and the character (a figure portrayed in a song text)’ (4). Auslander’s typology will be useful for characterising the performing subject in the
analysis of record-texts and framing the images of black womanhood that might emerge in the selected record-texts (as discussed in Chapter 1). However, two issues can be raised about Auslander’s typology. The first issue has to do with precision of definition. Auslander talks about the performer as the ‘real person’ (the person as human being) but, arguably, what is at play is a notion of the performer as a person outside role, in other words this persona is defined negatively as the ‘lay person’ behind the performance persona.

More importantly, the second problem with Auslander’s three-layered performer has to do with range and complexity. The distinction between the various roles of the performer in popular music is not as clear-cut as Auslander’s typology perhaps seems to imply. Indeed, in the rock tradition, where authenticity is at stake, arguably we tend to have a collapse of the performer as the ‘lay person’ (or Auslander’s ‘real person’) and the performer as the ‘performance persona’, with a playing down of the character aspect, in order to maintain one single authentic voice. In the RnB tradition, on the other hand, the relation between the different layers of the performing subject is both much more fluid, but also more strongly articulated. As we will see in the analysis of RnB record-texts in the following chapters, this relation in the genre may be informed by tactics of trickery right through to authenticity.

Auslander’s typology will then be used around the performative-implicative continuum to show how the relation between the different roles of the performer varies from one socio-linguistic pole to the other, thus characterising this fluid quality of the performing subject in RnB. In other words, not only does the relationship between the various facets of the performing subject vary from one genre of popular music to another, it also varies from one performative-implicative strategy to another, as the song analyses located along the continuum will bring to light.
The aim of this fourth chapter was to introduce the notion of a speech-act theory informed continuum of performative-implicative strategies as it is defined by its two socio-linguistic poles. We have seen how based on these two socio-linguistic poles, many attributes run through the continuum and how these are useful for exploring change and continuity between the way each strategy operates. The continuum, this thesis argues, is useful for exploring how black female RnB record-texts embody performative-implicative strategies that bring to light the range of possibilities of political agency (or types of metalocutionary implicature) as they are played out in and through the limits of emancipatory politics. In this sense the strategies on the continuum between two socio-linguistic poles are different, though interrelated ways of dealing with the concrete experience of racism. The continuum, in other words, shows black women’s struggle for empowerment, self-definition and identity as an ongoing process as it takes place within the structural constraints of power relations based on race, gender and class.

The continuum is based on an action-oriented approach informed by formal considerations. It is informed by a ‘performative-implicative’ approach that takes into account the constative aspects necessarily always intertwined with the performative function of language, thus showing how the constative also bears on the strategies found embodied in black female RnB record-texts. The continuum then will make it possible to explore the formal structure of the speech acts for the purpose of illuminating their social implication, and so move beyond the contradictory characterisation of black female politics of representation which predominates in some of the literature. Instead of either celebration or critique the continuum points to a complex interrelationship between these aesthetic-political goals.
Drawing on the material presented in this linking fourth chapter, the next four chapters of the thesis will explore the performative-implicative strategies of the continuum as they might emerge in our corpus of African American female RnB record-texts. Each chapter will deal with one strategy. Thus, moving from the subversive to the affirmative socio-linguistic pole of the continuum, Chapter 5 will deal with ‘pure’ subversion, Chapter 6 with affirmative subversions, Chapter 7 with subversive affirmations, and Chapter 8 with ‘pure’ affirmation. Where relevant, references will be made in each of the four chapters to the repertoire of images of black womanhood and to Stuart Hall’s typology of strategies of resistance, both discussed in Chapter 1, in order to show how the present study may provide a useful complement to these existing approaches. Moreover, the song analysis that will be undertaken in each chapter will take slightly different angles by focusing on different aspects of the record-texts. This will not only enable a stronger case to be made about the breadth and depth of the performative in RnB, it will also highlight the range and adaptability of the speech-act theory based methodology used in this thesis.
This fifth chapter will deal with the performative-implicative strategy of ‘pure’ subversion as it might be embodied in African American female RnB record-texts. ‘Pure’ subversion, at the subversive socio-linguistic pole of the continuum, is the highly reflexive strategy whereby subverted language in the form of insincerity is used to undermine norms. This thesis argues that although ‘pure’ subversion appears to be purely and simply nihilistic, it does nevertheless, as the continuum highlights, paradoxically produce an affirmative content in the emergence of the ‘absent present’ implicative level ‘happy 2’ – to the extent that it points out the limits of what can sincerely be said about the world. As it is embodied in black women RnB record-texts, the performative-implicative strategy of ‘pure’ subversion is a way of pointing out the difficulty for African American women of saying what is, that is, of using straightforward language, in white patriarchal America. Thus it exposes the power relations at stake.

The aim of this chapter, then, will be to demonstrate how this might be the case. This will be done through an exploration of the performative and implicative
aspects of the strategy of ‘pure’ subversion as it is embodied in RnB record-texts, using the speech-act theory framework and the concept of the continuum introduced in the previous chapter. The chapter will be divided into two main sections. The first, theoretical, section of the chapter will sketch out how ‘pure’ subversion is articulated intra-linguistically in order to show how the social implication at stake on the subversive socio-linguistic pole of the continuum emerges. Then, drawing on and opening out this structural framework, the second, analytical, section will demonstrate how and to what effect ‘pure’ subversion might be employed in black female RnB record-texts. This will be done through a close examination of the performative-implicative aspects of Kelis’ song ‘Milkshake’.

From unhappy to ‘happy 2’ – strategic abuses

In the previous chapter, Austin’s concepts of ‘happy’ and ‘unhappy’ speech acts were presented and it was suggested that these would be useful for framing affirmation and subversion and understanding how performatives might be brought off in these different strategies. It was argued that subverted speech acts, at stake on the subverted side of the continuum, fall under category of ‘abuses’, which are ‘unhappy’ speech acts that are nevertheless achieved, but through an ‘abuse of the procedure’ by a person having certain thoughts or feelings which may be ‘insincere’. Austin gives the example of someone making a promise without the intention of keeping it (see: 1976: 14-17). We will later consider some of the ways record-texts might be ‘unhappy’ or ‘abusive’ when we look at the case of ‘Milkshake’. Arguably, we can expect that ‘abuse’ or insincerity will be achieved at the ostensible level of record-texts through maintaining a contradictory relationship or misalignment between constative (what is
said) and performative (how it is said) aspects of the performance with a foregrounding of performativity.

While the type of subverted speech acts at play in ‘pure’ subversion may be said to belong to Austin’s category of ‘abuses’, that is, ‘unhappy’ speech acts that are actually achieved through insincerity, they nevertheless have a quite different inflection. Arguably, unlike Austin’s ‘abuses’, the subverted speech acts at stake in RnB record-texts may be said to be brought out only to the extent that their implied audience recognises that they are indeed insincere. That is, as we will see with the example of ‘Milkshake’, it is necessary that the listener understands the musical and expressive conventions at play in the particular genre if the strategy is to be brought off. Austin rightly argues that ‘abuses’ are unhappy speech acts that are achieved. However he does not deal with the issue of why people might need to perform abuses, why they might want to perform speech acts insincerely. Indeed, he does not deal with the social or implicative dimension of performing ‘abuses’, which is arguably what is at stake here. As the continuum highlights, ‘abuses’ as they are brought off strategically in ‘pure’ subversion at the socio-linguistic pole is a form of social criticism in the sense that it points out the limits of what can sincerely be affirmed about the world, thus exposing the power relations at stake.

Indeed, ‘pure’ subversive speech acts do not only involve a subversive (unhappy) ostensible level; they also have an affirmative (happy) implicative level. This affirmative implicative level can be said to be ‘absent present’ since it is not so much inscribed at the ostensible level of the speech acts but it is rather inherently implied by the total lack of sincerity with which these speech acts are expressed. The unhappy ostensible level then paradoxically leads to the emergence of a happy implicative level in ‘pure’ subversion, showing metalocutionary implicature.
(performative reflexivity) at play. As we will see in the analysis of ‘Milkshake’, happy is then used here in a different way than Austin in that it shows the paradox of the performative.

As we briefly saw in the previous chapter, at the subversive socio-linguistic pole of the continuum, what is at stake is a second stage of obliquely achieved affirmative content, a second stage of producing meaning through ‘an abuse of the procedure’, a subverted speech act stage – as opposed to the primary speech act stage where meaning is achieved straightforwardly, according to the procedure. Happy here is rather a paradoxical second order effect of unhappy performatives. It is for this reason that this thesis distinguishes this second order effect affirmative meaning that emerges in ‘pure’ subversion from Austin’s understanding of ‘happy’ by referring to it as the ‘absent present’ implicative level ‘happy 2’.

This distinction is crucial as it shows the implication at stake in the form of political agency involved in ‘pure’ subversion. Indeed, in the emergence of ‘happy 2’ as a second order effect of ‘pure’ insincerity we see how a sincere pessimistic statement about the possibility of emancipation given the power relations at stake is actually paradoxically produced. ‘Pure’ subversion as it might be embodied in African-American female RnB record-texts points out the difficulty for black women in white patriarchal America to challenge the externally defined racist and sexist norms about them through using traditional straightforwardly affirmative language. What is being implied in ‘pure’ subversion then is the affirmative statement ‘We can not speak!’ in an unequal social structure. It is to the extent that they expose the power relations at stake that Austin’s abusive speech acts as they are articulated within the context of metalocutionary implicature might be involved in emancipatory strategies. Before moving on to the second, analytical part of this chapter, we need to address
one more key issue related to the way the nature of the relationship between unhappy and happy in ‘pure’ subversion as it was sketched out above is handled in RnB record-texts.

If ‘pure’ subversion is to be brought out in RnB record-texts, a certain level of ambiguity needs to be maintained between ‘unhappiness’ and ‘happiness’, between insincerity and sincerity. Unlike for example in punk where subversion was expressed much more obviously (see Laing: 1985), in ‘pure’ subversive RnB a certain ambiguity needs to be maintained if the ‘absent present’ affirmative level ‘happy 2’ is to emerge. If the unhappy (insincere) is expressed too boldly then the sincere ‘absent present’ level will not emerge and the performance will not be achieved. For this reason, we can expect that subtlety will be a key characteristic of the use of the strategy of ‘pure’ subversion in RnB songs. While this may partly have to do with different genre conventions, arguably, the need for subtly is also related to power relations as black female RnB artists are disempowered by the dual effect of racism and sexism. Arguably, black female RnB artists cannot speak in the same straightforwardly ‘abusive’ way white male punk artists could. That is, we can expect that unhappiness will be expressed in a subtle way by contemporary African American female RnB singers in order to control the relationship between unhappy and happy which needs to remain ambiguous. Indeed, the emphasis in the strategy of ‘pure’ subversion is on how things are said (the performative), as opposed to what is said (the constative). And, since the success of ‘pure’ subversion in RnB depends on it being expressed subtly, we can expect that ‘expressive implicature’ (Robinson: 2006) – see Chapter 2 above - will be highly complex in the songs; more, we can expect that attention will be drawn to the complexity of the speech acts. In the next section we
will explore how ‘pure’ subversion might actually be embodied in black female RnB record texts with the example of Kelis’s song ‘Milkshake.’

‘Milkshake’ as ‘pure’ subversion

Until now the chapter has been concerned with demonstrating why it can be argued that what Austin calls ‘abusive’ speech acts may involve political agency. Drawing on this, the second section of the chapter will explore how the strategy of ‘pure’ subversion might be played out in contemporary RnB mainly through a close analysis of Kelis’s hit song ‘Milkshake’. The following analysis will do so by reviewing different aspects or components of ‘pure’ subversion in the record-text, different ways in which its unhappiness might be said to bring out the affirmative content ‘happy 2’ at stake. For practical purposes, a transcript of the lyrics to ‘Milkshake’ is provided below:

Chorus (2x)
My Milkshake brings all the boys to the yard
And they like it’s better than yours
Damn right it’s better than yours
I could teach you
But I have to charge

Verse 1
I know you want it
The thing that makes me
What the guys go crazy for
They lose their minds
The way I whine
I think it's time

La,La,La,La,La
Warm it up
La,La,La,La,La
The boys are waiting
La,La,La,La,La
Warm it up
La, La, La, La, La
The boys are waiting

**Chorus (2x)**
My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard
And they like it's better than yours
Damn right it's better than yours
I could teach you but I have to charge

**Verse 2**
I see you're on it
You want me to teach thee
Techniques that freaks these boys
It can't be bought
Just know things get caught
Watch if you're smart

La, La, La, La, La
Warm it up
La, La, La, La, La
The boys are waiting
La, La, La, La, La,
Warm it up
La, La, La, La, La
The boys are waiting

**Chorus (2x)**
My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard
And they like it's better than yours
Damn right it's better than yours
I could teach you but I have to charge

**Verse 3**
Oh once you get involved
Everyone will look this way-so
You must maintain your charm
Same time maintain your haylo
Just get the perfect balance
Plus what you have within
Then next his eyes are squint
Then he's picked up your scent

La, La, La, La, La
Warm it up
La, La, La, La, La
The boys are waiting
La, La, La, La, La
Warm it up
La, La, La, La, La
The boys are waiting

**Chorus (2x)**
My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard
And they like it better than yours
Damn right it's better than yours  
I could teach you but I have to charge.

This song was selected because it is representative of how ‘pure’ subversion might be employed in contemporary African American female RnB. While some RnB songs may contain some ‘purely’ subversive elements or sections, it could be argued that ‘Milkshake’ is a good example of an entirely unhappy or insincere song. For this reason analysing ‘Milkshake’ will be helpful for considering different ways in which a song might be ‘purely’ unhappy. This will be done by breaking down the song into different areas or aspects to see how they might be ‘purely’ subversive and how together they work to paradoxically produce an affirmative content, that is, how they lead to the emerges of the ‘absent present’ affirmative level ‘happy 2’. Three main interconnected aspects of ‘Milkshake’ will be successively examined: the different possible parts or facets of the performing subject; the issue of the implied addressee or audience; and finally, having established who speaks to whom, how and in what context, it should be possible to address the issue of the actual speech acts performed in the song and their illocutionary force.

The performing subject: multiple personas

As we saw in Chapter 4 the issue of who is doing the performance is essential in a performative analysis of record-texts. The performing subject is an important component of the performative-implicative dimension of a song. Therefore, exploring the different possible angles from which the song ‘Milkshake’ might be performed and how these relate to each other should be useful for bringing to light how ‘pure’
subversion might be embodied in record-texts. A useful starting point for exploring the assumed ‘pure’ unhappiness of this dimension of the song is Philip Ausländer’s (2006) three aspects of the performer in popular music, introduced in the previous chapter. To recap, Auslander sees the performer in popular music as made out of three layers: the performer as a real person or rather as a ‘lay person’; his/her performance persona, meaning the performer’s self-presentation; and the character(s) portrayed in the song’s story world (2006: 4). It was argued in Chapter 4 that the relation between the different facets of the performer in popular music is not necessarily as clear cut, and that for this reason Auslander’s typology would be used as a starting point, although we would expect the relationships he describes to vary from one socio-linguistic pole to the other in RnB.

Arguably, the role of the performance persona, as in the performer’s self-presentation, should be especially indicative of the performative-implicative power of a record-text. Indeed, as the various typologies of images of black womanhood found in media representation discussed in Chapter 1 suggest, self-presentation is a key aspect in black women’s on-going struggle for empowerment, self-definition and identity. In this sense we can expect that metalocutionary implicature, at stake in political agency, will be involved in the use of performance personae. It might be useful at this stage to refer back to Cheryl Keyes’s (2000) typology of the images used by African American female rappers introduced in Chapter 1 as it can help us frame Kelis’s performance persona and situate it within the black female tradition. To briefly recap, Keyes’ typology consists of four categories of African American women rappers found in rap music performance in the female rap tradition: the regal and self-assured African-centred ‘Queen Mother’; the chic, erotic, and independent ‘Fly Girl’; the assertive and defiant ‘Sista with Attitude’ – also called ‘bad girl’ (she is
often a reconstructor of the word ‘bitch’); and finally the ‘black lesbian’ who is concerned with issues of race and role-play. Kelis’s performance persona is that of an assertive, street-wise, sexy and chic urban black woman. Using Keyes’s typology it could be said that Kelis’s performance persona combines the chic, erotic, and independence of the ‘Fly Girl’ with the assertiveness and defiance of the ‘Sista with Attitude’ (or ‘Bitch’).

Cheryl Keyes’s discussion suggests that both the ‘Fly Girl’ and the ‘Sista with Attitude’ are indeed highly reflexive personas. The aim of this analysis is to show how Kelis’s persona of the ‘Fly Sista with Attitude’ plays a role in the performative-implicative power of the song ‘Milkshake’. It will be argued that the performance persona sets up the tone of the performance; it gives an indication as to how the performance is meant to be taken. As it will be demonstrated throughout the analysis, many elements or components of the song ‘Milkshake’ suggest that the tone of the performance persona is ‘purely’ insincere. In order to explore how ‘pure’ subversion and so metalocutionary implicature is articulated through the performance persona, it might be useful to refer to the issue of the character(s) acted out in the song, the third facet of the performer in Auslander’s typology.

It will be argued that Kelis’s highly reflexive performance persona of the assertive, defiant, and sexy ‘Fly Sista with Attitude’ is articulated through the use of multiple characters that are acted out in the song ‘Milkshake’. The main character in the song seems to be that of the sexual black woman. However, this manifest character

---

8 Used in this way Auslander’s performance persona in popular music is not unlike Seymour Chatman’s (1978) concept of the ‘implied author’ in the narrative form. Chatman explains that the implied author, who should not be confused with the real author, establishes the norms of the narrative. The implied author is, like the implied reader, always present in the narrative and it is ‘reconstructed by the reader from the narrative’ – the narrator and everything else in the narrative have a certain tone, attitude, ideas, etc and these help the reader reconstruct the implied author (148-9). Drawing on this, it could be argued that the performance persona is the implied performer of a song and that it establishes the norms of the performance and is reconstructed by the implied audience from the record-text.
appears to be contrasted by an implicit character, that of the little black girl. As we
will find out later with the textual analysis of the actual speech acts brought off in
‘Milkshake’, these two contradictory characters (which articulate Kelis’s performance
persona) may be seen as being involved in a complex implied dialogue.

It will be useful to refer to Barbara Bradby’s work on this topic as she
shows how the division of the performing subject is indeed part of a longer tradition
of female popular music culture. In ‘Do-Talk and Don’t-Talk: The Division of the
Subject in Girl-Group Music’ (1988), Barbara Bradby gives a linguistic analysis of
the early 1960s ‘girl-group’ songs, the dominant black female RnB style of the early
1960s. Bradby’s main argument is that, unlike male group singing, in girl groups the
subject is divided against itself. Bradby looks at this division of the subject in ‘girl
group’ songs by analysing sequences of pronouns in the lyrics of a sample of these
songs and by examining the relationship between lead singer and chorus in the ‘girl
group’. Through her analysis Bradby challenges Frith and McRobbie’s version of rock
history which presents men’s music as being in conflict with the dominant cultural
forms, as bringing innovations and women’s music as tending to reproduce
mainstream cultural forms. She opposes their association of masculinity with sexual
expression, and femininity with sexual repression, and she also contradicts the
argument that, in rock music, the female listener is necessarily ‘masculinised’ by the
address of the songs.

Bradby’s analysis is useful as she shows how these ‘girl-group’ songs
constitute a gendered, feminine space in and through their linguistic organisation. She
shows how the fluidity of the subject in these songs articulates a female culture.
However, whereas Bradby argues that, in ‘girl group’ songs, subject position and the
use of pronouns shift in a continuous and relatively unplanned manner, what is being
argued here is that variations in the relationship between singer as ‘lay person’, persona and character are a matter of strategy, a matter of performative-implicative potential. Moreover, the ambiguity necessary for ‘pure’ subversion to be achieved, i.e. for the ‘absent present’ implicative level ‘happy 2’ level to emerge obliquely, involves contradiction as much as continuity.

So far then the analysis has been concerned with presenting the range of possible facets or positions from which the performer is doing the performance, and with the relationship between these different facets of the performer, how its ambiguous nature helps control the subtle relationship between ‘happy’ and ‘unhappy’. In this sense we have explored how Auslander’s typology works out at the subversive socio-linguistic pole of the continuum. In the next sub-section, the discussion will move to the related issue of the implied addressee of the song.

The implied addressee

It will be a useful starting point to deal with the issue of the implied addressee in ‘Milkshake’, by referring to Austin’s ‘conditions for happy performatives’. Austin explains that to bring off an action successfully is not only to utter certain words; the circumstances must be appropriate for a performative to be happily brought off. Without claiming to be exhaustive, Austin lists some of the necessary rules that need to be satisfied if a performative is to be happily brought off. He groups these rules into three sets, however only the first two sets are relevant at this stage of the discussion. Austin calls them rules A and rules B.
(A. 1) There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances, and further, (A. 2) the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked.
(B. 1) The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and (B. 2) completely (Austin, 1976: 14-15).

Austin’s rules or conditions are meant to apply to performatives brought off straightforwardly, on a primary, ‘happy’ speech act stage. However, they are equally applicable to subverted speech acts brought off as a second order effect. Austin’s rules A have to do mainly with there being a particular conventional procedure and appropriate context and with the fact that the person performing the act must be the right kind of person for invoking the particular procedure. It could be argued that until now, we have been dealing with aspects relating to rules A as they might apply to a subverted speech act stage of ‘happy 2’ performatives. The issue of appropriateness of the person invoking the procedure has also been covered as the different facets of the performer were reviewed and their relationship was described in the previous sub-section. Rules B’s, on the other hand, have to do with the participants or listeners being familiar with and recognising the procedure that is being invoked and so responding adequately. In other words, rules B’s are audience-orientated; they are concerned with the relationship between performer and audience.

We will now return to the case of ‘Milkshake’ in order to verify how rules B might similarly apply to subverted speech acts. The fact that the success of a speech act partly depends on the listener being familiar with it and recognising it and reacting appropriately suggests that we can assume that the song ‘Milkshake’ should have inscribed in it an implied addressee, that is, an audience to whom the ‘pure’ subverted speech acts are directed at and who is expected to recognise them as such. In other words, the implied addressee of the song is expected to be or at least become familiar
with and recognise the 'pure' subversive procedures invoked in 'Milkshake' and so the way the song is meant to be taken, that is, as a form of second order effect social criticism. The implied addressee is expected to realise that speech acts such as 'My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard. And they like it better than yours' are not implicit happy sexual references intended to please a male audience and perpetuate black women's objectification but rather that they are ironic speech acts intended to raise political consciousness. Therefore, it could be argued that the implied addressee of the song, the audience the song is attempting to move to political consciousness is primarily an RnB audience and, it can be assumed, primarily a black female audience familiar with RnB conventions and the subtle ways in which it brings out 'pure' subversion.

Having talked about the audience-related conditions that need to be fulfilled for 'happy 2' to emerge and 'pure' subversion to be achieved, the discussion will now consider what happens when this is not the case. We ought, in other words, to consider the possibility of failure of the strategy. For this, it might be useful to go back to Austin's conditions for happy performatives. As mentioned in Chapter 4, Austin argues that offending against these rules leads to unhappy performatives. He however distinguishes between two types of unhappy performatives, depending on which sets of rules are being offended against. He calls 'abuses' the type of unhappy performatives that are achieved, but through an abuse of the procedure, that is, through insincerity – the variety of unhappy performatives, this thesis argues, found in 'pure' subversive lyrics. The other type of unhappy performative, Austin calls 'misfires'. Unlike 'abuses', 'misfires' are acts that are not achieved. 'When the utterance is a misfire, the procedure which we purport to invoke is disallowed or is
botched; and our act.... is void or without effect, &c. we speak of our acts as a
purported act, or perhaps an attempt....’ (16). Austin explains that ‘misfires’ happen
when acts are performed with sincerity but rules A and/or rules B are not fulfilled.
Austin is concerned with sincere ‘happy’ speech acts here.

However it will be argued that, like straightforwardly affirmative speech
acts, subversive speech acts can ‘misfire’, but that this is more likely to be caused by
failures to fulfil audience-related rules B than failures to fulfil rules A. For as we
have seen in the case of ‘pure’ subversion what is at stake is a kind of re-writing of
rules A, a reflexive inversion of the speech act for ironic, even nihilistic, effect. In
other words RnB singers competently invoke existing unhappy procedures which are
(they hope) recognised within the genre of RnB, and they do so with the intention of
producing ‘happy 2’, i.e. achieving ‘pure’ subversion, in songs. What may, however,
make ‘pure’ subversive lyrics ‘misfire’ is if audience-related rules B are not fulfilled.
In other words, ‘pure’ subversive lyrics may ‘misfire’ but only to the extent that the
actual listener is not the implied addressee of the song and fails to recognise the ‘pure’
subversive lyrics for what they are. To go back to the example, if a listener is not
familiar with RnB and its conventions, s/he might not pick up on the unhappy
elements of the song and interpret the lyrics as straightforwardly affirmative rather
than abusive. If subversion is not recognised, ‘My milkshake brings all the boys to the
yard. And they like it better than yours’ may be interpreted by the listener as Kelis’
sincere boasting performance directed at a rival woman within the song, with the
intention to tease an implied male audience.

In other words, whether ‘pure’ subversion will be achieved or ‘misfire’
will largely depend on the kind of audience. If particular listeners cannot identify with
the implied addressee of the song, then ‘pure’ subversion will ‘misfire’ and the song’s
political implication will not emerge for that audience. To refer back to Chapter 1, in his discussion of female rapper Lil’ Kim’s subversive use of the image of the ‘bitch’ by enacting it and pushing it to its limits, therefore creating a caricature, Shaviro (2005) explains that although ironic and subversive, her persona is problematic because drag or caricature may be subversive but it is also conformist.

To the extent that Lil’ Kim is performing ‘blackness’ and ‘femininity’ for a white male audience, her mode of self-presentation cannot help being problematic. No matter how campy and ironic, drag exhibitionism ultimately does not break with an economy of gender based upon the objectification of black women’s bodies (177).

Considering the above discussion which dealt with the issue of audience reception within a speech-act theory framework, it could be argued that Shaviro’s critique is actually of the possibility a ‘misfired’ interpretation of Lil’ Kim’s performance style. However, the fact that the subversive nature of a performance may be lost on a particular section of the audience which does not recognise the genre conventions does not necessarily mean that subversion is problematic and conformist. What surely counts is the performative-implicative power of any given record-text, in other words, its facility to subtly, yet with the strongest possible perlocutionary force, to ‘reach across’ to a broad enough constituency of listeners. It is such power, this thesis argues, that is involved in the record-texts that we have selected for analysis. At stake in all of them is how political agency emerges in and through the contradictory nature of representation. If that is so then we can avoid the dilemma of having to choose between either successfully carried performative acts or simple misfires. Rather there will tend to be a complex mix of interpretations among the audience, all of which may be anticipated by the performer.
So far the discussion has been centred round, on the one hand, presenting the different possible positions from which Kelis might be performing and how these relate to each other and, on the other hand, discussing the issue of audience reception and who might be the implied addressee in 'Milkshake'. In other words, the analysis has been concerned with bringing to light what might be described as a second order equivalent of what Austin calls the 'conditions for happy performatives'. In the next and last section, the analysis will move to the issue of the actual speech acts and their illocutionary force or meaning.

The speech acts and ‘other ways’ of expression

While the proposition that the meaning of what is said (the constative) depends on the way it is said (the performative) is a basic principle of speech-act theory that applies to all speech acts, it seems especially true in the case of ‘pure’ subversive speech acts achieved through a second order, subverted stage. Indeed, rather than being inscribed simply through the ostensible ‘unhappy’ level of the speech acts, the implicative level in ‘pure’ subversion is ‘absent present’ and emerges paradoxically from the subtly ambiguous way in which the insincere lyrics are being performed. Key here are musical elements, which are beyond the normal territory of speech-act theory. That said, we can find hints in Austin as to how this might be the case.

Austin argued that performative acts may be realised in different ways than by uttering words. He explained that performatives may be achieved verbally, by the use of speech devices other than the explicit performative verb, i.e. other than performative formulas such as ‘I promise you…’, ‘I warn you…’, which are actually not that commonly used in everyday language where illocutionary force is mainly
implied. Austin lists as other, more common speech devices than explicit performative verbs: the mood, the tone of voice, cadence and emphasis, adverbs and adverbial phrases, connecting particles, accompaniments of the utterance, and the circumstances of the utterance (1976: 73-76). Musical expression, then, plays a similar part to these factors identified by Austin and, as we will see, is key in bringing out performatives in record-texts. While musical expression is important right through the continuum, it will be especially important at the poles where implication emerges as an 'absent present'.

This is because of the facility of musical expression to subvert ostensible meaning, and so work 'against' language. Interestingly, Austin anticipates this in the following passages: ‘In very many cases it is possible to perform an act of exactly the same kind not by uttering words, whether written or spoken, but in some other way’ (8). ‘Strictly speaking, there cannot be an illocutionary act unless the means employed are conventional, and so the means for achieving it non-verbally must be conventional’ (119). According to Austin, then, performatives may be achieved ‘in some other way’ so long as this involves shared or recognisable means. The notion that performatives may be achieved in non-verbal ways is important as this thesis is concerned with performativity in the record-text. Indeed, the speech-act analysis will demonstrate how non-verbal aspects such as musical setting, para-musical sphere, and voice quality are indeed at play in the performative-implicative power of record texts.

Moreover, as it was argued earlier, the use of performance personae, another non-verbal aspect, is also involved in the performative-implicative dimension of records-texts. The performance persona is actually a good place to start the speech-act analysis of 'Milkshake'. It was argued that the highly reflexive nature Kelis’s performance persona seems to be articulated through the subtly contradictory
relationship between the manifest character of the sexual black woman and the implicit character of the little black girl. This subtle contradiction can be found articulated in four different ways in four different parts of the song. First is the Chorus which appears to simultaneously enact both characters of the sexual black woman and the little black girl. Second is Verses 1 and 2 in which Kelis’s performance persona appears in the form of the enactment of the sexual black woman alone. A third appearance of Kelis’s persona is found in what will be referred to as the ‘La, la, la, la, la’ section, repeated after each verse, which seems to reference little girls’ songs. And, finally, in Verse 3 we have yet another, fourth, Kelis persona in the shape of what sounds like a somewhat distorted version of the sexual black woman.

The four manifestations of Kelis the persona described above can be seen as engaged in a complex implicit contradictory dialogue in the way they throw the characters of the sexual black woman and the little black girl into contrast. The analysis will show how contradiction is indeed at play both within and between each of the four instances of Kelis the persona. It is this contradictory dialogue in ‘Milkshake’ that will maintain the necessary ambivalence between happy and unhappy for ‘pure’ subversion to be brought off, that is, for the ‘absent present’ implicative level ‘happy 2’ to emerge. To show how this might be the case, it would be useful to consider what each one of our four instances of Kelis the persona is doing. The first of our four instances of Kelis the persona that is heard in the song is the Chorus which, it was argued, appear to simultaneously enact both characters of the manifest sexual black woman and the implicit little black girl. It might be useful to recap the lyrics of the Chorus:

My Milkshake brings all the boys to the yard
And they like it better than yours
Damn right it's better than yours
I could teach you
But I have to charge
(x 2)

It was argued earlier that we could expect that, even more so than in ordinary language, explicit performative formulas will not be so common in song lyrics. And, indeed, all of the speech acts performed in this Chorus are implicit in that it is not made explicit by the appropriate performative verb or formula (as in ‘I promise you...’, ‘I order you to...’) what illocutionary act is being performed. For example, it is not made explicit that, within the context of the story world created by the song, the line ‘But I have to charge’ is meant as a warning by using the appropriate explicit performative formula ‘But I warn you that I have to charge’. We know that this line is meant as a warning to a certain extent through convention, but also from the way in which it is expressed musically, as well as through its immediate context, that is, the other speech acts and performative elements that make up the Chorus.

However, the speech acts in the Chorus are also indirect in that their actual illocutionary force is not stated. In affirming ‘My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard...’ or warning ‘But I have to charge’, Kelis’s persona as it appears in the Chorus is ostensibly performing the illocutionary act of boasting. In singing the Chorus, she is showing off the fact that she possesses desirable breasts and/or good skills in performing a certain sexual favour, which she refers to as ‘milkshake’. However, this illocutionary act of boasting may be understood in two different and contradictory ways. On an ostensible level, the illocutionary act of boasting may indeed be understood straightforwardly (as actual boasting) and the lyrics as implicitly being of a sexual nature. The voice is rough, thick, breathy and high-pitched, all of which
suggest a feminine woman voice, and the tone is seductive and teasing. From this perspective, it is then the character of the sexual black woman which is enacted within the song, and the addressee within the song’s story world a rival woman.

However, more is being performed by the Kelis persona of the Chorus. It can be argued that this character of the sexual black woman which is being enacted through the performance of ostensibly boasting speech acts with sexual connotations is being thrown into contrast by the enactment of the implicit character of the little black girl. This opposed character of the little black girl is suggested mainly by the musical expression, that is, by the way the lyrics are being sung and the context created by the song. The rough, thick, breathy and high-pitched voice of the feminine woman seems indeed to be thrown into contrast by the speech-like or rap-like phrasing and playful tone of the voice, which seem to refer to little girls songs. This reference to little girls songs is also suggested by the relatively fast tempo (110 bpm) — as in a skipping songs perhaps — and strong repetition of the Chorus throughout the song. Actually it could be argued that the Chorus, which also opens the song, constructs a school or neighbourhood playground context — we could almost visualise a playground with little girls singing, hand-clapping and playing jump rope. Indeed, as well as the reference to little girls songs, the Chorus also features para-musical sounds such as tinkling sounds, which could be referring to bicycle bells and which are actually heard throughout the song. Although, from the perspective of the ostensibly sexual meaning of the Chorus and as suggested by the line ‘But I have to charge’, the tinkling sounds could also be referring to a cash register.

The fact that the contrasting character and world of the little black girl is suggested by the way the song is expressed is not surprising as indeed, as it was explained earlier, from a speech-act theory perspective it is not the manifest or
grammatical meaning of an utterance (what is said) that determines its illocutionary force (meaning). Rather it is how it is said. It is how the lyrics are being performed or expressed that determines their illocutionary force or meaning, how they are meant to be taken. In other words, the illocutionary force of what is said by the character of the sexual black woman (implicitly sexual boasting speech acts) is actually subtly contradicted by the ironising effect created by the voice of the little black girl suggested by the references to handclapping songs and the playground environment.

In other words, the speech acts are abusive. The illocutionary force of boasting (the ostensible illocutionary force) is abusive, and the actual illocutionary force of the speech acts is to ironise the boasting (the implicative illocutionary force). And it is the ambivalence between the seemingly happy boasting of the sexual black woman and their unhappy ironising by the character of the little black girl that paradoxically leads to the emergence of ‘happy 2’, in other what is implied through this performative strategy. It is the subtly ambivalent meaning of these abusive speech acts that ultimately leads to the emergence of the ‘absent present’ implicative level that we are calling ‘happy 2’.

In The Games Black Girls Play (2006), Kira Gaunt, highlighting the way girls and women have been ignored in most histories of African American music, argues that black girls’ play is actually key to understanding African American music and expressive culture. Gaunt argues that black girls’ playing games, which constitute a black female space, have influenced contemporary styles of popular music usually associated with men and masculinity such as hip-hop. Male rappers, she argues, borrow from the black girls songs and handclapping games they would have heard growing up. Gaunt notes that while girls do ‘tend to borrow from popular jingles and male-voiced songs’, on the other hand, once they become adults, they do not borrow
or use this female realm of music-making they were once part of. She explains that ‘girls’ musical games help them learn to identify with men (rather than women), to view men and masculinity as powerful, and to view heterosexual relations as the norm’ (17). The song ‘Milkshake’ is an example that this is not necessarily the case. ‘Milkshake’ does not only borrow from black girls’ musical games, it directly references them in the way it performatively recreates a whole universe of black girls’ musical play. And what is more, the reference to girls’ musical games helps to generate an ironising implicative force in ‘Milkshake’.

We have just seen how the ambivalence between happy and unhappy at stake in ‘pure’ subversion may be maintained within speech acts. We will now see how the same effect may also be achieved between speech acts. Indeed the contradictory dialogue found at play within the Chorus, the first of our four instances of Kelis’s persona, may also be found between, on the one hand, Verses 1 and 2 and, on the other hand, what we call the ‘La, la, la, la’ section, respectively, the second and third ways Kelis’s persona appears in ‘Milkshake’. That is between, on the one hand, Kelis the persona as the single character of the sexual black woman and, on the other hand, Kelis the persona as the single character of the little black girl, respectively. Both Verses 1 and 2 are directly followed by the ‘La, la, la, la’ section:

Verse 1
I know you want it
The thing that makes me
What the guys go crazy for
They lose their minds
The way I whine
I think it’s time

La,La,La,La,La
Warm it up
The speech acts of Verses 1 and 2, which enact this character of the sexually assertive black woman, are or rather appear, if considered independently from the rest of the record-text, to be straightforwardly affirmative.

Speech acts such as ‘I know you want it. The thing that makes me. What the guys go crazy for’ in Verse 1 or ‘I see you’re on it. You want me to teach thee. Techniques that freaks these boys’ in Verse 2 appear (and to a certain extent are) straightforward speech acts. Indeed, if we try to determine their illocutionary force without taking into account other speech acts with which they might be involved in a performative dialogue, we will find that it (their illocutionary force) is not, strictly speaking, abusive. On their own, the boasting speech acts seem quite happy. Moreover they are unambiguously of a sexual nature. If the reference to ‘milkshake’ in the Chorus could have been interpreted both as having sexual connotations and as the flavoured milky drink in a playground context, in these two verses it is made overtly clear that the boasting speech acts are of a sexual nature. Indeed, the character of the little black girl, which subtly ironised the meaning of the Chorus and kept it
ambivalent, has disappeared in the verses. The way the speech acts are expressed (straight, feminine voice) is in alignment with their illocutionary force (sexual boasting). After the Chorus, the tone and phrasing changes in Verses 1 and 2. The verses are performed in a serious, grown up, and seductive voice, as opposed to a playful, childish voice. The speech acts are sung, as opposed to the speech-like and playful delivery of the Chorus. Thus, unlike in the ‘double-voiced’ Chorus, the features of the feminine woman’s voice (thick, rough, breathy, and high-pitched) are not contrasted by references to little girls playing songs.

However, if we take into account how the sexual black woman of Verses 1 and 2 relates to the repeated ‘La, la, la, la, la’ part, where Kelis is singing in a childlike fashion, then we hear a strongly ironising force at work. Its effect is that the speech acts that enact the sexual black woman of Verses 1 and 2 are rendered much less straightforwardly affirmative. In fact, the way the ‘La, la, la, la, la’ section interrupts the verses implies a contradictory dialogue between these opposed characters – woman and girl. This becomes clearer as we listen: the words ‘La, la, la, la, la. Warm it up. La, la, la, la, la. The boys are waiting’ are delivered, rather than sung, in the same speech-like style and playful tone of the little girls’ songs which we find in the Chorus. The reference is made even stronger by the repeated and nonsensical nature of the phrase ‘La, la, la, la, la’, typical of little girls’ game songs. Moreover, whereas the foregrounded/loud positioning of the feminine woman’s voice of the verses suggests intimacy, the little black girl’s voice in the following ‘La, la, la, la, la’ section is not foregrounded anymore, so evoking a communal sphere – such as a neighbourhood or school playground. This communal sphere is also suggested by the fact that the ‘La, la, la, la, la’ is double-tracked.
There is then an unhappy dialogue between, on the one hand, Kelis the sexual black woman of Verses 1 and 2 and, on the other, Kelis the little black girl of the almost overlapping ‘La, la, la, la, la’ section, respectively, the second and third instances of this Kelis persona. And thus the ambivalence created here is actually of the same order as the tension that is set up between ostensible and implicative illocutionary force produced internally within the speech acts of the Chorus, the first way Kelis’s persona is articulated.

Before moving on to the fourth and final appearance of Kelis the persona, in order to explore yet another way implicature might be at play in the ‘pure’ subversion of ‘Milkshake’, one last point could be made about this ‘La, la, la, la, la’ section. In the above interpretation, it was described as unambiguously referring to little girls’ songs and, therefore, as not having sexual connotations. However, and this is especially the case if we consider the ambiguous meaning of the record-text as a whole, it would be hard to not also hear the character of the sexual black woman in the ‘La, la, la, la, la’ section. Indeed, the lyrics ‘Warm it up’ and ‘The boys are waiting’, which it includes, could be as implicitly sexual as, for instance, the opening ‘I know you want it. The thing that makes me. What the guys go crazy for’ in Verse 1. Moreover, while the tone of the voice may be described as playful and innocent, it can also be said to be teasing and seductive. A contrast which actually makes the ‘La, la, la, la, la’ section sound a bit cynical and disturbing and, as this is done subtly, ultimately more ambivalent. Indeed, if anything, this uncertainty about the character or character(s) heard in the ‘La, la, la, la, la’ section only adds to the overall ambivalent nature of the song.

The fourth and last instance of Kelis the persona identified in this speech act analysis of ‘Milkshake’, can be found in Verse 3 which, as we will see, pushes the
cynicism even further, perhaps making the abusive nature of the speech acts more obvious as we reach the end of the song. At first glance, it appears as though in Verse 3 we are dealing with the character of the sexual black woman alone and that Verse 3 is therefore plainly and simply a continuation of Kelis the persona as it appeared in Verse 1 and 2.

Verse 3
Oh once you get involved
Everyone will look this way-so
You must maintain your charm
Same time maintain your halo
Just get the perfect balance
Plus what you have within
Then next his eyes are squint
Then he's picked up your scent

Indeed, the speech acts performed in Verse 3 appear to be quite similar to those performed in Verses 1 and 2 (they are also obliquely of a sexual nature); they seem to be resuming the narrative started in Verses 1 and 2 in a unambiguously continuous fashion. In this narrative the sexual black woman’s (ostensible) boastings in Verses 1 and 2 would be followed by advice, warnings and forecasts in Verse 3 in a progressive and uninterrupted manner. In other words, it appears as though Kelis’s persona in Verse 3 is articulated in the same way as in Verses 1 and 2, which would suggest that ‘Milkshake’ is actually rather less political, less concerned with subverting the song’s ostensible message than we have so far suggested. However, reaching such conclusion would be failing to appreciate the complex and subtle way in which subversion is played out in the song.

Indeed, if we look at the way Verse 3 is expressed musically, we see that ambivalence is actually maintained and what is more in Verse 3 it is maintained in yet a different way. Whereas in Verses 1 and 2 the abusive nature of the sexual black
woman's boasting speech acts is subtly expressed through their contradictory relation with the almost overlapping little girl’s ‘La, la, la, la’ part, here the warnings, forecasts, and advice are rendered abusive through being expressed in a sonically distorted way. This distorted effect in Verse 3 is suggested by two aspects. First, the recording simulates a tape being slowed down so that the voice gets very low-pitched. Second, the voice is remarkably foregrounded and the tone is rather dramatic and disturbing. What we hear in Verse 3 then is a distorted version of the character of the sexual black woman enacted in Verses 1 and 2. In other words, we at once hear continuity and change, that is, ambivalence. The way in which the voice of this character of the sexual black woman is distorted suggests that Verse 3 may be referring to a patriarchal male voice. Indeed, these advices and warning speech acts about how women ought to seduce men expressed in an authoritative, low-pitched foregrounded voice could be those of a man whose patriarchal views are being ridiculed through the comical effect created by a tape being slowed down. This uncertainty about who is doing the performance shows how Kelis’ s performance persona is indeed thoroughly shape-shifting and deceitful, that is, a trickster. The ambiguity between happy and unhappy at stake in ‘pure’ subversion is then maintained.

Yet from a slightly different angle, it could be argued that the ambiguity about who is doing the performance in Verse 3 has quite another effect. That is to say, the sonic distortion makes the cynicism of the performance relatively less subtle, which has the effect of bringing to light the abusive force of the speech acts of advice, warning, and forecast a bit more boldly. Kelis’s persona in the form of the distorted sexual black woman/patriarchal figure in Verse 3, it seems, draws attention a bit more obviously to the complexity of the speech acts, that is, to the high level of ‘expressive
implicature’ (see Robinson; 2006: 164) at play in ‘Milkshake’. Kelis the persona in Verse 3 seems to be a bit more obviously drawing attention to itself, to the fact that it is a trickster. It seems to be implicitly saying: ‘In case you haven’t noticed yet, in saying all these things I was taking the piss….’. It seems as the song progresses, its ‘pure’ subversive nature is made a little bit more ostensible – as if to test the limits of how boldly the ‘pure’ subversion can be expressed without failing. Nevertheless, the ambiguity is maintained until the end. Actually it could even be argued that it is reinforced at the end of the song and this is achieved without the use of words.

For after the heavy repetition of the ‘La, la, la, la, la’ part that ends the song, a combination of para-musical sounds can be heard. The tinkling sounds heard throughout the song and which were interpreted as signifying children’s bicycle bells (or a cash register), are now heard in combination with the sound of liquid pouring – a milkshake maybe. The sound of the liquid pouring and the line ‘Warm it up’ from the ‘La, la, la, la, la’ part seem to suggest that now the tinkling sound could be referring to a microwave alarm, taking the listener away from the environment of the playground. The fact that we might not be in a playground anymore is also suggested by the introduction of drum sounds which seem to reference Indian music, suggesting sensuality and contributing to the creating of the soundscape of a more adult environment such as a party. However, on the other hand, it could also be argued that the drum sounds reference handclapping, which would bring us back to little girls playing songs and the playground. This confusing mix of para-musical sounds at the end of the song seem to be performing something. Indeed, we saw earlier how Austin argued that performatives may also be achieved non-verbally: ‘In very many cases it is possible to perform an act of exactly the same kind not by uttering words, whether written or spoken, but in some other way’ (8). In response to Verse 3, and actually in
response to the song as a whole, the para-musical sounds seem to be implicitly asking: ‘Or was I [taking the piss]...?’, an open question that performs by maintaining, and even reinforcing, the ambiguity until the end.

Throughout the analysis we have thus seen how what is at play in ‘Milkshake’ is indeed a form of ‘trick’ manipulation of voices. Kelis’ s shape-shifting performance persona emerges as a trickster. Trickery, arguably a highly performative-implicative strategic tool, is a major aspect of African American symbolic culture. Trickery, a practice rooted in African culture, has long been used by African American people as a way to trick whites (see Gates; 1988). We have seen how it has been used in the black female tradition in Chapter 1 through the examples of black female travelling tent show comedian ‘Moms’ Mabley’ s use of the mother figure and black female rapper Queen Latifah’s use of the ‘Queen B’ trickster figure.

Here we have seen how the speech-act theory based continuum of performative-implicative strategies can help us explore how the complex practice of trickery actually operates. Breaking down the song into Kelis’ s persona’s various manifestations (and the ‘explicit sexual black woman/implicit little black girl’ binary on which they are based) was useful for demonstrating the way Kelis’ s trickster persona is articulated and so the way it is involved in the performative-implicative dimension of ‘pure’ subversive ‘Milkshake’.

Drawing on and opening out the speech-act theory framework and the concept of the continuum introduced in Chapter 4, the aim of this chapter was to explore the performative-implicative strategy of ‘pure’ subversion as it is embodied in black
female RnB record-texts. This was done mainly through the analysis of Kelis’s ‘Milkshake’, very much a ‘pure’ subversive song.

The aim of the analysis was to show how ‘Milkshake’ exposes the power relations at stake in a racist and patriarchal social structure to the extent that it points out black women’s relative inability (as women and as black) to speak directly and openly through straightforward language. This was demonstrated by showing how this ‘absent present’ implicative level ‘happy 2’, paradoxically emerges from the ambivalence between happy and unhappy maintained throughout the record-text. The analysis of ‘Milkshake’ has in other words demonstrated that even at the nihilistic socio-linguistic pole of the continuum an affirmative content is produced. This, it is argued, challenges Stuart Hall’s argument that subversion ‘is more concerned with the forms of racial representation than with introducing a new content’ (1997: 274). For it seems that some substantive things about racism, its nature and extent can actually be said through metalocutionary implicature.

Another aim of the analysis was to demonstrate how Auslander’s typology of the facets of the performer in popular music works out at the subversive, nihilistic pole of the continuum in black female RnB record-texts. Indeed the focus of the analysis was to show that the performance persona is indeed an important aspect of the performative-implicative dimension of record-texts. It demonstrated how Kelis’s shape-shifting and undefinable performance persona or personae, a trickster figure, is heavily involved in maintaining the ambivalence between happy and unhappy at stake in ‘pure’ subversion, thus showing how the relationship between the different roles of the performing subject in ‘pure’ subversive RnB record-texts is anything but clear-cut.

Having explored how implicature is played out at the subversive socio-linguistic pole of the continuum, in the following chapter, moving away from the pole,
we will consider other ways of creating meaning through subverted language in the form of affirmative subversions; that is the next position to the right on the continuum.
Chapter 6: Affirmative Subversion

Moving away from the pole and inside the continuum, still on the subversive side, we find another way of creating meaning through subverted speech acts, in the form of what we will refer to as affirmative subversions. The aim of this sixth chapter is to explore affirmative subversions as they might emerge in African American female RnB record-texts. As we saw in Chapter 4 when we introduced the continuum, in affirmative subversions the implicative level (‘happy 2>…’) does not emerge as an ‘absent present’ but is rather inscribed or indeed affirmed in and through the ostensible level of the speech acts. That is to say, in affirmative subversions, meaning, and so the fact that what is being criticised in the speech acts is racism, is actually made more or less explicit. It is in this sense that affirmative subversions differ from ‘pure’ subversions where the issue of race is not ostensibly affirmed.

To the extent that it relies on a subverted speech act stage, the strategy of affirmative subversion suggests a realisation of black women’s relative inability to speak directly through straightforward language – as is indeed exposed in ‘pure’ subversion. On the other hand, and unlike ‘pure’ subversion, in the sense that
affirmative subversions are ‘impure’ (they work in and through the contradictory nature of racist social relations), they suggest a willingness to engage in the constant process that is the struggle for emancipation and identity in a hostile world. In other words, affirmative subversions suggest a different, though interrelated way of dealing with the concrete reality of racism than that found at the pole in the form of ‘pure’ subversions.

The aim of this chapter then is to explore how the social implications suggested by the use of affirmative subversions may be found in black female RnB record-texts. Like the previous one, this chapter will contain two main sections. The first section will consider how the performative-implicative strategy of affirmative subversion is articulated. Drawing on this, the second section of the chapter will consist of an exploration of how affirmative subversions might be embodied and brought off in black female RnB record-texts.

**From unhappy to ‘happy ...’**

Like ‘pure’ subversion (or nihilism), affirmative subversions have long been part of black symbolic culture. This implicative subversive strategy is for example commonly used in the rap tradition in the form of appropriation of denigrating racist images through subversive performative language and practice. In her typology of images used by African American female rappers, presented in Chapter 1 of this thesis, Keyes (2000) explains, regarding the image of the ‘Sista with attitude’, that ‘[f]emale MCs revise[d] the standard definition of bitch, from an “aggressive woman who challenges male authority”... to an assertive female who subverts patriarchal rule’ (263). Using the speech act perspective developed in this thesis we might say that Keyes’s African American female rappers’ appropriation and positive identification with the denigrating
image of the 'bitch' are achieved through affirmative subversive language and practice. They are thus ultimately a way of critically affirming the concrete reality of racism. And, it is this social implication, the thesis argues, that is centrally at stake in performing such affirmative subversions.

To show why this is the case, it will be useful to draw a parallel with the male hip-hop tradition. Indeed the same social implication is arguably at stake in male gangsta rappers' appropriation of the racist image of the 'nigga'. Tommy L. Lott (1999), who explains that the image of the black criminal in gangsta rap is a metaphor for resistance, argues that '[t]he appropriation and respelling [from 'nigger'] of the term 'nigga' by gangsta rappers displays resistance by embracing and rejecting the social meaning of this term' (105). Therefore, like with female rappers' appropriation of 'bitch', in the way they engage with the ongoing process that is the struggle for emancipation and identity, male gangsta rappers are critically affirming the social fact of racism as they reclaim the term 'nigga'. Indeed, rap's appropriation of the terms 'bitch' and 'nigga' suggests an engagement with, rather than a rejection of, the possibility of social change through the use of performative language. It affirms the possibility of performing identity even while this means embracing the contradictory nature of the racist social relations at play. It is in this different, though related implicative sense that ('impure') affirmative subversion, like 'pure' subversion, is ultimately critical of racism.

Having clarified the issue of the social implication centrally at stake in affirmative subversions, we can turn to the question of how it might be brought off performatively. The two examples above suggest that it is exaggeration that is at stake in the reversal of meaning in the terms 'bitch' and 'nigga'. However, as we will see later, it is not the
only way affirmative subversion might be brought off. Indeed, because the continuum involves continuity between two poles, affirmative subversion could be considered to vary in the sense that we could imagine many degrees or ways in which speech acts might embody the performative-implicative strategy. In this sense, affirmative subversion is a general term for the many 'impure' sub-strategies that might exist between 'pure' subversion and the other side of the performative continuum, that is, the affirmative side. While 'pure' subversion is a point at the subversive end of the continuum, affirmative subversion covers the whole space between 'pure' subversion and the affirmative side of the continuum. A diagram might be helpful here:

```
  'Pure' subversion
      +-----------------+----------------------+
      |                |                        |
      |                |                        |
      |                |                        |
      |                |                        |
      |                |                        |
      |                |                        |
      | Affirmative subversion |                    |
      |                |                        |
      |                |                        |
      |                |                        |
      +-----------------+----------------------+
```

As we move away from the 'pure' subversive pole we can expect to find various degrees to which the implicative level is present in affirmative subversions – going from the almost 'absent present' to the more obviously present as we near the middle of the continuum. We can also expect that the level of ambiguity of the speech acts will decrease accordingly. In other words, we move away from a secondary level of achieving meaning 'happy 2' and towards a primary level of meaning 'happy 1'. This is why we are referring to the various degrees of happiness that can be achieved through affirmative subversions as 'happy 2>...'. The sign > indicates that the level of ambiguity involved in bringing off affirmative subversion will be necessarily smaller than that involved in bringing off 'pure' subversion but may greatly vary from one song to another. That is to say, although the implicative level in affirmative subversion is inscribed in and through the ostensible level of the speech acts, the level to which it
will be explicitly present will vary along the subversive side of the continuum which looks like this:

‘Pure’ subversion

Affirmative subversion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Happy 2&gt;…’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘Happy 2’

The implicative level in affirmative subversions is then neither a second order effect (‘happy 2’) nor is it yet a primary straightforward type of affirmation. The closer an affirmative subversive speech act is to ‘pure’ subversion on the continuum, the more it will rely on ambiguity (often in the form of exaggeration) in the way it brings off ‘happy 2>…’ and so critically affirm the fact of racism. The closer such a speech act is to the affirmative side, the more likely it is to be achieved through the use of relatively straightforward speech acts and so state the fact of racism relatively more explicitly. In this way, it can be argued that the two examples provided earlier, the categories of ‘bitch’ and ‘nigga’ in the rap tradition, are a type of affirmative subversion located very near ‘pure’ subversion on the continuum. That is to say that the appropriation of these terms relies heavily on maintaining a certain sense of ambiguity through exaggeration and so makes the critique of the fact of racism at stake relatively implicit.

But perhaps it will be useful to approach the issue of the various degrees of affirmative subversions from a slightly different angle. Rather than trying to identify many varying degrees of affirmative subversions, which would be an endless and not at all fruitful task, it might be more useful to articulate this issue of degrees of affirmative subversions by setting up two subcategories. That is affirmative subversions might
usefully be conceived of as either ‘blatant abuses’, in other words exaggeration, or ‘partial abuses’.

\[
\text{‘Pure’ subversion} \\
\text{Affirmative subversion} \\
\begin{array}{c|c}
\text{blatant abuses} & \text{partial abuses} \\
\end{array}
\]

With affirmative subversive speech acts as ‘blatant abuses’, the strategy is brought off through the speech acts being performed in a way that is blatantly exaggerated and insincere, as in rap’s appropriation of ‘bitch’ and ‘nigga’. Blatant abuses or exaggerations are then equivalent to Stuart Hall (1997)’s notion of reversal of stereotype as a strategy of cultural resistance, discussed in Chapter 1 of the thesis. Hall explained that reversing a stereotype means giving a ‘positive’ value to a stereotype or characteristic normally considered ‘negative’ by mainstream society. An offensive and oppressive stereotype can be reversed by turning its evaluation round (270-2). Hall shows how this strategy was first widely used in the 1970s ‘blaxploitation’ films, a series of black –orientated films such as *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasss Song* (Martin Van Peebles, 1971), *Shaft* (Gordon Parks, 1971) and *Superfly* (Gordon Parks, 1972). These films cast black actors in roles that reversed all the traditional stereotypes about African Americans. Centred on ghetto life-style, they presented angry and aggressive glamorous black male characters as heroes who take their revenge against whites and get away with it: ‘[i]n the ways their [these films’] heroes deal with whites, there is a remarkable absence, indeed a conscious reversal of the old deference or childlike dependency’ (271). Rap’s appropriation of the terms ‘bitch’ and ‘nigga’ could then be seen as more recent examples of such reversals of norms through exaggerated performance.
In our second case, affirmative subversions are ‘partial abuses’. They are therefore also partially straightforward or sincere. Using terms from speech-act theory, we might say that they are part abusive and part happy. Partial abuses would then be speech acts that deal with social issues relatively explicitly while still remaining ambiguous through being partly abusive. They are in this sense, a subtle way of critically affirming the fact of racism. Resistance through the subtle use of subversion has long been an important aspect of African American female culture. It is, as we have seen in the previous chapter, related to the fact that African American women are less able to be openly and blatantly critical of social norms because of their doubly vulnerable position both as black and as women. Arguably we can expect that, like in ‘pure’ subversions, trickery will also be involved in partial abuses. However the use of trickery might be said to have a slightly different purpose in partial abuses in the sense that it is mainly meant to distract attention away from, and thereby provide a pretext for, the subversive meaning of a text rather than to simply maintain undefinability as is the case in ‘pure’ subversion.

African American female rapper Queen Latifah for instance used trickery in this (partially abusive) implicative sense as she assumed the nonthreatening character of ‘Mother Africa’ to smooth the way for the oppositional nature of her lyrics. Influenced by Black Nationalism and Afrocentrism, Queen Latifah adopted the image of the regal and powerful but asexual ‘Mother Africa’. ‘As a female she can exploit the way cultural nationalists hold sacred Mother Africa’ to distract from the feminist stance of her lyrics which often deal with issues facing black women (Stallings, 2004). This kind of trickery (through partially abusive language and practice) was also noted by Joan Radner and Susan Lanser who argued that it is a strategy of coding found in women’s culture known as ‘distraction’ and that it is used to ‘draw out or draw
attention away from the subversive power of a feminist message’ (in Keyes, 2000: 257).

To sum up, for the sake of simplicity we have sketched out two subcategories within the strategy of affirmative subversion. Blatant abuses could be thought of as being nearer to ‘pure’ subversions, while partial abuses could be seen as being closer to the affirmative side of the continuum since they are in a way ‘covert’ affirmative speech acts (refer back to diagram page 164).

What we are here calling affirmative subversion has been criticised by some who argue that even though it represents an improvement on accommodationist and integrationist strategies, its effects remain limited because it tends to replace ‘old’ stereotypes with ‘new’ ones. As Hall puts it, ‘[e]scaping the grip of one stereotypical extreme... may simply mean being trapped in its stereotypical ‘other’. Reversing the stereotypes, Hall explains, ‘has not escaped the contradictions of the binary structure of racial [and gender] stereotyping’ (Hall, 1997: 272). But, what is centrally at stake, this thesis argues, is the performative-implicative dimension of what we are calling strategies of affirmative subversion. This dimension suggests an engagement with the performative world and a willingness to take part in the on-going process that is the struggle for identity in a hostile environment. To refer back to Moi (1999), the issue is one of ‘becoming’ (62-63), rather than one of escaping the inherent contradictions of cultural representation once and for all.

Having sketched out the specifics of affirmative subversions as they are located along the subversive side of the continuum, in the second section we will explore how and to what extent affirmative subversions might be embodied in black female RnB record texts.
Affirmative subversions in RnB

Drawing on the distinction made above between approaches to affirmative subversions, this analytical section of the chapter will be divided in two. In a first sub-section we will explore blatant abuses. This will be done through the analysis of ‘Caught Out There’, another song by Kelis. ‘Caught Out There’ is from her first album, Kaleidoscope, released in 1999. In the second sub-section we will consider affirmative subversion as it might be brought off through partial abuses. The example that will be used in the analysis is Jill Scott’s song ‘My Petition’ from her 2004 album Beautifully Human: Words and Sounds Vol. 2.

‘Caught Out There’ as blatantly abusive:

Here is a transcript of the lyrics to the record-text:

Intro (spoken)
Yo yo yo yo, ...
[Yo..this song..yo..
This song is for all the women out there
Who have been lied to by their men
And I know ya have been lied to
Over and over again
This is for ya all..yo..
Maybe he didn’t break ya
The way he should have broke ya
But that break
You know what I’m saying..so
This is how it goes..yo..
Damn...yo..]

Verse 1
Last year, Valentine’s day, you would spoil me, say
“Babe, I love you, love you (Yeah he’s lying) and I swear”
Held you when you were sick heavin’
The whole time I think to myself, this isn’t fair
What is this I see (No)
You don’t come home to me (Oh, no)
When you don’t come home to me (Man)
Can’t deal, can’t bear

You keep tellin’ me lies
But to your surprise
Look, I found her red coat
And you’re (Bitch) caught out there

Chorus
I hate you so much right now
I hate you so much right now
Ugh...
I hate you so much right now
I hate you so much right now
I hate you so much right now
Ugh...
I hate you so much right now....

Verse 2
So sick of your games, I’ll set your truck to flames
And watch it blow up, blow up, (laughter) tell me (How you gonna see it now)
So far I’m sincere (I love you), fabrications in my ear
Drive me so far up the wall, I come slidin’ down

What is this I see (I don’t believe this)
You don’t come home to me
When you don’t come home to me
I can’t deal, can’t bear (I won’t)

You keep tellin me lies
But to your surprise
Look, I hope you’re happy
Since you’re caught out there
(Yeah, you’ve been caught)

(Yo’, come on
Come on
Yo yo yo yo....)

Chorus x2
I hate you so much right now
I hate you so much right now
Ugh...
I hate you so much right now

I hate you so much right now
I hate you so much right now
Ugh...
I hate you so much right now

Verse 3
(She’s so) Oh, cheap, so vulgar, not me, why the hell her
Look, she dresses (Look at her) a mess, what do you see (I don’t know)
It’s not all about cash (Hell, no), nor how much you flash
How I dress is a reflection of me

What is this I see
You don’t come home to me (Uh-uh)
When you don’t come home to me
Can’t deal, can’t bear (Told you I won’t)

You keep tellin’ me lies
But to your surprise
Look, I got something’ for y’all (sound of loading gun)
Since you’re caught out there

Chorus
I hate you so much right now
I hate you so much right now
Ugh...
I hate you so much right now

I hate you so much right now
I hate you so much right now
Ugh...
I hate you so much right now

I hate you so much right now
I hate you so much right now
Ugh...
I hate you so much right now....

Yo yo yo yo....

The following performative analysis will demonstrate how, in performing blatant abuses (or exaggerations), ‘Caught Out There’ reverses the negative meaning associated with the notion of the ‘angry black woman’ or ‘bitch’. It will show how, in performing the persona of the ‘bitch’ – or ‘sista with attitude’, according to Keyes’s (2000) typology of images enacted by black female rappers - Kelis intends to reverse the negative meaning associated with it. We saw earlier how female rappers have similarly reversed the negative meaning associated with the image of the ‘bitch’ through convincingly enacting it. We will now see how the same effect might be achieved in the genre of RnB. ‘Caught out There’, it will be argued, performs this
reversal by invoking female solidarity to counter the white males’ racism and sexism. However, the aim of the analysis will be to show the social implications of such reversal of value, arguably, what is centrally at stake here. As seen in the previous chapter (though here of course the strategy is different) one of the key techniques is the framing of a dialogue between different facets or characters through which the performance persona is articulated.

Indeed, as in the previous chapter, once again there are issues raised here about implied dialogue. The performative-implicative strategies seem to be working in and through some kind of dialogic approach to language. However, we can expect to find in ‘Caught Out There’ a different type of implied dialogue at play than that found in ‘Milkshake’. This is due to the fact that we are dealing with two related though different ways of creating meaning indirectly through a subverted speech-act stage. Whereas in ‘pure’ subversives the performance persona’s sincere affirmative level was not at all inscribed within the lyrics but rather emerged as an ‘absent present’, here both sincere and insincere aspects are inscribed at the ostensible level, in and through which the implicative level (‘happy 2>…’) is then implied. In other words, in the blatantly abusive ‘Caught Out There’, unlike in the ‘pure’ subversive ‘Milkshake’, both the sincere and the insincere levels of the performance persona should be inscribed and contrasted within the record-text itself. This is through an implied dialogue which deconstructs (the negative) and reconstructs (positively) the notion of the ‘bitch’.

Three facets or acoustic representations of the persona of the ‘bitch’ seem to be involved in this process. Firstly, we can hear the character of a woman who explains how she has been cheated on by her male partner. This foregrounded character is enacted in the verses of the song. On realising she has been cheated on, the character articulates her resentment through performing speech acts such as ‘So sick of your
games, I'll set your truck to flames. And watch it blow up’ or ‘Drive me so far up the wall, I come slidin’ down’, using an assertive yet feminine voice. However, although angry and resentful, this feminine character that is being performed is sincere as those feelings she expresses remain somehow ‘controlled’ and ‘rational’ and therefore do not suggest that the performance could be exaggerated. The cheated woman of the verses then performs by presenting a state of affairs or story line in a way that is articulate and unambiguously sincere. Indeed, any female listener (that is, not necessarily black female listeners or female listeners familiar with RnB) could easily identify with her and understand why she might be angry (even to the point of wanting to ‘set his truck to flames’).

However, the sincere angry tone of the cheated woman of the verses changes and becomes much more angry and actually aggressive as it leads a crowd of equally very angry and aggressive women in the Chorus. This is the second of the three facets of Kelis’s persona of the ‘angry black woman’ or ‘bitch’ in ‘Caught Out There’. This is not the character of the cheated angry woman of the verses anymore; this is the character of the aggressive and uncontrollable ‘bitch’ or ‘bitches’. That is, this is the ‘bitch’ in the negative, common sense of the term or, in Keyes’ s terms it is the ‘aggressive woman who challenges male authority’ (2000: 263). This second character, the Chorus, is in effect a crowd of very angry women or ‘bitches’ led by Kelis and aggressively shouting ‘I hate you so much right now’ and screaming loudly. This confrontational communal voice is very much in the foreground. It seems to be referencing the context of a demonstration – actually the video for this song features a group of women, led by Kelis, marching down the street in a protest style. The camera looks up on them, which suggests they are in the position of power while the camera seems to stand for cheating men on whom the women look down.
As in the case of ‘pure’ subversion, exaggeration, which also seems to be at stake here, serves to maintain a certain level of ambiguity between happy and unhappy. The angry shouting and screaming of the communal character of the Chorus, the crowd of angry ‘bitches’, then performs by creating ambiguity; it raises the question of whether all this anger is sincere or ironic. In doing so the Chorus also creates confusion about the ostensible illocutionary force of the speech acts performed by the (moderately) angry black woman in the verses; it asks the question of whether the force of speech acts such as ‘So sick of your games, I’ll set your truck to flames. And watch it blow up’ was really sincere after all or whether it was actually abusive. This suggests that affirmative subversions in general do indeed rely on maintaining a certain ambiguity between happy and unhappy to be brought off. However, whereas in ‘pure’ subversion this ambiguity performs by leading to the emergence of the ‘absent present’ implicative level ‘happy 2’, which is a second order effect that points at the fact that nothing can be sincerely affirmed about the world, in the case of blatant abuses speech acts are brought off in and through the very process of pointing out the ambiguity.

To understand how this might be the case we need to consider what is being subtly performed alongside the sincere character of the cheated angry black woman of the verses and the blatant, ambiguity-raising ‘bitches’ of the Chorus. In ‘Caught Out There’, the reversal of value is brought off through the relation between these two and a third character, or facet of Kelis’s persona. This third character is in the background but is nevertheless very assertive. It is the spoken voice, between brackets in the transcript of the lyrics, that makes comments throughout the song in a cynical manner, even laughing on one occasion in Verse 2 – after the cheated angry woman, explains that she will ‘watch it [his truck] blow up’. In relation to the cheated angry black woman the illocutionary force of this cynical spoken comment is to back up or emphasize the
sincere force of her speech acts. It almost seems to be expressing in a straightforward way what this somewhat controlled character of the cheated angry woman is repressing. It says it like it is. For example, in Verse 1, while the cheated angry woman explains that the lover used to say to her: “Babe, I love you, love you and I swear”, we can hear this third unconstrained female character in the background saying it straight: (Yeah he’s lying). The same thing happens in the following lines also in Verse 1: ‘Look, I found her red coat. And you’re (Bitch) caught out there.’ In Verse 3, this is achieved not through spoken comments but through the use of a para-musical sound: ‘Look, I got something’ for y’all (sound of loading gun).

But this third facet of the persona has another function or illocutionary force in the song. It also relates to the communal character of the Chorus, the crowd of angry ‘bitches’, but in a more implicit way. Indeed, it seems to be inciting or encouraging the Chorus to start shouting or protesting. It moves it to action. This function is also suggested by the fact that the second repetition of the Chorus is introduced by the line (‘Yo come on come on’) which seems to induce the Chorus to start again. In doing so, this third inciting character actually solves the issue of ambiguity raised by the Chorus’s blatantness. It answers the question of whether the strong feeling of anger performed by the Chorus is sincere or ironic. It confirms that it is actually sincere. In effect this third character or facet of Kelis’s persona in ‘Caught Out There’ works as a link between the two other, arguably performative, facets, so resolving the issue of the ambiguity between happy and unhappy at an ostensible, ‘happy 2>…’ level. To bring out a further aspect, this third character, between brackets in the transcript, is the constative facet of Kelis’ s persona, the one that makes statements and says what is. Indeed, in the sense that, by backing up and emphasising the verses and inciting the Chorus to start, it brings off the reversal of value (giving the
image of the ‘bitch’ or ‘angry black woman’ an empowered meaning), the third character ultimately suggests a critical statement about the dual effect of racism and sexism on black women, thus appealing to a notion of constative truth or reality.

This (between brackets) constative female character or facet of Kelis’s persona is actually also found at play in the intro: ‘This song is for all the women out there who have been lied to by their men...’. The intro explicitly states who the implied addressee of the songs is. The fact that it states that the song is ‘for all the women out there who have been lied to by their men...’ suggests that the implied addressee is not only black women but all women. In other words, part of this reversal of values involves the use of a tactic whereby, issues that go beyond race differences and to which all women can relate to are being invoked in order to expose the underlying racism and sexism behind the notion of the ‘angry black woman’ or ‘bitch’. It can then be argued that the way the song implies a constative critique about the dual effect of racism and sexism on black women actually involves bringing the issue of sexism to the foreground while keeping that of racism relatively implicit. In this sense the issue of racism in the particular example of ‘Caught Out There’ is almost, but not quite, an ‘absent present’. The example of the blatantly abusive ‘Caught Out There’ then shows that the way the implicative level ‘happy 2>...’ is brought off may indeed greatly vary from song to song. In the way it keeps the issue of racism relatively implicit, it can be argued that while being affirmative subversive, ‘Caught Out There’ is located relatively near the ‘pure’ subversive pole on the continuum.

The analysis of ‘Caught Out There’ then brings to light the metalocutionary implicature at play in the strategy of affirmative subversion through blatant abusiveness. It suggests the notion of a black female subject who is indeed aware of the contradictory nature of
a racist and patriarchal social structure. It shows a way of working through as opposed
to escaping, the contradictory nature of racist and patriarchal social relations. In other
words, affirmative subversion through blatant abuses acknowledges the fact that to
resist racialised and gendered representation is a constant process. It suggests a
willingness to engage in the struggle that is defining one’s own cultural identity in a
hostile world. Once again, we can call on Moi (1999); ‘Caught Out There’ exemplifies
a notion of black female identity as a process, as an issue of ‘becoming’ (62-63). It is in
this sense that affirmative subversion or the reversal of values takes place in and
through the contradictory nature of representation. The strategy draws attention to
contradiction through the clash of distinct voices and then solves the issue by bringing
out a notion of constative truth or reality, one which is pointed up in particular through
the performative work of Kelis’s ‘third voice’.

If what we have been talking about until now are blatant abuses located
closer to ‘pure’ subversion on the continuum, this is only one sub-category of
affirmative subversions. The other is the partial abuse, in other words, the sub-strategy
of affirmative subversions located closer to the affirmative side of the continuum. In the
next sub-section, we will explore how it works using Jill Scott’s song ‘My Petition’ as a
case-study.

‘My Petition’ as partially abusive:

Partial abuses, as we saw in the pervious section, are speech acts that are part abusive
and part sincere or happy. Partial abuses as they might be performed in black female
RnB record-texts, are a way of affirming oppositional constative statements about the
world while maintaining a certain level of ambiguity. We saw with the example of rapper Queen Latifah’s use of the image of ‘Mother Africa’ how subversion as a way to divert the attention away from the oppositional nature of texts has long been an important aspect of African American female culture. The aim of the following analysis is to bring to light how this strategy is achieved on a linguistic and musical level. The song that will be used as an example is ‘My Petition’, from Jill Scott’s 2004 album *Beautifully Human: Words and Sounds Vol.2*. The performative analysis will show how affirmative subversion through partial abuses is used in this song to subtly criticise political hypocrisy and celebrate working-class single black mothers. Here is a transcript of the lyrics of ‘My Petition’:

**Verse 1**
You say you mean good for me
But you don't do it
You say you have a plan
But you just don't go thru with it

You say you know the way to go
And I should follow
But all of your empty promises
Leave me hollow

**Chorus A (descending)**
And oh
How do I trust you
How do I love you
When you
Lie to me repeatedly

And oh
How do I have faith, in you
When you just don't come thru
Like you say you could

Oh, say can you see (2x)
Verse 2
You say that I'm wrong for
Stating my opinion to you
You say that I'm wrong
And there'll be quiet consequences too

But I know my rights babe
There'll be no law abridging
The freedom of my speech
Or the right for me to petition for a remedy of grievances

Chorus B
And I
Want to trust you
I want to love you
But you lie to me repeatedly

And oh
I want to have faith in you
But you just don't come thru
Like you said you could

Oh say can you see
Hmmm

Middle 8
I want fresh fruit, clean water,
Air that I don't see
I want the feeling of being safe on my streets
I want my children to be smarter than me
I want, I want to feel
I want to feel, I want to feel free

Chorus C
For real ya'll
I'm just telling you so you know
I want to, I want to have faith in you
I really do but you keep lying to me

It hurts
I believe, I believe
You owe it me
Give it to me like you said you would

(augmented)
Hmmm
Oh say can you see
Hmmm
Oh say can you see
Oohh say can you see
Hmmm
By the dawn's early light
If ‘My Petition’ is an example of insincere or ambiguous expression, Jill Scott nevertheless adopts a sincere persona in the song - that of a politically conscious black woman. This persona is used to bring off the character of the working-class single black mother in the song. As the analysis will show, this character or persona articulates the constative level of ‘My Petition’ as she denounces political hypocrisy and discrimination. This character or persona of the politically conscious working-class single black mother is portrayed as an assertive and articulate woman who knows her rights and is not afraid to speak up. However, like Queen Latifah and others before her, Jill Scott hides her sincere (implicative) persona behind an ostensible trickster figure. In ‘My Petition’, she does this using the non-threatening persona or character of the woman disappointed in love. Indeed, she expresses her critiques in a very subtle way as she dilutes the force of her affirmations and critiques through the way she sings them. The trickery involved here derives from the expressive style and the ambiguous nature of some of the speech acts. These perform by having the listener make an association with conventional love songs or ballads and so get distracted from the assertiveness and oppositional nature of the speech acts.

The use of such trickery suggests that while the implied addressees of the song are primarily working-class single black mothers, there is the idea of a potential secondary implied listener (or possible ‘over-hearer’) which is the white man – hence the necessity, for a black woman, to water-down her critique. The following speech act analysis of Jill Scott’s ‘My Petition’ will demonstrate how such strategic distraction is achieved through the performance of affirmative subversions through partial abuses. Partial abuses can be found at play in two ways in ‘My Petition’. Speech acts may be partially abusive in themselves, or in relation to other performative elements in the
record-text including other speech acts. ‘My Petition’ makes use of both tactics to bring off partial abuses.

In the first tactic, then, the partially abusive nature of the speech acts performed in the song arises independently. As we will see with some examples, the content of the lyrics, or rather their illocutionary force is sincere but the way they are expressed musically is insincere. That is to say, while the ostensible illocutionary force of the speech acts is actually sincere, the ostensible character of the woman disappointed in love (who is doing the performance) is insincere. And crucially it is the musical expression of this character which does the implicative work. As the title suggests ‘My Petition’ is a song that deals with political issues but as the style of expression borrowed from the conventional love song or ballad suggests, this fact is meant to remain ambiguous. Here again it will be useful to consider these two performative aspects of the speech acts (the ostensible speech acts and their implication) as two different voices engaged in a contradictory dialogue. In this way, we have, on the one hand, the sincere persona of the politically conscious black woman and, on the other hand, the persona of the woman disappointed in love. This second persona performs a trickster role (and is thus abusive) to the extent that it partially conceals the voice of the politically conscious black woman.

The persona of the politically conscious black woman is implied in the sincere speech acts of the two verses of the song. The illocutionary force of these speech acts is that of criticising the political system and its hypocrisy and asserting one’s own political rights. These sincere speech acts are sometimes very subtle or ambiguous and sometimes more explicit and straightforward. Indeed, the comments in Verse 1, which opens the song are particularly subtle and implicit:
You say you mean good for me
But you don't do it
You say you have a plan
But you just don't go thru with it
You say you know the way to go
And I should follow
But all of your empty promises
Leave me hollow

The illocutionary force of these speech acts, which is that of criticising political double standards is so implicit in that they seem to be addressed to a lying lover rather than a lying politician - they are almost in alignment with the love song style of expression in which they are performed and which will be discussed below.

However, later on in the song, in Verse 2, the political nature of the speech acts performed by the politically conscious black woman is much more explicit and straightforward. Their illocutionary force of asserting one’s own constitutional rights and freedom of speech is made very clear. In fact, the use of juridical discourse in the second part of Verse 2 makes this illocutionary force even more explicit:

But I know my rights babe
There'll be no law abridging
The freedom of my speech
Or the right for me to petition for a remedy of grievances

The presence on the implicative level of Jill Scott’s sincere persona of politically conscious black woman is then suggested by a combination of both very subtle and very explicit political speech acts. And the subtlety does not end here.

The fact that this politically conscious black woman (implicitly brought off in the two verses) is more specifically the working-class single black mother is also done in a very subtle way. The listener can only infer this retrospectively from the
middle 8 section towards the end of the song and before the last chorus. Indeed, only in speech acts such as ‘I want the feeling of being safe on my streets’ or ‘I want my children to be smarter than me’ is it implied that we are dealing with the character of a working-class single black mother, which will be referred to as the WCSBM from now on. What this, subtly, suggests then is that as well as being critical of political hypocrisy and the impact of racism and inequalities on black communities, ‘My Petition’ is also a celebration of WCSBM as it implies that it is she who is the politically conscious women performing these oppositional speech acts. It implies that WCSBM are politically conscious women who are aware of their situation and of its roots in institutionalised racism and social inequalities. In ‘My Petition’ we then also have a class dimension. The subtle performance of class in the song suggests that it is not just an issue of race and gender politics, in other words, criticism of the white male. There is a class issue too, and so by implication it is more specifically the white middle-class male Scott must deceive in her subtle critique.

Until now this examination of ‘My Petition’ and partial abuses has been concerned with their sincere dimension, that is, with how Jill Scott’s sincere persona or character of the WCSBM is brought off through the implicitly and explicitly political speech acts of the two verses and middle 8 section of the song. But partial abuses, by definition, also have an insincere or abusive dimension to them.

Indeed, the sincere political persona discussed above is contrasted by another persona at play in the song: that of the trickster or unreliable persona of the woman disappointed in love. While the sincere persona of the WCSBM is performed through the implicitly and explicitly politically oppositional speech acts of the verses and middle 8, that of the insincere woman disappointed in love is brought off through
the way these sincere speech acts are performed or expressed musically. That is, unlike the sincere persona of the WCSBM, which is implicit, the trickster persona of the woman disappointed in love is brought off on the ostensible level of the record-text. Jill Scott’s style of delivery throughout the song suggests a reference to the traditional love song or ballad. Indeed, Scott sings these politically oppositional speech acts in a feminine, intimate voice that suggests romantic feelings and emotions. Her voice is relatively smooth and high-pitched and is therefore feminine. It is brought to the foreground in the mix, and is soft and breathy, all of which suggest intimacy. It is also somewhat tense and vibrating, which suggest tense emotions such as love and anguish (see Van Leeuwen, 1999: 129-41). The reference to love songs or ballads is also suggested by the acoustic guitar accompaniment and the soft back-up vocals in the background.

The persona of the woman disappointed in love is insincere because it is intentionally unsuitable or, to use Austin’s term, inappropriate. In referencing conventional love songs, it brings off a context or circumstances that are inappropriate for performing such politically oppositional speech acts. The illocutionary force of the abusive non-verbal performance or sound acts performed by the woman disappointed in love, it might be said, is that of bringing off ambiguity. Indeed, its intended perlocutionary effect is to distract the attention away from the sincere force of the political speech acts of the WCSBM. However, the ambiguity this trickster figure produces also, paradoxically, reinforces the oppositional force of the speech acts.

In his discussion of the conditions for happy performatives, Austin (1976) explains that to successfully bring off a performative is not only to utter certain words. The context in which the speech act is performed should also be appropriate: ‘[s]peaking generally, it is always necessary that the circumstances in which the words
are uttered should be in some way, or ways, *appropriate*…’ (8). As it has just been highlighted the speech acts above do not obey Austin’s general condition of happiness. The way they are brought off goes against the conventions or expectations of how such speech acts that comment on political issues are usually brought off. The way they are expressed is more appropriate for intimate (as opposed to public) speech acts that express feelings and emotions. But Austin’s comment concerns straightforwardly affirmative speech acts; they are speech acts that bring off a primary stage of happiness, that is, they are ‘happy’ in Austin’s sense of the term. Here we are dealing with speech acts that bring off a subverted stage of happiness (‘happy $2>…$’); we are dealing with partial abuses.

These are partial abuses that are brought off exactly because the ostensible illocutionary force of the speech acts and the way they are expressed are at odds with each other. This ‘inappropriateness’ is therefore intentional as well as tactical. Intimacy is here used intentionally to express political speech acts that belong to the public sphere in order to at once distract the attention away from the sincerely oppositional force of the speech acts. But, paradoxically, this intimacy also reinforces the political because, as mentioned earlier, the use of such partial abuses suggests an awareness of the power relations at stake in an unequal society. The use of such trickery implies that while the implied addressee of the song is primarily WCSBM, there is the idea of a potential ‘over-hearer’ - the white middle-class man – and so the necessity, for a WCSBM, to dilute the full force of her oppositional speech acts by maintaining a certain level of ambiguity between sincerity and insincerity which, paradoxically, also has the effect of actually adding force to her oppositional speech acts.
All the above instances of ambiguity belong to what we earlier called the *first tactic* of partial abuse in 'My Petition'. As we have seen, this is a tactic that involves a dialogue between expressive elements *internal* to given speech acts. In the *second tactic* what is at stake are speech acts whose ostensible force and expression are in alignment with each other but at odds with the rest of the record-text. In other words, performative implication is achieved through *external* relations. We can see this in the three choruses of the song.

Here, at first sight, the speech acts such as 'I want to love you' appear as though they could be either sincere happy speech acts or, on the contrary, 'pure' subversive speech acts. But, they are neither; they are partial abuses. Interpreting the choruses' speech acts as happy affirmations would be possible but misleading – and, as we will see below, this misleading interpretation is intentionally implied as a potential meaning in the song. In addition, interpreting these partial abuses as 'pure' subversions would be a mistake or misunderstanding of what is being performed, as it would imply taking the speech acts out of context.

If we examine speech acts such as 'How do I trust you. How do I love you when you lie to me repeatedly' from the first chorus we can see that they are especially ambiguous and misleading. They suggest that Scott is addressing a lover rather than politicians. These speech acts appear as though they might be sincere because here there is an alignment between the ostensible speech acts and the way they are expressed. Indeed, while the overall ballad-like and emotional style of delivery used by Scott in this song might be at odds with straightforwardly affirmative political speech acts such as 'There'll be no law abridging the freedom of my speech or the right for me to petition for a remedy of grievances', it is (technically) appropriate for expressing the romantic speech acts of the chorus.
This means that these speech acts appear as though they would be sincere when actually they are deceptive. Indeed, their insincere nature is revealed when they are considered within the overall context of the song. Like in the first tactic the aim is to bring off ambiguity or draw the attention away from and, paradoxically, emphasise the oppositional nature of the sincere political speech acts of the verses. And, it is to this extent that the fact that the disappointed lover’s speech acts in the choruses can potentially be interpreted as straightforwardly sincere affirmations is indeed an intentional attempt to mislead the listener. As it was argued earlier such use of distraction suggests a realisation of the power relations at stake. The fact that a WCSBM needs to dilute (yet also reinforce) the full force of her oppositional speech acts suggests the possibility of a secondary listener or ‘over-hearer’ in white middle-class patriarchal America.

Another example of lines that appear as though they could be sincere when taken out of context is found in the last chorus at the end of the song. The last chorus is actually a citation from the ‘Star Spangled Banner’, the US national anthem. Indeed, even if here again the ballad-like emotional style of expression of the song seems actually appropriate and therefore suggests that Scott’s quote from the US national anthem might be sincere patriotism, it is not. This citation is ironic. It comments on or points out the actual inequalities and racism behind the great ideals America and its Constitution stand for. The insincerity of this citation is here again revealed when it is taken within the overall context of the song. It would indeed be very unlikely to find a sincere citation from the US national anthem in the context of a song which, as the performative analysis above has demonstrated, is about bringing off politically oppositional speech acts through partial abuses. Moreover, the fact that we are dealing with an ironic citation of the ‘Star Spangled Banner’ is also revealed by the fact that it
gets augmented at the end with extra ‘say can you see’ couplets, which suggests pain and sadness.

Both the romantic choruses and the citation from the US national anthem are then examples of partial abuses (part of the second tactic) since their function is to contribute to maintaining the overall ambiguity between sincerity and insincerity in the song in order to distract the attention away from what is really being sincerely affirmed as well as, paradoxically, giving it more impact. Indeed as well as toning down the full force of the speech acts, irony also reinforces it as it can also be painful.

The aim of this chapter was to explore how and to what effect the ‘impure’ strategy of affirmative subversion, the second performative-implicative strategy on the subversive side of the continuum, might be brought off in black female RnB record-texts. It was argued that the use of affirmative subversions suggested an understanding of the power relations at stake and the willingness to engage in the on-going process that is black people’s struggle in music for self-definition and identity in such an unequal social system.

In order to take into account the different degrees of affirmative subversions (‘happy 2>...’ ) on the continuum, a distinction between two sub-strategies was made. It was argued, affirmative subversions are either brought off through blatant abuses and located closer to ‘pure’ subversion on the continuum or they are brought off through partial abuses, closer to subversive affirmations on the other side of the continuum. Indeed, as it was demonstrated through the two examples, this distinction takes into account a significant nuance in the implication behind the strategic use of affirmative
subversions. While affirmative subversion through blatant abuses suggests using subversion in the form of exaggeration in order to reverse the value of what is being performed, affirmative subversion through partial abuses suggests using subversion or irony to draw the attention away from the force of what is actually being performed. At the same time, paradoxically, a reinforcement of the political message is achieved as irony is also painful.

Until now, the thesis has been concerned with the subversive side of the continuum. With the strategy of ‘pure’ subversion, we explored a nihilistic approach that consists of rejecting the possibility of performing anything sincerely in a hostile world. With the ‘impure’ strategy of affirmative subversion we examined two other approaches or ways of dealing with the contradictory nature of racist social relations through subverted speech acts which, this time, consist of engaging with the performative world despite the on-going nature of the struggle such engagement suggests in a hostile context. The following two chapters will be concerned with the two performative-implicative strategies located on the affirmative side of the continuum. We will see how and to what effect straightforward, as opposed to subverted, speech acts are bought off in these strategies and the social implications they suggest.
Chapter 7: Subversive Affirmation

The previous two chapters dealt with strategies on the subversive side of the continuum, i.e. with 'pure' subversion and with 'impure' affirmative subversion. In this seventh chapter, the discussion will move to the affirmative side of the continuum with the 'impure' strategy of subversive affirmation. In moving from the subversive to the affirmative side of the continuum, we are in a sense moving from the performative to the constative side of the continuum. While affirmative subversion, discussed in the previous chapter, suggests enacting the values of black resistance through subverted language as a way of obliquely breaking through the (constatively) fixed values of racism, subversive affirmation suggests affirming the constative truth of black social reality directly through straightforward language thus bringing out racism as false. In other words, while the former suggests a more pessimistic form of social implication, the latter implies a more optimistic one.

This chapter will be divided into three sections. The first section will introduce the usefulness of the concept of the constative, its relationship to the performative, and how the two relate to black resistance. The second section will
introduce the strategy of subversive affirmation, its performative aspects and social implications. Finally, drawing on all this, the third and last section will demonstrate how and to what extent the strategy of subversive affirmation might be used in African American female RnB record-texts.

**Black resistance: from the performative to the constative**

In moving from the subversive to the affirmative side of the continuum we move from strategies that rely on the performance of secondary or subverted speech acts to strategies that involve the performance of primary straightforward speech acts. Unlike subverted speech acts, which rely on ambiguity, with straightforward speech acts there is an alignment between what is said and how it is said, that is, between the constative and the performative. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the concept of the constative comes from Austin’s initial distinction between constative utterances and performatives utterances. Constative utterances, Austin first argued, are those that state or describe reality. They are, in other words, statements and statements have the attribute of being either true or false. Performative utterances, on the other hand, are those that do something; they do not merely describe but perform the very actions they refer to and, unlike statements which are either true or false, performatives are either successfully achieved or not (see Austin, 1976: 1-11). However, realising that all utterances are actually performing actions, Austin later abandoned this distinction. He acknowledged that all utterances are performative, even though they may ‘have on the face of them the look – or at least the grammatical make-up – of ‘statements’; but nevertheless they are seen, when more closely inspected, to be, quite plainly, not utterances which could be ‘true’ or ‘false’ (12).
Although, as Austin realised himself, all utterances are ultimately performative, his concept of the constative is nevertheless a useful tool. Douglas Robinson used it to distinguish between two approaches to language: performative linguistics which looks at actual language use in real-world contexts and the traditional approach of constative linguistics which attempts to codify, regulate and objectify language (see Robinson: 2003; 2006). Two approaches to language studies, it was argued, also suggest two approaches to the world. The division suggests two ways whereby groups of people may use language to make sense of the world. Indeed, a distinction can be made between a constative approach whereby groups of people may use language in an objectifying and regulatory way to impose certain norms, values and beliefs under the ‘make-up’ of constative truths, and a performative approach whereby it is acknowledged that it is the people who create meaning and shape reality through performative language. These two approaches to the world are very closely linked to power relations. The dominant racist values that define and marginalise black people as ‘other’ and as low have been fixed historically by white supremacists through performative language and practice masquerading as constative truths. The tradition of black resistance to racism and black people’s struggle for equal rights and self-definition has, on the other hand, been located within an ongoing performative tradition, where opposition is constantly expressed through performative language and practice.

We saw in the previous two chapters how this is achieved in the work of African American artists with the performative-implicative strategies of ‘pure’ subversion and ‘impure’ affirmative subversion. We saw how subversive strategies are used in RnB record-texts as a way to break through the constatively imposed and fixed social structure of racism. However, if the performative has been one of the key
markers of black symbolic strategies, it is also the case that the constative has also been used in black resistance as a way to affirm the truth of a social reality in which racism actually exists. Indeed, in this chapter and the following one, we will consider how resistance to racism in the work of African American women is also expressed in a straightforward way with the constative (in the form of rebuttal), as opposed to indirectly through subversion. The strategic use of the constative as a means of political resistance is indeed what is at stake on the affirmative side of the continuum. Since constatives are by definition either true or false, to affirm the inside view of the truth of social reality has, by implication, the effect of bringing out racism as false.

In other words, whereas affirmative subversion, as a subversive strategy, brings to light or uncovers the performative aspect of the dominant racialising values, the affirmative strategy of subversive affirmation uses the power to impose truths offered by the constative approach to language and therefore the power to more or less implicitly falsify. That is, affirmative subversion and subversive affirmation suggest two different ways of dealing with the contradictory nature of the racist social relations at stake. In bringing to light the performative nature of dominant racist values, affirmative subversion suggests an acknowledgment of and engagement with the performative world and the on-going nature such engagement or struggle entails in a hostile society. In falsifying the dominant constative racialising values, subversive affirmation suggests a more optimistic approach in the sense that it implies the possibility of affirming the truth of social reality directly. These two different approaches to language, as the continuum between two socio-linguistic poles highlights, suggest two ways of dealing with the concrete reality of racism. In its use of the performative in subverted language, the first brings to light how black people’s relative powerlessness has meant they have been unable to assert themselves and their social reality through straightforward
language. Resistance here is covert, ambiguous, or in the mouth of the trickster. On the other hand, the use of the constative shows how, despite their relative powerlessness, black people have nevertheless been able to make use of straightforward language to confront oppression and affirm the truth of their everyday life.

The aim of this first section was to bring back the notion of the constative at stake on the affirmative side of the continuum and bring to light the social implications behind its strategic use in subversive affirmations. Drawing on and expanding this discussion, the next section of this chapter will explore how such subversive affirmations might be articulated in the work of African American women.

From happy to ‘happy…<1’

What defines the strategy of subversive affirmation is performance of what might be called the insider view of the truth of black social life. In this respect it is affirmative. What then gives it a subversive dimension is that African-American women, by implication, expose the fixed dominant racist norms as false, that is, as a lie.

In her study of the music videos of African American female singers, Emerson (2002) argues that African American women’s ‘identification with signifiers of Blackness’ in hip-hop and RnB videos are acts of resistance and agency and a celebration of black culture and black women. Emerson explains that the majority of videos she analysed constructed a black context and a black aesthetic, for instance, through their presentation and valuation of an urban hip-hop style and through featuring African American women with darker skin as opposed to light-skinned women. She cites Erykah Badu’s On and On, a “‘Color Purple’-style version of the Cinderella fairy tale’, as a good example of the construction of a black and feminine universe in music.
videos: ‘[i]t highlights the specificity, difference, and particularity of the Black experience’ (125). In her study of the self-definition or representation of the African American female comediennes from the television programme ‘Russell Simons’ Def Comedy Jam’, part of the hip-hop scene, Do Venna S. Fulton (2004) makes a similar observation. Fulton observes that the African American women comediennes featured in the show create a black context through the use of forms of black oral traditions such as call and response, signifying, dozens and black vernacular, and through the use of elements of the hip-hop scene such as music and dress styles (85).

In other words, in ostensibly drawing on elements of black culture and tradition, the music videos of African American female singers in Emerson’s study and the black female comediennes from the ‘Def Comedy Jam’ in Fulton’s investigation are indeed affirming an insider celebratory view of blackness and black culture as the constative truth. But it does not end here. In affirming a black perspective of what it means to be black as the constative truth, these black female cultural producers are, by implication, undermining and actually falsifying outside racist notions about black people historically maintained as constative truths. Indeed, to falsify and replace *constatively* fixed dominant racialising values is the implication at stake in affirming the constative truth of black social reality. As in the case of affirmative subversion, this implicative level ‘happy...<1’ at stake in subversive affirmation, does not emerge as ‘absent present’ (as is the case with the ‘pure’ strategies at both poles), but is rather inscribed *in* and *through* the ostensible level of the speech acts. What this means is that implicature and so the issue of race is indeed made explicit in subversive affirmative speech acts and, it might be argued, even more so than in affirmative subversion as here we are dealing with relatively straightforward speech acts.
Unlike subverted speech acts which rely on maintaining ambiguity between the constative and the performative, the relatively straightforward speech acts, at stake in subversive affirmations, are brought off through a greater alignment between what is said and how it is said. In other words, unlike subverted speech acts, more or less straightforward subversive affirmations tend towards being happy speech acts in Austin’s sense of the term. That is, they tend to be sincere speech acts whose ostensible illocutionary force is reliable, as opposed to ambiguous. Austin’s three levels model introduced in Chapter 2 of this thesis (see page 56) will therefore be a useful tool for bringing to light how subversive affirmative speech acts are brought off as we will see in the song analyses in the next section of this chapter.

Having discussed how the strategy of subversive affirmation is articulated in a broad sense, we will now consider the ways in which it might actually be brought off. In the same way affirmative subversive speech acts could be more or less subverted (hence the reference to their implicative level as ‘happy 2>…’), subversive affirmative ones can be more or less straightforward, that is, tend more or less towards being happy speech acts in Austin’s sense - hence the reference to their implicative level as ‘happy …<1’, with the sign < meaning they will necessarily be less straightforward than ‘pure’ affirmations. In order to take into account the different degrees to which subversive affirmations might be straightforward, it will also be useful, as with affirmative subversions, to consider two ways in which they might be brought off. Subversive affirmations might be conceived of as being brought off either through ‘partial affirmations’ or through ‘blatant affirmations’. As might be expected the sub-strategy of subversive affirmation through ‘partial affirmation’ is located closer to the subversive side of the continuum and to affirmative subversion, while that of
subversive affirmation through ‘blatant affirmation’ is closer to the strategy of ‘pure’
affirmation, on the affirmative end of the continuum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affirmative subversions</th>
<th>Subversive affirmations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>partial affirmations</td>
<td>blatant affirmations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To perform subversive affirmations through partial affirmations is to perform the
insider view of black people’s experience and life as the constative truth and in doing
so to more or less implicitly expose the dominant racialising views fixed as truths
through racist constative language and practice as false. Subversive affirmations
brought off through partial affirmations suggest an approach to social criticism whereby
it is expressed through the performance of more or less explicit straightforward or
happy speech acts, in Austin’s term, as opposed to through subverted speech acts as in
the ironic or partially abusive speech acts in Jill Scott’s ‘My Petition’. For example, in
the song ‘The Grind’, from her 2003 album *Worldwide Underground*, Erykah Badu
articulates urban black people’s constant struggle to make ends meet and feed their
family. She denounces the fact that poor black people living in the projects are given no
other options to survive than to take on a job in which they are being exploited and
underpaid. This is indeed implicit in the report: ‘Mommy got a job makin’ bout six-
some’ m an hour. She became the breadwinner when daddy was unemployed. Working
forty-plus hours and kissing ass. Seeming like the only honest way she can get some
cash.’
Badu goes on to explain that in such a racist unequal system black people are left with no other option than to resort to crime in order to survive: ‘The ends ain’t even meeting – the family ain’t eatin. Cause if taxes is 10%, and rest is for rent. Then crime is what u get and nigga is innocent.’ With her explicit exposé and analysis of the reasons behind the problem of crime in black urban areas, namely racism and social inequalities, Badu falsifies the dominant racist notion that black men are criminals. It is in this sense that her statements are subversive affirmations through partial affirmations, that is, a social critique through straightforward language. In describing the causes of the everyday problems experienced by urban black communities, Badu’s insider constative truths are implicitly exposing as false any attempt to explain its harsh realities by invoking fixed racist notions of an essential black character trait of irresponsibility. Instead Badu poses the degredation of black life as being the result of historically embedded social structures.

In the previous chapter we saw with the example of Jill Scott’s ‘My Petition’ how affirmative subversion through partial abuses, that is social criticism through subverted language, involves using insincerity in order to obliquely yet powerfully bring to light the fact that actually the historically fixed (constative) racialising values that justified black people’s oppression and discrimination are still present today in the persistence of inequalities. Here, with the example of Erykah Badu’s song ‘The Grind’, we see how in the case of social criticism through happy language it is not any more irony but sincerity and so the suppression of performativity that is used. What is more, this sincerity is used not just to assert the insider black perspective as the constative truth but with the effect of countering the fixed outside racialising values and so ultimately falsifying them. In other words, while ‘My Petition’ brings out the hidden truth obliquely, ‘The Grind’ exposes it as false in a direct way. It
is in this implicative sense that the two songs suggest two different performative sub-strategies, and therefore approaches to social reality, on the two sides of the continuum.

Until now the discussion has been concerned with subversive affirmations brought off through partial affirmations, the first sub-strategy on the affirmative side of the continuum. The other way subversive affirmations may be brought off is through blatant affirmations, located closer to ‘pure’ affirmation on the continuum. These consist of blatantly affirmative speech acts whose sincerity is then exaggerated in order to more or less implicitly undermine the negative meaning previously associated with what is being blatantly affirmed. In other words, while partial affirmation has to do with social criticism, blatant affirmation suggests a celebratory attitude. But, in the sense that it aims to subvert racist ascriptions previously associated with what is being blatantly celebrated, blatant affirmation has a relation to the reversal of values through blatant abuses which we examined on the other side of the continuum, and hence also to Stuart Hall’s reversal of the stereotype. It could then be argued, that the reversal of values through celebration considered here is the straightforward variant of Hall’s subversive strategy. An example of subversive affirmation through blatant affirmations (in the form of celebration) is found in Jill Scott’s song ‘Brotha’ from her 2000 album *Who Is Jill Scott: Words and Sounds Vol. 1*. ‘Brotha’ could be described as an ode to black men in which Jill Scott, using the authoritative and maternal persona of the mother figure, asks the listener to ‘Check the affirmative’.

The bridge, addressed to her brothas, is a good illustration of blatantly affirmative or celebratory speech acts. ‘If nobody told ja brotha, I’m here to let you know that: You’re so wonderful. You’re so marvellous. You’re so beautiful. You’re splendid. You’re fabulous. Brilliantly blessed in every way.’ Being blatant affirmations,
these speech acts have an implication that goes beyond their ostensible illocutionary force of celebration. If these speech acts are so sincerely and blatantlly celebratory of black men, it is for the purpose of falsifying fixed (constative) racist stereotypes that define black men in negative terms and prevent them from realising their worth and potential. The implication at stake in blatant affirmations is indeed made more or less explicit in the song in lines such as: ‘Brotha don’t let nobody hold you back no no no. Don’t let nobody hold ya, control ya or mold ya.’ It is in this implicative sense that blatant affirmations differ from blatant abuses considered in the previous chapter and illustrated by Kelis’s song ‘Caught Out There’. While ‘Caught Out There’ exposed the racialising values underlying the notion of the aggressive black woman by making the performative nature of this stereotype ostensible, ‘Brotha’ falsifies the racist stereotypes that define black men in negative terms by celebrating the insider constative truth.

To sum up, then, we have two sub-categories of subversive affirmation. What marks out both of them is their performance of social criticism through straightforward language, and the reversal of values through celebration of the black American tradition. Equally, both appeal to the possibility of making sense in a meaningful way even in a hostile world, by asserting the value of what it means to be black as the constative truth. In the last section of this chapter we will see how these two types of subversive affirmation might be embodied in African American female RnB through a detailed analysis of two record-texts.
Subversive affirmation in RnB

As in the previous chapter, one song will be used to illustrate how and to what intent each sub-strategy discussed above is articulated in contemporary black female RnB. Following the continuum from subversion to affirmation, the first of the two sub-strategies of subversive affirmation that will be considered is that brought off through partial affirmations. ‘Other side of the game’ by Erykah Badu will be used to illustrate the use of this strategy in contemporary black female RnB. Then, moving closer to ‘pure’ affirmation on the affirmative pole of the continuum, the use of the second type of subversive affirmation in RnB, that is, the use of blatant affirmations or the reversal of norms through straightforward celebratory language, will be illustrated through the example of Angie Stone’s song ‘Brotha’.

‘Pure’ affirmation

Affirmative subversions Subversive affirmations
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>partial affirmations blatant affirmations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘Other Side of the Game’ as partially affirmative:

‘Other Side of the Game’, from Erykah Badu’s 1997 album *Baduizm*, is best described as an unconventional love song. It is a love story as it is experienced by a young black woman in her roles of lover and mother within the harsh realities of black urban life. ‘Other Side of the Game’ is a love story as it is complicated by the vicious circle created by racism, exclusion, poverty and the resulting necessity to resort to illegal
activities as the only way out, and by the constant fear of the dangers this often involves. Here is a transcript of the lyrics of Badu’s song ‘Other Side of the Game’:

Chorus
What you gonna do when they come for you
Work ain’t honest but it pays the bills
What we gonna do when they come for you
Gave me the life that I came to live

Verse 1
Do I really,
Want my baby
Brother tell me what to do
I know you got to get your hustle on
So I pray
I understand the game, sometimes
And I love you strong, but,

Chorus
Whatcha gonna do when they come for you
Work ain’t honest but it pays the bills (Yes it does)
What we gonna do when they come for you
God I can’t stand life withoutcha

Verse 2
Now, me and baby got this situation
See brotha got this complex occupation
And it ain’t that he don’t have education
Cause I was right there at his graduation

Now, I ain’t sayin’ that this life don’t work
But it’s me and baby that he hurts
Cause I tell him right
He thinks I’m wrong
But I love him strong

Verse 3
He gave me the life that I came to live
Gave me the song that I came to give
Pressure on me
But the seed has grown
I can’t make it on my own
Summer came around and the flowers bloomed
He became the sun
I became the moon
Precious gifts that we both received
Or could this be make believe

Chorus
Whatcha gonna do when they come for you
Work ain’t honest but it pays the bills (work ain’t honest but it pays the bills)
What we gonna do when they come for you
Gave me the life that I came to live (Yes you did)

Verse 4
Don’t worry baby
Don’t I know there’s confusion
God’s gonna see us through (yeah)
Peace out to revolution
But we paid though

Don’t you worry, I know there’s confusion (What you gonna do What you gonna do)
The work ain’t honest but it pays the bills (Yes it does)
Don’t you worry (Tell you not to worry baby)
Gave me the life that I came to live (Yes you did)
Don’t you worry ...
The work ain’t honest but it pays the bills (Work ain’t honest but it pays the bills)
Don’t you worry ...

[Repetition Verse 3]

Oh yeah
Badu is...... mmh
We gonna make it Yeah
Me you and baby
What we gonna do What you gonna do
Oh oh oh yeah
See I ain’t trying to run your life
But I want you to do what’s right yeah
Peace out to revolution
I know there’s confusion
You do what you got to do
And be strong

‘Other Side of the Game’ then uses the theme of the love song but in an unconventional way in that it gives it a realist treatment. It combines the theme of the dual impact of racism and hardship on black urban communities with that of the will to struggle and overcome through determination and faith. Though unconventional in terms of it being situated within the context of the harsh realities of the black urban experience, the theme of the love song in ‘Other Side of the Game’ is used in a sincere straightforward way as opposed to the ironic way in which it is used by Jill Scott in the partially abusive ‘My Petition’. In ‘My Petition’ the reference to the love song is very conventional in terms of style but it is not sincere. Scott uses the love song theme in an
ironic way to simultaneously draw the attention away from and reinforce the implicit theme of her song which is the exposure of a hypocritical social and legal system that asserts equality while tolerating inequalities and perpetuating underlying racist values.

The following performative analysis will bring to light how the love song theme in ‘Other Side of the Game’ is articulated in diametrically opposed ways to those used in ‘my petition’. It will expose how, in describing the harsh realities of everyday black urban life on an ostensible level and in asserting their causes in historically embedded social structures on an implicative level, ‘Other Side of the Game’ falsifies interpretations that would be based on fixed (constative) racialising values. As with the song analysis in the two previous chapters we will use an approach that combines speech act theory with a notion of implied dialogue. For it is dialogue that effectively ‘brings out’ performativity both within and between speech acts. As already mentioned, since we are now dealing with relatively happy speech acts in Austin’s sense (i.e. not subverted), it will be useful to draw on Austin’s three level model.

To recap, according to Austin, when we say something we always simultaneously perform three actions: a locutionary (constative) act, an illocutionary (performative) act, and a perlocutionary act. Using this model will be useful to explore the way the straightforward or happy speech acts in subversive affirmations are brought off. For example, in the case of the speech act ‘I know you got to get your hustle on’, from Verse 1, the illocutionary force is made explicit as it starts with ‘I know’. This is what Austin calls the explicit performative verb or formula (Austin, 1976: 103-4) and which makes it clear what act is being performed. However speech acts do not always start with the appropriate performative verb or formula and their illocutionary force is therefore not always explicit. For example there is no explicit performative verb in the line ‘And it ain’t that he don’t have education. Cause I was right there at his graduation’
from Verse 2, but we can tell that we are not merely dealing with a statement in the constative sense of the term, but with the more powerful act of testimony. This is because an illocutionary act is implied here via the unstated words in brackets in the following version of two lines from the song: '[I testify] that it ain’t that he don’t have education. Cause I was there at his graduation'.

It is because of devices such as word order, mood, intonation, and arguably, musical expression that we can derive the intention behind such implicit illocutionary acts. This is because, unlike perlocutionary acts (the effect the speaker intends to product by saying something), illocutionary acts (what the speaker means in saying something) are conventional acts. The fact that the illocutionary act is a conventional act means that it is circumstantial in the sense that it has to be performed in circumstances that are in some way, or ways, appropriate. If a performative is to be happily brought off, it is necessary that certain conditions, which have to do with who says what to whom and in what context, should be satisfied (see Austin, 1976: 8). It is the contention in this chapter, that such performative conditions are satisfied in the case of RnB songs belonging to our category, ‘subversive affirmation’. Indeed it is these conditions which render the affirmative as subversive, which make it ‘impure’.

Having briefly gone over Austin’s three level model we can now move on to the speech-act analysis of ‘Other Side of the Game’. As in the previous two chapters, it will be useful to conceive of the song as involving an implicit dialogue. In this analysis it will be argued that ‘Other Side of the Game’ involves a dialogue between one explicit constative character which states or describes everyday life for black urban communities and one implicit performative persona which locates or asserts the roots of its harsh realities in embedded social structures. The explicit constative character is that
of Erykah Badu as she enacts the character of a young urban black woman (or YUBW) in her roles of lover and mother. Complementing this character, is the implicit performative persona of Erykah Badu ‘herself’; effectively Badu attributes her own political consciousness to this YUBW. In this way, we will see in the analysis how Auslander’s typology works out in this first straightforwardly affirmative strategy on the continuum through an alignment between two complementary, sincere aspects of the performer.

The character of the YUBW in her roles of lover and mother in the song is that which explicitly states or describes the realities of black urban life. It might be argued it performs the locutionary level of Austin’s threefold model, which is why we refer to it as the explicit constative voice. While, as one of the three components of any speech act, the locutionary or constative level runs throughout the song, it appears especially foregrounded in certain lines. Indeed this descriptive function performed by the explicit constative voice of the character of YUBW is particularly significant in lines such as ‘I know you got to get your hustle on. So I pray. I understand the game, sometimes’ from Verse 1. In addition, lines such as ‘Now, me and baby got this situation. See brotha got this complex occupation’ and ‘Now, I ain’t sayin’ that this life don’t work’ from Verse 2 also offer good descriptions of the state of affairs they refer to, i.e., the harsh realities of back urban life as they are experienced by black people.

As we are dealing with the constative or locutionary level of the speech acts, that is, with their grammatical level, we need to bracket out musical expression or any function indicating device into account in this first stage of analysis. When the bracketing is done we are confronted with the speech acts as they appear in the transcript, in other words with their locutionary level. They state the insider view of the harsh realities of black urban life as it is. They describe things as they are through
statements then, and, as we have already seen, unlike performatives, statements can be either true or false (see Austin, 1976: 1-4). What is at stake in these cases is to affirm the insider speech acts performed in this song as the constative truth of black life. And this is achieved through falsifying outside interpretations based on fixed (constative) racialising values - at the level of direct speech it takes a constative to challenge a constative.

This affirming of the insider view as the actual constative truth leads us to the second level in Austin’s threefold model: the performative or illocutionary act, that is, what is intended or meant in saying these things, in performing these constative or locutionary acts. That in turn leads us to the issue of the relationship or dialogue between the sincere explicit constative character of the YUBW in her roles of lover and mother, and the implicit performative persona of Erykah Badu as she identifies herself with, and attributes political consciousness to, the YUBW. This implied composite persona then performs the illocutionary or performative acts of the song. According to Austin’s conditions for happy performatives we would expect that the speech acts should invoke a conventional procedure and do so sincerely. If that is so we should therefore be able to determine their illocutionary force straightforwardly from function indicating devices in the musical expression, the voice quality, and other speech acts in the song. The fact that these are happy performatives also means that they will indeed be in alignment with the constative level. That is, unlike on the subversive side of the continuum, here the implicit dialogue in which the different roles of the performer are engaged is not contradictory, but rather complementary.

To put it another way, the speech acts performed by the implicit composite persona of Erykah Badu as the politically conscious YUBW make sense of those performed by the explicit constative character of the YUBW. For example, the locution
‘Work ain’t honest but it pays the bills’ performed by the Chorus, is not only describing a state of affairs, it is also intended to mean something, that is, to state something from a political perspective. It is an implicit performative with the illocutionary force of an assertion. This is suggested by the fact that the line ‘Work ain’t honest but it pays the bills’ is reinforced by a ‘Yes it does’ in the second Chorus and by a repetition of the line in question in the third Chorus, which are performed by the implicit composite persona of Badu’s politically conscious YUBW. The assertive force of her voice is also suggested by the fact that it is relatively low-pitched which, according to Van Leeuwen, indicates assertiveness (see Van Leeuwen, 1999: 134). It is also rather tense which, also according to Van Leeuwen, may express tense emotions such as scorn and sarcasm (131).

In giving the force of an assertion with sarcastic undertones to the constative ‘Work ain’t honest but it pays the bills’ the implicit performative persona of Erykah Badu the politically conscious YUBW is then affirming the fact that if black people are given no opportunity by society then it is normal that, like anybody else in that situation, they will indeed have to resort to illegal activities to support themselves and their families. She asserts and defends black people’s right to survive and get through by means of whatever it takes in a world that treats them unfairly. Another significant example of this implicit performative persona can be found at work in the lines ‘And it ain’t that he don’t have education. Cause I was right there at his graduation’ in Verse 2. The illocutionary act which is implied here is ‘[I testify] that it ain’t that he don’t have education. Cause I was there at his graduation’. Indeed, these lines which have the illocutionary force of a testimony imply the fact that it is not because they don’t know better or are somehow predisposed to becoming criminals that

---

9 But it could also be argued that the line ‘Work ain’t honest but it pays the bills’ is a critique of work in general and capitalism as being exploitative.
so many young black people get involved in crime. It is because of historically embedded social structures which locate them into this situation. Or to go further, this testimony implies that even when young black people are ‘granted’ access to education on the ground of equal opportunities they will then face unequal access to employment, which means that they are still effectively kept in their place by a deceitful system.

The explicit constative character of the YUBW and the implicit performative persona of Badu as the politically conscious YUBW are then in alignment with each other (they make up a composite) and are involved in a complementary dialogue that brings out the link between the harsh realities of urban black life and their origins in historically embedded social structures. It is this dialogue of alignment between the constative and the performative in ‘Other Side of the Game’ that, in bringing out the insider view as the constative truth, suggests the implicative level ‘happy...<1’, which is to implicitly falsify any explanations regarding the realities of black urban life based on dominant racialising values fixed through constative language and practice.

One last point can be made about ‘Other Side of the Game’ before moving on the second analysis of this chapter. The song ‘Danger’ from Badu’s album Worldwide Underground released in 2003 (and already used in the second chapter of this thesis as an example) seems to be the sequel of ‘Other Side of the Game’. It continues the story started in ‘Other Side of the Game’. Indeed, this is suggested by the musical intro and by the implicit speech act ‘See brotha got this complex occupation’ from Verse 2 and which is repeated in the introduction to ‘Danger’ by the same persona/character of the YUBW in her roles of lover and mother. In ‘Danger’ we learn that they did indeed ‘come for him’ as at that point he is in prison as a result of his
‘complex occupation’. The two songs therefore also perform together in a narrative relationship of before-and-after.

‘Brotha’ as blatantly affirmative:

The analysis of Erykah Badu’s song ‘Other Side of the Game’ demonstrated how the strategy of subversion affirmation might be conceived of as being brought off through partial affirmations. In the next analysis we will see how, moving closer to ‘pure’ affirmation on the affirmative pole of the continuum, subversive affirmation may also be seen as being achieved through the performance of blatant affirmations. As we saw in the second section of this chapter, this sub-strategy consists of performing blatantly affirmative speech acts whose sincerity or ‘happiness’ is then exaggerated in order to more or less implicitly undermine or subvert the negative meaning previously associated with what is being blatantly affirmed. Located closer to ‘pure’ affirmation, on the affirmative end of the continuum, blatant affirmations do indeed involve an even greater alignment between the constative and the performative than that already involved in partial affirmations.

The song that will be used as an example is ‘Brotha’ from Angie Stone’s 2001 album Mahogany Soul. The speech act analysis will show how ‘Brotha’ falsifies the racist stereotypes that define black men in negative terms by blatantly affirming the insider constative truth from a complex black female point of view as it is articulated through the theme of the mother figure.
Intro
oh oh oh oh oh oh
mm mmm ooh girl

Verse 1
He is my king (king), he's my one (one)
Yes he's my father, yes he's my son (son)
I can talk to him cuz he understands
Everything I go through and everything I am (I am)
He's my support system, I can't live without him
The best thing since sliced bread
Is his kiss, his hugs, his lips, his touch
And I just want the whole world to know
About my

Chorus
Black brotha, I love ya
And I'll never try to hurt ya
I want cha to know that
I'm here for you, forever true
(Cuz you're my) black brotha, strong brotha
And there is no one above ya
I want cha to know that
I'm here for you, forever true
You're my

Verse 2
He's misunderstood (yeah), some say that
He's up to no good around the neighborhood
Well, for your information:
A lot of my brothas got education
Now check it:
You got your Wall Street brotha
Your blue collar brotha
Your down-for-whatever-chillin'-on-the-corner brotha
Your talented brotha
And to everyone of ya behind bars
You know that Angie loves ya, my my

Chorus (2x)
Black brotha, I love ya
And I'll never try to hurt ya
I want cha to know that
I'm here for you, forever true
(Cuz you're my) black brotha, strong brotha
And there is no one above ya
I want ya to know that
I'm here for you, forever true
You're my

Verse 3
You mean so much to me, you give me what I need
I'm so proud of you
I love you for staying strong, you got it goin' on
I'm so proud of you
Goin' through thick and thin, brothas you gonna win
I'm so proud of you
Whenever you're facin' doubt, brotha's gon' work it out
I'm so proud of you
I got unshakable faith in ya
(Cuz you're my)

Chorus
Black brotha, I love ya
And I'll never try to hurt ya
I want cha to know that
I'm here for you, forever true
(Cuz you're my) black brotha, strong brotha
And there is no one above ya
I want cha to know that
I'm here for you, forever true
You're my

Black brotha, I love ya
And I'll never try to hurt ya
I want cha to know that
I'm here for you, forever true

Cuz you're my (ooo eee ooo eeee oooo)
For everyone of ya, you know that Angie loves ya
Everyone of ya'll (ooooooooooo ooo oooo oooo ooo)
For everyone of ya'll, you know that Angie loves ya
Yeah yeah, yeah yeah

Angie Stone's 'Brotha' is not unlike the song by Jill Scott, also entitled 'Brotha', that was used as an example in the second section of this chapter. Both blatantly affirmative songs use the same theme, that of the defence and support of African-American men, and suggest an insider celebratory approach and optimistic attitude towards the world. Both songs also make use of the mother figure or persona of the black mother. However, they differ in the way in which they are performed and expressed musically. Indeed, while Jill Scott's voice sounds more sweet and girly, as we will see in the following analysis, Angie Stone's authoritative and maternal voice
quality makes her use of the mother figure stronger and more ‘appropriately’ brought off. Moreover, as we will also see, in Stone this persona of the black mother is also articulated through a more complex and multi-layered black female universe. It might actually be useful for the purpose of this speech-act analysis to use this persona of the black mother as a starting point.

The strategic use of the mother figure has long been an important feature in the black female entertainment tradition. In the previous chapters, we saw how it has been used in a subversive way or as a trickster figure through the examples of early twentieth century black female comedienne Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley and, more recently, black female rapper Queen Latifah.10 ‘Moms’ Mabley presented herself as a mother figure, at the time, a safe and acceptable role for a woman, in order to divert attention away from the ‘threatening’ or oppositional nature of her texts which dealt with sexual and political issues (Fulton, 2004: 84). Influenced by Black Nationalism and Afrocentrism, rapper Queen Latifah adopted the image of the regal and powerful but asexual ‘Mother Africa’. ‘As a female she could exploit the way cultural nationalists hold sacred Mother Africa’ (Stallings, 2004) to distract from the feminist stance of her lyrics which often deal with issues facing black women as well as the African American community as a whole.

In other words, while for ‘Moms’ Mabley and Queen Latifah drawing the attention away from (and at the same time emphasising) the oppositional nature of their texts involved foregrounding their trickster mother figures, in the case of Angie Stone’s straightforwardly affirmative and celebratory lyrics, we can assume that when Angie brings her persona to the foreground this will have the effect of giving even more

10 Interestingly, like Erykah Badu, Queen Latifah is a stage or performer’s name and it is part of her image or persona of ‘Mother Africa’. While the title of ‘Queen’ refers to her regal and powerful status as an African Queen, the name Latifah, an Arab first name that means ‘the kind, delicate one’, characterises her maternal qualities.
emphasis to her speech acts and draw the attention to (as opposed to away from) the metalocutionary implicature. Thus Stone’s persona is not a trickster in the conventional sense of the term. Since so far we have been approaching Angie Stone’s ‘Brotha’ from the perspective of its use of the figure of the black mother, it might be useful, for the speech-act analysis, to explore how this persona is articulated throughout the song. To do this we will consider the implied dialogue between its different manifestations or uses in the song. The following analysis will bring to light the relationship or dialogue between three different uses of the persona of the mother figure, respectively, in Verse 1, in the Chorus, and in Verse 2.

This song analysis will start with the opening Verse 1. On an ostensible level, the speech acts of Verse 1 are statements that describe African American men in blatantly affirmative or positive terms: ‘He is my king, he is my one. Yes he’s my father, yes he’s my son... He’s my support system, I can't live without him’. The statement ‘The best thing since sliced bread is his kiss, his hugs, his lips, his touch’ especially suggests that these celebratory speech acts may be performed by Angie Stone as lover. As descriptive statements, these speech acts foreground the constative, which articulates their blatantly affirmative or celebratory level. But these speech acts are not only constative; they are also simultaneous performative. In describing African American men in celebratory terms, Angie Stone is also performing an illocutionary act. The speech acts of Verse 1 seem to have the illocutionary force of a testimony of the type that could be heard in a law court. This testimonial force could be made explicit by beginning each speech act with the appropriate performative formula [I testify that]. The testimonial form of the speech acts suggests that the implied addressee here could be mainstream white middle-class society who judges African American
men and that Angie Stone is acting as a character witness on behalf of her black brothas and she is doing so by bringing off the powerful persona of the black mother.

The fact that the implicit performative persona that testifies on behalf of African-American men or brothas is that of the black mother is suggested by the voice quality. The voice is low-pitched and relatively rough which suggest assertiveness and authority (like the voice of the matriarchal, strong black mother) but it is also soft which suggests intimacy (like the voice of the nurturing black mother or that of a lover). This notion of the black mother as both the matriarch and the nurturer used by Angie Stone is not unlike the community 'othermother' discussed by Patricia Hill-Collins (1991). Unlike the externally (white) defined and controlling images of black womanhood she presents in her typology (see Chapter 1), the image of the community 'othermother' comes from within the African American community. The 'othermother' is an insider perspective on black motherhood which refers to the supportive role and authoritative status of the black mother within the community:

Black women's involvement in fostering African-American community development forms the basis for community-based power. This is the type of "strong Black woman" they see around them in traditional African-American communities. Community othermothers work on behalf of the Black community by expressing ethics of caring and personal accountability which embrace conceptions of transformative and mutuality ... community othermothers become identified as power figures through furthering the community's well-being (Hill-Collins, 1991: 132).

In using the powerful status of the black mother Angie Stone makes for an appropriate and convincing character witness on behalf of African American men.

The blatantly affirmative (celebratory) constative character of the black woman as lover and the implicit performative (testifying) persona of the black mother in her roles of matriarch and nurturer are engaged in a complementary dialogue. This
dialogue between the two roles of the performer, or relationship between the constative and the performative levels of the speech acts, suggests the implicative level (‘happy...<1’) of falsifying the negative terms in which black men have been described by mainstream white society. This then shows metalocutionary implicature at play in the blatantly affirmative (celebratory) ‘Brotha’.

Until now the analysis has been concerned with the opening Verse 1 and the way it articulates the powerful persona of the black mother – as the implicit performative persona in a complementary dialogue with the affirmative constative character of the lover. Now we will see how this figure of the black mother as matriarchal and as maternal is also articulated or implied in the Chorus. Whereas Verse 1 features one dominant singing voice, the chorus, which is double-tracked, suggests a collective female singing voice. It could be argued that with the Chorus we move from one public sphere to another. We move from what could be described as a public courtroom setting to the more intimate yet equally public world of what sounds like a black women’s choir – a black public sphere. This move involves a change in the mode of address, the use of language and the subject position. While the celebratory speech acts of Verse 1 which foregrounded the constative were addressed to mainstream white middle-class society, those of the Chorus are addressed to black men or brothas and they foreground the performative. Indeed, the supportive speech acts of the Chorus, addressed to black men feature at least one, if not two, explicit performative verbs: the [I want] in ‘I want cha to know that I’m here for you forever true’ and the [I love] in ‘Black brotha, I love ya’, both of which suggest the illocutionary force of a promise or a declaration.

The foregrounding of the performative in the Chorus is also indicated by the fact that it seems to reference nursery rhymes. Indeed, the slow tempo and rhythm,
the phrasing, the use of repetition, and the fact that this communal female voice sounds soft and intimate also seem to suggest such reference. This reference to nursery rhymes and the explicit declaration and promise of unconditional love and support suggest that the celebratory communal female voice we hear is that of the strong and maternal black mother or the community ‘othermother’, to refer to Hill-Collins. In foregrounding the illocutionary force of her speech acts through the use of explicit performative verbs and a reference to nursery rhymes, the communal persona of the strong and nurturing black mother makes the straightforwardly affirmative nature of her message to black men blatant. Indeed, while blatantness in the abusive affirmative subversions in ‘Caught out there’ took the form of insincere exaggeration or irony, here in this straightforwardly happy mode it has the function of emphasising the sincerity of what is being affirmed or celebrated and of making it more powerful. This highly performative Chorus is also involved in a dialogue with Verse 2, which follows it.

The first two lines of Verse 2. ‘He’s misunderstood (yeah), some say that he’s up to no good around the neighborhood’ foreground the constative; they describe a state of affairs. But implicit here is the performative persona of the mother figure. The implicit illocutionary act that is performed here is that of reporting: ‘[I report that] he’s misunderstood, some say that he’s up to no good around the neighborhood’. This act of reporting implicitly performed by Angie as the mother figure suggests the act of metalocutionary implicature. It suggests a realisation of the fixed racialising values underlying mainstream white society’s stereotyping of black men as criminals and so an intention to undermine that by affirming the insider constative truth. It is within this implicative context that the nursery-rhyme-like blatant celebration of black men in the Chorus is performative. As well as performing with the Chorus, the first two lines of Verse 2 (‘He's misunderstood (yeah), some say that he's up to no good around the
neighborhood') is also in dialogue with the rest of Verse 2 in which the persona of the black mother is used to set the record straight by affirming the insider constative truth about her black brothas.

We hear this in the third line, 'Well, for your information', which is expressed in a very assertive and defiant way, suggesting that here the performative persona of the black mother is brought to the foreground. The performance takes the form of an announcement of her position on the issue (the fact that she disagrees) which anticipates her intention to use her authoritative status to defend her black brothas against outside racist ascriptions which is then revealed in the following lines. Indeed, the speech acts from line 4 to line 9, which now foreground the constative and are addressed to mainstream white society, affirm the insider constative truth. After the announcement 'Well for your information', which could be paraphrased as 'Well, I'm telling you that...', Angie makes the statements:

A lot of my brothas got education
Now check it:
You got your Wall Street brotha
Your blue collar brotha
Your down-for-whatever-chillin'-on-the-corner brotha
Your talented brotha

But these speech acts which describe the different experiences of black men are also implicitly performative. Indeed, as before, they have the illocutionary force of a testimony. In making these statements Angie as the mother figure is implicitly meaning '[I testify that] a lot of my brothas got education...' and, by this testimony, she intends to undermine the dominant racist stereotypes that define black men as criminals.

In the last two lines of Verse 2, however, Angie suddenly brings back her performative persona of the black mother. Indeed, while the speech acts from the 3rd to
the 9th line addressed to mainstream white society foregrounded the constative, the speech act ‘To everyone of ya behind bars, you know that Angie loves ya’ addressed specifically to those of her brothas in prison foregrounds the performative. Like the speech acts of the Chorus, which also foreground the performative, this speech act has the illocutionary force of a declaration of unconditional love and support. This declaration is performed with a very intimate yet assertive voice, which indeed suggests a foregrounding of the mother figure. It also sounds distant, which suggests that it perhaps comes out of a prison intercom or speaker like a direct announcement to the prisoner. This speech act is also especially powerful for three reasons.

First, its positioning within the song; it comes directly after the criticism of racist stereotyping of black men. Second, the fact that it is targeted at those brothas in prison who suffered the most from society’s victimisation of black men and who need the most validation and support. And finally because it is (now) Angie speaking – ‘to everyone of ya behind bars, you know that Angie loves ya!’ In other words, Angie is or rather strongly identifies herself as the mother figure and she is speaking directly and personally to those of her brothas who are behind bars. With the example of the blatantly affirmative ‘Brotha’ we then see yet another way the different roles of the performing subject may be articulated on the continuum.

The aim of this chapter was to explore the strategy of subversive affirmation, located on the affirmative side of the continuum. As the chapter demonstrated, the strategy of subversive affirmation as it is employed in black female RnB record-texts involves metalocutionary implicature in the sense that in affirming the truth of black social reality through straightforward language on an ostensible level, it brings out the implicative level (‘happy...<1’) which exposes outside interpretations based on fixed
racist values as false. As in the previous chapter, two sub-strategies were considered. The difference between them bears on the fact that they respectively bring out
‘happy…<1’ through criticism and celebration. Closer to the subversive side of the
continuum, subversive affirmation works through partial affirmations, that is, through
traditional social criticism using straightforward language as we saw with the examples
of Erykah Badu’s songs ‘The Grind’ and ‘Otherside of the game’. And, tending
towards ‘pure’ affirmation on the affirmative pole of the continuum, subversive
affirmation might be achieved through blatant affirmations, that is, through celebratory
language aimed at reversing values as we saw with the examples of Jill Scott’s and
Angie Stone’s songs both entitled ‘Brotha’.

This chapter then showed how, while on the subversive side of the
continuum it was the performative level of speech acts that was foregounded, on the
affirmative side of the continuum it is their constative level that is of most significance.
In the next and last chapter of this thesis, moving to the affirmative socio-linguistic pole
of the continuum we will see how even in its ‘pure’ form, straightforwardly affirmative
language, does nevertheless involve metalocutionary implicature.
Chapter 8: ‘Pure’ Affirmation

This eighth and last chapter of the thesis will explore the performative-implicative strategy of ‘pure’ affirmation, located on the affirmative socio-linguistic pole of the continuum. Like the type of subversive affirmations brought off blatantly and discussed in the previous chapter, ‘pure’ affirmations involve the use of celebratory language to acclaim black culture and identity. However, the difference stands in the fact that, on the affirmative pole of the continuum, this celebration of blackness appears in its ‘pure’, depoliticised form (at the ostensible level of the speech acts). Indeed, what is at play here is a suppression of the idea that the affirmation of blackness might have any further implications beyond its manifest celebratory function, that is, a suppression of the idea that it might involve metalocutionary implicature.

However, given the social context of racism and power relations, such strong affirmation of blackness begs the question of implication. It seems unlikely that for female RnB singers there could be a form of song in which racialised identity is simply the subject of celebration. Thus the aim of this chapter will be to demonstrate
how ‘pure’ celebration of blackness does actually involve metalocutionary implicature. We will see how it is this very use of ‘purely’ affirmative language that, paradoxically, leads to the emergence of an ‘absent present’ implicative level (‘happy’) in ‘pure’ affirmative RnB lyrics. What is being implied here is that in order to transcend racism and move into an imagined space of emancipation, there must inevitably be critique of actually existing, racialised social relations, even in songs whose affirmative sincerity, on the face of it, appears to be indubitable.

This chapter will be divided in two sections. The first section will deal with the issue of the strategic aspect of ‘pure’ affirmation by locating it within a theoretical framework. Drawing on this, the second section will explore the strategy as it might be embodied in black female RnB through a detailed analysis of India Arie’s song ‘Brown Skin’.

**From happy to ‘happy’ – strategic celebration**

Within the tradition of back resistance, the use of celebration entails the affirmation of the insider view of blackness and black culture. In the previous chapter, we saw how blatant affirmations of black identity and culture imply bringing out as false outside fixed racist ascriptions previously associated with what is being celebrated. We saw how in the song ‘Brotha’ Angie Stone’s celebration of black men is intended to counter their racist stereotyping by mainstream white society.

The celebration of black identity and culture at play in ‘pure’ affirmation is however different in the sense that it involves a suppression of the idea that it might have a further implication. The affirmation of blackness is ostensibly decontextualised as though there is no history of oppression. This is suppression (as opposed to mere
absence) in the sense that, within the context of a profoundly racist society, a strong affirmation of blackness paradoxically begs the question of implication. Indeed, this thesis argues that like all the other strategies on the continuum, 'pure' affirmation does involve metalocutionary implicature. What is implied in the celebration of a depoliticised race identity is actually a critique of existing racism.

The aim of this section will be to explore this strategic aspect at stake in a 'pure' celebration of blackness as it is found on the affirmative socio-linguistic pole of the continuum. To do so it will be useful to go back to Stuart Hall's typology of strategies of resistance (1997) and use it as a starting point. Hall argues that racist representations of black people can be resisted by reclaiming and reworking some of these images' characteristics to create 'positive' images. He explains that this strategy is used to try to transform the 'negative' representations of black people and culture, which are still dominant in popular culture, into 'positive' ones. Still, according to Hall, the main advantage of this strategy is that it embraces and celebrates difference and diversity.

It inverts the binary opposition, privileging the subordinate term, sometimes reading the negative positively: 'Black is Beautiful'. It tries to construct a positive identification with what has been abjected. It greatly expands the range of racial representations and the complexity of what it means to 'be black', thus challenging the reductionism of earlier stereotypes (272-3).

In other terms, Hall is here referring to the strategic use of celebratory language in black resistance which is at stake in both subversive affirmation (blatant affirmation) and 'pure' affirmation.

Hall then goes on to argue that the problem with this strategy is that it might merely 'evade the difficult questions, dissolving the harsh realities of racism into a
liberal mish-mash of ‘difference’ (273). Hall’s argument is pertinent as it raises the issue of metalocutionary implicature at play in the use of celebratory language in black resistance. Indeed, Hall’s argument that celebratory strategies might be ignoring the harsh realities of racism has to do with the issue of range and complexity; with the idea of celebratory language as being itself confused as a message. In other words, Hall’s argument applies to the ostensible level of celebratory language, to the way a decontextualised celebration of blackness is being ostensibly affirmed in celebratory strategies. However, what this thesis argues is that it is the implicative power that is centrally at stake here. Indeed, from a speech act theory point of view, the celebration of blackness at stake in ‘pure’ affirmation has a strategic function in that it involves metalocutionary implicature. What is being implied is the truth of blackness that goes beyond racism even while it points to the fact of racism here and now.

What is being suggested, then, is that to overcome the problem of range and complexity raised by Hall it might be useful to take a different approach, one which is concerned with the implicative dimension of ‘pure’ affirmative language. For this reason it will be useful to refer to Indian literary critic and theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s concept of ‘strategic essentialism’. An important concept in postcolonial theory, ‘strategic essentialism’ is useful as it involves taking the oppressed as the subject of his/her own history. Indeed, this thesis is concerned with how and to what end a set of linguistic strategies of resistance are used by black people from their insider point of view as producers. The concept will then be useful for understanding the type of metalocutionary implicature at play in ‘pure’ affirmation. In her discussion ‘Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography’ (1985) Gayatri Spivak problematises the post-structuralist critique of humanism as she argues for an approach
which is committed to the oppressed as the subject of history. Using such a strategy she argues ‘reveal[s]’ the limits of the critique of humanism as produced in the west’: ‘The radical intellectual in the west is either caught in a deliberate choice of subalternity, granting to the oppressed either that very expressive subjectivity which s/he criticizes or, instead, a total unrepresentability’ (1985:347-8).

Spivak makes a case for the usefulness of strategically adhering to the essentialist notion of consciousness; for a ‘strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulous visible political interest’ (342). She argues that ‘the strategy becomes most useful when “consciousness” is being used in the narrow sense, as self-consciousness’ rather than class-consciousness: ‘“[c]lass” is not, after all, an inalienable description of a human reality’ (342). ‘It is within the framework of a strategic interest in the self-alienating displacing move of and by a consciousness of collectivity, then, that the self-determination and an unalienated self-consciousness can be broached’ (343).

Strategic essentialism then, according to Spivak, can usefully be seen as a sort of appropriation of essentialism by oppressed people whereby, in reaction against outside domination, they, as a group, attribute themselves ‘essential’ characteristics and qualities. Strategic essentialism then has to do with agency and self-determination; it is an issue of who has control over language. It can therefore be a powerful political tool for oppressed groups when used within the context of their struggle against outside domination.

Although Spivak locates her theory of the ‘emergent collective subaltern consciousness’ in the context of a pre-capitalist colonial Asia (344), it is arguably relevant to the struggle of all oppressed groups, including African American resistance. Indeed strategic essentialism has long been part of the tradition of black resistance. The essentialism underlying the Black Nationalist and Afro-centric movements is strategic;
it is to be taken within the context of African American people’s struggle against white supremacy. The aim of this chapter is to explore how such strategic essentialism also operates in contemporary RnB lyrics through ‘pure’ affirmations.

The purpose of this first section was to demonstrate how and to what extent the celebration of an apparently depoliticised black identity and culture involved in ‘pure’ affirmation is strategic, that is, suggests metalecutionary implicature. This was done by drawing on Spivak’s related concept of ‘strategic essentialism’. Drawing on the speech-act theory based continuum used in this thesis, the aim of the second section will be to show how the ‘pure’ celebration of blackness at play (on an ostensibly happy level) in ‘pure’ affirmative RnB record-texts does actually imply a critique of the concrete experience of racialised social relations (in the emergence of ‘absent present’ implicative level ‘happy1’). This will be done through a detailed analysis of India Arie’s song ‘Brown Skin’.

‘Brown Skin’ as ‘pure’ affirmation

Here is a transcript of the lyrics to ‘Brown Skin’, from India Arie’s 2001 album *Acoustic Soul*:

**Chorus**
Brown skin, you know I love your brown skin
I can’t tell where yours begins, I can’t tell where mine ends
Brown skin, up against my brown skin
Need some every now and then...oh hey...

**Verse 1**
Where are your people from? Maybe Mississippi or an Island
Apparently your skin has been kissed by the sun
You make me want a Hershey’s kiss, your licorice
Every time I see your lips, it makes me think of honey-coated chocolate
Your kisses are worth more than gold to me
I’ll be your almond joy, you’ll be my sugar daddy

Chorus
Brown skin, you know I love your brown skin
I can’t tell where yours begins, I can’t tell where mine ends
Brown skin, up against my brown skin
Need some every now and then...oh hey...

Verse 2
Every time you come around, something magnetic pulls me and I can’t get out
Disoriented, I can’t tell my up from down
All I know is that I wanna lay you down
Every time I let you in, abracadabra magic happens as we swim

Higher and higher finally we reach heaven
Come back to earth and then we do it all again
Yeah...

Chorus
Brown skin, you know I love your brown skin
I can’t tell where yours begins, I can’t tell where mine ends
Brown skin, up against my brown skin
Need some every now and then...oh hey...

Verse 3
Skin so brown, lips so round
Baby how can I be down?
Beautiful mahogany, you make me feel like a queen
Tell me what’s that thing you do that makes me wanna get next to you, yeah

Chorus (2x)
Brown skin, you know I love your brown skin
I can’t tell where yours begins, I can’t tell where mine ends
Brown skin, up against my brown skin
Need some every now and then...oh hey...

Once again, it appears, at first sight, as though we are dealing with a love
song yet, once again, as the analysis will bring to light, we are not actually dealing with
a love song in the conventional sense of the term, but rather with a political song. In
order to show how implicature is involved in ‘Brown Skin’, the analysis will be carried
out in two steps. In a first sub-section, the ostensible level of the ‘purely’ celebratory
speech acts in ‘Brown Skin’ will be explored. This will be done using Austin’s three-
levelled model for happy speech acts, namely, the locutionary, the illocutionary, and the perlocutionary acts (see pages 202-03). Going beyond this happy level, the second subsection will examine how the excess of strength in these ‘purely’ celebratory speech acts suggests implicature.

The ostensible level ‘happy’

Being ‘purely’ affirmative, we can assume that the speech acts in India Arie’s song ‘Brown Skin’ are straightforward or, in Austin’s terms, they are ‘happy’ speech acts. They are sincere speech acts brought out successfully according to Austin’s sets of basic rules which have to do with who says what to whom in what context (see page 139 for Austin’s sets of rules for happy speech acts). Austin’s three level model will therefore be a very useful tool for bringing to light how the ‘pure’ nature of the celebratory speech acts is articulated at the ostensible level. However, unlike with the ‘impure’ affirmative strategy of subversive affirmation, here the issue of the relation between the locutionary (constative), the illocutionary (performative) and the perlocutionary acts will be considered independently from that of the performing subject. This is because in ‘pure’ affirmation what is at stake is the structure of the speech acts alone rather than how that structure is articulated in relation to some implied dialogue between different voices.

The structure of the speech acts suggests that, as in the case of the ‘purely’ subversive ‘Milkshake’, we are dealing with two levels of illocutionary force. Actually, with both ‘pure’ strategies at the poles of the continuum, what is at stake is the relationship between the speech acts’ illocutionary force within the song’s narrative as it
were and their actual illocutionary force. But whereas with the ‘purely’ abusive speech acts in ‘Milkshake’ the relationship between these two forces (boasting and ironising) was a contradictory one, here the two levels of illocutionary force share a complementary relationship. The illocutionary force of all the speech acts within the love song narrative in ‘Brown Skin’ suggest the actual illocutionary force of a strong affirmation of blackness. Implied in the line ‘Brown skin, you know I love your brown skin’ from the Chorus, which has the illocutionary force of a declaration, is the actual illocutionary force of an affirmation of blackness. Similarly, the observation ‘Apparently your skin has been kissed by the sun’ from Verse 1 and the expression of appreciation ‘Beautiful mahogany, you make me feel like a queen’ in Verse 3 are both meant to affirm ‘Black is good!’. Having shown how the relationship between the illocutionary force within the narrative and the actual illocutionary force is articulated at the ostensible level of the speech acts in ‘Brown Skin’, we will now see how the speech acts involve a suppression of the idea that they might have a further implication to them beyond the celebration of blackness.

Being located on the affirmative pole of the continuum, the happy speech acts in ‘Brown Skin’ will be as straightforward as affirmative speech acts can possibly be. Indeed we can expect a very high alignment between the constative and the performative in the speech acts. In stating (constative), ‘Brown skin, up against my brown skin. Need some every now and then…oh hey…’ in the Chorus, India Arie is strongly affirming (performative) ‘Black is good!’ Similarly, the description (constative) ‘Skin so brown, lips so round’ following the rhetorical question ‘Baby how can I be down?’ in Verse 3 also implies the illocutionary force of a strong affirmation of blackness. This strong complementary relationship between constative statements of
blackness and performative affirmations of blackness is implied at the ostensible level of all the speech acts in ‘Brown Skin’. But this very high alignment found in speech acts on the affirmative pole of the continuum goes further. It can be argued that it also involves the perlocutionary.

What is at stake on the perlocutionary level is, so to speak, a ‘boosting’ of the purity of the speech acts, that is, to affirm ‘Black is good is the truth!’ In other words, what is at stake at the ostensible level of the ‘pure’ celebratory speech acts in ‘Brown Skin’ is not merely ‘Black is good!’ as a performative, but actually ‘Black is good!’ as the constative truth. Indeed with ‘pure’ affirmative speech acts we have not only a strong alignment between the constative and the performative; the alignment is also with the perlocutionary. Listeners are supposed to accept this message as manifestly stated. This is what distinguishes them from other (‘impure’) affirmative speech acts on the continuum.

The relationship between the constative description ‘Skin so brown, lips so round’, the performative affirmation ‘Black is good!’ and the intended perlocutionary effect of the ‘pure’ celebration of blackness (‘Black is good!’ is the constative truth!) is then as straightforward as it gets. The strong complementary relationship means that the possibility that something more could be implied beyond this manifest celebratory level is suppressed. The idea that such celebration of blackness might be in any way related to outside racist ascriptions or be intended to undermine racism is absent on this ostensible level. It is in this sense that it is the structure of the speech acts that is at stake in ‘pure’ affirmation. Indeed, it is paradoxically this excess of strength in the ‘pure’ celebration of blackness (indirectly through the invocation of a general notion of human happiness) that ultimately suggests a notion of the social reality of racism. In the next sub-section
we will then explore the implicature beyond the ostensible ‘happy’ level of the speech acts.

The implicative level ‘happy 1’

The aim of this second sub-section is to show how the ‘pure’ celebration of blackness (‘Black is good!’ is the constative truth!’) in suggesting a move beyond racism, inevitably involves a critique of actually existing racialised social relations. This will be done by showing how the strength of the speech acts at their ostensible level, as demonstrated in the previous sub-section in the analysis of their structure, goes beyond this level of the locutionary, the illocutionary and the perlocutionary and into the implicative. Three such implicative dimensions in ‘Brown Skin’ will be considered: the musical expression and voice quality, the issue of the performing subject, and the use of what Spivak calls ‘strategic essentialism’.11

The strength of the speech acts at their ostensible level, as shown in their ‘pure’ straightforward structure, is also found in their musical expression and is suggested by the quality of India Arie’s voice. The singing voice we hear is that of a mature and confident black woman. Like Angie Stone in ‘Brotha’, India Arie’s vocal delivery suggests both assertiveness and intimacy. It is relatively low-pitched and rough, both of which suggest assertiveness (see Van Leeuwen; 1999: 131-2 & 134). However, unlike Angie Stone’s voice, India Arie’s voice does not sound maternal or matriarchal. The intimacy in India Arie’s voice has more to do with sensuality than

11 While these three implicative dimensions are related to the ostensible level of the speech acts discussed in the pervious sub-section, they are being considered separately in this analysis because of the specific powers of implication that are at stake in ‘happy 1’.
maternity. Indeed, while the maternal quality of Angie Stone’s voice is suggested by the fact that it combines low pitch and softness, as well as combining these two qualities India Arie’s voice has the added dimension of being breathy. Breathiness, as Van Leeuwen explains, makes a voice sound sensual (133). The sensuality of India Arie’s voice has the same effect as the love song narrative on the speech acts’ ostensible level: it serves the purpose of achieving the ‘pure’ affirmation of blackness at stake by adding intensity. As we will see when we deal with the issue of the performing subject, with ‘pure’ affirmation there is no clear distinction between different roles. In India Arie’s vocal delivery, we hear the mono-logic voice of a confident black woman, whose confidence is rendered more powerful by her sensuality.

The argument, then, is that, along with the strong reference to the blues tradition and the repetition in the Chorus of the key phrase ‘brown skin’, India Arie’s delivery of the speech acts in ‘Brown Skin’ suggests metalocutionary implicature. As well as being in alignment with the speech acts, the strength and confidence of India Arie’s vocal delivery seems to imply something beyond the locutionary, the illocutionary and the perlocutionary. It seems to be drawing attention, in a reflexive way, to what is inherently implied in the move beyond racism suggested by the ‘pure’ constative truth ‘Black is good!’, that is, an awareness of outside racist notions about black people. In other words, the musical expression suggests that the ‘pure’ celebration ‘Black is good!’ as the constative truth does indeed imply a critique of the actually existing racialised social relations. This implication is suggested because ‘pure’ affirmation inevitably enters into a dialogue with the social fact of racism. In effect, this

---

12 This implicative level suggested by the expressive style is a good example of Charles Altieri’s performative concept of ‘expressive implicature’ discussed in Robinson (2006). As already mentioned earlier in this thesis, expressive implicature, which appears to be especially at play at the poles of the continuum where implication emerges as an ‘absent present’, is ‘a way of implicitly drawing attention to how something is said and how style expresses the speaker’s feelings or personality’ (in Robinson, 2006: 164).
fact is a constative statement (for the implied audience) 'behind', as it were, the record-text. Thus, it might be argued, the critique of the fact of racism emerges from the contradiction between two constatives (we say, 'Black is good'/they say, 'Black is bad').

So far the discussion has been concerned with the implicative dimension of expressive style in 'Brown Skin'. Another aspect that suggests implicature is the interrelated question of the performing subject. Arguably, in keeping with the 'authentic' setting at stake in 'pure' affirmation, the performing subject should be mono-logic on the affirmative pole of the continuum.

Rather than involving a dialogue between two or more contradictory or complementary characters as it was the case with the other strategies of the continuum, the performance style in the strategy of 'pure' affirmation entails the use of one single performing subject. At the affirmative socio-linguistic pole of the continuum, no clear distinction can be made between the different roles of the performer and so no implied dialogue is suggested. With 'pure' affirmation it is only the structure of the speech acts at their ostensible level that is at stake, rather than how this structure is articulated in its relation to different subject positions. 'Brown Skin' is then performed by India Arie 'herself', as the politically conscious and spiritual black woman.

The very high alignment between the constative and the performative which we noticed on the ostensible level of the speech acts and the mono-vocal style of the performance are in turn in alignment. Arguably, this shows a relation between sincerity and authenticity. The mono-logic quality of the performing voice is also in alignment with the 'authentic' musical setting in 'Brown Skin'. The blues guitar in the song,
which carries connotations of ‘authenticity’, also contributes to making India Arie’s
voice mono-logical.

It seems, the integrity of the performing subject becomes at stake as we
move towards the affirmative pole of the performative continuum. Indeed, maintaining
a mono-logic performing subject is as crucial to the strategy of ‘pure’ affirmation as was
maintaining an implied contradictory dialogue between different voices in the case of
‘pure’ subversion on the other side of the continuum. The fact that the performance is
done by one person contributes to, or is in alignment with, the ‘authentic’ setting we
find in ‘pure’ affirmation.

The authenticity at play here is related to the notion of authenticity in rock
aesthetics (see Moore: 2002). However, it can be argued that, in the context of ‘pure’
affirmative RnB, the performance of authenticity is more strategic than ideological. It
suggests metalocutionary implicature. At stake in the ‘authentic’ performance of
blackness in ‘Brown Skin’, is indeed a critique of actually existing racialised social
relations, rather than the affirmation of an actual ‘authentic’ black identity that would be
located outside the contradictory nature of representation. It is in this political sense
that, as well as being sincere, the affirmation of an ‘authentic’ blackness in ‘Brown
Skin’ is strategic. In this way, ‘authenticity’ as it appears in ‘pure’ affirmative RnB
lyrics is a form of ‘strategic essentialism’ (Spivak: 1985), a form of appropriation by
oppressed black people of the (arguably white, in its ideological sense) concept of
authenticity as a political, emancipatory tool. The issue of ‘strategic essentialism’ leads
us to the third and last implicative dimension considered in this song analysis, which is
the use of epithets.
Another way in which 'strategic essentialism' is found at play in 'Brown Skin' is in its use of heavily connotative descriptions of blackness, a further dimension which suggests the emergence of the implicative level 'happy 1'. When we take a closer look, the 'pure' affirmation of a true blackness in 'Brown Skin' is not as literal as it appears to be. It is achieved through the strategic use of a series of epithets which are metaphors for black people and which highlight their characteristic qualities such as their brown skin. Examples of this can be found in Verse 1. In the third line 'You make me want a Hershey's kiss, you're licorice', the references to 'Hershey' (a chocolate bar) and 'licorice' (a black coloured candy flavoured with the sweet root of the licorice plant) both carry connotations in terms of their brown or black colour and their sweet taste.

More heavily connotative descriptions of blackness are used in Verse 1 in the forth and sixth lines. The reference to 'honey-coated chocolate' in 'Every time I see your lips, it makes me think of honey-coated chocolate' also carries similar connotations of colour and taste and so does the use of 'almond joy' and 'sugar daddy' with the added gendered dimension in 'I'll be your almond joy, you'll be my sugar daddy'. Another example of use of epithet is found later in Verse 3. In the third line 'Beautiful mahogany, you make me feel like a queen (you make me feel like a queen)', the reference to 'mahogany' (the dark reddish-brown colour tree native to tropical America) a commonly used metaphor for blackness, carries heavy connotations of skin colour and exoticism. And, to a certain extent, it can be argued that the term 'queen' used in the same line as a substitute for 'black woman' suggests a reference to the Afro-centric notion of African Queens. Seen within the context of strategic essentialism (that is to say involving metalocutionary implicature) the use of such heavily connotative descriptions of blackness has the effect of making the illocutionary force of the speech which as we saw in the previous section is to say 'Black is good!' much more powerful.
And finally, going back to Verse 1, we have an example of strategic essentialism used to affirm a locus of blackness in the lines ‘Where are your people from? Maybe Mississippi or an Island’. While in the previous examples strategic essentialism was used to affirm qualities or characteristics of black people, here the description of black people (‘your people’) as being from ‘Mississippi or and Island’ affirms a place of blackness. India Arie locates this place of blackness in the South and the Caribbean, which has the effect of bringing out in the mind of the listener black people’s experience of slavery. The listener infers that the black identity she is affirming is that of the descendants of enslaved African people. What this means is that even though the issue of race is never referred to ostensibly in ‘pure’ affirmational speech acts, it is always affirmed through implicature, precisely because of the contradictory nature of the racist social relations in which these speech acts are performed.

These examples of strategic essentialism can usefully be contrasted with more literal affirmations of blackness. For the series of epithets we have just been examining is balanced by more straightforward descriptions of blackness such as the line ‘Skin so brown, lips so round’ in Verse 3 and the phrase ‘brown skin’ repeated many times in the Chorus. This combination of heavily connotative and more literal descriptions of blackness in the song ‘Brown Skin’ makes for a more powerful affirmation of race. We can see then how the strategically essentialist treatment of the affirmation of blackness at stake here provides another powerful example of the fact that ‘pure’ affirmation does indeed involve metalocutionary implicature.

The aim of this last chapter was to explore the strategy of ‘pure’ affirmation as it might be employed in black female RnB record-texts. The key issue was to demonstrate how
the ‘pure’ celebration of blackness at stake in the strategy of ‘pure’ affirmation has a further dimension than at first appears. A detailed analysis of India Arie’s song ‘Brown Skin’ demonstrated how this is the case. In the way it reaches beyond racism, that is, in the way it shows how the world *should be* but *is not*, the ‘pure’ celebration of blackness in ‘Brown Skin’ inevitably implies a critique of actually existing racialised social relations.

This final chapter then confirmed that there is indeed a performative-implicative dimension right through the continuum. It showed how the concrete reality of oppression is implied even through ostensibly straightforward language, precisely because of the contradictory nature of the racialised social relations in which it is performed.
Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to explore the politics of representation in African American female RnB songs using the concept of the performative and, in doing so, to demonstrate the usefulness of speech-act theory. A method of textual analysis based on speech-act theory was used to investigate the socio-linguistics of RnB record-texts. The approach consisted in showing how the strategies of resistance used by African American women in recorded song may be located along a continuum between two socio-linguistic poles. Marking the constraints of social structure, and thus defining the continuum, these two socio-linguistic poles exposed the impossibility of performing effectively pure speech acts in an unequal society by pointing out the limits of subverted, nihilistic language, on the one hand, and of straightforward, celebratory language, on the other.

The relevance and actual existence of a continuum of types of speech acts in songs was demonstrated in this thesis from both a thematic and a historical perspective. In Chapter 1, a discussion of the existing literature on the topic of African American women's politics of representation highlighted the existence of a tension in black female performance between the constraints of race, gender and class, on the one hand, and black female resistance, on the other. Black female performance is, in other words, defined by an inherent dilemma in the sense that social structures are the constraints to it, as well as paradoxically being its conditions of possibility. Chapter 2 introduced speech-act theory and highlighted the usefulness of the performative for exploring the politics of representation in songs. The thesis then showed how the dilemma in black
performance between constraint and possibility (highlighted in Chapter 1) emerged as a
result of racialised social relations through a discussion of the evolution of black music
in relation to black history after Word War Two in Chapter 3.

Based on the existence of this continuous dilemma in black performance
between possibility and constraint, the thesis argued that black performance is played
out within a continuum of strategies which is defined by its two socio-linguistic poles.
The specifics of this continuum were presented in Chapter 4. Drawing on speech-act
theory (introduced in Chapter 2) and moving beyond it, the continuum was then used to
provide responses to the problems of representation and signifying on the part of a
marginalised social group that were raised in the literature on black women’s politics of
representation, thus providing a useful complement to the existing approaches. In the
way it considered the formal aspects of speech acts in song lyrics as they relate to social
structure, the continuum of strategies brought out the social implications at stake in each
of the strategies of resistance embodied in black female R&B record-texts and how these
relate to each other. The strategies were dealt with individually in the four remaining
chapters of the thesis.

The key issue was to explore the scope and limits of the political agency at
play in black female R&B record-texts, given a racist, patriarchal, and class-based socio-
cultural context. The textual analyses carried out in the thesis showed that there is
indeed a performative-implicative dimension right through the continuum, thus
validating the hypothesis that the strategies of resistance embodied in black female R&B
record-texts can be located along a continuum between the two socio-linguistic poles
defined above. Implicature, it appears, is always involved precisely because of the
contradictory nature of the racialised social relations in which R&B record-texts are
produced. Even as they embody a pessimistic, nihilistic view of the world or as they
affirm an optimistic celebration of blackness, RnB record-texts inevitably imply a critique of the concrete reality of racism.

Political agency in RnB then always takes place in and through the inescapable contradictory nature of representation. To this extent, the strategies embodied in RnB record-texts symbolise different, though interrelated ways of ‘coping with’ the concrete reality of racialised and gendered social relations. What this means is that, in the way they challenge the social structures that reproduce race, gender, and class inequalities, the strategies embodied in RnB exemplify a form of on-going political resistance to this concrete social reality, rather than a form of acceptance of the status quo.

Further research aimed at verifying the findings of this thesis may be carried out in the future. A reception study, for example in the form of ethnographic work on audiences, could be envisaged to test the hypotheses about the performative assumed in this thesis. Alternatively, a production study, in the form of empirical work on production, might be useful to investigate the extent to which these strategies are recognised as such by the singers and music makers involved. However, even if they corroborate particular findings, it is unlikely that either reception or production studies can affirm the validity of the general approach taken here. We ought to finish by making some final comments on this question and the place of the performative perspective in a sociological analysis of popular music genres.

Clearly, the problem here derives from the fact that the thesis is based mainly on textual analysis. Being text-based, the performative approach developed in the thesis raises two main issues. The first has to do with the reliability of record-texts as evidence. Texts, it is sometimes suggested in sociological analysis, are not reliable as
evidence because of their essential polysemy, which means they can be (and indeed are) interpreted in different ways. For example, Kelis’s song ‘Milkshake’ analysed in Chapter 5 of the thesis, which dealt with the strategy referred to as ‘pure’ subversion, was interpreted as a thoroughly ambiguous song. Nevertheless it could be read in a potentially infinite number of other ways. It could be understood as being about a woman showing off her sexual prowess and sex appeal, or even as being a promotional tune for a brand of milkshake. Following from the unreliability of texts as evidence due to their polysemic nature, the second problem with using a text-based approach is that it is difficult to establish one’s own interpretation as true. The record-text on its own does not provide us with any firm evidence on the basis of which it can be affirmed that the interpretation of ‘Milkshake’ given in Chapter 5 is actually a socially prevalent meaning. The analysis of record-texts carried out in the thesis might therefore be deemed to be ‘merely’ subjective, and in turn invalid.

However, the thesis argues that performative analysis can overcome these problems to a significant extent. To begin with we can note that problems to do with reliability and interpretation are not specific to text-based analytical methods. These problems are indeed inherent in all forms of sociological research to some extent because it is impossible to produce experimental conditions on the model of natural science in which pairs of variables (dependent and independent) can be isolated. Once this limitation is acknowledged, the issue becomes one of asking what strategies might provide ‘good enough’ (i.e. reliable and valid enough) conclusions. And, it is argued here that performative analysis of the sort done in the thesis can do this, and recover some objectivity, by locating the record-text deep in concrete social relations. The performative analysis carried out in the thesis located contemporary female RnB record-
texts within the African-American musical tradition as it has been shaped by racialised social relations and historical events.

More specifically, the positioning of the record-text in concrete social relations was done through the notion of the continuum developed in the thesis. The performative-implicative continuum always depends on reference to historical conditions. Arguing for the importance of music as ‘social text’, John Shepherd (1991) points out that ‘music is fully implicated in the social conditions of its production and consumption’ and that it is therefore ‘theoretically feasible to conceive of music as articulating from within the inherent characteristics of its sonic channel socially mediated messages’ (7). It is interesting here that Shepherd uses the term ‘implicated’ in a very similar, though quite independent, way to its use in the social speech-act theory we have been drawing on in the thesis. Crucially, implication from music to social relations is what has been at stake throughout and specifically the tension in contemporary female RnB between the social structures of race, gender and class, on the one hand, and black women’s political agency through music, on the other. In sum, the thesis showed how the strategies embodied in women’s RnB record-texts exemplify a form of on-going resistance to concrete historical conditions.

In showing this, the thesis illuminated the productiveness of speech-act theory in the area of cultural studies and demonstrated how the method of performative analysis – though text-based - is reliable and valid enough to the extent that it allows plausible conclusions to be made about the social meaning of record-texts.
Bibliography


Discography


