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TALKING BACK, BENNY STARR, CHARLESTON MUSIC HALL, CHARLESTON, 22 SEPTEMBER 2018

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> Hip-hop didn't have a place there, but I made a place for hip-hop.
>
> (Starr)

Black people in and/or from the South (US) deserve more than what they are provided. As a queer Black southerner, this became especially clear to me while growing up in South Carolina (SC). As I witnessed the many ways white folks acted out their supremacy, the energy needed to work against them became abundantly clear in the live performance of Benny Starr's *A Water Album* in Charleston, SC. Charleston is a locale full of the history of Gullah Geechee folks (as well as Black folks who may not be Gullah Geechee) resisting the bonds of white violence and creating culture as way to free themselves, celebrate life and thrive. This media review looks at how Benny Starr – music artist and activist – the Four20s (band) and his audience members 'come to voice' during the song 'The Water Keeps Rising'. 'Coming to voice', according to bell hooks, is the act of speaking out against the powers that be and asserting oneself as a person rather than an object. Here, place is also crucial to observe alongside this act of resistance. Black folks are constantly creating space and place through 'coming to voice'. Through use of both bell hooks' *Talking back* and Black geographic theorizations from Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, I consider how musical resistance such as this became a way for Starr, the Four20s and his audience to acknowledge how white complicity, silence and other forms of violence engender destruction upon both people and land (in Charleston, SC), never one or the other. I strongly suggest listening to the song before, while and after reading.[1]

Artist and activist Benny Starr uttered the statement above in response to a question I posed concerning where he is from in Pineville, South Carolina (SC). It is a rural town and certainly not 'popular' for having a burgeoning hip hop scene. However, hip hop culture in Charleston, where Starr resides now, doesn't always feel like it has 'a place' in that city, either. But, on the night of 22 September 2018 Starr and his team made a place for hip hop culture and the city's Black communities at the Charleston Music Hall.

The Charleston Music Hall in downtown Charleston is packed to capacity. Benny Starr stands atop a burgundy prayer rug speaking to his audience as his brown skin soaks up the purple and blue light, '[w]e gone be Black as hell in here tonight!'. The crowd squeals. Starr turns to the band, the Four20s, kindly requesting '[c]an I get some keys?'. The song 'The Water Keeps Rising' is next on the bill. This song and the entire live album recording of his LP, *A Water*

1. Listen to the song here: https://open.spotify.com/track/1Ty67YlJ3Hr7hUW2mXJNfb?si=3aaaecf282d54804. Accessed 9 April 2021.

Album, gave Starr and other Black folks at the concert the opportunity to do what bell hooks calls 'come to voice'.

Charleston, founded in 1670, is known as one of the oldest cities in the United States and was one of the largest ports in the United States for chattel slavery from the seventeenth to nineteenth century (Kytle and Roberts 2018). According to the US Census Bureau, 40 per cent of the enslaved African peoples that experienced forced migration to the United States were sent through Gadsden's Wharf in Charleston (IAAM 2018). The vestiges of this chattel slavery appear in US society, and surely in the Black communities, especially Gullah Geechee folks,[2] of Charleston, SC. Whether the visceral effects are experienced by Black folks through gentrification, classicism, environmental racism or anti-Black violence (both physical and spiritual) – note this is where the Emanuel Nine Massacre and murder of Walter Scott occurred in 2015 – the pertinence of speaking out and thereby acting out against white supremacy is imperative.[3]

Given this history and the denial of chattel slavery's proverbial 'children' by white and anti-Black leaders in power, hip hop artist Benny Starr often uses his musical platform to 'come to voice'. In *Talking Back*, bell hooks states, '[i]n the world of the southern black community I grew up in, "back talk" and "talking back" meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure' (hooks 1989: 5). A similar relational dynamic could be said to exist between white folks and Black folks (not to simplify the varying levels of power and privilege that can be ascribed to either peoples). More clearly, hooks often uses the phrase 'coming to voice', which references how people who are marginalized begin to speak and are heard newly as subjects instead of objects. hooks claims, 'only as subjects can we speak. As objects we remain voiceless – our beings defined and interpreted by others' (hooks 1989: 12). Black folks are often relegated to marginal sites of existing as objects to be used by white people, yet 'coming to voice' becomes a method by which they can literally speak out from the margins, empowering themselves. Therefore, 'coming to voice' is essential for Black people, as it promotes revolution and change from the voices of those demanding such. By considering how Starr 'comes to voice' with his community in Charleston, I hope to make plain how he creates space for Black communities with his music and performance.

To create space or make place, based on theorizations from Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, means that Black people constantly produce spaces to be and thrive in jubilation with acknowledgement to and amid the racial violence and spatial prohibition they endure from purely existing. 'The Water Keeps Rising' a gospel-soul influenced hip hop song from *A Water Album* captures this sentiment well. The five-minute performance of this song is as much Starr questioning the colonization of Black spaces during an environmental crisis as it is a musical conversation between the community members that attended the show and 'white and rich Charleston'.

On the Music Hall's stage at the beginning of the song, silence dissipates across the room as Starr kindly requests to the pianist, '[c]an I get some keys?'. A smooth melodic riff echoes throughout the hall as Benny recites,

> 'Gave a twenty-dollar bill to a woman on the street for a fresh meal/in front of a hotel that clipped the ribbon/where the Black folk used to be, now hipsters live in' (*The audience yells in excitement*).

2. Gullah Geechee folks are the descendants of enslaved Central and West Africans forcibly put on isolated barrier islands off the coasts of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida.

3. The tourist industry, which largely serves to appease white people, is a part of this white supremacist complex.

Each note of the sombre piano melody falls rhythmically out of place with each syllable of Benny's words. Starr's indictment of the physical and racialized spatial changes in Charleston (Black life → hotel) pairs with the rhythm of the piano melody – it is both a musical and a corporeal displacement, with Benny talking and preaching on top of the minimalist keys.

Throughout the song, Starr refers to the impact of gentrification (e.g. communal displacement, homelessness) and the environmental threat of the rising sea levels, which disproportionately affects Black communities. Gentrification is 'a process of dismantling existing urban neighborhoods and displacing poor people of color to make way for new residents who are mostly white and wealthier' (Patton 2017: 4). The racial makeup of downtown Charleston has changed drastically over the last 30 years.[4] Some Gullah Geechee folks are facing the threat of losing their land to developers while other Gullah Geechee folks are priced out of their long-time downtown neighbourhoods as they are pushed off the peninsula and sea islands to North Charleston and areas like Ladson, Summerville and Hanahan. Some of these places where Gullah Geechee and low-income residents are forcibly migrated to 'suffer from greater exposure to environmental hazards that include noxious incinerators, landfills, Superfund sites, Toxics Release Inventory facilities, and sewer and water treatment plants' (Patton 2017: 62).[5] This is a common case of environmental racism.[6]

The assurance in Starr's voice and lack of instrumentation at the beginning of the song forces audience members to hear his words. As he finishes especially truthful sentences, the audience erupts approvingly in 'Asé's, 'yes's, 'aye's and 'woo's. A powerful dynamic and melodic intensification of the keys provides the perfect backdrop for Benny's lines,

> 'See I'm not a rich white girl in white pearls riding through the hood, just to make it to the brewery...' (*Audience members say 'Oooooooo!'*).

This line incites much excitement from the crowd as it points to places that were formerly viewed as unworthy of living in by white people, but which are now occupied by them. The 'urban' lifestyle that young white professionals seek notably includes Black cultural productions like soul food, palmetto roses and hip hop, but it does not include the Black people that create it. This is not to say that the new Starbucks or the all-white-staffed sparkly cupcake shop is somewhere that Black people cannot go, but it is to say that these businesses, as examples, are not Black cultural institutions that one would find in a Black community (particularly when it is not owned by Black people). Neither are they places that truly value Black humanity. Starr ends this verse with the question '[t]ell me what you gone do when the water keeps rising?'. The music abruptly changes after this initial questioning and Starr continues with his inquiry, transitioning to a mid-song bridge and passionately spewing,

> 'Put the Black man on the boat/Black woman on the boat too/spilling blood in the field it's real/So everything a nigga sing feel spiritual/Came here in the Lord's name/white man brought the world war/We got a boat full of rebels and we pullin' up/Revolution on the shore' (*Whispers barely audible amongst the crowd*).

4. Over the last 30 years, the racial makeup of the city reversed from roughly two-thirds Black to two-thirds white, with a 55 per cent drop in the Black population (Patton 2017).

5. Environmental racism appears throughout the city; from the railroad tracks that break up communities to Mary Ford Elementary that is built on top of an old landfill, or the East Side in downtown Charleston, which is an area prone to flooding.

6. Robert Bullard's work on environmental racism is an apt source to explore here. For context, environmental racism is the disproportionate effect of environmentally hazardous issues on communities of colour.

Starr evokes revolutionary imagery reminiscent of the transatlantic slave trade perils, so applicable to Charleston. In this moment, the instrumentation and pace of the song alter, the original piano melody quickens in tempo (and is placed on a loop) and rising twinkling computer production sounds enliven the suddenly growling mood. This section foregrounds high-pitched syncopated dings, rattling ticks and telephone dials. Tones are rising, just like the water in Charleston. This transition prepares audience members for an even more inquisitive 'questioning chorus'.

'Tell me what you gone do when the water starts rising? / You realizin' that the water don't drown us'. This questioning chorus is a mainstay within the song and directly interrogates event-goers who are either complicit in or consciously perpetuate anti-Black racism. Starr and his team purposefully curate this moment to 'come to voice' on behalf of the community, yet also *with* the community, as they approve of his musical reckoning through the energy they feed back to him. This musical reckoning made me hear what bell hooks means when she insists that, '[t]he oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves – to rewrite, to reconcile, to renew. Our words are not without meaning. They are an action – a resistance' (hooks 1989: 28). Again, speaking is resistance. This resistance looks like Starr addressing all who participate in, or are complicit in, the subjugation of Black people. He and the cheerful audience re-write a narrative about spatial concerns in regard to Black folks' environmental wellness. Verbalizing the social and environmental struggles is of prime concern here as Starr transitions from his 'questioning chorus' to a repeat of the original verse at the beginning of the song, except this time instead of a talking recitation, he is rapping.

About halfway into 'The Water Keeps Rising' Starr directly talks back to two populations. After returning to the same questioning chorus, he exclaims,

> 'What you gone do?' (*Crowd screams*) 'White Charleston, tell me what you gone do?' (*Hollering from the crowd*) 'Rich Charleston, tell me what you finna do?' (*Audience shouts*) 'I can't hear y'all. Tell me what you gone do. I have a message for y'all…' (*Audience member 'aye's*).

This direct statement to the rich people and white people in Charleston pairs well with a quiet, serene variation on the first melody from the keys while the drummer, who previously provided a backbeat, completely disappears. Much of the computerized sounds are hushed too. Immediately after, all the instrumentation makes a roaring return. In this moment, concert goers are even more active participants in the act of 'coming to voice'. Rather than Starr merely brushing over this moment of questioning white and monied Charleston, he gives them the chance to hear the affirmations of the audience. Driving home the message of this song, audience members jump in with response to the call, sounding out what they are going to do when the water keeps rising, which is speak truth to power and stand with community members who support the thriving of Black people and hip hop in Charleston. Starr and the Four20s use this instrumental pause to supply room for the audience's voice not only to be heard but also to be centred in the moment of truth-telling reverberating through the Charleston Music Hall.

Starr's decision to record at the Charleston Music Hall was an intentional one. The Music Hall is right down the street from new hotels and condominiums that aid in the gentrification that he discusses in his song. This is the

Music Hall which is in the heart of downtown Charleston and is truly in threat of being underwater in the next 100 years because the 'water keeps rising'.[7]

Starr's ability to 'come to voice' with the affirmations and cheers of audience members reminds listeners that the musical experience is not without particularity to place nor does it exist as powerfully without the collective voice. The same stands for resistance. Without a collective group of people to 'come to voice' in resistance and a specific place to do it in, the act is removed from its context. 'Coming to voice' in places that are known for being spaces that perpetually cater to white people forces observers (and those that frequent those places the most) to pay attention to how artists use, navigate and intentionally 'make room' for their community in response to long histories of being unacknowledged or pushed out.

7. It is said that Charleston could experience around 180 days per year of flooding by 2045.

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