

“Let’s Call Her Cleopatra, Cleopatra”

Cleopatra is as much a cultural phenomenon as an historical figure. The last queen of Egypt fills our magazines, museums, screens, stages, and novels. While her cultural preeminence has been well-appreciated by scholars, one medium has been given less attention—popular music. In this paper, I will focus on four recent songs of various “popular music” genres (as defined in Rojek 2011), all of which narrate a male musician’s (first-person) love/obsession of a Cleopatra— “Pyramids” (2012) by Frank Ocean, “The Flames of Desire” (2016) by ABC, “Cleopatra” (2014) by Weezer, and “Cleopatra” (2017) by Anik Khan. In these songs, Cleopatra finds herself, as ever, the object of male desire, revealing much more about the wants and anxieties of the male narrators than her own.

The audience for these songs is vast, diverse, and, in most cases, likely distinct. Except for the Cleophiles, few fans of Anik Khan’s Bollywood-infused hip hop single would find ABC’s 80’s synth-reunion on their playlist. Similarly, there is likely to be little fan-overlap between the folksy-rock of Weezer and of Frank Ocean’s rich, imaginative “Pyramids.” Yet, these musicians share the same object of desire (and even narrative technique), while simultaneously transcending genre, ethnicity, nationality, and generation. As the British critic Arthur Symons once said, “Before the thought of Cleopatra every man is an Antony” (Lovric 2001), this diverse cast of musicians have all taken on their own Antony-role (though admittedly the ABC’s are likely channeling Julius Caesar too with their lyric, “you came, you saw, you conquered me”).

As “Antony,” each man “sets the cheetahs on the loose” (“Pyramids”) after his unique Cleopatra. For some, she has “skin like bronze and hair like cashmere” (“Pyramids”), and for others she “look[s] like diamonds and gold, diamonds and gold, diamonds and gold”

("Cleopatra" (2017). While she is the "jewel of the Nile" to Weezer, she is the jewel of the whole of Africa to Frank Ocean. While some Antonies are still on the prowl, ABC's narrator is nearly destroyed while "burning in flames of desire" and Weezer's narrator has grown old of Cleopatra's faded beauty and tells her "it's time to move to the next life."

While it is hard to imagine copies of Plutarch or Cassius Dio in the recording studio (not to mention dense numismatic, epigraphic, papyrological, and art historical monographs), the lyrics of each song preserve artifacts of ancient sources, as well as the transmitted Cleopatras of Shakespeare, Alma-Tadema, Elizabeth Taylor, etc. Through the constraints of genre and imaginative storytelling, each modulates Cleopatra to the expectations of audiences and studios and, fundamentally, to modernity.

Pop music relies on a cultural "repertoire that form[s] the basis of social recognition and markers of collective memory" (Rojek 18). The cultural repertoire for Cleopatra is vast, and the collective memory is long. In this paper, I will explore this repertoire and how it has been incorporated into and functions in the selected songs. In my discussion, I will touch on themes such as gender roles, race ("Found my black queen Cleopatra," ("Pyramids")), the male gaze, orientalism, agency, sexuality, power, prostitution ("But your love ain't free no more," ("Pyramids") cf. Propertius III.11.39, *De viris illustribus* 86.2), empire, conquest, death and the afterlife, and *tryphe* (Ptolemaic extravagance and opulence). For instance, I will parallel Ptolemaic *tryphe* (e.g. "she furnished herself with a world of gifts, store of gold and silver, and of riches and other sumptuous ornaments..." (Plut. *Ant.* 13)) with the extravagant materialism of hip-hop culture (Podoshen, et al. 2014), as well as their parallel critiques.

And why does popular music matter? It is the music of the people – of our readers, our students, and ourselves. Pop music pervades our society – our commercials, movies, stores,

restaurants, playlists, etc. Pop music is our everyday cultural repository, and Cleopatra will not wait for the next opera.

Bibliography

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