I am wearing my womanhood from the inside out
cause I met myself through the eyes of my ancestors
my beige-bamboo to tree-bark dark daughters
my sisters who mothered me, smothered me with the eyes of
let there be peace . . .

—Debra Powell-Wright, “Woman . . . Just Be”

Black Women: Reflections Eternal

In her essay “Selling Hot Pussy,” bell hooks writes, “Bombarded with images representing black female bodies as expendable, black women have either passively absorbed this thinking or vehemently resisted it” (65). Unlike Nina Simone’s 1966 first-person rendition of “Four Women,” in reaction to the unbridled racism and white supremacy of the civil rights era, Talib Kweli’s twenty-first-century third-person voice, in tribute to Simone, positions these same four black women—Aunt Sarah, Siffronia, Sweet Thang, and Peaches—squarely within the cultural iconography of today’s contemporary urban environment. And while his lyric is specific to each character’s individual physicality as written by Simone, different than her sparse yet powerful lyric, Kweli locates each of them to a particular encounter that he may have had in his role as a young, lyrically gifted black male. Same song; different use.
of language, music, and vocality; different approach to addressing the imagery around the black female stereotype.

The son of an English professor mother and a sociology professor father, Brooklyn-born Kweli has been labeled a conscious rapper, a political rapper, a righteous-voiced hip-hop artist and skillful lyricist in tune with and a product of urban America’s social and cultural issues. Long before the hip-hop era lay claim as the worldwide dominant voice of the disenfranchised urban community, there was Nina Simone, High Priestess of Soul, singing “Mississippi Goddam” and “To Be Young, Gifted and Black.” And a generation after Simone, there was Talib Kweli, along with DJ Hi-Tek, together known as Reflections Eternal, with their October 2000 debut CD featuring “For Women” as the final cut. Interviewed a few years later by 50 Cent for hip-hop magazine XXL, Kweli is quoted:

I discovered Nina in high school. I got sent away to boarding school and in order to keep myself clean, really—whenever I would go home, I would take my father’s old records and listen to them. I had a little turntable and Nina Simone records. The reason that she touched me is, when she came out she wasn’t a traditional singer . . . And she didn’t have the look of, like a Billie Holiday. She was a lot more African looking . . . She chose to speak about issues that affect poor people and issues that affect Black people. And you know, she was ostracized for it, but she kept doing it. Her career path speaks to me because I don’t feel like I do this naturally . . . And with me, I feel more in touch with Nina Simone . . . But I didn’t feel the effect she had on me until she passed. (102–8)

In her 1992 biography, I Put A Spell on You, Simone states on writing “Four Women,” “The women in the song are black, but the skin tones range from light to dark and their ideas of beauty and their own importance are deeply influenced by that. All the song did was tell what entered the minds of most black women in American when they thought about themselves; Their complexions, their hair—straight, kinky, natural, which?—and what other women thought of them” (Simone and Cleary 117).

Although it is not known whether Simone heard Kweli’s version, she did not share his appreciation for the art form that would serve as the foundation for him to give voice to issues of oppression and racism. Simone is reported to have said of rap, “I don’t like rap music at all. I don’t think it’s music. It’s just a beat and rapping” (Brainy Quote). Despite Simone’s reaction to rap, she and Kweli, each in their own time, have suffered from a creative economy that has valued commercialism and capitalism over