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African slaves used singing as a form of communication. Chants, vocal percussion, and other techniques of vocalization were renowned as a therapeutic ritual to those that battled with complex trauma. While enslavement is said to have been abolished, 'slave music' has continued to evolve and expand worldwide. It is evident that countless genres have adopted African rhythms and sounds in further ways than we are inclined to admit. Truth be told, white musicians are marketable whereas blacks are deemed noncommercial. As a result, black female musicians, in particular, are often rewarded with the short end of the stick. Despite the fact that a small percentage have made a breakthrough in the field of music and created a positive effect on society, a great deal are forced to remain in the shadows. Our society has spent decades silencing women of color, excluding them from crucial conversations, and threatening those who dare to speak out. The four black female artists featured in the composition are proof that regardless of the circumstances, black women will continue to exude grace, power, and the incapacity to keep quiet on lingering issues.

Billie Holiday, formerly known as Eleanora Fagan, was labeled as one of the most influential performers of her time. The illustrious jazz singer was born on April 7th, 1915 in Baltimore, Maryland during the Jim Crow era and suffered in the state of little income. As a child, Fagan faced a multitude of challenges. Between scrubbing floors, running errands for a brothel, prostitution, and jail time, the future seemed bleak to the adolescent. In addition, her father, Clarence Halliday, abandoned the family to pursue a music career and rarely visited (“Billie Holiday - About the Singer”). Despite her dark and troubled past, Fagan looked to the stars, singing along to the records of Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong as a means of redemption. In the late years of 1920, she and her unattached mother, Sarah Fagan, packed their bags and headed straight for the Big Apple. Life without funds drove the juvenile to audition as a singer at a Harlem jazz club where she habitually appeared as the principal artist. The pseudonym, Billie Holiday, was inspired by her father’s stage name, Clarence Holiday, and her favored film star, Billie Dove. Record producer John Hammond discovered the eighteen-year-old and took it upon himself to promote her. This led to a debut album, recording contracts, appearances in feature films, music tours, and much more (“Billie Holiday”).

One of her signature numbers, “Strange Fruit,” brought upon numerous controversies and her usual record label, Columbia Records, had qualms about recording the song. Fortunately in the year 1939, the independent jazz label Commodore Records obliged and recorded the song though certain radio stations refused to play it. In spite of that, these obstacles did not stop the tune from becoming a hit (Fields). The eerie anthem was associated with the Civil Rights Movement and is considered a symbol for the anti-lynching crusade. The arrangement opens with the piano as it plays a vigorous C minor block chord. A solo trumpet then takes the lead and

wails the first sequence of notes (G C Eb F Eb D Ab D) while the piano continues to accompany with a D minor seventh flat five and a G dominant seventh. Both instruments repeat the sequence and at the end of the phase, the trumpet goes astray and trills on the notes (Bb Ab G F G). On the third time around, Billie begins to sing as the brass and stringed instruments provide improvisations and decorations underneath. Each lyric paints a picture of “bulging eyes” and “twisted mouths” as black bodies hung from poplar trees. It is reported the words reminded the vocalist of her father who had been denied treatment from a hospital because of his race and soon passed on due to lung cancer. Regardless of the unconditional threats from the government, Billie Holiday remained audacious and continued to raise awareness of the issue at hand (Pak). Susan-Lori Parks, creator of the Pulitzer-Prize-winning play *Topdog/Underdog* and screenwriter for the drama *The United States vs. Billie Holiday*, explores the narrative of the acclaimed jazz singer and states, “This story is about how this woman, this icon, was too outspoken, and so the government came after her.” Parks said in an interview, “It’s about how we African American folks love this country that doesn’t really love us back” (qtd. in Ito). And even though her statement holds veracity, Billie Holiday persists as the figure of determination and perennial faith.

Eunice Kathleen Waymon, known as Nina Simone, was delivered on February 21, 1933 in Tyron, North Carolina. The self-trained pianist and organist was raised in a musical environment where all nine members of the immediate family were assigned an instrument – Eunice becoming the most proficient. Her mother, Mary Kate Waymon, was a Methodist minister, housemaid, and respected piano player. The father, John Divine Waymon, dabbled with vocals and the harmonica. Mr. Waymon bounced from job to job, first as a dry cleaner, a barber,

handyman, and then a reverend. Both parents were chief supporters of their daughter and participated in the development of her talents. With the aid of private lessons with the classically trained pianist Muriel Massanovich and the freedom to exhibit her voice at the local church, the child prodigy discovered her true calling (“Nina Simone”). In the year 1945, the gifted twelve-year-old performed at a school recital where her parents were escorted to the back of the room on account of the color of their skin. Eunice, utterly aware of the dimensions of racism, threatened to put a stop to the performance unless her parents were seated at the front row. This instance became her first stance against the displays of discrimination and prejudice – a pure insight into Eunice’s character. After immersing herself into the traditional works of Johann Sebastian Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, and more, the wunderkind dreamt of becoming the first black female classical pianist to entertain at Carnegie Hall. While insufficient financial resources made the aspiration seem inconceivable, proponents from her small Southern town raised funds for the high school valedictorian to enlist at Juilliard School of Music in New York City and the Curtis Institute of Music. In spite of her excellence, the establishments denied admission in view of her race (“Biography of Nina Simone”).

Disappointed by the outcome, Waymon resigned from the classical world, left her hometown, and started anew by improvising on jazz tunes at a nightclub in Atlantic City. Impressed by her adroitness on the piano, the owner hired Waymon with the intentions of her playing the piano and singing. From there on, she acquired the moniker Nina Simone; the idea derived from the French actress, Simon Signoret. At the age twenty-four, Simone caught the attention of recording companies. She signed contracts with Bethlehem Records, and then a few years later she moved to Columbia Pictures. In the 1960s, the natural full-toned alto recorded

political songs to express her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement and abhorrence of the bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. In response to the cataclysm, Nina Simone, nicknamed the “High Priestess of Soul,” released a self-written civil rights composition, “Mississippi Goddam,” and in 1965 preceded with a distinctive rendition of the show tune “Feeling Good” (“Nina Simone”).

Simone sings the first verse of “Feeling Good” in acapella in G minor. Then the piano, saxophones, violins, and guitars are added after the lyric, “and I’m feeling good.” The basic pattern (Gm-Gm/F-Eb-D7) repeats throughout the first two lines of each verse, for the third line (Gm-Gm/F-C/E-Eb), and the last two end with (Gm/D- Cm-Bb-Am-D7-Cm-D7). Simone decorated the melody with slurs, yodels, and the imitations of elements in nature which were described in the lyrics. As a major celebrity of the mid-20th century, Simone continues to embody the spirit of defiance and demands the world for her well-earned respect.

On October 3, 1975, India Arie Simpson was born in Denver, Colorado to professional basketball player Ralph Simpson and accomplished vocalist Joyce Simpson. Alas, her parents divorced when she reached the age of thirteen, which placed her in Atlanta, Georgia with her mother and siblings. India derived a love for music from her mother, which manifested into a collection of instruments. The musically inclined child mastered the saxophone, baritone clarinet, French horn, and trumpet in a short amount of time. As she attended the Savannah College of Art and Design, India devoted herself to singing and took an interest in guitar. Carrying the instrument on her back, she unexpectedly entered the music business by collaborating with local musicians. The performances caused her to be recognized by a talent scout, Reen Nalli, and the president of Motown Records, Kedar Massenburg (Tiana Smith). Once 1999 rolled around, India

Arie began writing and then released her debut album, *Acoustic Soul*, in 2001. The album was number ten in the *Billboard* U.S. 200 and listed number three on the Top R&B/Hip-Hop Albums. The album sold 2,180,000 copies in the United States and 3,000,000 million copies worldwide thus leading her to attain seven Grammy awards in the year 2002 (“India Arie”).

Stardom comes with its advantages and disadvantages, and Arie is not one to disregard the negative aspects. As pleased as she is with her accomplishments, Arie sheds light on the racism and sexism found in the music industry. With her natural hair, “be it braided or cut short,” she encourages her fellow brothers and sisters to embrace their beauty, despite the efforts of the industry trying to make her think otherwise. Dressed in “less-revealing clothes,” she attempts to break the oversexualized stereotypes of black female singers and shows one does not have to follow the notion that “sex sells” in order to be successful (Allen). In the most recent news, a well known American commentator and podcaster, Joe Rogan, was caught saying the N-word on various accounts; and though he has apologized and explained it was not said with ill intent, India Arie remains suspicious. On an episode of *The Daily Show* with the host Trevor Noah, Arie speaks her mind on the issue and educates the audience on the “differences between ‘conscious racism’ and ‘unconscious racism.’” She says:

I have learned in my life to make room and forgiveness for people who are unconsciously racist because our whole society is built on racist concepts. So if you’re born into it, if you’re not actively working to not be racist, then you have some of it in you. (Carras)

On multiple occasions, Arie describes how her upbringing differs from the world around her. She discusses how her family members believed colorism was “a small minded way to look at Black people” and that it is their duty to break free from the constraints (Johnson).

The song “I Am Not My Hair” from her 2006 album, *Testimony: Vol.1, Life & Relationships*, is a catchy number which starts with a short dialogue where two women talk about India’s hair. A guitar and piano play the harmonic sequence (G Cm7 Bb Am7 D7 G Cm7) and Arie enters with an embellished type of scatting on the word “Da-Da.” Then the lyrics describe all the different hairstyles she has worn throughout her lifetime. The chorus explains how her skin and hair do not define her worth for it is “the soul that lives within.” India Arie evokes the spirit of peace and individuality through colorful lyricism accompanied by the sweet harmonious sounds of her acoustic guitar. The prominent R&B singer and songwriter cements herself as a musical activist, protecting the positive portrayal of blackness, and uses her musical voice to promote positive change. In the end, India Arie helps her listeners journey through heartbreak, soul-searching, self-love, and the practice of forgiveness.

Jorja Smith, born in Walsall, West Midlands County, England on June 11, 1997, is an adored singer and songwriter who began her musical career at the age of eight. Her mother, Jolene Smith, invested in the jewelry business while the father, Peter Smith, was a Human Resources officer. The two assisted in their daughter’s interest in music-making which led her to pursue her dreams of becoming a well known vocalist. By the age eleven, Smith started to share her tracks online, where she gained an enormous following and attracted the interest of record producers and other famous artists such as Kendrick Lamar, Drake, and Stromzy. In 2016, her first single, “Blue Lights,” was released and the lyrics shined a light on the subject of police brutality. The intro begins in B Minor with the main chord progression consisting of (G-Bm-F#m/A). Smith dives into the lyrics and explains how she dreams of changing the color of the police sirens into “strobe lights” or “fairy lights.” The words continue to tell a story of a

young black child and how the world perceives them as a threat. At the end, the kid is caught in the wrong place at the wrong time which results in them having “blood on their hands” and not knowing where it had come from (“Jorja Smith”).

Smith herself described the acts of micro-aggression she endured throughout her childhood and how she is astonished at how prejudice and racism continues to thrive (“Jorja Smith”). As she is half-Caucasian and half-Jamaican, Smith is roped into heated discussions where some argue that her rise to fame stems from being light skinned. By society’s standards, light skinned celebrities are considered “attractive” and are fetishized within the black community. Smith fights back, stating it is important for her to use her platform to discuss challenging topics and reassures listeners that her color does not shield her from being objectified. Nevertheless, Smith keeps her head high, proceeds to address these conflicts, and is not afraid to display her disapproval (Cisne).

In conclusion, the presence of these four powerful black women have ignited a path for others to help dismantle racial stereotypes and inspire the future generations. Each artist has a purpose: to raise awareness of the issues at hand by exposing the negative assumptions about black people within our society, provide an insight into the injustice black women face around the world, and discuss the modern forms of slavery that continue to thrive among us. Music opens the door for humans to peek into the lives of others. As a collective, we are eager to judge a book by its cover. Yet no one walks the earth without bruises and scars. Our perceptions make it so we view the world in a flawed personal lens. In order to follow in the footsteps of these four wise black women, we must learn to fight for our rights, conduct acts of love, and educate others to prevent history from repeating itself.

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