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Incorporating intersectional musicality within the classroom: Black feminism through Nina Simone and Janelle Monáe

ABSTRACT

In an age of social justice advocacy within education, the work of Black women continues to be excluded from the hegemonic educational canon despite the long history of Black feminists advocating for the eradication of systemic oppressive systems in education. By examining the livelihoods and music created by Black feminist musicians, music educators may begin to reflect on how Black women's positionality within society has had a direct influence on the music they created within a White culturally dominant society. The purpose of this article is to conceptualize how the intersectional musicality of Nina Simone and Janelle Monáe – informed by the conceptual framework of Black Feminist Thought – can speak to the experiences that Black girls and women face within music education and society.

KEYWORDS

Black Feminist Thought
intersectionality
popular music education
Nina Simone
Janelle Monáe
race
gender
Black women

INTRODUCTION

Intersectionality has become an academic buzzword across multiple disciplines in the academy (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016). Albeit, in its co-option, intersectionality has been divorced from the origins of Black Feminist Thought (BFT). Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw originally coined the term intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991; Hill Collins and Bilge 2016). Her earliest writings on intersectionality reflected on how structures such as law and government failed to systemically protect Black women and, therefore, social justice for Black women continues to fall short. While coining the term allowed for more focused dialogue on how systematically oppressive systems impact Black women, Black feminist writers before and after Crenshaw have shared similar sentiments regarding the oppressive nature of socially constructed concepts such as gender, race and sexuality within multiple societal institutions. Therefore, Black feminists align themselves and their social justice advocacy through these four tenets outlined by Hill Collins (1990):

1. Racism, sexism, and classism are interlocking systems of oppression.
2. We must maintain a humanist vision that will not accept any amount of human oppression.
3. We must define ourselves and give voice to the everyday Black woman and everyday experiences.
4. We must operate from the standpoint that Black women are unique, and our experiences are unique.

(cited in Woodard and Mastin 2005: 267)

In music education, scholars such as Hess and Talbot (2019), Shaw (2020) and Robinson (2017) have urged the field to implement culturally responsive outlooks that are rooted in providing opportunities for sociopolitical critiques, academic advancement and developmental opportunities towards cultural competence (Ladson-Billings 2000). Music educators should consider pedagogical frameworks that are embedded with an intersectional perspective – as outlined by Black feminist scholars – as it may provide a more dynamic insight into the lives of popular musicians we incorporate within the curriculum. Therefore, analysing subfields of education – including music education – under the lens of intersectionality may result in insights into how epistemology in music education may be inclusive and normal to some, and exclusionary and discriminatory to others. This may be extremely beneficial for Black girls who often view music education as a decontextualized educational experience (Gaunt 2006; Hess 2015; Love 2015; Robinson 2017). When music educators purposefully teach music of Black female musicians, students of colour, specifically Black girls, may feel a sense of understanding through the shared stories, experiences and ideas expressed through the lyrics of Black female popular musicians (Hill Collins 2000; Lindsey 2015; Morgan 2000). Researchers have found that when educational fields and practitioners root their pedagogies and praxes in intersectionality, students often engage in sociopolitical critiques towards their educational system and society (Abril and Robinson 2019; Asante 1991; Robinson 2017; Shaw 2020). Therefore, it is our responsibility to conceptualize a popular music educational praxis that can affirm the intersectional identities of our students.

Intersectionality, as associated with BFT, makes a useful intervention into an otherwise Eurocentric norm of music education. Hence, I advance intersectional musicality as a framework for music education researchers and educators

to consider in disrupting the hegemonic state of music education and making music education more accessible to Black girls. More specifically, the purpose of this article is to conceptualize how the intersectional musicality of Nina Simone and Janelle Monáe – informed by the conceptual framework of BFT – can speak to the experiences Black girls and women face within music education and society. To ground this argument, I first offer a further explication of BFT and intersectionality in education. Then, I contextualize examples of how the lyricism of and interviews by Nina Simone and Janelle Monáe contribute to Black feminist collective theory, and I conclude by offering implications and suggestions as to how the contextualization of Black feminist popular musicians can be beneficial to Black girls in popular music education.

BFT AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Audre Lorde (2007: 113) warned readers about tokenism in ‘The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House’, asserting:

this is the same evasion of responsibility, the same cop-out, that keeps Black women’s art out of women’s exhibitions, Black women’s work out of most feminist publications except for the occasional ‘Special Third World Women’s Issue’, and Black women’s texts off of your reading lists.

By incorporating the writers, scholars, artists and everyday people who contribute to the scholarship known as BFT, music educators can nuance our understandings of Black girls’ multiple avenues of oppression, or intersectionality, within society as well as in our classrooms (Crenshaw 1991; Hill Collins 2019). Patricia Hill Collins (2000) explained that the understanding of the Black women’s experiences in America cannot be solely found in books as Black women have been hindered in a multitude of systemic ways: from entering the academy to writing for the academy. Therefore, to become aware of the infinite personifications of Black womanhood, we cannot rely exclusively on the works that the academy has ordained as Black intellectual writings. Patricia Hill Collins, distinguished university professor of sociology at the University of Maryland, insisted that we should hear the voices of the

working-class women with jobs outside of academia [...] mothers in extended families, [as] othermothers in Black communities, [as] members of Black churches, and [as] teachers to the Black community [...] Musicians, vocalists, poets, writers, and other artists constitute another group from which Black women intellectuals have emerged.

(Hill Collins 2000: 16–17)

Thus, the experiences of Black women are not monolithic.

The writings and art of Black feminists come from places of resistance of oppression while writing from the nexus of socially constructed oppressive identities (Hill Collins 2000; Lorde 2007). Intersectionality helps music educators to understand this nexus, or intersection of socially constructed identities that are used to create hierarchies but, cannot explain oppression as exclusive from one another. Hill Collins (2000, 2019) and Bilge (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016) expanded upon this conceptualization of intersectionality supported by BFT and applied it to other societal structures such as media and education. Writings by Hill Collins and Ladson-Billings (2000, 2013,

2016) created a monumental shift in how educational researchers and practitioners could ground their social justice praxis. Hill Collins (2019) indicated that an intersectional praxis was intended to 'transform educational institutions and the knowledge they embodied' (2019: chapter 1, section 2, para.1). Although the use of intersectionality within research has created a collective push towards transforming curricular practices in a way that highlights and affirms historically minoritized communities, there is a long lineage of Black feminist researchers who have theorized that the root of decolonizing education and creating a more equitable and emancipatory educational process is to develop a praxis that affirms the lives of our marginalized students (Crenshaw 1991; Dill and Zambrana 2009; Hill Collins 2019; Hill Collins and Bilge 2016; hooks 1996, 2015).

Black feminist authors such as Lorde (2007), hooks (1996, 2015), Crenshaw (1989, 1991), Morgan Jerkins (2018) and Tressie McMillian Cottom (2019) all have cited the institution of education as one of their earliest memories of sexist and racist encounters. However, several of their instances were not grandiose events of overt racism and sexism. They were small daily occurrences of microaggressions – from the curriculum (Ladson-Billings 2009, 2016) to after-school activities (Jerkins 2018; McMillan Cottom 2019) – that eventually reshaped their understanding of education.

INTERSECTIONAL MUSICALITY

Intersectionality is a way of understanding the social paradigms that help construct our unique human experiences (Hill Collins 2019). Human experiences are not constructed on one aspect of our identity. Therefore, intersectionality is defined as a lens through which we can understand how multiple occupations of privilege and oppression make up one's social identity (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016). Intersectionality, as a social theory within music education, can create opportunities not only for researchers and practitioners to examine historical musical figures' positionality but also how their positionality is expressed through their music. If we do not adopt a heuristic intersectional musical approach towards epistemology in music education – popular music included – the field will remain colonized (Hess 2015). The consistent centring of White, cis-gendered male musicians within popular music curricula only provides one perspective. Furthermore, said perspective has been overly represented not just within popular music but within the general music education epistemology. The hierarchy of Eurocentric music over other cultural music is so deeply entrenched within the epistemology of music education that the study of music education or music in higher education has become synonymous with Eurocentric styles of music. When we implement an intersectional musical praxis, we can reduce our leniency towards White hegemonic epistemological frameworks and members of diversification, and can provide a more accurate representation of the diverse artists our students engage with at all levels of music education. The heavy leniency on prototypical members, as understood by Sesko and Biernat (2010), in the name of diversification has led to the invisibility of Black women within the traditional and hegemonic music education. Sesko and Biernat (2010) synthesized prototypical representation as individuals who are quickly identified or recognized as members of a category due to social conditioning. This is largely seen within the categorization of race and gender. Therefore, differentiation and individualization seen from prototypical representation has led to the invisibility of Black women

in certain fields. Prototypical diversification within music education can be understood as centring the majority-minority. Within music education, it often takes the shape of the well-intentioned concept to create a more racially diverse programme of composers but continuing to centre cis-gendered men, or attempting to diversify along the lines of gender and excluding Black or other minority women as well as trans and non-binary individuals (Sesko and Biernat 2010). While diversification for the sole purpose of representation may be well intended, without applying an intersectional lens, such efforts can still be viewed as shallow and potentially harmful towards the diversification of music education curricula (Hess 2015; Ladson-Billings 2000).

Representation for the sake of representation, or tokenism (Hess 2015), does not provide insights into the systemic structures of why critical pedagogical frameworks, such as culturally responsive pedagogy, are just now being introduced to the mainstream educational research agenda (Hess 2015). Representation is no longer enough. We must teach *through* representation. Popular music education as a curricular tool and an epistemological framework presents ample opportunities for educators and students to grapple with the sociocultural nuances embedded within the music, and also how said musicians' embodiment of multiple socially constructed identities and their lived experiences are reflected in their music (Green 2001, 2006). Such epistemological framework of popular music education intrinsically seeks to bring awareness of previously marginalized music, as popular music is a naturally diverse music genre (Green 2001, 2006; Hess 2015). While other educational fields have implemented pedagogical approaches such as critical race theory, hip hop feminism and hip hop education to centre the cultural epistemological understanding of specific cultural and ethnic groups, music education can create new connections in how we can understand music as an extension of identity (DeCuir and Dixson 2004; Emdin 2016; Hines 2018; Ladson-Billings 2013, 2016; Lindsey 2015; Love 2015; Morgan, 2000). I hypothesize that if popular music education was rooted in an intersectional critical discourse, or highlighted popular musicians from diverse racial, cultural, gender, ability and socio-economic levels, popular music education could create a deeper critique and pedagogical praxis.

WHY BLACK GIRLS?

When music educators purposefully teach music of Black female musicians, students of colour – and specifically Black girls – may feel a sense of understanding through the shared stories, experiences and ideas expressed through the lyrics. Often these lyrics provide insights into what it means to be Black, a woman and thus the intersectionality of Black womanhood (Hill Collins 2000; Lindsey 2015; Morgan 2000). Black womanhood and music education may seem unrelated. However, when educational fields and practitioners root their pedagogies and praxis in intersectionality, students often engage in sociopolitical critiques of their educational system and society (Abril and Robinson 2019; Asante 1991; Robinson 2017; Shaw 2020). Therefore, it is the responsibility of music educators, researchers and theorists to conceptualize a popular music educational praxis that can affirm the identities of our marginalized students. If intersectionality is to be the lens of understanding Black female musicianship, Nina Simone and Janelle Monáe are my theoretical filters in which I advocate for the consistent placement of Black female musicians' contributions within popular music education experience.

1. 'Strange Fruit' was originally written by Abel Meerpol in 1937 and recorded by Billie Holiday in 1939.

UNSUNG BLACK FEMINISTS

For the scope of this article, I find it imperative to highlight two outspoken popular Black female musicians from two generations: Nina Simone and Janelle Monáe. I chose Nina Simone and Janelle Monáe because their discographies are easily accessible due to their mainstream success, and because they are ideal examples of intersectional musicality. Black feminist musicians do not live or create music in a Black cultural vacuum. Musicians such as Nina Simone and Janelle Monáe have created music that was inspired by other conceptions of cultural music such as showtunes, childhood nursery rhymes and western classical music, along with traditionally culturally Black music genres such as hip hop, funk, soul, blues and jazz. As a result of their ability to centre the livelihoods of Black women through a fusion of music genres, they provide an opportunity to grapple with how their intersectionality is reflected within their music and how these understandings can be used to encourage the development of Black girls' musicality in music education.

Throughout their careers, artists' lyrics, music and personal statements have been viewed as critiques towards hegemonic societal norms. The centralization of Janelle Monáe and Nina Simone expands upon the current canon of historical Black female musicians we highlight within the classroom. By positioning Nina Simone, a historical figure, and Janelle Monáe, a contemporary figure, as my filters, I hope to illustrate parallels in the collective Black feminist consciousness through music. Finally, I aim to trouble the excuse that, because music about Black women has historically been riddled with vulgarities, we must ignore any music that presents the opportunity for Black women to be a topic of conversation in and outside of the classroom (Kruse 2016). I hope to show that words, opinions, stories and songs of Black women can be centred as individual lenses or provide a collective understanding through which we can engage in a more reflexive music educational opportunity for all students.

NINA SIMONE

Many of Nina Simone's songs spoke about the lived realities of Black women and Black girls. Nina Simone centralized the collective Black American experience in songs such as 'Four Women' (Simone 1966), 'To Be Young, Gifted, and Black' (Simone 1967), Simone's cover of 'Strange Fruit' (Simone 1965)¹ and 'Mississippi Goddam' (Simone 1964). Nina Simone's expression of her musicality often depicted the pleasures but also the devastating realities many Black women faced regarding the intersection of racism, sexism, sexual discrimination and classism in society (Simone and Cleary 1992). The height of Simone's career coincided with the Civil Rights era. Thus, many expected famous Black artists with cultural platforms to speak out against social injustices. However, artists were afraid of being seen as too radical and causing detriment to their mainstream careers (Lee 2015). Dick Gregory, a Black American comedian and civil rights activist, strongly admired Simone's sharp tongue and unapologetic commentary towards White supremacy and systemic institutions that benefitted from the social constructions of race and gender (Lee 2015). Nina Simone showed no mercy by performing her most brutally honest music for all-White audiences. This was largely due to Nina Simone's ingenious ability to blur genre lines. The public's inability to categorize Nina Simone was due to her musicality, which appealed to Black and White audiences. Her intersectional musicality consisted of the playfulness and buoyancy often found within Eurocentric historical children's songs or showtune-like music along

with lyrics that criticize society's actions or reactions towards racism and sexism in the United States. However, there is no denying that Nina Simone's music was rooted in the struggles of the Black community. In Simone's autobiography, she stated:

Critics started to talk about what sort of music I was playing and tried to find a neat slot to file it away in. It was difficult for them because I was playing popular songs in a classical style with a classical piano technique influenced by cocktail jazz. On top of that, I included spirituals and children's songs in my performances, and those sorts of songs were automatically identified with the folk movement. So, saying what sort of music I played gave the critics problems because there was something from everything in there, but it also meant I was appreciated across the board – by jazz, folk, pop, and blues fans as well as admirers of classical music.

(Simone and Cleary 1992: 68–69)

JANELLE MONÁE

Janelle Monáe, the 33-year-old Black, pansexual, singer, songwriter and Oscar- and Grammy-nominated activist, has been a prominent figure within popular music within the past decade. Her journey with Hollywood beauty standards, expectations of her sexuality and displaying her early struggles with classism can easily be seen as resistance towards a myopic understanding of what it means to be a successful Black female musician. This outward personification of intersectionality has not only relegated Monáe to a level of crossover stardom, but the intersectional musicality of her music has left Monáe in an undefined music genre (Tran 2020). She is not an artist who can be described solely as an R&B, pop, soul, funk or rock artists. But Monáe is an intersectional musician who consistently centres her intersectional identity within her work. She initially embodied an androgynous look, performed dance moves that resembled those of Michael Jackson and James Brown, and played with her vocal range and ability on several recordings. While some praised the uniqueness of her image and music, others found it difficult to pigeonhole Monáe according to socially constructed expectations the society typically aligns with a darker-skinned young Black woman (Wortham 2018). Monáe opened up about her purposeful clothing decisions and expressed her choice to wear black and white and to view the colour palate as a personal uniform. This was an homage to her working-class parents. Her mother, a janitor and hotel maid for several years, and her father, a truck driver, were direct influences on Monáe's perspective of hard work, dedication and how society values individuals who live in poverty (Monáe 2018a). However, her lack of conforming to the Hollywood standards expected of Black women resulted in rumours and speculation about her sexuality rather than turning these observations into critical discourses around the sacrifices and inspiration behind Black women's art. In 2018, Monáe came out as pansexual, following her initial self-labelling of bisexual in *Rolling Stone* magazine (Monáe 2018a). Media speculation and the consistent watchful eye over Monáe's romantic interests not only speak to how women are not afforded the luxury of self-definition but specifically to how, when Black women or girls express interests or lifestyles outside of socially constructed expectations, they are viewed as spectacles (Costa

Vargas 2018; Hill Collins 2000). Janelle Monáe, a Black, queer woman from an economically poor background, created music reflexive of her own experiences while also critiquing systematic structures that impact the lives of Black women and girls. Black feminist musicians continue to uphold the responsibility of reflecting the sociocultural and sociopolitical times through their music. By creating an analysis of the lyrics of popular Black feminist musicians – such as Nina Simone and Janelle Monáe – within music education can provide a glimpse in what it means to create, perform and even exist as a Black woman in the field of music and in society.

‘FOUR WOMEN’

Black women have created opportunities for self-definition against the hegemonic norm through art, poetry, music, personal essays and other forms of creative pursuits. Collins (2000: 112) stated that ‘[w]hen Black women’s very survival is at stake, creating independent self-definition becomes essential to that survival’. Nina Simone and Janelle Monáe delivered unique poetic justice as they both perpetuated the discourse around Black women stereotypes and archetypes while also providing a more holistic understanding of these archetypes. Hegemonic Black and White social structures have attempted to completely ignore or kill poor Black ghetto women and children. Thus, Nina Simone’s ‘Four Women’ can be seen as ‘an instantly accessible analysis of the damning legacy of slavery, that made iconographic the real women we knew and would become’.

The musical personification of these four archetypes – Aunt Sarah, Saffronia, Sweet Thang and Peaches – vocally personified the survival of Black women from slavery to Simone’s modern day. ‘Four Women’ allowed for listeners to understand that these stereotypes and many others were constructed based on Black women’s usefulness to White culture (Hill Collins 2000; Woodard and Mastin 2005). However, these stereotypes are indeed reflective of the oppressive realities Black women faced in everyday reality. No matter the variance of the name, the survival tactics of Black women and girls echo Aunt Sarah, Saffronia, Sweet Thang and Peaches. The understanding of an essentialized Black women’s identity, or stereotype discourse, must be balanced between the personal self-perception, an inside Black cultural perception and society’s perception. Thus, the point of view Nina Simone presents in ‘Four Women’ not only accounted for the essentialized Black cultural understanding of these stereotypes, an essentialized White hegemonic understanding, but Simone’s radical perception and understanding of the discourses too.

As each story held a mirror to these ingrained societal stereotypes of Black women, Nina Simone performed the radical act of naming. Martin (1993) stated that Black feminist writers such as Audre Lorde and bell hooks emphasize the power of naming to speak to the larger societal issue of domination and difference. Martin (1993: 43) continued by stating that Black feminist poets such as Audre Lorde and bell hooks used different epistemological and methodological means to define the complex nature of African American women’s racial, gender and class structured oppressions. Simone’s ‘Four Women’ reimagined and created a holistic persona of these archetypes. While many of these archetypes and stereotypes are viewed as inherently negative or subordinate (Hill Collins 2000; hooks 1992), scholars have noted that ‘Four Women’ provided a musical and poetic opportunity for Black women and Others to grapple with the sociocultural paradoxical nature of Black

female archetypes and stereotypes. Black women and girls continuously find self-pride, self-autonomy and self-definition within these archetypes or characteristics despite the fact that these archetypes were constructed from the historical systemic oppressive structures Black women faced and continue to face. While these archetypes have been maintained as a sense of othering, Black women have found that these stories, songs and poems pay homage to the legacy of survival and are embedded within the lives of Black women.

2. 'Womxn' is used in solidarity with Janelle Monáe's advocacy and inclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals that can be consistently found throughout her performances and interviews.

'GHETTO WOMEN'

Monáe's 'Ghetto Woman' provided a contemporary critique of another archetype or stereotypical essentialization of Black women: ghetto women. While Simone points at how racism and racist acts have contributed to the pigeonholing some Black women feel subjected to, Monáe provided insights to yet another socio-economic-based conceptualization of a particular type of Black woman. Outsiders to the Black cultural ghetto norm view being ghetto as something negative. Residing in the ghetto or being ghetto is a concept that can be flipped on its head to represent and personify Black resiliency, creativity, innovation and even survival against oppressive systems directed towards the downfall of Black communities (Hill Collins 2000). Monáe wrote 'Ghetto Woman' to signify musical admiration and acknowledgment of the work ethic, dedication and life of Black women living in poverty. Hill Collins (2000) indicated that ghettoization is not relegated to spaces of residence but also within academic spaces. The segregation and suppression of BFT from the mainstream educational canon, the White feminist canon and the African American philosophical canon has been extremely detrimental to the encouragement of the Black feminist intellectual. Thus, Janelle Monáe speaks not only to those who would classify themselves as ghetto due to their cultural and socio-economic background, but Monáe's song speaks to any Black womxn² who has been ostracized due to hegemonic norms.

These socially constructed narratives of labelling – Ghetto Women, Aunt Sarahs, Saffronias, Sweet Thangs and Peaches – were created to 'other' or denormalize the experiences Black women may encounter (Browdy De Hernandez 2003; hooks 1992; Lorde 2007). However, presenting musical artists or music that uplifts and critiques societal norms is not unusual within the realm of social justice within music education (Vasil 2020). As music education advocates, we must continue to remain critical of who we are centring within popular music education, why, and what are the implications. By consistently implementing Black female artists within our curriculum, we may witness something that has collectively been missing from the popular music education pedagogy: the opportunity for Black girls to see themselves within the music education curriculum beyond mere tokenism.

AN ARTIST'S DUTY

In Netflix's *What Happened, Miss Nina Simone?* (Garbus 2015), Nina Simone spoke about the responsibilities of an artist. She stated:

An artist's duty, as far as I'm concerned, is to reflect the times. I think that is true of painters, sculptors, poets, musicians. As far as I'm concerned, it's their choice, but I choose to reflect on the times and situations in which I find myself. That, to me, is my duty. And at this crucial time in

3. Hill Collins (2000: xi) defined a social justice project as 'an organized, long-term effort to eliminate oppression and empower individuals and groups within a just society'.

our lives, when everything is so desperate, when every day is a matter of survival, I don't think you can help but be involved. Young people, Black and White, know this. That's why they're so involved in politics. We will shape and mold this country, or it will not be molded and shaped at all anymore. So, I don't think you have a choice. How can you be an artist and not reflect the times? That to me is the definition of an artist.

(Simone cited in Garbus 2015: n.pag.)

Black feminist writers have written similar statements. Hill Collins (2000: xi) stated, 'I have always seen organic links between Black feminism as a social justice project³ and Black feminist thought as its intellectual center'. Black feminists have historically been extremely vocal towards the eradication of all forms of oppression (Combahee River Collective 1986; Hill Collins 2000). Thus, it is not uncommon for Black feminists and Black feminist musicians to provide reflexive lyrics towards oppressive systems and societal structures in songs like 'Mississippi Goddam', 'To Be Young Gifted and Black' and 'Strange Fruit'.

While Simone's musical commentary was provocative and progressive, due to cultural morality of the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, Nina Simone did not provide contextual information by way of music or interviews on her views of the LGBTQIA+ community (Simone and Cleary 1992). However, Simone's call to action, understood in her reflections towards an artist's duty, provided theoretical support for future Black LGBTQIA+ individuals to creatively share their stories and experiences through music. Examples of openly queer Black women in music include rapper Young M.A., singer Syd the Kid, the Godmother of Rock 'n' Roll Sister Rosetta Tharpe and, of course, Janelle Monáe. Similar to Simone, Janelle Monáe has been seen as a musician-activist. In a 2018 *New York Times* feature, she elaborated, 'I've always understood the responsibility of an artist – but I feel it even greater now' (Wortham 2018).

Her activism as a mainstream artist continues to be unexpected, as she went off script and had her mic cut off during a *Good Morning America* interview (Pengelly 2015). Before she was censored, she publicly stated:

God bless America. God bless all, all the lost lives to police brutality. We want White America to know that we stand tall today. We want Black America to know that we stand tall today. We will not be silenced.

(Pengelly 2015)

It is important to state that while we can certainly see similarities of activism between Simone and Monáe, they are not outliers or spectacles. Black women have a history of calling for social justice. All we have to do is simply listen.

Monáe's activism in the form of lyrical representation can be seen in her hit single 'Q.U.E.E.N.' featuring Erykah Badu and was first released in 2013. Her 2018 *Rolling Stone* interview (Monáe 2018a: n.pag.) claimed, '[t]he original title of "Q.U.E.E.N.", she noted, was Q.U.E.E.R., and you can still hear the word on the track's background harmonies'. Although Monáe chose the alternate title of Q.U.E.E.N. over Q.U.E.E.R., Q.U.E.E.N. stands for 'Queer community, untouchables, emigrants, excommunicated, negroid' (Monáe 2018a). While the title was changed, some lyrics hinting towards sexual attraction are still seen within the lyrics, such as the line '[a]m I a freak because I love watching Mary?' (Monáe 2013).

Just as adolescents of any demographic, several young Black girls go through a period of questioning. They question their aesthetic beauty, their worth in society, the sensuality and the perception of their sexuality – as Black girls are often highly sexualized at a very young age (Carney et al. 2016; Hill Collins 2000; Townsend et al. 2010). However, many Black girls suffer in silence because no aspect of their identities has been normalized within society or, therefore, at school. Monáe’s discography is filled with moments of reflexivity towards her sexuality from this episode of questioning in Q.U.E.E.N. to her more recent single ‘PYNK’ – an ode to femininity. The positionality of a young Black woman openly questioning her sense of attraction throughout her discography, consistently encouraging her listeners to become more critical of systems of oppression, and fighting for equity, while also attempting to normalize aspects of her intersectionality through her music and videos, show Janelle Monáe to be a viable figure to lean on concerning social justice advocacy within popular music education.

‘MISSISSIPPI GODDAM’ AND ‘AMERICANS’

While 50 years separate the peak success of Nina Simone and Janelle Monáe’s current success, their vigour in expressing issues regarding race and gender and the systems that they scrutinize have been very similar. Arguably, Simone’s most controversial song, ‘Mississippi Goddam’, displayed her anger and frustration about the sociopolitical climate of the 1960s. The lyrics reflected the murder of Medgar Evers in Mississippi; the 16th Street church bombing in Alabama in 1963 that killed four young Black girls; and the protests towards integrating schools in Nashville, Tennessee. While it was not uncommon for famous Black musicians to speak about the travesties and murders that happened regularly during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, Simone premiered ‘Mississippi Goddam’ for a majority White audience at Carnegie Hall in 1964 (Dunga 2018). Simone’s second verse opens with:

Hound dogs on my trail. School children sitting in jail. Black cat cross my path. I think every day’s gonna be my last. Lord have mercy on this land of mine. We all gonna get it in due time I don’t belong here I don’t belong there I’ve even stopped believing in prayer.

(Simone 1964)

Simone’s usage of the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘my’ positioned her as the protagonist or at least centralized her point of view within the lyrics. Simone’s self-centring allowed listeners to remove the prototypical image that was often associated (and continues to be associated) with assault and domestic terrorism during the 1960s. The imagery of Black women being chased by dogs during the Civil Rights Movement or other forms of domestic terrorism were often prototypically remembered as an experience exclusive to being Black. However, ‘Mississippi Goddam’ provided an intersectional understanding that privileges of femininity, such as safety and protection, were not extended to Black women (Hill Collins 2000; Truth 1851). Black women’s femininity did not save them from the societal consequences of being Black.

While the lyrics depict the traumatic experiences Black Americans faced during the Civil Rights era, Simone paired this heaviness with buoyant instrumental support that could be categorized as showtune-like music. I encourage music educators to not inherently dismiss this idea of finding a place for

'Mississippi Goddam' to be discussed within music education simply due to the provocative title. But rather, discuss why music education has excluded provocative work from cultural minority groups that could provide unique counternarratives towards the music education epistemology. Therefore, the critical discussion of the lived realities of Black women has a place within popular music education as we educate, work with and encounter Black women daily. The incorporation of 'Mississippi Goddam' within popular music pedagogy can create spaces to bring awareness to the inhumane acts such as lynching, police brutality and murder of Black Americans by other American citizens – in the classroom from the point of view of a Black woman. As educators and adults, we must accept the responsibility and the reality that how we teach and what we teach our students deeply impacts their lives. Therefore, the lives of not just our young Black girls but our Black boys and Black non-binary children are at stake. While we may aim to have classrooms that are supportive and nurturing for all, a growing number of our public school classrooms are becoming more diverse towards socio-economic levels, racial and ethnic backgrounds, gender identities, ability and disability and many other facets of intersectionality (Elpus and Abril 2011).

Janelle Monáe creatively utilized the collective term of 'Americans' to raise awareness of how specific privileges are not given to individuals who reside in the United States. The humanist tone of 'Americans' questions how discriminatory practices, ideals and institutions within the United States can continue to exist while minoritized individuals, such as a Black woman, continue to be dehumanized despite being American. Monáe sang, 'I like my woman in the kitchen. I teach my children superstitions. I keep my two guns on my blue nightstand. A pretty young thang, she can wash my clothes. But she'll never ever wear my pants' (Monáe 2018b). While many of these statements were rooted in misogyny, Monáe illustrated how even these hegemonic concepts of misogyny still permeate the Black culture. Towards the end of the song, Monáe featured an undisclosed speaker who made the following statement:

Let me help you in here. Until women can get equal pay for equal work. This is not my America. Until same-gender loving people can be who they are. This is not my America. Until black people can come home from a police stop without being shot in the head. This is not my America, huh!

(Monáe 2018b)

Monáe's 'Americans' tackles injustices faced by oppressed people in the United States from a Black American queer woman's perspective. However, as a Black woman speaking from the vantage point of experiencing multiple forms of oppression and bringing awareness to societal issues that regularly impact Black women, such as equal pay, police brutality and equal treatment of Black LGBTQIA+ people, Monáe's 'Americans' provides a unique critique of the conceptualization of what it means to be 'American'.

Black feminists and philosophers have deconstructed the meaning of what it means to be 'American' within the context of the United States (Hill Collins 2006; Hill 2009; McCarthy 2018; Vickery 2017; Woodard and Mastin 2005). While Black women born in the United States may legally be American citizens, there are several historical periods in the United States where Black Americans and cis-gendered American women were excluded from the assumed privileges of American citizenship (Hill Collins 2006). These

privileges include access to public parks without confrontation (Mezzofiore 2018), walking in one's neighbourhood (Fausset et al. 2020) and resting in a private residence without being shot and killed by the police (Hawkins and Paul 2019). Deconstructing the normative understanding of what it means to be an American in the United States can evoke a stronger call for equal pay for minoritized women, the end of police brutality and recognizing the civil rights of LGBTQIA+ people, which all directly impact the lives and livelihoods of minoritized children within school classrooms. By incorporating the work of Janelle Monáe – and Nina Simone – within the classroom, music educators are forced to look beyond the prototypical members and speak to students who face police brutality or oversurveillance outside of the classroom, affirm minoritized students who identify within the LGBTQIA+ community, and become critical of how structures, such as education, have historically excluded minoritized individuals.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Prominent music education scholars have taken up the task of providing research-based suggestions on how to implement an inclusive praxis at all levels of music education. Hess and Talbot (2019 91) raised the banner for systems and individuals in music education to 'challenge injustice and contribute to social change [...] [and to] give voice to different perspectives and respond to political events'. Robinson (2017) and Chou (2007) have stated that for pre-service teachers to fully grasp pedagogical approaches to understanding and affirming the lived experiences of students from diverse sociocultural backgrounds, music educators must also develop awareness and reflectivity of our own beliefs, behaviours and cultural assumptions of others and ourselves. If music educators wish to understand and create change within our field, we must provide a space for voices to be heard; understand that conversations relating to developing cultural competency are not the sole responsibility of popular music education or other liberal subfields; and insist that if we wish to speak about or reflect the music of diverse communities, our foundational pedagogical understandings should first come from those community members. While music education researchers and practitioners attempt to diversify pedagogical practices that highlight more Black musicians, the field must remain critical of how these frameworks are directly affirming or ignoring the works of prominent Black female musicians of the past and present day. How might the choice of providing a consistent representation of Black women within our classroom impact Black girls and others? I reiterate the statement pinned by Black feminist author Morgan Jerkins (2018: 24), '[o]ur blackness doesn't distance us from other women; however, it does distinguish us, and this requires further understanding'.

As racial tensions rise in the United States, music educators may realize that our current curricula are no longer good enough. We all have to do better. We are responsible for the holistic education of every child we are given the privilege to teach. Therefore, it is our responsibility to provide sustainable and consistently inclusive music education experiences. With intersectionality as a lens, music educators can reimagine the curriculum and avoid potentially harmful representations or stereotypes associated with the vast cultural, racial, linguistic, gender and ability diversification within our classroom. By incorporating an intersectional musical understanding, we avoid a possible one-dimensional or monothematic understanding of Black female musicians.

Through Nina Simone and Janelle Monáe we can begin to understand how Black female musicians have crafted stories and messages within the lines of their lyrics and musical choices. However, they are not the only ones. By understanding the intersectional musicality of Black female musicians, we can recognize and continue to validate the experiences – such as racism, sex or gender oppression, economic disadvantages and other social constructs – that Black women and Black female artists attempt to reflect within their art. By adhering to an understanding of intersectional musicality, one can begin to understand how Black female musicians hold their cultural background and identity of Blackness constant within a music industry that is dominated by Whiteness. However, that is not to say that the Black women’s experience can be essentialized. Due to the societal consequences of being Black and a woman, Black women provide insights into the complexities of obtaining true social justice. As the Combahee River Collective stated, ‘[i]f Black women are free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression’ (Combahee River Collective 1986: 215).

Nina Simone’s sociopolitical and cultural commentary through music provides music education practitioners with additional resources and insight that may be beneficial to the intrinsic motivation of Black girls in music education programmes. However, the ability to see sociocultural and cultural commentary rooted in a Black woman’s experience is not solely beneficial to Black girls’ participation and motivation within said programmes. Highlighting Black womxn musicians who balance sociopolitical and sociocultural critiques through reflexive lyrics and intersectional musical choices disrupts the stereotypical and often monolithic perspectives of Black women within music education, the popular music industry and society. Nina Simone, along with Janelle Monáe’s history of queering the music industry for Black women in popular music, can serve as an example – to future Black female musicians in music classrooms – of how to carve out true self-definitions for themselves and of how music education can validate and support the identity, musicianship and experiences of Black girls (Hill Collins 2000; Lorde 2007; Simone and Cleary 1992). Through the theory of intersectional musicality, students can begin to develop a deeper understanding of their own layers of identities with music as their guide.

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