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ALOOF:

BLACK DIVAS OF REFUSAL

by

KWAME K. OCRAN

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2021

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Black Divas of Refusal

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Aloof Black Divas of Refusal

by

Kwame K. Ocran

Advisor: David Humphries

“Aloof: Black Divas of Refusal” studies performers Lena Horne and Billie Holiday as the progenitors of a new tradition of authentic representation of Black female interiority in the entertainment arts. As interiority denotes the wide-ranging amalgamation of human expression, these divas equipped themselves with a sense of refusal and aloofness to strategically posture themselves in conditions that suited their personal predilections best and considered their status as representatives of the Black community. Lena Horne’s evolution as an aloof diva successfully saw the singer and actress escape classist thought of racial uplift to the full embracing of the totality of Black experience, and she was successful on the merits of her performative choice to withhold her interiority, and talents, from an oppressive gaze. Jazz icon Billie Holiday refused the simultaneous logistical arrangements of racism with an aloofness to law and an unapologetically candid interiority. By rejecting pervasive stereotypes of Black women in their art and lifework, I come to recognize, honor, and venerate these divas for their contributions to Black female performance.

Keywords: PERFORMANCE, ALOOFNESS, REFUSAL, LENA HORNE, BILLIE HOLIDAY

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Life for my mother was no crystal stair, but her prowess, her refusal and her aloofness allowed her to make a way where there’d be no way: climbing and reaching higher and higher landings, turning corners, and now, living in the splendor of an afterlife with her father, her old friends, and the ancestors.

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Introduction

The first purpose of “Aloof: Black Divas of Refusal” is to elucidate and better understand the standpoint of Black female interiority with respect to Black representation in the modes of American media—namely film, television, and popular music. The second is to honor Black female interiority as sacred and foundational to any perspective of liberatory impulse. Certain Black female performers, starting with Lena Horne, contended with Black femininity in mass media in a way that suggests that they are entrusted—by custom or circumstance—with a responsibility to curate representations of themselves with dignity, aplomb, and glamour. Neither the Mammy nor the Mulatto stereotype would be suitable forms for these women. By interiority, I mean the internal combination of human faculties of expression, mental, sexual, spiritual, psychological or otherwise. Though everyone possesses interiority, it is a Black female interiority that persists despite the limiting gaze of largely White, male audiences; in the face of oppression at the intersections of race, sex, and class, Black divas Lena Horne and Billie Holiday fashioned for themselves an armor of aloofness for the sake of self-preservation and a revolutionary form of representation of Black women. By innovating new forms of being in Black female performance, certain performers were able to entertain a multiracial, multivalent audience—often by portraying simultaneous images of entertainment and a subversion of entrenched cultural norms. An authentic Black female interiority afforded these performers the ability to project a glamour and grace while vying for the aims of Black insurgency in the years preceding the fever-pitch of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. By insurgent or insurgency, I mean to signify the movement’s efforts to radically transform the social order with respect to contemporary racial politics beyond a Jim Crow South and a complicit North.

“Aloof” desires to dwell upon and celebrate manifestations of power that hold themselves

well, even in non-masculinist spaces. Two performers of note—Billie Holiday and Lena Horne—each challenged and surmounted hegemonic conceptions of strength, performance, and art that call for an expression of deep respect and gratitude. Their unique performative gifts enveloped and were buttressed by a wielding of political power that galvanized their positions in society as night-chanteuses. Their utilization of refusal in the negotiation of studio contracts, the withholding of performances, and even in the self-subduing of performance style collectively subverted the unspoken policies of Jim Crow and contemporary sexual politics in the middle of the twentieth century. Moreover, together, the works of these two women and notable successors shield Black female interiority from becoming subjected to an oppositional White gaze that has proved destructive, objectifying and at times, violent. Further, aloofness may have been a triumph of self-preservation and carte blanche, but this came at a cost: Lena Horne became stuck to the pretty pillars from which she sang, and Billie Holiday suffered from state surveillance because of her aloofness to law. However, by recounting the career highlights and outstanding performances of these women, each *diva* receives her due for resisting racial and sexual denigration in nightclubs and in Hollywood.

With “Aloof”, the stressors that affect *Black divas*—ones which White divas could easily choose to elide—will undoubtedly prove that the two must be estranged. The former’s refusal of simultaneous racial and sexual oppression, manifested in quotidian yet revolutionary acts, legitimate why the Black diva is the focal point of this study. To designate the term ‘*Black diva’* as a site of inquiry is to regard Black female interiority, and in turn, human interiority with respect, recognition and dignity regardless of sex or race. Such thought is inherited from the highly esteemed Combahee River Collective (CRC), which finds that the understanding of Black feminism is prima facie evidence of a successful arrangement of cognitive, political, racial and

sexual liberation.

Why are these divas aloof? I assign to aloofness a pretense of nearly uppity disregard for varied and pernicious forms of oppression, a choice the diva elects to enact in spite of clamoring audiences. Whether during live performances, or in film roles, the diva declares an autonomy as a kind of physical and psychic retraction, a cleaving from the demands of onlookers. Whereas racial codes and sexual domination previously underscored the range of cultural and theatrical forms available to Black women, what was left were spaces that collectively performed Black pain for the entertainment of White audiences. The Black blueswoman tradition of the 1920s, led by performers like Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, and Alberta Hunter, would eschew White custom and sing the blues for Black audiences in all of its full, queer, and subaltern glory. Their records, full of suggestive and subversive humor, had yet to achieve crossover appeal at the national level. Thus, the succeeding generation of Black female performers, beginning in the 1930s, countered a political and social stifling with performance and political strategies of aloofness and refusal. These strategies had been employed by the aforementioned divas during their nightclub acts and their televised and filmed appearances in varied ways. If refusal is a political stratagem, a radical stance that balks at hegemony and its complicit oppressions, then aloofness—in the diva's distance, glamour, and performance—shields Black female interiority from performing Black pain for White audiences in each performance, maintaining a sense of dignity and self. Aloofness creates a sense of unapproachability and unattainableness in the diva. Refusal, on the other hand, is the radical positionality and strategic mode that defies racial exoticization and fetishization.

Several Black divas follow a lineage established first by Lena Horne and subsequently, Billie Holiday. For the purposes of this thesis, these two serve as archetypes of aloofness and

refusal. I will look to aspects of Lena Horne's performance to define her aloof *impersona*—a performative affect that is the opposite of a traditional expectation of engaging on-stage persona that features a subtraction of her vocal abilities, while maintaining a tense balance of respectable sexuality. I will also consult differing accounts of Billie Holiday's insurgency and refusal as testament to the diva's shrewd political savviness and unabashed consideration and representation of the grave realities of Black life. The lives and choices of these *divas* will serve as guiding hallmarks to recognize the same performative behavior in the others. Whereas I document Horne's pre-Civil Rights development into the model of Black middle-class autocritique and rejection against racial uplift theory, I discuss Holiday's refusal work—a direct flouting of then-contemporary custom for the sake of her own—and others'—freedom.

To render the sound of the diva's singing voice as culturally, racially and psychically significant, I discuss arguments that place a premium on the Black singing voice as an instrument of transgression, a weapon of dignity that can be, and has been, used as a weapon against White oppression. As each performer manifests the Black female singing voice, I argue their success, in part, originates from a psychic rearrangement of the performer-audience dynamic that each diva employed when performing. The same can also be said for the instances where divas chose not to perform, nor participate in engagements that affronted her sensibilities. Ultimately, the subversive nature of Black singing unseats, dislodges, and dethrones White patriarchy, if only temporarily. With that said, Horne and Holiday kept traditional masculine ideas of power from themselves and arguably took it away from audiences as well.

I close with a valorizing of each diva for their insurgent, rebellious acts during Holiday's tenure as a night-chanteuse and Horne's work as a Hollywood starlet. These two behaved in a way that could pave towards Diahann Carroll's groundbreaking performances in *Julia* and

Dynasty, Dorothy Dandridge's countering of the mulatto image and other policed social mores, Hazel Scott's defiance against poor representation of Black women in Hollywood, and Eartha Kitt's cool demeanor in spite of CIA surveillance. I conclude that Horne and Holiday were not only heroic in their endeavors to advance Black representation free from the codes of racial segregation, but had to move with an aloofness and choose to resist as a method of survival and thriving in the entertainment industry. For that, they deserve the title, *diva*.

I continue in this thesis work that Shane Vogel began with *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret*. Without significant development save for Horne, Vogel simply namedrops a few of the divas as those who follow in lineage with Lena Horne in his final chapter on Horne's *impersona*, a subtractive disposition, a disaffecting, a friendly but estranging posture in performance. The research here mines texts and artifacts of each *diva's* life and career for examples of the same *impersona* recognized in Horne, and the same sense of refusal found in Billie Holiday. The intended effect is to widen Vogel's reach beyond Horne and into her performative descendants. For each *diva*, cultural artifacts related to their biographies, notable performances, and career decisions will be studied in a way that has not been endeavored before around the term *Black diva*. Visual analysis and close readings of primary and secondary media are intended to suggest that the *Black divas* I study are more than just mere entertainment for White audiences, but rather entertainer-tacticians that calculated when to provide excess, and when to withhold the self for the sake of self-preservation and the burden of racial representation. This argument is supported by matching instances of aloofness and refusal in Horne and Holiday with instances of the same in Carroll, Scott, Kitt and Dandridge.

Black Female Interiority

Within the traditions of Performance Studies and American Studies, theorists typically

value a veracity in the representation of images of the self, meaning, there is a premium placed on authentic, experientially tied, symbols. In their scholarship, they typically identify a dissonance between the roles Blacks were allowed to perform from the age of minstrelsy and throughout the Hollywood era and the deeply varied, complex, and rich traditions that is the Black experience in the United States. Indeed, the humiliating choice between the docile, sexless mammy or the exotic, nymphomaniac jezebel-mulatto is the case where the varied identities of the Black experience are concerned. What's more is that the minstrel tradition had been enjoyed as a major form of entertainment for both White and Black audiences in the United States; not only did Black stereotypes like the mammy or mulatto become the subject of the minstrel tradition, Black performers actually contributed to the minstrel show as well.

Bronx-born author and journalist Joan Morgan brings the issue of a whole, multifarious and untenable Black female interiority to bear. As published in *Black Scholar* in 2015, "Why We Get Off: Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure" creates a vivid and fearsome understanding of the concept: that in light of the cultural products created with Black women in mind, they are cast in representations that discount

> *Black female interiority*. While *interiority* is widely understood as the quiet composite of mental, spiritual and psychological expression, *Black female interiority* is that—and then some. I use the term specifically to excavate the broad range of feelings, desires, yearning, (erotic and otherwise) that were once deemed necessarily private by the "politics of silence." Now frequently expressed in Black women's cultural expressions specifically for the purpose of observance and consumption, it demands a Black

> feminist reckoning. *Black female interiority* is the codicil to
> cultural dissemblance. (37)

Whereas interiority literally means the amalgamation of human expression—as wide-ranging and complicated as that is—I can't help but acknowledge allusions to interiority being much like the image of a secret closet or cabinet of curiosities. Within, lay the yearnings, interpretations and whim of an authentic Black female experience, but never to be released, never to be received. Relegated as subsidiary in not one, but two respects—to Whites and to males—there exists synchronous histories and examples of what Morgan calls the "politics of silence" and its suffocation of authentic and real Black female expression. Whether Black feminist thought has finally commanded the attention of scholars throughout the academy, or that perhaps, the Black woman's experience—a conscious perspective—is truly the key to reversing the culture's consignment to an inauthentic death, culturally resolute and steadfast representations of Black female interiority demands honor, respect, and reparation from the parties that have long sequestered and stifled the Black female voice. Further, the idea of a codicil, a clarifying amendment to a document that obviates an earlier portion, will not only invalidate patriarchal and racist expressions of Blackness (and rightfully so), it will also destabilize the hegemonic narratives of our contemporary cultural fabric. The codicil performs the function of valuing a Black female interiority, and work from that definition to create culture anew. If that codicil were taken into effect, assuming a society where Black female interiority was accepted and honored, we would have more representation of Black women leading in Hollywood on both sides of the camera, a continual advancing of Black owned, operated and fully functional film studios, for example.

From the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, Black women had been

limited to two forms of representation. Though these images of Black woman differed from each other entirely, the biting irony is that neither had ever enjoyed freedom from the denigration of White oppression and male entertainment. The first, the mammy, hails from the minstrel tradition from the nineteenth century in the U.S. A wholly American form of entertainment, the minstrel shows introduced and later perfected the mammy as an archetype of a docile, unassuming, and compliant corpulent Black woman. Often portrayed by men in simultaneous drag and Blackface, as "happy, harmless, and sexless," the mammy would often be cast as a maid for Whites (Taylor & Austen 11). Twentieth and twenty-first century images of the mammy can be seen in Hollywood classics such as Hattie McDaniel's portrayal of "Mammy" in 1939's *Gone With the Wind*, as well as in Aunt Jemima.

Whereas the mammy had been pliant and submissive, the other prevailing Black female stereotype would see them as immoral and sexually voracious, yet exotic due to their multiracial lineage. Two writings give clarity to the jezebel-Mulatto caricature in literature, theater, and other mediums. In Kenneth P. Harms' "Betwixt and Between: the Representation of the Female Mulatto in the Twentieth Century United States Cinema," the mulatto is seen as a tragic figure, one that resulted from a psychological distance yet simultaneous physical proximity between sexual beings of both races, as well as exploitation due to the social and sexual mores of that time period. Such a salacious configuration creates some mental distance from what looked like an appearance of rigid social classes and the propagation of peoples without intermixing. Come to find out, sexual mores were actually fluid and miscegenated due to the effects of rape and sexual intercourse between the races. Though both multiracial men and women could be considered to be mulatto, the standalone term typically refers to a female, and usually one that can be exoticized or fetishized in American literary and cultural spaces for her features and light

complexion. Karen A. Chachere's dissertation, entitled, "Visually White, Legally Black: Miscegenation, the Mulatto, and Passing in American Literature and Culture, 1865-1933," intimates the nuances of the identity politics at play, finding the mulatto's desperation to pass for White validates the historical supposition that "it is better to be White in America than Black" (Chachere 3). She finds that the mulatto's "attempt at racial passing has often been misconstrued as an indictment against the Black community rather than what it really is— an indictment against claims of racial purity and White superiority" (Chachere 3). Chachere here emphasizes the sort of aspirational sentiment that would be proscribed onto the Black US population, that to capture the White way of living is to elevate one's social standing in the eyes of all. As we shall find in our study of Lena Horne, Whites would never allow that to be the case, as racism has continually fueled legal and cultural parameters for Black life and expression. Though Chachere speaks to American literature of the nineteenth century, the sentiments around racial uplift—the idea of self-improvement, propagated by the Black intelligentsia, espoused the ways of White life—and White-passing Black people were propagated in theater and film in the twentieth century. The ascription of sexual insatiability to the mulatto becomes synonymous with an element of danger—meaning, she would be featured as an immoral figure to Whites, while simultaneously presented as their exoticized guilty pleasure. That combination of danger and pleasure not only engendered a jezebel connotation, in the intersection with a woman's multiracial identity, her existence tantalizes as much as it seen as taboo. An object of male desire and perhaps a tragedy of attempting to become White-like, the mulatto functioned as an emissary of patriarchal capitalism at a time when law-inscripted segregation was taken for granted.

Nevertheless, though the mammy and the jezebel-Mulatto appear to be diametrically opposed to one another—one asexualized, the other, sexualized, one domestic, the other,

exotic—both are seldom apt representations of the Black female experience in the United States. American literary critic Hortense Spillers provides a cutting analysis of the mammy-mulatto dynamic in "Interstices" from *Black, White, and in Color.* She avers,

> the Black-female-as-whore (jezebel-Mulatto) forms an iconographic equation with Black-female-vagina-less (Mammy), but in different clothes, we might say. From the point of view of the dominant mythology, it seems that sexual experience among Black people (or sex between Black and any other) is so boundlessly imagined that it loses meaning and becomes, quite simply, a medium in which the individual is suspended…Under these conditions of seeing, we lose all nuance, subjects are divested of their names, and, oddly enough, the female has so much sexual potential that she has none at all that anybody is ready and able to recognize at the *level* of culture. Thus, the unsexed Black female and the supersexed Black female embody the very same vice, cast the very same shadow, since both are an exaggeration of the uses to which sex might be put. (164)

Indignant to the modes of imagination that Whites have keenly focused on in the mammy-mulatto milieu, Spillers recognizes an equivalency of limitation between the characterizations of the mammy and the jezebel-mulatto that may not be apparent to the untrained eye. She laments the fact that for the mammy, mulatto, and other primitive Black forms, their imagined sexualities are devoid of eroticism and are without moments of "inauguration, transition, and termination" (Spillers 164). Because Spillers affirms the unfettered purity of Black female passion, state-sponsored White supremacy is seen as diametrically opposed to her project, as a state "of

vicious, routinized entanglement" (Spillers 164). Not only is this problematic, due to a collective ignorance of Black culture or spaces in which Black women inhabit and express themselves, it is also a subsidiary of White patriarchal oppression. Though both the mammy and the jezebel differ from one another radically, both are significantly stifling roles that other architects created for Black women to fulfill representationally. When Spillers mentions the boundless imaginings of Black sex, she does so to accentuate a distillation of an authentic Black experience, without which, becomes a one-size fits all identity foisted unto all Black women—generalizations about the group are prioritized over the individual's experience. As a result, Black sex has been reduced from all nuance or vivid and varied recounting. Spillers laments that depictions of Black women—whether mammy or mulatto—have been subjected to an entangling, a position of perpetual discomfort. Despite the wealth and rich subtext of the Black female experience, at the very bottom of common human discourse, Black female interiority was not recognized or honored. To distill the volume and variety of authentic Black experiences to two impossibly limiting stereotypes reduces the importance of a Black female presence, subjugating it to male and White appearances. These are the stressors by which divas such as Lena Horne and Billie Holiday contended with in their performances, their roles, and their professional and political temperament.

The identification of these stressors alone affirms a need for veracity in the representation of the images of the Black female self in media and the culture. With the following reflection in "Interstices," Hortense Spillers charts the way in scholarship where many Black female performers turned to create honest and real expressions of their experiences:

> To find another and truer self-image the Black woman must turn to
> the domain of music and America's Black female vocalists who

> suggest a composite figure of ironical grace. The singer is likely closer to the poetry of Black female sexual experience than we might think, not so much, interestingly enough, in the words of her music, but in the sense of dramatic confrontation between ego and world that the vocalist herself embodies (165).

Here, like a master cartographer, Spillers recognizes familiar landmarks—yet not on physical uncharted plains, but on the uncharted instances of recognition, acceptance and celebration of realistic self-images of Black women. Spillers' concept of ironical grace is not estranged from my conception of aloofness; the diva is more esteemed by the distances *she* creates between herself and her audience. With distance and space, she can perform her interiority, she can enact the drama in her voice as witness to a reality that sounds out a dislodging patriarchal oppression, even if only for a fleeting moment. Spillers finds that the Black diva's dramatic confrontation with ego can best be found in forms of music; the careers of Horne and Holiday suggest the telling irony: that the representation of Black female interiority continues through the performers' works, but in this instance, in the individual lived experience of the performer. Thus, it is imperative that this project concern itself with the diva's lived experiences as well as her on-stage persona. Spillers' perches on the dock of the Black female musician, elevating her to the level of poet laureate, not because of the actual words she sings but her *way or style* of singing. When Spillers concludes that it is the sense of dramatic confrontation between the ego and the world, it is a phenomenon that every performer embodies. However, what is unique and very special about the Black female experience is that it confronts—it commands the attention from male and White counterparts in a way that challenges racial codes, destabilizes patriarchal rigidity, and makes heard what has long been silenced. Culture dictates the timbre of the

zeitgeist; whenever performers like Horne and Holiday sing, they move audiences to ecstatic and euphoric heights, making the possibilities of the imagination and the internal mind all but certain, if only for a fleeting second. Horne and Holiday, with their respective interiorities, signaled that others, fans and casual audiences alike, could possibly enact their own interiorities too. With these Black divas, such crude classification of the mammy-mulatto divide had been fully reorganized into a fluid spectrum that give audiences a vivid impression on Black female life in the U.S. Thus, their work bears political as well as performative significance for widening the range of Black female performance.

Lastly, it would be remiss of me to not acknowledge conceptual aid from the presence of the Combahee River Collective Statement—a definitive cornerstone in establishment of Black feminism. By articulating the meaning of intersectionality some fifteen years before the term was coined, this 1974 statement has become a cornerstone in Black feminist thought and has remained relevant through to the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement. The statement challenged mainstream feminism for its perceived Whiteness and exclusion of women of color; a useful heuristic for studying the Black diva, it pledges solidarity to progressive men of color due to seeking a unified racial front and provides a perspective of vision maintained principally on queer Black women. The Combahee River Collective Statement maintains a belief in a Black feminism that acknowledges an inherent value of Black women and a belief in a liberation that is untethered and not an adjunct to the perspectives and values of other liberation movements. The freedom to work towards Black female liberation is directly manifested in the choices divas like Horne and Holiday made during the mid-twentieth century. If the statement were taken to be representative of Black feminism, then we can commiserate with and celebrate both women for persisting under their respective circumstances.

Lena, The Aloof Black Diva

In performance, Lena Horne (1917-2010) was the consummate aloof diva. She maintained a sense of non-masculine power and control in her light and delicate phrasing, her beguiling eyes, and an effervescent grace that communicated a sort of respectable sexuality for Black women at the time. Whereas other Black female performers—say, Gladys Bentley—may have been compelled to give themselves wholly over to performance, Horne wielded a sense of formidable restraint that not only shielded her interiority from White audiences, but also projected an image of representation that Black audiences could and did aspire to. What's more is that Horne's professional acts, such as her negotiation of her 1941 studio contract with Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer (MGM), or her refusal to continue singing with the United Service Organizations (USO) due to their racist treatment of Black soldiers in 1945, demarcate a significant political life of a Black individual who strategically parleyed their professional work as a Black female entertainer and celebrity to a life of activism, positive representation, and civil rights.

Horne's feminine power as a chanteuse and actress challenged and surmounted hegemonic conceptions of Black art. Being that the minstrel mammy and the jezebel-mulatto were archetypes created and propagated by Blacks and Whites alike, Horne entered the conversation with a scant, yet important foil to the mammy-mulatto motif: she would present an artistic vision of Black women as dignified, whole, multi-dimensional beings worthy of respect and adoration. Her performance bears a certain subtle disregard for the oppressive cultural values impressed upon and practiced by Whites or misogynistic males. Consider the meticulous makeup choices that Horne, pale in complexion, endured due to fair-skinned mulatto comparisons—from

attempting to darken her skin tone, to defending herself against prejudiced makeup artists, to even developing new shade of makeup for her skin with Max Factor, only to see it used on Ava Gardner in *Show Boat* (1951). While affirming the image of the Black female, Horne enacted a shield of glamour, adorned in pleasant custom, much to the chagrin of a White and a male oppositional gaze. Due to these obstacles, from the very start of her film career with MGM, Horne was associated with a pretentious demeanor. She had been regarded as aloof in a pejorative sense in Black spaces because of her contract. Yet, her professional strides aside, Horne maintained a productive aloofness, a performative distance between herself and her audience that was also a form of empowerment and critique.

Take her 1943 performance of "Honey in the Honeycomb" from *Cabin in the Sky* as an example of Horne's aloofness. In the song, her vocalization is subtle, demure, inviting, nearly giddy but smoothed to a cool reserve. Though Horne sounds enticing, offering fans and audiences a glimpse into an interiority of fertility, her vocal performance is so chaste that the intended effect went over well to multiple audiences at once. When she reaches the high note in the lyric, "When I charm, the men all swarm," it is nearly operatic, creating further aural distance between herself and other divas. The lyrics, being secondary to the aurality of vocalization and expression, tell of a young woman who realizes that she attracts men and avers the rationale behind this skill; that there's "honey in the honeycomb" suggests not only is she fertile, but she is inviting. All this is done without sounding salacious or lewd. There remains the visual, which has Horne seated atop of a bar, swarmed by well-dressed people, she, herself, in a beautiful light-colored gown with frills. When she opens with, "What have I got, that the others ain't?," it is so fitting; not only does Horne seem boastful of her attributes, but the line also transcends the film and even addresses her landmark studio contract with MGM, which I consider in more detail

below.

Under the guise of performance scholar, Shane Vogel, Lena Horne appears to be performatively as well as politically significant. His reconfiguration of Horne sees the diva as a skillful chanteuse who wields the power of subtraction—as later, more vocally powerful performances would prove. Horne transcended the cognitive and physical demands of segregated Harlem cabarets—not by rising mightily over the top, but by frothily bubbling over. Though her lyrics weren't the door busting blues tunes of say, Bessie Smith, Horne withheld portions of her voice and performed sotto voce, an unexpected strategy from a black performer. After a recounting of Horne's refusal work, it would be fitting to analyze "The Lady is a Tramp" as well as "Stormy Weather" for her performative aloofness. Both American Studies scholar Ruth Feldstein and Vogel would characterize Horne's legacy as an immense contribution; the former identified Horne's storied career as a "long shadow" that other younger Black female performers had to contend with (Feldstein 12). To cast Horne's legacy as a long shadow is to really celebrate the heights achieved by the actress's refusal of stereotypical norms, and to venerate her ability to make a third way where there would have not been one. Horne crafted and honed an archetype for her descendants to follow. As each faced a grappling, a coming to terms with Horne's parameters, they would also find that neither mammy nor mulatto would suit them either. Though Feldstein informs a great deal of foundation for Lena Horne's refusal, the author is primarily concerned with contributions Horne made to civil rights. The second half of "Lena, The Aloof Diva" is thus dedicated to her performance strategies and their political, racial, and sexual ramifications, and relies on Vogel's reading of Horne to describe her aloofness and vocalization of an authentic Black female interiority.

Horne's Refusal

Feldstein wrote the text that later became the foundation for the PBS documentary of the same name, *How It Feels to Be Free*. As she documents the close kinship between Black women entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement, she uncovers much of Lena Horne's work around the rejection, or refusal of old archetypes of Black women in Hollywood, while even hinting at Horne's performative aloofness. Telling is its documentation of Horne's acts of professional and political refusal, which merit a recounting and analysis. Focused on the final fever-pitch of the century-long US Civil Rights Movement, Feldstein affirms the post-WWII era, which saw transformative legislative gains, as a period where performers like Horne became enamored with the combination of art and activism. I affirm that for Horne, this actually occurred in the antecedent period. Vogel asserts that as an adult, Horne would contribute to racial advancement through organizations like the National Council of Negro Women the Delta Sigma Sorority and the Urban League, "social organizations that sought racial improvement through moral and social reform" (Vogel 169). Horne had a long and storied relationship with activism and a refusal to capitulate to contemporary racial codes through the very use of her celebrity to support Black activism in her personal and professional pursuits. In Horne's refusal, we find a Black female interiority that is at once a presence and also a shield to her actual volitions because she "performed Black womanhood in new and distinct ways… [Horne] drew attention to the unequal relationships between Blacks and Whites *and* to relationships between men and women" (Feldstein 6). In setting the stage for Horne's later, more profound acts of refusal, Vogel's *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret* recognizes the symbolic aspect of Horne's activism prior to the 1960s. After all, Horne had been inducted as a lifetime member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1919, when she was all of two years old. It is

worth mentioning that according to Vogel, Horne hailed from a well-respected Brooklyn family, whose members had been inculcated in the policies of racial uplift and maintained an active presence in the NAACP, the Urban League, and other reform organizations. A fine spectrum of Horne between her younger days of representation and racial uplift in Hollywood and her later, more brazen and forward forms of Black activism should thus be acknowledged, as they inform the watershed moments of her life as an activist from the sixties onward.

Feldstein does well to enliven those that had been associated with Horne's rise, such as Walter White, the executive secretary of the NAACP from 1931 to 1955. It had been White's conspiration with her father, Edwin Fletcher Horne, Jr., that had figured significantly into securing Horne's integrity when negotiating her Hollywood contract with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in 1941. With her signing, Lena Horne became the first Black woman signed to a major studio with a long-term, seven-year contract—and a revolutionary one, free from any roles as a maid. However, Feldstein does not address the problematic nature of proto-Civil Rights Era beliefs in racial uplift and respectability politics, which had enjoyed relative popularity at the time. Such politics would have Blacks capitulate to White standards, in hopes that the latter would accept the former as equal. Feldstein's work hints at this with help from archival interviews of Horne herself: the diva remembers being told upon signing to MGM, "'Now you are in a representative position and you must *handle yourself circumspectly* so that, you don't embarrass other Black women.' Well, that was a heavy load" (emphasis mine) (*How it Feels*). To handle herself circumspectly, so to speak, was the very impersona, that same intentional aloofness, that Vogel identified in Horne's early film appearances.

Feldstein also recognizes Horne's choice to refuse but chooses to discuss refusal as *rejection*; when considering Horne, the author believes she *rejected* "definitions of women as

either sexualized Jezebels or as caretaking and subordinate Mammies" (Feldstein 12). That rejection of the positionality of Black women designed by White and male oppressors is indeed a refusal of the logistical arrangement of Black female representation, a mistaking of the interior yearnings, feelings and volitions of Black women. As Feldstein and Vogel's analyses would suggest, Horne's signing to MGM was symbolically significant; representation, despite its origins in respectability politics, is important to the Black community to project a myriad of authentic and healthy images. With Horne, the Black community had established another small modicum of recognition, respect, and equality. Horne made a second major refusal in 1943. As one of several celebrities to entertain American soldiers during the war effort under the USO, Horne learned that Black servicemen would be seated behind prisoners of war. Incensed, she contacted the local NAACP and planned to give a performance exclusively for Black soldiers. As Feldstein recounts, "Even then, Nazi prisoners of war 'crowded in'" (Feldstein 12). At that point, Horne requested the POWs be excluded. Rebuffed, Horne became confronted by racial conditions that violated her sensibilities as a Black woman and acted by deciding to stop touring with the USO altogether. Instead, from then on, she entertained American soldiers on trips and concerts she funded and organized herself. Not only did she directly flout U.S. government by refusing to continue as part of the USO tour, but she also refused to perform complicit with standards that systematically denigrated Black soldiers in favor of enemy prisoners of war.

Vogel avers that Lena Horne's status as one of the first Black female movie stars led to her promotion by the NAACP, then under White's stewardship, "as a symbol of refinement and respectability that could push against the color line and expand the parts available for Black women beyond the stereotypical roles of the maid or mammy" or mulatto (Vogel 169). Such a thought came from carefully designed artistic and cultural programs, such as the Harlem

Renaissance, to advance a belief in improving the lives of Blacks to a basis where they would be readily accepted by Whites. Elite Blacks, known for their affiliation with the ideas of the Talented Tenth and the Black intelligentsia, would avoid the more vulgar, pedestrian and subaltern or queer subjectivities of Negro Vogue—the totality of Black artistic expression during the 1920s. In this milieu, Horne was trained to perform. Nevertheless, as White and Horne, Jr., convinced the young starlet that she could change the image of Black women in Hollywood, a law of unintended consequence would have it that Horne began a precedent that would allow women to continue to refuse the then-current logistics of a racist, sexist Hollywood. This does not discredit Horne for not enacting agency on her own but demonstrates her choice to respond to her call to serve the advancement of Black people. Although Feldstein affirms that Black activism of the 1950s and 1960s had "escalated into more visible and sustained struggles for Black freedom," the fever-pitch of the Civil Rights Movement resulted from the direct, sustained efforts of several decades of enacting agency through choice after choice of refusing to de-escalate (Feldstein 4). As culture was a "key battleground in the Civil Rights Movement," Horne's role in representing Black women in glamour with self-control certainly registers as part of a pantheon of Black insurgency in the United States (Feldstein 5).

Though it was her father who seemed to be key in cementing the deal between Horne and MGM, his role does not obviate the parameters of this innovation in Black performance. Though Horne, as we will find, needed little to no help with her on-stage aloofness—what Vogel would call her *im*persona—her major off-stage acts of refusal of White oppression were largely assisted by others. Culture does not happen in a vacuum, and in this context, it means that Horne's contract was a fortuitous response to Black contributions to the war effort during WWII and thus, the partnership between Horne and MGM figured to be representationally sound—Horne would

lead the effort in affirming positive images of Black women in a country that had been changing. As Feldstein would consider, the film industry compromised to reject or refuse, if you will, "all these deeply entrenched stereotypes of African American women. And [Horne] was saying, 'No, I can be another kind of performer, I can offer a different kind of representation'" (*How it Feels*). In interviews, Horne bears admiration towards her father's strong and steely negotiations with MGM; the elder Horne recalls a tenet of the Combahee River Collective's "solidarity with progressive Black men…we struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism" (Combahee River Collective 1977). Due to his insistence that his daughter never be contractually obligated to portray a maid, Horne, Jr. secured what was then never seen or heard of before. The symbolic refusal of minstrel themes in Hollywood is a direct flouting of the arrangement created to limit Black female interiority to the small parts and bit ranges of the maid. With the concerted efforts of Horne, Jr. and Walter White, Horne revolutionized a Black woman's positionality by surmounting the odds that had inhibited so many before her.

Lena Horne's position as the pinnacle of racial respectability notwithstanding, her middle-class pedigree figured into her allure and set her aside from the standard guard of robust, full-bodied, full-voiced Black divasGladys Bentley, Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith come to mind. Yet, her upper middle-class upbringing also served as basis for isolation from others. In fact, Horne's success saw her act as though she were a cut above maid roles in the eyes of other Black female performers; she inspired their ire and distance from her—a sort of professional aloofness. Their animosity should not be completely dismissed, however. Feldstein and Vogel both point to instances of Horne's contract not being well received because other Black female actors feared her contract would make working in Hollywood difficult. Juxtaposing Hattie McDaniel's role as

"Mammy" in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) with Horne's prospect of maid-free roles may have cast the former in troubling light, due to the fact that maid parts were seen as demeaning vestiges of the mammy stereotype. Even so, Horne's meager film career would suggest, racial respectability as a program to vie for White acceptance is a faulty premise because it asks for permission where acceptance should be demanded. Horne's work for MGM significantly underutilized the full spectrum of her talent. Horne herself believed there was no niche for her to play authentic Black roles, and as a result, felt the isolation due to distancing from other Black actors. Nevertheless, on her refusal alone, Horne is worth venerating due to the fact that after being virtually groomed to embody the rhetoric and philosophies of racial uplift and respectability, she abdicated that thought entirely and began advocating for Civil Rights in earnest.

By first inhabiting the respectability ordained by the Black elite, Horne demonstrated a cognitive shift that would test the ideological limits of racial uplift. Vogel recounts, in detail, the harrowing events of Horne's 1942 engagement at the New York Plaza-Savoy Hotel. After performing, Horne would have to leave the Savoy and travel uptown to Harlem to sleep at the Hotel Theresa because the Savoy did not allow Blacks to patronize the hotel as guests at the time (Vogel 169). Whereas Horne sung popular standards of the day, her aloofness—that nearly uppity disregard of the demands of a clamoring audience—may have come from such instances dealing with the draconian rule of law that Whites had set in place, while still entertaining them so intimately, but without their complete approval. Moreover, Horne's acuity in identifying pernicious forms of racism went beyond roles Black women portrayed in Hollywood. Her reflections in the Feldstein documentary demonstrate that Horne had a keen interest in breaking up unions in the motion picture industry to allow Black cameramen on more Hollywood sets in the 1940s.

Horne's refusal is resistance in the form of a series of revolutionary acts, but her aloofness is what speaks volumes about performance and self-knowledge of the particular experience of Black female stardom. Horne's aloofness may not have been as radical as her acts of refusal; however, the two are related. Whereas the former has a direct and emphatic impact on the contemporary perceptions of Black people—take her history-making studio contract with MGM, for one—Horne's sense of subtraction and aloofness is all about her subtlety in her affect. It is perhaps difficult to pin exactly, but it can be ascertained in juxtaposing Horne's performances at the beginning and end of her career; comparing "Honey in the Honeycomb" to "Believe in Yourself" from *The Wiz* (1978) demonstrates the bashful cloud in Horne becoming the hurricane to behold. Vogel's prescient analysis created an avenue by which Horne could be seen as a leading chanteuse-in-protest. The actress and singer basked in the energy created by a combination of art and activism. The hospitality she found at the Hotel Savoy, or lack thereof, demonstrates the failure of uplift and respectability as a political strategy. Her example is a statement on the full incorporation of Blacks into an America of integration, and moreover, the ability to evolve, transform and innovate one's thinking as a figure of Black representation. Perhaps further and more developed than the advice given to her by her father and White is Horne's shielding of her own interiority and an adapting of an aloofness that came off as slight detachment from her appearances. To handle oneself, to grapple and refine oneself and perform, is not only a feat of Black female performance, but one that deserves praise.

Horne's Aloofness

Horne's performance style during her nightclub and Hollywood appearances are significant because they create an archetype of aloofness—a textbook by which younger divas could study and master the art of psychically distancing themselves from their audiences'

demands and focusing on entertaining from an authentic positionality.

From the very start of her film career with MGM, Horne had been associated with a pretentious demeanor. She had been regarded as aloof in Black spaces because of her contract. Yet, her professional strides aside, Horne maintained a performative distance between herself and her audience. Upon the release of her debut film appearance in 1942's *Panama Hatti*e, MGM attempted to pass Horne as Latina, much to the chagrin of Black audiences. She felt more isolation than ever, as she remembers in the Feldstein documentary. It would seem that a stifling isolation appears to be a condition of aloofness; because Horne had not yet been embraced by Black female performers in Hollywood, and because her appearance was striking—Horne had a fairer complexion than most other Black performers at the time—the parameters are set for a younger Horne to feel the pressures of Black superstardom alongside the political and personal issues it incurred. What's more is MGM's behavior of appeasement to Southern distributors: apprehensive about their lucrative Southern market and contemporary racial tensions, they allowed censors to cut every performance Horne was in. Not to mention that save for her two speaking roles, Horne had been limited to what she and Vogel call a pillar singer, meaning that in subsequent appearances, Horne would sing a song from a pillar that could be easily removed from a film without altering its plot.

Horne's aloof allure can be seen in her early performances at MGM. Specifically, her performances of "Honey in the Honeycomb" in *Cabin in the Sky* and the titular "Stormy Weather" portray a certain class, grace and glamour that could not have been afforded by the mammy maid. Vogel venerates Horne, expressing his interest in not completely dismissing Horne's negative affect or looking past her subtraction to find some fabricated true self (Vogel 169). I would aver that the negative affect and subtractive singing are aspects of Horne's

aloofness, a real reflection of the logistical arrangement of being the first Black diva to escape the mammy-mulatto trap. To attempt to uncover a "truer" sense of authentic performance would prove fruitless to pursue, as Horne maintained that distant coolness and control within herself at the very surface of her performance. Vogel is correct to embrace this negative affect, welcoming the totality of Horne's work and *im*persona as a triumph. By impersona, Vogel characterizes Horne's aloofness as the median between an outward extroversion and an unentertaining introversion: Horne's impersona is engaging, but at an arm's length. It is cause to celebrate Horne's subtle, yet ultimately effective, stand against the limitations placed upon Black women.

Thus, two performances of "The Lady is a Tramp" and "Stormy Weather" merit analysis for understanding Horne's psychological and physical distance. Her "pillar" performance of "The Lady is a Tramp" in 1948's *Words and Music* is a wonderful example of Horne's posture of refusal, which can be seen throughout her early oeuvre. Horne's vocalization reveals a delicate, nearly apathetic phrasing of the chorus's last line "That's why the lady is a tramp". Horne was not at the point of making the bombastic declarations that came to be associated with her later powerhouse vocal performances. No, Horne's adventures into the Great American Songbook would see her froth and coo, like a soft, undercurrent bubbling over. Her physicality is also extremely distant and stoic; her look upturned towards no one at all. Statuesque and beautiful, Horne delivers a dignified "Tramp," if there ever was one. She would not be confused as a tramp—she had far too much of an air of sophistication and glamour to be considered remotely trampy. About a minute into her performance, she perches the resolution of the chorus high, as if upon an inaccessible shelf, for a disengaged audience to behold entranced. Audiences fawned over Horne for more entertainment. Critical reviews noticed the subtle nuances of her film and cabaret appearances; Vogel reports that *Time* magazine found her to radiate a

"'seductive reserve' with the 'air of a bashful volcano' and went on to note that unlike most Negro chanteuses, Lena Horne eschews the barrel house manner"; meaning, in several aspects, Lena Horne's performance was a novel spectacle to behold—one that proved difficult to categorize at first glance because it wasn't the style of the blueswoman singing that rouses and rabbles, the sort of music that is equally raucous and radical (Vogel 172-73). Instead, Horne is radical for dissolving into popular standards. What I mean to say here is that Horne deliberately sang so she was not a vocal standout or an audacious physical performer; instead she performed with a straightforward manner that resembled an agreeable dissolution between vocalist and song. Horne arrested audience with this style of singing, to the point that viewers wanted more.

Therein lies a level of awkwardness in attraction to Horne's performance style. Vogel describes her, "singing without a microphone, instead [performing] standard love songs and ballads written by White and Jewish popular songwriters, which she delivered with a straightforward detached stylization" (Vogel 173). The basis by which Horne should be measured against Vogel's assertion is her level of authenticity in representing Black female interiority. However, much of her cabaret acts, orchestrated and literally worded by Whites could have been an attempt at captivating a White audience with respectability politics while also displaying beautiful images of Black female grace to a Black audience. Nevertheless, whereas Vogel describes "the controlled gestures, precise phrasings, deflecting glances, and restrained physicality," I suggest these are indications of the air of aloofness around her. To Vogel's conception of Horne's impersona, I affirm that her movements were not only reflective of Horne's volitions, but with them, carried the full knowledge that she represented an authentic Black female interiority, to be adapted, consumed and capitulated to by Black audiences.

Her unique performance can also be witnessed in 1943's *Stormy Weather,* which would

have Horne sing the title song. As part of an all-star cast meant to entertain troops, Horne performs a forlorn and slightly depressed reflection on the fact that her man is away, and the burden of living with weariness. Though flanked with a full orchestra, Horne is not pressed to vocalize large and undeniable notes; again, her subtlety is key to understanding the heavy-hearted and sad disposition of the song. When she does sing loud, clear notes during the bridge, building up to a crescendo with the words "Rain pourin' down, blindin' every hope I had/This pitterin', patterin', beatin' and spatterin' drives me mad/ Love, love, love, love," she immediately trills operatically down the vocal scale, perhaps to recreate the misery of listening to running water and the rain (*Stormy Weather* 2:49-3:05). Horne sings like a waif bereft of good fortune, her phrasing light and delicate but melancholy. As if made to reflect her cabaret show, Horne is glamourous and appears once again to be looking at no one in particular. Her refrain from direct engagement with the audience creates an allure around her interiority—rather than dismiss her, audiences clamored for insights into what she broadcasted and shielded at the same time. Additionally, she has not lost herself to her feelings of her isolation from her lover; instead, what we see in the film is a self-possessed vocalist actress portraying an honest and popular Black experience (soldiers off to war, leaving a void at home) that is at once, authentic, appealing and arresting.

In the literature, the most prescient analysis of Horne's aloofness comes from Vogel's work on Horne's impersona in *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret.* By focusing on the bewitching manner by which listeners and audiences sought Horne from the "anonymity of the concert hall," not the other way round, the aloofness that Horne espoused could be better identified and understood (Vogel 167). To remark that Horne "reflected in style, repertoire and public image the complex and often contradictory negotiation of changing racial politics and popular

performance practices throughout the twentieth century" is to recognize the agency she enacted to craft her image and its political and cultural ripples, and to acknowledge the desperate aspiration of racial uplift through Horne's deliberate transformation from representation and subtlety toward insurgency and bombast (Vogel 167). Vogel's assertion that Horne's early aloofness could be understood within the "theatrical and gendered discourse of the diva" and that as one, Horne exemplified qualities such as unattainability, self-involvement, and inaccessibility that divas often cultivate.

In analyzing photo stills and recordings from Horne's 1942 residency at the Plaza-Savoy, Vogel recognized Horne's restraint— the novel sight of a statuesque Black woman "[withholding] herself in performance and [contradicting] the expectation of the cabaret stage as a place of performed plenitude" (Vogel 169). Horne's performance choice seems here to be reactionary. As if in response to the "barrel house" manner, raucous and loose, Horne strategically enacted aloofness as a mode of Black presentation that disengaged and challenged the mammy and mulatto stereotypes as a foil. Well-to-do upper strata of Black society—namely the Black elite and the upper middle-class—valued Horne at the outset of her career due to her bankability as a good representative worthy of White adoration. Notably, that rationale no longer functioned as a motivating force in the Civil Rights Movement, but Horne's class still informed her performance choices. Vogel would find that as a middle-class performer, the diva would create room for meditation and introspection from audiences over a "shielding of marginalized subjectivities", meaning that the tenets of uplift would be interpreted, understood and abandoned during the performance, which was suffused with subtle hints at varied impressions of "racial and sexual normativity" (Vogel 170). Rather than be given to vocal excess in the sexual self-determination of the full-voiced blueswoman, Horne's performance of the task and the task alone

with glamour and deflection left audiences craving more from her.

A notable hallmark of Horne's then newly crafted aloof impersona included an aversion to the blues. It remains unclear if Horne herself, or her male mentors, elected to not lyrically and thematically participate in the tradition of the blueswoman, which was considered a seat of radical Black female position at the time. Because the blues has come to be known as a source of radicalism, Horne's straightforward singing of the Great American songbook proves challenging to behold in context with famed performers of the blues tradition. As the blues had been associated with explicit lyrical content concerning "sexual self-determination, extramarital relationships, homosexuality, working-class experience, and women's social oppression," they would have been considered too graphic for a Black female star poised for national and international fame and renown (Vogel 171). However alienating Horne's content had been, her performance style of restraint and subtraction demonstrated a feminine prowess of control that contribute significantly to the legacy of the Black female performer. Horne's refrain from improvisation in her acts is also worth mentioning. Vogel considers that Horne withheld such creative impulses until much later; considering the aims of respectability politics and racial uplift, it seems passable that the rationale behind avoiding improvisation was to not alienate White audiences with authentic forms of Black expression. This does not render Horne's performance as inauthentic, but it does walk a fine line between an alienation of Black subaltern elements of Negro Vogue, and a cultural mélange of the popular standards of the day and Horne's straightforward musical interpretations. Further, Horne's sophisticated, reserved and refined vocal and performative technique, immediately noticeable in performances like "Honey in the Honeycomb" where her phrasing is startlingly delicate and exact. Vogel suggests that her song catalogue and musical repertoire "drawn from popular standards, nightclub revues, and Tin

Pan Alley compositions" instead of the blues, and her upscale cabaret spaces as her performance venue of choice both had additional roles to play in creating and solidifying the air of aloofness around Horne's mystifying allure (Vogel 171).

I invoke Spillers, Vogel, and Feldstein to properly render the tremendous implication of Horne's aloof impersona: that what made Lena Horne distinct was that *her* phenomenological unfolding through space and time as she interfaced with segregated and stratified publics, multivalent Black and White audiences, hegemonic masculinity, and financial stressors—all handled with the utmost grace and aplomb. Uncovered is a politicized Horne, on stage, in performance, and in activism, resisting and restraining herself while performing what was popular, offering a different forum for moments of self-knowledge and social critique than the blues. In reflecting upon the enigmatic quality of Horne's straight affect, I turn again to Spillers, who finds that whether a Black female entertainer was entertaining or not, the woman, "in her particular and vivid thereness" is poised in the only historical position privy to the articulation and embodiment of a sexual ethics, one whose phenomenological situation may approach "the poetry of Black female sexual experience" (Vogel 171). That Horne was *also* entertaining, a presence of effervescence straddled by restraint, and the progenitor of high-class Black glamour in Hollywood, is in itself, an excess when Lena would give just enough.

Horne was not pliant and submissive, nor did she overpower audiences with her talents, but her straightforward vocalization and on-stage aloofness was significant, as it provided an alternative means for black women to express themselves differently than the expected forms of entertainment. Horne's aloof impersona and representation was a well-timed development of Civil Rights; as black soldiers had experienced first class treatment in Europe, yet fought as second class citizens for the United States, Horne's presence in Hollywood temporarily met the

demands for equal representation at the time. Her work would symbolically lead future divas to a performance style in the tradition she began.

Billie, The Diva of Refusal

The legacy of Billie Holiday (1915-1959), ever evolving in popular cultural consciousness, has become American folklore. As though the lines of her existence have been blurred with an ethereal mystery or an enchanting mystique, the sheer amount of scholarship on the diva continues to articulate the unique effect felt in luxuriating oneself in the nuances of her lifework: the equivalent of an aural intoxicant, Holiday's unique voice captivates audiences who were drawn to her peculiar vocal stylization and the more peculiar circumstances of her whirlwind life. To properly pay homage to Holiday is to recognize her as one of America's greatest jazz and vocal musicians. She was more than the totality of her tragedies. She was more than her insurgency, more than her timeless voice, more than her transcendent music. Billie Holiday is the diva of candid refusal in her life and music. In performance, she would represent herself honestly and sing directly to themes that affected Black life in the U.S. during the mid-twentieth century. However, in her life, she would live unapologetically, holding herself aloof to standards only she regarded. By choosing not to shield her interiority, she charmed audiences, critics, and scholars alike with the arresting sound of her voice and the manifold fibers of her being.

The legend of Billie Holiday is a paradox—while she enjoyed a timeless freedom and an aloofness in song, she entangled herself within a web of addictions that would figure into her surveillance, imprisonment, and untimely demise. A sight and sound to behold in American popular culture, Billie Holiday developed and inhabited a trademark unique sound, matched with a panache for beauty, elegance, and transparence that made her peerless. Her life of rebellious

insurgency, a collective of declarative statements and independent acts, stands as an emphatic refusal of the sexual and social mores of Whites, men, and the law. To render Holiday's mystique as that of a truly rare and transfixing icon, I will endeavor through the milestones of her life that demonstrate her ability to enthrall audiences, an ability that transcends any of her many tragedies; both her voice and her life have long since become conduits and vehicles for other artists that share some or all of the following identities: woman, Black, artist.

Here I use various texts and films to trace the touchstones of Holiday's life and oeuvre. This way, we can examine her instances of aloofness and refusal in life and performance in the modes where Billie appears most after her death in 1959: in the academy and in the culture. James Erskine's British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) produced documentary *Billie: In Search of Billie Holiday* (2019) provides rich context to Holiday; the film simultaneously outlines the hallmarks of Holiday's life and demonstrates the mystic power of Lady Day within the setting of contemporary racial, sexual, and economic stressors. Further, as the Erskine documentary would benefit from the manuscripts of Linda Lipnack Keuhl—a late Bronx writer—it is a clear example of the peculiar phenomenon of people who take Holiday on as subject or persona. Drawn to Holiday, Keuhl dedicated the better part of eleven years to researching an unfinished project on the sentimentality and truth of Holiday; much of her archive includes the recorded interviews of those who knew the singer during her lifetime. As I see it, rendering Billie Holiday requires a multiplicity of diverse, interdisciplinary material to create a pastiche—not only out of creative impulse, but also from a sense of duty and gravity towards my subject. Thus, Erskine and Keuhl figure prominently in accounts of Holiday's experiences in this thesis.

Other works lend their voices in honoring the diva. *Blackness and Value*, the work of late

literary and cultural theorist, Lindon W. Barrett, asserts an insurgency in young Holiday as she worked as a maid in Baltimore. Her cognitive freedom and gifts of perception allowed her to psychically rearrange and subvert the American racial social order. These gifts would play into her performative aloofness in songs like "Ain't Nobody's Business (If I Do)" and "Strange Fruit." American writer Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019) blends Holiday's earliest refusals of authority into the milieu of Black life in the city. Hartman works to capture the essence of Black social life and convey the sensory experience of New York as an American metropolis in the early twentieth century. Her archival finds feature Holiday's participation in prostitution during her adolescence. By including Barrett and Hartman's work, we come to find Holiday fomenting insurgent energy, a resource that would enable her to persist through her professional and personal struggles. Farah Jasmine Griffin's own *In Search of Billie Holiday: If You Can't Be Free Be a Mystery,* greatly assists in thickening the roux of Holiday's legend—by that, I mean the complicating of traditional myths associated with Holiday and reveals a constant presence and trajectory from the diva's life, her death, and her afterlife. The comparative literature professor is attuned to Holiday's legacies of refusal and aloofness, and how critics and scholars approach that mystique in the singer. Together these texts animate the singer's movement and performance, where we may find further proof of a candid Black female interiority within a diva who is fully aware of the range of her powers and her ability to entertain. Though Keuhl, other writers and the White critics of her day experienced vastly different positionalities than Holiday, her allure and open performance of Black pain would allow writers to be drawn to witnessing an authentic, candid interpretation of a Black female interiority.

In selecting which films and documentaries to study on Holiday, I chose to focus on the themes presented in Lee Daniels' film, *The United States vs. Billie Holiday* (2021) instead of the

famed Diana Ross vehicle, *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972). Though the latter boasts a wonderful soundtrack and features a command performance from Diana Ross's engaging in Holiday's enigma, it also assisted in spreading false information about Holiday, often reducing her to her drug habits. The Griffin text accuses Holiday's own arrests, her autobiography *Lady Sings the Blues*, and the film for creating the impression that Holiday was seldom more than a junkie who sang sad blues. Andra Day's Oscar-nominated portrayal in the Daniels' film levies Holiday's refusal to stop singing "Strange Fruit" as an emphatic politically defiant statement toward the political establishment. The Daniels' film proves powerful in aiding the analysis of Holiday's aloofness and refusal. Though I realize there is a vast amount of scholarship available on the subject, this selection is intentionally diverse and disparate in format, age, and portrayal of Holiday—as if to chart a rough approximation of the dynamism in Holiday's presence as an American icon since her 1933 debut. Together, they provide useful insights to Holiday's candid persona and revealing interiority.

God Bless the Child, Eleanora

Billie Holiday's adventures in aloofness to the law began in childhood. According to Keuhl's research and Hartman's inclusion of Holiday in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Eleanora Fagan lived with her mother as a child and was preyed upon by men. Raped at age eleven, the young girl had been known to be vulgar by all accounts, and even as a child would use words such as "motherfucker" and "cocksucker" to express discontent. Though this may seem passé today, in Holiday's time, curse words were seldom taken lightly. Nevertheless, by age 14, Holiday had engaged in prostitution, an experience chronicled by Hartman:

> When the young Billie Holiday appeared before the Women's
> Court after being arrested in a disorderly house, the fourteen-year-

> old Elinora Harris gave her name as Eleanor Fagan, which was her grandmother's surname, and pretended she was twenty-one in order to avoid a custodial sentence of three years at the reformatory in favor of a short stint at the workhouse. (223-24)

Holiday's early mistrust of the government—to the point of having the prescience to change her name—is demonstrative of her *aloofness to law*, meaning that she inhabited a haughty disposition to the boundaries of written law, law enforcement, and a renegotiation of her participation under the rule of law. Throughout her life, and her infamous relationship with authority, Holiday would continue to refuse and evade incarceration from a source of personal aloofness. This sort of disregard for the system and its mandates is a recurrent theme seen in Holiday's drug use and her refusal to stop performing "Strange Fruit" at the behest of the government as well. The moving ballad's vivid portrait of the lynching of Black bodies had been thought to foment civil unrest, much to the chagrin to a government hellbent on maintaining the status quo of segregation.

Keuhl, like many writers before her and many to come, intended to dutifully uncover the "true Billie Holiday" beyond romantic myths of the singer's helpless tragedy or her then-infamous identities of helpless junkie or tortured artist. According to Keuhl's account, Holiday had as much a hand in her own mythmaking as any of her critics (Erskine 2019). However, it was her defiance—her uncompromising and constant aloofness and her rebellious acts of refusal—that provided Holiday agency in having a role in crafting her own narrative. For example, her catalogue of three hundred records demonstrates a selectivity in choosing material that related to her authentic lived experience of herself, her loved ones, and the entire Black community. Though this essay discusses Holiday's voice, her songwriting credits are worth

mentioning as a sign of her presence in her career: not only did she sing standards, blues, big band, and jazz material, Holiday contributed "Don't Explain," "Fine and Mellow," and "God Bless the Child" to the Great American Songbook, with "Don't Explain" identified as a theme of her interiority. Interspersed within Keuhl's research are interviews with Holiday herself; to listeners, she divulged that "Don't Explain" was the song that best encapsulated *her* (Erskine 2019). As the beautiful and somber jazz ballad would show in word and in voice, Holiday's unyielding sense of yearning is featured as a central piece to a candid Black female interiority. Honest, saddening, and poignant, the lyrics of "Don't Explain" tell of a woman's full knowledge of her man's infidelities. There is no peace for the woman, who had been written after Holiday's experiences. Instead, there a quiet disconsolation in Holiday's recording, so palpable that from the first lines, "Hush now, don't explain/ There ain't nothin' to gain" we can hear Holiday revealing that she chooses blissful ignorance, even if its immediate result is deleterious.

Lindon W. Barrett has offered a needed glimpse into the childhood of Eleanora Fagan. Insights into her early active refusals and aloofness to law not only provide context to her candid and cavalier stance, but also assist in defining Holiday as an aloof diva of refusal.
Barrett's *Blackness and Value* recognizes instances of refusal that bear true witness to her early life and ascent to cultural relevancy. Through granular commentary on race and value, Barrett's depictions of Holiday's tactician mindset reveal a deep, somber young Holiday in her days scrubbing the stairs and floors in Baltimore during her adolescence. Holiday's ambition and entrepreneurial spirit saw her charging White patrons an extra ten cents for cleaning services because she secured and owned her own cleaning products. Holiday's staunch refusals began in childhood; she became aloof to the observance of economic and racial relationships by refusing to commit to written law. When Barrett decides that Holiday willingly participated as a maid, it

suggests that she *ritually* observes the configurations of her racial dialectic with her customers while *simultaneously transgressing* the configuration. It is seen in her subversion of the racial order; she renegotiates the prices to her own end. By refusing to accept the parameters of her wages as a maid, Holiday, who is seen as wrong, as that which belongs outside, to the low and commanded, takes from engaging with the oppressor at its discursive core, what is considered right—to be inside, to be the high commanding, clean mistress, an exorbitant confirmation of herself beyond the boundary, as much as she capitulates to an aggrandizing of the boundaries that confirms those within (Barrett 18-19). Holiday's genius recognizes the cognitive limits of the White women who employed her, and rearranged the logistics of working as an adolescent maid. Barrett suggests that Holiday was more than capable of the sort of mental acuity to psychologically and physically rearrange the way her employment was compensated. Holiday's intelligence, thus, would figure well into her singing career, which was also sadly and paradoxically manhandled and controlled. Dr. James Hamilton observed Holiday and found her to have the mind of a psychopath, an impulse driven, strong, talented individual (Erskine 2019). Billie Holiday would often succumb to the scheme or plot of a paramour, but her Machiavellian, near "psychopathic" mentality manipulated her men back and prevailed. When Holiday became affiliated with John Levy, he became her "husband-manager" and was by most accounts Holiday's pimp and parasite (Erskine 2019). Levy hit Holiday; she hit back. This relationship was seen as toxic—Holiday continued to blur the line between song performance and revelations of her interiority with songs such as "My Man"; the lyrical content is an honest representation of her temperament—full of yearning and unabashed attachment. Nevertheless, Holiday had been unruly in a way that challenged Levy to the point where the latter became an informant on Holiday's activities, simply because he could not control her (Erskine 2019).

Indeed, Holiday manipulates the situation to benefit herself monetarily, and thus accrues some value. This can be seen as a self-preserving insurgent act. Holiday was not satisfied with the logistical arrangement of her position, and thus endeavored to change the situation. However, Barrett is quick to lament that Holiday's relatively "valueless status without the boundary is marked by" the occasion and "by the conspicuousness of her own flesh—the very site (sight) of her," meaning that Holiday was automatically devalued because of her pigmentation, that the location and the visible presence of her black skin rendered her valueless in the eyes of white supremacy; that Holiday can seemingly never escape racial value, what Barrett feels is a highly symbolic boundary, is not only demonstrated by white supremacist punctilious behavior around the exact *science* of the estimation of skin color, it is a value system performed repeatedly to the point of agony—a maintenance of a simultaneous façade of baseless, racist formalities (Barrett, 24). Holiday recognized this in the government—that White predisposition to obsess over racial value resulted in acts of Black insurgent suppression; her White counterparts could easily rehearse the well-known narrative of superiority based on pigmentation.

The irony is not lost, that Holiday had suffered devaluation because of the sound of voice, a gift that Holiday would skillfully wield for her entire life. Barrett writes, "Forgoing the condemnatory efficacy of sight, Holiday is apprised of the full extent of her *relatively* valueless position ("nigger") by 'the sound of [the] voice', the medium she will learn to value, master, intensify and privilege so well" (emphasis mine) (Barrett 24). Barrett wants to put the very sight of difference in pigmentation aside because it is acknowledged that it creates the opportunity for racial valuation in the eyes of Whites. However, with the sound of her voice, those values are challenged and disengaged by a phenomenon that does not require what Whites harbor to hold its own knowledge and wisdom. The pernicious and nearly omnipresent oppressive narrative of

White supremacy is thus dislodged and, if only temporarily, circumvented with the act of making music.

Holiday's prowess as a vocalist and musician is a direct outpouring of the way she observed and verbalized the language of oppression, a skill she honed in adolescence. In fact, it is Holiday's voice that eventually sets the record straight between herself and her White employers working as a maid in Baltimore. Barrett is good to include the more momentous occasion of Holiday's recounting of the significance of the incident in her autobiography *Lady Sings the Blues* (1956). This attribution of significance in Holiday's version is flippantly *sounded out* (Barrett 24).

> This great big greasy bitch [the woman for whom Holiday worked] didn't do a thing all day until about fifteen minutes before her old man was due home for dinner. Then she would kick up a storm. I didn't know my way around her fancy kind of joint. Instead of telling me what she wanted me to do, she'd get excited because her husband was waiting, start hollering at me and calling me "nigger." I had never heard that word before. I didn't know what it meant. But I could guess from the sound of her voice. (Barrett 23)

The preceding selection from Holiday's autobiography is an experience of Holiday's sound. Very matter of fact and straightforward, her candor and willingness to discuss racial matters is enveloped in a rich, elastic velvet tone. From Barrett, we learn that such voices are the fodder for cognitive space that accommodates Black singing as an instrument of transgression. This is useful in hearing the insurgency in Holiday's voice. There is success for Holiday—material, critical, or otherwise—in "darkness" (a possible allusion to the state of racial segregation and

sexual subjugation). Symbolically, the sound of Billie's voice was a weapon of dignity wielded against White oppression; this theme is presented in the Daniels' film as it is remarked that Holiday was doing good work and singing truth in her 1939 single "Strange Fruit" where few Black performers could or would in the 1940s.

Barrett's observations inhere in the voice of the aloof Black diva; when she sings, she is insurgent, transgressive, a successful light unto the darkness. In his second chapter, "Figuring Others of Value: Signing Voices, Singing Voices & African American Culture," he decides that the singing voice is that which allows Blacks to "enter or subvert symbolic, legal, material, and imaginative economies two which we are most usually denied access" (Barrett 57). Besides noting the commercial and critical success of Holiday and others, Barrett's considerations are grounded in his thought on the "turn," the subtle improvisation of a song forced by slave traders. The sudden improvisation, an immediate oral subversion of the devaluation from Whites, the turn would occur during farewell dirges between severed African families converted into groupings called cottles, and from that heritage, Barrett concludes music as an integral certitude to the Black experience. The turn's improvisation would take an African folk song and orally change the lyrics to fit the sad occasion of permanent separation of Black families. Such innovations in music are heard and celebrated in jazz music, which is deeply entrenched in the Black cultural tradition of the U.S. Barrett notes, "indeed, the extreme centrality of music and its collateral activities to African-American cultural practices in terms of not simply production but, above all, reception—underscores the point" (Barrett 57).

Barrett's observations of Holiday are germane to an understanding of the aloof Black diva. The author's distinction between written text and the sound of the Black singing voice indicates an antagonistic relationship that Holiday took part in as a Black female performer.

Artfully, Barrett demonstrates the intellectual West's harboring of literacy—the written word—from Blacks to be a systematic denial of access to material knowledge, wisdom and wealth; his revelation indicates how Whites *valued* Blacks to be devoid of true knowledge, to be "in the dark," if you will. These two actions, the harboring of knowledge and the racist condescension, were performed to the point of factualization, sublimation and fetishization. Literacy became inscribed as the preferred custom. Yet from the vantage point of darkness, Barrett honors the singing voice as that which stands without the need for literacy. Though Holiday was a skilled lyricist, it was the knowledge and wisdom enveloped within her speaking and singing voice that transfixed audiences, the critical estimation of her efforts, and the order by which she was valued. Barrett would certainly declare that Holiday's singing voice had provided a profound, widespread, and "much more inclusive challenge to" the assumptions of literacy (Barrett 75). I would even extend her challenge to written commentary of social reformers as well as the written laws of the government. Barrett intimates that the cultural sites that represent the singing voice represent communities that "assume and valorize alternative grounds of meaningfulness" (Barrett 75). This means that the laws and dictums outlined by literacy needn't apply here, nor to Holiday herself. As a Black cultural artifact, he avers,

> the singing voice belies this estimation of matters and because it openly *refuses*, as outlined here, "the basis for Western systematic thought," one can easily imagine its disturbance of dominant communities and configurations of value inhering in far more than its vocal acoustics. As a central valorizing instrument of dispossessed communities, this refusal of the singing voice cannot be minimized; the singing voice is, in its own contexts on

> alternative premises to "the basis for Western systematic thought,"
>
> a site of the active production of meaning. (emphasis mine) (76)

That the singing voice dwells in the realm of orality—which, "for the modern mind, seems to possess a self-presence and immediacy regretfully forfeited by the abstract nature of literacy"—should not be entirely lost upon the reader. Holiday was successful in securing value for herself as a maid due to the immediacy of orality in her dealings with White employers. Appearance may have been used to denigrate Blacks on an aesthetic basis, but the sound of voice, especially Holiday's with its presence and command, can flippantly sound out prejudice and segregation and can yield greater self-estimation and value. Thus, the dynamic nature of a the singing voice, so far removed from literacy, is one of refusal. Our conceptions of the aloof Black diva and the historical development of her performance should be augmented to note a certain defiance, a refusal that shields female interiority from unforgiving audiences clamoring for an exoticized fetishization of her identities. Refusal is the subversive turn in the song between parting family members, the common ideological domain where Billie Holiday successfully rearranged the racial order to suit her needs; refusal manifests itself in the sounds and insurgent actions—actuated in the voice, body, and mind of the aloof Black diva.

I'll Be Seeing You, Billie

Billie Holiday captured, and continues to garner, attention for her unique vocal talents. Both Linda Keuhl and Farah Jasmine Griffin remark being haunted by the sound—at first, a girly contralto or soubrette, limited in range, but full of expression, bright and paunchy timbre. That sound would grow into a womanly alto, gravely, further contracted in range, but ripe with interpretative vocalizing power. Holiday loved to play with pitch and was a masterful vocal improviser. Lindon Barrett invokes the following remark made by musicologist Portia K.

Maultsby to describe the dynamism found in Black female performers:

> Traditionally, African diasporic vocalists "bring intensity to their performance by alternating lyrical percussive and raspy timbres; juxtaposing vocal and instrumental textures; changing pitch and dynamic levels" alternating straight with vibrato tones; and weaving moans, shouts, grunts, hollers, and screams into the melody (Maultsby 1990 in Barrett 32).

Writers like Shane Vogel consider Holiday and her sound to be a model for the aloof Black diva, much like Lena Horne. But due to Holiday's lived and performed rambunctiousness, certainly more animated than Horne's, around her exists that mysterious question that Vogel attempts to answer, "What kind of diva was Billie Holiday?". Why does Holiday's popular catalogue and "cultivated aura of aloofness" garner her comparisons in status to Lena Horne if she sang the blues (Vogel, 223n3)? With her unique, full swinging sound and an endorsement for being placed in the feminist blues tradition by Angela Davis—one that would likely include the fuller-voiced Black divas that were drastically different from Lena Horne—there is slight contention (Vogel, 223n3). Ultimately, Vogel correctly asserts that attempting to wrest Holiday into either tradition is uneasy. Although Holiday sang the blues and is considered to be part of the blues tradition, it wasn't her exclusive genre. She began her career by singing tunes like "Blues are Brewin'," but Holiday brought a considerable amount of glamour to her wardrobe and performances of standards and other compositions; these performative choices distance her from the quintessential blueswoman. Therefore, Lady Day is an uneasy fit into both traditions, meaning she is both a diva of excess and an aloof Black diva of refusal.

In crafting her voice, Holiday expressed her desire to sound like Louis Armstrong, whose

technique often rendered him similar sounding to an instrument. Keuhl learned from John Hammond, one of Billie's producers, that after hearing her debut in February 1933, Holiday had the quality of sounding much like a horn. Often pitted against jazz legend Ella Fitzgerald in rivalry, pianist Bobby Tucker settled the score with Keuhl. When Ella sings "my man is gone," it came as a pleasant caricature for entertainment. When Billie sung it, however, it felt like the man was really gone (Erskine 2019). Her performative choices, singing to just below the point of laughter or tears, left audiences to consummate those acts. Nevertheless, her interpretive gifts still speak directly to Maultsby's description. Take her performance in "Ain't Nobody's Business (If I Do)" as an example of an intense independent spirit that flaunts a raspy timbre and juxtaposes straight notes with her vibrato. Though Holiday doesn't shout, groan or holler on the track, her interpretative power beholds the song as *she* intends for the audience to receive it. She also intends for audiences to know her in her full, complex glory—societal transgressions and all.

Though not as forward or *out* as Gladys Bentley, Billie Holiday was queer and had several same-sex relationships, as the Erskine and Daniels films would suggest; her tryst with the actress Tallulah Bankhead was featured in the latter's *The United States vs. Billie Holiday* (2021). Lovers John Simmons and Roy Harte would describe Holiday as a "sex machine," that she would make partners perform like a three-ring circus and then venture out for a prostitute (Erskine 2019). Holiday's queerness—and the queerness of any performer in the mid-twentieth century for that matter—is a direct transgression of contemporary written and unwritten codes that moderate social behavior. Holiday's choice to enjoy the company of women, even to the point of being lampooned by men for her lesbian relationships, enlivens her legacy and deepens the complex richness of her interiority.

Both Daniels and Erskine document Holiday's drug use, which as a major transgression of the law, as a point of significant logistical contention between Holiday and the United States government. Starting with open cannabis use and incorporating whiskey during prohibition, her marriage to Jimmy Monroe would see Holiday graduate to cocaine, assorted pharmaceuticals with scotch, and eventually heroin. Known as "extremist" by pianist Bobby Tucker, Holiday had begun using drugs to seek pleasure and revelry and enjoyed being high during an era of prohibition. Her large capacity for drugs attracted the attention of Henry J. Ainslinger, the head of the Department of Treasury's Federal Bureau of Narcotics. Beginning in 1930, Ainslinger waged war over the sale, distribution and consumption of cannabis. Holiday, through her agency, made the choice to use her drugs flagrantly. However, through her insurgency, she kept that choice in the face of being a target for state intervention. It appears that federal bureaucrats and those who were associated with the state had a grossly simplified misreading of Holiday. One of Ainslinger's subordinates, narcotics agent Colonel George H. White, accused Billie Holiday of being a trafficker, an addict, of being wayward, and flaunting her ne'er-do-well lifestyle with fancy clothes, cars, and coats, etc. (Erskine 2019). This not only reveals nuances into the perniciousness of the US government, but it also questions Holiday's non-masculine, non-White power from a positionality of a White male in a seat of government power at a place where Holiday's fortunes should never be in question.

Perhaps producing less of a clear emphatic refusal than Lena Horne's work with the NAACP, Billie Holiday possessed her own abhorrence toward certain forms of aesthetic and logistical choices White producers would make about her pale complexion and White supremacy would make about her literal comings and goings. Earlier in her career, aestheticians would darken Holiday's face so that her pigmentation matched that of most of her Black bandmates.

Though she had reached her commercial peak in 1947, she was still relegated to using the kitchen or "Colored" entrances to venues. During bus tours of the American South, Holiday would sleep in the bus or a car when her White bandmates patronized hotels. Yet in her insurgency, Holiday had been political in her familial conduct with male counterparts and White bandmates. Joining Count Basie's band as lead singer in 1937 at age 22, Holiday received the nickname "Lady Day" from close bandmate, saxophonist and future confidant, Lester "Prez" Young. Together with Holiday's mother, the three formed what the singer lovingly called "The Royal Family." That did not translate to an aloofness in terms of alienating her bandmates for her own sake, but rather an enveloping sense of presence and interiority around them. Lady Day was described as having the positionality of a man, but "feminine" (Erskine 2019).

Nevertheless, according to accounts given to Keuhl by Jo Jones, Basie's drummer during Holiday's tenure, she and others felt that her image in Basie's band had been crafted by Hammond, Billie's White male producer, to resemble that of the mammy. Holiday, on the other hand, desired to transcend blues music and the suppressing nature of the tenuous relationship Black artists maintained with White producers, critics and managers. Billie would have to negotiate this dynamic at a time when Black music—and Black life—had been so heavily surveilled by the segregating force of racism. What's more is that Holiday encountered significant issues as a Black singer in the South. Singing for Artie Shaw's all-White band in 1938, the singer encountered a lack of indoor plumbing that White bandmates received and was given to heckling by audience members who requested she sing another song. In November 1938, Holiday was asked to use the service entrance of the Lincoln Hotel in New York because other patrons complained (Erskine 2019). Though the worst of these incidents would see the singer lash out and removed from the bandstand, she inculcated a cognitive freedom in

adolescence that allowed her to weaponize a cavalier bravado and remain aloof to the demoralization of racial denigration. As Erskine would have it, Billie was said to have a great deal of pride and expressed herself fully and openly in song. Fueled by anger, pride, and the philosophical consideration of the turn of events during her southern tours, Holiday's interiority did not rely on the written word to assuage her frustration. Instead, like a soothing catharsis, Holiday laid it bare with her voice. These experiences, and other reports of Holiday's temperament and unprofessionalism, prompted her to part ways with Artie Shaw as well.

In interviews with Keuhl, guitarist Al Avola would reflect on the limitations Holiday experienced in communicating her frustration, her choice to publicly resist, or refuse the racial arrangements of society, by stating, "She only had the words to her songs" (Erskine 2019). If Hortense Spillers accurately elucidates the Black female's dramatic confrontation with the ego, then the sound of Billie's psychic presence can especially puncture Black listening ears as well as Whites in timeless works that speak directly to White supremacist thought. "Strange Fruit" captures the twenty-four-year-old Holiday in her finest hour, a song she would return to for the rest of her life with consistently beautiful results. Written under the pseudonym Lewis Allan, Abel Meeropol penned a haunting blues and jazz ballad about the protagonist's witnessing and representing the full weight of lynching, death, and loss in the Black South. Produced by Milt Gabler, the song found initial pushback from Holiday's label, Columbia Records, over the song's social content. The unusual nature of the protest song garnered attention because of its shocking depiction of "Black bodies hanging from the poplar trees" (Allan 1939). Holiday's final performance of the song on British television in 1959 features subtle yet fitting performative choices: emotional candor in downcast eyes, an honest and emotive vocalization to the point where her voice nearly cracks. Guitarist Barney Kessel considered her performance, where, in

the eyes there was almost a reflection of the sacrifices Holiday made due to her race in order to find success as a recording artist. Kessel believed Billie could only crusade on the behalf of the Black community in song (Erskine 2019). Critics were baffled by “Strange Fruit”, with *TIME* magazine deeming it the most unusual song heard in a nightclub in 1939. The singer would maintain a stoic presentation while White audience members walked out in the middle of her performances.

The song and its chanteuse engendered notoriety from law enforcement because of “riots” incited by the song’s content and jarring melody (Erskine 2019). The lyrical content of “Strange Fruit,” powered by Holiday’s unusual and haunting vocal, made it perfect fodder for Bureau of Narcotics chief Henry J. Ainslinger; an emissary of the Department of Treasury, Ainslinger has rightly been portrayed both in the Daniels’ film as well as in Keuhl’s notes as having launched an assault against Billie Holiday. The rhetoric by which the bureaucrat spoke, both in real and imagined iterations, sought to pervert Holiday’s image as the poster child for dissenting against the written law and against contemporary racial codes; for this feat, the diva should be recognized for her insurgency in persisting to perform “Strange Fruit.” Not only was the song queer to the ear at its time, it also became a rallying cry for Blacks in America. However, such exposure at the outer limits of social custom came at a price to Holiday; a friend of hers would lament the price of celebrity and stardom in service to symbolic activism to Keuhl, “Now that Billie’s star shined so brightly, she could not retreat into the night” (Erskine 2019).

Holiday’s insurgent tactician mind often found her one step ahead of law enforcement in a way that maintained her very political stance of refusal. In trying to suppress Black insurrection in the US, Ainslinger sought to take Holiday down through her heroin addiction to coerce her into not singing “Strange Fruit.” Ainslinger coordinated and colluded with Joe Glaser, Holiday’s

manager at the time, and hired Black narcotics agent, Jimmy Fletcher, to bust Billie for possessing drugs on her person. According to Keuhl, Fletcher would constantly follow and observe Holiday for the better part of two years, infiltrating her circle, and coordinating a raid that resulted in her 1947 drug conviction. Fletcher was asked by Ainslinger to not incriminate but follow Holiday throughout the country. Despite being raided "dozens of times," Holiday's intent to continue her activities led her to be resourceful in refusing the law: though she never sold or distributed heroin, she would procure the drugs from trumpeter Joe Guy. During a raid in Philadelphia in 1947, her car was caught with two ounces of heroin; Billie and her chauffeur were tipped and escaped the raid, a police chase and a shoot-out. She was eventually apprehended in New York on May 16th, 1947.

Holiday's last relationship with Louis McKay would see her spouse use whatever means he could to access her fortune—and succeed. McKay and the singer indulged in the latter's masochistic tendencies in public love-brawls. This, along with McKay forcibly starving Billie and mentally manipulating her into isolation, resulted in a dramatic weight loss where Holiday appeared to be gaunt. Her addictions to alcohol and hard drugs took their toll and by the end of the decade, her life would end from heart failure from cirrhosis of the liver, and her estate would go to McKay. Whereas Holiday's aloofness to law and defiant refusals defined her career as one of ultimate vindication, the sad turn of events of the end of Holiday's life is also indicative of Holiday's sense of refusal, because she neither completely yielded to McKay's whims nor did she relieve herself of him; instead, she occupied a difficult space in relation to him. Her decision to contend with McKay in this way does not avail Holiday to high regard for substance, but it demonstrates a long-suffering persistence and a commitment to personal values, which are admirable in and of themselves.

Good Night, Lady Day

Notably, Holiday's favorite connection to Britain precipitated American ideas about her. The myths that Holiday herself contributed to included her romanticized version of Europe serving as an "uncritical portrait of the continent as an oasis for Black artists" (Griffin 102). Holiday's critical mistake in romanticizing Europe is another hallmark of the diva's aloofness to straightforward truthfulness. The sort of playful equivocation that Holiday would engage in made her illegal activities a known matter of fact on both sides of the Atlanitc. As her disastrous second and third sojourns to Europe would suggest, the mythic Billie Holiday had been condemned to exist in demise, to lurk about as someone forlorn, someone who had indeed seen better days; yet, even in the face of Holiday's professional failure, her legacy, artistry, and unique vocal sound are still adored. Holiday's final performances in France, alongside less than favorable reviews and attendance records, set up the diva to counter the myth of Europe as a haven for Black Americans. Clearly, Holiday's rendering of Europe creates an impression that the diva had been aloof to a precise retelling of her life experience, which is, perhaps, important for the sake of representing Holiday palatably. Nevertheless, her bad performances in Europe would ultimately fortell the lukewarm responses to Holiday's battered voice in her late 1950s output. Griffin concludes, "Holiday's last days [in Europe] were anything but triumphant. By the end of her time in Paris, she was singing for a percentage of the gate in Parisian nightclubs" (Griffin 108). An account of European fascination-turned-apathy with her may have proved telling about responses to her performance, but Holiday worked with author William Dufty to promote a rosier, more appreciative image of her European relations.

Nevertheless, both Griffin and Holiday knew that the English took the diva more

seriously than Americans did at the time. Griffin remarks that in fact, "these intellectuals also sought to provide an historical, psychological, and sociological ground upon which to place Holiday" (Griffin 109). It is in this spatial arrangement that European jazz critics commenced, fusing disciplines in academia to study and admire the diva.

However complex their understanding of the diva was, the Europeans' analyses suffered the same sociological pathologies of American race relations, repeating with each European examination of Holiday. For example, Eric Hobsbawm's scathing obituary asserted that Holiday's early death at age 44 "is actually better than the life she would have led" (Griffin 109). Griffin, enraged at Hobsbawm's belief that all Holiday really had was "the disinterested worship of aging men who had heard and seen her in her glory," dismisses the writer for his dubious claim and establishes a clear discourse and history of appreciation for the diva (Griffin 109). It seems as though Hobsbawm inscribed his perspective on what constitutes a well-led life onto Holiday; her adoring fandom settles the score by seeing to it that such sentiments are refused from being associated with the diva.

Though Holiday's life ended more than sixty years ago, her afterlife has endured in American consciousness. Many writers, musicians, critics, scholars, and fans have experienced Billie Holiday as a conduit to authentic lived experiences of amazing jazz music, and the psychic space occupied by Holiday's authentic Black female interiority. Thus, a meditation on how she has been consumed, critiqued and understood should serve as a fitting end for this thesis on the diva. Due to its nuanced and comprehensive approach to studying Holiday, her critics and her lifework, Farah Jasmine Griffin's *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* is a suitable testament that beholds the Black diva in all her tremulous complexity, her beauty, and her faults. Griffin recognized that the diva inhabited an afterlife as a symbol of "so

many different things: racial pride and resistance; feminine melancholy and tragic weakness; dignity damaged by demons from without and within" (Griffin 2019). This formulation is useful to associating the diva as human with a revealed interiority as close to the truth as possible. As Griffin explains Holiday's interiority, her innermost thoughts and emotions, as one that nonetheless strives and remains reaching and aspiring, she does well to describe Holiday's voice as one that longs for something it will never have, as one that "[aspires] for a destination [it] will never reach" (Griffin 2019). The tragic intertwines with the beautiful where Holiday and her eternal yearning are concerned. Griffin continues, "'Where will she land? It is always someplace unexpected,'perhaps not where she was headed, but oh the journey there, and the place itself is beautiful, not because it satiates, 'but precisely because it doesn't'" (Griffin 2019). As Holiday's forty-four-year journey through life is still seen as beautiful yet without destination, we continue to earnestly reckon with the accounts of Holiday that sensationalized her addiction, her untimely deterioration and demise. Griffin's articulation speaks to Holiday, in all her audacity, and her self-effacing view of herself. We can use Griffin's reflection to directly confront and elucidate Holiday's own refusal—a refusal to be ashamed of her addiction; the author recounts, "this Holiday is a Holiday of refusal, refusing even my own attempts to present an alternative version of her life…This one is the kick ass, genius, Black woman who makes no excuses for her addiction" (Griffin 2019). Griffin does not realize the full significance of speaking to Holiday's refusal, but we must acknowledge Holiday's contributions as a diva who not only resisted White oppression and male capitulation but also resisted change and concealment from her activities. Holiday's refusal is perhaps, more biting than Horne's; the former did not just refuse the contemporary racial order, she did so on her own terms, maintaining that aloofness to the law and custom. The diva utilized her aloofness to law to persist in her refusal and was unapologetic

for doing so.

Recognizing Holiday's insurgency requires occupying variegated positionalities. Griffin writes intentionally from the intersections of intellectual *and* fan to review versions of Holiday that emerged during her life as well as alternative portrayals that emerged after the diva's death in 1959. Perhaps this is the ideal combination for deifying aloof Black divas: to be in awe and appreciation of their work and to be equipped with the tools of the academy. The former creates a certain enjoyment in culling and curating sources of knowledge production on the diva, whilst the latter creates greater cultural space and imaginings for the artist's lifework. As Griffin's text opens with a mourning overture about her personal relationship to Holiday, she speaks to the intimacy and accessibility she feels emanating from the diva. A revelation of Holiday's interiority, this is the intended effect of Holiday's allure; Billie's inviting candor was apparent in interviews and performances and was certainly palpable in Andra Day's performance of Holiday in the Daniels film. Thus, it seems sensible that others feel Holiday's warmth, setting alight a legacy for a consummate diva and continuing the narrative that could have ended in death yet instead resolves with new life.

Griffin's reflections on Holiday's complexity and the way it "challenges notions of respectability and divisions within the Black community" dovetails well into an understanding of representation of authentic Black images (Griffin, "Returning"). As Black organizations such as the NAACP struggled with representation via racial uplift, a performer such as Holiday revealed and projected an interiority that was real and felt by legions of fans and critics (Griffin, "Returning"). The fanfare would even continue in intellectual circles in the decades after her passing. While European intellectuals appreciated the diva for her gifts, they served a role in stereotyping Black American artists. A bevy of Black male critics made for afterlife suitors for

Holiday, as well as several Black female writers, including Angela Davis (Griffin, "Returning"). Griffin makes the critical error of taking Davis's classification for granted and not following Vogel's assertion: Holiday belongs to *both* the blues tradition, and also the set of divas that include Lena Horne.

Deliberately, Griffin chooses to bridge both Black and European camps of thought with the concept of mythmaking over Holiday's life. At Holiday's feet, Black intellectuals' manifest their interpretations and cultural imaginings of the diva; as part of this tradition, Griffin assembles a prodigious genealogy that begins, remarkably, with the entire discourse of jazz writing. Against a White jazz criticism landscape, Griffin writes, "Prominent Black intellectuals began to challenge White dominance by asserting the brilliance and elegance of the players as well as situate the music firmly within an African-American cultural and political milieu" (Griffin 120). After death Holiday became a medium, the means by which Black music criticism could ground and announce itself. Griffin boasts a bevy of Black music critics who wrote about Holiday, including: Amiri Baraka, Langston Hughes, and Ralph Ellison; Griffin cites Baraka, Stanley Crouch, Leon Forrest, and Robert O'Meally. All are considered Lady Day's scholars cum knights templar—their collective acts of chivalry are for the diva: to rescue and protect her legacy from "sensationalizing myths that obscure her contributions as a major artist" (Griffin 121). Griffin works unyieldingly to complicate the traditional myths by introducing alternative takes on Holiday. She does this by invoking the names of Angela Davis, Michelle Wallace, Alexis De Veaux, and Ntozake Shange as Black female intellectuals who have written considerably on Holiday.

In spite of them, however, it is Baraka who renders Holiday as "a Black poet of longing who expresses the collective desire of Black people. She is both an artist in the tradition of Black

culture and a spokesperson in the tradition of Black struggle" (Griffin 122). Due to her careful selection of a multiplicity of sources, both legitimate and alternative, from male and female perspectives, from European to Black origin, Griffin illustrates what would be necessary to adequately celebrate Holiday as an aloof Black diva. Invoking Baraka, Griffin considers that "Holiday as woman and artist comes to be representative of the experiences, needs and thwarted desire of Black people in this land called America. Baraka's Lady does not transcend history; she is mired in it, carries the weight of it in her voice and her being" (Griffin 236). Griffin and Baraka are speaking once again to Holiday's interiority while speaking to the reality of Holiday's very public life during the age of segregation in America. However true it was for Holiday to be mired in history, her voice and being have acquired a temporal aloofness, meaning, she has indeed transcended history with her legend and undeniable talent. By fomenting a rebellious refusal of contemporary norms, Holiday attained a timelessness in the way she is remembered, revisited and revered. Holiday's temporal aloofness would see to it that knowledge production on the diva would continue in her afterlife. Yet, the possession of an afterlife so robust would suggest the diva's seemingly effortless escape of time. After all, save for Frank Sinatra, few if any performers born in 1915 are discussed with such fervent energy.

As chaotic and paradoxical as it may seem, Billie Holiday sought and found her way through life—out of a turbulent childhood and into an existence of representation, defiance, aloofness and refusal. These themes would present themselves throughout her work as a jazz chanteuse. Holiday had been a transgressive aloof diva, aloof to law and eventually to time, in a way that attracted legions of fans and a generous level of respect. Baraka is correct to say that as a representative, Holiday carried the desires of Black people in America; she remained honest to herself and dutifully giving in her contributions to the liberation and entertainment of Black

people. Perhaps the activity of her afterlife, a growing legacy of new literature and entertainment inspired by Lady Day, obviates the tragedy of her death in July 1959. What is clear to me is that within her voice is a suspension of what is reality for what could be possible. Hers is a comforting sound in our own contemporary dirge. Her dramatic turn of the vocal phrase, her intonation, her improvisation all suggest that the legacy of Billie Holiday lives on.

Conclusion

Lena Horne and Billie Holiday, in their formidable efforts to create greater versatility in the representation of authentic images of Black women, have created a mold which younger divas can follow. Their respective acts of refusal and aloofness, bucking traditional oppressive standards and images, have been remembered and discussed as part of Horne's and Holiday's legacies. These two divas have endured because younger Black women—new generations of aloof divas of refusal—sought their example to guide their careers in Hollywood.

Whereas Horne's contributions have been discussed in excess, some additional consideration must be devoted for concluding remarks on Billie Holiday. The jazz chanteuse and icon has become a paragon for Black female artists. There are a number of female artists that come to mind that have, through perhaps an early death, are compared to Holiday in talent and tragedy. Rhythm and blues musician Phyllis Hyman and British balladeer Amy Winehouse come to mind as salient examples that easily show the wide and deep reach of Holiday's appeal across the United States and abroad. Holiday's rich oeuvre also laid the groundwork for Diana Ross's acclaimed portrayal of the singer in *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972) as well as Andra Day in *The United States vs. Billie Holiday* (2021). Both actresses were showered with praise for choosing to adopt Holiday's persona and vocalizations in their respective films. Further, Holiday's refusal against government suppression contextualizes the antagonisms of future black insurgents after

her death—namely, Angela Y. Davis, and the Black Panther Party. Perhaps the ways in which the aloof diva enacted her own journey in refusing allowed for greater expression of Blackness untethered by the fetishization for White consumption.

By reviewing and analyzing the aloofness and refusal in the work of Lena Horne and Billie Holiday, I come to honor and observe two performers who possess deeply beautiful, graceful and glamorous interiorities. These women held court to testify from the perspective of the black woman's experience—not only for themselves, but for their successors as well. The effect of Horne and Holiday's examples made it clear that black women could and did hold power well in a revolutionary, non-masculinist fashion.

The torches set ablaze by Lena Horne and Billie Holiday have passed from epoch to epoch, from diva to diva, providing light unto the darkness with rich interiority. Their voices, often disparate, collectively roar against the deafening clamor of eager audiences. These divas, with their voices, suspend reality for what could be possible. It is indeed a comforting sound.

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