

The Grain of her Voice: Nina Simone, Josette Bushell-Mingo and the Intersections between Art, Politics and Race

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70733/34cg98wdjqid>

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Abstract

This article consists of four parts: a prologue followed by three reflections on Josette Bushell-Mingo's solo performance, *Nina—A Story about me and Nina Simone*. These four parts are authored by Anna Lundberg, Anna Adeniji, Monica L. Miller and Barby Asante, respectively (and in that order). Each part is composed of three intertwined layers of text: excerpts from the script of *Nina—A Story about me and Nina Simone*, written by Bushell-Mingo; excerpts from a transcribed conversation between the five contributors to this article; and individual reflections, written after the conversation took place.

These reflections approach the performance's shifts between rage and joy from different viewpoints. Anna Adeniji's contribution, "Guardians of Grief, Angels of Death", evolves around the ways in which mothering, community, grief and healing are described in *Nina*. How do Black feminists take care of each other within this space of rage, grief and joy? How do art, politics and kinship become healing practices in a world in which Black women were never meant to heal? Monica L. Miller's piece, titled "What You Will Get...", is audience-focused, addressing the differences between Black and white spectators. While the pure *jouissance* of Simone's music is present throughout the show, Miller observes a split between the white and the Black audience. If the white audience is centred on relaxing and enjoying the music, for the Black audience the sense of *jouissance* also appears to come from within the rage itself, or rather the display of it. Lastly, in "Our Readiness to be Present", Barby Asante takes as her point of departure Bushell-Mingo's demand for change. Is the white audience let off the hook too easily?



The Grain of Her Voice. Photograph: Oskar Omne

Prologue

Anna Lundberg

And then on stage comes somebody everybody was expecting. Somebody that everybody knew she shouldn't have been there, but she decided to be there. She decided that this time she was going to be a part of this. She was going to lead. She was going to inspire. She was going to use her voice. She was going to use her voice to start a revolution. (A revolution.) She was going to turn things around...

And It started. It started. The chords changed. And everybody knew it was the beginning of the song. And the applause goes up. Today was the day, today was the day of the concert. And every single face out there was... Mine...¹

Every single face out there was... mine. In *Nina A Story about Me and Nina Simone*, the narratives and artistry of Nina Simone overlap, intersect and disjunct with those of its author, Josette Bushell-Mingo, who interprets and performs Simone's music. It is through Bushell-Mingo's eyes that the audience gains access to the spirit of that hot day in Harlem in 1969, that epic moment in black cultural history, when Nina Simone entered the stage:

And now we got a revolution

Cause I see the face of things to come

Yeah, your Constitution

Well, my friend, its gonna have to bend

I'm here to tell you about destruction

Bushell-Mingo describes in her performance how she had watched the films, had seen the pictures of the black community embracing Nina Simone's presence and music, the urge to be there, to move and be moved, to join in, to immerse, in revolution.

Singin' about a revolution

Because we're talkin' about a change

Its more than just evolution

Well you know you got to clean your brain

The only way that we can stand in fact

Is when you get your foot off our back

At this point in the show, the music stops, suddenly. Bushell-Mingo's voice fades:

Sorry Nina. I can't sing this anymore. I am not going to sing this this song anymore.

The definition of revolution is to revolve. Right? To turn. Unfortunately turning can also be a circle. Which means you end up right back in the same fucking place. It's like a revolution, a car stuck in the mud. The wheels keep turning but they don't go anywhere. They keep spinning and spinning and spinning and they keep sinking and sinking and sinking.

[...]

The truth of it is... I don't think that the revolution has happened yet Nina

[...]

How the fuck did we come to a time where we have to say "black lives matter"?

Sudden emotional shifts like this one, between euphoria and resignation, run throughout the show like a long, sore, but persistent nerve. On the one hand, there is the joy of immersion, and the joy of Simone's powerful,

political *Revolution* (1969). On the other, there is the rage expressed in Simone's political anthem *Mississippi Goddamn* (1964) over the Birmingham killings of black citizens in 1963, reverberating in today's Black Lives Matter movement, founded in the aftermath of the killing of African American teenager Trayvon Martyn in 2012, and in widespread contemporary outrage at the killing and deaths of black people globally, as a very present afterlife of the legacies of slavery and colonisation. The uncomfortable question raised by the conjunction of seemingly paradoxical emotions is the following: is it right to let oneself emerge in the *jouissance* and libido experienced through Simone's musical gift, considering the ongoing racist violence and deaths?²

Rage and joy. *Nina A Story about Me and Nina Simone* travels between historical, social and geographical settings. The show moves between the United States, the country where both Nina Simone and the Civil Rights Movement were born, the United Kingdom, where Josette Bushell-Mingo was brought up, and Sweden, where Bushell-Mingo has lived and worked since the beginning of the millennium, and where the show was originally produced. After its premiere in October 2016, *Nina A Story about Me and Nina Simone* toured the UK, Sweden and US for three years. Three different countries, with three different historical and political contexts: how does the rage and joy of *Nina A Story about me and Nina Simone* travel between these three national settings of race, gender and culture? What pressing issues need to be articulated in relation to the work, given the differences due to shifting time and place?

When I saw *Nina* the first time, I was struck by the forceful music and visual setting. In my head, the performance embodied Maya Angelou's pounding poem, *I rise, I rise, I rise*:

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide

Welling and swelling I bear in the tide

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave

I am the dream and the hope of the slave

I rise

I rise

*I rise.*³

But above all, I was torn and devastated by the upfront account of white deadly violence acted out on black bodies. On the occasions I have seen the show, I observed the spectators, most of them white like me, although a few have been black, brown, or Middle Eastern, stumble out after the show, weary, disturbed, bewildered. I think *Nina A Story about Me and Nina Simone* has the ability, rare in our era, to evoke in the audience an aspect of the Aristotelian notion of *catharsis*, which, beyond emotional purification, engenders a form of experiential crisis in the spectator. The experience is violent, affecting body and soul, forcing the spectator to shift. After having seen *Nina*, I wanted to hold on to this moment of white discomfort. I wanted to stay with the trouble,⁴ keeping in mind Sara Ahmed's words:

If we want to know how things can be different too quickly, then we might not hear anything at all. The

*desire for resistance is not the same as the desire for good practice. And yet, both desires can involve a defence against hearing about racism as an ongoing and unfinished history that we have yet to describe fully. We still need to describe how it is that the world of whiteness coheres as a world.*⁵

“Racism as an ongoing and unfinished history that we have yet to describe fully.” With an academic background, and with a strategic position at Riksteatern, the Swedish theatre that originally produced *Nina A Story about me and Nina Simone*, I had the chance to create the scene for such an opportunity to stay with the trouble and attempt to deepen the understanding of racism as a part of ongoing history. Wanting to practise my firm belief in transversal learning and unlearning,⁶ I invited three scholars who live and work in Sweden, the UK, and the US respectively Senior Lecturer Anna Adeniji, Professor Monica L. Miller, and PhD candidate and artist Barby Asante to watch *Nina A Story about me and Nina Simone*, and share their thoughts evoked by the performance through conversation with Josette Bushell-Mingo and myself. Thus, on a gloomy December afternoon in 2017, the five of us brought our personal histories as one white Swedish woman and four black women living and working in the diaspora as educators, artists, and performers to gather in Stockholm. We remained seated for five hours. This article builds on the myriad thoughts expressed that afternoon, intimately entangled as they were with the performance of the night before.

Guardians of Grief, Angels of Death

Anna Adeniji

Suddenly the doorbell rings. I go down the stairs. And through the misty glass on the front door I could see faces out there. I slowly open the door. And standing there were a gang of women. All of them looked like my mother. Because they all had these thick glasses which made their eyes look really big. Like fish. Just like my mother.

And they had their coats and hats on, like Sunday church, and plastic bags with food in them. And then the woman at the front said (with a Caribbean accent):

“Hello, my name is Mabel. And we come to help you with your mother.”

“I’m sorry?” I said.

“We have come here for the wake. We have come here to help you with your mother.”

“But my mother is dead.”

“We know. That’s why we are here.”

Barby: You know, the moment which we all said really touched us? That completely beautiful moment; the women turning up, right? To me, this is the gift that she gives to black women. A complete gift, the showing up. And it’s just so brilliantly funny, and, you know, it’s just grief giving and just... everything about it is so completely,

completely special.

Anna A: These women, this “gang of women”, or the angels of death as I have come to think of them, come along, interfering in her lonely grieving, with a forceful kindness that is impossible to say no to, and they just stay there with her. They do all these things, they laugh, and they dance, and they eat. And then the crying comes. And that’s allowed. And then, they start over. The repetition, even if it’s just one night, it feels like a very, very long time. Because we know that otherwise, she would have been alone in that house. And the process of grieving wouldn’t have started until way later.

And at some point. I started to cry. Started to cry. I think I was overwhelmed, I was hungry and I was overwhelmed. I was more overwhelmed by their reaction to my crying... “That’s it girl. Let it out. You cry now. Cry. Cry now. That is why we are here. Cry now. That’s it. You finished? Good; blow your nose. Anyway. As I was saying. Your mother... She was loud and rude... She could dance that jiggi jiggi.” And we go on and on and on all night laughing and crying.

Of course I realised they were not there to cry themselves... They were there to help me cry. They were there to help me go through this. Which my God, my white God didn’t teach me. He didn’t show me how to do this. In fact, he said “you are going to be so far removed from the dead, so distant from death.” I had never felt so un-alone.

Monica: But it’s about mothering, though. The whole piece is about mothering.

Josette: Yes, yes.

Barby: I agree, that is something important.

Monica: And it also allows us to see how Josette is dually mothered by Simone and her own mother. It is as if she is posturing herself as her mother’s daughter, right? And as the daughter of this group of black angels? She’s also proffering a version of herself as a part of Nina’s legacy, which would require her to reinterpret the songs in her own voice. And in a voice that is in some ways actually a little bit lighter in tone, because the subject of what she’s talking about is actually not lighter at all. It actually accrues a kind of deepness, and additional darkness, because of the fact that the civil rights movement is over, and according to Nina Simone, failed in a certain way. And we’ve ended up now in a new era of black death, right?

Barby: Yeah, and which I think is so important.

Monica: You see that trajectory? And then, when we are all there with her, and those other women, it is a kind of passage through time. That’s enabled by a black womanly care, that seemed really important. So you can actually think about the show as moving along that path, in terms of ferrying someone over, or through. This doesn’t happen all of the time. But it is a part of a Caribbean and African-American experience, that piece of diaspora mourning. It is about home-going, about ferrying, about moving people through. It seemed so important. This piece is the centre of the show. It is about the kinds of things that black mothers do and have to do, in a situation of state violence.

Anna A: For me it also symbolises the necessity of grief and the necessity for grief in solidarity. And also in the

Swedish context, the total absence of possibility to grieve the consequences of racism.

Josette: There you go, there you go.

Anna L: I thought about what you said earlier about Swedish identity as very individualistic. But at the same time, Swedes are taught that they can rely on the system and the state in times of crisis. So there you have it: deeply individualised citizens trusting the system, seemingly independent, and therefore we don't have to rely on people of flesh and blood surrounding us: family, friends... In *Feminist Theory*, bell hooks writes about her experience in the 1970s when she took her first Gender Studies course at the university.⁷ The class was dominated by white women, who were all thrilled by the fact that they as feminists were supporting each other. And hooks was thinking, "What's the big deal?" Where she came from, women of colour did just that: they have had to stand up for each other *all* the time, otherwise they wouldn't survive. So I was thinking, in the Swedish individualised society... the difference is even bigger. It's huge. So, when I watched that scene with the angels helping Josette through the night, I thought about how lonely Swedish people may be at such occasion. Because many Swedes wouldn't do that, they wouldn't turn up at the doorstep of the daughter of a dead friend. Afraid of interfering. Afraid of dependence. And perhaps of being vulnerable.

This is the scene in *Nina A Story about Me and Nina Simone*, in which Josette talks about one particular night after her mother's death. Josette is alone in her mother's house in London and suddenly the doorbell rings. Outside is this group of women, looking like her mother only they are very much alive. Then follows a magnificent portrayal of the gift of grieving. Josette describes them as "guardians of grief, they were the soldiers of death." The scene touched all of us who participated in the conversation after that December afternoon, and I wish to unpack why this was.

The conversation does not only engage in the significance of grieving in solidarity, but is also letting us know something important about time, timing, the importance of knowing your history, and being present at the same time. The angels showing up at Josette's doorstep are not only helping her to be present, by eating, talking, laughing and crying together. They are also giving her back her history, through the telling of their stories about her mother, and telling her stories about what black women have done for each other for generations. Helping each other to grieve, but also to move forwards. Walking together through life and death. And what Josette does in the show, is giving us back the memory of this practice, reminding us of the importance of a collective grief and the deep knowledge from generations before us. It is a gift to the black women in the audience. We are living within racism, and so did our foremothers. Somehow, in spite of genocide, rape, seeing their children die or robbed from their arms, many of them survived, and thus it is possible for us to survive this too. The process of grief is a process of healing. And black women healing is a dangerous political act. In the individualist neoliberal discourse that we are up to our ears in, it is easy to think that self-care is about taking care of yourself. Audre Lorde reminded us that, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."⁸ Josette reminds us that we cannot do it by ourselves.

These women were the *guardians of grief*, they were *the soldiers of death*. These were women who had lived through their own battles, their own civil rights, these were women who came over on the boat, these were women who had seen so much death and loss in spirit, in life, even in their own children.

Reading the quoted parts of our conversation above, focusing on the scene in which Josette describes the

collective mourning of her mother, I was once again struck by the differences of black experience, depending on where in the world you are. Not only the differences between African experiences and European experiences while being black, but the differences between diasporic experiences all over the world. Growing up in Sweden, I never had a black community of women, until my adult years when I found a group of Afro-Swedish people connected through black arts and culture, which was TRYCK (an association for black artists in Sweden). They became my friends, and formed a community in a way most of us black Swedes were unfamiliar with. Being born and growing up black in Sweden, at least for my generation, meant that you were used to being the only one or one of a few. Black organising, across ethnic backgrounds is still pretty new. For instance, The National Association for Afro-Swedes was formed in 1990, while TRYCK was founded 2010 by a group of stage professionals, including Josette Bushell-Mingo. During the last five years, a growing number of black identifying Swedish groups have emerged through social media, connecting people all over the country. But the trajectory of black feminist intellectual thought, the history of black women showing up, the backtracking of black communities all that seems to happen somewhere else. We still look to the US for cultural imagery, for cultural representation and inspiration. My own black cultural guardians of grief, the angels of death, life and healing, are for the most part African American. I mourn Maya Angelou, I mourn Nina Simone, I mourn Toni Morrison, and simultaneously they help me to heal and survive. But my own life feels like a shadow of a black life. A fake black wannabe, grasping for the cultural representation I can get hold of. What I mourn even more is the absence of Nigerian foremothers, role models, as well as social, cultural and intellectual angels from the country of my African origin.

They taught me that night that death is something you walk towards and you meet it. Death in its white version didn't stand a chance. There was not death in that house that night, there was spirit, there was the brightest darkness.

I strongly remember Josette's comment about what happened after the show we all attended the night before in Stockholm:

Josette: There was a woman who came and spoke to me after the show yesterday, the mother who came with her children, and she held me for a very long time. That very special heat, that very special embrace. I was hers yesterday, if that makes any sense. She held me, there was nobody else there, but she was whispering in my ear at the time, and she was saying, "I have often thought of killing white people. If I had a gun, I'd kill them all." She said, "I would kill them all. But I heard you speak tonight, and I let it go." That's what she put in my ear. And you know, you just stand there. And her daughter was there, and her son was there.

When I think about this now, associating it with the guardians, the angels, I see Josette herself as some kind of angel working through the stage. The show's violent display of rage and possible revenge in tandem with the act of grief give us a space to heal.

Black women in Sweden naturally have all sorts of experiences and family trees, depending on their diasporic story. In my own community of black Swedish women there is actually a majority of women that do not have black mothers, either because they are mixed race with white mothers or because they were adopted by white families. Many of us do not have a community of black foremothers accessible within our birth family, knocking on our door with potluck and techniques to heal. This means we need to turn to each other as mothers, as daughters, as sisters in private matters as well as in art, in politics and intellectual thought.

What You Will Get...

Monica L. Miller

Anna L: When Josette repeatedly states, “I’m not Nina Simone”, could that be understood through James Baldwin’s “I’m Not your Negro”? I mean, what she tells the predominantly white audience is: “I’m not *your* Nina Simone. You expect a nice string of tunes that you know by heart and really like, but what you will get is a ticket to blackness.”

Barby: I don’t know... because I don’t sit in a white body, I don’t know what they, the white audience, take away. But is there a place where there is a letting off the hook, at the end?... What is taken further?

Anna A: The show really feels like it comes in two parts, where in the second part, which is a concert, you can sort of avoid listening to the words in the songs. It’s easier not to listen to words in a song than it is when words are spoken... And it feels like... I felt the audience [sighs]: “Okay, now we can relax and just listen to this fine music instead of being trapped in a black woman’s fury...”

Barby: I thought a couple of people next to me relaxed.

Anna A: Yeah! “Just listen to the songs, they’re so good.” That split is so interesting. Because in me, the first time I saw the show, I too felt that relief, because the tension was so... strong.

Josette Bushell-Mingo and Nina Simone are not the same person, even in this performance. Josette does and does not play Nina Simone on stage. They Josette, Nina are and are not the “every woman” evoked by Chaka Khan in her famous song. If there is one word that would describe Nina Simone, the person, *Nina* the performance, and Josette Bushell-Mingo as a performer, it would be dynamic the performance slips and slides between personas, directs their words at some audience members and not at others, changes the pitch and timbre of their voices, the postures of their bodies to create other literacies and send particular messages. Who Josette is at any given point very much determines who she is speaking to and the nature of what she wishes to convey. In our conversation about *Nina*, we kept coming around to the wisdom of another black feminist icon, Toni Morrison, who, Josette reminds us, confronted similar issues of the desire for her to simultaneously be “every woman” and unapologetically black. Josette reminds us that Morrison said, “I can’t be the patient *and* the doctor.”

Whenever I go to the theatre, even when the play is by a black woman playwright, I ask myself, at some point during the performance, who the play was written for. I don’t do this ironically or cynically, but as an exercise in critical analysis, of making sure that I am truly paying attention to the multiplicity of what is happening around me on stage and in the audience. My spectatorship begins in the lobby of the performance space: I scan the room, count the black and brown faces, figure out who the performers see when and if they look out into the audience and can see beyond the stage lights. In my experience of black theatre, both in New York and Stockholm, I see a recent interest in clarity of anti-racist politics and for social justice, a reckoning that is often productively (maddeningly) complicated by the performances themselves and their interactions with their

audiences.

On the one hand, black playwrights and performers are increasingly calling on strident voices, sharp critics of racial injustice, the uncompromising rhetoric of civil rights warriors such as Nina Simone, James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry. Like *I am Not Your Negro* (Raoul Peck's documentary film on James Baldwin that has screened worldwide), all the revivals of Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* (Sweden, South Africa, Washington DC) and *Les Blancs* (London), Josette's *Nina* is evidence of this desire for a particular kind of articulation of difficult and enduring truths. On the other hand, more contemporary playwrights like Jackie Sibblies Drury, author of *Fairview*, which won the Pulitzer prize for drama 2019 in the US; Jeremy O. Harris, author of *Slave Play*, now on Broadway and winner of the Lorraine Hansberry playwriting award; and Jennifer Kidwell and Scott R. Shepherd, authors of *The Underground Railroad Game*, winner of an Obie award, 2016 construct theatrical experiences that directly involve the audience, force their participation, begin in or work their way towards moments of incredible discomfort and tension, sometimes actually but always metaphorically separating black from white in the theatre. They force mixed audiences to think quickly through structural histories, racial politics and the politics of political correctness, community and personal loyalties and act/feel in the moment. These moments, meant to clarify, are often very messy, feel chaotic, like a free fall. At least they do for me, an African-American woman, professor of Africana Studies, married to a white Swedish man, who has two mixed-race children.

Nina opens with the house lights up; a woman is onstage, inviting the audience to a concert. Then, in the latter part of the show the first part of the performance exchanges invitation for confrontation. In eight scenes, each punctuated by a song, the woman on stage sometimes Josette, sometimes Nina reveals that the hoped-for revolution has not come: Nina's songs have not changed the world. Instead, as their liberatory sentiment and melancholy lament are unresolved, these songs become nostalgic and explanatory of the grotesqueness of the racial violence of our contemporary moment. Also exchanged are the names of our freedom fighters for those of our most recent dead. In the show, Josette meditates on the deaths of Laquan Macdonald, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Stephen Lawrence, Mzee Mohammed, Rashan Charles. She stamps her foot sixteen times on the floor, the number of bullets that police shot at Laquan Macdonald. The relationship of black art to black death is probed. Questions of responsibility and forgiveness follow.

Forgive? Carry on and forgive?

Nina. Nina didn't forgive anyone. Nina took music and built her own church. She resurrected our Gods, she praised our ancestors, she reaffirmed our relationship with each other as blacks, with Africa, history, homeland, our bodies...

In the final scene of the first half of the performance, Josette directly confronts the audience, walking them through a horrific thought experiment on racial violence and what might or might not prevent, stave off, revolve this cycle into its next phase.

Bear with me, just as an idea. I take a gun and walk into a supermarket. No, let's be more specific: I have a gun and I am in this theatre.

And it is important to know that I do not care if I live or die. When you know all of this again you don't care if you live or die. Bring up the light.

So, you would be free, you would be free... because you look like me. You'd be free... But everyone else in this room I would kill. Because you kill us in the street. You hang us from the trees again and film it...

So I have a gun. I need your help here. What are you going to say to stop me from using this gun?

The “you” here is multiple: black, brown “you would be free”; white, “you kill us”; every woman “What are you going to say to stop me from using this gun?” Later in the scene, after Josette considers what she would say to her husband, who is white “by the way”, and her sons if she were actually in this situation, gun in hand, police outside, centuries of rage and love in her eyes and her heart, she asks, “Where is the structure for this Nina? Where is the cleanliness, the tone, the nuance, the implication, the dynamics?” She asks, “What are you going to say to stop me from using this gun?” She waits for an answer, from both the audience and Nina. At this moment in the performance, anything can happen. The evening we were all in the theatre someone shouted: “Love!” “Forgiveness!” Every night, Josette waits; there is a different answer every time. She must react in the moment, figure out what to say next. Who to address. How to move on. Then, part two of the performance begins, a concert of Nina Simone songs. She begins with *Mississippi Goddam*, and ends with *I Wish I Knew How it Would Feel to be Free*.

Monica:... So, I was thinking about that moment... before the concert begins, right? What do you do with that rage? It's a combination of your rage, put into the room for a diverse group of people to handle... I know that you must have been thinking about that famous moment that Nina Simone herself talks about, right? After the bombing of the Birmingham church, when she was going to take a gun, and then her husband said the one good thing that he ever said to her...

Josette: Was?

Monica: Was... You have to put that rage in your music... your weapon is music. So, I'm assuming that was the turn, right?

Josette: Yeah, exactly...

Monica: I was concerned about having the white audience's bias relax into the space at the same time that I feel that you are coming up like a phoenix. And in that song, *Mississippi Goddam*, you are Josette, right? And you, Josette, as Nina, are then in this moment in a kind of incredible power. And I think those two things are in a beautiful tension. You can let the white audience go. Because it's actually not about them at that point, it's about you. And I was so happy in that moment.

Josette: That's it.

Monica: It is about you and this idea of freedom and liberation. I actually didn't care, I worried about leaving people relieved, ready to go home. On the other hand, I was grateful that we got to this other place.

Barby: I think definitely both things happened.

This other place. Both things happened. Where did we go and how did we get there? For me, the importance of *Nina* is not the confrontation of the audience, but I now understand that we had to go there first. When Josette was writing *Nina*, I had a chance to see her develop this moment in rehearsal, the scene where she talks about the gun. Now that I think back on it, my reaction concern about how it would play in Sweden (versus the US, which would be differently volatile), her ability to handle the response, both in the moment and then again in reviews, my worry for her actual and metaphorical safety, anxiety about what would happen next was exactly what she wanted. She wanted to shake me, take all of us to another place.

Where you land does, likely, depend on your positionality, your proximity to the rage, despair, and ecstatic joy that blackness contains. When “Josette” says “Take it away!” and the music for *Mississippi Goddam* starts, that up-tempo, show-tune beat is a kind of balm even as the lyrics (“Picket lines/ Police shots!”) keep us in this terrible moment; the combination throws us, black and white, into “the break”. This break is an existential condition, the condition of blackness, full of terror and beauty.⁹ As the song progresses, Josette plumbs the interstices between herself and Nina, black and white, life and death, the beautiful and the ugly, transforming the energy in the room. She becomes all powerful, a conduit, totally in command of the band, the audience, her art, herself. While some experience this as relief, others experience it as *fire*. The necessary pivot between immolation and rebirth phoenixing. We are witnessing *Nina A Story about Me and Nina Simone*, the forging of a black woman’s art.

Our Readiness to Be Present

Barby Asante

Josette: And that’s the only thing I’m interested in, what’s going to change.

Barby: When you say change, what are you talking about?

Josette: Personal transformation, the community transformation, transformation within Black people. It works in two ways, which is what you said yesterday Monica, wasn’t it? It becomes interesting when someone starts to engage with you, you know? Because that takes huge courage.

It is Black History Month here in London as I sit in my studio reflecting on the conversation on that cold Stockholm afternoon back in December 2017.

Black History Month is my month off! I do not work with any white institution (apart from my regular teaching gigs) to fulfil their yearly “Black” programming quota! I think about this because my first encounters with Josette were in London back in the early 2000s, when she worked with a team of volunteers to bring about a change in the cultural landscape of the United Kingdom. Through her work and passion for change she birthed her *PUSH* project, with *PUSH 01* at the Young Vic Theatre. If I remember rightly, *PUSH 01* was in the light late summer, not the darkness of Black History Month October!

When I met Josette, I was a young visual and performing artist working with ideas that de-centred my body as

the one that was being looked at in the performative engagement, to inviting others to take up that position, to be the ones with the gaze turned onto them. Being part of *PUSH 01*, a Black arts platform that took up space in a major theatre space in London was truly inspiring and began to shape my thinking about how I present my work and in which spaces. It was being part of *PUSH 01* and other similar platforms that gave me the confidence to take up creative space, experiment with form, to bring challenging experiences to audiences. All this guided and supported by people such as Josette. People who wanted a change. A change that was not just about us being seen, but one that was structural and transformative. It was joy, it was liberation, it was presence, it was healing.

Although this was some time ago, there are significant resonances with today. In the UK back in the early 2000s, we were in the midst of a financial boom. Multiculturalism was being funded, giving us Black and brown artists and cultural producers the possibility to develop and hone our craft. Our bodies as performers and our practices of writing, creating, visualising became more prominent in arts spaces, especially in London and other UK cities. After the financial crash in 2008, many Black-led arts organisations, theatre companies, youth arts projects and more took a serious hit, meaning that now in October 2019, Black History Month, many of those that were around in the early 2000s and before no longer exist, and those that survive have been through some extremely lean times. The fallout of deep funding cuts, austerity measures and a more inward-looking nationalistic nostalgia for a time when Empire was supreme and the power and sovereignty of the United Kingdom was firmly intact, means that once again “others” are scapegoated for the moral and financial troubles of the country and racism is rearing its ugly head again.

Amidst this revealing of the truth of our presence in the UK, the cultural sector attempts to deal with these stark realities through diversity initiatives that attempt to veil their own deep complicity in these social situations. How do we self-determine in a space that wishes to lock our histories into months and turn our creative work into tokenistic gestures that hide deep systemic injustices within many cultural institutions?

It's been years since I had seen Josette. So when I saw her on that December day in 2017, just thinking about her, knowing her significance for my own creative growth, I was excited to see her perform again after all this time. The show opens in a blaze of excitement and music, the lights go up and Josette bursts onto the stage in a blaze of sound and movement, wearing a fabulous 1970s style outfit and afro wig...

This is how it was Harlem 1969... Nina Simone is on her way. It was the day of power, of revolution. It was the day when the promise would come through. It was a time of a better life. It was a time for the people. This is the day it happens. This is the day when change is gone come. This was it. The streets were packed. Full. Thousands of people. The energy...! People were laughing, they were shouting, they were singing. Passing food amongst each other. It was 38 degrees in the shade. It was so hot they were frying chicken on the street. It was so hot. Like no other day on earth. The shine of hair oil, hundreds of afro combs. Hundreds, thousands, a sea of shapes, color and hands clapping. (clapping different clapping rhythm). And they were ready, a bit like you I suppose.

We are ready! And because we are ready, we are quickly thrown into a world that is both personal and political. We experience time travel and our call to remember as the portal opens. What we are invited into is as much a ritual as it is a performance. I am mesmerised. I am joyful. I am angry. I am filled with grief. I am fearful. I am perplexed. And by the end of the performance I am liberated. I am elated. My body is full and I am ready to face the world again!

Josette's presence, Nina, the songs, the set, the space, the energy was all resonating within me as I tried to get

some rest back in the hotel before our meeting to discuss the work the next day. Before going to sleep, I made a note: "What do these dramatic choices make possible? PRESENCE."

PRESENCE... The presence I am talking about here is very different to that which moments such as Black History Month afford to us. Just as Josette gave us *PUSH 01* as a way to see ourselves and our work differently, so too did Linda Bellos the former leader of Lambeth Council in London and chief lobbyist for Black History Month in the early 1990s. She used her position in local government to advocate for Black History Month as a way to PRESENCE Black people and our contributions to the story of the United Kingdom. But these forms of presencing soon gets co-opted to re-assert our marginality, just like legislation that supposedly legitimises our presence. When Josette arrived on the stage that evening in Stockholm something different was offered.

I know through my connection with her that she is acutely aware of the politics that surround her position on that stage. To make us ready she opens the show by taking us with her to the Harlem Cultural Festival in 1969, when Nina Simone played a free concert in Mount Morris Park. This concert was one of many over a three-week period that saw Black people in all their glorious presence. Black, proud and unapologetic, decades before Afro Punk. Josette takes us to this place with her words, her renditions of Nina's songs and the archival footage that documented the crowds of beautiful Black people in the park that historic day. They are walking, dancing, waiting and watching as Nina Simone delivers this legendary concert. Josette's enthusiastic call that; "this is the day that change is gonna come", is a call to power, presencing the power we all have to effect a change. She transports us through a portal of space and time to that day in Harlem where the spirit is one of optimism and Black joy, setting out her intention that this will be a work of personal transformation, community transformation, transformation within Black people. We are in the place she wants us to be. A little nostalgic for something we never experienced, but perhaps desired to be part of.

The audience in Stockholm that night was much the same, if not whiter than I was used to seeing in London. They felt full of excitement for the nostalgia of Nina Simone, but unnervingly distant from any Black experience. Acutely aware of her audience, Josette's presence brings to the stage all the experience and training she gained from treading the boards of stages of where white bodies and critique dominate.

Quickly she cuts through the Black joy, a joy we know many white folks enjoy, to say out loud the names of Black men and women killed in police custody and racist murders. In doing this she acknowledges the practices of "saying their names". Drawing a breath from the rituals of activists groups such as Black Lives Matter, Sisters Uncut and Justice for Grenfell, who invoke the names of the dead as a way of giving presence to those souls that lost their lives to state, oppressive and systemic violence to presence and conspiring with as in, in solidarity with or aligned with, also in breathing with or being with the traditions of African and indigenous peoples, calling our ancestors to be with us, to witness us to guide us. And to do this Josette doesn't just break the fourth wall, she smashes it, presenting the audience with both her own and Nina's anger, the anger that still lives in Nina's music and the archive footage we have of her performances. To make sense and I use *sense* here to mean to literally "make" sense, to make sense palatable Josette takes the risky path of polarising the audience into those who are Black and those who are white, viscerally introducing the audience to the differences in our lives and experience. Her anger is so powerfully destructive, her call to violence echoing that of the native described by Frantz Fanon in his essay "Concerning Violence".¹⁰ Josette presents to us a living anger. A RAGE so palatable in the theatre, that you could feel the fearful energy physically as a cold and thick fog as rising around us all, taking away our ability to breathe, the white folks in the theatre smelling their own imminent death and us or maybe me or we, fearing the brutality in which this Black woman, our sister will be killed, maimed or demonised for even attempting to play with this theatrical tactic of unapologetic presence. And as this happens, we feel it and we

wait...

We wait to see what happens as a horrifically violent and fearful silence takes over the theatre.

Unexpectedly and slowly the music starts again and soon the fear of the last minutes is forgotten and we are in a concert of Nina Simone songs performed by Josette. And for a moment I/we/us the Black folx in the theatre, feel that maybe, perhaps... I mean has she really... Has she let them off the hook?

And as Josette sings the closing concert to the audience, but really to herself and those of us who need the healing, the release from our anger, Josette reminds us that this is not about them, as she is mounted by the spirit of Nina like the devotee of a certain Orisha at a Tambour is embodied with the movements of that Orisha as it enters the body of its devotee as the music of tambour embraces them. Her bodily presence is hers, but is inhabited by the movements of Nina, Josette's voice does not mimic Nina, it is her own. She sings in unapologetic presence, the songs of a woman who has inspired her and given her life in the midst of some very difficult situations. She is singing life into her grief, her anger. Into our grief, our anger. She is singing with joy, celebration and liberation.

No Black History Month or theatre space can contain us. We arrive, we survive and we arrive again.

Footnotes

1. All excerpts in below are from the Belfast version of the script *Nina—A Story About Me and Nina Simone*, written by Bushell-Mingo (2018).
2. Barthes, Roland. *Image, Music, Text*. London: Fontana. 2008.
3. Maya Angelou. *And Still I Rise*. London: Random House. 1978.
4. Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2016.
5. Ahmed, Sara. "A Phenomenology of Whiteness". *Feminist Theory*. Vol. 8. No. 2. 2007. p.165.
6. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. Edited by Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean. New York, NY: Routledge. 1996.
7. hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston, MA: South End Press. 2000.
8. Lorde, Audre. *A Burst of Light*. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books. 1988.
9. Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2003.
10. Fanon, Franz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press. 1961.