

Hunter College

From Primitive to Pristine:

Jazz, The Confines of Respectability, and the Path to Reimagination through Black Feminism

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Before I begin establishing the main argument of this paper, I feel it is necessary to address the language that will be used repeatedly in this work. There has long been discourse and debate around using the term “jazz” to describe the Black music born out of New Orleans that over time has developed into innovative iterations including swing and bebop. Now more than ever, there is a push to stop referring to the aforementioned music as jazz and rather label it Black American Music (BAM). While I completely agree that jazz is and always will be a Black American art form, in this paper I will be referring to it as jazz. There are several reasons for this. This paper does not set out to settle the debate on which term should be used or which one is right. The discussion around jazz versus BAM does connect to my personal thinking and exploration of race and elite identity that is outlined below, but this paper is not centered on the discussion of this language. My sources will largely be in reference to what is generally understood as jazz music and will have that term quoted. This paper also focuses on the people and communities that have made up the jazz ecosystem and all have different opinions on the term. In this work I will be specifically referring to music that fits into the large category of jazz rather than say hip-hop, which is also a form of Black American music but has a completely different cultural capital. Though the argument of this paper very well can apply to music that is not thought of as jazz, I feel that the use of this term will better center myself and my reader. My hope is by using the term jazz, there will be a collective understanding about the culture, music, and tradition I am referring to.

When I tell people today as a young Black woman that I am interested in jazz and listen to it every day, I am met with a special type of curiosity and intrigue. Jazz is elite. Jazz is sophisticated. Jazz is music that adults who are wealthy and white enjoy in the background of

their lives. What would a Black girl like me want with jazz? Of course, this has started to bother me, not only because I know jazz's history as a Black folk music that was associated with the low people of the early 1900s, but because I am actively trying not to center my worth based on what society deems sophisticated.

Interactions like these and my own personal experience as a musician prompted my desire to explore the role of respectability politics within jazz. As coined by Evelyn Higginbotham in her exploration of the Baptist Church and the Black women who were members from 1880-1920, respectability politics or the politics of respectability references a sense of morality and public behavior that garner white respect through middle class ideals. Higginbotham cites the educated elite Black women that served as duty-bound missionaries and teachers of temperance, hard work, and refined manners. These actions of self-respect separated Black people into distinct economic classes, which also often separated the light-skinned elite from the poor dark masses. Colorism, a term defined and established by Alice Walker in her work *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, describes the preferential treatment of people from the same racial group based on their complexion and thus proximity to whiteness. Colorism is a large aspect of respectability politics, as one's proximity to whiteness alone can be a social tool to secure an elite lifestyle. Those that have been given the opportunities, training, and financial strengths receive preferential treatment because of the color of their skin and have great success in building material and generational wealth. When understanding jazz as a musical and artistic phenomenon, it is essential to also distinguish it as cultural practice forever rooted in Black expression. I point this out for several reasons, but most importantly in connection with my argument because the social and political tension within the Black community affects the dynamics with the jazz community. Colorism and respectability, for instance, permeate Black

society as a whole and influence Black people in all sectors, especially within the performing arts.

Though I don't seek to be a professional musician now, my formative years in high school were spent exploring and studying the art form, and today my social connections and community predominantly consist of young musicians. During these adolescent years, I wasn't aware, and able to criticize or question the way that respectability politics and colorism were affecting my experience as a young student and the other students around me. Being a musician and liking jazz became a large part of my identity, but the community that I found myself in was not reflective of me as it was largely male and white. Often, I felt the need to subdue aspects of my personality to create and maintain relationships with the young men I was constantly surrounded by. They seemed so confident, so sure that the music we were all interested in was theirs to dissect, analyze, and regurgitate without hesitation. When I finally had time away from the jazz community I had come of age in and began to explore Black Feminism, I knew there was a larger issue at hand.

I once struggled to see myself in a music that in reality is tied to my lived experience and that of my ancestors. In my musical education I was often surrounded by young white boys who seemed to have all the resources I didn't and a confidence and understanding of the music both technically and historically that I didn't. There was a sense of entitlement that white men generally do a great job of conveying. Unlike them, their musical idols, whether living or deceased, were Black. I often struggled with watching white boys with little knowledge of Blackness idolize and create a narrative about people they knew nothing about outside of their music. I knew there was more to the artists being celebrated than what the dominant jazz narrative shared about their music. They were complex individuals that had to often diminish

parts of themselves too and present as their greatest, most elite selves to be given opportunities. This reckoning with elitism, whiteness, and entitlement slowly turned into questions about how jazz went from a Black low-class community-centric music to a discipline that was favored enough to be taught and performed at institutions like Juilliard and Carnegie Hall.

These questions and experiences have led me to this work and exploration. The contemporary cultural understanding of jazz as an elite and sophisticated music is tied to the continued rise of colorism and the influence of the politics of respectability during the Harlem Renaissance. By examining the sentiment towards jazz and general pressure for Black artists to use their works as propaganda for racial uplift, we can see how jazz was molded into a respectable art form, thus leaving out authentic depictions of Black life and especially ostracizing Black women in the process.

I will begin by establishing the general background of the Harlem Renaissance and the “Negro Problem” in America and focus on how a general emphasis on respectability politics in society puts immense pressure on all Black people. The blatant colorism of the period and desire to establish a Black elite that conformed to western ideas of success seriously determined where and how jazz was played. W.E.B. Du Bois’ essay “Criteria of Negro Art” will be especially important in his section to emphasize the use of art for racial uplift and as propaganda. Once the general politics of the period is presented, I will shift towards the sentiment concerning jazz music during the early Harlem Renaissance. This largely negative outlook is important to understand as it is so opposite to the cultural understanding of jazz as an elite and sophisticated music contemporarily. I will reference works from the period, especially music journal publications and newspapers, that reference jazz as low music in comparison to western classical idioms and associate the music with moral decay and savagery. Then I will focus on three

examples of artists/groups--Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra--and how their artistry is impacted by the politics of respectability. In the last section, as a remedy to the problems highlighted throughout the rest of the essay, I will present ideas in varying works of Black Feminist writing that will introduce ways to question the complexities that are overlooked by the dominant narrative concerning respectability in jazz. These ideas will not be answers to the problem, but rather offer ways to re-imagine the restrictions currently facing Black artists because of the legacy of respectability politics. It will also offer tools to help critically think about artists from the past as complex subjects. Specifically, when looking at the absence of Black women in jazz and the roles they are forced into by introducing works that center Black women as artists and essential to creativity. I plan to specifically pull from the work of the Combahee River Collective Statement and Audre Lorde. This paper will examine the effects of respectability on artists historically and contemporarily and argue that by using radical Black Feminist ideas we can critically think about and deconstruct the dominant jazz narrative that praises use of respectability politics and has little regard for the original legacy and complex identity of musicians. Black Feminist thinking will give musicians, writers, and those that engage with jazz the tools and background to consider complex individuals as whole people, rather than just musicians. Using an intersectional approach in critiquing respectability politics in general, but especially in jazz, will help decenter dominating misogynistic and colorist values.

The Harlem Renaissance and Influence of W.E.B Du Bois

The Harlem Renaissance is not the idealized utopia of Black life and Black art the dominant jazz discourse subscribes to. Within Harlem, colorism and the regulations of respectability politics dominated the lives of residents. If you weren't apart of the elite who owned brownstones, you most likely were working for them. Though Harlem was predominantly

Black, the color of one's skin often dictated success and upward mobility. On top of this, "The Negro Problem" is constantly in the background and informing the decision making of Black thinkers and leaders like W.E.B Du Bois. The growing number of the Black elite and their movement for racial uplift motivates morality, community engagement, and all aspect of everyday life for the neighborhood. In this paper, I will specifically examine the work and scholarship of W.E.B Du Bois. His influence is crucial here, especially in understanding the concept of respectability politics and how they're idealized practice would serve to benefit Black people in all sectors.

Du Bois coined the term "the Talented Tenth" in 1903 to label the elite, intelligent, and promising ten percent of the Black population that would lift the rest of the race out of poverty and second-class citizenship. For Du Bois and many other Black leaders at the time, the belief that dominated society was "the negro race will be saved by its exceptional men" ("Talented Tenth" 1). Arguably, this theory's success could be seen through the lifestyles of Harlem's Black elite. Black folk that studied at elite academic institutions, attended church, were well read, and enjoyed European classical music made nice lives for themselves in Harlem.

The goal of making a respectable group of Black Americans was to communicate civilized behavior and thus convince white America that Black people were more than capable and qualified to be equals. Du Bois emphasizes several values that are needed to achieve racial uplift, one being academic pursuits at the best colleges in the country. He also focuses on the importance of family and "the training of one's home, of one's daily companions, of one's social class" ("Talented Tenth" 15). Success for the race is dependent not only on an individual's motivation to better themselves, but on the whole community's training and dedication to morality and uplift. The social structure that Du Bois theorized in 1903 had time to manifest in

cities across the country and especially in Harlem. Du Bois' influence not only affected movements toward social justice, but also extended into Black art and culture.

Art and its Usefulness: Does Jazz Count?

Artistic, creative, and musical practices were seen as essential elements to the communal effort towards betterment. In this movement for racial uplift, art was not a vehicle for individual expression but a necessary tool as propaganda. The rules that dictated life in these elite social circles had strict definitions of what qualified as art and culture, and what was important to expose Black Americans to. Social concepts like attending university, marriage, and having children were all important to establishing respectability, since these status symbols were important in white society. Thus, the group of elite Black Americans attempting to assimilate held these concepts as essential too, but music and culture are just as much a part of how to establish a respectable personhood.

So how do we see the influence of Du Bois and respectability politics in music? By the early 1920s, jazz had grown steadily in popularity and presence. It was no longer a music that could only be found in the brothels of New Orleans. In 1917, a group of white men known as The Original Dixieland Jass Band recorded what is widely believed to be the first jazz record, and after them, both Black and white artists began to Jazz and its growing reach weren't celebrated. Jazz was a stain on the American consciousness and a musical crime. Black and White Americans were concerned about the effect of jazz on youth, but also on the country.

The Etude was a popular music publication published from 1883-1957 whose audience was made up of music educators across the country. Their August 1924 issue set out to discuss the "The Jazz Problem" and several prominent men in music shared concern on where jazz was leading the moral compass of the country. All the men were white, and their concerns all had to

do with the waste of time playing a music as sloppy as jazz would be. Dr. Frank Damrosch, director of the Institute of Musical Arts, which today we know as the Juilliard School, goes as far to say, “jazz is to real music what the caricature is to the portrait” (Walser 44). Jazz is not art, jazz is not music, and [in] its origins “in the dance rhythms of the negro, it was at least interesting as the self-expression of a primitive race. When jazz was adopted by the ‘highly civilized’ white race, it tended to degenerate...we can only hope that sanity and the love of the beautiful will help to set the world right again.” Damrosch, an influential musical voice and member of the elite constantly interacting with high art, had a clear elitist attitude towards jazz, and this attitude was shared by a large majority of musicians, musical critics, and influential figures in performance. The belief that jazz was a music meant for primitive people wasn’t simplistically a Black versus white narrative. Members of the Black elite whose morality and lives were dictated by the politics of respectability shared in the feeling that Black people engaging with, performing, and enjoying jazz music were low.

Dave Peyton, a pianist and music columnist for the Chicago Defender, felt that jazz held back the possibility of racial progress for his fellow Black Americans, and the commercial success of jazz confined and dictated the musical ability of Black artists, solely associating them with low class primitive expressions. In a 1928 article for the Chicago Defender, Peyton takes a similar stance to Damrosch in his dissatisfaction with Black performers, believing that “if they can handle jazz music, they fall short when a legitimate score is placed before them.” He advises, “if you are now in a jazz band do not give up proper study on your instrument. You may be called upon to render real services to play good music.” A few things are essential to take away from Peyton’s comments. First, those that disapprove of jazz and see it as unartistic aren’t solely white Americans. Second, jazz isn’t just a waste of time, it is a hindrance and barrier to the

success of Black people at large. Jazz and how it is expressed by Black people is too emotionally charged, physical, and unrefined to gain respect in existing musical idioms. For Peyton, the issue lies within Blackness. At its core his disapproval of jazz is anti-Black, but it is masqueraded and understood as a criticism and encouragement for Black artists to do better, and present art that already has societal values. Jazz and its popularity throughout the Harlem Renaissance would continue to grow and be a force too strong to stop, despite some believing that it would only be a fad. The question became, “will [jazz] wither or be trained and turned to artistic uses?” (The Appeal of Jazz)

Duke Ellington: An American Artist

Duke Ellington’s image was highly curated, and contemporarily he is understood as jazz royalty and one of the most sophisticated composers of the 20th century. He is a prime example of the efforts to make jazz artistic. Ellington’s manager, Irving Mills, took control of his image and worked to separate Ellington from other Black jazz musicians and composers. Ellington’s music was expectational, and Mills knew the financial value of connecting himself to Ellington, but steps to establish him as a respectable musician were essential to creating a greater audience. Harvey Cohen reflects on the marketing of Duke Ellington by Mills in his article “The Marketing of Duke Ellington: Setting the Strategy for an African American Maestro.” For Cohen, the marketing techniques used by Mills to refine Ellington’s image into that of a respectable American genius are something to marvel. Mills was able to remove Ellington from the dominant stereotypes of Black performers as minstrels and savages, and jazz as jungle music. Though this is true, the respectable identity that Ellington and his band assumed is equally as limiting as the stereotypes the dominated American entertainment. Ellington was now an artist, but one that had to create and perform carefully, because one misstep in his behavior would

affect his band and other musicians. Adhering to the politics of respectability worked for Ellington in ways that it never would for other artists. Ellington was a light skinned Black man whose family already had access to wealth. The core ideals and values Du Bois and the Black elite held as pillars of their community were taught to Ellington at a young age as he grew up in Washington, D.C. Ellington was already the perfect artist to demonstrate respectability and represent the goal of racial uplift through his music. Mills saw this opportunity and strategically marketed his client to continue to uphold those values to great financial success.

It was essential to send a “powerful nonverbal message” (Cohen 295) about the Black musicians in Ellington’s band. The way they dressed, the way they played, and most importantly the class they represented “shielded them from being associated with the degrading...images of Jim Crow segregation” (Cohen 296), but this did not end the problems that would still face other Black musicians. Ellington was the exception, not the rule when it came to viewing Black artists. The issue of centering Black success and communal uplift around respectability politics, especially when it comes to high profile artists, is respectability politics hyperfocus on the individual. Ellington and his bandmates proved their humanity and value through adhering to societal standards of excellence, but this does not address the racism at the structural level that continues to oppress other Black Americans and limits their ability to genuinely express their concerns about the treatment of Black Americans. In the face of violence and discrimination, Black artists are asked to present at their highest level, and just maybe will they be accepted.

Though this lifestyle and marketing technique did work to establish Ellington as Harlem’s Aristocrat of Jazz, it pushed Ellington more to create serious and respectable art, and that meant works mirroring the long form pieces European classical artists are known for. Cohen explores the premiere of “*Black, Brown and Beige* [which] represented the highest profile

example of Ellington's lifelong efforts to advance the politics of race through music, lifestyle and image, but rarely words" (Cohen 1). Cohen opens his article with a telling quote from journalist Richard O. Boyer clearly highlighting Ellington's awareness

that it is good business to conceal...his interest in American Negro history. He doubts if it adds to his popularity...to have it known that in books he has read about Negro slave revolts he has heavily underlined paragraphs about the exploits of Nat Turner...new acquaintances are always surprised when they learn that Duke had written poetry in which he advances the thesis that the rhythm of jazz has been beaten into the Negro race by three centuries of oppression...Duke doesn't like to show people his poetry. 'You can say anything on the trombone, but you gotta be careful with words' he explains.

Cohen seems to miss the point of how problematic this revelation is for Ellington and how the curated marketing and image of Ellington that he admires in the article is diminishing the artist's ability to be himself. This text celebrates Ellington as an artist who only worked through music to create social change, not words. He wasn't "Preaching, complaining, or standing on a soapbox" (Cohen 3). Ellington was challenging stereotypes through his works, especially ones like *Black, Brown, and Beige*. But symbolic achievements like performing a long form suite at Carnegie Hall did not uplift Black artists, they only continued to legitimize jazz when it was presented in a highly curated and respectable way.

Billie Holiday: Being Her Own Lady

Billie Holiday's life was not at all confined to the morality and regulation of respectability. Holiday lived on her terms, and this caused a mixed public opinion of her. Holiday's lifestyle alienated her from Black listeners who felt she wasn't representing her race well. Many of her harshest critics were Black people appalled with her behavior. She was a low

junkie whose music wasn't worth their time. This posed a serious problem during her lifetime when marketing Holiday. Contemporarily, this issues still persists as historians and consumers try to make sense of her complex identity within the confines of the dominant jazz narrative. Holiday could never fit into the regulations that respectability demands. Compared to someone like Ellington, she was set back from the beginning of her life by factors beyond her control. She was a woman, she was poor, and her parents weren't married. Holiday was always an outsider. Black women, generally, were always outsiders when concerning womanhood. To be called a lady and enter the world of legitimate womanhood would be a great honor, one that leading a respectable life would help achieve.

Farah Jasmine Griffin's text *If You Can't be Free, Be a Mystery: in Search of Billie Holiday* explores the complex reality of Holiday's life and choices she made without judgement, and from the point of view of a Black writer and fan that is deeply "fearful of the implications of some of the Holiday myths for other black women and girls" (Griffin xiii). She makes it clear that this work is not a biographical telling of Holiday's life, but rather a contribution to the way that society understands Holiday and the multidimensional life she led. Griffin dedicates an entire chapter to the politics of respectability and their relationship to the singer. Holiday's lifestyle was heavily covered in the press and her management made several attempts to change her public image from one of a junkie to a lady ready to turn her life around through religion. A 1949 *Ebony* cover article with the headline "I Am Cured for Good" was a way to show a different side of Holiday and present her to a Black middle class that disapproved of her lifestyle. *Ebony's* influence in the Black community is essential. Using this magazine as a vehicle for the marketing of a respectable Holiday demonstrates the need for her to be accepted by the Black middle class and have her behavior represent not only herself, but the rest of Black society. The

audience of *Ebony* did not want to investigate her complex identity and did not even care to give her music a chance—they even had “disdain for it. This ambivalence and disdain were born from a desire to distance themselves from the source that gave birth to and nurtured the music” (Griffin 78).

Holiday was hated for the way that her individual actions represented the masses, and though that wasn't fair, it is in essence the core issue with the politics of respectability. This mindset “seeks to reform the behavior of individuals, and as such takes the emphasis away from structural forms of oppression such as racism, sexism, and poverty. The logic is as follows: We will get our rights if we prove we deserve them. Positive images of us will ensure a better ground on which to fight for our rights” (Griffin 73). The portrayal of her in the *Ebony* article is a clear demonstration of this knowledge. Holiday's music and identity as an artist aren't the focus, rather she is marketed as a woman that the audience of Black middle-class wives could identify with. She mentions her new \$30,000 dollar Cadillac, a new piece of land in New Jersey, a new wardrobe that would help her play the part of a lady, and the desire for a quiet home life. Griffin highlights this tactic and reveals it as a vehicle to push the perfectly respectable narratives of “religion, consumerism and private property, the epitome of the American dream” (Griffin 80).

This ideal Holiday, the one she was often pressured to play, was a trap, but one that she evaded. Some would argue that her life was a tragedy and that if she had adhered to the respectable lady-like identity she could have lived longer, had greater success, and had a better standard of living. I would argue the opposite. This very pressure to be something she was not often accelerated moments in her life that added to her negative image. And the racism, harassment and structural issues that would never disappear, even with reformed behavior, took the greatest toll. Contemporarily, they still take a toll on Holiday and her legacy. Griffin's book

is an ode to Holiday and her complex identity historically and at this very moment. With time, it would be easy to forget the realities of her life and just write of her lifestyle as something to pity or to censor. Neither of those options honor her humanity and the complexity of her life or help us to engage with her and question the systems that made her life as layered as it was. What I am stressing here is the act of choice and how continuing to view Holiday through the confines of respectability and the few tellings of her life that are a part of the dominant jazz narrative, which sensationalize her choice or completely rewrite it, will continue to uphold respectability.

Jazz at Lincoln Center: Respectability in the 21st Century

Jazz at Lincoln Center began as a series of “Classical Jazz Concerts” in the mid 1980s, and after its success, JALC became a department of Lincoln Center. Before even examining its mission, philosophy, or leadership, the influence of respectability is apparent at its inception. After decades of jazz musicians navigating respectability, some with success, and others not so much, there is still no freedom through adherence. To present a jazz concert series at Lincoln Center, it had to be prefixed with classical to establish a legitimacy and respectable tone that the word jazz alone still did not have despite decades of work.

Wynton Marsalis, famed trumpet player, composer, and educator, has led Jazz at Lincoln Center since its beginnings in the late 80s. Marsalis has been instrumental to the organization's function and its determination to establish jazz as a Great American art form of the highest intellect and sophistication. The mission of Jazz at Lincoln Center and its marketing centers jazz as “a metaphor for Democracy. Because jazz is improvisational, it celebrates personal freedom and encourages individual expression” (Mission Statement). Despite JALC’s mission stating it celebrates personal freedom, the organization and its leader represent a contemporary manifestation of the power of respectability and tying jazz to Americanness.

Throughout his career, Marsalis has represented a particular sophistication as an artist. He is not just a jazz trumpet player, but also a talented classical musician. Generally, his direction of JALC skews to the traditionalist and conservative side of jazz. In a 1988 piece for the *New York Times* titled “What Jazz Is - and Isn't”, Marsalis grapples with public hesitancy towards purism, “which is considered a form of heroism [in other fields]- the good guy who won’t sell out- but in jazz that purism is incorrectly perceived as stagnation and the inability to change...the major obstacle facing this generation of musicians is finding out what makes something jazz” (What Jazz Is). Purism here is not in reference to the brothels or low establishments that jazz came to life inside. It is in reference to the musicians from that time including King Oliver, Buddy Bolden, and Jelly Roll Morton, but only their musical ability and intelligence not their lifestyles. It is difficult to completely erase those histories of vice to fit the JALC narrative, but not impossible. The musical intellect of these artists makes up for their decorum, but in their footsteps would come equally intelligent and more respectable artists, like Ellington, who fit the JALC standard of musician. There is nothing wrong with valuing and teaching what is known as trad jazz, or rightfully giving Duke Ellington his flowers. My concern comes from the idea that approaching success through respectability like Ellington is the only way. Artists who are openly political, give into vices, and live on the margins of society can only be great through their music, and are alienated because of their life choices. This also applies to musical evolution that leaves behind traditional jazz language and ideas for approaches that are more contemporary in their use of electric sounds, back beats, and God forbid, rappers.

Marsalis in recent years has come under fire for his opinions on hip-hop as modern-day minstrelsy, saying “My words are not that powerful...I started saying in 1985 I don’t think we should have a music talking about [n-words] and bitches and hoes. It had no impact. I’ve said it.

I've repeated it. I still repeat it. To me that's more damaging than a statue of Robert E. Lee."

Despite Marsalis saying that his words hold little power, that couldn't be farther from the truth.

His article from the *New York Times*, mentioned above, gave him a large platform to discuss what he feels is and isn't jazz, a bold and often subjective point of view that many turn to him for wisdom on. Marsalis' influence and voice were so powerful that he was a leading force for the creation of the Juilliard Jazz Department, which he is the current director of. How far jazz has come in respectability to finally have a place in "one of the world's most prominent institutions for classical music education" (Ratliff) whose original director believed jazz as a caricature of real music.

Moving Forward: Creating an Alternative

I am not proposing a set of answers to the overarching problem of respectability and its influence in jazz music, but rather suggesting that those who are interested in Black people, Black music, and Black expression take time to question and investigate the narratives we have been consuming for decades. Griffin suggests,

If those of us who write about Black people insist on ridding ourselves of the oppressive politics of respectability, we must create a viable alternative—an alternative that would have us not rush to the defense of Lady Day by proving what a lady the 'real' Billie Holiday was. Instead, we need an alternative that is aware of the workings of history and power that have defined us for the world, and to some degree ourselves...Our analyses need always be accompanied by a historically informed structural critique of the very things that called a politics of respectability into being (Griffin 93-94).

The alternative that Griffin is alluding to is demonstrated by her throughout her exploration of Holiday in *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery*. To begin creating this alternative, I argue that

centering an intersectional would take it a step further to say that not just writers interested in Black experiences, but musicians, artists, and creatives that engage with Black art forms need to consider an alternative. Upholding respectability does not serve Black artists. It does not offer the validity that it was created to, and it only pushes us farther away from understanding the complex and real-life experiences of those that came before us. There is a serious issue with continuing to validate and uplift artists through notions of respectability, and I believe the clear way to begin creating the alternative Griffin suggests is through a Black Feminist lens.

Griffin's work is a prime example of using a Black Feminist mindset and understanding to analyze a complex individual with grace and considering the structural forces that played into Holiday's life. Using A Black Feminist centered critique is the most logical way to approach this alternative. Black women have long been the most marginalized in our society. With this in mind, we can read many great Black Feminist thinkers and see their inherent belief in and need for intersectionality. Though there is not a set list of rules for Black Feminists, there are documents that are foundational to its principles, one of which is the "Combahee River Collective Statement." This text presents essential beliefs and commitments that Black Feminists live their life in accordance with. In this statement there is an understanding of the exclusion that Black women typically face and how solidarity across gender as well as race is important to creating a communal effort towards liberation. The "Combahee River Collective Statement" emphasizes the importance of lived experiences and the disillusionment its creators had with other mainstream liberation movements, but importantly it stresses their active commitment "to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our

lives” (Statement 1). An understanding of the way oppressive systems function in tandem is essential to building an alternative way to understand figures like Holiday and Ellington. Another thing that is essential to the collective and the critique of respectability politics is solidarity. It is true that women in jazz, especially Black women, are subject to harsher criticism and judgment, but Black men are still forced to adhere to respectability politics even if it has the potential to benefit them more. Creating solidarity across gender and racial lines is necessary to challenge and begin rethinking the value systems that are rooted in respectability.

Audre Lorde’s essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” is particularly useful in reading respectability politics and demonstrating its failures. Lorde stresses the value of difference in liberation struggles and how “difference must be not merely tolerated but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic” (Master’s Tools 111). Respectability has no room for tolerance. Those who object to the notion of being respectable are different in the worst way possible, they are undignified and not deserving of respect. Lorde’s perspective offers a considerate approach to difference. What distinguishes people from each other is not something to hide or transcend, but rather is what makes a community stronger. Lorde makes two important distinctions; difference is not to be rid of or ignored as if it doesn’t exist. In her understanding, difference is a personal power that contributes to a collective. The politics of respectability also insist on the individual and their choices, but rather than embracing an individual’s difference it asks them to sacrifice their individuality to empower a group. Lorde argues oppositely that the aspects of difference that the master’s tools suggest one ignore and devalue are exactly the traits needed to fight for liberation.

The understanding that the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house directly criticizes the use of respectability politics to advance Black society. The master’s tools “may

allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (Master’s Tools 112). In relation to the use of respectability politics in jazz, the positioning of Black artists like Ellington as American geniuses did grant them access to musical and creative spaces that were historically barred to Black people. The insistence that jazz is intellectual through Western musical standards did help to create Jazz at Lincoln Center, but neither of these notions stop or address the structural racism that created the problem in the first place. Though there are momentary benefits to accessing a seat at the table, little work is done to question and dismantle what already exists. Once there is a crossover there is constant need to defend and support the argument that jazz has value, which means maintaining a respectable facade.

Lorde's piece “Poetry is not a Luxury” is particularly important here as well. I understand jazz as a type of poetry, a creative expression that directly correlates to her argument in this essay. Jazz, like poetry, does not have to be defined by a “sterile word that too often the white fathers distorted the word to mean” (Poetry 37). Jazz does not have to adhere to the politics of respectability and contemporarily be understood as an elitist art. Jazz can be defined and created through an individual like Holiday, who is uninterested in the confines of respectability, because for her jazz is central to personal expression. As Lorde argues about poetry, jazz “is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our own existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change. [It] is the way to help give name to the nameless so it can be thought... carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives” (Poetry 37). The lived experiences jazz musicians share through their performance do not have to be limited to what is prescribed through western art forms and a legacy of respectability in the music. If we consider Lorde's argument, we can recenter our minds and understand that jazz

should allow everyone regardless of their proximity to whiteness and respectability to present their art. Musical expression should not solely be for those who can appear in a palatable way.

If we simply consider the few examples I have pointed out through the work of the Combahee River Collective and Audre Lorde, we can begin to construct the alternative Griffin urges us to establish. By centering these mindsets that accept difference, insist on solidarity, and honor the presentation of artistic creation that centers lived experience, we can begin to understand complex figures in jazz in relation to the complex structural forms of oppression that insist on their adherence to the politics of respectability. The introduction of a Black Feminist lens when consuming jazz music, history, and culture will offer a new perspective that rarely is central to the dominant jazz narrative today.

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