

NINA SIMONE WAS VERY BLACK

In the song “Pirate Jenny,” originally from 1928’s *The Threepenny Opera*, a maid named Jenny, who works at a cheap hotel in London, plays out a fantasy in which she gets revenge on the townspeople who have treated her so poorly. A pirate ship—with fifty cannons, eight black sails, and a skull on its masthead—rolls into the harbor and fires on the city, destroying every building except the hotel. The pirates walk ashore, into the ruins of the city, and put all of the townspeople in chains. Upon presenting all of the chained townspeople to Jenny, she orders the pirates to kill them, before sailing away with the pirates to new land.

I first heard “Pirate Jenny” sung by Nina Simone when I was twelve years old. The record, from 1964’s *Nina Simone in Concert*, spun in the living room of my childhood home while I played on the floor. In Nina’s version, Jenny works at a flophouse in South Carolina. She watches the pirate ship grow closer, larger, out of her window. For years, this was the only version I knew. In the world Nina Simone builds around the song, the already harrowing tale takes on a new, more terrifying life. In hearing it for the first time, with the active imagination that comes with childhood, I could see the black ship through the walls. I could hear the chains locked around the arms and legs of the townspeople. I could hear their cries for mercy before death. I could see Jenny, standing tall on the black ship as it drifted away, sails raised high.

I can only imagine that I still find Simone’s version of the song to be so jarring because Nina Simone knew well that

black people have a different relationship with boats, with chains, with the South, with freedom and the haunting that comes with not having it. "Pirate Jenny" was my introduction to Nina Simone, and it has informed how I have chased after her work ever since. Nina Simone opens her mouth and an entire history is built before us, where there is nowhere for anyone to hide from the truth as she has lived it. I view her now much like I did as a child, when I picked up the record cover to see the woman behind the voice. Nina Simone, of dark skin and a nose much like my own, never afraid.

I have been thinking a lot lately about how black people have to hold on to our stories, or tell them for ourselves. I have been thinking about how I learned to write, to tell the stories I have, largely at the feet of black women who then became ghosts—ghosts by death, or ghosts by erasure of their living contributions, and sometimes both. I think of Nina Simone's legacy, and I see the legacy of so many black women I know, who have had their work reduced by all of the hands that are not their own. Today, movements are stolen and repackaged with faces America finds more palatable. Hashtags and viral memes are created by black girls and women who do not profit from their enduring popularity: Peaches Monroe, the originator of "on fleek," and April Reign, who created #OscarsSoWhite, have had to fight for the minimal credit they've received. Meanwhile, the "Damn Daniel" kid ends up on Ellen after a week. I have always held the legacy of Nina Simone close, because I know how easily it could be taken from me and served back to America as something more pleasing.

It is easy to be black and non-confrontational if nothing is on fire, and so it has never been easy to be black and non-confrontational. The silence may reward you briefly,

but it always comes at the risk of something greater: your safety, your family, how the world sets its eyes upon you and everyone you love. When you look like Nina Simone looked in the 1960s—dark, with an Afro piled high on your head—the confrontation will find you. It will inform your existence and the way you move through the world. Nina Simone sang songs of protest even when she wasn't singing songs of protest. Every song was a plea to be seen through that which was burning around her. I say "burning," and mean that Nina Simone wrote songs while churches were being blown from their foundations. I mean that I listened to her sing her version of "Baltimore" in a summer when the internet argued about the value of property and the value of a man's spine, the song arriving just in time for a new, burning generation. "Ain't it hard just to live. Just to live."

Zoe Saldana is, in my opinion, a fine actress. The kind of actress who I will not rush out to see, but if I am at a movie and she is in it, I don't feel as though her performance is distracting. When I saw the trailer for *Nina*, the Nina Simone biopic that was released in 2016 before, I shared a feeling of disappointment with many others. It was more jarring for some, myself included, because it seemed, for a time, that this idea had been scrapped. The initial announcement of the film's concept, in 2012, was not well received, and Nina Simone's family did not give the film their blessing. To have the trailer arrive at all seemed to be a small injustice, one that visibly upset the Simone estate. The trailer portrays Simone, of course, as a mess, during a period when her life was at its most out of control, needing to be pulled back from the brink of destruction by a man. This is how it goes for women on screens in America: a loss of control driven by anger, or "complication," followed by a man to help them

regain the control that they have lost. In the trailer, we see Saldana in very obvious makeup used to darken her skin. She has a nose that looks very different from her own, and a kinky Afro wig. This is the Nina Simone that is being presented to America now: clichéd and predictably polished.

I came of age during a time when I was constantly reminded of the darkness of my skin, the width of my nose, the size of my lips. I am similar to Nina Simone in this way. When I chose to take up jazz at 13, driven in part by Nina's influence, my white jazz teacher told me that my lips were "too big to play trumpet." This led to my father marching into his office with record after record of large-lipped black trumpet players, spreading them all out on his desk while I sat in a corner and watched. Louis Armstrong, Freddie Hubbard, Mercer Ellington; my father, born in the era of Nina Simone's most confrontational living, standing over the desk of a white man who tried to tell his son that he didn't belong.

America, so frequently, is excited about the stories of black people but not the black people themselves. Everything is a Martin Luther King, Jr. quote, or a march where no one was beaten or killed. This is why the telling of our own stories has always been important. The idea of black folklore as community is still how we connect to our past, locking in on our heroes and making them larger than life. This is, in many ways, how we make our own films. I tell the story of my father walking into my jazz teacher's office in a place other than here, perhaps on a hot porch at the end of a long summer. In that version, my father storms into the room and pulls out a Miles Davis record. He puts it on, pulls a trumpet from the sky, and plays along with every note. When the record dies down, he places the trumpet on the

teacher's desk, and walks out of the room with me on his shoulders. In any version of the story I tell, he is driven to do loud things, to be the type of black that has to be loud in order to not vanish.

When I see people talk about diversity in film rooms and writing rooms, I often see numbers and percentages, but not often very plain talk about what the repercussions are when no black people are present. Of the core team that created and brought Nina to life, there is only one black person: the film's co-star, David Oyelowo, is one of the executive producers. Nina Simone's blackness—not just her politics rooted in it, but her aesthetic blackness—is not a footnote. The fact that no one in the room was able to point this out serves as this film's undoing before it is even released.

Because Nina Simone unlocked a part of my imagination that I have always returned to, I hoped the story of Nina Simone to be one that was larger than life, because that is what she has always been for me. I wanted to hear folklore, a story of a great black woman surviving violence through more violence, driven by her incredible gifts. Here is the story I hope we tell: Nina Simone's blackness didn't wash off at the end of a day. Nina Simone sang "Sinnerman" for ten minutes in 1965, and the whole earth trembled. Nina Simone played the piano like she was cocking a gun. Nina Simone was dark, and beautiful, and her hair piled high to heaven. Nina Simone survived what she could of the civil rights era, and then got the fuck out. Nina Simone rode away on the troubled ocean, standing on the deck of a black ship, looking back while a whole country burned, swallowing itself.