‘four (single parent) women’: emulating Nina Simone’s storytelling for critical consciousness

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preface

From 2017 to 2018, I was privileged to carry out in-depth biographical interviews with black British women who raised children as single parents for my doctoral project. This project is part of my ongoing work to investigate the experiences of single-parent women in the context of urban inequalities, and also to challenge a continued problematisation of single motherhood among black populations. While collecting this data, I was a single parent with a young son. My motherhood journey was still unfolding, so I had a personal interest in what women with more years of motherhood experience had to say. In policy, media and academic narratives, single black motherhood has been represented as a bleak, troublesome and disempowering experience for women, not to mention the communities they belong to more broadly. This was a message I had internalised. I devised the project to try to understand women’s experiences. Listening to numerous personal accounts of single black mothers over months slowly transformed my personal beliefs about single motherhood—the way I viewed my own situation radically shifted. To me, this indicated the potential of stories to vindicate, to heal and to empower.1

In this exploratory and experimental piece, I attempt to show how much can be learnt when the personal testimonies of less-heard mothers are focused upon. Taking inspiration from the groundbreaking 1966 song ‘Four Women’ by legendary singer-songwriter and civil rights advocate Nina Simone, I have developed four monologues of single-parent women drawn from my qualitative research for analysis and reflection.2

1 See ‘Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: the danger of a single story’, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg [last accessed 24 March 2022].
2 The data used here is from my doctoral project, which analysed the retrospective experiences of black women who raised sons as single parents, and adult men raised by them. The study critically analysed the longstanding notion that unwanted, divergent outcomes—such as educational ‘underperformance’, homelessness and unemployment—are experienced by some young black men partially due to the fact that relatively high numbers are raised by single-parent women. One key ethical concern I was mindful of while carrying out the study was that the experiences being explored in interviews—including becoming a single mother, parenthood, the nature of one’s parent–child relationship and growing up without a resident biological father—were
Miranda Armstrong  Feminist Review 131 27

‘Four Women’ (2006 [1966]), Simone essentially sings four testimonies: each of the record’s four verses are narrated by a different character who speaks frankly about her life in her own words. The accounts articulate difficult histories of black womanhood in America and provide rich insight into black female interiority. Each woman is a survivor; their testimonies recount difficult personal histories, outline tough realities lived and voice their reactions to social conditions, including rage. From a contemporary perspective, ‘Four Women’ might be criticised for re-telling stereotypical tales of black suffering and depicting black people as being defined by their difficulties (see Nkumane, 2016; Okundaye, 2021). However, the song was progressive for its focus on black women’s subjectivity and for airing taboo experiences. Simone believed it articulated realities ‘many people … simply weren’t ready to acknowledge at that time’ (Simone and Cleary, 2003 [1991], p. 117). In an academic analysis of Simone’s catalogue of songs, Jasmine Mena and P. Khalil Saucier (2014, p. 61) single out ‘Four Women’ for detailing ‘the marginalisation experienced and associated with multiple and intersecting statuses’.

This form of creative sharing3 of research findings uses qualitative data generated by my research project. The testimonies are made up of research participants’ own words and are used here with their consent. The personal accounts created through research interviews produced many pages of narrative; the monologues shared here are the result of a distilling and editing process.4 The eponymous monologues are titled with pseudonyms to maintain participants’ anonymity.

I regard this as an important exercise because as a minority among women, mothers and black people, single black mothers’ lived experiences and perspectives are often missing from policy, media and academic accounts. Two path-clearing exceptions that give room to such mothers include The Heart of the Race: Black Women’s Lives in Britain (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, 2018 [1985]) and Caribbean Mothers: Identity and Experience in the UK (Reynolds, 2005).

Nina Simone’s ‘Four Women’ provides an excellent blueprint for ‘speaking back’ to stereotypes and negative assumptions about black women. For me, the song’s key achievement is in humanising a category of women that have been frequently misrepresented and misunderstood in society and culture. The purpose of the monologues here is similar, in documenting women’s own narrations of their private and intimate subjects to discuss with a researcher. Potential participants were made aware of subjects that would be covered in interviews in advance, through the project information sheet and in any preliminary conversations. Interviews were mostly exploratory in nature and participants were able to focus on the subjects important to them, as my questions were kept to a minimum and were responsive to what interviewees shared. This enabled participants to control the direction and shape of the interview, and in so doing, to define their own realities and influence the research agenda. Another large concern was the arguably socially sensitive nature of the research, due to ongoing stereotyping and stigmatisation of single black mothers and young black men raised by them. Without care, there was a risk of inadvertently reinforcing and perpetuating stigma. I was sure to contextualise the experiences of participants in the social conditions and to ratify my hunches and developing interpretations with pre-existing research and theory. In addition, I was constantly reflexive about my positionalities and the ways this might be influencing the research process and took steps to mitigate any resultant bias.

3 I have also produced a free graphic pamphlet on the findings of the broader research project: Miranda Armstrong, 2021, Beyond the Myth: Single Black Mothers and Their Sons, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60b940eef81c50d6a73ceef5/t/60d992980154c117bd50b64/1624871592603/BeyondTheMyth–MirandaArmstrong–Web.pdf [last accessed 10 April 2022].

4 To develop these monologues, I read the interview transcripts repeatedly and selected quotes that spoke most strongly to the themes of the study. These quotes were organised in an orderly way, then lightly edited for clarity and flow. I selected some of the most poignant or socially significant interview narratives to be included here.
circumstances and positionality and in demonstrating that single black mothers’ worldviews and journeys vary. While the socio-historic contexts of the African American women of whom Simone sang and the Black British women I interviewed differ, both populations share experiences of silencing, erasure and representational distortion. The absence of fair and full representation thwarts the development of ‘critical consciousness’. The late groundbreaking scholar and writer bell hooks (2003, pp. 69–71) discussed critical consciousness as necessary for empowerment. For hooks, critical consciousness involved an awareness of the nature of society and its harms, and ways to resist these harms for the purposes of psychic survival. In hooks’ view, critical consciousness could empower social actors through an informed understanding and by encouraging the use of agency to respond responsibly to the social conditions. Without nuanced accounts of single black motherhood, women will be more prone to self-blame and to naturalising their difficulties. The personal accounts that follow offer new ways of seeing single black motherhood for critical consciousness, which depart from the many time-worn stereotypes and tropes that black feminist scholars have noted and critiqued (see Phoenix, 1987; Collins, 1991, pp. 73–77; Reynolds, 1997, 2005, pp. 29–37). It is suggested that storytelling can transform dominant cultural understandings by ‘open[ing] new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society’ (Solórzano and Yosso, 2001, p. 475). Similarly, in her astute 2009 TED talk on distorted yet dominant narratives, ‘The danger of a single story’, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reminds us: ‘stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanise. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity’.5

The testimonies below demonstrate the ways black single-parent women subvert socially prescribed gender roles, defy negative expectations and draw on parental agency to overcome obstacles. Also illuminated are women’s common struggles: the disproportionately heavy parental responsibility borne by mothers and the courage that single motherhood requires. In the final section of the piece, there is a brief analysis of the testimonies.

one: Beverly

I remember finding different expectations for boys and girls ridiculous. My mum didn’t know what to do with me. I refused to iron my brother’s clothes, was relaxed about armpit hair and loved wearing men’s shoes. That rebellion extended to marriage: I would not be giving up my name and I would not be doing the servitude. Watching my aunts’ experiences made me think, ‘I’m not having that’. One had been the most active and fun auntie, but then suffered postnatal depression after having her last child and seemed kind of broken. Her husband did nothing to support her. Another aunt had nine children, but her husband was like the tenth—he would get his food served to him on a tray in front of the TV. On a Saturday night my aunt would be expected to run his bath, iron his clothes and polish his shoes before he went out for the night. Not for me.

5 Supra note 1.
It wasn’t the done thing to be unmarried and expecting when I was pregnant during the late 1970s. People didn’t think twice about commenting on your situation, but it was not a problem to me. The relationship I was in ended when my son, Michael, was still very small and some people thought my situation as a single parent would be tougher because I had a boy. But there are lots of women who have raised happy and balanced boys. Now people are pleasantly surprised when I tell them how Michael’s done.

Raising him was generally fine—I had a stable job that enabled me to provide for him, my family nearby for support and I had a partner. I was with that person for fifteen years. Again, this is something else people comment on, but I refused to deny myself a relationship. Mothers are human too, we have needs and desires. To deaden that part of yourself for your child’s sake would just create an artificial bubble. Obviously, you have to be thoughtful about it all and my son came first in lots of respects, but I don’t think everything should be put on hold because of being a parent. You have to live your life.

two: Marsha

Have you ever been in a situation where you feel yourself fading? Dwindling to a point where you no longer recognise yourself? That’s how I found myself feeling with Anthony, my children’s dad. I remember feeling that he didn’t see the real me, who was outspoken and opinionated. We were going to get married, but it felt the wrong thing to do.

After breaking up, it was important to me that Anthony maintained his relationship with our daughter and son. They saw a lot of him and we even all went on holiday together a couple of times—but we didn’t manage to share the responsibility equally. For instance, there was a stretch of time where my son was having problems at primary school and rather than getting to the root of the issue, the school labelled him as a problem child. I was the one taking frequent calls of complaint from the school and attending meetings on my own, or with my mum. It was so stressful; I was asked repeatedly if there were problems at home and questions about my parenting. I would go to bed exhausted and the next day was usually another battle with the school. It weighs you down. As a black single mum and particularly when you’re raising a son, it can feel as if you’ve got things coming up from all corners: the stereotypes, that’s a pressure, the school complaining about your child, that’s a pressure, and the media and all the things said about black boys, that’s a pressure. You can end up parenting from a position of fear rather than a position of nurturing and love.

I cried when I was stressed, and I didn’t hide it from the children. I explained what I was going through—I think it was important they saw I wasn’t invincible. We would have conversations about our difficult emotions, and I think these things have liberated them both to express themselves fully. Those myths about black people not being vulnerable are dangerous. Particularly that strong black woman trope: it implies we don’t need any support and that we can meet everybody else’s needs to the detriment of our own. I don’t think it should be celebrated. I think I’ve shown my daughter and son that it is ok not to be ok and that difficult emotions do pass.

three: Juliet

My parents were right behind me from the start. It was my mum who said I didn’t have to settle for the relationship just because we had had children. David had always tried to stop me doing the things I
wanted to do—it was as if he didn’t want me to get on. It was daunting to leave the relationship with two young children; Caleb was six and Georgia was one. But it was such a relief—the absence of emotional turmoil meant I had more headspace. I was worried about myself and my children becoming statistics so one of the first things I did was to start studying at uni. Growing up I had wanted to be a writer, which wasn’t seen as realistic. To support my kids, I made a more stable choice: social work.

My parents would help with school runs and feed us dinner. My older sister also played a big role. I could confide in her and our families spent lots of time together. At her place I could relax and even nap while the children were enjoying time with their cousins. At uni I made friends with other women. We were all single black mums, in the same boat with similar concerns—we were there for each other and we enjoyed finding interesting activities to do with the children around London.

Looking back on my journey with the kids, I think I can say we didn’t have a boring life. For example, we lived in New York for a few years, as my favourite cousin encouraged me to join her there. Culturally, New York was brilliant: I could wander to Harlem and visit all of these cultural spaces that focused on black people, like the Schomburg Center. I saw lots of black authors speaking about their work in bookshops. I soaked it all up; it fed me.

Over the years I chose to put my children first, which included prioritising them over a love life—I wanted them to know they were most important to me. I’ve come to really value my independence, so being single at fifty does not concern me. I feel like I’m in a good place: Georgia and Caleb are both adults now and are developing well. Interestingly both of them are artists: I encouraged them to develop their potential as I wasn’t encouraged. Now I have more space to explore my interests—starting with honing my voice as a writer.

**four: Aisha**

Do you remember when young single mothers were constantly vilified in the press? It was horrible. I became pregnant during that time. I had always done well at school so telling my family was one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do. I knew I was intelligent, I just happened to have made a foolish and reckless decision. I felt like I had failed, but I also had fire in my belly. I gave birth to Jude during the summer before I was due to start my A-levels and got started three weeks into the term. At college my breast milk would leak into my tops sometimes and there was a tension between these two big responsibilities.

The pressure was immense because of that feeling of being judged and being watched, I felt like I had to be perfect. There was a time when I was eighteen and had to take Jude to the hospital following an accident at home, and they had social services to come to make sure that I wasn’t abusing him. As a teenage parent, a black teenage parent, a single black mother on an estate, I always felt prejudged. Partly in reaction to that, I set quite high standards for myself. I am so grateful to my parents, my grandparents, my brother and Jude’s godparents for their help—without them I don’t think I would have been able to maintain that.
My A-level results were not what they could have been, but I did well enough to progress to university. I worked three jobs to pay my way through my first degree as I didn’t qualify for student grants. I decided to become a teacher because I know people who had a terrible time at school—put in the lowest ability groups or sent off to dustbin schools. I was frightened of what the education system might do to Jude and wanted to contribute to change. Teaching in Tottenham and in Hackney—where I grew up—has been all-consuming. I get so invested in students’ journeys. Occasionally I do tell students about my past. I want them to know that a difficult start in life doesn’t necessarily define you.

epilogue

In my view, there are a number of interesting and unexpected themes contained in the accounts above, but I want to focus on two key findings: the disproportionate care work done by single mothers and the under-recognised courage of single black mothers.

Some of the narratives show how women experience a marked asymmetry in the spread of parental responsibilities between single-parent women and separated fathers. Recall both Marsha and Aisha dealing with emergencies with school and at the hospital alone. This uneven distribution means single-parent women racialised as black face the gaze of powerful institutions and wrangle with any consequences alone. In Juliet’s narrative, she describes her family assistance closing the parental labour gap, through their support with the practical operations of everyday family life. The stories hint at the constraining impact this weighty responsibility can have; time and energy are consumed, impeding on a woman’s personal freedoms. For example, Juliet expresses the belief that she had little option but to curtail her romantic life. In this way, the narratives support the view that the experience of single motherhood is exacerbated by different forms of oppression (see Brooks, 2016, pp. 43–67). Placing personal experiences in social context for a deeper, more instructive understanding enables critical consciousness (hooks, 2003, pp. 69–71). In doing so, we see that the disproportionate responsibility borne by mothers—not only single mothers, but also those in heterosexual couples (Lockman, 2019)—has been viewed as natural and not problematised due to the gendering of care work.

The courageousness of women taking the decision to parent alone is also illuminated by these testimonies. All four women recall their clear awareness of stigma and bigotry around single mothering. Some described a resultant pressure and its impacts. ‘I was worried about myself and my children becoming statistics’, said Juliet, ‘so one of the first things I did was to start studying at uni’. Aisha spoke of a perfectionism she felt she needed to embody as a mother, due to a sense of being ‘judged and being watched’. She speaks of this scrutiny as a consequence of her age, ethnicity and class. How much would the quality of single black mothers’ experiences be improved if they felt more respected, valued and supported? Despite their awareness of stigma, these mothers have lived their lives on their own terms: balancing single-parenting with a romantic companionship (Beverly); ending a relationship that felt stultifying (Marsha); taking the decision to move the family abroad (Juliet); and balancing young motherhood with working as a teacher to make a difference in local schools (Aisha).

In the mid-1960s, Nina Simone’s ‘Four Women’ powerfully articulated the thoughts, feelings and historic experiences of certain black women in America, giving vital context to particular lives. Not
dissimilarly, these monologues demonstrate the humanity of single-parent black women, not least their individuality and the diversity of their experiences. Personally, listening to women’s stories as a single mother, not only as a researcher, offers me vindication, as well as new feelings of pride and empowerment. More broadly, it underscores the importance of a wide variety of in-depth, nuanced and contextualised stories for potential social transformation through critical consciousness.

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