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The Importance of Writing *Reclaiming Venus*

The Many Lives of Alvenia Bridges

ABSTRACT Seventy-six-year-old Alvenia Bridges is someone who could be described as forever young. While she contends with typical signs of aging such as osteoporosis and arthritis, her daily meditative walks, diet of primarily salmon and avocados, and invigorating friendships contribute to her youthful demeanor. But a healthy lifestyle can only account for so much. Her captivating storytelling is what truly keeps her young. When she recounts her ability to move throughout the world in the heyday of her youth and when she describes how music allowed her to escape a violent beginning and discover her true purpose for existing, she transports both herself and her listener to another place and time. In doing so, age loses all meaning. Furthermore, her experience as a Black woman navigating the predominantly white and male-run world of Rock and Roll bears witness to the racial and gendered dynamics that exist in the music industry, highlighting how the past informs the present. By narrating an incident that occurred when Bridges was tour-managing the Rolling Stones, this lecture explores how our ethnographic memoir entitled *Reclaiming Venus: The Many Lives of Alvenia Bridges* conveys the power one wields when telling a story on one's own terms.

KEYWORDS Rock and Roll, race, gender, Rolling Stones, ethnography, storytelling

The video lecture transcribed here is available in the online version of JPMS Volume 33, Number 1

[Slide 1] Seventy-six-year-old Alvenia Bridges is someone who could be described as forever young. While she contends with typical signs of aging such as osteoporosis and arthritis, her daily meditative walks, diet of primarily salmon and avocados, and invigorating friendships contribute to her youthful demeanor. But a healthy lifestyle can only account for so much. I am convinced that her captivating storytelling is what is most responsible for keeping her young. When she recounts her ability to move throughout the world in the heyday of her youth and describes how music allowed her to escape a violent beginning and discover her true purpose for existing, she transports both herself and her listener to another place and time. In doing so, age loses all meaning. In this talk, I will share part of Alvenia's story based on our ethnographic memoir titled *Reclaiming Venus: The Many Lives of Alvenia Bridges*.

[Slide 2] I first met Alvenia in 2014 when, through happenstance, I sublet a room in her beautiful apartment a block south of New York City's Central Park. I was immediately struck by how regal this woman was. She was statuesque—her six-foot frame

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towering over me even though her back was slightly bowed as she leaned against the door frame. She wore a simple strand of pearls around her neck, accentuated by the smooth mahogany of her skin and the blackness of her flowing outfit. Her eyes, meanwhile, conveyed the accumulation of wisdom that comes from a lifetime of experiences. As I studied her face, Alvenia's warm voice resonated in the hallway, "Please, come in. Welcome to your new home. You must be tired from your journey. Set your things over there. I'll make us some tea before I take you on a tour."

[Slide 3] While waiting for our tea to steep, I started noticing all the photos pinned up on the wall above the table. The breakfast nook was plastered with incredible images, many adorned with beautiful inscriptions: photos of Bob Marley signed by his favorite photographer, Kate Simon; portraits of Roberta Flack and Dizzy Gillespie with heartfelt notes scribbled in their handwriting; a blown-up copy of a color Polaroid of Jimi Hendrix strumming his red guitar outside his home in Seattle when he was just a boy. This image was juxtaposed with a black-and-white photo of Jimi waiting on a bench in an airport taken shortly before his death. Someone had drawn angel wings on his back with sharpie. I then noticed a black-and-white photo of a much younger Alvenia modeling a stunning dress as she presented the viewer with her profile. The kaleidoscope of images went on and on, consuming all blank space. "If you think that's impressive, you should see my office," she winked. She then grabbed her mug and beckoned me to follow.

[Slide 4] It was true. The objects hanging in the breakfast nook were only the tip of the iceberg. She proudly drew my attention to even more impressive memorabilia suspended above her office desk: two framed records encased in glass—identical except one gold, the other, platinum, with her name engraved next to an image of Mick Jagger's first solo album cover "She's the Boss"; a black-and-white photo of Mick during the height of his Rolling Stones career; a color photo of Mick huddled together with other Rock and Roll legends—Tina Turner, Madonna, Bob Dylan, the list went on.

[Slide 5] A black-and-white photo of Alvenia and a man I didn't recognize rounded out the series. The two of them were looking at each other with immense respect and admiration. The inscription read, "Don't ever forget—don't ever forget how good you are . . . —Bill." I asked Alvenia about these objects that she so lovingly displayed, and each one catapulted her into a distant memory. At first, I didn't know what to expect, but as she casually said things like, "Oh that's when I was working on *Live Aid*," or "That's when I was Mick's personal business liaison," or "Roberta was how I got into the music business," or "I was with Jimi the days leading up to his passing," I would have to stop her and say, "Wait, what?" She laughed, "Those were from another life. Another time. I'll tell you the stories behind them someday soon." Once I got over my initial shock, I fumbled into my pocket and pulled out the digital recorder that I had been using to interview people for the ethnographic book project that had brought me to New York. I then stopped Alvenia mid-sentence, "Alvenia, would you mind if I recorded you?"

And this is how we got into the lovely habit of meeting in the evening over tea and tales where she would chronicle her life—not just the glitzy and glamorous insights of being a model in Europe or the absurd behind-the-scenes chaos of some of the biggest musical acts in the world but also about her troubled childhood in segregated Kansas

amidst the backdrop of societal rot and the moment in the nineties when her world came crashing down, a period of her life from which she was still recovering. I accompanied her in this journey, feeling immense joy, inspiration, anger, and sadness as she interwove tales of despair and rejection with those of success and triumph. I kept thinking to myself how fortunate the world would be if they ever got to hear her voice. She had spent a lot of her life behind the scenes. What if she could finally have a stage of her own?

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[Slide 6] Alvenia would often reminisce about what it was like to be a Black woman from Kansas tour-managing one of the most famous and successful rock groups in the world, the Rolling Stones. She began working with them in 1981 when they were touring for the *Tattoo You* album, first in the US and then throughout Europe. Her excitement was always palpable when she described being on the road with them. She told me how for every concert, Bill Graham—the promotor—would introduce the show, “Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for waiting. . .” and no matter where she was, she would scream, “Yes! I can’t believe I get PAID to do this?”

[Slide 7] By the time they arrived in Torino for a couple of concerts, Alvenia had found her stride and became known as someone who got things done. For a reason she never quite figured out, however, Keith Richards had a beef with her from the beginning, and it came to a head there. [As I tell Alvenia’s story, I must warn you about foul language. Alvenia’s language is usually quite clean, but when discussing Keith Richards, it is kind of hard not to swear.] Before the second Torino concert Alvenia was in the underground part of the stadium at her table where she kept the VIP passes. The room was sort of tucked away, a sanctuary. The calm before the storm that brewed whenever the Stones took the stage. The VIP passes were flown in every day from Bill Graham Presents in San Francisco so that they couldn’t be forged. As the only person allowed with the passes, Alvenia was absentmindedly stamping them to add that last mark of authenticity. All of a sudden she heard an unmistakable voice behind her, “You stay out of my way, you fuckin’ Black bitch.” At that point, she lost it. Keith had harassed her before, and she wasn’t going to stand for it any longer.

Getting in a stance to defend herself, Alvenia turned around and threw down her things: “You motherfucker, you’re standing all the way over there.” She wasn’t known to curse, so her words surprised some of the crew as much as her standing up to Keith did. But if she were ever to be taken seriously as a woman in this business, she had to become adept at the well-placed expletive. She then sneered, “If you are so fucking bad, do something!” Keith threw off his blue-mirrored sunglasses, and as he lurched at her, Joe Seabrook—a Green Beret assigned to Keith because of his volatility—pulled him back.

[Slide 8] Alvenia closed the door and caught her breath. What did he mean “fuckin’ Black bitch”? She was a woman. Ain’t nobody’s bitch. Most of the time she didn’t think about how she was one of three women out of a 250-person road crew. Alvenia had spent half of her youth sleeping with a knife under her pillow to protect herself from her stepfather. She had learned how to handle men. No man would ever lay a hand on her again and survive.

[Slide 9] Alvenia thus had no problem navigating these hypermasculine spaces as a woman. Bill Graham used to say about her, “If you don’t see her, she’s in her room because she only means business.” This meant a lot coming from Bill since right before Alvenia was set to go on the road with the Stones for the first time, Mick warned her that Bill didn’t want her in a position that no woman had held. He had said to Mick, “You’re going to have someone that looks like that on the road with all those men? Are you crazy?” But Alvenia’s reputation when she had worked for Roberta Flack preceded her. Roberta was one of the toughest in the business. Alvenia learned everything she needed from her. And Bill, who eventually became her biggest champion, was always the first to admit how wrong he had been.

[Slide 10] Alvenia knew that the way she interacted with people surprised them. She didn’t fit their stereotypes as a woman, especially as a Black woman. She was surrounded by people who had spent so much of their careers trying to capture a “Black” aesthetic. Many of them prided themselves on their sexual conquests, and especially in the sixties and seventies, they could get an extra feather in their cap if they could bed Black women. As the actress Marsha Hunt, the mother of Mick’s first child, Karis, recounted about refusing to pose for “Honky Tonk Women,” she “didn’t want to look like [she’d] just been had by all the Rolling Stones.”¹ At the same time, Marsha was a possible inspiration for the song “Brown Sugar,” which evokes both a historical past of enslavement and abuse as well as an ongoing social expectation of Black sexuality. Black womanhood was an undercurrent in the Stones’ psyche.

[Slide 11] But Alvenia wrote her own rule book and did things by her own code, defying expectations the world placed on her. She would never be anyone’s sexual conquest nor would she put up with any demeaning or abusive behavior. When the band went on stage, Alvenia was standing behind the scenes with all the VIP passes. Keith came through, and as he ran up the stairs, he glared at her and continued on. A few days later, Keith passed her in the lobby of their hotel and smiled before saying, “Next time, I’ll get you.” Alvenia fearlessly replied, “You will never get me, Keith. I’ve put up with way worse than you in my life.” It turned out that he never bothered her again.

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[Slide 12] A few days before I was set to leave New York, Alvenia turned to me after sharing a particularly emotional memory. “You know. It has been my dream to write my memoir. Numerous people have told me I should. On several occasions I’ve tried, but each time life would get in the way or people tasked with writing my story would fail to see the true essence of what I am about. After spending these months rehashing the experiences of my life, I finally want to try again. Would you help me?”

I was at first taken aback by her request. I pondered our generational gap. I am four decades her junior. She lived many of her most dramatic experiences before I was even born. And the musical acts she supported during her decade in the music industry did not

1. Ann Kolson, “Marsha Hunt’s Life is Filled with ‘Joy’: The Irrepressible Performer has Mick Jagger in her Past, Old Ties to Philadelphia, and a New Book,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 16 February 1991.

even cross my radar until long after these performers had exited their prime. Yet Alvenia and I resonate with each other in a way where the age difference quickly dissipates whenever we are locked in dialogue.

[Slide 13] We share a variegated perspective to understanding what it is like being highly mobile Black women who have travelled the world and have experienced the ebbs and flows of life in motion. I have arguably had a much easier experience in reaching the far corners of the globe. As a child of the eighties, I had more of a leg up than Alvenia ever had. I grew up in the wake of my parents' and ancestors' sacrifices as well as the movements for Black Power and Women's Liberation, which gave me a more expansive understanding of what I should demand for myself and how I should conceptualize my own humanity.

Alvenia, by virtue of her upbringing and the timing of her birth, encountered this world in a very different way. She was an unwitting player in the desegregation of America, and her personal experience serves to illustrate the human trauma associated with demanding liberation and equality. The country may have slowly been moving toward justice, but little children like Alvenia were often forced to bear the scars of an unjust world. I thought I knew what this experience was like through hearing my parents' recollections of Jim Crow and reading personal accounts from the period. But it wasn't until I heard Alvenia's story of failing to integrate a public school and then saw how the repercussions reverberated in various ways throughout her life did I realize how that formative experience would dictate how Alvenia learned to engage with the world and color how she would approach interactions around race for a lifetime.

[Slide 14] I have not experienced nearly the same amount of racist vitriol nor have I been subjected to the extent of lowered expectations that she endured during her childhood and working career where those around her assumed failure based on her race or her gender, and yet many of the emotions she conveyed and disappointments she had to overcome were ones I've wrestled with as well. The world has always been very adept at creating scripts based on preset conditions and shoehorning people into stereotypes that limit their potential and their worth. And while the world has evolved a lot since Alvenia's arrival on this planet, in many ways it has stayed the same. Alvenia's story is just as relevant today as it was when her story began to form. Through *Reclaiming Venus: The Many Lives of Alvenia Bridges*, her story will hopefully become central to the history of Rock and Roll. ■

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Kolson, Ann. "Marsha Hunt's Life is Filled with 'Joy': The Irrepressible Performer has Mick Jagger in her Past, Old Ties to Philadelphia, and a New Book." *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 16, 1991.

AV Sources

Slide 1: Headshot by PS Roy Photography

Slide 2: Photo of Alvenia by Kate Simon; photo of Alvenia by me

Slide 3: Photos of Bob Marley by Kate Simon; photos of Jimi Hendrix by unknown; photo of Alvenia in her kitchen by me

Slide 4: Photo of Mick Jagger by unknown (unable to make out signature); photo of several performers at *Live Aid* by Ken Regan; photo of Alvenia in her office by me

Slide 5: Photo of Bill Graham and Alvenia by Ken Regan; photo of Alvenia in her office by me

Slide 6: Image of the cover of *Tattoo You* (1981) by the Rolling Stones

Slide 7: Photo of *I Rolling Stones in Italia*, published by Arnoldo Mondadori

Slide 8: Photos of Alvenia by me

Slide 9: Photo of Roberta Flack by Dakotah; photo of Bill Graham and Alvenia by Ken Regan

Slide 10: Photo of Marsha Hunt found at https://dangerousminds.net/comments/brown_sugar_marsha_hunt_beautiful_muse_of_mick_jagger_and_marc_bolan

Slide 11: 1978 photo of Keith Richards from the *Star Ledger* found at https://www.nola.com/entertainment_life/article_837dab1a-c31f-5b38-8ea3-f45f9553b05e.html

Slide 12: Signed image of Antonio Lopez's "Shoe Metamorphosis"; photo of Alvenia's expired passport

Slide 13: Photos of Alvenia by Leonardo de Vega, Antonio Guccione, and unknown

Slide 14: Photo of Alvenia and me