

SONGVERSATION I AM LIGHT

My Thoughts On The
Skin Bleaching Allegations

A SongVersation on how we can heal.

Part Three: My Real Struggle, Section 1



SongVersetion: I Am Light

Part 3: My REAL struggle..., Section 1.

Tis Healthy to be sick sometimes. - Henry David Thoreau



Just 3 months after this image on the red carpet in February of 2012, a health crisis affected my skin in a MAJOR way.

We left off SongVersation Part 2: Nuance, saying, that I was fighting a VEEERRY different battle than “SkinGate 2013” would suggest. Actually I was fighting a FEW different battles. Some of it very private and unique to me, and some of it, sadly common and predictable. The reason I’m writing ALL of this, instead of just sending a few tweets or letting “SkinGate2013” just be, is because I MUST speak my truth, having someone ELSE project their story on to me, doesn’t sit well with me. The price of being unexpressed is TOO high, I know THAT, from experience. Being in the public eye most of my adult life, I have learned this: You NEVER know what ANYbody is going through. And so this essay is entitled, SongVersation: Part 3 My REAL struggle, because there is much MORE to “SkinGate2013” than meets the eye.

So, I want to start, where I left off at the end of SongVersation Part 2: Nuance,

The challenge of bringing YOU into MY world.

Physically: I’ve mentioned a few times here in this SongVersation, that I had a health issues that affected my skin and finally I’m going to talk about that here. THE BIG ISSUE I was having was with the HEALTH of my skin!! not the SHADE of my skin. I had been through a health crisis in early 2012 that resulted in my detoxing through the skin (mainly) on my face. As I mentioned earlier, my skin tone is Type 5 (on the Fitzpatrick skin type scale), brown to dark brown, tans easily, scars easily, rarely burns. In a matter of 6 weeks, I went from having perfectly, even toned skin to having Large areas of cystic acne, little acne bumps, AND A rash basically over my entire face. All of this eventually turned into scars ALL OVER MY FACE. I looked in the mirror one day and realized only the area under my eyes was clear.

The foundation of this SongVersation is my humanity, and to speak as a physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional FULL being, - not a “celebrity” and I will continue in that vein here in Part 3 because this is where it starts to REALLY matter.

I *certainly* didn’t enjoy going through this, but I honor that experience now, because I NOW, know that it was necessary. The shift in my body was SO DRASTIC, I didn’t think I was going to die, but it was the first time that I REALLY faced my mortality.

SO, By the day of the photo shoot, I had come through this difficult time! It was a lot of work with diet and supplements, rest from the road, spiritual and emotional work. I’m STILL healing from that era, some days are better than others with my skin, but TODAY, I am on the other side of the acute phase of it.

I realize now that my skin attracted so much attention, because I WAS paying so much attention to it.

The day of the “Cocoa Butter” photoshoot:

Physically: My skin was still in the healing *process*, but not yet HEALED. The photographer requested heavier makeup than normal, as a complement to the special “Ring Light” she created. This light is used to “blow out” skin imperfections. I really just wanted to look pretty and luminous, and truthfully, that IS what I saw, and STILL see when I look at this picture... a *version* of ME.

Emotionally: It did hurt a bit to be photographed with my skin in that state, but honestly, I was so filled with JOY, to just be doing a photo shoot at all. For that day, I was just focused on the joy.

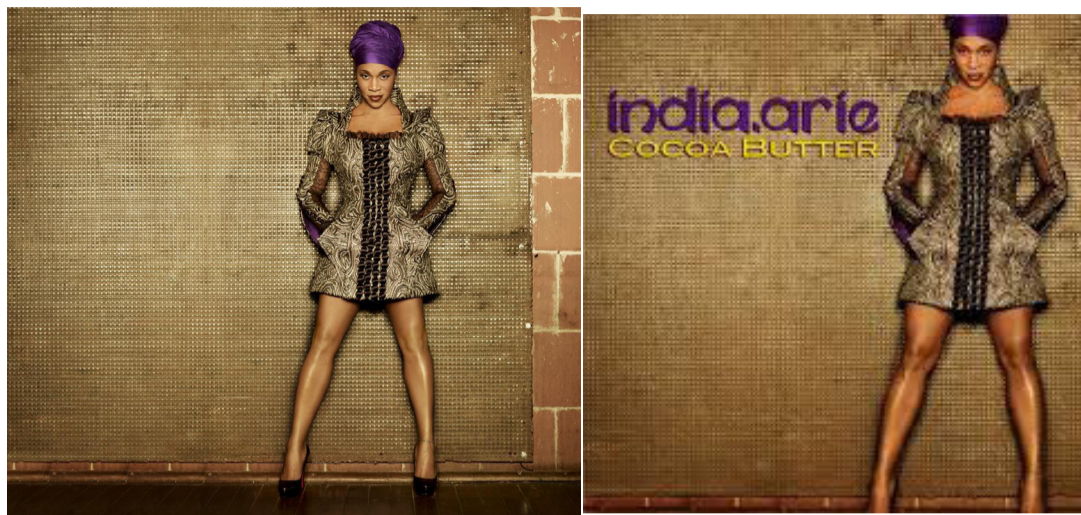
Mentally: I was prepared to step BACK into the music industry world. I’d come SUCH. A LONG WAY. The first outfit of the day was a dress created by my Mother, we named it (we name all of her creations) “The Prince Dress”, as in the artist Prince; gold, purple and lace. This dress was short for me! VERY SHORT, but I really DO love my body, and my legs have always been my favorite physical attribute. MY Mom has ALWAYS said “you have some of the best legs in the biz, you need to SHOW them”. So this time, I did. I’d been through so much, I just wanted to LIVE. Mentally, when I stepped onto the set, I felt GOOD.

Spiritually: When I left in 2009, I prayed for 3 things; a career that I enjoy, a baseline feeling of well being, and to be FREE. **After a 19 hour photo shoot**, this being my first big project back in 4 years, we were all surprised by how different, organized, and FUN it was. The entire SoulBird creative team felt that day was a model for how work SHOULD happen. A few days later we received the ENTIRE photo shoot. We LOVED ALL OF IT! Our task was to choose ONE image for the first single “Cocoa Butter” and send the chosen image out for retouching. I was on a high for weeks, that I was actually *enjoying* my career.

That’s why it was a shock for all of us when...

My REAL Struggle:

...we got the photoshopped image back. WE. WERE. SHOCKED!!! It was clear that the retoucher and I had different visions of me “looking the BEST I ever had”. The *issue* was not the *color* of my skin but the photoshopping of my BODY! We were STUNNED!



First round of photoshop. I was like, “Uh, left whose legs are these?”

The Final Photo. I STILL think MY leg looks weird ...

LITERALLY, I had no knees. It was RIDICULOUS.

Emotionally: As I mentioned, I was strong and READY for the world in general. I was prepared to defend showing that much of my body and having that “KIND” of body. I just didn’t think I’d have to fight THIS battle, at THIS level, THIS EARLY in the process; before the picture was even released to the public.

Again, the challenge of bringing people into MY world: We went back and forth so many times with the retoucher, that we finally requested the completely un-retouched image. I gave the picture to someone I trusted, someone who understands me and actually thinks I’m beautiful, my friend Anna Valencia Bruch - who had done all of my previous album covers. THAT’s is what WE were dealing with...



Completely un-retouched legs.

We went back and forth for many days while under VERY tight deadlines. I was STILL writing, AND recording, AND doing interviews, AND traveling for performances. we *finally* completed the re-touching of the image, JUST in time to ship the song to iTunes and radio. Words cannot even *explain* the STRESS of this time. We were *GRINDING!*

As I mentioned in Part 1 those MISSTEPS that can hurt so much.

All of this took me back to the experience of shooting the cover for my third album *Testimony Vol. 1: Life & Relationship*. I was told, “You can do whatever you want, but this (the photo on the left) looks too “muscular.” I was basically coerced. It was implied that I would sell more albums with the OTHER cover. It was implied that the label would support me MORE if I chose the OTHER cover. I went along with it; in other words I was afraid. So I complied. It obviously bothers me to this day.



The cover I wanted. This ended up being the cover in the UK.



The cover in the rest of the world. We also argued over the smile, the hair, and the tilt of my head.

Given my past experiences, my past missteps, I was invested in this *Cocoa Butter* image, and wanted to get it right.

The night before “Cocoa Butter” was released, I laid across my bed with my eyes open feeling SOMETHING I couldn't put my finger on. I'll *never* forget that night. I was excited but worried; I guess in hindsight it was anxiety. This is significant because when I lay down (and sometimes sitting up, in cars, planes, etc.) I go TO. SLEEP. I was hours away from diving back into the very waters that almost drowned me. My promise to myself was that I would come back to the industry and TRY this life again and SEE how it goes, and if it's wasn't working I would walk away for good. I was just hours away from what would either be the beginning of Act 2, or the beginning of The End.

The day the Cocoa Butter single was released, within MINUTES my social networks were FLOODED. It was *exciting*, AND uncomfortable, that same feeling I felt lying across the bed the night before. Initially the discomfort was from the *sexual* energy in the comments. For a lot of reasons I've been uncomfortable with that “*kind*” of attention. So, I sent the image to a few of my male friends asking, “Is it really THAT sexy?”. The answer was always “Yes”! Again, I was prepared to DEFEND showing my body, so I never expected this “SEXY” reaction.

As the days went by, and I was forced to confront myself, I realized that all of the work I'd done in the four years leading up to *this* day, mattered. Those old feelings of wanting to hide were a habit, it wasn't anything I *actually* FELT anymore.

I loved the image. I loved what it said about me. I LOVED, that I was actually REACHING my intention of looking like the WOMAN I had become. So, I REALLY wasn't prepared when...

about four days in the skin bleaching allegations BLEW UP! The main antagonist tweeted something about how he was concerned because of “what I mean to his daughter”. I want to thank that person today for giving me the impetus to speak my mind on so many of these issues. @rhymefest, I hope your daughter reads this

The challenge of bringing you into my world

This is where it gets REALLY interesting.

Let's get into it!

Fast forward about a month after the release of Cocoa Butter: I'm sitting around a table with my SoulBird creative team and I see out of the corner of my eye the Cocoa Butter image on someone's laptop. My first thought was, “I'm my MOTHER'S color”. She is lighter skinned, (around a Type 4 on the fitzpatrick skin scale) I said out loud, “HOLD ON A SECOND, LET ME SEE THAT!!!” Then slow and stunned like I say, “NOW I... SEE WHAT.... SOME PEOPLE.... MUST HAVE.....SEEN.”

We went around the table looking at the picture on phones, laptops, and iPads, only to find I was a slightly different color / feel on all of them. The ONLY image that looked like what I HAD ENVISIONED was the one on MY laptop screen.

The most difficult debates are the ones where *everybody* is right. Maaaaaaan, how do you talk about THAT?!? I mean REALLY.

I also realize now in hindsight, I WAS lightened, with the make up and the flash, and I was being seen thru the photographer's eyes. Given the way they photoshopped my body, I see now that we had MUCH different ideas of what it means to make a beautiful picture of ME. I didn't even notice the color, I wasn't looking for that. I NEVER look for that.

I realize NOW, that my skin became the focus of this image because, it was MY focus, not the COLOR of my skin, but the HEALTH of my skin.

I realize NOW, that there was NO WAY that I could control how that image looked on every device, or to every EYE. There was NO WAY I could control how this image would read to every person's PSYCHE anymore than I could control what people *thought* I *should* look like.

I still don't see my color in this picture as "wrong", I really just don't see the world that way, but I DO see what some others saw.

I understand now, why in my prayer time I was guided to BE STILL. We really were all "seeing" different things.

What I STILL DON'T UNDERSTAND is, WHY the attack?

Why it is our natural response to *attack* one another?

What we're doing with this "color trolling" thing, is blaming the victim, AND *blaming the victim inside of ourselves.* Have you heard the saying: *When you point a finger at someone else, there are literally 3 fingers pointing back at you?*

I used to think this saying was kind of corny, but I see now, it's deeper meaning.

it saying that judgement is simply a mask for fear.

Needing to protect yourself, that is just a part of life, if you let your fear keep you from flying, you will never reach your height. - Come Back to the Middle from the album Acoustic Soul

I get it, we are all looking for a way to feel better, a way to not be so afraid about our life's particular challenges, and if we can focus that fear on something external we feel better... for a little while anyway.

That is why I have said throughout this SongVersation, "SkinGate2013" is not about ME. It's about something I *triggered*. Removing the trigger is the REAL healing.

The real Key to empowerment is to focus on YOU.

I want to say this to every critic of this Cocoa Butter image:

To every person on my InstaGram page who says, "I don't know what it is, but her skin just looks "different", or anyone else still questioning or discussing this as a side note whenever my name comes up, my skin looks different because...

It is. *shrug*

My skin IS different.

Did I lighten it? NO! *However*, what I *have* discovered is that it does REFLECT more light in images. Clearly all of the purging of toxins and shedding of skin made it "different".

I AM DIFFERENT.

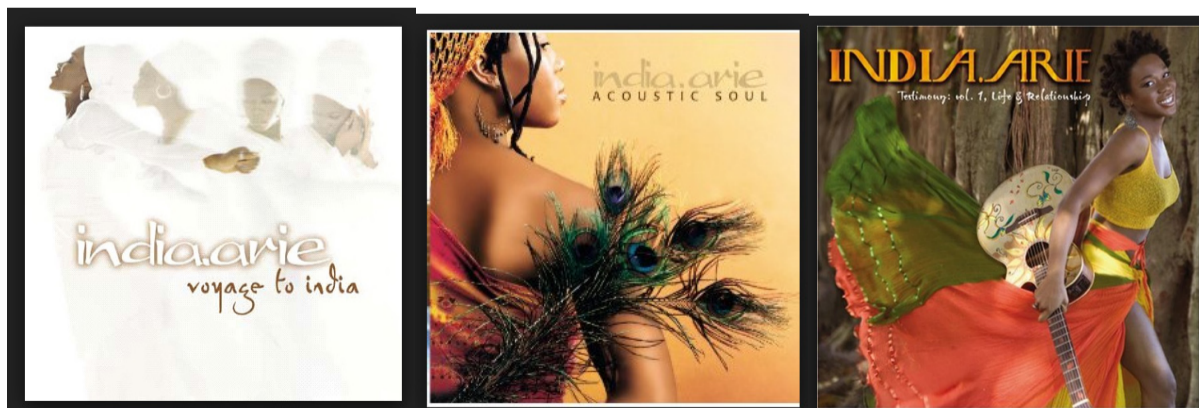
My skin IS different.

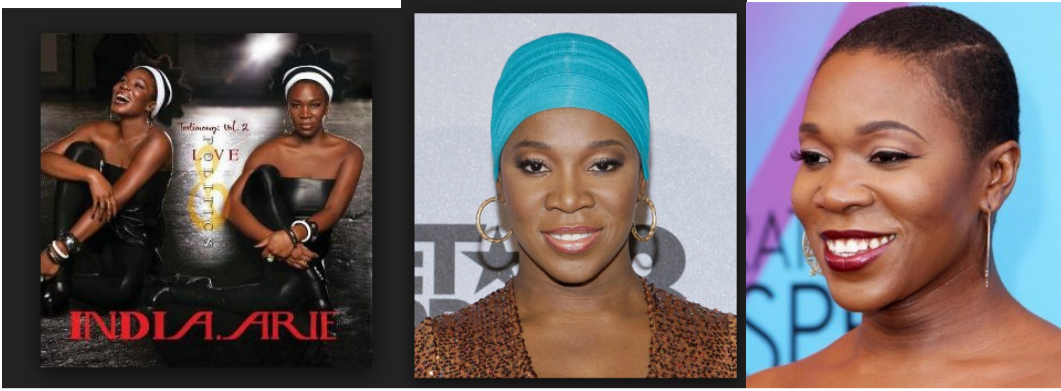
And WHY CAN'T IT BE?

This is just LIFE doing what it does.

WE, ALL OF US, are FLUID beings! We shift in height and shoe size, in hair texture and hair color, we shift in weight, in skin color, in personality, and energy! We are ALL, always changing, over the course of our lives.

People. Change.





AGAIN: When I talk about being seen as a FULL being, physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional, there is MORE “different” about me than how I LOOK!

I didn't feel SAFE trying to explain this in that climate. I tried on Oprah's Super Soul Sunday, but just wasn't ready to take the conversation that far. But I'm going to attempt to explain it here:

MATURITY: I believe, as human beings, every aspect of who we are is *interconnected*, meaning when one part shifts, so go the OTHER parts. So, what happened with my skin, was the PHYSICAL aspect of a profound life transformation. The **physical** part of that transformation is what people are responding to because obviously, it's the part that can be SEEN. Even I SEE a different me when I compare images of myself from 2009 and 2013.

Here's the part that is especially difficult to explain. I strongly believe that what most people *perceived* as different about me, the thing that they couldn't put their finger on, is MUCH MORE THAN MY SKIN! What they are seeing is a A MATURED me. I call what I went through “embodiment” (more about this later). Quite simply, I had matured. It happens to all of us.

As one of my fans said about seeing the Cocoa Butter image, “When I saw it, I did think, is that MY India?”

Yes, it's ME.

I know it's hard for some people to REALLY wrap their minds around this, but this IMAGE is really NOT so farfetched. It's an aspect of ME, and I ask, “WHY CAN'T IT BE?!”.

The miracle of Melanin! IS its beautiful diversity of Brown, Gold, Yellow, Green, Red, Blue undertones... and *why can't it be?*

Michaela Angela Davis, my friend and stylist for my very first magazine photo shoot, on the episode of BET's *Being Mary Jane* that sparked this letter, called it, “Our Magic”, and she asked, “Why can't we PLAY with our MAGIC?!”. I agree with her. WHY CAN'T IT BE?

I want to ASK every critic of this Cocoa Butter image a question:

“Because the rest of the world has a colorism complex, because our ancestors were terrorized in this way, does that mean WE, TODAY as Black people *have* to carry the complex into the next generation?”

One day, WE will be someone's ancestor, and what will *our* legacy be?

YOUNG BLACK AMERICA IS THE MOST INFLUENTIAL CULTURE IN THE WORLD. But, we are a very YOUNG culture that is still living the legacy of slavery because our MINDS are enslaved in many ways. While we set the trends, we fall back into this trap of FOLLOWING someone else -- off a cliff in many instances.

I ask, “CAN WE be the generation that lifts the consciousness of the world out of colorism?”. “WHY CAN'T IT BE?”.

Why CAN'T we, wear straight hair AND nappy hair depending on the season?
Why CAN'T we be lighter in the winter and darker in the summer?
Why CAN'T we shape shift the way the *rest* of nature does and BE that magic?
Not at the behest of a society that dictates, but out of celebration, and authenticity.

I am asking you, “CAN WE BE OUR MAGIC?”.

I'm finally ready to answer THE question...

The ONE question posed that I felt mattered...

“Why did I let that image go out that way?”

The answer is...

I DIDN'T "LET" it go out that way.

For all of the reasons outlined in this SongVersation.

1. What I put forth was different than many EXPECTED of me, because simply I'd changed.
2. The world has changed, people are looking for other things, "color trolling" is NO DOUBT a distinct construct of the social media era. When I left the public eye in 2009, I wasn't even really on twitter. one of the FIRST tweets I sent was from the island i'd ran away to.
3. The images WERE lightened, by the *process*, lights and makeup, but I didn't and STILL don't see it as *that* drastic.
4. This image translated into a digital format, took on many different looks depending on the device. In the final product, the subtle humanness of the skin and the shimmer was gone, it just looked flat and lightened.
5. Because my skin color consistently photographs so differently, it's normal for me to see myself in different shades.
6. My Mom is about, a skin type 4 (on the Fitzpatrick skin type scale), so seeing a "lighter me" is something my Soulbird team understood visually.
7. I was fighting a few COMPLETELY DIFFERENT battles.
8. Again, it wasn't the SHADE of my skin, it was the HEALTH of my skin.
9. I just don't SEE color like that. I mean I see it physically, but I don't associate it with better or worse.
10. We were all really just celebrating my growth and freedom.

There was no way to *just* TWEET these things to the "SkinGate2013" critics. How would a world that doesn't even see me as human accept this type of conversation? This IS my truth.

The challenge of bringing you into my world

THAT SAID, I want to take you into ANOTHER ASPECT OF MY WORLD! A Black Woman Artist in the American Music Industry. It is a VERY particular walk. BUT first we have to talk about being a Black Woman in America as a backdrop to that deeper conversation.

In Part 3, Section 2, I will talk about my REAL struggle and some of the most important lessons I've learned in my life.

[Click here to download Part 3, Section 2!](#)

