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THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND GENDER IN THE EXPERIENCES OF
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes the ways in which the intersections identities of race and gender informs African American women's experiences. Beginning with a historical overview of the systematic erasure of African American women's narratives from American history, the paper seeks to demonstrate the distorted view of African American women in the collective American conscious. State-sanctioned violence is focused on in order to demonstrate the specific dangers and challenges African American women face in activist work as well as interactions with police. Finally, analysis of texts authored by Black Feminists is used to offer a perspective on how to resist the mainstream negative images of black women in the United States.

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Chapter 1 Historical Overview

On May 22nd, 1962, Malcolm X declared, "The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman," (Rodriguez, 2016). This sentiment still rings true today, as black women arguably remain some of the most overlooked populations in The United States. There seems to be no place for black women in history textbooks, the media, or popular culture. This tradition of erasing black women from American history is not a new phenomenon. In order to better understand how black women fit into the 21st century in the United States, it is imperative to first examine U.S. history to understand how their narratives were carefully blocked out of America's collective memory.

By erasing the accomplishments of black women from the understanding of America's official history, Americans have successfully erased role models that young black girls could look up to as examples of how to evolve and grow in a society that disrespects them and refuses to protect them. Melissa Harris-Perry argues that this responsibility often falls on other black women who have to remind their daughters that women who looked like them accomplished more than the American collective conscious is willing to give them credit for. She points out that, "Families and educators prepare black children to meet racial hostility through a process of socialization meant to negate harmful images of blackness and replace them with role models of courage, resilience, and achievement," (102). This is a large task to take on, considering the incredible amount of contributions black women have made to their own communities as well as The United States as a whole, while still facing the constant barrage of negative images of

blackness utilized every day to force those contributions out of the public eye. This section of the text will seek to bring African American women's contributions to the forefront of memory, as well as answer the following question: What historical events contribute to the contemporary perception of black women and their place in the United States?

Slavery – Ownership of the Black, Female Body

Raped and denied the right to cry out in her pain, she has been named the culprit and called "loose," "hot-blooded," "wanton," "sultry," and "amoral." She has been used as the white man's sexual outhouse, and shamefully encouraged by her own ego-less man to persist in this function. –Abbey Lincoln, To Whom Will She Cry Rape? (Bambara, The Black Woman: An Anthology, 98)

The first boat carrying slaves stolen from the West Indies arrived in America in the year 1607, nearly two centuries before The United States was born. Throughout the legal existence of the Atlantic Slave Trade, nearly 388,000 enslaved people were brought to North America. They were treated as brood mares, forced to reproduce in order to expand their master's wealth and labor power. Of the 42 million African Americans living in the United States today, the majority are descended from less than half a million Africans (Gates, 2014). Despite the massive impact that the institution of slavery has had on the formation of the United States, modern discussions of slavery are often relegated to one short chapter in a high school textbook. Anything more, such as Michelle Obama's famous quote, "I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves," (Jacobson, 2016) sparks outrage amongst people who wish to forget such simple facts. Even Civil War reenactments, which aim to celebrate the events of a war fought over the

institution of slavery, fail to include accurate accounts of slavery and those who were affected by it. Just as an absence of education was used to manipulate slaves, a lack of education is now being used to systematically erase the truth about slavery from American history.

Part of this truth is that for the most part, male slaves and female slaves experienced slavery differently. Male slaves were more likely to be field hands, while female slaves were more likely to do domestic work such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for children of their masters. This division of labor had the primary goal of increasing profit. By keeping female slaves closer to the house, slave masters did not only create an environment in which sexual assault was easy to commit, but they also profited from it. The sexual assault of female slaves was completely legal. Under the laws of slavery, slaves were the property of their master. Slaveholders could treat them however they saw fit. It is this institution of slavery that marked the birth of state-sanctioned violence against black women.

From this tradition of sexual assault built into the structure of slavery the myth of the Jezebel was born. The Jezebel is still an easily recognizable typecast of African American women in modern society: she is sexually aggressive, promiscuous, and cares not for the consequences of her sexual behavior. In fact, she is the complete opposite of what the Cult of Domesticity (Victorian ideals based on a code of gender) prescribed for white women: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (Harris-Perry, 55). By pitting these ideas of white womanhood and black womanhood against each other, slave masters were able to justify sexual assault by claiming they had been seduced by female slaves. Blaming the victim gave slave masters' white wives license to place blame on female slaves rather than the perpetrators of sexual assault. This practice was not only beneficial to slave holders because it allowed them even more control over the female slaves' bodies, it also allowed them to force their female

slaves to reproduce. Most often, children born to an enslaved mother by a white father were treated harshly by the lady of the house and were either forced to labor in order to increase profits for the slave master, or were sold for profit in order to maintain positive relations between white family members and keep black mothers subservient.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl by Harriet Jacobs (published under the pseudonym of Linda Brent) highlights the perilous position of women forced to bare children to white men. Legally, children followed the status of the mother: a child borne to a female slave was destined for the same fate (117-118). Jacobs describes a scenario in which a true choice does not exist; she will either be raped by her owner, Dr. Flint, or engage in sex with another white man (Mr. Sands) in order to protect herself from the assault she knows is coming. Jacobs emphasizes her lack of choice when she writes:

Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares, and eluding the power of a hated tyrant; you never shuddered at the sound of his footsteps, and trembled within hearing of his voice. (86)

Even women who understand “the snares” Jacobs is trying to avoid struggle to understand the decision she has made, and she is shamed for using her sexuality as a tool to protect herself. After her two children are born, Jacobs spends several years hiding in inhuman conditions, occasionally risking what little freedom she has attained in order to implore Mr. Sands to free her children. Though Mr. Sands seems to be relatively kinder than Dr. Flint, his extended refusal to free the children functions to keep both Jacobs and her son and daughter in a state of arrested development. Jacobs is forced to live in a crawl space for seven years, and both

of her children suffer the various torments slavery inflicts on its victims, including being denied the education Mr. Sands had once promised. For her daughter Jacob expresses a very particular concern:

When they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own. (119)

Harriet Jacob's narrative demonstrates how enslaved women's sexuality was used as a weapon against them, and how their children were used as pawns to maintain the power of the slaveholders.

The sexual victimization of black women is still prevalent in society, as the myth of the Jezebel continues to erase the notion that black women can even be victims in the first place. Modern society may not use the same exact tactics that slaveholders used centuries ago, but has certainly adapted them to fit the modern age. Consider the average black girl who dreams of being a dancer. She has little to no role models in ballet slippers, tap shoes, or leotards, as those are the realm of the white female dancer in popular imagination. Her role models wear bikinis, stilettos, and thongs. They do not perform on a stage for a polite audience, but can rather be found in hot tubs and dance clubs, performing for the sexual pleasure of the men who employ her. Take the Radio City Music Hall Rockettes, for example. Although one of the most famous and revered dance troupes in the United States, the Rockettes didn't allow black women to join until 1987 (Lambert, 1987). The rule change that occurred in 1987 seems only to have further tokenized black women, as the Rockette's performance in the 2016 Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade featured only one black dancer out of thirty dancers. The black girl who dreams of being

a dancer has very few opportunities to fulfill her dream if she is unwilling to fulfill the role of the Jezebel imposed on her by centuries of white supremacy, patriarchy, and state-sanctioned violence.

Jane Crow – The Illusion of Abolition

When slavery was abolished, she exercised the very dubious prerogative of starving to death or working, for a most minimum wage, for the very people under whom she had previously been a slave. This proved to be a fine arrangement for the whites, since they were no longer obliged to provide both her and her family with room and board, but had only to pay her as little as was humanly possible for the privilege of waiting on them hand and foot for sixteen to twenty hours a day. – Fran Sanders, Dear Black Men (Bambara, 87)

After the Civil War, once the southern United States had been destroyed and then restored through Reconstruction, when the enslaved peoples who made up the majority of the southern states' labor force were freed, white people sought out new ways to control, oppress, and profit off of black people. Quickly, states began to add new laws to their constitutions, detailing the ways in which black people and white people would be legally segregated. Public places, such as buses, restaurants, stores, and schools, were effectively segregated on the grounds that they would be, "separate, but equal", a sentiment which did nothing to truly improve the conditions of the public spaces black people were permitted to occupy.

Beyond segregation, other issues arose. African Americans were offered nothing in the way of reparations for generations of forced servitude. Their education was persistently lacking,

their skills did not always transfer smoothly to gainful employment, they had little to no economic power. Thus, African Americans as a group were forced to remain dependent on whites for survival, as white people could afford to hire help. Sharecropping during this time period was a common phenomenon: whites with extensive farmlands would essentially “rent” pieces of land to black families in exchange for the majority of the profits the black families reaped from the land. The model of sharecropping is debatably more insidious than slavery itself, as whites were no longer responsible for ensuring the survival of African Americans. They had nothing to gain from preventing starvation and everything to gain by keeping black families indebted to them so much that the scenario barely resembled freedom.

During the period of Jim Crow laws, which lasted from the end of the 19th century to the late half of the 20th century, African American women held a unique position both in the family and the community. The expectations for African American women were exhausting and pointed at self-reliance and unconditional sacrifice for the greater good. According to *Living With Jim Crow*, a book based on interviews of African American women growing up in the Jim Crow South, expectations included, but were not limited to: obtaining an education as best as your family’s situation would allow, maintaining respectability expectations (chastity, sobriety, mindfulness, etc.), working both inside and outside the home (often from a young age), putting all wages earned back into the family, and eventually, pursuing careers that served the community such as teaching or nursing. These expectations left black women with few choices and little room for mistakes. In particular, the expectation that African American women work outside the home left them more vulnerable to blatant racism and outright oppression. It forced them into a double consciousness, which dictated how they navigated the world both inside and outside the home. “Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social

classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals, and tempt the mind to pretence or revolt, to hypocrisy or radicalism,” (Du Bois, 85).

The pervasiveness of the phenomenon of black women performing domestic labor for wealthy white families was demonstrated in the 2011 film *The Help*. Set in Mississippi in 1960, the film tells the story of a white woman, Skeeter (played by Emma Stone) who sets out to interview black female domestic laborers and reveal the oppressive qualities of such an arrangement. She interviews several black women (Aibileen Clark, played by Viola Davis, and Minny Jackson, played by Octavia Spencer, to name a few), compiling the information into a book that calls out the behavior of racist whites and shakes up the entire town. The film demonstrates several facets of the effects of Jim Crow on the lives of black women: degrading labor (such as changing children’s dirty diapers because the white mother finds this kind of labor to be below her), dehumanizing treatment (such as the proposal that white families employing black women build separate toilets outside the house to avoid cross-contamination), and the distrust of whiteness (evidenced by the black women’s disapproval of Skeeter and her project).

The Civil Rights Movement – Picking Sides

As the movement toward the liberation of women grows, the Black woman will find herself, if she is at all sensitive to the issues of feminism, in a serious dilemma. For the Black movement is primarily concerned with the liberation of Blacks as a class and does not promote women’s liberation as a priority. Indeed, the movement is for the most part spearheaded by males. The feminist movement, on the other hand, is concerned with the oppression of women as a class, but is almost totally composed of white females. Thus the

Black woman finds herself on the outside of both political entities, in spite of the fact that she is the object of both forms of oppression. –Kay Lindsey, The Black Woman as a Woman (Bambara, 103)

When most Americans think of the Civil Rights movement, a few key names come to mind. Perhaps Martin Luther King Jr. comes first, then Malcolm X. Each of these key figures in the fight for civil rights has an entire course dedicated to them at The Pennsylvania State University. African American Studies 146 and 147 allow students a full semester to study the legacies of these men. Meanwhile, the entire history of African American women is condensed into a single course: African American Studies 101, “The African American Woman” (African American Studies). Not only does this course title exemplify the singular history assigned to black women, the course itself demonstrates that there is apparently just as much to say about one African American man as there is to say about all African American women.

The Civil Rights Movement is typically defined as the period of 1954-1968, when activists worked to end racial segregation and discrimination against people of color. It’s convenient to relegate such a pivotal moment in American history to such a small period of time. The narrative typically perpetuated in mainstream settings is, “there was racism in the United States, African Americans protested, and the United States graciously ended racism and everybody became equal.” The public history of this time period also emphasizes heavily the contributions of men, while women activists and key players in the movement tend to fade into the background. The truth is that women were leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, participating fully every step of the way, or at least as much as the gender codes of the time period allowed. The other truth is that African American women had a choice to make: the Second Wave Feminist Movement was born in the early 1960’s and lasted through the early

80's. Because feminism and civil rights acted as two separate movements, African American women had to decide whether to prioritize their race or their gender. These women fall through the cracks on every front of public history from this time period: The Civil Rights Movement is owned by black men and the second wave of feminism is owned by white women.

What little memory exists of black women's contributions during this time period is also effectively skewed by attempts to downplay the Civil Rights Movement. History textbooks celebrate Rosa Parks for her refusal to give up her seat to a white person on a bus, but neglect to mention the careful organization surrounding this act of dissent. First of all, Rosa Parks was not the first African American woman arrested for resisting segregated seating on public transportation. On March 2nd, 1955, a fifteen-year-old NAACP Youth Council member named Claudette Colvin was arrested for a similar offense, a full nine months before Rosa Parks' resistance. Colvin's resistance is nearly forgotten not only because of her young age, but because she became pregnant outside of wedlock shortly after her arrest, making her an undesirable face for the movement. History textbooks also treat the Montgomery Bus Boycott (a movement resulting from Parks' arrest) as a short boycott that brought attention to the issue of segregation and effectively put an end to it. In reality, the boycott lasted over a year, and put a significant financial strain on the profits collected by the public transportation system before it came to a close. The retelling of these events paint Rosa Parks as a tired woman, simply wanting to rest on her commute home, and ignores the power of her (and Colvin's) acts of resistance. This is only one example of the erasure of black women's contributions to American history.

Carrying Over – History’s Effect on Contemporary Racial and Gender Dynamics

*When the experts (white or black, male) turn their attention to the Black woman, the reports get murky, for they usually clump the men and women together and focus so heavily on what white people have done to the psyches of Blacks, that what Blacks have done to and for themselves is overlooked, and what distinguishes the men from the women forgotten. –Toni Cade Bambara, Preface, *The Black Woman, An Anthology* (2)*

From the moment the first enslaved African woman set foot on American soil in 1607, American history has served to discredit, dehumanize, and downplay African American women’s roles in society. Four centuries later, those interested in understanding how African American women have shaped the nation must not only understand the ways in which a white supremacist, patriarchal society manipulates and erases these narratives, they must also piece together snippets of history from sources outside of the mainstream. As Toni Cade Bambara points out, the history of African American women is distorted by the perspectives of white and black men alike. The perspectives of white women are often no more reliable. The burden of creating a comprehensive history of African American women then falls on the shoulders of those women, and it is them to whom our attention should be turned. However, the white supremacist and patriarchal society of the modern United States still actively seeks to silence the voices of African American women through thinly-veiled racism aimed at forcing black women to suffer in silence and a prison industrial complex that has merely replaced the institution of slavery.

One of the most effective tools used to silence African American women is the myth of the Sapphire. This myth is “one that characterizes them as shrill, loud, argumentative, irrationally angry, and verbally abusive,” (Harris-Perry, 87). This stereotype dates back to the early 1930’s,

when the popular radio show *Amos n' Andy* first aired. The character of Sapphire, a black woman whose main character trait was anger, served to pave the way for this representation of black women that still exists today. Modern reality television shows, such as VH1's popular series, *Love and Hip Hop*, continue to profit off the myth of the Sapphire. By promising African American women their fifteen minutes of fame, shows such as this capitalize off of female competition for male attention where tensions run high and emotions are exaggerated to the point of caricature. When "Sapphires" are one of few portrayals of black women on television, black women are forced to carefully police their emotions in order to avoid falling into the stereotype of the angry black woman.

Emotional responses, however, especially to systematic oppression are at the root of any successful activist movement. Many activists today like to cite the phrase, "If you're not angry, you're not paying attention." Certainly, if your emotions don't move you to action, what will? Black women are precariously positioned in the double-bind of their oppression, then. If they broadcast their emotions about the social and political environments in which they live in their activism, they risk being typecast as angry black women, always angry about *something*. If they choose to police their emotions to avoid this stereotype, they lose the basis of their platform. African American women's path to liberation and equality is a very narrow path to walk.

Chapter 2 Contemporary Reactions to State Sanctioned Violence Against Black Women

Black Lives Matter is a unique contribution that goes beyond extrajudicial killings of Black people by police and vigilantes. It goes beyond the narrow nationalism that can be prevalent within some Black communities, which merely call on Black people to love

Black, live Black and buy Black, keeping straight cis Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all. Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements. It is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement.

–Alicia Garza, A HerStory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement

The #BlackLivesMatter movement is a reaction to the white supremacist patriarchal beliefs the United States was founded on. Founded after the murder of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African American boy at the hands of George Zimmerman, the movement has had a plethora of issues to focus on. At the center of its focus is positively affirming the value of African Americans that traditional black liberation movements have neglected. However, state-sanctioned violence against black Americans is the typical focus of conversations surround #BlackLivesMatter. This violence takes many forms: allowing “vigilante justice” such as George Zimmerman’s act of murder to go unpunished, forgiving and protecting police officers whose racial bias is seen as justification for killing unarmed black citizens, and supporting government and corporation profit off of the mass incarceration of people of color are just a few examples of the ways violence against African Americans continues to be a prevalent and accepted part of American culture. This section of the text will seek to answer the following question, “What are the modern-day dynamics that work to erase the narratives of black women who are the victims of police violence?”

The Strong Black Woman – Silencing Black Female Voices

If they ask you how you are
don't say stolen. Don't say forgotten, passed over,
ignored. Don't you dare say Orphan.
Don't say beaten by the system
oppressed and disturbed
and don't you dare say disappointed
don't you dare say damaged.

Smile.

Smile with all of your teeth, even the rotting ones.

Even the rotting ones.

-Yrsa Daley-Ward, Fight (Patel, 2017)

The #BlackLivesMatter movement was founded by three African American women, Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrice Cullors (Garza, 2016). The attempts to appropriate the movement from the original vision these women shared have been extensive and unwavering. From the emergence of slogans like All Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter from white Americans who refuse to recognize the issues at hand, to the media's inability to focus on anything beyond police shootings of African American men (and the media's inability to focus on the crimes committed by the police in favor of rhetoric that demonizes black men for simply existing), it has become clear that the resistance to black liberation extends far beyond ignorance and is in fact a systematic maneuver intended to tell African Americans to "just get over it".

As Melissa Harris Perry points out, the rhetoric of “just get over it” is so far-reaching that even African Americans are inclined at times to agree with sentiments that echo the phrase. Perry, using a scale she calls “get-over-it”, analyzed the causes and effects of black people agreeing with phrases such as, “many groups have worked their way up without special favors, and black people should do the same,” (208). The most relevant of her findings highlights a specific narrative imposed on, and consequently accepted by, several generations of black women. This narrative is that of the “strong black woman”, or the black woman who sacrifices her own physical and emotional needs in favor of anticipating those needs in others. Perry argues that subscribing to the image of the strong black woman creates a situation in which black women must practice self-reliance, an ideology which emphasizes self-sacrifice and independence (186). This ideology leaves little room for the critique of social structures which place African American women at a disadvantage, leaving them vulnerable to rhetoric that demands that African Americans take responsibility for their own oppression and victimization. While the “strong black woman” ideology certainly has positive attributes, such as empowering black women to be tough and independent, it is also incredibly problematic and pervasive. Harris-Perry argues that, “While all individuals are publicly judged by their actions, the strong black woman imperative is unusual in that it requires tremendous personal fortitude from a group with few structural resources,” (185). It is clear that the idea of the strong black woman has the power to affect black women’s involvement in activism and how people around her may perceive that involvement.

Police Brutality and Violence Through a Gendered Lens

You don't have to dig deep to see how police brutality is a women's issue—whether it's the terrifying way that Oklahoma City police officer Daniel Holtzclaw preyed on black women in low-income sections of the city, or the murder of seven-year-old Aiyana Stanley-Jones inside her Detroit home. We know that girls and women of color are also dying. The question is: does anyone care? –Marcia Chatelain, Women and Black Lives Matter (Asoka)

The mainstream narrative in the United States surrounding police brutality is controlled primarily by news and media outlets. Currently, the media's focus on police brutality against black men is framing the issue in a way that ignores the unique challenges black women have faced when dealing with police. These gender-specific risks include, but aren't limited to, sexual harassment, sexual assault, endangerment of children in their care, and strip searches (Asoka, 55).

One example of how black women experience police brutality differently than black men, is the case of Daniel Holtzclaw. Holtzclaw, a police officer working in Oklahoma City, took advantage of his position by running background checks on black women in low income areas and using incriminating information to coerce/force them to have sex with him. A total of thirteen African American women came forward to say that they had been victims of Holtzclaw's terrifying tactics, and he was convicted of eighteen crimes which yielded a 236-year prison sentence.

Another example is the murder of Tarika Wilson, a 26-year-old mother who was shot in her home by a police officer who fired his weapon into a bedroom where Wilson and her six children were hiding. Wilson died from her injuries and her one year old son (whom she was

holding in her arms at the time of the shooting) was injured, later having to have a finger amputated. Officer Joseph Chavalia, who recklessly opened fire on a young mother and her children, was cleared of all criminal charges and is still allowed to work as a police officer (News One Staff, 2010).

Violence against black women at the hands of police officers is a constant threat which further endangers victims of other crimes who require help from the police. For example, an African American woman who is the victim of domestic violence may refrain from calling the police for help because it's likely that the police will escalate rather than diffuse the situation. Consider 48-year-old Yvette Smith, an African American woman in Texas, who was shot by police when she answered the door. The police had been called to the home to resolve an altercation between two men in the home, and claimed that Smith had answered the door with a gun. That statement was later retracted as it became clear that Smith was in fact unarmed (Edwards, 2014). Rather than completing the task at hand (conflict resolution) with caution and decorum, police officers murdered an unarmed black woman at her own front door. This illustrates the constant threat of danger in police interactions with black women: who do you call for help when the police have the power to murder you first and ask questions later?

Black Transgender Women and Gender Policing

When I was perceived as a black man I became a threat to public safety. When I was dressed as myself, it was my safety that was threatened. -Laverne Cox (Top 25 Quotes)

One of the most vulnerable groups of black women affected by the issue of police brutality and state sanctioned violence is transgender women. Their vulnerability stems from a range of issues: difficulty finding employment, difficulty securing housing, lack of emotional support systems and lack of access to healthcare. These are just a few examples. Many black transgender women find themselves homeless, unemployed, or imprisoned. Some are forced to participate in survival sex work, a phenomenon which arises out of economic desperation (Graham, 280).

Due to all of these factors, transgender women of color are more likely to have frequent interactions with police. These interactions range from unpleasant to fatal:

Transgender women are framed by law enforcement agents as not only the ultimate gender transgressors, but also as overly sexualized, as indicated by the fact that they are pervasively profiled as sex workers and routinely subject to sexual abuse by police officers. They are also frequently subject to sexualized verbal abuse – officers regularly call transgender women of color, “fags,” “whores,” “sluts,” “bitches,” and “prostitutes” when they encounter them on the street. (Ritchie, 144)

This targeted abuse is deeply rooted in the need to maintain the status quo by enforcing societal rules about gender, with the additional layer of overt racism.

#SayHerName

Aiyana Jones, say her name

Aiyana Jones, say her name

Aiyana Jones, say her name

Aiyana Jones, won't you say her name?

Sandra Bland, say her name

Sandra Bland, say her name

Sandra Bland, say her name

Sandra Bland, won't you say her name?

-Janelle Monáe, Hell You Talmbout (Janelle Monáe and Wondaland Records)

On January 21st, 2017, millions of women around the world gathered in various locations in a demonstration of solidarity and resistance to the sexism that pervades every society. At the main Women's March in Washington D.C., singer and actress Janelle Monáe took the stage to debut her new song *Hell You Talmbout*. The song included a segment in which Monáe called out the names of various black men and women who have died at the hands of police officers in the United States. The audience was encouraged to respond, "say his/her name". The moving performance raised awareness of the #SayHerName movement which was started in 2015 by the African American Policy Forum.

The #SayHerName movement is aimed at bringing police brutality against black women into the public eye. Their website states, "The #SayHerName movement responds to increasing

calls for attention to police violence against Black women by offering a resource to help ensure that Black women's stories are integrated into demands for justice, policy responses to police violence, and media representations of victims of police brutality." The website underlines this goal by presenting several examples of black women who have been the victims of police brutality and placing their names in bold font to emphasize their humanity.

Chapter 3 Moving Forward: Black Feminist Perspectives

In 1851, at the Women's Convention in Akron Ohio, Sojourner Truth introduced a concept that would later be named "intersectionality". Her speech, now known as, "Ain't I a Woman?" sought to demonstrate the ways in which African American women experienced misogyny differently than white women did because of racism. Several anecdotes are at work in her speech highlighting the various levels in which Sojourner Truth's race and gender identities and the way they intersected informed her experiences with discrimination.

On the issue of being treated like a lady Truth notes: "Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman?" (P2) On the issue of motherhood she references that cruel tactics of slavery: "I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?" (P2) Finally, on the argument that men should be treated better because Christ was a man, Truth points out: "Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him," (P4).

One of the most well-known examples of early black feminism, this speech continues to bring meaning to the discussion of intersecting identities today. The term "intersectionality" was

first coined in 1989 by Kimberle Crenshaw in her essay, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*. The necessity of using an intersectional lens, or a point of view which takes into account the intersecting forms of oppressions in the lives of African American women, is stressed when Crenshaw asserts that, “Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated,” (140).

Intersectionality is one of the key principles that informs black feminist thought, taking into account not only race and gender, but a broad range of identities such as class, sexuality, gender identity, religion, physical ability, citizenship, language, etc. This section of the paper will place the same emphasis on intersectionality when seeking to answer the question, “How can black feminist theory be applied to issues of systematic erasure of black women’s experiences and state-sanctioned violence?”

Black Feminism in the 1970s

The new world that we are attempting to create must destroy oppression of any type. The value of this new system will be determined by the status of the person who has low man on the totem pole. Unless women in any enslaved nation are completely liberated, the change cannot really be called a revolution. If the Black woman has to retreat to the position she occupied before the armed struggle, the whole movement and the whole struggle will have retreated in terms of truly freeing the colonized population. –Frances Beale, Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female (Bambara, 121)

In the mid 1970's a group of black feminists in Boston began meeting to develop their own politics and participate in political activism. They were called The Combahee River Collective, named for the guerilla action that Harriet Tubman organized in 1863 which successfully freed 750 slaves. This was the only military action coordinated and led by a woman in the history of the United States (Collective, 210). In April of 1977, The Combahee River Collective released a statement outlining what they understood their politics to address: the historical context of black feminist thought, the necessity of valuing black women as individuals, the problems that arise in organizing black feminists, and issues that black feminism seeks to tackle.

This document sheds tremendous light on the workings of black clearly explaining the need for intersectionality at two different points, the first being in reference to the Black Liberation movement:

The reaction of Black men to feminism has been notoriously negative. They are, of course, even more threatened than Black women by the possibility that Black feminists might organize around our own needs. They realize that they might not only lose valuable

and hardworking allies in their struggles but that they might also be forced to change their habitually sexist ways of interacting with and oppressing Black women. Accusations that Black feminism divides the Black struggle are powerful deterrents to the growth of an autonomous Black women's movement. (216)

The second references the white feminist movement:

One issue that is of major concern to us and that we have begun to publicly address is racism within the white women's movement. As Black feminists we are made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism, which requires among other things that they have a more than superficial comprehension of race, color, and black history and culture. Eliminating racism in the white women's movement is by definition work for white women to do, but we will continue to speak to and demand accountability on this issue. (218)

These assertions reaffirm what has already been argued: African American women have been displaced from movements that fail to act intersectionally, focusing on issues of either race *or* gender. The Combahee River Collective makes it glaringly obvious that their work is hindered by sexism from their men and racism from their sisters. For swift progress to be made on any of the issues previously discussed in this paper, there can be no doubt that eliminating biases from social justice movements is an absolute must. If we are to end the systematic erasure of black women's narratives from our collective American consciousness, we must first stop erasing them from movements that claim interest in their wellbeing.

Black Feminist Thought at the End of the Twentieth Century

This time, as I listened to her talk over the stretch of one long night, she made vivid without knowing it what is perhaps the most critical fact of my existence – that definition of me, of her and millions like us, formulated by others to serve out their fantasies, a definition we have to combat at an unconscionable cost to the self and even use, at times, in order to survive; the cause of so much shame and rage as well as, oddly enough, a source of pride: simply, what it has meant, what it means, to be a Black woman in America. –Paule Marshall, Reena (Bambara, 20)

The 1980s and 1990s saw a flourishing of black feminist literature as writers like Kimberle Crenshaw, Audre Lorde, and Patricia Hill-Collins began publishing groundbreaking pieces that sought to distinguish black feminist thought from other social justice movements and clearly outline the goals and beliefs of black feminists in the United States. These were risky endeavors, as Patricia Hill Collins points out. She reports that she waited until after she received tenure to write and publish *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (No Guarantees, 2349).

These authors' texts have various unifying characteristics, such as recurring themes of resistance to patriarchal, white-supremacist power structures, even those that exist within well-meaning social justice movements, as well as self-care, self-love, and self-definition. More simply put, each author emphasizes actions that occur at the group level as well as the individual level. In the words of Patricia Hill Collins, "Black feminist work portrays African-American women as individuals and as a group struggling toward empowerment within an overarching matrix of domination," (*Black Feminist Thought*, 203). The texts then allow for a higher level of

accessibility by describing actions that account for the intersection of race and gender in black women's lives.

Patricia Hill Collins works to make political activism more accessible by pointing out the barriers that black women face in a society that doesn't wish to hear their voices. In the chapter titled, "Rethinking Black Women's Activism", she analyzes the emphasis on labor unions and political parties, both fields dominated by white men and viewed as "fundamental mechanisms for working class activism". According to Collins, because these institutions have systematically barred black women from participating, black women's activism is often overlooked and misrepresented as an overall lack of participation (Black Feminist Thought, 202). By recognizing political acts outside of classic ideas regarding activism as political acts, such as "a Black mother who may be unable to articulate her political ideology but who on a daily basis contests school policies harmful to her children," (Black Feminist Thought, 203), the historical view of African American women's participation in American history may become more inclusive and celebrated. By changing the narrative of what constitutes activism, once-vanished pieces of African American women's history may be brought back to the forefront of the nation's collective memories.

In terms of individual acts of resistance, Collins emphasizes the importance of a self-defined black female consciousness – one that does not submit to the intersecting oppressions she may face but rather overrides these ideas in favor of self-respect. She points out that stereotypes about black women do not define the black woman:

U.S. Black women's ideas and actions force a rethinking of the concept of hegemony, the notion that Black women's objectification as the Other is so complete that we become willing participants in our own oppression. Most African-American women simply do not

define themselves as mammies, matriarchs, welfare mothers, mules, or sexually denigrated women. The matrix of domination in which these controlling images are embedded is much less cohesive or uniform than imagined. (Black Feminist Thought, 99).

Collins argues that in order for this self-definition to be its most productive, it must come with a clear voice. The previously mentioned methods of silencing black women's voices make sense; maintaining the status quo requires the voice of the individual and the group to be erased so that issues of oppression can continue to be swept under the rug. Though the endeavor requires strength and patience, creating a racial identity outside of mainstream narratives about black women is necessary for black women's survival, empowerment, and social class mobility.

Collins emphasizes this point when she says, "For U.S. Black women, constructed knowledge of self emerges from the struggle to replace controlling images with self-defined knowledge deemed personally important, usually knowledge essential to Black women's survival," (Black Feminist Thought, 100). The black feminist's power arises from her own ability to see herself as she is, rather than as society tells her she is.

Where Are We Now?

I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own.

—Audre Lorde, *The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism* (Lorde, 133)

The most recent presidential election has served to demonstrate just how little progress has been made in eradicating racism, sexism, and bigotry. It has also made the issues of white supremacy and misogyny in the United States glaringly obvious. With Donald Trump as president, acts of violence against minority groups have skyrocketed due to rhetoric that

normalizes bigotry. President Trump has also shamelessly made statements that are degrading to women and which condone sexual assault, despite his claims that nobody respects women more than he does. To many Americans, these issues were unsettling and swayed them to vote for Hillary Clinton. For many others, these issues didn't seem to be deal breakers in the decision of who to vote for.

President Trump did not win the popular vote, yet received enough votes from the electoral college to win the election overall. Voting statistics paint a very divided picture: 94 percent of black women who voted chose Hillary Clinton, while 53 percent of white women who voted chose Donald Trump (Rogers, 2016). Black women were justifiably upset by this information. A tweet from Mikki Kendall conveys this feeling well: "Trump wouldn't have done so well at the polls without the votes of white women. Many of whom would probably tell you're they're feminists". Internalized misogyny on the parts of white women combined with the resurgence of white supremacy was the perfect recipe for abandoning black women once again.

Can there be any kind of reconciliation between white feminism (that particular brand of feminism which has been championed by middle-class, cis-gender, heterosexual, white women) and black feminism? That's up to white women. As long as racism is swept under the rug, or shoved aside as a problem for black people to solve alone, or normalized through microaggressions and "jokes", black women will rightfully choose not to collaborate with white feminists. It is not enough to say sorry or to act dismayed at election results, because these actions are empty and will produce no results except to continue demonstrating to black women that white feminists cannot be bothered to care. In "An Open Letter to White Liberal Feminists" Rhon Manigault-Bryant asks,

How will you interrogate and sustain your recent enlightened perspective about how white women remain complicit in the oppressions of so many non-white folks, and even themselves? ... *Who will you be in this hour? What will you do to enact change and with whom will you partner to do it?*

Black women should not and cannot be solely responsible for fighting oppression. It's time for white feminists to challenge white supremacy so that a truly intersectional feminist movement may be born.

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