“Sisters in the Collective Struggle”: Sounds of Silence and Reflections on the Unspoken Assault on Black Females in Modern America

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Abstract
As the conversation on the state of modern Black America deepens in the wake of the Trayvon Martin tragedy and increased violence affecting young Black males, acknowledging historical and present structures that serve to disenfranchise the Black community remain largely focused on boys and men. Yet, to fully examine the impact of White supremacy, patriarchy, and violence on Black lives, it is necessary to remove the culture of silence that permeates the discussion of how oppression is experienced by Black females. In this article, I explore the ways in which society encourages misogynoir (anti-Black misogyny) by reinforcing the marginalization of Black females and their status as the keepers of Black life. A dialogue about Black life, which does not speak to the troubles of Black women, is incomplete. Giving voice to their struggles, in the context of discussing the collective Black experience, is a part of the larger fight for peace, justice, and equality.

Keywords
misogynoir, Black motherhood, social invisibility, Black women, assault

Introduction
For me, the summer of 2013 will always be the summer that the fate of Black boys was elevated to the nation’s consciousness. It was the summer that I was riveted by the Trayvon Martin murder trial and the media attention surrounding the increased intra-racial violence in Chicago disproportionately affecting Black male youth. Everyone from conservative TV show pundits to civil rights activists to the president weighed in on the state of Black males in America. Oppression and marginalization were palpable then, and nothing made me feel more outraged, victimized, and under attack for my blackness than the acquittal of George Zimmerman for Trayvon’s death.

I found it noteworthy, however, that while the case was essentially all about men (Trayvon—the victim; George—his killer; and the White—all male defense team), the strategy of abusing and demeaning Black women became central to the trial. The prosecution’s main witness, Rachel Jeantel (Trayvon’s best friend and the last person to talk with him while he was alive), took a beating on the stand as the defense mercilessly cross-examined her. Making fun of her use of Black Vernacular English and her inability to read cursive, it appeared that they sought not only to discredit but also embarrass her. In the end, to prove Zimmerman’s self-defense claim, attorneys Don West and Mark O’Mara disrespected Rachel in every way possible: portraying her as an immature, inarticulate, hoops-wearing, big, dark skinned, Black woman with “attitude” who was thoroughly unrelatable to the jury.

Likewise, instead of treating her with the customary care afforded to the mother of a slain teen, the prosecution repeatedly pressed Sybrina Fulton (Trayvon’s mother) in various ways about her child’s past behavior and whether or not she was mistaken about her son’s voice on a police recording screaming for help. Sybrina displayed steely determination throughout the trial and didn’t cry once in court. This was not surprising, given that most Black women know all too well the feeling of having to act strong in public. We also understand that while White women can cry and generally get empathy, when Black women (who are often regarded as less than human and less feminine than White women) cry, our tears just make others uncomfortable. In the end, the defense disrespected Sybrina too; painting her baby boy as a troublemaking,
Weed smoking thug who was looking for trouble and responsible for his own death.

Social and mainstream media took great pleasure in participating in the misogyny (anti-Black misogyny) that emerged from the trial. Rachel was the subject of brutal attacks, jokes, and numerous suggestions that she learn how to speak, lose weight, and get a makeover. Simultaneously, questions about Sybrina’s parenting choices and ability were limitless. In the end, George was acquitted and went free to kill another Black child while Black women were made into a joke. And outside of select conversations in progressive feminist circles, the attacks on Rachel and Sybrina went largely unnoticed, particularly by Black men and the media. Activists and commentators continued calling attention to the state of race relations and Black America for the rest of the summer but did not mention or include the experiences of Black women, whose lives not only continue to be ravaged by direct and indirect violence by people of all colors but who also struggle to navigate the intersecting identities of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1993).

Several months later, in early 2014, Michael Dunn was also absolved of the responsibility for murdering a Black teen (Jordan Davis) in the name of self-defense. Just days before the verdict, President Obama announced a new initiative to help the lives of minority men called “My Brother’s Keeper.” The program’s purpose is to bring foundations and companies together to test a range of strategies to support young men of color in an effort to keep them in school and out of the criminal justice system. As the conversation deepens about Trayvon, Jordan, and other Black victims of White and state aggression, something is fundamentally missing from the dialogue. The irrevocable fact remains that there is a deafening silence surrounding the fact that Black female personhood is also under attack.

We have heard the names over and over again: Sean Bell, Abner Louima, Amadou Diallo, Oscar Grant. And now Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis. The impact of White supremacy and violence on these young lives is tragic. And yet, what of the slew of Black females whose lives are also affected by physical, mental, structural violence and racism? Rekia Boyd, 22 years old, unarmed but shot and killed by an off-duty police officer in a park in Chicago. Renisha McBride, 19, also unarmed, who knocked on a door to seek help after a car accident only to be shot in the face with a shotgun by the homeowner. Hadiya Pendelton, a 15-year-old honor student huddled with friends for shelter on a rainy day, only to be shot in the back and killed, a week after she performed at the second inauguration of Barack Obama. Marissa Alexander, 33, sentenced to 20 years in prison for firing a warning shot into the air at her abusive husband who was not hurt. While we engage in the business of discussing our historical present and its links to the Black national condition, we need to face the hard truth: Something is also fundamentally wrong when Black women can be killed or penalized for minding their own business or defending their lives. And more importantly, the overwhelming muteness about it suggests that there is much work to do to acknowledge the realities faced by Black females so as to develop a collective understanding of Black women and men’s freedom as intertwined. The following is an exploration of the ways in which society reinforces the marginalization of Black females and their status as the keepers of Black life. Giving voice to our struggles, in the context of discussing Black experiences, is a part of the larger fight for peace, justice, and equality.

The Invisibility Factor

Social psychology research demonstrates that when racism is investigated, it focuses on the experiences of Black men as its targets, whereas sexism is investigated as a White female phenomenon (Sesko & Biernat, 2009). Subordinate-male target hypothesis argues that Black males experience racism more than females, whereas ethnic-prominence hypothesis suggests that race trumps gender thereby posit ing that women experience marginalization due to race but not gender. But such a limited view does not reflect reality nor does it allow for understanding the intersections of multiple dimensions of identity like race and gender that Black women experience.

Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. And so, when the practices expound identity as “woman” or “person of color” as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling. (Crenshaw, 1993, p. 1242)

Furthermore, research on stereotypes demonstrates that Black women experience both different and similar stereotypes in comparison to Black men and White women—such as being seen as masculine and aggressive (as compared with White women) and being lazy, hostile, and uneducated (similar to Black men; Sesko & Biernat, 2009). These findings are helpful to understand that Black women are not regarded in the same ways that other women nor Black men are—situating them in a unique location where they become rendered invisible. “Invisibility is typically defined as an absence of, or erroneous representations of, oppressed groups and/or individuals” (Sesko & Biernat, 2009, p. 357). This means that while Black women are not literally invisible to others, persistent stereotypical labels allow for others to fail to identify them as individuals and to ignore their voices. Sesko and Biernat’s (2009) study, which examined the ability of Whites to recognize Black women’s faces and speech contributions, found that Whites were least likely to recognize or identify Black women correctly when compared to other Black women and saw them as interchangeable. Similarly in conversation, their comments were
confused with those of other Black women. This indicates that Black women are often socially invisible and are more likely than Black men or White men and women to go unnoticed by others in a group or social situation (Burkley, 2010). This research also begins to explain some of the silence and invisibility surrounding Black women’s experiences in the conversation about the state of Black America in national discourse.

From Cradle to Grave: Black Motherhood Under Attack

An important connection to acknowledge regarding Black women in the discussion on our collective experience is their status as mothers. As the vessels that bring Black life into the world, Black mothers have always been the bedrock of their families. Yet, they have always faced a complex duality—one that within their own families and Afrocentric cultures has always revered them while Western culture has simultaneously reviled and subjugated them (Abdullah, 2012). According to Nah Dove (2002), African cultures dating back to the beginning of civilization produced mother-centered societies, whereas European cultures produced patriarchal, male-centered societies. Mother-centered meant that all inheritance (both cultural and physical) was derived from the mother’s lineage. “The mother is viewed as the bringer of life, the conduit for the spiritual regeneration of the ancestors, the bearer of culture, and the center of social organization” (Dove, 1998, p. 4). Yet, even while mothers took a predominant role in these cultures, they espoused a feminist praxis that sought to equally respect and acknowledge male and female contributions to the family. Even though this arrangement predates the modern concepts of feminism and justice, there was a sense of balance present in these families where neither gender had total control nor sought to control the other. Dove suggests that it was through contact with European “father-led societies” via colonialism and slavery that African cultures became exposed to patriarchy and the values of male-centered control over women, the erosion of the social order and mother-centered values that resulted in the debasement and marginalization of women. One need only look at the history of Black women in the United States as proof of this.

Black women have been victimized throughout the history of the United States—dating back to the first contact with the “New World” via the Transatlantic Slave trade. Black wombs were used for the sole purpose of bringing bodies into the world for labor and to make White slave owners rich, rendering any choices in childbirth or childrearing effectively non-existent. And while Black women were also producing children who would inevitably be stolen and forcibly entered into the labor market via chattel slavery, they were also simultaneously forced to work on plantations and be sexually available to both Black and White men. Black females lives, bodies, and children were not their own. Given that despicable and depraved reality, it is not completely shocking to hear stories of desperation and a refusal to submit—like Black mothers who threw themselves and their children overboard in the Middle Passage to escape enslavement. Another similar example is the tale of Margaret “Peggy” Garner from Kentucky, who in 1856 killed her 2-year-old daughter with a knife rather than return her to a life of slavery (McWhirter, 1998). This urgent aspect of Black motherhood cannot be ignored. Black mothers were so traumatized by the impacts of colonialism and slavery that in some instances they actively chose death for their children. Aside from the deep visceral emotional reaction, this knowledge evokes, it is quite compelling. What other group of people in the history of this country has been forced to make that kind of choice?

In more recent history, Black mothers have been devalued and marginalized in modern society through harmful stereotypes that serve to delegitimize and reinforce racial and gender oppression but also through specific laws that continue to limit and repress Black women’s autonomy. The 1980s and the election of Ronald Reagan brought about the image of the welfare queen—a nefarious (and unidentified), lazy Black mother who was single, had too many children, was not working and living off federal assistance. As society somehow needed to become “protected” from said welfare queen, it seemed perfectly appropriate to enact welfare-to-work laws (otherwise known as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996) which restricted cash support to needy families, made welfare more difficult to obtain and forced single parent households (many of whom in the Black community were headed by females) to look for work. This act took the war on Black mothers one step further by increasing the perception that while it was acceptable for middle-class White women to stay at home with their children, poor Black women with kids needed to get out, quit living off the government and find themselves a job.

In conjunction with welfare reform, which has proven effective in stereotyping Black women and limiting the choices of poor Black women with children, the emergence of the pro-life movement has proven equally stifling for Black women. Critics of abortion assert that Black women are engaging in a form of mass genocide—citing data which states that Black women choose abortion at rates 3 to 5 times higher than their White counterparts (Cohen, 2008). Instead of acknowledging their right to freedom of choice, reproductive justice or exploring whether Black female abortion rates indicate a need to enhance Black women’s access to pregnancy prevention, Black women who choose to have abortions are instead shamed and shunned. Terrell (2013) notes that the abortion statistics of Black women
mobilize the pro-life movement, who use them to convince others that organizations that provide reproductive health care (like Planned Parenthood) are the devil. However, it is important to note that, in contrast, Black men can generally have full reproductive autonomy and may have children with several different “baby’s mamas” and will not necessarily be viewed as degenerate or irresponsible.

These narratives about Black females and their offspring have served not only to negatively shape the identity of Black mothers in the eyes of non-Blacks but have been particularly damaging for Black women themselves. Even as they become more educated and upwardly mobile, many Black women have internally conflicting views about motherhood and see it as incompatible to their liberation and empowerment. Some view motherhood as an opportunity for self-definition, status in the Black community, and social activism, whereas others see it as a burdensome condition which stifles creativity, exploits their labor, and makes them partners in their own oppression (Collins, 2000). Most (whether they are mothers or not) live in constant fear and terror about what it means to raise little Black boys and girls in a country which sees them as troublemakers, taking their lives for granted and victimizing them racially, economically, and socially.

**A Black Woman’s Reflections**

As I write this commentary, I find myself angry. And rather than simply finding myself resigned to the stereotypical angry, Black woman trope, I choose to direct my anger in ways that are productive and call us to action. I am frustrated with the conversation about the perils facing Black America being framed largely from the Black male point of view. I make no pretenses that identities are multi-faceted and complex and that some Black men experience forms of oppression and marginalization that I do not due to class, sexual orientation, physical/mental ability, and so on. In fact, statistics show that Black males are nearly 40% of the male prison population, whereas Black female rates of incarceration decreased by 35% between 2000 and 2010 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2012). However, Black females are also incarcerated at nearly 3 times the rate of White women, are more likely to have minor children than men in prison, and more likely to be the victims of staff sexual misconduct while incarcerated (Sentencing Project, 2012). It isn’t just Black men who become disadvantaged by racist features in the judicial system and prison industrial complex. Black women are also disenfranchised by it, whether we are serving time ourselves, taking care of children whose fathers, mothers, and other relatives are incarcerated, or advocating for the release of a family member from the system.

Furthermore, any analysis of our state as a community seems to turn a blind eye to the mental, physical, and sexual abuse of Black females by women and men of all colors. Black women are more likely to be raped than White women (18.8%-17.7%; Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network, 1998) but face abuse and victim blaming; as was the case of a Black woman who reported her rape to a female police officer in Cincinnati only to be told she shouldn’t have put herself in a situation where she was drinking too much (Myers, 2014). Moreover, as a result of age-old stereotypes about Black female sexuality, we are seen as promiscuous, always wanting sex, and are therefore “unrapeable,” thereby taking away our agency to publicly name ourselves as victims and survivors of sexual assault, forcing us once again into silence. As we talk to Black boys about the perceptions that unfairly denote that wearing hoodies and baggy pants and listening to loud music in public can label them thugs where they can then become targets for White and police aggression, let’s simultaneously teach Black girls that they will also become targets for violence, likely because their womanhood, virtue, and sexual freedom is seen as ripe for the taking. And when Black girls and women are the targets of violence, let us shy away from blaming them and assigning damaging labels like “fast tailed,” “hoe,” and “loose.”

**Conclusion**

Black lives in America are at a breaking point. Although there have been some systemic and cultural shifts that serve to offer us greater access and opportunity to the so-called American Dream, our reality is one that is colored by our national heritage as the descendants of slaves, victims of Jim Crow laws and segregation, systems of economic marginalization, and White supremacy. However, as a people, we have also been so affected by racism and patriarchy that we have a hard time acknowledging the deeply painful experiences of Black women as part of our collective reality. We will likely never fully be united if we continue to embrace misogynoir and patriarchy. While elevating our concerns about Black males to the highest levels of discourse, we must also intentionally include and make room to learn from the voices of Black women. Our fate as a people and lives depend on it.

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**Note**

1. Misogynoir is a term coined by Dr. Moya Bailey in 2008 to describe the unique ways in which Black women are
pathologized in popular culture. “What happens to Black women in public space isn’t about them being any woman of color. It is particular and has to do with the ways that anti-Blackness and misogyny combine to malign Black women in our world” (Bailey, 2014).

References


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Kelly Macías is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Conflict Analysis and Resolution at Nova Southeastern University. Her dissertation research focuses on Black women’s use of social media for storytelling and testimony.