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Comm 372

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20 April 2015

The Erasure of Black Women in #BlackLivesMatter Movement

Growing up in America, it might not have been uncommon for youth or young adults to be told some topics are not polite for social functions or first time greetings: politics, religion, and race. Whether they are good or bad, nuanced or narrowed, conservative or liberal Americans hold strong beliefs about these subjects. To engage conversation about with in the wrong setting with the wrong person would be impolite and inappropriate. Instead of having healthy discourse around the topics, they are brushed under the rug.

Likewise, when examining social justice and civil rights movements in this nation, once a monumental step has been made for that particular movement Americans are ready to sweep away conversation about it. When women were granted suffrage there was no longer the need for feminism. When the Civil Rights Act of 1965 was passed discrimination was no longer an issue in this country. When the Defense of Marriage Act was struck down issues for the LGBTQ community were all solved. At least that was the narrative being told by some privileged. There is a culture within American society that perpetuates the belief once one stone has been given the entire house has been built and life is good.

Since the election of President Barack Obama in 2009, the notion of a post-racial America has floated around. A post-racial society is one lacking racial prejudice, discrimination,

and bias (Speri). With thanks to Affirmative Action, representation of black bodies in entertainment, social services availability, and lastly the first black president race is no longer an issue in America. The playing fields have been leveled and racism has been declared dead. However, in this alleged post-racial America, racial tensions have been on the rise, from Congress members referring to the president as a tar baby to the numerous killings of black people by law enforcement and civilians (Brittain). As a reaction to these heinous acts, the social movement #BlackLivesMatter was conceived, a form of hashtag activism that flooded social media feeds and gained attention from the mainstream outlets. The names Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Mike Brown, and Tamir Rice with their stories were picked up by national and international new stations. The names of these black men and boys became household names. All black men and boys, but where are the names of black women and girls that suffered the same fate as their male counterparts? Despite the efforts of the creators, this movement has participated in the erasure of black women. The remainder of this paper is examine how black women have been erased from the ongoing movement that is drawing attention to black bodies.

Where is Our Leader?

When examining who is doing the talking, especially in comparison to the Civil Rights Movement, there is one key component missing, a charismatic leader. Generally this person is male and appeals to the white gaze. In the case of the Civil Right's Movement that person was Dr. King. He was not the sole person giving speeches and contributing to progress the movement, but it is his voice that has been called on the last 50 years, because he was the face of the movement. The existence of a particular figurehead who fits a framework that is deemed appreciable can be favourable towards the movement. While having bodies to make noise , hit

the pavement, and make collections is just as useful having a leader begins a sense of legitimacy to the organisation through presence. As foretold in a piece by Herbert W. Simons, “His is the pattern of peaceful persuasion rhetoricians know best and characteristically prescribe, the embodiment of reason, civility, and decorum in human interaction. Dressed in the garb of respectability and exhibiting Ivy League earnestness and midwestern charm, the moderate gets angry but does not shout, issues pamphlets but never manifestos, inveighs against social mores but always in the value language of the social order (Simons).” It is a persona that makes those around comfortable to invite the individual into their inner circle. It is a carefully crafted persona that may salve actions made by the overall organisation. It is a persona that has to be accepted by those with privilege in order for the message to be accepted.

While Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors – the black, queer, women creators of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement- do make public appearances, they have not gained them the national attention which would them in the position of speaking to larger publics with the white gaze, such as news sources that are deemed credible (Garza). Society still views queerness and blackness as being other. While King dealt with otherness during his time, the other factors in his life worked to outshine the darker hue of his skin to white Americans who consumed his words. He was a PhD holding preacher who had a beautiful family that supported him. That picture helped to bring legitimacy to his persona by appealing to the heteronormative standards of society. In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Audre Lorde explores the notion of a mythical norm, stating “In America, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of

power reside within this society.” Outside of being white, King fit the model of the mythical normative making it easier for those with privilege to identify with him. Unfortunately Garza, Tometi, and Cullors do not possess such privileges. The absence of such privileges also means the absence of their voices as the voice. They are not able to discredit people who are outliers and do not represent what the movement stands for, because they have to be deemed leaders by those that wield the power. That alone can be contributed to the erasures of the lives of black women and girls be they heterosexual, lesbian, transgender, or non-able bodied.

When a Google search is done on the names of this movement’s founders, approximately 700,000 results appear. Compare those figures to the men and boys that have been the deemed the center of this movement, their search results surpass 1 million. This is none too shocking when looking at the historical context that black women play in social movements. One must only think of the Civil Rights Movement and who is remembered. The March on Washington, considered a key point in the Civil Rights Movement, initially had no women speaking. When they were given the limited speaking time (Goff). One of those speakers happened to be Gloria Richardson. Richardson, the leader of the Cambridge Movement in Cambridge, MD. Richardson's movement fought for desegregation of the town and economic fairness (Goff). Her efforts gained her recognition as a major figure in the Civil Rights Movement, yet this recognition did not stop the silencing of her voice and that of other black women of her status. In a 2013 interview, she recalled how a marshal hindered her 2 minute speech at the March on Washington and also the treat of the female leaders. They were placed in separate tents and had their chairs taken away ,yet were treated as if they were fragile creatures up to the

point of being ushered away so not to be “overwhelmed by fans” causing them to miss Dr. Martin Luther King’s remarks (Goff). It is the behavior that occurred 50 years ago that does not make a handful of articles about the creators of #BlackLivesMatter shocking. The silencing of black women in leadership leads to the silencing of black women in other facets of life, such as media and representation.

Do You See What I See: How the Portrayal Shapes Narrative

By viewing social media platforms and obtaining news from mainstream news, the general population might be led to believe the genesis of this social movement began when standard traction of the brutal deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York by police officers during the summer of 2014; in actuality it began with the death of Trayvon Martin in 2012. Martin was a 17 year old high school senior, who was killed by neighbor, George Zimmerman, one rainy afternoon in Sanford, Florida. If one were to read the article “Hundreds attend ‘Black Lives Matter’ rally” on ABC News website and many others of a similar tone that are a quick Google search away, they might believe “Black Lives Matter is a national movement of activists rallying and marching to address police brutality” with an emphasis on the brutality black male bodies are subjected to (Woods). However, the creators of the movement assert “#BlackLivesMatter is working for a world where Black lives are no longer systematically and intentionally targeted for demise....the call for Black lives to matter is a rallying cry for ALL Black lives striving for liberation” (Black Lives Matter). Their website is inclusive of all walks of blackness and black life ; however, intentions of the creators and the narrative that is being feed to the public tell different stories.

Moreover, looking at how the narrative has been misconstrued from the beginning of its

national storytelling, impacts how the movement is perceived and received. This form of misinformation changes how the average citizen in American , or internationally, might piece together the stages of this movement. In the book *Persuasion and Social Movements* Charles J. Stewart, Craig Allen Smith, and Robert E. Denton, Jr. detail cycle of a social movement. Using their definitions as a guideline, if #BlackLivesMatter began with Ferguson, the movement would be somewhere between Genesis ,the event that started it all, and Social Unrest, the time in which a manifesto is created and public protests begin to emerge. However, following the factual timeline given the female creators, by the time Ferguson occurred the movement was somewhere between Social Unrest and Enthusiastic Mobilization, which is where commitment is garnered and a call to action occurs (Stewart, Smith and Denton). These details are crucial, because they help to shine a spotlight on what is or is not being left out of the rhetoric and in this case it's black women's lives.

The Genesis of the movement occurred in 2012 with the killing of Trayvon Martin. Garza and her cohorts felt compelled to create something have seeing the a rise in blatant racism and lack of accountability for someone to take credit for these wrong doings. As verdicts were read and more black bodies faced abuse and death, the more people began to latch on to the movement. As manifest was listed on the #BlackLivesMatter webpage and marches and rallies began to appear across the nation being people to the stage of Social Unrest. So when Mike Brown was murdered in 2014, the movement saw great exponential growth and opened the to Enthusiastic Mobilization. People began to use the hashtag to spread word about what as not being reported by news stations such as ABC,CNN, or ,MSNBC (Garza). In the stage of

Enthusiastic Mobilization, calls of action were made across the nation with universities holding die-ins and sit-ins and daily marches. A search of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag on websites such as Twitter or Tumblr would bring for photos from said events or even from supporters showing solidarity(Woods). These images and protests showed resistance towards oppressive forces, but also non-verbally sought vie for the morals of those that stood in the middle ground to choose a side to stand with, thus allowing for discussions to be created around the subject.

When assessing who is doing the talking, ultimately to define the rhetor of these discussions it s a bit difficult. Being that this is a movement which was birthed out of hashtag activism and grew a life of its own as the racial inequalities and tensions rose, it is not an easy task to pinpoint one solid source. With the spread of information across social media, it is easy to pick up a tweet or blog posts made by one individual and sensationalise it. In the same respect, it is easy to look at the official #BlackLivesMatter website to see they are inclusive of all black lives, yet these aren't the stories being heard by the masses. These aren't the messages being sent out the publics and state. It is the misinformation, the non-inclusive information that is being picked up by the "reputable" sources. When dealing with the Internet, social media, blogs etc. features such as followers and ads and "clicks" counts when it comes to who sees this information. When the people with the greater number of followers is only focusing on the lives of black men, be it intentional or not, it has the potential to influence a greater scale of people.

These unforuately for the people who are given the microphone to speak. They appeal to an agenda that is being set forth. When a activist with a well written and rehearsed speech is presented to a news outlet it is more difficult to discredit them. So to fit the narrative that is

sought, journalist seek the Average Joe or Jane to be the voice of the movement (Frank). They select the photographs of protests and select one scene to label as riot instead of protests because it allows for debate, lack of legitimization, and sensationalism of the story for a short period of time. When these people chosen are not focusing on the lives of black women, those with are just learning about the movement will not focus on the lives of black women either.

Which Black Lives Matter?

Nodding back to the Google searches of the male victims and female founders, a similar trend can be found when doing a search of the name Aiyana Stanley- Jones. Her name results in roughly 80,000 results on Google. In 2010 at 7 year old Aiyana Stanley-Jones of Detroit, Michigan was shot and killed by a police officer in her own home while she slept. Her death was the result of a raid by Detroit SWAT for the show A&E show *First 48*. A grenade landed next to the young girl and burned her blanket before a single bullet to the head resulted in her untimely death (LeDuff). Nearly 5 years later and 2 hung juries, there is been no justice for her as her killer will not be retried (Bronner Helm). Yet there are no marches for her. There are not protests or calls to action for her wrongful killing. While one might argue her death occurred in 2010, the latest verdict was rendered in January 2015(Bronner Helm). When juxtaposed to the recent events with Garner and Brown or even the mention of Martin, one would assume this recent decision would spark up conversation and a call for action amongst those that have been organizing marches and rallies across the nation, yet none of these have occurred. The only missing factor is that she is not a male.

The lack of inclusion is not only found in narratives around protests but also in regards to

information purported to be facts. On the #BlackLivesMatters website there is statistic which reads ,“ Every 28 hours a black person – man, woman, or child, is killed.” However, this fact has been reconstructed as, “ Every 28 hours a black man is killed”(*Black Lives Matter*). It is misinformation such as this that slowly but surely erases black women’s lives from the movement. Unfortunately, this form of erasure is not new. Touching back to the opening on impolite or sensitive subjects, when it comes to the black community in America, the plight of black women is one of those subjects.

Similar to the notion of post-racial America, which continues to work against an oppressed group by offering a narrative about their lives they do not necessarily agree with, the myth of black matriarchy does the same for black women and girls. Black matriarchy is the belief that black woman wield more power within black society and oppress black males, because they the often the bread winners and head the household (Staples). This assessment ignores the hundreds of years of enslaved, abuse, and dehumanization black women have endured by being forced into the role of matriarch. During slavery families were broken apart for capitalistic and patriarchal gain often leaving the women vulnerable to rape and / or the inability to raise their children. During post reconstruction and even Jim Crow era with a shortage of jobs due to discrimination men and women, though mostly men, had to travel to different parts of the country to provide for their families. This often led to women being single parents by default (Berlin). While these eras are times of the past, these same struggles are still faced amongst black women. Instead of being allowed humanity and nurturing and empathy they are bunkered down with the notion of being strong, black women and casted aside while

issues pertaining to black men are pushed to the forefront.

This behavior exists within the black community and other communities where black women are arguably should be welcomed such as the feminist circles. While the black community silences the issues and voices of black women by overlooking their years of oppression so do white women. Instead of focusing on systems that have placed black women the position to be abused or burdened with single parenthood or lack of humanization, white feminists have only focused on issues that they see as relevant to their world thus not creating an inclusive environment. They over looked how black women “were not qualified for prevailing standards of femininity, white femininity, so they [we] were passed down” (*Some American Feminists*). This disregard creates a hierarchy in the humanity and legitimization to which lives be they black or female mattered. As phrased by feminist Margo Jefferson “ What is a Black Woman? She’s a woman and she is also black. We weren’t as good as black men and we were useless, we weren’t good enough to be imitating white women. So we had nothing”(Some American Feminists). Jefferson’s words echo to an experience of life that is overshadowed by patriarchy and racism as they are not afforded the humanity and empathy and support that has been offered to their counterparts. Instead they are left to fight and rally for themselves while also rallying for said counterparts as way to survive. They are not able to divorce themselves from their blackness or womanhood, although those they should be standing in solidarity with them have attempted to divorce them for from blackness and womanhood.

Peeling back another layer when looking at the intricacies of black womanhood, adding transgendered to that already double-edged sword pushes for further erasure. Audre Lord relays

that a lesbian woman in her case, mean to be “defined as other, deviant, inferior, or just plain wrong.” These are some of the same labels black transgendered women encounter as well. When their entire existence is deemed wrong by the oppressor, and to some extent society, it is not difficult to see how their deaths can go unreported by the masses. By February of 2015 alone, seven transgender women had been murdered in the United States, and out of those seven, six were women of colour and five were black women of colour (Kellaway). Yet like Aiyana Stanley – Jones, we have not seen the families of these women on the news sharing their grief as a bring light to the injustices that are being enacted upon this subgroup with black community.

This is no way taking away from the group in San Francisco that organised a shut down at a local bar that has been hostile towards queen and trans people of colour (QTPOC Liberation, and The Feminist Wire). However, in the recent months these acts have been confined to spaces with large populations of LGBTQ communities and do not have the same traction as their male, cis-gender, and/or heterosexual counterparts. The lack of attention by media and the foot soldiers of the #BlackLivesMatter movement is a reflection of how transgendered people are viewed and casted aside by society. While they may be painted as deviants or wrong for existing their lives still matter, and failure to acknowledge that is failure to encompass what the movement stands for.

Where Do We Go From Here? Conclusion

Unlike examining the second wave of feminism or the Civil Rights Movement, it is not known what will come of #BlackLivesMatters. With the movement still in the somewhat early stages of a social movement life cycle resting between Social Unrest and Enthusiastic Mobilization, its cycle must still continue to run its course. Moreover, its shelf life currently does

not have an expiration date, especially as more and more black individuals are killed by police and suffer various other forms of oppression and resistance within society.

Just as it is unknown if or when there will be change in how black bodies are treated in society, it is unknown if or when black women will stop being silenced and ignored within this community and the movement. There is certainly power in unity by banding together and making noise to bring light to the injustices in the world, but when all within that group are not being represented all is not being accomplished.

While the life of this movement is not known, one thing at the time is clear, the main stream narrative is not the narrative of the creators nor is it the narrative of countless black women and girls dying, abused, and protesting for all black lives. #BlackLivesMatter is a social movement making changes in the here and now and doing so by refusing to be silenced and opening up a conversation about years of oppression, systematic racism and societal norms, but it when reflecting on the erasure of its female creators and black female victims, it makes one wonder: which black lives matter?

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