

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Dismantling Respectability: The Rise of New Womanist Communication Models in the Era of Black Lives Matter

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Legacy media coverage of the Civil Rights Movement often highlighted charismatic male leaders, such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., while scores of Black women worked quietly in the background. Today's leaders of the modern Black Lives Matter movement have turned this paradigm on its face. This case study explores the revamped communication styles of four Black feminist organizers who led the early Black Lives Matter Movement of 2014: Brittany Ferrell, Alicia Garza, Brittany Packnett, and Marissa Johnson. Additionally, the study includes Ieshia Evans: a high-profile, independent, anti-police brutality activist. In a series of semi-structured interviews, the women shared that their keen textual and visual dismantling of Black respectability politics led to a mediated hyper-visibility that their forebearers never experienced. The women share the advantages and disadvantages of this approach, and weigh in on the sustainability of their communication methods for future Black social movements.

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Brittany Ferrell remembered the tear gas most. As a frontline demonstrator during what came to be known as the Ferguson protests in August 2014, she recalled the unimaginable sting in her lungs and nose as she gasped for air. “I felt like I didn’t know if I would make it home that night,” she told me in February 2017. She added, “There was the police that were shooting rubber and wooden bullets at protesters. There were gunshots. There were dogs. There was fire ... and it was like we knew it and we still went out, night after night after night.”

Ferrell protested by day, too. With her bullhorn in hand, she appears in an AJ+ documentary film (2014), teetering precariously in the rear flatbed of a pickup truck. An unnamed man helps her catch her balance. He places a steadying hand

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near her waist as she begins a new chant. The image creates a new visual rhetoric for Black protests. Whereas the 20th-century Civil Rights Movement relied heavily upon Black women donning Sunday's best dresses and white gloves behind charismatic male leaders (Gillespie & Clinton, 1998; Harris, 2003; Hickey, 2013), the 21st-century Black Lives Matter Movement has placed African American women at the forefront, with men literally supporting them. These women wear purple braids and blue braids. They sport nose rings and sardonic T-shirts. They hijack legacy media platforms and innovate new ones. This defiant approach, of anti-respectability, is no accident. This case study explores the revamped political communication styles of four Black women organizers who led the early Black Lives Matter Movement of 2014: Brittany Ferrell, Alicia Garza, Brittany Packnett, and Marissa Johnson. Additionally, the study includes Ieshia Evans: an independent, anti-police brutality activist who chooses not to affiliate with any organizations.

All of these women have reached international levels of renown for their participation in high-profile protests. Similarly, all of the women said that they believe their hyper-visibility is due to a conscious turn away from former models of genteel Black activism. I sought to investigate the elements that comprise this new communication model. This essay follows in three parts. First, I review how scholars have defined the concept of respectability in the context of political communication. Second, I explain how respectability politics hindered Black feminist activist leadership during the 20th century, which led to the current Millennial backlash. Lastly, the study's participants share how their dismantling of respectability freed them to explore new ways of expressing their civic demands. Taken together, I offer an analysis of the gifts and curses that anti-respectability has brought this generation of Black women organizers, in hopes that future communication studies explore Black activism through this evolved lens.

On manners and morals

For as long as Black women have organized publicly, there has been a cultural code of decorum for all who dare to enter the public sphere. Brittany Cooper explains in her 2017 book, *Beyond Respectability*, that calls for refinement date as far back as the 1890s, during the era of post-Reconstruction. Black women, Cooper has explained, were at a dynamic time of reclaiming their humanity. Whereas the horrors of slavery perpetuated a system through which their bodies could be sold, raped, or maimed at will, the end of the Civil War brought with it the hope of establishing Black womanhood as worthy of protection and respect. Cooper (2017, p. 21) wrote, "race women took it as their political and intellectual work to give shape and meaning to the Black body in social and political terms, to make it legible as an entity with infinite value and social worth." Mapping humanity onto the Black body invited a set of rules of engagement for Black women leaders, Evelyn Higginbotham has argued. Between 1890 and 1920, as the Black Baptist church became increasingly influential as a site for resistance, so too did its women infuse their values into

nascent social movements. Higginbotham (1993, p. 186) wrote of the Women's Convention of the National Baptist Convention, "their religious-political message was drawn from biblical teachings, the philosophy of racial self-help, Victorian ideology, and the democratic principles of the Constitution of the United States." This fusion of socially conservative ideologies birthed what Higginbotham (1993, p. 187) has called the "politics of respectability," which "emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations." The Women's Convention thus instructed its members to be living contradictions to crude stereotypes of Black women, which permeated much of the early 20th-century media landscape. By emphasizing manners and morals, Higginbotham (1993, p. 193) has explained, Black Baptist women endeavored to create counter-discourses of Blackness through "adherence to temperance, cleanliness of person and property, thrift, polite manners, and sexual purity."

In terms of visual communication, the politics of respectability dictated that Black women leaders of social movements adopt a "culture of dissemblance" (Hine, 1989, p. 912) or "self-imposed secrecy and invisibility" (Higginbotham, 1993, p. 194). Modest clothing that erased the Black woman's body (and sexuality) was encouraged. Black women within the church were discouraged from making loud, individual displays of protest. Public, corporate prayer was a preferred form of civil disobedience (Higginbotham, 1993, p. 224). In terms of oral and written communication, the politics of respectability manifested itself as the "highly scripted" public addresses that Catherine Squires (2002, p. 448) has attributed to Blacks who have left the "enclave" to join the "counterpublic." Squires has explained that marginalized groups often organize privately at first, until they have the agency and resources to ramp up their political communiqué. Then, the group decides whether it will anoint a charismatic leader as its representative, continue to function as a leaderless collective with shared, public demands, or both. In the former instance, counterpublic leaders deliver grand orations. In the latter model, collectives circulate manifestos for the public to appraise.

Panopticism and the paradox of the "proper" performance

Although Michel Foucault did not introduce the concept of panopticism until the mid-1970s, Black Baptist women activists living in the post-Reconstruction era indeed functioned as if they were ever-aware of the White gaze, taking great pains to assimilate to imagined norms of Whiteness and, therefore, worthiness. The Great Migration intensified this sense of being watched. Between 1916 and 1970, more than six million Black people moved from rural, Southern states to the industrialized North. Jane Rhodes (2016, p. 202) has explained that the politics of respectability were "a means for negotiating and managing the class, educational, and regional distinctions within African American communities, with an old settler establishment seeking to control what were deemed unruly and uncouth newcomers." This

socioeconomic stratification gave way to a cultural gatekeeping of Black protest that was steeped in Du Boisian double-consciousness (Du Bois & Marable, 2015, p. 8). That is, an elite group of Blacks often anointed an impeccable spokesperson from that in-group to lead a social movement, with an eye toward placating a White public sphere. “In this way,” Titilayo Rasaki (2016, p. 34) wrote, “respectability politics weaponizes racial kinship; it espouses the notion that individual Black achievement advances the race, while individual failures hinder the race.”

Rasaki’s assertion explains, in part, how the politics of respectability paradoxically birthed and silenced Black women’s activism in the latter portion of the 20th century. It is true that the Women’s Convention was a “safe space” (Collins, 1991/2002, p. 110) for post-Reconstruction-era Black women to define themselves and reclaim their bodies. It is true that the Black church served as an enclave where African American women could plan their public addresses with great care and collaboration. It is true also, however, that the politics of respectability was deeply entrenched in assimilationist thought, which reinforced many of the Black stereotypes that it sought to annihilate. The “performance of self” (Goffman, 1949) became a constant tightrope act of appeasing the White gaze. This perpetual pursuit of exemplary Black womanhood—for the benefit of a White panopticon—ultimately suppressed the leadership of unwed Black mothers, queer Black people, and many other Black subgroups during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

Claudette Colvin, for example, was the original instigator of the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott (Adler, 2009). Colvin refused to give up her seat at the front of an Alabama bus 9 months before Rosa Parks did. Colvin, however, was an unwed, teenaged mother. She was shooed summarily out of public life when church leaders discovered her pregnancy (Hoose, 2010). Parks—a married, churchgoing seamstress—was elevated instead. During the same era, Black clergy similarly marginalized African American transgender women activists. Marsha P. Johnson, for example, helped lead the 1969 Stonewall riots in Greenwich Village, New York. The uprising is regarded widely as the tipping point for the American gay liberation movement. Still, the *New York Times* published her obituary as part of its “Overlooked” series in 2018, almost three decades after her 1992 death.

Black feminism as resistance

The silencing of Black women’s voices led to the articulation of a discrete, Black feminist movement that flourished alongside the Black Power Movement of the 1970s. Women of the Black Panther Party used internal media veins initially. Candi Robinson wrote in the August 1969 issue of the *Black Panther*, for example, “Black women, Black women, hold your head up, and look ahead.... For too long [Black women have] been doubly oppressed, not only by capitalist society but also by their men” (Farmer, 2017, p. 76). It was 4 years later, in 1973, that the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) launched. The organization grew quickly, from one to ten chapters in a single year (Weiss & Brueske, 2018). By 1974, a radical offshoot of NBFO, called the Combahee River Collective (CRC), sprouted up (Taylor, 2017).

CRC was named after Harriet Tubman's most successful guerrilla campaign, which freed 750 slaves in a single South Carolina raid in 1863. The Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Alice Walker, gave these trailblazers a name: "womanists." She declared in an acclaimed collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, that a womanist is a "Black feminist or feminist of color" who engages in "outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior" (Walker, 2004, p. xii). She added, the womanist is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female" (Walker, 2004, p. xii, author's emphasis). NBFO lasted only three years. CRC fared better, thriving until 1980.

When Black feminism met Black Twitter

Black feminism, or womanism, may have remained a scholarly abstraction were it not for the rise of social media in the 2000s. In 1991, for example, Patricia Hill Collins's seminal tome, *Black Feminist Thought*, ambitiously anthologized intellectual ideas from womanist thinkers such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Angela Davis (Collins, 2002/1991). In 1994, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1994/2005, p. 282) coined the term "intersectionality" to describe further "how the experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism, and how these experiences tend not to be represented within the discourses of either feminism or anti-racism." Still, no sustained social movements led by Black women dominated the American political landscape during the 1980s or 1990s. The Internet rebooted visible, collective womanism in two phases.

The rise of Black women bloggers

In the Web 1.0 paradigm, Black feminists experimented with their digital voices. Blogs such as Gina McCauley's *What About Our Daughters* (Rapp, Button, Fleury-Steiner, & Fleury-Steiner, 2010), K. Tempest Bradford's *The Angry Black Woman* (Curtis, 2015), and Brittney Cooper's *Crunk Feminist Collective* (Boylorn, 2013) quickly became required reading material for Black women in the early 2000s. The trio were invited regularly to pen editorials for *Essence* magazine or to appear on NPR's now-defunct program, *News & Notes*, with Farai Chideya. In this fashion, the affordances of Web 1.0 rewarded individual, standout digital personalities with coveted access to traditional media, but did not yet offer a path to collective leveraging of the Internet for social movement formation. The Web 2.0, read/write version of the Internet shifted this focus—from singular womanist bloggers—to a plurality of connected Black feminists online.

The rise of Black Twitter

Shortly after Twitter's launch in 2006, African Americans began to visit the social media platform more than any other ethnic group. By 2014, more than 26% of African Americans were convening on Twitter at any given time of day, while only 16% of Whites were doing so (Smith, 2014). So-called "Black Twitter" (as it was

dubbed by blogger Choire Sicha in 2009) comprised African American voices from all over the world. Initial academic explorations into Black Twitter found that African Americans were engaging in lively games of the “dozens” (Florini, 2014) or live-Tweeting hit television shows such as Shonda Rhimes’s *Scandal* (Everett, 2015) or *How to Get Away with Murder* (Williams & Gonlin, 2017). The digital frivolity gave way to fury, however, after the Trayvon Martin murder trial in 2013. When George Zimmerman, who is half-White, was acquitted of killing the unarmed, Black teenager in Sanford, Florida, Alicia Garza took to Facebook to write a love letter to Black people. Her friend, Patrisse Cullors, reposted it to Twitter with a hashtag: #BlackLivesMatter (Garza, 2016). Neither of the women said that they ever expected the Tweet to become a global movement. In many ways though, this moment may have been inevitable, since the socially conservative politics of respectability silenced many groups of willing Black women activists for decades. As of this time, however, as scholar Sarah J. Jackson (2016, p. 375) explains, “millennial activists have rejected the respectability politics that guided much of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and have turned to new technologies as tools for the promulgation and solidification of messages, nurturing a counterpublic community that centers the voices of those most often at the margins.” For the remainder of this essay, five womanist activists share just how this process works.

Meet the participants

This case study focused on four Black women founders of three leading organizations that comprised the early Black Lives Matter Movement of 2014: Brittany Ferrell of Millennial Activists United; Alicia Garza and Marissa Johnson of Black Lives Matter; and Brittany Packnett of We the Protestors/Campaign Zero. Additionally, the study included Ieshia Evans: a high-profile, anti-police brutality activist who preferred to identify as an “independent protester” rather than align with an organization. I contacted all of the women on Twitter to request one-on-one, 60-minute, semi-structured interviews. I conducted one interview in person, on camera, after one activist hosted a Black Lives Matter rally at a mid-Atlantic university in the United States. The other participants consented to recorded FaceTime interviews.

Alicia Garza is one of the three co-founders for Black Lives Matter. She is based in Oakland, California. Garza is an award-winning community organizer who specialized in workplace equality in the Bay Area prior to establishing Black Lives Matter. She self-identifies as a member of the LGBTQ community, and emphasizes the inclusion of queer leaders in the Movement. She is married to the openly transgender male activist, Malachi Garza.

Marissa Johnson is a member of the Black Lives Matter Seattle chapter. She gained notoriety in August 2015 when she interrupted Presidential hopeful Senator Bernie Sanders (an Independent candidate from Vermont) at his Seattle campaign rally. Her assumption of his podium dominated the news headlines for several

weeks. Johnson self-identifies as “an evangelical Christian, a former theology student, and a biracial, queer woman.”

Brittany Ferrell is a native of St. Louis, Missouri. She met Alexis Templeton and Ashley Yates on Twitter. Together, the trio formed Millennial Activists United (MAU). Ferrell and Templeton married at the zenith of the protests. Ferrell self-identifies as “a mother, a nurse, and Alexis’ wife.”

Brittany Packnett is a St. Louis native, too. She is Vice President of National Community Alliances for Teach for America and the co-founder, in 2014, of We the Protestors. The organization rebranded itself in 2015 as Campaign Zero, introducing a 10-point plan to reduce police violence in America. Packnett created the policy-oriented organization—with Deray McKesson, Johnetta Elzie, and Samuel Sinyangwe—after the four met on the frontlines in Ferguson. Packnett is a former appointee to President Barack Obama’s 21st Century Policing Task Force. She self-identifies as “a Christian, a daughter, a sister, and a community activist.” She is engaged to civil rights photographer Reggie Cunningham.

The final participant is Ieshia Evans. Evans was the subject of the viral photographs of the Alton Sterling protests in August 2016. She was pictured in a peaceful standoff with Baton Rouge police. They wore riot gear. She wore a dress. Evans has conducted international interviews about her assumed affiliation with the Black Lives Matter Movement since she became a media sensation. She emphasized in our interview, however, that she traveled to Baton Rouge from her native New York in the summer of 2016 on her own. Evans eventually was arrested and charged with obstructing a highway. After being released from jail, she returned home to care for her son. Evans self-identifies as a “single mother and a Black woman.”

Method

Brittney Cooper’s concept of “embodied discourse” guided the development and refinement of the interview map. Embodied discourse, as Cooper (2017, p. 3) defines it, “refers to a form of Black female textual activism wherein race women assertively demand the inclusion of their bodies and, in particular, working-class bodies and Black female bodies by placing them in the texts they write and speak.” In this manner, embodied discourse disrupts the “politics of respectability as the paradigmatic frames through which to engage Black women’s ideas and their politics,” since respectability as a communication method sought to make Black women’s bodies “as inconspicuous and as sexually innocuous as possible” (Cooper, 2017, p. 3). Embodied discourse instead invites observers to regard the full corporeality of a womanist protestor, to consider how her race, class, and even sexuality might converge to shape her activism (Cooper, 2017, p. 3). In terms of this case study, this meant examining (a) the Black woman activist’s stated purpose for evading traditional communication models of respectability; (b) whether she intuited that her sartorial choices added a layer of visual rhetoric to her textual or oral protest; and (c) how she believed her mediated hypervisibility impacted the broader image and messaging of the Black Lives Matter Movement.

First, with regard to dismantling respectability, I asked questions about how the activists performed their civil disobedience in person and on Twitter. I asked if they were aware of previous social scripts that Black women activists may have followed in the past, and whether they worked consciously to counter these traditions.

Secondly, with regard to sartorial choices, I inquired about the meanings behind certain garments and accessories the women wore while protesting. Two of the participants, for example, own and operate Movement-inspired apparel lines. Did clothing comprise their communication model or was it merely a revenue stream? If the fashion was indeed intended to make a political statement, what kind of commentary did it make?

Lastly, I asked personal questions about the activists' relationships, to see how their gender and sexuality influenced their approach to political communication. How did motherhood impact the women's decisions to engage in mediated activism, for example? Did Black male chauvinism in community organizing persist? How did one's sexual orientation position one in the Black Lives Matter Movement? Did they believe that cisgender Black women enjoyed more visibility than women who identified as members of the LGBTQ community, for example? Taken together, Cooper's concept of embodied discourse challenged me to see the interviewees as complex leaders who are bringing their whole selves to the fore. I used computer-assisted software, called MaxQDA, to code 73 segments across the 5 interviews.

Results

The top five narrative themes that emerged from this grounded theory analysis were: (a) distrust of legacy media, with 13 coded segments; (b) private and state-sponsored intimidation, with 13 coded segments; (c) chauvinist news portrayals of Black feminist activists, with 9 coded segments; (d) the push for inclusion of Black queer activists, with 8 coded segments; and (e) paying homage to Black social movements past, with 5 coded segments. I offer exemplars from each code category here.

Distrust of legacy media

Activists from the Civil Rights Movement courted the press with dramatic news events, such as marches and sit-ins, but the womanist activists in this study said that their contemporary communication models do not rely on legacy media at all. Each woman shared that she used Twitter instead to spread her own news when she was on the frontlines of a protest. By physically embodying the news story and bearing witness firsthand, the women said that they challenged incorrect legacy media narratives, brought humanity to sensationalized media images, and centered Black women's voices in ways they did not trust mainstream media outlets to do.

Brittany Packnett of We the Protestors, for example, explained that Twitter became invaluable when police officers teargassed peaceful protesters in August 2014. She explained that she saw a CNN report that claimed the predominantly Black

residents of Ferguson were looting a local McDonald's. She said her Twitter feed was full of kindred protesters from around the globe—as far away as Palestine—discussing the antidotes to teargas. Milk was a remedy, Packnett said, so demonstrators rushed into a local McDonald's restaurant to ask its managers for some. Packnett took to Twitter to correct this important omission in the news story. She said: “That is the instantaneous correction that you're allowed to have. Twitter also gave us immediate access to CNN ... [and] on the ground people would go up to cameras and say, ‘People are Tweeting me right now, calling me right now, and saying that you're reporting incorrectly, so we will stand here in front of your cameras until you decide to tell the truth.’”

Brittany Ferrell, the founder of MAU, said that Twitter helped her find allies. She discovered like-minded Black feminist activists online, then began organizing demonstrations in her hometown of Ferguson in August 2014. Her organization is now defunct, she said, and she believes that is due, in part, to negative media portrayals of the Movement. She said: “They've done a very good job in portraying BLM [Black Lives Matter] overall as a hate group. And I don't expect anything else because when I think about the media and I think about who they serve, they serve the majority and the majority is not looking to do away with White supremacy. They benefit from it.”

I asked Ferrell to elaborate on her beliefs that legacy media have misrepresented the Black Lives Matter Movement. She explained further: “Blackness is oftentimes very, very misunderstood. When you're Black and you're angry or you're Black and you're fighting for something, people don't really receive that very well.... People don't believe that we're worth what we're fighting for.” Ferrell added that she believed the framing of Black Lives Matter and its protesters in the news as lawless rebels without a cause was intentional. She said she humanized many of the women who worked with MAU on her Twitter timeline, so people could see that Ferguson had real mothers, daughters, and sisters convening peaceful gatherings in Ferguson. She explained: “I do think that they framed us in a way so that people would look at this movement and not understand it, or to think that it's violent, or to think that we are not making progress when in fact that we are.”

I asked Ferrell what she thought about the framing of the 2017 Women's March in Washington, DC, which was organized to highlight women's rights and, in part, to denounce President Donald Trump's growing catalog of misogynistic behaviors. In an infamous “hot mic” moment, President Trump bragged to an entertainment reporter that a man of his stature simply can “grab them [women] by the pussy” without anyone ever complaining.¹ Women's March participants defiantly (and ironically) donned pink hats, stylized to resemble vaginas, to many of the nationwide protests. Although two of the Women's March organizers are women of color, the demonstration was regarded popularly as a White feminists' march. Ferrell's voice rose in anger as she dissected the media framing she felt the Women's March received. She said:

I feel like a lot of White women went out and they were like, ‘Oh, this march is *peaceful*.’ And really putting the emphasis on *peaceful*. And it’s like well, you know, our demonstrations were also peaceful, but when you see a sea of White women with pink vagina hats on their heads, White women are not going to be met with the same type of aggression from police officers as a community of traumatized, torn Black people who continue over and over and over again to be traumatized. To be told that we don’t matter. To be in communities where we don’t have food, we don’t have jobs, we don’t have nothing! White women had the audacity to emphasize how safe their protests were! And it’s like, of course they were. They’re protecting you! No one’s protecting us. So [the news media] frame this narrative about how *this* is peaceful, and *this* is not. And it’s like no, *this* is valued in society and *we* are not!

Ferrell recomposed herself. She was very near tears. She concluded quietly that Black feminist activists should embrace and create independent media outlets, such as blogs, podcasts, and web video series, to reframe their organizational missions and leaders. Overall, the participants shared a common desire to see the Movement framed favorably in the news. The women want more coverage of the peaceful gatherings they painstakingly convene, for example. I thought I might see a higher priority placed on Black feminist labor being highlighted in the news, but the women I interviewed saw “the work itself”—not the activists or even the riots—as the news lede. This is not to say that these women do not want to be recognized for their efforts. Rather, they believe an accurate portrayal of the Black Lives Matter Movement makes room for their contributions to be celebrated, rather than condemned.

Private and state-sponsored intimidation

Brittany Ferrell recalled the first time that it happened. She was out running errands when an unmarked car drove up to her, and “a White man with a camera leaned out of the passenger side window and started snapping photos [of me],” she said. She explained, “There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t think about who’s listening, who’s watching. I’ve become inured to feeling like safety is an illusion.”

Ferrell said that the cameraman became a fixture in the days leading up to her March 2017 sentencing date. When I inquire about the charges against her, she said a woman drove through a crowd of Black Lives Matter protesters who had blocked off I-70 in St. Louis to commemorate the 1-year anniversary of Michael Brown’s death in August 2015. “[She] used her vehicle to try and run protesters over.” Ferrell added, “I allegedly struck her driver’s side door with my size 6 shoe and now I’m facing a felony. It’s definitely political retaliation towards the Movement. It’s definitely an effort for them to make an example out of me.” Ferrell remarked that her felony charge is made all the more bitter when she considers that “the same prosecutor [Robert McCulloch] who failed to indict [Officer] Darren Wilson [for killing Michael Brown] is now trying to convict me of a felony for allegedly kicking a vehicle.” Ferrell was given a suspended sentence in March 2017, and was granted probation as part of a plea deal.

Marissa Johnson said she brought White allies with her when she interrupted Senator Sanders at the podium. These friends formed a human barricade between her and the audience. It proved essential, Johnson said, as an audience member bit one of her friends when he could not get to her. Johnson said that she does not think she would have made it to her car without them after she finished her speech. Her friends could not protect her from the aftermath, however. She explained, “I’ve gotten thousands of death threats. I still do, a year and a half later. Every time something would happen in the [2016 Presidential] election again, I’d get new death threats.”

I asked how people find her. She sighed and said, “Through emails, through Twitter, through Facebook... I finally went through [Facebook] and cleaned it out like 8 months after it [the rally] happened and it literally was just thousands and thousands and thousands of messages. I still get tons of those messages every day.”

Johnson emphasized that her experiences are not unique. She said: “The tactics that we chose—if you’re really aware of the legacy of people who take that road—then you understand that everything up to death is on the table.” Johnson took a long pause to think about her answer to the next question: whether she believes her protest was worth it. She nodded slowly, yet said, “I’m really happy about what we were able to contribute to history and trying to advance the people’s agenda forward. That being said, had I known what it would cost me personally, I don’t know that I would’ve.”

For both Ferrell and Johnson, bucking against what respectable women do afforded unimaginable, mediated hyper-visibility. Ferrell became the subject of several award-winning documentaries. Johnson preempted a sitting U.S. Senator on live television. In both instances, their willingness to be out front made it easy to communicate their political demands to large audiences. Being on the front lines also made these women incredibly vulnerable to harassment, however, in ways that previous generations of womanist activists may not have experienced.

Chauvinist news portrayals of Black feminist activists

“It’s sexism. It’s misogyny. It’s ageism,” Marissa Johnson said, pounding her fist into her hand for emphasis. She was describing how she believed the media portrayed her August 2015 stand against Senator Sanders in Seattle. She said that she was angered by early coverage of her demonstration with fellow protestor, Mara Willaford. She explained: “[It was] like we’re just little girls and we just got mad, and we just yelled and other things happened to happen out of it. White supremacy in that moment could never conceive that we had intentionally crafted this plan, executed it effectively, and done things that people would have told us that we could not have done.”

Johnson said she noticed this narrative—of the unintended girl protesters gone viral—continued for about a week until she reluctantly agreed to an interview on MSNBC. In the segment, she revealed the planning that went into the interruption

and confirmed her affiliation with Black Lives Matter's Seattle chapter. "Five days to a week out, then folks are able to start saying, 'Oh actually, I see why they did what they did and actually here are already some outcomes of this.' Then, 2 weeks out, they said: 'What they did was spot on. Here's why what they did was genius.'"

As frustrated as Johnson was about the eventual news coverage she received, she acknowledged that sexism actually helped her achieve the interruption in the first place. "I had a White man who was with me," she recounted, laughing. She added, "His job was to help me get in." She said she held hands with him, and no one noticed them initially. Senator Sanders' event organizers were focused on someone else, Johnson explained:

What was interesting was that I also had a Black man who was there, and when the organizers of the Bernie [Sanders] rally saw him and saw me, they knew we were going to [do] something. They just had a feeling we were going to do something, but they assumed he was going to be the one to do it because he was a man. He went over to a different corner and they put all the security over where he was and so when the time came and they introduced Bernie, the White man who was with me helped me separate the barriers. I ran, and ducked and dived [*sic*] up the stairs.

Johnson shook her head as her laughter trailed off. She said she is torn when she thinks about the approach, as it highlighted how heavily surveilled Black men are when they are innocent and how invisible Black women are until they "behave badly."

In Ferguson, Brittany Ferrell echoed Johnson's sentiments. She said sexism led her to launch MAU in 2014 with two fellow womanist activists. As the uprisings gained steam in her hometown, she explained: "I began to notice that people began looking for this charismatic male leader. They romanticized the early Civil Rights Movement. They were looking for their Malcolm [X] or their [Dr.] Martin [Luther King, Jr.]."

Ferrell added that many of her Twitter followers and local friends self-identified as Black feminist women. Critics of her growing base made her feel like "... if you are not male then you are not worth listening to. You are not worth leading." Ferrell said mainstream news media outlets even began to anoint certain men as the official leaders of the Ferguson uprisings, on the backs of Black women labor. The men, oftentimes, would do nothing to acknowledge the steadfast women organizers publicly, she lamented.

"I just knew I had to control my own story," Ferrell explained. Ferrell said she accepted nearly all of the mainstream media interviews that came her way, despite her frustration with the Movement's portrayal as a hate group. She said she developed a network of journalists she trusted. Doing so helped solidify her place in history as a mother of the Movement, she said. "There have been times where I really had to stand my ground when doing this work because people like to undermine you," Ferrell explained. She added: "They like to condescend to you. They like to tell you where your place is. I've had my fair share of having to push back on people

that have been coming to me with some sexist or patriarchal point of view or standpoint.”

Ferrell paused and looked at her watch. She is a licensed nurse by day. It was almost the start of her 12-hour shift, she explained. She adjusted the rearview mirror of her car and examined her reflection before she said:

It's been a struggle for myself and other women in this movement because a lot of times you can be labeled as divisive when calling out sexism, but it's our duty to do that. It's our duty to do that because all that's going to happen if we don't is people are going to recreate structures that are going to continue to marginalize people—women, queer people, trans folks—so we have to confront those issues head on, the same time we confront White supremacy and racism.

Ieshia Evans, who is known internationally for facing off with Baton Rouge, Louisiana, police, disagreed. She said that today's demonstrators should focus on racial inequality primarily. “I've actually had people who have tried to divide and conquer the situation and try to get me to sway my opinions in more of a feminist direction,” she said, adding, “I shut that down automatically. Before anyone has ever discriminated against me for having a vagina they discriminated against me because of the color of my skin. My people first and then my sex.” Evans reasoned further that being a woman did not protect her from being handled roughly by police. When Evans was arrested amid the Alton Sterling protests of July 2016, she recounted, the police neither Mirandized her nor told her what charges she faced. The police “met me with war gear” and “I was in a sundress,” she said. She did not feel like a lady then, she said with a wry laugh.

The push for inclusion of Black queer activists

The third most popular code in the corpus included vigorous debates about the role of queer Black women in the Black Lives Matter Movement. Three of the five interviewees identify openly as members of the LGBTQ community. Unlike their political predecessors, the participants showed no interest in concealing this portion of their identities. Alicia Garza, co-founder of the Black Lives Matter Movement, explained: “As a Black woman who is queer, I think one of the things that just feels important for us to understand, I think, historically, is that it's always been true: that Black women and women of color have been kind of the very foundation of what it's meant to get free, and then we're pushed aside or kind of erased.”

I asked Garza pointedly whether she believed Black Lives Matter is more progressive about gender and sexuality than Black social movements past: especially since the press seemingly anointed Deray McKesson (a gay, Black man) as the leader of the Movement. She paused for a moment. We were on the campus of a mid-Atlantic university, where she was slated to speak to a small group of student leaders on the importance of self-care. Many of the workshop participants milled outside of the door of the room where we interviewed her, waiting to hear her answer. “It's certainly not perfect,” Garza answered slowly, adding “but one of the

things that we can continue to do is craft our organizations, our culture, our demonstrations, our movement in ways that not only make visible the leadership and the work of women of color and queer women and trans women and poor women, but that we also name what those contributions *are*. That we be very specific about what it is that we contribute.”

Garza shared that she was very frustrated when other groups began to co-opt the Black Lives Matter slogan. “What do you feel when you hear All Lives Matter?” I asked her.

“Nope!” she said, while shaking her head. She explained that what “feels really important is making visible folks who feel invisible.” She said focusing on anti-Black racism opens the door for a greater discussion still about *which* Black lives matter. She referenced the cultural silence about violence against Black people who identify openly as gay, bisexual, or transsexual. “This is a moment where we can shift that, and I think what we’re seeing is that we’re watching old ways of being go away and new ways of being come in,” Garza said.

At the same time, Garza mentioned that some historic, Black organizations adhere staunchly to respectability politics still. Leaders of these storied groups are worried that members of the LGBTQ community will muddle the messages and priorities of the cause to end police brutality, she said. They are unable to marginalize LGBTQ leaders in ways that they have in the past, however, since social media gives everyone a potential platform. While Garza declined to name the legacy Black organizations that attempt to engage in contemporary gatekeeping, she said simply, “it’s important for us to fight for our space without fighting each other.”

Since Garza’s October 2015 interview, many of the groups that were birthed in Ferguson under the broad Black Lives Matter campaign either have rebranded, merged, or dissolved. Brittany Ferrell explained that her organization (MAU), which she co-founded with Alexis Templeton and Ashley Yates, is in the latter group. Still, she said she is proud of what they built.

“We had a lot of young people, a lot of queer people, and a lot of women who were doing so much work that was not being recognized. Their work was not being taken seriously, but it was the work that we felt like a lot of men got the credit for,” Ferrell said.

Ferrell noted that MAU made Black, queer womanists feel protected and valued. In private messages and threads on Twitter, she saw her members discuss the unique threats that the three layers of marginalization often elicited. “We wanted to create a space [where] young people could feel safe coming in with their whole selves—not to feel like they have to fit in anybody’s box—and to collectively organize power,” she explained.

Part of MAU’s communication strategy was to allow its members to operate without much publicity or fanfare. While Ferrell, Templeton, and Yates took turns fielding press inquiries, many other women offered first aid to those hurt by police in the frontline protests. (In fact, Ferrell said the experience made her pursue her current nursing career.) MAU women also cooked food for protesters, helped write

lengthy proposals for local police reform, and, in Ferrell's case, even fell in love. She and Templeton became engaged in December 2014, 1 month after the city of St. Louis decided not to indict Officer Darren Wilson on any charges for the killing of Mike Brown. She recalled that both of them were very depressed by the decision, but found hope in each other. "We were forged in the fire," Ferrell said. She explained that their roles as romantic public figures created "its own set of trauma." She said:

It's a love that has never really felt like any other love that I've ever experienced. Knowing that somebody is so committed to something in the same way that you are and that they are on this journey—to make sure that they're whole and they're healthy in the same way that you are—it's something very powerful about the type of love that Alexis and I have grown into during this movement.

MAU dissolved in 2016, Ferrell said, as she awaited sentencing on her felony charge.

Paying homage to Black social movements past

Although none of the questions in the interview map asked participants to think of a Black feminist activist predecessor that they admired, four of the five women repeatedly referenced unsung heroines from the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Marissa Johnson recounted: "When we did the [Sanders] interruption, I had a shirt on that said, 'Fight like Fannie Lou Hamer,' and it was really funny because I had that shirt on and yet people were like, 'Why did she do that? We don't understand!' and I'm like ... all she did was go after Democrats, right? I think in that way, she's someone I would be connected to." Hamer registered thousands of Black Mississippians in her home state to vote in the 1960s. She even challenged the Democratic party to hear their concerns by demanding a delegation at its National Convention in 1964. President Lyndon B. Johnson preempted her televised testimony about the police brutality she endured in pursuit of Black enfranchisement. Marissa explained that this time, however, she would be "the Johnson doing the interrupting," in Hamer's memory. Johnson explained also that she and her protest partner, Mara Willaford, wore colorful braids and large hoop earrings purposefully on the day of their protest. She said: "That aesthetic for us was really important because we wanted to represent folks who were in the 'hood. We really believe that's where a lot of Black liberation is taking place, so we wanted to reject this notion of being respectful.... We tried to embody that even in our aesthetic, which was a trigger for people. We did not come off as respectful."

Ferrell said she has made sartorial choices that criticized previous movements' politics, too. One of her favorite protest shirts, for example, is a Black hoodie that reads, "Not Your Respectable Negro," she said.² She explained that the shirt challenges what modern Black leadership should look like. Brittany Packnett suggested that today's Movement may look like "more than one thing," after all. Of all the participants, she is perhaps the most visible activist who is still working on the

frontlines, with a weekly podcast and a Twitter following of more than 180,000 users as of December 2018. She has a clothing line, too, called Love and Power. The apparel's Twitter hashtag, #loveisresistance, encapsulates the ethos of Packnett's brand of activism, and serves as a revenue stream for her social justice projects, she explained. Packnett sat in a coffee shop in Washington, DC, one afternoon in February 2017, waiting for an Uber driver to pick her up. The Skype connection faltered a bit as she toggled between mobile apps to track her ride. When she returned on-screen, she said she drew inspiration from "late '60s and '70s folks like [Stokely Carmichael] Kwame Ture and Gil Scott-Heron and Maya Angelou and Audre Lorde." According to Packnett, these are "people who took the foundations of the mid-century Civil Rights Movement and built something intentionally radical on top of it."

She bristled when I asked what she thought of people who criticized her current group, *Campaign Zero*, for operating under the Black Lives Matter banner when it is not affiliated with an official chapter. She and her friend and fellow protestor, Deray McKesson, received the coveted President Obama White House invitations and late-night television show appearances on HBO and NBC, while many unknown Black women activists continued to toil in obscurity, two of the activists in the corpus (who wished to remain nameless) complained. Another of the interviewees explained that Packnett, as a cisgender Black woman, is "the most palatable one of us [Black Lives Matter activists]." Packnett has been a brand ambassador for Pantene hair products, a cover subject for *Essence* magazine, and serves as a video columnist for *Mic* news and comedienne Amy Poehler's blog, *Smart Girls*. Packnett frowned and said that legacy media are largely to blame for lumping all the organizations together. She is unapologetic about her crossover into the mainstream, she said. Still, she maintained, there is value in coalition-building like activists did in past generations, rather than pitting leaders against each other. "There were lots of organizations who had lots of different tactics, aims, and leaders, and constituents, but they were oriented towards the same goal. A goal of racial equity and freedom. Goals of economic empowerment, goals of the American dream, right? ... So, in the same way that SNCC, SCLC, and NAACP and CORE and the [Black] Panthers all had different tactics, they were all a part of a broader movement."³

Discussion

Embodying individuality

Anti-respectability, as an approach to political communication, picks up where womanist movements of the mid-1970s left off, with intentionally radical performances of self and strong promises to value the most vulnerable Black lives. Anti-respectability asks, in other words, that one bring their intersectional identity to the protest. The underlying message is that any Black woman can lead. In the current paradigm, Claudette Colvin might have been protesting on the back of the pickup truck next to Brittany Ferrell in Ferguson, as a fellow single mother lifting her voice.

Marsha P. Johnson might have an Instagram account, just as Alicia Garza does, which features pictures of an out and proud life.

All told, the participants in this study welcome many varieties of Blackness in their politics, rather than pushing forward one “model” identity as sacrosanct. In doing so, these women depart from the Baptist church–infused values of the Civil Rights Movement, to carve out a new style of political communication. Their rejection of normative performances of ladyhood are not self-conscious in the face of the White panopticon, either. Although all of the women share an awareness that White audiences are watching them, they assume a defiant posture in the glare of this gaze. They hardly are performing a “vanilla self” online or in real life (Pitcan, Marwick, & Boyd, 2018). All of it seems to say, “If you are going to stare at me, indeed I will give you something to see.”

Embodying the discourse

Black feminists’ use of hashtag activism is “a unique fusion of social justice, technology, and citizen journalism,” Williams (2015, p. 344) has explained. Scholars have surmised also that social media allow today’s Black feminist activists to engage in unprecedented intersectional mobilization (Brown, Ray, Summers, & Fraistat, 2017), highly mediated protest (Langford & Speight, 2015), and subversive, gendered cultural scripts (Lane, 2015). I have found all of these assertions to be true. The women of this study have highlighted, at long last, the political needs and demands of Black America’s most marginalized groups. By leveraging Black Twitter’s affordances, these women create, crystallize, and share political messages faster than any of their forebearers. What is more remarkable, however, is how these activists use their bodies to push forward political narratives. They are refusing to adhere to the culture of dissemblance. They want the panopticon to see their demonstrations. The way these woma-nists decide to take up space defies early 20th-century logic that Black women activists should shrink, step aside, or simply disappear.

In this vein, the hyper-visibility these women have experienced rebooted a saga of Black feminist narratives that lay dormant for more than 20 years. The way forward is uncertain, however, as the Black bourgeoisie continues to wring its hands about the “ratchet performance” as a political communication device (Abdelaziz, 2017; Pickens, 2015). As Pickens (2015, p. 44) has explained, “The ratchet imaginary has no desire to participate in narratives of racial progression or social uplift; instead, it articulates a desire for individuality regardless of the ideas and wants of a putative collective.” A ratchet performance, in other words, is an exercise in anti-respectability. It glares back at the White panopticon, just as Ieshia Evans stared down that riot gear–clad police officer in Baton Rouge. Time will tell if this approach will bind Black people politically, or widen the chasm between its various socioeconomic classes.

Conclusion

Marissa Johnson said she considers herself an “elder stateswoman” of the Black Lives Matter Movement, simply because news cycles move so quickly today. Still, she said that many Black women activists today leave the public eye with little fanfare because: “It’s very dangerous and it’s hard to maintain. There’s not proper structures in place. It’s not very sustainable to do that kind of work really effectively long-term, because it’s super traumatic.”

The Movement needs fresh faces to continue to grow, she said. It also needs womanist activists who will document their contributions. To these ends, all of the participants are creating original media or taking legacy media interviews on their own terms at the time of this publication. Evans appeared on an MTV news program in 2017 to criticize Pepsi’s controversial commercial, where model Kendall Jenner (who is White) handed a White police officer a soda to quell a protest. Pepsi pulled the advertisement when Black Twitter lampooned it. Ferrell served as one of the principal characters of *Whose Streets*. *Rolling Stone* magazine’s David Fear called it the “Doc of the Year” and “and a chronicle of activism as a triumph” in a 13 August 2017 review. Garza (2016) completed a book chapter that offered a “her-story” of the Movement. Johnson is the owner of the Safety Pin Box, which offers “ally training” for White people. Lastly, Packnett hosts a Webby Award-winning weekly podcast, *Pod Save the People*. She is a newly-minted fellow in Harvard University’s Kennedy School Institute of Politics, too, where she is studying the question of whether Black social movements can achieve longevity. “I didn’t even get into Harvard in 2002,” she Tweeted on 27 August 2018, adding, “Look at God” (Packnett, 2018). A sea of Black feminist activists affirmed her. April Reign (2018), creator of the #OscarsSoWhite hashtag, for example, wrote back: “They weren’t ready for you. They might not be still. But it is time. So proud of you. xoxo.”

Reign’s comment captures the Zeitgeist of this new generation of Black feminist activists perfectly. While America might not have been ready for intersectional, womanist movements to thrive in the 20th century—and might not be still—it is time. The perfect storm of persistent causes around which to rally, the lightning-fast connectivity to one another afforded by the Web, and careful study of the successes and failings of womanist predecessors have prepared Black feminist activists to be authors of their own stories. Imagine what Fannie Lou Hamer would say if she could see that three of the most prominent social justice hashtags of the last decade—#BlackLivesMatter, #OscarsSoWhite, and #MeToo—all were created by Black women. In this vein, the small cohort I featured here is but a portion of the vast network of progressive, Black women activists who organize and communicate online. Scholars will find this a rich research area, as womanist activists grow ever-emboldened to call out misogynoir—misogyny directed toward Black women—in American culture (Bailey & Trudy, 2018). Still, the work continues for generations anew, like Brittany Ferrell’s daughter, who was 10 years old at the time of her mother’s interview in 2017. “I am passing her my baton,” Ferrell said via FaceTime.

She gazed silently out of her car window for a few minutes, a smile lingering on her lips. Then, she checked her reflection once more in her rearview mirror. She fastened her hospital ID badge to her medical scrubs and said goodbye to me. She had work to do.

Footnotes

- 1 For the complete transcript of the conversation, see: <https://nyti.ms/2jaECZT>.
- 2 See: <https://afropunk.com/2015/02/bhm-faces-from-the-new-civil-rights-movement-alexis-templeton-and-brittany-ferrell-of-millennial-activists-united/>.
- 3 One of the participants abbreviated some important civil rights organizations in a response she gave above. SNCC refers to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. SCLC is the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. NAACP stands for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Finally, CORE was the Congress of Racial Equality.

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