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# Black, Female, and Controlled: An Historical Overview of Policing Black Women’s Bodies

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The intense policing of the Black female body has given way to a list of terms defining the aesthetic of the Black body as “grotesque,” “strange,” “unfeminine,” “lascivious,” and “obscene” (Hobson, 2003, p. 92), yet the same features are hailed as beautiful and exotic when they do not belong to a Black body (Hobson, 2003). In this paper I provide a historical overview, beginning with the Middle Passage, of the ways intense policing imposed upon the Black female body transcends the centuries in order to evidence how, as it pertains to the Black female body, our captive bodies—irresistible to our captors—become the other, a thing, upon our capture.

Black women have always been “doubly” oppressed, with overlapping race and gender resulting in intersectional oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). Uncovering these experiences taking into account aspects of social positioning is a worthy pursuit in order to shed even light on highly racialized, discriminatory, hate-based discourses so pervasive in this sociopolitical moment. In the paper’s first section I draw from Hortense Spillers’ (1987) *Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe*, who recounts ways 18<sup>th</sup>-century slave captors not only policed Black female bodies, but stripped Black women of their gender identity as they traveled through the Middle Passage. Additionally, I celebrate Harriet Jacobs’ (1861) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, an unparalleled memoir of the experiences of a Black female slave and fugitive. Through Harriet’s account (she wrote under the pseudonym Linda Brent), her audience learns just how the Black slave body is policed by the white slave owner and becomes a “being for” the captor and mistress. Next, I move into the 19<sup>th</sup> century to introduce Sara Baartman, known by the pseudonym Hottentot Venus (Crais & Scully, 2010). Her story highlights how the Black female body is degraded, objectified, and put on display as “other,” analogously shaping how Black female bodies are policed. Lastly, I move to the postbellum era to

illustrate how the institution and social order of slavery introduced during the middle passage remain woven into the fabric of U.S. culture for Black women, our bodies, and Black women's ongoing struggle for corporeal justice. I recount Black female exemplars—the Relf sisters, Beyoncé, and Serena Williams—to illustrate my argument. Throughout I show Black women as essential to maintaining the U.S. social order—in spite of how our autonomy is systematically stripped from us.

### **Black Feminist Theory**

The initial purpose of the modern feminist movement was to promote gender equality and to bring forward and celebrate women's experiences and perspectives. The “third wave” of feminism centered the voices and experiences of white women of European descent (the theory of which was penned largely by female, French Post-Structuralists, many of whom concentrated on challenging the claims of white, male psychoanalytic theorists), so although the era's feminists fought generally for women's rights, many women and their experiences were left out; thus, the Black feminist movement came along to address this deficit and focus upon Black women's fight for equality. Coined by Black legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), “intersectionality” encompasses an individual's multiple, layered identities which create complexity in the way a person experiences oppression. Crenshaw posits the ways Black women are discriminated against fit neatly neither into the box of racism nor that of sexism; rather, Black women encounter discrimination on the basis of both racism and sexism. Ahmed (2017) puts it plainly, claiming “Feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit” (p. 5).

Legally sexism is defined as prejudice or discrimination against women. And racism, from a legal standpoint, is defined as discrimination faced by Black people and people of color. Based on these basic definitions, Black women are considered invisible within the law and thus without legal recourse. Due to the intersectionality of Black women's experiences, white feminist theory does a very poor job of representing or advocating authentically for Black women. As I report the ways Black women historically have been policed, I self-consciously frame my essay in order to engage in countering dominant, patriarchal discourses by placing Black women at the center of the dialogue.

Although Black feminist theory emerged in the 1970s, the underlying politics of Black feminist thought date to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In her 1833 speech, women's rights activist and free-born Black woman Maria W. Stewart proclaims, “It is useless for us any longer to sit with our hands folded, reproaching the whites; for that will never elevate us. Possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted” (quoted in Hill Collins, 1990, p. 4). Stewart raises the call for Black

women to develop the confidence of men as a path to free Black women from oppressive bondage. Stewart foreshadows Black feminist successors when she suggests a variety of themes be taken up toward the betterment of the Black woman. Black feminist thought has been a powerful tool working for the destruction of a dominant white, male social order that steals Black women's agency and autonomy.

Black women were denied support by white feminists who wanted to paint all women's experiences as monolithic. In the 1970s activist Angela Davis faced tremendous aggression and political persecution; white feminists only reluctantly came to her defense and that reluctance further alienated Black women from the cause (Simons, 1979). Critical theorist Patricia Hill Collins (1990) identifies four tenets of Black feminism: 1) Black women empower themselves by doing away with the negative representations of Black women by creating their own self-definition and establishing multiple, positive images of the Black woman; 2) Black women dismantle the overarching dominant structure in terms of race, class, and gender oppression; 3) Black women intertwine political activism and intellectual thought; and, 4) Black women are cognizant of the distinct cultural heritage that has equipped them with the tools to navigate through and transform daily discrimination. Hill Collins summarizes these tenets, saying, "[Black feminism] is a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community" (p. 39). Black feminist theory provides a way and mean for Black women to revolutionize conditions for empowerment on our own terms.

### **Middle Passage to Slavery (15<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> Centuries)**

The Middle Passage most notably refers to a period of time during which Africans were packed onto ships and transported as goods to the U.S. across the Atlantic. Stolen Africans were densely packed together, chained to the floor for the voyage's duration, spanning anywhere from three to four months. The Middle Passage introduces Black Africans to an early form of policing Black bodies, as Africans were chained so closely and so densely they were completely denied their ability to mobilize—were unable to walk or stand up. Spillers (1987) argues Middle Passage rendered Black women at least "pre" human and without agency, recounting how, "removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet 'American' either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also *nowhere* at all" (p. 72). Stripped of their name, identity, place, and culture, Black women were not acknowledged as human. And, stripped of her clothes, the Black woman stands as a "constant reminder of her sexual vulnerability" (hooks, 1981, p. 18).

Another method of policing Black women's bodies employed by slave captors comes in the form of segregated bunkers for African men and women. Although there are no accounts proving the participation of women as part of insurrection uprisings aboard ships, based on recorded accounts of Black women and their resistance toward the oppressor during their time in slavery, it is a fair assumption Black women aboard slave ships battled beside Black men; thus, creating additional need to police the Black female body (Morgan, 2004). As Black women were captured and deprived of freedom and agency, they effectively were rendered objects. The captive body "brings into focus a gathering of social realities as well as a metaphor for value so thoroughly interwoven in their literal and figurative emphases that distinctions between them are virtually useless" (Spillers, 1987, p. 68). Slave captors introduced an ideology reducing Black women to a slew of metaphors—a "being for," a [dangerous] object of desire, the "other" (Spillers, 1987)—repeated and enforced through dominance and social order. As Spillers puts it,

The captivating party does not only "earn" the right to dispose of the captive body as it sees fit, but gains, consequently, the right to name and "name" it. The nicknames by which African-American women have been called, or regarded, or imagined on the New World scene demonstrate the powers of distortion that the dominant community seizes as its unlawful prerogative. (p. 72)

The capture and enslavement of Black women transformed them from personhood to property. In addition to policing their physical bodies, their essence was policed as well. Black women lost the autonomy to self-define, and instead became marked bodies defined by their enslavers. Black women were concealed under layers and layers of discourse naming them property meant only to serve the physical and economic needs of masters and mistresses. The effects Black women faced from policing during the Middle Passage and into slavery were physical as well as psychological.

As slave ships reached land, African women's torturous fates became clear. Many enslaved women were sexually violated while chained and shackled to the boat's floor leaving them with child—producing "property" for their holders. Three important "humanly" rights were stricken from the African female as a result of capture: 1) the right freely to choose an intimate partner; 2) the right to a healthy, functional pregnancy; and, 3) the right to parent her child. Harriet Jacobs' experience as a young slave girl reveals the perverted obsession of both her master and mistress. Because of Jacobs' status as property, her sexual expression was policed, her psyche—conscious and subconscious—was policed, as was her right to parent her children.

Oftentimes Black slaves were brutally raped and sexually exploited by their masters. Furthermore, Black women were stripped of agency to choose a mate. “Something akin to freedom” (Jacobs, 1861, p. 85) came in the form of exercising some autonomy over their sexual and reproductive lives. For Jacobs, she writes:

The influences of slavery had had the same effect on me that they had on other young girls; they had made me prematurely knowing, concerning the evil ways of the world. I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation. (p. 83)

Here Jacobs alludes to a time when she exercised free will in her choice of a sexual partner. Although not her first choice as a mate or father for her children, a deliberate sexual encounter with Mr. Sands was a way for her not only to exercise free will over her body and the acts of sex and procreation, but also a way for her to thwart her master’s attention away from his sexual obsession with her. Jacobs also speaks to how the institution of slavery policed her choices in ways of which white women often take advantage.

But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by laws. (p. 83)

The Black female body was policed in ways unknown to white women. Jacobs recounts the experience of many enslaved Black women—losing agency in one’s choice of a partner, engagement in consensual sexual intercourse, and parenting one’s children, a profound lack of intimate justice for Black women.

Other ways the Black female body was policed during this time came in the form of jealousy and resentment often expressed by white mistresses who “were subject to the same fabric of dread and humiliation” (Spillers, 1987, p. 77). In Harriet Jacobs’ case, her tormentors were both the master, Mr. Flint, and his wife, Mrs. Flint. Through the systematic degradation perpetrated by the latter, one learns of the ways white feminist theory’s focus on gender alone does little to nothing to protect Black women’s interests or agency, for the Black female body was not safe in even the most vulnerable of states—while sleeping.

Sometimes I woke up, and found her bending over me. At other times she whispered in my ear as though it were her husband who was speaking to me, and listened to hear what I would answer. If she startled me, on such occasion, she would

glide stealthily away; and the next morning she would tell me I had been talking in my sleep, and ask who I was talking to. At last, I began to be fearful for my life. (Jacobs, 1861, p. 54)

In this memory, Mrs. Flint's actions become metaphor for her husband's madness, as her power over Jacobs grows unchecked, for even a slave's dreams were policed by sick, twisted instances of unchecked power, petty jealousy, and ill will. As her words torment and penetrate Jacobs' sleeping state, those who enslave her inculcate jealousy, fury, and ownership upon the Black body in its state of increased vulnerability. The enslaved Black woman had no saving grace from either master or mistress.

### **Hottentot Venus (19<sup>th</sup> Century)**

In mainstream media portrayals of beauty are heavily filtered through a racialized lens. Oftentimes, Black women and their aesthetic—specifically their batty, or rear-end—are described uncomplimentary, directly opposing the phrase, “beauty is the perfect realization of a human being” (Kant, 1997, p. 3). In 2002, tennis world-champion Serena Williams was infamously berated due to her bold sartorial style, which media dubbed “ghetto” glamour: a tight-fitting catsuit outlining her posterior and, on her head, bleached-blond box braids. Although she would triumph, winning the U.S. Open that year, the press' attack reflects the wider historical attitudes toward the Black female body's aesthetic. Deep-seated feelings on exhibiting the Black body date back to the South African woman known as “Hottentot Venus,” though her name was Saartje or Sarah Baartman (Crais & Scully, 2010). Much like the fascination with Williams' buttocks, Venus was known for this same “strange” attraction. Criticisms garnered after Williams' 2002 U.S. Open appearance and the uninvited attention to her backside seem to brand a Black woman's sexiness as lewd and obscene rather than a vital, entitled part of a woman's identity and agency—paradoxically sexiness that white folks were keen to gape at.

Disability Studies and feminist theory scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson coined the term “disabled bodies” which “flies in the face of [an] ideal...presenting the ultimate challenge to perfection and progress” (Garland-Thomson quoted in Hobson, 2003, p. 11). She situates disabled bodies within feminist disability theory, whose scholars resist the social construction of disabled bodies as deviant, pathological, and inferior. Disabled by oppression, white supremacy, and loss of agency, the Black body is rendered an “outsider” to dominant, white, European standards of beauty. Discourses that normalize white, European beauty leave little room to consider the Black female body as valued, therefore leaving Black women open to discriminatory practices aimed at

controlling Black women and the ways in which our bodies may appear and be used.

The Black body is not necessarily a subversive representation; rather a representation that has been crazily distorted—much like images seen through a carnival funhouse mirror. Black feminist artist and critic Lorraine O’Grady (1992) writes, painfully, “To name ourselves rather than be named we must first see ourselves. For some of us, this will not be easy. So long unmirrored, we may have forgotten how we look” (p. 14). Here she refers to stereotypical racist images representing Black female sexuality, such as the “Hottentot Venus,” “Jezebel,” “mammy,” “welfare queen,” and, most recently, “baby mama.” Patricia Hill Collins (1990) terms these “controlling images” which distort the ways Black women perceive themselves and one another.

Dominant society’s views on beauty are made overtly clear by conducting a simple google image search of the terms “beautiful woman,” “white female model,” and “Black female model.” The search for “beautiful women” produces only images of white women, which echoes Kant’s definition of beauty and Garland-Thomson’s theory Black bodies are “disabled bodies.” When googling “white female model” or “Black female model,” those images returned evidence starkly different racialized discourses between images of white female models and Black female models. White models’ poses appear poised or offer tasteful headshots. Black models’ bodies are displayed in exploitive poses, only further perpetuating the hypersexualization so commonly associated with Black women’s bodies and souls.

### **Post-Slavery (20<sup>th</sup>–21<sup>st</sup> Centuries)**

In 1973 a landmark decision handed down by the nation’s highest court, *Roe v Wade*, gave women everywhere in the U.S. the constitutional right to safe, legal abortion. For the mainstream, white feminist movement *Roe v. Wade* represented major victory and a positive step toward ensuring both women’s autonomy over their bodies and their right to choose termination. While white women fought tooth-and-nail for their right to safe, legal abortion, some Black women were unknowingly losing their right even to conceive through a practice grounded in Eugenics: sterilization abuse—corporeal policing that coercively stripped Black women of their reproductive rights. So, while white women rejoiced, 14-year-old Minne Relf and her 12-year-old sister, Mary, both of whom were considered mentally disabled, were subjected to compulsory sterilization under the guise of scientific study of an experimental contraceptive, Depo-Provera (Threadcraft, 2016). The Relf sisters were born to uneducated farmhands from Montgomery, Alabama. When approached by nurses from the federally funded

Montgomery Community Action Agency to ask permission for their daughters to take place in this experimental treatment, their mother consented by signing the form with an “X.” Eventually, studies revealed Depo-Provera injections were linked to cancer, and it was then the Relfs learned their daughters had been sterilized.

Procedures mirroring those the Relf sisters endured were commonly performed at “maternity clinics” in Southern states, dating back to as early as the 1930s, although, Black people have been the subject of such vile medical experimentation dating back to slavery (Threadcraft, 2016, p. 3); indeed, such heinous, nonconsenting medical experimentation on Black bodies led to a revolution in human subjects protections and informed consent practices. Curtailing Black fertility was a form of reproductive policing enforced by white, Southern doctors who imagined the Black uterus useless or outright undesirable. The Relf sisters’ sterilization stands as a lasting symbol of a racially stratified system that works aggressively against the reproductive health of Black women. Threadcraft (2016) writes:

At a time when women’s ability to control their fertility moved from the margins to the center of the struggle for women’s rights, the Relf sisters’ violation was a clear reminder that the very patriarchal control of reproduction that the period’s feminist activists decried had diverged sharply along racial lines historically. (p. 3)

Furthermore, because Black women had a greater dependence on public assistance—welfare—they were made susceptible to being compulsorily sterilized at twice the rate of white women. Acts of Black, female sterilization not only served to police the reproductive rights of individual Black women, but also toward maintaining “the population and power imbalance” (Beal, 2008) that favored white bodies disproportionately over Black bodies.

The sterilization abuse and coerced reproduction of Black women during this time were structured to uphold the same principles as when Black women were coerced to reproduce property during slavery. Once “liberated,” their reproductive functioning, or lack thereof, became linked to their overall health and well-being (Nelson, 2003, pp. 80–81). So, while *Roe* became a symbol of justice and agency for white women by allowing control over reproduction, *Relf v. Weinberger* is symbolic of how that control directly affects Black women.

I contend we live in an era in which even the most “elite” Black women are steadily reminded of their place: as flesh which may entertain members of the dominant group so long as their Blackness remains masked. Frightening is the way in which our symbolic language regards

Black women as “person” not “property,” yet, dominant social order renders Black women, still, as “property” with no power—and therefore inhuman. These reminders of how Black women differ from the standards of “normal, American” society are not even covert, with elite Black women like Serena Williams and Beyoncé constantly reminded their Blackness represents nothing more than “flesh” to those who watch.

According to Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, within a social order dominance persists because agency is won over and over again by the dominant group (Gramsci paraphrased in Hebdige, 1979). On 10 September 2018 Australian cartoonist Mark Knight of the *Herald Sun* published a cartoon of Serena Williams that boldly evidenced the racialized and sexist discourses at work defining and upholding stereotypically racist representations of the Black female and her body. Knight’s cartoon depicts yet another gross, dangerously inaccurate characterization of a Black woman in a passionate moment during the U.S. Open championship match—a woman whom many rightly call the greatest athlete ever. The same cartoon also depicts the whitening of Williams’ opponent, Naomi Osaka, who is half Japanese and half Haitian, overshadowing an elite Black woman athlete and her astonishing record. Knight’s cartoon reinforces the racialized fallacy that Black women cannot be passionate without anger and cannot show passion because white culture only ever reads a Black woman’s passion as anger. Language associated with Black women is deeply grounded in property relations, so to represent the Black woman as human introduces a false concept of power when Black women are merely flesh—and marked in so many ways by beatings, rape, and controlled images.

Beyoncé fell victim to a similar dose of reality when her child was ridiculed by the news media and the public because of her child’s “natural” hair. Backlash toward her young daughter who innocently sports her naturally kinky hair serves as a caution: the Black female body is policed in such a way that when daring to put on display an aspect of Blackness, one is admonished back into a physical manifestation only—a piece of property. I interpret such ridicule toward Beyoncé’s daughter as a subtle reminder that, in the U.S., Black women produce property for white social structures. As Beyoncé and Jay-Z say in the song *Nice*,

Was too busy touring out all your arenas my passport is tatted,  
it look like it’s active. I play on these planes, y’all catch me in  
traffic, y’all drag me in court for that shit? Y’all backwards.  
After all these years of drug trafficking, huh? Time to remind  
me I’m Black again, huh? All this talking back, I’m too

arrogant, huh? (Williams, Knowles-Carter, Carter, Andrews, & Coney, 2018)

As African Americans, we are reminded of our Blackness in almost every setting into which we walk. In myriad ways, we police ourselves from too openly expressing our Blackness from fear of being attacked, jailed, or killed. As we are policed on the intersectional basis of race and gender, this, in large part, accounts for why language associated with the Black woman must be seen as firmly grounded in property relations—for patriarchy supplies the other. If woman equals human, yet Black equals unhuman, then Black and woman must equal neither human nor woman. Policing the Black female body across centuries proves a perverse way of maintaining a social structure in which there is a clear bottom or inferior status. For if the Black woman is to be considered human and stereotypical language describing Black women is no longer, this alone might signal the end of white dominance.

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