Women and Black Lives Matter

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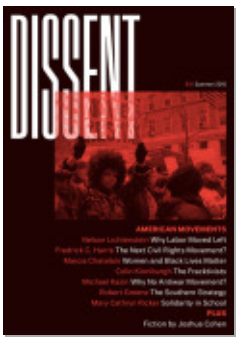

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Women and Black Lives Matter

An interview with Marcia Chatelain

In recent months, the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, and others have mobilized an unprecedented mass movement against police brutality and racism that we now know as Black Lives Matter.

So far, the movement's attention primarily to the experiences of black men has shaped our understanding of what constitutes police brutality, where it occurs, and how to address it. But black women—like Rekia Boyd, Michelle Cusseaux, Tanisha Anderson, Shelly Frey, Yvette Smith, Eleanor Bumpurs, and others—have also been killed, assaulted, and victimized by the police. Often, women are targeted in exactly the same ways as men—shootings, police stops, racial profiling. They also experience police violence in distinctly gendered ways, such as sexual harassment and sexual assault. Yet such cases have failed to mold our analysis of the broader picture of police violence; nor have they drawn equal public attention or outrage.

A growing number of Black Lives Matter activists—including the women behind the original hashtag—have been refocusing attention on how police brutality impacts black women and others on the margins of today's national conversation about race, such as poor, elderly, gay, and trans people. They are not only highlighting the impact of police violence on these communities, but articulating why a movement for racial justice must necessarily be inclusive. Say Her Name, for example, an initiative launched in May, documents and analyzes black women's experiences of police violence and explains what we lose when we ignore them. We not only miss half the facts, we fundamentally fail to grasp how the laws, policies, and the culture that underpin gender inequalities are reinforced by America's racial divide.

How are black women affected by police brutality? And how are they shaping the concerns, strategies, and future of Black Lives Matter? Marcia Chatelain, professor of history at Georgetown University, creator of the #FergusonSyllabus, and author of *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration*, shares her insights on the role of black women in today's vibrant and necessary movement for racial justice.

KAAVYA ASOKA: In addition to your historical work, you're the creator of a valuable resource for educators—the #FergusonSyllabus—which crowdsourced reading materials from Twitter and elsewhere to help teachers discuss Ferguson and race in their classrooms. Could you begin by telling us about your own relationship to Black Lives Matter?

MARCIA CHATELAIN: As a black woman in America, this movement is fundamentally about my life and the lives of those I love. I've participated in student-led actions—like die-ins and social media campaigns—and I consider myself a student of all these amazing activists. I am a beloved observer and a participant to the extent that I incorporate the movement in my teaching and encourage my students to get involved.

ASOKA: "Black Lives Matter" was created by three black women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, after George Zimmerman's acquittal for Trayvon Martin's death. Women have been organizing marches, die-ins, protests, and otherwise leading various responses to police brutality. Why are women playing such a key role in today's movement?

CHATELAIN: Women across the generations are participating in this movement, but I think we've had a wonderful opportunity to see especially young, queer women play a central role. It's important to recognize that while they are organizing on behalf of victims of police brutality and cruelty broadly, they have to constantly remind the larger public that women are among those victims too. So, although these women are putting their bodies on the line for the movement, they also have to articulate that they are fighting for all lives, including their own.

ASOKA: We know that there is currently no comprehensive national data on police killings. But the information we have shows that black women are targeted in similar ways to black men—police killings, stops, and racial profiling; targeting of poor, disabled, or trans women; deaths in custody. In some cases, they're also targeted at similar rates—research released by the African American Policy Forum and Columbia University showed that in New York in 2013, 53.4 percent of all women stopped by the police were black, while 55.7 percent of all men stopped were black. Women also face gender-specific risks from police encounters—sexual harassment, assault, strip-searching, and endangerment of children in their care. How prominently is the impact of police brutality on women featuring in today's movement?

CHATELAIN: I think *any* conversation about police brutality must include black women. Even if women are not the majority of the victims of homicide, the way they are profiled and targeted by police is incredibly gendered. There are now renewed conversations about how sexual violence

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

We also have to consider that sexual harassment, exploitation, and assault not only happen on the streets, they also occur in the home and in the detention center. In other words, black women are often targets of violence inside homes and in private spaces where people cannot easily see them or galvanize around them. When we consider how and where people organize, it's important to remember these victims of brutality too, even if we can't gather at their specific sites of victimization. I think the most important part of all this is that black women are fighting for their names to be known as part of this issue—there is a real desire to complicate the notion that it is only young, black men who are living in fear for their lives.

When we look at this issue historically, women activists were often targeted by police, and the sexual violence that civil rights activists experienced in places like Mississippi's Parchman Farm raised the consciousness of other activists about the need for prison reform. Women like Fannie Lou Hamer were abused behind the walls of a detention center. So for black women and black female activists, police brutality is a very real concern.

ASOKA: We tend to see violence and racism against black men as a barometer of racism against the black population at large, whereas violence against black women is often invisible. We're all familiar with the names Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Freddie Gray, but Rekia Boyd is one of the few names of black women that we've heard. Why haven't the killings of women of color received the same attention as those of men?

CHATELAIN: Yes, I agree with Dani McClain, Melinda Anderson, and Kali Gross, among others, who are calling out the fact that the conversation about police violence is mostly framed around the endangerment of men of color. Kimberlé Crenshaw has criticized the silence around women's victimization, as well as initiatives like My Brother's Keeper, which excludes girls and young women. Sexism is a factor, but so are market forces—an industry built on saving, rehabilitating, and disciplining men of color has emerged, which has attracted state funding and enriched some leaders of color and their organizations. Since the 1980s, private and public dollars have been devoted to solving the problems of boys and young men of color in ways that they haven't for girls. This reinforces the notion that in times of scarcity, girls and young women are a low priority. So the fact that the killings of women of color do not galvanize people—whether we are talking about

Maria Hamilton, whose son Dontre Hamilton was killed by a Milwaukee police officer in April 2014, addresses protesters in Madison, Wisconsin, March 7, 2015. Photo courtesy of Light Brigading via Flickr.

state actors or progressive organizers—doesn't surprise me. But I'm heartened that there are activists and collectives that have been critical of the unchecked sexism in this fight.

ASOKA: You mention Dani McClain. Last August she argued in the *Nation* that the killing of black men is a reproductive justice issue for women, who have a right to see their children live in safety. Are there others who are articulating this fight for racial justice in explicitly feminist terms?

CHATELAIN: Black Lives Matter is feminist in its interrogation of state power and its critique of structural inequality. It is also forcing a conversation about gender and racial politics that we need to have—women at the forefront of this movement are articulating that "black lives" does not only mean men's lives or cisgender lives or respectable lives or the lives that are legitimated by state power or privilege.

Historically, movements for racial justice have often framed the question of equality as one that could be answered by men. From the abolitionist movement to the civil rights movement, many of the key issues were framed around concerns that racial injustice harmed masculinity. I think that today's movement has this in mind when calling for the names of women and girls

to be included among those who inspire the fight. No community wants to see its daughters die, or for women to be unable to support their families because of the death of their partners or other family members. I think the reproductive justice issue inherent in all of this is that violence undermines the ability to keep families and communities strong. The stress of violence and intimidation affects child protection and child development. The anxiety of parenting a child of color in a world where they are often targets can certainly shape one's decision to have children and one's approach to parenting.

ASOKA: What are the challenges of trying to address issues like domestic violence against black women (a leading cause of death) when we know that calling the police seldom spells safety for either black men or women?

CHATELAIN: I think the tension between demanding attention to police violence and developing strategies to ensure the safety of black women and children is very real right now. When black women weigh whether they can trust law enforcement, it's a dilemma, given the reality of mass incarceration.

The next step in this movement is to consider alternatives to the current approach to policing, which relies all too often on a labor force that does not come from a particular community or alienates communities in the name of public safety. One group that supports this is Project NIA, which encourages alternatives to calling the police on youth. Another model from Chicago is the Cure Violence project (featured in the documentary film *The Interrupters*) in which respected citizens intervene in heated situations. We're now seeing organizers developing community leadership and community-based models of accountability to ensure the safety and well-being of people, while continuing to challenge the ways in which patriarchy reinforces racism and oppression.

ASOKA: Many Black Lives Matter activists are using the momentum behind this movement against police brutality to also raise other issues, like economic inequality and discrimination against black LGBT people. Why is this intersectional approach to activism important?

CHATELAIN: Gendered police violence against cisgender and trans women, and the criminalization of poor black women and how that affects their families and communities are both key issues, although I don't know if they've been adequately captured in the protests. Protests often have to deliver a sliver of a larger message in order to prompt a deeper conversation. But the protests have also opened up a space for discussing specific structural issues—the state of our schools, unemployment, access to public spaces—and shown how police violence is one of many issues that communities

have to contend with.

I am proud of Black Lives Matter's attention to intersectionality. These women and other young organizers are consciously resisting the mistakes of previous movements, especially the classism and sexism that all too often shaped the direction of older civil rights and feminist struggles. What we see now is a result of what these organizers have learned from each other about the pitfalls of narrow focus and exclusivity. This movement's openness to other movements—like the battles against mass incarceration and mass deportation—allows us to see how deeply these issues resonate across different communities.

In the early days of Ferguson, we heard messages from a wide swath of the organizing sector lending their support. From the Dream Defenders to the undocumented youth movement to the various queer organizing communities to Amnesty International, you saw a wide array of groups—along a political spectrum from relatively mainstream to radical—moved to speak out against police violence. "Black Lives Matter" became a rallying cry to identify the places in which black life is cut short, whether it is in highly publicized instances of police brutality or through the slow suffocation of black communities facing poverty and economic inequality.

The movement's reliance on community strength rather than dependence on a single establishment voice, and the fact that throughout we've seen shifts in protest strategies—from vigils, to die-ins, to shutting down highways—reveals its creativity and flexibility. Ferguson, Staten Island, Chicago, and Baltimore are different, and different leaders emerged to organize those communities. But Black Lives Matter was able to collectivize the will of communities in each of these places where a critique of policing was severely needed.

Black Lives Matter activists come as they are—there is no management or slick manipulation of the image of the movement by anyone. It was wonderful how young activists resisted the performance surrounding December's Justice For All march because they believed that the movement they had literally put their lives on the line for was not being respected. The confrontation between a young movement and establishment groups like the National Action Network and the Urban League is deeply necessary, and I see it as another iteration of the youth driven SNCC's struggle with Martin Luther King's more established SCLC, and other moments when seemingly like-minded constituents have challenged each other.

ASOKA: Like Occupy, Black Lives Matter is a bottom-up, collaboratively organized movement. Yet people often call it "leaderless." Could you put this lack of recognition of women's leadership and political participation in a historical context for us?

CHATELAIN: I hate it when I hear people call Black Lives Matter leaderless.

At the Millions March in Oakland, December 13, 2014. Photo by Daniel Arauz via Flickr.

If there are no leaders, then who is getting the word out? Who is getting the young people on buses and cars to appear before state houses and to lie down in train stations? Who is sending out the calls for protests? Who is managing the social media presence? Leaders, that's who. I think women are leading without suggesting they are the only leaders or that there is only one way to lead. Some of the criticism of Black Lives Matter as "leaderless" is generational. It isn't a coincidence that a movement that brings together the talents of black women—many of them queer—for the purpose of liberation is considered leaderless, since black women have so often been rendered invisible.

Across history, any time a movement has had black women at its helm or in its leadership—from Ida B. Wells and the Niagara movement to Ella Baker in the civil rights movement—there have been sexist and racist attempts to undermine them. The most damaging impact of the sanitized and oversimplified version of the civil rights story is that it has convinced many people that single, charismatic male leaders are a prerequisite for social movements. This is simply untrue.

ASOKA: Women have historically been (and continue to be) perceived as the cultural and moral anchors of their communities. This has allowed societies to police women's behavior, their reproductive choices, and their sexual autonomy, while arguing that it's for their own "protection." Can you talk

about this in the context of your book, *South Side Girls*?

CHATELAIN: In *South Side Girls* I examine the experiences of black girls and young women during the Great Migration, a period in which black people also confronted challenges in housing discrimination, hyperpolicing, and racist violence. These girls were part of a massive movement in black life, and they were often looked to as the models of black success or failure; they in fact shouldered many aspirations and hopes for a community that did not always treat them like their lives mattered. The rigid ways that black community leaders viewed black girls was fascinating to me because they were in an impossible position—too young, too female, and too black to be heard. Yet despite this, I found moments in which they were given—or simply took—opportunities to discuss what mattered to them. I found some interviews with pregnant teenage girls in the 1920s and 1930s—they were the most marginalized of the marginalized. But in these interviews, I argue, they make it clear that they are citizens and that the state, families, and institutions have failed them. Some of the girls I include in my book resist blaming themselves; instead, they make it clear that they, as citizens, have rights, which are not being respected.

I think about these girls often as I watch today's movement unfold—where young women, some still teenagers and others barely older, are making it known that they will not tolerate state failure, or the failure of their communities to recognize the value of their lives or their leadership. The women involved in Black Lives Matter are not concerned about representing the race in any particular light or bending to the demands of respectability politics. Rather, they are carving out the space for black women to fight for justice—from the trans woman who is dying for it, to the woman in elective office, to the attorney representing protestors, to the little girl holding up a sign for Rekia Boyd, to the sorority member holding vigil in front of a police station, to the college women wearing Black Lives Matter T-shirts on campus. I'm looking forward to seeing what influence Black Lives Matter will have on the national presidential race in 2016—front and center, I hope, will be the black women who started this movement and a legion of even more behind them.

Marcia Chatelain is assistant professor of history at Georgetown University. Her book South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration *is just out from Duke University Press.*

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