

An Open Letter to Men & Boys: When Black Feminism Comes Home; Lessons to be Learned Before One of the Women in Your Life Becomes the next Hashtag

Black Feminism. It is the collective experience and narratives of women who are uniquely positioned at the margins of society due to the intersection of their gender and race. It is a discourse birth by Black women for Black women to speak their truth on the realities that they experience every day. Yes, it is in part theory, but it is also the lived experience of sisters across the Diaspora.

Black feminist thought covers a number of historical and contemporary experiences. Among these experiences is the work of Black women that is rarely, if ever, recognized and given its due credit. In example, Black women were the marketing agents and the promoters of the Civil Rights movement. It was African-American women who stayed up into early hours of the morning turning out copies of flyers to be distributed, constructing billboards to be carried by men's hands; and when America needed a dream to believe in, it was a Black woman who spoke up and said, "tell 'em about the dream Martin!"

August 9, 2014

Michael Brown, an African-American resident of Ferguson, MO (a town outside of St. Louis), was unjustly shot down by Darren Wilson, a White cop of Ferguson, MO. Brown, suffering multiple wounds to his body as a result of the confrontation, died in the street with his community looking on in horror, fear, and anger. For hours Mike Brown's murdered body laid in the open, as if it were the principle prize of unbridled White supremacist patriarchy. Mike's unjust killing made him the third hashtag among a string of Black men who had been unjustly murdered the week before his encounter in 2014: Eric Garner (New York) and John Crawford (Ohio).

Immediately, and rightly so, the community demanded answers and spoke of a common narrative among Black men: being murdered unjustly at the hands of the police. As a result, many within the collective community of the United States (and the world), placed back at the top of the national agenda the lives of Black men. But there is an often forgotten element when discussing the murders of Black men: the work of Black women.

The work of Black women, since time immemorial, has built nations, created and sustained economies, and has comforted the masses. But what does it mean when the

work of Black women is stolen, commodified, and appropriated for another's use? What does this do to the generations of Black women who have tirelessly labored, and who, out of their lived experience, created ways to retain and transmit their culture by means of their work? What is the psychological impact? What is the political impact? Does the constant theft, appropriation, and abuse of one's work force an individual to reimagine what is possible for themselves and their children?

Here, I want to suggest that while the untimely death of Mike Brown directs our attention toward Black males, his passing and many others should also direct our attention toward the theft, appropriation, and abuse of Black women's bodies and their work. Not only was Mike Brown constructed for nine months in the womb of his mother, but she pushed him to higher levels of possibility creating a world of opportunity for him:

"You took my son away from me. Do you know how hard it was for me to get him to stay in school and graduate? You know how many Black men graduate? Not many. Because you bring them down to this type of level where they feel like I don't got nothing to live for, they gonna try to take me out anyway." (Mike Brown's mother on the day Darren Wilson killed her son to KMOV News 4).

Mike Brown, like so many men of African descent, was the product of his mother's limitless creative constructive abilities. He was the manifestation of several years of labor and turmoil, who was set to begin college, to better his life, the Monday after he was murdered. Mike Brown was the work of Lesley McSpadden.

To take his life, not only places another occurrence in the continuum of Black men killed by the state, but equally, it is also to participate in (and continue) violence against Black women. Further, after the killing of her child, the state, via Robert 'Bob' McCulloch, the elected prosecutor for St. Louis County, refused to arrest or press charges against Darren Wilson—despite numerous eye-witness testimonies and preliminary autopsy results that concretely established probable cause. What does this occurrence do to the psyche of Ms. McSpadden? How does this occurrence reshape how Ms. McSpadden perceives her political power and vote? What impact does this occurrence have on Ms. McSpadden and what she believes is possible for herself and her work?

Not only did the State take the life of another Black male, the State also committed violence against Ms. McSpadden. Her work of love has been taken from her and has

been appropriated and commodified into several hours of overtime pay for outside agitators (the police force) demanding peace from a family and community they openly robbed.

Additionally, as the community protested, reports began to emerge, via social media, from women that they were being assaulted by men, while protesting for the taking of a man's life—again the work of women appropriated, this time for the sake of one's own pleasure. Seemingly the patriarchal gaze takes no break and knows no boundaries, even among those who are protesting for the cause of men.

This was in 2014. Now in the summer of 2016 we find ourselves in a different, yet all too familiar scenario. A Black woman, Korryn Gaines, has been shot and killed by police; moreover, her child was shot in the leg. To no surprise many white people, both men and women, blamed the Korryn for her child being shot and also justified her death. The typical assaults ensued: bad mothering, being combative, 'well she shouldn't have been...', etc. Added to this mix was our voices brothers, our justifying the State lynching of a Black woman. Many argue she had a gun and shot back; however, how many times have we seen this of white persons and they lived to tell the story, and moreover, have been given the benefit of doubt in court. Many argue she should have done what police told her to do; however, how many times have Black men performed in the same way as Korryn, yet the value in their lives was not only recognized, but became a rallying cry for justice in the Black community. Our problem is this: **BLACK WOMANHOOD IS SEEN AS EXPENDABLE, VALUELESS, AND A THING TO BE PROPERTIZED.** This is where I want to suggest that it is not the psychological duress of Philando Castille's girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds, that causes us to rally for justice. Her on going pain and torment, and that of her child fades into the background as we focus exclusively on the immediate death of Castille, giving the daily torment of Reynolds and her child no consideration. I am not suggesting here either/or, but in this instance both/and.

This is the meeting place of both Diamond Reynolds and Korryn Gaines: their beings have both been appropriated in service of Black manhood. In one instance to focus exclusively on one form of State torment. In another instance to magnify the voice and place of Black men in the US polity. In both instances Black men become centered as subjects, as Black women play the margins. Is there a place for Black women? Is there a home? These three women—McSpadden, Reynolds, and Gaines—causes the words of Dorothy Roberts in her work *Killing the Black Body*, to always stay at the front of my

mind "...Black mothers are blamed for perpetuating social problems..." Roberts' assertion becomes more salient when we consider the bonds of fictive kinship which hold the Black community together; causing Black women without children to become mothers, those without brothers and sisters to become aunts, and so and so forth.

This is the lesson to be learned: that women's bodies and their work is autonomous to themselves. It is not ours to take, appropriate and/or commodify for our own purposes. It is vital that we understand that it is oxymoronic to protest for Mike Brown and others, as well as stand with his mother, while assaulting our sisters at the same time. Moreover, we must see our lives as extensions of our sisters and the result of the life-sustaining work of our sisters. Too often, we do not take a stance for Black women, until Black feminism—the stories and experiences of Black women—come home to our front door in the form of our mothers, sisters, wives, cousins, etc—and only then do we want to turn the world upside down for justice and equality on their behalf and not because there was a harm done to them, but because somehow their experiences implicates the measure of our manhood.

Brothers, we must immediately come to a place where we understand, that we cannot echo into the universe 'power to the people' or 'fight the power' or 'Black Lives Matter,' while simultaneously marginalizing our sisters to the point of objectivity and relegating them to the margins of society; this makes us complicit in the White supremacist structure we seek to eradicate. Further, it makes us Darren Wilson in Blackface; police without badges. Violence against women is inclusive of, but not limited to justifying their deaths, rape, and fist fights. When a woman is not permitted to preach and stand in full equal measure to a man in a pulpit, it is violence against women. When women are cat-called, it is violence. When women are subjected to colorism, size, shape, weight, and hair texture, it is violence. When women's dance expressions and manner of dress is interpreted as an open invitation for sex, it is violence. When women are told what they should and should not wear, from both hetero and LGBT males, it too is violence, if your opinion is not asked for. And yes the stripper is owed the same respect as the corporate male executive officer and trans sisters are owed the same respect you give your mother or guardian; patriarchal respectability is just as damning as White supremacy.

If we are to honor the lives of our many sisters and brothers that has been cut short at the hands of a State that is determined to kill, if we are to authentically empower our communities politically, if we are to grow our community economically, if we are to

guarantee a future for our progeny, then we must not engage in the tactics of patriarchal warfare along with our male racial opposites. We must be willing to give up our perceived right to entitlement and 'columbusing' because we are male. Brothers, we cannot wait for Black feminism to come home to stand by our sisters and make a difference. We must stop violence and abuse now. Her body is her own. Your ring does not denote ownership. Neither does your penis and/or testosterone grant you automatic rights to access.

We are a communal people, a loving people, an understanding people. We must recognize that our liberation is tied up in the liberation of our sisters; if you impede them brothers, if you circumvent them **YOU WILL ABORT YOURSELF.**

Let us do better going forward,

Antwann Michael