

Whose Lives Really Matter: The Invisibility of African American Women in the Political Discourse of the Black Lives Matter Campaign

MAMIE LOCKE

Virginia Social Science Journal | Volume 51 | 2016 | Pages 17–25

ABSTRACT When George Zimmerman was acquitted in July 2013 for killing Trayvon Martin in 2012, three African American women launched the Black Lives Matter campaign to bring attention to this perceived miscarriage of justice. The campaign spread to incorporate other incidents where African American men and boys were being killed by law enforcement. Excluded from the marches and political discourse were African American women. Their invisibility and marginalization is not new and is rooted in the fabric of the American political system due to the intersectionality of multiple oppressions of race, sex, and gender. For African American women's lives to matter, a paradigm shift that dismantles the existing tools of oppression is needed that extricates them from the periphery to inclusion, visibility and empowerment.

AUTHOR MAMIE LOCKE is Professor in the Department of Political Science and History and former Dean of the School of Liberal Arts at Hampton University. She can be reached at mamie.locke@hamptonu.edu.

INTRODUCTION

The “awareness to be Black and female is to be political” argues Mary Burgher. She also points out that the “vital dimensions (of the Black woman) have been ignored, lost, overlooked, or perverted, by critics and scholars...handicapped by preconceptions, biases, naiveté, and ignorance” (Burgher, 12). African American women have played central roles in every social and political struggle and movement in the United States since its inception. Despite immersing themselves in these struggles and movements and being agents of change, African American women are often historical footnotes and afterthoughts, generally pushed to the periphery of discourse and policymaking in reality. Exclusion from the Black Lives Matter Campaign is the most recent example of African American women's issues being ignored. This erasure of African American women from inclusion in American political discourse is not a new phenomenon.

THE BACK STORY

Recently, thousands of citizens have been marching for justice on behalf of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and Freddie Gray. All these men and boys were unarmed and killed by law enforcement, with the exception of Martin who was killed by a self-proclaimed neighborhood watchman allegedly defending himself under Florida's stand your ground laws. As a result of these deaths and many more, the Black Lives Matter Campaign was launched by three African American women—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi. It is important that attention be given to the injustice of the criminal justice system and the miscarriage of justice when African men and boys are targets of violence. Clearly procedural justice, inherent bias, and the racial implications behind these deaths require the voices of the community to be lifted in

protest and concern. However, many unarmed African American women have been killed directly by the police or while in police custody, or they have been physically abused by law enforcement officials.

The state of Texas appears to be ground zero for exposing the invisibility of African American women in the American political system as the discussions of Black Lives Matter movement traverses the nation. Twenty eight year old Sandra Bland is the latest tragedy in the criminal justice system to be victimized. What was her crime? She dared to raise questions with a police officer during a routine traffic stop when she failed to signal during a lane change. She ended up in jail and was dead three days later of an apparent suicide with drugs in her system. Fourteen year old Dajerria Becton of McKinney, Texas attended a pool party and ended up being pushed to the ground with Officer Eric Casebolt restraining her with his knee in her back and his gun pulled on other teenagers. Fortunately, no one was seriously injured or died that day. In 2012, twenty seven year old Shelly Frey was shot and killed by an off duty Sheriff's deputy at a Houston Walmart for allegedly shoplifting. In 2014, forty seven year old Yvette Smith of Balstrop, Texas was shot and killed when she was ordered to come out of her house by a sheriff's deputy who claimed that she was armed (*Association of Black Women Historians Statement*, July 28, 2015; *Huffington Post*, February 13, 2015). These women and young girl were victims, but were rendered voiceless and invisible as part of the Black Lives Matter campaign and within political discourse overall.

Over thirty years ago in her seminal work, *Sister Outsider* (1984), Audre Lorde clarified the reality for African American women and children in the American power structure as being “stitched with violence and with hatred” (119). She further argued that white feminists feared that their children would grow up and join the patriarchal society while African Ameri-

can women “fear our children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street, and you will turn your backs upon the reasons they are dying” (119). How fortuitous that Lorde’s statement rings true in 2015 as African American men and women are the targets of violence while so many policymaking voices remain silent.

Although launched by three women, the Black Lives Matter campaign has conspicuously missed the names of the many women who have been killed or abused by the criminal justice system. Since the shooting death of Trayvon Martin in 2012 by George Zimmerman, several unarmed African American men have been killed by law enforcement. The names of the men and boys are well known. Following their deaths, there were numerous protests and marches with the chant of “Black Lives Matter.” And, indeed, they do. However, there have not been marches and protests for Michelle Cusseaux, Aiyana Jones, and Kathryn Johnston, African American women and a young girl, all killed by law enforcement.

Michelle Cusseaux suffered from depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia and was shot by police officers in Phoenix, Arizona who claimed she charged at them with a hammer. The four officers had a court order to transport Cusseaux to an inpatient mental health facility (*Reuters*, 2014). Given the circumstances of her illness, a reasonable reaction of four police officers sent to assist a mentally ill woman should have been expected. Aiyana Jones was seven years old and slept with her grandmother on the sofa in her home when she was shot and killed by a Detroit Special Response Team police officer when they entered the wrong apartment. Kathryn Johnston was ninety two when police officers broke down her security gate, entered her home, shot and killed her based on false information. The officer in the Jones case was charged with involuntary manslaughter, but the case was dismissed following two mistrials. Three officers were charged related to the death and the subsequent cover up in Johnston’s case and served time in prison. The City of Atlanta also paid a settlement to her family (*Reuters*, August 15, 2014; *Huffington Post*, 2015).

Other cases involved Natasha McKenna and Sheneque Proctor. Both died while in police custody; McKenna from a stun gun shock in a Fairfax, Virginia jail and Proctor from an alleged drug overdose in a Bessemer City, Alabama jail (*Washington Post*, April 28, 2015; *Weld for Birmingham*, December 2, 2014). The lives of these and other African American women have gone virtually unnoticed, while mass mobilizations have occurred for Michael Brown, Tamir Rice and Eric Garner. The Black Lives Matter Campaign has been an important political and social movement designed to empower African American people to rebuild a liberation movement that validates black lives, especially to address issues of state violence. The inclusion of the abuse and deaths of African American women in the movement is a necessity for its continued success.

African American women are targeted by law enforcement on a regular basis, but it has been noted that they are “erased from our demonstrations, our discourse and our demands” (*Washington Post*, May 20, 2015). Activist Christa Noel founded Wom-

en’s All Points Bulletin as a means of protecting women against the violence of law enforcement when she found herself as a victim of that violence. This violence and crimes against women are suppressed while being systematically applied to African American women. “The demonization of women of color strips them of their innocence, casts them as “undeserving” of public sympathy and support, and labels them as the aggressors in policing encounters. Every assault on women of color showcases the expendable nature which police openly view their bodies” (Noel and Perlow, 2014, 14). This subjugation of African American women in the political system is woven into the very fabric of the body politic. Being erased from the Black Lives Matter Campaign is merely an extension of a significant historical exclusion and marginalization.

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF INVISIBILITY

The invisibility of African American women in political discourse is not new. Although African American women have been in the vanguard of social and political struggles and movements in each historical period, the push to the periphery of social and political dialogue is rooted in the very history of American society. The dynamics and multiplicity of oppressions were long recognized and called for what they were by the sage Sojourner Truth in her 1851 speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” at the Akron, Ohio Women’s Convention. She had to own her abilities as a woman and as an activist fighting for her right to be heard among abolitionists wanting to end slavery and women wanting to vote. The voice of Sojourner Truth was critical to making African American women visible at a time when African American people as a group did not have a voice.

Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart, Harriet Tubman, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and others were advocates for freedom and justice in the abolitionist movement. Given the existence of slavery, the racist foundation of American society was well established. Bell Hooks points out that white women were part and parcel of the society that benefitted from the racist construct of a slave society. They not only supported and advocated the ideology, but were themselves oppressors (Hooks, 2000). During this era, fighting racism took precedence over sexism as the abolitionist movement and anti-slavery protest were the center of vocal opposition.

Objecting to their treatment at the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention in London, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott organized a convention in 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York. This meeting attracted two hundred women and is credited with being the start of the women’s rights movement in the United States. As women, Stanton and Mott had not been allowed to be on the convention floor at the anti-slavery convention and were compelled to organize a movement to demand equal rights for women. The Seneca Falls gathering was an important step in the women’s movement. It was one of the first organized efforts that delineated the issues and concerns of women for equal rights. Stanton drafted a Declaration of Sentiments and Grievances petitioning for the rights of women, notably the right to vote. However, omitted from the Declara-

tion was any mention of slavery or race, although it is argued that many of the ideas that led to Seneca Falls were spurred by abolitionism (Seneca Falls Convention, 1980, 124).

Attendance at the convention was revealing as well. There were white women and white men present and one prominent African American man, Frederick Douglass. Many of those present at the convention were veterans of the abolitionist movement and from wealthy backgrounds. There were no African American women, the most oppressed of all groups. The issues of non-white women, enslaved women, or working class women were not addressed by those at the convention. Feminist scholar Gerda Lerner emphasized that Stanton's Declaration of Sentiments addressed how mankind mistreated women; however, the document did not speak to exploitation and abuse of working or non-white women. On that subject, the document was silent and indifferent. The Seneca Falls movement had its origins in the life experiences and realities of the wealthy (Lerner, 1969, 13).

The invisibility of African American women continued with the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment. Here was an opportunity to provide all African Americans and women the right to vote after the abolition of slavery (13th Amendment) and the granting of citizenship (14th Amendment). However, the debate over the Fifteenth Amendment became race based and a line of demarcation was drawn between abolitionist allies over who should obtain the right to vote, women or African American men? Suffragists Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton refused to support passage of the 15th Amendment because it would elevate the "lowest orders of manhood" over "the highest classes of women" (DuBois 1987, 850). They ceased all rhetoric in support of African Americans and directed their attention to achieving the right to vote for women. The discussion over passage of the amendment was between African American men, white women, and white men. The group excluded and dismissed from this debate were African American women who found themselves, once again, on the outside of a dialogue that clearly impacted their lives. Writer, poet and abolitionist Frances Ellen Harper, however, noted that race took precedence over sex in the debate over the 15th Amendment. Sojourner Truth disagreed. Her reaction to the Fifteenth Amendment was as follows:

There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the colored woman; and if colored men get their rights and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before...I am glad to see that men are getting their rights, but I want women to get theirs, and while the water is stirring I will step into the pool... (Lerner, 1973).

As the Constitution was initially framed in 1787, African American people were counted as three-fifths. With the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment with voting rights being given to African American men in 1870, African American women found themselves going from three-fifths to zero (Locke, 1990). This legislation served to reinforce the patriarchal foundation of

the American political system and ignite the flames of racism among white women suffragists. As Stanton and Mott had excluded African American women at Seneca Falls in 1848, Mott and Susan B. Anthony demonstrated only an interest in white women's suffrage in 1870.

As the United States was on the brink of the twentieth century, Anna Julia Cooper (1892) identified the exclusion and invisibility of African American women as the result of race and gender. Cooper was a political activist who was critical of both African American men and white women for their omission of African American women from respective movements. African American men were sexist while white women were racist. As she pointed out over a century ago, African American women were confronted by "both a woman question and a race problem" (134). Cooper felt that it was important for African American women to participate in social and political movements so that they would know when and how best to deliver their influence (143). She clearly wanted African American women out of the shadows of invisibility and the margins to take control of their lives and shape their future.

As a consequence of exclusion from mainstream American society, African American women organized their own suffrage groups and clubs. Women like Ida B. Wells Barnett were one of the first to establish an ideological direction of the organized movement of African American women. She was one of the first to openly disclose the habitual sexual abuse of African American women by white men. In her view, any organized movement of African American women must perforce be a defense of African American womanhood concomitant with the defense of the entire African American community. All African American people had to be protected from the oppression imposed by the growing development of Jim Crow laws in the aftermath of Reconstruction. Unlike white suffragists, the concerns of activists like Wells, Mary Church Terrell, Mary McLeod Bethune and others of the early twentieth century were not confined to their own particular sex or class, but to the entire African American community. Issues like lynching, suffrage, education, and improved health conditions impacted the entire community and were not just gender based. Jim Crow laws had eliminated men from the voter rolls and women had not yet obtained the right to vote. Lynchings were rampant and educational opportunities were lacking (Locke, 1984, 58). The struggle for visibility and to matter in the American political system pushed African American women into unprecedented, and often unappreciated, leadership roles.

In 1944, Howard University law student Pauli Murray and several of her classmates participated in a sit-in at Thompson's Cafeteria in Washington, D.C. That demonstration was a short term success because the cafeteria began to serve African Americans. However, the president of Howard feared retaliation from a Southern dominated Congress and ordered the students to cease any further activities. Without the added pressure of further demonstrations, the cafeteria reinstated its segregationist policies (Olson, 2001, 21). History has generally erased Murray's defiant actions and leadership with that of the other women

who joined her at that historic moment in time. The Greensboro sit-ins are those remembered as significant and important because they spurred similar actions across the South. However, there was a movement led by a woman decades before in the person and action of Pauli Murray. She would continue to challenge the status quo of patriarchy and racism in the civil rights and women's movements that were to follow.

The exclusion of African American women continued during the Civil Rights Movement. From Claudette Colvin to Fannie Lou Hamer, the many women activists of the movement may well become historical footnotes but for the efforts of African American feminists and scholars who keep their names alive. Faced with the dilemma of dichotomous oppression, racism and sexism, African American women had to determine how they could best organize themselves and distribute their energies among their various problems. They had to also pursue strategies which would reduce conflict among their many interest and goals (Locke, 65).

Clearly, the names of African American men are more well-known than that of African American women coming out of the civil rights movement, despite the fact that women were prominent community organizers and leaders. Many male leaders were unwilling to see women's problems as identical to their own and saw the position of women as secondary to that of men. In many ways African American women were exploited and viewed as "errand girls whose job it was to perform clerical duties. However, when it came time for the important speeches to be given, it was men who appeared at the podium. African American women found themselves constrained by demands that they step back and push African American men into positions of leadership. They were made to feel disloyal to racial interests if they insisted upon women's rights (Locke, 69).

Despite this, women were powerful leaders, organizers, strategists and foot soldiers. They were the primary fundraisers operating behind the scenes. But, men definitely had the edge, being in the public eye and being the negotiators with the power structure and the press. For women, making significant contributions to the cause was more important than receiving personal accolades (Olson, 125). But, there were well known women leaders like Rosa Parks, JoAnn Robinson, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Ella Baker. There were others, not so well known, whose defiance paved the way.

At age 15, Claudette Colvin was arrested for violating Montgomery, Alabama's bus segregation laws. She did so in March, 1955, nine months before Rosa Parks' famous stand. She was also a plaintiff in the lawsuit that ruled Montgomery's bus segregation laws unconstitutional. Colvin had to eventually leave the city and state after being labeled a troublemaker. When asked about her role she replied "our leaders is just we ourself" (Olson 127). Colvin's leadership in early 1955 paved the way for others who followed in the latter stages of the civil rights movement.

Not all women's voices were silenced during the movement.

The issue of the multiple jeopardies faced by African American women tended to surface as the struggle progressed. Pauli Murray expressed concern over the lack of African American women's presence and voices in the civil rights struggle, either as leaders or policymakers. She knew women were an integral part of the movement, but were not at all visible. She stated that African American women could not "postpone or subordinate the fight against discrimination because of sex to the civil rights struggle but must carry on both fights simultaneously. She must insist upon a partnership role in the integration movement..." (Olson, 287). Outraged at the omission of women from the program, Murray wrote to one of the organizers, A. Philip Randolph, stating that she had:

been increasingly perturbed over the blatant disparity between the major role which Negro women have played and are playing in the crucial grassroots levels of our struggle and the minor role of the leadership they have been assigned in the national policymaking decisions. The time has come to say quite candidly, Mr. Randolph, that 'tokenism' is as offensive when applied to women as when applied to Negroes (Azaransky, 62).

Despite Murray's plea, the most accomplished was a tribute to African American women, written by a man and delivered by civil rights activist Daisy Bates. Women's participatory roles were that of entertainment—Marian Anderson and Mahalia Jackson both sang.

Overlapping and following close on the heels of the civil rights movement was the gender based women's rights movement. African American women found themselves faced with the either/or dilemma of deciding between two oppressions, racism or sexism. Given their role in the labor market with earning less, there was also a class stratification issue. In the two major political and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, they were clearly faced with "all the women are white and all the blacks are men" syndrome (Hull, Scott, Smith, 1982). African American women still found themselves defined as "other" and excluded from political discourse in the feminist movement.

African American women found it difficult to build bridges and form partnerships in movements where they were being marginalized and being openly discriminated against, whether on the basis of race or gender. Because they were invisible, their needs and rights were being ignored and dismissed. As in the early 20th century, African American women formed their own groups and organizations. The National Black Feminist Organization was formed in New York in 1973. Although the organization was short-lived, 1973-1976 (with some chapters lasting through 1980), it had over two thousand members and was successful in revealing the predicament of African American women across the United States. They were able to expose issues of low wages for domestic workers and sexual harassment in the workplace. Most importantly, it was the first national organization to tackle and expose the issues of racism and sexism within the civil rights and women's movements and their lack of inclusiveness (Mjagkij, 362).

African American feminist scholars began to address intersec-

tion of racism and sexism as well as the challenges of class for poor women. In her book *Ain't I a Woman* (1981), Bell Hooks states that in examining the “woman’s question” most discussions were inaccurate, biased or distorted. This is generally due to an assumption that African American women should be able to disconnect sex from race and race from sex. Hooks also clarified that although white women were victimized by sexism, they could assume the role of oppressor in their relationship to African American women. Further, when issues of race are discussed the focus tends to be on African American men and when sexism is discussed the focus shifts to white women. That erases African American women from the discussion. Thus, all the women are white and the blacks are men.

When reflecting on the various levels of oppression, whether race, sex, or class, it is difficult for African American women to separate the concurrent oppressions. Crenshaw (1989) developed the term intersectionality to explain and clarify the multiple levels of oppression experienced by African American women. She observed that African American women were regarded either as too much like women or African American men and the compounded nature of their experience were absorbed into the collective experiences of either group. On the other hand, African American women were viewed as too different, in which case their Blackness or femaleness sometimes placed their needs and perspectives at the margin of the feminist and Black liberationist agendas. Consequently, this resulted in a situation where they were defined as “other” and erased from those movements on any terms they may have set for themselves.

Patricia Hill Collins (1990) explains that the theory of intersectionality is central to black feminist thought. She points out that African American women do not have the ability to indulge in isolating one oppression from the other because of the intersecting nature of those oppressions and their implications for black women’s lives. It is not either/or, but both/and, plus more. African American women have a self-defined standpoint. As a result, their experiences create different realities, different levels of consciousness, and a different worldview from other groups.

In her book *Sister Citizen* (2011), Melissa Harris-Perry addresses the stereotypes and myths that have evolved about African American women. Not only have they had to contend with the many issues inherent in patriarchy and expectations of conformity, but have also had to overcome the assigned roles of oversexed Jezebels, Mammy maids, and strong Sapphires. This mythology “is a misrecognition of African American women which creates specific expectations for their behavior within the American polity” (21). Harris-Perry defines misrecognition as the narrow way in which African American women have been described, most especially through the myth of the strong black woman. This misrecognition of African American women, in Harris-Perry’s view, is intentional and leads to an unrealistic expectation of behavior. It boxes women into a corner, which allows negative labeling and categorization. Thus, African American women must contend with more than just their era-

sure from history or marginalization, or even the intersectionality of oppressions. They are faced with having to deal with the lack of societal recognition of race, gender and sexual identity, but this misrecognition as well.

Through focus group research, Harris Perry found that there are three pervasive myths that account for this misrecognition of African American women: sexual promiscuity, emasculating brashness, and Mammy like devotion to white domestic concerns. In the United States there is a long history twisting the racial and gender stereotypes that entangle African American men and implicate white women. This interconnecting mythology has serious political implications. These implications have long impacted the societal worldview of African American women and contributed significantly to their continued invisibility.

In striving to overcome invisibility and marginalization, African American women have battled the images of the matriarch, welfare queen with multiple children, sub human Amazons, and pancake box Aunt Jemimas who emasculate men. Angela Davis (2012) posits that African American women are held responsible for raising poverty stricken fatherless children whose boys are on a trajectory for the cradle to prison pipeline. Those African American women who are raising their children and building families are labeled as destroying the community. Even more destructive is the notion that African American women are the producers of violent African American men (32). Davis makes clear that this suppression of African American women cannot become the basis of saving African American men. As she observes, “victimization can no longer be permitted to function as a halo of innocence” (31). In 1965, in *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, Daniel Patrick Moynihan established the tangled pathology notion of the matriarchal structure of the African American family. As Davis argues, African American women cannot become the scapegoats for what ails the African American community yet again.

Emerging from the civil rights and women’s movements, African American feminists clarified that intersectionality is real and impactful in the lives of women. Through concentric circles, a Venn diagram depicts logical, overlapping relationships, or common elements of relationships. The intersectionality of race, gender and class overlap intricately, impacting the social, political, and economic lives of African American women. The Venn diagram of race, sex and class and the dynamics of those intersections across two centuries has pushed African American women to the margins and erected a wall of invisibility from political discourse. The time has come to change that dynamic.

SHIFTING THE PARADIGM FROM THE MATER’S TOOLS

Over thirty years ago, feminist and lesbian activist Audre Lorde was invited to speak at New York University’s Institute for the Humanities conference. Due to the absence of poor, lesbian, African American and Third World women, and her presence at the only panel requiring input from an African American feminist, Lorde raised this question: “what does it mean when

the tools of racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of the same patriarchy” (Lorde, 112-113)? For the women’s movement, this meant that very narrow change was possible, but not wholesale change because white feminists were using the same tools of the system in an attempt to change it. The tools that Lorde referenced were white feminists’ use of the same tactics of oppression which would not eliminate oppression. Tools also meant the patterns of exclusion and indifference that were inherent and systemic in a racist and patriarchal society that had to be exposed for what they were. In Lorde’s view, white feminists were using the very racist and patriarchal tools of exclusion they purported to challenge by ignoring the differences of women of color. She admonished white feminists because “systems of oppression cannot be challenged by woman’s participation in those same systems” (Rollo, 2011).

Lorde’s concern about white feminists ignoring difference led to her observation that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house... [it] will never enable it to bring about genuine change” (Lorde, 112). What she meant was that change could not be brought about by using the same flawed and narrowed methods that caused the oppression in the first place. That is, white feminists at the conference were not truly interested in change, but finding their place in the existing system, using the same ideologies, thoughts and strategies of patriarchy that ignored the differences of women of color. While white feminists sought means to climb the corporate ladder and break glass ceilings, many women of color still found themselves stuck on sticky floors. Using the master’s tools, that is the tools of the dominant culture, kept the focus on the patriarchal structure and concerns of the master, while ignoring the exploitation of women of color and the causes of that exploitation. As a result, women of color would remain marginalized from a system that chose not to be inclusive. If change was to occur, the differences among women had to be welcomed, embraced, and addressed.

Any attempt to change the American political system with the very tools used for oppression is not likely to exact change. As the marginalized outsiders, African American women’s voices are needed to eradicate the mark of invisibility. A paradigm shift from the master’s tools is needed to bring about real change. In his seminal work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970), Thomas Kuhn defines a paradigm shift as a change in thinking that is often motivated by change agents who help to create the shift. He argued that scientific advancement is not evolutionary, but caused by a world in which there are peaceful interludes interspersed with intellectually violent revolutions. It is a result of those revolutions that conceptual world views are replaced by new world views, thus, causing a paradigm shift. If African American women are to cease being invisible and marginal in the American political system, then they are to be the change agents creating new tools to shift the paradigm and deconstruct the negative impacts of patriarchy that sustains institutionalized and systemic sexism, racism and classism on their lives. The new tools are empowerment, collective strength, and capabilities to be used against the power structure.

When the Black Lives Matter Campaign began, it was in response to a real problem—African American men and boys being the victims of law enforcement and state violence. Unfortunately, the violence being perpetrated in African American communities across the country is seen as an African American men’s issue. In the process, African American women are ignored although they are the ineffable story in this movement. If the gendering of police violence is seen as a social problem that focuses only on African American men, then that means a large constituency group in the American political system does not exist for policymakers. It means that programs like President Barack Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper are missing key constituents affected by the violence spreading across African American communities. The pressure for justice is imbalanced because it has not focused on the lives of African American women who have also died and been abused at the hands of law enforcement.

My Brother’s Keeper was introduced to focus on opportunities for men and boys of color having evolved out of their murders across the country. While one applauds the purpose of the program and its concern for developing programs addressing disparities in education, employment and the inherent biases present in the criminal justice system, it is imperative to note that African American women do not live in a vacuum. African American women experience the same racism and are victimized and exploited by the same political, social and economic system. They have had to survive both racial and sexual violence and are victimized by class oppression. However, there are few and sporadic movements, marches, or programs organized around their victimization. Hence, the politics of domination and oppression continues unabated with a partial agenda. The Black Lives Matter Campaign is a partial construct, a partial paradigm shift in the tool box for justice.

The assumption that African American women and girls are somehow doing well must be challenged. The cradle to prison pipeline is as scary a proposition for African American girls as it is for boys. This begins with the race based punishments that African American girls face in school, a characteristic shared with African American boys. In a study of New York City and Boston, Crenshaw (2015) found that African American girls statistically have a greater chance of suspension and expulsion when compared to other students of the same gender. This in turn results in higher prison rates for African American women, which is three times the rate of white women. This ultimately establishes a negative pattern and direction that contributes to the continued marginalized status of African American girls and women.

Despite the fact that they have been contributors to the labor force, literally, since slavery, African American women have been left behind in the American economy. As the economy recovers from the 2008 recession, the recovery for African American women has not improved as quickly as it has for other groups. In February 2015, the unemployment rate fell to its lowest rate in the nation to 5.5% overall and to 4.2% for white women. However, for African American women, that

rate is 8.9%, double that of white women. By 2010, African American women's job losses accounted for 42% of all jobs lost by women, although they are only 12% of all women workers. They also lost more jobs (258,000 to 233,000) at the onset of the recovery than during the entirety of the recession (*Black Women in the United States* [BWUS] 2015, 2).

African American women are a significant part of labor force participation; in fact, they consistently lead all women in labor force participation. However, they find themselves not shattering glass ceilings, but clinging to the sticky floors. They are challenged by high unemployment and higher levels of unequal pay. Where white women earn seventy seven cents on the dollar to white men, African American women earn only sixty eight cents. They are the working poor, trapped in poverty and overly represented in low wage jobs (BWUS, 2014, 21-23). This has far reaching consequences in that it leads to African American women having both a wage and wealth gap that is shaped by both their race and their gender. Needless to say, this creates vulnerability during retirement. As the data from the BWUS study show, African American women's wages are depressed across every level of education throughout their life cycle (27). Although education is the great equalizer in American society, this has not translated to equal pay. As a high school graduate, African American women earn over \$2000 less than white men who drop out of school with a 9th grade education. African American women earn less than men at every educational level and the disparity increases as educational level increases. They have the lowest level earnings across the board (BWUS, 4-5). The poverty rate for African American women is more than double that of white women (25.1% to 10.3%) and Asian women (11.5%) and slightly more (24.8%) than Latina women (BWUS, 7). This is but one aspect of the systemic tool that has marginalized and erased African American women from political discourse.

Exposure to violence and the criminal justice system is equally as compelling for African American women and girls as for men and boys. The minimization of their lives began in slavery as they were raped and impregnated by white owners who would then sell those children at will. African American women are more likely to be beaten, raped or murdered than any other woman in America. The intersectionality of race, class and gender put them in the position of facing lifelong threats that place them in the path of law enforcement and a political system to which they do not matter.

Andrea Ritchie released the report *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women* to bring attention to the number of African American women being brutalized by police. She argues that it is important to take a gender inclusive approach to racial justice when addressing black lives. "Neither the killings of Black women, nor the lack of accountability for them, have been widely lifted up as exemplars of the systemic police brutality that is currently the focal point of mass protest and policy reform" (2015, 1). Clearly, there is a need for a paradigm shift and a new world view that pulls African American women from the periphery to visibility. Kimberlé Crenshaw

(2015) points out that intersectionality provides a clear way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power. African American women and other invisible groups are able to use intersectionality as a means of advocating for their inclusion, visibility, and empowerment.

As the Black Lives Matter Campaign moves forward, it must do so on an inclusive basis. It is no longer acceptable for African American men and women to operate at cross purposes. Nor can policymakers continue to not see African American women. Although Audre Lorde was referencing the lack of inclusion of African American women at the feminist conference, she more specifically chastised white feminists because they chose not to recognize difference. In the context of Black Lives Matter, African American women's difference by virtue of gender is clearly at issue. It is gender difference being ignored and marginalized. At the 1988 Women and the Constitution: A Bicentennial Perspective Conference, Congresswoman Barbara Jordan put it succinctly: "Life too great—to hang out a sign—For Men Only" (February 11, 1988).

Lorde astutely noted that it is a tool of all oppressors to ensure that the oppressed are focused on the concerns of the master and that the master utilized that tool to divide and conquer (112). African American men and women in recognizing that all lives matter and are equally important must accept what Lorde recommended then; that is, to move from divide and conquer to define and empower. As in all other periods of history, African American women must engage in a struggle to end racial and gender inequality, fighting against the interlocking oppressions that lead to invisibility, shifting the paradigm from the master's tools to crafting their own.

Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi began a movement to draw attention to the destruction of African American lives at the hands of law enforcement as a consequence of implicit bias, procedural justice and racism. Black Lives Matter was launched to bring attention to this travesty of injustice in the political system. They note that African American women have been at the forefront of freedom movements without being credited for their leadership roles. As has been shown, this is not new. Irrespective of multiple oppressions and repression by the political system, African American women's leadership and voices will continue to lead, organize, strategize, and be on the front lines of shifting the paradigm to ensure their inclusion in political discourse and policymaking.

African American women are an important factor in the Black Lives Matter campaign as founding members, leading voices, key strategists, and boots on the ground in communities across America. Their inclusion broadens the discussion and the focus of the movement as it did for both the civil rights and women's rights movements. Barbara Beese and Mala Dhondy eloquently articulated the role of African American women some forty years ago when they stated: "As black women in our own collective we have no choice to make between the two movements; we are products of both and not in opposition to either. Our existence poses no division in the class. It poses instead

the potential for a linkage to its power” (James, 8). Crenshaw (2015) posits that intersectional work necessitates collective action to tackle the inequalities facing women of color in the American political and social system. “Intersectionality alone cannot bring invisible bodies into view...we continue...calling for holistic and inclusive approaches to racial justice” (*Washington Post*, September 24, 2015). This is the way forward for black lives matter and racial and gender equality.

African American women are the linkage to power as a consequence of their intersectionality which lays the foundation for shifting the paradigm and establishing a new world view. The struggle that began with Sojourner Truth asserting herself as a woman continues in the 21st century in a fight for recognition with new tools; tools that recognize African American women’s humanity; tools that seek to achieve gender, class and racial equality. Through the collective efforts of men and women and the politics of inclusion, African American women will no longer be invisible from political discourse. As a collective, the tools of their cause become a hammer to knock down the wall of systemic and institutional racism, sexism and classism. Then and only then will all black lives matter.

REFERENCES

Association of Black Women Historians. Statement on the Modern Day Lynching of Black Women in the U. S. Justice System. July 28, 2015.

Azaransky, Sarah. 2011. *The Dream is Freedom: Pauli Murray and American Democratic Faith*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Black Women in the United States, 2014. Progress and Challenges. National Coalition on Black Civic Participation. Black Women’s Roundtable. March, 2014.

Black Women in the United States, 2015. National Coalition on Black Civic Participation. Black Women’s Roundtable. March 26, 2015.

“Black Women’s Lives Matter, Too.” XOJane. May 28, 2015. http://www.xojane.com/issues/black-womens-lives-matter-tooutm_sourcexojaneutm_mediummonistemainlinkutm_campaignsyndication. Accessed July 14, 2015.

Burgher, Mary. “Images of Self and Race in the Autobiographies of Black Women.” In Roseann P. Bell, Bettye J. Parker, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, editors. 1979. *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books.

Cooper, Anna Julia. 1892. *A Voice From the South by a Black Woman of the South*. Xenia, OH: Aldine Printing House.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced and Underprotected*. African American Policy Forum.

Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies. February 2015.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics.” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*. (1989): 139-167.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. “Why Intersectionality Can’t Wait.” *The Washington Post*. September 24, 2015.

Davis, Angela. 2012. *The Meaning of Freedom and Other Difficult Dialogues*. San Francisco: City Lights Publishers.

“Death of Woman Shocked by Stun Gun in Fairfax Jail is Ruled an Accident.” *The Washington Post*. April 28, 2015.

DuBois, Ellen Carol. “Outgrowing the Compact of the Fathers: Equal Rights, Woman Suffrage, and the United States Constitution, 1820-1978.” *The Journal of American History*. 74 (December 1987): 836-862.

Harris-Perry, Melissa. 2011. *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Hill Collins, Patricia. 1990. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.

Hooks, Bell. 1981. *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Boston: South End Press.

Hull, Gloria T., Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, editors. 1982. *All the Women are White, All the Blacks Are Men: But Some of Us Are Brave*. Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press.

James, Selma. 1975. *Sex, Race and Class*. London: Fall Wall Press Ltd.

Jordan, Barbara. “Women and the Constitution: The Challenge.” Speech Delivered at Women and the Constitution: A Bicentennial Perspective Conference. Atlanta, Georgia. February 11, 1988.

Jordan-Zachary, Julia S. “I Ain’t Your Darn Help”: Black Women as the Help in Intersectionality Research in Political Science.” *National Political Science Review*. 16 (2014): 19-30.

Kuhn, Thomas. 1970. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lerner, Gerda. 1973. *Black Women in White America*. New York: Random House.

Lerner, Gerda. “The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson.” *American Studies Journal*. 10:1 (Spring 1969): 5-15.

Locke, Mamie. "Deconstruct to Reconstruct: African American Women in the Post-Civil Rights Era." In Yvette M. Alex-Assensoh and Lawrence J. Hanks. *Black and Multiracial Politics in America*. New York: New York University Press, 2000. 375-395.

Locke, Mamie. "From Three-Fifths to Zero: Implications of the Constitution for African American Women, 1787-1870," *Women & Politics* 10, #2 (1990):33-46.

Locke, Mamie. *The Politics of Powerlessness: The Impact of Sex, Race and Class on the Political and Economic Development of Black Women in Hinds County and Sunflower County, Mississippi*. PhD diss. Atlanta University, 1984.

Lorde, Audre. 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press.

Mjagkij, Nina, editor. 2001. *Organizing Black America: An Encyclopedia of African American Associations*. New York:: Garland Publishing.

Noel, Crista E. and Olivia Perlow. 2014. *American Police Crimes Against African Women and Women of Color*. Presented for the Review of the United States on the Adherence to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

Olson, Lynne. *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement From 1830 to 1970*. New York: Touchstone, 2001.

"Phoenix Police Say Veteran Officer Shot, Killed Mentally Ill Woman." *Reuters*. August 15, 2014.

Robnett, Belinda. "African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965: Gender, Leadership, and Micromobilization." *American Journal of Sociology*. 101 (May 1996): 1661-1693.

Ritchie, Andrea. *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women*." American Policy Forum. Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies. 2015.

Rollo, Toby. "The Master's Tools Cannot be Used." November 16, 2011. <http://www.toboldrollo.com/2011/11/16/the-masters-tools-cannot-be-used/>. Accessed September 4, 2015.

Seneca Falls Convention. Section 1: The Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention and Origin of the Women's Rights Movement. National Park Service. December 28, 1980.

Simpson, Candace. "How Black Women Have Been Erased From America's Race Debate." <http://qz.com/316955/how-black-women-have-been-erased-from-americas-race-debate/>. Accessed July 14, 2015.

Sulik, Gayle and Mindy Fried. "Gender, Social Science, and Black Lives Matter." *Feminist*

Reflections. January 15, 2015. <http://thesocietypages.org/feminist/2015/01/15/gender-social-science-and-black-lives-matter/>. Accessed July 14, 2015.

"These 15 Black Women Were Killed During Police Encounters. Their Lives Matter, Too." *Huffington Post*. February 13, 2015. Accessed July 14, 2015.

"What Happened to Sheneque Proctor?" *Weld for Birmingham*. December 2, 2014.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Locke, M. (2016). Whose Lives Really Matter: The Invisibility of African American Women in the Political Discourse of the Black Lives Matter Campaign. *Virginia Social Science Journal*, Vol. 51, pp. 17-25.