

The background of the entire image is a complex, abstract pattern of swirling, marbled lines in black, white, and various shades of gray. These lines create a sense of movement and depth, resembling liquid or smoke captured in time. The pattern is dense and fills the entire frame.

SISTER SOLDIERS

ON BLACK WOMEN, POLICE BRUTALITY, AND THE TRUE MEANING OF BLACK LIBERATION

On June 9, 1963, Fannie Lou Hamer was arrested in Montgomery County, Mississippi, along with June Johnson, Euveste Simpson, Rosemary Freeman, and Annette Ponder. The five women were on their way back from a voter registration workshop in South Carolina. Upon their arrival at the Montgomery County jail, Hamer, Johnson, and Ponder were subjected to vicious brutality at the direction of notorious racist Sheriff Earl Wayne Patridge.

In the booking room, Johnson was stripped naked and slapped until her face was bloody and unrecognizable, then thrown into a cell. Deputies dragged Ponder into the booking room and beat her about the face as they yelled “Can you say ‘yes, sir,’ nigger? Can you say ‘yes, sir?’” When Ponder fell to the floor, they pulled her up and demanded that she address them as “sir” again. When she refused, the beating resumed.

When they were through with Ponder, the deputies came for Hamer. She was taken from her cell to another that held two Black male inmates. Deputies handed the inmates weapons and ordered them to beat Hamer or suffer the consequences. The first inmate, wielding a blackjack, beat her on the back until he tired. The second inmate was told to take over and resume the beating. When he was handed the blackjack, Hamer began to struggle and move her feet. Deputies instructed the inmate who had performed the first beating to sit on her feet so she couldn’t move them. When Hamer began to scream, one of the deputies hit her in the head, demanding she remain quiet. Hamer’s dress had worked up high above her shoulders, and she attempted to pull it down. In a display of racist sexual domination, a deputy walked over and yanked it back up.

Fannie Lou Hamer told her story in a speech at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, and continued to tell her story until her death in March of 1977. While her speech brought national attention to the severity of police brutality against civil rights activists, it did not change the narrative that Black cisgender men were the primary victims of violence at the hands of law enforcement—a narrative that persists today.

by TASHA FIERCE | illustrations by EBIN LEE

This past year, we've learned the names of men we should have never had to know. Eric Garner, a 43-year-old man who died in an NYPD chokehold while repeatedly saying "I can't breathe." Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old shot six times by police officer Darren Wilson. Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old shot and killed two seconds after police officer Timothy Loehmann arrived at a Cleveland, Ohio, park in response to a 911 call about a child waving a toy gun. Their names have become synonymous with police brutality against Black Americans, and their recent deaths have highlighted the pervasive racism within American law enforcement. A new Black liberation movement is in the process of formation, spurred by collective outrage over anti-Black police brutality.

But what of Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Yvette Smith, and Rekia Boyd? Unless you're looking for their names, you won't find their stories—all Black women shot and killed by police officers in the past five years—featured in the discourse surrounding police reform. While media attention has focused on the tragic loss of Black cisgender men, it seems like we've forgotten that Black women are subjected to the same state-sponsored violence. Black women are also on the front lines of #BlackLivesMatter protests across the country. They are holding it down. They are daughters in the spirit of the Black women who fought in the Black liberation and feminist movements of the past, whose contributions have been minimized in the interest of maintaining the patriarchal, white supremacist status quo. Fannie Lou Hamer didn't see the narrative on police brutality shift during her time on this earth, but these Black women are intent on ensuring the narrative is shifted during their own.

The degradation and sexual exploitation of Black women's work dates back to slavery—it's an American tradition at this point. Even after slavery was outlawed, rape was used as a means of reminding Black women of their place, just as lynching was used against Black men (though history rarely mentions this legacy of the Jim Crow era).

The sexism of larger society was reproduced in Black liberation movements, which limited the roles women were allowed to play. While Black men dominated leadership roles, Black women were expected to remain behind the scenes. When Black women activists were made national icons, it was in the stereotypical role ascribed to Black womanhood: stoic, long-suffering motherly figures. Rosa Parks is popularly remembered as a humble, quiet seamstress who spontaneously decided to stand up to her oppressors. In fact, she was a fiery activist who was branch secretary in the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP. Parks, a victim of attempted rape herself, investigated sexual violence targeted at Black women as one of her duties as branch secretary. Yet Parks's legacy was sanitized in order to maintain her "respectability" and to minimize any contributions to the movement that fell outside of her expected social role. Parks was somewhat complicit in the sanitization of her legacy to ensure the story of the civil rights movement and her involvement in it remained consistent. To speak out against it at the time would have distracted from the focus of the movement (racism) and also implicated its leaders in sexist oppression. Her own needs were put aside in favor of the greater good.

In both the feminist and Black liberation movements of the 1960s and '70s, the need for Black women to remain behind the scenes was crucial to courting public favor with white America. In both movements, Black women were told they would have to wait until the goals of the movement were reached before their specific needs would be addressed.

This history still influences the dynamics of Black women's interactions with the current movement against police brutality. Police violence against Black women is a specific manifestation of sexism and misogyny underscored by racism. Black women are disproportionately targeted by police and face the threat of not only being shot, but of being sexually assaulted. During slavery and legal segregation, assaults against Black women by white men were often legally sanctioned, and went unpunished. Today, the group of men who are most able to manipulate the law to avoid accountability are law enforcement officers themselves. They can continue the state-sponsored terrorization of Black women through physical and sexual assault, and they know it.

The justification of police violence against Black women has roots in age-old stereotypes of Black women from slavery, when Black women were forced to perform the same tasks as men, despite ideas of femininity at the time. Today, Black women—though still considered less physically threatening than Black men—are often masculinized to justify violence against them. Descriptions of Black women who are assaulted or killed by police are often worded to make the women sound physically imposing and strong.

Police violence against Black women also has roots in the punishment inflicted on Black women post-manumission. The tactic of using violent and sexual displays of power as retribution for "uppity" behavior was behind the degradation inflicted on Fannie Lou Hamer by sheriff's deputies in 1963, and is alive and well in white men like Officer Daniel Holtzclaw, who sexually assaulted at least eight Black women in Oklahoma while on patrol last year, using his position of power to intimidate women into submission. Black women's history of sexual exploitation, and the specter of historical accusations that they were complicit in their own assaults, ensures that the majority of victims of sexual assault by police will remain silent.

We've come full circle, in a way. Just as Black women were the backbone of the Black liberation movements of the '50s and '60s, Black women are now at the forefront of actions of resistance in response to the deaths of Mike Brown and Eric Garner. In this modern movement, however, Black women are not content to remain invisible. They are demanding that their experiences be given the same consideration as Black men's and calling attention to the erasure of those Black women, transgender, and queer folks who also die at the hands of the state, who are beaten and raped by police, and whose stories were never used as the catalyst for a movement.

Three queer Black women—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi—created the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag on Twitter that subsequently evolved into the Black Lives Matter movement. The hashtag was created in response to the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin in Florida, and the subsequent acquittal of his killer, George Zimmerman. The mission statement of the Black Lives Matter movement states its dedication not only to reframing the narrative surrounding police violence against Black people to include Black queer folk and Black cisgender and trans women, but also to "broadening the conversation around state violence to include all of the ways in which Black people are intentionally left powerless at the hands of the state."

Cherrell Brown, a national organizer for Equal Justice USA, and Carmen Perez of Justice League NYC were instrumental in orchestrating that powerful display of solidarity on the part of NBA players. LeBron James made headlines when he wore a t-shirt emblazoned with

the words “I Can’t Breathe” across the front at a December 2014 Brooklyn Nets game, as did other NBA players. Since NBA officials did not approve of the t-shirts being worn during warm-ups, Brown and Perez, with the help of t-shirt designer Rameen Aminzadeh, organized a smuggling operation to get the shirts into the stadium. Brown has also been a high-profile presence at New York City protests against police brutality.

Feminista Jones, a Black feminist writer and social worker from New York City, has used her writing to call attention not only to violence inflicted by law enforcement officials, but to the violence Black women experience on a daily basis. She started the popular #YouOKSis hashtag on Twitter to raise awareness about street harassment, and she organized a National Moment of Silence (#NMOS14) a week after the murder of Michael Brown to honor victims of police brutality. Jones has experienced pushback on social media from men—specifically Black men—for her feminist views, including accusations of being a CIA plant and a puppet of white feminists who’s out to destroy Black manhood.

As with earlier social movements, Black women’s contributions to this new liberation movement have been minimized. “Black Lives Matter” was soon co-opted and distorted without permission from or acknowledgment of its creators. As Garza penned in her essay “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement”:



FAILURE TO ACKNOWLEDGE BLACK WOMEN AS VICTIMS OF POLICE BRUTALITY ACTUALLY ENDS UP KILLING MORE BLACK WOMEN AND GIRLS.



We began to come across varied adaptations of our work: all lives matter, brown lives matter, migrant lives matter, women’s lives matter, and on and on.... While imitation is said to be the highest form of flattery, I was surprised when an organization called to ask if they could use “Black Lives Matter” in one of their campaigns. We agreed to it, with the caveat that a) as a team, we preferred that we not use the meme to celebrate the imprisonment of any individual and b) that it was important to us they acknowledged the genesis of #BlackLivesMatter. I was surprised when they did exactly the opposite and then justified their actions by saying they hadn’t used the “exact” slogan and, therefore, they deemed it okay to take our work, use it as their own, fail to credit where it came from, and then use it to applaud incarceration.

The hacktivist group Anonymous created a “Day of Rage” on the same day of the National Moment of Silence organized by Jones. The stated purpose of the Day of Rage was basically the same as the National Moment of Silence—to

honor the memory of those killed by law enforcement—but Anonymous used it to crusade against government in general. Not only did this erase how police violence is racialized, it also introduced a rhetoric of “rage” that the #NMOS14 organizers had intentionally avoided. Although Jones had been reluctant to center herself as the organizer of #NMOS14 in order to keep attention focused on the victims of police brutality, she used her sizeable Twitter following to spread the news of Anonymous’s hijacking of the event.

The existence of blogs and social media have allowed for the real-time refutation of the co-option of Black women’s work, but the point remains—Black women’s contributions continue to be minimized rather than celebrated.

Black women are now positioned as the vanguard of a new Black liberation struggle and have started a dialogue on the sociopolitical consequences of centering Black cisgender men’s experiences when discussing police brutality. Failure to acknowledge Black women as victims of police brutality actually ends up killing more Black women and girls by

KNOW THEIR NAMES

Though the stories of these Black women and girls may not have been the catalyst for this movement, they are the fuel that will sustain it. These are just a few of the casualties of America's white supremacist war on Black people. I urge you to look up their names and read their stories.

REKIA BOYD, 22: Shot in the back of the head by off-duty Chicago police detective Dante Servin who fired five shots “blindly” over his shoulder at a nearby suspect in a disturbance call. March 21, 2012.

ELEANOR BUMPURS, 66: Killed by NYPD officer Stephen Sullivan while he attempted to evict her from a housing project. October 29, 1984.

ERICA COLLINS, 26: Shot in the head and chest by Cincinnati police officer Matthew Latzy responding to a call about a fight between Collins and her sister. October 13, 2012.

SHANTEL DAVIS, 23: Shot in the chest by Brooklyn NYPD officer Phil Atkins after a car chase. June 14, 2012.

SHELLY FREY, 27: Shot by Louis Campbell, an off-duty Houston sheriff's deputy who suspected her of shoplifting. December 6, 2012.

PEARLIE GOLDEN, 93: Shot five times by Texas police officer Stephen Stem, responding to a 911 report of a woman “brandishing” a gun. May 7, 2014.

DARNESHA HARRIS, 16: Shot and killed by an unnamed Breaux Bridge policeman who stated she was driving erratically and he feared for his life. December 2, 2012.

KENDRA JAMES, 21: Shot in the head by Portland, Oregon police officer Scott McCollister as she tried to drive away from a traffic stop. May 5, 2003.

TYISHA MILLER, 19: Shot 12 times in a car on the side of the road by Riverside, California, police. December 28, 1998.

YVETTE SMITH, 47: Shot and killed by Bastrop County Sheriff's deputy Daniel Willis after she answered his knocks at her door. February 16, 2014.

AIYANA STANLEY-JONES, 7: Shot in the head by Detroit SWAT team member Joseph Weekly while executing a raid in search of a murder suspect. Jones was asleep at the time. May 16, 2010.

TARIKA WILSON, 26: Shot and killed by Lima, Ohio, SWAT team member Joe Chavalia while attempting to arrest her boyfriend. Wilson, by the officer's own admission, was not a suspect—neither was her 14-month-old son, Sincere, who was also shot. January 4, 2008.

perpetuating the myth that white America does not view Black women as threatening. While Black boys are trained to recognize the danger law enforcement poses to them, Black girls might not be. There are still Black women who believe that we are privileged over Black men due to our gender. In her essay “Michael Brown's Death Reopened My Eyes to My Privileges as a Black Woman,” Diana Ozemebhoya Eromosele states she is “a person of privilege with regard to police brutality against black men.” For her, being an “ally” to Black men means learning “when and where I should bite my tongue, swallow that lump in my throat, and adhere to the ways in which Black men have learned to survive and thrive in this world, especially if they don't quite jibe with my own methods... and I'm more than willing to do so.”

Black women who continue to center Black men are effectively forced to participate in their own erasure. Patriarchy has conditioned Black women to fear racist exploitation more so than sexist exploitation, and any perceived racist threat to Black men provokes a circling of the wagons. But Black men, and only Black men, benefit from the prioritizing of racism over sexism when it comes to activism in the Black community. While Eromosele's particular lived experiences may leave her with the feeling that Black women are “privileged” and should act as “allies” of Black men, the reality is that Black women occupy a social status lower than that of white men, Black men, and white women. We are in no way privileged over Black men in regards to police brutality, and we have just as much to lose in escalating an altercation with law enforcement. To believe anything less is dangerous.

Simply put, it is not selfish of us to demand that our experience of racism and the incidents of brutality against us be addressed along with the experience of Black men.

American capitalist patriarchy employs a divide-and-conquer strategy to turn oppressed peoples against each other. We're made to believe that there's only so much freedom to go around, which encourages us to invalidate the oppression of others in order to lend credence to our own. Intersectionality as praxis counters that strategy by creating space for each person's lived experience with oppression to be heard and validated. By acknowledging the existence of multiple levels of oppression, we can work toward eliminating oppression altogether. State-sponsored racist and sexualized violence is meted out against Black women as part and parcel of our dual oppression. That violence is minimized as a function of maintaining a status quo of representation.

This point in history offers us the chance to reframe the narrative on racism in America by acknowledging that Black women are not only as endangered by racial imperialism and white supremacy as Black men but are affected by it in specific, gendered ways. We stand with Black men against a world that wants to see them dead, even as they stand aside when that same world comes for us. It's long past time for Black women to receive the same support we've provided to others for so long, and to shed our perceived role of patient, faithful caretakers and protectors of our men. We must honor women like Darnesha, Tyisha, Shantel, Eleanor, and Rekia, who suffered and died in service of upholding institutionalized white supremacy. That means speaking their names alongside those of Michael, Tamir, and Eric. Only when we fully acknowledge the validity of all Black people's experiences—whether cisgender, transgender, queer, or straight—will we be able to visualize what true Black liberation means. **b**

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