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BLACK LIVES MATTER AND THE RISE OF WOMANIST NEWS NARRATIVES

Allissa V. Richardson

As a frontline demonstrator in August 2014 during what came to be known as the Ferguson protests, Brittany Ferrell recalled the unimaginable sting in her lungs and nose as she gasped for air. "I felt like I didn't know if I would make it home that night," she said in a February 2017 interview. She added, "There was the police that were shooting rubber and wooden bullets at protestors. There were gunshots. There were dogs. There was fire . . . and it was like we knew it and we still went out, night after night after night."

Ferrell also protested by day. With her bullhorn in hand, she appears in one documentary film, teetering precariously in the rear flatbed of a pickup truck. An unnamed man helps her catch her balance. The image creates a new visual rhetoric for black protest. Whereas the photographic grammar of the twentieth-century Civil Rights Movement relied heavily upon black women, wearing dresses and white gloves, behind charismatic male leaders (Gillespie & Clinton, 1998; Hickey, 2013), the Black Lives Matter Movement has placed women at the forefront, with men literally supporting them. This is no accident. The women leaders of BLM interviewed for this study described being intentional—and, at times, shrewd—about managing their core messages, their affiliations with particular organizations within the broad Movement, and the legacies that they create with every Tweet. They are keenly aware of the relative obscurity of their forebearers as black women activists. Hence, they launch and lead their own groups. This study focused on four black women founders of three leading organizations that comprised the early Black Lives Matter Movement of 2014: Brittany Ferrell, Alicia Garza, Brittany Packnett, and Marissa Johnson. I also included Ieshia Evans—a high-profile, anti-police brutality activist who preferred to identify as an "independent protestor," rather than align with an organization within the Movement.

Having contacted all five via Twitter to request hour-long semi-structured interviews, I interviewed one person, on-camera, after she hosted a Black Lives

Matter rally at a US mid-Atlantic university. Four participants consented to recorded Skype or FaceTime interviews. I integrated two established philosophies for my interview map: phenomenology and the functional approach to narrative analysis (Bruner, 1991). Phenomenology focuses on the lived experiences of the study's subjects by evaluating a subject's: (1) intentionality, (2) intuition, (3) empathy, and (4) intersubjectivity (Husserl, 1970). Here this meant focusing on (1) the black woman activist's stated purpose for producing protest journalism; (2) whether or not she intuits her bearing witness as an act of protest; (3) how she views her body in relation to the world (for example, whether she sees herself in the body of a dead black woman who has been gunned down by police); and (4) how she believes her reportage impacts the broader Black Lives Matter Movement. Phenomenology allowed me to identify common threads in how this cohort of black feminist activists *see* themselves and *situate* themselves as protest journalists who have political agency and unprecedented media visibility.

I coded my interviews using Jerome Bruner's functional approach to narrative analysis. Bruner proposed that people chiefly use narratives to construct their realities and make meanings of events. For instance, although the initial claim that Michael Brown had his hands up and screamed, "Don't shoot!" just before a white police officer killed him, proved to be untrue (Capeheart, 2015; Lee, 2015), that narrative arguably compelled people to join the protest in Ferguson in 2014. Online photo memes of African American NFL football players (NBC Staff, 2014), college students (*Clutch* Staff, 2014), Congresspersons (Larson, 2014), and even media personalities (Marsh, 2015)—all with their hands up in the air—went viral. An eponymous organization, Hands Up United, sprang up (see www.handsupunited.org). Some narratives continued to stick, even if they were not true, because people needed to shape chaotic events into a coherent story that made it easier to process. For this reason, "[The] domain that must be widely (though roughly) shared for a culture to operate with requisite effectiveness is the domain of social beliefs and procedures—what we think people are like and how they must get on with each other" (Bruner, 1991, p. 21). Part of probing a black feminist activist's lived experience, then, involved examining her perceived status in the world, within the Movement, and within the context of her relationship to others, such as black male activists and white feminists. I looked for these themes when I analyzed the data. I listened to how they made sense of police brutality and other acts of anti-black racism for themselves (and for others) by telling stories online too.

I used MaxQDA, to code 73 segments within the five interviews. The top five narrative themes include: (1) distrust of legacy media, with 13 coded segments; (2) private and state-sponsored intimidation, with 13 coded segments; (3) sexist news portrayals of black feminist activists, with nine coded segments; (4) the push for inclusion of black queer activists, with eight coded segments; and (5) paying homage to black social movements past, with five coded segments. After briefly describing the five women, I highlight key portions of the interviews to show these themes.

Meet the participants

Both Alicia Garza and Marissa Johnson wished to be identified primarily as Black Lives Matter activists who are affiliated with an official chapter. Garza is one of the three co-founders for the organization. Her love letter to black people after George Zimmerman's acquittal in the Trayvon Martin murder trial in July 2013 contained the original #BlackLivesMatter hashtag. When her friend, Patrisse Cullors, shared her letter to Twitter it went viral. Some said the Movement was born then. Other activists believe the Movement did not take off until August 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri. Based in Oakland, California, Garza is an award-winning community organizer who specialized in workplace equality in the Bay Area prior to establishing Black Lives Matter. She self-identifies as a member of the LGBTQIA community and emphasizes the inclusion of queer leaders in the Movement.

Marissa Johnson, a member of the Black Lives Matter Seattle chapter, gained notoriety in 2015 when she interrupted Presidential hopeful Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) at his Seattle campaign rally. Her assumption of his podium dominated the news headlines for several weeks. Prior to this act of protest, Johnson organized "die-ins" at Seattle businesses to oppose the shooting deaths of unarmed black men by police. One such event shut down Seattle's downtown mall on Black Friday 2014. Johnson self-identifies as "an evangelical Christian, a former theology student, and a biracial, queer woman."

Two participants told me that the Movement did not begin until the Ferguson, Missouri, uprisings in August 2014, in the wake of Michael Brown's death. In the months that followed those protests, they called themselves the "Day 1's," to differentiate themselves from what they regard as late-coming opportunists who capitalized on legacy media appearances but did not have actual boots on the ground in the early campaigns. They were the early fact-checkers of the Movement, churning out data and eyewitness news from the front lines that served often as a corrective to legacy media reports. Brittany Ferrell is a Day 1. Ferrell is a native of St. Louis, Missouri. She is a co-founder of the now-defunct organization, Millennial Activists United. When she began protesting in the days after Brown's death, she went on Twitter to find like-minded demonstrators in her age group, since she said the earliest activists were mothers of friends of Michael Brown's mother, Lesley McSpadden. She met Alexis Templeton, whom she married at the zenith of the protests, and Ashley Yates. (Both Yates and Templeton declined to be interviewed for this study.) The three women pushed to have Officer Darren Wilson prosecuted for Brown's murder. Alas, the local legislature failed to indict Wilson in November 2014. Ferrell self-identifies as "a mother, a nurse, and Alexis's wife."

Brittany Packnett is also a Day 1. A native of St. Louis, Missouri Packnett co-founded We the Protestors in 2014. The group launched a reform campaign in August 2015, called Campaign Zero, which is a 10-point plan to reduce police violence in America (see www.joincampaignzero.org). Along with DeRay Mckesson, Johnetta Elzie, and Samuel Sinyangwe, Packnett created the policy-oriented organization after the four met on the front lines in Ferguson. Packnett was an

appointee to President Barack Obama's 21st Century Policing Task Force. She self-identifies as "a Christian, a daughter, a sister, a community activist, and the girlfriend of civil rights photographer Reggie Cunningham."[1]

Ieshia Evans was the subject of some viral photographs of the Alton Sterling protests in August 2016. Evans, wearing a dress, was pictured in a peaceful standoff with Baton Rouge police wearing riot gear.[2] Since becoming a media sensation, Evans has conducted international interviews about her assumed affiliation with the Black Lives Matter Movement. She bristles when one suggests that she is part of the organization; no one from the group, she says, ever reached out to her after she was profiled in the press. She emphasized in our interview that she went down to Baton Rouge from her native New York in the summer of 2016 on her own. Evans eventually was arrested and charged with obstructing a highway. After being released from jail, she said she planned to return to New York and live a quiet life. When someone created a fake Twitter account in her name, however, she decided to bear witness on the platform with her own verified account. Evans self-identifies as a mother and a black woman.

Distrust of legacy media

All five participants told me that they distrust traditional media outlets. This was the most popular code in the corpus. Each woman shared that she used social media outlets, such as Twitter, to spread her own news when she was on the front lines of protest. Brittany Packnett, of We the Protestors, explained that Twitter became invaluable, for example, when police officers tear-gassed peaceful protestors in August 2014. She explained that she saw a CNN report that claimed the predominately black residents of Ferguson were looting a local McDonald's. She said her Twitter feed was full of protestors discussing the antidotes to teargas. Milk was a remedy, Packnett said, so protestors rushed into a local McDonald's restaurant to ask its managers for milk. Packnett used Twitter to correct this important omission in the news. She said:

> That is the instantaneous correction that you're allowed to have. Twitter also gave us immediate access to CNN . . . [and] on the ground people would go up to cameras and say, 'People are tweeting me right now, calling me right now and saying that you're reporting incorrectly, so we will stand here in front of your cameras until you decide to tell the truth.'

Brittany Ferrell, the founder of Millennial Activists United, said that Twitter was the reason she got involved in the Movement. She found like-minded black feminist activists online, then began organizing demonstrations in her hometown of Ferguson in August 2014. She believes that part of the reason her organization is now-defunct is negative media portrayals of the Movement. She said:

> They've done a very good job in portraying BLM [Black Lives Matter] overall as a hate group. And I don't expect anything else because when I think

> about the media and I think about who they serve, they serve the majority and the majority is not looking to do away with white supremacy. They benefit from it.

Asked to elaborate on her belief that legacy media have misrepresented the Black Lives Matter Movement, Ferrell explained:

> Blackness is oftentimes very, very misunderstood. When you're black and you're angry or you're black and you're fighting for something, people don't really receive that very well. It's almost like if we're too angry we just become violent. People don't believe that we're worth what we're fighting for.

Ferrell added that she believed the framing of Black Lives Matter and its protestors in the news as lawless rebels without a cause was intentional. She explained:

> I do think that they framed us in a way so that people would look at this movement and not understand it, or to think that it's violent or to think that we are not making progress when in fact that we are . . . mainstream media is not for the people. They're not trying to get us free.

I asked Ferrell what she thought about the framing of the Women's March in Washington, DC, which was organized to highlight women's rights and, in part, to denounce President Donald Trump's growing catalog of misogynistic behaviors. In an infamous "hot mic" moment, President Trump bragged to an entertainment reporter that a man of his stature simply can "grab them [women] by the pussy" without anyone ever complaining.[3] Women's March participants defiantly (and ironically) donned pink hats, stylized to resemble vaginas, to many of the nation-wide protests. Although two of the Women's March organizers are women of color, the demonstration was regarded popularly as a white feminists' march (Gebreyes, 2017). Ferrell's voice rises in anger as she dissects the media framing of Women's March:

> I feel like a lot of white women went out and they were like, 'Oh, this march is *peaceful*.' And really putting the emphasis on *peaceful*. . . . Our demonstrations were also peaceful, but when you see a sea of white women with pink vagina hats on their heads, white women are not going to be met with the same type of aggression from police officers as a community of traumatized torn black people who continue over and over and over again to be traumatized. To be told that we don't matter. To be in communities where we don't have food, we don't have jobs, we don't have nothing! White women had the audacity to emphasize how safe their protests were! . . . Of course they were. They're protecting you! No one's protecting us. So [the news media] frame this narrative about how *this* is peaceful, and *this* is not. And it's like no, *this* is valued in society and *we* are not!

Ferrell seemed very near tears but recomposed herself. She concluded quietly that black feminist activists should embrace and create independent media outlets, such as blogs, podcasts, and web video series, to reframe their organizational missions and leaders. In fact, all of the women said that they encourage the next generation of black feminist activists not to place as much emphasis on courting traditional press. In 2017, for example, Packnett, launched *Pod Save the People*, a weekly podcast dedicated to Movement politics.[4] Packnett co-anchors the show with the fellow founders of We the Protestors/Campaign Zero, Deray McKesson and Samuel Sinyangwe. Similarly, Black Lives Matter's Marissa Johnson said that she co-founded *Safety Pin Box* after her disillusionment with televised news.[5] Her media literacy company's website states that its mission is to educate "white people who want to be allies in the fight for Black liberation." *Safety Pin Box* has a weekly email newsletter and a dedicated Twitter feed. Both outlets host in-depth discussions about white privilege, and how whites can use that privilege to end racial equality.

Overall, the participants shared a common desire to see the news frame the Movement favorably. Whereas I thought I might see a higher priority on black feminist labor being highlighted in the news, the women I interviewed saw "the work itself"—not the activists or even the riots—as the news lede. This is not to say that these women do not want to be recognized for their efforts. Rather, they believe an accurate portrayal of the Black Lives Matter Movement makes room for their contributions to be celebrated, rather than condemned.

Private and state-sponsored intimidation

Brittany Ferrell recalled being out running errands when an unmarked car drove up near her, and a white man with a camera leaned out of the passenger side window and started snapping photos of her. She explained: "There's not a day that goes by that I don't think about who's listening, who's watching. I've become inured to feeling like safety is an illusion." Ferrell said that the cameraman became a fixture in the days leading up to her March 2017 sentencing date. She explained that a woman drove through a crowd of Black Lives Matter protestors who had blocked off I-70 in St. Louis to commemorate the one-year anniversary of Michael Brown's death in August 2015. "[She] used her vehicle to try and run protestors over," Ferrell said. "I allegedly struck her driver's side door with my size 6 shoe and now I'm facing a felony. It's definitely political retaliation towards the Movement. It's definitely an effort for them to make an example out of me." Ferrell remarked that she becomes all the more bitter about her felony charge when she considers that the same prosecutor who failed to indict Officer Darren Wilson for killing Michael Brown was, at the time of the interview, trying to convict her of a felony for allegedly kicking a vehicle. Ferrell eventually got a suspended sentence and probation as part of a plea deal in March 2017.

Marissa Johnson said she brought white allies with her when she interrupted Senator Sanders at the podium. These friends formed a human barricade between her and the audience. It proved essential, she said: an audience member bit one

of her white allies when he could not get to Johnson himself. Her friends could not protect her from the aftermath of the rally, however: "I've gotten thousands of death threats. I still do, a year-and-a-half later. Every time something would happen in the [2016 Presidential] election again, I'd get new death threats."

I asked how people find her. She explained "through Twitter, through my phone." She sighed, adding:

> People call me, people found my phone number, yeah. Through my phone, through emails, through Twitter, through Facebook. . . . I finally went through [Facebook] and cleaned it out like eight months after it [the rally] happened and it literally was just thousands and thousands and thousands of messages. I still get tons of those messages every day.

Johnson sees her experiences as par for the course. She said: "The tactics that we chose—if you're really aware of the legacy of people who take that road—then you understand that everything up to death is on the table." Johnson took a long pause to think about her answer to the question of whether she believes her protest was worth it. Nodded slowly, she said: "I'm really happy about what we were able to contribute to history and trying to advance the people's agenda forward. That being said, had I known what it would cost me personally, I don't know that I would've."

Sexist news portrayals of black feminist activists

"It's sexism. It's misogynoir. It's ageism," Marissa Johnson said, pounding her fist into her hand for emphasis in describing how she regards the media portrayal of her 2015 stand against Sen. Sanders. She said that she was angered by early coverage of her and fellow protestor, Mara Willaford. She explained:

> [It was] like we're just little girls and we just got mad, and we just yelled and other things happened to happen out of it. White supremacy in that moment could never conceive that we had intentionally crafted this plan, executed it effectively, and done things that people would have told us that we could not have done.

Johnson said she noticed this narrative—of the unintended girl protesters gone viral—continued for about a week until she reluctantly agreed to an MSNBC interview. In the segment, she revealed the planning that went into the interruption and confirmed her affiliation with Black Lives Matter's Seattle chapter. ". . . [A] week out, then folks are able to start saying, 'Oh actually, I see why they did what they did and actually here are already some outcomes of this' and then two weeks out, 'What they did was spot on. Here's why what they did was genius.'" As frustrated as Johnson was about the eventual news coverage she received, she acknowledged that sexism actually helped her achieve the interruption in the first

place. "I had a white man who was with me," she recounted, laughing. She added, "His job was to help me get in." She said she held hands with him and no one noticed them initially. Senator Sanders's event organizers were focused on someone else, Johnson explained:

> What was interesting was that I also had a black man who was there and when the organizers of the Bernie [Sanders] rally saw him and saw me, they knew we were going to something, but they assumed he was going to be the one to do it because he was a man. He went over to a different corner and they put all the security over where he was and so when time came and they introduced Bernie, the white man who was with me helped me separate the barriers. I ran, and ducked and dived up the stairs.

Johnson shook her head as her laughter trailed off. She said she is torn when she thinks about the approach, as it highlighted how heavily surveilled black men are when they are innocent and how invisible black women are until they behave "badly." Her eyes began to well with tears.

Echoing Johnson's sentiments, Ferrell said sexism led her to launch Millennial Activists United in 2014 with two fellow black feminist activists. As the uprisings gained steam in her hometown, Ferrell began to notice that people began looking for a charismatic male leader: "They romanticized the early civil rights movement." They were, she said, looking for their Malcolm X or their Martin Luther King.

Ferrell added that many of her Twitter followers and local friends self-identified as black feminist women. Critics of her growing base implied ". . . [I]f you are not male then you are not worth listening to. You are not worth leading." Ferrell said mainstream news media outlets even began to anoint certain men as the official leaders of the Ferguson uprisings, on the backs of black women's labor. The men would often do nothing to acknowledge the steadfast women organizers publicly, she said, which caused rifts among various organizations vying to "headline" the Black Lives Matter movement.

"I just knew I had to control my own story," Ferrell explained. Ferrell said she accepted nearly all mainstream media interviews that came her way. She developed a network of journalists she trusted. She felt she needed to go on record, she explained. This is how she came to be one of the few women referenced in the documentary, *Ferguson: Duty to Fight, Duty to Win*. In the film, a male protestor supports her by the waist as she is chanting, bullhorn in hand, in the back of a pickup truck. I asked her about this developing black protest iconography—of the men now standing behind the women—which subverts all traditional imagery for black women demonstrators in movements past. She nodded slowly, recalling times when she had to stand her ground when doing this work "because people like to undermine you. They like to condescend you. They like to tell you where your place is. I've had my fair share of having to push back on people that have been coming to me with some sexist or patriarchal point of view or standpoint."

Near the end of the interview, Ferrell, who is a licensed nurse and was almost about to start her 12-hour shift, explained the difficulty of undoing white supremacy, sexism, and patriarchy:

> It's been a struggle for myself and other women in this movement because a lot of times you can be labeled as divisive when calling out sexism, but it's our duty to do that. It's our duty to do that because all that's going to happen if we don't is people are going to recreate structures that are going to continue to marginalize people—women, queer people, trans folks—so we have to confront those issues head on, at the same time we confront white supremacy and racism.

Only one of my participants said that black feminists should de-emphasize their womanhood in the Movement. Ieshia Evans, now known internationally for facing off with Baton Rouge, Louisiana police, said that today's demonstrators should primarily focus on racial inequality. "I've actually had people who have tried to divide and conquer the situation and try to get me to sway my opinions in more of a feminist direction," she said. "I shut that down automatically. Before anyone has ever discriminated against me for having a vagina they discriminated against me because of the color of my skin. My people first and then my sex."

Evans further reasoned that being a woman did not protect her from being handled roughly by police. When Evans was arrested amid her demonstration, the police neither "Mirandized" her, nor told her what charges she faced. The police "met me with war gear" while "I was in a sundress," she said. She did not feel like a lady then, she said with a wry laugh.

The push for inclusion of black queer activists

Participants vigorously debated the role of queer black women in the Black Lives Matter Movement. Three of the five interviewees identify openly as members of the LGBTQIA community. Alicia Garza, co-founder of the Black Lives Matter Movement, explained:

> As a black woman who is queer, I think one of the things that just feels important for us to understand, I think, historically, is that it's always been true: that black women and women of color have been kind of the very foundation of what it's meant to get free, and then we're pushed aside or kind of erased.

Garza is married to a woman, Malachi Larrabee-Garza, who prefers the pronoun "he" as a modifier. As Alicia and her husband have given extensive, first-person interviews about what it is like to be a queer activist of color, she preferred to discuss the inclusion of these marginalized groups in more general terms.[6]

When asked pointedly whether she believes Black Lives Matter is more progressive about gender and sexuality than past black social movements, Garza briefly paused for a moment. We were on a university campus, where she would speak to a small group of student leaders on the importance of self-care. Many of the workshop participants milled outside the room where we interviewed her, waiting to hear her answer:

> It's certainly not perfect, but one of the things that we can continue to do is craft our organizations, our culture, our demonstrations, our movement in way that not only makes visible the leadership and the work of women of color and queer women and trans women and poor women, but that we also name what those contributions *are*. That we be very specific about what it is that we contribute.

Garza shared that she was very frustrated when other groups began to co-opt the Black Lives Matter slogan. "What do you feel when you hear All Lives Matter?" I asked her. "Nope!" she said while shaking her head. She explained "[What] feels really important is making visible folks who feel invisible." She said focusing on anti-Blackness, specifically, opens the door for a greater discussion still about *which* black lives matter. She referenced the cultural silence about violence against black people who identify openly as gay, bisexual or transsexual. "This is a moment where we can shift that, and I think what we're seeing is that we're watching old ways of being go away and new ways of being come in," Garza said.

The general, political consensus is that groups who are working under the broad umbrella of Black Lives Matter should prioritize unarmed black men, she explained further. She wanted Black Lives Matter to be a different kind of modern ally, she said. At the same time, she mentioned that some storied organizations that are fighting systemic, anti-black racism alongside her group adhere staunchly to "respectability politics." Leaders of these historic groups are worried that members of the LGBTQIA community will muddle the messages and priorities of the cause to end police brutality, she said. They are unable, however, to marginalize LGBTQIA leaders in ways that they used in the past, since social media enables anyone to grab the proverbial bullhorn. While Garza declined to name the legacy black organizations that engage in gatekeeping, she said simply "It's important for us to fight for our space without fighting each other."

Since Garza's October 2015 interview, many of the groups that were birthed in Ferguson under the broad Black Lives Matter campaign either have rebranded, merged, or dissolved. Ferrell's organization, Millennial Activists United (MAU), dissolved. Ferrell and two other black feminist lesbians activists launched MAU amid the Ferguson uprisings in August 2014. They found each other on Twitter.

Ferrell said that when she began looking for ways to get involved in her hometown of Ferguson, many of the early organizers either were older black women—like the friends of Mike Brown's mother, Leslie McSpadden—or men who had a lot of "chauvinist energy," she said. There were not many black women

"twenty-somethings" on the front lines, she said, let alone any queer black women her age. She went on Twitter to search for them, she said. She had a feeling that they were there, watching the news as events escalated in her hometown, yet too afraid to come forward. After exchanging private messages with Ashley Yates and Alexis Templeton, the trio agreed to form a new organization that would involve women like them. "It was created out of a need for young activism organizers who wanted to do something, but didn't feel like they had a place to do something," Ferrell said.

Ferrell explained that young black women often must do "double duty" when they want to engage in activism if they are also mothers. For younger women with small children and a limited support system, childcare can be costly. This leads women who may have had bigger visions to settle for support positions within a movement, instead of major strategic ones, she said. "We had a lot of young people, a lot of queer people, and a lot of women who were doing so much work that was not being recognized. Their work was not being taken seriously, but it was the work that we felt like a lot of men got the credit for."

When black queer women did deign to take on leadership positions in the early Ferguson protests of 2014, Ferrell said they did not feel safe. In private messages and threads on Twitter, black queer women activists discussed the unique threats that three layers of marginalization often elicited. "We wanted to create a space for young people regardless of your identity and regardless to your gender, your sexuality, if you are ready to do this work for black lives this is your space. So we wanted to open that up so people could feel safe coming in with their whole selves, not to feel like they have to fit in anybody's box—and to collectively organize power."

Part of MAU's strategy was to allow its members to operate without much publicity or fanfare. While Templeton and Yates took turns fielding press inquiries from *The New York Times* and NPR (Corley, 2014), Ferrell said many other women offered first aid to those hurt by police during frontline protests. (In fact, Ferrell said the experience explains her decision to pursue a nursing career.) MAU women cooked food for protestors, helped write lengthy proposals for local police reform and, in Ferrell's case, even fell in love. She and Templeton became engaged in December 2014, one month after the city of St. Louis decided not to indict Officer Wilson on any charges for the killing of Brown. Both of them were very depressed by the decision, she recalled, but found hope in each other. "We were forged in the fire," Ferrell said. She explained how their roles as romantic public figures create "its own set of traumas":

> It's a lot that we talk about that we have weathered through . . . but I can definitely say that because of this experience, it's a love that has never really felt like any other love that I've ever experienced. Knowing that somebody is so committed to something in the same way that you are and that they are on this journey—to make sure that they're whole and they're healthy in the same way that you are—it's something very powerful about the type of love that Alexis and I have grown into during this movement.

Paying homage to black social movements past

Although I never asked participants to think of a black feminist activist forebearer that they admire, four of the five women referenced unsung heroines from the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Marissa Johnson recounted that when she interrupted Sanders, she was wearing a shirt that said, "Fight like Fannie Lou Hamer." "And it was really funny because I had that shirt on and yet people were like, 'Why did she do that? We don't understand!' and I'm like . . . all she [Hamer] did was go after Democrats! I think in that way, she's someone I would be connected to."

A couple of months and nearly 2000 miles away, Ferrell identified similarly with Hamer's story. Hamer registered thousands of black Mississippians in her home state to vote. She even challenged the Democratic party to hear their concerns by demanding a delegation at its National Convention in 1964 (Lee, 2000). Ferrell said: "I didn't even learn about Fannie Lou Hamer until I was in undergrad. It was like she put in work for the [Civil Rights] Movement and yet no one knew about her, but we knew about all the men!"

Both Johnson and Ferrell said that Hamer's obscurity in history is something they considered actively when strategizing their own interactions with legacy media outlets. Johnson leveraged television's reach. Ferrell said she decided to find journalist allies within the ranks of print and online media. Ferrell added that in wooing modern press, she made sartorial choices that criticized previous generations of activists for omitting women. One of her favorite protest shirts, because it challenges what modern black leadership should look like, is a black hoodie that reads, "Not your respectable negro," she said.[7]

Brittany Packnett suggested that today's Movement may look like more than one "thing," after all. Of all the participants, she is the most visible activist who is still working on the front lines, with a weekly podcast and a Twitter following of 138,000 people. She said she drew inspiration from "late 60s and 70s folks" like "Kwame Ture, Gil Scott-Heron, Maya Angelou and Audre Lorde." According to Packnett, these are "people who took the foundations of the midcentury Civil Rights Movement and built something intentionally radical on top of it."

She scoffed when asked what she thought of people who criticized her current group, *Campaign Zero*, for operating under the Black Lives Matter banner when it is not affiliated with an official chapter. She and her friend and fellow protestor, Deray McKesson, enjoyed presidential appointments and late-night television show appearances while many unknown activists continued to toil in obscurity, two of the activists in the corpus (who wished to remain nameless) complained. Packnett frowned and said that legacy media are to blame largely for lumping all the organizations together. Still, she emphasized the value in coalition-building, like activists did in past generations. "There were lots of organizations who had lots of different tactics, aims and leaders and constituents, but they were oriented towards the same goal. A goal of racial equity and freedom. Goals of economic empowerment, goals of the American Dream. . . . So in the same way that SNCC, SCLC and NAACP

and CORE and the [Black] Panthers all had different tactics, they were all a part of broader movement."

Conclusion

"I'm just a regular degular girl from New York," Ieshia Evans said, emphasizing her home state in her pronounced Brooklyn accent.[8] She said she had no idea that she would become a global icon from one photograph. After conducting interviews with publications in Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States, Evans shared that she planned to go dark for a while. "You won't see me too much in a little bit," she said. "I am in my learning phases right now. I was asleep for so long . . . but I am 'woke' now." Evans declined to say what her activism will look like in the future.

Marissa Johnson said that many activists leave the public eye with little fanfare because: "It's very dangerous and it's hard to maintain. There's not proper structures in place. It's not very sustainable to do that kind of work really effectively long term because it's super traumatic." Johnson said she considers herself an "elderstateswoman" of the Black Lives Matter Movement, simply because today's news cycles move so quickly. The Movement needs fresh faces to continue to grow, she said. It also needs black women activists who will document their contributions. To these ends, all participants are creating original media or taking legacy media interviews on their own terms, at the time of this publication. Evans appeared on an MTV news program in 2017 to criticize Pepsi's controversial commercial, where model Kendall Jenner (who is white) handed a white police officer a soda to quell a protest.[9] Pepsi pulled the advertisement when Black Twitter lampooned it.

Ferrell was one of the principal characters of the 2017 film, *Whose Streets*. *Rolling Stone* magazine called it the "Doc of the Year" and "a chronicle of activism as a triumph" (Fear, 2017). Garza completed a book chapter that offered a "herstory" of the Movement (2014). Johnson is the owner of *Safety Pin Box*, which offers "ally training" for white people.[10] Lastly, Packnett hosts a weekly podcast, *Pod Save the People*. The show grew from a call-in program to a live show in Washington, DC's Lincoln Theater in February 2018.

All these examples illustrate a new generation of black feminist activists who are as media savvy as they are passionate about their causes. This small cadre of women led one of the most sustained, meaningful black social movements in the new millennium. Using little more than smartphones and social media, they harnessed incredible organizing power that bucked respectability politics and highlighted the contributions of black women activists. Some of the women, like Ferrell and Evans, never had organized a movement before. Others, such as Garza, Johnson and Packnett already were working in organizing spaces when the political "stars" aligned. For all the participants, their experiences on the front lines revealed how fraught activism can be for black women. There are added layers of personal danger. There is sexism that stings. There is white silence—even from fellow feminists—that infuriates. Still the work passes on to generations anew, like Ferrell's daughter, who is nine.

"I am passing her my baton," Ferrell said smiling, before ending our Skype session. Then, she checked her reflection in her rearview mirror and fastened her hospital ID badge to her medical scrubs. She had work to do.

Notes

1 Cunningham is a fellow native of St. Louis who photographed the Ferguson protests extensively. See: www.bepureblack.com/untitled-gallery.
2 See: http://time.com/4403440/baton-rouge-protest-photo-ieshia-evans/.
3 See: www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html/
4 See: https://crooked.com/podcast-series/pod-save-the-people/.
5 See: www.safetypinbox.com.
6 See: Alicia Garza + Malachi Garza on Being Partners in Love & Activism: www.youtube.com/watch?v=DOb85JOTw0s.
7 See: Faces from the New Civil Rights Movement: http://afropunk.com/2015/02/bhm-faces-from-the-new-civil-rights-movement-alexis-templeton-and-brittany-ferrell-of-millennial-activists-united/.
8 See Urban Dictionary entry for regular degular: www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Regular%20Degular.
9 See: www.youtube.com/watch?v=yyziH2eORvQ.
10 See: www.safetypinbox.com.

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