
The Memeification of Black Women's Trauma

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Abstract

This piece discusses the online and offline discourses on the lives and bodies of Black femme and non-binary individuals and the harm that is so casually inflicted upon us. Through popular stories of harm performed around famous Black women, such as with rapper Megan Thee Stallion, I connect the history of Black women in popular culture to current online spaces that continue to minimize and trivialize our trauma. I seek to highlight that these stories are not an anomaly, but rather sentiments rooted in the misogynoir that is so entrenched in western culture and have been expanded and weaponized within the online sphere. In addition, the piece challenges the universality of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in its implementation, criticizing its propensity to forget its feminine victims. It is important to emphasize where it has failed and where it needs to be intentional about the people it has overlooked, as this is a movement that began online, where this harm is currently taking place, and at the hands and energies of Black femmes, the very people getting hurt. This piece has manifested from many conversations already occurring in online Black feminist spaces about our treatment and our needs. It invites others into the fold and seeks to encourage individuals to critically reflect on how Black femme and non-binary individuals are presented on their timeline in-between the numerous BLM posts that claim to protect them.

Keywords

misogynoir, gendered violence, virtual communities, intersectionality, racism

In July of 2020, amongst the second wave of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement, Houston rapper Megan Pete, i.e., “Megan Thee Stallion” was shot in the foot by the Canadian rapper, Tory Lanez (Bero, 2020). The public’s immediate response to this story was humour and ridicule instead of what would traditionally be sympathy. After sharing the details of her injury, Pete was met with jokes that sexualized her and hinted at transphobia, thus insinuating that she deserved more violence from both other public figures and the public writ large. From this derision arose the following question in Black feminist internet spaces: “Why is Black women’s pain a joke?” (amandabb, 2020; Foster, 2020; Wilson, 2020). This question has been posed in Black Feminist spaces for decades, rhetorically asked in our critiques of the discourses surrounding the dehumanization of Black women, particularly when our pain and trauma is concerned, and have been further highlighted in the online sphere. Moreover, in the larger online world, Black women’s trauma has constantly been transformed into a digital caricature, often in the form of memes reminiscent of the minstrel shows of the Jim Crow Era in the United States. I refer to this process as “the memeification” of Black women’s trauma, and it constitutes the basis of my following discussion.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that the BLM movement, in its first incantation was popularized online via the hashtag #BLM, was created in response to an important issue for the Black cause: Black people as the uneven targets of police brutality. In many ways, the advent of BLM illustrates the radical potential for Black activism in the digital sphere. BLM has slowly evolved into a springboard from which conversations about systematic racism more generally can be placed at the centre, opposed to the periphery, of online, academic, and activist spaces, especially in response to the movement’s second wave, which emerged after the public lynching of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in May 2020. Despite the transformative and anti-racist potential of BLM, however, the same online spaces that gave birth to the movement remain as sites of trauma and violence for Black women, as well as our gender nonbinary and masculine trans* peers.

Ironically, the same spaces that mobilized and

promoted the idea that Black lives matter can also, at best, ignore Black femme lives and, at worst, chastise us. Even when sticking to the original criteria of police brutality, Black women were – and continue to be – consistently overlooked by the #BLM movement, causing an adjacent movement to arise in the #SayHerName campaign (The African American Policy Forum, 2014). However, while this inclusion is important and necessary, it has added insult to injury as it was Black women and nonbinary folx who created #BLM – and yet, the creation of #SayHerName indicates that they were easily sidelined and that our concerns are considered secondary. For example, Breonna Taylor (arguably the most notable recent women victim in which the #BLM movement has rallied behind) only received notoriety on the heels of George Floyd’s murder, despite her murder occurring two months before (Cooper, 2020). Moreover, Breonna’s tragic story has been reduced to a popular meme all over social media. The use of “Arrest Breonna Taylor’s murderers” in online spaces began as a rallying cry for awareness, yet it has increasingly been commodified into a hashtag placed alongside phrases at the end of selfies, vacation pictures, and other vanity posts (Andrews, 2020).

Dialogues on the topic of race are often focused on the masculine members of our communities. Women’s role in Black communities is that of support (while femme trans* folx are often ignored or ostracized), and thus, our needs are placed in the backseat, if noted at all. Early Black feminists, such as Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and Angela Harris, have criticized the idea of a universal gendered or Black experience due to the unique challenges that occur when oppressive behaviours are compounded across racial, gendered, and class lines (Jones & Norwood, 2017). As Gloria Hull once said, “All women are white, all the Blacks are men, but some of us are brave” (Jones & Norwood, 2017). The frequent exclusion of Black women (as well as Black femmes/ gender nonbinary [or enby] people) as visible icons in social movements is why, moving forward, there needs to be intentionality in the deconstruction of the specific oppressive behaviours that affect Black women, in addition to our masculine trans* peers.

Black femme bodies have been deemed as

unsympathetic. They encounter a unique brand of oppression in which racism and sexism feed one another, also known as misogynoir, a term coined by Moya Bailey in 2010. Like our male counterparts, Black women fall outside the realm of “respectability” that is required to be viewed as a true “victim” despite being one of the most vulnerable populations to violence (Thompson, 2020). This is profoundly exacerbated by sexism, which explains the need to understand misogynoir as beyond mere racism plus sexism. Due to the legacy of racial slavery, Western understanding of what is feminine is in direct opposition to what is associated with Black women. Black Women are viewed as too abrasive and strong (Jones & Norwood, 2017; Walley-Jean, 2009), and our natural features do not comply with the idealized feminine beauty standards that have been outlined by white society and are thus positioned closer to the masculine (Madden et al., 2018). In other words, Black women are not thought of as “innocent” women according to Western gender roles, except, of course, when assuming the Mammie role (Walley-Jean, 2009). Accordingly, Black women are unable to access the social capital of femininity in the same way white (and even some Brown and Asian) women do and are therefore not afforded the same protective sense of nurturing, especially when they are victimized.

An easily recognizable facet of misogynoir in action is the trope of the angry Black woman. This stereotype automatically positions Black women as the aggressor in instances of conflict or tension, regardless of our level of victimization in the proposed situation (Walley-Jean, 2009; Jones & Norwood, 2017). The “angry Black woman” trope appears to be universal, even among Black men. Black women’s emotions, especially when expressed by and for ourselves, are deemed loud, disagreeable, over the top, and rendered unruly by design. Such rhetoric is an imperialist tool that is used to not only dismiss the issues facing Black women but to manipulate and contort situations in which they experience harm so that they wrongly appear as the agitator (Walley-Jean, 2009).

Familiarizing ourselves with even just a *little* bit of Black feminist theory sheds light on why many Black women and femmes are upset but not surprised by the social media reaction to Megan Thee Stallion’s shooting. The internet has not been kind to Black women, and many approaches to our

lives within online spaces are reminiscent of historical acts of oppression. For example, let us consider the many forms of harassment that Black woman comedian Leslie Jones received when being cast in a blockbuster film. This harassment included (but was not limited to) constant and degrading acts of violence whereby she was sent pictures of apes and called a man, an act reminiscent of the historically coded racist-transphobic language that is often spouted at Black women (both cis and trans* alike) (Madden et al., 2018). The same type of language was used towards Michelle Obama’s “manly arms” or Serena Williams’ athletic build, which stands in stark contrast to the desirable and delicate white feminine Western ideal.

On the other side, you have the more “lighthearted” jokes made towards Black women. In 2012, Kimberly Wilkins, also known as the “Ain’t nobody got time for that” woman, was a viral sensation and a source of national humour, so much so that the public completely forgot that her comedic interview response was an honest reaction to having experienced a traumatic fire. The “Hide Your Kids, Hide Your Wife” quote became another online joke, originating from an interview with a Black man by the name of Kevin Antoine Dodson during the recount of his sister’s assault. Finally, we return to the Breonna Taylor trend that is pervasive across the internet as I write this. More often than not, when Black women’s tragedy and pain are publicized, it is memeified, manufactured into comedy, as if our lives are viewed as a minstrel show (Foster, 2020).

The popular use of Black women’s general social responses as reaction GIFs is the more benign, but no less dismissive, form of this action or memeification. Black women’s visceral reactions to lived experience and embodied emotions have been reappropriated as “funny” expressions more than any other demographic. A short survey on GIF keyboards finds that phrases such as “Black lady”, “sassy Black lady”, “angry Black lady”, “Black fat lady”, etc. are some of the most popular searched terms (Jackson, 2017). These GIFs, and the use of them, reinforce the notion that Black women’s place in social media is that of the performer, an issue strongly argued in Black feminist spaces. Such memeification has been further escalated by some, often white, individuals who manufacture entire pseudo personas based on pervasive stereotypes of Black women in order to gain an online fame (Jackson, 2017). These social

media personalities recognize that playing up this “minstrel” femme identity is profitable, regardless of how offensive these depictions truly are. In short, it is profitable on the internet to mimic and laugh at Black women. The internet is only concerned with Black femme lives as entertainment, not as a site of racial-gender-sexual-classed conflict, strife, and resilience. Whether intentional or not, digital spaces have engaged in the memeification of Black women’s pain for at least the last decade (Foster, 2020; Jackson, 2017). As many communities are uncomfortable with Black women as victims, internet trolls, consumers, and tycoons find a way to repurpose this discomfort into popular humour by pointedly making fun of Black women.

Going back to Megan Thee Stallion - she was criticized as *someone who deserved to be shot in the foot*, the inference being that, as a Black woman, she was probably disagreeable and “had it coming” (Foster, 2020; Wilson, 2020). Further, due to her height and build, it was implied that she was assigned male at birth through a series of transphobic tweets, and thus more deserving of violence, a form of bigotry that has been weaponized against cis Black women on many occasions, and which further subjugates Black trans* women, men, and nonbinary people (Madden et al., 2018). Lastly, Megan was publicly dismissed as a liar until she posted graphic images of her injuries. This instance highlights how Black women are rarely considered to be the victims and how our pain is easily consumable, digestible, and objectified. Most uncanny of Megan’s story is that some of the same online accounts attacking her had also championed the #BLM movement just weeks before. This cognitive dissonance between claiming the words “Black Lives Matter” and expressing vitriol towards a Black femme victim shows that much more work needs to be done to uplift and center Black women’s stories and experiences in Black activist and digital spaces, even in our post-George Floyd and BLM era.

It is important to point out that the most notable sphere to offer immediate sympathy to Megan Thee Stallion was from online Black women’s spaces, particularly within Black Twitter. These spaces exist to run in opposition to the mainstream internet and have cultivated environments to validate other Black women’s (as well as femme’s and enby’s) experiences (Williams & Gonlin, 2017). These are

the spaces that birthed the #BLM movement through our rejection of respectability politics— they were able to accept victims, such as Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Walter Scott, and the like, and channel this acceptance into deeply political and powerful rage (Hill, 2018). Black women and trans* folx, pioneered the BLM movement, and yet, the world seems to have forgotten (or has never learned) that Black women and non-masculine/non-cis Black people need support. Until then, the thriving and powerful online community of Black women will have to continue to take care of each other.

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Author biography

Natalie Stravens (she/her) is pursuing an MA in Public Issues Anthropology in collaboration with International Development at the University of Guelph. She received her undergraduate degree from McMaster University with a Bachelors of Honours in Multimedia and Anthropology. Her current research is focused on understanding the dynamics and barriers that affect recent immigrants' access to mental healthcare in Southern Ontario. She is concerned with how structural inequities, social legitimacy, and attitudes of deservingness impact access in political economies of health. At the University of Guelph, she is committed to making a more equitable academic experience for BIPOC students and combating the legacy of racism in Canadian scholarship. She has been a part of strategies to promote BIPOC scholarship through engaging seminars and training sessions. In association with the Dean's office, within the College of Social and Applied Human Sciences, she is working on the development of mentorship opportunities for BIPOC graduate students. Through this program, she hopes to encourage the voices of marginalized groups in academia.