Police Violence against Black Women

Race in the US: Herstory

by Treva Lindsey 5 Sept 2015

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"Get out of the car! I will light you up! Get out!"

The words of Texas highway patrol trooper Brian Encinia to Sandra Bland after he pulled her over for a failure to signal powerfully capture a rarely discussed reality - the pervasiveness of anti-black state violence against black women.

Her subsequent death – [allegedly] by hanging in a jail cell – three days after her arrest, elicited outrage from many.

Although ruled a suicide by the Harris County, Texas, medical examiner, numerous questions remain about her violent death in police custody.

In the month of July alone, six African American women died in police custody post-arrest: Bland, Raynetta Turner (New York), Kindra Chapman (Alabama), Ralkina Jones (Ohio), Alexis McGovern (Missouri), and Joyce Curnell (South Carolina).

Circumstances vary in each case, but such deaths are occurring at an alarming rate.

Erasure

The individual stories of each of these women, with the notable exception of Bland, did not receive extended media coverage. Their erasure or limited visibility in the public domain fits within a lesser-known, but painful, history of black women victimised by anti-black state and state-sanctioned violence.

Contemporarily, the murders of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Oscar Grant, and Tamir Rice anchor most narratives about police brutality against black people.

The violent deaths of these black boys and men commonly serve as the basis for mass media coverage of cops killing black people, as well as for a significant portion of the grassroots activism against racist policing.

Racial justice activists seamlessly connect the murder of Emmit Till by white supremacists in Mississippi in 1955 to the 2015 killing of Sam DuBose by University of Cincinnati police officer Ray Tensing. T-shirts with the names of black men and boys killed by police officers or vigilantes often use Till as a referential point for historicising anti-black state and state-sanctioned violence in the US.

Of course, the deaths of these black boys and men are by no means universally decried. Far too many across the nation question their humanity and their "last acts" before dying.

But the massive, sustained and multi-tiered protests unleashed and led by the people of Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014, after the killing of Michael Brown by Darren Wilson awakened a nation divided on issues of race, racism and policing.

As the slumber of post-racial-ness wore off and more public conversations about police conduct towards black people occurred, the discussions primarily focused on the experiences of black men and boys.

The killing of Brown coupled with the video footage of the killings of John Crawford, Eric Garner and Tamir Rice in the second half of 2014 necessarily raised important questions about the rampant killing of black men and boys by police officers. Footage of their deaths etched themselves onto the consciences of those seeking answers for the near daily occurrence of black people being killed by police officers or vigilantes .

But, until the recent suspicious death of Sandra Bland and the five other black women who died in police custody, the national conversation on anti-black racism and policing has primarily focused on black men and boys.

Black women and girls remain conspicuously absent from the collective roll call often used as evidence of anti-black state violence.

Even many of those who know the stories of the aforementioned black male victims may not recognise the names Tarika Wilson, Pearlie Golden, Rekia Boyd, Tanisha Anderson, Aiyana Jones, and Yvette Smith - black women and girls killed by police officers.

Despite the tireless work of numerous activists to illuminate state and state-sanctioned violence against black people, regardless of gender or sexual identity, the killing of black women and girls by police continues to not garner significant attention in the mass media and in some racial justice activist communities.

This lack of inclusivity in the documenting of and mobilising around anti-black state violence provided the basis for the release of Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women, a 2015 report detailing the specific experiences of black women with policing and profiling.

The glaring invisibility of black women and girls as victims of fatal police violence also resulted in the Association of Black Women Historians releasing an official statement in July 2015 on "The Modern Day Lynching of black Women in US Justice System".

Their use of the word "lynching" to describe contemporary state violence purposefully situated recent killings of black women by police in a longer history of violence and violation experienced by black women in the United States.

Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness or Disenfranchisement, oppression and dehumanisation

Three women stand with nooses around their necks as a form of protest against lynchings in ***1946*** [Afro American Newspapers/Gado/Getty Images] [Daylife]

The *herstory* of state and state-sanctioned violence against black women in the United States commences with the transporting of African women and girls to the US via the transatlantic slave trade.

Under chattel slavery enslaved black women endured forced breeding, rape and brutal assaults. Death at the hands of slave traders as well as slave owners was not uncommon. The work of scholars such as Deborah Gray White, Thavolia Glymph, Sadiya Hartman, Daina Berry, Wilma King, Christina Sharpe, and the late Stephanie Camp unmask the utter brutality black women and girls experienced under US chattel slavery.

Acts of violence perpetrated and sanctioned by the state against black women occurred in the same historical era in which the nation's founding principles of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness emerged. Foundational documents of US democracy upheld systems of disenfranchisement, oppression and dehumanisation.

The state sanctioned black women's perpetual and legally codified vulnerability to a wide range of violent acts. The subjugation of black women and girls became deeply entrenched in the fabric of this nation's democracy.

At the Dark End of the Street: A New History

By Danielle McGuire

SOURCE: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/danielle-mcguire/at-the-dark-end-of-the-st_b_708185.html

I knew this was a story I had to tell when I figured out that black women had been enduring, resisting and testifying about interracial sexual violence for years and that these crucial and revealing moments had never made their way into the history of the civil rights movement.

My first sense that historians had missed something big was in the winter of 1998. I was a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and was listening to NPR. Veterans of the 1955-56 Montgomery bus boycott were speaking about their experiences and Joe Azbell, the editor of the *Montgomery Advertiser* talked about a woman I had never heard of. He said something like, "Gertrude Perkins is never mentioned in the history books, but she had as much to do with the bus boycott as anyone on earth." I stopped and looked at my friend, confused. "Everyone knows Rosa Parks was the one who caused the boycott," I said, "so who the heck is Gertrude Perkins?"

The next day, I went to the archive and ordered the *Montgomery Advertiser* on microfilm and started searching. I found out that two white police officers kidnapped and raped Gertrude Perkins, an African-American woman, in 1949. Instead of remaining silent, she told her minister, Reverend Solomon S. Seay Sr., and he encouraged her to press charges. Local black activists and ministers rallied to her defense and launched a citywide campaign to bring her assailants to trial. Their public protests were so effective, the "Perkins case" appeared on the front page of the *Advertiser*, the local "white" newspaper, for nearly two months. In the end, however, an all-white, all-male grand jury refused to indict the policemen. Still, it was the first time the black ministers were, as Seay put it, "all shook up."

I was not sure what to do with this information — how to fit it into a story that was already so well known. I couldn't see how it connected until I started digging a little deeper. I was in the process of researching the 1959 gang-rape of Betty Jean Owens, a black college student at Florida A&M University in Tallahassee, Florida when I kept coming across similar cases of white men attacking black women throughout the Deep South. It seemed as if every front page of every black newspaper between 1940 and 1950 featured the same story: a black woman was walking home from school, work or church when a group of white men abducted her at gunpoint, took her outside of town, and brutally assaulted her.

I began sifting through court files and old trial transcripts and the evidence showed that white on black rape was endemic in the segregated South. Black women were vulnerable to racial and sexual violence and they often testified about their experiences — in churches, courtrooms, and congressional hearings. Their testimonies often led to civil rights campaigns that began with a simple demand for justice and became a struggle for human rights and human dignity. This was true in Montgomery, where Rosa Parks and her allies had been protesting rape and sexualized racial violence on the buses for nearly a decade before the 1955-56 boycott, as well as other major movement centers.

I felt like I had discovered a whole new civil rights movement with black women and their struggle for dignity, respect and bodily integrity at the center, that is as poignant, painful and complicated as our own lives.

Danielle McGuire is the author of *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance - A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power.* Find out more on her website.

Lynched

Post-slavery and throughout the Jim Crow era, racial oppression as articulated through violence included black women being assaulted, raped and lynched. Contrary to more widely-known historical narratives about the lynching of black men and boys, at least 200 black women and girls were lynched in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Black women in the US comprised a notable portion of the black bodies swinging from southern, northern, western, mid-western, and eastern trees.

The brutal murder of black people by white mobs primarily occurred in extra-legal contexts, and yet, the justice system rarely arrested, indicted or convicted those accountable for these crimes against black humanity. Killed for allegations of theft, rape, insolence towards white authority and violent offences against white people, the veracity of these accusations was often unquestioned. Due process largely did not exist for black suspects. Even black people not suspected of 'crimes' or associated with fabricated criminal offenses faced the possibility of daily anti-black violence.

Conversely, white people accused of beating, raping or even murdering black people rarely faced state-level consequences. In the handful of cases that made it to trial, all-white juries and white judges rarely found the accused guilty.

The raped 'un-rapeable'

The rape of black women by white men, a common form of racial violence during both chattel slavery and the Jim Crow era, was foundational to maintaining a white supremacist racial status quo. The prevalence of violence as a tool to maintain segregation and to promote white superiority shaped the African American experience throughout the post-emancipation and Jim Crow eras.

More recent historical work from scholars such as Cheryl Hicks, Kali Gross, Kidada Williams, Hannah Rosen, and Sarah Haley uncover the specific ways in which black women experienced anti-black racial violence. From convict labour and violent employers in domestic work settings to the stark vulnerability of those engaging or perceived to be involved in sex work, black women encountered a range of violations without any recourse.

The state played an integral role in violence against black women through forced sterilisations, abusive and exploitative convict labour, and the hyper-policing and criminalising of black women's bodies.

The state often sanctioned the assault, rape and murder of black women through not searching for or convicting those responsible for these acts of violence. Viewed as un-rapeable, the mere suggestion that a white man would rape a black woman flew in the face of anti-black racist logic.

Internationally and nationally renowned anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells had her life and livelihood threatened for calling out the collective dubiousness of claims about an epidemic of black men raping white women, while also exposing the reality of sexual violence against black women perpetrated by white men.

Danielle McGuire's *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance - A New History of the Civil Rights Movement From Rosa Parks to Black Power* (Vintage 2011) compellingly asserts how the rape of black women figured as a prominent tool of state-sanctioned anti-black racial violence in the 20th century.

The battered and violated bodies of black women and girls were numerous, largely unknown and woefully neglected by the state.

The various iterations of anti-black racial violence inscribed the daily lived experiences of black people in the US.

Although often historicised as a strictly Southern problem, the lynching, raping and assaulting of black people occurred in cities and towns across the nation. The harsh realities many black people faced after migrating from the South indicated a national problem as opposed to a regional anomaly. When factoring in the prevalence of black women being raped by white men in the Jim Crow era, the geo-historical framing of anti-black racial violence drastically shifts.

The murder of Emmitt Till and the subsequent coverage of the act and trial undeniably sparked new national conversations about racial violence.

In 2015, racial justice activists continue to use the horrific murder of Till to historicise modern anti-black racial violence. A painful chronology of racial violence connects Till to Trayvon Martin. The differences between these cases do not detract from the overarching concern that those who kill black people will not face consequences for their acts.

Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, Denise McNair

Mourners watch as a group of young pallbearers carry a casket towards a hearse at a funeral for the victims of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. The September 15, 1963 bombing killed four young African American girls - Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Denise McNair [Declan Haun/Chicago History Museum/Getty Images]

The death of one black person by police or vigilantes every 28 hours in the US – a figure discovered by the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement in 2012 - necessarily provokes the question: do black lives matter? The urgency of this question propelled the protesting in Ferguson after the killing of Michael Brown and catalysed a racial justice movement centred around the powerful assertion that Black Lives Matter.

Despite the work of many activists to focus on anti-black state and state-sanctioned violence against all black people, predominating narratives in both mass media and in some social justice circles often frame racial violence as primarily or solely experienced by black men and boys.

But this contemporary era of state and state-sanctioned racial terror targeting black people in the US, similar to previous eras, affects all black people. The erasure of black women, girls and trans* people from the collective consciousness of anti-black victimisation also has historical precedent.

The name Till resonates as more familiar than Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Denise McNair, the four little girls killed in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama on September 15, 1963.

The bombing has been revisited as symbolic of the anti-black racial violence during the civil rights era in the wake of a number of black churches mysteriously burning and of the mass murder of nine black people in Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Carolina by white assailant Dylann Roof.

The names of the four girls killed in that church in 1963, however, rarely circulate as representative of the modern legacy of anti-black racial violence.

Beyond calling the names of black women and girls, understanding a history of anti-black racial violence which includes all black people irrespective of gender renders the deeply disturbing arrest and suspicious death of Sandra Bland less anomalous.

The stories of Bland as well as the other black women found dead in police custody in July 2015 and the black women and girls killed by police officers over the past 30 years profoundly illustrate the reality of anti-black state and state-sanctioned violence.

Ranging in age from seven to 93, black female victims of police violence fit within a painful legacy of black women and girls victimised by state and state-sanctioned terror.

The pain of hearing an officer violently threaten Bland is all too familiar. The cries of Tanisha Anderson as she was restrained and eventually killed by officers in East Cleveland echo the screams of unknown black women victims of state and state-sanctioned violence. Over a dozen African American women accusing Oklahoma City police officer Daniel Holtzclaw of rape and sexual assault should remind us of what occurs at the dark of end of streets for many black women.

Black women and girls have always been victims of racist terrorising. This is why we must emphatically #SayHerName.

About the author: *Dr Treva Lindsey is an assistant professor of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies at The Ohio State University. Her research and teaching interests include African American women's history, black popular and expressive culture, black feminism(s), hip hop studies, critical race and gender theory, and sexual politics. Her first book entitled* Colored No More: New Negro Womanhood in the Nation's Capital *is under contract at the University of Illinois Press.*