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Breaking the Silence: The Voices of Black Women and the Path Towards Liberation

Jaleesa Smiley

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From an early age I was acutely aware of my identities of black and women. As a dark skinned black woman growing up in predominately white neighborhoods of the Pacific Northwest, how could I not? In school, the dark pigmentation of my skin was consistently the butt of jokes while, simultaneously, my butt being the subject of much male attention. At home the double standards that my birth father placed upon my sisters and I were immensely apparent; my brothers were granted exceptions that varied from staying out later to doing less chores. My reality was further complicated from being situated within the context of poverty, dysfunctionality, and violence. Moving from an area of extreme poverty located within the South Side of Chicago, my family relocated to Seattle with no plan and little-to-no money where first, all ten, then all eleven of us bounced around from homeless shelter, to motel, to section 8 housing, apartments, and homes of relatives. I moved a total of five times in the span of two years. The only constants throughout were the outbursts of rage from my birth father, the arguments between him and my mother, and the incessant worry about money. This, I could count on. This I learned to rely on and expect at any given moment. The emotionally, physically, and mentally abusive relationship between my birth father and mother combined with the realities of being poor (constant moving, worry of money, the list is non exhaustive) complicated and reinforced my narrative as a black women; a narrative that I was already beginning to establish as one of double-standards, hypersexualization, and constant exploitation. It wasn't until I developed a political

consciousness complete with a vocabulary and language centered on the experiences and voices of black women, that I began to name my experiences for what they were/are, developed an understanding of the interconnectivity of the experiences of black women, and started to recognize the history of abuse, rape, silence, and exploitation that continues to inflict trauma in the lives of black women today.

Through the lens of my own realities, the realities provided by the accounts of history, and present day narratives, I will explore the intergenerational traumas in the lives of black women and the ways in which those traumas are perpetuated and manifest in our lives from a historical, political, and socioeconomic context. Essential to this exploration is persistent questioning: When and where did we learn to accept abuse as an everyday reality? Where do we learn silence? How is our silence a detriment to our physical and mental well-being? And most importantly, how do we begin to heal from experienced trauma?

It is no secret that within the dehumanizing institution of slavery black people were not considered human beings, but were merely chattel property, and were subject to the wishes and whims of their owners. ¹ This being said, if an enslaved black were to go against the wishes of their master, the master utilized methods of punishment, which typically involved violence, in order to reinforce his authority and power. Whipping was just one of the methods. In his book "Slavery and Social Death: A

1. Orlando Patterson "Slavery and Social Death" Harvard University Press, 1982. (39)

Comparative Study” Patterson quotes George P. Warwick on the use of whipping in the antebellum South: “Whipping was not only a method of punishment. It was a conscious device to impress upon the slaves that they were slaves; it was a crucial form of social control particularly if we remember that it was very difficult for slaves to run away successfully.”² Violence was a necessity within the slaveholding society of the South and whipping was a key component within the master-slave relationship. If an enslaved black were to attempt to express themselves, they were beaten. If they attempted to read, they were beaten. If they tried to protect their loved ones, they were beaten.³ Any attempts on the part of the enslaved to free themselves of the physical and psychological bonds of slavery by insisting upon their humanity, were met with equal opposition from the whip. This legacy of trauma was internalized, normalized, and passed down through generations of blacks. Dr. Joy DeGruy Leary writes in her book “Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing”,

In most families the dominant male is the father. Who was the dominant male in a slave’s life? The master was figuratively, if not literally, the father. It was the master who more often than not became the imprint for male parental behavior...and this imprint was passed down through generations. At its foundation, this imprint was dominated by the necessity to control others through violence and aggression. ⁴

2. Patterson, 3

3..Patterson, 78

4. Joy DeGruy Leary “Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing” Uptone Press, 2005 (123)

This demonstrates how trauma inflicted by the whip and the master-slave relationship within the slaveholding society of the South, manifests in the lives of blacks post emancipation, when the master-slave relationship was no longer a presence but remained a model for interpersonal relationships between blacks. Leary further concludes that:

While some of what we learn we learn through direct instruction, the bulk of our learning takes place vicariously, by watching others. The individuals and families that survived the slave experience reared their children while simultaneously struggling with their own psychological injuries. They often exhibited the typical symptoms associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The children lived and learned the behaviors and attitudes of their often injured and struggling parents. Today, we are those children.⁵

This further illustrates a second form of trauma: secondary trauma. Secondary trauma is learned trauma that “takes place vicariously”⁶. This is the context of the current trauma that my generation, my parents’ generation, and my grandparents’ generation live in. Within this context the patterns of violence and abuse have already been normalized and we now fall victim to repeating the cycle.

Central to the historical denigration and abuse of black women during and after slavery is rape, and sexual abuse. In her article “Black Women’s Post-Slavery Silence Syndrome” Broussard cites Professor Pamela Bridgewater explaining that

Although female slaves endured intense and extreme physical labor, they were also vulnerable to a gender-specific form of slavery--sexual abuse. Given their social and

5. Ibid, 123

6. Ibid, 123

legal status as property, they were without means to deny their owners, or their owner's agents, sexual access to their bodies. Socially, there was no available shelter for sexually abused female slaves, nor were there moral sanctions against owners who sexually abused or allowed sexual abuse of their female slaves. Legally, enslaved women had no standing under civil or criminal law to accuse their owners of rape.⁷

This quote sums up the plight of enslaved black women. With no legal protection and no one to confide in, silence for the sake of survival, was the only option. This is the tone for discussions on how the law failed and continue to fail Black Women and sets the foundation for the perpetuated sexual exploitation of black women by both Black and White men. Further, as indicated in the court case decision of *George v. State*⁸ in 1859:

The crime of rape does not exist in this State between African slaves. Our laws recognize no marital rights as between slaves; their sexual intercourse is left to be regulated by their owners. The regulations of law, as to the White race, on the subject of sexual intercourse, do not and cannot, for obvious reasons, apply to slaves; their intercourse...would be a mere assault and battery.⁹

This case very clearly articulated that there was no protection within the justice system for enslaved black women; rape against black woman was not even a crime for a majority of the history of the United States. Also, commonly used in justification of the rape of black women is the trope of the Jezebel, identifiable through use of such phrases

7. Broussard, 387

8. Ibid, 399

9. Ibid, 400

like “she wanted it” or “she was asking for it”¹⁰. This simultaneous hypersexualization and dehumanization upheld the notion of the unrapeable black women and continues to permeate the psyche of society today.

Post-Emancipation and well into Jim Crow era, the sexual abuse of Black Women continued. Even though the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments included black women within their protections¹¹, the law was not applied in an equitable manner. This was further complicated by the presence of the Ku Klux Klan. A description by Barbara Omolade of what often occurred when the Ku Klux Klan would come into town is cited by Broussard:

A third layer of silence grew around Black women during the early and mid-twentieth century as the rape of Black women by White men continues. These rapes were not widely publicized, especially when compared with the public discourse, debate, and protest against lynching. The Black community always pointed to lynchings as the most blatant and vicious aspect of White males’ attack on the Black community, but no such discourse and protest surrounded the rape of Black women by White men. Yet, rape was frequently part of White males’ attacks on the Black community.¹²

The continued sexual abuse and assaults on Black womanhood, uninterrupted for centuries, and the lack of support and protection from the legal justice system, contributed to the development of a culture of silence among black women; a silence that was necessary for survival and required for the preservation of blacks as a race

10. Ibid,

11. Ibid, 401

12. Ibid, 408

during an era in which the black community suffered some of the most horrific crimes against humanity. In Mina Karavanta's article "The Injunctions of the Spectre of Slavery: Affective Memory And The Counterwriting of Community" Karavanta writes "What I am suggesting is that the text attends not only to the history of slavery...but also to a history of silence in which the black woman is doubly expropriated...first as a black woman remaining a subject-less subject, someone who bears witness to the disaster but who does not speak.." ¹³ Throughout enslavement and the Jim Crow era Black women witnessed unspeakable crimes within their communities while bearing the burden of physical and psychological hurt themselves. In centering those voices--making black women the subject within the context of enslavement--the veil of silence is lifted and the experiences of Black women are brought to the forefront.

Currently, within the twenty first century neoliberal context¹⁴, the silencing of black women is perpetuated through the ever expanding prison industrial complex, which some argue is an extension of the institution of slavery, itself. In Stephen Dillion's article "Possessed by Death: The Neoliberal-Carceral State, Black Feminism, and the Afterlife of Slavery" Dillon states:

The spirit of slavery does more than meddle in the present; rather, it has intensified, seduced, enveloped, and animated contemporary formations of power. Possession

13. Mina Karavanta "The Injunctions of the Spectre of Slavery: Affective Memory and the Counterwriting of Community." *Feminist Review* 104, (2013): 42-60.

14. Mary V. Alfred and Dominique T. Chlup ""Neoliberalism, Illiteracy, and Poverty: Framing the Rise in Black Women's Incarceration" *Western Journal of Black Studies* k 33.4 (Winter 2009): 240-249.

names the ways that the operations of corporate, state, individual, and institutional bodies are sometimes beyond the self-possessed will of the living. Something else is also in control, something that may feel like nothing even as it compels movement, motivates ideology, and drives the organization of life and death. In this way, slavery is not a ghost lingering in the corner of the room- rather, its spirit animates the architecture of the house as a whole. The past does not merely haunt the present; it composes the present.¹⁵

Although the physical enslavement of blacks is long since over, the spirit of slavery possesses the institutional structures that drive the functioning of the State and manifest itself underneath the guise of “social control” and “reform”, which is then utilized as rhetoric for social policies such as the War on Drugs which “has been used as a contemporary system of racial control.”¹⁶ And the people who are targeted by and are living the effects of such policies? People of color. But specifically highlighting Black women within the context of increased criminalization, “while only 13% of the female population is African American, they represent 50% of the incarcerated population.”¹⁷

As cited by Dillon, Assata Shakur notes during her time spent in prison that

The rest of the women who weren't doing time for numbers were in for some kind of petty theft, like shoplifting or passing bad checks. Most of those sisters were on welfare and all of them had barely been able to make ends meet. The courts had shown them no mercy. They brought in this sister shortly after I arrived who was eight months pregnant and had been sentenced to a month for shoplifting something that cost less than twenty dollars.¹⁸

15. Stephen Dillion *Possessed by Death: The Neoliberal Carceral State, Black Feminism, and the Afterlife of Slavery.* Radical History Review v. 2012 n. 112: 113-125. Duke University Press.

16. Gilda Graff "The Intergenerational Trauma of Slavery and its Aftermath." *Journal of Psychohistory* 41, no. 3. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (Winter2014 2014): 181-197

17. Alfred and Chlup, 241

18. Dillon, 117

It is this intentional targeting and criminalization of Black women that subscribes to the analysis of the prison industrial complex as an extension of the institution of slavery.

The disregard for humanity of the pregnant sister described by Shakur, the methods of survival of the other women imprisoned labeled as “criminal”, the majority of the female prison population consisting of Black women, the lack of legal protection and support from the justice system, and the prison industrial complex’s inseparable link with capitalism. There is a collective desire within this capitalist society that is both White supremacist and patriarchal in nature which authorizes the need for exploitation and requires the silence of Black women in the process. But once we consent to silence how, then, do we reconcile with the violence inflicted through exploitation? How do we deal?

The short answer to this question is “we don’t.” We simply bottle up all of our feelings and move on with our lives. But a much more complex and nuanced response to this question would consist of both an affirmative and negative; in coping with the intergenerational traumas of slavery, the persistent racism within society, the constant dehumanization and hypersexualization of the black female body, the secondary traumas experienced and learned through the family and community, and the continuing patterns of exploitation, abuse, and silencing, we, black women, rely on the trope of “the strong black women” in order to placate our pain related to inflicted

trauma¹⁹ (we do). In the negative sense (we don't), the trope of the "strong black woman" is often applied callously and dishonestly to the lives of all black women, imposing a standard of being that was never desired nor asked for. In "Keeping Up Appearances, Getting Fed Up: The Embodiment of Strength among African-American Women", Lafontant states:

The construction of strength allows both onlookers and a woman herself to de-emphasize her struggle, to disconnect from any assistance, and to turn a blind eye to the real oppression in the context she is facing. Keeping up the appearance of having things under control often requires black women to adopt a "warrior mode" in which "individual and group responsibilities are distorted, personal and political boundaries are blurred, and personal and community priorities are unbalanced" (Scott 1991). Becoming everything to everyone, they become less of someone to themselves, hence the often heard reference to black women not as people but as "mules of the world" (Hurstun 1937).²⁰

This analysis sheds light on the intricacies of the construction of strength; it requires the adaptation of a stoic like persona, a complete and utter selflessness, sustained control over her life and the lives of others within the realm of responsibilities. The "Strong Black Women" sounds more like a super hero within a comic book series than a description of a persona of an actual human being. In aspiring to this standard of living, black women will always succumb to becoming "the mules of the world"; carrying the burden of others before dealing with the weight of our present load. Because this standard doesn't exist and therefore, impossible to ever attain. The role of the strong

19. Tamara Beauboeuf- Lafontant "Keeping Up Appearances, Getting Fed Up: The Embodiment of Strength among African American Women." *Meridians* 5, no. 2 (2005): 104-123.

20. Lafontant, 106-107

Black women was a role that we were forced into during enslavement and post emancipation in order to survive and protect children and family from the onslaught of violence, poverty, and the nature of forced servitude.²¹ We didn't choose this. In fact, who says it something that is even wanted?

Research compiled in the *"Handbook of African American Psychology"* on the effects of performing the role of the "strong Black women" concludes that

African-American women manifest depression due to the internalization of society's negative stereotypes and/or the accommodation to limiting racist/sexist notions of their roles. They assert that depression, because it is culturally incongruent with being strong, is often masked in Black women and as a result may present in indirect ways, such as through emotional overeating and somatization.²²

The effects of committing to the role of performing strength are real, and dangerous.

Black women have higher rates of depressive symptoms, have higher rates of anxiety disorders and phobias such as obsessive compulsive disorder, and have higher rates of obesity. When our feelings, health, and personal well-being are disregarded in

justification for contributing to "the greater good" and we are expected to obey, and

care unconditionally about everyone except for ourselves, our emotional labor is being

exploited. June Jordan writes in her essay "Where is the Love?"²³ that "My Black

Feminism means that you cannot expect me to respect what somebody else identifies as

21. Nelville, Tynes, and Utsey "The Handbook of African American Psychology"

22. Ibid, 451

23. June Jordan "Where Is the Love?" In Making face, making soul, Creative and critical perspectives by feminists of color. San Francisco, California.

the Good of the People if that so-called Good (often translated as *manhood* or *family* or *nationalism*) requires the deferral or the diminution of my self-fulfillment". This becomes evident within movements such as the Black Power Movement, the Civil Rights Movement and currently the Black Lives Matter Movement, where our recognition as black woman, who are engaging in the same work, if not more so, than Black Men but it is Black Men who remain the focus. It is Black Men who receive all the credit. This is by no means an attempt to discredit Black Men but is a call for the love and respect of Black Women, who have been cast aside and forgotten in the name of justice.

Lafontant further states that "the lie of being "strong" enough to bear a life of struggle without complaint and assistance and the lie of the oppressive order that the status quo is 'natural' and immutable have the potential to make African-American women sick with unhealthy overweight, an embodied manifestation of the emotions of discontent that naturally emerge from the constant suppression of one's desires and interests." ²⁴ Constructing and subscribing to the performance of strength is an oppressive role in which requires a complete un-conditioning and redefining. In order for Black women to empower ourselves and find methods of coping from the constraints of identity forced upon us, we need to begin to define what our womanhood means for ourselves.

24. Lafontant, 120

It is clear that rape, abuse, violence, law, race, and society form a complex and powerful tool utilized to silence Black women for centuries. How do we begin to heal from centuries of abuse? How do we begin to peel back the layers of neglect and disempowerment? In Alice Walker's essay "In Search of our Mothers Gardens" Walker encourages us to reflect upon our mother's cultural cultivation of a creative spirit; to remember the artistry that was cultivated by our mothers, and our mothers, mother. "Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength-in search of my mother's garden, I found my own."²⁵ The cultural knowledge of ancestors passed and knowledge of heritage is forever imprinted in the lives in the spirits of black women. In searching for truths of the past an uncovering of truths of the self is located instead. The connectivity between ancestral heritage and the spirits within us will lead us towards a path of liberation. Olga Davis in her essay "A Visitation from the Foremothers: Black Women's Healing Through a 'Performance of Care'-From the African Diaspora to the American Academy" cites bell hooks:

The self not as signifier of one "I" but the coming together of many "I"s, the self as embodying collective reality past and present, family and community. Social construction of the self in relation would mean, then, that we would know the voices that speak in and to us from the past, that we would be in touch with ... "our ancient properties" - our history. Yet, it is precisely these voices that are silenced, suppressed, when we are dominated. It is this collective voice we struggle to recover.²⁶

25. Alice Walker. "In Search of Our Mothers Gardens. 1972.

26. Olga, Davis "A Visitation from the Foremothers: Black Women's Healing through a 'Performance of Care'-from African Diaspora to the American Academy." *Women's Studies in Communication* 31, no. 2 (summer, 2008): 175-185.

As a result of our enslavement, oppression, and silencing as black women knowledge of the collective self, of the past and present, were lost and with it, our abilities to tell the stories of our families and communities. We know the voices of our collective selves are there but we just can't hear them. Centering these voices, the voices of black women, is the first step to regaining our sense of self collectivity.

Conclusion

When we talk about the liberation of the black woman we have to bring into the discussion the forces of domination upon which inhibit the progress of it. The exploitation of intellectual, emotional, and physical labor; with residual effects manifesting in the body and souls of black women as trauma. The silencing of black women through increased criminalization and inequitable distributions of the law. The physical and sexual abuse. The suppression of voices. When we begin to unpack our complicated realities we begin to see them for what they really are: a twisted structure built on untruths and faux pas that were designed to inhibit our growth and humanity from the very beginning. In breaking my silences around my experiences as a black woman; by speaking about pain, placing language and understanding to the hurt, I am centering my own voice within the context of centuries of silence and abuse. This is essential in order for us to begin the project of healing from our traumas and un-learning the things that we were taught to help us survive, because they will not help us

to thrive. And thriving is mandatory in order to truly engage in a liberating practice.

Engaging in practices that enhance our spiritual connections with our past and present selves, (re)membering our ancestors, and redefining what womanhood means to us, are all everyday practices that guide us towards the path of liberation. We have been socialized in the code of silence because we believed that it would save us, but it won't.

As Patricia B. Broussard says "When no one listens to your cries, you learn to stop crying." Well I'm here, and I'm listening. Let's break the silence.

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