

To Be Black, Female, and Already Dead: Black Women, Discourses on Value, and Disposability

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Abstract

Given disparities in treatment of black female victims as it relates to violence and homicide, this paper will interrogate the ways in which black women are increasingly vulnerable to instances of kidnapping, sexual violence, and serial murder. The HBO film *Tales of the Grim Sleeper* will be integrated throughout this paper to map the ways in which disposability occurs and how black female lives are situated in these violent intersections. The underrepresentation of targeted violence against black women in the media is conducive to the very violence that manifests. By prioritizing violence based on race, the media contributes to narratives that construct violence against women as violence against white women at the hand of strangers. This narrative situates black female life in territories of disposability, in which the presumption that black women's bodies can be thrown away without regard is institutionalized. This paper will frame the definition of disposability as the literal using up and throwing away of black women's bodies in moments of violence. Black life being negligible has historical features rooted in chattel slavery that will be discussed to understand prevailing discourses on value and contemporary disposability as it relates to black women's bodies.

Keywords: Black Women, Intersectionality, Gendered Violence

1. Introduction

“Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed...” – from “Beloved” by Toni Morrison [1987]

“I'm a black woman, who cares about me?” This saddening, yet provocative quote from Pam Brooks, a recovered addict and former prostitute in *Tales of the Grim Sleeper* (2014) introduces the erasure that is often situated on black women's bodies and experiences. HBO's *Tales of the Grim Sleeper* provides a local mapping of serial murder and violence in South Central LA. Although the LAPD refused to comment on the police side of the story, the film narrates the serial killings through the voices of poor black women and sex workers who witnessed and were affected by mass murder. Many of the bodies that were found had been strangled, shot, stabbed, and carelessly dumped. Sex workers and women engaging in drug usage comprised most of the victims in this case, illustrating the intersectionality of race, class, and gender.

The murders stretched from 1985 to 2010, and it is believed that over 100 women ranging from the ages of 14 to 36 were killed in this 25-year period. Despite photos of 180 missing women being found in Lonnie Franklin Jr.'s apartment, he was charged with only 10 counts of murder and one count of attempted murder after his arrest in 2010. The police expressed little knowledge concerning the exact number of women who were murdered and assaulted. Lonnie's job as a garbage truck driver led to assumptions that many of the victims could be buried in landfill. Margaret Prescod, an organizer with the Black Coalition Fighting Back Serial Murders commented: “Back in the 1980's we had a count of 90 women and only 18 of them were on the books. What happened to the rest of them?”⁸.

Both the film and Prescod's criticality of police handling of the case are an entry point for the larger issue of black women and disposability. Black women's bodies have been a historical site for violence, exploitation, and sexual subjugation. Black women are often perceived as subfeminine and subhuman in comparison to their feminized white counterparts. Crimes against black women have historical roots in their lack of prosecution and legitimacy when compared to the false allegations of violence against white women. These disparities in treatment of black female victimhood are illustrated in *Tales of the Grim Sleeper*, as well as media representations of how victimhood is depicted.

This paper will argue that black women are of the most violent and neglected intersections of our society, resulting in their increased vulnerability as disposable subjects in cases of kidnapping, sexual violence, and serial murder. The HBO film *Tales of the Grim Sleeper* will be integrated throughout this paper to map the ways in which disposability occurs and how black women's lives are situated in these violent intersections. The underrepresentation of targeted violence against black women in the media is a dangerous practice.

2. Discourses On Value Emerging From Slavery Onward

Despite the lack of visibility surrounding the case, the conditions and implications of the violence inflicted by the Grim Sleeper raise larger questions concerning disposability and the ways in which black women's bodies are devalued. The film highlights the violent intersections of value, blackness, and disposability. Within these intersections exist black women who are hypersexualized and attacked based on pathologies that render black women's bodies readily available for sexual activity regardless of consent. Like other cases that will be discussed throughout this paper, poor black women and sex workers were among many of the women who were victims of the Grim Sleeper. Victims were routinely referred to as N.H.I. by law enforcement, an abbreviation which denotes "no humans involved."

The designation of N.H.I. for the devastatingly large and disproportionately black female victim pool suggests a relegation in black women's humanity which has distinctive historical implications stemming from the antebellum period. The perpetuation of violence that accompanies the day-to-day experiences of black women is subjected to this form of categorizing. The concept of value in the United States is both anti-black and rooted in misogyny. As the dominant narrative of value privileges attributes that range from whiteness and heteronormativity to elitism and maleness, black women were marked for the increasing disposability that has followed the black female body from slavery onward.

Like many pathologies of blackness, the presumed disposability of black women's bodies has deeply racialized and sexualized origins. The disregard of black humanity is a direct iteration of slavery. Racialized discourses on value and fungibility emerged out of the institution and into the post-bellum period. During enslavement, "it was commonplace for white slave owners to rape their female slaves, thereby adding to their slave harvest"⁶. Characterizing enslaved populations as fungible promoted the culture of disposability and violence that plagued the landscape of the black experience. For female slaves the practice of racialized sexual violence conveyed the negative relationship between value and black women's bodies. The commodification of female slaves gratified the sexual and reproductive expectations of slave masters in which black women's flesh became figured as essential to the reproduction of the trade.

Similarly, the characterization of victims as N.H.I. in the Grim Sleeper case closely resembles the ways in which female slave bodies were rendered devoid of humanity because black women are imagined as a commodity. Figuring female slaves as sexually available for white heteronormative consumption excluded black women from discourses on value and humanity. The bodies who occupy the periphery of the traditional Enlightenment notion of humanity were consistently delineated as object rather than human². Black women's bodies were constructed as a source of heteronormative pleasure and patriarchal domination with boundless availability. The objectification and violence that is normative to black women's experiences also manifested in spaces occupied by the mob. Though often presumed an experience that is distinctly black and male, the ritualized disfiguring of African-American bodies illustrated by the spectacle of the lynching fits into racialized discourses on black women and value.

While it is certainly true that African-American men were the primary targets of the barbaric lynching practice, it is important to remember that African-American women were also subjected to this violence⁶. Despite the racial and sexual politics of lynching that attempted to terrorize and criminalize black male sexuality, sites of dismembered black female bodies reveal sustained notions of disposability emerging from slavery. Terrorizing the entire black community placed brutal emphasis on the fact that slaves did not own their bodies³. Between 1882 and 1927, of the 3,515 African-Americans and 1,438 white Americans that were lynched 83% of the total number of women lynched in this report were black women⁶.

The U.S. ritual of lynching as a process of securing the fetishized boundary between racial blackness and whiteness documents the historical relation between value and violence¹. Following the abolition of slavery and the lynching epidemic, black women continued to negotiate society's refusal of their value, and frequent moments of sexual violence. The unchecked murder of black women followed the same pattern as the widespread rape of slave women⁶. Black women's history of anti-rape activism intersected with organizing efforts against the serial murders of black women. Laboring to save the lives of black women, the Combahee River Collective, a black feminist organization, organized around the serial murders of thirteen women, twelve black and one white, whose bodies were found in predominantly black neighborhoods in the city of Boston⁶. This incident encouraged black feminists and lesbians within the collective, such as Barbara Smith, to quickly realize the ways in which value and disposability coincided with their anti-racist and anti-sexist activism.

Their political work and organizing provided spaces to disseminate materials centered around the fear of being a black woman while living in Boston. The collective distributed pamphlets to local black communities to increase public awareness of the issue. Serving as an effective tool in their resistance to violence and the unchallenged disposability of black women's bodies, the pamphlet achieved internal and external goals. "Internally, the pamphlet was designed to equip with information and resources, and to communicate the message that black women's lives were valuable. Externally, it was a signal to mainstream institutions that their inadequate coverage and response to murder was unacceptable"⁶. Although the efforts of the collective were successful in organizing against public refusal to acknowledge the death of black women, the problematics of value remain increasingly intricate and arresting in a century heir to the consequences of the abolition of slavery¹.

Like lynching, the North Carolina case of JoAnn Little reveals a great deal concerning the historical relationship between the state and violence against black women. The case sparked spirited debates about a black woman's right to bodily integrity and self-defense⁴. The case of JoAnn Little illustrates the refusal of ownership to something that has been historically denied to black women: their bodies. JoAnn Little is of relevance given her negotiation of the historical features of slavery that continue to operate on black women's bodies. Although African-American women used their voices to launch the first public attack on sexual violence as a "systemic abuse of women" in response to slavery and the wave of lynching in the post-emancipation South, black female flesh persists as a site of violence⁴.

JoAnn Little was detained in a jail in which she was the only woman³. Some believed that she may have been kept there for sexual purposes, leaving her little to no privacy and constant surveillance of her body even when she changed clothes. Rather than frame the situation as a moment of attempted rape, the details of Little's assault implicate her as a black woman who seductively lured Clarence Alligood, the assailant, into her cell with the hopes of killing him so she could escape⁴. Although Alligood was found naked from the waist down in his efforts to rape Little, the denial of Little's rapability and victimhood suggest that she, in turn, could be raped and murdered with absolute impunity³. Despite this instance of resisting rape via self-defense, Little was charged with first-degree murder. "If found guilty, she would receive the death penalty and would be executed in the state of North Carolina's gas chamber"⁴.

This case is exemplary of the post-bellum practice of rendering black women's bodies as disposable. Black women who experience sexual violence are critical to conversations of disposability because of the largely contested right to one's body that has been historically denied to black women. Contesting the right to life and ownership are discourses that continue to situate themselves on black women's bodies. In relation to the Grim Sleeper case, black women at-large navigate the intersectionality of violence and illegitimacy as a victim. Although Little was not a sex worker, like many of the Grim Sleeper victims, she was a black woman whose body was presumed to be a sexual object. When compared to the women who were assaulted by Lonnie Franklin Jr., the little to no value placed on Little's body illustrates the symbiotic relationship between violence and hypersexuality.

Looking at discourses on value emerging out of slavery bring cause to isolate the ways in which the notion of value is based on the "values of a dominant white regime"⁶. The issue of black women and disposability posits the very existence of black women's bodies as something that is antithetical to prevailing conditions that grant worth. The Grim Sleeper case speaks to this claim given the state's dismissal of the growing list of victims based off their background and identities. About eleven or twelve women were knowingly murdered before the police decided to inform the public. Despite hypervisibility of the locations where bodies were dumped, the ongoing threat of serial murder was not made evident to black women living in the area⁸. The police questioned the sense of urgency reflected by community members, such as those organizing with the Black Coalition Fighting Back Serial Murders.

When asked why they were concerned about the issue, members of law enforcement responded that Lonnie was "only killing hookers." Although true in the context in which many of the victims chose to live their lives, this rhetoric presents larger concerns regarding black women as a group, including those who are "in the life." Coined by Terrian Williamson in her essay, *In the Life*, living both dangerously and pleurably in the very intersections that people run away from, such as poverty and sex work because of their location outside of value is defined as being "in the life." The abbreviation of N.H.I. to characterize the pool of sex workers, drug addicts, and poor black women who were

violated by the Grim Sleeper inspires a moment to think about the multidimensional devaluation of black bodies and how they are presumed to be disrupting value. In her essay, Williamson describes grappling with the serial murders of ten black women between the ages of twenty-nine and forty-five who had either turned up dead or gone missing between 2001 and 2004 in her hometown of Peoria, Illinois.

Identifying this deeply personal case as the site of her research, Williamson discusses black women who are “in the life” and what’s at stake when black women refuse what has already been refused⁹. In these cases, what has been refused is the heteronormative and whitened notion of value. Black women’s very existence inhabits spaces that disrupt the conditions of worth in our society. Thus, the essay concerns itself with articulating discourse on worthiness as a violent language and practice. Being “in the life” provokes us to question the concept of value we have subscribed to and how the violence of worth contributes to violence against the black community. Value holds the capacity to inflict violence and, more to the point, value is violence disguised or disfigured¹. Given the overrepresentation of black women experiencing disposable outcomes in these cases, an interrogation of value’s erasure of black women from public conversations must be offered.

“Literally hundreds of black women have been and are viciously slaughtered one after the other across the country” and their deaths remain shrouded in national silence⁹. In the case of the Grim Sleeper, information on the serial murders and 911 calls were not made public until 22-years later. Williamson’s Peoria case is also similar in which the silence persisted about 6 years after the crisis. Despite attempts to erase their existence, there is something profound about those who engage in activities that put them near death and whose existence is externally conditioned by their presupposed nonexistence⁹. The treatment of the deaths of black women who are not “in the life” mirrors that of those who are. Black women naturally live outside of conceptualizations of worthiness, thus Williamson’s concept of “in the life” is inclusive of black women’s experiences.

Just like South Central LA, Peoria became a site for the dumping of disfigured and devalued black women. Both Williamson’s case and the Grim Sleeper murders are illustrative of the larger concern of black women and the practice of disposability. Victims were typically those who were perceived to be “in the life,” poor black women involved in sex work and/or drug use. Despite the increasing body count and troubling details of the Peoria case, there was never a call to injustice. The media and even activists failed to raise awareness of the gruesome serial murders of these women. A local white man, Larry Dean Bright, confessed to killing eight of the women, to doing drugs and having sex with them, strangling them, and dumping their bodies around the city, or in the case of four of his victims, burning their dead bodies in a makeshift fire pit he had dug behind his home⁹. The ways in which these bodies were disposed seems to reinforce the violence of value, and how refusing what has already been refused grants black women a unique vulnerability to unchecked disposability.

3. Conclusion

Mainstream American media often positions the lives of certain young, white, well-off women as worthy of societal empathy, while casting others as disposable lives⁷. This normative practice is referred to by critics as “Missing White Woman Syndrome.” This phenomenon refers to the sensationalized news coverage that is allotted to white women and girls who are deemed missing or in crisis. This phenomenon usually involves around-the-clock coverage of disappeared young white females who qualify as “damsels in distress” by race, class, and other relevant social variables⁷. For example, the death of Jane Bashara on January 25, 2012, eclipsed media coverage of any other homicide in Detroit that year after her story was featured on *ABC Nightly News*, the Huffington Post, NBC’s *Dateline*, and *Good Morning America*. In addition to whiteness, her suburban, upper-middle-class background were factors that mobilized her case’s visibility. Bashara was also married with children which further reinforced her eligibility for worth, catapulting her legitimacy as a victim.

Additionally, the 2005 disappearance of Natalee Holloway is an example of the ways in which missing white woman syndrome prevails. When comparatively examining coverage concerning the Grim Sleeper assaults versus Natalee Holloway’s disappearance, one recognizes the media’s tendency to naturalize narratives that dismiss the deaths of certain “kinds” of women (poor, non-white, precariously employed), while commodifying others⁷. Even when the deaths of black women receive media coverage, they are usually met with negative portrayals. This is often seen in the case of sex workers and/or black women who partake in non-normative behaviors such as drug use, prostitution, and live in poverty. Black women’s continued negotiation of surveillance and violence as it relates to pleasure, sexuality, and ownership of one’s body continues to promote doubt in their legitimacy as victims of violent crimes.

The example of Ashley Conway and Abreeya Brown who were found on March 25, 2012 in a shallow grave after being bound, gagged, and shot at close range in the back of the head illustrates the skepticism that manifests when black women live both dangerously and pleurably⁵. The two friends had attended a strip club the month before and

were kidnapped after refusing to engage in romantic and sexual activities with their assailant. Although the press reported their murders, the scenario was portrayed as if attending a strip club played a role in their brutal deaths. The conversation like many others relating to black women and disposability centered around pathologies of sexuality and autonomy. “One can assume that even the suggestion of sexually liberal behavior can be enough to negatively shape the image of the victim in the public eye, especially if she is a minority”⁵. The simultaneous hypersexualization and hypervisibility of black women’s bodies by the media often constructs their narratives in ways that render them responsible for their own death. These racialized practices of legitimization versus victim-blaming prove to be dangerous for black women who remain increasingly vulnerable to disposability.

A related paradox of disposability presents itself in news stories about violence against sex workers⁷. Narratives that suggest the unrapability of prostitutes are particularly of grave concern due to the historical sexualization of black women’s bodies that also asserted the impossibility of raping a black woman. “Even though the population of black women in the United States in 2011 was 22 million compared to 100 million white females, they are more at risk for lethal violence. They are also less likely to be informed of this unsettling reality by the media”⁵. The growing list of missing black women in South Central LA and Peoria, Illinois didn’t even make it in the *LA Times* or the local news. The police, media, and public response to crimes against women of color, poor women, lesbians, women prostitutes, and women drug users is particularly abysmal—generally apathy laced with pejorative stereotyping and victim blaming (for example all women of color are drug addicts and/or prostitutes who put themselves in danger)⁶.

Constructions of worth by the media deny the devastating deaths of black women visibility in national, as well as local spaces⁷. Unfortunately, missing white woman syndrome centers white women in the public imagination as the dominant representation of victimhood. We find the media and surrounding communities engaging a refusal to concern themselves with black women who are “in the life,” as well as those who are not. Despite their failure in many cases of disposability, “activists possess the power to challenge dominant media representations of ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ victims”⁷. This interrogation remains crucial to recognizing and combatting the casual and disinterested treatment of the death of black women. Had the women in the case been white, the Grim Sleeper case most likely would’ve received national media coverage and outrage. Through critical news consumption and participatory reporting, steps to integrate black women into the public eye can be taken to insist that no body – nobody – is imagined as anything less than fully human⁷.

Although dismissed by the media and law enforcement, the Grim Sleeper case raises concerns regarding black women and moments of disposability. This case highlights the violent intersections of politics, value, racial blackness, and gender. The refusal of recognition and narration in the mainstream media perpetuates its own form of injustice⁷. Given the construction of value as one that nurtures conceptualizations that deny black women attention and recognition, we must consider the countless lives of black women that are at stake if the issue of disposability remains ignored. Discourses of value and history reveal that such killings do not unleash an ethical crisis because these persons’ bodies and the territories they inhabit always-already signify violence². To prevent and share the stories of black women who have died, we must refrain from situating ourselves in dialogues of worth. Instead, we must interrogate the very violence of value and decolonize its pervasive grasp.

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