Resisting Through 2020: Political Strategies of Black Women Receiving Government Assistance In the U.S. During Floyd, Trump, and COVID-19

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to Jordan, Journi, Juli, Jessy, Justice, and Bobo. May you always know that your support and sacrifice for me to get here has never been taken for granted.

I dedicate this dissertation to Dennis and Jackie Gaddy. Your support in my entire life means the world to me. I will continue to teach the lessons of respect, love, and humility you instilled in me while fighting for what's right.

I dedicate this dissertation to my ancestors who broke down barriers for me to be here.

I dedicate this dissertation to the women who took the time to speak with me. This is for you! These are your voices, your experiences. This project is nothing without you.

I dedicate this dissertation to every single person who believed in me, cheered me on, and knew I was capable of more. It took 10 years, but we made it! I love y'all.

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ABSTRACT

RESISTING THROUGH 2020: POLITICAL STRATEGIES OF BLACK WOMEN RECEIVING GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE IN THE U.S. DURING FLOYD, TRUMP, AND COVID-19

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The year 2020 in the United States is one that TIME magazine mentioned "will go down in history books". Edits and revisions have already occurred in scholarly publications to include the historic events that shaped the lives of so many. On February 11, 2020, the World Health Organization announced coronavirus (COVID-19), May 30, 2020, the conversation about systemic racism extended beyond COVID-19 as the world watched the murder of George Floyd by police officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota, all while Donald Trump served as president. This work focuses on Black women receiving government assistance in the U.S. and looks at the ways these three factors, Trump/Trump's Administration, COVID-19, and what scholars have called "The Summer of Racial Reckoning", impacted how women thought about their bodies, reproduction, and motherhood while also addressing the chronic stressors that occurred in their everyday lives. However, instead of focusing the research question solely on the

negative impacts on these women, this qualitative work uses a Black Feminist Intersectional methodology to center their resistance and social transformation. Through interviews and Isoke's bottom-up approach to structural intersectionality, this project spotlights the everyday resistance strategies: faith, sacrifice, centering self, and community support, used by these women to persist through the systemic oppressions these factors had on their bodies. Persistence, resistance, and dissent are then defined as emic categories to show how the strategies implemented by Black women partook in all of them; concluding that Black women receiving government assistance in the U.S. spent their lives consistently participating in politics.

INTRODUCTION

"While it's personally dispiriting to see your work targeted in bad faith, what's more distressing to me is that the lives of women of color I've written about are being diminished and erased in a political moment in which we need their stories most."

-Kimberlé Crenshaw (Twitter, 2023)

The year 2020 in the United States will more than likely find its way in textbooks for children to learn about in school. Edits and revisions have already occurred in scholarly publications to include the historic events that shaped the lives of so many. On February 11, 2020, the World Health Organization announced an official name for the disease causing the 2019 novel outbreak, coronavirus (COVID-19), on May 30, 2020, the conversation about systemic racism extended beyond COVID-19 as the world watched the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, by police officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota, all while Donald Trump served as president. While more national and global headlines circulated that year, these three events are what TIME magazine mentioned "will go down in the history books" and what factors guide the research for this project. Numerous groups of people, no matter their identity, were impacted by these three factors, however, this project is interested in how they specifically impacted Black women receiving government assistance in the United States (U.S.). More specifically,

this project focuses on the ways these factors, Trump/Trump's Administration, COVID-19, and racial tension post the murder of George Floyd, or what is known by scholars like Chang, Martin, and Marrapodi (2020) as "The Summer of Racial Reckoning", impacted how women thought about their bodies, reproduction, and motherhood. Historically, Black women receiving government assistance in the U.S. have been negatively impacted by institutions of power and political events such as presidential elections and welfare inform and 2020 does not yield a different outcome; instead of focusing the research questions solely to these negative effects, they were arranged to spotlight the political strategies used by these women to resist, cope, and navigate around the systemic oppressions these factors have on their bodies. When Black women's politics is situated within the idea of structural intersectionality, the numerous ways Black women resist the negative impacts that come from it, are recognized which is the focus of this project.

Using a Black Feminist Intersectional methodology, this qualitative project not only centers Black women who receive assistance by using their narratives as the primary method of research, it also suggests that they are not disposable and centers their resistance and social transformation. This perspective contributes to scholarship that negates a more traditional narrative about Black women who are economically disadvantaged in academic writing, which will be examined later, as bad mothers or "welfare queens" for example. This project goes beyond describing the individual experiences of these women, but seeks to reveal how their identities are produced, forged, and deployed to disrupt oppressive vehicles of power (Dhamoon, 2011). This paradigm requires examining how each factor is produced when and how people make use of the

particular identities of the subject in this case “blackness”, “woman” or “economically disadvantaged”. It also requires identifying and analyzing how they are impacted by these factors on multiple levels including the local level of their body, families, and communities, but also the national and global level.

Using the narratives of the interviewed women as the primary method of research, in a way, is practicing resistance against whitewashed patriarchal scholarship and culture that paints distorted images of the very women who have allowed society to function. What drives this intent to center Black women’s resistance is the work of Katherine McKittrick (2021) and Tracey Walters (2021) work on the resistance of Black domestic workers (Walters) and rebellious methodological work (McKittrick). McKittrick is intentional about the way she structures the stories in her book *Dear Science and Other Stories* to push against traditional ideas of how knowledge is produced showing how Black creatives and scholars attend to science in their work. McKittrick structures her thoughts in a series of stories that center Black life and Black experiences “as a way to hold on to the rebellious methodological work of sharing ideas in an unkind world” (p. 7). The stories shared by McKittrick, like the ones that will be shared in this project, are connected through knowledge systems, Black livingness, and liberatory ways of knowing (2021). This process of placing Black women’s narratives at the core enhances the power embedded in their knowledge. The act of centering their stories is an act of resistance within itself. In *Not Your Mother’s Mammy,* Walters centers the book on three core themes “representation, resistance, and performance” (p. 2). Understanding how intersectional oppression denies Black women’s opportunity to control their own stories,

her work looks at the ways former domestic workers restructure their image and narrative in Black media. What this project looks to replicate and extend, is Walter's (2021) process of featuring Black women, in this case Black women receiving assistance in the U.S., engaged in performative acts of resistance that enable them to establish their identities as multi-dimensional individuals with a deep understanding of the world far beyond their class status. This dissertation brings visibility to the powerful stories of resistance of Black economically disadvantaged women often neglected in academic studies and national-corporate media. This dissertation is structured to display the findings from interviews along with supporting scholarship, throughout each chapter. With the methodologies that were selected, storytelling is imperative, and having one chapter designated for the literature review and then another solely for findings, did not work best for the style of research.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology that informs my research is best characterized as a combination of history, sociology, gender studies, health communication, and law; with the main disciplines being cultural studies and Black feminism. Each of the main factors, Trump, COVID-19, and race relations, produce forms of power and control that both disciplines explore and critique. Cultural Studies, interdisciplinary in nature, theoretically, politically, and empirically engages cultural analysis that concentrates upon the political dynamics of contemporary culture, its historical foundations, and conflicts. Through a critical approach, Cultural Studies understands the deep connections between systems of classism, racism, gender studies, decolonization, and civil rights. Finding these

connections between systems helps to exhibit the production of objects. Studying social institutions such as gender and race, and class, Cultural Studies aims to account for the instability of objects and processes under changing capitalist relations. Rather than seeking answers that will hold for all time, Cultural Studies develops flexible tools that adapt to this rapidly changing world. The tools that will be used here focus on the critical analysis of forms of power such as race, class, and gender and explore the connections between them that help to develop the ways of thinking about culture that is then utilized by agents for change. Bringing in the economic situation as a component to this project narrows in on a very specific experience and will be examined using a Marxist framework. Understanding that we live in social formations organized along capitalist lines that manifest deep class divisions in work, wages, housing, education, and health, cultural practices are also commodified by large corporate culture industries which dictates how Black women receiving assistance are socialized, used, and what resources they have access to (Barker, 2007). A Foucauldian approach is also used in analyzing the historical elements of power and how it has produced subjects. Power, for Foucault, is not concentrated as a centralized force, but rather dispersed through all levels of social formation which produces social relations and even identities. This project follows how power has been dispersed historically to shape how Black women receiving assistance seen and treated.

Black Feminist Theory paves the way for compelling research in humanities and politics and putting the perspectives and experiences of Black women at the center rather than in a historically non-dominant position. The literature of Black Feminist Theory

derives from the ideas and experiences of Black women. Contemporary scholars of Black feminist theory recognize that African American women are deprived because they face discrimination based on race and gender (Simien, 2004). The work of earlier scholars such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Barbara Smith, and Patricia Hill Collins, created the central arguments to frame the theory. By merging the works of the women mentioned above, Black Feminist Theory is both theoretical and qualitative with recurring themes that define its shape: a. focus on the concept of intersectionality (hooks, 1982) b. address gender inequality within the Black community (Collins, 2000) c. benefit the Black community by challenging patriarchy (Collins, 2000) d. insist that a sense of belonging to Black women arises from everyday experiences with race, class, and gender oppression (Lorde, 1984). These tenants of Black Feminism are relevant to my work because it shapes the creation of the research questions but also serve as guidelines on how to tell the stories of the interviewed women in a way that stays true to the experience of Black women. Racism, patriarchy, and classism are all so closely embedded in scholarship, that it is easy to perpetuate these power structures by centering them albeit supremacist language that can harm the Black community rather than benefit it. And while Black Feminism requires inequality to be addressed, scholars like Price, Bhattacharya, and Warren (2020), do work to ensure that we "reject the ideology grounded in white supremacy and anti-blackness, that shifts narratives to reinvigorate our shared imagination, and disrupt the imbalance of power in our society (p. 137). It is important to also highlight Marxist/socialist feminism which emphasizes social-economic structures

(i.e., divisions of labor), and its examination of women's systematic economic and social oppression as the product of a patriarchal and/or capitalist social system (Jackson, 2000).

Crucial to this project is Critical Race Theory as part of the methodology. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is the critical analysis of raced society by way of its legal structures. Emerging out of the Civil Rights movement in the 1970s as lawyers, activists, and legal scholars saw a decline in the energy, time, and effort towards the advances of the Civil Rights movement and saw an emphasis on color-blindness within law practices. CRT founder and Black feminist, Crenshaw (1995), argued against the color-blind view of civil rights, emphasizing that race must be at the forefront to truly do feminist work justice. This theoretical framework then shapes her concept of intersectionality, "race, class, gender, and sexuality are co-dependent variables that cannot be separated or ranked in scholarship, political practice, or in lived experience" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 143). Since being coined in the late 1980s, intersectionality has become widely used and oftentimes separated from how it was intended. To understand how it frames this project, it is explored below.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality, a theory coined by Crenshaw (1982), is a concept that race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability are all at play together to create a hierarchy of systemic inequalities. Crenshaw critiques dominant feminist theorists and stresses the need for the inclusion of people who hold marginalized identities. In her piece "Mapping the Margins," Crenshaw (1995) explores the intersections of race and gender as it relates to violence against women of color. She recognizes that "the problem with identity

politics is… that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences. Thus, when [feminist] practices expound identity as 'woman' or 'person of color' as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling" (p. 365). However, it is imperative that we unpack the work of intersectionality on a systems level. Crenshaw's understanding of intersectionality is "not really concerned with shallow questions of identity and representation but ... more interested in the deep structural and systemic questions about discrimination and inequality" (Coaston, J, 2019). Intersectionality is not the end or the solution to inequality, it is a prism through which we look at inequities, it is the beginning. Intersectionality is a method that requires us to look at systems of power and control in order to understand how they create inequities for the marginalized. Hancock (2007) explains the specifics of the theory:

> Intersectionality is based on the idea that more than one category should be analyzed, that categories matters equally and that the relationship between categories is an open empirical question, that there exists a dynamic interaction between individual and institutional factors, that members within a category are diverse, that analysis of the individual or set of individuals is integrated with institutional analysis, and that empirical and theoretical claims are both possible and necessary (p. 66).

The critique of intersectionality is not the sense that it is a bad notion, in fact that is what Black feminism is predicated upon, but because of how it is used and socialized, obscures the work of black feminist writers. Intersectionality has become a buzzword closely tied to feminism and has been socialized as this process of naming numerous

identities and ways they shape how a person experiences the world and by how the world treats them. As McCall (2005) explains it this practice of intersectionality "takes marginalized intersectional identities as an analytic starting point '...in order to reveal the complexity of lived experience within such groups" (p.13). With the attention the theory is getting in multiple disciplines, it is a critical moment to address its challenges and critiques. This additive model of oppression, which interpreted the combinations of race and gender and other identities/oppressions as producers of a "double-jeopardy" (Beale, 1970) or "multiple jeopardy" (King, 1988), was critiqued for its tendency to treat each axis as isolated or separable. (Spelman, 1990). This model later recognized the simultaneity of systems of oppression and inequality in shaping women's experience and identity, and a theoretical framework of intersectionality (O'Reilly, 2012). The intersectional framework aims to provide a more thorough understanding of why women's lives are complex by exploring dominance and subordination and the relationship between social structure and women's agency. Using Dhamoon's (2011) work on intersectionality, this project looks at aspects of sociopolitical life. The four aspects studied in intersectional work are identities (of an individual), categories of difference (race, gender, class), processes of differentiation (racialization and gendering), and systems of domination (racism, sexism, etc.) which are sometimes distinct and other times merge into one another (p. 237). While terms such as Black (identity), race (category), racialization (process), and racism (system of domination) are sometimes used interchangeably and simultaneously, each emphasizes something different in our

understanding of subject formation, difference, and power, and thus it cannot be assumed that they are doing the same analytic work (Dhamoon, 2011, p. 238).

When speaking to intersectionality in this project while there are components that speak to the individual identity level, I am using the theory to get to the solution. In other words, I am using intersectionality as an approach to look at the impacts on Black women receiving government assistance in the U.S. from systems of power. To focus on these women and the politics they engage with, it is imperative to examine their lives using an intersectional analytical framework. By examining Isoke's work on structural intersectionality and resistance of Black women, I find evidence for why intersectionality must be a vital component of my methodology. Isoke (2013) continues this idea that an intersectional approach should be "bottom-up" to "magnify how macro-level ideological processes impact people at the level of the individual, neighborhood, and community" (p. 20). In other words, there must be a focus on acts of resistance at the local level, the everyday strategies, against fragments of state power by many individuals who remain unnamed working constantly and overtly to dismantle power structures over time. This bottom-up approach then reveals what Isoke calls "radical visions of democracy" held by Black women who are constantly denied individual rights and group recognition. This project looks closely at those local battles waged against oppression by Black women receiving assistance in the U.S. Structural intersectionality, for Isoke, refers to how systems such as racism, sexism, neoliberalism, and entrenched poverty, to name a few, interlock to cause social violence that consume Black women's lives. A Black Feminist Intersectional approach leaves room for the consideration of how the experience of Black

womanhood within these systems informs these women's approach to politics. This approach then becomes more than just a critique, it becomes about contestation, it centers on the ways Black women who have been economically disadvantaged actively speak and stand against oppression by engaging in meaningful strategies. In looking at the ways Black women have historically and currently engaged in politics, multiple words will be used simultaneously to speak about their contestation, "resist," "persist", and "dissent" which will be analyzed in chapter six.

CHRONIC STRESSORS

The Trump Administration, COVID-19, and racial reckoning after the murder of George Floyd are the primary factors that guide this research, but because the focus is on Black economically disadvantaged in the U.S., the constant ways systems of power have oppressed this group must be acknowledged. In order words, 2020 is not the first time by any means that Black women have had their bodies and reproduction negatively impacted. The field of psychology and its work on chronic stressors look at the multiple ways Black women are affected. Tense and temporality are explored, arguing that Black women have been navigating chronic stressors before entering a more collective national consciousness born shortly after the murder of Floyd, Trump's political campaign, the racial disparities of COVID-19, etc. The realities exposed recently are not new experiences.

In the piece "Everyday Conflict and Daily Stressors: Coping Responses of Black Women", Brown & Keith (2003) explain how the unique experiences Black women face due to how systems of power oppress them, create daily stressors that can have

consequences on their health, emotional and psychological well-being. Using intersectionality as a framework, Everett, Camille Hall, & Hamilton-Mason look at not just systems of race and gender, but also class. Whereas racism or sexism represents significant aspects of the realities of Black women, other types of oppression, such as socioeconomic status, set their experiences apart (Brown & Keith, 2003). Understanding how these systems of power all create systemic oppression, Belle (1982), who studied depression among Black and White women, described the chronic stressors in the lives of Black women as those that ‘‘include an increased number of personal negative life events, a ‘contagion effect’ from exposure to the stressful life events of significant others and chronic stresses including exposure to painful incidents of discrimination in their daily lives’’ (p. 138). It is the constant engagement with negative events due to systemic oppression that Black women carry that have an impact on their social, cultural, psychological, physical, and even political being. This project also gives space to Black women's narratives (as articulated in the interviews) on issues of chronic stressors outside of the three explored.

By incorporating the chronic stressors Black women receiving government assistance face in addition to the three main components, it allows a look into the relationship between when a stressor irrupts into a wider national consciousness versus when a stressor that is constantly present is not addressed. The reality is, so much of what causes chronic stressors for Black women and the effects of those stressors never rise to the level of an historic event like the events of 2020. Some stressors experienced, evictions, health issues, and grieving for example in the case of the women interviewed

or “chronic stressful environmental conditions, such as poor housing and discrimination, as well as acute stressors, such as crime and violence” (Everett, Camille Hall, & Hamilton-Mason, 2010, p. 32), are static, flat, they are chronic instead of episodic or eventful. How do we lend visibility and legibility to chronic stressors that do not ever rise to the level of event, how do we make them eventful? This project attempts to do that within the scope of a dissertation by spotlighting chronic stressors and keeping the concept as an undertone even when focusing on the three main factors.

METHODS

As stated above, the findings from the research are provided throughout the entire project so the methods will be explored here. This project is committed to acknowledging and centering the resistance of Black women who have been economically disadvantaged against oppression to highlight their continued leadership in activism and social transformation. Interviews were the best method to use to accomplish this. Cultural Studies is the body of theory created by scholars who regard the production of theoretical knowledge as a political practice where knowledge is a matter of positionality (Barker, 2007). Positionality is the place from where one sees, speaks, to whom and for what purpose which required me to reflect before starting the interview process. Being a Black woman myself moved me to be intentional about understanding that this research project is about centering the voices of the interviewed as the primary voice and not wanting to overgeneralize based on my own experiences. Reflecting on my own identity and positionality, I understood I could come into these interview spaces from a place of privilege. Although I am a Black woman in the U.S., I am not currently receiving

government assistance. I am pursuing the highest level of education and that identity alone comes with an image of being "too good for us" or thinking "you are better than us."

My research question: What political strategies do Black women receiving government assistance in the U.S. implement to resist and cope with systematic oppression in the current conjuncture? served as the foundational question and began to build questions and create an interview process around that. I wanted these interviews to feel more conversational and ideally have each interviewee experience the interview process similarly. This led to a detailed research application to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) highlighting the ways each person would be treated during the process. The application received approval from the IRB and in November 2020, advertisement began. The IRB-approved flyer was advertised on social media channels, in non-profit organizations who serve Black women receiving government assistance, and circulated interview information within my social and professional networks. In addition to these advertisement methods, the women who interviewed also shared information in their networks which helped to create a rapport and trust with the interviewees. Each interview was advertised for 60 minutes. These interviews were conducted between December 2020 and June 2021. It is important to note the period these interviews were conducted. Although Joe Biden had won the presidential election, some interviews were conducted before the inauguration while Trump was still in office. There was a tone of hope and relief from women who interviewed after the inauguration, however, they felt the impact of Trump's Administration was still present and could still share the strategies they used

to keep going during his administration. COVID-19 and racial tensions were still very much present in the current day to day lives of these women and circulating in the media.

Best practices for research interviews include watching for body language cues, making eye contact, and acknowledging emotions (rev, 2019). Not only had COVID-19 impacted the lives of these women, but it also impacted how interviews could occur. What was imagined to be in-person interviews pivoted to Zoom interviews making it more difficult to perform some of the best practices. Out of the eleven interviews, five of them occurred in person following the CDC guidelines at the time and honoring the comfort level of each woman. Negative COVID test results were provided to each woman for in-person interviews, who sat at least six feet away, and wore a mask.

Eleven Black women who receive government assistance living in the U.S. were interviewed. One of the best practices for conducting an interview is to have opening questions that allow for the interviewee to talk more about themselves. Understanding that I wanted to have varying experiences, my opening questions looked at factors other than race and gender. Opening questions included:

- What state and region do you reside in?
- What is your age range?
    - 18-24
    - 25-35
    - 36-45
    - Over 45
- Are you a mother?
- What forms of welfare assistance do you currently receive?

Forms of assistance varied from food stamps to Women, Infants & Children (WIC) to Housing. Although they all shared these intersections of identity, there were varying

identities that also impacted their experiences. Age, location, and parental status were demographics that the women provided that contributed to diverse responses.

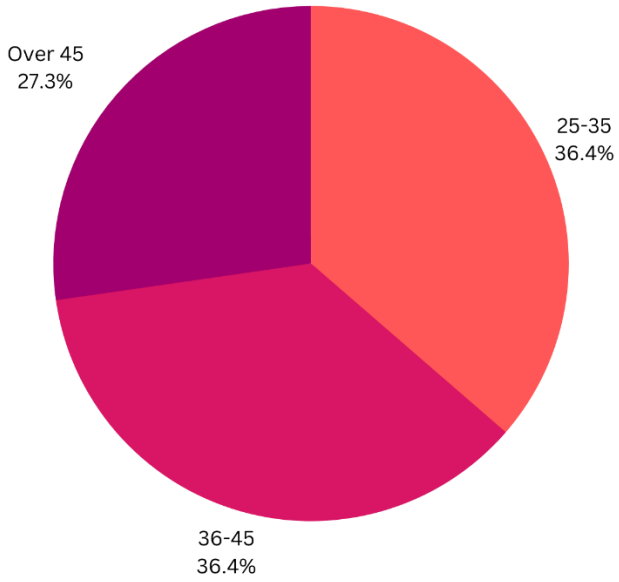


Figure 1: Age Group Of Participants



Figure 2: Are You A Mother?

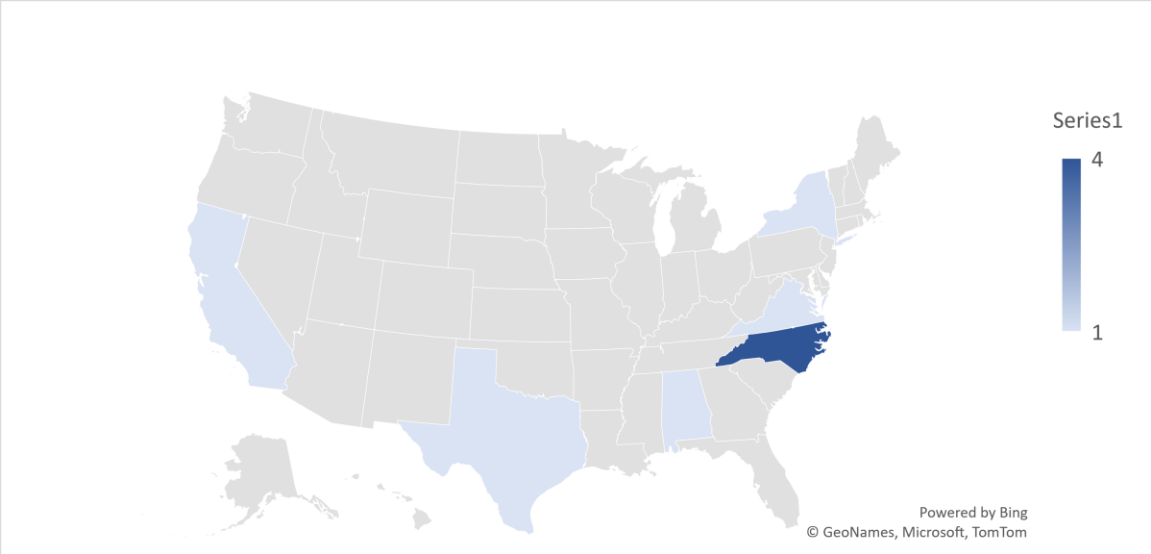


Figure 3: Participant Location

To protect the identities of the women, names were changed, and each woman provided their pseudonym.

To provide consistency for each interview, the women received the same questions. These questions allowed me to find out more about their experiences in 2020 and how they thought about their bodies, reproduction, and motherhood. These questions presented to each participant consisted of:

- I am interested in how you think about topics like having children and birth control. When you think of these, do you think you have enough "say so" to make decisions? If so, explain. If not, explain. Do you feel anyone/anything comes in to dictate your decisions? If so, explain.
- We have just been through the Trump administration, currently in the middle of COVID-19 and continued heightened race relations, especially since the murder of George Floyd. These are the three main factors in my project, so I am going to ask to separate each one here, starting with Trump. Has anything changed about how you think of about motherhood or birth control since/because of:
    - The Trump administration?
    - COVID-19?

    - Heightened race relations?

- During Trump's administration there were aggressive funding cuts and roll back on laws and policies on sexual and reproductive health. Have you experienced this lack of support and access especially in the Trump administration to things like contraceptives, children's healthcare, and your healthcare? If so, explain.
- As we have discussed, the three factors Trump, COVID-19, and race relations, have impacted decisions about motherhood, birth control, etc. My main focus of this project is to learn how you kept/keep moving through all of it. I want to break down each factor and have you talk about how you reacted and how you responded to keep going.

  - During the Trump administration?

  - COVID-19?

  - During heightened race relations?
- So let's pull back a bit, in general, in thinking about your health and well-being with reproduction, motherhood, etc. did you get help from anyone? Is there anyone/anyplace/anything that empowers you? Church? Family? Social circle? Speak to how.
- You have made it to 2021. How are you feeling now? What are your thoughts about the future?
- I truly appreciated your time today. Is there anything you want to add?

There were also times that questions were tailored in real-time as a follow up depending on the answers the women provided.

It was important for me to connect with the interviewees in a personable way, so I was intentional about the atmosphere I created. One factor that contributed to building trust with the interviewees was showing my appreciation for the time provided and asking them to tell other women they know about the opportunity to share their narratives. This referral process allowed for rapport to be a part of the experience. Trust is huge in Black communities, so if a woman told her friend or family member about their positive experience, the next woman was more comfortable with sharing her truth

with me. Another factor that allowed me to have a connection with the women was how I phrased the questions. I "stepped out" of my academic identity, if you will, to talk to these women like I would anyone else I know. When I speak to other Black women, I am not using words like those situated in my research question so the questions above represented a more conversational tone rather than feel like a formal academic interview.

It is also important to define some of the colloquialisms used in the women's responses to understand the power of these strategies. Oftentimes, the women shared that these strategies allowed them to "show up" for themselves or others. For centuries Black women have been on the front lines being present and working hard for what they believe in and care about. In 2020 alone, Black women led social movements in protest for Black lives, 91% of Black women voted for Joe Biden, and over 200,000 Black nurses worked in intensive care units for COVID-19 patients in the U.S. (Connley, 2020, W.S, 2020, YMCA, 2020). April Ryan (2022), the White House correspondent who received public slurs from Trump, which will be explored more in chapter one, spoke in her new book, *Black Women Will Save the World: An Anthem,* about the resilience of Black women "through pain, strife and glory, they have sown the seeds that allow this nation to grow and thrive" (p. 7). When these women mentioned showing up, they were speaking to the endurance through obstacles and barriers, some of which will be explored, to still be able to provide for their families, be a caretaker, fight injustices, and engage with their communities. Showing up is more than just a physical presence for Black women in the U.S., it is an act of resistance within itself.

Most women in this study at some point in their interview spoke to a very common saying “you do what you have to do”. This saying is widely understood in U.S. culture. Either by a Garth Brooks or Four Tops hit, a line in the popular animation *Futurama*, or by the Urban Dictionary definition as “to do something you don’t want others to know about or what you shouldn’t be doing, to take care of important business” (2006), for Black women it has a dual meaning. In his farewell speech, *The Daily Show* host Trevor Noah brought voice to how this saying is understood for Black women. He states: “I always tell people if you truly want to learn about America, talk to Black women. Because unlike everybody else, Black women can’t afford to fuck around and find out. Black people understand how hard it is when things go bad…Black people know that when things go bad, it gets worse for them. Black women in particular, they know what shit is, genuinely” (2022). The women interviewed embodied this quote as they sacrificed, worked while sick, endured hunger, and more all for the ability to keep their families alive and safe. Doing what needs to be done for Black women means survival. These colloquialisms help to provide context to the responses of the women as they spoke to the political strategies used.

CHAPTER REVIEW

In understanding the multiple ways these factors could impact Black women's government assistance, the factors are separated into chapters before speaking to how they worked simultaneously. Each separate chapter is structured to show the impacts of the factor, along with other chronic stressors the women experienced, on Black women, while also introducing strategies the women implemented to resist against them. Chapter

One takes a deeper dive into the policies, laws, actions, and campaign speeches given by Donald Trump during his time as president of the United States and how they have impacted Black women receiving assistance in the U.S. Going beyond policies and actions that attempted to regulate women choices, I argue how Trump's response to welfare reform and racial injustice negatively influences decisions Black women can make about their bodies. Chapter Two explores Coronavirus (COVID-19) and its impacts on the subject. While COVID brought certain information about Black communities to the spotlight, the processes of population management are not new. Foucault's analysis of biopolitics is used to argue how these factors have affected Black women in the U.S. for centuries, causing an increased risk of death. To offer a deeper understanding of the ways Black economically disadvantaged women have been impacted by racism over the years, Chapter Three provides a brief historical review from the Reconstruction era to the present day. This chapter also traces a series of murders in 2020 starting with Ahmaud Arbery (February) and Breonna Taylor (March), leading up to the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. Floyd's vicious murder spurred an international uprising of protests and riots and has triggered civil unrest in the U.S., at a scale not seen since the Civil Rights Era. In this chapter, I argue how the killing of Black bodies directly impacts how Black women make decisions about motherhood. Building upon chapters one, two, and three, Chapter Four provides an analysis of the overlapping intersections of the Trump Administration, COVID-19, and the spike in race relations post-George Floyd. These factors not only provide oppressions that are simultaneous but multiplicative in their impact as well. This chapter will also speak to the impact all of these factors had on

access to healthcare for these women which directly impacts how they make choices about their bodies.

Chapter Five brings in the role of the media. In this chapter, I argue how national media coverage of these factors was used to mobilize viewers during convenient times, such as an election or event. There was also a pattern for media to pull away from the stressor once it lost its trend although the impact of the factor remains, leaving Black women stories untold. This chapter unpacks the disconnect of the media and the Black community and examines how Black women in the media are used for political gain and profit. In being at the receiving end of all these negative exploitations, these women found ways to display their narratives and celebrate themselves. This chapter also conducts an analysis on three platforms that focus in some way on the Black community, *The Kevin Samuels Show*, a podcast, Tik Tok, and "Black Twitter" to look at ways these mediums highlight women. I argue that Black media avenues like *The Kevin Samuels Show* degrades women and perpetuates "The Welfare Queen" motif, while platforms like Tik Tok and "Black Twitter" allowed these women to put their narratives out in public spaces.

Chapter Six examines the strategies Black women receiving government assistance in the U.S. implemented to persist through the simultaneous oppressions from the Trump Administration, COVID-19, and The Summer of Racial Reckoning. After narrating a set of reactions and explications brought on by the problems mentioned in previous chapters, this chapter also looks to answer the question, "what type of politics do these strategies engage in?" This chapter defines persistence, resistance, and dissent as

emic categories and shows how the strategies implemented by Black women participated in all of them. This chapter will analyze when the strategies are reactive, rather than proactive and focus on how these women are supported through it all and also explain how the research contributes to Cultural Studies scholarship.

CHAPTER ONE: TRUMP AND HIS ADMINISTRATION

"I'm Scared For My Future"

-Taylor DiNovo. 2017 Women's March on Washington

In January 2021, Joe Biden was inaugurated as the 46th president, but there is no question that the U.S. is still feeling the effects of the past presidential term under Donald Trump. Viewers and voters watched night after night waiting for the results of who would lead the nation next; many hoping for a different direction than before. Donald Trump, several would argue, deepened hardships that felt continuous. Beginning as early as 2014, which marked the start of his presidential campaign, numerous stories, articles, and hours of live footage surfaced that can be analyzed to support this argument. What this chapter specifically highlights are the voices of Black women who were disproportionately disadvantaged by Trump's actions and polices. The impact of Trump's behaviors such as his demeaning slurs of Black women during #TrumpAttacksBlackWomen and policies like the "Reducing Poverty in America" Executive Order had on women's decisions about their bodies are examined. More importantly, this chapter begins to introduce everyday resistance strategies, faith, and centering self, used by the women in the study to refute against the spread of negative stereotypes by Trump and also against the attempt to control their daily lives through policy reform.

Before exploring Trump's presidential term, it is worth noting that policies and laws that impacted Black women during the Trump Administration originated prior to his presidency. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), for example, is the only Federal anti-poverty program that provides monthly cash assistance which is used for any supplies that a family may need. This program was started during the Clinton administration shifting funding to a block grant process, meaning a lump sum of funds would be given to a state each year. What was not considered, was how inflation and population changes would affect the funding, leaving each state to receive the same amount since 1996, decreasing the real value by 40 percent (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2022). During Trump's administration, stricter rules were formed to access the TANF. In 2017, in more than twenty-five states, a family of three…at half of the federal poverty level earned too much to qualify for TANF cash assistance, although women were reported only making eleven dollars an hour (Center for Law and Social Policy, 2017). So, while Black women were negatively impacted during the Trump Administration with programs like TANF, these impacts were a continuation of a policies implemented before. The women also expressed ways in which Trump and his administration impacted their personal lives and influenced their thoughts surrounding motherhood and reproduction.

It is important to properly distinguish between Trump the person (i.e., actions, comments, etc. made directly by him), and his administration (i.e., policies, laws, executive orders) that were made and implemented during his presidency. While Trump, the person, was hyper visible for the past four years, this piece is also interested in

evaluating incidents that took place within his administration that were very public or widely covered by national media, further creating a continued cycle of hyper-invisibility surrounding Black women. The idea that Black women are "simultaneously visible and invisible" is a recurring theme in feminist writings (Bell, 1992; Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981; King, 1988). This theme also appeared in recent theoretical works stating that the experiences of individuals with multiple-subordinate-group identities (such as Black women), experience ''intersectional invisibility" and are subject to different outcomes than their more prototypical counterparts (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Although Black women receiving government assistance and their respective thoughts on motherhood and reproduction were not directly acknowledged by Trump or his administration, by engaging in systems of power and perpetuating racist, sexist, and classist behaviors, these women's lives were impacted.

Race is not a new topic for Donald Trump. Earlier in his life, as a New York real estate developer, he took out full-page newspaper ads across the city calling for the reinstatement of the death penalty to punish the Central Park Five— a group of Black and Latino men who were wrongly convicted of a brutal rape—writing that, "they should be forced to suffer" (Marcus 2020). In his campaign and during his presidency there were numerous comments made by Trump about people of color, and more specifically, women of color. But it is in an ad by novelist and activist Don Winslow that reveals Trump's comments and thoughts specifically targeting Black women he has encountered. In October 2020, Winslow, known for covering U.S.-Mexico border relations, released a YouTube ad using the hashtag #TrumpAttacksBlackWomen which showcases snippets of

recordings of Trump speaking directly against Black women. Despite the controversial title of this video, in a time where a YouTube video could go viral with millions of views over the course of days, this particular video had only received 440,000 views and 1,000 comments in the span of eleven months. The narrator begins showing clips of interviews where Trump speaks about Black people, and then specifically begins to showcase Trump degrading Black women. In 2018, in his response to House Representative Maxine Waters' call for people to stand against Trump's policies, the video shows tweets sent by Trump calling Waters, "an extraordinarily low IQ person" (2018) and repeating it at a campaign event in Hershey, Pennsylvania.

The ad continues with clips of an interview from November 2018, where Trump called White House Correspondent April Ryan a "loser" and states, "She doesn't know what the hell she is doing" and even goes on to call her "nasty" (Britto, 2018). The clip cycled through slurs Trump made against CNN reporter Abby Phillips, White House correspondent Yamiche Alcindor, and Vice President Kamala Harris. These comments evince underlying themes related to a lack of education, stupidity, and being hostile; all of which are racialized stereotypes often attributed to Black women in America as they are typically caricatured as "the angry Black Woman." Although this specific video ad did not gain much publicity, it provided a montage of examples from news channels, tweets, video clips, and transcripts of Trump publicly slandering Black women and their work which have millions viewed each collectively.

These slanders, which Ryan stated, have been happening since his first campaign, perpetuate the victimization of negative stereotyping of Black women as aggressive, ill-tempered, illogical, overbearing, hostile, and ignorant without provocation, which directly impact how Black women see themselves through the lens of Trump. In analyzing this power structure, it is evident that Black women are used to reiterate the idea that they are "out of order" and do not deserve to be protected. Ashley (2013) argues that such speech "significantly affect[s] Black women intrapsychically, interpersonally, and [is] likely to influence the efficacy of mental health treatment" (p.29). When conducting an interview with Kookie B (36-45, Northeast DC) about how Trump sees Black women, she stated, "They can kill us, talk about us, but it's evident, he will not protect us." Dee (over 45, Raleigh, NC) also provided insight into how she feels Trump views Black women, "He downgraded us, like we were nothing. He has a mother, that's who brought him into this world, so he shouldn't downgrade women. We all are equal, you know?" Both women acknowledge the ways in which Trump did not value Black women. Although Trump never directly addressed them personally, by watching him constantly speak poorly about the identities they hold, transcended into a message of inferiority. This idea of being downgraded with no protection did not cause Dee to lose hope. Dee utilized one of the strategies that is analyzed in chapter six, faith, to resist this form of oppression by Trump. Dee explained how her prayers got her through the Trump Administration:

> What kept me going was prayer. My faith to know God's going to change it. I just knew God was going to work things out.

What Dee wanted God to change was the constant run-ins with negative messages about women like her. The derogatory comments about Black women were not the only negative messages by Trump during his time as president. The next section will explore how Trump's behavior towards women ignited mass resistance.

The push for equality of women that Dee spoke to has been an ongoing topic that gained more traction when Trump took office. Articles, video clips, and statements on his views towards women and their bodies began to circulate widely during his campaign. Most of the country became aware of the footage from his 2005 interview with Billy Bush, which emerged during his campaign. This video captures Trump stating perhaps one of his most infamous and inflammatory comments, "Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything," in reference to a woman who served as a publicist (2016). The constant offensive comments Trump made about women coupled with slurs about women's bodies prompted the 2017 Women's March on Washington. This nationwide collective protest brought millions of women together to "send a bold message to our new administration on their first day in office, and [showed] the world that women's rights are human rights," making it the largest single-day protest in U.S. history with over 470,000 people in attendance in Washington, D.C. alone (Alcindor & Hartocollis, 2017). There to capture both the narratives and emotions of the day was *Time magazine's* photographer, Ruddy Roye, who is best known for his work capturing Black voices in modern American protests. After reviewing several interviews with women of varying identities, it is Vostina and Taylor DiNovo, a Black woman and her daughter, who captured a shared

sentiment amongst many Black women during the Trump administration: "I'm scared for my future" (2017).



Figure 4: Scared For Our Future

This slogan, this feeling, symbolizes the fear women have for the welfare and protection of their children. With Trump's marginalization of women, slurs, and patriarchal ideologies, not only did they feel their bodies were in danger, but they also felt this threat towards their children as well, which even prevented some women from wanting to have children during the Trump Administration. When asked how the Trump era has changed her view on motherhood, Woman #7 (36-45, California) stated:

> … for me, I wouldn't want to bring any child into that type of environment. Why would I? To see how black children are treated in society as is, but under his administration, [I] still cringe when I think about it."

The type of environment that Woman #7 is speaking to is one where women are disrespected and mistreated, an environment where it is accepted to talk about how their bodies are mishandled. In addition to how women are treated and talked about, Woman #7 is addressing the inequalities Black children face because of their race. With Trump perpetuating negative messages about both identity groups, Woman #7 is fearful as a Black woman to bring a Black child into the world. The way in which Trump has publicly shown the mistreatment of women and their bodies not only is impacting Woman #7 herself, but her decisions about reproduction. This fear over their lives and their children's futures appeared to also be affecting Black women's mental health. While interviewing with Kenzi (25-35, Washington, DC), she answered, "Has anything changed about how you think about motherhood or birth control since Trump took office?" In her response, Kenzi spoke directly to the impacts of how Trump saw Black women which have impacted her mental health:

> …that has been my challenge, mental health has been my challenge…I can definitely see how it can cause stress, especially with the things we are dealing with Trump. I mean…I'm a woman so I feel he wasn't really supportive of women, and then I'm a Black woman, so it's like I have all this stuff built up against me. I can definitely see how it can be an issue and cause women to not want to have children during this time 'cause you're already stressed out enough [by] things that are not even your responsibility; and you're distracted by things like Trump's comments.

These constant slurs, negative stereotyping, and statements made by Trump about Black women, again in addition to the chronic stressors, show one of several ways Black women were significantly impacted during his presidency. We have already seen how chronic stressors can impact mental health for Black women, but here Kenzi specifically spoke to Trump's direct effect on her mental health. It is important to highlight this impact because it illuminates the power of not only this one person, but the hegemonic power dominant systems such as media and politics can have over individuals. That just by constantly seeing Trump on a screen and listening to his words can negatively dictate one's mental well-being.

This negative impact on mental health is not just the experience of Kenzi, but many like her whose mental health suffered due to the Trump Administration. In 2016, the American Psychological Association "Stress in America" survey showed 63 percent of Americans said the future of the country was a "significant source of stress," and 56 percent said they were stressed out by the current political climate. In the 2018 version of the survey, those numbers went up to 69 percent and 62 percent, respectively (American Psychological Association, 2016). In her piece "People are not okay": The mental health impact of the Trump era", North (2021) makes it clear that for many while the Trump presidency is over, the trauma isn't and shines a light on how it has affected Black girls and women specifically. For four years, some would argue longer, Black women consumed "racist rhetoric, incitements of violence, and out-and-out chaos resulting in stress, anxiety, and feelings of being overwhelmed" (p. 3). She even goes on to explore

the work of clinical psychologist Jennifer Panning who coined the term "Trump anxiety disorder" to describe the stress felt after the 2016 election.

For the women interviewed, the physical body was affected by the stress that came along with Trump's actions which took a toll not only how these women navigated the world, but also what they were unable to do because they were confronting their stress. Kenzi spoke to how the effects of stress on her body hindered her:

> I did not have access to a therapist or counselor. So, when my body felt attacked by the weight of the world during this time, I had to find my ways to push through. I now had to spend time trying to calm myself down and scroll through YouTube to find free meditations that I could listen to in lieu of a professional. It takes so much time to be your own therapist. I could have been doing something that I enjoy doing or taking care of my child, but no, I am finding ways to heal my own self.

What Kenzi is executing is the process of being negatively impacted by oppression while still actively finding ways to contest it. On the one hand it shows how stress from Trump's comments required her to take care of herself because she did not have access to professional resources; taking time away from other activities. And on the other hand, Kenzi chose to prioritize her healing and invest in herself so that her mental health would not be a barrier. Centering Self is another strategy these women used to persist past obstacles presented to them, which is explored more in chapter six.

Decisions around certain policies during the Trump Administration also show heavy impacts on the daily lives of these women and their families. For example, welfare reform has been a major platform for presidents in the past and remained at the forefront during the Trump Administration. Trump's presidential campaign promised to make overhauling welfare a priority, and on April 10, 2018, Trump signed an executive order that significantly impacted government assistance programs. Executive Order 13828, entitled "Reducing Poverty in America", was directed at all programs that aid low-income people, households, and families with intentions to force recipients to join the workforce or lose their benefits. Per Section 2 *Policy* of the Executive Order:

> The Federal Government's role is to clear paths to self-sufficiency, reserving public assistance programs for those who are truly in need. The Federal Government should do everything within its authority to empower individuals by providing opportunities for work, including by investing in Federal programs that are effective at moving people into the workforce and out of poverty (Executive Order of the President, 2018).

Some of the principles of this Executive Order included:

> (i)Improve employment outcomes and economic independence (including by strengthening existing work requirements for work-capable people and introducing new work requirements when legally permissible)

> (ii) Promote strong social networks as a way of sustainably escaping poverty (including through work and marriage).
>
> (vii) Reduce wasteful spending by consolidating or eliminating Federal programs that are duplicative or ineffective; (Executive Order of the President, 2018)

The order also stated that the Federal Government should:

> (i)review current federally funded workforce development programs.
>
> (ii) invest in effective workforce development programs (Executive Order of the President, 2018)

Per the Trump Administration, this order was intended to be a continuation of the bipartisan welfare reform in 1996 as a step forward to eliminate economic stagnation. The Trump Administration believed this order was best for both the recipients and the economy as it would provide income for families and decrease unemployment rates. Sonny Perdue, the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture during Trump's Administration applauded Trumps Executive Order stating "I commend President Trump today for his leadership on moving American back to work" (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018).

Per Trump, the Reducing Poverty in America order would prevent recipients who have no intention of working from "making more money and doing better than the person that's working his [or] her ass off" (Thrush, 2018, p. 2). However, scholars argue that there is not much data that supports this position and in fact, many recipients of assistance programs have significant barriers to working full time. Advocates of low-

income communities and recipients of this order feel differently than the Trump Administration about how it has affected communities. According to Sharon Parrott, senior fellow at the left-leaning Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, "many recipients of government assistance already work, but often earn too little income to pay for rent, groceries, and health care on their own. Evidence shows that such [work] requirements have few long-term positive effects on employment and often result in families losing help they need to afford the basics" (Horsley, 2018, p. 4). For Geraldine (over 45, North Carolina), it is not just her children who she has to provide for, but her young grandchildren as well. Medicaid is crucial to her family's well-being and while she works full time, she does not make enough to cover healthcare:

> There are certain things that weren't available during his [Trump's] time. I'm appreciative that my children are adults now and able to do for themselves and make provisions for themselves because if they were young, like my grandkids are now… it'd affect them. I am unable to provide for everyone's healthcare. As a matter of fact, the administration did limit my abilities with my youngest son at the time during the Trump administration. My son was in school working part-time and wasn't able to have a full-time job with his own benefits. He also was limited with Medicaid—not being able to see specialists and having health issues and not being able to pay the doctors, so that was an out-of-pocket expense for myself. I had to make sure he stayed healthy because with Medicaid, it didn't allow him to go to different specialists without me having to pay for it privately. It affected a lot of the decisions I made during the Trump administration. With my

> work being affected as well, I had to ration what I had for my children's, and now grandchildren's, health.

Geraldine, like some of the women, has a full-time job. Other women had limited access to full time employment and spoke to barriers, including a physical disability, mental health, and incarceration that prevented them from getting jobs or moving forward in certain application processes. For the women who are mothers, their financial stability was at the forefront, and they all spoke to the challenge of balancing and providing for their families and being more present with them during these unprecedented times. Later the strategies they used to push past these challenges are examined.

While Trump announced this plan very publicly on his campaign trail, Thrush (2018) reveals a much different reality shrouded in privacy in his 2018 article, "Trump Signs Order", which states, "The order — signed in private on a frenzied news day dominated by congressional testimony from Mark Zuckerberg, the Facebook chief executive, a potential military response in Syria, and the president's rage at the raid on Monday on his personal lawyer's office — tries to redefine "welfare" to fit the catchall term Mr. Trump used in campaign speeches" (p. 5). When powerful decisions like these are made in private, it prevents the contest of the policy by activists due to lack of exposure and perpetuates a lack of trust in the current administration. These private signings are affecting Black women and quite often changing their lives in the shadows. While none of the women directly mentioned the Executive Order by name, they spoke to the negative impacts that came directly from the order. Therefore, this policy was not a

benefit in the eyes of these women, and it makes it even harder for their families to receive the support they need and trust the government. Kookie B spoke to this lack of trust in government administrations:

> The Trump administration, and the Biden administration, all of them are trying to annihilate us. If we are struggling and need help and the government constantly looks the other way, what do you think is going to eventually happen? They want to get rid of our culture, our golden race and no one even notices [or] blinks an eye. And you want me to trust them?! Nah.

Kookie B has consistently experienced the feeling of abandonment from government agencies both on an individual and cultural level. The lack of responses from agency employees and policy changes from presidential administrations that intentionally harm Black women receiving government assistance, creates a lack of trust.

In addition to the policy changes on welfare assistance, changes to policies on birth control also occurred during the Trump Administration, impacting millions of women nationwide. In July 2020, the Supreme Court ruled 7-2 upholding Trump's move to let more employers opt out of the Affordable Care Act mandate, which guaranteed no-cost contraceptive services for women. The Affordable Care Act requires insurers to include "preventive care and screenings" as part of "minimum essential coverage", and since 2010, all FDA-approved contraceptives were included allowing women to acquire contraceptives at no cost. This case included a 2018 regulation from the Department of Health and Human Services which exempts any employer with a religious or moral

objection to birth control from having it covered in an employee's health insurance plan. While Republicans saw this as a victory for religious liberty, Democrats, Planned Parenthood, and women throughout the country saw this as a setback for reproductive justice. Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Sonia Sotomayor voted against this ruling due to its lack of protection for thousands of women. Ginsburg wrote, "As the government estimates, between 70,500 and 126,400 women would immediately lose access to no-cost contraceptive services, leaving women workers to fend for themselves" (Dwyer, 2020, p. 3). Other advocates for reproductive rights also saw this as a step backwards. Lourdes Rivera, Senior Vice President at the Center for Reproductive Rights stated, "Today's ruling has given bosses the power to dictate how their employees can and cannot use their health insurance—allowing them to intrude into their employees' private decisions based on whatever personal beliefs their employers happen to hold" (Dwyer, 2020, p. 3).

This use of power to dictate decisions over women's bodies angered the women in this study. Ladii (25-35, Richmond, VA) spoke directly to this anger:

> Particularly after Trump, people have this idea of, well, I can say what I want, and it doesn't matter how you feel. And it's like, although that's cool, I'm glad you got that off your chest. It doesn't change anything. This is still my life. I still have to walk with the weight of these decisions about women's bodies. And especially when it comes to men, it's white men telling Black women that they don't have the right to their bodies, and that makes me so angry. You don't have to walk in my shoes. You don't have to be pregnant for almost a year. You don't

> have to wait for your bones to dislocate to bring this child into this world. So why are you writing laws for me without my say? It's bothersome.

While some women in the study were angry about the decisions made about their access to birth control during Trump's Administration, other women in the study feel that per their experiences with healthcare and healthcare workers, contraceptives were forced on them to intentionally prevent them from reproducing. When asked about her experience with the lack of access to contraceptives and healthcare during the Trump Administration, Kookie B responded:

> During the Trump Administration, they gave me this implant in my arm, and I got the implant out of my arm within three months. They were so gung-ho about that because they don't want melanated people and melanated women to have children. They don't want our blood line to flourish. And now with the whole Trump administration and everything, they are even more gung-ho.

The eagerness from the government to restrict the reproduction of Black women reflects what Marable refers to as "racial suicide", and the rejection of birth control serves as a form of resistance to allowing Black families to thrive, which we will explore later. (1998). It is important to address the different responses by Black women receiving assistance regarding the Supreme Court ruling around birth control. Even with these two interview responses there is contradiction in emotion, with Ladii becoming angry about not having access to birth control while Kookie B actively tries to resist it. A few points surface when analyzing these various responses. First, it shows that although these

women share the identity of being Black women receiving government assistance in the U.S., it does not conclude that their experiences are the same, in fact, that is the whole point of crafting a qualitative research project like because it gives room to the numerous narratives of these women, disrupting this idea that Black is monolithic. Second, it shows that even if there are different types of responses to the same decision by these women, the main point is that a decision made by people of power had a direct impact on their bodies; that power dictates control and both are constantly at playing causing serious oppressions for people like these women. Third, that both responses can be valid. That a dialectic, a both/and, way of thinking and analyzing applies. What is clear here, is that decisions around birth control during the Trump Administration required Black women receiving government assistance to think differently about reproduction and motherhood.

While the U.S. has had its fair share of presidential terms that have caused fear and terror whether through campaigns such as "stop and frisk" and "just say no", through scandals like Watergate and Andrew Johnson's Impeachment, or through the presidents support of the institution of slavery and Jim Crow, some would argue that the "Trump Administration was one of the most terrifying presidential terms of the 21st century" (Naftali, 2021, p. 7). Hatred, control, and power seemed to elevate to a public stage during Trump's presidency, especially after coming out of a presidential term that some would call "post-racial" because a Black man was in office. Woman #7 spoke to the outward display of hate being the most she has ever experienced in her life:

> [Trump] is still partially here [in power], you know what I mean? Cause he's not all the way out… as I look over my 44 years of life, most of us have been living through Trump the whole time, right? Experiencing hate. But to see the level of hatred displayed while he was in office not only by the public, but by the president himself, and to see the rising hate towards everybody, Black people was the worst I've ever seen.

Whether the effects of Trump were felt during his administration or even before his time in office, it is evident through the work of Black feminist theorists, scholars, and Black women in my study, that dominant tactics used by people in power have lasting effects. Hyper-invisibility, mental and physical wellness, lack of trust, fear, and anger are just a few direct impacts these women have experienced because of Trump or the laws he passed during his administration. These impacts on Black women during Trump's administration are not new to Black women based on how they have been socialized in the U.S. hooks (1982) explains this socialization below by stating:

> No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women. We are rarely recognized as a group separate and distinct from black men, or as a present part of the larger group of ''women" in this culture. When black people are talked about, sexism militates against the acknowledgment of the interests of black women; when women are talked about, racism militates against the recognition of black female interests. When black

> people are talked about the focus tends to be on black men; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women (p. 37).

This constant displacement of Black women, especially women who are receiving assistance, was enhanced with Trump's slurs towards Black women, lack of support for women's rights, and executive orders and laws passed during his administration that does not progress welfare reform or reproductive justice as stated in this chapter. With a direct connection between stress and physical and mental health (Ashley, 2013) and the input of women in my study, I argue that Trump's response to welfare reform, women's bodies, and racial injustice negatively influences the decisions Black women receiving assistance can make about their bodies and at the same time, Black women are implementing strategies that allow them to press pass this barriers on the local level to continue being present for themselves and others.

CHAPTER TWO: COVID-19

"COVID is pushing me to fight more, look at life differently, because we never know when we're going to lose one another"

- Dee (Over 45, Raleigh, NC)

Now that the impact of Trump's behavior and administration, along with the resistance strategies used against them, have been explored, the second factor, COVID-19, will be examined. This chapter highlights the ways COVID-19 carried a fear of death while enhancing a lack of trust around the vaccine in addition to the physical and emotional struggle of quarantine The strategy of sacrifice is introduced here to highlight how these women risked their lives to provide for their family during the pandemic which through the lens of Foucault's differential vulnerability, never rise to the title of "hero".

On February 11, 2020, the World Health Organization announced an official name for the disease that was causing the 2019 novel coronavirus outbreak, first identified in Wuhan China: coronavirus disease 2019, abbreviated as COVID-19. In COVID-19, 'CO' stands for 'corona,' 'VI' for 'virus,' and 'D' for disease. Formerly, this disease was referred to as "2019 novel coronavirus" or "2019-nCoV" (The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). As of November 2, 2021, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) calculated 46,024,349 positive cases of COVID-19 in the U.S. Although over 50% of the U.S. has been fully vaccinated, the daily average for new cases was 74,798 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). This global

pandemic has brought social life, healthcare systems and economies of the world to their knees (IIyas, 2020). And while there are many lingering, long-term effects of the disease on those who have been infected, the social impact of COVID-19 has also brought years of systemic racial and health disparities to the forefront. Since the virus was announced, scholars have been studying the impacts of COVID-19 on healthcare, economics, and racial divides. The CDC determined that "racial and ethnic minority groups" are disproportionately affected by COVID-19 naming factors to include a. Discrimination, b. Healthcare access and utilization, c. Occupation, d. Educational, income, and wealth gaps, e. Housing (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). These factors have affected Black women in the U.S. for centuries in healthcare, causing an increased risk for death. This chapter explores how Black women receiving government assistance in the U.S. were affected not only by the disease COVID-19, but also by the fear and panic it has induced, as well as the uncertainty surrounding the longer-term effects of the ongoing pandemic, impacting the ways many Black women think about mothering and their physical bodies.

According to the Pew Research Center (2020), About 13% of the U.S. population are African Americans. But according to CDC data, out of the 22% of those infected with COVID-19, 23% of those who have died from it are Black. Furthermore, some 44% of African Americans say they had lost a job or have suffered household wage loss due to the pandemic, and 73% say they lack an emergency fund to cover living expenses. As the death rate of Black Americans during the pandemic was entered into national consciousness, I was curious to find out how these women processed COVID-19 and the

data being released around it. Fear arose as a common theme when discussing healthcare in general, but also when narrowing down healthcare to COVID. The women spoke to a lack of support and trust in the healthcare system causing stress and uncertainty, but COVID-19 only enhanced this fear for Black women receiving assistance in the U.S. The pervasive fear of death during the pandemic was quite apparent among these women. Woman #7 (36-45, California) shared:

> COVID-19 has been scary for us [Black women]. No matter what health scare comes, what pandemic comes, we die at the highest rate. And Black women die at the highest rate giving childbirth. So yeah, I would be scared in this current environment to bring a child in the world during this pandemic.

Earlier Woman #7 spoke to the environmental elements from Trump's treatment of women and lack of racial sensitivity, and here she spoke to the ways an increased death rate of Black women produced the fear of having children especially in a pandemic.

As an older woman with a disability, Lena (over 45, Raleigh, North Carolina) was in constant fear that she would not survive the pandemic due to her fragile state of health and the amount of uncertainty surrounding her odds of survival:

> I'm just scared to be out here around people. Cause you don't know who got what, right? Even with the shots—I have my shot, but you still don't know. I can't risk getting it. I have a disability and the government barely gives me enough to take care of myself. I can't get sick.

In interviewing Lena, the thought of getting COVID-19 in addition to her disability, almost brought her to tears. The fear of not only getting sick, but not having the means to recover, prevented Lena from leaving home or being around groups of people no matter the size.

This fear during the pandemic extended to mothering and having resources to support children in a time when access to resources was limited. For Neferti (36-45, New York), her fear resided in the innocence of her son:

> I am scared for my kids because they go to school every day. You know, the baby is in daycare, he touches things. He's three. He doesn't realize that he has to sanitize his hands.

For Dee (over 45, Raleigh, North Carolina), the panic surrounding the pandemic pushed her to protect her children more:

> COVID is pushing me to fight more, look at life differently, because we never know when [we're] going to lose one another. It changed me; one to protect my kids more, make sure that they have the right things they need to survive, and two, teach them how to protect themselves.

For both women, the virus itself influenced the ways they took care of and protected their children. For Dee and Neferti, they spoke to being cautious about their children prior to the pandemic, however, the virus pushed them to be hyper-aware of sanitation and protection.

For Ebony (35-46, North Carolina), the pandemic created a fear of not being able to provide for her children as they navigated virtual school without access to the free lunch program:

> …during the pandemic, it just made it hard for me being a single mother. Funding and support, like free lunch, got cut off. That program kept my kids fed during the day so losing it created a bigger obstacle. And then with them being out of school and needing computers…it was just so hard for me because it's like, I have a 12-year-old, a 7-year-old, and a baby. How am I supposed to multi-task with them being virtual? It's been so long since I've been in school. I don't know nothing about no computers, like laptops and stuff. And I didn't have a job anymore 'cause it got shut down, and I am used to working, so being home and providing was hard.

For the women interviewed, COVID-19 overwhelmingly impacted them in ways much larger than just the actual virus. It is important to showcase here through Ebony's narrative, that COVID-19 required schools to embrace a new virtual learning style, which not only made her feel incapable of supporting her children's educational journey, but also directly impacted her finances due to the absence of the free lunch program. For other women interviewed, other aspects that COVID-19 affected were health issues, finances, motherhood, education, and even birth and death rates. Many of the other aspects that were impacted by the virus and pandemic were present for these women before the virus was announced. While some of these situations were by happenstance, the death of a loved one by a car accident, the majority of these directly spiraled from the

chronic stressors that these women lived through every day such as not getting approved for Medicaid or constantly wondering how rent would be paid to continue housing. Chapter four will look deeper into the ongoing impacts of chronic stressors the women faced in 2020. It is important to note here that these women relied on their faith, sacrifice and communal support to resist the fear that COVID-19 and other stressors presented them with. It was these strategies that they argued "got them through the pandemic" and which is explored later.

The fear and panic of catching COVID-19 continued to push citizens into quarantine, mandating that individuals stay in their homes for up to 14 days to prevent the spread. The practice of not leaving the home, not working, and not having access to resources proposed a risk for these women. Mel (25-35, Fort Worth, Texas) spoke to this lack of ability to stay home, as work is a must for her and her family's survival, no matter the risk:

> Being a full-time single parent, getting sick is not something I'm concerned about because I know I can't afford it. Like I cannot afford to be sick because if I go down, my whole household goes down with me. I can't afford that. I've always been essential personnel. I was with Amazon when the pandemic hit. They gave us a nice little bonus, but I'm like, at the end of the day, once this bonus is gone and I'm back to my hourly wage, I'll be suffering. So, what do we do after that? It's like the job does not look out for us. I've been at work since the beginning of this thing [COVID-19]. I've had to take three or four COVID tests. Some people have to take them every week. They're the most uncomfortable things ever. They

> want my son to take COVID tests and it's not happening. We just gone have to thug it out. Like, Imma have to figure something out so he can quarantine because I can't miss work. But I'm used to always having to take the hardest road anyway. I honestly [feel] like I mastered the hard stuff.

As the sole provider for her son, staying home was not an option. While she understood the intent of taking multiple COVID tests, she did not agree with her son doing the same. The process of "thugging it out," as Mel stated, means that she would rather risk taking her own precautions to keep him safe from COVID than constantly get him tested. In answering the question of how Black women receiving government assistance coped with the impact of factors like COVID-19, Mel displayed the strategy of sacrifice which will be explored in chapter six.

The question of quarantine is one that also reveals its struggles and stresses. Scholars also look at this question of quarantine by exploring ways it produces systemic hierarchies and oppressions. According to Judith Butler (2020), these oppressions get stronger during a pandemic. In a recent piece, Butler shares, "the rapidity with which radical inequality, nationalism, and capitalist exploitation find ways to reproduce and strengthen themselves within the pandemic zones" is unprecedented (p. 2). Oftentimes in crisis, the sense of unity, solidarity, and humanity tend to rev up in our society as a reminder to us that we are "all in this together." Thinkers such as Jean-Luc Nancy (2020) even argue that COVID-19 "puts us on a basis of equality, bringing us together in the need to make a common stand" (p. 3). But for whom? The equality that Nancy speaks of resides within the populations who have access to such things as homes to quarantine in

or have quarantine as an option altogether, and who cannot work or stay home from work instead of being forced onto a job site because their livelihood depends on it. This was the reality of Black women receiving government assistance in the U.S. during the pandemic. The increase of inequalities Butler speaks to prevents many of these women from choosing safety measures like quarantining as an option, putting them at risk to experience more harm such as catching the virus or even death in this context.

Quarantining was not the only additional aspect of this pandemic outside of the virus that Black women had to think about when it came to their bodies, reproduction, and motherhood. Physical and social restrictions due to the virus seemed to further emphasize feelings about race and class barriers in healthcare facilities. While today, many hospitals have instituted a limit of one adult visitor per patient, at the start of the pandemic visitors were not allowed to visit patients in labor and delivery units. We will see in later chapters that physical, moral, and spiritual support is critical to how these women progressed in times of the pandemic, racial tension, and the aftermath of Trump. The absence of that support during the pandemic made the birthing process much more difficult for some, Ladii (25-35, Richmond, VA) explained:

> the experience of having a baby in a birthing center during COVID was completely different from the experience before. I'm used to a good support system, and for the second birth, there were only two people; the doctor and me. The tightness was so uncomfortable. I don't know these people. I'm already Black

> with white medical staff, now I have to hope these people wear masks, wash their hands... it caused stress on me and the baby.

Although not a mother, Woman #7 (36-45, California) spoke of having to support her cousin from a distance as she navigated hardships during her pregnancy:

> My cousin was told she couldn't have her boyfriend in the room with her for an appointment. In the lobby there were two women who appeared to be White who had people with them and when asked, the doctors explained that one had a mental health challenge, and the other had a language barrier, but no one took into consideration the racial barrier that is constantly there for Black women every day. That support is needed in one of the most frightening times of their lives.

It is important to reiterate the impacts of chronic stressors outside of the three main factors. Ladii and Woman #7 both shared how space and language showed up as a stressor impacting well-being. For Ladii, the tight space of the birthing center in addition to not having her support system with her in the space, caused stress on her and her child. Not only was the physical space causing discomfort, but the process of constantly questioning the sanitation of the staff took a toll on her mental health. Woman #7 experienced patients receiving additional support for a mental or language barrier but was adamant about the need for additional support due to racial barriers. Because of the stress Black women are exposed to daily in addition to experiencing higher rates of complications with pregnancy, their race needs to be taken into consideration. These

stressors also sustained a fear around the birth of a child and the child's health as well, especially in the middle of a pandemic.

The spread of COVID-19 brought death tolls to a peak in the summer of 2020 leaving millions of people longing for a solution. Talks of a COVID-19 vaccination brought relief for some but made many Black Americans skeptical. There is a long history of mistrust between Black Americans and healthcare which impacted their decision to get the COVID-19 vaccine. This same sentiment of mistrust resided with Kookie B (36-45, Washington D.C.) about the vaccination as well. She spoke about how a traumatic event played a role in her decision to not get the vaccine:

> My daughter died in the hands of doctors, in the NICU. I believe it was because of negligence from the staff. So, if I went through that with my daughter, why would I trust anyone at the hospital? Especially now during COVID. You hear people having babies during COVID and stuff like that. And they've been saying that they don't give the babies the COVID shot. How do I know? I mean with all the shots they give a baby; how do you really know what they are injecting into your child? We're going by sheer blind faith that your baby is not going to be exposed. Black women like me really need to stop and think about what it is that they really want to do with our bodies, what hospital they want to have their child in; that's *if* they want to have their child in the hospital at all.

The negligence of staff from the death of her daughter produced a trauma for Kookie B that she does not want to relieve and prevents her from putting her trust in medical

workers. Repeatedly, Kookie B has been on the receiving end of inconsistent communication and care. She urges women to reflect on the autonomy of their own bodies and carefully research their healthcare staff.

Chante (25-35, Birmingham, Alabama) spoke to mistrust in the current healthcare system stemming from the knowledge she had around the history of Black women's bodies in gynecology:

> What I learned about gynecology took me out. It took me out to sit here and know that I go to a doctor, and they do things to me and use tools on me that were used on dark bodies without anesthesia. There is some white man in front of me introducing himself as my gynecologist. Now that I have the history behind it, it is trembling. It is troubling. But my problem is, I don't know how we gain access back to it. I don't know. I don't know how to answer that question of access because that's a major, major problem. Access to contraceptives, pap smears, are very important. I don't have insurance and have one fibroid that needs to be removed. So, me and him [the fibroid] gone to have to rock out a little bit longer, and that is something that can affect my reproduction because my fibroid can continue to grow.

The history of the correlation between Black women's bodies and pain defeats Chante. She feels hopeless about her own healthcare journey because not only are Black women mistreated in healthcare, but the absence of insurance prevents her from receiving a procedure for a long-lasting issue. Having a fibroid that she cannot get removed, because

of lack of coverage, directly impacts how she makes decisions about her body, reproduction, and motherhood.

This fear that their bodies could be harmed influenced the decision around the CDC's recommendation to receive the COVID vaccine.

Dr. Sherita Hill Golden (2021) at John Hopkins Medical School provides context as to why there is a lack of trust in the Black community towards vaccinations:

> Institutional racism and historical inequities in healthcare may also play a role in vaccine hesitancy among African Americans and other people of color. Incidents of the medical establishment endangering the health or betraying the trust of Black patients and research participants have complicated the relationship between the medical establishment and these communities. A historic lack of diversity among health care practitioners and substandard services and care afforded to patients living in poverty can create enduring negative experiences with medical care (p. 2).

In an attempt to get more people in the Black community vaccinated, campaigns launched around the nation to make residents feel more comfortable in the product and restore trust in the healthcare system. Black political leaders, church pastors, and community members all used various platforms to help educate their audiences about the benefits of the vaccine. The widely known organization "Black Community" created a toolkit used by others to build campaigns in their communities that drive Black individuals to vaccination sites.

The mistrust these women and Black Americans felt in the COVID-19 vaccine requires us to look at bigger questions around public health and access to proper healthcare for Black people. Along with the data provided by Dr. Golden above, Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) survey data shows that even before COVID-19, African Americans were experiencing lower rates of health insurance coverage, increased barriers to accessing health care, and worse health outcomes compared to their white counterparts; and COVID has drawn new attention to and compounded these existing disparities in health and healthcare (Artiga, Brodie, Hamel, Lopes, & Muñana, 2020). When asked about potential reasons why Black people in the U.S. have worse outcomes regarding access and treatment on average compared to white people, Black adults were much more likely than white adults to view various factors as major reasons, including disparities in access to healthcare and insurance (72% vs. 49%), environmental exposures (70% vs. 40%), and disparities in the level of care provided to Black vs. white patients (54% vs. 26%). Black adults were also more likely than their white counterparts to blame lack of healthy behaviors (38% vs. 24%) and genetic differences (26% vs. 14%) for racial disparities in overall health outcomes.

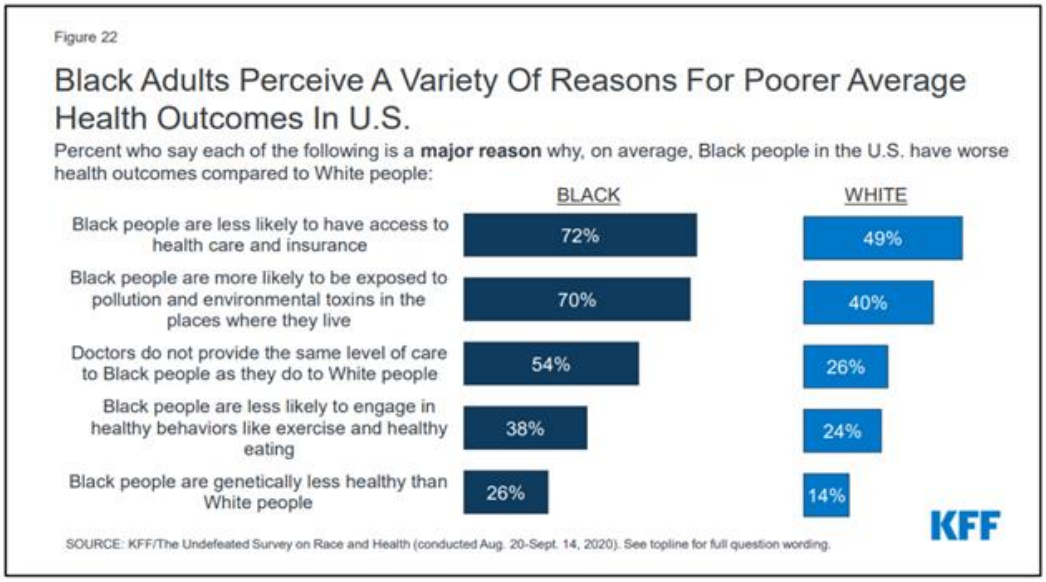


Figure 5: Black Adult Health Outcomes

There is longstanding research that also suggests the main drivers of racial disparities in healthcare originate from the provider, institutional bias, and discrimination which can affect not only access to healthcare, but also how Black adults are diagnosed and treated. (Artiga, Brodie, Hamel, Lopes, & Muñana, 2020). The disparities that enter national consciousness around race, class, and healthcare are the disparities these women witness on a day-to-day basis that have only heightened since the spread of COVID-19. Historical discrimination in healthcare creates a runway for Black women to be treated unfairly throughout the public health field. Although data shows that Blacks experienced the largest number of improvements in health coverage, access, and utilization when compared to pre-ACA healthcare (Figure 1), it is very evident that the pandemic has impacted how Black women receiving government assistance is the U.S. think about their bodies, their reproduction, and motherhood (Aritga & Orgera, 2019).

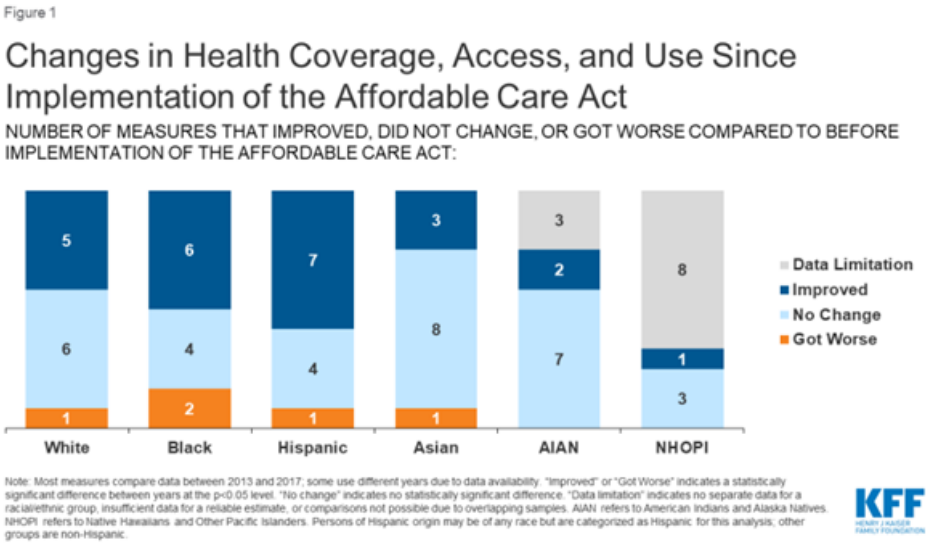


Figure 6: Changes To Health Coverage

Black women are among some of the highest victims of racial discrimination in healthcare as seen above. Studies show that Black women are often misdiagnosed and mistreated for their healthcare concerns, most commonly around pain tolerance which continues from centuries ago (Belyue-Umole, Fuller, Howell, Jefferies, King, Marshall, & Prather, 2018).

When learning about the field of gynecology, Chante (25-35, Birmingham, Alabama) referenced the knowledge about its origination as the cause of her mistrust towards the healthcare system. The origins of this medical field documents how Black women were brutally treated. James Marion Sims, the "Father of Modern Gynecology" and former president of the American Medical Association performed many reproductive experimental surgeries without anesthesia to treat various childbirth illnesses among

enslaved African American women. Adverse sexual and reproductive health and healthcare experiences continued for African American women throughout the Black Codes/Jim Crow era, and the Medicaid program forced many hospitals to adhere to the Civil Rights Act and hired doctors who would treat patients of all races, although unequally (2018). This historical exploitation of Black women remains evident in healthcare practices today. In 2016, *Proceedings of the National Academies of Science* published research revealing that "40% of first- and second-year medical students endorsed the belief that "black people's skin is thicker than white people's" (Sabin, 2020).

When analyzing the responses of these women and looking at supporting data that proves that Black people are much more disproportionately affected by this disease than other populations, questions of population management arise. Could this phenomenon also be part of a larger political strategy that impacts the death rate of Black people? While observing ways that Black women as a population are widely affected by this virus, the concept of Foucault's biopower surfaces. During a lecture given at Collége de France in 1977 under the title *Security, Territory, Populations,* Foucault (1977) defines "bio-power" as, "the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power" (p. 54). Later, Foucault (1990) introduces observations about relations of force directed at both individuals and populations: an "era of biopower" (p. 33). Biopower, operating at two poles, discipline and biopolitics, functions as "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations" (p. 33).

Biopower is both “centered on the body as a machine” through disciplinary practices implemented at the individual level, and at a biological register that is "focused on the species body" of the population (1990). An essential factor of biopower is the focus on the life (bio, biology) of the population as a political matter and Foucault argues that “population” arose in the eighteenth century as a political concern. Within the administration of biopower, bodies become quantifiable, and qualities of life are then contributed to the population.

Foucault’s explanation of this milieu showcases the features of biopolitics. Interventions into the milieu affect the social and political environment of a population of people. In his final lecture, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault (1979) states that biopolitics is governmental practices focused on "health, hygiene, birth rate, life expectancy, [and] race" (p. 43). Biopolitics focuses on many aspects such as wealth, resources, climate, and accidents; all of which according to Foucault, impact birth and death and is not derived by nature but is a form of governmental reasons that produces principles essential to it.

What begins to become clear in listening to these women, is that aspects of their daily lives like the ones mentioned above are affected by how the government, or systems of power, control them. In Foucault’s lecture, *“Society Must Be Defended,”* Foucault (1975-76) argues that racism is “a way of introducing a break into the domain of life taken over by power: the break between what must live and what must die” (p. 13). In other words, with the emergence of biopolitics, racism becomes the determining factor that creates a hierarchy between people to regulate who will be exposed to the risk of

death. The “differential exposure”, as Lorenzini (2020) calls it, of people to health and social risks is a main component of biopolitical governmentality. With racism being a “condition of acceptability”, it dictates this exposure of lives in society in which “power is mainly exercised to protect the biological life of the population and enhance its productive capacity” (p. 4). While Lorenzini does argue that Foucault’s biopolitics can certainly be used to explain the management of lives during the time of coronavirus, he does caution us to avoid reducing it to just “making live and letting die”, but rather understand it as an effort to differentially manage the gray area between the two (Foucault, 1975-76). What biopolitics does engage in, however, is “differential vulnerability”; meaning it is a politics that structurally relies on the establishment of hierarchies in the value of lives, producing and multiplying vulnerability as a means of governing people (Lorenzini, 2020). During the pandemic when healthcare workers are being deemed as “medical heroes” or being responsible for “fighting coronavirus” it is the people like Mel who are delivery workers who are risking their health to ensure packages are delivered while others can remain safe in their homes that get left out of the conversation, that don’t get acknowledged, and certainly do not receive the honor of “hero”. What about the factory worker, the gas station cashier, the bus driver, the people who mostly are economically disadvantaged a lot like the women interviewed? Differential vulnerability neglects to bring attention to the bottom-up approach to systems of power, making the work of the oppressed invisible although the work is heavily relied upon. What COVID-19 has done is revealed more about the racial and social inequities that are present, it has exposed ways our society structurally relies on the production of

differential vulnerability and Black women receiving assistance are oftentimes the ones withstanding the worst of it.

This chapter investigated the ways COVID-19 specifically impacted Black women receiving government assistance in the U.S. and the ways they were able to persist and cope through such a heavy time. The next chapter will explore the impacts of another heavy moment in 2020, The Summer of Racial Reckoning, the third and final factor.

CHAPTER THREE: HEIGHTENED RACE RELATIONS

"And while Floyd was down on the ground, advocating for himself, expressing his unbearable pain in his final moments of life, this 46-year-old Black man cries out for his mother — his mother, who, though she undoubtedly did the best she could, could not protect him or save him from a broken system. Fear is a mental home base for mothers of Black sons."

- Hudson (2020)

On May 30, 2020, the conversation about systemic racism extended beyond COVID-19 as the world watched the murder of George Floyd at the hands of police officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Journalists and scholars analyzed why this murder was different from others and how the impact may spark change in the United States. After suspecting Floyd of using a counterfeit $20 bill to purchase cigarettes, three squad cars arrived to confront Floyd, resulting in police officer Derek Chauvin "casually kneeling on the victim's neck" for 8 minutes and 46 seconds and ultimately, Floyd's death (Altman, 2020). Following the murders of Breonna Taylor (March 2020) and Ahmaud Arbery (February 2020), Floyd's vicious murder spurred an international uprising of protest and riots and triggered civic unrest in the United States at a scale we had not seen since the Civil Rights Era also known as The Summer of Racial Reckoning (2020). The women in this study spoke to how this and other heightened racial tensions after the killings of Black men and women by police officers, affected the ways they see themselves and think of motherhood.

Unlike Trump and COVID-19, racial reckoning has a long history for Black women who have been economically disadvantaged in the U.S., their bodies, reproduction, and motherhood. This chapter provides a brief historical review of the ways they were impacted by the institution of racism before exploring the impacts brought upon by The Summer of Racial Reckoning.

HISTORICAL RACIAL IMPACTS

The emancipation of enslaved Black Americans, documented to have been June 19,1865, ushered in the Reconstruction period. Black Americans were eager to receive the promises of equality stated in the Constitution. Black women were now expected to receive money for their own families in exchange for their labors (Sharpless, 2010). One of the ways Black women began to take charge in making this promise a reality, was to form clubs that centered the fight against inequities. Starting in the late 1890s, the Black Women's club movement was spurred by efforts to end lynching. Ida B. Wells traveled the country lecturing about lynching and founded Black women's clubs such as The Alpha Suffrage Club and co-founded, the National Association of Colored Women, one of the largest coalitions of Black women assembled during this time with local chapters around the country. These women believed public health was particularly important in Black communities due to a shortage of healthcare professionals and medical institutions willing to serve Black communities. Smith (1995) explains how Black women's club movement saw itself as the pillar of health work:

> Black club women believed that health work was distinctively women's work because of their unquestioned acceptance of the gendered division of labor of the family, their commitment to racial uplift and alleviating poverty, and their concerns about sexual mortality (p.18).

It is important to note the position class status played in the stance of sexuality for club women at this time. Black middle-class women felt they had a personal stake in the "improvement" of the poor because of the potential effects on their own status. These women constantly expressed their attitude about how the fate of their status was tied to economically disadvantaged communities, despite their efforts to distinguish themselves from the poor. To counter the racist sexual stereotypes that attempted to depict Black women as promiscuous by nature which primarily began during slavery, club women felt compelled to expose sexual myths and bring publicity to the sexual abuse Black women were experiencing. A major goal of The National Association of Colored Women was to address sexual vulnerability by countering these negative sexual stereotypes with positive "moral" images of Black women's sexuality.

During the early 20th century, the denial of government support activated Black women to respond to these inequities. In the early 1930s, while the country was in The Great Depression, talks of government aid began to spread. In response to this, the Social Security Act of 1935 was created as a part of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal program. The 18 million Americans affected by the Great Depression mostly consisted of "elderly, disabled, and single mothers with children who already lived at a bare subsistence level"

("Bill of Rights in Action," 1998). The Social Security Act established programs that assisted each demographic including: a Social Security program funded by payroll taxes to contribute to the decline of poverty among the elderly, an unemployment insurance program administered by the state to assist widows, poor children, the elderly poor, and the disabled, and the Aid to Dependent Children program which provided aid to single mother homes. When the act passed, agricultural workers and domestic servants – mostly Black men and women – were excluded from the core programs of the Social Security Act (Albiston and Nielsen 478). Spouses and children of ineligible workers were prohibited from receiving these benefits as well. These exclusions of rights for Black people, specifically Black women, charged a movement spearheaded by Black women to demand equality.

The exclusion of Black women from monumental governmental assistance programs continued into the Civil Rights Era, including various skilled jobs and corporate work. While Executive Order 10925, which implemented affirmative action to ensure that applicants were employed and that employees were treated fairly during employment without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin signed by President Kennedy in 1961, allowed Black men to enter jobs with higher wages, Black women were not granted this same opportunity. Black women had to rely primarily on domestic work for income to provide for their families. The stability of the family was at stake and required Black women to work to uphold it. Individually and collectively, Black women struggled to assert their right as dignified individuals, having meaningful existence (Rio, 2000). They were seen as victims of their own ignorance, and many

whites believed they came from Black communities plagued with crime and poverty with elevated levels of premature pregnancies. This depiction of Black life in white minds was common and helped inform legal, racial segregation policies (Bambara, 1970). The image of Black women as uneducated domestics forged during this time echoed past imaginaries of the slavery era and rearticulated them in the context of the 20th-century Civil Rights era. However, scholars like Tracey Walters, in her book *Not Your Mother's Mammy*, highlight the ways in which Black women were resisting these images and disassociating with domestic work. Due to the activist work in the 1940s and 1950s by Black feminist like Claudia Jones and Dorothy Bolden, who wrote extensively about the inequities of domestic workers and founded organizations like the National Domestic Workers Union of America (NDWUA), hundreds of domestic workers courageously helped bring visibility to the oppression of Black citizens by the white supremacists (2021). Showing once again this bottom-up approach to how Black women engaged in politics revealing injustice on a national level. By the 1960s and 1970s greater access to higher education, increasing opportunities in the private sector, and a rejection of labor that had a reminisce to the plantation, also led Black women to disassociate with domestic work.

Black women were still spearheading the fight for public health initiatives and by the 1960s, the battle for access to proper healthcare was intersecting with welfare rights campaigns driven by the concept of motherhood. The family served as the fundamental social unit in the United States. The family structure was shaped by middle-class suburbia, which created the notion that the family unit was uniform throughout all sectors

of society. This idea of a "normal family", meaning the idea of a family that was accepted as good, right, and safe, is one that "the white family has achieved [at] a high degree of stability and is maintaining stability, but in contrast, the family structure of lower-class Negros is highly unstable" (Moynihan, 1965, p. 11). Due to the "normal family" standard set by white Americans, the unstable identity of the Black family became contingent upon the stable identity of the white family, much like the perception of Black women's impure identity was made possible by the pre-established perception of white women's pure identity developed during the time of chattel slavery. The constant exclusion of Black women and their role in family-making transcends through centuries. The release of The Moynihan Report in 1965 brought national attention to the implied instability in Black homes, showcasing high rates of families led by women and births "out-of-wedlock." Conservatives used the results of the Moynihan Report to implement how Blacks should progress. Moral revitalization was the answer to progression, not economic or social support. To uphold the image of America as a civil society, stable families needed to be at the forefront. The report results argued that Black families were "broken" with a high percentage of these families led by Black women. The Moynihan Report heavily influenced policymakers' decisions about contraceptives for Black women in the 1960s and for years to come. Black women who were economically disadvantaged and their children deemed social liabilities, and lawmakers had the power to "control indigent women's fertility as the first step in moral and behavioral rehabilitation [to ensure] poor women do not reproduce" (Thomas, 1998, p. 420). Theoretically, to reduce the number of unstable families, it was necessary to create a formalized control tactic to better manage

Black women's reproduction to ensure the decline of "unstable families." Although not identical, this modern form of control and management resonates with that of slave masters managing and making decisions for enslaved children. While the management of reproduction for poor women of color began during slavery, universal acceptance of the report increased forms of control that were not as aggressive. In her book *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, Collins (2004) draws the connection to the controlling of enslaved women's wombs and modern-day strategies of control. Collins states under chattel slavery, the bodies of the enslaved and all that was contained in those bodies (labor, sexuality, and reproduction) were objectified and turned into commodities; owners of the enslaved defined their slave women as commodities, "eliminating their feeling and rights to choose; their head and heart are separated from their hands, and they are divided into womb and vagina" (p. 37). With this kind of historical background, traces of objectification of Black women's bodies remain and produce how Black women are viewed today. Control of their right to reproduction is dismissed and substituted with policies created by the dominant (Collins, 2004). The overturn of Roe vs. Wade, the landmark piece of legislation that made access to an abortion a federal right in the United States, in 2022 is one example of how policies affect women's right to make decisions about their reproduction.

Two years after the release of the report, amendments were made to the Social Security Act, raising eligibility standards and reducing welfare benefits to low-income mothers and their children. Black women receiving government assistance from all over the country were active with The National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO)

angered by these amendments that acted as a form of social control. On Mother's Day in 1968, more than five thousand Black women marched in Washington, D.C. for the opening of the Poor People's Campaign coordinated by NWRO to call for a repeal of the amendments to the 1967 Social Security Act. The idea of motherhood played a vital role in welfare reform:

> discordant views about welfare mothers and, especially, black families lay at the heart of the welfare reform efforts that both recipient-activists and welfare authorities undertook. District welfare authorities and federal officials branded AFDC recipients as immoral for their illegitimacy rates and presumed their dishonesty in claiming eligibility to receive public funds (Valk, 2000, p. 47).

Black mothers receiving assistance had a different view of motherhood and their behaviors. Welfare rights activists "refused to internalize negative perceptions" as they addressed issues that raised this image of them as immoral (White, 1999, p. 17). Coining the slogan "mother power" for the 1968 march, Black welfare rights activists conceived motherhood as a source of moral authority and a way to emphasize that their motivations were for their families' best interests (Valk, 2000). These actions of persistence, activism, and resistance about rights tied to family care and reproduction continued through the 20th century.

In the 1970s and well into the decades to follow, National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) along with The Combahee River Collective (CRC) and the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) made reproductive rights central to their political demands. These organizations linked a woman's right to prevent reproduction

using abortion and birth control to the socioeconomic context that chose to have a child a reality (Nelson, 2015). The Black woman's right to medical healthcare for herself and her children expanded to her right to be safeguarded against sterilization and attaining the means to prevent the birth of an unwanted child, and the economic means and protection from reproductive abuses necessary to bear a wanted child. Black feminist organizations supported birth control and abortion and called out sterilization abuse, bringing attention to women of color who were economically disadvantaged and disproportionately victims of sterilization abuse. The impacts of sterilization will continue to be explored later in this chapter.

Now in the 21st century, Black women receiving government assistance must still deal with the negative impacts of race. In 2016, researchers from Utrecht University and Colgate University studied the link between "typical" welfare recipients and racial stereotypes. Participants looked at 400 pairs of faces and selected the face in each pair that looked more like a welfare recipient. Based on the participant's responses, the researcher superimposed images to create one photo showing the average welfare recipient and another photo showing the average non-recipient. The image of the average welfare recipient appeared as a Black woman, and the average non-recipient appeared as a white man. It is important to note the way politicians and media, particularly during the Regan Administration in relation to "The Welfare Queen" troupe, intentionally chose Black women as the face of welfare (Demby, 2019). Researchers then asked two completely distinct groups of participants to evaluate various features, for example, race and gender. Other features related to aspects of the individual's personality, including

laziness, competence, humanness, and agency, were also evaluated. Importantly, the participants were making these evaluations based on the image alone – they were not informed how these images were generated or what they represented, only that these were images of actual people who had applied for government welfare programs. Additionally, participants rated the average welfare recipient as less attractive and less happy than the aggregate non-welfare-recipient face. Moreover, they assessed the individual representing the welfare recipient to be lazier, more incompetent, more hostile, and less human. Participants also rated the perceived average welfare recipient as generally less responsible and specifically less responsible with food stamps and cash assistance than the non-welfare recipient. It is important to note that the public's idea of who is a welfare recipient is a construction produced by systems of power, so these ratings from the participants are influenced by what messages, images, and knowledge they have received over time about who receives assistance. These evaluations of the average welfare recipient also drove their opinion about the support of the recipient, which expressed less support for giving food stamps and cash assistance. Researchers expressed how this experiment, "sheds light on the psychological roots of political policy preferences" and justifies the importance of race and gender bias in policymaking around welfare (Brown-Iannuzzi and Payne, 2016, p. 234).

RACIAL IMPACTS AFTER GEORGE FLOYD

The historical references presented above, highlight just a handful of instances throughout history where Black women receiving government assistance have been negatively impacted by ways racism, sexism, and classism but also the ways in which

Black women have resisted myriad oppressive logics and refused to take on the projections dominant culture placed on them. While the murder of George Floyd did not create new experiences for Black women, it did bring about a collective national consciousness of the realities of stress from racial disparities. All the interviewees spoke about racial injustices post George Floyd and their direct impacts on thoughts about their bodies, reproduction, and motherhood. Hudson (2020), an attorney and member of the Black Lives Matter Movement, gives more insight into the ways these mothers may have processed the impact the death of George Floyd:

> Months before giving birth to my son…I wept for Black mothers, women like myself, who would bring handsome and talented and lively Black boys into a world that hates them and us. The killing of George Floyd is a tragic and tangible depiction of this egregious reality. And while Floyd was down on the ground, advocating for himself, expressing his unbearable pain in his final moments of life, this 46-year-old Black man cries out for his mother — his mother, who, though she undoubtedly did the best she could, could not protect him or save him from a broken system. Fear is a mental home base for mothers of Black sons (p. 3).

Hudson speaks to this brutal reality and even expands on the trauma by stating that the only way to protect Black sons from this vicious cycle "is to help him not to exist at all, to never birth him in the first place" (p. 3).

Over half of the participants were mothers to Black boys who described the fear they have each time their sons walk out of the house. Lena (Over 45, Raleigh, North Carolina) described this fear:

> I be scared for my kids because of this racial stuff because police acting the way they're acting. I can say that every cop is not the same, but it just seems like nobody cares.

The lack of care and empathy from the police officers that Lena spoke to jolted her to act and practice self-advocacy. Understanding that if she does not speak up about her rights, things may never happen, she decided to use her voice:

> When things are wrong, I always want to say something about it. We have rights! Yes, I will say 'you're doing this wrong.

For Lena, the police were making it noticeably clear through their killings, that they do not care about Black lives. To protest this stance, proclaiming that Black lives do matter, and to stand up against wrongdoings, Lena used her voice to dissent against injustice.

Other women in the study who were mothers to Black boys spoke to how nervous they became out of their sons' protection. Ebony (35, North Carolina) shared:

> First of all, I have two Black sons from the hood basically. And I don't know, I be more nervous for them to play outside because they could run out and the police pull up and things get hot and my son gets shot. So, it just makes me nervous.

Geraldine (Over 45, North Carolina) spoke to the in-depth conversations she had to have with her two sons to ensure they have a chance to make it home if confronted by the police:

> I have two sons, you know, African-American sons, so the murder of George Floyd does concern me because they [police] are out daily, you know, and my son's actions can be misconstrued. You can be doing something innocent, and you just don't know what could happen. It could be my son that gets… God knows I don't want that to happen, but it can happen because it's so much going on with the police and African American males. You tell your sons every day, 'be careful, watch your back. If the police pull you over, if you were speeding or not, you make sure that your hands are to be seen. You don't move and follow directions so you can come home to tell your story. Do not try to argue, do not say you weren't speeding.' Just listen, listen. And if you get an opportunity before the police get to your door, when you in your vehicle, make sure you got your phone recording, so you can have that voice.

When asked if recording police interactions was advice she started giving after the murder of George Floyd, Geraldine responded:

> Yes, I always tell them to record now because of the simple fact that sometimes, not to say that all police officers are racist, but recording is for your protection. It's always for your protection. And you'll have a witness if nobody else is around. Cell phones, technology right now, could be your best friend or your worst enemy. And in that circumstance, I'll always tell them, that'd be your best friend.

At the end of the day, Ebony and Geraldine simply want their Black sons to live. The thought of them dying at the hands of the police required them to be even more cautious. The innocence of their children is not able to be preserved because as mothers, watching police brutality reoccurring, to protect their sons, they must teach them at an early age how to survive.

The Summer of Racial Reckoning, from 2020-2022, also impacted Black women who are not mothers. Two out of the eleven participants interviewed were not mothers and still spoke about the terror they witnessed due to the murder of Floyd. Woman #7 (36-44, California) reflected on how she is more aware of her responses to white police officers:

> I was walking the other day in my cousin's neighborhood, and I stopped to get on a prayer call. I was praying and there was a white police officer sitting in the car. I was scared to even pray because I was like, what if I'm praying too loud and he says I'm disturbing the peace? Luckily, after I was done praying, he said, 'I needed that [referring to the prayer]'. That calmed me down for a second, but at the end of the day, he's still a white police officer. And he'll still assimilate. If it comes down to protecting himself or protecting me, he'll protect himself.

The fear of seeing a white police officer is so consuming, that even if a woman has not done anything wrong, she is still afraid to engage in her daily practices. Seeing a white police officer triggered Woman #7 to think about the volume of her prayers as a potential

cause for altercation. And although in this particular case, the police officer positively responded to Woman #7, the fear remains, because next time, she may not be so lucky.

This idea of whiteness protecting itself is something that comes up repeatedly throughout the interviews revealing a practice that perpetuates racism and continues to uphold whiteness as superior. DiAngelo (2011) expounds on this idea explaining how "white people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress" (p. 58). Fine (1997) identifies this insulation when she observes "… how whiteness accrues privilege and status; gets itself surrounded by protective pillows of resources and/or benefits of the doubt; how whiteness repels gossip and voyeurism and instead demands dignity" (p. 61). White people are rarely without these "protective pillows," and when they are, it is usually temporary and by choice. This insulated environment of racial privilege builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress. (Fine, 1997). These protective pillows DiAngelo speaks of exist outside of Black women's identity. Black women have constantly been the target of violence, exclusion, and erasure, and the women in this study experience these impacts of racial oppression constantly and still find ways to actively engage in practices of resistance to fight for their justice.

CHAPTER FOUR: SIMULTANEOUS STRESSORS

"It's either COVID is killing us, cops are killing us, or the economy is killing us."

- Borkor

While each of the three factors uniquely impacts Black economically disadvantaged women, when they overlap the multiplicative consequences are severe and generational. Building upon chapters one, two, and three, this chapter provides an analysis of the ways the Trump Administration, COVID-19, and the spike in race relations post-George Floyd all come together to create unique oppressions for these women. Altman speaks to how these three factors affect the Black community; "It's either COVID killing us, cops are killing us, or the economy is killing us" (Altman, 2020). The voices of the women, as interviewed, help us to dive deeper into how the culmination of these factors directly impacted their daily lives. This chapter analyzes how these factors work together to create mental, emotional, and physical stress by examining access to birth control and medical treatment. This chapter also introduces the fourth strategy of community support as a form of resistance against the negative experiences continued in the height of 2020.

SIMULTANEOUS STRESSORS

In 2020 it all seemed to come to a head. By June, American citizens were living through the effects of the Trump Administration, COVID-19, and the murder of George Floyd. For most of the women who were interviewed, they described 2020 as a perfect

storm. All at once these happenings created stressors that at times were too hard to decipher which aspect of their identity was being attacked “For women like us, Black, needing assistance, there's no peace outside. When you walk outside, there's no peace anywhere” (Ladii, 25-35, Richmond, VA). The word overlap here not only emphasizes how all three of these factors were occurring simultaneously, but also showcase how the oppressions of all three factors created specific experiences for these women, the impact is not just additive but also multiplicative.

Each factor has been unpacked spotlighting how they impact Black women, but the simultaneity and multiplicativity of the overlap of these factors cause even more stressors especially around reproduction and motherhood. When it comes to topics of reproduction and motherhood, it becomes evident that these women experience stressors that stem from multiple oppressive systems. Woman #7 (36-45, California), Neferti (36-45, New York), and Ladii (25-35, Richmond) provide three different narratives about how they experienced the impacts on reproductive health when all three factors were at play at one time in 2020. For Woman #7, it is the pressure she felt from both society and medical staff to have children that made her feel like others were in control of her body. In sharing, from her position, she felt the Trump Administration purposely created laws to make it harder for poor Black women to take care of their families, Woman #7 also spoke about how this applied pressure created more stress on her mental and physical body:

> I feel like society pushes you, especially when you're older to have kids. All the time I am asked by people ‘why haven't you have kids? Why haven't you had kids?’ Then, on the other hand, when you are a certain age, doctors are telling you, you can't have kids. Last year I was diagnosed with stage four endometriosis, having one of the worst cases my African American doctor said she had seen. I remember coming out of surgery and immediately the anesthesiologist comes to me and says, I had only been awake for about five minutes, she says ‘you're probably not going to be able to have kids anyway. I read that you were a believer so you probably could probably ask somebody at church to have a kid for you.’ So now the doctors are forcing motherhood on me in a different way when I haven't even coped with the possibility that this may not happen in a natural way. There is no room given to us to mourn, to feel, to experience human emotion. So, it is hard for me to believe I have control over my body. The worst part is, these types of experiences are happening all the time, especially during Trump’s era, making Black women feel helpless and dependent on doctors.

Woman #7 spoke to a process imposed on Black women for centuries, this detachment of human emotion from the body. Dating back to slavery, Spillers (1987) describes a clear divide between body and flesh. The body pertained to legal personhood; flesh, on the other hand, was conceived as both a temporal and conceptual precursor to the body allowing only the flesh identity of the enslaved to exist in the eyes of possessors. Hence, various forms of violence, including that caused by whips, chains, and knives against flesh, which was drained of self-determined personhood, could be justified because the

enslaved were as less than a person and seen as property. This treatment of Black women has evolved over time and yet the regulation of their bodies and the separation from humanity, human emotions like the ones Woman #7 felt still occur in behaviors like the ones above. In all the pain this caused on the physical body, Woman #7 still had to be responsible for her recovery. Woman #7 spoke to having to arrange her transportation on days where driving was impossible which sometimes required her to spend money that could have been used for other important responsibilities like her paying her bills. She also spoke about how thoughts of her body being regulated would affect her mental health becoming anxious and overwhelmed, forcing her to rely on her community support to affirm her, which resistance strategy used by these women that is examined more in chapter six.

Dorothy Roberts focuses on this long history of the regulation of Black women's bodies in her work *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* where she concludes that Black women are targets for reproductive oppression, oftentimes being punished by systems to give birth. Among all U.S. women trying to assert their reproductive liberties, Black women have received the poorest treatment from governments, justice systems, social work systems, and health care systems which this project and scholars mentioned have continued to expose (1998). Roberts encourages a reframed thinking about reproductive rights and liberties arguing that the infrastructure to have a healthy pregnancy and a healthy parent-child relationship also ought to exist when a woman wants to have a child. Roberts suggests that this reframing of social policy would best occur if society placed Black women at the center

of discussions about reproductive rights (1998). The experiences of Black women can help other women understand the dangers they face when exercising their reproductive rights. This research project extends Robert's argument by centering the resistance of Black women against the reproductive and racial oppression, highlighting the strategies they use every day to overcome barriers against their bodies.

In analyzing the interviews multiple narratives about how bodies were regulated began to surface. On the one hand, women like Woman #7 are having their bodies regulated through the forcing of the idea of motherhood and on the other, women like Ladii and Neferti, are experiencing regulation via birth control, with medical staff, and so much more. Once again, dialectic, a both/and if you will, of different experiences occurring from the same events is present. Ladii explained:

> In high school, when I became sexually active doctors told me "you have to be on birth control today." The way they pushed it felt aggressive, but I could understand it, I was young with no children. I asked about the best form of birth control and was told it was the pill. I wanted to know the side effects and I was told " it doesn't matter." But it does! I needed to know how this was going to affect me later. I got pregnant at 21 and went to Planned Parenthood through the state of Virginia and then I knew the system was screwed against me. It's like if you have nothing, they don't want you to have children. But if you have a job, you have something, the option is open. But in having a job, you lose planned parenthood. You can't win! I had my daughter and as long as I wasn't working, they were covering my birth control OB-GYN appointments. But the second I got

> a job, they were like, oh, figure it out. You got it. It's like, wait, I still need assistance! So, it's like every time you think you're getting forward, you go back a little bit because it seems like they give you a little power, but then pull it back, as if to say “It's still mine”.

Ladii spoke directly to the regulation of power and control. When she was younger, she understood why there was an aggressive push to take birth control. As she got older and received more knowledge, she realized that the reasons for the push were much deeper than her age and were directly tied to her race, gender, and class status. Ladii experienced a process of confusion when it came to receiving assistance. Planned Parenthood was available when she did not have kids, but once she got a job and had a child, she lost the assistance that helped with her pregnancy. The contradicting circumstances made Ladii feel that she was not in full control of her own body.

Neferti explained how she experienced this push of control:

> When you are on assistance, a lot of outsiders want you to do what they want you to do. Having kids’ costs, so the more you have, the more they [assistance programs] have to dish out to you, right? So, they want you to not have children and get on birth control, to prevent you from having children. I had my son right before the pandemic and they kept asking if this was my last one, they kept recommending birth control. Even during the pandemic during doctors’ visits, it was asked. I know times were hard during the pandemic, but how can you tell someone what to do with their bodies?

What Neferti and Ladii spoke to is a long history of regulation through birth control towards Black women, even more towards Black women who are economically disadvantaged. Birth control is an example of understanding biopolitical power. Expanding upon Foucault's state racism, birth control is a legal way to regulate and manage populations. Complementing the theoretical contributions about population management from scholars like Foucault is more material and empirical research about reproduction management for Black women. Thomas (1998) explores the return of punitive fertility regulation proposals aimed particularly at mothers receiving help from the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program. State lawmakers in the 1950s and 1960s proposed sterilization become law and "each state plan referred to the special concern for rising welfare expenditures, but each also showed a preoccupation with controlling indigent women's childbearing behavior" (p. 423). The article suggests that parallels exist between eugenic sterilization and proposals involving "voluntary" birth control and benefit caps for indigent women on welfare (Thomas 420). Thomas views these benefit caps as a form of racism and focuses on how this racism is covered by an economic need and "moral" understanding.

The attention to Black women's protest against contraceptives is present in the work of scholars as well. For example, Manning Marable explores the idea of "race suicide" from birth control and sterilization. Marable explains that Blacks who tolerated birth control were indeed committing "race suicide" and suggested that racists used birth control as a legal means to reduce the Black population. There were many reasons why Black women began to reject any type of contraception in the 1960s. The fear of being

punished for birth circulated throughout the south and in 1964, “Mississippi house ratified a law that stipulated that any person who became the parent of a second out-of-wedlock child would be guilty of a felony” (Marable, 2015, p. 45). Marable traces how both white Republicans and Democrats alike even proposed punitive sterilization for Black welfare mothers. Other scholars such as Caron (1998), examined this topic of conversation and protest efforts in the Black power movement, “some Blacks, in particular, became skeptical of the increasing push for contraceptive dispersal in poor urban neighborhoods, accusing contraceptive proponents of promoting nothing less than “Black genocide” (p. 551). Neferti made it clear that she was skeptical of the push of birth control on Black women. She was completely aware of the capitalist ideology that more lives cost more money.

Multiplicative Impact On Healthcare

Social institutions such as healthcare have socialized people into norms and beliefs of the dominant social group. Gramsci argued that consent to the rule of the dominant group is achieved by the spread of these ideologies and when controlling these institutions, there is control over societies (1991). To reproduce the social structure, certain ideologies must remain in place. “Everyone keeps telling us Black women to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, well we don’t have straps, the system makes sure we barely have shoes” (Kookie B 36-45, Washington, D.C.) these words of Kookie B represent Gramsci’s idea of “common sense”; dominant ideas about society and in this case, Black women’s place in it (Cole, 2020). Black women receive this message, mostly from people in the dominant group, with the idea that one can succeed economically, that

they can advance in society, if they just work hard. Common sense can sustain under capitalism and works to justify it. If a person believes that all it takes to "make it out" is hard work and dedication, then the system of capitalism and the social structure that it produces, is valid. The problem with common sense is that it places the responsibility of success on the individual which in turn does not address the true racial, class, and gender inequities that are embedded on the systemic level. Therefore, if a person struggles economically, then they "deserve it," they "deserve to be poor".

This ideology restricts access to services like proper healthcare for Black women receiving government assistance in the U.S. Healthcare was not created to advance the lives of Black women, especially poor Black women. The women interviewed, spoke to firsthand experiences of poor healthcare closely tied to reproductive health for the sake of this research, but because these oppressions are ongoing, they also shared about their experiences engaging with the healthcare system for other aspects as well. For Dee (Over 45, Raleigh, NC), her everyday health was dependent on the ability for her to take medications, which cost up to $500. Not only was there a struggle with cost, but it was also the process of applying for healthcare assistance that Dee said made getting coverage impossible:

> Being a diabetic and having high blood pressure, it was hard for me to get Medicaid and get some help as far as getting my medication going. Even my kids didn't have Medicaid because of some issues with Trump who shut it down. I have to keep applying and filing out. I know I applied three times and the fourth

> time they gave it to me because of the kids, not even because I was sick. It is tiring filling those papers out. My insulin was $500 just for pens because I have two different types. So that's a thousand dollars that I did not have out of pocket. So I needed that Medicaid to help me to be here today.

The tedious application process Dee spoke about is one that many people must deal with when applying for assistance. In reviewing four Medicaid or government funding websites, all of them had some sort of message that "this is not an easy process" (medicaid.gov, 2022). The taxation of a constant runaround process prevents these women from gaining access to healthcare simply because they are so exhausted. In addition to everything else they are dealing with, the time and effort it takes to complete the application provide another barrier, especially when it is believed that complicated application process is intentional in keeping certain people from applying. What is also evident in Dee's narrative is the refusal of the answer "no" given to her by the government regarding Medicaid. By continuing to apply for healthcare coverage even though her body was physically sick from not having consistent access to her insulin in addition to the exhaustion the application process offers, Dee engages in an act of resistance by pushing back against these systemic barriers. Dee's persistence allowed her to finally obtain coverage and receive the medicine needed to sustain life comfortably.

In a 2015 report by the Urban Institute and the Virginia Commonwealth University Center on Society and Health, income and race were linked to health and longevity of life. According to the report, adults with an annual family income of less

than $35,000 were four times more likely to report being in fair to poor health than those earning $100,000 or more (Sternburg, 2018).

Figure 1. Self-Report of Fair or Poor Health, by Income, 2011

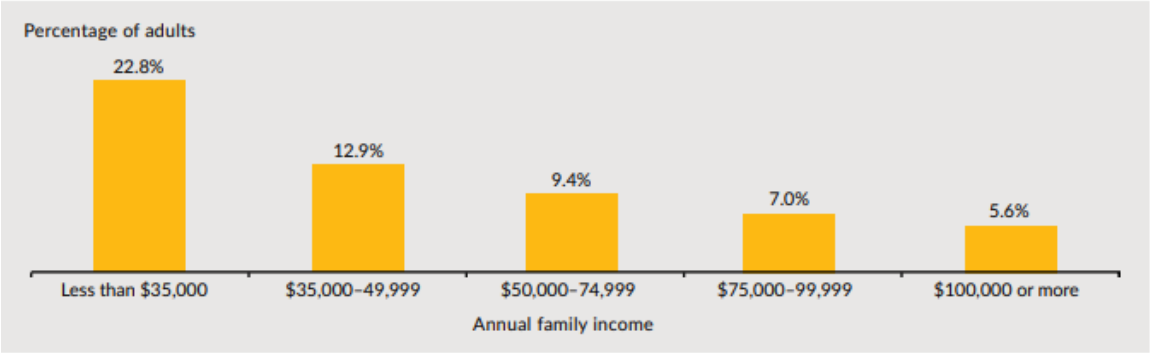


Figure 7: Health By Income

The report goes on to look at how health disparities are also present when looking at race and class:

> Income also plays a large role in the health disparities that affect minorities, the report says, with wealthier people typically healthier than low-income members of their own racial or ethnic group, whether they're Black, Hispanic or Native American. Population health is influenced not only by the economic well-being of individuals and households but also by the civic and economic vitality of their communities. (Urban Institute and the Virginia Commonwealth University Center on Society and Health)

It becomes evident that the oppressions that come out of racism and classism are affecting populations at a higher rate than others. The lack of resources that are in Black and Brown communities that have been disadvantaged reproduces this biopolitical process of who to "let die." The message of inferiority becomes noticeably clear when looking at poor communities of color. In her piece "Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Racism and Geography" Ruth Wilson Gilmore explores this biopolitical process answering the question of who is worthy of protection. Gilmore examines Black agricultural workers during The Great Depression and the ways their labor provided profit for regional capitalists who then funded mill-based work. Industrialization depended on the expansion of Jim Crow which reiterated that Black lives were disposable and not worth protecting even if their labor continued a capitalist system (2010).

In thinking about ways that Black bodies were viewed as disposable, Neferti (36-45, New York) spoke to another aspect that while not tied to 2020 specifically, impacted her and so many others. The image of the welfare queen. Again, although not directly a reflection of the three factors we are discussing, it is important to highlight this point here as it represents a larger barrier that Black women receiving government assistance battle daily, representing those chronic stressors experienced in addition to the three factors of 2020. Neferti explained:

> A lot of times people have this misconception about people who are on food stamps; this idea that they are not working or sitting around being lazy. Um,

> they're working! They're having kids as well, but sometimes their job is not meeting the income for them to be able to provide for their children. So just because I'm on social security or food stamps does not mean that I'm just sitting at home, twiddling my thumbs, I work, I'm just like the next person. I'm on social security because I have a chronic illness. People don't see the background; they just see you as another black girl. Um, another quote, unquote, maybe young mother, you know, because my first child I was, I was 23 when I had my first child and it was hard for me then, but I think it's harder for me now. Everything is happening all at once. 2020 is hard. Now I have two kids 11 years apart and everything is so much more expensive than it was when I had my first son.

This small section of Neferti's interview had so many overlapping components. Inflation in prices, mothering at an early age, living with a chronic illness, and needing financial support, were all obstacles for Neferti that had to be fought or overcome each day. The images of laziness or a helpless dependent in addition to all the listed obstacles only made the fight harder.

Bullock, Wyche, & Williams (2001), explained Black women on welfare in the 1980s and 1990s were viewed as hyperfertile, lazy, bad mothers, and "trapped" in the welfare system due to their unintelligence and inability to find work. This perceived way of life helped to coin "The Welfare Queen". This history of The Welfare Queen is one that was used by the media for bigger political agendas. This narrative of a Black woman who "used 80 names, 30 addresses, 15 telephone numbers to collect food stamps" was not always the face of welfare (Black & Sprague, 2016). During The Great Depression,

The Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program's caseload was 80 percent white families, although Black families were disproportionately affected by poverty. After The Great Migration of Black people to the northern states, Black mothers began accessing ADC which was met with hostility. During the Civil Rights era, the media's portrayal of poverty shifted. In 1964, only 27 percent of the photos accompanying stories about poverty in three of the country's top weekly news magazines featured black subjects; the following year, it rose to 49 percent and by 1967, 72 percent of photos accompanying stories about poverty featured black Americans (Black & Sprague, 2016). The image was used to perpetuate subordinate images of specifically Black women on welfare to justify reproduction management. Albiston & Nielsen (1995) linked race and the narrative around welfare queens together. They reviewed The Personal Responsibility Act and how it can be viewed from the lens of Black people:

> Although congressional reformers speak of personal responsibility for women receiving welfare in race-neutral terms, the racial modifier 'Black' lies implicit in the reform debate. No one misunderstands that the term 'welfare queens' refers to Black women. Messages about welfare are coded communications about social policy that substitute for more explicit racist statements that are no longer socially acceptable (p. 475).

The aspects of "The Welfare Queen" implied that she was a poor Black woman, symbolizing sexual irresponsibility, defective parenthood, and deviancy. The cycle of this narrative was critical to her management of her reproduction. This cycle is constant for Black women receiving assistance in the U.S. Even in the 21st century, politicians have

circulated their equivalent of the welfare queen narrative for their own gain. In 2000, Newt Gingrich, the 50th Speaker of the House of Representatives, infamously lamented a food stamp recipient who used her benefits to fly to Hawaii at the taxpayer's expense which resulted in policy restrictions on the Temporary Assistance of Needy Families program (Black & Sprague, 2016). This cycle of stigmatizing Black woman's bodies in the media for a bigger motive is not new. Historically, the media has played one of the biggest roles in dictating how Black women are seen and treated. When it comes to the present day, not much has changed.

CHAPTER FIVE: IMPACT OF MEDIA

"The media is selective because they don't even tell our real story, so I know they are not going to share the whole truth."

-Neferti (36-45, New York)

Media holds a unique relationship with the three factors being explored and Black women receiving government assistance. This chapter explores the impacts of national media coverage of these women when the factors were at their peak and how Black women were left to deal with the violent results long after the cameras left. This chapter unpacks the disconnect of media and the Black community and examines how Black women in the media are used for political gain and profit. In being at the receiving end of all these negative exploitations, these women found ways to showcase their narratives and celebrate themselves. This chapter also looks at how women are spotlighted by conducting an analysis on three platforms that focus on the Black community, *The Kevin Samuels Show*, a podcast, Tik Tok, and "Black Twitter."

Understanding now how these three factors were happening simultaneously, media impact is analyzed through multiple lenses. From addressing the use of social media during Trump's presidential campaign, to explore how Black women/mothers are misrepresented in the media, to examining Black Lives Matter, as a movement, and the impact of police killing on Black mothers/families, media is at the center of each of these factors. National media coverage of these factors mobilized viewers during opportune

times, oftentimes focusing on a specific election or event, and using communities of color as political scapegoats (Reed & Lumumba, 2022). The power of national consciousness brought attention to problems rarely exposed; however, this spotlight did not represent authentic care for the wellbeing of Black mothers. Instead, highlighting Black mothers' plights served as a short-term political expedient for progressive and left-leaning politicians. This tug-of-war, if you will, has been played between Black women and the media for some time. Media brings certain stories to national consciousness for reasons we will analyze later and these three factors, all having a direct impact on Black women, elevated their narratives. Some women interviewed noticed this shift in media presence. Ladii (25-35, Richmond, VA) in particular, spoke to the elevated visibility of Black experiences these factors created:

> Now that we have seen numerous Black people murdered on television, stories that have gone under the radar are coming out. They were not hidden because they aren't spoken about in the community, but because the media doesn’t bring it out loud enough. And then once it's bought out, the whole nation is in shock, like they can't believe this actually happened, but it did. And nothing is preventing these types of visuals from happening again. Stories are no longer being hidden; the pandemic also played a part in stories being global. Something that used to be minor and centrally located is now seen by the world, so the change that is required to be better needs to happen on a global level as well.

Ladii is speaking to several elements that happen simultaneously when national corporate media attempts to tell the stories of Black people. On one hand, there are numerous

incidents of police brutality that happen locally that are never brought to national consciousness. On the other hand, once stories do begin to circulate on a national level, viewers are so shocked as if it is a new occurrence. Ladii believes that media needs to be responsible for sharing local stories more widely and be sincere about how to mobilize viewers to change.

The question of corporate performativity in response to the Black Lives Matter movement is consequential. Hunsi asks "Is it hypocrisy? Or a genuine change?" (2020). This chapter begins to answer that question from the standpoint of the Black community and through the lens of the Black women, as interviewed.

POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA DURING TRUMP'S CAMPAIGN

One avenue that has played a key role in how narratives are shared is social media. The rise of social media continues to shape what is seen, processed, and expressed by the masses. During the 2016 election, almost a billion dollars, or 10% of the political ad budget, was forecasted to be spent on online advertising (E-Marketer 2016). Social media contributed to a shift of power relations between politicians, their campaigns, mainstream media, and journalists because now politicians could directly connect with audiences and have direct access to the means of production and distribution. With over 17 million followers on Twitter, Trump could impact and influence people all over the world within seconds with the release of a tweet, rather than relying on other mainstream media platforms such as the news stations and newspapers. This shift to advertising using social media platforms allowed political strategists to directly target individuals who were undecided about their vote while remaining cost-effective. Strategists followed

audiences, analyzed algorithms to develop sophisticated approaches to deliver messages that were sharable and able to spread quickly. According to Andy Wigmore, the campaign director of Leave.EU explained:

> It didn't matter what was said in the press. The more critical they were of us when we published these articles on our social media, the more numbers we got. So, it occurred to us that actually Trump was onto something because the more outrageous he was the more air time he got, the more air time he got the more outrageous he was. . .. The more outrageous we were the more airtime we got in the normal media and the more airtime—which was always critical—, the more support we got. . .. The more outrageous we were, we knew that the press was going to attack us, which is what they did. We are now anti-establishment full throttle. The more outrageous we were, the more attention we got. The more attention we got, the bigger the numbers (Tambini, 2018).

Wigmore's frustrations are shared by many of the interviewees. They spoke about the slurs against Black women, the offensive tweets, and the ongoing cruel discourse that not only impacted marginalized people across the globe but kept Trump's toxicity at the forefront of national consciousness. This impact was intentional. With over 88.5 million followers in 2021, the impact, at least via Twitter, ended for Trump in January, days after the attack on The Capitol, when Twitter permanently suspended Trump's account "due to the risk of further incitement of violence" (Fung, 2021).

POWER OF MEDIA DURING THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT

With the rise of media comes the rise of making audiences more aware of events that occur either around them or in places that seem unreachable. In July 2014, a video released captured on someone's cell phone of a New York Police Officer choking Eric Garner who was confronted for illegally selling cigarettes in front of a convenience store. It is important to acknowledge not only the impact mobile devices had in sharing protests that happened globally against police brutality, but the role they played in revealing the act itself. As the video played, Garner could be heard gasping for air struggling to say, "I Can't Breathe" (ABC News, 2014). The video went viral and with the increased spread of recorded footage of these acts of brutality, it became imperative to recognize mobile devices playing a significant role in media. When conducting surveys of acts of the police force, The Bureau of Justice reported that only 1.4% of police public contact used police force or threat, which has been consistent since 2002 (Ly, 2014). What has shifted is the massive production and consumption of mobile devices equipped with cameras that can be used at any time to capture footage. Cell phone videos of alleged police violence have circulated online via a website, but most commonly social media sites. When Ramsey Orta, the person who filmed Eric Garner's death was asked about recording the incident he stated "The police out here [are] crazy. Nobody trusts them. So, I decided to pull out my camera every time they come over here" (Ly, 2014). Over the years more and more citizens have begun to use their cell phones as protection, capturing what is occurring in front of them as a form of proof because they, marginalized people more than likely, are oftentimes not believed. Video footage of deaths has circulated in recent years, but what

has also continued to make its way into the spotlight are the everyday occurrences of racism that people of color face, and Black individuals more widely.

Since 2020, the name "Karen" has become a name that stirs up quite furry. What once was one of the most popular names in the U.S. in the 1960s, in 2020 became a pseudonym for a middle-aged busybody with a choppy blond bob who asks to speak to the manager and morphed into a symbol of racism and white privilege (Goldblatt, 2020). The name has become so closely aligned to racism, that news reports do not even use the actual name of the woman they are referring to in a story:

> Kroger Karen, named after the supermarket chain, blocked an African American mother's car so the woman couldn't leave the market's parking lot. San Francisco Karen called the police on a Filipino man stenciling "Black Lives Matter" *on his property* And, of course, the Queen of Karens — Amy Cooper, also known as Central Park Karen — threatened and fabricated accusations against a Black man after he politely asked her to put her dog on a leash, as park rules stated. (Goldblatt, 2020).

All these occurrences of white women aggressively haggling Black and Brown people have all were captured on cell phones by either the person being victimized or a bystander allowing for these more localized instances to make their way to national mediums. "Karen Videos" have gained millions of views on platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram while also being reported on national news channels and written about in magazines and articles. A result of Karen videos becoming more widespread is the countless individuals who are angry about the fact that they exist in the first place.

Protestors have also used national platforms to showcase their disdain for this form of oppression that, per the amount of video footage released in recent years, seems to be happening at a very high rate. The media then works as an outlet to not only bring national awareness to acts of oppression whether subtle or violent, but also bring consciousness to ways in which these acts fuel demonstrations against them.

In 2014, after the death of Michael Brown, The Black Lives Matter Movement made global news reflecting the protests happening in different countries. This catapulted the stories and lives of Black people on tv screens and cell phones around the world. This only increased with the televised death of George Floyd which ignited protests all over the U.S. and in other countries, who were also dealing with matters of racism. The UK had the largest global protest and was already galvanizing around the death of Belly Mujinga. In Columbia, just three days before the death of George Floyd, Anderson Arboleda was beaten to death by police officers propelling protesters to rally. Other countries such as France and New Zealand also hosted Black Lives Matter protests and the news was there to cover it all. The women spoke to this constant cycle of increased media presence in the media after the killing of Black individuals by police officers, once again seeing their communities everywhere they watched. However, much like chapter three revealed, there was something about the video footage of George Floyd's murder that shocked the nation, the world, more abruptly than other recordings causing the coverage around it to be elevated to another level. Mel (25-35, Fort Worth, Texas), for example, spoke to how significant the national and global media attention of Floyd's murder was, "with George Floyd, I take that very seriously because the world watched.

So yeah, it's a big deal." News media coverage was such a big deal that scholars from the University of Michigan found that media focused on protests in June 2020 more than any other month in two decades — 60 percent more than at any point in the past two decades; in fact, not since the Kent State killings, in which National Guard troops shot and killed four student protesters in May 1970, has there been so much media attention on protests (Heaney, 2020). Scholars argue that there are several factors, like the ones mentioned above; video coverage from cell phones of bystanders and the global spread of protests from people of all races, which contribute to this comparable coverage. There are other elements such as Trump and COVID-19 that played a key role in why this particular incident generated more media coverage than any other protest in 50 years as well. Protests all over the country were met with military force and racist comments displayed by President Trump which Heaney argues was done "to exploit a chaotic situation for political gain" and because these demonstrations were conducted in the height of the pandemic, individuals were risking their lives in the name of justice, once again proving that these factors were happening simultaneously impacting many multiplicatively (2020). Black Lives Matter continued to be on the frontlines as an organization, a movement, a slogan, and in news stories.

Studies show that in cable news and in online newspapers the words "Black Lives Matter" was mentioned up to 200 times in headlines and new clips in 2014 during the Ferguson protests, spiked to 500 in 2016 when a Black man shot five Dallas police officers right before Trump took office, dropped drastically during other shootings and

court cases related to police brutality, and in 2020 spiked to 300 after the death of George Floyd (Mehta, 2020).

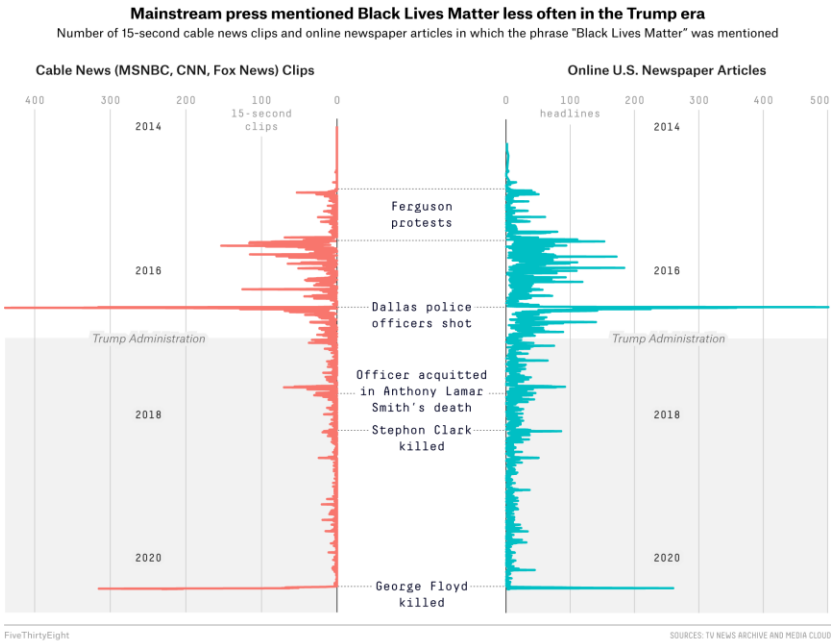


Figure 8: Mainstream Press BLM

It is worth noting the irony, and quite frankly the unsurprising truth, of "Black Lives Matter" is used most frequently during the shooting of the Dallas officers by a Black man than it is when white police officers kill Black men. Black bodies have been criminalized for centuries prior to BLM. From "brute" to "thug'" to "suspect," the media has manufactured and disseminated these misconceptions and prejudices of Black men through various channels (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). These titles are imposed on Black men without them even being attached to a shooting, let alone a news story like this. The point here is that Black Lives Matter in the mainstream press only peaked after a killing,

or a case tied to a killing where race was a public factor. When it did peak, however, the coverage spread far and wide.

During the 2020 coverage of protests surrounding the murder of George Floyd, journalism engaged with these protests in ways that are uncommon. The Media Diversity Institute analyzed numerous news stories to find that journalism paid remarkably close attention to police behavior, which is not typical, and paid a significant amount of attention to police repression (2021). Coverage of the protests during 2020 had also been generally favorable causing shifts in white public opinion to support the Black Lives Matter movement and goals showing a drastic parallel to the more critical negative attitudes seen in journalism from 2014 to 2016. Some have even argued that George Floyd protests have changed the way people see race and policing for the better.

MOTIVE BEHIND THE MEDIA

The increased media coverage and newly used tactics by journalists to bring awareness to the policing of Black bodies raises the question of progression. If constant coverage centering Black Lives Matter rises to national and global levels over the years, then why hasn't there been coverage reflecting the positive change in Black communities? If indeed there was a connection to the Black community, if the Black community was on the media's side, then maybe there would be a shift in stories being told. There seems to be probable motivation for why this is allowed to happen; why Black lives enter into national consciousness, brought to the surface with no change in how they are viewed and treated. I argue that motivation is largely political and profitable. The bodies that are marginalized, Black women who are economically

disadvantaged in this case, are used to maintain a level of power and control by large institutions such as the media while also using Black women's bodies to become more profitable. The bigger question, as stated earlier, is not why Black women/mothers are ignored and oppressed by the media, but how do they refuse the racist-sexist-classist logic and persist. This section explores both the actions of the media for political gain and ways Black women receiving assistance in the U.S. resist against it.

This idea of mobilizing Black women for political gain comes from Rebecca Wanzo's work in "sentimental political storytelling". The image of Black women in media has constantly correlates to suffering and they have "struggled to gain political currency against narratives that often exclude them from stories about proper victims, and when they are visible, it is often because they powerfully illustrate one or more of the conventions in sentimental political storytelling" (2009). Wanzo explains sentimental political storytelling as a form of narration that mobilizes sympathy for political ends. The story of suffering conjures sympathy from viewers and when all three factors were at their peak, they garnered political attention and even political action. Suffering must negotiate differing conventions, including "progress narratives that either offer more sympathy for people who are successful enough that they have moved beyond requesting state and institutional intervention" or "the idea that some people who claim to be suffering 'real' pain are only suffering hysterical or phantom pain" (2009). The marketplace has an appetite for both narratives and Wanzo suggests that political engagement with crisis discourse treat violence as an exception, not an ongoing daily

condition. These Black women know violence to be a part of their narrative and the media is not highlighting their suffering in this manner.

When suffering is publicized as something that occurs occasionally, this creates tension in the Black community. Black women do not see their realities shown in the media and understand that the reason their authentic stories are absent from media is intentional. As they watch increased media coverage and attention, the attention is not innocent. Neferti (36-45, New York) spoke to selective media coverage that has a hidden agenda:

> the media is so quick to put out what they want you to know, but what are you not telling us? With COVID it was all a secret at first. I already know the media is selective because they don't even tell our real story, so I know they are not going to share the whole truth.

The chronic stressors coming from oppressions that are at play in the daily lives of women are what Kenzi (25-35, Washington, D.C.) said was absent from news stories:

> the news does not capture the stress of stressful environments, or the PTSD of living in high trauma all the time. My daughter may deal with PTSD from just seeing people get shot or flying bullets. All those things, like that's what I really deal with. Environmental factors can impact me and my children's well-being.

The representation of their stories matters the most. Women like Neferti and Kenzi understand that the media will not bring their stories to national consciousness in the way

it should, so they must find spaces to represent themselves. In *Birthing Black Mothers*, Nash takes a closer look at Wanzo's study of the Left marketplace of narratives of Black womanhood connecting to grief and trauma. Because of this constant narrative, Nash argues that Black mothers must "speak to, in, and through crisis to secure their visibility and to advocate for their needs" (2021). In thinking about the crisis as political currency and strategic development, Black mothers have the ability to represent themselves and refuse to represent themselves as "cites of crisis." Kenzi wanted to bring her crisis in front of the camera, she wanted her realities to become visible so that women like her are represented accurately. What this representation does is reveal a woman who is strong simply because she is handling this environment daily. She is not helpless, she is "making it work", refusing to settle for what national-corporate media is putting out about women like her.

This disconnect between the media and Black women, as well as people of color in general, is an ongoing tension due to the inability of the media to understand the people they are putting in the forefront. In 2020, at the initial height of COVID-19 while in the Trump Administration, Pew Research Center conducted a study and captured reasons why viewers feel that they are misunderstood by the media and found unlike their white counterparts, Black people were misunderstood mostly because of their characteristics rather than their political views.

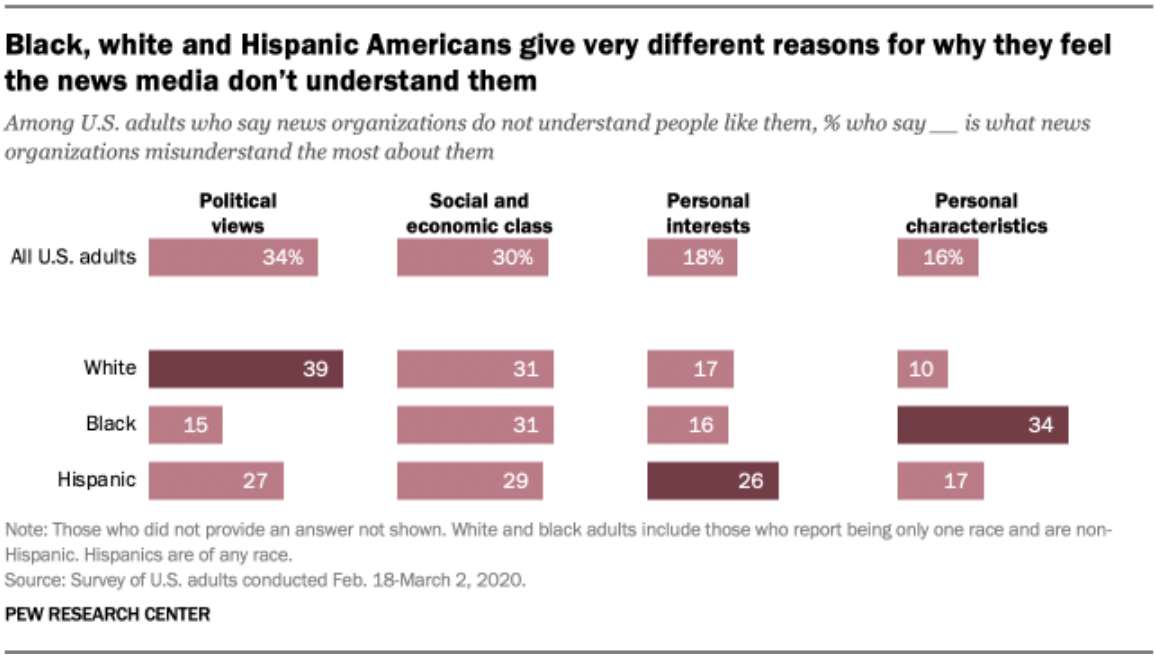


Figure 9: Americans To Media

Scholars, like Steele and Davis, have debated the origins of what shapes personality development for Black people; whether it stems from social class (1984) or the Black socialization experience (Boykin & Cross, 1978), personality characteristics connect to Black culture. If the media is not intentional or even has a desire to cultivate a relationship with or understand Black culture, as much as it can without being in the identity group, then there will certainly be a disconnection. This inability to connect with the community gives Black people evidence that the intentions of media attention are not innocent and that they are indeed scapegoats for an institution's end game, no matter how conservative or progressive it may be.

It is also worth noting that 31% of both white and Black groups stated that their social and economic class was misunderstood by the news media. How class has been

socialized with race provides enough data to argue that the narratives behind why 31% of white people feel the media misunderstands their social and economic class and 31% of Black people are not the same. The real experiences at the intersections of race and class are not portrayed in a way that Black people can see themselves represented accurately which the women who were interviewed have made clear.

If the disconnect to the community and the political means behind national coverage was not enough to make Black women feel that their lives are disposable in the media, the language used about them only prolongs the feeling. Protest movements in every decade have come with their fair share of national attention that produce a political aim. The movements in the U.S. have been the outcomes of system inequalities and "occur when people are ignored and when they have exhausted the mainstream pathways towards resolution for their long-standing problems" (Haggerty & Smith, 2021). To be successful in achieving change at the systems level, Mehta explains the delicate balance protest movements must engage in "They need to be disruptive enough to capture and hold national attention, but also retain enough public support to pressure politicians into action" (2020). What comes along for Black people participating in disruptive behavior to get the attention of policymakers, is the media taking their actions and turning it into slander. The fine line that protests movements must walk in to be successful, Kilgo suggests, a particularly tough one for the Black Lives Matter movement because protests about anti-black racism tend to get less legitimizing news coverage (Brown, 2020). The words associated with protests after George Floyds murder varied by the news station,

more liberal stations speaking to protest while more conservative stations focused on looting and rioting.

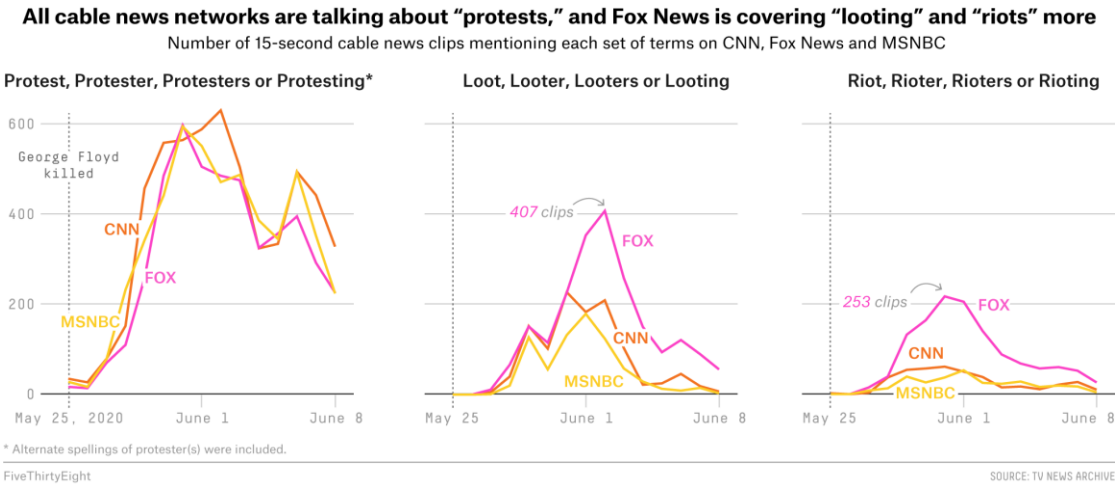


Figure 10: Cable News Network

Ladii (25-35, Richmond) experienced being associated with looting and rioting as she was protesting for justice of Black lives:

> We ended up on Monument Avenue with a crowd so thick that we had to park our car and walk to the main location. There were news crews everywhere and heavy policing, but we didn't care; we knew we had to publicly show politicians, the judicial system, and anyone else with power that this is not acceptable and we will continue to demand justice for Black people. Later that evening on the news, nothing about our intent was shared. They said we were rioters who just wanted to

> damage our city. It was heartbreaking, it's like they missed the entire point just so they could get their viewers to be against us.

Ladii personally experienced what it felt to attend a protest with the intent of demanding justice for her people, only to see it turned into a negative story. The different word associations attached to protestors is just one example out of many of how the media portrays a certain image towards Black people. Of course, there are people who are not Black who are highly active in protest movements, specifically for Black lives, but because the core focus is Black people, the narrative must remain in alignment with the political position of that particular institution. It is this position, the one that the media must keep a certain narrative afloat, that I argue not only harms Black communities, Black women specifically in this case, but also hinders a true connection to the media preventing Black women receiving government assistance from getting their true narratives exposed.

Media continues to create obstacles for Black women in the ways it commodifies their bodies for profit. Black women receiving government assistance are at the center of the process of blackfishing better known as "digital blackface." This idea of blackfishing for profit comes from the work of Wesley Stevens in his piece "Blackfishing on Instagram: Influencing and the Commodification of Black Urban Aesthetics." Steven defines blackfishing as a "practice in which cultural and economic agents' appropriate Black culture and urban aesthetics in an effort to capitalize on Black markets" (Stevens, 2021). Focusing on Instagram, Stevens analyzes how influencers have altered their physical appearances, adopted language associated with Ebonics, and sold products that

replicate an “urban aesthetic.” What has been used in journalism to imply poor Black communities that equate to negativity, the idea of urbanism, has now been repackaged and curated to appeal to the masses in digital media (Thompson, 2018). While the attention may be new, forms of racial commodification and exploitation are still familiar and exposed through the process of blackfishing. Black women receiving assistance are constantly associated with the urban aesthetic so when white women try to replicate similar aspects for capitalist ends, their bodies become commodified for profit. Thompson explains this point further, “Instagram itself has become a breeding ground for white women who wish to capitalize off of racially ambiguous Black women for social and monetary gain” (2018). Steven goes on to examine how the Marxist concept of creative destruction continues to reproduce discrimination against Black communities, especially those who are associated with the idea of urbanism. Instagram influencers blackfish by mining Black culture and urban environments, oftentimes relying on trends specifically set by Black women, for aesthetic value only to direct their followers to luxury brands that are inaccessible for Black communities that enable their success from the beginning. This process allows media industries and digital platforms to capitalize on online consumers at the expense of Black people reiterating that national-corporate media will commodify Black women/ mothers and their lives when it is profitable. Certainly, these corporate media platforms do not widely perpetuate narratives of liberation, strength, perseverance, and power. And while this project, at this point, does not reach the level of global or even national consciousness, this project is committed to sharing the

ways in which Black women, both interviewed and others, can keep going in the face of adversity.

BLACK WOMEN IN BLACK MEDIA

By exploring multiple ways that national media has impacted Black women who receive government assistance, the question of Black media comes to mind. Are the same problematic narratives that have been examined above found in Black media? The women interviewed spoke to ways in which stories in their own communities may not always reflect their experiences. Kenzi (25-35, Washington, DC) spoke to the images she sees circulating in Black media that do not align with who she is; "the woman I see all the time is the woman who is college educated, has a husband and a family, and holds a corporate job and that's not me". The women also spoke to how media exposes the concept of Zora Neal Hurston's famous quote "all skin folk, ain't kinfolk," meaning although Black people may share the same race and cultural experiences, they all do not have each other's best interest in mind. Analyzing Black media can illuminate what is happening in media platforms made by Black people for Black people. To help answer the question of problematic narratives of Black women in Black media, I examined *The Kevin Samuels Show,* a podcast, Tik Tok, and "Black Twitter" all of which are owned, managed, or made for the Black community.

In 2020, every element of the entertainment industry was shaken up by the global pandemic. While quarantined, many people turned to podcasts to tell their stories and share ideas. According to Edison Research, at the top of 2021, 78 percent of Americans

were familiar with the term "podcasting" and more than 5 in 10 have listened to a podcast themselves (Richter, 2021). Audio can be produced quickly and remotely causing podcasts to be widely accessible covering a multitude of topics. One person who rose to popularity in 2020 based on his podcast show and livestreams was Kevin Samuels. Kevin Samuels, a Black man, served as an image consultant and in 2020 started *The Kevin Samuels Show*, a podcast focused on bringing awareness and advice to people in the Black community. Samuels gained traction having over 1.75 million subscribers on YouTube and a 4.9 rating for his podcast which was known for its controversial viewpoints on Black women. In reviewing the 141 podcast episodes from 2020-2022, over 85% of the episodes were specifically focused on Black women with episodes such as "Single Mother from Down Under Has Too Many Options?" and "Modern Women Are Laughable". On June 4, 2021, Samuels released an episode entitled "Black Women Choosing Welfare Over The Black Family. In this episode, Samuels introduces the idea that in the 1960's when Black women were given more access to government assistance, Black women divided the Black community by choosing money over family. Samuels (2021), explained:

> Prior to 1965, we [Black people] were married at a rate of 80%. [We were] broke, [in] Jim Crow, segregated, lynched and everything else, but we had a community. We had HBCUs, we had churches, we stuck together. We had Black businesses, Black buses…but as soon as assistance was offered came and the women were given a choice, far more chose this [government assistance] over the men. And that's the original "sin" that we have yet to deal with in the Black community.

What Samuels is explaining here is that Black women are to blame for breaking up the Black family and causing a divide in the Black community because they decided to choose money rather than the stability of the family. During the episode, racism is only mentioned to describe the obstacles Black people were facing (i.e., segregation, lynching, etc.) but not named as a cause or factor to the divide of the Black family. Samuels later spoke to how Black women on government assistance not only were choosing assistance and raising families on their own instead of wanting "stable" two parent households, but they were also using the benefits with the intent of staying on assistance. Samuels stated:

> They [the government] did not expect to give government assistance and food stamps to the Black community only for women to choose the check over the men. They were actually confused as to why this was happening, like 'what a minute, we thought we would give this to you for a little bit and then once you got stable then you would get back', but they [Black women] took the benefit with no plan to ever become stable.

What Samuels is doing, is perpetuating the image of a modern day "Welfare Queen" by claiming that Black women are "lazy" and want to continue to depend on the government for their livelihood. It is evident here that within this particular media outlet, problematic narratives about Black women receiving government assistance are present. Black women are degraded and not seen as valuable, but rather seen as a problem within their own communities. Samuels even showcased some of the same tactics Trump used when negatively addressing Black women.

Another platform that saw a rise in engagement during the pandemic was the social media app, Tik Tok. Launching in 2016, Tik Tok was created for public users to post videos like photos for Instagram or written post for Facebook. Tik Tok was not created solely for Black users, however, I felt it was eligible to be analyzed since individual users who are Black can create stories specifically about and for the Black community. During quarantine, TikTok saw a significant increase in popularity during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak in the United States, with a growth of 180 percent among 15–25-year-old users. Other demographics also saw an increase in engagement due to people working and studying primarily from home (Ceci, 2022). To see how Black women receiving government assistance were represented on this application, a review and analysis of videos was conducted. A word search for "Black woman," "motherhood", "government assistance/welfare", "reproduction", and "resistance" was conducted through a filter for stories that may include or adhere to women like the ones interviewed to rise to the top. There are more detailed ways to analyze Tik Tok videos but I wanted to keep the process of finding a story that reflected the experiences of Black women receiving government assistant board, to represent how everyday people scrolling through their device would find a story. In other words, everyday people do not usually conduct deep analysis on social media platforms to find stories they connect to, they simply turn open their internet browser or an application. I am also aware that only a few words were selected for the word search and there are a wide variety of stories that would resonate with Black women, but for the purpose of this review, the words above were the ones selected.

After searching the selected keywords on Tik Tok over 3,000 videos appeared, mostly by women who hold the identities of Black women receiving government assistance. In randomly selecting 50 videos, I found that 27 videos consisted of women educating others on their experiences with assistance programs. The women used Tik Tok as a platform to share their stories and real-life experiences. Kenzi (25-35, Washington, DC) also spoke to using social media apps to represent all of who she is:

> The other issue with media is constantly showing this Black woman who seems to have it all together with no struggle at all. It's like we are either seen as the bottom of the barrel or superwoman. Those stories of the elite, "the ideal woman", don't really seem that real to me. I feel like that's why it's important for a story like mine or more women like me to speak up; we are left invisible because of those other stories. Like some women don't want to be married. I don't want to be…I don't know if I'm going to be married. So, it's like, when I see this "perfect" woman there is always this idea that she is married or wants to be. I look at the media and say, 'that's definitely not going to be me because I don't want to be that.' The biggest factor is for media to be relatable, and they are not. These stories are not relatable, even if it's from our own people. So, I need to share my story so people like me can look and say 'she gets me, she understands' and creating videos on social media is the way I do that.

Kenzi is hyperaware of images of Black women that are on extreme sides of a spectrum; they are either "lazy and promiscuous" or have a college degree and long to be married.

These extreme images are publicly consumed and fail to do what this project is trying to do, which is show that all kinds of Black women who receive assistance have their own narratives and ways of dealing with oppression, none of which are represented widely. The representation of these women's experiences is the motivation behind why I chose this project in the first place.

Black women on Tik Tok are choosing to use the same strategy as Kenzi using the platform to not only contest negative or unrealistic images of Black women, but to provide a different narrative about government assistance that is different than what's mainstream. One video posted on March 21, 2022, from user @KedaHerWay (2022) captioned "stop passing judgement on others" shows @KedaHerWay sharing about her experience with government assistance while being pregnant. She states:

> I got government assistance during all of my pregnancies. I was also on WIC, and I am still a good mom. My kids are excelling in school and on track to graduate with honors. Stop judging people who are on government assistance. Nothing is wrong with us.

The point @KedaHerWay is making here is that women can be on government assistance and raise their children to be successful in school and in life. @KedaHerWay is pushing against narratives that people like Samuels circulate about Black economically disadvantaged women being "bad mothers." There were other Black women who receive government assistance who commented on this video sharing their stories as well. User @UGC commented "I can't say this loud enough! I needed WIC when my kids were

young because I needed help. That's it! People just need help sometimes and it doesn't mean we are bad or did something wrong". In reviewing @KedaHerWay's profile, there were multiple videos of her speaking to motherhood and how government assistance influenced it. It is clear through reviewing pages like @KedaHerWay that Tik Tok is a place where Black women can represent themselves.

While not a standalone social media application, "Black Twitter" is very much a cultural phenomenon in the Black community. Meredith Clerk, an assistant professor of media studies at the University of Virginia, studies Black Twitter and defines it as "a network of culturally connected communicators using the platform to draw attention to issues of concern to black communities" (Reid, 2018). The name "Black Twitter" took off around 2010 in response to the *Slate* article "How Black People Use Twitter" and has been referred to the communal connection ever since. Clerk shares that other races can engage in it, as long the main focus is on the Black community, which requires other races to know how to position themselves within those conversations, "being more of an observer at times, rather than somebody who's trying to control the conversation if you're not Black, is really important" (2018). Black Twitter can be located through the hashtag #BlackTwitter, following trending topics, and sometimes conversations that algorithms do not pick up. More recently questions around the continuation of Black Twitter have surfaced since Elon Musk took over the company fearing that the changes will be made that surveil accounts more closely. Some users did not let this stop their use of the app, "the spirit of Black Twitter will endure because there's a real need for African Americans

to connect in real time; however, it will morph, and some of it will go underground" (Farzan, 2022).

Much like Tik Tok, Twitter was also created for the public to create and share their own stories. In conducting the word keyword search and including the hashtag #BlackTwitter, over 15,000 tweets appeared. To narrow the search more and align with the period of the three factors in this project, the timeframe searched was February to May 2020 resulting in over 2,000 tweets. Starting from most recent, May 31, 2020, the timeline immediately started loading tweets that users posted about the murder of George Floyd. Not only was #BlackTwitter being used alongside hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter or #JusticeforGeorgeFloyd, #BlackTwitter was also used as a call out to the community to use its power of influence to bring to light injustices that occurred around the murder. On May 30th a tweet was sent "This dude has been a known racist for years …Black Twitter do your thing. #BlackTwitter #BlackTwitterMovement #BlackLivesMatter" another tweet stated, "One of these days these racists will learn. #BlackTwitter is better than the FBI" (2020). These tweets and others like it show how engaged Black Twitter is in the fight for justice for Black individuals. Users know that if Black Twitter sees proof, whether it be video footage, a photo, a text message, of racist behavior happening, they will collectively come together to either find the person who is perpetuating the behavior or share the information publicly enough for it to go viral. Black Twitter has the power to change a person's life.

In reviewing the results from the word search within Black Twitter, tweets about motherhood and government assistance were most common and what was most reflective

of Black women receiving government assistance in the U.S. both in the user sending the tweets and topics that about what these women were facing in 2020. Out of the 40 tweets that appeared within Black Twitter that included “mother” “motherhood” and/or assistance, 10 of them explicitly stated they were Black mothers who receive government assistance. Twitter became a public outlet that these women can share their opinions, ideas, and personal narratives that reflect what is happening in their world. This is what user @daejaeunique appears to do in her profile. On May 29, 2020, @daejaeunique tweeted about the ways racism systemically oppresses Black people, starting with the media perpetuating the trope of Black people are lazy or don’t do anything:

> I want to speak on the “black people are lazy or don’t do anything” remarks. First you don’t allow black people to live in districts where the schools are better because they can’t afford it. You even put the underscoring schools in black communities on purpose. So, if someone can’t get a proper education, they can’t get a better paying job, so if selling drugs or living off the government makes them more than their job and all they have to do is stay home?! Or for the single black mothers getting assistance like me, after you all have systemically removed their help aka black fathers, if the mother starts making too much money, 1 cent over the line of being “poor” she no longer receives assistance. It is one HUGE TRAP (2020).

@daejaeunique brings a perspective of how racism directly impacts her and others who may identify the same way or going through the same situation. A reality that says although Black people are the ones deemed lazy, the system is the one that hinders their

progression that forces them to provide for their families the best way they know how. This resembles the narrative of the welfare queen troupe from the 80's that many Black women receiving assistance at the time also resisted against. With over 21,000 followers, and several retweets, this narrative could have had the potential to be seen widely, revealing more of a real-life aspect than Black news and magazine outlets were revealing. Black Twitter then becomes the Black media outlet out of the three explored that best represents women like the ones interviewed.

It is evident per the review, that a large amount of the tweets during this time that focused on motherhood and assistance were in response to a tweet that Trump released or a news story that came from his administration. On February 2, 2020 @CAROLANNSPROD replied directly to GOP's Black History Month tweet that speaks to Donald Trump's commitment to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

> @GOP: President @realDonaldTrump has made Historically Black Colleges and Universities a priority. He's appropriated more money to HBCUs in one year than ANY other President. He also established a Presidential Board of Advisors on HBCUs. #BlackHistoryMonth2020 (2020).
>
> @CAROLANNSPROD (CB): Geesh! You must be referring to THIS YEAR. Because RealDonnie hasn't done much to help young black Americans…until ELECTION YEAR! Oh yeah? You must be referring to cutting the AFDC and Food Stamp Programs for young black mothers who depend on assistance to feed their children #BlackTwitter (2020).

Here CB, whose avatar seems to reflect a middle age white woman and whose profile reads “American to the core!,” is engaging with a couple of strategies that the women spoke to in their interview. CB, who per the profile and the tweets we can assume is white, chose to reply directly to the President of the United States and the Republican Party speaking to the performative nature of how the Black community enters to national consciousness for political gain, in this case the election. CB also shifted the focus from college educated women and brought light to how Trump’s administration decisions on welfare reform are hindering the lives of Black mothers, a perspective that could surprise users coming from a profile such like CB’s. I would argue that this is what many would call of act of allyship, a white person who is using their platform to speak up against acts of inequity and oppression for people of color, in this case Black women receiving government assistance. This then becomes an example of someone who is not Black, allegedly, engaging with Black Twitter by centering Black lives and pushing past voice that try and do the opposite. In the next chapter Ladii (25-35, Richmond, VA) will explore how allyship kept her going past the systemic oppressions that she faces, allies are important to how Ladii performed resistance, “they stand with me…that allows me to keep going”. This is just one aspect of political strategies Black women receiving government assistance have used as they refuse to let the impacts of these three factors and other chronic stressors keep them from continuing and showing up for themselves and their families.

In examining three forms of digital media that focus on the Black community, and Black women in particular, examples such as *The Kevin Samuels Show,* reveal that Black

women who receive assistance must also face the negative impacts of the media from their own communities in addition to what national-corporate media perpetuates. At the same time, Black women also use social media platforms to represent themselves and share stories that national-corporate media may never bring awareness to.

CHAPTER SIX: POLITICAL STRATEGIES

"Respect My Existence or Expect My Resistance"

- Poster, Women's March on Jan. 21, 2017

Through the analysis of interviews and literature, the impacts of Trump, COVID-19, and racial tension post George Floyd and other chronic stressors on thoughts of the body, reproduction and motherhood for Black women receiving government assistance in the U.S. have been explored while shedding light on a few ways these women engaged in acts of resistance, refusal, and persistence. The focus of this project derives from my research question that works to center not only Black women's voice, but also to center the strategies they use to sabotage the quotidian repressive forces encountered. This study makes clear that Black Women invent and employ a range of strategies to disrupt the racist myths that malign their character and personhood. They confront the constant cycle negative images about Black women who receive government assistance while also experiencing Trump/Trump Administration, COVID-19, and the epidemic of police violence. In sum, the interviewees battled the simultaneous and multiplicative oppressive forces. Recalling the concepts of centering Black women's resistance as rebellious methodological work from McKittrick (2021) and Walters (2021), this chapter centers the political strategies of resistance, persistence, and dissent the women engaged in to exert power and defy discriminatory policies (Elder, 2022 p. 14).

SUMMARY OF STRATEGIES

After talking with these Black women and analyzing the data, four major strategies emerged. Summarized here are the strategies the women implemented to resist and cope through the oppressions that stem from Trump/Trump Administration, COVID-19, and The Summer of Racial Reckoning:

- Faith
- Sacrifice
- Centering Self
- Community Support

The women spoke to these strategies in multiple ways; whether a passive notion or active method, these strategies allowed these women to continue to press forward and show up for themselves and others, regardless of the oppressions that surrounded them. These strategies were used in these women's daily lives; and while some were implemented publicly, most of these strategies of resistance were conducted privately without ever gaining public attention. The women also spoke to other hardships they were simultaneously dealing with while interviewing. Some of these included: being evicted, health issues and chronic illness, being separated from children, divorce, and death. Much like the ways in which these factors have multiplicative oppressive impacts, these strategies are also multi-layered. Each strategy was explored through the lens of these women's narratives and other literature that supports how Black women in the U.S. persist. While there are four main strategies, I will also highlight other methods mentioned that are connected to the research question.

FAITH

Faith was a strategy that almost half of the participants stated allowed women to continue to show up even though these oppressions were intended for them to give up. Each woman who spoke to their faith identified as Christian and spoke to the hope that God provided. Dee (over 45, Raleigh, NC) explained how her prayers got her through the Trump Administration and how her faith is linked to the teachings from her late mother:

> What kept me going was prayer. My faith to know God's going to change it. I just knew God was going to work things out. And never giving up. That's one thing my mama told us, never to give up on something you want in life. So, I keep that in my head, I lost my mother in 2016 and she plays over in my head.

This connection to faith through the teachings and memories of family members also carried Woman #7 (36-45, California) through the tough times of Trump:

> There's a song that my grandma used to sing 'Trouble don't last, always', that helped. What I really relied on during the Trump administration, was finding my situation in the Bible to see how God handled it. When I find it there, I know how to deal with it. I looked at it from the perspective of David because I resonate with him. David had five smooth stones, but it only took one to knock the giant out. And I knew that eventually that he [Trump] would be knocked out.

Women #7 also compared the presence of Black women in social movements to biblical narratives and that connection empowered her to remain hopeful:

> When we look at the history of times, Black women push the movement and Black woman have always been the forefront out the movement. And it helped me to know that I, as a Black woman push movements, my voice changes, the atmosphere, and what I speak comes into existence. And so, I had to speak each and every day when I would hear hateful things from Trump and hateful things from his supporters, knowing that hate can only last so long.

Neferti (36-46, New York, New York) even prayed for Trump himself, "with that Trump… child, all you can do is pray. I pray for that man cause only God can bring you through the things that he [Trump] says and does." Geraldine (over 45, North Carolina) experienced a first-time financial hardship during the Trump administration:

> Working a part-time job, making less than $25,000 a year, that was the first time I ever had to repay taxes. I also had partial insurance, that was once free, it was taken away when he [Trump] came in office. So, during the Trump administration, I had to start paying for insurance. If I wanted it, I had to stop paying federal and state taxes, which is something I've never done in all my working years.

Geraldine stated that her trust in God kept her from feeling worried and overwhelmed. Faith was also the main strategy for Geraldine as she navigated COVID-19, focusing on gratitude for being able to still be alive while others were losing their lives:

> I thanked God each and every day for keeping me and my family healthy and safe. Even though I was continuing to go to work on a daily basis, just trusting

> God, knowing that he was going to see us through this time and cover us. I asked God to cover, not only just me and my children, but those who are out there exposed; those on the frontline because they were getting sick just as much as the other people.

These women's connection to faith to press past systemic oppression is representative of most Black women nationwide. In fact, according to a nationwide survey conducted by *The Washington Post* and the Kaiser Family Foundation, Black women were among the most religious people in the nation. 74% of Black women surveyed said that "living a religious life is important to them" (Labbe-DeBose, 2012, p. 4). This importance has a deep cultural connection that stems back to the days of enslavement. Religious faith helped to maintain hope and dignity in the face of violence and discrimination. "Black women have been the most mistreated and scandalized in U.S. society and culture as they wrestle both individually and collectively with the triple jeopardy of racism, sexism, and classism, it is no wonder that black women, due to their experience of sexism, would seek out their faith as a way of finding relief, reprieve, resolution and redemption" (Labbe-DeBose, 2012, p. 4). This strategy is significant to their resistance, faith creates hope for these women and without hope, many would not be able to see themselves continuing through life. Faith is foundational to how they live their life. They are not separate from God, their values, beliefs, morals, decisions, thoughts, actions, are all predicated on God's word. Faith continues to be one of the most common strategies Black women in the U.S. utilize to resist and be able to continually show up.

SACRIFICE (DO WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO)

As mentioned above, sacrifice is a practice Black women know too often. A quarter of interviewees spoke directly about how sacrifice was a primary strategy they were able implement to resist and cope with systemic oppressions that allowed them to show up for themselves and others. The women spoke to this strategy differently than the others; they used language like "there was no other choice," "survival" and "our lives depended on it". Other strategies seemed to be a choice, or an option, the agency to opt-in if you will; this strategy was a requirement, even a sense of urgency was present when the women spoke about the ways they had to sacrifice. In other words, they were able to understand other methods as a more formal strategy, but with sacrifice, there was no connection to a formal method or strategy, it was just an automatic response that had to happen.

When asked how she kept going during this challenging time in her life, Geraldine (over 45, North Carolina) explained how she eliminated certain aspects of her family's norms during hard financial times during the Trump Administration. While her son was sick, insurance was a priority and for the first time ever, during a pandemic, Geraldine had to pay for it out of pocket. Geraldine had no other choice but to sacrifice and ask questions of herself and her family members to keep her son healthy. Geraldine assessed:

> If it's not a necessity, then do I really have to have it? Do I really need to do it? I need to make sure that I have enough to save my son. If you go out to eat, take it

> off the table and eat at home, no new clothes can be purchased, no outings, it has to be a strict way of living you know, there are sacrifices to be made.

No other options were on the table when it came down to her son's health. These questions had to be asked regularly to prioritize the survival of her son.

Chante (25-35, Birmingham, Alabama) spoke to sacrifice in a different way than Geraldine during Trump's election. Chante had a physical and emotional response to the election results feeling disgusted, numb, and hopeless, but her work required her to come to work to support students. As a practitioner in higher education, showing up for students was an automatic response once she arrived on campus the next day:

> I literally had a line of Black and Brown students at my door the morning of elections with teary eyes. I also had teary eyes. We didn't have much to say but would stare teary-eyed at each other. Although I was struggling with my own emotions and mental health, I let them stay because at a predominantly white institution, there are not many Black faculty. On that day, I had to show up for them. I knew I had to sacrifice myself for them because the impact of so many was more than my one. What made it worse is that I did not have support from my own supervisor, a white woman, so in a way, I needed them too.

For Chante, showing up for students provided an avenue to cope with her current physical response to what was happening and what was on the horizon from Trump's election win. Sacrifice transformed into community support from other Black and Brown individuals feeling some of the same emotions which in turn provided Chante with the

strength needed to continue being present. For weeks she had to make a conscious choice to go to work knowing there was a lack of support from the administration which could be taxing on her mind and body; and yet, she persisted, and found community elsewhere to get the job done.

COVID-19 created a level of sacrifice for many individuals as the world moved into lockdown. Citizens' daily routines adjusted instantly with the spread of the virus. One industry that saw a surge during the pandemic was package delivery. With more people shopping from home, companies like FedEx tripled their net income from 2020 to 2021 (The Wall Street Journal, 2021). While others were staying at home due to loss of work or working from home, Mel (25-35, Fort Worth, TX) was extremely busy sacrificing her health during COVID as a delivery person for FedEx. Mel explained how intense the labor was to keep up with the demand of her job:

> I can have anywhere from 100 to 160 stops a day picking up and pushing items that are solid. And this is me by myself; I'm working by myself and its triple digit heat, the heat alone exhausts you.

As a single mother, living in a different region than her familiar support and having her mother pass away when she was younger, Mel found ways to cope with this physically intense job on her own. Mel's job was vital to her livelihood; therefore, Mel turned her physical barrier into a fitness journey:

> I was 212 pounds like solid and with this job, my life has evolved inside out. I show people, people my thick girl pictures and then I show them today. My

> attitude was trash. It was so tragic. I have evolved so much. I'm so proud of myself because I did not think that I would be this person. I knew she was in here somewhere, but the way this job has pushed me physically and forced me to be better, because it's the only way to provide for my son, made me pull my ideal self out.

As dangerous as the virus could have been to her life or her son, she had no other choice but to go to work. Stopping work to stay in during lockdown would mean that she and her son would suffer financially and that was not an option for Mel. Sacrificing her own life by encountering individuals to provide for her family was a response Mel did not have to think twice about. Mel explains the need to sacrifice:

> I don't have the option to stop. I don't care if it's pneumonia or whatever. If I got COVID I am still going to work, I am going to have to figure things out. I am going to do what I have to do. Something's going to have to happen.

These automatic responses kept these women from stopping, from giving up and allowed them to press on.

With systemic oppression stemming from forms of control, certain demographic groups are prevented from advancing. Hegemonic rule of cultural institutions maintains power and exploits others that could result in extreme poverty, poor health, and even death. (Gramsci, 1991). Per these oppressions, some of these Black women who were interviewed should not be here, some even stated in their interview; that their hardships should have killed them. Existence becomes resistance (LaPointe, 2020). Sacrifice is

significant as it may feel as if something is being taken away, but with each day that these women continued to choose to sacrifice to exist, they were resisting instead.

CENTERING SELF

Earlier chapters highlighted how the impacts of these three factors on Black women receiving government assistance attempted to take their agency away. One of the most substantial strategies that came out of this study was the ways Black women centered themselves. Almost half of the women interviewed talked about using their voices to speak to their needs, holding themselves accountable, and practicing self-recovery to press past systemic barriers. For decades, self-advocacy has been a strategy that Black women receiving government assistance in the U.S. have had to implement to make aspects of life better for themselves.

Kookie B (36-45, Washington, D.C.) spoke to the importance of speaking out and standing up for herself when talking about how she persisted through the Trump Administration “I don't keep quiet. I keep a voice. That jerk isn’t going to do it for me.” For Kookie B, speaking up for herself is one aspect of advocacy, but it is imperative to ensure that she passes down her knowledge to the younger generation. Passing down information about her people helped to keep their truth alive. Kookie B created her own platform to speak:

> I give young bosses the knowledge and the information that they need to strive and move forward. That's my response to everything. We must speak for our people, whether they want us to speak or not.

Constantly speaking about and centering Black knowledge is a political act, a dissenting practice, actively going against the majority, going against oppressions that are created to silence them, and letting others know agency for Black women exists. Black women receiving government assistance in the U.S. have a history of protesting the majority to gain placement and power in systems that impact their daily lives. From the powerful anti-lynching lectures of Ida B. Wells in the 1890s, Black women marching for welfare reform in 1968, or the countless demonstrations and protests happening locally, nationally, and globally fighting for Black Lives, Black women have been at the center of social movements working for justice and reclaiming their bodies.

Self-accountability had an impact influence for the women interviewed. The way in which they spoke to accountability allowed them to center themselves, which is a form of resistance by replacing a Eurocentric view of themselves with their narrative. Kenzi (25-35, Washington, D.C.) spoke to how she uses self-accountability to counteract the oppressive nature of systems that surround her:

> I'm accountable to myself. I'm aware of my needs and what I want. I do understand that this system can definitely be a system that can prevent me from moving forward, but that's only if I'm distracted and allow it to. What I mean by that it's like the system can enable you to make you feel like you're so dependent on it, that you can't do anything on your own, but because I'm aware and I'm accountable for my actions and the decisions that I make, it is easy for me to see the system as a help aid rather than something that is, you know, controlling my life. I choose happy.

This was a powerful stance to take. It exemplified liberation. Amid trauma, oppression, negativity, women decided to still choose themselves and to find joy. Self-care is produced by this choice of self amid struggles. Angela Davis defines this as a radical act of self-care, understanding that Black people have been subjected to the most unimaginable forms of violence and at the same time have offered the world beauty and art (Davis, 2018). Kenzi fully understood that the system she functions in regulates her body and access to resources. She fully understood that the outputs of an oppressive system naturally should bring about feelings of hopelessness and despair; and yet still she centered herself, focusing on what she can control which in turn, shifted her view of herself as a participant in the system.

Mel (25-35, Fort Worth, TX) expresses self-accountability differently than Kenzi and spoke about how The Summer of Racial Reckoning required her to pay more attention to her emotions and responses. Taking time to focus and check-in with herself before responding is a new practice for Mel. Over time, Black women have responded to situations out of survival, rarely asking questions of themselves to see how stress can affect them. hooks provided insight to this process, “Black women, in particular, are so well socialized to push ourselves past healthy limits that we often do not know how to set protective boundaries that would eliminate certain forms of stress in our lives” (hooks, 1999 p. 56). The process of setting protective boundaries requires a level of self-awareness where one can be honest with themselves about their feelings. Without knowing the factors that have created pain, Black women are unable to develop meaningful political strategies. The racial re-awakening pushed Mel into this process of

self-awareness and accountability. Mel realized a response out of stress or anger could cost her her life, therefore, more self-centered practices had to occur to be at peace. Mel explained:

> I know I have to think before I react. In the past, I tend to use my hands before I use my brain. I'm learning to do the opposite. I have to ask myself, ‘is it worth me reacting to?’ or ‘What is it about the situation that makes me want to react?’ I have to check in with myself when I feel those negative moments, and actually do the work in that moment, no matter how long it takes me to understand myself. I think stuff like that has been very important in my journey in holding myself accountable as well as understanding why I feel the way I feel and that my feelings are valid no matter what they are. And I'm wanting to accept the dark and the light side of me because both parts are Mel.

What this form of awareness begins to establish is self-healing and what hooks calls self-recovery. Self-recovery has become a focal point in Black feminist scholarship, understanding it as an “expression of liberatory political practice” (hooks, 1999). A firm understanding of self grounds Black women in their truth, which makes it harder to be exploited by the narratives and visuals placed on Black women's supremacist culture.

Centering self as a political act takes an amount of bravery, courage, and determination. The impacts of racism, sexism, and class exploitation are embedded in the daily lives of Black women receiving government assistance in the U.S. Messages of inferiority are internalized, lives are threatened, and there are also the specific impacts of

these three factors that are at play all at once. Living can be daunting. The stressors of these factors produced strong physical effects on these women's bodies. During the pandemic, Ladii (25-35, Richmond, VA) spoke to how she experienced elevated levels of anxiety and cried constantly, and felt anger which took a toll on her physically:

> I cried a lot in the beginning…My anxiety was high; I would be angry. I would remember telling my wife 'I'm not alright. Nothing is alright'. She's a calmer person than me naturally. I'm really fortunate to have a spouse. I was physically breaking down. I needed to center myself so I got really deep into stones and sage and smoked weed to put myself in that space where I could completely erase my mind and do yoga. I could erase my mind and hold my stones and find that peace that I'm looking for.

By centering herself, Ladii was able to find the peace it took to overcome the anxiety and anger that the weight of being in a pandemic among other stressors caused. It is important to note age here. Ladii was between 25-35 at the time of the interview and the stress from these factors still impacted her physically. Age did not dictate if or how a woman's body was physically impacted. The women who were interviewed represented multiple generations and yet still, each of them had diverse ways that these factors took a toll on their bodies. Ladii refused to let these physical and emotional barriers dictate how she lived her life. There would be times that centering herself felt scary, when she needed motivation to engage in this strategy especially during the Trump Administration and amid Black Lives Matter protests and racial tension. Ladii explained, "I get scared. But even if there is fear, our voices still need to be heard." Speaking for herself has allowed

her the opportunity to be supported by allies. As a queer woman, it was even more imperative for Ladii to advocate for herself, speaking to her needs from individuals who hold societal privilege. Allies have helped Ladii to press past oppressions because she feels safe in her community "When I feel like my voice isn't quite as big as I want it to be, somebody hears me, somebody gives me a hug, somebody puts their fist up or kneels, they stand with me. I now have an ally. That allows me to keep going, even when I'm scared. That's really cool to me."

Allies are an imperative factor to how these political strategies can help to dismantle systems of oppression. For centuries, Black women have stood side by side with allies who are committed to social justice to leverage power and make a change. This idea of unity, coming together to resist in community, is repeated over and over in scholarship that centers on resistance. Lorde argues this as the main strategy to dismantle the masters house, in other words, in order to disrupt systems of power that create oppression for the marginalized, people, women specifically, who hold societal privilege must use their power. It is the focus on difference for Lorde that allies must not only pay attention to but see as necessary for creativity and interdependence to occur. Tolerating difference just perpetuates racist, patriarchal, and classist ideologies and behaviors; when difference is recognized as the catalyst of change, the "necessity for interdependency becomes unthreatening" (Lorde, 1984, p. 113). The power of people comes from their differences. Women are socialized to ignore or use them to separate or compete, this tears them apart and does not build community. Community, between those inside the circle

and out, allows for a true shift in power dynamics, without it "there is no liberation" so it must be a strategy that is used correctly.

Centering Self is significant to these women's resistance because the practice refuses to absorb or internalize the negative narratives about who they are that surrounds them. These women choose to prioritize their own bodies and healing to face the obstacles that emerge or sustain. Knowing who they are outside of stereotypes, media attention, and political views, provides them with the power of agency. Once a woman knows her power, she gains the confidence to not only tell her own story but refute stories that try to control her.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Existing culture requires constant negotiation because, as Hall (2016) puts it, popular culture "is the arena of consent and resistance" (p.3). These women experience the tension between consent and resistance. Their ability to survive persistent socioeconomic quagmire depends on community support. The responses to the questions "who or what supports you through all the barriers you face? Who or what empowers you to keep going?" resulted in the most popular strategy by the interviewees, community support. All the women spoke to a wide range of people in their lives who empowered, encouraged, or motivated them to keep going. It was very apparent during these conversations that these women were not able to show up and engage in politics without some level of support. The process of showing up and self-care have been examined as political acts, but Lorde (1988) and Davis (2018) also speak to a higher form of care,

community care, which will be explored later, that allow Black women to experience a mutual form of love, support, that has not been afforded in the past.

The women interviewed saw themselves as deserving of mutual love and support. For Lena (over 45, Raleigh, NC), Mel (25-35, Fort Worth, TX), and Neferti (36-45, New York, New York) community support came in the form of their family members. The love from Lena's fiancé, niece, and sons made her feel better when she was "going through hell." For Mel, although her sisters did not live close to her, they were able to support her through using their strengths to educate her son. Being a single parent experiencing overlapping oppressions took a toll on motherhood therefore to receive aspects of mothering from her sisters that she could not provide herself, made her stronger. She explains:

> Both my sisters play different roles with my son, which I'm very thankful for. One sister is the financial girl. She's going to teach him numbers. She gives him puzzles and things with numbers and letters. My oldest sister she's like mom, checking in on him to make sure he is okay.

The assistance that Mel's sisters give her reflects a form of parenting that Mel needs to ensure her son is getting holistic support. Other family members like cousins also played an imperative role in mental health for some of these women. During the media coverage of the murder of George Floyd, Neferti felt scared, defeated, and hopeless. Knowing that this tragic experience and the effects of it impacted her relatives, she turned to communication and emotional release to get through dark feelings. Understanding how

difficult it is for Black women to be emotional and vulnerable with others without being stereotyped or criticized, Nerferi knew she had to turn to family:

> We have a cousin chat that we use all the time. We also use FaceTime in order to see everyone all together in one place. When George Floyd got murdered, we all cried together. We'll all sit and cry, asking each other 'did you see that?' We also talked about it. It's so emotional because though they might not have sons, they have brothers, we have male cousins. It's just so much to take in. That helps me though because I can't cry in front of people. The world doesn't accept my tears as sadness, they see weakness.

This inability to show emotion, that Neferti speaks to, comes from a long history of dehumanization and commodification of Black women in the U.S. stemming from chattel slavery. Chattel slavery laid the foundation for the commodification and dehumanization of the black body, processes which sustained for hundreds of years through cultural, social, and political forms of control (Cooper, 2015). Over time the image of a strong Black woman dominated the narrative creating a fear in Black women to show emotions. It created a lose-lose situation: either Black women never expressed vulnerability, which could lead to harmful ways to mask feelings and emotions, such as alcohol and drug abuse, or expressed emotions such as sadness or pain and Black women were called weak (Kyra, 2020). For women like Neferti, while there is a rational reason not to express her pain publicly, there is a commitment to find places of safety in her community to release. For Black women, community becomes a healthier avenue where their vulnerability is

accepted and valued which in turn is giving a sense of agency back to Black women and continuing a cycle of liberation.

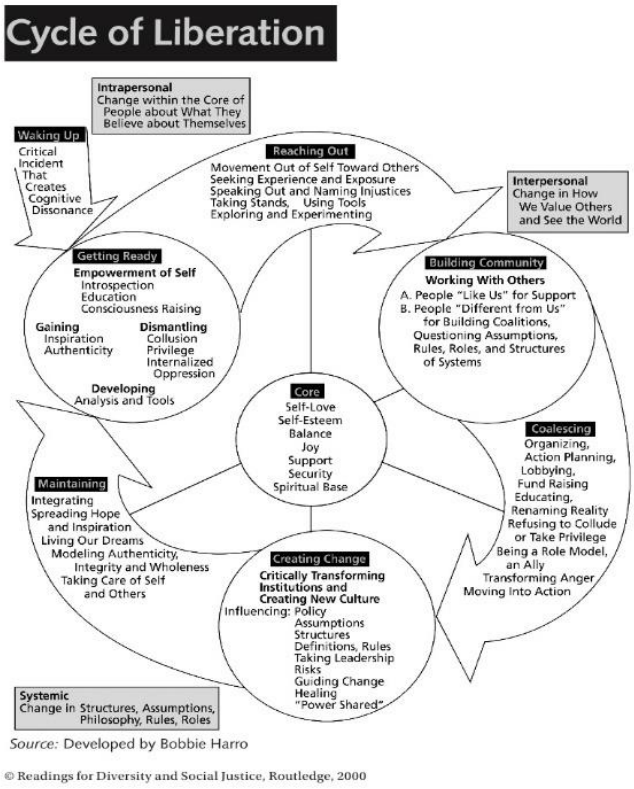


Figure 11: Cycle Of Liberation

Neferti also speaks of a form of support that has been consistent through generations in the Black community and that is the support and love of a mother. Neferti learned persistence by watching her mother:

> I do not know where this lady gets her strength from. I don't know where I would be if God gave me another mother, like, I literally wouldn't know, she is by far the strongest woman I know.

The Black mother-daughter relationship shaped by women watching their mothers succumb to unspeakable hardships, and watching their mothers overcome the insurmountable. This duality frames the relationship. The Black mother-daughter dynamic is important to this study because the strategies that Black daughters can absorb by watching their mothers can influence their survival. With detrimental treatment by members within and outside their communities, Black women must acquire strategies and knowledge through motherly role models that allow them to survive in a punitive world. According to Collins' (1987) Black mothers as role models for Black daughters face a "troubling dilemma" on what they should teach their daughters. To ensure survival, they must teach their daughters to fit into the systems of oppression and on the other hand, they do not want them to fit in too well in fear of them becoming willing participants in their own subordination; there is a delicate balance between conformity and resistance (Collins, 1987 p. 4). It is the relationship Black women have with white patriarchy that make Black mothers less likely to want to socialize their daughters into the "proscribed role of subordinate." Black mothers imagine more for their daughters, mothers provide their daughters with strategies, much like we see here, to get through tough times. As a kid, Neferti watched how her mother chose to participate in activities that made her happy rather than focusing on anything negative. She watched as her mother leaned on her grandmother for support, and she watched as her mother found the strength to bounce back from multiple situations that she argues "would have taken anyone else out." Social Learning Theory is prevalent in the ways in which Black mothers and daughters behave

(Collins, 1987 p. 4). Neferti chose to implement the same strategies she saw from her mother to cope and create a life of happiness for herself.

For other women in the study, community support came from individuals who were not kin or directly related to them. Ebony (25-35, North Carolina), Chante (25-35, Birmingham, Alabama), Woman #7 (36-45, California), and Dee (over 45, Raleigh, NC) spoke to the ways their community contributed to how they persist. Linking to faith, Dee relied on her church family to provide her with strength when she was weak; she explained "my church family keeps me covered in prayer, they pick me up, check on me, even tell me they love me." Dee spoke to how receiving love is difficult because she was not used to it. As previous chapters highlighted, Black women have been scrutinized to some of the highest forms of violence, this includes emotional violence as well, making affirmation of Black women rare. Dee chose to participate in reflection and meditation to work though the past traumas and placed herself in a posture to receive affirmations and support. It provided a sense of stability knowing she had a church family who would be there for her when she needed it most.

Ebony had a core group of friends who helped her get through tough times, "I have friends to get me through the struggles." The bond of sisterhood gave her an outlet when life felt heavy. For Ebony, her friends were who she vented to, who she could hang out with, they even served as babysitters when she needed them to. Although not related by blood, the connection to other women has proven to be a form of support that many Black women can resonate with. In *Embracing Sisterhood*, McDonald (2006) provides insight to how the collective of Black women can allow each other to survive and thrive,

despite the daily strains, stressors, and vulnerabilities they face (p. 22). Sisterhood shows up in a number of ways and can be extremely specific to a group of women. Ebony's narrative is one example, but there are material, emotional, and moral practices that allow Black women to be seen, supported and taken care of. And although there has been and still are tensions that can form between Black women for various reasons, one being what McDonald calls "class discord," sisterhood between Black women continues to be one of the most common ways Black women speak to their ability to go on past the struggle.

There are other non-familial relationships that Black women relied on to resist systemic barriers they faced. Chante and Woman #7 spoke to the support of their therapist and dietitian playing a significant role in how they made it through the pandemic and heighten race relations. Living in lock down increased feelings of isolation and affected mental and physical health for many in 2020. For decades, there have also been stigmas in the Black community preventing people from seeing a therapist or getting outside support with diet and nutrition. Research shows that only 8.6% of African Americans reported any mental health services use between 2008 and 2012 (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2015). Some African Americans chose to seek help from primary care physicians, elders in their church, or social supports, forgoing formal help seeking from professional counselors (Hays & Lincoln, 2017). Understanding that lack of resources and access to therapists due to poverty, class oppression, is a part of the reason why Black people do not seek mental and emotional support, engaging in it is an act of resistance within itself. Although Chante and Woman #7 both received government assistance, they both consciously made a choice to

prioritize their mental and emotional wellness and find a way to seek professional help. I realize that many are not afforded this opportunity and it does not dictate the level of care a person has for their mental and emotional health. Previous narratives proved that to be true in the ways these women took it upon themselves to take care of the mental, physical, and emotion when professional resources were not available.

Chante chose her therapist because of their focus on holistic health:

> I do see a therapist, and we work together on my holistic wellbeing. Having a therapist who cares about my interests, my goals, my physical health, provides me with a level of freedom to be my true self.

Chante looked forward to her virtual therapy sessions during the pandemic because of the sense of community felt between her and her therapist. Without these sessions, Chante would not have been as mentally stable. Chante explained:

> It is hard being strong when you are in the house the entire time watching your people getting killed. I came to my therapy sessions ready to unleash all of my thoughts and emotions and the relationship with my therapist let me know that I had someone in my corner. Knowing that got me through some days. I am stronger because of my therapist.

Quarantining had a heavy impact on Chante's mental health because she was not able to connect with her network like she did prior to COVID. Her therapist became her person. Not only did her therapist help to cope with her mental health issues, the exposure and routinely interaction with another person made quarantine a bit more manageable.

Woman #7 became physically stronger because of her community support. Food had continuously been a struggle for Woman #7 when she emotionally exhausted. The pandemic disrupted routines and took her off track causing her to turn to food more often. Woman #7 knew she needed community support to get back to a place where she felt better to continue to show up:

> I knew that I needed to get back on my food journey, release deadweight. My pastor's wife is a food coach, dietitian and she taught me about conscious eating and how to create healthy boundaries." Here community support is expressed by Black women in multiple roles.

The intersections of faith and wellness surrounded Woman #7 through the support of her pastor's wife.

There were various expressions of community support that Black women used that provided them with what they needed to resist and push through. The Black experience is not monolithic so not only do systemic oppressions effect each Black woman differently, but support is also customized to her specific needs.

Community support or community care as it is also referenced in Black feminist scholarship, providing capacity and bandwidth to each other in order to make it through oppressions. The women were clear that their community stepped in when they did not have the capacity to do so on their own. This is what allowed Black women to get to the next month, next week, next day. Abbey Lincoln (1970) asks the question "Who Will Revere the Black Woman? Lincoln spends most of the essay naming the ways Black

women are oppressed understanding that if it is not Black women who take care of us, no one will:

> Who will revere the Black woman? Who will keep our neighborhoods safe for our Black innocent womanhood? Black womanhood is outraged and humiliated. Black womanhood cries for dignity and restitution and salvation. Black womanhood wants and needs protection, and keeping, and holding. Who will assuage her indignation? Who will keep her precious and pure? Who will glorify and proclaim her beautiful image? (p. 82)

This question calls for community. The lack of care from systems requires Black women to rally together to receive the care they deserve. This radical form of self-care unifies women in their power to support and provide for communities even when the systems they exist in don't (Newman-Bremang, 2021, p. 17). "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self- preservation, and that is an act of political warfare," one of Lorde's most famous quotes has been written about many times (Lorde, 1988, p. 27). In recent years Lorde's quote has been used to promote what some are calling "new age self-care" that centers spending money on luxury pampering and less to do with nurturing and caring for communities who need the most care. The issue and quite frankly the contradiction from Lorde's philosophy is that this form of self-care is capitalistically driven and individually centered and reinforces structures Lorde devoted her life to dismantling (Eromosele, 2020). Lorde is not speaking of lavish trips and bubble baths when she is writing about an act of political warfare. The impacts of a racist patriarchal society cannot be survived alone and is more detrimental when having to navigate it

alone. The reality of these systems is that they cannot "be outrun, outbought, or pampered away;" we live inside them, but they can be resisted (Eromosele, 2020, p. 3). Dissent towards these systems requires a communal approach, not just a focus on the individual, which can place even more burden on marginalized people. Black women must ask how they can best show up for each other when the government fails them. Community care does what it can to keep life sustainable. Lorde reflects on the "devastating effects of overextension" and the difference between overextension and stretching. For Lorde, as Black women, it is okay to stretch ourselves, pushing our minds to our highest potential and contributing meaningful work, stretching turns to overextension when we adopt a capitalistic mindset equating work to worth. This Marxist understanding of a capitalist system keeping the proletariat constantly focused on work, keeping them exhausted is what communal care resists against. Excellence, success, should not be tied to how much someone works or how exhausted one is from work, which is not sustainable. Community care allows Black women to share the load, for Lorde self-care cannot exist without community, something these women who interviewed know to be true. Community support is significant to the daily lives of these women simply because together, they are stronger.

POLITICAL STRATEGIES

After narrating a set of reactions and explications brought on by the problems mentioned in previous chapters, this section looks to answer the question, "What type of politics do these strategies engage in?" This section defines persistence, resistance, and dissent as emic categories to show how the strategies implemented by Black women

participated in all of them. This section also will analyze when the strategies are reactive, rather than proactive and draws attention to the ways in which these women are supported.

These women are political and enliven their political values through daily acts of resistance. While they encounter bigotry and discriminatory systems every day, the women invent strategies to survive and persist despite the many impediments. For example, on more than one occasion, women noted that their participation in protests and demonstrations were consciously political. Yet, at the same time, their political intentions extend beyond the public events that garner significant crowds and media attention. The experiences of the women interviewed contradicts the traditional narrative about Black women's political engagement. While it may be true that many Black women are overtaxed and overstressed, it does not automatically mean they do not have time think about politics. Evidence suggests that new media platforms facilitate and encourage active political engagement. It is also true that Black women's political practices are illegible to those looking for conventional articulations of political positions. That their acts are rarely recognized or understood affirms the need for using a Black Feminist Intersectional approach. Its core principles make trust and make visible Black women's voices and courageous acts resistance and dissent.

"Nevertheless, She Persisted" this saying took the feminist movement by storm in 2017 when Senator Elizabeth Warren was silenced on the Senate floor when speaking against the confirmation of Senator Jeff Session as Attorney General. The quote appeared on apparel, posters, mugs and even jewelry. It became the theme for women's

conferences all over the nation and a social media campaign featuring women from Harriet Tubman to Beyoncé lasted for weeks. Persistence became a battle cry emphasizing two elements of what women experience: a. that no matter your positionality, women are constantly silenced and treated unfairly, and b. women will not let negative treatment make them stop. Persistence indicates that "a negative can turn into a positive", that in the face of adversity, women will continue to fight for their rights, boldly, and loudly (Grant, 2017, p. 2). As reviewed in chapter three and through the women's responses these two elements have been incorporated in political strategies for decades without ever gaining national attention. I argue that the popularity and backing of this phrase are due to its attachment to a white woman who is a public figure. After the phrase spread widely, Black women began to produce promotional items that associated the expression to narratives or images that were more relatable to what persistence looked like for them. In other words, Black women "blackened" up the phrase by placing it on memes of Black women like Rosa Parks or creating t-shirts spotlighting Black women without any mention of Senator Warren.



Figure 12: Nevertheless, She Persisted, Rosa Parks



Figure 13: Nevertheless, She Persisted, Black Women

The Black women in this study implemented forms of persistence that were real for their lives, mostly tied to protecting themselves and their families. The strategy of

sacrifice represents this political act, this continuation of past oppression. The reactionary automatic response to keep going and not give up when systems of oppression, tied to the three factors and other stressors occurred, is a literal display of persistence as a political act. These women make a way out of no way. When racist, patriarchal, and capitalist systems hinder them from having the resources to adequately take care of themselves, let alone their families, these women have the knowledge and tenacity to still find methods to get it done. “Nevertheless, She Persisted.”

Dissent, a political strategy recently inspired both by the passing of Justice Ginsburg and the ongoing Black Lives Matter movement, is an unwillingness to cooperate with an established source of authority (Redhead, 2014). The cultural collective engages in dissenting practices to demand justice from both people and systems of power. For some, dissent is seen as an integral part of a healthy democracy, and for others, it is seen to divide, either way, it is a political strategy that Black women constantly engage in to demonstrate their agency and push for equity. In examining work on dissident citizenship, Sparks (1997) explores dissenting practices of Black activist women and argues that these practices “point toward an expanded conception of democratic citizenship incorporates that dissent and recognizes courage as central to democratic action (pp. 74-75). Historical examples of dissenting practices are Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat to a white man in 1955, Johnnie May Tillmon along with other Black welfare rights activists challenging welfare reform in 1966, and Black feminist Audre Lorde calling white women feminists out for their racist, classist and homophobic practices in 1981. These actions represent what Sparks (1997) names

“dissident citizenship” which is implemented by citizens who are marginalized who publicly contest dominant acts of power through oppositional democratic practices. Instead of engaging in acts that can be more private like voting, Sparks argues that dissident citizenship establishes alternative public spaces through more public practices like marches and protests. For the women who were interviewed, their faith is not only expressed in private ways through practices like prayer that allow them to show up and provides hope against the negative emotions expected from living in such harsh conditions; the expressions of faith also allow them to participate in more public ways like participating in Black Lives Matter protests with their church members. Their existence in these practices serves as a dissenting practice as it represents an unwillingness, a refusal, to adapt to the majority while also being dissident citizens that help to “continue the revitalization of democratic life” (Sparks, 1997, p. 75)

Resistance is a method for change that happens when “culture, whether in the form of ideology, hegemony, or subjection, is cunningly engineering consent” and individuals find ways to resist those effects of 'normalization’ (Fluck, 2005, p. 22). Black women individually and collectively engage in resistance, like refusing to engage in dominant cultural practices, while also creating spaces for communities to participate; much like how the interviewed women refused to be associated to mainstream images of Black women in the media while using social media platforms to invite other Black women to share their narratives. hooks proclaim that resistance must be “even stronger” for Black women because of the daily confrontation with “racist stereotypes that devalue us” (hooks, 1999). Scholars like Lu and Steele (2018) argue that the act of choosing joy

in the midst of enduring dominant narratives that demean and dehumanize Black women, is a strong form of resistance. Centering self, reclamation of the Black body, disrupts the narrative of the angry Black woman that both middle class Black people, like Kevin Samuels, and white people, like Trump have imposed on Black women. Prioritizing self-healing and rest serves as a form of restoration so that Black women can fight again. Are Black women on the front lines of more visible tactics of resistance? Just look at the founders of Black Lives Matter, let alone the iconic names of Sojourner Truth, Fannie Lou Hamer, and the millions of Black women who go unnamed leading grassroots efforts around the country. Rest as resistance requires a woman to care for herself and requires a level of gentleness and softness which Black women are not taught either by their ancestors or society. Organizations like *The Nap Ministry* are helping Black women unlearn and disrupt living a life of labor, of production. Tricia Hersey (2022) aka "The Nap Bishop" highlights this concept as resistance:

> Disrupt and push back against capitalism and white supremacy: Our worth does not reside in how much we produce, especially not for a system that exploits and dehumanizes us. Rest, in its simplest form, becomes an act of resistance and a reclaiming of power because it asserts our most basic humanity. We are enough. The systems cannot have us (p. 17).

The strategy to center the self these women portray is breaking barriers in several ways. It serves as resistance to systems of power, it requires intentionality and care against the harsh conditions these women experience, and women can continually engage in these self-care practices; it is not situational; therefore, a woman can be in a constant state of

care against a world of cruelty which can create change for the individual and communities.

Throughout the data collected and analyzed, a common theme emerged: overlap. In their social identities, their oppression, and their engagement in politics, the overlap was paramount. All the strategies these women practice are a combination of persistence, dissent, and resistance.

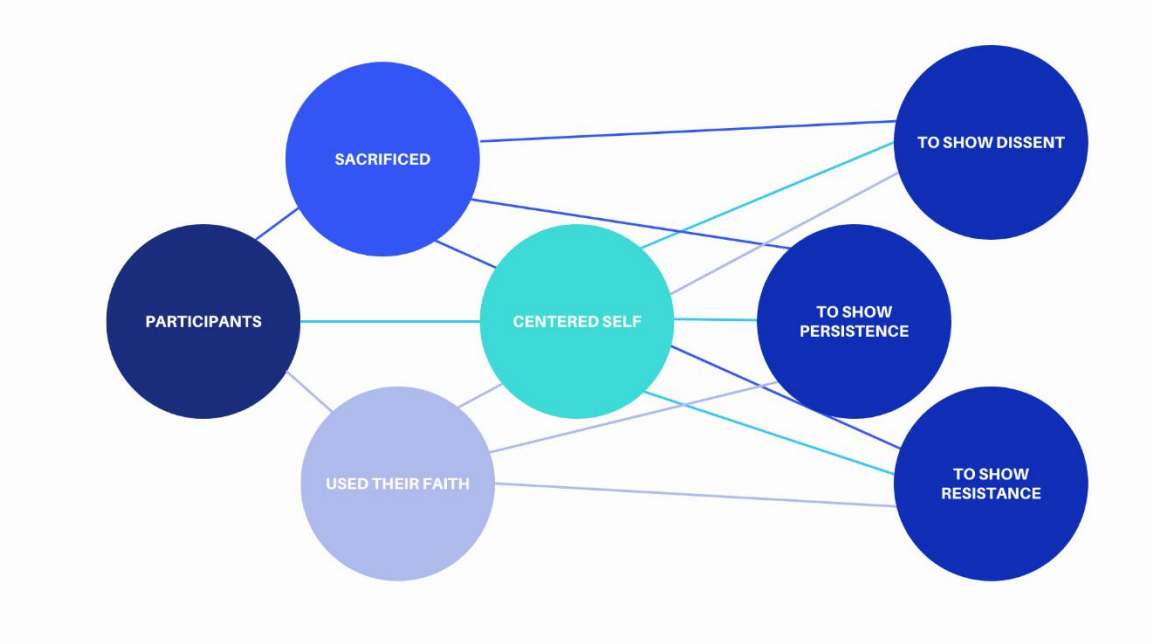


Figure 14: Political Strategies

These women do not quit. These women push against governmental power. These women do not ask for consent from the dominant group to move forward. These women boldly proclaim that they are here to stay no matter the racist, sexist, and classist

oppressions that come from Trump, COVID, racial oppression, or any other chronic stressors that come forward in their daily lives.

What is evident through the analysis of these four strategies, is that during 2020, even when these three factors were at its peak, Black women receiving government assistance in the U.S. were actively engaging in politics through persistence, resistance, and dissent. These women responded both proactively and reactively to systemic oppressions brought on by the Trump Administration, COVID-19, and racial tension along with other chronic stressors. Continuing the grassroots methods used by Black economically disadvantaged women in the U.S. previous decades, these women activated faith, sacrifice, their self-care, and community support to show up for their well-being, their families, and others to attain joy and justice on the local level in hopes that national and global realms would follow suit.

CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARSHIP

A common theme that continued to surface during this research project is the power that Black women hold; a power that oftentimes gets unrecognized because of how society chooses to ignore it and keep it hidden. In listening to these women tell their stories of how they have overcome and work through oppressive forces in 2020 and analyzing the strategies they used to do so, I am left with the question of how these narratives will contribute to scholarship. The original idea for this research project started my first year of graduate school in a Gender and Sexuality course offered in Cultural Studies. The concept of Foucault's biopower and biopolitics was introduced to me; a concept of which I had never heard. By using the topic of birth control, I was able to

understand the ways in the which governmental power implements the concept of "live and let die." Learning more about biopolitics solidified my research interests in looking at the ways power and control work to regulate Black women's reproduction. This project continues Foucault's work on power and control to look at how Black women's bodies are seen and regulated. However, the main focus is not solely on how power regulates the decisions these women make about their bodies, but how they resist against these power structures. Bringing Black economically disadvantaged women into the scholarship and focusing on their everyday resistance strategies pushes up against the Marx's idea of resistance which equates to mass revolution. These more discrete, private, daily practices of resistance allow access to the feeling of freedom and autonomy for these women on a local level and at times at a national and global level. This work also pushes against Cultural Studies scholarship by centering Black economically disadvantaged women in ways chronicle Cultural Studies texts do not.

While scholars have been studying power, control, and resistance for quite some time, this project looks at these factors in a specific way. This project contributes to the current scholarship by bringing in the voice of Black women receiving government assistance in the U.S. and how they resisted against the impacts Trump, COVID-19, and George Floyd had over decisions about their body, reproduction, and motherhood. The literature used throughout the text that focused on resistance for Black economically disadvantage women was either situated in other time periods like Walters (2021) work with Black domestic workers in the 1960s or incorporated the events of 2020 but did not specifically look at resistance for Black women who receive government assistance. The

narrow scope of the project brings in a unique perspective to how 2020 was experienced that is missing in current literature.

This research contributes to scholarship by looking into the interconnectedness of Black women's identities and how systems of power are structured for them. This work gives room for research to expand in the intersections of identity, temporality, and resistance. Areas that were isolated now get current research and come together to highlight the nuanced areas that have not been looked at extensively. The opportunity to look at resistance to state power at local levels to shine light on global level oppressive forces through the lens of an extremely specific demographic, whose political acts are so powerful, is now available through this research. This research also opens more opportunities for scholarship to focus on the dialectics that are at play within Black women's experiences. It does not require scholars to focus on an either/or framework, but more of a both/and approach to showcase multiple ways Black women are experiencing the same event. Through this study, the women spoke to different ways they experience the regulation of birth control, mothering, and healthcare. Not only were there different experiences from multiple women, but there was also a duality to the experiences had by the same woman. When research breaks this idea of monolithic, it allows for more practices to be explored and normalizes the diversity of Black women.

CONCLUSION

The year 2020 is one that will be discussed for decades to come. Some women in the interview spoke to how they will share stories of 2020 with hypothetical grandchildren when they are older because of how monumental it was. These factors were intentionally chosen for this project because while the world witnessed the more public impacts of Trump and his administration, COVID-19, and a spike in racial tension, there were many more effects on communities that were brought to national attention. More specifically, Black economically disadvantaged women's bodies, reproduction, and thoughts of motherhood were negatively impacted by these factors both separately and simultaneously in ways that deserved to be exposed. This projects luminates those impacts not only to reiterate the intersectional oppressions that these women face every day, but to showcase the immense power that they embody to resist these oppressions. In other words, by highlighting just how hard these women's lives were during 2020, in addition to the chronic stressors they faced prior to, the political acts of persistence, resistance, and dissent are much more remarkable.

By using a Black feminist intersectional approach, the women's narrative is centered in this "rebellious methodology" focusing on the ways they resisted. The bottom-up method allowed for the strategies these women engaged in daily to be the focal point. By doing so the racist, sexist, and classist aspects of power can be revealed. Trump, COVID, racism and the media all exemplified these multiplicative oppressive aspects. However, Black women receiving assistance have refused to let these

oppressions control the way they live their lives on a local level. These women, through their political strategies, made it through 2020.

In reflecting about this research project, the interviewees, the questions, and the overall experience, there are aspects that worked well: the timing of the interviews, the conversational approach to the interview, and the blend of history and chronicle texts with more modern scholarship on the resistance of Black women in the U.S. The interviews were conducted during the pandemic while these factors were still very much apparent and real in these women's lives. The women did not have to think back too far to answer the questions and some of them where still dealing the negative impacts of these factors even if they occurred months prior to our conversation. Crafting the interview questions to be more informal and conversational had a positive impact on the storytelling. The women shared that they felt comfortable in the interview and quite honestly were excited to have an avenue to express what was happening in their daily lives. No question shocked them or overwhelmed them to a point where they did not want to answer, and I would argue the intentionality of creating the questions played a part in that. Black feminist theory began to formally make its presence in the academic arenas in the 1970s centering the perspective of Black women and the ways they resist again an oppressive world. In addition, Black women have been engaging in political acts of resistance even before then. It was important to honor both the power in the longevity of Black women's resistance with the current ways scholars are writing about it and the current ways Black women are implementing it daily. One thing to do differently for this project was interviewing a woman in the age group of 18-24. As generations evolve,

Generation Z is experiencing and resisting against about systems of power very differently than Baby Boomers, Generation X, and even Millennials, having that younger voice represented would have enhanced the study.

The interviews took place from December 2020 through June 2021a time when Americans were starting to feel okay with the idea of leaving their home and were becoming hopeful for the future. To gauge how they women were feeling at the current moment in time and what they thought about the future, each one answered “How are you feeling now? And what are your thoughts about the future? Almost every woman spoke to a feeling of hope, while life was still hard, they were hopeful that things would get better. Some of the feelings reflected in 2021 were, “I'm feeling like things are not necessarily getting better, but they're on a road to recovery”, “if it doesn’t go right, then I'm not gonna worry myself out”, “I’m hopeful. I'm hopeful that things are going to get better”, “The future is great. The future is bright. The future is black female”. The answer to this question almost reflects this entire project in one short sentence, that obstacles are present and yet still Black women are not going to let it take them down. These women will find a way to persist in the face of adversity and recognize the power they embody. Lena (over 45, Raleigh, North Carolina) specifically was in the middle of having her housing taken away when conducting the interview but relied on her faith to bring her hope in this stressful situation:

> Right now, we're being thrown out of our apartment complex. So, it's kind of hard to say what I think about the future. But all I can do is keep on praying and try to

pull through. We're packing regardless if they kick us out or not, because I don't want the stress of not knowing on me. God is going to provide, and we will be fine.

This goes to show just how powerful these women are. Lena was not going to let anyone decide for her as to where her family would stay, she was taking control, relying on faith and her community support to keep her family in a stable situation. The stability, even if that meant living with someone else temporarily, was worth more to her than the idea of being evicted from her own home at any time. That is resistance.

The answers to the closing question of the interview are the best way to end this project because it allowed the women to confidently say whatever it is they wanted people to know; an opportunity, if you will, to talk to the reader about what is real for them. In staying true to my connection to the women, I leave you with their words.

Ebony (35-46, North Carolina): I just want to say, stay out of trouble as much as you can. If you don't get in trouble, you can do anything you want to do, and nobody can stop you or tell you what to do.

Lena (Over 45, Raleigh, NC): I just want us all to get along. Let's try to love each other, regardless of sex and color. Let's do this thing together. Together, we can do a lot. If we split up, it's going to be a mess. It's going to be a mess like Trump.

Ladii (25-35, Richmond, VA): Even though there are a lot of Black women in entertainment and social media, know that there are Black women who are doing remarkable things every day. There are so many ways that women's voices can be

heard. And the few that still go under the radar, those few that still walk around not wearing makeup are dismissed. The fact that you're giving them a platform for their voices to be heard, that's enough.

Chante (25-35, Birmingham, Alabama): Black women are dope, Black women are so dope. The world sucks sometimes. But Black women are light. Our melanin shines bright and beautiful. And I don't know how we are able to see beauty in pain, but we do. It's etched into our skin, into our blood.

Woman #7 (36-45, California): I would just say this triple pandemic can't hold us down. It will never hold us down. We're resilient people, black women who are on government assistance. Coons won't hold us down. white women won't hold us down. We will advance and move forward.

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