

Structural Power: Black Women, Misogynoir, and the Stagnation of Social Mobility

“The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black woman.”¹ When Malcolm X, a prominent leader during the American Civil Rights Movement, spoke on Black women, he drew attention to an important, and purposefully overlooked, challenge to systemic power. In discussing the disadvantages Black women faced within his time, Malcolm X details an essential message of power and the systems that enable said power. Historically, sexual violence, underrepresentation, and racist politics have disproportionately affected the safety and well-being of Black women. From the very genesis of the slave trade to the wage-gap within contemporary America, Black women remain victims of oppressive systems that immoderately prevent them from obtaining equality. With the introduction of America as a lucrative European market, Black women became the key laborers to a system that not only undervalued them but dismissed them as simple mechanizations of early capitalism. As White enslavers amassed fortunes from the free labors of Black individuals, racist stereotypes and power structures inaugurated various systematic barriers that controlled the Black community and operated as a tool of intrinsic oppression. The congregation of structural power in the hands of affluent White males disallowed Black women from engaging in sociopolitical systems that governed every facet of their autonomy and interpersonal sovereignty. The notion of intersectional oppression to Black women stems from both their gender and their race. When Moya Bailey, a Black, queer feminist, coined the term *misogynoir* in 2010, the focus on the structural barriers of Blackness and womanhood underscored every Black females’ complex relationship with power and representation.

¹ Kiesha Blain, “These Overlooked Black Women Shaped Malcolm X's Life,” *Time Magazine*, February 2020.

The investigation into these power imbalances acts as a tool for historians to synthesize and outline various forms of indelible oppression. Power on a structural level combines the political sphere, the social world, and the overlaying factors of the economy. Through the implementation of primary source documents, scholarly articles, and various examples from our contemporary world, this survey of the relationship between Black women and power structures underlines the manifestation and continuity of oppression. When systems of racism and misogyny buttress systematic control, the lack of power accessible to Black women becomes pronounced. It is the exploration of these facets of society that demonstrate how Black women cannot wield power due to the structural, oppressive forces combating equality.

When discussing marginalized groups and their access to power, it is important for historians investigating their stories to map the constitutions of influence and authority. The historical avenues to exercise both personal and societal sovereignty have been non-existent for Black women throughout much of America's long, contentious history. In underscoring the various pathways to power, Black women continually undergo modicums of disenfranchisement. Political power, the most blatant and obvious form of social authority, leaves little room for women of color to exercise personal autonomy. Political power represents the ability of governments, states, and individuals within these spaces to control the direction of one's nation. There are many outlets for the implementation of political power. From the domination of the military to the use of the judicial system, and most overtly, the legislative body, political power primarily relates to the rule of law and government. Presidential powers, like the ability to pardon criminals and veto bills constructed by Congress, give those sitting as Commander in Chief incredible amounts of political authority. The Supreme Court also demonstrates intricate avenues to political power. As members who not only operate as justices for life, the inspectors

of the Constitution command incredible amounts of authority and domination over the interpretation of the legal system and government. The investigation into these systems of power and control of American politics exemplifies interesting trends within White supremacy and racism, however. For Black women, the political sphere leaves little room to express their ideas, experiences, and narratives. As no Black woman has ever served as a Supreme Court Justice or President of the United States, the understanding that marginalized women of color cannot fully wield the political authority given to their White counterparts. However, analyzing the long history of political authority within America also details a more insidious proponent of oppression.

With the arrival of European conquerors on the shores of West Africa in the 16th century, Black women immediately became subjects to a complex structure of political, mercantile control. While White women of Europe already existed within a system that undervalued, ignored, and disregarded their political expression, women of color presented an intricately different challenge to the sociopolitical order.² The rise of profitability from the developing slave trade left European colonizers with a task to differentiate whiteness from blackness. While the Judeo-Christian culture of the Europeans equated whiteness with chastity and culture, how were these nations to justify the developing system of enslavement? The answer lies in the demonization of black individuals, especially bodies that belonged to Black women. In the article “Some Could Suckle Over Their Shoulder,” Jennifer Morgan examined the very beginnings of sociopolitical misogynoir, a unique, intersectional form of power imbalance that surrounds the control of Black women. As the popularity, profitability, and possibilities of the Atlantic Slave Trade steadily rose among European capitalists and monarchs, the need to

² Jennifer L Morgan, “Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder: Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, no. 1 (1997), 168-170.

dichotomize whiteness and blackness became of utmost importance.³ This observable facet clarifies when analyzing how White women contrasted Black women. According to Morgan, the creation of Black women as “savage,” “beast-like,” and “barbaric” detailed the rise of sociopolitical misogynoir in Colonial America. This juxtaposed the perception of White women that the Europeans conceived. For European women, beauty steadily became linked to their whiteness. The development of these beauty standards, coupled with their inability to organize politically, outlined the foundations of dominating masculinity and White supremacy. Moreover, because White women set the beauty standard vis-a-vis their whiteness, Black women ultimately felt the consequences of this development. By the steady hand of White enslavers, Black women shifted into one-dimensional entities of labor and reproduction.

More astutely, however, Black women, as individuals forced into slavery, became the least protected demographic of the colonial era. In childbirth, women of color often had their physiological agonies downplayed; the physical well-being of these women was often ignored by their White enslavers. White women, however, benefited from a theological-political machine that valued their lives, did not receive this same medical malpractice.⁴ State legislation, therefore, has never allowed Black women to fully assert personal, or even societal, power. During the colonial era, power localized itself within whiteness and masculinity. As Black women could not fulfill either of these criteria, their ability to assert power on the political level was completely suppressed. As Morgan’s article highlighted, historians understand that political authority rested with the mercantile, Christian elite puppeteering the Slave Trade. More horrifically, the racist stereotype of Black women developed into something comparable to livestock to the machine of colonial capitalism. With their bodies exploited, their fundamental

³ Ibid, 169-170, 174.

⁴ Ibid, 170-171.

human liberties appropriated, and their cultures demonized, Black women morphed into objects of oppression on a structural scale. As the most oppressed demographic in this developing commercial region, political power belonged the White, masculine bodies that caged these women under slavery.⁵

Historically, Black women have endured legislation that stripped them of their personal and political autonomy. As an oppressed demographic, political power remains the largest obstacle for Black women to overcome. The understanding of these historical trends by scholars notes that political oppression constituted the racialization and vilification of Blackness during the colonial era. But the inability to assert political power remains only one form of structural maltreatment. When observing structural oppression, and the disenfranchisement from power, social authority constitutes a massive role in defining, suppressing, and quelling Black women's sociopolitical mobility. When characterizing this less blatant form of structural authority, it must become clear what delegates social power, and how it affects Black women so directly. Social power represents the ability to sway beliefs, customs, reputations, and influence the actions and thoughts of others within one's community and geopolitical region. For modern, 21st-century sensibilities, a good example of the implementation of social power comes from high-profile celebrities like Kylie Jenner and her social media empire. With over 200 million followers on Instagram, Jenner holds massive sway over the perception of beauty standards, the idea of the modern American celebrity, and the luxury of wealth and status. Furthermore, Jenner enacts her social agency by changing fashion trends and becoming something of a role-model for her followers. But what does this 21st-century example of social power have to do with Black women and their history of social disempowerment? The answer lies in the history of cultural appropriation, sexual violence, and the silencing of women's voices.

⁵ Ibid, 173-174.

Continuing with the 21st-century example, trends like cultural appropriation, “blackfishing” (when one darkens their skin and styles themselves to appear like a Black woman), and the monetization of trends popularized by Black women all contribute to historic racism that removes social power from women of color.⁶ While White celebrities like Jenner continually profit off of features, styles, and mannerisms that have historically been demonized when done by Black women, it offers sociologists and historians alike a unique opportunity to analyze the importance of social power and its accessibility to Black women. In the article “It Was like All of Us Had Been Raped,” historian Danielle McGuire outlined an important history of social stratification of Black women in the investigation of sexual violence in 1959. One fateful day in Tallahassee, four White men brutally attacked, sexually assaulted, and robbed Betty Owens, a Black woman, of her safety. However, unlike the various other Black survivors of her time, Owens proceeded to challenge her attackers in the Florida legal system. The question arises of the significance of Owen’s attack and the social power of Black women as a demographic.⁷ The answer stems from how Black womanhood and misogynoir set the foundation for vulnerability during the Jim Crow era. McGuire underscored an important phenomenon when investigating the roles of gender and white supremacy within the locality of this specific court case.

Black women, beings of the segregated South with the least amount of both social and political power, understood that sexual violence coupled with public disbelief left them unprotected. This “culture of dissemblance,” as McGuire wrote, examined societal disbelief of sexual brutality from the most privileged and protected demographic, White men. Moreover,

⁶ Kameron Virk and NESTA McGregor, “Blackfishing: The Women Accused of Pretending to be Black,” *BBC News*, December 2018.

⁷ Danielle L. McGuire, ““It Was like All of Us Had Been Raped”: Sexual Violence, Community Mobilization, and the African American Freedom Struggle,” no. 3 (2004), 907-909.

when White womanhood was threatened by the gaze and apparitions of Black masculinity, oftentimes this resulted in the harshest penal punishment for Black men. Black women, however, often received no legal protection when the same bodily crimes continually plagued their communities. When Black women were assaulted by White men, a great majority of the time the legal system offered no protections to them. Investigating these instances of legal hypocrisies, misogynoir and racial stereotypes underscore the lack of social power women of color wielded. Although Owens ultimately triumphed in her case against her White attackers, important historical trends presented themselves through alarming avenues.⁸

Investigating the article “Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder,” racial stereotypes of the colonial era helped to define the social disenfranchisement Black women faced during segregation. The vilification of blackness as something “savage” or “beastly” created structures of racism that developed into Black women’s lack of social authority.⁹ As the very definition of social power stems from the reputation and perception of individuals within a society, Morgan’s article demonstrated that the creation of these malicious stereotypes stripped power from Black women and left them vulnerable to economic and sexual exploitation. When the powerful elite of the colonial era defined beauty standards as a phenomenon only obtainable through whiteness, Black women’s bodies, and the attitudes towards these bodies, transformed into something unfavorable. Social power in the hands of these high-profile individuals, such as the English colonizers of the 16th century or the Kylie Jenners of the 21st-century, remove the authority of Black women to assert individual power. Structural barriers created from the foundations of racial stereotypes demonstrate that a highly marginalized group, such as women of color, cannot wield any avenues to power.

⁸ Ibid, 907-910.

⁹ Jennifer L Morgan, “Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder: Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, no. 1 (1997), 170-171.

As aforementioned, political and social power allows groups and individuals to determine the trajectory of trends, legislation, and the perception of society. Blackness remained criminalized in the eyes of the legal system and perceived as grotesque by the standards of the social elite, highlighting the inability to assert individual or structural sovereignty. These oppressive forces of sociopolitical control leave little opportunity for Black women to reach a modicum of equality. Economic power, however, only further subjugates these women through its nefarious style of misogyny. The definition of economic power lies in the ability of the affluent to impose their financial interests upon a nation or group. A perfect, 21st century, example of this sociological phenomenon stems from an observation of men like Donald Trump. During his election campaign in 2016, the business mogul exclaimed vehemently of his father's "small loan of one million dollars."¹⁰ Donald Trump, an affluent White man, underscores an interesting study of generational wealth by Black historians. When one has high economic power, members of the economic ruling class unfairly gain significant advantages in politics and the social realm. For Black women in general, this is not the case. Because the Black community is often hindered by a mixture of political and social barriers, their ability to exercise economic power is diminished. In the controversial monograph, *Time on the Cross*, economists Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman outline the economic advantages of American slavery. Within this historical perusal, Fogel and Engerman outlined that the financial benefits of slavery helped to bolster the Southern economy. According to these scholars, the use of enslaved labor not only benefited White, Southern elites but also aided those under the domination of plantation owners.¹¹

¹⁰ Scott Stump, "Donald Trump: My dad gave me 'a Small Loan' of \$1 Million to get Started," *CNBC*, October 2015.

¹¹ Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, *Time on the Cross* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1989), 8.

The painting of slavery away from the barbaric nature understood by popular, and academic, consciousness demonstrates that Black women's economic mobility has always remained in the hands of the affluent White population. Black women, coerced on these sugar, tobacco, and cotton plantations, existed as dependents to their enslavers.¹² Moreover, Fogel and Engerman frequently dismissed how this economic dependency left Black women vulnerable to sexual violence and physical abuse. Fogel and Engerman, however, detailed that comparatively, enslaved women existed in a safer, healthier echelon than their counterparts in the Caribbean system. According to the scholars, the justification of the safety this system perpetuated stemmed from the records of birthrates and live births given by Black, enslaved women. Enslaved people in the US had higher birth rates and lower death rates compared to their Caribbean counterparts due to the development of immunity to disease in the New World and because "the fertility of African women was substantially below that of Creoles."¹³ Therefore, Fogel and Engerman misunderstood a key proponent of slavery and its economic planning; it relied on racial violence and coercion. The economic power of Black women remained stagnated under this system of coercion and suppression. While these economists claimed that the system of enslavement benefited from a "Remarkable demonstration of teamwork," historical racial structures litigate this claim remains false.¹⁴ As members of a marginalized demographic, the economic mobility and autonomy of Black women continually found itself in a cycle of repression and stagnation.

In a comparative analysis, the descendants of White plantation owners had generations of established assets to obtain economic power. For the oppressed, such as Black women, the institution of slavery crippled them from receiving these economic head-starts, stripping them of

¹² Ibid, 20-24.

¹³ Ibid, 26-27.

¹⁴ Ibid, 203-206.

important economic authority. Even with the 21st-century worldview, Black women still maintain a decreased ability to act as economic independence, especially when concerning true economic power. As the capitalistic system of contemporary America relies on the foundations of slavery and enslaver politics, Black women continue to remain victims of disenfranchisement. This twisted, underhanded oppression disables these women from asserting their autonomy. When affluent, White males, like Donald Trump, benefit from a system of longstanding oppression, they continually enact oppressive barriers that handicap Black women from asserting economic agency. An important contemporary example of this racist practice comes from the vilification of Black women's hair. When Black women enter a job interview donning their natural hair, it is considered highly unprofessional. However, if one looks at the trends of modern cultural appropriation when White women adopt styles like cornrows or braids, society perceives the style as quirky and beautiful.¹⁵ Trends like these stem from the colonial system of oppression that continues to keep Black women from reaching any modicum of economic power. Therefore, marginalized groups such as women of color can never enact agency of economic authority without first obliterating the racist structures that perceive their beauty, economic autonomy, and culture as dangerous.

Black women continually exist within a system of control that denies them the ability to assert personal and structural power. As the most marginalized demographic within American history, women of color exist outside of structural foundations that allow their white contemporaries to gain authority and influence. When historians analyze the systems of control that govern the distribution of power, Black women are continually left out and ignored. As the slave system continues to act as a buttress to white supremacy and racial systems, it becomes abundantly clear that Black women cannot have a seat at this metaphorical table. For

¹⁵ Chanté Griffin, "How Natural Black Hair at Work Became a Civil Rights Issue," *Jstor Daily*, July 2019.

investigating scholars, the implementation of primary source documents, scholarly articles, and various examples from our contemporary world, this survey of the relationship between Black women and power structures underlines the manifestation and continuity of oppression. When systems of racism and misogyny buttress systematic control, the lack of power accessible to Black women becomes pronounced. It is the exploration of these facets of society that demonstrate how Black women cannot wield power due to the structural, oppressive forces combating equality.