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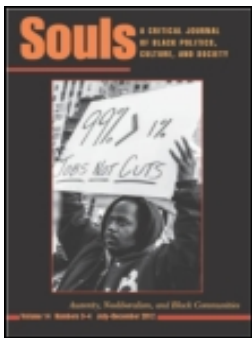
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## COMMENTS FROM THE FIELD

# Black Women's History and the Labor of Mourning

Jessica Millward

The image of the grieving African American mother, especially Sybrina Fulton (Trayvon Martin), Lucia McBath (Jordan Davis), and Lezley McSpadeen (Mike Brown), replaying across our television and computer screens has become all too common. Isabel Wilkerson noted, "There was a lynching every four days in the early decades of the twentieth century. It's been estimated that an African-American is now killed by police every two to three days."<sup>1</sup> For many, the images of grieving mothers also struck a cord with many in that we saw in their eyes the pain of Mamie Till Mobley and her son Emmett. The story of this family is well known. In the wake of the massacre of nine African Americans in South Carolina, Claudia Rankine used the example of Emmett Till and Mamie Till Mobley to underscore the ever-present acts of violence directed toward African Americans. In 1955 three white men in Mississippi lynched a 14-year-old Emmett. Visiting from Chicago, Till violated Southern norms by speaking to a white woman. Till was awakened in the middle of the night and taken from the home of his relative. He was tortured before being shot in the head. His body was weighed down by a cotton gin tied to his back and thrown into the Tallahatchie River to sink. When his lifeless body was pulled from the river, the handsome young man was unrecognizable. When Till's body returned to Chicago, his mother insisted on an open casket. She sent her only child away for a summer to have him returned in a casket. It is a pain that only a parent can understand. Yet, the image of Mamie Till is ever present in my mind. As a scholar of slavery, I often ask questions about enslaved mothers and their power to protect their children. Sometimes the answers are triumphant but more often than not answers are unsettling. The answers echo the comment made by a respondent in Claudia

Rankine's *New York Times* op-ed who lamented that, "the condition of black life is one of mourning."<sup>2</sup>

This special volume of *Souls* provides the occasion to discuss the hidden labor involved in the production of Black women's history. This article argues that contemporary violence against African Americans is influencing scholars to articulate a vocabulary that publically acknowledges what we once kept quiet; that there is a psychological and sometimes physical cost associated producing monographs dedicated to African American pain. The labors of writing about haunted and hunted subjects—that is, African Americans in the face of sanctioned and unsanctioned violence—is producing a body of scholarship dedicated to grieving publically, be it in the form of formal op-eds, or as tweets and Facebook posts. Inevitably, this increased attention to and acceptance of mourning is shaping the field of African American women's history. By articulating the necessity to grieve and utilizing public spaces to mourn, African American women's historians are shaping an academic discourse to help process the constant state of trauma that often accompanies our scholarly production.

The history of Black women is a long study in mourning. During slavery planters ensured that they profited from the reproductive capacities of enslaved women. Enslaved mothers, on the other hand, contended with the reality that there was quite literally a price on their children's head.<sup>3</sup> The realities of enslavement left many mothers without children.<sup>4</sup> Children were sold. Children ran away. Children died. And children were killed. Rather than the stereotypical callous matriarch devoid of feelings, enslaved women existed in a constant state mourning. Darlene Clark Hine's classic assessment about the Culture of Dissemblance is no less important in slavery.<sup>5</sup> There are examples of enslaved women who refused to have children and those who simply walked away from their children. Failure to develop a bond with children was a way to manage the inevitable grief associated with losing that child in the future.

In this present moment when so many African Americans are victim to police violence scholars of slavery are pointed in their commentary on the relationship between African American motherhood and mourning. As Daina Ramey Berry and Jennifer Morgan note, "We must say to ourselves and our children that, for many people, our lives, no longer associated with the accumulation of wealth for others, now do not matter at all. Because in the current racial marketplace, the only people compensated for the loss of black lives are those who take them. ... Black men and women appear to be disposable to all but the families and communities who mourn them."<sup>6</sup> Mourning then, accompanies every aspect of the African American history from slavery through its afterlife. Writing about the present means grieving the lives of countless African Americans who are systematically being hunted by law enforcement officials. Speaking specifically about the role of mothers in the current Black Lives Matter movements, Kali Gross notes that, "hearing the voices of grieving mothers of slain daughters only strengthens the movement to halt state-sanctioned anti-black violence. It also continues the cause for making black lives matter by valuing the humanity of black women and the families and supporters who do actually mourn them."<sup>7</sup> Black women grieve for their slain sons and their slain daughters. The key difference is that the media forgets many of the victims and this is particularly true

if they are Black women and girls. But their family does not forget victims of any kind of violence, nor do their communities forget them. The mourning takes on an added layer, however, when those sworn to serve and protect proceed to hunt and kill furthering African Americans's long distrust of the government. By articulating the relationships between the value of black lives and historic silences, scholars are illuminating the bereavement process in a manner that cannot be ignored.

If our scholarly DNA contains the traditions, training, and historiography that we bear witness to and write about, follows then that our etheric energy (our aura) contains the imprint of that work. Stated more plainly, African American women historians carry the energy of previous generations. Some of this energy is negative; some of it is benign; and some of it is pure inspiration. It is nearly impossible to be a black female scholar writing about history without feeling grief for all the ancestors, especially our enslaved foremothers. I note my own experience with Charity Folks, a woman who was manumitted from slavery in Annapolis, Maryland.<sup>8</sup> While conducting research for my dissertation, I found two documents related to the manumission of Charity Folks, her children's manumission, and that of her grandchildren. My research into Folks's life forced me to confront the challenges of historical memory in recovering African American women's lives. Perhaps more than African American men, African American women were elided by the experience of bondage.<sup>9</sup> For a long time those two documents were the only evidence that Charity Folks existed. But Charity was not content with being invisible. She was a ghost who refused to be silent.<sup>10</sup> She nudged me time and time again to reclaim her story. I learned that Charity was an important member of the free black community of Annapolis and her descendants were involved in the long struggle for African Americans in the United States.

Reconstructing Folks's life did not simply include stories of success. It also meant trying to understand her pain—a historic pain born out of social conditions, legal policies, and popular constructions that were anti-black, anti-woman, and for the most part anti-black-women. In essence, I found myself often in mourning. Mourning her experiences; mourning her losses; mourning the conditions of those who were enslaved and never freed. In addition to the emotional toll that reclaiming her story claimed on my psyche, I also experienced severe health problems while working on the project. Other scholars have been less public with their experience but can recount the psychological stress and physical symptoms related to producing a book on African American women.

The labor of mourning also involves navigating the pressures of the academy. The edited collection *Black Women in the Ivory Tower*, for example, provides evidence of the amount of disease and death that seems to fall disproportionately on African American women in academia. Deborah Gray White notes, “[T]he ivory tower can be an exhilarating, stimulating place. But it can also be isolating, debilitating and lonely, especially for those who not only buck the status quo but who's very bodies stand in opposition to the conventional wisdom regarding academia.”<sup>11</sup> In her work on African American women and the tenure process, Chamara Kwayke notes rates of terminal illness among African American women scholars.<sup>12</sup> Elsa Barkley Brown suggests, as embodied subjects, the weight of the academy falls disproportionately on

women of color, and black women in particular.<sup>13</sup> Grief and mourning take on an added layer when one interviews black women scholars about the personal sacrifices made to do work in a space that was never conceived to include them.

How do we grieve our lives in the academy, writing about haunting historical subjects, and witnessing the systematic hunting of black youth by the power structure? We cry. We talk. We agitate. We organize. And we write. Social media provides an immediate release of our frustrations. Perhaps more importantly it provides the space to grieve with and organize with others. For example, in early 2014, Marcia Chatelain from Georgetown conceived of the #Ferguson Syllabus. Since then concerned scholars of African American history have created a series of teaching materials which can be found on Twitter and other social media under the hashtags such as #fergusonsyllabus, #charlestonsyllabus, #ifldieinpolicecustody, #sayhername, #whathappenedtosandrabland? And, unfortunately, the list continues to grow. When confronted with the case of Charnesia Corley who was sexually violated while in police custody, Daina Ramey Berry started the #blkwomensyllabus. The list was picked up several places on Twitter and later formalized as part of the African American Intellectual History webpage and featured by *Essence*.<sup>14</sup>

As storytellers and secret keepers it is important that scholars of Black women's history engage in what some scholars call, "soul care."<sup>15</sup> The Cross-Generational Dialogues in African American Women's History conference at Michigan State University represented this notion of soul care. Co-conveners Pero Dagbovie and Daina Ramey Berry organized the weekend as a tribute to pioneers in the field of African American women's history. Participants honored and thanked pioneers of Black Women's History and acknowledged the difficult road in keeping trans-generational narratives alive. During the course of the conference, it became clear that soul care was crucial for Black women historians and soul care was dependent upon finding a safe community. As Jessica Marie Johnson has noted, "At the heart of our craft are the conversations we have with each other. But at the heart of doing African American women's and gender history is the kinship, trust, and intimacy we build *with and among each other*."<sup>16</sup> The community of women, so crucial during other historical eras, is just as important for those of us in academia.

We need to allow ourselves the permission to grieve the trauma that we witness via the women whose lives we document. It is important to allow the space for grief and mourning as it relates to scholarly production just as that we allow that space for circumstances in our daily lives. We also need to find moments for joy. As we write about the unquantifiable, and indeed the unimaginable, aspect of human loss, we can better understand the ability to survive.

## Notes

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8. See Jessica Millward, *Finding Charity's Folk*, especially the Prologue, xvii–xxii.
9. Millward, *Finding Charity's Folk*, xxi.
10. Millward, *Finding Charity's Folk*, xxi.
11. Deborah Gray White, ed., *Telling Histories: Black Women Historians in the Ivory Tower* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 21–22.
12. Chamara J. Kwakye, *Loud Silence: Black Women in the Academy* (Ph. D. Dissertation: University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2011).
13. Elsa Barkley Brown, "Bodies of History," in *Telling Histories: Black Women Historians in the Ivory Tower*, edited by Deborah Gray White (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 221–22.
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