

In the Fight of their Lives:

Mothers of the Movement and the Pursuit of Reproductive Justice

Kimberly C. Harper,

*North Carolina
Agricultural and
Technical State
University*

On December 15, 2019, I sent this article to the editors. On February 23, 2020, Ahmaud Arbery was followed and murdered as he jogged in Brunswick, GA by two white men who believed him to be a robbery suspect. On March 13, 2020 former EMT Breonna Taylor was shot at least eight times when Louisville Metro Police executed a no-knock warrant. When her boyfriend Kenneth Walker, who is licensed to carry, returned fire, he shot one of the officers in the leg. Walker was arrested and charged with attempted murder; however, the charges were later dropped. On May 25, 2020, George Floyd died in police custody. He was heard pleading with the arresting officer that he couldn't breathe for eight minutes and forty-six seconds, and he could be heard saying, "Momma. Momma, I'm through."

Today is June 1, 2020, and America is on fire. Protests are happening all over the country because people are fed up with

police-sanctioned violence against Black people. COVID-19 has forced Americans home for weeks, and hundreds of thousands of people are in economic and emotional limbo while the country slowly reopens. As I revise this paper, my five-year-old son, Amir, is playing with his Beyblade. Amir is seven years younger than twelve-year-old Tamir Rice when he was killed by Cleveland police officer, Timothy Loehmann. He is twelve years younger than seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis, both of whom were shot by White, vigilante citizens with guns. He is thirteen years younger than Michael Brown who was shot by Darren Wilson, a Saint Louis police officer. He is twenty-one years younger than twenty-six-year-old Botham Jean who was shot in his own home by off-duty cop Amy Guyger. Amir is twenty-seven years younger than thirty-two-year-old Philando Castile who was shot by Jeronimo Yanez, a Minnesota police officer conducting a traffic stop.

At every stage of life, Black people are in danger, and that makes me wonder what Amir's life will be like if America fails to bring an end to the use of systemic racism, excessive force, and unnecessary, racially charged 911 calls in this country. Originally, I wanted to write about the visual rhetoric of Black motherhood and how the negative stereotypes of the mammy, breeder, matriarch, jezebel, welfare queen, teen mother, and crack-addicted mother affect the implicit bias of medical providers. However, as is the case with writing, sometimes you give up control and let the research lead you to higher ground. In my preliminary research about the image of Black mothers and reproductive rights, I realized that Black mothers, who lost their children to violence, were engaging in reproductive justice (RJ) work by forming grassroots organizations to make purposeful the loss of their children's lives.

At first glance, one may wonder how losing a child to police or gun violence is part of reproductive justice—but it is. According to Ross et al. (2007, 14), “reproductive justice is defined as the right not to have children using safe birth control, abortion, or abstinence; the right to have children under the conditions we choose; and the right to parent the children we have in safe and healthy environments.” Ending reproductive injustice happens across three separate but related categories: reproductive health focuses on healthcare and access,

reproductive rights concentrate on the legality of contraceptive and abortion restrictions, and reproductive justice focuses on movement building and using global human rights standards (Ross et al 2017, 15). In this article, my goal is to examine how women from *Mothers of the Movement*¹ rebuff the negative ethos of Black motherhood to engage in reproductive justice activism. I start with a brief description of my methodology which includes ethos, counterstory, and Nommo. Next, I discuss several high-profile cases involving Black youth being killed and/or assaulted by police and regular citizens. Then, I discuss how Black mothers have been propelled into public engagement and activism that can be centered within reproductive justice theory. Finally, I would like to note the multi-modality of this piece. All hyperlinks are meant to provide you, the reader, with easy access to the resources I used while researching and writing this article. The links are found within the body text and in some footnotes.

METHODOLOGY

Centering the needs of Black mothers goes beyond repeating the often-quoted statistic that “Black women are three times more likely to die from complications of childbirth than white women in the U.S.” (Martin and Montagne 2017). Centering the needs of Black mothers means acknowledging the false narrative and oppressive relationship between Black communities and America’s racialized system(s). To do this, I engage in a mixed methods approach when analyzing Black mothers and reproductive justice activism. I start with the ethos of Black mothers and then turn my attention to the methods of counterstory and Nommo as part of the Black rhetorical tradition.

THE IDEOLOGY AND ETHOS OF BLACK MOTHERHOOD

Ideologies are belief systems that dictate how people make meaning of symbols. My own view is that rhetorical practices are key components of ideologies, and ethos is one of the most important

1 Mothers of the Movement is the name given to a group of women who lost their children in high-profile police involved cases. They include: Gwen Car, mother of [Eric Garner](#); Sybrina Fulton, mother of [Trayvon Martin](#); Maria Hamilton, mother of [Dontre Hamilton](#); [Lucy McBath](#), mother of [Jordan Davis](#); Lezley McSpadden, mother of [Michael Brown](#), Cleopatra Pendleton-Cowley, mother of [Hadiya Pendleton](#); and Geneva Reed-Veal, mother of [Sandra Bland](#).

because it shapes the identity of community members. The maternal ethos of Black mothers in American culture operates differently from that of white mothers. To illustrate this difference, I borrow from [Lindal Buchanan's](#) (2013) woman/mother continuum theory. She theorizes motherhood through the lens of *god terms* where the word **woman** has a negative value and meaning, and the word **mother** has a positive value and meaning. Buchanan's research shows how language exists on a sliding scale of comparison in order to "diminish the force of other terms" (Buchanan 2013, 8). In my version of the table, I add a column for the phrase "Black mothers" which I consider a god term. I then apply the same adjectives and adverbs to "Black mothers" and include a column that provides a corresponding image with the experience and emotional qualities listed in the table.

Woman (Devil Term)		Mother God Term	Black Mothers in society (God Term)	Corresponding image
childlessness	Rhetorics that combine elements of the Woman and Mother	children	children (multiple)	Breeder woman
work		home	Single parent and fatherless homes which disrupt patriarchy	Matriarch
sex		love	Her love is seen as sexual and immoral due to her unrestrained sexual appetites	Jezebel
self-centeredness		empathy	She has <u>empathy</u> (for white families via mammy)	Mammy
materialism		protection	She does not <u>protect</u> her children because of her poor choices.	Crack addicted mother
immorality		religion	She is <u>religious</u> but not pious b/c she has sex and children outside of wedlock	Matriarch Teen mom
hysteria		nourishment	She cannot <u>nourish</u> because she is unable to provide financially for her family, and she is immoral, so she is not able to provide a moral foundation for her children	Welfare mother
irrationality		altruism	altruism: she is not self-sacrificing	
extreme emotion		morality	She lacks <u>moral</u> training from her mother which ends up making her a teenage mother.	teen mother
weakness		self-sacrifice	She does not sacrifice for her children	

Woman (Devil Term)		Mother God Term	Black Mothers in society (God Term)	Corresponding image
the sensual body	Rhetorics that combine elements of the Woman and Mother	strength	She is seen as <u>strong</u> and overly masculine when necessary.	Slave field hands
the public sphere		the reproductive body	Her reproductive body is only valid if it supports the American economy; thus, reproducing for slave owners or curtailing her reproduction post slavery.	Breeder, jezebel, teen mother
		the private sphere	The private sphere does not exist for her because black bodies are policed, watched, and controlled. She will work and have her sexuality and body on display for the world	All images
		the nation	She is not of value to the <u>nation</u> unless her wombs are controlled	All images

Adapted from Lindal Buchanan's *The Woman/Mother Continuum* (2013, 9)

Like white motherhood, Black motherhood is rhetorically constructed and “provides readers with immediate and recognizable (and) culturally resonate stereotypes, each comprised of well-known qualities and associations” (Buchanan 2014, 8). The stereotype of the bad Black mother is embedded within the topoi of motherhood and strategically used when politicians and media want to create a specific image of motherhood. What I find most interesting about the rhetorical construction of motherhood is that people never overtly say Black mothers are bad. Instead, coded language is used, and people are left to use their community memberships and cultural common places to infer the meaning and intent. So, when language like *single-parent home*, *ghetto*, *thug*, *inner-city*, *inner city youth*, *fatherless*, *welfare mother*, *welfare queen*, *welfare babies*, *crack babies*, *crack mothers*, *teen mom*, *culture of poverty*, and *urban poor* are used, people almost intuitively apply these terms to Black mothers and communities.

The ethos of Black motherhood developed out of America’s need to develop a national discourse that could justify chattel slavery, explain why Black bodies and minds were inferior, and support racist political policies. After chattel slavery ended and reconstruction failed, America continued using images (mammy and breeder) from slavery to dehumanize and hypersexualize Black women. During America’s industrial revolution, Black women were stereotyped as matriarchs and jezebels. During the Civil Rights movement, they were welfare queens and unwed teen mothers responsible for draining the resources of America with their fatherless children and welfare entitlements. In the late 80s and early 90s, they were criminalized as crack addicted mothers. These images cemented a particular image of Black women in American’s cultural discourse, and although Black women have made great strides in breaking free from these images, they are still deeply embedded in America’s racial conscious.

In Buchanan’s distinction between the negative god-term **woman** and the positive god-term **mother**, we can see how the word woman can be synonymous with Black mothers. It is my argument that these god-terms and stereotypes control who is allowed to be a legitimate mother in American society. The institution of motherhood is viewed through the experiences and expectations of white, heterosexual, middle class women. To this end, Black mothers and anyone outside

of this narrative are erased. If we understand motherhood as the goal for a woman (hypothetically speaking), and white women are the standard bearers, then where does that leave Black women and other women of color. It leaves them outside of the protections afforded to white women and children; thus, Black lives do not matter because Black wombs do not matter (Harper 2018).

COUNTERSTORY, NOMMO & THE BLACK RHETORICAL TRADITION

Like women orators of the 18th and 19th centuries, Black women use motherhood as a *topoi* while defining the purpose of their activism. In doing so, the use of storytelling, which is part of the human experience regardless of ethnicity, is key for Black mothers because they've not had the pleasure of controlling their ethos. As such, I offer that counterstory is an essential rhetorical tool of Black women/mother rhetors. According to Martinez and Broussard (2018), counterstory is a theoretical approach that "serves to expose, analyze and challenge stock stories of racial privilege and can help strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance" (32). For bereaved Black mothers who find themselves thrust into the national spotlight as a result of gun violence, part of their activism is rooted in the use of counterstory. Counterstory allows them to take control and reclaim their children's narrative from the media who use cherry picked pictures of a criminal past, mugshots, or images pulled from social media accounts to dehumanize the victim.

These counterstories are also a form of resistance to state sanctioned violence, erasure, and victim criminalization. For example, the media attempted to stereotype Trayvon Martin as a *thug* by sharing he was on a ten-day school suspension for having trace amounts of marijuana in his book bag. Media outlets posted pictures of a young Trayvon giving the middle finger to the camera, wearing a hoodie, and wearing gold fronts. All reasonable things that young adults do as they grow up and none of which had ANYTHING to do with him being shot. In an excellent example of counterstory, Trayvon Martin's family, in conjunction with rapper Jay-Z, created [Rest in Power: The Trayvon Martin Story](#). Martin's family used this documentary to refute the media's suggestion that Trayvon was a troubled teen and presented a counterstory that focused on Martin's growth into a young man. In the documentary his mother states, "I just remember Trayvon being

so affectionate. It felt like everybody was his friend. He was seventeen years old transforming from a boy to a young man.” While I cannot list all of Ms. Fulton’s comments, her story and that of her ex-husband humanize Trayvon, thus allowing the audience to see him as a victim and not a criminal aggressor. In another example, the media, without any regard for the loss of life, released Terence Crutcher’s mug shot and criminal record to demonstrate that he was, in fact, “a bad dude.” The rhetorical intent was to criminalize Crutcher, the victim, in the court of public opinion. The mothers left to grieve are often seen in the media asking what happened to their children, and it is my argument that they represent the stereotypical matriarch who did not raise her children to have deference for white America’s social structures—specifically law enforcement, and that’s why their child was shot (Collins 1991).

Counterstory is also important to the Black community because it is how America receives its periodic shock from racial slumber and forces the law enforcement to do their job when Black people are victimized. When Emmett Till’s mother Mamie Till requested her son have an open casket funeral, she shocked the world and showed the brutality of white supremacy. While his killers were acquitted, the image of fourteen-year-old Till and his story has remained in America’s conscious for sixty-five years. In addition to the racial shock, which usually wears off, counterstory helps families demand a response from a broken legal system that typically refuses to investigate officer-involved shootings or white citizen shootings of Black people properly. Often, in these cases, the Justice Department declines to file charges against the shooter, or the family has to publicly protest to get district attorneys to press charges. In some instances, charges are filed, but the shooter is not convicted, as was the case of Betty Shelby, who shot unarmed Terence Crutcher after he left his car idling in the middle of the street. Shelby’s defense team argued that Crutcher would not comply when ordered to stop walking, and he reached back into his car, which prompted Shelby to shoot; however, video evidence appears to contradict the officer’s story. After being acquitted, Shelby found work in law enforcement in the Oklahoma Sheriff department and teaches a class titled, “How to Survive the Aftermath of a Critical Incident,” which focuses on being victimized by anti-police groups and the Ferguson effect.

[Shelby \(Shelby, 2018\)](#) defends her class by suggesting the four-hour course is her way of helping officers live through the challenges of officer-involved shootings. Crutcher's family argues that Shelby's course does not focus on teaching officers to identify their own implicit biases when dealing with communities of color. While the Sheriff stands by Shelby's class, another organization rescinded an invitation to have Shelby speak when Crutcher's family pressured the group. Crutcher's twin sister, Dr. Tiffany Crutcher, along with her parents, Rev. Joey and Mrs. Leanna Crutcher, founded the [Terence Crutcher Foundation](#) to amend policy and change the narrative about Black men. This holds significant importance because, in the helicopter video (Chappell 2016) of Crutcher's shooting, an officer can be heard saying, "he looks like [a] bad dude." Instances like this keep MOMs involved in the political process and committed to holding elected officials accountable. Our current legal system appears incapable of arresting officers when they are involved in shooting civilians—especially when it involved a police mistake. Recent events in our country exemplifies this challenge.

As of today, June 12, 2020, the Louisville Metro Council voted to ban no-knock warrants, but the officers who shot Breonna Taylor still have not been arrested. The officer who shot Atatiana Jefferson was arrested and indicted days after shooting Ms. Jefferson, which is rare for officer-involved shootings. The cop who held his knee on George Floyd's neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds was originally placed on administrative leave before being arrested and later released on a \$750,000 bond (Hanna 2020). America's track record for arresting and prosecuting officer-involved shootings is poor and even less solid when white citizen police kill Black people, which is deeply problematic. Arrest warrants for the McMichael's were not secured until May 7, some three months after they shot Ahmaud Arbery on February 23, 2020. George Zimmerman was released after being questioned the night he killed Trayvon Martin.

While counterstory is an effective rhetorical tool, I also suggest that it is connected to the African rhetorical concept of Nommo and the African-American oral tradition that places a high esteem on the spoken word. Nommo acknowledges the power of the spoken word

and its ability to bring about good into the world. Smitherman (1977) writes,

“The preslavery background was one in which the concept of Nommo, the magical power of the Word, we believed necessary to actualize life and give man mastery over things. All activities of men, and all the movements in nature, rest on the word, on the productive power of the word, and the awareness that the world alone alters the world...” (78)

Nommo and counterstory provide a space for Black mothers to assert control and correct blatantly wrong about details their children. Documentaries like Martin’s and Dontre Hamilton’s [The Blood Is at the Doorstep](#) (Ljung 2017) along with grassroots organization like [Mothers for Justice and Equality](#) (Mothers 2019), and [Mothers of Black Boys United](#) (MOBB 2019), are examples of mothers changing the discussion about excessive force and violence in our communities.

WHAT DOES REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE LOOK LIKE FOR BLACK WOMEN?

Black women have long done the work of reproductive justice, and I suggest the work started in 1831 when northern, free Black women set out to upend slavery, racism, classism, gender oppression, and violence. Their work was purposed as a response to the negative ideology of Black motherhood that was created by the white men who controlled America’s slave economy. In response to this ideology, free Blacks in the North developed their own narrative. Publications like the *Christian Recorder* suggested Black mothers held the power to “guide their children to success” and embodied the ideals of Christian morality and domesticity (Webster 2017, 434). After slavery ended, Black women rhetorically constructed their own view of motherhood, and they used racial uplift as a major part of the topoi. They believed it was their job to lift the race and reclaim their narrative. One of the most comprehensive examples of Black women writers, feminists, and rhetors reclaiming their narrative is [Words of Fire](#), edited by [Beverly Guy-Sheftall](#) (1995). The collection shows Black women from every time period using discourse to dismantle all forms of oppression. These women redefined motherhood, created their own ethos, and subverted the Bad Black mother trope used to devalue their reproductive needs.

The work of Black mother activists is reminiscent of what Jaqueline Jones Royster (2000) describes happened to African women and girls who lived through the Middle Passage. The displacement of the Middle Passage coupled with the trauma of chattel slavery forced these women and girls into a situation from which a “newly constructed community developed, largely because of their collective efforts to recover balance and stability in their lives” (Royster 2000, 99). Like their ancestors, Mothers of the Movement and other Black mother activists have constructed communities to support their ability to move forward in the face of devastating gun violence.

Today, Black women continue to work on all fronts of RJ. But for a small group of Black mothers, RJ work is helping families deal with their grief and reforming a broken justice system that unfairly targets Black people, allows police shootings to go un-investigated, and permits regular citizens to harass and even kill African-Americans. While these women might not see their work as reproductive justice, I do. [Sybrina Fulton](#), Trayvon Martin’s mother, and her ex-husband Tracy Martin started the [Trayvon Martin foundation](#) and created the programs [Circle of Mothers](#) and [Circle of Fathers](#) to help parents heal from the loss of a child. In a [powerful clip](#) shared on [Circleofmothers.org](#), Ms. Fulton discusses how she refused the job, but finally accepted that she was being called to do more with the tragedy that changed her life forever (Circle of Mothers 2018). In my estimation, helping families through the grieving process of gun violence is a huge part of RJ that is not discussed enough. Erica Ford, founder of the [Peace Mobile and Life Camp](#), also works to help families of gun violence heal. The need for mental health services that assist parents with grieving is of the utmost importance when dealing with the post-traumatic stress of gun violence.

While Fulton’s work initially focused on the restorative process necessary for emotional healing, she, along with Lesley McSpadden, mother of Mike Brown and [Lucia McBath](#), mother of Jordan Davis, decided to run for political office. They are actively pursuing political action to ensure that Black mothers can raise their children in safe environments, which is a key concept of reproductive justice, and they are constructing communities of support. Many of these moms are running for political office because they see changing the

structure of the justice system as part of saving lives. Fulton lost her bid for a seat on the 2020 Miami-Dade County Commission, and [Lesley McSpadden](#) recently lost her bid to join the Ferguson, MO, 3rd Ward City Council. McSpadden cites the death of her son as the reason for seeking election when she stated, “I wanted to go back and do something right in a place that did something so very wrong to my son, and I think that’s what my son would want as well” (Eligon 2019, 365). Despite McSpadden’s loss, the citizens of Ferguson recently elected Ella Jones as its first Black mayor, and she happens to be the first woman mayor of the Saint Louis, MO suburb.

In their pursuit of justice, all three mothers contextualized their activism as a part of parenting their murdered children. Lucy McBath lost her son, Jordan Davis, at the hands of a vigilante citizen who shot into his car ten times over an argument about loud music in a parking lot. Jordan’s killer was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison. McBath’s motive for running speaks directly to the topoi of motherhood and the need to have better gun control in our society, for she stated, “it’s just not enough to have the marches and the rallies and the speeches and the remarks. Championing for them in Washington is still championing for my child. I’m still a mother; I’m still parenting. That’s why I believe this was the time to stand up” (Chiu and Schmidt, 2018). McBath’s admission speaks volumes about the work of women across the country and how they use motherhood as part of their rhetorical appeal when fighting for reproductive justice. The need to hold bad cops and vigilante citizens accountable is a life and death matter for Black families in the fight for reproductive justice because, in addition to excessive force, white citizen police and racial micro aggressions also threaten black life in America.

Racial micro aggression has become so widespread that Black Twitter creates a new hashtag and works to identify the accuser every time a video goes viral. Even popular comedienne Niecy Nash created a satire (2018) based on the topic of [white fear](#). These racial micro aggressions result in police interactions sometimes leading to the arrest of Black citizens for no other reason than being Black in *so-called* white spaces. For example, a Starbucks employee called the police on Dontre Hamilton who was sleeping in Milwaukee, Wisconsin’s

popular Red Arrow Park. Unbeknownst to Hamilton and the officer who shot him, two officers responded to an earlier call to check on the sleeping Hamilton. The first two officers determined that he was not doing anything illegal and did not wake him. A second call made by the Starbucks employee precipitated Hamilton's interaction with officer Christopher Manney who conducted an illegal stop and frisk of the sleeping Hamilton. As a result, the two struggled over the officer's baton, causing Manney to shoot Hamilton fourteen times. It was later discovered that Hamilton suffered from schizophrenia. Hamilton's family believed he was confused and possibly feared that he was being attacked when the officer began to frisk him while sleeping. Manney was fired from the police department for the illegal stop and frisk, but he was not charged in Hamilton's death. Hamilton's family sued and was awarded 2.3 million dollars from the City of Milwaukee.

Hamilton's death is a prime example of white citizens calling the police on black people and the dangerous, sometimes fatal repercussions that happen. Another example of police misconduct is an incident involving the arrest of a six-year-old girl who



was arrested and charged with misdemeanor battery charges in Florida for having a severe tantrum at school. The arresting officer was a Black man, and I mention his ethnicity to make the point that excessive force with Black Americans is so engrained in American culture that the race of the arresting officer does not matter. These stories remind me that Black lives are not safe at in school or work or in public, and they are often subjected to dangerous race baiting in public places. For example, on September 24, 2019 Adrene Ashford was [verbally assaulted](#) by Heather Lynn Patton in a California CVS. Captured on video (Cleary 2019), Patton yells the word nigger fourteen times during the video and states she would kill a nigger if she could, but she cannot because it is illegal to kill niggers (Ashford 2019). The most recent example of racial micro aggression is the 911

call Amy Cooper made when Christian Cooper (no relation) asked her to leash her dog while he bird watched in the Ramble section of Central Park. In the video posted to Cooper's Twitter and reposted all over social media, Amy Cooper can be heard saying "I'm taking a picture, and calling the cops" (Cooper 2020). Cooper's threat is indicative of the power White women have over Black bodies, of which Cooper was keenly aware when she went on to say "I'm going to tell them there's an African American man threatening my life" (Cooper 2020). I suggest, as do others, that Cooper knew she would be believed in a police encounter between herself and a Black man, which speaks to the adage circulated in the Black community, "When a White woman cries, a Black man dies." Incidents like this demonstrate the fear Black mothers face as we struggle to raise our children in safe environments and ensure that our family members make it home at the end of the day.

WHO'S GOT NEXT? WE ALL DO!

As we work to dismantle existing systems of oppression, there's much that can be learned from Black mother activists. Considering that we are on the cusp of what I hope to be real change in American society, scholars of rhetoric, educators, and administrators across the spectrum of education are really at the forefront of helping a new generation discover and use their voice for equality. I suggest the following:

1. Amplify marginalized voices and grassroots organizations, and be open to sharing space with others;
2. Do not resist the disruption of the status quo narrative, stop asking for proof of racism, and be a proactive and responsible ally.
3. Organize voting campaigns and provide our youth with a civic education;
4. Accept one's privilege, and find ways to share access to systems of power.

This is a tall order, but it can be done.

AMPLIFICATION

Amplifying the work of grassroots organizations where Black women have been doing the work for years helps to broaden their network of supporters, and we have to be careful not to ignore the people who were first on the scene. For example, when Kim Kardashian got involved with prison reform, she was amplified for doing something Angela Davis, Michele Alexander, Patrice Cullors, and many others were already deeply involved with—in some cases for years. Amplification is particularly important to “feminist” organizations who claim to work on behalf of all women. I bring this up because Black women and other women of color often create their own organizations because mainstream white feminists do not recognize the intersectionality of their experiences. For example, when BlackLivesMatter-LA was not invited to speak at the 2002 Women’s March, organizers cited the desire to go in a different direction and focus on voting rights. This misstep suggested that voting wasn’t an issue that affected the work of BLM. But I argue it was, because voting for local officials is what will change the criminal justice system—change will need to happen at the state and local level because the federal government is led by an ultra-conservative attorney general. Additionally, amplification must go beyond slogans and social media posts. It must include support in the form of resources. Financial support, which is a constant need for most grassroots activist groups, is obviously important, but having conversations with family and friends about why reproductive justice and police reform play a key role in America’s growth is necessary.

RESISTANCE, PROOF, AND BECOMING AN ALLY

After we amplify each other, do not resist the disruption of narratives that do not align with your own personal experiences, and, for white people in particular, do not ask for proof of racism. It is waste of time, and as Toni Morrison (1975) explained in a speech given at Portland State, racism is a distraction. She said,

The very serious function of racism ... is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and so you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn’t shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says that you

have no art so you dredge that up. Somebody says that you have no kingdoms and so you dredge that up. None of that is necessary.

Finally, do not lecture people on how they should react to their experiences with racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia, and all the other *isms* and *obias* of inequity. A true ally does not sit in a position of privilege while simultaneously telling the oppressed how they should respond. Being an ally means leaving the stock story of privilege behind and engaging in meaningful support that requires action (Martinez and Broussard 2018). So, rather than saying “I support you,” speak up to the person who is creating and maintaining the oppressive space, especially if you have any power.

VOTING & EDUCATION

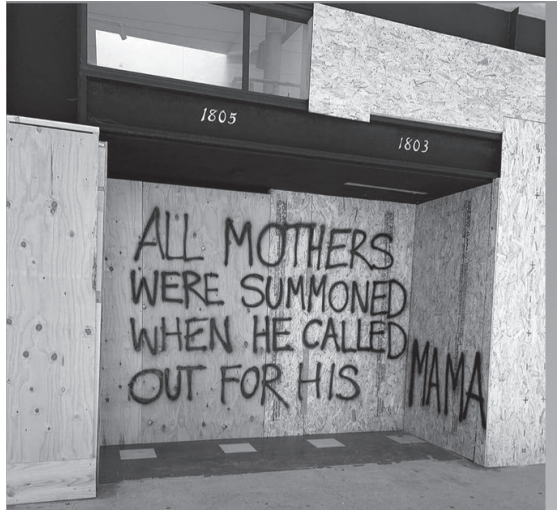
Black mother activists have shown us what to do. We must organize and utilize our political systems at the levels of state and local government. We can do this by pushing our communities to vote beyond the Presidential election, educating our children about the political system, and teaching them that social media is only part of an activist’s tool kit. For starters, I believe we need a major voting campaign. There’s so much emphasis on the presidential election in the Black community that we fail to elect officials that serve our needs at the state and local level. If we are to redirect funds from police departments back into social programs, then we need elected officials who are willing to carry out these agendas. In addition to voting and encouraging Black and Brown people to run for elected office, educators and parents need to teach their children about colonialism, imperialism, and its effects on people’s lives. We’ve allowed history to be disconnected from the present, and our children need to understand basic elements of civics, government, and policy. They need to understand how public policy is made, so they can become part of and eventually develop and maintain a new system that is equitable. We are all responsible for remaking America.

PRIVILEGE

Finally, people need to address their privilege. I do recognize that almost all people have some form of privilege in their own subcultures; however, white, male privilege is the most powerful in American

society. But, I assert that men of all ethnicities need to check their privilege. Heterosexual and cis-gender people of all ethnicities need to check their privilege. White women need to check their privilege, and other non-Black people of color need to acknowledge that their desire to be in close proximity to white privilege can also push them to be anti-Black. Now, if you are wondering, well, what about Black men and women, it is my argument that, within the context of American society, the privilege that Black men and women have does not create or sustain large scale systems of oppression.

The work of remaking this country and ultimately the world into a space where people are able to raise their children in environments that are free of racism, gun violence, and police brutality is a dream that I hope to witness. As protesters have suggested all across social media in a variety of protest signs, George Floyd's death has unleashed a wave of emotion that could not be held back, and his cry for his mother broke the hearts of mothers around the world. The fate of America depends on our ability to give up what is comfortable for what is right.



AFTERWARD

My son asked me what happened to George Floyd and why people were outside during COVID-19. So, I explained to my six-year-old that "Mr. George Floyd died, so that you can have a better life, and people are outside because America has work to do." My daughter asked, "why would a police officer kill someone begging for help, and why didn't he stop hurting Mr. Floyd?" Through her eight-year-old eyes, even she knew the officer was using excessive force. I told my daughter that police are sworn to protect everyone, but sometimes they don't. She was not satisfied with my answer, and neither was I. These are the questions we must answer for our children.

This work is deeply emotional, and I can only image the depth of the loss and stress these families feel when they engage in activism for the sake of their loved ones and our communities. I've walked away from this article several times because it's emotionally taxing. I could not finish watching Rest in Power: The Trayvon Martin Story; therefore, I did not watch The Blood Is at the Doorstep. This work reminds me that we must all practice self-care so that we can continue the fight for justice. I pray this article helps, in some small way, bring about the change we need to rectify this unjust world. Rest in Power Ahmaud, Breonna, and George.

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Dr. Kimberly C. Harper is an Assistant Professor of English at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University—the nation’s largest Historically Black College and University (HBCU). She has taught at the postsecondary level for 16 years. Her research examines social justice, race, and ethos within technical and professional communication. She also researches and writes about the rhetoric of maternal health and hip-hop discourse. Dr. Harper has a forthcoming monograph that discusses the ethos of Black motherhood and its influence on the Black Maternal Health Crisis in American society. She is the host of *The Space of Grace*, a monthly podcast focusing on reproductive justice and Black Maternal Health. Follow her on Twitter @ronbett75 or @spaceof__grace or visit her online at www.drkimberlycharper.com.