Women and Migration
Responses in Art and History

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In March 2017, many Black social media users turned their collective outrage to what appeared to be an epidemic of missing girls of color in Washington, D.C., America’s capital city. One of the alarming messages retweeted and widely circulated stated that over twenty Black and Latina girls had gone missing in twenty-four hours. The mainstream media remained silent. An intense and impassioned town-hall meeting in D.C. attended only by Black and Latinx residents occurred. A new police task force formed in response to a growing outcry to #BringBackOurGirls. For a brief a moment, it appeared that someone cared deeply about these missing Black and Brown girls.

The reality, however, was that there was no new epidemic.¹ Despite there being at least a dozen Black and Latinx youth missing, the fear of mass kidnappings proved false. The number of youth of color missing in Washington in the first three months of 2017 resembled the number from

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that same period in 2016. It became clear that a disastrous combination had caused the outcry: the poorly rolled out police notification system together with the longstanding neglect and invisibility of missing people of color. Together, these fueled the spread of misinformation about missing Black and Latina girls. The urgency to find these missing girls quickly dissipated. Nearly a dozen Black and Brown girls missing was not enough to sustain the initial outrage, nor garner mainstream media coverage.

With the majority of these missing Black and Brown girls classified as runaways, there were no Amber Alerts. Reserved for abductions, Amber Alerts convey a sense of imminent and possibly fatal danger. The designation of a runaway connotes choice and deviance. Few people pushing back against the mis-reported ‘epidemic’ stopped to ask that if in fact these girls of color were running away at alarming rates, what were they running from and to what or to whom were they running? What would compel a thirteen-year-old Black girl to run away from her home? What happens to that same girl when she runs away into a world that offers very little to those struggling to survive? What does it mean that it took exaggerated misinformation to draw attention to the reality that over 64,000 Black girls and women were missing in the United States?\(^2\) Black girls too often go missing from their homes, from our media, from policies and initiatives, and even from our activism. We rarely hear, see, or feel them. The system is working — it was made to fail Black girls.

Each era of this nation’s history boasts its own particular iterations of anti-Blackness. From enslavement to mass incarceration to the heinous murders of Black people by police, the epidemic of anti-Black state-sanctioned and state-sponsored violence is a fundamental truth of the US empire. A new phase in the nation’s racial climate emerged at the turn of the twenty-first century. The problem of the color line remains unresolved — it manifests in familiar and in new ways. The technologies of anti-Blackness are deadly in their sophistication and execution. The brutality of anti-Blackness runs on incessant loops on our smartphones, tablets, and laptops.

This ‘new’ era of anti-Blackness has particular effects on Black women, girls, and femmes.\(^3\) It compels examination of the relationship between Black women and state violence, and more specifically Black women, girls, and femmes surviving in spite of, dying as a result of, and resisting state violence. This exploration necessarily moves between the realities of state violence as experienced by Black women and girls, and the range of resistance mounted by Black femmes, girls, and women to anti-Black racial terror in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, it is important to understand anti-Black racism as mediated and structured through gendered violence. Although attacks on Black womanhood and girlhood and the activism addressing these attacks never ceased, the twenty-first century marks a distinct turning point in both the lived experiences of Black women and in Black women’s resistance to state and state-sanctioned violence. Black women in the United States organize and mobilize around injustices, and build upon a legacy of activism.

What would it mean to chronicle the lived experiences of Black girls through the lenses of state and state-sanctioned violence? This question is part of a growing body of scholarship on how Black women, girls, trans, and queer-identified people experience anti-Black state violence. This focus pushes back against the regular erasure of Black girls and Black queer and trans* people from historical records both as victims and as activists. The framing of contemporary anti-Black racial violence as a pervasive injustice primarily experienced by Black cisgender men and boys fails to capture the deeply entrenched reality of Black violability. In earlier work, I previously defined Black violability as a construct that attempts to encapsulate both the lived and historical experiences of Black people with state-initiated and state-sanctioned violence. Understanding this contemporary era of anti-Black racial terror and subjugation requires excavating the gender-specific and gendered dynamics of anti-Black racial violence, and necessitates a more inclusive conceptualization of the Black violable subject.

Taking seriously the violability of Black people, other than Black non-cisgender men, is of particular exigency because of contemporary

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\(^3\) Femmes refers to individuals who identify as both being feminine and falling somewhere on the LGBTQ spectrum. Not all Black femmes identify as Black girls or women.
generational realities such as rampant sexual and intimate partner violence, rising incarceration rates for Black women, state-sanctioned violations such as forced sterilization and police brutality, and the criminalization of Black girls in disciplinary matters in public education. We often cite a painful lineage of anti-Black violence against Black men and boys from Emmett Till to Trayvon Martin, Jonathan Ferrell, Jordan Davis, Oscar Grant, Ezell Ford, John Crawford, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Philando Castile, and Alton Sterling, while forgetting or not fully acknowledging the painful lineage of anti-Black violence against Black women and girls from Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Denise McNair (more commonly identified as the Four Little Girls killed in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963) to Latasha Harlins, Rekia Boyd, Renisha McBride, Aiyana Jones, Pearlie Golden, Tarika Wilson, Shereese Francis, Mya Hall, Sandra Bland, and Tanisha Anderson. Putting these two lineages in conversation with one another paints a broader and more accurate picture of Black violability and anti-Black violence. It also allows for us to have more nuanced and useful conversations about the gendered dynamics of racial injustice. Women, girls, and trans* people have got stories to tell too, and their experiences of racial violence articulate very clearly the necessity of building a gender-inclusive framework to understand anti-Black racial violence.

The murders of Tyre King in Columbus and of Tamir Rice in Cleveland sit firmly within a legacy of violence against Black cisgender male-identified bodies. They are the strange fruits of a new generation of Black masculine carnage. They become the terrifyingly familiar points of departure for understanding contemporary racial violence. Consequently, a distinct genealogy of anti-Black racial violence emerges that pivots around America’s unrelenting violence against Black male flesh. From the Middle Passage to a sidewalk in Staten Island, the linkages and comparative frameworks often deployed signal a history of violence against Black male bodies, which then become synonymous with the Black violable experience.

In If We Must Die: From Bigger Thomas to Biggie Smalls, Aime Ellis demarcates three distinct periods of racial terror: antebellum slavery, Jim Crow, and the mass incarceration of Black people in the
prison-industrial complex. Ellis’s book tackles the effects of racial terror on Black men by examining cultural texts about death and violence produced by and about Black men. Arguably, an updated periodization of racial terror could include police violence as a distinct, historically specific manifestation of domestic terror. Building on Ellis’s periodization using a ‘herstorical’ framework, I think about the legacies of brutality against Black girls during antebellum slavery. I think about the gendered and sexualized afterlives of chattel slavery and Jim Crow. These temporal linkages help to demarcate anti-Black racial violence into distinct, although overlapping and referential eras. Amie Ellis’s work on the Black deathly subject as understood through the Black male body is useful here, and allows me to utilize his historical framing to center Black girl as deathly subjects.

The state is preoccupied with Black femme bodies, and particularly young Black girls’ bodies (cis, trans, and gender fluid) as a site for violation. From deaths in police custody to the numerous unsolved murders of Black trans women and femmes, the deathly and violable Black subject is rendered anew. The violable subject also includes Black girls thrown across classrooms or pushed to the ground in their swimsuits, and the little Black girl running away from violence in her home. To think of Black girls as in-flux bodies, bodies moving away from present dangers into differing structures of anti-Black, anti-girl, anti-poor, and anti-queer dangers means to understand the movements of Black women and girls in new ways. It pushes towards a figuration of Black girlhood as a moving state inscribed by terror.

The bodies of Black girls often read as loud — unruly, uncontrollable, aggressive and excessive. They read as a problem, as something to be controlled, surveilled, policed, incarcerated, assaulted, or killed. Hip-hop feminist scholar Ruth Nicole Brown also speaks to these harmful renderings of Black girlhood, unveiling an archive of expressivity rooted in world-making, while Bettina Love’s writing is attuned to how Black girls engage sound in their world-making. The recent

4 Aime Ellis, If We Must Die: From Bigger Thomas to Biggie Smalls (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011).
work by Monique Morris on Black girls in schools is also useful here in thinking about the ways in which stereotypes about Black girls lead to discriminatory and disparate outcomes in the classrooms. Simply stated, the school-to-prison pipeline includes Black and Brown girls. And even within that framing it is important to remember, the framing of the ‘school-to-prison pipeline’ establishes the school as a safe or desirable place for Black girls. Far too often, classrooms, as well as the homes, churches, mosques, or community centers, are not safe places in which Black girls can live and thrive.

The cry to #SayHerName is made within the movement for Black Lives as well as to a broader world. Those calling out to be heard, to be seen, and to be felt are crafting, remixing, and conjuring a radical Black feminist vision of life after the afterlives of the failed project of US empire. This call-out is experienced both at the sites of violation and of resistance. Black girls are central to this call-out, or rather, calling-in of our unrelenting addiction to brutalizing, making invisible, and killing (both slowly and quickly) Black girls. These ‘safe’ or ‘sacred’ spaces can be sites of racial and gender terror. Where then can Black girls be safe, cared for, handled warmly, and loved fiercely?

Theorizing Black violability from the unique standpoint of Black girls provides a distinct space for wrestling with what happened to Bresha Meadows. Although granted a plea deal, she still had to plead guilty to the ‘crime’ of being a Black girl who fought for her life and those of her loved ones. Black violability gives voice to Black trans girls hoping and fighting to defy the horrifying statistic of Black trans women having an average life expectancy of thirty-five. Black trans girls and women have been fighting for Black cisgender women and girls, and yet Black cisgendered women have been moving at a glacial pace, if at all, to rally around their lives. Black violability reminds us that violence occurring in our institutions is deliberate and reckless. Suspensions and expulsions diminish Black girls’ chances for social mobility within a

system that already views them as disposable. Black violability creates an opportunity to think about the ways in which race, sex, gender, class, religion, ability, sexuality, and citizenship status affect how Black girls experience state and state-sanctioned violence. It grapples with how the state works against Black girls surviving, living, and thriving.

We cannot merely insert Black girls, women, and femmes into hearts and minds as survivors, victims, and/or tireless activists. We must push towards recognizing the complex realities they face and the movements they mount to seek justice on behalf of themselves and their communities. In defense of Black girls, femmes and women, Black girls, women and femmes take to the streets, classrooms, studios, stages, and spaces of worship demanding that you say their names, recognize the justice work that they do and have done for centuries across the diaspora, and hear their/our screams. They/We are indeed magic.
Bibliography


Ellis, Aime, If We Must Die: From Bigger Thomas to Biggie Smalls (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011).


