They will Only Stop Killing Us, If You Say Please: The Role of #BlackLivesMatter, Black Twitter, and Flint, Michigan in Modern Day Respectability Politics

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They’ll Only Stop Killin’ Us, If You Say Please:
The Role of #BlackLivesMatter, Black Twitter, and Flint, Michigan in Modern Day Respectability Politics

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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA • APRIL 2021
B.A. LAW, HISTORY, & CULTURE, MINOR: GENDER & SOCIAL JUSTICE
Respectability politics, which require Black folks to make ourselves as non-confrontational and white as possible, are a lasting remnant of the Jim Crow South where respectability politics were essential, not only for social uplift, but also for survival. An easy way to see the politics of respectability at work is to look at the icons of the Civil Rights Era, Malcolm X & Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Many people have an idea that these two men, and their philosophies, were radically different from one another. This isn’t the case.
Weeks before his murder, Dr. King worked to organize the Poor People’s Campaign, a socialist anti-poverty crusade, which he envisioned to be...
“This will be no mere one-day march in Washington, but a trek to the nation’s capital by suffering and outraged citizens who will go to stay until some definite and positive active is taken to provide jobs and income for the poor.” - Dr Martin Luther King Jr.
While he wasn’t alive to see the successful occupation of the National Mall for 42 days, this campaign was very much in line with frequently forgotten People’s Free Food Programs, health clinics, and other forms of community assistance offered by Black Panther Party, one of the most popular and impactful socialist movements in US history. Dr. King’s goals are also aligned with the 2nd point of the Black Panther Party’s 10 point platform...
We Want Full Employment For Our People. We believe that the federal government is responsible and obligated to give every man employment or a guaranteed income. We believe that if the White American businessmen will not give full employment, then the means of production should be taken from the businessmen and placed in the community so that the people of the community can organize and employ all of its people and give a high standard of living.

- Black Panther Party Ten-Point Platform
Many also forget armed members of the Nation of Islam in suits, known as the Fruit of Islam, escorting Black women and community members home safely. Another common misconception is that Malcolm X led the Black Panther Party in opposition to the “Civil Rights Movement” of Dr. King.
X was never involved in the Black Panther Party, the party was founded in Oakland in the wake of his murder. He led the Nation of Islam and was a pioneer in ideas of Black Nationalism and separatism, which seem to be inherently at odds with the integrationist claims of the Civil Rights Movement. However, near his death, X renounced his separatist philosophy and encouraged the Nation of Islam to assist in the Civil Rights Movement.
The Black Panthers have been presented as militant, violent, and evil, while the March on Washington was a peaceful and appropriate measure to combat dehumanization. Malcolm X is a threatening figure, while Dr. King is palatable, peaceful, and frequently quoted by white people. People seem to forget that the FBI saw both men as threats, wiretapping their phones, and targeting them through COINTELPRO operations. They arrested them and ultimately assisted in their assassinations. The white public hated both of them. Both had their homes firebombed because of their fight for Black existence.
The good/bad dichotomy, beyond being inaccurate, is the result of ideas of respectability. The Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party carried guns. They were absolute in their demands. They were threatening the social order that white people had worked so hard to maintain. They rejected notions of respectability and their legacy is marked by it. Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement instead adhered to ideas of respectability and as a result, his birthday is celebrated and a toned-down history of his life is taught in classrooms.
Dr. Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham

POLITICS OF RESPECTABILITY

The Harvard Gazette
The term “politics of respectability” was coined in 1993 by Dr. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, a distinguished professor at Harvard University, and was used to describe how Black women conformed to dominant standards of femininity typically placed upon wealthy white women in the 20th century. Dr. Higginbotham was aware of the assimilationist nature of this survival technique, and in fact, encouraged it. Assimilation to white upper-class standards challenged societal ideas of Black women as savages, unemployable, or hypersexual, allowing us to move forward in society.
However, adhering to respectability politics also divided Black communities. If Black women who made themselves as white as possible deserved respect and social uplift, respectability politics inevitably produced undeserving Black folks. Respectability politics produced a standard for Black folks in which the only way to be successful was to be as white and non-confrontational to power structures as possible. If anyone was unsuccessful, it was their fault for not conforming to white society.
Adhering to respectability politics was not solely an attempt at social uplift, it was also a survival strategy. During the Great Migration, white Americans responded violently to the development of Black communities, perceiving Black folks as violent and dangerous. Ironically, the response of white America to the threat of Blackness was to riot, destroying Black neighborhoods throughout the country during the “Red Summer,” red for the blood of Black bodies filling the streets. These stereotypes, or as Dr. Higginbotham describes them, a “rhetoric of violence,” maintained the image of Black criminality in America.
Films, textbooks, and newspapers not only mass-produced images of violent Black men terrorizing neighborhoods and raping white women, but they also presented hypersexual Black women who threatened the nuclear family’s stability. Thus, society presented Black women in direct contrast to white women. White women deserved respect and protection, Black women did not. Respectability politics challenged these stereotypes. Black women hoped to provide a counternarrative to these stereotypes, quieting the fears, and therefore the attacks of white people. We made ourselves respectable not only to get jobs, but also to stay alive.
Respectability politics still play a role in survival today. In response to the murder of countless Black Americans, white people and media outlets justify the actions of “fearful” police officers by noting how these dead Black folks did not adhere to notions of respectability. After the murder of Trayvon Martin, many people, both Black and white, claimed Trayvon should not have been walking in his own neighborhood at night, placing the blame of centuries of racism on the individual actions of a Black boy because it veered from standards of respectability.
Respectability politics presents an ideal set of rules for Black people to follow to be accepted and survive in society, which ignores the centuries of racism which allows a police officer to murder Black people regardless of how “good” we act. Even without breaking any laws, except for the unwritten one of being Black in America, Black bodies are subject to hyper-policing and extermination. In producing “good” Black people deserving of rights, respect, home loans, and employment; respectability politics also produce the social understanding that some are undeserving of such “luxurious treatments”; that those who deviate from respectability politics deserve death.
While respectability politics were important to Black Americans gaining citizenship, arguably equal status and the right to vote; young Black folks reject the belief that we should mold ourselves into whiteness in order to be respected, employable, or deserving of life. While older generations believe the placement of a waistband, hairstyle, or use of words clipped short with apostrophes renders one “ghetto” or makes our hyper-policing and extermination “understandable,” younger Black folks, most notably through the Black Lives Matter Movement and Movement 4 Black Lives disagree.
BLACK LIVES MATTER
FOUNDERS
Patrisse Cullors
Alicia Garza
Opal Tometi
(Left to Right)
Founded by queer, Black women, these movements face public backlash, not because our claim that innocent Black people shouldn’t be murdered by those sworn to protect us is so outlandish, but because we refuse to adhere to notions of respectability that have plagued us for centuries and the idea that “you must prove yourself to be good in order to gain rights that are already promised to you as citizens and human beings,” (Bunyasi & Smith 2019, 189).
Older Black people and most white Americans disagree with our approach because they believe Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement’s success came from their adherence to respectability, dressing “properly” in church clothes as a tool of resistance by clearly differentiating themselves from the “bad” Black people. They believe the new generation of activists, who are still marching for the same things are disrespectful. Modern-day activists refuse to shrink ourselves and make ourselves more palatable to the very people murdering us because it is ineffective in making change.
Rejecting respectability is not unique to Black activists; everyday Black folks are shifting from respectability politics. This transition can be seen in Black women refusing to tame our curls, take out our hoops, and shorten our nails in order to get a job. A shift can also be seen through Black Twitter. The public response to the Flint Water Crisis is a prime example of Black Twitter rejecting respectability politics.
SEE WHAT #FLINTWATER DID TO THE DINOSAURS, yall next.. Lmao

8:23 AM · May 8, 2014 · Facebook

Think about it.. Mich gov wants to end #Flint What better way to do it but through the water? FUCK THE GOVERNMENT #flintwater

3:22 AM · Jan 28, 2015 · Twitter Web Client

I don't even let my dog drink #flintwater anymore.

5:26 PM · Jan 13, 2015 · Twitter for Android
Outraged tweets, both from Flint’s citizens and outsiders watching on the news, ignored respectability politics and demanded change. While Black rage contradicts ideas of respectability, its position in social media lessens its power. Rather than being a powerful condemnation; people view Black tweets as entertaining and trendy. As a result, the public outrage by Flint’s citizens and Black Americans garnered very little public attention until celebrities got involved.
Jimmy Fallon is donating $10,000 to CFGF.org and challenges 10 friends to match him.

Detroit Lions DE Ziggy Ansah and his defensive linemates donated 94,000 bottles of water in Flint.
Jamilah King describes celebrity involvement as a “private endeavor to fix a public catastrophe,” (King 2016) which aligns with the ideology of respectability politics. Celebrities donated millions of dollars to help Flint, while government officials sat on their hands. In fact, many unaffected individuals forgot about the crisis until Jaden Smith announced his foundation sent Flint water filters to help citizens get clean water in 2019.
In order to get help and survive, Flint’s citizens have had to publically conform to standards of respectability and utilize iconic symbols in society, such as children and celebrities, to gain the attention of the masses. People listen to celebrities, not everyday people. While celebrities do have a larger following, they also have a very strategic understanding of white desire and expectations in order to move forward in society. Further, the requests and humanitarian gifts of celebrities to people who have successfully presented themselves as deserving of aid, feed into the neoliberal individualistic nature of respectability, rather than challenge higher systems of power.
Simply giving money to organizations to give bottled water to folks in Flint, rather than interrogating the government who made the crisis happen, rocks the boat just enough, without actually changing the power structures which attack Black Americans.
Flint’s citizens made progress towards getting clean drinking water with the help of celebrities, but also because they played into ideas of respectability and made people care, or see them as deserving of help. Because the majority Black, poor town of Flint was seen as undeserving of basic rights, like water, which the government routinely takes from disposable populations, Flint’s citizens constructed a persona for media outlets to challenge this narrative, primarily through children.
The legacy of the Flint Water Crisis isn’t that the government was able to withhold clean drinking water for over five years; nor is it the physical and psychological health effects the crisis had on the general population. Instead, media coverage focused on the poisoned children, who now had significant levels of lead in their blood and were being born with fetal abnormalities, but not the mothers, who were also poisoned by the water and had to be for the fetal abnormalities to develop in their children.
Since the beginning of the crisis, approximately 6,000 children drank, bathed, and ate food washed in toxic river water, producing “sustained high levels of lead” which Virginia Tech’s Dr. Marc Edwards hadn’t seen in over 25 years. Their findings sparked national outrage, but still, officials dragged their feet. While news outlets condemned the government for harming children, no one seemed to care about the effect of toxic water on the rest of Flint’s citizens. Articles focused on the effects of lead on brain development, intelligence, and other organs in young children.
These studies and articles were intentionally selected, using the perception and prioritization of children in society to get any help for Flint’s citizens. Media outlets ignored testing done by Virginia Tech, which revealed that water collected from the homes in Flint had lead levels between 200 and 13,200 ppb, most of which classified as hazardous waste, the standard of which is 5,000 ppb. Citizens of Flint were and are still drinking and bathing in hazardous waste and their pleas are being written off as irrational.
The Poisoning Of An American City

Toxic water. Sick kids. And the incompetent leaders who betrayed Flint

By Josh Sanburn
Government officials only acted when it was made explicitly clear they were poisoning and attacking children. Black adults were deserving of such treatment, maybe they didn’t work hard enough, but Black children were not. Black children deserved to live. Not only did mainstream publications ignore the effects of polluted drinking water on adults in Flint; they also neglected most requests of the government and other grassroots forms of activism except for the work of then eight-year-old Amariyanna "Mari" Copeny, also unfortunately known as Little Miss Flint.
LITTLE MISS FLINT

Amariyanna "Mari" Copeny

Amy Poehler's Smart Girls
After two years of ignoring Flint residents begging the government to do something, Mari wrote a letter full of respectable pleasantries, such as “my mom said chances are you will be too busy with more important things,” to then-President Barack Obama, requesting to meet with him, which Obama was more than happy to do.
Even though little progress came of the meeting, other than photographs and speaking engagements, Mari became a face for the Flint Water Crisis, gaining “celebrity” status without being held to the same standards of respectability as other celebrities because she is a child. Mari is bold. She doesn’t waver when tweeting about the crisis or other political matters.
Tomi Lahren @TomiLahren · Dec 12, 2018
$5 billion spent on a wall will be the BEST $5 billion taxpayers EVER spent! Build the wall. Secure the border. America FIRST! I’ll discuss on @foxandfriends in 10 mins!

Mari Copeny @LittleMissFlint

$5 billion for water infrastructure upgrades and testing in schools seems like a much better way to spend that much money...but what do I know...I’m just a kid from Flint who was forced to learn all things water after the government poisoned us

15.4K 5:25 AM · Dec 12, 2018 · Flint, MI

4,989 people are talking about this
She replied to Tomi Lahren’s claim that a 5 billion dollar wall was a wonderful use of taxpayer money, clarifying that the money should be used to get Flint clean water instead. Still, she is a very polite and eloquent child, who shouldn’t have to be an activist. She shouldn’t have to be the face of an epidemic and a voice for her city so her government will listen. She should be able to be a child.

Few people see a problem with Mari’s activism. Instead, they see her fight as inspirational because a Black child has already taken on the seemingly impossible task usually forced upon “strong” “unbreakable” Black women. She is honorable, instead of pitied.
FLINT MI HAS BEEN WITHOUT CLEAN WATER SINCE APRIL 24TH 2014

@LITTLEMISSFLINT

Popsugar
Six years later, Mari is still fighting for Flint to have clean water. While Black children often do not have the benefit of being viewed as children, in the case of Flint, their status was respected and valuable. Pushing children’s narratives is an effective use of respectability politics for survival in America today, directly contradicting the rejection prevalent on social media and in middle-class Black communities. While all Black people fight to survive, some have class privilege which allows us to be in a position to publicly disregard the protection of assimilation.
When Black Americans fight for their everyday survival on the level of access to resources such as clean drinking water; they do not have the luxury of disregarding respectability politics. Not only does Flint still not have clean water because Black and Brown bodies are viewed as disposable in America, but Flint also doesn’t have clean drinking water because people who aren’t directly affected by oppressive power structures only care when those suffering present their cries in a way that is easily digestible for the masses or from the mouth of someone iconic, when they adhere to ideas of respectability.
While young Black Americans publicly reject notions of respectability politics, the Flint Water Crisis paints a different picture, showing how Black folks’ survival and success in America are still heavily reliant on how we are perceived.
Sources


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