# Post-Trump Intersections and "Post-Racial" Reflections: A Black Feminist Analysis of Black Women and Navigating Structured Inequality in the U.S., 2012-2017

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**Abstract:** Barely a decade ago, the 2008 and 2012 elections of President Barack Obama to the U.S. Executive Office propelled questions about whether the U.S. had overcome its racially oppressive history, through the presidency of a political centrist of African descent. The premature celebrations of racial transcendence in were countered shortly thereafter by the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency in 2016. The latter was accomplished partly by using "dog-whistle politics" to covertly (and overtly) bolster a tide of racialized political backlash to the prior administration. Ultimately, just after post-racialism dominated discussions on U.S. racial attitudes, an openly white supremacist, misogynistic national affect presently coincides with anti-woman, anti-poor, anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, and anti-Black legislation. Further, under an inflammatory and oppressive administration, everyday incarnations of inequity expand as concerns for marginalized groups. This is particularly true for those subject to multiple and simultaneous forms of structured inequality – of interest to this project are Black women. In this project, I employ twenty-one semi-structured interviews with Black American women aged 22-50 drawn between 2011/2012 and in 2017. Building on earlier Black feminist theory, this article captures Black women's lived experiences navigating racism, classism, and sexism during the aforementioned political transition. Like many other Black feminist theorists, I argue that Black women are subject to, and still contend with these intersecting structures. Further, in line with other Black feminist approaches, the project elucidates ways shared lived experiences provide windows into everyday manifestations of structured inequality.

## Introduction

Barely a decade ago, the 2008 and 2012 elections of President Barack Obama to the U.S. Executive Office propelled questions about whether the U.S. had overcome its racially oppressive history, through the presidency of a political centrist of African descent. The premature celebrations of racial transcendence in were countered shortly thereafter by the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency in 2016. The latter was accomplished partly by using "dog-whistle politics" to covertly (and overtly) bolster a tide of racialized political backlash to the prior administration (Haney Lopez 2014). Ultimately, just after post-racialism dominated discussions

on U.S. racial attitudes, an openly white supremacist, misogynistic national affect presently coincides with anti-woman, anti-poor, anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, and anti-Black legislation.

As such, the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. Presidency was not a mundane event in the history of the U.S. Presently, race-, gender-, and class-based oppression manifests as racist, sexist, and classist policy and rhetoric. Further, under an inflammatory and oppressive administration, everyday incarnations of inequity expand as concerns for marginalized groups. This is particularly true for those subject to multiple and simultaneous forms of structured inequality – of interest to this project are Black women. Building on earlier Black feminist theory, this article captures Black women's lived experiences navigating racism, classism, and sexism during the aforementioned political transition. Shaped by history, legislation, and social attitudes, systems of oppression continue to intersect and manifest concrete consequences in the everyday lives of marginalized group members. Like many other Black feminist theorists, I argue that Black women are subject to, and still contend with these intersecting structures (Cooper et al. 2017; Cooper 2018; Davis 1999; Harris 2018; Hill Collins 2000, 251; hooks 2015; Pough 2004). Further, in line with other Black feminist approaches, the project elucidates ways shared lived experiences provide windows into manifestations of structured inequality.

In this project, I employ twenty-one semi-structured interviews with Black American women aged 22-50 drawn between the close of 2011 and the start of 2012 (termed the "2012" dataset), and in 2017. The interviews provide insight into emotional and professional weight of being perceived through the lens of raced and gendered bodies in the contemporary U.S. Participants in the project highlight forms of inequity ranging from overt discrimination, to daily sufferings with microaggressions, including negations, destabilizations, disproportionately high levels of scrutiny as compared to their white and male counterparts. These are highlighted alongside other subtle, minute, tiny, often deniable forms of oppression (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Delgado and Stefancic 2012). Similarly, participants also discuss strategies of navigation – ways they reject, resist, accommodate, and "shift" (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003) as means of maintaining personhood and affirming the value of their identities.

Investigating interview data drawn from Black women prior to the 2012 election, and just after the 2016 election, also helps demonstrate continuities and differences in perspectives on Black women's lives during the aforementioned sociopolitical changes. Interviews display shared struggles against racism, classism, and sexism, which have remained present regardless of the U.S. Executive Official. As such, this article stands as a lens into Black women's lives, during the era of transition from post-racial attitudes clouding the Obama Presidency, to the resurgence of overtly discriminatory actions and policies characterizing Trump's administration. Yet, ultimately, this project is not a universal synthesis of Black women's consciousness. Black women are not a monolith. The diversity of Black women's lives mandates that no such unadulterated homogeneity exists (Cooper 2018; Harris 2018). Our experiences are marked different by varying levels of social capital and economic privilege. It is given that the life experience of Michelle Obama might differ greatly from that of a fast-food worker in Philadelphia. As such, Black women's experiences may differ greatly – both from one another and from those who are not as vulnerable to the types of marginalization we experience.

Still, shared identities create collective experiences, knowledges, and positionalities (Hill Collins 2000; hooks 2015). Consequently, I focus on accessing and synthesizing a specific consciousness drawn primarily from working- and middle-class Black women included in the study. Participants' occupations range from engineers and artists, to students, office administrators, and professors. However, the collective knowledge drawn from living as Black

women in a patriarchal, white supremacist society during a time of political transition – from symbolic racial progress to re-emergent and overt racist, sexist, classist oppression – is what I seek to access in this study.

## Post-Racialism and President Obama

Until very recently, scholarly, and public debates have raised questions about whether the U.S. had become "post-racial" and "post-feminist" – finally transcending racial and gender inequity as critical factors to individual opportunity and experience (Bobo 2011; Bonilla-Silva 2010; Cohen 2011; Hollinger 2011; Perry 2011). The historic elections of President Barack Obama – the country's first Black Commander-in-Chief – in 2008 and 2012; post-1965 changes in immigration; and increasing rates of interracial relationships served to complicate dominant understandings of race and racism in the early twenty-first century U.S. (DiTomaso 2013; Gold 2004; Lee and Bean 2012; Treitler 2013).

> For many Americans, especially white Americans, the election of Barack Obama marked what they believed to be a major shift in the racial consciousness of the country, *with a colorblind framework predicted as rightfully coming to dominate the racial landscape.* In the wake of the election, commentators and politicians felt empowered to tell Black people and Black youth in particular that it was now time to stop the "whining" because they had no more excuses. (Cohen 2011, 200; emphasis mine)

Similarly, by the 1990s, with women's growing achievements in higher education and employment, a related gendered backlash questioned whether feminism had accomplished its major goals, and become irrelevant (Anderson 2014; Coppock et al. 2014; McRobbie 2004, 2011; Munford and Waters 2014). As noted by Anderson (2014), American women's progress in the realms of education and workplace participation indicated to many members of U.S. society that gender equality had been actualized.

> From this point of view, women, regardless of their race, social class, sexual orientation, or geography, have achieved equality in most meaningful respects. Feminism is now merely a history lesson. In fact, the argument goes, women have been so successful in achieving equality, it is now *men* who are the victims of gender discrimination. These sentiments make up modern misogyny. (xi)

In similar fashion to post-racialism, Ortner (2014, 545) conceptualizes post-feminism as growing disinterest among young women in the title "feminist," or discussions of gender equality in social, political, and economic arenas – as egalitarian gender relations have allegedly already been attained. In this view, feminism is no longer needed; we are "*post-*" feminism in the U.S. As McRobbie (2011) explains,

> There is a double entanglement, across the socio-political universe, as feminism is taken into account in order that it can be understood as having passed away. What once may have had some role to play on the historical stage is no longer needed....A sophisticated anti-feminism has become

a recurring feature across the landscape of both popular and political culture. It upholds the principles of gender equality, while denigrating the figure of the feminist....Post-feminism registers, time and again, the seeming gains and successes of the second wave of the women's movement, implying that "things have changed," so feminism is now irrelevant. (179-80)

As such, anti-feminist activist groups, such as "Women against Feminism," have gained popularity, denying that women's contemporary experiences are influenced by gender discrimination. In essence, like the U.S. became allegedly post-racial, to a large portion of the population, it also supposedly entered a post-feminist era, as well.

Yet, post-racial attitudes are used to explain away racial achievement gaps and white opposition to race-targeted policy by placing the blame for racial inequality on Black pathology. According to proponents of colorblindness and post-racialism, individual choices—not any type of structural and/or race-based impediments—precipitate individuals' social and economic positions (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Brown et al. 2005; Perry 2011; Winant 2004). To explain national trends that demonstrate Blacks are overwhelmingly subject to the negative effects of residential segregation, including different loan rates and access to certain neighborhoods (i.e., Massey and Denton 2003) and their continued disproportionate salaries in comparison to their white counterparts, neoliberals and colorblind racists rely on this discourse to assert fault lies within the Black community (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Brown et al. 2005). This assertion masks the structural effects of racism and neoliberal policies on particular communities and advances the ideology that Blacks alone are responsible for their fate. Furthermore, the discursive work of colorblindness and post-racialism asserts that if Blacks or other oppressed groups engaged in greater amounts of personal responsibility, they too would have social and economic advancements similar to their white counterparts. Put simply, this is a misnomer (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Brown et al. 2005).

Ultimately, the limited accomplishments of a few are not evidence that the U.S. is post-racial or post-feminist, or that racism and sexism are now insignificant. In fact, during the Obama First Family's occupancy of the White House, none of the Obamas were safe from scrutiny, discrimination, and being associated with longstanding stereotypes about Blackness. President Obama suffered immense disrespect following his ascension to Executive Office from government officials and the general public, and including a 400% increase in death threats (Anderson 2016). During the Obama presidency, the number of hate groups in the U.S. increased dramatically in response to the symbolism of a Black man in Executive Office (Morris and Muhammad 2014). Moreover, Winfrey Harris (2015, 79) notes ways that former First Lady Michelle Obama was subject to media and political framing as a bestial, angry Black woman and subject constantly to anti-Black stereotypes.

Additionally, as affirmed by Black feminist theoreticians, Black women's experiences are shaped by intersecting structures of racial, gender, and class oppression (Crenshaw 1991, 1242). Similarly, the concepts "multiple jeopardies" (King 1995) and "matrix of domination" (Hill Collins 2000) are demonstrative of the ways that multiple forces serve to maintain the oppression of Black women simultaneously (Combahee River Collective [1978] 1982; Crenshaw 1991, 1242). This is true, despite rhetorical moves to consistently minimize their oppression.

*White Supremacy in Trump's America*

Though outright hatred and oppression are not new occurrences in the U.S., the country transitioned abruptly from post-racialism to an obvious resurgence in white supremacist hatred and violence against non-whites in the country. As is a common throughout U.S. history, in 2016, symbolic racial progress was followed shortly thereafter by a tide of racial regression. Instances of identity-based brutality and discrimination continue to circulate news and social media, in affirmation of growing levels of xenophobia and non-white hatred in the country. Videos and news stories labeled "viral" for the reach of their visibility to millions on social media publicize acts of overt racism against Blacks, Latinos, Muslims, and other racial, ethnic, and religious minority groups.

As examples, in May 2017, a white woman Walmart shopper in Arkansas verbally accosted a Latina, telling her to "go back to Mexico", and then a Black woman, calling her the *N-word* (Herreria 2017). Also, in May 2017, NBA basketball star, LeBron James' house was spray-painted with the *N-word* in black letters (Bonesteel 2017). Further, "in June [of 2017], a white man in a Chicago Starbucks was filmed calling a Black man a slave, and a white woman in a New Jersey Sears was videotaped making bigoted comments against a family she believed was Indian (they were not)" (Dastagir 2017, para. 2). Along with this, a couple from Georgia received a collective nineteen-year sentence for terrorizing an eight-year-old Black child's birthday party with Confederate flags, racial slurs, threats, and guns (Chappell 2017).

In similar fashion to other interpersonal attacks, videos of police violence against Blacks also continue to circulate news and social media. With a specific focus on Black women, these include images of a frail Katie McCrary being beaten on the ground in Dekalb County, Georgia by a large, white male police officer for more than a minute (Miller 2017). Similarly, nineteen-year-old Tatyana Hargrove was punched, attacked by a police dog, and arrested in Bakersfield, California in June (Wang 2017). Police allegedly mistook the five-foot-two-inch, 115-pound teenager for a thirty-year-old man, outweighing her by nearly sixty pounds (Wang 2017). Moreover, Charleena Lyles, a pregnant mother of four, was killed by the same police from whom she sought help from in Seattle, Washington (Goff and Buchanan 2017).[1]

Further, while holding the position of the U.S. Executive Office, Donald Trump repeatedly employed an "us/them" rhetoric that galvanizes racialized nationalism against the threat of non-whites and immigrants who supposedly pose threats to jobs, Christianity, safety from terrorism, and the white supremacist structure of the U.S. (Haney Lopez 2014). Trump's aims to "Make America Great Again" included removal and restriction of those historically framed as "other," and "undeserving." In similar fashion to earlier political backlashes against the political, social, and economic dismantling of white supremacy, Trump employed this rhetoric, to facilitate enacting racially, economically, sexually, and ethnically oppressive legislation. He even faced suit for inciting violence at campaign rallies.[2] By the fall of 2017, Donald Trump encouraged the use of additional force during police arrests (Blake 2017). This, despite the killings of Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Korryn Gaines, Sandra Bland, and other Black members of the society whose encounters with racialized police violence resulted in their deaths.

Simultaneously, a groundswell of protests and political resistance to Trump's administrative moves emerged since 2016. This was galvanized during the 2018 midterm elections, by an influx of newly-appointed women of color into the U.S. Congress. Yet, in response to their critiques, in the summer of 2019, Trump leveled racist verbal attacks against four of these progressive politicians.

> A group of Democrats, who are women of color and have been outspoken about Trump's immigration policies, last week condemned the conditions of border detention facilities. The group of women joining Ocasio-Cortez were Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, Ilhan Omar of Minnesota and Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts. Trump implied in the series of tweets that the congresswomen weren't born in America and sarcastically suggested, "they go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came." (Cole 2019, para. 3-4)

Ultimately, given a president that verbally champions violence against bodies of color and moves legislatively to disenfranchise women, Muslims, LGBTQ people, and minority groups, it is no wonder that instances of racial violence reported by news and circulated in social media videos increased. This harmful context left many members of marginalized groups feeling more unsafe because they are increasingly subject to violence and vulnerabilities in racialized interactions and policy.

**Racist, Sexist, Classist Policy Moves of the Trump Administration**

Alongside increasing visibility of racialized mistreatment, policy-based infringement upon the rights, lives, and liberty of marginalized racial, ethnic, and gender groups is both sanctioned by law and justified rhetorically by the nation's elected officials. Trump's issuance of several Executive Orders between 2016 and 2020 resurfaced legislative moves towards social and political regression that scaled back civil and human rights surrounding issues and violence involving race, class, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, and gender. Such legislative moves work to: deny citizenship based on nationality and religion;[3] repeat violent histories of violating U.S. - Native American treaties to advance U.S. economic interests (in this case, oil pipelines);[4] limit sexual assault protections for students;[5] and, reduce reproductive options for women.[6]

In January 2017, a directive known as the "Muslim Ban," was issued by Trump, barring immigration from Iraq, Iran, Yemen, Somalia, Syria, Libya, and Sudan (all predominately Muslim countries) for at least ninety days (Diamond 2017). The aim of the measure was to prevent "radical Islamic terrorists" from entry into the U.S. (ibid.). Another executive order prepared for the building of a wall between Mexico and the U.S. to impede immigration (Davis 2017). And in September 2017, Trump announced his plan to repeal former President Obama's Deferred Action for Child Arrivals (DACA), which "protects undocumented immigrants brought to the U.S. as children from deportation and allows them the ability to work and study" (Kopan 2017, para. 6). Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) continued to jail hundreds of migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border, many of whom were unaccompanied children, or those separated from their parents by ICE officers. Further, the Trump administration facilitated ICE raids throughout the country to further perpetuate the incarceration of undocumented adults and children in inhumane conditions (Ravikumar 2019).

With regard to sexism, January 2017 revealed a rash of legislation that sought to limit reproductive choices, especially for low-income women (Levintova 2017). A then-Republican-directed Congress and Executive Office began targeting funding of Planned Parenthood, which provides reproductive health services and includes cancer screenings to women regardless of ability to pay. Additionally, a 2017 executive order prevented U.S. funding for family planning services internationally, and reinstated the Mexico City Gag Order. The latter mandate prohibits clinics that provide women's health services from discussing abortion options with patients

(Redden 2017). By 2019, following the Trump administration's lead, multiple states implemented legislation restricting abortion rights, which are guaranteed by the Supreme Court's decision in *Roe v. Wade* since 1973 (Levenson 2019).

Significantly, the aforementioned legislation disproportionately affects vulnerable groups in society and exacerbates racial, gender, sexual, and/or class inequities. Moreover, the Trump Administration's directives illustrate the relevance of, and need for, intersectional approaches to inequality to intervene in the structural maintenance of oppression, as well as the everyday manifestations of oppressions for marginalized groups. Investigating the lives of those whose experiences are shaped by intersecting structures that support multiple forms of oppression are paramount to supporting these groups and destabilizing the Herculean inequities with which they contend.

**Black Women in the U.S.**

In the U.S., minority groups in general, and Black women in particular, are subject to particular punitive vulnerabilities, as members of a marginalized racial group, which are uniquely shaped by class, sexuality, ability, body, citizenship, and gender (Crenshaw 1991). Black women continue to contend with legacies of enslavement; institutionalized segregation and discrimination; negative stereotypes and racial attitudes; victim-blaming for racial disparities; disproportionate levels of vulnerability to police and vigilante violence; material inequities in wealth and health; discrimination and segregation in housing; and, an abundance of symbolically coded media presentations that often draw on stereotypical images of Blackness (Cooper et al. 2017; Harris-Perry 2011; Hill Collins 2000; Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003; Lee and Bean 2012; Massey and Denton 2003; Neely 2015; Winfrey-Harris 2015). Black women's oppression as members of their own minority outgroup (Combahee River Collective [1978] 1995; Lorde 2007) connects ways they are treated, and the reading of their actions by others on a daily basis. This includes the stereotypes that have been used to maintain their oppression, that, as noted by Harris-Perry (2011), shape the "crooked room" in which they constantly try to stand straight.

Black feminist scholars and scholarship informed by these experiences have articulated that race, class, and gender inequality as intersecting, interlocking, mutually-reinforced social structures (Beaubouf-Lafontant 2009; Combahee River Collective [1978] 1995; Cooper et. al 2017; Cooper 2018; Crenshaw 1991, 1242; Foster et al. 2009; Guy-Sheftall 1995; Harris-Perry 2011; Hill Collins 1998, 204; Hill Collins 2000; Hull et al. 1982; Lorde 2007; Winfrey-Harris 2015). According to Patricia Hill Collins (2000, 4), "the convergence of race, class and gender oppression characteristic of U.S. slavery shaped all subsequent relationships that women of African descent had within Black American families and communities, with employers and among one another." That is, Black women's experiences are typically the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism, not a homogenized women's or black experience alone (Crenshaw 1991, 1242). Their race often causes them to experience sexism differently than white women and their gender causes them to experience racism differently than Black men (1252).

In addition, the continued effects of institutional inequity serve as persistent economic impediments to many Black women's progress, their success, and their feelings of wholeness at work and in personal spaces. For example, as shown in Table 1, although Blacks collectively make a fraction of whites' income, the U.S. Census Bureau's statistics on "Income Data by Race" (2010) demonstrate that Black women in particular are the lowest-earning group when compared to

white men, white women, and Black men. According to the report, median and average annual incomes were highest among white men, who reported $34,047 and $48,768, respectively. White women reported median and average annual incomes of $20,947 and $30,316, respectively. Black men reported a median annual income of $24,203, and average income of $31,908. However, these same median and average annual income figures for Black women were respectively $19,700 and $26,342 (ibid.).

| Table 1 – 2010 U.S. Census Income Data | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Race & Gender* | *Median Income* | *Average Income* |
| White Men | $34,047 | $48,768 |
| Black Men | $23,203 | $31,908 |
| White Women | $20,947 | $30,316 |
| Black Women | $19,700 | $26,342 |

Further, this economic disparity does not exist for want of perseverance, work, educational attainment, or political activity for Black women. As quoted in a 2017 *Slate* article, The Institute for Women's Policy Research (Caplan-Bricker 2017, para. 2 cited in DuMonthier et. al 2017) found that Black women are

> working more and getting less in return across all areas of American life. Black women voted at higher rates than any other group in 2008 and 2012 (and in 2014, more than any other group except white men and women)—but they remain drastically underrepresented in both state and national politics.

> The share of Black women with a college degree has increased by almost 24 percent since the early 2000s, but they graduated with more debt and worse prospects than white students. And Black women participate in the workforce at higher rates than other women, yet they're among the most likely to live in poverty, second only to indigenous women.

Ultimately, the U.S. gender wage gap, which records women earning at significantly lower rates than men for similar work, is further exacerbated by race.

> Over a lifetime, the cumulative effect of the wage gap for African American women is astronomical: For women overall, the average lifetime wage gap, as measured over a 40-year career, is $430,480. For African American women, the average lifetime wage gap is more than double that, totaling $877,480. (Holmes and Frye 2016, 1)

Yet, this racialized and gendered economic disparity is not necessarily a just consequence solely of existing discrimination (Caplan-Bricker 2017; White 2017).

> Black women have remained trapped in the worst-paying sectors of the economy—caretaking and service jobs—while white women have ascended to better-compensated professions. This is no coincidence, as Alicia Garza, a co-founder of the Black Lives Matter movement and the special projects director at the NDWA, writes in the forward to the report. "Without Black women's labor inside of white households, white women would not have been able to break (some) of the barriers of sexism that relegated the value of women's contributions to the sphere of the home...The result is a racialized economy where Black women are losing ground." (Caplan-Bricker 2017, para. 3 cited in White 2017)

Instead, the racial-gender wage gap is also a consequence of earlier economic oppression of Black women.

## Black Feminisms and Lived Experience

Recently, Jones and Shorter-Gooden, Beaubouf-Lafontant, Winfrey-Harris and other Black feminist scholars have employed lived experience to address the ways Black women navigate, resist, and challenge racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and other forms of inequality in media, public spaces, and their everyday lives. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) highlight ways Black women "shift," police, silence, and restrict themselves to avoid judgment, or alignment with stereotypes about their strength, attitudinally, womanhood, and femininity. Further, Winfrey-Harris (2015, 9) notes,

> In an effort to shake the weight of society's biased expectations, some Black women hold their tongues when they are justified in raging, deny their sexuality when they should be making love with abandon, give all their energy and care to others while they get sicker, hate African features instead of loving black skin, broad noses, and kinks. And they make decisions not based on their particular needs and wants but to circumvent what society thinks of them.

Similarly, Beaubouf-Lafontant's (2009) interview participants discuss hiding feelings of justified anger for fear of being classified (and subsequently dismissed) as angry Black women by family members, work peers, and in other interpersonal contacts. In many instances, Winfrey-Harris (2015, 82) argues that Black women are not *allowed* to feel, as others' expectations are confined to this stereotype – to the point that many Black women go to extents of rejecting and silencing their own valid emotion in order to avoid being framed as such. Similarly, as shown by Beaubouf-Lafontant (2009), even seemingly positive stereotypes, such as the "strong Black woman" can result in silencing emotion, overwork, high stress, and resultant health complications.

However, many Black feminist theorists aim to challenge and reverse dominant beliefs that associate Black women with pathology and brokenness. The work of Brittney Cooper (2018) and Julia Jordan-Zachery (2017) highlights the complexity of Black womanhood through storytelling and experiential knowledge.

> Through stories Black women theorize their experiences...Reality is grounded in multiple perspectives, and that truth is grounded in the everyday living of marginalized groups who are often muted by majority structures; thus the use of songs, literature, and narratives. (14-15)

That is, a major tenet of Black feminist scholarship is the significance of Black women's experiences to create knowledge about the structures that shape their lives. In similar fashion, this article aims to provide a lens into the everyday lives and navigation strategies employed by Black women, to route around, push against, and accommodate the structures of inequality that shape their life experiences. Moreover, the article aims to address continuities and dissimilarities in these experiences given the recent sociopolitical shifts occurring in the country.

**Intersectionality as Praxis: Methods, Oppression, and Strategies of Resistance**

| Table 2 – Participants Interviewed[7] | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Name** | **Age** | | **Name** | **Age** | **Name** | **Age** |
| Kenya | 30s | | Lilly | 20s | Antoinette | 40s |
| Desiree | 30s | | Rochelle | 20s | Jackie | 20s |
| Niara | 30s | | Yvette | 20s | Teresa | 20s |
| Traci | 30s | | Trisha | 20s | Brooklyn | 20s |
| Aliyah | 40s | | Ashley | 20s | Lisa | 50s |
| Candace | 30s | | Arianna | 20s | Tiana | 20s |
| Toni | 30s | | Shante | 40s | Victoria | 40s |

In this study, convenience and snowball sampling were employed heavily, through volunteers from professional and personal contacts, student organizations, religious and community groups, all gathered throughout Eastern and Midwestern U.S. Included in the twenty-one interviews were women of African ancestry who self-identify as Black women, including women who identify as African-American, as well as women who embody transnational and multi-racial (mixed-raced and multi-raced) identities, such as Grenadian and Jamaican.[8]

The first set of interviews was a result of my Master's Thesis data collection efforts in late 2011 and early 2012 (Cooper 2012). The first set of interviewees (2012) varied in age from 18-50, and resided in both the Midwestern and East Coast regions of the U.S. The second set of interviews were collected in the same geographical areas, but were collected digitally via Skype and phone. Participants in the 2017 interviews ranged in age from early 20s-mid-40s. Interviews were recorded. Following the interviews, the recordings were transcribed. After transcription, interview data were coded by line and by paragraph for themes that emerge across interviews. Each group of interviews provided its own data set analyzed separately for the presence of themes and theories in the interviews. Next, data were analyzed collectively for adherence to, or divergence from the theories that shaped the project at its outset.

In the interviews, I sought very detailed information from participants about how racism, sexism, and classism impact their home, work, and personal lives daily. Further, I discussed with participants their perspectives on the significance of both administrations. Participants offered unique perspectives on the experiences, weights, struggles and joys of Black womanhood in the contemporary U.S. Numerous themes emerged in the coding of data, though I centralize three

major themes: (1) Intersecting Racism, Sexism, and Classism; (2) Strategies of Resistance and Accommodation; and, (3) "Post-Racial" America & Post-Trump Developments.

The most prominent theme in the data, "Intersecting Racism, Sexism, and Classism," represents participants' cognizance of the consistent manifestations of systems of inequality in their lives. Findings illustrate that racial and/or gender discrimination often manifests as microaggressions, subtle dismissals, covert attacks by students, coworkers, and acquaintances. This, alongside linkages to denigrating stereotypes of Black womanhood, minimizes Black women's personhood, capability, credibility, and humanity. Supporting patterned relations in society are also ideas and stereotypes that help justify minority group positions, or otherwise perpetuate their marginalization in the society. Often, these ideas are circulated through various media and scholarship, accepted by outsiders as at least partial truths, and used by Whites to inform interactions with minorities, with whom they typically have limited or no interaction. Importantly, I highlight the ways participants see others' stereotype-informed expectations of their behavior shaping interactions. Further, some participants put specific emphasis their or their families' contention with sustained economic inequity (e.g., failing schools, food deserts), in neighborhoods that are marked by systemic racial oppression. This illustrates not only the intersection of structures of racial and gender oppression affect Black women's lives, but also the intersection of class inequality.

In the second theme, "Strategies of Resistance and Accommodation," I also address some of the ways Black women navigate intersecting and structured inequity. For instance, some speak out and some "shift" or "put on the mask" in response to clearly unequal treatment by peers. Participants develop and employ tools to provide for themselves and their families, maintain senses of self, and negotiate the tropes that often shape how others view Black women. The third theme, "'Post-Racial' America & Post-Trump Developments" highlights distinctions and commonalities between the 2012 and the 2017 data. To be clear, the 2012 interviews did highlight the presence of overt and covert forms of discrimination in the everyday lives of the participants. The 2012 participants noted a degree of racial progress since the 1960s and discussed racial inequality as being less intense today than earlier years; often, participants highlighted the symbolic progress of achieving two consecutive Obama presidencies. Still, amongst 2012 interviewees, skepticism about racial transcendence abounded and they limited their optimism about post-racialism, framing the achievement of racial transcendence in the U.S. as a utopian goal. Further, interviewees contrasted assertions of post-racialism from the realities of their lived experiences.

The 2017 participants, however, discussed feelings of vulnerability, in a much stronger fashion than 2012 participants. The 2017 data brought forth unique findings, following the election of Donald Trump. To be clear, both 2012 and 2017 participants discussed experiences with varied forms of discrimination. However, 2017 participants highlighted increasing sentiments of economic vulnerability to political change in the country. They amplified witnessing overt racism and gender marginalization and also, a sentiment that Blacks, in general, were unsafe from being targets of Trump's political and rhetorical moves.


*Intersecting Racism, Sexism, and Classism*


In this section, I address the participants' discussions of microaggressions, excess workplace scrutiny, and institutional oppression. Often these are the invisible types of

marginalization that have material consequences for the ways Black women navigate their everyday lives. In both datasets, interviewees discussed what participant Lisa (2012) termed, "an undercover racism that's very much still alive and kicking." Microaggressions can manifest as subtle attacks, differential treatment, excess scrutiny, and stereotype-informed perceptions – all of which is leveled against Black women because of the membership in their racial and gender group. Further, the subtleties of these types of marginalization allow incidents to be overlooked, or "brushed under the rug," as stated by Rochelle (2012).

In the 2012 participants' critiques of a colorblind, equal, or post-racial U.S. society, they identified specific sites of racially unequal treatment that they have either witnessed or encountered themselves.

> Right now people think we live in colorblind society. I've heard the argument. What does it look like? It looks like bullsh--. It looks like we're still writing "N-----" on people's dorm room doors.[9] It looks like we're executing Blacks like Troy Davis without sufficient evidence. It looks like we're still heavily incarcerating Blacks, putting them in worst conditions. So, I guess that's what a colorblind society looks like. It looks like bullsh--. It doesn't look like anything. It doesn't make sense. (Lilly 2012)

For participants working in fields that are white- and/or male-dominated, covert acts of discrimination were salient themes. For instance, Candace (2017) discussed the automatic assumptions of expertise and authority that accompany the mere presence of white co-workers. She contrasted assumptions of subordinate positioning, which mark her and other Black women's experiences on the job. She noted repeated instances of customers assuming whites were management and Blacks entry-level, despite workers' actual positions.

Moreover, a number of women discussed being "under the spotlight" professionally. Their actions are scrutinized more intensely than their peers, with a far smaller margin for error. These are additional challenges that their white and male peers do not endure (Joseph and Hirschfield 2011).[10] For instance, Lisa (2012) explains,

> Then when you're at work, if you and someone else are doing the same level of work, it's not gonna be acceptable. You always have to do more. My whole history says that they'll get a better rating than I am, so I've got to excel to get the same rating that they do. My work was always criticized more. Same level of work, you get rated lower. Your work product is criticized more. You don't get the promotions others get. But the sense of having to achieve at higher levels. Because there was this feeling that you have to do well, because you represent the 2% that's here and most of that was self-imposed at that point.

These expectations tend to shape their interactions with others, and projections from others about their behavior. Further, after being trained via surroundings and experience, often Black women internalize the knowledge that their work must be twice as good to be considered half as adequate as whites.

> I feel at times you need to prove yourself, or be the Super-Negro, or play the role that other people could probably get away with just being whatever, but you have to make sure you're top. You're on it. Or else you'll be penalized for not being that Super-Negro. (Traci 2017)

Multiple participants critiqued being saddled with additional work, at home and on the job, as they are expected to do it, or because no one else will, despite the need. Moreover, to navigate these expectations and scrutiny, some women over-perform, take on additional work, and consistently push to exceed expectations. They know that a different set of rules applies to their performances at work and in other spaces.

Furthermore, some participants expressed an additive nature of racial and gender discrimination and marginalization. As noted by Arianna (2012),

> To be a Black woman is an experience that could only be made more difficult if I was LGBT identified. Or non-Christian. In every other sort of discourse and experience, being a Black woman is difficult. Because you're not only disadvantaged because of your race, but also your gender. And within social groups, you're ostracized by your Black male counterparts because of gender.

Similarly, although sometimes the impetus for discrimination is very clear, often, they are unable to distinguish if the microaggression or differential treatment was leveled because the recipient was Black, a woman, or both.

A number of participants also addressed the economic effects of institutional racism in their everyday lives. This includes the deleterious effects of economic oppression, the War on Drugs and later crack epidemic of the 1970s-1990s (Kitwana 2003; Taylor 2016), and ways the growing prison industrial complex has funneled family, friends, and loved ones into the mass incarceration system (Alexander 2012). Candace, a working mother in her 30s, lives in a large, predominately Black, urban area in a food desert with failing schools. Candace (2017) reflected on the raced nature of the class oppression in her community, expressing anger at the ways race and class intersect to limit opportunities and life chances in her predominately Black community.

> But I think race is still gonna be a factor. And I think it's definitely still a factor in how our society is run. And how it was developed. And so you find institutional racism, or racism in how we live, what we have access to, the food we have access to, the fact that our men are in and out of prisons. So even if I can say I've never had an overt instance of racism, or that someone has never discriminated against me directly to my face, I LIVE all of the racism that I will ever need in my lifetime. Being stuck in this community where you don't get enough resources. Where our kids go to schools that are underfunded and failing schools. Where I have to figure out how to move, where to move, where I can live so my kids can get a proper education. Long as that's still going on, racism is still a big factor that I'll have to contend with. Whether or not I'll always have to, I'm not sure. But as long as this country is broken and run the way it's run, it always gonna be what we have to deal with.

Though insulated from outright racial discrimination by the predominately Black and Latino racial enclave in which she lives, Candace addresses the "broken" country, and the "way it's run." The lack of resources in her community manifests as racialized health disparities and are situated as the extended effects of intersecting oppression.

In similar fashion, Toni (2017), another working mother in her 30s, noted

> This is why my neighborhood is all Black and you look around and you see forty-year-olds walking around with a walker. And I remember going to a larger white area and buying lettuce and my son being like, "Oh, they're selling little trees!" Because the lettuce in our neighborhood doesn't *look*

like that! Like I think that's racism *too*! I don't know how to put what kind, but it is! They don't bring good things to our neighborhood.

Toni endures a lack of fresh food so severe that her son was completely unfamiliar with the unique varieties of fresh lettuce carried at grocery stores in affluent neighborhoods. To those with the economic and health-related privilege of easy access to healthy foods, it may seem mundane that a child might find a lettuce variety unrecognizable. Though fresh foods are necessary for healthy development, the lack to which Toni speaks is not uncommon in other food deserts lacking easy access to fresh groceries throughout the U.S. This speaks further to the extended effects of institutional racism and economic oppression on Black lives. For some, continued racial segregation remains a major factor that directly shapes their economic and life chances.

*Strategies of Resistance and Accommodation*

As a strategy of navigation, some women discussed what Jones and Shorter Gooden (2003) call "shifting," or what Harlem Renaissance poet, Paul Lawrence Dunbar ([1896] 1999) called "wearing the mask,"

> We wear the mask that grins and lies, /
> It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
> This debt we pay to human guile;
> With torn and bleeding hearts we smile...

Participants discussed sexual harassment, bullying, and the additional work women were expected to do at work in professional and home spaces. Most operate, challenge, and even "put on the mask" of feigned pleasantness or indifference, as an armor against the daily sting of microaggressions. They employ these strategies as means of self-protection. As Kenya (2017) explained,

> I think I approached it because I also teach race, and I also teach race to white students. So, there's a certain level, *a layer that I have to put on – a mask that I put on every morning because I do that* (original emphasis). And I know Black women wear the mask. But Black women who have to walk in spaces, to talk about race, to white people, and if you're an educator, you have to put on another layer, a different layer. Because you also have to be real cognizant of being not combative, making them feel guilty, and blah blah blah.

Similarly, a major instance of shifting in 2012 came from Victoria, who dealt with constant raced and gendered microaggressions, differential treatment and scrutiny working in a white-, and male-dominated STEM field. She articulated the sentiment of being under a microscope, and having to "limit" who she is at work. Further, she critiqued this as a problematic reality for many Black women, linking "limiting" or "shifting" to professional advancement:

> In order to fit in, I have to be less than who I am. I can't be my total self. I can't respond the way I would normally respond, or react the way I'd normally react. So, because I can't be all of me, they don't get 100%. They're not gonna get the best of me because they've put you into these little boxes. They already have their preconceived ideas about who you are as a Black woman. And because of that, you're always conscious of it.

> So, you play down the great person you can be. You're always trying to maneuver – I better not say that. I shouldn't do this. I won't motion like this. Gotta watch my facial expressions. You're constantly doing that stuff when you really could be thinking about the issue at hand and trying to solve the problem. And you do it because you're always outnumbered, and it's always about their level of comfortability.

> The more comfortable they are with you, the higher your paycheck will be. For the most part, you're the only Black woman in the room. They already think you're an angry Black woman. And so, everything that you say offends everybody. You're conscious of that all the time. You're second-guessing what you're gonna say. Instead of saying what you need to say because it's a good idea.

Feeling outnumbered, scrutinized, and assessed through the lens of stereotypes, the participants reported over-performing and endeavoring to ensure their work was consistently perfect. Unlink their white peers who were not subject to similar critiques, subtle attacks on Black women's credibility and authority are often leveled against them as means of discrimination. And often, Black women create layers of protection on the job, in particular, to sustain their livelihoods, and navigate the discriminatory acts they often experience in predominately white spaces.

Participants expressed awareness that there are problematic expectations that shape the ways others see them and interact with them. Importantly, they are aware that these images are often far from the realities of their lives. While some respond by overworking, others choose to live in racial enclaves as means to escape from everyday forms of racism. However, it is important to note that some who make this choice wind up further subjected to severe levels of institutional oppression.

*Post-Obama vs. Post-Trump Developments: 2012 vs. 2017 Data*

As compared to the 2017 interviews, the 2012 data illustrated an optimism associated with the symbolic gains of the Obama administrations. To be clear, the participants rejected the idea that the election had structurally changed the United States, or shifted positions for the majority of Blacks in the society. Yet, that the U.S. could elect a Black president represented possibility and change – at least at a symbolic level – for Blacks in the U.S. Prior to 2008, Americans never witnessed Blacks represent the country as the First Family.  Nonetheless, the 2012 participants characterized a colorblind and/or post-racial society as a utopia; a far-off, perfect world, but one that we cannot hope to reach in this lifetime. For instance, Tiana (2012) humorously likened post-racialism to a promised land and linked post-racialism to the dream of "flying cars," and joked that she would have to "see Jesus" before it became real. She further noted,

> It's a utopia. It's something we're striving to get to. And I'm not trying to be pessimistic, but people are saying we're there now? Hell naw. But when you say post-racial society, I think of heaven. *Like,*

> *damn, I gotta die to see a post-racial society.* I'm gonna hafta straight up see Peter, Paul, God, and be like whatup. Like, when you walk through the gates, there will be this waterfall that washes away all your preconceived notions about race, and people, and it won't be no color.

While all the interviews show that covert discrimination and institutional racism remain, the 2017 interview results reveal an increasing tide of outright hatred and economic vulnerability is more distinct than in the 2012 interview results. While both sets of women reference outright racist attacks, earlier interviews discuss them as declining since the mid-twentieth century, though still occurring. The 2017 interviews articulate increased witnessing of Black bodies being vulnerable to, and taken by, state-sponsored and/or police violence (Hill 2016). The 2017 interviews also highlight vulnerabilities experienced by other racial, ethnic, and social groups under a racially, sexually, and economically oppressive political administration. There is also a clear sentiment that Black women are similarly at risk, in unique fashions – as women, as Black people, as immigrants and/or second-generation descendants.

> The climate, it's thick. Thick in all ways. So you just have to, yeah, you gotta just make sure you take care of yourself. You gotta make sure you're self-caring. Because if not, these spaces are not meant for us at times. You have to go to sister circles, like I have different places to make sure that you're being fueled and charged up. Black spaces. That's what I been doing. (Traci 2017)

Additionally, the 2017 participants highlight stronger sentiments of economic vulnerability associated with the new administration. Candace (2017) highlighted a feeling of "uncertainty" that Toni (2017) further detailed,

> I have noticed some differences. As far as the atmosphere where I live, I live in a predominately Black neighborhood. The area where I live, it causes there an anxiety. When I hear people talk, they talk about the unknown. We don't know what's gonna happen with our job or our healthcare. I hear a lot of unknowns. There was even a white girl in one of my classes and she was crying. How she was talking, she's just overwhelmed by the thought of the things that could happen.

Though many participants were current and future professionals, and some had access to economic stability through their employment, they also recognized the precariousness of that position. For many, Black net worth is drastically limited by existing student loan debt, as is the case for many Black professionals. In short, the 2017 interviews express a growing fear and anxiety as associated with the presidency and its position towards oppressed groups.

## Conclusion

In this article, I assert that the structured and historical relations of patriarchy, economic inequity, and racism continue to shape everyday life for many Black women and the reading of their actions in interpersonal and public spheres. In line with earlier investigations of Black women's lives, this article discusses ways many continue to shift, bend, twist, and contort themselves to accommodate maintaining their senses of humanity despite the subtle and overt oppressions they constantly experience. In doing so, I addressed examples of how Black women

navigate, resist, and continue to affirm their personhood despite continuous messages that work to destabilize, devalue, and destroy their humanity. In attending to the agency of individuals, I argue that Black womanhood must be understood as everyday strategies of negotiation, resistance, rejection, and adaptation to the ongoing discrimination, marginalization, and microaggressions against Black women.

The women in the 2012 and 2017 interviews articulate similar experiences. The 2017 interviewees confirm the persistence of covert racism and sexism manifesting in their everyday lives through treatment by others interpersonally in similar fashion to 2012 participants. This is despite presidencies that led to the questioning of the continued significance of race in 2008 and 2012. Contrarily, the 2017 presidency centered race as a divisive force in the voting population and throughout public discourse and policy arenas. Because of this political climate, the 2017 participants discussed increasing feelings of vulnerability, witnessing and experiencing verbal attacks, overt racial violence, racial profiling, and police brutality.

Of particular significance, is the unique finding in the 2017 interviews that detailed the increased vulnerability felt by precariously positioned Black women, particularly first and second generation Americans from Jamaica or Panama. The politico-economic uncertainty brought about by the Trump administration is a cause for their expressed concern of vulnerability to racial, gender, and economic violence. Feelings of vulnerability associated with operating in an oppressive society in a raced and gendered body are heightened in the midst of a political backlash against anyone non-wealthy, non-white, and non-male. Ultimately, these interviews offer a lens into the weight of continued oppression in Black women's everyday lives and some of the ways this oppression continues to manifest brutal consequences. In short, Black women in the 2017 interviews expressed a growing sentiment of insecurity about the unknown changes occurring in the political realm that continues to adversely affect them.

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**Notes**

1. In line with longstanding stereotypes about Black women's "hardness," "criminality," and/or "toughness," even the most vulnerable members of the group – Black girls – tend to be punished more severely in schools, and treated harshly in interactions with police (Morris and Muhammad 2014). Georgetown Law's Center on Poverty and Inequality found that Black girls are perceived by others to be less innocent than White girls by age five (Epstein, Blake, and González 2017; Finley 2017). When compared to other girls, Black girls are more likely to experience "negative school, economic, and criminal justice outcomes" (Morris and Muhammad 2014, 141). Indeed, the suspension rate is higher for Black girls than other races (140). Black girls are imprisoned at almost three times the rate of White girls, and represent "fastest growing segment of juvenile justice population in secure confinement" (148). Paired with the visibility of outright xenophobia, these subtler inequities, characteristic of the post-civil-rights era, also persist.

2. "Kashiya Nwanguma, Molly Shah and Henry Brousseau attended the March 1, 2016, Louisville rally for the purpose of "peacefully protesting Trump," the ruling says. Nwanguma was carrying a sign with Trump's head on a pig's body, according to multiple news reports. At some point during his remarks at the Kentucky International Convention Center, the ruling states, the candidate said, 'Get 'em out of here.' Matthew Heimbach, who was representing the white nationalist Traditionalist Workers Party, and Alvin Bamberger attacked the protesters, according to the ruling. Nwanguma, Shah and Brousseau accuse Heimbach and Bamberger of assault and battery. They further level charges of incitement to riot, negligence, gross negligence and recklessness against the Trump campaign" (McLaughlin 2017, para. 5-8).

3. In 2017, the Trump administration also ended a two-decade-long tradition of holding a White House Eid dinner to close the Muslim Ramadan month of religious fasting (Hansler 2017).

4. For instance, the current president has lent government support to building the Dakota Access pipeline, which dissects, and may contaminate water sources on, treaty-protected Standing Rock Sioux tribal lands (Jones et al. 2017).

5. Further, newly appointed Secretary of Education, Betsy Devos, removed Title IX protections for sexual assault reporting at colleges and universities. As reported in a 2017 *Washington Post* article, "To an invitation-only audience at George Mason University, closed to the students who protested her expected announcement outside, [DeVos] declared that the Obama administration had gone too far, protecting student survivors to the detriment of the accused. The Education Department, she indicated, will reverse course through a technical process called 'notice-and-comment.' If that sounds innocuous, it's not. Rather, it's a signal that the Trump administration will make way for what is nothing less than an all-out attack on survivors." (Bolger and Brodsky 2017, para. 3)

6. This, only a few days in office, and marked by the irony of a room of White men signing legislation to determine the fate of women's bodies (Terkel 2017).

7. Participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

8. These initial interviews, came from available participants who volunteered for inclusion in the study. While transgender women were not included in these initial interviews, as I continue to interview Black women I hope to further expand the sample to include transgender women.

9. This is in reference to an incident of racial aggression that occurred on a local Midwestern college campus in 2011.

10. In terms of the consequences of notions of representativeness, scholarly literature asserts that these individuals often encounter "cultural taxation" (Padilla 1994; Joseph and Hirschfield 2011). Amado Padilla (1994) notes that faculty of color are required to negotiate added burdens and barriers in connection to their respective races. Professionals who are culturally taxed are given more work than their white counterparts and may receive more critical scrutiny from professional superiors (Padilla 1994). Consequently, many of these individuals feel forced to outperform White counterparts to receive comparable credit, to prove that they are qualified (i.e., not "diversity hires"), and to avoid unfair scrutiny. These are all stressors to which their white fellows are not subject to the same degree.

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