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Challenging the Violence and Invisibility against Women of Color – A Marxist Imperative

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We are heading into an era where unbridled greed, racism, sexism, and other forms of hate are, once again, unabashedly proclaimed to the world without remorse. This turn from the once negative association with racism and attempts to avoid being labeled racist has become increasingly evident in the U.S. since 2014, when, astoundingly, a string of White police killings of unarmed Black men went unpunished or unprosecuted (Monzó & McLaren, 2014). In some of these cases the police officers evidenced a complete lack of compassion for the men in their final seconds of life. National coverage of these events made clear to would be haters and predators that racism was still very prevalent and deep rooted in U.S. society. The White supremacist and misogynist venom that U.S. republican hopeful, Donald Trump, is selling in his 2016 presidential campaign has not been seen since the presidency of Ronald Reagan labeled millions of America's unemployed as potential welfare cheats and created the idea that welfare fraud was a nationwide epidemic. The welfare queen—a lazy Black and Brown female living off honest (White) taxpayers' money—was seeded in the soil of America's structural unconscious (Litchman, 1982).

With outrageous accusations that all Mexicans who immigrate to the U.S. are criminals and rapists and that Muslims should be kept from entering the country, Donald Trump has built a campaign that feeds on a fear of the Other and has amassed a strong following. The city of Ferguson, Missouri, ignited in anger and anguish and across the nation communities of color and White allies have come together to protest this racialized assault on Black men. We champion these efforts in support of our Black brothers but we also want to highlight a consistently invisible target of this and other forms of violence.

Women of color and girls of color are also disproportionate victims of violence – state violence, domestic violence, sexual violence, and symbolic violence. This racial-misogynist assault against women of color has received almost no national or international attention (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Watson, 2014). For example, Black women and girls are also disproportionately killed by White police officers who get off stark free. The case of seven-year old Aiyana Stanley-Jones who was fatally shot in 2010 in Detroit by a White police officer conducting a raid against another suspect was tried twice in four years and resulted each time in a hung jury. On March 2nd, 2014

22-year old Gabriella Nevarez was shot and killed by police who claim that she led them to a high-speed chase and attempted to ram their car into their vehicle. Witnesses say that she lost control of her vehicle after having been shot. Twenty-eight year old Sandra Bland who was shown on video pinned to the ground while surrounded by police officers was held in a Texas jail cell and found dead three days later.

On June 17th 2015 a White gunman murdered 9 parishioners at a historically Black church in Charleston. While this incident has been correctly referred to as terrorism against the Black community, rarely has it been emphasized that of the nine victims, six were women (Crenshaw et al., 2015). The media tends to treat police profiling and brutality against communities of color as police brutality against Black and Brown men. However, reports of police stoppings reveal a similar disproportionality with respect to racial profiling among Black men and women. For example, in New York City, of all police stoppings of men, 55.7% were Black men (compared to 10.9 of White men) and of all police stoppings of women, 53.4% were Black women (compared to 13.4 of White women) (Crenshaw et al., 2015)).

Police brutality against women of color often takes the form of physical and/or sexual abuse. Consider the examples of Marlene Pinnock who was pummeled in the face by a California Highway Patrol Officer, Keyarika Diggles who was beaten in a Texas police precinct, and a police officer was caught on video pinning down Dejerria Beaton, a teenage girl, at a pool party while she sobbed asking for her mother (Crenshaw et al., 2013). While it may be perceived that women are “included” in anti-racist efforts in support of specific communities, our androcentric society often fails to recognize the differences that affect women across almost any domain. Remedies against police profiling and violence against women of color requires a different approach. While racism may create a fear of Black and Brown men that leads to White police officers’ response to “shoot first, ask questions later,” racism against women of color contempt and dehumanization and sexual objectification. According to one researcher, sexual assault is a “huge problem” among police officers. Reporting and documentation of the problem are difficult but even then reports suggest that 9% of all reports of police misconduct involved sexual abuse (Carpenter, 2014). Their societal invisibility and presumed voicelessness makes them prime targets for sexual assault, physical abuse, and other forms of violence.

Immigrant women, poor women, and women whose languages are other than English are also vulnerable to sexual assault, sexual harassment, and other forms of violence because they are perceived as not capable of managing the justice system. Undocumented women are especially vulnerable to demands by both immigration officials and employers who demand sexual favors or who silence potential reports of rape with the threat of deportation (Hing, 2008). The anti-immigrant sentiment and hyper nationalism that we have seen in the U.S. since 9/11 demonizes immigrants as “criminals” even though migration into industrialized countries are increasingly a result of war, displacement, and poverty often caused by transnational capitalism (Monzó, McLaren, & Rodriguez, in press). This nationalism, spawned by anti-immigrant media messages, supports the systematic debasement of immigrants and justifies violence against them as deserved.

With recent gains within the GLBTQIA community and increased support of non-conforming gender and transgender community there has been a significant fallout against transgender women of color in particular. According to a 2013 report by the National Coalition of Anti-Violence programs (2014) transgender women accounted for 72% of all GLBTQIA homicides and 89% of the victims of such homicides were people of color. In each of these cases transgender women were brutally attacked, either shot, burned, or stabbed. According to a Fusion analysis (2015), 21 transgender women were killed in 2015 and 17 of these were either Black or Latina. While the number of transgender women deaths are increasing from previous year it is still unclear if the increase

has to do with greater hate crimes occurring or greater awareness and documentation (Kellaway & Brydum, 2016). Furthermore, these are only the numbers of transgender women killed. Many others exist who were attacked but survived. It is also difficult to know exact numbers since there is the possibility that victims may be misgendered. The string of victims include 20-year old Elisha Walker who was beaten to death in Smithfield, North Carolina, 20-year old Amber MonRoe who was shot to death in Detroit, Michigan, 17-year old Mercedes Williamson who was stabbed to death and found buried in a field behind her murderer's father's house in George County, Mississippi, 25-year old Ashton O'Hara was beaten to death in Detroit, Michigan, Tamara Dominguez who was killed by a male driver who repeatedly struck her with his vehicle (Kellaway & Brydum, 2016).

Violence against Muslims women is also on the rise. Indeed this has been the case since 9/11 but increasingly more so this past year. Thirty eight hate-based attacks against Muslims have been reported since the Paris attacks of 2015 and 18 of these occurred since the shootings in San Bernardino, Ca (Siemaszko, 2015). These incidents taken up by extremists are unjustly blamed on all Muslims. While these criminal acts cannot and should not be excused, the way to best prevent future attacks is to address the root causes: US imperialism and its desire to guarantee corporate interests in the Middle East (McLaren, 2015). In the West, our responses to national suffering have often been to find a scapegoat rather than to take responsibility for our own part in the world's rancor toward the West. We have not publicly taken stock of our own complicity in the development of extremist groups such as ISIS. Muslim women wearing the hijab are prime targets. Examples of these hate crimes against Muslim women include a Muslim woman being pushed in front of an oncoming underground train in London, a sixth-grade girl was beaten by boys who attempted to remove her hijab while calling her ISIS in a New York City middle school, and several newspaper headlines have appeared with Muslim women wearing hijabs followed by suspicions that they might be the "new terrorists" (Tinsley, 2015).

Another horrific form of violence against women is human and sex trafficking (The Advocates for Human Rights, 2016). Trafficking, especially sex trafficking, is a thriving business worldwide. Although the prevalence of trafficking is difficult to assess because of the hidden nature of this monstrosity, a 2012 report estimates that 20.9 million people and 15.8 million women are trafficked worldwide. While trafficking affects men too, the overwhelming majority of trafficking victims are women and young girls who face disproportionate poverty and discrimination which in turn negatively affect employment and educational opportunities. Although actual racial demographics are scant, the majority of women and girls who are trafficked into the U.S come from the "developing world," primarily from Latin America, countries of the former Soviet Union and South and Southeast Asia (Miko & Park, 2002). Traffickers prey on generally very young and poor women who are especially vulnerable because of their economic needs. They are often initially deceived about the nature of the work for which they are being hired and later forced against their will to engage in sex work. Other times women are lured into trafficking situations with false promises of decent working conditions. Tactics used to retain and control women in the sex industry include bondage, isolation, controlling money, physical violence and threats, and sexual assault and rape (The Advocates for Human Rights, 2016).

While violence against women is rampant throughout the world and reaches epidemic proportions that far outnumber many of the disasters that often occupy media outlets, only few cases gain national attention. Indeed one in three women will be physically or sexually assaulted at least once in their life, usually by the men who claim to "love" them (United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, 2008). As astounding as these statistics, drawn from self-reports, seem they are likely underestimated, hindered by the social stigma, ostracism, further violence, and sometimes even legal persecution that is often inflicted on women who dare to report.

Societal visibility is always related to the social and material conditions that create its possibility. That is, what we are able to or choose to see is related to the ideologies, values, and beliefs produced within a given mode of production. The violence that afflicts women of color across the world is a shameful reality that is apparently acceptable given that we rarely hear about the systematic nature of their specific forms of oppression. Indeed social justice advocates rarely recognize that any form of violence takes on particular characteristics when it involves women of color because they live a gendered and racialized existence, which produces distinct ways in which people relate to them. Since our capitalist world has been constructed in the image of Western man and to their benefit we have been conditioned to view the world through a Western androcentric lens. As such, unless we specify a subjugated group, by default we organize the world with men as the protagonists and create social, economic and political conditions that benefit them.

If the explicit and unconscionable violence against women of color discussed above is so pervasive that it rarely ignites our collective conscience, then the more everyday subtle forms of symbolic violence often go completely undetected both by outsiders but also often by women of color themselves. One particularly invisible form of symbolic violence is the exclusion of women of color and their particular knowledges in spaces of power – that is in spaces where important decisions, networks, advancements, and opportunities are made (Monzó & SooHoo, 2014). This occurs of course across race, gender, and class. However, there is no doubt that it occurs most often among women of color, particularly Black and Latina women, whose ideas necessarily (in that they come from a place of greatest marginality) are often perceived as too different, perhaps even threatening, to normative practices and ideologies. While these seemingly more mundane forms of violence are not as immediately threatening as those discussed above, they are endemic to the subconscious perception of women of color as less intellectually worthy or having knowledges that are of less value (Monzó, 2015). Restricting women of color from contexts of power and silencing them from explaining the world through their vantage points, removes the potential for new ideas to emerge – ideas rooted in the particular experiences of oppression, including ideas about the form of and processes by which the oppression they experience takes shape which would help with designing policies, laws, programs, and other strategies that may significantly curtail the violence they experience (Monzo, 2014).

Of course we cannot only adopt reactionary methods to end the violence against women of color. There is a need for pro-active strategies that entail a conscious awareness and inclusion of all women and all people of color and all those who currently live by the dictates of the ruling class. We engage this offensive against the structures of capitalism, racism, sexism, hetero and gender normativity, and all other forms of oppression simultaneously but with a conscious awareness that these take specificity within the capitalist mode of production (McLaren, 2015). This does not mean that these forms of oppression will automatically end as a result of a socialist revolution but that they are impossible to eradicate within the existing capitalist structure because capitalism depends on them to sustain its system of exploitation. Of course this means also that we must erode the structures that enable capitalism to continue, structures that sustain racist practices built upon the oppression of women, including the family – an institution that serves to control women and by so doing the production of the next generation into good working-class racist sexist.

This is a call to amplify our lenses (letting women of color's vantage points in) not to replace them. We do not subscribe to the postmodern notion that because women of color face specific forms of oppression we cannot work with other women and men to end our oppression. Our argument is in fact the opposite: that amplifying our lenses requires the inclusion of all voices toward the common goal of eradicating all forms of oppression.

An understanding of how these structures work together under capitalism to oppress women of color, and other

groups in historically specific ways leads to the conclusion that we must begin to name our oppression and our vision for social change. General notions of social justice not only hide the specificity of experience among the oppressed and therefore make us suspicious and resentful of each other but they also hide what we stand for. Increasingly the term social justice has been co-opted to reflect a left-liberal view that seeks to merely improve conditions for the oppressed so they can have more opportunities and a better standard of living. However, this notion of social justice resists acknowledging that capitalism cannot be reformed to avoid exploitation and to promote equal opportunity (Marx, 1906/2011). Those who strive for this approach support the view that some human beings are more motivated than others and deserve to have more (things) in life. They are still subscribing to the capitalist narrative of meritocracy. We must recognize that this narrative is based on lies – the lie that the accumulation goal of capitalism can be curtailed and capitalism ‘reformed’ to serve the interests of the working-class, the lie that wages for work is an equal exchange rather than a system of exploitation in which workers become the property (capital) of the capitalists, and the lie that although capitalism is not perfect it is the best system that can exist and that an alternative to capitalism that is class-free and can support greater freedom and equality is not possible. As revolutionary Marxist critical pedagogues we denounce unequivocally these lies (Allman, 1999; McLaren, 2015, 2006).

Paulo Freire (1970, 1994), one of the founding philosophers of critical pedagogy, engaged the idea of love not as an emotion locked in the heart of an individual but as a social relation that evidenced a true value for the Other, a recognition of value for the difference that an Other brings. Freire argued that this love was fundamental to the dialogic praxis that would lead to understanding the word and world and to the impetus and agency necessary for transformation. A love that attempts to change the Other into their mirror image is merely an expression of self-love. True love demands not only that we recognize the social and economic positioning of the Other and how it relates to our own positioning and to the structure of domination in the world but to do all in our power to transform these relations of domination. Love, Freire argued, is necessary for hope to flourish. Without love for the Other, for humanity and the world we cannot muster the hope necessary to risk our hearts and our lives to transform the world (McLaren, 1999). To love, we must be able to truly see the Other as a fully human being, magnificent in their existence in the world, deserving to be heard and to be trusted to engage their full human capacity and potential, equally worthy, always unfinished, but imbued with a unique responsibility and potential to mark the course of history. This revolutionary love is necessary to end today’s violence against women of color and all other social groups and against the capitalist structure that produces this violence. With love and hope we will begin to work together toward a better world across the social differences that have been created to keep us divided and in service to the capitalist mode of production. As revolutionary critical pedagogues, we favor a world free of class and organized around freely associated labor in which all living organisms are recognized as interdependent and in which each of us is socially responsible for the other, a society in which women of color, women of non-color and all men regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or other marker of difference can value each other and live together, and truly love each other enough to make our history one of equality, freedom, and solidarity.

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