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Changing the Narrative: A Discourse on Improving the Plight of Black Women

James Ponzo (II)
jeponzo@buffalo.edu

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Changing the Narrative: A Discourse on Improving the Plight and Media Portrayal of Black Women by James E. Ponzo (II)

(SLIDE 1) TITLE

(SLIDE 2) INTRODUCTION
First of all, thanks to all of those involved with coordinating the conference and choosing the proposals, and also to those in attendance today. My name is James Ponzo and I am a fourth year PHD student at SUNY Buffalo. The following paper developed out of my initial experience of teaching my *Black Gender Studies* course, in the Fall of 2018.

**SLIDE 3**  
**Baldwin Quote**

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*I have never seen myself as a spokesman. I am a witness. In the church in which I was raised you were supposed to bear witness to the truth. Now, later on, you wonder what in the world the truth is, but you do know what a lie is.*

—James Baldwin

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The current research for my doctoral dissertation involves investigating the life and work of James Baldwin. One of the most profound ideas that Baldwin discussed was the idea of being a ‘witness’, which involved him holding this country and the rest of society, to a very high standard. With this idea in mind, last semester in my Black Gender Studies class, one of the main elements involved focusing on the historical treatment of women of the African Diaspora in America. After teaching my students on the intersectional nature of the oppression experienced
by black women, we then investigated current events to determine whether or not any improvement in their treatment had occurred. Sadly enough, specific, high-profile examples from the media over the last few years, has given us a clear indication that very little progress has been made.

The media’s portrayal of the #MeToo movement; the vilification of black female politicians such as Kamala Harris, Maxine Waters, and Stacey Abrams; and the case (and sentencing) of sex-trafficking victim Cyntoia Brown, are all examples which confirm this unfortunate reality. This paper will investigate a couple of these in order to understand how they are reminiscent of the initial treatment of black women in this country. I will also include examples of related texts and material that we discussed in class, and finally, I will make suggestions on how we can make advance in this area. Although black women are now the most educated demographic in the country, compared to every other race and gender group, they are still victims of an intersectional oppression. In this current era of instability, it is imperative that we identify and eradicate this problem, and correcting the portrayal of them in the media will assist in this undertaking.

(SLIDE 4) TARANA BURKE
On of the stories that we looked at dealt with work of Tarana Burke. In The New York Times article entitled *The Woman Who Created #MeToo Long Before Hashtags*, Burke explained that she actually created the #MeToo movement in 1997 while sitting with a 13-year-old girl who was a sexual assault survivor. Burke said that at the time, she “didn’t have a response or a way to help her in that moment, and (she) couldn’t even say me too.” She went on to say that, “It really bothered (her) and, and it sat in (her) spirit for a long time.” Ten years later, Burke created a non-profit organization (Just Be Inc.) that helps victims of sexual assault and harassment. At this time she also named her movement ‘Me Too.’ Then, as the article explains, on October 15, 2017, actress Alyssa Milano used the hashtag “Me Too” in an attempt “to give a voice to victims of sexual abuse, in the wake of accusations of sexual harassment and assault leveled against Harvey Weinstein.” Soon after, Twitter erupted as black women and other ‘women of color’ shared posts which pointed out that Burke had not received proper support from prominent white feminists over the years, including creating the hashtag #WOCAffirmation or women of color affirmation (April Reign, digital media strategist who was responsible for #OscarSoWhite). Twitter, Facebook, and Snapchat were soon full of survivors sharing their experiences of sexual violence with others. In fact, during the first 24 hours, there were more than 12 million posts and reactions shared on Facebook. Milano, who said that she was unaware of the work done by Burke, reached out to her in order to collaborate, and also gave Burke credit as a guest on Good Morning America.

*(SLIDE 5) WHITE WOMEN & TRUMP SIGN*
As the article mentions, and as this photo that went viral also harkens back to, history explains the ________ relationship between black women and their white counterparts in the Women’s Rights Movement.

(SLIDE 6) ANGELA DAVIS
In fact, although I’m sure most of you are aware of this, Angela Davis highlights this in her book Women, Race & Class (year), which my students in my Black Gender Studies course and I went through. Davis begins by explaining the legacy of political involvement by black women. In addition, black and white women agreed to collaborate for the cause of suffrage, as they had done for the issue of education in the post-Civil War effort against illiteracy in the South (109). Davis even mentions one incident where Susan B. Anthony defended Ida B. Wells against a racist, white stenographer who refused to take dictation from her because she didn’t believe in “treat(ing) Negroes as equals” (110). While Wells respected Anthony’s work as a “pioneer and veteran in the work of women’s suffrage, she also “criticized her white sister for failing to make her personal fight against racism a public issue of the suffrage movement” (111). In one particular conversation, Anthony mentioned how she purposely “pushed (Frederick) Douglass—who was the first man to openly support the Women’s Movement, despite the backlash that he received—aside for the sake of recruiting white Southern women into the movement for women’s suffrage.” In the same conversation, Anthony also explained how she refused to support black women who wanted to form a branch of the suffrage association, in order to avoid anti-Black hostility from her white Southern members (111-112). Davis writes that eventually Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), would move from “self-avowed capitulation to racism on the grounds of expediency” (112) to definitively accept(ing) the fatal embrace of white supremacy in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Along the way, they were silent on the terror and violence—including lynching, with which Wells had a firsthand encounter (and against which she would
crusade against it—against black people during the time, and the spread of Jim Crow segregation.

(SLIDE 7)  CYNTOIA BROWN

Another polarizing headline that we covered centered on the plight of Cyntoia Brown. At the age of 16, Cyntoia Brown was sentenced to 51 years in jail before being eligible for parole. Brown admitted to shooting and killing Johnny Allen, who allegedly forced her into prostitution, in self defense. Brown’s story, which inspired a documentary film by Daniel H. Birman entitled Me Facing Life: Cyntoia’s Story, includes her being the daughter and granddaughter of women who endured abuse, Brown also being the victim of physical and emotional abuse, as well as being sex-trafficked by a pimp, and repeatedly drugged and raped by different men. On January 7 of this year, Brown was granted clemency by Gov. Bill Haslam of Tennessee, which commutes her life sentence. Brown, 30, will be released to supervised parole on August 7, after serving 15 years in prison.
When I began to learn about this case, the details reminded me of what Dorothy Roberts discussed in *Killing the Body: Race and Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*; and what my students and I discussed regarding it. Roberts did a great job of exploring the horrible ordeal that African people, and specifically African women, experienced after being kidnapped, enslaved, and transported to America. She explains how women (and children) who were originally ‘worth’ less than men, soon became the *most* valuable as chattel slavery continued, and the commodification and control of their bodies were central to this ‘peculiar institution.’ However, the white men responsible for the treatment of these women under slavery, also established and circulated false stereotypes designed to (shift the focus away from/distract?) manipulate public perception of black women, and also create a distraction from the fact that they regularly assaulted them sexually. Roberts also shares examples of how policies are still being introduced which seek to regulate the reproduction of black women.
Changing the Narrative

So, in writing this, I began thinking about ways in which we can change the narrative, permanently altering the way black women are not only portrayed in the media, but also the way they are treated in this country.

#1— I think we should accept that the obvious connection between the historical accounts—such as the ones I have touched upon today—and the examples taken from recent headlines, are not a mistake; this is all deliberate.
It is **not** a coincidence that Sandra Bland showed up dead in her jail cell, after being arrested for (basically) giving an officer an answer that he indeed asked for, but did not really **want** to hear. And then footage is released of him carrying her into police headquarters hog-tied!

It is **not** a coincidence that officer—let’s just call him ’barrel roll’—did not proceed in an objective manner, when responding to a call from neighbors about the number of black children present at a pool party in Texas, and ended up with his kneed pressed in the back of a helpless 15-year-old girl.

*(SLIDE 11)  WHITE PROFESSOR SUING BLACK GIRLS GROUP*


Just like it is **not** a coincidence that a white male professor recently decided to sue, based on his belief that Black Girls Who Code, is racist against white men (!), or that last year more black trans women were killed by the police than in any previous year.

#2— So, we should not only fully acknowledge this, but we should also call people out on it when they refuse to so, similar to how it is 'like pulling teeth’ to get individuals in the media to correctly acknowledge and declare that the current occupant of the White House is, and has been, racist.

#3— I think we need to continue to encourage our little girls and prepare them for the intersectional nature of oppression that will undoubtedly affect their lives. Encourage them to push boundaries, challenge the status quo, and love themselves.

*(SLIDE 12)  KORRYN GAINES*
In closing, as my class and I discussed and were witnesses to, black women are still being portrayed negatively by the media. Although it is definitely not new in this country, it is up to us to address this. Each semester I explain to my students that becoming better critical thinkers is essential not only for the course, but also for the rest of their lives. The coverage of the life and death of Korryn Gaines is a recent example of when I myself was unfortunately influenced by the media to initially view her as an irresponsible parent. Thanks to some pretty amazing friends on social media, my opinion was permanently altered. I realized that she was just a women who was fed up with the authorities who had taken her license and impeded her from taking care of her two small children. I empathized with her and I also understood the frustration that black women felt toward black men who did not get it, and viewed it as yet another example of us not supporting and defending one of them, they way they regularly do us. Yes, we must change the narrative. We must not wait any longer. We cannot wait any longer.
Bibliography

Articles


Photos


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