The Gender of Police Violence

BY NIKKI JONES

BYE, SEXY."

A teenaged boy launched the comment in my direction from just a few feet away. We’d just been sitting at a table together for about an hour, at a weekly meeting for young men in the neighborhood. I was stunned by the young man’s transgression, but, as many women are conditioned to do, I didn’t respond. Instead, I let the inappropriate comment hang in the air as I left the room.

Like most American women, I have been the target of uninvited comments like this one in the past. The regularity with which such intrusions are directed at women in public space recently inspired its own hashtag, #YouOkSis. The co-creators of the online campaign, Feminista Jones and @BlackGirlDanger, hoped the use of the hashtag would break the silence surrounding the experiences of black women and girls with street harassment. “I wanted to center our voices,” said Feminista Jones in an interview published in the Atlantic, “because I feel like black women’s voices are not always amplified. And I feel it’s my responsibility to do that.”

Another recent online effort is #SayHerName, which was inspired by the activism of the Black Youth Project 100 and allies like the African American Policy Forum, a group that published a report called “Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women.” This report seeks to amplify and center the experiences of black women and girls in local and national debates about police violence and reforms. #YouOkSis and #SayHerName are modern-day campaigns made possible by the technological advances of the twenty-first century and fueled by the power of Black Twitter. Yet the efforts to understand violence as a continuum that includes black women, who also confront police violence and are disproportionately affected by various forms of violence against women, are a throwback to an unfinished black feminist project, one that Kimberlé Crenshaw and Andrea J. Ritchie address in the #SayHerName report: “Black women have consistently played a leadership role in struggles against state violence—from the Underground Railroad to the anti-lynching movement to the current Black Lives Matter campaign—yet the forms of victimization they face at the hands of police are consistently left out of social movement demands.”

#SayHerName and #YouOkSis challenge the legacy of excluding black women and girls from conversations about violence in the black community. In doing so, these online efforts and their on-the-ground actions document the painful and liberating stories of black women and girls. The parallel movements also run the risk, however, of once again presenting these experiences as distinct and competing, rather than parts of a larger whole. Yet it is crucial for the safety of black men and black women to see structural violence and interpersonal violence, police violence and street harassment, as interconnected.

The “bye, sexy,” farewell followed a discussion of police aggression. The discussion took place at a weekly meeting in a public housing complex in San Francisco’s Lower Fillmore neighborhood. I lived there for more than two years while researching a new book. Lincoln, an African American man and father figure to several local teens, led the group. (Names in this article have been changed to protect the identities of those involved.) The weekly discussions helped participants process difficult events in the neighborhood, including arrests. On this night, the group was grappling with a recent arrest in the neighborhood. As Lincoln tells it, the incident began when the police got a call that a black man wearing a white T-shirt—a description broad enough to fit every young man in the room—had a gun. When the police arrived, they arrested a man known to the group but, it appears from the conversation, not known for his involvement in street violence. The police handled the man roughly, handcuffing him and slamming him to the ground before throwing him in the back of the police car.

Some of the boys at the meeting saw the arrest; they are saddened and frustrated. I join Lincoln’s efforts to help the boys make sense of the incident, asking them how they felt after witnessing the arrest. One boy says that it makes you feel like you want to hurt the police. Lincoln reminds the boys that they can’t hurt the police and returns to my original question. He asks the group again to talk about their feelings. One of the younger boys, about twelve years old, answers, saying that the arrest of the man makes him feel like it is racist, like the police do not like black people. They deliberately go after the older black men, he says, so that soon just young...
boys like them are going to be left on the property, and then they will need a pass to get on housing-complex property. I ask whether after witnessing the arrest they feel like the police are there to protect them. They say no, adding that the police do not care if somebody gets shot. When I question how it makes them feel about power, one boy says he feels like he has no power. I ask the group what they can do if they have no power. Stay out of trouble, do well in school, one boy suggests. Pressing, I ask, what else? The usually boisterous group falls silent.

Shortly after this conversation, I said my goodbyes to the group. I had an early flight the next day. I rose from the table and made my way to the door. As I placed my hand on the door's handle, one of the young men from the group—a young man who had always treated me with deference and respect—lofted the loud farewell into the air: “Bye, sexy.” I knew my silence would not be the end of it. I was sure that Lincoln would scold the young man for his lack of respect—a lesson that he sometimes punctuated with a swift jab to a boy’s chest.

I was frustrated by the boy’s outburst, but in that moment I also understood the young man’s actions with a clarity that I’d never had before. Although young, he understood the fragility of his masculinity and had already learned that his effort to repair an injury to his budding manhood required a female body. Yet, I also understood that “bye, sexy” was more than an adolescent’s jocular attempt to reassert his manhood. Our conversation was so powerful, so revealing, because it made visible the origin of the threat to the young man’s sense of manhood and developing sense of self. The threat wasn’t me or my body or my status position, as women who are the targets of uninvited comments in public are often encouraged to believe. Rather, the source of the young man’s sense of powerlessness was, as the group conversation made clear, his own marginality and the seemingly arbitrary and all-controlling actions of the police in his neighborhood. His comment was not just a desperate grasp at a semblance of power and control over his social world after having his sense of powerlessness laid bare before me. It was an attempt to escape his own vulnerability—a vulnerability that women...
and girls know well. If he hadn’t made such an effort, then he would have had to settle in with an unsettling social fact: that he is embedded in a set of power relations that make him more like a woman or a girl than he’d like to admit.

The experiences of black women and girls with street harassment, and of black men and boys with police aggression, are both similar and interconnected. The experiences are far more similar than competing discourses around police violence and violence against black women suggest. Police violence and street harassment reveal a shared vulnerability to dominance and violence. Both forms of violence are gendered violence. Routine practices that come along with contact with the criminal justice system force black men into submissiveness. In effect, poor black men are subjugated in a way that mirrors the street harassment of black women: they become bodies that can be accessed, penetrated, and controlled at will and without recourse. The emotional impact of such encounters lingers long after the encounter ends, as is often the case when women are subjected to unwanted comments or physical aggression in public.

After another boys’ group meeting, for instance, the boys finish the plates of food that are provided at each meeting and, one by one or in pairs, begin to trickle out of the meeting area. As they leave, they are confronted with a familiar scene. Two police cars have pulled into the parking lot near the meeting room’s door. The activity draws the group outside en masse. Once outside, Lincoln takes a stand near the four officers who have arrived on the scene. Lincoln says that the officers are claiming that three of the boys attending the meeting broke into a resident’s home. He says the boys were in the room the whole time. A small group of kids, who appeared to be between the ages of eight and eleven, gather around the officers. Lincoln orders the kids to run along. The older boys in the group walk away on their own, spreading out like water on pavement as they make their way across the street and away from the officers.

I hear Larry’s voice rise from the crowd of observers. Larry is Lincoln’s son. A senior in high school, he’s been studying for the state-mandated exit exam. I’ve provided some support for him along the way. A few weeks earlier, at the end of an emergency tenants’ meeting called to address a wave of evictions affecting the housing complex’s residents, Larry shared a recent encounter with the police. He had been picked up and taken to the local station and “strip-searched,” he said. He looked disheartened, frustrated, and somewhat defeated as he shared his experience.

The strip search Larry references is a routine practice in law enforcement and corrections. During the invasive search, a male suspect like Larry is coerced to bend over, spread his buttocks and manipulate his genitalia (or have it done by an officer) to show that he is not carrying contraband or weapons in or on his body. Invasive body searches can also take place on the street. Any failure to comply with an officer’s direction would be seen as resistance and met with coercive force. The largely hidden nature of this invasive practice mirrors black women’s experience with sexual violence as a form of social control.

“Not tonight, not tonight,” Larry repeats in a monotone chant. “Ya’ll ain’t taking me in tonight,” he says, bouncing on his toes like a boxer getting ready for a match. “You’re not going to strip-search me. That’s illegal.”

Larry makes his way over to my place in the small crowd. He continues to bounce and chant as we watch what’s going on from behind the railing that separates the entrance from the parking lot. Larry raises his voice and begins to yell in the direction of the officers. I turn to him to get his attention. In a low, soft tone I encourage him to calm down. He pauses for a moment.

“It’s frustrating,” he says, “they can come up in here, take me to the station, strip-search me, and I can’t do anything back to them.” I tell him that I understand, but that the way to get back at them is by taking and passing his exit exam. “You’re trying to go somewhere,” I say. I encourage him not to court the police into disrupting his path. He takes in my suggestion before retreating back into the crowd of bystanders.

It’s not uncommon for bystanders to launch accusations at officers from the outskirts of a confrontation. But I was struck by the specificity of Larry’s accusation: “you’re not going to strip-search me, that’s illegal.” His accusation made public what was an otherwise private and intimate violation he had experienced at the hands of the police. As with the efforts of #YouOkSis and #SayHerName, he is challenging a routine but degrading experience. In doing so, he also challenges the idea that such practices are a natural or normal condition of social life for young black men. Like the supporters of #YouOkSis and #SayHerName, Larry’s efforts to break the silence surrounding his experience also open him up to the potential for harsher forms of aggression, including the possibility of lethal violence at the hands of the police—a threat from which I hoped to insulate him by redirecting his frustration.

The omnipresent threat of sexual violence operates to keep women and girls (and other gendered outsiders) “in their place,” Patricia Hill Collins writes in Black Sexual Politics. For black women, she says, the threat of violence acts as “an invisible cage of control.” The penetration and expansion of law enforcement into the daily lives of young men is like an invisible cage, too. Reactions to these constraints can send ripples of aggression through a community; the aggression of the dramatic arrest that the boys witnessed eventually found its way to me. Yet, the hand that local policing efforts play in perpetuating aggression and violence in black communities, especially violence against black women at the hands of black men, is often made invisible. Disrupting the silence surrounding this relationship will require a broader analytical understanding of how
reveal the striking similarity between men and boys’ encounters with the police and women and girls’ experience with street harassment and sexual violence. We should organize around a shared experience of vulnerability and challenge the acceptability of expressions of dominance in any form as a reaction to this vulnerability. To do so is the path to equality and justice, one that is liberating for black men and boys, black women and girls at the same time.

violence moves through people’s bodies and minds, landing on whoever is on the lower end of the social hierarchy.

That understanding won’t emerge through competing discourses, but by acknowledging the similarities in the violence directed at black women and at black men, connecting concerns reflected in #YouOkSis and #SayHerName with recent debates over police violence. Such a conversation would not only make the necessary point that black women and girls are targets of police violence too, but would also