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Ratchet Black Lives Matter: Megan Thee Stallion, Intra-Racial Violence, and the Elusion of Grief

In July 2020, Megan Thee Stallion was shot. The vitriol directed towards her represented the ways certain kinds of Black women's bodies do not effectively garner collective forms of grief, or the public expression of empathy toward someone who experiences tragedy or suffers harm. The lack of empathy shown by many toward Megan falls in line with the ways that Black women, girls, and femmes are frequently disregarded—their bodies marked as excessive, loud, disposable, and above all, deserving of whatever violence is exacted upon them. In this essay, I argue that Megan Thee Stallion was not, to some, an appropriate target for grief—she was ungrievable—because, as a ratchet Black woman who embodies a purposeful lack of regard for Black middle-class norms concerning gender and sexuality, she is seen as less deserving of sympathy by those holding racist ideas about Black women. [affect, African American English, Black women, Hip-hop, Queer linguistics]

In March 2020, Houston rapper, Megan Thee Stallion released a remix featuring pop icon Beyoncé of her viral hit "Savage." The massive success of the song catapulted the already rising star to new fame. In July 2020, Megan Thee Stallion was shot. While her physical injuries turned out not to be severe, the backlash that she received as a victim of a violent crime, allegedly at the hands of a Black man, was severe. In fact, the vitriol directed toward her represented the ways certain *kinds* of Black women's bodies do not effectively garner collective forms of grief, or the public expression of empathy toward someone who experiences tragedy or suffers harm. Arguably, the lack of empathy shown by many toward Megan falls in line with the ways that Black women, girls, and femmes are frequently disregarded—their bodies marked as excessive, loud, disposable, and above all, deserving of whatever violence is exacted upon them.

The affective response of displaying *grief* for another's serious injury has been examined for the ways that it reveals the mechanisms by which we come to collectively hold certain attachments to symbols, ideas, relationships, and individuals (Butler 2009). When we grieve for individuals or groups suffering from harm, or injury, or who have experienced loss and even death, we demonstrate that we hold some form of attachment to them (Butler 2009). Grief is one way we demonstrate empathy for someone else's suffering. Additionally, to whom we direct our grief points out those who we consider members of a shared group (Rankine 2014). Therefore, we tend to show grief for those who we think are *appropriate* targets for that grief (Butler 2009; Fogg-Davis 2006). In this essay, I argue that Megan Thee

Stallion was not, to some, an appropriate target for grief—she was ungrivable—because as a *ratchet* Black woman who embodies a purposeful lack of regard for Black middle-class norms concerning gender and sexuality, she is seen as *less* deserving of sympathy as a victim of violence at the alleged hands of a Black man.

When I use the word *ratchet*, I do not simply speak of an aesthetic, or subjectivity linked specifically to the Black working class. My approach to the word *ratchet* speaks to the ways that individuals' behavior as racialized, gendered, sexualized, and classed subjects are compelled by competing and, often contradictory, ideas from within Black (heteropatriarchal) communities of practice as well as from the broader, "mainstream" (read white supremacist) society and cultural milieu (Higginbotham 1993; Lane 2019; Stallings 2013)). *Ratchet* is a word with multiple meanings which often operate simultaneously. I use it here to point out a set of behaviors which are not socially acceptable or appropriate under Black middle-class ideologies as well as within white supremacist ideologies (Lane 2019). And yet, it simultaneously refers to the purposeful lack of desire to fit within the boundaries of what has been deemed socially acceptable—a disavowal of "the politics of respectability" (Higginbotham 1993). Therefore, it functions not only as a tool for pointing out and critiquing bad (Black) behavior, but also as a tool for those who are often already considered bad—those who are poor, gender non-conforming, lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and/or non-monogamous—to resist the notion that what is "good" and "bad" must be based on what white people or Black middle-class people find acceptable (Lane 2019).

This particular understanding of *ratchet* helps us to understand how even an upstanding middle-class Black woman such as Anita Hill, a law professor, could come to garner such mistrust and vitriol when she recounted in 1992 the hurt that she'd been subjected to by now Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. Hill was acting out of line with the often unspoken prescription of Black women's silence in the face of harm or injury at the hands of Black men dictated by Black middle-class norms. In effect, Anita Hill is just as *ratchet* as Megan Thee Stallion.

The distribution of grief, or lack thereof, points out the ways that some adhere to a tiered system within the Black Lives Matter movement, whereby only certain kinds of Black people *deserve* sympathy and only certain forms of violence, exacted by certain kinds of perpetrators, matter. This narrow application reveals insidious kind of boundary work taking place. As Lamont and Molnár (2002) have argued, "social boundaries are objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities" (Lamont and Molnár 2002). Black heterosexual men of any class are seen as always grievable victims within progressive Black public life, and Black women and girls, cis, and especially trans, as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual and other gender non-conforming people are seen as *less* important victims of state sanctioned or intra-racial violence (Glover 2016, Bey and Green 2017, Megan Thee Stallion 2020).

Heath Fogg-Davis (2006) draws attention to the racialized, gendered, and sexualized nature of the distribution of grief and outrage over intra-racial violence and brutality. Fogg-Davis (2006) suggests an acknowledgment of the ways that white supremacist logics concerning Black women's "natures" as hypersexual, aggressive, and lacking femininity seep into the Black counter public creating particular consequences on intra-racial gender and gender politics (Fogg-Davis 2006, 70). It is within the context of intra-racial violence that we can see the sites where (Black and/or white) patriarchy shapes what we see, how we can make meaning of what happened, whose lives matter most, and the immediate questions that might come out of our mouths in a protective stance-taking measure (Du Bois 2007)—"Well, what did she do?"

The initial accounts of what happened in July 2020 were hazy with many online gossip magazines reporting that Megan had been shot in the foot, but details surrounding how—Was it an accident? Was it someone she knew? Was the car moving?—shifted and changed daily, all while Megan remained silent. As more

details began to emerge, that she had been shot outside of the car, that she had been shot after leaving a party, and that her ex-boyfriend, Canadian rapper Tory Lanez was present, the texture of the vitriol directed toward Megan began to thicken. Side-by-side to comments wishing her well and a speedy recovery were comments calling her a liar, claiming that she was “too big,” “too manly,” to be hurt. Several claims of her seeking attention, or trying to harm Tory Lanez’ career due to their relationship ending. The most famous of these comments came from retired rapper, Curtis Jackson (50 Cent). Jackson posted a meme on his Instagram page featuring a still from the 1991 John Singleton film *Boyz in the Hood*, where Ricky, a young Black man and gifted athlete destined to “make it out the hood,” is shot in the back by local gang bangers while running for his life down an alley. In an obvious and purposefully sloppy “photoshop,” Ricky’s face was replaced by Megan’s and the gunman’s face had been replaced by that of Tory Lanez.

The comments on his now deleted post were venomous and demonstrated the ways that Black women’s bodies are constantly traded upon within the culture of hip-hop as tropes to be ridiculed. Megan stands at 5’11 without the 4- to 6-inch heels she often wears. Her height and build are admired by many, but also attacked by others for being too masculine. We should recognize the transphobia embedded within the discourse that Megan is “too manly,” because her body is tall and powerfully built (think here about the ways Serena Williams’ body is routinely masculinized and dehumanized in public and sport discourse (Douglas 2019)). Here also runs the current of Black women’s bodies being deemed improperly feminine subjects where femininity constitutes white, small, demure, and silent (Davis 1981; Hammonds 1994; Roberts, 1999; Spillers 1987). Megan clearly doesn’t care about people’s issues with her “masculinity” as she’s taken on the gender-fucked moniker Stallion (which is a strong, powerfully built male horse that is un-neutered, “hot blooded” and difficult to control). Taking on “Thee Stallion” reminds us that she’s got “big balls.” Megan dismisses standards of femininity, or Black middle-class femininity that is rooted in proving one’s adherence to white middle-class patriarchal notions of femininity. It is within this context and Jackson’s previous homophobic and transphobic posts, that we can reflect on the ways that certain bodies, especially those of individuals who are Black and gender non-conforming, high-femme, trans, or all of these things at the same time, are treated as disposable bodies, unbelievable bodies, and bodies who do not garner universal respect or empathy. I would argue that these very same bodies are those which are most often considered to be the most “ratchet.”

“Damn I didn’t think this s--t was real, It sounded so crazy @theestallion i’m glad your feeling better and I hope you can accept my apology. I posted a meme that was floating around. I wouldn’t have done that if i knew you was really hurt sorry.”

Jackson, in what passes for an apology, said that he “didn’t think this shit was real, it sounded so crazy.” One of the most interesting things about his apology is that it falls right in line with the ways that Black women’s concerns are often treated. The everyday violence that they deal with “sounds so crazy” as to be met with incredulity. Jackson’s words are emblematic, but sadly do not touch the surface, of the toxic responses to Megan in the aftermath of her trauma.

Black women, girls, and femmes who embody ratchet politics point out the limits of Black middle-class heteropatriarchal ideologies. Their treatment shows the places where ideas about gender and sexuality are still tethered to white supremacist, assimilationist ideologies. Their treatment shows us this by giving us a glimpse into how intra-racial politics govern the treatment of those vulnerable to gendered and sexualized violence at the hands of those with the *most* amount of power *intra-racially*. Black intra-racial politics must be analyzed if we are to publicly proclaim #BlackLivesMatter. Analyzing how disgust, incredulity, and apathy animate a collective response to a ratchet Black woman’s harm at the alleged hands of a

(ratchet?) Black man, shows us how Black middle-class heteropatriarchal ideology often decides *which* Black lives matter *most*.

Black people invested in upward mobility within the context of white supremacist society and culture, are often compelled and/or coerced into to behaving in ways that uphold the logic of white supremacist heteropatriarchy (Higginbotham 1993). Those Black people who do not conform to normative ideas about the kinds of “positive” representations of Blackness—ratchet Black folks—are treated as anti-social, undesirable, and yet, by being the kind of Black people whiteness imagines all of us to be, they are simultaneously rewarded by being brought into the public domain as representative of all Black people, all while being damned for being themselves (Lane 2019). It is in the exact places where we, as Black middle-class subjects, care more about what white supremacists think of us, such as in public, that we see certain kinds of Black bodies—heterosexual, gender conforming, conventionally attractive, middle-class, proper—receive (slightly) more compassion, sympathy, and thoughts and prayers.

Megan Thee Stallion (2020) understands this complexity and its why her embodiment of unabashed, sexually explicit, ratchetness is life-giving for people too concerned with their own self-care, pleasure, and joy to be bending over backward to make others comfortable with our presence in a world that would rather we die in misery for trying to twist and contort ourselves to *earn* our human rights and dignity (brown 2019; Cooper 2017). If you are a Black woman, girl, cis or trans, or a femme presenting gender non-conforming person, then you know what it feels like to have empathy elude you, for your suffering to be ungrieved/ungrievable, but you also know the incredible amount of freedom that can come when you dispense with bending your body and personhood to fit within a narrow definition of Blackness.

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