

Sell-Outs or Home Girls? : Popular Media, Race, Intersectional Feminist Strategies, and Covid-19

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“This moment is a conjuncture between the COVID-19 crisis and the increasing awareness of the structural nature of racism.” (DuVernay)

- Angela Davis, in conversation with Ava DuVernay, *Vanity Fair*

Introduction: Of Statistics and Stories, Pandemics and Black Women

“The Color of Coronavirus”, APM Research Laboratory’s findings on the inequitable impact of COVID 19 on marginalized racial and ethnic communities in the United States, show some alarming skeletons in the closet of U.S. healthcare. In the tally of 171000 total COVID 19 deaths in the U.S.A (as of August 18th¹), APM Research Laboratory claims that while 40.4 White Americans per 100000 have lost their lives to COVID 19, this figure is an alarming 88.4 deaths per 100000 people for Black Americans (all data being age-adjusted). The findings show that Black people are most likely to lose their lives in the pandemic, while Indigenous Americans, Pacific Islander Americans, and Latinx Americans have greater risks of dying in the pandemic than White Americans, who are only at a slightly greater risk than Asian Americans.

APM’s data does not reveal any further categorization of gender, but an article in *The New Yorker* does. It reveals a few statistics about black women’s dangers in the U.S. healthcare and housing systems and their vulnerability to comorbidities. According to the article, black women are three times more likely to die in childbirth than white women despite often having greater educational qualifications, are sixty percent more likely to have a high blood pressure than white women. They constitute about forty-four percent of those who are evicted from their homes in urban areas and, the article comments, “as a result, they disproportionately experience homelessness and depression and, in extreme cases, commit suicide” (Taylor), and face an enormous pay inequity, with “Black women in Louisiana, the state where African-Americans face the highest mortality rates from covid-19, make forty-seven cents to every dollar made by white men.” (Taylor)

Many can take these statistics as an adequate look at the impact of COVID 19 on Black people. However, these alone are not enough in understanding this marked disproportion. The average reader-audience does not read or comprehend the implications of statistics like these adequately. Stuart Hall in his seminal essay “Encoding, Decoding” had stated that a “raw historical event cannot be, in that form, be transmitted” and that “the event must become a ‘story’ before it can become a communicative event” (Hall 508). Every statistic involving dead or dying Black women, or Black women losing jobs, getting lower pay, and facing house evictions is an event, and they have to be converted to stories. In an essay titled “Storytelling makes public health statistics more accessible”, Martine Bouman comments that “Information about health issues has to compete with thousands of other

communication messages. If the attention of our target audience is to be caught and held, especially when that audience is low literate or not yet interested in health issues, other, more emotionally appealing and popular communication methods need to be brought into play" (203). The curators of these figures are themselves cognizant of this limitation of statistics, and while *The New Yorker* preferred a formal interpretation, *APM*, after placing their findings to the public, took the responses of some leaders of PoC communities, some of which are extremely telling in themselves.

Dr. Ala Stanford, Pediatric surgeon and founder of the *Black Doctors COVID-19 Consortium*, had responded to the data with a poignant realization:

"What I see each day in the community is substantiated in this body of work: hearing the barriers people face getting a COVID 19 test and or attempts to be treated; listening to people speak about their loved ones dying after having prolonged symptoms unattended; people who share stories of many in a home being ill and trying to isolate and quarantine in tight, small spaces; elderly people without a referral from a doctor being turned away for testing." (*APM Research Lab*)

Dr. Stanford's comment presents not only a roster of reasons behind this disparity between white and black deaths but also stories of the effects of systemic racism. Systemic racism, as opposed to individual instances of racism, is defined by Joe R. Feagin in *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression* as "the exploitative and other oppressive practices of [a range of] whites, the unjustly gained socioeconomic resources and assets of whites, and the longterm maintenance of major socioeconomic inequalities across what came to be defined as a rigid color line" (2). Dr. Stanford had been hearing and listening to narratives of black people dying after being denied testing and treatment, stories of inadequate housing, and the impossibility of isolation. In her brief response, statistics turn into narratives, with humanized characters to be listened to, and a chaos of events to be made sense of and coherently explained. Without these explanatory narratives, the data alone, to use a slightly decontextualized turn of phrase of Pawnee Indian respondent Abigail Echo-Hawk, Senior research officer at the Seattle Indian Health Board and director of the Urban Indian Health Institute, "tells an incomplete story". Without such stories corroborating systemic racism, various unsavory causes and racist narratives can be attributed to this disparity in a way that downgrades and dehumanizes Black people, as evident in the following quote from *The New Yorker*,

"The stereotypes of African-Americans as fat and lazy, carefree and reckless, impetuous, irresponsible, and ultimately undeserving, are absorbed into the consciousness of the general public, health-care providers among them..." (Taylor)

It is, therefore, an important project for radical researchers and reporters of the pandemic to highlight those narratives that show how there is systemic oppression on Black women keeping in mind a political-theoretical idea of intersectionality, explained by Patricia Hill-Collins and Sirma Bilge as "...when it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other" (5). COVID 19 narratives around Black women victims are also examples of the line of narratological studies (Malson) which reads individual "stories" as "contain[ing] elements of cultural metanarratives", stories that are much more significant than the apparent narrative totalities in which their elements appear." (Andrews et al, 3)

For a more in-depth intersectional understanding of how Black women are being disproportionately affected by the pandemic and to disseminate the culled information in this JCLA issue on “Gendering the Pandemic: The Impact of COVID 19 on Women”, this paper seeks to read narratives and interpretations about the impact of the pandemic on Black women by Black women in popular media and illustrate how these writings circulate, respond to and record the narratives responsibly and are crucial for contemporary intersectional feminism. Scattered throughout popular magazines, social media, blog posts, and other digital media, these narratives form essential records of the lives of Black women during the pandemic, some of which the paper seeks to explore. These narratives are all examples of consumerist “lifestyle journalism” and “soft news”, variously accused of infringing on “hard news”. Sofia Kvarnström in “*Our readers consider themselves activists*”: A Mixed-Method Study of Consumption Discourses and Activism in Teen *Vogue* refers to T.E. Patterson’s definition of “hard news” as consisting of “breaking events” and “soft news” as “news that typically is more personality-centered, less time-bound, more practical, and more incident based than other news...The news is said to have become more personal and familiar in its form of presentation and less distant and institutional” (8). These narratives also produce other allied narratives of oppression on Black women that are left out of statistics, which includes the seizing of abortion rights, domestic and intimate partner physical, emotional and sexual abuse, workplace racism and sexism, rigid gendered work binaries, mental health issues, and trauma, racism and sexual harassment in public and the racial and gender insensitivity of law enforcement officials, all of which will be scrutinized by this paper. It will look at two such popular forums of reporting, narrating and interpreting how Black women are getting affected by the COVID 19 pandemic: the online pages of the African-American women’s lifestyle magazine *Essence* and an episode of NPR’s podcast *Code Switch* with Mikki Kendall, writer of *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women that the Movement Forgot*.

This paper is not trying to fall into the trap of an impractical “empathic fallacy”, defined by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic in *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* as “the belief that one can change a narrative by merely offering another, better one – that the reader’s or listener’s empathy will quickly and reliably take over” (28) and knows that “empathy is in shorter supply than we think” (28). It is aware that some of the narratives are produced in a particular discursive environment, which leaves their traces and motives onto them. The world in the year 2020 is more prepared to accept, consume and circulate such stories precisely to showcase an exaggerated, often false and shallow empathy towards racial, gendered, religious and ethnic minorities in today’s era of “woke-capitalism”, virtue-signaling, using terms like “intersectional feminism” as buzzwords and hashtag activism (#intersectionality has 6.5 K people and #intersectionalfeminism has 3.8 K people “talking about it” on Facebook). The paper tries to read into whether such pandering to “wokeness” (a term derived from the African-American slang term “woke” implying an awareness of social inequalities and issues) serves to relate these extremely important stories when they are getting suppressed. It also argues that such a pandering also creates spaces in which more radical narratives and interpretations about the plight of Black women (particularly those in lower-income groups) in the pandemic are produced. It also reads into how this kind of privileged performative-activist discourse informs how the stories are shaped and told. The paper would first look at how the African-American lifestyle magazine *Essence* generates essential, accessible narratives of being Black women during this pandemic, which panders the reader-audience without taking them to task but corroborates the statistics discussed above. For this reason, a sample of around ten *Essence* articles was chosen.

What is *Essence* Magazine?

With its first issue hitting newsstands in the 1970s, *Essence* currently boasts of a monthly circulation of 1,050,000, and a readership of 8.5 billion. It introduces itself as having occupied “a special place in the hearts of Black women everywhere” with a “girlfriend to girlfriend tone” while covering topics like “career and finance, health and lifestyle, and fashion and beauty”. *Essence Ventures* is presently under the Black ownership of *Sundial Brands* beauty products mogul Richelieu Dennis and is led by an all-black women executive team. The ownership profile is bound to raise a few eyebrows about the ideological motivations of the magazine, considering that ownership rests with a black cis-man (who is possibly steeped in Black patriarchy) who sells a set of commodities often accused of encouraging gentrification, and perpetuating negative body and beauty stereotypes and objectification of women. Yet, one also has to acknowledge the weight of a black feminist canon that historically graced the editorials of the magazine, mentioning Nikki Giovanni, Ntozake Shange, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker, Terry McMillan, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Bebe Moore Campbell as the many contributors. It had always veered away from being “just another women’s magazine” since 1971, till about 2005, when it was acquired by *Time Inc.* and notoriously had a white editor-in-chief and diluted, more overtly capitalist content that made African-American women mere consumers. The pandemic is possibly one of the biggest opportunities for *Essence* to reclaim this former glory after ownership transferred to Dennis, and such a past can explain why it can be a good vehicle for trenchant, observant narration and commentary on the inequities faced by Black women during this crisis.

What does *Essence* narrate about the pandemic?

Essence has been diligently providing narratives of the COVID 19 pandemic since early March and has also brought out impact surveys and reports on the effects of the pandemic on the lives of Black women. Much attention is captured by the op-eds and editorials featured under “News”, “Health” and “Home”, nestled amongst write-ups on the newest cosmetics, fashion, and skincare regimens. These editorials give more nuanced, subjective, and emotional narratives that illuminate the reasons and realities behind statistical data. In fact, by placing several editorials on the white political bias of government-produced statistical data, *Essence* is pushing Narrative forward as a more reliable source of information, while making the readers invested in the people whose stories are being told. *Essence’s* COVID 19 reportage is more than just a neutral description of COVID 19; it is a sustained, and sometimes surprisingly caustic, black feminist criticism of systemic racism leading to a disproportionate number of Black COVID deaths, making protagonists out of the victims.

The pandemic hazards producing a series of narratives with a narrative structure leading to “necrology”, introduced by Vito Russo in the context of queer studies in his book *The Celluloid Closet*, and defined by Clare Whatling as “a causal relational between deviant sexuality and a painful and retributive death” (198). Here, “deviant sexuality” can be replaced by “deviant race”, where the only deviation is being born Black. Most of the articles in *Essence*, however, refuse a “necrological” narrative structure with inevitable death, but rather pull the narratives towards open endings where the magazine asks the readers to protest against the system or donate funds to avert an ending of suffering and death. It depends on woke readers to complete the narratives in a racially emancipatory way. Further, none of these individual narratives are standalone and linear, but employ a herringbone structure of several narratives and narrative tropes of racial injustice (many

merely implied and understood by reading Black history) feeding into them, and also feed outward to hyperlinks to other articles/narratives.

Two *Essence* stories on Rana Zoe Mungin, “Brooklyn Teacher Diagnosed With COVID-19 Fights For Her Life; Family Pleads For Access To Experimental Treatment” and “Beloved Brooklyn Educator Dies After Long Battle With COVID-19” show a tragic narrative trajectory which not only details the protagonist as falling ill with COVID 19 but also being a victim of a systemically racist society to be potentially protested against. The first of these two pieces describes the denial of access to COVID 19 testing to Mungin even after she had exhibited symptoms, implicitly roping in the weight of the widespread cultural assumption that Black people do not necessarily feel pain in the reported words of Mungin’s sister: ““They gave her albuterol for asthma and and gave her a shot of Toradol for her headache...she kept saying, ‘My headache is so bad.’” (Savali) This point is explicitly stated at the end of the latter piece:

“Rana Zoe Mungin, as too many Black women before her, was not believed. Her pain was not taken into consideration. Her knowledge of her own body was not prioritized. She suffered and, ultimately, died needlessly because we live in a nation structured for our deaths.” (Savali)

Essence is here telling a loaded story rather than merely report a case of a COVID 19 casualty, continuing a tradition of telling stories of racial violence on and dehumanization of Black women by denying them the right to their pain, and their bodies. This tradition goes as early as the questionable surgical ethics of “The Father of Gynaecology”, Dr. J Marion Sims, who performed surgical experiments on enslaved Black women without the use of anesthetics, and continues to the present day. Dr. Ala Stanford and *The New Yorker* have commented on this very bias, the latter noting that “a 2016 study of medical students and residents found that almost half of them believe...the false notion that the nerve endings of black people are less sensitive than those of whites” (Taylor). It also brings in shades of criptistemological and Afropessimist perspectives where the former perspective enquires whether it is the doctor’s or the suffering (disabled) person’s knowledge of one’s own body that matters, and the latter states that the whole of American society is standing on the non-ontology, the death (social and physical) of the Black ex-slave, the forever-Other to Eurocentric society (“we live in a nation structured for our deaths”). And, by covering her story twice, by changing the headlines from a mere “Brooklyn Teacher” to a “Beloved Brooklyn Educator”, *Essence* is roping its readers into a continuum of suffering Black women. Mungin was Mia Mungin’s sister and could have been a sister to other Black women as well.

Familial terms and tones are splashed across many of *Essence*’s COVID headlines – “Black Mamas Can Thrive During Childbirth, COVID-19 Or Not”, with the use of “Mamas” instead of the more formal “mothers” complementing the ending of the piece: “You are going to be fine, Black Mama” (Crear-Perry). These tones of encouragement thwart disapproving narratives of dubious and unhealthy black pregnancies and “welfare queens” struggling to keep their lives and the lives of their children afloat, and also corroborates the statistic about a larger number of black women dying during childbirth than white women in *The New Yorker* article in more emotional terms. The magazine is trying to cover Black mothers’ narratives to a large extent, even bringing in the personal testimonies of a select few (which can serve as an important documentation project and a proto-oral history narrative archive). In many of these can be found narrations on food scarcity and even rueful comments on food quality. One black mother worries about food scarcity. “COVID-19 has made it harder in L.A. to find food for my family...I went

to the grocery store two days ago and all of the meat was gone...Thankfully, I was able to find stuff I wouldn't normally feed my family on a regular basis, like canned foods vs. fresh" (White). This worry is exacerbated by a history of institutional separation of black children from their mothers in the name of child abuse and negligence because of black mothers' lack of access to fresh foods and dependency on canned and fast foods.² Another worried about managing her career and her daughter's schoolwork. A third worried about her pay. Another spoke of her experiences as a Black disabled woman: "I'm a disabled homeschooling mom who has been experiencing displacement since last year. COVID-19 has made it much more difficult to get freelance graphic design work...My ability to go to necessary doctor appointments and safely shop for things we need have been affected as well" (White). In one of its most recent articles, *Essence* advocated for a more inclusive, intersectional movement for Black Lives by highlighting Black disabled person's experiences.

Essence rings in pathos while addressing black child victims of COVID 19 whose parents are frontline workers, by appealing to a narrative trajectory similar to that of Mungin – "Skylar Herbert, 5, liked to jump in her mother's arms multiple times a day to say "I love you." Five-month-old Jay-Natalie La Santa enjoyed music and being rocked to sleep. Now, these girls are gone." (Morris) This narration elevates these COVID 19 victims from being two in many black children victims to tragic child characters to be mourned by readers. It also battles against the idea of black children as numerous expendables, stigmatized as the unwanted products of the alleged dysfunctionality of the Black family system and hypersexualization of black people. It also draws from a narrative of historical confinement of several black people to frontline labor through lower access to employment, income equity, resources, and education. This opinion piece extends the narrative of these two girls to a narrative of the comorbidities Black girls from lower-income groups face in general, involving issues like inadequate and cramped housing, girls having to do housekeeping and caregiving work in addition to educational requirements, sexual abuse, mental health issues and unwarranted criminalization by the police force. All of these bring to mind the narratives in several instances of black women's young-adult fiction, a notable example being Sapphire's *Push*, which depicts a young Black girl repeatedly sexually abused by her father, left obese and with very low self-esteem, struggling with a racially-skewed education system and marked HIV positive.

Essence fairly boldly covers the peripheralization of Black Southern women, many of whom are cash-poor, deprived of health insurance, and facing little to no medical attention due to conservative state governmental reluctance to expand Medicaid and the shutting down of several rural hospitals. It takes a bold step to criticize neoliberal politicians who do not oppose such conservative measures unless their public images are involved, by invoking a narrative of Black Southern people being used for vote-bank politics.

At the same time, *Essence* also looks at other ways in which the pandemic has threatened or worsened the lives of black women, and demands the rights to alleviate these problems. It draws alarm on issues of Domestic Violence, once again appealing to black female sorority: "Social isolation may be a drag for you, but for some sisters, it's literally putting their lives in danger...We're also more likely to endure psychological abuse such as humiliation, bullying, name-calling, coercion, and control." (Jeffries) It gives a telling piece on abortion as rightfully being an essential service, pitting against the reader the stereotypical image of the "mammy". The "mammy" stereotype forced black women into the image of an "asexual", devoted black slave woman charged with taking care of slaveowners' children, and bell hooks described her in *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and*

Feminism as “a passive nurturer, mother-figure who gave all without expectation of return” (84-85). *Essence* places the “mammy” as a low-income frontline worker today (“You need a nanny/maid/housekeeper to care for your family and raise your children? Black women have been your affordable high-quality workforce” (Jones and Johnson)) while demanding rights for Black women to have full ownership of their bodies without state intervention (going against the idea of the “mammy” as “asexual”).

It addresses Black women’s mental health not only in the light of the isolating pandemic but also in the light of racial trauma, commenting that several Black people suffer from PTSD, and face multiple triggers daily due to everyday micro-aggression, increased pressures to perform and too common open displays of hostile racism, sexual harassment, and police brutality (Wilson). It addresses the strategies which Black people can take to dodge workplace racism during the pandemic, making an important point of withholding narratives from people too racially insensitive to listen to the stories with any interest beyond vicarious woke-mongering:

“How was your weekend?” “Oh, I see you’ve changed your hair!” “There is so much going on in the news, you must be so heartbroken.” During periods of major global unrest, remarks like this are tone-deaf and often rage-inducing. They force Black folks into discussions they shouldn’t be required to have”, (Cabral)

Essence gives a window to a meta-discourse challenging the vicariousness of the non-black reader like the author of this paper. For such a reader of these narratives as the author, *Essence* is taking charge of Black women’s narratives of COVID 19 while reporting them, forcing the author to look at the causes of the deaths and refusing any indulgence in paltry tragedy.

Is *Essence* Being a Sell-Out?

With most of these narratives circulating online, much of the reader-response can be found in the magazine’s social media pages. Mungin’s story had garnered 1.1 K comments, 8.1 K reacts and 2.4 K shares on Facebook, indicating its fairly prolific circulation, and even generation of smaller, corroborating narratives in the comments section which alleged systemic racism and the denial of treatment (for coronavirus or otherwise) to black women. Hashtags like #ranazoemungin to protest the denial of medical aid to Black women were shared on Facebook and Twitter. Online and hashtag activism does have their importance, particularly their consciousness-raising functions, its ability to help feminists of colour congregate beyond institutionalised white feminist cliques, connect several brief narratives to raise a collective voice against a particular issue and to organise offline protests, as happened with #blacklivesmatter. However, without their translation into some kind of pressure on an institutional level, as well as sustained circulation of the hashtag, the issue gets lost in a mire of online narratives, and becomes a fad. Social media sharing is a strong symptom of such performative activism, stuck in the digital world, and possibly diluting the responsibility of the readers to seriously interrogate the society they live in and its healthcare system.

In a *Medium* blog post titled “On the Commodification of Suffering: Anti-Trans Memos and the Fallacy of Empathy”, Frances S. Lee (pronouns they/them) makes an astute comment on how empathy generated by narratives of marginalization can serve to stonewall any further interest in acknowledging one’s privilege and knowing where things are going wrong in the ways of the world. “When the ability to feel the pain of

marginalized people becomes an experiential checkbox," Lee says, commenting on the pandering "woke" readers of such narratives get, "it can create the comforting sense of having done something to help, when you have actually done nothing" (Lee). Lee then states that this way of putting up marginalized narratives of pain for empathic display is a way of commodifying them in a neoliberal market of ideas. Lifestyle journalism is presently standing on the commodification of activism and "wokeness". Kvarnström refers to studies of how there is "the blurring [of] boundaries between life and work in neoliberal society, and...how activism and change has moved from communal responsibilities of government and corporate actions to individual responsibilities as self-branding and a form of labor... how branding is connected to commodity activism and consumer culture in post-modern and neoliberal society" (17). *Essence* is inadvertently commodifying the narratives of lower and middle-income Black women while writing the kind of editorials it had always written, resorting to merely throwing in some charities and hyperlinks for its patrons to follow or donate to for good measure, and thus making sure that its narratives can be co-opted by readers to such performative ends. The short-lived nature of #ranazoemungin (it ran for hardly three months) and the COVID 19 statistics show how online activism in her name against US healthcare has largely failed to snowball to an impactful end.

The narratives in *Essence* themselves are skewed towards the assumption of the Black woman and the black family as necessarily heteronormative and childbearing, and in most cases (except those specially marked out as narratives on the behalf of poorer people) having access to work from home, consumer goods and education for their children. It didn't cover the lives of middle and working-class Black queer people during the pandemic, relegating queerness to discussions on queer celebrities, fashion and tourism, and television shows.

The problem of performative activism runs further when there can be located a contradiction between the black feminist backbone of the magazine and its obvious capitalistic intent. In the essay "Black Womanhood: '*Essence*' and its Treatment of Stereotypical Images of Black Women", Woodard and Mastin do comment on how two of the original owners had clearly stated the class allegiances of the magazine: 'Edward T. Lewis and Clarence O. Smith present *Essence* as a "lifestyle magazine directed at upscale African American women." (265) This not only jars with any idea of the magazine being a "girlfriend" figure to all Black women, but also raises concerns about how equipped is the magazine to address the ways systemic racism affects Black women in the pandemic, because most of the affected people are not part of its "upscale", "respectable", ideal clientele.

Does *Essence* adhere to the image it portrays: being "girlfriend" to all Black women? Recent disclosures from within the *Essence Ventures* organization can fairly warn its readers that the management does not practice what it preaches. A *Medium* blog post called "The Truth About *Essence*" by Black Female Anonymous (published on June 28, 2020) called out Richelieu Dennis for sexual harassment in the workplace (and also in the Sundial workplace), his wife and HR head Martha Dennis' complicity, and former CEO Michelle Ebanks for repeated bullying and intimidation, workplace harassment on women on maternity leave and other women, leaving behind a string of unjustified layoffs and firings of Black female employees and inducing intense workplace anxiety and submission in those not yet kicked out. "Today", #BlackFemaleAnonymous asks, "do you [*Essence*] love us like we love you?" *Essence*, while ultimately bringing in a new CEO, did not take to this disclosure kindly, and stated in its official statement that "the allegations and mischaracterizations throughout...are unfounded attempts to discredit our brand and assassinate personal character" (*Essence Staff*), tempering it down with a #BlackWomenRiseTogether.

However, despite all the hypocrisy of the management, the woke-capitalist reportage given by *Essence*, or rather by its large, effective body of writers and reporters, actually furthers the narrative aim of circulating crucial knowledge about Black women sufferers of the pandemic, at least to an extent, leaving it open for other popular forums to give more radical narratives and interpretations of Black loss and suffering during the pandemic.

NPR's Code Switch Podcast and Mikki Kendall's Hood Feminism

The *Merriam-Webster* dictionary defines a podcast as “a program (as of music or talk) made available in digital format for automatic download over the Internet”. After 2005, podcasts have solidly entrenched themselves as a popular medium of disseminating essential socio-political information. Siobhan McHugh in her essay “Truth to power: how podcasts are getting political” finds the explanation of this phenomenon in podcasts’ “focus on personal storytelling supported by solid, journalistic research” and their being “intimate medium[s] that can powerfully convey emotion” (McHugh). McHugh also argues that podcasts are used effectively as a broadcast medium to talk about racism, mental illness, sexuality, and climate change. It is not surprising that podcasts potentially hold some strong narrative and interpretative responses to the COVID 19 pandemic which are pithy, affective, and easily communicable to the casual listener. Further, they can become more radical and critical than established print or television media with far less risk of political interference.

NPR's Code Switch's podcast episode “What does Hood Feminism Mean for a Pandemic?” is also characteristically conversational in nature. It is replete with jokes about social media trends involving the term “Karen” and about interviewing at home, full of sound-bites of songs, and an informal language use that focused on narration and discussion instead of statistical data. Yet, it is clear from the beginning that it is dealing with a serious discussion on systemic racism and classism even in apparently “woke” feminist movements, and is ushering in Mikki Kendall, who had challenged both feminist theory and activism and had expanded the horizons of intersectional feminism in her book *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women that the Movement Forgot*. *Hood Feminism*, for her, is a feminism that speaks of “basic needs as a feminist issue. Food security and access to quality education, safe neighbourhoods, a living wage, and medical care...” (xiii). It is feminism for those “in the hood”, the “hood” being a term used (initially pejoratively and later reclaimed in hip-hop) to denote low-income, working-class, urban black neighborhoods in American metropolises, often characterized by pockets of public housing.

Before moving onto the podcast itself, a comment by Mikki Kendall in an interview with *Forbes Magazine* is pertinent. In it, she tears into the priorities of a white-centric, high-income feminist movement as follows:

“they talked about concerns that [had] nothing to do with basic needs...how to be a girl boss, how to be a CEO, here’s how you can achieve your dreams, whether your lipstick is the right color...there would be some stuff around reproductive justice and abortion...feminism wasn’t really talking about housing, or poverty, or food insecurity, or police brutality.” (Asare)

Kendall’s words provide an indirect commentary on the kind of lifestyle feminism *Essence* is focusing on in this pandemic, as well as gives a hard knock to performative activism. In her comment, one can find how capitalism still shapes upper-class feminism, by making consumer choices and career success in MNCs the greater priority in the movement, and *Essence* is an upper-class magazine, howsoever “woke”, and thrives on selling these

dreams and suggestions and serving ways to the readers to be members of a new contingent of respectable, non-rebellious, code-switching, higher-income Black women. By questioning the priorities of contemporary, West-influenced feminism, Kendall does not pander the reader-audience for being receptive to the narratives of Black suffering during the pandemic but rather forces the reader to acknowledge their privileged positions and delve deeper into the actual reasons behind the systemic racism highlighted by discourses like that of *Essence*, throwing up more uncomfortable narratives in the process. *Essence* might have covered problems of acute Southern poverty and denial of state-sponsored medical access in the South, as mentioned earlier in this paper, but it upholds a simplistic, possibly convenient core-periphery, urban-rural distinction while tempering down the poverty and peripheralization faced by Black women in the “hoods” of American metropolises.

For instance, a calling out of class privilege among Black women was done by Kendall in the context poverty and catching the virus. To her credit, Kendall does not illustrate this viewpoint with higher academic jargon on Intersectional politics; she chooses to share personal anecdotes of her own privilege:

“You know, I had the virus. And in our household, it was OK because I am a veteran who can access medical care. We have health insurance. We had financial reserves...there’s a lot of stay home, stay alive, stay safe kind of things that really hinge on you having the money to be home even in terms of getting groceries delivered.” (Bates)

While this quote calls out most PoC celebrities’ reactions to the COVID 19 as ill-thought, privileged well wishes, it also underlines situations where many Black women possibly did not even reach the narrative stage of going to a hospital to be refused testing like Mungin was, because of the absence of health insurance and financial reserves, and where black women just could not stay home because they had to go out to earn their living and bring supplies. Many of the target women for *Essence* manage to stay home and work there.

Another important point Kendall brings up is the relation between domestic violence and the class of the victim. *Essence* writes about domestic violence, but Kendall, both in her book and the podcast, talks about a more fundamental problem of Black women victims of violence being unable to escape, which are poverty and lack of housing facilities. She states:

“One of the things I talk about in *Hood Feminism* is that when I left my ex, I had access to public housing, a medical card and food stamps...This is a safety net that meant that when I said, oh, this situation is unsafe and unstable and I will be harmed, my child will be harmed, let me leave him – I was able to do it”, (Bates)

She qualifies in the podcast that not only are poorer Black Women often barred access to these facilities in “post-racial” America, but also how poverty and unemployment are increasing “intensity on stressors”. There is a consequent rise of abuse in Black homes where previously situations were more stable because both partners went out to work. *Essence* mentions unemployment in passing in a domestic violence article aimed at victims with access to a car, or cab services, but in a more heteronormative framework, “For example, if a woman’s work hours have been shortened or she loses her job because of COVID-19 closings, she may be more dependent on her partner for financial support for herself or her children. That may put her at the economic mercy of her abuser—and without the ability to collect the coins she needs to make an escape” (Jeffries). While *Essence* does make a valid economic point, Kendall’s comments qualify and radicalize this point. Kendall dismantles any assumption about the relative job security of a male

partner, shows how an earning Black woman can also have economic difficulties in escaping (going beyond the slightly reductionist “collect the coins” phrasing that seems to ignore the prevailing steep standard of living in most American cities), how the reasons for not being able to escape is not just centered on protecting black men’s jobs and how the focus for feminism should instead be the strengthening of “social safety nets” and calling out the government for not maintaining them (something *Essence* does not do. Instead, it places a mere National Domestic Violence Hotline, despite mentioning that Black domestic violence victims often feel threatened by government law enforcement officials).

Conclusion: A Negotiation

This is not to say that Kendall and *Code Switch* are strictly against the involvement of more privileged feminists in the concerns of Black lower-income women during the pandemic, but they rather espouse a “Hood” Feminism that takes these intersections of class, gender, and race into strong concern. Kendall is also actively involved in online activism, having started the hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen to address the whitewashing of the feminist movement, showing how a hashtag can snowball into more insistent analyses of systemic racism in general and in the feminist movement in particular. They do not overtly antagonize the woke listeners despite all the criticism, and humorously welcome them into their contingent to improve the narrative arch of feminism from a top-down emancipatory model to a more lateral, intersectional movement:

“BATES: Does hood feminism have a certain amount of class stratification to it? Could you be a bougie black woman and be a hood feminist?

KENDALL: Oh, you absolutely could be a bougie black woman. I am a bougie black woman and a hood feminist.” (Bates)

In these sentences we find the intent of *Essence* and Kendall coming together to form a better continuum of addressing systemic racism during the pandemic perpetrated both by conservative circles (like those attacked by *Essence*: the healthcare system, white conservative State governments, President Trump, etc.) and neoliberal white-dominated, upper-class feminists. They are divergent in their class-interests, but, intentionally or not, they both highlight the impact of the pandemic on black women concerning healthcare access, access to food and retention of jobs, domestic violence, abortion rights, housing problems, mental health issues and workplace racism and sexism in unambiguous, conversational, familial narrative terms without much of the exclusionary discourse and jargon of academic intersectional feminist discourse. Considering the turbulent political scenario and looming election processes in the United States, such popular communication is extremely important to make a public rethink their governments, and a foreign public rethinks the public image of Black Americans worldwide. Whereas academic intersectional feminist discourses can serve to make intersectional feminism an esoteric discourse limited to those privileged to work in or with academia or legal systems, and can serve to overanalyze the various aspects of an impact study without communicating the ground-level stories first and eliciting the necessary response. Both these forums show how feminism can be made to work on a popular level, and the paper has hopefully pointed out the pitfalls of popular feminism in its brief reading of a “woke-wagon” culture’s problems, which forums like *Code Switch* attempt to avoid.

Notes

- ¹ According to APM Research Lab, by December 8th, 2020, the figures rose to a total of 286000 American deaths, with Black Americans dying at the rate of 123.7 deaths per 100,000 persons.
- ² Mikki Kendall in *Hood Feminism* has outlined how it is “remarkably easy to take a poor woman’s child” (into foster care) because “in society we tend to treat hunger as a moral failing”, and how the supply of only fast food to children is associated with neglect. Kendall states how for many Black women resort to fast food because they do not have time to prepare food, cannot afford refrigeration and food storage, do not have access to affordable fresh produce and resort to “gas stations, liquor stores and fast food restaurants” to access food at all.

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