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Ain't I a Mama?: A Black Revolutionary Mother in the Women's Rights Movement

In 1851, former slave Sojourner Truth gave a moving speech at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio. Her speech reflected on the intersections of gender and racial inequality experienced by Black women. While white women were fighting for the right to be treated equal to white men, Black slave women were fighting for their right to be treated as a whole human being. While men used white women's fragility and gentleness as excuses to deny women equal rights, abolitionist Truth pointed out—over the cries of white women's rights activists—that as a Black former slave, she was expected to do the same work as men and received no such preferential treatment. She demanded answers and clarity to a double standard of womanhood by repeatedly asking, famously: "Ain't I a woman?"

Even though years of progress have passed, there is a long-standing critique of the women's rights movement for its lack of and limited application of an intersectional analysis and frame when it comes to Black and other women of colour. In her speech, Sojourner exclaimed: "I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?" Today, as a long term activist in the women's rights movement, I ask: Ain't I a mama?

Through personal storytelling of experiences as a Black feminist mama working in the women's rights movement, this piece will reflect on the inequities and hypocrisies of the feminist movement and motherhood. When the day-to-day work of a feminist is to ensure that women's voices are heard, this Black feminist mama's personal experiences of being invisiblized, silenced, and denied access to privileges embolden her to raise the question harkening upon the ancestral spirit of Sojourner Truth: Ain't I a mama?

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In 1851, former slave Sojourner Truth gave a moving speech at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio. Her speech reflected on the intersections of gender and racial inequality experienced by Black women. While white women were fighting for the right to be treated equal to white men, Black slave women were fighting for their right to be treated as whole human beings. While men used white women's fragility and gentleness as excuses to deny women equal rights, abolitionist Truth pointed out—over the cries of white women's rights activists—that as a Black former slave, she was expected to do the same work as men and received no such preferential treatment. She demanded answers and clarity to a double standard of womanhood by repeatedly asking: "Ain't I a woman?"

Although the work of the women's rights movement in the United States (US) has made progress over the years (Rampton)—from the Voting Rights Act, the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, Violence Against Women's Act, Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, as well as cultural shifts around gender norms—Black feminists and other feminists of colour have long critiqued the women's rights movement for its application of an intersectional analysis and frame when it comes to Black women and other women of colour (Smith). In her speech, Sojourner exclaimed: "I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?" Today, over 150 years later, I echo Truth's words, as a long term Black mother-activist in the women's rights movement and ask: Ain't I a mama?

Through personal storytelling of my experiences birthing and caregiving while working in the women's rights movement, this article will reflect on the inequities and hypocrisies of the feminist movement in the US and motherhood. My experiences led to the conception of parenting for liberation, which was originally conceived through the idea that Black mothers, like myself, were suffering from a critical lack of support and suffering in silence. As Audre Lorde reflected: "My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences." These words reflected my experiences as well as those of the Black mothers and women in my life. I took Lorde's statements to heart and used them to guide me to these writings. This is not meant as a recrimination of white women and mothers but rather a challenge to #whitefeminism; it is to seek the intersections that bind us and to connect with and support mothers of colour. When the day-to-day work of a feminist is to ensure that women's voices are heard, this Black feminist mama's personal experiences of being silenced and denied access to privileges embolden me to raise the question harkening upon the ancestral spirit of Sojourner Truth:

"Ain't I a mama?"

Ain't I a Mama? Navigating Maternity Leave, Systemic Oppression, and the Birth of My Child

California was the first state to pass a paid Family Leave policy in 2002. The US feminist movement fights for paid family leave as a way to foster gender equity among working women and men to help support greater balance between work and family lives (Peck). As women disproportionately bear the brunt of the mothering or carework load, in addition to working outside the home, partial paid leave makes taking time off for care work accessible and affordable. So when I became pregnant in the feminist movement, I knew I'd be taken care of. Luckily, my nonprofit employer had a paid family leave policy to offset state disability pay. There was a stipulation to receive this privilege though time served. The privilege was only afforded to folks who worked at the organization for a year.

My son was born prematurely, as are lots of Black babies, which is a reproductive health crisis for Black mothers, who have the highest rate of premature births in the US. This is a result of systemic oppression in the area of reproductive health (Ross and Sollinger). He arrived two months shy of my one-year anniversary; therefore, I was denied access to employer paid family leave and instead found myself at the welfare office to supplement my income. Midway through my leave, I requested an extension in effort to access the pay benefit, and I was informed my position on staff may not be available that long. Worried that I would potentially be unemployed, on welfare, with an infant, I returned to work. This was the first of many times to come that I would seek access to a privilege and be rejected. I whispered and choked on my silent protest: "Ain't I a mama?"

Ain't I a Mama?: Back to Work, Back to Reality

Returning to work, I cried like a baby because my mind, body, and soul missed my baby. To add to the pain of leaving my beautiful three-month-old baby boy at home, I observed my white colleague who had a privileged arrangement to regularly bring her baby to the office. Beyond the emotional toil, the mere sound of her baby crying or the sight of her breastfeeding would make my breastmilk let down uncontrollably. I did not begrudge my white coworker's ability to bring her child to work. I benefitted from bringing my son to work with me for special occasions as well as if I had a family emergency or no other childcare; my arrangement was on a case-by-case basis—not an everyday arrangement—whereas my white colleague's was a permanent agreement. However, I wasn't the only one who had questions about this preferential,

inequitable treatment. There were other mamas of colour who'd been at the organization for over a decade with small children, and they didn't have this privilege. The US feminist movement has advocated for women getting equal access at work, by means of the Lily Ledbetter Act, to ensure equal pay for equal work while not penalizing women who parent and work, and the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, which protects pregnant women to maintain work. The ability to be both mother and staff was like a badge of honour. As women, we actually could have it all, right? Unfortunately, not all of us. Ain't I a mama?

Beyond the disparity with my white colleague's privilege of bringing her child to work, there was another layer that made the dynamics of mothering while white versus while Black more nuanced. She was able to bring her child and her Latinx caregiver. Picture a white woman with her child and a Latinx monolingual Spanish-speaking nanny to sit in her office with her, with a fellow staff of nearly 75 per cent Latinx women. I was taken aback to see a woman of colour serving a white woman's baby; it reminded me of my grandmother, who was a domestic worker and travelled weekly by bus to clean and care for a white family. I respect the profession. The issue is not with having a caregiver; the issue is with not having a conversation about the impact of a Latinx woman serving a white woman on a predominantly Latinx staff team. The avoidance of the truth was the elephant in the room, and it had a huge impact on folks. I was appalled, and some of my Latinx coworkers, who were also mothers with small children, were rightfully enraged. They were brought to tears, and they shouted the question: "Ain't I a Mama?" But no one heard them either.

Ain't I a Mama?: Lions, Gorillas, and Dogs. Oh My!

My identity is a mama who is raising a Black boy. A Black boy is a baby that wasn't meant to survive, a boy that's cute up until he's ten, and then he becomes a threat (Gumbs, Williams, and Martens; Goff et. al). Now, although I see the beauty, innocence, pain, joy, challenges, and triumphs of raising a Black boy, I never feel the same level of compassion, concern, happiness, or support that I feel my fellow white colleagues receive from one another about their children. This was most apparent when my son needed additional support at school and due to my commute, I didn't have time or space to support him. I put in a request to work remotely a couple days a week in an attempt to eliminate my daily three-hour commute. Instead of sitting in traffic, I planned to invest those three hours in my son. As before, I witnessed white colleagues working remotely and sought to access a similar privilege to that being offered to other colleagues. However, again, when I made the request, it was apparent the privilege was not applicable to me as my supervisor denied my request.

Although my supervisor said she understood, she demonstrated a lack of empathy and compassion in her actions by not offering me a similar privilege. Instead she recommended that I hire a nanny to support him. But I didn't want someone else to support my son through his trauma; I wanted to be there for him.

I spent months explaining the many reasons my son needed me; he transitioned to a school with few Black children and began showing signs of self-hate, such as telling me he wanted white skin. Eventually, I received a piecemeal offering of one day of telecommuting; however, the inequity and disregard for my son's plight became more apparent when months later, teammates shared stories about their traumatized pets who had special needs, and they received empathy, concern, and options to stay home to support their "fur babies."

Even more so, in the months to come, it became clear that an animal was more important than the life of my Black son and the lives of Black sons in general. My experience was triggered during the international uproar around the death of African animals. Folks called for punishment of the white man who hunted Cecil the Lion but victim blamed Sandra Bland, who was murdered within weeks of Cecil in July 2015 (Howard). Cecil was mourned, and Sandra was blamed (Baker). Similarly, when Harambe, an African gorilla at the Cincinnati Zoo was shot to save the life of a Black child, there was a huge outcry and victim blaming of the Black child's parents (Savali). Yet in Cincinnati, months prior to the Harambe incident, Samuel Dubose was murdered during a traffic stop, and there was absolutely no public shaming of the officer (Barajas). My blood boils when more people are distraught over the death of African animals yet care less about African American children. So when I felt that happening to my own son, I questioned whether or not my son's life mattered and whether the lives of all Black children mattered just as much as a dog, gorilla, or lion? Ain't I a mama?

Ain't I a Mama?: Black Children Matter

One wonders how a feminist movement with principles around equity and fair treatment for women has such a blind spot when it comes to race. Well, maybe that has to do with those who hold the most leadership positions of power—white women. According to research conducted by the Women of Color Network, for the last thirty years, white women have maintained positions of leadership within US feminist organizations and thus "the analysis and framing of the issue of violence against women as a gender issue [only] has remained intact" (Mason) without a strong intersectional analysis that looks at race.

Working in this movement, as a mother of a Black boy, I couldn't stomach

certain things anymore. Specifically, working in schools where Black and brown children filled the hallways and classrooms, I noticed the impacts of racism and poverty on their interpersonal relationships. My job was to advise girls to call the school police without acknowledging that those same school police officers at times also harass girls at school. According to my students, that advice was inviting more trauma and violence into their lives and not offering a real solution. The retraumatization and perpetuation of incarceration were at play. Raising my Black son, under those same circumstances, revealed the inconsistencies of my work in the feminist movement; my lived experience as a Black mama was taking a major toll on me, and I began to feel like I was a grenade whose pin was to be pulled.

And boom! I exploded, just as many other Black folks did in 2012, with the murder of Trayvon Martin and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. Whereas many Black feminists could see the interconnectedness of gender and race in the Trayvon Martin case, many white feminists stood by silently. Sybrina Fulton, the mother of Trayvon Martin, expressed major disappointment in the white woman judge, as well as with the jury, which was well-populated with white mothers. Ms. Fulton felt the verdict of innocence for George Zimmerman in the trial of the murder of her son was a travesty, illustrating a complete lack of empathy towards her own pain and loss of her son. She believed all mothers had a solidarity between them, but she realized she was wrong. Ain't she a mama?

Did her son's life matter to non-Black mothers? This was not new, as Sojourner Truth raised in her speech in 1851: The gentleness, fragility, and the safety of white women have been used to justify not only their preferential treatment over Black women but also violence against Black bodies. Then President Barack Obama connected to and empathized with Trayvon Martin's parents. Shedding tears while speaking on the matter on national television, he said if he had a son, he would look like Trayvon. I waited for the white feminist movement I was part of to stand 1up in solidarity with Black mamas to fight not only sexism but also racism. Although some did, I sensed an overall lack of compassion from the feminist movement (Movement Makers). What Black mamas want is to be treated as equal and for our children's lives to matter. As the late great organizer Ella Baker said in the 1960s: "Until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons, becomes as important to the rest of the country as the killing of a white mother's sons, we who believe in freedom cannot rest" (qtd. in Grant).

Like President Obama, my son "look[ed] like Travyon"; thus, I felt the pain and heartache that Sybrina Fulton experienced. I saw my son's face in photos of Trayvon, Tamir Rice, Jordan Davis, Michael Brown, and every other murdered Black boy. With all these modern day Emmett Tills, I fear that one day, I'll be a modern day Mamie Till crying over the body of my Black son

born from my womb. I am not alone in this feeling of fear, as many Black parents feel the same. Mother-author Karsonya Whitehead writes the following: "We are the parents of African American boys, and everyday that we leave the house, we know that we could become Trayvon Martin's parents" (Whitehead). Is that what it will take for me to be seen as a mama, and for my child's life to matter? Black Mothers of the Movement are only acknowledged after the loss of their children, as opposed to celebrated for our mothering (Sebastian). I'm not sure what's more critiqued, criminalized, surveilled, and punished: Black mamas and motherhood or Black children? Why can't our mothering be seen? Why is it intentionally and/or accidentally ignored? When I ask for equitable treatment or to access my employment benefits, why do I have to plead my case and prove my worth? Why do I have to petition to be seen as a mama? Why can't you see my children as you see your own? Ain't I a mama?

Ain't I a Mama?: Parenting for Liberation

I wrote this piece because my silence will not protect me (Lorde). Plus, white women's silence is not protecting me either. In fact, their silence has harmed me. I wrote this piece not to knock, judge, or critique white mothers. My challenge and invitation are for those white women who demand for their own mothering to be seen to not sit in silence when other mothers of colour make similar requests. White women who received special privileges watched me beg and plead, and they did nothing.

I request feminism to practice what they preach; for #whitewomensolidarity, if you are working and fighting for justice and equity in the world but allow injustice to occur, you are perpetuating systemic oppression. Justice doesn't begin in the streets; it begins in our homes, offices, and relationships. This is not only an ask for white women. As a Black feminist mama, I commit to partnering and supporting other mothers of colour by navigating workplace and structural policies. Inequitable internal policies contribute to a fragmented movement, so we must bridge the gap and create more equitable systems for all of us. This is one of the many reasons I founded Parenting for Liberation—a space for Black parents who are freedom fighting for our collective liberation to engage with one another and share how we operationalize liberation in our homes. In a world where Black boys and girls are set up to fail, parents can build up their children to do more than survive or thrive—but live liberated. Parenting for Liberation is for the incredibly passionate parent warriors who are fighting for liberation and freedom on multiple fronts—on the front lines of the movement and on our front porches. I do this to avenge the Black mama ancestors and create openings for future generations of Black mamas to come. I do this for Sojourner Truth who'd "seen almost all [of her children] sold off

to slavery, and when [she] cried out with [her] mother's grief, none but Jesus heard!" Until we have reconciliation around inequities within this fragmented movement and until we move towards eradicating racism within the feminist movement, we will always be held back, and the history and foundation our foremothers laid will not be honoured. I will continue to do this until the day when any and every Black mama no longer has to question: Ain't I a mama?

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