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Black and Blue: Black Women, 'Law and Order,' and the Church's Silence on Police Violence

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Abstract: During the mid-twentieth century, many southern White religious leaders proudly championed police brutality and other forms of state-sanctioned violence against Black citizens. In Martin Luther King, Jr's *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, he defends direct-action non-violent protests as he responds to criticisms and offers his own critique of the clergymen who gave commendations to "the police force for keeping 'order' and 'preventing violence,'" while ignoring the "ugly and inhumane treatment" that the police exerted on non-violent Black protestors who sought to stand up for their rights. King intentionally includes examples of violence against older Black women and girls in his critique. In this article, the historical grounding in King's critique is expanded to reflect longstanding support of police violence in White communities and a form of sanction through silence in Black communities centered around communal survival in the face of violent White power structures. This article highlights religious communities which ignored at best and sanctioned at worst police violence against Black women and girls and identifies the need for change in the twenty-first century. Ultimately, it calls for leaders to be in proximate location to police violence so when they see it, they can be moved ethically to address it.

Keywords: police violence; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Civil Rights Movement; Black Lives Matter; women; girls; church; Letter from Birmingham Jail; silence

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1. Introduction

During the mid-twentieth century, many White religious leaders openly and indeed proudly championed police brutality and other forms of state-sanctioned violence against Black citizens. In his April 1963 *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Martin Luther King, Jr. defends direct-action non-violent protests as he responds to criticisms leveled towards him and offers his own critique of eight such leaders in Alabama who gave commendations to "the police force for keeping 'order' and 'preventing violence,'" while ignoring the "ugly and inhumane treatment" that the police exerted on non-violent protestors who sought to stand up for their rights. As a minister, the support his fellow clergymen provided the police in the face of the brutality Blacks experienced at their hands deeply disturbed King. The following passage of King's letter, with a particular focus on police brutality directed towards older Black women and young Black girls offers a space for exploration and reflection. King writes,

> Before closing I feel impelled to mention one other point in your statement that has troubled me profoundly. You warmly commended the Birmingham police force for keeping "order" and "preventing violence." I doubt that you would have so warmly commended the police force if you had seen its dogs sinking their teeth into unarmed, nonviolent Negroes. I doubt that you would so quickly commend the policemen if you were to observe their ugly and inhumane treatment of Negroes here in the city jail; *if you were to watch them push and curse*

> *old Negro women and young Negro girls;* if you were to see them slap and kick old Negro men and young boys; if you were to observe them, as they did on two occasions, refuse to give us food because we wanted to sing our grace together. I cannot join you in your praise of the Birmingham police department. (King 1963, pp. 85–112, italics added)

This section of King's well-known letter is often eclipsed by the celebration of well-quoted passages including such famous utterances as "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere", "Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed", and "I would agree with St. Augustine that 'An unjust law is no law at all.'" Prior to its publication, King edited the letter and removed numerous passages because of the length, yet he made sure to include in the missive his direct observations about police violence, especially against Black women and men, girls and boys and the White religious community's complicit support of this violence.

From the arrests of Claudette Colvin and Rosa Parks in Montgomery to the vicious attacks on Fannie Lou Hamer and June Johnson in a rural Mississippi prison, Black women's bodies endured significant physical and emotional trauma as they non-violently resisted White oppression during the Civil Rights Movement. As an unfortunate carry-over in the twenty-first century, many Black women who have stepped forward as leaders and organizers in the Movement for Black Lives have also been subjected to police violence that has largely been ignored by both the mainstream media and the Church.

The reality that many police officers, whose actions exceed the force necessary for the encounter, attend churches on Sunday reflects a lacuna in categories of Christian preaching and teaching that do not result in the officers just treatment of everyone with whom they interact. King's critique of the White religious leaders' support of police who enacted extreme physical assaults under the guise of "preventing violence" is a challenge to the White Church today which has remained largely supportive with calls for Blue Lives Matter and prayers for first responders when police lives are taken, yet they are painfully silent in the face of ongoing police shootings and violence against unarmed young Black women and men (Wainwright 2018; WBTV 2020).

2. Before King's Letter

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s rise to national leadership in the Civil Rights Movement was not planned yet it seemed predestined. His elite upbringing as the son and grandson of leading pastors in Atlanta's profitable and prestigious Fourth Ward, along with his educational attainment of bachelors and graduate degrees seemed to shape him more as a prolific professor than a prophetic protestor. However, King's first arrest on 26 January 1956, in connection with the Montgomery Bus Boycott, shattered any hopes or pretensions of maintaining the practices of Black elite respectability that he was raised to embody. The King Center for Nonviolent Social Change notes that from his first arrest at the age of 27, King was arrested thirty times during the twelve years he served as a public national leader within the Civil Rights Movement. King was a well-experienced "jailbird", who often received critiques for his actions but he had never been moved to respond from jail until receiving the White clergymen's chastisement in Birmingham.

The immediate audience of King's letter is evident in that it was addressed to the eight White clergymen whose open letter was published in *The Birmingham News* on 12 April 1963 (Bass 2001, pp. 198–99). However, through the media, King's true audience was the White American society (Bass 2001, p. 137). Blacks were already living the reality that King wrote about, so while the letter gave language to their experiences and strengthened their resolve, it was not a new message or moral mandate for them.

King believed the broader White society needed to be addressed because it was the American society as a whole that suffered from the debilitating illness of racism. The clergymen write in their statement's penultimate paragraph,

> We commend the community as a whole, and the local news media and law enforcement officials in particular, on the calm manner in which these demon-

> strations have been handled. We urge the public to continue to show restraint should the demonstrations continue, and the law enforcement officials to remain calm and continue to protect our city from violence. (Statement by Alabama Clergymen 1963)

King's familiarity with the south in general and Birmingham, Alabama in particular led him to become deeply troubled that religious leaders would sanction and celebrate the brutal actions of the all-White law enforcement community, which did not hire its first Black officer, Leroy Stover, until 30 March 1966 (Stover 2014). Beyond its police, Birmingham was known as a violent city, where Whites targeted over forty bombings at the Black community between the late 1940s to mid 1960s. There were so many bombs thrown at homes in one neighborhood around Center Street that the area came to be called "Dynamite Hill", and the city earned the nickname "Bombingham" (Elliott 2013). In many ways, it was as if King and the White religious leaders were living in contrasting worlds where the non-violent protests of civil rights activists were viewed as dangerous and vicious, and the aggressive violent assaults of law enforcement and their collaborators on unarmed peaceful demonstrators were viewed as calm and restrained. A morally deficient White religious tradition resulted in leaders who had neither ears to hear nor eyes to see what stared them in the face. King's rhetoric challenged their statement which reflected a belief system that instead of enhancing their awareness of and attention to the suffering of "the least of these", the leaders became an integral part of a regime of power that was designed to protect the most advantaged.

Published as "A Call for Unity" in *The Birmingham News* on 12 April 1963, the clergymen's admonishment was directed towards King and the hundreds of Black citizens exercising their rights to challenge local Jim Crow laws and customs in their fight for justice. King counters this in his letter, explaining, "Actually, we who engage in non-violent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with." The deep disorder of a systematically oppressive society, maintained by terrorism, was hidden beneath the superficial order of a social world in which individuals were expected to know their place. King realized White moderate and conservative clergymen, like those who wrote him, were not seeing what he and other Black citizens were witnessing and experiencing on a daily basis. Within the short passage in the letter, King refers to sight five times as he confronts the clergymen—"If you had seen . . . If you were able to observe . . . If you were able to watch them . . . If you were to see them . . . If you were to observe them . . . " In this series of statements King pushed the White religious leaders to be present in the spaces where the violent acts were taking place in a hope that their seeing would lead to their believing, and their believing would lead to their condemnation of the terroristic actions of police officers.

By the time King's letter was published in early May 1963, the most egregious acts vividly memorialized on television as young people were attacked in Birmingham's Kelly-Ingram Park under the direction of the Commissioner of Public Safety, Eugene "Bull" Connor, were making the experiences King wrote about visible to the broader White community throughout the United States and beyond. Local media participated in covering up stories of violence in an effort to maintain the façade of Birmingham as a racially peaceful city (Alabama Public Radio 2013; Norris 2004). However, this was Bombingham. The history of violence was well known throughout the south, its reverberations had been felt, and conversations centered around White violence had been taking place for years in the Black community. It should not have been necessary for Whites to see newspapers and the nightly news coverage of the traumatic violent images of Black citizens being targeted by White officers they worshipped beside on Sunday mornings before they believed the Blacks lived experiences. Yet, King knew that they would need to see it for themselves if there was to be any hope of change.

3. History Repeats Itself

The violence faced by Black women and men, girls and boys at the hands of law enforcement was not a new response created as a result of their marching, kneeling, and sitting in public spaces during the Civil Rights Movement. State-sanctioned and vigilante violence against Black people in the United States has resulted in a long history of domestic terror from the period of enslavement through the current moment. The goal of White vigilantes was to terrorize Blacks into submission so Whites could maintain positions of power in their quest for superiority. Their reign of terror has been episodic from the period of enslavement through the current moment, and most White people are unwilling to acknowledge how this domestic terrorism has been effective in generating direct and indirect benefits for Whites (Hadden 2001).

Founded six years after the end of the Civil War, Birmingham, Alabama was a southern town without a particular past rooted directly in slavery, yet Birminghamians chose to maintain the deep racialized social divisions of the region. Police often used violence as a way to sustain sharply drawn racial lines. In 1895, Black churchgoers gathered for a mass meeting at Shiloh Baptist Church to protest the police shooting of a 13-year-old Black girl as well as other violent acts against Black citizens (Fallin 1997, p. 73). Nearly fifty years later, police violence continued to increase towards the Black community, and women and girls were not exempt. In 1942, 27-year-old Mildred McAdory was a young cook, journalist, labor organizer, and director of the Fairfield Youth Center who boarded a streetcar in Birmingham with two colleagues from the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) and moved the "colored only" sign and wooden bar known as the "segregator" as she took her seat. The police were called and they brutally beat McAdory before she was taken to jail, where she was not allowed to communicate with anyone (McWhorter 2001, pp. 90–91; McDuffie 2009, p. 86). The SNYC pamphlet, "For Common Courtesy on Common Carriers", increased awareness of McAdory's arrest and the accompanying police brutality.

The strong arm of the segregationist beast in Birmingham was the police department, guided by the hearts of White citizens who relied on terror to maintain their comfortable positions in the racially segregated society. Janice Wesley Kelsey was sixteen when she decided to march and go to jail during Birmingham's Children's Crusade. She knew the potential for violence because she witnessed police regularly harass young people in the Black areas of town, recalling "police officers would intimidate Black youth and call them to the police car for questioning and sometimes roll the window up on their necks" (Kelsey 2017, p. 6). Police abuse of Blacks in Birmingham was also documented by Rev. C. Herbert Oliver through affidavits taken over the course of five years (Oliver and Pollard 1989). In one interview, Oliver captured the account of law enforcement officers beating Mattie Mae Jones, the mother of Miles College star football player Robert "Jug" Jones who participated in a Prayer Vigil for Freedom on 1 March 1960. The police took twelve students into custody at the vigil, and although they were not charged with anything, they were fingerprinted, and their photographs were taken and publicized in the evening edition of *The Birmingham News* along with the larger group of praying protestor's names and addresses. Many members of southern law enforcement organizations also boasted their dual card carrying membership in the Ku Klux Klan, White Citizens Council, or similar White supremacist organizations through which they expanded their official authority to terrorize the Black community. With the information from the newspaper in hand, White men who identified themselves as police as well as other vigilantes entered Jones' home in search of her son. She declared they would get him "over her dead body." That nearly happened as the police deputies beat her so badly that she was hospitalized with multiple wounds to her head and a broken leg. The men also brutally beat Jones' daughters with iron pipes, clubs, and black jacks. The next day, while being evaluated in Bessemer General Hospital, Jones was visited by sheriff's deputies who she recognized as two of the men who beat her the night before (McWhorter 2001, pp. 135, 138; Eskew 1997, p. 371; Sales and Tobin 1995, p. 164). Martin Luther King, Jr. must have wondered if the clergymen

were commending Birmingham police officers like these who enacted brutal violence on a mother and her children.

Law enforcement does not operate in a vacuum and although police officers are often the most visible offenders, their complicity is the result of links between government officials, public priorities, and community consent (Horace 2018, pp. 76–77). The brutal attack on Freedom Riders arriving in Birmingham in May 1961 by White men who were given both time and official cover offers a clear illustration of what was possible when the closely interwoven relationship between White segregationists and government officials enabled the sanction of public violence under the guise of "law and order" (Arsenault 2011, pp. 90–91). King was keenly aware of this reality and believed the White clergymen should have been too.

Theophilus Eugene "Bull" Connor leveraged his role as Commissioner of Public Safety to convince judges to put structures in place that limited the freedom of 140,000 Blacks who lived in Birmingham, so he could stringently enforce those policies through the police. In one such example, on 10 April 1963, as Project Confrontation (Project C) was building momentum Connor had an injunction issued making it illegal for protestors to march in Birmingham. He also quadrupled the bail amount from $300 to $1200 increasing the city's profit and creating a greater obstacle for Movement leaders to raise enough resources to allow protestors to be released (Sutton 2014, p. 70). [In April 2021, Florida's legislators and Governor DeSantis enacted similar "anti-riot" laws.]

After intentionally violating the state circuit court injunction that prevented protesting, King, Rev. Ralph Abernathy, Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, and others were arrested for their Good Friday parade on 12 April 1963. The letter King wrote during his subsequent time in jail provided a critique of law enforcement that was not limited to Birmingham. At the time King drafted his response, the first documented use of the police dogs on Black protestors had taken place on 7 April, Palm Sunday, five days before the White clergymen issued their letter, so in addition to the city's long history King knew that violent actions were happening at the time commendations of police restraint were being given. Bass notes that it is not clear if King and his colleagues knew about the White clergymen's letter condemning George Wallace a few months before when King says they had been silent (Bass 2001, p. 150). However, the coverage of the first dog biting had already been captured in the national press the week before and the White clergymen were silent about that (Hailey 1963). The first attack happens almost one month before the more widely publicized 3 May 1963 attack with dogs and firehoses on young people in Birmingham's Kelly-Ingram Park. Connor's need to quell any form of challenge to White positions of power helped fuel violence from the men he led as well as others from the community ultimately showing the paradoxical restraint of non-violent protestors. King critiqued the police violence, but in reality, the Civil Rights Movement relied on media's ability to capture and make visible the predictable White violence Black bodies invoked, so broader awareness and support could be generated and lead to national change. King wanted to prick the conscience of the nation which included critiquing the silence and complicity of the Church.

4. Blacks and the Blue beyond Birmingham

Brutal attacks from law enforcement officers on Black women and men was a regular practice in many areas of the South. King's critique targeted Whites throughout the nation and served to draw attention to systemic practices in other communities where Blacks' encounters with the men in Blue that Whites looked to for protection were often the very persons in whose presence Black people were the most vulnerable.

4.1. Winona, Mississippi

On 9 June 1963, a group of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Field Secretaries were on a bus traveling back to Mississippi from a Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) Citizenship School training on Johns Island, South Carolina.

Prior to their arrival in Winona for a scheduled twenty-five minute stop, a phone call was made that alerted local law enforcement of the SNCC workers impending presence and possible trouble. As a result, the Winona Police Chief, Thomas J. Herod, Jr., dressed in plainclothes, and Mississippi Highway patrolman John Lutellas Basinger were ready for the group as they attempted to receive service at Staley Café in the Winona Trailways station (SNCC Digital 1963). Chief Herod met the Black women at the door and expressed that he had heard about SNCC activism 30 miles away in Greenwood where they were headquartered and threatened, "You come over here to Winona, you'll get the hell whipped out of you" (McGuire 2011, p. 157; quoting Dittmer 1995, p. 171). Annell Ponder, was a director within the SCLC Citizenship Education Program in Mississippi, and organized the citizenship training trip to South Carolina from which the SNCC workers were returning. As the police harassed them she began writing down the license plate numbers on the police cars so she could submit a formal complaint, which further angered the Winona police officers. Montgomery County Sheriff Earle Wayne Patridge and his deputy, Charles Perkins joined their fellow brethren to ensure that segregation practices in Mississippi, which ignored the Federal laws, were not threatened by "outside agitators." June Johnson, Annell Ponder, Euvester Simpson, Rosemary Freeman, and James West went inside the Trailways station to use the bathroom and then they sat at the lunch counter. Shortly after, police began to threaten them with arrest, and when Fannie Lou Hamer left the bus to find out what was going on she was also arrested. Unfortunately, Chief Herod's threat to the SNCC workers was not an idle one. Three of the women June Johnson, Annelle Ponder, and Fannie Lou Hamer each received brutal beatings in Winona (Civil Rights Movement Archive 1964).

The police first assaulted 16-year-old June Johnson with a studded leather strap. Hamer described the sexually humiliating ordeal Johnson was forced to endure where the officers "tore off most of her clothes" and forced her to strip the remaining articles of clothing until she was naked. The officers beat and stomped her while yelling "We're going to teach you how to say 'yes, sir' to a Mississippi white man", until she was bloody, and her eye was bulging out before finally sending her back to the cell where they were holding the SNCC women (McGuire 2011, pp. 157–58). Fannie Lou Hamer's attack by two Black male inmates who were ordered to beat her was so severe that she never fully recovered. Hamer, who was 45 years old at the time, looked one of the young men in the eyes and challenged him asking, "You mean you would do this to your own race?" (SNCC Digital 1963). Hamer describes the Highway Patrolman giving one of the Black men a long blackjack and when he asked if he was to use it on Hamer, the patrolman replied, "That's right and if you don't use it on her you know what I'll use on you" (Ross 2003, pp. 104-105). The White officers involved Black inmates enabling them to keep their own hands relatively clean and allow deniability if asked about beating Hamer. However, the Black men's acceptance of moonshine as "payment" for their actions shows a complicity in the violence such that not only did they brutally beat a Black woman who could have been old enough to be their mother and allow the officer to pull her dress over her head during the beating instead of taking whatever punishment they may have faced, but they also did not refuse the pint of moonshine, even if it was ultimately used to dull their emotional pain (Marsh 1997, pp. 20–21). Hamer held the marks of deep black and blue bruises for days and her body hardened as she and others were not provided medical treatment in jail.

FBI reports indicate that Hamer and the others were assaulted by officers from the beginning of their encounter, "Victim slapped by Mississippi State Trooper during the arrest. Could not determine the reason for the arrest of seven SNCC field secretaries traveling from South Carolina to Greenwood, MS." The FBI field notes also indicate SNCC workers were beaten to the point of needing medical attention, but they were prevented from receiving any (FBI Files 1963). This was the way of the southern justice systems which King and others were intimately familiar in ways that differed greatly from the experiences of the critical and self-righteous White clergy.

The critique of White Christians hypocrisy was strengthened even more in the interaction of Fannie Lou Hamer and the Jailer's wife and daughter, who brought cold water to share after the men who beat her were gone. Hamer recalled that the wife stated "she tried to live a Christian life", to which Hamer responded telling her to read Proverbs 26:26 and Acts 17:26. The Jailer's wife wrote the verses down and was likely convicted when she read the words "Whose hatred is covered by deceit, his wickedness shall be shewed before the whole congregation", and "[God] hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth and hath determined the times before appointed and the bounds of their habitation", because she never visited again during the four days that Hamer and the others were held in jail (Mills 1994, p. 65). Hamer could not accept the wife's profession of adherence to Christianity and attempt at allyship while she also hid behind a wall of Blue that her husband maintained as he brutally beat Black women and teenagers.

The women and men arrested in Winona appeared in court on the morning of 11 June 1963, and no charges were placed on Johnson once her age was determined. Photographs taken by FBI Agents revealed "bruises and swelling noted temple area of head and around eyes. Large bruise extending from right shoulder to waist and on right arm below elbow. Large bruise on right buttock. Large bruise on right leg between buttock and knee." "(Redacted) also interviewed this date. Claimed was whipped by two Negro inmates on orders Miss. Highway Patrolman, name unknown. Photos taken of (redacted) but no bruises noted" (FBI Files 1963, pp. 33–34). Hamer described the experience (one that she would recount often including at the 1964 Democratic National Convention), saying, "They beat me till my body was hard, till I couldn't bend my fingers or get up when they told me to. That's how I got this blood clot in my left eye—the sight's nearly gone now. And my kidney was injured from the blows they gave me in the back." Two months after the writing of King's letter, this FBI documentation serves to substantiate his claims of ongoing police violence against older women and girls throughout the south including in Danville, Virginia where police violence took place including with deputized garbage workers (Crane 2019; Civil Rights Movement Archive 1963a; Civil Rights Movement Archive 1963b).

4.2. Selma

Following the images of teenaged girls and boys attacked by police dogs and pummeled with high-pressure water hoses in Birmingham in the spring of 1963, the next likely most well-known images of police violence during the Civil Rights Movement were those of 7 March 1965 in Selma, Alabama, a day that became known as Bloody Sunday. Officers used tear gas, horses, and nightsticks to take down peaceful marchers. One of the indelible images was of voting rights activist Amelia Boynton. On Bloody Sunday, the then 53-year-old Boynton was knocked unconscious when an officer hit her on the back of the head, neck, and shoulder with a nightstick. Marie Foster, another local leader and voter registration activist who marched near the front that fateful day also fell victim to police violence sharing, "It was a trooper who hit me … I lay on the pavement with my eyes closed. I didn't move. I stood my ground" (Martin 2003). Violence against Black women and girls was a known reality yet the Church remained relatively silent regarding outwardly challenging and fighting ingrained White supremacist structures in police departments.

King challenged the White religious leaders to follow their faith and not simply align with their race. He understood these leaders were in a position to possibly influence their congregants who were often the very men enacting violence on Black citizens or at least those benefitting from the White power structure. Bull Connor was an active member of Woodlawn Methodist Church in Birmingham, where Reverend John Rutland served as pastor from 1952 to 1963. Rutland, who was not one of the signatories of the clergymen's letter, describes directly challenging Connor's actions when he stood at the church door physically blocking Blacks from entering, by saying it was God's church and not Connor's church, then threatening to call the sheriff if Connor and his men did not leave. (Rutland 1996, p. 106). Rutland later fell victim to having a cross burned on his front lawn as a result

of his support of integration. In *Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement 1954–1965*, a collection of sermons and speeches by Black and White men and women who were clergy and other leaders, there are just over fifty references to police in the 924 pages that comprise the transcribed proclamations (Houck and Dixon 2006). While there are strong critiques from Blacks and Whites in support of the civil rights efforts, out of 130 sermons and speeches none mention the violence of police towards Black women. While this is not comprehensive it offers a broad perspective into the silence on police violence, especially against women, from the pulpit.

Police officers were most often the initiators of violence and they stood not only behind a blue wall of silence sustained by their colleagues, but many also enjoyed coverage by white cloaks of collaboration in the political, business, and religious realms. After various riots and uprisings throughout the United States, a commission led by Otto Kerner researched and published *The Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* in 1968, popularly known as The Kerner Report. In it they report Police actions were the final event prior to an outbreak of community violence in 12 of the 24 cases of disorder that were surveyed. While Chapter 11 of the report addresses police and the community, it does not recognize the gendered differences especially in police interactions outside of riots and rebellions in which participants at the time were predominantly young Black males. King wanted clergy to see the impact of White Christians collusion with aggressive and violent police and advocate for the end of police violence against Black people.

5. No Protection from the Police

In the mid-twentieth century, Whites, from little children to adults, especially in the South, refused to extend basic respect to Black adults (Ritterhouse 2006). While attempting to vote at the Dallas County courthouse in Selma, Mrs. Annie Lee Cooper had an encounter with Sheriff Jim Clark and four officers. Cooper was poked in the neck with a billy club and she got into a fight with the Sheriff before Clark arrested her and held her on a $2000 bond in late January 1965. When reporters asked the sheriff if the defendant was married, Clark replied, "She's a nigger woman and hasn't got a Miss or Mrs. in front of her name" (Civil Rights Movement Archive 1965). The respect and protections provided by men for White women were not a consideration for Black women, and White women were not fully committed to advocating for an interracial sisterhood if it challenged their own positions of social power and comfort.

After her arrest in Winona, Fannie Lou Hamer described the discrepancy towards women this way, "My tax money go just like anybody else's. But we don't have no protection. At the same time, if it was your wife and you thought one small lick had been hit there would have been a thousand and 50 soldiers there to protect that woman. But me [implying that nothing was done to protect or defend Black women] . . . and I just don't know how long we can keep goin this way" (Civil Rights Movement Archive, Hamer). Church leaders, both Black and White, did not publicly demand protection of all women from the brutal treatment by police often leaving Black women in the most vulnerable positions for various forms of abuse.

During the Civil Rights Movement, pride and politics of respectability combined to produce women protestors dressed in their Sunday Best attire, yet their hosiery and gloves did not register as markers of femininity that needed to be protected by White men, and many Black men often knew that standing up to defend Black womanhood would likely be at the cost of their own lives. White men's extrajudicial violence made Black men's silence a complex reality that was often hard for both Black men and women to accept. In one instance, Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker's wife Theresa Ann was organizing with others at the Black owned Gaston Motel in Birmingham during Project C, and when she did not move quickly enough to an Alabama State Trooper's orders, he hit her with the butt of a carbine firearm so hard that it cracked her head, sending her to the hospital (Rieder 2014, p. 124; Brockwell 2017). Walker was physically pinned down by those near him and stopped from retaliating against the trooper who attacked his wife and would have likely killed Walker

in response to any direct aggression. There are many illustrations such as these which show that King's critique of the clergymen's commendations was not based on isolated incidents of rogue police officers, but a system that thrived on brutality against Blacks who sought to exercise their freedom as full citizens in the United States.

Despite beliefs that the majority of Black people and churches were supportive of the Civil Rights Movement, it is estimated that less than twenty-five percent of Blacks actively participated. Many Black Churches, pastors, and members who feared personal and professional retaliation, were silent in the face of police violence, but most were aware of its existence. While Movement leaders within some of the Black Churches celebrated the commitment of women who kept the movement alive through their willingness to offer support behind the scenes as well as put their bodies on the line, there was virtual silence within the church as it related to directly addressing the violence these women and girls faced at the hands of police. Not only was gender not a deterrent from police harassment, neither was age, as both young and old were subjected to hostile interactions. SCLC leader Hosea Williams' daughter, Elizabeth LaCeina Williams (now Omilami) was arrested and jailed four times at the young age of 11 for protesting discrimination in Savannah, Georgia (Civil Rights Movement Archive 1963a). This is what makes King's inclusion of women and girls critically important in his Letter from Birmingham Jail, and why we must not miss this critique of police violence and the call for justice in the midst of his more well-known quotes. King ensures that their gendered and aged bodies are not erased in a general critique of violence against Blacks.

6. Law and [Dis] Order

In 2016, White Evangelicals enthusiastically supported Donald Trump in his bid for the presidency as he pugnaciously proclaimed himself to be a champion of "law and order", drawing from themes of George Wallace, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton. In a July 2017 speech, Trump told a group of law enforcement officers, "When you see these thugs being thrown in the back of a paddy wagon . . . I said, 'Please don't be too nice.' . . . When you guys put somebody in the car and you're protecting their head . . . I said, you can take the hand away, okay? (Keneally 2017)" Despite an ongoing national decline in crime according to the FBI, Trump's declaration that he was the law and order candidate along with his call for police to intentionally rough up persons during arrests created a perception that lawlessness was a significant problem within certain communities and the way to re-establish order was through police violence sanctioned at the highest level of the State. This presidential support of police brutality was more expansive and direct than the commendations of the White clergymen in Alabama, and although a few police departments openly criticized Trump's comments, even the International Association of Chiefs of Police did not mention Trump by name when they stressed the importance of treating everyone with respect (Berman 2017).

Trump's renewed calls to empower police departments throughout the United States and his Executive Order 13809 which revoked the authorization plan established by Barack Obama's Executive Order 13688, and restored local law enforcement access to surplus equipment from the military such as armored vehicles, gave teeth to the "law and order" rhetoric many Black communities immediately understood as dog-whistle code words supporting extreme policing of marginalized communities. The increased militarization of the police has created virtual occupied territories in some communities as they struggle for human and civil rights in the first quarter of the twenty-first century.

In the same way that police violence against Black women is documented at least fifty years before the Civil Rights Movement, it is clear that the mid-twentieth century was not the last time that Black women and girls were assaulted by police for standing up for their rights as humans and citizens. Fifty years later, in the Movement for Black Lives which found national prominence in 2014, protests of police and state-sanctioned violence have often left out the names and narratives of Black women who are also killed by police. "Race, Gender, and the Contexts of Unarmed Fatal Interactions with Police", a 2018 study

by researchers at Washington University in St. Louis, shows that nearly 60 percent of Black women killed by police were unarmed at the time of their interaction with the officers (Johnson et al. 2018, p. 13). According to the *Washington Post* "Fatal Force" database, in 2020, police officers shot and killed 1021 people in the United States (Fatal Force Database 2019; Police Shootings Database 2021),[1] and although the overall numbers of Black women killed by police are lower than Black men, their deaths matter and must be addressed.

While many are familiar with the names and general stories around Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Alton Sterling, and George Floyd, unarmed Black men and boys who were killed by police, far fewer are aware of women and girls including Rekiya Boyd, Tanisha Anderson, Miriam Carey, and Aiyana Jones. The African American Policy Forum (AAPF) developed the #SayHerName platform to draw attention to the silence around the deaths of Black women in police custody. In their 2015 publication, "Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women", they note perceptions of Black women as aggressive, superhuman, and menacing shape police interactions in similar ways as they do with Black men, which often involves lethal uses of force (Crenshaw and Ritchie 2015; Jacobs 2017; Perry 2021). Even when there is a public outcry in the aftermath of Black death at the hands of police, there has not been significant pressure placed on elected officials to legislate change and hold the officers accountable. This is the work that the church could organize and lead, but instead the efforts to draw attention to Black women and police violence have been led by scholar-activists and families connected with the AAPF and other organizations.

The prominence of cellular phones with cameras that enable videos to be quickly captured and at times live streamed has created a democratization of media that centers the grassroots and makes experiences visible in ways that King desired for White clergy and the broader society. Sandra Bland's experience with Texas State Trooper Brian Encinia whose dashboard camera captures him yell "I am going to yank you out of here . . . Get out of the car! I will light you up", threatening the unnecessary use of his Taser is one of the most well-known recent experiences with police violence against a Black woman in the United States because of not only the police car's video but also a passerby who captured a portion of the encounter on his phone. However, the number of Black women and girls who have fallen victim to aggressive and violent policing continues to grow without consistent righteous rage and resistance from religious leaders.

I offer three additional brief illustrations of police violence against Black women and girls here. Fifteen-year-old Dajerria Becton whose arrest outside of a pool party in Texas by the McKinney Police Department sparked outrage when she was grabbed by her hair and thrown to the ground by officer Eric Casebolt who straddled her and placed his knee in her back as she cried out for someone to call her mother. Becton, like other teenagers at the pool party, was wearing a bathing suit without a covering which made it immediately visible that she was neither armed nor a threat to the officer (Ritchie 2018). The police were called for Chikesia Clemons, a 25-year-old woman, at a Waffle House in Saraland, Alabama after she refused to pay 50 cents for extra plastic utensils. Video shows the officers grab her and wrestle her to the ground where their rough treatment removed her top and left her naked and exposed as she asked, "what did I do, why are you doing this to me?" During the encounter she lets them know that they were choking her to which one of the officers responds, "I'm about to break your arm, that's what I'm about to do" (Nestel 2018). Rose Campbell, a 65-year-old grandmother in Alpharetta, Georgia was aggressively pulled from her vehicle by two police officers during a traffic stop in May 2018. One officer was captured on video shouting and cursing at the older woman as they struggled to forcefully remove her from her vehicle on the side of the road (Han 2018).

Unfortunately, these types of incidents are neither new nor isolated. We can add the names of women including Atatiana Jefferson, Breonna Taylor, and Roxanne Moore to the list. The proximity of the police killing of Breonna Taylor and the killing of George Floyd that resulted in international media attention generated in the spring of 2020 to include Taylor's name in sermons in ways that other Black women who lost their lives have not

been; however, in more than half of the cases since 2015, national media coverage for Black women who are killed by police has resulted in fewer than five articles within 60 days of their death. In one example, Churches in San Antonio, Texas began to wrestle with ways of directly addressing the efforts of the Movement for Black Lives from their pulpits after the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor (Wang 2020). However, overall media coverage of Black women's death reflects the silence among society as analyzed by FiveThirtyEight in the period from 2015 through 2021 using data from Media Cloud and the *Washington Post* (Samuels et al. 2021).[2] On 24 September 2021 in a collaborative fundraising effort with the AAPF, singer/actor/activist Janelle Monáe and other women artists released the song "Say Her Name (Hell You Talmbout)" in which they chant the names of 61 Black women and girls who have died in connection to police violence (Monáe 2021). It is important to not only say the names of these women and girls but to also draw attention to the violent circumstances they encounter with police and hold the officers accountable. Today, videos captured on cell phones and shared through social and mainstream media help those who are not directly impacted by police violence to see and observe it as King wrote, therefore increasing the exposure and awareness of violent police encounters with Black women and girls and hopefully inspiring Churches to break their overall silence and fight for political actions that disrupt the systems that support the violence.

7. King's Letter Still Speaks Today

Martin Luther King, Jr. made intentional choices regarding what he included in the epistle as it was published and he chose not to close his *Letter from Birmingham Jail* without addressing the violence faced by Black women and men, girls and boys at the hands of White officers who neither protected nor served them. The previous examples from the civil rights era reflect an extensive culture of aggressive policing which physically impacted Black women and girls with an intensity that did not appear to give favorable attention to their gender, even intentionally unclothing some of the women as they subjected them to beatings. King critiqued police violence, yet he relied on the strategic media coverage of the aggressive responses of White southern police officers to visualize for the broader society what Blacks had been enduring for generations. The White clergymen to whom the letter was addressed as well as those who King expected to read it when published were called to *see* the violence that police inflicted on Black people and to be in proximate community with the oppressed such that they could experience or observe the injustices that needed to be addressed.

In the twenty-first century, we have born witness to increasing numbers of deadly interactions between law enforcement officers who have used excessive force against Black citizens. These images have been captured and broadcast on television, and looped in replay on our computers and cell phones. They have generated hashtags noting the various everyday aspects of living that are limited for Black people by potentially deadly encounters with the men and women in Blue. The lack of awareness of police violence that King generously offered the clergymen as a reason for justifying their actions is certainly not an acceptable excuse in the contemporary media-saturated moment. Abuse of police authority goes unchecked within the departments that check themselves without community oversight boards, and within the religious and moral communities where they receive public or silent support without correction. Today, King would call us to not only see the violence but the systems that sustain it, the policies that reward it, as well as the people who participate in it. The militarization of state and local police departments who receive surplus military gear would have likely stunned King (militarization of police in Black communities was critiqued in the 1968 "Kerner Report"), whose home state of Georgia received former military items valued at over $70 million from 1993 to 2014 (Joyner 2014; Cook and Peebles 2017). When efforts to minimize this form of militarization through the limitations President Barack Obama placed on the 1033 program in 2015 were reversed in 2017 by President Donald Trump, the silence of both White and Black Churches

would have been condemned by King who grew to speak out forcefully about the evils of militarism (President Barack Obama's Task Force for Twenty-first Century Policing 2015).

The militarization and aggressive responses of police become an even greater problem when some White women place calls to police expecting them to act as an extension of their own biased and anti-Black convictions (Jerkins 2018; Thornton 2020). In many instances, they do so knowing it is less likely the Black person will be given the ability to clarify what is taking place before the police will react based on the readily believed fears and suspicions of the White caller. The list of things that Black people have to fear overly zealous and implicitly biased police being called to the scene for grows daily and limits their ability to flourish. From driving while Black, to sitting while Black, golfing while Black, asking for help while Black, breathing while Black, bird watching while Black, and more, the flippant retort of a White person to a Black person that they will "call the police" is a terroristic threat considering the known deadly responses that have been made visible in the twenty-first century.

During the Civil Rights Movement, too often the doors of even Black Churches remained closed as the fear of physical and economic retaliation were constant possibilities. A significant problem with silence in the church about Black women and the violence committed against them is that the place that is kept alive by the love and labor of Black women and has historically been seen as one of the hubs for disrupting the status quo (although the church's sexism has deep and continuing roots) acquiesced to societal disregard as it related to valuing the lives of Black women and girls. In July 2013, after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, many Black Churches held services where pastors and members wore hooded sweatshirts (the attire Trayvon Martin was wearing as his life was taken) proclaiming they too were Trayvon, yet similar congregational cries were not widely made for Sandra Bland and other Black women.

Rhetorician Andre E. Johnson's #WhiteChurchQuiet hashtag created a platform that critiqued the twenty-first century silence of White Churches in the face of Black death at the hands of White police officers (Simon 2016). Unfortunately, the potential prophetic voices in Black Churches often also lack the intersectional analysis around anti-Black violence that impacts not only Black men and boys, but also Black women and girls with an even greater frequency among Black trans women. Despite King's own patriarchal leanings, he specifically illustrated the violence Black women and girls faced at the hands of police instead of making a blanket statement in his letter. King's critique is about the physical protection of Black womanhood and girlhood but it is also about seeing and respecting their humanity. To be clear, seeing injustice does not mean much if the focus does not then shift to the ethics of challenging violence at its core. At times people who have not experienced the physical and spiritual traumas associated with anti-Blackness say, "I just can't imagine . . . " when they hear narratives. However, we must each learn to step out of our comfortable spaces and engage our theo-moral imagination in such a way that we do not have to directly see or experience something to know that it is real and worth us fighting to change. A call must be issued for all religious and spiritual groups to consistently use their voices to speak out against the systems that enable police and state-sanctioned violence against Black women and men, girls and boys and others who are similarly targeted to continue with impunity. This also means that the alarmingly high rate of deaths of Black transwomen is critically important and must be addressed by both religious leaders and the broader community.

The Church is no longer the geographical or moral center of the now more dispersed Black community as it was during periods of legal segregation. Clergypersons are not often at the front of protests today, and those who are at times are persons from outside of the community who have come in connected to the NAACP, National Action Network (NAN), and other organizations to walk the front line with local leaders. Unfortunately, the examples of police violence against Black women and girls shared here from the Civil Rights Movement through the Movement for Black Lives and their general erasure from narratives of aggressive policing and brutality reflect an ongoing acquiescence of the moral

center of the Church, whose silence in this area enables it to continue. Today, if Martin Luther King, Jr. experienced the ongoing violence faced by Blacks at the hands of police, his criticism of the religious leaders that preach and teach members who serve in these positions of power would be strong and direct. King would push us to move beyond candle light vigils to do the work to become God's light in the world, illuminating the dark areas of policies and practices that enable police violence against Black and Brown communities with impunity. He would likely join the liberating work of the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference and ministries of persons such as Pastors Leslie Callahan and Karen Anderson, and partner in leadership with Traci Blackmon and his daughter Bernice King to challenge not only aggressive policing but also structures within communities that condition young Black children to regular searches, surveillance, and suspicion by law enforcement. King's greatest critique would be for those officers who attend church each Sunday and profess to live their lives as Christians and the religious leaders who feel comfortable praying for the officers protection, but not challenging them to consistently live out their Christian convictions by respecting everyone they encounter as persons made in the *Imago Dei*. The Church, both pastors and parishioners, must be close enough to oppressed communities to see the injustices and break their silence and hold police officers and police unions accountable as they do the real ethical work of creating justice through radical love.

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Notes

[1] The fatal police shootings for 2019 were reported at 999, compared to 995 in 2018, 987 in 2017, 963 in 2016, and 995 in 2015.

[2] I hope that scholars will engage in future research that collects sermons and speeches from the Movement for Black Lives era may identify more references to police violence against women and girls across Black and White Churches.

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