

Introduction

Goddam, Goddam, Goddam

As I finished this book, the trial of Derek Chauvin, the Minneapolis police officer who killed George Floyd, a forty-five-year-old Black man on May 25, 2020, by pressing his knee into Floyd’s neck for almost ten minutes had just begun. On the second day of the trial, in March 2021, the prosecution called eighteen-year-old Darnella Frazier and her nine-year-old cousin—also a Black girl to testify about what they witnessed on that fateful day. My heart broke as I listened to Darnella, who was seventeen at the time she filmed Chauvin killing George. Her video went viral and sparked protests worldwide. This teenage Black girl cried as she testified and stated that she stayed up nights apologizing to George for not doing more.¹ I couldn’t stomach the trauma and guilt she felt. Nor could I make it through the five-minute questioning of the nine-year-old Black girl who saw George’s last moments as well. What she saw made her “sad and kind of mad.”² Although both Black girls survived this horrific incident, what they endured as they bore witness is unbearable. They must live with the sounds and sights of a man’s life being taken by a “peace officer” without an ounce of visible remorse. You don’t shake off witnessing something like that; none of us do. The violence we endure as well as what we witness stays with and

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shapes us. All I could say as I witnessed their witnessing was Goddam.

On the evening of Saturday, March 21, 1964, legendary singer, songwriter, arranger, musician, and civil rights activist Nina Simone took the stage at Carnegie Hall in New York City. She performed and recorded what became the album *Nina Simone in Concert* over the course of three nonconsecutive nights at the storied venue. At the first show of the three-night engagement, one song reportedly shocked her captive, predominantly white, audience.³ “The name of this tune is “Mississippi goddam / And I mean every word of it.” “Mississippi Goddam” was Simone’s first “civil rights anthem,” a scathing chronicling of antiBlack racism released at the height of mid-twentieth-century Black freedom struggles in the U.S. and across the globe.⁴ She had debuted the song a few nights before at the Village Gate nightclub in Greenwich Village, but it was the Carnegie performances that propelled the song to notoriety and infamy.⁵

It begins like a show tune, spritely and upbeat, but then quickly reveals itself to be fiercely political in its condemnation of racism. The music is almost playful, yet the lyrics indict a nation for its infinite crimes against Black people and convey Simone’s furor with what she has endured and witnessed: “*Oh but this whole country is full of lies.*” Simone implores her audience to feel the weight of what being Black in the U.S. is. It’s being chased, arrested and incarcerated, or fearing premature and violent deaths. “Mississippi Goddam” goes for the U.S.’s jugular. It’s a callout, a presocial media dragging. The lightheartedness of the music intentionally and carefully belies its unrepentant message about injustice and anti-Black racial violence.

In an acerbic tone, Simone told the audience that the song is “a show tune, but the show hasn’t been written for it yet.” Reports indicate nervous laughter erupted from the crowd. “Mississippi Goddam” was banned in many places throughout the U.S. South. Radio stations returned the promotional single with the record literally cracked in half.⁶ Those who viewed the song as a threat to a white supremacist status quo railed against the profanity of the song’s title and lyrics and the possibility that it could further galvanize and intensify support for Black freedom struggles. In the song, Simone mentions only a few states, but what she describes is a long history that stretches into the present. The story she tells in just a few minutes is one of this nation’s history of violence against Black people. It is woven into the fabric of this nation, one of its most prominent and defining features.

In Simone’s autobiography, *I Put a Spell on You*, she talks about the assassination of civil rights activist Medgar Evers in Mississippi on June 12, 1963, as an inspiration for her first “protest” song.⁷ Before writing “Mississippi Goddam,” she pondered “How can you take the memory of a man like Medgar Evers and reduce all that he was to three and a half minutes and a simple tune?”⁸ Evers was a prominent Black activist in one of the most violently racist areas of the country. Before being killed, he survived notable attempts on his life.⁹ Shot in the heart in his own driveway after returning home from a meeting with NAACP lawyers, the thirty-seven-year-old Evers perished just fifty minutes after being admitted to an all-white hospital that initially refused him care.¹⁰ His wife had been the first to find him after he was gunned down. His assassination sparked national outrage and protests. Deadly white supremacist violence left a widow (Myrlie Louise Evers) and three children—

Darrell Kenyatta, Reena Denise, and James Van Dyke—without their loved one. He was a prominent figure in the movement, but he was also beloved as a father, husband, and member of a community. How does one put all of that into a three-and-a-half-minute song?

The other catalyst for Simone penning and performing her first protest song was the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama. On Sunday, September 15, 1963, four members of the local Ku Klux Klan chapter planted dynamite on the east side of the church.¹¹ Five Black girls were changing into their choir robes in a basement bathroom in the church on what should've been an uneventful Sunday morning at their religious home. At approximately 10:23 a.m., the dynamite exploded and brutally killed eleven-year-old Carol Denise McNair, fourteen-year-old Carole Rosanond Robinson, fourteen-year-old Addie Mae Collins, and fourteen-year-old Cynthia Dionne Wesley. Those killed became known as the “Four Little Girls.” Additionally, more than a dozen Black people were injured, including the younger sister of Addie Mae Collins, Sarah Collins, who was the fifth girl in that basement bathroom. The explosion blinded her in one eye and several pieces of glass embedded in her face.¹² The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing was a gut-wrenching act of terror that shook civil rights activists, allies of Black freedom struggles, and everyday Black folks to their core.

History too often remembers Addie, Denise, Carole, and Cynthia as the “Four Little Girls” killed by white supremacists. When we talk about the bombing, we don't often say their names. We rarely talk about who they were before that fateful morning of unrepentant white supremacist violence. Denise loved baseball and was a Brownie. She also loved to perform and used her artistic

gifts to raise money for muscular dystrophy research. Carole wanted to be a singer, so the choir was one of her beloved training grounds. She loved reading and dancing and played the clarinet. Addie Mae was also artistic and delighted in going door-to-door in white and Black neighborhoods to sell kitchen items made by her mother to help her large family make ends meet. Cynthia was an academic standout and thrived in math and reading. She was in her school band as well.¹³ Among these young girls—Denise, Addie, Carole, and Cynthia—was an abundance of talent, laughter, and aspiration. Their lives were so much more than the seconds in which they were killed.

The murders of these girls and the broader attack on this haven within Birmingham's Black community combined with Evers's assassination, however, compelled Simone to write "Mississippi Goddam." Although she conceded that she "didn't like 'protest music' because a lot of it was so simple and unimaginative [that] it stripped the dignity away from the people it was trying to celebrate. But the Alabama church bombing, and the murder of Medgar Evers stopped that argument and with 'Mississippi Goddam,' I realized there was no turning back."¹⁴ "Mississippi Goddam" is a mere glimpse into a violent history in which antiBlack violence is constant and ravenous. This song was her resistance—a forthright truth-telling.

The lyrics of "Mississippi Goddam" are also about collective resistance to racial injustice and violence and a history of Black protest. On March 24, 1965, Simone performed the song for thousands of people near the end of the Selma-to-Montgomery marches for voting rights. Notably, just a couple of weeks before her performance, protestors including activists such as the indomitable Amelia Boynton,¹⁵ Student Non-Violent Coordinating

Committee member and future congressman John Lewis, and many others were brutally beaten by state troops and county posse men as they attempted to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge during their march from Selma to the Alabama state capitol.¹⁶ “Bloody Sunday,” as it came to be known, exposed both a national and a global audience to the gravity of the brutality nonviolent protestors endured. Simone’s participation at the historic final march was befitting and more firmly cemented her as a powerful voice of resistance and as an artist to whom we continue to return when we can’t find our own words to capture the abundance of violence against us.

Simone followed up her first protest anthem with two more politically charged/themed songs: “Four Women,” and “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black.” “Mississippi Goddam” stands out among her cadre of anthems because it depicts both antiBlack violence and the struggle against it. She didn’t just tell the story in terms of what happens to us; she sang about our fight against centuries of brutalization. Calling out those blocking the way to progress and those demanding that Black people be more gradual in their approach, Simone unequivocally rejected any efforts that didn’t trumpet full equality or that kept the door open for violent acts like the murders of Medgar, Addie, Carole, Denise, and Cynthia.

It matters deeply that the deaths of four Black girls at the hands of racist violence propelled Simone to write a song so scathing in its critique of violence against Black people in the U.S. Frequently, how we talk about pivotal moments in both Black freedom struggles and America’s history more broadly, ignores or limitedly acknowledges violence against Black women and girls as powerful catalysts. It’s worth parsing through why violence against us time and again doesn’t incite the kind of collective and sustained out-

rage expressed in this protest anthem. The nonnaming of the “Four Little Girls” and the erasure by some of their murders as catalysts for the release of “Mississippi Goddam” struck me as I reflected on how we talk about historical and contemporary antiBlack violence and Black freedom struggles. I always try to say their names when referencing what happened on that fateful Sunday. *Addie. Carole. Denise. Cynthia.*

I’m insistent about saying each of their names because their deaths at the hands of white supremacy reveal something I’ve always known to be true: antiBlack violence harms and kills Black people of all genders and ages. It may feel like I am stating the obvious, but far too often I find myself feeling like it’s only Black women, girls, gender nonbinary, and gender-fluid folks who seem to acknowledge and rally around violence against us. I try to steer clear of sweeping statements about who cares and who doesn’t. I remain convinced, however, both as a historian of Black women and as a Black woman who experienced multiple acts of violence throughout my life, that far too few who aren’t Black girls, women, or gender nonbinary know or perhaps care about what has happened and is happening to us. A lot of folks refuse to invest in learning about our histories and traditions of resistance. This book, therefore, centers on those who have survived violence, those who were killed, and those who resist(ed). I don’t reduce Black women and girls to *only* being casualties of antiBlack violence, although the focus of the book is violent encounters. I care deeply about the fullness of our lives and what exists that attempts to seize that fullness. We #SayHerName by telling our stories of surviving, dying, and struggling for justice.

America, Goddam explores contemporary violence against Black women and girls, as well as Black women’s resistance to it in

the United States. I look to the past to understand how we got here, where violence plays such an integral role in our lives. Whether 1708, 1964, or the present day, “Goddam” is a visceral and exacerbated response to the pervasiveness of violence against us. “Goddam” is also what I feel whenever I learn about yet another example of how compounding forces marginalize, harm, and kill Black women and girls. Words fail me time and time again as I search for a coherent response to the relentlessness. “Goddam” is typically all I can muster.

While I was writing this book in the spring of 2020, I, like so many other folks, learned about the brutal killing of Breonna Taylor by police officers in Louisville, Kentucky. Plainclothes officers Jonathan Mattingly, Brett Hankison, and Myles Cosgrove of the Louisville Metro Police Department (LMPD) forced entry into the apartment on March 13, 2020, as part of an investigation into an alleged drug dealing operation.¹⁷ No drugs were found. Police fired thirty-two rounds into the home, awakening a sleeping Breonna and her boyfriend, Kenneth Walker. Six bullets struck Breonna. Her killing, for which no police officers were held legally accountable became a rare moment in which people continually galvanized around a Black woman’s death at the hands of police.¹⁸ We said her name. Something about the killing of Breonna Taylor struck a chord with millions of people. People sought out pictures of her in which you could see her vibrancy. Images of her flooded my social media for months after her killing. I can’t recall a Black woman recently¹⁹ killed by police galvanizing this kind of sustained public outcry. And even as I was heartened by this, I couldn’t help but think about how often we don’t say the names, know the stories of, or take to the streets for Black women and girls who experience violence. Our vulnerability and disposability are erased or, per-

haps, illegible. The reality is that what happened to Addie, Carole, Cynthia, Denise, and Breonna illustrate a larger problem—a global one. White supremacy, after all, is a global reality.

America, Goddam also explores *unlivable living*, a Black life-centered riff on gender theorist Judith Butler’s concept of unlivable lives.²⁰ In *Unlivable Lives: Violence and Identity in Transgender Activism*, sociologist Laurel Westbrook specifically looks at how to increase livability for trans people. Westbrook emphasizes what makes lives unlivable and even indicts existing activist and organizing practices for sometimes making lives for trans folks unlivable.²¹ For Black women and girls, unlivable living is most emphatically felt at the intersection of poverty and economic deprivation. Capitalism wreaks a particular havoc on our lives. This deprivation and lack of access to basic necessities for surviving shapes the experiences of a disproportionate percentage of us. Unlivable living is a death-bound condition resulting from multi-system harm. Forcing Black women and girls into unlivable living is a form of state-sanctioned violence.²²

Forms of oppression such as but not limited to racism, sexism, poverty, ableism, queerphobia, and transphobia as experienced by Black women and girls living in the U.S. conjoin to materialize as an interdependent, death-dealing superstructure. This superstructure includes seemingly less direct, but nonetheless devastating, forms of oppression, such as lack of housing, food insecurity, forced sterilization, extreme low wages, and lack of access to healthcare. *America, Goddam* underlines the brutal forms of subjugation that a significant portion of us experience and concludes by highlighting historical and contemporary resistance and activism practices as well. I aim to delineate a complex story of Black women’s and girls’ lives that encompasses the necessity of collective

organizing and mobilization against oppression. Our resistance is a central part of how we have survived and, in some instances, prevailed.

Several questions drive this book: What are the particular forms of violence we've historically endured, and how does that legacy play out in more recent decades? What historical events and predominating ideas about Black womanhood and girlhood situate Black women and girls as distinctively violable to multiple forms of violence? Contemporary violence against us is what Saidiya Hartman identifies as an afterlife of slavery—antiBlackness normalized over five centuries on this occupied land. Key features of the afterlife of slavery are premature death and skewed life chances.²³ Our experiences with violence and unlivable living magnify how we, Black people of all genders, *are* the afterlife of slavery.

In the introduction to my first book, *Colored No More: Reinventing Black Womanhood in Washington, D.C.*, I wrote that “masculinist framings of anti-blackness during Jim Crow also contribute to contemporary discussions about anti-Black racial violence.” I grappled with the problem of not acknowledging the numerous ways Black girls and women were victims and violable subjects in past eras. This lack of acknowledgment obscures “how and why gender mattered and continues to matter in the operations and praxes of antiBlackness.”²⁴ In *Colored No More*, I put Black women in the nation's capital at the center of understanding the Jim Crow era. *America, Goddam* places Black women and girls in the U.S. at the forefront of understanding contemporary antiBlackness. Black women and girls incur disproportionate violence.²⁵ We are living, in-flesh embodiments of the interconnected oppressive systems of antiBlack racism, patriarchy, and capitalism. The history of anti-Black woman/girl terror in the United States encompasses multiple

iterations of antiBlackness, misogyny, and economic exploitation. The inability to see Black women and girls as victims or as persons negotiating multiple forms of oppression and structural barriers is at the heart of chattel slavery, Jim Crow politics of exclusion, and contemporary antiBlack politics of disposability.²⁶ Understanding this history in conjunction with contemporary iterations of anti-Blackness renders visible why “Goddam” is one of the most apt and visceral responses to violence against us.

Like “Mississippi Goddam,” this book concludes with a brief discussion of contemporary resistance to violence against Black women and girls. We are leading the charge in attempting to reshape the nation or, for some us, to abolish the nation as we know it.²⁷ Three of the most prominent rallying cries thus far this century, #BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName, and #MeToo were coined by Black women.²⁸ Addressing antiBlack police violence and the pervasiveness of sexual violence, these hashtags and movements build on a legacy of Black women’s resistance. Black women and girls have always been at the forefront of struggles for justice. As historian Martha Jones declared, we are the vanguard.²⁹

It is in many ways unsurprising that these formidable, contemporary movements were formally founded and largely organized by Black women. Like Black women and girls of previous generations dating back to the transatlantic slave trade, today we fight back against multiple forms of violence and unlivable living through numerous organizations, campaigns, initiatives, and everyday acts of resistance. Contemporary Black women’s activism in response to violence and unlivable living has a deliberate focus on those living at the margins. We continue to wrestle with and refuse to remain silent about violence against us. Our experiences as both victims and resisters constitute the archive I mine. This archive

doesn't simply tell us what we've endured; it reveals many of the ways we push back and protest against the seemingly unending reality of violence against us. While we have not always been triumphant, a belief that "it is our duty to fight for our freedom," underpins an unflinching commitment to justice.³⁰

The Archive of AntiBlack Violence

It's essential when studying violence against Black women and girls to look for the silences, the elisions, and the absences. This "looking" practice opened up the possibility of finding those on the margins and recognizing what political scientist Cathy Cohen identified as "the heightened stratification of marginal communities."³¹ Because we exist on the margins, it's easy for us to be overlooked and written out of predominating narratives about how white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy operate in the United States. *America, Goddam* engages a looking practice that presumes violence as an ever-present reality or possibility for marginalized communities. Furthermore, I take seriously the specificity of unpacking how numerous oppressive systems operate interdependently in the lives of Black women and girls. The presumptions undergirding this excavation aren't unfounded. They connect to a history of violence as well as an archive too rarely used when uncovering harsh truths about white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism. The past provides us with a road map to now and insights for us to build new futures.

When it comes to the archive of antiBlack violence, I am struck by how infrequently many of us engage the inglorious history of violence against Black women and girls to illustrate the gravity of contemporary antiBlackness. It is the deaths and near-deaths of cisgender Black boys and men that predominate how we under-