

Intervention Symposium – “Black Humanity: Bearing Witness to COVID-19”

Organized by Elaine Coburn and Wesley Crichlow

The “She-Cession” and Black Womanhood During the Pandemic:

What Is To Be Done?

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Abstract

According to economist Armine Yalnizyan, the recession brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic is a “she-cession” requiring a “she-covery”. Canada’s paid employment was reduced by more than one and a half million jobs in March 2020 – and female-dominated service-sector

jobs were among the first to disappear. We argue that if this approach helpfully recognizes gender, it is unhelpfully race-blind. To appreciate Black women's distinctive experience of the pandemic demands an analysis of the workings of racial capitalism and misogynoir.

Keywords

Black feminism, misogynoir, pandemic, racial capitalism, "she-cession"

Canadian economist Armine Yalnizyan (2020) informs us that the COVID-19 economic crisis has severely impacted women and could last much longer than the health crisis. She writes that the pandemic has not created a recession, but a "she-cession", in which women are disproportionately losing paid employment. The Royal Bank of Canada informs us that with 1.5 million losing their jobs in the first two months of the COVID-19 pandemic, women's participation in the Canadian labour force was at its lowest level in three decades (Desjardins et al. 2020). So far, women's employment is rebounding at a slower rate than men's (ibid.). Given the gender-unequal consequences of the pandemic, what is to be done? For Yalnizyan, government policies must promote a "she-covery" (cited in Vermes 2020), supporting women in their re-entry into the paid workforce through measures including affordable childcare.

Whatever the merits of this approach, the conceptualization of the "she-cession" risks centering the experience of white women at the expense of invisibilizing Black women's distinctive realities during the pandemic. As Angela Y. Davis (2016: 117) warns, "[a]ny critical engagement with racism requires us to understand the tyranny of the universal ... [its] abstractness ... coloured white and gendered male". We know that the pandemic is not gender-blind, as Yalnizyan (2020) observes; but neither is it race-blind in its effects.

Instead, there is a stark racial divide (CDC 2019), as anti-Black racism translates into higher rates of illness and death among Black Canadians compared to those racialized as White. Further, gender, class, age, sexual orientation, disability (Statistics Canada 2020) and other associated identities are key factors in the social determinants of health among Black Canadians

(Abdillahi and Shaw 2020), so that within Black communities the consequences of the pandemic are unequally felt. The intersectional complexities of anti-Black racisms, during the pandemic, render working class and poor Black women especially vulnerable to illness and death from the COVID-19 virus. Recognizing this means moving away from helpfully gendered, but unhelpfully race-blind analyses to recognize the centrality of gender *and* race during the pandemic.

We contend that the conceptualization of the “she-cession” has failed to account for the workings of what is not a semi-autonomous economy – a sphere separate from the political realm of the state and the social realm of civil society – but a political, economic, social and ideological world system: racial capitalism. As theorized by Cedric Robinson (1983), racial capitalism describes the mutually constitutive relationships of racialized exploitation and capital accumulation. Thus, racial capitalism has its origins in slavery, colonialism, and genocide; the social ideology of white supremacy and anti-Black racisms are the organic counterpart of a capitalist system whose expansion historically depended on the buying and selling of African people, and which today depends on the exploitation of Black labour. In combining an analysis of racial capitalism with the conceptualization of misogynoir (Bloom and Trudy 2018), which seeks to explain the *why* of Black women’s experiences of misogyny, it becomes possible to describe and analyse the unique social location of Black women, during the pandemic, within a racialized, gendered capitalist political economy.

The relations and ideologies of racial capitalism are expressed in concrete, historical realities for Black women during the pandemic. In nations like Canada, Black women confront specific challenges. Given their disproportionate social location within the low-wage service sector, many Black women do not have access to paid sick leave but must use limited vacation days. This dissuades Black women employees from reporting symptoms of the virus and discourages them from staying at home, even if they are ill. Black women who head single-earner households are concentrated in low-income neighbourhoods, where, as in cities like Toronto, they are disproportionately affected by the virus (Miller 2020). Black women face gendered race discrimination in their interactions within the health care system (Corra and Carter 2008) and may therefore be reluctant to seek medical care, anticipating racism and so delaying

timely health interventions. In these ways, class, geographical segregation by race, and systemic misogynist racisms combine to produce worse health outcomes. This is the legacy of racial capitalism, in the contemporary moment of the pandemic.

Moving away from these devastating outcomes for Black women demands challenging racism and sexism as these are expressed through racial capitalism. As Trudy (in Bloom and Trudy 2018: 767) explains, “[r]acism ending without sexism ending does not help Black women. Racism and sexism ending without capitalism ending can guarantee that Black women would still experience misogynoir. Because Black women experience oppression in intersecting ways, all of these systems would have to come apart”. In the final analysis, this will require a transformative shift away from racial capitalist logics that render Black women’s lives “legibly valuable” (Cacho 2012: 13) only insofar as they are profitable within narrow market logics of supply and demand, and a concomitant movement towards a politics that emphasizes the social – and human – value of Black women’s lives.

If, under racial capitalism and misogynoir, “race is about ... who lives and who dies”, and normatively about “who is *supposed* to live and who to die” (Gordon 2013: 725), then the fate of Black women is a particularly stark measure of our humanity during the pandemic. In putting Black women at the heart of our understanding of racial capitalism, we raise questions that speak to, but also beyond, the current moment of the pandemic. Any analysis about the “she-cession” and “she-covery” during the pandemic, and subsequent economic, political, and social choices, must be grounded in the basic, fundamental affirmation of the human value of Black women’s lives. Put another way, as we develop gendered analyses that inform policies and politics beyond the pandemic, “Blackness” – and we will add, specifically Black womanhood – “is a challenge at the heart of what is to be done” (Gordon 2013: 734).

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