



2020

## They'll Only Stop Killin' Us, If You Say Please: The Role of #BlackLivesMatter, Black Twitter, and Flint, Michigan in Modern Day Respectability Politics

Chasia Elzina Jeffries

University of Southern California, cejeffri@usc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications>

 Part of the African American Studies Commons, American Studies Commons, Cultural History Commons, Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, History of Gender Commons, Intellectual History Commons, Law and Race Commons, Law and Society Commons, Politics and Social Change Commons, Race and Ethnicity Commons, Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons, Social Control, Law, Crime, and Deviance Commons, and the Women's History Commons

### Recommended Citation

Jeffries, Chasia Elzina (2020) "They'll Only Stop Killin' Us, If You Say Please: The Role of #BlackLivesMatter, Black Twitter, and Flint, Michigan in Modern Day Respectability Politics," *The Macksey Journal*: Vol. 1 , Article 55.

Available at: <https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications/vol1/iss1/55>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Johns Hopkins University Macksey Journal. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Macksey Journal by an authorized editor of The Johns Hopkins University Macksey Journal.

---

## They'll Only Stop Killin' Us, If You Say Please: The Role of #BlackLivesMatter, Black Twitter, and Flint, Michigan in Modern Day Respectability Politics

### Cover Page Footnote

I'd like to begin by acknowledging this paper was written on land that was originally home to the Chumash and Tongva People. I'd also like to thank God, my ancestors, and my mom and dad, without whom I would quite literally not be here today. For their academic, emotional, and financial support, I like to thank USC's Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Program, USC's Center for Black Cultural & Student Affairs, USC's Black Alumni Association, USC's History Department, USC's Residential Education Program, My MMUF Cohort and Community, Dr. Alaina Morgan, Dr. Ange-Marie Hancock Alfaro, Dr. George Sanchez, Dr. Alisa Sanchez, Dr. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, Rissi Zimmerman, Stephanie Bower, DeAnna Rivera, Cassandra Flores-Montano, Dr. Theo Fowles, Morgan Vinson, and my family, both chosen & blood, especially my two younger sisters and godmother Dr. Sonja Wiley. Finally, this work, and all my future work, is dedicated to Victor Gadiel Ajaye McElhaney.

They'll Only Stop Killin' Us, If You Say Please: The Role of  
#BlackLivesMatter, Black Twitter, and Flint, Michigan in Modern Day  
Respectability Politics

Chasia Elzina Jeffries

*University of Southern California*

---

**Abstract**

Respectability politics, which require Black folks to make ourselves as non-confrontational, palatable, and white as possible, pressing our hair, pulling up our pants, and speaking properly are a lasting remnant of the diligent work of Black women during the Jim Crow Era to ensure social uplift and Black survival. This project traces the history of Black women in the development of performative survival and highlights our position and the efficacy of code-switching today, primarily through the Flint Water Crisis. As Black Americans refuse to conform to white standards, becoming more and more proud of our Blackness and as innocent Black children continue to be murdered, the efficacy of respectability politics is becoming questionable. Despite the rejection of respectability politics in upper-middle-class Black communities, respectability politics are still vital in lower-class Black communities, like Flint, Michigan. The Flint Water Crisis, which has been going on for over 5 years, is an example of how respectability politics are still essential in Black communities. Not only does Flint still not have clean water because Black bodies are viewed as disposable in America, but also because people who aren't directly affected by oppressive power structures only care when those suffering present their cries in an easily digestible way for the masses or from the mouth of someone iconic. While young Black Americans

publicly reject notions of respectability politics, the Flint Water Crisis paints a different picture, showing how Black folks survival and success in America are still heavily reliant on how we are perceived.

*Keywords:* Black Lives Matter, BlackLivesMatter, Black Twitter, Black Women, Flint, Flint Water Crisis, Jim Crow, Performance Theory, Police Brutality, Respectability Politics, Twitter

---

In February of 2019, New York made it illegal for schools and businesses to discriminate against students and employees based on our hair and hairstyles. This law confirms the right of Black people to wear our hair as it grows out of our head, natural, in braids, locs, or a big unruly afro without it being deemed unprofessional or against policy (Stowe). The fact that such a law was necessary is absurd, but also the result of a growing rejection of respectability politics among Millennial and Gen Z Black Americans. Respectability politics, which require Black folks to make ourselves as non-confrontational and white as possible, pressing our hair, pulling up our pants, and speaking “properly,” are a lasting remnant of the Jim Crow South where respectability politics were essential, not only for social uplift, but also for survival. As Black Americans refuse to conform to white standards and become more and more proud of our Blackness, the role of respectability politics in today’s society is questionable.

While older generations cling to acting and dressing “properly” in order to be successful in job interviews, younger generations don’t see assimilation as essential and as innocent Black children continue to be murdered, we don’t see it as effective in keeping us alive. Despite the rejection of respectability politics in upper-middle class Black communities, respectability politics are still vital in lower class Black communities, like Flint, Michigan. The Flint Water Crisis, which

has been going on for 6 years, is an example of how respectability politics are still essential in Black communities. Not only does Flint still not have clean water because Black and Brown bodies are viewed as disposable in America, but Flint also doesn't have clean drinking water because people who aren't directly affected by oppressive power structures only care when those suffering present their cries in a way that is easily digestible for the masses or from the mouth of someone iconic. While young Black Americans publicly reject notions of respectability politics, the Flint Water Crisis paints a different picture, showing how Black folks' survival and success in America are still heavily reliant on how we are perceived.

While discussion of respectability politics has increased in popularity among Black Americans, notions of respectability within Black American communities are nothing new. Though notability and inaccurately used to describe the differences in strategies and success of the work of Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X during the Civil Rights Movement, the term "politics of respectability" was coined in 1993 by Dr. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in order to describe how Black women conformed to dominant standards of femininity typically placed upon wealthy white women in the 20th century (Pitcan, Marwick, & Boyd 164). Dr. Higginbotham was aware of the assimilationist nature of this survival technique, and in fact encouraged it (Higginbotham 187). Assimilation to white upper-class standards challenged societal ideas of Black women as savages, unemployable, or hypersexual, allowing us to move forward in society. However, adhering to respectability politics also divided Black communities.

If Black women who made themselves as white as possible deserved respect and social uplift, respectability politics inevitably produced undeserving Black folks. For example, society viewed Black women who pressed their hair straight or whose hair held looser curls as professional and deserving of employment, while Black women with "nappy" hair were unemployable. Dr.

Higginbotham explains that this division “emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations,” (ibid). Respectability politics produced a standard for Black folks in which the only way to be successful was to be as white and non-confrontational to hegemonic power structures as possible. If anyone was unsuccessful, primarily the poor, it was their fault for not conforming to white society.

Adhering to respectability politics was not solely an attempt at social uplift, it was also a survival strategy. During the Great Migration, white Americans responded violently to the development of Black communities, perceiving Black folks as violent and dangerous. Ironically the response of white America to the threat of Blackness was to riot, destroying Black neighborhoods throughout the country during the “Red Summer,” red for the blood of Black bodies filling the streets. These stereotypes, or as Dr. Higginbotham describes them, a “rhetoric of violence,” maintained the image of Black criminality in America. Films, textbooks, and newspapers not only mass-produced images of violent Black men terrorizing neighborhoods and raping white women, but they also presented hypersexual Black women who threatened the nuclear family’s stability. Thus, society presented Black women in direct contrast to white women (Higginbotham 189-90). White women deserved respect and protection, Black women did not. Respectability politics challenged these stereotypes. By assimilating and presenting ourselves as white as possible, from our hair, to our clothes, to our grammar, Black people hoped to provide a counternarrative to these stereotypes, quieting the fears, and therefore the attacks of white people. We made ourselves respectable not only to get jobs, but also to stay alive.

Respectability politics still play a role in survival today. In response to the murder of countless Black Americans, white people and media outlets justify the actions of “fearful” police

officers by noting how these dead Black children did not adhere to notions of respectability. As more and more Black children are murdered, Black folks have increased how diligently we adhere to such standards. After the murder of Trayvon Martin, many people, both Black and white, claimed Trayvon should not have been walking in his own neighborhood at night, placing the blame of centuries of racism on the individual actions of a Black boy because it veered from standards of respectability. Many Black folks stopped wearing black hoodies, attempting to remove from themselves the criminality that damned Trayvon. After officers got away with using an illegal chokehold to murder Eric Garner, even though he was already in their custody, both Black and white Americans blamed Eric for breaking the law and selling cigarettes (Barnes). Respectability politics presents an ideal set of rules for Black people to follow to be accepted and survive in society, which ignores the centuries of racism which allows a police officer to murder Black people regardless of how “good” we act. Even without breaking any laws, except for the unwritten one of being Black in America, Black bodies are subject to hyper-policing and extermination. Respectability politics shift the blame from the police officers who murder to the murdered Black people. In producing “good” Black people deserving of rights, respect, home loans, and employment; respectability politics also produce the social understanding that some are undeserving of such “luxurious treatments”; that those who deviate from respectability politics deserve death.

While respectability politics were important to Black Americans gaining citizenship, arguably equal status (Harris 219), and the right to vote; young Black folks reject the belief that we should mold ourselves into whiteness in order to be respected, employable, or deserving of life. While older generations believe the placement of a waistband, hairstyle, or use of words clipped short with apostrophes renders one “ghetto” or makes our hyper-policing and extermination

“understandable,” younger Black folks, most notably through the Black Lives Matter Movement and Movement 4 Black Lives disagree (Bunyasi & Smith 188-9). We dawned black hoodies after Trayvon’s murder, a symbolic attack of respectability politics and a society that believes a jacket is a threat and a reasonable death sentence.

Founded by queer, Black women both movements face public backlash, not because our claim that innocent Black people shouldn’t be murdered by those sworn to protect us is so outlandish, but because we refuse to adhere to notions of respectability that have plagued us for centuries and the idea that “you must prove yourself to be good in order to gain rights that are already promised to you as citizens and human beings,” (Bunyasi & Smith 189). Older Black people and most white Americans disagree with our approach because they believe Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement’s success came from their adherence to respectability, dressing “properly” in church clothes as a tool of resistance by clearly differentiating themselves from the “bad” Black people (ibid). They believe the new generation of activists, who are still marching for the same things are disrespectful. Modern-day activists refuse to shrink ourselves and make ourselves more palatable to the very people murdering us because it is ineffective in making change and doesn’t stop police officers from taking every opportunity to murder us; it simply makes the restructuring of the situation more difficult for the media reporting it the next day.

Rejecting respectability is not unique to Black activists; everyday Black folks are shifting from respectability politics. This transition can be seen in Black women refusing to tame our curls, take out our hoops, and shorten our nails in order to get a job. A shift can also be seen through Black Twitter, or Black people using Twitter to express ourselves and our opinions fearlessly. Marc Lamont Hill describes this rejection through the advocacy of imperfect victims. For example,



even though Eric Garner sold cigarettes illegally, making him a “perfect victim” under 1960’s respectability politics, Black Twitter users argued he didn’t deserve to die (Hill). We also challenged the images and videos circulated after cases of police brutality; where news channels used the most incriminating photographs of the victims to paint them as deserving of death and folks repeatedly retweeted videos of the murders, desensitizing people to the horror of Black death and dehumanizing the victims. Black Twitter users also use African American Vernacular English, which white Twitter users usually co-opt as a meme. We don’t adhere to concepts of respectability within our tweets.

The public response to the Flint Water Crisis is a prime example of Black Twitter rejecting respectability politics. Outraged tweets both from Flint’s citizens and outsiders watching on the news did not adhere to respectability politics and demanded change. These tweets included, “Ain’t no way in THEE fuck am I drinking this water lmao #flintwater,” (J. Ross); “Think about it.. Mich gov wants to end #Flint What better way to do it but through the water? FUCK THE GOVERNMENT #flintwater,” (Raven), “SEE WHAT #FLINTWATER DID TO THE DINOSAURS, yall next... Lmao,” (AG), and “I don’t even let my dog drink #flintwater anymore,” (G. Ross). While Black rage contradicts ideas of respectability, its position in social media lessens its power. Rather than being a powerful condemnation; people view Black tweets as entertaining and trendy. We’re a PR strategy, not individuals making real claims in the world. As a result, the public outrage by Flint’s citizens and Black Americans garnered very little public attention until celebrities got involved. Jamilah King describes celebrity involvement as a “private endeavor to fix a public catastrophe,” (King) which aligns with the ideology of respectability politics. Celebrities donated millions of dollars to help Flint, while government officials sat on their hands. In fact, many unaffected individuals forgot about the crisis until Jaden Smith announced his

foundation sent Flint water filters to help citizens get clean water in 2019 (Ting). While individual citizens reject generalizations of Blackness and suffering; celebrities are respectable icons, acting to maintain their status and gain profit. Further, in using Black Twitter and Black suffering as a means of profit, Black folks become a monolith, a generalization essential to the success of respectability politics.

In order to get help and survive, Flint's citizens have had to publically conform to standards of respectability and utilize iconic symbols in society, such as children and celebrities, to gain the attention of the masses. For example, in allowing themselves to be pawns in the hands of celebrities and their PR teams, mostly because they had no other choice, citizens of Flint have received much-needed attention and assistance; however, Black celebrities themselves, are also pawns in the system of respectability. While some, such as Beyonce have become successful and iconic enough to no longer need to adhere to notions of respectability (Johnson), many celebrities strengthen the dichotomy which fuels respectability politics (Demby), either being "good" Black people, such as actors on *The Cosby Show* or *Blackish*, or "bad" and ignorant Black people such as those on *Love and Hip Hop*.

Further, many Black celebrities fear challenging systems of racism and oppression because they risk losing their economic status and proximity to white privilege. Instead, they play into respectability politics (Higgins), reinforcing its classist qualities, which claim wealthier Black people have gained their wealth by being respectable, placing the blame of a failed capitalist society on the poor Black people who suffer, like the citizens of Flint. This blame shift is a major element of respectability politics and celebrity involvement in Flint is an example of respectability politics at play. People listen to celebrities, not everyday people. While celebrities do have a larger following, they also have a very strategic understanding of white desire and expectations in order

to move forward in society. Further, the requests and humanitarian gifts of celebrities to people who have successfully presented themselves as deserving of aid, feed into the neoliberal individualistic nature of respectability, rather than challenge higher systems of power. Simply giving money to organizations to give bottled water to folks in Flint, rather than interrogating the government who made the crisis happen, rocks the boat just enough, without actually changing the hegemonic power structures which continue to attack Black Americans.

Flint's citizens made progress towards getting clean drinking water with the help of celebrities, but also because they played into ideas of respectability and made people care, or see them as deserving of help. Because the majority Black, poor town of Flint was seen as undeserving of basic rights, like water, which the government routinely takes from disposable populations, Flint's citizens constructed a persona for media outlets to challenge this narrative, primarily through children. The legacy of the Flint Water Crisis isn't that the government was able to withhold clean drinking water for over five years; nor is it the physical and psychological health effects the crisis had on the general population. Instead, media coverage focused on the poisoned children, who now had significant levels of lead in their blood and were being born with fetal abnormalities, but not the mothers, who were also poisoned by the water and had to be for the fetal abnormalities to develop in their children.

Since the beginning of the crisis, approximately 6,000 children drank, bathed, and ate food washed in toxic river water, producing "sustained high levels of lead" which Virginia Tech's Dr. Marc Edwards hadn't seen in over 25 years. These findings sparked national outrage, but still, officials dragged their feet until they had to make a change. While news outlets condemned the government for harming children, no one seemed to care about the effect of toxic water on the rest of Flint's citizens. Articles focused on the effects of lead on brain development, intelligence, and

other organs in young children, who are most susceptible to lead's effects. Media outlets failed to report on how lead affected other citizens, implying these studies and articles were intentionally selected, using the perception and prioritization of children in society to get any help for Flint's citizens. Media outlets ignored testing done by Virginia Tech, which revealed that water collected from the homes in Flint had lead levels between 200 and 13,200 ppb, most of which classified as hazardous waste, the standard of which is 5,000 ppb (Stanley 39). Citizens of Flint were and are still drinking and bathing in hazardous waste and their pleas are being written off as irrational. Government officials only acted when it was made explicitly clear they were poisoning and attacking children. Black adults were deserving of such treatment, maybe they didn't work hard enough, but Black children were not. Black children deserved to live.

Not only did mainstream publications ignore the effects of polluted drinking water on adults in Flint; they also neglected most requests of the government and other grassroots forms of activism except for the work of then eight-year-old Mari Copeny, also unfortunately known as Little Miss Flint. After two years of ignoring Flint residents begging the government to do something, Mari wrote a letter full of respectable pleasantries, such as "my mom said chances are you will be too busy with more important things," to then President Barack Obama, requesting to meet with him, which Obama was more than happy to do. Even though little progress came of the meeting, other than photographs and speaking engagements, Mari became a face for the Flint Water Crisis (Felton). Mari gained "celebrity" status but wasn't held to the same standards of respectability as other celebrities because she is a child. Mari is bold. She doesn't waver when tweeting about the crisis or other political matters. She replied to Tomi Lahren's claim that a \$5 billion dollar wall was a wonderful use of taxpayer money, clarifying that the money should be used to get Flint clean water instead (BET).

Still, Mari is a very polite and eloquent child, who shouldn't have to be an activist. Mari closed her tweeted response to Tomi with, "I'm just a kid from Flint who was forced to learn all things water after the government poisoned us," (ibid). She shouldn't have to be the face of an epidemic and a voice for her city so her government will listen. She should be able to be a child. Few people see a problem with Mari's activism. Instead, they see her fight as inspirational because a Black child has already taken on the seemingly impossible task usually forced upon "strong" "unbreakable" Black women. She is honorable, instead of pitied. Five years later, Mari is still fighting and fundraising for Flint to have clean water. I guess things move slowly when they are only pushed forward because the government is afraid of looking bad for poisoning kids.

While Black children often do not have the benefit of being viewed as children, in the case of Flint, their status as children was respected and valued. Pushing children's narratives is an effective use of respectability politics for survival in America today, directly contradicting the rejection of respectability politics prevalent on social media and in middle-class Black communities. While all Black people fight to survive, some Black people have class privilege which allows us to be in a position to publicly disregard the protection of assimilation. While white society writes off Black lives of all classes as disposable and nearly every Black American leaves our homes unsure of if we will return in the evening, these situations are unaffected by how white someone acts.

When Black Americans fight for their everyday survival on the level of access to resources such as clean drinking water and are attacked by the very people who are supposed to help them; they do not have the luxury of disregarding respectability politics. They have to play according to the games and rules set out by those in power who can grant them access to what they need to survive. While many Black Americans, even those within Flint, attempt to reject respectability

politics, primarily in appearance and how we request or demand respect and attention, the ability to make this decision is a class issue. Lower class and poor Black people are not necessarily in a position to disregard notions of respectability. Still, we don't always have to completely submit to these standards, sometimes we can use the visibility of our situation and Blackness strategically as a tool of resistance in order to survive, as seen in Flint.

Works Cited

AG, BUCBOI. Twitter Post. 8 May 2014, 8:23 AM.

[https://twitter.com/AG\\_2MYNAME/status/464425478573412352](https://twitter.com/AG_2MYNAME/status/464425478573412352).

Barnes, Riche J. Daniel. "She Was a Twin: Black Strategic Mothering, Race-Work, and the Politics of Survival." *Transforming Anthropology*, vol. 24, no.1, April 2016, pp. 49–60.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/traa.12060>.

BET. "Tomi Lahren Gets Owned By 11-Year-Old 'Little Miss Flint'." *BET*, 14 December 2018.

<https://www.bet.com/news/national/2018/12/14/tomi-lahren-gets-owned-by-11-yea-old-little-miss-flint.html>.

Bunyasi, Tehama Lopez & Candis Watts Smith.. "Do All Black Lives Matter Equally to Black People? Respectability Politics and the Limitations of Linked Fate." *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and Politics*, vol. 4, March 2019, pp. 180-215.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2018.33>.

Demby, Gene. "Using Black Celebrities To Push Pop, Pudding And Politics." *NPR*, 5 September 2017.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/09/05/548738114/using-black-celebrities-to-push-pop-pudding-and-politics>.

Felton, Ryan. "Little Miss Flint says water crisis is far from over: 'Nothing's changed'." *The Guardian*, 22 December 2016.

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/22/little-miss-flint-water-crisis-amariyana-copeny>.

Harris, Paisley Jane. 2003. "Gatekeeping and Remaking: The Politics of Respectability in African American Women's History and Black Feminism." *Journal of Women's History*,

- vol. 15, no. 1, Spring 2003, pp. 212-220. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2003.0025>
- Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. *Righteous Discontent: the Women's Movement In the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Higgins, Jonathan P. "Embracing Whiteness Won't Save You." *The Root*, 18 December 2016. <https://www.theroot.com/embracing-whiteness-won-t-save-you-1790858166>.
- Hill, Marc Lamont. 2018. "'Thank You, Black Twitter': State Violence, Digital Counterpublics, and Pedagogies of Resistance." *Urban Education*, vol. 53, no. 2, January 2018, pp. 286-302. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085917747124>.
- Johnson, Myles E. "Beyonce and the End of Respectability Politics." *The New York Times Opinion*, 16 April 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/16/opinion/beyonce-coachella-blackness.html>.
- King, Jamilah. "Here's What Celebs Fighting Over Flint's Water Crisis Says About Us." *Mic*, 27 January 2016. <https://mic.com/articles/133651/here-s-what-celebs-fighting-over-flint-s-water-crisis-says-about-us#.stuwkCMG1>.
- Pitcan, Mikaela, Alice E. Marwick, & Danah Boyd. "Performing a Vanilla Self: Respectability Politics, Social Class, and the Digital World." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 23, no. 3, May 2018, pp. 163-179. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmy008>.
- Raven, Dark. Twitter Post. 28 January 2015, 3:22 AM. <https://twitter.com/DarkRaven4135/status/560397498976845825>.
- Ross, Great Value Rick. Twitter Post. 13 January 2015, 5:26 PM. [https://twitter.com/Bishop\\_Randall/status/555173957322547200](https://twitter.com/Bishop_Randall/status/555173957322547200).



Ross, Jeff. Twitter Post. 23 January 2015, 4:28 AM.

<https://twitter.com/FlinTownDancer/status/558602264697638912>.

Stanley, Jason. "The Emergency Manager: Strategic Racism, Technology, and the Poisoning of Flint's Children." *The Good Society*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1-45.

[muse.jhu.edu/article/658670](http://muse.jhu.edu/article/658670).

Stowe, Stacey. "New York City to Ban Discrimination Based on Hair." *The New York Times*, 18 February 2019.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/18/style/hair-discrimination-new-york-city.html>.

Ting, Jasmine. "Jaden Smith Is Helping with a Clean Water Crisis." *Paper*, 3 March 2019.

<http://www.papermag.com/jaden-smith-flint-water-crisis-2630500654.html?rebelltitem=1>  
[#rebelltitem1](#).