

(This is an excerpt from the third chapter of my senior thesis in Political Theory, titled The Search for Cohesive Consciousness: Du Bois' Theory of Double Consciousness in a Contemporary Context.)

The Life and Death of Erica Garner

Erica Garner-Snipes died on December 30, 2017. After an asthma attack developed into her heart stopping, Garner fell into a coma on the 23rd, and on the 30th, she passed away. She is survived by her two children; her then eight-year-old daughter, and her then 4-month-old son, whom she named after her late father, Eric Garner. She was 27 years old.

In a conversation with Robyn Maynard at the Carceral Culture Conference in 2018, Joy James dedicates their talk to Erica, who had passed just a few months earlier, and considers her passing to be a direct consequence of her activism. In the three years following her father's murder, Erica "was constantly doing research on her dad's case, and organizing demonstrations against the force that killed him, but not taking care of herself."¹ Every Tuesday and Thursday after her father's death, Erica hosted die-ins on the sidewalk where he uttered "I can't breathe," his final words, eleven times. She would lay face up on the ground, rest her hands on her stomach, and close her eyes, a model of the premature death that had come to Black Americans in encounters with police for decades. The die-in was just one element of her regular demonstrations; it began as just her, her family, and a few locals protesting on the corner where her father was killed. Even in her actualizing the tragedy of her father's passing, the thought of an audience was secondary. "I do it without cameras there. I do it with cameras there, and I'm

¹ Shantz, J., James, J. and Maynard, R., 2018.

going to keep doing it," she said.² Her grief is a reckoning with a paradox: her care for Black life is disturbed when that life is extinguished by the state, a body meant to protect and serve that life.

In a 2015 interview with *The Guardian*, Garner said, "Of course it's harder being black than white in America, because white people have this privilege. They were born with this privilege. They were born higher than us."³ Erica, the oldest of the late Eric Garner's children, reflects on privilege as a kind of inherited dignity. To return to the Black Matrix metaphor, white people are born "higher," the weight of Black people at the other end of the plank lifting them into prosperity. This statement could be taken as an Afropessimist insight into the seemingly unstoppable reign of white supremacy, but her words on how she uses her anger and frustration in her approach to activism is muted, tactical. "I am angry but that's not going to solve anything. I'd rather be angry on a march and channel it with all those people and project it in my voice. Because now people are looking to me so I have to keep pressing on for my father and end the cycle of violence. You can't fight violence with violence. You'll either get killed or go to jail."⁴

In focusing her anger into organizing, Garner taps into the Black radical tradition, but her reluctance to directly challenge the state through violence speaks to the diplomacy of those who recognize the Veil and the retaliation that follows rupture. In this sense, her emphasis on the non-violent, grassroots nature of her politics, she both publicly roots her labor in

² Friedman, Dan, Rocco Parascandola, and Bill Hutchinson. 2014. "Eric Garner's Daughter Holds 'Die-In' At Staten Island Location Where Her Father Was Put In Fatal Police Chokehold." *NYDailynews.Com*. <https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/garner-daughter-holds-die-in-article-1.2042603>.

³ Elizabeth Day, "Erica Garner-Snipes: 'I Believe In Justice. It Will Take A Long Time But It's Gonna Come'," *The Guardian*, January 24, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jan/25/eric-garner-erica-garner-snipes-justice-will-take-a-long-time-police-violence>.

⁴ Day, 2015

(nonthreatening) love and builds coalitions with celebrity activists like Jesse Jackson and politicians like Bernie Sanders. The increasingly public and hypervisible nature of activism in the 21st century magnifies the utility of the “second sight” granted to Black Americans by double consciousness. Seeing oneself through the eyes of others is deeply ingrained in Black psychic life, and this sight informs the politics of respectability that inform Black led social movements. Garner’s second sight in particular is shaped by her existence as a Captive Maternal. The context of her dismissal of violence is critical: just before it, she states that she doesn’t want police coming after her younger brothers, who both look older than they actually are. Her stated desire for reform, and not revolution, can be read as a protective measure as much as a matter of her own politics. In the interview, she deliberately speaks of police brutality as a class issue, saying “it’s not just black people being killed, being brutalised. It might be people from a trailer park or poor white people that they [the police] will mess with, rather than messing with a man in a suit.”⁵ Garner had “a radical vision for life without trauma” in James’ words, marking her as a Captive Maternal.

Later in 2015, Garner returned to *The Guardian* with an opinion article that pleaded for a unified coalition. In the months since her earlier interview, Garner’s politics have become more particular. “I live within a system that regularly kills black people,” she writes, an explicit rebuke of anti-Black policing.⁶ Garner reflects on her continued activism following a grand jury’s failure to indict Officer Pantaelo, and the challenge of being the face of a growing movement. Here she specifies her resistance to the erasure of her agency. “People I trusted started voicing their

⁵ Day, 2015

⁶ Garner, Erica, and Kemi Alabi. 2015. "Conflict Can Destroy Movements. We Need To Fight The System, Not Each Other | Erica Garner And Kemi Alabi." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/dec/09/erica-garner-conflict-can-destroy-movements-fight-the-system>.

disagreements and pressuring me into decisions I never wanted to make. I was even told not to work with National Action Network and to say my father's death wasn't about race. From lies about what permits I needed to bad advice about dealing with police, the people I once thought supported me began to drown out my voice."⁷ Erica Garner's agency is untransferable, and through means like the *Guardian* piece and online coalition building, she rejects a compromised, contradictory consciousness.

The op-ed culminates in the deterioration of the #ChokeholdOnTheCity march, a joint event between Garner, Justice League NYC, and other organizers. Early on, there were undercurrents of dissent between Justice League and other organizers, likely due to the former's alliance with the controversial Louis Farrakhan. Upon the activists' arrival at the spot where Eric Garner had died, the tension exploded into "name-calling and finger pointing" over who should be credited for the rally. By the time Garner settled things, police had arrived and blocked their path, cutting the event off at the knees. "The police are killing our people – that's reason enough not to fight amongst ourselves," she writes. "No movement is immune to conflict, but it's up to every last person on the side of justice to make the decision to move forward together. We build relationships with other activists and supporters, take the streets and risk arrest because we're fighting for a world that truly values our lives."⁸

Garner's desire for a united front was a matter of necessity; without it, the opposition to her fight for justice would have been overwhelming. Her Freedom of Information Law Act requests about her father's case and the officers involved were frequently denied, she lobbied at the state capitol, and she watched as Daniel Donovan, the district attorney who gave immunity to

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Garner and Alabi, 2015

most of those officers and handled the grand jury case, won a seat in Congress. After everything, Erica muses that “the only person ever charged with a crime connected to my father’s death is Ramsey Orta, the man who recorded it all.” Her labor to generate a world without trauma (and thus without split consciousness) was powered by trauma, the strain of which is unofficially understood as the cause of her early death. In this sense, her uncompromised pursuit of accountability chafes with other contemporary movements.

“Even social justice movements and activists can be too ready to make accommodations to power and authority, believing criminal justice systems can be reformed (even when based on brutality, erasure, and genocide) and careful not to threaten their own positionality (through “reform-minded” politics). [...] So the unruly are left to deal with it—to push for real change, to confront the institutions and agents of exploitation of oppression. And face the consequences.”⁹

For an unruly activist like Garner, who like other Black women leading social movements suffered from health risks, the consequence is her annihilation. The fact that her death was a direct consequence of the same mechanisms that killed her father is a devastating tragedy, but it is critical to not flatten her into a symbol of the suffering of Black womanhood, as Du Bois may have done had he known her story. Her tragedy is not a sad story in a vacuum, but the culmination of ratcheting tension between two worlds: the American state that is dependent on the silence of Captive Maternalists doing the work of caregiving, versus her existence as a Black woman who refused to grieve in silence when the state targeted her people. “Erica Garner was a victim of both state violence and state neglect,” and a reckoning with the particular crimes of the United States against Black women (state sanctioned violence, the erasure of their political agency, redressing for their labor as caretakers) should be a critical component of Black liberation movements and scholarship on Black psychic life.¹⁰

⁹ Shantz, J., James, J. and Maynard, R., 2018.

¹⁰ The listed crimes from James’ conversation with Robyn Maynard.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, the striving for liberation is the first striving for cohesive consciousness, likely because Du Bois recognized it as both the earliest instinct for Black people and the underlying current at the heart of the strivings that followed. In this thesis, the modern iteration of that striving is presented last, after a critique of Black capitalism (the evolution of the pursuit of education) and an analysis of the fight for reparations (the evolution of the desire for political agency). This choice was deliberate. Chapters 1 and 2 are about the descendants of Du Bois' original strivings. Du Bois' envisioning of the Talented Tenth centered college education, not the exceptionalism of Black celebrity, but the ideals share a remarkable amount of DNA. Likewise, the desire for reparations began long before reconstruction, and contemporary scholarship on the matter is informed by growing support to holding the nation accountable for its genocidal foundations.

The striving for liberation differs because its central thesis remains relatively unchanged: "the freedman has not yet found in freedom his promised land."¹¹ In that sense, this striving engages most directly with the question at the heart of this thesis, which asks what it means to be a problem--a contradiction-- in America. If those who are free have not yet found freedom, as evidenced by the movement that Erica Garner and countless others take part in, then freedom is still denied to a significant number of Black Americans. But the denial of freedom as Du Bois presents it implicitly centers Black men as the primary victims of white supremacy, and the persistent disembodiment of Black psychic life is articulated and studied with Black men as the norm. Critics of the manifestations of patriarchy in Black social justice movements

¹¹ Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 39

unintentionally reify these norms, and as a consequence, dreams of freedom are implicitly shaped by restrictive gender formations.

This is precisely why I believe that double consciousness must be paired with an additional framework in order to understand what the desire for cohesive consciousness looks like today. The question cannot proceed with its current assumption of who is seeking freedom, that being Black, educated men. Perhaps if Du Bois had worked with his female contemporaries, such as Ida B. Wells, this narrow focus would have been fruitfully expanded. I find that Womb Theory, and the idea of Captive Maternal therein, complements double consciousness because it directly engages with the problems Du Bois does not ponder in *Souls*, primarily the problem of being a Black woman and all that entails (disproportionately facing “verbal slander and intimidation, physical violence, domestic violence, rape and sexual assault, and contempt, policing in schools, jobs, society, and prisons, from every sector”).¹² I also brought these two frameworks in conversation with one another in order to make the necessity of Black social movements for the creation of cohesive consciousness. All the United States’ sweeping changes, from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Act, were the result of political struggle, where people organized in order to secure and define their rights.¹³ These struggles can manifest into new realities, and an optimistic read on modern mobilization of Black people, which is more visibly tied to issues facing Black women, suggests that public organizing could grant reparations or other requested legislation.

I have my doubts on that particular front: I’m more inclined to agree with Anthony Paul Farley’s Afropessimist assessment, where “requests for equality and freedom will always fail,”

¹² James, 2016, p. 256

¹³ Spence 2015, p. 5

because “the fact of *need* itself means that the request will fail.”¹⁴ Anti-blackness is built into the nation, but I still hold out hope for Black social movements as a space where new visions of freedom can be generated and fought for (I find the “leverage” of *Captive Maternals* to be particularly promising). By incorporating a critique of Du Bois’ failings with Joy James’ theoretical framing, the possibility of a cohesive consciousness that is free of the Veil can be more richly imagined, while remaining grounded in the particular oppression that Black women face—and the leverage they utilize—as *Captive Maternals*.

¹⁴ Farley 2004, p. 226