



Say Her Name: The Lives That Should Have Been

ABOUT

From the minds of premier public intellectual and progenitor of intersectional theory Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Julia Sharpe-Levine and G’Ra Asim comes *Say Her Name: The Lives That Should Have Been*, a new play based on interviews with the mothers of Black women slain by police. The play emerges from the #SayHerName campaign, a movement the African American Policy Forum founded in 2014 to amplify and politicize the names and stories of Black women, girls and femmes lost to state violence.



INFORMATION

With years of experience in organizing and advancing the movement, the creative team behind the play recognized that the obstacles to making Black women’s vulnerability to police violence legible as a social problem apply in equal measure to bringing substantive depictions of the women affected to the stage. The normative assumptions that insulate male-centric conceptions of police brutality from critique mirror the ones that diminish women’s purchase in storytelling.

Consider the Bechdel test, a metric to evaluate the presence of women in fiction, which asks whether a work features a conversation in which two or more women talk about something other than men. The test’s criterion reveals how often women are only afforded narrative capital in terms of their relationship to men.

For women of color, race further impedes credible representation. In Saidiya Hartman’s *Venus in Two Acts*, the author imagines a plausible conversation between two enslaved women who were eventually murdered. Hartman’s vision of that conversation—in which “two world-less girls found a country in each other’s arms”—would pass the Bechdel test with flying colors, but the source material that could ground such fictionalization is dreadfully spare; the archive records nothing about their lives beyond the atrocities they suffered as human chattel.





Black people's elision from historical annals and the marginalization of women in fictive storytelling both come to bear in any project intended to depict Black women's subjectivity. *Lives That Should Have Been* endeavors to fill the narrative gap in our collective consciousness with all the force and precision one would expect from a creative project helmed by a legal theorist who came to prominence by writing expansively on how anti-discrimination law failed to encompass intersecting forms of oppression.

In preparation for drafting the script, Crenshaw and the African American Policy Forum compiled hours of interview and focus group research with family members of Black women killed by police. Among these techniques was an exercise in which family members were asked to project how the lives of their lost loved ones might have played out if they'd been spared from violence. The resulting script bears the imprint of asymptotic recovery, a process of real-life data collection necessary to attempt spanning the chasm between the reality of Black women's experiences and the dominant narratives that circumscribe their lives.

Answering the call that Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls* sounded by pleading for "somebody/anybody" to "sing a black girl's song," *Lives That Should Have Been* is an intersectional counter-history written to pave largely untrodden narrative terrain.

To illustrate the complex relationship between the contours of Black women's interiority and the external structures that constrain and discipline them, the play interpolates a conceit from Zora Neale Hurston's essay

"How It Feels To Be Colored Me",

in which Hurston likens herself to

"a brown bag of miscellany propped against a wall."



For the story's twelve characters, Zora's wall separates the zone of what should have been from the zone of what has, and a talismanic brown bag serves as the conduit between the departed and their dearest.

The plot entangles the stories of six women victims of police violence and their mothers to weave a tapestry of intergenerational loss, grief, resistance and rebirth. The mothers, women who have lost their worlds to a scourge that often lurks unnamed, find countries in the arms of one another. Just beyond Zora's wall, the daughters carry on in a world their mothers know is possible and yearn to deliver into being. Audiences will be tantalized by the glancing opportunity to feel such a world at their fingertips, and may perhaps nudge us all closer to its realization by watching.

