
The Forum

Intersections of Multiple Oppressions: Racism, Sizeism, Ableism, and the “Illimitable Etceteras”¹ in Encounters With Law Enforcement^{2,3}

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This think piece on the intersectionality of multiple oppressive markers incorporates critical race feminism, fat studies, body/embodyment studies, and dis/ability studies. It discusses the cases of two African Americans deemed irresolvable nuisances, treated as threats to police, and dealt with, with undue force, resulting in their untimely deaths. Eleanor Bumpurs, 66, was a black female of older age, ample size, with physical and mental disabilities; she was arthritic, fighting off hallucinations, and was economically disadvantaged. Eric Garner, 43, was a black male of ample size, with physical disabilities; he was diabetic, asthmatic, with sleep apnea and a heart condition, all of which made employment difficult for him. Intersectional identities determined what happened when each crossed paths with law enforcement. Intersecting oppressions of racism/classism/fat hatred/ageism/ableism/healthism resulted in the murder of Bumpurs in 1984 and Garner in 2014. Following Garner’s execution, police supporters used multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination to sidestep the brutality: “Garner would’ve died going up a flight of stairs—he died because of preexisting medical conditions.” This article argues that besides perpetuating the long history of portraying African American men as hulking brutes or as genetically inferior, such justifications aim to divert attention away from structural racism, cloaking it in sizeism/ableism/healthism.

KEY WORDS: ableism; healthism; intersectionality; oppression; sizeism; structural racism.

INTRODUCTION

This article examines violence against African Americans at the intersection of multiply marginalized identities. In particular, it looks at the cases of Eleanor Bumpurs and Eric Garner, who were murdered by New York City police in 1984 and 2014, respectively. In both cases, the victims were deemed irresolvable nuisances, treated as threats to the police, and dealt with with undue force. Bumpurs was an African American female of older age and ample size, with physical and mental disabilities; she was arthritic, fighting off hallucinations, and was economically disadvantaged. Garner was an African American male of ample size, with physical disabilities; he was diabetic, asthmatic, with sleep apnea and a heart condition, all

¹ Butler (1990:143) theorizes the “etcetera” as a launch pad for feminist coalition politics.

² This paper was presented at the RDCJN Workshop held at Rutgers-Newark, July 2016. I thank Waverly Duck, Jody Miller, Ruth Peterson, Müge Galin, and Emily Bent for their encouragement.

³ A response to my essay by Hitchens (2017) can be found in this issue.

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of which made employment difficult for him. This article focuses on how these intersectional identities determined what happened when they crossed paths with law enforcement.

In the eyes of police officers, Eleanor Bumpurs was a mad black woman and Eric Garner, a big-and-bad black thug. Bumpurs encountered seven white male officers when they busted into her apartment in the Bronx to evict her for unpaid rent. Perceiving her as a threat and a looming “monstrosity,” one of the officers could not suppress the impulse to shoot her. Garner, who was standing outside of a shop in Staten Island minding his own business, did not appreciate being harassed by police; his protestations of innocence to peddling loose cigarettes led a white officer, intimidated by his size, to apply a chokehold that killed him. Later, the white establishment justified this brutality by using one form of discrimination to defend another: Garner *supposedly* did not die because of the chokehold but because of preexisting medical conditions. The New York Police Department (NYPD) argued that Garner would not have died had it not been for his ailments. Therefore, he was somehow to blame for his own death. In analyzing these two cases, this article incorporates critical race feminism, fat studies, and dis/ability studies. It argues that the intersection of racism, fat hatred, ageism, ableism, and classism resulted in the untimely deaths of 66-year-old Bumpurs and 43-year-old Garner.

ELEANOR BUMPURS

Eleanor Bumpurs’s execution in her own apartment followed nonpayment eviction notices, phone calls, and apartment visits by New York City Housing Authorities to settle four months of overdue rent. Bumpurs had initially withheld her monthly rent of \$98 because she believed the kitchen stove, hallway light, and bathroom pipe were in need of repair. However, she also denied access to workers; and she blamed the poor condition of her apartment, including cans of feces in her bathtub, on “Reagan and his people” (McLaughlin and Smith 1997:56).⁵ Over time, she conjured hallucinations that “people had come through the windows, the walls, and the floor ... ripped her off ... [and] cleaned her out,” which is why she believed she was behind on her rent (McLaughlin and Smith 1997:56). During all this, Bumpurs received little to no help from the Department of Social Services to resolve her situation and was left to her own devices to face unremitting demands from authorities. Within four months, she spiraled into territorial schizophrenia until she literally greeted the city psychiatrist sent to evaluate her mental condition with a kitchen knife. Based on the psychiatrist’s eleventh-hour assessment, Social Services recommended evicting and then hospitalizing Bumpurs. However, neither in-home crisis counseling nor any emergency grant to cover her rent was provided to ease that transition. Four days later, Bumpurs was murdered in that very apartment, by the NYPD Emergency Service Unit that was “specially trained,” no less (McLaughlin and Smith 1997:57–58).

⁵ This rendering of the Bumpurs case comes from the New York State Commission on Criminal Justice and the Use of Force, *Report to the Governor*, vol. 1 (May 1987).

Ironically, while the police perceived and described Bumpurs as having been in a “murderous rage” and as having had a disproportionately emotional reaction to the situation, it was in fact her killer—a longtime veteran of the force, Stephen Sullivan—who did the “overreacting.” However, as at countless other occasions when a person with a psychiatric disability has been “hurt by law enforcement, the officers justifi[ed] their actions by explaining that the individual acted in unpredictable ways, was potentially threatening, and force had to be applied” (Perry 2014: ¶6). And so, seven white Emergency Service Unit officers proceeded to drill out Bumpurs’s lock to be able to look into her apartment, and when they saw her boiling lye and smelled the noxious fumes, they busted down her door and approached her with gas masks and plastic shields, while she wielded a small kitchen knife (McLaughlin and Smith 1997:57–58). After telling Bumpurs a few times to “drop the knife,” “Robocop” Officer Sullivan fired his shotgun twice, hitting her first in the hand and next in the chest (Kuntz 1998:105–106).

It is difficult to comprehend why Bumpurs had to be annihilated so violently. However, some answers emerge when we take into consideration the intersectionality of the myriad identities that rendered a relatively harmless individual to pose such a monstrous threat to a group of policemen. Bumpurs’s gender, race, class, age, body type, and disability created in concert the simultaneously “oppressive conditions” that worked against her and led the officers to construe the situation into one of life and death (Erevelles and Minear 2013:355).

[O]utrage emanating from a heaving, black body wielding a knife sent a nervous (and racist) police officer into panic when confronted by his own racialized terror of otherness. But . . . other ideological terrors . . . loomed large in this encounter. . . . Socially sanctioned fears of the mentally ill and our social devaluation of . . . disabled . . . bodies of color . . . justifi[ed] the volley of shots fired. . . .

Police abuse of power and the discretion to shoot are not impartial to disability or class, race, or gender. Although the authorities considered removing Bumpurs from her residence as a “mere matter of law,” when they routinely arrived at her apartment to carry out the rubber-stamped court order, they perceived Bumpurs to be a mad black woman.

It is with this indifference of society to the intersection of so many strikes against them, that people like Bumpurs are shoved even further down the socioeconomic ladder. As Carter (2010:118) states, “People with severe and persistent mental illness are too often evicted from their housing for reasons that are truly related to a disability, in violation of state and federal law.” Those with a mental disability who get evicted from their homes are unable to legally represent themselves; they have little recourse to “defend their right to remain in their housing” (Carter 2010:118). This, despite the Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988 and Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Undoubtedly, when Bumpurs made her last-ditch effort to fight off the police, she knew all too well that she would be institutionalized, if not dumped on the sidewalk. Ironically, her unwitting blame of “Reagan and his people” for her woes registers as a particularly lucid portrayal of how poorly black Americans were faring under Reagan.

ERIC GARNER

In the case of Eric Garner's murder, it is interesting to note what the police had to say to one another on a forum called PoliceOne.com.⁶ Several verified law enforcement officers⁷ publicly sided with the decision not to indict the accused officer, Daniel Pantaleo, for Garner's death, as can be seen in excerpts from their postings online (see Fig. 1). The remarks ranged from being racist and sizeist, sidestepping what actually happened: that Officer Pantaleo choked Garner while several other officers dogpiled on top of him until he died. Instead, the remarks reflected the police officers' impatience with, and distaste for, what they perceived as a "thug" whom they were not allowed by law to brutalize. Some blamed Garner's death on his weighing "400 lbs." Others called him "a walking heart attack," suggesting his family sue Domino's Pizza or McDonald's. One officer got lost in semantics, asserting that the accused officer had not applied a "chokehold" but a "carotid restraint" that lasted only "seven seconds."

The police used the kinds of arguments listed above to justify Garner's murder and his killer's exoneration. Similarly, New York congressional representative Peter King, a white Republican, remarked on CNN, "If [Garner] had not had asthma and a heart condition and was [not] so obese, almost definitely he would not have died" (Turner Broadcasting 2014). Diversi (2016:248) points out that according to Congressman King's logic, "the Fourth Amendment . . . can be ignored because of alleged poor health conditions." Revealing his "colorblindness," a term itself an example of ableism, the congressman added, "I have no doubt if that was a 350-pound white guy, he would have been treated the same" (Turner Broadcasting 2014). However, as Perry (2014:¶9) writes, "Ableism doesn't excuse racism. Racism doesn't excuse fat-hatred. Fat-hatred doesn't excuse class-based discrimination. Rather, they sweep together, enabling us to see patterns of prejudice and their horrific outcomes." Indeed, Garner was fat. He is also dead. However, the first truth does not excuse the second one (Khazan 2014:¶7).

Kukla and Richardson (2014:¶1) write, "Amidst the raft of deaths of African-American men at the hands of the police . . . repeated descriptions of the purportedly enormous size of several victims has been cited as the explanation for their death." Data show that police officers view black teenage boys as less innocent and older than they view white teenage boys. Body shape and size—in this case, having a bigger build—intersect with race and gender to magnify stereotypes. For example, Officer Darren Wilson, who killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, was himself six foot four inches, 210 pounds, though his being white allowed him to downplay his own size during his testimony, while he exaggerated Brown's. Wilson said, "When I grabbed him . . . I felt like a five-year-old holding on to Hulk Hogan . . . that's just how big he felt and how small I felt . . ." (*State of Mo. v. Darren Wilson* 2014:212).

⁶ Progressive netroots *The Daily Kos* and *How Did We Get Into This Mess?* quickly archived for online activists/bloggers the PoliceOne.com discussion of Garner from December 2014.

⁷ PoliceOne.com grants commenting privileges to only certified and sworn law enforcement officers, including police retirees.

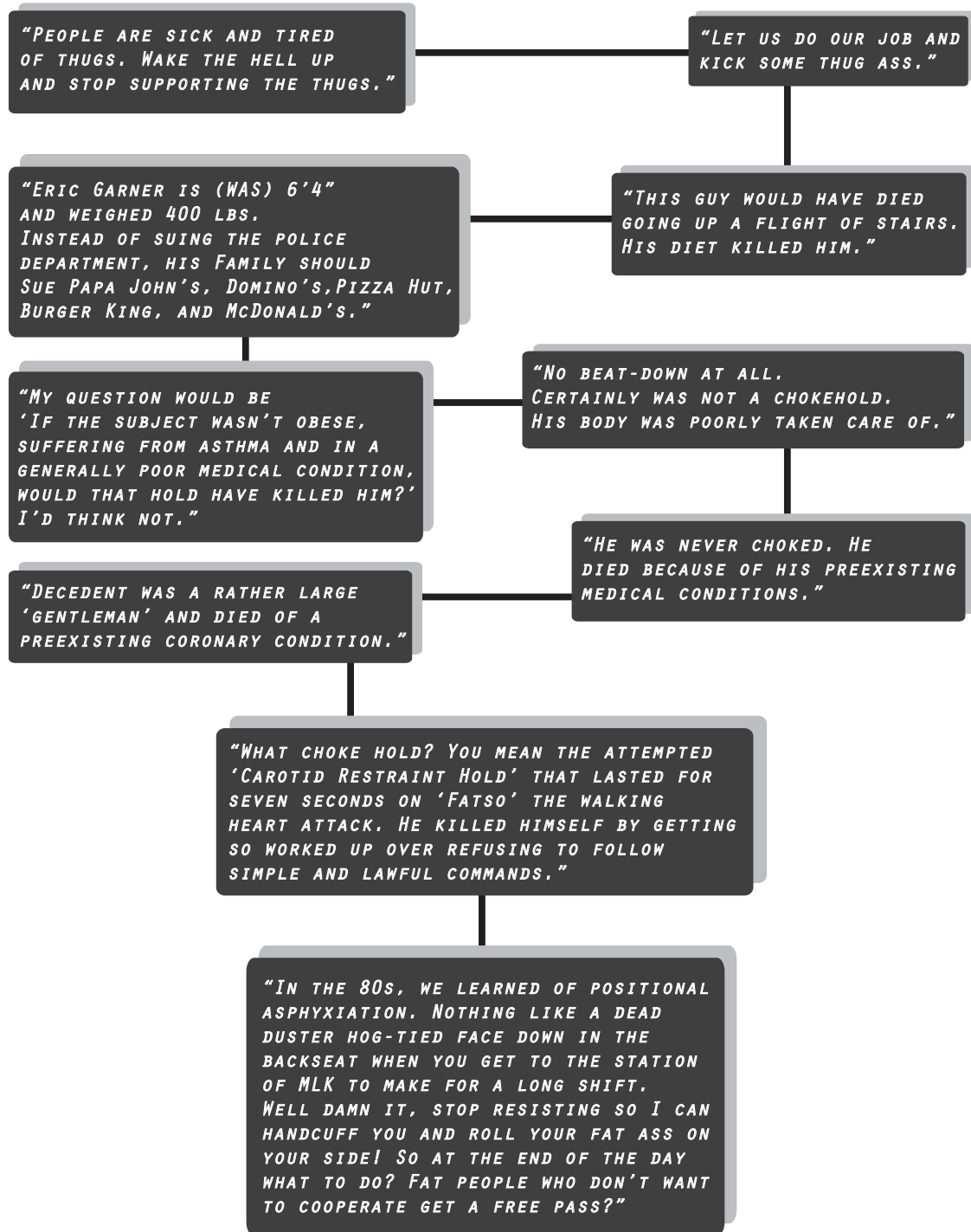


Fig 1. Officers' Opinions on Garner's Execution from PoliceOne.com

The colonial fear of a “hulking’ black brute,” whose imposing physique intimidates authorities, is nothing new (Daniels 2014:¶11). Diversi (2016:248) would liken “black demonization” veiled as sizeism and ableism to “the logic of politically correct lynching.” Yet, this stereotypical image of the big, bad, not-so-innocent black male youth intersects today with another demonizing rhetoric, which goes something like this: fat people are somehow personally responsible for whatever bad

things happen to them because their bodies are unworthy of regard. Thus Garner, like countless others, was not only “held responsible for his threatening body” but also blamed for his own death by “virtue of having made his body too vulnerable to withstand” police brutality (Kukla and Richardson 2014:3).

DISCUSSION

Critical race feminist Patricia Williams (1987:127) offers further explanation in her article on “the discourse of fingerpointing as the law’s response to racism.” She discusses what she calls “spirit-murder,” or the refusal to consider those whose lives depend on our regard for their welfare, and an unwillingness to acknowledge the ongoing legacy of slavery and devaluation of African Americans as a group. In a supposed era of liberties and democracy, rights and privacy are only granted to the relatively privileged. Williams thinks of “spirit-murdering” as forcing some individuals to endure a world without any meaningful boundaries; for African Americans, this has meant the crushing weight of total bodily and spiritual intrusion. For Bumpurs and Garner, it meant not being given proper personal space and respect. Williams (1991:73) recognizes racism as being only one form of spirit-murder. Other forms include societal devaluation of women, the poor, and the “cultural abandonment” of people with disabilities, of aging adults and older adults, and of fat people. That is to say, from this perspective, the lives of people like Bumpurs or Garner did not matter on multiple fronts.

Having their humanity disregarded and their dignity stripped is much more than societal disregard for African Americans. Bumpurs made it with her body intact—until age and disability caught up with her. Authorities stripped her of the power to govern her own body and personal space, her bodily integrity literally torn asunder by the violence inflicted against her myriad identities. As Erevelles (2014) noted, black womanhood becomes synonymous with a “racist grammar,” where the assumption about a black woman is that she must always already be an aggressor, that she must always already be on the defensive, yet far too often, she is victimized and all too rarely vindicated. Disability entangles with racialized notions of undesirable gendered subjectivities where being a dark-skinned, plus-size woman, along with “crazy talk” becomes the excuse that this person, indivisible, is undeserving of any respect for her humanity. As for Garner, white officers, a congressman, and the media shifted the blame from police brutality to Garner’s liability for his own demise (Kukla and Richardson 2014).

American society fears and devalues an individual when black *and* fat intersect within her or his body. Its national discourse holds fat people accountable for harm done to their abject bodies, by virtue of having made “poor lifestyle choices.” When the media covers the so-called War on Obesity, they roll the “headless fatty” footage, showing images of fat buttocks and bellies, dehumanizing the fat body, and sending the message that it is shameful. Fat stigma compromises human well-being, because it makes one a target for discrimination (Cooper 2007). In effect, the impunity flouted by law enforcement officers in Garner’s murder depends on the narrative of justification that resides between the violent interstices of race and size.

Among the ever-shifting narratives for brutalizing black people, healthism also rears its ugly head. “Healthism,” a term popularized in 1995 by medical sociologist Deborah Lupton, transforms the idea of health into a moral imperative. Health becomes the yardstick for moral entrepreneurs to decide not only how much one cares about one’s own body, but also how much *others* should impinge upon how one takes care of one’s body (Mason 2016). Thus, “healthism” represents a preoccupation with an unspoken but tacitly accepted regulatory discourse of physical fitness as the primary locus of well-being. A presumption is made that the more physically fit someone is, the better a person she or he is. From that perspective, disability becomes “the attribution of corporeal deviance . . . a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be” (Garland-Thomson as cited in Erevelles and Minear 2013:358). Therefore, the argument proceeds that without his various health issues, Garner might well have survived. And so, his not being physically fit becomes yet another ripple in a long line of multiple oppressions whereby healthism is used to justify racism, creating another hierarchy that ranks bodies “worthy” of human regard.

Granted, cultural, societal, and institutional changes may be slow to bring about. It would also be impossible to legislate the undercurrent of racial, classist, sexist, ageist, sizeist, gender queer, or ableist biases of individual police officers. However, additional courses in sensitivity training would be a reasonable requirement in the police academy. It is *not* impossible to require the police force, which is charged with the protection of *all* citizens, to undergo rigorous sensitivity training as part of its preparation for the job. As a takeaway from Bumpurs’s and Garner’s needless untimely deaths at the hands of law enforcement, it is essential to consider the overlap among racist, sexist, classist, ageist, sizeist, and ableist visions of who may be worthy and unworthy of human regard and to consider who assumes the responsibility for determining that “regard.” The bottom line has to be that social justice in America intermingles racial, sexual, economic, gender queer, and disability justice.

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