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A HISTORIAN'S TAKE ON CHARLOTTESVILLE

AN INTERVIEW WITH BOSTON UNIVERSITY AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES PROFESSOR ASHLEY FARMER

BY JOELLE RENSTROM, BOSTON UNIVERSITY

The past few years have been eye-opening for many white Americans who thought or hoped that prejudice, racial violence, socioeconomic oppression, miscarriages of justice, and other race-related issues that have dogged the country since its founding were improving. We've been presented with countless stories of black people who have paid for bigoted mindsets and behavior with their lives: Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Philando Castile, Eric Garner, Stephon Clark, and so many more. Hand-wringing and comments about how "this isn't the America I know" or "I had no idea things were this bad" highlight white privilege; for black Americans,

this reality is not new. Systems of black oppression and disenfranchisement have never been even close to resolved, and it seems that people who previously tamped down their racist, sexist, and/or xenophobic views have been emboldened to demonstrate them loudly and proudly, as we saw at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville last summer.

Impact spoke to Boston University African Studies and History professor Ashley Farmer about what insights we can take away from Charlottesville one year later—and where we can find hope for change.

(edited for clarity and length)

Renstrom: You've written a lot about the events of August 25, 1961 in Monroe, North Carolina, when an angry white mob attacked the [Freedom Riders'](#) non-violent protest against segregation. How would you compare that event to what happened in Charlottesville, and how might those similarities and/or differences be instructive?

Farmer: Racism and racist violence manifest in historically specific ways. That said, we can think about how different manifestations of violence can stem from or be representative of overarching ideas and anxieties. Although the Monroe and Charlottesville events happened in different locations and eras, both non-violent protests were organized by progressives of all races in an effort to challenge white supremacy. In both cases, white mobs wanted to maintain or reassert the status quo. Considering these two events in tandem can help us think about what forms of protest or challenges to power tend to provoke white racial violence, where and how white supremacists draw and reassert the boundaries of whiteness (in both instances they attacked white men and women), and the importance and limitations of allies in anti-racist protesting.

Renstrom: The violence in Charlottesville was a product of white nationalism and supremacy, but, considering intersectionality, that wasn't the only dynamic at work. What role do you think gender had in those events?

Farmer: Since the founding of our nation, whiteness has always been tied to ideas of manhood. The country was conceived of as a place for white men to be leaders, property owners, and to have power over all people, including white women. On the surface, the rally of white men at UVA was a response to the potential removal of a Robert E. Lee statue in a city park. However,

it was also a representation of white male anxieties over their perceived loss of power, as demonstrated by the protesters' chant: "you will not replace us." This loss of power certainly has a racial component, but it is also a manifestation of gendered anxieties. It is not a coincidence that the group was all men and that this happened after an election in which a white woman vied for the presidency.

Renstrom: I've noticed that while movements such as the Women's March and #MeToo represent a sense of sisterhood, that unity can break down along racial lines. Is that tension caused by a connection between whiteness and womanhood?

Farmer: White women play a critical role in manifestations of racial violence. Explicit examples include the many white women who falsely claim that black men assaulted them, or in the case of someone like [Emmett Till](#), simply looked at them the "wrong" way, knowing this would result in the death of those black men. Other examples include their endorsement of white supremacy through voting for avowedly racist candidates or joining white supremacist groups including the KKK. Although these women may not carry torches, their support of white supremacist men and their attachment to ideas about white womanhood and femininity embolden men to engage in violence on their behalf, including at Charlottesville.

Renstrom: In the 2016 presidential election, [Black voters were least likely to vote for Trump](#). Similarly, Black voters [propelled Alabama senate candidate Doug Jones to a win](#) over Roy Moore, a candidate who demonstrates consistent racism (and was accused of sexual assault by [8 teenage girls](#)). After these elections, we see outpourings of thanks for Black voters, who despite suppression and disenfranchisement made their votes count. But I also see backlash, as "thanks" is the equivalent to "thoughts and prayers." I saw this sentiment summed up at the Women's March last year, where I saw a black woman with a sign that said: "So we'll see all you nice white ladies at the next Black Lives Matter march, right?" What insights do you have about the effects of current racial and gender dynamics on politics?

Farmer: These voting patterns are not new. During the twentieth century, African American women have consistently voted for progressive candidates and have often been the voting bloc that secured progressive and/or democratic victories. It may be because someone as abhorrent as Roy Moore was close to securing a Senate seat that people are now paying more attention. Thus, the current political climate can be understood as one in which African American women are rightly frustrated for not receiving wider recognition for their voting and

organizing efforts, though there is now much more public acknowledgement of their vital contributions. We can best recognize and continue to honor African American women's contributions by supporting their causes, candidacies, and organizations. Allies can also do some more of the heavy lifting and not expect African American women to stand up for progressive causes in their stead.

Renstrom: In your 2017 [interview with BU Today](#), you said, “we only humanize black women by proving that they did the same things other people do in their daily lives.” In thinking about humanization, I was reminded of the *New York Times*' [November 2017 profile](#) of a white nationalist that drew harsh criticism because the writer presents a relatively sympathetic view of him. How do you think race and gender contribute to the humanization (or lack thereof) of people such as the Nazi sympathizer—or of black women?

Farmer: This country has a long history of dehumanizing minority populations. To be sure, some think that because minority and marginalized communities have some protections, everyone considers these groups as both equal and human. Articles such as the Times piece indicate that this is not the case. Society still has very entrenched ideas of who is human and who deserves to have their story told or heard. This, like most forms of bias, manifests in racialized and gendered terms. There is a general cultural consensus that if a white man adopts a different or negative view it must be because of something we don't understand, whereas if a black man or, especially, a black woman, has done so, something is wrong with that person.

Renstrom: Your book [Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era](#) focuses on the contributions of female leaders in the Black Power movement. How were these women able to overcome multiple forms of marginalization and effect change?

Farmer: [Mae Mallory](#) [who supported the Freedom Riders in 1961] and the other women I study found a wonderful balance between a clear-headed analysis of intersecting forms of oppression and a vibrant imagination of what a new world free from racism, sexism, and poverty could look like for African Americans and people around the world. It's easy to get lost or overwhelmed by the issues that we face and how to resolve them, but black women radicals of the past were able to keep hope alive, and I think that this could be a source of inspiration for us as well.

Renstrom: Which black female leaders today particularly inspire you?

Farmer: The tradition of black women radicals is alive in scholars and activists across the country. These include, but are not limited to: [Charlene Carruthers](#) and the incredible women working with [Black Youth Project 100](#); [Mariame Kaba](#), founder and director of Project Nia, which works to reduce incarceration in Chicago; to [Barbara Ransby](#), [Cathy Cohen](#), and the other founders of Scholars for Social Justice. These are just a few of the many African American women doing important and transformative work.

Renstrom: Do you see either the beginnings of another Black Power movement today—perhaps in the Black Lives Matter movement? And how might the events in Charlottesville galvanize or affect such a movement?

Farmer: The Black Power movement was a historically specific wave of activism responding to late 20th century manifestations of racism, sexism, and economic inequality. The activism today is different. Nevertheless, I do think a new movement is emerging to address the latest manifestations of the white supremacist patriarchy, most notably embodied in the Black Lives Movement. Although the current movement is different in its form, scope, and goals, we can see how activists organize with the lessons of Black Power in mind. First, the BLM movement is not defined by a single leader or organization; rather, it has multiple local leaders and activists who address ground-level manifestations of race, gender, and economic issues. Second, we see an effort not to repeat the same issues of exclusion that hampered earlier movements. There is now a concerted effort among activists to embrace a wide range of women, trans, and gender non-conforming leaders in order to support and articulate an expansive political platform.

Renstrom: Did the events in Charlottesville affect your research or teaching? If so, how?

Farmer: For historians, ideas about racism, sexism, and homophobia are never really far in the past. As a historian of African American women's history, I constantly research and teach about manifestations of white supremacy and patriarchy and their effects on the past and present. However, many students don't think about the omnipresence of these issues, largely because they are often taught historical narratives about American exceptionalism, democracy, and progress in their early education. Events such as Charlottesville offer history teachers an opportunity to disrupt this narrative. Students are often shocked that these events

could happen today. This gives history teachers an opportunity to contextualize such events, explain how they are part of larger systems of power, and push students to think more critically about how current ideas about race, sex, and class underlie events like Charlottesville.

Renstrom's note: If you would like to contribute to the causes, candidacies, and organizations that support African Americans, here are some suggestions:

- [BYP \(Black Youth Project\) 100](#)
- [Project Nia](#)
- [Scholars for Social Justice](#)
- [Advancement Project](#)
- [IMPACT Strategies](#)
- [Essie Justice](#)
- [Campaign Zero](#)
- [Black Alliance for Just Immigration](#)
- [Girl Trek](#)
- [Girls for a Change](#)
- [SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective](#)
- [Higher Heights](#)
- [A Long Walk Home](#)
- [National Black Women's Justice Institute](#)
- [Trans Women of Color Collective](#)
- You can find a list of black women running for various political offices throughout the country at blackwomeninpolitics.com

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