

BLACK WOMAN UNGENDERED: HOW SOCIETY FAILED MEGAN THEE STALLION

Tyah-Amoy Roberts

Content Warning: This article includes uncensored material depicting violence, including transphobia.

When I dream of myself, I do not ascribe to myself the label “woman.” I do not feel the same representation in the word that I see other women experience. At first, I thought that meant I might not be one, that I should explore other identities that may suit me better. I did so for a while, but eventually I realized that my identity was not the problem. There is something about being a “woman” that just didn’t quite fit for me, and it has nothing to do with the way I feel about myself or my gender.

Growing up I read a lot of fairy tales, and I would try to imagine myself as the “fair maiden” at the center of the story. I could not fit myself into her canon — my skin was not fair, but dark like my mother’s and my mothers’ mother’s. The word “maiden” sounded too docile and conquerable, both of which I was not. In fact, I was taught to be the opposite: strong, thick-skinned and self-reliant. But if the fair maiden was the epitome of womanhood, then how could I possibly be a woman?

For myself as well as many other Black women in the United States, the concept of womanhood seems to leave us behind. This does more than affect our self-concept; it also puts us in real danger. In this essay I will ask the following question: how is ungendering used to normalize and perpetuate violence against Black women? Though the phenomenon of ungendering affects most Black women, it is much easier to analyze when it is used against someone in the public eye. Therefore, to answer this question I will study the discourse surrounding rapper Megan Thee Stallion, following the news that she had allegedly been shot by hip hop artist Tory Lanez. I will present a

close reading of various social media posts that use ungendering to both dismiss her as a victim as well as justify her assault in order to prove the existence of ungendering in popular discourse surrounding Black women. I will then theorize what this means for Black womanhood in the present tense, and whether we must expand our conceptualization of women to include Black women or reject the label as a whole.

There are limitations of my analysis, especially as a result of studying the shooting incident many months after it occurred. Many of the social media posts I could have used have long since been deleted, most likely due to backlash, and because of this, I will not be able to analyze all of the occurrences of ungendering. Instead, I use available media posts to highlight language used surrounding the specific event, but that does not necessarily characterize the discourse in its entirety, but offers a snapshot. My analysis also leaves out negative comments that I do not perceive as relying heavily on ungendering, as well as all comments in defense of Megan or her womanhood, as they do not serve the purpose of the study. The posts I analyze are not a representation of how all —or even most —people on social media feel about Megan Thee Stallion, but instead function on the assumption that the posts I do utilize are representative of most of the discourse surrounding their ungendering of her, allowing us to study this phenomenon in real social media posts.

What is Ungendering?

To understand the concept of ungendering, I must first explain misogynoir. Misogynoir can be defined as “the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience” (Center). Black women do not experience racism the same way Black men do and certainly do not experience sexism or misogyny the way that white women or other women of color do. Therefore, it is important to name and define anti-Black misogyny, or misogynoir, as the phenomenon Black women face. According to Moya Bailey, who theorized misogynoir extensively and coined the term in 2008, “what happens to Black women in public space isn’t about them being any woman of color. It is particular and has to do with the ways that anti-Blackness and misogyny combine to malign Black women in our world” (Bailey 763).

Misogynoir takes many shapes, from the “angry Black woman” stereotype to natural hair discrimination in the workplace. Notice that neither of these examples are exclusive to Black women (white women can be deemed “angry” for being opinionated and Black men can face natural hair discrimination in the workplace), but both disproportionately affect Black women, who sit at the intersection of the oppressive struggles of both Blackness and womanhood. This intersection of race and gender is integral to the disproportionality of such stereotypes. For example, the “angry Black woman” plays on two tropes: the idea that women are overly emotional and the idea that Black people are “masculine and aggressive” (Macias 261). These tropes can only intersect at the identity of Black womanhood, making it a unique experience, to which neither white women nor Black men can relate in full. To treat such occurrences as only existing within one form of oppression would be grossly undermining the complexity of the experience.

An important stereotype in understanding misogynoir is the “matriarch,” or the masculine Black woman: “very aggressive, unfeminine women, Black matriarchs allegedly emasculated their lovers and husbands... one source of the matriarch’s failure is her inability to model appropriate gender behavior. Thus, labeling Black women 'unfeminine' and 'too strong' works to undercut U.S. Black women’s assertiveness” (Collins 75). Historically, this stereotype has been used to blame Black women for a number of things, including the socioeconomic shortcomings of the Black family and later for assaults committed against them, because of the idea that “Black women developed the characteristic of being abnormally strong... Although this stereotype sounds like it empowers Black women, it actually dehumanizes them” (Johnson 142). This brings me to the form of misogynoir around which I revolve my analysis: ungendering.

Ungendering was first introduced as a term by Hortense Spillers in her essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in which she argues that the perception of the modern Black family as illegitimate has roots in racism stemming back to slavery. In her analysis, Spillers theorizes that the socialization of race was so dehumanizing it did not even acknowledge or assert gender in its conception, such that Black women were positioned as outside of womanness .

Spillers writes, “gender, or sex-role assignation, or the clear differentiation of sexual stuff, sustained elsewhere in the culture, does not emerge for the African-American female in this historic instance, except indirectly, except as a way to reinforce through the process of birthing” (Spillers 79). This dehumanization allowed for the “materialized scene of unprotected female flesh - of female flesh ‘ungendered’” (Spillers 68). In this, Spillers is suggesting that the way Black women are perceived post-slavery relies heavily on the idea that they are not “women” at all, but property. The abolition of such an institution did not abolish the ideology but left it to evolve in its new environment. This same ungendering that reduced Black women to “flesh” continued to socialize them as just that, and the laws that removed from them the label of property did not pull them into a conception of womanhood.

To more concisely define ungendering, I will use a historical example: Sojourner Truth was born into slavery in 1797, and later became a pioneer for the women’s rights movement. In an 1851 speech given at a women’s conference in Akron, Ohio, she stated:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman?

In this speech, Truth is questioning the lack of representation that Black women were receiving in the movement for women’s suffrage. As a dark-skinned Black woman, standing at 6 feet tall with a muscular build, Truth is particularly asking why she is not awarded the same treatment that white women are given for their title of womanhood. For white women, it seemed that womanhood gave them access to a fragility which Truth was not allowed. Instead, she had to face grueling manual labor and was never helped or favored, begging her rhetorical question, “ain't I a woman?” Just as Truth was not allowed access to the fragility that white women had, many Black women are not allowed access to womanhood in the same way white women are.

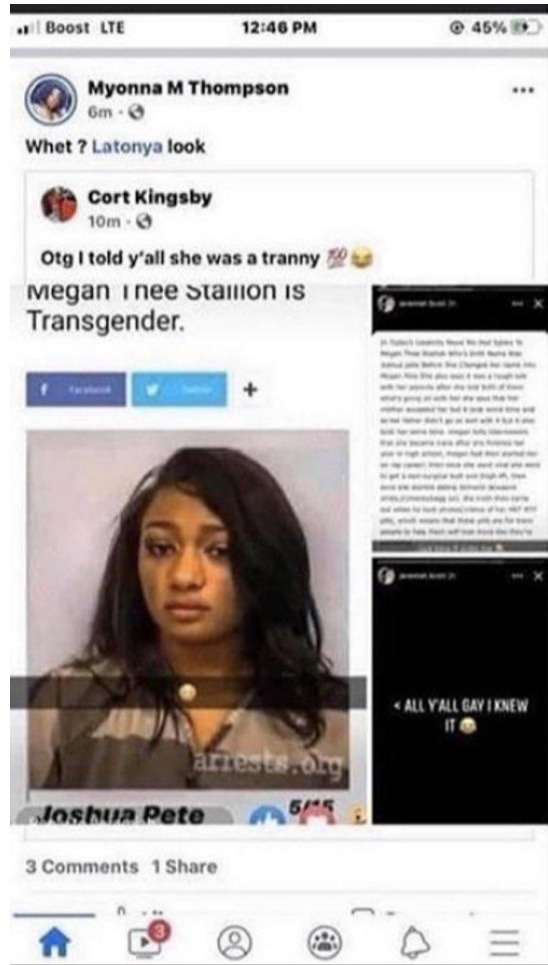
In her “Ain’t I A Woman” speech, Truth is describing the effects of being ungendered — to have her womanhood stripped from her and instead be classified as somewhat of an “unwoman.” Ungendering as I define it is the process by which gender is removed from a subject, particularly the process by which a Black woman is stripped of her title of womanhood and ascribed as an unfeminine or even masculine being, ie. “female flesh ‘ungendered’” (Spillers 79). This form of misogynoir is strongly rooted in transphobia (especially in a modern context) and uses much of the same language that is used to misgender trans people. I argue, however, that ungendering is not as simple as a manifestation of transphobia and misgendering, but something tied much more exclusively to Black womanhood (regardless of a queer identity), though I will detail in later sections the way the two are inextricably linked.

Moving forward, I now present a close analysis of the shooting incident involving Megan Thee Stallion and the way in which the phenomena of ungendering appeared in responses to the event.

Case Study: Megan thee Stallion

Content Warning: Transphobic slurs, violence

On July 12th of 2020, rapper Megan Thee Stallion was allegedly shot by hip hop artist Tory Lanez after leaving a party. The two were not in a relationship at the time. As with all celebrity news, this information was spread quickly via social media. Speculation surrounding what actually happened circulated the internet, despite there being photo and video evidence of Megan being shot in the foot. Social media users quickly took sides, deciding to either believe Megan or defend Tory, which led to a series of deeper conversations and settled on the normalization of violence against Black women.



Even before this incident, Megan Thee Stallion was constantly subject to public scrutiny for her height and weight. People used her stature to speculate about her gender, claiming that because she is 5’10” she must be a trans woman. This screenshot contains posts from Facebook, which call Megan a “tr*nny” and assign her the name “Joshua” to imply that she is a man. Through these speculations she was experiencing ungendering, even before any physical violence was committed against her. It is easy to see these things and classify them only as transphobia, but there is more at work here. The post is actually using transphobia to accomplish a different goal — to imply that women cannot be women if they possess certain features. Key to this analysis is understanding that the speculations regarding Megan’s sex are not because those making such comments actually believe her to be male (in which case we could call it misgendering and nothing more), but instead are a concerted attempt

Black Woman Ungendered: How Society Failed Megan Thee Stallion

to dewomanize her for an audience. This idea that there are certain attributes even besides reproductive organs which make one a “woman” is integral to the ideology behind ungendering.

After Megan was shot, the social media discourse was overwhelming and divisive. The two social media posts I will analyze, one Instagram post and one Tweet (both posted by Black men) are now deleted, but I believe that what they represent is integral in understanding modern-day manifestations of ungendering.

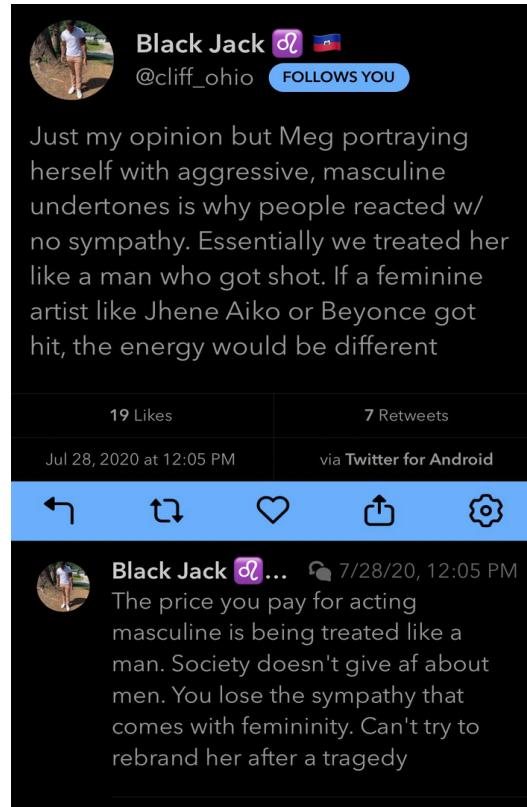


This Instagram post was posted by rapper Cam’ron, and garnered tens of thousands of likes before it was deleted (so clearly it was quite popular). Cam’ron captioned this post “Ayooooo... Da net wins again,” referring to it as some kind of victory/good deed for the internet. This suggests that he not only found this post to be funny, but he also asserts that it is truthful (almost as if truth is prevailing through the post). Just as the posts made about her before she was shot, this “joke” relies on the idea that Megan is a trans person who is hiding it from the world, claiming that

she has male reproductive organs. It goes on to say that this was the reason Tory Lanez shot her. The characterization of Megan as a trans woman, then going on to imply such characterization would have legitimized her being shot, is a representation of ungendering in a modern context. We see that transphobia is being used here to justify her assault, somehow asserting that we should expect for trans women to be assaulted, therefore dismissing her victimhood in the situation. However, this once again cannot be left as solely a case of transphobia. Context shows us that the majority of the public does not actually believe Megan is a trans woman. Those participating in the are thus not trying to prove she's a man, but rather remove her from womanhood enough to justify both the violence against her and the joke made thereafter.

This next social media post is a tweet that did not gain much traction before being deleted, but has much more verbiage to be unpacked. This post not only gets to the heart of modern ungendering, but also signifies how heavily situated the phenomenon is in ideologies of misogynoir. The first thing to note is that this language does not necessarily rely on transphobia. The original poster does not refer to Megan with any slurs or imply outright that she is a man, but instead says that she was "portraying herself with aggressive, masculine undertones." As an avid listener and follower of Megan Thee Stallion myself, I think these accusations can only be contingent on her portrayal of herself as sexually liberated, but the poster is reflecting the societal tendency to view Black people as hyper-aggressive beings, a view that begins with men but often extends to women who do not fit into a Eurocentric understanding of womanhood (many of whom do not).

This person goes on to say that Megan's supposed masculinity is the reason the people of social media reacted with "no sympathy" when she was shot. Setting aside the idea that men should be shot (because that could be an entire paper on its own), this poster is using his perception of her as masculine to outright justify the dismissal of Megan's victimhood, as if she is somehow to blame for her assault because of this perception of her.



An important aspect to be unpacked is what is said next: “if a feminine artist like Jhene Aiko or Beyonce got hit, the energy would be different.” This statement draws on the concepts of fragility that were discussed earlier, in that white women have greater access to fragility than Black women do and, therefore, are shielded from physical and emotional pain more so than Black women. The difference in this case is that both of the women who are “more feminine” compared to Megan are also Black women. So, what’s the difference between them and her? The answer is simple — Beyonce and Jhene Aiko have more proximity to whiteness (and therefore white femininity) than Megan does. While Megan stands at 5’10”, Beyonce is only 5’7” and Jhene stands at a mere 5’2”. Both Jhene and Beyonce are lighter-skinned compared to Megan, and have smaller frames than her. These two women are not perceived as “thick,” while Megan has been referred to as a “Stallion” (a term commonly used in Texas for tall, thick women) for the majority of her life. The “fair maiden” trope fits Jhene and Beyonce more squarely than Megan, who falls outside of that canon entirely.

Through this analysis, it becomes apparent that the discourse around Megan is heavily reliant on the fact that she is perceived as less womanly than white women or women with more proximity to whiteness. As the poster said, she “lost the sympathy that comes with femininity,” not because she acted in a masculine way, but because her Black womanhood disqualifies her from experiencing womanhood in the same manner in which it was socialized for white women to experience.

Reconceptualizing “Woman”

In as plain terms as possible, it is unfair that Black womanhood cannot exist without contention. To be a Black woman is to be “unwoman,” made that way because it is much easier to abuse us if we are not tied to such “womanly” tropes as fragility. But as Black women, we have to continue to exist in this society, and it is much less ominous for me to imagine a world where Black women are safe from violence than accept that we never will be. So, how can we conceptualize womanhood in a way that is not violent towards Black women?

It is important to recognize that ungendering was not founded on ideas of transphobia, but slavery, as noted earlier. That being said, I believe that ungendering has been adapted to lean heavily on transphobia because it can no longer rely on the belief that Black women are property instead of human beings with gender. On the other hand, the foundations of misgendering lie in transphobia, specifically the idea that trans identities are in some way illegitimate. While these two can look the same and even take on the same language, ungendering is contingent upon hundreds of years of misogynoir, while misgendering is contingent upon being a trans person. Ungendering is yet another means of abuse against Black women, and though it may use transphobic language to achieve its goal, we must look further than that to understand what is happening in the specific instance of cis-gendered Black women.

Kai M. Green and Marquis Bey offer us a deeper understanding of this question through their conversation on the intersection of Black feminism and trans feminism. They question whether we should expand our conceptualization of womanhood to include Black women, or reject the term as a whole, saying that we should “consider the limitations of the gender binary and made us think about how Black cisgender

women in particular have always already functioned as excess of that category” (Green 439). They talk about the idea that Blackness is inherently queer, that “Black and trans feminisms have always been historically imbricated” (Bey 439). This characterization of Black and trans feminism in conversation with each other makes sense given the ideas that Spillers details in her work, that Black womanhood exists outside of the gender binary and outside of the socialization of womanhood. It also makes sense when we analyze the way that transphobia is used to perpetuate misogynoir, which is how modern-day ungendering manifests itself.

In the discourse regarding whether or not “woman” is still a useful term, I find myself in agreement with those who claim that it is for now. Especially as a response to the man-dominant power structure, it is an important signifier of a general group of oppressed people, who do have similarities despite the ways that the hierarchy is structured within the oppressed group itself. I also believe that it is beneficial to have the option to call oneself “woman,” especially for non-cis women who have had to fight to be called what they are. However, I do believe that the idea of “womanhood” should be removed from activist language, unless it is being used in the context of analysis. There is no such thing as womanhood, because there is no way to be a woman. Femininity is not “womanhood;” it is not an indicator of who is and is not a woman, and neither are reproductive organs, height, skin tone or any other metric by which we traditionally measure a person on the imaginary scale of “man” to “woman.” I believe that if we do the work to counteract these conceptions of what qualifies gender, we will be beginning the long journey of reconstructing our understanding of the humanity of the Black woman.

Works Cited

- Bailey, Moya; Trudy (2018) On misogynoir: citation, erasure, and plagiarism, *Feminist Media Studies*, 18:4, 762-768, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2018.1447395
- Center, B. (2020, February 12). What Is Misogynoir? Retrieved October 14, 2020, from <https://www.blackburncenter.org/post/2020/02/12/what-is-misogynoir>
- Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

- Johnson, A. (2019). We Deserve Better: How Hip Hop Perpetuates the Rape Culture of Black Women. *North Carolina Central Law Review*, 42(1), 139–164.
- Kai M. Green & Marquis Bey (2017) Where Black Feminist Thought and Trans* Feminism Meet: A Conversation, *Souls*, 19:4, 438–454, DOI: 10.1080/10999949.2018.1434365
- Kong, S. (2020, July 31). What the Megan Thee Stallion Discourse is Missing. Retrieved October 14, 2020, from <https://www.fridaythings.com/recent-posts/megan-thee-stallion-tory-lanez-shooting-transphobia>
- Macías, K. (n.d.). “Sisters in the collective struggle”: Sounds of silence and reflections on the unspoken assault on black females in modern America. *Cultural Studies – Critical Methodologies*, 15(4), 260–264. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708615578415>
- Sojourner Truth: Ain’t I A Woman?* (U.S. National Park Service). (n.d.). Retrieved November 20, 2020, from <https://www.nps.gov/articles/sojourner-truth.htm>
- Spillers, H. (1987). Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book. *Diacritics*, 17(2), 65–81. doi:10.2307/464747