**More than ratchet, loud, and sexy**

**A content analysis on how black women were and still are portrayed in art, television, film, and media**

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Abstract

Black people of different diasporas have always faced tragedies such dating back from colonization to slavery, to segregation, and are still fighting for equality to this day. Black women however always get the shorter end of the stick. They are disrespected not only by other races but their own race as well. From harmful jokes and stereotypes, they faced dealt with growing up, to seeing how they are portrayed in social media skits and reality television. For a long time, black women have not been depicted in the best light in entertainment. Whether it is movies, tv shows, or reality tv. There are endless stereotypes and tropes that black women are molded into in the media.

**Where the stereotypes started**

Dating back to slavery African Americans were not only abused, tortured, sexually violated and overworked, they were also used as a source for entertainment. Slave owners would have them dance, sing, and even fight each other in organized wrestling matches in the antebellum south. In the article "To See Who Was the Best on the Plantation: Enslaved Fighting Contests and Masculinity in the Antebellum Plantation South", a former slave by the name of John Finnely recollected those times. "According to Finnely, the masters of different plantations matched their slaves by size and then bet on them." (Lusana, 2010, pg. 901) This was the one in many ways African Americans were not viewed as human but viewed more as amusement for white people. They found black people so amusing they even took it upon themselves to mimic them for other white people's enjoyment. In the 1800s minstrel shows were a major source of entertainment in America. White people would paint their skin black and would perform comedic skits as well as singing and dancing to create a caricature out of black people and dehumanize them. These shows are where the term blackface was coined, and it is still a controversial issue that is still happening today. In minstrel shows there were different characters such as the zip coon, Uncle Tom, Rastus, Sambo, mammy, and Aunt Jemima. (Lemons, *"*Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture 1880-1920", pg., 102) The mammy and Aunt Jemima character represents a black woman who is happy with her role of servitude to a white family. She is seen as a motherly figure who is heavyset. This character mirrored what female slaves and maids dealt with because they were often the caretakers of the house. They cooked, cleaned, and took care of the head of household children. Hatti McDaniel portrayed the role of Mammy in *Gone with the Wind 1939* and won an Oscar for best supporting actress which made her the first African American ever to win one. The Mammy/Aunt Jemima trope has been in

films such as *The Help* and has been used as symbols on products such as AUNT JEMIMA PANCAKE MIX and THE SOUTH'S ELITE MAMMY BRAND SALTED PEANUTS. This caricature is one of many labels that have been placed on to black women in society, art, film, and the media overall. Even modern entertainment still feeds into that stereotype for comedic purposes. Tyler Perry and Martin Lawrence have played characters where they are dressed as a heavyset black woman who is motherly but also loud, *(I Can Do Bad All by Myself, 2000)* (*Big Momma's House 2000*) proving that black people can feed into their own negative stereotypes as well. Eddie Murphy's *Norbit* (Eddie Murphy 2007) is about an awkward timid man who is married to Rasputia an overweight, loud, mean, and angry woman who treats him terribly and is unfaithful. Her character feeds into the black women are loud and angry stereotype.

**Angry or Assertive?**

The angry black woman is a sassy, ill tempered, impatient, and aggressive and always has a bad attitude. This stereotype is harmful to black women in real life because they often must suppress and downplay their feelings when disrespected in public especially in the workplace to not be seen as angry. In the article "Women's Anger, Aggression, and Violence", the author highlights results from a research study examining women's anger, stress levels, and responsibilities of being mothers, wives, and being in the workplace. When they examined African American women, they learned that their anger was more justified because of what they were taught growing up. "Unlike European American women, there was a greater acceptance of anger's positive functions, because Black women had learned in girlhood from their mothers and grandmothers that they must protect themselves to survive in a difficult racist world." (Thomas, 2005, pg. 511) In "Debunking the Myth of the "Angry Black Woman"*:* An Exploration of Anger in Young African American Women*",* J. Celeste Walley-Jean talks about how research suggests

that African American women's experience of anger is multifaceted by numerous factors and can have negative behavioral health effects. Two studies conducted by (Fields, "Anger of African American Women in the South, 1998,) and (Thomas, Women's Anger Aggression and Violence", *2005)* described how African American women's anger revolves around three central themes. Power which is experienced at home, school, or the workplace. Control is a way they would suppress their emotions and anger so they would not be labeled as out of control. Respect comes to play where they were not being treated with respect mainly when their knowledge, ethics, values, and judgement were questioned. (Walley-Jean, 74-75) This is some of the ways in which the angry black woman trope was imitated in real life.

**Lighter skin = identity crisis**

Transitioning from the angry black woman character comes the tragic mulatto which represents a biracial woman who has issues with her identifying with her more white or black side. Slavery has played a role in this stereotype as the lighter skinned and biracial slaves were treated more fairly than the darker skinned and fully black slaves. "In the aftermath of slavery and the resulting social, economic, and political effects, Black women became the victims of negative stereotyping in mainstream American culture (Ashley 2014; Mills, *"*Old Stereotypes Made New: A Textual Analysis on the Tragic Mulatto Stereotype in Contemporary Hollywood" 2019) She is sometimes white passing and as seen as more desirable than a fully black woman. "Similarly, Streeter's (2012) examination of biracial actress and her depiction of Dorothy Dandridge in the film *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* (1999) highlights the viability of biracial actresses in Hollywood because of the beauty and eroticism associated with them." (Streeter, 2012; Mills 2019*)* Hollywood has an issue with favoring actors with lighter skin and loose textured hair over those with darker skin. A lot of roles of fully black characters have gone to

biracial actors. The tragic mulatto was portrayed as either the villain or the victim who needed to be saved. In the film *Imitation of Life (Susan Kohner, Juanita Moore 1959)* the character Sarah Jane, although fully black, was white passing and denied her race. She identified as white and dated white men. She resented and rejected her mother who was a fully black housekeeper who ended up terminally ill and passed away. It was not until her mother's death when Sarah Jane regretted how she treated her and admitted to loving her. Her character was an example of the self-hating trope. The tragic mulatto and the white passing black woman were not the only trope that was desired and eroticized.

**Sexy or sexualized?**

The next stereotype is the jezebel, a trope where a black woman who is sexually aggressive and seductive. This stereotype, like the others, has a rooted connection to slavery. The article "Reexamining the "Jezebel" Stereotype: The Role of Implicit and Psychosexual Attitudes" informs that enslaved women were characterized as lustful and sensual as a justification to the sexual abuse and rape done by their owners. (Collier, Taylor, Peterson, 2017, pg. 92) "The African woman truly enjoyed being ravaged by her master and his sons so that abusing her was simply satisfying her natural desires" (Simms, Controlling Images, and the Gender Construction of Enslaved African Women, 2001, pg. 883) This problem still stands today when black women who report being assaulted or raped, and it not being taken seriously. This also affects younger black girls. "In *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood"* the authors explain how black children who were enslaved worked as much as the adults, did not have time to play, and were punished whenever they displayed normal childlike behavior.(Blake, Epstein, Gonzalez, pg. 4) This results to how black kids especially little black girls are viewed as more mature than other children. It is common in certain black American

households' where young girls are called "fast" or told they are acting "too grown" dismissing them from being seen as innocent as other children. Another theme is being told that they could not wear red lipstick or nail polish as that color was deemed grown or being told they cannot wear certain clothing when male figures were around such as shorts because it is disrespectful. This is an example on how the jezebel trope has made it normal for young black girls and women's bodies to be sexualized in American culture. The sexualization of black women's bodies in American culture dates to the 1930s. "The Jezebel Stereotype" written by Dr. David Pilgrim (2002) describes how young black girls depicted in art were usually naked with overly exaggerated adult-like curves and were covering themselves with objects such as trees and blankets in a seductive manner. "Everyday items such as ashtrays, postcards, sheet music, fishing lures, drinking glasses, and so forth depicted naked or scantily dressed black women lacking modesty and sexual restraint." (Pilgrim, 2002) This notion continued throughout American culture through film and music specifically hip- hop culture. Blaxploitation films in the 70s wanted to change the way black people were depicted in film, and appeal to urban audiences. They were usually about black heroes taking down white villains such as corrupt cops and officials. However, the black female characters in these films were sexually exploited and reduced to being a prize for the male lead to fondle with. A lot of the time the actresses were nude and often played roles as hookers and prostitutes. Pam Grier is notable for starring in these films and though she was also sexualized she was able to play the hero and have control over it. She got to toy with the men whereas the other films it was the opposite. Other films outside that genre still had a problem with reducing the black female characters as sexual objects and in some cases to white men. In *Taxi Driver (*1976) one of the characters who is a black hooker has sex with a white businessman in the back of the taxi. In *Monster's Ball* (2001) Halle Berry's

character has an explicitly drawn-out sex scene with Billy Bob Thorton who played a racist officer who supervised her husband's execution. Lisa Bonet played a voodoo priestess in the film *Angel Heart. "*Epiphany Proudfoot has a sexual episode with Harry Angel (Mickey Rourke) that was so graphic that the movie almost received an X rating." (Pilgrim, 2002) Aside from movies, the jezebel trope continued to echo in American music culture specifically rap and hip-hop. From sexually explicit lyrics referring to black females as "bitches" and "hoes" to rapping about the sexual activities they want to engage with them. They were usually eye candy in music videos. The proper term for this is video vixen which is a woman who is a female model who stars in hip hop music videos. She is usually the love interest of the artist who made the song. Video "hoes" are the women who are sexualized and dances promiscuously in the videos. "The Worlds Have Changed but the Ideology Remains the Same: Misogynistic Lyrics in Rap Music," breaks it down more. "The ho is illustrated as a sex object that can be used and abused in any form to satisfy the sexual desires of a man. She is generally depicted as a person with no conscious, no self-esteem, and no values." (Adams, T. Fuller, D. 2006, pg. 948)

**Does Life Imitate Art?**

The article mentioned before explains how rap artists use misogynistic imagery and rap for multiple reasons. Aside from objectifying black women, the lyrics they rap may boost up their ego while tearing down their own women. The more they tear their women down, the more they feel praised in a world that oppresses them. Zora Neal Hurston in a statement described how African American women sacrifice themselves while others worry about their own sense of importance. (Adams, T. Fuller, D. 2006, pg. 948) Hip-hop and rap culture has a big influence on society in America, especially amongst young consumers. It may be easier to fall into what's constantly said and shown in popular art forms. Young black men may think it's acceptable to

treat women the way their favorite artist talks about them. While the ones who are being talked about may begin to personalize and project those beliefs onto themselves. "Wade and Thomas-Gunnar (1993) report that more than half of a sample of young, educated adult males "agreed that rap accurately reflects at least some of the reality of gender relations, between black males and females."" (Adams, T. Fuller, D. 2006, pg 953) Negative stereotypes and tropes can cause an influence on how people are viewed and treated in real life.
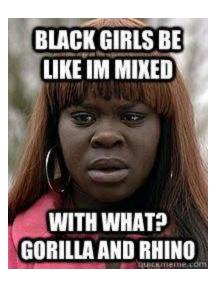
**Modern Day Minstrel Shows**

Starting from the 2010s-present internet memes as well as social media platforms such as YouTube, vine, and Tik Tok have had its fair share of content creators both black and non-black making ignorant jokes and stereotyping black women. They would play characters wearing colorful wigs, headscarves, or bonnets. Sometimes they would stuff their shirts and pants with pillows and blankets to mimic and exaggerate the curves most black women naturally have. The titles of the videos would be categorized as either "hood," "ratchet," or "ghetto girls be like." (Charlez. [Iamcharlez]. (2021, April 4). Ghetto girls on live be like) [Video]. YouTube. https://youtube.com/shorts/sXBN5QBZmC0?feature=share  They would name themselves something stereotypically ghetto like "Bonqueisha" or "Shanaynay." The characters are usually aggressively patting their heads in mockery of women who wear weaves and wigs that do cause itchiness of the scalp. They are almost always chewing gum loudly and use excessive slang and profanity. ([Dopee SimsLover].) (2014, April 22). Ratchet girls be like! Vine compilation 2014) [Video] YouTube. https://youtu.be/mwY0I42qTgA  These jokes would range from having to pay rent, using food stamps, fighting, twerking, or complaining about their baby daddies usually named Tyrone or Daquan. Famous youtubers like Shane Dawson has caught fire for participating in this trend in many of his older videos which are now deleted where he played a character

named Shenehneh and went as far as painting his skin brown and saying the word "nigga."

(Dawson, S. [Shane Dawson]. (2014, September 26). My Apology (Blackface & Offensive

Videos) [Video] YouTube. https://youtu.be/3jZDt5zQWsE  A lot of these creators were not

called out on their ignorance and racism until years later because it was such a normal thing at

the time the jokes were made. (Noir, T. [Tee Noir]. (2021, February 22). The Market of

Humiliating Black Women [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/yZtPMJKBD80 Young people

who have access to the internet may find these funny and think that it is ok to joke like this. This

may even shift their view on how they view actual black women. This type of humor is a modern

version of what white people did in the 1800s at minstrel shows, except black people especially

black men are participating and fueling these stereotypes as well.  These jokes have affected

black girls growing up as they were the butt of classroom jokes especially if they had dark skin.

The normalization of these jokes has caused deep rooted insecurities in black women as well as seeing the categories they are placed in in television and the media. Black girls and women may feel like they are not properly represented in the entertainment they consume. Women of other races especially white have not had as many negative stereotypes and tropes characterized onto as black women. They see themselves in numerous ways in tv and film. There is, however, some room for change and has been some progress.

**Moving Forward**

The big question in all this is how can black women be represented without being stereotyped but at the same time not being dismissed of their race? There have been some breakthroughs in the entertainment industry. Actresses like Zendaya and Candice Patton portrayed roles of iconic comic book love interests who were originally Caucasian such as MJ in *Spider-Man No Way Home (2021)* and Iris West in CW's *The Flash. (2014-Present)* This is great representation to show that black women can be delicate and the romantic interest who needs saving without being objectified. In addition to the sci-fi and fantasy genres black women were also represented as the heroes themselves with gifted abilities. Characters like Bonnie Bennett in *The Vampire Diaries (2009),* Kendra Young in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997),* Rosalind Walker in *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina (2018),* and Rue in *The Hunger Games (2012)* are some examples of black female characters who always helped saved the day. Even horror movies have evolved from just having the token black character who dies early in the film. *Doctor Sleep (2019)* a sequel to the horror classic *The Shining (1980)* tells the story of an adult Dan Torrance who cross paths with Abra Stone a young bi-racial black girl who has clairvoyant and telekinetic powers and they team up to stop an evil cult who prey on children with magic abilities. It is rare for movies to have young black girls have unique powers and defeat the bad guy. If not super-heroes or witches' black women can be princesses too. Singer and actress Brandy played Cinderella alongside Whitney Houston who played her Fairy Godmother in *Rogers & Hammerstein's Cinderella (1997).* Princess Tiana became an iconic character for little black girls in Disney's *The Princess and the Frog. (2009)* Singer Halle Bailey of duo group Chloe x Halle is taking on the role of the iconic Ariel in Rob Marshall's live adaptation of *The Little Mermaid. (2023)* When it was announced that she would be playing the role of course it was a lot of negative backlash most of it rooted in racism. A social media hashtag #notmyariel was created as people

shared their complaints on ariel being casted by a black girl even though Ariel's race contributed nothing to her character, her being a mermaid did. Rob Marshall, the director of the film, stated "After an extensive search, it was abundantly clear that Halle possesses that rare combination of spirit, heart, youth, innocence, and substance- plus a glorious singing voice- all intrinsic qualities necessary to play this iconic role." Kroll, J. (2019) "Disney's Live-Action 'Little Mermaid' Casts Halle Bailey as Ariel," 'Little Mermaid' Reboot Casts Halle Bailey as Ariel - Variety Unfortunately, regardless of how talented and fit for the role Halle is, there will always be people bothered by the fact that she does not resemble the white cartoon they grew up with. All around it is great that black women get to see themselves portrayed as mystical and magical beings, but some may want to be seen in normal coming of age stories where the character is navigating life. Television characters like Moesha (*Moesha*, 1996), Penny Proud (*The Proud Family*, 2001) Raven Baxter (*That's So Raven*, 2003) and Maya, Joan, Toni, and Lynn (*Girlfriends*, 2000) are just young women learning lessons about life and themselves. Issa Rae's *Insecure (2016)* is a modern-day comedy about black women with more quirky and awkward personalities dealing with life's everyday experiences and relationships. Black women come from various backgrounds and have various personalities, values, and beliefs which should be represented.

**Conclusion**

Historical moments such as slavery and white supremacy still impacts and shapes American culture. Every race has stereotypes, and whether they find it offensive or accurate is completely subjective. However black people, especially black women are patterned in media, art, film to entertain and please others.

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