



Carolyn M. West, PhD

is Professor of Psychology at the University of Washington, where she teaches courses on the psychology of Black women. She is co-editor of the journal *Sexualization, Media, and Society*.

Her research is focused on violence against women and human sexuality. Her best-known book is *Violence in the Lives of Black Women: Battered, Black, and Blue*.

Mammy, Sapphire, Jezebel, and the Bad Girls of Reality Television

Media Representations of Black Women

It is the summer of 2016 and the airwaves are filled with #BlackGirlMagic¹ (Thomas, 2015). I swell with pride as Donna Brazil, veteran political strategist, and Michelle Obama, our iconic first lady, take the stage at the Democratic National Convention (Owens, 2016). My spirit soars when young Black women athletes capture gold medals in swimming (Simone Manuel) and gymnastics (Simone Biles and Gabby Douglas) at the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro (Reid, 2016). I am entertained on Thursday nights by Shonda Rhimes, writer/producer extraordinaire, who has crafted complex Black female characters, such as Olivia Pope on *Scandal* and Annalise Keating on *How to Get Away With Murder* (Allison, 2016).

At the same time, the media landscape is populated with Gold Diggers, Modern Jezebels, Baby Mamas, Uneducated Sisters, Ratchet Women, Angry Women, Mean Black Girls, Unhealthy Black Women, and Black Barbies. *Essence* magazine surveyed more than 1,200 Black women and the participants overwhelmingly had a negative reaction to the aforementioned media images (Walton, 2013). At the same time, Black women are frequent consumers of this televised mayhem. In 2013, 6 of the top 10 television shows watched by African American audiences were in the “reality television” genre. By 2014, there were more than 10 reality television shows featuring

¹ CaShawn Thompson created the hashtag #BlackGirlsAreMagic in 2013 to speak about the positive achievements of Black women. Since then, the hashtag has spread widely (Thomas, 2015).

the antics of Black women, including *Basketball Wives*, *Love and Hip-Hop*, and the *Real Housewives of Atlanta* (Allison, 2016).

Understanding the role of media representations in the lives of 21st-century Black women is important for several reasons. According to scholars, some stereotypes have been activated so frequently, for example through media exposure, that these representations can occur nonconsciously in the mere presence of a stereotyped group member. If an individual chooses to accept a stereotype, or if he or she simply does not think about it, then the image can influence the way in which they perceive and interact with African American women in social situations (Donovan, 2011). I learned this lesson after attending a large professional convention for psychologists. As I was leaving the hotel restaurant, a White male diner asked me to show him to a table. He probably had encountered more Black female servers than Black female university professors, which made it easier for him to assume that I was a waitress, although my dark blue power suit and arms filled with books suggested otherwise.

In response to these misrepresentations, some Black women engage in “shifting,” which is an emotionally taxing psychological process where they “change or alter various parts of themselves such as their speech or dress, in order to placate both mainstream society and their own communities of color” (Johnson, Gamst, Meyers, Arellano-Morales, & Shorter-Gooden, 2016, p. 15). To illustrate, Black women may change the tone of their voice in the presence of non-Black people to avoid being perceived as aggressive, or they may downplay their academic achievements to avoid being perceived as threatening to potential male partners.

On the other hand, much like adjusting their posture to live in a crooked room, when “bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion” (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 29). In other words, the cultural (mis)representations of African American women are so widespread that individual Black women may embrace them as authentic characteristics and behaviors that they then enact in their daily lives. As a result, Black college women who self-identified as nurturing Mammies, or as verbally combative Sapphires, or as promiscuous Jezebels have reported a variety of psychological challenges, including lower self-esteem (Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2004), depression (Donovan & West, 2015), and binge eating disorder (Harrington, Crowther, & Shipherd, 2010).

In my lecture, I discuss how and why the Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel images were created and how they have been replaced by corresponding contemporary images that serve a similar function, including the Strong Black Woman, the Angry Black Woman, and the Video Vixen. Specifically, I discuss how the Mammy image can contribute to role strain, which is the challenge of balancing multiple responsibilities, and concerns about physical features, including skin color, hair texture, and weight. Next, I explore how Black women’s expression of anger is shaped by the Sapphire image. Finally, I discuss how the Jezebel image can influence perceptions

of Black women's sexuality and victimization. In a focus group interview, one Black female graduate student said: "It's hard to define yourself and create an image of yourself that is positive and healthy" (Watson, Robinson, Dispenzas, & Nazari, 2012, p. 466). Therefore, I discuss some ways that Black women can develop more positive self-images.

Throughout my lecture, I use examples of media representations that depict Black women in popular culture, including those from television and film, the music industry, advertising, print, and digital media (Gammage, 2016; Goldman, Ford, Harris, & Howard, 2014). I invite you to become a more critical consumer of these images (Nicol, 2013). As you read, ask yourself and your peers questions such as: Do you think that reality television performers such as Tiffany Pollard, better known as "New York," and her mother "Sister Patterson" are modern-day Jezebels and Sapphires who reinforce the worst stereotypes about African American women (Campbell, Giannino, China, & Harris, 2008)? Perhaps you believe that shows that depict Black women engaging in verbal combat and slugfests are just entertainment (Warner, 2015). Is the Oliva Pope character on *Scandal* a sexually liberated Black woman who freely has an affair with the married White president or is she a modern day Sally Hemmings, the enslaved woman who bore President Thomas Jefferson's children (Gammage, 2016)? Is talented singer Beyoncé a Black feminist icon, particularly after she created the stunningly visual album *Lemonade* (Trier-Bieniek, 2016), or is Beyoncé a "cultural terrorist" who has recycled the Jezebel stereotype² (hooks, 2016)?

Mammy

The names *Mammy* and *Aunt* were both used in Southern antebellum fiction to describe a role and a person within the plantation household who served as a baby nurse, cook, and general domestic worker (Parks, 2010). The Mammy image continues to be a common representation of Black women. Christian (1980) described her temperament and physical appearance as follows:

black in color as well as race and fat with enormous breasts that are full enough to nourish all the children in the world; her head is perpetually covered with her trademark kerchief to hide the kinky hair that marks her as ugly. Tied to her physical characteristics are her personality traits: she is strong, for she certainly has enough girth, but this strength

² To inform your discussion about Beyoncé, see the reading list at #Lemonade <http://www.aaihs.org/lemonade-a-black-feminist-resource-list/> and watch her video *Lemonade* at <https://www.izlesene.com/video/beyonce-lemonade/9296178>. In May 2014, The New School in New York City hosted a panel discussion that caused quite a stir after author and social activist bell hooks called Beyoncé a "terrorist." Watch bell hooks and Janet Mock debate: <http://lives-tream.com/TheNewSchool/Slave/videos/50178872>

is used in the service to her white master and as a way of keeping her male counterparts in check; she is kind and loyal, for she is a mother; she is sexless. (pp. 12–13)

There is little historic evidence to support the existence of a subordinate, nurturing, self-sacrificing Mammy figure. The reality is that enslaved women were beaten and overworked. In response, they ran away or helped other slaves escape, fought back when punished, and, in some cases, poisoned the slave owners. Therefore, historians and authors rewrote history to create the image of the loyal, happy Mammy for several reasons. First, if we could believe that Mammy in Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone with the Wind* (brought to life by Hattie McDaniel in the movie) was content with her life, we could believe that slavery was a relatively humane institution and that Black women were happy with their marginalized status (Harris-Perry, 2011; Parks, 2010).

Of course, the Mammy image did not retire after slavery. Americans surrounded themselves with this image in the form of commercial products, such as cookbooks and cookie jars. Similar to the work that they performed during slavery, and well into the 20th century many Black women were forced to work as cooks, nursemaids, and washerwomen. The Mammy image erased the economic and occupational inequalities that Black women faced in the workplace by popularizing and normalizing the notion that Black women were naturally suited to be in perpetual servitude. After all, the domestic items always had a broad, toothy grin, and the actual Black women who performed these domestic duties were expected to project the image that they too were equally as happy. Ask your classmates why Mammy syrup pitchers and similar racist memorabilia have been retired into attics and garages, but the Quaker Oats Company has refused to retire the smiling Aunt Jemima icon that has appeared on their breakfast products for more than a century (see Nicol, 2013, and Pilgrim, 2015, for a discussion).

The portrayal of Black women as asexual, physically undesirable Mammies also made it easier to deny the frequent sexual assault of enslaved women. Depicting African American women as kinky haired, coal-black Mammies who were morbidly obese ensured that they would be at the very bottom of the beauty hierarchy that valued White-/light-colored skin; straight, preferably blond hair; and a thin body build. After all, it was reasoned (Harris-Perry, 2011), what slave owner would select this monstrous Black woman as a sexual partner over his White wife who was the epitome of refinement and beauty?

Role Strain and the Strong Black Woman

The expectation that Black women constantly provide service and emotional labor, always with a smile, continues to persist in modern times. In fact, Black women from all walks of life, from corporate professionals to service workers, complain that coworkers and supervisors ask them to assume multipurpose caretaker roles as guidance counselors, nannies, and therapists.

As Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2013) asserted, “mammification invokes the long history of racialized and gendered comfort imagined in the person of a large, African-featured Black woman” (p. 47). For example, in 1998, John Gray, author of the Mars and Venus series of self-help books, appeared on Oprah Winfrey’s show. In response to an audience member’s distress, he instructed Ms. Winfrey, one of the most powerful women in the television, to give the woman a hug. He went on to say, “Oprah’s going to be your mommy. . . She’s the mother of America. That’s why she didn’t have time for her own kids. She’s taking care of all the lost children” (Burrelle’s Transcripts, 1998, p. 8). However, unlike Oprah, less wealthy mammified Black women may receive verbal praise for such displays of emotional warmth, but rarely does this recognition result in monetary rewards or respect in the workplace (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2013).

Unlike her Mammy predecessor, the Strong Black Woman (SBW) is expected to perform constant emotional services to Black community and family members. Perhaps you know her as

the do-it-all mother, always on-call, raising children, sustaining households, working both outside and inside the home...She’s the determined sister who against all odds got that college degree. . . She’s the girl-friend you bare all with, the one you tell your troubles to. . . . We’ve been schooled by the stories about her, seen her in action, witnessed her in our sisters. We’ve named her the “Strong Black Woman.” (Parks, 2010, p. viii)

A growing Black feminist literature of autobiographical, theoretical, clinical, and empirical studies has consistently shown that African American women internalize the SBW image (Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, & Belgrave, 2014; Nelson, Cardemil, & Adeoye, 2016). For example, the majority (83%) of Black college women in one sample perceived themselves as currently, or in the future, exhibiting the following traits: strong/assertive, independent, educated, hardworking/ambitious, caring, and self-confident (West, Donovan, & Daniel, 2016). Frequent consumption of music videos and Black- and women-oriented magazines, particularly if Black women perceived the images to be realistic, has been associated with accepting the notion of the SBW (Jerald, Ward, Moss, Thomas, & Fletcher, in press).

On one hand, the internalization of strength, up to a point, can provide some protection against the psychological and physical outcomes of stressful events and discrimination, including experiences with racism and sexism in the classroom. For example, Mary, a graduate student in psychology, reported in a focus group: “Black folks are less intelligent, and women are certainly unintelligent, so we’re just double stupid” (Scott, 2013, p. 318). In response, Mary always did her best work in order to challenge these stereotypes.

At the same time, there can be a steep cost, in the form of negative effects on Black women’s mental health, associated with the constant display of strength. For example, the internalization of the self-sacrificing Mammy, as measured by such items as “I feel guilty when I put my own needs before

others” and “People often expect me to take care of them,” has been associated with lower self-esteem (Thomas et al., 2004, p. 433). In addition, stress was a significant predictor of depressive symptoms among Black women who reported moderate and high levels of SBW endorsement (Donovan & West, 2015). Furthermore, adhering to the SBW mandate may intensify these symptoms when Black women are reluctant to seek help, as one Black woman admitted: “Yes, I noticed that it often causes me to refuse and avoid asking for help from others . . . thus trapping me in a rut and leaving me frustrated” (West et al., 2016, p. 402).

To conclude, the SBW is a paradox and a contradiction: “She’s flesh and blood, myth and fiction, fact and lie” (Parks, 2010, p. ix). As a society, we must address the economic and social inequalities that leave Black women so vulnerable to role strain. This means challenging social and political policies that assume Black women don’t need community or government support in the form of social services, such as child support, daycare centers, and financial support for education (Harris-Perry, 2011). It is interesting that a correlation between stress and depression was not found for Black women who did not strive to fulfill the SBW role (Donovan & West, 2015). As individuals, Black women must learn to seek and accept social support, nurture themselves as well as they nurture others, and set boundaries by refusing unreasonable requests. They must give themselves permission to move from superhuman to merely human, which will allow them simultaneously to express their vulnerability and celebrate their resilience.

Body Image

Portrayals of Mammy with a very dark skin tone, kinky hair, and obesity—all physical features that contrast with European beauty standards—suggest that Black women are at the very bottom of the beauty hierarchy. The belief that Black women, in general, are physically unattractive persists. *Psychology Today* blogger, Satoshi Kanazawa (2011), an evolutionary psychologist, created a firestorm in the media after he published a blogpost in which he claimed that “black women are far less attractive than white, Asian, and Native American women.” He further speculated that Black women’s higher rates of obesity and masculinized appearance contribute to their unattractiveness:

The only thing I can think of that might potentially explain the lower average level of physical attractiveness among black women is testosterone . . . women with higher levels of testosterone also have more masculine features and are therefore less physically attractive.

Although the blogpost was taken down and an apology was issued, Black women continue to be bombarded by media images in the form of “male mummies” such as Madea in Tyler Perry’s films, Rasputia in Eddie Murphy’s *Norbit*, and Martin Lawrence’s Big Momma. In one study, Black women said that these grossly overweight characters desexualized and demeaned actual Black women (Chen, Williams, Hendrickson, & Chen, 2012).

Some Black women struggle with reconciling their beauty with that of mainstream standards, especially concerning weight and body image, skin tone, and hair texture (Awad et al., 2015). The internalization of media images that feature a thin body type, lighter skin tone, and long or straight hair has been associated with greater body dissatisfaction (Capodilupo, 2015; Watson, Livingston, Cliette, & Eaton, 2015). Below, I discuss some of these challenges and ways that Black women have redefined beauty images.

Weight and Obesity. It may appear to the casual observer that the happy Mammy image is consistent with reality. A disproportionate number of African American women are considered to be overweight, and 35% are diagnosed as obese (body mass index of 30 or above) (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2013). Despite their heavier weight, in comparison to White women, African American women reported a more positive body image and were less likely to engage in unhealthy dieting and restrictive eating practices. In fact, many young Black women celebrate their curves and express pride in being described as *thick* or *healthy*. The acceptance of larger body sizes in the Black community and a rejection of White beauty standards may explain these results (Quick & Bryd-Bredbenner, 2014).

Yet, the cheerful Mammy image can also mask the reality of weight concerns in the lives of real Black women. Too often they are overweight because they live in disadvantaged residential areas, with an overabundance of fast-food restaurants and a limited number of full-service grocery stores that stock affordable, healthy foods, such as fresh fruits and vegetables. Moreover, these communities may lack recreational facilities and green spaces to exercise, and if available, they may not be safe places to play or exercise. Black women's sometimes heavy weight places them at elevated risk for a variety of chronic and debilitating conditions, such as hypertension, heart disease, and diabetes (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2013).

For other African American women, including those with economic resources, "overeating is the outward expression of emotional states that have no direct mode of expression" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2013, p. 44). In other words, it is a way to manage stress, depression, and anxiety. Consider Kira's experience using food as a coping strategy:

I feel like food is the easiest thing to get to, you know. . . . Let's say I'm having trouble, problems with people in general. Like, I go to work, I go to school, every day, and people are always interrogating me or whatever. And it's like, "Well, right now, food will solve the problem. It'll satisfy me." (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2013, p. 45)

Moreover, some Black women, particularly those who have internalized an idealized form of the Strong Black Woman image, use food to self-medicate and suppress the emotional pain that is associated with previous physical and sexual trauma (Harrington et al., 2010). Other Black women binge eat, which results in weight gain, because they hope to prevent future sexual

harassment and assault. In a focus group, one Black woman reported: "As I have aged, I realized that one of the things that I do to not have that unwelcome comment or objectification is to gain weight and to make yourself unattractive" (Watson et al., 2012, p. 467).

Black women also may receive mixed messages about their body size and shape. On one hand, they absorb the message from the mainstream media that a thin body type is most desirable and that they should diet or exercise to fit this beauty standard. At the same time, some thinner Black women perceived themselves to be less attractive because they lacked the curves that define the "typical" Black woman's body. Barbara, a 22-year-old undergraduate shared her experience: "There was this one girl . . . she couldn't understand why I wasn't as large as 'regular' Black women because my hips aren't large and my butt isn't big and she's like, 'I don't understand, 'cause you're Black'" (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Hunt, 2016, p. 772). Paradoxically, some Black women strive for a slim-thick body with a thinner waist with medium-size breasts and large buttocks.

Skin Color. The term *colorism* refers to a discriminatory economic and social system that values lighter over darker skin tones and has deep historical roots. During slavery, Blacks with lighter skin, often the offspring of White slave owners, were sometimes given more education, less strenuous physical labor, and better housing. These privileges continued after emancipation. In the early 1900s, consistent with the color discrimination that was perpetuated in the larger society, some Black community members used European physical features to determine admission to schools, churches, and social organizations. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the "Black is Beautiful" movement was at its height and celebrated African physical features, such as natural hairstyles and dark skin. In contemporary times, however, "old forms of colorism have been replaced with more subtle manifestations appearing through casual name-calling, subtle comments, and carefully hidden stereotypes" (Wilder, 2015b, p. 203). Beyond race, social class, and gender, in the midst of the 21st century, skin color still plays an integral role in shaping the life experiences of young Black women. For example, derogatory words are used to describe dark skin, such as *burnt*, *charcoal*, and *tar baby*. This negative connotation can be internalized. One self-described brown woman explained her bathing ritual: "As a little girl I would get really dark in the summer and I would come home and scrub my skin when I was in the shower, so I could get my brown color back" (Wilder, 2015b, p. 201). As they grew into adolescence, those darker in complexion quickly learned that society and even members of their own community perceived them to be loud, intimidating, and suspicious (Wilder, 2015b). Media representations, for example in the form of rap music videos, may convey unfavorable messages about dark-skinned women or even exclude them (Maxwell, Abrams, & Belgrave, in press). The internalization of this message can leave some Black women with the belief that they are unworthy of happy, healthy relationships with an intimate partner. Yet, despite

these challenges, with the support of a strong family support network and a positive racial identity, darker skinned Black women can develop a strong sense of self-esteem and comfort with their beauty (Wilder & Cain, 2011).

Light-skinned Black women appear to enjoy more social privileges, and many of them are aware of color preferences in job settings. One Black undergraduate noted: “If I go into an interview and there is a dark-skinned girl next to me, I feel as though I have a better chance than her just because I have a lighter skin complexion” (Wilder, 2015b, p. 199). As for dating relationships, lighter skinned Black women are believed to be more physically attractive and to possess positive personality traits (Stephens & Thomas, 2012). At the same time, they may be highly sexualized or find themselves wondering if partners are more attracted to their physical appearance than to their personalities. Because of these perceived privileges, lighter skinned Black women may be accused of conceit and arrogance. Sharelle, an 18-year-old who identified her skin tone as light brown, openly discussed her frustration with being stereotyped as a snob: “I don’t think I’m stuck up, but people say that I am, and I just think it’s because of my complexion” (Wilder, 2015b, p. 193). Despite these challenges, many light-skinned Black women develop a sense of pride and a healthy racial identity (Wilder, 2015a).

Hair Texture. Hair texture plays a critical role in how African American women view themselves and others. Recall that Mammy and Aunt Jemima always had their hair covered in a bandana or head rag. Kinky hair, which was referred to as “wool” during the slave era, was perceived to be dirty, unkempt, and unattractive (Ellis-Hervey, Doss, Davis, Nicks, & Araiza, 2016). Even today, Black women are publically shamed because of the appearance of their hair. On the April 4, 2007, edition of MSNBC’s *Imus in the Morning*, host Don Imus³ referred to the Rutgers University women’s basketball team, which was comprised of eight African American and two White players, as “nappy-headed hos” (Nicol, 2013). It is especially painful when this public hair shaming is perpetrated by members of the African American community. For example, Gabby Douglas received some very hurtful comments via social media about her hair as she competed in the Olympic Games (Buckner, 2016). Today, African American women can choose to wear their hair in a variety of styles, including weaves, wigs, dreads, chemically processed, or nonchemically processed (often referred to as “natural hair”) (Ellis-Hervey et al., 2016). Still, Black women who wear natural hairstyles may be perceived as “militant” or “angry.” In other cases, they are perceived to be more creative: “Now . . . because my hair is natural all of a sudden I can sing, I do poetry (laughter) like there are all of these things that are assigned to me because I have natural hair” (Awad et al., 2015, p. 549). Although their level of self-esteem does not vary based

³ On April 4, 2007, Don Imus commented negatively on the Rutgers University women’s basketball team, which was comprised of eight African American and two White players. Watch these comments at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmF8ileOVEo>

on hairstyle choice, African American women with natural hair seem to be less concerned about the perceptions of others and less inclined to embrace European beauty standards (Ellis-Hervey et al., 2016).

However, for other Black woman, altering their natural hair, with a straightening comb or chemical relaxer, is a “rite of passage” that begins at an early age and continues into adulthood. In addition to conforming to beauty standards, straighter hair seems to be an unspoken requirement for entering some social groups and business networks. Cindy, a 23-year-old Black graduate student cut her dreadlocks and her advisor remarked: “I love your new hairstyle; you look so professional.” The student experienced this comment as a microaggression because it implied that her natural hair was somehow “unprofessional” (Lewis et al., 2016, p. 771). A tremendous amount of time and money is spent on transforming Black women’s hair. For example, one Black college student admitted that “I had to take out an emergency loan so I could buy weave” (Awad et al., 2015, p. 546). Some Black women chose their hair over their health. The extra time and money spent to restyle their hair after exercise made some Black women avoid physical exertion, which led to weight gain (Huebschmann, Campbell, Brown, & Dunn, 2016).

To conclude, as one Black graduate student said in a focus group about beauty images, “having to compete with those images can be really exhausting sometimes” (Watson et al., 2012, p. 465). There are several things that could help Black women with struggles regarding beauty ideals and body image. For example, we can challenge ourselves and others when wavy or straight hair is referred to as “good” and curly or kinky hair is referred to as “bad” (Ellis-Hervey et al., 2016). Second, nutrition campaigns can consider how trauma, depression, stress, as well as adherence to the SBW stereotype, contribute to Black women’s health challenges and weight gain (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2013). Third, families (Wilder & Cain, 2011) and universities (Gasman & Abiola, 2016) can be places of healing and learning about color consciousness. For example, documentaries such as *Dark Girls* (Berry, Berry, & Duke, 2011), *Light Girls* (Duke, 2015), and *Good Hair* (Rock, 2010) examine Black women’s body image in ways that college students may find especially engaging. It is worth noting that Black women who have a positive racial identity remain satisfied with their body image, even when exposed to media images (Zhang, Dixon, & Conrad, 2009). Perhaps Grace, a Black graduate student, put it best: “As long as I perceive myself as beautiful then, I really don’t have any issue with the media’s definition of beautiful” (Awad et al., 2015, p. 560).

Sapphire

The *Amos ’n Andy* show created the character Sapphire Stevens, which was played by Ernestine Wade as a domineering, aggressive, and emasculating shrew who drew laughs for berating King Fish, her lazy, get-rich-quick,

con-artist husband. It began as a radio show, and the television version, with its all-Black cast, aired on CBS from 1951 to 1953. Civil rights organizations complained that the show depicted African Americans as buffoons, and it was eventually removed from the broadcast schedule (for a historical overview see Pilgrim, 2015).

In addition to humorous depictions, contemporary Sapphires are represented as Angry Black Women (ABW) or Sistas with Attitude. In fact, this portrayal permeates our culture. For example, there are websites where you can buy Angry Black Bitch cups, shirts, pillows, aprons, mouse pads, and even teddy bears (Pilgrim, 2015). All too often, reality television shows feature Black women who are drama-prone, overbearing, aggressive, and even hyperviolent. For example, VH1's *Love and Hip-Hop* based in Atlanta, New York, and Hollywood has filmed fight scenes among Black female cast members. Viewers are invited to tune in for "drama with explosive words, both on and off stage" or "explosive confrontations" (Gammage, 2016, p. 80). Even educated Black women are shown as rampaging ABW. Bravo's reality television show *Married to Medicine*, with two board-certified medical doctors, had an episode where cast members, Toya and Mariah, were filmed fighting at a gala. Omarosa Manigault-Stallworth, who was a participant on the first season of Donald Trump's television show *The Apprentice*, was the archetypal ABW. She shouted, lied, and undermined the other contestants, which earned her contempt and a place on *TV Guide's* 2013 list of the 60 Nastiest Villains List of All Times (Allison, 2016; Gammage, 2016).

The Sapphire/ABW image serves several purposes. According to Pilgrim (2015) "it is a social control mechanism that is employed to punish black women who violate the societal norms that encourage them to be passive, servile, nonthreatening, and unseen" (p. 121). In other words, because their passion and righteous indignation is often misread as irrational anger, this image can be used to silence and shame Black women who dare to challenge social inequalities, complain about their circumstances, or demand fair treatment (Harris-Perry, 2011).

Because this image is so pervasive, it has become a template for portraying almost all Black women. In fact, White college students rated Black women as loud, tough, strong, less sensitive, and uneducated; Donovan (2011) concluded that "when emotional is paired with loud and tough, as with the Black female target, it suggests a hostile, domineering nature that is out of control and threatening—unfavorable traits for women" (p. 464). When skin color was considered, darker skinned Black women were more often perceived as ghetto, loud, and aggressive (Wilder, 2015b).

Escalating levels of violence have been used against Black women when authority figures perceive them as noncompliant or angry. For example, in Prairie View, Texas, a police officer threw Sandra Bland to the ground and threatened to "light her up" with a Taser. What was Sandra's crime? She was pulled over and arrested for failure to signal a lane change. Sandra later hanged herself in a jail cell, although her family contested whether

this was really the case. In Columbia, South Carolina, a school resource officer wrapped his arm around a Black girl's neck; he tried to pull her from her desk, which flipped over backward, and she was thrown across the floor. She sustained a carpet burn on her forehead and her neck, and her back and shoulder were swollen. What was Shakara's crime? The recently orphaned teenager was arrested for disturbing class, although she never uttered a word, because she refused to put her cell phone away. Both cases were captured on videotape.⁴ Despite the disproportionate violence used by these officers and the injuries sustained by Sandra and Shakara, viewers of the videos inferred that the victims were belligerent and dangerous. Consequently, the violence against these unarmed Black women was deemed to be justifiable (Love, 2016).

It is frustrating for African American women to realize that "you cannot behave your way out of racial terror" (Love, 2016). Yet, they often censor themselves to avoid perpetuating the ABW stereotype. For example, some Black women monitor their communication styles, including nonverbal behavior, to avoid being threatening to their White colleagues or others in positions of authority (Lewis et al., 2016). One woman reported: "I'm learning not to do certain behaviors, such as resting my hands on my hip or roll my eyes when in certain environments" (Scott, 2013, p. 320).

Other Black women silence their voices. Nancy, a 31-year-old graduate student said: "I always have this stigma of this angry Black woman and so, I have to kinda tone down my passion for whatever it might be" (Lewis et al., 2016, p. 769). Meanwhile, Cathy reported in a focus group: "When someone offends me I have to bite my tongue, let it sink in, so I won't speak off the emotion of the moment" (Scott, 2013, p. 321). At the risk of gaining weight, other Black women overeat to manage their anger. Macy, a college student, reported that eating lets her "shut up for a second," which helps to avoid a verbal explosion. The alternative: "You would just start telling people off and wouldn't care if you hurt anybody's feelings" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2013, 46). Attempting to balance the expression of anger and assertiveness can leave Black women in a double bind: "I feel weak as a Black woman if I get angry in class. I'm like, 'How could you let them get to you?' But then when I don't say anything, I feel I'm weak. It's like a losing battle" (Scott, 2013, p. 321).

In contrast, other African American women see the ABW as central to their identity. For example, in a focus group, Deborah proclaimed: "I am loud, pushy, controlling, stand-offish and I am a loner. And that is how other people see me too" (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 90). However, endorsing the Sapphire image, as measured by items including "Black women are usually angry with others" and "People respond to me more if I am loud and angry," has been associated with lower self-esteem (Thomas et al., 2004, p. 433). Because

⁴ Watch the Sandra Bland police dash cam video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jpSEemvwOn4> and the cell-phone video of Shakara at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBSrcdaqXo>. Please note that these videos can be disturbing.

“sistas with attitude don’t cry, don’t break, don’t need (or ask for) help, don’t need a man, don’t need a friend” (Boylorn, 2008, p. 425), Black women who embrace this stereotype are less likely to receive assistance and support.

To conclude, perhaps we should recognize that Black women have complex reactions to the media representations of the ABW. On one hand, Black college women who are frequent consumers of music videos, movies, and Black- and women-oriented magazines, particularly if they perceive these images to be realistic, have been found to be more accepting of the notion that Black women are angry or sassy Sapphires (Jerald et al., in press). On the other hand, research has shown that young Black women can grasp the nuances and complexity of the racist and sexist workings of reality television shows such as *Love and Hip-Hop NY*. More important, viewers rejected this behavior for their own lives (Edwards, 2016).

Perhaps, we should strive to accept our mixed feelings when we watch these Sapphires and ABW. As Boylorn (2008) admitted, “I feel conflicted because I find myself embracing some images and rejecting others while finding a piece of myself (the good and not-so-good parts of me)” (p. 419). Maybe some viewers can find freedom and fun in the antics of their favorite characters. Warner (2015) asserted that “to witness the behavior of these reality TV characters without the lens of respectability—unconcerned with what ‘they’ will think of if ‘we’ show out—is a liberatory act for black female audiences” (p. 141).

Away from the televised mayhem, I think that we need to show greater compassion for Black women who carry anger. Projecting this hardened persona may be a type of self-protection. The constant threat of racism and mistreatment can create a hyperarousal to danger, which in turn gets perceived as anger or aggression (Ashley, 2014). In addition, Black women can be encouraged to write about and express their justifiable anger at societal injustices (Griffin, 2012). Contemporary Black women, like their historical counterparts, have strategically used anger to benefit themselves and their communities. For example, students can use their righteous anger to protest the extrajudicial killings and assaults of unarmed African American men and women.

Jezebel

In 1619, the first ship loaded with enslaved Africans arrived in Jamestown, Virginia. Upon arrival, enslaved women were placed on the auction block, stripped naked, and examined to determine their reproductive capacity. Once sold, they were coerced, bribed, induced, seduced, ordered, and, of course, violently forced to have sexual relations with slaveholders, their sons, other male relatives, and overseers. Sexual terrorism did not end with slavery. During nighttime raids, vigilante groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, whipped African Americans, destroyed their property, and savagely raped Black women. The Jezebel image, which has been embraced

by the larger culture for more than 500 years, supports the belief that Black women's innate hypersexuality made them "unrapeable" and underserving of protection and sympathy (for a historical overview see West & Johnson, 2013).

With advances in technology and increased access to various forms of social media, young women are bombarded with these sexualized images at an accelerated rate (Brown, White-Johnson, & Griffin-Fennell, 2013). Perhaps you know the modern Jezebel as the hyperfertile Black baby momma on daytime television talk shows. On *The Maury Povich Show*, she is seeking a paternity test from 10 potential "baby daddies" and hoping to hear: "You are the father!" On reality television she is the "freak" Chardonnay, dressed in a string bikini and high heels, who turned herself into a "human sundae" by putting ice cream on her body to compete on the show *For the Love of Ray-J* (Coleman, Butler, Long, & Fisher, in press). Tiffany Pollard (known as "New York") has been described as the "perfect Jezebel for the 21st century." She flaunts her surgically enhanced breasts to the viewing audience as 20 eager-to-please men compete for her attention on her reality dating show *I Love New York* (Campbell et al., 2008, p. 23).

The most sexualized images of the modern Jezebel can be found in hip-hop culture and music videos (for a review see Ward, Rivadeneyra, Thomas, Day, & Epstein, 2013). In the late 1990s, overtly sexualized, but one-dimensional rap artists, such as Lil' Kim and Foxxxy Brown were popular. By 2011, Nicki Minaj was the undisputed queen of the sexy, female hip-hop emcees (Harris-Perry, 2011). She is also personified as the "gold digger" or the "video hoe," a woman who uses her sexuality to obtain success in the entertainment industry. Do you remember Karrine "Superhead" Steffans (2005), the self-described "video vixen" who profited from her intimate sexual knowledge of Black male entertainers with her book and speaking tour? She and other video models are staged, or in some cases, position themselves, in ways that emphasize and fetishize their large buttocks.⁵

Because Black women have been reduced to their butts, historically and in the media, they are frequently the targets of harassment, sexual assault, degrading comments, and general sexual objectification (Watson et al., 2012). For example, Olivia, a 24-year old Black graduate student, revealed that a White man had approached her in a bar, used a slur for promiscuous woman, and began singing the lyrics to the song "Shake it Fast" by Mystical: "Yeah, shake that ass, you big booty hoe." She was offended because this explicit rap song encouraged women to shake their buttocks in front of men for money (Lewis, et al., 2016, p. 769).

⁵ Focusing on Black women's buttocks is not new. Sarah Bartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus, was exhibited, with an emphasis on her large buttocks, at fashionable parties in Paris and London in the early 1800s. Upon her death, her skeleton and genitalia were preserved at a national history museum in France before she was finally laid to rest in South Africa in 2002 (Harris-Perry, 2011).

There are a variety of harmful effects associated with exposure to these forms of sexual violence. Some women become fearful or develop anxiety; whereas, others have difficulty setting boundaries and demanding healthy relationships with their partners. When internalized in the form of shame and self-blame, “rather than blame their objectifiers and place their experiences within a sociocultural context, some African American women may have internalized oppressive ideology, and thereby believe that they have caused such events to happen” (Watson et al., 2012; p. 467). Endorsing the beliefs that Black women are sex objects and that men are driven by sex was related to higher levels of self-blame and lower levels of self-esteem among young Black women who are survivors of sexual coercion (French & Neville, 2013).

In order to combat the Jezebel image, similar to early 19th-century African American women activists, such as Ida B. Wells, some Black women today seek to redefine this stereotype through projecting modesty and respectability. For example, one Black undergraduate explained: “I arrive to class early . . . looking professional not what they think or perceive us to look like, tight shirts, booty shorts, whatever” (Scott, 2013, p. 320). Despite their best efforts to appear well mannered and appropriately dressed, the sexualized Jezebel image is still projected onto Black women (Donovan, 2011).

Unable to completely escape the Jezebel image, an increasing number of Black women are embracing the hypersexual Jezebel, particularly if they are frequent media consumers who believe that these are accurate representations (Jerald et al., in press). Also, endorsement of this image was more pronounced among younger Black women, especially if they had a lower educational status and lower self-esteem (Brown et al., 2013). However, there’s a problem, I believe, with the internalization of the Jezebel image: It may lead some Black women to believe that their sexuality is a major source of self-esteem and the only valuable resource that they have to barter for material goods, such as cars and money. Further, Black women’s endorsement of this image has been associated with engaging in risky sexual behaviors, such as more casual sexual partners in the past year, the belief that having sex without protection would strengthen their relationships, and a willingness to trade sex for money or drugs (Duvall et al., 2013). Equally as concerning, Black adolescent girls who endorse the Jezebel image are more likely to minimize the danger that is associated with their risky sexual behavior (Townsend, Thomas, Neilands, & Jackson, 2010).

To close, African American women today, as in historical times, are remarkably resilient when faced with sexual violence and sexual objectification. They have sought emotional and social support, used their spirituality to cope, and even physically and verbally resisted their attackers (Watson et al., 2012; West & Robinson, 2013). In my case, I unleashed my inner Sapphire/ABW and began writing about and protesting against sexual violence after I successfully filed a sexual harassment complaint as a graduate student (West, 2010).

Ultimately, Black women must strive to create a healthy sexuality in a society that depicts them as oversexed and unrapeable, an image that is

now broadcast around the world 24 hours a day in music videos and other forms of media. Young Black women, particularly those who are educated and have a strong sense of racial pride, are uniquely positioned to understand the oppressive nature of these gendered, racialized images. Along with other forms of activism, they can conduct media literacy training for their communities (Brown et al., 2013). In addition, Black women can create comprehensive sex education that promotes positive, healthy sexual expression.

Conclusion

In my lecture, I discussed why the Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel images were created, why they persist, and how they are reflected in contemporary images of, among others, the Strong Black Woman, the Angry Black Woman, and the Video Vixen. Although there is a heavy physical and psychological toll associated with coexisting with such images, I hope you have come to appreciate Black women's remarkable resilience. Please consider learning more about how these images have influenced your own life. For example, take the Stereotypical Roles for Black Women Scale (Thomas et al., 2004) or African American Women's Shifting Scale (Johnson et al., 2016). Then, demand representations that depict the diversity among Black women that are not connected to these historical or demeaning stereotypes. If you can't find them, get to work creating your own images and broadcast them through social media. With assistance from their allies, Black women can develop the capacity to imagine themselves as something more than these distorted media representations. Then, they can begin to change the structures that have created and maintain these images.

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