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The Strong Black Woman ≠ Superwoman: Shattering Stereotypes of Strength in Black Literature

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**THE STRONG BLACK WOMAN ≠ SUPERWOMAN: SHATTERING STEREOTYPES
OF STRENGTH IN BLACK LITERATURE**

by

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ABSTRACT

THE STRONG BLACK WOMAN ≠ SUPERWOMAN: SHATTERING STEREOTYPES OF STRENGTH IN BLACK LITERATURE

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Old Dominion University, 2023
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That the Black woman must be strong in order to endure the oppression she has been forced to withstand is a double-edged sword that equally contributes to both her dehumanization and willpower to survive. This project interrogates the patterns and characteristics that contribute to the schema of the strong Black woman through the examination of cultural texts foregrounded in biblical scriptures against literature written by prominent Black women through Beyoncé. Specific tropes explored include the jezebel, the mammy, and the sapphire with a conclusion that these harmful and dehumanizing stereotypes have cultivated a fallacious assumption of supernatural strength and resiliency that society has expected Black women to aspire to.

As such, the ideologies presented within this project are examined through the analysis of literary portrayals of hypersexualization and subsequent justification, self-erasure and *mulehood*, and Black girl magic and double and triple consciousness. A well-rounded framework for *uncap*ing, or demystifying, the Black superwoman is made possible by bringing biblical beliefs to the table with scholarly and literary works, enhanced by discussions of theatrical and musical portrayals of Black women. This project proves that Black women have been severely mistreated long before and well after the institution of slavery in not limiting the contexts in which the controlling images of Black women are portrayed to a specific genre or time period. The Strong Black woman schema incessantly demands perfection in all that we do through the shattering of

glass ceilings in an attempt to dismantle the master's house. So, too, must the stereotypes that celebrate mythical supernatural strength and concurrently shame the Black woman be shattered.

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This thesis is dedicated to my little Black girl.

May you be forever young.

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I must first acknowledge God, for without Him, nothing is possible.

To Anna Julia Cooper, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Michele Wallace, Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie, Rev. Dr. Cecilia Williams Bryant, Rev. Jarena Lee, Rev. Dr. Maxine LaRue Thomas, Maya Angelou, Fannie Lou Hamer, and the thousands of Black women that paved the way for this project to be possible.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Many names, ideas, and concepts have been interpolated onto Black women long before our forced arrival into the United States. While some of the concepts such as being strong or possessing Black girl magic, seem to be positive and motivating, many of these terms are derogatory, demeaning, and deprecating, as they portray Black women in a negative light. Namely, that the Black woman must be strong is a myth. The “Strong Black Woman” is an image that society conjured up from biblical scriptures, discussed more fully throughout the project, and emerged within the United States, specifically, from chattel slavery that puts an unnecessary amount of pressure on us to maintain a façade. Differently put, the image of the strong Black woman “defines the mantle that the nation, Black communities, and Black women themselves expect African American women to assume” (Perry 21). That is to say that the emergence of the “strong Black woman” has become an expectation of all Black women rather than the few that may fit into this category. Moreover, although Black women have certainly persevered in situations of heartache and turmoil, before, during, and after the institution of slavery and subsequent emancipation, there is a notion that if a Black woman rests, or shows emotion, she is perceived as being lazy or unjustified. In being considered a strong Black woman, the ramifications often go unrecognized, treading past the point of no return. With this interpolation, as it is most often someone else calling the Black woman strong versus, she herself tooting her own horn, comes dehumanization. There is a superfluous connection of the strength of Black women to the possession of a perceived, and frequently mythical supernatural strength. While the strong Black woman is typically a title that is endowed with the intention of spreading positivity and empowerment within the Black community, this “badge of honor” that can be associated with

notions of Black Girl Magic and is bestowed to the many Black women that were first to accomplish any given achievement, carries expectations that many women find are impossible to meet in a healthy and fulfilling way.

Furthermore, “sexual hostility against Black women is practiced not only by the white racist society but implemented within our Black communities as well” (Lorde 4). As such, many depictions within these hurtful stereotypes portray Black women as being either hypersexual or asexual and/or hypermasculine while simultaneously, yet subconsciously, painting them as less feminine than other women. Black women being viewed as hypersexual has contributed to countless cases of sexual violence against women that frequently goes unreported. In the same way, the asexual Black woman is subjected to fallacious assumptions of strength and the ability to withstand inhumane treatment. Throughout this project, both depictions of the hypersexualized and asexualized Black woman that inform the strong Black woman will be explored as the *magic* behind Black Girl magic mandates that we save the world wearing stilettos and red lipstick.

While there are positive aspects and characteristics of strength, the “controlling images” and connotations associated with the strong Black woman are frequently debilitating and dehumanizing (Collins). Expectations of the strong Black woman include hypersexuality while maintaining a virtuous shield, superior matriarchy in being the best mother, wife or caretaker ever, and going above and beyond in the workplace to shatter glass ceilings and add to the never-ending list of *firsts* by Black women. This project analyzes literature, criticism, and media portrayals to demonstrate how *systemically branding Black women as Strong unfairly places pressure for them to live up to a dehumanizing stereotype of maintaining supernatural strength.*

In doing so, the project explores a broad span of literature dating as far back as Biblical references of the “ideal woman,” eighteenth and nineteenth century heteronormative gender roles,

and examples in modern U.S. literature in which impossible roles and standards are assigned to Black women. Such literature includes, but is certainly not limited to, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. To support my argument, I will bring Black Feminist theorists, and artists such as Michelle Obama, Jamaica Kincaid, Patricia Hill Collins, Michele Wallace, and Beyoncé into the conversation. My purpose is to unpack the theories, mythologies and literature surrounding the conceptualization of being and becoming a strong Black woman, and thus proving that the perceived badge of honor is in reality a ball and chain of suffering and pain.

TO BE A STRONG BLACK WOMAN

The pressure to be perfect is enormous and unfair for the Black woman. It is not my aim to deflate the strength of the Black woman, nor do I wish to belittle or take away from the notion of Black girl magic. It is, however, my goal to debunk the myth that we must possess unnatural strength, resilience and balance in the face of adversity in order to truly be considered a Black woman. In order to do so, the methodology of this project necessitates the deconstruction of what it means to be considered strong, labeled as Black, and identify as a woman. These three terms have been and will be used throughout this project to analyze a specific set of women. Breaking down each term should prove to be useful in *uncap*ing the strong Black woman.

TO BE STRONG

The Oxford English Dictionary, which is widely accepted as the most complete record of the English language ever assembled, defines the adjective strong as “being able to perform physically demanding or laborious tasks” (OED). Conventionally, if one were to subscribe to gendered societal norms, strength is a characteristic that is typically associated with men. Physical strength is culturally and visually identified by stature. Specifically, men, or people, with larger

muscles and a toned physique are assumed to be strong, nuancing the projection of a *manly* characteristic onto a woman. Conversely, many of the physical attributes of strength can be correlated with being mentally strong.

Hutchinson in identifying signs of mentally strong people defines this by stating that “mentally strong and resilient people overcome the adversities in their lives over time, learn valuable lessons from them, and can often become enlightened by seemingly impossible setbacks” (Hutchinson). By equating mental strength to resilience, it is often assumed that those that are mentally strong are able to climb their way out of the deepest and darkest valleys of life. Differently put, “by calling us resilient, people are really admiring or celebrating our ability to endure abuse” (Thomas). Moreover, “expectations of exceptionality” in a show of extraordinary strength, require us to be viewed as something “other than human” (Lafontant 18). To be considered extraordinary eliminates possibilities of being ordinary, as most humans are. Subsequently, Black women may often find themselves being exploited as a consequence of their ability to find a way to cope during seemingly impossible situations.

TO BE BLACK

Black, as an adjective, can be defined as “being of the darkest color possible” (OED). In the physical sense, black absorbs light, denoting it as a low-energy color. In symbolism, this color is most popularly used to represent death, evil, and fear. Many authors and artists may use it to elicit feelings of depression and despair. While symbolically, black carries negative connotations, this color can also be used to “represent power, formality and elegance” (Smith). Interestingly, in comparison to white, the implications and nuances of the word black shift drastically. Black, when set in opposition to white, is traditionally symbolic of the age-old battle between good versus evil. In this context, black represents all things evil, while white represents good, contributing to racist

ideologies that white is the superior race and nothing good can come from Blackness. But “how can we change the narrative and symbolic meaning of the color black when we as a society were founded upon perpetual systemic racism?” (Riggs).

Within United States culture, Black is used to identify darker skinned people of sub-Saharan African descent. The Oxford English Dictionary elaborates this further in stating:

As the preferred designation esp. of North Americans of African origin, *black* gained acceptance in the late 1960s, rapidly replacing *Negro*...and *coloured*... Since then, it has been used as a self-designation affirming a distinct ethnic and cultural identity. Terms such as *African American* and *Afro-Caribbean* which gained popularity somewhat later are often considered more positive since they avoid reference to skin colour and any of the possible negative associations of *black*...(OED)

Post-slavery, there has been much debate and confusion as to who should identify as being Black. Indeed, “there are as many kinds of black people as there are people” (Riggs). Many states offered their own legislation with some as extreme as one drop of African blood. Biologically, there is not any conclusive research that marks significantly different aspects in Black people in comparison to non-Black people. Growing up, there is an imminent threat that one’s “black card” would be taken away if we did not act, dress, talk, or eat a certain way. However, this proves that to be considered Black is merely a social construct. Anna Julia Cooper in *A Voice from the South* critiques the racism and elitism embedded within the social construction of race in questioning, “Whence the self-congratulation of “dominant” races, as if “dominant” meant “righteous” and carried with it a title to inherit the earth? Whence the scorn of so-called weak or unwarlike races and individuals, and the very comfortable assurance that it is their manifest destiny to be wiped

out as vermin before this advancing civilization?” (Cooper 51). Differently put, white people, after the period of chattel slavery, created social constructs to keep nonwhite people out of positions of power through racism and the subsequent elitism that followed. Despite differences in skin color, hair texture, origin of birth, and physical characteristics, both identifying and being identified as being Black is subjective.

TO BE A WOMAN

Throughout this project, the term “woman” is used rather frequently, however I do recognize that this is not meant in any way to exclude transgender men, non-binary or persons that do not conform to genders. Woman, in the context of this project, is meant to be inclusive of all persons that identify in any way with womanhood, and the struggles thereof. Historically, and even systemically, women, too, have been fighting for their right to be heard for hundreds of years. Prior to the nineteenth century, many were considered to be sub-citizens with minimal rights and often left in the care of either a father or husband. Indeed, women were seen as property, with the business arrangement of marriage, as merely a means to bring wealth into the family through dowries. However, with the second wave of the Women’s Rights Movement in 1948, out of which feminism sprang forth, many white women were granted constitutional rights, including the right to vote. As such a “Black feminist presence has evolved most obviously in connection with the second wave of the American women's movement beginning in the late 1960s” (Combahee 2). The Black feminist movement differed greatly from that of the feminist movement as white women were also considered oppressors of the Black woman, and, therefore, could not properly fight for equality without bias.

Black women such as Ida B. Wells, who actively fought against lynching and racism, and Sojourner Truth who spoke out against discriminatory standards of womanhood, initiated the

ideologies behind this suffrage movement in the late nineteenth century in questioning where the rights of Black women fit into this complicated puzzle. Many of the queries raised point to the differences in privileges that white women subconsciously held purely by nature of identifying as a white woman. Feminism did “not allow most Black women to look more deeply into our own experiences and, from that sharing and growing consciousness, to build a politics that will change our lives and inevitably end our oppression” (Combahee 3). More specifically, “white women were implicated in the maintenance of this wider system of oppression because they challenged only the parameters of their domestic parameters” (Carby 267-268). Owing to such disparities, the early twentieth century was sprinkled with tales of Black women *passing* as white to avoid a particular subset of discrimination based on the color of their skin. As a result, out of the waves of women’s rights movements, also known as the birth of feminism, is the rise of womanism.

Coined in Alice Walker’s 1982 *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*, “womanism emerged as a parallel to feminism in order to acknowledge Black women’s specific struggle for equality” (Walker). As such, womanism speaks to the struggles that we have been forced to endure from both men and non-Black people. In the same way, it is my aim to prove, in alignment with the Black feminist theorists discussed in this project including the Combahee River Collective, Michele Wallace, Dorothy Roberts, Patricia Hill Collins, and thousands of other Black women, who remain nameless, whose work and scholarship has contributed to the fight for freedom and autonomy, that Black women are indeed humans. We have thoughts, emotions, and limits to what we can withstand. We, too, have inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The trope of the strong Black woman is a myth as it assumes that we actually desire or possess this supernatural superpower that has been interpolated onto us. This perceived term of

endearment is portrayed as a badge of glory, specially reserved for the strong Black woman. Furthermore, while the “defining quality of Black Womanhood is seen as strength” this project aims to demystify, and thus, *uncape*, the Black woman, without taking away from or demeaning the doubtless strength and tenacity we have accumulated throughout the centuries (Lafontant 1).

JEZEBELS, MAMMIES, AND SAPPHIRES, OH MY!

Women of color, and, specifically Black women, for centuries have survived mythological and supernatural interpolations of possessing an inhumane superpower of strength. The myth of the Black superwoman derived from chattel slavery in the United States beginning in the 1600s in which enslaved Black women were forced into perfecting multiple responsibilities and roles concurrently and, moreover, without complaint (Wallace, Carby, Roberts).

American slavery was profoundly different from, and in its lasting effects on individuals and their children, indescribably worse than any recorded servitude, ancient or modern...there was nothing in the tradition of English law or Protestant theology which could accommodate to the fact of human bondage — the slaves were therefore reduced to the status of chattels (Moynihan).

Black women have had to hold the brunt end of the stick for over two-hundred years of slavery, followed by almost two-hundred more years of systemic racism that disallows Black people from retaining the basic rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. “Racism [is] the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and hereby the right to dominance, manifested and implied” (Lorde 1). It is this “belief” of white supremacy that the strong Black woman schema stands opposed to as she is often seen as a threat to structures of racial capitalism. Moreover, the stereotypes addressed in this project were constructed by society to discredit Black women, as we “have been neither passive victims of nor willing accomplices to [our] own

domination” (Collins 747). Differently put, we become “unwilling accomplices” because our super strength as Black women merely places us in positions of maintaining the façade.

As such, it became our responsibility not to validate the stereotypes about Black women. If you were not perceived as a superwoman, “you could easily be cast as lazy, sexually aggressive, loud, ghetto, or simply angry” (Taylor 58). Being forced to be extraordinary leaves no room for gray or being ordinary; either they are the popular yet exploited strong Black woman or succumb to stereotypes surrounding being lazy, “whoreish,” or aggressive. “Merely naming the pejorative stereotypes attributed to Black women (e.g., mammy, matriarch, Sapphire, whore, bulldagger), let alone cataloging the cruel, often murderous, treatment we receive, indicates how little value has been placed upon our lives during four centuries of bondage in the Western hemisphere” (Combahee River Collective). Specific derogatory names that emerged during the institution of slavery, yet, to this day, are synonymous with definitions that surround and describe the strong Black woman discussed in this project include, but are certainly not limited to jezebels, mammies, and sapphires.

While the roots of these stereotypes are deeply embedded and intertwined within history, women’s rights and equality movements contributed to further traumatization of the Black woman. The image of the strong Black woman emerged from an urgent yet misguided need for similitude amongst male and white counterparts. Indeed, *so-called* women’s rights groups sought to eradicate the degrading stereotypes, however, this political movement seems to have caused more harm than good. More specifically, Hazel V. Carby in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Negro-American Woman* discusses the necessity of a political movement that directly addresses the issues and oppression that Black women face. “Feminist theory supports and reproduces a racist hierarchy [as it] actively ignores nonwhite women” (Carby 263). Struggles that Black women

face are greater than that of white women as we not only have to navigate a patriarchal society, but a racist society, causing our perils and oppression to place us at the bottom of the ladder of success. “White women stand in a power relation as oppressors of black women. This compromises any feminist theory and practice founded on the notion of simple equality” (Carby 112). As a result, feminist movements have either drastically failed to address those already existing harmful stereotypes surrounding Black women or have, in the same way, grafted new ones onto Black women.

The project is organized into three main sections, each examining a specific trope that carries characteristics that are typically associated with that of the strong Black woman. Each trope uses Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf* as a thread to weave together the literature and scholarship embedded in the project creating a seamless argument. Furthermore, biblical scripture references, beginning with Genesis 3, are used to support the claim that Black women have systemically been relegated to a place of subservience as “de mules uh de world” (Hurst 14). Indeed, “The two sources from which, perhaps, modern civilization has derived its noble and ennobling ideal of woman are Christianity and the Feudal System” (Cooper 9). As such, my project investigates the “intersectionality” of Black women and the subsequent stereotypes that have emerged (Collins). The following three thorns consistently appear to bruise our heels as we flee, attempting to transform ourselves into superhumans.

THE JEZEBEL

The jezebel, as discussed in Chapter II, can be described as “a racial stereotype and slur that historically and persistently has been used to obfuscate the truth, promote and justify racial inequality and sexual violence against Black women” (McClean). With roots tracing back to the

era of enslavement, and originating from a biblical context, this trope has been synonymous with Black women for thousands of years. The original *Jezebel* and her subsequent story can be found in the Old Testament books of the Bible, 1 and 2 Kings. Many scholars and theologians assert that Jezebel was successful in her schemes in part due to her seductive and cunning demeanor, which assumes that she was not skilled or educated enough to do so without the use of her body.

“Standardizing Black women as possessing an unnatural sexual disposition while concurrently framing this fallacy as consent” often led to objectification and sexual assault (Thomas). The natural “span of our hips, curl of our lips, arches of our backs and rides of our breasts, which make us phenomenal women,” is twisted and perverted into warped ideas of retaining an insatiable sexual appetite (Angelou). Subsequently, this implied complicity with our bodies being attacked, became normalized for Black women, even to this day.

We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression (Combahee 4).

By associating the Black woman with connotations of being overly sexual, seductive, and sinful by nature, we are socially reduced while crimes committed against Black women by men, both Black and non-Black, are exacerbated and normalized. My project explores much of “Black women’s literature [that] is full of the pain of frequent assault, not only by a racist patriarchy, but also by Black men” (Lorde 5).

Movements to embrace and love our bodies are not only perverted and sexualized but normalized and perpetuate the stereotype of the Jezebel. So much so, that sexual violence against

Black women is frequently overlooked and underreported. Moreover, due to the ramifications of this overgeneralized belief of hypersexuality, we are often blamed for our heinous attacks with assumptions of us being too forward or promiscuous, and thus, attracting our attackers. The days, weeks, and months that follow these unsolicited attacks, frequently are accompanied by a whirlwind of emotions including shame, loneliness, and isolation. Conversely, the trope of the strong Black woman calls for us to package our pain in dainty boxes never to be opened again, forcing us to “fight a little longer” without healing (Clarkson).

THE MAMMY

Similarly, the stereotype of the Mammy, as explored in Chapter III, is known for being content in the midst of contrite situations. She was created during the era of enslavement from a false image of satisfaction, delight, and loyalty to her enslaver. “Her wide grin, hearty laughter, and loyal servitude were offered as evidence of the supposed humanity of the institution of slavery” (Pilgrim). Often portrayed as being larger and darker skinned, during this era, the mammy was known for caring for the home and all who lived in it. In stark contrast to the Jezebel, who was often sexually abused by her enslaver and subsequently physically abused by his jealous wife, the mammy was desexualized and perceived as non-threatening. Her assumed happy-go-lucky persona deemed her as being the ideal image for Black women for hundreds of years to come.

However, after slavery, the stereotype continued to evolve through both jobs and normalized gender roles that only allowed Black women to be seen- and never heard- through servitude. Women, as a whole, were considered as weak, docile, and incapable of making decisions for themselves. “Ideologies of black female domesticity and motherhood have been constructed through their employment (or chattel position) as domestics and surrogate mothers to white families rather than in relation to their own families” (Carby 113). In fact, it was (and still is)

difficult for many men to imagine women outside of being barefoot, pregnant, and taking care of home. These gendered cultural norms are passed down through generations to young girls, perpetually threatening the innocence of Black girlhood in particular. “The family is the basic social unit of American life; it is the basic socializing unit. By and large, adult conduct in society is learned as a child” (Moynihan). As such, in her early years, the little Black girl is taught to care for her siblings, assist in caring for her father, and how to be a homemaker. Thus, by training her in the way society expects her to behave, the Black woman is taught to care for everyone but herself, recalling the mammy stereotype. In doing so, the erasure of the innocence of Black girlhood causes irreversible traumatization that can be seen regularly in the interactions of Black women under the guises of being a nurturer in the home and adhering to respectability politics within the workplace.

Likewise, the modern-day mammy is not only associated with extreme exhilaration derived from serving white people, but also caring for all in the form of a personified mother earth. Stereotypes such as the jezebel, mammy, and sapphire were “designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” which, in turn, has had a negative impact on the psyche of Black women that struggle to maintain or keep up with this particular façade (Collins 69). However, because the implications of satisfaction in spite of servitude embedded in the expectations of being a woman, to be *Sapphire-esque* threatens the comfortability of those in undeserved positions of power.

THE SAPPHIRE

The Sapphire, which is frequently characterized as the angry Black woman as discussed at length in Chapter IV, depicts us as being loud, aggressive, and obnoxious in an effort to deter us from dismantling systems that were meant to hold us down and keep us out. In the same way, this

present-day pejorative stereotype can be likened to the “boss lady” or “go-getter” persona. Both depictions of the Sapphire are privately demonized for being unladylike, and often too masculine, yet consistently publicly praised for shattering ceilings. As such, when Black women are elevated to positions of power and leadership, performing the role of “go-getter,” it is assumed by some that she was merely given that role either due to affirmative action or she slept her way to the top. Differently put, unless and until Black women make their way to the top, they are frequently portrayed as crabs in a barrel, aggressively climbing past everyone versus being seen as mere humans running in the rat race alongside everyone else.

This stereotype “originating from the 1930’s Amos ‘n’ Andy television character, Sapphire Stevens, the nagging and emasculating wife of George “Kingfish” Stevens, casts Black women as uniformly antagonistic and confrontational” (Grayman 3). In deeming the original Sapphire, in her attempts to sound off as equal to her husband or make things happen for them as emasculating, future depictions of Black women making something out of nothing out of necessity were seen as contrary and adversarial to the role of the Black man. Differently put, the notion of being independent and acquiring autonomy over our own bodies, has been historically equated with not needing men. As such, a common thought has been, if Black women are able to provide for themselves, the Black man, who sees his primary role as being a provider, feels emasculated. Resultantly, we are blamed for the alleged demise and downfall of the Black family for stepping up to a plate that was placed in front of us.

The birth of the modern-day American dream, explored in more detail within Chapter IV of this project, directly opposed nonwhite families that were rooted in kinship and community. “Colonialism attempted to destroy kinship patterns that were not modeled on nuclear family structures, disrupting, in the process, female organizations that were based upon kinship systems

that allowed more power and autonomy to women than those of the colonizing nation” (Carby 121). Moreover, the American dream does not now, nor did it ever thrive “on the fruition we now enjoy, but springs rather from the possibilities and promise that are inherent in the system, though as yet, perhaps, far in the future” (Cooper 11,12). Differently put, the notion of Black people fully realizing a dream that was never meant for them, places them in a precarious position of working to acquire social status in a land that relegated them to subhumanity. For the sapphire, as a Black woman, the promise proves to be that much more difficult to achieve as we are marginalized as both Black people and as women. While society mandates that we become the best of the best, Chapter IV explores the possibilities of “reject[ing] pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind” and instead asserts that “to be recognized as human, levelly human, is Enough” (Combahee 4).

To be viewed as a Sapphire is an oxymoron in that we have to do twice as much work to receive half as much yet are demonized for doing so. “For reasons of economic survival, U.S. Black women play the mammy role in paid work settings” (Collins 74). We have to go above and beyond by earning multiple degrees, have an extensive experience in our fields, publish dozens of articles and books, present at workshops and conferences just to even earn an interview. In the same way, while our white counterparts get in the door simply by knocking, we have to shatter glass ceilings. In doing so, we find ourselves stuck between a rock and a hard place. To the public, we are role models, innovators in our respective fields and often seen as the future or next generation. We are the pillars of our community, the backbone of our people. Yet, we are unfairly tasked with suppressing our success, because of so-called statistics that name the “Negro woman” as the head of the household” “the direct result” of the “deterioration of the Negro family” (Moynihan). As a resolution to the problem of economic disparities within the Black community,

Black women are further tasked with coddling the bruised egos of the Black man that was emasculated by the same system that exploits our labors and efforts.

CONTROLLING OUR IMAGES

The image of the Black woman over the past few centuries has been viewed through a funhouse mirror. Indeed, the topsy-turvy images reflected through the looking glass are merely representations of social constructs that we are expected to uphold. In the same way, our images possess a secondary superpower of having the ability to shapeshift with our mood. Namely, a *bad* mood will signify us as sapphires while being *in* the mood allegedly justifies us being called jezebels. These stereotypes perpetuate erroneous notions surrounding Black women, which, in turn, negatively impact systemic oppression that we are forced to face. Moreover, these images are “perverted and used to construct policies and barriers that further marginalize oppressed individuals” (Windsor et al.). Differently put, we are unfairly disempowered, disenfranchised, and disadvantaged, expected to both endure and end our own suffering, yet ridiculed for doing either.

WHAT WE READ

Literature is unique as it leaves a cultural footprint, providing clues to help us, as readers, understand society. Specifically, in many literary texts, we are given multiple examples of women of color coming to what should be a breaking point in their lives. These moments, of which many are relatable and transcend the lives of Black women around the world, can be detrimental to our mental health. At some point, a line must be drawn; enough must be enough. However, historically, there is no permissible middle ground between being considered a strong Black woman and embracing the new age soft life which aims to eradicate dehumanizing myths of the Black superwoman.

Indeed, this idea of condemning Black femininity and softness has been portrayed and reinforced in a plethora of ways throughout history. In Geoffrey Chaucer's second tale in *The Canterbury Tales*, "Tale of Melibee," we find the passage, "Therefore seith Seint Jerome: "Dooth somme goode dedes that the devel, which is oure enemy, ne fynde yow nat unocupied" (Chaucer). Furthermore, biblical literature through to modern literature often vary in the portrayals of "the woman as an equal, as a helper, as a friend, and as a sacred charge to be sheltered and cared for with a brother's love and sympathy, lessons which nineteen centuries' gigantic strides in knowledge, arts, and sciences, in social and ethical principles have not been able to probe to their depth or to exhaust in practice" (Cooper 18). In Chapter II, the project explores both biblical and canonical literature such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* that glorify being busy over having an idle mind. That is to say that although Black women have certainly persevered in situations of heartache and turmoil, there is a notion that if a woman rests, she is perceived as being lazy. These menial literary tropes which were created to offer a guide in being a virtuous woman juxtapose to dominant images of Black women that praise sexuality, servitude, and sassiness.

WHAT WE THINK

Many scholars and intellectuals have provided a concrete path to follow along on the journey to discover the strong Black woman. A few of these modern-day legendary bricklayers that are further discussed within and throughout this project include Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, Patricia Hill Collins, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Angela Davis, and Michele Wallace, to name a few. Specific schools of thought that contribute to the analyses and theories produced in this project include aspects of both feminism and womanism. Adichie asserts that "[women] should never be told that we should or should not do something because we are [women], which

could be seen as a primary tenant in feminism” (Adichie). Similarly, womanism, which is characterized by Black feminists or feminists of color, emerged out of feminism as Black women were virtually invisible within the protracted campaign for woman suffrage (Walker; Davis). Differently put, “black feminist thought centered on both race and gender and grew out of black communities as opposed to the white feminist movement” (Rooks). Both schools of thoughts will be utilized while examining controlling images and stereotypes of Black women in literature and society.

WHAT WE SEE

A large percentage of the images and depictions of Black women in the media perpetuate stereotypes. Television shows such as “Bad Girls Club” and “Real Housewives of Atlanta,” movies such as “Madea Goes to Jail,” and “B*A*P*S (Black American Princesses),” as well as Hip-hop artists such as Cardi B and Meg Thee Stallion are a few notable mentions. Black women in these representations are often hypersexual, hyper attentive, or hyper aggressive. Differently put, Black women are often type-casted or called on to mimic music and images that sustain stereotypes. While there are, indeed, women that do look, dress, act, and speak like the characters on the big screens and radios, the “invisible middle” is severely underrepresented. This group of women can be defined as awkward Black girls, the acculturated girl next door, and modern matriarchs (Issa Rae; Thompson). However, the media is known for creating these *hyperrealities*.

Women all over the world have often been forced to lead double lives as a result of the hypersexualized popular cultural expectations. In discussing postmodernism, French writer Jean Baudrillard has pointed out this culture of ‘hyperreality.’ That is to say that social media popularizes and attempts to normalize looking, dressing and acting a certain way, when it bears no relation to reality at all (Barry). Simply put, “the idealized images of masculinity or femininity

presented in advertisements, for instance, copies or representations for which no original exists—no actual people are quite like these, yet people tend to strive to be like them” (Barry). In the same way, many social media influencers have acquired notoriety and fame by pushing and marketing the “ideal” body type in addition to the way that a woman should look and dress through photoshopped pictures. This in turn causes other women, their followers and subscribers, to attempt to imitate a look that does not truly exist. Subsequently, this project explores in Chapter II, the frequency in which Black women are blamed for their rapes for “dressing provocatively” or “flirting” (Shange).

“The literature of women of Color is seldom included in women’s literature courses and almost never in other literature courses, nor in women’s studies as a whole” because racist structures within the education system perpetuate the notions that “literatures of women of Color can only be taught by Colored women [because their] experiences are too different” (Lorde 3). Although many portrayals of the Black woman are based on true stories, it is the narratives about trauma, trials, and tribulations that are always remembered and rarely the happy stories. In order to shift these narratives, Black women must write truth within these stories, that it is circumstance that the mythological Black superwoman derives from rather than a chosen way of life. Moreover, “to examine Black women’s literature effectively requires that we be seen as whole people in our actual complexities—as individuals, as women, as human—rather than as one of those problematic but familiar stereotypes provided in this society in place of genuine images of Black women” (Lorde 3). May this project through the presentation of thousands of years of negative portrayals of Black women that have been ingrained and normalized within our culture contribute to the work that has begun to eradicate myths surrounding the *strong Black woman*.

CHAPTER II

AIN'T I A WOMAN: THE JEZEBEL, FEMININITY, AND SEXUALITY

Prior to the rise and popularity of the novel in the late seventeenth century, many great works were written as sermons, poems, or in the epistolary formats that deviated from the traditional texts of the day that were either political, commercial, or religious. Instead, much of this early literature satirized both love and marriage and societal norms in order to further promote a particular set of unspoken rules that many societies have adopted. These rules, strategically placed within the Bible as commandments and laws from God, and literature, disguised as entertainment, came to be known as conduct manuals. Canonical examples include Samuel Richards' *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*, Eliza Haywood's *Love in Excess*, Daniel DeFoe's *Moll Flanders*, and Frances Burney's *Evelina*, to name a few.

For the purposes of this project, we must consider the Bible not only as historical literature, but also as an inspiration for many of the early conduct manuals. Indeed, many early novels either quote this sacred text or develop characters that are representative of people that are considered early Christians. "The source of the vitalizing principle of women's development and amelioration is the Christian Church, so far as that church is coincident with Christianity" (Cooper 17). Such depictions include, but are certainly not limited to priests, nuns, and monks. When considering much of the literature that we take in, there seems to be a common theme on the "guidelines" as it pertains to the nature of a virtuous woman.

However, Black women have systemically been excluded from the category of possessing an assumed virtuous characteristic as non-women of color were. "History has constructed our sexuality and our femininity as deviating from those qualities with which white women, as the prize objects of the Western world, have been endowed" (Carby 110). The societal norms and

pressures that we are forced to face leave little to no room for grace. Moreover, achieving specific characteristics and traits of the virtuous woman that were detailed in the conduct manuals of that time period were not realistic for Black women due to societal and economic constraints. Furthermore, Black women that attempt to compensate for the deficiencies of being virtuous through embracing their femininity are often hypersexualized. “Black women were relegated to a place outside the ideological construction of “womanhood.” The term included only white women; therefore, the rape of black women was of no consequence outside the black community” (Carby 269-270).

In modern society, we are criticized for presumably dressing provocatively in red lipstick, short skirts, or heels. Furthermore, Black women are automatically objectified and sexualized because of the natural curves of our bodies. The systemic objectification and dehumanization of the Black woman’s body is what informs the trope of the Jezebel. According to biblical scriptures found in both 1 and 2 Kings, Jezebel was a Phoenician princess that married Ahab, King of Israel. Her story became well known for convincing her husband, the king, to create a space to worship her pagan god, Baal. This in turn caused many of the Israelites to worship Baal as well. Her story continues by forging a document in order to acquire certain property for the king and ends with her being murdered and her flesh being devoured by dogs. By interpolating, and furthermore, blaming us, for perverted fantasies, this stereotype of an innate and insatiable sexual desire provides a fallacious justification for violence and discrimination against Black women.

This chapter primarily analyzes literature surrounding the trope of the jezebel to include the biblical account of Tamar, son of King David (2 Sam. 13), Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Throughout the chapter, and the project in general, are excerpts from Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem, *For Colored Girls*

Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf which explores the realities of seven different kinds of women. The first performance was in December 1974 just outside of Berkeley, California and was purposed to heal women of color through voice and motion in exploring sub-themes of common experiences for Black women including sexuality, intersectionality, love, relationships, rape, sexual violence, abortion, freedom, self-actualization, self-esteem, domestic violence and grief. Shange's text alongside the historical contexts portrayed in biblical references serve as a mantra in exploring the depths and concepts of the strong Black woman schema. Other literary texts interrogated within this chapter include that of the biblical account of creation found in Genesis 3, the story of Delilah as written in Judges 16, Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*, and Aoko Matsuda's "The Woman Dies." Each of these texts, when woven together, provide contextual evidence of the jezebel being embedded in Christianity, exacerbated in early literature, and exploited in modern literature.

FEMININITY AND THE VIRTUOUS WOMAN

The word *virtue* throughout the eighteenth-century carried many conflicting denotations. "In its earliest manifestation it had been deeply associated with ideals of manhood as the word had originated from the Latin term 'virtus', derived from the word for a man, 'vir', meaning those qualities which were deemed to be most worthy of a man" (Linton 1). However, over time, traits associated with virtue became synonymous with Christianity, thus imploring men and women to be virtuous in the sight of God. Subsequently, early conduct literature exploited and perverted the characteristics of a virtuous woman. This standard of virtue frequently included a vow of chastity, causing clothing or appearances of women being provocative to be deemed non-conforming. Furthermore, the more virtuous, and subsequently pure, the woman was, the more feminine she appeared. In exploring the nuances and double standards within heteronormative societal

expectations, namely expecting women to be virtuous while men were given the freedom to explore their sexuality, the primary texts interrogated include literature spanning from biblical to modern day examples.

FOR THE BIBLE TELLS ME SO

The namesake for the modern pejorative stereotype of the Jezebel is biblically known as being representative of a temptress or seductress. Indeed, Jezebel's story was predicated on distracting her husband and the people under his rule from God and attempting to persuade them to worship the false idol Baal. However, women being viewed in a similar darkness is prevalent in many tales within the bible. Pointedly, the first story of a woman is often noted as Eve deceiving Adam, tricking him into going against the will of God and eating fruit from the forbidden tree (Gen. 3).

According to the book of Genesis, in chapter two, God created Adam and placed him in a garden, the Garden of Eden, with two trees, and commanded him to only eat from the Tree of Life, forbidding him to eat any fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. The story continues by stating that shortly thereafter, the woman, Eve, was created and given the same commandment. However, in chapter three, the woman is tricked by a serpent into eating the forbidden fruit. In verse six, "When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it" (Gen. 3.6). After being caught by God, Adam immediately blames the woman for his demise stating, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it" (Gen. 3. 12). However, this accusation is troubling as there is no portrayal of deceit or threat in the woman offering the fruit to the man. In fact, it would appear as though he were right next to her as the serpent was tempting her and did nothing to intervene. Yet, Adam

relieved himself from blame and accused the woman as the sole reason for his disobedience toward God. The story continues to admonish the woman in God's punishment for the man. "Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you" (Gen. 3.17); while God only stated that there would be enmity between the serpent and the woman, so too was there enmity and resentment birthed between the man and the woman. It is no coincidence that the very first Biblical story of a woman is that of deceit and betrayal.

In the same way, the tale of Samson and Delilah chronicles Samson's betrayal by his lover, Delilah. In their story, Delilah is paid a relatively large amount of money to convince Samson to confide in her his origin of strength so that the Philistines would be able to defeat the Israelites (God's chosen people). The book of Judges details this in verse five of chapter sixteen.

"The rulers of the Philistines went to her and said, "See if you can lure him into showing you the secret of his great strength and how we can overpower him so we may tie him up and subdue him. Each one of us will give you eleven hundred shekels[a] of silver" (Jud. 16.5).

After this encounter, Delilah is shown asking Samson three times, each resulting in Samson giving her false information and not being able to be detained by the Philistines. Finally, in verse fifteen, "she said to him, 'How can you say, 'I love you,' when you won't confide in me? This is the third time you have made a fool of me and haven't told me the secret of your great strength'" (Jud. 16.15). Not surprisingly, as Delilah has already been depicted as a seductress, the author writes "With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was sick to death of it," finally revealing the true origin of his strength. According to the tale, as a result of her seduction and betrayal as his lover, Samson was detained and bound in such a way that placed him in position to

tear down the Philistine temple, its' leaders, people and himself. Troublingly, the tale does not show the circumstance in which Delilah was asked to betray Samson. More specifically, it is plausible that she was coerced or forced to do so outside of the handsome reward that was mentioned.

While these stories are memorable, the issue is that most frequently the stories of women in the Bible are seen in a negative light and become the tales that get taught to Christians the most. Differently put, it is more popular and acceptable for men to be beguiled by women than for her to be a hero. The images of women being temptresses and seductresses, such as Eve and Delilah, grew to be so prevalent that stories of women being victimized, such as Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11) and Tamar (2 Sam. 13) and even contrary wise, victorious, Queen Esther, are scarcely cemented and infrequently discussed outside of women's groups and bible studies, causing the perception of women to be diminished and in need of revival. Thus, the rise of conduct literature became prevalent as women were painted as being "in need" of help in upholding virtuous façades.

THE DENIAL OF WOMANHOOD

Much of the earliest forms of written modern literature is rooted in biblical thoughts and traditions. Specifically, fifteenth and sixteenth century British literary texts including *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *The Canterbury Tales* include quotes of scripture and/or religious characters and references. "The relationship between these religious developments and the literature produced in English...is profound and fascinating and continues to constitute one of the most dynamic areas of early modern scholarship" (Hiscock). Moreover, many of the questions surrounding religion, such as life, death, and morals, are often rather complementary to rhetoric and writing. With early forms of literature being presented in the epistolary, or letter, format, many were seen as conduct manuals. The trend of such literature continued through the eighteenth

century. Samuel Richardson's 1740 novel *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded*, is a popular example of such a concept.

Pointedly, the ideology of conduct manuals, and the lack of autonomy of their own bodies that women were allowed to possess can be best represented in Pamela's following statement:

O these men! fathers or husbands much alike! The one tyrannical, the other insolent; so that, between one and t'other, a poor girl has nothing for it, but a few weeks courtship, and perhaps a first month bridalry, if that; and then she is as much a slave to a husband, as she was a vassal to her father (Richardson 78-9).

In saying this, Pamela contemplates the lack of freedom and pleasures that eighteenth-century women are afforded. Indeed, after living under the rule of their father, women are *given away* to be under the control of their husbands. However, a woman choosing whom she spent the rest of her life with was nearly impossible as she was forbidden to show any interest. Verily, "custom required a woman to attract and marry an eligible man, but the same custom forbade her to show her interest in a man until he had formally declared his love for her" (Oakleaf 15).

Traces of conduct manuals can also be found in nineteenth century Romantic novels such as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Although there are, indeed, feminist readings of these canonical texts that portray the main characters as revolutionary, each of these novels, and many similar, are set in a society in which women had no autonomy over their bodies and were often viewed as property that needed to be whisked away by a wealthy suitor lest she become promiscuous. For the lower class, the arrangement was expected to be made post haste as the female child had a responsibility to bring her family out of financial ruin. However, as many of

these exemplary conduct manuals progress, the suitors are often found to be less than virtuous, and arguably unworthy of their conquered mates.

Yet, the societal norms, expectations, and standards for grace and virtue were not the same for Black women as they were for white women. When juxtaposing the portrayal of a virtuous woman through the interrogation of conduct books, novels and manuals such as mid-eighteenth-century novel *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded* by Samuel Richardson with the crude, unjust, and dehumanizing treatment of the early nineteenth century Black women, as recounted by Sojourner Truth, it is clear that the portrayal of the virtuous woman was never intended to include the Black woman.

Born into enslavement around 1797 in Swartekill, New York, Sojourner Truth is perhaps most famously known for her speech delivered at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, in May of 1851. While the words have been rewritten, and plausibly fetishized and reimagined, the question and sentiment remain the same, aren't Black women still women?

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?
(Truth)

Truth's speech revealed the injustices buried deep within the intersectionality of being born a woman and identified as Black. Black women were not permitted to be women as a consequence of the hundreds of years of concurrent chattel slavery and hypersexualization. Truth's question "Ain't I a Woman" questions the institutions of both racism and sexism in identifying with hard labor that she was forced to perform during slavery yet is not afforded chivalry as white women are.

For although the Feudal System can in no sense be said to have originated the idea, yet there can be no doubt that the habits of life and modes of thought to which Feudalism gave rise, materially fostered and developed it; for they gave us chivalry, than which no institution has more sensibly magnified and elevated woman's position in society (Cooper 13).

That is to say that while white womanhood was viewed as something that needed “to be protected”, the reverse was not true for nonwhite women (Carby 268). Rather, Black women were expected to, in a sense, be bed makers and caretakers or bed warmers and *special* care givers to men. As such, the Black woman assumes an identity of asexuality and is seen as not needing assistance from men, contradicting societal norms that assert the woman has no autonomy. Truth’s pivotal “Ain’t I a Woman” aimed to eradicate the line of “privilege” that separated Black women from white women in the fight for equality in women’s rights (Carby).

Over one hundred years later, Hazel V. Carby, prominent Black feminist theorist and researcher of social conceptions of Black womanhood, continues in the fight for the eradication of racist patriarchal constructs.

The black woman's role in a rural, industrial or domestic labor force affects the construction of ideologies of black female sexuality which are different from, and often constructed in opposition to, white female sexuality; and second, how this role relates to the black woman's struggle for control over her own sexuality (Carby 116).

Nevertheless, if we, as Black women, were to be viewed as women, the systemic violence and crimes that have been committed could not possibly be justified. One of the most heinous

crimes committed against Black women as a result of stereotypical images is the hypersexualization and subsequent sexual violence that Black women have been forced to endure.

HYPERSEXUALIZATION AND THE BLACK WOMAN

Targeted literature in the eighteenth-century became popular amongst women and men as it addressed the stark polarization of female desire and societal norms. In a society in which women rarely had any legal rights or opportunities to provide a living for themselves, in order to survive as a woman, they were taught to be virtuous if they aspired to be rewarded with marriage and financial stability. In fact, by the middle of the eighteenth-century, sexual knowledge was as strongly forbidden to middle-class girls as the experience of sex itself” (Nestor 581). This did not hold true for Black women specifically during the institution of slavery. Instead, sex was forced through rape, partially for the purpose of free labor through the impregnation and, thereafter, the birth of enslaved children, and in part because of enslaved women being hypersexualized. This in turn created tension between the enslaved owner’s wife and the enslaved woman. In the following sections, this project will examine the portrayal of the hypersexuality, and lack of bodily autonomy as portrayed in literary rape narratives.

THE RHETORIC OF RAPE

As it pertains to literature both written by and about Black people, Black women of all cultures are frequently marginalized by being portrayed as weak, docile, and unable to stand on their own two feet. These tropes are juxtaposed to the vicious violence that the women in these stories are subjected to and are subsequently written to have a triumphant ending. The fairytale endings are made to give Black women and other women of color hope and strength in the face of adversity. However, the rhetoric of rape, through the expression of rape narratives has had an adverse effect in bringing awareness to this grievous and heinous act against women, as it has

normalized these images. In the same way hooks speaks for many Black women as she maintains that she is “not that strong that [she] should endure rape, beatings and other abuses and then sit in a rocking chair, pick out my favorite spiritual and prepare to bear another child...nothing intrinsic in our nature requires us to suffer...I’m strong enough to be human, no more and no less.” Such “selfless maternal giving is a sign of neither self-love nor strength” (bell hooks 2001, 39 as quoted by Lafontant 35). Within the scope of rape narratives, after an assault, particularly by someone she is acquainted with, Black women are faced with a troubling and heavy decision: what next? It is these literary narratives that transcend the silencing of both voice and power that each was forced to suffer through, and, furthermore, gives them a voice that shatters the silence.

An author that attempts to unpack and facilitate discussions on the trauma of women and, therein, the myth of the superwoman is Aoko Matsuda. *The Woman Dies* is a short story that was written by Aoko Matsuda and translated by Polly Barton, then published in *Granta* in November 2018. In this story, Matsuda challenges the role of the woman in literature and film. She asserts that “the woman’s role in the entertainment sources is merely to move the plot along and is solely dependent upon the man and his feelings” (Matsuda). Indeed, even in situations where the woman is the main character, very rarely does her life not revolve around a man. Specifically, Matsuda lists that the woman

dies because the author can’t think of anything else for her to do; the woman gets married so that the reader can experience a happy ending; the woman gets pregnant to move the story along and produce another character; the woman miscarries to show her strength and add a touch of drama and tragedy to the storyline; and lastly, the woman is raped so that the man can be angry about it (Matsuda).

These elements, or dare I say, tropes, which are portrayed time and time again in texts and film, both contribute to and simultaneously debunk the myth of the strong Black woman. While she endures and goes through these often-traumatic events in her life, it is never by choice and most frequently out of duty. The examples given in this text can be linked directly to portrayals of Black women in both print and culture.

In discussing rape narratives of Black women as portrayed in literature, it is necessary to define rape. The legal definition has evolved greatly over the roughly three-thousand years that our selected texts span. The definition also changes from state to state and is constantly evolving to include and/or exclude specific categories of this egregious crime. Originally and chiefly, in accordance with the Oxford English Dictionary: rape was defined as “the act or crime, committed by a man, of forcing a woman to have sexual intercourse with him against her will, esp. by means of threats or violence. In later use more generally: it is defined as the act of forced, non-consenting, or illegal sexual intercourse with another person; sexual violation or assault” (Rape, n1). Similarly, “acquaintance rape, as defined by the same, is a rape committed by a person who is known to the victim” (Dictionary). However, Black women were not protected by law against rape as the subhumanity of Black people is still being challenged today.

More specifically, the “difference between [Black people and white people] means one of us must be inferior, then the recognition of any difference must be fraught with guilt. To allow women of Color to step out of stereotypes is too guilt provoking” (Lorde 3). Differently put, allowing justice to Black women in the face of sexual violence, directly implicates hundreds of years of rape by enslavers. Although miscegenation laws were put in place to protect white women from being raped by Black men, the laws left Black women vulnerable to attackers of all ethnicities and backgrounds.

“Miscegenation laws, which in practice, were directed at preventing sexual relations between white women and black men. The miscegenation laws thus pretended to offer “protection” to white women but left black women the victims of rape by white men and simultaneously granted to these same men power to terrorize black men as a potential threat to the virtue of white womanhood” (Carby 268).

As womanhood was an obsolete notion for Black women, laws predating the 1964 Civil Rights Act did not serve to offer justice for us and simultaneously offered white supremacists’ ammunition for the lynching of Black men for allegations of sexual assault, implied or committed.

The hypersexualization and subsequent rape of Black women was further “exacerbated by racism and the pressures of powerlessness, violence against Black women and children often becomes a standard within our communities, one by which manliness can be measured. But these woman-hating acts are rarely discussed as crimes against Black women” (Lorde 4). The vicious assaults were frequent, and rarely offered any justice to the victors as “women relinquish all personal rights in the presence of a man” (Shange 33). Moreover, stereotyping us as jezebels served as a scapegoat for white guilt and jealous wives, which will be discussed in more detail within the next section.

Along with the projection of being labeled a jezebel comes victim blaming. Black women that accuse their predators are often ridiculed and dismissed with statements such as, “you must have wanted it” “are you sure / you didn’t suggest / had you been drinkin” (Shange 31). In sharing these blaming statements that attempt to shift guilt from the attacker to the victor, Shange confirms that Black women were seen as complicit and willing participants to the various forms of degradation and dehumanization that were forced upon them during enslavement.

The potential attackers for acquaintance rape include the usual suspects of spouses, boyfriends/girlfriends, friends, etc. In their 2019 Study “Blaming the Victim of Acquaintance Rape,” Claire R. Gravelin, Monica Biernat, and Caroline E. Bucher have found that of those [one in five] women who have been sexually assaulted, 41% have been assaulted by an acquaintance (Gravelin). These acquaintances are often ones that the woman has known for enough time to build trust. Undeniably, cases of forced, non-consenting sexual acts with another person transcend both cultures and eras as nearly a third of black girls and women are sexually assaulted in their lifetimes (Perry 46). Our following texts explore the rape narratives of two Black women and cultures surrounding that of spanning from 1050 B.C. to 2022.

The story of Tamar comes from the Bible and is written in 2 Samuel 13. For context, this particular book of the Bible begins with the death of King Saul, king of the Israelites, and the subsequent ascension of David as the new King called by God around the year 1050 BC. Interestingly enough, this story takes place directly after the controversial story of David and Bathsheba, whom feminist theologians argue may have been raped by King David. In order to constitute Tamar’s story as one of the plights of Black women, it is also necessary to discuss her possible race and familial lineage. Tamar is the only daughter of King David that is mentioned by name. Although he was born in Bethlehem, King David, as well as the Israelites to whom he ruled over, are all of the lineage of Abraham, Noah and Moses. Moses is most noted for delivering the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. More information regarding the ethnicity of Tamar can be found in Dante Fortson’s book, *King David: The Black Hebrew with Ruddy Skin*. For the purposes of this project, we will presume that Tamar is of African descent, categorizing her as a Black woman.

In 2 Samuel 13, one will find the story of a woman named Tamar, daughter of King David. For a clearer understanding, I have taken the liberty of studying the New International Version

which, published in 1973, translates the Bible from the King James Version to a more modern language. In doing so, it provides for a more well-rounded analysis of the texts within this chapter as they now share a similar writing style being published within the last 50 years. The literary and technical writing style of this historical religious text primarily uses conversation to carry the plot. These conversations first take place between Tamar and her half-brother Amnon, son of King David. This is then followed by a brief conversation with Tamar and her brother Absalom, who is also the son of King David and has the same mother as Tamar. While conversations are used within this text, the narrator writes from a third person omniscient point of view, as the reader is privy to the internal thoughts of the characters in addition to witnessing their actions. It is also important to note that Tamar is not the main character of this text and merely provides a supporting role in the text. Indeed, her voice is so silenced that throughout the chapter, the narrator specifically identifies the speaker, i.e., “Amnon said,” “Absalom said,” etc. However, for Tamar’s two speaking parts, the narrator attempts to silence and demean her voice and importance further by simply denoting “she said.”

Tamar was subsequently raped by her half-brother Amnon. He was very much in love with his sister Tamar, so he pretended that he was sick and asked that his sister prepare a meal for him in front of him in a vicious scheme to get her alone. Once alone, he asked her to come to bed with him. The reader can ascertain that she was raped, not only because most translations of the Bible state that he raped her, but also because she is noted in 2 Samuel 13: 12 as refusing him, saying, “No, my brother! Don’t force me! Such a thing should not be done in Israel! Don’t do this wicked thing” (2 Sam. 13.12). In this moment, Tamar, who could have been seen as a damsel, attempted to reason with her brother. This attribute of standing up to figures of authority was typically reserved for men during this time period. Not identifying Tamar as a damsel in distress eliminates

any hope of truly sympathizing with her as a victim of sexual violence. Tamar pleaded to her brother Amnon, not to do this wicked thing by requesting that he consider the aftermath, “What about me? Where could I get rid of my disgrace? And what about you? You would be like one of the wicked fools of Israel. Please speak to the king; he will not keep me from being married to you” (2 Sam. 13.13). This instead portrayed her as resilient, aligning with the trope of possessing a supernatural strength.

Unfortunately, her pleading was to no avail because in the next line of the text, Amnon did just what he aimed and pleased to do: he raped his sister. Tamar’s immediate aftermath can be seen as one of both panic and fear. Upon being sent away, she pleaded with Amnon, “No! Sending me away would be a greater wrong than what you have already done to me” (2 Sam. 13.16). In the Concise Holman Bible Dictionary, Chris Church states that although rape is seen as a crime, the woman is forced to marry her rapist in this culture, which most likely causes further mental torment and torture to her (Church). Pursuant to the law of the land, Tamar tries to convince her rapist brother Amnon to marry her and cause less shame. “Notably,” Church continues, “in other cases of forcible rape, in the book of Deuteronomy, chapter twenty-two, the offender was required to marry his victim and was not permitted to divorce her” (Church). Although these treacherous stories in the Bible took place hundreds of thousands of years ago, still today similar traditions are continued.

Gravelin, Biernat, and Bucher stated that “Victims of sexual assault in many Middle Eastern communities are punished, even outcast by their families, or must marry their rapists in order to restore honor to their families” (Gravelin et al.). Historically and traditionally, after such an awful wrong has been committed, women are expected to subject themselves to marriage to their rapist in order to avoid being shamed. However, in the case of Tamar, she was not even given

this dreadful alternative opportunity. As a subsequence, her desperate marriage plea, in an attempt to prevent a forcible rape, could give readers pause in interpreting as to whether or not she was truly raped. Indeed, it is modern day definitions of forced sexual assault that deems rape as any situation where consent is not, or in Tamar's position, could not be given. Literary portrayals of resilience and, furthermore compliance, rather than victimization normalize an unnatural strength to withstand suffering. Thusly, despite imperfect translations from the Hebrew language, which does not contain the word rape, to English, it is fair to assert that Tamar was indeed raped.

After being sent away from Amnon's chamber, Tamar went to her half-brother, Absalom to inform him of what had transpired, in great anticipation and expectation of his sympathy. His response to her regarding this matter was, "Has that Amnon, your brother, been with you? Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother. Don't take this thing to heart" (2 Sam. 13.20). The scope of this particular Biblical text shows the state of mind of Tamar just moments before the rape, directly after the rape, and how she dealt with it long term. It also shows the reality of the second trauma that some rape victims experience when reaching out for help. After confiding in her brother, Absalom quite literally told her to be quiet and forget it happened. Do not take it too seriously. Accordingly, not only does this story utilize the rhetoric of rape much to the chagrin of Tamar, but it also perpetuates the commonly overused literary trope of supernatural strength in Black women and unfortunate reality of Black women being silenced into submission.

More specifically, a common trait of the strong Black woman is her silence. It is in the silent sufferings that she is seen as resilient, and able to take on any trauma that comes her way. Furthermore, her silence is often perverted into complacency, which further exacerbates the assaults and gross misconceptions of absolute tenacity and inflicts more pain. The strong Black

woman's ability and so-called *willingness* to be silenced into submission, not causing a fuss or sharing her grievances, can be seen as the head of her strength.

Other translations of the Bible regarding Absalom's reaction and response to his half- sister being raped by her brother are slightly harsher, perhaps due to the fact that these translations are more modern. The King James Version has much flowery rhetoric as the newer versions give readers the ugly truth. The Message translation notes him as saying, "Now, my dear sister, let's keep it quiet- a family matter. He is, after all, your brother. Don't take this so hard," and likewise, The Good News Bible Translation says, "Please, sister, don't let it upset you so much. He is your half-brother, so don't tell anyone about it" (2 Sam. 13.20). The Tanach says "Has your brother Amnon been with you? Be silent, for now, my sister. He is your brother; do not concern your heart over this matter" (2 Sam. 13.20). In an annotation in the Tanach, the editors analyze this text by stating that Absalom tried to comfort Tamar by saying that the outrage would have been even more humiliating had it been committed by an outsider. Furthermore, "he urged her to try and forget about the traumatic incident and get on with her life" (Zolowitz). In a futile attempt to console his sister, he belittled her experience and told her that it could have been worse.

Former President Barack Obama once stated along the same lines that "We still don't condemn sexual assault as loudly as we should. We make excuses. We look the other way. The message that it sends can have a chilling effect on our young women" (Obama). Even though the speech was offered thousands of years later, the sentiment still holds true. Sexual assault and, more specifically, acquaintance rape "are on the increase, reported and unreported" (Lorde 5). While Absalom may not have made Tamar aware of his disdain, in the end, Absalom's hate for his brother disgraced his sister and had him killed over two years later. Absalom may have meant well by telling Tamar to move on, as he was secretly plotting revenge, but his advice to Tamar was to keep

quiet and forget it ever happened. It was a “slap in the face” as the Tanakh depicts Tamar as being devastated after their conversation (Shange 31; Zlotowitz). Unfortunately, not only is she silenced by her brother, but by the narrator as well. The narrator leaves Tamar’s resolution up to the reader’s interpretation and imagination as she is never mentioned in the Bible again following her story. The reader is therefore left unaware as to whether or not Tamar ever discovers Amnon is dead. Tamar’s rape and successive being forced into silence can be likened to many other Black woman in the following analysis.

The aftermath of rape, particularly that of an acquaintance rape, can be detrimental to Black women, often having long-term effects.

“For anybody whose once-normal, everyday life was suddenly shattered by an act of sexual violence, the trauma, the terror can shadow you long after one horrible attack. It lingers when you don’t know where to go or who to turn to...It’s a haunting presence when the very people entrusted with your welfare fail to protect you” (Obama).

For the purpose of the next particular analysis, it is necessary to pinpoint the aftermath of a Black woman’s rape and how femininity, even as displayed in little Black girls, can be perverted. Moreover, it speaks to the deliberate hypersexualization and contributes to the discussion in Chapter III surrounding the adultification of children. However, for contextual purposes and to provide a clear analysis of the situation that so many Black girls are subjected to, some details regarding the actual rape in of itself need to be provided.

As conveyed in her 1969 literary autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou was assaulted and subsequently raped by her mother’s boyfriend, Mr. Freeman, at the tender age of eight years old. As a literary autobiography, she uses a combination of conversation

and storytelling in portraying the text. It is written in the standard, first person point of view and includes little to no deviations of this style. When Maya Angelou was a child, she and her brother were sent to live with their grandmother for a while. Presumably, the mother was ill and either could not or would not raise her own two children. Eventually, their mother regains custody of the two children. However, it is during this brief stay that Angelou is sexually assaulted and raped. The first two assaults were innocent in her mind because he “didn’t hurt [her],” and she “simply didn’t understand him either” (Angelou 73). These assaults consisted of Mr. Freeman holding and cuddling her on two separate occasions. Moreover, her innocence as juxtaposed to Mr. Freeman’s hypersexualization blindly eradicated any doubt in her mind that his intentions were anything but pure. By rationalizing the assaults as not being painful and leaving her confused, Angelou, unfortunately believed that the physical rape was her fault. She thought that had she said no to the hugs and cuddles, or told her mother, then perhaps he would not have hurt her.

Her third and final encounter with Mr. Freeman was one of pain. It was not the pleasure and comfort she had become accustomed to receiving from him holding her prior to the unbeknownst sexual assaults. In contrast to the story of Tamar, in which Tamar fought vehemently with her words to prevent being assaulted, Angelou welcomed his touches and displays of love and affection as she assumed them to be innocent. Therefore, when Mr. Freeman raped her, she was not only left in physical pain, but was emotionally distraught as well.

In describing her traumatic experience, Angelou writes, “The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can’t,” (Angelou 77). After the traumatizing experience, Angelou awakens to her rapist bathing her. Although it is not explicitly stated, the reader is left to assume that she was so violently violated, that she passed out from the pain, as she thought she had died, but instead awoke to Mr. Freeman bathing her. This can be

doubtlessly interpreted that Mr. Freeman symbolically washed away not only evidence of his crimes, but his guilt as well. In the text, he is portrayed as painfully scrubbing, perhaps in hopes that if he scrubs hard enough, he can scrub away the rape as well. Fortunately, Angelou did, however, manage to keep the incriminating evidence of her underwear. By doing so, she retains the only proof she needs to defend herself against anyone, including herself, who may doubt that the trauma she experienced was real.

In Mary Vermillion's analysis of representations of rape in Maya Angelou's, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, she "maintains that while trying to perceive herself as whole and untouched, the rape victim runs the risk of fragmenting her identity, of excluding her body from what she considers as the rest of herself" (Vermillion). Such was the case with Angelou. Moments after reviving and coming to after her rape, it appears as though she had an out of body experience. While she described herself as just feeling a little tired, in her first response regarding Mr. Freeman, she informs the reader that she "was somewhere above everything" (Angelou 75). What follows in Angelou's story is comparable to Tamar's tale, in that even in the midst of trials, the desires and requests of Black women often fall on deaf ears. For both women, immediately after the rape, and while in conversation with their rapists, their requests to their perpetrators were denied. While Tamar begged not to be sent away which would cause shame for the rest of her life yet still was, all Angelou wanted to do was rest. However, Mr. Freeman, most likely out of regret, remorse, and disgust of himself, sent her away to play at the park after roughly bathing her. It is interesting to note that despite her innocence and Black girlhood being forcibly ripped away from her, in a futile attempt to restore what he stole, he sends her to play at the park as children should. However, Angelou's voice came out as a whisper for fear that he would hurt her again when she pleaded, "I'm so tired I'll just go and lay down a while, please" (Angelou 79). Angelou, like Tamar, and

countless other Black women, are frequently sent away and expected to “act natural” as if a life-shattering event did not just occur (Angelou 78). It is during these moments that this forced ability to suffer in silence is then praised in the public sphere, and worthy of denoting, and dehumanizing, a woman as being super.

Although it is unclear what happened to Tamar due to her portrayal as a supporting character in her brother’s story, following her conversation with her brother Absalom, in accordance with multiple different translations of the bible, the remainder of Tamar’s life is described in 2 Samuel 13:20 as bitter, desolate, sad, and lonely (2 Sam. 13.20). In comparison, likewise, Angelou had similar feelings, as she wrote that she “knew [she] was dying, in fact, [she] longed for death” (Angelou, Chapter 77). Now, of course, with Angelou still being a child at the time of her rape, her mental ability to process what transpired greatly differed from that of Tamar’s experience. Tamar was fully aware that the rape was wrong and beyond justification while Angelou was sent away confused and in pain. Nonetheless, both felt sad and lonely in the aftermath of their rapes. Tamar, because the one person she told, her brother Absalom, was dismissive, and Angelou, because initially she could not tell anyone.

As a direct result of the perverted hypersexualization of Black women and subsequent lack of control by their attackers, in a moment of perhaps guilt or shame, she is forced to suffer in silence. As such, she is brandished as a strong Black woman yet consistently minimized by appeals to their strength, their presumed power to defy victimization (Lafontant 38). Moreover, as Black women were not allowed bodily autonomy, even more, viewed as property rather than humans, it was only the rapes of white women that were substantiated.

To this, activist Ida B. Wells, a pivotal voice in the outcries against lynching in the “New South” asserts that “emancipation meant that white men lost their vested interests in the body of

the Negro and that lynching, and the rape of black women were attempts to regain control” (Carby 269). Specifically, she states in her research pamphlet *Southern Horrors*,

Aside from the violation of white women by Negroes, which is the outcropping of a bestial perversion of instinct, the chief cause of trouble between the races in the South is the Negro's lack of manners. In the state of slavery, he learned politeness from association with white people...Since the emancipation came and the tie of mutual interest and regard between master and servant was broken, the Negro has drifted away into a state which is neither freedom nor bondage. In consequence...there are many Negroes who use every opportunity to make themselves offensive, particularly when they think it can be done with impunity (Wells).

Black women were not afforded the same dignity, humanity and justice when it came to sexual assault. White women's alleged assaults were *rectified* through the lynching of Black men. However, “the cry of rape, which pleaded the necessity of revenge for assaulted white womanhood, attempted to reduce sympathy for black males” (Carby 269). Black men were lynched for even allegedly whistling at white women while the white women that make the false allegations are still protected. In August 2022, the Mississippi decided not to indict Carolyn Bryant Donham “on charges of kidnapping and manslaughter due to insufficient evidence” (Johnston). The lack of justice for Black people, both men and women alike, in light of a direct confession rebutting previous statements exemplifies the torments that Black people are forced to suffer through and, specifically, Black women are expected to rise above.

ATTEMPTED JUSTIFICATION THROUGH THE JEZEBEL TROPE

The 1861 novel *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is an autobiography written by Harriet Jacobs under the pseudonym of Linda Brent. In this text, the reader is taken on a journey through life both during and following Jacobs's enslavement. Editor Farah Jasmine Griffin describes Jacob's work as gaining "importance from her descriptions, in great and painful detail, of the sexual exploitation that daily haunted her life- and the life of every other black female slave" (Griffin). The novel is considered a slave narrative as it is the direct autobiography of a former enslaved person and will be used to portray ways in which the tropes of the strong Black woman, the Jezebel, Mammy, and Sapphire were both villainized and glorified throughout Jacobs's life.

"My mistress had taught me the precepts of God's Word: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.' 'Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them.'" But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor" (Jacobs 11). Indeed, Jacobs faced many situations in which she was "othered" and treated not only as less than in comparison to her white counterparts but inhumane as well. Unfortunately, such was the case for the vast majority of enslaved Black women throughout the world. For Jacobs, specifically, there were tensions between herself and her mistress due to her repeatedly being raped by her enslaver. Jacobs tackles the irony of beauty in chapter 5 in stating, "If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave" (Jacobs 27). That is to say that if an enslaved woman was considered to be beautiful, she was at a higher risk of being sexually assaulted, and subsequently abused. If Jacobs were to refuse her enslaver sexually, she was subject to punishment as severe as death because of the confounds of enslavement. This coercive and degrading sexual assault that

Jacobs, and many other enslaved women, survived and detailed was targeted by her mistress, whom, in turn, treated her badly.

Like many white women, instead of blaming their pervasive and devious husbands, she felt no compassion and blamed young Jacobs for seducing her husband, reinforcing the trope of the jezebel. Furthermore, this refusal of white women to acknowledge and empathize with the rape and traumatization of enslaved women, and instead invoking personalized victimhood, criminalized the Black women who were wronged. Specifically, in chapter 6, Mrs. Flint is quoted as stating, “She felt that her marriage vows were desecrated, her dignity insulted; but she had no compassion for the poor victim of her husband’s perfidy. She pitied herself as a martyr; but she was incapable of feeling for the condition of shame and misery in which her unfortunate, helpless slave was placed” (Jacobs 31). Although Jacobs was the clear and absolute victim in this situation, Mrs. Flint made herself a martyr, feeling pity for herself for being in the middle of such a terrible situation. Such is true still today in the rape and sexual assault of Black women who are unfairly and unjustly viewed as mythological creatures that have a high tolerance for pain and seductive ways that begs the white man to rape or assault her. While the wives of the enslaver may have twisted the Black enslaved woman’s forced silence for complacency, it is necessary to note that the Black woman was considered to be property and, as such, had no control over her own body and could not consent to such abuse. As such, the Black woman was forced to build a shield in order to survive, suppressing any feelings of self-pity as there was no one to wipe her tears.

In a similar way, Black enslaved women were forced to reckon with the cruel auctioning and selling of their own children. In chapter 3, Jacobs laments the impending holiday season, knowing that she may have another burden to bear: the loss of her children. To this Jacobs recalls:

To the slave mother New Year's Day comes laden with peculiar sorrows. She sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before the day dawns. She may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalized her from her childhood; but she has a mother's instincts, and is capable of a mother's agonies (Jacobs 17).

This is an important factor that applies to the strength of the enslaved Black woman not only because in, and of itself, is an atrocity, but oftentimes, it furthered the trope of the *Black mammy*. Indeed, oftentimes an enslaved woman's infant child was sold to a nearby plantation so that she could, in turn, nurse and raise the white child. However, this stereotype of the jezebel is reinforced by enslaved Black women being forced to raise the white children of her enslaver and is subsequently used as a supercilious reason to separate the *jezebel* from her children.

In the same way, Shange's choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* also discusses a stereotypical image of the strong Black woman with its portrayal of the *jezebel* as exemplified beginning on page 31 and personified by the lady in red. In this choreopoem, Shange uses the literary device of counter-story to debunk the myth of the jezebel. While the story opens with the lady in the red seducing men with her beauty and charm and subsequently sleeping with them, before the night is over, Shange reveals the inner thoughts of this alleged jezebel.

she wd gather her tinsel
 & jewels from the tub
 & laugh gayly or vengeful
 she stored her silk roses by her bed

& when she finished writin
 the account of her exploit in a diary
 embroidered with lilies & moonstones
 she placed the rose behind her ear
 & cried herself to sleep (Shange 31).

While the narrator does not explicitly state why the lady in red puts herself through this torment on a regular basis, it can be presumed that it is because she had been hurt before. Moreover, it may very well be a portrayal of the power dynamics that men have over Black women. Since men have more social standings and economic resources, an exchange of sexual favors could potentially help her to maintain her lifestyle. Although, perhaps, her decisions may not be ideal to the audience, in order to keep her appearance and strength as a Black woman, she has decided to hurt other men, lest she falls victim again. However, the truth behind her story, the nights of crying herself to sleep should arguably be a part of the lady in red's story as well. The tears could be representative of a myriad of emotions from sorrow, to shame, to distress and cannot be mistaken for compliance or joy. Yet, unfortunately, so many Black women suffer in silence as the lady in red does, to keep up the façade of appearing to be strong.

Many self-identified feminists, especially Black womanist writers, have agreed that the enslavement of Black women can be seen as the source for many of the stereotypes surrounding the myth of the strong Black woman (Collins; Carby; Taylor; Wallace, etc.). Collins defines these ideologies in stating:

Ideology refers to the body of ideas reflecting the interests of a group of people. Within U.S. culture, racist and sexist ideologies permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely, seen as natural, normal, and

inevitable. In this context, certain assumed qualities that are attached to Black women are used to justify oppression. From the mammies, *jezebels*, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, negative stereotypes applied to African American women have been fundamental to Black women's oppression (Collins 5).

That is to say that the identification of the Black woman was often interdependent of that of the woman, particularly in the south, and, more specifically, directly opposes that of the white woman. These stereotypes serve to further oppress Black women in a twofold, cyclical manner. In the first way she is hypersexualized, causing her to be at a greater risk to sexual assault and violence. In the second, if a Black woman were to take pride in her sexuality, she too would be viewed in a manner that was hypersexualized and, subsequently, would be blamed for her own attack.

In today's society, the oppressive and traumatic experiences that created the stereotype of the jezebel, now hold Black women in a chokehold, causing them to feel as if they were less than a woman for not oppressing themselves through the subjection of undue trial and tribulations. Moreover, "Black feminists and many more Black women who do not define themselves as feminists have all experienced sexual oppression as a constant factor in our day-to-day existence...As we grew older, we became aware of the threat of physical and sexual abuse by men. However, we had no way of conceptualizing what was so apparent to us, what we knew was really happening" (Combahee 2,3). It is now trending to be labeled as sexy which in turn carries the interpolated notion that a sexy woman is a jezebel. Melissa Harris-Perry elaborates upon this phenomenon by pointing out that Hip-hop videos put the "Venus Hottentot's" exaggerated sexual

organs back on display for the voyeuristic pleasure of the paying public. “Though separated from her by many decades, corporate-controlled hip-hop music and culture created a new set of tilted images portraying black women as lusty, available, and willing partners” (Perry 66). Sara Baartman, also known as the Venus Hottentot, is a woman from Africa whom around 1810 was enslaved and brought from South Africa to Europe for her body to be put on display.

[Her body... had been so brutally violated in the name of science... [Baartman was] an individual that had been literally disassembled under the watchful eye of Europe's most revered scientist, Georges Cuvier, some 20 decades ago, her genitalia and brain placed in jars—her body re-presented in cast form, her skeleton hung from a rack—and all were placed on display in a museum for decades—groped, leered, and prodded at by the watchful eyes of a paying public who came to see that "missing link" between humans and animals (Henderson 2).

Black women were seen as being more inclined to sexual promiscuity due to our bodies being naturally fuller. What's more is Black women that are not voluptuous or thick are not fully appreciated as women and admonished for having boy-ish figures, yet women that are thick are sexually objectified as Baartman was.

Due to the attention that curvy women receive, many Black women in today's society opt for harmful surgeries such as Brazilian Butt Lifts (BBLs) and tummy tucks as well as subject themselves to other beauty enhancements such as shapewear and waist training in order to only feel more feminine, but as an attempt to reclaim autonomy and freedom over the Black female body. However, this idea of appearing more feminine for the Black woman means becoming more closely aligned to the licentious jezebel. Thus, the feminine and body conscious Black woman is often portrayed as a sex symbol, hypersexualized and expected to uphold the stereotypes that feed

this vicious, perverted cycle. This is one of the many ways that rape of Black women has been normalized throughout the years. Furthermore, it nuances and adds complexity to the absolute eradication of the jezebel stereotype, as both culture and literature simultaneously feed one another with façades of hypersexualization and beauty standards until the jezebel has become normalized. So much so, that the characteristics of the strong Black women have been expanded to include being both beautiful and physically fit.

Much literature of the past gives us an insight into how life used to be and can give us a strong foundation upon which to build our future. Indeed, history is made known by its cultural representations as they are a picture of desires, anxieties, and ways of life. Therefore, if there are multiple examples of rape narratives in which the Black woman shrugs it off or the attacker is given a slap on the wrist as a consequence, it would appear in historical textbooks and records as though that culture believes that the forced sexual act with a Black woman is justified and maybe even glorified. Specifically, in over 20 countries, if the woman is raped, she is forced to marry her rapist, or it will bring to shame to the family. The further traumatization of a victim marrying her attacker demands justification through the veil of chastity. Conduct manuals, which outline chastity and virtue as two of the main tenants of womanhood, stand in direct opposition to rape narratives that further normalize and glorify the mistreatment of and sexual violence against Black women. Today, Black women have attempted to reclaim our bodies through becoming sexier with trending surgeries and enhancements. Beauty, arguably being the epitome of womanhood and seen as a strength, for the Black woman, has become a double-edged sword that, in the process of acquiring simultaneously boosts self-confidence and unwanted attention. History attempts to justify this phenomenon in labeling the beautiful Black woman a jezebel, but *ain't* we women too?

CHAPTER III

THE WOES OF DOMESTICATED WOMANHOOD: THE MAMMY AND SELF-ERASURE

In May of 1962, Malcolm X asserted that “the most disrespected woman in America, is the black woman. The most unprotected woman in America is the black woman. The most neglected woman in America is the black woman” (X 1962). Indeed, throughout the entire span of her existence on American soil, the Negro woman has been alone and unprotected, not only socially but psychologically as well. She has had to fend for herself as if she were a man; being black, even more so (Hernton as quoted by Wallace 106). During the institution of slavery, dehumanizing and detrimental stereotypes surrounding enslaved Black women ran rampant and continue to influence controlling images today. Specifically, the *mammy* was characterized for cheerfully and selflessly caring for her white enslavers, including their families and children. “The mammy— the faithful, obedient domestic servant [was] created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women’s long-standing restriction to domestic service” (Collins 72). Specifically, women that find difficulty in achieving the stereotyped felicity of the mammy, associated with the matriarchal duties of bearing and raising children, tending to her husband, keeping the house in order, all while balancing a job and social life, are made to feel less than their counterparts that instead suffer in silence.

This image is frequently juxtaposed to that of the *jezebel*, “a popular mythology that degrades black women and portrays them as less deserving of motherhood,” further reinforcing their subhumanization (Roberts 389). These interpolations are merely two examples of a “complex set of images that deny black humanity in order to rationalize the oppression of blacks” (Roberts 389). When juxtaposed to the “controlling image” of the sexy and seductive *jezebel*, the *mammy*

is an image that aids in the comfortability of white people (Collins). Characterized in direct contrast to the normalized societal standards of beauty that epitomized white women, and moreover that of the voluptuous and attractive jezebel, the mammy is traditionally pictured as a stout, dark-skinned, ever-smiling, diligent, and doting being. Furthermore, the mammy has endured as a comforting image of Black womanhood to whites doting physical characteristics that were read as robust rather than fragile, and thus as markers of their natural proclivity for sexual activity and heavy labor (Lafontant; Pilgrim; Collins; Taylor). The mammy is pictured as being physically strong and happy to help. In typifying her as such, both her femininity and sexuality are averted and replaced with a subhuman interpolation. Differently put, the asexualized mammy proves to be far less threatening than the hypersexualized jezebel. Moreover, many of the characteristics of the mammy stemming from forced servitude while enslaved have not only become normalized but are intertwined within the societal standards and expectations of being a Black woman.

This particular chapter has been organized in a way to track the origins and subsequent oppression of the mammy. This ideology is explored through the investigation of texts rooted in the early depictions of women found in the biblical book of Genesis and further expounded upon using literature to include Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*, Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat" and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl." In addition to the thread of Ntozake Shange's choreopoem, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf* being continued throughout this chapter as well, Tyler Perry's stage play *Madea Goes to Jail* helps to further identify the cyclical manner in which oppression is passed down. The premise of "The Woes of Domesticated Womanhood," is that while the oppression of Black women was exacerbated through chattel slavery, and, arguably, biblical standards that have been filtered by a

patriarchal society, in the name of always being seen as *strong*, we have become our own oppressors in silencing and erasing ourselves to please others.

MAMMIES VS MOMMIES

The prevailing image of the Black mammy is arguably that of a Black woman taking care of white children. Black women during enslavement were raped and impregnated for the sole purpose of producing more “livestock” and free labor on the plantation. Sexual violence against enslaved women was often for the purpose of forced reproduction for the profit of enslavers in a white economy. In the same way, Dorothy E. Roberts in her pivotal 1991 article, “Punishing Drug Addicts Who Have Babies: Women of Color, Equality, and the Right of Privacy” discusses the ramifications of an oppressor using a woman’s oppression as just cause for dehumanization. More specifically, Roberts contends that female slaves were “commercially valuable to their masters not only for their labor but also for their capacity to produce more slaves” (389). Essentially, enslaved women were not only seen for their laborious efforts, but also for their ability to produce free labor through the process of childbearing. In doing such, Black women were excluded from society’s white-washed images of motherhood and denied the humanity of raising their own children. Moreover, the deleterious depiction of the enslaved Black woman as a jezebel served as a double-edged sword, using this façade of hypersexualization as a reason to deny motherhood. Subsequently, their children were stolen from them and then sold into slavery, often to different plantations. To this, Lafontant maintains that the construction of the mammy “enabled white southern apologists” to offer a “redeeming embodiment of Black womanhood” that “knew her place of servitude,” helping others to learn the same “through her discipline and example” (28). Resulting from the intersectionality of Black women being denied humanity through the objectification of the jezebel and taken advantage of through the silent servitude of the mammy,

Black women were left defenseless as enslavers believed themselves justified and tearing apart families for profit.

In *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Negro-American Woman*, Hazel V. Carby discusses the differences in the ideologies of womanhood between white women and Black women in the antebellum south. Essentially, the Black woman was not viewed as truly being a woman because of the way she was forced to relate to the enslavers. Carby continues this argument in stating that Black women have gained their strength from surviving these situations and subsequently unjustly accused of possessing supernatural masculine strength, resulting in further oppression. She also speaks to the juxtaposed stereotypes of white women as being weak and feeble minded in addition to generalized stereotypes of women. “One of the most treacherous outcomes of anti-Blackness is the continual denial of Black humanity [which] continues to be deeply tied to the racist, sexist, ageist, and classist mythology of Black motherhood” (Story 877). The forced production and subsequent threat of removal of a child exemplifies this notion in that through chattel slavery, Black people were stripped of their own identities and were forced to conform to that of their enslavers. Additionally, as property, they were not able to own anything, including their bodies and their children’s bodies under a sexist reading of the bible, commanding women to have many children. Differently put, the psychological effect of systemically having no autonomy over oneself is rooted in biblical expectations of being fruitful and multiplying and was exasperated through the institution of slavery.

The United States of America was founded on religious principles, and more specifically Christianity. Still today, in the nation’s Pledge of Allegiance, school-aged children are to memorize and recite that the USA is a “nation under God.” As such, much of our belief systems and political views can be said to be rooted in biblical laws and suggestions. In the same way,

God's first commandment to humans was to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1.28). Women have struggled for centuries to have full autonomy over their own bodies. By commanding humans, and more specifically women as they carry the brunt of the burden of childbearing, motherhood has become normalized and can be seen as synonymous to womanhood. The expectation of women to "be fruitful and multiply," places the ability of the woman's body to produce children on a pedestal, dehumanizing women into a role of subhumanity and being viewed as beasts of burden (Gen. 1.28). This subjugation of women is further exasperated within the intersectionality of being a Black woman, particularly post enslavement. However, that Black women and white women are seen as equally synonymous is a state that the US has yet to ratify.

THE HISTORIC DEVALUATION OF THE BLACK WOMAN

In being commanded to be fruitful and multiply, the woman, and especially the Black woman through chattel slavery, loses autonomy over her own body. Moreover, not wanting to have children is viewed as unwomanly, as if being a mother makes you a woman. However, in men asserting control over our reproductive systems, they, too, gain control over our bodies. In her time-transcending 1991 article, "Punishing Drug Addicts Who Have Babies: Women of Color, Equality, and the Right of Privacy," Dorothy E. Roberts identifies areas of pain stemming from bodily autonomy and the lack thereof. In investigating the "history of the devaluation of women," she discovers possibilities for women to gain full autonomy over their personhood (Roberts 389). More specifically, Roberts asserts that the devaluation of black women as mothers began through the control of black women's reproductive lives during slavery. As aforementioned, the trope of the jezebel created a whitewashed façade in order to sexually violate enslaved Black women. Furthermore, these grievous acts were perpetuated for free labor. Indeed, until slavery was abolished in the 1860s (specific dates differ across states), any child born to an enslaved woman

was also enslaved and was considered property. “Advertisements announcing the sale of black female slaves used the terms “breeding slaves,” “childbearing woman,” “breeding period,” “too old to breed,” to describe individual women” (hooks 39). The idealization of viewing enslaved women’s bodies merely as means to labor and producing free labor has certainly contributed to systemic assumptions of Black women and motherhood. In the same way, Roberts concludes that “enslaved women were reduced to a sexual object, an object to be raped, bred or abused” (389). Thus, the invested interests in creating free labor and concurrently dehumanizing the creator perpetuated a vicious cycle of systemic trauma. In a not so cruel world, this dehumanization and forced childbearing of enslaved women would end with the ratification of the thirteenth amendment, yet the fight for autonomy and the dismantling of racist and sexist practices of and committed against Black women and women of color still continues during this century.

American definitions of womanhood, and by consequence, motherhood was never meant to be inclusive of enslaved Black women [as they were seen] and thought of as “abject and nothing more than property, Black women were exiled from the institutional and vernacular praxis of mothering and womanhood” (Story 878). That is to say, as a result of the systematic and purposeful oppression of enslaved persons for centuries, Black women are still fighting to be treated as women, and moreover, as mothers. Today, the intersectionality of struggles to be respected as Black mothers has become even more pressing as new legislation continues to pass that denies bodily autonomy to Black women such as the 2022 overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, a supreme court decision that marked the ending of the constitutional right to abortion.

“Overturning *Roe v. Wade* disproportionately impacts women of color, as they are more likely to obtain abortions, have more limited access to health care, and face

underlying inequities that would make it more difficult to travel out of state for an abortion compared to their White counterparts” (Artiga).

Overtaking a woman’s autonomy and control over her own body is detrimental in itself. Yet, when taking into consideration that marginalized women of color face socio-economic disparities, this gross injustice is magnified. However, the injustices and lack of human dignity expressed do not begin, nor do they end with forced reproduction.

THE RISE OF THE MAMMY

Adding insult to injury, enslaved Black women were frequently forced to raise the children of their white enslavers. It is through the act of raising these white children that the controlling image of the *mammy* comes from. They were looked at as a second mother, often having to neglect their own children in order to raise their enslavers’ children. “By loving, nurturing and caring for her White children and “family” more than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group’s perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite White male power” (Collins 72). The nuances of a Black woman reckoning with being a mammy while being forced to neglect being a mommy is discussed more in depth in Kathryn Stockett’s 2009 novel *The Help*.

Stockett’s novel traces a group of Black women who self-identify as domestic workers, or maids. Primary duties of their job included housekeeping and “helping” to raise the children of their white counterparts. However, as Aibileen Clark, a main character describes, *the help* was often subjected to child rearing alone. “Taking care a white babies, that’s what I do, along with all the cooking and the cleaning. I done raised seventeen kids in my lifetime. I know how to get them babies to sleep [and] stop crying” (Stockett 1). As domestic workers, Black women were often expected to be at their employers’ home from before the child wakes up until after supper. As such, often their own children were left without a mother on workdays. While it was not typical for the

white children to call their caretakers mammy, rather they used their first name as Mae Mobley does in *The Help*, ironically, the biological *mommy* would offer minimal care, support and love in raising the child. Specifically, *The Help* seems to suggest through the relationship of Aibileen and Mae Mobley that the main thing white women impart on their children is the cycle of racism.

As the novel is set in Jackson, Mississippi in the early to mid-1960s and culminates with the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, issues of segregation and discrimination are a prevalent theme. Stockett, a white woman who herself was raised by a Black nanny, seems to imply that racism is not inherent, but is rather learned. Pointedly, in chapter seven, Mae Mobley is scolded by her mother, Miss Hilly, for using a “separate but *equal*” bathroom that Aibileen’s employers built for her. Miss Hilly explained to her young daughter that she could not use the colored bathroom because Black people were dirty, and their bathrooms were full of infectious diseases. “I want to yell so loud that Baby Girl can hear me that dirty ain’t a color, disease ain’t the negro side of town. I want to stop that moment from coming – and it come in every white child’s life – when they start to think that colored folks are not as good as whites” (Stockett 112). Racism and classism are perpetuated and taught to children at a very young age, making it difficult for Black women to avoid prejudices and preconceived notions of their subhumanization. The mammy is such an image as it places expectations on the Black woman to be a selfless caregiver to those around her, negating her own family, fears and happiness. Moreover, just as racism and biases are passed down to young white children, caregiving and self-erasure is instilled in Black girls at a very young age.

CARETAKER

The contradictory image of a woman that is unable to take care of herself as a woman that takes care of everyone around her, is a nuanced side-effect of the interpolated characteristic of the

mammy. Biblically speaking, when God created woman, His intentions for her were twisted and mistranslated to be a helpmate. To this, Genesis 2:18 of the King James Version of the Holy Bible states, “And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him” (Gen. 2.18). Unfortunately, many have taken this scripture out of context and have taken it as meaning that women’s sole purpose on earth is to be a help *mate*, helping people, and more specifically, her husband.

Indeed, early novels and conduct literature predicated on the ideologies surrounding love and marriage, as discussed in chapter II, often portrayed the societal norms for the English economy. Moreover, marriage had transformed into a business contract of sorts, with love as an added benefit versus the basis. “The argument went, that marriage was an object of mockery, used only as a cynical means of increasing wealth. Brides were being bought and sold with no regard for the future happiness or future compatibility with their husbands” (Tague 76-77). Primarily, unions were established among the elite to solidify political, societal, and/or economic gains, leaving the woman as a bartering tool.

LOVE AND MARRIAGE

Both Victorian and biblical ideologies surrounding womanhood carried connotations of grace, virtue, and purity in order to obtain the desired reward of marriage which directly opposed the intensive and strenuous labor that enslaved women were subjected to. Thus, when black people were bought and sold as slaves, they were “placed beyond the bounds of humanity” and, subsequently, womanhood (Williams 227). Differently put, imposed and forced enslavement led to the ensuing dehumanization of Black people in an attempt to justify their mistreatment. Furthermore, womanhood for Black women was questioned as neither the prevailing dominant images of the mammy nor the jezebel were particularly comparable to the presumed gentleness of

the white woman (Roberts 390; Story 878). Indeed, the mistreatment of Black mothers stems from gendered expectations and liberties taken during slavery. For instance, historian Deborah Gray White argues that “myths about black women’s lusty availability, set against the gendered expectations of the chaste Victorian era, justified the sexual abuse of enslaved women” (as quoted by Perry 49). However, hypocrisy in the proposed conduct of women, that supposedly held Black women to the same standard, was exacerbated by the promotion of the virtuous woman. “Many writers sought to reinstate the traditional importance of marriage and domestic life, a reaction that would find its most extreme expression in conduct manuals” (Tague 79-80). Undoubtedly, as Black women were viewed as being subservient and subhuman, for hundreds of years many found it impossible to be accepted by society as women, especially with prevailing images that identified and characterized Black women as the direct opposite. The Victorian ideal of true womanhood required “strict adherence to a code of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity—virtues believed to be inherent in feminine nature, yet the myth of Black women as lascivious, seductive, and insatiable was merely a way to justify the brutality of white Southern men [and women]” (Perry 55). Differently put, by normalizing the fallacies of white womanhood while stereotyping Black women as having *masculine* behaviors that the same white Southerners forced us to exhibit, a seemingly never-ending cycle of striving to eradicate the vicious stereotypes was created. Themes of motherhood, love, marriage and identity can be found within the vast majority of poems within Shange’s *for Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf*.

Although every story within text can be said to examine, and ultimately eradicate, the trope of the strong Black woman, the first story that particularly speaks to the sub-theme of the Black woman as matriarch and provider is that of the story of the lady in red beginning on page 13. Specifically, she is portrayed as evaluating her relationship with a man that she has poured her

heart and soul into and has received nothing in exchange. Moreover, she laments an unrequited love, which is often the case in stereotypical matriarchal families. To this Shange writes:

without any assistance or guidance from you

i have loved you assiduously for 8 months 2 wks & a day (Shange 13).

This particular narrative is continued by displaying for the audience how one-sided the relationship was in that she was always there for her lover, but he only reached out to her for sex. In addition, she notes that she had often driven “27 ½ miles across the bay before [she] had to go to work,” in order to appease him (Shange 13). Such is the case for many Black women that, for fear of not living up to the fallacy of womanhood and ending up single and alone, stay in toxic relationships in which they are unhappy. This pressure comes from the trope of the strong Black woman that is almost always pictured with children and a loving husband.

In 2006, Tyler Perry’s stage play *Madea Goes to Jail*, star cast member Aunt Ella, sings a song early on in the play idolizing the Black woman as a caretaker. Ella, played by Cassi Davis is a recurring character that can be said to exemplify the mammy. Specifically, outside of her stereotypical “mammy-like” appearance, dark-skinned, big and full of energy, she is also a church going woman, a counselor, and subscribes to traditional gender roles. In the song “Cook and Clean,” Ella implies that in order for a woman to live a good life and keep a man, she needs to cook and clean and take care of him (Davis). “Come on Ms. Career Woman, you gonna have it all and nobody to share it with... That is a good man you got up there, and the way you treat him is a shame” (Davis). Simultaneously, she insinuates that being a “career woman,” is a hindrance to properly being able to serve her man and could cause her to lose him and everything that a man has to offer. Further, it implies that women are still incapable of providing for themselves and keep a good man as any sensible man would be repulsed by a career woman. This notion is derived from

the misconstrued traditional school of thought that women are docile creatures and unable to survive without a man as they were created to be a helpmate. American society upheld these laws as many women, despite culture or ethnicity, were denied basic rights such as voting, owning a home, and even American citizenship outside of their father or husband. Collins furthers this in stating that the “faithful, obedient domestic servant [was created] to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women’s long-standing restriction to domestic service” (Collins 71). In *Madea Goes to Jail*, this song serves as a means to demean the Black working woman and reinforce the image of a Black woman as a modern-day mammy or differently put, a housewife.

The song continues by asserting that if a man is “doing his part” the Black woman “better do [hers]...cook and clean and wash everything” while “smiling and grinning” (Perry). This not only perpetuates patriarchal ideologies of nuclear families of which the man as head of household is the sole breadwinner, but it also enforces traditional societal standards that demand men should pay all the bills and women should stay barefoot and pregnant, taking care of the kids and cleaning and cooking for everyone, being seen but never heard. This fantasy is rarely capable in reality for Black men though due to the socio-economic disparities that America has established, keeping the Black man, too, in his place.

Yet, the song continues by stating that “young girls don’t know how to treat [a] man” but wonder why they are single, claiming that “a man should be treated like he is a king. If he brings home the money” that is all a woman needs (Davis). This also reinforces the notion that the newer generation of Black women are not “treating their man” the way they should be treated. This song speaks to the notion that Black women working and contributing to the household financially emasculates the man, obliterating the idea in which both the man and the woman contribute to the

financial support of the household. As such, by situating men as the sole breadwinners, relegates all household duties to women, making the sole identity of the Black woman mother and/or wife, and denying any part of her identity to exist outside of her family. This self-denial also, inadvertently, promotes misogynistic stereotypes that women are incapable of doing anything outside of the family structure. However, many of the stereotypical duties of a woman are derived from a time period in which women were not allowed to enter into the work field outside of domestic service as a housekeeper, as portrayed in *The Help*. Moreover, Ella's suggestion that as a wife a woman should "cook and clean and wash everything," while smiling and grinning perpetuates that a woman should merely be seen not heard, being grateful for what she can get while performing silent servitude (Davis).

TO PROTECT AND SERVE

The prevailing characteristics within the pejorative stereotype of the mammy, namely protecting, serving and caring for others above ourselves, have become a standard way of living for the Black woman. She is expected to organize, manage and execute the completion of household duties including cooking, cleaning and raising children with little to no outside help. The successful fulfillment of these presumed womanly duties come with honor, and recognition as a strong Black woman. That the Black woman must be subjected to mulehood as the backbone of the family to be denoted as strong, however, is questionable. As such "African American families form another contradictory location where the controlling image of Black womanhood becomes negotiated" (Collins 87). In ascertaining the position of the backbone of the family, it is often understood, but not spoken, that her life must be put on hold to do so. In a two-parent household this may look like a mother that works a part-time job so that she can still contribute financially to the household but be there whenever the children need her. In the same way, men

are celebrated for doing *traditional* fatherly duties while women are expected to do the same with little to no recognition. Moreover, as the backbone of the family, the Black woman is conjectured as the protector and primary support for all under her care. Because the black woman is expected to be the backbone of both her family and her community (i.e., church mother) and support the Black man no matter what, she is often the recipient of abuse, sexually, mentally, and physically, with no hope of justice or relief. Indeed, to be strong is to be resilient and unwavering in the face of adversity.

In the name of protecting and serving those around us, intrapersonal crimes within the Black community are rarely prosecuted. Women fear that they will be shamed for “allowing” the black man to harm her. Society believes that the “black man loves the black woman and would never harm her” and any abuse she receives “was just a misunderstanding” (Shange). Contrarily wise, if Black women were to start reporting these crimes, one of two things could possibly happen. The first is that, statistically, the man would be prosecuted harshly and serve more time than their white counterparts for the same crime and the Black woman will be ridiculed for putting the Black man through such trauma and turmoil when the world already hates him, completely negating her thoughts, feelings, emotions and trauma. Secondly, the police could escalate the situation, causing the Black man’s life to be in danger as a Black man that uses violence against women would be *justified* as being dangerous, giving the police another excuse to execute Black men. Rather than teaching Black men to protect and love Black women, we are taught how to survive the abuse. What’s more, is that we are taught to look forward to taking care of a man one day, as the ultimate prize or, as is the argued case in nineteenth century ideologies surrounding womanhood, “virtue rewarded” (Richardson).

Zora Neale Hurston's 1926 short story "Sweat" allows the reader to peek into the life of Delia Jones and her husband Sykes. Early on in the story, Hurston reveals that Delia is the breadwinner as she is a washwoman for the white women in her area and has undergone torment, abuse, and infidelity from her husband.

Ah been married to you fur fifteen years, and Ah been takin' in washin' fur fifteen years. Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat, cry and sweat, pray and sweat!...Mah tubs of suds is filled yo belly...Mah sweat is done paid for this house...You ain't paid for nothin' on this place...(Hurston 1023).

In expressing her plight to Sykes, it is apparent that she is the financial head of the household while he is portrayed as a leech, biting the hand that feeds him. Hurston is showing that Black women were expected to stay committed and faithful to their husbands *'til death do [them] part*. More specifically, as patriarchal societal laws were created and enforced to keep women, both Black and white, from elevating to a place of power, in a sense, women were forced to rely on a man for survival, even when he was unable or unwilling to provide.

In the same way, it would be assumed that because the Black woman plays such an integral role in the community that they would have the Black man would support her the way she has been forced to have supported him. However, while members of the community may whisper and gossip about how much of a shame it is that the Black woman is being abused, very rarely does anyone ever come to Delia's rescue. Within "Sweat," this notion is portrayed in a conversation at the local store.

Too much knockin' will ruin any 'oman. He done beat huh 'nough tuh kill three women...He useter be so skeered uh losin' huh, she could make him do some parts of a husband's duty...Taint no law on earth dat kin make a man be decent if it ain't

in ‘im. There’s plenty men dat takes a wife lak dey do a joint uh sugarcane. It’s round, juicy an’ sweet when dey gets it. But dey squeeze an’ grind, squeeze an grind an’ wring till dey is wrung dry, dey treats ‘em jes lak dey do a cane-chew. Dey throws em away. Dey knows whut dey is doin’ while dey is at it, an’ hates themselves fuh it but they keeps on hangin’ after huh tell she’s empty. Den dey hates huh fuh bein’ cane-chew an’ in de way (Hurston 1024-1026).

In these passages, the town’s folk, and more specifically, Joe Clarke, the store owner, discuss the implications behind Delia’s abuse. It is likened to sugar cane as it was a common crop in Eatonville, Florida where the story takes place in order to provide a clearer understanding. In the end, Sykes’ abusive behavior is summed up to taking advantage of a woman until the point where he begins to “hate [himself] fuh it but [he] keeps on hangin’ after huh tell she’s empty” (Hurston 1026). Differently put, the initial cycle of abuse is unknown, but it is continued through the Black man’s self-hatred of doing such terrible things, further perpetuating the abuse and hate. More simply, the Black woman becomes victimized for being a victim but in order to be considered *strong*, she must withstand it. Hurston continues in writing that “Delia avoided the villagers and meeting places in her efforts to be blind and deaf...and everyone knew about it but never spoke on it or helped” (Hurston 1026). While in the end, Delia is able to exact her revenge in inadvertently using a snake that Sykes released in her home to scare her away to poison him, earning her freedom, it is shameful that the Black community does not come together to protect the Black woman that serves them for fear of going against the status-quo.

Because Black women were already not considered women according to American societal standards, and subsequently viewed as “the most unprotected woman in America”, the trope of the strong Black woman further objectifies and dehumanizes her (X 1962). As such, the Black woman

has become an entity that is neither woman nor human that does not have feelings, nor do they require rest or protection and can therefore be denied autonomy to process any trauma they may incur. Why? Because she's strong enough to handle anything.

The litany of abuse and acquaintance rape portrayed in literature and within the media perpetuates the idea that the Black man cannot be trusted, not even by the Black woman, and reaffirms the age-old mantra, *I can do bad all by myself*. Since it is believed that Black men cannot be trusted, the Black woman's need to survive may contribute to the matriarch stereotype in which she feels as though she does not need any help. The sapphire seemingly stands in direct opposition to views of the modern-day mammies that coddle and mother their men. Resulting from the characteristics of the mammy that have become an expectation for Black women, those that do not subscribe to the gender role of a domesticated servant are placed in opposition of the Black man and, furthermore, blamed for his subsequent emasculation.

This means that the Black man works his traditional 9 to 5 then comes home and expects a hot meal, the house to be clean, the children's homework to be done and sometimes dessert, in accordance with Auntie Ella's "Cook and Clean" suggestions. Furthermore, after the kids are put to bed, he may expect to be sexually intimate with his wife and then fall asleep. Subsequently, in the morning, he expects breakfast to be made and possibly a lunch to be packed. If the Black man falls short, due to the systemic manner in his being kept down by society, he expects his Black woman to be there to pick up the pieces. If he's late on a bill, he expects her to be able to pay it. As he complains about being tired, the Black woman is often subjected to working full time during the day, taking evening classes, and working full time in the evenings from home all while managing homework, dinner, baths, housekeeping and being a "good" wife and "mother." If the overburdened *strong Black woman* complains, she's nagging as Hurston's Delia was portrayed as

being. It should not be emasculating to say that your woman is the head of household, rather, it is recognizing that married couples are in a partnership with their spouse and as such are able to recognize each other's individual strengths and areas for improvement and able to work together to reach common goals. What would be emasculating is a Black man being at rock bottom and dragging their significant other down with them to save face and be *a man*. However, the long-established common gendered roles of men and women are perpetually passed from generation to generation from the time children are born, leading to an innate tendency for Black women to serve selflessly.

BRING BACK OUR GIRLS

Within the Black community especially, Black parents train and condition their children to conform to gendered societal norms at a very early age. Prior to even taking their first breath, balloons and decorations lauding boy or girl, pink or blue, bows or bowties serve as traditional ways to welcome healthy babies. Furthermore, toys and clothing that represent community expectations are gifted based on sex; baby dolls and barbies are standards for little girls while trucks and dinosaurs are for little boys. However, these toys subconsciously condition children to behave and act in a certain way. Specifically, traditional girl toys such as baby dolls, kitchen sets and toy cleaning supplies teach girls how to care for children, cook and clean. Conversely, these same skill learning toys are not made readily available for boys. Rather they receive blocks, trucks and tool kits, teaching them to build and work. With these toys and ideas being presented during childhood as early as one-year old, sexist ideologies that contribute to both the stereotypical image of the mammy, and aspects connected to the ideal woman, surrounding how girls and women are expected to behave and viewed are quite difficult to eradicate in adulthood.

It is important to note here the notion of *Black girl magic* and the use of the word ‘girl’ to describe and portray Black adult women. The thought behind Black girl magic can be described as a “celebration that encourages unity among African American women while fostering and empowering a sense of self in all ladies” (University of Central Oklahoma). Often those that possess this *Black girl magic* are interchangeably characterized as *strong Black women*. However, “girl” and “boy” have been used to infantilize, and thereby, demean the adult Black people. Moreover, Black women often refer to their peers as “their girls” or a “girl at the store,” yet subconsciously identify white women as “that lady” or, more simply, “a white woman” (Hooper). In self-describing Black women as girls, we discredit ourselves, contributing to the misconception that we are less than women. As such, we are able to interrogate the intersectionality between the two schools of thought through the investigation of adultification.

GRIEVING THE LOSS OF GIRLHOOD

There is a delicate balance between progression and precariousness within Black girlhood. The line is thin and shrouded with uncertainty. Shange elects to open her choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf* with the imminent loss of innocence, and, subsequently, girlhood, in being born a Black woman. Specifically, the play opens with lady in brown speaking on the nuances of womanhood and the loss of childhood.

dark phrases of womanhood

of never havin been a girl...

somebody/ anybody

sing a black girl's song

bring her out to know herself

to know you

but sing her rhythms

carin/ struggle/ hard times (Shange)

Because of the trials and tribulations that Black women face, many even before the age of sixteen, the innocence of girlhood is lost before ever coming to realization. In the case of Shange's text, this opening poem/ scene serves as a preview into what the future holds for Black women. Furthermore, the loss of childhood innocence that Black women are forced to grieve primarily catapults little Black girls into roles of service that model traditional characteristics of the mammy. "In being conditioned [as a young girl] to be independent, demonstrate physical and emotional strength, self-sacrifice, and show great restraint, the indoctrination of the strong Black woman schema or Black superwoman façade begins" (Taylor 7). Biblically, this indoctrination is allegedly justified in using the scripture, "Train up a child in the way [she] should go: And when [she] is old [she] will not depart from it" (Prov. 22.6). This loss of innocence is further described and categorized in Kincaid's *Girl* as the presumed mother educates the presumed daughter on the predestined life skills that the girl must possess before entering into womanhood.

The short story can be read as a list of rules and expectations of a proper woman. The mother details life skills that may have been passed down to her such as cleaning, cooking and lessons on chastity. These attributes are typically passed on from generation to generation within the Black community, beginning from the time a child can speak. "Women were trained to pass it on. Sacrifice, hard work and silence are part of our heritage...Even today when we extol the virtues of our mamas, most often it's a litany of hard work, of what she did without and what she gave—never what she took or expected or demanded as her due (Gillespie as quoted by Lafontant 34). Specifically, in *Girl*, while the reader is unsure if there was any conversation prior to where we

begin that may have prompted this session of lessons, Kincaid begins with the traditional way to do laundry.

Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry (Kincaid).

Similarly, to Zora Neale Hurston's *Sweat*, in teaching the young girl how to do laundry, she is being prepared to either do work as a washwoman, which is unlikely as there are other social cues suggesting that the mother expects her to marry into the middle-class, or, more likely, to keep up with her home. This line of training continues with learning how to prepare traditional meals and foods.

Soak saltfish overnight before you cook it...this is how to make a bread pudding; this is how to make doukona; this is how to make pepper pot (Kincaid).

While cooking and cleaning are traits that all humans should be taught, parents primarily ensure that their daughters have mastered these traits while merely introducing the basics, if at all, to their sons. In teaching the girl how to cook and even grow certain fruits and vegetables, the mother prepares her to be able to handle the pressure of cooking multiple meals per day for a family. Furthermore, the mother does not only teach her daughter how to cook and clean, but also how to behave like a woman so that she "doesn't act like the slut [she] is so bent on becoming" (Kincaid).

When juxtaposed to the devious, hypersexualized portrayal of the jezebel, the selfless, serving stereotypical image of the mammy is seemingly more palatable as she does not pose a threat to society. In *Girl*, the lessons aligned with being a servant disguised as being a great wife and host are most readily portrayed in being taught how to set the table.

this is how you set a table for tea; this is how you set a table for dinner; this is how you set a table for dinner with an important guest; this is how you set a table for lunch; this is how you set a table for breakfast (Kincaid).

As such, the mother expects her daughter to be able to keep both a man and company in modeling etiquette and social skills. Today, these skills are still taught cross-culturally as special occasions call for special table settings. In the same way, it would seem as though the most important skill that the mother imparts upon her daughter is how not to be a jezebel.

Several times throughout the text, the mother's advice seems to steer her daughter in the path of homemaking versus being too friendly with men. Not only does she warn her against "singing benna on Sunday," but several of the lessons end with the clause "like the slut you are so bent on becoming" (Kincaid). The story ends along with the innocence of the child. The final command was to always squeeze the bread to ensure that it is fresh, to which the girl questions her ability to do so. In asking this question, the girl's innocence shines through as it is reasonable to wonder if it is okay to touch bread before it has been paid for. However, the mother's response insinuates that only jezebels would not be allowed to touch the bread in saying, "after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread?" (Kincaid). It can be inferred that the freshness and quality of the bread is the moral of the story and has been likened to the girl and her reputation. Differently put, fresh bread can be seen as a characteristic of the mammy while stale or of bad quality, the jezebel and in order to secure a stable future with a good man, she must learn to display good quality.

Shange's choreopoem, too, alludes to the loss of innocence that Kincaid details in *Girl*. In being expected to be a caretaker of others at such a young age, Black women lose their childlike

innocence and are forced to forfeit their girlhood and begin their lifelong journey as the “mules of the world” (Hurstun 14) fulfilling the role of the mammy.

MAMMIES AND MULES

Traditionally, women have been married at a young age, typically around the time of being able to bear children (Hurstun). Subsequently, through life lessons learned at an early age, as cataloged in *Girl*, misogynistic misconceptions of Black women and more specifically, wives, are perpetuated and normalized. Rarely are little Black girls taught anything about self-care, love or appreciation, rather the aforementioned are sometimes seen as being selfish. Furthermore, the lessons passed down are for Black women to survive family life afore loving and caring for a family. Likewise, to Kincaid’s little Black girl, novels such as Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as well as her short story, “Sweat” exemplify where cultural values lie; directly contrasted to how little women are cared for, even by themselves. Moreover, similar morals can be found as Janie learns how not to be a slut and, instead, to be a good wife, before ultimately finding herself.

To prevent the mythical innate sexual desire of young Black girls from running rampant, and perhaps as a defense mechanism against such stereotypes as the jezebel, they are often married or pledged to be married at a very young age. For Janie Crawford, the main character of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, her first marriage was arranged by Nanny, her grandmother, to Logan Killicks in response to a seemingly innocent kiss shared between Janie and Johnny Taylor. Upon seeing the two kissing, Nanny asserts that Black women are at the bottom of the totem pole and therefore have been deemed unworthy of choosing to marry for love over comfort and sustainability. Specifically, she states:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out.

Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see...De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see (Hurstons 14).

Blatantly, as a “mule of the world,” Black women are expected to work tirelessly to please everyone around them. Nanny, in perceiving Janie’s “blossoming young womanhood as dangerous, arranges her marriage to an older man” (Perry 51). For Janie’s first marriage to Logan Killicks, the tireless work was physical labor. She was forced to take care of the land as her husband was too old to do it himself. In contrast to her first experience of love while watching bees and pear tree blooms (Hurstons 11), her marriage to Killicks was loveless. As a young woman she learns that her “assigned role is to serve as a mule, carrying the weight of racial prejudice and gendered inequality” (Perry 6). Such was and is the case for many Black women, causing us to pass down the damaging rhetoric to conceal our emotions in order to survive.

It can be said that one of the main reasons for Janie and Killick’s union was as a result of her presumed ability to work. She quickly learned that “marriage did not make love” and because her “first dream was dead... she became a woman” (Hurstons 25). In the same way, her marriage to Jody Starks, also known as Mayor Starks, began the ultimate erasure of her self-identity. So much so that the people of Eatonville, an up-and-coming Black owned town in Florida, began to only identify Janie as Mrs. Mayor Starks. While the Killicks’ union was built on physical labor, the Starks’ union was premised on Janie being a trophy wife. Her place as Starks’ mule was solidified publicly during his acceptance speech as the temporary mayor.

As Janie played an integral role in helping to build the community from the ground up, as was expected of Black women to be the “pillar of the community” and “backbone of their families”, she was called on from the crowd to offer a speech (Collins). Instead, Starks quickly

quieted Janie indefinitely in stating “Thank yuh fuh yo' compliments, but mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home” (Hurstons 43). In asserting that Janie was incapable of “speech-makin’” and that because she was “uh woman and her place is in de home,” Starks establishes control and dominance over their marriage. The sentiment that Black women should just stay in their place is typically described as a “place that does not impose upon the status or desires of others in perceived power” (Taylor 6). Further, as he claims that he did not marry her for ability to make conversation, the notion that Black women were meant to be seen and not heard was promoted. Subsequently, as mammies and likewise caregivers, Black women are expected to withstand humiliation and abuse without any hope of achieving self-actualization.

In Starks’ final moments of life, Janie found the courage to tell him how she truly felt about him, their marriage and herself.

“Listen, Jody, you ain’t de Jody ah run off down de road wid...Naw! Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me...All dis bowin’ down, all dis obedience under yo’ voice— dat ain’t whut Ah rushed off down de road tuh find out about you” (Hurstons 86-7).

Differently put, Janie intended to leave her loveless marriage to Killicks and enter one of companionship and mutual affection. However, she was met with self-erasure and instead forced to be obedient in her marriage to Starks. That is to say, as a result of stereotypical images of the mammy juxtaposed to the jezebel, Black women were and are expected to be submissive and obedient, stifling any desire to be their own person.

The preconceived notions associated with the mammy can be traced back to the Bible in which God stated that the woman was created to be “an help meet” (Gen. 2, 18). This scripture is

frequently taken out of context and twisted to conform to misogynistic traditional and cultural norms that aim to keep women othered and marginalized. Specifically, if taken verbatim, after creating the world and leaving Adam to be in charge, God realized that the man could not take care of the world by himself and the other creatures and animals that He created were not suitable helpers (Gen. 2.20). And thus, the woman was created, as an equal, to help Adam tend to God's creation, not to be the "mule of the world" (Hurstons 14). Yet, from biblical times to present day society, Black women are assimilated and conditioned at a young age to be caretakers. From the time of playing with baby dolls and barbies, to raising children and caring for their husbands, Black women are trained to believe that our strength lies within our uncanny ability to handle adversity and our willpower to survive.

When faced with fallacious expectations into a culture of womanhood, a notion that was not conceived with the Black woman in mind, we tend to look to our mothers, grandmothers, and the *strong Black women* in our lives for the courage and motivation to keep going, continuing the perpetual cycle of being overworked and underappreciated. Through historic devaluation and subordination through domesticated tasks that force us into self-erasure, the Black woman, indeed, "the most neglected woman in America" (X 1962). This is simply because, as Black women fighting against pejorative stereotypes such as the jezebel and the mammy, the world does not see it as fitting to genuinely appreciate us for who we are, despite how successful we may be.

CHAPTER IV

I'M EVERY WOMAN: THE SAPPHIRE BLUES OF BEING SUCCESSFUL AND SOPHISTICATED

To be successful, sophisticated and Black in America is to, at some point or another, be brandished with the derogatory stereotype of the *sapphire*. Characterized most frequently as an angry Black woman, the sapphire stands in opposition of the subservient mammy as she refuses to accept gendered societal norms that do not allow women autonomy over their own personhood. Moreover, “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, non-threatening, and unseen” (Pilgrim). Worth noting is while the jezebel and mammy tend to have strict confines as to what qualities denote a Black woman of being seen as either of the two, the sapphire tends to be more fluid. Differently put, stereotypes including the welfare-queen, gold-digger, and, more frequently, the angry Black woman, are associated with and can be considered to have evolved from the stereotype of the sapphire. As such, “women responding to racism means women responding to anger; Anger of exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal, and co-optation” (Lorde 1). However, the well-deserved *anger* that seemingly drives the Black woman is considered passion, fortitude and resilience in white women and male counterparts. Moreover, “the sapphire is deemed as noncompliant, deviant, unreliable, and therefore discreditable” (Lafontant 8). As such, any behavior of a Black woman that challenges silent servitude and instead focuses on a journey of self-discovery in pursuit of fully realizing the *American Dream* is demonized as being a loud, obnoxious, selfish sapphire.

In exploring the “Sapphire Blues,” primary literature unpacked in this chapter includes Lorraine Hansberry’s play *A Raisin in the Sun*, Dorothy West’s short story, “For Richer, For Poorer,” and the Disney animated film *Encanto*. Essential to this chapter is the analysis of Michele Wallace’s *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* as it has sparked multiple conversations and controversies in stating that the Black woman has been subjected to patriarchal domination from her white *and* Black counterparts. Specifically, in addressing her critics, Wallace states that, “black feminists have not been good at critiquing the black male sexism. Because of the oppression that we suffer as a people, I think that it just becomes the job no one wants to do” (Riggs 12). Crucial, also, is the interrogation of “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” a report prepared in 1965 by Daniel P. Moynihan which is commonly referred to as “The Moynihan Report.” Within this document, which was created for the office of policy planning and research for the United States department of labor, Moynihan accuses the Black woman, performing the role of the matriarch, is the root cause for the deterioration of the Black family, and thus, Black people as a whole. These texts are further supplemented by including revolutionary song lyrics written by Beyoncé and the autobiography *Becoming* penned by former first lady of the United States, Michelle Obama.

THE THIN LINE BETWEEN SELFLESSNESS AND SELFISHNESS

As the Black woman is often stereotyped as kind, caring, and constantly putting the needs of others before her own as the mammy does, any behavior that is not selfless is considered being selfish. That is to say that, systemically, Black women have not been afforded the luxury of being able to say no. Contrarily wise, selflessness is considered to be deeply embedded in their nature. When considering the dynamics within Black families and communities, whether there is a father present in the home or not, it is typically the women that are holding the family together.

Traditionally, as Mayor Joe Starks put it so eloquently, it was thought that the woman's place was "in the home" (Hurston 43). Yet, many women have suffocated within the confines of the walls in their home, gasping for a space to call their own. As homemakers, women are expected to do everything except pay the bills. This includes but is certainly not limited to bearing and raising children, cooking, cleaning, and caring for the man of the house. Moreover, while the husband is considered the head of the household, he rarely makes any contributions to the house outside of financially. As such, running the home from sunup to well past sun-down can drain women of any energy and ambitions they may have previously had. Often the only time Black women have to themselves is if they are self-disciplined enough to "wake up a couple of hours before everyone else" (Hooper). Thus, if it can be said that a mammy is a smiling servant to the white family she cares for, then the modern-day matriarch is like a mammy for her own family.

MATRIARCHS: THE MODERN-DAY MAMMIES

Earning the title of being a matriarch seems to have received both positive and negative connotations throughout time. Reports such as the Moynihan Report of 1965 have aligned matriarchs with having characteristics of the sapphire and deemed them solely responsible for the alleged destruction of the Black family. Contrarily wise, within the Black community, matriarchs are praised for being a staple, bringing comfort, prayer and stability to all who enter her home. Gillespie and Lafontant speak to the construct of the Black matriarch as being a

utility to normalize sexist constructions of social life. As the "ultimate heroine" of her community, a strong Black woman is a maternal figure expected to "accept the assumption that women's work is never done...[because] she's only too willing to let others add to the pile (Lafontant 33).

Yet, this concept at its core directly contradicts eighteenth and nineteenth century conceptions of womanhood. Specifically, the matriarch as an *independent woman*, challenges sexist laws that, although currently overturned, were created by a patriarchal society to assert dominance and maintain complete dependency on the white man.

“The use of the concept of "dependency" is also a problem for black feminists. It has been argued that this concept provides the link between the "material organization of the household, and the ideology of femininity." How then can we account for situations in which black women may be heads of households, or where, because of an economic system that structures high black male unemployment, they are not financially dependent upon a black man? “(Carby 113)

These two conflicting schools of thought, one of stripping power away from Black men and the other from herself, seemingly contribute to the ideology of the sapphire as the stereotype has been summed up as any woman that does not adhere to traditions. As such, Black women who were forced to step-up to the plate that was placed in front of them to be the head-of-household due to unforeseen circumstances, are expected to stand up for their families and communities without ever having an opportunity to sit down and rest. Specifically, in Lorraine Hansberry’s play *A Raisin in the Sun* we are presented with the deferred dreams of a loving matriarch.

Lena Younger is the widowed mother of Beneatha and Walter Younger Jr., mother-in-law to Ruth Younger (Walter’s wife) and grandmother to Travis Younger (Walter and Ruth’s son), all of whom live in her home together. The underlying power struggle between Walter and the women in his family is evident as while he has become the man of the house due to the passing of his father, the women, and more specifically Lena, is the head of the household. Subsequently, this leaves Walter feeling emasculated and sends him in an emotional spiral as he struggles to find

himself. His concern with women is primarily evident within his behavior toward and conversations with his wife Ruth.

Walter: See there, that just goes to show you what women understand about the world. Baby, don't nothing happen for you in this world 'less you pay somebody Off!

Ruth: Walter, leave me alone! Eat your eggs, they gonna be cold.

Walter: That's it. There you are. Man say to his woman: I got me a dream. His woman say: Eat your eggs. Man say: I got to take hold of this here world, baby! And a woman will say: Eat your eggs and go to work. Man say: I got to change my life, I'm choking to death, baby! And his woman say – Your eggs is getting cold! (Hansberry 33-34)

In this scene, Walter and Ruth highlight the differences between dreams and reality for Black men and women. Walter is hoping to use his father's insurance money to start his own business, allowing him to feel empowered as a man while Ruth would like to use the money to purchase a larger home for their growing family. The distinction between the two is that it is expected for a Black woman's dreams and aspirations to be tied to the happiness and success of her family while the Black man is afforded the privilege of elevating himself and as a subsequence, the family. In the scene excerpted above, Ruth has grown weary of discussing what seems like an impractical get rich quick scheme and instead chooses to focus on the immediate future of Walter eating his eggs and getting to work on time.

Likewise, Lena, affectionately called Mama, as the matriarch of the family, does all that she can in order to keep the family together. To her, this means working as a domestic maid to

contribute to the household income. Moreover, her physical description seems to fit that of the stereotypical mammy.

MAMA enters. She is a woman in her early sixties, full-bodied and strong. She is one of those women of a certain grace and beauty who wear it so unobtrusively that it takes a while to notice. Her dark-brown face is surrounded by the total whiteness of her hair, and, being a woman who has adjusted to many things in life and overcome many more, her face is full of strength. She has, we can see, wit and faith of a kind that keep her eyes lit and full of interest and expectancy. She is, in a word, a beautiful woman (Hansberry 42).

As such, while theorists believe that the mammy is in direct contrast to the matriarch, it can be said that the stereotypical matriarch presented from the 1950s through the late 1990s is merely an evolution of the mammy that has become subservient to her family and community rather than to her white employers. Furthermore, often the careers of early matriarchs were domestic maids, as were both Lena and Ruth Younger, further blending the line between mammies and matriarchs. This is important to note as the play was adapted twice for television broadcast and both times the role for Mama was filled by Black women, Claudia McNeil (1959) and Esther Rolle (1989), that could have easily played Hattie McDaniel's mammy character in the 1939 film *Gone with the Wind* due to their physical appearance that can be likened to that of a mammy.

The ever-thinning line between selflessness and selfishness for Black women becomes blurred all the more as family needs become personal needs. Ever the multi-tasker, they manage a household while working one or multiple jobs, act as pillars in their churches and communities while remaining present for their family's achievements and crises. "In between their motherly, spousal and community roles, they are magically able to maintain an immaculate appearance

regardless of their age and commitments” (Alexander). Differently put, as matriarch, the Black woman must be able to make something out of nothing in order for her family to survive the harshness of reality. As mama, her sole duty has become to protect her family by any means necessary. For Lena, a portion of selflessness, arguably to a fault, is displayed in relinquishing her title as matriarch and *allowing* Walter Jr. to take his place as “head of the family.”

Walter – what you ain’t never understood is that I ain’t got nothing, don’t own nothing, ain’t never really wanted nothing that wasn’t for you. . . . There ain’t nothing worth holding on to, money, dreams, nothing else – if it means – if it means it’s going to destroy my boy. . . . I’m telling you to be the head of this family from now on like you supposed to be (Hansberry 106).

In this scene, Lena offers Walter control of the remainder of her late husband’s insurance money as the societal gender roles call for the oldest male, rather than person, to be the head of the household. In confessing that not even her dreams are “worth holding on to” if it means shattering her son’s self-esteem, Lena is putting her son’s dreams ahead of her own. As aforementioned, this concept of selflessness carries both positive and negative connotations because while benevolence is indeed an admirable trait, many believe there must be a balance to avoid being exploited.

A DREAM DEFERRED

For Beneatha Younger, Lena’s daughter and Walter’s sister, the balance is created in choosing to begin a career prior to becoming a “settled woman” as Ruth and Lena have chosen. Throughout the play, Beneatha, can be viewed through the scope of a stereotypical sapphire as she rejects the traditional gendered expectations of Black women as being subservient homemakers

and, instead, inspires to attend college to pursue a career as a doctor. However, Walter attempts to remind his sister of her place.

Walter: Who the hell told you you had to be a doctor? If you so crazy ‘bout messing ‘round with sick people – then go be a nurse like other women – or just get married and be quiet . . .

Beneatha: Well – you finally got it said . . . It took you three years but you finally got it said (Hansberry 38).

Beneatha is frequently misunderstood amid the play as she has dreams for herself outside of family life. This desire for autonomy and control over her own life has been villainized from the inside out. Similarly, to Lena and literary portrayals of mammies, matriarchs and sapphires were described as no longer possessing beauty and life in their appearance and manner.

Specifically, Ruth was described by Hansberry in claiming that “she *was* a pretty girl, even exceptionally so, but now it is apparent that life has been little that she expected, and disappointment has already begun to hang in her face. In a few years, before thirty-five even, she will be known among her people as a ‘settled woman’” (Hansberry 27, emphasis added). That is to say that once a woman has fulfilled her womanly duties, she no longer has a need to be beautiful. Likewise, early depictions of sapphires, or non-traditional women, such as Beneatha were presented as more masculine than feminine; “BENEATHA enters. She is about twenty, as slim and intense as her brother. She is not as pretty as her sister-in-law, but her lean, almost intellectual face has a handsomeness of its own” (Hansberry 38). Hurston’s short story “Sweat” character *Delia* was also described as being pretty once but asexualized women that serve the role as matriarch or sapphire, are often portrayed as being muscular and unattractive. “She was young and soft then, but now she thought of her knotty, muscled limbs, her harsh knuckly hands...too late

now to hope for love” (Hurstons 1023). Both the financial and emotional freedom that were indicative of the goals of the sapphire were foreign concepts for Black women in the 1950s as mammies, matriarchs and jezebels were the prevailing controlling images. However, at the tail end of the Women’s Suffrage Movement and the rise of the Women’s Rights Movements, Black women began imagining a world in which they would be treated as equals to men.

As this notion of chasing *The American Dream* evolved from equality, justice, and democracy in the 1930s to the 1950s version of individual wealth and the prospect of success, so too did the ambitions of the sapphire. Moreover, after hundreds of years of Black people being given an unfair disadvantage due to the institution of slavery and forced labor, followed by hundreds of years of discrimination through federal legislation and Jim Crow laws, Black women were seemingly given more opportunities to fully realize the American dream. Similarly, to Beneatha Younger, Dorothy West’s short story *The Richer, the Poorer* (1967), depicts an ambitious Black woman that chooses to go against the grain in beginning a career prior to beginning a family. Accordingly, this younger generation of women, five to six generations following enslavement can be said to want more from life than merely being the mules of the world, no longer settling for deferred dreams, rather determined to pursue the happiness that was promised to all Americans in the declaration of independence.

In *The Richer, the Poorer*, the third-person narrator follows the lives of two sisters from humble beginnings. One, Lottie, chooses to live “frugally in her middle years so that she could live in comfort and ease when she most needed peace of mind,” working from the time she was a teenager until she retired around age sixty (West 130). Contrarily wise, Bess lived her life to the fullest, traveling the world with her husband, Harry, whom she married “straight out of high school,” and did not worry about money or the finer things in life (West 131). Throughout the text,

Lottie is portrayed as being unhappy about her decision to live comfortably over happily, resulting in asking her sister in the end to teach her the true meaning of life.

Well, to tell the truth I felt sorry for you. Maybe if I'd had any sense I'd feel sorry for myself after all. I know I'm too old to kick up my heels, but I'm going to let you show me how. If I land on my head, I guess it won't matter. I feel giddy already, and I like it (West 133).

That is to say, that while Lottie is financially stable and, as such, is in a position to take in her widowed sister, money could not buy her happiness. Furthermore, Lottie's life was described as being "mean and miserly" due to her ambitious decisions. Short stories such as *The Richer, the Poorer* play a role that can be likened to that of nineteenth century conduct manuals in that they portray life outside of gendered societal constructs as unappealing and, often, unattainable.

THE EMASCULATION OF THE BLACK MAN

The Black woman has systematically been burdened with so much resulting from the controlling images of both the jezebel and the mammy that in order to "earn" the title of being strong, she must break her back, bending over backwards for the world *and* forward for her man. During enslavement, Black women were forced to watch their husbands beaten by their enslavers and in turn, their husbands were forced to watch their wives be raped causing further emasculation. These heinous acts were structurally created in order to keep control and break the spirit of the enslaved persons, causing them to be more submissive to their enslavers. Therefore, as the Black man was forcibly stripped of his power during enslavement, lawfully written out of his power during the Jim Crow era, and cheated out of his power today, the strong Black woman presents as being a threat to the Black man.

In her two-part work, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, Michele Wallace unpacks the mythological and supernatural superpower that is constantly interpolated upon Black women, especially in relation to others in her life. Specifically, she writes on the stereotypes from the enslavement period to present day, stating that there is still much work to be done in terms of the liberation of Black women. Additionally, she juxtaposes the image of the Black macho man, and subsequent, emasculation of the Black male through the perpetual dehumanization and mythicization of the Black woman. That is to say, in order for the Black woman to appear as strong, or as the matriarch of the family, the man feels as though he is weak and is stripped of his role as patriarch. In defining the superwoman, Wallace writes, “From the intricate web of mythology which surrounds the Black woman, a fundamental image emerges. It is of a woman of inordinate strength, with an ability for tolerating an unusual amount of misery, and heavy and distasteful work” (Wallace). In the same way, Marlon Riggs in their documentary film *Black is...Black Ain't*, also critiques the emasculation of the Black man in order to mythologize and romanticize the Black woman.

In a segment of their docu-film, Marlon Riggs discusses the myth of the Black superwoman. Essentially because of the many roles that women have had to have such as mother, wife and taking care of the home all while working, going to school, or both, the Black woman has been stereotyped as being a group of women that can do it all. This stereotype is that much more abundant in the characteristics of the matriarch. However, “While black women were seen as strong and often, because of this, unwomanly, our men were considered weak” (Riggs 11). No one should have to fulfill all of these roles alone. As such, Riggs argues against the notion that the Black man’s manhood is stripped of him when his wife, mother, or significant other is forced to fulfill these duties without any help. Donahue counters this in recalling the black macho man,

which is essentially an over exaggeration of the strength of black men, most likely stemming from slavery. He argues that the Black man had been emasculated, and, subsequently, the Black family is falling apart as a result of the Black superwoman. His argument regarding the super Black woman nods to her ability to be omnipresent. “I mean you're strong, you can take anything. Boy, look at her caring for those kids” (Riggs 12). That is to say, that the Black woman is able to do any and everything concurrently with little to no trouble. However, the trouble with the interpolation of omnipresence and super strength is that it leaves little to no room for a woman to just be. Interestingly enough, this trope of women possessing an unnatural and inhumane supernatural strength was recently explored in Disney’s Academy Award winning animated film *Encanto*.

While watching this movie with a middle-aged, older Black woman, it became apparent how deeply rooted the seeds of women of color being portrayed as strong truly is. Upon seeing the character Luisa Madrigal, the oldest sister, she was extremely confused. She could not understand why she would be portrayed as being tall, with an exaggerated muscular physique and lower voice. “Why they got her lookin’ like a man?” she said without expecting an actual response. However, the outward appearance of Luisa, the eldest of three sisters in a presumably Afro-latinX, Colombian family, displayed the dangers of interpolations of her perceived strength. Her caricature was purposeful in portraying outwardly the amount of supernatural strength that women of color are presumed to possess. This notion is made clearer in her iconic song, “Surface Pressure,” sung by Jessica Darrow.

In this song, Luisa details the pressure that she is under to be strong and how heavy a toll it weighs on her to maintain this super strength. While the song specifically pertains to being the oldest sister in the family who was given the *gift* of super strength during a family ritual, the same

concepts can be applied to Black women that are perceived as being strong. The song begins with Luisa presumably gloating and bragging about her super strength.

I'm the strong one, I'm not nervous

I'm as tough as the crust of the Earth is

I move mountains, I move churches

And I glow, 'cause I know what my worth is (Darrow).

Here it seems as though she has come to enjoy and even “glow” resulting from the amount of responsibilities that she has been given. Up until this point, when Mirabel, her younger sister, began to notice a slight change in her demeanor, Luisa had been unwavering and maintaining a façade of keeping it all together. However, a few lines in, Luisa reveals that she contemplates both how her life would be without the “growing pressure” as well as what would happen if she “received the last straw that makes the camel [‘s back] break” (Darrow). Specifically, she sings,

I take what I'm handed, I break what's demanded, but

Under the surface

I feel berserk as a tightrope walker in a three-ring circus

Under the surface

Was Hercules ever like, "Yo, I don't wanna fight Cerberus?"

Under the surface

I'm pretty sure I'm worthless if I can't be of service (Darrow).

In disclosing to her younger sister that she feels like a circus attraction in possessing this supernatural strength, she is admitting that even though her conduct has become normalized, it is far from natural. Moreover, it is in a symbolic scene in which Luisa is asked to gather donkeys, representing the “mule uh de world” trope, that Luisa questions not only whether or not people

that are seen as strong are working willingly, but are they ever permitted an opportunity to rest? For Black women, more often than not, the answer we receive is no. In the end, Luisa's community comes together so that she does not have to work so hard and be the "backbone" of her family. Subsequently, Luisa is shocked that given the opportunity, the same people that expected her to do all of the heavy lifting, were able to shoulder the weight themselves. In reality, very rarely does the Black woman receive genuine relief from the load she carries. Black women are expected to "conceal our trauma...even if it is at the expense of our mental, physical, and emotional well-being" (Taylor 4). Worth mentioning as well is the underlying message within the beginning of Disney's 2022 *Frozen*.

Similar to Luisa, Elsa princess, and soon to be Queen of Arandel, has been gifted a superpower. However, "her parents suggest that she conceal it as oftentimes our super strengths create a bigger target on our back" (Taylor 4). She is heard repeating the lyrics "Don't let them in, don't let them see/ Be the good girl you always have to be/ Conceal, don't feel, put on a show/ Make one wrong move and everyone will know" throughout the film, showing how women, especially women of color are forced to suffer in silence (Mendel). In both the case of Luisa and Elsa, women with unnatural strengths and gifts are frequently subjected to displays of their talents without any consideration of the tolls it may take on the women.

Oftentimes the Black woman is forced to do things she does not necessarily want to do in order to keep her family and household intact. The ruling school of thought was that the woman held no true value except as primary caretaker for her husband, home, and heirs. Indeed "the pattern of women's work, at least for the lower classes, remained unchanged, and upper-class women were still burdened by the responsibilities of managing large and complex households at a time when most goods were still produced at home" (LeGates 25). If bills are to be paid, if food is

to be on the table, if she does not want her children to want for anything, then *she's gotta do what she's gotta do*. For some women that looks like working two to three jobs while putting herself through college so that she can eventually go down to one to two good paying jobs. And, contrary to popular belief no, this does not always mean that she is a single mother or that there is not a man in the house.

The reality is that many men, even though they are present, are not always financially stable. They may even have a job but are in debt and lack a sustainable credit score. Oftentimes, the world is stacked against the Black man and his lack of financial stability may not be entirely his fault. However, this means that the woman is left to be the main provider for her family *while* the man still claims to be “head of household.” If, subscribing to the traditional gender roles, a Black man’s sole duty is to be the head of the household and provide, but, due to society's unjust treatment of the Black man, is unable to provide, then naturally he should find some other way to meaningfully contribute to this household. Yet, as discussed in chapter III, good cleaning habits such as washing dishes and doing laundry are frequently seen as women's work. Similar to Walter’s presumptions about Beneatha in Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, and Aunt Ella’s assumptions in *Madea Goes to Jail*, West portrays the pursuit of a financially stable life as a sapphire, or career woman and presumed declaration of independence as one of bitterness, loneliness, and, subsequently, regret.

A DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

Publicly praised for shattering glass ceilings as the first Black woman to *fill in the blank, * yet privately penalized for that of the same, Black women that choose to balance a career and family life, fight an uphill battle in their declaration of independence. Taylor further explains this phenomenon in stating that “merely because we are Black, we are either deemed unworthy of

respect or seen as having done something extraordinary that is really quite ordinary if I meet any measure of success” (Taylor 68). The most common misconception is that by making the choice to take control of their own future through securing financial freedom, Black women are concurrently declaring that men are no longer needed. However, this could not be further from the truth as many still desire and have secured a loving family. Collins describes the controversy surrounding this conundrum in stating:

Spending too much time away from home, these working mothers ostensibly cannot supervise their children and are a major contributing factor to their children’s school failure. As overly aggressive, unfeminine women, Black matriarchs allegedly emasculate their husbands... [causing them to] understandably desert their partners or refuse to marry the mothers of their children (Collins 74).

Differently put, the Black woman that plays the cards she was dealt, as Ruth Younger does, by working to compensate for her husband’s lack of ability to do so, often through no fault of his own, is seen as single-handedly causing the destruction of the Black family. As such, movements such as womanism and feminism are heavily critiqued for creating independent women. Moreover, the pressure to dismantle the master’s house by shattering the glass ceilings is overwhelming.

BLACK GIRL MAGIC

The magic behind *Black Girl Magic* seemingly lies in the Black woman’s mythical capabilities to be resilient, even in the midst of adversity. By and of itself, this celebration of resiliency is, at its core, truly a celebration of tolerance. More often than not, in order to rise to the stature of *Black Girl Magic*, a term that can be said to describe the process of, or celebrating, a strong Black woman, they are subjected to unmitigated critique, hate and invasions of privacy and personal space. In addition, many are accused of code-switching and meshing, or assimilating into

popular society, and thereby neglecting the *village* that raised them. Nonetheless, through invasive and often demeaning criticism, the mythical and magical strong Black women that little Black girls are encouraged to aspire to be, are not spared from being inspected through pejorative projections of the sapphire.

Among the arguable and far from comprehensive list of strong Black women within the 21st century is Michelle Obama (former first lady of the United States 2008-2016) and Beyoncé Knowles (American singer-songwriter). However, the tests that these women had to take and endure in order to get to their testimony is rarely a joyous one. “It is not that black women have not been and are not strong...it is simply that this is only part of our story, a dimension, just as the suffering is another dimension— one that has been most unnoticed and unattended to” (hooks 153). That is, that Obama and Knowles, as many others granted this badge of honor, have withstood and achieved the impossible to get to where they are today.

As it pertains to Michelle Obama, although she has been publicly lauded for achieving the ultimate American dream of success, because she has been very open concerning her views on racism and the mistreatment of marginalized people, the lines between being a strong Black woman and a sapphire were said to have been blurred. Kaplan asserts:

Michelle was admired as long as she filled the prescription of a successful black woman on paper -- college grad, married to an equally successful black man, a working but attentive mother, financially secure, immaculately turned out. But as soon as she began revealing herself as a person and airing her views a bit, she began shape-shifting in the public eye into another kind of black woman altogether: angry, obstinate, mouthy -- a stereotypical harpy lurking in all black Women (as quoted by Pilgrim).

In the same way, Mychal Massie (2008), chairman of the National Leadership Network of Black Conservatives-Project 21 -- a conservative black think tank, claims that Michelle Obama “portrays herself as just another angry black harridan who spits in the face of the nation that made her rich, famous and prestigious” (as quoted by Pilgrim). The resounding concern from conservatives, regardless of cultural background or ethnicity, seemed to be that a person that is in a place of privilege is a hypocrite for fighting for those who are not, especially if that person is a Black woman. Any Black woman that dares to speak up for injustices are demonized for doing such. Yet, “where white women are said to be 'independent,' black women are said to be 'emasculating,' robbing their men of their sense of manhood and where white women are said to be standing up for themselves, black women are seen as wanting a fight” (Pilgrim). This oxymoronic projection of being admirably reprehensible can also be seen in Black celebrity women such as Beyoncé.

THE INDEPENDENT SAPPHIRE

Beyoncé Knowles Carter has grown to become known for her outspoken music and women empowerment, but also has led the public to believe that Black women are “flawless” by nature. One of her earliest albums to the same tune, *Survivor* (2001) was written with the assistance of Knowles and performed with group Destiny's Child and provided several hit singles that chronicled many of the pejorative stereotypes of Black women in an empowering and uplifting way. Specifically, “Independent Women” Parts I and II, and “Survivor” encouraged women to declare independence from subservience and to no longer rely upon others for personal happiness.

Tell me what you think about me?

I buy my own diamonds and I buy my own rings....

Tell me how you feel about this?

Try to control me, boy, you get dismissed (Knowles).

The opening lyrics have been interpreted to mean that Black women should not be dependent upon men for financial stability, and moreover, should no longer tolerate systemic control and abuse that generations of Black women have been forced to suffer through in silence.

Similarly, in “Survivor,” Destiny’s Child sings of victory for not only surviving but thriving without the help of people that were trying to hold them back.

Now that you’re out of my life, I’m so much better.

You thought that I’d be weak without you, but I’m stronger...

You thought that I’d be sad without you, I laugh harder...

You thought that I’d be helpless without you, but I’m smarter (Knowles).

In both songs, autonomy, education, financial freedom, and, most importantly, happiness is highlighted as reasons for women to become less dependent upon men and society. While lyrics and songs that subscribe to similar ideologies seemingly align with negative notions and depictions within Daniel Moynihan’s *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965) and his assertion that the independent Black woman is the root cause for the deterioration of the Black family, the full picture has yet to be fully realized.

The first, and arguably the most blatant, justification in the need for Black women to assert independence and autonomy is a direct result of the misconception that the *career woman* or *working woman* is a new concept. However, Black women have been working consistently since our forced arrival onto this stolen land. From the institution of slavery to sharecropping and domestic servitude to teaching, Black women have never truly been able to rest and have consistently played an integral role in providing for their families. The problems arose when, as better opportunities presented, their labor and efforts were poured into themselves rather than their

husband or white employers. As a result, any behaviors and ideologies that went against the status-quo, including declaring independence were disparaged in an attempt to discredit and dehumanize the Black woman, keeping her in her place.

Additionally, is the notion that we asked for this lifestyle. While Destiny's Child's lyrics admit that "it ain't easy being independent," the song negates the fact that Black women are merely playing the hand that was dealt to them (Knowles). Put differently, Moynihan argues that the working, independent, Black woman as matriarch, jeopardizes the progress of the Black community in achieving equality, yet ignores the underlying reasons as to why she evolved. With the growing popularity of the 1950s version of the American dream that glorified patriarchal nuclear families with both parents living in the house, many Black people attempted to theoretically subscribe to this design. Although in 1868, full citizenship was granted to Black people with the ratification of the fourteenth amendment, it was not until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the alleged end of segregation and discriminatory practices that they were even able to begin practicing the *full citizenship* promised almost 100 years prior, making it nearly impossible to achieve the American dream. As Black women have always had to work, it can be presumed that the Black man asking her to be solely a homemaker, as was the way with many white families, caused marital conflict and strife in the home. While the American dream grew in popularity, Black men began to feel emasculated for dreaming of a better life. Thus, the pejorative image of the sapphire was created as a Black woman that refused to allow her husband to have authority and ambitions. This could not be any further from the truth. As Ruth Younger depicts in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, Black women, as the backbone of the family, were forced to keep Black men grounded in order to prevent financial ruin within a society that did not respect him as a man. As Perry states, "We keep things together. He man may be the head of the household, but

we are the backbone has got the strong” (Perry 34). This further resulted in Black men feeling trapped and suppressed both inside and outside of their homes, and led to the creation of caricatures of nagging, controlling women as a face to blame for the systemic oppression of American society.

Moreover, while the Moynihan reports alarming statistics of single-family households, it repudiates truths that while it seemed as though Black people were not getting legally married, the number of families living under common-law is left unaccounted for. Perhaps the numbers in totality would shift completely if unmarried couples were included in the preliminary research and findings. It is important to note the significant dates within the timeline of marriages in the United States in that marriages were not federally recognized in America until the Revenue Act of 1913; as aforementioned, the beginning of the end of discrimination did not occur until 1964; the Moynihan Report was not published until 1965. As such, *The Negro Family* is contestably biased as it could not possibly provide a fully accurate picture at such a time, and instead, premised from popular stereotypes of the Black family and the role of the Black woman. Unfortunately, many of the accusations within the report that was published over fifty years, still inform the criticism and condemnation that subverts the independent Black woman as a sapphire.

THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF ASSIMILATION AND DISSIMILATION

Arguably, with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, more doors of possibility were opened to the Black woman than they were to men. Pointedly, the controlling image of the mammy depicted her as consistently going above and beyond for her employer, a characteristic that is certainly admirable in the workforce. As such, and perhaps resulting from the *exemplary* behavior and dedication of the stereotypical mammy, Black women were often given an opportunity to be successful in the workplace before Black men were. In response, Black men, such as Hansberry’s Walter Younger Jr., could not fathom why a woman would want to do anything outside of domestic

work. In questioning his sister Beneatha, he asks, “Who the hell told you you had to be a doctor? go be a nurse like other women – or just get married and be quiet...” (Hansberry 38). His wonderment and anger amount to not only being stunted by society but being consistently being overlooked for success in favor of Black women, a group of marginalized people that are still fighting to be seen as human beings. What he fails to realize is that Beneatha’s suitor, Joseph Asagai, in pointing out her “mutilated hair,” Asagai is casually hinting toward a future of assimilation and negation of self-identity and culture through subsequent dissimulation that many Black women face when preparing to climb the ladder of success (Hansberry 61).

TWICE AS HARD FOR HALF AS MUCH

A Black proverb that has been passed down from generation to generation in America is the fact that Black people have to work twice as hard to receive half as much. As such, late nights and early mornings have become the norm for many women who aspire to have both a successful career and family. Failure to do so paints the Black woman as being weak or lazy bringing shame in a community in which strength and resilience were honored to a fault. Consequently, to realize the American dream for the Black woman also means to develop a deep understanding of intersectionality and the contribution that each role plays in being a woman that is Black in America. The process in doing so involves reckoning with the mask we often wear that “grins and lies” in the face of oppression; a mask that conceals that we, too are American, and Black, while striving towards our wish to make it possible for a human to be a woman, a Negro and an American (Dunbar; Hughes; DuBois, Henry).

Black feminist theorists such as Kathy Henry have expounded upon W.E.B. DuBois’ 1897 theory of double consciousness, expanding the ideology to that of triple consciousness to account for the intersectionality of struggles that Black women face in belonging to two marginalized

groups: Black people and women. In the former bounds of double consciousness, DuBois speaks to the “duality of being both a Negro and American, which leads to the necessary habit of viewing yourself through the eye of a white racist” (DuBois). Put differently, the Black person in America is only as good as *the white man* says they are. In only looking at duality, feminists, and womanists, such as Henry have found that double consciousness cannot accurately be applied to encompass the oppression that Black women receive on both ends of the spectrum. Specifically, she argues that the “Black woman was brought to this country to be an unpaid worker, a concubine and a broodmare and has become a swirling contrast of fire, salty tears wept, and strength” (Henry). In the triality of being Black, American women often find themselves forced to assimilate into a society that was most certainly not created for us as Black people or as women.

Specifically, there are cultural markers and regulations within society that have been blatantly targeted towards Black people including rules to control the way that we dress, talk, and even style our hair. Likewise, the pressure to be polite and *ladylike* is even more so for women. As a result, respectability politics has seemingly allowed a way for Black people to successfully climb the ladder into the cloud nine that is the American dream, often with a goal of bringing forth systemic change to make the world a better place. “Black women must be hyper aware of what they do, what they say, and who they socialize with” (Taylor 40). However, is it truly possible to “dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools?” (Lorde 6) With no time to ponder the realities, and perhaps consequences, of the glass ceilings of the master’s house that Black women are expected to shatter, we pass to our daughters, and granddaughters tips to assimilate as to not succumb to becoming the stereotypes that have been interpolated onto us.

Arguably, much of the traditions and characteristics of respectability politics such as, but certainly not limited to, modesty, gentleness, and submissiveness, perhaps inadvertently recalling

the pejorative stereotype of the mammy, including prioritizing employers and companies needs over that of her own personhood and family. This “politics of respectability” enacted through a specific culture of dissemblance, is a response to the “myth of hypersexuality and therefore, it was important to present an untarnished self to the public at all times regardless of the difficult, messy human realities women experience” (Perry 62). For example, the mother in Kincaid’s “Girl” teaches her daughter the concept of masking and how to appear polite in public: This is how you smile to someone you don’t like too much; this is how you smile to someone you don’t like at all; this is how you smile to someone you like completely” (Kincaid). Likewise, in the face of adversity, turmoil, and strife, we are forced to mask-up, putting our feelings aside to get the work done. Taylor details this at length in describing the “proverbial mask called a smile” and defining it as not being “an act of consideration” rather it is “an act of survival” (Taylor 47). She continues in stating that:

Failure to wear the smile mask appropriately and in a timely fashion has the potential to lead her to professional slaughter...Too boastful or confident, which could result in making them feel inept, unsure or inadequate...A small too shallow may be viewed as a smirk causing them to feel threatened...The smile mask is inherently designed for the comfort of others (Taylor 47-49).

As such, we must be sure to suppress our feelings and, especially any discontentment for fear of being considered overly emotional, or worse, an angry Black woman, regardless of whether or not the emotions and anger are justified. Interestingly, Black women that tend to adhere to more conservative and traditional views of women rather than the career woman, seemingly consider their counterparts as not only being sapphires but as abandoning their Black identity, community and culture.

Former First Lady of the United States describes this phenomenon in an encounter with a distant relative in which they have come to the realization that being Black, American and woman is still too broad of a label to place on Black women as there are so many other factors that contribute to our identities.

At one point, one of the girls, a second, third, or fourth cousin of mine, gave me a sideways look and said, just a touch hotly, “How come you talk like a white girl?”

The question was pointed, meant as an insult or at least a challenge, but it also came from an earnest place. It held a kernel of something that was confusing for both of us. We seemed to be related but of two different worlds (Obama 40).

Here, Obama nods to the ideology of code-switching in order to better and more fully assimilate within American society. With the image of the sapphire-esque angry Black woman running rampant, the consequences of not choosing to use *standard* American English rather than Black language can, unfairly, be detrimental to the rising success of the Black woman. But code-switching is not limited to merely a shift in verbiage, rather, it is a shift in persona. It is understanding that even if we use *standard* American English, without a shift in inflection, Black women will still come off as angry.

Without keeping a smile on, as suggested in “Girl” and expounded upon by Taylor, Black women are subjected to portraying RBF (*resting bitch face*) and for the Black woman there is no in between. Code-switching is also a shift in conversation. Out of fear of being tokenized or viewed in a certain way, many topics are purposely left off of the table we are not sure we deserve to sit at. Michelle Obama addresses this reality by stating, “Your passion stays low, yet under no circumstance will you underperform. You live, as you always have, by the code of effort/result, and with it you keep achieving until you think you know the answers to all the questions—

including the most important one. Am I good enough? Yes, in fact I am” (Obama 92). However, the drive to code-switch and work twice as hard can be seen denying one’s true self. Code-switching, at its core, is a way in which Black people have been taught to assimilate in order to become socially acceptable in a society that prefers to be color-blind. Yet, the unspoken oxymoronic ideology behind being colorblind is that pure white is the absence of color, and thus to assimilate in American culture is to concurrently dissimilate in Black culture.

THE COST OF A SEAT AT THE TABLE

Star of ABC’s popular television series *Once Upon a Time*, Rumpelstiltskin was known for consistently warning that “magic always comes with a price” (Kitsis). The same is true for obtaining Black Girl Magic as a strong Black woman looking for a seat at the table. “The prescription to be strong necessitates the defensive denial of pain, vulnerability and suffering” (Lafontant 41). For many, the price that is paid to purchase the American dream is often the loss of self. Just as Janie Crawford (Hurstons), Beneatha Younger (Hansberry), and Lottie (West), at some point in the journey to the top, Black women pause to self-reflect and wonder, is it worth it as “employed Black women too often are treated as modern day mammies” (Lafontant 29). While Lottie spent sixty years conforming and penny-pinching to afford the cost of a seat at the table of American dreams, Obama realized early on that some dreams simply are not worth it.

“I’m just not fulfilled,” [Obama] said. I see now how this must have come across to my mother, who was then in the ninth year of a job she’d taken primarily so she could help finance my college education, after years of not having a job so that she’d be free to sew my school clothes, cook my meals, and do laundry for my dad, who for the sake of our family spent eight hours a day watching gauges on a boiler at the filtration plant (Obama 132).

In recognizing her privilege to have fulfilled the American dream in graduating from two Ivy-League universities and leading a successful life and career, Obama realized that there was more to life than success. Specifically, she states that there are pieces of public life, of giving up one's privacy to become a walking, talking symbol of a nation, that can seem specifically designed to strip away part of your identity (Obama 320). Moreover, the American dream that has been subscribed is not quite as attainable for Black women due to all that has to be traded for a *piece of the pie*.

In balancing family life and a successful career, women have found it difficult to obtain both equal and fair treatment. For mothers, balancing both has been made out to seem that Black mothers use their children as an excuse to be lazy at work and, subsequently, their jobs to be lazy at home causing them to be angry Black women. Yet, in reality, career women often find themselves sacrificing their career dreams to begin and raise their families. "It [is the Black women] who'd alter everything, putting [their] passions and career dreams on hold, to fulfill this piece of [the American] dream" as such, we often find ourselves in a "small moment of reckoning," asking ourselves if we truly want a family life (Obama 189). Yet, this internal struggle is rarely seen, or even believed, due to the controlling image of the sapphire that portrays successful Black women as being selfish and angry, not needing or wanting men in their lives. What's more, is that while we are expected to portray a stature of resiliency in being omnipresent in all aspects of our lives, there are often times where we feel pressured by societal expectations to dim our lights in order to allow the men in our lives to be seen.

Such is the case as described in the 1965 Moynihan report. The feelings of emasculation are depicted in Lena Younger's resolve for her son Walter. When Black women are realistic with family goals that their husbands, partners, or men of the house may have, we are condemned for

knocking a brother down. “That is just what is wrong with the colored women in this world . . . Don’t understand about building their men up and making ‘em feel like they somebody. Like they can do something” (Hansberry 34). Conversely, it would seem as though men are not satisfied until Black women resume their “place in de home,” serving their men and families silently and without fuss (Hurstun 43). This relinquishing of power is seen in Lena’s statement to Walter, *finally* recognizing him as the head of the house.

I ain’t got nothing, don’t own nothing, ain’t never really wanted nothing that wasn’t for you. . . There ain’t nothing worth holding on to, money, dreams, nothing else – if it means – if it means it’s going to destroy my boy. . . I’m telling you to be the head of this family from now on like you supposed to be. (Hansberry 106)

Pointedly, whether we are successful career women or powerful matriarchs, if men *feel* as though they are being emasculated, it is our job as the magical and mythical Black woman to heal his ego that oppresses ours. Resultedly, the seat at the table that Black women are compelled and even encouraged to sit at, is concurrently a set of condemnation and further dehumanization that results in “persons of power” struggling with continuous moments of feeling “insecure or unheard” (Obama 406).

Like all stereotypes, the image of the sapphire has been exaggerated into a slur that serves the sole purpose of undermining Black women in positions of power in order to appease the bruised egos of Black men and our white counterparts. In the workplace “mammification” (Omolade) refers to the interactional dynamics that pressure Black women to assume a status-reassuring deference to whites, particularly in workplaces” (Lafontant 30). As such, through viewing Black women through a one-way glass that unfairly accounts for our reasonings and motivations for wanting, and more frequently forced into, positions of power within our homes and communities,

our selfless efforts that demand we sacrifice our dreams and ambitions are perverted and viewed as being selfish and greedy. Our seemingly aggressive behavior is never understood to be “an adaptive defense against oppressive forces within a system that places Black women at the bottom of America's social hierarchy,” but rather it is “conceptualized as a learned form of resistance against threats of powerlessness and annihilation” (Grayman 4).

Conversely, rather than join in the fights against the oppression of Black people and women, as Black women, we are encouraged to stay in our place, just get married, and hope that our husbands will be gracious enough to provide for us in a world in which we are more than capable of providing for ourselves. If a Black woman is courageous enough to take the bull by the horn and step up to the plate in fighting against oppression by ensuring that she is able to be fulfilled while caring for her family, “pernicious seeds are planted...of [Black women being] disgruntled and vaguely hostile, lacking some expected level of grace” of which “almost always carries a less than-subtle message about race, meant to stir up the deepest and ugliest kind of fear” (Obama 262). Black women are trapped within a never-ending cycle of being depended upon as a motherly figure to help the community while simultaneously being demonized and dehumanized as being sapphires for helping in the only way she’s ever been afforded to, by doing it herself. As a consequence, Black women in all walks of life, from corporate professionals and university professors to service workers, complain that colleagues, co-workers, supervisors, etc. to ask them to assume multi-purpose caretaker roles, be their guidance counselors, nannies, therapists, priests, i.e., to be that all-nurturing “breast” – to be the mammy (hooks as quoted by Lafontant 30). If Black women reject the societal pressures and burden placed upon them, to be *strong*, they are demonized unfairly as being sapphires.

CHAPTER V

UNCAPING THE BLACK SUPERWOMAN

The myth of the strong Black woman exists to dehumanize us and limit our ability to rest, and express our pain, anger, or sorrow as regular humans do. These emotions, along with our burdens and back-breaking responsibilities are toted around beneath an invisible cape of strength, resilience and fortitude. To be characterized as a strong Black woman, tightens the knot of this cape around our necks, suffocating us and suppressing our ability to just be. For centuries Black people have already been perceived as being inhumane. As such, out of the harsh repercussions and lingering effects from the institution of slavery and a driving motivation to survive, emerges the Black superwoman. Idolized, loved, and equally hated by many, the Black superwoman is easily the most efficient *modus operandi* to encapsulate mythologies surrounding the strong Black woman.

Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf*, catalogues, arguably some of the greatest examples of the strong Black woman. Specifically, nestled within the "No More Love" poems, each of the ladies speaks to the plight of the Black woman, and the personal conviction to keep going. Beginning in a state of pity and woe for being Black, Shange takes her readers through a journey of self-actualization.

...cuz i had convinced myself
colored girls had no right to sorrow/ & i lived
& loved that way & kept sorrow on the curb/ allegedly
for you/ but i know i did it for myself/
i cdnt stand it
i cdnt stand bein sorry & colored at the same time

it's so redundant in the modern world (Shange 43)

In the same way, this idea is further explored in contemplations of being white instead, in addition to, the pity of the sad Black woman. This excerpt specifically proves that the pressure of being a Black woman is often romanticized in the form of the mythological supernatural being that is the superwoman.

Indeed, as Patricia Hill Collins states in her article on *Black Feminist Thought*, “Survival for most African American women has been such an all-consuming activity” (Collins). In associating the strength of the Black woman with her ability to survive, Collins interrogates this ideology in detailing specific psychological effects of the Black superwoman myth. The trauma that the Black woman is forced to live with becomes normalized, creating a vicious cycle that the Black woman is now forced to uphold. For example, throughout the bible, the institution of slavery, and in today’s society, she has been raped, pillaged, and then characterized as a jezebel and a whore. Subsequently, this interpolated stereotype was, and still is, used to justify the hyper sexualization of the Black woman, leading to further oppression. This dogma is displayed in many sections of Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in which Brent was punished and hated by her enslaver’s wife because of his sexual attraction to Brent, despite her role as an enslaved woman in being forced and unwilling.

Likewise, the mammy is a direct derivative of the Black enslaved women that were forced to raise and nurse their white enslaver’s children. Over time, with the ending of the institution of slavery and the era of Jim Crow and civil unrest, the apparent dedication and silent servitude evolved into caring not only for their white employers' children but taking care of the home as well. Today, Black women are assumed to be great mothers and expected to birth and raise multiple children because of roles and duties that were forced upon Black women generations ago “as beasts

to breed and raise and produce” more enslaved children (Matsuda). However, “while the pejorative stereotype of the loving and selfless mammy circulated, so too did several other popular images denigrating black mothers—the careless, incompetent mother; the domineering matriarch; and the lazy welfare mother—reinforcing and legitimating the devaluation of the Black woman” (Roberts 389). The stereotypes of both the jezebel and the mammy have systemically held a direct influence on the mistreatment of Black women causing undue psychological trauma for those that attempt to pull themselves up.

“The psychological toll of being a Black woman and the difficulties this presents in reaching political consciousness and doing political work can never be underestimated. There is a very low value placed upon Black women’s psyches in this society, which is both racist and sexist” (Combahee River Collective 215). Throughout this text, which defines Black feminism, the women of the Combahee River Collective analyze and discuss the major issues and concerns within the Women’s rights movement. The collective also discusses a few of the pejorative stereotypes that have been attributed to Black women over the past few hundred years, including that of the jezebel, the mammy, and the sapphire, asserting that it is her duty to change the damaging narrative of the Black woman. The pressure to shift the narrative of past pressures that have been placed on us makes it seem like there is no hope.

We have historically been hypersexualized, unrecognized, and overanalyzed in the media with forced projections of stereotypical characteristics that aim to diminish our validity as humans which in turn forms corrupt and perverted ideas in the minds of people around the world. The systemic objectification of the Black female body further promotes misogynistic ideals and stereotypes against women. In an anthem-esque fashion, Destiny’s Child sings that we are “survivors” we’re not “gonna stop,” we will “work harder” in the face of adversity (Knowles).

While this sentiment could certainly serve as a testament of the history of undue trauma that the Black woman has had to survive, our story does not have to end there. In a perfect world, communities would come together to be more supportive and understanding to the plight of the Black woman, helping to alleviate some of the pressure that is placed on us rather than celebrating us for our brawn, tenacity, and resilience. If we are to be truly viewed as Mother Earth incarnate, then what is the world doing to make sure that the Earth is both sustained and fulfilled? As we pour love and support into all that are around us, we lie empty, awaiting the moment in which our “souls” can be “restored” (Psalms. 23.5).

The pressure to be perfect in a society where everyone is far from it, is both overwhelming and obnoxious for the Black woman to be obligated to rise to, and yet we still rise. America must recognize the long-term effects of the institution of slavery that still resonate today within the abuse of the Black woman that has been ingrained within cultural and societal American standards. The strong Black woman trope must no longer be rewarded with a crown of thorns and matching badge of strength that expects us to “keep on survivin’” after over 400 years of mistreatment and dehumanization that has merely become more calculated and conspicuous overtime (Knowles). Moreover, the pressure has become so entangled within society that we as Black women have perpetuated and further exasperated the myth of the strong Black woman and passed down from generation-to-generation guidelines on conduct, respectability and a supernatural work ethic. In doing so, it can lead one to believe that we as Black women have unknowingly become co-conspirators in maintaining our misery, “complicit in perpetuating the same bullshit that unintentionally” fed to us (Taylor 82). This cycle often leads to lowered self-esteem and being seen as worthless if we cannot live up to being superwoman. Since society believes us to be beasts of burden, we mindlessly oblige ourselves to keep ourselves booked and busy in order to receive

a stamp of approval. We are seen as superwomen for our ability to balance it all, but are never to permit anyone to see us fall. We perpetuate stereotypes that are preferential to fallacious beauty standards, silent servitude, and a seat at the table as long as we stay in our place.

In order to shatter these fallacies inflicted upon Black women, we must uphold and empower other Black women to not only reverse the narrative through positive images but eradicate the stereotypes that draw from realistic situations within the Black community. It has indeed been my aim throughout this project to prove that Black women are emphatically and assuredly complex, and imperfect, as all humans are. We have thoughts, emotions, and limits to what we can withstand. Although the steps of completely eradicating pejorative “controlling images” such as the jezebel, mammy and sapphire may be unclear, the need to do so is indisputable. Until the Black woman can live in a society in which she is granted full autonomy over her own body and personhood, she may never feel safe enough to *uncape* her projected superwoman garb that protects her body, mind, and soul from never-ending torture of not being enough.

Have a seat, Black woman, you deserve it.

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