Black Women In the Media: What Archetype Do You Fit In?

By

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To all my mahogany girls. The ones with the big butts, big waists, slim girls, and those who are “out of shape”. To the one with deep skin and the ones with skin as bright as this piece of paper you are reading. To all my black girls.

Special thank you to Dr. Heyward for all her help and Dr. Brown for always being there when I needed her. And most importantly a special thank you to my mother, my favorite mahogany girl.

Abstract

I have spent my entire life proving people wrong and crushing down stereotypes that have had nothing to do with me. It has been exhausting, to say the least, but I am working towards a future where little black girls and boys do not have to experience what I did at their age. That is why I have done outreach programs with my University organizations, it is why I have sat uncomfortably in rooms with administrators, who clearly didn't want me to be there, and told them to their faces that our curriculum didn't represent our student body. And it is why I am writing my thesis on this topic. Black women and girls need people who look like them fighting for them. It is admirable for people to stand up for us even when they don't necessarily experience the things that we do, however, the only way for real effective change to happen is for people of these communities to be given the space and opportunity to speak for themselves. I hope that you come into this with an open mind and heart but I cannot promise you that the information in this paper will be easily digestible as we are focusing on race dynamics in the United States, particularly those that impact black women. So let's dive into Black Women in the Media.

Introduction

As a black woman, I have always had to deal with white supremacy growing up. I was told in subtle and blatant ways that I did not belong. I remember the first day I realized that I was “black”. I was 8 years old and Barack Obama had just been appointed as President of the United States. I remembered thinking, wow I can do anything now. Looking back I don’t know when I started thinking that I couldn’t. Maybe it was between the microaggressions of my teachers who told me I wouldn’t make it to college even though I was a straight-A student or the looks I would get from people when I was out in public. Regardless, something stuck, and I realized that things would be a lot harder for me than they would be for people who didn’t look like me.

When I came to Saint Peter’s University as a first-year student, I didn’t know where I belonged. That changed at the University Club Fair. I hadn’t gotten involved in activism in high school but when I saw clubs like the Black Action Committee (BAC) and PRIDE, I knew I wanted to join them. I never would have thought that I would be president of them the following year, becoming the youngest President of those clubs in University history. Being a black woman I didn’t feel out of place at the BAC. However, I’ll be honest with you, I didn’t expect to make the impact that I did in these spaces.

The summer following the murder of George Floyd, a fire was lit under me. I had already been running two organizations at the time and that was the moment I decided to change what those clubs would stand for. We started to participate in more activism and fewer partying/social events on our campus. And boy when I tell you my life changed, it did. The Administration started to look at me and my group for insight on how to make Saint Peter’s a more inclusive and welcoming environment for black and

brown people. We helped them in their efforts to change the school's newspaper name, take steps to establish the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, and practice a more diverse hiring process. We hit a few roadblocks on the way that should have disheartened us. However, we (our organization) knew that we were being viewed as the voice of the student body and we had to speak up for them.

I know that you are probably confused about how my background in activism is in any way related to the topic we are discussing. However, it is actually a major part of it. When we talk about stereotypes and black women, we tend to focus on three archetypes. These archetypes are the Angry Black Woman (the Sapphire), the Jezebel, and the Strong Black Woman (STB)[1]. These archetypes tend to intertwine in many ways as well, giving you an intersection of two, or sometimes even three of them. When I was speaking about my activism earlier, I wanted to set you up to dive into our first two archetypes, the Mammy and the Strong Black Woman.

Black women are expected to clean up messes, even when we aren't the ones that created them. Although my activism was a choice, I beg you to ask yourself, was it really? Or was I backed into a corner where I had to fight in order to survive in an environment that was supposed to be safe from the start? This way is typical for "the mammy", protector of all else but herself. Then we have the Strong Black Woman (STB), the one who is expected to take everything on without batting an eye. I don't remember the administrators that I met with ever checking in on my mental health and

[1] Examining the Internalization of the Strong Black Woman Archetype. (n.d.). Retrieved April 19, 2022, from https://any.run/report/9995ba19a699aade6ba38c1512fce4e916393df095814905faf047c851f806b5/36815e24-feb7-4c6e-a49a-f9dc09723349

how I was dealing with all the pressure. This isn't to say that they didn't, I just don't remember it so it must have been in passing, if at all.

Methodology

In this thesis, we will be dissecting the three different archetypes that black women are forced into in our American society. These archetypes are as follows: the Strong Black Woman/Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Angry Black Woman. I am going to be focusing primarily on the representation of Black women in the media. Therefore, most of my research is coming from book(s), tv shows, and news articles. One of the novels that I am using is, *In Every Mirror She's Black,* a contemporary fiction novel written by Lola Akinmade Akerstrom. I am including scholarly articles to deepen my research and to provide statistical data. I will also be tying in my experience as a black woman in America into my thesis.

Another piece of media that will be used in this research is the HBO Original, *The Sex Lives of College Girls*. This show follows four college girls, turned roommates, who couldn't be more different from one another. It shows us the behind-the-scenes of their lives (sex lives more specifically) and how they interact with the world and one another due to those differences. I will be focusing primarily on Whitney Chase, who is a black college athlete and the daughter of a United States senator who is running for President. In terms of scholarly articles and research, my two primary sources will be; S*tereotypes of Black American Women Related to Sexuality* and *Motherhood and Examining the Internalization of the Strong Black Woman Archetype.* However, there are additional sources that will be included from other trustworthy sources.

The Strong Black Woman

The amount of times that people have commended me for being strong is more than I can count. I know that they mean it as a compliment, and for a very long time, I took it as such. However, it is in no way, shape or form, a compliment. What is interesting is that the “Strong Black Woman” archetype was initially conceived by Black women in an attempt to avert negative stereotypes, however, the popularity of it in tv and film has created a stereotype just as dangerous as those it intended to replace (Ukaegbu, 1).

While the intention is to "compliment" a black woman, that doesn't mean the impact matched the intent. Stereotypes are powerful tools used to shape how people are viewed and treated in society. These stereotypes affect how Black women are seen in society and how we, in turn, see ourselves. They are also used as tools for perpetuating inequality. So although you might mean it as a compliment, when it comes to situations of inequality intent is irrelevant. The impact is what actually counts.

In fact, the Strong Black Woman archetype is nothing but a lazy attempt to leave Black women on our own since it is believed that we can handle it. Since we are so strong and resilient there is no reason to come help us, we don’t need saving. Don’t get me wrong, many Black women have no issue with the Strong Black Woman archetype, as stated by Ams Ukaegbu in *The Problem with the “Strong Black Woman” Narrative:*

> Many women find undeniable truth, liberation, and empowerment in the “Strong Black woman” trope. There are times when we assume that Black woman resilience—the kind that allows us to face racism and sexism on a daily basis and still maintain our sanity and our health. We walk out of our houses everyday, putting on our ‘armor’ in anticipation of experiencing racial discrimination in some

> form. We evoke the historical strength of our foremothers to tell each other "You can do it." That strength is real and should in no way be diminished. (Ukaegbu,1)

Black women are viewed and described as always being strong and fearless. In fact, during the Black Lives Matter[2] uprisings back in 2020, most of the world was looking towards black women for answers. Especially during that election season since 98% of Black women had voted for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election over Trump. In fact, Mexican politician Jorge Guajardo stated the following in August of 2020, "Black women will save the United States." He received a lot of backlash from that tweet, mostly from Black women of course, who emphasized the fact that viewing black women as superheroes is just as dehumanizing as erasing our humanity altogether.

In an article written by Tennile Rollingson of *LAPP* released in April of 2021 titled, *Black Women are Expected to Save the World but Who Is Going to Save Us?,* she stated the following:

> "As black women our intense desire to protect and fight for other marginalized groups is constant, coming from a place of empathy rather than sympathy. However, oftentimes our advocacy can come at the price of our mental health and wellbeing. Many 'woke' white people often look to black women to explain oppression to them rather than researching it themselves, almost as there is an expectation for us to educate and bottle feed everyone information. While we're expected to lead the conversations for change and be at every protest, no one ever bothers to wonder if we need that same support." (Rollingson)

[2] Black Lives Matter movement was started by three black women, Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi- https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/

The mental health of Black women is never even brought up in conversations surrounding activism as they have been presented as these “strong” heroes who are going to save everybody rather than victims of a system who are fighting for their lives in order to survive.

While it is important that we give Black women their flowers for the revolutionary work that they do in the world of politics and activism, it is equally as important not to mythologize them. The latter is a double-edged sword as it turns them into symbols rather than seeing them as people. Kemi Adeyemi from *In Every Mirror She’s Black* is the perfect representation of this. She was scouted from a Swedish powerhouse company to join their Administration following a scandal. In a conversation with the company CEO Johan Von Lundig she stated the following: “....So this new position, Kemi started, “is it for show?”. The possibility of being added simply to satisfy a diversity quota in a foreign country was more than she could emotionally bear. The last thing she needed was to become a prop in another man’s country. Her heart couldn’t take any more struggle.” (Akerstrom)

It is sad to say that although Jonny (Johan) denied this, it is exactly what happened. The internal battle that followed Kemi during the next two years working at his company was devastating.

The issue with pushing the narrative that black women are “strong” and can handle everything on their own isn’t simply or only perception. This framework impacts the treatment of Black women in other areas as well. Societal perceptions of strength in black women contribute to the dismissal of claims of discrimination and harassment by Black women. In other words, due to the perceived strength of Black women, people are

less likely to believe or help them when they bring up issues of discrimination and harrassment. It is easier for people to excuse and justify their mistreatment of Black women when they believe that they can handle said treatment, hence the “strength”. It was never about uplifting black women, it was about making sure nobody pities them enough to call out society's treatment of them.

Not to mention that the innate strength of Black women is a stereotype that followed enslavement. “....the characterization of Black women as innately strong supported the justification of their mistreatment while the embodiment of such characteristics was necessary for personal and communal survival…” (Geyton, Johnson and Ross, 2020). Rather than seeing it as a means of survival, it has been flipped as an innate state of being. Because of this, black women are expected to do more, withstand and endure more than our non-black counterparts, which is innately racist.

Being viewed as the giver and not the person that gets taken care of is part of the reason why Black women face significant disparities in healthcare. “Notably, the outlook for Black women often depends on the perspective. Some mental health providers believe that they are some of the most disadvantaged people in the United States, often simultaneously experiencing racism, sexism, and, at times, financial inequality.” (Richards, 2021). However, even with all the research that points to black women being half as likely to get medical help as white women, as well as being seven times more likely to die in childbirth in comparison to white women (due to the belief that Black people do not feel pain)[3]. Many medical professionals believe that this makes Black

[3] Implicit Bias In Medicine: How It Hurts Black Women- https://www.today.com/health/implicit-bias-medicine-how-it-hurts-black-women-t187866

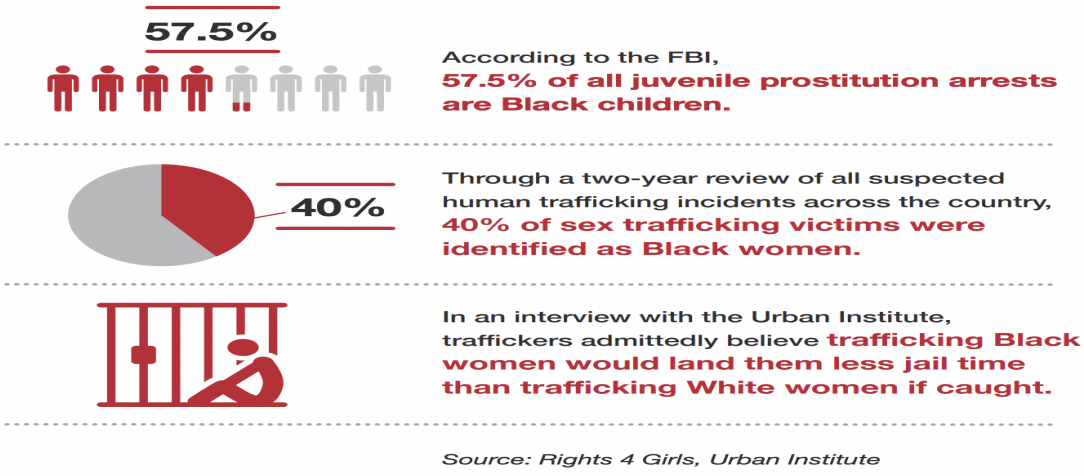
women one of the most resilient groups around. While this may be true, it does not negate the fact that these very ideologies are what aid to these outcomes.

Black women are not innately strong. They have been forced to be due to their treatment in our society. They are human and capable of being flawed and “weak” just as much as anybody else. Black women deserve the privilege of being human. While they make the world a better place, as most groups do, they should not be expected to be the sole protectors of it.

The Jezebel

The Jezebel is the promiscuous overly sexual black woman. She is easy and ready for you at all times. In fact, she is here for your pleasure and satisfaction. The Jezebel stereotype also has its roots in slavery and was used as an excuse for the rape and sexual exploitation of black girls and women by their masters. I hope that at this point of the paper you understand how damaging stereotypes are for groups of people. Stereotypes, whether you are conscious of them or not, affect people’s judgments and behaviors/actions towards others. “Stereotypes have a connection to decision-making, such as decisions about public policies..” (Kunda, Spencer, 2003). I say this to prepare you for the topic that we are about to discuss as it is a heavy one. **Trigger Warning for this section of my paper as it discusses sexual assault and sex trafficking.**

Black women and girls are disproportionately impacted by sex trafficking. Please see the following graph for statistics and the research done on this topic:



[4]

Research done on this topic, provided to us by the Congressional Black Caucus, has indicated that the over-sexualization of the bodies of Black women and girls has led to their high numbers in sex trafficking. The myths around Black women and girls' hypersexuality cannot be ignored when researching sex trafficking. It is also important that we note that Black girls being treated and viewed as older than their actual age adds to their high numbers in sex trafficking. Issues of socio-economic class and levels of education also play a major role in the sexual exploitation of black girls. When you are in a system of poverty your access to education and safety are scarce. Due to this, black women and girls are more likely to engage in prostitution than their white counterparts, aiding in the stereotype of them being more promiscuous than white girls.

The Congressional Black Caucus, who researched this topic, stated:

"In addition, the intersecting factors like low socioeconomic status, child welfare

[4] The Congressional Black Caucus- https://www.cbcfinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SexTraffickingReport3.pdf

involvement, detachment from education, criminal justice involvement, and history of physical/sexual abuse must be addressed. These factors contribute to the increased vulnerability of sex trafficking. Compared to their racial counterparts, Black women and girls suffer higher rates of these combined factors." (Davey)

Some black women and girls may find themselves in dangerous situations but cannot leave them as they do not have the means of survival without them. An example of this would be Muna Saeed's character in *In Every Mirror She's Black.* Muna was a Somali immigrant whose village had been destroyed by war. She had been threatened by the real possibility of being sold to the highest bidder whenever she would step out of place and stand up for herself. She did not have the luxury of disappointing or leaving them as they were her sponsors and she was just a guest in Sweden. Many of the Swedes did not view Muna as one of them because she was Black, Somali, and Muslim. They often looked past her or completely dehumanized her, and there was no in-between. Thankfully, her sponsors never went through with their threats. However, horrifically, she committed suicide because of the emotional and physical abuse inflicted on her by the Swedes.

PMC Labs[5] did a research study on the over-sexualization of Black women back in 2016. They used a control group of over 450 undergraduate students from a public university in the Northeastern United States and showed them a picture of two women. The catch was the pictures were actually of the same woman, one was just manipulated to make her look black. The manipulation worked as more than 90 percent of the students identified "Jasmine" as being black and the other woman and being white. The

[5] A peer reviewed research organization

researchers showed the group a mix of pictures of the woman, some indicating that she was pregnant and others not, then asked them which woman they thought was pregnant as well as asked the study's participants to answer a series of questions. These questions included but were not limited to: how many sexual partners the woman had, was she in a committed relationship, does she need public assistance, etc.

An overwhelming amount of students thought that the "Black" woman in comparison to the white woman was more likely to have more sexual partners, less likely to use birth control, more likely to have been pregnant before, more likely to be receiving public assistance, etc (Rosenthal, Lobel). The white counterpart, however, was viewed by the participants as more likely to be married or in a serious relationship, and a good idea for her to be a mother at his time.

When the targets were visibly pregnant, both women, black and white alike, were seen as less likely to be using any form of birth control. In this circumstance, students voted that the Black woman was most likely pregnant before the White woman and less likely to follow instructions given to her by the doctor than her white counterpart. Claims that the father of the Black woman's child would be less likely to be involved were also brought up by the participants.

While this was a study done to emphasize the over-sexualization of Black women, we cannot dismiss or ignore the origin or source of these views. The black target was viewed negatively in the unique, historically-rooted stereotypes that exist for Black women in the United States (hypersexuality). The over-sexualization and hypersexualization of black women and girls is a major factor of research in this as this experience is exclusive to them due to stereotypes placed against them due to them

being both Black and women. The intersecting identities of Black women make their experiences unique.

The over-sexualization of Black girls doesn't always end in such an extreme as sex trafficking; in fact, most Black girls are viewed as an "experience" rather than a whole human being. *In Every Mirror She's Black* Kemi experiences inappropriate advances from her boss due to the Jezebel archetype. "Connor McDonough's look reminded her that she was still a specimen to be sampled and tested. Or rather tasted. He was already married to his first choice…" (Akerstrom, 11). Connor had no intention of being with her, he just wanted to "try" her. He wanted to see if the rumors of Black women being good in bed were true, even though he already married the woman it was acceptable for him to be with, a white woman. Whitney's relationship with her assistant soccer coach in *The Sex Lives of College Girls* also brings the issue of Black women being used as sexual placeholders for white men. Her coach had always made it a point to bring up her skin color and how he was more attracted to Black women than any other race of women. Imagine our surprise when Whitney found out that he was married, to guess what, a white woman. Growing up in this body, I saw that coming from a mile away. I have had too many experiences with men who claimed to want me and find me extremely attractive. However, they only kept things surface level, and when it came time to get serious they got with either a white woman or someone with lighter skin. This also brings up the issue of colorism.

There have also been many issues raised about what is "appropriate" for black women to wear in the workplace. I have seen countless stories of curvier black women getting fired for wearing outfits that their employers deemed inappropriate. Even though

their outfits would not have even been questioned if they had been white or skinnier, as they covered all of the body. In an Article published by Georgetown Law entitled *Oversexualization of Black girls, women must stop* they stated the following:

> "As children, Black girls worry about the clothes they wear, how much skin is showing and what their actions might suggest. Black girls grow into Black women who face similar struggles. As adults, Black women have to be conscious of how they dress in professional settings and how others may perceive their bodies. The perception of Black bodies, like the notion that it Black women's bodies are inappropriate could result in workplace harassment and even being fired" (Moses,2).

We as a society need to allow Black girls to be children and stop over-sexualizing Black women. It isn't just locker room talk and in fact, is very dangerous to the safety of Black girls and women. Black women are not samples for you to try or an "experience"; they are human beings and should be treated as such.

The Angry Black Woman

One of the most pervasive stereotypes set against Black women is that they are angry. A research study done by Harvard Business Review has found that the angry Black woman stereotype has penetrated many parts of American culture, including the workplace[6]. Due to the fact that the stereotypes paints Black women as being more

[6] The Angry Black Woman Stereotype at Work-
https://www.odihi.com/post/the-problem-with-the-strong-black-woman-stereotype?gclid=

hostile, aggressive, overbearing, illogical, ill-tempered and bitter in comparison to their white counterparts, it clips their wings and makes it difficult for them to reach their full potential in the workplace. (Motro, Evans, Ellis, Benson III).

In research conducted by Harvard Business Review, its authors surveyed 250 adults who worked in different industries in the United States. The researchers played an audio series of black, white, male, and female workers speaking about tardiness. The actors that were meant to be “black” had what is viewed as a traditional black name like ‘Lakiesha’ while the white woman had a name like ‘Claire’. Each actor had two clips, one where they were speaking “normally” and the other where their voice was more stern. This study found that an overwhelming majority of the participants found that participants were more likely to attribute the Black female employee’s anger to internal characteristics such as her personality rather than just her expression[7].

Whenever Black women are passionate about something or stand up for themselves they are painted as being angry and abrasive. This makes it difficult for them to “hustle” their way to the top compared to their male and female white counterparts. This isn’t just in the workplace either, it is also evident in their interactions with the world too. Please see the following series of tweets between Activist Mikki

[7] Harvard Business Review
https://hbr.org/2022/01/the-angry-black-woman-stereotype-at-work

Kendall and Director Julie Plec:

Julie Plec was responding to a tweet from Rapper Megan Thee Stallion that spoke about the crippling anxiety and mental health of Black women due to the expectations that are placed on them. Plec answered by claiming that Black women being called “strong” is a compliment and that it is in no way, shape or form used to add to their anxiety. Not only was this comment dismissive of the point that Megan had made, but it was also rich coming from Plec.

Julie Plec has a well-documented history of anti-blackness which Mikki brings up in her tweets. If you are not familiar, Julie Plec was the Director of the *Vampire Diaries* series as well as many other famous shows. Kat Graham, the actress that played Bonnie Bennett, recently spoke about her treatment behind the scenes by Plec and the other administrators. Graham was often silenced, her opinions for her character dismissed, and just overall dehumanized by them. Not only was she forced to keep working with a racist coworker who had called her racial slurs, but Plec and her

company colleagues also threatened to fire her on multiple occasions due to her being "difficult" to work with.

The only reason why they did not go through with this threat was that Ian Somerholder, who played Damon Salvatore, was aware of Kat's treatment on the show and told the administrators that if they fired Graham he would quit the show in solidarity. However, through the storylines and treatment of Bonnie's character on the show, it was evident that Plec did not like her. Her character was mostly used to push forward her white counterparts' stories and to get the crew out of messes. This is a common use of Black characters in the media. This Julie Plec debacle is a good example of white people expecting Black women to work overtime for them and save the world even when they do not treat them well in their real lives.

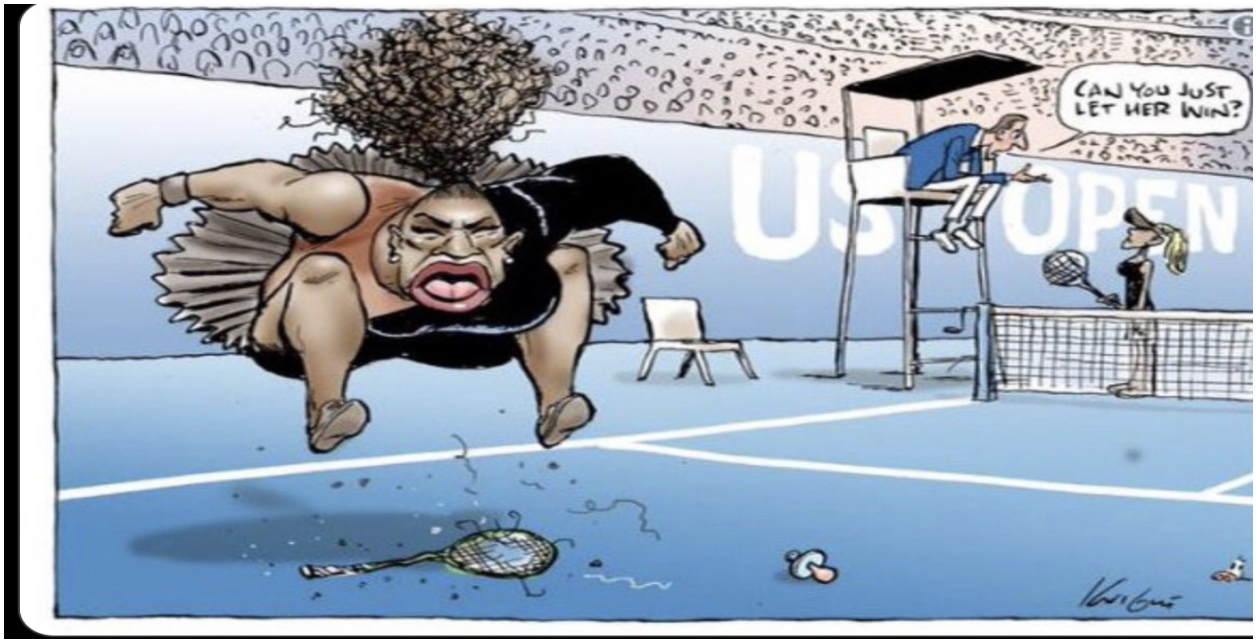
Athlete Serena Williams has also had her share of being painted as angry[8]. Williams has been penalized a few times over the years for her "angry outbursts" and has even had to pay over $80,000 in fines because of her "angry outbursts". Reading that you would think the woman has anger issues, however, she is far from the only tennis player who has had an outburst while playing. Back in 2009, Williams was given a fine and was reprimanded personally by the official for being "coached" while playing. Whether or not the call was legitimate is still up for debate, however, what is not up for debate is the fact that the coach is who is supposed to be reprimanded for this offense,

[8] Artwork done by Mark Knight

BBC. (2018, September 11). *Serena Williams: Cartoonist denies US open depiction is racist*. BBC News. - https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-45479954

not the player. Williams had an outburst because she was aware of this context and did not understand why the referee was addressing her.

Following this, there were countless news articles and art that castigated Wiliams for being aggressive and angry. Even though she has rarely ever gotten out of character and that was the first time she exploded like that before on court. Make no mistake, the Angry black woman trope (also known as the Sapphire) is the cause. Please look at the following racist caricature cartoon drawn of her following this incident:



[9]

The way that Mark Knight drew her was an over-exaggeration of her natural black features. He made her look animalistic and made sure to draw her as unruly, and

[9] Artwork done by Mark Knight from Melbourne's *Herald Sun*

BBC. (2018, September 11). *Serena Williams: Cartoonist denies US open depiction is racist*. BBC News.- https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-45479954

childlike. (The pacifier was used to diminish her adulthood). Williams had played tennis star Naomi Osaka who is a biracial woman, however, they painted her as a white woman with blonde hair. This was done on purpose. Knight wanted to emphasize how unhinged and dangerous Williams was while whitewashing Osaka to make it easier for viewers to distinguish who the “aggressor” was. As we know, white women are seen as being more docile, fragile, and in need of protection.

It is also important to note the language used in the cartoon’s caption, “Can’t you just let her win”. Serena Williams has 23 Grand Slams. This is the most number of Grand Slam wins by any tennis player in the Open era, and she is close to beating the all-time record of Margaret Court, who has 24 Grand Slams under her belt. I say this to note that Serena Williams does not need anybody to “let her win”. She is one of the greatest athletes of all time. However, her accomplishments are diminished and her credibility was brought to question constantly.

Conclusion

Black women worldwide, but specifically in the United States, have been forced into three boxes historically: The Sapphire, The Jezebel, and the Mammy. Black women are not here to satisfy your sexual fantasies or educate you or even save the world. They are not innately angry or dangerous. Black women are not a monolith. They are individuals just like the human beings in the world. When they get upset it is not because they are intrinsically angry. When they are sexually liberated it is not because they are over-sexual by nature. And when they are “strong” it is because they have been forced to be.

The media and literature that we consume play a major role in how we perceive and treat one another. Make no mistake, the perceptions people have of black women have been fed to them through years of consumption. When you rarely see black women on your screens unless they are playing vixens, or are on a reality show fighting, it is easy to assume that that is how they all are. These roles have been constructed within and in support of a white supremacist, patriarchal, and capitalist system. This is the narrative that the powers that be want to be fed about black women. When you put people in boxes it is harder for you to see them as anything else or empathize with them.

I would like to thank you for getting this far into my thesis. Conversations surrounding black women are always one-dimensional and I hope that this provides a nuanced understanding for you, the reader. Growing up as a black girl in the United States I have had to prove myself constantly. Not in the way that other people do, I had to prove that I wasn't like the others. That I was one of the good ones. But it only takes one mistake for people to put you in a box. Even if you have spent your life being multifaceted. So I ask you, which archetype do you fit in?

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