

AS SEEN ON TV: THE EFFECT OF MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS ON  
PROFESSIONAL AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

Kimberly Janeece Woods

Thesis

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Colleen E. Wynn, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, Advisor

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Elizabeth Ziff, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Sociology, Reader

## **Abstract**

My research project aims to study how professional African American women perceive the influence of popular culture media representations on their workplace environment. I explored if and how the stigmas of representations in the media are similar to what African American women are experiencing in their professional lives by conducting in-depth interviews with professional African American women. I asked the participants in my study about their views of media depictions of African American women and the role they think these depictions may have played in their professional lives. I conducted personal interviews with thirteen participants, with each interview lasting approximately thirty five minutes to two hours. I found that professional African American women are still susceptible to experiencing discriminatory treatment influenced by mainstream media tropes inaccurately depicting Black women. Despite the strict restraints these women put on themselves to contradict the stereotypes, their cautious behavior, style of professional attire, and their resumes do not exempt them from being treated like the popularized stereotype of the Angry Black Woman. On the contrary, I found that these professional women try to be the exact opposite of this caricature, they are slow to anger, patient, and empathizing even when being antagonized and regarded as an Angry Black Woman.

## **Reflective Statement**

I am an African American woman and was compelled to study this topic based on my own personal experiences and those of people around me. As a part of this group, I have been able to participate in deeply personal conversations with other African American women my whole life. Conducting interviews as an African American woman likely allowed my participants to feel more comfortable sharing their experiences with me. Hearing troubling accounts of workplace racism was not a new experience for me, I recall being in elementary

school when my mother worked her way up from the factory assembly line to her first management position in the factory's office. Upon introducing herself to her new office mate, she was interrupted by her coworker who expressed surprise that my mom was married with one child. The woman told my mother that she had assumed she must be a single mother with five or so children and this job had gotten her off welfare. Not only was this offensive and alienating but it triggers a list of questions as to why someone would have these assumptions. When I searched for myself through the media I was hard pressed to find anything that resembles me, the Black women I knew, or my real life. I saw these caricatures of Black women, these obtuse, unrealistic, one dimensional portrayals of women that react in impractical yet, predictable ways. I realized that how we are treated is based more on them than ourselves.

As I began in the workforce and started to have my own experiences, I realized not much had changed from my mother's experiences in a couple decades worth of time. I have had many impressionable events of racism and discrimination on a micro and macro level however, I have attributed it to not having reached enough success to yet garner a level of respect. If time had not changed the treatment then surely, education and achievement will. I turned to the highly educated and accomplished Black women wondering if they were beyond the reproach of the tropes. I sought to hear their stories and learn from the incredible Black woman what it is like for those who achieve success. For better or worse I found myself in their stories and realized society is not changing much to reflect us beyond a monolith. I am encouraged by their optimism and commitment to change their communities and society as a whole. I hope my project, the furtherance of it, and ones like it will transcend representation beyond the physical appearance of a Black woman on screen but a greater representation of who we are.

### **Introduction and Literature Review**

African American women have played a pivotal role in advancement throughout our nation's history from civil rights, to academics, to the arts and culture (Harris 2015). African American women have had huge impacts on the cultural trends and public discourse but often these impacts are presented in the media only as isolated occurrences and anomalies (Cartier 2014; Hook 1989; Ladner 1971). Maligning Black women, regardless of their personal or collective truth, is part of America's DNA; seeds for negative perceptions planted centuries ago, when Black women were chattel (Harris 2015). Despite the important contributions of African American women, their representation in the media lags behind, with caricatures of outdated tropes rather than fully realized human beings (Cartier 2014).

These media representations have real world implications when they affect how Black women are treated especially in public spaces like their work environments (Jones and Norwood 2017). In their careers, many Black women find it challenging to combat stereotypical personas placed on them by White peers and to be taken seriously as individuals; receiving recognition for their achievements (Collins 1999; Jones and Norwood 2017). African American women in professional fields historically dominated by White people, including law, medicine and politics, say the pressure affects how they dress, what they carry in their wallets, and how they behave (Hauser 2018).

Their authentic collective and individual selves are usually hidden by racist and sexist stereotypes that we cannot seem to shake- or rather, images that others will not let us shake (Harris 2015). The stereotypes have had an unyielding durability that has not only dominated media representations but also popular thought (Pellerin 2012). Therefore, people whose interactions with Black women are only relegated to limiting public circumstances like work, rely on these representations to dictate social behavior (Weaver Jr. 2016).

Black media stereotypes are nothing new; Weaver Jr. (2016) traces them as far back as Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). When the book began to be adapted

into film, the narrative was manipulated to make the Uncle Tom character submissive and meek to appeal to White audiences in the Reconstruction era (Weaver Jr. 2016). Theatre entrepreneurs were able to dilute the horrors of slavery and make a profit by creating a nostalgic version of it (Weaver Jr. 2016). Moreover, it is important to mention the roles of enslaved African Americans in these theatre productions were played by White actors in black face, not by African Americans themselves (Versluys 2014). Therefore, from the beginning of narrations on Black lives in the media, American culture became accustomed to depictions of African Americans from an inauthentic voice and representation that showed no true representation at all (Versluys 2014).

Hattie McDaniel's character in the 1939 film, *Gone With the Wind*, was such a poignant representation and reflection of Hollywood's relationship with African American women (Carter 2011). "Respectable" Black women had to serve white families loyally as domestics, with little reference to their own families, and were often cast as asexual, unattractive, and plump (Carter 2011). Hattie played the character simply referenced as Mammy, the house slave of Vivien Leigh's character Scarlett O'Hara (Carter 2011). It is interesting where even today Black actors are still fighting for acknowledgments, McDaniel received the Academy Award for best supporting actress in 1940 for her role as Mammy. Those who dismiss criticisms of that award decision ignore a long-established and troublesome Hollywood practice of rewarding talented African Americans for playing roles meant to be subservient and demeaning and punishing those who protest against those types of roles (Carter 2011).

These examples show the powerful role the media has played in directing the response of and creating lasting impressions for its audience. African Americans have a relationship to American history that cannot be replicated by any other minority group (Weaver Jr. 2016). The reality of slavery and the Jim Crow Era that followed, placed the African American community subject to misrepresentation in mainstream American culture even before the modern idea of media started (Weaver Jr. 2016).

The literature raises points about the media as a tool in creating the narrative for African Americans, women in particular, and the control it has in the perceptions of them. Weaver Jr. (2016) introduces cultivation theory, postulating that since television occupies a central role in American culture, it is more influential to the discussion than other forms of media. Further, it posits that television shapes people's attitudes and beliefs rather than directly affecting behavior (Gerfber and Gross, 2002). This theory uses qualitative and quantitative content analysis, with early studies coding parameters that classified characters as good and bad (Weaver Jr., 2016).

Of the twelve dominant African American stereotypes found in media that Weaver Jr. (2016) defines in the literature, he highlights five that are specifically directed at African American women. However, the tropes of Black women in the media go beyond these five, some have evolved and branched into new stereotypes all together (Collins 1999). *The Mammy* stereotype is the depiction of a Black woman who works as a nanny or housekeeper (West 1995). It is rooted in the real-life experiences of female slaves who were domestic workers in White households, where they cooked, cleaned, and were responsible for taking care of the master's children. Generally, the mammy was portrayed as an old, overweight, dark-skinned woman (Weaver Jr. 2016). It seems this image was popularized as a tool to control the narrative, suggesting it was impossible for African American women to be victimized sexually in these domestic roles because of their unattractiveness (Harris 2015). Confining the Black woman to an isolated one-dimensional portion of experience occurs in a systematic cycle, leaving the African American woman seen without being heard (hooks 1989).

A subset of the Mammy is the Matriarch; she is defined by her failure to be submissive to a man/husband causing the breakdown of the Black family (Harris 2015). Unlike the typical jovial Mammy, the Matriarch is sassy and domineering. She is portrayed as unattractive and not having her own life, so she focuses all her energy on meddling in and controlling the lives of her

family; especially her sons (Collins 1999). She is usually divorced, bitter and intimidating to both men and women (Cartier 2014).

*The Independent Black Woman* is an archetype of a Black woman that is depicted as being narcissistic and emasculating to men in her life (Harris 2015). This stereotype has evolved in modern times often to symbolize a Black woman who cannot find or keep a male partner because of her emasculating ways (Collins 1989). Her successes are meant to be perceived in a negative connotation, keeping her at odds with men and most others (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009).

*The Jezebel* stereotype presents Black women as sexually promiscuous seductresses (Mitchell and Herring 1998). This stereotype was meant to be the antithesis of the submissive and pure elements associated with the ideal (White) Victorian woman (Weaver Jr. 2016). It in turn, also supports the narrative that Black women cannot be victimized sexually, as they are already “over-sexed” or “asking for it” (Harris 2015). The Jezebel is often characterized by her flashy, skimpy style of dress and street lingo; she is often portrayed as not very intelligent but the one thing that is definitely on her mind is sex (Brooks and Hebert 2006).

The next trope is the Ghetto Queen, she is the Black woman characterized for being loud and uncouth; she can take many forms and go by several different names; to the millennial she may be called “ratchet” (Brown and Chaney 2016). This trope shows Black women as inherently blatant whether she’s educated or not; whether she’s got money in her pocket or begging for a handout (e.g., Brown and Chaney 2016; Collins 2000; Harris 2015). When she is being portrayed as being financially needy, she is often called the Welfare Queen (Weaver Jr. 2016). When unchecked baby making and constantly seeking handouts from men are added to the trope, she’s often referred to as a Baby Mama (Harris 2015). This image is largely shaped by the racial and political agendas aimed to decrease support for single Black mothers and framed into the Baby Mama trope (Brown and Chaney 2016). However in either case, she is not just branded as being

in need of assistance; she is characterized as abusing it. The Baby Mama is often portrayed as over-sexed and unintelligent like the Jezebel but she is still smart enough to cheat the system and profit from her promiscuity through having many children (Harris 2015). Studies show that the media's overuse of these types of portrayals lead to a dramatic overestimation of African Americans living under the poverty line (Levin 2013).

Perhaps one of the most popular tropes explored is the *Angry Black Woman*, derivative of the Sapphire character from the 1930's *Amos 'n' Andy* radio show, who was known for nagging and emasculating her husband (Weaver Jr. 2016). While sometimes grouped with the Independent Black Woman stereotype, the Angry Black Woman differs somewhat in Weaver's (2016) typology. The Angry Black Woman is considered angry for no reason, just a cantankerous human being. The modern Angry Black Woman is always equipped with a sharp reply for anyone who crosses her path, not usually limited to just emasculating men, unlike the independent Black woman. However, like the Independent Black Woman, the Angry Black Woman is hard pressed to find and keep a man to tolerate her strong will and emasculating ways (Harris 2015).

It is postulated that the Angry Black Woman stereotype is often used as a tool to shutdown conversations of racism (Jones and Norwood 2017). The Black woman who stands up for herself is often painted as the Angry Black Woman. "It is remarkable how a stereotype functions as an actual trap; how 'Angry Black Women' have been caught in the circular logic of that phrase. When you are not listened to, of course you would get louder," Michelle Obama (2018). Criminality has always been an element in these misrepresentations and historically cited as one of the excuses for Blacks needing to be enslaved because of their inherent rage, they needed to be controlled by masters (Weaver Jr. 2016).

The literature identifies that these tropes present themselves through daily interactions and occurrences of a Black woman's life, including the professional workplace (Jones and



Norwood 2017). “Black women are immediately familiar with aggressive encounters because their daily lives are filled with opportunities for emotionally draining interactions” Jones and Norwood (2017:2031). This means that these occurrences can range from assuming a Black woman holds a lesser position than the high status position she actually does, to full blown altercations targeting her. Oftentimes, race and gender outweigh all other indicators of professional status in the refusal to see Black women as professionals regardless of how they dress or activities in which they are engaged (Jones and Norwood 2017). Examples include Black female doctors being mistaken for nurses or being there to clean the hospital rooms and security guards refusing to believe Black women were seeking entrance into courtrooms were in fact the lawyers or judges working the cases (Jones and Norwood 2017). These instances are usually brief; the intensive confrontations of race and gender that Black women face come from their encounters with colleagues and coworkers (Jones and Norwood 2017). The more Americans consume stereotypes of Black women in the media, the more they are triggered where real Black women are concerned and this subconscious activation affects in particular the way Black women are seen by potential employers (Harris 2015).

This project uses interviews with professional African American women to understand their perceptions of media depictions of African American women and their experiences with these tropes in the workplace. I use the media tropes of African American women as a lens through which to understand the experiences of professional African American women who may be one of the only or the only African American women at her level in her company. Because many of the coworkers of these women may not know many other African American women, their perceptions of their African American coworkers may be limited to media depictions and stereotypes. American society is racially and ethnically segregated not only in terms of employment (e.g., Mintz and Krymkowski 2010; Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2006), but also housing (e.g., Logan and Stults 2011; Massey and Denton 1993; Wynn and Friedman 2018), and

religion (see Edwards, Christerson, and Emerson 2013 for review). Most people still predominantly interact with people who are racially and ethnically similar to them and therefore rely on their stereotypes to predict behavior of those they consider others in professional interactions.

## **Method**

This study uses in-depth interviews with 13 African American women to explore their perceptions of media depictions of African American women as well as how these media depictions have impacted their professional lives. The interviews lasted between roughly 35 minutes and 2 hours and took place in the participants' offices, homes, restaurants, or in an office, or other location selected by the participant. I sought to make sure my participants were in a space that was comfortable to them. My participants were African American women aged approximately between thirty five to seventy and who held a range of professional positions such as, Executive Directors, managers, teachers, professors, government and elected officials. Most women currently live in the Midwest, though one participant currently lives in the South. To recruit my participants, I used my own professional networks through my sorority alumni chapter, church, and other professional and volunteer experiences. I also used snowball sampling to find additional participants.<sup>1</sup>

## ***Results & Conclusion***

Through my interviews with these highly credentialed professional women it became clear that regardless of their varied career backgrounds, tropes of African American women have haunted them throughout their careers. The lasting effects of these tropes were clear throughout our conversations. How these women conduct business is molded by a constant awareness of the

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<sup>1</sup> In order to protect their identities I have given each interviewee a pseudonym based off of the 2020 list of popular baby girl names.

negative stereotypes of their existence, especially when they are trying to exist within positions of power.

### Setting the Stage and Deflecting Stigma

Madison who has been a business owner, author, and a life coach. She appears to be the picture of confidence but, Madison admitted to feeling trapped by the urge to dress in certain ways to counteract negative stereotypes being projected onto her. Madison recounted a conversation with her husband:

I would downplay myself and my husband finally asked why, because I didn't want anyone to look at me in a certain way. You can be misjudged without someone ever really knowing you as a person.

Madison realized that just being a Black woman would invoke reactions and assumptions from her colleagues; that she must actively work even harder to break the stigma. Madison did not want to trigger confirmation of their presumptions through her wardrobe. Emma, a well educated woman with a diverse employment background inside and outside of state government. She currently is a trainer and unfortunately has trouble hearing. She has to give a disclaimer at the beginning of her training sessions to thwart off negative stereotypes such as the Angry Black Woman and the Jezebel by her stern or uncouth facial expressions. Emma tells me:

So right up front because I know people will perceive me that way, as I frown when I'm struggling to hear. I say, oh ok, I'll make a joke out of it because I'm trying to process and I know there are some individuals that will judge me as angry and even though they're here for the training; all they are going to see is my face. They're not hearing what I'm saying, or anything like that and they're looking for a reason to discount whatever I'm saying.

Black women like Emma can not even afford to have physical challenges without having to be conscientious of the lurking Angry Black Woman trope. Amelia, an older woman who earned both her Master's and JD and has had several successful careers, was raised in the iconic backdrop of the Civil Rights movement and has experienced first-hand blatant and more subtle

discrimination in the most tense of circumstances. Despite her credentials and her professional success, she still has to be constantly aware of how she's seen. Amelia said:

I probably hold myself very formally because I had to when I started. It was a totally different kind of situation. Where dress mattered. You had to be what you had to be; in order to be perceived in a particular way and so, professional representation means a lot to me. I do not deviate to the left or to the right because I couldn't.

Amelia spoke with a solemn reservation thinking back on societal pressures in the workforce when she began decades ago. Yet, speaking with women much younger than Amelia still feel those same pressures now. Evelyn, a highly intelligent scholar and educator, finds that in the world of statistical mathematics people still fall into judging people by stereotypes. Evelyn said:

I have been more thoughtful of what I wear to the workplace. I can't wear the same thing my White friends wear to work, for some reason it looks more sexual on a Black woman versus on a White woman. I am very thoughtful about what I wear to work; because it could influence how I'm viewed at work as a professional.

Amelia and Evelyn are at each end of the age spectrum of interviewed participants but have such similar trope/behavior experiences. It goes to show that stagnate media representations of Black women are just as unyielding in the workplace as well (Collins 1999).

### The Angry Black Woman

While poignant themes sprang forth through my interview coding process, the Angry Black Woman trope was dominant throughout my preliminary research and the most commonly used media stereotype for African American women. Therefore, I was interested to know how the professional women I interviewed would relate or not to this trope. There was a significant relationship between the women and the trope however, it differed from the one I assumed. The fear of the stigma from this trope causes many of the women I interviewed to move with extreme caution as to not give anyone a reason to direct that label towards themselves and take much more than they should. Amelia told me:

Just get yourself together and don't cry. And if you do cry; I got eye drops in my drawer. You put eye drops in and get your eyes cleared up and you open that door and walk out of there with confidence! Smile at everybody. You better not let them know. My mother would always say, "never let them see you sweat." And that's how we live.

It was heartbreaking to hear the unchecked poor treatment that Amelia swallowed over the years. I asked her if she felt drained, she expressed how draining it is to be a Black woman; she said; "I'd be lying if I said it wasn't draining, I'm drained right now." Charlotte is an academic, an author, educator, researcher and her credentials are a mile long with diverse and interesting background yet, she also experiences the dread of trying to bystep this trope that has shut down so many Black women time and time again. Charlotte speaks to that feeling when she says:

Nobody wants to be the Angry Black woman, this is the number one; I would say, trope that I try to fight. The Angry Black woman has been the number one trope I feel is relevant to my professional employment. It's the way we make the Black perception always seem angry, negative, hostile, aggressive; that really does a disservice to African American women and to foster their inclusion in our world. I hate being an Angry Black woman, but if I don't get passionate; if I don't speak up to prove my point then oftentimes my point is discounted. And so, it's a double edged sword; you shy away from the thing that gets you the most attention; when the thing that gets you the most attention shouldn't be the way you act, but it should be; the content and the way it's delivered.

Sophia, the street smart academic and self proclaimed Boss, even identified to fighting against the stereotypes by her approach to her work ethic. Sophia commented:

We as Black women we always have to play a part; right? If you weren't invited to hangout with the men, you have to sacrifice so they want you to invest all your time at the worksite. When you don't do that, when you have to juggle your time; you can't be 100% committed then, it was also a thing. Not even emasculating men but, for you to not be good enough to fill his shoes and so, they're always judging you. So I just think, you always have to be on point, no days off.

The constant professional and successful elected official, Emily too works hard to prove herself in hopes of dispelling the tropes about Black women. She says:

I feel that being an African American woman, there is always going to be some adversity to you until you actually are able to prove that you are a professional woman; I work at carrying myself as a professional because I want to be treated as a professional.

Of course, Charlotte, Sophia, and Emily try as much as they can to prevent having this trope applied to them however the stigma is attached to them before they even say a word. This creates a common inward trepidation for expressing themselves for fear of being labeled an Angry Black Woman and other tropes. It is almost as if Black women are trained to have robotic responses and mask emotions. I identified this type of behavior as internalized/apologetic; finding that these successful women are characterized more by keeping composure and suppressing the natural desire to defend themselves when wronged. Not only does a failure to respond in a way deemed appropriate have personal consequences but have a lasting effect on their careers.

#### Acting with Deference: Apologetic Tendencies

Rather than women who are quick tempered and boisterously belligerent, as the Angry Black Woman trope would imply, I met African American women whose success was dependent in part on being the exact opposite. Also deeply enmeshed within this finding is the fact that these women were apologetic, nearly every moment of discrimination or disrespect the interviewees discussed was followed by a remark to soften the blow or minimize the incident. The tone and mood of the interviews would change when the women told me a story of being wronged or about a time they experienced discrimination. Their demeanor would often change, eyes would turn from me to the device I was using to record. Although I assured my interviewees their identities will remain protected and the recording would only be heard by me, Ava pointed to my device saying, “I don’t know who all is going to hear this” before her answer. Our interview had been very relaxed with Ava just as with Emma as well but, she looked at the device every time she had to attest to facing racial issues at work. Amelia spoke with such eloquence and her descriptors painted picture while she told a story however, she would suddenly become very vague in describing certain unpleasant circumstances she faced.

As almost a reflex, they underrate the infraction and humanize the perpetrator to give them the benefit of the doubt. Olivia is a highly motivated school teacher with degrees behind her name and still pursuing more; as driven as she is, Olivia speaks with reservations facing racial challenges at work and often takes it in without response. Olivia seems to reflect inwardly when she says:

I do notice sometimes I have to question whether it's paranoia, because it does happen quite frequently. It kind of bothers me but then, you know me I'm really trying to not cause any controversy; I kind of let it go.

Olivia reflected on a time when a colleague used the term "you people" in a meeting, when she just asked the woman did she mean people of color; the woman burst out of the meeting in tears. Her colleague made a scene and ran down her resume of working with minority communities. By the end of her rant she had made herself the victim somehow and it was Olivia who was asked to apologize by her supervisor.

Isabella, attended a prestigious university and entered the ranks of corporate leadership at a young age; supervising those much older than herself. When asked about racial stereotyping in the office, she immediately started her answer saying it hasn't been bad for her. However, she then began to explain being judged for the styles of music she listened to and her hairstyles, and recoiling from statements like "being too Black". It is telling that Isabella did not rate these experiences as bad treatment; as to what Black women are made to internalize and accept as the cost of doing business.

Harper is a poised and polished professional with over 30 years experience working for the federal government. I was stunned to hear how she kept her composure with a coworker who said the unthinkable to her. Harper told me that as she advanced in the ranks and gained a prestigious position, a White female coworker was giving her such a hard time. When she was asked why are you treating me this way, the woman told Harper that she was offended by the level of success that Harper had reached and that she outranked even herself. The lady went so

far as to quote the King James bible scripture Ephesians 6:5 to Harper, “Slaves, obey your earthly masters.”

Even when these successful women want to react, respond, and defend themselves from the treatment they receive, the internal struggle is further complicated by the burden of representation successful African American women feel. They don’t want to speak up and give the majority validation to believe what they already assume is true nor give those in power a reason to never give another Black woman a chance in the future by enhancing the stigma. The weight of representation of every Black woman everywhere is a heavy load that was easily sensed among the interviewees; not only do they have to consider how their choices will affect their careers but, the careers of every woman that looks like them.

### Paving the Path

Abigail explained to me her unique career opportunities and the rewarding experiences of inclusivity. Abigail was one the many PhDs that I interviewed and has spent much of her career in positions related to diversity and inclusion. Despite this, she has often been the first African American woman to hold many of her positions and stepping into those roles initially brought pressure. Abigail told me that she worried if she were to speak up or defend herself every time she faced adversity, that she would be not only the first but also the last Black woman in that particular position. Amelia recognizes the weight of the burden in her own experiences:

Having to hold yourself in a particular way. Inside that culture; because you had to represent. But sometimes we put things on ourselves. More things on ourselves, because we do have to represent. And so even through that; looking at ourselves, even viewing ourselves, having to do it better. Making sure it comes in on time, in time. Yeah, and it has to be not just good, but the best. And that’s a lot of pressure to be under; and to put yourself under. But that’s what we’re taught.

Madison in the same way sees her experiences as paving a way for those who follow:



Hopefully not what I went through but even if you have a similar situation that you can survive and you can stand. We have come a long way to go in having to dispel the myths about us; we are phenomenal in whatever role we operate in and we can do anything.

The beauty of the struggle that these amazing women have gone and continue to go through; is that it creates a spirit of sisterhood and comradery. They are internally and outright advocates for women and especially women of color. Charlotte spoke passionately about this idea, of making things easier for someone else, “It would be nice if my students didn’t have to have that struggle; because I made it a slight bit easier for them. My mom always says, ‘we must lift as we climb.’” That same spirit and sentiment was evident in each of the women interviewed. Harper explained giving back to young people and imparting wisdom to women just beginning their careers is the best part of her job. The pressure and isolating feeling of constantly living confined by parameters of others makes the network of support so imperative to success. All the women brought up the importance of mentors and the importance of counsel from wise women to navigate the workforce.

#### Concluding Remarks:

My data shows that high achieving African American women cannot escape the tropes of Black women perpetuated by the media (Collins 2000; Harris 2015; Crenshaw 2016). Yet, their level of success often requires them to be the exact opposite of how these tropes portray African American. Amelia told me:

Successful Black women are not mean insecure ladies; that need help. Usually you have had to navigate and forge your way through a process in a way others have not had to do and it doesn’t look like this! We can’t, not real jobs! If there is someone who has ascended to this kind of level; even if it is that kind of demeanor, that’s there many times, they’re not going to stay very long.

Charlotte expounded on this further saying:

I realize that our culture as African American women is not monolithic, there are poor, there are rich, and somewhere in that spectrum I reside. I have more access to resources than some, but not as many resources as Beyoncé. I see African American women portrayed in the media, no matter what their level of income or education is; it's very rarely positive and not a reflection of who I am.

My findings show African American professional women are acutely aware of the stereotypes and are still susceptible racist treatment because of the tropes. The general perceptions of professional Black women in the media are incorrect. In most cases these women must be polar opposite of these representations to be successful. They are not brash or quick to react in anger but must become skilled in keeping their composure. Even as African American women go to great lengths to govern themselves accordingly to avoid trope relevant accusations; my research identifies that they still face stigma and negative treatment associated with the stereotypes. The harsh reality is that educated and accomplished Black women can be and in many cases are the picture of poise and self-control are still treated like the Angry Black Woman, the Jezebel, and other negative stereotypes. The common denominator of the treatment is not for being treated that way is not their behavior it is the color of their skin and their relations to portrayals of women that look like them in the media. African American women ask themselves, "If they don't see me act this way, what gave them the impression that I would?" This study exhibits that people are bringing preconceived assumptions many taken directly from the media to form opinions of African American women who are using everything at their disposal to debunk these stereotypes.

Many of these women were complete strangers to me, but were so eager to participate in my research, moving their schedules, and offering further support. As an attempt to not influence my research I was advised to keep a distance between myself and the interviewee but am eager to engage with them after this process. The interviewees were all intelligent, hard working, self possessed women. At same time they are humble, collaborative, and accommodative women seeking to help others with no excuses. I did not interview a victim even when they had every

right to feel victimized. I am reminded once again of Tamara Winfrey Harris's (2015) work, *The Sisters Are Alright*, it is not the women that have it wrong. It is the representations that are not alright; it is not just entertainment but a tool to make African American women unhirable and silence their voices.

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## **Appendix**

### **Interview Questions for Professional African American Women**

1. Can you tell me the story of how you ended up in your current career?
  - a. How long have you been in your current position?
  - b. Approximately how many people work under you?
  - c. What do you spend most of your time doing?
2. What percentage of your workplace is female?
  - a. What percentage is non-White?
3. What are the best parts of being in a leadership role?
  - a. How do your subordinates treat you?
  - b. How do other leaders treat you?
    - i. Was it always this way?
4. Can you describe the importance of reputation and perception of yourself in the workplace?
  - a. Have there been any memorable moments where reputation and perceptions about you came into play, positively?
  - b. Have there been any memorable moments where negative perceptions about you came into play?
5. Has there ever been a time your tone or demeanor was questioned?
  - a. Do you feel that negative stereotypes of African American women played a role?
6. Talk to me about how the media stereotypes about African American women show up in your workplace.
  - a. Has this changed over time?
  - b. Do you think these stereotypes impact how people view you as a leader?

7. I have provided a handout referencing the five common representations of African American women in media. Have you ever experienced a workplace interaction where you saw the Mammy/Matriarch stereotype directed at you?
- a. The Jezebel?
  - b. The Ghetto Queen/Baby Mama/Welfare Queen?
  - c. The Independent Black Woman?
  - d. The Angry Black Woman?

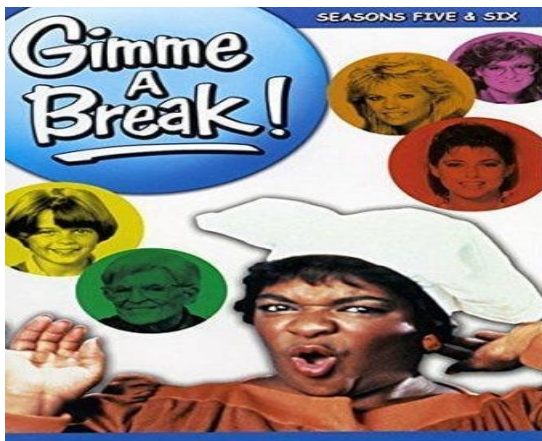
## Common Stereotypical Depictions of African American Women

1. **The Mammy** - the mammy/servant stereotype is the depiction of a Black woman who works as a nanny or housekeeper (West, 1995).

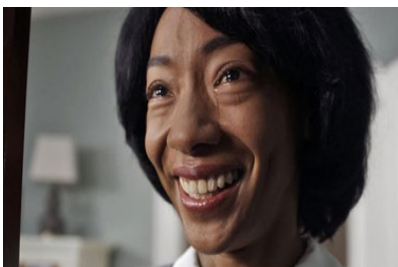
Examples: Viola Davis's character Aibileen in the 2011 film *The Help*.



Nell Carter's character in the 80's classic TV show *Gimme a Break!*



Betty Gabriel's character in the 2017 film *Get Out*



2. **The Matriarch** – She is defined by her brash attitude and failure to be submissive to a man/husband, with mom in charge of everyone's lives in the family and not having one of her own.

Examples: Loretta Devine's character in the 2011 film *Jumping the*

*Broom.*



Kim Whitley's character on the FreeForm series *Young & Hungry*.



Jenifer Lewis's character Ruby on the current ABC sitcom *Blackish*.



3. **The Jezebel** – the Black woman who is (not always) dim-witted but is always sexually promiscuous and a seductress (Mitchell & Herring, 1998).

Examples: Tiffany Haddish's character in the 2017 film *Girls Trip*



Meagan Good's character in the 2011 film *Jumping the Broom*



Shar Jackson's character in the 90's sitcom *Moesha*.



4. **Welfare Queen**- financially needy Black woman she's not just in need of assistance but, she is characterized as abusing it.

Examples: Kia Steven's character on the Netflix original series, *Glow*



*Monique's character in the 2009 film Precious.*



5. **The Ghetto Queen** - Loud, unprofessional, uneducated, can also be characterized as abusing the system and sexually forward.

Examples: Terri Vaughn's character on the 90's sitcom *The Steve Harvey Show*.



Countess Vaughn's character Kim Parker on the 90's sitcoms  
*Moesha* and the spin-off *The Parkers*.



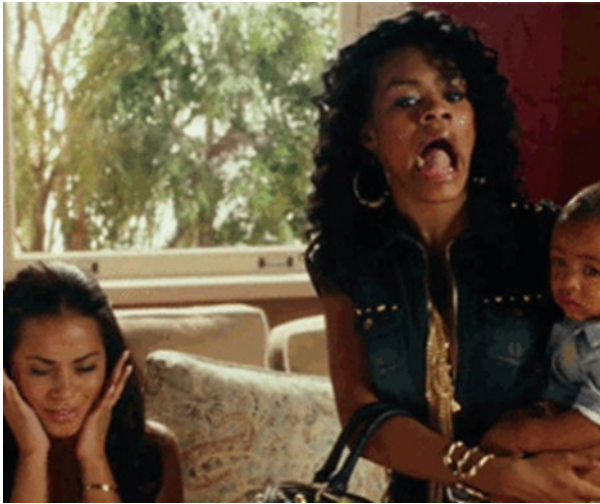
Queen Latifah's character in the 2003 film *Bringing Down the House*



6. **The Baby Mama** - She is the angry single mother harassing the father of her children and always after money or a handout; she often is characterized by impeding the man's happiness.

Examples: Teyana Taylor's character Sabrina in the 2011 Film, *Madea's Big Happy Family*.





Lisa Raye's character in the 2003 television series *All of Us*.



7. **The Angry Black Woman** – is derivative of the Sapphire character, from the 1930's Amos 'n' Andy radio show, who was known for nagging and emasculating her husband (Weaver Jr., 2016). She's considered perpetually angry, loud and often uncouth, and her quick wit is only used to make biting remarks.

Examples: Taraji P. Henson's character Cookie Lyon on the Fox television series *Empire*





LaWanda Page's character on the classic 70's sitcom *Sanford And Son*



Tichina Arnold's Character Pam on the 90's hit sitcom *Martin*



8. **The Independent Black Woman** - is depicted attaining success only through as being narcissistic and emasculating to men (Harris, 2015).

Examples: Chandra Wilson's character on ABC television series *Grey's Anatomy*



Sanaa Latham's character in the 2008 film *A Family That Preys*



Gabrielle Union's character in the 2003 film *Deliver Us From Eva*.

