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Just One Woman

Oil paint

My art piece is about the archetypes of black women in the African American diaspora. In our society, black women are seen through the lenses of these archetypes. The *Mammy*, *Jezebel*, and *Sapphire* were created post slavery as a way to continue dehumanize them as people.

The Mammy is submissive, the Jezebel is sexual, and the Sapphire is sassy. These stereotypes/archetypes are imposed onto black women in their daily lives and are constantly the main representation that is seen in the media. With the creation of this artwork, I sought to explore how these archetypes exist today and how they change the perception of black women.

I have created an oil painting along with 3 mixed media portraits on plexiglass. I chose these materials specifically because I believed it would best show how these archetypes aren't real and do not show who the woman actually is. To do this I created a painting of a normal black woman with nothing on her but gold. I used oil paint to make the black women based off a black model for reference. Creating her took about 4-5 days not including the gold. The plexiglass creates an opportunity to put the archetypes on the woman without ever changing her actual appearance. Her face, her body, and her stance remains the same while you interchange the different archetypes on her. Each of these archetypes were created with some type of physical component or fabric on them. I also created each of these archetypes with the ability to be exchanged in and out of the painting to call attention to how society puts these archetypes onto black women despite her being nothing more than just one woman.

Female Archetypes of the
African American Diaspora



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OS46

Writer's Note: In this paper I address the archetypes of Black women throughout American History. I show how these have been implemented in our society since early America and are still present today. In this paper I answer the question of how these archetypes have shaped how we view Black women in our society.

Throughout early American history, negative stereotypes and archetypes of African Americans were created to dehumanize them. These played a role in how African Americans were perceived and portrayed in the media. Archetypes such as: Jim Crow, Sambo, Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel are still present. Today they live on and are perpetuated through our media. Before the first films were even produced, African Americans were the subject of ridicule through minstrel shows and black face (Versluys, 2013). As Versluys states "...images of African Americans were used to sell a distorted picture of Southern plantation life ... theatrical productions romanticized slavery and depicted slaves as non-threatening, inferior imbeciles" (Versluys, 2013). Once the first films were being produced, Black people in particular were the subject of ridicule and comedic jabs. In movies like *Birth of a Nation (1915)*, African Americans were depicted as aggressive and violent people and the film was a great success among white audiences. For the next 20 years, blacks in film continued to be portrayed as either the fumbling idiots or aggressive predators. Later in the 60s and 70s, Hollywood realized the potential market of aiming at black audiences. Due to that, there was a boom in blaxploitation movies. Films like *Cleopatra Jones*, *Super Fly*, *Black Dynamite*, *Coonskin*, *Shaft* and many more were very successful at that time. Even though they had a mostly black cast, almost all the themes dealt with gun violence, drugs, prostitution/pimps, criminals, etc. My grandparents, parents, and even I watched these movies despite being born 3-4

decades after they were released. To the black community, movies like these are precious because it was the only time they had representation in the media.

Exposure to these movies also changed our perception of our own community and culture. Growing up as a young black girl from the late 2000s to 2010s, my exposure to black people on television was shows like *Maury* and *The Jerry Springer Show*, which made us seem like we were these loud, aggressive, ghetto people who wanted to fight all the time. They showed audiences that absent fathers in black families were common and were something to be laughed about. On reality TV, black women were loud, rude, and always angry or arguing about something. They wore skimpy clothes, shook their behinds, and constantly had their hands on their hips. In movies like *Madea*, the elderly black woman with sass was usually played by a black man in drag (Tyler Perry). I remember thinking how easy it was for a black man to play a black woman because they were so masculine anyway.

Growing up and seeing that on my TV screen or in my cartoons made me embarrassed of being black. I didn't want to be associated with being a black girl. Little did I know that it wasn't my fault I felt this way; the presentation I saw of black women had been crafted and formulated before I even took my first breath. The *jezebel*, the *mammy*, and the *sapphire* are the 3 main archetypes and representations of black women that have stuck throughout history. Even though many of the archetypes and stereotypes created about black people were created long ago, they have seeped into our present through our media and our society, always reminding us that we aren't that far away from the watermelon-eating jigaboos depicted in the past. In this project I want to explore how these archetypes have shaped how we view black women in society.

I. The Mammy

One of the most enduring archetypes for black women is *The Mammy*. The caricature of the mammy traces back to the post civil war period. During slavery, many african american women had to work in their white slave owners “big house”. They did work such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the white children in the house. Mammies are portrayed as overweight grandmothers who are dedicated to their white families. She is self-sacrificing, often doing more for her white family than her own family. She is good-humored and sassy, yet never too outspoken. The mammy was shown as being almost a second family yet was never seen by guests or visitors. She is seen and never heard, never wanting to leave her white family because she loves them too greatly. Pilgrim quotes “In reality these women were often teenagers, ripped away from their families in order to take care of white families they had never met” (Pilgrim 2000) .The depiction of her being overweight is also inaccurate because many of them were extremely malnourished from the little food they were rationed. Also, it was even more unlikely for them to reach elderly age because of the intensive labor that they performed. Plantation mammy is a myth created to soothe white southerners' consciences. She is depicted in media such as *Gone with the Wind*, *Aunt Jemima*, *Imitation of Life*, *Madea*, *The Help*, *Ma*, or, generally any Tyler Perry movie.

One of the most famous depictions of a mammy was in the film *Gone with the Wind* (1939), played by Hattie McDaniel. In the movie she fights off black soldiers to protect the white mistress of the home. Hattie McDaniel was one of the first African American women to win an award for her performance but wasn't allowed to go to the showing because she was black. Although she faced extremely unfair treatment in the industry, she was quoted“ I'd rather play a maid than be one.” Through the 1930s 40s, the mammy was becoming a popular staple in film. White southerners reminiscent of plantation life created the perpetuation of the mammy. As McDole

quotes “Mammy was first birthed on the plantation. If that is true, mammy went through a second birth following slavery’s end” (McDole, 2017).

Mammy was born out of slavery but she grew in popularity during the era of Jim Crow (Pilgram, 2000). She became the staple for household items especially in breakfast foods, cleaning supplies, and in/on sewing materials/supplies/etc. The mammy’s most successful commercial caricature was and still is *Aunt Jemima*, created in 1889 by mill owners Charles Rutt and Charles Underwood. They took the name Aunt Jemima from a song sung by minstrel show performers, who got it from a song black southerners would sing. Rutt decided to use the mammy image of Aunt Jemima for his business and it was very successful. “In 1934 the movie *Imitation of Life* (Laemmle & Stahl) told the story of a black maid, Aunt Delilah (played by Louise Beavers) who inherited a pancake recipe”(Pilgrim, 2000). The movie mammy gives the recipe to her boss, her boss becomes very successful, and she offers Delilah 20 percent of the company. Aunt Delilah, who is devoted to her white family, obviously declines, saying “My own house? You gonna send me away, Miss Bea? I can't live with you? Oh, Honey Chile, please don't send me away... How I gonna take care of you and Miss Jessie [Miss Bea's daughter] if I ain't here... I'se your cook. And I want to stay your cook." Even though she lives in complete poverty, she doesn’t want her own house and only lives to serve her boss. In order to emphasize her role as the mammy character Aunt Delilah, she was deeper complexioned and overweight with a scarf on her head to match it. Today, the image of Aunt Jemima and the mammy has been given a makeover with lighter skin and no scarf on her head. She is still overweight, elderly, and black, yet she doesn’t look like she arrived straight from the era of Jim Crow. Still in our modern day, we cannot escape this archetype in the things we consume. In the 21st century we have this theme of “mammy in drag” films that further dehumanize black women just the same as in the past. Movies with characters like Madea

or Rasputia show the mammy-esque sassy big black woman who is played by a man. Also an example is white savior movies such as *The Help* where the mammy was devoted to the white child she was nannying. Although the mammy archetype isn't explicitly called that now, we still see this archetype in our modern day society imposed onto black women. Not only is it harmful but it also isn't discussed enough despite being such a prevalent issue.

II. **The Jezebel** (TW: sexual assault)

The second archetype is the jezebel, also referred to as the Jezebelle. It is the portrayal of black women as inherently lewd and sexual by nature. She is very promiscuous and almost predatory to men. The name Jezebel comes from a woman in the Bible who was a seductress and used sex to deceive men into evil doings. Jezebel in early American culture comes from the fact that during slavery, many slave owners marked black women as sexual beings as an excuse for sexually assaulting them. There is also a kind of duality between the black woman being portrayed as the Jezebel whore and the black man portrayed as a potential rapist, even though white slave owners forced themselves onto black female slaves and were never rapists because the women were considered property. However, black men who were falsely accused of sexually assaulting white women were beaten, hung, and castrated. Pilgrim quotes "The idea that black women were naturally and inevitably sexually promiscuous was reinforced by several features of the slavery institution" (Pilgrim, 2002). Many women were stripped naked on auction blocks for physical examinations. Based on the article by Ferris State University, "In practice, the stripping and touching of slaves had a sexually exploitative,⁵sometimes sadistic function. Nakedness, especially among women in the 18th and 19th centuries, implied lack of civility, morality, and sexual restraint even when the nakedness was forced" (Pilgrim 2002). Also, many slaves wore ripped and loose

clothes that exposed all parts of their bodies. This contrasted with how white women at that time wore more civilized clothing that covered their entire body to show modesty and purity. Black women were the opposite: sexually immodest, uncivilized, and impure. This archetype of black women remained popular for decades. So much so that in the early 20th century, many of them took vows of piety. In the late 60s through early 70s blaxploitation films, as classic as they are, never put a good light on black people. Films like *Cleopatra Jones* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974) showed black women as these sexual gunslinging women who used their bodies to get revenge.

In our modern day, the idea of the jezebel has slipped its way into black culture as well. Little black girls are often hypersexualized and adultified in our society. Most often it is by peers or close family members in our communities. Being called “fast,” “grown,” or “hoes” is a common experience that most black girls have heard at least once. Black girls are seen as more grown up than other girls and also more independent. They know more about sex and adult things and they need less protection. Who is to blame when growing up all you see is rap music videos with women scantily dressed and promiscuously dancing in front of the camera. Always calling them hoers or b*tches, whether a male or female artist is singing. Even though the first depictions of the jezebel archetype began many, many years ago, she is still perpetuated and constantly haunts black women in our present day society.

III. The Sapphire

The sapphire archetype portrays the loud, angry black woman who is always yelling and rude. This is one of the most popularized stereotypes in the media, especially in television. She always has a hand on her hip with her finger wagging to tell someone off. She's too outspoken and often irrationally aggressive. She is masculinized through her appearance and her own attitude. This archetype was not only created as a way to dehumanize black women, but it was also a way to

punish women who acted out of the norm of being passive, subservient, and non-threatening. So, if you do decide to be opinionated or speak out about something, you are the loud aggressive black girl who's constantly upset or bitter about something. The sapphire also has subtle roots in slavery, created as a justification for the exploitation of black women. The first media outlet to use this was in the 1930s with the radio show *Amos 'n' Andy*, which was later adapted to a TV show due to its popularity. Their character "Sapphire Stevens" was the angry and nagging wife of a lazy, unemployed black husband. Both characters were played by white men mimicking black dialect, as an auditory minstrel show. This narrative of angry black women echoed throughout history with characters like Aunt Esther from *Sanford and Son*, Pam from *Martin*, Cookie from *Empire* and many others. All of these shows are famously black shows that many in the black community have watched and enjoyed. The sapphire is not only portrayed as aggressive and angry in shows like that, but also unattractive. Reality TV does an excellent job of showing black women as ghetto and unattractive. Shows like *The Real Housewives* or *Love & Hip-Hop* show the women screaming, yelling, and all around having no manners whatsoever. Their roles in the shows are nothing but one-dimensional portrayals of the Sapphire caricature. In the words of Eveline Versluys, "The sapphire still remains an oversimplified enlargement of actual individuals" (Versluys, 2013). The sapphire also prevents black women from expressing themselves out of fear of being perceived as the angry, black woman. Sapphire is an archetype that is more prevalent than the previous archetypes, however it is still as undiscussed as the others.

Conclusion

One of the most important things to consider when dealing with negative preconceptions of a certain group of people is to understand the nature of the stereotypes. To understand it, you have to know the history behind it, why it happens, and who it happens to. Exploring these subjects

and learning more about them helps us to create a space of awareness, which is the first step to an intervention. Intervening in perpetuating negative archetypes/stereotypes about black women is important to help the problem. Seeing as these issues are so integrated in our society, it is essential to provide people with as much information as possible to challenge them. We will never learn from our mistakes by repeating the same beliefs, prejudice, and ignorance. The biggest problem with fixing how we view black women in American society is trying to change the way people view them. Media plays a large part in formulating/aiding in the negative narrative on African Americans. Positive representation can do a great deal in helping change that narrative into a better one. Inaccurate stereotypes and representation as we have seen is extremely damaging, but not irreversible. This topic is such an important thing to consider because it affects the lives of black women to this day. If we want things to really change we have to take the initiative to do so. As Einstein once said “*The world is a dangerous place to live, not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don’t do anything about it.*”

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