

- Orbe, M., & Spellers, R. E. (2005). From the margins to the center: Utilizing co-cultural theory in diverse contexts. In W. B. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Theorizing about intercultural communication* (pp. 173–191). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Smith, D. E. (1987). *The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology of knowledge*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.
- Wallace, R. A., & Wolf, A. (1995). *Contemporary sociological theory: Continuing the classical tradition*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Story & A Stereotype

*An Angry and Strong Auto/Ethnography
of Race, Class, and Gender*

Robin M. Boylorn

A Story of Stereotypes

She is the amalgamation of centuries-old assumptions and enduring comfort. She is a cultural enigma, parading dual identities at once and challenging notions of class, race, and sex stereotypes that have existed since the beginning of time (Parks, 2010). She presents herself in a way that centers her strength and suppresses her anger. Her strength is a combination of historical and cultural requirements, wrapped in faith and selflessness. Her anger rises when the strength subsides, an inevitable switch because the two prevailing tropes involve a lot of code switching. She is financially disadvantaged, even when she makes a good living, because she is often the breadwinner and primary caregiver of those in her family and community who need help. She is oftentimes blamed and vilified for emasculating men and intimidating women, even though those characterizations and accusations are not legitimately based on her actions or intentions.

She is "the mammy figure, the suprahuman endurer, and the Christian hard worker" (Harris, 2001, p. 1). She is "dark-skinned, ever-smiling, diligent, and dotting" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009, pp. 28–29). She "confronts all trials and tribulations ... is a source of unlimited support for her family ... [and] suppresses her emotional needs while anticipating those of others" (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 21). She is self-sacrificing, self-supporting, and rebellious. She is "too domineering, too strong, too aggressive, too outspoken, too castrating, too masculine" (Wallace, 1999, p. 91). She is "shrill, loud, argumentative, irrationally angry, and verbally abusive" (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 87). She is "the Dark Feminine" (Parks, 2010).

She is belligerent, bossy, feisty, insatiable, exotic, dangerous and hypervisible. She is also asexual, happy, smart, and deferential. She comes in all shades, from coconut-colored to mahogany brown; all sizes, from paper thin to country thick.

She is mad as hell sometimes, but not perpetually angry. She is resilient and longsuffering, but not inherently strong. She is compliant and willingly submits without complaint. She is a perpetual giver and transforms herself as a surrogate to meet the needs of others. She is often silent, but when she speaks, her voice reverberates and either causes calm or disillusionment. Her protests are unspoken, and she is known for swallowing her screams.

She is fiercely independent and doesn't need help. She is a problem-solver. A way-maker. A miracle worker. A sinner, a saint, and a savior (Harris, 2001), but she's not Jesus.

She exists in the public imagination but lives in private realities.

You've seen her on the cover of pancake boxes and at the box office featured behind the white heroine she saves. You know her, she silently concedes when you make unreasonable requests for which she will not be compensated or rewarded. You've heard about her lazy lascivious ways that are thwarted by the open doors that are only open because she is a minority, a leach, a pariah, a homewrecker, an affirmative action acquirer. You overlook her when she is serving food, cleaning rooms, sometimes struggling to get by. You don't pay attention to her when she is the only one in the room, the only one at the table, the only damn one. You see her, smiling on the outside, dying on the inside, but you can't tell the difference. She stands on invisible pedestals that set her up to fail.

When she doesn't smile, you ask her why she's so mad. When she doesn't concede, you throw accusations of bias and unfairness at her feet. When she makes babies, you shake your head in disapproval, when she is unmarried, you blame her for her undesirability. She cries in secret, and you are hopelessly unaware. You think telling her she is strong makes up for the circumstances that require strength.

She seems invulnerable when she's not mad.

Safe when she's not strong.

And poor.

*

The stories told about black women are often stories of stereotypes and contradictions disguised as truth.

*

The lives of black women, including "myths, mystiques, sincere fictions, or controlling images" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009, p. 152) inform and are influenced by larger cultural narratives that dictate their personal identity and interpersonal relationships. Black women routinely face negative stereotypes and limited representations that are popularized through media

and myths. When black women internalize stereotypes, it can limit their self-presentation and lower their self-esteem (Thomas et al, 2004). Two stereotypes in particular are pervasive of black women: Mammy and Sapphire. The Mammy stereotype is seen as selfless and nurturing. When a black woman internalizes this stereotype, she may support others to her own detriment and present a "facade of strength" for the benefit of others. The Sapphire stereotype is shrill, loud, hostile, and aggressive. When a black woman internalizes the Sapphire stereotype, she may feel limited outlets for self-expression and communicate anger in order to be heard (Thomas et al., 2004).

According to social constructivism (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), concepts of personal identity are socially and culturally constructed. For some populations, like black women, the social constructions are overwhelmingly reliant on stereotypes, which cause problematic and one-sided perspectives about identity. Auto/ethnography can speak back to stereotypes and provide insight into the cultural milieu of black women in the US.

In this auto/ethnography, I juxtapose the Mammy and Sapphire stereotypes together with a class analysis to investigate the layered-ness of race, class, and gender/sex identities. I use stereotypes to show how external labels of black women's identity are often used to limit and police their emotions and behavior. I also look at the interpersonal implications these restrictions have in their emotional and social lives and discuss how class informs black women's communicative performances of self. I offer personal stories and popular culture discourse to make sense of stereotypes as stories (of identity) and stories as stereotypes (of identity).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality offers a multidimensional way to think about how black women are often seen in contradictory ways because of their lived experiences as members of marginalized social groups. Crenshaw (1989) argued that black women experience discrimination simultaneously in at least three distinct but overlapping areas: race, class, and sex. Intersectionality speaks to the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination and the inextricable connection between them. Due to the simultaneity of oppression that black women experience, it is impossible to distinguish one form from another. When black women experience discrimination, it is often unclear if it is because of their race, sex, class, or all three at the same time. Additional factors that may contribute to intersectional subjugation include ability status, age, sexual orientation, and education¹.

While not a primary mode of intersectional analysis, I believe we can use intersectionality to consider how identity factors, both together and separate, are informed by stereotypes. By using an intersectional approach

to discuss black women's lived realities, we can better understand how and why black women are often limited by the collective stereotypes attached to their social identities.

How we see ourselves and how we perceive ourselves as being seen and understood by others is largely influenced by cultural factors (including stereotypes) and our relationships. Hundreds of times, as a child, I was warned before going in public that my behavior and actions were a direct reflection of my mother, my family, and anonymous black folk I had never met. I was taught that it was important that I carry myself in a respectable manner and was hyperaware that I was being watched and judged as a *blackgirl* (a lesson that has stayed with me into adulthood). I was not warned explicitly about stereotypes, but I was told how to behave like I had home training, to resist retaliation even when warranted, and to be prepared for racism. When applicable, my mother would point out someone else's child whose bad behavior seemed to both inspire collective shame and offer evidence to outsiders that "we" (read black folk) don't know how to act. The ways I was conditioned to resist those mischaracterizations were also opportunities to challenge larger injustices linked to black culture. My blackness and femaleness were linked to my identity, my identity had intersectional aspects, and those intersections influenced current and potential relationships. I knew the assumptions others held about (rural, poor, dark-skinned black women like) me carried consequences. I also understood that those assumptions were informed by larger cultural narratives (stereotypes) of black women, narratives (stereotypes) that we sometimes resisted and sometimes reiterated. Therefore, the link between my behavior and perceived intent was important, because black women, I was taught, relied on multiple relationships and institutions to survive. Beyond family, there was the church, my mama's work networks, nonbiological kinships or chosen kin, and friendships. We all, intentionally and unconsciously, represented each other.

Strong + Angry + Poor =

While stereotypes are pervasive in several categories, the implications of stereotypes on the lives of people of color and women includes further stigma, especially when those positionalities are jointly combined (Combahee River Collective Statement, 1982; Crenshaw, 1989; Lorde, 2007). I distinguish between strength and anger, later combining them, to discuss the ways that they inform one another in the public imagination about black women's cultural performances.

When strength is attached to black womanhood it is (mis)interpreted as a compliment.
When anger is added to black womanhood, it is (mis)recognized as an inalienable truth.

When poverty precedes black woman, it is seen as a lasting and sometimes inevitable reality.

Confronting these myths, assumptions, and occasional truths of black womanhood is challenging. As a black woman who knows black women who are strong, angry, and/or poor, and knowing myself, at various times in my life, as all of the above, I sometimes struggle with the ways that those labels impact my identity. There have been times I have held fast to the strongblackwoman myth while rejecting my working-class roots and denying my anger. It has taken me years to flip the switch on the expectations of my performance of black womanhood, to embrace the anger and resist the strength (Morgan, 2000) instead of the other way around.

The opening prose defines black womanhood in its various manifestations, blending myths and truths to show how indistinct they are made to seem. Missing from the larger hegemonic narrative and (mis)representations of black women is an acknowledgment of discrimination, exploitation, and oppression. We oftentimes overlook the pain black women are forced to endure in order to be strong. bell hooks (1989) states,

It is not that black women have not been and are not strong; it is simply that this is only a part of our story, a dimension, just as the suffering is another dimension—one that has been most unnoticed and unattended to. (pp. 152–153)

In other words black women live with circumstances that require strength for survival, and they endure structural oppressions that justify anger, but that does not mean their strength is impenetrable or that their anger is ongoing.

Stereotypes shape realities, but they don't always represent reality. By looking at the historical implications of strong and angry figures of black women, I can look at stereotypes as cultural constructions rather than realities and discuss the social and intersectional implications of these characterizations and how they are influenced by time (nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries), linked to culture, and affiliated with class. Further by using auto/ethnographic stories to challenge perspectives of black women from an inside/out view rather than an outside/in view (Sigelman & Tuch, 1997), I can critique how racial assumptions of women's communicative behavior work with stereotypes to police black women's public performances.

A Stereotype: Black Women Are Angry

Sapphire

The angry black woman stereotype became popularized in the late 1920s on the *Amos 'n' Andy* radio show, which was later a short-lived television show (Harris-Perry, 2011; Morgan & Bennett, 2006; Sapphire Caricature, n.d.).

The black woman character, Sapphire Stevens, was known for her abrasive treatment of her lazy, unemployed, and ruthless husband, "Kingfish." While both characters were largely stereotypical, and Sapphire's frustrations were targeted at her husband for his irresponsible choices, the name came to represent black women's so-called indiscriminate anger. The Sapphire image, unlike other stereotypic images of black women, requires the presence of a black man, who is usually the victim of her verbal vehemence (Jewell, 1993). The Sapphire characterization has survived various transformations in media representations and has been uncritically accepted as truth (Morgan & Bennett, 2006).

A Story: I'm Mad as Hell

Bluntness runs in my family. I grew up watching two distinct responses to injustice. My grandmother, who had a reputation of not taking any shit, was quick to seek retribution from those she felt had wronged her or those she loved. My mother, on the other hand, was a soft-spoken saint, who was quick to forgive and who consciously forgot. When I suffered mistreatment at the hands of peers, my mother would encourage me to "turn the other cheek," while my grandmother warned me on the first day of every school year that if somebody hit me, I had better hit them back (or face her wrath). Over the years, I internalized both of those strategies for tempering my anger and frustrations.

Anger swells in my belly and continues to expand until I can feel it in every crevice of my body, particularly my fingers and toes. It makes my face feel flushed, and I can hear my heart beat. I can sense my jaws clench, my lips tighten, my eyes squint, and my posture straighten. Anger grips my tongue in silence and numbs hurt feelings, weakness, or fear. My hands feel heavy, my mind often spins, and I feel an urgency for release, to scream, or swing, or shake, or swallow. I can feel my blood pressure rise, and I feel full and enormous. In many ways, anger manifests itself in my body as if I were preparing myself for a discursive fight or bracing myself to receive a physical blow.

I am not easily angered, but in many ways I feel that by the time I get mad, I have been provoked aggressively. I think of myself as mild mannered and easygoing, so if someone pisses me off, it usually feels intentional, the result of a barrage of ongoing slights and moments of disrespect or challenging. Countless times my kindness has been mistaken for weakness, but if I give in to my anger, if I speak my mind or rally in response to instigation, I lose. Black women cannot afford to be publicly angry. The consequences are ongoing. So I bury my malevolence and carry it with me, fully aware of the ways that my reaction to mistreatment is a corporate reflection of black

women. Microaggressions and insults happen every day. I have taught myself to overlook slights because if I had a visceral reaction to every attack on my personhood I would be exhausted from being angry. Though mammying (a term I use as a verb to describe the expectation that black women acquiesce to disrespect and duplicity) is no less laborious.

*

I am speaking to a black male student in my office, careful to smile after every few words, because I don't want to come across as angry. I tell him I am writing a paper about black women's anger. I don't say that I am writing about *my* anger, because I don't generally bring anger with me to the workplace (though there have been times when it meets me there). Black women, it seems, can't get mad at work. It's a job hazard.

The student sits down and says, "My dad told me once that when a white woman is upset, people think she is having a bad day, but if a black woman gets upset, people think she has an attitude problem." I nod, agreeing, wondering if I have ever heard someone accuse a white woman of being "angry." He went on to say, "I think people are genuinely afraid of black women's anger."

Reflecting on his words, I realize that I oftentimes avoid my anger and suppress expressions of it in fear that I will be viewed as an "angry black woman." Perhaps I am just as afraid of my black woman anger as everyone else.

*

Mammies are strong, accommodating, eager to help, and always smiling. Many times black women's elevated voices, default expressions, and lack of interest in coddling strangers is seen as attitudinal and abrasive. Black women are expected to suppress their anger and "mammy" their way through oppression, injustice and critique. It seems black women's anger is only acceptable in private.

Behind closed doors
in the car on the way home
talking to myself or
on the telephone with a homegirl
or sitting across from someone I trust
I can fully and finally express what I don't always recognize as anger.
My anger disguises itself as frustration, exhaustion, disenchantment, sickness and solemnity out of the fear of appearing stereotypical. The only escape is through unintentional tears and angry, harsh rhythmic words I save for someone who looks like me and understands I am more than my temporary emotions. And we can talk back and forth, roll our necks and our eyes, speak in our outside voices, cuss and shout when we have to, knowing we are angry but not at each other.

The Angry Black Woman: Deconstructing Anger

"Her anger is usually compassionate, protective, and retributive—you have to do something to her or those under her protection first—but once she is angry, offenders need to get out of her way.... Her anger is not out of control; it is strategic" (Parks, 2010, p. 110).

Black women are without social protections around their emotions. As Parks (2010) notes, "the image says that anger is the black female default emotion, and anytime a black woman is not smiling, she must be angry" (p. 115). Anger is generally attributed to men, as a masculine emotion, so when attached to womanhood, it is seen to be unfeminine and dangerous.

Often missing from the discussions of black women's assumed anger is the ways in which anger is not a negative emotion, nor is it an unreasonable reaction to the discriminations black women are forced to endure on a daily basis. Unchecked racism, sexism, poverty, and oppression are reasons to be angry, but miraculously, black women resist persistent anger. As Harris-Perry (2011) explains, the angry black woman stereotype

does not acknowledge black women's anger as a legitimate reaction to unequal circumstances; it is seen as a pathological, irrational desire to control black men, families, and communities. It can be deployed against African American women who dare to question their circumstances, point out inequities, or ask for help. (p. 95)

Parks (2010) describes a positive and negative version of the angry black woman. The positive version is linked to anger that protects others. The negative version is the more popular one "of a woman who is permanently furious and dangerously ready to act out her anger on innocent—read white—people" (p. 110).

Black women's anger is oftentimes in response to specific and continuous racial microaggressions² that oftentimes leave them feeling vulnerable, disempowered, and voiceless (Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008). Their anger, which many times they have been conditioned to hide, is the only thing they have left, but they struggle with the implications of what it means to be an angry black woman. While black women's anger can be seen as constructive (Griffin, 2012), "when [a black person] speaks directly and is also critical, it is likely to be seen as being an expression of hostility" (hooks, 1989, p. 154).

There are, however, positive possibilities for interpreting anger. It can be seen as an aesthetic that is at the heart of women's truths (Grasso, 2002). It can be seen as a catalyst for activism (Lorde, 2007). It also can be seen as a legitimate and justified response to injustice (Harris-Perry, 2011). A reimagination of anger, beyond the stereotype, can help black women engage their emotions and interrogate what it means to be angry. If we saw anger as powerful rather than mythical, what would happen?

A Stereotype: Black Women Are Strong

Mammy

While many scholars distinguish the strong black woman as separate from, but sometimes connected to, other controlling images of black womanhood, Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) offers the strong black woman as a current rearticulation of the mammy stereotype. She says,

Black women too often are treated as modern-day mummies, prized for their fortitude, caring, selflessness, and seeming acceptance of subordination. Like their historical counterparts, contemporary mummies are quintessentially beings designed to invisibly and uncomplainingly support a social order that regards them as an exploitable source of labor. (p. 29)

Mammy is the original strong black woman. According to Harris-Perry (2011), the strong black woman is a racial and political construct. The strong black woman archetype disguises itself as a compliment and emerges from various versions of black womanhood and masculinized circumstances. Ironically, the strength affiliated with Mammy was her ability to endure the hardships of slavery (including prioritizing the needs of white families over her own) and sustain her biological family after slavery (oftentimes as a matriarch and in the absence of black men). The superwoman label made her "a magnificent stereotype" (Parks, 2002, p. 51).

A Story: Breakable

The first time it happened I felt like a failure.

Sure as the sunrise I knew something was not right with me. I had grown up watching the women around me move mountains and shit, and there I was falling apart over a mole hill.

Black women in my world were stoic amazon women whose coconut skin and wide arms could equally intimidate and comfort. They were strong and willing women who spoke their minds, waved their fists, and never cried. They used words and stories to make sense of the things that didn't make sense. The way hereditary diseases swooped in and took away the lives of their loved ones too soon, the way making ends meet was always so hard, and paycheck-to-paycheck was a normal way of living. They always seemed to shake off the messiness of life. Hurt feelings from failed relationships was not worthy of too much attention because there was always a better looking man with better loving looking for a good woman. There was no sense in wasting time crying or worrying or waiting over things you could not control or change. They were emotionless, the women and men of the house, taking on every gender script required to get by. They struggled, but it never looked like struggling. It looked like living, like thriving, like surviving.

I had never seen them cry, but I couldn't stop crying. I had never seen them break, but I felt broken. They were strong black women, but I wasn't. They were standing over me, staring, praying, shaking their heads, confused, conflicted, and worried. I was ready to stop breathing, and they were willing to give me their last breath.

"Is she gone crazy?" my grandmother asked half-concerned, half annoyed. She didn't have time for my antics, no time for tears, no time to worry about something that she couldn't fix. When I said I hurt all over, but on the inside, they decided I needed to go to the doctor. The diagnosis, intermittent bouts of depression, was so un-blackwomanlike that my strong black women didn't know what to do with me. I wasn't like them. I wasn't strong enough.

Mental illness was like a secret we never talked about. I thought it was just me, buried under the weight of sadness I couldn't explain and an inability and disinterest in pretending I was always all right. In retrospect, I wonder if we all were not suffering from some form of depression, mine diagnosed and theirs buried beneath pseudo-anger and aggression. Without many options, and because we were unpracticed in talking through our problems (we were more versed in talking about things and/or people) we suffered in silence. I suffered in silence. I felt that strength, like curly hair, skipped a generation. Everybody had it but me.

The Strong Black Woman: Deconstructing Strength

"[I]t continues to be difficult to let the [superwoman] myth go. Naturally black women want very much to believe it; in a way, it is all we have."
—Michele Wallace

Equating black women's strength with fallibility, Michele Wallace (1999) exposed the myth of the black superwoman by explaining that just because some black women emerge as mythical does not make strong black womanhood glamorous. Wallace said that black women's strength was imaginary, temporary, and dangerous. For black women, strength is a by-product of survival and a self-defense mechanism against the tyrannies of racism, classism, and sexism.

Referencing the "Propaganda Mammy" figure as the personification of strong black womanhood, Parks (2010) explains that these images, often tied to Aunt Jemima, were strategic versions that commercialized pro-slavery images. These so-called strong women were perhaps angry black women in disguise, but the cost of expressing their anger was often more than they could afford.

Orde (2007) speaks of using anger for strength. Morgan and Bennett (2006) explain that characterizations of black women as angry and strong

disregard their emotional complexity and humanity. Harris-Perry (2011) believes that the strong black woman may be a way to reimagine the angry Sapphire as socially acceptable. The angry black woman and strong black woman stereotypes influence each other and are largely influenced by cultural norms that dictate how the representations are interpreted.

Social class offers an interesting lens through which to interrogate the angry and strong tropes of black womanhood. Class identities, though fluid, tend to remain intact based on original circumstances. For example, I self-identify as working class based on my upbringing, even though as a college professor I am currently comfortably middle class. However, my early gendered and raced experiences were strongly influenced by my class circumstances, which gives me an insider/outsider perspective of how and why class matters in terms of how black women are rendered. While class privilege does not protect black women from racial and gender discrimination, it does impact how it is experienced.

The stereotypes of successful black women, especially those who have overcome class disadvantages, may sometimes be used to support claims of meritocracy and exceptionalism, using one black woman's success against other black women who are not afforded the same options or opportunities. This realization, which upwardly mobile black women are usually conscious of, is problematic. Our relative class privilege comes with an experiential knowledge of how oppression works in our lives and in the lives of other disenfranchised folk (of color). Accordingly, I believe middle- and upper-class black women remain seen as inherently angry/strong, because we understand that our class circumstances offer an additional layer of stereotype privilege not afforded to other socially stigmatized groups.

Black FLOTUS: A Class Critique

Michelle Obama, the first First (black) Lady of the United States, was immediately heralded as both a strong black woman and an angry black woman within public discourse (Cooper, 2010; Lightfoot, 2009; Moffitt, 2010). It was clear that despite her upper-class status and position she was not exempt from the racist insinuations of conservative extremists who decided that her blackwomanness made her a fair target. Critics sought opportunities and reasons to attach her to stereotypes. Labeled everything from "angry" and "anti-American" to "ghetto" and a "baby mama," she was attacked with negative characterizations of black women as if they were weapons (Cooper, 2010; Harris-Perry, 2011; Parks, 2010).

The attempted stigmatization of Michelle Obama prompts a focused discussion on the differences between anger and strength in the presentation of black women. As one of the most elite, educated, sophisticated, and visibly upper-class black women in the country (who rose from humble and

working-class roots to the top echelon of national politics), she represents both the poor black woman and the rich black woman. She has personally experienced poverty and prosperity. Her class circumstances do not, however, protect her from racism and sexism (Cooper, 2010; Lightfoot, 2009; Moffitt, 2010).

The FLOTUS (First Lady of the United States) offers an interesting example of how class is trumped by race and sex politics. While working-class or uneducated black women may be expected to be strong, angry, and aggressive, upper-class and elite black women are brushed with the same stroke. Class privilege is often rendered as less salient than the penalty that comes from race and gender (Collins, 2009). Obama's social capital and bank account does not guard her from the raced and sexed stereotypes attached to black women (Harris-Perry, 2011).

Collins (2009) discusses the "black lady" as a class-specific image linked to successful and professional middle-class black women. The "black lady" is compared to both the angry black woman (for her assertiveness) and the strong black woman (she is deemed a modern Mammy) because she is hardworking and masculine-identified in the workplace. Class mobility, then, offers no protection for the problematic guise of black women's demeanor.

Despite the different economic conditions and circumstances of black women's lives, they are still subjected to essentialism and binaries. Bad black women are those who embody negative stereotypes, and good black women are those who don't. All stereotypes, even those that are disguised as positive (strong black women), are problematic. If good blackwomanhood is linked to the politics of respectability and employability (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009) and bad blackwomanhood is linked to negative interpretations of stereotypes, then the mischaracterizations of the FLOTUS don't make sense. The case of FLOTUS Michelle Obama provides a telling illustration that while class is a factor in black women's lives, and can sometimes be a buffer to racism and sexism, it does not offer protection from negative labeling.

Stories as Stereotypes and Stereotypes as Stories

"This is not to be confused with being strong, black, and a woman. I'm still alla that."

—Joan Morgan

In *Getting Off of Black Women's Backs: Love Her or Leave Her Alone*, Morgan and Bennett (2006) challenge the angry black woman myth explaining that the danger of stereotypes is not that they represent reality, but that they are used to shape reality. They state:

Stereotypes are powerful and pernicious ideological devices designed both to maintain social and cultural structures and, perhaps most importantly, to silence those whom they target, trapping them beneath a relentlessly confining and contemptuous gaze. Stereotypes do not merely tell us how a culture "sees" a group of people; they also tell us how a culture controls that group, how it bullies them into submitting to or evading the representations that haunt them. (p. 490)

Speaking specifically of the angry black woman stereotype they say, "[it] goes unnamed not because it is insignificant, but because it is considered an essential characteristic of Black femininity regardless of the other stereotypical roles a Black woman may be accused of occupying" (Morgan & Bennett, 2006, p. 490).

Stereotypes are effective and pervasive because they are sometimes reinforced by our lived experience and not challenged in our everyday lives. When we are used to black women being some combination of angry and strong, the trope becomes ingrained in the cultural narrative of black womanhood. We forget that Mammy and Sapphire are stereotypes and not truths. While black women generally reject negative cultural images and redefine and reconstruct them for themselves (Jewell, 1993), and black women do not necessarily use stereotypes to define themselves (Collins, 2009; Harris-Perry, 2011; James, 2007), stereotypes are regularly used against them. By using stories to confirm and resist stereotypes and looking at stereotypes to frame and tell our stories, black women can move beyond the emotional ambiguity that one-dimensionality causes. Stories may not always successfully challenge the myths and stereotypes of black women, but personal narratives guarantee that black women have agency about how they are represented beyond stereotypes. Stories allow black women to show vulnerability alongside strength, and justification alongside anger.

On Being Seen: An Angry & Strong Poem

*I see you
invisibly disguised
like a walking stereotype
raised rural and working-class
working
on living
a life that would make your mama proud
you make five times the salary of your grandmother
who worked in factories, houses and hospitals
cleaning up after other folk
like a Mammy
you are (strong) like her
I see you
hidden behind stories people tell about you*

dark-skinned and brown
 blackgirl beautiful
 with child-bearing hips
 but no children
 and insecurities you bury beneath ambitions
 I see you
 smiling to cover up fear
 doubt
 pain
 and anger
 so deep you worry it will swallow you whole
 if you let it
 sassy like Sapphire
 you are secretly afraid
 you will never be
 enough

Notes

1. Due to the focus of this chapter on stereotypes, I consciously focus on the ways stereotypes are used against black women. I am, however, aware of the ways that black women experience privilege and penalty due to their race and gender, especially in relation to intersectionality. For example, a black woman can experience heterosexual privilege and racial discrimination, or able bodied privilege and gender discrimination.
2. Racial microaggressions are commonplace behaviors and/or indignities that communicate hostility and/or subtle insults towards people of color. Microaggressions are often unintentional, and those who commit them are often unaware of the implications of their communication. For more on microaggressions, see Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso (2000) or Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder (2008).

References

- Beauboeuf-Lafontant, T. (2009). *Behind the mask of the strong black woman: Voice and the embodiment of a costly performance*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, C. (1967). *The social construction of reality*. Garden City, NY: Anchor.
- Collins, P. H. (2009). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Cooper, B. (2010). Ain't I a lady?: Race women, Michelle Obama, and the ever-expanding democratic imagination. *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the US*, 35(4), 39–57.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 138–167.
- Grasso, L. M. (2002). *The artistry of anger: Black and white women's literature in America, 1820–1860*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Griffin, R. A. (2012). I am an angry black woman: Black feminist autoethnography, voice, and resistance. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 35(2), 138–157.
- Harris, T. (2001). *Saints, sinners, saviors: Strong black women in African American literature*. New York: Palgrave.

- Harris-Perry, M. V. (2011). *Sister citizen: Shame, stereotypes, and black women in America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- hooks, b. (1989). *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black*. Boston, MA: South End.
- James, N. C. (2007). When Miss America was always white. In A. Gonzalez, M. Houston, & V. Chen (Eds.), *Our voices: Essays in culture, ethnicity, and communication* (pp. 61–65). New York: Oxford.
- Jewell, K. S. (1993). *From mammy to Miss America and beyond: Cultural images and the shaping of U.S. social policy*. New York: Routledge.
- Lightfoot, E. (2009). *First lady of hope*. Guilford, CT: The Lyons Press.
- Lorde, A. (2007). *Sister outsider*. Berkeley, CA: Crossing. (Original work published 1984).
- Moffitt, K. R. (2010). Framing a first lady: Media coverage of Michelle Obama's role in the 2008 presidential election. In H. E. Harris, K. R. Moffitt, & C. R. Squires (Eds.), *The Obama effect: Multidisciplinary renderings of the 2008 campaign* (pp. 233–249). New York: SUNY Press.
- Morgan, J. (2000). *When chickenheads come home to roost: A hip hop feminist breaks it down*. New York: Touchstone.
- Morgan, M., & Bennett, D. (2006). Getting off of black women's backs: Love her or leave her alone. *Du Bois Review*, 3(2), 485–502.
- Parks, S. (2010). *Fierce angels: The strong black woman in American life and culture*. New York: One World Books.
- Sapphire Caricature. (n.d.). Retrieved October 18, 2012 from <http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/sapphire/>
- Sigelman, L., & Tuch, S. A. (1997). Metastereotypes: Blacks' perceptions of whites' stereotypes of blacks. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 61(1), 87–101.
- Solorzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *Journal of Negro Education*, 60–73.
- Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., & Holder, A. (2008). Racial microaggressions in the life experience of black Americans. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 39(3), 329–336.
- The Combahee River Collective. (1982). A black feminist statement. In G. T. Hull, P. B. Scott & B. Smith (Eds.), *All the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave: Black women's studies* (pp. 13–22). Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press.
- Thomas, A. J., Witherspoon, K. M., & Speight, S. L. (2004). Toward the development of the stereotypic roles for black women scale. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 30(3), 426–442.
- Wallace, M. (1999). *Black macho and the myth of the superwoman*. New York: Dial. (Original work published 1978).