

Who Do You Say I Am?

How Black Women Are Portrayed in the Media and Church

By Terquoise Ebony Gwyn

When asked how to define womanhood, I think of Matthew 16 where Jesus asks, “Who do you say I am?”¹ Over the years I have learned that the answer to who I am depends on who I ask. Our culture seeks to define women, both who they are and what they do. As an African-American woman, the cultural and social markers of womanhood are not all the same as those of our white counterparts due to the legacy of slavery and racism. How women, and especially Black women, are portrayed in the media and wider North American society is very different from what I see within my own culture.

The legacy of Sojourner Truth hints at this dissonance in her famous speech at the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention. While the phrase for which the speech is known, “Ain’t I a woman?”, aptly highlights the

contrast between the treatment of White and Black women, it is not actually part of her original speech. This phrase came from a highly contested alternate version of her speech published by suffragist Frances Dana Gage. Her original speech, as presented at the 1851 Women’s Right Convention in Akron, Ohio, was transcribed by her friend Rev. Marius Robinson. In it, she describes how Black women lacked the same rights given to men despite doing the same work. “I am a woman’s rights. . . . I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that?”² Gage’s version, the more familiar iteration of the speech, notes that Black women received no special treatment and in fact, lacked even basic human rights. A White woman, Gage tweaked the speech to include some Southern phrases and language, fitting it into a



stereotype foreign to Truth, who was not from the South at all.³ The popularity of the less accurate version of the speech demonstrates how the media shapes the perception of Black women, even if it is well-intended.

Mammy, Jezebel, or Sapphire?

Stereotypes about Black women in media like popular TV shows generally fall into three categories: the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire. None are positive; most started during slavery.⁴ It is apparent that they are all adversarial and that these roles were defined *for us, not by us*.

The first corrosive and popular image of Black women is the “Mammy,” a trope borne out of slavery. The “Mammy” traditionally was an unattractive Black woman who was chosen to work inside the house, doing domestic chores and watching the master’s children. Submissive and non-threatening, a “Mammy” was sometimes considered part of the family. While this would seem like a positive mother figure, this role kept these Black women from

time their husbands could be sold or moved, and there was not always a choice of partners. As such, the Black woman was seen as a vehicle for vice and her role as a wife was limited by outside forces.

Another way Black women are defined by American society is the “Angry Black Woman” or “Sapphire” trope. The “Sapphire” is any Black woman who complains or speaks out about anything. In reality, verbal dissent was often the only tool Black women had against mistreatment of themselves, their husbands, and children. Although the censoring of women’s voices is common across cultures, it is rarely seen as a defining characteristic with few to no positive counternarratives. Like the “Jezebel,” this popular trope is common in media created by Black people as well.

Despite all the negatives that come with these labels, they have also contributed to the development of our self-armor, a positive aspect of Black womanhood. Black women are not stereotypes.

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tending their own children; they were expected to put the needs of their master’s children first. In addition to preventing them from tending their own nest, this frequently created an antagonistic relationship between the “Mammy” and the mistress of the house. This pattern of having to put others’ children and husbands before their own would follow Black women even after slavery ended.

The second stereotype still found in pop culture is the “Jezebel,” a figure named after the Bible character. Like her biblical counterpart, this type of woman is a controlling seductress who aims to bring strife and trouble to men. Her beauty is a weapon to trick men, an accusation familiar to all women. This particular trope is so popular that it is even common in Black media that promotes misogyny. Like the “Mammy,” this trope first started during slavery and was a way to shift blame for assault from men to women. At the same time that Black women were being defined as promiscuous, their White counterparts were often defined as virginal and virtuous. In addition, Black wives were constrained because at any

Where Are All the Fun Black Stories?

When thinking about what it means to be a Black woman, I have learned over the years that I cannot look to American popular media with its caricatures and one-dimensional depictions. As a particularly bookish person, I then turned to Black writing, hoping for a more balanced perspective. When I was a teen, my mother ensured I read books by and about Black people: authors such as Mildred Taylor, Maya Angelou, and Alice Walker. I resisted because, to me, these were all depressing stories about Jim Crow, slaves, or Zulus. I wondered, “Where are all the fun Black stories?” I see now that the point of these stories was that in spite of everything—being ripped from their homelands, enslaved away from their parents, sold apart from their husbands and separated from their children—Black women were *strong*, surviving the most difficult of circumstances. Even in the midst of it all, they never gave up their goal of freedom and self-definition. This led me to look for more positive images of Black women.



The powerful Black voice flips the dominant narrative of the "Angry Black Woman."

The Caged Bird That Sings

In her famous poem "Caged Bird," Maya Angelou alludes to the plight of Black women who still find a way to express freedom in the face of oppression:

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.⁵

As a caged bird can still sing, so did Black women who were enslaved. The powerful Black voice flips the dominant narrative of the "Angry Black Woman." Music has always been a means for advancement and empowerment for Black people. Many are familiar with the accurate image of a Black church with a choir full of Christian women who are God's Instruments. The Black church is a central figure in Black culture and is one of the few places that Black women are elevated.

It is common in Black churches to have a Church Mother, a person who serves as a mother to the entire congregation. In my Pentecostal church, she was the pastor's wife. As a child I remember watching with awe as she presided over Women's Day, which included some type of women's march through the center of the church and a sermon preached by a woman. The ordination of women is still debated in many places, but there are many Black women who lead churches, like Pastor Shirley Caesar, a popular gospel singer. Church Mothers are but one example of positive Black womanhood that contradicts the negative tropes in popular media.

The church not only celebrates Black women as mothers, teachers, singers, and preachers, it also affirms that

motherhood can look many different ways. One notable example is the Black homeschool movement. While the Black woman of the past was constrained in how she could be a mother, that is no longer the case. Growing up, people were always surprised that my mother was a SAHM (stay-at-home mother). We were not wealthy by any means; my mother simply wanted to be home with her children, to look after her *own* children. She explained to me that in the 1950s, my grandmother and all the Black moms she knew had to work. Even if they preferred not to, it was a financial necessity. This is a stark reminder of how the goals of the women's rights movement are not the same for everyone. Contrary to the experience of many White women, it was counter-cultural for my mother to stay at home. Now there is an increasing number of Black SAHMs focusing on their children and making work outside the home secondary. Instead of being forced into being Mammies serving other families, Black women can now focus on their own.

The church is also a place to see Black sisterhood in action. Since so many ancestral bonds were broken, the Black community had to create families with others in bondage to replace what was lost. Much like the church, Black Greek organizations at universities provide another place to create these bonds. During segregation, the Black community founded their own colleges and universities and within them, a network of fraternities and sororities called the Divine Nine. Of the nine, four are sororities, places to make life-long connections with other women. Sorors, as they are called, devoted themselves not only to supporting classmates but also to performing civic duties and service their entire lives. Zeta Phi Beta, the sorority to which one of my aunts belongs, was founded at Howard University over 100 years ago. Zetas commit to causes such as the March of Dimes and to supporting charities all over the world; they have sisters as far away as Japan. The Zetas and other such sororities, as well as women who actively participate in their churches and families,

prove that Black womanhood can look many ways and that Black women have made a way when there was none.

Diospyros Crassiflora

As I think about what it means to be a Black woman, I think of my middle namesake, *Diospyros crassiflora*, or African ebony. This type of hardwood can be polished to a beautiful shiny black and is found in several countries that supplied the Transatlantic Slave Trade. My mother, like many Black mothers, tried to remind me that “Black is beautiful,” and that is why she and my father chose this middle name. They taught me that ebony wood is highly prized, expensive, and versatile. It is used for wood carvings, doorknobs, piano keys, and chess pieces. Ebony is also commonly used for church instruments, just as Black women often participate in their churches’ music ministries. These are all direct contrasts to the media images of Black women as Mammies, Sapphires, and Jezebels.

Black Girls Are Magic⁶

In a world and society that attempts to define Black women, limiting them to roles such as Mammies, Sapphires, or Jezebels, they have had to create new definitions of themselves. Even today, these media stereotypes predominate, and those of us who are shy, bookish, and soft-spoken must work to find other examples that reflect our reality. While we no longer live in an iron cage or chains, those roles are still being shed. The Black church and Black sororities have given us a space to connect, create bonds, and grow in our gifts in ways that the larger culture has not allowed. Where Black womanhood has already succeeded is in coming to a place of self-definition and freedom. I have the freedom to be a working mother or SAHM; to be God’s instrument on my own terms; or simply to be myself.

Notes

1. Matthew 16:13–20.
2. *Anti-slavery bugle*, Vol. 6 (New-Lisbon, Ohio), June 21, 1851. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Lib. of Congress. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83035487/1851-06-21/ed-1/seq-4/>.
3. “Compare the Two Speeches,” The Sojourner Truth Project, last accessed November 13, 2024, <https://www.thesojournertruthproject.com/compare-the-speeches>. Also see: <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/21/aint-i-a-woman-may-291851/>.
4. “Popular and Pervasive Stereotypes of African Americans.” National Museum of African American History and Culture. <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/popular-and-pervasive-stereotypes-african-americans>.
5. Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Birds Sing* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2009).
6. Coined by Cashawn Thompson, the phrase “Black girls are magic” celebrates the positive achievements of women. “CaShawn, who at the time was a 38-year-old preschool teacher

and avid Twitter user, just wrote her truth — that Black girls are magic — to combat the messages Black girls and women were receiving through the media, social media included.” Sire Leo Lamar-Becker, “The Truth About #BlackGirlMagic: The Origin Story You Didn’t Know,” *Sesi Magazine*, September 2022, <https://sesimag.com/2022/09/19/black-girl-magic-the-origin-story/>. Also see: Dexter Thomas, “Why everyone’s saying ‘Black Girls are Magic,’” *LA Times*, September 2015, <https://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-nn-everyones-saying-black-girls-are-magic-20150909-htmlstory.html>.

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