

INTENTIONAL REPRESENTATION GUIDE

BLACK WOMEN & FEMMES

PROGRAMMING. WRITERS.

**Because the stories we tell greatly influence
how we view one another in the real world.**

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TROPES TO AVOID

THE ORIGINALS

The Jezebel
The Mammy
The Sapphire

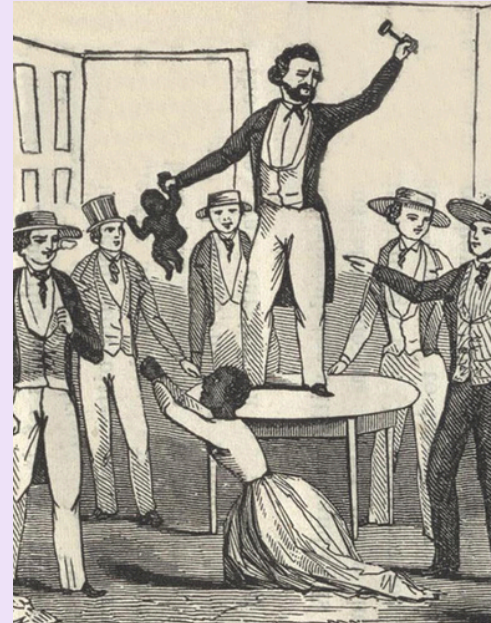
MODERN ITERATIONS

The Welfare Queen
The Magical Negro
The Angry Black Woman

THE JEZEBEL – ORIGINAL

NO MORALS. SEDUCTIVE. LUBRICIOUS.

The archetype of the Jezebel was a ploy to deem Black women's bodies as not our own and was created to justify the forced public exposure of Black women at slave auctions as well as their assault by white plantation owners. The power of this controlling image resides in the fact that one need not be lascivious to be regarded as a Jezebel. As an attorney and Harvard graduate, Michelle Obama does not fit the Jezebel archetype by any means and yet news outlets have referred to her as Obama's "Baby Mama," implying a promiscuity she doesn't exemplify.



WELFARE QUEEN – MODERN

LAZY. MATERIALISTIC. LIARS. BAD W/MONEY.

This idea began in the 60s even though men were the majority of welfare abusers. The trope gained traction in the mid-70s and was an important facet of welfare discourse and reform, resulting in the defunding of welfare programs. Stories that portray deadbeat Black mothers who scam the system play into this negative stereotype which has real world consequences. For example, the idea Black people are scheming makes it harder for Black entrepreneurs to gain funding.

THE MAMMY – ORIGINAL

LOYAL. SUBSERVIENT. SATISFIED IN HER ROLE.

After slavery, the Jezebel had to be reimagined because she was now a threat to the structure of the white family. Hence, the Mammy was created. The Mammy is subservient and content as the caretaker of the white family and their household which offers a non-threatening relationship between Black women and white folks. But the Mammy is a myth – Black women were not happy as servants and there are many records of their attempts to escape their circumstances.



MAGICAL NEGRO – MODERN

DEVOTED. SELFLESS. AIDS THE WHITE LEAD.

The Magical Negro is a character, usually a sidekick to the white lead, who provides insight or uses their otherworldly abilities to aid the lead. They may help them with their personal growth or they might support them in achieving an external objective. The Magical Negro has no goals of her own and often dies or fades to the background after their purpose of helping the white character is complete.

THE SAPPHIRE – ORIGINAL

EMASCULATING. BOSSY. LOUD. OVERBEARING.

This archetype was first named in the TV series *Amos n' Andy* and was created at the beginning of Abolition when white supremacy was under threat for the first time. The Sapphire is used to make Black women's anger at our own oppression seem dangerous or funny and shames us for expressing frustration about our circumstances. Put simply, it is a way to punish Black women for not adhering to the Mammy trope.



ANGRY BLACK WOMAN

ANGRY. LOUD. IRRATIONAL. SASSY.

The Angry Black Woman is a modern carbon copy of The Sapphire and is used more and more as the default framework for Black women and femme characterizations.

Of the three, this trope is the least studied. Melissa Harris-Perry explains that this is because it is widely accepted as true, which is a testament to the power of representation to shape how we view one another and ourselves.



WHY DO THESE TROPES PERSIST?

MISOGYNOIR

Activist/scholar Moya Bailey coined the term *misogynoir* to convey how anti-Blackness and misogyny conjoin and cause harm to Black women and femmes, particularly via visual representations in the media. Even when Black women and femmes remain calm, they can be perceived as aggressive.

THE WHITE GAZE

The white gaze devalues Black women and femmes and is a way of perceiving the world that “distorts how Black women are seen.” Melissa Harris-Perry called this the *crooked room*: when Black women are seen via the white gaze, it’s like trying to sit upright when the chair and room are at a tilt.



ALTERNATIVE CHARACTERIZATIONS

Black love and tenderness toward Black women. Black love is humanizing whereas sexualization plays into tropes. Entman and Rojecki's analysis of media "suggests that advertisers...find it more palatable to show Blacks being sexy than acting romantic." Stories of Black joy and Black love are an important way to rebalance these harmful narratives.

Fully realized characters that grow and change. Characters that have a purpose outside of aiding the white lead are necessary in order for audiences to empathize and feel a sense of connection. These characters are complex with struggles and goals - universal portrayals that represent an authentic human experience.



Resources

The Black Image in the White Mind by Andrew Rojecki and Robert Entman

White Tears/Brown Scars: How White Feminism Betrays Women of Color by Ruby Hamad

Sister Citizen by Melissa Harris-Perry

“But She’s Not Black!”: Viewer Interpretations of “Angry Black Women” on Prime Time TV by Philip Krestedemas

Black Lives Matter Movement Had Significant Impact on Black Entrepreneurs’ Crowdfunding Efforts by Byran Luhn

The Sapphire Caricature by David Pilgrim

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