

The Power of Anger

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Abstract: This Senior Project is about the angry black women stereotype and how women of color engage with and resist this stereotype to their advantage. I want to explain to people why women of color are overwhelmingly portrayed in film and television as having an angry inner personality. Within this paper I will be focusing on two powerful black females in the media industry, Taraji P. Henson and Mary J. Blige, and how they have to sacrifice blood, sweat, and tears in order to get to where they are within their lifestyle. Both actresses have in recent years have selected roles playing assertive and vengeful characters not because they earn them the best wages or the most prestige, but because these characters are unapologetically black and know their worth. My main objective for this project is to show that women of color can identify in different ways with these characters, as they offer a way for black women's pain and sacrifice to be acknowledged. This paper will explain how for these characters, being strongly passionate about something can cause you to make tough decisions you may not want to make, just to protect your own community from trauma and harm. I will also examine what critics and actors have to say about how women of color think and more when pursuing this specific role.

As a black female you're tired of hearing, "You speak so proper, you're beautiful for a black girl," and the more extreme "here comes the angry black women," This latter trope—of the "angry black woman"—continues to be portrayed across popular film and television today even in projects that are led by black directors and showrunners. The following films and shows that will be spoken and examined on are: *Empire* (Fox, 2015–2020), *Power Book 2: Ghost* (Starz, 2020–), *I Can Do Bad All By Myself* (Terry Perry, 2009), and *Acrimony* (Tyler Perry, 2018). I will look deeper into the critical point of view and try to understand how the "violence" of a woman of color can be both empowering and disempowering for actors and audiences. I am specifically interested in how these portrayals of violent women of color can challenge male gaze and possibly reflect the oppositional gaze. I will also address how popular critics frame these portrayals for popular audiences in ways that do or do not acknowledge the risk of stereotyping. As scholar Norma Miriam Schulman notes, "Appropriating a language of stereotypes in order to undermine the dominant order is an age-old device employed by persecuted groups [like filmmakers of color] to subvert the status quo" ("Laughing Across the Color Barrier"). I will examine how these recent films and television shows reframe the stereotype of the violent woman of color to invite new understandings of women of color's agency.

The first show is called *Empire*, which was produced by the acclaimed director Lee Daniels. *Empire* is based on an up and coming hip-hop artist who goes by the name of Lucious Lyon (Terrence Howard). Lucious is now the CEO of Empire Entertainment however, he was originally on the corner rapping with his friends while also slinging dope. He later met a beautiful young girl named Cookie (Taraji P Henson), who eventually became his wife and the mother of his three boys: Andre (Trai Byers), Jamal (Jussie Smollett), and Hakeem (Bryshere Y.

Gray). While Cookie was in jail for seventeen years, she was beaten and threatened by the inmates and guards, which eventually caused her to lose who she was. During all this, Lucious was still working on his music and hiding behind a mask instead of facing his own regrets in life. Lucious let Cookie rot in prison; he eventually stopped going to visit her which led her to think she wasn't good enough for him. Her reappearance caused complicated situations to occur within the family due to her taking responsibility for the drug running career. I am interested in how these family dynamics and maternal duties are significant to Cookie's portrayal as an 'angry black woman'. As I will discuss, these family obligations and maternal sacrifices are central to contemporary framings of black women and women of color's anger in popular culture.

The next show I will focus on is *Power* which was co-executive produced by Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson. *Power Book 2: Ghost* is about Tariq St. Patrick is on his own and now has to divide his time between school and hustling to pay for his mother's defence attorney. When he runs out of options, Tariq turns to a familiar drug game. The character we will focus on will be Monet (Mary J. Blige). However, when it comes to the series *Empire*, we will be focusing on Cookie Lyon. Both of these three women have a few things in common: they both have suffered major backlash due to their husbands' violent crimes, they hold it down for the ones they love and care about, but most importantly, they are both mothers who are trying to support their children the best way they can. I want to dive deep into the world of black women and hopefully, explain the struggles and hardships women of color have to go through in order to fit in somewhere, or just flat out survive.

To understand how the angry black woman stereotype has been elaborated on by black actresses across television and film, I will also examine two recent films directed by Tyler Perry starring Taraji P. Henson. The first film, *Acrimony* (2018) focuses on the suffering and anger that

was buried deep inside of an black woman, which is seen in the main character, played by Henson named Melinda Gayle. We meet Melinda as a teenager, and see her fall in love for the first time with a young entrepreneur named Robert (Lyriq Bent). Putting her dreams on hold, Melinda decides to mold herself into everything he wanted her to be, she even went against the wishes of her sisters and the final will and testament of her mother. Melinda performs a number of sacrifices for Robert to support his grandiose dream of being a rich inventor; she even believes and puts up with his actions when he's in the wrong. Yet we soon learn, despite everything she has done for him, another woman has been reaping the lavish rewards. Therefore, Melinda's betrayal leads her to perform a series of rage-filled acts of revenge, turning her into almost a villain in a horror movie. In contrast, the film *I Can Do Bad By Myself*, directed also by Tyler Perry, uses the character of Madea (Tyler Perry) as a foil for April (Taraji P. Henson)'s emotional growth and self-acceptance, Madea is able to use stereotypes of black people and turn it into comedy. As the movie begins, Madea catches three young children who are raiding her home in order to pay for food. But, since they're trespassing, she took matters into her own hands and dropped them off at their only relative's house: Aunt April. April is a nightclub singer who leeches off her married boyfriend, who wants nothing to do with the children. However, once a Colombian immigrant by the name of Sandino (Adam Rodriguez) moves into the neighborhood, April begins to realize that life may hold more possibilities. In this film Taraji P. Henson's performance as an 'angry black woman' is used to address cycles of abuse and trauma that are experienced intergenerationally.

Many young black females have been looked down upon, not only because of their skin tone, but, because of their sex as well. Black women have been taken advantage of not only sexually but, mentally and physically because of their skin color. In the article "Women in Film:

African Americans and Popular Culture,” Ingrid Banks explains the alienation African American women experience when they view black characters on-screen, since these characters’ actions are often dehumanizing and disrespectful. The media industry is a system in which it dehumanizes people of color into objects or animals, whether intentionally and unintentionally. It’s established as a “norm.” Women of color have been overlooked by their own white colleagues because of their skin color even when their work ethics show they're the best out of the whole bunch. As I continue, I will look deeper into how women of color are perceived as violent or forceful through the critical world. My main focus is Cultural Studies and Reception Theory, by comparing and contrasting popular critic reviews. In addition, the audience has some agency in interpreting and deciding what they want to see and don’t want to see on the screen, and so scholars must examine the ways that viewers critically interpret these popular media portray women of color. In addition to comparing and contrasting popular critic reviews, I want to critique how these portrayals of the angry black women serve the economic interests of mainstream media productions by focusing on limiting spectacular portrayals of black women that result in higher Nielsen ratings and exploitative sponsorships that only dehumanize women of color.

A number of scholars have examined how the stereotype of the angry black woman in particular circulates in popular culture. Television scholar Kimberly Springer notes in contemporary television, “the angry black woman as a stock television character, the ‘mouthy harpy’ who is a popular fixture on reality TV. Stereotypes, which portray a narrow, flattened, dehumanizing focus of singular, repeated, images, are dialectics activated by the portrayal of what they are not.” Importantly, Springer explains how the ‘angry black woman’ stereotype gains traction when framed by romantic or familiar struggles with black men via the trope of the

“no-good black man.” Yet she explains the most significant foil for the angry black woman in popular culture is “the virtuous, innocent, and victimized White woman.” While white women characters are not prominent in the shows and films I discuss, my examination of the interviews and critical discussions of black actresses' decisions to play these assertive and angry characters shows that they are very aware of the double-standards they face when compared to white actresses.

Feminist and black media scholars point to the ways in which today's media which includes: television, newspapers, and magazines are primarily controlled by the interests of rich white men. These men have their perceptions of truths, as well propagandas, which are used to establish certain ideologies as “facts” for the masses. The article “Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls” states, “On prime-time television, girls can watch fashion shows in which models are made to resemble little girls wearing sexy lingerie,” and this focus on sexuality is purposely done to gain more viewers and more revenue. Having models wear lingerie in front of millions of people on television may say they're comfortable with their own bodies, however, they need to know that they may also be perceived as sex objects. At a young age, girls are connected with fashion and television portrayals which can serve as another form of women's erosion of humanity. Black women in particular, continue to get casted away and or dehumanized on a daily basis. Between various male dominated industries: business, media, politics, relationships, etc; black women as a whole are considered to be less than another, not only with the white man, but their white female counterparts. This is discussed in the article, “A Monstrous Femininity,” it examines how black women are perceived as not being capable of dominating and being assertive in the same way as white women. The only thing women of color are good for is obeying, being invisible, or even allowing people to call them “freaks” and

“monsters.” White males selfishly don’t share the wealth, power, and or respect with other individuals; let alone the individuals who are lower on the food chain than them, and folks wonder why people of color hold so much anger.

Stereotypical expressions of black women’s anger and emotion is linked to representations of black communities during the period of slavery. When black people lost their identity and knowledge of understanding who they were, it caused them to comply and accept everything that was being done and said to them. For example, children were taken away from their mothers’ and black women were forced to take care of the white children as if they were their own. Which led to the stereotype of the black “mammy”, she had to live with taking care of a family that’s not even her own. During slavery, black families were forcibly separated away from one another, therefore, a black women’s anger and emotion is cause from the dehumanizing and theft process of losing their children and innocence was repressed and displaced. Majority of the audiences value the TV creators are those that uphold interests of dominant society—defined by white middle/upper class interests. These interests also uphold the patriarchal views on how women are considered to be objects that are defined by their emotionality and consumption. This is evident in TV commercials tape into the insecurities of women, particularly black women. They advertise skin tone creams, hair relaxers, and make up to condone the hiding and masking of black women’s natural beauty. Being bombarded from all sides can make black women audiences believe her natural beauty isn’t adequate or sufficient enough in a white-dominated society. This may lead its black audience down a path of hatred and humiliation which may give them a reason to be angry in ways that can only reinforce the harmful aspects of the angry back woman stereotype.

Independent black filmmakers and artists have struggled to engage with the complexity of black women's emotional experiences and cultural representations in light of this history. Toni Cade Bambara writes of the need for filmmakers to construct an "empowered eye" to invite audiences to engage with this "disremembered" and repressed history of black women's emotion ("Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: *Daughters of the Dust* and the Black Independent Cinema Movement"). In her discussion of *Daughters of the Dust* (Julie Dash, US, 1991), Bambara writes that the film highlights black complexity by examining "the thematics of colonized terrain, family as liberated zone, women as source of value, and history as interpreted by Black people." Bambara does not discuss whether an "empowered eye" can be constructed outside of art cinema and in popular culture productions, but, I am focusing on four different popular media texts that were directed by people of color to see how the "empowered eye" is enabled or restricted in popular film and television.

Regardless even if the show/film is directed, produced, and screenplay by a person of color, key decision making is still left in the hands of majority white network executives. However, within each of these four examples, I'm addressing how the audience witnesses how black-produced films show women of color do not keep quiet. Which is another reason why they are considered to have the stereotype of the angry black women. Simply because they speak about what's on their mind and about how they feel. Stereotypes are widely held but fixed and oversimplified images or ideas of a particular type of person or thing. Banks touches on the idea of stereotypes and what black individuals had to put up with in order to be on the big screen, explaining how the idea of stereotypes are used in order to control or dominate a group of individuals. I am interested in how recent films and TV shows portray the angry black woman stereotype in some ways providing an "oppositional gaze" for viewers, defined by bell hooks as a

looking relation that involves the political rebellion and resistance against the repression of a black person's right to look. The way the angry black woman is portrayed in *Acrimony*, *I Can Do Bad All By Myself*, *Empire*, and *Power Book 2: Ghost* can be considered stereotypical. These productions may have different ties to the soap opera and melodrama, however, at certain points within scenes, they do provide a connection of identification for women of color audiences who are marginalized and casted away for being black.

Taraji P. Henson has discussed the humiliation she has experienced while working in a predominately white industry due to being a woman of color. She performs outstanding movement, emotion, and rhythm in her film, but yet, she doesn't get paid what she totally feels she deserves. Henson has been steadily acting for over a decade, with nearly three dozen projects under her belt, including her role in *Empire* and collaborations with Perry in *Acrimony* plus *I Can Do Bad All By Myself*. In the article "Taraji P. Henson Talks Importance of Being Paid What She 'Deserved' on Road to Walk of Fame Honor," she states, "Hollywood can be cheap. They love a great performance at a discount price ... IF they can get it. I always seemed to get respect, as far as work [went]. I just needed to get my money." Henson's experience of being underpaid for her work motivated her to take roles created by Tyler Perry that met her salary demands and her creative interests. When she told him she didn't get paid exactly what she hoped for in *Benjamin Button*, he told her what to go for and became 'the first person to pay me what I thought I deserved at the time,' Henson says. Tyler Perry allowed her to make and create her own decisions; he created a platform for Taraji at the time when no one else would. For a strong female of color who is dominating the acting industry, Henson feels that she shouldn't be limited to a certain pay grade due to her skin color. She is content with the respect she gets from Hollywood, but the "respect" she desires from Hollywood, is nothing compared to the luxury and

respect Mr. Perry gives her. Which is why she partnered with Tyler Perry Studios. After Tyler Perry gave Henson the platform she deserved, she now feels stronger and capable of saying the word “NO” when she feels the offer she’s presented with doesn’t suit or satisfy her needs.

Henson’s critical acclaim and partnership with Perry has enabled her to address the perceived limitations of the “angry black woman’s” role, which has played part as a double standard in Hollywood between black and white actresses. The industry has limited point of views for diverse audience’s thoughts and interests. In the article, “Taraji P. Henson Talks Importance of Being Paid What She 'Deserved' on Road to Walk of Fame Honor,” she explains “I’ve been told my entire career [that] black culture and black projects don’t sell well overseas... Then, all of a sudden, *Empire* is a major hit [there] because people started streaming it illegally; the people forced Fox to sell it abroad. That blew me away.” Henson expresses that she selects roles playing assertive and vengeful like Cookie not because they earn her the best wages or the most prestige, but because they are characters that are unapologetically black and know their worth.

Even though Henson has struggled with gaining the proper salary, she doesn’t get into character “just for the money.” She states, “I don’t do things just for checks,” adding, “my fans trust me too much, you know? You can have a great resume and not have the audience to back it up. I do” (“Taraji P. Henson Talks Importance of Being Paid What She 'Deserved' on Road to Walk of Fame Honor”). She continues to say, “For me, it’s important because my son, my mom, my grandmother, who is still alive and is 94, will be there.” It seems to me Henson isn’t only standing up for what she believes in for her benefit, but for her family’s benefit as well. She wanted to be successful not only for herself, but for those in and around her community. When Taraji P. Henson gets into a specific character; she doesn’t do it for herself but for those who look

like her. The work and entertainment she produces has given her the recognition for being a nominee for an Academy Award, three Emmy nominations plus a Golden Globe win.

Now, Mary J. Blige also has been able to turn the harsh stereotype of the angry black women into a positive outlet for young women around the world and continues to this day. This mysterious and dark aura that comes out of this sweet and innocent woman happens due to having to provide for her family, while keeping her family's reputation up to par. She has to keep up this front of being tough for her children; no mother, she does want her children to see her break down. For example, the article "Mary J. Blige Has Nothing to Prove Except to Herself," Blige describes how she has fashioned her and her viewers portrayal of Monet in *Power Book 2: Ghost*, she says,

"A combination of women trying to raise their families without men—not just queenpins, but single-parent[ing] mothers, women with that survival mentality. By any means necessary, doing what it takes to provide for their families. I know a lot of women like that, like my mother, my aunt, and friends."

The character Monet is a single mother due to her husband is locked up in prison for murder and drug charges. As Blige notes,

"It was easy to put this character into play, because I know what *Power* is about. I grew up in the inner city, in the projects. I've seen what it really is, and [producers Courtney A. Kemp and 50 Cent] have been so brilliant in showing it. I saw *Ghost* in front of my building growing up. I hung out with Monet. I knew Tasha" ("Mary J. Blige Has Nothing to Prove Except to Herself").

Ms. Blige has witnessed first hand the dark and disgusting struggles people of color go through; she is able to relate to her character simply because of her childhood and due to the way she

grew up. Her growing up in the projects helped her become this tough and ruthless individual we see on television today. The show's producers saw Blige as bringing the necessary background experience of inner city struggle to the series. Producer Courtney Kemp has explained that casting Blige as Monet "made it possible to write the character as 'a boss and a mother at the same time'" ("Mary J. Blige Has Nothing to Prove Except to Herself"). She continues to explain how every choice Blige made as an actor would be completely believable and truthful. In many ways, she is the soundtrack to her life. She is a survivor, an inspiration and an all-around superhero to Producer Courtney Kemp and millions of fans — especially women. She is a tremendous actress with a ton of physical presence and power.

Blige is overall a relatable character because she not only approached the role of Monet as an already famous recording artist, but many of her other roles as well. She not only remembers where she came from, but she uses that energy and power towards her advantage when she has to bring alter ego to life to be more than just an anti-hero for audiences, but for women viewers specifically. In another article, "Power Book II: Ghost: Mary J. Blige on Her Role as a 'Queenpin' Survivor in Sequel Series," Kemp states "We're talking about different kinds of power (this season). The power of a mother's love and the power of a son's devotion; the power of the state; the power of the federal government to regulate our behavior; the power of the ivory tower of academia; the power of sex and sexuality; the power of family." Mary J, Blige discusses this kind of power she holds inside of her and how the role of the character, Monet allows her to make them visible. In addition, she says,

"What made this role special to me is not just that she's a queenpin and she's a powerful woman. She is a survivor, a single mother trying to raise her children, a woman who survives and lives in a male-dominated world and male-dominated business. She has to

do it alone now and she knows how, because she was the one showing (her husband) how to do it.” (“Power Book II: Ghost: Mary J. Blige on Her Role as a 'Queenpin' Survivor in Sequel Series”).

As a female, being able to survive and gain respect from the streets in a male dominated “industry” gives her the ability to show people that a woman can do anything a man can do, especially a woman of color. As long as she puts her mind to something, it can be done. Blige feels women of color are always ahead of the game because of their ability to deal with so much pressure. Such as being a caretaker, a mother, the help, an entertainer and more.

Furthermore, Blige’s and Kemp’s comments about Monet’s anger and assertiveness stemming from her sacrifices as a mother reflects how these shows and films are frequently tied to the conventions of the woman-focused melodrama. Patricia White and Timothy Corrigan state that “one or more women are typically at the center of melodrama, illustrating how historically women have been excluded from or limited in their access to public powers of expression” (*The Film Experience: An Introduction*). Mary J. Blige and Taraji P. Henson both choose roles centered around conflicts within their films and shows, and their characters' sacrifices and emotional struggles have a melodramatic quality. Even when the character being played is presented as a vengeful villain, like Melinda in *Acrimony*, critics describe these characters’ through references of melodrama. This can be seen in the article, “Tyler Perry’s 'Acrimony': Taraji P. Henson's Fierce Fury, Unleashed,” which states,

“With her captivating, wide-set eyes, Henson embodies a modern Bette Davis, playing women who are fierce, vulnerable, self-possessed but also fragile. In *Acrimony*, she stars as Melinda, a sweet, understanding woman with endless reserves of patience ... until she

gets mad. Her anger is her super power, giving her outlandish strength and skill. It takes a lot to unleash it, but when it gets going, you better get out of the way.”

The comparison to Bette Davis here emphasizes how Taraji P. Henson is not only able to play vulnerable roles when she needs to, but she’s also able to give someone a stare down. Henson’s character undergoes a lot of suffering at the hands of her family and her lover, but she’s able to stand and speak up for herself when she feels something isn’t right. Witnessing someone on the screen who looks like you doing all the things society says “you can’t do”, gives you the power and encouragement to turn the stereotype of “the angry black women” into something positive. Patrice Bowman further notes that in recent TV shows geared toward women and made by women, such as those created by Shonda Rhimes, the angry black women that we see “aren't quite anti heroes like those white male counterparts, but they're not sweetly benign racial tokens either. They're more than smiling nurses, sassy best friends, or reality show fame-seekers. Being angry doesn't make them a stereotype—it makes them human” (“Rising Above the ‘Angry Black Woman’”).

Bambi Haggins explains the suffering of black woman characters portrayed in films and television shows; he breaks down why they’re seen to be shady or angry (“Shady Is The New Black”). Many black women audiences in particular may identify and find value in the resonances Haggins mentions, but what is interesting about these films/shows is how they portray suffering to challenge notions of black women as solely victims who become better and greater and what’s to come. Bowman goes on to note,

“When society reduces blacks into a perpetually angry people, it becomes too easy to view blacks as threats who must be contained and punished when they appear as anything but docile. When this discontent is rooted in sociopolitical issues, some can interpret that

as yet another instance of blacks who are unable to stop ‘complaining’ about the injustices that still exist in our society. No wonder Obama has to keep calm all of the time” (“Rising Above the ‘Angry Black Woman’”).

It’s interesting because characters have the luxury of having their fans still by their side when their true colors begin to show. However, in real life society doesn’t believe in chance; three strikes and you’re out. Society automatically writes their views on you without you having to even say a word. It is important to acknowledge the significance of the dramatic rollercoaster *Empire* and *Power Book 2: Ghost* came with while creating an alternative portrayal of the ‘angry black woman’ for television. This specific stereotype has been forcefully used in reality television programs that targeted the black audience, for example, *Love & Hip Hop*, *Basketball Wives*, and more. Studies show that seeing these images can have an effect on black women's self-image, especially black little girls. When asked about what descriptors they'd use to describe the way black women are depicted on reality TV, 53 percent of black women and 37 percent of the white women said ‘argumentative.’ These scripted TV drama shows offer perceptions of a black woman's anger that are not necessarily negative or harmful for black women’s self-image, but rather offer a way of engaging an “oppositional gaze” that can acknowledge injustice without having to follow respectability politics.

Blige and Henson have noted that they have opted to play these characters because they establish a kind of relatable common ground for women audiences looking to have their frustrations and experiences of injustice validated. In “Taraji P. Henson Talks Importance of Being Paid What She 'Deserved' on Road to Walk of Fame Honor,” Henson explains, “I love that we attack those issues head-on and don’t make them pretty in *Empire*. In life, they’re not.” She continues to explain how much skill and commitment it takes to play such roles is not

acknowledged as extensively as similar roles played by white actresses. This same article goes on to explain how “Henson notes that ‘it’s emotionally draining to have to deal with that, [but] art is definitely a healing tool. You can change lives [and] hearts through art. You can change people’s perspective and perception of different cultures. We’re doing what we’re supposed to be doing’” (“Taraji P. Henson Talks Importance of Being Paid What She 'Deserved' on Road to Walk of Fame Honor”). The films and tv shows where the “angry black woman” is not shown to be a victim, but someone capable of larger systems of injustice—mental health institutions, the justice system, the prison system—and cycles of abuse.

As we look deeper into the films and the reasoning behind the actions and stereotypes shown on-screen, we can see how anger can address black women’s unique sacrifices and experiences of trauma. In the film, *I Can Do Bad All By Myself*, it demonstrates to its viewers what it's like to have an emotional toll hanging from your shoulders. April’s (Taraji P. Henson) anger is linked to her maternal role as a mother causes her to reminisce on traumatizing and painful memories from her childhood. April is first introduced to her sisters’ three kids because they tried to steal from Madea’s (Tyler Perry) home. April opens the door with a peach shirt and grey pants while also wearing a purple robe and scarf on her head. She is still in bed because she works at night as a singer at a club. It’s bright outside but the street is wet. The three children are mixed with emotions: happiness, fear, and anger. The oldest (Sister) is wearing a brown jacket and jeans with her hair pulled back, the middle (older brother) is wearing a blue hood, red shirt with a smile on his face, the youngest (little brother) is wearing a brown jacket and orange shirt. Madea is wearing a pink cardigan with a flannel shirt holding her purse while her tan old school car sits out front. The camera angles have both close ups and over the shoulders. This scene shows how Madea cares for the children in some way. Even though she didn't physically take

care of the children throughout the film, she still showed the children what it means to have tough love. Madea demanded the proper respect even if April's niece and nephew's weren't her own

Another scene to demonstrate a black woman juggling multiple things at once is seen when April dropped the children off at Madea's house because she had to go to work. Madea's home has a gloomy feeling with different flannel wallpaper. This scene is basically showing how different people handle/discipline children. We witness Taraji contemplate whether or not she leaves the kids with Madea or not. The oldest claims she's not scared of Madea but Madea will fix her attitude right up. The oldest (Jennifer) tries to protect her brothers from Madea but the reason Madea acts this way is because she's old school and she demands respect. The three children are wearing the same outfits because they don't have an extra set of clothes; no one can find their mother. While Madea is wearing her bedtime attire (a long shirt dress with different foods and designs on it). This scene has a lot of cuts back and forth between the characters. There are both medium and close up shots of the actors, with one over the shoulder shot.

There is a scene where April embodies the stereotype of the "angry black woman" involving a confrontation with her "boyfriend". Ever since the children came to live with April the guy sleeping with her has been trying to not only get her to throw them out onto the street, but he also tried to have sexual encounters with her niece, Jennifer. Since April went through this intense trauma, she knew saw in Jennifer's eyes she was terrified and that he actually tried to come onto her.... During this scene everyone is in their pajamas except April and the contractor because she's just now coming home from her night shift and he's fixing up the house. During this scene Taraji tells the guy to go upstairs and take a shower. She makes it seem as though she believes her boyfriend over her niece, until we are thrown into the bathroom with the two

characters. April gives the guy the benefit of the doubt and asks him again what happened just to see if he'll lie again instead of telling the truth. As this is all going down Taraji is in her performance dress that is black and the man she's seeing is butt naked relaxing in the tub. The bathroom is bright and lively. The floor is white with tiles and the tub is also white but with legs. April disappears and reappears with a radio in her hand, she plugs it in and turns on some peaceful music just before interrogating the guy again. He lied to her face again which brought back memories of her step father lying to her mother, so when he yelled to put the radio down, she dropped into the water without any remorse. Not caring if he gets electrocuted or not. The contractor dressed in his work clothes comes into the bathroom and takes April out of the room to calm her down and tells the guy he needs to pack his things and leave. The viewers were able to feel the same pain April is feeling at that moment; even if they haven't been in the same position. I find it interesting when the scene starts because it is all dark and scary until the bathroom scene when Taraji is about to seriously hurt the guy. This scene shows this display of anger and assertiveness are not just for show, but stems from the necessary sacrifices black women have to make in order to protect theirs. Just being a human being, you're able to feel the sorrows that call out which cause your stomach to turn into knots when hearing about this experience occurring to someone.

In the next film, *Acrimony*, Melinda's anger is further linked to the sacrifices of motherhood and cycles of abuse is when we see a flashback to a younger Melinda sitting in her jeep outside Robert's RV early in their relationship. This scene takes place outside where it was dark, the only lights there were coming from Melinda's car headlights. The RV is surrounded by a mini wood area with other homes, but no one came outside to check on the situation. The audience is shown a medium shot of Melinda debating in the car to herself. As soon as she

decides to turn around, Taraji catches her boyfriend at the time cheating on another female after he goes MIA when she buys him a car. We see an over the shoulder shot happening plus a wide shot of Melinda driving her truck into Robert's home. She then smashes into his RV several times, gets out and throws a brick through his car window. The car was black with a tan drop top, the one she recently bought for him. In this scene everyone is yelling and screaming at one another, that no one realized Melinda drove her body so hard into the RV that she fractured her ovaries. A wide shot of Robert holding Melinda back as she's ranting, before another medium wide when Melinda passed out into Robert's arms. This scene created Melinda to be both a vengeful character who will do anything to punish Robert for cheating and an unfortunate character because she is prevented from having children in the future.

As the film begins to play out, we learn that Melinda's anger stems from her tensions with her family and the failure to live a fulfilling life as a wife and mother. The causes for Melinda's anger is addressed in a more critical light during a significant scene. Which is when Melinda is speaking with her therapist/counselor about what Robert put her through and the reason on why she acts the way she does. The therapist's office has a dull and gloomy feeling; the decor is nothing but grey, white, and brown. There are also plants around the room to liven the atmosphere up. It is raining outside of the therapist's window and you see rain pouring down the windows causing the audience an uncomfortable feeling and fidgety. You never see the therapist's face which creates a mystery in the viewer's mind because you're wondering who Taraji is speaking with, but you do hear the sound of her voice. You know someone is there in the room with a female, but what female exactly? The main character, Melinda, is smoking a cigarette in a stressful position; ash falls on the floor. While she is speaking and trying to work through her feelings, the therapist is taking down notes which causes Melinda to be hostile with

her. As she's in the office, she explains to the counselor the story of how Robert and her met, and how their life came about. As Melinda was speaking she told the counselor, "I was strong when he needed me to be. I was weak when he needed me to be." She even told her "Whenever a black woman gets mad she's a stereotype..." As she sits there in her all black outfit smoking a cigarette, she says she's tired of it all. Meaning, people never ask or wonder why a black woman is angry. They just look at the fact of her hostility and anger. The camera angle position never changes during the intervention, just the depth of the camera does. As the explanation or story gets more intense the camera zooms closer toward the main character's face. However, when the scene is relaxed, the audience is shown either a wide shot or medium shot of Taraji sitting down on the couch including everything else around her.

In another scene, the audience continues to witness the reasoning for Melinda's anger, which is caused by the loss of her mother's home and the sacrifice made in order to keep their heads above water. The house is dimly lit with dark coloring all around. It's an old but sturdy home, filled with childhood memories. Again, she is smoking a cigarette in pain. She is wearing a purple top with black slacks and her sisters and brother-in-laws are wearing a black shirt with khakis at the bottom. They are all in their work attire except Robert, who is wearing a suit and tie holding his battery. They're all sitting around waiting for Robert to arrive back from his adventure with trying to sell his invention once again. The camera angling had close ups of Melinda's and Robert's facial expressions, medium shots of body posture and items around them, over the shoulder shots of the characters' facial expressions. This is the scene when Melinda and Robert are having a serious conversation about getting a divorce because of the selfish stunt he pulled with costing their family one of their best clients. Melinda is sitting in a comfortable chair holding back tears breaking down to her husband why she's done with him. Her facial expression

is calm while she sits in a brown red chair; she is physically no longer here. That's how upset and betrayed she feels. She explains to Robert she is officially done with him. On the side of the chair she's sitting in, is all of Robert's things. He says he's not leaving, but the look in Melinda's eyes and body language said otherwise. When she heard "I'm not leaving" come out his mouth she leaned towards him and said, "You know me. You know I can be the m**f** devil" while she stared into his eyes deeply. While this stare down in part contributes to certain stereotypes of the "angry black woman," it also reflects an oppositional gaze. Bell hooks writes, "By courageously looking, [black women have] declared: 'Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality'" ("The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators"). Melinda's claim that she can be a "devil" is one way she is reclaiming and changing the power dynamic in the relationship. In addition, the film highlights her assertive gazing as one way of rebelling against being seen as a powerless victim. As Melinda becomes more ruthless in her plans to get revenge on Robert, she appears more and more spectacular and glamorous in her femininity in ways that invite an objectifying male gaze. In the final scene, we see Malinda attack Robert and his new fiance on their yacht. Melinda is wearing a couture gown and has been beautifully dolled up; she is on a mission to exact her revenge. We see her glamorous appearance break down as she chases Robert on the boat and soon becomes covered in blood. Melinda fails at succeeding her goal, causing her to be accidentally drowned by the anchor. While she is floating to the bottom of the ocean, she has an angelic quality as we see her sinks, with her beautiful gown floating around her.

This tension between oppositional gazing and the objectifying male gaze in these characters' glamorous transformations is paralleled in the shows *Empire* and *Power Book 2: Ghost*. Both these series draw on the emotional spectacles seen in soap operas, but they focus on

glamorous and assertive black women to portray the complex experiences of motherhood in communities that are criminalized.

As we look deeper into the assertive black women portrayal, we can see its impact on two dramatic shows: *Empire* and *Power Book 2: Ghost*. The viewers are able to witness a few similarities and differences within soap operas that occur in today's television episode, while still continuing to be diverse in its own way. For example, the majority of the people who watch soap operas are females, however, over the years things have changed and now both genders watch shows like these. But, the connotational femininity of the genre remains overwhelming, as Charlotte Brunson outlines in "The Role of Soap Opera in the Development of Feminist Television Scholarship." The shows *Empire* and *Power Book 2* allow us to see the pleasing and displeasing emotional connection between each character; no matter if it's positive or negative. In addition, the viewers are always following the main characters within each of the episodes. In "The Role of Soap Opera in the Development of Feminist Television Scholarship," on page 58 it states, "In short, women have been targeted by the makers of soap opera, women have been investigated as the viewers of soap opera, and the genre is widely and popularly believed to be feminine, despite stubborn evidence that it is not only women who watch." Women, specifically women of color, barely see anyone who looks like them on screen, which means soap operas are the only way for them to relate and feel whole once more. Both of these television programs embrace women of color in a way other shows cause controversy. These shows show the reason why the mother does what they do, while also showing the emotional strain she would go through in order to protect and keep her young safe.

On the other hand, these programs are different from soap operas because when earlier soap operas were first starting off, they were strongly dependent on the idea of using stereotypes

and myths in order to characterize the individual they're creating. As Brunson discusses, he earlier Soap Opera writing also was a representation of women being dominated by one or two figures: being a housewife vs. being a sex object. I find this interesting because even though *Empire* and *Power Book 2* are considered "soap operas," these shows do not view these women as property, but it shows how powerful and strong they and you are as an individual of color. Unlike earlier soap operas, these two programs do not brainwash women into thinking they're nothing but objects and that all they're good for is being a housewife. *Empire* and *Power Book 2* having strong women of color representations: Taraji P. Henson and Mary J. Blige representing single mothers, while still co-parent with their ex-husband, demonstrates how tough and dedicated she can be. She'll never give up no matter what the situation is. I find it amazing and delightful to see women of color on screen using stereotypes directed towards them to their own advantage. The article, "The Role of Soap Opera in the Development of Feminist Television Scholarship," on page 61 states,

"It offers women a validation and celebration of those interests and concerns which are seen as properly their's within the social world they inhabit. Soap opera may be the opium of masses of women, but, like religion, it may also be, if not "the sign of the oppressed", yet a context in which women can ambiguously express both good humoured acceptance of their oppression and recognition of that oppression, and some equally good humoured protest against it."

This means that women have been given a special outlet to express themselves as they see. Soap Operas basically let women know it's okay to be accepted and different in their own way.

In *Empire*, we see the struggles black women face as mothers' in a community that is disproportionately targeted for incarceration. When we first meet Cookie in season 1 episode 1, she is being released from prison. We have a pan down of a medium close shot of cookie in the same clothes she got locked up in (leopard print dress, big fur white coat, hair pulled back in a high ponytail). As one of the guards opened the gate for her there is a close up shot of her facial expression while she's behind the gate her eyes look scared but when she gets on the other side of the gate this look of revenge and empowerment appears on her face. Later in the episode, Cookie barges into the company she risked her life for to find the father of her children, Lucious, married to another female. (This female is lighter than her and skinnier than her.) Cookie is wearing a hat that creates a small shadow around her face giving her that closed off feeling. Simply because she felt like Luscious forgot about her, and left her to rot . She's here to get half her company back simply because she helped start the company up with her \$1400. Cookie starts to get upset because Lucious isn't giving her credit since she's been locked up for 17 years and hasn't helped put extra money towards the company. During this interaction, she becomes hostile because she gave up her life, her time with her sons to protect this man just for him to say ill give you chump change

Though Cookie's anger and vengefulness is directed toward her ex-husband Lucious, we learn that even behind bars we learned that she was trying to be there for her children the best she can/ In the first episode we see Cookie a heart to heart with her son Jamal because he gets picked on a lot. He's basically trying to figure out who he is as a person, but his mother already knows who he is. Within this scene there is a flashback (11:32-12:39) when Jamal goes with his father in prison to see his mother. Cookie looks happy to see them both however Luscious didn't come to see her. When young Jamal asks "when she was coming out" she reasoned "I told you to

stop asking me that” and then quickly changed the subject with a smile. In this flashback we see the strain that Cookie has experienced in her role as a mother due to her time in jail. Yet Cookie feels a closeness to Jamal, as he has been an outsider to the family in part because of his identity as a gay man. In another flashback we see Cookie and Luscious are sitting around in their home with their extended family members when Jamal comes downstairs wearing feminine wear. The quality of the camera is an old picture color with a lot of medium shots to show the audience the facial expressions and body language. Luscious is disappointed with what he sees so he rushes towards Jamal and grabs him up hard and takes him outside. From this flashback we learn that Cookie always knew Jamal was different and it never bothered her, she was holding Hakeem at the time so she rushed to hand Hakeem to her sister as she ran after Luscious to protect her baby.

Cookie’s reunion with Hakeem further emphasizes her sacrifices as a mother and their ties to her feelings of anger and violence. After she is released from jail Cookie is snooping around his things trying to see the type of person Hakeem become without her in his life. And as all this is going down, she has an aggressive look on her face because she just came from having an encounter with Luscious’s new wife. Hakeem isn’t really happy with her just popping up at his home and telling him what to do. He has about 1 percent of respect for her because he feels like she just disappeared. However, she begins to explain how much she loves him and that everything she did was for him and his brothers, but he disrespected her by saying, “You want a medal b****?” Cookie wasn’t having that, she took a pause to basically contemplate on what she should do, and so she beat him with the same broom he was cleaning up his hair with, The anger displayed here is meant as a form of disciplining and not as a form of abuse, as Cookie states while she puts down the broom down she said “what I want is some respect.” There was a close up shot of Cookie hitting him with the broom and she looks like she was crying because it’s like

she never has the chance to see him walk and grow up due to stupid reasons that she thought were right simply because just like any child, a boy NEED his father in his life. And she's trying to apologize and write her wrongs but he's basically saying, "F-U".

Andre, Cookie's oldest son, has the strongest memories of Cookie as a mother and what she did in order for them to survive. Yet when he reunites with Cookie after her release from jail Andre is basically playing both sides simply because he wants the Empire company to be his, so he tells his mother how to get onto the board of Empire. Following Andre's plan, later in the episode we see Cookie enter the glass room meeting room where the Empire board is gathering, and she is wearing an animal print dress, with a puffy medium length fur coat, heels, and shades. As the meeting is going on she wants to board to know she was a part of the start of Empire, asserting her dominance by storming into the meeting room and demanding to know what they'll be speaking about. She even offers them cupcakes. In season 2, we see Cookie exact her revenge on Luscious while mending her relationship with her sons. In a scene in season 2 episode 1, we see Cookie still committed to speaking about injustices and disrespect, this time not just in her own experience, but in the experiences of the black community. Cookie dressed in an ape costume and was slowly dropped onto stage in a cage in order to make a point. She is making a statement about people of color and how we're treated like animals; society locks and cages us up as if we have no home training. She is explaining how American was built on the back of our brothers and sisters but were still treated unjustly. She starts to scream to encourage the crowd to stand up for black and brown people. She basically also is trying to tell the crowd to love the skin they're in. Yet Cookie is not fully free from Lucious' manipulations, since she still goes to visit Lucious in jail because the family is in danger. Even though they're not together anymore they still work together in order to protect their sons. Cookie's whole thing with what she does is not for her, but

for her children, and so even though she knows Lucious will disrespect her again, she cannot free herself of him because of her children. There is an irony that Cookie can speak out against the widespread injustice and disrespect that black communities face, and yet her role as a mother makes it impossible for her to leave her toxic relationship with Lucious. During later episodes within the season, we as the viewers witness the growth and maturity of Cookie Lyon. She went from depending on a man to becoming an independent black female who runs her own company, while still having a say about what happens at the original company, Empire.

In *Power Book 2: Ghost*, we first meet Monet when a party being hosted by Tariq St. Patrick (son of the drug dealer “Ghost”) gets out of hand. Monet tries to keep a fight from breaking out, and she asserts herself as a figure of power among these young men while wearing big hoop earrings, black leather jacket, jeans, and heels. She puts base in her voice to assert her dominance within the party and other the male testosterone, but one partygoer disrespects Monet by swinging on her child. We see Monet looking at the guy who swung on her son like she is out for revenge; it becomes clear she knows how the streets work, when someone doesn’t get their way the best way to take someone out is by getting a gun. The scene ends with her telling her oldest son to stay ready and to do what he has to do. This episode concludes with her oldest son killing the man who swung at Monet’s other son. This killed him in the staircase as she was returning home. Monet was waiting in the car for him until he got back from finishing the job. This shows no matter what your mother will ride or die for you, even if you decide to take the law into your own hands. Monet even wiped the blood splattered on him off his face and neck, showing that she is a caring mother even if she isn’t playing by the rules.

In the following episode, we see another way that Monet sacrifices for her children. Early in the episode we see her just finishing having sex with the police officer. She’s basically

explaining the only way she runs the streets is because of her husband's name, but she still wants her fun on the side. She chooses her affairs to secure protection or a connection with someone that her family needs. She's doing what she can in order to keep her family safe and off the police radar. Later on, the police officer she's sleeping with brings her a gift. But she doesn't want any mixed signals going around and begins to get hostile because she feels like the police office isn't giving her more than her husband in order to get out of the drug game. The cop brought her evidence that says the family member snitched but she already realized, she basically said his information intel is no good if it can't protect her and her family. In order to make sure she can trust him she gives him an ultimatum to find out information on Tariq or else.

For Monet, sex is a transaction that is used to protect her family; when it comes to her family, she upholds certain codes no matter the consequence. In this episode Monet is trying to see what she should do with a family member who snitched on their criminal enterprise. A code in the streets is to not be a snitch. Monet suspects her brother not only because he is suspicious but because of the inappropriate way he is looking at his niece, Diana Tejada (LaToya Tonodeo). Monet wasn't about to let a snitch back into the house let alone someone sexual assault her child. We see her calmly trying to teach her daughter about what goes on in the streets, and Monet is clearly trying to protect her daughter in ways that Monet herself was never protected as a young black woman. The character, Monet, has a calm head around her children but around other people is another story, especially because she's trying to run a well organized business. She gives orders, and when Monet learns her children have tried to make deals without telling her, we see her become angry at this disrespect toward her. In episode 3, we see Monet negotiate her power as a mother with the leadership role of her husband, Lorenzo Tejada, who has been incarcerated because of his crimes as a drug kingpin. Monet has to explain to her oldest son Cane

(Woody McClain), her middle child Dru (Lovell Adams-Gray) will be speaking with their connect. Their father, Lorezo Tejada (Berto Colon), believes the men of the family will run the family business best, therefore, he doesn't make a fuss when his daughter asks him if she could go to school. But, Monet tells Cane to follow him to make sure nothing happens to his brother, but he has to lay low.

She may listen and show respect to their father but he's in prison and she isn't so she's going to run the business the way she wants. She has to show some type of toughness with her children because they have to remember and realize that she is the one who has control over their wellbeing and is fighting for them to survive the violence within the streets. In this episode we see Monet again trying to keep the police officer away from investigating her children. The officer says he is trying to protect her but she has to lay low, but she can't because of her husband's demands. We see Monet struggle to navigate these different demands from the men in her life, and she ultimately changes the subject by becoming physically sexual with the officer. A mother would do and try anything in order to protect hers, and here we see Monet quite literally giving up her own chance of protection to keep her children safe in the only way she feels she can.

This episode is important because we also see Monet discuss her daughter Diana's future. Diana tells her mother she wants to go to college and play ball. But Monet warns Diana that she won't get to where she wants to go because she's a female. Monet understands she wants to have a life, but Monet wants Diana to understand this is a male's world. And the only way a male moves well though the world is because they have a strong woman behind them. Monet is having a serious conversation with her daughter about betraying the family, and tells her that blood is thicker than water. On the one hand Monet's role as head of the family makes her a powerful

figure, and it shows how in this series women are shown as capable of being leaders in their own right. On the other hand, Monet's discussion with Diana shows that her power as a woman is always being defined in relation to a male-dominated world, and so in many ways she sees Diana's ideals of being an athlete as naive ones that will actually trap her in a world where she will not have success. This exchange recalls the soap opera's role in highlighting women's "acceptance of their oppression and recognition of that oppression," but with *Power Book 2* these issues are presented in life and death terms of survival from both police and those in the drug trade.

In conclusion, the value in seeing oneself or someone who looks like you on screen, gives women of color more of an encouragement and authority. Seeing these two beautiful and talented individual women of color shows how stereotypes can be turned into something positive instead of disappointing; proves to be a powerful and authentic way of living. These two mothers have broken the stereotypical archetype of a single mother, and turned it into something honorable, all whilst in a male dominated industry. Women of color are human beings, too. No matter the size, shape, or structure women of color will always be discriminated against until a woman or person of color rises to the top of an industry and becomes a figurehead. People of color aren't scary or a threat to other individuals, so why make it seem as though they are?

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