



# The Evolution of the Black Woman

## To Those Who Came Before Me

“The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman, the most unprotected person in America is the Black woman, the most neglected person in America is the Black woman”, said the late, great Malcolm X in 1962. It is easy to say that women in general have suffered and been through many struggles, but when it comes to talking about and really acknowledging the struggles of the Black woman, they are mostly brushed off because of the many stereotypes that Black women are up against. Throughout history it has always been Black women against the world. They have been associated with many different forms of stereotypes such as the “Aunt Jemimah,” “Jezebel,” “Sapphire,” and “tragic mulatta,” just to name a few (Crenshaw, 1991; Davis, 2019; White, 1999).

Dominant western feminism had three waves: The first wave (1850s-1940s) focused on voting rights for women; the second wave (1960s-1980s) focused on women's liberation movement for equal legal and social rights; and the third wave (1990s-present) focuses on how women's lives are intersectional and shaped by multiple overlapping forces of oppression in addition to patriarchy (Cott, 1987). The dominant feminist movement signified that everyone should be treated equally. However Black women know that it was mainly for middle-class white women and separated to create Black feminism in the second wave. Black feminism in the second wave brought more attention to Black women's critiques of white women (Roth, 2003).

In this essay, I want to show how stereotypes persist and how their oppressive power continues to harm Black people over time. I will use a lens of critical Black feminist thought to show that for Black women there are still changes to be made, that we should all fight back against the stereotypes that are holding us back, and we can do this by starting with the "Mammy" because she is one of the earliest examples of a stereotype that continues to harm Black women today.

### Who Is the REAL Mammy?

The Mammy is a 100-year-old racist stereotype that started back during slavery and is still impacting Black women. It has perpetuated other stereotypes, like the angry Black woman, jezebel, and welfare mother just to name a few. Pilgrim (2012) writes, "The Mammy image served the political, social, and economic views and interests of the mainstream white America [...] The Mammy image was used to justify keeping Black women enslaved, suggesting that they were content and happy in this position." The Mammy is more than just an image or a thought, or even a product. She is a real person, but she isn't exactly who society thinks she is.

During slavery, the Mammy was used



*Figure 1.* Mammy Stereotype. From "Mammy Stereotype Image Gallery 02," by D. Pilgrim, 2012. (<https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/mammies/more/mammy-image-gallery-02.htm>).

as proof that Black women were contented and even happy with being a slave. "Her wide grin, laughter, and loyal servitude were offered as evidence of the 'humanity' of the institution of slavery" (Pilgrim, 2012, para. 2). The fictional Mammy is portrayed as an older woman, overweight and with very dark skin. Pilgrim describes her as a loyal, maternal, nonthreatening, obedient, and submissive caregiver, but independent and sassy towards others. She was devoted to her owners, and her main goal in life was to care for their needs. Some portrayals of the Mammy show

her with a family of her own, but her duties always came first. Mammy was portrayed as neglectful to her own family, due to her being very devoted to her white family. She treated her family horribly and had no friends who were also Black.

This Mammy was created by white southerners to redeem the relationships between Black women and white men within the slave society in response to the antislavery attack from the north during the antebellum period (Patton, 1993). What people don't know is that the REAL Mammy was the opposite. The house servants were usually young and skinny. They often had fair skin because they were typically mixed race, the product of the Black slave woman and her white slave master. When the Mammy image was created, she was deliberately constructed to suggest ugliness. The creators needed to desexualize her in every way to show that slave owners were not sexually exploiting Black women (Pilgrim, 2012).

The Mammy fits into the stereotype of what is believed to be the ideal look and body shape of Black women, which in its own right is completely wrong, and another discrimination towards Black women. She is seen as someone who dislikes her race and her people, who she should identify with the most. Mammy

is all about the white family: everything she does in life is for them. Although this was set during the times of slavery, we still see the Mammy everywhere we go. She is in every store, every home, and even in schools. To see her all you have to do is walk down the food aisles or open a cupboard. We see her today on the syrup bottles, pancake boxes, cookie jars, and blankets famously known as the "Aunt Jemima".



Figure 2. Jemima Display. From "The Mammy Caricature" by D. Pilgrim, 2015. (<https://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/mammies/>).

### **The Impact of the Mammy in Today's Society**

What many people don't know is that the Mammy still has an effect on Black women all over the world, but more so it affects darker-skinned women. The media's version of the Mammy told dark-skinned women that they were not acceptable, that they were ugly, and that

they are who you shouldn't want to be and/or look like. A popular TV show, *A Different World*, featured an episode entitled "Mammy Dearest", which addressed the issues she still raises. The characters talked about how the Mammy not only created turmoil between Black and whites, but how she also created turmoil between the African American community themselves by introducing colorism. This very thing caused one of the biggest debates between African Americans on what kind of Black is considered to be beautiful.

The year 1960 is when Black feminism came into broader public view due to the civil rights movement excluding women from any leadership positions and the mainstream feminist movement largely focusing on issues – like working outside of the home doing things other than cooking, cleaning and caring for the kids – that solely impacted white middle-class women. There is little evidence that Black women participated in the organization or what they wanted to get out of the Civil Rights Movement. Black women struggled to even be heard. The Black feminist movement was there to get Black women the voice they needed to be heard. There were women like Alice Walker, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, Maya Angelou, and

Kimberlé Crenshaw, who each played a big part in Black feminism.

First, Angela Davis was a part of many different groups throughout her life like the Black Feminist Movement, the Black Panthers, and Critical Resistance. Within these groups, she helped fight for African Americans as a whole and separately. In her later years, she became a university professor while continuing to do interviews and public speaking as a way to keep up her activism and fight for the Black community (Davis, 1974; Perkins, 2000).

Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” (1989). Her theory was about how overlapping or intersecting social identities, particularly minority identities, relate to systems and structures of oppression, domination, or discrimination. This theory shows that there is never one form of oppression without the other and you can't just try to fix one system of oppression without fixing them all (Crenshaw 1989, 1991).

Alice Walker coined the term "Womanist," which means to be a Black feminist or a feminist of color (Izgarjan & Markov, 2012). She wrote books that detail things she witnessed as well as about some of the struggles Black women faced. Her most popular novel was later turned into a movie called *The Color Purple* (1992). The novel follows a

young, troubled Black woman fighting her way through not just racist white culture but patriarchal Black culture as well.

Patricia Hill Collins originally published her book titled *Black Feminist Thought* in 1990. The book focuses on three important topics: First, the oppressions of gender, race, and class, sexuality, and how Black women have unique histories at the intersections of systems of power; second, how they have created world views out of a need for self-definition and to work on behalf of social justice; third, how Black women's specific experiences with intersecting systems of oppression provide a window into these same processes for other individuals and social groups.

Lastly, there is Maya Angelou. Maya Angelou is a famous poet and author who wrote about things she experienced in her life as well as things that Black women need to hear about themselves. She wrote about how Black women should be proud of who they are, where they come from, and how they look and choose to wear their hair. Her most famous works include a book called *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1971) (which is being read in many schools) and two poems called “Still I Rise”

(1978) and “Phenomenal Woman” (1978).

The list of amazing Black women who did and are still doing so much for Black women could go on and on, but these are just a few of them. These women just like so many others dared to stand up and make a difference and fight for what they believe in so many different ways. They made the world hear their voice and the voice of Black women everywhere, whether in the form of a poem, speech, book, movie, or in a classroom. They taught us that if we don't stand up for ourselves, then no one else will stand up for us; if we don't speak up for ourselves, then who will. Lastly, they taught us that we as Black women are strong, bold, and beautiful. We have power; we have a voice. More importantly, they taught us that we should hold our heads up high and be proud Black girls and women who uplift one another.

Within the past three to five years, there have been more movements, hashtags, and award shows to uplift and show appreciation for Black girls and women. Some examples are the Black Girls Rock! Award Show (BET Press, 2015) and hashtags such as #BlackGirlMagic, #MyBlackIsBeautiful, #BlackHair, and #BlackExcellence, just to name a few.

These were all created by other Black people. The world is seeing that Black women as a whole are still underrepresented, misrepresented, and underappreciated. Songs are being created such as Beyoncé's "Brown Skin Girl" (2019), and books are now being sold encouraging little Black girls to love their afros, curls, and hair texture, all because they are being suspended and kicked out of school for how they choose to wear their hair. These hashtags exist because Black women had to fight the hardest fight, and deserve to be celebrated and accepted for who they are, the curves they have, the way they wear their hair, and for having to work ten times as hard as someone who isn't African American just to prove that they can do it and that they belong.

### Dear Black Girls

You being Black is a battle you have already won. Don't let the world see your fears. Hold your head up high and walk with pride. Show the world your beautiful shades of brown and black no matter how light or how dark your skin is. Show the world your love for your thick curls, afros, braids and dreads. Show them your plumped lips, hips, and curves. Let the world know how amazing and beautiful you are on both

the inside and the outside. You are perfect just the way you are and just as important as those who don't look like you.

Society doesn't define you, the media doesn't tell you who you are. You come from overcomers, the true definition of strength. So, accept nothing less than that for yourself. Don't be afraid to use your voice. When you speak, do it with boldness, confidence, courage and purpose. You're not an angry Black woman, you're just passionate about what's on your mind and in your heart.

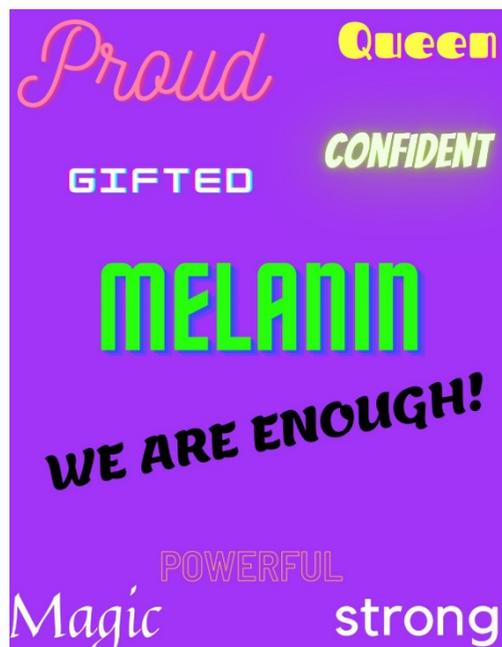


Figure 3. [Purple background with text: "Proud, Queen, Gifted, Confident, Melanin, We are Enough! Powerful, Magic, Strong" created by author]

## References

- ANGELOU, M. (1971). *I know why the caged bird sings*. New York: Random House. (Original work published 1969).
- ANGELOU, M. (1978). *And still I rise*. New York: Random House.
- BET PRESS. (2015, Mar. 26). *BET Networks and BLACK GIRLS ROCK! Inc. are proud to announce First Lady Michelle Obama's first appearance on the "BLACK GIRLS ROCK!" award show* [Press release]. <https://www.betpressroom.com/press-release/bet-networks-and-black-girls-rock-inc-are-proud-to-announce-first-lady-michelle-obamas-first-appeara/>
- BEYONCÉ. (2019). "Brown Girl Skin." *The Lion King: The Gift*. Columbia Records.
- COLLINS, P. H. (1991). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- COTT, NANCY F. (1987). *The grounding of modern feminism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- 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*, 1989, 136-168.
- CRENSHAW, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241. doi:10.2307/1229039
- DAVIS, A. Y. (1974) *Angela Davis : An autobiography*. New York: Random House.
- DAVIS, A. Y. (2019). *Women, race & class*. London: Penguin Books.
- IZGARJAN, A., & MARKOV, S. (2012). Alice Walker's Womanism: Perspectives Past and Present. *Gender Studies*, 11(1), 304–315. <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10320-012-0047-0>
- PATTON, P. (1993) Mammy her life and times. *American Heritage* 44(5), 78–. <https://www.americanheritage.com/mammy-her-life-and-times>

- PERKINS, M. V. (2000). *Autobiography as activism: Three Black women of the sixties*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- PILGRIM, D. (2012). Jemimah display [photograph]. Retrieved from <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/mammies/>
- PILGRIM, D. (2012). Mammy stereotype page 2 (30e309bc-a31b-4741-b6f1-1759de43a5bc) [photograph]. Retrieved from <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/mammies/more/mammy-image-gallery-02.htm>
- PILGRIM, D. (2012). The Mammy caricature. Retrieved from <https://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/mammies/>
- ROTH, B. (2003). Second wave Black feminism in the African diaspora: News from new scholarship. *Agenda: African Feminisms III*, 17(58), 46-58.
- WALKER, A. (1992). *The color purple* (10<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- WHITE, D. G. (1999). *Ar'n't I a woman? Female slaves in the plantation South*. New York: W.W. Norton.