



## Lay Down Your Cross

*If the strong Black woman is to ever gain visibility, then we need to be strong enough to allow ourselves the opportunity to rest. The implications that we are insurmountable beings have meant that Black women are routinely denied considerations by society. A host of Black feminist thinkers have indicated the unique spaces of oppression which the Black woman has occupied and continues to struggle within because of this institutional neglect. Black women have been the bridge which, not only supports the change that we wish to see, but also maintains the disparaging stereotypes which obstructs our efforts towards self-definition. The frustrations weigh heavily upon Black women, as they are forced to surrender need and charity in order to protect the utility of our families and communities. It is my belief that Black women need to lay down this burden of being everything to everyone, if we have any hope of experiencing the kind of freedom which have been liberally extended to others. Cast-off the shame that has silenced the strong Black woman; there is power to be gained when we stop allowing others to determine our worth.*

The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any.

(Alice Walker)

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man-when I could get it-and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

(Sojourner Truth, 1851)

### **Purpose**

I have witnessed both the need and the frustration of Black women as they attempt to define themselves against the ongoing historically constructed ideal of “the strong Black woman”. Society expects this particular woman to be powerful and sturdy within considerably defined public and family roles, yet society also holds her institutional authority hostage. This resilient Black woman has been born out of unspeakable misconducts and oppression. The burdensome task of having to be strong while caged makes the battles of this disenfranchised group significant as they lash through racism and sexism in order to gain visibility. For many African America women, frailty has never been an option; rather

these women struggle to obtain a space of refuge under weighty stereotypes which inscribe ethnic inferiority. American society reserved the right to pass up the Black woman's need for charity and empathy by reinforcing the Eurocentric ideals of beauty and femininity through gendered socialized traits of passivity, meekness, and domesticity. This narrow and objectifying way of being a woman has eluded our grasp, and as we fight for space and recognition, Black women in the United States sink deeper into a place of discontent.

I am an African American woman who has experienced generations of teachings around the need for the strong Black woman to be firmly planted at the center of Black families and communities. Lena Elizabeth

Caldwell, my maternal grandmother, was born the oldest of thirteen children in 1928. Her family was raised in Eau Gallie, Florida during a time of extreme racial turmoil. She married Lawrence Sheffield in 1944 and they began a family of their own which would consist of seven daughters. Despite the fact that the military had little respect for enlisted minorities then, my grandfather took advantage of the discipline, monetary benefits, and professional experience it would afford him and his family. The hegemonic atmosphere of the Navy, which produced hierarchies of white, male, military rule, influenced the way power and control was distributed within this family which was comprised of one male and eight females. That authority that the military rankings granted to my grandfather was quickly transferred to his civilian life as his wife and daughters became the platoon under his instruction.

The institution of marriage reinforced patriarchal authority, so for better or worse my grandmother surrendered her autonomy for the collective good of the family. She knew the matrimonial role she was to play was to be supportive, submissive, and undervalued, yet she also knew that her subverted identity was essential for the survival of her

household. The paradoxical nature of being needed yet expendable is the riddle which the Black feminist movement seeks to address. Black women need refuge from the torrential force of patriarchy which has been furthered compounded by racism and from the fundamental male-chauvinistic ideologies which took root in the Black power movement within 1950s American history.

My grandparents made the decision to relocate their family of nine to Rochester, New York in 1954 in order to pursue the promise of hope and opportunity sold to many minorities who were being trampled by prejudice and discrimination in the southern half of this country. Transplanting this sizable family to the North had its challenges. Without the support of extended family ties, my grandmother began her sentence as a stay-at-home mother to her seven daughters. Since the family had no savings, my grandfather was forced to work long shifts in multiple jobs. This meant the burden of family and domestic life fell on the shoulders of my grandmother, and she obediently honored her obligations as wife and mother. Her tireless efforts are a testimony to the indispensable nature of the strong Black woman, but her obligatory labors did

not answer her call to remain pertinent as an individual.

As a Black woman born into captivity, Sojourner Truth struggled and fought to make others acknowledge her relevancy. I cannot help but associate the words of Sojourner Truth with the feelings that my grandmother must have concealed. As I remember the body of my diligent grandmother lying in a coffin, I wondered how many times in her fifty-nine years that she needed help but societal codes that expected her strength shamed her into silence. Had she decided to speak out, would her cries have fallen upon deaf ears? It is my belief that if exhaustion had not compromised her health, then her silence would have been the attributing cause of death. Black women are routinely denied rights and privileges extended to whites. This vocal stillness must be broken if the liberties, freedoms, and wellbeing of African American women are to be recognized and applied to the habitual strong Black women everywhere.

Feminist Audre Lorde (1984) is a fundamental voice authenticating the experiences of Black women within the margins as she attests to ways sexuality, class, age, and race play a pivotal role in determining women's prospect for equality. It is important to consider

Lorde's thinking as a backdrop to Kathryn Scantlebury's (2005) work. Scantlebury is a feminist researcher who studied a group of African American female students in a Philadelphia public school. Scantlebury acknowledges that her identity as an educated, White, middle class female places her within the margins of this school culture, and that it is this privilege which insulates her from many of the tyrannical forces that Black women feel. The students in Scantlebury's study are often said to be loud, emotional, "ghetto fabulous" females. Their class, age, and race have excluded them from the considerations of society. I see these same conditions within the Rochester City School District where I am a mentor to the underserved young ladies in my community. As I continue my quest to insert the needs of Black girls onto a public platform, I am inclined to borrow a term taken from the works of civil rights and women's rights activist Pauli Murray's 1970 essay entitled, *The Liberation of Black Women*. It is here that I first heard the term "Jane Crow", which refers to the "entire range of assumptions, attitudes, stereotypes, customs, and arrangements which have robbed women of a positive self-concept" (p. 200). Hostile indignities force many girls to internalize these

negative beliefs and the consequence to these externally imposed ideologies creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, realized in the Black woman's dampened efforts towards upward mobility.

As a Black woman, I have had very few positive entitlements, just as is the case with the girls of Scantlebury's 2005 study. Circumstances of sexism and racism have caused others to disregard me and ignore my needs as a person. I dissent! My knowledge and perseverance is a tool which enables me to cut through the intricately woven entrapments which confines others in my group to occupy a place of submission. Lorde (1984) believes that we all lead lives where multiple factors impact how people see us and how we are treated. Being young, Black, and female exposes this group to unique hardships, and we see that society continues to devalue and demote the Black female identity. The early feminist agenda, which was concerned with suffrage, property rights, and political equity, has no immediate impact on the lives of these marginalized girls. The disconnections that separate women from other women occur not from these differences in race and identity, but from our inability to celebrate our

diversity. Addressing issues of poverty and other societal deficits along with discriminatory institutional practices captures the actions needed to improve the circumstances of young Black women.

Kiri Davis (2005) is a 17-year-old Black female who directed a documentary on the struggles that her friends have had trying to live up to standards of beauty and the promotion of "whiteness" in our society. Her refusal to conform to ill-conceived constructions of Black identity, color, and gender, specifically to the deconstruction of Black womanhood, is reassuring. The film, *A Girl Like Me* (2005), portrays an overwhelming number of minority girl's experiences and battles with self-love and acceptance. These young women in Davis' (2005) film made a conscious move towards a path of self-discovery and self-definition. Their journey was a replica of the one I embarked upon more than ten years ago. It was that moment when I first realized that my eleven-year-old daughter was struggling, and needed me to demonstrate how she had to go about negotiating her acceptance into mainstream society while remaining authentic. The ambiguity that America had become a colorblind nation where the color of a

person's skin was no longer an indicator of character or ability challenged the simplicity of this task: but how far has our nation really come?

Equality, as written into law, is the prerogative for every man, woman, and child; however, the perceptions of the privileged has not conceded to the equality decrees. I decided to teach Black girls by rebuffing the limitations placed upon me by others. Psychologist Claude Steele (1997) asserts that women of color may choose not to subscribe to disparaging labels of Black girls being unteachable, raunchy, hyper-sexual, and idle. But there is still evidence which suggest that Black women may fall victim to a "stereotype threat," defined as the process of internalizing the destructive label society places on minority women even though the individual personally rejects these stereotypes. The power to overcome such realities is an anomaly; and yet, here I am. Along with my own personal triumphs, the young women in Davis' (2005) film also progressed to a state of confidence and began embracing their reflections, showing that it is possible for Black women to reject the negative hype societal codes impose. The use of voice, emotion, and individuality helped the girls of this disqualified group to learn and test their

knowledge. Their outspokenness is beneficial as it bestows validity and credibility to their understandings and it endorses the work that Scantlebury is doing with young Black females. Their willingness to express individuality flaunts self-confidence essential to counteracting the negative portrayal that these marginalized young ladies encounter in the media and popular culture.

Scantlebury was able to effectively show how the daily experiences among the young Black cohort that she studied impacted their learning and ultimately their success opportunities. Personalities of African American students who society at one time ignored and misinterpreted are re-evaluated as vital adaptations to the harsh realities of many urban minority communities. Their circumstances will not command their attitude. The forces that knocked them down did not hold them there. These girls are resourceful, imaginative, and resilient, and they have found a way to reimagine their role in society: They are strong Black women.

What is the definition of a strong Black woman? Melissa Harris-Perry (2011), the author of *Sister Citizen*, states:

The strong black woman is easily recognizable. She confronts all trials

and tribulations. She is a source of unlimited support for her family. She is a motivated, hardworking breadwinner. She is always prepared to do what needs to be done for her family and her people. She is sacrificial and smart. She suppresses her emotional needs while anticipating those of others. She has an irrepressible spirit that is unbroken by a legacy of oppression, poverty, and rejection (p. 21).

Perry's depiction is vivid, and though she specifically attaches a color to this woman, history shows us that it could be any woman. The prevalence of black-suffering is the undoubted determinant that this remarkable woman is, indeed, a strong **Black** woman. I live in this matrix, as did my mother. I have gone to the edge and back again to provide for my family the necessities, often without the advantage of any considerations. Society never acknowledged my protests of exhaustion, and therefore, I never spoke of this fatigue.

Feminist legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) developed the theory of intersectionality, which attempts to explain how the experience of being a Black woman intensifies the overbearing state of oppressions for women of color. Using Crenshaw's intersectionality framework, biases in

the categories of race, sex, age, class, and sexual orientation interact both on multiple and often simultaneous levels to create exclusive impediments for Black women. As a group, our embodiment of the *beast-of-burden* has done us harm. Our daunting strength has in many ways expelled us out of femininity. Patricia Hill Collins, professor of African American studies and a Black feminist thinker, suggests that, "the heroic portrayal of the strong Black woman fosters the perception that Black women need no help because we can take it" (2008, p. 287). Society has seduced the Black woman into accepting the notion that we must be everything to everyone. But what does this role actually cost us?

A Black feminist theoretical lens helps me see the escalating cost of labeling young Black girls (hooks, 1994). Minority communities have been hit hardest by poverty, crime, unemployment, and violence. As a Black woman I have not had the privilege of staking claim to anything other than slavery and suffering in this country; an entitlement that I vehemently reject. Circumstances of sexism and racism have caused my status to be rated as discounted, and therefore, unworthy of respect. Even as I strive to bypass these spaces of

oppression, as a Black woman I face an intricate woven entrapment of dogmas and policies which confine my being to a place beneath others. Collins (2008) and other black feminist thinkers argue that it is empowering to simply gain critical consciousness to unpack the hegemonic knapsack carried by the dominant class. I fight against blind obedience in order to dislodge the lethal chokehold patriarchy has placed around women, and using a feminist lens, I contest submission to the white ideal which induces the need for black feminism and activism. Though theory allows my voice to be heard, at this point, it rings with no institutional power, and without this authoritative potency, it becomes part of the diluted cries of the many great Black women who came before me.

The spiteful and dishonest portrayal of Black women in America is not the narrative I want to represent the awesome legacy of strength, tenacity, and courage which have been handed down to me from my mother and to her from her mother. The stereotypes of mummies, sexually promiscuous teenaged girls, and lazy welfare mothers which run fervently throughout our subconscious, and which have been referenced in order to justify mistreatment of the Black woman, must

be obviated. Civil rights activist and educator Maya Angelou, in her work *Inaugural Poem* said, “History, despite its wrenching pain,/ cannot be un-lived, and if faced/ with courage, need not be lived again” (1993, 73-75). The hardships of the strong Black women that came before me will not be in vain. I appreciate that to some who read this, it may seem as though I am conceding and asking Black women to throw up both hands and succumb to the greater powers that be. I argue that it is precisely the opposite. I understand the importance of laying down the cross that I have been subjected to carry. I can choose to no longer be the mule for the masses. It is my argument that this cumbersome task of being everything to everyone denies the Black woman her very mortality. Learning to respect our own limitations as people may help others to finally see our humanity. The imperishable strong Black woman that Harris-Perry’s (2011) introduction pays homage to, though accurate in many accounts, has stirred up a mix of contradicting emotions. There is no denying that such an individual exists; I know her. I see and often try to imitate this “virtuous woman” in my own daily habits and behaviors. The introduction of *Sister Citizen* is concluded with a poem by Donna Kate

Rushin (1981) entitled *The Bridge Poem*.  
This piece of literary work voices the  
frustrations I and other Black women

experience as we embark on the road of  
self-discovery.

I've had enough  
I'm sick of seeing and touching  
Both sides of things  
Sick of being the damn bridge for everybody

Nobody  
Can talk to anybody  
Without me  
Right?

I explain my mother to my father my father to my little sister  
My little sister to my brother my brother to the white feminists  
The white feminists to the Black church folks the Black church folks  
To the ex-hippies the ex-hippies to the Black separatists the  
Black separatists to the artists the artists to my friends' parents ...

Then  
I've got to explain myself  
To everybody  
I do more translating  
Than the Gawdamn U.N.

Forget it  
I'm sick of it

I'm sick of filling in your gaps

Sick of being your insurance against  
The isolation of your self-imposed limitations  
Sick of being the crazy at your holiday dinners

Sick of being the odd one at your Sunday Brunches  
Sick of being the sole Black friend to 34 individual white people

Find another connection to the rest of the world  
Find something else to make you legitimate  
Find some other way to be political and hip

I will not be the bridge to your womanhood  
Your manhood  
Your human-ness  
I'm sick of reminding you not to  
Close off too tight for too long

I'm sick of mediating with your worst self  
On behalf of your better selves

I am sick  
Of having to remind you  
To breathe  
Before you suffocate  
Your own fool self

Forget it  
Stretch or drown  
Evolve or die

The bridge I must be  
Is the bridge to my own power  
I must translate  
My own fears  
Mediate  
My own weaknesses

I must be the bridge to nowhere

But my true self  
And then  
I will be useful (“The Bridge Poem”)

This poem resonates with me because I am a bridge to others. I realize the responsibility I have to share the wisdom which my education in Women and Gender Studies has afforded me. The weight of that huge obligation has had extreme consequences for me as for many other Black women. Growing up, I could not find it within myself to ask for help. As I witnessed struggle and hardship all around me, I felt as though adding to the burdens of others was selfish and cruel. My bumps and bruises would be the evidence of my toil and perseverance. And while they made my triumphs sweeter, these scars indicated to others that I can be excluded from the considerations of support and compassion. Within the human domain, there is an inevitable space to be occupied by frailty, vulnerability, and loss. It is difficult not accepting such a strong affirmation as a much-deserved badge of honor. The fact that I have been born into this non-optional and exhausting role of responsibilities that most dominant groups are shielded from, has left me malevolent, and chasing reciprocity; a

recoupment that I am uncertain as to whether society can ever fully compensate.

hooks (1994) explains that the privilege of definition and interpretation within a patriarchy will always rest with the dominant group, and thus, we must utilize feminist theory to transform the mind from a state of confusion to a place of understanding and healing. This tells me that, as a strong Black woman, I do have recourse. I will choose to no longer be the world’s mule. I can save myself and other women of color by emphasizing the power we will gain by simply saying no! Never in my history have I been able to define my existence. The authority to state my position has been pardoned unto me; however, how society chooses to interpret my placement in the world will be in accordance to the color of my skin. My behaviors and social roles have continued to be indiscriminately decided by others and assigned a respective value.

I had many expectations placed upon me during my life. One recurring theme was that hard work would pay

off. I have come to a point in my life where I must develop the confidence to allow my voice to be heard. The knowledge that I have acquired is fluid; it is constantly being challenged and reworked. Knowledge will never yield to the misconducts of others. Reflecting back on life and the reality that I have lived, I realize White-male dominance controls the movement of the oppressed from the margins to the center (hooks, 1994). Whiteness epitomizes power in this country, and Black feminism challenges that.

Using theory to define the pain and toil of the human condition solidifies the possibility for change and improvement. Theory authenticates feminist thought and supports the call into action. Collins (2008), as an author and feminist thinker, often speaks on the intersecting powers of our country's social institutions which have the jurisdiction to define and regulate the roles of Black women. It is simply not sufficient to speak of the forces of racism and sexism on an individual level where the impact is minimal. It would also be misguided to presume generalizations when it comes to the needs and expectations of all women. What Black feminism is hoping to accomplish is to redirect the perceptions that equality can be

attained for this group without acknowledgment of compounded and concurrent powers which diminishes the Black woman's chances to successfully move from the margins and acquire greater status. Whether there is truth in the notion that Black women must be twice as good, and work twice as hard to achieve half as much, we must recognize that because of our color, we are subjected to prejudices and the way in which we experience that oppression limits our access to opportunity and resources. Society must stop socializing our daughters to accept the belief that it is the role of the Black woman to place the needs and cares of the world on our shoulders. Lay down that cross. The burden is not ours to bear. As women, we must understand that there is no shame in failing to be strong every moment of our lives. Vulnerability is a component of our mortality. Occasionally, meekness is a requirement of the human condition. It is time for the strong Black woman to rest.

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