The State University of New York at New Paltz

The Representation of African American Girls and Women in Popular Culture Throughout the 20th Century
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Abstract

Photographs are a key component in deepening one’s comprehension of Black portrayals and their profound impact on the Black community. This picture essay focuses on the positive and negative representations of Black girls and women throughout the 20th century. Black girls and women had been sexually and physically objectified by a variety of stereotypes. The most familiar example of this would be the Aunt Jemima caricature, a face and product of the Mammy stereotype that desexualized and devalued Black women. Meanwhile, another stereotype, the Jezebel, overssexualized Black girls and women. This advertised Black women as undesirable while simultaneously justifying assault from white men. While negativity about Black girls and women was created by white people, positive portrayals were also being produced by the Black community.

Media like sheet music, Ebony Magazine, and The Cosby Show, were just a few examples of positive representations created by Black people. Rather than allowing white people to define Blackness as animalistic and Black culture as one that lacked civility, the Black community sought to assert themselves as valuable, respectable, and intelligent middle-class humans in America. As Black girls grew up with the white definition of Blackness, the effects from these portrayals shifted how they judged their own beauty, intelligence, and value. This paper strives to explain how the stereotypes that Black girls and women have been categorized under are prevalent and perpetuated through the early 20th century to the latter end of the century, and beyond.
Introduction

White Americans in the early 20th century accepted and normalized racism in American society. Black people were defined by stereotypical characteristics which perpetuated the idea of Black inferiority. Lying beneath the racist representations of Black girls and women were limited opportunities for them to be depicted positively. In the mid 20th century, within the media, Black people were trying to paint a humanistic image of themselves compared to the grotesque depictions that the white population created. At the end of the century, the Black image positively shifted. Companies, cartoons, and TV shows made a larger effort to include Black girls and women on their platforms. Even though there was a newfound representation of Black people, the perpetuation of bias, stereotypes, and colorism was still deeply rooted in white American minds. In order to break from racist habits, white Americans must reflect on the biases they have learned from previous generations. Recent historical events, such as the Black Lives Matter Movement, have highlighted actions and double standards that are unacceptable. Some of these included racist and erroneous portrayals of Black girls and women in popular culture. A look at the long 20th century allows us to connect how these misrepresentations influence Americans in the 21st century to the detriment of society as a whole.

“Scrub Me Mama With A Little Boogie Beat,” serves as an introduction to this paper while being a key example that displayed stereotypes about women and girls in the 20th century. The cartoon proved that racism was based on more than just skin tone by mocking women’s physical attributes, language, and work status. It highlighted the intense feelings of disgust and disrespect the white community held towards Black people.
*Scrub Me Mama With A Little Boogie Beat*¹

This banned Warner Brothers cartoon provided perfect examples of negative representations for Black girls and women in media in the 1940s. The heavier Black woman was associated with the Mammy stereotype (e.g. see fig. 4, 5), which promoted Black women as desexualized and subservient domestic workers. She was depicted as an ugly asexual being in comparison to the oversexualized lighter-skinned girl (e.g. see fig. 3). The mammy’s physical attributes like her big lips, big-bodied physique, and clown-like structure suggested that Black women were laughable. The sexualized main character of the cartoon had significantly lighter skin, thinner lips, straight hair, perky breasts, a flirtatious attitude towards men, and a helpful attitude towards the Mammies (e.g. see fig. 3). Categorizing Black women under the Jezebel stereotype, which defined Black women as sexually lewd, reinforced the idea that they were

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overly sexual beings, thus shaming Black women altogether for being sexual creatures. A chapter from *The Girls History and Culture Reader: The Twentieth Century*, by Susan J. Douglas, explained why Black women were simultaneously sexualized and desexualized during this time. She argued, “...one consequence for Black women, is that too often they have been stereotyped as more sexually active and responsive to their white bread sisters. But since the sexuality of Black people has always been deeply threatened by white folks, Black characters in popular culture also have been desexualized, the earth mother Mammy being a classic example” (275). The threat of white men feeling attraction toward Black women was concerning in white communities due to the idea that sex with African American women would result in the creation of interracial babies. Mixed children would break the foundation of white and Black being inherently unequal and separate in society. Thus, the foundation of white supremacy in slavery and during the Jim Crow Era would be shattered. The dehumanization and objectification of Black bodies created by the white community through the sexualized Jezebel and the desexualized Mammy, promoted that sex with Black women was dirty, belittling, and grotesque.
In the 1900s, the perpetual image of Black people looking animalistic contributed to the negative stereotypes of Black women. Sheet music and the mammy from “The Little Black Sambo,” by Helen Bannerman, encompassed some representations of Blackness in the early 20th century. Along with the physical images that negatively depicted Black women, the words “coon” and “sambo” personified her as hopelessly dependent on white people (Coon). Mammies and girls were paired together in figures 6 and 7 with the commonality of looking disheveled, overly happy, dark-skinned, big-lipped, and unkempt. The dark skin tones of these caricatures were the color black. It is important to note that there is a distinct difference between illustrating someone’s natural hue rather than the literal color black. Black face, when used on stage by white or Black actors, defined Blackness as laughable. This type of depiction was only meant to

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oppress, stereotype, exaggerate, and belittle Black culture and identity. Intentionally colorizing Black women’s skin as the color black continuously made fun of Blackness as a whole (Blackface). Based solely on these primary sources, in the 1900s, Black women were seen as ugly, asexual, and animalistic.

**The History of Mammy**

Much of the information written here was provided by “The Mammy Caricature” from the Jim Crow Museum of Ferris State University. This source gave an outstanding analysis of Mammy’s history and impact on American culture. This section will be summarizing the information provided by the website to deepen the analysis of the Mammy stereotype.

The caricature “mammy” served a purpose from the times of enslavement into the Jim Crow Era. As a response to an antislavery attack during the antebellum period, mammy characters were created by white Southerners in order to mend the relationship between Black women and white males. She was political, social, and economic propaganda that advertised Black women as happily content and subservient to white families. In order to promote the institution of slavery, mammies were always displayed with a warm smile, heartfelt laughter, and seen as loyal workers. Physically, mammies were obese, desexualized motherly figures. Their undying love for their white “families” was warped into the sense of “belonging” to them (The Mammy). Within a mammy’s household, she was crude to her children and dedicated her life to providing and caring for her white “family.” These caricatures did not represent the actual population that were the “right hands” to white families (The Mammy). Usually, these women were mixed-race and were greatly underfed, causing them to look frail in comparison to the big-bodied mammy that was promoted in America.
Utilizing sources from enslavement would aid in understanding the differences between mammies and other Black women. The sexual exploitation of women, especially light-skinned Black women, either consensual or non-consensual, happened frequently, although considered to be “taboo.” The idea of the mammy was to completely desexualize all Black women. The obese, “pitch Black,” middle-aged mammy was thus created to portray Black women as ugly and sexually repulsive (The Mammy). Essentially, white southern communities designed the mammy caricature in order to promote that no sane white man would want to have sex with an ugly overweight Black woman instead of the “idealized white woman” (The Mammy). The desexualization or, “...de-eroticism of mammy meant that the white wife -- and by extension, the white family, was safe” (The Mammy). In reality, white men were attracted to the fantasy of domination. Through the white superiority complex, white men desired nonconsensual sexual intercourse with Black women. This idea objectified Black woman’s bodies and sexualities while simultaneously supporting the idea that white men could satisfy their sexual desires through the exploitation of Black women.

The mammy, being a house servant, promoted that Black women should only be low-paid domestic workers. The mammy subsequently supported race-based and segregated jobs. These ideals created a narrow space for job opportunities for Black women during the Jim Crow Era (1877-1966). Real Black workers were not mammies. Mammy was a, “...figment of the white imagination, a nostalgic yearning for a reality that never had been” (The Mammy). Black women were denied the opportunity to expand their resumé beyond domestic work and thus were likely resentful about their limitations in society.

Black actresses that starred as mammies were criticized for promoting the mammy character. Significantly, Hattie McDaniel, an actor who starred in The Little Colonel with Shirly
Temple and *Gone With the Wind*, was accused by the Black community of continuing the Mammy stereotype through her roles on film. She said to them, “Why should I complain about making seven thousand dollars a week playing a maid? If I didn't, I'd be making seven dollars a week actually being one” (The Mammy). It seemed as though Black actors were willing to perpetuate racist themes on film rather than live in poverty like most other Black people during this time.

The use of mammy images as advertising on merchandise was most successful during the Jim Crow Era. Mammies were seen on most domestic items in the home including, “…breakfast foods, detergents, planters, ashtrays, sewing accessories, and beverages” (The Mammy). Later in history, mammies also appeared on detergents, coffee, molasses, and cleaners. She was advertised as the mammy you can trust. The most successful commercial mammy was (and still is) Aunt Jemima. The Davis Company that owned Aunt Jemima staged an event where they built the largest flour barrel in 1893. It promoted Aunt Jemima’s image as well as their renowned pancake mix. Nancy Green, the first Aunt Jemima, was born a slave in 1834 and assumed the character of Aunt Jemima until her death in 1923. In order to promote Aunt Jemima’s image during the event, Green, “…sang songs, cooked pancakes, and told stories about the Old South...” (The Mammy). Mammy’s bliss painted the South as a happy home for both Black and white people. She not only became a national celebrity, but she was an American icon (The Mammy).
Aunt Jemima

Based on the peer-reviewed article, “Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima,” Aunt Jemima’s character was only meaningful based on the social and political atmosphere of America during the late 19th into the mid 20th centuries. While her career was significant to the American people, author M.M. Manring focused less on her character and more on the personification of Aunt Jemima through American history. Mammy was the title that defined Aunt Jemima’s career, sold pancake mix, and advertised racism to women in domestic work and men through her economic success. The immortality of her happy demeanor created a safe space for white people to release their anxiety about losing Black domestic workers while simultaneously justifying the assault of the sexuality of Black women. The image of a happy Black woman “choosing” to work and cook for white families eased the tension between the North and the South after the American Civil War. This created a sense of familiarity for Southerners who were accustomed to “free” labor, while simultaneously giving Northerns a

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sense of a liberating white experience. Aunt Jemima’s image was, as the title suggested, slavery in a box. In the 1960s, as Black people forced others to listen about their lack of civil rights, Aunt Jemima’s image was challenged and eventually changed to represent a realistic version of an African American woman. Aunt Jemima was a “person” who shaped American history. Her identity was made to “imprison the minds of potential consumers” and allowed Americans to ignore the exploitation of Black people’s race, class, and sexuality (Thomas).

**Jezebel Stereotype**

To gain a deeper understanding of the Jezebel stereotype, the evidence provided in this section was from “The Jezebel Stereotype” found at the Jim Crow Museum of Ferris State University. This source critically analyzed the Jezebel’s history and influence on American culture. This section is paraphrased from the website in order to give an accurate and well-rounded description of the Jezebel stereotype.

The Jezebel stereotype was associated with being, “seductive, alluring, worldly, beguiling, tempting, and lewd” (The Jezebel). On the contrary, white women were associated with purity, respect, and modesty while Black women were automatically labeled as

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“hypersexual ‘bad-black-girls’” (The Jezebel). As white men forced Black women into an economic and sexual loop that they could not escape, the origin of the Jezebel stereotype was thus created by African American women’s coerced sexual relations during the times of enslavement. As mixed Black women would be sold into prostitution, the white customer would economically support her and her children as long as she would provide him with lasting sexual services. This cycle was called placage. During the early 1600s through the era of slavery, as white settlers traveled to Africa in search of slaves, the lack of clothing that African women wore suggested to white travelers that they were obsessive sexual beings and Jezebel whores. Themes like these insinuated that white people were justified in enslaving and sexually abusing Black women. They were seen as “...subhumans: intellectually inferior, culturally stunted, morally underdeveloped, and animal-like sexually” (The Jezebel).

In times of slavery, the Jezebel stereotype implied that Black women were sexually luring white men. White men believed the open sexuality of Black women gave them the right to sexually assault them without the threat of repercussions. Through slavery and later in the Jim Crow Era, white men when accused of rape would plead that a Black woman was being lustful and promiscuous, thus leading to their sexual interaction. In reality, Black women were assaulted and abused due to the white man’s overwhelming power to lynch, assault, and destroy Black communities because of the lack of laws that protected Black people. The accounts of Fredrick Douglas and other former slaves proclaimed that Black women’s sexual relations were fully controlled by the white master. Often, slave women were fearful of their masters and complied with having sex with them, their sons, or their overseers. This reinforced the idea that Black women were licentious creatures. When auctioned for sale, both men and women slaves would be stripped naked and examined. In theory, this was to ensure that they were in good physical
condition for both reproduction and health purposes. In reality, touching and searching slaves had sexual and perverted purposes.

In the 20th century, Black women in the South, especially before the 1960s, were continuously raped and overtly sexualized by white men. Significantly, most Black women, in the fear of lynching of Black men, did not report these abuses. If and when a Black woman would speak out against white male rapists, the white community would then retaliate through lynching Black men. This cycle of violence evidently made speaking out against rape nearly impossible. While unlikely, even if white Southern rapists were put on trial, none of them would be convicted due to their reports that Black women were provoking them through their sexual demeanor.

Within material items like, “ashtrays, postcards, sheet music, fishing lures, drinking glasses and so forth” (The Jezebel), the Jezebel stereotype was depicted with Black women naked or seductively dressed. In the 1950s, popular party paraphernalia, like ZULU LULU sticks, mocked Black women’s breasts and bodies with silhouettes of them naked with perky or saggy breasts (e.g. see fig. 10). A version of this gag gift read, “Nifty at 15, spiffy at 20, sizzling at 25, perky at 30, declining at 35, droopy at 40” (The Jezebel). This novelty item would be placed under the category of “pathetic other” through the Jezebel stereotype. Specifically in regards to ZULU LULU sticks, the pathetic other was shown by the distortion of the African American women’s body, their sagging breasts, and the gifts associated with alcohol and drunkenness. Although her nakedness and lack of modesty were being advertised, society tried to sexualize yet sicken the image of African-American women to look “unattractive, unintelligent, and uncivilized” (The Jezebel). Similar to the mammy, the pathetic other tried to disprove that white men could be sexually attracted to African American women. The other version of the
Jezebel stereotype, the “exotic other,” did not make African American women look unattractive, but promoted social and cultural stupidity (e.g. see fig. 12).

Jezebel images were commonly used in the everyday American household. For example, a 1949 postcard displayed a picture of a nude, pre-teenage girl covering her genitalia with a fan (e.g. see fig. 11). It read, “Honey, I’se Waitin’ Fo’ You Down South.” The sexualization of young Black girls suggested that even young Black children were sexually active. In the white perspective, this justified sexualizing Black children and made their objectification laughable.

Within the cinematic world in America, Black women throughout the first half of the 20th century were portrayed as mammies, piccaninnies (a racial caricature for children that displayed them with exaggerated physical features, butchered language, and animalistic characteristics), and tragic-mulattoes (light-skinned Black women with slender figures and features) (The Jezebel). By the 1970s, Black actors wanted to change this repetitive image and thus willingly exchanged one stereotype with another. From then on, Black women were produced as Jezebels, whores, and hookers in films that were labeled *blaxploitation* movies. Mostly directed by white producers, these low-budget movies were created to emulate the Black experience. In reality, by adding, “corrupt police and politicians, pimps, drug dealers, violent criminals, prostitutes, and whores,” *blaxploitation* movies were incorrectly defining Black lives through white interpretations of Blackness (The Jezebel). Within these films, Black women were cast to be the “sexual fodder,” usually there to fondle and grope as the Black male character got his superhero complex validated. *Blaxploitation* movies at times nearly qualified as rated X. Often Black women who had sex scenes in these movies were light or brown-skinned women while those in pornography had darker brown to deep brown skin tones. These movies largely promoted Black women as prostitutes that would satisfy white or Black men’s sexual fantasies
These images of sheet music challenged the majority of negative representations of Black women in the early 20th century. In figure 13, a dark-skinned, African American woman, shown to be sophisticated and poised, was incredibly well dressed, fashionable, and presumably wealthy. In figure 14, the entire silhouette of a Black woman in a full-length dress suggested that Black women could flaunt this attire. In the early 1900s, sheet music was printed and sold in order to allow people of all races to professionally perform or sing music at home. This method of performance was extremely popular at the turn of the century due to the limited number of people who owned and utilized radios. Many African American families in the South owned a piano which allowed them to share and create music. Opposed to the negative representations

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that were simultaneously being produced, these sheet music covers suggested that there was either a market or a culture in the Black community that wanted to sell and publicize these images.

**Sapphire Caricature**

Material by “The Sapphire Caricature” from the Jim Crow Museum of Ferris State University was utilized to strengthen the analysis of Sapphire’s impact on American life. This section is summarized from the website to provide factual and accurate information about the caricature.

The Sapphire caricature’s goal was to identify Black women as rude, loud, malicious, stubborn, and overbearing in movies, television shows, radio, and on magazine covers. Through the Sapphire, a caricature known as The Angry-Black Woman was created. Her irrational temper and abusive attitude were mostly directed toward white men but were welcome toward anyone that stood in her way. Her aggressiveness and desire for others to be unhappy influenced Black women to be the opposite of the Sapphire they saw on screen. Significantly, this caricature

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promoted these women to revert into being submissive, invisible, and obedient. The impact of Sapphire, also known as “sassy Mammys,” (The Sapphire), was prevalent from the 1800s through the mid-1900s. From 1928 through the 1960s, the *Amos ’n’ Andy* radio show, which eventually premiered on television, connected the traits of Sapphire to the name itself. The two white men who created the radio show and the white cast that starred in it mocked the behavior and dialect of Black people. When the same show premiered on television, an all-Black cast made fun of a stereotypical version of their own culture. The comedic aspect of the show altogether influenced American viewers and listeners to believe that Blackness was laughable. From the 1970s to the present, the presence of a Black man in multiple television shows along with a Sapphire caricature was a necessity in order for her to verbally emasculate and ridicule flawed Black males. These Black actors were overly cast in comedies and underrepresented in every other genre.

By the time *blaxploitation* movies became popular in the 1970s, the Jezebel stereotype and the Sapphire caricature merged into one. Now, in movies, there were Black women labeled and characterized as “angry ‘whores’ fighting injustice” (The Sapphire). A Sapphire’s anger shifted from verbally abusing black men to fighting injustice with their attractive bodies, brains, and guns.

Sapphire in the 21st century appeared in the majority of all-Black movies, was spoken about on news channels, written in books, made into clip art, and had her own merchandise that could be purchased online. A combination between a Sapphire caricature and the Jezebel stereotype was renamed Omarosa. Omarosa Manigault-Stallworth, a 2004 contestant on the show *The Apprentice*, personified a combination of the Jezebel and Sapphire stereotypes. Manigault-Stallworth’s flirtatious and seductive demeanor paired with anger and bitterness
resulted in her being considered a nuisance nationwide (The Sapphire). From a white person’s perspective, Omarosa acted similarly to the Sapphire caricature but was using her anger to call out the racism of her cast while alienating herself and distrusting her team. White people began to speculate and accuse Black people of “reverse-racism,” being too “uppity” (The Sapphire), and having the ability to fool powerful white men. The best example of this was the representation of the First Lady Michelle Obama as an Omarosa. White people characterized her as, “…a bitter, selfish, uppity, ungrateful, overly-ambitious Sapphire” (The Sapphire). The transition from the early definition of Sapphire from verbally abusing Black men turned into a resentful Black woman who despised anyone who was opposed to her ideals. The Sapphire label was now placed upon any Black woman that was dissatisfied, displeased, or had discontent. The effect of this category promoted the silencing of Black expressions and voices (The Sapphire).

While the Sapphire caricature focused on women, and picaninnies represented Black children, these stereotypes both criticized Black physique and dehumanized Black people. Children under the picaninny stereotype were sexually and racially violated by white people who regarded Blackness as inherently inferior. These stereotypes and caricatures were created to justify the objectification of Blackness as a whole.
Picaninny Stereotype

Dates Unknown - Early 20th Century

Picaninnies were the main racial caricature of Black children. Their physical appearances were primarily animalistic by being depicted with, “...bulging eyes, unkempt hair, red lips, and wide mouths into which they stuffed huge slices of watermelon” (The Picaninny). Commonly, piccaninnies were advertised on postcards, posters, and other trinkets with an image of them being chased or eaten. They were, “…portrayed as nameless, shiftless natural buffoons running from alligators and toward fried chicken” (The Picaninny). One of the most famous picaninny girls was Topsy. Her skin, darker than those in her race, her white bulging eyes filled with expression, and her raggedy clothing was shaped by Harriet Beacher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Stowe created Topsy as an effort to sympathize with enslaved African Americans.

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which, in turn, could have aided in ending slavery altogether. While some questioned the justification of slavery, others used Topsy to minimize the reality of slavery by transforming her into a laughable character. She was then turned into a harmless coon that was imitated in books, paraphernalia, and on film from the early 1850s into the late twentieth century (The Picaninny).

Topsy Turvy Dolls

12

1900s

1901

Unknown Date
“Topsy Turvy” Dolls from Uncle Tom’s Cabin were one of the first slightly positive representations of Black girls in the early 20th century. The advertisement and the newspaper strip served to promote Black dolls to people in both the white and Black communities. Both were encouraging people to buy Black dolls as well as giving press to companies that sold Black products. In the advertisement, it said, “Dolls, Dolls, Negro Dolls. An opportunity is given to every Negro family to secure a beautiful Negro doll for their girls” (The National). This was the first time that Black girls and Black dolls were considered and documented as beautiful.

In regards to the Topsy Turvy characters, there were multiple interpretations of Eva and Topsy. They originated from the book Uncle Tom’s Cabin, where Topsy, (e.g see fig. 22) was consistently depicted as a picaninny girl while Eva was given a white savior complex. In one version of the story, Topsy was to be laughed at as well as sympathized with. Her role was to perpetuate the unloved helpless Black girl. Eva reformed Topsy by stabilizing her and saving her from shame and humiliation. In the movie, “The Littlest Rebel,” with Shirley Temple, Temple

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tried to help a Topsy character when she was at a loss for words. Within television,

“...other such black television personalities, are seen as lovable pets. This is the heart of the white cultural ideology at work. Blacks are cast as inferior and obedient and, even though on the "right side," they are not quite capable of making a go of it by themselves. They, like a loyal pet, need the help of the master. As pets they are nice and have human-like characteristics, but they are not quite human. They are stereotypes” (Staples).

Topsy, constantly in need of her white savior Eva, perpetuated the idea that Black people could not be civilized or handle themselves in society without the help of white people. While finally giving Black girls representation through Topsy Turvy dolls, their impact was not at all positive.

**Oversexualization of Black Girls**

Picaninnies' physical attributes included skin tones ranging from, “...medium brown to
dark black,” matted hair that pointed in all directions, white, bulging eyes, and enlarged mouths to fit watermelon (The Picaninny). Piccaninnies were often dressed in “ragged, torn,” “oversized” clothing, or even depicted as naked (The Picaninny). Nudity for piccaninnies symbolized two main points. One: Black families did not care enough to clothe their young, and two: nudity justified the sexualization of Black children. Nakedness suggested that Black families had a lack of modesty and civility, unlike white families who would make it a priority to clothe their children. Constant exposure to nude Black children with exaggerated backsides and exposed genitalia normalized their sexual objectification and seemingly justified their sexual abuse (The Picaninny).

**Black Representation in Other Types of Media**

The white majority used media and television to exploit Black Americans and perpetuate the idea of white superiority and Black inferiority. The 1985 study, “Culture, Ideology, and Black Television Images,” documented that Black children and families watched 10% more television than whites, yet they were being portrayed negatively on screen. This broadcasted to viewers that Blackness was associated with grotesque stereotypes. Within this study, Staples noted that the creation of television in the 1950s could have been a resource to reeducate those who had received misinformation about Black culture and its people. In reality, those who controlled the industry, “were products of a racist society” (Staples). At the beginning of television, a Black person’s role had limited screen time as the musical entertainer. The Black presence quickly shifted from being a guest to acting as a “subservient clown” (Staples). Black people were booked on shows only to promote themselves as stereotypical, “happy, carefree, musical, and lazy” people (Staples).
Television shows like *The Little Rascals* and *Amos ‘n’ Andy* sought out to demean Black people. *Amos ‘n’ Andy* featured characters similar to the subservient clown, sapphire, and coons (Black people who were hopelessly dependent on whiteness). In 1951, before *Amos ‘n’ Andy* aired on television, there were protests initiated by the NAACP (The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) to stop its production due to the stereotypical portrayals of Black people. Eventually by 1966, nearly 15 years later, CBS ended the series. Both Black and white people at this point agreed that the show was incorrectly and stereotypically portraying the Black experience.

Within the 20th century, there appeared to be an ebb and flow of how Black people were welcomed, by some, on television. During the Civil Rights Movement, some attempted to give Black people humanistic and non-racialized roles, but soon after, the movement slowly fizzled, and American television went back to portraying Black people as a laughable race (Staples). The show *A-Team* that premiered in 1983, documented that the lead actor, Mr. T was casted as, “a Black male in the role of a brainless eunuch who is no threat to the white male” (Staples).

The one exception to this theme was *The Bill Cosby Show*. Released in 1984, *The Bill Cosby Show* was a realistic portrayal of a middle-class Black American family. Staples and

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Jones stated, “It is a show featuring black people, but it is not a black show” (Staples). Key identifiers of a stereotypical “Black show” were not present (Staples). The lack of references to guns or drugs, the presence of a father, and the fact that the parents in the show had well-paid and highly respected jobs was a game-changer for the representation of Black people. Executives in television previously convinced themselves that white people would not accept Black people in non-stereotypical roles. *The Bill Cosby Show*, with an all-Black cast, challenged these beliefs.

Besides *The Bill Cosby Show*, television in America’s “racist” and “ethnocentric” society promoted the fact that white leaders of the United States were, “so engrossed in their power and perpetuating it, that their perception of others, especially minorities is severely distorted” (Staples). In turn, television and white supremacy went hand in hand. The American public, advertisers, and the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) controlled the broadcasting of racial expectations and privilege while glorifying the white experience (Staples).

**Josie and The Pussy Cats**

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A riff off of the Archie comics, Josie and the Pussy Cats consisted of three girls in a rock band touring their music while fighting off the evil characters that crossed their paths. The three characters, Josie, Valarie, and Melody were the stars of the show. Valerie, the Black character in the cartoon, broke boundaries by representing a third of the band. Valerie was the intellectual of the group, and held the band together. In previous years, Black girls were represented as everything but smart. The rational and passionate Valerie was the first mainstream Black cartoon character to be premiered with positive representations of Black girls. This depiction was not well received by the television industry. Some argued that Patrice Halloway, the woman that sang and voiced Valerie, sang her into existence (Lewis). The founder of La La Productions, and hit songwriter, Danny Janssen, advocated for Patrice Halloway after Hanna-Barbera from the Hanna-Barbera Production Company fought for an all-white-trio (Lewis). Janssen was infuriated by this comment and threatened to cancel the whole show. Many popular musicians supported Janssen’s idea and offered their services at a discounted price for the music production within the cartoon (Lewis). The spin-off, called Josie and The Pussycats in Outerspace, lasted from 1973 to

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1974. While new episodes stopped their production at this point, reruns were constantly being broadcasted to audiences which evidently influenced generations. Barbies, an extremely influential children’s toy, gradually diversified the image of an ideal girl from the mid-20th century through its latter end. Similar to Josie and the Pussy Cats, Barbies had a direct impact on girls’ opinions of girlhood and race.

**Barbies**

The first Black Barbie was made in 1968 with the name Christie. From then on, the amount of diversity in Barbies increased. The majority of Barbie’s advertised in the 1990s were classically white with blonde hair and blue eyes. Some Black and Indigenous Barbies were also on the market in the early 1990s.

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Barbie Doll Experiment

In Mesa Elementary school, an 8-year old accidentally created a controversial and influential project which highlighted the racial bias of children in her school. The student interviewed both adults and children while using one Black and one white Barbie doll with different colored dresses. Her original goal was to see which Barbie her peers thought was prettier. Almost all of the adults preferred the doll in a purple dress no matter its skin color, while 24 out of the 30 children she interviewed said the white doll was prettier, no matter what color dress she wore. These results opened the eyes of administrators and teachers to the impact of racial bias that children unknowingly held. After continuous deliberation, Mesa Elementary used this experiment as a lesson on implicit bias in classrooms rather than erase and exclude the results of this child’s enlightening work (Tribune). Through the information children were absorbing through society, it was proved that they held bias towards the Eurocentric view of beauty. In the 1940s, to realistically portray Black lives and provide representation for the Black community, Ebony magazine positively shifted America’s idea of Blackness.

Ebony Magazine
Ebony Magazine was created by the Black community in 1945 to provide positive representations of African American people in the United States. Ebony allowed the Black community to have a mass-market magazine of their own while displaying the reality of Black


lives. All of the magazine covers shown represent African American girls in the 1940s. Ebony worked to counteract the negative representations that were present in the media for many decades prior. The cover that read, “America’s first Negro woman judge,” gave girls a new definition of Black opportunity in America (e.g. see fig. 40). Before this magazine was created, most Black girls were used to the mammy stereotype that deemed all Black women as domestic workers.

The concern with adolescent sexuality was apparent for all young people in the 1940s. The cover that read, “What to teach youngsters about sex” (e.g. see fig. 41), reflected upon the concerns of white parents and society at this time. The concern over sex was directed towards both young Black and white people, although the addition of juvenile delinquency was more so focused on African Americans. This cover was actually directed towards the parents of these children based on the “how to teach” aspect. Significantly, the cover, “What’s your chance of getting married?” highlighted that girls, both Black or white, were getting married in their late teens to early twenties (e.g. see fig 42).

Overall, the magazine covers were trying to promote Black families as middle-class Americans. Ebony magazine finally gave Black people a positive platform where Blackness was respected and celebrated. Significantly, throughout all fifty covers from Ebony in the 1940s, these seven were the only representations of Black girls. Ebony displayed no representations of girls with very dark skin and promoted the image of Black girls having lighter skin tones. Perhaps due to the lack of darker-skinned girls, Ebony magazine might have been influenced by the colorist messages promoted in America during the 1940s.
Figure 43’s advertisement for skin lightening cream promoted women to “have the skin that men love” (How). This suggested that darker-skinned Black girls and women would be undesirable to men and in society. Plainly stating that one’s darker complexion would cause women to feel self-conscious and fear persecution from their loved ones, told the reader that Black skin was ugly and unwelcome (How). This theme was present in both the 1942 and 1958 photos by white-washing Black women to emulate white beauty in their advertisements.

Based on information from the study, “African American Adolescent Girls’ Beliefs About Skin Tone and Colorism," it was found that the foundation of colorism or skin tone bias was originally established by consensual or nonconsensual interracial relations between white owners and slaves. This created an intermixing of skin tones, facial features, hair textures, and most importantly, a divide between dark-skinned and light-skinned African American girls. Discrimination between both was constant but lighter-skinned girls got preferential treatment in comparison to darker-skinned girls. They learned bias within society while also receiving favoritism or exclusion within families. Colorist principles partially originated through maternal family figures (i.e. mothers, grandmothers, aunts) due to a domino effect of the engrained colorist belief to, “…associate negativity with darkness and to equate goodness with lightness” (Abrams). This perpetuation of core beliefs created by racism had a profound psychological effect on a developing African American girl. Darker-skinned African American girls faced greater bullying and less social and familial favoritism, while lighter-skinned African American girls were subjected to interracial exclusion. The gendered effects of colorism were amplified for girls due to predetermined beauty standards and preference for girls with light skin.

The study, “African American Adolescent Girls’ Beliefs About Skin Tone and Colorism" examined the spread of “colorist messages” and the perception of skin tone by African American girls (Abrams). A group of 30 adolescent African American girls, with ages ranging from 12-16 years old, were interviewed and put into focus groups. In order to ensure a non-biased study was being performed, the interviewer had a script, the questions provided were as impartial as possible, questions were based on prior theory, and the interviewer was a young adult African American.
American woman. The results of the study stated that in regards to skin tone and attractiveness, both boys and girls equated light skin as attractive and dark skin as unappealing. When focusing on skin tone, social standing, and education level, dark skin was seen as “lower class” while light skin was associated with wealth (Abrams). Lastly, participants defined people’s personality traits through skin tone. Results explained that they felt that lighter-skinned boys and girls were associated with conceitedness, while darker-skinned youth were “ghetto” in their behavior (Abrams). Through this study, it was concluded that “(a) Skin tone denotes attractiveness, (b) Skin tone denotes social standing and education level, and (c) Skin tone is associated with personality/behavioral traits” (Abrams). Based on “internalized stereotypical beliefs,” one’s skin tone negatively defined oneself and thus resulted in increased bullying and body modifications like skin lightening creams for African Americans. This ideal highlighted that secular and generational colorism had been continuous. The article concluded that it was important for future researchers to discover if African American girls of various skin tones internalized these colorist messages (Abrams). The popular children’s television show, The Magic School Bus, influenced multiple generations beginning in the late 20th century into the 21st century. The show's portrayal of Keesha, the only Black female, shifted from a darker skinned Black girl to a lighter-skinned Black girl. These slight changes in one's skin tone affected Black girls' perceptions of beauty and worthiness in America.

The Magic School Bus
The cartoon, The Magic School Bus, had a vast amount of diversity in its cast due to the influence of the executive producer, Debrah Forte. Forte took strides to incorporate those “at risk of ‘science avoidance’” (Scholastic). Although science was a perpetually white male-dominated field, Forte took it upon herself to challenge that norm by using children of color and girls in her show. Keesha, the only African American girl, was known as the overly intelligent character that always had a solution to the class’s problems (Scholastic). Unfortunately, although Forte worked to diversify cartoons in the late 20th century, the 2018 Netflix spin-off of The Magic School Bus contributed to the effects of colorism by re-editing Keesha’s skin tone to be lighter than the 1994 version of the show (Andreluewrites).

“Styled by Their Perceptions’: Black Adolescent Girls Interpret Representations of Black Females in Popular Culture”

The womanist study, “Styled by Their Perceptions’: Black Adolescent Girls Interpret Representations of Black Females in Popular Culture” was performed at a writing institute that examined how eight Black girls from the Midwest, ages 12-17, described the impact of media and their interpretation of Blackness. Black female characters like the stereotypical mammy,

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Jezebel, and Sapphire, directly influenced what society associated with Blackness and altered how Black girls learned to identify. Due to constant misrepresentation in media and the widely overlooked reality of Black girls and women, this study examined if the candidates identified with or opposed how Blackness was represented.

A candidate named Violet related Black media exposure to drama and violence. The candidate made a connection towards drama being profitable and interesting for audiences, while Black girls becoming educated would not be as captivating. Altogether when asked about how Black girls and women were represented in media, 64% of the 22 responses stated that Black girls were viewed negatively and were especially judged based on hair and demeanor, and were objectified (Muhammad).

Three of the girls interviewed explained that beauty standards were based on the Eurocentric view of beauty. “Bad hair” was associated with having tight coils and coarse textures. These African American girls with “bad hair” were bullied during their schooling by white children (Muhammad). Feeling othered for their hair type, they internalized that their hair was not attractive. Violet stated that Black girls should not be defined by their hair expression. Heather, another candidate, agreed with Violet’s opinion but added that a lot of Black girls and women believed that adhering to Eurocentric standards was considered to be more beautiful in media (Muhammad). These messages about hair greatly influenced how Black girls perceived beauty and identity within themselves.

Six participants felt that Black girls and women were displayed as “tough, angry, bossy, loud, or confrontational” (Muhammad). In reality, these negative attributes did not define all Black women. Another candidate said that Black girls were seen to be violent in regards to fighting in and out of school. Most of these examples of the Black demeanor came from
participants viewing television (Muhammad). They picked apart the Black female characters and labeled them as “ghetto” and “loud” (Muhammad). These allegations were associated with the Sapphire caricature. As a response, Dahlia wrote an essay to confront these stereotypical allegations. She said that Black girls could “reclaim authority to set their own standards of representation” (Muhammad). Dahlia’s ability to reflect rather than internalize media provided evidence to suggest that Black girls try to resist stereotypes being thrown at them.

Three out of the eight girls connected the sexualization and objectification to Black girls in music and in media outlets. They said Black girls and women were referenced as “hoes” and “bitches” through musical lyrics and were seen as sex symbols with accentuated breasts and butts (Muhammad). The sexualization of Black women fell under the Jezebel stereotype. Zinnia, another participant, tried to encourage other young Black girls to ignore the messages that suggested that they were toys and instead, strive toward self-definition (Muhammad).

Based on the reactions of how Black girls and women were viewed in media, it was evident that these eight Black girls did not want to be associated with stereotypes and opposed the way in which media represented them. The study encouraged these girls to use “their pens” as a form of resistance in order to rewrite how they have been identified in media (Muhammad).

**Conclusion**

Representation of African American girls and women within the 20th century was shown to have both negative and positive qualities. This paper was written to prove that these representations were not only present in American lives, but also had a profound impact on Black people. Growing up with images of famous stereotypes like the mammy, Sapphire, Jezebel, and picaninny negatively affected Black girls and women’s self-esteem and their idea of worthiness. The concept of Black inferiority was created by the white community and absorbed
into the Black identity. Colorism in media influenced Black girls and women’s perceptions of beauty and likeability based entirely on skin tone. It was evident that the impact and sheer amount of negative representations overwhelmed the attempts of positivity in the 20th century. The study, “Styled by Their Perceptions’: Black Adolescent Girls Interpret Representations of Black Females in Popular Culture,” acknowledged the othering of Black girls in America and within their own communities. Despite the adversity, they kept a positive outlook by encouraging girls to not judge each other based on uncontrollable physical traits or stereotypes in media. America’s advertisements promoting whiteness separated girls within their own race, despite the attempts to unify Black people under positive platforms like Ebony Magazine and The Bill Cosby Show. I wanted to create this paper to fight ignorance about Black representation in the 20th century especially in the white community. White people who continue to take racist action against Black people use deeply rooted stereotypes from America’s history and revive them in present-day America. By raising awareness of how historical racism came to be and evolved over time, people in 2021 can make deeper connections toward racial conflict and address their own personal biases that were passed down through each generation.
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