

I am Not Your Mammy: The Penalty for Failing to Be a Stereotype

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Of all the stereotypical images that exist about black women, it is the mammy that bothers me most. At every moment, I see her, whether it is in the glaring image of Aunt Jemima or the Pine-Sol cleaning woman, or Oprah, or more recently, Jennifer Hudson in her role in *Sex in the City*. I can't quite put my finger on what bothers me most. It could be that she is "dark-skinned, ever-smiling, diligent, and doting" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 28-29). Or maybe it is because she is "the suprahuman endurer, and the Christian hard worker" (Harris 1). Still, maybe I resent that she is "a perpetual giver and transforms herself as a surrogate to meet the needs of others . . . [and] silently concedes when you make unreasonable requests for which she will not be compensated or rewarded" (Boylorn 130).

But why am I bothered by a stereotype? Because as an African American woman, I am well aware of the impact that stereotypes have on the everyday lives of black women. hooks explains that "stereotypes are created to serve as substitutions, standing in for what is real" (38). Although the mammy is a fabrication, a myth of sorts, she has become a staple of the American imagination. This is dangerous, for as a stereotype it "not merely tells us how a culture 'sees' a group of people, [it] also tells us how a culture controls that group, how it bullies them into submitting to or evading the representations that haunt them" (Morgan and Bennett 490). Because these images are so prevalent and popular in the American psyche, they have come to dictate what people know about black women. As such, black women are expected to confirm this representation by enacting a stereotypical identity for the sake of others.

This is the reality that I am confronted with in the academy. I am supposed to be a mammy, the professional black woman whose career is supposed to take precedence over herself

and her family. I am supposed to be "strong, accommodating, eager to help, and always smiling" (Boylorn 135). I am supposed to have an unwavering commitment to my white family, the academy, even at the expense of my own black identity. I am supposed to be a faithful worker who performs under precarious conditions while being "prized for [my] fortitude, caring, selflessness, and seeming acceptance of subordination" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 29). I am supposed to do all these things, but I do not. I refuse to embrace this role. Thus, my purpose here is to highlight what happens to black women who thwart attempts to be made a mammy within the university.

With this aim, I use autoethnography to explore this topic. Autoethnography is "a way of connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis and Bochner 739). Denzin and Lincoln explain autoethnography best:

Autoethnography is setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections among life and art, experience and theory, evocation and explanation . . . and then letting it go, hoping for readers who will bring the same careful attention to your words in the context of their own lives. (208)

By using autoethnography, I draw on my own experience as a black mother academic to critically expose the penalties that arise when I refuse to play mammy to students and colleagues alike, preferring instead to be a maternal figure to my own children at home. As such, I highlight my efforts to acquire agency that have resulted in negative effects, including stress, a sullied reputation, and a stigma towards my research and myself. This essay brings these experiences to light, aiming to expose how the academy creates a hostile work environment that limits African American professors from successfully fulfilling their role as mother and academic.

Yet, I must admit, I write this paper cautiously, for I know too well the dangers that come about when truth is spoken to power, or as hooks calls "talking back". She writes, "Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible" (hooks 9). Hence, I am not writing this to be combative, or antagonistic, quarrelsome or contentious. Rather, I am writing this essay because my very survival depends on it. As there are material consequences for speaking such truths, and because I acknowledge and am familiar with the power dynamics, some of the experiences have been obscured to protect myself.

I'm not smiling

My daily experiences within the academy are often plagued by stereotypical assumptions. Upon meeting me, others often quip, "You look too young to be a professor". Or there is the occasional addressing of me as "sweetie" or "honey" by staff members. When I arrive to help students with advisement, I am often stopped and accosted by faculty members who want desperately to know my very purpose in being in the advisement office. They are shocked to learn that I am a faculty member as well. Associate Professor of Psychology, Dr. Carolyn West, can clearly relate to this problem, as she describes how she was mistaken as a waitress while attending an academic conference. She writes, "Many Black women professors have been mistaken for clerical staff and even prostitutes" (287). In fact, I have been misidentified as various people, including as a worker in building and grounds, a cafeteria server, and a reference librarian. When I am not mistaken as a student, I am often treated as such. The basic rudeness that comes from the staff in different offices is often stunted when I say I am Doctor. It is only when I put a handle to my name that I am greeted with basic human courtesy.

For instance, in my attempt to complete a grant application, I met with a grant officer just for routine clarification. Previously, we had only spoken by email. As I was nearing a deadline, I needed to speak in person to finish some last minute details. I arrived at the office, and knocked at the door. The grant officer momentarily looked up from her desk, and immediately told me to see a student worker if I needed help. Holding my bag of papers, I informed her that I had a ten o'clock appointment scheduled with her.

She began, "Oh, forgive me. You look so much like a student".

"Yes, I get that a lot," I replied.

We began the meeting, her sitting at her desk and me sitting in the chair in front of her holding my papers. We discussed budgets, deadlines, submission requirements, etc. Towards the end of the meeting, she abruptly asks, "What did you get your master's degree in?" Completely taken off guard, at first I struggled to answer this question. I completed a master's degree over 10 years ago. Even my doctorate that was completed three years after my master's degree seemed fuzzy.

But even more so, why was she asking this question? It was totally unrelated to our entire conversation about the grant. So, why did it matter? It was the absurdity of the question that through me off. And why had she assumed that I hadn't earned a doctorate? Why was my highest level of education automatically at a master's level? I wanted to blow her off in the same manner in which she had done me, and dismiss her without any explanation. But I knew that given my liminal status within the academy, I was not in the position to challenge her thought process. So, with a stern look of consternation, I gave her a quick one-word answer to her question. I bluntly replied, "English". Then, I gathered my belongings, thanked her for her time, and went back to my office to complete the application alone.

Some would have me believe that my experiences are based on my age, or simply because I look young to be in this profession. But let me switch the scenario: if I really did work for building and grounds, would I look too young then to sweep up trash or clean the bathrooms? If I served food to students, would I look too young then to dump bad food on trays? I think not. I think that it is easier for others to picture me in a menial, low paying, and low status job rather than as a professor. And to be quite honest, subservient and subjugated positions make others feel comfortable with black women.

Some of what I am discussing here can be attributed to gender based stereotypes, as women in general are thought to be more appealing, nicer, and a nurturer. But these things take on a relatively new dimension, and are further acerbated when one is a black woman who has a specific historical context of enslavement, a position as server and slave to a white establishment. But when I correct people on who I am, I am labeled as combative, or pushy. When I no longer smirk at their comments about my young appearance, I'm perceived as being harsh. When I insist on my name being pronounced correctly with doctor as the appropriate prefix, I am accused of being vain. They all want to know why I am not smiling. Aren't I happy?

I recall an instance where I was totally unrecognizable to a person that I had just recently facilitated an important meeting with, even to the point where the person blatantly announces to everyone, "I don't think I know you". When I assuredly corrected the person and reminded him of said meeting that we facilitated together, he tried covering his embarrassment by doing a weird word play on my name. In yet another meeting, the same person, who, by the way, is a dean and full professor, was facilitating a meeting when he abruptly stopped, smiled, and asked me, "What's your research area"?

Huh?! What? Again, I'm in the position of where I have to validate myself, almost as if to explain why I am in his presence. In essence, he is asking me who I am, and judging whether I have the right to be here. And again, I am limited in what I can say in my response, for I understand that the academy is a hostile place that marginalizes and oppresses black women, "a site where Black women negotiate White dominance" (Generett and Cozart 149). So just like before, I blew him a one-word answer. With a slight tilt of my head, I looked squarely at him and said, "Narrative". I provided no further explanation or context for my answer. Everyone was silent, making the moment very awkward. Yet, I did nothing. I did not attempt to fill the awkward silence with conversation. I didn't make it a priority to smile in order to make people comfortable. I refused to appear "happy, smart, and deferential" (Boylorn 130). I sat there, knowing that my response pitted my "elevated voice, default expression, and lack of interest in coddling strangers [as] attitudinal and abrasive (Boylorn 135). Clearly, I have to be on guard in the academy. And this creates unnecessary stress, undue burden, and a serious lack of trust. Still, I am not a mammy, and I am not smiling.

I'm not self-sacrificing

If it were left to the academy, I wouldn't be a mother at all, just a typical asexual mammy. In many ways, it refuses to acknowledge that I am one, leaving me to pick up the pieces of my life and make them fit. For instance, meetings are often haphazardly scheduled, even during off-peak hours (5 or 6 in the evening). I have to negotiate class schedules that fit within the daycare and public school system hours. When a conflict in time is noted, it is always assumed that it is me, the oftentimes lone mother of the group, despite the fact that there are male professors who are fathers in the same group. Croom and Patton note that "women must balance their multiple roles, in and out of the academy, with little in the way of institutional support" (27). I am very

familiar with the lack of support when it comes to being a mother in the academy. Imagine, for instance, my surprise at learning that my maternity leave was thought of as "time off" by many a colleague. Their sentiments echo that of Meghann Foye, the author of the controversial new novel, *Meternity*, which advocates for a maternity leave for non-parents. Critics have lambasted the author, citing that Foye's book "perpetuates the damaging myth that maternity leave is a vacation instead of a sleepless marathon of feeding, changing and soothing a helpless human being" (Vitto). I would soon come to realize that this assertion pales in comparison to the outcome of my maternity leave.

I had just given birth to a beautiful baby boy in mid-August, just before fall semester. Through the union, I had 16 weeks of maternity leave. I intended to use all of my time for just that: uninterrupted time of being a mom. My maternity leave came on the heels of my being awarded a fellowship grant that allowed me to work on publications as an initiative to help junior faculty. Highly competitive and selective, this program served as a mentorship/writing program that brought together junior faculty from around the city for at least two Fridays out of the month. At the time, I didn't see how this program and my maternity leave related. I would soon find out.

While on maternity leave, I was emailed and called by the administration to question my performance (or lack thereof) of my committee duties while completing the fellowship program. Apparently, the administration forgot that I was even awarded the fellowship. They instead complained amongst themselves and senior faculty members that I failed to do my job at the institution. The phone call and email was to find out why. After explaining that I was awarded the fellowship leave that prevented me from attending and participating in committee service, my valid explanation did little to change the tone of the conversation. I knew something was wrong.

When I returned from maternity leave, I was half-heartedly greeted with sarcasm and disingenuous well wishes. Upon noticing the coldness of some of my colleagues, I inquired about this mood to a good friend and colleague. I remember asking, "Why does it seem like people feel some type of way toward my being gone, or my returning"? She hesitantly replied, "Well, people are saying that you don't do anything. That you don't participate on committees, perform service opportunities, or do any of the duties that you were hired to do". I was floored. And what's worst is that this perception was rampant throughout my department. Not only was it simply inaccurate, it had taken hold of my image at work. It was given a sort of truth. Having a damaged image can be quite dangerous in a career where advancement is largely decided by other faculty members.

And what makes this ever more challenging is that I was criticized for not attending meetings or performing my academic duties during my fellowship grant and while on maternity leave. This was so disturbing, as I don't recall this happening when other colleagues, those not of color, have given birth and returned to work. In fact, I remember the jubilee in the department when those women announced their pregnancy, received some sort of recognition for it (whether it be a gift card, or a standing ovation), and returned to work joyously showing pictures of the baby, and sometimes, with the actual baby. Why was I, then, being penalized for having a baby? It eerily reminds me of Boylorn's statement regarding black women in the academy, "When she makes babies, you shake your head in disapproval" (130).

And what was my recourse? I have no power within the academy. I occupy the lowest rank as assistant professor. Williams writes, "Emerging scholars of color are disadvantaged in challenging the authority of those in power because the power differential is so broad" (89). Generett and Cozart remind me that "Black women are concentrated among the lowest

professional ranks, are promoted at a slower rate, receive the lowest salaries, and teach only part-time" (148). In the face of what seems insurmountable odds, what do I do, knowing that I occupy such a perilous position within the academy?

Well, I dealt with the snide remarks, the looks of disgust, and continued with my duties.

But I refused to placate to people's perception. I made no attempts to provide some kind of grandiose explanation for my absence. I made no attempts to compensate or make amends for my lack of service while on leave. Doing so would imply that I had done something wrong, and I profusely rejected that idea. I didn't feel the need to appease anyone. So, those impromptu social gatherings at bars at 7 o'clock in the evening that I had to unfortunately miss would not cause me undue stress. The scheduled department events that occurred off campus that would result in me being late to retrieve my children would proceed without me. Those moments of collegiality that my tenure and promotion depended on would be few and far between. They would have to fit within my schedule of being a mother to two children, and not a mammy to an institution. By embracing my motherhood status, I am in essence, rejecting the mammy image. I relate my experience to that of First Lady Michelle Obama, who was criticized for embracing her role as "mom-in-chief". She refuses to place the public sphere ahead of her role as mother, opting instead to be an active mother to Sasha and Malia. Querusio writes, "Obama actively subverts the historical traditions of black women having to compromise their motherhood due to white patriarchal supremacy and provides black women with a new model to follow" (57). This is what I intend to follow.

I have already experienced the penalty of being a mother, and not a mammy, just from the gossip alone that ensued when I returned from maternity leave, and by my refusal to respond or appease people. By refusing to be "compliant and willingly submit without complaining"

(Boylorn 130), I chose to put the needs of my own family ahead of the needs of the university. By refusing to align myself as one of those contemporary mummies who are "designed to invisibly and uncomplainingly support a social order that regards them as an exploitable source of labor" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 29), I embraced my responsibilities as both mother and academic. I'd rather be judged by my work and less about my ability to be a faithful worker who accommodates others at the expense of my own happiness. As a result, I'm perceived as being less invested in the institution, and less committed to the work we do here. This affects my role on committees and service opportunities, especially those that involve leadership positions. Despite it all, I remain committed to my stance. I am not a mammy, and I'm not self-sacrificing.

I'm not silent

Despite the perception, I am an avid researcher, indicated by the plethora of publications I have garnered over the years. Most of them are single authored, as they employ autoethnography as the methodology. Autoethnography's intent is to provide scholarly space to the lived experiences of the underrepresented, oppressed, and marginalized. Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis define autoethnographic stories as "artistic and analytical demonstrations of how we come to know, name, and interpret personal and cultural experiences" (1). Short, Turner, and Grant go further, writing that autoethnographies are "creatively written, detailed, local and evocative first person accounts of the relationship between personal autobiography and culture" (2-4). Although developed as a liberatory method, African American women seldom use autoethnography as an investigative tool, aside from a relatively few (Boylorn 2008; Durham 2004; Ferdinand 2014; Griffin 2012; Hendrix 2011). Griffin supposes that black women have been conditioned to believe that their lived experiences are unimportant, and may have likely experienced repercussions when they have spoken their truth. Furthermore, as academicians,

black women struggle in terms of being recognized and accepted as capable scholars; as such, many refuse to use autoethnography for fear of reprisal for publishing research on lived experience, especially those impacted by race. In an effort to address the scant representation of the lives of African American mothers, I continue to pursue this line of research. This places my research in a very unique position, as it encourages a systemic change in the way knowledge is constructed, and it challenges hegemonic discourses that continue to exclude the voices of African American women.

This is where my intentions and the academy collide. The academy is hostile to the realities of black women academics. Generett and Cozart state, "For many Black women our intellectual ideas and sensibilities, often rooted in our identities and lived experiences, are rarely evenly exchanged within academia" (143). In fact, research by and about black women is often devalued. Houston and Davis write, "Black women's texts are much more welcomed in higher education classrooms than Black women themselves" (9). I didn't want to believe this until I encountered it for myself.

Oftentimes, among colleagues, we would attend meetings geared toward helping and encouraging faculty with their research goals. In such meetings, we would explore our research, and offer advice or suggestions when necessary. At one particular meeting, I remember the reception that my research received.

I sat in a small room at a circular table while listening attentively as one by one each person discussed his or her research. I noted the ways in which they were often handed very good advice, sources to seek out, ways of expanding the research, and even possible publication outlets. This made me very excited about presenting my own research.

I slowly took out my notes, and began briefly discussing my research on black motherhood. I talked about my impending plans to write a book, *Things I Tell My Daughter*, about the experiences of being a black mother to a black daughter in today's turbulent times. I talked about how my research focuses on lived experiences, and how it sheds light on an often neglected aspect of research: the experiences of black women. I finished thinking that I had adequately explained myself, autoethnography, and my future goals in publishing. Unfortunately, I was taken aback by the comments of the senior faculty, the organizers.

In an authoritative voice, she laments, "This isn't research. This is about your life. What makes this publishable"?

"Well," I said. "There is a big push now for lived experiences. Autoethnography is used nearly in every discipline. Plus, there is precedent for my research. In fact..."

I'm abruptly interrupted by a supposedly, more rational approach by the co-organizer.

He starts, "You will probably need to sell your scholarship because it may be perceived that you are just writing about yourself. There is likely a better way to explore race than to use your own personal life. Besides, it's not really related to literature".

He, with the supposedly cooler approach, nods at the original offender, assuring her that he has taken care of the problem.

I know the criticisms leveled at autoethnography, with claims of narcissism and self-indulgence, but these people were making claims about me as the subject of research, not my methodology. In fact, they were more concerned that I broached issues of race and gender than any mention of autoethnography. Apparently, the academy's henchmen had determined that my research was unimportant, uninteresting, and made no valuable contribution to the discipline. In an effort to keep me in my place, they most assuredly judged my value and worth as a researcher

by upholding the rigid academic research standards that oftentimes exclude black women. These are the same colleagues that teach novels by Alice Walker. They attend conferences where they discuss the works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. They regard Toni Morrison as one of the greatest living writers. Apparently, these colleagues are more apt at accepting fictional stories told about black women's lives than the real one that I tell about mine.

I politely responded, "No, this is the line of research that I conduct and that I will continue. I don't feel the need to sell it, not then, and not now".

A hush fell over the room. What seemed like minutes later, a colleague said, "Let's move on".

I could feel the tension in the room as I sat quietly and pretended to follow the discussion. But it was apparently clear that the meeting was over. No one put as much effort into the responses as before. I sat there, calm and confident, while the organizers stewed with anger.

And I knew what bothered them most about this moment: my inability to keep silent and take orders. They'd rather I accepted their opinion as proclamation by diligently listening to their advice and acknowledging it as universal truth. It is as Boylorn says of black women: "She is often silent, but when she speaks, her voice reverberates and either causes calm or disillusionment" (130). Apparently, I had caused the later. It is mammy who would accommodate them. It is mammy who would shrill at the thought of ever taking an authoritative position against whites. It is mammy who would rather suffer in silence than to appear as too outspoken. It is mammy who would nurture the egos of these people.

So, did I change my research agenda? No. And I don't feel alone. In fact, I'm following in the footsteps of other black women scholars. Croom and Patton write, "Black women faculty members are often engaged in research that examines and illuminates social issues in their

communities and they use non-traditional epistemological, methodological, and theoretical paradigms" (18). With this keen awareness, I continue to use autoethnography to explore various aspects of my life. But I no longer attend those meetings. All those missed opportunities of collegiality, which could have possibly led to future collaborations, mentoring relationships, or academic support network were blown up in smoke that day. Still, I am not a mammy, and I will not be silent.

I'm not invisible

My freedom begins by speaking truth to power. It is my truth that I am expected to perform as a mammy within the academy. It is my truth that there is a serious backlash when I refuse this role. All of this has a cumulative effect on my experience as a black woman academic. So, why make this a career? Answer: because someone is coming behind me. I'm sure there is a future English professor in Rajah coming soon, or a Sheniquah almost graduating with a degree in Communication Studies, or likely a Monique somewhere already making plans for her life in an Economics department. Someone has to be there. Carroll writes of the lack of black women faculty members in the academy, lamenting that "there is no one with whom to share experiences and gain support, no one with whom to identify, no one of whom an African American woman can model herself" (120). This makes my role more important, as I could possibly be a mentor to them. Hamlet writes that "a significant factor necessary for contributing to the survival and success of African American women in the academy is having a mentor to lessen the feelings of isolation, and to advance and enhance their careers" (301). Hence, a mentor is desperately needed for the success of black women, not a mammy.

I hope they come in already knowing that although the academy has become more accessible to black women, Cole finds, "It is critically important to acknowledge the obvious:

that being present in a college or university does not mean that one is welcomed, given the support needed to gain tenure [or promotion], or paid equally for equal work" (231). They will have to encounter the difficulty of maneuvering through an environment where they are not welcomed, but they know they belong.

What they don't arrive already knowing, they can learn from my experience. Maybe they will embrace the idea that there is no clear trajectory or path to follow, that there are multiple layers of experiences, problems, and obstacles, that they will be confronted with daily. Maybe they will not be dismayed to learn that being black adds an extra layer of everything, that they will be penalized for doing their job and told to do more without any specifics or clear recommendations. Maybe they will be cautious about their invisibility and silence in an effort to keep others from usurping their authority. Even considering all of this, there are no guarantees. Generett and Cozart write, "I followed the rules by serving on committees, publishing articles, teaching students, supervising, advising, smiling, listening, and cautiously sharing my opinion. In the end, following the rules is not enough if someone with greater authority can change the rules at will (142). So, in a lot of ways, they will have to find their own recourse as well. I can tell them of the barriers. But they will have to figure out how to overcome them.

Just in case they don't. Just in case it becomes too hard to do. Just in case they find themselves in a bit of a dilemma, or find themselves teetering on the edge, they can employ one of the suggestions that Thomas and Hollenshead note for black women to resist oppression: "[share] stories of oppression in communities of resistance"(169). Assuredly, this won't be an easy task, for the truth can be one of the hardest things to tell because it is not universal. It is especially difficult when one lacks power or prestige.

So, to Rajah, Sheniquah, and Monique and all the other black women proceeding me: I write this piece with you in mind, hoping that one day you attain some piece of freedom, some moment of truth telling, and some escape from dull imaginaries. Like Griffin, my work "is dedicated to every woman of color who has had to bite her tongue so hard that it bleeds to protect her body, mind, soul, loved ones, livelihood, or even her life" (139).

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