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With its tough exterior and essence of indestructible superhuman strength, on the surface of the Strong Black Woman (SBW) stereotype is a fleeting compliment that co-workers, family and friends reserve as verbal certificates and congratulatory notions of strength and acknowledgement to the collective resilience of Black women. However, guised with adoration and superficial empowerment, for centuries this colonialist racist white supremacist society has been able to use the SBW stereotype to applaud the Black woman for how well she keeps her dynamic emotions and complex issues from being expressed and affecting the lives of other people while simultaneously knocking her down, exploiting her labour, working overtime to destroy her worth and consistently broadcasting on a global level that she has no value. The SBW stereotype is a trap that disables and dehumanizes Black women. It is a colonial chain that derives from the mammy caricature that feeds on the myth of the infinitely independent Black woman who does not need no one and their help because "she got this!". Tamara Winfrey Harris defines this stereotype to a dime in Bitch Magazine:

We are the fighters and the women who don’t take shit from no man. We are the sassy women with the sharp tongues and hands firmly on our hips. We are the ride-or-die chicks. We are the women who have, like Sojourner Truth, “plowed and planted and gathered into barns and no man could head me.” We are the mothers who make a way out of no way. On TV, we are the no-nonsense police chiefs and judges. We are the First Ladies with the impressive biceps (2015).

The SBW stereotype feeds on the Black woman’s ancestral resilience. She is a single mother who is able to manage her household while working multiple jobs or is on welfare struggling but manages to make ends meet to feed her babies. Or she is highly educated, a workaholic with a sorry sex life who will never marry, even the men of her own race won’t marry her because she is too hard to love. Or she does have a remarkable love and sex life….and maybe it really doesn’t matter what she does and how she lives her life because the Black woman’s existence in a colonial context has been constructed in such a dynamic that she is by default a natural endurer of stress and pain as she carries on the onerous weights and trickle down effects of society’s oppressive systems. In the words of Zora Neale Hurston in *Their Eyes were Watching God*, “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see” (1990: 44). And she must mule alone. Here is where the myth of independence is converged with the SBW stereotype. This paper seeks to critically analyze the ways in which the myth of independence complimented by that of the SBW stereotype works to disempower the Black woman by pathologizing her human emotions, limitations, and vulnerabilities, creating barriers that stunt access to mental health resources and support, and subsequently deeming her as undesirable.

It is imperative to study how the naturalization and normalization of the violent white supremacist colonial state makes it easy to pathologize and locate a site of one dimensionality within Black women’s bodies through the essence of the SBW stereotype. In fact, this stereotype has become a principle aspect of Black womanhood granting Black women the foundational tools to navigate white supremacist society while not being a liability to that society. The values
that are associated with the SBW stereotype are so covertly enforced by that of white supremacy that they have grown strong roots in the Black community as a key to survival in a white world. The trauma caused by that of slavery that was endured by Black families relied on the need to groom Black girls into inheriting “survival response to an existence rife with violence, exploitation, and oppression... Today, Black women no longer have to contend with institutionalized chattel slavery, but they do have to contend with such significant intersectional stressors as racialized sexism and gendered racism” (Donovan, 2015, p. 386). The need to transform Black women into the superhuman persona that is the SBW stereotype derived from this historical context. The white supremacist society tells the Black woman that despite the exploitation, abuse, and (spiritual, mental, and physical) death that is her environment, that is her life, she is stronger because of it and that makes her a Strong. Black. Woman. Nevermind society holding itself accountable to being the problematic cause of her adaptable strength.

The naturalizing and normalizing of the systematic abuse that infiltrates the community, homes and lives of Black women make constant dealings with stress, emotional strife, and perpetual independence seem ordinary. Emotional containment or numbness, silver-lined with a steady stream of self-reliance and perseverance becomes a learnt routine at an early age. The SBW learns that her needs always comes behind the needs of others who can be sure she will mother them, sacrifice her time for them as well as provide any type of support which is never too small nor too big. Even if it seems impossible. And she doesn’t expect nothing in return. Even if it may break her. She is her own responsibility so she must support herself. She does not get exhausted from the challenges life may throw her way and she never complains. Her seeming ability to operate unremittingly is her grace. She doesn’t complain. She doesn’t cry. And if she does, it is not done in the vicinity of others.

The ways in which the SBW stereotype predisposes the humanity of the Black woman

leaves her emotionally zombified and disabled. She is supposed to be perpetually on guard emotionally and invulnerable to
those around her. Showing signs of stress and emotionality paints the Black woman as weak, needy, or in search of attention. Seeking validity from others is seen as a sign of low self-esteem. The world has been conditioned to see the Black woman as better endurers of distress and immediate healers from trauma than that of other women. In fact, through the initial creation of the SBW stereotype during slavery, this conditioning served as justification for white people’s violence against Black women;

The idea that Black female slaves were strong enough to endure any pain and keep on going justified slaveowners’ abuses, including rape: The Black woman’s mythic ‘strength’ became a convenient justification for everyatrocity committed on her (Wyatt, 2008, p. 60).

The mythic ‘strength’ that is used as justification for the horrible abuses done to the Black woman was given life through that of the Jezebel caricature which aided in the disposal of the Black woman’s humanity in processes of her being hyper-sexualised. This form of dehumanization aided in erasing her emotions and the mental health that is intricately tied to her humanity.

Aided by that of the psychiatric channels of the larger colonial institution that make up the white supremacist society, the Black woman experiences a certain mapping of madness unto her body that not only pathologizes her human emotions but also works to distort her anger, pain and suffering. The close linkage between the derogatory essence of the “angry black woman” trope and the SBW stereotype traverse here, illustrating the limitations of “our ability to emote as [Black] women, as if the only emotion we can express is anger and our only quality is strength” (Sinclair 2015). Here, the links between the SBW and the Sapphire caricature are evident as they are both seen as inherent characteristics of Black womanhood and femininity. The Black woman is represented to be either too mad or too strong, her presence is constructed as one that is always hyper-visible leaving no room for acknowledgement of her organic human complexity and nuance. What is even more dangerous about the SBW stereotype is that the Black woman often times may bend herself backwards to fit the distortion in order to fit acceptable im-
ages of Black womanhood in pursuance of survival and success in contemporary society.

The ways in which this global racist white supremacist society has made the Black woman disposable has forced the Black women to mold herself to resemble the qualities of a rock for her and her community. But this doesn’t ensure survival. And if survival is attained, pieces of the Black woman’s sanity and humanity have been lost along the journey. The SBW stereotype puts Black women in the peril of mental health issues. It is particularly sadistic how the SBW stereotype psychologically conditions the Black woman into believing that her feelings and emotions as a human being are not valid while simultaneously exploiting her labour and her victories under oppression. This conditioning also indoctrinates her into believing that seeking mental health is a sign of deficiency and so the

[Black] women may perceive professional psychological services to facilitate emotional expression, a consequence that is inconsistent with the expectations of strength, self-reliance, and self silence germane to the SBW race-gender schema. Unfortunately, avoiding behaviors that facilitate emotional expression—such as seeking professional psychological services—along with the pressure to be strong and self-reliant could exacerbate symptoms of anxiety and depression.” (Watson 2015: 605).

The stigma towards asking for help, although destructive, fosters silent perseverance from Black women. However, this silence runs deeper than the stigma itself and the colonial history of medical and mental health institutions are to blame.

Not only do mental health institutions lack the compatible knowledge to deal with the junction of sexual uniqueness and cultural/racial disposition that compose the identity of Black womanhood in a colonial context, they perpetuate madness and stereotypes unto her body through “myths of female hysteria and myths of Black savagery and sub-rationality” (Bruce 2012, p. 371). Mental health resources are much less available, accessible and reflective of the dark skinned Black woman, the Black woman in poverty, the queer Black
woman, Black women with disabilities, the fat Black woman, the list goes on as these institutions not only lack a decolonial framework of doing mental health to subvert colonial notions of madness and the stereotype of the SBW, but also lack the understanding of the nuance that comes with intersection in Black womanhood. In addition, whilst using the SBW trope as justification for their actions, mental health institutions have acquired a violent colonial history of experimenting on Black women’s bodies as seen with the ‘Father of Gynaecology’, Dr J Marion Sims, whose “fame and fortune were a result of unethical experimentation with powerless Black women” (Ojanuga 1993, p. 30). It is imperative to recognize how mental and medical institutions are channels of colonial advancement. These violent experiments practiced on Black women in the name of ‘advancement’ have cultivated intergenerational fear, suspicion and ultimately, as previously mentioned, a devastating stigma against mental institutions in Black communities. Therefore, by virtue of its intended function the Strong Black woman stereotype continues to plight the Black woman whilst attacking her gender and sexuality in the absence of sustainable mental health support.

In a white supremacist world where the ideal representation of femininity is the white woman, the Black woman is deemed undesirable as per the white supremacist racial binary and the concept of Black inferiority. In the context of a white supremacist patriarchy the Black woman is too strong to be seen as vulnerable, which in the narrow white supremacist construction of gender paints her as a bearer of masculine essence--NOT a endurer of oppressive systems that need to be dismantled. In fact, this aspect of the SBW stereotype not only attacks the Black woman but also entraps her Black male counterpart infusing dysfunction between them at a very intimate level. At its full capacity,

the “weak Black man” and “strong Black woman” constitute a binary in which each term is dependent on the other to define it. In turn, the pair “weak man/strong woman” functions in a binary opposition with the pair dominant man/submissive woman. The submissive woman and dominant man are white, and right: the message is, you have to be white to be a “real” man or a “real” woman
The race and gender dispositions of which Black men and women are forced to exist in uphold notions of the ideal forms of gender and racial superiority in the embodiment of whiteness. The internalization of these oppressive gender dispositions socially impairs Black people as a collective and as a result there are political effects: The anger that could energize protests against the unjust allocation of resources in a racist society is diverted into conflict between [Black] men and women [and people], dividing them from each other and thus preventing the solidarity needed for collective resistance...[it is a] most urgent appeal that [Black people] recognize the racist content of cultural representations of Black men and women, resist internalizing them, and thus free themselves to see one another in honest and loving ways, reversing the process of dehumanization associated with oppression (Wyatt, 2008, pg. 55)

The anger that is implanted in Black communities by that of white supremacist divide and conquer tactics and racist nomenclatures meant to turn Black people against each other could very well be useful to disrupt ideas of individualism and foster ideas of community. Coming together for the righteous purpose of liberation from colonial dispositions of Black inferiority and dismantling white supremacy could help promote a self-determining future and decolonized sense love that which expands beyond white supremacist normalizations and lack of understanding of what love looks like between Black people.

One of the things that helps to keep the SBW stereotype alive is the adoption of white supremacist capitalist notions of individualism and individual success in Black communities. This ideology of individualism works for those whose collective peoples do not have oppressive systems to surpass in order to ensure intergenerational and communal advancement in society. However, for the Black community this is not the case. The independence of the SBW would not have to be embraced if the myth of individual autonomy was demystified and replaced with ideologies of transformative communal agency. For Black people the myth of independence works as an
illusion of freedom, however this rhetorical freedom does not get achieved by all, simply by some. This is seen in figures like Oprah and Beyoncé where their individual “STRONGBLACKWOMAN” success stories do not trickle down into Black communal agency that would insulate Black communities against that of the total empire and religion of white supremacy. The myth is akin to claims of a post racial society in a society that continues to maintain itself through the means of a racial hierarchy. By disabling the Black community, the myth of independence has corrupted the ability to build systems of interdependence.

Moving away from the glamorized myth of independence and individualism, the embrasure of interdependency would be a radical act of resistance for Black people because out of the many gifts our ancestors have given us aside from survival is each other. In conjunction with this, Black womanhood, which is so often defined by ability of strength and overcoming hardship, would be insulated from the colonial mappings of the disabling notion of the SBW stereotype and the racist innuendos that trail along with it. In addition, interdependency could be used as a powerful tool for healing. Nobody understands the dynamic ways in which Black women hurt and the trauma in which that are reminded to us by the SWB stereotypes other than ourselves. No colonial mental institution can help us heal from violence that it has had a huge part in instigating. We can turn to ourselves to heal not just mentally and emotionally, but as well as spiritually if we spotlight and put into praxis the ideology of interdependence. Lastly, by turning to ourselves and healing our women we heal the various intersections that make up whole and complete Black communities. This has the potential to be pan-African movement. Ultimately, this is just one of the single greatest things that could potentially destroy the white supremacist empire and the power it exerts over us and representations of who we are.

References


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**Bio**

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