

## ABSTRACT

### 'TAMING OF THE SHREW': DIALECTICS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN'S RAGE IN DOMINANT AMERICAN FILMIC DISCOURSE

By Nannie Natisha Reed

This paper is an analysis of the depiction of African-American women's rage in mainstream American film. The thesis analyzes the films *Coffy*, *The Color Purple*, *Waiting to Exhale*, and *Two Can Play That Game*. The paper focuses on the negative images of African-American women's rage in film. It then contextualizes those images within a racist and sexist paradigm. An ideological analysis is used in this paper as well as a Black Feminist theoretical critique.

**‘TAMING OF THE SHREW’: DIALECTICS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN  
WOMEN’S RAGE IN DOMINANT AMERICAN FILMIC DISCOURSE**

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Nannie Natisha Reed

Miami University

Oxford, Ohio

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Advisor \_\_\_\_\_  
Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis

Reader \_\_\_\_\_  
Ronald Scott

Reader \_\_\_\_\_  
Robert Vogel

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## **DEDICATION/ACKNOWLEDEMENT**

I dedicate this thesis to all women of African descent.

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## INTRODUCTION

In *Waiting to Exhale*, Bernie (Angela Basset) responds to her husband's revelation that he is leaving her for his European-American mistress by stripping his closet of every solitary item, dragging them into his BMW parked out front and setting the car and its contents on fire. In doing so, she revealed the quintessential filmic depiction and historical characterization of African-American women's rage. While the scene became a rallying point for many women, it also illustrated the anger that African-American women allegedly harbor. This stereotype of the angry African-American woman is a staple in filmic texts, in literature, and in the consciousness of American society. The depiction of African-American women's rage is grossly misrepresented within mainstream films and the effect of that distortion is to silence and cripple African-American women's efforts in their fight for equality. In *Coffy*, *The Color Purple*, *Waiting to Exhale*, and *Two Can Play That Game*, the negative way of framing African-American women's rage in these films is indicative of the ways in which African-American women and their rage are perceived in general.

What is this rage? Is it justifiable or an overreaction? Why is this type of rage associated with African-American women? In many portrayals of African-American women's rage, violence is almost never absent. Since African-American women are already denigrated and historically thought of as unfeminine because of their status in society, their rage is depicted as a natural extension of their proclivity towards aggression and violence and of their status as less feminine. In Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American women, Patricia Morton quotes Michelle Wallace as saying that "the [Black American woman] is less of a woman in that she is less 'feminine' and helpless"( 6) By expressing their rage, they further defy the stereotypical images of femininity as based in passivity and acquiescence. Raging African-American women are associated with masculinity rather than femininity, which further pushes them away from the realm of the feminine and its ideological benefits.

African-American women have historically been devalued by society because they remain linked to their history as slaves and second-class American citizens. When the dominant group depicts African-American women's reactions as severe emotional overreactions, they use these images crafted through a history of racism and sexism as tools in the devaluation process. Although women of all races are portrayed as deviant when they become aggressive or violent, African-American women's depiction, because of their status as historically outside of "the feminine", is even more denigrating according to critical Black Feminist scholars including bell hooks, Patricia Hill-Collins, and others. Manatu writes in African-American Women and Sexuality in the Cinema that "having aligned White women to ideas of delicacy and sexual purity, the White female form [has] come to represent universally "the feminine" as well as the cultural standardized ideal of beauty; Black women's bodies on the other hand, would come to be viewed as symbols of sexual excess, unattractiveness, and immorality-as the deviant sexual 'other'." (19) Images of African-American women during slavery presented them as hyper-sexual beings such as jezebels and under-sexed beings such as mammies and matriarchs "because no matter how virtuous the black woman, no matter how feminine, she is more likely than not to be viewed as hypersexed because black women's virtue has no place in "the feminine" mythos of U. S. Culture." (19)

Instead of becoming less relevant and dominant, these old images have simply mutated and become more insidious. There may be few overt filmic depictions of the nagging, nappy-haired, Aunt Jemina-like African-American woman, but many modern images of African-American women are more or less sanitized versions of these prototypic figures. She may have long straight hair and conjugate her verbs correctly, but the depiction of her idiosyncrasies and her attitude typically keeps her connected to the "lower-class". Even upper-class African-American women are represented as always being willing and able to transgress upper-class social morays by resurrecting what is perceived as the unsophisticated, uneducated, and underprivileged behavior of the Black ghetto that lies dormant within them. Even upper-class African-American women are never really trusted to "act like a lady". A prime example is found in *Two Can Play That Game* when Shante (Vivica A. Fox), who is an upper-class African-American woman, resorts to punching Connie (Gabrielle Union) in the face at a work-related social function

because Connie is flirting with her boyfriend. Prior to the confrontation, this type of behavior is completely out of character for Shaunte, especially in that environment, but it is depicted as “natural” for this African-American woman to make a seamless transition from up-scale corporate image to “ghetto” thug. She physically assaulted a guest at her company’s high profile promotional party. This type of “street response” to conflict is often expected of African-American women in film. The way she turns to speak to the audience just before she punches Connie shows that Shante opts to shed her professional persona( read White) in order to address the situation. When Shante looks at the camera, she warns the audience that the behavior she wants to engage in is not recommended and certainly not proper. When the audience thinks that she is about to remain professional about the situation, Shante turns to us and says” but I don’t like this Bitch”. Her voice changes from the stereotypical professional one( read White) to one that is less professional( read Black). She exchanges her softer, more reserved demeanor that is connected to her impeccable pronunciation and word choice to adopt a more threatening tone that is designed to indicate the severity of the situation. As she slips into pronunciations that are indicative of traditional and highly stereotypical speech patterns of African-Americans, her facial expressions change to indicate that she is no longer “Ms. Nice Girl”. Through conscious efforts Shaunte’s character makes a transformation. Her transformation is a symbolic one. She is disassociating herself from any categories of femininity in order to take on very traditionally masculine traits. She intends to “teach Connie a lesson” through this violent display. They, in a sense, engage in a battle over sexual and social territory. Shaunte starts to behave in a way that is stereotypical of male dominance and bravado. As she gloats into the camera prior to the altercation, she is epitomizing and embodying this notion of brutality and fierce egotistical competition that is associated with masculinity. She symbolically “beats her chest” with this “look at my dominance” posturing which is reminiscent of Muhammad Ali’s antics in his hey-day. She then turns and punches Connie. This type of aggressiveness in African-American women has become their modus operandi in popular media depictions. Moreover, through this imagery, they are further removed from the realm of “the feminine”. They are not “proper” ladies. They are presented as mere imitations. They are not imitations because of the fight. Many filmic depictions of European-American women have shown

them fighting in front of an audience. They are imitations of femininity because of the way in which they sometimes engage in battle. Shaunte did not simply rip Connie's dress or pour a punch bowl over her head. She punched Connie like a man would have punched someone.

These perceived notions of them, such as lacking femininity, undercut African-American women's response to the oppression they face at the hands of African-American men and European-American women and men. When they express grievances, African-American women are not taken seriously. The dominant society's response to their voice indicates that they are undervalued. Even in the news media, African-American women do not get the same sympathies as European-American women often get under the same circumstances. A glaring example of this is the little attention paid to Shoshana Johnson. How many have heard of Shoshana Johnson, the African-American woman who was Jessica Lynch's counterpart in captivity, versus how much attention was given to the latter? In his article "Jessica Lynch is everywhere, but where is Shoshana Johnson?", Eugene Kane writes, "for many, what Lynch and Johnson represent is the troubling affirmation that, even in times of war, some Americans are deemed more worthy than others."<sup>(1)</sup> These stark inequalities are seldom the focus in mainstream media because "normal" ways of framing important news items privilege European-Americans. African-American women, with the exception of Julie Dash, Ayoka Chenzira and a few others, are not creators of film. The world of film directing, writing, and producing is almost completely dominated by people who are European-American and male. They are the ones who create images.

African-American women like Hattie McDaniel and Halle Berry win Oscars for portraying lower-class women like maids and sluts, while European-American women like Julia Roberts and Reese Witherspoon are awarded Oscars for playing working-class heroines and devoted wives and mothers. If winning the Oscar is indicative of how plausible a performance is, then what does that say about the ways in which the larger society sees these denigrated roles as "natural" and believable for African-American women? Is it possible for the mainstream to view overweight, dark-skinned African-American women as something besides happy darkies? Can thin, lighter-skinned African-American women be interested in something besides sex and its appeal? Can they be



more than tragic mulattoes? It is not so plausible for the mainstream, however, to connect a poor African-American woman with notions of morality and the purity of motherhood. It is less “believable” that African-American women can depict femininity and sexuality that is not debased.

This thesis analyzes the filmic depiction of African-American women’s rage and the representation of that rage as outside of the established parameters of acceptable feminine behavior. This analysis examines several films from 1973 to 2001 because I wanted to analyze the representations over a long span of time in an attempt to safe-guard my analysis from focusing only on present-day films. I hope to begin my film analysis during the Blaxploitation era, an era in which there was a surge in films about African-Americans. That era has had lasting effects on the way in which African-American women are portrayed in film today. I also wanted to select a popular film from each era to track the images of African-American women’s rage over time. I am interested in what images have survived time? What has changed in the representation of African-American women’s rage? Lastly, I chose these films because they quintessentially represent my critique. My analysis is centered in a Feminist critique and that critique uses the personal pronoun “I” in scholarship and academic writings.

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM/ SCOPE OF STUDY**

Although both African men and women suffer from historical inaccuracies and stereotypes, it is African-American women who must also contend with issues of sexuality, of gender. Bell hooks says that many of the roles that African-American women perform in dominant society are there to reinforce cultural stereotypes of the sapphire, mammy, matriarch, and jezebel. She argues that this is why there has historically been a systematic portrayal of African-American women that is based on negative stereotypes and myths.

These negative images have been depicted in media and disseminated to the dominant society as “natural” ones for African-American women. So pervasive are these stereotypes that they have seeped into the ideologies of the African-American community as well. Much of the time within African-American communities, women are stigmatized

and deemed less deserving of sympathies or legitimacy when they voice their objections to the way they are treated. Even within their own community, African-American women's rage is often seen as an over-reaction, as lunacy.

The specific problem that I am addressing in this thesis is the notion that dominant filmic representations of African-American women's rage do little more than reinscribe age-old stereotypes about African-American women's lack of femininity and value in society. However, African-American women have resisted this condemnation of their rage. In fact, they find empowerment through it. They are even able to offer counter-hegemonic discourse that allows them to locate spaces of resistance in the unlikely arena of mainstream films.

My usage of the term "rage" is a combination of an official definition and one that is crafted for the purposes of my thesis. Rage is defined in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition of The American Heritage College dictionary as 1. Violent explosive anger. 2. Furious intensity as of a storm or disease. 3. A burning desire, a passion. However, for my analysis, I create a textual definition of rage that is specific to African-American women. African-American women's rage is their violent response to what they perceive as both the dominant culture's and African-American male's disrespect and disregard of them. Yes, it is explosive anger. Yes, it is furious and intense, but it is not devoid of purpose, of humanity, like a storm or disease.

The issue here is that African-American women's rage is erroneously viewed as a problem by both dominant and non-dominant people, instead of being viewed as a response to the problem of African-American female oppression. My premise is African-American women's rage is not a monstrosity. It is not improper or shameful. It is an extremely visceral reaction to a particular systemic problem.

I understand that African-American males' response to African-American women is also a by-product of the ways in which the media has reflected dominant society's stereotypes about them. They are also fighting years of imagery that portrays them as unintelligent, insensitive, brutal, and savage. Although I am not offering any excuses for their responses here, I do recognize the complexities inherent in the oppression of African-American people as a whole. Nevertheless, African-American men are not exempt from being held accountable for their part in the perpetuation of a terrible system.

This thesis explores the depictions of African-American women's rage in four key films from four decades. Also, these movies were produced over a range of decades, beginning with the 1970s and ending with the new millennium. The films are: *Coffy*, *The Color Purple*, *Waiting to Exhale*, and *Two Can Play That Game*. These films were selected because they contain specific narratives which offer critical commentary on the impact of race and gender on African-American women's rage. They provide a glimpse into the creation of stereotypes about African-American women's domestic relations with men and allow for discussion of how the images convey to society the negative images of African-American women's rage.

I am looking specifically at African-American women's interactions within a context of patriarchal dominance and racial oppression. I believe their rage, although often interpreted by African-American women as positive images of liberation and empowerment, are depicted in ways that manipulate those images into old stereotypes which serve as mechanisms to silence African-American women's protest.

These films focus on the domestic or intimate sphere. In each film, the African-American woman's rage stems from her interaction with men in a familial setting. These women are responding to interactions taking place with loved ones or partners in their personal lives. I am looking specifically at rage that results from African-American women feeling "pushed over the edge" by men. Although these are contributing factors and play a major role in the oppression of African-American women, I am not specifically addressing issues like work-related oppression because my focus is in a more intimate and personal arena. It is important to look at patterns of representation of African-American women's rage over time, in order to understand how representations both endure and change.

*Coffy* (1973) stars Pam Grier, playing a nurse who is fed up with the narcotics that have infiltrated the inner city. When her eleven-year old sister is hospitalized after shooting some contaminated heroin, she goes on a murder rampage. She sets out to kill the drug-dealer involved in the destruction of her sister's young life. This journey eventually leads her to her own lover.

*The Color Purple* (1985) follows the life of Celie, a young African-American girl growing up in the early 1900s. Celie's story begins when, as a child, she gets pregnant by her step-father. The narrative then follows her life which is riddled with abuse from men.

*Waiting to Exhale* (1995) follows the lives of four African-American women as they cope with their men, careers, and families. This movie chronicles the friendships of modern African-American women and all the struggles and triumphs along the way.

*Two Can Play That Game* (2001), starring Vivica A. Fox, focuses on a 10-day plan on how to control wayward men in relationships. The movie chronicles the attempt of an African-American woman to train her man to be faithful. Ultimately, the characters and the audience find out that these types of strategies have major complications.

I am looking at the narratives of *Coffy*, *The Color Purple*, *Waiting to Exhale*, and *Two Can Play That Game* as a parallel to my argument about the options available to African-American women in their attempts to voice their protests. These movies are extremely similar in their basic depiction of African-American women's rage to oppression. My argument is that European-American women's race offers them a redemption that is not available to their African-American counterparts. European-American women receive the benefits of care, concern, and protection granted to "the feminine". This redemption for European-Americans is one of the spaces that serve as an area of oppression for African-American women because African-American women are not members of a privileged race. Additionally, redemption for European-American women exists because of the images that stigmatize African-American women. These stigmatized images not only aid in the devaluation of African-American female rage.

I begin with the 1970s as a decade that ushered in the glorification of this image of the African-American woman who is willing and able to exact revenge on all those deserving it. The 1970s is the era that solidified this image of vengeful African-American women, through "Blaxploitation" films because of the many movies that emerged with raging African-American women characters. It is looked upon as somewhat of a "Golden" era for African-Americans in film, in general. There were all sorts of "bad mama-jama" films in theatres, most of which starred Pam Grier as an angry woman.

Michele Wallace's ideas about the significance of the domestic sphere in understanding the anger between African-American women and men is a foundation for

why I chose to look at rage in the context of these particular films. In her book entitled Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman, Wallace reveals that “by the time [she] was fifteen there was nothing [she] dreaded more than being like the women in [her] family.”(89) She describes the women in her family as embodying those characteristics that dominant society says are negative: career-oriented, dominant, sharp-tongued, etc. Wallace writes that her step-father taught her to “not be like her mother.” He says her mother was a bad wife. Wallace said that her step-father’s views were the same ones she was seeing on television and reading in magazines. Her personal narrative in her work is telling of how even African-American hold African-American women to standards that disadvantage them. Wallace powerfully and explicitly addresses historical tensions created by African-American men’s perception that African-American women have contributed to their oppression by being unfit women and willingly being in cahoots with the enemy. Wallace writes that African-American men came to believe that “the black woman’s act needed intensive cleaning up.”(91) Furthermore, she writes that the African-American woman was seen as “too domineering, too strong, too aggressive, too outspoken, too castrating, too masculine.”( 91) African-American men during the time that Wallace refers to felt that “[African-American women] were undermining him at every opportunity.”( 91) Additionally, as African-American men began to express their discontent with and distrust of African-American women, they began to invoke in African-American women a sense of discontent as well. “African-American women began to grumble quietly about the African-American man and the European-American woman”(11) This seething tension exploded into hatred between African-American men and women as African-American women felt that they were making no real progress toward their liberation, in part, because they were being used as scapegoats. Wallace’s controversial piece is the basis for my analysis of African-American female rage in the domestic arena. These selected films in many ways take her arguments and represent them through actual filmic depiction.

I am looking at how narratives that have been designed to be a liberatory voice for women are also tainted with racism and stereotypic images that attempt to silence and invalidate that same voice. I am also looking at how narratives that laud African-American women’s courage and violent protest against patriarchal oppression are also

compromised in their power to liberate because of the constraints placed on them by the realities of African-American women's lives in America. These narratives send clear messages about dominant notions of African-American female sexuality; I want to explore those messages. Ultimately, I want to recognize African-American women as subjects in the representation of their own rage and reveal how this rage operates to empower them.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The questions that I ask create a foundation from which to approach the texts that I have chosen to analyze. One of the primary ideas that led to my topic was the image of African-American women's rage represented in contemporary films. How and when is rage in African-American women depicted in popular films? What does that presentation convey about African-American women's place in society? Is there a value system that posits the images of African-American women's rage as more threatening than other women's rage? Within the context of the history of African-American women's portrayal in the media, how are women in *Coffy*, *The Color Purple*, *Waiting To Exhale*, and *Two Can Play That Game* portrayed? How might these depictions increase the burden of racial discrimination and gender oppression placed on African-American women especially when they express their rage against the enemy called patriarchy? How can Black Feminist Theory be used to understand African-American women's rage and its depiction in popular film?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The particular process of defining is rooted in the power structure of our society. Patricia Hill-Collins says in "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images"(2000) that "because the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas about Black womanhood."(69). Since we live our lives in a hierarchal structure controlled by patriarchal ideologies, the decision-makers and power-brokers are European-American men. They are the only members of this "elite group" to which Hill-Collins is referring. Because of their status, what they value and their interests are always at the top of the

hierarchy. They essentially own this ability to define others in a dominant paradigm. Consequently, African-American women's identity and sexuality have been defined in the dominant sphere by these representatives of patriarchy. Hill-Collins says that they do so "by exploiting already existing symbols or creating new ones." (69) Furthermore, in Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist (1987), Hazel Carby suggests that "the objectives of stereotypes is not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise or mystification, of objective social relations." (22) Sharon Marcus writes in her essay entitled "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory of Politics and Rape Prevention" that "Feminist and poststructuralist theories have persuasively contended that we only come to exist through our emergence into a preexistent language, into a social set of meanings which scripts us" (390) African-American women's identities are created for them. They are born into this Blackness, into this social status.

In talking about this hierarchy and social relations, K. Sue Jewell in From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of U.S. Social Policy (1993), contends that the power structure is "designed to divide the masses into factions, creating hierarchies based on disproportionate allocation of resources and access to societal institutions." (5) She writes that "the privileged class, in constructing a system to maintain its power, has developed a belief system to explain the differential access and acquisition of various societal groups to resources and institutions in the United States." (4) This system posits African-American women as being "lower on the rung" and less entitled. Like Norma Manatu in African-American Women and Sexuality in the Cinema (2003), Jewell also argues that the system under which we live is predicated on the notion that there are some on top (empowered) and some on the bottom (disempowered). In terms of women's status in society, European-American women are empowered and African-American women are disempowered. For Manatu writes that "no matter how virtuous the black woman, no matter how feminine, she is more likely than not to be viewed as hypersexed because black women's virtue has no place in the feminine mythos of U.S. culture." (19)

Patricia Hill-Collins' matrix of domination theory posits that power is structured in a very particular sort of hierarchy that is sensitive to the slightest shifts. Everyone must

remain in place in order to maintain and prevent the destruction of the system. In other words, our society is built on a hierarchy that necessitates that African-American women remain powerless. Hierarchies are based on “privilege that becomes defined in relation to its other... this requires that one side of a dichotomy be privileged while its other is denigrated.”( 617) Indeed, African-American women’s experience with oppression and disempowerment is uniquely their own.

Kimberle Crenshaw, in “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics”(2000), writes that the concept of intersecting discrimination challenges the notion of “single-axis oppression”. She contends that the idea that there is a “single-axis” of discrimination, meaning either one based on race or one based on sex but not on both race and sex serves as a barrier to African-American women’s liberation. The “single-axis” notion erases the lived experiences of African-American women as both Black and female.

Crenshaw writes that this adoption of single-issue framework for discrimination not only marginalizes African-American women within the very movements that claim them as part of their constituency, but it also makes the elusive goal of ending racism and patriarchy even more difficult to attain. Whereas African-American women most often recognize that their lives are placed in the intersection of racial and gendered oppression, the dominant ideology often forces them to choose one form of oppression over the other. This invalidates their claim to a unique position as gendered and racialized beings.

However, because African-American women’s claims of discrimination are seen as hybrid, they are seen as unable to represent European-American women’s discrimination based on sex, which is seen as “pure” sex discrimination. According to Crenshaw, European-American women’s “claim to sex discrimination is simply a statement that, but for gender, they would not have been disadvantaged. Their race does not contribute to the disadvantage for which they seek redress.”(212) Unfortunately, African-American women are not in a position where they are able to separate their race from their gender.

W.E.B. Dubois’ concept of double consciousness described in Souls of Black Folk(2003), though designed to contextualize the male and female African-American experience, is a fitting perspective for analyzing the social condition of African-American



women. They always have a double sense of consciousness: their perception of themselves and others' perception and labeling of them. African-American women are forced to live under the realities of this two-fold identity. This duality reveals multi-levels of oppression. This oppression often manifests in mediated images of African-American women.

Norma Manatu, in African-American Women and Sexuality in the Cinema (2003), refers to Berne's notion that "children seek out information from different sources about what kind of persons they are and what happens to that kind of person. Then, they form scripts through which they act out and live their lives." (90) These "scripts" are formed from the available images of themselves. African-American female children are presented with an overwhelming array of negative images, which leave them to script these denigrated images, behaviors into their lives, permanently etching the dominant view of African-American females into the minds of young girls. The dominant group views African-American women as the media images depict them. However, these images are not just absorbed into the dominant group. They are also absorbed into the minority group to whom they refer. This stigmatization affects the sense of self and identity.

In From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of U.S. Social Policy (1993), K. Sue Jewell introduces the Afro-centric psychological concept that suggests that because of the negative image of themselves in the media, African-American women might find it difficult to develop positive self-concepts and group identification. Not only do mediated images have the power to shape how non-Blacks and men view African-American women, these images, that are filtered through dominant media, are powerful enough to influence how African-American women see themselves. She writes that "many psychologists in the Africentric school maintain that if African-Americans in general, and women in particular, see themselves as they are seen in the media, then it is questionable whether they will develop positive self-concepts." (33) In a very postmodern fashion, in mediated form, African-American women become more "real" than actual African-American women. The images of African-American women shown in film become larger than the actual living person. Often, African-American women are believed to act, think, and behave in the same ways

as fictional representations of them do in film. Even when African-American women do not behave in these negative ways, most often dominant opinions about them are not changed.

Additionally, there is a penalty in filmic depiction for not being a part of what Manatu refers to as “the feminine”, which is the ideological and cultural notions of femininity and its benefits that applies to European-American women, as well. Barbara Christian refers to “the feminine” as “the White female form that implies beauty, gentility, and virginity”. (19) Those women who are not categorized as being a part of “the feminine” are subsequently relegated to the status of whore. The virgin/whore dichotomy is a staple in patriarchy. It is used as a way of harnessing and subjugating female sexuality. There are no other categories that exist for women, and there can be no existing within both spheres. The whore historically has been denied all the protection and redemption that the virgin has been given as a reward for her obedience to the status quo.

The virgin/whore dichotomy is not restricted to sexual acts, however. In fact, that notion is transferred into all arenas of female behavior. For example, the virgin trope is associated with politeness, gentility, etc., whereas the whore trope is associated with crassness, vulgarity, loudness, etc. The whore is the epitome of sexual aggressiveness, which indicates a proclivity towards aggression that is not restricted to the bedroom. Hence, aggressive women are seen through the whore trope as threats to “the feminine” and ultimately threats to the system.

Jewell says that African-American women are viewed ideologically, as the epitome of female aggressiveness both physically and emotionally in order to justify negative cultural images of African-American women. She says that the creation of these images by dominant society are necessary in order to sell the notion that African-American women are not worthy of “the feminine” that Manatu speaks of. This makes it extremely interesting when looking at the African-American woman’s sexuality. Because she is genetically (according to patriarchy and hegemony) not able to rise to the virginal or feminine imperative, she is automatically placed in the category of whore. Just as her darker skin creates a permanent opposition to the European-American woman, her social status is also fixed as the consummate whore opposed to the virgin. Additionally, these images perpetuate the fallacy that African-American women are never the victims of

sexual oppression by African-American or European-American men because they are always open and ready for sex, even initiating it.

Hill-Collins contends that the images of matriarch, the jezebel, and the sapphire are more rooted in controlling African-American women's sexuality. These particular cultural archetypes signal that African-American women "dominate" and "emasculate" their men.(75) In Black Looks: Race and Representation (1992), where she writes about African-American women's and European-American women's sexuality, bell hooks observes that African-American female sexuality has been put on display as deviant in our culture and is there for anyone to take pleasure in. She writes that "they [are] reduced to mere spectacle." (62) An example of this is the notion that African-American women are sexual beasts. Their bodies are seen as spaces for men, especially European-American men, to indulge in their most explicit sexual fantasies. A more recent example is the exposing of Janet Jackson's breast by Justin Timberlake in their musical performance at last year's Super Bowl performance. Janet's exposed breast stands in opposition to the image of purity.

This perpetual system of oppression traps African-American women in what Hill-Collins calls a space of "binary opposition" (70). She posits that African-American women are engaged in this concept of binary opposition with European-American women, meaning that one group of women is defined by their opposition to another. "Society's historically dichotomized conceptualization of black and white womanhood assigned to White women the idealized attributes of "true womanhood", and cast black women as fallen womanhood." (Morton, 12) African-American women are European-American women's inherently opposed other, being the opposite of the "cult of true womanhood", which European-American women are said to embody. During the nineteenth century, the Victorian cult of 'true womanhood' prescribed not only female domesticity, but also chastity, piety, and dependence on and deference to men, together with other patriarchally prescribed 'feminine virtues'. Thus scholars have noted that the "good" woman was by definition 'pure, clean, sexually repressed and physically fragile'. In contrast the "bad" woman was by definition the woman without male protectors, who provided for herself. The Black woman was therefore de facto bad. So, according to Hill-

Collins, people, in this case, (African-American women) become objects for domination because of their assigned lack of privilege.

In Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks (1994), Donald Bogle gives a historical account of the images of African-American people that have been presented in television from the time of its invention through the early 1990s. The images that Bogle offers and the commentary about African-American women are useful, but his analysis stops short of addressing all the prevailing images of African-American women. He primarily focuses on the tragic mulatto, mammy, and Aunt Jemima figures. Bogle says that historically the images of the tragic mulatto and Aunt Jemima are more palpable for European-Americans. He writes that “usually the mulatto is made likeable – even sympathetic because of her white blood, no doubt.”(9) “Further, he writes, “Aunt Jemimas are often Toms blessed with religion or mammies who wedge themselves into the dominant culture.”(9)

Although Bogle’s analysis is about images in television, these same images are transferred to film and can be used in filmic analysis of African-American women. My analysis gives more attention to the Sapphire and Jezebel archetypes because these images are very instrumental in shaping and contextualizing how African-American women’s rage and sexuality are portrayed in mainstream films. In From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of U.S. Social Policy (1993), K. Sue Jewell offers further commentary on the Sapphire image, concluding that “of all the images of African-American women, the Sapphire image is the only one that necessitates the presence of the African-American male because she is always in contention with him”(45). Jewell essentially argues that this image of African-American women posits them as trouble-makers in their own communities. African-American women take the blame for these interpersonal conflicts, not African-American men. The Sapphire image is the physical manifestation of male-female power struggles. “The aggression, independence, decisiveness, and loquaciousness of the Sapphire image represent that ultimate threat of social treason under patriarchy”, according to Jewell ( ) Sapphire is particularly dangerous and feared.

K. Sue Jewell, Kimberle Springer in “Waiting To Set It Off”(2001), and other Black feminist scholars also specifically label the African-American male as Sapphire’s primary

source of antagonism. Moreover, Michele Wallace contends that the tension between African-American males and females occurs because the African-American male often serves as an agent of patriarchal oppression. In Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman (1994), She comments that "...The black man lives with her. ... The black man has not really kept his part of the bargain [to fight for the Black woman's equality as he did his own] they made in the sixties"(14) "[African-American women] [are] in the grip of black Macho, and it has created within her an unestimable emotional." (15) devastation"(302). Wallace's assessment effectively addresses the scope of Sapphire's rage to encompass her discontent with a social system of oppression that may have started with one man but certainly has now grown much larger. Sapphire's rage is no longer solely directed at an actual male. She is angry at the larger patriarchal system. Wallace contends that when African-American women become more aware, their rage becomes less about a specific male or incident but more about a perpetual system in which an individual male is a cog in the larger wheel of injustice. Wallace's piece addresses this anger that resulted from African-American women's perceived betrayal at the hands of African-American men. She says that African-American men had started to abandon relationships with them for ones with European-American women. In many ways, they felt duped, insulted, and mad as hell.

K. Sue Jewell adds that the stereotypes that define African-American women are not limited to the media representations. They seep into the consciousness of society and start to dictate how other people, including African-American men, relate to African-American women individually and collectively. For example, some African-American men have expressed in popular culture and in communal settings that they prefer European-American women as sexual and social partners because they offer less "drama" than African-American women. This "drama" is often code for the perceived assertiveness of African-American women compared to the perceived passivity of European-American women. Patricia Hill-Collins in "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images", writes that "aggressive, assertive women are penalized - they are abandoned by their men, end up impoverished and are stigmatized as being unfeminine." She continues by writing that "many Black men reject Black women as marital partners, claiming that Black women are less desirable than White ones because [they] are too

assertive.”( 77) These men are responding, in part, to negative notions of African-American women promulgated by mainstream media representations. This is not to say, however, that African-American women and their communities are perpetual victims of negative dominant stereotypes. I am not suggesting that family structures and other positive communal environments can not and do not offer positive alternatives that mitigate the negative effects of these images. What I am saying is that African-American women are assassinated in film by their depictions. This assault on their characterization makes their lives more difficult in their own communities and in the public sphere. Hill-Collins offers support for this argument when she writes “because controlling images are hegemonic and taken for granted, they become virtually impossible to escape.”(90)

These negative images of African-American women as being more antagonistic towards males, more violent, more vocal, less qualified to be “good” wives and mates (which translates into being more submissive) helps to invalidate African-American women’s criticisms about racial and gender inequalities. These stereotypes frame African-American women’s voices in ways that posit their discourse as problematic and simply combative, militant, and overly-sensitive. They are not empowered to create mainstream images of themselves. Additionally, African-American women are not taken seriously when they voice their discontent over these media images. In fact when they do voice their concerns, instead of having a redress of their grievances, the hegemonic structure co-ops African-American women’s discontent by using their protest as an example of their combative, problematic, militant, and overly- sensitive nature. For example, bell hooks talks about how when she was a student and would make specific references to the inherent racism in dominant feminist thought in class discussions, she would almost always be addressed as a militant, angry Black woman by her European-American counterparts. Her experiences were made worthless in that environment.

Patricia Morton in Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women (1991) addresses this idea that society has deemed African-American women unworthy and has instituted policy and swayed public opinion in the same direction concerning African-American women when she mentions the results of the Moynihan report. She argues that the Moynihan report was a government document entitled “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” that said that the breakdown in the

African-American family was the result of the African-American matriarch.( 1965)  
African-American women were now, through so-called objective research, determined to be almost single-handedly responsible for their social and economic status.

The focus was not on the social ills that make it a matter of survival for African-American women to work and head households, but it was on the genetic ineptitude of African-American women. In “Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images”(2000), Hill-Collins contends that from the dominant group’s perspective, the matriarch represented the failed mammy, a negative stigma to be applied to African-American women who dared reject the image of the submissive, hardworking, servant.”(75) Now that an official document had proven what everyone thought, the dominant society relied even more on this notion of meritocracy, an idea whereby you earn what you are given based on your effort and contributions. The idea that African-American women would be better off if they were submissive women and housewives and stopped being dominant, single-parenting, baby-having, welfare-getting, loud-mouthed bitches is the fallacy of the concept of meritocracy.

African-American women are deemed to be unworthy of the resources allocated to the genteel and pure woman. They are used as scapegoats. K. Sue Jewell says that the system uses the notion of meritocracy to create the illusion of fairness and to justify why African-American women are on the bottom of the social ladder. She posits that meritocracy is an ideology that sets up the fallacy that the African-American woman’s rewards are “commensurate with her investment.”(4) In other words, the images of African-American women that are presented in film are simply a reflection of the African-American woman’s worth in society, a worth which is determined by the good she has done to help develop it for the better (i.e. her personal investment).

As Peggy McIntosh argues in her article entitled “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”(1998), the notion of meritocracy is in itself a fallacy. She shatters this notion promulgated by the system which presents African-American women as being creators of their own oppression. She writes that “White privilege is an invisible package of unearned assets.”(148) She goes on to write that those assets manifest themselves in the sort of mundane, taken-for-granted perks that European-American people are privy to simply because they are the power-brokers in this country. McIntosh writes that the

power she has because of her race(European-American) is “unearned power conferred systematically.”(151) It is not merited. In fact, in order for white privilege to exist as McIntosh says it does, there must be a lack of privilege to act as a balancing system.

McIntosh makes a scathing commentary when she writes that “whiteness protected [her] from many kinds of hostility, stress, and violence, which [she] was being subtly trained to visit in turn upon people of color.”(150) Lack of privilege exists in the lives and experiences of African-American people, especially African-American people who are female. Although McIntosh did address issues pertaining to European-Americans represented in the media, she did not go far enough. What could very well be added to her list is the privilege of having positive female role models in film. The option to choose to associate with virginal images in film and to reap the benefits of that association is a privilege (a limited privilege but nonetheless the privilege that only European-American women have). This choice is denied to women of color.

The truth is that European-American people, including women, are born into a system of privilege that has absolutely nothing to do with receiving compensation for any work they have done or receiving a return on any investment they have made. The ideologies of hegemony and patriarchy espouse this doctrine in order to control and crush dissent from the masses, creating for them a belief that if they work hard, they can earn a place at the top. Those groups who do not make it to the top are thought to fail to do so because of their own genetic lack and ineptitude. Subsequently, the collective of African-American women are perceived as deserving of being considered inferior to European-American women because they have proven through the system of meritocracy that they are inferior, according to dominant views. Moreover, they do not deserve the privileges of “the feminine” that European-American women, through their purity, virtue, and relationship to European-American men, have earned, says patriarchy.

However, African-American women have found spaces to challenge the inequalities of the ideology of meritocracy. Hooks writes about the oppositional gaze that African-American women employ as a way of gaining agency, as a way of fighting back and creating a voice. Often that voice is expressed through rage at a system of oppression. When it is expressed, it is often used by the dominant society and patriarchy as an



example to give credence to perceived negative notions of African-American women that already exist.

Kimberly Springer in “Waiting to Set It Off” writes “for African-American women, the expression of rage is always presented as a result of their being black because whenever they are subject their racial and cultural perception is fore-grounded”(173). The fore-grounding of their race, then gives credence to racist logic that African-American women are violent because they are Black. They appear to be acting violently because it is in their “nature” to be violent. When their violence is expressed, dominant society uses this expression to give credence to prevalent beliefs about African-American women.

This representation of African-American women’s rage does not, however, prevent African-American women from becoming violent when fighting their oppression. They have not bought into the fallacies. They have not been bamboozled. On the contrary, they challenge the inequalities of the meritocracy argument. Springer notes that the images do not always produce shame and inaction in African-American women. Patriarchy fails in this respect because many African-American women see these images as liberating texts. Bell Hooks mentions the mass appeal of films like *Waiting To Exhale*. African-American women flocked to the theatres in support of this film that depicted an angry, vengeful African-American woman.

Additionally, according to Jacqueline Bobo, in her book entitled Black Women as Cultural Readers (1988), African-American women often interpret their own realities very differently than do members of other groups. Tony Brown, a syndicated columnist and a host of a television program called [*The Color Purple*] the most racist depiction of Black men since *The Birth of a Nation* and the most anti-Black family film in the modern era”, according to Bobo. However, “Black female viewers were not as critical of the film in its treatment of gender issues.”(Bobo, 91) What might be considered undesirable behavior to the dominant group might be considered heroic or courageous action by African-American women. The analysis that Bobo did in her work on African-American women’s response to *The Color Purple* reveals that some African-American women do interpret their rage and the images of it in film as positive elements in their fight for equality. Bobo states that “on the whole Black women have discovered something progressive and useful in this film.”(95) In fact, while trying to oppress

African-American women by keeping them subject to racial and gender discrimination, some of these images, like the Sapphire archetype, have been appropriated and are used as tools of empowerment by African-American women.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As cultural vehicles, films are heavily laced with particular ideas about race, gender, and class. Films reinforce and teach values, beliefs, and ideas that many members of the society are already exposed to in their life experiences. Since this analysis is focusing on the ways in which dominant stereotypes about African-American female rage are social constructs perpetuated by fictional film, it would be most appropriate to employ an approach based in ideological analysis, which is an analysis of the construction and framing of reality

I will offer a detailed textual and ideological analysis of the films *Coffy*, *The Color Purple*, *Waiting to Exhale*, *Two Can Play That Game*. I am looking at the entire films with specific emphasis on the scenes involving rage. Examples of such types of scenes would include the one in *Coffy*, where she kills drug dealers and shoots and kills her lover, in *The Color Purple*, where Celie almost cuts Mister's throat, the scene in *Waiting To Exhale* where Bernie burns her husband's possession, and the scene in *Two Can Play That Game*, where Tracye (Tamala Jones) destroys her boyfriend's apartment. I will use a Black Feminist paradigm as a way of approaching African-American women as subjects and as a way to frame my analysis and critique. A Black Feminist approach will allow me to position African-American women and their lived experiences at the center of my analysis, rather than at the periphery. I look specifically at how female rage is presented in each text and at how it acts as a framing mechanism in the texts. I will look at how contradictions arise in the text that reveal age-old stereotypes about African-American women's rage and reveal how African-American women manipulate these images to find empowerment.

Finally, I am writing this thesis in hopes of adding to the scholarship on African-American women's particular representations in the media. I hope to understand more the historical and social dynamics that intersect in the lived experiences of African-American women and in the construction of their identities. I aim to analyze this phenomenon of the

social repercussions of being angry, female, and African-American in the specific context of American film. I do not expect this research to change any of the dominant notions about African-American female rage or identity, but I will offer yet another challenge to it. I write this for African-American women in an attempt to help them to understand and put into perspective their “unique intersectionality”, as coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, of race and gender in America. African-American women need to understand construction of their identity in the media in order to offer counter-hegemonic discourses. African-American women need not be compelled to associate with the portraits that have been painted by the broad strokes of racism and patriarchy.

The problem is worthy of research because now more than ever the media control and dictate our identities to us. We as a society, and especially those of us who are people of color, are more familiar with our images projected by the media than we are with our unmediated identities. Moreover, we are most often engaging mediated images that are negative because we are not controlling power structures that operate in various mediums. If African-Americans were more aware of how the media shapes and creates identities for them, they could more easily engage critically with these issues of identity. This thesis is written in order to help flip the light switch on. It is written to save the lives of beautiful sisters.

## THEORY

In this chapter, I will explain how Black Feminist theory informs the foundation for this analysis. It is the lens through which I will critique the depiction of African-American women's rage in *Coffy*, *The Color Purple*, *Waiting to Exhale*, and *Two Can Play That Game*. My analysis will also incorporate Mass Media Theory. I use these different theories to reveal how they converge in an analysis of the filmic illustration of African-American women's rage. Both Mass Media Theory and Black Feminist Theory are fitting tools for chipping away at the dominant characterization of African-American women. My analysis focuses on African-American women's rage and its particular threat to American society. In The Wretched of the Earth, Franz Fanon talks about this concept of rage that erupts from within the "belly" of a disadvantaged group of people. Additionally, in "Blood Flows in the Antilles Under French Domination", he begs the question: "how does it happen that a population reacts with such violence, such rage?"(168) The answer is simple: their cups are full and have begun to run over with an incredible intensity. Their rage is unleashed upon their oppressors out of the basic human need for dignity and self-worth, for equality and survival. "For [s]he knows that [s]he is not an animal; and it is precisely at this moment [s]he realizes her humanity that [s]he begins to sharpen her weapons with which [s]he will secure her victory."(*The Wretched of the Earth*,43) He contends that this rage that builds deep within the oppressed is a very visceral reaction to being denied their humanity. Fanon writes that this response takes place as a "historical process, which sets out to change the order of the world."(*The Wretched of the Earth*, 36) "Those who put this program of violence into action are ready for violence at all times because it is clear that this narrow world, shrewn with prohibitions, can only be called in question with absolute violence."(37) In the resistance efforts of the disadvantaged, most often their commitment to violence must be firm.

In many of the filmic accounts of the expression of African-American rage in this country, men's rage has received more attention than women's. Modern popular films like *A Time To Kill* and *Rosewood* are examples of how film represents African-American rage as decidedly masculine. This illustration of how aggression and violence are defined by masculinity and inextricably linked to it is informed by our society's dominant views on gender roles. "Aggression, and sometimes sanctioned violence, was a common thread in American ideals of manhood", according to authors James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton in "Violence, Protest, and Identity: Black Manhood in Antebellum America"(1999). Violence often garnered for males a certain level of respect and/or fear that ushered them into manhood. It serves as a cultural "rites of passage". "The "thing" that has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself."(*Wretched of the Earth*, 37) Even slave male aggression and violence was connected to these dominant notions of masculinity. Horton and Horton recount Frederick Douglass' emergence into manhood through his confrontation with the slave breaker, Covey, as "his first step on his escape to freedom."(382) Frederick Douglass refused to be subdued by Covey during a 2-hour struggle. Douglass

writes in his autobiography of that encounter that “[he] was nothing before;[he] was a man now.”(382) Embracing aggression helped Douglass to stake his claim to manhood. Horton and Horton contend that the interconnectivity of violence, manhood, and freedom was not foreign to Antebellum society. Horton and Horton quote David Walker in his “Appeal” as having written “if ever we are to become men, we must assert ourselves to the full.”(385)

If masculinity is believed to emerge from aggression, then the two terms define each other: Masculinity is aggression, and aggression is masculine. Patriarchy bound femininity in the cult of “true womanhood” as the lack of aggression, but for “Black women no less than Black men, freedom and dignity were tied to assertiveness, even to the point of violence.”(Horton,394) However, African-American men, likewise, “accept[ed] masculine traits as the opposite of feminine traits [in order to] establish and define themselves as men in the face of assaults by slavery and racial discrimination.”(Horton, 394)

Ideologically violence is perceived and is generally accepted as masculine, regardless to race. This perception indicates that men’s threat of violence and aggression is not only more genuine than women’s but is also more feared because female rage is “unnatural”. In a culture where male violence is expected and glorified through iconographic images like John Wayne and American football, this notion of violence as masculine is viewed as a “natural” and immutable fact. Female rage stands in opposition to this and is therefore “unnatural” and is perceived as seeking to disrupt the foundations of our society. The categories of femininity and masculinity are rigid. They are not allowed any intersectionality because one is only defined in opposition to the other. In fact, even “most feminists oppose violence, define it as patriarchal and oppressive...[and] insist that we can and should do better than patriarchs...they celebrate images that define women’s heroic power in ‘female terms’- giving birth, forming community, and remaining nonviolent even in the face of violence”, according to King and McCaughey in “What’s a Mean Woman Like You Doing in a Movie Like This?” It is obvious that even some women have accepted restricting definitions of masculinity and femininity. When it comes to seething rage set to erupt, African-American men seem to have been historical poster-boys, warning European-Americans of the danger that their rage possesses.

Although historically this rage has been portrayed as masculine behavior, in more recent American film history, the rage of African-American women has moved into the spotlight. Fanon’s concept of the most disadvantaged people “[re]discovering the existence of a rebellious spirit” is evident in denigrated images of African-American women’s rage in film. African-American women’s rage stands as a beacon of rebellion to a system that disadvantages them from birth. Their rage is a righteous indignation. It is a battle-cry indicating that their “rebellious spirits” are rising up. Hegemony seeks to co-op this “rebellious spirit” in order to stamp out African-American women’s resistance. The dominant power structure must deflate this swelling in the chests of African-American women in order to keep social establishments in place.

The displays of female rage pose a threat to the dominant hegemonic order just as the rage of African-American men does. Especially in recent film history, female rage has proven to be as volatile and devastating as the traditional depiction of male rage. This is not to say that African-American women’s

rage is the same as African-American male's rage. It is different in that it encompasses issues of gender that are uniquely female. African-American women's rage is also a response to lack of opportunity that is connected to the representation of their sexuality for Barbara Christian argues that "images of Black womanhood serve as a reservoir for the fears of Western Culture, a dumping ground for those female functions a basically puritan society could not confront"(2) With this context of how debased the image of African-American women is, it is understood that the source of their rage and even its manifestation is not like that of their African-American male counter-part.

Tricia Rose's book Black Noise reveals the ways in which African-American women's rage is different. Rose has taken the idea of revenge and used it in an analysis of female rage in the lyrics and videos of female rappers. Rose, in her essay entitled "Bad Sistas," analyzes this emerging phenomena of female rage. Rose's getting even script is based on the premise that women attempt to attain retribution from a particular form of gendered violence. This gendered violence is the sort of disrespect that women experience from men that is particular to male-female relationships. She calls her commentary "the getting even script." Rose's getting even script allows for the emotional and psychological violation of women to be categorized as an act of violence tantamount to the brutality of rape. Rose contends that the continual exploitation of and violence against women have pushed them into revenge mode.

*Coffy*, *The Color Purple*, *Waiting to Exhale*, and *Two Can Play That Game* are films that connect the social concepts of festering rage and explosive revenge to the visual art-form of film. Once these concepts are embodied in images on film, they become much more powerful because the medium of film is so pervasive in American culture. Film is entrenched in American society. We have made it a necessity and given it dominance as one of the primary means of communication. Film creates characters that are larger than life. As these vivid images loom over the audience captivating them, audience members are being indoctrinated with American cultural ideologies. Movie-goers develop an intimacy with filmic depiction that makes them believe in the images they see. In "Visual Imperialism and the Export of Prejudice: An exploration of ethnographic film", Kathleen Kuehnast writes that "visual imperialism is the colonization on the world mind's through the use of selective imagery that acts as a representation of a dominant ideology, or as in many instances, as representation of the truth." (184) When film audiences see selective images of African-American women's rage which are then framed by dominant ideologies, they are being duped as the colonizing of African-American women's image is in process. Yet they are unaware of this process because of the power and insidiousness of dominant ideology.

This affect of film is why the negative images of African-American women's rage are so detrimental to African-American women. Marshall McLuhan's, Mass Media Theory termed "the medium is the message" adds credence to the notion that the medium of film is significantly powerful. "It is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action"(10) It is true that the mediated image, that film provides, is powerful. According to McLuhan, the real message that the medium of film sends is that cultures could now develop better relationships. Since the invention of film and due to its modern-day popularity, hegemony uses film as a way of communicating ideologies. Dominant ideologies are

represented through other forms of media and cultural institutions, but film's technology creates a unique method of disseminating these notions. Film makes the negative images of African-American women and their rage seem more plausible than an authentic representation would for many people who have little or no interaction with them. Often people will use film as a way of gaining insight into other cultures and experiences. Film can also permanently etch its images into the mind of an audience. This kind of education that film provides can have adverse affects on marginalized groups like African-American women. "Kathleen Kuehnast writes that "some have asserted that American visual entertainment is the most powerful force in shaping the global culture."(184) Dominant culture reinforces its beliefs about African-Americans to society on a global scale. Studies have proven that people use images in film to reaffirm what they already believe. Negative images of African-American women, then, are often "verified" in film to other groups. This state of representation is what postmodernist call the simulacra-a copy of the reality that is not based on any original but is accepted as itself the original, authentic image. Therefore, the world that the simulacra represents is both a reality and an illusion. It is like a mirage of cool, clear water in a bone-dry desert whose shape disappears upon critical inspection. The image of African-American women's rage in film reinforces old stereotypes of them and serves as a tool to repackage those negative images and sell them again and again in the cultural marketplace. This critical inspection comes from the non-dominant perspective. In this respect, Audre Lorde writes "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."(Sister Outsider, 1979) The "master's tool" of Hollywood-esque film will never represent African-American women's rage in equitable and authentic terms. The master's house must be renovated with the new tools of resistance through scholarship and African-American women's communal efforts towards a more equitable representation.

However, McLuhan's theory argues that the actual message is irrelevant. McLuhan writes that "in terms of the way in which the machine altered our relations to one another and to ourselves, it mattered not in the least whether it turned out cornflakes or cadillacs"(10) What is relevant, to his mass media theory, is how the particular medium of film affects its content. He is more concerned with the unique way in which this medium allows people to approach its material. This uniqueness, he argues, is the focal point on any discussion about the medium. I agree that "the medium is the message" is a viable and valid Mass Media Theory, but I do not agree that the content of a medium has no relevance at all. It matters greatly if the medium produces "Cadillacs or Cornflakes". If Cadillacs are for the rich and cornflakes are for the poor, it matters greatly because these material products signify larger socioeconomic conditions in the society where Cadillacs and Cornflakes are distributed. K. Sue Jewell in From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of U.S. Social Policy (1993) writes that "in effect it is through ideological hegemony that those in power control not only the means of production but also the production of ideas."(9) Those in power in the U.S control the means of cultural production and cultural ideas. In other words, film is a major producer of notions about African-American women. That is not to say that film created these images but that film re-produces these images in popular culture again and again. With film's pervasive nature, it ensures that images of African-American women and their rage are in-line with

dominant notions. Since European-Americans control the film industry, their “interests” are primary in espousing ideas about culture. I am not suggesting here that there is a conspiracy among European-Americans and even African-American male directors, screen-writers, producers, and industry executives to represent African-American women’s rage negatively. On the contrary, the hierarchal structure of our society maintains” the innocence of the privileged and the guilt of the African-American woman.”( K. Sue Jewell, 12). This dichotomous ideological concept of innocence and guilt in race relationship with Black and White folk is fundamental in any analysis of how film, a purveyor of cultural beliefs, functions as a medium. Guilt and innocence for African-American women and the dominant society date back to African-American women’s experience with slavery. The mistress most often blamed the slave girl for the master’s sexual perversion because “the white male was presented as being merely prey to the rampant sexuality of his female slaves.”( Carby, 27) She placed his guilt upon the African-American woman victim. The master, likewise, maintained his innocence and African-American women’s guilt. “Thus, the White slave master was not regarded as being responsible for actions towards his black female slaves.”( Carby, 27) These notions of guilt and innocence beg the question: Is there a systematic process for distribution that creates conditions whereby only the rich deserve Cadillacs, and the poor deserve Cornflakes? Ideological analysis would answer: yes, there is a systemic process. Notions of African-American women’s position in society indicate that they are deemed guilty both sexually and racially. Therefore, they receive Cornflakes and not Cadillacs, which are reserved for the innocent elements of society. Ideological analysis is “based on the assumption that cultural artifacts –literature, film, television, and so forth-are produced in specific historical contexts, by and for specific social groups.”( White, 163) When African-American women or European-American people are seen on screen, the intimacy in” human association” that McLuhan refers to is still present, but only one group is deemed worthy of the Cadillacs. Consequently, there is an intricate connection to ideological concepts of production and consumption and McLuhan’s theory about consumption and production.

Black Feminist Theory can be used to address and answer questions like these ones posed by notions of cultural production and consumption. BFT is able to provide relevancy and perspective in critically engaging these Mass Media Theories about cultural producers, such as film, and dominant ideology, such as notions about African-American women. Whereas McLuhan’s mass media theory is unable to provide adequate analysis about the content of film that affects the lives of African-American women, Black Feminist Theory serves as a tool in constructing a paradigm that does focus on content, on the ideological processes of creating that content. Representations of African-American women and their rage is film’s content. The fact that the medium of film is used to bolster the idea that African-American women are the “other” and deserve Cornflakes instead of Cadillacs is key for Black Feminist Theory. In fact, K. Sue Jewell notes that Gramsci’s belief that “ideological hegemony, and not the traditional use of arms, is the preferred method by which developed societies maintain an unjust social order.”(8) The representations of African-American women in film is a prime example of how the ideological concepts of African-American women as “unfeminine” create a backlash against African-American women’s rage which helps to maintain



the existing hierarchy that placed them at the bottom. BFT can be used to interrogate these ideological concepts of African-American women's experience in society. It is up to African-American women and their own theorizing to challenge the racist and sexist images of them in film. Black Feminist Theory creates a reference for analyzing these complex cinematic depictions of African-American women's rage. It subjects African-American women, making them the experts in interpreting and representing their own lives without the trappings of hegemony. BFT offers a counter-hegemonic discourse with which to engage and challenge dominant ideologies that oppress African-American women. "Against the grain" readings of dominant film narratives are perspectives that Black Feminisms bring to the critical and scholarly discussion about issues of race and gender. The theories of Black feminisms are created by women in the Diaspora for the benefit of women in the Diaspora. Theorizing from a BFT perspective enlightens African-American women. It gives them hope, and offers them a tool of liberation. This liberation is the result of a theory that moves African-American women from the margins to the center, creating a paradigm shift that is actually quite radical. This shift from margin to center is also a shift from hegemonic epistemology to one that is centered in lived experiences of actual African-American women. hooks pens a very thorough commentary on the efficacy of BFT.

This lived experience may shape our consciousness in such a way that our worldview differs from those who have a degree of privilege (however relative within the existing system). It is essential for feminist struggle that black women recognize the special vantage point that our marginality gives us and make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counterhegemony. I am suggesting that we have a central role to play in the making of feminist theory and a contribution to offer that is unique and valuable.".. (black fem.. page 144-145)

Here hooks explains the unique social position that African-American women occupy and just how critical Black Feminist Theory scholarship has been in positing a perspective that subjects African-American women and their lived experiences. Hooks commentary reveals that BFT can be a tool to "dismantle the master's house", showing the power of Black Feminist Theory to empower African-American. In expressing their rage, African-American women are challenging parameters that relegate them to the status of silent women victims. The evocation of our society's racial history brings to the forefront images of both violent and non-violent protest. Black Feminist Theory's scholarship on the historical racial tension between African-American women, as the colonized, and the dominant group, as the colonizers, puts it in a position to reveal a perspective through which to analyze African-American women's rage. Understanding the interconnectivity between the medium and its content is critical to uncovering the particular oppression that African-American women face in being defined by negative images of them as Mammies, Matriarchs, Sapphires, and Jezebels. The interconnectivity of the medium of film and its content also provides the basis for an analysis of African-American women's rage.

When African-American women's rage is represented in film, those images of violent women loom larger showcasing what is perceived as a particularly menacing threat.

Their rage is presented as particularly threatening to American society because it challenges both racial and gender social constructions. Sometimes the limitations of being black and being female in America can feel as rigid and binding as the caste system in India. It sometimes appears that African-American women can never rise to a level of parity with European-American men or women. However, the rigid system does not prevent African-American women from voicing their discontent. When African-American women do sound-off about their particular inequality, they expect to make it harder for the dominant society to ignore their injustices. There is always the dichotomy of African-American women seeking redress and the dominant culture seeking to thwart those efforts. When Frankie (Vivica A. Fox) was falsely accused of being in cahoots with the bank robbers in *Set it Off*, she sought redress by challenging her European-American supervisor on his perception of her loyalty, and immediately he ignored her proof of loyalty and continued to interrogate her.

Devaluing African-American women's voice about their oppression remains a prime example of the way in which film serves the dominant society. Media images attempt to invalidate their voices of discontent through representations that appeal to and thrive on those aforementioned racial tensions between African-American women and dominant groups (including African-American men). In representing African-American women as merely vengeful women, the media seeks to scribble a message on the images of African-American women with indelible ink that reads: danger proceed with caution. Hooks talks further about the idea of vengeful African-American women when she says that "often White feminist scholars feel that they must be the mediators between the dominant group and angry African-American women." (142) Her experience has been that European-American feminists have placed themselves in positions whereby they become the authority on African-American women's oppression. They feel equipped to negotiate the very tenuous space that exists when African-American women and other European-American women attempt to engage one another in dialogue. She indicates that these scholars feel that they are charged with "managing" angry African-American women under the delusion of racial understanding.

This notion of "managing" African-American women's rage is pervasive within hegemonic and patriarchal ideology and is not alien to European-Americans. Managing their rage is simply another form of maintaining oppressive conditions for women, in general. K. Sue Jewell writes that "it is the systematic (but not necessarily or even usually deliberate) engineering of mass content to establish order...the hold of hegemony rests on the element of coercion." (9) Jewell's reference to coercion as being inextricably linked to hegemony is an interesting one. Her analysis further reveals that system of managing African-American women's rage is in itself aggressive towards African-American women and their rage. In order for the status quo to remain, "mechanisms of coercion" must be employed by people like educators, politicians, film-makers, and any other people who take on the role of "managing" African-American women's anger. It attempts to keep African-American women's behavior within the realm of "acceptable" actions. African-

American women's rage must be quieted. Their rebellion must be quenched either by alienating African-American women who, as bell hooks describes, dare to speak out about the particular disrespect and disregard given to them, or it must be quenched by mutilating their image and their rage in mainstream filmic depictions.

European-Americans are not strangers to this management. They can not be unable or unwilling to manage social uprisings. They have created sophisticated socioeconomic processes like governmental resource allocations, dominant perspectives on knowledge, and the media's framing and interpretation of reality in order to maintain their dominance. "The systemic portrayal of cultural images that symbolize African-American women... can only benefit the producers of such imagery [because] it conflicts with the interests of African-American women." (Jewell, 10) Therefore, they must be always ready and able to "manage" this conflict as a mode of self-preservation. Finally, the managing of African-American women's rage makes them responsible for "proving" their claims of disadvantage. Indeed this process of being forced to offer indisputable proof (which is never deemed indisputable to dominant society) adversely affects African-American women even more.

The tactic of making the victim feel like her own ineptitude is the real reason why they lack parity with the victimizer is an age-old method used during colonization. Europeans were constructing systems and institutions during slavery to create a paradigm by which the colonized would worship the worthiness of the settler and doubt her own. In Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women, Patricia Morton observes that in Minrose Gwin's exploration of the literature of the Old south, the chase [southern] belle and the lustful female slave evolved into rigid stereotypes." (9) The rigidity of these stereotypes locked African-American women into a mold that they have yet to truly escape. However, many African-American women reject these rigid stereotypes. BFT provides alternative images for African-American women. The Theory has revisited images of Mammy, Matriarch, Sapphire, and Jezebel. With a BFT perspective, agency and redemption are possible for African-American women. The images that have for so long produced shame in African-American women and have been used by dominant society as proof that they should be denied governmental economic resources and social benefits are being challenged by African-American women. In using African-American women's lived experience and rich cultural and historical strength, scholarship strives to reclaim African-American women's denigrated image. It is their rage that helps them formulate and understand in tangible ways these intangible concepts of oppression. That is not to say that African-American women need theory to explain to them their unique oppression but that BFT theory and scholarship helps many African-American women by packaging their lived experiences and naming it in terms that give it academic credibility. For without the resource of academia with which to analyze these images and promulgate notions that challenge the racist and sexist hegemonic order, the ability of BFT to empower African-American women would be greatly limited. Without BFT discourse on the source and purpose of African-American women's rage, many African-American women could not find empowerment and consciousness that is produced by images of their rage in film

## ANALYSIS

In the previous chapter, I used mass media theory and Black Feminist theory as a mechanism for framing my analysis. In this chapter, I link the historical analysis to a modern one focused on African-American women's rage in filmic depiction through examination of the texts of *Coffy*, *The Color Purple*, *Waiting to Exhale*, and *Two Can Play That Game*. Generally, the media representations of female rage are characterized by dominant ideologies of male superiority and negative or unrealistic images of women. The power of patriarchy allows it to confine and restrain some women's behavior, emotions, and reactions by defining them as deviant. This labeling is restrictive because women are not in power to create labels for themselves in this institutionalized and systematic way. They are often at the mercy of patriarchal representations or definitions of femininity. Only women possess the institutionalized label of whore, whereas, sexually there is no reason why the concept of whore must be gender-specific, for example. In fact, the concept of whore has become gender-specific because of its reference to women, instituted by patriarchy. Although African-American women are able to offer resistance to these representations, they are not empowered to create dominant ideologies.

This is especially detrimental to African-American women, the only group in America with their unique history of gender and racial oppression because of their history as slaves in America. Other women of color also have histories that are unique to them. My argument here is that African-American women represent a separate category from these women primarily because of slavery. African-American women's physical bodies have been labeled by White supremacy as inferior and sexually available since they set foot in this country as slaves. Ideologically, they have been defined by the news and entertainment media and historical accounts as "welfare queens", "baby-mamas", "whores", "antagonistic" and "demanding". These images affect how African-American women see themselves and how others outside of the group see them. For example, African-American women's perceived dominance or matriarchal tendencies are considered to be the reason for their oppressed condition. The image of African-American women as emasculating females (matriarchs and sapphires) is used to control African-American women. So, the mammy, or the Aunt Jemima, the sapphire, the jezebel

are images (the meritocracy ideology would argue) that represents the worth of African-American women in society. Since that worth is of lower value, they are on the bottom. African-American women do not have much value outside of operating as the oppressed “other” for European-American women. These archetypes of African-American women’s sexuality do little more than personify “otherness” in dominant society.

K. Sue Jewell writes about the historical images of African-American women in film and says that “the images of African-American women as Mammy, Aunt Jemima, Sapphire, and Jezebel that can be traced back to slavery were designed to create African-American women as the antithesis of the American conception of beauty, femininity, and womanhood”(36). The European-American woman was perceived as possessing all these qualities, however. She says that these images were also designed to justify the sexual, physical, and psychological abuse of African-American women during slavery and today.

When African-American women who are already socially marginalized and categorized in this way express rage, they are attempting to disrupt a status quo. African-American women’s rage propels them into a contradictory space where they are perceived as embodying the aggression and violence expected and accepted of masculinity in the body of the feminine. African-American women have never systematically possessed power nor have ever been systematically treated as women. Their social construction makes for an interesting paradox.

In analyzing how African-American women’s rage is portrayed in the films that I have selected, particular elements emerge that define this sub-genre of film. First of all, women involved in all these scenes are African-American women who get cheated on, sexually abused, and mistreated by men in their lives. All of this bad treatment, whether it is over time or all at once, causes them to have a perceived lapse in composure. They appear to just “snap” without cause. During this lapse, African-American women become extremely revengeful and violent. They set out to settle personal vendettas against the men who have hurt them. After a period of time, these women appear to regain composure and discontinue their rampage. The vengeance subsides, and ultimately, they return to so-called socially acceptable ways of behaving.

It seems that the depiction of African-American women’s rage in these particular scenes possess the same components. It is almost formulaic how the media represents

African-American women's rage. In fact, all these movies that I have selected follow the same pattern of representing African-American women's rage, although the movies are very different in plot and were produced in different eras. They span a period of over 33 years, yet they are similar. These films represent African-American women's rage as a moment of temporary insanity in which their rage is a product of their irrational and dysfunctional personality, as a manifestation of African-American women's penchant for violence, as an impotent and unfulfilling act of vengeance, and ultimately these films reinforce the belief of African-American women as a living embodiment of wildness. This notion that women of African descent are wild and savage is common in literary and historical accounts. It emerged during colonization and has remained a staple in hegemonic representation of African-American women. Morton writes in Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on the Afro-American Woman that the predominant view of African-American women was that "slave women are unrestrained, lascivious creatures avidly seeking sex with their masters or anyone else." (9) Moreover, Horton and Horton in "Violence, Protest, and Identity: Black Manhood in Antebellum America" quote William Drayton, a nineteenth century apologist for slavery, as saying that 'only slavery checked the 'wild frenzy of revenge and the savage lust for blood' natural to the African...once removed from the domesticating influence of slavery, [they] [would] relapse into barbarism.' (384)

### **African-American women's rage as insanity, irrationality, excessiveness**

In the depiction of African-American women who become enraged and vengeful, the mediated image almost always portrays the moment at which the woman "snaps". It is always a decided moment when she becomes a frightening antithesis of the character the audience sees her as. When this woman "goes crazy", her behavior appears to be extremely illogical. Coffy goes on a killing spree after her sister is placed in a hospital to recover from her drug addiction. Since the movie is initially based on the idea that she is seeking revenge for what has happened to her sister, it appears that she is senselessly killing people. Although these men may be deserving of death for the ways in which they ruined her sister's life, Coffy's response seems to appear to be far too extreme, not to mention after the fact. Her sister is already being treated for addiction in the hospital.

Additionally, Coffy knew that her sister was an “at risk” youth. She could have done more preventive care for her young sister.

Coffy pretends to be a junkie needing a fix at any cost in order to lure her sister’s pushers into a vulnerable position. She then blows the head off of one man at close range with a shot gun and then shoves a needle filled with a lethal amount of drugs into the arm of the other one. The image of Coffy, a caring sister and hard-working nurse at the ER seems to be incongruent with the image of the same woman who kills these two men in the opening of the movie *Coffy*. It is these types of Dr. Jekyll and Ms. Hyde constructions that are enemies of African-American women’s rage. Through these types of depictions, they are further viewed as uncontrollable monsters. Additionally, African-American women’s representation as villains further blurs the lines of guilt and innocence for these women. It becomes difficult to garner sympathies for the oppression of African-American women when they are represented as vengeful. It creates further doubt that they are true victims.

In fact, Coffy goes to work the same night. Although she doesn’t want anyone to suspect what she has done, she is still jittery and slightly awkward after the murders. She is attempting to slide back into her “normal” self. She has some initial difficulty but manages to perform her job duties. Additionally, in the last scene in the film, when referring to how she managed to kill the bad guys and escape with her life, Coffy says, “I don’t know how I did it. It seems as if I am in a dream.” For the mainstream, her dream-like state does not absolve her of murder. It only serves to condemn her actions as those of a woman who is not in control of herself. Another example is after Coffy shoots her boyfriend with a shotgun, she walks off in a daze. Her mannerisms suggest that she is distraught; she is not herself. We see her emotional state just before she shoots him. She has begun to calm down. The audience sees her release some of her anger and vengeance as she lets Howard talk her out of killing him. Then suddenly, when she sees that he is cheating on her, she raises the shotgun and blows him away. She reverts instantly. The audience cannot help but notice that she reverts because Howard is with a European-American woman. It is unclear whether the fact that she was European-American was more offensive to Coffy or not. Since this film emerged in the post-black pride era, and with the ever-present controversy of African-American men choosing European-

American women, it is most probable that her rage is compounded by the fact that the other woman was not African-American. This detail is critical in the analysis of the depiction of African-American women's rage because this detail sends the message that African-American women are second-rate women, even to their own men, and they are primarily jealous of the beauty and desirability of women from other racial backgrounds. This image that Coffy has lost control is manipulated into an argument that women are emotional and over-react to their perceived oppression. The argument then becomes basis for patriarchal notions that women's rage is more about their inadequacies than about unequal treatment.

This form of dismissing women's oppression by labeling them as prone to emotional overreactions and more likely to mentally disconnect can be used to look at the characterization of Celie, for example. In *The Color Purple*, when Celie is about to cut Mister's throat, she mentally transitions to a different place. She has a look of detachment on her face. She does not attempt to cut his throat when we see her in imminent danger, like while he is having intercourse with her or while he is beating her. She attempts to cut his throat when she is operating in her traditional role as his wife and personal servant. Although she did decide to cut his throat after he slapped her and made her nose bleed, she was not in fear for her life at that moment. He slaps her in public and then walked home. The next scene shows them on the porch preparing for a shave, and the audience assumes that significant time has passed between the two scenes. The scene is not portrayed as one in which Celie would have needed to cut his throat in self-defense. The scene is distinctly read as a moment in which Celie disconnects and premeditates Mister's murder out of rage and revenge. In fact, it seems as if she is about to commit an act of murder, not one of self-defense in a traditional sense.

Ordinarily, she is meek and obedient; she takes the abuse without complaining, but this moment is different from those other moments. In this moment, she is depicted as someone else. Her characterization is that of a woman on the edge, and as she teeters there keeping the audience in suspense, Shug is racing as fast as she can to catch Celie from indeed slipping off the precipice. Even the way in which the camera sharply and quickly alternates from image to image, with cuts of one woman running and the other



woman sharpening a blade, indicates that emotionally and mentally something has gone awry.

To further indicate to the audience that mentally Celie is off-balance and abnormal, the camera cuts back and forth to a tribal ritual scarification ceremony that is happening in Africa. As Celie is sharpening the blade and Shug is running through the fields to stop her, two small children are being led in a village to take part in the tradition. The commentary here is very interesting. The children are surrounded by tribesmen who are dressed in traditional garb. They are frightened, and so are Nettie, Celie's children, and the minister. The scene is filled with anxiety, as the tribal rhythms and voices force their way into the foreground of the narrative in a frenzied pattern identical to the frenzied characterization of Celie's life in that moment. As blood runs down the cheeks of the young boy participant, Shug makes it to the porch and halts Celie. The construction of this scene is a prime example of how African-American women's rage is represented as animalistic, as barbaric and inconsistent with American society. Stephen Spielberg, a European-American director, made these links between Celie's rage and traditional Africa to paint vivid scenes for the audience. He did not want the symbolism to be missed, so he made it explicit. Yet, Stephen Spielberg is not alone in his beliefs about African-American women's rage. Time and again, their rage is represented in like manner when it is represented through the lens of a hegemonic and patriarchal society. Because of the perceived deviance of African-American women's rage, Shug's dramatic success at saving Mister's throat was emphasized.

Scarification is viewed by our American culture as quintessentially savage, as crazy, as insane. Celie, because of her African ancestry, is undoubtedly linked to this insanely violent process in Africa when she is about to cut Mister's throat. Kimberly Springer in "Waiting to Set It Off" writes that "when it comes to women, race and violence... African-American[women] are thought to be always already violent due to their 'savage' ancestry." (174) While Celie is slipping back into a mode that is portrayed as natural, everyone around her is "normal". The Americans witnessing the ritual in Africa were normal; that is why they were disgusted. Their disgust was characteristic of their Western perspective that finds no redeemable qualities in this African ritual. Shug was "normal". She saved Mister's life, in spite of the fact that she knows he abuses Celie. Shug's

decision to stop Celie reveals something larger about dominant society's belief that: first of all, no oppression African-American women suffer could excuse them from committing an extreme act of violence, and second African-American women themselves are conflicted about their own rage. Even the children who told Shug that Celie was about to shave Mister indicated some understanding that this shave was going to be very different from the ones before. At that moment in the narrative, Celie's rage presents her as the only person who is not "normal". She is not represented as a woman who has reached her limit of endurance. She is not characterized as a woman who has become stronger and can now defend herself against her oppressor. She is portrayed as a lunatic. She is portrayed as a woman who is mentally weak and out of control.

When Shug arrives exhausted from her fast-paced run and fearful that Celie has done what is characterized as the unthinkable, Celie is seen standing on the porch with an expressionless face. She shows no emotion at her decision to kill this man. In the legal system people like Celie are described as pathological. African-American women's rage has all the components of classic pathology when it is presented in dominant media.

Shug, however, saves Mister's life. She is not like Celie in that she is ready to kill her oppressors. In fact, through-out the film, Shug's source of oppression has been her own father, and she spends the entire film in torment over his lack of love for her. She is not truly happy until she wins her father's favor. She takes his abuse until he decides to stop issuing it to her. She appears to expect Celie to do the same. The inconsistency between Shug's approach and Celie's approach adds tension to the analysis of African-American women's rage because it provokes unsettling feelings of African-American female solidarity and race loyalty. The African-American viewer is left wondering which woman to align herself with. Even feelings of guilt about wanting Mister's death are issues for the audience. These conflicting feelings are even more vivid as the audience sees that both a Black female and male are about to undergo the scarification process. Both African-American women and men have historically been victims and still are. It is unsettling to think that African-American women's rage towards African-American men may be conflicted with the fact that, they are indeed victims as well as we. That knowledge provides conflict because it begs the question: why are we as African-American women expected to always suffer for the race more, whereas African-

American men are not required to sacrifice in the same way that women are? This sacrifice often manifests itself in these sorts of interpersonal relationships where African-American women are expected to suffer in silence through oppressive situations with their male lovers, and when they do refuse to remain silent, they are most often penalized through negative representations and characterizations.

In *Waiting To Exhale*, even as Bernie is destroying her cheating husbands personal items, she herself is not in any danger. The crazed look in Bernie's eyes as she frantically grabs her husband's things from the closet is another example of how African-American women's rage is depicted as insanity. The quick edits of the camera makes the scene look even more frantic, in an attempt to reproduce visually what Bernie is feeling emotionally. Bernie sears the image of the angry, over-the-top, African-American woman in the minds of the viewers, when she sets the car on fire.

Prior to torching the car, Bernie undergoes a transformation. She appears to become another woman. She dialogues with herself as if she is outside of her own body. There is a sense that an alternate personality has emerged from Bernie, a split from self that is both same and other. At the climax of her transformation, the media depicts her as a beast-like figure. Bernie was represented as a mad animal acting out her destructive nature.

To further set up a contrast between irrationality that Bernie represents and rationality that the dominant society represents, a European-American male firefighter arrives on the scene and chastises her for her unacceptable behavior. When the firefighter comes to the door, Bernie is on the couch watching an episode of the 1970's American television show "Nanny and the Professor". Bernie's selection of this show is significant because this act of watching positions her as the antithesis of the television series' primary female character, the Nanny. Since the Nanny embodies almost all the domesticity that patriarchy demands of women (sexual voraciousness excluded), Bernie's refusal to remain a mirror image of the Nanny marks her as deviant in the mainstream. Watching this show after her violent acts indicates that she has begun to critique the system from not only her present condition but also from a historical and cultural perspective. The paradigm here is such that there is a European-American woman on one side embodying all that femininity has traditionally and historically symbolized, and on the other side,

there is an African-American woman embodying complete lack of this depiction of femininity. Bernie engages this dichotomy by watching the show right after she has further separated herself from the acceptable image. Her rage not only speaks to men but to European-American women. She is engaging a system that oppresses her and she is challenging her own lack of validity as an African-American woman in our society by acting on her rage. Bernie sits calmly and watches the show. This behavior signifies for African-American female viewers that indeed her rage is not a product of her uncontrollable and irrational vindictiveness. This quiet moment is powerful in the validation of African-American women's rage.

However, the image that is presented on film is that this woman has lit a car on fire in her front yard and is not concerned about it. She is portrayed as not behaving in ways that are socially accepted as normal or sane in this situation. All of these instances of African-American women's rage are depicted as being an emotional over-reaction to a situation, as a manifestation of mental insanity. Their behavior appears irrational and excessive.

This notion that African-American women feel rejected and, they want to take revenge because of it, reduces their rage to a concept that is simplistic and offensive to African-American women. Moreover, Trauma Theory does not support these illustrations. Judith Herman's says that traumatic syndrome results from people experiencing conditions of terrorism. ( Conversations with History, Sept. 21<sup>st</sup>, 2000) During her interview, she said that there are three responses to trauma: hyper-arousal, re-experience, numbing. According to her descriptions, both Coffy and Celie were acting in ways that are recognized as classic responses to trauma. Coffy's trauma led her to this feeling of hyper-arousal. She was jittery and seemed uneasy, always expecting something after she killed the first drug pushers. Celie's lack of emotion is a classic case of a victim experiencing numbness, whereby her attempt to cut Mister's throat seemed almost automatic and robotic. Bernie's experience was one of re-experience. The next morning, she was re-experiencing the event of the night before when her husband left her.

Similarly, in *Two Can Play That Game* Tracye is depicted as a totally different woman when she is destroying her boyfriend's apartment than when she is with her friends. Tracye goes to her boyfriend's apartment to confront him about cheating on her. Her decision to bust up Dewayne's apartment is also portrayed as irrational. She plants a pair

of women's panties in his couch, then accuses him of cheating because although currently she has no proof, she knows that he is cheating and wants to make him confess it. In her anger, she breaks things in his apartment when he won't confess to his sin. Even her own girlfriend, who is initially portrayed as the more rational one, abandons her, stating that "Blacks and Latinos are always making the most noise in White people's apartment buildings." While Tracye is wielding a baseball bat inside Dewayne's apartment like a professional athlete, he is trying to calm her down and at the same time proclaim his innocence. When Tracye hits Dewayne, he does not fight back. He just tries to block her hits and hold her back. She breaks a vase and throws a glass plate. Right before she leaves, she takes a baseball bat and slugs a lamp, shattering it completely. Tracye leaves Dewayne's apartment in ruins. Dewayne does not fear Tracye's rage. He does not even fear the destruction it causes to his personal items. It appears that Dewayne is more annoyed than "scared straight". This disruption is only a small ripple in the larger scheme, but for Tracye it is just enough. The very next scene that we see Tracye in shows her spending quality time with her girlfriends. It is almost hard to believe that earlier that day, she was out of control. This tactic of positioning Tracye's her rage against the image of her in a non-confrontational situation with her girlfriends is an attempt to villainize her and bastardize African-American women's rage as an illegitimate response to oppression. The depiction that African-American women can simply turn their rage off and on like a switch weakens any argument that these women are acting out of trauma. However, according to Dr. Herman, Tracye is experiencing the post- traumatic syndrome of hyperarousal. The commentary is that although mental health issues like post-traumatic syndrome is used to oftentimes explain European-American women's trauma, this consideration is not given to African-American women's rage.

Some middle and upper-class African-American women often try to distance themselves from the media image of African-American women's rage. Mediated images create spaces of shame for African-American women in European-American society. The connection to this African-American rage precludes women from class-based progress. The Sapphire image, which is the image of the vengeful and contentious African-American woman is inscribed onto the mediated representation of African-American women's rage, so as to transform legitimate protest of oppression into negative images of

African-American women. The feelings of shame that are associated with those denigrated images from slavery attempts to subdue African-American female rage. African-American women who aspire to middle and upper-class status are often most affected by this form of control. Springer writes in “Waiting to Set It Off” that “socioeconomic class replaced religion as the colonizing tool of whiteness that civilizes African-American, particularly African-American women.”( 177) She further writes that Evelyn Hammonds in “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality” observes that ‘some middle-class black women engaged in policing behavior of poor and working-class women and any who deviated from a Victorian norm in the name of protecting the ‘race’”(177) Many middle-class African-American women are so desperate to belong, to be seen as being a part of “the feminine” that they seek to stamp out all elements of opposition to this Victorian archetype.

Even in the most sympathetic of cases, the depiction of African-American women’s rage is portrayed as over emotional responses. These women all appear to be women who use their rage as an excuse, not a justification to operate within this arena of rage and revenge. Additionally, this depiction of African-American women’s rage as being little more than a “license to kill” creates a negative stigma around our rage and ultimately helps to invalidate African-American women’s protest. These two primary ideas lay the foundation on which mainstream builds its case against African-American women’s rage, yet they are contradictory concepts. African-American women’s rage is seen as being simultaneously something that is a natural defect of African-American women. They are portrayed as being unable to control their deviance. Conversely, they are portrayed as choosing to be violent when they could otherwise choose not to be. They are depicted as reveling in their rage and thriving on it.

In *Waiting to Exhale*, when Bernie begins her tirade, her husband is not around, which is why his personal items and not he himself is a victim of her wrath. Additionally, she becomes vengeful and violent the morning after her husband leaves her. She sleeps all night, then gets up in the morning and puts her two children on their school bus with hugs and kisses before she burns everything that her children’s father has in his closet. This observation is not to say that she was not entitled to act on her rage a day later. The film’s commentary is that, based on the way society has structured appropriate responses to

trauma for African-American women through the “superwoman” myth, she should have been calmer a day later rather than more agitated. Sleeping on her emotions should have given her a clearer head, and sending her children to school should have helped her to control her rage, according to mainstream ideas that restrict female expression. The fact that it did not results in the depiction that African-American women’s rage as premeditated. African-American women’s deviance is represented in their lack of remorse and control. In “Hysteria and Trauma in Pauline Hopkins’ of one blood, or, the hidden self”, the author Deborah Horvitz, writes about Hopkins’ work on hysteria and African-American women. She writes that Hopkins contends that “although medical and psychological literature contemporaneous with Pauline Hopkins might lead one to suspect that only white, middle-class women were vulnerable to the medical diagnosis of hysteria, “hysteria's classic "conversion" or somatic symptoms, including trances, amnesia, fainting spells, lethargy, passivity, and dissociative states of consciousness”, were experienced by African-American women, as well.(Horvitz, 1) Bernie’s response is not scripted as hysteria brought on by a particular traumatic experience. It is scripted as her “venting” in a way that is excessive and deliberate. The depiction of African-American women’s rage in the media only cements an image of a genetic defect that is particular to them.

### **Violence As A Natural Step**

How can African-American women’s rage be identified in the media? Just follow the trail of egregious violence. It is depicted as the first manifestation of our rage. In these films, violence seems to be a natural extension of African-American women’s rage. In *The Color Purple*, when Shug announces at the dinner table that she is taking Celie away from Albert, Celie quickly puts a knife to Albert’s (Mister) throat when he begins to denigrate her character. Everyone is sitting at the table having a family meal, but that does not stop Celie from getting angry enough to put a knife to Mister’s throat. Her actions surprised everyone at the table, and they surprised the audience. She had already decided to leave. It was not as if she had to threaten him with the knife in order to secure her escape. She was going anyway. The scene is designed to tag Celie’s rage as disruptive and out of place. Her violent reaction portrays her rage as unfounded, having

no legitimate genesis. However, the truth is that Celie grabs the knife because of Mister's inflammatory criticisms about her, not an attempt to force him to let her go. She had had enough, and she wanted him to know it in no uncertain terms. Her characterization in this scene reinforces stereotypical ideas about African-American women and aggressive behaviors. Patricia Morton writes, in Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women that the image of African-American women is "far from pursuing relationships with males; her masculinized traits and aggressive behavior drive them away from her-if they survive her emasculation of them. Neither a magnolia-like figure nor a shrinking violet, in her image she resembles more closely the Venus's-flytrap that entraps and devours its hapless victims." (3) This characterization reveals the perceived monstrous aggression of African-American women. Her imagery is not of beauty and grace like the magnolia. Neither is her imagery that of a passive and submissive woman like a shrinking violet. Her imagery is that of one of the most violently intriguing plants. They are characterized as a "killer plant". Celie behaves in a way that is represented as unexpected for the situation. Being ready to cut Mister's throat on the front porch, and posturing to do that same thing at the dinner table is coded as extreme behavior.

This marking is evident when we analyze Coffy's response to her rage. Her first response was not to go to the police. It was to kill everyone associated with selling her little sister drugs. In the last scene of the movie, when she saw that her boyfriend was having sex with a European-American woman, her first response was to kill him like she had done the others. You would have thought that since she had just killed a whole group of men that she would have been less eager to kill another one. She is painted as a female killing-machine. In fact she was eager because her rage got an extra boost when she saw that half naked European-American woman standing on the stairs in her lover's home. Maybe she even could have cried, except that would have been too feminine since African-American women are denied their feminine side. The last depiction of African-American women's rage that would be portrayed in dominant media is that of femininity. "Cultural standards still equate womanhood with kindness and nonviolence, manhood with strength and aggression, according to Neal King and Martha McCaughey in "What's a Mean Woman Like You Doing in a Movie Like This" (2). Denying Coffy the stereotypical image of a weeping female equates her rage with hardened, emotionless



violence. This categorization of her rage connects her to manhood and not womanhood. Coffy's lack of female "weakening" or kindness in any way reinforces ideological beliefs that African-American women's rage is not a display of femininity.

In none of the films in my study have I seen an instance where the African-American woman who becomes vengeful was prodded and coaxed into doing so. Neither is the moment that she expresses her rage presented as one in which she was a helpless victim in immediate danger for her life. Even when Coffy was in danger of being killed by her kidnappers, she was not scripted as helpless. She was presented as cunning and resourceful, using her "street smarts" and "feminine wiles" to secure an escape, making mockery of the thought that an African-American female could ever be a true "damsel in distress". "Black women are "coded" as those particular kinds of "other" sinful, immoral, low-class, unlady-like type women." (Manatu, 64) The idea is that she "ain't" no damsel, and she "ain't" in no real distress.

When Coffy leaned over the drug pusher in the bathroom and shot drugs into his arm, she was still a nurse, a loving sister, a friend, and a lover. Coffy could be all those other things and still be responsible for the death of other people. Suddenly taking on this role as vengeful, vigilante was not beyond the limits of who she was as a person. In fact her behavior was presented as a first response when an African-American woman is angry or hurt or oppressed. Her first line of defense is violence. After Coffy kills the drug pushers at the opening of the film, she is seen talking to Carter about the drug ring. She asks "why can't we just kill all of them?" Carter, who is the dutiful policeman, chides her for even suggesting that. No one had to tell her to start killing people. It is natural to her.

Portrayals of African-American women indicate that they take the lead on aggression towards men. The popular Medea series produced by Tyler Perry is a prime example. Medea is always quick to advocate putting poison in a man's food or shooting him, etc. Even in Tyler Perry's latest film, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, Medea advocates violence against men as a way of "getting even". She takes a chain-saw and destroys the furniture of her grand-daughter's husband who has just revealed he has a mistress.

The scorned African-American woman could more closely be associated with wounded, vengeful animals. African-American women's portrayal is such that they are lashing out with such calculated aggression and hatred until their humanity is hardly

recognizable in this state of rage. This response seems to be a negative notion that this violence is lying dormant within African-American women and can be evoked given the right circumstances, which is usually when they are hurt by men's actions. This willingness to get violent appears to be innate, according to filmic depictions. They are defined as dangerous, indeed.

The way in which vengeful African-American women are represented as having a breaking point makes them appear to be an even greater threat to hegemony. Coffy was a nurse, Celie was a young woman, Bernie was a housewife, and Tracye was an average middle-class woman. This notion that African-American women's rage goes too far in filmic depiction adds weight to arguments that label African-American women as being naturally unable to operate within the confines of the "cult of true womanhood", meaning they are not women but simply females, hence are not entitled to the sympathy and protection that women receive from patriarchy.

Conversely, when we look at the depiction of European-American women's rage as seen in the popular film *Thelma and Louise*, we see a very different picture. In fact, European-American women's rage is characterized as being a result of extreme trauma. Louise kills a man because he was attempting to rape Louise. She kills him while he is right in the act, and she shoots him to save her friend. Louise protects Thelma and consequently protects this mythic European image of the pure and virginal European-American woman. After she kills the man, the women spend the next few days on the run, during which they are often depicted as scared little girls wondering what to do. Ultimately, they were never able to return to their normal lives after this violent experience. Not only that, but their only choice after the killing is suicide. Not once is their depiction once of malice. They do not seem to be filled with hatred for men or anger that stems from within. They are always scripted as women who are abused by the system, women who otherwise would be the epitome of womanhood. They are not depicted as already inclined to violence. Neither is their violence extreme. Even when the viewer sees the moment in which Louise shoots the would-be rapist and realizes that she shoots him in calculated anger, not just for his crime in that present moment but for all the crimes of patriarchal oppression and domination of women, her action is not portrayed as having such malice as the rage of African-American women. Louise's

actions are explained through the narrative of the film in such a way that she garners sympathy and not reproach from the audience. The revelation that she was the victim of sexual violence is a technique within the narrative that used to absolve her of any guilt. There are no such accommodations made for African-American women's display of rage at patriarchal oppression. The film sanitizes European-American women's rage. By the end of this canonical film, European-American women's rage is celebrated and offers them an escape that before they had not imagined.

In addition to the differences that I have already mentioned, films also indicate that although African-American women's rage can be evoked immediately, it often takes more time to regain control and subdue it. It is much more difficult to put the lid back on "Pandora's box". Once Coffy began killing men responsible for her sister's harm and eventually her own, she did not stop until she had killed every single person involved, including her own lover. Had Celie not been stopped by Shug, she would have slit Mister's throat right on his own front porch with an emotionless accuracy, while giving him a routine shave. Bernie did not stop her rampage until she had burned or sold every single solitary item that belonged to her husband, and even then she went to his office and made a scene by slapping his mistress in the boardroom. When Tracye got started on Dewayne's apartment, she was determined to completely destroy it. He could barely restrain her.

African-American women are not the only women whose rage is depicted negatively. All women's rage, including that of European-American women, is outside of the status quo and is therefore a threat to dominant society. However, for African-American women, this process is portrayed as such a genetically programmed response. The only certain outcome of their rage in filmic depiction is utter destruction and isolation. The dominant commentary is that if African-American women are to express their rage by destroying property, eliminating men from their lives, and jeopardizing their economic security, then they must be willing to suffer to consequences of their actions. Those consequences leave them broken and alone which then affect their socioeconomic status in society. K. Sue Jewell writes in *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of U.S. Social Policy* that,

“The more frequently the mass media purvey cultural images that attribute the socioeconomic status of African-American women to their own lifestyle, the more the wider society believes that social policies and legislation are unable to improve their life chances and increase their participation in major societal institutions. In effect, such images, which place culpability on individuals and not institutions, result in the denial that racism, sexism and classism are largely responsible for the status and functioning of African-American women in societal institutions.”( 17)

In other words mainstream does not want to admit guilt in the condition of African-American women’s lives, so it uses them as scapegoats, blaming them for their own oppression, and penalizing them when they attempt to demand a redress of their grievances.

### **Impotence of African-American Women’s Rage**

When Coffy ends her rampage of vigilante revenge, she finds herself alone. She has just shot the man she loved, and she walks along the beach at night. The film ends on an extremely hopeless note for her. Her sister is in the hospital, her friend Carter is dead, and her lover is also dead. She is in utter isolation. Her rage and revenge cannot undo the harm that was done to her sister or to Carter. It also is unable to make her feel better about losing the man she loved. Whether she had killed Howard or not, she still would have had to face the fact that he did not love her. He had ordered her killed in order to protect his own interests. Shooting Howard does not change that. Neither does it make her feel any less abandoned. It is quite a somber moment for Coffy. This moment is where the film ends. This message of hopelessness is the final one for the viewer. It is as if the film is aiming to highlight the limitations of African-American women’s rage.

When the blaze is set, the fire marshal knocks on Bernie’s door. His presence is a significant one. He is a representative of the patriarchal male dominated structure that Bernie is trying to hurt. His appearance is almost a message to her that she can not rid her life of the influence of this oppressive entity so easily. “It is against the law to burn

anything on your property” is what the fire marshal said to her as the crew was putting out the blaze she had created. The fire marshal revives what Bernie is trying to kill. He puts out the fire and warns her about that type of behavior with the threat of legal punishment, which sets up the dichotomous relationship between female behavior and male behavior in ways that are indicative of Hill-Collins’ matrix of domination. The fire marshal steps in for her husband easily because they are representatives of the same culture of masculinity. The marshal also “serves to remind Bernie that she has ascended into a better kind of neighborhood and this (ghetto) behavior will not be tolerated”, writes Springer( 186). This ghetto behavior can also be read as “Black” because the ghetto, although first associated with the Jewish community, has become analogous for African-Americans in today’s society. The fire marshal makes impotent Bernadine’s liberating act. Her satisfaction and glory is short-lived. Even with all her hard work to “get even” with John, in a matter of minutes her labor was nullified.

In the films in this analysis where African-American women’s rage is depicted, the ultimate result is that it appears impotent. If the woman succeeds in permanently damaging men who are objects of her wrath, like Coffy, she is then left alone. If her wrath punishes men but does not prohibit a relationship whether because of physical or emotional disconnect, she is forced to have to endure his oppression, like Tracye and Celie. It seems that the depiction of African-American women’s rage places them proverbially between a rock and a hard place. African-American women’s rage appears to be extremely impotent, lacking any real power for effective change in the power structure of oppression that creates a need for them to respond in such a way.

In *The Color Purple*, Sophia’s rage lands her in jail for eight years and causes her to miss her children growing up. When she is finally let out of jail, she is forced to be a maid for the same European-American family who is responsible for her incarceration. Moreover, her children have no idea who she is. Initially, her spirit and her body are broken because of time in jail. She is old and now many of her dreams have gone unrealized.

Media depictions are designed to regulate or restrain African-American women’s rage by presenting it as insanity, as a natural extension of African-American women’s proclivity towards violence and as a meaningless act of aggression. This process of

policing this particular rage is steeped in racist and sexist ideologies. African-American women's rage is seen as more of a threat than the rage of other women.

The media representation of African-American women's rage depicts it as dangerous to others and also unfulfilling for African-American women themselves. In *Waiting to Set It Off*, Springer writes that the images of African-American women's rage is presented as "sapphire, as the bitter, vengeful "black bitch," destroying all that she had thought would bring security and respect." (187) It is presented as having no real redeeming characteristics. It is excessive and animalistic.

The films in which I have analyzed reveal glaring inequalities in the depiction of African-American women's rage. For the purposes of my thesis, I have used particular films, but certainly there was not a lack of films depicting African-American women's rage in this stigmatized way in an attempt to recreate and encourage historical stereotypic images of African-American women. The fact that there are so many other films to choose from further indicates the very real and very damaging attack on the African-American woman in mainstream American society. She is certainly made out to be a threat to others and to her own racial group when she is challenging her social condition.

It is no accident that their representation is such. Neither is it harmless entertainment. It is a miseducation that has left African-American women without many allies in their fight against oppression that is unique to their position as racialized women. It is a pop-culture assassination of African-American women's protest. It is an on-going strategy to leave African-American women defenseless and without a single option for recourse.

## CONCLUSION

In the previous chapter, I employed a critical analysis of the text. In this chapter, I will reveal how African-American women's rage empowers African-American women. African-American women start from a position of powerlessness. They are born in a social order that assigns them an identity. This identity signifies them as inadequate, unable to rise to the feminine imperative. African-American women have not attained true womanhood nor have they ever benefited from its privileges in our dominant society. Representations of them in dominant society reflect their denigrated worth. They have no place of privilege in a system that is predicated upon privilege. The image of African-American women as savages in pre-colonial days and mammies, matriarchs, Sapphires, and Jezebels in colonial and post-colonial days, keeps African-American women locked into the category of the "unfeminine". African-American women are never able to rise above their status as "other". They are castigated to "less than" because their black skin requires it in a patriarchal and hegemonic society. Bell hooks contends that,

"As a group, black women are in an unusual position in this society, for not only are we collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, but our overall social status is lower than that of any other group. Occupying such a position, we bear the brunt of sexist, racist, and classist oppression. Black women with no institutionalized "other" that we may discriminate against, exploit or oppress, often have a lived experience that directly challenges the prevailing classist, sexist, racist social structure and its concomitant ideology. (144-145)

Manatu says that African-American women are represented as the "coded other" and "binary visual opposite" for European-American women in media depictions. She contends that this social relationship that African-American and European-American women have to one another is a construction that allows the power structures within this country to remain intact. African-American women have been oppressed by being historically and systematically denied entrance into the realm of "the feminine". They

have not been allowed to participate in the “true cult of womanhood” because that space has already been reserved for European-American women by their association to European-American men, the guardians of the entrance. “The feminine” has been defined by patriarchy as the realm of sexually chaste, virginal, delicate, females who are afforded care and love by males. Because the prevailing images of African-American women are in direct opposition to the notions and definitions of “the feminine”, by virtue of being born Black, these women are socially excluded. The parameters for “the feminine” are so rigid until there is no way of creating authentic space for African-American women who attempt to fit the mold. Manatu writes that, in a hierarchy, there must always be a dominant and a subordinate. African-American women have a “one down” relationship to white women; the depictions of African-American women in the media position them collectively as being a step down from European-American women. African-American women are presented as lacking in virtue that would make them worthy of “the feminine”.

Hooks writes in “Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory” “that anger led [her] to question the politics of male dominance and enabled [her] to resist sexist socialization.”(140) It was her anger towards systemic racism and sexism that influenced her consciousness. Like hooks, so many African-American women and scholars molded their resistance in anger. Hill-Collins says that the “rearticulation of black women’s standpoint is a tool in them resisting their oppression.” It is African-American women’s rage that has served as one of these “tools”.(184) It is often a catalyst for their liberating consciousness, whether that consciousness moves them to peaceful demands for equity or violent resistance. The *Cincinnati Enquirer* reports that before the race riots in 2001 erupted, they received a call from a female who said, “This is the 15<sup>th</sup> time a Black man has died in the custody of Cincinnati police. This time there will be revenge. This time you will see our anger.”(1) This very chilling response illustrates these issues of anger boiling over in females. Wallace comments on African-American women’s anger by saying that men in the sixties left her feeling like these men were telling her to be “more feminine, more attractive, and above all more submissive”(299). She says that during that time, African-American women “got angry, were not passive, and became impatient with the slow pace of gender equality”(299) In Communion: The Female



Search for Love, Hooks says that the “rage at men was intense and unrelenting” for the women in her feminist consciousness-raising groups.(163) hooks says “their rage was infectious.”(164) Here hooks addresses the fact that as women become more conscious, they often become more angry at social conditions and interpersonal relationships between men and women. This anger become intense as it turns into rage. This rage in one woman might move other women to rage as well.

African-American women’s anger that leads to their rage has been a source of empowerment for them. Jacqueline Bobo’s analysis in “The Color Purple: Black Women as Cultural Readers” led her to interview a group of women on some of the issues of gender and race that emerged in the film. She says that as this group of African-American women responded to the characterization of Celie, one woman said ‘I had different feelings all the way through the film because first I was very angry... but gradually as time went on, [Celie] began to realize that she could do something for herself’(93) African-American women are in a social position where there is no where left to go but up. As hooks states, African-American women are on the bottom rung of the societal ladder. When Celie attempts to cut Mister’s throat, she attempts to create a space for her liberation within the system she is fighting. Franz Fanon writes in “Blood Flows in the Antilles Under French Domination” that “the violent reactions of the people...simply indicates that the time has come to clarify problems and dissipate misunderstandings”(169).The system that stands against her is violent and callous. In that moment, she emulates those traits in order to better protect herself. She used her rage as a “strategy to square off with men.”( Rose, 286) In “First Truths on the Colonial Problem”, Franz Fanon writes that “today the people no longer feel their bellies at peace... the people really want things to change and right away.”(122) He captures the desperation that a colonized and oppressed people feel. Things must change. The people’s patience has run out. This state of desperation that Fanon so vividly describes when referring to colonization is the same type of desperation that created African-American’s rage. This notion of African-American women’s resistance as emerging out of the loss of identity that happened during slavery is an important one. It shows that their rage has developed out of a historical process of the oppressed resisting their oppression. Just as the

rebellions that took place in the colonies of the Caribbean and Africa, African-American women are rebelling. Many of them are embracing images of their rage in film.

As the oppressed “other”, African-American women have lived with an existence created for them by a hegemonic order. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon writes that it is “the settler who has brought the native into existence and who perpetuates [her] existence.”(36) African-American women’s existence have been perpetuated by negative images of them as asexual mummies and matriarchs, cantankerous Sapphires, and hyper-sexual Jezebels.

My analysis focuses on African-American women’s rage in filmic depiction. I used the films *Coffy*, *The Color Purple*, *Waiting to Exhale*, and *Two Can Play That Game* to discuss how dominant images of African-American women’s rage are used to reinforce age-old stereotypes that serves as agents of control over African-American women’s sexuality. My analysis asked how and when is rage in African-American women depicted in popular films? What does that presentation convey about African-American women’s rage as more threatening than other women’s rage? Within the context of the history of African-American women, how are women in *Coffy*, *The Color Purple*, *Waiting to Exhale*, and *Two Can Play That Game* portrayed?

When African-American women’s rage is depicted in the four films in my analysis, it is represented as excessively violent, impotent, and as a manifestation of insanity. The effects of these images haunt African-American women. Their negative impact often affects how African-American men treat them. It even affects their self-image. Knowing the detrimental effects of the distorted image of African-American women’s rage in dominant media, why do many African-American women find empowerment through these images? What do these filmic depictions of rage inspire African-American women? What power does our rage have for us?

African-American women are aware of the negative representations of their rage in the media. They are not duped into believing that old stereotypes of them have vanished. Everyday that they live, they are keenly aware that they are the “other”, the “unfeminine”. African-American women engage in what bell hooks calls “the oppositional gaze”. Hooks argues that African-American women resist by looking. This is often the first form of resistance. This action of looking at their condition then leads

them to anger, which leads to rage. African-American women are not victims to their rage. They are not, as dominant ideologies would suggest, helpless to control their wayward nature. They are smart. They are strategic, but they are also fed-up. Many African-American women find empowerment through the representation of their rage in film. African-American women may approach a film and “bring other viewpoints to bear on the watching of the film and may see things other than what the film-makers intended...read[ing] against the grain of the film.”(96). Their rage has historically given them a modicum of leverage. Although the denigration of their rage through its mainstream filmic depiction is designed to bring shame by conjuring painful stereotypes that remind African-American women of their “otherness”, these filmic representations are often not a source of shame for some African-American women. For those women who reject feelings of shame, these representations of their rage in film can create a deeper level of consciousness and move them to activism. African-American women’s rage has been a weapon with which to fight back against the injustice they have experienced. When this rage is reproduced in filmic depiction, often, it remains as a symbol of that inspiration and empowerment.

Berlant in Rose’s article states that a “resistance to male domination and violence must take place in a public sphere because that is where momentous exchanges of power are perceived to take place”( 286). This concept is similar to Patricia Hill-Collins’ belief that there are two spheres at working society; the public and the private. The public is the dominant sphere where the dominant discourse takes place. She contends that in order to challenge the systems of oppression, private knowledge must be transferred into the public sphere. Cutting Mister’s throat on the front porch was Celie’s attempt at injecting her private knowledge into the public sphere. Additionally, Coffy attempts such a transfer when she goes searching in the night-clubs for her sister’s drug dealers.

Again, Berlant warns though that “female complaint is often devalued, marginalized, and ineffective in this sphere”( 286). So while it is true that private knowledge must be injected into this sphere in order to effect change, it is also true that this injection is also detrimental to that private knowledge. Fire-marshals showing up at Bernadine’s door to inform her that she was not allowed to burn her husband’s car on her front lawn is another example of how the validity of private knowledge is jeopardized once inserted

into the public sphere. This insertion of African-American women's resistance through their rage can also be jeopardized. In fact, because African-American women's rage is such an affront to dominant society, it will always be attacked, forever being jeopardized. In Rose's response to the "getting even" script, she says that "even though a new light is cast on male-female sexual power relations and women are depicted as resistant, aggressive participants, often the larger patriarchal parameters of heterosexual courtship remain in tact"(280).

Knowing that the depiction of African-American women's rage is so detrimental to African-American women, why do some African-American women not only support these images in film but revel in them? Why do some women in an audience yell affirmations to the characters on-screen? Some African-American women encourage these fictive characters to commit all sorts of acts in an attempt to "get even". Even as I write this thesis and understand fully the impact these images have on the misrepresentation of African-American women's rage, I nevertheless, at times, feel a sense of empowerment when, finally through her rage, Bernie in, *Waiting to Exhale*, finds the strength to react.

As Bobo's work reveals, some African-American women use these images of their rage as sources of power in a patriarchal and hegemonic society. Their rage has historically given them a modicum of leverage. Although the denigration of their rage through its mainstream filmic depiction is designed to bring shame by conjuring painful stereotypes that remind African-American women of their "otherness", these filmic representations are often not a source of shame for some African-American women. However, for some it does produce a feeling of shame that is then used to police their behavior in an effort to keep them subjected to the oppressive status quo. For those women who reject feelings of shame, these representations of their rage in film can create a deeper level of consciousness and move them to activism. African-American women's rage has been a weapon with which to fight back against the injustice they have experienced. When this rage is reproduced in filmic depiction, often, it remains as a symbol of that inspiration and empowerment.

A significant part of these patriarchal parameters is Marcus's "rape script". However, she says that "the rape scripts' legitimacy is never complete, never assured. We enable a

gap between script and script and actress which can allow us to rewrite the script...( 392). She goes on to say that “ultimately, we must eradicate this social script. Although it does not disintegrate the dominant patriarchal structure, the “getting even” script does have some validity for African-American women. It does offer a way to resist. Fanon writes that “decolonization never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history’s floodlights on them.”(The Wretched of the Earth, 36) The depictions of African-American women’s rage in the media indicate that decolonization is taking place. As Fanon says, it is not going unnoticed.

The future of the permanency of images such as Mammy, Matriarch, Sapphire, and Jezebel is unknown. It is not clear whether these images will survive for another one hundred years. There is hope that African-American women can rise to a level of parity with their European-American female counterparts, although parity with European-American males is most desired. Maybe African-American women’s rage won’t force the dominant culture to eradicate those stereotypical images, but maybe new images will emerge through the scholarship of Black Women’s Theories that offer African-American women alternatives categories.

Likewise, the future might hold a new perspective on African-American women’s rage in film. This new perspective might represent their rage adequately and not as proof of their worthlessness. However, if these old images survive long into the future, and if there are no alternative images for African-American women, one thing is certain- dominant ideologies will increasingly offer images of negative African-American women’s rage in an attempt to silence their voice. When this happens, African-American women will continue to respond by find empowerment through the filmic depiction of their rage. They will not allow hegemony and patriarchy to deny them the very thing that has ushered in a tool for their survival.

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