Black Matrilineage, Photography, and Representation

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Low-Income Black Single Mothers’ Resistance to Controlling Images

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Introduction

In her pioneering book, *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins coined the term “controlling images” to refer to stereotypes about Black women used to justify and normalize their oppression. In addition to the mammy, jezebel, and bad Black-girl images, two other prominent controlling images have come to define Black womanhood in the U.S.: the welfare queen, a woman (presumably, a Black woman) who continues to have multiple children in order to collect a government check, and the baby mama, a woman (also presumably Black) whose central purpose in life is to milk her child(ren)’s father for as much money as she can get from him (Stephens and Few 2007: 52). These images have helped to portray Black mothers in the American imagination as unfit and Black motherhood as a social ill to be curtailed (Roberts 1997). As Adair (2000: xi) writes about master narratives of poor women,

These narratives, often packaged as literature, film, photography, political sloganeering, journalism, social anecdote, and even social science, define the landscape of the national imaginary, providing a lens through which we read ourselves, the material world, and others who share that world with us. These popular and widely disseminated visions fix and juxtapose the “deserving”—white, middle class, married—against the “undeserving” poor American woman. In this way the very bodies of poor women and children are produced as sites of extreme pathology and danger, juxtaposed always against the innocence, order, and logic of the privileged.
In contemporary popular culture, internet users often reproduce controlling images (typically, through the vehicle of photography) in the form of memes, which are used to express ideas, transmit information, or as sources of comedy. Merriam-Webster (2020) defines a meme as “an amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned image or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online through social media” (n.p.). One does not have to search very hard to find memes depicting low-income Black single mothers as lazy government moochers who have multiple children simply to collect a welfare check, or memes portraying Black single mothers as “bitter baby mamas” who seek to drain their baby daddy’s bank accounts by taking them to court to request child support payments. As these illustrations and memes are so widely circulated, they may have an impact on how low-income Black single mothers see themselves and their mothering.

In this essay, I place two memes in conversation with data I collected from in-depth interviews with twenty-one low-income Black single mothers in Virginia to illustrate the salience of controlling images of low-income Black single motherhood and how internet users use photography to reproduce such controlling images. I also demonstrate that while these images are powerful (and the mothers in my study recognized them as such), they also actively resisted them by evoking the Strong Black Woman schema (Watson and Hunter 2016; Watson-Singleton 2017). While this trope may have harmful implications, such as increased anxiety and depression (Belgrave and Adams 2016), it also presents a counter-narrative to the stereotypes of low-income Black single mothers, such as the welfare queen. When responding to such stereotypes, the women in this study affirm their right to be mothers and their capabilities as mothers who, despite their difficult circumstances, will do whatever it takes to take care of their children.

Background of the Study

The topic of low-income Black single motherhood is personal for me, as my mother spent a large portion of her life as a low-income Black single mother. I have witnessed her experiences with poverty and interpersonal violence, and I consider her one of the strongest and most resilient women I know. In many ways, she embodies the Strong Black Woman schema, although her experiences have shown me that strength does not necessitate a superhuman ability to always remain steadfast, even in the direst of circumstances. While
studying the impacts of neoliberalism on low-income single mothers (particularly, those of color) in graduate school, I was compelled to amplify the voices of low-income Black single mothers in an effort to dismantle the racist, sexist, and classist stereotypes that have been propped up against this group in the media and in public policy for decades. Thus, I decided to interview low-income Black single mothers to understand how they see themselves as mothers and how the intersection of race, class, and gender shapes their motherhood identities and mothering activities. For my dissertation research, I interviewed twenty-one low-income Black single mothers in southwest and central Virginia. The interview excerpts presented in this paper are drawn from that study.

Between September and December 2017, I recruited participants by hanging flyers in Social Services agencies in central and southwest Virginia, reaching out to Directors of Social Services agencies and organizations that serve low-income Black single mothers and asking them to share my flyer with clients, and speaking at churches (one in southwest Virginia and one in central Virginia). After speaking at churches, I met several people who worked with the types of organizations described above who then agreed to share my recruitment flyer with their clients. In addition, the director of a food pantry located in a church in southwest Virginia agreed to allow me to recruit participants there. Each participant received a $25 gift card to a local grocery store for their time.

Photography and Controlling Images of Black Womanhood

Photographic images of Black womanhood in the West developed as oppositional to photographic images of White womanhood (Willis and Williams 2002). White women were seen as the ultimate feminine subjects, while Black women were portrayed as the antithesis of femininity. Sojourner Truth eloquently elucidates this phenomenon in her seminal “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech given at the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention in 1851. She proclaims:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And
ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as any man—
when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I
have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and
when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And
ain’t I a woman? (Truth 1851, cited in Guy-Sheftall ed. 1995: 36)

Truth’s words show that “the ideology of femininity did not apply to Black

In the U.S., the images of the asexual mammy, the jezebel, and the “bad
Black-girl” became the defining standards of Black womanhood. These images
have shaped how Black women’s sexuality, reproduction, and mothering are
perceived in the American imaginary. Enslaved Black women’s reproductive
bodies were only valued to the extent that they produced more slaves and
nurtured and cared for their white slave master’s children, which the mammy
image illustrates (Collins 2000; Davis 1981; Roberts 1997). Black women were
not only forced to breed during slavery, they also faced a pervasive threat of
sexual and domestic violence, which caused many of them to migrate to the
Northwest (Hine 1995). Images such as the jezebel and “bad Black-girl” illus-
trate that Black women have been hypersexualized and thus deemed unreape-
able (Willis and Williams 2002; Collins 2000).

In her seminal text, _Black Feminist Thought_, Collins (2000) argues that con-
trolling images developed as a way to maintain Black women’s subordination
and the economic system of chattel slavery. As controlling Black women’s
sexuality and reproduction has historically been essential to the preservation
of race, class, and gender inequality in the U.S., these images serve as a means
of depicting Black women’s reproduction and motherhood as deviant and as
a social ill to be curtailed (Collins 2000; Roberts 1997). One controlling image
that does this powerfully is that of the “Black matriarch” or the Black female
head-of-household. As Collins explains:

While the mammy typifies the Black mother figure in White homes,
the matriarch symbolizes the mother figure in Black homes. Just as the
mammy represents the “good” Black mother, the matriarch symbolizes
the “bad” Black mother. Introduced and widely circulated via a gov-
ernment report titled The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,
the Black matriarchy thesis argued that African-American women who
failed to fulfill their traditional ‘womanly’ duties at home contributed
to social problems in Black civil society (Moynihan 1965: 83).
The matriarchy thesis and the resulting controlling image of the Black matriarchy thus contributed to the vilification of Black single mothers in the U.S. During the time of Moynihan’s report, women, in general, were expected to be “just dependent enough” (i.e., not too dependent, but certainly not too independent) (Fraser and Gordon 1994: 325). White women thus were characterized as too dependent, while Black women were characterized as too independent (Fraser and Gordon 1994). As welfare dependency became increasingly stigmatized in the latter half of the twentieth century and white women began transferring to “first-track” public assistance programs, such as unemployment and old age insurance, single Black mothers became the face of welfare dependency (Fraser and Gordon 1994).

While the historically popular belief that families of color comprise the majority of welfare recipients is false, families of color have, for decades, been disproportionately represented on the welfare rolls. For instance, between 1985 and 1992, fifty percent of non-Hispanic Black women and thirty-six percent of Hispanic Black women received some form of welfare benefits (Moffitt and Gottschalk 2001). According to Fraser and Gordon (1994: 327), “The ground [for Black single mothers becoming the face of welfare dependency] was laid by a long, somewhat contradictory stream of discourse about ‘the black family,’ in which African-American gender and kinship relations were measured against white middle-class norms and deemed pathological”. Black mothers’ leadership in their families, which was largely a result of Black men’s unemployment and under-employment due to racist discrimination in the labor market, was seen as deviant.

The “welfare queen” controlling image became popularized during the Reagan administration and appears to be linked to Black women in the United States gaining access to social welfare benefits, as prior to this, there was no need for such a stereotype (Collins 2000). As the social welfare state expanded in the U.S., African-Americans fought for and gained access to social welfare benefits that were previously denied to them (Collins 2000; Gordon 1995). In the wake of the major neoliberal economic shifts of the 1980s and 1990s, which exacerbated poverty among African-Americans in the U.S., the “welfare queen” controlling image blamed Black mothers for their own poverty, as opposed to examining the political and economic structures that perpetuated poverty in Black communities (Collins 2000). This controlling image denotes a “highly materialistic, domineering, and manless working-class Black woman” who was “content to take the hard-earned money of tax-paying Americans and remain married to the state” (Collins 2000: 88). Politicians and policymakers
employed this controlling image to justify cuts to social welfare programs, including eventually reforming the social welfare system, which occurred during the Clinton administration with his signing of the 1994 Personal Responsibilities and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA).

Several of my participants recognized the “welfare queen” controlling image and attempted to distance themselves from it by describing themselves as hard-working and emphasizing that they were only relying on Social Services benefits temporarily. Historically, welfare recipients have not been seen as citizens in the same way as those who do not rely on the state for social support. As Shklar (1998: 22) explains, “To be on welfare is to lose one’s independence and to be treated as less than a full member of society. In effect, the people who belong to the under-class are not quite citizens.” Simply put, people on welfare lack the social standing necessary to be recognized as full citizens (Shklar 1998). The rise of neoliberalism has amplified the significance of being an independent wage-earner, as being a good “neoliberal subject” is dependent upon one’s ability to be self-sufficient and thus to not rely on the state for social support (Brown 2005; Weigt 2006). Given this historical context, it makes sense that my participants would try to distance themselves from the idea that they are lazy government moochers.

The “baby mama” controlling image that emerged during interviews denotes a Black mother of an “illegitimate child” “who purposely becomes pregnant so that she [can] maintain a relationship while making the biological father financially indebted to her…” (Stephens and Few 2007: 52). The notion that single Black mothers must have multiple “baby daddies” stems from controlling images that portray Black women as sexually lascivious and immoral, namely, the “jezebel, whore, or ‘hoochie’” controlling images (Collins 2000: 89). The jezebel controlling image is rooted in slavery and was used to portray Black women as sexually aggressive, “thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by White men typically reported by Black slave women,” as well as justifying the exploitation of Black women’s bodies to produce more slaves (Collins 2000: 89). Stemming from the jezebel controlling image, the whore or hoochie controlling images also signify Black women who enjoy sex. Unlike the “good girl,” the hoochie is a “bad girl” that is good in bed and that men feel content with using only for sex (Collins 2000). Like the hoochie controlling image, Black women with strong sexual appetites are often labeled “freaks.” As Stephens and Few (2007: 52) note, “The Freak is a ‘bad girl’ who gains male attention through an overt sexual persona. She appears sexually liberated, empowered, and seeks
sex solely for physical satisfaction, not for a relationship”. In many ways, the baby mama controlling image is a combination of the jezebel, whore, or hoochie controlling images and the “sapphire” or “angry Black woman” controlling image. Stigma attached to being a baby mama is part of the reason why single mothers who take their children’s fathers to court seeking child support payments are often berated for doing so. As my participant, Tamara, put it, they are seen as “bitter baby mamas.” Internet users reproduce both the welfare queen and baby mama controlling images through memes that often circulate on social media platforms. I now turn the discussion to two such memes.

The Reproduction of Controlling Images of Low-Income Black Single Motherhood through Memes

The first meme that I focus on in this paper depicts a low-income Black single mother sitting on a bed in what appears to be a hotel room with eleven of her children and it reads: “$200 per kid? Yea, I’ll have some more!” (Pinterest.com). This meme alludes to the welfare queen controlling image, as it suggests that this mother’s main goal in having many children was to collect a welfare check. Angel Adams, the woman pictured in the photograph made news headlines in 2012 after police officers used a Taser on her when she was eight months pregnant, upon coming to her home to talk to one of her sons. A Daily Mail headline reads: “Police use stun gun on pregnant mother expecting her SIXTEENTH child after scuffle inside her own home” (Daily Mail Reporter 2012). Another headline reads, “Mom expecting 16th child tazed by police” (Wise 2012). Both of these news sources seemed to be fixated on the fact that Adams was expecting her sixteenth child. The Daily Mail article also detailed previous incidents in which Adams made news headlines explaining:

Two years ago, the mother of 15 first made headlines when she was evicted from her apartment and had to move into a tiny motel room with 12 of her 15 children. Blaming the system for her problems, she angered people when she demanded that, ‘Somebody needs to pay for all this.’ After having to legally prove her fitness as a mother, Adams received the support of the Department of Children and Families and moved into a six bedroom-home big enough for her family (Daily Mail reporter 2012: n.p.).
The fact that the author focused on Adams expecting her sixteenth child and having to prove her fitness as a mother after being evicted from her apartment a couple of years earlier, rather than keeping the focus of the article on Adams being tazed by a police officer while pregnant illustrates the shame that low-income Black single mothers (especially those receiving public assistance) often endure in the public eye (Hancock 2004). Adams’ past housing troubles were not relevant to the central topic of the article, so one has to wonder why those facts were even discussed in the article.

The second meme that I focus on depicts Gabrielle Union’s character, Mary Jane Paul, from Black Entertainment Television’s (BET) drama series, Being Mary Jane. In the meme, Mary Jane is pictured sitting across from her niece, Niecy, explaining to her that “Being a Baby Momma is Not a Career” (Memebaby2019.blogspot.com 2019). Similar to the welfare queen controlling image, the implication here is that some women have children by men purely to secure their own financial gain. In the show, Mary Jane plays a successful television reporter who co-hosts a morning show on a major television network. In many ways, her character represents the “Black lady” ideal, which is a respectable middle-class Black woman who uplifts the race (e.g., Michelle Obama or Oprah Winfrey) (Reid-Brinkley 2008). The baby mama controlling image contrasts with the “Black queen,” who is “characterized by sexual purity, motherhood, spirituality, commitment to the uplifting of the race, and in particular the uplifting of black men” (Reid-Brinkley 2008: 247). As Reid-Brinkley (2008) notes, “The stereotypical representations of poor and working-class black women ‘become texts of what not to be’ for middle- and upper-class black women” (246; citing Collins 2004). Thus, Black women may aspire to fit the ideal of the “Black lady” in an attempt to achieve ideals of femininity set forth by the “cult of true womanhood” and to achieve a certain level of respectability (Reid-Brinkley 2008).

For Black women, achieving the ideals of respectability politics has historically been a form of resistance to stereotypes about their sexual deviance and a means of protecting themselves against state-sanctioned sexual abuse, particularly at the hands of white men in the South (Gaines 1996; Reid-Brinkley 2008). Whites justified abuse against Black women by portraying them as immoral and sexually lascivious, thus suggesting that it was impossible to rape Black women, as their bodies were always available to men (both white and Black) whether they consented to sex or not (Reid-Brinkley 2008). Therefore, staking a claim to the virtues of femininity that traditionally were only reserved for white, middle-class women was Black women’s way of
attempting to “gain patriarchal protection” (245). To this day, ideals of white, middle-class femininity are the standards by which Black people judge Black women’s behavior (Reid-Brinkley 2008).

**Beyond Welfare Queens and Baby Mamas**

As the memes discussed above illustrate, the welfare queen and baby mama controlling images have become symbols of pathology. Memes such as these are simultaneously meant to shame those who fit into those categories and draw a distinction between good citizens and bad ones. During interviews with participants, it became evident that such controlling images of low-income Black single motherhood largely shaped how they think of themselves as mothers, or their motherhood identity. Throughout the interviews, participants often referenced stereotypes about Black single mothers, especially those who receive public assistance. The “welfare queen” stereotype was especially prevalent. While they recognized racist and sexist stereotypes about Black single mothers, they also actively resisted them. When asked what it means to her to be a Black mother, Kenya, a 29 year-old mother of two explained:

Stereotype a little bit, ‘cause they think...I don't know...It’s just some things you read, or you hear people say, they think Black moms just sit around and wait for the government to take care of them, and that is not the case...I mean, I’ve had my share of sitting down, but it’s because I was always, you know...him and my middle son, they’re behind each other, he’s six and he’s five. He was still crawling and I was pregnant with him, and then when he came, they were still both in diapers...I couldn’t work, you know, so of course I’ve had to wait on food stamps and Medicaid and TANF, but once I was able, I got up...got out and worked, but...they just think that Black people are just lazy and that’s far from the case, I’m far from lazy. I work so much overtime and I will work.

When asked who “they” were, she added:

Government, the rich people, people like Donald Trump...I mean, white people. They’re always saying, “we paying our taxes for them to just sit on their tail” while I work my tail off, and you know, just crazy stuff. And they don’t know the people’s situations. And in some cases, it is
true, some people are lazy and don’t want to work. But other people, they have kids with disabilities, or they’re disabled, or it’s different...50 million situations...why a person may not be able to work, you know. But I feel if you’re able to work, get up and work.

Kayla, a 29-year-old mother of three, began our interview with a statement about stereotypes of low-income Black single mothers receiving public assistance:

There’s a great misconception about people who receive benefits, especially us, in that a lot of us are just uneducated people who just lay around having babies and just sitting on our butt being lazy. And that’s the furthest from the truth. That’s why I wanted to sign up for this [interview], just to speak on that because I work so hard, and to be defined by a stereotype, it can be very, I guess you could say hurtful. Some people are not sensitive. They see a lot of what’s on social media or the Internet, but not the real thing. Not everybody should be categorized in that way. As I said, I did graduate from college with honors. And it took a lot for me to just push through it and do that. I did have help with childcare through Social Services. My main goal in life is to not have to be dependent on government or any programs. But we’re using it as a stepping stone right now because it is needed. Not using the system, or taking advantage, or anything.

Both Kenya and Kayla attempt to dismantle the “welfare queen” stereotype. Like Kenya, Kayla immediately distances herself from the stereotype that low-income Black single mothers are lazy and uneducated by emphasizing that she works very hard and that she graduated from college with honors. Explaining that she is simply using Social Services benefits as a stepping stone reinforces the narrative that public assistance benefits should only serve as a temporary fix for recipients, rather than a source of long-term support. It is also indicative of the fact that, in the U.S., being a good citizen-subject is largely determined by one’s employment status. Working is a means by which individuals demonstrate their self-sufficiency; therefore, if one does not work, they are not independent, and are thus met with disdain.

The “welfare queen” controlling image is pervasive in U.S. culture, as the memes discussed earlier illustrate. Politicians and policymakers also employ this controlling image to justify cuts to public assistance benefits and
programs. Some of my participants discussed being blatantly stereotyped while they were out in public. Kayla described an experience of micro-level racism and classism in which people in the grocery store were making disparaging remarks about her because she was using her Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card:

If I’m in the grocery store using my food stamp card, and it’s happened before. I would hear people or see people looking, saying little comments about how they can’t get it. But I don’t say anything, because it’s bigger than just me. People don’t see the real picture, that you have to be humble to even go and ask for this type of help. And there was a time, that was me. I would judge and say, oh, they got money to get their hair and nails done, and stuff like that, but here I am working hard, and whatever’s coming out my check for taxes, whatever, is paying for their stuff. I was very judgmental, until I had to end up doing it myself. And now I see, okay, not everybody is abusing the system like that…and it is hurtful. But like I said, I don’t hold it in my heart. Because people, if they don’t know, and they’re just being ignorant based off of what’s on the Internet or what they see…

The above passage from Kayla illustrates the power of the welfare queen stereotype. It is so powerful that even she believed it until she started receiving Social Services benefits herself. Part of the power of the welfare queen stereotype stems from the fact that it stands in stark contrast to the cultural and political mandate to be a hard-working, tax-paying American citizen. It also runs counter to the American myth of meritocracy or the bootstrap myth, which suggests that if one works hard, they will be able to succeed. These myths systematically mask structural racism and classism, blaming victims of racism and classism (e.g., low-income Black single mothers) for their own predicament.

Similar to Kenya and Kayla, Leslie, a 27-year-old mother of four, also alludes to the welfare queen stereotype, specifically, the idea that because she is a single Black mother with multiple children, she cannot possibly be making ends meet without receiving public assistance:

I feel like the way I’m viewed is the main thing that has to do with my race though, more than anything. I feel like a lot of times when I go somewhere, because all my kids are small, I get looked at. I’ve had
people make comments like they wonder how many baby daddies I have. That’s one thing. I hate that word...like, “Do they all have the same dad?” I mean people are just very blunt about things they may ask. They may assume that I have multiple, that each one of mine is a different father, or assume that I have section 8. I’ve had that comment made about me to my son’s father, some of his friends would make comments to him like, “Oh,” there was rumors going around that I was on Section 8 and all this stuff, and I make $40,000 a year, you know, they just assume because I’m a young Black woman with a bunch of kids that that just must be how I’m surviving...or I’ve had...when I go to the grocery store and I have a cart full of food, it’s automatically assumed you have EBT. I’ve been asked that before.

The assumption that Leslie must be on public assistance is rooted in the notion that single Black mothers with multiple children are lazy and enjoy “mooching” off the government. Another stereotype that Leslie alludes to is that of the “baby mama.”

Tamara, a 26-year-old mother of one, discussed how Black mothers are often portrayed as “bitter baby mamas” on social media. When asked what it means to her to be a Black mother, she responded:

That the world’s already against us, like I—read posts where like black women is this, black mothers is bitter baby mamas, and all [that] stuff, but honestly...you’d be bitter too, like not saying that all chicks is bitter, but it’s like the perception they put out of us like we’re bitter...You see it everywhere, like even when I was talking to my friend and he was like, ‘Oh, because you put your ex-husband on child support, you bitter.’ It was like, just because I put him on child support--and me and him broke up last year in May, and I had to put him on child support this May for him to actually give me money, that’s not being bitter. I gave you a whole year to take care of your son and you didn’t, so now I’m gonna make the government make you take care of your son...

Tamara’s discussion of the posts she has seen calling Black mothers “bitter baby mamas” and her friend’s comment accusing her of being bitter because she took her ex-husband to court to make him pay child support are symptomatic of the baby mama controlling image, as the idea behind such statements and accusations is that Black mothers take their children’s fathers to
court to pay child support out of spite, rather than so that they will own up to their responsibility of taking care of their children. The notion that baby mamas get pregnant in part to get money from their children’s fathers suggests that they are “Gold Diggers,” or women who trade sex for economic and material gain (Stephens and Few 2007). It is also important to note the accusatory phrasing of “putting” one’s child’s father on child support, which effectively demonizes the mother and disregards the father’s responsibility to take care of his children. Obviously, if a father is already taking care of his children, a mother need not take him to court; however, in Tamara’s case and that of most of my participants, their children’s fathers are unfortunately not taking responsibility for helping to care for their children.

The Strong Black Woman Schema as Resistance

During interviews with my participants, the Strong Black Woman (SBW) Schema emerged as a potential means of resistance to controlling images of low-income Black single mothers. According to Watson-Singleton (2017), the Strong Black Woman Schema refers to “the culturally specific and multidimensional construct internalized by African American women to overcome oppression (e.g., racism, sexism). SBW encompasses both cognitive characteristics and stress-coping behaviors, like emotional suppression, self-reliance, and caregiving” (Watson-Singleton 2017: 779). While SBW appears to have positive connotations, it may have negative consequences for Black women’s mental and physical health, as it perpetuates the idea that Black women are superhuman and thus it encourages them to suppress their emotions and to forego self-care practices (Belgrave and Abrams 2016).

When referencing what it meant to them to be a Black mother and/or how their race impacts the way they think of themselves as mothers, participants often referenced this schema by suggesting that Black women (particularly Black mothers) have a special ability to overcome even the grimmest of circumstances and to succeed despite facing many obstacles/barriers. Thus, for them, the Strong Black Woman Schema may serve as a means to affirm themselves as Black mothers. For instance, when asked what it means to her to be a Black mother, Jenise, a 28-year-old mother of three, replied, “Strong... there’s many times where you know, I struggled...I was stressed and...one thing I can say for sure, even with the women in my family, my mother...we know how to make a way out of no way...” The notion that Black women have
the ability to “make a way out of no way” is a common sentiment in the Black community, stemming from dominant narratives of Black women’s “superhuman strength,” which emerged during slavery and were used to justify Black women’s enslavement (Watson-Singleton 2017).

Similar to Jenise, when asked how she feels her race impacts how she thinks of herself as a mother, Tamara replied:

They put us down, but somehow, we succeed every day...So, [to] me being a Black mother in America is very hard, but somehow, we make it...Our kids still succeed...we’re still able to get the education, and still able to strive without [the] other parent in the house...Black mothers is very...like, through everything, Black mothers survive...They always make a way for their kids...most of them...

Tamara makes reference to the structural inequalities that exist for Black single mothers in the U.S., which create barriers to getting an education and simply making ends meet, especially without a partner. She also mentions the unfortunate realities of racism, which Black single mothers in the U.S. must navigate. Despite all of this, she explains, Black mothers “survive” and “always make a way for their kids.”

For Pamela, a 38-year-old mother of two, witnessing her own mother survive tough circumstances taught her how to do the same. When asked what it means to her to be a Black mother, she explained:

...Sometimes, it’s a challenge. I don’t let it get me discouraged because...like I said, I always keep pushing for it ‘cause I gotta survive, and my mom was a single parent until she got married, so, me looking at that kind of gave me a better feel of how to survive...She had to work. She always had to work. And I was the oldest, so I always had to take care of my brothers.

Survival is key to the historical legacy of Black mothers in the U.S., as they have had to endure many hardships, including racism, sexism, and caregiving. Thus, embracing SBW may help Black women develop strategies to endure these hardships (Watson and Hunter 2016).

SBW perpetuates the notion that it is not okay for Black women to show any weakness. When asked what it means to her to be a mother to Black children, Pamela explained:
I guess it shows...[strength]. You don’t want to let them see too much weakness, but then sometimes you have to because they gotta understand everything is not going to be [inaudible]...when my son got older, I could explain that to him because he was mature enough to understand what I was talking about.

Pamela’s statement that “you don’t want to let them see too much weakness” reveals some of the potential harmful effects of SBW as it creates a culture of silence around the emotional and mental health issues that Black women (particularly Black single mothers) may be facing (Belgrave and Abrams 2016).

Some participants mentioned being raised or largely influenced by the strong Black women in their lives. For instance, Briana, a 36-year-old mother of two was raised by her grandmother, who she identified as a “strong Black woman”:

What I had was a strong Black woman and that she was a grandmother...I know my grandmother never...let us see her sweat and never let us see that she maybe didn't have [enough] for a bill. We never seen none of those problems...never seen her [say], ‘Oh my goodness. How am I going to pay these light bills and still get food?’ ‘cause she raised five of us without my mother or my brothers’ and sisters’ father. Now, I know she had assistance, never knew that she had assistance, just knew that my grandmother got up every day, cook and clean, would see us off to school, and if she’s not in the house when we coming home from school, she’s meeting us and always had food, like I said, always cleaned, always made a way. To me, that’s a strong Black woman because you don’t see them sweat...So, it’s like she knew how to stand up. She knew how to hold her head up high, didn’t know what this world had to offer, but she still did it and that’s what, like I said, the type of person that I am now. So through all of it, that was a strong Black woman, you know, made it to, like I said, it was four or five of us in the house. My brother played basketball, I danced, my sister always stayed in trouble, but she was always at the basketball games, always at a dance recital, always there for when my sister got in trouble. It wasn’t ‘Oh, because you acting up, I’m not going to be there.’ Or, ‘I’m just too tired ‘cause I just did a double and my back hurt and I didn’t get my back brace ‘cause Medicaid didn’t send it or I didn’t have the money.’ She was there. You seen her. So, that’s what I mean by a strong Black woman. That was like my superwoman.
Like Pamela, Briana’s idea of a strong Black woman is one who never lets anyone see them “sweat,” which most likely means being silent about the burdens they are carrying and the pain they may be experiencing. Briana may never have heard her grandmother complain about bills or medical issues, but that does not necessarily mean that her grandmother did not have trouble with those things. Black women, in particular, often feel pressured to fit the mold of “superwoman,” or the woman who somehow has a superhuman ability to effortlessly juggle many responsibilities, including working, raising children, and in the case of Briana’s grandmother, raising grandchildren (Belgrave and Abrams 2016; Watson-Singleton 2017; Watson and Hunter 2016). It is clear that for Briana, Pamela, and others, their ideas of what it means to be a good Black mother are shaped largely by the mothering experiences of their own mothers and grandmothers. Although Briana suffers from a chronic illness, she still feels the pressure to be a “superhero” for her children:

I always told myself that I am my kids superhero ‘cause they see me every day, so I have to...I’m not gonna be able to [not do] that, but I have to be strong, I have to be that person that can do, like Superman or Spider-Man, that can do everything at once, even though I’m not built for it, but I have to do it.

Societal pressure to be a Strong Black Woman was so robust for Briana that she felt she had to “do everything at once,” despite being chronically ill.

Conclusion

Controlling images of low-income Black single motherhood have permeated U.S. popular culture throughout history. Some of the most salient include the welfare queen and the baby mama. Photography is a prominent medium through which these images have been perpetuated. These images are so omnipresent that they are frequently reproduced in the form of internet memes, often using lens-based mediums. In this essay, I used a meme portraying the welfare queen controlling image and another portraying the baby mama controlling image to illustrate the prominence of these images and elucidate how internet users employ photography to perpetuate stereotypes about low-income Black single mothers. It is difficult to determine the identities of the individuals who create such memes (let alone their racial/ethnic identities);
however, it is clear that the purpose of such memes is to draw a distinction between whiteness/white people as inherently good, worthy, hard-working, and deserving, and blackness as bad, criminal, lazy, and undeserving. Beech (2017: 133) argues that the “circulators” of such memes “participate in varying degrees of explicit to implicit rhetorics of whiteness”. Whites do this by employing “a rhetoric of innocence (be it with respect to discussions of affirmative action or other situations in which they perceive they are being taken advantage of)” while also evoking “a sense of black abstraction and an implied sense of blacks as the defilers of white innocence” (134).

In addition to memes, I drew on interviews with low-income Black single mothers to demonstrate that although they recognize these controlling images, they also actively resist them, which sometimes manifests itself in the form of them employing the Strong Black Woman schema as a means of affirming their identities as mothers. The women in this study alluded to stereotypes of low-income Black single mothers as welfare queens or “bitter baby mamas,” but distanced themselves from these images by emphasizing how hard they work to provide and care for their children and asserting their right to receive state support and/or support from their children’s fathers. Despite the often negative portrayals of low-income Black single mothers on social media, these mothers largely associated Black motherhood with strength, resilience, and tenacity.

Positive Counter-narratives

Artists have also used photography to provide a counter-narrative to the images mentioned above. For instance, photographers such as Beuford Smith, Renee Cox, Nona Faustine, and Carrie Mae Weems have used photographic mediums to provide a multidimensional portrayal of Black mothers and Black families. In addition, Black women have begun embracing a movement towards radical self-care through podcasts and online and social media platforms such as Girl Trek, Therapy for Black Girls, and Mater Mea. Radical self-care helps Black women process the mental and emotional impacts of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism. Black feminist theorist Audre Lorde famously wrote that self-care is an “act of political warfare” (Lorde 1988). For Black women, “Self-care is ‘an act of political warfare’ not only because the personal is indeed political, but because when Black women take care of themselves, they challenge the myth of the superwoman (Michele Wallace) and simultaneously challenge structures of oppression that praise Black women for being the perpetual ‘mules of the world’ (Zora Neale Hurston)” (Brooks-Tatum 2012: n.p.).
Notes

1 See Beuford Smith’s famous “Woman Bathing/Madonna” photograph, Renee Cox’s “Yo Mama” series, Nona Faustine’s “Mitochondria” series, and Carrie Mae Weems’ “Family Pictures and Stories” series.

Works cited


