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## Is It All Just For Laughs? An Examination of Gender Minstrelsy and its Manipulation of the Image of Black Womanhood

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Is It All Just For Laughs?

An Examination of Gender Minstrelsy and its Manipulation of the Image of Black

Womanhood

by

Brittany Sessions

Under the Direction of Jonathan Gayles, PhD

## **Abstract**

Controlling images and negative stereotypes have had damaging effects on black men and women. The entertainment industry continues to play a vital role in perpetuating these historically damaging images to people all over the world. Early representations of black men and women within entertainment were performed by white men under the guise of blackface. These representations were offensive and inaccurate portrayals of black life. Early blackface minstrel performances of black women were performed by white men in blackface who were also cross-dressing. Their performances presented black women in stereotypical roles which have become a norm. Recently, there has been a phenomenon of black men cross-dressing as black women portraying negative stereotypes. These depictions done under the guise of comedy further perpetuate controlling images of black women to the world. This research examines how current and former displays of gender minstrelsy manipulate the image of Black womanhood.

Index Words: Black Womanhood, Gender Minstrelsy, Controlling Images, Stereotypes, Black Entertainers, Black Women, African American Women, Women, Blackface Minstrelsy, Films, Television, Blackface Transvestism, Entertainment, Black Feminist Thought

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Womanhood

by

Brittany Nicole Sessions

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2015

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May 2015

## **Dedications**

I dedicate this to my sons, Jeremiah and JoJo, thank you for being patient with Mommy as she completed her studies. This is a true testament that you can do anything you set your mind to as long as you believe in yourself and you have people willing to help you get to where you want to be.

I also dedicate this to my Mother Brenda Sessions, thank you for believing in me when I didn't believe in myself. You constantly push me to be a greater person and I love you for that. Thank you for being my rock, the person I could vent to when things got overwhelming, you saw me through this and I wouldn't be here without you.

It definitely took a village to get me here thank you to my brother Brandon and sister Jamera. You both made life so much fun and I am happy that God saw fit to put our crazy bunch together. To my friends Aisha, Chesya, Cierra, Jason M., Sharaine, and Shevy, I survived because you all helped push me through.

For any young black girl searching for their voice and trying to navigate their way through this society in the midst of all the oppressive forces that seek to stifle you I dedicate this to you. I survived, I overcame, and I conquered and if I can make it through so can you.

Last but definitely not least, I dedicate this to my grandmother, Christine Sessions. I promised you that I would make my life better that I would get my Masters and I would make you proud. I hope that you see my accomplishments and you are smiling in heaven. I am because you were and I love you with all of my heart. Rest in peace.

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## 1.1 Introduction

Controlling images and negative stereotypes have continued to have damaging effects on black men and women. The entertainment industry continues to play a vital role in perpetuating these historically damaging images to people domestically as well as internationally. Prior to the invention of mass media, blackface minstrelsy expanded the stereotypical ideals of black people, integrating them into the foundation of American popular culture<sup>1</sup>. Jim Crow, Zip Coon<sup>2</sup> and the Wench<sup>3</sup> were some of the first stereotypes introduced to the American public through blackface minstrelsy; and later, they began to include Uncle Tom, the Mammy, Coon/Sambo, Jezebel, Brute and Tragic Mulatto<sup>4</sup>. These early representations were performed by white men under the guise of blackface. They were offensive and inaccurate portrayals of black life. As technology advanced and entertainment moved to film, radio, and television those stereotypical images followed making it difficult for blacks who sought to make successful careers in entertainment especially black women. Having to succumb to pre-determined stereotypical roles, black women were oppressed and objectified. Early blackface minstrel performances of black women were performed by white men in blackface who were also cross-dressing. Their performances presented black women in stereotypical roles which black women have had to also portray as they attempted to enter and make careers in the entertainment industry. Recently, there has been a phenomenon of black

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<sup>1</sup> Brundage, W. Fitzhugh. *Beyond Blackface African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. Print (Pg. 50)

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, Stephen. *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012. Print. (Pg. 28)

<sup>3</sup> Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Print. (Pg. 159).

<sup>4</sup> Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks; An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. New York: Viking Press, 1973. Print. (Pg. 10)

men cross-dressing as black women portraying negative stereotypes. These depictions of gender minstrelsy are done under the guise of comedy helping to further perpetuate controlling images of black women and black womanhood to the world. This study examines the historical and contemporary notions of black womanhood looking specifically at ways in which gender minstrelsy seek to manipulate it.

## **1.2 Background**

Gender minstrelsy became a popular aspect of American culture during the time of blackface minstrelsy. During blackface minstrelsy, white men dressed in blackface to portray imitations of black people and black life; in addition to this, some performers would go further by also cross-dressing (blackface transvestism) to portray black women. This imitation was successful in creating exaggerated versions of black women that became stereotypes that continue to be seen today. As blackface minstrelsy faded away and black men and women began entering the entertainment field in hopes of being successful, they found themselves having to fill stereotypical roles pre-determined by white men. Within the past several decades, black men have adopted and seized the reigns of gender minstrelsy left behind by white entertainers. Throughout this study, the researcher examined how these former and current displays of gender minstrelsy manipulate black womanhood; seeking to discover whether or not the images display controlling images of black women.

Over time, black women have been subjected to objectification and oppression based upon controlling images that have been perpetuated through media depictions. Black men have also found themselves oppressed by stereotypes. The Mammy, Jezebel,

Uncle Tom, Sapphire, Sambo, etc. were all created as a means to thwart positive images that black men and women were attempting to create for themselves. These stereotypical images have had a negative impacts on the preconceived notions people have pertaining to both black women and men. These preconceived notions shape prejudices that hinder the growth and development of black women. Within this study, the researcher examined the relationship between black male actors who perform gender minstrelsy, and how those depictions continue to manipulate the image of black womanhood.

### **1.3 Problem Statement**

Patricia Hill Collins states that stereotypes, controlling images and other measures were created as a means of oppressing black women and used to “manipulate ideas about black womanhood”<sup>5</sup>. This study examines the historical and contemporary notions of black womanhood looking specifically at ways in which gender minstrelsy seek to manipulate it. The researcher examined several highly successful films and one television show that all portray black men engaging in gender minstrelsy. These include *The Flip Wilson Show* starring Flip Wilson, Eddie Murphy’s *Norbit*, Tyler Perry’s *Madea Goes to Jail*, and Martin Lawrence’s *Big Momma’s House*. The researcher examined the each actor performing in gender minstrelsy, evaluating whether their performances perpetuate controlling images that seek to manipulate the image of black womanhood.

### **1.4 Purpose**

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<sup>5</sup> Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2 Ed.). Routledge: New York. (Pg. 76)

The researcher conducted this study using a content analysis. This allowed the researcher to administer an investigation by observing the television show *The Flip Wilson Show* and films *Norbit*, *Big Momma's House*, and *Madea Goes to Jail*. Each of these performances not only display black male actors engaging in gender minstrelsy but, they also garnered huge financial successes for both the actors and the film studios. While analyzing each of the performances, the researcher closely examined whether or not these characters display controlling images of black women within their portrayals. Four categories were used to code the controlling images of the Black Matriarch, the Mammy, the Jezebel and Other which were displayed by the actors. Performances were coded and reoccurring themes were noted throughout to help analyze the historical and contemporary notions of Black womanhood under the guise of gender minstrelsy.

### **1.5 Significance of Study**

This study is important to the existing body of research because it examines the relationship between gender minstrelsy, controlling images, and black womanhood. These images were created as a mechanism to manipulate the image of black womanhood. This manipulation of stereotypical images can influence and develop preconceived notions about black women that were previously non-existent. Each of the films and the one television show created huge success for both the actors and the production studios. Through these portrayals, people all over the world have been privy to the images portrayed which can produce preconceived notions and prejudices that may have not normally existed. Many, times, people view these images and attempt to mimic or recreate the images they have seen without knowing that these images carry negative consequences about the individuals they are attempting to imitate. The

researcher hopes that this study will create discourse on gender minstrelsy, stereotypes, controlling images, and black womanhood in hopes more research will emerge that will aid in creating effective change. Youth groups can also use this research as a foundation for teaching both kids and teenagers about gender minstrelsy, controlling images and stereotypes in popular culture. Also, this research can facilitate the implementation of communication literacy targeting advertisers and film producers so that they are aware of gender minstrelsy and how it manipulates black womanhood.

### **1.6 Nature of Study**

A content analysis was used to conduct this research. Utilizing a content analysis allowed the researcher to examine the characteristics and behaviors each character engaging in gender minstrelsy exhibited and compare it to the controlling images that define black womanhood. Also, this research method allows the researcher to incorporate semiotics as a framework for examining the signs that each performer gives through each of their performances. Utilizing content analysis as the research method, allows “the situations, setting, styles, images, meanings, and nuances (to be) key topics of attention”<sup>6</sup>. Analyzing each visual document through the proposed research method will allow the researcher to “have a better understanding of the impact of popular culture on ‘nostalgia,’ ‘cultural myths,’ and our sense of the future”<sup>7</sup>.

Examining the films and television show will allow the researcher to analyze the characteristics that these men are portraying by looking closely at the language, dress

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<sup>6</sup> Altheide, David L., and Christopher Schneider. *Qualitative Media Analysis*. 2 Ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2013. (Pg. 23)

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* (Pg. 11)

and stereotypical actions throughout. Viewing these individual portrayals is critical in understanding the impact they potentially have on the image of black womanhood.

### **1.7 Hypothesis/Research Question**

Research has shown that stereotypes have had damaging effects on the ways in which black women and young adults perceive themselves<sup>8</sup> as well as how they are viewed by others<sup>9</sup>. Negative stereotypes of black women reject traditional and cultural black ideals of beauty while endorsing Eurocentric ideals of beauty<sup>10</sup>. While research exists that explores gender minstrelsy and the way black women feel about themselves<sup>11</sup> based upon those performances, there are gaps in examining the relationship these performances have with the continued perpetuation of controlling images and how they manipulate the image of black womanhood. The research seeks to aid in filling that void by exploring the question “how do current and former displays of gender minstrelsy manipulate the image of Black womanhood?”

### **1.8 Framework, Theory or Concept Relevant to Africana People**

Throughout this study, the researcher utilizes two theoretical frameworks to interpret the data. Black Feminist Thought was the first framework the researcher used to collect the data for the research. The researcher focused on the ideas presented by

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<sup>8</sup> Jackson, T. R.(2010) et al. I'M No Jezebel; I Am Young, Gifted, And Black: Identity, Sexuality, And Black Girls. *Psychology Of Women Quarterly* 34.3. 273-285. *Family & Society Studies Worldwide*. (Pg. 280)

<sup>9</sup> Monahan, Jennifer L., Irene Shtrulis, and Sonja Brown Givens. "Priming Welfare Queens And Other Stereotypes: The Transference Of Media Images Into Interpersonal Contexts." *Communication Research Reports* 22.3 (2005): 199-205. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*. Web. (Pg. 201)

<sup>10</sup> Mary Jane Ojie, et al. "Gold Diggers, Video Vixens, And Jezebels: Stereotype Images And Substance Use Among Urban African American Girls." *Journal Of Women's Health* (15409996) 20.9 (2011): 1315-1324. *Women's Studies International*. Web.(Pg.

<sup>11</sup> Li Chen, et al. "Male Mammies: A Social-Comparison Perspective On How Exaggeratedly Overweight Media Portrayals Of Madea, Rasputia, And Big Momma Affect How Black Women Feel About Themselves." *Mass Communication & Society* 15.1 (2012): 115-135. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*. Web. 5 Sept. 2013.

Patricia Hill Collins that focuses on controlling images of black women and how they alter the perception of black womanhood. She states that “portraying African American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mammas helps justify U.S. Black women’s oppression”<sup>12</sup>. Film, television, and theater are primary examples of where these stereotypes are portrayed most often in mass media as well as how these stereotypes are shared globally. Furthermore, she explains how the depiction of these controlling images makes the ideologies surrounding sexism, patriarchy and racism a normal part of our lives<sup>13</sup>. The depiction of black women by both black and white men, both during minstrelsy as well as today, perpetuates the stereotypical controlling images that are clearly addressed in *Black Feminist Thought*.

Secondly, the researcher used semiotics as a theoretical framework to understand the meaning of the signs that are portrayed by the actors’ in their performances. Images and the ways in which we perceive images are based upon semiotic signs and symbols that have been shown throughout the totality of our lives<sup>14</sup>. These signs have become so engulfed into our subconscious that they are now a part of our daily routines<sup>15</sup>. Everything from dress to preconceived notions about particular groups and races of people are based upon signs that we see, especially those displayed in the media. Because gender minstrelsy is an imitation of one sex by the opposite sex, in this case the imitation of black women by black and white men, the researcher closely examined the signs shown through the actors’ performances. The examination of these signs helped in

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<sup>12</sup> Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black Feminist Thought* (2 Ed.). Routledge: New York. (pg. 76)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. (pg. 77)

<sup>14</sup> Kim, Kyong Liong. *Caged in Our Own Signs: A Book About Semiotics*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Pub., 1996. (Pg. 2)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. (Pg. 2)

exploring the relationship gender minstrelsy has had on black womanhood through the perpetuation of controlling images.

Both black feminist thought and semiotics are needed to understand the implications surrounding the importance of controlling images and black women as well as the importance of signs and how they alter our outlook on life. These theoretical frameworks aided the researcher in doing an in-depth study. Examining the displays of gender minstrelsy, the signs that are shown through the performances and the relationship these signs have on the image of black womanhood.

### **1.9 Definitions**

**Gender Minstrelsy-** the portrayal of men as women, or women as men, for entertainment purposes more often perpetuating negative stereotypes under the guise of comedy<sup>16</sup>.

**Blackface Transvestism-** white men cross dressing as black women under the guise of blackface undermining traditional gender categories<sup>17</sup>.

**Controlling Images (as defined in *Black Feminist Thought* by Patricia Hill Collins)** - Stereotypical portrayals of African American women that helps to justify U.S. black women's oppression<sup>18</sup>.

### **1.10 Chapter Summary**

A content analysis was used to conduct the research examining the how gender minstrelsy manipulates the image of black womanhood by continuing the perpetuation

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<sup>16</sup> A definition created by the researcher.

<sup>17</sup> Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Print. (Pg. 24-25)

<sup>18</sup> Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black Feminist Thought* (2 Ed.). Routledge: New York. (pg. 76)

of stereotypical controlling images. This research method aided the researcher in analyzing performances in the television show *The Flip Wilson Show* and the films *Norbit*, *Big Momma's House*, and *Madea Goes to Jail*. Each of these films and the one television show were selected because they were huge financial successes and they portray a black man performing under the guise of gender minstrelsy. Four categories were developed based upon the major controlling images defined by Patricia Hill Collins. The Black Matriarch, the Mammy, and the Jezebel were the major controlling images that were categorized as well as an 'Other' section that was used for stereotypical images that did not fall into those categories. Each performance was coded based upon the characters behavior and relationship to one another as well as how they fit the definition of controlling images. These performances were analyzed to understand whether or not they manipulate the image of black womanhood.

## **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter will provide an outline of the current literature which lays the foundation for the proposed research. The research has examined the literature on blackface minstrelsy and American popular culture, stereotypes and black entertainers, and the assault on black womanhood through controlling images exhibited through mass media, to understand how current displays of gender minstrelsy developed. Because of the influential role mass media has played in the formation and sharing of American popular culture, the literature review will specifically examine the origins and continuation of controlling images surrounding black women which aid in the preconceived notions about black women.

## 2.2 The Emergence of Blackface Minstrelsy and American Popular Culture

In May of 1830<sup>19</sup>, a white actor by the name of T.D. Rice performed the song “Jump Jim Crow” for the first time in front of an audience in the play “The Kentucky Rifle<sup>20</sup>”. Dressed in blackface, using burnt cork as the foundation for his color transformation and tattered clothing, this performance sparked a flame that changed the trajectory of traditional minstrel performances and propelled blackface minstrelsy into American popular culture. From this single performance, the construct of blackness within entertainment began through the interpretations of white entertainers. These entertainers also established themselves as the sole authorities on depicting blackness through blackface minstrelsy.

For Americans, Jim Crow became a very popular caricature that embodied blackness. Dialect, dance, intellect and the costuming of black characters all became synonymous with exaggerated portrayals of blacks which helped to bolster white superiority. Prior to Rice’s portrayal of Jim Crow, the image had more political attributes<sup>21</sup>. Pushing for the inclusion of blacks, Jim Crow was more of a political image that shined the light on the injustices that hindered the attainment of the basic rights included in the Declaration of Independence<sup>22</sup>. However as time progressed and blackface minstrelsy became a part of the lives of American people, the ideas that birthed Jim Crow changed to embody negative attributes<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Johnson, Stephen. *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012. Print. (Pg. 20)

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. (Pg. 20)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. (Pg. 24)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. (Pg. 28)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. (Pg. 36)

The success that followed T.D. Rice after his embodiment of Jim Crow on the theatrical stage took him from near obscurity, propelling him into fame and fortune. Because of this, a number of primarily white working class Irish men sought to piggyback off of his successful blackface ideas in hopes of also achieving the same results. Many men went from struggling to highly sought after actors through blackface minstrelsy including Edwin P. Christy and Dan Emmett<sup>24</sup>. Because of this, the popularity of Blackface minstrelsy grew relatively overnight making it one of the first highly successful ideas of American culture<sup>25</sup>. However, it was not in the Southern states that this form of entertainment began. Although ideas about the 'Old South' and plantation life were a part of minstrel shows, Southerners were not influential participants in the overall growth of minstrels. Many Southern states banned blackface minstrel performances during the 1850s, because of the political tension surrounding slavery<sup>26</sup>. Urban cities of the North became the birthplace of blackface minstrel shows. During its inception, the cities in the North were beginning to change drastically<sup>27</sup>. Lower class whites and immigrants were settling in the cities in attempts to acquire more of the industrial jobs that were available. This influx of people created class differences amongst the people who were already in the cities, including the affluent and those coming into the cities. Because of this divide, "one of minstrelsy's functions was precisely to bring various class fractions into contact with one another, to mediate their

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<sup>24</sup> Saxton, Alexander. "Blackface Minstrelsy and Jacksonian Ideology." *American Quarterly* 27.1 (1975): 3. Print.

<sup>25</sup> Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Print. (Pg. 67)

<sup>26</sup> Brundage, W. Fitzhugh. *Beyond Blackface African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. Print. (Pg. 54)

<sup>27</sup> Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Print. (Pg. 69)

relations, and finally to aid in the construction of class identities over the bodies of black people”<sup>28</sup>.

The Virginia Minstrels, a troupe of white men, became one of the first to give a full theatrical play complete with songs, burlesque skits and jokes as well as dancing in blackface<sup>29</sup>. This was a new phenomenon because prior to this most shows and plays that included blackface performances would only have a few scenes with these characters. The Virginia Minstrels sought to fully capitalize on the popularity of blackface minstrelsy by giving the audiences what they felt were authentic depictions of black life. Their depictions, as well as other troupes, perpetuated the racist ideologies of black inferiority held by whites. Because minstrel shows were primarily Northern, most of the themes surrounding the content of the shows and the actors’ performances centered on the racial tension and interactions of blacks and whites in the North. This tension often spilled over from the stage and sparked racially motivated riots and attacks by whites inflicted upon black people and black neighborhoods<sup>30</sup>.

The need to depict the inferiority of blacks expanded ideologies of white supremacists making minstrel shows a breeding ground for the creation of negative caricatures and stereotypes. Under this guise of blackface, characters were developed that depicted black men and women as inferior often inhumane creatures. These portrayals became parodies of black life and culture. Jim Crow and Zip Coon, two of the original caricatures created in the early days of minstrelsy were transformed into Uncle

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<sup>28</sup> Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Print. (Pg. 67)

<sup>29</sup> Brundage, W. Fitzhugh. *Beyond Blackface African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. Print. (Pg. 53)

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* (Pg. 137-138)

Tom, Mammy, Coon, Jezebel and more as theatrical shows transitioned to radio, film and television. Because of the popularity of blackface minstrelsy amongst white Americans, the implications about blacks and black life created from these stereotypes are ineradicably woven into the moral fabric of this country and still haunt us to this day.

### **2.3 Stereotypes and the Black Entertainer**

For black men and women entering into the entertainment arena seeking to obtain any sort of financially successful career as an entertainer meant that the person had to submit to the negative caricatures created previously by their white counterparts. These stereotypes and controlling images did not aid in uplifting the black race it continued the perpetuation already cemented concerning black inferiority. The success of blackface minstrelsy and the stereotypical caricatures created by whites in blackface created a phenomenon with which white audiences were familiar with and were not willing to adjust just to allow black entertainers' into entertainment. Because of this, early black entertainers found themselves being required to also wear the mask of blackface while personifying the stereotypes created by their white counterparts.

Throughout the era of blackface minstrelsy, caricatures such as Uncle Tom, Jim Crow, Jim Dandy and Zip Coon helped to perpetuate the inferiority of blacks although they were depicted primarily by white men in blackface. These caricatures were overly exaggerated ideas of black people and black life. Because of minstrelsy's popularity, the stereotypes associated with these caricatures outlived the era of blackface minstrelsy. As time evolved and technology advanced within the entertainment arena so did the

images. With the introduction of film and radio, the stereotypical caricatures of blacks transformed in new ways.

Edwin S. Porter's 1903 short film "Uncle Tom's Cabin" not only revolutionized the world by being one of the first blockbuster moving pictures<sup>31</sup>, it also introduced controlling images and stereotypical portrayals of black people created during the era of blackface minstrelsy to the world. This introduction created a trajectory of negative stereotypes within film and television that's plagued both black entertainers and ordinary black people and life. Much like blackface minstrelsy, the portrayals of blacks in film were primarily achieved by white men in blackface. Often times, these white men would not only portray black men but black women as well. These personifications were powerful tools used to reinforce black inferiority. With the invention of moving pictures, people all over the world had the ability to see these controlling images and stereotypes first hand. Much like the era of blackface minstrelsy, white men seeking to become successful directors and actors did so by purposefully perpetuating black inferiority through the guise of blackface.

D.W. Griffith's film *Birth of a Nation* debuted in 1915, becoming the nation's first blockbuster film<sup>32</sup> grossing over 3 million dollars in the United States<sup>33</sup>, this film advanced the racial divide in America. After its debut, *Birth of a Nation* aided in the implementation of strict Jim Crow laws which halted any progression black people were achieving during the Reconstruction era. An adaptation of the play *The Clansmen*, *Birth*

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<sup>31</sup> Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks; an Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. New York: Viking Press, 1973. Print. (Pg. 3).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* (Pg.10)

<sup>33</sup> IMDb.com. "The Birth of a Nation." IMDb. [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0004972/?ref\\_=fn\\_al\\_tt\\_4](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0004972/?ref_=fn_al_tt_4) (accessed June 29, 2014).

*of a Nation* focused on how life in the South would be under the control of black people. In the film, Blacks are depicted as savages leaving the South in total disarray while abusing their positions of power after the Civil War. The main black character, Silas Lynch, is portrayed by a white man in blackface. Throughout the film he is seen as a power hungry man who has also gone insane in attempts to overpower Elsie, a white woman whom he has begun lusting after. After a dramatic battle ensues between Silas's army of black men and the Klu Klux Klan, the Klu Klux Klan is able to rescue Elsie from Silas before the sanctity of her womanhood is tarnished. In the end peace is restored after the white men regain power of the South, Silas is dealt with and the sanctity of white womanhood is left undisturbed. While this film is historic in creating cinematic techniques that are still relevant today, this film became a portrayal of age old stereotypes for black men and women. Much like blackface minstrelsy, every stereotype personified in this single film displayed the inferiority of black people and black life. Each black character embodied at least one of the stereotypical caricatures of the Uncle Tom, the Mammy, the Coon, the Tragic Mulatto, and the Buck<sup>34</sup> all aiding in perpetuating black inferiority.

Uncle Tom is the submissive servant who is not only faithful but happy with his plight in life. He, along with the Mammy, were created during the antebellum era as a way to insinuate that the institution of slavery was humane and pleasurable for black people who faithfully served their white masters. The Uncle Tom could be a butler, field hand or anything in between. In whatever job he was given, he was always eager to lend a helping hand to his master and was seen as one dependable servant. Initially, the

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<sup>34</sup> Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks; an Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films.* New York: Viking Press, 1973. Print. (Pg. 4)

Uncle Tom caricature was displayed as the older black man primarily because they were seen as physically weak and at every turn, this caricature was dependent upon the approval of whites. Today, the Uncle Tom's age can vary and rather than being called 'Uncle', they are primarily referred to Tom. Ironically, the Tom still seeks the approval of his white counterparts many times altering their entire existence in order to assimilate into white culture.

Similar to Uncle Tom, the Mammy stereotype is one of the oldest and most celebrated caricatures in existence. Depicted as an obese, asexual maternal figure, this caricature was created during the antebellum era to justify slavery as a positive institution. The Mammy is as devoted to her white family as one could be, helping to raise the children that would one day rule over her yet little is known or seen about her own children. David Pilgrim, describes the Mammy as:

an obese, coarse, maternal figure. She had a great love for her white "family," but often treated her own family with disdain. Although she had children, sometimes many, she was completely desexualized. She "belonged" to the white family, though it was rarely stated. Unlike the Sambo, she was a faithful worker. She had no black friends; the white family was her entire world<sup>35</sup>.

The Mammy's creation justified the notion that black women were created and bred to serve whites and although they were inferior, they were loyal to their white families.

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<sup>35</sup> Pilgrim, David. "The Mammy Caricature." Mammy Caricature. <http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/mammies/> (accessed October 2, 2014).

Because the Mammy was desexualized or seen as asexual, this image helped to downplay the sexual assaults black women were constantly victims of by the hands of their white male masters. Much like Uncle Tom, the Mammy encouraged the institution of slavery creating the impression that slavery was ideal for blacks. These stereotypical caricatures gave the illusion that physical subjugation was not only humane but enjoyable. Over the years, this caricature is seemingly the most renowned image in the lot. She is still seen on television shows, films, food products and through various form of advertising<sup>36</sup>. As Black men began their depictions of gender minstrelsy, we see this caricature as one of the primary images to which they base their characters especially with Tyler Perry as Madea, and Martin Lawrence as Hattie Mae Pierce in *Big Momma's House*.

The tragic mulatto, while not entirely comparable to the Uncle Tom or Mammy, did seek to fully assimilate into white culture; however, they could not. Portrayed as either male or female, this caricature possessed the phenotype of their white counterparts however, their one drop of black ancestry forever tarnished their chances of obtaining the one thing they desired above all things, which is to be white<sup>37</sup>. Throughout history, we find that a number of black men and women will 'pass' and live their lives as white rather being shunned by white society because of their black ancestry. Walter White the former secretary of the NAACP and longtime activist against lynching speaks about 'passing' stating that,

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<sup>36</sup> Pilgrim, David. "The Mammy Caricature." Mammy Caricature. <http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/mammies/> (accessed October 2, 2014).

<sup>37</sup> Pilgrim, David. "The Tragic Mulatto Myth." The Tragic Mulatto Myth. <http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/mulatto/> (accessed October 2, 2014).

Many Negroes are judged as white. Every year... white-skinned Negroes disappear- people whose absence cannot be explained by death or emigration. Nearly every... Negro in the United States knows at least one member of his race who is “passing” –the magic word which means that some Negroes can get by as whites, men and women who have decided that they will be happier and more successful if they flee from the proscription and humiliation which the American color line imposes on them<sup>38</sup>.

For the individuals who are unable to successfully assimilate into white culture through passing, or are discovered to be passing, they generally found themselves victims of “self-hatred, depression, alcoholism, sexual perversion, and suicide attempts”<sup>39</sup>.

The Jezebel was created and used to portray black women as sexually deviant objects that create uncontrollable lust in men (primarily white men) justifying their raping of these women. This caricature is seen as overly sexual in everything that she does and her objectification is justified because of her sexual nature. David Pilgrim further describes this caricature,

white women, as a category, were portrayed as models of self-respect, self-control, and modesty - even sexual purity,

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<sup>38</sup> White, Walter Francis. *A Man Called White, The Autobiography of Walter White*. New York: Viking Press, 1948. (Pg. 4)

<sup>39</sup> Pilgrim, David. "The Tragic Mulatto Myth." *The Tragic Mulatto Myth*. <http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/mulatto/> (accessed October 2, 2014).

but black women were often portrayed as innately promiscuous, even predatory<sup>40</sup>.

Historically, while all of the stereotypes present a falsified idea of black people, in general, this stereotype has been particularly damaging for black women because it justifies rape and assists in labeling black women as hypersexual objects. Throughout history, the objectification of the black woman's body has been something that has plagued not only black women in America but throughout the world<sup>41</sup>. Within various entertainment outlets, the Jezebel caricature is essential in perpetuating the controlling images that shape not only prejudices about black women but policies that impact their lives as well<sup>42</sup>. From this stereotype spawns an array of other negative stereotypes such as the Sapphire and the Welfare Queen all of which are seen constantly through displays of gender minstrelsy.

The Coon stereotype is seen as the lazy uneducated buffoon who is typically child-like in mannerisms and action however he is an adult. This caricature justified the idea that black people were lazy and needed consistent monitoring. From this stereotype the Picanniny and the Sambo were born. The Sambo similar to the Coon was very child-like in behavior yet to his master he was very loyal. The Picaninny is the child version of a variation of the Coon and the Sambo<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Pilgrim, David. "The Jezebel Caricature." Jezebel Caricature.

<http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/jezebel/> (accessed October 2, 2014).

<sup>41</sup> Moudileno, L.. "Returning Remains: Saartjie Baartman, or the "Hottentot Venus" as Transnational Postcolonial Icon." *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 45, no. 2 (2008): 200-212.

<sup>42</sup> Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black Feminist Thought* (2 Ed.). Routledge: New York. (pg. 76)

<sup>43</sup> Pilgrim, David. "The Coon Caricature." Coon Caricature. <http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/coon/> (accessed October 2, 2014).

Different from the Uncle Tom, Coon and Sambo is the Brute. This particular caricature presented black men as savages who lusted hungrily after white women. This hunger for white women caused him to do all manners of inhumane things to satisfy his desires. The Buck caricature was developed to justify white men to imposing their own forms of justice through groups like the KKK, when they felt the sanctity of white womanhood was put in jeopardy by the hands of a Black man<sup>44</sup>.

Black inferiority was and has been justified through each of the caricatures named above and portrayed through various forms of entertainment. Each stereotype made it harder for black people as they began entering the world of entertainment. On the stage and in the early days of film black people who were successful in breaking into entertainment had to wholeheartedly embrace the stereotypes that were in place in order to be successful. One of the first break away black stars was Bert Williams.

A successful entertainer in the Ziegfield Follies<sup>45</sup>, Bert Williams became one of the first successful black men to wear blackface. Prior to this, he and George Walker were a duo performing in blackface until Walker's death. George Walker comprehensively describes what it was like for a black entertainer to wear blackface,

Black-faced white comedians used to make themselves look as ridiculous as they could when portraying a "darky" character. In their "make-up" they always had tremendously big red lips, and their costumes were frightfully exaggerated. The one fatal result of this to the colored performers was that they imitated the white

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<sup>44</sup> Pilgrim, David. "The Brute Caricature." Brute Caricature. <http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/brute/> (accessed October 2, 2014).

<sup>45</sup> Chude-Sokei, Louis. *The Last "Darky": Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora*. Duke University Press. Durham and London 2006. Print.

performers in their make-up as “darkies”. Nothing seemed more absurd than to see a colored man making himself ridiculous in order to portray himself<sup>46</sup>.

Early on, blackface became status quo for black entertainers as they entered the field of entertainment and as the tradition of blackface began to fade the caricatures perpetuated while in blackface continued on. With the invention of radio and later television, the black entertainers of the day had to slip in and out of the stereotypical roles in order to be successful. Stepin’ Fetchit, played by Lincoln Perry, and Amos n’ Andy a black television show became hugely successful largely due to the successful continuation of stereotypical black caricatures.

Born on May 30, 1902<sup>47</sup>, Lincoln Theodore Monroe Andrew Perry, better known as Stepin Fetchit, would become one of the biggest black entertainers to follow Bert Williams. Embodying the coon caricature in his roles as Stepin Fetchit, Perry’s character was “racially demeaned and often verbally and even physically abused by white characters<sup>48</sup>”. Although Lincoln Perry the man, described himself as being far from “lazy and stupid... the white man’s fool”<sup>49</sup> in order to become a successful actor in Hollywood, he had to strip down all notions of intellect and dignity to play the role of Stepin Fetchit. Ultimately Perry found himself falling victim to typecasting due to the stereotypical caricatures created by white entertainers in blackface. Even though he was a huge

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<sup>46</sup> Chude-Sokei, Louis. *The Last “Darky”*: Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora. Duke University Press. Durham and London 2006. Print. (Pg. 33-34)

<sup>47</sup> Watkins, Mel. *Stepin Fetchit: The Life and Times of Lincoln Perry*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2005. (Pg. 9)

<sup>48</sup> Pilgrim, David. "The Coon Caricature." *Coon Caricature*. <http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/coon/> (accessed October 2, 2014).

<sup>49</sup> Watkins, Mel. *Stepin Fetchit: The Life and Times of Lincoln Perry*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2005. (Pg. 9)

success in his career, he was never able to move past Stepin Fetchit which left very little roles for him as the years progressed.

Very similar to the coon character of Stepin Fetchit were the characters of the immensely popular show Amos n' Andy. Beginning as a radio show, Amos n' Andy was created by two white men, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll<sup>50</sup>. The show follows the migration of Amos Jones and Andrew 'Hogg' Brown as they leave the south heading north<sup>51</sup>. Set as a comedy, the two main characters were "in and out of comic scrapes... known for being bumbling, stumbling, dim-witted souls who had problems thinking straight and who constantly misused the English language"<sup>52</sup>. Just like the black male actors, black women also portrayed stereotypical roles on the show.

Stereotypes and controlling images have posed challenges for black men and women throughout the history of American popular culture. Attempting to enter into an arena where stereotypes have been established left black people with only one option, become the stereotypical imitation created by white entertainers. For well over a century and even today negative images have shifted and shaped the roles black men and women play, especially if they are seeking to be successful within Hollywood. Black women in particular have been and are subjected to negative controlling images that seek to objectify their bodies.

#### **2.4 Controlling Images and the Assault on the Black Woman's Body**

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<sup>50</sup> Bogle, Donald. *Primetime Blues: African Americans on Network Television*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001. (Pg. 26)

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* (Pg. 27)

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* (Pg. 27)

The objectification of the black woman's body has been an issue within the westernized world for centuries. The idea of black inferiority has justified and upheld the belief that people outside of the black race had the authority to objectify the black body, especially the body of black women<sup>53</sup>. White supremacy and ideas surrounding black inferiority subjected black men and women to horrifying treatment. One of the most notable and widely publicized black women to experience this objectification was Saartjie "Sara" Baartman "The Hottentot Venus".

At the young age of 22, Saartjie Baartman travelled from South Africa to Europe with Alexander Dunlop and Hendrik Cesar on the premise that she would earn unimaginable riches and return to the Cape six years later<sup>54</sup>. Unbeknownst to her, the people to whom she entrusted herself sought to profit solely from her objectification. Coined the 'Hottentot Venus', Saartjie was displayed on a stage in a body stocking that created the illusion that she was naked while donning minimum accessories on top<sup>55</sup>.

Saartjie's popularity grew exponentially. The "Hottentot Venus" exhibition was a success and people came from all around to gaze upon her. She was not seen as a person who had real talents that needed to be exhibited, she was a mere object whose body parts were gawked at and used to justify the inferiority of black people. Her show made both Dunlop and Cesar a huge success yet it is uncertain if Saartjie saw any of that money personally.

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<sup>53</sup> Hobson, Janelle. The "Batty" Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body. *Hypatia*, 18(4), 87-105.

<sup>54</sup> Holmes, Rachel. *African Queen: The Real Life of the Hottentot Venus*. New York: Random House, 2007. (Pg. 6)

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* (Pg. 39)

Georges Cuvier, along with a group of scientists<sup>56</sup>, paid to have a private observation of her seeking to get a more scientific understanding of what made Saartijie different. During this observation these men measured various parts of her body and based upon their findings, concluded that the entire black race would be forever inferior based upon their physical stature. Not long after this, Saartijie fell ill and soon after died. Upon her death, Cuvier took ownership of her remains making a permanent cast of her body before dissecting it putting her genitalia and brain on display along with her skeleton at The Museum of Natural History in Paris. There she stayed for almost a century, in pieces, mere objects that were available to the public during the museums open hours. After a number of protests by people all over the world, her remains were finally returned to Hankey, South Africa in 2002 to be properly buried<sup>57</sup>.

All over the world throughout the course of time, black women have been subjected to and experienced inhumane treatment while being both stereotyped and criticized simply for being black and a woman. Just like Saartijie Baartman, black women have been objectified while controlling images have further pushed the need for whites to inflict their thoughts of superiority and racist ideology upon them. As enslaved Africans were transported from Africa to the Americas during the trans-Atlantic slave trade we see the continuation of a legacy of objectification and the inhumane treatment of black women especially. This continued devaluation of black womanhood “occurs as a result of the sexual exploitation of black womanhood during slavery... (which)... has not

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<sup>56</sup> David, 1962 May Johnson. "Representing the Cape "Hottentots," from the French Enlightenment to Post-apartheid South Africa." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 40, no. 4 (2007): 525-552. (Pg. 526)

<sup>57</sup> Moudileno, L.. "Returning Remains: Saartjie Baartman, or the "Hottentot Venus" as Transnational Postcolonial Icon." *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 45, no. 2 (2008): 200-212.

been altered in the course of hundreds of years”<sup>58</sup>. Black slaves were deemed sexual savages that caused white men to lust after them<sup>59</sup>. Because of this, rape and the sexual assault of black women became a normal occurrence within plantation life.

Black women were raped not only by their masters, they were subjected to this barbaric treatment by any white person male or female, young or old at any time. Sexual abuse forced black women into the role of their slave masters “unwilling concubines”<sup>60</sup> and she was seen not as a human being or a woman whose womanhood was to be protected but an object brought forth only for momentary acts of sexual pleasure. This, along with the constant threat of being sold, made it hard for slave families to thrive within plantation life. Black men were seemingly helpless and powerless when it came to protecting their wives and daughters from the lustful gaze of their masters. To justify these regular occurrences, controlling images such as the Jezebel were created depicting black women as sexual deviants who tempted white men into engaging in sexual relations with them.

After emancipation, the controlling image of the Jezebel continued to circulate heavily. As black women entertainers entered into the entertainment arena, they found themselves having to succumb to stereotypical roles that aided in their objectification if they sought to have a successful career. The impact of sexism and racism prevented the black woman from “injecting herself into the desperate struggle for existence”<sup>61</sup>. As

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<sup>58</sup> hooks, bell. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981. Print. (Pg. 35)

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* (Pg. 33)

<sup>60</sup> Davis, Angela. *Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves*. *The Massachusetts Review, Inc* (1972): 81-100. (Pg. 95).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* (Pg. 99).

technological advancements occurred controlling images used to objectify black women continued to be perpetuated.

Today the entertainment industry today is saturated with sexualized images of black women. Recent research examined whether or not the influence of racist and sexist stereotypes of black women, particularly the Jezebel and Mammy, factor in placing blame on rape victims. After interviewing 313 white participants, the author concludes that the preconceived notions they held about black women, based upon stereotypical images, did alter how white men viewed cases of rape involving a black woman. Many of the white male participants view the rape survivors as promiscuous based upon the race of the rape victim and the perpetrator<sup>62</sup>.

Over the years, black women have attempted to counter the negative images with more positive ones however the controlling images in place create difficult obstacles that make it hard to achieve that goal. Sonja Brown Givens and Jennifer Monahan interviewed over 182 undergraduates of various races to get an understanding of how media influences their judgment of black women. Throughout the study, they showed their participants several clips of black women figures, based upon stereotypical images. Afterwards, a clip of non-stereotypical black women giving an interview is shown and they ask the participant whether the first clip influenced their ideas about the women in the second clip. They concluded that indeed the stereotypical images shown helped to formulate their opinions and ideas about the non-stereotypical black women in the

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<sup>62</sup> Donovan, Roxanne A. "To Blame Or Not to Blame. Influences of Target Race and Observer Sex on Rape Blame Attribution." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 22.6 (2007): 722-36. ProQuest. Web. 5 Sep. 2013.

second clip<sup>63</sup>. This study, along with others, demonstrates that images perpetuated in the media do help to influence the preconceived notions about black women.

## **2.5 Gender Minstrelsy and Black Womanhood**

Gender Minstrelsy has aided in the attack on black womanhood by furthering the perpetuation of controlling stereotypical images. This form of entertainment has created an arena which specifically targets the ways in which black women are perceived helping to create prejudices and preconceived notions. For over a century, whether it was white men dressing as black women under the guise of blackface or black men cross dressing as black women, this form of entertainment has been a continuation of negative stereotypes.

During the age of blackface minstrelsy the phenomenon of white men in blackface who also dressed in drag became a popular and expected part of most blackface minstrel shows. Throughout their skits, these white men would portray overly exaggerated versions of black women acting out their ideas of black womanhood. These performances were more than mere entertainment; blackface transvestism<sup>64</sup> became tools that helped reinforce black inferiority, as well as patriarchal and misogynistic ideas of black women in particular. In the book, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask* by William Mahar, he states,

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<sup>63</sup> Brown Givens, Sonja M., and Jennifer L. Monahan. "Priming Mammies, Jezebels, And Other Controlling Images: An Examination Of The Influence Of Mediated Stereotypes On Perceptions Of An African American Woman." *Media Psychology* 7.1 (2005): 87-106. Communication & Mass Media Complete. Web. 31 Aug. 2013.

<sup>64</sup> A term used in the book *Love and Theft Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* authored by Eric Lott. Blackface transvestism is described as white men cross-dressing as Black women under the guise of blackface undermining traditional gender categories.

For every negative stereotype of an African American male in minstrelsy, there are many if not more stereotypes of black and white women generated as much by misogyny as by racism and all the more powerful because those images were encoded in the sentimental language of the antebellum period<sup>65</sup>.

With every performance the ideas of black women as sexually deviant, submissive servants, and completely inept were constantly shared with the audience. Firsthand accounts of blackface minstrel performances describe these female impersonators as featuring “fiendish dances, much show of leg, and silly confidences uttered in parody of womanhood<sup>66</sup>”. These particular minstrel performances became extremely popular amongst traveling minstrel groups and many of the impersonators drew huge success from their depictions. Although cross-dressing for the theater was common during the early inception of theater in Europe as well as in American theaters, blackface transvestism helped to cultivate the overall attack on the black woman although it was generally done as comedy.

Unlike blackface transvestism, during minstrel performances, drag queens presented a different arena for men who impersonated women. Most of the men who choose to perform as drag queens were homosexual and would typically perform in “gay

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<sup>65</sup> Mahar, William J. *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999. Print. (Pg. 268)

<sup>66</sup> Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Print. (Pg. 159).

bars or pubs”<sup>67</sup> while blackface transvestism acts were typically done by heterosexual men. This phenomenon did not become wide spread until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>68</sup> with 1871 being one of the first early references of men dressed as women in the United States<sup>69</sup>. A restaurant in Philadelphia was noted to be frequented by men who chose to wear women attire and a number of other large cities throughout the country also made reference to men who would dress as women<sup>70</sup>. Drag queens and performances in drag were vastly different from blackface transvestism because these shows typically centered solely on a man cross dressing as a women rather than being the comedic relief of a wider show. Also, drag performances were typically aimed at gay audiences<sup>71</sup> while minstrel shows were open to everyone seeking to be entertained. While drag queens used their opportunity on stage to personify women, it is not noted that their performances were steeped in stereotypical portrayals of women. Blackface transvestism however, embodied a number of stereotypical and controlling images that justified black women’s inferiority.

As the popularity of blackface minstrelsy began to fade away, the legacy of blackface transvestism continued to loom over the entertainment arena. As television and film grew in popularity, the stereotypes exhibited by these white men in blackface began to transform. Seeking to establish successful comedic careers as actors black men began to take on the role of cross dressing as black women, continuing the traditions of their white counterparts. The black men who engaged in this form of entertainment also

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<sup>67</sup> Bullough, Vern L., and Bonnie Bullough. *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993. Print. (Pg. 236)

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* (Pg. 238)

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* (Pg. 238)

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* (Pg. 238)

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* (Pg. 239)

began personifying the negative stereotypical images of black women. While these images have garnered much success, they continuously perpetuate stereotypical images which manipulated the image of black womanhood by shaping the minds of millions of people worldwide.

One of the first black men who became extremely successful while portraying a black woman was Flip Wilson. The Flip Wilson show a successful variety show on NBC features Flip Wilson playing his most notable character Geraldine Jones. Geraldine was seen as “usually strutting about in wigs and short dresses, and she had a boyfriend named Killer<sup>72</sup> and most of the lines during Geraldine’s performance ended with “a snap of her fingers or a shake of her hips”<sup>73</sup>. The success of his show was unprecedented, with a weekly audience of 40 million people<sup>74</sup> it became the first number one variety show making him a huge success. He received a number of awards and was dubbed the “First Black Superstar”<sup>75</sup>. Since Flip Wilson’s variety show, there have been a number of black male actors who have used gender minstrelsy both on television as well as in films.

Television shows like *In Living Color* featured Jamie Foxx’s character Wanda, while the show *Martin* featured Martin Lawrence’s character Sheneneh Jenkins. On the big screen major productions including gender minstrelsy are movies like Tyler Perry’s *Madea*, Martin Lawrence’s *Big Momma’s House 1 & 2*, and Eddie Murphy’s *The Nutty Professor 1 & 2* and *Norbit*. Each of these television shows and films were not only successful in bolstering the popularity of the male actor but, they were financially

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<sup>72</sup> Bogle, Donald. *Primetime Blues: African Americans on Network Television*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001. (Pg. 180)

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* (Pg. 180)

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* (Pg. 180)

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* (Pg. 180)

successful as well. With the wide spread reach of the media people all over the world have the ability to view these performances.

The era of blackface minstrelsy began the perpetuation of white men engaged in blackface transvestism using their performances as black women as a way to garner laughs on the stage<sup>76</sup>. These portrayals were shrouded in controlling images which show black women as aggressive, masculine and oversexualized<sup>77</sup>. Similarly, the black male actors who engage in gender minstrelsy today for television and films also use their portrayals in comedic ways yet they also personify controlling images of black women. These portrayals continue the ideology of black women's subordination while furthering the preconceived notions about black womanhood.

## **2.6 Chapter Summary**

This chapter was meant to weave together the scholarship surrounding the experiences of black men and women throughout history particularly looking at negative stereotypes in entertainment. The negative stereotypical images created to reinforce black inferiority have been and continue to be obstacles especially for black women. Objectification and the inhumane treatment of black women led to the creation of controlling images that we see displayed throughout the media. These depictions have aided in the creation of preconceived notions people have of black women.

## **3.1 Introduction**

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<sup>76</sup> Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Print. (Pg. 26)

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* (Pg. 159-160)

Mass media, through the various forms of communications, plays a very intricate role in the society in which we live. Semiotics, in many ways, dictates how people choose to live their lives, including how one thinks of themselves, and other groups of people. It was the evolution of American popular culture that allowed the popularity of mass media to blossom, opening the door for its expansion as technological advances occurred. Recently, there has been a sub-group of black male entertainers that have begun engaging in gender minstrelsy, cross-dressing as black women as a form of entertainment within the media. While this phenomenon is not new, their performances are seen on a larger scale with availability to people both domestically and internationally. The purpose of this study is to examine historical and contemporary notions of black womanhood in gender minstrelsy. Looking specifically at the phenomenon of black men cross-dressing as black women in the financially successful films *Norbit*, *Madea Goes to Jail*, and *Big Momma's House* as well as the television show *The Flip Wilson Show*.

### **3.2 Research Method and Design**

This study examines historical and contemporary notions of black womanhood within gender minstrelsy. Using a content analysis, the researcher, analyzed the films *Big Momma's House*, *Norbit* and *Madea Goes to Jail* along with the television show *The Flip Wilson Show*. Examining the performances of each actor engaging in gender minstrelsy, the researcher analyzed and coded reoccurring themes and signs throughout. Looking particularly at their relationship to one another and whether the signs displayed controlling images of Black women aiding in the manipulation of the image of Black womanhood.

Over the last three decades, modern advances in technology have allowed for new methods and techniques within document analysis research to evolve that may not have been available previously<sup>78</sup>. Newspapers, television shows, films, audio recordings, etc. can all be made available through the World Wide Web at the click of a mouse. Accessibility to documents has given researchers the opportunity to conduct research on various topics pertaining to culture, mass media and communications. Because of this researchers have been given the ability to study shifts, phenomena and covert signs occurring within culture via media outlets.

A content analysis is most appropriate for this study because it will allow the researcher to describe and interpret “the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language of a culture-sharing group<sup>79</sup>”. Blending together aspects of the traditional content analysis with the observations of the participant, this content analysis will “look at how the researcher interacts with the documentary material so that specific statements can be placed in the proper context for analysis”<sup>80</sup>. Being aware of the meanings, processes, and emphases displayed in the content rather than simply studying the overall content is what makes a qualitative content analysis different from a traditional content analysis<sup>81</sup>. Since blackface minstrelsy helped with the conception of American popular culture<sup>82</sup>, many of the signs, symbols and stereotypes created through this form of entertainment created beliefs and behaviors that still exist today

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<sup>78</sup> Altheide, David L., and Christopher Schneider. *Qualitative media analysis*. 2 ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2013. (Pg. 10)

<sup>79</sup> Creswell, John W. *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2007. (Pg. 90)

<sup>80</sup> Altheide, David L., and Christopher Schneider. *Qualitative media analysis*. 2 ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2013. (Pg. 5)

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* (Pg. 2)

<sup>82</sup> Lott, Eric. "The Blackening of America: Popular Culture and National Cultures." In *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. (Pg. 89-107)

especially when looking at gender minstrelsy. A content analysis will allow the researcher to analyze the television show and films that display performances of gender minstrelsy in-depth. Because the performances have already previously been filmed, analyzing the films is the best way to get an accurate image of what gender minstrelsy is when it pertains to Black men dressed as Black women. When looking closely at the displays of gender minstrelsy, it will be important to extensively examine the characteristics each of these actors display to interpret and understand what they are embodying and sharing with their audiences. Similarly, in the study *Invisible Mothers: A Content Analysis of Motherhood Ideologies and Myths in Magazines* researchers Deirdre Johnston and Debra Swanson utilized a content analysis to discover myths and ideologies about motherhood in contemporary women magazines. Looking specifically at how these magazines portrayed traditional ideas of motherhood yet undermine those women who chose to be stay-at-home parents. Overall, a content analysis offers a way to “systematically study the use of visuals and texts in media<sup>83</sup>”.

The researcher conducted a qualitative content analysis rather than quantitative content analysis because a qualitative analysis allows the researcher to interpret the meanings that are presented rather than solely “obtaining data to measure the frequency” of the messages<sup>84</sup>. In order to understand how gender minstrelsy manipulates black womanhood, it is crucial to understand the meaning behind each performance. The subtle signs and nuances that each actor might display may be lost if the researcher simply collected data pertaining to frequency of certain characteristics. Quantitative analysis will allow the researcher to answer the questions proposed yet, it

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<sup>83</sup> Altheide, David L., and Christopher Schneider. *Qualitative Media Analysis*. 2 ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2013. (Pg. 33)

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* (Pg. 24)

will make it very difficult to leave room to make discoveries outside of the initial question. With a qualitative study, the researcher can collect “numerical and narrative data” freely without the constraints imposed when doing a quantitative analysis.

### **3.3 Sampling, Data Collection, Procedures and Rationale**

This study used the films *Norbit* with Eddie Murphy, *Madea Goes to Jail* with Tyler Perry, and *Big Momma’s House* with Martin Lawrence as well as the show *The Flip Wilson Show* with Flip Wilson. These films were chosen because they garnered huge box-office success. According to Box Office Mojo<sup>85</sup>, *Norbit*, released on February 9, 2007, grossed \$159,313,561.00 worldwide<sup>86</sup>, *Big Momma’s House*, released on June 2, 2000, grossed \$173,959,438.00 worldwide<sup>87</sup>, and out of all of the Madea films made by Tyler Perry, *Madea Goes to Jail*, released on February 20, 2009, made the largest sum of money grossing \$90,508,336.00 worldwide<sup>88</sup>. Each of these films have been highly successful and they have been seen all over the world. Also all of the male actors engaging in gender minstrelsy are exceedingly popular Black actors who are also known all over the world. The television show *The Flip Wilson Show* was one of the first successful variety shows that garnered huge success for Flip Wilson. Because of the huge success that Flip Wilson experienced, he was dubbed the “first Black superstar”<sup>89</sup>. He became an influential entertainer during his tenure in the industry and is revered by

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<sup>85</sup> Box Office Mojo is an online box office reporting service that also produces individual information pertaining to movie publications. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/about/?ref=ft>

<sup>86</sup> "Norbit (2007) - Box Office Mojo." Norbit (2007) - Box Office Mojo. Accessed November 10, 2014. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=norbit.htm>.

<sup>87</sup> "Big Momma's House (2000) - Box Office Mojo." Big Momma's House (2000) - Box Office Mojo. Accessed November 10, 2014. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=bigmommashouse.htm>.

<sup>88</sup> "Tyler Perry's Madea Goes to Jail (2009) - Box Office Mojo." Tyler Perry's Madea Goes to Jail (2009) - Box Office Mojo. Accessed November 10, 2014. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=madeagoestojail.htm>.

<sup>89</sup> Bogle, Donald. *Primetime Blues: African Americans on Network Television*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001. (Pg. 180)

many to this day. Because *The Flip Wilson Show* is no longer in syndication, the DVD *The Best of the Flip Wilson Show* released on February 27, 2007 will be used in this research. This collection contains three discs with two episodes on each disc for a total of six shows. There are two shows with the character Geraldine in them and it is those skits that were analyzed for this study. *The Best of Flip Wilson* has a running time of 347 minutes, *Madea Goes to Jail* has a running time of 103 minutes, *Norbit* has a running time of 110 minutes and *Big Momma's House* has a running time of 98 minutes. Each of these films and the television show has a main character that is engaging in gender minstrelsy.

The researcher collected the data needed for this study while watching each film. Focusing on and documenting the controlling image characteristics created to oppress Black women that were personified by these actors while they were engaging in gender minstrelsy. For this study, the researcher focused on the controlling images of the Mammy, Jezebel, and Black Matriarch that are described in Patricia Hill Collins book *Black Feminist Thought*. There are several other controlling images that are discussed such as the Welfare Mother/Queen, the Black Lady and Hoochie however, for this study the researcher chose to focus on the more prominent ones.

Throughout time, the Mammy is described as being “the faithful and obedient domestic servant”<sup>90</sup> who is completely loyal to her white family. She is also seen as morbidly obese and is “lacking all sexual and sensual qualities”<sup>91</sup>. For this controlling image any characteristics that depict the characters as nurturing, motherly, or domestic

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<sup>90</sup> Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Rev. 10th anniversary ed. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print. (Pg. 80)

<sup>91</sup> Pilgrim, David. "The Mammy Caricature." *Mammy Caricature*.  
<http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/mammies/> (accessed March 15, 2015).

will be categorized within the Mammy group. The Black Matriarch is the complete opposite of the Mammy figure, where the Mammy is seen as loyal and devoted the Matriarch is seen as “overly aggressive and unfeminine”<sup>92</sup>. This controlling image is seen as the female head of household who “emasculates her lovers or husband”<sup>93</sup> therefore justifying the lack of the Black male presence in the home. Characteristics that are viewed as overly aggressive, violent, emasculating, and unfeminine will be categorized within the Matriarch category. The Jezebel is the controlling image that tends to be one of the most damaging images of them all. This was an image that developed for black women during slavery and consisted of “relegating all black women to the category of sexually aggressive women”<sup>94</sup>. Because black women were seen as sexually aggressive it gave justification for the onslaught of sexual assault that occurred by their slave masters<sup>95</sup>. It showed black women as being the cause of their own victimization and turned the perpetrator into the victim. All behavior that signifies the women being sexual or sexually aggressive will be categorized into this group. This will include covert and overt signs and gestures displayed by the actors engaging in gender minstrelsy. Since the researcher is focusing on the controlling images defined by Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* anything that does not fit within these three categories will be placed in the group ‘other’. While the researcher is aware of the array of controlling images and stereotypes that exist for black women, the three listed above are the focal point for this research. These controlling images are directly defined as being some of the main problems that go against the cult of true womanhood which

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<sup>92</sup> Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Rev. 10th anniversary ed. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print. (Pg. 83)

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. (Pg. 83)

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. (Pg. 89)

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. (Pg. 89)

leads to the oppression of black women. The portrayals of each actor engaging in gender minstrelsy were coded within the predetermined four categories, focusing specifically on their behavior, their visual representation, and their interaction with secondary characters. The researcher viewed each film a minimum of three times, focusing on a separate quality each time which may have been overlooked if only watched once.

### **3.4 Validity Internal and External**

For this study, the researcher implemented triangulation as a form of internal validation. Triangulation allows the researcher to “make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence<sup>96</sup>”. Since this study examined the displays of gender minstrelsy analyzing the documentation found in the films with other documents that discuss stereotypes and controlling images assisted in validating the research. In addition to using triangulation as a method for internal validity the researcher enlisted the assistance of a secondary reader to review the themes, and codes that the researcher found while collecting the data. This step aided the researcher in further validating the data that was collected.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

The researcher analyzed each film along with the television show from the beginning to end. While watching each film, notes were taken on the characteristics of the actors who are engaging in gender minstrelsy. Since the *Flip Wilson Show* is a variety show, the only performances analyzed were the performance of Flip Wilson as Geraldine. Each actor and their performances of gender minstrelsy were analyzed

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<sup>96</sup> Creswell, John W. *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2007. (Pg. 251)

looking at the ways in which they dressed, their mannerism, while also observing the way they interact with the other members of the cast. In addition to analyzing the behaviors and characteristics of the actors within the film, in-depth attention was paid to the environment that each character was in throughout the totality of the film. Each film was watched three times to ensure that no signs or characteristics were overlooked. Once the data were taken, codes and themes were developed particularly looking at the relationships between all of the films and how those relationships aid in manipulating the image of black womanhood. In order to validate the information that the researcher collected triangulation was implemented. Documents like books, photos, articles, etc. were used to corroborate the interpretations that the researcher is drawing from the themes and codes. As a secondary method of validity, the researcher enlisted the help of a secondary reader to analyze the codes and themes the researcher found. Finally, the researcher presented the findings through an overall narrative describing the relationship gender minstrelsy has with black womanhood; including tables and charts that discuss the themes found throughout the films. Detailed notes of the themes and codes found by the researcher are included in the analysis of the research.

### **3.6 Chapter Summary**

This chapter gives an in-depth overview of the research detailing how the researcher conducted this study. A content analysis was implemented to analyze the four visual documents. Themes and codes were pulled from each performance and correlations have been analyzed looking at how the displayed acts of gender minstrelsy aid in manipulating the image of black womanhood.

## 4.1 Results

This study focuses on the how the portrayals of black men in gender minstrelsy manipulate the image of black womanhood. Looking specifically at the controlling images defined by Patricia Hill Collins<sup>97</sup>, three images are used to categorize the portrayals from each of the four films. The first image is the Black Matriarch, any behaviors that shows the characters as an “overly aggressive, unfeminine woman” who also “emasculated their lovers and husbands”<sup>98</sup>, were placed in this category. The Black Matriarch is also seen as the female head of the household<sup>99</sup> so characteristics that display the woman as the head will also be coded within this category. The Jezebel image will be used to categorize any of the characteristics that depict these characters as sexual or sexually aggressive women<sup>100</sup>. The Mammy category encompasses any behaviors that are seen as motherly, nurturing, or in any way domestic. Since there are three out of the four films that depict the characters as morbidly obese, this appearance is categorized as a direct reflection of the Mammy stereotype because one of her physical attributes is that of an obese woman<sup>101</sup>. Any characteristics that are displayed by these actors that does not fall into any of the three categories that are described will be coded in the group ‘other’ and will be discussed separately. Table 1.1 (see below) shows the data collected for all of the controlling images analyzed in this study.

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<sup>97</sup> Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Rev. 10th Anniversary Ed. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print. (Pg. 76)

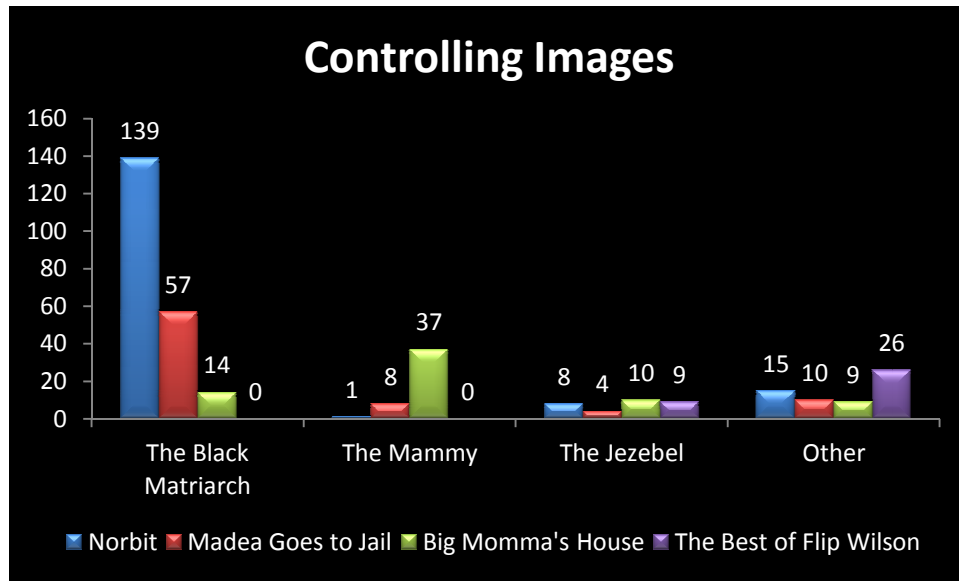
<sup>98</sup> Ibid. (Pg. 83)

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. (Pg. 82)

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. (Pg. 89)

<sup>101</sup> Pilgrim, David. "The Mammy Caricature." *Mammy Caricature*.  
<http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/mammies/> (accessed March 15, 2015).

Table 1.1 Controlling Images



There are four main characters in each of the four movies that were central to this research. Madea, also known as Mable Simmons, is played by Tyler Perry. Throughout *Madea Goes to Jail*, we see Madea’s plight as she battles with assault charges, overcoming her anger and aggression and dealing with life in jail. Big Momma, also known as Hattie Mae Pierce, is played by Martin Lawrence. In *Big Momma’s House*, Malcolm an FBI agent has to go undercover as Big Momma in order to solve one of his high profile cases. Rasputia is played by Eddie Murphy. *Norbit* is the story of the life of Norbit a man who grew up as a foster child. Norbit met Rasputia as a child and she became somewhat of a dictator to him. The film chronicles their life together. Geraldine is played by Flip Wilson. In *The Flip Wilson Show*, Geraldine was a part of one of Flip Wilson’s various skits that he would perform throughout his show.

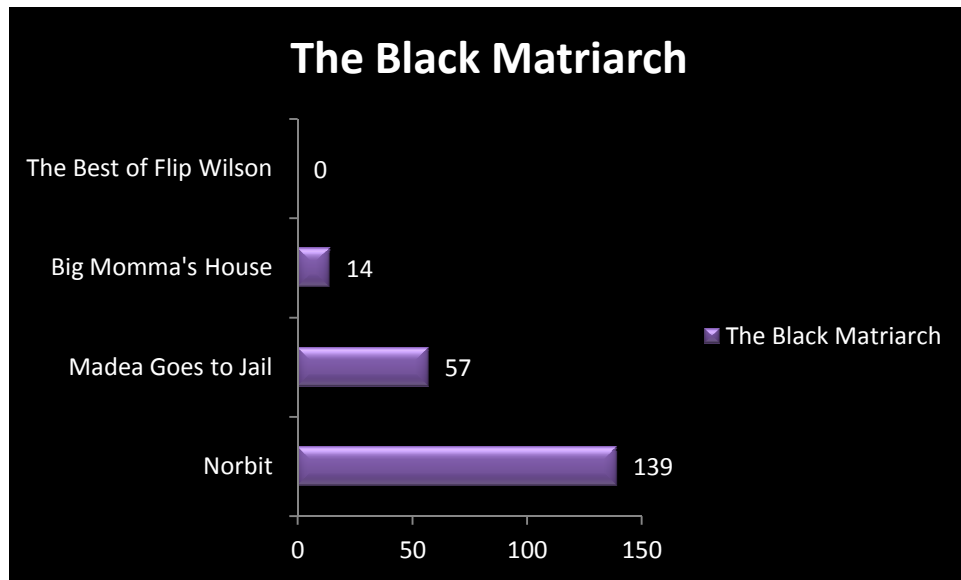
In order to examine the relationship between the controlling images and the portrayals of gender minstrelsy by the black male actors a content analysis was used. Each film was viewed a total of three times. The researcher analyzed each portrayal to

determine if controlling images were seen in their behavior, interactions between the character and secondary characters and finally their appearance throughout the film. A total of 347 characteristics were documented from all four films which were categorized as a controlling image or stereotype. Triangulation was used as an internal form of validity throughout the research to corroborate the data collected with the previous research on controlling images, stereotypes, and gender minstrelsy. Also, a second research coder from Georgia State University was recruited as a form of external validity.

The secondary coder watched each film, coded the information into the pre-determined categories and reviewed her findings with the researcher. Of the four films analyzed both researchers agreed that there was substantial evidence present that each character did embody controlling images. Whether it was the Black Matriarch, Mammy, Jezebel, or 'Other' category each portrayal displayed characteristics from either one or a combination of them. The secondary coder and the primary researchers' findings did not vary. A comparison was done to look at any significant variances in the findings but, there were no significant differences. There was a detailed discussion, between the researcher and secondary coder, on each of the films watched looking specifically at the type of clothing worn, their verbiage/behavior, and interaction with secondary characters. The information presented in the results is a synthesis of the findings amongst the two.

#### **4.2 The Black Matriarch**

Table 2.1 The Black Matriarch



Of the four films analyzed, three included characteristics of the Black Matriarch, *Norbit*, *Big Momma's House* and *Madea Goes to Jail*. Geraldine, from The Flip Wilson Show, did not display any characteristics that would categorize her with the Black Matriarch controlling image. The Black Matriarch has historically been seen as the overbearing, aggressive black woman who is constantly emasculating men and wreaking havoc in the lives of those who get in her way. Characteristics of this controlling image were portrayed through each of these actors' performances. These women displayed aggressive, violent, and emasculating tendencies that oppress black womanhood. There were 210 overall portrayals of this controlling image displayed throughout these three films. *Norbit* had the highest number of portrayals in a single film with a total of 139 compared to all four films (see Table 2.1 above). Of the many characteristics that define the Black Matriarch, the need to emasculate men and displays of physical violence were major themes throughout all three of those films.

#### **Emasculating Men**

Any interaction between each of these characters and a person of the opposite sex showed that there was very little power held by their male counterparts. Aggressive behavior, physical violence and belittling speech were observed in all of these women throughout various scenes. These women made it clear that they were the authority figures and no one had the ability to rule over them especially not a man.

Rasputia and Norbit are married in the film. They met as children. At their initial meeting Rasputia saved Norbit from being physically attacked by two boys on the playground. Her introduction to the storyline symbolizes the terror and intimidation she inflicted upon people. As the boys are in the midst of attacking Norbit, the shadow of Rasputia is seen before you actually see her. This shadow, much like the shadows that are seen in a number of scary movies, is a symbol used to foreshadow the villain or antagonist coming. When you finally see her, you see a large black girl standing over the boys who quickly picks them up and with one in each hand she says “leave him alone” the boys say “says who?” and she knocks the boys into each other and throws them to the side. At this point conversation between Norbit and Rasputia commence they introduce themselves to one another and upon hearing his name she tells him “that’s a stupid name.” He asks her why she attacked those boys and she told him that it was done to “protect him.” This dialogue is followed by Rasputia asking Norbit in a rather flirtatious way whether or not he has a girlfriend to which he says “no.” Upon hearing that she tells him “well you do now” grabbing his hand and dragging him behind her. Throughout this exchange we see how traditional gender roles are violated. Typically it is the man who pursues the woman in an attempt to win her over gaining her permission to become exclusive but, with their initial meeting this is not the case. Both

the researcher and the secondary coder agree that Rasputia completely dispels traditional roles by being the dominant one she also lays the foundation for the Black Matriarch controlling image to live and thrive.

Throughout this film in particular there are instances in which Rasputia would terrorize Norbit completely emasculating him. She was and continued to be the authority in their relationship leaving Norbit with very little control over his life or theirs as a couple. During their wedding ceremony for example, the pastor reached the final part of the vows where the kiss was to occur. Rather than both of them embracing or Norbit taking the lead, Rasputia told him to open his mouth and commenced to stick her tongue into his mouth to kiss him. Carrying Rasputia across the threshold presented another opportunity for emasculation to occur. She insisted upon Norbit carrying her through the door of their home after their wedding. When Norbit was unsuccessful in lifting her up, she pushed him to the floor telling him he “wasn’t a man” as she walked over him into the house. The second coder points out that this scene shows Rasputia definitely as the head of their household. Typically displays of physical violence coincided with the emasculation of the male characters in these films. The women made it their point to result to violence when attempting to get their points across.

### **Displays of Physical Violence**

The use of physical violence by Madea, Rasputia, and Big Momma was used throughout each of the three films. There were many instances where secondary characters were assaulted, chased, and more. Physical violence was primarily used when these women were not getting their point across as they would like or if someone angered them in any way.

Rasputia inflicted violence not only upon her husband Norbit but against anyone who prohibited her from doing what she wanted to do. At the end of the movie when the community rallied against her attacks on Norbit, she made it her business to retaliate against those who tried to protect him. The flower lady is picked up and thrown into a heap of flowers. Several old men were attacked with a shovel that she stole out of the window of a business. She also took it upon herself to run over her neighbor's dog in an attempt to kill him after seeing him walking down the street. This act of attempted murder was solely because she did not like that the dog was constantly barking at her. All of these attacks were nothing compared to the abuse Norbit had to endure.



**Figure 1.1** Rasputia chasing Norbit through their neighborhood

Throughout the movie, Norbit was frequently attacked by Rasputia both physically and verbally. After Norbit catches Rasputia cheating on him with her fitness instructor, Rasputia attempts to act as if nothing happened. When Norbit refuses to let I go and calls her a “whore” she chases him out of the house attempting to “set him

straight.” Figure 1.1 shows Norbit on the opposite side of a tree after being chased through the neighborhood by Rasputia during this altercation. He was thrown out of their window because she was mad at him for going out with Kate, his childhood friend. She threatened to pour acid on Kate’s face if he continued their friendship. She slapped him in the face during arguments when he wouldn’t “shut up” right when she demanded him to. At a community festival, Rasputia pushed a large audio speaker down on him because he was dancing with Kate and she became extremely upset, sending him to the hospital.

*Madea Goes to Jail* focuses on the violent nature of Madea which ultimately lands her in jail. As the film begins we see a group of county prosecutors who are watching a video of police attempting to arrest Madea. Their attempts are futile because Madea manages to physically assault all three of the officers before they are able to apprehend her. After the video ends the group of lawyers is briefed on her prior cases in which they also see old mugshots. Madea has been previously charged with assault and attempted murder amongst a slew of non-violent charges. This introduction of Madea gives the viewer the image of someone that is not to be “messed with” because her aggression will lead to physical attacks. Throughout the film she lashes out in various acts of rage and violence.

After her initial trial from assaulting the three police officers is dismissed, she goes home to find that her brother Joe is in the midst of throwing a large party. People are everywhere wandering around her entire house. This infuriates Madea because she keeps asking repeatedly “Jo, what are all these people doing in my house.” Her trust in her brother to maintain her home while she was away was frayed and privacy had been

violated which caused her to become angry. After Madea catches a man coming down the stairs from her second floor level we see her angrily go upstairs and the scene transitions to the front of the house. Here, we see a herd of people running out of the house screaming and the sounds of an automatic weapon going off as Madea is screaming for them to get out her house. One might analyze this scene as empowering because Madea is regaining power in her home the way in which it is depicted perpetuates violence as her only source to regain that power. While this scene was meant to garner laughs, it perpetuates the stereotypical images that black women can be violent when things do not go their way.

Another example of Madea displaying physical acts of violence within this film involves her physical altercation with Big Sal while she is imprisoned. Madea comes to the aid of Candace who is being heavily pursued by Big Sal to become her “prison-mate.” When Candace denies her requests for companionship she becomes forcefully insistent with her request leaving Madea to speak to Big Sal using her fists. As they finally face off in the laundry room of the prison Madea begins her physical assault telling Big Sal that no means no and to leave Candace alone while Candace also joins in the assault. As they hear a prison guard coming into the laundry room, they stuff Big Sal into a bin hiding her and the damage they have done from the guard. This scene displays Madea coming to the aid of Candace who is being perused by Big Sal and also preserving both of their safety it is showing once again that black women must resort to violence to make the point.

Hattie Mae Pierce, also known as Big Momma, did not shy away from the physical assaults either, handing them out freely to those who stood in her way. This

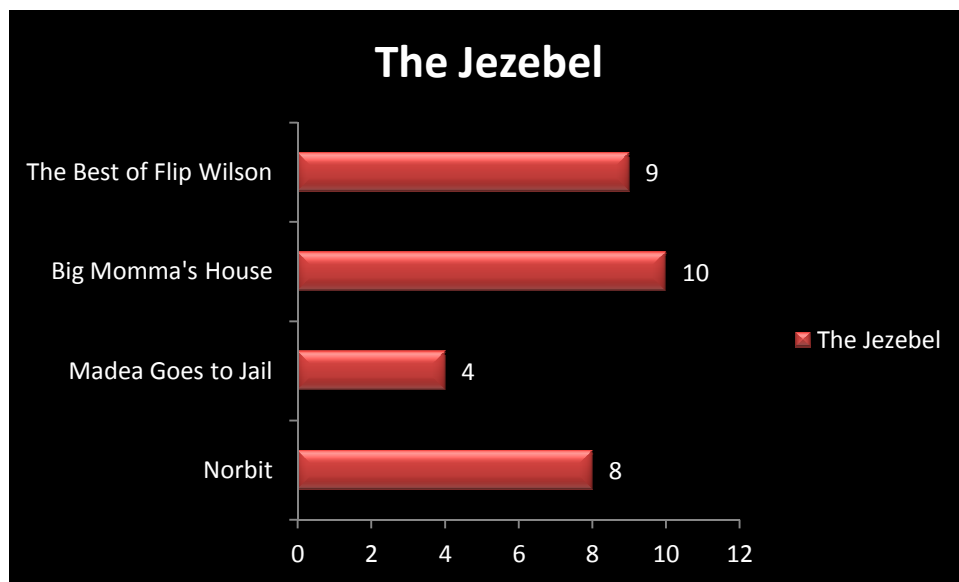
film follows FBI agent Malcolm (Martin Lawrence) as he unexpectedly has to go undercover as Big Momma in order to catch a suspect. At first glance, Big Momma is seen as this genteel grandma working in her garden, yet that lasts all of a few seconds. As she turns around holding up her neighbor's dog, she is seen tossing him onto the sidewalk while fussing at him telling him to stay out of her flowers or the next time she would really inflict some pain onto him. We also see Big Momma kneeing John, the FBI agent that has accompanied Malcolm on their sting operation. She does this because he was attempting to delay her from going into her home because Malcolm was attempting to plant surveillance throughout her house. Every time that she attempted to go to her home John would delay it. This causes Big Momma to become extremely irritated making her kick him in the groin to get away from him. While it was done in a comedic manner, this introduction perpetuates the image that black women anger quickly and that anger will lead to physical assaults.

The introduction of Big Momma is not of a man in gender minstrelsy but a woman, it is not until Big Momma has to suddenly go out of town to help a friend that Malcolm goes undercover. To help the FBI solve the case, involving Sherry, Malcolm studied Big Momma's mannerisms and characteristics from the initial interactions and duplicated them in an attempt to be as natural as possible. Throughout his portrayal as Big Momma, we see him display physical assaults much like that of the real Big Momma. During a self-defense class Big Momma decides to combat an over-zealous instructor with her own defense skills. She is seen attacking and flipping him over on the mat before the rest of the class joins in on the attack.

The Black Matriarch controlling image played a large role in each of the three films that displayed its characteristics. These depictions were steeped in behaviors that perpetuated each woman as being not only physically violent but also emasculating when needed. The Jezebel character became another ongoing controlling that was found throughout each of the four films analyzed.

### 4.3 The Jezebel

Table 3.1 The Jezebel



Each of the four films analyzed displayed the Jezebel controlling image (see Table 3.1 above). There were exactly 37 total portrayals documented of this controlling image with Norbit having the highest number of portrayals at 15. Whether these displays were done in a covert or overt manner, they assist in perpetuating the objectification of the black woman and the black woman’s body. This objectification alters the reality of black womanhood because black women are not seen as women but sexual objects that are

used to curb the males' insatiable sexual appetite<sup>102</sup>. Historically the Jezebel image was used to justify the assault of black women turning the victims of sexual assaults into the willing participant and the aggressor into the victim<sup>103</sup>. As white men engaged in blackface transvestism during the blackface minstrel era they used this guise as an opportunity to undermine black women's sexuality in a comedic manner<sup>104</sup>. They often portrayed black women as "masculinized, powerful women<sup>105</sup>" which helped to perpetuated stereotypical ideas about black womanhood. In each of the four films, the characters engaged in some sort of sexual acts or objectification, whether it was done covertly or overtly, as a form of comedic release.

On the Flip Wilson Show, viewed through the compilation *The Best of Flip Wilson*, Geraldine uses her sexuality covertly throughout the skits flirting and making small talk with the male characters. In the skit the Fashion Show, Geraldine comes onto the stage modeling an outfit that she made herself. As she comes onto the stage seductive music begins to play and she extends her hands to show her entire outfit to the audience. As she walks down the steps she begins to sway back and forth until she reaches center stage. Throughout the skit we see her flirting with Joe, one of the male hosts, telling him that her skirt runs "from the mid-field to the end zone" telling him that her boyfriend Killer says that "helps a lot when my backfield is in motion". Both the researcher and secondary coder agree that words were used covertly to reference sexual

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<sup>102</sup> Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Rev. 10th anniversary ed. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print. (Pg. 89)

<sup>103</sup> Pilgrim, David. "The Jezebel Caricature." *Jezebel Caricature*.

<http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/jezebel/> (accessed March 24, 2015).

<sup>104</sup> Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Print. (Pg. 161)

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.* (Pg. 161)

tendencies. Words such as 'backfield', 'mid-field' and 'end-zone' were all used to covertly reference things sexual in nature which garnered huge laughs from the audience.

As Malcolm takes on the persona of Big Momma we see the dichotomy of masculine and feminine sexual nature occurring at the same time. When Big Momma first sees Sherry get out of the car and walk towards him (as Big Momma) his first verbal response is "damn you're fine" to which she gives him a bewildering stare. He pretends that wasn't what was said and from that moment on, this masculine versus feminine sexual nature is in constant battle with one another. When Joe, an older man comes to Big Momma's house and attempts to kiss her at the door we see her push him away disgustingly. Finally, she takes him outside to talk to him, away from Sherry and Trent, telling him that she is not "street poon-tang" before telling him to get "his ass off of her porch". Throughout the film, as Malcolm's affinity for Sherry grows, we begin to see his personification of Big Momma border homosexual and incestuous tendencies.



**Figure 2.1** Malcolm (as Big Momma) laying in the bed with Sherry

During a thunder storm, Sherry comes into Big Momma's room because she is scared and asks her if she could sleep in her bed (seen in the photo above). As they are laying there talking Sherry feels something poking her in the back. When asked if she knows what it is Big Momma says it is a flashlight and pulls one from under the cover. After laying there for a few more seconds Sherry asks Big Momma if she has another flashlight underneath the cover that is continuing to poke her. While the audience is aware that Malcolm is undercover as Big Momma and although it is portrayed in a comedic manner, the portrayal of a woman with manly tendencies is something that was done through blackface transvestism and continues today.

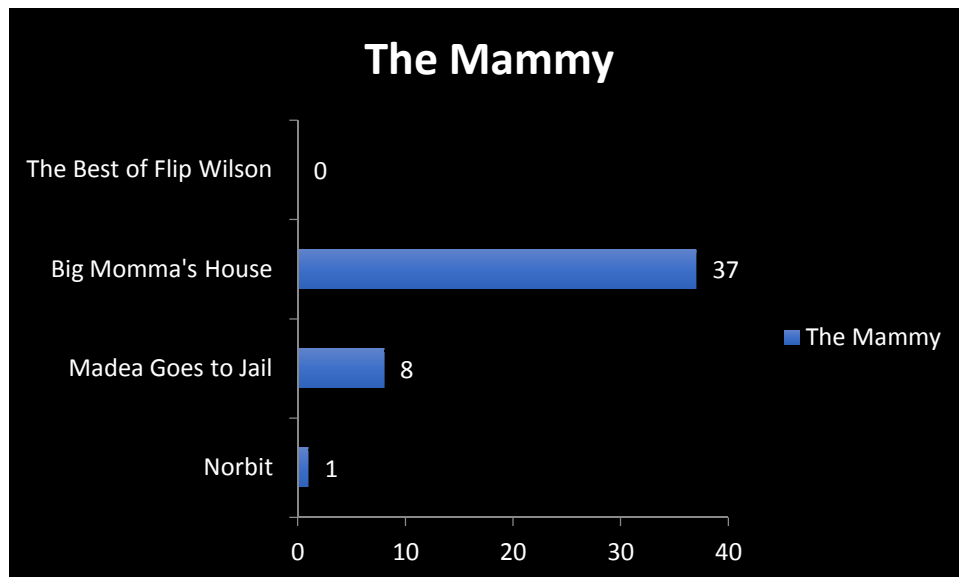
The opening credits of *Madea Goes to Jail* is a montage of photos showing Madea's life as an exotic dancer as well as physical assaults she was involved in over the years. On a business card we see a logo of a woman with one hand and leg around a stripper pole and it says "Platinum Simmons, Exotic Dancer and Escort." A flier shows a picture of Madea in a dress with the bottom half flying up in a Marilyn Monroe like manner that says "Come see Platinum's famous fan dance." And finally, a newspaper article is shown that says "super-sized stripper smacks spectator which symbolizes both the sexual nature of Madea as well as her aggressiveness. The second coder noted that while Madea's sexuality was never a huge topic of discussion, throughout the movie, there were instances where her sexual deviancy is addressed covertly.

In *Norbit*, Rasputia flaunted her sexuality and sexual nature openly and without any reservations. After Norbit and Rasputia were married, a montage is shown of them in their bedroom where Rasputia exits the bathroom in various pieces of lingerie running toward and jumping on Norbit smashing him between her and the bed.

Throughout the movie, she is constantly seen wearing tight and revealing garments that leave little to the imagination. Rather than seeing these displays as liberating for larger women it comes off as comedic and yet grotesque. Her sexual nature continues to be forefront as she begins a sexual relationship with her power tap dance instructor. He seeks her services in getting funding for his workout video and she tells him that she would need private lessons before that will occur. This display is a direct reflection on the sexual nature of the Jezebel controlling image.

#### 4.4 The Mammy

Table 4.1 The Mammy



One of the oldest surviving controlling images is that of the Mammy. This image has existed since the antebellum period and has continued to transform itself to fit the present. The Mammy has been historically seen as the morbidly obese, mother-like figure that was loyal to the family for whom she worked<sup>106</sup>. Three out of the four films analyzed (see Table 4.1 above) displayed these women as motherly, nurturing or domestic with Big Momma's House having the highest total of 37 for the mammy

<sup>106</sup> Pilgrim, David. "The Mammy Caricature." Mammy Caricature. <http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/mammies/> (accessed March 24, 2015).

controlling image. Even though these women possessed the characteristics that could make them aggressive and angry they also displayed nurturing sides. Also, each of these characters displayed one of the major physical characteristics of the Mammy with each woman being morbidly obese.

### **Nurturer**

While the women in these films were often seen raising hell, there were times in which they extended their nurturing side in an attempt to help someone other than themselves or give words of encouragement. Rasputia, in the movie Norbit, extended herself only once in the entire film coming to the aid of Norbit who was being attacked on the playground by two boys. She overpowers both of the boys saying she did it to “protect him” from being attacked. While in prison, Madea offers members of a church group words of wisdom when it comes to forgiveness, taking responsibility and making your life the best you can telling them “no matter how good or how bad life was it is up to you to make something out of it.”

Big Momma’s nurturing side is seen often throughout the film. She was always lending a hand to help those in distress or need. At the beginning of the film Big Momma and a group of older women in the neighborhood come over with welcome baskets full of food as a friendly gesture to welcome the ‘new neighbors’ to town. A late night phone call from a friend in need sent the real Big Momma out of her house to help aid in any way possible. After this, Malcolm sought to portray Big Momma as accurately as possible so he adapted those nurturing tendencies into his portrayal of her.



**Figure 3.1** Big Momma talking to Sherry and Trent when they first arrive to her home.

When Sherry came to visit, Big Momma comes to the porch with arms wide open telling her how happy she was to see her (seen in Figure 3.1) and immediately took her into the kitchen for a home cooked meal. Throughout the film, there are very intimate moments that Big Momma shares with both Sherry and Trent that shows her being extremely nurturing. When she sees distress on Sherry's face she is quick to tell her "you know you can always talk to Big Momma" which reassures her that they can get through life's perils together. In one scene Trent is sitting on the porch steps sad because some boys would not let him play on the basketball court. Because these boys shunned him she took it upon herself to take him back to the basketball court and challenged them to a game of two-on-two basketball. The boys laugh and take both Big Momma and Trent up on their offer which ultimately leads to the boys losing. This game restores Trent's happiness and creates a bonding moment for him and Big Momma. This gesture shows

that Big Momma cared about the well-being of the people that were close to her and as a nurturer she was willing to do anything to prove her loyalty.

While these characters had their nurturing moments that expressed their loyalty to loved ones, associates, or friends, the Mammy controlling image is ever-present. One of the main physical characteristics displays this image as being morbidly obese. Each of the three women that fall within this category are all extremely large throughout their portrayals.

### **Wearing the Fat Suit**

One of the primary physical attributes of the Mammy is that she is extremely large<sup>107</sup>. Actors who engaged in blackface transvestism during the blackface minstrelsy era portrayed black women as

“Physically large and strong, with gigantic appendages and oversized shoes or boots, the insignia of maleness peeping through the womanly pretense”<sup>108</sup>.

The black men in gender minstrelsy create a duality between their maleness underneath the womanly guise they are wearing. Three out of the four films analyzed *Norbit*, *Big Momma's House* and *Madea Goes to Jail* all portray the women as morbidly obese. Their depictions do not highlight any positive attributes of being a plus sized woman; the large frame is used more as a symbol that creates avenues for comedic relief instead.

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<sup>107</sup> Pilgrim, David. "The Mammy Caricature." Mammy Caricature. <http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/mammies/> (accessed March 24, 2015).

<sup>108</sup> Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Print. (Pg. 161)

In *Madea Goes to Jail*, Madea's large frame was seen as intimidating and rather than making her seem more feminine, she comes off as masculine in many instances. In the opening credits of the movie, there is a montage of pictures that are being shown of Madea throughout various parts of her life. Many of the images include newspaper clippings that discuss her large stature and how she assaulted other people. The headlines of these articles include words like 'super-sized' which paints the picture of her being larger than the average woman making her less feminine and more masculine in her physical attributes. After being sentenced to prison Madea used herself as a weight to prohibit the deputy's from taking her into custody. Throughout the entire film Madea's large frame aided in her aggressive nature by being a tool that gave her the upper hand.

*Big Momma's* large stature was something that Malcolm attempted to recreate and maintain while undercover. We see him and his partner creating large legs and stuffing a fat suit to create the character that became *Big Momma*. Throughout Malcolm's time as *Big Momma* we see the struggle that he has keeping the costume from falling apart. He struggles with body parts coming undone and falling out of place and we see his struggles to mend it back together again before his cover is blown.

*Rasputia's* large frame was not something that prohibited her from flaunting her body. Out of the three films that displayed the characters as morbidly obese she is the only character that pushed the envelope on what was worn. The only time she is seen wearing large flowing clothing is once inside her home and at that time, she is wearing a house robe. Outside of that, her clothes were often times extremely tight. Having her clothing extremely tight did not make her look more feminine. Instead it came off often

as grotesque. This display mirrors the first-hand accounts of blackface transvestism that described the men as dressing in an over the top manner<sup>109</sup>. While they might not have worn extremely tight clothing, the clothing that they did wear was meant to be comical, and stereotypical rather than empowering and liberating.



**Figure 4.1** Rasputia in a two-piece swim suit.

For example, when she went to the water park with Norbit, she wore a hot pink two-piece bikini and a small robe that did not cover much (seen in Figure 4.1). As she walks to the entrance of the park, the attendant standing at the gate asks her if she is wearing any bottoms because her stomach is hanging over it so it is hidden. She scoffs in a

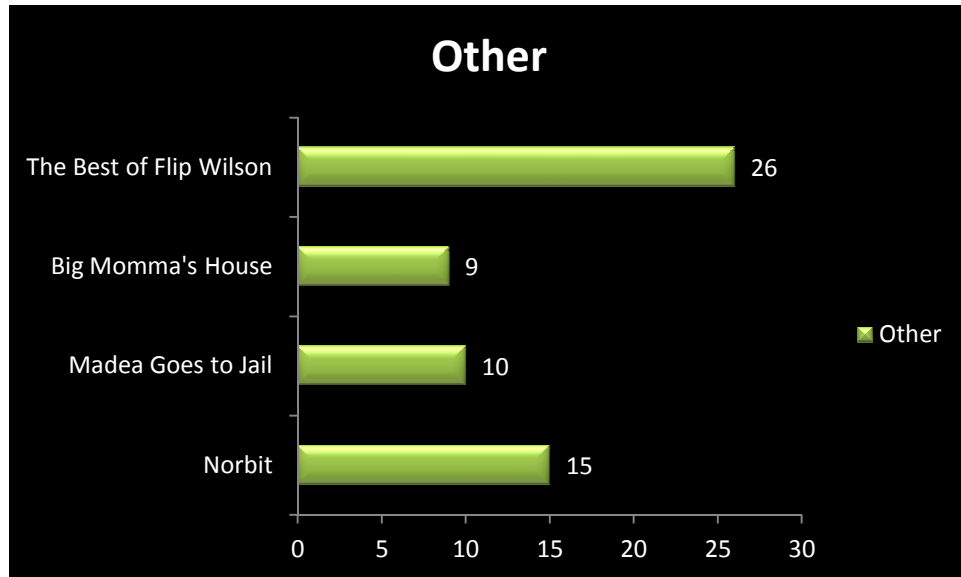
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<sup>109</sup> Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Print. (Pg. 161)

disgusting manner and tells him that she does have on bottoms and has to lift up her stomach to actually show her bikini bottoms.

#### 4.5 Other

Table 5.1 "Other"



Each of the four films displayed controlling images, themes and stereotypes that were not a part of this particular study (seen in Table 5.1). Behaviors and characteristics that did not fit within the predetermined categories for controlling images were placed in the group 'other'. In this category major characteristics and behaviors that were coded are the need to invoke religion, the use of overly exaggerated clothing and speech to alter their appearance, and the use of comedy.

#### **It is all in the Appearance**

Each of the four characters in all of the films wore clothes that were indicative of stereotypical caricatures of black women. Big Momma and Madea often wore clothing that reminds one of the Mammy caricatures like Aunt Jemima or Beulah with large

flowing dresses that often times have floral prints on them. Rasputia wore only one item throughout her film that gave off this persona and that is the robe that she wore in her house. This robe much like the dresses historic Mammy figures wore makes it difficult to see them as nothing more than asexual creatures; yet, we are constantly reminded that these are men who are portraying these women rather than actual women. Their masculinity is constantly being displayed one way or another. Geraldine wore overly exaggerated costumes with bright colored makeup and her voice was a scratchy tenor attempt to sound feminine. While Geraldine dressed very feminine you could still see the masculinity throughout the performances. Rasputia on the other hand often wore clothing that was too tight for her large frame with long nails, a wig over her natural hair and a lot of makeup. This portrayal is reminiscent of blackface transvestism actors who would portray their characters in ways that would make them look abnormally dressed<sup>110</sup>.

### **Comedy at its Foundation**

Each of the four films analyzed in this study were within the comedy genre. The actors are all comedians therefore the characters that they depicted through gender minstrelsy were done so with a comedic undertone. Everything from the characters gestures, to their walk and even the way they interacted with secondary cast mates were all crafted in a way to garner huge laughs. When Madea is standing before the judge initially for her assault on three police officers we hear her telling her nephew Brian that he is not a real lawyer. She repeats this over and over again finally saying she “needs to find a real lawyer like Matt Johnson” because Brian is not one but as soon as she is

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<sup>110</sup> Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Print. (Pg. 161)

released upon a technicality, she does not say that again. This interaction is shown as funny because she tries to downplay his knowledge while needing to use it desperately.



**Figure 5.1** Geraldine in the Fashion Show

Geraldine is very flirty and quick witted with all of her casts mates, using dance as a method of entertainment and laughs. Figure 5.1 shows Geraldine in the midst of a dance move during the skit the Fashion Show. She is constantly referring to her mysterious boyfriend Killer who is often times used as comedic relief during her witty banter. The second coder made note that the characteristics of Killer often followed the stereotypical breakdown of the Brute. For example during the skit the Fashion Show when the host Joe asks her “who is Killer?” she says “the question is not who is Killer but, rather where is Killer” as to say he is always somewhere lurking in the shadows. The duality of Malcolm playing Big Momma while also attempting to create a relationship with Sherry as himself creates a number of humorous moments within the film. There are moments throughout the film where you see Malcolm jumping out of the window or running to a

room with the fat suit on but he no longer has on Big Momma's mask. Rasputia's aggressive nature and emasculating treatment of Norbit was used throughout the film in comedic ways. She was constantly shown physically or emotionally assaulting Norbit and the treatment was so absurd that it became humorous to think that someone would allow another person to treat them that way.

### **In the Name of God**

Three out of the four films analyzed invoked religion during various scenes throughout of the movie. Calling upon God symbolizes how a lot of black women especially older women have heavy ties to their religious beliefs and to church. Throughout *Madea Goes to Jail*, Madea makes several references to God. For example, her first reference is made when she is in court during her assault case against 3 police officers, she tells her daughter "if God gets me outta this I'm going by the church." It is not until her case is thrown out due to a technicality she tells her daughter she really meant that she would go by a church as in drive by a church not go to one. Another example that Madea uses to invoke religion occurs after her physical altercation with Big Sal in the prison laundry room. After the guard rushes in to see what happens she says "I was just telling her how good God is" she then holds her hand up to the sky and begins to speak in tongues. Rasputia invokes religion while she is searching for Norbit after she sees that he kissed his female friend Kate. Rasputia rushes into the church looking for Norbit and when she doesn't find him she curses right before leaving the sanctuary. After cursing she says "damnit Norbit, you got me cursing in the church" she continues to mumble things and begins to pray the Lord's Prayer as she is leaving out.

This shows that although Rasputia was evil and mean she still had respect for God and attempted to not use foul language in the church.



**Figure 6.1** Big Momma in Church

Big Momma portrayed the typical black grandmother who went to church on Sundays (see Figure 6.1). She wore the typical church attire and while at church she was allowed to go before the congregation and give a word from God which involved not just a word but catching the Holy Spirit. Seeing each of these characters invoke the often sacred space of religion for many black women was interesting to analyze because it seemed as if in the reverence for something most black women hold dear, it was also a form of mockery.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

This chapter discusses, in detail, the data that was gathered throughout this study. Examining contemporary portrayals of gender minstrelsy we looking at how the perpetuation of controlling images manipulate the image of black womanhood. Through

this study, the researcher has made the determination that the data collected does indeed reflect gender minstrelsy as perpetuating controlling images of black women. The Black Matriarch, the Mammy, and the Jezebel are among a host of stereotypes and controlling images that are used as a tool to garner laughs. While they are done with a comedic undertone, these images do exhibit behaviors and characteristics that manipulate the image of black womanhood. These manipulations continue the cycle of oppression and discrimination to which black women have been subject for centuries.

All of the characters in gender minstrelsy displayed characteristics of controlling images yet each one seemed to rely heavily on specific images throughout their depictions. Rasputia's and Madea's behavior closely resembles the characteristics of the Black Matriarch. Rasputia was constantly emasculating her husband Norbit by talking down to him and physically assaulting him. Madea was almost always operating in an aggressive way, whether it was her daughter, brother or a stranger. If her aggressive nature was not enough to get what she wanted, she was always willing to use physical violence. Geraldine was the only character who did not overly embody any of the predetermined controlling images. Characteristics of her portrayals were primarily in the 'other' category yet there were displays of the Jezebel controlling image. Big Momma displayed most frequently the Mammy controlling image. While she was seen as aggressive, she was more of a nurturer always cooking and helping those close to her get through adversity.

## **5.1 Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine whether contemporary portrayals of gender minstrelsy manipulate black womanhood by perpetuating controlling images. Throughout this study, four films were analyzed *Norbit*, *Madea Goes to Jail*, *Big Momma's House* and *The Flip Wilson Show* which all featured a main character engaging in gender minstrelsy. Using the descriptions of controlling images as described by Patricia Hill Collins four major categories were created the Black Matriarch, the Mammy, the Jezebel, and 'Other'. The category 'other' was added to incorporate characteristics and behaviors that did not fall within the three predetermined categories. It was through analyzing this category that that each character represents multilayers that influence the ways in which black women and black womanhood are viewed.

The cult of true womanhood details traditional family ideals which define women as possessing "four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity"<sup>111</sup>. These four cardinal virtues were never created to include black women but rather "propertied white women and those of the emerging middle class were encouraged to aspire to these virtues"<sup>112</sup>. Because black women were primarily enslaved during the implementation of the cult of true womanhood, controlling images were created "each reflecting the dominant group's interest in maintaining black women's subordination"<sup>113</sup>. Images like the Mammy and Jezebel were developed to marginalize the roles black women played within society making it socially acceptable to treat them as less than women. These images became embedded into what black womanhood became and what it currently is now. As the entertainment industry and American

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<sup>111</sup> Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Rev. 10th Anniversary Ed. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print. (Pg. 79)

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* (Pg. 79)

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* (Pg. 79)

popular culture emerged, the controlling images of black women continued to be perpetuated. This perpetuation was seen in the literature, on the stage and on memorabilia. As entertainment has evolved controlling images and stereotypes have also. Each behavior, characteristic, gesture or sign used to depict black women within the realm of a stereotype or controlling image assists with manipulating the way black womanhood is viewed continuing the perpetuation of subordination and oppression. This manipulation of black womanhood is easily recognizable when analyzing the films of black gender minstrelsy.

Historically, cross-dressing on the stage has been something that has occurred for centuries with both men and women taking on the persona of opposite gender specific characters throughout the world. In traditional Japanese Kabuki theaters men performed as women. Since women and boys were prohibited from performing in these theaters, men had to take on the roles of all of the characters within a stage play. These female impersonators (Onnagata) represented their characters in a sophisticated manner<sup>114</sup> rather than with comedic and stereotypical undertones. During the nineteenth century, female impersonation on the stage began to gain popularity again<sup>115</sup>. Prior to this, female impersonation had begun to decline because more women were allowed to act on the stage<sup>116</sup>. The actors, who participated in female impersonation at this time, would “dress as an absurd and ugly woman” and personify these female characters in comedic ways<sup>117</sup>. These impersonators “evoked fears of female aggression and overt sexuality as well as fears about homosexuality” yet they were able to downplay

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<sup>114</sup> Bullough, Vern L., and Bonnie Bullough. *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993. Print (Pg. 242)

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* (Pg. 232)

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.* (Pg. 232)

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* (Pg. 232)

the fears with comedy<sup>118</sup>. In America, minstrel and vaudeville shows became training grounds for a new generation of female impersonators<sup>119</sup> because “women, like Negroes provided one of the few stable ‘inferiors’ that assured white men of their status<sup>120</sup>.”



**Figure 7.1** Rollin Howard playing the Wench in a minstrel show

These men gained popularity and amassed a fortune perpetuating stereotypical and controlling images of black women. Figure 7.1 shows Rollin Howard playing the role of the wench in a blackface minstrel show<sup>121</sup>. These performances of blackface transvestism become the features within a minstrel show and many of the men who portrayed these caricatures became the stars. After the Civil War, the men who engaged

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<sup>118</sup> Bullough, Vern L., and Bonnie Bullough. *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993. Print. (Pg. 232)

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid* (Pg. 233)

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*. (Pg.233)

<sup>121</sup> Mahar, William J. *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999. Print. (Pg. 313)

in blackface transvestism became some of the highest paid minstrel performers<sup>122</sup>. Much like today's performances of gender minstrelsy the black male actors' garnered huge financial success through their portrayals of black women on the screen.

Each of the films analyzed made millions of dollars worldwide and most are remembered for their portrayals of these characters. In particular, Tyler Perry is most notably known for his performance of Madea and Flip Wilson is often remembered for his portrayal of Geraldine. Both used those characters as stepping stones to fame and fortune. With each of these actors, their performances and depictions of each character, while done in a comedic way, were shrouded in stereotypical and controlling images that have been in place for black women which constantly display them as inferior.

Previous studies have examined how stereotypical images displayed within the media, such as that of the Jezebel influence one's perception of black women<sup>123</sup> in general. This research discovered that controlling images do have the power to alter one's opinion of black women even if they are not acting in a stereotypical manner. This is important because often times these images are the only representation some people may have of black women so they generalize these depictions as being an innate part of black womanhood. Additional research also examines how characters like Rasputia, Big Momma and Madea affect how black women view themselves<sup>124</sup>, concluding that the black women interviewed felt dissatisfied with their bodies as a result of these

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<sup>122</sup>Bullough, Vern L., and Bonnie Bullough. *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993. Print. (Pg.

<sup>123</sup> Brown Givens, Sonja M., and Jennifer L. Monahan. "Priming Mammies, Jezebels, And Other Controlling Images: An Examination Of The Influence Of Mediated Stereotypes On Perceptions Of An African American Woman." *Media Psychology* 7.1 (2005): 87-106. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*. Web. 31 Aug. 2013.

<sup>124</sup> Li Chen, et al. "Male Mammies: A Social-Comparison Perspective On How Exaggeratedly Overweight Media Portrayals Of Madea, Rasputia, And Big Momma Affect How Black Women Feel About Themselves." *Mass Communication & Society* 15.1 (2012): 115-135. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*. Web. 5 Sept. 2013.

portrayals. Furthermore, they felt that these characters were not accurate depictions of how black women really are. These became important factors to consider as the current study was analyzed.

While the Black Matriarch became the prevailing image seen amongst all of the controlling images used within this study, there were clear signs of the Mammy, and Jezebel in their depictions. Behaviors and characteristics that were viewed included these characters as being overly aggressive, overly sexual, unfeminine, domestic, or emasculating toward a man whether it was a significant other or secondary character. Rasputia, Big Momma and Madea all embodied these characteristics and behaviors of this controlling image and Geraldine reflected the Jezebel controlling image while also using comedy which included a lot of dancing, as a way to masque her flirtatious advancements.

These images are a direct reflection of the new racism that is described in *Black Sexual Politics* by Patricia Hill Collins. Within this new racism there is a creation of a black gender ideology that “depicts black men as being inappropriately weak and black women as being inappropriately strong”<sup>125</sup>. This black gender ideology counters traditional hegemonic ideals of the men being the leaders and women being submissive to men reinforcing the need to oppress black womanhood. These personifications of overly aggressive women who emasculate men and use violence as a normal method of control directly reinforce the manipulation of black womanhood. The portrayal these men present of black women is not one of respectable ladies. Their characteristics and behaviors do not subscribe to the ideologies of the ‘cult of true womanhood’ rather; they

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<sup>125</sup> Collins, Patricia. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print. (Pg. 178-179)

exploit black women aiding in their subjugation. Furthermore these depictions continue the cycle of white supremacy because it adds to the idea that black people are inferior based upon their treatment of one another and the shifting of traditional power.

## **6.1 Conclusion**

This study examined whether contemporary portrayals of gender minstrelsy manipulate black womanhood by perpetuating controlling images. Using Patricia Hill Collins *Black Feminist Thought* to define what controlling images were, four major groups were created The Black Matriarch, the Mammy, the Jezebel, and 'Other'. From there, the researcher analyzed four films Tyler Perry's *Madea Goes to Jail*, Eddie Murphy's *Norbit*, Martin Lawrence's *Big Momma's House*, and Flip Wilson's *The Flip Wilson Show*. Each film is significant because they all displayed a main character engaging in gender minstrelsy. A content analysis was used to collect data on each character to determine whether or not the displays of gender minstrelsy perpetuated controlling images. Using both black feminist thought and semiotics as the two frameworks allowed the researcher to treat each character as a sign while analyzing whether or not the characteristics displayed the controlling images defined in *Black Feminist Thought*.

It was concluded, through the research, that the characters in each of the four films analyzed did display characteristics of controlling images. These characteristics are detrimental to the image of black womanhood because they continue to perpetuate black women as inferior beings. The Black Matriarch, the Mammy and the Jezebel were images that were seen throughout all of these films. Additionally there were reoccurring

stereotypical characteristics that were not categorized within these three categories that were observed that are also detrimental to the image of black womanhood. Further research on stereotypes and gender minstrelsy will aid in providing a detailed analysis of those stereotypical caricatures. The black male actors relied heavily on these controlling images while engaging in gender minstrelsy to shape, and shift the persona of their characters while doing so with a comedic undertone. These personifications are mirrors of the white male stage actors who performed blackface transvestism during the vaudeville and minstrelsy era. Their performances, both former and current, undermined the role that black women play within the American society while displaying images and characteristics that objectify, over-sexualize and marginalized them.

The Black Matriarch image was seen most often displaying these women as angry, emasculating and verbally or physically violent when and if someone crosses them. Rasputia had the highest number of displays for this image but each of the three film characters displayed this image. The Mammy image was displayed in three out of four films analyzed. Each woman, Madea, Big Momma and Rasputia told on the physical attribute of the Mammy by being morbidly obese yet only Big Momma and Madea shared the some of the characteristics of being nurturing, motherly, or domestic and out of those two Big Momma embodied those characteristics the most. All four of the gender minstrelsy characters embodied the Jezebel image. Each at one moment or another overtly or covertly hinted at the sexual prowess they possessed. Major themes that did not fall into the three pre-determined categories include the use of comedy as a spring board on which these actors introduced their characters. It was as if comedy

somehow made it acceptable for the characters to behave in certain ways while pushing forth preconceived stereotypical notions about the inferiority of black womanhood. The correlation between black women and Christianity became another theme found throughout three of the four films.

This current study can contribute to further research in the area of gender minstrelsy exploring new trends that are emerging. Recently, there has been a rise in the amount of black men who choose to engage in gender minstrelsy as a form of comedic relief. This participation, much like that of their predecessors, has been to gain exposure and notoriety. As the popularity of social media outlets such as Youtube, Instagram, Facebook and Vine grows one no longer has to wait for a popular figure like Flip Wilson, Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence or Tyler Perry to don the mask. Anyone with a video camera and a wig can post their mini-skits for the world to see. Further research is needed to analyze these new occurrences to determine whether this trend perpetuates controlling images and stereotypical characteristics that have aided in the manipulation of black womanhood. Also, further research is needed to compare the acts of gender minstrelsy amongst black male actors with those of white male actors. Looking particularly at how each group navigates through their depictions of women and whether similar stereotypes and controlling images are displayed by both groups, if any.

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