‘Excuse me, I’m speaking’: Reconceptualizing Freedom of Speech Through a Black Feminist Lens

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1. Premise

Black women are woefully undervalued in academia, especially when it comes to what they have to say, or expertise they bring. As expressed by Nicole Hannah-Brown, author of the 1619 Project, “I have decided that instead of fighting to prove I belong at an institution that until 1955 prohibited Black Americans from attending, I am instead going to work in the legacy of a university not built by the enslaved but for those who once were.” Professor Daina Berry echoes Brown in her statement regarding Black women in the academy, “We have to have twice the credentials to be considered equals” (Fosset, 2021). They are not alone in their supposition. Based on personal experience and experiences of other Black women in the academy, I embarked on examining racialized and gendered tropes Black women encounter when navigating their own speech and expression from an intersectional Black feminist lens.

The project examined the concept of free speech from a Black Feminist lens and explored historical racialized and gendered tropes often levied at Black women, especially when they express their First Amendment rights. These tropes are at play when Black women in the United States choose to express themselves, whether in the media, in the classroom, at work or via political debates. These tropes, when viewed through racialized and gendered lenses, reaffirm that Black women are often deemed unworthy and less deserving of being heard or taken seriously than their White female counterparts or men.

This is exponentially significant as Black women have to navigate unfair stereotypes, racial and gender biases, just to exercise the right to express themselves, a right that others wield more freely. Within this project, I proposed that the racial and gendered lenses often at play include the Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire archetypes. I contend that these historical tropes (defined in table 1) are often associated with Black women, and are still at play in the American context. One additional archetype that arose through in-depth interviews and focus groups was that of the Strong Black Woman, which will be further defined.

JEZEBEL	• is a slave construct and stereotype that paints Black women as evil and immoral. The Jezebel stereotype is "synonymous with promiscuity," having "an insatiable sexual appetite," and "someone who uses sex to manipulate men," Ladson-Billings writes. She is a "conniving temptress who cannot be trusted."
MAMMY	• is a slavery construct of Black women that "distorts the notion of caregiver," Ladson-Billings wrote. Mammy is generally characterized as a "grossly overweight," "jolly," "unattractive dark-complexioned woman," and "asexual — living only to serve the master, mistress and their children."
SAPPHIRE	• is a construct that labels Black women as "stubborn, bitchy, angry, bossy and hateful." She "lacks the requisite femininity to make her attractive to any man," Ladson-Billings writes. The Sapphire construct suggests that Black women are the reason for the "enmity between Black men and women." The "Sapphire" name traces its origins to the 1950s television character on the *Amos and Andy* show.

2. Project Overview

This project was inspired by Vice President Kamala Harris' iconic phrase, uttered at the 2020 Vice President debate with then Vice President Mike Pence. VP Harris, smiling, not raising her voice and appearing as calm as possible, says, "Mr. Vice President, I'm speaking." The phrase has taken on a life of its own, going viral as well as selling thousands of apparel items emblazoned with the catchphrase "Excuse me I'm speaking" or simply "I'm speaking." As I watched the debate, I kept saying, "Keep calm Kamala, don't raise your voice, smile." I wasn't the only one saying this; the women and men in my household also echoed this and other refrains like, "Oh I hope she doesn't show any anger or emotion."

Twitter users also shared these concerns, posting: "Why does @KamalaHarris have to moderate her own debate?" (Twitter user @AnthonyTheNP) and "If @KamalaHarris didn't answer the questions, interrupted the moderator and consistently went over her time she would be called angry and disrespectful" (Twitter user @Feministabulous). Others also commended the move by sharing comments like, "Iconic" (Twitter user @OurHealthyUS) and "Love her fierceness!" (Twitter user @Kwalls0323). Kim (2020) writing for *Politico* online suggested that Harris' very public position in such a high office "opens up new opportunities to perpetuate troubling biases against Black women, with Harris having to navigate stereotypes that pigeonhole Black women as angry and aggressive, and less qualified than White men."

The project defines the aforementioned archetypes situating them over time, starting from slave era perceptions to current manifestation as defined and identified by the study participants. Hence it was essential that a Black feminist lens be used for this project. The use of a Black feminist lens allowed for a more targeted analysis of the issue of freedom of speech, and tests if Black Women are afforded the same access to free speech without any added baggage. Black feminist lens is defined as a demonstration of Black women's intellectual ability to be agents of knowledge, and empowers the oppressed to be self- defined, resilient individuals confronting race, class and gender among other types of oppression (Collins, 2020).

The project not only draws on these archetypes, but also on the concept of misogynoir, a term coined by Dr. Moya Bailey (2021) which means "the ways anti-Black and misogynistic representation shape broader ideas about Black women." It also draws on the concept of intersectionality, a term coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw. Intersectionality will be used here as a way of explaining the ways in which gender and race intersect (Crenshaw, 1995). Intersectionality helps us understand that we cannot separate the experiences of Black women into independent categories (gender or race), as their experiences are different from White women and Black men, we need to see their experience as both/and—both occurring at the same time, and all the time. Additionally, this exploration helps us determine how "systems mutually construct one another and how they articulate with one another" (Collins, 1998, p. 63). The investigation of how these four archetypes and concepts map on to the free speech arena on college campuses is central in this project. In doing so, the project places Black Women at the forefront of this conversation and illuminates the voices of those who are often saying, "Excuse me, I'm speaking."

3. Methodology

I conducted the project using a qualitative multi-level analysis. Two methods for primary data collection were used: individual interviews and focus groups. The reason for choosing a qualitative approach is because it allowed me to explore the complexities of navigating the concept of free speech through the rich narratives and descriptions provided by the participant group. Using a mix of narrative and phenomenological methodological approaches, participants were able to share with me their narratives and lived experiences on how they make meaning of this concept of free speech. It allowed them to ponder the racialized and gendered tropes/archetypes and reflect on how those have impacted them when it comes to freedom of speech. The project examined a main research question and three other sub questions. These sub questions were necessary as they complemented the main question to give a more concise picture of how Black women perceive their right to free speech within the academy. The questions being explored included:

3.1 Main Research Question

> *How do Black women in U.S. higher education understand and navigate their own speech and expression on campus?*

3.2 Sub Questions

- *At UMB, how do Black women perceive themselves when they navigate their own speech and expression?*
- *At UMB, how do Black women perceive how others receive them when they navigate their own speech and expression?*
- *Do Black women at UMB think about gendered and/or racialized tropes when they navigate their own speech and expression?*

The project was U.S. focused and conducted within the UMass University system (UMass Boston). The demographic for this project were individuals who identify as Women (Cis-gender and Trans). The project drew from a wide cross section of groups at UMB, namely, students, staff and faculty, over the age of 18. The individuals selected also identified as Black (African, African Descent, African American, African Diaspora, Afro-Latinx, etc.). This selection was intentional, as the project focuses on racialized gendered tropes that are unique to Black Women, more than any other group.

I interviewed women who identified as Black to gather their stories regarding how they engaged in freedom of speech and asked about any potential pushback they might have faced. For this project, twelve (12) participants from across the UMB campus were interviewed and participated in focus groups. These included Staff, Students and Adjunct faculty. No tenure track or tenured faculty were included in this project. Participants were recruited via snowballing and targeted emails to the staff, faculty and student association listserv. For the project I conducted individual interviews and focus groups using open ended questions.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1 Navigating Free Speech

> *How do Black women in U.S. higher education understand and navigate their own speech and expression on campus?*

The answer is very carefully; they do so very carefully and thoughtfully. Black women understand that they have the right to free speech and expression…BUT note it's a lil' mo' complicated than that! The First Amendment in the United States grants the right to free speech and expression to all citizens and persons who are under its jurisdiction. However, not everyone has the same access to be able to do so without consequence. Women in general, regardless of race, are penalized or silenced for speaking their truth.

Take for instance this 2020 tweet from user @drdw1455 who was responding to a tweet commending VP Harris' demeanor and poise when she said, "Excuse me, I'm speaking" as something so many women contend with. User @drdw1455's objection to VP Harris reads: "Not every woman only those like Harris. No amount of anger, feelings of injustice from men (real or imagined) can ever make her or any woman equal to men. God created women to be the weaker sex for a reason. Those unhappy with the arrangement need to take it up with GOD not MAN." Franks (2019) attempts to help us understand why user @drdw1455 and others may have this opinion. Franks argues that "this unbroken history of suppressing women's speech demonstrates that the supposed American commitment to free speech is a seductive fraud…and that current practice is not free speech as such, but speech that advances or at least does not directly challenge White men's monopoly on power" (p. 125).

As such, the gendered implications are not missed here, but to explore this avenue will veer us off course to an equally complex phenomenon within the gender and free speech arena. Given that this paper is focused on Black women, I shall stay on target, holding the assumption that women in general face barriers to free speech and expression. However, I argue here that Black women have an added layer of complexity when it comes to race and gender. Respondents reacting to questions along this line of inquiry expressed that they recognize that based on them being under the jurisdiction of the United States, they in theory have free speech protections.

But they also recognize that there are some unspoken rules when it comes to women and using their voice to advocate for themselves or speak on an issue, regardless of it being controversial or not. A few respondents expressed that Black women have an added layer of rules they needed to follow and abide by based solely on racial stereotypes associated with Black women. This is in line with Franks' (2019) supposition about the unspoken rules women have to abide by when it comes

to free speech and expression. Bailey (2021) and Harris-Perry (2012) add a layer of complexity to this supposition by adding that Black women have an added layer of rules fueled by unfair racial stereotypes and misogynoir.

4.1.1 Quotes from Respondents

> *"One of the great things about being in the U.S. and being at an institution such as this (is) you are free to say what you want, but also know the rules."* - Student

> *"I am very aware that as a person in the United States that I have a right to free speech. But being a woman and Black comes with its own challenges."* - Adjunct Lecturer

> *"So, for me, I feel like we should really express how we feel, but I know I could be unpopular with this. I love that we can do that in this country. Ideas always start in our educational institutions and universities, and most of them…they play a critical role, you know, to share information."* - Staff

4.2 Perceptions of Self

> *In exercising their right to free speech, how do Black women at UMB perceive themselves when they choose to use this right?*

Taking the project from a macro to a micro level, the following layer of analysis focuses on the perceptions of Black women within UMass Boston (UMB), a small, picturesque waterfront campus that is a part of the larger University of Massachusetts system. UMB prides itself on being a social justice focused, health promoting, anti-racist institution. But does an institution such as this have areas they can improve on when it comes to those they serve in terms of freedom of expression? More to the point, how do Black women at UMB perceive themselves when it comes to free speech? The answer to this question helps us to get a more nuanced picture.

Respondents' reactions to this line of inquiry indicated that they are highly cognizant of the fact that they might be perceived or viewed as angry, headstrong or out of line if they exercise their right to free speech and expression. As mentioned previously, Black women recognize that they need to be careful in how they respond in instances of highly charged emotional content or discussions. As a result, they find that they negotiate internally about how to respond, so as not to be perceived as the "angry Black woman." They stated that anger is never an emotion they felt they could project, even in situations that warranted anger.

When asked why, respondents articulated that they were very aware of the racialized and gendered tropes, archetypes and stereotypes associated with being a woman and Black. So, they tend to placate others and reduce their own emotions or ways of expression, so as not to be seen as a threat. The respondents also emphasized the importance of having an intersectional lens when it comes to analyzing free speech and expression. The analysis suggests that when it comes to Black women, both gender and race are at play, which should be understood as dueling factors, not as separate entities.

4.2.1 Quotes from Respondents

> *"I am very aware of how I may be perceived if my tone is slightly elevated, or I express myself in an impassioned way."* - Administrator

> *"You know how it be when we open our mouths. First, they think we aren't educated enough, then they try to say 'don't be so emotional.'"* - Student

> *"I have to be really careful in how I respond to controversial topics in class, especially if it is about race. Everyone looks to you for a response or how you will respond."* - Student

4.3 Perceived Reception

> *In exercising their right to free speech, how do Black women at UMB perceive how others receive them when they choose to use this right?*

Holmes (2020) states plainly that Black women do not have freedom of speech, Black women, especially trans Black women, face violence for simply speaking. Consider women like Sandra Bland, Breonna Taylor and Oluwatoyin Salau. Salau went missing after a series of tweets about sexual harassment and abuse, and was later found dead. Bland, after failing to signal a lane change, was stopped and forcibly pulled out of her car and arrested following several tense verbal exchanges with the police officer. When Bland refused to put out a cigarette at the officer's request, she was forcibly pulled from her car and arrested. Shortly thereafter, she died while incarcerated (Calvin and Schuppe, 2015). It was later found that improper procedures were used by the police; a small victory for her family, but hardly one that can bring Bland back to life.

How you operate in the United States as a Black-identifying person comes with hidden rules and regulations. These rules are often given by Black parents to their children through what is down as "the talk." The talk "refers to a specific type of racial socialization message that many Black parents

have with their children about how to safely conduct themselves when interacting with police officers and other individuals in positions of power" (Anderson, Caughy and Owen, 2022, p. 475).

From an early age Black people have been conditioned to be hyper aware of how they may be perceived by others, as a means of survival and preparation for bias they may face when they are away from their parents (Anderson, Caughy and Owen, 2022). It includes ways of behaving and do and don'ts. Such preparation is hardwired and has significant impact on socialization.

The women in this study shared how, from an early age, they were socialized to operate in various settings because of their race and their gender. Parents and extended familial relations equipped these women with guidance that is "atypical of common racial socialization." These strategies were important as the people in their communities believed that failing to "effectively transmit these pertinent messages" would do their young charges a disservice and fail to prepare them for what was out there (Anderson, Caughy and Owen, 2022).

4.3.1 Quotes from Respondents

> *"Oh, you are tough, you know, like for everything. So, what am I? Tough? Have you touched my hands? You know how I talk, and? You hear, I'm tough, you know, I didn't say that about myself, so it's and it's just like you internalize that, like, you know, you know about notions about black women."* - Student

> *"When you are communicating across the platforms, you rethink on how your messages, is going to be perceived, you get it. Every time I communicated there was this barrier. Oh, what did she say? So that gave me no, it gave me no position to really express who I am or what I was doing"* - Staff

4.4 Racialized and Gendered Tropes/Archetypes

> *Do Black women at UMB think about gendered and racialized tropes when they choose to exercise their right to free speech?*

With the good girl image and ideals of femininity being viewed from the male gaze, racialized and gendered tropes continue to persist way past the slave era, and have evolved over time. No longer is the Mammy a domesticated servant taking care of her master's household, nor is Sapphire just a contemptuous woman or Jezebel, just an oversexed temptress. These archetypes themselves have somewhat intersected to usher in the Strong Black Woman archetype. When participants of the study were asked to share their views on the questions posed, certain words like angry, unemotional, feisty, sassy, irrational, spicy and headstrong were conferred. Participants were then introduced to the formal

definitions of three archetypes of Black women: Sapphire, Mammy and Jezebel. After origins and examples of the archetypes were presented to the participants, they were then asked, based on what they shared earlier, if any of the tropes best described what they either felt they were being perceived or received as. Many participants expressed that they felt they were either perceived or received and some but not all of the tropes.

Sapphire

Overwhelmingly, all of the participants identified Sapphire as the main archetype they felt they are often most perceived as. When asked why, they mentioned that it was because Sapphire most resembles the fire-brand, sassy and angry woman description. Sapphire has evolved the most over time, making way for the "sassy Black friend" archetype (Ramsey, 2016). But Sapphire's portrayal, when she first graced the airwaves, was a caricature who "emasculated Black men with frequent verbal assaults […] conducted in a loud, animated, verbose fashion" (West, 1995, p. 461). She was the loud, eye rolling, no-nonsense woman, who was to be feared. Of the participants, only two identified with the Mammy archetype, and no one identified or thought they were being identified as Jezebel.

> *"Oh, Sapphire is that sassy, witty, no-nonsense girl. Yeah, I'd say her, definitely her, that's me."*- Adjunct Lecturer

Mammy

With two participants identifying with the Mammy archetype, I wanted to unpack why they felt they were perceived as such. The Mammy is a slave era archetype (McLean, 2021), a pervasive representation "so entrenched in Southern culture that the daughters of the American Confederacy proposed a bronze monument to signify her loyalty" (West, 1995, p. 459). But this archetype did not stay in the South or in the slave era. In 1939, Hattie McDaniel became the first African American (man or woman) to win an Oscar for her role as a slave era Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*. In 2011, just over seventy years later, Octavia Spencer also won an Oscar for her role as the Mammy in *The Help* (DiBenedetto, 2023).

4.4.1 Quotes from Respondents

> *"You know it might be a little much, but I'd say mammy, you know based on my body type and that I'm in a helping role. We always gotta be taking care of these kids like we they mama. Cause if not us then who?"* - Administrator

> *"Yah, I think I am seen as a mammy, I was told once that I act like the mom for my classmates. It doesn't help either that I'm not, you know, a video vixen type."* - Student

Jezebel

Black women are very much aware of the Jezebel trope and her imagery continues to permeate through the U.S. Many studies have been written about the oversexualization of Black female bodies, especially young girls (hooks, 1981; Bell, 1992; Dickens and Chavez, 2018; Kilgore, Kraus and Littleford, 2020). Go no further than film media to see evidence of this. In 2001, Halle Berry, the only Black woman to have ever won Best Actress, received the award for her role in *Monster's Ball*. Angela Bassett, who has only been nominated twice in her four-decade long career, shared that she turned down the role Halle played because it was "such a stereotype about Black women and sexuality" (DiBenedetto, 2023, para 20). Lupita Nyong'o would win Best Supporting Actress in 2013 for her portrayal of Patsey in the slave era drama *12 Years a Slave*, a role that featured the repeated rape and physical abuse of the character by her master and his wife.

Participants felt neither perceived, nor received as the Jezebel archetype, but instead pointedly articulated that, while definitely not at UMB, they may be perceived as a Jezebel outside UMB, including within the larger Boston community as well as the U.S. This may be due to the university's policy on sexual harassment and the #MeToo movement. But since that is not the focus of this paper, I will hold that assumption lightly. It was curious that all the participants said they didn't feel they were identified through the Jezebel archetype. When asked why none associated with the Jezebel archetype, some shared that within this intellectual community, success or failure in academia was more important than desirability. Participants never had any situations where they were subjected to remarks that were sexual in nature. Instead, they felt more like imposters in the academy, not objects of desire.

4.4.2 Quotes from Respondents

> *"My understanding of Jezebel is it's from the Judeo, Christian Bible. She's a woman of ill repute more from a sexual connotation."* - Student

> *"The Jezebel is not me, and I don't think anyone ever made me feel like that here."* - Administrator

> *"Definitely outside this place Jezebel is relevant because of how Black women bodies are perceived as oversexualized. Even young girls have to deal with this. But I don't think it fits UMass."* - Adjunct Lecturer

5. Conclusion

These narratives have transcended time and have embedded themselves in the very fabric of the U.S. Black women in this project have internalized these archetypes and have found ways to negotiate their way through academia. These archetypes were placed on them, and some have reclaimed certain aspects of each in their own way. The rise of the Strong Black Woman archetype has been heralded by most of the participants as both a blessing and a curse. Her strength and her resilience enable her to carry on despite adversities, but this has serious implications for mental health and wellness. It cannot be stressed enough that it is important, when looking at issues and in this case free speech or free expression, to evaluate that not everyone has the same access to speech. This is why an intersectional lens is necessary, as it allows for an examination of the complex historical implications that Black women have to contend with. These narratives lead to a different type of misogyny, one that included racial and gendered biases, known as misogynoir. The examination of how Black women's voices in the U.S. and their ability to freely use their voices without consequence does not only fit in with free speech or expression. However, it is a good place to start.

6. Next Steps and Future Iterations

I conducted this project at a relatively small public institution in what can be deemed a progressive state. As previously mentioned, the institution is a minority-serving university that prides itself on social justice, anti-racism and health promotion. The women in this study were all either degree-seeking or already had a first or terminal degree. They are women who value education and see the academy as a means of social mobility. It is not taken for granted that this sample, though representative of the university, is not representative of the U.S. in general, or the entire UMass university system.

As such, a larger study, initially of the larger UMass system, would be a necessary next step, followed by a study that included private universities in Massachusetts, starting with the Boston area. These studies would initially still focus on Black women in academia. After this go around it would be of merit to conduct similar projects, this time focusing on how other demographics perceive Black women in the academy. This would give a 360 perspective of how Black women perceive themselves and how others perceive them, as well as generate data from other demographics to test these perceptions. Obviously, there is more to be done, so my thoughts for next steps are as follows:

Expand

- to include other participants at UMB

Expand

- to include other participants at UMass System Schools

Expand

- to include other institutions

Explore

- just the gendered implications

Explore

- just the racial implications

Expand

- to include national perspective

Explore

- the other side
- How do people perceive Black women in terms of free speech

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