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Trapped between justified anger and being the strong Black woman: Black college women coping with racial battle fatigue at historically and predominantly White institutions

Nicola A. Corbin\textsuperscript{a}, William A. Smith\textsuperscript{b} and J. Roberto Garcia\textsuperscript{c}

\textsuperscript{a}Department of Communication, Weber State University, Ogden, UT, USA; \textsuperscript{b}Department of Education, Culture, & Society and The Ethnic Studies Program, University of Utah, Salt Lake, UT, USA; \textsuperscript{c}Teacher Education Department, Weber State University, Ogden, UT, USA

\textbf{ABSTRACT}

Using the unique form of a composite counterstory culled from the experiences of 13 Black women at historically and predominantly White colleges and universities in a Western U.S. state, this paper explores the psychological tensions and silencing Black college women face as they navigate social constructions of their selfhood under a White gaze. This study centers these Black women's voices through a tradition of storytelling and examines the ways they try to carve their own place by often engaging liberating, yet repressive, historically constructed STRONGBLACKWOMAN imagery to counteract equally silencing Angry Black Woman imagery. The historically and predominantly White institutional spaces within which these women study, live, and play exacerbate this tension, propelling them to model and rely upon stereotypically 'positive' representations of Black womanhood to deal with the pain of microaggressions. Altogether, these factors create instances of enhanced racial battle fatigue.

I love being a strong Black woman, but … I'm tired being a strong Black woman just NOT to be the angry Black woman.

Within the U.S. context, mass media plays a critical role in helping us to construct meanings and understandings of people and places with whom and which we might have had little-to-no interpersonal interactions. For all its benefits, many deleterious repercussions result, including perpetuating harmful stereotypes and tropes that malign and marginalize particular groups in service of maintaining dominant culture (e.g. Barlow, 1993; Kitch, 2001). The principal concern of this interdisciplinary paper is to examine how such media-perpetuated stereotypes and tropes about Black women become salient within predominantly and historically White spaces in higher education. In an attempt to subvert majoritarian narratives, this paper takes the form of a composite counterstory to probe and make visible, in rich and multilayered color, what these tropes are, and where and how they are activated in Black women's lives within higher education (Delgado, 1993; Yosso, 2005). Additionally, the counterstory reinforces the need for connections between scholarship about Black women in higher education (e.g. Croom & Patton, 2011; Fleming, 1983; Howard-Vital, 1989; McNeely Cobham & Patton, 2015; Patton & Catching, 2009; Shavers & Moore, 2014; West, Donovan, & Daniel, 2016) and critical media studies (e.g. Griffin, 2014; Hill, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Patterson, Howard, & Kinloch, 2016) by reemphasizing
that media and popular culture continue to influence instantaneous interactions in real life, and as such should not be studied in isolation.

This paper makes the case that Black women find themselves on the defensive when encountering everyday racial microaggressions in predominantly and historically White spaces such as higher education institutions. Consequently, they often emotionally police and parse their interactions using the prism of the media-perpetuated misogynoir\(^1\) script of the Angry Black Woman. In response, a similarly problematic STRONGBLACKWOMAN\(^2\) trope becomes activated. Both tropes act as controlling images (Collins, 2000) that drain these women emotionally and contribute to the phenomenon known as racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2004). We argue that Angry Black Woman and STRONGBLACKWOMAN postures become inextricably linked as both offensive and defensive responses within Black women’s toolboxes. We see STRONGBLACKWOMAN as a dominant response that preserves individual agency and staves off being maligned and dismissed as an Angry Black Woman in places where being heard is critically important. It becomes part of a counteroffensive script to cope with misogynoir attacks. Additionally, STRONGBLACKWOMAN functions as an internalized mechanism that privileges resilience, perseverance, and silence (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Davis, 2015).

This study is steeped in the rich legacy of Black feminist epistemology that vigourously interrogates the lived experiences of Black women from the personal to the political, viewed from their particular positionalities (e.g. Collins, 2000), and intersectionality theory that argues for the need to consider the ways in which systems of oppression work together to structure people’s everyday lives (e.g. Crenshaw, 1991; Davis, 1981). In content, structure and theory, this study grounds the effects of media controlling images, detailed by Collins, in the day-to-day experiences of Black college women whose intersectional identities position them precariously within predominantly and historically White spaces.

While scholars have theorized and documented the overall negative psychological effects of being the STRONGBLACKWOMAN in general (e.g. Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008; Edge & Rogers, 2005; Thomas, Speight, & Witherspoon, 2008; Watson & Hunter, 2016; West et al., 2016), this study seeks to contribute to the scholarship about Black women in higher education in the following ways: (1) extend scholarship about the effects of controlling images on Black women’s lives by arguing that these tropes often do not act independently or in isolation, but rather are inextricably linked and work dialectically in the women’s toolboxes as responses to acts of violence to the psyche within spaces where the need for respectability politics run high; and (2) advance the interdisciplinary scholarship that actively interrogates the impact of mass media-perpetuated narratives in and through the fabric of Black women’s lives, using specific illuminating experiences in higher education.

In essence, this contribution attempts to complicate our understandings of racism and sexism in higher education by examining how Black college women handle mass media perpetuated tropes and to what effect. We argue that predominantly and historically White institutions are one set of spaces that force the incessant activation and perpetuation of Angry Black Woman and STRONGBLACKWOMAN scripts. Such activation can lead to instances of racial battle fatigue which can trap Black women and stunt their full development.

**Controlling images and the mass media**

Popular mass media continually mark Black women as uncontrollable, abusive, unpredictable, sassy, irrational, strong, and angry: from Olivia Pope and Analise Keating as highly successful, fast-talking, power-wielding characters who kick ass and take names in network television’s Scandal and How to Get Away With Murder, respectively (Stanley, 2014) to the reality show Real Housewives of Atlanta’s NeNe Leakes, Phaedra Parks, Sheree Whitfield, Porsha Williams, and Kenya Moore who bring the eye-rolling, head-popping, always-mad, always-in-a-fight drama to over four million weekly cable television viewers (Cox & Proffitt, 2012; Psarras, 2014). Even on the big screen, Tyler Perry’s Madea matriarchal character is just as likely to pull a gun on some unsuspecting soul as she is to erupt into a boisterous rendition of a church hymn (Cooper, 2014). These pervasive depictions often lack nuance and ingrain simplistic constructions so that they appear to be truthful and holistic representations of Black women. Even
former First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama, was unable to emerge unscathed from one of these offenders: the Angry Black Woman representation (e.g. Bruce, 2012).

Over time, a number of Black women writers, artists, cultural critics, theorists, and academics have critiqued, problematized, explored their effects, and downright denounced these representations as ‘controlling images’ that go beyond stereotypes in their ability to malign, police and naturalize disempowerment (see Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Bell-Jordan, 2008; Collins, 2000; Donovan, 2011; Harris-Perry, 2011; Hine, 1989; hooks, 1981; Morgan, 1999; Tyree, 2011; Wallace, 1978). Unfortunately, even in the face of useful critiques and criticism, they continue to be activated within the popular milieu.

The Angry Black Woman

Winfrey Harris (2015), in her book ‘The Sisters Are Alright,’ chronicled recent depictions of the two most pervasive and culturally accessible images in popular culture: the Angry Black Woman and the STRONGBLACKWOMAN. Critically, Winfrey Harris effectively linked these controlling images to their material effects on contemporary American Black women’s real, lived experiences. For example, she demonstrated how the myth of negative Black female anger continues to be perpetuated by citing a Time magazine interview with Apprentice contestant Omorosa Manigualt-Stallworth. In the interview, the reality TV star acknowledged she received more airtime when she was argumentative. In analyzing 10 reality television shows, Tyree (2011) confirms this assertion, finding at least one African American participant in each show who portrayed one stereotypical role and, in some cases, representing two stereotypes at the same time. Overall, Black women represented the Angry Black Woman in the majority of reality television shows.

The groundwork for the Angry Black Woman trope is steeped within a historical legacy of North American race-gendered stereotypes and has been perpetuated in and through mass media and culture (e.g. Bogle, 1973). The Amos n Andy show’s Sapphire character is often credited as the contemporary caricature of the Angry Black Woman who is loud-talking, irrational, overly assertive, aggressive, and argumentative. In this intersectional iteration, racial politics fuse completely with gendered politics, generating an archetype that falls both outside of, yet within, the constructed boundaries of conventional masculinity and femininity. For while her body might bear a close enough resemblance to the (White) female, the Black woman archetype is most certainly masculine in aggressive and overly assertive temperament and, therefore, not wholly female. However, her irrationality certainly embodies common raced and gendered assertions of femininity. The net result is a figure whose justified angry responses are maligned and dismissed (Donovan, 2011; Livingston, Rosette, & Washington, 2012; West, 2012). The Angry Black Woman is censored.

The STRONGBLACKWOMAN

Like the Angry Black Woman, the equally controlling STRONGBLACKWOMAN (Morgan, 1999) image occupies a problematic space of both control and resistance to misogynoir (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). Higginbotham (1993) traces some of its development through a strand of respectability politics that embodies a deeply gendered facet of racial-uplift discourse. It was a discourse through which primarily Black middle-class women in the Black Baptist Church instructed working-class Black women on morality, self-help and economic empowerment, and assimilative values in the bigger interest of racial uplift and pride (Higginbotham, 1993). She documents these middle-class women attempting to push back against dominant racist narratives of Black women being immoral, promiscuous, unclean, lazy and manner-less by engaging in public outreach campaigns that included literature that warned against brightly colored clothing, gum chewing, loud talking, and unclean homes, among other directives. These actions were directed against an early iteration of the Angry Black Woman trope (Higginbotham, 1993). The clubswomen presented an archetype of womanhood to which these working class Black women should aspire – a model traced to the modern iteration of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN. Illustrating the church women’s vision of the Black woman as the bastion of morality, Higginbotham cited the minutes
of the Baptist Women's Convention: 'since she [the Black woman] is liable to these insults and encroachments ... she must become a tower of moral strength and by her reserve and dignified bearing defy and cower her aggressors' (p. 193). Such reserve and dignity also imply superhuman strength to squelch human responses to indignities and discourage agentic action. This response, as a defense mechanism to misogynoir, is exhausting and stressful.

Others have made similar linkages to respectability politics in historical and contemporary contexts from superwoman to Sisterella (e.g. Hine, 1989; Jones & Shorter-Goeden, 2003; Morgan, 1999; Wallace, 1978). They all speak to a 'do-it-all' Black woman who bears up against and through all adversity without complaint. However, Morgan (1999) popularized the image of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN explaining it in plain-spoken, hip-hop vernacular: 'No matter how bad shit gets, handle it alone, quietly, and with dignity' (p. 90). Watson and Hunter (2016) argue this phenomenon has become internalized as a schema that provides a 'blueprint' to appropriately perform Black womanhood. It signifies overcoming adversity often at overwhelming odds and represents a peculiarly unique and distinct position, particularly when presented against constructions of White femininity (Donovan & Williams, 2002; Edge & Rogers, 2005). There has been an effort to illuminate the prosocial benefits of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN trope. In an exploratory study, Davis (2015) argues that the trope enables a collective of sorts that allows Black women to build sites of resistance and find strength through particular communal communicative practices.

Within higher education spaces, scholars have also documented the pervasiveness of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN. Fleming (1983) in her formative work on Black college women found that these women in predominantly White colleges exhibited self-reliance and assertiveness, traits strongly associated with the aforementioned trope, while those at historically Black colleges and universities tended to manifest passivity in social, if not academic, circumstances. More recently, scholars have focused on how the STRONGBLACKWOMAN trope constitutes a double-edged sword, creating double-binds for Black women in higher education (e.g. Romero, 2000; Shavers & Moore, 2014). Others have documented the coping mechanisms Black women and people of color use in higher education. For example, McNeely Cobbham and Patton (2015) argued that high levels of self-efficacy help Black women faculty persist in their careers.

Within some spaces, such as historically and predominantly White colleges and universities, the dearth of Black women on campuses exacerbates feelings of entrapment and silencing. As media-dependency theory argues, mass media effects increase when people are unable to verify stories or information through personal interactions (Brown Givens & Monahan, 2005). Therefore, when there are only a few Black women in these spaces, the culturally pervasive Angry Black Woman image, as amplified through media, activates over and again. In short, Black women's diverse experiences are not part of the White racial frame (Feagin, 2013). As a result, when the facts do not fit this racial frame, society changes the facts about Black women to fit its stereotype.

As cited in Merritt, Pool, Greer, Adewunmi and Peterson (2012), Bim Adewunmi argues Black women often fight against being labeled as angry because it de-legitimizes and discredits the very human and normal human emotion of anger. Conversely, they often activate the problematic STRONGBLACKWOMAN in juxtaposition to the Angry Black Woman as a coping mechanism or as resistance (Thomas et al., 2008; Watson & Hunter, 2016). One popular example is the case of U.S. Representative Maxine Waters who proudly, and gloriously, defended herself in the face of misogynoir comments from a popular television show host by invoking the STRONGBLACKWOMAN image. In response to former Fox host commentator Bill O’Reilly’s comment about not being able to hear Waters’ policy arguments on the floor of the United States Congress because he was too distracted by her hairstyle, Waters asserted that ‘I am a strong black woman and I won’t be intimidated’ (Park, 2017). Although many Black women have publicly applauded and drawn strength from Waters’ response in a manner that supports Davis (2015) Strong Black Woman Collective hypothesis, others advocate a more nuanced understanding, cautioning about the negative ramifications of an uncomplicated understanding of the phenomenon (Williams, 2017).

Pervasive and dominant, images of the Angry Black Woman and the STRONGBLACKWOMAN ‘dehumanize and control’ Black women (e.g. Collins, 1986) and deny them opportunities at true self-definition.
These images create psychological and emotional tensions that trap and silence Black women as they attempt to navigate their own selfhood under and in opposition to a White gaze.

**Anti-Black misogynistic microaggressions and racial battle fatigue**

Invariably, Black college women in historically and predominantly White spaces become prone to experience racial battle fatigue as they attempt to reconcile these images with their own selfhood in the face of numerous racial macro- and microaggressions and misogynoir (Smith, 2004, 2010, 2016; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2007). Pierce (1974) observed that in identifying racial discrimination we ‘must not look for the gross and obvious. The subtle, cumulative mini-assault is the substance of today’s racism’ (p. 516). The offensive mechanisms of racism and ‘the enormity of the complications they cause can be appreciated only when one considers that these blows are delivered incessantly’ (p. 266). It is the unrelenting nature of racial discrimination – whether subtle or overt – that constitutes racial microaggressions. Racial microaggressions (Pierce, 1970, 1974), therefore, can be both inconspicuous and difficult-to-confirm racial slights and more obvious and overt attacks that become recurrent indignities and irritations and unfair treatment which escalate to stigmatization, hyper-surveillance, low expectations, and personal threats or attacks on one's well-being (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Essed, 1991; Smith, 2004; Smith, Mustaffa, Jones, Curry, & Allen, 2016; Sue, 2010; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997; Wilson, 1990).

The main challenge for Blacks is the more-than-considerable energy spent trying to identify, judge, predict, and jettison racially motivated microaggressions (Profit, Mino, & Pierce, 2000). The difficulty in this challenge is that some racial microaggressions are automatic, indirect, stunning, or seemingly innocuous messages that are both verbal and nonverbal and which devalue the lives of people of color. On the other hand, racial macroaggressions by definition are more overt occurrences that are less frequent and are typically easier to discern and respond to with prepared intergenerational and intragenerational racial socialization and coping strategies (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2012). In their totality, racial microaggressions are inescapable and are cumulative expressions of racist views, dysconscious ideologies, and institutionalized practices toward people of color. They are the psycho-pollutants that disrupt Black quality of life, quality and privileges that most Whites take for granted (Smith, 2004).

These disruptions, the cumulative effects of frequent racial microaggressions and misogynoir, call for continued research to understand their impact on the success of Black college women.

Scholars have examined the effects of consistent and persistent microaggressions on people of color and assert that racial battle fatigue is the cumulative social-psychophysiological impact of racial micro- and macroaggressions on racially marginalized targets (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2007; Smith, Mustaffa, Jones, & Allen, 2016; Smith, Yosso, Tara, & Solórzano, 2006; Smith et al., 2007). According to Smith (2004, 2010, 2016), racial battle fatigue is the result of these toxic and persistent gendered-racialized microaggressions with their subsequent negative health sequelae on marginalized and oppressed people. Racial battle fatigue, experienced at both the individual and group levels, is a direct result of being a part of a racially oppressed group. The symptoms are oftentimes communicable, as pain is shared among family, friends, and the larger racial group; with the potential to be spread across generations through collective group memories, racial socialization, and coping processes (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2008).

We offer racial battle fatigue as a theoretical framework to explain the psychosocial stress responses (e.g., frustration, sadness, anxiety, hopelessness, helplessness, irritability, defensiveness, shock, and anger) that are faced in anti-Black misogynistic environments. Our multi-campus study suggests that anti-Black microaggressions, misogynoir, and racial battle fatigue are important determinants for understanding how the Angry Black Woman and STRONGBLACKWOMAN tropes affect the lives and educational experiences of Black women (Smith, 2016). These concepts informed our understanding as we developed our composite counterstory based on the experiences of thirteen Black college women.

This study also suggests that anti-Black microaggressions and misogynoir shape the ‘bundle’ of racial understandings Delgado (1993) describes. Within our ‘colorblind’ and ‘post-racial’ society, misogynoir
majoritarian stories are a natural and oftentimes unchallenged part of the dominant discourse. As Delgado has explained, ‘majoritarians tell stories too. But the ones they tell – about merit, causation, blame, responsibility, and social justice – do not seem to them like stories at all, but the truth’ (p. 666). Counterstories challenge this dominant revisionistic form of truth-telling by revealing racialized-gendered perspectives and the power and privilege behind them.

**Methodology and structure**

In the tradition of Du Bois (1920), Bell (1992), Delgado (1996), Solórzano and Yosso (2002), and Smith, Yosso and Solorzano (2006), we developed a composite counterstory from the dialog that emerged among interviewees and our own discussions following data analysis. We used the counterstory methodology described by Yosso (2006) to examine primary and secondary data sources as well as scholarship from the social sciences, humanities, and legal studies. This methodology allows us to better understand the psychological tensions and silencing Black women in higher education face as they navigate social constructions of selfhood under a White gaze. In addition, we utilized Delgado Bernal’s (1998) idea of ‘cultural intuition’ because it ‘extends one’s personal experience to include collective experience and community memory, and points to the importance of participants’ engaging in the analysis of data’ (pp. 563, 564). Yosso (2006) has maintained authors should use their professional and personal experiences to help articulate the composite counterstory and better develop composite characters. As a result, the ‘composite’ characters we present here are grounded in real-life experiences, actual empirical data, and contextualized in social situations that are also grounded in real life. They are not fiction.

Interviews were conducted by a Black female tenure-track faculty member, who also claims an Afro-Caribbean identity and is the lead researcher and author. She has been educated, lived, and worked for more than twenty years in predominantly White U.S. higher education spaces. Her research seeks to understand the ways in which media and popular culture structure the lives of Black women. The second researcher and co-author is an African American male tenured faculty member, and a critical race scholar who studies race-related stress in predominantly and historically White settings. The third researcher and co-author is a Latino male tenure-track faculty member. His areas of study encompass qualitative studies in education and critical race praxis. Altogether, we represent a collective experience of more than 60 years working in historically and predominantly White campuses. Applying a critical race theory (CRT) framework, we focused on thematic patterns and recurring ideas in the data. We created fictional characters who embodied our sampling pool and our own personal and professional experiences. The composite story’s value lies in our ability to embody the work of culturalists, psychologists, and educators into one character. Thus, both characters in the conversation speak through heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 2010) from experiential and theoretical places.

This composite counterstory focuses on portions of data collected during in-depth semi-structured interviews with thirteen women from universities in a Western U.S. state during the fall semester of 2016. The participants represented first year students, a sophomore, juniors, seniors, and one recent graduate. They ranged in age from 18 to 30. At these institutions, Black women undergraduates represented 1.1% of the total campus populations, on average, while Black women faculty averaged less than a full percent. Part of a convenience sample, they were solicited through email appeals to Black-affiliated student organizations and through referrals. Interviews were conducted on and off campuses, lasting from an hour and a half to slightly more than two hours. All but one participant identified as Black and female. The single participant identified herself as a Cuban national and female.

Interviews were designed to get a sense of how participants saw themselves within the academy, using thematically grouped questions that probed self-concept and place, coping strategies and responses to microaggressions, and ideas about Black feminisms and pop culture. After concluding the interviews, each researcher independently listened to all recordings of interviews, taking notes to gain a general feel of the experiences each Black woman related. Following transcription, we used data source triangulation to analyze the data along with our personal notes. Analyses revealed that these
Black women had unique racial-gendered experiences on college campuses that recognized misogynoir conceptions about what a Black woman was or was not.

The findings illustrate the impact of anti-Black microaggressions and misogynoir and their consequent constitution of racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2016). Since opportunities for White college students to have interpersonal interactions with Black women are few within these historically and predominantly White spaces, the occasions to mitigate mass media effects regarding current representations of Black women are minimal and insignificant, at best. Thus, the effects of the culturally constructed controlling images of the Angry Black Woman and the STRONGBLACKWOMAN become magnified, and the likelihood of racial battle fatigue for Black women is exacerbated.

**The composite counterstory**

For the purposes of our composite counterstory, we created Kyla Sarpong, a Black female of African and African-American heritage and a rising junior at Beehive University. In addition, we created Dr. Maya Gabriel, a tenure-track faculty member who identifies as Black, female, and immigrant. The counterstory that follows picks up significant moments in a longer conversation between the composite characters and is told from the perspective of Dr. Maya Gabriel.

**Excerpt one.**

“How have you really been?” I ask.

“It’s been good,” Kyla responds.

“Classes going well?” I press.

“Yeah, I guess. It’s been interesting,” she says noncommittally.

“Interesting? What do you mean, interesting?” She says nothing. I wait, knowing the reticence students of color feel, particularly in this predominantly White space, to be open about particular issues, even with people they trust. They don’t want to seem as if they are complainers or whiners. So, I continue to wait for about ten seconds or so. Then it all tumbles out, jumbled together.

“Well, I just had this one class. It’s like a diversity-type class and we are talking about the images, the way Black people were drawn, like you know, the Black Sambo, and the Venus Hottentot woman and all that. So, my teacher shows us this picture of what this image of a little Black girl was supposed to be and then the way they actually drew her. This little girl looked like … I don’t even know what. She looked like such a cartoon with the big pink lips and big black circles for eyes, and hair sticking out all over the place. Anyway, this chick … um, White girl gonna up and say ‘Well, what if the artists’ markers ran out?’ I had to turn and give her a look. Like what? People can be so dumb.’

“How did the professor respond?” I ask.

“I have no idea,” she mumbles. ‘I was too annoyed to even pay attention. And you know what made it worse? People in the class laughed like she was that funny.’

‘Did you say anything to the student who made the comment?’ Kyla shrugs, her eyes fixed somewhere in the center of the room. ‘You know, I really wanted to say something to her. I really should have. But sometimes …’

‘Sometimes …’ I prod, understanding the complexity of the agitation students of color feel when faced with the choice of confronting what could be dismissed as an innocuous and funny remark. A response, particularly coming from the raced, gendered body of a Black woman in this instance, becomes seen as heavy, race-baiting, and angry. Therefore, Kyla must make a decision whether to respond or not based primarily on her intersectional identity of being a Black female, and the constructed societal frame of Black women’s anger through which it will be read.

She looks squarely at me, just for a moment, before staring at the ceiling, dark brown eyes a wee bit dewy. Sighing, she pulls on the end of one of the curls by her ear in her large Afro. The semi-tight black curls balloon out and frame her round, coconut-brown face. Over and above the student’s comment, it seems that Kyla found some identification with the drawing as it should have been and what it became. So, the callous comment cut even deeper to the historical representative construction of Black little girls.
'Sometimes, I'm just so tired. I just wanna leave it alone, you know,' she says. 'I know I should've said something. But sometimes, ugh! I feel like I can't even deal with this right now. And, besides, it's not like she called her like a terrible name or something. It's just so annoying to see how easy that girl could dismiss what was done to that drawing of that little girl. It's a diversity class, for heaven's sake!'

'Do you think you always have to speak up about things like this?' I ask, trying to get her to speak about the pressure and expectation to be the 'authority' or the activist and defender of all things Black. While this pressure exists, assuming such a position also comes with the risks of backlash from one's peers.

'Maybe I don't have to. I mean, nobody is making me, Dr. Gabriel. But since like fifth grade when we started learning more about the Civil War and slavery ... ugh. I was the only Black kid in the class, so everybody's eyes were always on me like I'm supposed to know what slavery days were like. I am not the authority on everything Black, but I feel like I have to be because who else will say something, you know? A lot of times, even the professor or the teacher, they don't know. And because I'm usually the only one, I feel like if I don't say something that they will never know anything different. I don't know if that makes sense. It's not like I don't like to talk to people about race and racial issues. I actually think that I'm a really patient person, and I know that here in this state, there just aren't many Black people. But the thing about it is that it is exhausting 'cause I'm not a teacher. I am not here to educate you on the race and culture of others that you don't look like. I'd be happy to do it from time to time. But when you're hit with it every day, it's just ... it's tiring. It's ... it's exhausting and it's like ... the mental shutdown. And it's like 'ok, I'm gonna let it slide 'cause I don't have the energy today.'

She continues:

And with the whole 'Black Lives Matter' movement and now with Trump, sometimes it's just hard trying to talk about why Black people are protesting. They don't see it as a big deal. I mean many of them say they don't like Trump. But with 'Black Lives Matter,' every time another Black man is shot, it hurts, you know. My White friends are always texting me to explain to them why Black people are mad and protesting. But, explaining to them is like you're starting from all the way back from Adam and Eve, you know. It's exhausting. It's bad enough that we're seeing all of this, but now we have to take the time in our pain to explain to you, when you can just look it up for yourself. You're college students. You can read and do research. That's what I'm doing. It's not that hard to do. Ugh!

'Picking her battles' by being strong

As stated earlier, Smith (2004, 2010) attributes persistent and toxic racial microaggressions as a primary contributor to racial battle fatigue. Additionally, scholars argue that its symptoms are oftentimes communicable as psychic and emotional pain which is shared among family, friends and the larger racial group (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2008). Consequently, racial battle fatigue is the cumulative psychosocial–physiological impact of racial micro- and macroaggressions on racially marginalized targets.

In this case, we see that Kyla is expressing pain, frustration and exhaustion on a number of levels. First, she experiences racial group identification with the little girl in the drawing and the intended rejection of a physical appearance that is very much like her own. The flippant response by the classmate underscores an inability to appreciate how damaging such imagery has been for society's conceptualization of Black people. Kyla's ability to respond in an agentic manner to her classmate's comment is inhibited by her own hypervigilant self-policing. Further, her response is filtered through the subtle ways in which microaggressions perform their work. The comment appears superficial, even innocuous, and Kyla might have been easily dismissed as being oversensitive had she vocalized a response.

In fact, while she did not directly speak the words, she filtered her own response through the controlling image of the Angry Black Woman, and calculated the social cost of how her words would be received (Kaiser & Miller, 2001; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003). In this sense, Kyla decided to 'pick her battles,' a process response identified by Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Huntt (2013) in their investigation of how Black college women coped with gendered racial microaggressions. This process of 'picking battles' and tempering normal responses to indignities mesh completely with the schema of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN, a woman who can withstand and bear up through it all. However, there is a mental and emotional cost to the mental gymnastics Kyla performs to cope in and out of the classroom (Smith et al., 2016).
Second, her friends’ requests to explain her pain, particularly given the highly publicized shootings of unarmed Black people by police officers, also creates psychological and emotional exhaustion. When one is consistently positioned as the sole purveyor of experiential knowledge for a racially marginalized group, particularly in a setting that requires and/or encourages engagement, the pressure to speak up to, dispute ignorant or malicious statements, or simply ‘represent well,’ becomes heightened and burdensome. This racial burden is also increased by the knowledge that she cannot realistically represent all the views of her ‘group,’ but only her own experience. However, she knows that whatever she says is likely to be taken as an overall representation. Coupled with this position of being the expert of all things Black, the qualities associated with the STRONGBLACKWOMAN also come with expectations that Black women are always the first to speak up. As Vanessa Williams (2017) writes, ‘When it’s time to rumble, everybody looks to you to make the first swing. And if you don’t show up, some folks are upset or suspicious, wondering whether you’ve lost your super powers or maybe cut a deal. And you have to calibrate that show of strength just so, or you become marginalized as an angry black woman.’

Whether in the classroom or with a predominantly White peer or friend group, Kyla is confronted with this particular position in direct relation to the current environment and events. From a micro-level situation regarding commentary in a classroom discussion to the national macro-level emotional racial climate, she is consistently placed in a position to explain, defend, and validate even as she opens herself to the risk of repudiation and ostracism for her positions on these subjects. On an academic level, she might consider how her engagement and positions could negatively impact her class standing with professors, her ability to work well with groups on assignments, and her overall interactions with her peers. On a personal level, with her (mostly White) friend group, she weighs offending them and harming, even ending, otherwise satisfying friendships. The emotional labor of filtering her everyday responses through the prism of trying not to be perceived as the Angry Black Woman by invoking traits associated with the silence and resilience of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN contributes to Kyla’s racial battle fatigue.

Excerpt two

‘Even when you speak up, sometimes you aren’t even taken seriously anyway. Like what you’re saying isn’t even true. Or that you’re just coming up with stuff to complain or talk about. What you’re saying gets dismissed, or I’m always questioned like I’m just reading it the wrong way. So sometimes I’m like it’s not worth it because when I speak up all they hear is that I’m angry. It’s not like they even listen to what I’m saying. You know, that whole Angry Black Woman thing.’

‘Yeah, I know all about that Angry Black Woman thing,’ I say. ‘It doesn’t matter whether we’re passionate or excited or even if we just want to share our opinions, it’s just read as angry once we aren’t quiet.’

‘It’s like because we are Black women, we are supposed to be always angry. I swear sometimes my friends are just waiting for me to act “ghetto,”’ Kyla says, forming air quotes as she says the word ghetto. ‘Like how they see on TV and in the movies.’

‘What do you mean act “ghetto”? I ask, wanting her to articulate the racialized and gendered cultural meaning this term has taken on that specifically targets Black women.

‘Dr. Gabriel! Now you know ... The head rolling, finger wagging, loud talking, unsophisticated, unintelligent. Ok. For example, I got into it with one of my roommates a couple weeks back about cleaning up after herself. She had her underwear in the kitchen. I’m not saying I’m like a clean freak or something. But I mean, who leaves their underwear on the kitchen floor? Who does that? Anyway, she was like “Oh so you’re gonna act ghetto on me now?” All I did was ask this girl to clean up her stuff. Ugh! I feel like people are just waiting for you to mess up so that they can at least say they’ve seen it happen. My thing is, would she have said that to my other White roommates if they would’ve called her out on her nastiness? No, she would’ve just been mad about being called out, but she wouldn’t be trying to say that they’re crazy for caring about living in a clean apartment.’

‘So what did you say?’ I asked, curious about her response.

‘Dr. Gabriel! If I had told that child what I wanted, my mother wouldn’t have been proud. I just said that it was nasty and went to my room.’
‘Yeah. It’s such a different standard, isn’t it?’ I agree, sighing heavily. ‘A lot of times, I find myself being very aware of what I say and how I say things, especially in meetings. I’m always parsing my words and managing my facial expressions because I want folks to really listen to what I’m saying and not just hear my words as noise.’

‘Honestly, I blame the media and all these stupid shows,’ Kyla adds, her voice raising. ‘I mean I enjoy the nonsense as much as the next person. But you know when we only have about so many of us here and they look at “Madea” and “Housewives” or “Love and Hip-Hop” and “Basketball Wives” and think that’s how every Black woman is supposed to act. But when you don’t act that way, then they say “oh you’re not really Black. You don’t even talk Black. What do you mean I’m not really Black? What’s that about? Oh, but then when I speak up about issues, then I’m too Black, I’m too angry, I’m too sassy. But it’s ok for them to say the N-word around you ‘cause they think you’re cool or something. And I’m not supposed to be offended?

Oh, and why is it when I’m upset, I’m angry, but when this Latina girl says it, she’s sexy? What’s up with that? And what does talking Black even mean, anyway? Because I use proper grammar, I’m not Black? It makes you feel like you’re the one that’s crazy.’

Kyla stops talking abruptly and exhales loudly. We both laugh. I couldn’t help but agree with her assessments.

‘How about Wendy Williams and that “how you doin?” foolishness?’ I add. ‘And it goes beyond the reality TV ratchetness, right?’ I continue. ‘Look at how they portrayed Bailey in “Grey’s Anatomy” for those first couple of seasons or even Cookie on “Empire.” Like they are always angry and ready to tell someone off. And don’t get me started on the whole ‘you don’t talk Black nonsense. It’s so ridiculous.’

Kyla stops talking abruptly and exhales loudly. We both laugh. I couldn’t help but agree with her assessments.

Strength as offense to de-legitimized anger

Far from being immune, Black women receive the same messages about who they are supposed to be through mass media images. Winfrey Harris (2015) and others have linked the mass media construction of the Angry Black Woman through the character of Sapphire in the 1950s Amos n Andy television show. This aggressive, emasculating woman presents a caricature of irrational and baseless anger (Winfrey Harris, 2015). Justified or not, her anger becomes just noise. As previously argued, this characterization continues to proliferate in popular culture and, as Winfrey Harris asserted, this may explain why so many Black women think that they are assumed to be angry by default. The construction of irrationality surrounding Black women’s expression of anger can cause them to self-police and remain silent, which in turn robs them of their agency to address critical issues. In a 2012 opinion piece in The Guardian, Bim Adewunmi sums up the silencing many Black women encounter in the face of this Angry Black Woman controlling image:

The fear of being labelled an ABW makes you bite your tongue all the time. It’s designed to shut you up. It allows people to get away with things they would never try anywhere else – and then blame you and your reaction. It’s a catch-22 situation: I’m angry about this, but I can’t show it, or else they’ll use that anger as a stick to beat me with. (Merritt et al., 2012)

Further, Kyla also makes a critical connection between the use of the potent term ‘ghetto,’ as a synonym for Angry Black Woman. In the roommate situation she describes, the term casts racial, gendered, and classed aspersions all at once. Moreover, by deploying the term as a strategic weapon, the roommate inhibited, or at least interrupted, Kyla’s ability to confront about normal roommate matters. If she responded with justified anger about the situation, Kyla’s actions had already been primed by her roommate as words to be dismissed, as noise. Therefore, Kyla pulls another device out of her toolbox – the STRONGBLACKWOMAN. Restraining her response, and even invoking her mother’s expectations of respectability, she self-polices and silences her critique of her roommate.

Additionally, Kyla draws a stark contrast in the responses to her Black womanhood by questioning the behavior of others in terms of race. First, she asks whether her White roommate would have been called ghetto; she also questions whether a Latina might have been called sexy for precisely the same actions. Theorists such as Hall (1996) argue that we construct our own identities in difference. Kyla makes sense of the racial differences that serve as conduits in pathologizing normal emotions.

Kyla’s ability to locate the perpetuation of this controlling image in media constructions at a macro-level and how it manifests itself at an institutional level (i.e., her campus) is particularly insightful.
and ultimately, empowering. Being able to name at least one source of animus presents her with some process for agency and coping. She identifies media constructions as the ground zero for why her White friends easily box her into the Black woman stereotype who speaks and acts a particular way but negates her true Black identity because it does not quite fit with popular representations. These media constructions are exacerbated by her White friends' limited interpersonal exposure to people of color in general, but more specifically to Black women.

The Angry Black Woman characterization leads to persistent self-policing by both Kyla and Maya. Even though, they inhabit different social positions – student and faculty member – both are subject to the same intersectional constructions; neither is immune to the fear nor the resulting impotence that their feelings, thoughts, and ideas would be characterized as noise, and therefore invalid. Because we all seek to be valued and validated, Kyla and Maya look to curb expressions that might be seen as ‘sassy’ or ‘angry.’

In their totality, these conditions contribute to a sense of perpetual unfairness and consistent racial frustration, even as both women engage in hypervigilance and self-policing to mitigate anticipated effects, much like Du Bois’ (1903) double consciousness. The constant need to be vigilant about perfectly natural and normal human emotions such as anger becomes exhausting, as does policing ensuing interactions just so that she can be heard, taken seriously, and even simply make her way successfully in these historically and predominantly White environments. It contributes to the emotional instability that is part of her racial battle fatigue. Hence, Kyla's comment about feeling like she's ‘crazy.’

Excerpt three

'I don’t even know why, but it feels so good to talk about this stuff. There aren’t many people here for me to talk to about stuff, you know. I mean, it feels a little weird, but also so freeing,' Kyla says.

‘Weird? How come?’ I ask.

‘Cause you know how it is. I feel like I should be able to handle things, right?’

‘From what you’ve told me, it seems like you’re handling things just about as fine as you can. People just get overwhelmed from time to time,’ I say.

‘I guess. It’s just like, I guess, I grew always hearing that you can’t really have a mental illness or breakdown cause that’s for rich White people,’ she says laughing. ‘You know it’s not true, but it’s just one of those things, you know. Black people just tell you to pray about it or God will take care of it or something. I feel like we always have to be strong all the time. Especially Black women.’

‘Well, I have learned that there is strength in acknowledging that you don’t always have to have it together. We are all human,’ I say. Kyla laughs.

‘Don’t get me wrong,’ she says. ‘I love being a Black woman. We have so much strength. I’m really proud to be a Black woman. It’s just …’ She pauses and then continues. ‘It’s just so hard sometimes, like you’re always fighting for people to see who you are all the time. Yeah. It can be a lot.’

Battling against STRONGBLACKWOMAN constructions

On multiple occasions, all of this study’s participants emphatically identified with and reaffirmed their pride in Black womanhood, equating it with strength, and giving multiple examples of beauty and career success. As exemplified in Kyla’s comments above, participants were less able to articulate particular instances, examples, or anecdotes about what motivates and enhances this pride, other than strength. They almost always said that it was difficult being Black and a Black female, and proceeded with more anecdotes to illustrate the difficulties. While historically traced to a respectability politics that attempted to remake the image of Black women in America in the 1900s (Higginbotham, 1993), the internal construction of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN who handles her business has made its way into popular culture in seemingly positive ways as seen with the recent depictions of characters like
Olivia Pope and Annalise Keating in *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder* respectively. This sort of high-powered Black woman represents another caricature of Black womanhood that emphasizes that the respectable Black woman is ‘together,’ for, after all, she is the keeper, the standard bearer, and the locus around which ‘respectable Blackness’ revolves. Arguably, strategic moves have been made in the aforementioned shows to create multidimensionality in these lead characters. However, the key personality traits still revolve around strength, reinforcing an in-group reading of Black womanhood. As Kaila Story remarks in an opinion piece in *The Washington Post*, ‘It doesn’t leave any room for vulnerability, to say, ‘Hey, I quit today. I’m tired. I’m resting today’ (Williams, 2017). The problem with dependence on the STRONGBLACKWOMAN as the conduit for respectability is that it structures Black women’s behavior, while they believe otherwise, and blurs the lines between oppression and authentic self-definition (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; West, 2012).

**Excerpt four**

‘Oh! Can I tell you about the BSU (Black Student Union) conference?’ Kyla burst out after a lull in the conversation. I laugh at her exuberance. It is so refreshing to see the excitement.

‘So, how was it?’

‘Oh. My. Goodness. It was a-mazing.’

‘Was it? Where did you go?’

‘D.C.’

‘What did you like?’

‘It was beautiful. It was weird though to see soooo many Black people in one place; she says in a low voice. I wonder if she is feeling shame or guilt about having that feeling. So, I probe.

‘What was weird about it?’

‘I mean, I loved it. But that first day … it was clear that we were not from there. Like how we spoke, and I guess, acted. I’m not really sure what it was. But we were like, um, we have officially left home. But people were so great. And they just seemed so comfortable being who they are. They seemed like they were comfortable being Black, if you know what I mean. I can’t really explain it.

‘It took us like a day to get adjusted. But it was so fun. And we got to meet so many successful Black people. And there were so many different types of Black people across the spectrum. It was great!’

‘Sounds like it was a rewarding experience,’ I say.

‘Definitely. First, it was good to leave here. I don’t know. Since the trip, I’ve been really thinking about what it would be like to live somewhere else.’

‘I can understand that,’ I say. ‘Any places come to mind?’

‘I’ve heard really great things about San Francisco. But, I really liked D.C. It’s pretty cool, too. But oh my gosh, this conference was so good,’ Kyla starts laughing. Her excitement is so infectious that I find myself laughing too. ‘I met these girls from …’

Just then, a White woman pushes the glass conference room door open. We both look at her.

‘Um, excuse me,’ she says, looking straight at Kyla. ‘Was the door open when you got here?’ We both stare at her. I am so confused. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Kyla glance quickly at me.

The woman rephrases the question. ‘Do you have a key to be in here?’ she asks again still looking at Kyla. I’m dumbfounded. I finally find my voice.

‘Yes. I do have the key,’ I say leaning slightly to the side and patting the back pocket of my jeans. ‘Oh ok,’ the woman says. ‘Well, this is a study area. You’re a bit loud and it’s disturbing other students.’
'Sorry,' Kyla says quickly. The woman gives a quick smile, closes the door, and walks away.

I watch her go and then look at Kyla. We stare at each other for a moment in shock. Then she gets up quickly, too quickly, and picks up her backpack.

'Ok, Dr. Gabriel. I will see you on Friday.'

Her face tells me the story. My face must have reflected the story. 'Ok. See you in class,' I manage. Kyla walks through the glass door.

I stare at the painting on the wall. It was abstract. It was a busy mix of pastels. Honestly, it annoys me. Is that supposed to be art? I wonder who selects the furnishings for these rooms, anyway. I look down at my clothes. Even though I'm wearing jeans, perhaps I should have put on heels today. I turn back to completing my calendar, but nothing makes sense. The screen goes black to save power and I'm staring at my dark brown face, my almond-shaped eyes, and my black natural hair, proudly pushing through the confines of a scarf of bright purples, reds, and oranges.

Something wet drops onto my keyboard. I quickly look up and to the side.

Later, I sit in my bathtub, staring mindlessly. I don't usually do baths, especially in the middle of the week. Today, I needed the water. I can't stop going back to the incident in the conference room. Why did she ask if we had a key to be in the room? If the issue was a noise complaint, why didn't she just say that to begin with? Would she have begun the conversation the same way if we were White women? Or Asian women? Is this one of those cases where Black women can't laugh or have a good time together? Is Black laughter noise? Why are we always too loud? Ugh! Can we just live? I sigh. Exhausted, I lean my head against the back of the tub and stare at the lit lavender and eucalyptus candles. My racial battery died today. Too much.

**Battling against microaggressions; coping with racial battle fatigue**

The story is old. The story is recurrent. The place of these two Black women – the Black female student and the Black female tenure-track faculty member – was questioned at this historically and predominantly White institution of higher education. Instead of addressing a noise complaint, the White woman's first question to them asked whether they had a right to be in a small glass conference room that is typically locked, one that requires a key from the administrative office to be opened. The woman's first assumption felt like no Black person in that room could possibly have the right or authority to have a key to open the door and be present in the room legitimately.

Kyla's and Maya's initial response of silence highlights the mental confusion or stunned response that can occur when one's very place of belonging is threatened. Additionally, Maya ruminated on this situation long after it had passed. Rumination and recall can prolong an individual's physiological stress response while influencing their health over the course of their lifetime; this can lead to increased levels of racial battle fatigue (Sapolsky, 1998; Smith, 2004, 2010; Smith et al., 2006). This particular situation, which occurred during one of the interviews for this larger study, highlights the shaky terrain upon which Black women interact in historically and predominantly White spaces. Very often, we are regarded as interlopers, and are not accorded the simple assumptions and dignities that are given others. In this instance, Maya’s stature is potentially diminished in Kyla’s eyes, her student. Further, her confusion and inability to respond quickly in the particular situation fails to give Kyla a concrete model on how one can cope or handle such situations. Again, such is the manner in which microaggressions function insidiously in ways that emotionally exhaust and undermine one’s very sense of place, belonging, and self.

**Discussion**

Just like everyone else, Black women are subjected to the same media-perpetuated misogynoir scripts of the Angry Black Woman prevalent in U.S. popular culture. In fact, this majoritarian narrative is arguably intensified in controlled spaces such as historically and predominantly White higher education institutions. Additionally, trying to exist in a predominantly White state with little racial diversity, where the project’s participants live and study, exacerbates all conditions outlined previously. Such an environment encourages incessant activation of the Angry Black Woman schema, a script triggering the
STRONGBLACKWOMAN coping response. The linkages made by Kyla and Maya to popular culture's impact on their everyday existence in predominantly and historically White spaces underscore the need for scholars to also intentionally make such linkages in research. We rarely live our lives free of popular culture's influence, and at times the consequences can be detrimental to our mental states.

From a macro-level perspective, this composite counterstory reinforces higher education research and current discussions in academia about actively recruiting and retaining faculty of color (Smith, 2015; Fries-Britt, Rowan-Kenyon, Perna, Milem, & Howard, 2011). Students of marginalized groups in these spaces, and particularly Black female students, need access to active role models as potential mentors, as seasoned, resilient defenders and protectors against misogynoir, and as people who can offer pockets of respite. Kyla recognizes how freeing it is to speak with Maya without having to perform extensive emotional labor. More role models are needed, even when those role models are subject to the same situations as the students, as depicted in excerpt four. More role models with whom one can identify or empathize with on the deep and unconscious levels at which racial microaggressions and misogynoir function enable the potential to share and unpack coping strategies. Role models provide more opportunity for bonding, coping, and learning for all.

From a systemic level, however, the responsibility for ensuring adequate numbers of available role models for Black women and other students of color lies on the desk of every senior college and university administrator and department chair. Black women and other students of color should not be the primary source for bringing diverse attitudes to support a socially just campus. Admissions criteria, too, should include a desired profile of students with a proven record of social justice as among its highest preferences.

Finally, it is worth noting that Angry Black Woman and STRONGBLACKWOMAN scripts tend to exist within the same spaces in the lives of these women. Very often, what might be considered ‘normal human responses’ to indignities, such as anger, are suppressed and muted because some Black women use respectability politics, or strength, to resist. Black women harness responses that speak to internal mental fortitude even when it becomes unhealthy. As such, scholarship should begin to examine these tropes in a dialectical manner, rather than as separate and independent typologies for explanation.

**Conclusion**

Black women continually work to maintain their psychic space in historically and predominantly White higher education institutions through ongoing efforts to subvert media-perpetuated stereotypes of their very essence. The constant need for hypervigilant, self-policing responses to misogynoir microaggressions are filtered through the culturally constructed controlling images of the Angry Black Woman and the concomitant STRONGBLACKWOMAN response. In effect, these images create a trap that promotes or enhances racial battle fatigue.

The post-secondary Black women students in this study battled against fatigue in a number of areas: being purveyors of experiential knowledge for all things Black; being boxed into damaging media-perpetuated Black female archetypes and then having their sense of self doubted when they did not conform to these pervasive constructions; and being pressured to present strength and resilience as the most respectable formats under the White gaze. These conditions all directly contribute to a contested sense of being and belonging, where agency can lead to personal success, but also mental and emotional exhaustion.

However, this much is clear from our study. The dominant and problematic mass media-perpetuated controlling image of the Angry Black Woman continues to structure the lives of Black college women. Much like the respectability politics of the clubswomen and women of the Black Baptist Church in the 1920s who advocated bearing up in strength to cower one’s aggressors, these college women engage the STRONGBLACKWOMAN controlling image as a coping strategy to be heard, to not be dismissed, and to be recognized. It is within this paradox, which leaves little room for human emotion and expression, that racial battle fatigue occurs.
Notes
1. Moya Bailey is widely credited to coining this term that merges misogyny and noir (French for black) in 2010 to describe what she called ‘a particular brand of hatred toward black women in American and visual culture.’ It conceptually encompasses the intersection of racism and misogyny. http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2010/03/14/they-arent-talking-about-me/
2. West (2012) explains Morgan’s (1999) particular usage of the term STRONGBLACKWOMAN to demonstrate the inseparability of the constructions of strong and Black woman in many Black women’s identity formation.
3. A New York Times Style Magazine tweet promoted a story about U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama with the headline ‘How @FLOTUS shed an angry Black woman caricature and evolved into a political powerhouse‘ (@NYTstyles, Nov. 8, 2016). Later, the Twitter headline was adjusted to read ‘The Closer: Michelle Obama http://nyti.ms/2eGxP7G (deleted earlier tweets for language that some found offensive).’

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors
Nicola A. Corbin, PhD, is an assistant professor of Public Relations & Advertising in the Department of Communication at Weber State University. Her research interests encompass exploring representations of Black women in mass media and popular culture, and critical approaches to public relations pedagogy. Prior to academia, Corbin practiced journalism and public relations for a number of years.

William A. Smith, PhD, is interim department chair and associate professor in the department of Education, Culture & Society at the University of Utah. He also holds a joint appointment in the Ethnic Studies Program. He has served as the associate dean for Diversity, Access, & Equity in the College of Education as well as a special assistant to the president at the University of Utah & its NCAA Faculty Athletics Representative. Smith is the co-editor (with Philip Altbach & Kofi Lomotey) of the book, The Racial Crisis in American Higher Education: The Continuing Challenges for the twenty-first Century(2002). His work primarily focuses on his theoretical contribution of racial battle fatigue which is the cumulative emotional, psychological, physiological, and behavioral effects that racial microaggressions have on people of color.

J. Roberto Garcia, PhD, is an assistant professor at Weber State University, where he teaches educational foundations. Prior, he taught English Language Arts in urban secondary settings. Garcia is a qualitative researcher who explores the intersectionality of oppression through the ethnographic study of social relationships in the classroom. In his work, he examines the discursive practices that students and teachers engage in while discussing issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation. Garcia’s interests are qualitative research, critical race theory, and critical discursive psychology.

ORCID
Nicola A. Corbin http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4369-7456
William A. Smith http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7941-2942
J. Roberto Garcia http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7906-4629

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