The Rose that Grew from Concrete: Exploring the Image of the Black Superwoman

Student name: Kristyn A. Carter
Project advisor: Dr. Lucas Wilson

The Black Superwoman (BSW), coined by Michelle Wallace in 1978, is a specific term used to describe the features of Black women’s history from their experiences to their dreams. The BSW is characterized by her independence, ethnic pride, dedication to the care of others, her ability to manage multiple roles and exceed expectations. Black women exude strength and their ability to sustain not only themselves, but their family and friends is unparalleled in any other woman. In peeling back the layers of the BSW, we explore the myths and the facts behind the image of the Black Superwoman.

According to Wallace’s analysis of the “mythic” BSW, there is no woman like a Black woman¹. She strives for excellence and her ambitions are beyond the scope of her peers yet she is not seen as multidimensional. The Black Superwoman is just that, a superwoman. She is perceived to lack feelings or emotions to express, her consumption with tending to the needs of others causes her to neglect her own. This fluctuation of strength is a common human trait, so why do we only see Black women as one dimensional pillars of strength? Why are Black women only seen as superwomen? How does this trope serve and undermine Black women’s freedom, dignity, and humility?

My interrogation of the BSW myth draws on Tupac Amaru Shakur’s poem “The Rose That Grew From Concrete,” where he describes his fascination with the rose that defied nature’s laws and grew from a crack in the concrete². My research correlates the rose, its thorns and the concrete as the image of Black women flourishing despite disproportionately experiencing environmental stressors, pre- and post-enslavement, including institutional, systemic, and cultural oppression that have marginalized them and their families. But how did this rose grow from concrete? How can the concrete be broken up so that more can roses grow? So that more Black women can reach their full potential?