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Black Feminism: Dismantling Tropes and Embracing Sisterhood

Elaine Negron
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

This paper examines the usage of films like Set it off (1996) and Girl's Trip (2017) and their sisterhood as friends as a way to dismantle tropes typically used towards Black Women. It is through the story lines of each movie that the main characters contradict certain female tropes and go against the societal norms that women are suppose to follow. Meanwhile, dismantling these tropes leads to the empowerment of sisterhood in these communities.

Elaine Negron

Black Feminism: dismantling tropes and embracing sisterhood:
Black women are the most oppressed group in the United States, it is said that once they are liberated so, will all the other groups of women. The ways in which they have faced discrimination goes beyond any other ethnic group present in the United States. Slavery caused Black women to not only be abused in the fields but also in the homes as domestic workers. In the 21st century, society has shifted to a different route of oppressing Black women by using mass media outlets such as films, shows, music, social media, etc. All of these outlets play a role in contributing to the narrative of Black women in a positive or negative way. Overall, most of mass media incorporates negative images of Black women that are associated to the infamous tropes like the angry/strong black women, the jezabel, and the mammy. These tropes racialized and contain black women in a box dictating and criticizing their behavior. A angry/strong black women is seen to never have a man and be completely independent meaning they never need someone else's help. The jezabel is oversexualized and makes bad decisions with her money since it always leads to drugs. The mammy is just the motherly black women that is very nurturing and treats everyone like a child.

These three tropes have slowly been constructing the experiences of black women and having them be label by their behavior. The only way to deconstruct these narratives is to use the mass media outlets to promote a contradicting experience.Films in popular culture have played a role in impacting the narrative and view of black women. It is movies like *Set it off* (1996) and *Girl's Trip* (2017), have demonstrated the ways in which tropes can be dismantled or seen positively through the use of Black sisterhood providing strength and support.

The presence of black sisterhood is shown differently in both films due to the plot. *Set it off* was released in 1996, directed by a black man named F. Gary Gray. The main storyline is about four black women in poverty decide to rob banks in order to get out of the their low income neighborhood. Each character goes through a tough moment in the film. Frankie gets fired for the assumption of being involved in a robbery at her job because the perpetrator was black. T.T. as a single parent faces a court date with child protective services when her son gets chemically poisoned. Toni is taking care of her brother providing for him before he goes to college. He then becomes a victim of police brutality and gets killed due to looking like the suspect of the robbery, this leaves Toni alone. Cleo is a butch lesbian, who is gangster in her neighborhood and just a rebel compared to the other girls. All of the four women encountered a troublesome experience, Cleo specifically having a marginalized identity in a minority group makes her experience different. Ultimately, all these experiences makes them unite even closer.

In addition, Girls trip was released in 2017, directed by a black man named Malcolm D. Lee. The general plot of this film is about four women who are good friends attending Essence festival in New Orleans to celebrate and support their friend speaking as the keynote speaker. Best friends Ryan, Lisa, Dina and Sasha are all successful in different ways and have various storylines. Dina is the friend that got fired for acting disrespectful to a co-worker and is ready to fight at any moment. Ryan is a successful publisher but is truly not being honest to the public. Lisa is the single parent that works hard as a nurse to provide for her family, but has not had a partner in a while. Sasha is trying to make a career out of spreading rumors about certain celebrities, which has not been going well for her. Each character had a reason for a getaway, but some were faking their struggles to impress the group like Sasha.

Despite their various occupations, each friend had a specific role in the group that held it together. Lisa is the conservative friend and tries to be the medium in between some disagreements. Dina is the loud but straight up friend. Sasha is the the friend that they quickly see as a traitor because of her career and she cannot let the past go. Ryan is the friend that doesn't like to confront the truth. The movie ends with Ryan coming to terms with her situation by admitting everything which leads her to become an independent single women with Sasha as her business partner.

Both films throughout do demonstrate how the characters could not have their behavior defined since they do not fulfill specific tropes like the jezabel, angry/strong black women, and the mammy. It is more that they all at one point act in accord to a trope or all of them. The tropes help guide the sisterhood. Their friendship and group sticks together through their loyalty to each other in good and bad times. In *Set it off,* Cleo and Frankie are the ones in the film that get the women ready and riled up to do the robbery and everyone else followed. In *Girls trip*, before and after the Essence festival Sasha and Ryan seem to lead the group but Dina and Lisa are the ones who bring everyone together in the end. Obviously, *Set it off* and *Girls trip* have different plots and lessons that show the struggles of being a women, specifically a black women in a white society. The films clearly show how the women care about each other and give support, while not changing who they are in different spaces.

To continue, Regina N. Bradley analyzes the sisterhood image in *Set it off,* in the perspective that it resulted from hip-hop culture since this genre of music came to be a platform for marginalized voices. Hip-Hop was able to influence the American popular culture and allows space for the narratives of low income working class black and brown communities to a wider

audience. This impacts the view of *Set it off* because the presence of hip hop in the film creates the setting in which none of the characters are defined by the tropes. Also, it demonstrates the reality of poverty in the community Black people live in. Cleo's character made the stance that not everyone in the "hood" is straight, she reclaims her sexuality disregarding the opinions of others since it might have been rare at that time to be Gay. Meanwhile, there is physical, emotional and economic violence also shown through the poverty these black women experience, which would explain why the four friends were willing to risk it all to get out of these circumstances. *Set it off* compared to *Girls trip* show the friend group being targeted as an outcast because of the robberies. In *Girls trip*, it is more seen that Ryan herself feels like an outcast if she decides to leave her cheating husband since that would result in her losing the brand her and her husband created.

Similarly, the way the narrative is presented on behalf of these two films can be influenced by how the film industry works and justify any out of the ordinary scenes or violence. The film analysis done by Ryan and Lenos (2012) explain the reasoning behind the issues of poverty, violence, and the outcome of what happened to the women in *Set it off.* An obvious one is the fact that they committed a crime, but the white man has contributed to this violence. The white cop, detective Strode in *Set it off*, is the reason why Toni's brother is dead all because of the same haircut making it become racial profiling. Ryan and Lenos mention that this hostility and damage to the out- groups is a survival tactic, leading to hurt them in the worse way economically. In my opinion, this would not defend their actions because there was no need to shoot the brother more than one time, they should of just injured him not murder him. This troubling experience for the friend group would justify their feelings of getting angry and

wanting to be done with their neighborhood once and for all. The violence the women faced made their anger more reasonable which did not allow for them to be confined in a trope throughout the film.

In *Girls trip*, the economic violence that is shown is with Ryan and how she rather know her husband is cheating on her instead of leaving him to not lose her brand nor her contract. These experiences of violence among Ryan and Toni shows how their characters cannot be contained in the box of the strong independent black women because there are different factors impacting them in truly being independent or holding them back from becoming independent. The types of violences in both films are tweaked to the advantage of the directors to highlight how the tropes title can be misleading and to counteract the typical views of black women as a whole.

In addition to the way the film industry has certain ways of portraying violence onto black women done by white characters. Matthew Hughey (2009) conducts an analysis on a cinethetic racism in which allows for the white characters to have redemption while maintaining the black characters in a certain perspective. Hughey argues that the new racism in films is shown through structural racism, institutionalized racism and other social structures. This allowing white characters to continue putting down black and brown communities form moving forward. But the article highlights the success in the increased visibility of Black powerful characters that continue to change the narrative and tropes of the black community specifically of women, which have influenced more films to be centered around the experiences of women of color and to be seen in a better light.

In the same perspective of counteracting the views of black women, there is a distinct way that black sisterhood is seen by society. Maria Lugones (1995) evaluate the term of sister in the black community. In Lugones analysis, she refers to Pat Rosezelle who has looked deeply into the notion of sisterhood. Rosezelle interprets "sister" as a familial tie to show several feelings that do not need to be shared through a bloodline like trust, celebration, love, and just a connection to one another (139). This is very evident in both films as an example in *Set it off* when the girls celebrate their first success in robbing a bank. Also, the trust amongst one another to just be there for each other in tough times like when T.T.'s son was in the emergency room. An example from *Girls trip,* is the scene where Ryan came clean about the infidelity about her marriage. She reflects publicly by saying "There are some people that when you see them you cannot pretend anymore bc they know you, the real you" demonstrating that her "sisters" are her community and her circle where she does not have to be someone else. These scenes align with the definition Rosezelle found sister to be. Also, interesting enough,the term sister could be used as a political act within the black community. This could relate to the whole film of *Set it off* since they did everything together meaning that the friends are all connected. The tropes come into the image of sister and sisterhood because the connection the women had to each other in both films leaves the women in a different role than the popular culture is accustomed to see. Overall, the women act and treat each other like we expect a family to be like, together at all costs, defending one another and unconditional love.

The American popular culture seems to demand the usage of tropes in films since it gives off a symbolic meaning that is present in society. The character that fulfills a trope would be Dina in *Girls trip* as the loud ratchet friend, yet it is an interesting case. Dina is a crazy friend

that is very extra and funny through her actions and comments which is usually ignored or seen as not a good friend to have. But she is the most truthful and loyal friend out of the women. Therefore, Dina is seen as a good friend since she is the friend that would say the truth disregarding how one would take it, making this a great friend to have overall. The other tropes are present but not in a bad narrative. The mammy is shown in a different light because T.T. in *Set it off,* is an actual mother. However, she plays a role of just being the person who over thinks and is extremely nervous, making the mammy trope is a different lens not as nurturing as usual. The angry and strong black women tropes are shown in both movies because at one point all the main characters get angry at their situation or the world overall. But all the characters in the movies had the right to be angry or have to be strong to achieve what they wanted whether that was robbing the bank or pretending to be happy. Society typically makes this trope be seen as a negative characteristic or behavior black women have and should not show. The jezabel is played in both films by Jada Pinkett Smith, she has different stories lines that leave her as a single mother in a way and alone. The single mother part of her in *Girls trip* makes her a bit of a mammy but to an extent. In both movies, she has a love interest, but is not presented as a oversexual jezabel this image gives black women a narrative that goes against the way society oversexualizes the body of a black women. Generally the tropes have a specific way of being but these directors made it their own way, which has changed the narrative of black women and not making them seem so bad as these tropes usually have.

The rethinking of the black women tropes and how society treats them is seen differently in the eyes of Brian Norman (2006), who examines how the conscious raising was a form of activism that uplifted the feminist movement. Black women were not accepted in the first wave,

so it explains as to how this analysis has come to grow into the second wave. This connects to the discussions our class had on the fact that black women were involved in the first wave, it just was not noted in the public sphere. The fact these women were not mentioned in the first wave or known during that time period, creates a wanting for black women role models ad activists in the second wave. Norman uses a specific conscious raising document of "Sisterhood is powerful" that was essential to black women because it builds unity and is a process of gathering personal narratives. Once again ties to the work Lugones and Rosezelle analysis of the meaning behind "sister." Also, it reiterates on the change that needs and has occurred with the narrative of black women in films and media.

These changes in the tropes have impacted black girlhood in their community and shows positive and real issues that they face on the daily strengthening the image of black women in general since in the movies it is mostly a negative image creating those stereotypes and preconceptions that contain black women in a box. The black girlhood is researched by Brooks et. al (2010) which shows support of how a specific narrative of Black girlhood can become monolithic to young girls, which makes it important to provide various messages. Her analysis focuses on certain literature for young black girls. The main aspect that influences the young girls is the depictions of tropes and experiences of the female body, economic oppression, male dominance, family relationships, etc (10). This would support and explain why the there is a demand to have more films that present themes and tropes that go against the stereotypical messages.

Likewise*, Set it off* and *Girls trip* while breaking the way black women usually conform to these tropes. It also gives off an image of the reality and positive message to the black women

community. *Girls trip* positive messages is that you girls always have your back and to be true to yourself. *Set it off* sends the message of the poverty level and the narrative that many have in the community. Both films end with the characters learning lesson, in *Set it off* Toni is left knowing that her life is over due to her crimes. But she is left with the memories of her friends and the aspiration of a better life through their strength exemplifying that in a best outcome there needs to be a struggle or fight to receive that. In *Girls trip,* Ryan and the other friends learned that disregarding all of their disagreements they will always be the Flosse Posse. Both friend groups demonstrates that through their disagreements and actions there is that one person that needs to learn a lesson to continue the growth of the friendship. The character growth and maturing highlights the way they cannot identify with a specific trope and challenge the dominant narrative.

The change in making more narratives black women can agree to and young girls to look up to creates the space for them to be true to themselves and not let anything define them.This correlates with Sheila Radford-Hill (2000), investigation on black women and their politics of empowerment. It began with the rise of ethnography cases that highlight the struggles of black women to go against that alienation they receive from white feminist and their own community.this act would challenge the whole feminist discourse and rethink many social constructs such as race, gender, and class (96). Black feminism had its issues in creating a new image of itself, leaving women to rely on historical images of proud black womanhood. This would explain the increase of films like *Girls trip* and *Set it off* giving new images of black women and unconsciously changing the perspective of black women tropes and their behaviors. In terms of black feminism and womanhood, this was created to oppose white feminism since

they did not include black women from the beginning. Also, this caused the divide we see in popular media in films and society.

On the contrary, the tropes that are usually presented by black women is not the case in these films. Instead from my observations, the white characters and men play the stereotypical tropes, not the women. Matthew W. Hughey (2014) looks into the white savior trope and how it represents the modern whiteness in society. The white savior trope is a character that feels they are the leader that will save black and people of color from oppression, poverty, diseases, and overall survive. The white savior complex is reflected in both *Set it off* and *Girls trip.* The main detective in *Set it off* being Detective Strode was investigating the robberies and shot Toni's brother. He was also there when most of the women were killed because of running away and trying to escape. The last scene when the cops shot Frankie, detective Strode made eye contact with Toni, who was on a bus leaving to Mexico. He just watch her get away, but I think he let her go because he felt he owed her something since it is his fault her brother is dead. This act plays into the white savior trope because detective Strode felt compelled to let Toni escape instead of doing his job and putting her in jail.

In conclusion, tropes are seen as a cinematic strategy used to reference a symbol of a specific community. Recently mass media outlets have been taking back the narratives of black women and changing the way they are seen to make it a more positive image. As mentioned films like *Set it off* (1996) and *Girls trip* (2017) have shown the ways directors can change the impact of sisterhood and the way tropes like the jezebel, the mammy, and the angry/strong black women. It contradicts how society has seen those roles portrayed, these films have given more purpose as to why black women women might be able to identify with those tropes rather than

being contained to that specific role. Tropes need to be used in a more positive way because society needs to see black women in a better view and that difference will make the world move into a better situation for everyone.

I affirm that I have upheld the highest of principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

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