

Industry and the Pet to Threat Phenomenon

VO: HBO's Industry has what I consider the best representation of being a Black woman in a corporate environment.

The show starts with the first day for several new hires and the show's main characters: Harper, Yasmin, Rob, and Gus. They all work at Pierpoint, an investment bank with a high-stress, high-reward work environment that is also very outwardly toxic from day one.

Harper is not only the only Black woman in her cohort but also at least from the viewer's perspective the only Black woman in Pierpoint.

THESIS: Harper's journey from the pilot to the season three finale perfectly showcases the pet-to-threat phenomenon that Black women face in workplaces around the world. Throughout this video I'll explain more about the phenomenon, how Harper faces this in the show, as well as what can be done, if anything at all, to prevent this.

FX: TRANSITION - The Office Threat

First, what is the pet-to-threat phenomenon? This term was coined by Dr. Kecia Thomas in 2013 to describe a mid-career shift that affects many Black women. The 'pet' phase is often early in a Black woman's career. She is celebrated for her "diversity social capital," while simultaneously being underutilized for her knowledge, skill, and/or ability.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/keciathomas/2024/01/13/the-persistence-of-pet-to-threat/>

If this same Black woman persists – with no negative change in work ethic or attitude, she starts to be less loved, and instead viewed as a threat. She faces workplace alienation and isolation, without the same financial or career rewards compared to her peers, and without the same support and mentorship she received early in her career.

While this term can be applied to any one who is a minority in a workplace, it's most often applied and applicable to Black women. Black women in the workplace and beyond are often described as either happy or angry, with no nuance.

This lack of nuance and the "pet-to-threat" phenomenon is due to racial stereotypes placed onto Black women, most relevantly – the angry Black woman stereotype.

Harvard Business School conducted experiments on the perception between Black and white female employees who expressed frustration.

QUOTE: ...participants were more likely to attribute the Black female employee's anger to internal characteristics (her personality) because the behavior brought to mind the stereotype of an angry Black woman. Once again, this reaction had negative consequences for the Black

woman, leading to poorer performance evaluations and lower assessment of her leadership capabilities, even when controlling for the gender and race of the study's participants.

QUOTE CONTINUED: Our research shows not all people are treated the same when it comes to expressing anger in the workplace, and people react more negatively to Black women who express anger because they activate the stereotype of an angry Black woman and internal attributions. Yet, there is little evidence suggesting that Black women actually are angrier than white women.

<https://hbr.org/2022/01/the-angry-black-woman-stereotype-at-work>

FX: TRANSITION - Harper in Industry

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ckrYnS2Rvc&ab_channel=genesisofthevoid 2:30-2:50

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PdcGSw1GRX4&ab_channel=BBC 2:36-2:55

In Industry seasons one and two, Harper embraces her status as a threat. She takes risks that her peers don't have the calculation or guts to take. She's actively cut-throat from day one, taking risks that her peers don't have the judgement to make.

Yasmin goes out of her way to please her supervisor and the people around her – even if that means her talents and skills aren't utilized. Harper takes the opposite approach. She isn't disliked, but she's not necessarily liked either. From episode one people immediately note Harper as a shark, someone egotistical who will do anything for a sale.

Luckily for Harper, that's the exact attitude needed to survive at Pierpoint. But her being a Black woman complicates this. Harper isn't a cutthroat character who happens to be Black, but her Blackness is one of the motivators for her working at Pierpoint and her desire to climb the corporate ladder. In an interview, co-creator Mickey Down stated:

QUOTE: "Harper, to us, was first and foremost a really interesting character, an outsider, someone that was motivated by self-interest and her own advancement. And a Black woman having those characteristics in a predominantly white workplace feels way more realistic, in some ways; you're constantly pushing up against something, you're trying not to be defined by your race, you're trying to be defined by your merit.

Despite being in an industry that rewards risk, when she starts to be too successful at the thing she's known for (making dodgy decisions), her supervisor, Eric, is threatened by her and reveals that she falsified her college transcripts.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-oyzTdPvx5k&ab_channel=PNUT 0:05-0:16

[It's important to note that Eric knows Harper didn't graduate very early on. Even when he didn't know, he still took a chance on her as not only being from a non-target school (SUNY Binghamton), and her not having the connections that other hires had – which could fall under the pet treatment Harper and Eric's relationship. Eric even calls her 'harpsichord,' a cutesy nickname for a character who is more terrifying than adorable.]

After the college transcript fiasco is revealed to HR, Harper is fired. By the next season, she's moved to FutureDawn, an ESG-focused hedge fund that's primarily white women instead of white men. Still the minority, Harper leans into her status as "pet." Her wardrobe is softer and more casual, she smiles more, she tries to be more social and interact with others – all things Pierpoint Harper would never do.

Moreover, her attitude at FutureDawn doesn't lead to success, but simply her treading water. She has a lower position as executive assistant, and is only listened to when she pulls out her more assertive qualities. Her position as office pet doesn't just demean her and her abilities, but it also doesn't lead to career nor personal success.

Gloria Oladipo wrote an amazing article for The Guardian analyzing Harper's position as a Black woman. In it she writes:

QUOTE: Industry... examines the strict conditions under which Harper's ambition can survive and thrive. At Pierpoint, Stern's sly and unsparing mentality wins her adoration, but ultimately leads to her downfall. Her attempts to "play the game" at FutureDawn, to etch out legitimate routes of success, are met with tight-lipped smiles and head shakes. Her pleas to be included in the company's investment choices are shot down, emphasizing her ultimate status as an outsider.

...

Industry argues that even when Black people "win" in white workplaces – when they embrace their status as "pets" or appeal to gatekeepers by working "twice as hard" (only to be rejected as "threats") – they still lose. The show argues that there is never really a way for Stern as a Black woman (or anyone really) to "win" at capitalism, not without shelling out some part of themselves.

<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/article/2024/sep/08/hbo-industry-workplace-black-wo men>

FX: TRANSITION - Solutions and Reflections

The pet-to-threat phenomenon isn't just about getting promotions and being respected at work (though those are extremely important, especially considering Black women are the lowest paid demographic in the US), but it's also a matter of life and death.

In January 2024 Antoinette Candia-Bailey, the former Vice President of Student Affairs at Lincoln University (a Historically Black College) committed suicide at 49 years old. In a letter sent the day of her death, she states that it was the harassment and bullying led by white president of this HBCU, John Mosely, that led her to suicide.

She wrote about a previous meeting with her and Mosely: "I couldn't even finish the meeting because you didn't hear me. I left in tears. You intentionally harassed and bullied me and got

satisfaction from sitting back to determine how you would ensure I failed as an employee and proud alumna."

<https://abcnews.go.com/US/hbcu-administrators-death-suicide-prompts-calls-presidents-resignation/story?id=106463624>

This issue is so deep-rooted and systematic, that it almost seems there isn't a solution – but there are many things that can be done to protect the mental health of Black women in the workplace. The obvious solution could be to switch jobs, but if this isn't feasible in today's job market, there are still actions you can take.

For Black women, Career coach Luciana Paulise published an article on the pet-to-threat phenomenon and how to break out of it when you start to notice this pattern.

One suggestion is to BREAK THE ONLYNESS PATTERN, look for a supportive partner at work that recognizes what you're going through. She also suggests LOOKING FOR WOMEN MENTORS or joining DIVERSE COMMUNITIES within or outside of your company. Luckily in the age of the internet, this is easier than ever and more people are speaking up about their workplace experiences.

Whether its National Society of Black Engineers, National Association of Black Journalists, or even Facebook groups – someone out there knows what you're going through.

Paulise suggests discussing with your manager how you feel, or asking for specific feedback on what's holding you back. If this direct action doesn't work, Paulise reminds readers that "being perceived like you don't belong doesn't mean you don't belong."

Again, this advice isn't only useful for Black women, but for white people who may be noticing this phenomenon happening to their colleagues. For white people, the best advice is to BE A SOURCE OF SUPPORT, don't be a bystander and let racial abuse or harassment in the workplace happen, no matter how subtle.
