

SISTER CITIZEN

Shame, Stereotypes, and
Black Women in America

Melissa V. Harris-Perry

Yale

UNIVERSITY PRESS

New Haven and London

Published with assistance from the Mary Cady Tew Memorial Fund.

Copyright © 2011 by Melissa Victoria Harris-Perry.

All rights reserved.

This book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, including illustrations, in any form (beyond that copying permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the US Copyright Law and except by reviewers for the public press), without written permission from the publishers.

Yale University Press books may be purchased in quantity for educational, business, or promotional use. For information, please e-mail sales.press@yale.edu (US office) or sales@yaleup.co.uk (UK office).

The publisher gratefully acknowledges permission to reproduce the following: Elizabeth Alexander, "Praise Song for the Day," from *Crave Radiancy: New and Selected Poems, 1990–2010*, copyright © 2009 by Elizabeth Alexander, reprinted with the permission of Graywolf Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota, www.graywolfpress.org; "No Mirrors in My Nana's House," copyright © 1998 by Ysaye M. Barnwell, reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company; "Resisting the Shaming of Shug Avery" from *The Color Purple*, copyright © 1982 by Alice Walker, reprinted by permission of Harcourt, Inc.; excerpt from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston, copyright 1937 by Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc.; renewed © 1965 by John C. Hurston and Joel Hurston; reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers; Kate Rushin, "The Bridge Poem," reprinted by permission of the author.

Set in Bulmer type by Keystone Typesetting, Inc., Orwigsburg, Pennsylvania.

Printed in the United States of America by Sheridan Books, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Harris-Perry, Melissa V. (Melissa Victoria), 1973–

Sister citizen : shame, stereotypes, and Black women in America / Melissa V. Harris-Perry.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-300-16541-8 (clothbound : alk. paper)

1. African American women—Politics and government.
2. African American women—Psychology—Political aspects.
3. Stereotypes (Social psychology)—United States.
4. African American women—Social conditions. I. Title.

E185.86.H375 2011

305.48'896073—dc22

2011015860

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992
(Permanence of Paper).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ist public persona could be used as a weapon against women who do not conform to this domestic ideal. The majority of black mothers are working women who struggle to raise their children without husbands and often without adequate financial support from partners or the state. It would be easy to use Michelle Obama's choice, a choice fostered by a unique circumstance of privilege, to reassert that black women who labor for pay outside the home are inadequate parents. Given the pervasive myths of black women as bad mothers, this narrative could easily be deployed to undercut support for public policies focused on creation of a just and equal political and economic structure and to focus instead on "marriage" and "family values" as solutions to structural barriers facing black communities. At the same time, these conservative discourses have never needed any particular excuse to exist. Michelle Obama's framing herself as mom-in-chief does not make her complicit in the demonization of black mothers that began long before she became First Lady. Her decision does, however, deliver a blow to the Mammy image that many might have preferred that she embody.

Sapphire and Michelle's Marriage

In his second book, *The Audacity of Hope*, Barack Obama recounts the story of the night he delivered the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. After he told Michelle that his stomach felt queasy, she hugged him, looked him in the eye and said, "Just don't screw it up, buddy!"²⁴ This gentle teasing of her "rock star" husband was a hallmark of Michelle Obama's self-presentation early in the presidential primary season. She talked about how Barack did not pick up his dirty socks, laughed about how their daugh-

ters complained about his snoring, and was honest about how she sometimes felt abandoned in the early years of child rearing. She explicitly refused to worship her husband solely for political purposes but instead insisted that they were equal partners. “And Barack is very much human. So let’s not deify him, because what we do is we deify, and then we’re ready to chop it down. People have notions of what a wife’s role should be in this process, and it’s been a traditional one of blind adoration. My model is a little different—I think most real marriages are.”²⁵ For some, Michelle’s honest assessment of Barack made him seem more human and likeable; it allowed many to believe that the Obamas would be models of gender equity in the White House.²⁶ Others saw Michelle’s unwillingness to take on a traditional spousal role as evidence that she was a dominating, overpowering black woman.

This specter of the dominating black matriarch is a riff on the angry Sapphire character. As I discussed earlier in this book, the black matriarch first entered the national policy discussion with Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, which designated black mothers as the principal cause of a culture of pathology that kept black people from achieving equality. Moynihan’s research reported the assumed deviance of black families. This deviance was obvious, he opined, because women seemed to have the primary decision-making roles in black households.²⁷ Michelle Obama has the same Ivy League educational pedigree as her husband, throughout their marriage she was an independent wage earner—sometimes drawing a higher salary than he—and because of her husband’s political responsibilities, she often took on the role of primary parental caretaker as well. Thus when she teased her husband, pointed out his faults, and declined to worship him, she did so as an equal partner. For those inclined to see

black women through the angles of the crooked room, this independence easily read as deviant and domineering matriarchy.

Remember that the crooked room is not only set askew by the racial inequality of broader society; it is also a problem of sexism within black communities. Black women struggle for recognition both within and outside their own racial group. The belief that black women make inadequately submissive wives is not the exclusive creation of white prejudice. African Americans embraced the image of the strong black woman, and this image figures prominently in the idea of black women as overpowering. For example, during the 2008 campaign, African American comedian Chris Rock added a new joke to his routine. Its premise is that African American women are dominating shrews unable to allow their husbands to lead in the domestic sphere. His humor assumes both that men are the rightful leaders of the home and that black women's inability to submit to this leadership is pathological.

Barack has a handicap the other candidates don't have: Barack Obama has a black wife. And I don't think a black woman can be first lady of the United States. Yeah, I said it! A black woman can be president, no problem. First lady? Can't do it. You know why? Because a black woman cannot play the background of a relationship. Just imagine telling your black wife that you're president? "Honey, I did it! I won! I'm the president" "No, we the president! And I want my girlfriends in the Cabinet. I want Kiki to be secretary of state! She can fight!"²⁸

Rock's comic imagination is fueled by widely held assumptions about who black women are in relation to black men: that African

American women are strong, unyielding, and uncompromising while black men are endangered and emasculated. The image of aggressive black women dominating their male partners persists despite empirical evidence that African American women are more likely to be victims than aggressors in heterosexual partnerships. Black women suffer higher rates of domestic assault and homicide than women of other racial and ethnic groups.²⁹ Their romantic attachments are also linked to their growing incarceration rates: black women's crimes tend to be ancillary to those of their male partners.³⁰ Black women are also the women most likely to face unassisted child rearing and the vulnerability to poverty that single parenthood entails. The reality is that black women's political, social, and economic marginalization ensures that they nearly always "play the background," but Rock can get an easy laugh by evoking the familiar stereotype of the domineering black woman.

In contrast to her repudiation of Jezebel and Mammy, Michelle Obama more readily accommodated to the anxieties produced by the strong black woman stereotype. She flouted attempts to shame her about her body. She refused the role of Mammy by turning her efforts toward her own hearth. But she found it necessary to defuse the dangerous image of the angry black matriarch by consciously embracing a softer image. After her pride comment and the Princeton thesis were used to frame her effectively as an "angry black woman," she noticeably softened her spousal image. While the couple's mutual respect remained evident, Michelle was more frequently photographed with her head on Barack's shoulder, grasping his hand at public events, or evading reporters by stealing brief, romantic walks on the White House grounds. The outspoken Michelle Obama who made many bristle with anxiety earlier in the campaign

was replaced largely by a woman who evokes a warm feeling when we see her with her husband, her children, and even her dog. Many reporters and scholars expressed anxiety about the ascendance of this kinder, gentler Michelle. They worried that she was being packaged in a way that thwarts her authenticity and undermines the efforts of feminists committed to the notion of women as equal partners in their marriages.³¹ Although this worry is not groundless, it is important to remember that as an African American woman, Michelle Obama is constrained by different stereotypes from those that inhibit white women. After she was depicted as irrationally angry and potentially unpatriotic, the public space for her as an independent but loving wife shrank considerably.

As First Lady, Michelle has crafted a more traditional role for herself. She is highly visible, but she has taken on relatively safe issues like childhood literacy, ending childhood obesity, advocacy for women and girls, and support of military families. Even her White House garden is framed more as an initiative for healthy eating than as a commitment to local foods in an effort against global climate change. White, middle-class gender norms in the United States have generally asserted that women belong in the domestic sphere. These norms have limited white women's opportunities for education and employment. But the story has been different for women of color and those from poor or working-class origins. These women have had to work, and they have shouldered the extreme burden of being effective parents while providing financially for their families. Black women were full participants in agricultural labor during slavery, in the backbreaking work of sharecropping, and in the domestic services of Jim Crow. Even middle-class and elite black women have typically worked as teachers, journalists, entrepreneurs,

and professionals. At every level of household income and at every point in American history, black women have been much more likely to engage in paid labor than their white counterparts.³² In exchange for their labor and independence, they have been labeled with ugly terms like Sapphire and matriarch, told that they are emasculating their men, and punished by a public discourse that sees them as insufficiently feminine. It was within this crooked room that Michelle Obama attempted to embrace a wifely traditionalism that is unusual for black women in the public sphere.

Michelle's choice to accommodate this demand for traditionalism is also dangerous for black women, who have so little space in which to speak back against patriarchy and sexism among black men. Black men face tremendous structural and personal challenges caused by racial inequality. Many of them believe that black women have a responsibility to silence their own concerns so as to ensure that black men not be given any additional burdens. Further, to the extent that Michelle Obama's apparent embodiment of traditional submission is connected to her position as First Lady, her "success" as a woman can be used as a rhetorical weapon against the majority of African American women who are unmarried. If only they, like Michelle, would submit to the authority of a husband, perhaps they, too, could live a life of wealth and comfort. Michelle Obama's traditionalism could encourage the discourse that establishing appropriately patriarchal families will offer solutions to the social ills facing black communities.

A glimpse of this trajectory in public discourse occurred during a *Nightline* special that aired April 9, 2010. The program, titled "Why Can't a Successful Black Woman Find a Man?" insisted that a crisis exists because 70 percent of professional black women are

without husbands. It began with the assumption that marriage is an appropriate and universal goal for women and that any failure to achieve it must therefore be pathological. Panelists were encouraged to offer solutions without needing to articulate exactly why low marriage rates are troubling. Furthermore, given the distortions or absence of black women in most mainstream media outlets, I am skeptical that the *Nightline* special was motivated primarily by a desire to address the needs of African American women. More likely, marriage is a trope for other anxieties about respectability, economic stability, and the maintenance of patriarchy. Which social issue appears on the public agenda is never accidental. In this moment of economic crisis, social change, and racial transformation, black women are being encouraged to embrace traditional models of family and to view themselves as deficient if their lives do not fit neatly into these prescribed roles.

The solution offered most frequently by the *Nightline* panelists was that professional black women need to scale back their expectations. Black female success, the panelists concluded, is an impediment to finding and cultivating black love. Despite advertising itself as a news program, *Nightline* failed to call on any sociologist, psychologist, historian, or therapist who could have contributed context, statistics, or analysis about the “marriage crisis” among African Americans. Instead, these delicate and compelling issues were addressed by comedians, actors, bloggers, and journalists. Without structural analysis or evidence-based reasoning, the panel relied on personal experience. The three male participants have all written books on the black marriage and partnership crisis.³³ To varying degrees, all of these books frame the issue as a black female problem rather than a community issue. They encourage women to conform

to a more sanitized ideal of femininity that doesn't compete with socially sanctioned definitions of masculinity. Each of these male participants was allowed to pontificate about how black women should behave without being challenged on his own relationship history and status. None of them can boast a lifetime marriage to one black woman. This personal information is relevant because personal narrative was the sole basis of the conversation. The women participating in the panel were subjected to public scrutiny of their supposed shortcomings, while the men's biographies were shielded by an assumption that their maleness alone made them worthy. The discussants on the show cited Michelle Obama as an example of a black woman who knew how to catch and keep a good black man. In that moment, Michelle was used as a weapon against other black women.

Straightening the Crooked Room

The week after Barack Obama was elected president, *Newsweek* ran an article by Allison Samuels titled "What Michelle Means to Us." Samuels, an African American woman, expressed enthusiasm about the possibilities inherent in Michelle Obama's impending tenure in the White House. She suggested that Michelle had a unique opportunity to straighten the angles of the black women's crooked room. "The new First Lady will have the chance to knock down ugly stereotypes about black women and educate the world about American black culture more generally. But perhaps more important—even apart from what her husband can do—Michelle has the power to change the way African-Americans see ourselves, our lives and our possibilities."³⁴