

SISTER CITIZEN

Shame, Stereotypes, and
Black Women in America

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Yale

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One
Crooked Room

The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.

—Audre Lorde

Zora Neale Hurston writes Janie Mae Crawford as an irrepressibly independent woman. Janie leaves the economic security of her emotionally deadening first marriage to pursue adventure and love. After the death of her second husband, she flouts social convention and follows her heart into an affair with a much younger man. When her beloved descends into madness and threatens her life, she kills him rather than allow him to destroy her. When she is ready to return home, she does so despite the whispers and scandal occasioned by her unconventional choices. By following this path Janie does not avoid pain, loss, and disappointment, but by choosing her own burdens rather than allowing the burdens of others to be heaped on her back, Janie refutes her grandmother's prophecy that black women are the mules of the world. Janie's quest is about carving out a life that suits her authentic desires rather than conforming to the limiting, often soul-crushing expectations that others have of her. In this way, her personal journey is a model of the struggle many black women face.

This struggle is interestingly mirrored in the post-World War II

cognitive psychology research on field dependence. Field dependence studies show how individuals locate the upright in a space. In one study, subjects were placed in a crooked chair in a crooked room and then asked to align themselves vertically. Some perceived themselves as straight only in relation to their surroundings. To the researchers' surprise, some people could be tilted by as much as 35 degrees and report that they were perfectly straight, simply because they were aligned with images that were equally tilted. But not everyone did this: some managed to get themselves more or less upright regardless of how crooked the surrounding images were.¹

When they confront race and gender stereotypes, black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion. It may be surprising that some gyrate half-naked in degrading hip-hop videos that reinforce the image of black women's lewdness. It may be shocking that some black women actors seem willing to embody the historically degrading image of Mammy by accepting movie roles where they are cast as the nurturing caretakers of white women and children. It may seem inexplicable that a respected black woman educator would stamp her foot, jab her finger in a black man's face, and scream while trying to make a point on national television, thereby reconfirming the notion that black women are irrationally angry.² To understand why black women's public actions and political strategies sometimes seem tilted in ways that accommodate the degrading stereotypes about them, it is important to appreciate the structural constraints that influence their behavior.³ It can be hard to stand up straight in a crooked room.

The subtitle of this book is an adaptation of Ntozake Shange's

choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*. *For colored girls* is a definitive artistic, visual, and poetic representation of the experience of the crooked room. It has sold more than a hundred thousand copies. The play was first produced Off-Broadway in 1975. The next year it became a Broadway production, and in 1977 it earned an Obie Award for distinguished production and a Tony Award for Best Featured Actress. The official publication, production, and awards history does not capture the meaning of this piece for African American women. Since its introduction more than thirty years ago, *for colored girls* has been a mainstay in the personal libraries of African American women, of black feminist curriculum, and of black women's local theater productions. Literary scholar Salamishah Tillet describes it as the "black feminist bible," and author Ntozake Shange observes, "Not a day goes by when some young woman somewhere isn't doing a *for colored girls* monologue, making the voice her own, finding her own infinite beauty once again."⁴

Shange's piece viscerally depicts the crooked room that black women confront.⁵ The production portrays the harshest and most bitter experiences of black women's lives. Her characters suffer sexual and romantic betrayal, abuse, rape, illegal abortion, heartbreak, and rejection. *For colored girls* has lasting significance for so many because it presents black women's experiences with unflinching rawness that is not primarily concerned with translating these experiences for a broader audience. Its primary goal is to give voice to black women by acknowledging the challenges they face, not to invoke pity or even empathy either from black men or from white viewers. It speaks to and about black women, and it does so by using language, images, and experiences that resonate for black women.

For many who love it, reading or seeing Shange's *for colored girls* is like noticing not that one is alone in the crooked room but, rather, that there are others standing bent, stooped, or surprisingly straight. It is an experience of having someone make visible the slanted images that too frequently remain invisible. "The poems were addressing situations that bridged our secret (unspoken) longing. *For colored girls* still is a women's trip, and the connection we can make through it, with each other and for each other, is to empower us all."⁶

Shange's work exposes the fragility of black women's emotional lives and insists that the agony of their experiences is collective, structural, and not of their own making, but it is not exclusively an exploration of victimization. Though her characters know pain, they also know love, passion, exploration, joy, music, and dance. Despite the incredible obstacles they face, not all of her women are irreparably broken. Results from the psychological studies of the crooked room showed that many respondents did find a way to discern the true upright position even when everything around them was distorted. Hurston's account of Janie Mae Crawford in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a literary example of this ability to find the upright, as is Shange's final poem in *for colored girls*, "A Laying on of Hands." Black women's political history is similarly filled with examples of this independence. Black women of the early twentieth-century club movement resisted the lie of black promiscuity by leading a movement for temperance, modesty, and respectability.⁷ African American domestic workers resisted the idea of Mammy-like devotion to whites by living outside their employers' homes, protesting unfair labor conditions, and nurturing their own families and communities.⁸ Women of the civil rights movement helped change the country, not through angry violence, but through disciplined endurance of racist counter-

attacks against their nonviolent struggle. These women managed to stand straight despite the crooked world in which they lived.

Sometimes black women can conquer negative myths, sometimes they are defeated, and sometimes they choose not to fight. Whatever the outcome, we can better understand sisters as citizens when we appreciate the crooked room in which they struggle to stand upright. In the next several chapters I will pose a number of questions about how black women's politics is affected by the crooked images they encounter. Is it possible that black women's organizing efforts and public reactions to issues of sexual assault are linked to their beliefs about the stereotype of black women's promiscuity? Does the pervasive notion of Mammy help explain why black women are suspicious of coalitions with white women? Do black women often defer to black men's religious, familial, and political leadership because they reject the idea that they are angry and domineering? Having a clear view of the distorted images and painful stereotypes that make America a crooked room for African American women is the first step toward understanding how these stereotypes influence black women as political actors.

To learn more about the titled images of the crooked room that contemporary black women encounter in the United States, I conducted focus groups with forty-three African American women in Chicago, New York, and Oakland.⁹ As a warm-up task, I asked participants to think about black women as a group and list the stereotypes or myths about them that other people may hold. I then asked them to write down the "facts" about black women as they saw them. They worked in groups and had very lively discussions about both the myths and the facts. Although these women lived in different cities, were of several generations, and had different economic

and family circumstances, their discussions formed a coherent picture. They independently arrived at the same three stereotypes that many researchers of African American women's experience also identify: Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire.

Like the women in the focus groups, some readers will find these stereotypes familiar, others may never have heard of these myths, and still others may not know the negative connotations attached to them. In the next chapter I will explore the historical and contemporary outlines of the three stereotypes at length, but for the purposes of understanding the general idea of the crooked room, here I offer the brief explanations given by the women in the focus groups. For those of you less familiar with these ideas, I ask you to trust me for a few more pages that Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire are common and painful characterizations of black women and that each has a long history in American social and cultural life.

As they identified the main stereotypes, the focus group participants said that black women are seen either as "oversexed" or as "fat mummies who aren't thinking about sex at all." There was broad agreement that white people generally saw them as either promiscuous or asexual. "Jezebel," "maid," and "Mammy" were the terms they used most often to label these stereotypes. Margaret, a fifty-two-year-old woman from the West Beverly neighborhood of Chicago, said, "Just because we are African we're supposed to be wild and all this. We are supposed to be from the jungle and like to have wild sex. Like that is all we think about. Folks think we're hot to trot. Or they think we're Aunt Jemima. It's never in between."

Many talked about the "welfare queen" as an ever-present characterization. Although nearly all the women rejected the hypersexual and Mammy stereotypes, several agreed with the welfare queen

myth. “That is not a myth,” one participant said. “That belongs on the ‘fact’ side of the page. There are a lot of black women out here living on the system.” Still, everyone agreed that not all black women conformed to the image of welfare cheat, and most argued that the stereotype was damaging even if it was rooted in real behaviors.

The focus group members believed that black men and other black women also perpetuated myths about black women. “Haters,” “gold diggers,” “overly demanding,” and “argumentative” emerged as the main intraracial characterizations of black women. One professional woman in her fifties said, “Black men always try to say that we are manipulative and too bossy and too demanding. They act like they don’t know that black women are the backbone of the family. We keep things together. The man may be the head of the household, but we are the backbone and the backbone has got to be strong.”

Throughout this book I will return often to these women’s voices. Their insights set my research agenda by giving me clues about where to look to understand black women’s emotional and political experiences. Their discussions of myths pointed me toward three particular characterizations: hypersexuality, Mammy, and emasculating anger. These were the recurring stereotypes that participants said influence how others saw them. Most of the women also talked about their personal strategies to counter these negative assumptions. “I respect myself, so I know that nobody can call me a ho.” “I let my husband be the man in our house, so he never says that mess to me [about being too bossy]. He knows he is my man and God made him the head of our home.” “I have never been on welfare. I worked two jobs, but I have never been on welfare.” These narratives reveal the ways that black women attempt to stand upright

in a room made crooked by the stereotypes about black women as a group.¹⁰

In their 2003 book *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America*, Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden report on the results of their African American Women's Voices Project. After surveying and conducting in-depths interviews with hundreds of black women, they discovered that "97 percent acknowledge that they are aware of negative stereotypes of African American women and 80 percent confirm that they have been personally affected by these persistent racist and sexist assumptions."¹¹ Their book provides detailed evidence of how black women accommodate other people's expectations by shifting their tone of voice, outward behaviors, and expressed attitudes.¹² The women in my focus groups offer additional evidence that black women believe others think negatively about them. Jones and Shorter-Gooden's research shows that this awareness has real effects on how black women see themselves, how they pursue personal relationships, and how they comport themselves at work. I think it also influences how they understand themselves as citizens, what they believe is possible in their relationship with the state, and what they expect from their political organizing.

The Politics of Recognition

We can characterize African American women's struggle with the slanted images of the crooked room as a problem of recognition—an important theme for political philosophers interested in issues of identity, difference, and citizenship.¹³ Recognition scholarship derives from the concept, central to Hegelian philosophy, of *Anerkennung*, or mutually affirming recognition that allows citizens to oper-

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