Lectures on the Psychology of Women

Second Edition

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Contents

PREFACE *ix*

INTRODUCTION *xi*

I. **Status of Women**

1 *Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality: From Biological Difference to Institutionalized Androcentrism* *3*
Sandra Lipsitz Bem

2 *Who's In and Who's Out: The Results of Oppression* *17*
Ruth S. Ostenson

3 *Global Connections: The Significance of Women's Poverty* *27*
Bernice Lott

4 *Gender Dynamics in the Classroom* *37*
Susan Basow

II. **Women's Bodies**

5 *Sweating It Out: The Good News and the Bad News about Women and Sport* *49*
Ruth L. Hall

6 *Women, Weight, and Body Image* *65*
Christine A. Smith

7 *The Intersexed and the Transgendered: Rethinking Sex/Gender* 81
Carla Golden

8 *PMS as a Culture-Bound Syndrome* 97
Joan C. Chrisler

9 *Understanding Emotional Responses after Abortion* 113
Nancy Filipe Russo

10 *From Postpartum Depression to the Empty Nest Syndrome: The Motherhood Mystique Revisited* 129
Ingrid Johnston-Robledo

III. **Diversity of Women**

11 *Asian American Women and Adolescent Girls: Sexuality and Sexual Expression* 149
Connie S. Chan

12 *Life as a Lesbian: What Does Gender Have to Do with It?* 163
Linda D. Garnets

13 *Appreciating Cultural Difference: On Being an American Jewish Woman* 179
Kayla Miriyam Weiner

14 *Gender Issues among Latinas* 193
Donna Castañeda

15 *Beyond Double Jeopardy: Female, Biracial, and Perceived to Be Black* 209
Angela R. Gillem

16 *Developing an "Oppositional Gaze" Toward the Images of Black Women* 221
Carolyn M. West

17 *Crossing the Color Line in Women's Friendships* 235
Suzanna Rose

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16

Developing an "Oppositional Gaze" Toward the Images of Black Women

I collect Black memorabilia, such as movie posters and postcards. Many of these items depict African Americans in a demeaning and distorted manner. For example, my collection includes images of fat, Black Mammies and Aunt Jemimas. Many of my colleagues and friends wonder why I surround myself with such offensive images. I became a collector after what appeared to be a meaningless encounter with a stranger. Several years ago, I was attending a large professional convention for psychologists. Upon leaving the hotel restaurant, a White woman asked me to show her to a table. She had mistaken me for a waitress. I was stunned and confused. It ruined my day.

As a feminist psychologist and researcher, this event raised two important questions for me. First, I wondered why I, rather than the older White gentleman who was standing next to me, was mistaken for the server. After doing some research, it became clear. During slavery, Black women worked as servants. When slavery ended, the combination of race, gender, and class discrimination meant that there were few employment opportunities for African American women. Consequently, many Black women worked as domestic servants well into the twentieth century. As I was growing up, Mozell, my proud, hard-working grandmother, used her experience as a domestic servant to encourage me to stay

in school. Reading this history helped me to understand how a stranger in a restaurant could look past my dark-blue power suit and armful of books and assume that I was the waitress. After all, she is likely to encounter more Black female servants than Black female university professors.

This incident also raised a second question: Why do I care that a stranger assumes that I am a waitress? Perhaps it was an honest mistake. In any case, I could simply gather my books and move on. However, this is a significant event. Think of it this way. Imagine that carbon monoxide, a very dangerous gas that is colorless and odorless, starts to build up in your house. Everything *seems* normal because you cannot see or smell the gas. Over time, however, the gas fumes can do great harm to your health. Exposure to negative images of Black women works the same way. These images do not seem significant because they are so deeply ingrained in our society. Because we are surrounded by these images in the media and in our daily lives, it almost appears "natural" or "normal" that Black women should be domestics rather than successful professionals. Unfortunately, there are many people in positions of power who still believe that Black women are more suited to work in the dining room rather than the classroom or boardroom. When I encounter these people in professional situations, walking away from the interaction may not be an option. This is why I am concerned with the social construction of Black women's images. It is also why I became a collector. By surrounding myself with these images, I remember to challenge them on a daily basis.

According to African American feminists, Black women have most often been portrayed in three distinct images: as nurturing, self-sacrificing, asexual Mammies; as seductive, sexually irresponsible, promiscuous Jezebels; and as angry, combative Sapphires (Collins, 1990; West, 1995). Spend an afternoon or evening watching television if you don't believe that these images still exist. Certainly television depicts many oppressed groups in a negative light, including women of color, poor people, and gays and lesbians. However, this may be more damaging for some groups because there are fewer positive or realistic images to counter these negative representations. In the case of Black women, Hudson (1998) argued that:

> . . . on television, one can see relatively little change within the dominant racial ideology because television, as a mass media outlet, provides a space which continually updates and re-create Mammy and Jezebel stereotypes, and in turn, presents them as icons of what black womanhood is today (p. 245).

Because these images are so common, it is not surprising that even some educated people embrace them as accurate representations of contemporary Black women. Using a sample of 256 undergraduates, Weitz and Gordon (1993) found that a substantial percentage perceived Black women as having traits that were consistent with these images.

Bell hooks (1992), a Black feminist scholar, believes that we need to take an "oppositional gaze" toward the images of Black women. It is her belief that these images should be critically examined and challenged.

Moreover, she believes that we should deconstruct these images to reflect more positive and accurate representations of Black women. This is what I would like to do in my lecture. First, I would like to start with a brief historical overview, which will include why these images were created and why they persist. We will see that these images are rooted in history, shaped by structural inequalities, such as racism, sexism, and classism, and further reinforced by the media. Second, I want to explore how these images may influence the psychological functioning of some Black women. Specifically, I want to discuss how the Mammy image can contribute to role strain, or the challenge of balancing multiple roles, and concerns about physical features, including skin color, hair texture, and weight. Next, I want to discuss how the Jezebel image is related to feelings about sexual victimization. Finally, I want to explore how Black women's expression of anger is shaped by the Sapphire image.

Before I discuss these images, I want to remind the reader that Black women have actively resisted these images. Nevertheless, they are so pervasive that some Black women have accepted them as realistic. As a result, they may limit their behaviors, dress, or mannerisms to those deemed "appropriate" based on these stereotypes. In contrast, other Black women might spend a great deal of time and emotional energy trying to disprove these images.

Mammy

Mammy, one of the most pervasive images of Black women, originated in the South after slavery. She was expected to be a subordinate, nurturing, self-sacrificing, domestic servant who happily performed her duties with no expectation of financial compensation. Christian (1980) described her as:

> . . . black in color as well as race and fat with enormous breasts that are full enough to nourish all the children of the world; her head is perpetually covered with her trademark kerchief to hide the kinky hair that marks her as ugly. Tied to her physical characteristics are her personality traits: she is strong, for she certainly has enough girth, but this strength is used in service to her white master and as a way of keeping her male counterparts in check; she is kind and loyal, for she is a mother; she is sexless, for she is ugly . . . (p. 12–13).

There is little historic evidence to support the existence of a dutiful Mammy figure. Slavery was not a leisurely lifestyle. Slave women were often beaten, overworked, and raped. Analyses of slave narratives revealed that Black women were cunning, prone to poison the slave owner, and far from content with their slave status (Christian, 1980). Because this was such an uncomfortable reality, historians and authors rewrote history to create the image of the loyal, happy Mammy. After all, if we could believe that Mammy in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* was content with her life, we could believe that slavery was a humane institution.

We continue to live with the Mammy image. The first Academy Award presented to an African American went to Hattie McDaniel for her role as Mammy in *Gone With the Wind*. Although this was in the 1930s, the film industry has not changed very much. Another award-winning actress, Whoopi Goldberg, played a maid in several movies, *The Long Walk Home* in 1991 and *Corrina, Corrina* in 1994. Even if you are not a movie fan, you may still encounter the Mammy image in the form of Aunt Jemima, an icon that has appeared on breakfast products for more than a century. Although the image has been updated several times, the message is the same: Like their foremothers, contemporary Black women belong in the kitchen performing domestic services. Consequently, some Black women start to believe that their role in life is to take care of others at the expense of their own emotional needs. According to Abdullah (1998), if a Black woman embraces the Mammy image, she "puts the needs, wishes, and desires of an unrelated person above the needs, wishes, and desires of self . . ." and "is preoccupied with the comfort and pleasure of others, while denying her own pain" (p. 205). This can potentially lead to role strain and other mental health problems, such as depression.

ROLE STRAIN

I do not want to give the impression that care taking, nurturing, and service to others are negative characteristics. By exhibiting these traits, Black women have contributed to the survival of the Black community. I also do not want to imply that role strain is a problem that is unique to Black women. Regardless of ethnicity, many women face the challenge of managing the multiple roles of mother, worker, and intimate partner. However, Black women may be more vulnerable to role strain for several reasons. Black women disproportionately earn less, have lower levels of education and job status, and are more likely to be single parents than their White counterparts. As a result, they often must perform multiple roles without economic security or partner support. In addition, this caretaking role frequently extends beyond the family to a community that may be plagued by crime, poverty, and unemployment (Gibbs & Fuery, 1994). The Mammy image exacerbates role strain by reinforcing the belief that Black women happily seek multiple roles rather than assuming them out of necessity. It also implies that they effortlessly meet their many obligations and have no desire to delegate responsibilities to others.

Role strain can lead to depression. In a sample of 100 middle-class Black women, Warren (1997) discovered that increased work responsibility, coupled with a limited social support system, was related to depression. Some Black women link their depression to the demands of performing like "superwomen." For example, in her recent memoir, Meri Danquah (1998), a young, single mother explained that "Black women are supposed to be strong-caretakers, nurturers, healers of other people—any of the twelve

dozen variations of Mammy" (p. 1). Not surprisingly, this expectation made it more difficult for her to seek help for the depression.

In many cases it might not be desirable or emotionally healthy to step out of certain important roles, such as nurturer, mother, or activist. So, what are some solutions to Black women's role strain? As a larger society, it is necessary to address the economic inequalities that leave Black women more vulnerable to role strain. At the individual level, Black women must learn to nurture themselves as well as we nurture others; learn to feel more comfortable refusing unreasonable requests; and develop coping strategies that have traditionally reduced stress among Black women, such as strong social support networks and political activism.

SKIN COLOR AND HAIR TEXTURE

Black women were frequently raped during slavery. This miscegenation or race mixing resulted in a variety of skin colors and hair textures among African Americans. Slave owners used these physical features to create a hierarchy within the slave community. Slaves with dark skin and kinky hair were considered more suitable for field labor. In contrast, Blacks with lighter skin and straighter hair, who were often the offspring of White slave owners, were sometimes given more opportunities, such as education, less strenuous physical labor, and better housing. After emancipation, lighter-skinned Blacks continued to have greater access to higher education and professional jobs. In the early 1900s, they used these physical features to determine admission to schools, churches, and social organizations. In the 1960s we experienced the "Black is beautiful movement," which celebrated the diversity of Black beauty. However, "color consciousness" continues to exist in the form of greater economic opportunities for lighter-skinned African Americans (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992).

Color consciousness also shapes how beauty is perceived in the Black community. Regardless of ethnicity, women are victims of the "beauty myth," a phrase used by Naomi Wolf (1991) to describe "a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement" (p. 10). For Black women, the beauty myth can't be separated from the Mammy image. According to Becky Thompson (1994), "the resilience of the stereotype of the fat black 'mammy' shows the futility and damage of considering standards of beauty as separate from issues of race and racism" (p. 360). Recall that Mammy was portrayed as a dark complexioned, bandanna-clad Black woman. Devaluing dark skin and kinky hair served two purposes. It made Black women appear unattractive to White men, which made it easier to deny the sexual abuse in plantation households. It also created a hierarchy of beauty within the Black community, which continues to exist.

Dark-skinned Black women may experience shame and feelings of unattractiveness. As young girls, they are sometimes given the message

by family members, friends, and the media that they would be more desirable if they had lighter skin and straighter hair. This message can be summarized in the following rhyme (Russell et al., 1992):

> If you're White, you're all right;
> If you're yellow, you're mellow;
> If you're brown, stick around;
> If you're Black, get back.

This message is reinforced in adolescence when they encounter some young men who prefer dating women with more European features. This is not to suggest that all Black women are ashamed of their physical characteristics. Using a sample of college students, Wade (1996) discovered that darker-skinned Black women did *not* rate themselves as less attractive than their lighter-skinned counterparts. However, the preference for light skin remains. Bond and Cash (1992) found that the majority of Black college women, regardless of skin tone, were satisfied with their skin color. Nevertheless, when asked if they could change their skin color, 47 percent desired no skin color change, whereas 36 percent would make their complexion lighter, and only 17 percent wished to be darker. Although the pursuit of light skin does not appear rampant among Black women, the brisk sale of skin lighteners and hair relaxers indicates that many women have a desire to alter their physical appearance. This makes sense because darker-skinned Black women are still somewhat more likely to be economically disadvantaged and perceived as less desirable marriage partners (Russell et al., 1992).

Although light-skinned Black women appear to enjoy more privileges, they can sometimes be the targets of hostility. For example, one Black woman recalls the fights she had with classmates. She wrote: "High yella culud girls with long hair were often moving targets for their darker-hued sisters. When girls went after whuppin' your butt, hair was the first thing they went after" (Muse, 1994, p. 127). These rivalries may continue into adolescence. Although lighter-skinned Black women may appear to enjoy an advantage in the dating game, they may find themselves wondering if they are perceived as desirable dating partners because of their physical appearance more than their personality. In adulthood, "there is pain and privilege inherent in the light skin Black experience" (Cunningham, 1997, p. 399). Their identity may be challenged by Whites who discount their Black heritage, whereas Blacks may be suspicious of their commitment to the African American community. For example, they may be accused of trying to "pass" as White or using their physical appearance to gain unearned opportunities. In response, light-skinned Black women may feel isolated, guilty, and unfairly targeted. Despite these challenges, many light-skinned Black women develop a sense of pride in their racial identity.

The madness around skin color and hair texture can be stopped in several ways. First, the beauty images in the media should reflect the

diversity of Black beauty. This means that we need to value dark skin and kinky hair, physical features that are typically associated with the Mammy image, as much as we value lighter skin and straight hair. Second, Black women can understand how racism and sexism create a beauty myth in which we devalue ourselves and other Black women. After all, "by hating our skin colors, we are buying into the notion that beauty and femininity are a black woman's most important virtue, and we are therefore relinquishing the power to define ourselves" (Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 1987, p. 99). Not surprisingly, Black women who exhibit greater self-esteem and racial identity are less likely to accept oppressive beauty standards. This pride needs to be instilled early in childhood.

EATING DISORDERS

It is estimated that 50 percent of Black women are overweight compared to approximately one-third of White women. Despite these high rates of obesity, many Black women have a positive body image. Acceptance of larger body sizes in the Black community and the rejection of White beauty standards may enable some Black women to maintain body image satisfaction. These cultural factors do not protect all Black women, however. Some may develop eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa, a syndrome of self-induced weight loss in which a person attempts to become thinner despite the unhealthy consequences. Others are vulnerable to bulimia, an eating disorder characterized by binge eating followed by various forms of purging, including self-induced vomiting or laxative abuse (Williamson, 1998).

We cannot discuss eating disorders without considering the influence of the Mammy image. Becky Thompson (1996), a feminist researcher, wrote "these race-biased stereotypes are built on dichotomous portrayals of Black women as forever-large mammies and hoarders of food and White women as frail, weak, and self-denying" (p. 106). The Black woman's economic situation may interact with this image to shape the type of eating disorder she may develop. For example, the Mammy image continues to represent the working conditions of economically disadvantaged Black women. As previously discussed, they are expected to work in low status jobs without getting their financial and emotional needs met. This economic reality, coupled with more lenient weight standards in the Black community, less exercise, and unhealthy dietary habits can result in weight gain. Among some working-class Black women, overeating may provide one of the few socially appropriate ways of dealing with the stress associated with poverty and the emotional deprivation felt in other areas of their lives (Thompson, 1996). One poor Black woman explained why she overeats:

> I work for General Electric making batteries, and, I know it's killing me. My old man is an alcoholic. My kid's got babies. Things are not well with me. And

> one thing I know I can do when I come home is cook me a pot of food and sit down in front of the TV and eat it. And you can't take that away from me until you're ready to give me something in its place (Avery, 1994, p. 7).

In response to her oppression, this woman appears to be overeating and binging. However, her weight gain and possible eating disorder may be overlooked because researchers and doctors believe that obesity is a "natural" condition for poor women. This could potentially lead to a delay in treatment.

In contrast, middle-class Black women may embrace the dominant cultural standards of thinness. The pressure to be thin may be encountered early in life. In her interviews with eating disordered Black women, Thompson (1994) discovered that Black parents, who feel powerless to protect their daughters from racism and sexism, may encourage thinness in an effort to protect them from discrimination against fat people. This pressure to be thin continues into adulthood. As more social and occupational alternatives become available, thinness may be perceived as a ticket to a better life. A "Mammy like" appearance would be deemed unattractive, slovenly, and unprofessional. Thus, unhealthy eating and dieting habits may be used by some Black women to distance themselves from the fat, Mammy image.

In order to understand eating disorders among Black women, we need to look beyond beauty and vanity. We must also consider how their eating patterns are shaped by the trauma associated with racism, sexism, class oppression, and homophobia. These underlying societal problems need to be addressed (Thompson, 1994, 1996). Furthermore body satisfaction appears to be related to a positive racial identity. Perhaps if racial pride could be fostered early in childhood, Black women would experience fewer eating disorders (Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1998).

JEZEBEL

During slavery, Black women's economic value was based on their ability to reproduce. They were frequently stripped naked and examined on the auction block to determine their breeding capacity. When the international slave trade became illegal, rape and forced breeding were used to increase the slave population. Instead of acknowledging this sexual victimization, slave owners portrayed Black women as promiscuous, immoral Jezebels who seduced their masters. This image gave the impression that Black women could not be rape victims because they were chronically promiscuous and always desired sex. Consequently, they were victimized by both White and Black men because there were no legal sanctions against their rape. In contrast, sexual assaults against White women were severely punished, particularly if the assailant was a Black man (Wyatt, 1992).

The Jezebel image continues to shape how we perceive sexual assaults against Black women. A group of researchers presented undergraduates with a scenario of a date between two college students. As expected, they found that a forced sexual encounter would be perceived as less serious if the victim was a Black woman than if the victim was a White woman. Specifically, students were less likely to define the incident as date rape, believe it should be reported to the police, and hold the assailant accountable when the victim was Black (Foley, Evanic, Karnik, King, & Parks, 1995). The authors concluded that "racial history and rape myths thus make African American women more vulnerable to forced sexual encounters while simultaneously making accusations of rape more difficult for them" (p. 15). This is not to diminish the sexual victimization of women from other ethnic backgrounds. However, this racist imagery means that sexual assaults against Black women may not be taken seriously. One solution is to acknowledge the role of the Jezebel image in our discriminatory treatment of victims. By doing this, perhaps Black women can feel more confident that their rapes will be taken seriously (Wyatt, 1992).

The stigma of the Jezebel image may be projected onto nonvictimized Black women, as well. This image can be seen daily on television talk shows, such as *Ricki Lake* and *Jerry Springer*. For example, we commonly see such guests as:

> Connie, a slender, 17-year-old wearing a small tight pink vinyl dress . . . she says to both an audience member and her sister, who redress her about her promiscuity, "If I want to have yo' man, I'll take yo' man" (Hudson, 1998, p. 246).

In this context, Black women are depicted as "sexually and verbally promiscuous, highly fertile, and socially inept" (p. 246), behaviors that are consistent with the Jezebel image. If you do not believe that these images have an impact, consider a study conducted by Gan, Zillmann, and Mitrook (1997). They divided their White undergraduate sample into three groups. The groups were shown videos that featured either sexually seductive Black women singing lyrics such as "Freak Like Me," videos of Black women singing songs of devoted love, or no videos. The groups were then shown slides of unknown, well-dressed, attractive Black and White women and asked to record their perceptions of each person. The students who were exposed to sexual images were more likely to characterize the Black women in the slides as indecent, promiscuous, sleazy, and sluttish. The researchers concluded that "perceived traits and conduct of a rather small sample of female Black rappers were generalized to other members of the population, namely Black women, but not to members of alternative populations, such as White women" (p. 397).

Because this image is so pervasive, it may shape the sexual decision making of some Black women. Specifically, they may act out this image by becoming involved in early sexual activity, which can contribute to sexual

victimization, teen pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). If health care professionals endorse the same attitudes expressed by the students in the Gan et al. (1997) study, they may attribute teen pregnancy and STDs to immorality. Effective intervention requires that we challenge the notion of Black women's promiscuity (West & Williams, 1998).

SAPPHIRE

During slavery the "cult of true womanhood" required middle class, Southern, White women to adhere to a femininity that was characterized by passivity, frailty, and domesticity. In contrast, the traditional standards of womanhood were not applied to Black women. Instead, they were characterized as strong, dominant, and aggressive because they worked in the fields alongside Black men. In order to explain how Black women were able to perform these "male" jobs, slave owners argued ". . . that Black slave women were not 'real' women but were masculinized subhuman creatures . . ." (hooks, 1981, p. 71). This image also served another purpose. It was easier to depict Black women as driving their partners and children away because of their domineering and controlling nature than it was to acknowledge that slave owners divided family members by selling them to different owners.

Today this image has taken the form of Sapphire, a character who was portrayed as the hostile, bitter wife on the 1940s and 1950s Amos and Andy radio and television shows. She encompassed the negative attributes of both Mammy and Jezebel. Hudson (1998) explained that she is "devoid of maternal compassion and understanding (opposite of Mammy yet consistent with Jezebel); she is asexual (consistent with Mammy and opposite of Jezebel)" (p. 246). More recently, the image has taken the form of Aunt Ester on "Sanford and Son," Wanda from "In Living Color," and Sheneneh from the sitcom "Martin." According to Black feminists, the Sapphire image was socially constructed because Black women's anger was perceived as dangerous, threatening, and a challenge to patriarchy. Rather than addressing this justified anger, a racist and sexist society must neutralize this anger by raising doubts about Black women's femininity. The Sapphire image served this purpose by:

> . . . softening images of Black men, to make them seem vulnerable, easygoing, funny and unthreatening to a White audience. She was there as a man in drag, as castrating bitch, as someone the White and Black audience could hate . . . scapegoated on all sides (hooks, 1992, p. 120).

Apparently the media have been effective in their efforts to portray Black women this way. Even today Black women are perceived as having traits that are consistent with the Sapphire stereotype. A significant percent of Weitz and Gordon's (1993) White undergraduate sample perceived Black women as loud, aggressive, and argumentative.

The Sapphire image has the potential to influence how anger is expressed and experienced by Black women. Characteristics of this image, such as active displays of outrage, may be embraced as one of the few "positive" traits available to Black women. After all, being angry feels more empowering than being passive like Mammy or a sexually abused object like Jezebel. As previously discussed, Black women had to be strong and assertive in order to survive. However, the Sapphire image may take the form of "telling it like it is" or using the "truth" as a weapon to hurt others. Some people may characterize these women as mean. However, exhibiting Sapphire traits might be a coping strategy. If you have to do battle on a daily basis, you might as well come out swinging. Therefore, some Black women use an angry, self-protective posture to shield themselves from discrimination, victimization, and disappointment. The problem is that Black women who unfairly lash out in this way may alienate others and unwittingly undermine their support systems, which leaves them without the emotional support that they need (Hooks, 1993). Perhaps these women can learn techniques for expressing anger in more constructive ways. For example, they can learn assertiveness skills or use their anger to form protest actions. Black women who lash out in this way are often self-critical, as well. hooks (1993) recommended that they be helped to move toward a more accepting, gentle attitude toward themselves.

I don't want to give the impression that Black women's anger is unjustified. Like other oppressed groups, Black women have many reasons to be angry. However, when this anger is verbalized, the problem may be denied or the woman may become the target of institutional sexism and racism. As a result, some Black women may avoid appropriate expressions of anger or assertiveness. They may even modify their behavior in an attempt to appear nonthreatening. Black women who are reluctant to express anger for fear of reinforcing the Sapphire image may need to address the negative societal messages about Black women's anger. One specific technique might include emphasizing that Black women have historically used various coping strategies for resisting oppression and expressing anger, ranging from active methods (e.g., protests, confrontations) to covert methods (e.g., feigning illness or ignorance). There are advantages and disadvantages associated with each strategy. Every Black woman must find her own "style" for addressing conflict.

CONCLUSION

In this lecture I provided a historical overview of three images of Black women (Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire). These images derive from historically constructed conditions, were shaped by structural inequalities, such as sexism and racism, and are still perpetuated by the media. Because they are so pervasive, they may influence the psychological functioning of some contemporary Black women. However, I think the Mammy,

Jezebel, and Sapphire images are distortions and misrepresentations of positive traits that have enabled Black women to survive. I agree with Audre Lorde (1984) who wrote that "... if we do not define ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment" (p. 45). This is what members of oppressed groups can do regarding these images. All readers, regardless of their background, can be more aware of these images and challenge them in a more assertive way. By taking an "oppositional gaze," as bell hooks suggested (1992), we can work together to make sure that all groups are fairly and accurately represented.

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PARTNER VIOLENCE

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