# *Lectures on the Psychology of Women*

## *Third Edition*


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# Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire

## 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. As I was 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 (Neville & Hamer, 2001). 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, 2000; West, 1995). If you do not believe that these images still exist, spend an afternoon watching television. Certainly, television programs stereotype many oppressed groups, including women from all ethnic backgrounds, poor people, and sexual minorities (Patton, 2001). However, oppressive images 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)

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 will do in my lecture. First, I will begin with a brief historical overview, which discusses 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 race, gender, and class oppression; and further reinforced by the

media and religious doctrine (Neville & Hamer, 2001; Thomas, 2001). Second, researchers have documented a link between the internalization of negative stereotypes and chronic health problems and psychological distress (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). Consequently, I will explore how these images may influence the psychological functioning of some Black women. Specifically, I will discuss how the Mammy image can contribute to role strain, which is the challenge of balancing multiple roles, and concerns about physical features, including skin color, hair texture, and weight. Next, I will discuss how the Jezebel image shapes perceptions of Black women's sexuality and victimization. Finally, I will explore how Black women's expression of anger is shaped by the Sapphire image.

Although I focus on the lives of African American women, the reader should remember that these stereotypes are experienced across the African Diaspora. For example, these mythical images also influence the lives of African Caribbean women in Britain (Reynolds, 1997). Second, the reader should remember that Black women, both individually and collectively, have actively worked to challenge and change these oppressive images.

## *Mammy*

The Mammy image, 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 . . . . (pp. 12–13)

There is little historic evidence to support the existence of a dutiful Mammy figure. Slavery was not a leisurely lifestyle. Enslaved women were often beaten, overworked, and raped. Consequently, Black women were far from content with their slave status. In response, they ran away or helped other slaves escape, fought back, and in some cases poisoned slave owners (Roberts, 1997). In order to deal with this 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 (Simms, 2001).

We continue to encounter the Mammy image in our daily lives. For example, many of us had breakfast with the smiling Aunt Jemima, an icon

that has appeared on breakfast products for more than a century. In the 1990s, Quaker Oats Company removed her red bandana and eliminated her slave dialect. She no longer declares, "Honey, it's easy to be the sweetheart o' yo family. Yo know how de men folks and de young folks all loves my tasty pancakes." Despite her makeover, there have been Mammy sightings on television. Consider the Pinesol lady, a dark-skinned, slightly overweight, motherly figure who smilingly announces, "Honey, it's rain clean Pinesol." Are we seeing things? In research conducted by Fuller (2001), college students clearly saw the legacy of the Aunt Jemima image. One student remarked, "They're giving an up-to-date Aunt Jemima image to Black women that clean" (p. 128).

Even professional status and education cannot protect Black women from the Mammy image. In 1998, John Gray, an author and psychologist, appeared on the Oprah Winfrey talk show. In response to an audience member's distress, he instructed Ms. Winfrey, one of the most powerful women in the television industry, to give the woman a hug. He went on to say, "Oprah's going to be your mommy. . . . She's the mother of America. That's why she didn't have time for her own kids. She's taking care of all the other little lost children" (Burrelle's Transcripts, 1998, p. 8). If you notice, John Gray's description of Oprah was remarkably similar to Christian's (1980) description of Mammy. Although this interaction may seem subtle or inconsequential, the message is clear: Like their foremothers, contemporary Black women belong in the kitchen, performing domestic services and meeting the emotional needs of others.

## ROLE STRAIN

I do not want to give the impression that caretaking, 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, the economic plight of Black women makes them more vulnerable to role strain. Black women disproportionately earn less, have lower levels of education and job status, and are more likely to be single parents than are their White counterparts. As a result, they must often perform multiple roles without economic security or partner support. In addition, this caretaking role frequently extends beyond the family to a community that is plagued with crime, poverty, and unemployment (McCallum, Arnold, & Bolland, 2002).

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. Extreme care-

taking by African American women has been referred to as *Mammy-ism* (Abdullah, 1998) or *moral masochism* (C. L. Thompson, 2000). Both conditions are characterized by a woman's personal sacrifice, within her family, community, or workplace, at the expense of her own mental and physical health.

Role strain has been linked to feelings of depression. For example, in a study of 100 middle-class Black women, Warren (1997) discovered that increased work responsibilities, coupled with a limited social support system, was related to depression. These feelings are often exacerbated by adherence to the Mammy image (Mitchell & Herring, 1998). In her memoir, Meri Danquah (1998), a young, single mother who was struggling with depression, wrote that "Black women are suppose to be strong—caretakers, nurturers, healers of people—any of the twelve dozen variations of Mammy" (p. 19). It is not surprising that this expectation made it more difficult for her to seek help for her depression.

In some cases, it may be undesirable or emotionally unhealthy to step out of 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 and social inequalities that leave Black women more vulnerable to role strain. This means challenging social and political policies that assume Black women don't need community or government support in the form of child support and adequate daycare (Harris-Lacewell, 2001). At the individual level, Black women must learn to nurture themselves as well as they nurture others; learn to feel more comfortable refusing unreasonable requests; and develop coping strategies that have traditionally reduced stress among Black women, such as developing strong support networks and political activism.

## *SKIN COLOR AND HAIR TEXTURE*

The perception of beauty is influenced by *colorism*, a discriminatory economic and social system that values light-skinned over dark-skinned people. For Black women, perceptions of beauty cannot 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 large, dark-complexioned, bandana-clad Black woman. Devaluing Mammy's physical features reinforced a beauty standard that valued white/light skin; straight, preferably blond hair; and thinness. Collins (2000) reminded us that these physical features "could not be considered beautiful without the Other—Black women with African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair" (p. 89). The portrayal of Black women as unappealing Mammies made it easier to deny the sexual abuse in plantation households. After all, how could slave owners be

attracted to such creatures? However, there was rape and miscegenation, or race mixing, which resulted in a variety of skin colors and hair textures among African Americans.

Slave owners also used these physical features to create a hierarchy of beauty and social status within the enslaved community. Slaves with dark skin and kinky hair were considered less attractive and intelligent[1] and thus more suitable for field labor. In contrast, Blacks with lighter skin and straighter hair, 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 1990s, consistent with the color discrimination perpetrated in the larger society, some Black community members used these physical features to determine admission to schools, churches, and social organizations. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the "Black is beautiful movement" was at its height and celebrated African physical features, such as natural hairstyles and dark skin. However, colorism continues to persist in the larger society and in communities of color, which has implications for Black women's economic, social, and psychological well-being (Hunter, 1998, 2002).

Although many Black women are generally happy with their complexion, we can not ignore the fact that others may experience feelings of shame and 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 a lighter skin color and straighter hair texture (Coard, Breland, & Raskin, 2001). This message can be summarized in the following children's rhyme (Collins, 2000, p. 89):

> 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 physical features. One teenager reflected on a high school crush:

> It was obvious and evident that most if not all of the black boys in my school wanted nothing to do with black girls, which was sort of traumatizing. . . . In the final analysis, I ended up feeling that there was something wrong with him, but it was hell getting there. (Carroll, 1997, pp. 131–132)

[1]Researchers continue to argue that darker-skinned Blacks are less intelligent. Using the National Opinion Research Center's (NORC) opinion poll survey of 1982, Lynn (2002) discovered that Blacks who rated their skin color as "light" performed better on a 10-word vocabulary test. Based on a statistically significant positive correlation of 0.17 between light skin color and intelligence, he concluded that "the level of intelligence in African Americans is significantly determined by the proportion of Caucasian genes" (p. 365).

The consequences of colorism become more pronounced in adulthood. Regardless of ethnicity, beauty is a form of social capital, which means that women who are deemed attractive are more likely to benefit economically, educationally, and romantically (Hunter, 2002). In this hierarchal system, darker-skinned Black women are disadvantaged. Using national surveys, researchers discovered that they were consistently rated less attractive (Hill, 2002). In addition, when compared with their lighter-skinned counterparts, darker-skinned Black women had less education and lower incomes. These differences remained even after controlling for their age and urban residence (Hunter, 1998). In an effort to increase their opportunities, some Black women use skin lighteners and hair relaxers. Although most of these products are generally safe, some Black women have experienced adverse reactions. For example, women in Senegal and other West African nations have reported severe acne and skin discoloration (del Giudice & Yves, 2002). On a positive note, Wade (1996) discovered that darker-skinned Black college women did not rate themselves as less attractive. Furthermore, dark-skinned Black women, particularly if they had economic resources, did not have lower self-esteem (M. S. Thompson & Keith, 2001).

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 reject a beauty myth in which they devalue themselves 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).

## EATING DISORDERS

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2001), more than 50 percent of all American Black women are overweight or obese. Despite their higher levels of obesity, when compared with similar groups of White women, Black women are more likely to have positive body images and are less likely to exhibit eating disorders or unhealthy dieting practices. Researchers speculate that acceptance of larger body sizes in the Black community and the rejection of restrictive White beauty standards may enable some Black women to maintain body satisfaction (Lovejoy, 2001). Of course, these cultural factors do not protect all Black women. Some women develop eating disorders, such as anorexia, 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 (Mulholland & Mintz, 2001).

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 (B. 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 bingeing. 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 be pressured to conform to the dominant cultural standards of thinness. In her interviews with eating-disordered Black women, Becky Thompson (1994) discovered that parents who felt powerless to protect their daughters from racism and sexism discouraged obesity 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, some Black women distance themselves from this image by engaging in unhealthy eating and dieting habits. Margaret Bass (2000) wrote very eloquently about the shame and pain of growing up as a fat Black girl and the challenges of functioning as an overweight, middle-class professional. Although her parents instilled racial pride, which made her appreciate her kinky hair and brown skin color, she was unprepared to resist fat oppression. Despite her educational achievements and professional status, she realized that "my fat belies my new 'white' middle-class status, and I am keenly aware of that each time I enter a room" (p. 225). Her fear of reinforcing the Mammy image made this awareness more painful, because "my fat signifies the perpetuation of a stereotype. . . . I look like 'mammy' without her bandanna" (p. 230).

To conclude, in order to understand eating disorders among Black women, we must consider how their eating patterns are shaped by oppressive images and the trauma associated with racism, sexism, and class oppression (B. Thompson, 1994, 1996). Despite these challenges, Black women who are satisfied with their skin color and body weight express greater overall body satisfaction (Falconer & Neville, 2000). Ultimately, the media, family members, and women, regardless of skin color and body size, must challenge narrow, oppressive beauty standards.

## JEZEBEL

During slavery, Black women's economic value was based on their ability to reproduce.[2] 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

[2]Black women have a long history of being publicly displayed. In 1810, Saartjie Baartman (Sarah Bartmann), an African Woman, was lured to Europe with promises of wealth. Instead, she was dubbed the Hottentot Venus and put on display at parties, circuses, and museums. Researchers and the viewing public were particularly interested in seeing her enlarged buttocks and genitals. Upon her death, she was dissected and her mummified body, skull, skeleton, and disembodied vagina were preserved in specimen jars and displayed at various museums until 1974 (Magubane, 2001). In 2002, after years of protests, her remains were returned to South Africa for a dignified burial.

who seduced their masters. This image gave the impression that Black women could not be rape victims because they always desired sex. Consequently, there were no legal or social sanctions against raping Black women, which meant that they could be victimized by both White and Black men with impunity. In contrast, sexual assaults against White women were severely punished, particularly if the accused was a Black man (Collins, 2000; Roberts, 1997; Simms, 2001).

You may hear the contemporary Jezebel referred to as a "hoochie," "freak," "hoodrat," "chickenhead," or "ho." Although the names have changed, the message is the same: Black women are sexually available and deviant. This image is reinforced in the media, in the form of music videos, rap music, movies, and pornography (Collins, 2000). Jezebel also makes a daily appearance 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 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)

If you do not believe that these images have an impact, consider a study conducted by Gan, Zillman, and Mitrook (1997). They divided their White undergraduate sample into three groups. The groups were shown videos that featured sexually seductive Black women singing lyrics such as "Freak Like Me," videos of Black women singing songs of devoted love, or no videos. Next the groups were shown slides of unknown, well-dressed, attractive Black and White women and then asked to record their perceptions of each person. The students who were exposed to the sexually seductive videos were more likely to characterize the Black women in the slides as indecent, promiscuous, sleazy, and sluttish. The researchers concluded that the "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). Although these images may have negative consequences for some African American women, some Black feminists argue that music videos can be used to "reclaim and revise the controlling images, specifically 'the Jezebel,' to express sexual subjectivity" (Emerson, 2002, p. 133). This means that some Black female artists are reconstructing the Jezebel image to depict Black women's sexuality as positive and enjoyable, as, for example, in the Salt n' Pepa song "Lets Talk about Sex."

Despite efforts to deconstruct the Jezebel image, stereotypes about Black sexuality continue to influence our perceptions of rape survivors (George & Martinez, 2002; West, 2002). For example, 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 were a Black woman than if the victim were a White woman. Specifically, students were less likely to define

the incident as date rape, believe that 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).

The Jezebel image influences perceptions of partner violence as well. For instance, Gillum (2002) investigated the link between stereotypic images of Black women and intimate partner violence in the Black community. Although 94 percent of the African American men in this sample endorsed positive beliefs about African American women, 48 percent also endorsed the Jezebel stereotype, which was measured by items such as "African American women are likely to sleep around." The belief in this stereotype was positively related to the justification of domestic violence against Black women. These findings do not diminish the sexual and physical victimization of women from other ethnic backgrounds. However, this racist imagery means that sexual and physical assaults against Black women may be taken less seriously. One solution is to acknowledge the role of the Jezebel image in our discriminatory treatment of victims. As a result, Black women may be more willing to disclose their rapes and seek assistance (West, 2002).

## SAPPHIRE

During slavery, the "cult of true womanhood" required middle-class, Southern, White women to adhere to a standard of 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 concluded "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 stereotype, also referred to as the Matriarch image, is used to blame Black women for social problems, such as inner-city poverty and the high incarceration rates of Black youth. Supposedly, her unwillingness to conform to traditional female roles—for example, being a stay-at-home mother and wife—resulted in lower moral values, single-parenthood, and the emasculation of Black men (Collins, 2000; Roberts, 1997).

The media reinforced this image in the form of Sapphire, a character who was portrayed as the hostile, nagging wife on the 1940s and 1950s

*Amos 'n' Andy* radio and television shows. After years of complaints, the show was taken off the broadcast schedule in 1953 (hooks, 1992). However, the Sapphire image continues to reappear on television and in the movies. Sometimes, Black women's anger is depicted as violent and dangerous. For example, she is Bernadine, played by Angela Bassett, the scorned wife who sets fire to her husband's expensive suits and luxury vehicle in the movie *Waiting to Exhale*. We also see the Sapphire image in the movie *Set It Off*, which depicts four poor Black women who resort to bank robbery. The character Cleo, played by Queen Latifah, suggests that Black lesbians are particularly dangerous. Generally, however, Black women's anger is depicted as funny. For instance, a comical example of a Sapphire image is Pam, the verbally abusive friend on the sitcom *Martin* (Springer, 2001). According to Black feminist scholars, the Sapphire image was socially constructed because Black women's anger was perceived as dangerous, threatening, and challenging to patriarchy. Rather than addressing this justified anger, the media and society minimized this anger by making it humorous and raising doubts about Black women's femininity (hooks, 1992).

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 resilient and assertive in order to survive. However, anger becomes dangerous when it reaches the "Sapphire level," defined by Childs and Palmer (2001) as a response "that takes an argument to the extreme, which includes losing the perspective of the situation, becoming verbally or physically abusive, throwing things, and venturing into tactics that are below the belt" (p. 5). Some people may characterize these women as mean. However, exhibiting Sapphire traits may be a coping strategy for some women. 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 women who unfairly lash out in this way may alienate others and unwittingly undermine their support system, which leaves them without the emotional support that they need. 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. Women who lash out in this way are often self-critical, as well. It is recommended that they develop a more accepting, gentle attitude toward themselves (Childs & Palmer, 2001; Mitchell, & Herring, 1998).

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 (Childs & Palmer, 2001; Mitchell & Herring, 1998; Thomas, 2001).

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

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