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sister citizen: shame, stereotypes, and black women in America

Melissa V. Harris-Perry, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2011, 392pp., ISBN: 978-0300165418, Hardcover, \$21.00

In *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, political scientist Melissa V. Harris-Perry explores what it means to be a Black woman and an American citizen when the two seem diametrically opposed. She posits that misrecognition, stereotypes and shame circumscribe African-American women's lives and influence their political decisions. At the same time, she shows how Black women resist this mislabelling and strive to define themselves and their experiences.

The text hinges on a post-World War II cognitive psychology study about field dependence, in which 'subjects were placed in a crooked chair in a crooked room and then asked to align themselves vertically' (p. 29). In Chapter 1, the author explains that she uses the study as a metaphor for Black women's experience in the United States, as standing in a 'crooked room' and trying to navigate their way through the stereotypes that circumscribe their lives. She introduces one aspect of her research methodology that she utilises more fully later in the text: several focus groups of Black women who were given the task of identifying stereotypes about Black women and then discussing how they combat them. She does so with an eye towards understanding how these 'distorted images and painful stereotypes about black women'—the Jezebel, Sapphire and Mammy—that make America a crooked room for African-American women, can help us understand 'how these stereotypes influence black women as political actors' (p. 32).

In Chapter 2, the author treats more fully the stereotypes introduced in Chapter 1. In order to facilitate her exploration, she cites some well-publicised examples of them and interprets the responses from the 'ordinary women' in her focus groups, offering a counter-balance to her discussion of public figures. She buttresses it all with lucid discussions of the effects of these stereotypes on public policy, as well as Black women and men themselves. In Chapter 3, she defines 'shame', making a distinction between constructive or 'integrative shaming', which is done lovingly, and destructive or 'stigmatising shaming', meant to alienate or denigrate. She explores the state's role in shaming as she posits that, historically, the United States has defined African-Americans as malignant. Through her discussion of Jim Crow

and beyond, the author argues for the existence of stigmatising shame as negatively impacting African-American life and 'sisters' lives in particular.

In Chapter 4, the author turns her attention to two contemporary 'disasters' in order to illustrate processes of misrecognition and shaming of Black women. The first is the natural disaster of Hurricane Katrina and the even greater human disaster or 'catastrophe of misrecognition' (p. 136) in its wake. Harris-Perry focuses on the experience and use of Black women during that 'after natural' disaster in 2005 to delineate not only how the Black women perceived their own treatment by the state as part of a larger racial group, but also the differences between White and Black perceptions of the events that unfolded following the levees' breaking. She then explores the very fraught Duke University Lacrosse case in which a Black woman accused several lacrosse players of raping her and the fallout when 'physical DNA evidence cleared the young men of any sexual misconduct' (p. 158). In Chapter 5, Harris-Perry argues that although the myth of the strong Black woman 'serves as a constructive role model because black women draw encouragement and self-assurance from an icon able to overcome great obstacles' (p. 184), it is also a prison, because it helps craft an expectation that African-American women 'should be autonomously responsible and self-denying caregivers in their homes and communities' (p. 185).

Chapter 6 discusses how God and, by extension, the church are central to Black women's survival. However, the church has not always supported Black women because of its strict patriarchal structure. Although the author speculates that womanist perspectives may be 'just another crooked image that encourages black women to take on yet another responsibility for others' (p. 251), she proposes that they may embrace womanist contributions to the religious faith in such a way as to 'straighten the shame-producing images of the crooked room' (p. 265) in which Black women are trying to stand up, both within and beyond the church.

The final chapter discusses Michelle Obama's 'homegrown' background as the descendant of enslaved people. As she fits so neatly into the American racial framework, Obama was subjected to the distorting images of the crooked room that Harris-Perry has discussed throughout the text. Although Harris-Perry believes that Obama, as 'the most visible contemporary example of an African-American woman working to stand straight in a crooked room' (p. 271), has successfully resisted the stereotyping that was thrust upon her, she also shows how little this highly visible figure has fostered a fundamental paradigm shift, providing data from 'ordinary sisters' culled from her focus groups, as well as the example of a less visible, although successful, woman who was publicly and wrongly vilified, the former USDA Georgia director of rural development, Shirley Sherrod.

Although one reviewer has commented that 'the book wobbles as it straddles academic rigor and mainstream accessibility, intimacy and analysis',¹ I think it evidences how personal the project was to the author. Moreover, the text is

1 Clark, A. 'Book Review: Melissa

squarely positioned within the tradition of Black feminist scholars who work through and across boundaries in order to make larger social and political claims centred on the intersections of race and gender.

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Harris-Perry's *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes and Black Women in America*, <http://isak.typepad.com/isak/2011/12/book-review-sister-citizen-shame-stereotypes-and-black-women-in-america-by-melissa-harris-perry.html>, last accessed December 10, 2011.