

Debunking Angry Black Woman

By Vanessa E. Jones
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CLEVELAND, Ohio — Stereotypes about black women have coursed through pop culture for centuries. They range from the smiling, asexual, and often obese Mammy to the promiscuous Jezebel who lures men with her sexual charms. But the one getting a major workout these days is the angry black woman.

"It's the workhorse," says Gail Wyatt, author of the acclaimed 1997 book on black female stereotypes "Stolen Women: Reclaiming Our Sexuality, Taking Back Our Lives."

"The black woman who's achievement-oriented, kind of no-nonsense, overworked, exhausted, not particularly kind or compassionate, but very driven." This tart-tongued, neck-rolling, loud-mouthed sister reigns on reality television.

You see elements of her in Alicia Calaway of "Survivor: All-Stars," who indulged in a temperamental bout of finger wagging during an argument in 2001's "Survivor: The Australian Outback." Coral Smith, who rules with an iron tongue on MTV's "Real World/Road Rules Challenge: The Inferno," browbeat one female castmate so badly a week ago that she challenged Smith to a fight. Then there's Omarosa Manigault-Stallworth of "The Apprentice," who rode the angry-black-woman stereotype to the covers of People and TV Guide magazines even as she made fellow African American business-women wince.

Looking for comic relief? In the fictitious worlds of film and television, it's usually found in the form of a raving ABW. Think Wanda Sykes, whose character on HBO's "Curb Your Enthusiasm" gives Larry David a regular tongue-lashing. Or Eve's role as Terri, who shouts her way through 2002's "Barbershop" and its recent sequel, "Barbershop 2: Back in Business."

"You see this character so often in movies," Wyatt says. "They're always telling somebody off. The media plays a very strong role in perpetuating the stereotype."

Today, the ABW is so ingrained in society that the tag gets slapped on any African American woman in a position of power. Consider National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, who was shown on TV and in newspapers looking monumentally peeved last month after former counterterrorism adviser Richard Clarke began chastising his former boss for failing to adequately fight terrorism. It was a revelation to see her smiling in the face of a barrage of questions when she testified on April 8 in front of the 9/11 Commission.

Now a new book by a trio of black women in their 20s and 30s seems poised to prompt debate about whether this stereotype is toothless enough to joke about. It's called "The Angry Black Woman's Guide to Life," and its 146 pages are filled with ironic chapter titles such as "I'm an ABW and Proud of It" and helpful hints on how to deal with anger-inducing lovers, children, friends, and co-workers. The authors even have a Web site, angryblack-woman.com, that crowned Manigault-Stallworth its first ABW of the month.

It's humor that teeters on the edge of impropriety. On the one hand, coauthor Denene Millner says, "We didn't want people to read the cover and stereotype all black women as angry like the rest of society tends to do." On the other, she says, "This is real. Everybody completely gets it when we say 'angry black women': black women, black men, white men. What we wanted to

show to our reader is there's a lot of humor in this."

The ABW label is so hateful to others that they fail to see the joke.

"I don't connect to stereotypes about black women that I don't think are positive," says Wyatt, 59. In her mind the myth of the ABW simply pigeonholes and marginalizes African-Americans. "To combine black women with 'angry black women' limits our ability to understand black women's context. Some women are angry because they are tired or they have been overlooked or

they're not taken seriously or they are being rejected.

What we don't want is to convey that that's the way black women ought to act."

The authors of "Guide to Life" don't encourage black women to act out.

"We said, 'Hey, what's so bad about being angry?'" says Angela Burt-Murray, coauthor of the book. "There's plenty to be angry about. Anger has sparked change in history. If we're able to harness our anger and use our anger for good, we'd be able to get things done."

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