

Author debunks myth about angry Black women

By Vanessa E. Jones
Special to Sentinel-Voice
CLEVELAND (NNPA) - 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 ste-

reotype to the covers of People and TV Guide magazines even as she made fellow African-American businesswomen 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 Website, angryblackwoman.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, another 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."

The idea for the humor book was hatched last summer when Millner, Burt-Murray, and Mitzi Miller worked for the now-defunct

magazine Honey. The editors needed an idea for the humor column. Burt-Murray shot out an interoffice e-mail pitching the idea, angryblackwoman.com, "where people can sign up to have someone that did them wrong cursed out good and righteous for a low fee of \$19.95 a month — cause you know don't nobody curse somebody out like a sistah." Everyone laughed, and Millner, Burt-Murray, and Miller thought the idea was so good they pitched it to publishers. The book reached store shelves late last month. Soon, the editors left for other magazine jobs: Burt-Murray became executive editor at Teen People, Miller was hired as an associate editor at Jane,

and Millner began working as an articles editor at Parenting. They completed the book by gathering every Saturday at Millner or Burt-Murray's home in South Orange, N.J. What everyone can agree upon is that Rice is the current poster child for the stereotype, with her gravity-defying hair and stern face.

Millner hopes that recent events have elevated Rice from an "In-Denial" ABW to a "Silent-Stewer-That-Plots-Your-Demise." "I really do believe she's being pushed out as the fall guy for the shortcomings of the administration," Millner says. "If she's not mad, she needs to be."

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Teens

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my hair and nails done," said girl. In addition to dating older men, many teen girls openly participate in lesbian relationships.

Other major findings include many variations of traditional dating relationships.

Teenage boys' attitudes toward dating mirrored that of many men.

Both have their special girlfriend, referred to as their "wifey," but they also have other women who are just casual sex partners, referred to as "shorties."

There appears to be a lack of trust many teen boys feel toward their counterparts. This results in name-calling and huge levels of disrespect for teen girls. The lack of respect may also be the reason African-American girls have very little social status in their communities.

Often a girl will become sexually active to gain respect or just to be liked.

"The norm is to be active. If a young lady declines sex, she is made to feel odd and will reconsider. She believes that the young man will just move on to another female and have sex. So she may give in just to have a man," said Maisha Hamilton-Bennett, a clinical psychologist with Hamilton Holistic Healthcare in Chicago.

Dr. Frances Cress Welsing, psychiatrist and author of The Isis Papers, a book that

examines the dynamics of racism and White supremacy on people of color, said we must begin to talk about sex in the entire society.

"Low-income Black teens are being fed a negative image of themselves by the dominant society which determines what happens in economics, education, entertainment, labor, laws, political, religion, sex and war," said Welsing.

One White communication researcher agreed.

"Blacks watch more television and are more dependent on television for their views about the world. More affluent people have other forms of recreation and education. Blacks are not in control of what appears on television about them. Therefore, they are heavily influenced by what is portrayed," said George Gerbner.

MEE believes that the media needs to imbibe socially responsible messages. School-based sex education should give more comprehensive information about sex, starting in elementary school.

Health care providers must become more youth friendly. And parents should communicate more effectively with their children and get back to traditional African-centered values.

Valencia Mohammad writes for the Afro Newspapers.

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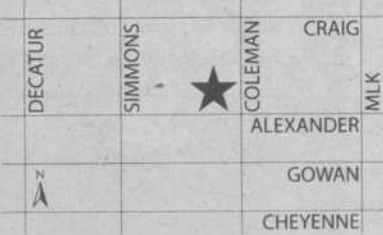
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