



Charisse Jones
and
Kumea Shorter-Gooden, Ph.D.

“Always moving, at times haunting,
and often inspirational, *Shifting*
provides a richly textured look at
the lives of Black women.”

—Bebe Moore Campbell,
author of *What You Owe Me*

Shifting

Based on the African American Women's Voices Project

The Double Lives of
Black Women in America



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For my mother, Jean, the beacon whenever I lose my way,
For Olive and Irene, grandmothers who paved the road,
And for Camille, a sister and a friend.

Thank you.

Charisse

In memory of my grandmothers, Ella and Rosa,
And to my mother, Margaret,
And my sister, Wendy,
And my daughter, Adia,
With love and appreciation for the gifts you have given me,
And the gift you have been to me.

Kamea

THE ROOTS OF SHIFTING

Black women are seen as "hot in the pants," tough and strong, able to withstand a lot of physical and emotional abuse, unfeeling. . . . I find this to be demeaning, degrading, and unproven. Yet I find myself constantly trying to disprove them.

CECILIA, 52, HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

The Gifts of Black Women in America

Black women in America have learned to find humor in heartache, to see beauty in the midst of desperation and horror. They have been both caregivers and breadwinners, showing incredible strength and resilience, unflinching loyalty, boundless love and affection. They have risen above centuries of oppression so that, today, after years of dealing with society's racist and sexist misconceptions, with its brutal hostilities and unthinkable mistreatment, not only are they supporting families, they're leading corporations, major media organizations, the military, our state and federal governments. Black women have often been the champions on our nation's sports teams, breaking Olympic records, guiding the nation to victory. They have assumed a prominent place in the culture of our times both in the United States and abroad, contributing great literature, journalism, music, dance, theater, science. They have etched anew the cultural landscape with their courage and vision. Maya Angelou. Oprah Winfrey. Mae Jemison.

Venus Williams. Alfre Woodard. Judith Jamison. Faith Ringgold. Lauryn Hill. Ruby Dee: bell hooks. Carol Moseley-Braun. Anna Deavere Smith. Faye Wattleton. Toni Morrison. Johnnetta Cole. There are so many brilliantly talented, beautiful, deeply thoughtful and intelligent African American women who are shaping our world today and doing everything possible to make it a richer and better place.

Black women have so much to offer our country, so many gifts to share with all of us. And yet, as a society and as a nation, we have never quite stopped to appreciate the truth of their experience, the verity of what it feels like to be Black and female, the reality that no matter how intelligent, competent, and dazzling she may be, a Black woman in our country today still cannot count on being understood and embraced by mainstream White America.

As a society, we know very little about the psychology of Black women, a group of 19 million people—7 percent of the U.S. population.¹ The way they experience the workplace, the complexities of their romantic lives, the challenges they face as mothers and grandmothers, their spiritual and religious practices, these and so many other aspects of their lives are largely unknown to the wider community. Being ignored and poorly understood likely explains why so many Black women today still feel profoundly unhappy about their place in society. In a June 2002 Gallup poll, 61 percent of Black women said they were dissatisfied with “how Blacks are treated in society.”² For Black men, the rate of dissatisfaction was lower—47 percent. In the same poll, 48 percent of Black women, in contrast to 26 percent of White women, said they were dissatisfied with “how women are treated in society.”

Black women in America have many reasons to feel this deep sense of dissatisfaction. As painful as it may be to acknowledge, their lives are still widely governed by a set of old oppressive myths circulating in the White-dominated world. Based upon those fictions, if a Black woman is strong, she cannot be beautiful and she cannot be feminine. If she takes a menial job to put food on the table and send her children to school, she must not be intelligent. If she is able to keep her family together and see her children to success, she must be tough

and unafraid. If she is able to hold her head high in spite of being sexually harassed or accosted, she must be oversexed or promiscuous. If she travels the globe, she must be ferrying drugs rather than simply trying to see the world. Fifty-year-old Melissa from Los Angeles articulates what she finds most challenging about being a Black woman in America today: “Believing what I know and not what I’m told, and beginning to understand the divide. *I am a Black woman. I am moral. I am intelligent. I am lovable. I am valuable.* But the majority of the messages I get all say that I’m not. . . . I don’t know how I do it.”

While most people of color, and African Americans in particular, are perceived through a distorted lens, Black women are routinely defined by a specific set of grotesque caricatures that are reductive, inaccurate, and unfair: bell hooks of the City College of New York enumerates these “gendered racist stereotypes” that include the emasculating Sapphire, the desexualized Mammy, and the scheming temptress Jezebel.³ Today, in the twenty-first century, these and other stereotypes, so prevalent in old Hollywood movies and black-and-white television reruns, have mutated into contemporary versions of their old selves. Sapphire, for instance, can inevitably be found with just a few clicks of the remote control in an old episode of *NYPD Blue* or *Law and Order* when police make their way into a poor Black neighborhood. Sapphire is harsh, loud, uncouth, usually making the other characters seem more professional, more charming, more polished by contrast. She is a twisted take on the myth that Black women are invulnerable and indefatigable, that they always persevere and endure against great odds without being negatively affected. This is one myth that many Black women themselves embrace, and so they take on multiple roles and myriad tasks, ignoring the physical and emotional strain, fulfilling the stereotype. There is peer pressure among Black women to keep the myth alive, to keep juggling, to keep accommodating. Some women who desperately need balance in their lives, who greatly need assistance, never seek or receive it. Instead, their blood pressure soars. They overeat. They sink into depression. Some kill themselves or try. Others simply fantasize about making an escape.

Indeed, society's stubborn myths continue to do tremendous damage to Black women. They often seep into their inner psyches and become permanently internalized, battering them from within even if they're able, for a time, to wriggle free and live the truth. Stereotypes based on race, gender, and social class make it hard to trust oneself and to trust others who look or behave like you do. They set confusing parameters on who you think you are, and what you believe you should or can become. They often dictate what you expect, what seems real, and what seems possible.

The African American Women's Voices Project

Over the last two years, the two of us—Kunee, a clinical psychologist and professor at Alliant International University, Los Angeles, and Charisse, a New York-based correspondent for *USA Today*—have completed the African American Women's Voices Project, an extensive research project designed to explore the impact of racism and sexism on Black women in America. We set out to learn about African American women's experiences of racial and gender stereotypes, bias, and discrimination; what it feels like; and how they react and respond to it. We wanted to know about the impact of racism and sexism on different aspects of their lives, on their self-image, their relationships with men, their lives as mothers, their experiences in church, and their experiences in the work world. We wanted to hear about whether, to what extent, and in what ways Black women change how they behave in order to counter the myths and manage direct acts of discrimination. We wanted to learn about internal changes as well, the emotional responses to and consequences of prejudice, the invisible toll of bigotry on their individual lives.

Ours is the largest, most comprehensive study to date of African American women's perceptions and experiences of racism and sexism. A number of studies have focused on Black women's experiences of racial bias and discrimination, and others have focused on gender stereotypes and prejudice, but few, like ours, have looked at both areas of discrimination simultaneously and how they connect and intersect

with one another. The existing research on Black women's experiences of racial or gender bias tends to be characterized by a small number of research participants, often a few dozen women; a research sample that represents a particular segment of the Black female population, for example, Black female college students or Black female managers; and samples that are geographically limited, often restricted to one or two colleges, a handful of workplaces, or one metropolitan area. As described below, our study includes a large number of women from across the country of diverse ages and backgrounds. Moreover, our research, unlike many other studies, entailed listening very closely to how Black women make sense of their lives, to the words and voices they use to evoke their experiences.

The psychology of Black women has gotten short shrift in the national discourse, mostly due to indifference and the same racial and gender prejudice that shadows Black women's lives. But it is now critical that we pay attention. The rates of hypertension, depression, and AIDS among African American women have reached crisis proportions. Understanding the pressures Black women live with, and the compromises that they make mentally, emotionally, and physically, is of utmost importance. Their lives may depend on it. Thus, the African American Women's Voices Project.

The project included a survey and in-depth interviews. With the generous and diligent assistance of research assistants located throughout the country, all of whom are Black women, we collected surveys from 333 women, ages 18 to 88, who reside in 24 states and Washington, D.C.: from large cities such as Los Angeles, Phoenix, Chicago, Dallas, New York, and Atlanta, to suburbs in New Haven County, Connecticut, and Prince George's County, Maryland; from small towns in New Jersey, Ohio, and Alabama to rural areas in Kentucky and Arkansas.⁴ We were able to obtain responses from a remarkably diverse cross section of Black women in America—women of different ages, educational backgrounds, incomes, marital statuses, and sexual orientations. The survey, which has mostly open-ended questions, asks women to write briefly about their perceptions of stereotypes of Black women, their major difficulties as Black women, whether and in what

ways they've experienced racial and gender discrimination, whether they feel pressured to behave differently, and what helps them to "make it." It also inquires about their joys as Black women—what they love about being Black and female. (See Appendix for more details on the survey and the findings.)

In addition to the surveys, we conducted in-depth interviews with 71 women throughout the United States.⁵ The interviewees range in age from 18 to 80 and represent many walks of life.⁶ Though the sample of women who were surveyed and interviewed is neither random nor representative of Black women in the United States, it provides a meaningful glimpse of the diversity of Black women across the country. Along with the research we conducted, another source of data is Kumea's experience as a psychologist. Some examples come from clinical class.

Many of the women we interviewed commented on how deeply moving it was to be asked about areas of their lives that other people generally express little interest in and offer little understanding of. Some wept during their time with us, and told us how cathartic it felt to have the chance—sometimes for the first time ever—to talk openly about the truth of their lives as Black women.

The "Shifting" Principle and Other Key Findings of the African American Women's Voices Project

In the testimony of the women who participated in the African American Women's Voices Project, by far the most resounding theme is that Black women in America find that they still must deal with pervasive race- and gender-based myths. Of the women we surveyed, 97 percent acknowledge that they are aware of negative stereotypes of African American women and 80 percent confirm that they have been personally affected by these persistent racist and sexist assumptions.⁷

Our research shows that in response to this relentless oppression, Black women in our country have had to perfect what we call "shifting," a sort of subterfuge that African Americans have long practiced to ensure their survival in our society. Perhaps more than any other

group of Americans, Black women are relentlessly pushed to serve and satisfy others and made to hide their true selves to placate White colleagues, Black men, and other segments of the community. They shift to accommodate differences in class as well as gender and ethnicity. From one moment to the next, they change their outward behavior, attitude, or tone, shifting "White," then shifting "Black" again, shifting "corporate," shifting "cool." And shifting has become such an integral part of Black women's behavior that some adopt an alternate pose or voice as easily as they blink their eyes or draw a breath—without thinking, and without realizing that the emptiness they feel and the roles they must play may be directly related.

The ways in which a Black woman shifts have of course changed over time. An enslaved woman or a Black woman living under the heel of Jim Crow would have to shift literally, casting her eyes downward, moving her body off a sidewalk or to the back of a crowded bus when a White passenger came into view. Today, shifting is more subtle and insidious—keeping silent when a White colleague sexually harasses her, for fear she will not be believed; acting eager but not aggressive at work, so as not to alienate a White boss; and then shifting again at home to appease a Black man who himself has to live with the pain and unfairness of society's prejudices and hate.

Shifting is what she does when she speaks one way in the office, another way to her girlfriends, and still another way to her elderly relatives. It is what may be going on when she enters the beauty parlor with dreadlocks and leaves with straightened hair, or when she tries on five outfits every morning looking for the best camouflage for her ample derriere.

And shifting is often internal, invisible. It's the chipping away at her sense of self, at her feelings of wholeness and centeredness—often a consequence of living amidst racial and gender bias.

To shift is to work overtime when you are exhausted to prove that you are not lazy. It is the art of learning how to ignore a comment you believe is racist or to address it in such a way that the person who said it doesn't label you threatening or aggressive. It is overpreparing for an honors class to prove that you are capable, intelligent, and hard-working or

trying to convince yourself that you are really okay no matter what the broader society says about you. It is feeling embarrassed by another African American who seems to lend a stereotype truth, and then feeling ashamed that you are ashamed. And sometimes shifting is fighting back.

There are few high-achieving Black women who are not adept at shifting, and few others who, whatever their proficiency, do not find that they must shift in order to survive. But sometimes in their endless quest to prove themselves and put others at ease, many Black women break down emotionally or physically under the pressure, their lives stripped of joy. Sometimes they are unable to withstand the onslaught of negative messages. Their sense of self falters as they start to believe the falsehoods, doubting their own worth, questioning their own capabilities. They become susceptible to an array of psychological problems, including anxiety, low self-esteem, disordered eating, depression, and even outright self-hatred. They may have made others comfortable, but left themselves feeling conflicted, weary, and alone.

The devastating impact that shifting can have on a woman's psyche and soul is far more obvious today, if only because there are now statistics to document it. Our research and that of other colleagues suggests that the disconnect between who one is and who one must pretend to be can be tremendously damaging. Research consistently shows that Black women are less happy and experience more discontent than Black men, White men, or White women.⁸ For example, in a National Center for Health Statistics study of more than 43,000 U.S. adults, Black women were three times as likely as White men and twice as likely as White women to have experienced distressing feelings, like boredom, restlessness, loneliness, or depression, in the past two weeks.⁹ Our analysis of the survey and interview data from the African American Women's Voices Project reveals that racist and sexist attitudes and discriminatory behavior are still taking a significant toll on Black women. Specifically we found that:

- *Race discrimination against Black women persists.* Fully 90 percent of the women we surveyed say they have experienced discrimination,

and 10 percent specifically remember being called a "nigger" at one point in their lives.

- *Gender discrimination against Black women is also pervasive.* Sixty-nine percent of the survey respondents report that they have experienced bias or discrimination based on gender.

- *Most Black women "shift" their behavior to accommodate others.* A majority (58 percent) of the women in our survey indicate that at times they have changed the way they act in order to fit in or be accepted by White people. Of this group, 79 percent say that to gain such acceptance, they have changed the way they speak, toned down their manners, talked about what they felt White people were interested in, and avoided controversial topics.

- *Discrimination is experienced most frequently at work.* While Black women respond to racism and sexism in various arenas, it is the workplace where they encounter it most often. Sixty-nine percent of the survey respondents say that they have experienced racial or gender discrimination at work, and issues related to the workplace, including getting hired, being paid equitably and being promoted fairly, emerged as the major difficulties in being a Black woman.

- *Black women frequently submerge their talents and strengths to support Black men.* Forty percent of the women surveyed have at times downplayed their abilities or strengths with Black men. In the most extreme cases, Black women who don't feel good about themselves, who feel pressure to fulfill traditional gender roles by being passive and submissive, or who feel that they must give up parts of themselves in order to secure and keep a male partner may put themselves at risk for emotional abuse, violence, and even HIV infection.

- *Sexual abuse and harassment of Black women is all too frequent.* Many Black women suffer silently as victims of childhood sexual abuse or adult sexual harassment, sexual assault, or rape. The myths and stereotypes about Black women being promiscuous may make it more difficult for Black women to feel comfortable speaking up about their abuse experiences, and the tendency to be silent about gender abuse in the Black community makes it particularly difficult if the perpetrator is a Black male.

- *There is increasing pressure on Black women to meet conventional beauty standards.* From early childhood through adulthood, many Black women, pressured to be physically attractive and to live up to Eurocentric beauty standards, experience tremendous pain and shame related to their skin color, hair texture, body shape, or weight. The feeling of being unattractive haunts many Black women and impacts their self-esteem and relationships with men. These feelings can also put Black women at risk for eating disorders, to which they were previously thought to be immune.
- *Black mothers are acutely aware of having to train their children to cope with discrimination.* Mothering Black children involves the usual parental tasks of providing for the child's basic needs and supplying nurture and guidance, but in addition Black mothers are almost always involved in socializing their girls and boys to cope with the reality of racism, and they are often engaged in educating their girls about the dynamics of sexism. Racial/gender socialization is a central focus of many Black mothers, particularly if they are raising children in predominantly non-Black areas.
- *Black women have a disproportionately high risk for depression.* Black women are at particularly high risk for depressive symptoms and clinical depression. Yet Black women often mask their depression, submerging it in busyness, martyrdom, overeating, or overspending.
- *Black women often feel discriminated against within their churches.* Though many Black women are deeply spiritual and rely greatly on their faith to buoy them during difficult times, many feel that their gender makes them second-class citizens within traditional Christian churches.

Our findings, and the conclusions we've drawn from a review of related research conducted by other investigators, indicate that much of the physical and emotional distress that Black women in America experience today is a consequence of racism and sexism, and particularly of society's stubborn myths about who they are and can be.

America's Myths

While research reveals that Black women are misunderstood and mistreated for a complex array of reasons, the women in our study point to five central sets of myths and stereotypes that confront them again and again.

First, Black women regularly receive the message that they are inferior to other people. Many African American women find that they must routinely struggle to disprove this untruth, often going to great lengths simply to demonstrate that they are as intelligent, competent, trustworthy, and reliable as their non-Black friends, associates, and coworkers.

Second, there is the myth that Black women are unshakable, that somehow they are physically and emotionally impervious to life's most challenging events and circumstances. The stereotype of the strong, tough Black woman is pervasive in American society, and many women in our study lament how hard it is for them to express and accept their own disappointments and vulnerabilities. The pressure to maintain such an image can be immense, and behind the facade, there is often tremendous sorrow.

Given the societal tendency to see masculine and feminine qualities as diametrical opposites, it is not surprising that Black women, deemed strong, invulnerable, and unshakable, are also stereotyped as unfeminine. Moreover, since White women presumably provide the ideal model of femininity, and because Black women don't fit the same mold, they are mythologized as domineering, demanding, emasculating, and coarse. To avoid being labeled overbearing, or too assertive, a Black woman may suppress her opinions and her voice. She may mute her personality.

Fourth, there is the myth that Black women are especially prone to criminal behavior. Numerous women speak of experiences in which salespeople, police officers, security guards, and even colleagues at work falsely perceive them as dishonest and untrustworthy, as law-breaking crooks who must be watched at every moment.

Finally, Black women continue to be perceived as sexually promiscuous and irresponsible. Many Black women in America are disrespected, objectified, sexually harassed, and sexually abused. Tragically, the Black community itself often ignores the extent of this mistreatment.

For many women, dealing with these myths means stashing away their dreams. Ashley,¹⁰ a talented actress and singer from Chicago, put off becoming a professional cabaret performer until she was in her late thirties, and hesitated even then to tell certain people that she was on stage, because she didn't want to be viewed as "one of those," a Black woman who would fulfill a stereotype by "grinning, and entertaining the White people." For years Ashley toiled in unfulfilling jobs because she was afraid of confirming the stereotype of Black people as mindless entertainers. "It made me old," she remembers of the days spent doing work that did not interest or challenge her.

Edna, a 38-year-old New Yorker, asks a poignant question: "Is there some place I can go and be seen and be heard as a human being, just as a human being? Can my humanness be heard while you're looking at a Black woman?"

The Myth of Inferiority

Lucinda gave up her house in Berkeley last year for an apartment in a luxurious high-rise building in San Francisco. She wanted to be closer to her job in a downtown brokerage firm, but she missed her old neighborhood. The folks in her co-op didn't say good morning to each other. Instead of a backyard, she had a small wrought-iron balcony dotted with petunias and impatiens. And she hadn't been living in her new building more than a few weeks before a disturbing pattern began to emerge. Her new neighbors never seemed to believe that she actually lived there.

About two months after she had moved in, Lucinda was waxing her Honda Accord behind the apartment building when a slender brunette approached her. "When you're finished," the White woman asked her, "Could you help me?" Lucinda was devastated by the

woman's assumptions: "I was like, 'Excuse me?' And she was like, 'When you finish here, could you help me?' I looked at her and caught what she was saying, so I said 'Are you disabled?'"

When the woman angrily demanded whom Lucinda worked for in the building, Lucinda told her: "Nobody. I live here. And she just looked at me and said, 'Oh.'" The woman had thought Lucinda was a housekeeper.

Lucinda claims that such incidents don't weigh on her mind. "I don't give White people power and maybe that's my own prejudice. They don't have any power in my life, [over] my core, the person who I am in my being."

But unlike Lucinda, many women express how acutely painful it is to live with the myth that Black women are somehow inferior to other people. Although some of the women we interviewed claimed that they had rarely been the brunt of direct comments to this effect, nearly all of them reported how difficult it is to survive in a culture that constantly stereotypes Black women as unintelligent, lazy, unmotivated, unattractive, difficult to deal with, and unable to maintain a functional family. The message in America is that there's something very wrong with Black women.

In reality, on a number of levels—higher education, career development, professional positions—Black women in our nation are increasingly competing shoulder-to-shoulder with other Americans. According to recent statistics, 78 percent of African American women ages 25 and older have completed high school, 17 percent have completed a bachelor's degree or more,¹¹ and close to half a million have earned a master's degree or more.¹² The high school completion rate of 78 percent compares favorably to the graduation rate of 85 percent for White women; and while the rate has almost doubled for White women since 1960, the rate for Black women has nearly quadrupled.¹³ Moreover, from 1977 through 1997, the number of Black women with bachelor's degrees increased by 77 percent and the number with master's degrees jumped by 39 percent.¹⁴ From 1989 to 1995, the number of Black women in managerial and professional positions rose by 40 percent, which was a much greater rate of increase than that of White

women.¹⁵ And yet the general public, by and large, does not seem to be aware of these soaring rates of achievement.

Listen to Tina, a 23-year-old science major and student government officer at a university in Texas where she is one of very few Black students. Tina invests huge amounts of her time and energy trying to disprove the myth of inferiority by emphasizing to her non-Black peers and professors that she is not lazy or unintelligent but rather a talented hard-working student. She feels constant pressure to perform as the "optimum African American," and as a result, she works herself to exhaustion.

When I walk [into a new class] that first day, . . . I feel like I come in with something to prove already, like I'm already set back by the way people are perceiving me. They're wondering why I'm here. Am I really smart enough to be in this class? . . . Last semester, there were only eight people in my biology class. After the first couple of assignments, I felt like I had to work extra hard on the professor go to his office hours, show him I'm not in this class to sit here and coast through. In classes like English literature, where I know teachers are gonna ask questions, I go out of my way to make sure I have answers prepared for those classes. I make sure that I have stuff done for that class just so I will never look like I don't know what I'm talking about or I'm unprepared or not keeping up with assignments, even if sometimes it's making me suffer in another class.

Tina's parents warned her about the myth of Black women's inferiority. "What you have to understand, Tina, it's like you already have two strikes against you. You're Black and then you're a woman. You need to stay two steps ahead of what everybody else is doing in this world." And for Tina, this message has taken on particular salience: as a science major, she has sometimes been both the only African American and the only woman in a class. Tina feels she's "carrying the weight of not just being me, but being all Black women," and that it's tremendously difficult to please everyone all the time.

How are they going to perceive every Black woman? How are they going to perceive every woman who's in science? . . . You feel like you gotta be perfect. You gotta be fit. You gotta be smart. You gotta be strong, but not so strong that you offend everybody. You gotta be outspoken, but not too outspoken. You've got to be all these different things. You've got to be able to take crap from people and bite your tongue. . . . You feel that almost every day.

Jordan, 29, perhaps represents the extreme to which African American women can go in order to disprove the myth of inferiority. During her elementary school years, living in what she describes as "the heart of racism," she had to fight her way out of special education classes, where she was placed because it was assumed she couldn't read, even though she'd been reading since before she entered kindergarten. Outside of school, in the neighborhood, she was confronted with open Ku Klux Klan rallies. Now a nursing school graduate, she has an Afrocentric look, and she seems to feel good about herself as a Black person. Her dreadlocks dangle, and she speaks with fondness about the predominantly Black community where she spent her teenage years. Yet she's in a long-term relationship with a White man who is tattooed with Klan-related insignia. While her boyfriend disavows any current involvement in the KKK, his father is the local grand master. Jordan's aunt and uncle, who raised her, have refused to meet her boyfriend, but Jordan prides herself on not seeing color the way that they do. And she's taken on the task of educating her boyfriend's parents. The first meeting with his family, however, was brutal: They openly called her a "nigger." But Jordan persisted.

When they sat down and opened up their hearts and listened to me and saw what I was doing with their son, they kinda accepted me more. I get phone calls from them now. They just check on me. . . . I don't know what it was. I really wasn't their image of Black people or Black women. I had gone to college. I had had this. I had that. I didn't need anybody. I had an intellec-

tual background, and they saw me going to work every day. And when I talked to them, they was just like, "Maybe she is different." I don't know what it was. But it was something in them clicked. . . . They know that I'm Black, but they can talk to me. It's like, I'm with them as a person. They accept the fact I'm with their son.

We can't help but wonder what it's cost Jordan to engage in this struggle with the grand master's son and his family. It would seem that in working to disabuse them of the myth of Black inferiority, in shifting to meet them where they are, suffering their abuse and suppressing her emotions, she at times has sacrificed her own self-respect.

The reaction of the grand master and his wife to Jordan suggests another reality: disproving stereotypes does not always dispel them. Her boyfriend's parents appear to see her as an aberration. Indeed, so pervasive is the myth of inferiority that when women defy the stereotype, they are sometimes seen as suspect. Listen to Samantha, who was laid off her job, ran out of money, and then ended up being evicted from the apartment where she lived with her two young children. When Samantha, an attractive woman, clearly bright and thoughtful, sought public assistance, desperate for temporary financial support to make ends meet, the state welfare workers didn't believe her case: "They didn't see me as needing anything because of my demeanor, my ability to speak well, the fact that I can carry on a conversation and still make sense. Basically, I was told that I didn't qualify for anything even though I was homeless and even though I showed proof. I went through hell just to get what little bit I have now."

Many of the women in our study lamented that when they finally prove to others that they are hard-working, refined, and intelligent, non-Blacks often deem them to be "exceptional" or "different from" other Black people. Ironically, some may temporarily benefit from the myth of Black women's inferiority, gaining a kind of acceptance in certain circles, and a platform for success in certain careers, because they are considered "unique," "better than" other women of color.

"That's one of those games you play with yourself," says Lisa, a 33-

year-old woman who graduated with honors from MIT and was constantly praised by her professors. "Maybe I'm not that great. They're not expecting me to be great as a student." Lisa has dealt with such skewed expectations her entire life. She remembers tutoring a fellow student in biology when she was in the tenth grade. "He said to me, 'You know Lisa, you're really smart for a Black girl!'"

Other Black women recount that as children, they constantly had to face teachers and schoolmates who marveled at their academic prowess, at how "special" they were. And such thinking haunts these women as adults. Though they are educated, and may have come of age in homes more prosperous than their White, Latino, or Asian colleagues, outsiders still often react with surprise when Black women are well-spoken, inquisitive, or well-read. Indeed, it's a double-edged sword to hear, as many bright professional Black women do, the phrase "You're so articulate." While seemingly a compliment, the underlying message is that it is surprising to find an intelligent Black woman who speaks Standard English so well. "You don't seem Black," they are told again and again. The message is clear: When Black women are talented, professional, and competent, they're no longer really Black, because these qualities don't fit the stereotypes.

Francine, a woman in her midforties, and a high-ranking manager at a pharmaceutical company, talks about how frustrating it is not to be seen as "truly Black." "When you're Black and competent, White people see you as the exception to the rule. I can't tell you how many times a White person has told me that I'm different from most Black people. [It's] very insulting." Francine elaborates:

I think they mean you're articulate, you can hold a conversation, you can talk about world events, you read the paper, you know how to use the computer, you have one in your house, you've got family structure, you have a sister and a brother and they're all doing well too. . . . I think they think they're complimenting me, but what they've really done is just smack you across the face. . . . I have felt ashamed that somehow I've portrayed myself in a way that makes them think I'm a better per-

son because I'm not "Black," because I've assimilated so much that I get this great pat on the back from them, and somehow I kind of divorce myself from my true being.

Being deemed exceptional can also mean bearing the burden of living up to unrealistic expectations, never easing up your workload, always conforming, staying ever mindful of your p's and q's to continue justifying your acceptance. Many Black women feel that they must be far better at their jobs than their White counterparts just to prove that they have a right to be where they are. They sense that the margin for error that they are offered is much smaller and narrower than the one offered to most White folks. When a White colleague falters or fails, executives seem to be relatively forgiving. But when a Black woman stumbles on the job, White executives are more inclined to see it as "proof" that she just doesn't have what it takes—that she is inferior. Black women do not believe that they have the leeway to be average, to be better at some things rather than others, simply to have a bad day. Rather, the women in our study say that they feel a strong demand to exceed people's expectations, to do everything "right."

The Myth of Unshakability

Black girls don't cry. They shake and bend and explode, but they never break. In all the black-and-white stills of Rosa Parks, arrested in Montgomery because she was tired and dared to sit, she sheds no tears. She is strong. She is unflappable. The obituaries written about Betty Shabazz, Malcolm X's widow, talked about how she got her graduate degrees and raised six daughters by herself, but not about the toll such daunting challenges must have taken on her emotionally. On television, powerful stalwart Black women have been legion—from the noble housekeeper on *I'll Fly Away* to the Black attorney on *Any Day Now*, to Jeannie, the pediatrician's assistant on *ER* who had time to forgive her philandering ex-husband and love a dying boy, even as she struggled with HIV.

Black women are told that they are tough, pushy, and in charge

rather than soft, feminine, and vulnerable. The image makes her someone to be feared rather than someone to be loved. These stereotypes render Black women as caricatures instead of whole people with strengths and weaknesses, tender sides and tough edges. And ultimately they make Black women invisible because they are not seen for all that they really are.

To be deemed unshakable is not the most vile of myths. Indeed, Black women have consistently demonstrated exceptional strength and courage. And many say that it feels good to be recognized for something positive.

However, because the myth of unshakability has also become so embedded in the collective psyche of the Black community, African American women often find that they are not allowed to be vulnerable or needy, even among their own. Sharon, a 38-year-old insurance claims adjuster, in Greensboro, North Carolina, and Phyllis, a 36-year-old graphic artist from Boston, go so far as to suggest that Black women today have no right to complain, given the harsher realities their ancestors endured. "Anything past slavery is gravy," Sharon opines. Adds Phyllis, "Nothing should be driving us crazy right about now. The shit that we've overcome? Think about that. I don't care how strong we think we are. They bounce us back to slavery, you think we'd survive two weeks? I wouldn't say we were strong at all. Strong? That's funny."

Betty, 47, didn't feel the emotional weight of the loss of her mother until weeks after the funeral. She'd been the one who'd had to make the arrangements and support her father and siblings in their immediate emotional collapse. It was the typical pattern. She was always diligent and dependable. When her husband died suddenly a decade ago, Betty had at times worked three jobs to keep a roof over her family's head, support her children, and put them through college. Now, months after her mother's death, she needed someone to lean on. But even her closest girlfriends couldn't handle her grief. Her best friends would walk away from her on the rare occasions when she'd break down and cry. After all, she had always been strong, taking care of everything and everyone. Betty had to go to a psychotherapist to find someone to cry with.

Claudia, a 24-year-old single woman who grew up in a family of 10 children, had managed to get her bachelor's and master's degrees while working full-time and raising an infant son on her own. In Claudia's view: "What happens is when you're feeling independent and strong, everybody relies on you for emotional support, but nobody's willing to give it to you because they automatically think that you have it within yourself, that you don't need to have someone hug you and say, 'Everything's going to be okay' or 'Do you need any help?' People won't offer any help because they feel that you have it all under control."

But even if help were offered, some Black women would not accept it. Many who have internalized the stereotype of unshakability, when they find themselves in anguish, continue to sustain their strong Black woman persona. They are unable to turn it off, to shift from overdrive into neutral. Regina Romero, an African American psychotherapist in Washington, D.C., notes that the "paradox of strength" is such that it's often tough for these women to permit themselves to get the help they need and deserve.¹⁶ Connie, a confident, soft-spoken woman in her late thirties and a published writer, explains how she's been crippled by the need to act strong and in control at every moment:

The superwoman stereotype—we have embodied that. And we think that we have to be all things to everybody. And we go about doing that, but we are nothing to ourselves. . . . We are nurturing, we are taking care of our kids. Sometimes we are taking care of our sisters' kids, our brothers' kids. We're taking care of our brother, we're taking care of our sister, we're taking care of our man. We're taking care of our parents, but not taking care of ourselves. I think that just about every Black woman I know is doing that in some capacity, that they feel like they have to be "the all." And they are going about wearing themselves out trying to do that. . . . I really feel guilty if I do something for myself. And I think that maybe we don't think we're worth it. I think that a lot of us have been beat down by life, that even though outwardly we may be the most

sophisticated, the most together sister that there is, we're not sure we're worth the self-nurturing.

As Connie's comments suggest, strength can be an illusion. The truth, of course, is that like all other human beings, Black women are constantly trying to refill their wells of confidence and self-esteem. They struggle like everyone else to regain emotional ground lost after every broken romance, after every professional or personal setback. Sometimes they need assistance or direction. Sometimes they are sad and disappointed. Sometimes they are afraid.

To be sure, Black women are heirs to a remarkable legacy. It is hard to imagine what courage it took to go to bed each night knowing that when you rose the next morning, you would still be a slave—yet you kept on living. It is hard to discern what spiritual fortitude was required to instill pride in generations of children who were growing up in a hostile society that sought to belittle them, or worse. But the image of invincibility that has arisen out of such a history can become its own prison, an impossible standard to uphold, unrealistically raising the expectations of employers, lovers, and relatives and compelling a younger generation of Black women to judge itself too harshly.

Part and parcel of the myth that Black women are unshakable is the myth that Black people don't become depressed or commit suicide. Suzanne, 29, remembers the day that she tried. It was 1988, the year that Suzanne was in a car accident that left her partially paralyzed. She was 15 years old.

"I took an overdose," she remembers. "By the time they found out, it was too late to pump my stomach." The doctor said that she would have convulsions. "But nothing happened. So it was always a medical mystery, and I feel like that was just God intervening."

The daughter of a nurse and a construction worker and the older of two children, Suzanne was told from the time she was small that she had to set an example. And she didn't let her family down, excelling in school, doing her chores without being asked. But it was the courage she showed after the car accident that seemed to prove that nothing could ever undo her. Her relatives and friends often said that if it had been

them—running free one day, struggling with a walker the next—they would not have handled it so well. But Suzanne showed her stoicism, and soon began to believe that she had to be courageous because, after all, that was what everyone expected. There was no other way to be.

"I feel like I can't be anything less than strong," she says, adding that the pressure comes in myriad ways. "I think it's because I'm a Black woman, and we're just tough. I think it's because I'm a Christian and I feel like I have to keep the good fight going, the good fight of faith—'No, woman, you can't get tired. You get up. You'd better not be weary and ill doing. . . . You've got to be a soldier, and if you're getting tired it must be because you don't believe.'"

Suzanne is close to her parents and speaks of their love and support. But she says that at times her mother's and father's words only added to the unrealistic strain that she puts on herself. Once as a teenager she had to go to the emergency room after she'd injured her arm. Suzanne writhed in pain, and her mother held her in her arms. But even then, Suzanne was told how to be. "Stop that crying," her mother would say. "You've got to be strong. Be strong. Be strong." Suzanne concludes: "I think through all those years of all those sermons about being strong, I feel like, *How dare you not be strong?* Almost like it's shameful to be anything less than strong." But that day, when she was 15, she reached her breaking point.

The Myth of Nonfemininity

If Black women in America are stereotyped as unshakable, our research shows that there is another closely linked myth that persists: that Black women are less feminine than other women and, in fact, even emasculating. The myth sprang to life in the characters of Mammy and Sapphire, then evolved into the archetype of the coarse, sassy Black girl, a ubiquitous image in popular culture. In an oft-repeated skit on *Saturday Night Live*, cast members and a rotating roster of guest hosts, including Gwyneth Paltrow and Jennifer Lopez, pose as a neck-swallowing, slang-spouting, "ghetto-fabulous" girl group in the style of Destiny's Child, drawing peals of laughter. But such warped

images take an immeasurable toll on the psyche of Black women, who in their desire to be seen as ladylike, to challenge the notion that they are less feminine, may affect a way of talking or behaving that does not truly reflect who they are. Some may settle for less than fulfilling relationships because they fear, based on their own self-image, that they cannot do any better.

Of course, many Black women do have a language and style all their own, a way of communicating through gestures or a glance that is unique. Sass, they will tell you, is at times an attitude of necessity. It's what you need to be the high-jump champ on a city block. It can carry you through schoolyard confrontations or give you the last word in a political debate. It's the mask you wear to cover the hurt when a friend tells your secrets, or the armor you don when a boyfriend breaks your heart. But it is a myth that all Black women possess this quality, and that those who do are less sophisticated or less feminine.

Unfortunately, while the Black community has been remarkably adept at blocking out the negative messages of the broader society, it is perhaps inevitable that society's distortions will sometimes color African Americans' views of themselves. More than one Black male celebrity has evoked the image of the "emasculating," or "difficult" Black woman to explain why he mistreated his wife or why he is now dating a non-Black woman. Others have blamed the problems of some Black men, from chronic unemployment to incarceration, on dominating Black girlfriends, wives, or mothers who, they say, did not allow these men to take the lead or grow into responsible adults.

When asked what major difficulties she faces as a Black woman, Margo, a 41-year-old attorney in Chicago, says: "The perception of Black women as complaining, overbearing, bitchy . . . has affected my relationships with men, Black and White. For example, if I challenge my White male supervisor or coworker, I'm viewed as aggressive, and Black men view my ambition and independence as overbearing and bitchy."

"I feel that I have to walk a fine line to show assertiveness without appearing harsh," says Heather, a 31-year-old conference planner from Los Angeles. "I am always under added pressure to make certain my

reactions and responses are within a predescribed window of ranges."

Too many Black women are pushed to internalize these misperceptions and accusations, their sense of self slowly corroding. Paula, a 22-year-old executive assistant, says, "By trying to disprove the whole 'attitude' stereotype, I make myself small. In other words, instead of being the strong woman that I am by voicing my opinion and saying how I feel, sometimes I back down so as not to seem like I've got an attitude, which is discouraging."

Some women say they are not approached by men from other ethnic groups because, they believe, the men don't think of them as "feminine" or "ladylike." It is a twisted testament to the pervasiveness of sexism that some Black women say that this misperception can be a good thing, sparing them from sexual harassment at the hands of non-Black men. Vera says that in medical school, her Blackness seemed to shield her from the leering advances and attention suffered by her non-Black female peers. "The reason I say it's an advantage is because I didn't have to deal with male students and male instructors on a sexual level at all," she says. "They didn't treat me as a sexual person. I was more of an 'it.' So I felt like they dealt with me with more respect than they did White women and Asian women. There were so few women that they were subject to a lot of flirtation, a lot of attention from men that was definitely of a sexual nature, and I never got that. I never felt like my professor was hitting on me. When I dealt with TAs [teaching assistants] or professors, I felt we were talking about the material."

Tammy, a 38-year-old executive secretary from Hyattsville, Maryland, believes that in order to be professionally successful, Black women have the complicated task of being both traditionally feminine and uniquely strong. "There is a constant struggle of balance between strength and femininity. In the work world, you must have exceptional strength to supersede the obstacles in your way as a minority and woman. Yet, you must be able to show the more feminine side, even in business situations."

For many of the Black women in our study, such shifting is necessary in all the realms of their lives. Anne, a 47-year-old investment adviser from Atlanta, who spends her workday in a male-dominated

field and, as a single parent, handles the full gamut of parenting responsibilities, describes how "masculine" she feels at times.

Being single and having to do absolutely everything feels very masculine. It feels hard. I need to break down for a day and just be whatever I need to be. There's hardly any space to do this. . . . Both my parents are deceased and my family is in another area, and I feel I have to be father and uncle, grandmother, grandfather. There's all these roles and sometimes it has to be very masculine. . . . Being masculine is being hard and having to be tough through the war. I can't just be the gatherer now. I got to go out and hunt, kill it, strip it down, then gather it, prepare it, cook it, feed it. I don't want to do all that. Doing all of that feels very masculine."

Still, as Anne and many others attest, one can be strong and still very much a lady. Artemis, 46, has skin the color of almonds and barely fills out a size 3. She wears her cornrows in a pageboy and is the type of woman who can go to a thrift shop, pick up an elegant gown for \$40, and outshine the woman next to her who spent thousands.

She also has a smoky voice as smooth as Drambuie, and can sing the songbooks of Nancy Wilson and Peggy Lee from memory. So when she performed jazz standards at supper clubs around Cleveland, Artemis couldn't understand why, when she took the stage, she sometimes felt a chill descend upon the room. She sounded great and she looked good, so what could be the matter?

Her appearance, she soon realized, was exactly the problem.

"There's a way that people can freeze you out," Artemis says. "They can let you know without saying a word that you're not welcome. You just know it. And being Black, we're in tune to that. For example, I could be singing at a particular hotel or a corporate gig and feel it. It's subtle, but it's there. I see it in their eyes. In other words, I see their souls. . . . I see, 'What's she doing here?' And then it's, 'Who does she think she is? How dare she be here?'"

When it happens, explains Artemis, it is always women—White

women. "I have come out and the women in the audience—there's a scowl on their face. They hate me. And the musicians have seen it. I'm not making this up. The musicians have seen it. Just angry at me. Very angry."

When Artemis first saw such reactions, she felt hurt and confused, until the interracial group of men who backed her on stage explained it to her. "The musicians say, 'You're supposed to be fat. You're supposed to be real fat,'" she says. "Or I'm supposed to be loose and vulgar. I mean it sounds so silly because it is, but it's true."

Because Artemis doesn't fit the myth of the asexual Mammy or the harsh Sapphire, because she exudes femininity and is strikingly beautiful, she is rebuffed. What we find is that when Black women are stereotyped, they pay a price, and when, like Artemis, they defy the stereotypes, they may pay a price as well.

The Myth of Criminality

As challenging as it is to be seen as ignorant and incompetent, callous and unshakable, and less feminine and lovable than other women, one of the most devastating myths about Black women is that they are prone to criminal behavior. While this myth is most closely associated with Black men, Black women suffer from it as well, sometimes uniquely.¹⁷

It is hard to find a Black woman who cannot recall an incident in which she was treated disrespectfully by store employees who assumed she was there to steal or could not possibly afford the merchandise. And too many Black women in America can tell you stories about being mistreated by police and other law enforcement officers. Notably, in a June 2002 Gallup poll, only 29 percent of Black women said they felt that the rights of Blacks are respected in the criminal justice system.¹⁸ According to the poll, Black women are more disenchanting with the criminal justice system than Black men, 38 percent of whom said they believed that the rights of Blacks were being respected.

In a national study conducted in 1999 by the U.S. Department of Justice, researchers found that Black women drivers are more likely to be stopped by the police than women of all other ethnicities.¹⁹ There's

also evidence that Black women are more likely to be arrested than White women for a variety of alleged offenses.²⁰

So what does she do? Assert her rights to a police officer and possibly risk her life—or suppress her outrage and stay alive? Does she linger defiantly in a store where she is not welcomed—or walk out never to return? Does she protest her treatment, feeling uncomfortable in the moment but satisfied later that she stood her ground, or does she walk away and later regret that she did not do more? Such are the dilemmas that Black women often face, the questions jostling against one another as they decide which way to lean and what their decisions will cost them.

Jocelyn, 35, remembers an experience she had two years ago in a small jewelry shop in Kentucky. She just wanted to browse, but from the moment she walked through the door, she felt that every pair of eyes was on her. "I remember very vividly wanting to just hold up my hands as I was walking through the store, as if to say, 'Okay, my hands are open, you can see where my hands are the whole time I'm here, and I'm not going to steal anything.'" She stayed a few minutes, then hurriedly walked out the door.

Jocelyn says that it truly hurts every time her presence in an establishment is questioned, each time she is "randomly" selected during the searches that have intensified since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. "It makes me feel unhappy . . . that we've gone through a lot of things, especially as Black women, to prove ourselves—and it doesn't mean anything," she says of such incidents. "I don't take it as a personal affront. I take it as an affront against all Black women. I don't look at myself and say, 'Gee, you're less of a person because of this.' I just look at society and say, 'You know, this is really awful that I have to feel this in my own home, in my own society.'"

Bonnie, a 42-year-old information systems manager, describes how a car dealership lost a sale because they treated her like a suspect. Bonnie had decided to purchase a high-end luxury vehicle—she had been working long hours lately and wanted to have a comfortable car in which to make the one-hour commute to and from her job. But when she went to the local dealership to purchase her dream car, a 2001 Lexus, things didn't turn out the way she had hoped. After the sales-

man showed her all the bells and whistles on a gorgeous showroom model, he walked away to get some additional information. Just moments after he left, a White salesman approached Bonnie and pointedly asked her, "Why are you in the car?" After letting him know that she had been a potential customer, Bonnie found the general manager, filed a complaint, and walked out.

Carmen, a 61-year-old teacher, shares her experience of police harassment.

I was stopped while driving my husband home from work at approximately 2 A.M. To my knowledge, I'd been following all the proper traffic rules, so when the policeman pulled me over, approached the car with his hand on his holster, and very rudely asked for my license and registration, I inquired what I had done. I didn't have my license with me, but I was a block from my home and asked if he would permit my husband or me to go and get it. I was told no, and when I continued to ask what I had done, I was told to "shut up" or I would be "placed under arrest." Of course, this angered me. I asked on what grounds I would be arrested, and I was told to follow him to the precinct. At the station, my automobile was examined—sears pulled apart—and the officer denied saying that I would be placed under arrest. The desk sergeant explained that policemen are often placed in inner-city stations as a "punishment" and many have attitudes or have had bad experiences and so they "take it out on everyone."

So entrenched is the myth that Black women steal, that Davida, 35, recalls as a child in San Francisco playing a game that mocked such bigotry. She and her girlfriends called it the "five-and-dime."

"You ever go to Woolworth's?" she asks. "The Black girls would walk in the front, and the security would be following the Black girls, and the White girls would take all the lipstick." Later, Davida explains, the Black and White girls, all friends, would sift through the loot, brushing on fingernail polish, trying on the pilfered lipsticks.

When Davida looks back, she sees this childhood game as a way of turning the tables on those who believed that her brown skin automatically made her a criminal. But as an adult, she challenges stereotypes more directly by confronting people who mistreat her based on such lies and misperceptions. Today Davida is careful not to spend money at establishments where she has been disrespected, and she encourages her friends and relatives to do the same.

"Maybe it's an emotional defense," she says. "But they're not getting a dime of mine. I always take it there. I'm going to make sure everybody I know knows this so they don't spend their money there. We're not victims. . . . We have so much economic power. . . . We got money. And this is a capitalistic society. It's about money. And when I talk about me, I talk about all Black women. I look at us as one, and when it's an offense against me, it's an offense against all of us."

In the late 1990s, a flurry of lawsuits revealed that federal Customs officials were profiling Black women as drug couriers and subjecting them to invasive body searches more often than anyone else, even though Black women were less likely to be breaking the law.²¹ Although the Customs Department announced that as of June 2001 it had overhauled its search criteria and implemented new policies to deal with the search disparities, many women continue to carry the psychological scars of their experiences. Most Black women don't have statistics to prove that they're being mistreated by local, state, or federal law enforcement officers or by security guards at their local mall. So every single day of the year, millions of Black women across America—good, honest, law-abiding women—are left to fend for themselves as they continue to live with the myth of criminality.

The Myth of Promiscuity

The last dreadful myth about Black women is that they are sexually loose. Many Black women today feel that men of other races too often see them as oversexed vixens.

During slavery and decades of segregation, the myth of sexual looseness first emerged as a twisted justification for the rapes and sex-

ual assaults of Black women by White men.²² While the archetype has changed slightly, the stereotype of Black women, as oversexed, care-free, and immoral remains. In the 1970s, she was the trash-talking prostitute, making cameos in films and on cop shows. In the 1980s, she took the form of the teenage mother who had multiple children with multiple lovers and paid her bills with government checks. And by the 1990s, she had become an omnipresent fixture in pop culture, the girl in the video who would bare her body for a ride in a Benz and a bottle of Cristal. Even some Black performing artists, through their compact discs and videos, have propagated the idea of Black women as sexually charged and available, as obsessed with money and men. Black female rappers Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown molded their stage personas around such images, playing insatiable divas who live for sex, diamonds, and champagne.

But our research and the work of other scholars shows that these narrow misrepresentations are especially dangerous, leaving Black women vulnerable to sexual violence and abuse. The myth that she is always interested and ready for sex forces many a Black woman to shift back and forth as she scrutinizes the motivations of non-Black men who ask her on a date, debating whether or not it is safe to go. It makes some Black women feel conflicted about their famous peers, happy that the beauty of a Black celebrity is being celebrated, but uneasy when they see her sensuality being exploited. It forces many Black women to make quick decisions about how to handle a flirtatious coworker or acquaintance who assumes that she won't be offended by lewd remarks and who, in fact, expects her to consent to sex.

The fear of being misrepresented was visible in 2002 when Halle Berry became the first African American to win an Academy Award for Best Actress. Though many were happy about the milestone victory, some Black women quietly expressed disappointment that Berry had been honored for an acting part that included a graphic sex scene with White actor Billy Bob Thornton. As one woman said, "It is a disgrace that the first Oscar to a Black woman [for best actress] had to go to a Black woman that showed her ass. It distresses me that a Black woman's work seemed to be recognized only after she stripped down

and got sexual. How typical is that? I think that society already views us as sex machines. In my opinion, Halle was awarded for fulfilling a stereotype."

Of course, the truth contradicts the stereotype. In a recent review of research on sexual behavior among African Americans, Kathleen H. Sparrow of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette concluded that while the limited early research indicated that Blacks engage in premarital sex earlier and more frequently than Whites, more recent studies suggest that this pattern is changing.²³ And while the teen birth rate is higher among Black girls than White girls, research shows that the difference is primarily due to Black teens' less frequent use of contraceptives and not to substantial differences in sexual involvement.²⁴ Moreover, between 1991 and 1998, the birth rate for Black teenage girls dropped more precipitously than for any other ethnic group in our nation.²⁵

Research indicates, too, that Black women's sexual practices are typically more conservative than those of White women. In *Stolen Women: Reclaiming Our Sexuality, Taking Back Our Lives*, Gail E. Wyatt describes the findings from her in-depth research with two representative samples of women in Los Angeles County.²⁶ She found that while Black women were slightly more likely than White women to have an extramarital affair, White women tended to have more sexual relationships during adolescence, were more likely to initiate sex with their partner, were more likely to engage in cunnilingus, fellatio, and anal sex, and were more likely to engage in sex with more than one person at a time. These findings are in no way presented as a criticism of White women's sexuality, but rather to point out that the stereotype of Black women as oversexed and sexually promiscuous is unfounded.

Yet this stereotype has been so much a part of the fabric of U.S. society that, according to one recent study, it has even crept into the formal assumptions of our mental health-care system. Jill Cermele, Sharon Daniels, and Kristin Anderson of Drew University in New Jersey recently analyzed the *DSM-IV Casebook* for instances of racial and gender bias.²⁷ The *Casebook* was developed to illustrate the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)*, which is the psychiatric bible for the diagnosis of mental disorders. The cases are hypothetical vignettes of

people exhibiting a variety of emotional problems. Cermele and her colleagues found that the *Casebook* tended to describe women of color (in contrast to men and White women) in terms of their attractiveness and sexuality. In other words, in developing these vignettes upon which psychologists and psychiatrists throughout the country rely, the authors apparently allowed their own racist and sexist biases to creep in. Sadly, the *DSM-IV Casebook*, a tool designed to help mental health professionals identify and treat peoples' psychiatric disorders, may perpetuate stereotypes that could exacerbate such disorders.

The myth of the wanton Black woman is inescapable. It seems to come up everywhere, even in a doctor's office. "When I was getting a medical examination, the nurse didn't believe me when I told her I was a virgin," recalls 28-year-old Christine. Tiffany, 35, dealt with it during college. White men, she says, would boldly approach her and announce how curious they were about going to bed with a Black woman: "I mean generally non-Black men or foreign men have these ideas about Black women being some exotic, sexual tiger," explains Tiffany. "And I must say that 95 percent of the White men who ever approached me were looking for the sex of their lives. They'll say something to you like, 'I've never been with a Black woman.' Or 'I'd like to be with a Black woman.' They're very direct about what their intentions are. . . . Sometimes I'm shocked at how forward they are."

Stacy, a decade younger, says that it's not uncommon for non-Black men to hit on her at dance clubs in the most vulgar ways—even to assault her. "The men seem to push up on me more because they seem to think that they're going to get somewhere, and it's disrespectful, and it's obvious what they're doing. They'll just be straight out and ask you, 'Do you want to come back to my place?' And I'm like, 'I just met you.'"

For many Black women, the assumption that they're sexually available contaminates their work life too. Ten years ago Diana worked as a civilian in a law enforcement agency. She recalls how a high-ranking White man propositioned her in her first months on the job:

I had one gentleman, who was beyond officer—he'd been promoted up one level—he actually solicited me for prostitution.

He said I'd make a wonderful prostitute. It was very well established at the time that I was happily married. He just thought he and I could make a lot of money together. And I was 26. . . . I shook it off; I was graceful with it. What I should have done is run out of the office screaming and filed a major lawsuit. But I figured it would be my word against his, and there was no sense in trying to take it anywhere else. I quashed it with, 'Not my style, never anything I would consider.' It would have been the civilian against the cop, the female against the cop. I didn't even want to try and argue this because all he has to do is deny it, and I'd be the one carrying the baggage.

Though Diana would have been well within her rights to report this superior officer, she suppressed her anger, rebuffed him gently, and continued to function effectively on the job.

Like Diana, Angela, age 48, harbors painful memories involving White men's attitudes toward Black women: "There've been times when socially I've been befriended by White men and I can't get past the race," says Angela, 48. "And there've been one or two times I have kicked myself years later that I didn't. But I just couldn't. It's like, *I automatically don't trust you*. And then later on, I saw that something that they had said or done was really a gesture of kindness, of friendship. But at the time I'd been so conditioned to not become used by White men."

Angela received such lessons as a young girl in Ohio. "I must've been in elementary school, and one holiday there was a parade downtown," Angela remembers. "After the parade we got back on the bus to go home, and there was a Black girl on the bus who was in the parade. She had on a little cheerleader sort of skirt. And the bus was crowded and I remember this White man touched her or fondled her, and she said something to him. She made a lot of noise and I remember my mother telling me that we had to be careful of White men. And that stuck. So it was pretty emphatic the way my mom got it across to my sister and me. You know it wasn't Black men that we had to be afraid of. It was White men that we had to be real careful about."

Angela concludes: "If I were to meet a White man tomorrow, or a man of a race other than African American, and he wanted to have a relationship with me I think that I would consider it. But that's now. That's recent."

Transcending the Myths

Myths and stereotypes do much of their damage subconsciously. They seep into the inner psyche and take up residence, affecting how one thinks, feels, and perceives others, even while one purports to be unbiased and tolerant. Even in the most progressive and open-minded people, stereotypes often hold sway. They're insidious. They're sneaky. They have had centuries to sink in. And every day these myths and stereotypes betray our view of ourselves as decent, fair, and just and undermine our hopes and ideals.

Stereotypes are also damaging within a group. They often become internalized. Though invisible, they wield much power. They can cause the self to diminish, to shrink, or to disappear.

But fortunately, the news isn't all bad. Yvonne, 43, who lives in northeastern Ohio, is a model of how one can triumph over myths and stereotypes. When she was first asked whether she's been affected by them, like a number of our interviewees, she was quick to deny it. But later in the conversation, she talked about a conference many years ago that she and her parents had with her seventh grade math teacher, a White man whom she respected and trusted.

Yvonne had been doing poorly in the course, and his very clear message was, "You'll never have the head for math." She believes that behind this prophecy was the teacher's view of her station in life as a Black woman. "What else was I going to be anyway? I'm going to cook in somebody's house. I'm going to be a homemaker. I'm going to be a domestic, so you're not going to be doing anything having to do with math."

Dropping out of high school, she worked for many years in dead-end, low-paying jobs, but two years ago, with the support of her husband, she made the bold decision to earn her GED and then enroll at the local public university. Tearfully, she confesses that she's just

recently mastered her multiplication tables. All those years, she'd been so demoralized by the teacher's words that she'd been too petrified to try her hand at numbers. "All my life thinking, *How am I going to get there?* It made me feel like I couldn't do it, I can't do it because you told me I would never have a head for math. . . . And I never did. Until now."

Yvonne had shifted her ambitions, lost faith in her own abilities, because of the negative words uttered by an admired teacher. But after many years, she was able to block out his message and find her way back to believing in herself.

Though Yvonne is now mastering math, her calling is to be a poet. She has written and performed her poems at readings, achieving celebrity on campus and in her local community. If she was haunted for almost three decades by a few words, Yvonne today has become her own wordsmith, the definer of her own reality. She has found a way to rewrite the story of Black women.

We're All in This Together

Conducting the African American Women's Voices Project, and creating this book, was not a distant or detached exercise. As Black women, the two of us have lived much of what we talk about in the following chapters. Charisse for many years believed that there was only one fight, that against racism. She didn't see sexism as her struggle and was largely blind to it. Only recently has she begun to realize that the biases she and other Black women face, and the compromises that they make because of their gender, can be just as cruel and damaging as those wrought by racial bigotry. For Kumea, a pivotal life experience was integrating a White school in the mid-1960s. Though she survived and, in fact, thrived academically, it took her many years to sort through the emotional residue of that experience and to feel fully centered in her own identity as a Black woman.

Over and over, as the two of us listened, we heard our own experiences echoed in the stories that women shared. We found our concerns about the double jeopardy of racism and sexism voiced by many other women, and in a multiplicity of ways. At times we found ourselves cry-

ing with the women with whom we talked—crying for them, for us, and perhaps for all of you who are concerned about the human condition.

Yet we were frequently buoyed by the passion of our participants. Lynn, a 43-year-old from Washington, D.C., says, "This was not an easy survey. It made you dig deep and look inside yourself and examine your soul. I applaud your efforts, because Black women have been second class for too long." Greta, a 40-year-old from southern California, encourages us with a prayer: "May God bless you in your glorious endeavors." And 58-year-old Janice from Connecticut admonishes us, when we publish, to "tell it like it really is."

The more we listen, the more committed we become to providing a platform from which Black women's experiences, perspectives, triumphs, and triumphs can be seen and heard. In the coming pages, we offer a window into their worlds: how they discover their own beauty despite the distorted images society reflects back to them; how they find their own voices, even as their speech is mocked and their ideas dismissed; how they transcend bigotry and remember their own worth.

Black women will find particular resonance in these stories. Those who thought they were alone in their experiences will learn that they are not, that many of their sisters share the same truth. They will be able to put a name to all the compromising and emotional ups and downs they weather each day. And by becoming aware of how and why they shift, they can change their lives. They can examine their relationships, their health, their feelings when they look in the mirror, and determine if they have shifted too far. If they have, they can take steps to swing the pendulum back, to regain control, to honor themselves.

But there is something too for those who are not Black and female. Anyone who has ever been prejudged, put down, or overlooked will likely see parts of their own experience in these chapters. And they will realize that they can learn much from Black women.

Finally, we anticipate that all of our readers, regardless of race or gender, will gain a deepened awareness of the terrible cost of bias and discrimination. We hope and trust that by hearing these women's voices, we will all be inspired to redouble our efforts to end bigotry and to create a world that is fair and just for each and every one of us.

2

THE PAIN OF GENDER SILENCE

"I Am Black but Ain't I a Woman?"

Isms travel in packs.

SHERRY, 31, NEW YORK

The games of childhood are universal. Girls and boys from all walks of life play jacks together in a schoolyard corner. They pick teams to play baseball, basketball, soccer, lacrosse, and then take to the field. The playground is a rainbow. Black, White, Latino, and Asian children share games together, as differences of gender, race, and ethnicity fade away into their play.

But there is one game today that still seems the domain of Black girls. Two jump ropes fly toward each other, slicing the air, slapping the concrete a millisecond apart. The girls rock back and forth, waiting for the right moment to leap in. They jump. They skip, turn, shout. They can hardly catch their breath, soaring, singing, laughing all at the same time. Double dutch, more often than not, still belongs to America's little Black girls.

That separate game of courage and timing, that separate place with its own rules and challenges, resonates onward, into adolescence and