

SPECTATORS AND STRAITJACKETS

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Beyoncé Knowles is in full command of her body, as she slinks closer to the camera with a sly grin only slightly concealed on her face. She inches closer until she erupts, practically pouncing on the cameraman, screaming a slew of expletives. She is angry, and no longer willing to contain her emotions.

The album *Lemonade*, released in visual format in April 2016 on HBO, is full of big, extravagant gestures from Beyoncé, calling on black women to be absolutely fearless in the face of infidelity, hatred, and neglect—put more plainly, any form of oppression. It is a message that certainly needs to be heard, and Beyoncé is one of the most famous performers in the world. She is almost untouchable, and there are very few consequences for the fiery outbursts in her art. This is not always true when black women show their anger outside the performative realm.

Dr. Wendy Ashley, a professor at California State University's College of Behavioral Sciences, has investigated the enduring label of the *Angry Black Woman* (ABW). According to her research, stereotyping black women as always angry "results in fundamental distortions and misinterpretations of their actual emotional experiences" (30). Dr. Ashley insists that this is more a harmful cultural ideology rather than a stereotype; we use the Angry Black Woman label as a way to "dehumanize" black women and put the blame on them for the oppression they experience (31). When black women genuinely react to a threatening or demeaning situation, they are brushed to the side and stamped "ABW."

Beyoncé has an astounding career and reputation behind her, one that portrays her as the ultimate image of beauty and strength for black women. She has millions of fans across the globe, and while the video album did make headlines for some of its more rage-fueled scenes, it certainly did not impact her album sales. As of June 2016, Billboard reported that *Lemonade* had sold over one million copies (1). Beyoncé was able to create a piece of art that was raw and emotional, and faced very few roadblocks to her success, something most black women never get to experience.

But unadulterated anger and raw emotion almost caused permanent damage to world-class professional tennis player Serena Williams's career. In 2004, Williams threatened a lineswoman with a slew of violent profanities and ended up facing a 2-year probationary period and a hefty \$82,500 fine for the outburst (4). Foot faults are rarely called in tennis, and spectators and commentators seemed to agree nearly unanimously that the call was bad. Poet Claudia Rankine examines both how this bad call was rooted in racism and the aftermath of Williams's outbursts on the court in an excerpt from her book *Citizen*, "Graphite Against a Sharp White Background." Rankine argues that because Williams is expected by her white and homogenous industry to remain quiet during blatantly bad calls by referees, instances of mocking by competitors, and even passive-aggressive comments by the media, her anger has recently become hidden from the public. She is no longer reacting so forwardly towards injustice, but instead brushing it off. Rankine asks her audience to contemplate whether this compromise Williams has made for her sport is admirable or not. However, I believe that Williams's frustration is not limited to the injustices throughout her career, and that it is her history of dealing with these small acts of prejudice that have built the powerhouse tennis player we watch on our television sets today.

When all of her repressed frustration finally comes to fruition, no matter the setting, she is slapped with the Angry Black Woman label immediately; not only that, her career is affected by these instances. Granted, a professional tennis court may not have been the best place to let out her frustrations, but then again, what other outlet does she have? She would be labeled with the same stereotype and dismissed. The tennis court is the one place in the world where she can grunt, yell, show off her truly amazing talents, declare triumph over white opponents, and feel at ease. Tennis is the domain of her skill-sets and her art, and when both are threatened, retaliation must be imminent. Williams is strong, poised to defend what she has spent decades, against all odds, creating for herself. It is easier for most white people to see this entire conflict from a totally different perspective, one that does not view the bad call as a small piece of a bigger picture of prejudice. Of course, it was unprofessional for Williams to curse at a referee on the court mid-match, but that seems to be the furthest extent to which some white people can see the interaction. There is usually no understanding of the long, tumultuous, and silenced relationship that black women have had with showing emotion and defending themselves from any opposition.

These subtle acts of racism that Williams experienced, acts that provoked her strong reactions, are referred to as *microaggressions*. Microaggressions are nearly invisible acts of racism that deal with underlying bias rather than explicit hatred. Microaggressions can take the form of a sly comment or even a backhanded compliment that may not even appear hate-fueled to the perpetrator. However seemingly innocuous they may seem to the perpetrator, microaggressions have devastating effects on people of color, just as much as blatant acts of racism do. Dr. Derald Sue even suggests in his article, "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life," that microaggressions "may be more harmful to people of color than hate crimes or the overt and deliberate acts of white supremacists such as the Klan and Skinheads" (4). He insists that their cumulative effect over time can become devastating, resulting in an almost "chronic fatigue"(4). Microaggressions are inescapable, as most perpetrators dismiss them as being harmless or unintentional. However unintentional these acts might be, Dr. Sue argues that they still cause people of color to feel "trapped in a stereotype" (4).

The stereotype of the Angry Black Woman restricts not only black women's ability to publicly show their anger, but also restricts their ability to show their full range of emotion to those around them. Dr. Ashley argues on the basis of her extensive research and experience of working in the field of psychotherapy with black women, that the Angry Black Woman stereotype has perpetuated the thought that black women will be extremely reactive to any small incident. Dr. Ashley concludes, after introducing case study after case study of black women being afraid to speak up out of fear of appearing like a stereotype to white people, that the "myth of the angry Black woman results in stereotypes that may be internalized" (33). This fear is what is most devastating, as it provides an unnecessary restriction on black women, a straitjacket that prevents movement up a social hierarchy.

Stereotypes, at their very core, are used to generalize a group of people and characterize them by a single emotion or trait that is never representative of the whole. They become something that minorities go out of their way to avoid, and the scales of emotion and representation seem to suddenly tip to the extreme opposite of the stereotype. As a gay man, I have been aware of the limits placed on me by stereotypes from a very early age. Although I have not faced the same constant oppression that Williams and other black women face on a daily basis, I do not feel like a spectator to Williams's outbursts. I remember feeling angry

every time someone reduced me to a nasty slur on the playground at school. Gay men face the stereotype of effeminacy; while the stereotype is not negative in and of itself, it is used as a weapon against gay men in the same vein as misogyny, as femininity in men is seen as a sign of weakness. For years, I was afraid to be in touch with any feminine part of my personality, out of fear of being called names or being dehumanized by my peers.

Then I discovered a show on television called *RuPaul's Drag Race*, in which a gay man celebrated other gay men, all of whom competed to become America's Next Drag Superstar. Each gay man fearlessly and fiercely went to the extreme of femininity by strutting down a catwalk. These drag queens were famous and had thousands of fans and people who loved them. I saw that RuPaul was extremely confident, too, and was in touch with all sides of his personality, masculine and feminine and everything in between. He acts, sings, and appeals to a massive audience. He represented what I was afraid to be; he demonstrated to me that I could show feminine traits and still be successful, in spite of everything I hear from naysayers and bullies. I was not cured of my fear, as it has remained a small part of my insecurities about my identity, but I was opened up to a community that accepted something about me that I tried so hard to exclude from my personality.

That is exactly why Beyoncé's *Lemonade* is so important: representation gives people hope. Although Beyoncé is only performing her anger on camera as a storyline in a much larger piece of art, her success and her endurance give young black girls the same chance to break away from the constraints they have felt placed on their identities. Williams even appears on camera in *Lemonade*; she dances next to Beyoncé, and suddenly, two of the strongest and most powerful women in the public eye become goddesses among men. Her movement and unrestricted emotion on camera are more of a slap in the face to her oppressors than anything she could ever shout at a lineswoman.

Have Beyoncé and Serena Williams had to sacrifice parts of themselves in order to climb the proverbial ladder of success? This is one critique Rankine seems to have of Williams, as she describes Williams as "newly contained" (5). However, this is a temporary restriction both Williams and Beyoncé had to endure in order to gain a larger platform for their messages. When they dance side by side during *Lemonade*, one can practically see the two tearing apart the straitjacket of emotion that stereotypes had previously fit them into. While they

may not feel completely freed of all judgment, they have new strengths that only years of experience on their respective stages could give them. Most importantly, they are ready to show other black girls that it is perfectly fine to show emotion and share their anger. Representation does not cure the ongoing struggle of minorities, but it can help to build endurance in the face of adversity. If someone in the public eye who looks like one of “us” can make it, then there’s hope for the rest of us.

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