CRISJ Building Justice Podcast

Season 4, Episode 1: Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire Stereotypes: Intersectional Stereotyping and Voter Bias

Moderator: Danielle Joesten Martin, Associate Professor of Political Science at Sacramento State (Speaker 1)

Guests: Rana McReynolds, Assistant Professor of African American Studies at San Jose State (Speaker 2)

Please note: This transcript may be imperfect. Please contact danielle.martin@csus.edu directly should you have questions.

Music lyrics:

Company under construction, the function, justice for the human family we demand it. Justice, true freedom, equality is a must. Thus, decolonization of the planet. So bust this. People be the power now we're Building Justice. Pulling out divinations, now we're Building Justice. Welcome the planet to the Podcast, "Building Justice," "Building Justice," "Building Justice." Building is to add on, or to do away with.

Introduction
Welcome to Building Justice, a podcast by Sacramento State's Center on Race, Immigration and Social Justice (CRISJ) . We explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world.

Speaker 1
Welcome to Building justice, a podcast by Sacramento State's Center on race, immigration and social social justice. Chris j we explore critical issues affecting our communities with

the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world. I'm Danielle Joesten Martin, an associate professor of political science at Sacramento State and I'm here with Rana McReynolds, an assistant professor of African American Studies at San Jose State University. Today we'll be exploring Rana's research on how mass media stereotypes of black women shape evaluations of black women candidates in the United States, which has obvious implications for the 2024, presidential election in which one of the major party candidates is a black, Asian American woman first, let me introduce Rana. I met Rana during my first year as a professor at Sac State in my research design and statistics course Rana is Made at Sac State. She graduated from Sac State with her BA in government in 2015 and her MA in government in 2018 she then completed her PhD in political science at UC Davis. While working on her PhD, she earned several awards, including the UC Davis Provost fellowship in the arts, humanities and social sciences, the Carrie Chapman Catt prize, the Marvin Zetterbaum Award for Excellence in graduate education, and the Ruth B Mandell Dissertation Award, just to name a few. Her dissertation is titled intersectional stereotyping and voter bias. Her research interests include race and ethnic politics, women in politics and intersectionality. At UC Davis, she taught classes such as women in politics and introduction to American politics. Now, as an assistant professor at San Jose State, Raina is teaching classes on African Americans and the development of America's history and government and the and the black civil rights movements. Rana, thank you for joining us.

Speaker 2
Thank you for having me. I just want to say this is a surreal moment. As you mentioned in your introduction, that we met during your first year as a professor, and now I'm in my first year as a professor.

Speaker 1
Yes, everything coming for full circle, which I love. So first, Rana, can you share a bit about yourself, where you're from, your background, and especially your academic journey, where you started, where you are now, and how did you get to where you are now?

Speaker 2
Yes, so I am a Bay Area native. I grew up in Richmond, California, lived in the East Bay, then lived in the Sacramento area for many, many years. I lived in Davis for the last part of my PhD, and now I'm happy to be back living in the Bay in San Jose. I am a first generation college student. My dad barely finished high school. He got his GED later, and as I was in college, my mom decided to go back to get a bachelor's degree. And both of my parents are grinders. They are hard workers. So even through my academic journey has been long and windy. I feel that the grind and hardworking spirit from my family. I started my academic journey at a community college. I went to Sacramento City College, and I didn't really have a lot of direction. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I just knew that I needed to go to college, so I sort of wandered around, took classes here and there, both at Sac City and at American River College. I took semesters off to work full time. Had some academic probation issues, mostly because while I took a lot of classes, I also withdrew from a lot of

classes, and I felt just really unsure of my future. The one pivotal moment for me was when I was working at in and out for a summer. I was working 12 hour days, and was making great money at the time, but I sort of had a come to Jesus moment and realized that I was too comfortable, and if I didn't change or do something different, then I would probably be stuck there working for the rest of my life. So I ended up going back to school full time. I racked up so many classes that I ended up graduating from American River College with three different associates degrees. I transferred to Sac State, and at the time, I still wasn't 100% sure what I wanted to do. I was interested in law, in some politics and journalism, and I went to Sac State because it had a dual major in government and journalism, but then I later dropped the dual major and focused primarily on political science. What really piqued my interest was your research methods clause. It was a lot of what I enjoyed to do, but had yet to find an outlet for I really enjoyed trying to figure out how. Things worked, or how things were put together. As a child, I would read dictionaries and instruction manuals, and so I'm also the type of person who sits back and kind of observes things, behaviors and actions. And I was like, Is there a job that I could do, that I could study behavior? Wow, that's really cool. And, and now I get to figure out why people vote and how they vote and or why they believe the things that they believe. And actually, I don't know if you remember this conversation that I had with you, but I remember being really excited about one of your assignments. And I went to your office hours and asked you, what job is this? What career could I do to to have this? And you said that I could go to grad school. At the time, my older sister, who was very few years older than me, was in a master's program, and my older sister is incredibly smart, and to me, grad school was for really, really smart people. I didn't think it was for me and for you to sort of casually believe in me, believe in my abilities, was really impactful. At the time, I still wasn't sure that going to grad school was something that I could do, and my grades weren't stellar, and you had mentioned something about Sac State having a master's program. So I applied and got in, and then after that, I applied to UC Davis and got in, and the rest is sort of history.

Speaker 1
Rana, you're gonna make me cry. I'm tearing up here, loving that story. So as I mentioned, your dissertation is titled intersectional stereotyping and voter bias, the impact of mammy Jezebel and Sapphire stereotypes on black women. So what made you just pursue this research, I guess maybe describe it a little bit first. But what inspired this research topic?

Speaker 2
Yeah, so I'll actually start with what inspired it. It was a tweet. It was when Stacey Abrams was running for governor in 2018 for Georgia, and then she later founded fair fight action, an organization to address voter suppression in Georgia and across the United States. When she was running, there was a lot of political discourse about how Abrams was sort of going to single handedly save democracy and sort of clean up what was happening in Georgia and then in United States, and then even in 2020 how she delivered Georgia to Biden. And all of this talk sounded very dog whistling to me, whether intentional or unintentional. It sounded like people were playing into old racist tropes and stereotypes about how black women are being caretakers, and that Stacey Abrams was going to be the

caretaker of the Democratic Party. So I started really getting interested in the research on gender and racial stereotypes of political candidates and how candidates present themselves to the public, and how the public reacts to and evaluates candidates.

Speaker 1
Can you describe your research generally and tell me what you found?

Speaker 2
Yes. So I was interested in stereotypes and how voters perceive stereotypes of different candidates and how that influenced their voting behavior. So what I started with was three stereotypes that we see present, sort of in the media and pop culture. And I trace those or assign those to particular hypothetical candidates. So these stereotypes are the mammy stereotype, which is seen as communal. We see this in the media with sort of Medea or Octavia Spencer in the hill, Hattie McDaniel and Gone With the Wind, Aunt Jemima, sort of the maid, nurse, maternal figure, and then the Jezebel stereotype is seen as sexually assertive or sexually promiscuous. In the media, we see this with the Foxy Brown character, or in pop culture, THE VIDEO VIXEN. It's a little bit of the welfare queen stereotype with the unwed mothers aspect. But generally the Jezebel stereotype is portraying black women as sexually promiscuous. And then the last stereotype is the SAT fire stereotype. This portrays black women as being outspoken or angry or emasculating. In pop culture, we see this oftentimes with Serena Williams, when she plays tennis, she's portrayed as being angry. And then in politics, we often see this with Maxine Waters or Corey Bush, who's often portrayed as being outspoken. So I was interested in how voters evaluated particular traits based off, based off of these three stereotypes, and the traits that I was interested in in. Is compassionate. So I was interested in voters whether or not voters believe that these particular candidates would be compassionate and caring towards issues. I was also interested to see if voters thought that these candidates would be cooperative in their ability to sort of reach across the aisle. And then I was also interested to see about the candidates level of assertiveness, and whether voters perceive these candidates as being sort of strong and assertive. And so what I found was that these evaluations, the voters evaluations of these traits tracked pretty well with the presented stereotypes. So for example, the Sapphire stereotype was seen as the most assertive. But what was really interesting is although these evaluations tracked with the presented stereotypes. Voters thought that, or they perceived that all of these candidates were equally electable. So they didn't perceive perceive one candidate being more qualified or more electable than the other. What's really interesting is that once I accounted for a voter's level of sexism. I was particularly interested in hostile and benevolent sexism. I found that individuals with high levels of benevolent and hostile sexism perceive black women who conform to the mammy stereotype as more assertive than those with low levels of hostile and benevolent sexism. And remember, the mammy stereotype is the sort of most communal, most cooperative, the sort of nurse made maternal figure. And I found it was really interesting that individuals with high levels of sexism thought that this mammy candidate, this Mamie stereotype candidate was assertive, and they thought that more than people with low levels of hostile and benevolent sexism,

Speaker 1
what is benevolent sexism and what is hostile sexism?

Speaker 2
Yes, so benevolent sexism is a part of the general ambivalent sexism inventory, which is split into two parts, benevolent and hostile sexism. Benevolent sexism portrays women or people believe women are sort of special and should be treated and put on a pedestal. They should be cherished and protected and have sort of pure qualities that are different than men. Hostile sexism, however, is the sexism that we traditionally think of when we say sexism. It portrays women as having sort of manipulative powers or control over men. It says things like women fail to to appreciate fully that men do for them, and that oftentimes women interpret innocent remarks as being sexist. I'll give you an example with the mammy stereotype. Again, remember the mammy stereotype is sort of the devoted maternal figure, probably the most unassertive person, but people who have high levels of benevolent hostile sexism still see this many stereotype candidate as more assertive than those who don't have this high level of benevolent and hostile sexism.

Speaker 1
So putting my research methods professor hat on, I'm curious, since these are obviously really sensitive topics, and most people don't want to admit to having any sort of sexist or racist attitudes, I'm wondering, how do you actually measure whether someone has high or low levels of sexism or racial resentment?

Speaker 2
Yeah, so there's what's called the ambivalent sexism inventory in the racial resentment scale. And these are questions that researchers commonly use to assess whether people have high or low levels of sexism or higher low levels of racial resentment. So it's a series of questions where people, where people are presented with a statement and they're asked whether they agree or disagree with this particular statement. And what researchers do is we sum up these questions and get a score, so an ambivalent sexism inventory score or racial resentment score, and that tells us whether or not someone has higher low levels of these thing.

Speaker 1
So you have to kind of go about it in a roundabout way, yes, yes.

Speaker 2
Of course. You can't directly ask someone you know if they are sexist or racist, because they will probably say no.

Speaker 1
Okay, so. Generally, what would you want someone leaving this podcast to remember from your research, what are your main takeaways?

Speaker 2

Yes, a lot of research is being done on candidate emergence and political ambition and sort of what gets women out to run. What I would like people to know is oftentimes the conventional wisdom that's given to women when they run, sort of soften their approach, be more likable, be more soft, may not necessarily apply to black women. My research shows that, again, no matter sort of how black women present themselves, in some cases, they're still thought of as being assertive, but it doesn't necessarily impact their voters perception of their electability. So if it doesn't really impact electability, then Black women in particular should stop trying to fit themselves into particular boxes to win over voters, because voters who are sexist unfortunately are going to be sexist, and voters who are racist are unfortunately going to be racist. And so instead of trying to fit yourself into a box, voters are going to sort of vote the way that you know, the sort of characteristics that they have. So that's the one, one big takeaway. The also, other big takeaway is on the sort of party recruitment and party support side. Oftentimes, black women are told they need to sort of wait their turn or aren't given a lot of party supports are run simply because the these party organ organizations believe the same thing that voters believe. But again, if what my research is saying that voters still believe black women are equally electable no matter how they present themselves, then hopefully this will get more party support and party recruitment for black women.

Speaker 1

Yeah, that finding you have that all candidates are equally electable, regardless of what stereotype they're presenting themselves with is really striking. So your research is clearly relevant for today. Kind of switching gears to be a little more specific to recording this in the fall of 2024 when we have the history making candidacy, candidacy of Kamala Harris, a black, Asian American woman who is nominated as a major party candidate for President of the United States. So with your researcher hat on, and given these results and implications that we've been talking about, what are you looking for paying particular attention to during the 2024 election.

Speaker 2

Yes, I'm paying very close attention to how people are talking about Harris, how the media is portraying her, how the other parties portraying her, her identity, her qualifications, her policies and background and actions. And what I've seen so far is unfortunately sort of the same old playbook, the same sort of racist and misogynistic attacks, attacks on her gender, her relationships, sort of implying that she's sexually promiscuous and thus discounting her qualifications, attacks on her race, that she's not black enough and therefore is unqualified to both substantively and descriptively represent the diverse population of America and then misogynoir attacks. So there were criticisms of her speaking engagements, sort of saying that she went to a sorority party when she spoke in front of the Zeta Phi Beta Sorority. Zeta Phi Beta is sorority is a part of the Divine nine, which is a group of historically black American fraternities and sororities. And so again, just

discounting her, her gender, her race. And I find that, you know, unfortunately, uh, really problematic, but as a researcher, exciting for my research?

Speaker 1
Yeah, I'm curious, um, if you have any thoughts on she seems to not want to talk about her identity. And I'm just curious if you have any any insight on that, or just what are your thoughts on on that? Yes,

Speaker 2
I completely agree, so far, she has not taken the bait. And I personally would love to meet her campaign manager or her communications strategist to see because so far, that strategy seems to be working where she's not playing into these same old stereotypes, the same old playbook, and just really presenting herself, you know, as a qualified candidate, as a you know person who is ready to reach across the aisle. So so far, it seems to be working, but we will see come November.

Speaker 1
Yeah, time will tell, and I'm sure a lot of research will be coming from her candidacy. Curious, what are your future research plans?

Speaker 2
Yeah, so I've been examining and sort of messing around with content analysis. I'm very interested in how candidates present themselves to the public. Again, as I mentioned, sort of communication strategies and their public interest image, I'm interested in how these candidates are either combating these stereotypes, or how they're leaning into these stereotypes. And as we mentioned, it seems like Harris is really taking a complete step back away from these stereotypes and not even engaging in these conversations.

Speaker 1
I can't wait to see what your future, future research has in store. So finally, I want to switch gears, and I have a couple more personal questions. So first, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, black females make up only 4% of full time faculty at universities in the United States. I know you just started in your position as an assistant professor, but you were in graduate school for several years before that, so I'm curious, what has your experience been as a black female in academia or in higher education more generally?

Speaker 2
Yeah. So the 4% number is shocking to me, not because I didn't realize it. You know, I see it at conferences in names listed in articles on faculty web pages. I know what the state of academia looks like, but just to hear that number is quite shocking. My own personal experience, you know, I've experienced the micro microaggressions, the macro aggressions from both faculty and students, the general stereotypes and tokenism that often happens in academia. One of the things that I really connected to when I was going

through grad school was the hashtag black in the ivory, which was started by Sharde Davis in 2020 and a lot of black people in academia we're sharing similar stories through this hashtag, and it sort of brought a community together of black people in academia and their experiences. And you know, sometimes being the only person in the room that looks like you is is very difficult, the sort of sheer, just emotional toll of having to navigate academia as a black woman. You know, sometimes I think academia is worse than the Oscars as far as diversity goes. But I also feel very fortunate to have people who supported me through this journey. It's not easy, like I said, being the only person in the room who looks like you, that's why I think it's very, very important to find your community, find your people, find people who will support you. Sharde Davis wrote a book with the same title, and it is on my to do to read list. I have not yet read it, but there are various sort of groups in academia that support black people, black women in particular, the one that comes to mind is Pia sister scholars, which was started by Nadia Brown, and it was a group of women of color in political science, who came together, particularly during the pandemic, and supported each other through this journey.

Speaker 1
Yeah, really appreciate. I noticed some, you know, Women Helping Women. So yes, I'm really happy to hear that some of those things are still very active. So finally, what advice do you have for our Sac State students who might be interested in pursuing higher education or social science research, or even our just current Sac State students? I'm curious. You know, what is some of your general advice for our students?

Speaker 2
First, believe it's possible, believe in yourself, believe that you can do it. I think that's a great motivator for you in pursuing this often difficult journey in academia or higher education. The second thing, as I mentioned before, find your people. Find a community. A lot of grad school is a solitary journey, but you cannot do it without people who are in your corner. You need people to pull for you. You need people to speak your name in rooms where your name needs to be spoken to help you and to help you connect with other people, and then also you have to find your. Inner reason, whatever your motivation or goal or plan your drive, find that articulate it, write it down. Keep that close, because times will get rough, and it's helpful to keep reminding yourself of that reason, that motivation, when the times do get rough.

Speaker 1
As a first gen student who had that kind of long, winding road, I'm curious, did you find that community at Sac State, and if so, kind of which groups were you involved in as a student?

Speaker 2
As a transfer student, it was, it was definitely challenging. I also worked as well. And then when I was getting my master's, I worked full time. I think it's important to in your classes, find friends, make friends, not just for the Oh, I didn't come to class today. Can I have your notes? But also so you feel like you're not alone. So I think looking back, while I didn't do

that as much as I probably should have, as a transfer student my first, you know, two years at Sac State, that is something I would definitely push for more of if I was to give myself advice going back,

Speaker 1
I think it's so tough. You know, students are so busy with all of their classes and other obligations and work, etc, I think it's really hard to find the motivation to get involved in other groups, when at some points that might just seem like more work that they don't have time for.

Speaker 2
So yes, I mean, I so I will say that, um, well, as a student, trying to find community with other students. For me was difficult. I did feel much support from advisors and other faculty, yourself and other professors that I had at Sac State.

Speaker 1
Yeah, you'd only need a few, right? So just find a few friends in your classes. Make sure you get to know them again. Like I like that, not just for the notes when you miss class, but then you're right. Also find some good mentors who can support you as well. Well. So any final remarks before we conclude here?

Speaker 2
Yes, it is election season, so I want to remind everyone to register to vote if you haven't already, if you are registered vote November, particularly, vote in your local and district races. There are things on the ballot that affect your everyday life. Sometimes I hear people say, Oh, I don't do politics, or I don't believe in the political system. And okay, but politics does you and the political system is happening with or without you. So since politics affects you, at least contribute to what is happening to you by voting.

Speaker 1
Love a Get Out the Vote message. That's excellent, wonderful way to end. Well, thank you so much for your time and sharing your amazing story and your compelling, important research with us, Rana, I really appreciate your time, especially in your first year as a professor. So thank you very much. Thank you, all right. Thank you for listening. We hope our ongoing conversations spark understandings, empathies and motivation to join the struggle for a better future. For all you just listened to the building justice podcast. The information contained in this podcast, including its title and description, represent the views and opinions of the host and guest, and do not necessarily represent the views or opinions of Sacramento State CHRISJ and or the building justice podcast committee.

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Concluding Language

Thank you for listening. We hope our ongoing conversations spark understandings, empathies, and motivation to join the struggle for a better future for all. {PAUSE......} You just listened to the 'Building Justice' podcast. The information contained in this podcast, including its title and description represent the views and opinions of the hosts and guests and do not necessarily represent the views or opinions of the Sacramento State, CRISJ and/or the 'Building Justice' podcast committee

Outro Music Lyrics
No more penalties and no more wars. Based on the actions. Now, time for "Building Justice," "Building Justice." Time for building justice, justice.