

"Sister Citizen" and the strong black woman

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mtravis@tulane.edu

In her latest book, Tulane political science professor Melissa Harris-Perry explores what it means to be both a black woman and an American citizen. "I use the lived experiences of African American women as my point of departure for understanding democratic citizenship in the United States," she says.



Although her new book is focused on African American women, Melissa Harris-Perry thinks all sorts of people will find insights into contemporary politics by reading it. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes and Black Women in America (Yale University Press, 2011) is a book about politics but not about policy or voting patterns. Drawing on literature, psychology and religion, [Harris-Perry](#) connects "political realities to socially influenced private emotions."

She addresses how African American women are boxed in by the stereotypes through which others see them and by the false personas that they often feel compelled to present to the world.

The book is heavily influenced by her post-Katrina experience, says Harris-Perry. She attended Bring New Orleans Back commission meetings as early as November 2005, when many residents had not yet returned to the city. She heard and responded to the anguish of citizens. She was writing a different book about citizenship before Katrina but discarded most of it, changing the book's focus because “the post-Katrina levee-failure disaster opened up a new set of political questions for us.”

Although the book is focused on African American women, Harris-Perry thinks all sorts of people will find insights into contemporary politics by reading it.

To be a citizen, one must be perceived as an individual first. “The book is in many ways about how we struggle to be accurately seen in our communities, by our government, by ourselves,” she says.

Harris-Perry is the founding director of the [Anna Julia Cooper Project](#) on Gender, Race and Politics in the South at the Newcomb College Institute. She will sign her book on Saturday (Oct. 22) at 6 p.m. at the [Maple Street Book Shop](#).