



KNOWING OUR BEAUTY:  
**RECLAIMING**  
the True Images  
of Black Women

BY JULIANNE MALVEAUX

*She does not know her beauty  
She thinks her brown body has no glory  
If she could dance naked under palm trees  
And see her image in the river  
She would know  
But there are no palm trees on the street  
And dishwasher gives back  
No images.*

ELIZABETH WOLF

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hen the poet Waring Cuney wrote those words in 1926, the majority of the African-American women in the labor market worked as maids. His poem reflects the invisibility of black women's beauty, even to themselves, and the fact that their reality had been distort-

ed by the narrow occupational choices available to them.

Black women's lives outside the workplace were multi-dimensional, with church and civic service a cornerstone of their lives, but because they were seen by the public mostly as cleaning women,

few were the arenas in which their beauty was depicted and reflected. There were some exceptions, but African-American actresses who were portrayed as “beautiful” were few, and their mistreatment in Hollywood is legendary.

Similarly, the dancer Josephine Baker earned international renown for the eroticized image she presented, and later for her humanitarian work. The tension between views of African-American women as de-feminized workhorses, or alternatively, hypersexual women, bleed through to current images. The derision implicit in Don Imus’ description of Rutgers basketball

## Through history, context and policy, disparaging images and shape them

players as “nappy-headed hos” is telling. Summarizing history, he described a group of phenomenal, achievement-oriented and well-spoken women as sexualized (“hos”) but unattractive (“nappy-headed”), and unworthy of respect.

While African-American

women’s occupational reality has shifted, their image in media and popular culture remains distorted and unrealistic. Despite the prominence of Oprah Winfrey, the profound wisdom of poet Maya Angelou, the gentle grace of businesswoman Susan Taylor and the small, but powerful influence of African-American women in an array of occupations, we are virtually invisible in the policy context and demeaned and distorted in popular culture.

### SEX, LIES AND VIDEOS

In music videos and in rap music especially, African-American women are routinely portrayed as scantily-clad sexual objects, derided as “bitches and hos.” That image of black women had become so pervasive in popular culture that shock jock Imus, who had cleaned up his image so sufficiently that respected journalists clamored to appear on his radio show, felt entitled to take an insulting and derogatory foul shot at female athletes whose beauty was apparent not just as individual players, but as a team.

Objections to the Imus comments morphed into wholesale

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criticism of images of African-American women in popular culture, particularly in rap music videos. While clearly appropriate, such a focus on the contemporary fails to capture the historical injury implicit in the Imus comments and the extent to which African-American women’s images consistently have been degraded in the media and in popular cultures. Too often black women have been invisible in the media, or rendered inferior in a culture where the standard of beauty, despite the reality of demographic shift, is still white and blonde.

When Sojourner Truth asked white women “Ain’t I A Woman?” she was implicitly protesting the contrast of the dainty white woman who was helped into carriages with the slave woman who “plowed and planted and not a man could head me.” Woman still, Sojourner Truth said, baring her breast to prove it.

The contrast of the filigreed white woman with the rugged and capable African-American woman has been enduring, and black women frequently have been de-feminized by those images. We were not depicted as beautiful,

dainty or desirable, but as hypersexual, women who were so available that few men who raped African-American women faced charges. Given those confusing images, is there any wonder that some black women are obsessed with hair and skin color?

At times, whites’ obsession with black women has been even more basic than that. Sarjae Bartsjee, the Hottentot Venus, was paraded around the world so white people could examine her distended posterior, her genitalia and the rest of her body. When she died, her genitalia were preserved and displayed in a museum.

Hyper-sexualized but de-feminized, Bartsjee’s treatment was the forerunner of the treatment of black women in rap videos, where unconnected body parts get extreme camera inspection—an undulating butt, a moving crotch or just cleavage. “Ain’t I A Woman?”



Poet Maya Angelou walks along the beach in San Francisco.

BETTMANN/CORBIS



Josephine Baker

CORBIS

## Even when we are demure, as many of us have chosen to be in reaction, that demureness has been sexually caricatured.

Sojourner Truth might ask—a person, a soul, without the body parts?

Clearly, all women have been sexualized in popular culture, but no other race has been so simultaneously sexualized and de-feminized as African-American women. In popular culture, we are overly sexual, so much so that our gyrations represent nothing more than the deconstruction of femininity.

Even when we are demure, as many of us have chosen to be in reaction, that demureness has been sexually caricatured. For example, when soft-spoken Anita Hill said she had been sexually harassed by now Associate Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, she was accused of “erotomania,” a high-toned form of hyper-sexuality. She was ground down to a 19th-century stereotype of a black woman whose erotic availability made her immune to violation.

### FIXING THE PICTURE

African-American women always have spoken out against those broken images. The colored-women’s club movement was, at least in part, a statement about African-American female respectability. The National Council of Negro

Women was an umbrella under which civically engaged black women organized and asserted their civility and “finer character.” By the time Hill had been disrespected by Thomas partisans, there was enough grit in the African-American women’s movement for Chicago professor Barbara Ransby to get together a group called “African American Women In Defense of Ourselves.” Hundreds of women signed a declaration saying we would not be diminished, disrespected or peripheralized. We defended our image.

C. Delores Tucker, one of the founders of the National Political Congress of Black women (now called the National Congress of Black Women), was another sister who staked her claim to defending our images. A passionate objector to the denigration of African-American women in music videos and other venues, Tucker made the important connection between artists and their labels, and wondered whether labels would be willing to distribute images that disparaged white women as cuttingly as those that denigrated African-American women.

Part of the challenge is to consider denigration in the context of the hyper-sexualization of our nation. We are a nation that took a child—JonBenet Ramsey—and turned her into a coquette. We have shattered innocence and introduced sexuality to the youngest of children, regardless of race. From that perspective, is what is happening to the image of African-American women alarming, or simply the natural devolution of pervasive sexuality in a morally unrestrained society?

The answer does not matter. The fact is that African-American women have been denigrated historically, and that denigration has been heightened in the context of a popular culture that commoditizes sex and devalues blacks. Our hyper-sexualized de-feminization is part of a cultural continuum that both allows a Don Imus to disrespect black female athletes and affirms a black artist’s right to dispense disrespectful depictions of our being.

She does not know her beauty; she thinks her brown body has no glory, wrote the poet. Dishwater may not reflect our images, but the video screen doesn’t, either. The real picture will emerge in a framework of history, context and policy, through which we may be able to contain disparaging images and shape them into a more reflective reality. Activism and policy will make all the difference.

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