

ROUTLEDGE TRANSFORMATIONS IN RACE AND MEDIA

Representations of Black
Women in the Media

The Damnation of Black Womanhood

Marquita Marie Gammage



Representations of Black Women in the Media

In 1920 W.E.B. Du Bois cited the damnation of women as linked to the devaluation of motherhood. This dilemma, he argued, had a crushing blow on Black women as they were forced into slavery. Black womanhood, portrayed as hyper-sexual by nature, became an enduring stereotype that did not coincide with the dignity of mother and wife. This portrayal continues to reinforce negative stereotypes of Black women in the media today. This book highlights how Black women have been negatively portrayed in the media, focusing on the export nature of media and its ability to convey notions of Blackness to the public. It argues that media such as rap music videos, television dramas, reality television shows, and newscasts create and affect expectations of Black women. Exploring the role that racism, misogyny, and media play in the representation of Black womanhood, it provides a foundation for challenging contemporary media's portrayal of Black women.

Marquita M. Gammage is Assistant Professor in the Africana Studies Department at California State University, Northridge, USA. Her research interest focuses on overt and covert representations of racism and sexism as they pertain to media-generated images of Black womanhood.

Routledge Transformations in Race and Media

Series Editors: Robin R. Means Coleman

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Charlton D. McIlwain *New York University*

- 1 **Interpreting Tyler Perry**
Perspectives on Race, Class,
Gender, and Sexuality
*Edited by Jamel Santa Cruze
Bell and Ronald L. Jackson II*
- 2 **Black Celebrity, Racial Politics,
and the Press**
Framing Dissent
Sarah J. Jackson
- 3 **The Cultural Politics of
Colorblind TV Casting**
Kristen J. Warner
- 4 **The Myth of Post-Racialism in
Television News**
Libby Lewis
- 5 **Representations of Black
Women in the Media**
The Damnation of Black
Womanhood
Marquita Marie Gammage

Representations of Black Women in the Media

The Damnation of Black Womanhood

Marquita Marie Gammage

First published 2016
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2016 Taylor & Francis

The right of Marquita Marie Gammage to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gammage, Marquita Marie, 1983-
Representations of black women in the media: the damnation of black womanhood /
by Marquita Marie Gammage.
pages cm. — (Routledge transformations in race and media; 5)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. African Americans in mass media. 2. Women in mass media. I. Title.
P94.5.A37G36 2016
302.23089'96073—dc23 2015025359

ISBN: 978-1-138-94519-7 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-67155-0 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by codeMantra

Contents

<i>List of Tables and Figures</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
Introduction	1
1 From Sara Baartman to Michelle Obama	15
2 From the Auction Block to Hip Hop	34
3 The Reality of Reality TV	71
4 Ain't I a Woman? Cause I Damn Sure Ain't a Man!	93
5 I am Mom-in-Chief	113
6 Redefining Black Womanhood: An Africana Womanist Approach	136
<i>Conclusion</i>	149
<i>Index</i>	157

This page intentionally left blank

List of Tables and Figures

Tables

2.1	Top Ten Rap Music Videos That Feature Black Women 2010	37
3.1	Reality Television Shows Starring Black Women 2014	76
3.2	Reality Television Show Episode Descriptions with Messages of Hyper-Violence in 2014	80
5.1	Black Female Lead Character as Mothers in Television Dramas 2014	119
5.2	Black Mothers in Reality Television Shows	125

Figures

1.1	Sartjee the Hottentot Venus, Now Exhibiting in London, Drawn from Life, circa 1810. Image provided by the Westminster City Archives	21
6.1	Participant with Son	139
6.2	Participant with Group of Community Kids She Mentored	141
6.3	Participant's Two Friends	144
6.4	Participant as Naturally Beautiful	145

This page intentionally left blank

Acknowledgments

I begin by acknowledging my foremothers and founders of Africana Womanism for their insight and courage in creating a theoretical methodology attuned to the cultural and historical lives of Africana women. Clenora Hudson-Weems, Nah Dove, Delores P. Aldridge, Pamela Yaa Asantewaa Reed, and all Africana womanists, thank you for paving the way and creating the space for culturally appropriate scholarship on Africana womanhood.

Black female focus group participants from the south and east coast helped to inspire this manuscript. Their critiques of the representations of Black women in the media and their desire to see more accurate portrayals of womanhood encouraged me to systematically evaluate images of Black women in current popular media. I would also like to thank all research participants who participated in my study *Perceptions of African American Females: An Examination of Black Women's Images in Rap Music Videos*.

I must acknowledge the Cheikh Anta Diop International Conference for providing the platform in which I first presented my analysis on the damnation of Black womanhood. I would like to thank the conference committee and the intellectual community of Afrocentric scholars who attend the conference for their critical feedback and support.

The students at California State University, Northridge, and California State University, Dominguez Hills, were very receptive of my analyses of media images of Black women. I acknowledge the students in *The Black Woman in Contemporary Times* course and all students who attended the Black Bag and Flawless: Black Women and Body Image discussion panels. Thank you to the Department of Africana Studies and the Sisterhood organization for providing the venue to share my research with the academic community at CSUN.

The College of Social and Behavioral Sciences at California State University, Northridge, provided several grants to financially support the writing of this manuscript. Summer grants and research grants throughout the Fall and Spring semesters helped to secure resources and course release throughout the manuscript writing process.

Words cannot express my gratitude for my mothers, sisters, and girlfriends who supported me and my family throughout the writing of this book. My mother Thelma Pellerin has offered invaluable support, and is

x *Acknowledgments*

my example of womanhood. My sisters Crissy and Shikieta have influenced me since childhood. I must also thank my fathers and brothers for their love and support. My children, Jalia and Justin Jr., your smiles inspire and motivate me every day. Finally, I must acknowledge the unconditional love, support, and friendship of my husband Justin. This manuscript would not have come to fruition without your encouragement, support, and critical feedback.

Chapter 6 first appeared in *Western Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 36, no.1, Spring 2012, 76–85. The article was originally entitled: *Defining Africana Womanhood: Developing an Africana Womanism Methodology*.

I dedicate this book to my daughter Jalia. May you always define your image.

Introduction

In 1920 Dubois linked the damnation of women to the devaluation of motherhood. He argued that Western societies confined women to a simplistic idea of femininity that forced them to choose chastity, motherhood, or career. This dilemma, he argued, had a crushing effect on Black women as they were forced into slavery and their reproduction became a labor supply. According to Dubois, the Black woman was riddled with the double burden of racism and sexism, and neither could be overlooked. In fact, his discussion of gender domination paralleled his critique of racism. He argued that no other racial group of women suffered the social stigma as Black women due to their dark skin. Black womanhood, which symbolized the beauty, purity, and dignity of African societies, was attacked and almost destroyed in an attempt to dehumanize African people. Dubois recognized this as a systematic devaluing of Blackness and campaigned for the liberation of womanhood. The genesis of an anti-Black woman agenda, while emerging from the 16th century European ideals of Africans, now placed a crippling burden on Black women's ability to ascend into womanhood. Their portrayal as hypersexual by nature became an enduring stereotype that did not coincide with the dignity of mother and wife. The proliferation of these types of characteristics became a way to rationalize the misrepresentation of Black women and in effect currently is reinforced by negative stereotypes of Black women in the media, evolving into damnation.

Contemporary media provide a venue to promote an anti-Black woman agenda, which in turn constantly assaults African humanity. Stereotypical portrayals of Black women dominate current popular representations and perceptions of Black womanhood. While much research has been done on women's representations in the media, few studies have been conducted to investigate the significance of the imagery of Black women. Instead, Black women have been reduced to images as representations of reality. Even more noteworthy is the fact that previous research approaches and theories have failed to adequately address the need for a cultural critique and liberation of Black women from these images.

Theoretical Methodology

Utilizing an Africana Womanist theoretical framework this text examines media representations of Black women and how these representations

2 Introduction

directly impact cultural attitudes. According to Hudson-Weems, *Africana Womanism* is an African-centered

ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in our culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women. It critically addresses the dynamics of the conflicts between the mainstream feminist, the Black feminist, and the Africana womanist. (24)

Pamela Yaa Asantewaa Reed points to the usefulness of *Africana Womanism* as a governing tool to address the struggles of Africana people. Thus, *Africana womanism* methodology is grounded in an African-centered approach to systematically investigating the Africana women phenomenon (Asante). The objective is to establish an appropriate frame of reference attuned to the historical and contemporary realities of Africana women. It is the aim of this text to apply the *Africana womanism* methodology to investigate the representations of Black women in the media.

The essential principles of an *Africana womanist* methodology must include: (1) a pledge to the wholeness of *Africana* womanhood; (2) an acceptance of the interconnectedness of *Africana* women and humanity; (3) consciousness of the *Africana* woman through the *Africana* family and community; (4) recognition of the centrality of motherhood; (5) acknowledgment that *Africana* women are inherently tied to the struggle for social justice; (6) the inseparability of the *Africana* woman and her race; (7) an awareness of spiritual and moral grounding; and (8) a commitment to the beauty and strength of the *Africana* woman's body, mind, and soul. Thus, what defines an *Africana womanist* methodology is holistically engaging in an agency-driven investigation of *Africana* womanhood in order to conceptualize and unshackle the realities of *Africana* women.

Africana womanist methodology is constituted to engage in a comprehensive examination of *Africana* women, therefore, a pledge to the wholeness of *Africana* womanhood is essential. There exists a mounting need to adequately address and reclaim *Africana* womanhood from the vantage point of the *Africana* woman, as her history, name, and being have been misinterpreted and distorted. For Hudson-Weems, the *Africana* woman's "sense of wholeness is necessarily compatible with her cultural consciousness and authentic existence" (69). Therefore, it is vital that we generate a new methodology that equips the researcher with the proper tools to investigate the wholeness of *Africana* womanhood.

Aligned with the wholeness of *Africana* womanhood is the need for an acceptance of the interconnectedness of *Africana* women and humanity. Cheikh Anta Diop (1955/1974) identified Africa as the cradle of human civilization. The struggle of the *Africana* woman is a human struggle, and the assault on *Africana* womanhood is ultimately an assault on humanity. According to Ntiri, "There is an inextricable relationship between the black

woman and her community and the black community's survival and growth rest largely on its acceptance, understanding, and appreciation of her female self-definition and empowerment" (167). Thus the maintenance of humanity comes in part through the liberation of Africana women.

The Africana womanist methodology is concerned with consciously investigating Africana woman phenomena. Consequently, consciousness of the Africana woman comes through the Africana family and community. Hudson-Weems argues that Africana womanism "embraces the concept of collectivism for the entire family in its overall liberation struggle for survival" (44). In this sense, recognition of the complementarity between Africana men and women is necessary in order to more fully understand Africana womanhood. (Aldridge) In effect, "Africanans are grassroots people who depend on the support and confidence of their community" (Hudson-Weems 26). Hence, there is no need for the African male and female to become enemies as they are warriors on the same battlefield. In examining the Africana woman, the researcher must be cognizant of the shared history, culture, and destiny of the Africana community.

Coupled with establishing a consciousness of the Africana woman is the need to recognize the centrality of motherhood. According to Hudson-Weems, the art of motherhood is historically and culturally rooted for the Africana woman. Vivian Gordon argues: "To address women's issues, therefore, is not only to address the crucial needs of black women, it is also to address the historic primacy of the African and African American community; that is, the primacy of its children and their preparation for the responsibilities and privileges of mature personhood" (viii). In this regard, an Africana womanist project must include recognition of the centrality of motherhood.

Fundamental to an Africana womanist methodology is the acknowledgment that Africana women are inherently tied to the struggle for social justice. Hudson-Weems states that "the chief role of the Africana woman is to aid in bringing to fruition the liberation of her entire race" (51). There should be no disagreement that the Africana woman has faced and continues to face oppression on several fronts. However, her burden of oppression is not solely grounded in her gender—indeed it is grounded in her race first. As such, there is no separation between the Africana woman and her race because her struggle is a communal struggle that must collectively be addressed within and by the community.

Africana womanist methodology emerges as a frame of reference whereby an awareness of the spiritual and moral grounding of Africana womanhood is established. Hudson-Weems states: "The Africana womanist demonstrates a definite sense of spirituality, a belief in a higher power that transcends rational ideals, which is an ever-present part of Africana culture. From this point of reference, she acknowledges the existence of spiritual reality, which brings into account the power of comprehension, healing, and the unknown" (69–70). Thus, engineering a frame of reference that

4 *Introduction*

encompasses the spirituality of Africana womanhood is central to any investigation on Africana women.

Finally, inaugurating a commitment to the beauty and strength of the Africana woman's body, mind, and soul is a necessary component of an Africana womanism methodology. The Africana woman has been demonized, hypersexualized, and criminalized such that her image has been damned. The disrespect of the Africana woman, in turn, has done great damage to her image. As articulated by Hudson-Weems, it is through respect and recognition of her 'humanness' that the Africana woman can more "effectively fulfill her role as a positive and responsible co-partner in the overall Africana struggle" (68). Thus we must have a commitment to respect and recognize the humanity of Africana womanhood. Utilizing an empirical examination rooted in an African-centered Africana womanism theoretical framework, this text seeks to consciously analyze the representations of Black women in the media and actively engage Black women as agents of their own image liberation.

Contextualizing Damnation

Damnation is here defined as the purposeful condemning of Black womanliness as inferior, inhumane, and ungodly. It entails a systematic monopolization of Black women's images in an attempt to destroy and control the value placed on Black femininity. Damnation is often coupled with the public adoption and expression of an unaccepted existence for those damned. The damnation of Black womanhood exists in three major forms: ideological, social, and institutional. The ideological assault on Africanness has long been recorded as a racial system of oppression and for Black women a sexist system of oppression. Ideological damnation is presented as spiritual, physical, and intellectual. The idea of white racial supremacy corroded the minds of Europeans and they thus rendered Africans as inferior and uncivilized on all accounts (House Soremekun). African woman's spirituality was deemed wicked and ungodly, and she was considered untrustworthy. Her physical and social differences from European women were believed to represent an innate inferiority to whiteness, and all Africans, male and female, were deemed intellectually inferior to Caucasians. Of course, these assumptions were unsupported, and no evidence supports the ideological damnation of Black womanhood. However, these assumptions still inform public opinions about Blackness, despite scores of evidence-based research illustrating the greatness of African civilizations, culture, and people.

The social damnation of Black womanhood was introduced and enforced through Eurocentric systems of patriarchy that contradicted the indigenous social order of African communities. This foreign social order replaced the complimentary and communal nature of African societies with a system rooted in individualism and male privilege. African women were seen as inferior and no longer permitted to function as leaders or key figures in

society. For years Africans successfully resisted this foreign social order, but the indigenous responsibilities and privileges previously experienced by African women were replaced under colonialism and enslavement, and a new foreign standard of womanhood was introduced. For centuries Black women have endured the continued social damnation that Dubois cites as a conflict between motherhood and work. These social orders forced Black women to operate as reproductive laborers, sexual laborers, and physical laborers and have not wavered in the 21st century.

The highest form of damnation is institutional and is most alarming because it has the potential to reinforce and legitimize the undervaluing of Black women in society. Institutional damnation is the formal and official rendering of Black women as unfeminine and in need of social control. It can be identified within three historic periods: the colonialism and enslavement era, the Jim Crow era, and the Reagan/Bush era. Colonialism and enslavement placed African people in an inferior social hierarchy that resulted in legal bondage. Black women were legally reduced to a reproductive labor supply and were highly eroticized as hyper-sexual beings. This treatment was operational not only in the Americas but in the world. Black women exercised limited or no control over their offspring and had no sexual rights. The worldwide call for preserving the human rights of Blacks contributed to the end of enslavement. After Reconstruction, Jim Crow legally placed Blacks in a position of second class citizenship and for Black women third class citizenship as both their race and gender were weighted against them in their claim for rights. Blacks were legally denied access to basic citizenship rights and were penalized for outward expressions of resistance. Laws were enacted against Black women prohibiting them from equal access to hospital facilities, educational institutions, and voting. Political, social, and religious campaigning of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements brought an end to the Jim Crow era. The Regan Bush era quickly emerged and marked a return to the racial social order of the 1950s. Whereas Black men were labeled criminal drug offenders (Alexander), Black women were seen as criminally negligent mothers and chronic abusers of the welfare system (i.e., welfare queens). This form of institutional damnation has been longstanding, and unlike the fight for civil rights or the women's suffrage movement, there has not been any wide scale movement to end the subjugation of Black women in American institutions.

Contemporarily, ideological, social, and institutional damnation has manifested itself in media systems. Media has systemically adopted a devalued understanding of Black womanhood and in turn has evolved racial stereotypes of Black women to reflect 21st century assumptions about Black peoplehood. The politics behind the images represented in the media have led to the wide-scale broadcast of racist and sexist notions. Understanding the media's role in the construction and reproduction of racist imagery cannot be understood outside of the context of mass media systems and the institutions that they operate within (Grandy). The exploitation of these

6 Introduction

images therefore establishes beliefs about the subjects being represented. In this case of racist and sexist imagery, as bell hooks discusses in *Sisters of the Yam*, “obviously, the dearth of affirming images of Black femaleness in art, magazines, movies, and television reflects not only the racist white world’s way of seeing us, but the way we see ourselves” (84). These images become internalized and reflected in Americans understandings of Black women.

Media transcriptions frame public discourse by directly influencing public opinion on any given subject matter. As such, media serves as a primary mode of education in U.S. context, meaning that media takes on the task of imparting knowledge on various subjects deemed to be an important information base for its audience, no matter how accurate or inaccurate. “As a result of the overwhelming media focus on crime, drug use, gang violence, and other forms of anti-social behavior among African-Americans, the media have fostered a distorted public perception of African-Americans” (Balkaran). Media productions of Black women can result in the colonization of Black women’s images because it is the primary venue through which Black women’s images are transmitted to society. Misogynistic and materialistic images of Black womanhood in the media aid in the reduction of the Black female to a sexual product used to export negative stereotypical imagery to society and “their subsequent use contributes to the reproduction of racism” (Gandy 83) and therefore “minimizes Black women’s humanity” (Williams-Witherspoon 263–66). As hooks argues, this hyper-sexualization of the Black female is “part of the cultural apparatus of the 19th-century racism and which still shapes perceptions today” (Black Looks 62).

Currently, images of Black women dominate popular media despite the fact that Black women disagree that these images accurately represent them (Pellerin). Ironically, research has provided evidence that Black women have been regulated to a unidimensional characterization that presents them as hypersexual jezebels (Pellerin). Unsurprisingly, Black female bodies are predominantly showcased in the media as sex objects—possessions used solely for sexual pleasure. This representation has had a damaging impact on the image of Black womanhood and simplifies and devalues its essence.

As the power of the media grew, Black women increasingly became a target of negative portrayals. The common view of Black females in rap music videos, for example, is dressed in revealing clothing, dancing suggestively toward the camera; the original value placed on the Black woman has been lost in the media. The over-saturation of negative images in the media has caused some Black women to be more susceptible to internalizing these images, and they in fact participate in their own damnation. These are all deep, profound illustrations of an institutional anti-Black woman agenda that leads to the damnation of Black womanhood.

In the 21st century, media plays a major role in the construction and reinforcement of ideas about Blackness. The reliance on visual images as a cultural frame for understanding society fosters an environment of race-based assumptions about Black women. The racist and sexist images represented