

OPEN SEASON ON AMERICA'S BLACK WOMEN?

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Why are Black women so increasingly ignored, abhorred, disrespected and rejected in this country? Who declared "open season" on us, and why?

Increasingly over the past decade the media has projected images that Black women are "public enemy #1" who can be battered about, cast down, kicked aside, ignored, denigrated and disrespected at the will of all who take delight and sport in doing so. I say it is tantamount to a public flogging in the modern-day Town Square—the media, the Internet, TV, movies and music videos.

The latest town square venue? The UGA campus where Chi Phi fraternity pledges distributed images of naked Black women to passers-by. Why? Because they could. It's acceptable sport in the 21st century to do so. They're just Black women; who cares? One student told a reporter he thought it was funny. It's not.

The late comedian, Rodney Dangerfield, enjoyed a lifetime of fame and fortune and received many a laugh saying, "That's the story of my life, I don't get no respect." Many of today's Black women may feel Dangerfield's battle cry is one, they too, can claim. But for many Black women, getting "no respect" is not funny and hardly any are laughing.

The public disregard and disrespect of Black women is pervasive. More and more, Black male models and actors are readily cast opposite White and Hispanic women, to the blatant, total exclusion of Black

women. Magazine ads frequently engage colorism—favoring light-skinned Blacks over brown-skinned ones. Lighter Black women often get the sexy ads and poses; they're positioned to look soft and desirable while brown-skinned women are posed stern, frowning and even masculine with bald heads. Often African-born models are selected to the exclusion of native-born Black American women.

It also seems to me that the media are ever eager to show the often embarrassing antics of U.S. Rep. Cynthia McKinney, model Naomi Campbell, Omarosa and others, but won't allow for others to be heard or seen. It seems, "well, there's Oprah," so that's all the room they'll allow for "good" Black women of richer hue.

Sadly, too, those Blacks—including Oprah—in position to present Black women in a better light, often fail to do so. Tyler Perry and Martin Lawrence, more so, get rich on the image of the fat, gun-toting, loud Black granny.

Shonda Rhimes, the Black female creator/producer of "Grey's Anatomy," has the Black male character sleeping with Asian Sandra Oh (who brushes her teeth in the kitchen sink!) while Chandra Wilson, the lone Black actress on the show, is "the Nazi," "the bitch."

And MTV—whose president, Christina Norman, is a Black woman—recently aired a cartoon to young Saturday morning viewers entitled "Where My Dogs At," which had Black women squatting on all

fours, tethered to leashes. In 2004, U.S. Army reservist Sgt. Lynndie England subjected Iraqi prisoners at Abu Grhaib to the same denigration and she was convicted and sentenced to prison. Where is the justice for Black women?

Mind you, however, the Iraqi prisoners were tethered against their will. Why would the MTV president have such unconscionable racial insensitivity, and why, why would Black women participate in such debasing imagery? I submit many of these sorely misguided Black women are merely seeking acceptance, appreciation and value in a society that affords them none. Everyone wants to be valued; sadly these women choose a disparaging route that leads to shame for themselves and their race.

The effects of these demeaning images and absolute disregard for the Black female demographic in this country send a loud, disturbing message and are detrimental to our society at large. The negative imagery affects not only the psyche of Black men and women, but also that of impressionable boys and girls of all races.

As a physician I'm likewise concerned about the effect such constant societal rejection has on Black women's physical health. I can say with certainty that constant rejection, disrespect and denigration cause stress. Stress increases the release of cortisol and other stress hormones. These high levels lead to high blood pressure, stroke, diabetes, central obesity and more, all of which can lead to death. Prolonged stress also severely affects the immune system, diminishing its ability to fight against life-threatening diseases. Black women have a very high incidence and death rate from these killer conditions. Connect the dots.

Someone must give voice to this societal poison. White women aren't going to say

anything because they readily benefit from negative images of Black women. Many white men—media executives, and obviously some UGA frat brothers—are having too much fun and cash flow at the expense of Black women's dignity and social value; and sadly, many Black men are inexplicably silent, standing sideline. And people wonder why Black women are "angry" and "tired." Some posters to message boards proclaim that any women addressing this topic are "just darkie black women with self-hatred." No. We don't hate ourselves; we know who we are. Many of us are successful, well-groomed, well-spoken entre-preneurs, doctors, lawyers and homeowners, who are also loving, passionate, funny, exciting, devoted and sensual. What we hate is how we're portrayed and disrespected in the media and in real life.

As a Black woman I've tried for years, beginning in 1999, to shed light on this issue with media executives, television producers, literary agents and publishing editors, to no avail. And earlier this year I wrote Marc Cherry, creator of the hit show, "Desperate Housewives."

Normally, to see a Black woman get a recurring role in the number one prime-time network program would be a major coup, a step in the right direction for American media and Black imagery. But alas, once again, the lone Black woman—on a show that mostly deals with sexy, alluring women with kinky trysts and family matters—is portrayed as some psychopath who chains her sons in the basement. How did her storyline even fit the show? Did they just have to cast a Black woman and decided to make her "the evil, demented, crazy one"? These images—often to the exclusion of more positive, loving ones—must stop.

As my cries went unheard/ignored, increasing numbers of disgraceful,

disrespectful and demeaning videos, photographs and movie clips with disparaging images of Black women were seen by millions worldwide.

The problem has multiple prongs, and so does the remedy. For starters, I suggest new congressional hearings and laws to effect a tangible change in the depiction of women in music videos. Black women who participate in such videos must stop; there are better, more respectful ways to gain acceptance.

Parents need to stop allowing their children to listen to the despicable lyrics in hip-hop and rap songs and stop buying those recordings; they are poison to the mind. We've gone from "My Cherie Amour" to "bitch, ho, slut and whore." This is unacceptable. This must STOP. Black boys need to don proper attire and learn to speak to girls and women respectfully. And Black girls/women need to stop allowing men to speak to them in any which way and again, stop participating in disrespectful deeds.

Beyonce' and the like need to stop shaking their booty, mimicking orgasmic seizures on stage for young girls to see and later have their children emulate in "Baby Beyonce'" contests. Black men need to step forward: Say and do something. Honor your women. Speak to young boys.

Black film and music producers need to be socially conscious and realize what effect the images they set forth have on the community and the world; you can so better "represent." White media and ad executives must advance past colorism; they also need to cast Black actresses and models of all hues in loving, desirable roles.

White (and all) parents need to stop teaching racist attitudes to their offspring. And UGA students need to find something else to do in the town square. Denigrating and disrespecting Black women is not a sport. It's sad that members of the Chi Phi fraternity think it is.

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