The Sisters are Alright

Changing the Broken Narrative of Black Women in America

Tamara Winfrey Harris

More Praise for *The Sisters Are Alright*

"*The Sisters Are Alright* is a love letter to black women. Winfrey Harris's unapologetic celebration of our intelligence, mettle, and beauty counters the proliferation of negative stereotypes we endure daily. She sees us, she knows us, and she also understands that we're not monolithic. Winfrey Harris surfaces stories about black women's realities that are often glossed over or tossed aside, urgently insisting with beautiful prose that contrary to our cultural narrative, black women's lives matter."

—Jamia Wilson, Executive Director, Women, Action, and the Media

"Tamara Winfrey Harris picks up where Ntozake Shange left off, adding an eighth color to the rainbow of *For Colored Girls*. This academic work reads like a choreopoem that challenges the notion that black women are too tough to love or be loved. The author does more than deconstruct the stereotype of Sapphire; she asserts that black women are diamonds, and she insists that her reader consider their sparkle."

—Duchess Harris, PhD, Professor of American Studies, Macalester College, and author of *Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Obama*

"Tamara Winfrey Harris's book *The Sisters Are Alright* is a fitting answer to the question W. E. B. Du Bois said all black Americans are forced to consider: 'How does it feel to be a problem?' In a society that treats black people as problems and women as problems, it is nothing short of revolutionary to answer, as this book does, 'No, really, the sisters are alright.'"

—Jarvis DeBerry, journalist, *The Times-Picayune*, NOLA.com

"*The Sisters Are Alright* is written with the same honest, compassionate tone Tamara Winfrey Harris is known for. This book feels like a hug for the overlooked brown girl. It's a combination of experience, honest reflection, history and popular culture, and a good read no matter your race or experience. She brings it home with a strong call to action, reminding us that while resilience is necessary, so is basic human respect—and we would do well to follow her lead."

—Samhita Mukhopadhyay, author of *Outdated: Why Dating Is Ruining Your Love Life*

"If corporate media and pop culture are active volcanoes, Tamara Winfrey Harris is a clear-eyed excavator who can help us make sense of their constant, painful eruptions. Writing from a place of love, Winfrey Harris pulls at the strings that unravel the racism, sexism, and abject irrationality of newspapers attempting to reduce one of TV's most powerful producers to an 'Angry Black Woman'; of hip-hop stars, pundits, and preachers blaming black girls for the violence and discrimination they are forced to endure; and of reality TV replacing black women's humanity with slavery-era tropes. After laying those biases bare, *The Sisters Are Alright* elevates the too-often-unheard voices of black women themselves, offering nuanced insights about the nature of love, sex, beauty, marriage, violence, economics, politics, culture, and more. Anyone who cares about black women will enjoy—and learn a lot from—this excellent new book."

—Jennifer Pozner, Executive Director, Women in Media & News, and author of *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth about Guilty Pleasure TV*

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Black women possess so much joy and love, yet we are told that we do not deserve this. Then there is systematic oppression keeping our access to love, respect, joy, and highest self-worth at arm's length. Through this collage I incorporated rich color, shapes, and atmosphere that aim to recontextualize this narrative. . . . Art is powerful in the way that we can create our own universe in which our dreams and visions for the future come true.

—Adee Roberson

ABOUT THE COVER

Illustration by Adee Roberson (http://blackpineappleadee.tumblr.com/), using a photograph by Jamel Shabazz from the collection "Back in the Days."

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Preface

I love black women.

I love the Baptist church mothers in white.

I love the YouTube twerkers.

I love the sisters with Ivy League degrees and the ones with GEDs.

I love the big mamas, ma'dears, and aunties.

I love the loc-wearing sisters who smell like shea butter.

I love the ladies of the "Divine Nine."

I love the "bad bitches" in designer pumps and premium lacefronts.

I love the girls who jumped double Dutch and played hopscotch.

I love the *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* chanters, the seekers, and the atheists.

I love the awkward black girls and the quirky black girls and the black girls who listen to punk.

I love the "standing at the bus stop, sucking on a lollipop" 'round the way girls.

Black womanhood—with its unique histories and experiences—marks its possessors as something special.

I love black women, and I want the world to love black women, too.

It doesn't, though. I know this in my bones, from forty-five years of black-woman being. The world does not love us—at least not in the way black women deserve to be loved—because it doesn't truly *see* us. Our authentic collective and individual selves are usually hidden by racist and sexist stereotypes that we can't seem to shake—or rather, images that other folks won't let us shake. This is confirmed for me every time I read another article about a little black girl sent home from school, not for bad behavior or bad grades, but for having kinky black hair; every time some well-meaning pundit or preacher offers advice to "fix" black women to be more marriageable; every time some hack comedian tells a specious joke about tyrannical black wives and girlfriends; every time some black female performer is called a "ho" for baring her bodacious booty, while her male counterparts stay slapping asses in their videos to cheers and applause; every time a black woman gets murdered by the police or her partner or some scared homeowner with a gun in a Detroit suburb.

I am not an organizer. I am not much of a fighter. But I have faith in my way with words. I can write. And so, about eight years ago, I began writing about race and gender and the way they intersect with current events, pop culture, and politics—first on my own blog, *What Tami Said,* and then in other places.

My idea for a book was born out of the demeaning and tiresome nattering about the "black marriage crisis"—a panic that seemed to reach a peak a few years ago with endless magazine articles, TV specials, and books devoted to what black women might be doing wrong to so often remain unchosen. In researching that issue, I realized that the shaming directed at single black

women is part of something much, much bigger—a broader belief in our inherent wrongness that we don't deserve.

I wrote *The Sisters Are Alright* out of anger. (Yes, I am an angry black woman. And justifiably so.) I wrote it because my sisters deserve better. I wrote it because I want black women to be seen. I wrote it because *I* want to be seen. And I wrote this book because even if the world won't love us, I want black women to love themselves and to love each other. The most frustrating sentence I've heard uttered by a black woman—and I've heard it many times—is "You know how we are." It is rarely said in reference to anything positive. That damnable sentence is a sad illustration of the many ways black women can't help but absorb the biases against us and the ways that we can be complicit in our own oppression. And it shows how hard it is to love yourself when everyone insists you are unlovable. I have two young nieces. I want the world to see their black-girl awesome and I want to make sure that they see it, too—always and no matter what. If they say, "You know how we are," I want it to be in reference to their cleverness, their confidence, and their beauty—not some stereotypical quality that is a reduction of who they are. I wrote this book for them.

Black women are a million different kinds of amazing. It is not our race or gender that makes this true; it is, as I will say later in this book, our humanity. This book is about that humanity—the textured, difficult, and beautiful humanity that lies in the hearts of all the black women I love.

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Introduction

The Trouble with Black Women

What is wrong with black women? To hear some folks tell it, the answer is EVERYTHING.

Black women are to blame for urban violence, the welfare state, and the disintegration of the black family. Media fashions them as problems and oddities or downright disrespects them. ABC News has twice convened panels to discuss black women's lack of marriage prospects, once asking, "Why can't a successful black woman find a man?" Bill O'Reilly claims Beyoncé's song catalog and dance moves cause teen pregnancy. *Psychology Today* published an article online explaining why black women are "less physically attractive than other women," and during the 85th Annual Academy Awards, in 2013, the satirical news site *The Onion* called African American best actress nominee Quvenzhané Wallis, then nine years old, a "cunt."[1]

Memes traded online illustrate a shocking derision for black women. One popular one accuses them of dropping stacks of cash on weaves and wigs, making Korean beauty-store owners rich while their own bills stay due and their children's college funds

stay empty. Another compares a photo from 1968 showing black women with Afros and fists righteously held high to a modern image of sisters in short-shorts and weaves twerking on the subway, as if to illustrate that all of black womanity has lost its way.

Some high-profile black men critique, advise, and clown sisters with little consequence to their popularity. A viral video of a sermon by black mega-church pastor Jamal Harrison Bryant showed the reverend in the pulpit castigating women with a line from a song by Chris Brown: "These hos ain't loyal." In a videotaped interview with entertainment website Necole Bitchie, actor-singer Tyrese cautioned black women against chasing away men with their independence. Ubiquitous funny man Kevin Hart "joked" on Twitter that "light-skinned women usually have better credit than dark-skinned women.... broke ass, dark hos." And King of Comedy D.L. Hughley told a National Public Radio audience, in all seriousness, "I've never met an angrier group of people. Like black women are angry just in general. Angry all the time."[2]

Well, damn.

Who is this lonely, booty-popping, disloyal, and financially foolish harridan who reigns in the public consciousness as the image of black womanhood? I am a black woman, and I don't recognize her. Most African American women I know don't either. To many of us, the popular mythology about who we are and how we live feels like a size-6 skirt on size-16 hips—stretched, distorted, and uncomfortable—and it has little to do with reality.

"At this point in my life, I'm fed up!" says Fatima Thomas,* a thirty-seven-year-old doctoral student and mother. She remembers as a young girl wanting to distance herself from blackness. "If I could just be smarter. If I could just work harder. If I could be more honest and more of a good person.... If I could do all

of that, then I wouldn't have to deal with all of the bad stuff said about black people, and black girls and women, in particular.

"The only [difference] now is my skin is tough enough to push back."

Maligning black women, regardless of our personal or collective truth, is part of America's DNA. The seeds for negative perceptions of African American women were planted centuries ago, when black women were chattel, part of the engine that drove the American economy. Many scholars have named, explained, and extensively researched historical stereotypes and how they function in the lives of black women—notably Dr. Patricia Hill Collins, in her iconic work *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. These "controlling images," as Collins terms them, provide a template for black women's place in public discourse. To understand how people speak about black women today, you have to understand the source of anti–black woman ideology.

Troublesome Roots

The moment the first black woman set foot on American shores, sexist and racist stereotypes were laid across her back. How do you justify holding a woman as property, working her from "can see" to "can't," routinely violating her sexually and breeding her, and separating her from her children and loved ones? By crafting an image of her as subhuman—no more worthy of empathy or care than a mule. Stereotypes of black women as asexual and servile, angry and bestial, or oversexed and lascivious were key to maintaining the subordination of black women during slavery.

They also provided a counterbalance to the identities of middle-class and wealthy white women, who had been placed

on a pedestal as perfect illustrations of femininity—beautiful, pious, pure, submissive, domestic, and in need of protection. (But still kept personally, politically, and economically powerless.)[3] Throughout this book, I frequently compare black women's experiences with those of white women. These groups' struggles are connected by gender and yet are divided by different racial histories and privileges. I do not intend to imply that white women are primarily to blame for the oppression of black women, or that I have forgotten the existence of Latina, Native American, Asian, and Pacific Islander women. It is simply that, in Western society, black and white women have been placed in binary positions. White women have been idealized (through the lens of sexism), and black women have commonly been denigrated as their opposite.

There was no room for Melanie Wilkes (or even Scarlett O'Hara) out in the cotton fields or in plantation kitchens. Enter the three-headed hydra of distortion that dogs black women yet today—Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel.

Mammy is the obedient, loyal domestic who loves most to serve her white family.[4] Unfailingly maternal, she has no personal desires and is not herself desirable; her broad, corpulent body is meant solely for work and the comfort of others.[5] Mammy is asexual, and to underscore this, she is generally depicted as dark skinned and with African features, a headscarf covering what we imagine to be nappy hair—the negative of the pale, fine-featured, light-eyed, and straight-haired whiteness seen as the pinnacle of beauty.[6]

Of course, Mammy was always a fiction—a response to abolitionists' depictions of brutality and the ill-treatment of enslaved women. Female house slaves were not happy to be in bondage. The very idea is absurd. But the stereotype was useful in abetting

slave culture. Positioning Mammy's girth and features as unattractive, particularly to white men, erased the routine rape of enslaved women.[7] The image of a content servant helped legitimize the economic exploitation of house slaves (and later the long relegation of black women to service and domestic work).[8] Mammy also stood as the embodiment of the optimal black female relationship to power—comfortably subservient.[9] She reinforced the idea that black women are natural workhorses, capable of carrying multiple burdens alone—not because they have to, but out of natural ability and desire.[10]

In antebellum America, true women (read: white women) were thought too delicate for hard manual labor. Black women, by contrast, were expected to work alongside and as hard as men.[11] They were not soft and delicate in the eyes of the majority culture; they were anti-women. In the mid-twentieth century, the image of the masculinized black woman found an identity in the form of "Sapphire," a character in the *Amos 'n' Andy* radio and television shows. By then, the stereotype had evolved into a rancorous nag—the stock angry black woman.[12]

Sapphire doesn't know a woman's (submissive) place and is therefore emasculating and repellent to men. Not so Jezebel, the embodiment of deviant black female sexuality. During slavery, black women were positioned as seductive and wanton to vindicate the naked probing of the auction block and routine sexual victimization and also to justify the use of black women to breed new human property.[13] The stereotype positioned black women as incapable of chastity in a society that demanded the innocence of women. And it further masculinized them, ascribing an unladylike sexual hunger more typical of men.[14]

Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel followed black women out of slavery, but a 1965 government report would introduce a new

stereotype and cement all of these images as the cornerstones of how modern culture views black women.

Released in the same year that President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, prohibiting racial discrimination in voting after centuries of black disenfranchisement from the democratic process, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (or the Moynihan Report, for its author Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then assistant secretary of labor) put significant blame for societal problems on the role of black women in their households:[15]

> In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.[16]

The Matriarch—the negative of the pleasantly nurturing Mammy—is a motherly figure who has overstepped her place and become the head of a black family. By her failure to perform her womanly domestic duty of being subordinate to a man, we are to understand that she upsets the stability of the family, her community, and the fabric of America, leading to crime, poverty, confusion of gender roles, and moral decay.[17] In that her dominance renders her unfeminine, the Matriarch has much in common with Sapphire, and her alleged unchecked baby-making recalls Jezebel.

Here, then, is the foundation for all those news reports and "jokes" at black women's expense. Sapphire is peeking from behind D.L. Hughley's rant about angry black women; Jezebel is all up in Bill O'Reilly's "concern" about Queen Bey's energetic wiggling, as is Mammy in *Psychology Today*'s lament about our

lack of desirability; and the Matriarch in all that hand-wringing over the "black marriage crisis" and advice to get black women hitched. Emancipation may have taken place more than a century and a half ago, but America still won't let a sister be free from this coven of caricatures.

Sadly, the notion of black women as oversexed, emasculating workhorses remains not just in the majority culture but deep in the bones of a black community influenced by the broader culture's racism and sexism—as well as in the considerable rewards that come with enforcing white, middle-class, Judeo-Christian, heteronormative respectability.

Respectability politics works to counter negative views of blackness by aggressively adopting the manners and morality that the dominant culture deems "respectable." In the United States of the late nineteenth century, black activists and allies believed that acceptance and respect for African Americans would come by showing the majority culture "we are just like you." In "No Disrespect," an article in *Bitch* magazine,[18] I explored the history of respectability politics in the black community and how it is employed against black women in the public eye.

Black women's clubs, spearheaded by women like Ida B. Wells, uplifted the black community and "proved" the respectability of African American women by replicating similar organizations that were led by white women.[19] Black civil rights activists showed up at marches and protests in their Sunday best, despite discomfort and sometimes only to be spat upon or stung by fire hoses. Those jackets and ties, heels, and hats sent a message: your stereotypes are untrue, we deserve equality, we, too, are respectable.[20] Dr. Sarah Jackson, a race and media studies scholar at Northeastern University in Boston, says, "Assimilation was an effective way to join the national conversation at a

time when there was a great disparity in not just the visibility of black Americans, but in the opportunity and legal protections afforded them."[21]

But respectability politics is not without its problems. It often requires an oppressed community to implicitly endorse, rather than resist, deeply flawed values, including many that form the foundation of its own oppression. For instance, newly freed black women were expected to adhere to the strictures of the cult of true womanhood (sometimes called the cult of domesticity), a set of values associating authentic womanhood with home and family. The ideology, popular among the middle and upper classes, had long positioned white women as inherently childlike and submissive, in need of being "helped over mud puddles," as Sojourner Truth famously said in her "Ain't I a Woman" speech.[22] But those restrictions were sexist and stripped white women of agency, oppressing them just as racism disempowered people of color.

The black community still uses respectability politics as a form of resistance. And black women carry a double burden as they are asked to uphold ideas of decency built on both racist and sexist foundations. And perhaps now more than ever—when there are so many different ways to be black and to be a woman—this approach to liberation has the potential to harm more than uplift by reinforcing oppressive ideology and constraining the way African American women are allowed to live their lives.

Black Women Erased

The more that Americans are exposed to stereotypes about black women in the media, pop culture, and other places, the more these stereotypes are subconsciously triggered where real black women are concerned. This subconscious activation affects the

way we are seen by potential employers, partners, the government, and others.[23] And so, black women are perpetually forced, as Melissa Harris-Perry explains in her book *Sister Citizen*, to try to stand straight in the crooked room created by biases against us:

> When they confront race and gender stereotypes, black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion.[24]

And some black women angle so hard against it that they break their backs. In an effort to shake the weight of society's biased expectations, some black women hold their tongues when they are justified in raging, deny their sexuality when they should be making love with abandon, give all their energy and care to others while they get sicker, hate African features instead of loving black skin, broad noses, and kinks. And they make decisions not based on their particular needs and wants but to circumvent what society thinks of them.

Kawana,* a divorced mother of two, became a homemaker after she married a high school sweetheart she no longer loved to avoid being a single black mother.

"I was tortured every day by that decision. I died inside for four years, and when I decided that I'd had enough and I couldn't live that lie anymore, everyone thought I was crazy. 'Why would you leave your husband who bought you a house and a truck and provides for you?'

"Who the fuck said that's what I wanted? Who said that any of those things were ever important to me?"[25]

When we speak, thirty-year-old Wendi Muse is contemplating

adding bright red color to her hair. Quirky style is not uncommon in New York City, where Muse lives, but she is concerned that on a black woman, unnatural hair colors often lead to negative assessments of class and capability—more "ghetto" than "quirky and fun." She says that because of her race and gender, "I police myself on the way that I dress, the way that I joke. . . . I feel like I have to act really formal in spaces where others are not as guarded, because I'm constantly concerned about not being taken seriously."[26]

Erasing yourself is no good way to be seen.

The media, pop-culture critics, and brainwashed members of the black community may think black women are problems. In truth, African American women are seen as troubling because of the reductive way they have been viewed for hundreds of years. But black women are not waiting to be fixed; they are fighting to be free—free to define themselves absent narratives driven by race and gender biases.

Black women know better than anyone that as a group they face significant challenges. As individuals, many black women are struggling. More than a quarter of African American women are poor,[27] making them twice as likely as white women to be living in poverty. Black women suffer from high rates of heart disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes.[28] In a society that benefits married people, they are half as likely to marry as their white counterparts.[29] Black women account for one-third of domestic homicides in America.[30] They are, as a whole, overworked and underpaid, earning a fraction of what white and black men do for the same work.[31] These are problems—and not the only ones. Their weight and impact cannot be diminished. But black women should not be uniquely *defined* by their problems, nor

should their problems be evaluated through the framework of stereotype.

In short, black women are not the trouble. They are not to blame for the systemic racism, sexism, and classism that buttress societal inequities. But tackling the Goliaths of government, the corporatocracy, and American bigotry is hard. Talking about weave-wearing, mad, broke hos is much easier, although tsk-tsking black women never made a sick body well or a neighborhood safer, improved a school system, fed and clothed a baby, or built a happy black family.

A hyperfocus on black women's challenges, with Mammy, the Matriarch, Sapphire, and Jezebel forever in the shadows, gives an inaccurate and narrow picture of black women's lives. Many will never experience the struggles that are so wedded to them in popular conversation, and those who do are so much more than their weight, singleness, or thin bank accounts. The current discussion about black women also ignores the many singular and group triumphs of black women and erases the fact that other groups wrestle with the same ills.

The panicked headlines, the relentless criticism by talking heads and know-nothing celebrities, the bogus and biased studies, the self-righteous and snide online memes—they turn African American women into caricatures. What black women really need is for the world, including many people who claim to love them, to recognize that they cannot be summed up so easily.

Tell the World Who You Are

"There's this quote I've seen," offers artist Lisa Myers Bulmash, forty-five, who lives in Washington State. "It says something like,

'The world will tell you who you are, until you tell the world who you are.' That includes people you think know you well. We cannot be seen as individuals with our own interior lives and motivations if others are always guessing—usually wrongly—at what makes us who we are."[32]

Forty-seven-year-old Nichelle Hayes agrees: "I think [black women] need to hear that we're okay. We have what we need. We don't have to change. That is not to say that we shouldn't be on a path of self-improvement. Everyone should. But it's not affirming or helpful to think, 'I'm not right as I am.'"[33]

Indeed. As a black woman and a writer committed to telling our stories, I believe it is important that we yell our real experiences above the din of roaring negative propaganda. No one can define black women but black women.

The Sisters Are Alright is an attempt to do just that—present a conversation about black women by black women. This book explores how the specters of Mammy, the Matriarch, Jezebel, and Sapphire still underpin perceptions of black women and it demonstrates the burden of living in the shadow of those stereotypes. But most importantly, in the following pages black women illuminate the reality of their lives—a reality that has been too often and for too long obscured by biased news coverage, GOP dog whistling, postracial and postfeminist progressives, and other people looking to make a fast buck reinforcing everything the world thinks is wrong with us.

Readers will also encounter rarely shared positive statistics and brief profiles of black women who are not just alright themselves, but who are working to make sure that other black women are alright, too. "Alright" does not mean possessing a life without hardship—being among the happy statistics rather than the dire

ones. It means that black women are neither innately damaged nor fundamentally flawed. They are simply women navigating their lives as best they can.

Most of the women interviewed for *The Sisters Are Alright* are educated, part of the middle class, or both. And class is as great an influence on identity as race and gender. These women cannot represent *all* black women. But that is also the point. Black women's lives are diverse. The diminishing mainstream portrait of black womanhood cannot contain its multitudes.

Black women's stories look a lot different from what you've heard. And when black women speak for themselves, the picture presented is nuanced, empowering, and hopeful.

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Chapter 1

Beauty

Pretty for a Black Girl

Thirty-nine-year-old Heather Carper grew up in Kansas and learned at least one lesson very early: "Black girls were never the cute ones. You could be 'cute for a black girl,' but you were never the pretty one."[1]

To be an American woman of any race is to be judged against constantly changing and arbitrary measures of attractiveness. One decade, being waif thin is in; the next, it's all about boobs and booties. Wake up one morning, and suddenly your lady parts "need" to be shaved smooth and your gapless thighs are all wrong. The multibillion-dollar beauty and fashion industries are dedicated to ensuring that women keep chasing an impossible ideal, like Botoxed hamsters running on the wheel of beauty standards.

But while expectations for how Western women should look have evolved over centuries, one thing has remained constant,

and that is black women's place at the bottom of the hierarchy. In 1784, Thomas Jefferson praised the skin color, "flowing hair," and "elegant symmetry of form" possessed by white people, writing that black men prefer the comeliness of white women "as uniformly as is the preference of the [orangutan] for the black women over those of his own species."[2] Stereotypes of black women were designed in part to provide the antithesis to the inherent loveliness of white women, leaving other women of color to jockey for position between the poles of beauty.[3] Old beliefs die hard. Hundreds of years later, in 2011, the London School of Economics evolutionary psychologist Satoshi Kanazawa published a series of graphs and numbers at *Psychology Today,* "proving" that black women are "far less attractive than white, Asian, and Native American women." Because . . . science.

Moments in Alright

Anala Beavers, age four, knew the alphabet by the time she was four months old, could count in Spanish by one and a half, and never leaves home without her US map. (She knows all the state capitals!) Anala was invited to join Mensa in 2013.[4]

Neither a Beast nor Fetish Be

The inferiority of black beauty continues to be reinforced partly through popular culture. In allegedly liberal Hollywood, black women are nearly invisible as romantic partners. American fashion catwalks remain so white that former model and activist

Bethann Hardison, who formed the Diversity Coalition to challenge whitewashed runways, was moved to pen an open letter to the industry:

> Eyes are on an industry that season after season watches fashion design houses consistently use one or no models of color. No matter the intention, the result is racism. Not accepting another based on the color of their skin is clearly beyond 'aesthetic' when it is consistent with the designer's brand. Whether it's the decision of the designer, stylist or casting director, that decision to use basically all white models reveals a trait that is unbecoming to modern society.[5]

Black beauty is even marginalized within subcultures that pride themselves on subverting mainstream values, according to twenty-seven-year-old Black Witch,* who is active in pagan, punk, and Lolita fashion communities. Lolita fashion originated in Japan and is inspired by frilly, Victorian-era dress—lots of petticoats and delicate fabrics. Black Witch says that many of her fellow community members see Lolita femininity as at odds with black womanhood.

"They call us ugly. They say we look uncivilized in the clothes," she says. "I once heard a person say, 'I'm not racist, but that looks like an ape in a dress.'"[6]

Increasingly, black women are even absent in our own culture's illustrations of beauty.

"I don't really watch music videos anymore, but I have noticed that white girls are the 'it thing' now," says Liz Hurston,* thirty-four. "When hip-hop first came out, you had your video girls that looked like Keisha from down the block, and then they just started getting lighter and lighter. Eventually black women were

completely phased out and it was Latinas and biracial women. Now it's white women. On one hand, thank God we're no longer being objectified, but on the other hand, it's kind of sad, because now our beauty doesn't count at all."[7]

Seeming to confirm Liz's observation, in 2006 Kanye West told *Essence* magazine, a publication for black women, that "If it wasn't for race mixing, there'd be no video girls. . . . Me and most of my friends like mutts [biracial women] a lot."[8]

In a society that judges women's value and femininity based on attractiveness, perceived ugliness can be devastating. The denigration of black female beauty not only batters African American women's self-esteem, it also drives a wedge between black women with lighter skin, straighter hair, and narrower features and those without those privileges.

Thirty-five-year-old Erin Millender says that the time she felt least attractive was as a teenager. "I went to a very white high school with a very J. Crew aesthetic," she says. "I was brown. I am built stocky. I've always had a butt . . . and not a tiny, little gymnast booty either. I was aware of the fact that I did not conform to the beauty standard."[9]

Erin is biracial. Her mother is Korean American and her father is black. Many would see her light-brown skin and shiny curls and note her advantage over black women with darker skin, broader features, and kinkier hair. But Erin says that in school she was teased for "anything that was identifiably black. White kids don't know the difference between various grades of nap. They see frizzy hair and brown skin? That's just nappy hair to them—the same as any other kind of black hair. Brown skin and a big booty gets 'ghetto booty.'"

But at the predominantly black schools she attended before high school, Erin says some black girls targeted her, jealously

pulling the long hair that brought her closer to the ideal of mainstream beauty. "Then, after school, in ballet, white girls made fun of my butt."

And the attention of men like West, who fetishize biracial women, is no honor. "[It is] creepy and insulting." Erin says that far too often that appreciation comes with backhanded compliments "implying that I don't really look black and would be less attractive if I did," plus "shade" from other black women, "who assume I think I'm better than somebody."

Black looks are not just erased; features commonly associated with people of the African diaspora are openly denigrated in American culture. (Though it is important to note that blackness is diverse. Black women can be freckled, ginger, and nappy; ebony skinned and fine haired; and every variation in between.)

Get the Kinks Out

Hair is a lightning rod for enforcement of white standards of beauty. And reactions to black women's natural hair help illustrate the broader disdain for black appearance. While black hair can have a variety of textures, most tends to be curly, coily, or nappy. It grows out and up and not down. It may not shine. It may be cottony or wiry. It is likely more easily styled in an Afro puff than a smooth chignon. For centuries, black women have been told that these qualities make their hair unsightly, unprofessional, and uniquely difficult to manage.

Don Imus infamously called the black women on the Rutgers University women's basketball team "nappy-headed hos."[10] In a ubiquitous late-night infomercial for WEN hair products, the host refers to black hair as "overly coarse," assuming that white hair is the baseline next to which other hair is "too" something.

In the 1970s, when veteran investigative reporter Renee Ferguson debuted a short Afro at the NBC affiliate in Indianapolis, she was told that she was "scaring" viewers.[11] Forty or so years later, some young black-female reporters still report being told to straighten their hair. In the summer of 2007, a *Glamour* magazine editor sparked outrage among many black working women when she told an assembled group of female attorneys that wearing natural black hair is not only improper but militant.[12] Even the US military is ambivalent about black women's hair. In 2014, new military grooming guidelines provoked furor among black servicewomen and prompted a letter to Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel from the women of the Congressional Black Caucus. The guidelines had banned styles traditional for black women without altered hair textures and also referred to some hair (guess whose) as "matted" and "unkempt."[13]

The message that black natural hair is innately "wrong" is one that girls receive early. In 2013, two cases of black girls being punished at school for their natural hair made headlines. Seven-year-old Tiana Parker was sent home from an Oklahoma charter school and threatened with expulsion because her dreadlocks were deemed "faddish" and unacceptable under a school code that also banned Afros. Twelve-year-old Vanessa VanDyke also faced expulsion because of her voluminous natural hair that Florida school authorities found "distracting."[14]

Is it any wonder, after generations in a society that affirms white features while disparaging those associated with blackness, that many in the African American community have internalized negative messages about their appearance and learned that beauty requires disguising, altering, or diluting blackness and that we pass that inferiority complex on to younger generations?

Patrice Grell Yursik, founder of Afrobella.com, does her share

of counseling black women scarred by a lifetime of beauty insecurity and parents who could not transcend their own conditioning. She shares a memorable conversation she once had with the mother of a young black child with cerebral palsy. The woman confessed to using double the recommended amount of a caustic chemical relaxer on her daughter's hair in an effort to make it straight. The mother was distraught that despite her efforts, the child's hair held on to its kinks.[15]

"I was horrified. It made me want to cry," says Patrice. "This poor child who cannot fend for herself and cannot physically take care of herself is enduring this burning on an ongoing basis for what? So she can be what? Why are we doing this?"

It should come as no surprise that most black women, rather than wear the braids, twists, Afros, and dreadlocks that black hair adapts to most easily, alter their hair's natural texture chemically or with extreme heat or cover it with synthetic hair or human hair from other races of women.

Let me be clear: black women should be free to wear their hair as they please, including straightened. But as Patrice Yursik urges, "It's really important for us to ask ourselves the tough questions. Why are we in lockstep in relaxing our hair? Why do we all come to the decision that this is something we have to do for ourselves and our children, [especially when] so many of us hate the process and see damage from it.

"Always do what makes you happy, but at least know why it's the thing that makes you happy."

During the "black is beautiful" 1970s, many black women embraced their natural kinks, but that rebellion gave way to assimilation in the Reagan era. The popularity of neo-soul music in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with its iconic faces such as Erykah Badu, Jill Scott, and Angie Stone representing for natural

hair, opened the door for a new generation of women to embrace the nap.[16]

The challenge was that many would-be naturals found little support in traditional places for beauty advice, including beauty magazines (even ones catering to black women) and professional stylists. Often, even mothers and grandmothers were of no help; the hair care that many black women learned from their foremothers was solely focused on "fixing" or "taming" natural hair, not on celebrating its innate qualities. Many black women had not seen or managed their natural texture in decades. Black beauty magazines such as *Essence* continued to mostly feature models with straightened hair. And, until the recent renaissance, education for beauticians included little to no training about the care of natural black hair. Stylists were tested only on their ability to handle straightened black tresses.[17]

What is profound about the natural-hair revolution is that it has been driven by everyday black women searching for a way to honor their natural features in spite of all the messages encouraging the contrary. Finding no support in the usual places, black women created what they needed, forming communities online. Forums buzzed with women offering support and maintenance and styling techniques when family, boyfriends, and employers rejected the natural look. Women with similar hair types learned from one another's trials and errors. Naturals pored through Fokti (a precursor to Flickr) to find photos of cute natural styles on everyday women. Naturals began eschewing the preservatives and chemicals in mainstream beauty products and instead searched for natural alternatives. Black women such as Jamyla Bennu, founder of Oyin Handmade, began creating natural products in their own kitchens and selling them.

"I didn't come from a family where people had [chemical relaxers]," Jamyla says. "My mom's hair is very loose; it's not like mine, so she didn't have the skills to do the cornrows and stuff like that. I was the Afro puff girl. Although it was always affirmed, there were not a lot of ideas about how to wear my natural hair."

Bennu muddled through, finally beginning to relax her own hair in junior high school. But seeing more natural women in college opened her eyes to new options. "'Oh my gosh, *that's* what you're supposed to do with it! You can twist it. You can braid it.' I stopped perming my hair and have had natural hair ever since."

In about 1999, Jamyla began making hair products for herself "out of general craftiness." She experimented with common ingredients, like honey, coconut oil, and olive oil, that she had grown up using in her beauty routine. And, true to the ethos of the time, she shared her recipes. A freelance website designer, she eventually took a chance and began offering a few of her products online. Today, Jamyla and her partner, her husband Pierre, not only have a thriving online store but a brick-and-mortar retail space in Baltimore. And Oyin Handmade products can be found in select Target and Whole Foods stores across the country.

The natural-hair movement is "an example of women deciding for themselves what's important, what's beautiful, what's natural. . . . Not only how they want to look, but what they want to use to make themselves look that way. It's a really empowering moment in black beauty history and in beauty industry history because it's a kind of user-driven change."

Jamyla, like several other black women, has become a successful entrepreneur through the black beauty renaissance, but she has done so in a way that is uniquely affirming, unlike most

consumer beauty brands. When my first box from Oyin arrived in the mail, it included a small container of bubble solution, two pieces of hard candy, and a card that read "Hello, Beautiful."

Jamyla says that approach comes from "myself as consumer, as a feminist, as a person who loves being black, who loves natural hair. I was in a place of pure celebration and discovery, and so was everyone else around me. So were the people with whom I was sharing the product. It didn't even make sense to try to market as if to a deficit or a lack, because I didn't see a deficit or a lack.

"A lot of black women grow up with so much negative messaging around their hair—not only from the marketing, which is, 'Fix it by doing X, Y and Z.'" Jamyla points out that caregivers often frame black girls' hair as a problem from the time they are small. "Sometimes we'll get messages like, 'Oh, this stuff. It's just so hard to deal with.'

"My political feeling is that it is very serious work to love yourself as a black person in America. I think it's an intergenerational project of transformation and healing that we are embarking on together."

Jamyla says that when she found herself with a platform to reach black women, it was important to deliver an empowering message. "You know that this is fly, right? I know you know it's fly, I'm going to echo that to you so that you can feel a little bit stronger in knowing how fly you are."

Now, mainstream beauty and cosmetics industries are playing catch-up in the movement black women began. Not only are homegrown brands like Oyin enjoying broad success, but major cosmetics companies have debuted lines catering to black women who wear their hair texture unaltered. In 2014, Revlon purchased Carol's Daughter, a beauty company with roots in

the natural-hair movement.[18] Even Hollywood is taking notice, thanks to stylists like Felicia Leatherwood,[19] who keeps natural heads looking good on the red carpet. Her styling of *Mad Men* actress Teyonah Parris (Dawn) made all the flashbulbs pop at the 2013 Screen Actors Guild awards. Buzzfeed gushed that the actress had "the flyest hair on the red carpet."[20]

"We never thought that would happen," said Leatherwood of the attention-getting coif. And perhaps neither did Parris, when she first did what many black women call "the big chop"—cutting off relaxed hair, usually leaving short kinks or coils. Parris told *Huffington Post:* "I cried. I cried. I was not used to seeing myself like that, I did not want to walk outside. . . . My [friend] . . . had to literally come over to my house and walk me outside because it was such an emotional experience, and it wasn't just about hair. It was what my perception of beauty was and had been for all of my life, and then I look at myself in the mirror and I'm like, 'That doesn't look like what I thought was beautiful.'"[21]

Now the Internet has exploded with not just natural-hair blogs and websites, such as Nappturality, Curly Nikki, and Black Girl with Long Hair, but also fashion sites, like Gabifresh and The Curvy Fashionista, and holistic beauty blogs, like Afrobella, run by black women and including (or catering to) our unique beauty needs.

When Patrice Grell Yursik went natural in 2002, she too went online for guidance and noticed a void of women who look like her tackling broader topics of beauty, including body image, skin care, makeup, and fashion.

"I'm a big girl. My hair is natural. I might have some skin problems. I'm trying to figure out what makeup looks good on me. Nobody was really holistically giving me that."

And so, in 2004, Patrice launched Afrobella. As a beauty blogger, she drew from her own journey to self-acceptance, including coming to terms with her body.

Moments in Alright

College-educated black women are the most likely group to read a book in any format.[22]

Fierce, Fat, and Fashionable

For a country with a growing rate of obesity, America is remarkably unforgiving when it comes to fat women. Fat, *black* women have become lazy, comedy shorthand. Want to bring on the cheap laughs? Then trot out an oversized, brown-skinned lady. Even better, despite her fatness and blackness, make her think she is attractive and worthy of amorous attention. (Think Rasputia, in Eddie Murphy's film *Norbit*, or Kenan Thompson's blessedly defunct character Virginiaca on *Saturday Night Live*—hulking, sexually aggressive laughingstocks.)

"My weight has always been at the forefront of things that would weigh me down emotionally and make me feel like I was less attractive than other people," says Patrice Yursik. "I've always been a big girl. When I wasn't a big girl, it was because I was bulimic."[23]

Patrice, though now a Chicagoan, grew up in a well-to-do neighborhood in Trinidad, where her friends and neighbors tended to be light skinned and thin. "I used to have to really psych myself up to go out because I would feel so unattractive next to my friends."

She hid her body under big, shapeless clothes. "I never used to wear sleeveless things. I felt very, very self-conscious of the stretch marks at the top of my arm and the fact that my arms had a little swing to them."

But one day, as she walked across her college campus in warm weather, a classmate, clad in jeans and a little sleeveless top, asked, "Aren't you hot wearing sleeves all the time?"

"I had never thought about it, because it was just my defense mechanism. [But I wondered], 'Why do I feel the need to cover this thing up that is just a part of myself? To try and hide something that anybody could have seen anyway? Why am I trying to hide my arm fat?' I'm a big girl. I get hot, just like any other human being."

That moment began Patrice's transformation into the style maven thousands of women follow. "It was like I started to really come into my femininity and feel more comfortable with whatever that was. I had to define it on my own terms."

It is hard to reconcile beauty insecurity with the woman who took the stage at the TEDxPortofSpain event in 2013. Standing on stage in a leather motorcycle jacket and long fuchsia skirt, a halo of burgundy kinks surrounding an impeccably made-up face, there is no doubt why Yursik is sometimes called the "Godmother of Brown Beauty." She is fierce. But the message she delivered that day was even stronger: all women can be beautiful on their own terms. It is a notion that she says underpins the black beauty revolution, which allows African American women, even those with kinky hair, large bodies, brown skin, and broad features, "a place at the table."

Many black women have been liberated by that lesson.

Heather Carper says she feels beautiful more often now than when she was a kid in Kansas. She says part of her evolution from

"pretty for a black girl" to beautiful woman involved the realization that attractiveness is not as narrowly defined as mainstream culture would have women believe. Her mother once told her, "When you appraise art, you look for color and texture. With your skin and your hair, you will never lack either."

"The view of what makes you pretty is very dictated to you when you're younger. Whether it's the media or your peers, there is a whole lot of looking for external validation for what's pretty. You're just kind of checking in with everybody: 'Is that pretty? Is she pretty? Is this outfit pretty?' Part of getting older is that you stop checking in so much about whether what you like is cool with everyone else. You know, it may not ever be cool. But you know what? I like it. My beauty falls into that, too."[24]

Patrice says, "I always knew that there was something different about me, and I used to want to hide that difference when I was younger; to assimilate, to blend in. As I grew older, I realized: Why am I going to fight what I am? I am made to be a beautiful woman on my own terms, why not just embrace that and be that?

"Am I going to hate myself forever . . . or am I going to be free?"[25]

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