Black women and the burden of respectability

Fame + Fortune

Illustration by Angie Wang

In February 2012, PBS host Tavis Smiley interviewed Viola Davis and Octavia Spencer about their Oscar nominations for their roles as Aibileen and Minny, Jim Crow–era domestic workers in The Help. "I'm pulling for both of you to win on Academy Award night," Smiley ventured. "But there's something that sticks in my craw about celebrating Hattie McDaniel so many years ago for playing a maid"—a reference to the actor who won for her role as Mammy in 1939's Gone with the Wind. "I want you to win," Smiley concluded, "but I'm ambivalent about what you're winning for."

Davis countered that it is hard for black actresses to find multifaceted roles in Hollywood, and that pressure from the black community to eschew portrayals that are not heroic makes it even harder: "That very mindset that you have, and that a lot of African-Americans have, is absolutely destroying the black artist.... If your criticism is that you just don't want to see the maid...then I have an issue with that. Do I always have to be noble?"

For black women, particularly those in the public eye, the answer to this question is often a resounding "Yes." They are required to be noble examples of black excellence. To be better. To be respectable. And the bounds of respectability are narrowly defined by professional and personal choices reflecting the social mores of the majority culture—patriarchal, Judeo-Christian, heteronormative, and middle class.

Spencer ended up taking home an Oscar later that month for Best Supporting Actress (Davis lost to Meryl Streep for Best Actress), but Smiley had articulated a discomfort many in the black community felt about their big-screen roles. For all its popularity and acclaim, The Help illustrates that Hollywood still filters (and distorts) the lives and histories of minorities through the eyes of the majority; celebrates white saviors; and, 72 years post-Mammy, is still more comfortable casting black women as maids than as prime ministers, action heroes, or romantic leads.

Where Smiley trod lightly, some people have been more explicit in their criticism of Davis and Spencer. In an open letter to Davis on the film-industry site Indiewire, black filmmaker Tanya Steele wrote, "Currently, the vanguard of black culture is still healing wounds from their past. Wounds that racism has created, wounds that drive you to gain acceptance in the larger culture. The acknowledgment comes in the form of a paycheck, exposure, star status, acceptance. An acceptance that is more important than our legacy. Isn't it that simple? How else could a black woman...take the role?"

Much-needed criticisms of The Help and the characters of Aibileen and Minny have come from sources like the Association of Black Women Historians, which, in its own open letter, challenged various aspects of the book and film, including misrepresentations of elements of black life and the lack of attention given to sexual harassment and civil rights activism. But there is something else floating in the ether: the idea that the role of a maid is simply too ignoble for a 21st-century black actress. That idea is merely respectability politics at work.

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Respectability politics work to counter negative views of blackness by aggressively adopting the manners and morality that the dominant culture deems "respectable." The approach emerged in reaction to white racism that labeled blackness as "other"—degenerate and substandard—with roots in an assimilationist narrative that prevailed in the late-19th-century United States. Black activists and allies believed that acceptance and respect for African-Americans would come by showing the majority culture "we are just like you."

Black women in particular had their own set of stereotypes to battle, as they had long been labeled by white society as lascivious Jezebels, animalistic beasts of burden, and disreputable antiwomen. According to Dr. Sarah Jackson, a race and media studies scholar at Boston's Northeastern University, to counter these stereotypes newly freed African-American women were forced to adhere to the sexist strictures of the Cult of True Womanhood, which positioned white women as inherently chaste, pious, childlike, submissive, and (as Sojourner Truth famously said in her "Ain't I a Woman" speech) in need of being "helped over mud puddles." In other words: respectable.

And here emerges one fallacy of respectability politics: An oppressed community can implicitly endorse deeply flawed values, including many that form the foundation of their own oppression. The idea that domestic work is shameful is a product of class bias that disdains the working class, and of gender bias that devalues "women's work." And while Truth spoke longingly about the delicate way white women were treated, that treatment was deeply sexist.

On the other hand, respectability has been important for marginalized people throughout history. Black women's clubs that formed in the early 20th century, spearheaded by women like Ida B. Wells, uplifted the black community and "proved" the respectability of African-American women by replicating similar organizations led by white women. Black civil rights activists showed up at marches and protests in their Sunday best—despite discomfort, and sometimes only to be spat on or sprayed by fire hoses. Those jackets and ties, heels and hats, sent a message: Your stereotypes are untrue; we deserve equality; we, too, are respectable. Jackson notes, "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."

Negative views of blackness have surely not disappeared in the 21st century. And the black community still uses respectability politics as a form of resistance. But perhaps now more than ever—when there are so many different ways to be black and to be a woman—respectability politics have the potential to harm as much as uplift. As often happens, black women carry a double burden, as they are asked to uphold a respectability built on both racist and sexist foundations. And the burden isn't just about professional decisions—say, which roles an actress should choose—but personal ones as well.

When neo-soul singer Erykah Badu announced her third pregnancy in 2008, some fans attacked her for having children outside of marriage with more than one father. One online commenter labeled the singer, known for rocking a mega 'fro, "trash with great hair." A Zimbio.com article that referred to Badu's "growing list of baby daddies" featured a "Knocked Up Again" headline. A blog article wondered baldly if the singer was "a ho." She was derided as a poor example of black womanhood. The storm got so heavy that Badu bit back in a lengthy and poetically unapologetic online post about her family that ended with an entreaty to "Kiss my placenta."

Three years later, when Beyoncé announced she was expecting, she was publicly applauded for doing pregnancy "the right way," and celebrated for being a model of black womanhood. Even Diddy's 18-year-old son, Justin Combs, weighed in on Bey's proper use of her uterus. Combs tweeted: "Beyoncé dated, married, THEN got pregnant...young ladies take notes." (No word on whether Combs's dad, who has never married but has five children, is also taking notes.)
Jackson calls the differing reactions to Badu's and Beyoncé's pregnancies "a sexist, puritanical, moral panic. The idea that a woman who doesn't have her children in wedlock is discrediting an entire race of people is ridiculous. It only serves to further demonize single women, who are working hard at motherhood, and are sexually independent. And it reinforces the historical idea of sexual deviance and unfit motherhood that has been used to marginalize black women."

Badu's personal choices raised the specter of the Jezebel. And rather than reject that problematic stereotype, critics pilloried Badu as a poor example to the black and broader communities—as not respectable. But the hand-wringing over the singer's familial status is less about the welfare of her children and more about a black woman publicly violating sexist morality by having children (read: sex) outside of marriage.

"The traditionalist [respectability] narrative has come dangerously close to being exclusionary to the very community we are trying to uplift," says Jackson. In rightfully pushing back at negative and untrue caricatures of modern black motherhood centered around "welfare queens," we can unwittingly demonize any black mother whose family falls outside of traditional, heterosexual, and patriarchal paradigms—no matter how thoughtful her decisions, how involved her partners, or how well cared for her children. If we buy that the only "right" way for a woman to build a family is through a state-sanctioned marriage to a man, then we have made a large percentage of black women "wrong."

Respectability politics serve to curtail the individual liberties of people who have spent centuries fighting to be free. For black female actors and other artists, this may mean making choices based not on what's best for their careers and personal lives, but instead, on what serves to convince the majority culture that people like them deserve respect.

Take Halle Berry's Academy Award–winning performance in the 2001 film *Monster's Ball*, which was as controversial as it was critically acclaimed. Berry drew particular criticism for a daring sex scene with costar Billy Bob Thornton. A black woman on screen, bouncing and writhing naked with a white man, was viewed as base and degrading by many in the black community. Angela Bassett, who had turned down Berry's role, was critical.

"I wasn't going to be a prostitute on film," Bassett told *Newsweek*. (In fact, Berry's character was not a prostitute, but a woman who begins a relationship with her husband's executioner.) "I couldn't do that because it's such a stereotype about black women and sexuality. Film is forever. It's about putting something out there you can be proud of 10 years later. I mean, Meryl Streep won Oscars without all that."

By choosing a highly sexualized role, Bassett implied, Berry was reinforcing stereotypes about black women. Put another way, Berry was reinforcing the way white society views black women. For women, to be sexual, to be sexual with different partners, or to be sexual outside of marriage is not deemed respectable. This is especially true for black women. Respectability politics allow both the white and black communities to lay claim to black women's bodies.

"For black women, our quest to have ownership over our bodies and ourselves has always been at least 50 percent public. It's never been just a private quest for dignity and respect," says American and Africana studies scholar Kimberly C. Ellis. Ellis, also known as Dr. Goddess, performs one-woman shows that leverage spoken word, comedy, and music to mine issues of race, class, and gender.

Though Ellis says she does not adhere to the standards advanced by the politics of respectability, she is still conscientious about the characters she creates. "The question is, do we have the responsibility to define ourselves within what Dr. Cornel West calls 'the white normative gaze' or the responsibility to demonstrate our full humanity?"
But Ellis says she "can't act as though there is not an active agenda to attack and destroy any image of black dignity and leadership and power in order to affect public policy and political will."

The image of black female dignity is routinely attacked by a 24/7 media-industrial complex that serves up a steady stream of caricature. Scripts featuring fully formed black female roles may be difficult to find, but the exploding popularity of unscripted television has placed an increasing number of stereotypical black female characters in the public eye—characters presumed to represent "real" black womanhood. In her book *Reality Bites Back*, Jennifer Pozner points out that producers in the reality tv genre specifically seek out "characters" that represent gender and racial stereotypes—namely angry black women.

Bravo’s popular Real Housewives franchise—a reality juggernaut that keeps spawning new shows—follows the antics of groups of bourgeois women from various U.S. cities. Nearly all participants are presented as bullying, narcissistic, backstabbing, money-grubbing, cliquey, disloyal, arrogant, self-involved, willfully ignorant, poorly spoken, wasteful, and tackily nouveau riche. It makes for good television. But the mostly African-American Atlanta cast's dysfunction is accepted as uniquely black, a confirmation of a host of stereotypes about poor, ignorant, urban people; loud, angry black women; and shiftless black men. The cast is discussed in the blogosphere using racialized terms, including, frequently, "ghetto." By contrast, the Beverly Hills, Orange County, New York, and New Jersey wives are not seen as representative of white culture or white womanhood. They are not discussed using racialized terms. And few white people are spending time being embarrassed by their hijinks.

The question is: Who is most to blame for the images of black women we see? In the case of the Real Housewives franchise, it is series creator and Bravo executive Andy Cohen, who selects the casts and guides storylines through editing and behind-the-scenes maneuvering. But modern purveyors of respectability politics have concerned themselves with black women like *Real Housewives of Atlanta* star NeNe Leakes. Loud, aggressive, and crass, Leakes is often charged with setting black women back through her behavior. For instance, earlier this year, in an interview with HelloBeautiful.com, actor Brian White (*Stomp the Yard*) derided Leakes while calling her presence on television an accurate depiction of reality, and urged the black community to do better by saying, "You can't call it a stereotype if it's the majority."

Engaging with respectability politics is not just arbitrary policing. In the case of black women, it is rooted in the realities of racism and the specific way it intersects with sexism and class. When members of the community react to a black actress in a highly sexualized role, they can be pushing back at the destructive notion of black woman as rump-shaker, as belly warmer, as unrapeable object of pleasure. They may be anticipating the fallout from one more salacious black female character—another brick in a wall of sexual stereotype that has dogged American women of African descent for centuries. When we rage at the prevalence of NeNe Leakes–type portrayals, we do so knowing black women carry that neck-rolling stereotype on their backs into every interview for a potential new job and every interaction with authority.

Representation matters. It changes minds and cements biases. Individual black women are more likely to be viewed as representatives of their race by the majority culture. Black women and girls do suffer from seeing limited and/or relentlessly negative reflections of themselves in the media. Those limited images do reinforce stereotypes about black women and often prevent people from recognizing their humanity. And those stereotypes do burden black women in their real, everyday lives.

What can we do about that?

Policing the behavior of black women is not the answer. If it is wrong for a contemporary black actress to portray a maid, what message are we sending to black women who do domestic work? If it is wrong to be shown having sex with white men, what does that say about black women in interracial relationships with white men? If Erykah Badu is a whore for having children out of wedlock, what does that say about all
black single mothers? Indeed, since more than half of births to all women under 30 occur outside of marriage (regardless of race), what does it say about women as a whole?

The goal of respectability politics may be noble, but the execution is flawed, damaging, and ineffective. By indulging in respectability politics, we acquiesce to the racially biased idea that the actions of individual black people are representative of the whole. We add to the pre-existing burdens of racism and sexism. And we fail to solve our problem, because we move the responsibility for eradicating race and gender biases from the powerful institutions and systems that perpetrate them to those oppressed by them. It is easier to try to control the oppressed than challenge the oppressor, but it is rarely a humane or useful approach.

Jackson adds, "I worry about putting all our eggs in the basket of media representation. We’re relying on institutions that historically have been run by nonblack and nonfemale entities—institutions that are invested in regurgitating old stereotypes and tired perspectives."

Rather than critiquing the individual choices of black actresses, Jackson proposes an alternative. "There are countless firsthand narratives by black women. We need to be critiquing Hollywood for not adapting more work about black women by black women. If Hollywood and the black community were willing to get behind films like *Pariah*”—a 2011 independent film, written and directed by Dee Rees, about a Brooklyn teen dealing with friendship, family, and sexual identity—"we wouldn't be having this conversation. [Hollywood] may still make *The Help*, but it wouldn't be such a big problem."

Marginalized people might also lead the way in rejecting the essentialist notion of respectability that has provided a foundation for our own misery. Black women have been on the front lines of many a revolution. A battle that opens the door for all people—domestic workers and duchesses, the chaste and the promiscuous, the conventional and the daring—to be seen as valuable, to be seen as respectable, is a fight well worth having.

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