

2001

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Recommended Citation

Ashe, Bertram D. "'Hair Drama' on the Cover of 'Vibe' Magazine." *Race, Gender & Class Journal* 8, no. 3 (2001): 64-77.

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"HAIR DRAMA" ON THE COVER OF VIBE MAGAZINE

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Abstract: This study consists of a cultural reading of the cover photograph of the June-July 1999 issue of *Vibe* magazine. It explores the relationship between Mase, an African-American male rap star, and the three anonymous African-American female models that surround him. The study interprets the cover through the long, straightened hair of the models, locating the models' hair in a historically-informed context of black hair theory and practice. The study argues that the models' presence on the cover, particularly their "bone straight and long" hair, "enhances" Mase in much the same way breast-augmented "trophy women" "enhance" their mates. Ultimately, the study encourages and validates a wide variety of black hair styles—including straightening—even as it urges the acceptance of black hair as a site where the demonstration of the struggle for black consciousness (however one exhibits that consciousness on his or her head) can be observed.

Keywords: African-American hair, hip hop culture, African American music, beauty

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The *Vibe* issue arrived wrapped in cellophane, the warning screaming at me: "Your subscription is at ... THE END; unless you send us your renewal instructions now!"

I tore the plastic away. As far as I'm concerned, my "instructions" are to let it end, and I probably should have ended it sooner. No doubt, reading *Vibe* is an excellent way to keep up with hip hop culture; I began my subscription with the first issue, volume one, number one. But I've got young kids in the house. I'd grown tired long ago of having to either hide or rip the cover off the magazine every month—my children aren't ready for nearly naked Janet Jackson, Toni Braxton, and Lil' Kim covers, if they'll ever be. This last issue, though, pretty much did it for me. Now I'm truly through.

This June-July, 1999 issue has not one but *three* bikini-clad young women on the cover. And it isn't so much their visible skin that grabs my attention. It's their hair. In front of a teal background the rapper Mase, wearing a Ralph Lauren t-shirt and visible tattoos, stands in the right-middle of the cover gazing up at me. Strategically draped around him are three light-brown young African-American women, each with breast-length straight hair. Completing the image is a platinum pendant dangling from a platinum chain around Mase's neck. The pendant, about the size of a toddler's fist and resting an equal distance from each woman's face and hair, appears to be a black head wearing a knit hat, from under which flows even more long hair. Intentionally or not, Marc Baptiste, noted photographer, draws a peculiar connection between the long-haired, inanimate piece of jewelry worn by Mase and the three long-haired women who almost seem to be "worn" by Mase as well. The cover blurb? "Don't Hate Because the Ladies Love Mase."

I shake my head. These, apparently, are "the Ladies." I'm standing in my foyer, a few steps from the mailbox, trying to figure out exactly what it is that bothers me so much about this cover. I flip backwards through the issue as I walk to the kitchen table and sink slowly into a seat, the same way I do when I've opened a letter from home in the hallway and get engrossed in it by the time I sit down.

But this is no letter from home. Inside, I move from back to front, past reviews and advertisements, past a vacuous Britney Spears "beauty secrets" page, past a photo lay-out featuring actors from HBO's prison-block series *OZ*, only to stop stock still at a couple of arresting, one-two punch images of Treach of the rap group Naughty By Nature. One shot captures him in all his bald-headed, tattooed, thick-muscled glory (the page lay-out completes the image with top-to-bottom

links of chain running down the left side of the page) (Diehl, 1999:112). The other photo is a black-and-white, head-and-chest shot of Treach wearing a startling black leather face-mask; one penetrating eye is exposed (110). In this photo he is flanked by his boys from Naughty By Nature, Kay Gee and Vinnie, who are looking seriously and intently into the camera over each of Treach's shoulders. The darkness of the photo is palpable.

I flip backward just one page, and there's a full-color photo of Mase, clean-cut and dressed in white from head to toe, one eye-brow arched in classic ain't-I-cute fashion (Diehl, 1999:108). The *lightness* of this photo is remarkable—particularly when contrasted with the "treacherous" image awaiting the reader on the next page. The rest of the photos accompanying the Mase story include the three women from the cover. They're wearing different outfits, but the same amount of skin is exposed, and the posed positions are similar to those on the cover. It occurs to me that in much the same way Vinnie and Kay Gee heighten Treach's "dangerous" identity, part of the reason these three women surround Mase is to project Mase's identity as the man ladies love to love. The difference is that Kay Gee and Vinnie spin and rap behind frontman Treach; they have their own identities, however subordinate they are to Treach's. These women wrapped around Mase are nameless and mute. In the absence of any contextual personality, their skin color, expressions, and, especially, hair, "speak" for them. I don't like what I'm hearing.

It is a case of "women's bodies as objects of consumption," writes Tricia Rose, in *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994:169). "The aesthetic hierarchy of the female body in mainstream American culture," Rose explains, "positions many black women somewhere near the bottom" (168). And hip hop, "like other contemporary popular music, has become a highly visual genre that depends on video [and photographic] representations to authenticate the performer's ghetto roots and rough exterior," writes Robin Kelley. "In a world of larger-than-life B-boys surrounded by a chaotic urban backdrop, there are few spaces for women outside the realm of hypermasculinity" (1997:70). And yet, Rose argues, "we cannot escape the reality of black women's complicity" in displays such as this *Vibe* cover. "In a wide variety of videos, photos, and other aspects of creative production and marketing, women who are called 'hotties' or more derogatorily 'video ho's' or 'skeezers' are willing participants in their own exploitation." Rose quotes Carmen Ashhurst-Watson, president of Rush Communications, as saying, "we never have any difficulty finding women to appear in the videos." One producer told Rose that he keeps "'hottie files' with the vital statistics of innumerable young women, so that one can be located at the drop of a hat" (169).

So are these women on this *Vibe* photo shoot from someone's "hottie

files"? There are several more photos of Mase and the women, posed in various "glamorous" positions. The models are clearly playing a role. But of what? I flip back to the cover. Joan Morgan, in *Black Issues Book Review*, calls women like these models "chickenheads," saying, "It's a mistake for women to act like erotic power is [their] only available power source" (Chideya & Morgan, 1999:46). Morgan says it's important that young women understand that the "glamorized sexuality" portrayed on magazine covers and music videos "is not ultimately the way to play the game and win." These "chickenheads" think "if I wear my skirt up to there and my hair down to here, [Sean] Puffy [Combs] will come and whisk me off in a Lear jet," says Morgan. "The young girls I have interviewed weren't completely clueless," she emphasizes, "but young girls are so male-identified. . ." (46).

That's it, I realize. The "male-identified" aspect of these young women in the photo wafts off the page like a foul scent. *Vibe's* editors seem to have posed these women around Mase to have males identify with Mase, even as the women appear "male-identified" themselves. Both sides of the representation appear to fold into the male gaze. (And it gets deeper: when I shared an earlier version of this essay with my freshman composition class, one young brother practically shouted out in recognition. "I remember that cover!" he said. "And to tell you the truth, it was Mase's hair that I was most impressed with. I checked out his hair before I checked out the ladies...." Whether the presence of the women helped inform his enthusiasm for Mase's hair is left up to question.)

But let's face reality: black folk can't alter but so much about themselves. Forget about lightening creams or sleeping with clothes-pins on noses: for most of us, skin is black; noses are flat. Contemporary black women occasionally have cosmetic surgery or buy colored contact lenses, but hair style choice, including "permanents," hair weaves, extensions, and Jheri curls, remains the most popular way to play the "beauty" game. And at least since Madame C. J. Walker became the first female millionaire selling skin-lightening and hair-straightening products before her death in 1918, black periodicals have carefully constructed and displayed representations of black women to exploit that purchasing interest and power (Rooks, 1996:71-4).

But are constructed media portrayals of men really all that different? Black men do, after all, play their own version of the "beauty" game. Truly, if women thought cornrows were laughable and derisively ridiculed any man wearing them, I'm sure no gangstas in the 'hood—let alone NBA tough guys like Allen Iverson and Latrell Spreewell—would even consider wearing them. After all, are Treach's muscles and tattoos truly for his personal enjoyment only? Where do we draw the line? How do artists—and the rest of us—make that tight fencewalk between personal statement about ourselves and general attractiveness

to society at large, particularly where media portrayals are concerned? I think about how dancer/choreographer Bill T. Jones, in the premier issue of *Code* magazine, defines style as "an intimate response to one's time and place. Style," he continues, "is a dialogue between the individual and his world" ("Style Matters," 1999:37).

I like that. My sense of the media's intervention into—if not complete construction of—that "dialogue" of style allows me to start making sense about my problems with this *Vibe* cover. For me, at least, these women, in mid-fencewalk, have fallen off the fence. See, the best thing about Jones's view on style is that it speaks to the tension between "the individual" and "his world." But the fact that these three women, all identically long-haired and bikini'ed, are essentially media creations makes it seem as if they *have* no individuality. They're mannequins, wax figures. It's almost as if they're empty vessels who've had their style (hair- and otherwise) poured into them by Baptiste—who then posed them around Mase and told them to pout for the "click." What Baptiste poured into them, it seems to me, is the male fantasy of ideal black female sexuality. Hair, it appears, is key.

Of course, this is nothing new. "In African cultures, the grooming and styling of hair have long been important social rituals," writes Shane White and Graham White in "Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries." "Elaborate hair designs, reflecting tribal affiliation, status, sex, age, occupation, and the like, were common, and the cutting, shaving, wrapping, and braiding were centuries-old arts" (1995:49-50). White and White write that, "According to the prevailing racist ideology of eighteenth-century America, the physical attributes of African Americans—their skin color, facial structure, and, of course, their thick, curly hair—were freighted with negative connotations. Whites frequently referred to blacks' hair as 'wool' (the association with animals was hardly accidental), in order to differentiate it from the supposedly superior white variety. . . . Obviously, blacks were not supposed to be proud of their hair. . ." (56). Perhaps because of this antebellum struggle over hair, African Americans seem to have always had "issues" behind living in a country in which the European (white) ideal of beauty holds sway (Rooks, 1996:25). Truly, as a woman in John Langston Gwaltney's *Drylongso* put it years ago, "Too many blackfolks are fools about color and hair" (1980:66). But it would be too easy to simply erect the time-worn "good hair/bad hair" dichotomy as a critical framework for viewing this *Vibe* cover. Kobena Mercer, in his seminal essay "Black Hair/Style Politics," argues that, yes, "Black practices of aesthetic stylization are intelligible at one 'functional' level as dialogic responses to the racism of the dominant culture, but at another level involve acts of appropriation from that same 'master' culture through which 'syncretic' forms of diasporan culture have evolved. Mercer insists that "syncretic" strategies of black stylization—"creolizing' found or given elements"—are reflected in such black

innovations as jazz, with its African polyrhythms and European harmonies. What's more, Mercer argues, "creolized cultural forms are made use of by other social groups and then, in turn, are all incorporated into mainstream 'mass' culture as commodities for consumption. Any analysis of black style or any other medium, must take this field of relationships into account" (1990:257-8).

But if black hair issues have been with us as long as we've been on the continent, gender issues, the use of "attractive" female bodies to surround and enhance a central male figure, has certainly been a long-held concept, as well. As early as the 1940s, black public spaces such as pool halls and saloons had "soundies" machines, a combination of screen and speaker about the size of a standard refrigerator. Place a quarter in these machines and you would instantly see and hear the music of Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller, Louis Jordan, Maurice Rocco, and many, many more. But these "soundies" and today's music videos share much more than the marriage of visual images and music. I was surprised to see—from "soundies" produced almost sixty years ago—many of the same females-draped-around-male-star arrangements (with many of the women wearing the requisite long hair) that are so routine today they are almost unnoticeable. Fats Waller's "Honeysuckle Rose" initially features the expected "wholesome" images of early-1940s womanhood: beaming, head-wagging, finger-snapping women in exaggerated, childlike hair bows and huge, puffy sleeves, the bows framing their grateful grins as they surround Waller at the piano. Their purpose, it seems, is to actively enjoy the music on-screen, heightening, in the process, the participatory experience of the viewer/listener. But during the song's instrumental break, the women also energetically dance, revealing long legs through slit skirts. Soundies by Maurice Rocco and Louis Jordan also contain startling images of dancing women in halter-tops, cut-away dresses or other leg-revealing short outfits. In each of these cases the women are as anonymous as the three women on the cover of *Vibe*. Although the social mores of the era largely determined the boundaries of the representations of black female sexuality displayed in these soundies, viewing these images is both striking and sobering. The way these women are positioned in relation to the male star enhance his presence for his viewing audience.

While "soundies" are, of course, fairly early examples of electronic media, these long-ago images do anticipate and inform today's media and their depiction of black women. It's not much of a jump, alas, from the portrayal of women in "Honeysuckle Rose" to the succession of women who appear, for example, in Q-Tip's recent "Breath and Stop" video. It's worth noting, as well, that the "bone-straight and long" hair of the women in the video is relentlessly flung from side to side for maximum effect throughout. In both songs, a group of women move in simultaneous, stylized movements, pointedly surrounding (and enhancing) the male star. It appears there is a grammar of gender representation,

and today's media portrayals are merely adapting, updating and extending that grammar; they haven't, apparently, invented anything. For all the noise—in many ways justified—about the revolutionary nature of hip hop, this cover photograph is, in terms of media-generated gender portrayals, absolutely nothing new.

And yet, all the media does is present images that strike chords with the audience it serves. Fact is, when I look at these women on the *Vibe* cover, I can't help but see specific black male expectations projected onto black female heads of hair. Now, it certainly goes without saying that when a woman chooses a hair style she's not simply trying to attract some man. No doubt, women chiefly wear their hair in a style that pleases them. But there's more to it than that. As writer Erica Vital put it in an article about cutting off her dreadlocks and retaining a short, natural style, certain "Toni Morrison characters, such as Hannah in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Sula in the novella of the same name, and the girl-child Pecola of *The Bluest Eye*, all fall prey to dishonor and grief without the presence of the mothering voices to grant the essential reminders: don't let your slip show, don't sneak off with the neighborhood boys, don't forget to do your lesson, [and] don't be a fool with your hair . . . no man likes a bald-headed woman" (Vital, 1994:11).

But Vital also writes that her own "mothering voices" never liked the idea of her growing dreadlocks in the first place—at least, not until those locks grew out some. Length, it seems, is even more important than texture. As long as it's long . . . , the voices seemed to say. Amazingly, Vital's "mothering voices" then gave her grief for wanting to cut off a hairstyle they didn't want her to have in the first place! You could say these "voices" are acting as agents for a male point of view. And while Vital did go on to cut her dreads, one of the questions she asked herself in those final moments in the barber's chair was, "what will the brothers think?" (12). This consideration of a black male's "likes" is not always on the surface, but, like the black male's regard for the black female's "likes," it is there, subterranean.

And yet it is just the sort of "hair drama" Vital describes above that surfaces in various entertainment media: music videos, on the cover of *Vibe* magazine, or in popular movies. I flip back to the cover photo, thinking of Nola Darling, the protagonist in *She's Gotta Have It*. The three men in her life, "Buppie" Jamie Overstreet, hip hop main man Mars Blackmon, and BAP Greer Childs, all have corresponding hairstyles: Jamie has a conservative natural, Mars has cut an arrow into the back of his buzz-cut, and Greer has a slick, processed 'do. Their hair is an index to their personalities. And then there's Nola, the bohemian, unconventional artist. Nola wears her longish hair "natural" throughout the film, also matching her personality, except for a signal restaurant scene where she wears a wavy style, quite possibly to try and momentarily adapt

to Greer's attempts to "shape and mold" her character. But this is a *portrayal* of Nola, mediated by director Spike Lee in much the same way photographer Baptiste and his editors mediate this *Vibe* cover.

But see, I can already hear black women going off on me for claiming black males are their primary consideration in the first place: *The nerve. The nerve. Here we are, finally fixing our hair the way we want to—whether we straighten it, braid it, dread it or buzz-cut it—and this Negro here thinks it's about him. We already know these brothers believe we think about them every second of the day; now this one tells me he owns every strand of hair that curls up and out of my head. Lord, it's enough to send me outta my head. Listen—Bert: I hate to deflate your puffed-out chest and everything, but it's not about you!*

I know, I know; she's right. Believe me, I'm no hair cop. Lisa Jones weighed in on the matter in her book *Bulletproof Diva* when she talked about the time *Essence* magazine "invited men to comment on women's hair practice. Men gave the thumbs-down to weaves and drippy curls. Women wrote back telling the men to mind their business. As if to say, this ain't about y'all and this ain't about The Man, this is our creative space, best you stay out" (Jones, 1994:304). Jones's example is interesting, but incomplete. When she says, "this is our creative space, best you stay out," she doesn't address the magazine's role in helping shape and sustain contemporary black women's hair practice.

But then, even for Jones, the Diva, "out of nowhere, massive hair drama took hold" when she became prematurely gray (304). The episode caused "the girl," the protagonist of that particular essay, to reflect on hair tales past, and she found herself considering black male perceptions of black female hair. "Their fetishes always got the better of their politics," she remembered. "Like the boyfriend who spoke of how proud he was of his girlfriend's short natural, though he called her a 'bald-headed black bitch' in private. Or the boyfriend who slapped her for cutting her hair, then apologized in tears." The girl "imagined that heterosexuality was the source of all her hair issues. Yet she knew better, or did she?" (306). In fact, there are a variety of sources that produce the "hair issues" confronting "the girl." After all, *Essence* did frame the debate that the male and female readers had. The absence of a media consideration in Jones's example appears to allow the hair issues to play out among real, unmediated personalities. But the media does inform black attitudes on skin color and hair. Fact is, on some level, when it comes to black women and hair, the various media do, indeed, weigh in. I'm sitting at my kitchen table, staring down at the cover of this issue, and all sorts of preferences and emotions and oppositions are flowing through my own gaze. Jones writes, on the last page of her book, "Just as suddenly, the hair drama passed" (306). But the complexity remains.

If Jones's example seems extreme, consider the following comparison:

American men, black and white, generally like their women with full breasts (Thesander, 1997:169). Similarly, African-American men generally like their black women with long hair. But anecdotal evidence suggests that while American men like full-breasted women, they don't like the idea of unnatural means to enhance them. And black men, as that *Essence* survey suggests, don't like unnatural means to enhance hair length. Now, certainly, many, many Americans, men and women, black and white, have a conflicted relationship with plastic surgery: they value all of the attributes that result from the surgery, but they don't like the idea of the surgery itself; they want these attributes to be natural—God-given, if you will. Black men like the idea of long hair on black women, but they, too, apparently want the hair to be solely nature's own. "In every culture," writes Marianne Thesander in *The Feminine Ideal*, "a female physical ideal is created, by various means of artifice, and given precisely the form and the meanings with which the culture wishes the women to be identified" (1997:11). Men appear to have an investment in believing in the fiction of the "ideal" breasts of American women—and the fiction of the "ideal" long hair of African-American women, as well.

The situation abounds with irony. In a typical *L.A. Weekly* magazine, one of the free cultural guides distributed each week in Los Angeles, there are pages and pages of plastic surgery advertisements, most near the front of the issue. But there are pages and pages of advertisements for strip clubs and outcall services in the *back* of the issue. The irony is that both sets of advertisements feature the same sculpted images of the youthful female body. Yes, the strip club ads display these bodies in sexually suggestive positions, but that's the only difference—well, that and the fact that plastic surgery isn't explicitly mentioned anywhere in the strip club ads. But the similarity of the two front and back sections of the *L.A. Weekly* implicitly suggest, to my reading, that both sets of bodies are, for the most part, surgically enhanced. A similar irony exists in the hair images in magazines such as *Essence*, *Black Hair*, or *Blactress*: the long hair on the heads of many of the women in the articles is indistinguishable from the hair on the heads of the models in the advertisements for hair weaves and extensions. The implication is the same as in the plastic surgery and strip club ads: that the hair on the women in the articles is "enhanced," as well.

What men often don't realize, however, is just how few women are "[well] endowed by their creator"—particularly when these men repeatedly see "perfect" images of the American beauty ideal in the popular media: on television, in movies, in magazines, and in newspapers. "'Today,' says Dr. Stephen Herman of Albert Einstein College of Medicine Hospital, 'I think, almost every popular model has had some type of breast augmentation operation'" (Wolf, 1992:266). And these beauty-ideal issues are far older than 1940s "soundies" or even Madame C. J. Walker's market success earlier in the century. As Karen Halttunen makes clear, contemporary issues of female authenticity and sartorial appropriateness can

be traced back at least to the mid-19th century, when the "fashionable" use of make-up produced many of the same sorts of issues raised by today's hair-weaving and breast augmentation (1982:63-4).

At its root, the urge to have either of these alterations performed essentially comes from feelings of powerlessness and incompleteness (Wolf, 1992:211-12). And you can hear it in the very terminology of the procedures. One does not "augment" or "extend" what is already "complete." Although I've generalized in this extended example for the sake of coherence, there are, in fact, only certain women who feel "incomplete" and who opt for these procedures. And what men must understand is that, in the same way media coverage informs and heightens all of these pre-existing issues, in a very real sense those men who are unreasonably attracted to "trophy women," those men who only want women who have, say, full-breasts and/or long hair, possess the very same essentially "incomplete" feelings of the women who undergo alteration: these men need specific women with these specific attributes to "complete" them because they are incomplete themselves.

My reading of this cover of *Vibe* magazine, then, includes the possibility that male stars who either surround themselves or allow themselves to be surrounded by highly sexualized representations of women must be experiencing a sense of "incompleteness" themselves—whether it's Maurice Rocco and Fats Waller in the 1940s or Q-Tip and Mase at the turn of the century. After all, the pop music star who needs to "enhance" his image in the marketplace by cavorting with leggy women in bikinis does seem eerily analogous to the man who needs a trophy wife to "enhance" his self-image, to say nothing of his image at work or around his friends. When viewed through this context, Mase and the women on the cover assume a bizarre co-dependency: they need him to exist in order to appear on the cover at all, and his stance as "love man" needs to be "enhanced" by their presence. But don't read the "co-" in "co-dependency" as "equality." Not only is there an inherent inequality between the well-known male star and the anonymous female models, but male privilege and patriarchy affect gendered representations in any case, including those occasions when male models surround a female pop music star in a video or on a magazine cover.

This breast augmentation/hair extensions comparison can also help explain some of the intense internal considerations surging, consciously or unconsciously, through Lisa Jones's example of the black man who said he was "proud" of his girlfriend's "short natural," but still called her a "bald-headed black bitch" behind closed doors. Or the brother who apparently had more of an investment in the African-American beauty ideal than he realized: he not only slapped his girlfriend for cutting her hair, he also defensively lashed out at a perceived assault on his carefully constructed fantasy of appropriate black female hair length. And the media plays a critical role in presenting and enabling that

fantasy. It's easy enough for Jones to say "this is our creative space, best you stay out," but as Jones well knows, in the same way the apologetic, teary-eyed brother who's just slapped his girl is all too real, the written or electronic mediation between African-Americans and their hair is real, as well.

But as I continue to idly roam through this issue, thinking about reactions to these standards of beauty, one more ironic realization leaps into my head: the Editor-in-Chief of this issue of *Vibe* magazine is Danyel Smith, an African-American woman. Covers like this one imply that Smith is acutely aware that attractive African-American women showing plenty of skin can really move magazines off newsstands—particularly when coupled with a bankable male star. But she also seems to understand that long hair heightens whatever attributes these models may have. The irony specifically breaks the surface in a story that appears in this same issue, just five pages before Mase's piece. "Every year somebody's gonna come up with a new way to be sexy," opens an article about the female rap duo Infamous Syndicate, from Chicago. "A man ain't gon' look at you half naked and think, 'Boy she got a pretty brain,'" says Rashawna Guy with a laugh. "Let me be that one you *wonder* what I look like when I get sexy" (Hopkins, 1999:94). Her partner, Lateefa Harland, chimes in: "I always say it's in a woman's nature to be sexy. But to totally rely on it—that's not what we're about" (94). The images back them up: no gratuitous skin, no-nonsense expressions. These are not Naughty By Nature-like "hard" poses, their expressions are more self-assured and confident, particularly Guy's. It is, however, "bone-straight" hair that frames those expressions, hair that curls in slightly just as it hits their shoulders.

If, as Joan Morgan suggests above, fashion and hair are ways for some young women to act out "male-identified" identities, Infamous Syndicate's counter-image complicates Morgan's assumption somewhat. Infamous Syndicate's recording is aptly titled *Changing the Game*. "Women can do the same things as men," says Guy. "That's what we say in our music. We're not trying to be what you think we should be. We're tryin' to be who we are" (94). Infamous Syndicate seems to have found a way to acknowledge the male-attraction factor without allowing it to rob them of their agency, their sense of control over their own lives. Their presence in the magazine implicitly critiques the issues the cover photo raises. The difference is that these women speak for themselves (although the quotations used are, of course, selected by the writer).

Tricia Rose, in *Black Noise*, argues for a social class dimension to these gendered, hip hop representations. "Through their lyrics and video images," writes Rose, "such black women rappers as TLC, Queen Latifa, MC Lyte, Yo-Yo, and Salt 'N' Pepa form a dialogue with working-class black women and men, offering young black women a small but potent culturally reflexive public space." Infamous Syndicate obviously belongs among these female rap groups who, Rose suggests, "are carving out a female-dominated space in which black women's

sexuality is openly expressed. Black women rappers sport distinctively black hairstyles and hip hop clothing and jewelry that ground them in a contemporary working-class black youth aesthetic. They affirm black female working-class cultural signs and experiences that are rarely depicted in American popular culture" (Rose, 1994:170).

Editor Smith's own views on the matter are expansive. "I think I have a broad view of what a woman can be," she says. "Some people say, 'Danyel, how can you put Janet Jackson on the cover of the magazine with her boobs hanging out?' 'How can you put Lil' Kim on the cover in a camisole?' But I say these women are artists; they can do what they wanna do." Smith also insists that "there's room for all kinds of women in *Vibe*. If you want to be Erykah Badu and be wrapped up from head to toe, then we have room for you. If you weigh more than people think you ought to—like Queen Latifah or Missy Elliot, who don't have the fashion model kind of figure—we've got room for you on our cover. I'm not making decisions for the artists, male or female. Be who you are. I don't have a narrow interpretation of blackness or femaleness" (Aronson, 1998:86). Smith is, of course, "making [*editorial*] decisions" for the artists, male and female. But her point is well taken: this month's cover is simply one of a range of cover subject portrayals.

Fair enough. But rightly or wrongly, implicitly or explicitly, the media does, indeed, weigh in on African American female hair. The models on the cover, in a sense, "speak for" the editorial choices the magazine makes as it displays its own carefully constructed identity as an organ for American's hip hop nation. Certainly, the media didn't create black male desire for light skin and long hair on black females. Historically, black men, like white men, were affected by "ideal" standards of beauty long before the contemporary media explosion. And black male attitudes toward black female hair do, of course, vary widely. Many black men appreciate all manner of black female hairstyles; they enjoy them as varied expressions of black womanhood, expressions of the healthy, fresh difference between each black female head of hair. Still, the media does help sustain, if not exploit, existing black male attitudes towards black womens' hair, if in no other way than the ongoing parade of "ideal" portrayals that feed the black male supposition that these images are not the exception but the norm. Similarly, black female hair attitudes—and black female hair practice—are far more multifaceted than merely an attempt to accede to black male desire. Black women have a range of attitudes about their hair and their hair possibilities, but even these diverse attitudes are ultimately influenced (not necessarily created, as such, but, yes, influenced) by media-driven considerations.

And yes, hair certainly is, as Lisa Jones argues, "creative space" for black women. But that space, it seems to me, is also a site of struggle. I would hope that it is a site of resistance, as well. In other words, while it's important to

recognize that most black women have a media-influenced consideration of appropriateness floating somewhere in their heads, it is most important for black women to still wear their hair the way they want to, regardless. The struggle is for agency, for autonomy over the "ideal" images the various media continue producing literally as this essay is being read; images that are constantly being pumped out of media outlets day after day, over and over and over again. And although I obviously can't tell for sure, it just doesn't seem as if these cover models are conscious of the struggle, let alone the resistance.

So these three long-limbed "hotties" with light skin and long hair on the cover of my last issue of *Vibe* magazine are not just posing for a photo, they are standing, frozen, trapped in a complex web of competing representations. Maybe I'd see them differently if they were individually walking down the street in business attire—or in sweats or jeans, for that matter, free of an explicit media portrayal. Ultimately, I agree with Kobena Mercer: "On the political horizon of postmodern popular culture I think the diversity of contemporary black hair-styles is something to be proud of" (1990:263). It's not these women's long hair itself that rankles. It's the setting, the placement. It's not the text; it's the context. These may very well be three intelligent, wise and thoughtful women, but what I see looking at them on the page are the implications of cultural, photographic construction; the long hair hanging from these three models' heads ultimately seems more like a media-driven response to black male desire than anything else. And for this male, anyway, that's just the wrong kind of vibe.

Note: The author would like to gratefully thank Valerie Ashe, Dr. Pamela Ashe, Dr. Bertram L. Ashe, and his Fall, 1999 composition class at the College of the Holy Cross for their assistance in completing this essay.

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