



NOTEBOOK

Body Baggage

By Carla Williams

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Now that nearly everyone has weighed in with an opinion - from the reasonably intelligent to the patently absurd - about Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake's Super Bowl halftime show performance, here's a new perspective I've yet to see discussed: race. Yes, the trump card that we as a nation hate to see pulled out.

I can hear the naysayers moaning already, but I don't think it's a coincidence that out of all the explicit sexuality on display in the media these days it finally took a black woman's quickly exposed nipple to bring the whole dirty house of cards crashing down.

Although Jackson quickly claimed responsibility, I find it troubling that all of the blame - such as there's anything to be blamed for - has been heaped upon her. Here's what I saw: a white man reaching out and yanking the covering off of a black woman's breast as he sang words to that effect from his own hit song. I saw her appear to cower and quickly cover herself, shocked and exposed.

Why is she the pariah now and he the unwitting victim of her apparently sneaky ways? Why is he still appearing on the Grammys and she is not? That garment didn't pull apart all by itself.

Let me say up front: I don't really care whether the stunt was planned or not. That's immaterial, and hypocritical considering the degree to which sex, and women's breasts, are used to sell everything from automobiles to toothpaste. Were Jackson and Timberlake looking to sell records? Why not? Their marketability is why they were hired in the first place. Why shouldn't they profit?

If, however, we don't take Jackson's explanation at face value and agree with the pundits who insist she intended to show all, then why shouldn't she be the one in control of how her body gets displayed and sold? What Jackson did, intentionally or not, is make glaringly obvious what's been happening all along in her career as she's been carefully cultivated as a sex symbol with fewer and fewer clothes on, up to her last album cover on which she reclines covered only by a bed sheet.

It was fine if her record company was selling her sexuality and no one was complaining, but when the public finally cried foul everyone backed away to leave her twisting alone in the media wind. So now Jackson solely is to blame. It's a familiar trope in American culture - the oversexed black woman, now even willing to whip her tit out on national television to sell some records. She surely has to be stopped.

Black women's breasts, their bodies and their sexuality remain the great taboo in American culture. We



can deny it or exaggerate it, but God forbid we actually consider the history of their bodies over which, starting with slavery, they have had little control, particularly in how they've been represented.

In photography - the Super Bowl's one-second peep show has instantly become a series of flipbook-like still photographs freely available for download - there are numerous precedents to help understand why a breast isn't just a breast when race is involved. One hundred fifty years ago, the acclaimed Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz commissioned photographs of enslaved men and women on a plantation in South Carolina in order to prove the innate inferiority of blacks. The photographs of the women show them from the waist up, their clothing unceremoniously pulled down around their waists so that their breasts can be measured and catalogued by the camera. Those images have been reproduced in magazines, textbooks and on television with nary a murmur - after all, that's science, right? And Agassiz's name is still inscribed on the building at Harvard not far from where the images are housed.

National Geographic magazine, the source material for many a grade school history or geography report, published the first image of a bare-breasted native woman in 1896. Surprise, she happened to be African, and no one uttered a complaint. That's how those people go around, after all. It took the publication seven years later of images of bare-breasted Filipina women for the editors to feel moved to even discuss the morality of showing such images.

And does anyone remember the Benetton advertisement from 1989 that used a close-up image of a black woman's breasts nursing a white baby to sell sweaters? Only black people complained then, because it painfully reminded them of a history they'd rather forget - the fact that black "mammies" were forced to play wet nurse to generations of white children, often at the expense of spending time with their own children. Yet the photograph became the most awarded in Benetton's advertising history.

The only thing new with Janet Jackson is that a black woman appears to have made the decision to show her body for her own profit, and that's just not acceptable.

The biggest disappointment? That in 2004 Jackson couldn't simply own up to it and have the public say, so what?

Despite the proliferation of images in music videos and magazines, black women still do not really have control over their own bodies. The black community vilifies them for embodying sexualized stereotypes (think of the outcry surrounding Toni Braxton's 1997 VIBE magazine cover in which she posed naked with one arm covering her breasts and a towel between her legs, nonetheless one of the magazine's best-selling issues), while the dominant culture remains all too happy to let them to reify old notions of their supposed salacious natures. With all the cultural baggage they carry, Jackson's body - and her breast - are ultimately not her own.

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