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## BEYOND MINSTRELS, MAMMIES AND MASCOTS: DEMANDING AND PRACTICING RESPECT

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The rising movement among Black women to demand respect from both rap artists and the recording companies that produce, promote, protect and profit from them is a rightful and righteous call. Although the focus is necessarily on Black women's demands for respect given the gross, insupportable and almost canonized degradation of them in gangsta and related rap, the issue of degradation and disrespect is a larger one. It's about Black people as a whole, how we are perceived and treated in society itself, and how some of us collaborate in our own oppression and degradation. This may be done because of money, racial madness in its many forms, the compulsion to buck and bend over at any cost, or the illusion of the right to be wrong regardless of whomever else it might harm or hurt.

So, however we read or respond to it, the issue of respect is in a larger sense about us as a whole with women demanding and deserving a special focus. Thus it is about how we, as artists and a people understand and assert ourselves in dignity-affirming or dignity-denying ways. And it is about whether we give our artists a latitude destructive of our dignity, hostile to our humanity and damaging to our sacred sense of self. The problem is societal and communal, and it has its roots in the racist definition of Black women and men and centuries of training the victims to embrace this definition, embed it in their speech and song, accept it as their own, justify it and pretend they've changed its meaning, although they act it out in the same vicious and violent ways. Thus, there is the need to understand and attack the social roots of this disrespect which lie not only in the transnational corporations' commitment to lucrative reproduction of racist stereotypes of Blacks, but also in the

system of racism in society itself. Again, this is why all smaller-focused struggles must be understood and waged within the overarching web of our people's struggle for liberation, not only from disrespect, but also from the conditions of oppression and degradation which produce and perpetuate the disrespect of both Black women and Black men.

Here, however, it is important to remember Amilcar Cabral's teaching that regardless of the problems imposed by our oppressor, the greatest struggle we wage is the struggle to overcome ourselves. It is, as we say in *Us*, a struggle to overcome that in us which is in contradiction to our highest values and the choice we made for liberation and ever higher levels of human life. This means that we must not only confront our oppressor and those who delight in and distribute his racist and degrading doctrines, but we must also struggle against collaborating in our own oppression, dancing to our own degradation, buying and listening to music that mutilates us and denies us respect around the world.

This further means we must have a new understanding of and approach to our arts, that is to say, standards of judging art not only for its creativity, but also for its social relevance and respect for its subject, especially when the subject is our people. Artists who have no respect for their subject can only degrade and distort it and thus collaborate in the projects of our oppressor. Clearly, one of the greatest challenges facing us as a people is the established order's attempts to use our art to indict, degrade and dismiss us thru its distorted projections in the media, its support of projects of self-mutilation, its handsome rewards for collaboration in one's own degradation, its cul-

tivation of the conditions and the psychology of compulsive racial self-exposure and self-degradation, and its reintroduction of the minstrel, mammy and mascot as fundamental modes of Black self-presentation and self-understanding.

This includes not simply the daily spectacles of mutual mutilation on the talk shows, but also literatures of tawdry confession, bitter critique and merciless condemnation in both popular and “scholarly” works, and men and women savaging each other and mutilating themselves in music. The minstrel is best represented by the gangsta rapper and the self-degrading comedian who are defined by lack of boundaries of decency and dignity. Unlike the minstrels of the past, they are not socially compelled to perform these self-mutilating tricks. On the contrary, they delight in it and in savaging the community, other people of color, women, the disabled, the aged and other marginalized and vulnerable groups.

The mammy is the Gone-with-the-wind type, who is constantly looking for an opportunity so suckle and support the White man, women and child. There’s no need to name names here. We all know it whether it’s a commercial, a movie or TV program, the self-degradation and the degradation of others whether Black woman or Black man is done with ease and perverse enjoyment as a way to please the paymaster and oppressor.

These mammies have no real concern for their children or men; they live for and thru service to the oppressor. But there are also male mammies, Black genies and infantil-

ized giants caring for or playing with little White boys, redoing Bojangles and Shirley Temple roles without the skill or coerced nature of it, or knowledge of its ultimate meaning to them or us.

The mascot is best represented by the horde of deformed caricatures that exist only to make White people look good and to draw a clear distinction between one species of human being (the inferior) and another (the superior). They are essentially created to degrade and mock, are always mentally, morally or physically deficient and in need of White assistance. Inherent in the practice of constructing these caricatures is the need to undermine strong images of Black men, with roles of melodramatic drag queens, brutal-but-layin’-to-cry criminals; fake radicals who finally concede the rightness of the White hero or heroine, and clowns enough for any circus or carnival in town. Black women fare no better in their casting as garish prostitutes, crude and raucous mothers, disrespectful and disgusted wives, and a host of other dignity-denying roles.

The task, then, is to reaffirm the need and practice of Black artistic standards which encourage the highest levels of creativity, defend artistic freedom and insist on artistic responsibility in respect for the dignity and interests of African peoples and their right to freedom from any form of degradation or devaluing—artistic or otherwise. After all, if not this, then what? And if we don’t respect, reaffirm, and liberate ourselves, and build good, meaningful and dignity-affirming lives, who will?