

2019

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Recommended Citation

Shepherd, Jazmyn (2019) "Jet Magazine: Celebrating Black Female Beauty," *XULAneXUS*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.xula.edu/xulanexus/vol16/iss2/1>

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Jet Magazine: Celebrating Black Female Beauty

Jazmyn Shepherd

Abstract

Once referred to as, “the Negro bible” by famed actor and comedian Redd Foxx¹, *Jet* has continued to be a pioneer in representing Black Americans as beyond the stereotypes to which they are so often relegated. The magazine has not only provided accurate coverage throughout momentous Black historical movements such as the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s, the Black is Beautiful movement of the late 1960s, and the Natural Hair Movement of the 2000s, but it has also catered to the daily interests of Black Americans, such as fashion and beauty, lifestyle advice, dating advice, politics, health and diet guides, and coverage of popular actresses and actors of the time. *Jet* has prided itself on instilling in Black women “confidence and strength” through their representations of Black women. Comparison of the portrayals of Black women in *Jet* articles, advertisements, and illustrations published in the years 1950-1955, 1970-1975, 1990-1995; years during which the beauty standard of America was very Eurocentric and did not stray from that line; shows that *Jet* Magazine was one of the first publications to depict Black women as inherently beautiful. Examination of these representations within the historical, political, and psychological contexts of Black culture in America shows the development of *Jet* as an agent of social reform and change that challenges both the traditional view of Black women and the beauty standards present in American society.

Keywords: Beauty, Media, Black Women, Hair

In 1952, Mrs. Ida Jackson's heart stopped beating during an operation in a Philadelphia hospital. After being deceased for several minutes, the doctors were able to bring Mrs. Jackson back to life. Once completely recovered, Mrs. Jackson's main preoccupation was with when she would be able to be discharged so that she could go see her beautician.ⁱⁱ Mrs. Jackson's dedication to her beauty routine after having literally risen from the dead demonstrates the importance of beauty within the Black community. Currently, it is estimated that Black women spend "an estimated \$7.5 billion annually on beauty products."ⁱⁱⁱ Black women's dedication to beauty can be difficult to maintain in a culture that often completely disregards their existence and influence. This forgotten and lucrative demographic is often blatantly excluded due to a beauty standard of Eurocentrism, a standard that does not model or support the many diverse features that are found on Black bodies.

Accordingly, at a time when racial tension in the country was at an almost record high, Black people decided that it was time to seize the narrative and showcase their own definition of beauty. In the 1950s *Jet*, began to publish its view of beauty as reflected by the Black woman, after noting the lacking of representation of people of color in the media. While the magazine, in its earliest articles and advertisements, has reflected unconscious internalized racism, the overall intention of the publication has been social reform and change. *Jet's* avenue of reform and change is shown through the use of both positive visual imagery and writing. *Jet* has been able to represent Black women and interrogate ideas about beauty in a fashion that is readily accessible to their predominantly Black readers. A comparison of the advertisements, spreads, articles, and pictures from the genesis of the magazine in the 1950s, the 1970s, and the 1990s shows *Jet's* growth as a magazine and as a powerful agent of social control.

In 1951 John H. Johnson saw the lack of a true reflection of Black Americans in the publication industry, so he created *Jet Magazine*. *Jet* quickly became a weekly news magazine for the average Black American. The magazine featured Black history facts, Black celebrities, Black art, all Black, all everything. This turned out to be Johnson's third successful publication venture after having already created both *Negro Digest* and *Ebony* in 1942 and 1945, respectively. Within the first six months of its first issue, the magazine "was selling 300,000 copies a week, making it the largest selling Black news magazine in the world."^{iv} Not too long after its debut it was clear that Black America's love affair with *Jet* was not to be short-lived, and soon after its initial publication it became a common household name. Tuskegee, Alabama Mayor, Johnny Ford, once said about the bestselling magazine:

As a child, I grew up with the Johnson Publishing Co. magazines, especially *Ebony* and *Jet*. There were three publications you could find in my house - the *Sears Catalog* and *Ebony* and *Jet*.... My most poignant memory, however, is of the Emmett Till coverage in 1955. Though I was barely a teenager, *Jet's* coverage of his tragic death gave me a keen appreciation for the need for the civil rights struggle. And down through the years, *Ebony* and *Jet* have given me Black heroes - heroes I couldn't read about.^v

While *Jet* clearly provided the Black community with heroes, examination of the Black heroines it offered reflects how the magazine initially struggled to represent a positive Black standard of beauty. The struggle to find a positive Black standard of beauty has been a result of the mainstream representation of Black women. Historically, representation of Black women, of any shade, in popular media before the first publication of *Jet* was mainly based on common stereotypes that had their origins in the eighteenth century and were based on colonial and imperial standards. Traditional portrayals of Black women in popular culture were very negative and portrayed the Black woman according to three main archetypes: the lusty seductress jezebel; the obedient, meek mammy; or the ignorant and loud sapphire.^{vi}

Each representation not only negatively impacted Black women's perceptions of themselves, but also of those around them in society. Even today when Black women encounter people on a daily basis, they continue to battle the preconceived notions that most people have of them upon their first meeting. The most detrimental fact is that when Black women do not see themselves being represented equally and positively in media, it begins to affect their mental health. In 2010, through extensive research Carla Monroe found that:

There is a positive relationship between stereotypical images of black women, racialized beauty standards of light versus dark skin, and sexual risk, such as early onset of sexual intercourse or unprotected sex. These studies suggest that black girls with darker skin may be more vulnerable than their lighter-skin peers to negative messages from the media about their physical appearance and attractiveness, which can lead to long-term risky behaviors.^{vii}

This divide between the many shades of Black people comes from a colorism that runs rampant throughout the global Black community. During slavery it was not uncommon for those who had, what were deemed attractive European features, to be given better treatment. The standard by which this system was created is called the Eurocentric beauty standard. Because of this long and complicated history, it is not uncommon for Black people to unconsciously make decisions based on the criteria of this standard.



Figure 1: Nadinola Bleaching Cream Advertisement. (1955, 13 January). *Jet Magazine*. p.68.

Jet's advertisements initially replicated this problem. Figure 1 shows a 1955 advertisement for Nadinola skin cream. The black-and-white advertisement features a light-skinned woman with beautiful glowing skin that seems to resonate throughout the entire room, in the middle of a group of men. The words, "men can't resist a clear, light complexion" are below the photo. The implied meaning of the advertisement is loud and clear: lighter skin is magnetic, loud and attractive, while darker skin is dumpy, unnoticeable and uninteresting. The words, "improve your complexion" are located within the paragraph below the picture. The implication of those words is that dark skin is a problem that must be remedied. The 1955 advertisement quite boldly equates lightness with attractiveness, leaving no room for misinterpretation.

Figure 2: Johnnie Walker Red Advertisement. (1972, 29 June). *Jet Magazine*. p.52



Even as the standard of Black beauty began to evolve, *Jet* advertisements were still haunted by racist stereotypes of the past. For example, in Figure 2 a 1972 Johnnie Walker Red advertisement features a Black woman, dressed tastefully in a black dress with a plunging V-neckline, holding a tray of scotch in her bright red-painted nails, hair a perfectly piled mess of waves around her head, gazing at the camera. The words “because you’re mine,” are placed above her head. While provocative, this type of advertisement was not uncommon for the time period; however, the use of a Black model with what appears to be unaltered hair was very different. The Eurocentric standard of beauty only tolerates straight hair, especially on Black women who have a natural kinky hair texture. This subtle act of defiance towards the accepted traditional norms of society was beginning to form the new norm for *Jet* in the 1970s. In contrast, the advertisement for the same scotch published in a White magazine within the same year as that of Figure 2, shown in Figure 3, features a blond-haired, blue-eyed woman, also scantily clad and staring into the camera seductively while holding a bottle of the product, with a black background to bring out her light skin. Both advertisements clearly establish a power dynamic between the women and the product being advertised. However, when the advertisement features a Black model, she is depicted in a position of servitude, offering the Johnnie Walker to the magazine audience on a silver tray. When the white model is featured, she is seen as the recipient of a special gift. While both these roles are passive and derogatory, their difference highlights how racism continued to deeply affected visual depictions of women in advertising into the 1970s.

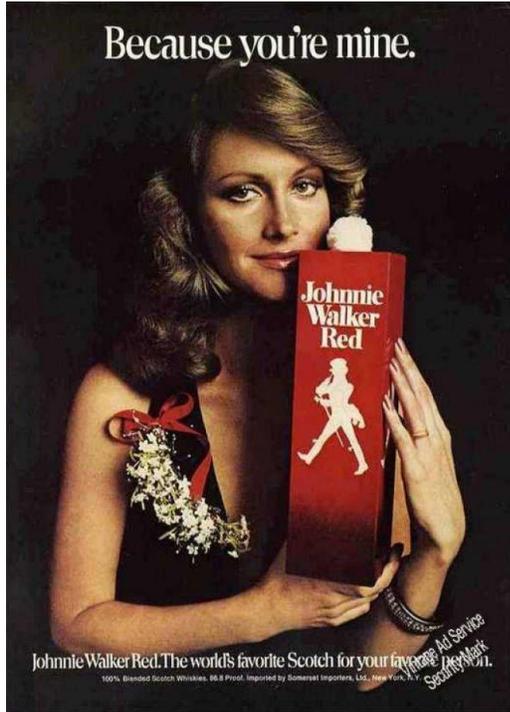


Figure 3: Johnnie Walker Red Advertisement. (1972).

Retrieved from

<http://www.vintageadbrowser.com/alcohol-ads-1970s/12>

Jet's implementation of the "beauty of the week" feature also reflects its struggles to represent standards of Black beauty that defy the Eurocentric model. Each of these featured is an everyday woman that either won a contest or is chosen specifically by *Jet* as the "beauty of the week." Josephine Baker was featured as one such "beauty of the week," and *Jet* published a corresponding 1952 article entitled "The Perfect Negro Beauty," based on an interview with the artist E. Sim Campbell,^{viii} who the article describes as a man with a "long and distinguished career as a top American cartoonist.....he has sketched hundreds of comely women."^{ix} The author mentions all of this to establish Campbell's credibility as he begins to cite many Black female celebrities that he believes would comprise the "perfect negro beauty." This article was likely intended to exalt Black female beauty and to showcase an appreciation for Black beauty in its diversity. In it Simms begins to list names and features from many different celebrities that, combined, would comprise the form of what he believed the "negro venus" would look like.

Among the most notable mentions, he cites Josephine Baker as having the perfect complexion saying, “my ‘perfect’ negro beauty would have to possess an autumnal brown complexion like Josephine’s. Her skin coloration is the most tantalizing shade a woman could possess, the loveliest brown an artist can create.”^x This is an interesting choice for perfect complexion, because throughout her career she was known for her skin, oftentimes nicknamed the “Bronze Venus,” the “Black Pearl,” and the “Creole Goddess.”^{xi} Baker’s beautiful bronze-colored skin can be seen in Figure 6. Born to a washer-woman in 1906 of unknown heritage, her creamy complexion opened many doors for her as a new entertainer when she moved to New York during the Harlem Renaissance. It was a very common practice for the club owners of the time to only hire Black entertainers with lighter skin and more European features to perform, and Josephine looked the part. “The performers were ‘white’ blacks, in accordance with the ‘vogue,’” she recalled in an interview.^{xii} She became obsessed with her skin and considered a pale complexion to be “essential to her image and her success,”^{xiii} and she was known to rub her entire body with lemons daily to lighten her skin further.

Considering this, Campbell’s choice of Baker for his “negro venus’s complexion model is predictable for the time given the standards of beauty. He is unconsciously adhering to the standards of the only society he has known. It is interesting to see, however, that he does say that choosing each feature was difficult, citing the difficulty in choice due to “the many different kinds of beauty evident in the race.”^{xiv} When asked about the hair of this perfect “negro venus,” - something that is of the utmost importance to many Black women, and often the crowning glory of Black beauty- Campbell says “hair needn’t be straight to be beautiful. Imagine how foolish the tall, arrogant women of the Watusi tribe in Africa would look with dead straight hair, clinging limply to their majestic skulls. The healthiness of hair, and not its texture, is the really important

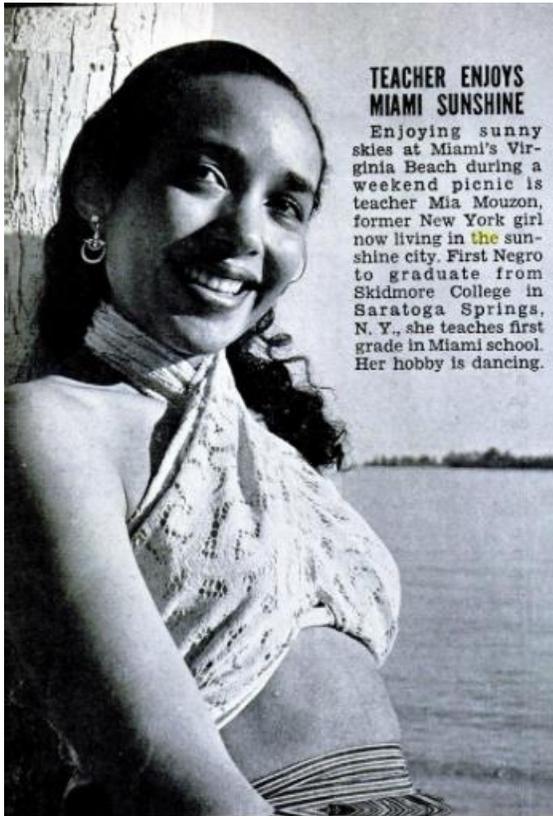
factor”^{xv} This was a very progressive thought for the time, because the dominant hairstyle of choice for Black women was a straightened, maintained fashion, often thanks to the use of the hot comb, and later on, the perm. This slight variance from the established standards of beauty shows some progressivism in both the Black community and *Jet*’s staff.



Figure 6: Josephine Baker. Digital Image. Accessed January 10, 2019.

After Josephine Baker, “the beauty of the week” showcased other women with small, brief biographies and a description of their hobbies. While the goal of this spread was to exalt Black beauty by battling internalized racism, the spread seems to have been affected by the racist Eurocentric beauty standard in its initial choice of lighter-skinned models. Another commonality is the clothing and the physical type of the women chosen. In an effort to create a new standard for this spread, each model was photographed in a swimsuit, oftentimes a bikini. In the first few years of the magazine, additional copy briefly detailed the model’s measurements and her aspirations and goals. While the spread did become a way of showcasing Black beauty and a way for aspiring Black models and actresses to get their start, the biggest side effect of Eurocentric

beauty standards in these spreads is the exclusive use of models with a slim, bikini-model body type.



**TEACHER ENJOYS
MIAMI SUNSHINE**

Enjoying sunny skies at Miami's Virginia Beach during a weekend picnic is teacher Mia Mouzon, former New York girl now living in the sunshine city. First Negro to graduate from Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, N. Y., she teaches first grade in Miami school. Her hobby is dancing.

Figure 4: Beauty of the Week. (1953, 19 March). *Jet Magazine*.



Figure 5: Beauty of the Week. (1990, 21 May).
Jet Magazine.

However, as the Black is Beautiful movement began to take shape in the early 1970s, so too, rose the appearance of the natural hairstyle commonly referred to as the “afro” or the “natural.” As Black women began to adapt to their hair’s natural texture, they began to visit the salons less frequently, negatively impacting the profit margins of the beauty industry. This is important because companies that once pushed products that would alter natural beauty according to the standards of Eurocentrism soon began to create products specifically designed for natural hair. This can be seen in the effort that *Raveen* -a company that traditionally sold bleaching creams- took to reinvent itself with both a men’s and women’s afro spray, which can be seen in Figure 7. This advertisement features both a dark-skinned man and woman, smiling directly at the camera, both wearing their hair in the “natural” style, with the words “sisters are different from brothers” in bold red lettering above their heads. This is a first, because in advertisements of the past, especially for this product, the center of the advertisement is usually a Black woman of lighter coloring with straighter hair, trying to sell a product that would

chemically alter her hair. This radically different advertisement is only a small example of how the beauty standards were subtly shifting away from the Eurocentric mindset and becoming more

inclusive of those with distinct features.

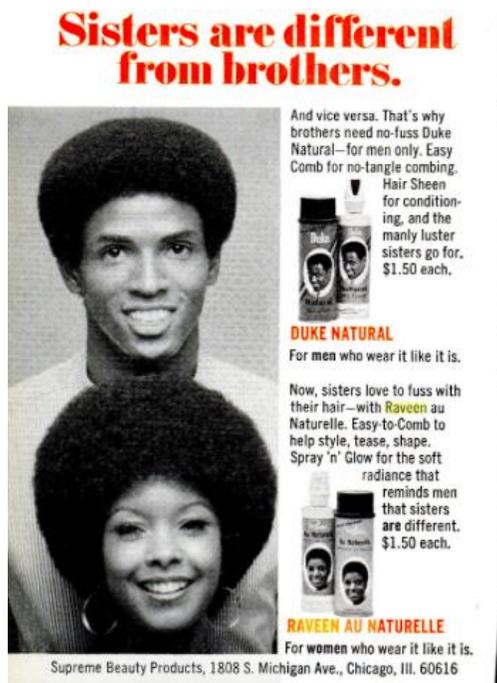


Figure 7: Raveen Afro Spray Advertisement.

(1970, 8 January). *Jet Magazine*.

Jet not only came to challenge the

established Eurocentric beauty standards, but it also attempted to celebrate Black women as beautiful by debunking the myths that followed them and providing the public with written examples of Black beauty in all its diversity. The first case of the magazine using its influence to disprove antiquated stereotypes was in an article published in 1952. The article states that White people perceive the Black woman as, “a fiery female whose sex appetites can be aroused upon the slightest provocation.”^{xvi} This hypersexualization of the Black female body that originated during the slave trade was often used “as a justification for their rape at the hands of their owners.”^{xvii} Yet in this article, Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey advised against this stereotype. And in research that he conducted and published himself in that same year under the title *The Sex Behavior of American Women* he negates such racist claims saying there is, “little difference at

all between the sexual activity of colored and white women on the same social levels.”^{xviii}

Despite the fact that these findings were undisputed by most counselors during this time, they were hard to completely shake. The stereotypes were so prevalent that they continued to affect job opportunities for Black women. Young aspiring Black actresses of the 1950s often expressed despair about the conditions of Hollywood saying, “negro beauties must scramble for what they can get: maid parts, jungle roles and chorus girl bit parts, and live hopefully for the day when they can be free of the color hex.”^{xix} The hypersexualization of Black women continued to prevail, and as the 1970s article, “What Films Are Doing to Image of Black Women,” describes:

Black women, have been viewed only as depreciated sexual objects who serve as the recipients of certain debased passions of men who are ashamed to act them out with their own women. Historically, she has had some value as a ‘breeder’ of slaves and workmen. But most of all, she has been viewed, as all black people have been viewed, as a source of labor; and she has been valued for the amount of work she can perform.^{xx}

Actress Ruby Dee said it best when she expressed her unhappiness with media in an interview saying, “The black man’s image is beginning to be portrayed in some good roles, there have yet to be developed roles, in depth, for Black women. The whole subject of women must be explored. Black women are multi-dimensional. We are maids, executives, housewives.”^{xxi} The main complaint of actors often centered on the lack of Black writers and Black representation in media. *Jet* provided what was missing in the most effective way possible. *Jet*’s response was writing that showed the whole woman, not just the surface. In articles about famous female celebrities, interviews like Dee’s included specific questions catered to each woman, in order to allow the audience to really see into their lives and connect with them. While this is not the same as having a Black female icon playing an amazing character on the big screen, the voice that *Jet* has given Black women is crucial.

While *Jet* Magazine has not always been the perfect model of a vehicle for social reform, it has evolved. *Jet* has provided Black women with both positive imagery and writing that represents Black women as complex and beautiful beings. *Jet*'s 1970 article about American Airlines Grace and Glamour program perfectly exemplifies this evolution. This program was "created to help disadvantaged teenage girls build confidence through good grooming habits and proper makeup techniques."^{xxii} It was run by stewardesses that volunteered their time to go to universities and teach Black women students basic makeup and etiquette. The article describes how each student was given her own makeup products that were made specifically for Black women, and it quoted the Dean of Women at Langston University who said of the program that it was an "inroad to helping young women to become 'black and proud.'" Although there is still much work to be done in transforming the Black woman's place in standards of beauty, *Jet* will continue to be our loyal advocate. It will continue to create means of covering and celebrating Black beauty. *Jet* knows that once we truly see ourselves as beautiful, we will be able to recognize the beauty in others and pass it down to the next generations of beautiful Black women

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^{viii} A notable Black American cartoonist that is credited with creating Eskey, the mascot of *Esquire Magazine*.

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