

Misogynoir: the intersection of breast size and skin color

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“Did we all assume Annie was Smoke’s mother at first? Or was it just me :/” said one user on X. While watching “Sinners,” I stumbled upon one of society’s most confusing double standards: the simultaneous oversexualization and desexualization of Black women with large breasts.

The bodies of women of color — most often Black women — are consistently exploited in the media through various demeaning archetypes and caricatures. In discussions surrounding Black femininity, a specific term has been coined to describe its oppression: misogynoir. A portmanteau of “misogyny” and “noir,” the term was coined by queer Black feminist scholar and activist Moya Bailey in 2008, since which it has gained wide usage and is recognized in Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

One of the most prominent examples of misogynoir is the mammy. Needing to justify themselves, white slaveowners created the caricature of the mammy, an enslaved black woman, often a mother herself, who is devoted to serving inside the white home. The Jim Crow Museum, citing from Barbara Christian’s book “Black Women Novelists,” asserts that mammy was “black, fat with huge breasts … strong, kind, loyal, sexless.”

Large breasts are central to mammy’s function as a nurturer, and were thus desexualized by their association with servitude and maternal labor. Additionally, by distinguishing that Mammy’s breasts were not an object of romantic or sexual desire, the caricature obscured the frequent sexual violence made against black women serving in domestic roles.

The reaction towards Wunmi Mosaku’s portrayal of Annie in “Sinners” is deeply rooted within the mammy stereotype. Although Annie was demonstrated through both the direction and story to be the love interest of a male lead, her skin color and breast size invoked racial sentiments that removed this possibility.

Many characters based on misogynoiristic ideas in media are discrete or perhaps even appear well-intentioned. Take the “strong Black woman” trope: while seemingly positive, it often functions as mammy’s modern descendant. The “strong Black woman’s” value lies in her ability to nobly nurture, support, and endure for the benefit of the other (often white) characters rather than invest in her own complexity or relationships. Considering the fact that many domestic enslaved Black mothers were forced to “selflessly” breastfeed white babies and neglect their own, the relationship between these two tropes is apparent.

I’ve found myself falling for these portrayals. After watching “The Help” last year, I naively thought of Viola Davis’s central character Aibileen and Octavia Spencer’s Minny to be inspiring, compelling representations of hard-working Black women. After I looked deeper, however, I learned that Davis regretted the film. “I just felt that at the end of the day that it wasn’t the voices of the [Black] maids that were heard,” said Davis in a 2018 interview with Vanity Fair. “The Help,” despite having two central Black female characters, was still largely focused on its white characters. Aibileen’s “happy ending” only came true because she helped the white character Skeeter write her book, despite having to badmouth and expose personal details about her white employers and thus severely risking her life and career. Her fellow maid Minny found her livelihood at the end of the film by discovering a friendly white couple to work for, with no mention of an improved wage. In both endings, the women had to find happiness through serving white people, often at the expense of themselves. Indeed, after taking Davis’s perspective into account and learning about the existence of misogynoir, “The Help”’s misogynoiristic themes became more clear to me.

Racialized tropes are deeply embedded within our media and culture. By recognizing the existence and history of intersectional oppression such as misogynoir, we can increase our racial literacy and encourage more inclusive social behavior.





source: American Cancer Society

~44%
drop in the breast cancer death rate has occurred since 1989, due to improved screenings and treatments

OVERSEXUALIZATION OF BREASTS

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"That top is not leaving much room for the imagination."

It's quips like these that actually point to something much deeper than a dress code violation. From schools to Hollywood sets, women's breasts have been deemed a distraction for men — a way to excuse a man's desire. A boy could show up to school wearing a muscle tee and no one would bat an eye. A girl showing up in a tank top with her bra straps peeking through, though, that's a different story. According to the Government Accountability Office girls face 83% of all dress code violations. In other words, dress codes have been stricter for girls than for boys because a girl's body, especially her breasts, supposedly creates a distraction in the learning environment. Dress code violations span from tops that show cleavage and bra straps to sheer material and tight tops, inherently objectifying a natural part of a girl's body.

Another overwhelmingly common example of the oversexualization of breasts is seen through public perception of breast feeding. This is one of the ways mothers feed their children, yet it is stigmatized because breasts are associated with sex appeal. Mothers are forced to distance themselves from public view during this process. Sometimes there are separate rooms mothers are told to go into just so they can feed their baby, but other times they are told to go to bathrooms or anywhere "out of sight."

HOW TRANS MEN DEAL WITH BOOBS

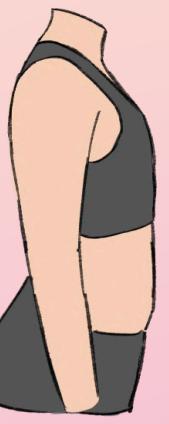
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An important aspect for members of the transgender community is going through the complex process of transitioning their gender identities. As a result, this personal journey often involves moving past the social conformities tied to their birth sex. Gender dysphoria is the feeling of discomfort and uncertainty that can come from a person's physical body parts not aligning with their gender identity. It is especially prevalent through the disconnect presented by having breasts associated with the feminine. However, transgender men have created different ways of combatting this gender dysphoria when it comes to how they show or hide their breasts.

Binding, which uses tight clothing, compressive material, or tape to flatten the chest area, is a commonly used non-surgical method to reduce the appearance of breasts. Commercial binders made of nylon and spandex as well as medical tape such as Transtape provide the most widespread and comfortable binding. Layering with multiple shirts, wearing tighter sports bras, and compression shirts are also ways transgender men can find gender-affirmation, though those

methods only work for smaller chests. Binding has been proven to promote mental health because of its gender affirming qualities and a greater sense of self-control on one's image, helping decrease feelings of dysphoria. However, due to the restricting nature of the technique, symptoms such as back pain, shortness of breath, and overheating are common.

There are also more permanent methods that help transgender men feel more comfortable in their bodies such as mastectomies and hormone therapy. Mastectomies, surgeries to remove unwanted breast tissue to give the chest a more masculine appearance, help boost confidence in transgender men as it helps them match their outside appearance with how they feel on the inside. Hormone therapy, treatment in which people take testosterone or use hormone blockers to achieve a more masculine appearance, is another permanent method that helps with reduction of breasts, but also has other effects such as facial hair growth and the deepening of the voice. These various methods demonstrate the difficult situations for many trans men, and highlights their determination to realize their gender identities.



BREASTS THROUGHOUT HISTORY

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Renaissance Europe:

With the start of the Renaissance throughout Europe, breasts began to take on a more erotic and sexualized meaning. Artist Jean Fouquet is well-known for his portrayal of the Virgin Mary breastfeeding baby Jesus in his painting "Virgin and Child Surrounded by Angels." Rather than the usual sweet expression on her face, she is devoid of any emotion and stares straight into the eyes of the viewer, shifting the focus on a single breast she offers to the baby. It was eventually banned by the Council of Trent, as they believed it was too scandalous and would distract from prayer. The French Catholic Church even banned showing cleavage, going as far to refer to it as the "gates of hell." However, starting at the beginning of the 14th century, decollete gowns became a fashion trend with low necklines and visible cleavage. Queen Elizabeth I was known for wearing these low-cut dresses to important meetings as a symbol of purity and virtue.

Victorian Era:

During the Victorian Era, women were faced with conflicting values of modesty and portraying maternal femininity. The ideal body shape was an "S," facilitated by a corset that cinched the waist and lifted the breasts. Although most outfits worn by women were high-necked, evening wear was marked by lower-cut necklines that emphasized cleavage created by corsets underneath. Additionally, there exist some Victorian-era daguerreotypes portraying women breastfeeding their children.

1920s-1940s:

From the 1920s to the 1940s, the United States was marked by rapid change on the world stage and accompanying shifts in the societal roles of women. After World War I, women embraced the "flapper" look, marked by short hair and bandeau bras that flattened their chest. By the 1930s, the trend shifted towards embracing the sensuality of breasts, with sex symbols such as the actress Mae West embracing a more feminine silhouette. America's involvement in World War II led to the rise of hypersexualized

21st Century:

In the 21st century, breasts simultaneously represent sexuality and liberation. In mainstream media such as the popular TV show "Euphoria," main characters like Cassie (played by Sydney Sweeney, a modern sex symbol) wear revealing outfits, thus associating cleavage with sexual attractiveness, and by extension, vulgarity. Breasts in paintings are sometimes censored in public broadcasts, such as Pablo Picasso's "Women of Algiers" on Fox News in 2015. The fashion industry favors plunging necklines and form-fitting outfits that emphasize the chest.

In response to this trend of oversexualizing breasts, the "Free the Nipple" movement launched in the 2010s. Aiming to advocate for the desexualization of breasts, the movement encourages women not to wear bras.

Another way that breasts have become less sexualized is through breast cancer awareness, which has resulted in a flurry of pink ribbons and phone cases with breast-inspired designs.