

# Dr. Carolyn West

## 'Still on the Auction Block' gives historical context to sexual exploitation of black women

By Lynn Ingrid Nelson

Today's social context is rooted in history, according to Dr. Carolyn West, associate professor of psychology at the University of Washington-Tacoma. "What you see today didn't happen in a vacuum," she points out. Dr. West's presentation, "Still on the Auction Block," put the sexist exploitation of black women in a historical and social context.



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During her remarks to the audience who attended the IDVAAC conference Aug. 8-10, 2004, she discussed the sexual double-bind experienced by black women today. "How do you embrace your sexuality without reinforcing stereotypes?" she asked, adding that a very narrow view of who and what African Americans are is portrayed in music videos that are projected globally. "It's very disturbing that there aren't more positive images to balance this perspective. There's a cyber auction block today."

Dr. West pointed out that today's commercialization of black sexuality has been historically rooted in commerce. "Take the breeding of slave workers," she says. "What we're seeing today is just more of the same. The larger culture has always benefited from this. Today's young blacks think: 'Why can't I? If I don't make these videos, someone else will.'"

### Curbing the tide of exploitation

The best way for us to curb this tide is to become critical consumers and take the stand that I won't participate, advocates West, who is not a proponent of censorship. Taking a stand makes the biggest difference. She pointed out that some leaders in the African-American community are doing just that.

In Nelly's music video promoting the CD "Tip Drill," he swipes a credit card between a black woman's buttocks. The female students at Spelman, a women's college in Atlanta, challenged Nelly. He had planned a visit to the college to raise money for a bone marrow drive. The students warned him: "If you're coming, we'd like to have a critical discussion about your music." Ultimately, Nelly declined to come. There was no censorship, just a heart-felt challenge. "They didn't say he *couldn't* come," says Dr. West.

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Her multi-media show featured a series of historical photos showing how black women's sexuality has been exaggerated throughout history. In a very sophisticated visual presentation, she traces the roots of violence from slavery through '50s dance queen Josephine Baker to Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake's infamous Super Bowl fiasco, where he ripped her bodice away while they sang "gonna have you naked by the end of this song" in front of 100 million viewers.

West says given the content and volume of the messages that bombard young women – particularly young black women today, she's not surprised they are often confused and in denial. The prevalence of the images alone, according to West, makes young women unaware of their own victimization.

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They take a position of benevolent sexism that pits "good" women against "bad" women. "They tell themselves if you carry yourself well, they're (the rappers) not talking about me," says West. These young women are in denial at the deepest level, but this attitude allows them to control their sexuality, and enjoy the music while pretending it has no impact on them, she adds. "Unfortunately, the reality is that sexually violent images normalize this kind of behavior. I'm not an advocate of censorship, but we must recognize that you can't be surrounded by these images and not be affected by it."

The bottom line is that blacks must do a better job of holding each other accountable. "We don't do a good job of showing young people what healthy sexuality looks like," says West. "And we don't hold each other accountable in the same way that we hold white people accountable. You don't see the NAACP taking this issue on. What's the reluctance?"

Turning the tide of sexual exploitation will require an aggressive challenge by African American leaders. Given the recent leadership provided by institutions such as IDVAAC, *Essence* Magazine and Spelman College, Dr. West believes the tide is turning. ♦