

Representations in Transition

by Andrea Ressler

In a world in which we are surrounded by images and media messages, it is hard to step back and analyze how much these messages affect our lives—particularly our lives as women. The media's ability to influence popular culture has become more obvious and more evident in the past century. Despite the fact that representations of women of color are progressing in a more positive direction in more recent times, this has not always been the case. While all females still take the brunt of unhealthy media stereotypes, representations, and inaccurate messages, historically, this has been a more serious problem for women of color.

While media outlets today are moving in a more positive direction, they still only represent an image rather than reality. Living in this world of fantasy, it is hard to present images of ourselves as Mennonite women, or as women of color, without others distorting the images. To be a light in the world is always difficult, and in this fantasy space, the light is easily snuffed out. Unfortunately, photojournalists often take an image (whether accurate or not) and make it fit a situation that suits their immediate need. This tactic changes the photo's meaning and supports the biases of the photographer and the editor about the subject. These biases are what often keep images of women of color from representing reality, thereby moving society's attitudes beyond discrimination and racism.

Very few people realize how the images they see are meant to persuade and convince them rather than show them a true representation of reality. More specifically, women of color have historically faced more discrimination in the media than other women, supporting society's discriminatory attitudes. Simple things such as women's body shapes, women's lifestyles, and women's personalities and demeanors can be distorted by the media resulting in a negative image being communicated to the public. Even if they are actresses, singers, models, or spokeswomen, women of color have had to endure negative stereotypes, unique to women of color, with regard to their roles in their families and their role in society, as well as the negative stereotypes regarding physical appearance

However, images are changing from early ones of women of color being desexualized nurturing maternal servants, aggressive promiscuous sexual objects, antagonistic matriarchs, or mere bystanders (even Oprah's early career was as a radio sidekick) to ones of beautiful women like Tyra Banks gracing the pages of *Vogue*. But as the pictures change, the negative impressions can linger behind. Society's attitudes need to catch up with the reality of women of color in our contemporary world, while at the same time, it must not allow media distortions to create a sense of a lack of progress when real progress is gained by women of color in society.

As Christian women in a secular, material-oriented world, it is hard to find a clear and accurate example of the reality around us. The pictures that are most often found have traces of editing and opinion laced into the images. The images of women of color are changing ever so slowly, yet the complexities and stereotypes that are attached to them can be deep-seated and decades behind.

In the satirical film, *Bamboozled*, a TV station is looking for a new TV show to complement the *Bill Cosby Show* on a competitor's station. They want "a black show, with real blackness, good blackness, the blackest, black show ever!" Without realizing it, the main character, an African American, brings back one of the most unhealthy, exaggerated representations of any culture in the 20th century: the blackface minstrel show. It's a hard film to watch because it is meant to make the viewer think about the stereotypical words and actions that help form our opinions and show how off-base they are compared to the reality of the world today. Through sarcasm and satirical language, the movie illustrates how detrimental for society a simple TV show can be and shows the ramifications of our society's history of racism in the 21st century.

To be sure, stereotypical images of women of color are less explicit than before. Change happens, but it happens slowly. There aren't explicitly identified minstrel shows anymore, and media icons such as Oprah, Tyra Banks, Halle Berry, Michelle Obama, and Condoleezza Rice are helping to reshape America's view of African American women. As the pictures change, society's attitudes change too. It is hoped that camera angles will not be used to produce the "right" picture containing biases.

It's hard to take a stand against such a powerful influence like the media. Yet, as Christian women, we have to be the ones to speak out. We must speak out against negative, unhealthy representations, not only of women of color, but also against images that form unhealthy societal attitudes through their (re)presentation. 🖐️

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