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## “An ill-bred lady with a great big chip on her shoulder”: Gender and Race in Mainstream and Black Press Coverage of Eartha Kitt’s 1968 White House Dissent

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## Introduction

Perhaps best known for her portrayal of Catwoman in the 1967 *Batman* series, Eartha Kitt achieved a level of cross-over popularity that continues to be out of reach for most African American female entertainers. Kitt, who began her career as a cabaret performer, was highly accomplished as a singer and dancer as well as an actress. Like Dorothy Dandridge before her and Halle Berry after, as a mixed-race African American actress being marketed to white audiences, Kitt's racial identity was largely depoliticized in mainstream discourse<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, this discourse tended to claim her success as evidence of racial progress while fixating on her sexuality in undoubtedly raced ways (Dagbovie 2007).

Popular with both black and white audiences, Kitt's status with each nevertheless generated skepticism among the other. Kitt's roles typically constructed the star as a sophisticated and racially ambiguous seductress. Thus, while she challenged dominant stereotypes of African American women as being undesirable and unrefined (Collins 2000), her sex-kitten image and apparent willingness to play into stereotypes of black women's hypersexuality generated criticism from some in the African American community. At the same time, and despite the ways in which her race and gender disempowered her within the entertainment industry (Haggins 2007), Kitt's crossover celebrity allowed her unprecedented access to elite spaces.

In January of 1968, in a sociopolitical climate that included much unrest regarding both the Vietnam War and Civil Rights, Kitt was invited to attend a luncheon for prominent "women doers" with the First Lady of the United States. The event, billed as a women's problem-solving

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<sup>1</sup> According to her own reports, Kitt was the product of the rape of a young black woman by the son of the plantation owner for whom she worked (Bone 2008). Thus, the depoliticization of Kitt's racial background was likely seen as especially necessary for her to be palatable to mainstream audiences .

meeting regarding youth unrest and delinquency was one part of President Johnson's larger initiative regarding urban crime. The luncheon included fifty high-profile women in political, social and entertainment circles, forty-six of whom were white. Kitt had been invited because of her celebrity and work in inner city neighborhoods in Watts, California and Washington, D.C.

The luncheon went as planned with the women reportedly discussing the planting of flowers and installation of streetlights as possible solutions to inner city unrest. During a question and answer session, Kitt raised her hand and was called upon by the First Lady herself. In her comments Kitt, a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, criticized the Vietnam War—in particular the draft—and linked it to racial and social unrest among youth in America's inner cities (Blackwell 2004). Her attempt to convey the frustration felt by young people in urban centers regarding the war to the President of the United States—while in his home and addressing his wife—was received with both adulation and ire. Kitt instantly became a hero to many in the antiwar movement and a traitor to those who supported the war (Radano 1999, in Hine).

Given the significant role newsmakers play in making sense of political dissent, gender, race and nation for their audiences (e.g. Squires 2007; Entman & Rojecki 2001; Stabile 2006; Smith, McCarthy, McPhail & Augustyn 2001), this paper presents a critical comparative analysis of mainstream and black press valuations of Kitt's comments, focusing particularly on how newsmakers constructed the relevance of these comments to public debates around race and nation. In the mainstream press data was included from the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*. Black press sources include the *New York Amsterdam News*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Chicago Defender*, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, *Ebony* and *Negro Digest*.

For each of these sources data was collected via Proquest Historical Databases online, microfilm holdings from the University of Minnesota and other public universities, and the online archives of several specific sources. Every article, editorial, letter-to-the-editor and column containing explicit mention of Kitt's visit to the White House from January 19, 1968—the day after Kitt's comments to the First Lady—and March 19, 1968, two months later<sup>2</sup> is included in this analysis.

### **Data Overview**

In the black press, the *Chicago Defender* presented the most coverage of Kitt's dissent (n=13) followed by the *Amsterdam News* (n=7), *Los Angeles Sentinel* (n=6), and *Pittsburgh Courier* (n= 3). The frequency of *Defender* coverage is unsurprising given its daily publication in 1968 compared to the weekly publication of its counterparts. Neither *Ebony* nor *Negro Digest* discussed the incident within their pages resulting in a dearth of African American-produced magazine coverage of Kitt's words to the First Lady.

In the mainstream press the *Los Angeles Times* presented the most coverage of Kitt's dissent (n=21) followed by *The Washington Post* (n=18), the *Chicago Tribune* (n=14), and the *New York Times* (n=11). The mainstream magazines *Time* and *Newsweek* both published only one article that focused on the events of the White House luncheon, however *Time* mentioned it in passing in several subsequent articles, and *Newsweek* included four letters-to-the-editor regarding the event.

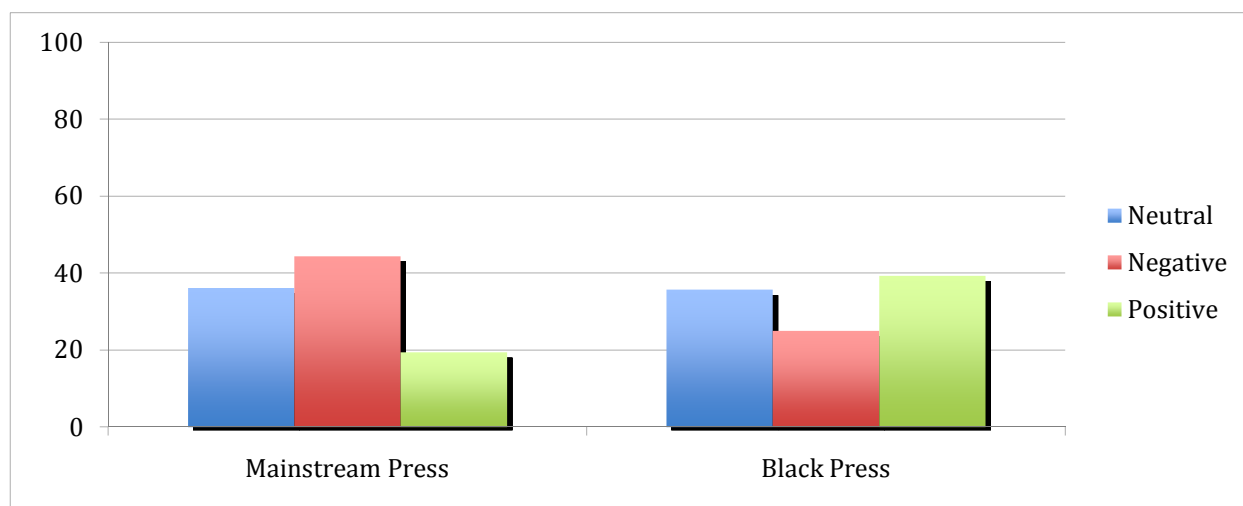
In total, the black press contained twenty-eight (N=29) texts that addressed Kitt's White House dissent with just over fifty-percent of those being presented as opinion (in the form of

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<sup>2</sup> Preliminary analysis revealed that the newsworthiness of the event largely dropped off after a 60 day period. Importantly, two weeks after this ending date Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King was murdered by James Earl Ray and mainstream and African American publications along with the rest of the nation became consumed with making sense of this national tragedy.

editorials, columns and letters-to-the-editor). The mainstream press presented over twice as many texts as the black press (N=72), unsurprising given its more frequent publication and available resources, with fifty-percent of these being editorials, columns or letters-to-the-editor.

Overall, the mainstream and black press presented their audiences with distinct frames for making sense of Eartha Kitt's words at the White House<sup>3</sup>. Below I discuss the frequency of positive, negative and neutral valuations applied to Kitt and how they fit into the common frames in the mainstream and black presses. I also discuss the similarities and differences that existed within and across press type and the implications of these findings.



**Figure 1: Mainstream and Black Press Coverage by value judgments of Kitt.**

## Mainstream Press Findings

### *Trends in Positive and Negative Coverage*

As reflected in the above chart, the mainstream press negatively framed Kitt's dissent at the White House; nearly forty-five percent of its coverage represented her comments as

<sup>3</sup> News frames, as defined by Entman (1993), are the result of the process in which newsmakers "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation of an issue or event" (p.52)

inappropriate. Conversely, less than twenty-percent of the coverage of Kitt's dissent in the mainstream press was positive in its descriptions. Mainstream newsmakers relied on two specific frames for making sense of the event for their audiences: (1) that Kitt's words were a personal attack against the Johnsons-particularly Lady Bird Johnson; and (2) that Kitt's speech was a breach of proper social behavior given both the setting and the audience. Both of these frames depended on raced constructs of gender that located Kitt as an antagonist to idealized white womanhood.

*Mainstream Press Frame #1: Kitt on attack*

This frame appeared in thirty-three percent (n=24) of mainstream stories on Kitt's dissent at the White House and was particularly common in news articles<sup>4</sup>. Within this construct Kitt was discursively identified as an attacker against whom Lady Bird Johnson was forced to battle. In many cases, Kitt was constructed as such a threatening force that Johnson needed the help of others to fight her.

For example, rather than focusing on the fact that Kitt's dissent was part of a larger political discussion that included many individuals, mainstream newsmakers constructed it as a part of a one-on-one during which the First Lady was attacked without warning. *The Washington Post* ran the headline "Eartha Kitt Confronts the Johnsons: Startled First Lady Responds to Singer's Attack on War." The use of "confronts" and "attack" as descriptors of Kitt's words and the description of Lady Bird Johnson's "startled" response construct Kitt as aggressive and intentionally ill-timed. The article goes on to characterize the conversation between Kitt and Johnson as "an impassioned confrontation," and "the dramatic confrontation," in which Kitt "pointed a finger to Mrs. Johnson."

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<sup>4</sup> Eight-three percent of the occurrences of this frame were in news stories.

By calling upon imagery and discourse that stereotypes black women as shrewish Sapphires, and by locating Lady Bird Johnson's womanhood as an example against which to judge Kitt, this frame perpetuates a dichotomy that idealizes white womanhood while constructing black women as gendered failures. Additionally, such constructions of Kitt's interaction with the First Lady minimized the possibility for substantive coverage of her comments on the draft, race, and poverty.

A day later *The Washington Post* ran the headline "Mrs. Johnson Chides Eartha Kitt: 'Shrill Voice' Jars First Lady." This article also characterizes Kitt's statements as a "confrontation." Like the last, this headline constructs Johnson as a victim "jarred" by the "shrill voice" of Kitt. Further, it allows Johnson the power an adult is usually understood to have over a misbehaving child—"chides" suggests both that Kitt's actions were childish and irresponsible and that they required a denunciation from a motherly figure (i.e. Johnson) who is described in the article as "expressing indignation at Miss Kitt's actions." Further, the use of the gendered term "shrill" to describe Kitt's voice demonstrates the way outspoken female voices are uniquely denigrated in public discourse.

*The Washington Post* further framed the incident as only a women's issue by publishing over half of its news articles on the subject of Kitt's dissent in the "For and About Women" section of the paper. This both assumes a gendered interest in what Kitt had to say and justifies a focus on the interpersonal relationship between two women rather than the serious domestic and military issues that were at the heart of Kitt's words.

The *Los Angeles Times* constructed this antagonist/protagonist relationship with even stronger language. One article begins "Eartha Kitt's Tirade on War Leaves First Lady in Tears" and goes on to mention that "Miss Kitt's angry tirade brought tears to the First Lady's eyes"

three more time before its conclusion. In addition, Kitt is described once again as a near-violent attacker—“her eyes flashing in defiance while she puffed on a cigaret (sic) and jabbed a finger at her audience” as she “delivered an emotional tirade.”

Like the multiple mentions of Johnson’s tears, descriptors of Kitt in mainstream sources as “angry” and “emotional,” and her speech as an “outburst,” “blast” and “tirade” in which she “shouted,” “jabbed her finger at a startled Lady Bird Johnson” and “told off the First Lady” are repeated frequently. Such descriptors not only construct Kitt as an attacker but as an unrestrained and irrational one. She is a Sapphire-like instigator, angry and uncontrollable. Further descriptors of Johnson as victim—“shocked,” “shaken,” “stunned,” “tearful” and “trembling”—are repeated with similar frequency.

Despite the heavy reliance on direct quotations from Kitt’s White House speech, her message is all but subsumed by the idea that she personally attacked the beloved figure of Lady Bird Johnson. Thus, poverty, inner city unrest, and the Vietnam War—the topics of Kitt’s words—become tangential in mainstream news reports that instead focused on constructing a war of words between an irrational and aggressive black woman and a controlled and respectable white one.

*The New York Times* also joined in this Kitt vs. Johnson storyline, though with less sensational language. Its initial headline, “Eartha Kitt Denounces War Policy to Mrs. Johnson” seems more even-handed than that delivered by the *Chicago Tribune*—“Eartha’s Shouts Stun Lady Bird into Tears.” The *Tribune* contends twice more in the same article that Kitt “shouted” her words at Mrs. Johnson although none of the press members representing other mainstream newspapers seemed to come away with the impression that anything was shouted. The *Tribune* notes that in response to “the confrontation between the Negro singer and the President’s wife,”



Mrs. Johnson considers Kitt “the shrill voice of anger and discord,” and that other guests at the luncheon felt it necessary to come “to Mrs. Johnson’s defense.” The explicit attention paid to Kitt’s race in this discourse combined with the idea that Mrs. Johnson needs defending reinforces the construction of Kitt as a threat and simultaneously dismisses her “shrill” and “angry” words as irrational.

Together, the various iterations of the “Kitt on attack” frame worked discursively to silence the actress. Rather than interrogating the content of her statements to Mrs. Johnson, the focus on the supposed threatening and irrational nature of Kitt’s statements resulted in a dismissal of the social critiques they raised. At the same time, focus on the First Lady’s supposedly rattled state constructed the story as a battle of good and evil, with the sympathetically constructed, white, elite woman playing the former role and Kitt, an African American woman with little concrete social power the latter. Thus, Kitt and Johnson are constructed according to the prescribed racial binaries of black wench and white lady, roles that reinforce gendered racial norms.

#### *Mainstream Press Frame #2: Breach of etiquette*

A second common frame, appearing in thirty-eight percent (n=27) of mainstream coverage, constructed Kitt’s words as a breach of etiquette. This frame appeared in news articles, but predominated in opinion-based pieces: sixty-percent of occurrences appeared in editorials, columns, and letters-to-the-editor. Dominant social expectations of “polite,” “ladylike” behavior were heavily relied upon in the construction of this frame which characterized Kitt’s “outburst” as both “rude” and threatening to basic concepts of civility. As with the previous frame, this

presentation of Kitt's dissent draws from larger social discourses that frame black women as failing to fulfill the requirements of womanhood<sup>5</sup>.

For example, in one of two opinion pieces published by *The Los Angeles Times*, columnist Joyce Haber characterizes Kitt as "an ill-bred lady with a great big chip on her shoulder." Besides the sexism of a sentiment that assumes a politically outspoken woman to have a "chip on her shoulder," this statement seems particularly vicious given Kitt's conception in rape. A letter-to-the-editor published by *Newsweek* opined that "You say that there were 50 ladies present at Lady Bird Johnson's White House luncheon...Judging from Eartha Kitt's behavior and her remarks to the gathering, there were 49 ladies present plus Miss Kitt." As a result of such gendered language Kitt is constructed as lacking not only in basic manners but those qualities that supposedly evidence sophistication and class in women.

Similarly, nearly seventy-percent of the letters-to-the-editor published by the *Chicago Tribune* focused on denouncing Kitt's supposed breach of etiquette. These denounced Kitt's "public display of anger" as "the epitome [sic] of vulgarity," "bad manners," "discourteous," "shameful," "poor manners" and noted that it is "inexcusable" and a "breach of etiquette [sic]" "to be rude to one's hostess." It is important to consider here that certainly no newspaper publishes every letter it receives but rather must select those that the editors feel most adequately reflect the various opinions (or lack thereof) of its readers. In the case of the mainstream sources analyzed here it appears that editors deemed the social appropriateness, rather than the substance of Kitt's words, to be of utmost concern to their readers.

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<sup>5</sup> In a contemporary and alternative reading of Kitt's comments, Joyce Blackwell (2004) has described them as an example of peace activism "in the traditional sphere of motherhood or womanhood" because of Kitt's explicit attempt to appeal to a female audience and descriptions of her audience and herself as mothers whose concern for their children's safety and futures should result in an anti-war, anti-poverty agenda.

In addition to condemnations of her behavior based in idealizing Lady Bird Johnson's womanhood, every mainstream newspaper compared Kitt's words to those of another White House luncheon guest, Mrs. Richard J. Hughes. It was reported that the wife of the Democratic Governor of New Jersey, "came to Mrs. Johnson's defense" stating that "youth are not rebelling because of the war." These reports also noted that the First Lady of New Jersey had lost her first husband in WWII and had eight sons none of whom "wants to go to Vietnam but all will go." Further, Mrs. Hughes is reported to have stated, she is willing to "kiss [her sons] good-bye as a contribution to my country." Thus, the white Mrs. Hughes is constructed as an ideally patriotic wife and mother who has raised her children to be willing to sacrifice for their country (and is herself willing to apparently sacrifice every member of her family). Such reports, then, construct a binary between the performed patriotic white womanhood of Hughes and that of Kitt who appears not only to be lacking manners but patriotism as well.

In a further twist on this comparison, the *Chicago Tribune* made the point in reporting that Eartha Kitt had only "a 6-year old daughter" in comparison to Hughes' eight military eligible sons. The implication of the *Tribune*—that compared to Hughes, Kitt has nothing to lose (and nothing to contribute) to the war effort because of her young, female child—seems to take an even harsher ideological dig both at the validity of Kitt's comments (after all why should she care if she has nothing to lose personally) and her womanhood (One daughter vs. eight sons! Clearly someone is the real woman here!).

Editorials in both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*—presenting something of a sympathetic take of Kitt's actions—deemed a national dialogue around race, poverty, and the Vietnam War necessary. However, within these same editorials the editors of the *Times* and the *Post* also labeled Kitt's comments as a "rude confrontation" that "disturbed a polite White

House luncheon.” Thus, even mainstream coverage that supported, at least in small parts, what Kitt had said at the White House found it necessary to construct Kitt as rude and impolite. This frame carried over into news articles in the mainstream press that frequently reported on quotes from Lyndon Johnson’s pastor Rev. George R. Davis that called Kitt’s actions “ill-mannered,<sup>6</sup>” and Katherine Penden, the only woman member of Johnson’s Commission on Civil Disorders, who referred to Kitt’s actions as “the rude interruption that shocked the Nation.”

It is important to note again that such gendered criticism of Kitt in the mainstream press additionally raced her in such a way that she was constructed as an (uncivilized) stand-in for all African Americans. For example, in the above mentioned reports of criticism of Kitt from Davis and Penden (both white), Davis’ is repeatedly quoted as having apologized to President Johnson for “those Negroes who are ill-mannered, stupid, and arrogant,” while Penden is reported as believing that Kitt had done a “disservice” to women and civil rights. Thus we see media coverage of Kitt’s dissent dominated by whites who are taken as reliable judges of what is acceptable for a black woman to say while fighting for civil rights. Such discourse reflects a “blame the victim” attitude that focuses on the actions and mannerisms of the oppressed rather than the power held by the dominant group.

Further, the idea that Kitt interrupted to make her statement and the constant use of the word “outburst” in the mainstream press to describe it is especially evident of elite interpretations considering the (rarely reported) fact that Kitt had waited for all the other women at the luncheon to speak, raised her hand, and was called upon by Mrs. Johnson herself. Thus,

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<sup>6</sup> In an anticipatory article on the Rev. George R. Davis, *Time* reported on Feb. 4 1966 that “As senior minister of Washington’s National City Christian Church, the Rev. George R. Davis of course favors equal rights for Negroes—but he has grave doubts about most of the methods Negroes use to get them.”

characterizing Kitt's actions as a sudden interruption was not only cueing racial and gender stereotypes, but was also inaccurate and misleading.

Like the previous frame, part of framing Kitt's dissent as a breach of etiquette included portraying her as angry and out of control, acting on impulse rather than careful thought, and at the whim of her emotions. Ultimately she appears uncivilized. Together, by focusing on a constructed battle between Kitt and the First Lady and questions of etiquette rather than the substance of Kitt's words, the mainstream press revealed: 1) a tendency to gender the issue and an attempt to domesticate Kitt; 2) a reluctance to address the substance of Kitt's words; and 3) a strong defense of dominant ideologies regarding the speech borders around gender, race and social status—especially for black women.

### **Black Press Findings**

#### *Trends in Positive and Negative Coverage*

Overall, the black press framed Eartha Kitt and her dissent mostly in a supportive (41%) or neutral (35%) way. Just under twenty-five-percent of stories in the black press were predominantly critical, negative, or unsupportive of Kitt with the majority of these found in the more socially conservative *Chicago Defender* and *Pittsburgh Courier*. While, as previously discussed, gendered discourse was common in mainstream coverage of Kitt, there was little explicit sexual objectification of her (other than the *Chicago Tribune*'s noting her "tight-fitting" dress at the luncheon). On the other hand, three out of the four black press sources that covered Kitt's dissent included descriptions of her as "sultry," and a "sex kitten," with one *Pittsburgh Courier* article referring to her as a "tigress" five times. The *Pittsburgh Courier* also included the condescending, sarcastic, and sexist statement at the end of its (negative) editorial about Kitt that

“who will deny that if you get a group of fifty women together, even in the White House, many things are possible.”

Despite this explicit sexual objectification of Kitt in the black press, the most common frames of her dissent did not rely upon gendered constructs of appropriate behavior or racial binaries. Instead, black newsmakers focused on gauging the political validity—or truth—of Kitt’s words (rather than social appropriateness) and emphasized the value of freedom of expression (rather than interpersonal relationships).

### *Black Press Frame #1: Truth-telling*

The most common frame of Eartha Kitt’s dissent in the black press was that she had engaged in truth-telling. This frame occurred in over forty-percent of black press coverage, most commonly in opinion-based content but also in news articles. While many black newsmakers mentioned the offense Mrs. Johnson may have taken to Kitt’s words and the question of etiquette raised by mainstream discourses, they explicitly upheld truth-telling as a more central issue than these concerns. Thus, in the black press the idea that Kitt told the truth was presented as a defense of the gendered mainstream criticism that was being levied against her.

For example, letters-to-the-editor in the *New York Amsterdam News* contended that “Miss Eartha Kitt’s statement was right to the core,” and asked rhetorically in response to criticisms of Kitt “How can you do harm with the truth?” Similarly, the *Los Angeles Sentinel*’s singularly published letter-to-the-editor stated “I see little cause or reason to rise up in indignation over reflective remarks such as those made by Kitt. Surely there was much truth and responsibility in them.” Clearly, characterizing Kitt’s remarks as “reflective” and “responsible” presents a counter-discourse to mainstream characterizations that insisted on the irrationality of Kitt’s action. Similarly, columns in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* and *Amsterdam News* contended that Kitt

had “fearlessly” “spoken the truth” and noted that you can “always depend on Eartha Kitt to tell it like it is.”

Clearly not impervious to the dominant discourses that led in to the framing of Eartha Kitt’s dissent as a personal clash between the actress and Mrs. Johnson, twenty-percent of all coverage in the black press also presented this idea<sup>7</sup>. However, it is notable that in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* and *New York Amsterdam News* the personalization of the story was used to enable the truth-telling frame rather than to undermine Kitt’s sentiments. For example, both papers suggested that the reported tears of Mrs. Johnson were the result of being “moved” by the truth of Kitt’s words rather than fear or offense. The *Sentinel* reported a quote from Kitt stating “that ‘because Mrs. Johnson is a mother, as am I, what I said about youth moved her,’” and a letter-to-the-editor in the *Amsterdam News* contended that “Mrs. Johnson was moved to tears knowing how many people are against her husband on account of the war.”

The *New York Amsterdam News* editorial staff additionally noted that while some people “claim that she [Kitt] said words at the wrong time, at the wrong place, and in the wrong way, culminating in bad taste, there are others who think Miss Kitt was the only guest who added *truth* to the luncheon menu. *With this group we align ourselves*” (emphasis added). Such statements reflect the main point of difference between framing approaches in each press, with most mainstream coverage being concerned about *how* Kitt communicated her concerns and black press coverage being primarily concerned with the *content* of these concerns.

An article in the *Chicago Defender* focused on the fact that Dr. Martin Luther King considered Kitt’s comments “appropriate both to content and to place,” and a reflection of “the

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<sup>7</sup> In particular, the *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Chicago Defender* presented coverage of Kitt that aligned with the dominant framing of the story. However, even in this negative black press coverage, the truth of Kitt’s words was insisted upon.

feelings of many persons.” Similarly, other news articles that applied the truth-telling frame did so primarily through interviews and quotes from African American citizens, particularly black women, on their perspective of Kitt’s actions. This is significant because of the lack of anything but elite, white sources quoted in the mainstream press. The *Chicago Defender* quoted a chauffeur and housewife who felt that Kitt’s experiences had “put her in the enviable position of knowing what young people are thinking,” and that Kitt “let Mrs. Johnson know how young men who are about to be drafted feel...” In both cases Kitt’s perspective is treated as valuable and she is given credit as a viable representative for “young men.”

Likewise, the opinions of “Angeleno women” run by the *Sentinel* contended that Kitt was “courageous” “because she told the truth.” While criticism of Kitt’s manners appeared in these interviews with African American women it was again tempered by the truth-telling frame. Ultimately, the *Sentinel* noted, “the consensus was that any ‘rudeness’ that occurred was the unexpected injection of harsh facts of life into a discussion that revolved around ‘planting flowers’...” While gendered considerations of “rudeness” are not absent, such discourse in the black press presents a critique of the dominant expectations that would have preferred Kitt simply ignore the “facts of life” and discuss “planting flowers” rather than speak to her experiences as a black woman.

The truth-telling frame also presented a unique trend altogether absent from mainstream press coverage; the use of Christian imagery to justify the significance of truth over social expectation. For example, a letter-to-the-editor in the *New York Amsterdam News* noted of Kitt that “...if she is for the right as God is for the right, then whoever is angered by the truth of the matter can cast his lot with the devil, that old Satan.” Other *Amsterdam News* letters noted that to suggest “it rude for her [Kitt] to think of the millions of Negroes who are unable to speak for



themselves...is enough to make God angry and sick,” and that “open confession is good for the soul and body...May God Bless you, Miss Kitt.”

Similarly, a letter to the *Los Angeles Sentinel* suggested that Johnson’s pastor “peruse through his scriptures and read the story of Queen Esther. She also chose a gala affair to embarrass a symbol<sup>8</sup>,” and an article in the *Sentinel* noted that some felt “Christ Jesus spoke the truth and was crucified. So Eartha Kitt shouldn’t feel badly because she is criticized.” Such religious rhetoric not only draws from the Civil Rights tradition of using Christianity as a call for social justice, but also allows Kitt, an African American woman, to be considered Godly and Christ-like because of her embrace of the truth, an understanding far from those allowed by mainstream press coverage.

#### *Black Press Frame #2: Freedom of expression*

Although not appearing as frequently as the truth-telling frame, a frame that emphasized America’s basic commitment to freedom of expression, particularly speech, was presented in nearly twenty-percent of black press coverage of Kitt’s White House dissent. Like the truth-telling frame, this frame appeared as a response to arguments that Kitt should not have said what she did, or that she should have edited her comments given her audience and location.

The *Amsterdam News* reported that “Ladies in New York” felt that ““Miss Kitt, of course, is entitled to her opinion and to the free expression of it.”” Likewise the *Sentinel* reported that “The effects of the Miss Kitt’s [sic] exercising her inalienable right to speak freely in a democratic country at the White House—the citadel of freedom—has caused all kinds of reaction,” and went on to report the opinions of several women who felt “She [Kitt] has a right to

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<sup>8</sup> According to the book of Esther in the Old Testament, Queen Esther saved the Jews from annihilation when she revealed to her husband, King Ahasuerus, at a banquet that she herself was of Jewish blood and the King’s close official Haman, whom the King had trusted, was plotting to destroy her cousin Mordecai and all Jewish people.

dissent like any other American,” and that “everyone has the right to speak their mind in America.” The *Defender* printed the opinions of several interviewees that “as freedom of speech is an important principle in our country” Kitt as an “American citizen should be able to talk to her [the First Lady] just as she would to anyone else.”

Through such framing an emphasis is placed on the ideal application of principles of freedom of expression, which as a right of all American citizens, should clearly apply to Kitt, an African American and a woman. While explicitly calling on constitutional rights, and relying on the input of women, such coverage also suggests that Kitt is being subjected to a double-standard in the mainstream judging of her actions that the majority (i.e. “other Americans,” “everyone”) are not subject to. Thus, while not explicitly noting the gender double-standard Kitt was being held to in mainstream discourse, black newsmakers do identify her racial identity as at least some of the reason for her dismissal by elite sources.

In an interesting example of the sometimes apprehensive relationship between the black community and black celebrities who are perceived as catering too much to mainstream audiences, three stories published in the mainstream press explicitly noted previous concerns about Kitt’s allegiances and praised her for demonstrating that she was invested in her community. For example, a letter-to-the-editor in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* noted that Kitt’s recent actions were “wonderful” considering that “only a few years ago she seemed reluctant to identify with the masses and, in particular the Negro masses.”

Interestingly, despite the welcoming of Kitt’s apparently new found activism, several members of the black press apparently remained skeptical about her intentions. For example, an article by Ethel L. Payne that was printed by both the *Defender* and *Courier* noted that the question remained unanswered as to “why the pussycat [who] had never expressed any views on

Vietnam before had turned herself into a tigress and chosen the White House to vent her fury,” asking “Could it have been publicity or was it sheer frustration?”

Thus, there was some disagreement among members of the black press as to if Kitt’s actions were a reflection of a genuine concern for “the masses” or for herself with the later view taking on a more gendered tone than the former. This finding may reflect a phenomenon in which Kitt’s personal convictions were regarded with cultural, political, and racial suspicion by opinion leaders in the black press because of a collapse between viewing Kitt as an autonomous person and the “sociopolitical predispositions” of her hypersexualized, de-raced Hollywood persona (Haggins 2007).

Despite this, the black presses’ insistence on primarily framing Kitt’s dissent as a story about truth-telling and freedom of expression minimized gendered denunciations of Kitt and especially criticized any racial double-standards in her treatment.

## **Discussion**

According to Blackwell (2004), Kitt’s dissent can be understood as an example of the unique discourse that African American women contributed to the anti-war movement in that her criticisms not only focused on the Vietnam War but on its connections to American racial and economic injustice. Given this, these findings reflect several trends regarding the different understandings readers of the mainstream press and black press may have come away with in regard to Kitt and each of these issues.

It is clear that dominant constructs of race and gender intersected to influence the way newsmakers in both presses made sense of Kitt’s political dissent. However, while journalists in the mainstream press failed to interrogate these constructs, newsmakers in the black press attempted to present counter-discourses for understanding Kitt that primarily avoided gender and

racial essentialism. While black newsmakers by no means presented a feminist critique of mainstream coverage of Kitt, and even explicitly perpetuated her sexual objectification, their attempts to focus on the validity of her words and her inequitable treatment disallowed much of the gendered discourse popular in the mainstream press.

For example, an overwhelming common characteristic in both the mainstream and black press was the representation of Mrs. Johnson as a likable, sympathetic figure. While the mainstream media primarily accomplished this by representing the First Lady as a victim under attack, the black press accomplished the same by praising both Eartha Kitt for her truth-telling and Mrs. Johnson for the poise with which she handled the situation. Thus, journalists in the black press effectively minimized the raced binary definitions of womanhood called upon in larger society for making sense of the event by demonstrating that supporting Johnson did not necessitate denigrating Kitt.

While the mainstream framing of Kitt as a political threat is unsurprising given previous scholarship on how all kinds of challenges to the status quo are regarded (see Druckman 2001, Smith, et. al 2001), her construction as a threat to social norms and the antithesis of idealized white womanhood is linked uniquely to her gender. Questions of rudeness and manners and a focus on interpersonal relationships undermined Kitt's dissent and her womanhood by locating her outside of normative social hierarchies that require women to perform publicly in a constrained manner and keep their opinions in the private sphere in order to be eligible for the full citizenship.

Kitt's race intersected with these mainstream discourses and contributed to constructions of her as a threat to both governmental and gender hierarchies. The mainstream press regularly identifying Kitt as a "Negro singer" in their coverage of her visit to the White House while

failing to identify the race of any of the European American figures involved in the story<sup>9</sup>.

According to Haggins (2007), re-racing African American women who have otherwise been de-raced in dominant discourses is a common practice when such figures are perceived to threaten dominant understandings of race, class or gender by appearing to contradict the apolitical nature of their dominant public persona. Thus, the mainstream press contributed to re-racing Kitt and functioned to discipline her socially, culturally and politically because of her choice to challenge and make salient national understandings of poverty, race and nation.

On the other hand black journalists, without always denying that some might view Kitt's actions as an attack on the Johnson's or as rude behavior, focused on the idea that Kitt was both within her rights as an American citizen and ethically and morally right in her contentions. Thus, black press frames worked to challenge mainstream frames that constructed Kitt as less than deserving of basic American rights because of her race and gender by explicitly evoking the Bill of Rights. At the same time the black press undermined mainstream attempts to dismiss Kitt's words because of the supposedly unladylike way they were conveyed in favor of reinforcing the validity of their content.

Thus the black press successfully presented its readers with alternative discourses that allowed Kitt, as a dissenting black woman, to both maintain her citizenship and moral standing in the face of dominant discourses that suggested otherwise. At the same time African American journalists gave voice to a whole segment of the population largely ignored by the mainstream press—non-elites, particularly black female ones,—and thus were able to construct Kitt as a representative of the thoughts of everyday people.

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<sup>9</sup> This is interesting both because everyone of course knew Kitt was a "Negro" given her popularity and thus there was no legitimate reason to remind people of it but also because of how ridiculous it would sound to refer to, for example, to Lady Bird Johnson as the "White First Lady."

Ultimately, while the interpretations of Kitt's actions were limited by the frames presented in both the mainstream and black press, the extensive coverage of them in both presses reflects the impact Kitt was able to have, if briefly, on public discussions around war and urban unrest. While the *content* of Kitt's words never became the focus of intense mainstream debate, and thus her intended impact on policy regarding urban unrest was perhaps lost, she did accomplish something unique by using the access granted by her celebrity status to publicize the worldview of an African American woman in an elite space where such perspective would have otherwise been altogether ignored. Or, as Cathy W. Aldridge of the *New York Amsterdam News* put it at the time: when Kitt "confronted the President and Mrs. Johnson with thought-provoking questions, usually reserved for more intimate gatherings, she spoke for the ages—daring to place all the hurt felt by Afro-Americans everywhere...in the hallowed White House broke a barrier for the first time in the mansion's history. There is much to be said for that..."

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