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Op-Ed: You Will Not Find Respectability Politics At ESSENCE Fest

"THE ESSENCE FEST OF THE PAST DOES NOT EXIST ANYMORE. IF YOU WERE BEHOLDEN TO THAT IDEAL OF YOUR MOTHER'S ESSENCE FEST, IT'S GONE."



BY [TAYLOR CRUMPTON](#) · [UPDATED JULY 27, 2023](#)

While thousands of Black women flocked to the New Orleans Convention Center last week for the [2023 ESSENCE Festival of Culture](#), I reported on Black authors at the [ESSENCE Authors](#) stage. The stage, done in partnership with The Collective Curates and powered by Mahogany Books,





Conversations emerged about the misrepresentation of Black love in [literature](#) and pop culture, civic and political engagement in the light of the recent Supreme Court rulings around affirmative action, #metoo in the workplace for Black women, and overcoming survivor's remorse. Birthed from thoughtful, intentional dialogue between a diverse collection of Black authors, these conversations were overshadowed by things you can imagine, like stations with swag bags and performers.

In retrospect, Black women attend EFOC for a multitude of things – some enter the weekend with the opportunity to exude themselves from their daily work, which may include civil and social engagement, while others attend to learn more about a specialty, whether it's the Global Black Economic Forum stage, the Beautycon experience, or the Food and Wine center. That's the beauty of the festival – its scale and reach.

Yet, there is no reason to guise one's critiques of ESSENCE fest as a ploy to platform their beliefs of respectability politics onto Black women and femmes., i.e., just let Megan, a Houston-bred, down south woman, put on a show, and Janelle Monae exude her confidence in ways she sees best.

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We think of the ESSENCE Festival of Culture as traditionally a space where “aunties” have congregated for 29 years. In our collective consciousness, it appears to be a convening of a particular type of Black woman. A Black woman of class, of stature, of high income due to the finances needed to attend, travel, and have a good time. Yet, it's also the festival of family reunions, of girls trips, of an excuse to go down to New Orleans to twerk with your girlfriends.

This brings to question who is the ESSENCE festival really for. The common response is ESSENCE Fest is for the culture. Who is the culture? What does it look like? Who does it prioritize? Because an abundance of culture was at the ESSENCE Festival, even parts of the culture and people which not everyone identifies with. Truthfully, there will never be a singular festival to accommodate the needs of everyone in the culture – but ESSENCE does its best.

In the city of bounce music, in a region where twerking originated from, in a season where denim cutoffs and a sundress are the preferred outfit because of over 100-degree temperatures, the argument is being made that a Black woman from the South is degrading Black culture, even





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I have yet to be shocked or amazed by the utilization of respectability politics to demean Black women and femmes, especially when the critique is made by a Black woman of a generation who decided to write lyrics of degradation about the video vixens of the early 2000s. An aesthetic where contemporary Black women rappers like Megan Thee Stallion have reverse cowgirkled the “video vixen” stereotype into ownership of one’s sexual self and prowess instead of being beholden or objectified by the gaze of a heterosexual Black man.

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