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**FIRST LADY CHIRLANE MCCRAY DELIVERS REMARKS AT NYU FLORENCE'S BLACK  
PORTRAITURE II: IMAGINING THE BLACK BODY AND RE-STAGING HISTORIES  
CONFERENCE**

*Remarks as Prepared for Delivery*

Thank you, Ellyn. I am so delighted to be back at Villa La Pietra! The Villa brings together three of our family favorites — Italy, NYU and thought-provoking art.

Those three would be enough. But wait, there's more! La Pietra is led by the ever-charming Ellyn Toscano, whose warmth and wit are di fama mondiale. Bill and I so pleased to count her as our friend.

I am also grateful to everyone who has been part of putting this conference together. What an intriguing and fantastic assemblage this gathering is! Ellyn, you know I love you, but when I saw the list of who else was going to be here, that did it for me. I had to be here.

And I am especially grateful to whoever carved out time for me to share a few words with you this morning. Because the theme of this conference lines up perfectly with a topic I've been thinking about since I was a little girl: the intersection of Blackness and beauty.

Given that I was born in 1954, it should not come as a surprise that one of my first images of what a pretty little girl was supposed to look like was Shirley Temple, America's "biggest little star."

Watching her on TV was like looking in a mirror that magically showed my exact opposite. The things that seemed cutest about Shirley Temple—her nose, her lips, and of course, her hair—were the things I grew to dislike about myself.

As a young teenager, the images that dominated my world changed, but their hair and skin color did not. I was constantly bombarded with all of these images that were not like me. And those glossy pictures were so compelling! I studied women's magazines for tips on how to make myself look like them. Attractive. Desirable. Maybe even gorgeous.

Of course, nothing was going to make me look less Black. I still remember one particularly humiliating experiment when I was in high school, and for a hot second wigs were very popular. Everyone was wearing them, even some of the girls at my all-white high school.

I decided to give it a try and got a wig with black curls. They were not Shirley Temple curls, but they were big and bouncy and shiny. And I thought I looked pretty damn good.

I held my head high and shook those curls. I shook those curls right up until the moment I heard one so-called friend whisper to another so-called friend that "Chirlane kinda looks like a prostitute, don't ya think?"

I was so devastated. Quietly, of course. I had put so much effort into getting the look that would give me the look. So I would be admired, desired—and here I was being snickered at.

Thankfully, the world was changing, and so was I. We made great strides with “Black IS Beautiful.” And then Toni Morrison, Miriam Makeba, Nikki Giovanni, Cecily Tyson, Angela Davis and so many others helped us begin to understand not just the depth of damage to our Black psyche, but also our intellect and beauty.

That work is far from over. Just pick up a women’s magazine or flip through the TV channels. Check out the newspapers and look at the photos. A picture is still worth a thousand words.

That is one of the big reasons why this conference is so important. As artists and art lovers, we have the ability and the power to create new images of Blackness, and re-define old ones.

We also have the power to reshape the institutions that control the images.

Earlier this year, the de Blasio administration launched a major initiative to promote diversity in the staffs, boards, and audiences of the city’s cultural organizations, including museums, dance troupes and orchestras.

This work is long overdue. Nationwide, more than 90 percent of museum staff members are white. At the same time, African Americans and Latinos are much less likely to visit a museum than their white counterparts. In a city where nearly two thirds of residents identify as non-white, this is a major problem.

I saw this troubling reality for myself last week, when I visited the Jacob Lawrence exhibit at MoMA. The exhibit itself is remarkable, a beautiful and ultimately inspiring chronicle of the Great Migration.

But again, the journey our ancestors began a century ago is far from over. Because when I looked around the galleries, most of the Black people I saw were either in the art on the walls or standing guard.

I don’t mean to single out our amazing MoMA, which put together an audience-expanding exhibition of a seminal artist. The truth of the matter is that many of our most treasured institutions face a similar challenge.

That’s the bad news. The good news is that the presidents and board chairs we’ve been meeting with have shown a refreshing eagerness to tackle the challenge head-on.

These meetings are part of a demographic study we’re undertaking to gain a better understanding of the problem. The study will engage all of the nearly 1,000 cultural nonprofits that receive City funding.

We’re asking stakeholders what’s working, and how we can build on those best practices to create lasting, long-term change.

But the burden doesn’t only fall on our cultural institutions. If we want a future where children of all colors feel good about what they see in the mirror, then we all have to do our share.

That means speaking up, making waves, not compromising, and never, ever allowing yourself to be the only person of color in a place of power. Because what’s the point of having influence if you don’t use it for good?

I’m eager to hear what all of you have to say. I’m going to be very busy appreciating all the Black beauty and positive images at this conference, but please don’t be shy about saying hello if you see me around. Grazie!

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