Mentoring and Mothering Black Femininity in the Academy: An Exploration of Body, Voice and Image through Black Female Characters

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Abstract
This paper examines the ways in which body, voice, and image are portrayed in contemporary media productions that persist in creating negative identity constructs for Black women. Much of what is consumed by mainstream culture is a skewed, caricatured perception of Black women created by those outside of their demographic. More recent and limited works by and about Black women attempt to dismantle this phenomenon and are moving in the right direction by offering images of empowerment; however these presentations of the Black female experience are still distorted and conventionalized. This essay encourages additional portrayals that affirm and explore a wider array of Black female experiences.

Introduction and Background
It was her mother who was the guide and teacher for what it meant to be human, to resist... In owning the site of her own labor, she has ownership of herself. Because she is finally master of her own work, her work becomes an act of creation. And because there is a connection between what one does and how one thinks, she is euphoric in this new labor of creativity and self-possession through performance. (Madison, 1993, p. 219, 228)

To be both Black and a woman is doubly challenging. Black women have historically been among the most stereotyped, hypersexualized, and disenfranchised racial groups in the United States (Collins, 2004). Black women must contend with the hyperbolized perceived performances by which they are characterized including being labeled loud, unintelligent and highly sexual since girlhood (Fordham, 1989; Townsend, Jones, Neilands & Jackson, 2010; Winn, 2010). If Black women overcome the expectations of these stereotyped under-performances, they remain confronted with stereotyped over-performances through vilification as monsters or reduction to physically hypervisible beings centered around sexual disdain which is directly related to the intersection of race, gender and social class that uniquely governs their lives (Calafell, 2012; Mowatt & French, 2013). On the contrary, Black women cite their comparable contributions in the workplace as being held to a different standard from their colleagues or reduced in significance in evaluations rendering their performance invisible (Griffin, Bennett, & Harris,
Though many Black women have disrupted and dodged the generalized outcomes imposed upon them by society, they frequently find themselves in conflict with negative media portrayals and popular culture references which contribute to the formation of their body, voice, and image (Harris-Perry, 2011). Within particular media productions and cultural references, Black women are virtual prisoners to the negative performances of themselves regardless of the measures they take in lived experiences to disrupt these common misconceptions. (Emerson, 2002, Gordon, 2008; Littlefield, 2008; Watson, Robinson, Dispenza, & Nazari, 2012). Based on these attributes, why would a Black female consider entering the field of media performance and actively participating in the machine that systematically oppress her?

One response to this question is a mother who consciously and unconsciously groomed her Black daughter to critique the physical and vocal representations that were offered to young audiences from the mid-1990s. The authors of this work are a daughter/mother team who has academically explored notions of performance in a variety of contexts including daily and staged performances, and through their personal and professional relationships is compelled to examine the Black female images created in media messages. This work emerges from an act of mentoring and mothering and is what Madison (1993) referred to as the meta-performance. This performance of the performance where the narrator recounts an experience with an unreceptive, dominant environment and reshapes the story into a victorious outcome where the narrator finds opportunities to claim purpose and power is at play in this piece. The performance theory is multilayered as the mother in this team historically utilized performance theory to deconstruct Black images in education before and after desegregation in U.S. schools (Jeffries, 1993; 1994; 1999) and mentored the daughter's research during her master's thesis on Black feminine identity in historical and contemporary dramatic works (Jeffries, 2013). The mentoring/mothering aspect of this relationship ebbs and flows and colors the daily interactions between the two. This undoubtedly influenced the mother's willingness to support the daughter's desire to change her undergraduate major to theatre and invade the predominantly white theatrical world despite the question she consistently receives, “What are you going to do with that degree?” To this she confidently responds, “Among other things, critically examine the lives of Black women to improve the lives of Black women.” The mother would like to think that years of mentoring and mothering a young, Black female to consider her unique place in the world nurtured this commitment. The meta-performance suggests this is so.

Raising an academically oriented Black female with high self-esteem from 1990-2008 was seldom an easy task. Regardless of the mother's academic inclinations and ability to navigate the educational system, external forces and influences, in particular those from media sources provided daily challenges to her message as mother and mentor. With Bell, Biv & Devoe (Straite, 1999) screaming that girls are poison and you can’t trust their big butts and smiles, Black females are villainized and admired simultaneously and specifically for their over-sexualized, manipulative ways. Trying to convince the daughter not to be a patronized sex object when Destiny’s Child (Knowles, et al, 1999) is telling females that guys are only useful for paying their bills, bills is again an enigma when the anthem concurrently alludes to the independence of women who have their own. Examples of media research exist suggesting that Black females are finding their voice through media and using their opportunities in the music business to define themselves (Kahn, 2008; Roberts, 1991), however counter arguments exploring the musical influences on Black women predominantly agree that the industry has systematically reduced the perception of Black female power (Su-lin, Zilman & Mitrook, 1997; Woldu, 2013).

Television analyses produced similar mixed results. Bobo (1995) critically examined Black women as an interpretive community as the 1990s ushered in a new era of print and video media written about and from a Black female perspective. These works heightened the interest of Black women regarding the ways in which they were characterized and opened the market for Black female producers and increased media productions targeted specifically at this demographic. Black women collectively supported these positive productions at a significant rate; however lucrative markets where media depictions of Black females include negative stereotypes such as overweight women and men playing the role of women leave Black females struggling to find multiple constructive representations of themselves (Chen, Williams, Hendrickson & Chen, 2012). There is much work yet to be done that critically examines the productions that influence Black females and others' perceptions of them.

This paper provides an analysis of the modes in which Black women are consistently stereotyped and objectified in media. The representations of Black women on screen, film and television especially, influence how they are viewed by society in a derogatory
and hypersexualized manner. This examination aims to critique the ways in which their body, voice, and image are portrayed in contemporary media productions that persist in creating negative identity constructs for Black women. A pressing issue is the lack of Black women’s voice and presence in both media productions’ illustration of them and the scholarship about them. Therefore, much of what is consumed by mainstream culture is a skewed, caricatured perception of Black women created by those outside of their demographic. More recent and limited works by and about Black women attempt to dismantle this phenomenon and are moving in the right direction by offering images of empowerment; however these presentations of the Black female experience are still distorted and conventionalized. It is the goal of this essay to investigate existing representations of Black women and consider possibilities for additional portrayals that affirm and explore a wider array of Black female experiences. Underlying this analysis is the assumption that “on both institutional and cultural levels, performance has become the medium through which American anxieties about race (in particular, blackness) are pondered, articulated, managed and challenged” (Catanese, 2011, p. 3). This work expands the body of research on Black feminist identity and explores the impact of media productions on teaching and learning with an emphasis on inspiring social justice in educational spaces.

Contextualizing Black Women’s Body, Voice, and Image

This paper analyzes the racial and gender aspects of Black female character portrayals in contemporary television and film using critical race and Black feminist theories as a framework. For the purpose of this essay, body, voice, and image are the identity formation constructs assessed to analyze the portrayal of Black women among a selected sample of television and film productions. An analysis of body includes the visual and physical representation of Black women. An evaluation of voice includes the verbal and vocal expression of Black women. Finally, an investigation of image includes the collective iconic and cultural perception of both the body and voice of Black women. A contextual analysis is organized around these defined terms.

In “Textual Healing: Claiming Black Women’s Bodies, the Erotic and Resistance in Contemporary Novels of Slavery”, Griffin (1996) described the way that historical devaluation and negative treatment of the Black female body in the slavery era has since haunted Black women’s perception of their physical features. Her text highlights a number of Black female writers and activists including Williams (1991), Marshall (2009), Davis (1983), and hooks (2000), whose work strives to rewrite the way they view their own bodies and “imagine new possibilities for black women” (p. 524). Additionally, Osha (2008) provided background information on Suzan-Lori Parks’ (1996) play Venus, which calls attention to the sexual exploitation of the black body, and like Griffin’s article, the degradation of that body. Venus is a fictional script based on the true story of a nineteenth-century African woman Saartjie “Sarah” Baartman, known as “the Hottentot Venus,” who was caged and exhibited naked in Europe, because of a fascination with her posterior. Both the novels Griffin features and the play on which Osha’s text focuses speak to current attitudes about Black women’s bodies and the shame and sexual exploitation that they continually resist in order to redefine the physical representation of themselves.

Griffin (2012) forthrightly critiqued in “I AM an Angry Black Woman!,” the lack of scholarship and texts available for and by women in the academy. The subtitle “Black feminist autoethnography, voice, and resistance” appropriately addresses the frustration she experienced having such limited resources to simultaneously resist as well as confirm, create, and reform her identity as a Black woman. This restricted access to or further, existence of, Black women’s writing and expression of their experiences is what presently contributes to the silencing of Black women.

Consequently, Hammond (2004) commented on how the iconic and stereotypical images of Black women have been shaped by the exploitation of their physical bodies as well as the inability to speak against their humiliation. She suggested that the historical and contemporary narratives of many Black feminists have both addressed and contributed to the present state of Black female sexuality and identity which is sorely needed:

Three themes emerge in this history: first, the construction of the Black female as the embodiment of sex and the attendant invisibility of Black women as the unvoiced, unseen everything that is not white; second, the resistance of Black women both to negative stereotypes of their sexuality and to the material effects of those stereotypes on their lives; and finally, an evolution of a ‘culture of dissemblance’ and a ‘politics of silence’ by Black
Though Hammond's proclamation of issues regarding the Black female image includes a comparison to White dominance and normative culture, she is also primarily concerned with the ways in which the hypersexualization of the body and the hushed voice of the Black female contribute to the stereotypical representations that Black women must either passively accept or actively resist.

While an analysis of the objectification and stereotypes attributed to Black women has been previously considered, Black women's voices continue to be lacking in the scholarship by and about them. Related research typically examines the stereotypical representation of Black women in dramatic text, literature, music videos, and other mainstream and entertainment fields, as well as their objectification by men in the workplace, body type discrimination, and colorism amongst Black women. While some texts discuss the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of Black women, fewer studies specifically address the symbolic implications of the body, image, and voice as they shape the stereotypical depictions of Black women in film and television. The goal of this paper is to explore some particular instances of Black women's objectification utilizing the three aforementioned identity markers in order to deconstruct their representation in contemporary media productions. This may encourage more careful attention and accuracy be granted to their formation in future works.

Methods

Case study method was employed to understand seven thematically related media texts which serve as the data source. The media texts were purposefully selected for their unique quality as data events which explore the criteria outlined in the contextual framework (Lemke, 2012; Merriam, 1998). The framework focusing on the body, voice, and image of Black female characterizations are demonstrated in these media texts through the use of rhetoric which is dialogue intended to persuade or encourages individuals to act in particular ways based on their confrontation with specific questions and problems (Knape, 2012). Analysis of visual rhetoric was conducted through the thematic exploration of the symbolic imagery used to create and perform communication (Foss, 2005) within the media texts.

Comparing and contrasting the directors' characters' effectiveness to convey messages about Black female identity as demonstrated in body, voice and imagery dictated the selection of media texts. Scholarly analyses of the media texts served as secondary documents along with peer review to triangulate the data and establish trustworthiness. The primary visual rhetoric data was content analyzed subjectively and systematically examined for themes and categorized by patterns exhibited within and across texts in alignment with the contextual framework (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

Deconstructing and Analyzing Body, Voice and Image in Film and Television Texts

Collectively, these films and television shows primarily written and directed by Black entertainers (excluding Monster's Ball and Deception), are duplicitous representations of Black women. Two of the most popular Black films of the 1990s, Boyz N the Hood (Nicolaides & Singleton, 1991) and Friday (Charbonnet & Gray, 1995), take a dramatic and comedic approach respectively, to the life of Black teens in Los Angeles. Both films focus on men, and even the small appearances by popular female figures appear as hypersexualized bodies, pejoratively stereotypical individuals with an insignificant presence and a diminished voice. Viewed as an iconic portrayal of Black inner city behaviors, metaphorical culture and the invisible and stereotypical African American experience (Massood, 1996; Matthei & Smith, 1998; Scruggs, 1993), Boyz N the Hood enjoyed mass appeal among popular audiences and was nominated for best director and screenplay by The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. This coming of age story set in the ghetto of Los Angeles revolves around a group of male friends, Tre, Ricky, and Doughboy played by Cuba Gooding, Morris Chestnut, and Ice Cube respectively. The two primary female characters are not particularly major roles in this film but are indicative of the subjugated status of women in society (Pough, 2004). Regina King, the iconic homegirl, makes her film debut as Shalika, Doughboy's girlfriend; a loud, ghetto, obnoxious, stereotypical Black woman. Nia Long's role as Brandi, Tre's girlfriend, characterizes her as the somewhat less degraded good girl whose body is, however, hypersexualized by the male characters in the film. In seemingly private and intimate moments, Tre's gaze of Brandi gives open access of her body to the viewer and reduces their relationship to base level sexual interactions. Additionally, male characters gawk at and call out random female characters as they walk by, relegating them to insignificance beyond their bodies.
and existence for sexual observation. These interactions denigrate women’s bodies and place emphasis on the sexual objectification of women’s bodies. Further, their speech is minimal in these scenes as camera angles and close-up shots primarily focus on female physical attributes and trivialize the women’s intellectual dimensions or development as complex characters. Therefore, the overall image of Black women in the film is as sexual objects. Though the title itself suggests that the film is about the boyz, this iconic representation of Black teens continues to portray young Black women as sexual, silenced, and trite with the male characters as complicit perpetrators of the subtle assault on Black females.

While Boyz is largely a tragic take on urban life, Friday, also set in Los Angeles, portrays similar conditions through a comedic lens. Three familiar faces appear in this film including, Ice Cube as main character Craig Jones, and Regina King, playing his sane, advice giving sister, Dana, who encourages him to get himself together. The character Dana, however, is yet again very small and does not appear significant to the dominant story line as her appearances are rare throughout the film. Additionally, Debbie, played by Nia Long, is the love interest of Craig, who nervously but adamantly pursues her. Though her character is considerably more substantial than that of Dana, Debbie is again characterized as a sexual object, most notably in a scene where Craig and others gaze at her while she runs along the sidewalk. The possibility of a romantic relationship between Craig and Debbie is hinted at but not fully developed in favor of superficial flirtation and the trivial matters with which he entertains himself around the neighborhood. There are also few opportunities for Debbie to voice opinions and articulate the essence of her character as her enduring image in the film is primarily constructed as Craig’s sexual fantasy framed as a love interest. Catanese (2011) essentializes the film as a reduction of gender and race in a White-washed Hollywood cross-over attempt to mass market the content as a film about buddies who have overcome their relationship with Black oppression and who perpetuate a cycle of gender oppression.

Other minor female characters that are sexualized and stereotyped include Mrs. Parker (Kathleen Bradley), who bears a striking resemblance to Pam Greer in Foxy Brown (Feithans & Hill, 1974), an iconic blaxploitation film glorifying hypersexualized female objectification. Greer, who enjoyed a highly successful career as a Black female action figure, despite the extreme sexual overtones, it is notable that she was virtually ignored in the 1980s when white female action characters emerged and proliferated as if these roles were new terrain (Holmlund, 2005). In Mrs. Parker’s most revealing scene, she is wearing tiny shorts and a tight crop top, bending over and making sexual inferences with her water hose as she waves and says hello to Craig and his companion Smokey (Chris Tucker). Additionally, she is humiliated because of her sexualized nature when her miniature husband (Tony Cox) catches her in the midst of an affair with a fornicating pastor (Bernie Mac). Characterized as an adulterer, her iconic role in the film is enticing men and causing drama in her home. She could have just as easily been the silhouette of an exotic dancer on a gentleman’s club advertisement, as her Is lasting impression is that of nothing more than an objectified female. One additional female character, an alternative homegirl icon, is the bothersome crack addict (Angela Means). Known as the neighborhood nuisance, Felicia is presented in an unflattering and disheveled state, begging to borrow a car, a joint, or anything she can convince Craig or Smokey to give her. This scene lasts just over a literal minute before she walks away unsatisfied by their responses. With large braids standing on end, she scratches her butt and claims “Y’all stingy,” after being dismissed with the famous and frequently quoted line, “Bye Felisha” (Nicolaides & Singleton, 1991). This iconic phrase has become a popular cultural reference and its cuteness speaks to the attitude toward African American women in film [and otherwise], who are belittled in insignificant or supporting roles, portrayed exhibiting negative, hypersexualized behaviors, and silenced from the dominant dialogic exchange. This iconic performance popularized by Martin Lawrence’s Shenehneh, a Black male playing a Black female, displays the height of sanctioned rejection of the Black woman based on her loud, argumentative, street-wise, man-handling ways (Nelson, 2008).

The new age mistress is another iconic representation of Black women that appears in contemporary film and television. Halle Berry is “the first African American actress to win [an Oscar for] Best Actress” for her role as Leticia Musgrove in Monster’s Ball (Benshoff & Griffin, 2001, p. 95). While her achievement is worthy of celebration as a groundbreaking accomplishment for Black women, her character is subjected to relying on the kindness and charity of the racist White prison guard Hank Grotowski (Billy Bob Thornton), who executed her husband (Sean “Diddy” Combs). While sitting with Hank, mourning her husband’s death, she decides that the only thing she wants is for him to “make her feel good,” as she strips off her clothes in the living room which becomes the site of their sexual encounter.
American dream, their exchanges with males negatively portrayed and positive, prosperous and indicative of the partners. While many other aspects of their lives are similarly reliant on fickle relationships with male successful, career driven, and fiscally stable Black women不幸ately only lasted one season, and (Beers, Wilding, & Rhimes, 2012), mistress in currently popular shows including women whose performances are recognized for excelling in their personal lives, facing racial discrimination in their work separate, as Vivian’s brother, Julian consistently tries to rekindle their childhood flame. Being Mary Jane (Gabrielle Union) takes a slightly different direction in that the title character, a TV anchor and self-sufficient woman, is involved with two Black men, one a ladies’ man, David (Stephen Bishop), who is not ready to settle down, and the other a straying married man, Andre (Omari Hardwick). Though some may argue that this series eliminates the racism exhibited in the more recent films and current television dramas where Black women are objectified by White men, Mary Jane’s character portrayal still illustrates a relationship dependent, promiscuous, and sexualized image. The most recent season of BMJ tackles a wider variety of realities that Mary Jane and a plethora of Black women faces including living single in their personal lives, facing racial discrimination in their work lives, and encountering full-on racism in the public sphere as MJ confronts the “ugly Black woman” syndrome.

Many Black actresses in in the last two decades have made themselves a noticeable presence in film affect the way they handle and display their bodies, speak their minds, and resist the mistress stereotype to which Black women have metaphorically lived. Scandal, starring Kerry Washington, is a favorite of many now glued to their televisions on Thursday nights. Washington’s character, Olivia Pope, is a crisis management attorney with a previous occupation at the White House as the Communications Director. Early in the show it is revealed that the White President Fitzgerald (Tony Goldwyn) is much more than her formal employer. He pursues Olivia with persistence, even vowing that he will leave his wife and the Presidency for her. Though Washington is the face of the show, the majority of the drama surrounds her affairs with her former White male employer, as well as a subsequent White male love interest, as the object of sexual desire. The evolution of the Black female character is clearly demonstrated through the role of Olivia Pope, however the oversimplification of Olivia as a powerful, Black female who rarely encounters gender or racial discrimination reinforces the growing belief that the United States is now post-racial (Wright, 2014). Deception similarly places a Black woman, Joanna (Meagan Good), at the center of the show, though her given circumstances are limiting and stereotypical. The daughter of the former housemaid for a rich White family, Joanna, now a detective, returns to their home to investigate the murder of her former best friend, Vivian. While among the family with whom she was raised, Joanna struggles to keep the business and personal natures of her work separate, as Vivian’s brother, Julian consistently tries to rekindle their childhood flame. Being Mary Jane (Gabrielle Union) takes a slightly different direction in that the title character, a TV anchor and self-sufficient woman, is involved with two Black men, one a ladies’ man, David (Stephen Bishop), who is not ready to settle down, and the other a straying married man, Andre (Omari Hardwick). Though some may argue that this series eliminates the racism exhibited in the more recent films and current television dramas where Black women are objectified by White men, Mary Jane’s character portrayal still illustrates a relationship dependent, promiscuous, and sexualized image. The most recent season of BMJ tackles a wider variety of realities that Mary Jane and a plethora of Black women faces including living single in their personal lives, facing racial discrimination in their work lives, and encountering full-on racism in the public sphere as MJ confronts the “ugly Black woman” syndrome.

Many Black actresses in in the last two decades have made themselves a noticeable presence in film
and television. However, these women’s efforts to epitomize strong, Black females through their personal and professional accomplishments are continually in conflict with the characterized, stereotyped images of Black women they play as silent, subservient victims of sexual exploitation. It has only been through their increased visibility that they may strive to transform these images to a nuanced and positive set of physical and vocal representations. While all television and film require some element of drama or conflict to engage viewers, it is imperative to analyze why this task falls at the expense of Black women’s character, literally and figuratively. These images present a complex, layered characterization of Black women, even in their dismissal and distortion of the body, voice and overall image of Black women—one that many media consumers are unable or unwilling to deconstruct. This complexity coupled with a lack of critical analysis by the mass population of film and television viewers, perpetuates and reifies notions of Black female identity and solidifies them in society as reality. It is, for some, the only close and personal view of Black females they will ever experience, rendering these characterizations critical regarding their purpose and intent and the resulting outcomes of such.

**Implications for Teaching/Mentoring and Learning/Mothering**

Media productions such as those featured in this examination reflect on body, voice and image as vehicles to explore social justice issues by highlighting characters and individuals troubled by race and gender discrimination. These productions shed light on Black women’s generational struggles to craft positive images that are built from their sexual identity and vocal presence. The explorations in this essay imply significance within media productions to initiate movements that demand a departure from the White male norms traditionally valued and perpetuated in contemporary film and television and that reflect Black females in more positively powerful characterizations. This deconstruction of media productions offers a springboard from which social justice issues can be explored and negotiated through communication that is attentive and accurately reflects myriad Black female perspectives (Knape, 2012). These works critique and expose prevalent, destructive notions of race and gender that constantly function within and against this highly marginalized community of women exposing the viability of works of this nature to serve as catalyst for critical conversation in the educational spaces. The consideration of body, voice and image are critical to political discussions in the classroom and offer multiple points of departure from which a diverse classroom audience can connect. Media productions including film, television, live theatre, videos, photographs, radio podcasts, blogs and discussion forums are outlets around which students might interrogate the socio-political impact of race and gender from the Black female experience on a comprehensive level (Kakonge, 2011).

Engaged examination of media productions offers students an opportunity to become agents of social change. Functioning as advocates who critically consume media productions, student advocates are equipped to challenge media messages and the impact these messages bring to their lived experiences. Students grasp complex concepts introduced in the classroom through the use of media productions, and the impact of the historical marginalization of Black women is more easily deconstructed through visual imagery. The development of metacognition skills is enhanced through media analysis as audience members consider their roles in sustaining or destroying social injustices that affect the psychological welfare of the American community at large through these performance events. By infusing elements and themes of Black women’s culture and traditions with critical interventionist thinking, this specialized knowledge provides Black women with new tools of resistance. Specialized knowledge functions as a counter-hegemonic discourse in providing epistemologies, grounded in socio-cultural practices, that critically interrupt cultural productions that promote and reinforce dominance. (Madison, 1993, p. 230)

Specialized knowledge is the essential gift traded in effective mentoring relationships. It is the valued wisdom that is passed on from the expert to the neophyte in grooming the student to be perhaps even better than the teacher. This is often the goal in good mentoring relationships and is most certainly the goal in good mothering relationships. In highly effective educational setting, they are one in the same.
References


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