IN FOCUS: African American Caucus

Introduction: When and Where We Enter

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“Don’t call it a comeback, I been here for years.”

“Wake up!”
—Spike Lee, School Daze (1988)

“Memory is a selection of images. Some elusive, others printed indelibly on the brain.”
—Kasi Lemmons, Eve’s Bayou (1997)

When we first began to assemble this In Focus on black media, our excitement was quickly tempered by the enormity of the undertaking. Should the essays focus on mainstream or independent media? Would the contributors emphasize texts, pedagogy, or research? To what extent should we address issues of identity facing not only this type of scholarship but also the scholars themselves? Ultimately, we decided to take on all these questions, using Stuart Hall’s provocation “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” as both prompt and connective thread. Written in 1992, Hall’s essay still carries particular resonance for this contemporary moment in media history. Hall makes it clear that issues of identity, representation, and politics will always converge around blackness. Further, Hall’s own academic background reminds us that, as a field, black media studies has always drawn on discourses and scholarship from multiple academic disciplines. This context is particularly important.

1 We have chosen to use the term black when describing media texts and elements of popular culture and African American when referring to individuals and groups of people. In the essays that follow, however, the authors use these terms in many different ways. This variation in usage points to the myriad politics, identities, and experiences associated with black popular culture.
in the contemporary moment, where shifts in culture, politics, and society reverberate in all areas of the media landscape.

Undoubtedly, our past serves as prologue for the contemporary moment. Thirty years ago, in 1984, Paula Giddings’s *When and Where I Enter* emerged as the preeminent text on African American women’s place in US history. It came alongside the multiplicity of goings-on with the “culture war” of the 1980s—Ronald Reagan’s trickle-down versus Jesse Jackson’s run; Prince (the artist formerly known as) alongside Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” (1983) and Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight” (1979)—all together rocking, all the way live. The mediated landscape introduced blackness writ large with the inauguration of Black Entertainment Television. *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984–1992), *A Different World* (NBC, 1987–1993), and *School Daze* (Spike Lee, 1988) ushered in a previously untasted “flava” of blackness. For African American audiences and inductees, the 1980s provided a welcome relief from the drought of representation—of significance—preceding it. That decade (the 1970s) blew up and quickly burned out. Much more likely to see a blackface *Superfly* at a Halloween party than *Bush Mama* in the theater, the 1970s dished, then dashed.

One of the central bully-pulpit points of this period lives in the world of definition—of who folks could or could not be, as announced by their melanin, vagina (or lack thereof), or digs. This past helps translate and structure the present. When and where we enter in 2014 situates cultural production and scholarship at the nexus of futuristic criticality and a commodification of self that makes even the Oracle’s prophecies palatable. It brings the past, present, and future together.

Marking the midpoint of Spike Lee’s 1989 film *Do the Right Thing* is a “roll call” of contemporary and historical greats from a variety of black musical genres. Love Daddy presides over the day’s escalating and ultimately tragic events from the radio station’s storefront window overlooking the block. His voice-over accompanies a vivid montage of shots of the film’s Bed-Stuy residents enduring the stifling summer heat. It is an eloquent and reflective sequence, a rare still moment amid the frenetic racialized conflicts and misunderstandings that Lee depicts as banal but potentially deadly incidents of American city life. This naming ritual’s power to still and suture means as much to our work here, even in its translation from spoken to written word.


This calling of names of a given community has a specific value that owes something to the African oral tradition and something else to the importance and agency

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involved in names and naming, given African Americans’ history as dominated by erasures and obfuscations. Naming oneself, naming pioneers, naming the dead and the living, provides a way to establish a sense of lineage and communal bonds. It also provides ways to think critically about what names do and do not mean. The juxtapositions that arise from the practice of the roll call, in its profusion of apparent binaries of old and new, gay and straight, classic and hoochie, gospel and funk, male and female, independent and Hollywood, film school and self-taught, classical narrative and experimental, and so forth, give rise to a useful kind of intertextual worldview.

It is this species of intertextuality that has long informed African American media making and African American media scholarship. Just as Love Daddy’s (Samuel L. Jackson) breakdown in Do the Right Thing reminds us that there is a relationship between Sam Cooke, Parliament-Funkadelic, and Al Jarreau that both incorporates and exceeds the boundaries of race, so does an academic, cinematic, and performative roll call of African American media makers remind us of the utility of considering black media within the larger context of popular culture and cultural expression (Figure 1). To that end, Zeinabu irene Davis, in her essay “Keeping the Black in Media Production: One LA Rebellion Filmmaker’s Notes,” reflects on the realm of African American production where she enters as a filmmaker, production professor, wife, and mother. She examines the commingling of life and art, of culture and rhythm, of criticality and performance, as embodied in her filmmaking practices and in the love of her daughters—always with an eye toward educating.

Scholarship on blackness and African American scholarship (not always the same thing) stand both central to and still outside of mainstream media studies. “Central” inasmuch as the same theoretical paradigms, many of the same approaches, certainly the infusion of and prostrating before big names exist in these works. “Outside” because in many, many cases, the ground and works examined by African American scholars fall outside the pale of mainstream viewership—general audiences and
scholars alike. While *Do the Right Thing* has become a requisite, canonical text for some aspect of most film curricula, anything else depends on taste and when and where blackness enters at the end of the syllabus. And on the most basic pedagogical level, black popular culture often finds itself relegated to the margins. If one were to survey any number of syllabi for Introduction to Film or its equivalent, one would most likely find a single day dedicated to “race and ethnicity in the media.” This might be the only time that a black media text appears in the course. What message does this send to students, other than that black media is—at best—only tangentially relevant to the critical study and appreciation of film, television, and new media?

... Pearl Bowser, Manthia Diawara, Ed Guerrero, Donald Bogle, Teshome Gabriel, Thomas Cripps, Jacqueline Stewart, Arthur Knight, Gloria J. Gibson, Nelson George, Wesley Morris, Charlene Regester, James Snead, Jacqueline Bobo, Mark Reid, Herman Gray, Phyllis Klotman, Daniel Bernardi, Jane Gaines, Tommy Lott, Robin Means Coleman, Clyde Taylor ... 

Once we finally get down to studying black popular culture, how do we move through and beyond the all-too-familiar parameters framing the discourse? Terri Francis raises this issue in her essay “Whose ‘Black Film’ Is This? The Pragmatics and Pathos of Black Film Scholarship,” in which she notes, “Even when discussing the successful careers ... of black filmmakers, the dominant tones of film analysis remain the rubrics of misrepresentation and burden.” These constructs overshadow the complexity and nuance of black popular culture, aesthetically and ideologically. The creation of a sustainable pedagogy not only displaces the model of one day of “race and ethnicity in the media” but also takes into account the power of black film as an idea that productively complicates many of film and media studies’ central methods and assumptions.

The politics of the academy routinely weigh heavily on African American scholarship. The collisions of race with gender, with sexuality, with class (and class presuppositions), frame the work done by, about, and potentially for African American audiences and readers. It requires a trapeze-like balance, with other identity categories consistently claiming their more viable spot in the spotlight. In his essay “No Getting around the Black,” Mark Cunningham points out that there is often an idea of the right to expect blackness mattering. He suggests that terms such as *quality* and *universality* are not without their inherent biases. The notion of a film’s “universal” appeal often functions as a way to undermine a text’s cultural specificity—its blackness. Of course, this does not mean that a film, a television show, or a new media text cannot be simultaneously black and universal. Charles Burnett’s 1977 *Killer of Sheep*, for example, comes to mind as a film text that invokes a specifically black aesthetic and narrative while embodying themes that have wide-ranging appeal. However, we should be vigilant about the ways that claims of universality (or similarly utilized designations, such as *quality*) replicate hierarchies of taste, culture, and power: categories from which black media texts have often been excluded.

Moreover, as scholars we must attend to the ways that we inadvertently replicate the supposedly passé dialectical relationship of good-bad, quality-trash, positive-negative, in our own work, from our choices of texts to study to the methods that we employ in our analyses. In what ways, for example, do we construct our identities as scholars in direct relation to the types of texts that we privilege, and how do these processes
possibly undermine our stated purposes of dismantling normative ideas about race? When writing about race, how often do we choose media texts that are buffered by some other form of privilege, such as the designation of *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–2008) as “quality television”? Wanting flexibility and fluidity of thought, imagination, possibility (of the sort uncritically accorded to non–African American scholars)—representing (the race and all its manifestations) and recognizing that what you offer could be lauded, devalued, or ignored—drains.

We are also reminded of the heavy debt that black media studies owes to the interdisciplinary field of black studies more generally, as a historically productive and welcoming context in which to pursue this work.


As this particular “In Focus” suggests in its very unprecedentedness, the place of such study has not necessarily been ensured in the context of film and media studies proper. Scholars of black media have historically had to make a place at the table for themselves wherever possible in the face of overwhelming silences on issues of race in media studies scholarship. In considering the dimensions of the question “What is this ‘black’ in black popular culture?” we find ourselves invoking more names—of scholars, cultural producers, and performers—as a conjuration signaling that when and where we enter the discourse, a heterogeneous collective gathers and enters with us.


Traditional venues for articulating black work have expanded, though, not necessarily for the work done and certainly not on a consistent basis. Thus, many scholars take up the DIY, “I’ll find a way or make one” approach to having an impact on our fields via blogs, black cultural and news sites, the best of speaking tours, and one-person mediated shows of criticality (we see you, Mark Anthony Neal). This same impulse, and same necessity, exists around production. African American cultural production stays at the forefront of each new technological innovation (aesthetically and industrially), and people like Tyler Perry, Oprah Winfrey, Shonda Rhimes, and right now, Issa Rae absolutely get shout-outs for their contributions to the larger cultural landscape. Little head-nods go to one-offs (or one plus a little), to such efforts as black reality-show mayhem and spectacularized encounters with the law and media and hoodies. Yet most black cultural offerings usually live only in the context of black-on-black
commentary—even though African American scholars’ and cultural workers’ efforts affect every part of the aesthetic, industrialized, and theoretical discourses that occur within our disciplines.

During the 2011 Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) conference, many conversations buzzed around Tyler Perry. Interestingly, no actual panels or workshops were dedicated to the study of Perry’s works that year—all the discussions about this crucial piece of black popular culture, his industrial shape-shifting, his box-office successes, his runaway brand across all media platforms, were taking place quite literally at the margins of the conference. Perhaps those panels on Perry had been rejected. Perhaps scholars chose not to submit proposals on Perry or his various film and television works, concerned with what doing so might say about their own reputations as scholars. Whatever the case, we offer this example as a way to address a larger question: where is the study of black popular culture located within the field of cinema and media studies?

This SCMS anecdote also reveals several larger issues related to the historical and ongoing marginalization of black media studies, with implications for scholars, research, and pedagogy. First, it is crucial to acknowledge that those scholars of racial representation (many of whom are also scholars of color) often face certain criticisms about the relevance—indeed, the quality—of their work, particularly in the more recent move away from talking about identity that has often (but not always) accompanied the turn toward new trends in the field of media studies. In her essay “‘Who’s ‘We,’ White Man?’ Scholarship, Teaching, and Identity Politics in African American Media Studies,” Allyson Nadia Field recognizes this supposed incompatibility and calls for scholars to reconcile experience and identity on the one hand with critical methodologies on the other hand. There is an urgent need to place analyses of black media within conversations about theory, genre, affect, and the industry, rather than treating issues of identity as either irrelevant or inconsequential to those discussions.

Building on this concept, we must also consider the ways in which the methodologies typically used in service to black media texts also contribute to their marginality. For instance, while narrative analysis and an emphasis on sociopolitical impact are still immensely valuable, why are black popular texts overwhelmingly discussed solely through these emphases? What might a return to formal analysis, or a shift to industry studies, tell us about black media texts and, in turn, about the current landscape of American media? In her essay “Black Film, New Media Industries and BAMMs (Black American Media Moguls) in the Digital Media Ecology,” Anna Everett does just that. She remembers and reconnects the work of African American media professionals who successfully parlay their talent and knowledge of African American audiences to profitability. In the open marketplace, their choices, business acumen, and artistic visioning and experimentation have led to some of the most significant industrial shifts of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Moreover, we must also acknowledge that much of the historical work on black media has in fact employed various methodologies in innovative ways, though it has seldom been recognized for doing so. As debates over representation continue into the current moment, Nina Cartier suggests that many contemporary black media images mobilize historical (and often problematic) representations of blackness in a uniquely
postmodern way, whether consciously or unconsciously. In “Black Women On-Screen as Future Texts: A New Look at Black Pop Culture Representations,” she argues that figures such as rapper Nicki Minaj, actress Kerry Washington on the television show Scandal (ABC, 2012–), and director Tyler Perry’s “Madea” are emblematic of the ways in which images of African American women can embody multiple representational tropes at once.

In 2014, if the repeated exclusion of the works and voices of black scholars in mainstream scholarship weren’t so indicative, it would be comical. We would be wise to remember, for instance, that early analyses of black media (much of which took place in the black press or in academic fields outside of media studies) included examinations of industry practices, distribution trends, reception, intertextuality, and affect—long before those areas became standard tools of analysis within the field of media studies. To recognize the importance of this history is just one step toward demarginalizing the study of black media. So beware that in an essay near you, ideas around future texts and even ratchetness may be retooled and repurposed as the new-new nonblack thing.

If we continue to relegate black media to the hallways of conferences, or to “special topics” weeks, or think about it solely in terms of identity, then we grossly elide the ways in which American media has always already been—since its inception—undergirded by racial identity. From Edison’s early shorts to the first screen adaptations of Uncle Tom’s Cabin (Henry A. Pollard, 1927), cinema and media are inextricably entwined with blackness. To disregard this is to ignore the very foundation on which both the media and the field of media studies were built.
Black Film, New Media Industries, and BAMMs (Black American Media Moguls) in the Digital Media Ecology

by Anna Everett

It is not news to say that black film in the twenty-first century is alive and successful. The critical acclaim, box-office success, and ratings gold that met such recent black films as *The Best Man Holiday* (Malcolm D. Lee, 2013), *12 Years a Slave* (Steve McQueen, 2013), *Fruitvale Station* (Ryan Coogler, 2013), *Precious* and *The Butler* (both by Lee Daniels 2009, 2013), *Woman Thou Art Loosed* (Michael Schultz, 2004), *Jumping the Broom* (Salim Akil, 2011), *Why Did I Get Married and Why Did I Get Married Too* (Tyler Perry, 2007, 2010), as well as cable television movies like *Dark Girls* (Bill Duke and D. Channsin Berry, 2011), among others, attest to this fact. Moreover, this prolific output may seem at once extraordinary and expected in the era of President Obama. However, upon reflection it becomes evident that these texts constitute the latest iteration of a familiar cycle of black film production over time. Clearly, for even casual observers, the elastic category of “black film” and its cyclical manifestations over a historical continuum feature crucial and compelling distinctions that sometimes parallel and sometimes lead dominant Hollywood cinema, independent film, and experimental cinemas.

Neither is it news to say that technological innovation and social change power most of the cyclical changes in black film. We can easily trace these cultural and technological shifts back to the silent-era black independents; the sound-era race films by black indies as well as black-white coproductions, the indie films of the civil rights era; the 1970s blaxploitation films, the LA Rebellion and East Coast indies; the fin-de-siècle 1990s *New Jack* cinema, and the Internet, most notably. Today’s wildly successful crop, then, is long overdue, anticipated, and expected when contextualized within this remarkable and persistent history of twentieth-century black film productions against formidable obstacles.

Black film and television, as portmanteau handles, are characterized by a number of features and expressions that position them astride powerful African diasporic cultural traditions and dominant American mainstream media industrial practices that defy simplistic
or essentialist meanings or definitions. And further, truth be told, epistemologies of black film from its inception in the early 1910s through the end of the twentieth century have been marked consistently by a lack of precision and clarity. Thus, black film and other media continue to be overdetermined by debates and binary thinking. There is an influential compendium of criticism and scholarship about this span of filmic output over the decades—criticism that tends to be as diffuse as the films, filmmakers, and cinematic movements themselves. Of course, this is predicated on the fact that categories are not so clearly delineated in practice as they are for heuristic or teaching purposes. Rather, black films often transcend and overlap neat temporal and categorical frameworks.

What is news about black film today is its audacious persistence and the fact that it flourishes despite daunting odds and revolutionary changes in the media industrial complex. As in earlier historical moments, black filmmakers were once again in the vanguard of evolving media industry practices in the new millennium. In particular, the twenty-first century witnessed a powerful cadre of influential black culture agents, both media industry insiders and outsiders, who adroitly leveraged digital media’s participatory, interactive technology protocols to advance their entries into the chaotic and uncharted territory of emergent business models that were then being erected around new digital technologies and social media, with legions of tech-savvy gen Xers and millennials in tow. For example, in 1998 Oprah Winfrey established Oprah.com.1 Following her successful model a decade or so later, Spike Lee, Tyler Perry, Reverend T. D. Jakes, and others took advantage of the Internet and social media’s game-changing presence and powerful cultural feedback loops, using them to solidify their own media brands while simultaneously recoding and innovating twenty-first-century black cultural productions, including transmedia narratives and adaptations, for new markets, new fan communities, and expanding multicultural audiences.2

Indeed, this is an opportune moment to consider the contours of black film in the new millennium, not only because more than twenty years have passed since the publication of the field’s seminal works on the topic (listed here later) but also because the conditions of possibility for sustaining successful black films have evolved radically and demand a new critical and/or theoretical hermeneutics of black film for new digital times, spaces, and places. Now is also an opportune moment to reflect on the status of black film twenty years after the publication of Stuart Hall’s essay “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?”3 Hall’s work helped establish the academic validity

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1 See a discussion of how the Oprah.com website was established in Trysh Travis, The Language of the Heart: A Cultural History of the Recovery Movement from Alcoholics Anonymous to Oprah Winfrey (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 246.

2 In 2008 Spike Lee’s company, 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks, set up the 40Acres.com website, and Lee has been active on both Facebook and Twitter. Although it is difficult to say exactly when Perry and Reverend Jakes began their online presences, I hazard a guess that both men began in the first decade of the twenty-first century. For Perry the motivating force was likely building on the success of his first blockbuster film Diary of a Mad Black Woman in 2005, and for megachurch superstar Reverend Jakes, whose Potter’s House ministry originated in 1996, it is not unreasonable to attribute some of his phenomenal congregational explosion from fifty families to more than thirty thousand members in Dallas, Texas, to the Internet.

and gravitas of British cultural studies in the US academy. In fact, the 1993 publication of Hall’s essay dovetails nicely with an amazing corpus of foundational texts on black film by black scholars, whose works helped solidify black film as a legitimate and valued academic disciplinary pursuit unto itself. Initially, black film studies were, for the most part, located within black studies, Africana studies, or ethnic studies. Some film studies programs, still fighting the battle for their own legitimacy in the academy, welcomed the next generation of scholars working in this evolving field.

Among some of the foundational, fin-de-siècle academic treatises consolidating black film studies were *Framing Blackness*, by Ed Guerrero; *Black American Cinema*, edited by Manthia Diawara; *Redefining Black Film*, by Mark Reid; *White Screens/Black Images*, by James Snead; *Black Looks*, by bell hooks; *Black Women as Cultural Readers*, by Jacqueline Bobo; and too many others to name here.4 This successful scholarly output, and the ongoing production of black films, engendered a well-received progeny of single-authored books, multiauthored anthologies, peer-reviewed journal articles, and popular texts.

Black film’s unheralded arrival in the United States had originally emerged during the silent-film era, and it persisted despite its struggles for survival with the expensive coming of sound technologies, emergent film studio industries, and unionized film workers’ racist Jim Crow (racial separation) practices, and subsequently, postwar racial politics in the United States and abroad. Black film production, exhibition, distribution, aesthetics, politics, audiences, and economics over time were difficult either to deny or to fully co-opt or assimilate. This resilience prompts my particular retrospective gaze at Stuart Hall’s probing question.

In the first place, I am struck by black film’s persistence and longevity, given its coterminous but suspect existence alongside highly revered global and national film cultures, movements, and expressions, from which it has drawn unabashedly. From its early origins in the United States at the dawn of the twentieth century, however, black film as a distinct category has been difficult to distill or delimit in meaningful terms. The complexity of transnational “blackness” writ large in popular culture that Hall articulated twenty years ago still resonates in the specific case of black film in the digital age. Consider his insights here: “By definition, black popular culture is a contradictory space. It is a site of strategic contestation. But it can never be simplified or explained in terms of the simple binary oppositions[:] . . . high and low; resistance versus incorporation; authentic versus unauthentic; experiential versus formal; opposition versus homogenization.”5

In 1993 Hall recognized the need to refuse the binary structuring of cultural space and the idea of privileging an “authentic” versus an “inauthentic” blackness in contemporary society. Hall’s particular caution against expecting that somehow black life


5 Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’?”
can be experienced outside of representation is apt. As he put it, “There is no escape from the politics of representation.” Furthermore, Hall, following Roland Barthes, reminds us that popular culture operates in an arena “that is profoundly mythic . . . a theater of popular desires, a theater of popular fantasies.”

Black popular culture, he argues, does not escape such representational political economies of opposition and hegemonies; rather, it manifests their complicated dialogic encounters. In other words, the dialogic nature of black popular culture is not characterized by an essentialist either/or African-Western proposition, but arguably is a productive hybrid construct made manifest in such sites as music, dance, and language styles, in addition to the overdetermined black body with its multiple hues and varying skin colors. And Hall’s insights seem even more relevant in light of the advent of digital media tools, social networks and communities of practice, convergence technologies, and transmedia narratives. These contexts concretely bear out Hall’s arguments of “rethinking race” for the present millennium.

This contextual lead-in brings us to BAMMs (black American media moguls) and how digital media technologies, especially the Internet and social media, helped propel them forward. The BAMM auteur Spike Lee led the way for black film and other media makers’ participation in the emerging digital media ecosystem with his controversial film *Bamboozled* (2000). Seeking economic frugality, Lee primarily shot the film only on consumer-grade digital (MiniDV) camcorders. He calculated a trade-off between losing the film’s high production values and the economic benefits of shooting with fifteen cameras at a time, given his modest budget. The financial economies of digital video enabled Lee to spectacularize the crucial “Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show” sequences by shooting only those on 16mm film stock. As one of film’s iconic BAMMs, Lee’s foray into big-time American film industry innovation is at once expected and surprising. With *Bamboozled*, Lee returned to his early mode of “guerilla filmmaking”—a phrase Lee popularized, according to Stuart Hall—and demonstrated early on that digital video and 16mm film technologies could converge and produce a successful vision of old and new media dialogism.

Further solidifying his vanguard status and new media bona fides, Lee announced at Time.com that he had reached his fund-raising goal for his next film (not yet named but about people who love blood, and not a new *Blacula*, according to Lee) through the crowdsourcing website Kickstarter. On August 21, 2013, Eliana Dockterman reported that in thirty days on Kickstarter, the director raised $1.4 million. Lee is quoted as saying, “The truth is I’ve been doing Kickstarter before there was Kickstarter, there was no Internet. Social media was writing letters, making phone calls, beating the bushes.”

While Lee, one of America’s first popular black crossover film directors, was taking black film to the new frontier of digital media film production and financing, community theater impresario and playwright Tyler Perry was cultivating his religious media

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6 Ibid., 113.
7 Ibid., 113.
9 Ibid.
audience and developing his unique brand of transmedia storytelling across theater, film, television, and the Internet. And while the 2005 *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* was his breakout film, catapulting him to success in Hollywood, Perry had already amassed a body of work in local theaters that became a deep reservoir for his stage-to-DVD products and his film and television adaptations and more. Inspired by Oprah Winfrey’s successes in the late 1980s, Perry took advantage of the Internet as a marketing tool to connect with his growing and loyal fan base of black women. Fatefully, Perry teamed with Winfrey to coproduce *Precious* (based on Sapphire’s novel *Push*), which received critical acclaim as well as box-office revenue. The two have continued their partnership on Winfrey’s OWN network, propelling it into profitability by the summer of 2013, months ahead of expectations. In 2010 Perry adapted Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* to film as *For Colored Girls*.

Perry’s outsider status in the Hollywood film industry’s inner sanctum served him well, enabling him to accrue huge successes with mainstream and black audiences by the time he blew up overnight, it seems, with *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*. That film secured a place at the table of Hollywood film insiders and generated a national obsession with his drag-queen character, Madea. For Perry, the Internet was his direct line to his loyal fan base and potential collaborators.

Working separately, but simultaneously, black megachurch pastor Thomas Dexter (T. D.) Jakes was creating a brand name of his own, broadcasting his massive church services over the Trinity Broadcasting Network, Black Entertainment Television, and the Miracle Channel in Canada. And like Perry, Jakes began mining his own inspirational writings for popular film texts, such as his 2004 film *Woman Thou Art Loosed*. From there, Jakes went on to produce several other black-themed films.

Director and producer Lee Daniels, whose 2001 film *Monster’s Ball* led to Halle Berry’s historic Oscar win for best actress; his hugely successful 2009 film *Precious*; and his highly acclaimed 2013 film *The Butler*, which garnered praise from President Obama, position Daniels as a BAMM in the wings. It is his lack of transmedia platforms at this point that qualifies him as a shadow, or emerging, BAMM.

The most successful BAMM and twenty-first-century media powerhouse is Oprah Winfrey. As the personification of a transmedia brand across television (*The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Oxygen Network, OWN Network, *Oprah’s Next Chapter* [OWN, 2012–]), print (*O, The Oprah Magazine*), film (*The Color Purple* [Steven Spielberg, 1985]; *Beloved* [Jonathan Demme, 1998]; *Precious*), and the Internet (*Oprah.com*), Winfrey leveraged her enormous crossover Q-score (or likability quotient and brand appeal) with women television viewers of all races, ages, nationalities, and socioeconomic statuses. On her November 20, 2009 *Oprah* show, Winfrey stunned fans and media watchers alike when she announced that she was leaving her ratings-powerhouse syndicated show and starting her own cable network enterprise. Yet this bold move two years later, in

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10 One might consider Lee Daniels a BAMM-in-waiting. His visibility stems from his 2001 film *Monster’s Ball*, which led to Halle Berry’s historic Oscar win; his controversial 2009 film *Precious*; and most recently, his 2013 film *The Butler*, which garnered praise from President Obama. However, he lacks the transmedial presence of the BAMM’s discussed here. Given his productive associations with media moguls Oprah Winfrey and Tyler Perry, Daniels may come to produce in other platforms as well.
September 2011, surprises only if one forgets that along with Marcy Carsey and Geraldine Laybourne, Winfrey helped cofound the Oxygen network in 1998. And while the gamble seemed a bad risk initially, Winfrey’s OWN (Oprah Winfrey Network) is finally in the black and making profits, which some attribute to her brilliant television partnership with Tyler Perry.11

Oprah’s transmedia empire that spans cable television, print media, films, and the Internet is remarkable, and her collaborations with Perry, Daniels, and others have produced a BAMM model for the twenty-first century that capitalizes on new media technologies and the new media industry practices that are finally tracking with contemporary media “prosumers” on their own terms. As YouTube, Vimeo, and other social media outlets clearly reveal, media-savvy audiences today consume and produce popular, successful, and globally engaging media texts at will. As for black film’s next act, stay tuned to such innovators as Issa Rae, whose Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl web episodes on YouTube and other ventures have become a sensation (Figure 1). As new media technologies provide black media producers with new outlets and options for their creative and educational work, our discussions of black film and media may need to be tweaked or rebooted. I anticipate that Shonda Rhimes, one of contemporary television’s most prolific showrunners, producers, and owners (ABC’s Grey’s Anatomy [2005–], The Practice [1997–2004], and Scandal [2012–]) will be beckoned to the big screen someday soon—in the not-too-distant future. I hope so, anyway. ✽

11 Perry created two programs for OWN, a soap opera, The Haves and Have Nots (one of the few prime-time dramas featuring black story lines), and a sitcom, Love Thy Neighbor (2013–).
One spring quarter, at the conclusion of a large undergraduate lecture course on the history of African American cinema, I received an anonymous course evaluation which read in part, “Someone should tell Professor Field it’s weird she’s so into Black stuff.” While I could dismiss this assessment as off topic and unconstructive—equivalent to a kid pointing and laughing “your epidermis is showing!”—it reflected a pervasive assumption in education and the broader culture: the notion that authority is based on identity and the experience of cultural belonging. Behind the student’s flippant comment are interesting questions about the relationship between scholarship and identity: for example, what would he or she say about a Latino or Latina studying African American media, or an African American scholar of another discipline? Like Fox News recently did, would the student question a scholar’s work on Christianity if that scholar happened to be Muslim? Conversely, does the student believe that there is a straightforward category of “whiteness,” and that I, as an Egyptian American, have an uncomplicated relationship to it? Certainly, the student’s underlying assumption that academic interest is based on identity is a reductive correlation that presumes that interest and authority are narrowly confined to racial and ethnic categories as well as gender and sexual orientation, ignoring the porousness and instability of these concepts. But it also rejects the fundamental premise of scholarship: the advancement of knowledge through rigorous inquiry. Intellectual endeavors are driven by curiosity and the desire for exploration. Yet when it comes to issues of race and ethnicity, identity seems to trump scholarship. As Pamela Caughie has asked, “Will the authority derived from experience always be more convincing

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1 In an interview on the Fox News online program Spirited Debate on July 26, 2013, concerning his book Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth (New York: Random House, 2013), Reza Aslan was repeatedly asked by Lauren Green why he, a Muslim, would write a book about the founder of Christianity. Aslan replied coolly, “Because it’s my job as an academic.”
than the authority derived through training? More to the point, as scholars and teachers, how are we to reconcile the requirements of scholarly inquiry with the often charged emotions surrounding issues of identity? Put differently, why should we think that experience is inherently unscholarly? In media studies, methodologies have long been attuned to the experience of actual spectators, producers, and participants—and in a manner inseparable from other concerns (e.g., formal, industrial). For African American media studies in particular, the issue of authority and its attending privilege (who can talk about whom) is a vexed one, since part of the historical problem is that those in the dominant culture have presumed to speak of—and for—other groups. All these issues (privilege, authority, assumptions about identity) are at play in the student’s seemingly facetious remark.

What I have wanted to tell the student (and the countless other people who have expressed similar sentiments) is that I think it’s weird not to be interested in “Black stuff”—or in any and all of the myriad elements that constitute our cultural fabric. Being in the world means belonging to a multicultural, multiethnic society. Inherent in my student’s assumption is the belief that being white is to be without race, and to be outside the dynamics of race altogether (the lunacy of this is captured in the recurring Stephen Colbert joke about not seeing race, and it has been theorized by, among others, Richard Dyer in *White*). We all have a race, whether we take it to be ontological or socially constructed. And it is an undeniable fact that race, an elusive category with very concrete implications, has been a defining component of the American experience. If we take seriously Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s warning that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” then we should all be concerned with understanding and combating social inequities, understanding their roots, the mechanisms by which they proliferate, and the means by which they can be fought. Race affects everyone. It should matter to everyone.

How race matters is the key question for academics. As a scholar and teacher, my work is unified by two broad theoretical inquiries: how film and visual media shape perceptions of race and ethnicity, and how these media have been and can be mobilized to perpetuate or challenge social inequities. Through investigations into film history, I aim to open up possibilities for a different understanding of the visual world in which we live and the language with which we represent that world. This has practical consequences: when I teach African American film practices, I treat them as American practices that resonate across broader concerns, investments, and applicability. This is not to downplay the significance of particularities of production and exhibition but to advocate for a careful negotiation of the relationship between specificity and generality without necessarily privileging either. The same is true when I teach courses with more general topics—I do not believe in segregating minority media practices in a separate week or as a subset of American film history, or as only relevant to concerns

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2 Caughie is speaking specifically to scholarship on indigenous literatures, but her point applies to scholarship pertaining to race and ethnicity more broadly. Pamela L. Caughie, “‘Not Entirely Strange, . . . Not Entirely Friendly’: Passing and Pedagogy,” *College English* 54, no. 7 (November 1992): 776.

3 Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997). Another possibility is that the student might be assuming that apparent whiteness is, in fact, raced, and that being raced as white implies a general lack of serious interest in “Black stuff,” which, arguably, is frequently true.
of race and ethnicity. At the outset of a course, I tell my students that media are multiethnic, multiracial, and variously gendered. Likewise, our considerations of them should be similarly complex.

The notion that Black media speaks only to issues of identity is a grave fallacy that is too often perpetuated in teaching and scholarship, and therefore it is our responsibility as educators not to limit what Black media can speak to or about, or to segregate Black media in a narrowly delineated unit on a syllabus. I do not wish to suggest that there is an inherent problem with courses dedicated to Black media. Instead, I believe that as we diversify our curriculum and our scholarship, we do so not by placing representational burden on already-overdetermined objects, but by asking the same questions of all objects under study. While attentive to questions of identity politics, privilege, subject position, and representation, these concerns should not obfuscate other approaches, such as formal analysis, historical contextualization, and industrial situation. Doing so risks perpetuating the marginalization against which our work fights and turns film into nothing more than sociological tracts. Taken together, these questions create a complex discursive space that is rarely neat. Yet by allowing for this inherent messiness, we are better able to grapple with the living questions that account for the richness and complexity of the material, placed within its contexts of production and reception.

More to the point, broad scholarly rigor does not diminish political investment; rather, it bolsters it. For example, when we think about Oscar Micheaux’s work as important for the study of issues of narrative, adaptation, and independent production, as well as for questions of class and reception, it significantly aids and contributes to our understanding of race films. Sankofa (Haile Gerima, 1993) is a film that deals with slavery and collective memory, but it is also an excellent object for discussing multiple diegeses, camera movement, sound, and other aspects of film form or even independent filmmaking practices (Figure 1). Do the Right Thing (Spike Lee, 1989) is an ideal case study of framing, composition, and editing, just as it is a vehicle for discussing urban ethnic and racial conflict, police brutality, and the question of what the “right thing” is. Or take Penitentiary (Jamaa Fanaka, 1979), which was the highest-grossing independent film of 1980, yet rarely figures in histories of American independent filmmaking. In another direction, Tyler Perry’s oeuvre offers insights into the structure of the contemporary film industry, genre, audience and reception, and gender and representation.

To return to my student’s course evaluation, what he or she was asking, if we give the most charitable interpretation, was why I was personally invested in African
American cinema. When I teach or research African American media, I explicitly approach it from many critical angles. What I don’t do is try to “explain” why I am, or why someone “like me,” could be personally invested in African American cinema. I see several problems in doing so. First, it would presume that personal investment and personal identity are straightforwardly correlative, even if the path is not immediately evident. Second, it risks pathologizing the scholar: something must have happened to her to make her care (another theme that has appeared in course evaluations and suggests a disturbing normalizing of racialized and gendered presumptions). Third, and perhaps most insidious, it subordinates scholarly inquiry to individual psychology, often manifested in gendered terms. Of course, scholarship certainly can be motivated by personal experience. In most cases it is—to dedicate a career to inquiry in a particular area, one must be motivated by passion, and passion is usually derived from strong personal experiences and/or motivating influences. Yet the personal is inextricable from the social; we ought to reject the notion that an investment in issues of social justice and a curiosity about the roots and manifestations of inequities is not a universal concern. There is something dangerous about evaluating authority on the basis of perceived group belonging, not least because it reinforces the notion that whiteness is a lingua franca, whereas difference (whether race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation) is the domain of identity politics. I consider it a responsibility of scholarship to work against such assumptions.

To be sure, there are limits to the scope of scholarly authority. In my work on African American film history, I am invested in how race is figured and contested, how it is present, and how the absence of its signifiers marks the presence of entrenched regimes of representational oppression. I talk frequently about African American filmmakers, spectators, and audiences. And yet I would not speak for them. In this way, there is less of a burden on me to be representative. While my African and African American colleagues face the presumption that their authority derives from cultural belonging, I rarely encounter an assumption that I am speaking from a specific subject position. I am assumed to be nonrepresentative, so that the student who wrote that course evaluation did not see me as a raced body (I wonder if he or she would have questioned my authority if I were a sixty-year-old white man). This means that I am not asked to


5 For example, I have faced frequent assumptions that my interest in African American media derives from some level of intimacy, usually presumed to be sexual, with African American men. (I find this sort of assumption the most pernicious of all, given the historical paranoia over interracial intimacy that has masked Black women’s victimhood against white male aggression with the myth of hypersexual Black masculinity.) For many reasons, this is a deeply vexed and complex issue that requires more analysis than space allows here, yet it is certainly inseparable from the issue of identity and pedagogy and scholarship.


7 While it is impossible to know, I assume that the student writing the comment is not Black and likely white, given the demographics of this particular class.
be representative of any group outside of being a scholar (people don’t ask me what all white people think about Black culture). I am never asked to speak for a particular group, and when I offer an opinion it is allowed to be merely that of a professor without the expectation of broader applicability. This is a way of being seen that comes with the inheritance of white privilege; while students may deny me a certain type of personal authority because they do not see me as a member of a group, they nonetheless perceive me as a professional authority for that very reason. However, part of being answerable (of accepting responsibility for one’s subject position and one’s argument within a broader social world) is to be constantly vigilant about voice and authority: Where does it derive from? From what perspective? For me, it helps to remember my Egyptian mother’s retort, channeling Tonto, “Who’s ‘we,’ white man?,” when she encounters essentializing statements or the presumed universality of the pronoun *we.* This is a good reminder that each of us speaks from a specific subject position that is informed by numerous factors, including (but by no means limited to) race.

In teaching, I constantly reiterate that there is no monolithic notion of “Blackness,” just as there is no singular “Black community” (just as there’s no singular white community, or no singular Egyptian community). I insist that we interrogate pronouns like *they* and *them,* *us* and *our*—along with *we*—and aim for precision in how we talk about filmmakers, characters, audiences, and broader cultures. I also directly address questions of privilege and authority, to bring these issues to the fore in the classroom. This requires a persistent deliberateness that pushes me to be a better scholar. Continually questioning my assumptions means that there can be no rest, but the personal consciousness pays off in scholarly rigor and intellectual growth. This means maintaining a critical distance from my work: no matter how familiar I become with the cultural milieu of the works I study, I can never claim to be writing as an insider. It will never be a question of trying harder, passing, or assimilating. Rather, it is about straddling that gap and accepting the always-tenuous position of outsider.

Accepting that one is writing from this position does not have to mean relinquishing scholarly authority. Rather, it helps to clarify the perspective of the scholar, a position that in many disciplines goes unchecked or unexamined. As a film historian, I take this as a fundamental methodology for scholarship: critical distance enables analytic assessment. Filmmaker Monona Wali calls herself “a friendly squatter”—an outsider who shares cultural affinities for and political investments with another group. There is something appealing about this image as an embracing of one’s outsidership (in her case, an Indian woman working with predominantly African American filmmakers; in my case, an Egyptian American woman working on Black film history). *Squatting* also suggest transience and illicitness. I like the image of transience because it suggests that one’s relationality should always be in flux. Illicitness is an appealing evocation as well because it keeps us mindful of the frequently justified suspicion of whites and

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8 This originally refers to a parodic cartoon by E. Nelson Bridwell about Tonto’s retort to the Lone Ranger’s presumption of the pronoun *we* that appeared in *Mad Magazine* 38 (March 1, 1958) and was later repeated and thematized by many, most notably by Oscar Brown Jr. in his 1974 song “The Lone Ranger.”

white authority that have attended interracial interactions from the antebellum period, through segregation, to the post–civil rights era Black Power movements and beyond. Just as much as I hope that my students do not judge me on the basis of what they perceive to be my identity, I also welcome their interrogation of their own assumptions—and, of course, mine as well. Suspicion can be a fruitful springboard for dialogue. Indeed, suspicion is often justified. After all, there is always the danger of squatting from the position of privilege (like the teenager who lives in a downtown squat but goes to her grandmother’s Upper East Side townhouse to shower or eat). This is the tricky negotiation that must take place in the classroom when questions of race, class, gender, and other aspects of social disparity are on the table, and when one is dealing with students from a wide range of backgrounds. It is a useful and necessary dialogue to have with oneself as a scholar who, by definition, writes from a position of privilege.

The privilege of scholarship comes with immense responsibility to our disciplines and to our students. While embracing intellectual curiosity, as scholars we should be wary of academic tourism. Like the less attractive side of squatting, the touristic approach belies the dangers that historically have haunted ethnographic studies. We work from that legacy, and from the legacy of sociology in Black film studies, and we must reckon with those precedents even as we search for approaches and methodologies that expand the scope of scholarly inquiry.

Part of the responsibility we have as teachers is to model ways of dealing with vexed issues. In the classroom, my goal is to enable students to talk about race without the fear of getting it “wrong.” Many students believe that discussions about race are the equivalent of racism (another frequent theme in evaluations). This is dangerously close to the notion that studying race is divisive, as was argued in the recent battles in Arizona over Mexican American studies, or that talking about race is divisive, which recalls right-wing charges against President Obama whenever he broaches the subject, however tentatively. Such attacks on discourse are a means of silencing dissent and perpetuating the status quo of inequities, whether they are economic, linguistic, legal, or any number of mechanisms by which hegemony asserts itself.

I write this during the summer of the Trayvon Martin murder trial, the subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman, and the ensuing outrage felt by many, myself included. The “national conversation about race” is frequently invoked in situations such as this, but it rarely results in anything resembling a real conversation. In the contemporary moment, there is an urgency among intellectuals working on issues of race and ethnicity to refute the fallacy of a “postracial America” that so many of our students are invested in, and that a wide swath of media constantly disproves. Yet equally vital is the imperative to consider all media production as interracially and interethnically imbricated. As Stuart Hall affirms, “[t]here is no escape from the politics of representation,” and experience is rarely homogeneous. Likewise, our scholarship and teaching should reflect the heterogeneity of experience. The fallacy of the “postracial” is evident


in the student’s evaluation, in which he or she cannot understand the impetus to teach outside of specific racial parameters. One strategy of addressing—and combating—assumptions surrounding race and ethnicity is to foreground discursive problems in the classroom and, where appropriate, in our writing. When we shy away from such difficult discussions, we model for our students shame and embarrassment and thereby perpetuate the notion that talking about race is tantamount to racism. It is when we are open about the nuanced difficulties of these issues, and confront them head on, that we demonstrate how discourse leads to understanding and, as a scholarly pursuit, creates new possibilities for breaking from previous paradigms of misunderstanding.

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No Getting around the Black
by Mark D. Cunningham

Often when I read or see an interview with black filmmakers who have a film being released—particularly one of some emotional or historical heft—many seem to make it a point to explain how the themes and subject matter of their film are universal, human, and something to which everyone from all walks of life can relate. I detect a form of pacification or politeness in Ryan Coogler’s revelation that he made his film *Fruitvale Station* (2013) about “human beings and how we treat each other[,] . . . how we treat the people we love and how we treat the people we don’t know,” especially when juxtaposed to the candor of his comments in the *Los Angeles Times* that filmmaking is “my outlet for my fears, for the things that make me angry or frustrated, for messages I want to get out. I was terrified, shocked, angry. I felt this was the film I was born to make.”¹ In an MSNBC interview, Lee Daniels offers that his inspiration for making *The Butler* (2013) was “because it was a father-son love story and that transcends race; it’s universal. . . . It really was a love story with the

civil rights movement in the backdrop.” Whether they make such assertions because they are playing the marketing game or are honestly invested in such an admission is up for interpretation. But as a film scholar and aficionado who just happens to be black, I have to wonder what, for example, is “human” about the way Oscar Grant was shot down in the prime of his life on a Bay Area subway platform by an overanxious white officer. What is “transcendent and universal” about the way, fictionalized or not, Cecil Gaines worried about the well-being of his college student son who chose to join the ranks of the Freedom Riders while, at the same time, drumming up enough of his own courage to confront a bigoted employer who failed to pay black butlers in a manner commensurate with white ones? These experiences are a decidedly horrific part of black experience as a whole, and comments like the ones the aforementioned black filmmakers make, from either a promotional or a personal standpoint, seem to soften the importance of that.

I have come to realize that comments like these reflect or play into the concept of a postracial America that many have negligently and naively wished into existence, especially after the election of Barack Obama as the nation’s first black president. People act as if everything is of equal accord and that racism has fossilized and become extinct, but we know better, right? Or, at least, we should. From the academy, I have read, agreeing and disagreeing with, countless essays, blogs, and social media nuggets of wisdom and erudition that point out any negative portrayals or problematic visions of black culture. But yet, arguments on the horizon suggest that “this black in black popular culture,” to refer to the title of Stuart Hall’s renowned essay, is not really necessary; that the problem in specifying the black is limiting and opens up a can of worms that does not consider complexities in identity, ethnicity, ethnography, experience, and gender.

For example, an increasing number of white scholars are academically invested in the origins and mechanics of black artistry. As quoted in E. Patrick Johnson’s Appropriating Blackness: Politics and the Performance of Authenticity, Henry Louis Gates affirms this interest when he writes, “No human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world.” His assessment may very well be correct, but I find myself wanting to know exactly why they are interested in these topics. I have never asked any of the white scholars I know who concern themselves with black subject matter the source of their scholarly fascination. I am certain I have refrained from inquiring out of an uncomfortable combination of civility, not wanting to make enemies or prompt disdain so early in my career as an academic, and the feeling that only I saw it as the elephant in the room.

Still, the question persists because I see it as yet another method (in a long historical line of them) in which black popular culture gets appropriated by outside racial groups. It is an extension of the quizzicality I feel about such cases in point as Eminem being considered the biggest-selling hip-hop artist of all time, about the vitriol leveled


at filmmaker Spike Lee by blacks and whites alike for criticizing director Quentin Tarantino’s Oscar-winning slavery satire *Django Unchained* (2012), not to mention the case with which Tarantino tosses the word nigger around in his films only to have it met with laughter and considerable box-office receipts, or singer Justin Timberlake aligning himself with every black artist and producer he possibly can to enjoy the designation from critics, award-show categories, and audiences alike of “R&B and soul artist.” It gives credibility to what Academy Award–nominated screenwriter and director John Singleton says in a guest column he wrote for the *Hollywood Reporter*, in which he considers whether a white director can effectively make a film about issues and topics related to black culture. Singleton suggests what studio executives might be thinking when they fail to seek the input of black talent about said films: “We want it black, just not that black.”

Perhaps my thinking about black popular culture in general and the scholarship written in critique of it is a direct result of the difficulty of the academic job market. Something inside of me is disquieted with reading a white scholar writing about the films and filmmakers that inspired my own sojourn into the Hollywood game two decades ago. Why do they get the chance to do it? A recent trend in filmmaking may possibly answer that. In that same column, Singleton questioned, in a conversation with a screenwriter friend of his, if the recent successes of black-themed films helmed by white directors, including *42* (Brian Helgeland, 2013) and *The Help* (Tate Taylor, 2011), might be making it more difficult for black screenwriters and directors to get hired. His friend provided this reasoning: “It’s simple. Hollywood feels like it doesn’t need us anymore to tell African-American stories.” Singleton goes on to say of Hollywood ideology, “The thinking goes, ‘We voted for and gave money to Obama, so [we don’t need to] hire any black people.’” Once again, the postracial narrative that imagines an existence devoid of any disparity is at work. Like Singleton and his friend, I wonder and worry, as a fledgling scholar trying to declare a position in the academic setting, about the necessity of and regard for my own investigations of black popular culture if my reality as a black man could be perceived as negotiable and expendable. I liken it to Claudia asking why Shirley Temple gets to dance with Bill “Bojangles” Robinson and she doesn’t, in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. Nonetheless, my trepidation extends beyond just mere scholarly coveting. Many encounters and conversations with white people about black popular culture have been the source of much contemplation and consternation for me as well.

As an undergraduate, I once sat in on a graduate-level course on the novels of Toni Morrison taught by a black female professor. The professor possessed a tremendous gift for blending anecdotes with theoretical and critical discussions of the novels she taught—a skill I thought brilliant and akin to the narrative abilities of my own mother, grandmothers, aunts, and cousins. During one class meeting, while discussing *Sula*,


6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

this griot of an instructor began to connect a tale from her own experience to a salient point made in the novel.9 To her left, a white female student interjected well into the story, with a patronizing half giggle, “Can we get back to *Sula* at some point?” The professor glanced at the student casually and firmly proclaimed, “We can when I finish my story,” and proceeded to do just that. I remember my younger Malcolm X, verse-filled self (a stance also encouraged by the reach of black popular culture at the time in the guise of Spike Lee’s epic 1992 film) being incensed at the audacity and disrespect of that student.

However, years of thought about this incident have revealed to me that the student’s disrespect stemmed from her lack of appreciation for the oral storytelling tradition, a foundation that supports much of black popular culture. What she believed to be superfluous and off topic spoke to the very thematic elements employed by Toni Morrison in her own storytelling, for which the student obviously had great affection and admiration. She could see the benefit of folklore in the work of an author who had not yet won the Nobel Prize, but she could not recognize or apply that same respect to the stories and personal experiences of this professor.

Recently, this same inability to transfer experiences and awareness made itself known to me again. On a recent trip to San Francisco, with a very good friend of mine I saw the film *Fruitvale Station* (Ryan Coogler, 2013) during its release in selected theaters. Prior to seeing it, my friend, who is white, did not know a lot about Oscar Grant or the events surrounding his unfortunate death in 2009. This case did not incite the national outrage the way the recent Trayvon Martin case did. After seeing it, we were both emotionally affected but in different ways.

My emotional response stemmed from my excitement about seeing the film, my prior knowledge of the events and multiple viewings of the YouTube clip of Oscar’s death for my dissertation research (long before there was even a movie in the works), and my own experiences and understanding about my place in the world as a black man. Conversely, while my friend was justifiably outraged by the injustice of it all, he could not bring himself to understand the reason Oscar was shot. He kept asking, “But what did he do? Why would they do that?” My continued explanations about the threat of the black male body and that body’s defiance of the white officer’s commands to stay seated despite the fact that the police had no real reason to detain him did not bring my friend any closer to an answer. The inability to reconcile this discrepancy even resulted in a brief and awkward dispute between us that was, no doubt, born of frustration on both our parts and because our viewing positions and readings of the film are located in our individual racial identities and subjectivities.

Now, what I thought was interesting is this: my friend has a deep affection and fondness for hip-hop and R&B music. In fact, it comprises his entire music collection. In the midst of all the Kendrick Lamar, Kanye West, Drake, Big K.R.I.T. and the like—which he enjoys and can recite word for word—themes of blackness in America, and more specifically, black maleness in America, come up in the corners and crevices of their lyrical compositions. Our conversation, and his seeming lack of context for the police shooting of Oscar Grant, led me to wonder: What *does* he hear when he listens

to this music? How could he fail to connect the messages these artists advance with the story that unfolds in *Fruitvale Station*? Maybe, to my friend, an appreciation of black popular culture has little to do with comprehension and more to do with a passive listening experience that affords him a certain coolness factor without actually having any empathetic or meaningful investment. He gets to participate in a black experience, which is largely centered on popular entertainment, without *really* having to be black. I am not sure it would be so “cool,” however, if he were forced to renounce his white male privilege and really live the life depicted in some of the music he listens to. I am reminded of a moment during Chris Rock’s stand-up routine *Bigger and Blacker* (1999) when he speculates to his audience that there is not one white person, even the lowliest of them in status, who would trade the cultural luxuries of that whiteness for his blackness, wealth and all.

While I am keenly aware that it can be difficult to know from what perspective anyone approaches the art he or she consumes, I would argue that the attempts to excise the *black* from black popular culture speak to an artifice of sorts in the scholarship written by those who suggest that it might be interchangeable with universal, human experiences. If we deem the distinct messages regarding race and community outlined by black music artists, filmmakers, photographers, and writers as stories we *all* can relate to, we diminish the uniqueness of what the art attempts to convey about a particular people, and we compromise the message being presented. To remove or dismiss the culture of an artist from his or her work is to do fundamental violence to the work itself. For this reason, the black experience, in all its varying forms, is significant when discussing the black popular culture this series of In Focus essays speaks about. As Gina Dent states, “We must remain mindful that the basis of the popular is its association with the people. And we must never forget that the mirage of representativeness is merely a symptom of our experience of that powerful and profoundly mythic realm—our culture.”\(^\text{10}\) Further, as Harry B. Shaw claims, black culture is connected to popular culture “because it continually looks toward the roots of the common Black experience and draws from these roots for its creativity.”\(^\text{11}\) Finally, Singleton, too, expounds on the necessity of acknowledging the “black” in black popular culture when he writes, “There are cultural nuances and unspoken, but deep-seated emotions that help define the black American experience. The rhythm and cadence in which we carry ourselves among one another is totally alien to most non-blacks, even if it is a constant fascination to them.”\(^\text{12}\) Therefore, it matters.

In my dissertation I wrote about my beginnings as a man. At the age of twenty-one, I was profoundly shaped by my interaction with four examples of black popular culture: Toni Morrison’s novel *Song of Solomon*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*; the lyrical content of Ice Cube’s album *Death Certificate* (1991), and John Singleton’s *Boyz n the


\(^\text{11}\) Harry B. Shaw, introduction to *Perspectives of Black Popular Culture*, ed. Harry B. Shaw (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1990), 1.

\(^\text{12}\) Singleton, “Can a White Director Make a Great Black Movie?”
In particular, Singleton’s film was probably the most influential because it not only spoke to the way I thrived in the urban community of Oak Cliff in Dallas, Texas, but also provided tremendous inspiration for my creative self, the part of me that wanted to tell stories on film about my neighborhood the way Singleton did. Because of him (with some Spike Lee added in for good measure), I wrote a screenplay about my neighborhood called Public Love (I took my title from one of my favorite lines in the last paragraph of Morrison’s novel Jazz) and navigated the brisk and callous terrain of Hollywood off and on for a period of three years to get my film made. Although my path did not parallel Singleton’s success the way I had imagined, he did inspire me, as a young black man, that it was at least possible. Morrison’s novel was significant not just because of the beauty of language and phrasing but also because of the familiarity in the homespun wisdom of, and way of being in, her narrative.

Malcolm X and Ice Cube made me aware of just exactly what I was up against as a young black man in America. I come from a female-led, single-parent home, and my mother effectively taught me immeasurable and valuable lessons, but Brother Malcolm and Cube taught me what my father should have. They represented; they stood in for the men in my life when I was not able to be with my grandfather or uncles. They explained to me the futility of some things while making me believe in the hope to be found in others. These expressions of black popular culture were very much what I needed to sustain myself as a black man on all accounts. Ignoring the black in these forms of popular culture was not possible for me, and it should not be possible when we assess this construct overall.

Where would I be now, I wonder as I type this, if these things were relatable to all?

As a film scholar, I approach my research interests with the same depth of feeling and thought. I eventually decided to write my dissertation on narrative, race, and gender in the trio of films John Singleton branded his “hood trilogy”: Boyz n the Hood (1991), Poetic Justice (1993), and Baby Boy (2001) (Figure 1). I initially vacillated over what to write about because I wondered if I was expected to write about these types of films because I was black. I was also anxious about whether I would pigeonhole myself as a scholar. After all, as one of my mentors reminded me, “Mark, you don’t just know black movies; you know movies period.” And he was right. I do know movies, both foreign and domestic.

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However, another mentor, who is black, reminded me of something else: “No matter what you write about, you will always be the black scholar who writes about ‘fill in the blank.’” It crystallized for me then that there is no getting around the black. Therefore, I decided against some of my other choices, which included writing about filmmaker John Sayles (although I wanted, and still do, to explore his portrayals of black people in his movies) and stuck with Singleton.

For the first time in my life, I felt as if I was in command of deciding what kind of man I wanted to be, and the four examples of black popular culture I’ve mentioned here were essential to the development of my character and self-perception. That they were distinctively black in their language, ideology, expression, and storytelling connected to those parts of myself I had either ignored or was blind to. The culmination of those artistic expressions stimulated an awareness, eagerness, and even anger within me. They were a call to action. For those reasons alone, I cannot fathom a black popular culture in which the black is given little or no merit. In my quest to understand what motivates their interest, I am not advocating for white scholars to forgo research that is black focused, or for filmmakers and screenwriters to shy away from those topics as well. However, I am suggesting that the black in black popular culture benefits immensely, in terms of discussion, critical analysis, and interpretation, from scholars and artists who know and truly understand that the adjective in the phrase is about more than just the universality of the human condition.

Whose “Black Film” Is This? The Pragmatics and Pathos of Black Film Scholarship

by Terri Francis

Teaching black film, whether in the form of African, African diaspora, or African American media, has become more commonplace in cinema and Africana studies programs across the country. Yet those who teach this material, and allies who seek to diversify and deepen what we mean by “film studies,” encounter a range of practical, pedagogical, and political conundrums in rapidly changing environments both within and outside the university. The popular understanding of African American film history continues to run parallel to and seemingly apart from the knowledge and insight that professional researchers and archivists share with their constituencies. So, whose “black film” is this, and what are we doing with it? What is this “black film” in black film? This essay addresses three current challenges for the field of black film scholarship. First is navigating
the nationalistic and auteurist rubrics of film studies curricula, given that black film is a product of diaspora and that it may not be possible to document each filmmaker’s idiosyncratic career using traditional historiographical approaches. Second is weighing how movies convey past and present experience in complicated ways, as they are themselves products of the past and present. Third is advocating for black film against the backdrop of an absurd media environment and popular culture in which African American audiences both distrust Hollywood and at the same time seem skeptical of black independent media that challenges representational comfort zones.

The idea of black film provides a space, maybe the only space in a department, where students take up matters of race, racism, and other prejudices within Hollywood’s economic and aesthetic structures—where they broach the idea that films are not only “art” and entertainment but also commodities that carry with them ideas about who we are and how we live. In constructing syllabi, though, I feel I must choose between two courses—Race, Racism, and Representation in Hollywood, and Films That Black People Have Made (Anyone Has Made)—that are so dense with black collective memory they should be considered black film the way Invisible Man is considered black literature. In teaching black film, it is never just about form—or it is always about form, shaped in contention or collaboration with the media industry and its aesthetic and political norms.

The material I teach, early and independent black films, is largely unfamiliar to students, colleagues, and even the public at large, and this presents issues of affect and receptivity. Black film is not a national cinema; black film is a cinema whose borders are variously defined by multiple audiences, diverse scholars, different generations of students, and the changing priorities of the popular press.

The way film and media studies programs have been introducing “black” film into film history is largely through its status as a representation of black culture or as a substitute for the teaching of black history. But this strategy is problematic in a number of fascinating ways. If the black in black film is to be defined, it’s surely more of a psycho-social-aesthetic nonlocation, a site of citations; the black in black film is an idea. “Black is, black ain’t,” as Ralph Ellison put it. If it is a form, then it can be made and unmade. And in a marketplace of identities unmoored from historical context, it can be too. Blackness is a tenuous and uncertain platform within a hall of mirrors where reality is reflected, refracted, and crooked. It is like a genre of genres in which questions of authenticity, authorship, and appropriation are parsed against the often highly emotional backdrop of long-standing cultural debates on the role of the artist and the responsibilities of the black artist to represent. Such a position offers film studies as a whole potentially expansive view of the ways in which media makers and media scholars navigate questions of authorship, genre, and nation through the idea of black film. The routine film studies rubrics of author, genre, and nation pose pedagogical challenges when constructing syllabi for black film, because this filmmaking practice bends and resists these very categories.

2 Ibid., 9.
In the telling of African American history, visual material tends to be mobilized as evidence or as illustrative of larger historical moments without fully considering the specific histories and structures of the photographs or motion pictures themselves. The reality is, however, that once we bring pictures into the mix, we open up a whole new set of problems, and we need new concepts for situating, not necessarily interpreting or even judging, the images. Historical photographs and motion pictures certainly provide a treasured portal to the elusive past, yet they are themselves products of that past (and, in a way, of our present). Seamlessly incorporating excerpted footage into a narrative elides questions such as the following: Who made this picture? How did he, she, or they make this picture? What should we make of the content found outside the frame, after the cut, and behind the camera? How we answer these questions forms the stories of innovation, entrepreneurship, and personal adventure that position black film at the vanguard of African American modernity.

Movies are a forum, dialogical and full of unresolved contradictions, not merely a reflection or representation of reality; and black cinema is a particularly self-reflexive one that unfolds amid continued dissatisfaction with black images on screen, perennial hype on new waves of black film, and the ongoing whiteness of boardrooms that control the media screenscape. “Black film” is uniquely positioned as both an object of public scrutiny and of disdain, as well as a fantasyland of accurate and satisfying portrayal. We have a complicated love-it-and-loathe-it relationship to popular culture. Indeed, many so-called negative images do have a certain allure, as there is a perverse pleasure in cringe-worthy television, and, privately, many viewers don’t cringe at all. Why not openly embrace, laugh at, and laugh with “ourselves” or at caricatures of folks we know, at exaggerations of all-human foibles? Why hide such intimacies under phrases like “guilty pleasure”? Meaning many things to many people, “black film” is a niche market of entertainment products sold and consumed on a variety of platforms. And at the same time black film is an underground network of lost and recovered fragmentary archives, such as the LA Rebellion films being unearthed by scholars Jacqueline Stewart, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Allyson Nadia Field.

The shared discursive space between popular culture and black film raises more issues in that the relationship among media, the movies, and black folk has long been a vexed one. Vital concerns include (1) the pervasiveness of derogatory imagery; (2) the relative invisibility of both African American–authored stories and African American theories of criticism; and (3) the inaccessibility of independent works because of business-related issues such as ineffective or inappropriate marketing strategies. Less obvious but just as essential a problem for black film is the near-total lack of infrastructure for screening film and sustaining public dialogues with filmmakers and audiences on a do-it-yourself level. My classrooms often double as critical exhibition spaces for screening rare black independent film, actually staging what amounts to town halls in which students, and at times the public at large, can engage with the unwieldy race polemics that often get attached to the black image in “film,” which of course today means television, web series, social media, and music videos. Increasingly these types of products provide the perceptual coordinates through which students see _Within Our Gates_ (Oscar Micheaux, 1920), _Story of a Three-Day Pass_ (Melvin Van Peebles, 1968), _She’s Gotta Have It_ (Spike Lee, 1986), or _Daughters of the Dust_ (Julie Dash, 1991) for.
the first time—and their screening might well be via YouTube (Figure 1).

In the popular press, as in the classroom, the crisis of black visibility and the hype around new black films compel more attention than the no-drama thrill of learning the histories and theories of African American cinema. Even when discussing the successful careers, or well-received films, of black filmmakers, the dominant tones of film analysis remain the rubrics of misrepresentation and burden. I am ever trying to balance scholarly skepticism with the exuberance of advocacy and teaching. Looking toward the future, we need to reexamine our relationship to multiple media industries, particularly those of independent and experimental black film.

Thus, questions of criteria continue to nettle us: how black is black film anyway? Must a film be produced by black people, feature a black cast, and/or address a black audience to be classified as a “black film”? Can a black film be produced within the Hollywood studio system? Is there a discernible black film aesthetic? Does the market determine our syllabi? Or is our teaching research driven? What am I teaching when I teach black film? And what does it mean to teach black film in the context of America’s “conversation on race”? What of dubious and undignified blackness? How do we approach teaching what cultural appropriation violates—and makes possible—in a multicultural setting? Are we really this invested in biology and in skin color? Where are our artifacts?

The black in black film, as well as the film in black film, continues to morph and change, bringing with it implications for library acquisitions and also access. Will black film courses have required screenings? Required Twitter feeds? In which formats should departments invest? Are libraries and film studies centers willing to purchase expensive and rare black films? Do librarians and others recognize our content as necessary? Where does the responsibility for purchasing new films, DVDs, and so forth lie? If students can get the material on their own, why shouldn’t they? The answers to these questions vary between institutions and will certainly continue to change as we move toward an increasingly digitized future and all that is beyond that.

Over the past decade of teaching I have noticed how students’ expectations and experiences of my courses hinge on their openness to avant-gardes in African American art, literature, music, and theater. And every semester I have plenty of students who are like I was in college: I had no interest whatsoever in mainstream media, but I saw each Spike Lee joint when it came to my city. Once I discovered the wider world of black film in graduate school I viewed it through my studies of African American and diaspora literature, music, theater, and art. I ask myself how to reframe some students’ skepticism toward unfamiliar and difficult moviemaking modes when they are
saturated with easy-to-watch and much-discussed media products. My role is partly to advocate for black film and, in doing so, to make space for the contemplation of black art, fostering intergenerational exchanges of experiences and knowledge. In the end, simply introducing students to Charles Burnett, Julie Dash, and outstanding works like Chameleon Street (Wendell B. Harris Jr., 1989) and Losing Ground (Kathleen Collins, 1982) generates new, enthusiastic, and better-informed audiences—you can’t unsee those films (Figure 2).

The competing demands and particular circumstances of black film, given the quickly changing conditions of teaching film generally, challenge us to show students strategies of media literacy that account for its crookedness and inspire them to seek out, and even craft, new possibilities in black film production and black film cinephilia.

Black Women On-Screen as Future Texts: A New Look at Black Pop Culture Representations

by Nina Cartier

Postmodern, post-soul, post-black—we have numerous appellations for our current moment in black popular culture, yet we really aren’t post-anything when it comes to our expectations of black women on-screen. As an export, black popular culture transforms into US popular culture, especially if we consider the immense popularity of hip-hop as an international force, like jazz and R&B were before it. It has always been “cool to be black,” while at the same time, no one ever wants to be “black.” Qualified, it is always cool to possess the vitality, originality, and magnetism black people as a whole seem to imbue, while accepting none of the pain, prejudice, and struggle the fact of actually having so much discernible melanin entails. It is a strange ontology, this blackness, and it becomes stranger
when we consider black women in the mix. For black women, their most persistent images on-screen have typically been neither black nor women, if we recognize the media’s love affair with the tragic mulatto or any of the other pernicious stereotypes like the mammy, Jezebel, or Sapphire. However, as the media offers us what seem like fresh, new perspectives on black women’s representations in the form of Kerry Washington (Olivia Pope) from *Scandal* (ABC, 2012–), Nicki Minaj (Black Barbie), and even Tyler Perry (Madea) from numerous stage shows and films, we are forced to consider the shifting representations of black women within our contemporary moment and thus to reimagine the trajectories of “black” in American black popular culture. In an effort to create a new pathway for these trajectories, I offer a new reading strategy with which to interrogate black women’s representations with the ultimate hope of offering new expectations of what black women can achieve on-screen. This strategy utilizes the future text, taking Alondra Nelson’s term from her groundbreaking essay “Future Texts” one step further to mobilize it as a way to interpret what black women are currently doing on-screen.¹

In “Future Texts,” Nelson coins and defines the term as those “text[s] and images . . . [that] reflect African diasporic experience and at the same time attend to the transformations that are the by-product of new media and information technology. [Future texts] excavate and create original narratives of identity, technology, and the future . . . [and] represent new directions in the study of African diaspora culture that are grounded in the histories of black communities, rather than seeking to sever all connections to them.”² Using future texts to describe a collection of Afro-futurist essays, poems, and visual art that she edited, Nelson, interpreting Ishmael Reed’s idea of the future text, contends that such content “represents the opportunity to encode African diasporic vernacular culture and create a tangible repository of black experience . . . by mining a usable, living past which retains the present and carries into the future.”³ For Nelson, a future text is syncretic, borrowing and remixing the various contributions from ancestors, contemporaries, and generations to come.

For me, future texts—which as a strategy release black representations from rigid signifiers, thus allowing them to freely float—proffer new paradigms for black women, particularly to re-present and create anew the “black” in popular culture. To utilize the future text as a strategy is not simply to “read against the grain” of what we expect black women on-screen to represent, or to flip the binary so that black women perch atop the hierarchy of representational standards that usually place them on the bottom, much like a resistant or oppositional reading might do.⁴ However, like a resistant or oppositional reading, the future text as strategy does attempt to expand what constitutes black female representation on-screen by accepting blackness as a spectrum and refusing the primacy of the politics of respectability and the culture of

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² Ibid., 9.
³ Ibid., 7.
dissemblance as the most effective weapons black women wield against the intersecting oppressions of patriarchy, racism, and the prejudices that arise from class and sexuality. I want to consider how pop culture screen figures such as Minaj and Washington, in their roles as Harajuku Black Barbie and Olivia Pope, respectively, embody multiple time-spaces and problematize what it means to be black and female now. I posit the future text as a reading strategy that can be utilized to unpack the ideological struggles at play when deciphering these roles, especially as these women play with the tropes of black female subjectivity. In addition, these representations perhaps foreground just why a filmmaker like Tyler Perry—whose most famous character, Madea, is a man in drag—keeps getting under our skins. In his attempts to both celebrate and adulterate the power inherent in black women’s future texts, he ostensibly usurps and undermines that power in many of his own screen depictions.

Power creates possibilities. The ideological power inherent in black screen representations creates possibilities as well, since black audiences’ engagement with black characters on-screen is at once a matter of fantasy projection as well as the reification of a collective sense of self. In this manner, black people are always in a process of becoming, of imagining that what we see on-screen might both reflect our screen fantasies and refract our lived realities. We want to see black heroes take center stage on-screen, and we want to liberate ourselves from second-class citizenship off-screen, where often our heroism is denied us. However, we have yet to arrive at a place in representation where a critical mass of different roles has been reached and a wider swath of the spectrum-that-is-blackness is ubiquitous, because we have yet to be fully accepted as people in a society that loves our “cool” but denies us our humanity in the form of equal access to the ways and means of success in this society. To be black still carries stigma, and as we create ourselves anew to bend and shape to perform some version of what we “should be,” often under the rubric of the politics of respectability, we are constantly thwarted as a result of what we are: black, and thus never equal and never quite human. As viewers of American popular media representations, we scour the screens searching for images that both reflect our lived experiences and offer new possibilities to free ourselves from the confining humdrum (and sometimes stifling racism) of our daily existences. We search for some small, tangible artifact as evidence not only that we exist as a people but also that we matter as people.

Patriarchy militates against this process of becoming and somewhat stabilizes becoming for black men. Thus, they can achieve plenitude, which I see as a complete fulfillment of the desire to be fully human and accepted as such, through assuming the power of the phallus. On-screen, “black man” still means “man,” and by adopting the postures and positions of male power—though not unproblematically—the screen allows the black man to be fixed in time and space and therefore legible as a man. Sidney Poitiers and Bill Cosbys abound, and they can exist alongside Lil Waynes and Chief Keefs, because each of them—and the wide spaces between their opposite poles—still can be men on-screen. No such stabilization exists for the black woman, for like all women on-screen, she represents a lack, and doubly so. Like her white female screen counterparts, she is not a man, and thus not a person. At the same time, nor is she fully a woman, since the fact of her epidermis prevents her from fully entering the realm of desire. Nobody wants to be her (except perhaps the black women in the audience), and
nobody wants her. Thus, the black woman’s process of becoming remains continual and her body, a floating signifier, drifts easily back and forth through past, present, and future, making her a future text and the black man—the moment he becomes stabilized through patriarchy—transhistorical.

As a future text, the black woman participates in a triple signification of the past, present, and future: she is trapped by the deviant sexuality of the past (always a whore or strangely asexual); she lives her own present in contention with current conventions of both black and white female beauty (or lack thereof); and she strives toward a future in which her body is her own to embody or transcend, unfettered from the binaries of too black or not black enough (among many others) where she can be however she is—sexual not sexualized, desirous and desired—and free. But what does this look like on-screen? Let me consider Minaj, Washington, and Perry as future texts. Reading them as such illuminates new possibilities for understanding female subjectivity in black popular culture. As a strategy, future texts expose the obstacles that continue to impede black women’s full participation in vernacular expressions of progressive blackness, which I contend are those manifestations of screen blackness that counter the staid tropes of the mammy, Sapphire, Jezebel, and other black female stereotypes.

**Nicki Minaj as Harajuku Barbie: Don’t Think Pink.** Nicki Minaj represents the essence of the future text through her syncretic approach to rap lyricism (Figure 1). She has no problem grabbing the influential part of a rhyme from one place, a tune from another, and the rhythm from yet another—all on the same track and sometimes within the same lyrical phrase. But her remixing doesn’t stop there, as Minaj borrows myriad visual and cultural aesthetics. Her bodily remixing presents just one productive trajectory of black female subjectivity in the face of the chaos and liminality that the future text affords. Yet the new place she carves for black women spatiotemporally, by remixing various moments from older and future disparate times and spaces, sometimes proves problematic. One problem is that Minaj apparently jumps over the politics of respectability without ever traversing through it, as it seems most black women’s representations are forced to do. She has created the ultimate space of liminality, for not only do we not know whether she is bisexual or straight, we also never know which Minaj we are getting, given her multiple and sometimes colliding alter egos. She is the ultimate ratchet, and she represents lower-class black females’ longings unabashedly. She disregards the tropes associated with black female...
respectability, and she refuses to trade in their commerce of not proper enough or too proper—but not exactly.

The old Minaj (before she catapulted to the hip-hop stratosphere) was much harder—though perhaps not much more lyrically profound—and much less “feminine.” The Minaj we know and love today realized that the one power of black women was indeed sex, in every trope that has represented them in the media. So, she played her own sexuality to the hilt, with rumored butt implants, fantastic makeup, outrageous fake hairstyles, and a signature Barbie pink as her trademark. She took Lil’ Kim’s image, wholesale, then disparaged Lil’ Kim for not being her. And we bought it, because Minaj expands the space of what can be allowed for black female representation by eschewing the game of respectability altogether and casting the tropes of black female representation aside. But I am not so sure we can keep buying it. For in her song and video “Stupid Hoe” (directed by Hype Williams, 2012), she calls out female emcees who would challenge her, calling them stupid hoes, as she trades on those same tropes while seemingly ignoring them. To the black female audiences that may wonder whether she purposefully enacts these tropes, I heartily reply that of course she does, for butt implants and fake hair are always purposeful. Further, we may wonder whether she is trying to transcend these tropes or whether she is ignorant of the ideological work the tropes perform. I don’t think her intent matters, for in the discourse we create surrounding Minaj, we as scholars, consumers, and black folk will ask the question anyway, and thus interpellate her in the ideological work whether or not she intends to play. We recognize the potential power of the liminal space she helps create with her image, and we are intrigued by its possibility even as we censor and censure it for being too profane.

Kerry Washington as Olivia Pope: Can’t Turn a “Hoe” into the President’s Wife in *Scandal* (ABC, 2012–). If Minaj pulls out all the stops in remixing black women’s screen images but still lands in the realm of black sex, Kerry Washington, in her role as Olivia Pope on the hit television series *Scandal*, seems to reverberate just one: the allure of black respectability. Yet like Minaj, she still trades in black women’s sexuality. When the show first aired two seasons ago, it sent shock waves through the Internet as Twitter feeds, blogs, and Facebook posts ruminated about the narrative’s premise of a black mistress to a white president and the connections to the Sally Hemings–Thomas Jefferson tryst. And while the show’s creator, black female writer Shonda Rhimes, does not attempt to refashion the problems inherent in a white male slave owner taking a black female slave for his mistress, she most certainly remains aware of the power of the jungle fever trope. Rhimes pushes against this trope in each season, toying with it to probe questions of just how far black female sexuality has moved from the stereotypes of “unrapeability” and lasciviousness, if it has indeed moved at all. And though the intrigues created in the series provide a string of “fixes” to political and interpersonal snafus, one could argue that the unspoken scandal remains the incredulity of Pope ever exercising the power of her sexuality with a white sexual partner.

In deliberately creating Pope’s character as a mistress to a white president, Rhimes consciously creates a future text by syncretically interpellating Hemings as well as the countless screen images wherein a black woman becomes the object of sexual desire
for a white man, from Josephine Baker (*Princesse Tam Tam*; Edmond T. Gréville, 1935) to Halle Berry (*Monster’s Ball*; Marc Forster, 2001) to Sanaa Lathan (*Something New*; Sanaa Hamri, 2006) and beyond. It speaks volumes about the state of black popular culture when one of the most watched television series lures its viewers with the promise of a peek into the scandalous sexcapades of a black mistress. Perhaps *Scandal* plays in close proximity to the reality TV shows that promise the same, or closer still to the exploits of Karrine “Superhead” Steffans—the most famous ratchet who sucked her way to fame on the tips of various famous black male entertainers—just a bit more polished and stylized. My problem with Pope is her wholesale utilization of the politics of respectability despite her being a whore, a mistress. As black female audiences, we sublimate this fact because we are so desperate for black female images to do so much ideological work for us: each image has to be everything to every black woman, when that always leads to frustration and disappointment. We elide the Jezebel trope in which she is enmeshed and focus only on her positive traits of power, both sexual and economic.

**Perry as Madea: The More Things Change, Black Men Still Hold the Reins.** I mention Tyler Perry’s creation Madea, the sassy, gun-toting grandma from his popular films such as *Madea’s Big Happy Family* (2011) and *Madea Goes to Jail* (2009), in this essay about syncretism, black time and space, and black female subjectivity in black popular culture to foreground how a man in drag can illuminate for us the obstacles that impede black women’s full entry into progressive black popular culture. Madea is no ordinary man in drag: she represents a unique combination of the Sapphire and mammy tropes that have plagued black female screen images for decades. As a man in drag, Madea opens up a space for the expansion of black female subjectivity through foregrounding that subjectivity as a performance. Perry’s films purport to expand the realm of the black female subject by unfettering her from any constraints of patriarchy or sexual domination. Like Minaj and Pope, who perform opposite ends...
of the spectrum still with the same result—black female sexuality as the crux to sub-
jectivity—Perry’s Madea collapses these polar opposites into one body, and therefore
does the impossible: perfects what it means to be a black woman on-screen while
acknowledging and discarding all the tropes that follow black women. A feat of this
magnitude hasn’t been achieved since Clair Huxtable astounded us all in The Cosby
Show (NBC, 1984–1992). In doing so, Perry creates a liminal space: his perfect black
woman doesn’t really exist (perfection never does, since it is always myth), and yet he si-
multaneously demonstrates over and over again that the perfect black woman is really
a man. Madea, as a performance, is neither black woman nor man, but Perry leads us
to believe that she is the best of all black women, even as her persona reverberates the
collisions of ratchet and respectability, gun toting and lascivious, housedress wearing
and spiritual—all in one large frame.

I contend that Perry sees the potential of the power in this liminal space, but as a
man, he usurps it, throwing it back into our faces as black women in a game of “see, I
can do you better than you.” With each film the surrounding black women must suf-
f er until they are redeemed. Madea never suffers, as she lies outside the ideology—as
fantastic as that might seem—because she is both man and woman. For in Perry’s
performance of Madea, we never forget that a man is under the dress. And even in
roles in which Perry plays a man, I argue that he is really playing Madea in drag, since
in films like Why Did I Get Married? (Tyler Perry, 2007), he still performs the ultimate in
black female subjectivity, because we are drawn to identify and root for his character
and not the black woman who is his counterpart. Like the supporting roles the women
in his Madea films play, Perry suffers, melodramatically, and we can’t understand why
he must endure so much pain. He thus becomes all those supporting roles rolled into
one: the perfect suffering black woman who in these particular films (Why Did I Get
Married? and Why Did I Get Married Too? [Tyler Perry, 2010]) gets to save himself, instead
of Madea having to save the day for him. To contend that the perfection of the black
woman lay at the hands of man interpellates so many other moments in black history,
for when the struggle for representation happens, we must always choose to be black
first and women second and perhaps sexual beings a distant third. Unless, of course,
you’re Madea, who can do all that we regular black women cannot. Thus, Perry pricks
our sensibilities and raises our ire. We either love him or love to hate him, and this
extends to Madea as well. It troubles me that in this moment of black popular culture
one of the most vibrant, dynamic black female subjectivities is a man in drag. What
ideological impact resounds if the perfection of black female strength and independ-
ence comes mediated through a failed queering of black female sexuality? I contend
that Perry’s feisty Madea performance forecloses any possibility of black female power
on-screen for women and suggests that the category of woman may no longer have
any political exigency in contemporary black popular culture.

Are We Tired Yet? Wading through These Images. As a scholar trying to navi-
gate these images, I feel a great sense of fatigue. My fatigue emanates from watching
every black female image carrying the burden of all the ideological work for all black
women. My fatigue rises as I wonder not only when a critical mass of black female rep-
resentations will occur so that a wider spectrum manifests but also why black women’s
roles have to become ubiquitous for that wider spectrum to even occur in the first place. When can we lift the burden of representation, as it were, so that we can ask different questions of the black female roles we do see? My extension of the future text offers but one way to explore those questions and to create new ones. Since like me, I bet you are tired of expecting the same of black women on-screen and constantly not getting it. If we consider Minaj, Washington, and Perry as future texts, and if we also utilize future texts as a reading strategy with which to interrogate black media artifacts, perhaps we can reconsider the ideological underpinnings the three figures manifest. In doing so, we can get beyond hackneyed debates about whether any of their screen images are “helping or hurting” black popular culture, and we can more fully discern the nuances of how black media representations continue to recycle and recirculate the disparities between black male and female subjectivities. Perhaps such a strategy will remind us to put the question of black women back into investigations of black popular culture.

Keeping the Black in Media Production: One L.A. Rebellion Filmmaker’s Notes
by ZEINABU IRENE DAVIS

I am a member of the L.A. Rebellion group of filmmakers who came out of the UCLA film school with an agenda. We are a small group of critically acclaimed Black filmmakers and media artists who began the first sustained movement in the United States by a collective of minority filmmakers aiming to reimagine the media production processes. Our goal was and is to represent, reflect on, and enrich the day-to-day lives of people in our own communities. Although we are of very diverse origins and conflicting ideas, we share a common desire to create an alternative to the dominant American mode of cinema. Generally speaking, the hope of the group is to realize a cinema of informed, relevant, and unfettered Black expression and the means to bypass the restrictive apparatus of distribution and exhibition to create a viable, alternative delivery system that will sustain the ongoing work of Black cinema artists.

What does the Black mean in Black contemporary media production? For me, it means creating and preserving Black life, culture, and history. It means continuing to create and engage in oppositional media practice, but it also means supporting those who choose to make
work within more mainstream models such as American broadcast television and film. As Stuart Hall states, “The point is not simply that, since our racial differences do not constitute all of us, we are always different, negotiating different kinds of differences—of gender, of sexuality, of class. . . . We are always in negotiation, not with a single set of oppositions that place us always in the same relation to others, but with a series of different positionalities.”¹ I am a filmmaker, professor, wife, and mother—all of these “positionalities” influence my choices and decisions, and they inform the “Black” in my life.

My current work-in-progress, a feature-length documentary, *Spirits of Rebellion: Black Cinema at UCLA*, observes the lives and work of the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers. Headlined by Julie Dash, Charles Burnett, Jamaa Fanaka, Haile Gerima, Billy Woodberry, Barbara McCullough, Ben Caldwell, Carroll Parrott Blue, Alile Sharon Larkin, and Larry Clark, the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers collectively imagined and created a Black cinema against the conventions of Hollywood and blaxploitation films (Figure 1). They did this by attending to the quiet moments of everyday life in their communities and by paying homage to the dignity of their characters.

For the most part, ours is an oppositional cinema that tried to create its own style, approach, and aesthetic—an aesthetic that was informed by a rigorous study of other relevant cinematic approaches. Traditions as divergent as Italian neorealism, Brazilian cinema nova, African cinema, Cuban cinema, and various other “third” cinema practices have influenced our media making. Our narrative work might be characterized by a style that privileges the duration of a shot—holding an image long after an action has been completed to inscribe the beauty of the character or moment. Our style can also mean using a group of people as a symbol for an idea, rather than the story of an individual protagonist. Our cinema celebrates African diaspora culture by incorporating pan-African music, clothing, dance, and spiritual practices.

As one of the younger members of the L.A. Rebellion, I know most of the people who came through the program from the late 1970s through 1990. I have always been one of the members who traveled between the filmmaking world and academia fairly easily. In the past ten years, my work has been in documentary—not because that is what I wanted to do, but because it has been what I can get funded. There is hardly any funding for narrative filmmaking now, certainly not the kind that I want

to do—the kind that plays with and bends genre: documentary, narrative, and experimental all within the same film. The 1990s were the death knell of most public funding of the arts, especially the cinematic arts. There are no more National Endowment for the Arts regional seed or American Film Institute grants that fund anything other than social issue documentaries. Yet many of us still find ways to make media; we might not be in the mall cinemas, but we are still making work and getting it to audiences via the Internet or through traditional audience screenings in theaters.

The pacing of contemporary Black oppositional cinema, especially that of the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers, is different from mainstream cinema. Generally, the narrative films by the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers have a slower pace and pay more attention to small details, such as the way a person holds a cup, or embracing silences between the characters. Action or quick editing may be limited. That’s not what we do best, and that’s not how we see the world. Quiet moments need to be discovered and explored.

I trust that my audience is intelligent and will work with me. Thinking about this audience is extremely important to the way I conceive, produce, and distribute my work and that of others. My ideal audience is a concentric circle that constantly expands—first, Black women at its core; then Black people of all generations and gender orientations; and then others.

My primary subject matter will almost always be Black—I see too few representations of Black people who look like myself in mainstream media. Precious few television shows exist with Black families—comedic or dramatic. My husband and I are raising two girls, ages twelve and seven. It would be wonderful to have a Black family show like The Cosby Show (NBC, 1984–1992) to watch as a family. Hell, I’d even have us sit and watch reruns of Everybody Hates Chris (UPN, 2005–2006; CW, 2006–2009) these days, but these series are not being produced now. Although I am not sorry to see it go, even Tyler Perry’s House of Payne (TBS, 2006–2012) has completed its run, and his new shows are not quite family comedies.

All I can manage these days are frank and open discussions with my children on why the Black character Zuri from the Disney Channel’s Jessie (Disney, 2011–) series is not a good character to emulate. Her smart-aleckiness will get you some evil mama stares from me, and if you misbehave like she does, you will be punished by losing privileges or having an intimate date with the belt.

Film is a powerful art form. As a Black filmmaker, I know it can be both entertainment and education. As a filmmaker mom, my children know that we will and must talk about the media we see. We go see movies together when we can. For example, my oldest has seen Lee Daniels’s The Butler (2013), and we used the film as an opportunity for discussions of civil rights history. It is empowering for her as a young woman to see how young people were the catalysts for much of the change that happened in the movement. But that is not enough. It means explaining to her the history of the Black Panthers and letting her know that The Butler’s depiction was not quite accurate. Keeping the “Black” in media production and practice means exposing both my children and my students to real people in the movement, reading and watching movies about the unsung heroes and heroines, like the Black Panthers, Ella Baker, Ruby Bridges, and many others who have been ignored or misrepresented in mainstream discourse.
Putting the “Black” in Black popular culture as a mother and professor means explaining and arguing with my children and students about mass media representations of Blackness. For example, I love Bruno Mars, and I let my girls listen to him. But “Gorilla” (2013) works my last nerve. “Ooh I got a body full of liquor / with a cocaine kicker / and I’m feeling like I’m thirty feet tall” are not ideal lyrics for a seven-year-old to belt out. The song also insinuates that making love between humans is the same as sex between gorillas. As much as I wish we were post-racial, many people still construct Black people as savage apes. I do not want young Black men to think that they need to have the savage virility of gorillas! I’m still old school enough to want Otis Redding’s “Try a Little Tenderness” (1966) to be the anthem of relationships in my girls’ lives.

The only way I can address my anger and concern with “Gorilla” is to explain why I have problems with it to the girls. I can no longer monitor what they see and listen to all the time—I’m not with them twenty-four hours a day. For media education to be effective, it has to be employed as a natural, everyday occurrence. What I can do is teach them to be able to stand on their own and explain to their friends why the song is problematic. We also expose them to alternatives. Janelle Monáe performed as the opening act for Bruno Mars a few years ago. Both Mars and Monáe had new albums come out this year. My girls and I will listen to both, but we make comparisons and decide whose music and videos will be more lasting and interesting years from now. Right now, Janelle is winning, hands down!

So we know that style is important to our work in Black media production. Understanding and having a mastery over mainstream conventions is good and important. But for me as a media maker and an artist, I still want to push those conventions a bit and add more. Some pieces might be experimental, as are some of the works of Cauleen Smith: her wonderful and provocative gallery installation videos that push the limits of audio and visuals—The Grid and Remote Viewing (both 2010); Portia Cobb’s Don’t Hurry Back (1996) and her collaborative dance and video-photo piece with Ferne Caulker, The Sweetgrass Project (2013); Phillip Mallory Jones’s new and exciting immersive graphic novel Bronzeville Etudes and Riffs (2013); and Kevin Everson’s award-winning experimental documentary Quality Control (2011). Other Black media works might be just a little off-center in terms of aesthetics, just because we still want that broad audience.

Black media production has to go beyond merely producing work. It also means using whatever means necessary to get the films, videos, installations, and web episodes to the people. I am a founding member of the Black Film Society of San Diego. We are a small group of film lovers who want to see more films by Black people. It means doing crowdsourcing screenings where we get a large group of people together to see a Black film that didn’t make it to the theaters in San Diego. It is a lot of work, and we only get the film for one night, but it serves as an intervention. And we get to see great films.

2 For more information on the experimental videos and installations of Cauleen Smith, see her work on Vimeo (http://vimeo.com/kellygabor/videos). For more information on Portia Cobb’s photography and videos, see her work on Vimeo (http://vimeo.com/user4431044/videos). For more information on the work of Philip Mallory Jones, see his website, at http://www.philipmalloryjones.com. For more information on the work of Kevin Jerome Everson, see his website (http://people.virginia.edu/~ke5d/).
Film-making, as a Black filmmaker, means not just making the films but also doing the important and necessary work of engaging with a live audience whenever possible. It is essential to have a question-and-answer discussion period with an audience. During these sessions we have the opportunity for elders to testify and exchange oral histories. We get to hear possible solutions to problems that the characters faced in the film. We get youth to articulate and tantalize our minds with new possibilities and ways of seeing and creating. We get to talk and engage and not hide behind our computers and phones. As a filmmaker, I get fed from these discussions. I learn, and I try to incorporate what has been said in future work. The audience and I determine, as a collective, what Black means today in all its messy, problematic but yet wonderful ways.

Film or media in a general sense is so important to Black popular culture because it can indeed encompass all those things that Hall suggests are important elements of Black popular culture. Using style, music, and the body as a canvas, Black independent filmmakers play with these three elements in various ways. I am thinking of the wonderfully odd visual compositions of Ava Duvernay’s *Venus Vs.* (2013) by our beloved camera wizards Arthur Jafa and Hans Charles. Of music expressed through the form of ragtime by Reginald R. Robinson and African drumming by Atiba Jali in my own feature film *Compensation* (1999). Of the body as a canvas in *Pariah* (2011), by Dee Rees; *Fruitvale Station* (2013), by Ryan Coogler; and most certainly *Mother of George* (2013), by Andrew Dosunmu. Maybe the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers have influenced these filmmakers, or maybe they have not. The important thing to recognize and understand is that a path and a legacy of Black independent film have been laid. Clearly, a Black film legacy lives on in the United States, be it an initial response to racism, to Micheaux’s *Within Our Gates* (1920), or even to Madame C. J. Walker’s hair products films: these early works, no matter how disparate, both reflected and influenced Black popular culture. We are still doing this today.

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Contributors

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Mark D. Cunningham is an adjunct professor in radio, television, and film at Austin Community College, in Austin, Texas. He received his PhD in radio, television, and film from the University of Texas at Austin. He has contributed essays to several anthologies: on the film Crooklyn (Spike Lee, 1994) for The Spike Lee Reader, on the film adaptations of the Twilight novels for Genre, Reception, and Adaptation in the “Twilight” Series, and on television’s Noah’s Arc (2005–2006) for Watching While Black: Centering the Television of Black Audiences. He has forthcoming essays on Ice-T and his role on the television series Law & Order: Special Victims Unit (1999–) and on the independent black film Medicine for Melancholy (Barry Jenkins, 2008).

Zeinabu irene Davis is an independent filmmaker and professor of communication at the University of California, San Diego. Her work is passionately concerned with the depiction of women of African descent. A selection of her award-winning works includes a short drama about a young slave girl for both children and adults, Mother of the River (1996); a personal essay on breast-feeding, Co-Motion (2010); and an experimental narrative exploring the psycho-spiritual journey of a woman, Cycles (1989). Her dramatic feature film Compensation (1999) features two interrelated love stories that offer a view of black deaf culture. Her current documentary work, Spirits of Rebellion: Black Cinema at UCLA, is in postproduction.

Anna Everett is a professor of film, television and new media studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She is a two-time recipient of the Fulbright Senior Scholar Award (2005, 2007), among other honors. Her many publications include the books Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909–1949; Learning Race and Ethnicity: Youth and Digital Media (for the MacArthur Foundation’s series on Digital Media, Youth, and Learning), New Media: Theories and Practices of Digiextuality, AfroGeeks: Beyond the Digital Divide, Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace, and Pretty People: Movie Stars of the 1990s. She is finishing a new book on President Obama, social media culture and the Where U @ Generation.

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Miriam J. Petty is an assistant professor in the Department of Radio, Television, Film and the Department of African American Studies at Northwestern University. She writes and teaches on issues of stardom, reception, genre, race, and media and is especially interested in the history of African American representation in Hollywood film. Her book *Stealing the Show: African American Performers and Audiences in 1930s Hollywood* (forthcoming from the University of California Press) explores the complex relationships between black audiences and black performers in the classical Hollywood era. Petty is also exploring the layered connections between the work of contemporary African American filmmaker Tyler Perry and key African American cultural works, movements, and institutions. Her recent projects include *Madea’s Big Scholarly Roundtable: Perspectives on the Media of Tyler Perry*, a scholarly symposium examining the significance and impact of Perry’s ascent as a multiplatform cultural producer.

Beretta E. Smith-Shomade is an associate professor in the Department of Communication at Tulane University. Her research centers on the production, aesthetic, representational, and industrial aspects of Black television engagement. She has two books published in these frameworks: *Shaded Lives: African-American Women and Television* (Rutgers, 2002) and *Pimpin’ Ain’t Easy: Selling Black Entertainment Television* (Routledge, 2007). Her most recent effort is the anthology *Watching While Black: Centering the Television of Black Audiences* (Rutgers, 2013). Beyond these, Smith-Shomade has published in journals and anthologies on Black filmic representations, cable television, and Black spirituality. Future research directions include the examination of African American independent media distribution; K–12 media literacy efforts; and Blacks, mediation, and religion.