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Cinema Journal, Volume 53, Number 4, Summer 2014, pp. 121-127 (Article)

Published by Michigan Publishing

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2014.0034>



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IN FOCUS: African American Caucus

Introduction: When and Where We Enter

by BERETTA E. SMITH-SHOMADE, RACQUEL GATES, and
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“Don’t call it a comeback, I been here for years.”
—LL Cool J, “Mama Said Knock You Out” (1990)

“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.¹ 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.² 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 prophesies 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.

. . . Cheryl Dunye, St. Clair Bourne, William Greaves, Robert Townsend, Julie Dash, John Singleton, Michelle Parkerson, Melvin Van Peebles, Yvonne Welbon, Noble and George Johnson, Ava DuVernay, Haile Gerima, Kasi Lemmons, Marlon Riggs, Charles Burnett, Cauleen Smith, Stan Laathan, Shola Lynch, Spencer Williams, Aishah Shahidah Simmons, Louis Massiah, Camille Billops, Bill Duke, Byron Hurt, Gina Prince-Bythewood, Oscar Micheaux, Shonda Rhimes, Stanley Nelson, Mara Brock Akil, Rodney Evans, Warrington Hudlin, Euzhan Palcy, Wendell B. Harris, Felicia D. Henderson, Steve McQueen, Debra Martin Chase, Keenan Ivory Wayans, Charles Stone III, Spike Lee, Tyler Perry, Ivan Dixon, Reggie Rock Bythewood . . .

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

2 Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984).

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.



Figure 1. Mister Señor Love Daddy (Samuel L. Jackson) in *Do the Right Thing* (40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks, 1989).

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 pre-suppositions), 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.

. . . Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, bell hooks, Stuart Hall, Barbara Christian, Michele Wallace, Frantz Fanon, Valerie Smith, Houston Baker, Hazel Carby, S. Craig Watkins, Mark Anthony Neal, Barbara Smith . . .

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.

. . . Paul Robeson, Ruby Dee, Taye Diggs, Angela Bassett, Jeffrey Wright, Loretta Devine, Canada Lee, Dorothy Dandridge, Richard Pryor, Vanessa Williams, Forest Whitaker, Madge Sinclair, Samuel L. Jackson, Gertrude Howard, Adolph Caesar, Nina Mae McKinney, Glynn Turman, Will Smith, Ethel Waters, Flip Wilson, Irma P. Hall, Cuba Gooding Jr., Diahann Carroll, Mantan Moreland, Lena Horne, Laurence Fishburne, Kerry Washington, Ossie Davis, Alfre Woodard, Billy Dee Williams, Theresa Harris, Blair Underwood, Lonette McKee, Don Cheadle, Louise Beavers, James Earl Jones, Nia Long, Howard Rollins, Hattie McDaniel, Morris Chestnut, Cleavon Little, Juanita Moore, Al Freeman Jr., Lillian Randolph, Harry Belafonte, Halle Berry, Sidney Poitier, Jada Pinkett Smith, Delroy Lindo, Morgan Freeman, Denzel Washington, Diana Ross, Stepin Fetchit, Fredi Washington, John Amos, Terrence Howard, Rosalind Cash, Bill Cosby, Whoopi Goldberg, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Gabrielle Union, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Anthony Mackie, Phylicia Rashad, Clarence Muse, Cicely Tyson . . .

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. *