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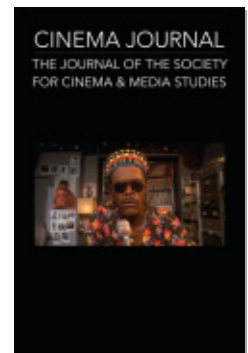
Black Women On-Screen as Future Texts: A New Look at Black
Pop Culture Representations

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Figure 2. Sara Rogers (Seret Scott) in *Losing Ground* (Kathleen Collins, 1982). Courtesy of Milestone Film and Nina Lorez Collins.

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 cinophilia. *

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

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

1 Alondra Nelson, "Introduction: Future Texts," *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002): 1–15.

2 *Ibid.*, 9.

3 *Ibid.*, 7.

4 For more on resistant spectatorship and oppositional spectatorship, respectively, see Manthia Diawara, "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance," *Screen* 29, no. 4 (1988); bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992).

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.



Figure 1. Nicki Minaj as Black Harajuku Barbie.

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



Figure 2. Kerry Washington's character Olivia Pope in *Scandal* (ABC, 2012–).

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 subjectivity—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 simultaneously 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 suffer 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 independence 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 navigate 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 representations 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