America’s Chief Diplomat

The Politics of Condoleezza Rice from Autobiography to Art and Fashion

We must remain patient. Our own history should remind us that the union of democratic principle and practice is always a work in progress. When the Founding Fathers said “We the People,” they did not mean me. My ancestors were considered three-fifths of a person. Knowing the difficulties of America’s own history, we should always be humble in singing freedom’s praises. But America’s voice should never waver in speaking out on the side of people seeking freedom.

—CONDOLEEZZA RICE, remarks to the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, October 8, 2003

I represent the United States. And the United States has had to do some really difficult things. And not everything is popular that the United States has done. But I look at how many people still want to come to America, that this is the place that everybody wants to study, particularly in graduate school or in college. I look at the popularity of American culture, some of it good, some of it bad. And I think America is widely admired. Some of our policies are not very popular and not very well liked, but I think you can’t base how you use the influence of the United States on whether a decision is going to be popular.

—CONDOLEEZZA RICE, Essence magazine, May 25, 2006
The slow response of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in providing relief in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, an ecological and environmental disaster in August 2005, which devastated the nation’s Gulf Coast region and New Orleans, Louisiana, resulting in high casualties when the levee system failed and the city flooded, led to widespread criticism of President George W. Bush and members of his administration. Bush’s administration was criticized for failing to provide faster governmental relief to the population in the city that was predominantly black and poor, lacked the resources to evacuate before the hurricane hit, and had been stranded without food and water for several days in various locations, including the Superdome, where thousands had sought shelter. In the days thereafter, as Bush and Michael Brown, the director of FEMA, were being attacked widely for slowness and inefficiency in responding to the crisis, Gawker reported in a sensational feature that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was spotted shopping at Salvatore Ferragamo, an exclusive designer boutique on Fifth Avenue, where she spent several thousands of dollars on shoes. According to Gawker, as Rice shopped for Ferragamos in New York that fateful day, another customer confronted her, exclaiming angrily, “How dare you shop for shoes while thousands are dying and homeless!” Allegedly, the customer was removed from the store by security.

Rice has denied that this incident with an irate fellow Ferragamo shoe customer ever happened. Whether or not it happened, this story about Rice shopping in an exclusive boutique as poor blacks in New Orleans suffered circulated widely, to the point of becoming a veritable urban legend, epitomizing a view of Rice as being apathetic about the plight of blacks in the United States. Spike Lee’s documentary When the Levees Broke reinforces this representation of Rice in its interview with scholar Michael Eric Dyson, who comments, “While people were drowning in New Orleans, she was going up and down Madison Avenue buying Ferragamo shoes. Then she went to see Spamalot!”

The report about Rice’s shopping at an exclusive shoe boutique while the levees broke reinforced the public perception of the Bush administration as elitist and indifferent to the acute suffering of the predominantly black population in New Orleans. Famously, the rapper Kanye West remarked, “George W. Bush doesn’t care anything about black people,” before a nationally televised concert sponsored by the Red Cross to raise funds to help the victims, which aired on NBC. It also reinforced the association of Rice with policy agendas of white conservative Republicans perceived as being oppressive and detrimental to the economic, political, and social well-being of black communities and
the public perception of Rice as being indifferent to black interests, notwithstanding Rice’s identity as a black woman and upbringing amid the racism and violence of the segregated U.S. South. Her biographers have highlighted her southern background, which she has also discussed recurrently in her writings and interviews.

Rice explained her trip to New York to see the play, shop, and attend the U.S. Open as a much-needed vacation after visiting forty-six countries over a period of nine months. Moreover, as the nation’s secretary of state, a role that, unlike her previous post as national security adviser, was not related to domestic matters, she perceived Hurricane Katrina as beyond the scope of her charge. She cut her trip short and returned to Washington to help address the international response to the situation, traveled to Alabama because of her origins in the state and the impact of the hurricane there, and spearheaded outreach to Bruce Gordon, a leader of the NAACP.

An interview with Essence magazine, the premier organ pitched primarily to the nation’s black women, on May 25, 2006, registers the magnitude and import of Rice’s role in politics, as well as its mutual race and gender implications, as “one of the most powerful women in America” and as “the top official—black official” in the Bush administration, acknowledging concomitant expectations of her to address matters concerning the black population. She explains that the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina was when she first fully grasped and understood her perception as a national leader by many black Americans, who expected her to weigh in on national affairs concerning the population because of her public profile and platform: “I guess—sure, I’ve never felt that—even though my responsibility is foreign policy, I realize that I’m the highest ranking African American in the government. I realize that I have a close personal relationship with the President. And so yeah, I feel responsible for helping on those issues, too.” Similarly, in 2011, Rice acknowledges this moment of realization in her 2011 memoir, No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington, the sequel to Extraordinary, Ordinary People: A Memoir of Family: “[I] sat there kicking myself for having been so tone-deaf. I wasn’t just the Secretary of State with responsibility for foreign affairs; I was the highest-ranking black in the administration and a key adviser to the president. What had I been thinking?” She went on to comment, “I’m still mad at myself for only belatedly understanding my role and responsibilities in the crisis.”

The moment simultaneously registered Rice’s positioning as the nation’s most powerful woman and African American leader and threw questions into
relief related to her racial solidarity with black community interests. Rice was perceived to be indifferent to the suffering of black and low-income minority communities during Hurricane Katrina in what was described as the worst ecological and environmental disaster in the nation's history, which reinforced perceptions of her complicity with the policy agendas of the neoconservative Bush administration, widely perceived to be inimical to black communities, sometimes to the point of being linked to antiblackness. Notions of color-blindness had increasingly inflected neoconservative thought in the post–civil rights era, fueled by a backlash against civil rights within a political climate that routinely downplayed the significance of race and denied the continuing repercussions of racism. This moment that put national and global attention on the predominantly black and poor population of New Orleans, however, was revealing for Rice in providing an epistemology on the relevance of her African American racial and cultural identities in shaping expectations among blacks for her as a leader working on matters related to domestic and national affairs. It was a moment of reckoning in which she was forced to grapple with her influence and legibility as the nation's most powerful and prominent black national leader and as a representative black woman, who was expected to use her voice, platform, and power to add perspectives and insights to public dialogues that affected the nation's black citizenry.

As the most prominent black woman in the national arena, who was initially silent in the wake of this national crisis, the appropriation of her raced, classed, sexed, and gendered body and its serviceability for the advancement of reactionary and controversial domestic and foreign policy agendas mirrored and extended ways in which black feminine bodies become hyperembodied, highly visible, and nationally abstracted while simultaneously remaining rigidly contained and voiceless. Rice's intersectional race, class, gender, and sexual identities have grounded her status as a national icon inasmuch as they constituted her as one of the foremost emblems of national femininity to emerge in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The vociferous criticism of her in the post-Katrina moment both reflected and responded to her high level of visibility and national iconicity, including among many in black communities who viewed her as a “race traitor” because of the neoconservative policy agendas she played a key role in advancing as a member of Bush's cabinet. This iconicity consolidated even as Rice viewed her status as a national leader ambivalently, and her role in sanctioning the war on terror in the wake of the tragedy of September 11, including the Iraq War, garnered widespread public distrust and criticism.
Rice’s role as national security adviser in the Bush administration focused on domestic issues and played a pivotal role in her nationalization as a public figure, just as her role as secretary of state accorded her unprecedented power and influence as a black woman in the international arena. Significantly, Forbes magazine named her the most powerful woman in the world in both 2004 and 2005. Even as national security adviser, Rice’s profound influence on U.S. foreign policy was patently evident in her salience in helping to provide rationalizations for the Iraq War in the wake of the September 11 tragedy. Rice famously invoked the history of blacks in the South by comparing the pressure to withdraw U.S. troops from the war in Iraq to northerners advocating for the end of the Civil War before slaves had been freed: “Absolutely. Because it’s difficult, it doesn’t mean that, first of all, it won’t work out. I think it will. I’m sure there are people who thought that it was a mistake to fight the Civil War to its end and to insist that the emancipation of slaves would hold. I know there were people who said why don’t we get out of this now, take a peace with the South, but leave the South with slaves?”

While Rice was a child of the South and viscerally linked to its civil rights history, there was an irony in bringing up its antebellum past given that she was part of the group whose rights were frequently compromised by its racial politics. In the post-civil rights era, the neoconservative movement mainstreamed the notorious southern strategy, designed to dismantle legislative gains, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Rather than address persisting racism, it routinely prioritized agendas that were designed to undermine affirmative action and to propagate reverse discrimination claims by whites, who contended that they were disadvantaged and discriminated against within employment and educational systems that used “quotas” based on race to increase the number of minorities within institutions. Rice gained a political voice and platform in the national mainstream in the new millennium amid a neoconservative backlash against civil rights that appropriated civil rights discourses to advance reactionary agendas. Paradoxically, Rice gained symbolic capital from invoking civil rights legacies, which have saliently mediated her claims to moral authority in the public sphere, along with her rise as a black model of national femininity in the new millennium.

Rice emerged as the most ubiquitous and legible black woman in national politics and consolidated her power against the backdrop of a climate in which black women’s voices had been marginalized by Republicans and Democrats alike. This climate suggests that by the end of the twentieth century, the space
for black women leaders in the political arena was severely limited as the ideology of neoconservatism gained traction during the post–civil rights era. Pondering the conditions within the political climate that yielded Rice as a national leader is important for recognizing the anomaly that she was, within a space that severely limited the participation of black women and that had established a pattern of maligning, ridiculing, and pathologizing through a barrage of negative media anyone who even got close to entering its top echelons of power. James D. King and James W. Riddlesperger Jr. remind us in “Diversity and Presidential Cabinet Appointments” that Rice, Hillary Clinton, Colin Powell, and Madeleine Albright are among the handful of leaders who have diversified the inner cabinets of presidents by representing race and gender categories other than white men, who have historically held such positions.

If Rice was embraced as a top leader within the cabinet of George W. Bush as a Republican presidential leader, there were clear limitations to the unprecedented power she wielded in the national arena as a black woman. If we consider Nicholas Boushee’s analysis of the concerted Republican Party efforts in recent years to expand beyond its conventional base of white voters, drawing in more ethnic minorities as new messengers within a diversifying electorate to increase odds for success, then Rice registers as a harbinger of this turn at the dawn of the new millennium. The articulation and sanctioning of Rice as a national leader and symbol by the Republican establishment in the new millennium was paradoxically premised on her complicity with race-neutral narratives, which repressed civil rights agendas or rearticulated and appropriated them in relation to reactionary policies in the political mainstream. It relied on gross and superficial appropriations of civil rights history to advance agendas in which the needs and concerns of black citizens were subordinated to prioritize the advancement of race-neutral, colorblind policies that seemed designed to reverse the gains of the civil rights movement. Though Rice emerged as a leader and one of the prominent emblems of the national body and national femininity, her embodiment and articulation of national femininity was paradoxically premised on an ideology of the postracial. Isabelle Vagnoux has noted that the careers of leaders such as Madeleine Albright, Hillary Clinton, and Rice obscure the persisting challenges to women being elected to high-ranking positions.

In recent years, the stories of Rice joining the formerly segregated Shoal Creek Golf Club in Birmingham, Alabama, in 2009, and in 2012, making history by being one of the first two women inducted into the formerly segregated Augusta National Golf Club in Georgia, the home of the annual Masters
championship, adds to her record of groundbreaking achievements and points to her continuing efforts to challenge the specter of southern segregation in her adult life. Because of the more sustained space for reflection that Rice’s memoir provides, it is a valuable text to draw on for thinking about her public leadership and relationship to the national body and for tracing the conditions of her emergence as a model of national femininity back to her history in the segregated South. I begin this chapter with a discussion of the first volume of Rice’s monumental memoir, *Extraordinary, Ordinary People*, to examine the deliberation with which she has attempted to help shape and redefine notions of the national body and citizenry in the United States, which profoundly registers her voice in meditations on notions of national selfhood. It builds on the recurring narratives within her public speeches and interviews, which have centered family by invoking the Rice clan as a representative American family and recollecting the values and struggles of her paternal ancestors, as well as by emphasizing children in references to the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, which claimed the lives of Denise McNair, Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, and Carole Robertson, to advance policy related to the war on terror.

As a scholar of African American literature, I also value this work because it contributes to the subgenre within African American literary history of serial autobiography. This subgenre was inaugurated in slave narrative writing in the late eighteenth century and reached epic proportions in the multivolume autobiographical masterpiece produced over a span of more than thirty years by Maya Angelou. Rice’s autobiography is another prime illustration of how profoundly and consistently black women in politics have produced literature primarily concentrated in the genres of memoir and autobiography, which have often failed to gain legibility or garner critical interest and notice from literary scholars.

I build on this literary analysis by examining signal representations of Rice in the realm of culture that draw on her national iconicity, an approach that reflects my concomitant critical investments in cultural studies. I consider *Mad TV*’s “Condi Comes to Harlem” comedy skits, which draw on blaxploitation cinema motifs to critique, reconstruct, and redefine Rice’s relationship to the Bush administration. These works imaginatively invoke temporalities from slavery to the 1970s and spaces from Harlem to the White House to critique Rice’s influence on the political arena and her relationship to President Bush, along with neoconservative ideologies. They are useful for my purposes for the extent that they are premised on her status as an emblem of the national
body and notions of national family, as well as centering blackness in framing her as a model of national femininity. They script her as a national symbol and deconstruct her iconicity, linking her to the black liberation movement, framing her as a primary advocate for black community interests, mediated by her queer interlocutor. Simultaneously, they critique her serviceability in consolidating repressive neoconservatism, along with highly conventional scripts of national selfhood, unsettling the authority of neoconservative ideology in shaping the national narrative and notions of American patriotism. In turn, they illustrate the limitations in fashioning the black female body as a liberatory symbol or subversive site in revising conventional national narratives grounded in a discourse of reaction and premised on the alienation and subordination of black subjects within the national body, obscuring the potential of black queer and trans subjects to expand and diversify American democracy.

A prolific body of interviews and photographs that circulated for over a decade in print newspapers, magazines, on television, and on the internet has shaped Rice’s emergence as a visual icon in national and global contexts. Her popular representations have recurrently invoked her iconicity in staging visual representations provocatively premised on recurrent narratives of Rice as a race traitor, while critiquing her neoconservative politics. The final section of this chapter furthers my investigation of cultural works by examining art by Terry Lloyd, Ayanah Moor, Luc Tuymans, Enrique Chagoya, and Amy Vangsgard to consider ways in which they variously respond to and deconstruct Rice’s iconic force by emphasizing race, class, gender, and sexuality in imaging her as a black woman in the public sphere and critiquing her relationship to whiteness, including white patriarchy and notions of southern paternalism. The visual art representations of Rice that I examine in this chapter have been produced in the United States as well as in transnational contexts, from Great Britain to Mexico, and all share commonalities in registering and citing her national and global iconicity. I conclude by examining fashion’s role in shaping Rice’s iconicity.

**America’s “Birth Defect”**

In “Long Time: Long Lost Daughters and the New ‘New South,’” Hortense Spillers methodologically foregrounds a detailed reading of autobiographical and biographical volumes related to African American Supreme Court
justice Clarence Thomas to illustrate the retrograde policies reflecting a temporality that on the front end would have conceivably led him to oppose the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, which ended segregation of public schools. She argues that his ascendance to the nation’s highest court in 1991 foreclosed the civil rights era and assaulted the legacy established by his predecessor, Thurgood Marshall, in effect ending the long span of the 1960s. Thomas’s birth in poverty in Pin Point, Georgia, and his upbringing by a grandfather who instilled values in him such as hard work were widely cited to demonstrate his rootedness in black communities in the months preceding his confirmation to the Supreme Court. Like Thomas’s infamous claim that he was the victim of a “high-tech lynching” during the weeks of hearings before the Senate Judiciary Committee related to law professor Anita Hill’s allegations of sexual harassment, such stories about his southern background linked him to notions of black authenticity.

Similarly, trauma narratives related to civil rights history and black southerners during the era of Jim Crow, specifically the loss of the four girls when Rice was a child coming of age in Birmingham, have been instrumental in legitimizing and authenticating Rice as an African American who understands racism and discrimination, notwithstanding her right-wing political alliances. The stories framing Rice as the daughter of a Presbyterian minister in Birmingham who stressed the value of education have been appropriated and promoted by the right wing to create essentialist and romanticized scripts, linking black subjects to conventional narratives of success and uplift that define the conventional national narrative and obscure or downplay the reality of racism. In addition to reinforcing her linkages to conservative ideology in the national mainstream, *Extraordinary, Ordinary People* reinforces and further enshrines Rice within discourses of black conservatism, because autobiography and memoir are primary genres in which such reactionary ideologies about blackness have been historically elaborated, circulated, and promoted.

The invocation of a southern background to invoke strong values and tradition is a central device in instating conservative African American leaders at the national level, such as Thomas and Rice, whose policies have been controversial and associated with retrenchments against civil rights in the nation and human rights in the international arena, respectively. Louis Prisock uses the autobiography of former national Republican Party chairman Herman Cain as a lens to explore themes within the literature of black conservatism and to suggest how the critiques that typically portray black conservatives as what Sumo Cho describes as “racial mascots” in effect obscure the larger work of
this group in upholding notions of American exceptionalism and global superiority. These critical reflections by Prisock centered on Cain, who also grew up in the Deep South, also hold implications for Rice’s memoir.

Rice’s memoir not only accords with the classic bildungsroman but also builds on the body of coming-of-age stories in the Jim Crow South, a genre that was heralded by Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) and includes signal works such as Ann Moody’s *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968). In more recent years, autobiographies by black feminist critics, from bell hooks’s *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (1997) to Trudier Harris’s *Summer Snow: Reflections of a Black Daughter from the South* (2007), have provided revealing insights on subject formation for black girls in the South. Beyond the account of the unrest in Birmingham, Alabama, during the civil rights era at the foundation of Angela Davis’s famous 1972 autobiography, produced during the black liberation era in the wake of her imprisonment and trial, Rice’s story is valuable for providing what is perhaps the most gripping and detailed account of what it meant to come of age in a time during which the city gained notoriety to the point of being referred to as Bombingham because of the bombings that white supremacists frequently carried out to terrorize black communities. In the post–civil rights era, this body of autobiographical work by black southern women has valuably informed black feminist epistemologies related to the repercussions of race and gender oppression on black women and girls who grew up in the Jim Crow South and their reflections on its lingering traumas.

Such writings provide valuable perspective for childhood studies and hold critical implications for the growing body of scholarly work in black girlhood studies, particularly by scholars such as Robin Bernstein, Wilma King, Stacey Patton, and Nazera Sadiq Wright, who are among the authors who have increasingly investigated the effects of racism on black children, including black girls. Such critical epistemologies are also an indispensable foundation for reflecting on Rice’s account in *Extraordinary, Ordinary People* of growing up in her middle-class family in segregated Birmingham and the childhood experiences that have continued to influence her perspective as an adult woman, including her political outlook and view of the nation and the world. More to the point, critical insights from studies of black childhood and girlhood are helpful for thinking about Rice’s reflections, which affirm the continuing influence of slavery in shaping the nation, as well as about how the mourning story related to the four girls who died in the bombing at 16th Street mediated
Rice's nationalization as a leader and shaped her policy outlook on the war on terror as an international leader.

Images of Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, and Denise McNair circulated worldwide in the wake of the bombing and further nationalized and globalized the civil rights movement during the 1960s. The images of the girls became iconic transnationally and emerged as a site of national mourning in ways that linked the girls to notions of national selfhood. Rice originally rose to national prominence through her keynote speech at the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 2000, in which she focused on her paternal ancestors by incorporating anecdotes related to her grandfather's quest for education in the postslavery South and her father's shift to the Republican Party when Democrats refused to allow him to register to vote during the era of segregation. Yet invocations of the female-centered narrative of the iconic four girls seared in the national imagination have played the primary role in linking Rice to civil rights history and in mediating her scripts in the U.S. public sphere, including her emergence as a leader in the national arena and her relationship to national femininity. In speeches and interviews, Rice repeatedly invoked the tragic losses of the four girls, one of the most salient and familiar national scripts of black femininity that emerged during the civil rights era, in reflecting on her childhood before her audiences, and she mobilized it to advance the war on terror in contexts such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

For example, in keeping with Rice's recurring invocations of civil rights in discussions of the war on terror, in a speech to the Mississippi College School of Law in May 2003, she acknowledges the exclusion of blacks within the nation's founding ideals and frames the civil rights movement as the catalyst for the birth of a new and more inclusive nation. She goes on to analogize the tragic church bombing that took the lives of the four girls in Birmingham with terror in the Middle East. In these moments, Rice both draws on and reinforces the recurring scripts that linked the girls to notions of American identity at the time of the bombing. At the same time, in linking slavery and the erasure of blacks to the nation's failure to achieve its founding ideals and the civil rights movement to the nation's rebirth, Rice reframes the national narrative to centralize black subjects in its origin and definition.

Nonetheless, such comparisons have been critiqued and resisted by Rice's critics. In reflecting on Rice's invocation of civil rights history to justify the Iraq War in an interview with Katie Couric, journalist Eugene Robinson
frames Rice’s analogy as a “retrospective reinvention” that “left me wondering whether I was hearing polished sophistry or a case of total denial.” Robinson, who mentions his own upbringing in the South as the Jim Crow era ended and critiques Rice’s failure to acknowledge that the terror against blacks during that period was typically state sponsored, suggests that she posits a false equivalence between the Klan bombing of the church and contemporary jihadis. More broadly, his critique suggests the limitations in Rice’s positing of the movement against terror in the global arena as a continuation of the modern civil and human rights movement. Her analogy obscures continuing black traumas in the South, including residual traces of the political and social climate that led to the bombing.

Not only did references to the girls’ deaths regularly inflect Rice’s speeches and interviews during her years in the Bush administration, but they are also foundational in her memoir. In the first installment of Rice’s two-part memoir Extraordinary, Ordinary People, an image of Rice’s friend Denise McNair, the youngest of the victims, being conferred a kindergarten diploma by Rice’s father, John Rice, encapsulates their shared histories and memories and links Rice to this horrific tragedy in a visceral way as a child growing up in segregated Birmingham. That Denise’s father, Chris McNair, a professional photographer, took the photo of his daughter being conferred the diploma by Rice’s father points to their mutuality as “daddy’s girls” and to the McNairs as another model black family like the Rices in the city. Rice’s memoir indexes the foundational role of the southern landscape, including the horrific bombing at the 16th Street Baptist Church, in structuring her consciousness and shaping her identity.

Rice’s reflections on the tragic losses of the girls at the 16th Street Baptist Church simultaneously conform to conventional and even reactionary narratives of civil rights history in popular and literary contexts that mainly associate the problem of racism with the past. As Valerie Smith points out, contemporary literature and films often present a narrative of the civil rights movement suggesting that “through shared sacrifice and exemplary action, the movement triumphed over white supremacy and delivered the nation from its past injustices into a brighter future of freedom, equality and opportunity,” a narrative that presents its martyrs sentimentally, implies racism to be a bygone phenomenon, and reinforces the notion of America as a land of opportunity. Smith notes that “the martyred Sunday School girls have come to symbolize the innocence and moral rectitude of southern black communities under siege” and argues that Spike Lee’s 1997 HBO documentary 4 Little Girls,
by using strategies such as featuring family members and friends of the girls who continued to be affected by their losses and presenting a more dynamic and complex story of the girls’ lives, “dislodges the ‘four little girls’ from their symbolic status as a collective icon.”

Lee’s film both builds on and reinforces the iconicity of photographic images of the girls, images whose circulation worldwide helped to nationalize and globalize the civil rights movement during the 1960s. The girls became iconic at a national level in the wake of the tragic bombing. These images illustrate a key instance when black and southern feminine bodies have become iconic and circulated transnationally in constituting this nation’s sense of selfhood, including discourses of loss and mourning, in relation to the civil rights movement. The Lee documentary extends these abstracted significations by casting the children as angels within its visual iconography, with their pictures underneath, all atop a banner that reads, “The story of four young girls who paid the price for the nation’s ignorance.”

Rice’s reflections on this tragedy have typically been framed within the discourse of American patriotism and conservative politics and in relation to her endorsement of the fight against terrorism in the global arena. Her invocations of the bombing at the 16th Street Baptist Church have also continually played a key role in scripting her in relation to discourses of national femininity, by drawing on the tragic losses of these iconic young girls and her experience of racism and segregation in Birmingham to underscore how her achievements have given her optimism about the American dream, notwithstanding the painful struggles that she both witnessed and experienced growing up in Birmingham. This story was an established aspect of the national narrative and had a lingering presence in national memory.

Citing it and noting her connections to the girls mediated Rice’s entry into national politics and made her legible and relatable in relation to civil rights histories in the South. It helped to moor emerging scripts of Rice as a national leader once she entered the public sphere as national security adviser and gained increasing iconicity in the media. The press conferences Rice staged, which typically featured her standing behind a podium near an American flag, recast and mirrored the backgrounds typically used by presidents and featured her as a key representative and spokesperson within Bush’s presidential cabinet, framing her as a spokesperson for him and as an extension of his authority. She was the most visible and vocal woman in national politics and a reigning national leader, authority that made her a constant presence in the media, conditioned her national iconicity, and articulated her in relation to
national femininity. Speaking of the children in dialogues about the urgency of the war on terror reinforced the long-standing global reach and power of this story, acknowledged its continuing significance, and made linkages between the violent history of the U.S. South and newer forms of terrorism.

At the same time, Rice’s narratives about this tragedy in effect obscure the role that some conservative whites in the U.S. South have played in endorsing right-wing policies related to the war on terror because of anxieties about Islam and the Middle East, whites who, unlike her, typically do not prioritize this tragic history related to the four little black girls, register it as a lingering trauma in the sense that accords with Rice’s experience of it, or acknowledge the South’s racist and violent past in thinking about the urgency of the war on terror. Rice’s narratives about this tragedy obscure the ways in which the right wing has typically repressed and disavowed the U.S. South’s violent history and racism. Furthermore, the levels on which Rice was exposed to this tragic bombing in her youth have made it unsettling and ironic for some of her critics that in the battle against terrorism, she has been identified with war policies that perpetrate violence against civilian communities and that have resulted in more than three hundred thousand civilian casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan, including thousands of women and children.

Another image from Rice’s childhood that she includes in *Extraordinary, Ordinary People* holds important implications in anticipating her eventual emergence as a national and global black female public figure. The photo shows her as a little girl standing in front of the White House in Washington, DC, during a family vacation to the city when she was nine. She wears a dress and holds a book, with one foot positioned slightly forward. Marcus Mambry’s biography of Rice, *Twice as Good: Condoleezza Rice and Her Path to Power*, features this photo as a cover shot to suggest a progression in the path that Rice walked from this moment early in life on to numerous career achievements and her eventual historic appointments as a black woman in Bush’s presidential cabinets, as national security adviser and secretary of state. This photo is intriguing for its bold representation of Rice during the era of segregation, in relation to the White House, one of the nation’s most prominent and famous architectural symbols. Her pose resists, defies, and assertively revises conventional scripts of blacks as being excluded and alienated from notions of national belonging and definitions of the national body.

This image set the stage for Rice’s iconicity and her work in the West Wing of the White House later in life. It established foundations for her recurrent representations as an emblem of the national body. If the journey began in
her distant past with this childhood pilgrimage to the White House with her parents, it culminated with her friendship with President George W. Bush and appointment to cabinet-level positions in his presidential administrations. In the process, Rice emerged in the first years of the twenty-first century as a premier emblem within recurrent narratives highlighting the black feminine body in relation to the White House and the Capitol as symbolic architectural spaces while being abstracted as an emblem of the national body and as a model of national femininity.

Rice’s formative childhood years in Birmingham, Alabama, during the civil rights era; her family’s move when she was thirteen to Denver, Colorado, when her father was offered a job at the University of Denver, and her years of matriculation in the city as a student; her graduate work at Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana; her eventual relocation to Palo Alto, California, to assume a professorship at Stanford; and her decade of work in Washington, DC, are all factors that link her subject formation to a range of geographic contexts and circuits of migration within the United States. They situate her amid newer waves within the long continuum of black movement in the United States, historically known as the Great Migration. Indeed, several chapters in Rice’s Extraordinary, Ordinary People, such as “Tuscaloosa,” “Denver Again,” “Leaving the South Behind,” “D.C. Again,” and “Back in California” explicitly invoke geographic points across the national map that she has traversed throughout her life. Rice’s scholarly studies of the Soviet Union and work in the Pentagon during the presidency of George H. W. Bush were the earliest gateway through which she began to travel and circulate internationally as her academic career began. Her eventual appointments as national security adviser and secretary of state by George W. Bush increased her movements around the globe exponentially and are the basis of her emergence as a global icon. It is significant that a chapter title mentions leaving the South “behind,” which implies that the region is an aspect of her past. Yet the region has continued to play a dynamic role in shaping her subjectivity, as well as the public discourses related to her, including her own interviews and speeches.

The numerous biographies of Rice chronicle the foundational influence of her upbringing by her doting mother, Angelena Rice, and close relationship to her father, John Rice, in establishing foundations for her success and emergence as a leader in the global arena. It is noteworthy that scripts of Rice alternatively emphasize the passion and commitment in their parenting, stress her close relationship with them, and frame her as a model daughter in place of the narratives that have recurrently framed black women national leaders in
relation to maternal motifs. Just as family has served as a salient lens through which Rice has presented her story in speeches and interviews, *Extraordinary, Ordinary People* narrates her personal story as a family story, as signaled in the title, and frames her success as an outgrowth of conscientious parenting, the values of her extended family, and a resilient community. Rice grounds and centers her story in her linkages to a patrilineal heritage spanning back to itinerant minister and educator John Wesley Rice Sr. on her father’s side and the insurgent and hard-working miner Albert Robinson Ray III on her mother’s. Narratives that foreground Rice’s parentage have inflected scripts of Rice’s family as a representative American family in the public sphere and in her writings. Beginning with this memoir’s title, Rice frames her African American family of origin as being a unique and yet typical and highly representative American family that embodies values related to perseverance because of its roots in the segregated South. Concomitantly, she frames the black population collectively as being definitional and foundational to notions of the national family.

Just as *Extraordinary, Ordinary People* draws on Rice’s story of the girls at the 16th Street Baptist Church in part to advance neoconservative foreign policy agendas, it also meditates on the social problem of racism and invokes blacks in relation to the prevailing notions of national family while revealing her investments in conventional patriotic and nativist scripts of the national narrative in the United States. The memoir includes numerous anecdotes and stories that draw on her experiences and those of others in her family to reflect on race and racism and, in keeping with her comments in multiple interviews and speeches, frames slavery as America’s “birth defect.” This personifying metaphor for the nation, which is also tacit in the phrasing of the first epigraph from Rice that frames this chapter, notably unfolds against a backdrop of reflections related to her own family, situates blacks and whites within a symbolic national family and shared history, and points to their long-standing interracial sexual intermixture at the same time that it speaks to how slavery was systemically institutionalized during the colonial era and shadowed the nation’s emergence as a republic in the late eighteenth century, when notions of citizenship and democracy were originally formulated.

Rice’s image of a baby conceived and birthed with a defect to embody the nation alludes to conventional raced and gendered birth metaphors of nationhood that have circulated in American literary and cinematic history. In a symbolic sense, Rice invokes the reigning right-wing discourses that Lauren
Berlant has linked to an excessively intimate public sphere in the United States constituted through the phenomenon of “infantile citizenship.” As Berlant argues, “In the process of collapsing the political and the personal into a world of public intimacy, a nation made for adult citizens has been replaced by one imagined to be for fetuses and children.” Berlant goes on to describe “a strong and enduring belief that the best of U.S. national subjectivity can be read in its childlike manifestations and in a polity that organizes its public sphere around a commitment to making a world that could sustain an idealized infant citizen.” The national iconicity of the four girls that coalesced in the wake of the bombing is the obverse of scripts of infantile citizenship fetishized by reactionaries.

Even as Rice’s metaphor of an infantile abnormality emphasizes the nation’s failure to live up to its cherished ideals, its continuing limitations, and the inherent flaws that shadowed its rise as a republic, her interpretation of the nation’s history is premised on conventional notions of American exceptionalism, purity, and innocence. Prisock relates such logic to complicity with American exceptionalism and argues that it reinforces white supremacy, pointing out that “because America’s history is so closely intertwined with its ‘original sin’ (slavery), making the black-white conflict the defining racial conflict in the nation, to have the descendants of slaves validating America’s heralded traditions while putting the nation’s reprehensible treatment of their group behind them symbolizes to the right a closure of the nation’s ignominious racial history, thus truly validating America’s greatness.”

This section of Rice’s memoir illustrates the deliberation with which she has attempted to help shape and redefine notions of the U.S. national body and citizenry and profoundly registers her voice in meditations on notions of national selfhood. By implication, if unwittingly, she also marks disabled bodies as marginal and undesirable within the nation’s normative citizenry. Moreover, Rice’s acknowledgment of her preference to use the term black over the hyphenated African-American, by aiming to unsettle conflations of black experience in the United States with the nation’s immigrant narratives, reinscribes the hegemonic signification of African Americans in relation to the category black and is steeped in a nativist, U.S.-centered definition of the category black dislodged from the larger African diaspora. It reveals how her definition of blackness has been developed against the backdrop of historical debates related to race, nationality, and ethnicity, as well as contemporary discourses on immigration and transnationality.
defining the term as a referent for African American subjects, her exclusionary formulation of blackness holds even direr implications when recognizing its elaboration during a historical moment when the nation’s increasingly reactionary immigration policies were routinely targeting black immigrants alongside Middle Easterners and Mexicans through heightened surveillance and racial profiling. Ultimately, though Rice’s framing of blackness as central in defining the nation is subversive and provides valuable critical reflection on notions of national identity, her perspective is limited and mirrors prevailing themes in conservative autobiographies premised on American exceptionalism.

The essays in *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State*, edited by Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón, and Minoo Moallem, foreground study of the influence of gender, particularly women, in shaping the nation-state, including nationalisms, while expanding the terrain of study within transnational feminism to Latin America and the Middle East. Their study provides a reminder that the salience of the feminine in framing national identity holds potential to both subvert and reinscribe the power of hegemonic states, including forces of colonialism and imperialism. Such insights are also indispensable for reflecting on Rice’s centrality in the early 2000s in advancing the foreign policy of the Bush administration in nations where women continue to face subjection and remain vulnerable to state forces from within, as well as to the ravages of U.S. policy agendas. The accessibility and serviceability of women in constructing national narratives routinely linked to fundamentalisms and abuses carried out at the state level is no less true in the United States than in the contexts examined in this landmark critical anthology. Even as the power that Rice wielded in national and global contexts as a black woman was unprecedented, such geopolitical dynamics remind us of what was at stake in her iconicity and empowerment, and they complicated her representational politics.

More to the point, the authority and value in models of national femininity in the United States are compromised when mobilized to buffet imperialism and colonialism. In some cases, such national iconicity and visibility paradoxically serve as a signpost of women’s continuing subjection and lack of power by showing the limitations in women leaders who nevertheless remain beholden to patriarchal political agendas. In the new millennium, the familiar narrative of the girls victimized by the bombing in Birmingham mediated Rice’s emergence as a national leader alongside citations of her family as a model and representative black family that maintained continuing faith
in American democracy, notwithstanding its imperfections, and persevered. Her emergence as a model of national femininity was paradoxically reinforced and consolidated by her prominent role in advancing the war on terror. Still, her iconic femininity was less linked to her subjectivity and agency as a woman leader, or even to agendas designed to advance the interests of women globally, than to authorizing and rationalizing foreign policies that advanced militarism on behalf of the Bush administration. In the section that follows, I discuss the profuse cultural representations that register Rice’s status as a powerful leader. They stage bold fantasies and incorporate queer motifs that marshal her authority and iconic femininity on behalf of black communities and realign her political identity as a black woman to redress the benign neglect of black populations in the United States, a domestic issue that reached its height after Hurricane Katrina. In the process, they portray her as a revolutionary with more agency and autonomy in foreign policy.

Condi Comes to Harlem

In April 2011, Rice made a cameo appearance on the NBC sitcom 30 Rock, in which she poses as a woman who once dated Jack Donaghy (Alec Baldwin). She is asked to help him because his new wife has been kidnapped in North Korea, a scenario with a provocative subtext of interracial romance that alludes to Rice’s challenging diplomatic engagements with North Korea as secretary of state. In the episode, her character also challenges him to a duel, with her on piano and jazz flute. In Francesca T. Royster’s essay “Condi, Cleopatra, and the Performance of Celebrity,” she argues that such representations are steeped in rumors and fantasies about romance between Bush and Rice and draw on Rice’s iconicity. In depicting Jack as being reliant on her expertise, Royster points to how the episode throws into relief the marginality that Rice experienced as a woman within Bush’s male-dominated cabinet. Royster relates such popular representations premised on rumors about Rice’s private life and relation to powerful men, which play up “her specularity as a beautiful black woman” instead of engaging her political work, to the myth of Cleopatra. She frames them as “sources of distraction,” relating Rice to celebrity and anxieties about her political power, representations that deflect from serious dialogues about her role in the nation’s foreign policy, including sanctioning torture. William L. D’Ambruoso offers a revealing reading of how policies and limitations on torture establish norms that paradoxically escalate torture.
practices by political leaders who rationalize circumventing those strictures for the greater good.  

Rice’s representations in comedy draw on race, class, gender, and sexuality and are inflected by anxieties about her racial identification, her relationship with President Bush, and her role in international politics, including her work in helping to constitute the war on terror. Rice has been recurrently embodied, abstracted, and rendered as a character for performance when parodied in contemporary television comedy. Royster’s reading of the representation of Rice on 30 Rock, which fantasizes Rice in relation to white masculine lovers in ways that emphasize aesthetics and belie her power, obscures popular comedy representations that ground her in black specificity, while linking her to both power and agency, such as in Mad TV’s “Condi Comes to Harlem” skits. Given Rice’s black identity and widespread social concerns about the consequences of conservative policies on African Americans, it is also not surprising that some of Rice’s most assertive critiques have been staged in African American comedy. 

Black comedians, from Redd Foxx, Flip Wilson, Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, and Whoopi Goldberg to newer contemporary performers such as Wanda Sykes, Steve Harvey, Chris Rock, and Dave Chappelle have routinely incorporated political topics in their comedy routines. As Mel Watkins notes in his important history of black comedy, On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying—The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor that Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor, African American comedy has made a vital if typically overlooked contribution in shaping American humor. Richard Pryor was one of the first black comedians whose shows attracted diverse audiences and enabled him to achieve crossover success in the post–civil rights era, akin to that associated with pop musicians. As a performer, his comedy helped to break down color barriers and boldly confronted controversial topics related to race and politics. In more recent years, comedian Dave Chappelle offers some of the most compelling confrontations of race as a topic in comedy. As John H. Jackson argues in his study Racial Paranoia: The Unintended Consequences of Political Correctness, the provocative content of Chappelle’s work, given its recurrent engagements of race, is valuable for thinking through social anxieties related to race and racism. 

Chappelle famously lampooned Rice on Chappelle’s Show during a 2004 segment called “The Racial Draft.” “The Racial Draft” is broadcast live by several commentators before a spirited audience, whose members are separated into racial and ethnic categories, such as blacks, whites, Latinos, Asians, and Jews, and whose atmosphere recalls that of a sporting event, such as the
annual drafts of the National Basketball Association and National Football League (NFL), an institution of which Rice is, incidentally, a longtime fan and supporter. While *Chappelle's Show* frames this skit within the broadcasting style associated with sporting events, it ironically alludes to the commodification and trading of black bodies on the auction block during antebellum slavery and links this dehumanizing and humiliating practice to a range of contemporary ethnic and racial categories. As K. A. Wisniewski notes in his edited volume on Chappelle's comedy, “The Racial Draft” ranks among skits that illustrate “the powers and problems surrounding stereotypes.”

In this suspenseful and excited atmosphere, Chappelle uses comedy as a medium to draw attention to anxieties and concerns in the African American context about the political alignment of Colin Powell and Rice with the Republican right wing. By voluntarily trading her over to the “whites” to complement their request for Powell, Chappelle marks Rice as expendable and undesirable within the African American context and as the quintessential “race traitor.” The logic here reinscribes notions of black authenticity, in this case based on the perception that black leaders who are Republican and conservative are not truly black and, in a symbolic sense, are identified with whiteness. The right-wing affiliation of Powell and Rice is the basis for their rejection by the black race. While Rice is correlated to Powell, the implication is that both are inimical to African Americans because of their mutual alignment with neoconservative politics and work in Bush’s presidential administration.

Comedy’s energetic and frequently profane linguistic economies and visual staging, which so frequently prioritize the voice and narrative authority of the singular performer, make it fascinating to weigh within the vector of performance studies, which engages critical theories of performativity, even though the field has not prioritized comedy. For example, performativity discourses shape the arbitrary ascriptions of different racial categories to subjects on the spot within this skit, which is premised on the notion that race is changeable and decidable by verbal pronunciation and decree. The aforementioned public performances also make performativity discourses highly relevant to Rice. At bottom, the Chappelle skit is premised on a view of race as being performative and socially constructed, on *black* and *white* as binary categories, and on passing as a phenomenon that enables movement within and across them.

Like Chappelle’s “Racial Draft,” the series of skits entitled “Condi Comes to Harlem” on *Mad TV*, a television series rooted in Harvey Kurtzman’s satirical *Mad* magazine, resonates with the history of black comedy and draws on film as a genre. The title of these skits alludes to Chester Himes’s 1964
novel *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and the 1970 blaxploitation film based on it, directed by Ossie Davis. The *Mad TV* comedians portray Rice by drawing on the conventions of blaxploitation and the personas portrayed by prominent black actresses who became its best-known action heroines, including Tamara Dobson in *Cleopatra Jones* (1973) and Pam Grier in *Foxy Brown* (1974). In this sense, they allude to the profuse Cleopatra motifs that Royster suggests have been linked to Rice in popular contexts.

A segment of one of these videos begins with a view of the White House’s facade, with Rice, who is wearing a conservative pinstripe suit, receiving an urgent message on her futuristic televisual wristwatch indicating that she is needed in Harlem. The camera cuts to an image of Rice wearing a 1970s-style bright orange jumpsuit to evoke the fashion of the decade during which the blaxploitation genre first gained popularity and to undercut the prim, conservative dress style with which she has been associated.

This radicalized version of Rice is riding a motorcycle into Harlem, a place posited within the narrative logic of these short skits as the symbolic locus of blackness and as a primary counterpoint to the White House, which they make synonymous with white subjectivity. She discovers from an effeminate black male informant known as Knee-Hi, who tells her in a dramatic voice with exaggerated animation that blacks are “glowing” after entering a Korean grocery store. She discovers that its owner has built a nuclear missile site in the middle of Harlem and brags about “outsmarting you dum dums in Washington by building a nuclear missile in Harlem.” Rice does karate moves to conquer “two gigantic Korean men” and disarms the missile, whose use is appropriative and ironic here given the association of the martial arts with Asian male subjectivity. The motorcycle also masculinizes her image in the skit.

The skit, which also seems designed to critique growing patterns of gentrification in Harlem, culminates with the promise of a romantic encounter as she walks off with a seductive black man named Duke and asserts that her work in Washington can be put on hold. In this instance, the skit invokes Rice’s struggles as secretary of state with North Korea and its nuclear threat. Yet it is vital to raise questions about what is at stake in Rice’s reclamation in black communities when it is premised on Asian and black queer stereotypes and an uncritical endorsement of her foreign policy agendas.

Similarly, another skit in this vein features Rice being interrupted in her official job in Washington as she is beeped on her watch by Knee-Hi, who reports that Big Whitey has forced all black people in Harlem to drink his “crazy juice,” which is grape flavored. The “crazy juice” invoked here alludes
to the mass murder that occurred in Guyana in 1978, when the minister Jim Jones forced more than nine hundred of his predominantly African American followers in Jonestown to drink Flavor Aid poisoned with cyanide. Rice drives into Harlem in a long seventies-style red convertible, confronts Big Whitey, and physically vanquishes two of his accomplices with deft karate moves. In the end, she assertively takes the initiative and joins Duke for what promises to be a romantic encounter, proclaiming that “the president can wait.”

The queer subject who summons her to come in and rescue the black community throws the masculine bravado associated with the Rice characters in these skits into relief. The skits draw on retro style and futuristic technologies in portraying Rice as a heroine with superhuman superhero qualities. They enact a fantasy wherein Rice is devoted to remedying the plight of the African American community and dropping her work at the state level to go to its rescue. Unlike Chappelle’s “Racial Draft,” which exiles and eliminates Rice as an African American, the “Condi Comes to Harlem” skits reinvent Rice as a quintessential embodiment of black subjectivity who identifies with and works primarily in the interests of black communities. In this sense, they unsettle pervasive perceptions of Rice as being detached from black communities.39

Both of the “Condi Comes to Harlem” skits that I examine here attempt to unsettle narratives that portray Rice as a “race traitor,” identified with whiteness, and as a devoted and loyal friend of George W. Bush by drawing on blaxploitation motifs and Harlem as a setting to construct an image of her as a woman who is “down home” and identified with black communities. Reconstructions of Condoleezza Rice in these skits, which draw on retro blaxploitation film aesthetics primarily linked to urban and northern contexts, to the 1970s, and to her geographic reframing in Harlem, unsettle her conventional southern moorings and link her to an alternative geography and period. This genre rescripts Rice as a radical and insurgent black woman leader.

The skits signal a shift in her political consciousness at a visual level through her style and geographic setting, though Condi (and by extension, tacitly rice) notably replaces, displaces, and substitutes for the word cotton in the title of the skits, whose original point of reference dealt with the incursion and intrusion of a product linked to southern plantation economies on the urban landscape. It is useful to draw on critical epistemologies of the Global South in southern studies that unsettle conventional North/South binaries, geographies, and temporalities in defining the U.S. South, and that invoke Malcolm X’s speech that famously located the region anywhere below the
Canadian border, to ponder the realignment of Rice with an urban northern geography in her characterization. At the same time, the status of the urban northern area of Harlem as the site of her radicalization and politicization accords with long-standing essentialist historical conflations of the black radical subject primarily with urban contexts. Action and agency reside in the dynamic environment of Harlem, and the U.S. capital is represented as a static, distant place. Indeed, these skits posit Harlem as the nation’s capital in a symbolic sense, mirroring and nationally abstracting the scripts of Harlem as the “home” for blacks that emerged in the African diaspora during the Harlem Renaissance.

Sexuality centrally disrupts Rice’s relationship to Bush in these skits, which portray him as being “jilted” by her. She puts work demands on the back-burner for a romantic tryst with a physically attractive black man to whom she is romantically attracted, alluding to her well-known fascination with football players. These implied trysts disrupt Rice’s reputed closeness to the president, map her outside the space of the White House as a workspace, and present black and white masculinities in competition, with black masculinity triumphing in the implied contest for Rice’s heart and allegiance. As the action in the latter skit begins, queer masculinity is ideologically mobilized to emphasize the physical strength and assertiveness of the Rice character and to ascribe her heroic qualities of popular blaxploitation heroines. Reinventing Rice within this conventional heteronormative black coupling obscures the queer performativity inflecting her characterization, as well as the potential of black gay men and black queer and trans women to shape a more democratic and inclusive model of black community. Knee-Hi’s marginal representation also obscures the dynamic and complex historical contours of black queer communities in Harlem, including its legendary drag ball contexts, which have been at the forefront in reimagining black subjectivity and challenging conventional scripts of family and democracy. The skit ends with an emphasis on her sexuality, as a seductive, strong, and hypermasculine black male woos her away. Tacit, too, in the company that Rice opts to keep with black men are black nationalist narratives from the 1960s that routinely constructed white men as economically and politically powerful while being sexually effeminate and impotent.

What happens next in both skits is left to the imagination, as they conclude with Rice putting play above work and associate an air of mystery with her. The skits enliven and animate Rice with a style and sexuality that undercut her constructions as prudish and reserved. At the same time, they unsettle
fantasies of Rice in relation to powerful white men like Bush, along with images such as the one depicted on *30 Rock*, by emphasizing black men as her primary social companions and objects of her sexual desire. The skits imply that their Rice is the *real* one, not the reserved, prim persona in the public sphere. They unsettle Rice’s link to the conservative political establishment by reconstructing her as the adventurous Condi persona and reclaim and embrace her within black communities.

The bold no-nonsense Condi in Harlem is the obverse of the staid Condi in Washington. The skits imply the latter to be an inauthentic facade. They are grounded in a binary that constructs black communities as dynamic, lively, and vibrant, and whiteness, as linked to Bush and sites such as the capital, as static. The skits disrupt an overdetermined friendship connection between Rice and Bush, who is significantly imagined as absent as a figure and is never fully embodied, in contrast to Rice’s hyperembodied persona. The skits construct superhero-like Condi as a woman who harbors more power than the state-based and typically male-centered authority associated with the president in Washington. They frame Harlem, not Washington, as the nation’s political epicenter. As much as they draw on the past by foregrounding blaxploitation, the futuristic technologies in the skit that facilitate Rice’s updates via a digital watch and that enable her instant movements from Washington to Harlem, as well as her radical transformations in appearance, posit her as an ultimate mobile subject on a national and global stage, to parallel her physical agility and superhuman, cyborg-like fighting ability, which makes her so invincible. “Condi Comes to Harlem” presents Rice within the aesthetics of Afrofuturism, which unsettles conventional Western, Eurocentric logic in combining elements from science fiction and speculative fiction, fantasy, and historical fiction to rethink the past and envision alternative futures.

By according the character Condi authority that supersedes and circumvents the power of the state as embodied in the president (a figure who is notably absent from their action), “Condi Comes to Harlem” skits challenge the conventional conflation of state power with white masculinity, including presidential authority, along with their typical disjunction from black femininity, appropriating its power and authority for a black female subject. The depiction of the character Condi on sojourns to Harlem from the nation’s capital abstracts and hyperbolizes her body and voice to underscore her autonomy and independence from the president as a figure and portrays her as a black revolutionary. She functions as the de facto president, and as the site for reinventing American identity in a way that accords legibility to and embraces
black bodies, viewed as expendable within conventional scripts of the national body premised on black alienation.

By scripting Condi as a public official who keeps Harlem on the top of her agenda, with the priority of getting there and serving the population’s urgent needs, the skits fantasize the United States as a nation in the new millennium that prioritizes rather than denies the citizenship rights of black subjects, who were excluded in the original formulations of citizenship as the republic emerged in the late eighteenth century. Rice emerges as the consummate leader at a local level, whose power is tacitly sanctioned by the state. Interestingly, the fantasy here mirrors Rice’s arguments in her speeches and writings about the centrality of black struggles in advancing the nation toward a truer, more inclusive sense of democracy and definition of American identity. In this context, she emerges as an idealized, respected, and beloved leader. This portrait is far removed from the heartless, abusive, and despicable despot envisioned in Carlos Fuentes’s apocalyptic, futuristic novel *La Silla del Águila* (2002). Rice’s ability to go out and literally kick butt on the street backs up her mettle behind the podium in Washington, a provocative depiction that also mildly alludes to and critiques her suspected complicity in enhanced interrogation techniques such as torture.

Chappelle’s “Racial Draft” implies Rice’s politics to be extreme enough to be beyond redemption and recategorizes her into a white subjectivity suggested to be more befitting of her neoconservative ideological beliefs. While his strategy is to alienate her from the category black, the “Condi Comes to Harlem” skits stage a critique of Rice’s neoconservative politics by linking her to narratives of black uplift and empowerment. “Condi Comes to Harlem” skits provide an alternative script of Rice by positing her as the quintessential symbol of the national body and linking it intimately to black subjectivity. African Americans emerge as the central national subjects, and Rice emerges as the most valued and reliable leader in the nation. As a woman, her superhero-like strength empowers her to gain a level of leadership, authority, and control that trumps the president, whose position is merely nominal.

The Condi character is a lens through which these skits envision Rice as the ideal model of national femininity as black and feminine, appropriating and redirecting the power and authority associated with the president as a white and masculine figure to address the specific needs of African American communities. In the world that these skits imagine, the plight of urban blacks, as represented in Harlem, is highest and most urgent on the list of the nation’s priorities. The skits posit an assertive counternarrative to what happened in
New Orleans in 2005 after Hurricane Katrina, as African Americans suffered from benign governmental neglect and were initially labeled as refugees instead of being recognized as citizens in the media. Instead of drawing on slavery to reflect on Rice as evidenced in Chappelle’s skit, “Condi Comes to Harlem” skits focus on the 1970s to envision an Afrofuturistic, radical version of Rice fully freed from the encumbrances of the white political masculine elite and directing her energy and agency toward advancing the interests of black communities. The skits imply that progress in the United States is contingent on black inclusion and advancement within the social order. They draw nostalgically on the 1970s, a time prior to the rise of neoconservatism in the political arena and prior to the Reagan era, when drugs and crime escalated exponentially in black communities, to fantasize a more democratic America and a better future for blacks, and by extension, for all Americans.

The depiction of Rice with supernatural, superhuman power, with the ability to travel across time and space, counters comedy scripts that objectify Rice or downplay her strength, agency, and power as a woman. The portrayal lies in the continuum with Marvel’s Black Panther superhero character. Masculine power, whether black or white, is sidelined to fully showcase the Rice character’s strength and, if anything, is trivialized through its linkage to bodily objectification and possibilities for romance. That Harlem is Rice’s home base, as well as the nation’s, frames this black community as a family, invoking notions of national family, as well as centering and prioritizing blackness in definitions of American identity. The intimate relationship of Rice to this black community and the usage of her voice and national political platform on its behalf to ensure that it shares in American democracy recall the vision of Mary McLeod Bethune. The skits interestingly align with the logic in her memoir that frames blacks as central agents in the long struggle for citizenship and democracy in the nation, repositioning black subjectivity as central in defining America, while situating her as a central agent in fighting against forces that terrorize and threaten to destroy black communities. Rice’s reflections linking the recognition of the full humanity of blacks during the civil rights era to breakthroughs in American democracy not actualized at the time of the nation’s founding, when slavery existed, well suggest her values along these lines, even as she initially failed to recognize or embrace any responsibilities as a black leader after Hurricane Katrina.

The skits hold up a mirror to her iconicity and ubiquity as a black woman national leader during the first decade of the twenty-first century. In them, the mapping of 1970s visual aesthetics onto Rice as a millennial leader conflates
and reconstructs these temporalities, another queer dimension of the skits. Such techniques seem designed to remind us that while in the wake of the civil rights movement, such power for a black woman was only imaginable in the fantasy world of blaxploitation film, it had become a reality for Rice as the world’s most powerful woman leader and visible representative of the United States. In the fantasy that these skits stage, Rice emerges as a foremost emblem of national femininity. Yet the crucial difference for her is a point belied in her representations in these skits.

She was different from her predecessors in being positioned and framed to speak on behalf of everyone, not primarily for marginalized African Americans, who had been denied civil and human rights, as had been the case with her predecessors, who emerged as emblems of national femininity in politics. Her emergence as a model of national femininity was premised not on having changed the world, as was the case for Rosa Parks, but on her status as a world leader and one of its foremost diplomats, who had ascended to the top echelons of power in the nation. In the cultural arena, Rice’s representations in visual art, like those in comedy, have been premised on her iconicity and status as a model of national femininity. Yet their critiques of her power have been far more direct and assertive.

Rice and Reaction in Visual Art

Amiri Baraka’s controversial poem “Somebody Blew Up America,” which ponders the tragedy of September 11, 2001, has been the most striking and controversial poetic response to Rice to date. Nas critiques Rice in his 2004 song “American Way.” These pieces by Baraka and Nas invoke slavery and represent Rice as a race traitor, a motif that has been associated with her repeatedly in the national arena, and particularly in the black public sphere. Such perspectives are rooted in a black arts sensibility, which is not surprising when considering this movement’s grounding in poetry and spoken word and Baraka’s status as one of its founding theologians and Nas’s investments in storytelling and lyricism in his rap artistry. Such representations of Rice are noteworthy not only for how they relate her to black stereotypes, which were critiqued in visual art related to the black arts movement, but also for resonating with the body of contemporary creative works in visual art, emerging in diverse ethnic contexts, that consistently read her in relation to slavery and depict her as a race traitor while scrutinizing her relationship with George W. Bush.
While poetry was the literary genre that mainly fueled the black arts movement, the movement was also saliently advanced by the visual arts. In light of the civil rights and black power movements, which were bringing about radical social transformations for blacks during the 1960s, the black arts movement was an epoch during which items featuring black stereotypes in American material culture, alongside ubiquitous advertising trademarks, would emerge as objects of intense scrutiny. The Aunt Jemima from advertising was the most salient image in black liberation art that confronted these stereotypes. Jeff Donaldson's *Aunt Jemima and the Pillsbury Dough Boy* (1963–64), Joe Overstreet's *The New Jemima* (1964), John Onye Lockard's *No More* (1967), Murray DePillars's *Aunt Jemima* (1968), and Betye Saar's *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972), are among the signal works of this period that transformed Aunt Jemima into a black militant. The same is true of a later piece by Faith Ringgold, *Who’s Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* (1983). Through varying strategies, they recuperate the “sassy” and assertive qualities that were historically associated with the mammy, which tended to be muted in Aunt Jemima, and recast them as black militancy.

Though the philosophy of the black arts movement stressing that art should be politically useful was primarily oriented toward literature, it was also discernible in the visual arts, in this revisionist work concerning such black stereotypes. The seeming goal was to make images of black servility serviceable to the black revolution. Art of this era sent the message that if a type ordinarily so accommodating to white interests as Aunt Jemima could be reclaimed, redeemed, and drafted for participation in the black liberation struggle, then the movement had to be effective, pervasive, and infectious. In addition to suggesting to blacks their own potential to become revolutionaries, the art also suggested to whites that blacks were not going to tolerate social and political disenfranchisement any longer.

Rice's iconicity in politics in the new millennium decisively departs from such national brands in advertising premised on notions of national abjection and paradoxically epitomizes possibilities for the black feminine subject to help expand and redefine national narratives of black women, conventionally premised on whiteness, toward a definition that envisions national femininity in relation to blackness. Rice's images as a powerful black woman in the political arena are the obverse of this stereotype steeped in notions of black women's voicelessness, hyperembodiment, and specularity. Her alignment with the policies of the Bush establishment, however, fed narratives of her as being politically reactionary and regressive. For some, such postures recollect
the political positions of sellouts linked to these stereotypical images, which is why references to them inflect some of the art representations of her.

The revisionist portraits of Aunt Jemima make assertive political statements in challenging stereotypes of black womanhood enshrined within advertising through Aunt Jemima as a national brand. Some of the contemporary art depicting Rice during the first decade of the new millennium resonates with this subversive body of visual art by drawing on her national iconicity in the political arena to critique her association with reactionary policy agendas and the war on terror, while linking her to the Uncle Tom stereotype frequently invoked to critique black leaders as sellouts and race traitors in relation to their own communities. These works acknowledge Rice’s salience in contemporary debates related to race, including definitions of blackness and the meaning of black authenticity. This racial discourse on Rice is particularly significant when considering contemporary characterizations of the United States as posttracial and postblack, which escalated exponentially in the wake of the election of Barack Obama as the nation’s first black president in 2008, and obscure the continuing social repercussions of racism in this nation, while perpetuating the ideology of the United States as a colorblind society.

In recent years, critiques of Rice have been staged in the visual arts in media ranging from oil painting and drawing to digital art and large-scale wall installation. Works on Rice have been produced by artists in national contexts from Mexico to Great Britain, reflecting her status as a global icon. While art and politics have been conventionally perceived as mutually exclusive areas, and notions of authenticity and form in art premised on a detachment from political concerns, all the works I am considering here that engage Rice thematically foreground her political alliances. They use the technique of juxtaposing her image with President George W. Bush or other presidential figures and incorporate texts and images that align her with state power, authority, and even violence. As is the case in Baraka’s poem, a hermeneutics invoking slavery has been amazingly consistent and recurrent in reading, thinking about, and imagining Rice within the realm of visual art. Almost all of these works incorporate design elements to emphasize her salience as an embodiment of black femininity in the nation’s public sphere, at the same time registering and drawing on her symbolic capital as a model of national femininity. They draw on her iconicity to critique her alignments with reactionary neoconservative ideology and to highlight her complicity with abusive U.S. foreign policy in the form of the war on terror. In the process, they play up the irony of wedding a black feminine body to abuses that have typically been associated with white patriarchal men.
In a 2006 digital art piece, *Uncle Tom’s Condi Rice* (figure 3.1), artist Terry Lloyd visually relates Rice to the Uncle Tom stereotype, an image that accords with her representation in the poetry of Baraka and verbal art of the rapper Nas. The piece puns on her last name and alludes to advertising trademarks, such as Uncle Ben’s rice, in its banner—“Perfect Every Time”—by including as a logo a round cameo portrait featuring an image of Rice wearing her famous flip hairstyle and gold earrings. At this level, this piece reflects the recurrent citation of Rice in relation to food in popular culture, as evidenced in the reference to Rice as a “chocolate lady” in the 2006 film *Borat*, and comedian Loni Love’s joke that Rice’s name “sounds like a side dish of Kentucky Fried Chicken” on *Comedy Central Presents* in 2007.47

A banner with the phrase “Prevaricates Every Time” cuts across it. Phrases on the box such as “Enabling Loss Globally,” “Trusted by Despots Everywhere,” “Recant in 5 Minutes,” “Working for the Man Brand,” and “100% refined Ingreedience” associate Rice with a lack of integrity and suggest her to be complicit with oppressive and hegemonic policies in the global context.
Recall that “the man” was a slang term that became popular in black nationalist movements of the 1960s as a reference to the power and authority of the white patriarchy in the United States. In invoking this term in its textual economy, Lloyd’s piece suggests Rice’s alienation from black communities and her failure to advance or support their interests. Moreover, it implies her to be beholden to the contemporary white masculine and patriarchal political establishment as a worker in the presidential cabinet of George W. Bush.

At the same time that these works of art invoke her relationship to Bush and to repressive foreign policy agendas, they give salience to her national iconicity by linking her to one of the most famous advertising trademarks in U.S. history. Uncle Ben, like Aunt Jemima, has been one of the best known and most prominent advertising trademarks highlighting a black image and has frequently been associated with stereotypical and degrading representations of blacks circulating in U.S. material culture, a visual economy to which this art piece also alludes. The appropriation of Rice’s raced and gendered body and its serviceability for the advancement of reactionary and controversial foreign policy agendas against minority populations in the global arena mirrors and extends ways in which black feminine bodies become hyperembodied, highly visible, and nationally abstracted while remaining rigidly contained and voiceless.

Such advertising images have been intimately linked to nostalgia about slavery and the plantation South and have inherently queer roots, which lie at the foundation of their race and gender mutability and are patently evident in this cross-gendered figuring of Rice as an Uncle Tom. By invoking them and positioning Rice on a background whose facade resembles the boxes on which they were primarily circulated, this image suggests that despite her prominence in the national arena and the national iconicity that she has attained, her role more closely mirrors and mimics that of conventional black stereotypes, even if her body does not accord with the Aunt Jemima stereotype in a visual sense and enters the public gaze under radically different conditions and meanings from those attached to black women’s images in the commercial marketplace. The shadow of the Aunt Jemima trademark is inescapable as a prelude to her articulation and commodification as a national model of femininity, given its ubiquity and hyperembodiment in advertising from the late nineteenth century in making black womanhood legible within the national imaginary, as other representational models of black womanhood largely remained invisible. The use of the term brand here calls to mind products that are advertised and circulate as commodities for purchase and consumption,
suggesting that Rice has fully internalized and consumed the ideology of “the man.” The word *brand* also seems to figuratively cast Rice as a slave when considering the routine branding of slaves’ bodies during the antebellum era.

More to the point, it seems to link her, even, to the history of black overseers who routinely carried out abuses against other black slaves. Rice, like other crops such as cotton, tobacco, and sugarcane, was among the chief agricultural products resulting from intensive physical field labor primarily among slaves in the U.S. South. In the contemporary era, rice is a staple consumer item across some Latin American, African, and Asian nations in the Global South. The added irony is that Rice's last name mirrors and echoes the name of this staple crop of plantation slave economies. Lloyd’s art piece links her to the abuses and labor exploits associated with this product. This work accords with the litany of creative representations heralded by Amiri Baraka that invoke the history of slavery to meditate on Rice's alignment with contemporary neoconservative political agendas and as a strategy for dramatizing their oppressive, regressive character.

By foregrounding a portrait-like image of her, the piece cites the iconicity that Rice developed in international contexts during her two terms of work in the presidential administration of George W. Bush. The portrait of Rice depicts her with a stern look on her face and hovers over a ship in movement across water, an image that most literally alludes to the Chevron oil tanker once named for Rice, the *Condoleezza Rice* (a naming undone once she joined the Bush campaign); her board membership in this corporation; and Chevron’s alignment with an oppressive political regime to sustain its drilling exploits in Nigeria for profit. This ship also invokes both military vessels and slave ships and associates Rice with oppressive ravages of modernity such as colonialism, imperialism, and capitalist greed. The piece visually foregrounds modern technologies that have been used to destroy and contain black bodies, such as the gun and the ship, even as it is produced and staged digitally itself and therefore grounded in one of the most innovative media for contemporary visual art production and circulation in the global arena.

The face is much lighter than the neck on the image, a technique that presents her face as a mask and associates her with superficiality, duplicity, and deception. This veneer of Rice in “whiteface” implies a coveting of whiteness, and even racial passing, while paradoxically associating her with the visual aesthetics and racist ideologies of blackface minstrelsy. That rice as an agricultural product is literally whitened in its processing makes the double meaning of this term in the piece all the more significant. This work is also a
powerful basis on which to analyze and deconstruct notions of the postblack and postracial that have increasingly inflected contemporary art discourses, particularly given representations related to Rice, race, and questions of black authenticity.

Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez’s remark about secretary of state and former First Lady Hillary Clinton—“To me, she’s like Condoleezza Rice, a blond Condoleezza”—while aiming to associate Clinton with the reactionary policies reminiscent of Rice’s, is a statement based in the hemispheric South, which accords with the representation of Rice in Fuentes’s aforementioned novel and that attempts to capture her influence on Latin America by suggesting that Clinton as secretary of state mirrored and extended abuses in the global arena associated with Rice while previously in the position. Chávez’s comment also in effect links Rice to the narratives of racial masquerade, betrayal, and passing cited by Lloyd.48

These associations are even more explicit and direct in Ayanah Moor’s digital print and wall drawing *Never Ignorant Getting Goals* (2005). This piece (figure 3.2) draws on a newspaper feature documenting the celebration of Bush’s appointment of Rice as secretary of state, a happy moment that both registers her national iconicity in her positioning against the backdrop of an American flag and draws attention to the dire consequences of their policies in the international arena. It indicts her for her alliance with abusive white masculine authority and power and symbolically masculinizes her inasmuch as she is whitened in Lloyd’s piece.

The artist invokes hip-hop and portrays Bush and Rice as “thugs,” juxtaposed with images of them wearing formal suits in the news photograph that serves as the focal point of the installation, alongside newsprint that announces the official appointment. It is most significant, too, that the piece unsettles the typical associations of black masculinity with the thug to link it to a white man such as Bush and a black woman like Rice. Because of the ostensible formal attire, the converse of the casual sportswear and street identification associated with the “thug” as a figure, the image suggests that this sensibility is manifested internally in Rice and Bush, rather than externally, in their tactic of sanctioning enhanced interrogation techniques in implementing the war on terror. Again, as in Lloyd’s piece, the emphasis in the image is on Rice’s complicity with abusive foreign policy agendas.

Moor’s incorporation of text in this art piece draws on a strategy in conceptual art quintessentially identified with artists such as Glenn Ligon. This large-scale work of visual art even recalls techniques associated with the revolutionary
impulse in modern art by muralists such as Diego Rivera, who was known for his epic public art installations, a genre that is profoundly ironic to invoke when considering Rice’s association with counterrevolutionary and reactionary policy agendas. Furthermore, in size and scale, this piece by Moor is reminiscent of Kara Walker’s monumental wall-size silhouette tableaus, which often feature grotesque and graphic images of abuses of slavery within the Old South’s plantation system, sometimes by juxtaposing the bodies of white masters and black slaves, including children, engaged in sexual acts. In this piece, as in Walker’s tableaus, black and white are the dominant color scheme. Here, the black and white of the newsprint and the photographs symbolize the racial categories connected to Rice and Bush. By highlighting the image of Bush kissing Rice, Moor sexualizes and eroticizes their collaboration and invokes interracial sexual desire. Moor’s image uses a different strategy from Lloyd’s in acknowledging the specter of slavery by alluding to the conventional sexual relationship between white masters and black women slaves. Even more specifically, it alludes to the affair of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson, though Bush’s kiss of Rice is staged in a public context and captured in the news—a central medium for broadcasting and circulating information—not
in a private setting. Through these thematics, Moor stages a portrait that links a black feminine figure to the presidential and portrays a fantasy of Rice and Bush’s relationship that is overtly sexual. The banner of bold capital letters going across the wall, which reads, “Getting Goals Accomplished,” parallels Lloyd’s tag with the words “Prevaricates Every Time.” It makes the intimate juxtaposition of these figures all the more provocative, for the word “accomplished” covers them, suggesting their (potentially romantic) intimacy and that their shared goals may not be related only to policymaking.

Moor’s image also provocatively suggests, through the centralization and salience of their bodies in the intimacy of the kiss, the possibility of another kind of affair in a private context. Such perceptions were fed when Rice famously slipped up at a 2004 dinner in Washington, DC, sponsored by the city’s New York Times bureau chief Phillip Taubman and his wife, Felicity Barringer, and said of George W. Bush, “as I was telling my hus—,” before stopping herself from saying the word “husband” and correcting herself: “As I was telling President Bush.” The national arena is the context in which Bush and Rice are primarily partnered, and the piece registers Rice’s status as an icon of national femininity through the patriotic symbolism that it associates with her. Yet the text also emphasizes their impact on foreign and global affairs.

Belgian artist Luc Tuymans’s The Secretary of State (2005), which is now housed in the Museum of Modern Art, is an oil painting that accords with Lloyd’s and Moor’s works in drawing on Rice’s iconic photographic images in its composition (figure 3.3). The piece presents Rice as a commanding figure with strong features, including eyes that serve as a focal point and a gaze resolutely into the distance, highlighting her vision in a more abstract sense. The painting, like Lloyd’s, features Rice wearing all the accents associated with her image as iconic, including gold earrings and the flip hairstyle. The arched eyebrows and dark lipstick emphasize her traditional and conservative style, even as the lips resemble the color of blood and allude to the casualties of the war on terror. The partial and fragmented image of her face, which is cut off at top and bottom, seems to position her behind a symbolic veil and as a woman hidden, an image of her body that is provocative given her role in the international arena working primarily on policies related to the Middle East, where Muslim women are often figured by the West as being oppressed by patriarchal mandates and traditions such as veiling. In this sense, the image can be interpreted to suggest that Rice has a lot in common with the women whom her policy agendas are aimed to help “free” in that she, too, is in some ways covered, obscured, and dominated by men. At this level, the painting points to this
situation by depicting Rice as hyperembodied and voiceless, notwithstanding her position as the “most powerful woman in the world” as secretary of state.

This image also, as some art critics have noted, features Rice in a pose associated with the faces of U.S. presidents on Mount Rushmore—which features George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln—representing her in relation to the landscape and as an extension of it. In Tuymans’s image, Rice’s implicit association with Mount Rushmore, one of the nation’s most popular tourist attractions, relates Rice to the most highly revered models of leadership in the nation’s history, links her to greatness, and situates her in relation to the reigning presidential figures in U.S. history. In this sense, it figures her in relation to one of the most prominent national symbols and draws on her iconicity to instate her as a premier model of national femininity, even as it suggests that she reinforces rather than revises the nation’s prevailing national narratives and underscores the limitations in her political vision. The association may not be entirely accidental or coincidental when considering that Rice’s press secretary has admitted that once Rice became secretary of state, many photographs of her were staged behind a podium with a seal in press conferences to link her to power and authority ordinarily attached to the president. Despite her
famous resistances and hesitations to run for public office, Rice has frequently been idealized as a potential presidential candidate in the Republican Party.

Tuymans was inspired to develop this piece by the comment of a close friend who had served as minister of foreign affairs in their country. According to Tuymans, this friend who knew very little about Rice had described her on reading an article about her upcoming visit to the nation, and as she began her work within the Bush administration, by saying, “She is very intelligent, and she is not unpretty.” In the artist’s view, this statement was sexist and reduced her to an object. Such comments echo Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi’s fascination with Rice. He had remarked, “Leezza, Leezza, Leezza... I love her very much. I admire her, and I’m proud of her, because she’s a black woman of African origin” on Al-Jazeera television in 2007. When his Tripoli compound was raided in August 2011, Gaddafi’s cherished album of glossy photographs featuring images of Rice was uncovered. Tuymans’s aim in developing the painting was to foreground the paradox related to Rice’s attractive and desirable body and the destructive and despicable policies that she endorsed or helped to develop in her work with Bush.

That Tuymans’s native country is historically linked to colonial exploits in the African Congo may also inflect his critique of a contemporary national official in his home country in constructing an image of Rice, whose color, fashion accessories, facial expression, and scale make a critical statement on the impact of the U.S. government’s military on nations in the Middle East, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, and newer forms of colonialism. As in Moor’s piece, white masculine interracial desire for the black feminine body linked to histories of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism emerges as a subtext in this work and primarily surfaces through the story underpinning its composition instead of registering at a visual level. It imagines Rice as a prominent model of national femininity. At the same time, it acknowledges the transnational reach of her feminine iconicity and demonstrates how artists in a range of global contexts have deconstructed and critiqued the controversial foreign policy agendas with which she has been associated.

Mexican artist Enrique Chagoya is another international visual artist who has produced images that critique Rice’s relationship to problematic U.S. policy agendas. His 2004 charcoal and pastel work on canvas, Untitled (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs), features the cabinet members of George W. Bush dressed as characters in the fairy tale Snow White (figure 3.4). For example, the piece depicts Colin Powell as Doc, and Rice as Snow White, a representation that also, like Lloyd’s image, associates Rice with whiteness and a lack of
black authenticity and portrays her as a race traitor in the vein of the Uncle Tom. The invocation of the fairy tale as a genre links these political figures to infantile rather than adult behavior and decision making. The invocation of Snow White in relation to the diminutive dwarfs also points to her ubiquity and salience on the national and global political stage.

Similarly, Poor George #3 (After P. G.) (2004) is a provocative image by Chagoya that portrays Rice being held, doll-like, by George W. Bush, who is portrayed as a ventriloquist, to imply how much she has been controlled and manipulated by him, as well as toyed with, and has served as a mouthpiece for his problematic policies (figure 3.5). Significantly, they are positioned in front of an old-fashioned camera, which suggests the framing, multiplication, and circulation of this dynamic involving an infantilized Rice and Bush. Here Rice is dressed in a red and white ensemble that makes her resemble a little girl sitting on her daddy’s lap. The drawing features Bush wearing a red tie, the same color in her dress, perhaps to symbolize blood and the losses associated with the war on terror and the Iraq War, which his administration spearheaded. It is also significant that this piece and other pen and ink drawings in this series by Chagoya revise drawings by Philip Guston, from the latter’s early 1970s Poor Richard series satirizing President Richard Nixon, including one depicting Nixon holding a black doll for a photo op. These allusions allow Chagoya to critique a longer history of right-wing politics, spanning back to the end of the civil rights era and the rise of the neoconservative movement. We can also draw on them to recognize levels on which this political climate advanced neoconservative agendas into the new millennium and established foundations for current policies connected to anti-immigration and antiblackness in the Trump administration.

Like Tuymans’s, this piece uses red in cosmetic makeup to metaphorically invoke blood. The image presents Bush as Rice’s symbolic white father, who has, by implication, usurped the place of John Rice, her real one. The image associates power with Bush as a figure and casts her as pliable, subordinate, childlike, and dollish in relation to him, staging a fantasy of their relationship implying that the authority in her office as secretary of state is an illusion. She is positioned on his arm as a puppet would be, suggesting that she is manipulated and controlled by him. This representation recalls digital artist Amy Vangsgard’s depiction of Rice (figure 3.6), in the form of a clay art sculpture, as a marionette wearing a suit and holding a book on Iraq, which associates Rice with egregious foreign policies and postures of racial accommodation, as well as evoking the grotesque and caricatured black collectibles that were circulated in U.S. material culture, described by Patricia A. Turner as “contemptible collectibles.”

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FIGURE 3.6 Amy Vangsgard, Politician Clipart #12206, n.d. Courtesy Clipart of LLC.
Chagoya’s image of Bush is not only fatherly but also fundamentally paternalistic. Paternalism subtended and rationalized the antebellum plantation economy and structured its race, class, and gender hierarchies. When considering slavery’s afterlives and rearticulations from Jim Crow to the present, residual traces of this concept of paternalism associated with southern culture are indispensable for analyzing Rice’s relationship as a black woman with an elite wealthy white family in the South like the Bushes, who are often described as a “political dynasty.” Rice was descended from a family whose ties with the Republican Party went as far back as her grandfather, and she had previously worked in the George H. W. Bush administration. These linkages point to the southern landscape as a relevant context for thinking about representations of Rice that have emerged in visual art and popular culture in the global arena. Her global paths of travel as a black woman during her years as secretary of state inflect the creative discourses related to her that have emerged in various transnational contexts in the growing body of work on Rice in art and popular culture.

In slavery, paternalism premised on a view of slaves as being childlike and intellectually inferior was fundamental to mythologizations of slave masters in the antebellum myth of the Old South. Slave masters were imagined as being generous and benevolent to their slaves, who in turn were devoted servants who understood and remained in their “place.” Chagoya’s *Poor George #3* stages a powerful visualization of a white masculine typology that emerged during slavery. It is a useful and relevant site on which to ponder the benevolence of a wealthy and primarily white and masculine right-wing establishment, including a southern political dynasty such as the Bushes, based in Texas, in investing in Rice’s career and facilitating her advancement in the political arena. It follows that we can also draw on this image of Rice as childlike for pondering her devotion and complicity in advancing right-wing political agendas. Such a reading properly situates Bush and Rice against the backdrop of the plantation complex, which structured the geographies of the Western Hemisphere, while framing their policies in the Global and hemispheric South as an outgrowth of governing systems of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism.

Rice’s representations in the visual arts are schematized to critique her engagements in foreign policy. These representations emphasize her femininity, fashioning, and accessories, such as her elegant hairstyle and jewelry, to imply her conventional qualities and to highlight an external beauty that starkly contrasts with the ugly consequences of her policies. The hard and stern look on the faces of figurations of Rice in the work of Lloyd, Tuymans, and Chagoya all allude to questions about her character and conscience that
have emerged among her critics. Her style, including the impeccable and staid veneer for which she is well known, serves as a primary device in these artworks to emphasize her conservative image and to visualize her as a reactionary. The use of the visual serves as a means of giving testimony to atrocities that have not been emphasized in the media as much as the veneer of Rice’s charming and attractive persona has. These pieces all centralize and deconstruct Rice as an icon in the national and global arenas and present her as hyperembodied paradoxically to suggest her subordination and manipulation within the neoconservative establishment. Unlike the “distractions” that comedy highlights in depicting Rice, which, as Royster suggests, have tended to deflect direct criticisms of policy agendas to which she has been linked, her critiques in visual art have been unremitting. The art featuring Rice builds on the graphic, violent, and troubling images in media reports that dramatize the consequences, including casualties, of Bush’s war on terror, which it associates ironically with forms of state-sanctioned terrorism and deploys the visual to highlight critiques of Rice and her linkages to state power.

The idealized fantasy of Rice rooted in black urban community staged in comedy differs starkly from the biting realism depicted in art images of her, which link her to repressive foreign policy agendas steeped in legacies of colonialism and imperialism. As Carole Boyce-Davies points out from her perspective in black feminism and transnational feminism, black Americans produced by histories of slavery and Jim Crow and subjected to persisting racism are routinely complicit with the nation’s military in helping to carry out U.S. policy agendas that play out abusively against populations in the African diaspora. These artists are less invested in celebrating than in castigating her iconic force. Rice is not represented as an enlightened, visionary, or insurgent model of black identity but is conversely linked to politically regressive and oppressive political agendas. They register ways in which Rice’s association with state power has been linked to war and violence in the global arena. They recurrently relate her to an abusive foreign policy and suggest that she fails to help the United States become a better or more perfect union, contradicting her own reading that centers black subjects as agents in shaping American democracy in her speeches and memoir. While Rice embodies a model of blackness that unsettles and disrupts conventional race and gender stereotypes of the past, such visual images that associate her with white patriarchy suggest that her agency and representational space as a black woman remain limited. These works suggest that even as a black woman working in the presidential administration and categorized as the most powerful in the world,
Rice leaves narrow definitions of American citizenship unexamined and undisturbed and does not offer a visionary or empowering alternative through her reactionary leadership model. Instead, they emphasize her uses as a black woman and token presence within Bush’s administration to camouflage the egregiousness of U.S. foreign policy agendas through her high visibility and iconicity, which fails to disrupt or even challenge the neoconservative establishment, to the point of sanctioning and reinforcing all the regressive notions of American selfhood in which it continues to remain invested, while invoking her iconicity steeped in her salience as a model of national womanhood and emblem of American patriotism. While Bush’s administration prided itself on “spreading freedom” in the Middle East, all these artworks suggest that the model of national femininity that Rice represents not only undermines freedom and democracy but also helped to frame the United States as a repressive, reactionary, and oligarchic force in foreign affairs. Fashion provides a final context and subtext vital for its role in helping to consolidate Rice’s iconic force and legibility as a model of national femininity.

**Commanding Clothes**

In the introduction of a 2015 guest-edited issue of *NKA: A Journal of Contemporary Art* entitled “Black Fashion: Art, Pleasure, Politics,” Noliwe Rooks remarks, “Fashion matters. It provides and pulls tight the threads of identity that tell others how to locate one within a culture, in relationship to a society, or inside the realms of one’s imaginings.” She goes on to observe, “The significance and meaning of fashion are nowhere more visible than in how it manifests and functions at the site of the collision between identity and race in the African diaspora. There, black fashion has identified and continues to identify wearers as part of political, cultural, and social groups or movements.” This critical project affirms the intimate linkage between fashion and art as well as the profound role that fashion plays in Africa and in its diasporas in scripting race and signaling political investments. Her insights can also help us understand how and why fashion played a key role in conditioning Rice’s iconicity and mediating her rise as a model of national femininity in the new millennium.

The fashion subtexts related to Rice are important to throw into relief for the important role that they have played in consolidating her national and global iconicity as a woman leader, a dimension that has been the subject of
substantial commentary in the media. Like visual art, fashion played a primary role in shaping discourses of race, gender, and sexuality related to her. Pearls, designer shoes such as Ferragamos, and St. John knit suits were signature fashion pieces in Condoleezza Rice’s elegantly stylized public appearances on national and global stages, including events such as President Bush’s periodic State of the Union addresses. Rice received substantial attention in the fashion world, including listing on *Vanity Fair’s* International Best Dressed List in 2006, alongside figures such as Oprah Winfrey, Kate Moss, and Prince William, and has been lauded for being “immaculately groomed.” Some in the fashion industry credited her with helping to resurrect the flip hairstyle. In a 2005 interview, Rice was asked by conservative Fox television host Sean Hannity if she had an idea that she would become a “fashion trendsetter.”58 Her clothing ensembles, in their varying forms and combinations, have tended to be plain, dark, demure, and understated, but in their own way, and for their own purposes, have often commanded attention and made statements.

In a 2008 article in the *Guardian*, “This Is the Age of Power Pearls—And No One Exploits Their Potency Better than Condie Rice,” Germaine Greer describes the significance of Rice’s regular wearing of white pearls. According to Greer,

Condie is the consummate power-dresser. Every pant suit—whether by St John, Armani or Versace, in black, navy or charcoal grey—is immaculate, no matter how long she has been crouched memorizing briefs as she is whirled by plane from one end of the earth to another. She is said to work out at 4am each morning; certainly the belly is flat and the stride purposeful, no matter how long she has been cooped up in a plane. Her hair is regularly beaten into submission. Right now she is sporting a ringer for the Michelle Obama bob, which itself is a version of the Jackie Onassis big hair flick. Occasionally, Condie lets herself be seen in knee-high, high-heeled jackboots, to the unspeakable excitement of the armies of lackeys that follow her about. She wears dark lipstick, highlighting the expressiveness of her eyes and the occasional dazzle of her smile. Otherwise her subfusc is relieved only by the milky radiance of her power pearls.59

As a fashion accessory, pearls align Rice with an image classically and even quintessentially associated with traditional American elite women, including the white southern model of femininity most legible to the politically conservative establishment of white male leaders with whom she has primarily worked, presidents who are Texas natives such as George Herbert Walker
Bush and his son George W. Bush. In her public appearances, Rice has strategically used pearls to adapt and embody the image associated with the southern “steel magnolia” in her public forms of dress and stylization. The steel magnolia type manifests the traditional trappings of southern femininity on the outside, including beauty, and may wear items such as pearls, suits, and dresses but is fundamentally defined by qualities such as strength and toughness at their core. That she was adorned with pearls as a signature accessory in media interviews and statements about the Iraq War helped lend credibility to war policies that she advocated and to accord them legitimacy.

Even as Greer registers the performative aspects of Rice’s gender identity, that she devalues trans women and victims of rape makes it crucial to critique the essentialist narrative of femininity that her description of Rice ultimately enshrines, and to more broadly ponder how much Rice’s reification in the national imaginary reconsolidates narrow and exclusionary definitions of womanhood. That Greer draws on the rhetoric of 1990s power feminism and emphasizes the uses of lipstick and hairstyling in the case of Rice’s gender fashioning, which Greer famously minimized and dismissed as being superficial when embraced to aestheticize trans women such as Caitlyn Jenner in the wake of Jenner’s selection by *Glamour* magazine as a “Woman of the Year” in 2015, suggests the conceptual and theoretical limitations in feminist discourses that obscure diverse and multifaceted feminine formations and sanction conventional definitions of the category *woman* premised on binary and heterosexist formulations of femininity. Such blind spots that read Rice’s fashioning on the surface and draw on it to link her to essentialist notions of femininity obscure visual and cultural representations that look beyond this veneer to examine what is at stake in her alignments with a white patriarchal political establishment, while failing to recognize and reflect on more complicated race, sex, and gender discourses, as we see in works from Terry Lloyd’s art to *Mad TV’s* “Condi Comes to Harlem,” that describe how appropriations of masculine imagery reinforced her power.

One moment in particular during which Rice flouted the typical decorum and respectability politics associated with her fashioning in the political arena stands out and bears noting. Significantly, one instance of Rice’s self-fashioning in the global arena strategically borrowed from visual codes associated with the dominatrix, an alternative feminine type whose sheer evocation serves as a valuable and telling counterpoint to the genteel feminine aesthetics that inflect some of Rice’s most familiar visual representations. In February 2005, Rice’s wearing of all black, including a short skirt, a long gold-buttoned military-style
coat, and knee-high high-heeled boots to the Wiesbaden Army Airfield held
great symbolic significance. The sleek black ensemble, at a visual level, made
an assertive statement and established a no-nonsense mindset before an all-
male military audience. The outfit associated her with power and reinforced
her authority as a woman while occupying the historically masculine leader-
ship role of secretary of state. Robin Givhan’s article in the Washington Post,
“Condoleezza Rice’s Commanding Style,” observes that the look projected a
combination of sex and power to the point of evoking the dominatrix.60

This figure is associated with sadomasochism, perversion, the appropri-
tation of forms of control and domination associated with masculinity, and the
use of sex and force to subordinate and subdue men and put them in positions
of submission. The dominatrix is an inherently paradoxical figure in the sense
that she is feminine yet dominant and powerful. In the most literal sense, she
is often depicted dressed in tight and skimpy black leather ensembles such as
body suits, shoes or boots with steep high heels, and props such as whips. It
is provocative that Rice evoked some elements of the edgy attire associated
with this figure, such as the sleekly tailored black suit with the coat and skirt
and the black high-heeled boots, to project an image of authority before an
audience of military men.

The appropriation of this stark black image becomes all the more signifi-
cant if we consider factors such as race, gender, and sexuality. That is to say,
Rice’s status as a black woman leader makes her assertive and symbolic use of
this imagery before an audience of predominantly white and male military
men all the more subversive. In its ostensible evocation of sexuality and power,
the ensemble belied the reserved and desexualized image as a “black lady” that
has typically been associated with Rice in the public sphere of politics.61

Givhan points out that in this ensemble, “Rice boldly eschewed the typical
fare chosen by powerful American women on the world stage. She was not
wearing a bland suit with a loose-fitting skirt and short boxy jacket with a pair
of sensible pumps. She did not cloak her power in photogenic hues, a femi-
nine brooch and a non-threatening aesthetic. Rice looked as though she was
prepared to talk tough, knock heads and do a freeze-frame ‘Matrix’ jump kick
if necessary. Who wouldn’t give her ensemble a double take—all the while
hoping not to rub her the wrong way?”62 Givhan concludes by pointing out
that “Rice’s appearance at Wiesbaden—a military base with all its attendant
images of machismo, strength, and power—was striking because she walked
out draped in a banner of authority, power, and toughness. She was not hiding
behind matronliness, androgyny, or the stereotype of the steel magnolia. Rice
brought her full self to the world stage—and that included her sexuality. It was not overt or inappropriate. If it was distracting, it is only because it is so rare.\textsuperscript{63} Givhan suggests that the outfit makes Rice appear more dynamic, powerful, and larger than life because it links her to qualities typically associated with masculine heroes in action films.

In Givhan’s estimation, this edgy outfit lends Rice authority because it walks the fine line of connoting strength while remaining distinctly feminine, and yet not too stereotypically or overtly so. Givhan explicitly articulates a point about Rice that few of her critics notice: her ability to both emblematize and subvert conventions and codes associated with the feminine in politics by using fashion. Yet at the same time, it is limited in eliding the subversive potential of androgyny. In some ways, in this moment, Rice mirrored the fashion ingenuity, attitude, and boldness associated with her imaginative superhero persona in the “Condi Comes to Harlem” skits. In general, for me, such intensely performative moments are critically fascinating and most useful for thinking about queer epistemologies in relation to Rice.

Drawing on imagery connected to the dominatrix for body fashioning takes on a very different and more problematic meaning, however, when one considers the white male-dominated, neoconservative establishment and power structure in the United States that she represents in the international context. The implications of making her body legible as a woman on its behalf by drawing on such provocative sexual imagery at a male-centered military base need to be considered in light of the historical serviceability and subjection of the captive black feminine body within a white patriarchal structure, which arguably used it prosthetically in this moment, and the attendant raced and sexed power relations. Furthermore, evoking such an image purposefully flouts the high-profile controversies involving the sexual harassment of women that have been associated with the military in recent years. Such uses of fashion by Rice have served as a device to reinforce her authority and link her to patriarchal power and have by extension helped to advance policies related to war in the global arena.

That Rice’s suiting in styles ranging from the classic southern lady to a bold dominatrix, to the point of engaging in forms of political showmanship, garnered high-profile media attention and helped her gain legibility and power is just one valuable lens through which we should recognize her complex negotiation of race, gender, class, and sexuality within a global context as a black woman. Just months after this trip to Germany, the politics of her fashioning and stylization became much more complicated after she was famously said
The cultural texts that I have examined in comedy and art all code fashion, from the retro clothing and color and design of blaxploitation to classic designer suits in reflecting on Rice’s national and global leadership. By emphasizing her adoption of Harlem as a space and advocacy on behalf of black communities, the former genre imaginatively scripts Rice in relation to maternal political narratives of black women that have recurred in politics, and that are epitomized in the examples of Bethune and Parks, suggesting that one does not have to be a literal mother to be linked to this narrative of the black feminine. Rice’s writings also retool this maternal narrative by alternatively emphasizing parentage and ancestry. While in the post–civil rights era, the conventional model of black femininity that characterizes Rice’s fashioning is exceptional in light of the political power that she wielded, she also emerged as the prototypically reactionary black woman national leader and icon during the new millennium.

If she challenged the conventional white-centered models of national femininity through the unprecedented power that she had attained in the global arena, in contrast to the prolific scripts of marginalized black women leaders that consolidated during the post–civil rights era, she failed to produce a radical black feminine model that posed an alternative to Eurocentric ones, unlike predecessors such as Bethune and Parks. Although Nadia Brown emphasizes the legislative level, her discussion of the importance of examining differences among black women in the political realm and acknowledging black women in all of their diversity provides some helpful critical contexts in political science for thinking about such differences among black women leaders. Despite what may have been good intentions, Rice’s recurring rhetorical citations of civil rights discourses such as the tragedy at 16th Street obscured its dimensions related to the South’s domestic terrorism and were a far cry from the radical messages linked to earlier black women leaders. This may have been because Rice’s citations of civil rights were framed within reactionary right-wing ideology rather than organically within freedom movements, which historically constituted the most empowering and visionary scripts of black femininity. A consideration of Michelle Obama in the next and final chapter, who shares common ground with Rice in staging scripts of her black family as nationally representative and is useful to read in comparison, will help us reflect on black women’s constructions in the post-Emancipation era as national models of femininity in contexts from politics to popular culture in the new millennium.